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# THE WOLVES OF CASCADE

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BY MORGAN BRIARWOOD

Cascade. A city divided. A city traumatised by its past. The wealthy elite live in luxury, safe in their high towers. In the city below, the streets are ruled by the "Wolfpack": the ruthless street gang that rose to dominance in the wake of the Red Night Riot. Cybernetic surgeon Blair Sandburg could have been one of the elite but, pulled into the Wolfpack through some bad choices, he now sees no way out of the criminal underworld. Jim Ellison is a man with a mission and a secret he must keep at all costs. His quest leads him to risk a journey through the depths of the Wolfpack's territory to Sandburg's door, beginning an adventure that will change the lives of both men.

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## CHAPTER ONE: "HOT DATE, ELLISON?"

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...in First Nations cultures every tribe had a sentinel. This was a watchman who patrolled the border, watched for approaching enemies, changes in the weather or the movement of game. Tribal survival depended on him. A sentinel was chosen because he possessed a genetic advantage: a sensory awareness that could be developed far beyond normal human capability.

The Sentinel, an unpublished manuscript believed written in 1999

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The black asphalt was shiny with rain and slick with spilled oil. Steam rose from vents in the sidewalk. Garbage lined the gutters, the acrid stink of rot and decay filling the air. A pair of hookers huddled under the only working street-light. They had been there long enough for the endless rain that gave Cascade its name to ruin their overdone cosmetics. In the gap between two dumpsters, a vagrant huddled under layers of discarded newspaper and cardboard, muttering to himself. In the distance, a siren wailed.

This was the Cascade underworld, the grimy depths of the city beneath the city. This land belonged to the gangs and the drug dealers, to the bums and the addicts. No one else ventured here, these streets of hopelessness and death.

With cold rain seeping under his raised collar, Jim Ellison drew his scarf across his mouth and nose in a futile attempt to stifle the stench. As he turned into the narrow alley his footsteps echoed and he was glad for the weight of the gun at his side. He knew he looked out of place; his good clothing and sturdy shoes marked him as an outsider as much as his military bearing. It was almost midnight; he was late.

A crumpled food carton skittered down the alley ahead of him, blown by the wind. He followed it with his eyes and it led him to the foul-smelling dumpster. Jim detected a strange scent beneath the decay. Sighing, he walked over to the dumpster and raised the lid. The body of a man at least three days dead was partially buried in garbage. Though it was almost too dark to see, Jim observed the gleam of metal beneath the greying flesh. There were blackish purple veins in a spider-web pattern across the corpse's face. A mech addict, most likely killed by his own illegal mods. Those cheap fuel cells could be lethal. Jim let the dumpster lid fall and walked on.

The image of the dead man stayed with him. It felt like a warning, but it was not a warning Jim could heed. He had no choices left.

Finally, he reached the end of the alley. In a dark recess he found a door. Once painted green, the door was rusted and daubed with graffiti. Some of it was obscene: a crudely drawn penis, a disembodied mouth open to receive it. Some was colourful, almost artistic. Near the top of the door was a stylised head of a wolf with pointed ears and teeth.

Jim saw the square of an intercom beside the door. He pushed the button and heard the buzz sound somewhere within the building. After a moment, the intercom crackled and he heard a peremptory order.

"Show your ID to the camera."

The lens of a camera glinted just above the intercom. Jim extracted an IDent® card and raised it before the lens. The card identified him as James Ellsworth, a former army captain now running a small business in the Cascade docklands. The IDent® was good: James Ellsworth had a birth certificate, school and army service records, bank accounts and a business license. He existed on the social matrices, too: as fully realised an identity as any other person. He just didn't exist in the flesh. Or, rather, he existed as a cipher: a ready-made alias for men like Jim to step into and out of, as needed.

Jim waited almost ten seconds before the voice said:

"Enter."

The lock clicked. Jim raised a hand and pushed the door open. The corridor within was well lit and he blinked while his eyes adjusted. He let the door swing closed behind him and heard it lock itself once more.

"Are you armed?" the voice said from a speaker on the wall.

Jim hesitated, but he had come too far to be thrown out for a lie now. He had gone from hood to drug addict, from dealer to mech head and finally found a bouncer in an underground night club who agreed – for a significant price – to make arrangements for Jim to come here. Jim pulled back his leather coat, exposing the gun.

“Yes,” he answered.

“There’s a row of lockers on your left. Leave your weapons there.”

Jim examined the lockers. There were six: metal, fairly sturdy, each with a combination lock of the type that allowed the user to set a new combination each time the lock was used. Jim nodded to himself. He was sure the locks could be broken but it was a reasonable effort to make him feel secure. He took the gun from his holster, slid the clip out and placed it in the third locker. He kept the clip and its bullets, unwilling to leave behind a weapon that could be used against him. He studied the lock for a moment then, satisfied, he set a combination and locked it.

The walls were painted pale grey, the paint peeling in places. The floor was charcoal grey linoleum. As far as Jim could tell both walls and floor were clean; a welcome change from the alley outside. He walked down the corridor. At the far end was another door, standing slightly open. Jim rapped on it with his knuckles.

“Come in.” It was the voice from the intercom, but softer this time.

Jim entered the room. He found a room with a once-white curtain pulled across it, concealing the size of the room. On his side of the curtain there was an old-fashioned wooden desk with a man seated behind it. On the desk sat a computer holo-projector and several medical instruments.

The doctor behind the desk was a surprise. When he made this appointment Jim ran a search on the doctor’s name. It was a simple precaution. Doctor Blair Sandburga was a US citizen, but listed as born in the Texas Union. That had unpleasant associations for Jim but the doctor’s qualifications interested him more and they were good. Double undergrad major – cybernetics and pre-med – medical doctorate and post-doc work at Rainier University with a surgical residency at Sky City Surgical Hospital. It was an impressive resumé that didn’t explain why Sandburg was now working in the illegal market.

Sandburg was younger than his resumé suggested. It was the hair Jim saw first: long and glossy black curls tied back in a futile attempt to tame them. Then the man looked up and Jim saw his grey-blue eyes and friendly smile. He was younger than Jim had expected. His skin had the pallor of someone who rarely saw the sun but despite that he was perhaps the most beautiful young man Jim had seen for a long time. Jim felt an immediate attraction but he ruthlessly suppressed it. That was not his purpose here and his goal was too important to let his cock do the thinking.

The young man gestured to the chair on the other side of the desk. “Please, have a seat.”

Jim sat down warily.

“Before we begin, I have to ask. Are you a cop?”

It was a sensible precaution. If a police officer came here and denied what he was, any evidence he gathered would be inadmissible: entrapment. But Jim wasn’t worried about that.

“I’m not a cop,” he answered. Him, a cop in Cascade? Jim could trace his family back to the twentieth century and he knew that there were lawyers and police in his family history, but no Ellison had such a mundane job in Cascade today. The very idea was ridiculous.

The man nodded. “I am Doctor Sandburg. Why don’t you tell me what I can do for you?” He turned his head slightly as he spoke, and Jim spotted the tattoo on his neck: the same stylised wolf’s head that was on the door.

Jim stiffened. He knew he was in Wolfpack territory; he had not known this doctor belonged to them. It made Jim uneasy. On the plus side, it told him that this doctor was competent, in spite of his youthful appearance. But the downside was bigger. Jim couldn’t trust that his visit would remain confidential and he did not want to give the Wolfpack something to hold over him. He didn’t want anyone to know. That was his whole reason for coming here instead of getting more conventional medical assistance.

Doctor Sandburg waited patiently while the silence spun out. Finally, with a barely audible sigh, he leaned back in his chair. "You made an appointment, so I know you haven't come for emergency treatment. I can tell by looking at you that you're not in withdrawal, so it's not narcotics. Your IDent® says you're registered at a Docklands medical practice, so if you were sick, you'd go to them. That means your reason for coming to me is, well, illegitimate. So it's either mods or steroids."

This was a mistake. Jim stood. "I'm sorry. I shouldn't have come," he muttered and turned toward the door.

"I'm gonna guess it's steroids," the doctor added, as if Jim hadn't spoken.

Jim turned back to him, surprised. He had a strong and athletic body which he kept in top condition, but he was no cheat. He got the body he had through hard work. Why would this young pup assume he wanted steroids?

"You're wrong," Jim answered.

Doctor Sandburg nodded gravely. "You're looking for mods?"

"I...yes. I mean, I was. But..."

"Sit down, for goodness' sake." Doctor Sandburg flashed a reassuring smile. "You've got nothing to lose by telling me what you want."

"I do," Jim said. "Have something to lose, that is," he clarified when he saw Sandburg's frown. But he didn't explain. If he revealed that secrecy was important to him, he was opening himself up for blackmail.

"You've taken the biggest step already. You're here. Why not talk to me?" Sandburg gestured to the chair again.

Reluctantly, Jim sat.

"Do you have any mods already?" Sandburg asked him.

It was a reasonable question. Jim shook his head. "No. The usual comm chips, but nothing more. I was offered basic enhancements when I was in the army, but I didn't need them."

"Okay. Are you looking for something, uh," Sandburg hesitated for a moment, and then finished, "something visible?"

Visible cybernetic modifications – mods – were usually ostentatiously visible. They ranged from simple skeletal enhancements that had originated as treatments for injuries to full-on mecha. Jim knew it was the fashion among certain people, but the thought of doing that to himself made him feel nauseous. Nothing like that would help Jim.

"No," he said firmly. "It's no good to me unless I can hide it."

Sandburg nodded again. "So, what effect is it you want?"

Jim hesitated again.

"Come on," Sandburg urged, impatience creeping into his voice. "You've trusted me this far."

Actually, he hadn't. Jim wouldn't have said even this much if he'd been using his real IDent® and they were getting into dangerous territory. He had rehearsed this conversation a hundred times in his head. He knew he had to be honest, fully honest, for the mods he wanted to work. But still he hesitated. Trust didn't come naturally to him.

But what other choice did he have? Finally, Jim answered. "Sensory. I've read about the new IK-47 units for the eye-sight..."

"Ah," Sandburg interrupted him. "I can certainly install an IK-47 for you, but as you say, it's very new. That means it's costly. In a few months the price will come down, but at the moment..."

"How much?" Jim asked bluntly.

Sandburg named a figure and Jim almost smiled. It was a hefty sum, but not unexpected and not out of Jim's reach. "That's acceptable," he said carefully, "if it works."

"Search. Elijah CyberNet, IK-47. Download spec," Sandburg instructed his matrix. He knew the name of the manufacturer without having to check, Jim noticed. It increased his confidence in the doctor: the man knew his stuff and kept up with the latest tech.

The matrix's holo came on and a cartoonish clock appeared in the air above the desk.

"Why the 47 in particular?" Sandburg asked Jim.

Again Jim hesitated, unwilling to disclose his secret. "Control," he answered. It was an honest answer, just not a complete one. "I read it works like a biological eye, giving the user a fine control over the, uh..."

Sandburg reached for his matrix projector and turned the holo a little so Jim could see the display more clearly. After a moment, the specs for the eyesight mod Jim had researched appeared in the holo. Sandburg touched the image and rotated it.

"The IK-47 is a new class of mod," he explained as the technical diagram rotated. "Undetectable by the standard scans because it reads more like a neurally integrated link than a mod. That doesn't mean it's entirely undetectable or that the best scanners won't recognise it. The IK-47 uses nanotechnology to integrate with your nervous system, which is what gives you that control. That part is true. But it also means you can't just get it implanted and walk out of here with super vision. It takes time to integrate and even more time for you to learn the system. To get the fine control they're advertising, you have to adjust to the mod. It's similar to learning to walk again after a badly broken bone."

"How much time?"

"It would vary. I've only got the data from the company, but based on this...maybe four weeks. Probably six months before you learn enough to use it to its full potential."

Jim's stomach felt hollow. He hadn't anticipated it would take so long. His research told him most mods took a week or so to settle. But six months! He couldn't disappear for that long. He couldn't wait that long.

"That level of integration takes time," Sandburg said, evidently reading Jim's worry. "I've got sight mods I could fit for you tonight and you'd have it working by morning. But they wouldn't be undetectable."

Jim nodded to say he understood, but his mind was racing. He wanted something that wouldn't be visible, but he wasn't worried about passing scans. Getting a mod this way was illegal, sure, but there were ways around that. It was secrecy he needed, and a long recovery would make that impossible.

"Guess I wasted your time," Jim said glumly. He shifted his weight in the chair, about to get up.

"Wait," Sandburg said sharply. He dimmed the holo-display. "Look, I know you've done your research, man, but I know a lot more about this than you can pick up online. So why don't you explain to me what you want from a mod, and I'll figure out if there's something out there that will fit?"

It was a sensible suggestion, but Jim was fairly sure he'd covered all the bases himself. To explain fully to this doctor required trust. And Jim couldn't trust an underground doctor who was owned by the Wolfpack. He sighed. "Don't take this the wrong way, but I'm not desperate enough to lay out my business for the Wolves."

Sandburg stiffened. "I'm a doctor. This is confidential."

"I can't trust that." Jim looked pointedly at the tattoo on Sandburg's neck.

"Hey, that's not fair. Sure, I have an arrangement with the Wolfpack, but they don't own me. I don't betray my patients."

"That's not the way I hear it works," Jim answered levelly. Everyone knew there was no compromise with the Wolfpack. You were either one of them, or you weren't. The tattoo said it all, whatever kind of "arrangement" this doctor thought he had.

Sandburg stood and walked around the desk. "I get it, man. I see a lot of people here, and most of them are addicts of one kind or another. You're different. I can tell you need help. You're not desperate yet, but you wouldn't be here if you had anywhere else to go. I can help you, if you trust me."

He was persuasive. And it was true. It had taken Jim forever to find this one doctor. He had nowhere else to go.

"I have..." he began, hoping he could keep at least some of his business to himself, "...problems with my eyesight. I need control of it."

Sandburg nodded. "Well, you don't need something as expensive as the IK-47 to improve your vision. There's – "

"No, Doc," Jim interrupted. "You don't understand. I don't need improved vision. I need the opposite."

For the first time, surprise registered on Sandburg's face. "Why would you want...?" he began, frowning a little. Then his eyes widened, his expression registered something like fear. His eyes flickered to his right: a swift, involuntary movement which told Jim their conversation was not as private as Sandburg claimed.

Sandburg recovered quickly. Leaning across the desk, he cleared his throat a little before going on. "I'm sorry, your reasons are none of my business."

Suddenly the holo flickered and vanished. A burst of static and high-pitched feedback came from the computer and Jim clapped his hands over his ears. That hurt!

"Sorry!" the doctor said. He did something to the computer and some of the sound faded. It was less painful, but Jim still heard a lot of static. What the hell was wrong with the computer?

Sandburg was looking at him, an odd, intense look. He spoke almost inaudibly. "Are you a sentinel?"

Jim flinched at the word and instantly knew he'd answered the question. He knew something else, too. That computer glitch was no accident. Sandburg triggered it somehow, and Jim could think of only one reason to have pre-programmed something like that: to knock out surveillance. So much for confidentiality.

"And you need control?" the doctor said, apparently oblivious to Jim's growing anger. "I can help, but not here." He tapped the computer again and the static finally cut out. More loudly, Sandburg said, "Man, I'm sorry about that. This equipment is temperamental sometimes."

Jim began to stand. Coming here was a serious mistake. He should have walked out the instant he saw the Wolfpack was involved here.

The door burst open and a woman strode in. Jim spun to face her, automatically reaching for his absent gun. He tried not to stare, but it was a struggle. She was the most striking woman he had ever seen.

She was tall, close to Jim's height, with an hourglass figure and long, blonde hair: she had been beautiful, once. Now the mecha overwhelmed her beauty. Silver covered the right side of her face: smooth and shiny around her eye, pitted metal across the cheek and a glitter of silver dots around her mouth. Her right eye looked biological, but the iris was full of circuitry and Jim caught a flash from her pupil that was definitely mecha. Above the eye, a stylised wolf head was etched into the metal, proclaiming her allegiance. Along her jawline on both sides were crystal chips of many colours – on their own they would have looked like jewellery. She was dressed head to foot in skin-tight black and Jim saw the ripples of other mods beneath the cloth: wires across her chest and a coil like a solenoid around her collar bone. Her hands, too, had a glint of metal and she wore a power pack outside her clothing, on her belt beside a large gun. Jim suspected she had more mods than was healthy, but he saw no sign of the tell-tale dark veins of an addict.

The woman's eyes locked onto Jim for an instant then she focussed her steel gaze on Sandburg. "Need you. Parker's coming in bloody."

Sandburg straightened instantly. "How long?" he asked.

"Soon!" She whirled, revealing a bulge of mecha on her spine, too. Ignoring Jim altogether, she strode out of the room. The door slammed behind her.

Doctor Sandburg stood. "I apologise," he said awkwardly. He looked genuinely chagrined. "Look, I'll research the mod you want and find out for sure about the integration time. Here..." He took a contact card from his pocket, wrote on it and offered it to Jim. "Call me. We'll set up a new appointment."

And give you another chance to screw me? Jim thought. I don't think so. He did stretch out a hand to take the card.

The doctor held onto it a moment too long. "I mean it, man. I can help. Call me."

Jim nodded curtly and pocketed the card.

\*

Blair collapsed into the chair. He rubbed his hands on his pants, wiping away sweat. Alex hadn't been listening. If she was on comms with Parker, she hadn't been monitoring Blair's meeting. Ellsworth was safe.

A sentinel. Another sentinel. Blair's heart was beating wildly. He reached into the desk and injected himself with a dose of Tranquil. Nothing too strong: just a mild dose to steady his nerves. He hoped Ellsworth would call him. But not too soon! Blair needed time to work out a strategy that would keep them both safe.

The medication helped and Blair was calm when Alex returned. He had already pulled back the curtain, revealing the emergency operating theatre. It was as well-equipped as any hospital in the city above, with space for three patients. Each bed had its own medi-scan and life support. Along the back wall, Blair's supplies were neatly organised: instruments, drugs and crisis mods.

"What's the damage?" Blair asked Alex. He didn't ask what happened – he didn't need to know that. Only what he had to prepare for.

"Chen is shot. His pack was hit. Frankel's bloody but walking."

"Just the two?"

"So Parker said."

Blair quickly assessed what he would need. Chen used an F32 power cell; replacing that would be most urgent. But the power cell being hit could mean it was no longer functioning, or it could mean it was leaking fuel. That would be extremely bad. He would need to neutralise the fuel first. He crossed to the supplies and found the chemicals that would do it.

"Alex, mix these for me while I scrub and sterilise."

She took the bottles with a curt nod. The instructions were on the bottles, but she assisted Blair frequently in emergencies and knew what to do.

Blair ran the sterilisation programme: blue light lasered across the room and he saw the sparkles of the nanobots doing their work. While that was running, he turned to his own station to scrub. He slicked back his hair, covered it with a cap and then slathered a cleaning gel over his exposed flesh: face, neck and hands. Then he slid a sterile coverall over his clothing and cleaned his hands again.

He could already hear the commotion of men in a panic outside when he completed his preparation by pushing a button and holding both hands under a spray of blue surgi-seal. It formed a second skin over his hands which was both sterile and would protect him.

Five men burst into the room. Two of them carried a third, who was moaning in pain.

Blair pointed to the nearest medi-scan. "Get Chen there, now. Alex, give me the neutraliser then see to Frankel."



He ran to the medi-scan, but didn't need its readout to see that Chen was in serious trouble. His F32 had been shattered by a bullet. Shards of metal were embedded in his flesh, but it wasn't the metal that worried Blair. It was the liquid fuel from the cell. Free of the cell, it was eating through his flesh rapidly.

"Back off!" Blair ordered the men. He pulled what was left of Chen's clothing away from the wound and gagged at the smell of burning flesh. He pushed everything but the immediate problem out of his mind. First, he injected a dose of neo-morphia for the pain. He pulled away the largest chunk of the shattered F32 and let it fall to the ground. He took the neutraliser from Alex and applied it to the wound with his hands. It wasn't the right way to go about this, but it was fastest, and every microsecond made a difference.

His fingers searched out the shrapnel as he worked the neutraliser into Chen's torn flesh. He found five or six sharp pieces of metal. Behind him, he heard the voices of the men and hoped Frankel's injury was simple enough for Alex to deal with it.

A seizure wracked Chen's body. Blair glanced at the scanner. Chen had been without power for too long. His mecha was failing, causing his body to flood with adrenaline to compensate.

It was a no-win situation. If Blair didn't finish neutralising the leaked fuel, it would eat its way to Chen's vital organs and he would die. If Blair didn't replace the fuel cell, Chen's heart was going to fail in moments.

Blair decided. He withdrew his hands from Chen's wound and reached for the replacement F32.

Two hours later, Blair closed Chen's eyes with his bloody fingers. He drew a sheet over what was left of Chen and leaned back against the medi-bed. He felt numb and exhausted. Chen had been dead from the moment the bullet hit his power pack. The leaked fuel sealed his fate before Blair had a chance to help him. Blair could have replaced the ribs and lung, but he hadn't realised the fuel had already reached Chen's heart. When he did, it was too late. Blair built a new heart in record time, and he got it beating in Chen's chest. But by then there wasn't enough left of Chen to revive.

Blair stripped the surgi-seal off his hands and dumped the surgical gown and cap in the trash. He set the cleaning programme and walked out of the room. He had to report to Alex.

\*

The room where the Wolfpack did business was deceptively plain. The security and defences were not visible to a casual glance. Alex stood on the raised dais at the far end of the room; Parker stood facing her, his body stiff. Even from a distance Blair could see the barely controlled fury in Alex and he quailed inside. He didn't want to give her the news when she was in this mood. There was always a chance she would blame the messenger. His scars itched at the thought; a sense memory of the last time she blamed him for someone else's tragedy.

Alex had Parker's gun in her hand. As Blair nervously walked the length of the room, she stroked Parker's cheek with the barrel of the gun, whispering something Blair couldn't hear. Parker never flinched.

Blair stepped onto the dais and met Alex's dangerous eyes. "It was too late," he reported, struggling to keep his voice neutral. "I did everything I could, but he's gone."

Alex's cyber-eye flashed red as she turned her gaze back to Parker. "You lost the shipment," she said icily. "You lost Chen." She transferred the gun to her left hand and cupped Parker's cheek with her right. It looked gentle, like a caress, but Blair knew it wasn't. He could see the predator in her.

Parker stared straight ahead, but Blair saw his legs begin to tremble.

"One loss, I might forgive," Alex purred, "but two..." She smiled, the expression twisted by her facial mods: only half of her face was really capable of a smile.

She struck swiftly. Blood spurted from Parker's neck – an arterial spray. He made an odd, choking sound and seemed to look down at the blood pouring down his chest. His knees buckled.

Blair started forward. He could save Parker if she let him act immediately.

But Alex gestured sharply, forbidding his approach. Blair looked helplessly at the other men in the room, the men who had been on Parker's team that night. Not one returned his gaze: he would find no help there.

Alex watched Parker's blood flow across the floor, pooling around her boots. She raised her right hand, admiring the way the sharp steel claws that tipped each finger caught the light. Then she flexed her hand. One by one, the claws retracted into her fingertips, each with a soft snick.

Her gaze returned to Blair. "Frankel?" she asked.

"He's fine. He left."

"Good," she said. "Get someone to clean that up, then join me."

Blair swallowed. He wasn't up to playing her games, but she would not give him a choice. He nodded a reluctant acknowledgement. "Sure. Ten minutes."

"Five." She walked away, leaving bloody boot-prints behind her.

\*

The door closed behind Jim as he emerged into the rain. He heard the lock engage behind him and a moment later the noxious air of the undercity surrounded him once more. He looked up and felt the rain on his skin. It wasn't really rain, of course. Above him was not sky or cloud but the great mass of Sky City Fifteen. Instead of stars above he could see the flickering red lights that warned traffic away from the anti-gravity engines. In the darkness, Jim could make out the long, icicle-like spikes that descended from the city. Water in the air condensed around the spikes, ran down them in constant streams, creating the constant rain that fell on the city beneath the city. The rain contained traces of oil and grit: it was dirty, but not toxic.

The sky cities were made possible by the anti-gravity technology developed a century earlier by Ellison Industries. Sky City One was built over the ruins of San Francisco after the earthquake of 2247: the first quake-proof city. The earth beneath Sky City One could shake as it pleased without affecting the city which floated high above. Sky City One was tethered in place, but some of the later sky cities were built to move. These nomadic cities travelled slowly, on predictable routes and the constant rain they generated was put to use in fields below them. Sky City Fifteen was completed in 2283, the year after the Red Night Riot in the city beneath the city. It was the largest of the Americansky cities and the home to the company that built all of them: Ellison Industries.

Jim felt a touch of claustrophobia in his awareness of the huge mass of the city above his head, but he shook it off as he headed back into the alley. There was a familiar itch between his shoulder blades for the entire walk out of Wolfpack territory. He did not believe there was really a sniper out there, but there were certainly eyes on him, electronic and bio.

At the monorail station he bought a ticket for Docklands and paid in cash. Docklands wasn't his real destination. He resettled the scarf over his face as he climbed to the platform: the smells of fuel and cigarettes weren't nearly as toxic as the streets he'd left, but were still unpleasant. As if the mention of sentinels had summoned his disability, everything seemed more intense: the smells stronger, the sounds louder.

He glanced over the seats on the platform, but none appeared clean. He stood instead, slouching back against a billboard flashing ads for women's lingerie and touched the commlink on his wrist to activate it. Although implanted in the flesh, comm chips were not considered mods because they were implanted just under the skin and did not pump fuel residue into the blood; instead the fuel waste sweated through the skin and you simply washed it away. Such chips didn't link to the nerves or other bodily systems, though Jim's did include a bio monitor. He felt the tingle of electricity pulse through the re-activated link as it automatically sent an encrypted signal back to its mainframe. The signal wasn't merely a ping to establish contact; it contained a lot of data. Jim didn't know exactly how much, but he knew it included his location and vital signs, how fast he was moving and on what vector. If he were sick, or hurt, the mainframe knew it. If his heart rate elevated, the mainframe would check his location and decide whether he was at the gym or in action. Or having sex. Which was the reason he had turned the damn thing off for his appointment.

The rail began to vibrate, announcing the approaching train. A moment later Jim saw the headlamp of the train emerging from the darkness. Jim stepped forward as it pulled into the platform.

He felt the buzz of the commlink on his wrist and glanced at it. The LED flashed amber.

Shit. Jim knew shutting off his comm was a risk but that amber command meant he was needed. He stepped onto the train and pulled the earpiece from inside his leather coat. He hooked it over his ear as he glanced around the car. "Base," he instructed.

The comm buzzed only once before Simon's voice came on the link. "Ellison, we've got a problem."

Jim had guessed as much from the amber command. He took a seat as far as possible from his fellow passengers. At this hour, there were not many: a kid lost in his music, a woman in a dark cloak, trying to be invisible, and an older man, unwashed and apparently high on something. No one was paying attention to Jim.

He kept his voice low; the system would filter out the train noise. "What's happened?"

"I've been calling you for an hour! Why did you turn off your link?"

"Because Brackett's on my back enough as it is," Jim snapped. Truth, but phrased in a way to lead Simon to the wrong conclusion.

Simon snorted. "Hot date, Ellison?"

"One of those," Jim quipped. If Simon was relaxed enough to banter, the situation wasn't too serious. Or at least not too urgent.

"What?" Simon asked, his confusion evident.

"Hot. Date. One of the two. You pick. Are you calling in the quad?"

"Already did. You're late."

Jim sighed. "I'm on my way, Simon." He waited, in case Simon had more to say, but the link disconnected abruptly. Jim drew a relieved breath. If any of the team were in trouble, Simon would have told him. But he was a long way from Base. He did some quick calculations in his head, trying to figure the fastest route. He couldn't get there in much less than an hour. He had planned to leave the monorail at Central and catch a cab to Base, but at this hour a cab would take too long. Better to take the Skyhook to Prospect where his own car, a Detroit Hercules deluxe aircar, waited. If any of the Wolves were tracking him, that could blow his cover, but the amber summons made it an acceptable risk. The Hercules was the fastest aircar on the civilian market. Jim glanced at the map of the monorail above the carriage window. The closest Skyhook was two more stops. For now, he was stuck on the monorail.

In the mid-twenty-first century, escalating international wars and terrorism created a climate of fear and paranoia in the, then, United States of America. There were still fifty states back then, and if the USA was no longer the dominant power in the world, it still ranked in the top five for wealth and power. History condemned President Mitchel's administration as a cure worse than the disease he was elected to treat. He promised to make America safe again, but to do so he cut the heart out of the constitution and Bill of Rights.

Jim wasn't historian enough to judge the rights and wrongs of the changes the Mitchel administration wrought, but he knew it began the fall of the USA from what it had been. Over the decades that followed successive constitutional amendments culminated in the Second Secession, but after that the country rebuilt itself and it was now a nation Jim Ellison was proud to serve.

One enduring legacy of the Mitchel administration was the establishment of UMIAC. Created as an anti-terrorism initiative the United Military Intelligence Agency and Command was a single agency intended to cut through the mess of conflicting jurisdictions and rights which allowed terrorists to hide within the gaps. UMIAC ran it all: foreign and domestic intelligence, military and civilian agencies. The original charter of UMIAC specified that the agency existed to detect, investigate and eliminate threats to national security by any means necessary and in its first decade of existence the agency had a fearsome reputation. "By any means necessary" was taken to extremes.

UMIAC reformed after the Second Secession, though, and now it was an elite corps, military by charter but drawing from civilian agencies, too: UMIAC valued talent over rank. Shades of the old UMIAC remained but were not abused.

A quad was deployed by presidential order in response to a suspected threat. Once deployed they had the authority to take almost action to combat that threat without seeking further authorisation. In practice that power was checked both within the agency by its complex rules and without the agency by political and practical realities. UMIAC saved lives, but still it was the rare extremes that got journalists' attention and maintained UMIAC's reputation.

The train slowed as it approached the station and Jim headed for the door. A UMIAC quad in Cascade, the city he loved, was a disturbing thought. He didn't know whether to be ashamed he was part of it, or happy he had some control over the situation. There was no question the quad was needed. Someone was using the Cascade docks to smuggle biological weapons. So far they had found connections to Sky City Fifteen and but not to the undercity. It looked as if Cascade was merely a venue and the smuggling would trace to some other country. Or was that just wishful thinking on Jim's part? He had been trying not to think about the undercity since his quad deployed here. Walking through the undercity streets reminded him how much deprivation there still was in Cascade. The contrast of the poverty-stricken and factionalised Cascade to affluent Sky City was stark and Jim felt some responsibility because his family was prominent in the state. These were gloomy thoughts and he made an effort to shake them off.

Jim stepped onto the platform and headed for the skyhook which would carry him to the city above.

\*

When Blair knocked and walked into Alex's apartment, she wasn't there. The apartment was long and narrow, like a corridor. The entrance led into the kitchenette. Alex never used it, but she allowed Blair to cook for her sometimes. Through the kitchenette was a lounge area with matrix and entertainment stations. Beyond that, at the far end, was the large, round bed, draped in black. Blair walked toward the lounge. He was about to turn on the vidscreen and download a movie when the bathroom door opened.

Alex walked toward Blair. Oil from her bath glistened on her skin. Her hips swayed as she walked. She was completely nude. Her golden hair hung loose about her shoulders, covering the wolf etched into her forehead mecha. But the hair couldn't cover everything.

Blair gazed at her body, because she wanted him to, but he was looking at the mods, not at her.

He had installed the first of Alex's mods himself. Like Ellsworth, she was a sentinel who needed help to control her senses. She'd come to Blair when he was newly qualified, offering enough money to tempt him into the illegal market. But it wasn't all about the money. He was fascinated by her case and the absorbing problem of how to help her. And he had helped her.

But Alex couldn't stop with the sensory mods. She wanted more. When she came to him with the specs for the spinal implant, Blair refused. It wasn't a necessary mod. It wouldn't enhance her strength or control. It was purely recreational, and she already had four mods. Too many could be dangerous, even with the top-of-the-line mods Blair installed. Alex found someone else to give her what she wanted. He should have guessed she would go behind his back.

That was her fifth mod, and five was the safe limit. But the next time she came to him, Blair did what she asked because he knew she would get the mod she wanted one way or another. He did not trust the quality she would get from another surgeon. He gave her the retractable claws. He had no choice. He gave her the muscle enhancement and the speed. Now, she couldn't survive without the mods. Her body had adapted, so without the mecha she would be effectively quadriplegic. Worse, the fuel cells she needed to power her mods were slowly killing her. That was the reason for the five-mod limit. A normal human body could process the waste from up to five fuel cells. More than five, and the body couldn't get rid of the waste fast enough, so it built up in the blood, causing the darkened veins of the mech addict and, eventually, an excruciating death.

Blair traced the veins becoming visible across Alex's chest. He smelled the scented oil on her skin. "You need another blood change," he reminded her.

"We'll talk about that later." Alex pulled him close to her and kissed him.

Blair slid his hands around her waist as he returned her kiss. Her hands pushed on his shoulders and he obeyed the silent command, moving backward toward the bed while they kissed. She ripped his shirt open with one hand. Blair felt the bed behind him an instant before she shoved him backward. He fell into soft sheets.

Alex killed a man less than an hour before; Blair had known she would be like this. Killing always made her crave sex, but he didn't like to be with her when she was in this mood. He tried to push her away. "Alex, I'm tired..."

It was a mistake. She drew her hand down his chest, unsheathing her claws. Blair felt the steel scratch his flesh, raising welts but not quite breaking the skin. She could scratch him bloody and love it. Blair had the scars to prove it.

"I need you, honey," Alex pouted. She began to work at his pants.

Damn, she was impatient. Blair tried to move her hand away. "Alex, no," he begged, but the words were a mere token resistance. She slid her warm hand between his legs, cupping his cock in her palm. His body betrayed him, his cock hardened to her touch.

"You're not that tired," she told him with satisfaction.

It was not healthy to refuse Alex, and it would be over more quickly if he let her have what she wanted. She wouldn't notice he wasn't into it; she never did. Alex was only interested in her own satisfaction.

Blair raised his hands to her breasts. Alex leaned into his touch with a sigh of pleasure. Blair rolled her nipples between his fingers and raised himself up to kiss her. He ran his tongue down the left side of her neck where there was no mecha beneath the skin. He couldn't help remembering how she used to be: lovely, soft and sexy. Blair loved Alex...once. He still loved the memory of her.

She moved away from his kiss, shifting position to pull his pants off. Blair let her do it, but once she dropped the pants on the floor he sat up on the bed. He hoped he could get her to slow down a little. At least that way he might get something out of this. Blair caressed her golden hair and tried to kiss her on her lips. Alex permitted the kiss, but gentleness couldn't satisfy her. Her mouth on his was hard and bruising. She moaned into his mouth and her teeth cut his lower lip. She grabbed his hand and pushed it between her legs, demanding. She was hot and wet. Blair, his own excitement rising, obligingly pushed two fingers inside her. Alex rocked against him, her breath coming faster.

Blair watched her with emotions so mixed he couldn't have named them. He loved to see her like this, her pleasure in her body, and his. He loved to touch her. But he knew she would spoil it. Alex couldn't simply relax and enjoy sex any more. She had to be dominant. She had to take.

Even knowing that, Blair had to try. Someday, maybe, she would allow him to make love to her the way they used to. He stroked her shoulder and arm, gently encouraging her to lie back. Alex pushed him backward instead, but she allowed Blair to draw her with him. She straddled his body and ran her hands over his chest. Her steel claws scratched him just hard enough to make him react to the pain; his breath came out in a hiss and he arched his back.

Alex laughed and shifted her position enough to draw his cock into her. Pain and pleasure. With Alex there was no difference. Blair gripped her thighs as she rode him hard, her body arched above him. Her hair swung around her face and she cried out her pleasure.

She used to cry out his name.

Blair looked up at her and revelled in the sight. In moments like this she was still beautiful. He felt a touch of the old spark between them and dared to hope that, just this once, she would let herself feel it for real.

Alex's breath came in short, sharp pants. She ran a hand across her belly to her side, leaving scratch marks on her own skin.

Don't, Blair thought, but he didn't dare to say it aloud. Then it was too late to say it. Alex triggered the spinal mod which sent a flood of endorphins through her system. Electrical impulses ran along her nerves, intensifying the orgasm rippling through her. She screamed, her hands flailing in the air between them for a moment before she found Blair.

He cried out in pain; Alex's claws pierced his skin and he felt his blood flow in warm, ticklish trails as she rode out the orgasm and collapsed on top of him at last.

Blair lay under her, staring at the ceiling until she rolled off him. Then he left the bed without a word. He picked up his clothing, dressed and left her alone.

\*

Walking from his surgery to the Honeycomb helped Blair to clear his head but by the time he reached his home he was soaked from the rain. It said a lot about his mental state that he'd walked out into the streets without his rain slicker. But the walk and the rain washed Alex from his body and clothing, if not his memory.

So much death. First losing Chen, then Alex's murder of Parker: both of them deaths Blair should have found a way to prevent. His shoulders slumped as he climbed the twisting path to his unit.

The Honeycomb was what was left of the temporary housing created for the workers who built Sky City Fifteen. After the city went online and everyone who could afford it moved to the sky, the old prefabricated housing was left to decay. Over the years, those left in Cascade had taken over the area. Old industrial shipping crates were piled atop prefabricated housing. Roofs and walls were reinforced with scavenged iron. Water reclamation systems were built to collect the rain from the city and filter out the dirt. It was 'grey water', not drinkable, but good for other purposes: washing, heating, even some rudimentary generators. The Honeycomb was so named because it had no streets or true pathways, just random gaps between the units which the inhabitants learned to navigate. Gaps too small for adults to squeeze through were used by children, who built dens of their own in nooks and holes. Some were quite dry and these became homes, or at least sleeping places, for youngsters with no adult to take care of them, but there were few children who couldn't find someone to take them in. The Honeycomb residents were poor, but they took care of their own.

To reach his home, Blair had to climb in a couple of places, but most of his route was easy to walk. Most roofs were treated with a thick, black tar that did not become slippery when wet, enabling everyone to walk more safely. Blair lived in the middle of the Honeycomb, where the units were sturdy and dry...and dark, as no natural light penetrated so far.

His door opened to a six-digit code punched into a keypad; it was not as secure as a palm-scanner but Blair kept little of value in his unit: everything worth stealing was in his Wolfpack rooms. But few would try to steal from the local doctor: he was well known, competent and generous with his time when his neighbours needed care. The door opened and the interior lights came on automatically as he entered. Blair stripped off his wet clothing and shoes in the entry hall where there were hooks and wires on which he could spread clothes out to dry. He shivered a little, but heard the whir as his heating system detected his presence and turned itself on: he would be warm soon enough.

His bare feet sank into the rug as he headed into the main room. Everything he needed was in a single room. The walls were concrete and iron, painted in shades of green. At the far end, his bed was piled with mismatched pillows and blankets, many of them gifts or payments from people he had treated. There were three battered but comfortable chairs arranged around a low table. On a nightstand two holographs were displayed. The holo of Blair's mother was old, taken when he was a boy. He hadn't seen her in the flesh since he was ten and rarely heard from her. The other holo showed his maternal grandparents; they took him in when he was taken from his mother and it was their legacy that enabled him to get his education. Alongside the bureau stood a tall closet, a small entertainment centre that held books on data-chips and music and, most important to Blair, a well-stocked kitchen. Between the long kitchen galley and the closet, a narrow door led to his tiny bathroom. While grey water was plentiful, space was not and the bathroom was barely big enough to stand in, with a shower fitting hanging over the washbasin which in turn could be raised to reveal the toilet.

Blair felt too tired to cook fresh food, so after dressing in soft pants and a thick, comfortable sweater, he dug into his freezer and found a pizza he could flash-heat. He spooned herbal tea into a pot while the pizza flashed and added water from a bottle. Drinkable water was expensive, but Blair could afford what he needed. He was more fortunate than many: his work for the Wolfpack gave him a steady income and he could live comfortably, if not in luxury.

That thought led him to consider his last patient of the night, before Frankel and Chen: Ellsworth, the man looking for one of the most expensive sight mods on the market. Was he truly a sentinel? Blair felt excited by the possibility. He had learned so much about the sentinel gift from working with Alex, but there was so much he didn't yet know, so much about Alex that didn't fit with the papers he'd read about sentinels. The opportunity to work with another sentinel was tantalizing. He had helped Alex with her abilities, but Blair was conscious he hadn't helped her very well. Ellsworth was an opportunity to start fresh, to avoid the mistakes he made with Alex. And maybe, just maybe, he could learn things that would help Alex, too.

\*

Jim shut off the Hercules' engine with a huge sigh of relief. He leaned back in the soft leather seat, closed his eyes and forced himself to breathe deeply to steady his nerves. Closing his eyes shut out the confusion of colours and images, but it did nothing for his other senses. He could feel the sweat drying on his skin, his clothing prickling everywhere it touched him. He smelled gasoline and cigarette smoke, oil and the scents of that filthy alley still lingering on his clothes: rot, decay and death. He was surrounded by a cacophony of sound: the tick-tick of the car's cooling engine, the rasp of his breath, the dah-dum of his own heartbeat. The thud of footsteps approaching his vehicle and a waft of a familiar perfume.

Jim opened his eyes just as a gloved hand tapped lightly on the glass beside his head. He opened the door.

"What the hell are you doing?" Connor demanded. Her voice thundered in Jim's head. She bent toward the window and her auburn hair fell forward and brushed against the glass. Jim took in her appearance with a glance: hair loose, makeup flawless, a glint of diamonds in her ears. Simon had interrupted her night out.

"Nice to see you, too," Jim growled.

"You're in no state to drive, Ellison." Connor's voice softened. "Was it another attack?"

There was little point in denying it. Jim nodded. He knew he shouldn't have been driving, but the amber command meant the situation was urgent and there had been no faster way to travel. With his senses spiralling out of control, driving the Hercules was a terrifying experience, even with the autopilot to compensate. The system would have picked up his elevated adrenaline and since Simon had called in the quad, Daryl would have known how to interpret that data. They knew his control was slipping again.

So he said only, "I'm okay, Connor."

"You're sure?" she pressed.

"Yeah." He slid out of the car, locked it with his palm print and fell into step beside Connor as they headed inside.

A standard quad consisted of two active agents, a mission co-ordinator and an information specialist. The senior active and the mission co-ordinator always held equal rank and mission command could lie with either of them, depending on the mission parameters.

Jim was the senior active agent on this quad; Agent Megan Connor the junior active. Agent Connor replaced Jim's former partner three years earlier; she was a temporary civilian transfer from another agency that had become permanent and they were now a tight-knit team. Though she had no military rank, she was an honorary captain by protocol within the agency. UMIAC drew talent from all branches of the military and law enforcement; ability was prized above all and the agency's chain of command and protocols reflected that.

Their mission co-ordinator was Simon Banks. Simon spent five years in the army, but where he really earned his stripes was as a cop. UMIAC recruited him after he headed a multi-agency task force investigating a drug syndicate, restored him to his former military rank then promoted him to Major. Banks had been Jim's MC for five years, and Jim was happier with Simon in command of the quad than he was when circumstances placed him in charge. Major Banks ran the team with an iron fist but they trusted him to lead their missions because he had earned it. He knew when to trust them to go it alone and when to interfere. He kept the team safe.

When Jim was first promoted to senior active status, Banks approached him, proposing they form a quad together. Simon had a unique problem: he worked with an artificial intelligence as his information specialist and would not accept a post that required him to give up his partner. This was just a few months after the disaster with the Gemini Matrix and most unattached actives were unwilling to work with an AI on the team. Initially, Jim had the same reservations, but he was impressed by Banks' service record. He had a mission and he needed a team, so Jim agreed to a probationary partnership. It only took that one mission to prove to Jim that Daryl was no ordinary AI. As soon as they returned from that mission Jim cut short the probationary period and formed a permanent quad with Banks as mission co-ordinator.

In the converted apartment that was the quad's base in Cascade, Jim took his seat at the briefing table. He placed his left hand, palm down, in the scanner. It glowed briefly and when it confirmed his identity a touchscreen rose from the table in front of him and activated.

In the seat opposite, Connor did the same. She had shed her coat, revealing clothing that matched her makeup: a low-cut top with glitter around the neckline and a tight, full-length skirt. She wore diamonds in her ears and a gold chain around her neck. She'd been on a date. It might have been part of her cover, but the delicate perfume and the chain – hers, not agency issue – made Jim suspect that it was personal. Connor was married. Her husband lived in Washington DC but he could have flown in for a visit. It would be characteristic for Connor, an intensely private person, not to mention it to her colleagues.

Connor met Jim's eyes across the table, silently asking if he was okay. Jim smiled a quick affirmative. In this place, so familiar to him, it was easier to control his senses.

"As you both know," Simon began as he took his seat, "there was a transfer going down tonight."

Connor nodded, calling up her files as she spoke. "I placed eyes and ears throughout the location, multiple redundancies. The objective was surveillance only so it was assigned to Daryl."

Which is why we both took the night off, Jim thought. He turned to Daryl, or rather, to the AV unit that was Daryl's avatar at the conference table. It could display an animated image of his face – or the face he chose to show them all – or it could display data as they discussed his findings. It was showing a "hold" image which as Jim turned to the display changed into the face of a young man.

Daryl picked up the story. "The shipment arrived on schedule." His voice was not mechanical at all: a rich tenor with very human cadences.

In the centre of the table, a holo-display activated and formed a 3D image of the shipyard. The shipping containers were transparent so they could all see the small holographic people moving between them.

"This is what happened at 23:33 when the deal was about to go down," Daryl reported.

They watched the holographic people gather. There were two groups: two sides of the deal. If the holo was accurate, all of them were male. Two people waited outside the shipping container. They were joined by three others who arrived in a large grav-van: these were the purchasers and the individuals the quad most wanted to identify. All as expected. But then others appeared. Two leapt from the surrounding containers. Three came from the shadows between them. There was an exchange of fire and the newcomers were driven back. It looked as if at least two of them were hit.

One of the attackers threw a grenade toward the shipping container. A second later, it blew. Those containers were sturdy; the blast was enough to destroy whatever was inside, but the container itself enclosed the explosion. A blast of flame burst from the open end of the container.

Daryl froze the image as the blast illuminated the scene. Two men were in motion, fleeing the explosion. Two others were lifting the body of a third into their open van, just outside the reach of the flames. Daryl's display zoomed in on the three. There was a clear image of one face, but it was the injured man who caught Jim's eye. He saw the bulge of a power pack at the man's side and the hand that clutched at the others for support was metal.



"Wayne Andrew Parker," Daryl reported, identifying the face. "Thirty six years old. Native of Cascade. Criminal convictions for – "

Jim interrupted. "He's a Wolf, isn't he?"

"Confirmed," Daryl responded.

"The buyers are from the Wolfpack," Jim repeated. His mouth felt dry. How close had he come to disaster tonight? "Who were the attackers? What did they get?"

"Unknown, and nothing," Simon reported. "The attack disrupted the deal and both sides left empty handed. But you see why this changes our strategy?"

Jim understood. He was a native of Cascade and he knew his city well. It was possible he understood this better than the others. They had thought some foreign group were the buyers. Evidence gathered early in their investigation pointed to one of the European criminal organisations funnelling their contraband through the US to avoid the strict Euro-Asia border controls. Seeing the Wolfpack here changed everything.

"This might not be their first purchase," Simon added.

His words made Jim readjust his thinking again. Of course, they didn't know that the Wolfpack had been the buyers all along. The Euro connection might still be there.

"We need to know what they have," Simon continued. "And why they want it." He turned to Daryl. "Is there anything in their systems?"

"The Wolfpack systems are well secured. I haven't yet broken through," Daryl answered.

"If we can't hack in," Connor suggested, "we'll need a contact on the inside." She looked at Jim. He knew why: she was already undercover. It was possible to juggle two undercover identities but she wouldn't attempt it when another agent – Jim – was available.

The problem was Jim already felt like he was juggling two identities. Being back in Cascade meant he had to be an Ellison again. The name meant something in Cascade and it was an identity he preferred to take up only on his rare visits. If he had to go undercover, the stress would be hell on his senses.

"Tell us about the Wolfpack, Jim," Simon said.

Jim thought for a moment. Simon couldn't know the turmoil of memories the question raised for Jim. "When I was a kid, they were just another street gang. They made the news sometimes, but no more than the others. It was when the illegal mods started to flood the undercity that the Wolfpack changed. The Wolves cornered the early market in Cascade. It led to a war between the gangs. You've probably heard of the Red Night Riot but trust me when I say you don't get it if you weren't in Cascade that night."

Jim took a breath, fighting back the memory of a metal-studded face snarling above him, of gunfire, screams and blood. Of a man he knew, falling, light visible through the hole in his chest. Of a man in a soldier's uniform, offering a hand and a kind word. And of the week full of funerals that followed. In both Cascade and Sky City, "Where were you on Red Night?" was a question you asked only of someone you trusted. And you answered it only if you returned that trust.

He turned to Daryl. "Daryl, access the footage for me. Red Night Riot. Aftermath at the stadium and mall."

"Searching." Daryl responded tonelessly, then his animated face vanished and was replaced by an old 2D news report. The camera panned slowly across the inside of a shopping mall. It resembled a field of battle. Stores had been smashed and looted. Human bodies, broken and bloody, lay everywhere. Many showed signs of shattered mods and fuel burns. Over the images, the voice of the news anchor explained that the Cascade police had finally quelled the battling gangs. City jails were overflowing. The National Guard were patrolling the streets. After seven nights of fighting, the cost to the city was incalculable. So was the cost in lives.

There was silence at the table as they all absorbed the horror of that long-ago civil unrest.

Jim resumed his narrative. "They called it a riot, but it was more like war on the streets. Those gangs were organised like sovereign states. There were alliances and they broadcast formal declarations of hostility across the networks. It was a complete rejection of the rule of law, which is why it took seven days to put it down. They were fighting for their territory. For a couple of years after the street war the gangs were less trouble. Some of them even vanished. But the Wolfpack used that time to regroup and strengthen their numbers. Today they operate a number of legitimate businesses as fronts for the illegal. Exactly what they do, I don't know. Police have reports of everything from prostitution and drug dealing to mecha and bio weapons."

"Who is their boss?" Connor asked.

Jim shrugged. "As far as I know, there isn't an overall leader. They are called a pack, but it's more accurate to say they're a confederation of several packs. Cells. Each cell is autonomous and co-operates with the others."

"So we don't just have to infiltrate the Wolfpack. We have to infiltrate the right cell," Connor concluded.

Jim detected some hesitation in her tone and was glad to hear it. He was not eager to go undercover with the Wolfpack. He knew something about the cell they wanted, at least. The cyber woman had told him: Parker's coming in bloody, she had said. That had to be the man Daryl identified as Wayne Andrew Parker. It didn't identify the cell, but it was a breadcrumb trail to follow.

Jim looked at Simon. Ultimately, it was his decision.

"Simon, I'll take on the infiltration if that's what we decide. But it might not be the best way. I can't pose as a recruit or a wolf from another pack. No mecha: I'd stand out like a virgin in a strip joint."

"Alternatives?" Simon demanded.

"Daryl," Jim answered at once. "If he can hack their system he'll have everything we need, and he's got to do that anyway, because as Connor says, we won't know which cell to target until we've got access to their data."

Daryl said, "It'll take me one hundred and fourteen hours, thirty seven minutes to get full access."

"That's five days!" Connor sounded shocked.

"Too slow," Simon declared.

"I can do it faster with a direct link to their matrix. Otherwise, one hundred and fourteen hours, thirty seven minutes. That's how long it will take to crack the encryption."

Simon swore. "We can't move until we understand what went down tonight. If that means we have to wait a week..."

Jim slipped a hand into his pocket. He felt the smooth edges of the contact card Doctor Sandburg gave him. He laid the card on the table where they could all see the words Doctor Sandburg had scrawled on the card.

CALL ME AT THIS LNK NOT THE ONE ON THE CHIP. LT555-743

"It's a gamble," Jim told them, "but I might have a way to get Daryl the direct link he needs."

## CHAPTER TWO: "NO GOOD COFFEE IN THE CRIMINAL UNDERWORLD"

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...a typical human brain naturally filters sensory input to focus on the significant, to the point where we no longer consciously notice scents or sounds constantly present in our environment. For the sentinel whose ability reveals itself in adulthood, this control must be learned, or re-learned. A sentinel in control may be formidable; a sentate without it is unstable and unreliable. Prone to moments of trancelike distraction and sensory spikes, the uncontrolled sentinel is a danger to himself and in a combat situation would inevitably endanger others.

Assessment of the sentinel as a military asset, ©2136 Federal Government of the United States of America

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It was not easy to travel from the undercity to the city above. Most people used the Skyhook but Blair didn't like it one bit. An aircab from the undercity would take him only as far as the maintenance dock. This entryway at the base of the floating city was used mostly by undercity workers on temporary contracts; they did the low-skilled, dirty work that kept the anti-gravity engines working.

Blair stepped off the air cab and retrieved his credit card from the slot. The cab hovered for a moment then swooped away. He walked along the gantry to the elevator at the far end. At the elevator, he submitted to a standard scan. It detected his VR mod, which Blair expected. He showed his Ident® and waited for the system to verify that his mod was legal and not a weapon. When he was cleared, an elevator carried him upward to Sky City.

That only got him as far as Sky City's lowest streets. From there, Blair hailed another aircab. This one had a human operator so Blair asked for the quickest route to the Plaza. The operator gave him a strange look, but took him to the city's core, from where he could get an elevator to the city heights.

Blair stepped into the elevator. "Plaza," he said aloud, and the elevator began to rise. He was the only passenger. Music, a gentle but nondescript tune, played while the elevator made its ascent, not the blaring advertisements Blair usually heard. The only commercial was a small screen set into the elevator doors which helpfully displayed a silent, rotating banner introducing the stores and restaurants that could be found at his destination.

When the doors swished open at the Plaza, Blair stepped off the elevator into a world entirely alien to him. The Plaza was all white marble and light. At one end it was dominated by the huge mirrored skyscraper which reflected the blue sky and the distant snow-capped mountains: Ellison Tower, the home of Ellison Industries. On the other three sides Romanesque pillars with real ivy hanging from the beams above framed storefronts and displays. In the centre of the Plaza was a tall fountain. From where Blair stood, it looked like real water. He had never seen water just wasted like that.

Blair walked toward the fountain, uneasily expecting people to stare at him. He knew he looked out of place. His dark blue slicker would never be seen in Sky City and he slipped it off his shoulders self-consciously. He rolled it up and carried it under his arm, but his clothing beneath the slicker was not much better. He half-expected someone in authority to approach and tell him to leave. This was the home of Sky City's wealthy elite; Blair didn't belong here. He never had and never would. Around him, women wore dresses and high heels; men wore smart suits. He saw no sign of weapons on anyone. A few individuals had visible mods, but nothing like the gaudy mecha Blair saw among the Wolfpack.

There was a coffee vendor near the fountain. Blair watched a woman purchase a cup and take a seat on one of the marble benches to drink it. Blair was early, so he paid for a cup of coffee, wincing a little at the price. He walked toward the fountain, intending to sit on the edge. Close to the water, he could see it wasn't real water at all. It was a hologram: a beautiful, sparkling illusion of cascading water. He sat on the edge of the fountain, rested the coffee cup on his denim-clad knee, then took a sip. The coffee tasted wonderful.

Blair was a doctor. He graduated from med school top of his class and aced one of the best surgical programmes in the country. This could have been his world, had he made different choices eight years before. Had he never got involved with Alex.

He raised the coffee cup and inhaled the rich scent, closing his eyes to savour it.

"No good coffee in the criminal underworld?"

Blair spilled half of his coffee down his shirt. He swore and grabbed at his shirt, pulling the scalding fabric away from his skin.

Ellsworth deftly took the coffee cup from him before he could spill the other half. "I'm sorry. I thought you saw me." He didn't sound very apologetic. He sounded like he was trying not to laugh.

Blair looked up, annoyed. "Thanks, man. That's my best shirt."

Ellsworth managed to look a little chastened. "Well, I can help you with that. Come with me, Doc. You look uncomfortable out here anyway."

Ellsworth looked like he belonged in this world. He wore a neatly-pressed grey suit, a stiff-collared white shirt and a blue tie. A gold tie pin glittered on his chest. Blair looked down at his own clothing self-consciously. His pants were black denim. He wore a black leather jacket over his coffee-stained shirt, and a silver earring in his right ear. He looked even more out of place than he felt.

Blair fell into step beside Ellsworth, eager to be out of the Plaza, out of sight. Ellsworth strode across the Plaza confidently, heading for the shining tower at the east end of the square. Blair pulled himself together. He had known Ellsworth was wealthy. The IK-47 was expensive, and Ellsworth hadn't even blinked when Blair told him the price. Blair could figure out a way to blend in with this man's world if he had to. He hadn't exactly fit into Alex's world when they first met, either.

Ellsworth led him into Ellison Tower and straight to a security barrier. The guard on duty nodded to Ellsworth and pushed a button to let them through. He didn't ask for IDent® and Ellsworth didn't offer it. Maybe the guard knew Ellsworth by sight, but surely he should have challenged Blair? At the least, Blair should have been asked for IDent®.

Ellsworth walked to the executive elevator, which, in a way, answered Blair's unspoken questions. The elevator doors closed silently behind them.

"Eighty," Ellsworth instructed, and the elevator began to rise.

Blair could keep silent no longer. "Man, who are you?" he demanded.

Ellsworth laughed, his eyes crinkling. He flashed white teeth as he smiled. "Took you long enough."

"You gave me a false IDent® the other night!" Blair accused.

"Of course I did. I told you, I don't need the Wolfpack in my business." His smile held amusement, but no malice as he took in Blair's confusion. Blair was drawn to that smile; in spite of the lies, the man seemed so genuine. "Relax, Doc. Let's take care of that shirt, and then we'll talk business."

The eightieth floor was carpeted in white, with small lights inset as if to guide the way. For all Blair knew, that was their purpose. The elevator opened into a wide vestibule where a receptionist, immaculately dressed in a powder-blue uniform, smiled a friendly greeting.

"That was quick, Mr Ellison," she said.

Blair felt like all the air left his lungs at once. Ellison? He stared at her, certain he must have misheard.

"My friend here had a little accident while we were having coffee," Ellsworth – Ellison??? – explained. "Do you think we might have a change of clothing lying around?"

She smiled at Blair. "I'll take care of it, sir." Her eyes were a vivid violet. Blair thought at first it was a vision mod and automatically looked for the circuitry: professional curiosity. He saw none: it was either an exceptional mod or just violet-dyed irises. "What's your size?" she asked, her tone patient, and Blair realised she'd repeated the question.

"Huh?" he said stupidly.

"Your shirt size, sir," she repeated with no hint of disrespect or impatience.

"Oh. Yeah." He told her his size.

"And coffee for two, Marie, please," Ellsworth added.

"Of course, sir." She offered another lovely smile.

"This way," Ellsworth said to Blair and they walked past her desk. They walked past several offices to a plain door. There was a frame on the door for a nameplate, but no name was displayed. Ellsworth touched a palm-scanner to open the door and gestured for Blair to enter ahead of him.

It was... Wow. Amazing. The window drew his attention first: the entirety of one wall was glass, giving a magnificent view of the bay and the islands. On one side of the room was a comfortable living area: three leather couches around a glass-topped coffee table which Blair had no doubt could convert into a display. There were shelves holding real books protected by glass. The pictures on the walls were original artworks, not digital copies. A desk near the window was clear of everything but a comm unit and a holo display.

Mierde, what had he gotten himself into?

As the door closed, Blair repeated his earlier question. "Who the hell are you, man?"

Ellsworth turned blue eyes to Blair. Sentinel eyes, seeing everything. "I'm James Ellison," he said.

\*

It was Simon's idea.

Jim had explained what he knew about Doctor Sandburg to the team without saying anything about how or why they met. Daryl quickly verified the doctor's identity and qualifications and that he had some connection to the Wolfpack. Doctor Sandburg was their best shot at a contact on the inside. When it became clear that Simon expected Jim to continue the contact, Jim made no objection. But Simon knew him too well not to notice Jim's discomfort when they talked about building up the Ellsworth alias.

Simon took Jim aside and demanded to know what his problem was.

Jim sighed, leaning back against the cool wall. "I'll do my job, Simon."

"That's not what I asked, Jim. You've been off your game for days. What do I need to know?" The use of his first name told Jim that Simon was asking as a friend, not as MC.

"It's just...being home isn't easy, Simon. We were brought into this one because of who I am, but I'm distracted by it. I can't be in Sky City and ignore my family, or the company, but I can't be myself around them either. I feel like I'm already undercover."

Simon nodded. "I don't think it's fair to ask Megan, and you've already made contact."

"Like I said, I'll do my job."

"You don't have to use the Ellsworth alias. If you already feel into a role, why not use that one?"

Jim blinked. "What do you mean?"

"All that really matters is this doctor doesn't know you're an agent. James Ellison of the Cascade Ellisons is as good a cover as any. You already know how to play the part."

"That's true, but..." Jim automatically thought of several objections, but then stopped himself and really thought about it. It could work. But it might drag the company into the case and if that happened, Jim would be on his father's shit-list. That wasn't a comfortable place to be.

"Your father can spin on it," Simon growled, when Jim said as much.

Jim couldn't help smiling. "Okay. Let's do it. At least if Dad disowns me I'll never have to come home again."

Settling into the plush leather couch, Jim decided this had been a very good idea on Simon's part. The man in this office was as far removed from the real Jim as most of his undercover roles. James Ellison of Ellison Industries didn't really exist for much more than five days a year: the days he couldn't get out of attending shareholder meetings or high level functions. He knew how to play the part, to accept being waited on by assistants, to play at the politics and pretend he gave a crap about profit margins or mergers. But it was a mask. He found the whole thing tiresome and superficial compared to his real work with UMIAC. Even so, his office in Ellison Tower was a place he knew well; it was his own territory, so to speak. Here, he could feel in control in a way he rarely was on a covert op.

He gestured to the other couch, inviting Sandburg to sit. The man looked like his head was about to explode. Jim almost felt sorry for him. He understood the culture shock; he felt a mild version of it himself, but he was accustomed to adapting himself to his environment.

"You're an Ellison," Sandburg repeated. "I don't get it, man." He glanced around the room, his eyes taking in the evidence of wealth and privilege. "You could fly to Japan or Switzerland to get what you want. Hell, you don't need mods, you could get sentinel training. Why would you come to me?"

He got straight to the point, didn't he? Usually, Jim would have appreciated that. He was saved from having to answer immediately by a subtle alert on his link. Jim answered it by tapping his wrist and Marie entered the office. She carried a couple of suit bags over one arm and offered them to Sandburg. "One of these should suit you, sir. Would you like me to get that cleaned for you?"

Sandburg looked taken aback by the offer. "Uh..."

"I'll let you know, Marie," Jim interspersed smoothly.

"Of course." She headed to the dumb waiter and unloaded a tray: coffee with all the trimmings. She set the tray on the table, but did not offer to pour: she knew Jim disliked it.

"Thanks, Marie. That's all for now."

She left, and Jim took control of the conversation before Sandburg could fire out more questions. "There's a bathroom through there if you'd like to change," he suggested.

Sandburg looked at him, frowning. "Why? I mean..."

Jim shrugged. "I'm the one who made you ruin your shirt. It's only fair I fix it. Besides, you are kinda conspicuous dressed like that. I'd rather not have to explain why I'm hanging out with someone dressed like..." he broke off, unable to think of a way to finish the sentence that wouldn't be an insult. Sandburg looked like he'd come from the undercity: who else dressed for rain?

Sandburg's eyes narrowed. "Fine. I get it. But you know what I am and you invited me here. We could have met anywhere."

"True." Jim tried for a smile. "Relax. You don't have to wear it if you don't want to."

Sandburg muttered under his breath, gathered the suit bags to himself and headed over to the door Jim had indicated.

It gave Jim a precious moment to order his thoughts. He poured coffee for both of them and was halfway through his first cup when Sandburg emerged. He smiled into his cup. Marie had excellent taste. The shirt she supplied was a very pale pink with thin blue stripes that caught the colour of Sandburg's eyes. Even worn without a tie, it looked very good on the young doctor.

Jim set down his cup as Sandburg approached. "You said I can trust you. I hope that's true," he said seriously.

Sandburg took a seat, still looking a little uncomfortable. "I'm affiliated with the Wolfpack," he said. "I know that bothers you. Why wouldn't it? But I am a doctor first, Mr uh, Ellison."

"It's Jim."

Sandburg's look said he was never going to relax enough to be so familiar with an Ellison; a reaction Jim understood as much as he disliked it.

The doctor went on without acknowledging Jim's interruption. "As a doctor I respect the confidentiality of my patients."

"When I saw you the other night, you had someone listening in," Jim pointed out.

Sandburg took a deep breath. "Not exactly. I always have someone in the building as security. Usually, they monitor the surgery on camera, no audio. Everything is confidential that way, but they can still come in if a patient makes trouble."

Jim nodded, understanding. Sandburg had said he dealt with addicts and he did business in a rough area. Jim couldn't argue with his need for security.

"But that night my security was – " he broke off and looked down at his lap. "She wouldn't have paid any attention to what you said if we'd just been talking mods, but when I realised you were a sentinel...she would have heard that, man. And I didn't know what she'd do if she knew what you are. So I had to make sure she wasn't listening."

"She?"

He gave an odd shrug. "I can't tell you."

"Alexa Barnes," Jim snapped impatiently.

Sandburg's eyes flew open and he paled. "How...?"

It had been a shot in the dark. Daryl didn't have much data yet, but Alexa Barnes was one of the women they knew were associated with the Wolfpack. Daryl found only two images of her, and neither was very clear, but Jim thought it could have been the woman he saw in Sandburg's office.

"There isn't much I can't find out," Jim said evasively. "Which is part of my problem. If we're going to do business together, I need to be able to trust you."

Sandburg met his eyes. "You can trust me."

Jim believed he was sincere, but he didn't believe that this doctor would really keep his secrets under pressure. Still, this was no longer about the mod he wanted. Jim didn't know if he would have time to find another underground surgeon, but his mission was more important. Sandburg's sincerity was enough. He nodded. "Okay. Just do me a favour and stop calling me a sentinel."

"Sure. No problem."

Jim sipped coffee. "You're right. I have more than enough money to fly to Japan. Or to get the training. But money isn't everything. If I do either of those things, my family would know. I can't risk anyone knowing I have this...problem." It was close enough to the truth. Jim didn't want his family to know he was going underground for a mod. It would raise far too many awkward questions, but they weren't his biggest problem.

Colonel Brackett was.

Sandburg hesitated. "I'm not prying, but it would help me to understand why keeping it secret is so important to you. It's not like there's any real stigma in having the gift."

That wasn't strictly true. In the military sentinels were kept apart from regular troops and while technically treated equally, the possibilities for promotion in the sentinel programme were very limited. Sentinels were considered unsuitable for active deployment. It was a judgement Jim partially agreed with: he did struggle with his own senses and wouldn't trust himself in a combat unit. Quad work suited him, however, and his disability wasn't a disadvantage to the team...most of the time.

Jim did not mention any of that. "All this...it's the family business. Ellison Industries is my father. I own some shares and I'm on the board of directors but I never gave a crap about it." He paused, then decided to come at it from a different angle. "How much do you know about me? From the news net, I mean."

"I don't really follow the society pages." Sandburg shrugged, then frowned. "Um...You were in the army, right? I remember something a few years back. They thought you'd been killed in some battle."

"Good memory." Jim nodded, relieved he wouldn't need to explain that part. "I was listed as missing for nearly two years." He frowned. Missing. Jim was certain his superiors knew exactly where he was during those years and what he'd been going through. But he was captured behind enemy lines during a covert mission not authorised by the top brass and that did not make for good press. "Missing" sounded so much better.

"When I got back, I transferred to an admin post in the army. But I can still be reactivated and I don't want to get dragged into their sentinel programme." He paused, expecting more questions, but Sandburg simply accepted the statement. Jim continued, "The legal issues aren't a problem. But what I need is something that will give me control, something not visible and that will pass a standard scan. I think you can give me that."

"Why me?"

"I decided to go underground, and yours was the name I got." It was true.

Sandburg frowned. "It's a hell of a coincidence then."

Jim agreed with him about the coincidence, but perhaps for a different reason. When he arranged his appointment in the undercity he hadn't known the doctor's name. When Sandburg introduced himself Jim found the name naggingly familiar, but it wasn't until the following morning he remembered why. But this doctor couldn't possibly know about that.

Sandburg went on, "You said you'd done your research, so you may know this already, but there's a limit to the number of mods a person can have and be safe. To get complete control over your gift you'd need mods for all your senses, and that – "

"Is that even possible?" Jim asked, genuinely surprised.

Sandburg smiled, warming to his subject. "Sight, hearing, smell – those are easy. Mods for taste aren't much in demand but they do exist. Touch is the challenging one, because you can't sheathe your entire skin with metal. But with multiple, interacting mods there are ways it can be done. What I was about to say, though, is that would take you over the safe limit. Now, there are still options. Even over the limit, you could mitigate the effects. You can afford the treatments."

Jim smiled bitterly. "Money is never my problem," he agreed.

"But the more mods you have, the more difficult it is to hide. Tell me something." Sandburg leaned forward, meeting Jim's eyes. "Have you made a final decision that this is what you want, or are you still exploring options?"

It was a difficult question, but only because Jim wasn't sure how much of the truth he should share. He and Simon had agreed the mixture of truth and lies Jim would tell about himself, but even Simon didn't know why Jim contacted Sandburg in the first place.



Jim gave a truthful answer, because he couldn't think of a lie that would be consistent with his actions so far. "If there were an option that didn't involve cyber modification, I'd take it. But there isn't one. I nearly killed myself flying back after the last time I saw you because my senses were...I don't even know how to describe it. This is what I need."

"It's a sensory spike," Sandburg said. "You've got too much data coming in from one or more of your senses and your mind just can't process it all."

Jim frowned. "How do you know so much about..." Sentinels. But he didn't say the word.

Sandburg poured more coffee into his cup. His hand was unsteady. He raised it to his mouth and took a sip, then set the cup down. It was a delaying tactic, but Jim let him have the time. He could see the younger man was nervous.

Finally Sandburg looked up. "I guess you know anyway. Alex has the sentinel gift. Everything I know about sentinels I learned trying to help her."

Jim hadn't known, and that was important information. He suddenly understood why Sandburg so feared her listening in. He kept his expression neutral and simply nodded, encouraging Sandburg to share more.

"She came to me for help eight years ago. We started with mods, but it wasn't enough for her. I had to research sentinel training, all that stuff."

"And now?" Jim asked, intrigued and impressed. The training was a specialist skill and, as Jim understood it, not easy to learn. It said something about Sandburg that he'd gone so far for Alexa Barnes, but Jim wasn't sure what message he should take from it.

Sandburg looked up at him. "The thing is, Alex is the only sentinel I know. I can't tell if she's typical or..." He shrugged. "If she is, mods might not be enough for you. Money might not be an issue, but there are risks with mods. You have to understand before you go ahead with this that it might not be the solution."

Jim already knew that much. "Let's talk specifics," he suggested.

\*

"We've only got a short window, Daryl," Megan whispered. "How quickly can you scan the entire matrix?"

"I don't need to scan all of it, only the updated or new files. I need three hundred seconds." Daryl's voice, channelled through an ear implant disguised as jewellery, was audible only to Megan.

"Alright," she agreed. "Standby for uplink."

"Confirmed." He went silent.

Megan slipped out of the toilet stall. There was someone else in the bathroom; one of the postgraduate assistants. She was leaning into the mirror, applying lipstick. Megan smiled her way, but said nothing while she sanitised her hands. As the woman headed for the exit, Megan checked her appearance in the mirror. Her auburn hair was combed into a neat French braid, the stray strands slicked back with hair gel. Her makeup was understated: just enough to emphasise her eyes. Under the white lab coat she wore a charcoal grey dress and flat, sensible shoes. She looked like any of the women who worked in the research labs.

She returned to her station quickly and called up the data analysis software. After a quick check to confirm that the most recent results had been entered by her assistant, she set the programme running. Colourful graphs animated on the screen in front of her. Megan watched the animation intently but she wasn't really paying attention to the data. Instead, she laid her right hand near to the matrix link: a gesture that would appear casual to any observer. She felt the faint vibration as her comm link activated, giving Daryl access to the lab's matrix.

While she waited, Megan watched the play of colour on her screen. She didn't understand the data in the kind of depth a real researcher would. She had a near-photographic memory and had studied up on bacteriology and related subjects and could discuss her supposed specialism convincingly, but she was no expert. So when one of the charts caught her eye, she paused the display and rolled it back a few frames out of idle curiosity. She glanced at the bacteria

strain classifications and felt a chill that had nothing to do with the aircon. She studied the result more closely. Something was wrong.

Daryl was done with his hack. Megan tapped her link to close the connection and turned her attention back to the data. If the anomaly was serious Daryl would find it, but Daryl, like Megan, was no expert. She needed to check with someone who knew this stuff well. Megan downloaded the data onto a tablet and slipped it into the pocket of her lab coat.

Someone in this lab was doing business with some very bad people. Since the lab held samples of diseases that could, if released, wipe out the entire population, the quad was assigned to investigate. In the weeks she had been here, Megan had narrowed down the suspects, but she still didn't know where the leak was coming from. In some ways, who was less important than what. It appeared the lab was receiving supplies from illicit sources, which wasn't unusual. A lot of researchers tried to cut through the red tape by going underground for supplies. But what were they trading in return? And how was the Wolfpack involved?

An alert from the lab's matrix broke into her thoughts. Megan touched the screen to answer it and a message popped up on her screen:

DR BROMLEY, PLEASE COME TO MY LAB WHEN IT IS CONVENIENT. TK

Professor Tyler King's lab was a large, well-lit room. The walls were lined with storage units, each about fifty centimetres square, each labelled and locked. Most of the storage units were in use, containing a rack of test tubes or a sample jar. And every one of them was deadly dangerous. In the middle of the room a round stainless steel table was divided into three workstations, each with identical equipment: microscope, nano-scan, data input and AV display.

Professor King was bending over the microscope studying a sample when Megan buzzed the door. He made a "wait" gesture without looking up. Megan waited, because there was a very strict rule that you didn't enter that room without an invitation from the professor. She liked him. He was a brilliant man but had little of the arrogance so common in top academics. He had been kind to her, the newbie on the team, and she suspected he was attracted to her, though the age difference was at least twenty years. Megan wasn't above using that if she had to. But Doctor Megan Bromley PhD was a post-doctoral researcher, eager to learn and discover. That was her role here, and Professor King had summoned her.

Tyler finished his examination, removed the sample from the microscope, placed it into a storage unit and locked the unit with his thumbprint. Only then did he beckon her in.

Megan held her palm to the scanner. It verified her identity and security clearance and the professor tapped a code to let her enter.

"Megan. You look worried."

She hadn't realised it showed in her face. "You asked to see me, sir?"

He smiled gently. "Sir is for the military, Doctor."

"I'm sorry, Professor."

"I was just reviewing the latest data on your bacteria strains. Some of it seems to be missing."

Megan took the tablet from her pocket and touched the activation. "I just noticed that myself. I initiated the test cycle and set up the solutions but Richard and Justine entered the data. I checked with them and they both said it was complete. So I went back to the last few sets of results. Would you take a look?"

"What is it you think you have?"

Megan hesitated. "I don't want to prejudice you," she answered carefully.

Professor King stretched out his hand for the tablet. "You should have more confidence in yourself, Megan. You're as qualified as anyone here." He began to scroll through the data. "Latest results from the bacterial cell cultures," he said to himself.

Megan's qualifications were as bogus as her identity. Megan knew the results showed an anomaly; she understood mathematics and the curve was clear. What she did not know was the significance of the change. A good memory and a month of cramming the subject were no substitute for years of experience.

She knew when Professor King saw the result that worried her because he stopped flipping through the charts and studied the results more closely.

"Have you double-checked this?" he asked without looking up.

"I ran the data analysis three times," Megan confirmed. "It was only when I extrapolated the missing result that I saw the curve. The neodymium levels in the sample..."

"Yes. I see," he interrupted. He tapped the tablet a few times, calling up the detail of the analysis. "Strain 56NP. What's changed?"

Megan silently blessed her excellent memory. "The human cells cultured with the bacteria are immortalised so there's been no refresh. I haven't ordered any change to the nutrient solution. Temperature, morphology, agitation, all constant."

"So if this is accurate," the professor concluded, "it's a spontaneous evolution."

Megan's mouth went dry. "I'd want to verify the direction of the results before I said that. Maybe there was some contamination."

Professor King thrust the tablet back to her. "If you really thought that, you'd be quizzing the lab assistants, not me."

Megan swallowed. "Tyler," she said, using his first name to establish intimacy and make the conversation personal, "is this the disaster I think it is?"

He looked surprised. "Disaster?" His eyes softened and he sat down, asking her to sit with a gesture. "Why don't you tell me what you're thinking?"

Megan sat. She began by summarising the background as she understood it: a habit ingrained in her by the agency, but also how Professor King liked his students to report. "We've been culturing the bacteria for five years in one hundred different cell lines, each with unique but replicable conditions, adjusting their conditions gradually to direct their evolution. Lines forty to sixty failed to evolve the ability we sought, so have been a stable control group for most of that time. In the culture designated fifty-six NP, the consistent pattern in the mass. spec. results has been a zero point zero zero three concentration of neodymium – the same trace that's in the nutrient solution before the culture is added. Except in the most recent results, the concentration has been reduced."

The professor nodded. "And what conclusion do you draw from these results?" he asked, his tone formal.

Megan hoped she wasn't about to expose her ignorance. "I'm afraid it means the bacteria are metabolising the neodymium."

Professor King smiled. "That would seem logical."

"But isn't that the opposite of the result we were looking for? Tyler, this stuff is already a potential doomsday plague. Neodymium is used in nearly every cybernetic device."

The professor stopped her with a gesture. "Megan, it's a potential plague only if it gets out of the lab, and it won't. The changes in the bacteria over the years were projected to reduce its virulence; you can test for that whenever you're ready. But if this really is a mutated strain and if it truly has become what you think, what your results suggest, it may be a real breakthrough. Think about it."

Megan looked at the numbers again. She saw little positive in this. "I'm sorry," she began.

"If a bacterial strain can be developed to reduce the neodymium, surely it confirms it's possible to create a strain that will metabolise other substances, too."

She hadn't made that logical deduction but of course the professor was right. Megan was reacting to what she knew: that the lab's security wasn't as tight as Professor King believed. She hadn't seen the positive. This "breakthrough", if it was real, was a step toward the holy grail of their research project. Not seeing that had come close to blowing Megan's cover. She had to be more careful.

Megan took a deep breath and forced a smile onto her face. "Yes. Of course."

"Not only that, but there are uses for this strain, too, if it's stable. I can think of several applications."

So could Megan, but few of them were beneficial. She saw very little good in this discovery.

King went on, oblivious to her worries. "These are exciting results, so I want you to be very careful. You came straight to me with this?"

"Yes."

"Good. First, re-run the tests on the strains with missing data and make sure you verify every single step. Then go back to the frozen samples and do it again. If you get the same result, we'll go to the next step."

Megan managed a weak smile. She instinctively wanted to protest that she wasn't qualified to re-run anything. She wanted to ask what he thought the next step would be. She could not say either of those things. "I will. Thank you, Professor."

He smiled encouragingly. "And Megan. Enjoy this. It's the kind of discovery we all dream of."

Megan slipped the tablet back into her pocket and turned to go. She couldn't figure out how she was supposed to enjoy a discovery so potentially devastating.

\*

"How far can you see?"

Blair watched Ellison closely as he gazed through the window. The view was magnificent from this height. Blair could see the city with its deeply shadowed streets overwhelmed by the skyscrapers. He could see Docklands, with the huge freighters and out beyond the ships, the ocean and the islands. But it wasn't the beauty of the view that he was interested in.

"I see what you see," Ellison answered.

"Work with me, man. I need to understand how strong your senses are."

"If I do that, I'll lose control again," Ellison told him.

Blair remembered how much that loss of control used to frighten Alex, and he understood Ellison's reluctance. But he still insisted, "You have to take that risk to learn control. Trust me."

Ellison's frown deepened. Blair watched him concentrate, his eyes sweeping the vista and he felt a small stab of envy. He would give a lot for an ability like that.

"You're asking the wrong questions," Ellison said. "I can tell you that the ship coming into dock is called the Vesta. She's flying a Russian flag," Ellison said. He looked downward. "Air cab. Serial number on the roof is six, five, one, eight, seven, four, bravo. Thirty levels below the Plaza there's a commercial street with a group of teenagers outside the herbalist's shop. Four boys, three girls. One of the boys is wearing a cap embroidered with the letters charlie juliet. Cascade Jags? Must be a bootleg; that's not the official logo."

Even knowing how amazing Alex's senses could be, Blair was astonished. He moved close to the glass and peered down, fighting vertigo. "Man, at this distance I can barely make out people down there, let alone describe them. That's amazing."

"It's a party trick," Ellison shrugged dismissively. "Flashy, but it's not a true measure of what I can do."

Blair watched him, wondering. "What is a true measure?"

Ellison turned back to face him. "You washed your hair this morning. The shampoo is lemon scented, but artificial. I know you left home with your hair still damp. You came here through the industrial sector. I know you had sex last night and you didn't particularly enjoy it." His lips twisted in an odd smile. "And I know your heart rate just elevated. Have I scared you or does this turn you on?" The blue eyes were suddenly predatory.

Breathlessly, Blair said, "Can't you tell that, too?" He swallowed; Ellison, in that moment, reminded him a little too much of Alex.

He shrugged again. "If I knew you better, I could. I can pick up the physical reactions but interpreting them takes practice. Everyone's different."

"Why do you want to give that up?" As soon as the words were out, Blair wished he could take them back. It came from his own envy. He knew better than most what a burden a sentinel gift could be.

Jim turned away from the window, rubbing at his temples. "I don't. I want to control it." He frowned and took a small box of pills from his pocket. "I can read the headline in a newspaper on the street from a hundred storeys up. It makes a great party trick, but it's not as much fun when I'm trying to drive and the street turns into a kaleidoscope. Or when the sun flashes off someone's jewellery and I get dazzled." He opened the box.

"Wait," Blair said quickly. "What are you taking?" Ellison was in pain; Blair could tell that, and he knew why. It was part of that poor control.

"Codeine. For the pain."

"Alex used to get headaches, too, but codeine is the worst thing you can take for it. Codeine is an opiate. It weakens your control. I've got something..." he reached into his pocket, then remembered he had changed his clothing. Blair had transferred the essentials like his IDent® and credit cards to his pants pockets, but not the medicine he habitually carried. "Oh, I left my coat in your bathroom. But if you get headaches from using your ability, take plain aspirin, unless you're allergic. Or a mild sedative."

"I don't –" Jim began, but then broke off and glanced at the comm link on his wrist. "Excuse me for a moment. I must take this." He pocketed the pills without taking one and hooked a link over his ear. "Go ahead, Connor." He pinched the bridge of his nose as he turned away, a sure sign he was still in pain.

Blair felt almost cold as Ellison turned away, dismissing Blair from his attention. It was as if Blair had suddenly ceased to exist for him. It was an unpleasant feeling, but Blair recognised Ellison's need for privacy. He headed into the bathroom where he'd left his clothing to retrieve his meds.

The bathroom was as beautiful as the office: a screen of smoked glass surrounded a spacious shower unit. Blair frowned, the presence of the shower suddenly struck him as odd. When he changed in here, he had simply accepted it because he had a shower in his office, too – surgery could be bloody and he often needed to clean up afterwards. But why would Ellison need a shower in here? Did he ever use it? The speculative image came strongly into his mind: this grey marbled room full of steam, Ellison naked behind the smoky glass...and likely not alone. The shower was big enough for three.

Stop it, Blair chided himself. Ellison was so far above him it wasn't even funny. He would never look at undercity scum like Blair. His clothing hung on a rack alongside the suit he hadn't used. He was grateful for the offer of a fresh shirt, but when Marie had appeared with more than that Blair couldn't bring himself to take advantage.

Blair went to his jacket and retrieved the two syringes of Tranquil. It was the drug he took himself when he needed to calm his nerves, as he had the other night when he first met Ellison. He pocketed one syringe and seriously considered using the other for himself. His mind was still racing.

Ellison. This man was an Ellison. The Ellison family was the closest thing Cascade had to royalty. Ellison Industries built Sky City! The company directly employed a fifth of the local population but even those not employed by the company were dependent on it in other ways. The company supported half of the charities in the city and underwrote a lot of the work at Ranier University. What William Ellison, the head of the family, wanted, he got. The most prominent of his two sons, Stephen, was a US senator and hotly tipped as a future president. Blair could name at least ten other members of the family, all powerful people in Cascade or the surrounding states. He had never heard much about James Ellison, though. Not that Blair ever looked for news of the family, which was probably why he failed to recognise James as an Ellison before.

With an effort, Blair brought his mind back into focus. He couldn't think about who this man was, or the attraction he felt. He was a sentinel who had come to Blair for help. That was all that mattered. Blair slipped the second syringe into his pocket and returned to the office.

Ellison stood at the window, still speaking into his link, but so quietly Blair couldn't hear a word. He waited in the doorway until Ellison finished his conversation and signalled he could approach. Ellison's expression was grim; the call must have been bad news.

Blair offered a syringe. "Here. It's a mild sedative."

Ellison waved it away. "I don't..." he began to object, frowning.

But Blair saw the pain in his eyes and he knew how bad it had been for Alex in the beginning. He raised the syringe again. "This won't impair your judgement or your reactions. But it will help the pain and steady your control of your senses. You've got to trust me, man."

"What's in it?" Ellison asked sharply.

"It's Tranquil," Blair told him, using the popular name of the drug, because if Ellison had researched sentinel training he might have come across it under that name. Then he turned the cylinder to show the chemical name printed on the side. The syringe was a sealed, disposable unit: one dose only.

Ellison nodded. "How long will it last?"

"An injected dose will stay in your system for three, maybe four hours. If it works as it should, the pain will stay away for longer." He had a tourniquet, too. "Tranquil is usually injected into a muscle, but it will work faster if I use a vein. Your choice."

"Alright." Ellison slipped off his suit jacket, unbuttoned the cuff of his shirt and pulled the sleeve up to expose the vein inside the elbow. He offered his left arm to Blair.

Blair pushed the shirt sleeve up further to make room for the tourniquet. He hesitated when he saw Ellison's scar. It was an ugly, ragged line of raised flesh running from just inside the elbow down toward the wrist: a deep gash that had not been treated properly and healed badly. He glanced up at Ellison questioningly while he pulled the tourniquet tight. The injury was peculiar in a man who could afford the best medical care. Ellison volunteered no information and Blair couldn't ask when questions were so clearly unwelcome.

He pulled the cap seal off the syringe and injected the sedative.

Ellison pulled his sleeve down quickly, concealing the scar. "Thanks, Doc."

\*

Jim buttoned up his shirt sleeve. Sandburg's reaction when he saw the scar on Jim's forearm confirmed Jim's suspicion that the young man had some scars of his own. Perhaps in Sandburg's case the scars weren't so physical, but they

were there. On a purely practical level Jim cursed his growing empathy for the doctor. He couldn't afford to care about a man he needed to use. The mission came first, always.

Jim's original plan was to plant one of Daryl's links on Sandburg when they parted company. When Sandburg got near the Wolfpack's computers, Daryl could use the link to hack the system and open a backdoor. After that, it wouldn't matter if the original link were found or destroyed; Daryl would be through the security and could access their systems at will. The plan carried some risk for Sandburg but that hadn't bothered Jim. The doctor was one of the Wolfpack.

It bothered him now. Sandburg helped him. He didn't have to. Jim's headache was already fading, only seconds after the injection. Jim trusted his instincts about people and Blair Sandburg struck him as a good man. It no longer seemed right to use him in the way he'd planned. But if he told Sandburg the truth and asked for his help, it would blow everything if Sandburg refused.

"If I place an order for your mod today," Sandburg offered, oblivious to Jim's dilemma, "I can be ready early next week."

Decision time, but not about the mod. That was now irrelevant. Connor's news changed a great deal. Among other things, it gave Jim operational control if he wanted to take it from Simon. He didn't want command...but this was a command decision and he had no time to consult.

"There's one more thing we need to talk about, Doc," Jim suggested.

Sandburg dropped his gaze. "You wanna know about the Wolves."

Jim nodded. "If I'm going to trust you, I need to know." It was a reasonable statement, if not entirely true. "I checked you out. You're board certified but there's no record of you as a practicing surgeon since you received your certification. I assume that's because you got into the illegal market, but how did you end up with the Wolfpack?"

Jim expected either a denial or a defence. He got defiance. Sandburg looked up at him, determinedly. "All due respect, man, but that's none of your business."

Which meant the answer to Jim's question was personal, not professional. Was the Doc involved with Alexa Barnes? Jim didn't ask. He simply headed back toward the couch. "Come on. You claim you don't belong to them, but you've got a pack tattoo."

Sandburg followed Jim. "The tattoo isn't what you think."

"Then tell me."

Sandburg shrugged, evidently unhappy. "Alex put the tattoo on my neck." He sat down and stared at his hands for a long time. Finally, he shrugged again. "Alright. I'll tell you." He did not look up. "I didn't know Alex was a Wolf when we first met. We were...involved. I thought she loved me. Maybe she did, back then, I don't know. She talked me into helping the Wolfpack. Being their medic, helping with their mods. That sort of thing. But I never joined the pack."

"So, the tattoo?" Jim prompted.

"Alex...changed," Sandburg said uncomfortably. "She's...I guess it doesn't matter. Only, I tried to end it between us. Alex wouldn't allow it. No one leaves the Wolfpack and no one leaves her. She put the tattoo on me like some kind of slave brand. To show I belong to her." His voice was full of bitterness.

"So walk away," Jim said. "You can get the tattoo removed anywhere." He spoke dismissively, wanting to provoke a response.

"I can't," Sandburg declared.

"Why not?"

"Because whatever Alex is now, it's my fault. Because she still needs me." He raised his eyes at last, begging for understanding. "You have no idea what it's like, man. I want out. I want out so bad. But I just can't."



## CHAPTER THREE: "DON'T BE AFOOL"

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...was usual for a tribal sentinel to work with a partner or guide, an individual with normal senses but an understanding of the sentinel's abilities. This guide functioned as both a helpmate and a physical protector. As a helpmate the guide helped the sentinel to develop his gift and to focus his senses where they were most needed. But physical protection was also necessary as the sentinel, when deeply absorbed in his gift, was unable to defend himself against predators or enemies.

The Sentinel, an unpublished manuscript believed written in 1999

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The elevator descended swiftly, but not fast enough for Megan Connor. Today, she couldn't wait to get out of the lab. Stepping off the elevator on the ground floor, she surrendered her key card to the security guard. She waited while he locked it up; this was standard protocol.

Turning away from the bank of lockers, the guard picked up a handheld computer. "Seven across, nine letters," he said with a grin.

Megan returned his smile. She enjoyed this little end-of-day ritual. "Try me."

"Brightest star," he read.

She rolled her eyes. "Supernova. Give me a hard one." He hadn't stumped her yet.

"Tomorrow," he promised.

"I'm taking a personal day. Are you working the weekend?"

"Not this week."

She smiled again. "In that case, you've got three days to find one I can't solve. Good luck." She headed for the exit.

Outside in the sunlight, Megan pulled out the band and shook her hair out. Her auburn curls tumbled about her face. She looked around, making sure she wasn't being watched. Rainier University was an odd mix of old, traditional buildings and ultra-modern high-rises. The pathway to her car took her from the biological science building with its smooth, ceramic exterior, past the beautiful red brick of the anthropology and archaeology building and out into the square with its green lawn and paved pathways.

It was a relaxing walk and usually Megan took it slowly, enjoying the scenery. Today, she hurried to her car and tapped her link as she walked. "Base," she said quietly.

"Daryl responding." The voice came instantly.

"Daryl, can you confirm the missing files?"

"Test results related to bacterial strains five-six-november-papa, five-six-papa, five-seven-november-papa and five-eight-november-papa have been expunged and the directories corrupted. Based on the nature of the corruption, the most likely source is an AI data miner, but it covered its tracks well. I can't confirm or trace."

"Is there anything in the data to indicate why those four strains are significant?"

"They are closely related and the existing records indicate they are failed strains. If there is more, I cannot see it, but intuition is not one of my gifts, Agent Connor."

She smiled, though she knew he couldn't see it. "Thank you, Daryl. Is Simon at Base?"

"He will arrive in nine minutes."

She had reached her car. "Tell him I need to talk to him. I'm on my way in."

"Relaying now," Daryl confirmed.

"Connor out." She disconnected the link to Daryl and switched her comm to personal mode. "Kevin," she said, and moments later her husband's voice answered her. "Hello, darling," she said as she unlocked the car. "How was your flight home?"

\*

Jim intended to walk down to the Plaza with Sandburg but Marie stopped him as they passed her desk.

"Mr Ellison, your father is in the boardroom. He asked to see you there."

The words stopped Jim short. His father was supposed to be in Washington negotiating a government contract. "Is he alone or is this an ambush?" he asked her. He thought William had given up trying to encourage Jim to take a greater role in the business, but if he was walking into a business meeting he wanted to be prepared.

"I believe he is alone," Marie answered.

"It's okay," Sandburg said. "I can find my way out."

Jim concealed his reluctance, but a summons from his father was not something he could ignore. He offered a contact card to Blair: it concealed one of Daryl's links as well as the usual contact chip. "Thank you for your help," he said. "Call me with your account number for the cost of the item we discussed."

Sandburg took the card. "I'll be in touch tonight."

Jim turned to Marie. "I didn't sign him in. Would you walk Doctor Sandburg out so he doesn't have trouble with security?"

"Of course." She rose and smiled at Sandburg.

Jim offered his hand in farewell. Sandburg clasped his hand briefly and Jim used the moment to slip a second link into the cuff of Sandburg's leatherjacket, which he had slipped on over the borrowed shirt he still wore. Stifling a pang of guilt, Jim turned away without another word and headed for the boardroom.

William Ellison sat at the head of the long, black table. There was a glass of bourbon in his hand and the screen in front of him was cycling through the pages of some report. He appeared more comfortable in this setting than Jim would ever be. William Ellison had been CEO of Ellison Industries for longer than Jim had been alive. In that time, he had tripled the size of Ellison Industries and taken the company from a successful multinational enterprise to the global powerhouse it was today. Jim respected his father's achievement, but he could not admire it. He knew what the family's wealth and power cost.

And he would never forget how little help the Ellison billions had been to him when he truly needed it.

Jim approached his father warily. William stood as he approached. He was as tall as Jim, but so thin he appeared taller. His hair was mostly white, but not thinned with age: it was one of the benefits of great wealth. His eyes were intensely blue, a feature father and son shared.

He opened his arms to Jim as he drew near. Jim accepted the hug and returned it, but there was not much affection between them. The gesture had an unnatural formality.

"It's good to see you, son." William sat, inviting Jim to sit, too. "How long will you be in town?"

It was an innocent enough question, but Jim sensed a trap. He'd told everyone he was on leave because the quad's mission was secret. "I'm not due back for a few weeks," he answered carefully, "but I was thinking of flying to Barbados to finish the vacation."

"Good," William said, and Jim knew he wouldn't like what was coming. "Our annual charity ball is tomorrow night. You'll be there."

Jim swore silently. He hated the ball and usually managed to be out of town when it was happening. "Yes, sir," he answered respectfully.

"You'll bring a date," William added: an order, not a request. "If you can't manage that yourself, I'm sure one of Fernan's daughters will be happy –"

"I can get my own dates, Dad," Jim interrupted. He didn't like the implied order to bring a woman to the ball. Dad knew Jim was gay, though it was true he usually found a female acquaintance to go with him to public events. There was no woman in his life but Megan and he wouldn't inflict one of Dad's fundraisers on her. It didn't matter. Jim would call a local agency and hire someone: an actress or a model. It had worked for him before. He got an escort with no complications or expectations. She got to hang on the arm of one of the heirs to the Ellison empire in front of the cameras. It was good for her career.

"Just be there," William snapped. "And take that look off your face. I expect the whole family to attend."

Oh, this just gets better and better. "I'll be there, Dad. Is there anything else?"

"Just one thing," William touched a control and the table display came to life. Jim watched the holographic data scroll through the air between them. He recognised most of the designations: they were files he had accessed from his office.

"Research," Jim shrugged.

"Why are you researching this company, James? Dare I hope you've finally developed an interest in commerce?"

Jim scowled. His father knew Jim worked for a covert agency. No one was supposed to know – officially, Jim pushed papers for the army since his long imprisonment left him unfit for combat duties – but a man like William Ellison had the resources to uncover any secret. So Jim offered a partial truth.

"It's background, mostly. I have a mission coming up and wanted to refresh my memory."

"A mission related to the company holdings? Is there something I should know?"

Jim hesitated. "Dad, if I thought Ellison Industries were a threat to national security, I would bring the company down and slap the cuffs on you myself. If someone who works for the company is implicated, I'll tell you when I can. As soon as I can. That's the best I can do."

He knew his father wanted to demand more information, but Jim had already given away too much. His father would go through every single file he had accessed in an attempt to figure out what Jim was researching. Or, more likely, he'd have one of his flunkies do it. Anticipating that, Jim had accessed a lot of files that had nothing to do with his mission. But Jim had used his influence at the company to get Megan into the Rainier lab. There was a possibility William would uncover that, too. Jim had to be more careful.

To his credit, William did not insist Jim reveal state secrets. "The reputation of this company is yours, too, James."

"Only in your world," Jim disagreed. "But you can relax. I may not be interested in playing the big-shot businessman, but I do care about the company. Everything's fine."

"Thank you, son." William did relax, visibly. He turned off the holo display and sipped his bourbon.

It meant a lot to Jim that his father trusted his word. He smiled and changed the subject. "So, what are we raising money for this time?"

\*

Megan usually enjoyed driving, but the traffic lanes of Sky City were a challenge for any driver not accustomed to the altitude. And the attitude. Aircars flitted from lane to lane in defiance of traffic regulations and there was little traffic control. Megan gritted her teeth and rose to the upper lanes, although her car didn't have a top level permit. If you can't beat 'em, join 'em. She took the speedway as far as Prospect then dived down to street level to complete her journey to Base.

The quad's base was in a forty storey apartment building downtown, outwardly identical to a hundred others. Secure parking was its only luxury. But once you got to the apartment door, that changed. The door required a palm-scan, which was standard, but this scan didn't just read the shape and pattern of the hand. It confirmed temperature and blood-flow, ensuring the hand was attached to a living body. The walls and door were reinforced and shielded against electronic interference and surveillance. The front door led into a narrow vestibule which could, if the door were somehow breached, be converted into a kill zone and filled with gas or bullets. Megan paused in the doorway long enough for the system to scan her and then she walked into the main apartment.

Simon and Jim were at the conference table, deep in conversation. Megan had hoped to speak with Simon before Jim arrived. She was beginning to suspect their investigation would have to turn to Ellison Industries and it was obvious that Jim Ellison couldn't be involved in that.

It wasn't a matter of trust. Megan knew that Jim was an ethical and trustworthy man. He wouldn't compromise on his duty and he wouldn't betray the quad. It was a matter of how it would appear from the outside.

Jim looked up as Megan entered the room. "Megan, I've just been reviewing the data Daryl – "

"We need to talk," she announced bluntly. She glanced at Simon.

Simon looked at Jim. That gesture told Megan that Simon, too, was aware their mission was edging into dangerous territory.

Jim, of course, missed none of the silent conversation. He had been casually slouched in his chair; now he straightened to attention and activated the workstation.

"Briefing mode, Daryl," Simon said, and Daryl's display changed to his face. Simon, too, activated his workstation.

Megan took her seat at the quad and placed her palm in the scanner. "I think I know what's happening at the lab," she announced while the scanner verified her. "It's a theory and I can't prove who is behind it. But I have enough evidence to say this is a level two threat."

Simon sat up straighter. His look said she'd better be able to substantiate that.

Jim, on the other hand, showed no reaction. His expression, when he turned to her, was utterly neutral. Megan envied his ability to conceal his thoughts and feelings so completely. He'd be a hell of a poker player. But in a way, that neutral expression gave him away: it told her there was something to conceal.

"You think Ellison Industries is implicated, don't you?" Jim asked.

"It has to be," Megan answered. "Ellison Industries is bankrolling the research project."

"That doesn't mean the company supports any illegal activity."

"No, it doesn't," Megan agreed, though she noted Jim's defensiveness and wondered if he already knew something. "But, Jim, you own a big block of the company's shares. You are on the board of directors. That means you would be implicated, too. You can't be the one to investigate this."

Jim nodded. "You're right by the regs. But you called me earlier to give me a heads-up about the missing test results. What's happened between then and now to make you think you can't trust me?"

"I trust you!" Megan protested. "I'm just concerned about our case. You can't run this one."

"I'm not running it. Simon is."

Megan simply looked at him and waited.

Simon said it. "Jim, if this is a level two threat, I'm supposed to cede command to you."

Jim opened his mouth to respond, but they would never know what he was going to say.

Daryl interrupted. "Wolfpack connection online. I have access."

\*

There was a line of people waiting outside Blair's surgery. Blair made a quick assessment as he walked past them. Most were patients he recognised and he knew what each of them needed. Those he hadn't seen before were equally predictable: the signs of broken mods and withdrawal were visible even to an untrained eye.

As a doctor, Blair supplied safe narcotic substitutes to addicts who would otherwise find their shit on the streets. He dealt in steroids only within the Wolfpack because he had no choice, but he always made sure the Wolves who came to him for steroids fully understood the risks and side effects. Mostly, Blair worked with cybernetics. He would not fit mods for people who couldn't afford to maintain them, or beyond the safe limit, but he repaired mods and supplied parts for those who already had them because he knew the quality of his own work was better than anything else they would find in the underground.

Blair spoke to his supplier first and placed an order for an IK-47 mod for Ellison. Next, he called Alex but she didn't respond to his comm. For the next three hours he saw patients. He repaired mecha and replaced fuel cells. One patient was an addict he hadn't seen before. He sent her to a charity with a good treatment programme. She was still young enough to be helped, but he didn't know if she would take his advice.

Another patient was a child he had treated before. Ami's knee had been badly broken when she was four years old and Blair fitted a cybernetic replacement for her. Mods for children had to be carefully maintained. Tonight, Blair had an upgrade to fit for her: she had been going through a growth spurt and needed a new mod to keep pace with her growth. That was a good thing: it meant she was healthy and her body was dealing well with the mod.

His last patient was a dying mech addict, thirty years old. He had an exo-skeleton wired into his body: a single mod that did the physical damage of eight. The exo-skeleton was developed for accident rehabilitation and was intended for temporary use only. It would keep the body mobile while bone or nerve damage healed, then it could safely be removed. But this man had worn his for years. Now it was killing him. Blair cursed whoever had fitted a healthy man with such a monstrosity. He explained it as best he could to the man, and outlined the options, but none of them were good. They could do nothing and treat the pain, and the man would die within eight weeks. Blair could remove the exoskeleton and filter the poison out of his blood; it might save the man's life, but he would probably never walk again. The damage was too advanced for blood filtration to cure him without removal of the mod. Filtration alone would buy him a few more years, but only with constant pain. Blair was not surprised when the man left without treatment. He would seek out another doctor who would tell him the same thing, over and over until he ended up dying in Cascade's infirmary.

Depressed by the unproductive meeting, Blair checked there was no one else waiting to see him and closed the surgery. He considered going home – he longed to go home – but Alex still hadn't returned his comm. He tried to link to her again but again got no response.

He called the security office instead. "Crawford, is Alex here?" he asked.

"She's in her apartment, Doctor."

Then why wasn't she answering Blair's comm? "Is she alone?" he asked.

Crawford didn't answer at once, which was an answer in itself.

"I just need to know if I can go in there. I don't care who she fucks," Blair said. There was a time he would have cared very much. Now, if Alex took another lover, it might give Blair some respite. He welcomed it.

"She's alone...now," Crawford admitted.

"Thanks," Blair responded, and he meant it. He cut the connection.

Alex needed a treatment, so Blair prepared and sterilised the equipment before he left the surgery. He loaded the machine onto a trolley and added a supply of blood to the shelf below. Only then did he go to her apartment.

The door light was red, indicating she didn't want to be disturbed. Blair ignored the light and buzzed the door. Once again, there was no response. He placed his hand on the scanner. "Override lock. Open," he commanded. If she was still with a lover she would be pissed, but Crawford had said she was alone.

The door opened. "Alex?" Blair called. Cautiously, he entered the kitchenette. He looked down the length of the apartment and saw her. "Alex!" He broke into a run.

She was on the floor of the lounge, lying on her side. There was blood everywhere. She was wearing a white shirt and it was badly ripped, the blood dark red against the white. Alex's eyes were open, but unseeing. Her body shook convulsively. She was having a seizure, and had torn her skin to pieces with her own claws.

Blair skidded to a halt and crouched beside her. He slammed his hand on the comm link. "Crawford! I need help! Bring my bag!"

He pushed the table away from her so she wouldn't strike it while she seized, then wiped blood and saliva away from her mouth. She had bitten her tongue but her airway was clear. Blair could do nothing more while the seizure continued.

Crawford burst into the room, his gun drawn as if he expected some kind of attack. Idiot!

Blair yelled, "No guns! Where's my bag?"

Crawford threw it to him. At least he'd remembered to bring it. Blair caught the bag awkwardly, ripped it open and searched through his emergency meds. He found a dose of diazepam and injected it quickly.

In moments, her shaking quieted. Blair sat on the floor. He tenderly brushed her hair out of her eyes. "You're okay, Alex," he said softly. "Take it slowly. You're okay." Carefully, he helped her to sit up and held her close against his chest. "You're okay, Alex," he said again, but he knew it was a lie.

Alex's skin was grey and slick with sweat and she was breathing in short gasps. "Blair," she whispered.

He looked up at Crawford. "Whoever was last with her, I need to talk to them." He saw the objection filling the guard's expression and snapped angrily, "Don't be a fool! Just find him."

He pulled Alex's shirt aside but didn't remove it because she wore nothing under it. The veins in her chest were much darker than the last time Blair saw them. He lifted her arm, pulling the shirt sleeve up and saw the same dark veins on the pale flesh of her inner forearm. How did it get this bad in just a few days?

"Alex. Oh, Alex, what did you do?" He stroked her hair, gently soothing. She lay limply in his arms, awake and breathing but exhausted. He touched her face and found the skin clammy and cool.

Her cyber-eye was dark. "It hurts," Alex moaned.

"What hurts, honey?" Blair held her close.

"Everything."

"There's too much fuel residue in your blood," Blair explained. Talk about an understatement! "I've got everything ready for your treatment. Just as soon as you feel better, okay?"

"No," she breathed. "Can't..."

"What do you mean, no? You'll die without treatment!" And I'll be free. Blair recoiled from the thought but it was there in his heart. Insidious and unworthy. He could never say no to Alex; she simply didn't hear the word.

"I can't be weak," Alex said, and the words came out clearly, if not strongly. She pushed at him with her hands, but there was no strength in her.

Blair understood. The Wolves obeyed Alex because they feared her ruthlessness and respected her strength. But she had hurt too many of them. She had enemies. If they saw her as weak, she would be challenged. If rumours spread of her in this condition, her life would be in danger.

"Can you get up?" Blair asked her gently. "Just to the couch." He helped her, but Alex barely had the strength to stand. Blair had to carry her to the couch. He set her down and she leaned back into the soft leather. Blair was puzzled. The seizure he understood, it was a common side-effect of the fuel poisoning. But why was she so weak? So cold? He slipped his jacket off and used it to cover her upper body. As he tucked it around her side, he caught sight of her power pack. There was no light on the power indicator.

Oh, no. He leaned closer and turned the power pack slightly toward him. It was completely dead. "Alex, this isn't one of mine. Where did this come from?"

She shook her head.

"Damn it, Alex!" Blair glanced to the door, grateful they were alone, but Crawford might be back any time. "I've got to replace that power pack. Stay here and rest. I'll be back soon." He ran from the apartment.

There was so much wrong with this! Blair didn't understand what she was doing with a cheap shit power pack when he could have given her top quality. He didn't know why her pack was drained, when she knew better than to let the battery get low. He didn't know why veins barely visible a few days ago now looked like she'd gone months without treatment. He didn't know if whoever she had sex with that night had left her to die, or if she'd been okay when he left. None of it made sense.

Blair forced himself to push the questions aside and concentrate on the immediate issue. Alex was dying. She needed a fresh power pack and she needed a blood change immediately. When she was better, he could figure out who to blame for this. He grabbed a power pack from his stock and threw it on the trolley. He pushed the trolley back to Alex's apartment, unable to run this time because the equipment was so delicate.

Alex was where he had left her, her head drooping forward as if she was sleeping. Blair sat beside her and touched her wrist to check her pulse. Her claws were still unsheathed. Her pulse was a little fast, but it was strong.

"Alex, I need to change your power pack," he told her. He waited for her nod before he rolled her to one side to expose the pack she wore. Each mod had its own internal power cell but Alex – in common with many of the Wolves – had a power pack fitted to provide additional energy to the mods when over-use weakened the charge in the internal cells. Alex's was completely drained. Blair had no time for the usual safety precautions. He used his bare hands to pull the battery and winced as the acid burned his fingers. He wiped it off on his pants and slid the fresh battery into place.

It didn't engage.

He pulled it out and wiped the contacts with a corner of his shirt. He pushed the battery into place. The power indicator glowed green. Alex gasped aloud as the power flooded her system. Blair took her right hand in his. He manipulated her index finger and the claw retracted. Blair let out a breath in relief. Alex flexed her hand and the other claws snicked back into her flesh.

Her strength was returning, but it wasn't over. Blair turned his attention to the blood filtration unit. The machine was a custom job, created to his design specifically for Alex. A standard unit merely filtered the blood. This one first drained the damaged blood from her body and replaced it. The fresh blood had to be real: synthetic was no good for such a large transfusion. Blair used a combination of cloned blood grown from Alex's cells and plasma from donated blood. When the fresh blood had circulated through her system, the filtration unit would filter it. This was similar to the standard treatment protocol but included immuno-boosters which helped boost the recovery time after treatment. The result was a cleaner treatment that would last much longer than the standard. Blair slid the first needle into her arm and the tube immediately filled with blood. The blood was thickened with residue and almost black. How had it become so bad so quickly?

Blair set up the transfusion to replace the blood she was losing. Alex's eyes followed him while he worked, but he wasn't sure she was really seeing him. Her colour was improving as the dirty blood drained. Blair met her eyes with relief. That had been too close. He still needed to treat her arms where she'd scratched herself during the seizure, but that would wait until after the blood change. He sank down onto the couch beside her.

Alex's expression hardened. "Lock the door."

Blair hadn't really expected thanks, but he didn't like her tone. "What?"

"Lock. The. Fucking. Door!"

With a sigh, Blair rose to obey. After all that, all she cared about was appearance. He locked the door and keyed the do not disturb light.

Alex still reclined on the couch with Blair's jacket tucked around her torso. "You let Crawford in here."

"If I didn't have help, you'd be dead," Blair explained defensively.

She sat up and balled the jacket in her lap. "Now he's got to die. That's on you."

Blair felt cold. "Alex, Crawford is loyal. He won't – "

She threw the jacket at his chest. Blair caught it automatically. "It's on you! You stupid fuck! How could you – " She stopped, looking down.

Blair followed her gaze. On the ground at his feet lay a comm link. And it was active.

\*

"Report," Simon ordered.

Daryl's display split into three sections. At the top, the computer-generated face remained. Below, on the left, images flashed up, one after the other, too fast for Simon to really take in the details. On the right, data scrolled as Daryl processed it. Daryl reported, "The matrix is designed as a web, no central core. My back door is installed. I have the encryption key."

"How long will it take you to scan the system?" Megan asked.

"I can clone and index this matrix in eighteen minutes, forty one seconds. I have detected eight other matrices linked in this web. No estimate available for those."

"Nine matrices," Jim mused. "Nine cells?"

It was not reassuring that Jim made that a question. He was supposed to be the one with the local knowledge in Cascade. "Does that fit with what you know of the Wolfpack?" Simon asked him.

"I would have guessed at six, but nine is a reasonable estimate." Jim turned to the display. "Daryl, alert us when you find anything related to Rainier University or Ellison Industries."

"Confirmed," Daryl responded.

It would take time for Daryl to sort through the data and there was nothing to be gained from pushing him. They could deal with other issues while they waited, and Jim's evident concern for the company was troubling Simon.

The thing was, Jim Ellison didn't really seem like a billionaire. Outside Cascade, he didn't live in luxury or throw his money around. He never had to worry about money, but he gave every appearance of living within his salary. His only real extravagance was his car: the Hercules was a top of the range aircar and Jim loved to drive. Jim was a dedicated agent, and one of the best Simon had worked with. So it was easy for Simon to forget that Jim Ellison necessarily had other loyalties. Would he jump the wrong way in a pinch? Not a chance. Would he consider it, though? Perhaps, and that was enough uncertainty for Simon to pursue it.



"Jim are you certain the company is in the clear on this?" Simon knew the answer. There was no possibility that Jim could be one hundred per cent sure.

"That's just the thing, Simon. I'm not." Jim shrugged. "I talked to my father this afternoon. I think he was warning me off."

"You think?"

Jim grimaced. "You've got to know him. Dad's never direct about it. He asked me about the company files I've accessed and said something about the company's reputation. I know he was telling me not to mess with something. Whether it's anything to do with our mission, I can't say."

"It's a good bet," Connor said.

"No," Jim disagreed. "Connor..." he sighed and ran a hand through his short hair. "I'm not an idiot. I know that no one gets to my father's position by being on the right side of the law all the time. I know the Ellison empire was built on cheap labour and environmental damage. But I also know my father. He won't involve the company in anything that would get our agency's attention."

"Then why did he warn you off?" Simon asked, before Connor could get the question in.

"It could be a lot of things. Dad controls the company but even he has to answer to the board and I've made myself a pain in his ass before when I've had ethical problems with company policy. So maybe there's something he doesn't want me to take an interest in. Or maybe he suspects something and doesn't want us in the way of his own investigation."

"Either one sounds dirty to me," Connor said.

"There's a big difference," Jim bristled, "between dirty and traitor."

Simon interrupted to cut off the bickering. "Enough, you two. You're both right. Jim, you certainly know William Ellison better than we do and I believe you. But if Ellison Industries is implicated in this we have to investigate him, if only to clear his name." He held Jim's gaze, willing the man to see sense.

"Agreed," Jim answered stiffly.

"And you," Simon rounded on Connor, "quit borrowing trouble. One: you know Jim won't command a mission unless he's forced to. Two: our job is to shut this operation down and neutralise any threat to national security. Prosecution is a bonus, not a mission objective, so appearances don't matter."

"Retrieval report," Daryl interrupted with perfect timing. Simon was sure that Daryl's timing wasn't coincidence. He heard the growing tension in the conversation and had chosen the opportune moment to cut in.

"Report," Simon ordered.

"The Wolfpack's contact in the Rainier lab is not named in the files other than by a codename: Scarlet. He or she has been passing information to the Wolfpack for at least a year. Scarlet informed the Wolfpack six weeks ago that the King experiments achieved a dual breakthrough."

"Dual?" Connor said sharply.

"Details are missing. Whoever maintains these records is highly paranoid. I can analyse it and offer an hypothesis but that will take some hours."

"That's not a priority, Daryl," Simon ruled.

"Acknowledged. The attack on the shipment is documented but not the reason for it. I calculate an eighty per cent probability that the product was not the primary target."

Connor looked confused but it made sense to Simon. The attackers were after the Wolves. They didn't want the product; they wanted what it could get for them.

"Thanks, Daryl," Simon nodded to the computer-generated face. "Keep scanning."

"Confirmed."

Simon looked around at his team. "We're not done, but I think we could all use a break. Two hours? Then we'll finish this over dinner." Two hours was a long break, but he wanted to give Ellison and Connor a chance to get their tempers in check. He didn't have much hope they'd use the time to talk it out, but maybe they could move on.

"Suits me," Jim agreed easily.

Connor nodded. "Okay."

Jim put his workstation into sleep mode and rose from the table. "There's a great Chinese place next to my gym. Dinner's on me. I'll pick it up on my way back."

\*

While Jim was in control of his senses he liked to push the Hercules to her limits. It took him eleven minutes to fly from Base to Prospect and his favourite gym. He went to Woo's first and placed an order for food. Jim knew the team's favourite dishes, and added a few others for variety, telling the girl who took his order he would return in ninety five minutes. She promised the food would be hot and ready.

For an hour and thirty Jim worked his body hard: cardio first, then free weights. No time for endurance work tonight. He took a swift, cold shower and was back at Woo's only two minutes later than scheduled. Woo's served their take out in traditional cartons and bamboo baskets, but packed the containers into insulated cardboard boxes with carry handles; the boxes kept the food warm and made transport easy. Jim's order took up two large boxes. He loaded everything into his aircar and zoomed up to the fast lane.

At this hour, there was little traffic in the heights and Jim had a great view of the lighted city below. Advertisements flashed on the tall buildings, and a laser show arced over the distant plaza. He adjusted the mirrors to give him a clear view of the lanes below. At night, the greatest danger was other drivers changing lanes too quickly. A flare of light in a building ahead attracted his attention. Orange light, like a flame. Jim slowed the aircar and cautiously focussed his gaze on the window where he'd seen the flare. Sandburg had said he had to take the risk if he was to learn control, and the advice made sense.

Something shifted in his head, and suddenly the whole world opened up. Jim could see into the office, every detail sharp in spite of the darkness. But it was more than sight. All his senses engaged. A moment before all Jim had been able to smell was the Chinese food on the seat beside him. Now Jim's nose seemed to cut through that and instead he smelled ozone and the sharpness of spilled gasoline. He heard voices speaking rapidly, the clink of metal on metal. A few words came through clearly, enough for Jim to recognise what he was witnessing.

The aircar wobbled and Jim hurriedly pulled his focus back. For a moment, pain sliced through his head and his vision blurred. Jim gripped the controls and braced himself for the familiar onslaught. But it didn't come. He felt that odd shift in his head again and the car steadied under his hands.

Maybe experimenting in the air wasn't such a good idea.

Jim linked to Sky City PD and reported a robbery and arson in progress. When asked to identify himself, he gave his name as Major Ellison, UMIAC. It saved time. He considered his civic duty done and accelerated the aircar again, heading back to Base.

Jim reached Base with three minutes to spare. Connor arrived as Jim was unloading the car and she took one of the boxes from him. They walked up to the apartment together. Neither of them mentioned what was said earlier. Jim didn't resent it, but he was a little disappointed. He thought he'd earned more trust from Connor.

With the workstations deactivated, the briefing table made an excellent dining table. Only three of the four workstations were off: Daryl's display remained so he could join them while they ate. In minutes the table was filled with gaudy cartons of Chinese food emitting delicious smells.

Simon grabbed the dim sums and a pair of chopsticks. "Looks good, Jim. Thanks."

Connor claimed the chop suey. "I've been thinking about that code name. Scarlet." She rubbed the chopsticks together to smooth away any splinters. "I don't know if literary references really fit a criminal street gang, but I think it could be Richard Holmes."

Simon snorted. "Cute. Is he on your list?"

Connor nodded. "He was. I had eliminated him as a suspect but that was before we found the Wolfpack connection. Based on the new information, I think I'm looking for two people on the inside, not just one. One person is arranging the imports; using the lab's semi-legit imports to cover smuggling for the Wolfpack. Someone else is passing information on the experiments to whoever attacked the Wolves during the transfer. Only three people had access to the missing test results and Holmes was one of them."

Jim reached across to claim a carton of crispy beef with chilli sauce. "Megan, what's the deal with those test results? You didn't get round to telling us."

"The project is about genetic modification of bacteria. Some of the strains held in the lab are seriously dangerous but the project itself isn't evil. Professor King believes they're close to the goal."

"Which is?"

"A 'friendly' bacteria to cleanse convus waste from the bloodstream."

Jim let out a low whistle. Convus was the residue produced by cybernetic mods. "Shit. No wonder Dad doesn't want me near it."

"I don't get it," Simon admitted.

"Who is the biggest user of legal mods, Simon?"

"The military," Simon answered instantly. "So?"

"So even the military is limited in what they can do with mods, because the convus waste is fatal if you have too many of them. There are a lot of companies trying to develop a fuel that won't create waste, but from what I understand of the science that's a dead end. If it can be done, it will be so expensive no one can make a profit from it for at least a decade. So the real holy grail of the industry is a safe way to clean convus waste from the blood. If Ellison Industries can get control of that one, it's worth billions in military contracts alone. But only if it's exclusive to us." Jim ate a mouthful of crispy beef, thinking it through. "Dad must believe I'd give the army a heads-up. Because this lab stores deadly bacteria, the military could appropriate their work as a matter of national security before the company can register a patent. Ellison Industries would sue, and we'd end up with the rights, but by then it would be too late. All that profit would be gone."

But would the company sue? Thinking about it, Jim realised what a double-edged sword that was. They would win in court, he was sure, but the publicity – persecuting the army for protecting soldiers – would kill Stephen Ellison's bid for the Presidency before it began. Not that Jim would weep over that.

"Will you give them the heads up?" Connor asked, her tone interested rather than challenging.

"I wouldn't have," Jim admitted. "Now I might have to." Then another piece of the puzzle fell into place. "Of course! That's what the Wolfpack wants." Jim had seen the woman – Alexa Barnes. She was healthy for a mech addict, but an addict she certainly was. There was more metal on her than skin. Somehow, Sandburg was helping her mitigate the effects of the mecha but she had to be in a lot of pain. Something that could keep her blood clean would be priceless to her. It would be valuable to the Wolfpack as a whole, too, both for themselves and the mods they sold to others.

But even if Professor King was close to breeding a bacterium that would do it, surely it would be years before it was even ready for human testing, let alone distribution. Jim was sure that would be too late for the woman he'd seen.

"So those missing test results were the big breakthrough?" Simon confirmed.

"Oh, no," Connor answered. "That's just it. The bacterial strains I've been testing are dead ends. They only keep them as a control group. The test results have always been consistent." Briefly, Connor explained what she'd discovered in the lab. Something had changed three of the bacterial strains. It was only a small change, but a significant one.

"Get to the point, Connor," Simon growled.

"It was eating the neodymium."

Jim saw the implications at once. He glanced at Simon, who looked sick. Yeah, Simon got it, too.

Jim said it aloud. "Neodymium is in every mod made in America. And two thirds of the world. An infectious agent that could destroy neodymium...that's a biological weapon. And I think that's the best case scenario."

Daryl interrupted. "The Wolfpack records first contact with Scarlet one hundred and thirty two days ago. That must be long before this was discovered."

"But it wasn't until a few nights ago that the shipment was attacked," Simon pointed out. "Connor, when did this first show up in the lab?"

Connor frowned. "I didn't notice until today. I wouldn't have seen it at all if the results hadn't gone missing."

"Someone else noticed." Simon stated it as a fact.

Jim put it together. "The Wolves use a lot of mods. They're famous for it. They were keeping tabs on the lab because they need the treatment the lab's trying to make. The mole gave their rivals news of a potential weapon. The attack on the shipment might be related."

Connor nodded. "Makes sense."

"A bio weapon makes this a level two, Jim," Simon pointed out. If a foreign agent was involved...but they hadn't proved that.

Jim shook his head firmly. "I won't take command from you, Simon. If there was an actual weapon here I would have to, but we're talking about a couple of test tubes. Nothing certain, nothing weaponised." Jim wasn't finished eating, but he laid the chopsticks down and sat up straight in a mockery of the parade ground. "Your orders, sir?"

Simon threw a dim sum at Jim's head.

Jim caught it. "I'm serious." He ate the dim sum.

Simon cracked a smile. "Shut up, Ellison. Daryl, analysis report."

"Indexing eighty seven per cent complete. This cell runs everything through their core matrix. When I'm done, I'll be able to tell you what they have for breakfast."

"Good to know, but I don't think that'll be useful information. They've got a mole in the lab. I need to know if he's helped them acquire more than information. Report soonest."

"No indication of it so far. Full analysis in approximately ten minutes."

"Thanks." Simon turned to Connor. "Your priority is to close the case in the lab. Daryl has the data but we still need to confirm three things."

"How they are paying for the shipments and who is leaking intel to the Wolfpack," Connor agreed. "That's two. What's the third?"

"I need to know exactly what we're dealing with. Whether the threat we're talking about is real, and whether they've really got this breakthrough. Jim should decide what to do with that intel, but we have to know."

"I'll take care of it," Connor agreed.

Simon nodded once. "Jim, how soon can you touch base with your contact?"

"He said he'd call me tonight."

"Good. I want you to wait on that call. I'm going to sort through everything we have so we're ready to pass this over to a prosecutor."

Jim studied Simon closely, noting how tired he looked. He knew Simon could go a night or two without sleep – they all could. But he'd been doing that a bit too often on this mission, and it wasn't because their mission was particularly challenging. Simon had other worries.

"Simon, go and get some sleep," Jim said firmly. "I'll do that work while I wait."

"You need sleep, too."

"Yeah, but I've got to take tomorrow night off. His Majesty ordered me to appear at the charity ball." Jim scowled.

Connor smirked. "Wow, the great Ellison Charity ball. I've heard a lot about that."

She knew he would hate it. Jim shrugged, not wanting to give her more ammunition. "A bunch of people with too much money looking for ways to spend it. There are worse ways to avoid taxes."

She didn't drop it. "I've never seen you in black tie. I bet you'll be very dashing in a tux." She said it with a flirtatious smile which Jim knew wasn't serious.

He narrowed his eyes. "Yeah, well, just watch the fucking news tomorrow night. You'll see me." He added in a mutter, "I'd rather face torture again."

"Poor little rich boy," Connor commiserated.

Jim ignored her. Connor wasn't intentionally being mean. The banter was just her way and Jim was well aware his family's wealth was an obvious target. But tonight ignoring it was the best Jim could do. To Simon he said, "I'll work tonight. Daryl can keep me company."

Simon surrendered. "Far be it from me to discourage such dedication."

\*

Jim gathered the empty food cartons and carried them through to the apartment's small kitchen. He dumped it all in the recycler and ran the cleaning programme in the main room to get rid of the smell. While that was running, he made himself coffee.

He activated his workstation and set the coffee down in front of him. "Okay, Daryl, let's get to work."

Left alone with no distractions, Jim could give his full attention to the investigation. He had no need to search for information; with Daryl at his elbow he could retrieve any half-remembered reference instantly.

He organised his report into a timeline of events as they had pieced them together and created a database of the principal people involved, adding notes as to the role each played and on what evidence each was believed guilty or not by the quad. He added personnel from Ellison Industries to the list, beginning with the accountant who oversaw the lab's funding and on up the chain of responsibility to his father. The higher up the chain, the less likely it seemed that there would be criminal liability, but Jim ruthlessly suppressed his own opinion. He recorded only whether there was motive or opportunity, listing the evidence where it existed and leaving his own bias out of it.

Finally, he added data about the Wolfpack and the individuals they knew were involved. Wayne Andrew Parker – still the only one of the Wolfpack they had been able to identify from the failed transaction in the shipyard – was, Daryl confirmed, now deceased, but Jim could use his name as a starting point to map the command structure within the Wolfpack. It led, unsurprisingly, to Alexa Barnes, mech addict and sentinel. Jim recorded that fact, too, but did nothing to draw attention to it. Barnes' involvement also implicated Sandburg. Feeling very ambivalent about it, Jim added his name to the list.

It was almost 0300, and Sandburg hadn't called him.

There could be a lot of reasons. Jim didn't know Sandburg well enough to guess. Perhaps 'James Ellison' had scared him off. But money talks and Jim thought it unlikely Sandburg wouldn't call to get his payment.

He tapped his link and clipped on the earpiece. "Call lima-tango-five-five-five-seven-four-three," he instructed. He heard the low tone of a link trying to connect, but there was no response.

"Daryl, how much live information do you have from the Wolfpack?" he asked, yawning. He was ready to crash. He either needed a stimulant or sleep very soon.

Daryl's computer-generated face cracked into a cheeky grin. "The headquarters of the target Wolfpack cell crosses three buildings, ground floor and all basement levels. All rooms and corridors are monitored. I can give you a live feed of any and all locations. There will be a three-second delay."

Daryl sounded smug. It was unusual for Daryl to show emotion, but in this case it was justified. "Why the delay?" Jim asked. Three seconds was a long time.

"The Wolves are aware their matrix was hacked. They believe they have locked me out. The delay keeps my presence in their matrix undetectable."

Jim sat up straight. "What do you mean they found your hack? Why didn't you alert us?"

"There was no reason to alert. My backdoor was already in place."

"When did they find your hack?" Jim asked sharply.

"Twenty one, twenty four," Daryl reported.

"Details, Daryl."

"The link was discovered and the matrix was locked down. I was –"

Jim felt cold. "Did they find the link on Sandburg?"

"Unknown," Daryl answered serenely.

Jim cursed. "What do you mean, unknown? You just said you've got a live feed!"

"I do now. I did not at the time the link was discovered," Daryl reported.

Getting mad at Daryl was pointless. Simon was better at getting answers out of him, but Jim knew it was just a matter of asking the right questions. Daryl could be very literal.

"Locate Doctor Blair Sandburg now," Jim snapped. No room for misinterpretation there.

Daryl's face vanished from the display. An instant later Jim was looking at a dark room. In the middle of the room, a man was tied to a chair. He wore pants, but no shirt and there was blood on his exposed skin. His head hung down so Jim couldn't see his face, but the long hair, the size and shape of the body – it did look like Sandburg. And Daryl had identified him as such. That was worth more than a shaky visual ID.

"You should have told me, Daryl!" They found the link at 21:24. Six hours ago. Sandburg had been in trouble for six hours, and it was Jim's fault.

Jim bit back a curse, reminding himself that Daryl didn't think exactly like a human. "Where is he? Exact location."

Daryl displayed a three-dimensional map. It was the same building Jim visited before, but sub-basement level.

"You said we've got a live feed from all cameras."

"Confirmed."

"Push the feed from that room through to my car. Stay on it and alert me if anything changes."

"Confirmed. Jim, I was not informed Doctor Sandburg was cooperating."

From Daryl, that was as good as an apology. "He isn't. That doesn't mean I'm going to let him take the fall for this." Jim placed his palm on a scanner and entered the weapons locker. The quad carried enough ordnance for a small war, because a quad had to be prepared for anything. Jim strapped on body armour and a weapons belt. He shut down his workstation. "Say with me on the link, Daryl. I may need you."

"Constant live link established."

"Is Simon awake? Or Megan?" Jim asked hopefully as he closed the apartment door and ran for his car.

"Simon is sleeping," Daryl reported. "Megan has turned off her link. Her last registered location is the Rainier lab."

Damn. Megan was obviously working and couldn't be disturbed. Jim could have ordered Daryl to wake Simon, but he wouldn't do it. Not for this. It was his mess; he would clean it up.

## CHAPTER FOUR: "PERMISSION TO TELL THE TRUTH, SIR?"

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...protective imperative that is common to the majority of sentinels we studied. The sentinel may 'imprint' upon an individual, a family or a larger grouping and once established, this bond is very difficult to shake. The sentinel who feels protective of an individual may go to extreme lengths to keep that individual safe. It is therefore essential that these protective instincts be properly directed in the sentinels we train. In order to achieve this, we must...

Assessment of the sentinel as a military asset, ©2136 Federal Government of the United States of America

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Simon tossed his coat over a chair as he entered his small apartment. He walked over to the cabinet and poured himself a large measure of bourbon. Ellison was right: he was tired and needed a night's rest. He was grateful Ellison had his back.

Lighting a cigar and carrying the bourbon bottle with him, Simon turned on the entertainment matrix and selected music with the volume low. Then he called up a video link. He couldn't relax until he had made this call.

"Hospital," he instructed. His system needed no clarification: there was only one hospital as far as Simon was concerned. It took a moment for the connection to come through.

The face on the link was familiar and she smiled when she saw Simon. "Hello, Major. It's good to hear from you."

"Hello, Diane. Is there any news?"

Her smile faded. "I'm afraid not. His physical condition is unchanged."

Well, that was no surprise. "And the rest?" Simon asked.

"You would know better than I." Her voice was a little tart. Simon was aware that Diane didn't approve of the arrangement, so he ignored the tone.

"What do the scans show?" he asked patiently.

Her face vanished and an image of a brain scan appeared, slowly rotating on the screen. The scan was brightly coloured, different regions of the brain glowing blue, green and red. It was a familiar sight to Simon; he couldn't read it the way a doctor could, but he understood enough to come to the right conclusion before Diane said it.

"The deterioration has stopped for the time being," Diane reported. "Brain activity remains high and healthy."

For the time being. Meaning she thought this was a temporary reprieve. Simon finished his bourbon and poured another. "Thank you, Diane. Is there anything else I should know?"

Her face returned to the screen. "Not tonight. Everything is normal. But you look tired, Simon."

"Work," he explained shortly. "I'm about to get some sleep, but I had to call first."

"Sure. It was good of you to check in. Goodnight, Simon." Diane cut the link without waiting for him to say goodbye.

Simon finished his second drink, turned off the matrix and went to bed.

\*

Megan did not go home when she left Base. Instead, she returned to the Rainier lab. Her job and security clearance entitled her to access at any hour. She signed in, collected her access card and asked the guard if anyone else was working tonight. He informed her the lab was empty.



Once she had confirmed she was indeed alone, Megan sat at her desk for a long time, reading and re-reading her logs and going over every step of the experiments in her mind. Only when she was certain she would make no mistakes did she begin work. First, she donned the usual protective clothing, sealing her lab coat all the way up to her neck and covering her hands with surgi-seal. She pinned her hair back so it wouldn't get in her way.

Megan had already re-run the tests as Professor King suggested, but that was with the help of her lab assistants and it was only with the most recent batch of samples. This time she would work alone and she was going back to the beginning. She made up the petri dishes herself, taking each component from sealed containers to be sure there was no contamination. She warmed agar and added each of the nutrients in the correct order, measuring each sample three times to be certain it was exact. The next step had to be done by machine because no human hand could create a perfectly uniform base in each dish. She set the machine to work. While the solution cooled in the petri dishes, Megan went to the freezer.

Bacteria could be frozen and stored indefinitely. If you freeze a mouse, when you defrost it you've got a dead mouse. But when you freeze bacteria and defrost them, they go right back to reproducing and eating and all the other things life does. It was an integral part of the process that the lab kept frozen samples of their bacteria at each stage of their directed evolution. The sample trays for bacterial cultures held twenty five culture dishes each. For each of the strains with missing data, Megan located twenty five samples from different stages of the work, marking the trays carefully so she could identify each, but using codes she invented on the spot so if someone tried to mess with her work, they wouldn't know what was in each dish. She noted the details in her tablet, too, and encrypted that file with her thumbprint. When she was finished, she would have seventy five unique samples of bacteria in three trays, each sealed and catalogued. It was a routine, a series of simple movements: take dish, take bacteria sample, swab dish with sample, destroy swab in hazmat disposal, seal dish, place dish in sample tray. She had completed seventy out of seventy five when an alternate plan occurred to her. Abandoning the last five samples – she had worked backward in time, so those were the earliest and therefore least significant –she left the trays where they were and headed to a different storage facility: the cybernetics cupboard.

Megan felt out of her depth in the lab, but cybernetics she understood. It took her only moments to locate a device she could use for her idea. She sat down and began to dismantle it. Sitting was a faux pas in the lab; everyone worked standing because that way, if you dropped something it ended up on the floor, not in your lap. But this wasn't dangerous in that way, and being seated gave Megan the greater control needed for this delicate work. After a few minutes work she gave up and went to her locker for her own tools. Then the work went more quickly, though it was still nearly an hour before she extracted the part she wanted from the device. She dropped the core chip into de-ionised water, broke it open within the water, shook it lightly then picked out the visible pieces. She didn't have time to run full checks, but she dropped a little of the water onto a sample slide and glanced at it under a microscope. The water droplet was shiny with nanobots. She added a small quantity of that solution to each of the five remaining slides and added a sample of the most recently stored bacteria.

When she was finished, she slid all three trays into an incubation unit, programmed it to culture the bacteria and sealed it to her security code and thumbprint. It was nearly 0200. Megan yawned, stretched and ran her hands down her spine, feeling her bones pop as she worked out the kinks from so long bent over the samples. She went back to her desk and finished writing up her notes before locking the tablet away.

Yawning once more, Megan decided it was time to go home and sleep. There was nothing more she could do until the tests were ready and there was no way to make bacteria culture faster than nature worked. It would be ninety six hours before the bacteria cultures would be ready for the second part of the test.

Megan folded her arms and laid her head on the desk. Just a moment of rest so she would be safe to drive home. In seconds, she was asleep.

\*

Jim programmed destination and preferred route into the Hercules' autopilot so he could let the car do most of the driving. Throughout the flight, Jim paid more attention to Daryl's security feed showing Sandburg tied to the chair than he did to the traffic all around him. He was concentrating so hard on the vid he forgot to turn on the rain repellent as he flew beneath Sky City. Oil streaked his windshield as a result, but Jim could still see. Occasionally, the shadow of another person passed in front of the camera: a single guard in the room with him. Sandburg himself barely

moved; Jim thought he was unconscious. But he was alive, or there would be no need for a guard. Jim clung to that one certainty.

He landed on the roof, forty storeys above the street. He couldn't take his car to street level in Wolfpack territory. The aircar, Jim's pride and joy, looked as expensive as it was. If he left it on those streets, he wouldn't get out alive. Even landing on the roof was a risk. He shut off the engine and spent a few precious moments engaging several layers of security protocols. He glanced at the camera feed one more time.

In his pocket, he still had the second syringe of the drug Sandburg gave him. If he used it now, could his sentinel ability give him an edge? Would it help him help Sandburg? Jim considered it, but his control was too shaky and he knew at least one of the Wolves was a sentinel. His own sentinel ability could be used against him as readily as it could give him an advantage. He would not risk it tonight, with Sandburg's life at stake.

The rain was cold on his exposed skin and the air smelled of burned fuel and old oil. Jim pulled his equipment from the car and quickly strapped on weapons, safety gear and a combat helmet. The helmet would protect his skull, but more importantly it would conceal his face. He walked to the edge of the roof and ran a hand across the concrete, testing it.

"Daryl, give me a status update."

"Unchanged."

"Acknowledged. Monitor the room constantly and alert me if anything changes."

"Confirmed."

"Monitor the Wolfpack security systems and alert me if I am detected."

"Confirmed."

Jim lifted the grappling tool which hung from his belt. He set it in the middle of the concrete ledge and triggered it. The tool sent a grappling spike deep into the concrete. Jim tugged on it, satisfied himself it would hold and looked down over the side of the building to judge the distance. He pulled a length of the cord out from his belt clip. Then he jumped.

The rappelling cord stretched enough to check the force of Jim's fall. As he felt it begin to pull taut he twisted in the air and reached up to catch the rope with his gloved hands. He felt the jerk as he reached the limit of the cord's stretch, gripped the cord and angled his body as he swung toward the wall. He landed at right-angles to the wall, his boots planted perfectly. A second to catch his breath – no longer – then he touched the belt control and began to walk down the wall as the cord paid out slowly.

As he passed the fourth floor, he heard Daryl's voice in his ear. "Alert. You will be detectable by the Wolfpack system in three seconds."

Jim stopped his descent. He felt the strain in his muscles and rain seeped into his clothing, chilling his body. "System details?"

"Audio. Visual. Infra red."

"Can you give me some interference so I can get inside?"

"I can do better than that. Standby." After only the briefest pause, Daryl continued. "Enter by the third window on the second floor. You will not be detected."

Jim didn't question it. The third window was a short distance to his left and he had no additional crampons to make it easier to shift to the side like that. He paid out a little more cord so he could walk sideways and leaned to an angle to compensate for the pull of the cord. He felt the strain in his muscles as he slowly descended toward the window. Reaching the place, he understood why Daryl chose this one: it was open a crack. He gripped the frame and pulled it open just enough for him to squirm inside. He dropped to the floor with relief. The rappelling cord detached from Jim's belt at a touch and he watched it slither out through the open window, free of his weight. He leaned out to

gauge the distance between his window and the rope. It was just barely within reach if he jumped, but he wouldn't attempt that unless he were truly desperate. It would be too easy to miss.

"I'm in, Daryl," Jim said quietly, though he was sure Daryl knew it. He crossed the room to a door, paying no attention to the room itself. He stopped at the door, listening for signs of people. He could hear music coming from somewhere below, a thumping beat muffled by distance. "Daryl, how many on this level?"

"Thirty one individuals. I have frozen the security feeds. Warning: many of the Wolfpack members are directly connected to the matrix through their mods. If you kill any of them, others will be alerted."

"Understood." Jim cursed. He could do this without killing, but he would be fighting his instincts every moment. He was in enemy territory. There would come a point when detection was less important than taking out the enemy in front of him.

Cautiously, Jim opened the door. The corridor appeared to be empty. It couldn't be this easy, but there were ways to improve the odds. Jim flipped the visor of his helmet down. "Daryl, darkness, please."

"Confirmed."

Jim counted the seconds silently. In three seconds precisely the corridor was plunged into darkness. On the fourth second, Jim's visor engaged. Now he had a perfect view of the corridor via infra-red, and a digital readout along the bottom of his vision that gave him additional information. He moved silently into the corridor.

Daryl's map of the building complex was clear in Jim's memory. He reached the accessway without incident but he heard voices from the other side: a female and a male having a good-natured argument as they moved toward Jim's position. The infra-red view in his visor even gave Jim a vague view of their bodies through the door. Jim considered and discarded several options. Then the accessway opened and he was out of time.

Blinding light filled the corridor. The two Wolves froze. One threw up a hand to shield her eyes. Jim was aware of the light, but his eyes were protected by the visor. He took out the woman with a hard punch to her solar plexus, spun with his momentum as she doubled over and swept his leg through the man's knees before he'd figured out how to see. As the man fell, Jim regained his feet, hooked an arm around the man's neck and squeezed, cutting off his air. Something metal dug into his arm but Jim ignored the pain.

The woman recovered quickly and instead of attempting to rescue her companion she leapt toward an alarm. Jim drew a knife and threw it. He had intended to hit the wall beside the alarm – a warning – but he was still struggling with the man and his aim was off. The alarm shattered under the hard-flung blade. There was no sound from the alarm – Daryl's doing, Jim hoped – and the woman turned toward Jim. He let the man's body fall and leapt into her attack. She got one good blow in, but Jim's body armour absorbed the impact. He slammed her head into the wall. She went down. He turned back to the man, ready to deliver another blow, but found it wasn't necessary.

Breathing hard, Jim straightened. "Thanks for the lightshow, Daryl. But warn me next time."

"Confirmed." Did Jim imagine the note of laughter in that word? It was always hard to tell with Daryl.

Jim grinned, adrenaline pushing him onward. He dragged the two Wolves into the nearest room, but could not take the time to tie them up. He had to find Sandburg.

The pounding music was coming from the next level. Jim descended the stairs and detected the scents of nicotine and several narcotics in the air. A party? Or just an average night in the Wolfpack? Jim had no way to know, and it did make a difference to his strategy. He moved past the party and was about to continue downward when Daryl alerted him.

"Jim, your prisoner has been joined by others."

"How many?"

"Two. There are now four people in the room."

"Thanks." There were three – no four – possibilities. They might be letting Sandburg go, or moving him to another location. They might be there to continue the interrogation. Or they were going to kill him. The first Jim dismissed. The second was the best case scenario because it gave Jim the best chance to save him. But it was the last possibility that got Jim moving. He could have asked Daryl for an audio feed from the room but he feared that would just be a distraction at this point. He had to get to Sandburg now!

Jim flew down the stairs to the sub-basement level. He passed three people during his headlong run, and saw none of them, so focussed was he on his goal. He shoved them out of his way without daring to slow down or stop. Angry shouts followed him and he knew that even with Daryl to silence the alarms, the Wolves now knew an intruder was in their den. He could not pause to worry about that.

The music from the party above was somehow louder, the bass beat vibrating through Jim's skin. The smells of mildew and rot in the sub-basement thickened around Jim, forcing him to slow his pace as he gagged. He tried to breathe through his mouth to lessen the stench but then the taste of it was on his tongue, sour and bitter. Then he understood what was happening to him. Not now! He instructed his senses. Not that it would do any good.

"I don't know!" Sandburg cried. Jim was still far from the room where he was being held but Sandburg's voice was so clear Jim might have been right beside him. Sandburg sounded desperate, but it wasn't a cry of pain. "Alex, I was at the market today. Anyone could have slipped that thing into my pocket."

Jim headed for the sound of that voice.

"You are lying," a woman's voice said in tones that chilled Jim's blood. "You know who it was. Or you suspect."

Sandburg cried out in pain and Jim broke into a run.

"I don't know!" Sandburg yelled again. "Please, Alex, I don't know."

"Then guess," she answered, drawing out the s sound like a hissing snake.

Jim burst into the room, his gun hot and ready. It took him less than a tenth of a second to assess the scene. Sandburg, bound to a chair with tape around his wrists and ankles. The woman – Alexa Barnes – behind Sandburg, leaning over his shoulder. She was gripping his bare shoulder with one hand and there was blood running down his arm. There were two others: a heavily armed man beside the door as Jim burst in and another at the back of the room, beside a table that appeared to hold surgical instruments. All four heads turned toward Jim.

Jim's training, so ingrained he no longer needed to think about it at all, was to identify and neutralise the greatest threat first. His first shots took out the armed man with three bullets – two shots to the heart, the third to the upper left quadrant of the chest. His ammo was the best the military could offer and pierced the guard's inferior body armour; the third shot was for impact, to make the man's body twist as he fell, throwing off any return fire. But this man had a mecha implant in his chest and Jim's third bullet produced a shower of hot sparks. It dazzled him momentarily, though by then he was already turning his weapon to cover Barnes.

Jim blinked, afterimages of sparks dancing before his eyes. He cursed his disability. He couldn't fire until he could see the target.

"Stop!" Barnes commanded.

Jim still couldn't see clearly, but with his visor down she might not realise it. He could see enough to know she was standing over Sandburg. He froze, blinking. As his vision finally cleared, he saw the sharp steel claws at the ends of her fingers, curved around Sandburg's throat.

He saw, too, the satisfaction in her eyes. She now knew Jim could be coerced by her threat to her prisoner.

"Drop the gun. Now," she ordered.

Jim would not surrender his weapon, but the pause gave him time to focus. He shifted his weight slightly as if preparing to lower the gun. Then he fired: once at Barnes, aiming for the mecha covering her face because Sandburg's

body was blocking a better shot, and once at the other man, a body shot intended to disable. He returned his aim to Barnes.

Either Jim's shot missed her, or the bullet only grazed the metal. Barnes moved unbelievably fast. She threw Sandburg to one side, chair and all. He yelled in fright as he fell, unable to save himself. Barnes had made herself a bigger target and Jim shot again. Again, she wasn't there, it seemed before the bullet left his gun.

No one could outrun a bullet, no matter how enhanced they might be. Jim swung around, switching the gun to automatic fire as he sought his target. For a moment, he thought she was somehow gone. Then he looked up. She was on the ceiling, where steel girders ran the length of the room in parallel lines. She was between them, her legs and one arm braced on the girders and aiming a gun with her other hand.

They both shot at the same instant. Jim fired a burst of ten rounds. The sound was deafening in the confined space and his ears rang with it even as her bullet winged him. Jim didn't see what happened to her. Pain ripped through his left shoulder as the bullet tore through the weak spot in his body armour where the shoulder plate met the upper arm guard. Barnes was either an exceptional shot or Jim was incredibly unlucky. Jim reacted to the pain by twisting away, making himself a smaller target. As he took his eyes off her, the door behind him slammed and she was gone.

Jim ran to Sandburg's side. He made no attempt to set the chair right, just pulled a knife to cut through the tape binding him. "Sandburg. Are you okay?" He winced, his arm hurting as he sawed through the tape.

Sandburg stared at him. "Ellison?" He seemed dazed, uncertain.

Jim's ears still rang from the gunfire and his eyes stung from the propellant discharged by his gun, but he saw Sandburg's mouth form the words and understood him readily enough. He realised the visor was still covering his face, but he did not raise it. There was no time. He released the last of the tape from Sandburg's ankle. "Can you stand?" he asked urgently, shouting because Sandburg must be having trouble hearing, too.

"Maybe." Sandburg shoved the chair away and began to stand.

Jim reached down to help him up.

"Alert," Daryl's calm voice interrupted. "Hostiles approaching. Fifteen seconds."

"Is there another way out of here?" Jim asked Daryl.

Sandburg, unaware of Daryl, answered, "The tunnels."

"Where do the tunnels lead?"

"Sector three-zero-three. But – "

"Show me," Jim commanded, already pulling Sandburg toward the exit.

Sandburg resisted. He shook off Jim's hand. "You can go to Hell, man!" He moved instead toward one of the men Jim had shot.

Jim pulled him back. "Sandburg, they are going to kill you!"

"And how do I know you won't?"

Jim stopped. He knew he had done wrong by Sandburg but he never considered that Sandburg might not trust him. Now it seemed obvious: he was an idiot. And he was out of time.

"Five seconds," Daryl reminded him.

"I guess you don't," Jim admitted. "But you know you're dead if you stay. Come with me now."

Sandburg looked toward the downed man once more, then he turned to Jim. "Okay."

Jim headed for the door. "Daryl, I need a diversion!"

"None available," Daryl responded with infuriating calm. It meant there was nothing on this level linked to the matrix, or nothing that would make a useful diversion.

Jim cursed. "Which way?"

Sandburg said, "Through there," and pointed to a dark, empty doorway as Daryl sent the route to Jim's visor display. Jim shoved Sandburg through the doorway and turned, raising the gun again as several of the Wolves, led by Barnes, appeared. Jim had only moments to take in the sight, but he saw men and women in leather and urban camouflage, most of them with dark metal or polished steel mecha visible on faces, arms and chests. Adrenaline and an old terror rushed through him and he fired into the crowd. The cries of the injured were drowned by the roar of automatic fire until the gun clicked empty. The oddly sweet smell of propellant filled the air. In a well-practiced motion that was smooth despite the pain in his arm, Jim released the empty cartridge, let it fall and slammed a fresh load home, all the while backing into the darkness.

"I can't see anything back here!" Sandburg protested.

"I can," Jim answered. But they couldn't run yet. He had to do something to cut off pursuit. If Daryl could not provide a diversion, Jim was carrying some weapons that would do it. He was reluctant to use them with his senses so volatile, because the grenades weren't explosives. Now he had little choice, and Barnes was a sentinel. If he could overwhelm her senses, the risk to himself was worth taking.

Jim pulled a flash grenade from his belt. With a touch he set it for a one second delay then threw it into the air above the approaching Wolves. He turned to run, grabbing Sandburg's arm to guide him, too. The flash was magnesium-bright and even with his back to it, the light stabbed painfully into Jim's eyes. If he'd been looking that way, or if he didn't have the protection of his visor, it would have disabled him. Jim did not dare look back.

The thick, rotten smell was stronger in this tunnel. Jim did his best to ignore it and freed the second grenade from his belt. He thumbed the dial, setting – he hoped! – a ten second delay, then he threw it back as he and Sandburg rounded a corner.

"This way!" Sandburg urged as Jim glimpsed a light ahead.

His words were swept away as the second grenade went off. The noise was horrible: a piercing screech. Jim's helmet protected him, but this time, not enough. He stumbled as the weaponised sound tore through his head, destroying his fragile control over his senses. The air was suddenly thick with the smells of rot and bullet propellant and blood and fear. The pain in Jim's arm intensified and every motion made the body armour chafe his skin like sandpaper. Jim fell to his knees. He couldn't block it all out. He couldn't block any of it out!

Sandburg hauled him to his feet. "You idiot!" His voice was thunder. "You're an untrained sentinel; didn't you know what that would do to you? Hold it together!"

Jim had no choice. He stumbled onward, letting Sandburg lead the way, painfully aware that if the Wolves caught up with them now, he was useless to defend them. But Daryl's directions projected onto his visor told Jim there wasn't far to go.

They passed a blue light set into the wall and Sandburg changed direction, leading them through a jagged hole in the wall and then up an uneven slope. Jim found he could breathe a little easier. He looked ahead and saw bars covering what looked like an exit into the street. Were they trapped? If this led to Sector 303 they would still be in Wolfpack territory. They were still in danger.

Sandburg ran ahead to the barred exit. He looked through it, then turned back to Jim. "I think it's clear."

"Let's go," Jim agreed. He threw his weight against the grate and it inched open. "Help me!" He shoved again. Sandburg joined him and they pushed the grate together. It opened, slowly, making them battle for every inch.

Jim sent Sandburg through first, then followed. As they emerged, he felt the downdraft of an aircar descending.

"Sandburg!" he warned. Jim raised his gun and moved to protect the other man. He checked the load: he had used too much ammo – automatic mode ran through rounds too quickly. He switched the gun back to manual. Five rounds left. He had to make each one count. They had nowhere to hide; nowhere to run.

The aircar descended swiftly.

Jim took aim at the aircar, his finger tense on the trigger.

The aircar rocked to one side as if someone within was trying to aim a weapon. Then its door opened.

A familiar voice shouted, "Ellison! Move!"

Simon!

"It's okay!" Jim shouted to Sandburg over the roar of the engine. "Get in!" He could hear others coming through the tunnel.

Sandburg obeyed, scrambling into Simon's aircar. Jim planted his foot on the rim, grabbed the bar above the door and hauled himself into the open doorway as Simon took her up. He levelled the gun at the grate and fired his last five rounds, discouraging pursuit. As the final bullet left his gun, he saw Barnes emerge from the tunnel, blood spattered across her skin and hair. She turned her face up to the car and for an instant her eyes met Jim's. Somehow, even through the visor, she saw him. Jim saw recognition in her eyes.

Jim didn't hesitate. He pulled the trigger, his gun aimed at her face as she looked up to the escaping aircar. But the gun clicked on an empty chamber.

Jim pulled himself inside the car, slammed the door closed and checked the seal. "Tight," he reported. "Go, go, go!"

\*

They said little as Simon drove.

Jim loosened the chin-strap of his helmet and pulled it off. He wanted Simon to go back for his car; Simon told him it was taken care of. His tone warned Jim not to argue. Simon was angry with him, and he had a right to be angry. Chain of command could be fluid in a quad and Jim and Simon were of equal rank. This made it all the more important to adhere to the chain of command once it was established: a ship could not have two captains. Earlier that night, Jim had placed Simon firmly in control of the quad. That he then headed off into enemy territory without informing Simon was inexcusable.

Daryl alerted Simon, of course, probably even before Jim left Base. Since Simon was in command, Jim couldn't object to it and Simon's timely appearance had probably saved their lives. It seemed churlish to complain.

Sandburg leaned over to Jim and touched his injured arm. "You're bleeding."

"It's nothing." Jim dismissed it, although now the adrenaline rush was fading he was becoming more aware of the stinging pain in his arm. Surface wounds often hurt worse than real damage.

"I'm a doctor, remember?" Sandburg said. "Let me help."

Jim gave him a grateful look, but said, "Not while we're in the car. She only winged me. It'll wait."

Sandburg looked unconvinced, but just then Simon swerved the aircar and Sandburg blanched. He said nothing more.

When Simon drew into the Base parking lot, Jim was grateful to see his Hercules in its usual space. Either Daryl hacked the autopilot or Simon had sent Megan to get her. Neither scenario pleased him but he was glad to have the car safe.

"Inside, Ellison," Simon ordered curtly. "Where do you want me to drop him?" He indicated Sandburg with a jerk of his head.

Jim stared in surprise. "He's coming with us."

"That's not – "

"We owe him an explanation," Jim insisted, "and he has information we need."

"You planted that link on me!" Sandburg declared. "I thought it had to be you. But...what the hell, man? Who are you?"

It was the same question he had asked earlier. Jim looked at Simon. "Permission to tell the truth, sir?"

Jim intended it as an apology but Simon scowled. "Why ask me? You will anyway."

Apology not accepted, then. Jim met Sandburg's eyes and saw a similar anger there. Everyone was pissed at him tonight.

"I am James Ellison," he said. "I told you the truth today. But there's more. I'm Major Ellison, UMIAC."

Sandburg paled. "UMIAC," he whispered, pronouncing it as you-make, instead of the initials Jim had used. "The Sabres are coming after the Wolfpack?"

The name Sabres came from the UMIAC insignia: crossed sabres. It wasn't a name its agents used often.

Simon shot Jim a warning glance, but he didn't need it. "Our mission is classified," he answered evasively. "But...if we were?"

Sandburg, still white-faced, swallowed hard. "I'd say it's about damn time. And I'd say you blew it, man. We could have made a deal!"

It wasn't the response Jim expected. Gently, he said, "Maybe we still can. Please come inside."

Sandburg's look was resentful. "Do I have a choice?"

Simon cut in before Jim could answer. "Right now, no, you don't." His big body blocked any chance Blair had of getting away. "But you're not a prisoner," he added unconvincingly. "You can leave if you want to after debriefing."

Sandburg reached for the aircar's door. "You're a piece of work, you know that?" he said, his venom directed at Jim. "If you'd told me, I would have helped you. Instead you levelled my life." His fury was palpable. Sandburg climbed out of the car and Jim could see his struggle to retain his dignity and control.

That struggle decided him. Jim had messed this up; he must make amends.

Somehow.

\*

Ellison hovered near Blair's back as they approached what looked like a regular Sky City apartment. His closeness made Blair feel like a prisoner. His mind reeling, Blair thought glumly that his situation closely resembled out of the frying pan and into the fire. There seemed more to fear among these people than among the Wolves. Blair was used to dealing with Alex. She had hurt him before and she was angry when she found the link on him, but Blair didn't really believe Alex would have killed him. She knew she needed him to keep her alive.

He had no reason to trust Ellison. He killed with such ruthless efficiency and he had lied to Blair again and again. Was any of it true? Why did he come after Blair? Just to stop him from spilling his secrets? If that was it, it was too late now. Blair remembered the moment when Alex followed them out of the tunnel. He had seen recognition on her face. He wasn't sure if that meant she knew who Jim was, or if she'd recognised him as another sentinel. Maybe both. Either possibility was dangerous for Ellison. Did he understand the significance of a face-off between two sentinels?

The big dark-skinned man unlocked the door with a palm scan. "Daryl, lockdown," he said as the door swung open. "Did anyone track us?"

The voice that answered was a young man's tenor. "Lockdown confirmed. I detected no pursuit."



They walked through the door and it was immediately apparent that this was no ordinary apartment. They passed a small kitchen but what should have been the living room was a high-tech conference room. The walls were lined with computer equipment. The table was a huge holo-projector as well as a four-person workstation.

Quad, Blair's memory supplied. UMAIC agents worked in teams of four.

"Where's Connor?" Ellison asked.

"According to Daryl, she's still at the lab," the other man answered. "Should I call her in for this?"

"Maybe. I'm not sure yet." Ellison looked at Blair. "Have a seat, Sandburg." He indicated a station at the table with a careless gesture. "I'll find you a shirt. Do you want anything else? A drink? Food?"

Blair had almost forgotten he had no shirt on. He hugged himself self-consciously and shivered as the aircon chilled his skin. It was many hours since he last ate but his stomach was in knots. He couldn't bear the thought of eating: he would vomit for sure. "Uh...water would be good. Please." He sat down where Ellison ordered, at the large, black-topped table. The chair shifted around him, moulding to his height and body shape. It was very comfortable.

Ellison headed toward the kitchen. He returned moments later with a glass of ice water and a plain black t-shirt. He offered both to Blair.

Blair muttered a thank you and pulled the t-shirt on over his head. It was several sizes too big for him, but it covered him and it was warm. He sipped the water, but it didn't help the dry-mouthed fear.

One wall split open at Ellison's touch, revealing an arms locker with an arsenal inside. Ellison began to strip off his weapons and armour, placing each in a space moulded to fit. Blair tried not to watch but Ellison's calm efficiency was mesmerising. It was like the way he killed those men; not a movement wasted. Blair did not think Ellison had lied to him this time. The weapons in that arsenal were military-grade. He saw enough weapons around the Wolfpack to recognise superior models. And the computer equipment in this room...it was hugely advanced tech. The UMIAC story made it all make sense.

The other man took a seat at the table. "I'm Major Simon Banks," he said simply. Major Banks was an imposing, dark-skinned man. He wore black: pants, shoes, a plain sweater with an embroidered brand label the only splash of colour on him. A smell of expensive tobacco lingered about him, though whether it was a pipe or cigar Blair couldn't tell.

Blair's mouth went dry again and he sipped the cold water. "D-Doctor Blair Sandburg."

"I know, Doctor. Listen, I want to make it clear you are not under arrest. We don't have the authority to arrest you."

Only to abduct me in an armed raid. That's reassuring. Blair knew that UMIAC had the authority to kill. "Just what authority do you have?" he asked, not really expecting a useful answer.

"That's not a simple question," Major Banks began.

Ellison closed the weapons locker. "It varies depending on the level of threat we're dealing with and that can change throughout a mission as we gather intel. Right now we're at level three. That means we can detain you for interrogation only. We have no power to hold you once our questions have been answered."

Major Banks nodded agreement. "That about covers it."

Blair appreciated the clear explanation. "And what rights do I have?"

Ellison came toward the table. "Ours isn't a criminal investigation so Miranda rights don't apply. You don't have a right to legal counsel, but you can request a witness, who could be your lawyer if that's the way you want it. Most importantly, you don't have the right to remain silent. If you refuse to answer our questions we can use other means to extract the information from you. That's not a threat: I'm just answering your question."

"Other means?"

"Drugs. Some rough interrogation techniques. Not torture. But the flipside is that evidence we gather can't be used against you in court. For that to happen we'd have to bring in a prosecutor and you'd have different rights."

"I understand," Blair agreed. "I think I do."

"Do you want a witness?" Banks asked.

Blair considered it for a few seconds. A witness was probably there to certify they didn't cross whatever line UMIAC drew between "rough interrogation" and torture. There were one or two people he could call. But he couldn't really see much benefit in it. He wasn't planning to be uncooperative. So he shrugged in answer. "I guess not. Am I allowed to change my mind later?"

"Yes," Banks agreed.

Blair turned to Ellison. His dark clothing didn't show the blood but Blair could see where the fabric had been torn by Alex's bullet. "You should let me look at that wound," he said.

Ellison pulled the ripped sleeve away from his flesh. "I think it's okay."

"Let him look," Banks ordered.

"Do you have a first aid kit?" Blair asked as he stood and moved toward Ellison. A standard kit wouldn't be worth much, but his medical bag, along with the rest of his life, was back at the Wolfpack. Lost forever.

Major Banks left the table and returned with a box the size of a briefcase which he laid in front of Blair. "Daryl. Vital signs analysis. Ellison."

The holo-display came on and Blair started in surprise. The holo showed body temperature, breathing rate and peak flow, heart rate, blood pressure and more. It was as good as a medi-scan. Blair nodded, satisfied with the analysis. "Will your AI hear my voice?" he asked, opening the first aid box. To Ellison he said, "Take the shirt off, please."

Banks answered by addressing the AI. "Daryl, Doctor Sandburg may have access to all medical data until revoked. Confirm."

"Confirmed." The AI's voice was everywhere.

"Thanks." The first aid supplies were much better than a standard kit. Blair took out a bottle of cleaning gel and slathered it over his hands. There was no surgi-seal, but there were nitrile gloves. He pulled a pair on then selected a swab, probe and antiseptic to clean Ellison's wound. He hesitated for a moment. Ellison had removed his shirt, as instructed. The body beneath that shirt was worth a stare or two. Hard, defined muscles bulged in his arms and chest, but that wasn't what caught Blair's attention. It was the scars: lines of imperfection marring the tanned skin. He had seen the forearm scar before but what he saw now was different. The scar on Ellison's forearm was an injury. The scars criss-crossing his back, shoulders and chest looked like the result of torture.

"Alex uses SD-Prime ammo," he informed Ellison when he recovered.

He saw immediate comprehension in the man's expression. SD-Prime was illegal. The bullets were designed to shatter on impact, which was common enough, but these broke up in a particular way, creating barbed shards that could burrow into the body. A bullet graze like this one could pick up a lot of tiny metal fragments. An SD-Prime bullet that penetrated the torso could be fatal even if it hit a non-vital area.

"You can relax. This will clean it. You were lucky." The skin around the wound was already slightly discoloured, but it wasn't too late. The swab was picking up the metal fragments as Blair carefully dabbed at the wound. "Go ahead and ask your questions, Major," Blair said as he worked.

The two men exchanged a look, then Ellison asked, "Why did you say it's about time we went after the Wolfpack?" He winced as Blair pulled a particularly long shard from his arm.

"Because they've been stockpiling for too long," Blair explained. He took a breath and felt the constraints of silence he had lived with for so long begin to weaken. He feared these men, but they were on the right side. He could answer their questions. "And Alex is – " – crazy – " – ruthless enough to use it. It's only a matter of time." He glanced at the medi-scan. "Daryl, can you give me a white cell count? Localised."

Immediately the display changed, first to a representation of a male body, then zooming in to the upper left arm. Colours filled the image and numbers scrolled beside it. There was more data than Blair requested; the AI had anticipated his next questions. Impressive. Satisfied there was no more metal embedded in his patient's flesh, Blair turned his attention to the edges of the wound.

"What do you know about the stockpile?" Banks asked him.

Blair shrugged. "Probably less than you do. I know what's in it because I've been told what vaccines and antidotes to keep on hand." He felt Ellison's muscles tense under his touch. "I don't know where it is, or how much they've got. I have some ideas...maybe I can help you narrow it down if you haven't found it yet."

Ellison twisted to look at Blair while he worked. "What vaccines and antidotes?" he asked. His voice sounded oddly flat.

"I'd have to think. Tularemia, several strains of flu, ebola, anthrax, botulism, ricin. Uh...Alex asked me about St Petersburg virus a few days ago but I haven't had an order to acquire an antidote yet. Just as well as there isn't one I know of." He set down the bloody swab and selected another.

There was silence in the room. Blair looked from Ellison to Banks. With dawning horror, Blair realised they knew none of this. His mind went into overdrive, reviewing everything they had said. Why were they coming after the Wolfpack if they didn't know?

"How long?" Banks asked.

Blair gulped. "How long what?"

"How long have you been storing these vaccines?"

"About a year for most of them. Before that it was only anthrax and ricin." Blair abandoned his attempt to clean Ellison's wound. "You didn't know about this, did you?"

The two men exchanged another look. Finally, Ellison answered, "The Wolfpack wasn't our mission. We stumbled into this while investigating something else. So we don't know much yet. Let me be clear, Sandburg. Are you telling us the Wolfpack has a stockpile of biological weapons?"

Blair's mouth was so dry he could barely get the word out. "Yes."

"And you believe they'll use it?"

At that, Blair exploded. "I thought you were from Cascade? Don't you know the history of this city? What do you think?"

Ellison recoiled and Blair saw the mingled horror and grief in his eyes. Instantly, he regretted his words. He knew better. In Cascade, you didn't throw Red Night in someone's face unless you knew what it meant to him. Even a man as privileged as Ellison was must have been touched by the riot and its fallout.

The moment passed quickly. Ellison schooled his expression back to blankness and straightened. His eyes turned to Banks. "They will use it. It's only a matter of time."

Banks nodded. "Orders, sir?"

That confused Blair; he'd thought Banks was in charge.

Instead of answering, Ellison turned to Blair. "Are you done?" he asked, indicating his arm.

"All but the suture patch." Blair chose one from the range in the box, pulled off the tape to activate it and laid it carefully across the bullet-graze. The patch would fill the wound with a healing gel and slowly contract, drawing the edges of the wound together as the skin repaired itself. "Leave it there for three days if you don't want a scar," Blair instructed automatically. His eyes dropped to Ellison's bare chest again. One more scar wouldn't be noticed.

"Thanks," Ellison said crisply. "Daryl, call Connor in immediately. Simon, report to Command and alert them we may need reinforcements. Sandburg, you've been through a lot today. Do you need sleep?"

The offer took him by surprise. "Sleep...no. But I need some medical attention myself."

Ellison looked contrite. "Of course, Doc." He stood to pull his shirt back on, revealing a firm six-pack before he covered it with black cotton. "How bad is it? I have field medical training, but I'll take you to a hospital if you think you need it. Daryl can't monitor you the way he does me." He nodded to the medi-scan, which still displayed his injured arm.

So that came from a bio-implant, Blair concluded. He focussed on Ellison's question. "I don't know. They drugged me and I hit my head when Alex threw me down. I have a headache. Do you know how to check for concussion?"

"Talk me through it. In the other room; Banks needs this one."

Ellison led Blair into another room through a door that simply appeared when he touched a control. He set the medical supplies down beside a bed and sealed the door behind them. The room contained a single bed, made up ready for someone to sleep in, a table and nothing else. A doorway without a door led from the bedroom to a compact bathroom. Blair looked at it longingly, suddenly aware of how grimy he was. He wanted to clean up.

Ellison said softly, "They don't know, Sandburg. About me. How we met. I'd appreciate you not telling them."

Blair shook his head. "How many times do I have to remind you I'm a doctor? It's confidential. Just because you're a damn liar doesn't mean everyone is."

Ellison sat on the bed. "I am sorry. Truly, I am."

"For what, now?" Blair asked impatiently. He couldn't trust a single word that came out of this man's mouth. Why would he trust an apology?

"I deserve that," Ellison agreed. "I'm sorry I keep questioning your integrity. I do trust you. It's just that no one can know I'm a sentinel." He ran a hand through his short hair. "If certain people find out – not my team, I mean others – it will ruin my life."

If that was true, then his telling Blair that was a real gesture of trust. He'd just handed Blair a weapon to use against him. Or was it a test? Ellison looked sincere. He looked worried.

"And I'm sorry I didn't tell you about the link," Ellison went on when Blair said nothing. "There was another in the contact card I gave you, by the way. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't risk you refusing to help. You seemed very loyal to your Alex."

Blair nodded. He did understand that much. He was loyal to Alex in his way. He was her lover, however reluctantly at times. He was her partner, as much as she allowed him to be. But most of all he was her doctor and she was a sick woman. Ellison couldn't know how badly Blair needed to escape from the Wolfpack. He knew what all those vaccine orders meant. He knew he had to do something about it, but he had no one he could ask for help. No one he could tell. Half the cops in Cascade had links to the Wolfpack. Ellison and his team were Blair's first opportunity to do the right thing. If Ellison had only told him the truth from the start Blair would have grabbed the chance.

"Most of all," Ellison said, "I'm sorry it took me so long to get to you tonight. Please believe me, the instant I knew you were in danger, I came for you. You never should have been hurt." He fell silent, waiting.

Blair being hurt wasn't Ellison's fault. Alex would hurt him for kicks. But Blair couldn't forgive the lies so easily. That link endangered his life, and Alex could make an execution last for a very long time.

"Alright," Blair said. Not You're forgiven. That would be a lie. But something.

The gratitude on Ellison's face was almost painful to see. Blair didn't understand him. The man was such a mass of contradictions! He was tough and uncompromising, yet vulnerable. He was paranoid about his secrets, yet he as good as held a gun to his head and gave Blair the trigger. He was a liar, yet he asked for trust. Blair was sure the words I'm sorry rarely passed Ellison's lips, yet he'd bare his soul for Blair. It made no sense. Blair was nobody who could matter to an Ellison. Why did Blair's opinion matter to him?

Ellison relaxed at Blair's grudging acceptance. "Okay. Tell me how to check for concussion."

## CHAPTER FIVE: "DEFINE INTIMATE"

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...strong territorial instincts. The sentinel who has claimed a territory as theirs will battle to defend that claim beyond all rationality. This has unsettling implications for inter-personal relationships involving sentinels. For example, the following case study describes a sentinel who developed an unhealthy dependence on his sexual partner, to the extent that...

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Ellison dabbed gently at the wound with a cleansing swab. Alex's claws had pierced deeply, but they were only punctures, not scratches. It could have been much worse.

"Earlier you said we could have made a deal," Ellison said quietly. "Just what sort of deal did you have in mind? I mean, we're not cops. You can't plea bargain."

Blair knew that. He'd heard stories about the Sabres for years; they had a fearsome reputation.

"I don't know, man."

"You told me you want out of the Wolfpack. That's something I can probably –"

Blair interrupted. "There's only one way I can be free of the Wolfpack."

"What's that?"

"If I can get Alex out of it. She needs help, man. There are treatment programmes for mech addicts, but she'll never volunteer for that."

Ellison's fingers traced the ridges of the newest scars on Blair's back. "Did she do this to you?"

Blair wanted to move away and hide his scars, but Ellison's gentle touch held him spellbound. He recognised it: a sentinel seeking out the differences in the damaged and undamaged skin. Blair wondered if he could feel the scars that weren't visible any more. He'd had laser surgery several times to cosmetically heal the damage.

"Why are you so loyal to her?"

Blair turned to face him. "Alex is dying and it's my responsibility." He didn't need to explain: Ellison had seen her.

"She's a mech addict," Ellison said in that neutral tone. "How many mods does she have?"

"Eight. But twelve power cells."

Ellison's eyes went wide. "Twelve? How is she still alive?"

"I developed a treatment. Partly medication, partly changing her blood. But it's not as effective as it used to be."

Ellison handed Blair his shirt. "So this deal you want is about her? Tell me what you want."

Blair felt the first spark of hope, and stifled it quickly. "Alex will only get help if it's forced on her. At least half of her mods have to be removed and her recovery from that will be tough. And on top of that she needs help with her addiction." He raised his eyes to Ellison, pleading. "I know you think she's not worth it, but you don't know her, man! She used to be...different. I've got to believe she can get better."

Ellison didn't argue. "Have you researched it? Is there a programme suitable for her?"

Blair nodded. "The best is the one run by the army, for soldiers enhanced for combat." And you couldn't get into that programme unless you were one of those soldiers. But UMIAC might have influence... Again, he stifled the hope. Hope was dangerous.

Ellison nodded. "Tell me about this treatment you developed."

Blair wasn't sure where this was leading, but he saw no harm in answering. "It's a combination of the work Gilchrist did on boosting immunity in mech users and Adler's standard dialysis treatment. But I designed the machine myself and worked with a pack engineer to get it built. It doesn't just filter the blood, it's a complete transfusion."

"Synthetic?" Ellison sounded startled. "I didn't think that was possible."

"No, not synth. I use cloned blood and plasma from donations. Synth works as a supplement if the supply is too low, but you're right – it isn't suitable for large-scale blood replacement."

"How long have you been treating her like this?"

"Since she got her sixth mod." Blair thought about it. "About three years."

Ellison shook his head slowly. "Sandburg, do you realise how rich you could be if you patent that process? A lot of people would pay for a convus treatment that works."

"But it doesn't! Not anymore." Trust an Ellison to think only of the money.

"Three years is enough. Would you be willing to share your work with the military?"

The question stopped Blair. The military. Not Ellison Industries. Suddenly Blair understood what this could mean for him. And for Alex. "I suppose I could," he agreed.

Ellison nodded. "Okay. I can't guarantee anything, Sandburg, but if you give us your full cooperation, when this is over I'll do my best to broker a deal for Alex." He offered his hand, a businessman sealing a contract.

Blair accepted his hand and shook it. "You have my cooperation, Mr Ellison." The formal words sounded strange to him, but formality seemed appropriate to the moment.

Ellison covered Blair's outstretched hand with both of his. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Treat me like an Ellison. I can't help being part of Cascade's royalty. I was born that way. But Mister Ellison is just a role I play. If you won't relax enough to use my name, it's Major, not Mr. But I'd rather you call me Jim."

Why, Blair thought again, was it so important to him? They had known each other only a few days and when this was over, they would most likely never see each other again. Ellison's hands enfolding his were warm. His sentinel eyes were open and sincere.

Blair smiled. "Okay, Jim."

\*

"Alert," the AI's voice interrupted.

Blair reached for his water, grateful for the momentary reprieve. He felt like he'd been answering questions for a week. All three of them had fired questions at him: Ellison, Banks and Agent Megan Connor, who arrived while he and Ellison were talking in the bedroom. They had been only briefly introduced. Connor was a beautiful woman but seemed to dress to hide it. Unlike Ellison and Banks she did not hold a military rank because she joined UMIAC from a civilian agency. Ellison didn't give any further details, but Blair guessed from the way she asked questions – challenging him for more detail and probing inconsistencies – that her background was law enforcement.

"Go ahead, Daryl," Ellison said.

"A coded order was just issued to all members of the Wolfpack. Red sky. All respondents appear to be mobilising."

All three of them turned to Blair. For a moment, he was utterly confused. Then he recognised the pack's code. "The code is red. It's a summons and lockdown imperative."

"What does that mean?" Connor demanded.

Blair was exhausted and no longer thinking clearly. He sighed, rubbed his face and tried to bring his thoughts into focus. "Red is an order: everyone affiliated with the Pack has to come in. Did a message go out to every Pack or just Alex's?"

There was silence from the AI until Ellison said, "Respond, Daryl."

"One Pack only. The order was issued by Alexa Barnes."

"Then it's a loyalty test," Blair concluded. "Anyone who fails to respond will be named traitor." He swallowed. "Meaning me." It was a death sentence, but Blair knew that when he agreed to cooperate.

"What's her next move?" Ellison asked. "Can you guess?"

Blair opened his mouth to point out that Alex was totally unpredictable, but he thought of something. The "red" order came from a list of six, each coded as a different colour. It was an unbreakable code: each Wolfpack had a list of six coded items and each member had to memorise his or her Pack's own list. Alex coded with colours. Another pack might use animals or city names. The orders were the same but no one from a different pack should be able to decipher the colour code. They would recognise it as a coded order, though, and issuing any order from the list was a big deal. Alex had alerted the other Packs that there was a crisis.

"Alex will have to explain what she's done to the other Pack alphas. What happens next depends on what she tells them. If she claims this is about me escaping she might be left to go it alone. But if they find out her matrix was compromised they'll see it as an act of war. Is there any chance they can trace the hack to you?"

"Unlikely," Simon responded. "Daryl?"

"I will know if they begin a trace."

Blair wasn't sure if that meant the trace would fail, but he took it as such. "In that case, I don't know what'll happen. They might strike against the wrong enemy. I don't know." He ran a hand through his hair.

"What would – " Connor began.

Ellison interrupted. "That's enough. Sandburg's ready to drop and he doesn't have our training. He's got rights, Connor, and we're damn close to the line here." He frowned and his hand strayed to his injured arm. Blair noted the motion with concern. Ellison was in pain. He was hiding it well, but fatigue would make it worse. "It's oh-four-hundred. I think we could all use a break."

"We haven't even talked about the lab yet," Connor objected.

"Fifteen minutes," Ellison told her. He stood. "Sandburg, come with me."

Blair rose from his seat and swayed. Ellison caught his arm. "Okay, Doc, I've got you."

Ellison led him back to the bedroom and sat him down on the bed. He touched a panel on the bedside table and several buttons lit up. "This opens the closets. You'll find spare clothing, towels, soap and razor – whatever you need. Light and heating are tied to our matrix; just tell Daryl what you want."

Blair nodded wearily. He glanced longingly toward the shower but he was too tired to walk that far.

"Get some sleep," Ellison suggested. "You won't be disturbed. I'll wake you for breakfast in about five hours. Is that okay?"



Five hours didn't seem very long. "Sure. Thanks, Jim."

Ellison touched Blair's arm briefly: a reassuring gesture. "Good. Sleep well, Doc." He turned toward the door.

"Jim?"

Ellison turned back.

"You should call me Blair. I mean, if I'm going to use your name."

He grinned. "Sure. Blair. Sleep well."

\*

By the time Jim came for him, Blair was awake and, if not entirely refreshed, at least prepared to face another round of questioning. The smells of food and coffee coming from the other room drew him.

It was a magnificent spread; these people didn't deprive themselves. Coffee – real coffee – came in a warm pot with milk and sugar. There were freshly cooked buttermilk pancakes and bacon, fresh fruit and syrup in sufficient quantity to feed eight...or Blair thought so until he saw how much Ellison and Banks could eat. Blair helped himself to the coffee first, remembering that Jim had teased him about it in the plaza. Real coffee was a genuine luxury for Blair, and this was a dark roast, the flavour strong and rich with undertones of chocolate.

While Blair heaped his plate with pancakes he wondered who cooked.

Connor added sugar to her coffee. "Jim told us you're a doctor."

So he wasn't even allowed to eat before it started. Blair nodded and picked up a fork. "Yes. I'm a cybernetic surgeon."

"Are you fully certified?" she pressed.

"Of course I'm certified!" Blair responded heatedly. "What do you think I am?"

"Relax, I wasn't accusing you." Connor raised a hand in a placating gesture. "Med students generally have VR mods. Do you still have yours?"

Blair hesitated, not sure where Connor's questions were leading. But Jim must have seen his virtual reality port last night, so he couldn't evade the question. "Yes. It's an old one I never upgraded but it still works."

Connor glanced at Jim. He did not look happy. What was going on?

Jim explained, "Blair, we were discussing plans while you slept. Before we can act, we have to confirm what the Wolfpack has stockpiled. It's not that we don't trust your word, but you've never seen the store. We need evidence."

"What does that have to do with my mod?" Blair asked suspiciously.

"Connor thinks you could interface with Daryl and show him what you know. It would allow him to calculate the most likely locations for us to scout."

Blair put down the piece of pancake he'd been about to pop into his mouth. Suddenly, he wasn't hungry at all. "You want me to jack in with an AI?" he said incredulously. "Jim, I gave you my word I'll cooperate but –"

"Daryl isn't –" Connor began and a sharp gesture from Major Banks cut off her words.

Banks took over. "Daryl is not a normal AI, Sandburg. You would be safe with him, but no one will force this on you."

Too many secrets here. "What do you mean, not a normal AI?"

"It's hard to explain," Jim said apologetically, "and I don't use VR so I can't speak from experience. But Daryl won't hurt you."

Daryl's voice came next. "I already have access to the Wolfpack matrix. In VR you can guide me through a simulation of the territory and show me what the matrix does not hold."

No ordinary AI. Blair noticed the night before how human Daryl sounded. The AI gave his input without being asked. His voice had human cadences and hints of emotion. But that made Blair more wary of him, not less. He would be opening up his mind to...what?

Jim, Banks and Connor were all watching him as Blair deliberated. Blair knew how important this was. He understood what could happen if he refused and the Wolfpack declared war.

He swallowed. "Alright. I'll do it."

\*

Blair hugged himself, leaning against the bedroom door while he watched Banks and Connor prepare the VR rig. Like most of their technology, it was a top-of-the-line system and Blair wasn't sure it would interface well with his older VR mod.

He smelled coffee and turned to see Jim holding out a fresh mug. Blair took it from him, but couldn't raise a smile. He was too nervous.

"You can still say no, Blair," Jim told him gently.

"When I was an intern," Blair said, "I treated a kid who was brain fried by an AI. It took us six months to rebuild him and when we were done he could just about remember his own name."

"That's not going to happen to you," Jim said with absolute confidence. "Daryl won't be invasive and you won't get biofeedback from him. He'll just direct the simulation so you can tell him what you know."

"How do you know?" Blair asked. It was easy for Jim to be confident when it wasn't his brain that would be vulnerable. Jim had no VR mod. If he'd never even jacked in, he couldn't possibly know what it was like.

"I know because I know Daryl," Jim answered. "Blair, I can't explain how he's different without permission, but you can trust me on this. He's not a typical AI."

Banks flipped a switch and the VR rig lit up. "We're ready. Daryl's in synch."

Blair swallowed and handed his coffee mug back to Jim. "Okay. Let's do it." He unbuttoned his shirt to expose his port, walked over to the chair and sat down.

Banks placed a soft ball in Blair's hand. "You'll be safe, Sandburg, but if you need to get out, squeeze down on this. It'll cut the connection instantly. That's a bit of a jolt, but it gives you control."

Blair squeezed it experimentally, just a little. The ball gave easily under his hand and he could feel the switch within. He nodded. "Thanks."

Next came electrodes. Banks reached to attach the first to Blair's temple and Blair raised a hand to stop him. "What's this for?"

"We'll monitor your vitals while you're inside. This is for your brain waves. There are others for your heart and breathing. Any sign of stress and we'll pull the plug."

That suggested Banks wasn't as confident as he seemed. Oddly, Blair felt reassured by that. He took the electrodes from Banks and attached them himself. "Show me your monitor," he ordered.

Jim chuckled. "He's a doctor, Simon."

Simon touched a control and the holo display came on, displaying Blair's heart rate, his breathing and more. Blair studied the display until he was satisfied.

Then he tilted his head to one side and lifted his hair out of the way in silent consent. Banks slid the plug into Blair's port. A remembered tingle ran through his system and Blair closed his eyes, allowing his body to relax as the real world disappeared. In med school they used VR simulations to teach surgical techniques. You could follow a master surgeon's work or practice rare and difficult procedures without any risk to a patient. Since completing his residency, Blair continued to use VR to practice installing new mods and occasionally jacked in for entertainment. But all of that was solo. He hadn't jacked in with another mind since his residency.

Blair found himself in a place that was all grey. The ground felt soft beneath his feet, like sand on a beach. A circle appeared in the air in front of him. It opened like the iris-aperture of a camera lens. On the other side a young man, perhaps a teenager, appeared and stepped through. He was a handsome, dark-skinned lad dressed in dark clothing: black pants and sneakers, a dark blue sweater, no jewellery or obvious enhancements.

The young man smiled at Blair, revealing straight, white teeth. "Hi. I'm Daryl."

Daryl's avatar, Blair's mind corrected. Aloud he said, "I'm Blair. Where are we?"

Daryl spread his hands as if showing off the nothingness surrounding them. "This is a secure corner of my matrix. From here we can go anywhere."

Then Blair was already inside the AI. He was okay so far. This wasn't exactly what he'd expected, but it wasn't bad.

"Where are we going?" he asked.

"Into my simulation of the Wolfpack's buildings. We'll begin in a place you're familiar with."

"What are we going to do?"

Daryl's avatar regarded him steadily. "Blair, you are safe with me, I promise. All I need from you is data. To begin with, you can help me refine the simulation. Just tell me everything you remember about the room."

"Like what?"

"Anything. It's the details that matter. What it smells like. What colour the light should be. Temperature. What you can hear. Anything that comes into your mind."

"I thought we were looking for the pathogen stockpile."

Daryl grinned. "I'm looking for that. You don't know where it is, but everything you tell me will help me home in on it."

"I don't understand."

Daryl shrugged. "You will. Come on. We'll start with your office."

The circle in the air opened again. Side by side, Blair and Daryl stepped through and suddenly they stood in Blair's surgery and operating room. Blair could tell it wasn't real, because it felt wrong, but it took a few moments for him to analyse what was wrong because it was very, very close to the reality. Colours were just slightly off. There was no smell. Blair heard a little background noise but familiar elements were missing.

The desk where Blair consulted with his patients every night was just as it always looked. The battered wood had all the scratches Blair knew so well, but when he caressed the wood with his fingertips it was just slightly too cool to the touch. Suddenly, Blair understood what Daryl wanted from him, if not why. The AI had access to the whole of the Wolfpack matrix and surveillance. But he didn't have a real sense of the place. It wasn't alive to him. He couldn't walk these halls and smell the air.

But why would an AI want such a human understanding? It made no sense. An AI wouldn't rely on intuition: it had none.

Daryl is not a normal AI.

No kidding.

Blair began. "This desk is wood; it should feel a bit warmer to the touch. Right now it's cold, like metal would be. The smell in this room...well, it's very subtle. It's an operating room and I use a surgical sterilisation programme that cleans almost everything. It's only this side of the room that can contribute scent. Smells from outside that patients bring in. The leather of the seat. But when I have an emergency here, it's different." He swallowed, remembering the struggle to save Chen's life and added quietly, "I lost a patient here a few days ago."

"I'm sorry," Daryl said, "but this is the kind of detail I need. Focus on that, tell me what it was like."

"Failing to save him? It hurt."

"Not your feelings, Blair. Your senses."

Instantly Blair was back inside the memory. The stink of Chen's flesh burning. Blood. The surgi-seal on his hands. The crackle of the surgical cap over his hair. The heat of bodies too close as he tried to work. He tried to put it into words for Daryl but found himself focussing on something else entirely. "The medi-scan hums when it's working and the vitals monitor reports in sound, different pitches so I can read it without seeing. When there are three patients it's almost like music, but that night it was just Chen. The smell in here was..." He went on, describing as much as he could remember, but while he spoke he was studying Daryl's avatar.

Daryl turned in the direction of each thing Blair described. As he did, the VR simulation became more and more real. Colours deepened. Blair heard the sounds of his OR, faint, but accurate. Taste remained absent and Blair hadn't realised until then that the room even had a taste. But the smells were there. Not just the scents Blair described, but more. The sharpness of the leaked fuel from Chen's cell. The burning rubber scent of the fuel on his surgi-seal gloves. How was Daryl doing it?

Finally, Blair couldn't think of any more details he was willing to share. He stopped talking. He gazed around the room and had the disorienting feeling he was really there.

"Amazing," Blair said, impressed.

Daryl smiled. "Thanks." The smile vanished. "I want to take in one more location that you know as well as this one. Then we can do the rest much more quickly."

Another location Blair knew well. It would have to be Alex's apartment. Another place full of difficult memories. Blair sighed. Better get it over with. "Alright," he said. "This way."

As they entered the apartment, Blair was glad this was only a simulation. The unreality of it, the washed-out colour and the lack of sound or smell made it easier to convince himself that Alex wouldn't catch them here.

"This is the kitchen," he said, stating the obvious. "Alex never uses it but she lets me cook sometimes. Simple meals, mostly, like pasta or chilli. Tacos. There's a good circulator so it doesn't get hot in here when the oven's on." Blair walked through to the lounge area with its couches and entertainment centre. He remembered Alex convulsing on the floor, her own claws ripping her skin as she shook. He remembered her using him for sex on that couch. He wouldn't share any of that with the AI.

Instead, Blair said, "Alex likes infrasonic rock. It's music, but they build in bass tones below the range of human hearing. You don't hear it – " though Alex could " – but you sure as hell can feel it when the music is loud. It's like your whole body vibrates with it."

As Blair spoke, Daryl supplied the music. It was quiet, so he couldn't feel the infrasonic resonances but Blair recognised it instantly: Alex's favourite band.

Blair hadn't mentioned the band.

The ground shifted under him and he was sure his fear must register with those monitoring him in reality.

"Are you..." he began. He broke off because saying it aloud would sound ridiculous, but then he couldn't not ask. "Are you reading my mind?"

The avatar looked unhappy. "Not exactly."

"Then what, exactly?" Blair demanded.

"It's hard to explain. We're not in a game-type sim. You are in my VR." Daryl fell silent for long enough that Blair wondered if he thought that explained it. Then Daryl sat on the couch and looked up at Blair. He seemed very out of place: a handsome young man in Alex's place.

"It's like this. The way you perceive the world, through your senses, isn't reality. It's a simulation of sensory input that your brain decodes so automatically you don't know you're living in your own personal VR. But if you could literally share your brain with another consciousness, you'd see that your individual simulations aren't the same."

"You mean like what I see as 'blue' and what you see as 'blue' are different to us. But we can never compare, so we don't know it." It was an old philosophical saw – an unanswerable question.

The avatar was frowning. "Well, not quite that. It's more about emphasis. What you notice, what matters to you. For instance, in the kitchenette you mentioned heat. Someone else might have thought first of smell or taste."

Blair understood, but that didn't explain how the AI had picked out exactly the right music. "There's more, right?" Blair challenged.

"What I'm doing is aligning your personal simulation with my own," Daryl said. "I can get size and dimension perfect. Some other details: ambient temperature, humidity, colours, materials I can get close. But that's not the same as having a memory of the place. You are giving me that. As I change details, your reactions help me fine-tune the simulation, so fast you don't notice. But it's not mind-reading."

If it wasn't mind-reading, it was damned close.

"How is this going to help you find the stockpile?" Blair asked, almost afraid of the answer.

"Ah. That's the clever part. When we're aligned, we'll walk – in VR – through the rest of this building and you'll see how fast I can get the simulation right. Then we'll go on to the places you've never been before. There, your intuition and expectations will shape the sim. And that will give me the data I need to analyse the full schematics. You might not be able to tell me where the stockpile is, but you'll recognise where it's not. The rest is down to probability."

Blair wasn't sure he understood the AI's methods, but he understood something else. Daryl was talking about creating a neural map. The implications of that were staggering. Blair pushed the thought out of his mind quickly, because he had to finish this job.

"Okay, so this area..."

\*

By the time they were done, Blair was exhausted. His brain was an empty sack. Time could be compressed in VR: Blair wasn't sure if he'd been in there for ten hours or one. But he was sure of one thing, one thing that terrified him. He didn't know if he'd been able to hide his thoughts from Daryl, and not knowing scared him even more.

Blair opened his eyes as the simulation dissolved. Adrenaline flooded him and he sat up sharply, tearing the electrodes off his skin. His hand went to the VR plug and he yanked it out. That hurt!

"Whoa! Blair, it's okay." Jim was at his side, reaching out.

"I've got to get out of here!" Blair insisted.

"Okay. Alright, just stay calm. We'll go." Jim helped him up and Blair's head swam. "It's alright, Blair. Lean on me."

Blair could do nothing but obey as Jim half-carried him from the apartment. Outside, Jim took him toward the elevator. He punched a button instead of using voice, and Blair didn't see whether it was up or down. The elevator doors slid closed. Blair leaned against the wall and felt his legs collapse under him. He was in trouble. So much fucking trouble.

"Blair. What is it? What's wrong?"

"Daryl," Blair said. It came out a bare whisper.

As the elevator began to rise, Jim knelt beside him. "Tell me."

Anger surged through the fear. "I shouldn't have to! You know what he is!"

Confusion crossed Jim's face. "Blair, did Daryl do something to you?"

"No! Shit, man, don't you get it? He can't be...you can't..." Blair shut up. Saying it aloud would make it real.

Daryl was a self-aware AI. Something that had been illegal since the Gemini disaster. Even for the military. Perhaps especially for the military. And Blair had no idea how far Jim would go to protect this secret.

Jim's frown cleared. "He's not what you think, Blair." He stood and reached down to help Blair up as the elevator doors whooshed open.

Blair accepted his help and they walked out onto the roof of the building. It was raining and the wind caught at Blair's hair, whipping it around his face. The rain was clean: real, natural rain. Blair walked away from Jim.

There were three levels of Turing potential defined in cybernetic theory. Level one was the ability to make independent decisions based on experience: learning. That was the minimum acceptable for a construct to be defined as artificial intelligence. Level two was self-awareness. Level three was emotional awareness. A self-aware AI was legal only if its Turing potential was choked at level two and only then within strict limits of intelligence. Daryl was so far beyond those limits it shouldn't have been possible.

"Blair!" Jim called.

Blair turned around. "He's self-aware, Jim. He's fucking smart and he's self-aware. I know you know what that means."

Jim nodded. "I know what it would mean, if Daryl was what you think."

"I was jacked in with him, man!" Blair knew he was right.

"Blair," Jim said again, raising his hands in a calm-down gesture. "Daryl isn't an AI. He's human."

Blair stared. Was it possible? "No."

"Listen to me, Sandburg. You're supposed to think he's an AI. That masquerade keeps him safe. But Daryl is human. Mostly. Yes, he's self-aware. People are. I can't tell you anything more. I shouldn't be telling you this much. But it's true. I'll get permission to tell you the rest, I swear. Then you'll have proof."

"No human could create a sim like that," Blair objected. But it did explain the inconsistencies Blair had noticed in VR. The way Daryl needed to align his simulation with Blair's mind. He hadn't used the word, but Blair understood he was creating a neural map. It was one of the things that scared him. An AI wouldn't take that approach unless its own 'brain' was at least as complex as a human brain. And not even the most sophisticated AI could approach human complexity, if it were legal.

Blair met Jim's eyes. Was he lying? If he was telling the truth, could he be mistaken? Too many uncertainties.

"Please, Blair. No more lies. This is the truth. Daryl is human."

Blair took a deep breath and nodded. "Proof. You promise."

"As soon as I can get permission to tell you."

"Alright. I believe you."

\*

"Analysis complete," Daryl announced.

Everyone around the table sat up straight.

"Show us," Jim ordered.

Daryl's holo display projected a map of Cascade. The Wolfpack territory was all at street level and mostly in the north west quarter – the poorest part of the city. Five locations were illuminated in Daryl's projection.

"No single pack of Wolves is trusted with the bio-weapons," Daryl reported. "It follows that the pathogen stockpile must be in a location multiple packs can access. Taking into account the conditions necessary to safely store such weapons, I have narrowed the possibilities to five. Each of these locations is Wolfpack controlled, not fully linked to their matrix and accessible to three or more cells. Any or all of these could be the weapons stockpile."

Jim studied the projection. Five was too many to search them all. Before they could act, they had to know for sure where the weapons were. Even if they could secure five locations at once, they didn't have confirmation that one or more of them was the stockpile. Without that confirmation, Jim's hands were tied. Oh, there were things he could do, standard protocols the quad was supposed to follow. But he would not risk declaring war on the Wolfpack until he knew he could win.

"Can you narrow it down any further?" Jim asked.

"Not with any certainty. I need more data."

Jim cursed silently, but aloud he said, "Well done, Daryl. That's good work." He looked at his team, and Blair. "As I see it, we can't move against the Wolfpack until we can locate and secure that stockpile. We can't do that without scouting these five locations and we can't scout with the Wolfpack in lockdown. Does anyone have an alternate view of the tactical situation?"

"I concur," Connor said.

"Seconded," Simon agreed.

Jim resumed his presentation. "Simon, although we can't yet confirm the existence of the biological weapons, I believe Doctor Sandburg's evidence is enough to justify changing our mission priorities. Do you agree?"

Simon nodded. "Given what you've told us about the Wolfpack, it's essential."

"In that case, I'm taking a command decision to hand our investigation of the Rainer lab to Ellison Industries." Jim paused, expecting Connor to object. When she didn't, he added, "Part of the lab investigation needs our attention but it's not urgent. I think it's best to pass the data on the experiments to the agency for long-term monitoring. It's not a quad issue. Connor, speak up. I can see you've got something to say."

"I agree with your decision, Jim," Megan said, "but I'd like to stay with it a bit longer. Those retests will take a while to run and I really want to confirm those results."

"When did you turn scientist?" Jim asked her.

"I didn't. But I was responsible, Jim. I missed it."

He understood that feeling. She thought that if she'd identified the odd test results sooner they'd have a head start on the lab situation. It was true, but it might also have meant they missed the Wolfpack connection. "Priorities, Connor. You don't have to quit the lab, but if I need to pull you out, I will."

"Agreed," Megan conceded.

Jim took a relieved breath. "So...how do we persuade the Wolfpack to break their lockdown?"

Blair looked down at his lap. "The lockdown can't last indefinitely."

"True, but the longer we wait, the greater the chance the Wolfpack will decide to strike. I will not let Cascade go through another Red Night."

Blair's head jerked up at the words. "Then you need to provoke Alex. She's unstable, so she's the most likely alpha to break."

Jim had figured out that much already. "You know her best, Blair. How can we do that?"

"Can we talk in private?"

Jim wanted to tell Blair he could talk in front of the team, but he held his tongue. They both had secrets. He nodded. "Alright."

In the bedroom, Blair said, "You and Alex are both sentinels. That's how you provoke her."

"I can't tell people I'm a sentinel."

"You don't have to, Jim. Alex knows what you are now. She saw you." He paced away from Jim. "There's more to being a sentinel than hyperactive senses, man. Sentinels are instinctively very territorial. You invaded Alex's territory and you took something that belongs to her. Me."

"You don't belong to anyone!" Jim protested.

"As far as she's concerned, I do." Blair bared the tattoo on his neck. "If you throw it in her face somehow, she'll have to respond. She'll lose face if she doesn't."

Jim shook his head. "Blair, I won't use you as bait. That's not how we work."

"You're the one she'll come after, not me, man," Blair asserted. "I'm talking about provoking her sentinel instincts."

It sounded like the kind of plan where almost everything could go wrong. Not odds Jim liked. He asked, reluctantly, "If I agree, how can we do that?"

Blair clearly hadn't thought that far ahead. He looked stumped for a moment, then ran a hand through his curls and looked up at Jim. "You have to claim me. In some public way so she can't hide from it." He frowned for a moment. "I guess we need to work on it. I can help you put a call through so half the pack will hear it. More, while they're in lockdown."

Jim shook his head. "A call is too direct. Blair, I can't risk anything she could take as a declaration of war. A challenge, yes, but..." he broke off. "Wait. You said public. I think I have an idea."

They re-joined the others so Jim wouldn't have to explain twice. As they sat at the briefing table, Jim said, "Blair thinks that Alex will see him being with me as a challenge. She got a good look at me when I rescued him. So what we need to do is make sure she knows we are still together. I have an idea how to do it." He looked at Blair. "If you're willing."

"Sure, Jim!"

"Hear me out before you agree," Jim cautioned.

"That means you're gonna hate it," Connor translated for Blair.

Jim wondered if she'd guessed what he was going to say. "The Ellison Charity Ball is tonight. Come with me, Blair. As my date."

Blair's eyes went wide. He opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came out.

Jim laughed. "Relax, Blair. It's what you suggested. I have to go to this thing and it's very public. It'll be all over the networks – who is there, who's wearing what. Even if Alex doesn't see it, she's going to hear about it."

"Oh, she'll see it alright! But Jim...do you really want to be seen with me like that?"



"I wouldn't have suggested it otherwise," Jim promised him.

Blair nodded. "Okay, I guess." Then he grinned. "But I don't have a thing to wear!"

Connor laughed.

It was a joke, but there was truth in it. Blair couldn't go home yet – it wasn't safe – and even if he could, he had nothing suitable to wear to a black tie event. Thankfully, this was a problem money could solve. Jim spent some time making calls, to his family's tailor, a stylist and others. Then he turned the job over to Connor, giving her custody of his credit card. She was to accompany Blair to the plaza and ensure he kept his appointments. She would deliver him to Jim's apartment by 20:30.

Blair objected to some of Jim's arrangements. "No one's gonna see my underwear, man! And there is no way I'm letting anyone cut my hair!"

"Trust me. It'll be a long night; you want to be as comfortable as possible. As for the hair, I said style, not cut." Jim's gaze lingered on Blair's luxurious curls. The man's hair was wildly beautiful; add a few pieces of straw and he'd look like the cover model for an erotic magazine. "A haircut would be too much," Jim added. "You have to look like yourself for this to work. But you cannot show up looking like you just got out of bed."

Grumbling, Blair agreed to Jim's plans for him.

Satisfied that Connor would protect Blair, Jim moved on to the next part of his plan. He had to go and see his father.

\*

Joel Taggart started out as a Cascade cop. He joined the force as a rookie street cop, and eventually passed the detective exams and earned the promotion. The week before he was due to give up his uniform for a detective's shield, the Red Night riot broke out. Taggart was in the thick of the fighting that first night and a bullet in the knee cap ended both his participation both in the field of battle and his career in the police force.

Forced to seek an alternative career, Taggart applied for a job with Ellison Industries security. After he'd been with the company a few months, he was assigned to act as bodyguard to the sixteen year old James Ellison. Like most teenage boys, Jim resented having a babysitter foisted on him. Taggart was not the first bodyguard assigned to the young man: the man who guarded him since childhood died on Red Night. A replacement bodyguard failed to get along with the boy. Taggart, replacing that failure, didn't make the same mistakes. He found he understood Jim in a way his father failed to do. The kid wasn't a teenage rebel: he was a maturing boy just beginning to discover the man he would become. They clashed regularly, usually when Jim wanted to go somewhere alone, but they learned to respect each other.

When his young charge joined the army, Taggart transferred to security for Ellison Tower. Today, he was head of security for the entire company. It was he who waited for Jim in the lobby of Ellison Tower.

Jim walked through the huge glass doors, saw Taggart waiting for him and gave a smile of genuine pleasure. He hurried across the lobby. "Joel. It's so good to see you."

Taggart met him halfway. "You're looking good, Mr Ellison." He offered his hand.

Jim ignored it and instead gave him a warm hug. "None of that, Joel. Not from you."

Taggart gave in and returned the hug. But then he drew back, straightening his jacket. The lobby was very public, and image was important in his position. "Your father is waiting...Jim."

Jim looked disappointed. "Right. Take me to him, then."

Once they were in the executive elevator, Taggart could drop the formality a little. He smiled at Jim. "Sorry I wasn't here when you arrived home. Your father needed me in Washington."

"I'll be in town a while longer. Let's have a beer soon and catch up."

Taggart would have enjoyed that, but what he said was, "I suspect your business today will leave me no time for that."

Jim smiled. "I'm not going to complicate your life too much."

Taggart glanced at the numbers ticking away above the elevator door. While they still had privacy, he said, "Jim, you already have. Who's the girl you smuggled into the King Project? One of yours, I hope."

Jim's smile turned wry, as if he hadn't expected Taggart to notice what he'd done. "She's UMIAC, yes. If you'd been here, I would have told you."

The elevator doors slid open silently. Taggart waited for Jim to step out first.

"I never turn off my link, Jim. You could have contacted me in Washington."

Jim tapped his ear. "Too many leaks, Joel, you know that." He greeted the executive receptionist, Marie, as they passed her desk.

Taggart waited until they were out of her earshot before he spoke again. "Why is UMIAC interested in King?"

"That's what I came to explain," Jim said, surprising Taggart. "Let's wait until I can tell you and Dad together."

Taggart touched the thumb-scan at the door to William Ellison's office suite. The thumb scan merely confirmed his identity: if he was on Ellison's 'welcome' list, it would alert him. If he was not, Ellison would not be disturbed. After a moment, the door slid open; they were permitted to enter.

William Ellison was already seated at the conference table, and he had a hospitality spread waiting: coffee, sandwiches and small cakes. Taggart accepted a cup of coffee and a cake; Jim asked for water.

"Well, James?" William snapped once the pleasantries were over. "What's so important it couldn't wait until after the ball?"

Jim took a data chip from his inner pocket and laid it on the table, within his father's reach. "This is evidence that someone in a research laboratory funded by Ellison Industries has been importing restricted substances from China. There's enough here to implicate the company in those trades."

William made no move to touch the data chip. He waved a dismissive gesture. "James, most research labs import to hold down the costs. Professor King's project has permits to hold every substance they use. What's the big deal?"

Taggart saw the flicker in Jim's carefully neutral expression. William had given away that they already knew it was the King Project. Jim thought it was a slip; Taggart wasn't so sure.

Jim answered instantly, "It's a big deal when those shipments include components for biological weapons."

Taggart caught his breath. He reached across the table for the data chip. Neither man attempted to stop him.

"Surely you're not implying – " William began.

"I am bringing this to you on the record, Dad," Jim said, his words clipped and formal. "I told you yesterday, if I had evidence against the company I'd slap the cuffs on you myself. That's not what this is."

"Then what is it?" Taggart asked. What did Jim expect, officially?

"Since Ellison Industries bankrolls the research, someone in this company authorised the imports. Someone is responsible, not for trying to save money but for involving an underground source and letting this happen with such lax security the smugglers could take advantage of it. I am giving you a chance to take action before I do."

That was more than fair. Security was Taggart's domain but he hadn't personally overseen this. He couldn't oversee everything but that was no excuse. Someone he trusted had proved unworthy of his trust.

"Do you have a name?" Taggart asked.

"I traced the chain of responsibility," Jim answered, "but not who authorised what. Yet."

Taggart studied Jim. They were friends, not close, but he knew Jim well enough to know what his poker-face meant. There had been a warning in that "yet", but there was something else. Taggart slipped the data chip into his handheld.

"Jim," he said seriously while he waited for it to load, "there's more. What are you holding back?"

The neutral mask slipped. Now Jim's eyes held a warning. "I'm going after the weapons," he said curtly.

Taggart nodded. That was Jim's job. "Fair enough," he conceded, "but there's some link between those weapons and the King Project or we wouldn't be discussing this. You need to tell me, Jim, if only so we don't get in each other's way."

Jim's mouth tightened in irritation. He sighed. "Alright, but this is classified," he said, watching both men. "It can't leave this room and you can't act on it, no matter how much you want to. Understood?"

Taggart nodded. He understood Jim's irritation now: Jim wanted him to save the questions until they were in private. But it was too late now to take it back and Taggart wasn't certain he would anyway. His duty was to William Ellison and Ellison Industries, not to Jim.

Jim's steely gaze locked with his father's. After a very long silence, William said, "Very well, son."

"Thank you. We – that is, my quad – have credible evidence that the bio weapons are in the hands of the Wolfpack. Worse, someone in King's lab has been supplying them."

Taggart felt cold. No one who had lived in Cascade all his life could fail to understand what that meant.

William, characteristically, was the first to recover. "We should have wiped them out years ago!" he growled.

"It's too late for that," Jim answered, "but I have to move against them."

"You'll start another war," Taggart warned.

Jim's eyes became ice cold. "If I start a war, Joel, I'll finish it. But that's not my plan."

"What is your plan?" William demanded.

"I can't tell you that," Jim answered.

"What do you expect?" Taggart asked him, then corrected himself. "Or, I should ask, what does UMIAC expect?" Jim had said this was official.

Jim relaxed a little. "UMIAC is primarily an intelligence gathering agency, with a mandate that covers any threat to national security whether the source is foreign or domestic," he said, in a tone that suggested it was a familiar lecture. "With domestic missions, the reality is we can often neutralise the threat quietly, as a quad, without recommending a true military engagement. That's my aim here, but the priority has to be to secure those bio weapons. Whatever it takes."

It seemed safest not to comment on what exactly "it" might take. "I meant," Taggart explained, "what do you expect of us?"

"Oh. Right." Jim sipped his water and the ice clinked against the glass. "In simple terms, my orders are to eliminate the threat by any means necessary. For the element of the threat that involves Ellison Industries, I'm handing the bag to you. You'll find enough evidence on that chip for a prosecutor to run with it but all I care about is the result. If the trade stops and the security holes at the dock are plugged, I don't care how you do it." Jim hesitated, then added, "I will say upfront that if you can't or won't take action, my quad will go the legal route."

Another threat. Taggart glanced at the handheld. The data was loaded and indexed, but there was far too much to take in at a glance. He turned to the index and scrolled through the names. Jim had done a comprehensive job.

"You're asking us to do your job for you?" William said archly.

Jim turned to him. "That's one way to see it," he agreed. "The other is I'm giving you the opportunity to safeguard the company. Or even to profit from this mess."

William turned to Taggart. "Well?"

Taggart laid the handheld on the table. "The file is detailed but I think I know who to start with. I believe I can clear this up in a few days, sir." From the names in the index, Taggart knew exactly where to begin his investigation.

"Then I'll leave it in your capable hands," William said. "Keep me informed."

"Yes, sir."

"James, we will see you at the ball tonight?" William made it a question, but only just.

Jim nodded and set his glass on the table. "I'll be there. Joel, I need to talk to you about some security for tonight."

Taggart was surprised. "It's in hand, Jim."

Jim's expression softened. "Of course it is. I just have a request, if you can spare a man or two."

That sounded interesting. "Okay, we'll talk," Taggart agreed. He turned to his boss. "Do you require anything else, Mr Ellison?"

"No, but check in with me before I leave." William stood.

It was a dismissal; Taggart and Jim both stood. Taggart reclaimed his handheld and followed Jim out the door.

\*

Jim was mostly dressed when his door alert sounded. He was clean and groomed. His black silk pants covered a gun in an ankle holster. It was only a .22, but a larger weapon would ruin the line of the suit. There were other weapons concealed beneath the stiff white shirt and black cummerbund. Jim did not expect to need them, but he was on duty tonight and had to be prepared for the unexpected. As he headed for the door, Jim's bow tie hung around his neck, untied, and his tuxedo jacket was still hanging up.

He glanced at the security display to confirm the identity of his caller: Connor waved at the camera, Blair stood beside her, slightly out of the camera's view. Jim opened his apartment door and stopped in astonishment when he saw Blair. He stepped back, smiling.

"Wow. You look good," Jim said appreciatively.

It was true. The tuxedo fitted Blair as if it had been made to measure, though Jim knew there hadn't been time for that. His cummerbund was blue. Blair's hair was uncut and worn loose around his shoulders but the stylist had tamed the wild curls into slick locks. Jim looked for the Wolfpack tattoo on Blair's neck. It was invisible, covered by a cosmetic patch, Jim guessed, but he had to look hard to see the edges. Only the silver earring Blair wore looked out of place. Blair's eyes were sparkling blue – something had been added to enhance the natural colour. He wore no other cosmetics, but Blair didn't need them.

Connor, standing behind Blair, smiled at Jim's words. "He drove the stylist crazy," she reported, "but I think the result is worth it."

Blair shook his head. "He wanted to cut my hair, man! No way!"

Jim chuckled. "Wise decision. We want you to be recognised, after all. Come in."

Blair walked in, but Connor hung back. "I have plans of my own tonight, if that's okay?"

She was asking Jim as leader of the quad. "No problem," he told her. "Nothing's likely to happen tonight, but keep your link active, just in case."

"I will. Have a good evening." Connor turned to go and Jim closed the apartment door.

"I'm almost ready." Jim turned to Blair. "Make yourself at home. I've got something else for you to wear."

Blair looked down at himself. "Something else?" he sounded confused.

Jim headed into his living room, where he'd left the jewellery box on the table. He picked it up and offered it to Blair. "It's hired, not bought, so don't get too excited. It'll suit you, I think."

Blair took the box and traced the name on the lid: De Beers. Nervously, he lifted the lid. "Oh! Jim, I can't wear this! Is it real?"

The question brought a smile to Jim's face. "Of course it's real. And you're attending a ball with an Ellison. You should look the part. Here you go, Cinderella..." Jim took the box back and took one of the earrings from it. He drew Blair's hair back, exposing his pierced ear. When Blair made no further objection, Jim gently removed the earring Blair was wearing and replaced it with the diamond. It was large for an earring, more than a carat, and a pale blue, cut into an octagon and set in simple gold. The box contained matching cufflinks as well as the earrings.

"There," Jim said, satisfied. He tucked a lock of hair behind Blair's ear so the diamond was visible. "Take a look." He nodded toward the mirror.

Blair walked over there. Jim plucked the cufflinks from the box and followed him, leaving the box on the table.

"Nervous?" he asked Blair. He offered the cufflinks.

"Yeah. A bit." Blair removed the cufflinks that came with the suit and replaced them with the gold and diamond ones Jim gave him.

Jim stood in front of the mirror and quickly tied his bow tie. He checked it in the mirror then redid it. The second attempt was satisfactory. He turned back to Blair. They needed to talk about what to expect.

"Come and sit down," he suggested. He led Blair to the couch.

Blair sat, but he didn't relax. He was nervous.

Jim didn't know how to help with that. "A couple of things before we go. First, it's important that everyone thinks we're a couple, not just the press outside. We don't have to pretend to be in love, but we should be seen to be intimate. Is that going to be a problem?"

Blair shrugged. "Uh...I don't know. Define intimate."

Jim smiled. "Eye contact. Touching hands. Maybe escape into the house for a while so it looks like we want privacy. And you can't show interest in anyone else."

Blair's frown cleared. "Oh, sure. I can do that. But, is this going to be a problem for you? I thought you were heterosexual."

Jim laughed. "I usually take a woman as a date to public events, but in private no, I'm not, and my family know it." Then a thought occurred to him. "Are you? I know you and Barnes are involved." Maybe it was Blair who was uncomfortable with pretending.

But Blair answered easily. "I'm bi. I've been with Alex for a long time and I've been faithful, but before her..." He shrugged again, and the shrug said it all.

"Good." Jim was relieved. He was a little surprised by how much that pleased him. He did find Blair attractive. It wouldn't be a chore to pretend to be intimate with him. It might not all be fake. "The other thing is what to expect when we get there. There'll be a lot of film crews and photographers at the landing dock outside the mansion. The

lights are blinding and it can be a bit overwhelming. Since we're putting on a show for Alex, we need to be more obviously intimate out there. We need her to get the message."

Blair nodded. "Sure. I get that."

"So trust me. Follow my lead, smile for the cameras and don't say anything. Not even 'no comment'."

"Got it."

"There'll be press inside, too – that's why we have to keep up the act all night – but they won't bother us."

"Okay."

"Stick to the truth as far as you can, just don't mention UMIAC or the Wolfpack. If anyone asks you how we met, just say we met through my work. A few people know I'm UMIAC, but most people think I work in an admin role for the army. If you tell them you're a doctor, they'll assume you were working for the army, too."

"I can manage that. I guess I'm just worried about other things. Jim, even in this clown suit, I'm not going to look like I belong."

"You already do."

## CHAPTER SIX: "MY BROTHER ALWAYS HAS SOMETHING TO PROVE"

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...possession of these genetic markers does not automatically result in the development of heightened senses. Where the ability is present, but latent, its development may be induced by prolonged isolation of the subject. The psychological trauma associated with such isolation frequently created a lasting instability (see section 6 on post-traumatic stress in sentinels). It is therefore not recommended...

The Sentinel Phenomenon: studies in theory and practice, ©2083Dr Leo Anderson  
D.Phil, Oxon (ed)

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The Ellison mansion stood on one of the islands in the bay, visible from Sky City but far removed from it. In an average aircar it was about a half hour's flight from Sky City; Jim made it in twenty four minutes and most of that was spent navigating the traffic lanes of Sky City itself. As soon as they were past the city limits, Jim pushed his aircar to supersonic. Blair yelled at the acceleration and sonic boom, but relaxed soon after and they completed the journey in under three minutes. Jim slowed as they reached the island and circled once to get the measure of the people below.

Most of the guests would arrive in their own cars; some travelled by boat or hovercraft from the mainland. All were expected to arrive first at the landing dock. As one of the family, Jim was allowed to head directly to the garage on the roof of the mansion, avoiding the press. He would not do so this night. The main cadre of reporters was clearly visible behind a security barrier between the landing dock and the red-carpeted, white stone staircase that led from the dock to the mansion. There was a wide open space in front of the barrier where the guests would be clearly visible to the press and their cameras. Jim selected a spot within that open space, close to the barrier.

"Hold tight," he warned Blair, then turned off his autopilot, positioned the Hercules above his target and cut the engine. The car dropped like a stone. For a moment they were almost in free-fall. Jim kept his eye on the altimeter and at almost the last moment turned the repulsion on high. The falling car decelerated so fast that Blair threw up a hand to keep himself off the ceiling, though his belt would have held him securely and safely.

They landed with a gentle bump right in front of the press. It was an idiotic, boy-racer's move and Jim knew he'd catch hell if his father saw it, but the flashy landing unleashed a burst of flashbulbs from the watching press. Jim had their attention now. A few might recognise his car, but the windows were shielded; most of them wouldn't know who was inside until they got out. Jim had placed the passenger side facing the security barrier, for maximum effect.

"Shit! Man, are you insane?" Blair demanded.

Jim laughed; the adrenaline rush had him jazzed for a moment. "I always wanted to try that here," he grinned. He set the Hercules into secure mode: that permitted a valet to drive her on the ground only. Then he glanced at Blair. "Ready for the lions' den?"

"Smile and say nothing." Blair repeated his instructions with an uncertain grin.

"Let me get the door for you. It'll focus their attention and we want this in the newscasts." Jim unbelted and slid out of the car. He heard Blair mutter something about already having everyone's attention. It brought a smile to his face and he made no effort to hide it as he straightened and looked toward the cameras.

Instantly Jim was dazzled by lights and deafened by shouted questions. They were all talking at once and he couldn't make out an individual voice. He smiled for the cameras and walked around the front of the aircar to open Blair's door.

He did not try to help Blair out of the car – that would have been a step too far – but as Blair closed the car door, Jim stretched out his hand. With a nervous smile, Blair linked hands with him. They walked, side by side, toward the long, red carpet. Eager questions followed them the whole way. Jim heard the obvious questions being directed at Blair: what was his name, how long had they been together. He made out references to his supposed romance with Isabelle Gorman. She was a prominent actress he had known for several years, but there was no romance. They had been

holographed having drinks together when he was on a mission in New York and again having dinner a month later in Hawaii; Jim hadn't seen her since. Other reporters took advantage of his rare public appearance to shout questions about the company's military contracts and others about his brother's politics. Jim answered none of them. Finally a reporter he recognised thrust a microphone into his face and asked if he was coming out tonight.

It was the old-fashioned phrase, not the question, that provoked Jim's laughter. "Rosie," he said into her recorder, hoping he'd got her name right, "I've been 'out' since I turned seventeen. I can't help it if you're not paying attention." He smiled at Blair, provoking another blinding explosion of flashes, and walked on.

At the bottom of the sweeping staircase he handed his car key to the valet, then turned and posed one last time for the cameras. He slid an arm around Blair's shoulders, saying quietly, "Just smile, it's almost over."

Someone shouted, "Kiss him!"

Jim was tempted, but a kiss would be too much to show in public and he couldn't be sure that Blair would welcome it. He kept his arm around Blair's shoulders and moved to shield him from the cameras, then let his arm drop and linked hands with him again as they headed up the steps. The wide stairway was edged with climbing roses and Jim found the scent overpowering. He resisted the urge to cover his nose and concentrated on breathing shallowly until they reached the top. By then another couple was distracting the press below.

At the top of the staircase stood the reception desk. Here, security was as discreet as possible, but very much present. Jim, as one of the Ellison family, needed no invitation, but he had to present one for Blair. This was one of the biggest social events on the west coast; invitations were in high demand. Jim exchanged the gold-edged card for two jewel chips, making sure both were blue. Blue meant family.

He pinned one of the chips to Blair's lapel like a corsage. "Keep that on you and visible. It tells the security system you're entitled to be here," he explained. Cameras flashed again, capturing the small intimacy.

Past the reception desk they were out of range of the worst of the press and could relax. A few carefully chosen reporters were permitted access to the ball, but were expected to behave as guests. For Jim, getting past the press was the easy part. The formal greeting line they had to face next was like running a gauntlet. He was lucky his father hadn't insisted he be part of the line.

He led Blair to meet his father.

"You're full of surprises today, James," William said, his eyes twinkling as he took in the two men.

Jim smiled back, relieved that he approved. "Dad, this is Doctor Blair Sandburg. Blair, I'd like you to meet William Ellison, my father."

Blair showed no sign of nerves now. "It's an honour, sir," he said smoothly as they shook hands.

"Welcome, Blair," William answered warmly.

"Thank you, sir."

"My wife, Catherine," William introduced her as they moved down the line.

Catherine Ellison was younger than her stepson, which didn't bother Jim so much as the fact that his father remarried at all. He hadn't liked his mother being replaced with a trophy wife: Catherine had been working as a fashion model when they met. It had taken him a few years to recognise that she really did love his father. She was good for him and she never made the mistake of trying to be a stepmom. In recent years, she and Jim had become friends.

Jim gave her a quick kiss on her cheek. "Good to see you again, Cathy."

"You too, Jimmy." She offered Blair a hand heavy with rings. "Welcome," she said, gracing him with the same smile that adorned magazine covers. Then she turned her eyes back to Jim. "Joel will meet you both in the library whenever you're ready."



"Thanks." Jim led Blair onward.

"That dress is amazing!" Blair said quietly. "Are those stones real?"

Jim hadn't paid much attention to Catherine's gown. He glanced back to refresh his memory. She wore a white sleeveless gown, skin-tight to mid-thigh from where it flared outward. The neckline was a plunging S-shaped curve with a thousand or more crystals that caught and reflected every photon, so that every movement, every breath she took made sparkles dance across her chest. Her skin was painted with something that added a subtle sparkling effect to her arms and chest, too. It was stunning, but everything Catherine wore in public was equally impressive.

"The necklace and earrings are family heirlooms," Jim answered. "The stones on the dress aren't real diamond. She couldn't carry the weight for long if they were real." They had reached the next person in the greeting line. "My brother, Stephen. Senator Ellison."

"I know. It's an honour, Senator." Blair shook hands again.

"I'm very pleased to meet you, Doctor Sandburg," Stephen told him. It was his perfect politician's voice, well-practised and impossible to tell if he were sincere. But then he added, more softly, "I hope we get a chance to talk later."

"Uh, sure." Blair seemed a bit nonplussed.

Jim moved on. He introduced Stephen's wife, two of the company directors with their partners and his uncle. Finally they were free to enter the house. As they moved into the opulent entrance hall a waiter carrying a tray of champagne approached them. Jim took a glass from the tray and passed it to Blair, and requested a glass of water for himself.

Blair took the glass from Jim's hand almost absently. He was gazing around the hall.

"Worth a stare or two, isn't it?"

The walls of the hall were draped with long curtains of silk in alternating panels of white and palest green. The fabric was so light the slightest breeze caught them, giving the impression the walls were constantly in motion. The grand staircase was lined with flowers. In front of the staircase, effectively barring the way, musicians sat with their instruments and conductor, playing a waltz. The doors to the ballroom stood open and there were many people already inside: men in black tuxedos, women in beautiful ball gowns.

Jim's gaze swept the hallway; he was looking past the decoration to seek out the security system and identify the guards. Satisfied all was as it should be, he led Blair toward the staircase. "This way," he said quietly. Just one piece of business, then we can enjoy ourselves." The library door was on the left of the staircase. As they walked toward it, a security drone – a little ball hovering in the air – appeared in their path. Jim waited for it to scan them both and it rose, allowing them both to pass.

The library was lined with shelves on every wall. Half of them were filled with old fashioned books, the other half held data chips and drives for a modern matrix. There was a lot of comfortable furniture: chairs and overstuffed sofas. This was a room to relax in, not a formal room. Jim remembered spending hours in here as a kid, reading adventure stories. Some of them were still on the shelves.

Taggart stood as they entered, as did the woman with him. Both were dressed for the ball: he in the usual tuxedo, she in a green satin gown.

Taggart scrutinised Blair closely. "This is Doctor Sandburg, I presume."

Jim had no doubt Taggart had checked Blair out thoroughly since they last spoke, but he allowed him to feign ignorance. "Yes, this is Blair," he confirmed. He turned to Blair, urging him forward. "Blair, this is Joel Taggart. He's head of security for Ellison Industries."

Taggart stepped forward. "Doctor Sandburg, this is Roxanne."

The woman he named stepped out from behind the couch. Her gown was skin-tight and covered her body from neck to floor, but left her arms bare. The skirt was split to the thigh, almost too high to be decent. Jim noted the outfit with approval. He could see three weapons in plain sight, but ones no one else would recognise as such: the shoes, a cord at her waist and the sticks holding her elegant hairdo in place. She also had a gun strapped to her thigh, invisible as long as she stood.

Taggart added, "She'll be your bodyguard."

Blair sputtered. "Like hell! I don't need – "

"Yes you do," Jim said firmly. As Blair turned to argue with him he cut him off. "Listen. I don't expect anything to happen tonight, but I want to be careful. Roxy isn't going to get in the way. You'll barely notice she's around, but if anything does happen, she'll protect you."

"And who protects you?" Blair demanded. "Jim, it's you she'll come after!"

"Yes, but our performance outside tossed you out there as bait. I don't want to take any chances. Blair, trust me on this. If anything happens, look for Roxy and do as she says. Let me take care of myself."

Roxanne said, "Doctor Sandburg, I have been doing this for a long time. I will simply keep you within sight while you are here. If there is danger, I will act. If not, as Mr Ellison expects, you need not even look my way."

"That's the problem, don't you see? I'm not used to having..."

"A caretaker," she supplied for him. "Or a guard? That's okay, neither am I."

Blair smiled.

"It's up to you, Doctor. If you'd rather we be friends, we can do it that way."

To Jim's relief, Blair gave in. "Okay, I guess. Just don't follow me into the john."

Roxanne grinned. "It's a deal."

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It wasn't until he walked into the massive ballroom at Jim's side that Blair finally began to relax. He understood the need to play the game for the press. He had suggested this, after all. But it still made him uncomfortable. He wasn't used to being on display and he felt completely out of place beside Jim. Jim seemed so at home in these luxurious surroundings; of course he was, literally, at home. Jim was born and raised in this house, while Blair still thought of himself as simply a struggling doctor working in the poorest part of Cascade.

A few people looked their way as they entered the ballroom, but only a few. Blair felt some of his tension dissolve. When a waiter offered him a tray he took one of the colourful little confections curiously. He had no idea what to call it: a tiny but exquisitely designed mouthful of food. He studied the different layers for a moment: something green at the bottom, topped with a white paté, then slivers of orange, pink and red. The only thing Blair recognised was the orange stuff – he was pretty sure that was carrot.

"Man, is this food or art?" he muttered to Jim.

Jim chuckled. "Both. I'm more a quarter-pounder man myself." He sipped his iced water. "You don't have to eat it. There'll be more than enough food at dinner."

Blair popped the thing into his mouth. It tasted unusual to his palate, but not unpleasant. "So...what now?" he asked Jim, noticing Roxanne enter the ballroom. She didn't speak to either of them but headed for the other side of the room, keeping them in sight as she wove a path through the other guests.

"We dally and mingle until dinner," Jim explained. "This is the part where the elite of Cascade tally up their points." He nodded toward several young women. "Whose daughter has the prettiest gown or the most expensive jewels." He

indicated the young men watching the girls. "There's been more than a few society weddings come out of the annual ball." He pointed to a couple on the dance floor, talking as they waltzed. "And a lot of deals done."

"You sound bitter," Blair observed.

"Not bitter, just cynical. Most of these people are useless. They'll never achieve anything that really matters, never make a difference. This event will raise at least three million and it's for a good cause, but I'd have more respect for them if they'd walk the streets just once and help someone real."

"When did you do that?" Blair asked, curious.

Jim began to walk, slowly, around the edge of the dance floor. "That's a fair question. When I was in central Africa with the army I helped dig wells for villages so they'd have clean water. I built roads and defended hospitals. And where a little money would do the most good, I dug into my own pocket and provided it. Good enough?"

Blair hadn't meant to provoke that defensive tone; he'd genuinely been curious. "You've got nothing to prove to me, Jim."

"My brother always has something to prove," Stephen Ellison said from behind him.

"Stephen," Jim said evenly as they both turned to face him.

"It's true, isn't it?" the senator challenged, but without giving Jim a chance to respond he went on, "We should talk, Jim."

"You've decided, then," Jim said, his tone wary.

Stephen sipped champagne. "Have you?"

Jim made an impatient sound. "I told you my answer when you made the offer. I won't stand in your way, Stephen, but I'm not going to help you when there's nothing in it for me but a fresh set of chains."

"That's unfair, Jim. I made you a good offer."

"Not one I care for," Jim snapped. "Excuse me." He walked away, weaving swiftly through the crowd.

Blair's stomach flip-flopped and he started after Jim. He had no idea what just happened.

"It's best to let him go," Stephen said softly. "He won't abandon you for long."

"I don't know," Blair said uneasily, but Jim was already out of his sight.

Stephen moved up to his side. "He must care about you a great deal, to introduce you to the family this way."

Blair felt his face heat. "We're not...like that," he demurred.

Stephen smiled his famous politician's smile. "If that's true, it's only a matter of time. I see the way he watches you. No," he held up one hand in a stop gesture as Blair began to interrupt, "keep your secrets. I'm not trying to pry. I just wanted to say I'm glad to see he's not alone. I don't always understand my brother, but I do love him."

"He's a good man," Blair answered, not wanting to encourage further confidences. He couldn't outright deny that he and Jim were dating, but this was Jim's family. He didn't want to lie to them, either.

Stephen nodded to show he understood Blair's hint. "Well, let me introduce you to some people while Jim cools down." He gestured toward the dance floor.

Blair looked around the room but he still saw no sign of Jim. Seeing no alternative, he followed Stephen's lead.

Senator Ellison, Blair knew, used a mod to help him walk. The story was well known. At age eleven, Stephen Ellison was injured in the aircar crash that claimed his mother's life. Without the mod – not a treatment usually

recommended for children – he would not have walked again. Blair observed the senator as they walked. He knew the signs to look for but Blair saw no evidence of the cybernetics. It was no surprise: the Ellisons could afford the very best.

Stephen introduced Blair to other members of the Ellison family. Though he didn't mention Jim when introducing Blair, everyone seemed to know he was there as Jim's guest. Blair met others, too: a famous local actress, another senator and her husband, other men and women Blair had never heard or read of. He found himself repeating the same half-truths over and over: he was a cybernetic surgeon, he and Jim met through Jim's work with the army, no, they hadn't known each other for long... He did enjoy himself, but he was still glad when he eventually saw Jim approaching. Blair smiled for him and waited until Jim reached them.

Surprising him, Jim slid a possessive arm around Blair's waist as he joined the group. "Sorry to leave you like that."

"Your brother kept me busy," Blair answered.

"So I see. Are you enjoying yourself or can I persuade you to take a walk with me?"

Blair searched Jim's face for a hint of what Jim wanted him to say but he found no help. Maybe Jim was really offering him a choice. "We could take a walk," he agreed tentatively.

Jim greeted most of the group with smooth words and smiles and then guided Blair away. "Daryl says our message got through to Alex," he said quietly as soon as they were out of earshot.

Blair gulped. "Oh. Is she, uh..."

"That's all I know. I'll keep my link on during dinner but I don't dare answer it. Here." Jim opened a door which led to a covered terrace.

Again, a security drone blocked their way briefly, then withdrew after scanning them. They walked out of the ballroom. The terrace was covered with a glass roof to keep off the region's all-too-frequent rain, but was open on the garden side. There were several stone benches and wicker love-seats, potted plants and marble statues. The terrace was lit only by the ballroom lights behind them, but it had a view of the garden beyond, which was lit by hundreds of glowing globes strung through the trees.

One statue caught Blair's attention: a marble angel with a blindfold carved over its eyes, its wings spread wide and casting a shadow over the love-seat beneath it. Blair wondered what the blindness signified. Perhaps Jim saw him noticing it, because he made for that seat, inviting Blair to join him. Jim pinched the bridge of his nose as he sat.

Blair moved to his side, concerned. "Another headache?"

Jim nodded as he let his hand fall. "So many people...it's too much sometimes."

"The people?" Blair was surprised. He'd expected Jim to complain about the light or the music.

Jim gestured again, asking Blair to sit. "People...smell," he explained. "Different deodorants, cosmetics, perfumes. I don't have trouble in small gatherings but something like this...it's too much."

"What can I do to help?" Blair asked as he sat beneath the stone angel. He had no meds with him, and chided himself for the omission. He should have expected this.

Jim shrugged. "Just distract me. Let's talk about something else."

Blair cast around for something. "Well...what's the problem between you and your brother?" he asked. He knew it was none of his business, but Jim hadn't seemed to mind talking in front of him. Blair thought that at least entitled him to ask the question.

Jim looked at him quizzically. "You really don't follow the news, do you?" Jim shifted slightly and Blair felt the heat of his body as their legs touched. "Stephen plans to run for president."

"I knew that," Blair defended himself. "I guess I didn't think that's what you two were talking about."

Jim sighed. "The day Stephen announces he's going to run, my career is finished. Unless he loses. He knows it, and he's going to run anyway. I can't stop him. But I don't have to like it."

"Why would your career be over?"

"Blair, I work in intelligence for a covert agency. My face is sometimes recognised but really it's only in Cascade I have to worry about that. That will change when I'm the President's brother. My superiors have made it clear to me I'll have to resign or transfer."

Blair nodded. "Right. I can see that."

"Stephen wants me to chase a promotion instead. He thinks if I support him politically – you know, the war hero angle – it will help his campaign. That's what we were arguing about. The truth is, he'll be a good president, but I can't openly support him. The military is supposed to be neutral."

Blair slid his hand over Jim's, comforting. "He cares about you a lot, Jim. Maybe if you said all this to him..."

Jim gave a short laugh. "Maybe what? He's not going to give up a chance at the White House."

"Probably not, but have you asked him?"

"I don't need to ask."

"Maybe you should try. Jim, I know it's not my business, but I never had a brother. If I did, I'd want to work out our problems. Not give up without trying."

Jim looked at him. "Wow. He really got to you, didn't he?"

Blair felt his face heat and was glad for the dim light out here. "Stephen assumed we're a couple and he said some things. Nothing important."

Jim nodded, accepting Blair's answer. He settled an arm around Blair's shoulders and gazed off into the garden. "We were very competitive as kids. School, sports, all that. It was after – " he hesitated, " – after Mom died that we went in different directions. I made up my mind to join the army. Stephen got interested in politics. It was the idealistic sort at first. You know, charity work and protesting for this and that. But Senator Hobart was a family friend and he encouraged Stephen to get involved in his campaign. He caught the bug. I wasn't surprised that Stephen took over Don's seat when he retired."

Blair said nothing. He was fascinated by this insight into the Ellisons but this was personal stuff. He was afraid if he interrupted Jim would stop sharing. But something Jim had said, or had not said, nagged at him. Why did their mother's death have such a profound impact on the boys? Losing a parent was always traumatic, of course, but for it to cause both children to change their futures completely, if that was what Jim implied, seemed unusual.

Jim shook himself and changed the subject. "So, what about you? I know you're from Texas. How did you end up a doctor in the US?"

Blair was surprised. His public profile did say he was born in Texas, but surely someone with Jim's resources would have uncovered the truth. Was this a test? He answered cautiously, "I wasn't born in the Texas Union. Mom moved there when I was a toddler."

"Why?" Jim sounded truly confused.

Sure, to Jim the Union must be the place no one in their right mind would want to live. The Union – six of the states that seceded from the USA a century before – had a sour reputation here and Jim's military patriotism alone would set him against them.

Blair shrugged, making light of it. "We moved around a lot. Mom was always restless." He waited for Jim to challenge him.

"That must have made it hard to get good schooling," Jim suggested.

"I was home-schooled, mostly," Blair admitted. "It wasn't very organised or consistent. But the one thing Mom did right was teaching me to read. We played a word of the day game: she would give me a word at breakfast and by supper I had to be able to spell it and define it. The words got harder and harder as I got older. By the time I was ten she was up to thermodynamics or semitendinosus. But everything else I learned from the people we lived with. When she lived with a musician I learned to play and write music. When we lived on a farm for a while I learned about the animals. And so on."

Jim smiled. "That sounds like a lot of fun."

"It was. When I was ten, Mom, uh..." Blair hesitated, "she couldn't take care of me anymore. I ended up in Cascade with my grandparents. They were great. They paid for me to have private lessons to fill in all the school stuff I'd missed and I sat for the college boards at sixteen. I did well enough to be offered a place at Rainier. That summer my grandfather died and I had to forget about Rainier to take care of my grandmother. I lost her, too, a couple of years later. She made me promise I'd go back to school, and in her will she left everything to me. It was enough to cover my school fees. My first year I studied everything I could get my hands on. My undergraduate degree was in cybernetics, then I switched to pre-med because you can't design mods without an understanding of neurology. I wasn't planning to be a surgeon, but I sort of got addicted to it. The possibilities, the ways the human body can be changed and enhanced. Mods, plastics, real, cosmetics." Blair shrugged. "Then as I was completing my residency I met Alex. Everything changed then."

"She was a fix for your addiction?" Jim suggested.

Blair bristled. "She was a unique challenge," he corrected, offended. "I could use both sides of my skills – cybernetic design and surgery. But to call her my addiction implies I performed unnecessary procedures on her. That's not true."

"I didn't mean that. I just meant I can see how you got so involved with her." Jim turned to Blair. "Hey, don't look like that. You're the one who used the word addiction."

"Bad choice of words," Blair muttered, though he couldn't help wondering if it were more an unintentional truth. He had never truly considered that his need to help Alex might be selfish.

He felt Jim's fingers gently cup his cheek and turn his face and realised he'd looked away. He raised his eyes to meet Jim's, and saw no condemnation, only concern.

"Whatever you're thinking," Jim said, "don't. Don't take on more than your share of guilt. There's always plenty of blame to go around."

Discomfited by the intimacy, Blair moved away from Jim's touch.

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They remained there on the terrace until someone came looking for them, then returned to the ball. Jim worked his way around the room, greeting old acquaintances, introducing Blair. When they were finally called to dinner, Jim thought it was as much a relief to Blair as it was for him. His headache had faded to a dull throb behind his eyes.

The dinner was served on tables of twelve, like a wedding reception. This was the reason William Ellison insisted Jim be present: he placed a member of the Ellison family at each table. It could have made for an excruciating evening, but William, or whoever organised the place settings, had planned well. Jim's table included scientists and doctors instead of the usual social climbers and business contacts. It meant much of the conversation was over Jim's head, but he didn't have to do much to keep the conversation going. These were not people who bought invitations for the thrill of talking to an Ellison. Some were angling for research funding, but Jim could deal with that. It had the added advantage that Blair seemed to enjoy himself.

The meal was excellent as always: five courses served with wine and champagne, followed by dessert, liqueurs and brandy, and finally coffee. As desert was served, the speeches began, made more bearable for most of the guests by the amount of alcohol they had consumed. Jim, however, had limited his intake to a few sips of champagne because he was armed and on duty...and because he wanted to drive home.

As soon as he could get away with it, he rose from the table and offered Blair his arm. "Shall we?"

"Sure, Jim," Blair agreed easily.

Jim glanced toward his father who gave him a nod; he was allowed to leave. The party would continue as long as there were guests still dancing, or until dawn if that came first. Jim had no stomach for that kind of partying. He headed for the exit with Blair.

A valet brought his aircar to the bottom of the steps and Jim opened the door for Blair before climbing in himself. While Blair strapped in Jim scanned the stairway and saw Roxanne appear and signal for a car of her own. Satisfied, he started the engine.

"Where are we going?" Blair asked him. "Back to Base?" He wasn't slurring his words at all.

"No, we'll sleep at my place." Jim turned on the repulsion and the car rose into the air. He didn't have to wait for Roxanne; she knew their destination and most likely would have someone already waiting at Prospect. "It's safe," Jim added, "and there's plenty of room."

"Okay," Blair agreed easily. "Hey! How high are you going?"

Jim grinned. "She's built for semi-ballistic speed and low orbit but relax, I won't do that to you. I just want to get above the clouds. Don't you like flying?"

"I don't fly much."

"Well, I'll make it a smooth ride. And no more HALO landings, I promise." Jim checked his altimeter: approaching ten clicks H-above-G. Good enough. He turned her nose toward Cascade and took her supersonic.

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Blair followed Jim into the apartment and closed the door behind them. He heard the maglock engage.

"Lights," Jim commanded as he slipped off his tuxedo jacket and hung it carelessly by the door. "Make yourself at home," he invited. "I just need to check in with Daryl."

Blair looked around the apartment. He had barely noticed the room earlier; he was too nervous. Now he could take in the details. Having seen Jim's office suite in Ellison Tower and the Ellison mansion, the apartment was not what he would have expected. Exquisitely designed, but very Spartan: the floors were polished hardwood and the walls were a rich yellow-cream. There were no pictures or other embellishments on the walls, except the large mirror near the door, which, Blair noticed now, wasn't a mirror at all. It was an e-screen: thousands of tiny projectors on a flexible mount, which meant it could function as a display screen as well as reflect the image before it. As Blair watched, his image in the e-mirror rippled and faded into a view of the corridor outside, making it appear as if the wall were transparent. That image rippled again and the display blanked, fading into the wall.

Light came from spots set into the high ceiling, which was white. The room was large and open-plan, so a kitchen with black worktops, pale oak cupboards and a lot of gadgets filled one corner. The kitchen was open to the dining area which had a four-person table. The dining area blended into the rest of the room. There was a staircase which led up to a mezzanine but it was dark up there and Blair couldn't tell what it was. Another door led to a balcony; Jim stood there with his link earpiece over his ear.

He was saying, "...all I need. What's his ETA?" A short silence followed and Jim's frown deepened. "Did Simon arrange the meeting I requested? ...Understood. Don't wake them, Daryl, but ask Simon and Connor to be ready for a briefing at 0900." Another pause, then he said, "Thanks. Ellison signing off."

He sounded stressed, and Blair started to move toward him. But instead of removing the earpiece, Jim touched his link again. "Dad. Priority." He signalled Blair to keep his distance. "I know, Dad, but you need to hear this. About the matter we discussed earlier. I am meeting with the governor at 1130 tomorrow. I recommend you call her and get yourself invited to the table." He sighed. "If you can't then send Stephen. But emphasise he's there for the company. I don't want Governor Lo pissed at me."

Jim beckoned to Blair, still talking. "...Yes...Yes, of course I will. Goodnight, Dad." He touched the link again and groaned. "I hate politics." He pulled the earpiece off.

Blair touched his shoulder tentatively. "You need to relax, man."

Jim turned to face him. "My CO is coming to oversee our action against the Wolfpack. We haven't even located the stockpile yet. Tomorrow I have to convince the state governor that military action against the Wolfpack isn't the most insane idea since Custer's last stand. Relaxation is asking a lot."

"I didn't know you needed the governor's permission," Blair said. He began to draw Jim toward the couch, backing that way himself so he could keep facing Jim.

"The quad doesn't need anyone's permission once we're deployed. But no matter how good we are – and we are good – four of us can't take on the whole Wolfpack. That's going to take a major co-ordinated op and for that we need the governor's mandate."

"Co-ordinated with who?" Blair asked, more to keep Jim talking than because he was interested.

"UMIAC can draw on the resources of other military or law enforcement agencies. Here there's the navy at Tacoma base, Cascade Police, SWAT, Marine SF if I can pull that string. And the National Guard in case it all blows up in our faces. There's something else, too...something I can't talk about. It'll be a tough sell but if they'll agree it will be decisive."

Blair swallowed. That sounded really bad. "Is there anything else you have to do tonight?" They were almost at the couch.

"No." Jim smiled. "Except keep you safe."

"Then relax. Come here and sit." Blair sat down and slipped his jacket off. He folded it on the couch beside him then went to work on the bow tie. Finally, he opened the top three buttons of his shirt. The tuxedo wasn't physically uncomfortable but he felt weird chilling out while wearing it. A tux was stiff and formal kind of clothing.

Jim sat on the couch then bent down and pulled up the leg of his pants. Blair's eyes widened when he saw the gun and his stomach gave a lurch. He was glad he hadn't known Jim was armed during the ball. Jim unstrapped the ankle holster deftly and laid it, and the gun on the table. He sat back, sinking into the soft leather couch with a theatrical sigh.

"Lights low," he said and the lights instantly dimmed. "Music, quiet, relaxing."

The entertainment matrix had a large screen which displayed images from a standard library when not in use. When they sat down the image had been red rock and azure sky: the Grand Canyon, perhaps, though Blair didn't recognise the location. When Jim requested music it changed to a scene of the sun rising over Mount Rainier. Soft music filled the air: something that sounded like American Folk, with a woman's voice singing. It was nice, but not an exciting sound. Relaxing, just like Jim said.

Blair leaned back into the couch and closed his eyes. He was a little tense and it took him a moment to understand. He couldn't hear any rain. Through the windows he could see the lights of the city, the view pin-sharp, with no raindrops blurring what he could see. He wondered if he would be able to sleep without the constant rain.

Blair felt the couch shift as Jim changed position. He opened his eyes.

He saw the invitation in Jim's gesture and smiled. Blair leaned forward a little so Jim could drape an arm around his shoulders. He slipped the shoes off his feet then raised his legs onto the couch so he was curled up against Jim's side.



It felt good and the closeness between them was no longer pretence. Sometime during the evening, their relationship changed. They began as doctor and patient, became something like cop and arrestee, but now they were friends. Perhaps more than friends. They sat together like that, not speaking, just listening to the music.

Blair wasn't surprised when, an endless time later, Jim leaned down and kissed him. It was just a brief touch of his lips to Blair's temple, but Blair finally understood it meant so much more than that.

"I think," Jim said, "I should show you the spare bedroom." His fingers played with a lock of Blair's hair. "Unless you'd like to spend the night in mine."

The offer (Request? Command?) sent an intense thrill through Blair's body. "You're very direct," he said, playing for time because he knew he had to refuse. No matter how loudly his body was saying yes.

Jim laughed a genuine, delighted laugh. "For an army man, that was subtle, Chief!" He leaned in to kiss Blair again.

Blair's body responded before he could stop himself and Jim's mouth was hard and demanding on his. Blair smelled a faint trace of cologne or aftershave: something musky and arousing. Jim's hand slid up Blair's thigh, warm and insistent, drawing their bodies closer together.

It would be so easy...

With an effort, Blair pushed Jim away. "Jim, no. Please."

He expected resistance, perhaps even force, but Jim let him go at once and moved back, putting some distance between them. "I'm sorry. I thought..."

It was the hurt in Jim's eyes that did it. Blair reached for him, needing to take that hurt back. "Jim, I can't. I mustn't."

"I want you," Jim said, low and husky. "Do you want me?"

"Yes." What else could he say? It was the truth.

"Then what's stopping us?" Jim held Blair's eyes with an unsettling intensity. "Are you being faithful to her? Is that what this is?"

"No! Hell, no."

"Then what's stopping us?"

Blair's resistance crumbled. "Nothing," he whispered, and pulled Jim into another kiss.

\*

Like some trashy movie, they left a trail of discarded clothing between the couch and Jim's bedroom. Jim's pants and socks were somewhere on the stairs. Blair's shirt hung over the mezzanine rail. None of it mattered. When Jim offered a night in his bed, he intended to offer sex – just one night, no strings, no obligations, certainly no feelings. But the wall he always erected around his emotions crumbled before they were halfway up the stairs, their mouths locked together, hands touching, exploring, ripping away clothing. By the time he laid Blair down on his big bed, Jim knew it was hopeless. His senses were full of Blair. Nothing else existed for him. The young man's long, dark hair spread across Jim's pillow like he belonged there, and had always belonged there. His eyes were half-closed, his full lips parted. He was truly beautiful.

And mine.

Jim's fingertips caressed Blair's cheek and he felt the slight roughness of beginning stubble there. Blair turned his face into the caress and kissed Jim's fingers. The touch of his lips was an electric thrill along Jim's nerves. He felt his senses open and for the first time in his memory, Jim welcomed it. He waited for the blinding pain that so often accompanied his erratic gift, but it did not come. He felt fine. He felt damn fine.

Jim ran his fingers across Blair's shoulders. The puncture wounds left by Alex's claws were healing, but still very visible. Jim bent to kiss the first wound. The healing skin was slightly warmer than the unmarked flesh that surrounded it and Jim's lips and tongue found every small imperfection on Blair's shoulder and chest. He remembered the way Barnes pursued them through the Wolfpack tunnels. He remembered her face as they escaped and wished he had killed her when he had the chance. The fresh injuries were not the only ones Blair bore. Jim's fingers explored Blair's chest and arms. He found the faint ridges of scars on his arms and under the dark hair on his chest. Those scars had been cosmetically healed, so were barely visible to normal sight. But to Jim's eyes and his touch they were as vivid as fresh wounds. The abuse Blair had suffered appalled him. Few of the scars he found represented serious injuries. They were superficial cuts, painful and bloody but dangerous only if infected. A cold anger settled in Jim's gut, but he pushed those feelings aside. Tonight was about Blair and the scars made it important to Jim that this night be good for Blair. He wanted to make Blair feel good. Feel loved.

"What's wrong?" Blair asked.

Jim shook his head. "Nothing. Just thinking too much." He shifted further down the bed and slid his fingers under the waistband of the underwear that was all Blair now wore. He could see the bulge of Blair's penis, thick and hard beneath the fabric. He pulled the underpants down slowly, carefully and breathed deep, scenting the musk of Blair's body like the most exquisite perfume. He stroked the proud flesh, spreading Blair's scent on his fingers. Blair moaned, his hands gripping the sheets.

"Jim! Oh...Jim..."

Jim bent low and drew Blair's delicious cock deeply into his mouth. Blair gasped wordlessly and arched his body, pushing himself deeper into Jim's throat. The taste of him exploded in Jim's senses, but it was more than taste. The scent of his arousal was like breathing in some exotic drug. The heat of him, the velvet hardness of his cock, the pulse of blood within that seemed to beat in time with Jim's heart, the sound of Blair's ragged breath...it was more than Jim's senses could take in, yet somehow he was aware of it all, sharp and bright.

He drew back, creating a firm suction and was rewarded by a cry of pleasure that sent a curling heat through his own body. There was a tension in Blair, a struggle, his muscles quivering under Jim's touch. He was fighting his own need.

Jim raised his head, releasing Blair's cock, and gazed up his body. He was stretched out on the bed, his hands gripping the sheets, legs spread wide, a sheen of sweat gathering on his skin.

When Jim spoke, his voice was rough. "Blair, don't hold back. I can take it, whatever you need." He swallowed Blair's cock once more.

He heard Blair's moan of surrender, felt his body relax. Warm fingers, gentle at first, rested on Jim's head, guiding him. Then, at last, Blair gave in to his body and thrust into Jim's mouth, hard. Jim, lost in the taste of Blair and drowning in his own desire, let himself be used. He loved it, revelled in it.

And he made it last.

Twice he felt Blair close to orgasm and slowed things down, his fingers gentle on hot skin, pulling Blair back from the edge. The third time he let it happen, aware of his own need as well as Blair's, their bodies locked together, Blair filling Jim's mouth, thrusting, hard, rough, delicious. Blair cried out, his hands convulsed, his body arched. Jim's mouth was flooded with Blair's semen and he swallowed it down.

"Jim...Jim..." Blair breathed. His hands relaxed and fell from Jim's head. His cock began to soften.

Jim crawled up the bed to lie beside Blair. He kissed him and tasted sweat. He felt for Blair's hand, squeezed it, then moved their joined hands to his hard cock.

"Please," Jim begged.

Blair's fingers curled around him and Jim hissed at the touch. Gently, Blair pushed him back and Jim obeyed, rolled onto his back, offering himself to Blair willingly...eagerly. Blair stroked him once, twice, and that was enough. Jim cried out as the orgasm crashed through him and he spilled himself over Blair's hand.

Blair was half-dozing, drifting into a satiated sleep, when Jim rolled away from him and stretched out an arm for the towel on his bedside table. The movement roused Blair back to wakefulness and he opened his eyes, watching Jim's body. Moonlight shone across the bed, accenting the curves of Jim's muscles, and turning the scars on his back to harsh lines.

It wasn't the first time Blair had seen those scars, but he reached out and traced one pale line with his finger.

Jim tensed. He sat up and balled the towel in his lap.

"I'm sorry," Blair whispered. "I was just..."

"We've all got scars," Jim said shortly.

Yes, Blair had scars, too, and he'd let Jim examine every last one of them. Blair was also a doctor to the Wolfpack, and he had seen a lot of injuries on others. He recognised the scars on Jim's back. Some were burns, but not from any accident. Red-hot rods had been held deliberately against his flesh. There were marks from a lash, too. Jim had been tortured, or at least terribly abused.

Blair kissed a whip mark that curved around Jim's shoulder. "When did this happen?" he asked. "When you went missing?"

"Yeah." Jim tossed the towel aside and lay back on the bed, inviting Blair to join him. "Twenty three months, I was MIA. For twenty of them, I was a POW in an Uzbek prison."

Blair cuddled up against Jim's side and laid his head on Jim's shoulder, silently letting him know he would listen if Jim wanted to say more, but not asking or compelling him to speak. Jim's arm curled around him, holding him close.

After a long silence, Jim began to speak. "I found out after I got back, the mission they sent me on wasn't sanctioned. That's why I was abandoned there. Fifteen of us went into that fight. When the bullets stopped flying, there were four of us left. I'm the only one who made it through."

"Oh, Jim," Blair murmured, hearing the horror of it in Jim's carefully neutral voice.

"I don't know how long it lasted. Time sense is the first thing you lose. They beat me. Starved me. Kept me awake for days at a time. I've been trained to resist interrogation, but they drill it into you in training – everyone has a breaking point. I figured all I could do was make them pay high to find mine."

Jim took a deep breath and let it out slowly. "I don't know how long. Just one day it stopped. The torture stopped. They put me in solitary and left me there. I didn't see or speak to another human being for...I don't know. A year or more."

Blair said quietly, "That's when your sentinel ability manifested, isn't it?"

Jim rolled onto his side, propped himself up on his elbow and looked down at Blair. "How did you know?"

"It's pretty textbook, Jim. Traumatic isolation. It's the common denominator in just about every case where the sentinel ability manifested in adulthood."

"You mean if I hadn't gone on that mission, this would never have happened to me?" Jim frowned. "I thought I was going crazy...hallucinating..."

"Not never." Blair concentrated on the science of it, hoping that would help distance Jim from the memories. "A sentinel ability is genetic. You might have had it in childhood but the sentinel gift makes your senses highly adaptive. If you didn't need it as a child, your sensory awareness would have been only a little more acute than everyone else."

"If I didn't need it," Jim repeated.

"It's a survival trait," Blair explained. "I guess the way you grew up, you never found yourself in real danger. Not before you joined the army, I mean."

Something dark crossed Jim's expression. "Don't be so sure."

"What do you mean?"

Jim took his time before answering. "I know I had it easy growing up. The fucking Ellison billions, sure. Twice in my life, Blair, I've learned the hard way that being an Ellison doesn't mean dreck when the worst happens. Those twenty months in prison were the second time."

Blair asked, because he thought Jim expected him to ask. "When was the first?"

"The same time everyone in Cascade learned the same lesson. Red Night."

Mierde. Foot, meet mouth. Idiot.

When the Red Night Riot took place in Cascade, Blair was six years old and he and his mom were living in a different city. So he didn't remember it the way most Cascade natives did. But he knew what it meant to the city. Where were you on Red Night? had become almost a ritual question for everyone old enough to remember. If someone would share their Red Night story with you, it meant you were trusted like family.

Naturally Jim Ellison would have his own Red Night story. One night in his bed didn't give Blair the right to ask for it.

"I'm sorry," Blair whispered, and reached up to kiss Jim. He would ask no more of him tonight.

\*

Blair was wakened by a gentle kiss and the smell of fresh coffee. As mornings go, he decided that was a good one. He opened his eyes to Jim's smile.

"Hi," Jim said.

Blair returned his smile. "Hi yourself."

"Breakfast is ready. Do you want to shower first?"

Blair wasn't good at answering hard questions when he'd only just woken up. He sat up groggily and tried to focus on the question. Just his luck that Jim was a morning person. Breakfast. Shower. Oh, right.

"I guess I should clean up," he agreed. Then he caught sight of his discarded underpants. With the warm memory of Jim taking them off him came the realisation that he had another problem. "Jim, what am I gonna wear? All I've got here is that tux!"

"It's taken care of," Jim told him.

Jim showed him to the guest bathroom, where Blair found everything he needed, including a toothbrush, fresh clothing in his size and his own shoes. He took a long, luxurious shower, shaved and dressed. There was no hairdryer so he towel-dried his hair and ran a comb through it. His hair would dry on its own.

When he came downstairs, Jim was watching a local news programme on the entertainment matrix. There was a report about the previous night's ball, including vids of Jim's flashy arrival and of Jim and Blair together on the stairs. It looked a lot more romantic than it had felt at the time.

The society news gave way to a story about an attempted robbery at an undercity bank. Jim muted the sound but left the newsvid running as he came to the table and greeted Blair with another kiss. He ran his fingers through Blair's wet curls. "You look good," he said.

"Back at you," Blair grinned.

Breakfast was yoghurt with granola and fresh fruit, waffles which Jim made fresh, syrup and fresh coffee. Blair drank two cups of coffee and was halfway through his second waffle before he risked asking a question.

"What am I going to do today? I mean, I know you've got meetings..."

"You're still under quad protection," Jim told him. "You can stay here if you want, or I'll take you to Ellison Tower. Not Base. Colonel Brackett will be there and I don't want you near him if we can avoid it. Your safety won't be his priority."

Blair felt his stomach flip-flop. The way Jim said that suggested he really, really didn't want to meet this Colonel Brackett. "I don't mind waiting here," he agreed, "but what am I going to do all day?" The apartment was great, but Blair wasn't used to being inactive.

"I'll give you access to my matrix," Jim offered. "You can do anything you like. If you want to go anywhere, there'll be security outside. Do you want more waffles?"

"No, I've had enough, thanks. Security? Do you mean Roxanne's been outside all night?"

"She's been on duty, yes. But she'll have a relief guard arriving soon." Jim poured more batter into the sizzling waffle iron. "There's building security, too, though I'd put more faith in Joel's people."

Blair almost wished he'd asked for another waffle. They smelled so good! "Okay. That sounds safe enough."

"Good. I'll be on link. You can call Daryl any time through my matrix and he'll connect you to me."

That reminded Blair. He swallowed his last spoonful of fruit and said, "You said you'd tell me about Daryl."

Jim nodded. "I did. Come on. Let's set you up on the matrix, then I can give you the proof I promised."

Jim's matrix, like most, was voice-controlled and locked to his voice print. Blair had to read from a card so the computer could record his voice, then Jim instructed the computer to give Blair access to everything except his secure files. He explained that meant Blair could contact the quad or order anything he needed on Jim's credit. When Blair raised his eyebrows at that, Jim simply laughed.

"Blair, I told you before, I've got more money than I can possibly spend. I don't think you'll go nuts and buy yourself a yacht, but if you did I wouldn't miss the money. It doesn't matter to me."

"That's a good way to lose a lot of it," Blair suggested.

"I don't make friends with the kind of people who'd do that. I trust you, Blair." He touched a control. "Comm mode. Link to Daryl."

A moment later the screen flickered to life and displayed the face Blair remembered from his VR trip: Daryl's avatar. "Good morning, Jim."

"Morning, Daryl. Access the specs for the mod Gene Madden designed and download to my matrix. Filename promise."

"Confirmed."

"Thank you, Daryl. Are the others at Base?"

"The quad meeting for 0900 is confirmed. Agent Connor is en route."

"Good. I'll see you there, then. Ellison out."

Jim sat on the couch as the screen faded to its colourful Arizona scene. He invited Blair to join him with a gesture.

Blair sat, curious about the mod Jim had mentioned. He recognised the name Gene Madden: he was famous for his work in artificial intelligence and robotics, but he was no cyberneticist. When had he designed a mod?

"So, about Daryl," Jim said. "Simon has a military background but he left the corps after his first tour. He became a cop and he was very good at it. I don't know all the details, because he doesn't talk about it, but Simon was working an inter-agency case involving illegal drugs. He was getting too close to something...or someone...so they put out a contract on his life."

"I thought we were talking about Daryl," Blair objected.

"I am. The hit man bombed Simon's car. But when the bomb went off, Simon wasn't in it. His wife and son were. She was killed outright. Simon's son survived. But only just."

Suddenly, Blair made the connection. "Simon's son? Daryl?"

"You're quick. Yes. Daryl was fourteen when it happened. Most of the physical damage could have been rebuilt, but the real damage was to his brain, or rather, the connection between his body and his brain. I'm no doctor, but the way it was explained to me, that connection doesn't work any more. Daryl is in a hospital bed. He can't move or speak, but his brain is awake, not comatose. He was fitted with a VR mod so he could communicate."

Blair nodded. "They used to call it locked-in syndrome. It was mistaken for brain-death before the doctors found ways to communicate with them."

"Daryl, before the bomb, was a genius with computers and he'd been building his own AI. He had this theory. He thought that he could use the VR mod to move his consciousness into his AI so he wouldn't need his body any more. He was all set to try it but Simon stopped him."

"Simon was right!" Blair drew away from Jim, unconsciously distancing himself from the story. "It's possible to transfer data from an organic brain to an AI matrix, but data is not the same as consciousness. He would have destroyed what was left of himself."

"That's what Simon believed," Jim agreed. "But Daryl wouldn't give up. He was permanently hooked into VR because he had no other life. He used the VR matrix to contact Madden at MIT. Madden was a student then, working on his doctorate, and he loved Daryl's wild theories. He agreed to design something for him."

"A mod?" The story didn't make sense to Blair. Sure, someone could live permanently in VR as long as their physical needs were taken care of. But that didn't explain what Daryl was now. No human could do the things he did: controlling the quad's matrix, effectively putting himself in several places at once. It wasn't possible.

"I guess you'd call it a mod. Really it's an interface between Daryl's human brain and his AI."

"No."

Jim smiled. "No?"

"That wouldn't work. A human brain couldn't handle a constant data stream like that. Not for long." The human brain did process a constant stream of data from the senses, but the kind of data stream you would get from an AI was nothing the brain evolved to handle. The brain had no way to filter or prioritise the data as it did automatically with sensory input. If you couldn't ignore it or shut it down, if you couldn't dream or imagine, you would go crazy in weeks, maybe even hours.

Jim simply shrugged it off. "Well, you're the expert so I won't try to convince you. Take a look at the specs and decide for yourself." Jim kissed him lightly. "I've got to go, Blair. My service uniform is at Base and I'll need it for my meeting with the governor."

Blair stood and followed him for a few steps. "Jim, be careful today. Alex is going to come after you."

Jim gave him a grim smile. "I'm counting on it."

\*

Roxanne's relief was a serious-faced man who introduced himself simply as Woo. Blair had no idea whether that was his family or given name and somehow it seemed impolite to ask. Uncomfortable with the idea of leaving Woo outside the door, alone all day, Blair asked if he could come inside. Jim agreed that would be okay. Woo said little, but Blair caught his look of gratitude.

After Jim left, Blair cleaned up the remains of their breakfast, leaving the table free for Woo. He was going to work at the matrix. Woo settled himself at the dining table with a cup of coffee and a handheld. He started reading.

"Access file promise," Blair instructed and the Grand Canyon disappeared, replaced by the first page of a technical diagram. Blair spent the next few hours studying the mod. At first glance, the connections looked like a standard VR mod, but Blair quickly realised there was more to it. The neuro links were finer than anything he had seen on the market and there were more of them. The mod connected to almost every area of the brain: short and long term memory, the senses, the speech centre, even the emotional centres. That was incredibly dangerous. Blair would not willingly have installed such a thing for a patient. That much input from a mod, if anything went wrong, could turn the brain into so much porridge.

But if this mod had been installed in a human body, there had to be some kind of safeguard against too much feedback. Blair searched for a choke circuit or switch. He didn't find one. What he did find astonished him, but he wanted to be sure. He needed more data than just the specs.

"Comm mode. Call Daryl." It was worth a shot.

"Daryl here," the tenor voice responded instantly.

"Daryl, Major Banks allowed me access to medical data. Do you have data on yourself? A PET scan, maybe?"

"Confirmed."

"May I see it?"

"Upload in progress." A bar appeared in a corner of the screen, slowly filling with green.

"Thank you."

"Ellison calling," Daryl said.

"Jim?" Blair found himself smiling.

"Hi, Blair. I'm meeting with the governor and other officials soon. We're hoping to turn the meeting into a strategy planning session. Can you be available if we need information about the Wolfpack?"

Blair was a little disappointed by Jim's business-like tone, but he understood it. It was a stressful day for Jim. "Sure, Jim. But I might not be much help. I know Alex's pack, and I've met some of the other alphas, but – "

"That will be enough. Keep your link with Daryl open. I'll call if we need you. And, thanks. Ellison out."

That was abrupt. Blair looked at the progress bar on the screen; it wasn't done yet. He sighed and leaned back on the couch.

"Blair, you can ask me your questions," Daryl said. "Now you know the truth about me, it's okay for us to talk."

"Thanks, Daryl, but I want to study this for myself first. I'll have questions after."

When the upload finished, Blair accessed the files and he saw at once why it had taken so long. He thought he had requested a single file, so he could see the mod in situ. Daryl had given him his entire medical history. Blair made a mental note to be more specific next time, but since he had the data, he looked at it.

He began with a scan several years old. The PET scan confirmed what the technical specs hinted at: Daryl's mod was based on nanotechnology. Nanotech wasn't new, but mods using nanobots to integrate with the human nervous system was cutting-edge. Cybernetics like this had only appeared in the past year... No, strike that. There were no

other mods like this. It was much more than a mod. Blair had at least a hundred questions he was dying to ask the designer.

Would something like this integrated into the brain have long-term effects? Blair pulled up the most recent scans. His heart sank. The mod was implanted in the brain stem with connections he had already noted to key areas of the brain. But in the recent scans Blair saw signs of brain damage. Given the physical condition of the patient, he did not immediately conclude the damage was caused by the mod. He wanted more data.

Blair knew he was overstepping his bounds, but his professional curiosity was too strong. He opened other scans, working backward in time and traced the deterioration to its source. Then he understood.

This mod – an exceptional design – had freed Daryl from his locked-in state and extended his life. More, it transformed him into something very like an AI. In effect, his human brain acted as a computer core with the mod filtering the data stream both ways to prevent the kind of biofeedback a real AI could cause.

But it was also killing him.



## CHAPTER SEVEN: "INNOCENT IS ARELATIVE TERM"

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...provided a rare opportunity to observe what instinctive behaviours might emerge when two sentinels came together. The results are difficult to assess objectively. What I can state for certain is both sentinels were aware of the other before either knew the identity of the other sentinel. An instinctive rivalry developed between them, combined with a bizarre physical attraction which I would tentatively ascribe to a Darwinian instinct to propagate the sentinel genes. The sense of rivalry was stronger, however, which led to...[two pages are missing from the manuscript at this point]

The Sentinel, an unpublished manuscript believed written in 1999

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Jim activated his workstation as he sat at the conference table. "Let's get right to it. I need status reports from everyone. Connor?" There was no time for the usual banter this morning.

Connor answered crisply, "I've been in contact with Taggart about the lab situation. He seems to be on top of it and I've offered my cooperation. Did you tell him who I am?"

To reveal her identity was a breach of protocol, but Jim was within his rights. "He guessed; I confirmed it. Joel is nobody's fool. Simon?"

"Colonel Brackett will arrive at 1000 hours. I sent him a full briefing, complete as of last night. But you need to hear Daryl's update."

"Daryl?" Jim moved on at once.

"Latest intelligence confirms that the Wolfpack holds a stock of multiple pathogens. I cannot confirm that the pathogens are weaponised but the probability is seventy three per cent. They have the capability."

"Details, Daryl," Jim pressed.

Daryl displayed his data on the holo. As it animated before Jim's eyes, he explained, "After integrating the simulation data from Doctor Sandburg, I re-ran the analysis to uncover the stockpiles. This eliminated one of the five possible locations." Daryl's holographic wireframe displayed all five of his targets; one turned red as he spoke. "This unit is a weapons store but for cybernetic weapons, not biological."

Jim nodded. "So there are four targets left. But you said you'd confirmed the weapons exist. How?"

"I got the key from Sandburg in VR. There were a number of files I was unable to translate before. One is an inventory."

Daryl displayed the inventory without further comment, original language and translation side by side. It was written in language that was not so much a code as a patois: words a Wolfpack member would have understood, but that to Daryl had initially been nonsense. Jim read through the list with mixed feelings. It was good to have confirmation, and it closely matched Blair's intel. But the thought of all this in the hands of the Wolfpack was horrifying.

Connor said it. "That's enough to wipe out the entire West Coast."

"Location?" Jim snapped.

"If the quantities in the inventory are accurate, probability favours all four of the remaining suspect locations," Daryl answered. "I am unable to confirm further."

That was disappointing, but not surprising. "Thank you, Daryl."

Jim took a deep breath. In one sense, this changed little. He had always intended to strike hard against the Wolfpack. It would not be enough to take their bio-weapons away: their job was to neutralise the threat. The threat was the

Wolfpack. He had expected the plan would have to include a covert incursion into Wolfpack territory to get to those bio-weapons before full military action could begin; this gave them one less target but they would still need to go in.

But the confirmation made it feel much more urgent. Where last night Jim had felt sanguine about taking time to confirm the intel and plan a strategy, now his instinct screamed that there was no time to lose. Some of it was illogical, a natural reaction based on his past experience of the Wolfpack. Some of it was training and knowledge.

Jim looked around the table. "We've got less than an hour before Brackett gets here. I want a plan of insertion and attack to present to him when he arrives. Does anyone have anything to add before we move on?"

"We haven't had your report, Ellison," Connor said pointedly.

"What's to report? We ate, drank and made merry. Quiet night. Is that it?"

"Ready, Jim," Simon answered.

"Simulation mode ready," Daryl reported.

"Ready," Connor agreed. "You want to secure the bio weapons ahead of a strike?"

Jim nodded, but added, "The Wolfpack is an army and even without bio weapons, a major threat to Cascade. We have to corral them in, secure the targets and launch an attack as close to simultaneously as possible."

"Four locations," Simon mused, studying Daryl's wireframe, "three of us. Can we do it?"

"Two of us, Simon," Jim corrected. "If we're going to pull this off, it will take precision timing. I need my MC on point."

"Daryl can do that," Simon pointed out.

"If it was just the quad in action, I would agree. But this will be – I hope – a multi-agency op. Cops and SWAT won't take orders from an AI." Jim rotated the wireframe with a gesture. "The locations divide quite neatly. These two are close together in the middle of Wolfpack territory. The other two..."

Thirty minutes later they had the bare bones of a workable strategy. Jim asked Daryl to run simulations for several contingencies and report to Simon when he was done. He just had enough time to change before the Colonel arrived.

\*

Colonel Lee Brackett was the most dangerous man Jim knew. Like all UMIAC agents, Brackett was recruited from another agency: in his case he served with the CIA for seven years. He was sharp, intelligent, a master strategist and a manipulative son of a bitch. In Jim's opinion, Brackett took UMIAC's by any means necessary mandate much too literally, but he was Jim's commanding officer and as such Jim owed him respect.

Jim offered a formal salute. "Welcome to Cascade Base, Colonel."

Brackett let the door swing closed behind him. "Never mind the sweet talk. What the fuck do you think you're doing, Major Ellison?"

"Our job, sir," Jim answered. He had expected this reaction. His last report to Command, through Simon, was a request for reinforcements. That had been enough for the Colonel to come out here. Now he was proposing a joint military action on US soil. UMIAC had the mandate and authority to do it, but it was never done lightly.

Brackett looked sceptical. "Really, Ellison? Let's have your status report."

"Through here, sir." Jim led him to the briefing table. He outlined the situation as quickly as he could: the potential threat of the Wolfpack, the confirmation of bio weapons. He explained that the Wolfpack was in lockdown and what they had done to draw Alex out. He explained that his plan had been to use that break to penetrate the Wolfpack and confirm the location of the weapons, but that with Daryl's confirmation the situation had changed. He explained he had arranged a meeting with the state governor to seek a mandate for military action at 11.30.

"What's the alternative?" Brackett demanded.

"There isn't one I'd consider acceptable. We could use covert means to acquire or neutralise the bio weapons, but our orders are to neutralise the threat. The threat is the Wolfpack, sir."

"The Wolfpack is nothing but a street gang. They're the police's problem."

Jim stifled a frustrated sigh. Anyone who could dismiss the Wolfpack as "nothing" did not understand Cascade. "The police don't have the resources, and the Wolves have made themselves a military target by acquiring biological weapons with the intent of using them on American soil."

"Do you have a strategy worked out?"

That was a risky question. Jim glanced at Simon, who silently mouthed seven. Jim gave a small nod. Seven minutes until Daryl's simulations were completed.

"We roughed out a battle plan, sir, but Daryl is still running the sim. There's been no time to refine it."

"How long?" Brackett looked at Simon; it was the first time he had acknowledged his presence.

"Six minutes, thirty four seconds," Simon reported.

"Good. Then while we wait..." Brackett lifted his briefcase onto the table, "I have new orders for all of you."

Jim looked at the briefcase and knew what was coming. He had thought Brackett would wait for their mission to be completed, but maybe he feared Jim would find some way to slip off the hook. No wonder Brackett grabbed the excuse to come here. It would be written orders this time, instead of a politely phrased suggestion that Jim could ignore or evade. Jim had finally run out of time.

He watched Brackett open the briefcase and remove three directive cards. He gave the first to Jim. "I want no discussion from you this time, Major Ellison," he warned. "Just acknowledge the order."

Jim took the card without a word. He touched a control to limit the display to himself and slid the card into a slot. Immediately, the orders were displayed. It contained no surprise. He was directed to report to Arlington in two weeks for "evaluation".

He looked up at the Colonel, switching off the display. "You're breaking up the quad?"

"Temporarily," Brackett lied smoothly. "Agent Connor will take over as senior active and there are several unassigned actives who can complete the quad while you are at Arlington."

Connor blinked at the words and struggled to keep all expression off her face.

If Brackett was promoting Connor, there was nothing temporary about the change. A quad didn't run with two senior actives so even if Jim were allowed to return to quad duty, the four of them could not serve together again. But Jim didn't point out the lie. It wouldn't achieve anything.

"Orders received and understood, sir," Jim said formally. "Please excuse me for a moment." He rose from the table without waiting to be dismissed and walked away.

Jim could not go far. He thought about leaving the apartment but he entered the kitchen instead and busied himself making a fresh pot of coffee. He didn't want coffee; it was just an excuse to be in there. Two weeks wasn't long enough for Jim to prepare. The assessors at Arlington would identify him as a sentinel. Colonel Brackett would have his proof, and Jim would be forced to go along with Brackett's plans for a UMIAC sentinel programme. That didn't sound too bad on the surface, but Jim knew what Brackett would do with such a programme: black ops and wet work. It wasn't the person Jim wanted to become.

For a moment, Jim considered the alternative – he could resign – but only for a moment. That wasn't an option he could take unless it was forced on him.

He heard Simon and the Colonel talking – talking about him – and he cursed his too-keen hearing. Simon was seeking clarification of the orders, carefully probing the Colonel's intentions. Brackett's explanation was so smooth, so plausible, his assurances that the change need only be temporary so heartfelt...the lying snake. If Simon was suspicious, his voice did not reveal it.

But it was Connor who came to find him. She poured herself a coffee and silently offered Jim the pot. He refused with a gesture.

"He says it's only temporary," she said tentatively as she replaced the pot on its hotplate.

"You want my job that badly, Connor?" Jim asked bitterly.

She looked hurt. "You are the one who recommended me for promotion, Jim. I came to thank you, not to rub your nose in it."

That made him look at her. "You're right. I'm sorry. You deserve the promotion, Megan. You've earned it. Congratulations." His voice conveyed less sincerity than he felt.

"Thank you." She leaned back against the kitchen cupboard and sipped her coffee. "Look, I know you don't want to hear this, but maybe..."

"Maybe what?"

Connor took a deep breath and Jim knew he wasn't going to like what she had to say.

"Jim, we both know you're struggling. Your PTSD is getting worse. Your attack the other night... Maybe at Arlington they will help you."

That was the moment when Jim should have come clean. He should have explained to Connor that what she thought was PTSD was a sentinel ability he couldn't control. He could have told her that Brackett's "evaluation" was intended to expose him as a sentinel. He could have told her why Brackett wanted a sentinel. Connor would understand why Jim wanted no part of it.

If it had been Simon with him in the kitchen, Simon offering sympathy and kind words about his apparent PTSD, Jim might have told him everything. But not Connor. Not in that moment.

What he said was, "Damn it, Connor, I have help. I just needed time." He laid the card with his orders on the kitchen worktop. "I took this mission in Cascade because I knew I could find someone here to help me. And I did. But two weeks isn't long enough."

Comprehension dawned in her eyes. "Sandburg?"

"That's right."

She frowned. "But he's a surgeon, not a shrink."

"Yeah. That should tell you something." It was the strongest hint he dared to give her with Brackett so close. Jim stood, leaving the directive where it was. "Let's get back. Daryl's sim should be done and we've got a lot of work to do."

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"The governor is ready for you now."

Jim stood at the words and smoothed out the lines of his green service uniform. The fabric felt stiff and itchy against his skin. He wasn't used to wearing it; UMIAC agents wore plain clothes on duty, since the whole point was to be covert. Formal occasions called for dress uniform; the more regular service uniform was rarely used.

Beside him, Colonel Brackett also stood. Jim would have preferred to go into this meeting alone. He understood just how much he was asking of the governor and the Ellison name would help if he was the one asking. Now the request would be coming from the Colonel instead and Colonel Brackett did not know Cascade.

Brackett would bulldoze where Jim would have persuaded. If he pissed off the governor and she refused them her mandate for military action, they would have to go into this fight with minimal force. No backup. No assistance from other agencies, which meant they would have to delay action until UMIAC troops could be brought in. With Colonel Brackett devising their strategy it might be possible: already he had refined the plan the quad devised earlier to one with a far better chance of success. But a minimal force incursion against the Wolfpack was too risky for Jim's taste. He didn't like to go into battle until he knew the odds were on his side.

Yet the Colonel's intent for this meeting was to present their battle plan as if they already had the governor's seal on it. Master strategist he may be, but Brackett didn't understand the buttons he would be pushing and Jim had no time to explain. Not that he'd be heard if he tried. Brackett was a stubborn son of a bitch.

It took a few minutes for everyone to assemble. Jim was glad to see his father present. For all their differences, he believed William would support him in this and he would need that support for the most crucial part of his battle plan. He met his father's eyes across the table, but said nothing.

Once everyone was seated at the conference table, the governor suggested they all introduce themselves. She began, characteristically, with herself though surely no one in the room could fail to know who she was. Sun Lo had been elected state governor four years before. Beside her was Louis Durie, her chief of staff. Also at the table was Mal Casado, the mayor of Sky City and Cascade, Hollie Wayland the Chief of Cascade Police, Captain Peter Stachowski, commander of the Tacoma naval base, William Ellison, Agent Rene Adams of the Sky City FBI field office, Captain Austin Warn of the state police, and lastly Jim – Major James Ellison of UMIAC and Colonel Lee Brackett of the same agency. Jim introduced himself last to underline that he was there as a UMIAC agent and not as a representative of Ellison Industries. Finally, he added that Major Banks and Agent Connor were joining the meeting by link, and that Doctor Sandburg, a civilian who had been assisting the quad's investigation, was standing by to participate if he was needed. He looked to Governor Lo, expecting her to move the meeting onward.

Before Lo could take control of the meeting again, Brackett jumped in. "I have to inform you all that this briefing is classified. The reason will become obvious as we proceed. For some weeks now UMIAC has had a quad in Cascade, investigating the smuggling of bio-weapons components into the city. We are now prepared to move against the gang responsible."

Jim fought to keep his expression neutral, but wasn't sure he succeeded. Dismissing the Wolfpack as "a gang" would win the Colonel no friends here. Jim bit his tongue, awaiting his turn to speak.

"We are here," the Colonel went on, "to discuss a co-ordinated strike to neutralise a major threat to national security and the cities of Cascade and Sky City. Major Ellison."

Jim saw Governor Lo draw a breath to interrupt. He met her eyes across the table, silently begging her to be patient. They knew each other, though not well; he hoped she would trust him. She gave him a subtle nod. Relieved, Jim stood and turned on the display screens in front of every seat.

"With your permission, Colonel, I want to begin by filling in the history. Not everyone at this table will be familiar with it." He meant Brackett, specifically, though Captain Stachowski and Agent Adams were also not locals.

Brackett nodded curtly and Jim began the presentation he had prepared.

The year of the Red Night Riot, the undercity was a powder keg. The world economy was tanking and the local economy was reliant on the import/export trade, so suffered under the world's economic strife. Illegal drugs and mods were rife on the streets. Violence was commonplace. No day passed without at least one murder, yet poverty drove more and more young people into the street gangs. Local police were overwhelmed and underfunded.

The construction of Sky City Fifteen was almost complete and the huge city hovering over the poverty-stricken city was a constant thorn in the flesh of the poor. It was in that year the city was first called Cascade, as the anti-gravity engines began to generate the never-ending precipitation that was the hallmark of the Sky Cities.

Anything could have lit the spark which started the riot, but what did it was the manslaughter trial of a young police officer who hit a teenage boy with his patrol car. The truth of the incident would never be known. Maybe the cop was a racist pig who gunned straight for a kid who was guilty only of "walking while black". Maybe he had indeed lost control of the car and never saw the boy until he felt the thud of his body against the fender. Maybe the truth lay somewhere between the two. What was certain was a jury of his peers believed the young officer's story and acquitted him with a unanimous not guilty verdict. Within seconds of the verdict being read out, word had reached the streets. Cascade exploded.

Street gangs – in those days there were forty or more of them – marched on wealthy targets in or near their own territories. Bank offices were ripped apart. City Hall was burned. Civilians who could not claim gang colours were slaughtered, but so were those wearing the wrong colours in the wrong place. Police did their best, but they were outnumbered and, in some districts, outgunned.

The Wolfpack was one of the largest gangs and by reputation, at least, the most vicious. The Wolves gathered around the stadium which, that day, was hosting a major baseball game. The stadium, though, was a fortress when closed up and security forces on hand for the big game successfully kept the Wolves out of the stadium. Repelled, they turned their fury on the neighbouring shopping mall. They tore through the mall, slaughtered shoppers, looted stores and occupied the building.

What the popular press termed the Red Night Riot was in reality a pitched battle between Cascade Police and the rival gangs. The fighting lasted for six days. On the seventh, the National Guard arrived and restored order, though violence flared in pockets for weeks afterward.

Jim paused in his presentation, fighting back his memories of the riot. He could see others at the table – his father, of course, Governor Lo and Chief Wayland – doing the same.

He took a deep breath and forced himself to continue. "The cost in lives will never be known, but it certainly exceeded two hundred thousand in that week." Statistics. All those people, all that horror and grief and lost love, reduced to a number. Jim hated himself a little for doing it. "The cost in property damage was calculated at one hundred and sixty billion. That's a conservative estimate because doesn't include things like lost business or days of work lost through injuries and because people couldn't travel during the fighting. But the true cost of Red Night is more than that. Business and property could have been rebuilt but most of the damage was never repaired because when Sky City Fifteen went online those who could afford it moved there. The undercity, Cascade, was effectively abandoned to the gangs. Those of us who were in the city that week are still paying for it in the psychological scars every one of us still carries. It can't be explained fully. Only experienced."

With those words, Jim drew a line between himself and the Colonel. He was making it clear to everyone else that he understood what was at stake. He was one of them: a native of Cascade, a Red Night survivor. He saw appreciation in Governor Lo's dark eyes. He met his father's gaze and received his silent approval, too. William, of course, knew how much Jim had left out.

To underline it, Jim added, "I was in Cascade on Red Night. I wasn't safe behind walls. I was out there and could have died. So understand, please, that I know exactly what we are asking for. I would not propose military action in Cascade unless the alternative was unthinkable. And it is."

Jim switched to his second presentation and hoped Brackett wouldn't interrupt him now that he had the room on his side. He met every pair of eyes around the table. Then he dropped his bomb.

"Four weeks ago I was sent to Cascade to investigate the smuggling of components for biological weapons. We now know that we're dealing with more than just components. Biological weapons have been built in this city and are in the hands of the Wolfpack. We have evidence that they have been stockpiling for at least a year. I believe they are planning for another war. One that, this time, they intend to win."

"If you move against them," Governor Lo said, "what guarantee can you give that they won't unleash those weapons?"

"No guarantees," Brackett growled.

Jim could have strangled him. "Daryl, display tactical map," he instructed. He looked to the Police Chief as the wireframe map appeared on the display. "This is what our AI mapped out as Wolfpack territory. It's mostly undercity street level and below and confined to sectors 300 to 350. The bad news is those sectors are packed with civilians and we don't have any way to evacuate without sacrificing the element of surprise. The good news is it's a natural corral. If we strike fast and set up a strong perimeter we can keep any fighting confined to this area. They won't get a chance to launch a biological attack."

"Major Ellison," Chief Wayland interrupted, "the population of those fifty sectors is nearly a quarter of a million. You cannot trap that many innocent civilians in a battle zone."

Jim was prepared for the objection. "Innocent is a relative term. A lot of those civilians are Wolfpack."

"Not all of them."

"That's why we're all here, sir. To figure out a way to do this with minimal casualties." Jim looked around the table again. "Let me be brutally honest here. The priority of UMIAC is to neutralise the threat of biological weapons by any means necessary. Cascade is my city too, and the last thing I want is another Red Night. A quarter million potential casualties could be our best case scenario."

"That's unacceptable," Lo snapped.

"That's war," Brackett retorted.

Jim interrupted, to salvage it. "I have several scenarios run through our simulator. Maybe there's a better strategy I haven't thought of yet. May I begin?"

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Blair was excited. He was inspired.

He had discovered a design programme in Jim's matrix. It was frustratingly basic, nothing like Blair's own software, but it was good enough to let him work. Daryl's design was flawed, but oh so brilliant in concept. Its most serious flaw was easily rectified on the drawing board and as for the rest, Blair could take the ideas behind it and use them to design something new.

He did not design mods for the Wolfpack. The kind of mods the Wolves liked were crude physical enhancements, weapons and gaudy costume-steel. Blair preferred more subtle work. His graduate project was a sight mod which projected an image into the corner of the user's vision. On its own it was merely a novelty, but if you hooked it into another mod it could act as a readout or control. He managed to make it small enough that it didn't need an independent power cell if installed alongside an existing mod. He thought of that as he worked and integrated some of those old ideas into his new creation.

"Ellison calling," Daryl interrupted.

Blair saved his work. "I'm here, Jim."

Jim's voice came through clearly, as if he was standing right there. "Sandburg, do you know the number of members in the Wolfpack?"

"No," Blair answered at once. "Alex's pack is about three hundred. It's one of the smallest but I don't know exact numbers for any of the others."

"How about a guess?" Jim pressed. "Three thousand? Ten thousand?"

"More than that. This is just a guess but I'd say ten thousand is the minimum. It could be as high as twenty, but that's just people who are actual members. If you include people like me, connected to the pack but not fully members, it could be a lot more. A lot more." It would have helped him give more useful answers if Jim explained why he needed to know. But Blair knew Jim was calling from his meeting. He couldn't ask questions.

"How many of the Wolfpack have cybernetic mods?" Jim asked.

Blair blinked in surprise. "All of them," he said. "That's kinda what the Wolfpack is all about." Jim knew that.

"And how many of them have too many mods?" Jim asked.

"Define 'too many'."

"At or over the safe limit."

Blair thought about it. "About thirty per cent, based on the ones who come to me for help. Maybe more."

"Thank you. That's all I need for now."

"No problem." Blair was left wondering what that had been about. Jim surely knew the answer to almost every question he had asked.

Blair looked at his design work again. He had finished a preliminary design; now it needed refining, but the interruption had broken the flow of his thought. It would be better to walk away from it for a while and begin again with fresh eyes.

"I'm going to make coffee," he told Woo. "Would you like some?"

"Sure. Thanks." Woo set his handheld down and wandered over to the kitchen while Blair studied Jim's coffee machine. It had been a while since Blair made real coffee and he wasn't at all familiar with this machine. What was wrong with a simple filter?

"Want me to make it?" Woo offered after watching Blair struggle for a few minutes.

Blair chuckled. "I can rebuild a man's heart, but I can't figure out how to make coffee. Some genius I am." He moved back to give Woo access to the machine.

Woo pushed a button and a little drawer popped out of the machine. "Coffee grinder," he said. "An Ellison wouldn't settle for less than freshly ground beans." He poured coffee beans from a jar into the little drawer. "Regular or espresso?" he asked.

"Regular. Thanks."

Woo deftly programmed the machine and set out two mugs.

"You don't like the Ellisons much, huh?" Blair said casually. The hum of the coffee grinder seemed very loud.

"They don't pay me to like them." Woo turned to face Blair. "It's okay, really. I'm just jealous, I guess. I grew up in the slums."

"I was born there, too, man. I know how you feel."

"Maybe you do, but – " He broke off. "Someone's coming."

"How do you know?" Blair asked, unworried.

"I'm linked to the building's security matrix." Woo unholstered his gun. "Stay back."

The coffee machine steamed and bubbled. Blair's stomach tightened. Woo's reaction worried him. He knew Alex would make her move today, but he was sure she would go after Jim. Jim was a sentinel: that on its own would provoke a response from her. Jim had delivered a very public challenge to her. Alex could not let that go. Woo was just being cautious. That was his job.



Trying to relax, he looked for the refrigerator to get milk or cream for the coffee. A police siren wailed from some distance below and Blair felt an instinctive chill. Sky City Police were not friends to the Wolfpack. He found the milk and lifted it out of the refrigerator.

Woo strode to the door. The e-mirror rippled at his command and its view changed to show what was outside the apartment. Blair caught a glimpse of a tall figure approaching. It was no more than a glimpse; he had no time to recognise her before there was a deafening report and the e-mirror went blank. A spiderweb of cracks appeared across it. Woo was gone. An instant later, so was the door.

Alex came through the smoke, flanked by four others. She held a rebreather in her mouth and a huge gun on a strap across her body. Her eyes fixed on Blair like twin lasers.

Blair's mouth went dry. He darted toward the stairs – his only possible escape. He never made it.

Alex grabbed his arm as he fled, her grip bruising. She spun him around and slammed him into the table. Pain exploded in his hip.

"Alex, please!" Blair gasped.

She brought her knee up to his groin. Agony exploded and Blair screamed. His vision blurred and he fought for breath. He could feel Alex's hands on his body, as if she were searching him, but the pain overwhelmed his ability to think.

Alex yanked him up from the table. Blair got upright but his legs buckled under him, the pain in his groin still too much for him to walk or even move. She dragged him for several steps then reached down and grasped him by his upper arm and forced him upright once more. She handled his body as if he weighed nothing.

"Stand!" she ordered.

She swung the gun upward. Machine gun fire roared, deafening Blair. The window disappeared in a shower of shattering glass. Blair's eyes stung and he choked on the propellant. Alex thrust him forward.

He saw the window approaching through streaming eyes. "No!" Blair yelled. She couldn't mean to –

Alex shoved him across the broken glass onto the balcony. He scrambled desperately for a hand hold but Alex was at his back, her weight and momentum forcing him forward. They went over together and fell, plunging toward the street so very far below.

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Daryl, monitoring the security system at Jim Ellison's Prospect apartment, was aware of the disturbance the instant it began. Had Jim not been in his meeting with the civil and military leaders of Cascade, Daryl would have alerted him directly. As Jim was occupied, he alerted Simon at Base instead. Simon instructed Daryl to alert Cascade Police but not to pass the information on to Ellison. That meeting could not be interrupted but there was another reason to hold back: Colonel Brackett and Ellison did not get along well. Brackett didn't need to know that Sandburg was in Ellison's home.

"One of us should go," Megan said.

"Whatever's happening will be over by the time we can get to Prospect," Simon said practically. "Daryl's monitoring. The important thing now is to get to Ellison." He headed for the weapons locker and armed himself. He didn't expect to need it, but he wanted to be prepared.

Moments later he was in Ellison's aircar, speeding toward the governor's mansion. He took Ellison's Hercules simply because it was fastest but it had another advantage: Jim could not fail to notice his own car waiting for him. Daryl fed the audio of the meeting through to the car as Simon drove so he could follow what was happening. They were down to the last details of the strategy now; the meeting would be over soon.

He showed his UMIAC Ident® to the security guard at the mansion. "Major Ellison is in the big meeting. I need to see him the instant they're done. It's urgent."

"Yes, sir. You can park there." The guard indicated a nearby spot and Simon moved the car. He heard the meeting begin to break up, each participant confirming their part in the action they had agreed. He left the car and ran up the steps.

As they emerged from the conference room, Ellison was speaking with a man Simon didn't recognise. "Ellison!" Simon called.

Several faces turned to him. Jim looked surprised, then a little annoyed.

"Ellison, there's trouble at Prospect. You're needed."

Jim paled a little. "Blair?"

Simon glanced toward Colonel Brackett. "I'll tell you on the way. Hurry!" He threw the car key to Ellison, who caught it at a run.

In the car, Simon buckled in quickly. "Daryl, play your recording from Ellison's apartment."

Ellison was already taking the car up. He didn't react when he heard the explosion, nor at Blair's first panicked words: Alex, please. Ellison flinched when Sandburg's scream of pain followed. The scream was echoed by a series of gasping moans, a burst of machine gun fire and shattering glass. Then Sandburg's voice again, terrified: No! Then nothing.

"End of recording," Daryl reported calmly.

"Barnes," Jim said grimly, accelerating much faster than was legal. "And that gun was a Viper-72."

"How can you tell?" Simon asked incredulously.

"It's a very distinctive report. Military hardware, Simon."

Military hardware...when they were about to go into battle. Simon swore.

Prospect Tower was up ahead. Ellison headed for the roof landing platform. "Report, Daryl," he snapped.

"Sky City Police have reached the apartment," Daryl reported. "The detective doesn't want to enter without your authorisation."

Simon didn't understand that until he saw Ellison's grim smile. Right. The Ellison name intimidated everyone in Sky City.

Jim landed hard and was out of the car in an instant, heading for the elevator. Simon scrambled to catch up. He made it to the elevator just as the doors were sliding closed.

"Ellison!" He jammed his hand between the doors and walked in as they reopened for him. "You can't help him like this," Simon said firmly.

"If Blair is hurt, it's my fault," Ellison said.

"Major Ellison!" Simon barked.

The words had the desired effect. Jim straightened and came to attention at once. His breath steadied. His face assumed its studied, neutral expression.

The elevator doors opened and Ellison stepped out. A burly man in a police uniform attempted to block his way.

Ellison flashed his Ident®, though the uniform he still wore should have been enough for most cops. "Major Ellison, UMIAC. That's my apartment." He moved past the officer, not pushing his way in so much as assuming the officer would give way. He raised his voice. "Who is in charge here?"

Another officer was kneeling just outside what was left of Ellison's door, examining the debris. He rose at Jim's words. "I am. Detective Miles. You're James Ellison?"

"Major Ellison," Jim corrected. "I want to check the scene before you go in, Detective."

The detective's eyes narrowed. "You realise you could contaminate the evidence?"

"I won't disturb much and my DNA is all over my apartment anyway. Me going in now can't affect the forensics. My AI has a recording of what happened. We know who did this."

"Handy. Very well, Major." Detective Miles stood aside.

Ellison walked up to the door, but did not enter. He raised his hand and reached toward the frame. He didn't quite touch, but his fingers hovered just above the surface. "Daryl, record," he ordered. "The door frame is still warm and the jagged edges indicate a gel explosive. It smells like D90, but the residual heat suggests something else in the mix."

Simon followed Ellison into the apartment but hung back, simply observing Ellison as he worked. It was Simon, not Jim, who had the police background but Ellison was so good at this he must have some forensics training.

Ellison stepped over the threshold, scanning the room with his eyes. He froze for a moment and Simon, following his gaze, saw the body a moment before Ellison spoke, confirming it.

"Woo is dead. He's the bodyguard I left with Blair." He stepped over the wreckage of the door and crouched beside the body. He didn't touch anything but studied the body for a moment, then looked toward the hole where the door used to be, then to the remains of the door itself.

"They shot Woo through the door before they blew it open. My door was armoured; there can't be many things that could get through in a single shot. It confirms the V-72 I heard in the recording." He straightened and signalled Simon to enter. He moved away from Woo's body.

Simon's eyes followed the blood spatter pattern over the floor and kitchen cabinets. He agreed with Jim: one shot, and the man died instantly. How could anyone target so precisely through an armoured door?

There were two mugs set out beside the coffee percolator.

Jim picked one of them up. "Blair loves coffee," he said softly.

Simon looked at him sharply.

"Blair was in the kitchen. He tried to run." Jim walked to the broken window. Wind caught at his uniform as he stepped over the shattered glass. "I see no rope. No marks from a grapple." His voice was no longer calm. "Did she throw him over? Simon, did she kill him?"

Ellison leaned over the rail as if he could see down to the street.

Simon moved quickly to his side. "I don't think he's dead, Ellison. If she wanted him dead, there would be no reason to take him elsewhere. His body would be here." He could only hope it was true.

Ellison winced and raised a hand to his head. "I keep hearing him scream, Simon..." He frowned and pinched the bridge of his nose. "Not now, damn it!"

Simon laid a hand on his friend's arm, recognising the signs. Sandburg was more to Ellison than a mere informant. "Jim, hold it together," he said quietly. He drew Ellison back from the balcony edge.

Ellison looked at him, his eyes frantic. "She was supposed to come after me! He was so sure."

"This is your place, Jim. Maybe she expected to find you here."

Ellison didn't seem to hear. "I never should have left him."

Oh. Oh, shit. "Ellison," Simon said quietly, "better tell me the truth now." He had never seen Ellison like this.

Jim met Simon's eyes. "We slept together. Want to make something of it?" He picked up a shirt that had been tossed over the back of the couch. He raised the fabric to his face, breathing deeply.

Simon didn't need to ask if it was Sandburg's shirt. They slept together? No, that wasn't it. Ellison had sex partners. Casual sex was easy to come by in the military. This was more.

"You're falling for him, Jim," Simon pointed out.

"What difference does it make now?" Ellison demanded.

"You need to set that aside and look at this dispassionately. Jim, you cannot let Brackett suspect Sandburg means anything to you."

Ellison reacted to Brackett's name as if Simon had tossed freezing water into his face. He straightened and the fear left his eyes. He hooked his link over his ear. "Taggart." After a pause, he reported in a few short sentences what had happened in his apartment. "Can you get someone here to secure the apartment? I've got a busy day ahead." The last was said with some irony, and whatever Taggart said in reply caused Ellison to crack a smile. "You too, Joel. Thanks." He slipped the link into his pocket and turned to Simon. "I'm going after him." He said it like he expected an argument.

Simon wasn't going to argue. "I know," he said simply.

"Let's go." Ellison marched to the door and spoke to Detective Miles. "It's all yours, Detective. The dead man is Woo: he's a bodyguard in the employ of Ellison Industries. Our head of security, Joel Taggart, will be in touch with you about his next of kin. Woo was here to guard Doctor Blair Sandburg, who is missing. He was a witness assisting me with an investigation and he was abducted by Alexa Barnes of the Wolfpack. I'll have my AI send you the evidence. I know you'll have more questions and I'm happy to cooperate with your investigation but I'm in the middle of something that can't wait. Here..." he offered a contact card to the detective, "call me tomorrow if you need me."

Detective Miles took the card with a frown. "Major, a man is dead. Our investigation won't wait for your timetable."

"Please check with Chief Wayland. I just came from a meeting with her and I think she'll confirm my work takes priority today."

Miles looked taken aback. "We'll do that." He nodded to his partner, who touched his link, evidently making the call.

Ellison went on, "Someone from Ellison Industries security will be here to secure my property but they'll wait for you to be finished. If you need to hold the apartment past tonight, call and let me know."

"Yes, sir." There was respect in Miles' tone now. Ellison always managed to do that: he had the same natural charisma that made his brother such a successful politician.

"We need to go, Major," Simon said, more for the cops' benefit than for Ellison's.

Ellison nodded crisply, playing along. "Yes, we do. Carry on, Detective."

In moments, they were back on the roof. The aircar's engine wasn't even cool. Simon had known they must visit the apartment – Ellison would have insisted – but they had achieved nothing by going there.

Jim opened the car door and looked at Simon across its roof. "Can I count on you, Simon?"

Simon anticipated the question and had his answer ready. "As long as you don't screw up the mission priorities, yes. We're with you."

Jim climbed into the car. "Daryl."

"Here, Jim."

"Forward everything you recorded in my apartment today to Detective Miles at Cascade Police."

"Confirmed."

"Is Alexa Barnes back at the Wolfpack?"

Simon detected an uncharacteristic hesitation from Daryl. "Unclear. She left with four others in a Ford Jupiter airvan ninety three minutes ago. That vehicle entered a Wolfpack-owned building in Sector 319 two minutes ago. I cannot tell who was inside it."

"I thought you had eyes throughout their buildings?" Jim said sharply.

"I have full access to all the Wolfpack security feeds. The Pack run by Alexa Barnes has all areas monitored. The building the Jupiter entered is owned by a different Pack. There are no cameras or audio monitors in the place where the van stopped but I estimate from the load weight that it carried two adults on its return."

Meaning that Alex might not be one of them, Jim translated. "Alright. Prepare a schematic and compare it to the hot zones. I'll need it the instant we're back at Base."

"Confirmed."

Simon spoke up as soon as Ellison was done giving orders. "What are you thinking, Jim?"

"She hurt Blair to disable him and then either threw him off my balcony or carried him over. There was no sign of a grapple and no sign of bodies in the street. So she had something waiting to catch him. If it was me, I'd use a skybike and a net, maybe three storeys down." He steered the aircar downward. "Let's take a look."

Ellison swerved around and down, close to the building and in flagrant violation of traffic regs. He hovered just outside his own apartment then slowly let the aircar sink lower. "About here, I think," he said, putting her back into hover mode. "Much lower and you'd hit too hard, even with a net."

Simon leaned forward and gazed up at the broken window. "That's a hell of a risk to take."

"If I had you or Megan flying the net, I'd risk it," Jim answered. "It's less dangerous than it seems and it's the fastest getaway possible. You just have to really trust the person doing the catching." He glanced at Simon, a small smile quirking his lips.

Simon appreciated the expression of trust. He nodded back.

"Daryl."

"Yes, Jim?"

"Is there any security monitoring that can pick us up in this location?"

"Affirmative. Police tracking. You are not in a legal traffic lane. Also building security from Prospect apartment eight-three-two."

"Get both for me. Send copies to Detective Miles then combine all the information you have and reconstruct what happened here. Inform Base we're heading back now."

\*

"Jim," Simon said, and Jim looked up from the workstation where he was in conversation with Chief of Police Wayland over a video link.

"Looks like you were right," Simon said quietly.

Jim turned back to the vidscreen. "I'm being called away, Chief Wayland. If I adjust the timetable as you suggest, can you mobilise in time?"

"Truthfully, Major, I don't know. There's no time to call in reserves or cancel leave."

"I understand that. Call me back as soon as you know how many officers you can deploy. We'll adapt the plan to suit your numbers, and reinforce with the marines if you need them." Jim hoped they wouldn't. Mixing marines with the cops was a good idea by the numbers but it would screw with the chain of command and that could be a fatal weakness. Jim was uncomfortable enough with this plan. Deploying military troops against a civilian population on US soil would have been impossible before UMIAC came into existence, and was rare enough even now.

Wayland nodded. "I can't ask for more. You'll hear from me within the hour, Major Ellison. Wayland out."

Jim blanked his screen and turned to Simon. "What have you got?"

"Daryl's reconstructed a vid of what happened to Sandburg."

"Show me!"

Simon sent the vid to Jim's screen. They were all busy working out the details for their action against the Wolfpack. Brackett was at the naval base, negotiating for the military resources they would need for their action. Brackett's absence freed the quad to search for Blair, but there was very little time. They were all busy with preparations for the coming action.

The vid was poor quality and silent, patched together from several sources, but Jim saw what he needed to know. The window exploded outward under Barnes' hail of bullets. Barnes appeared on the balcony, pulling Blair with her. Without hesitation, she leapt over the rail, carrying Blair. She was incredibly strong.

The two of them fell three storeys then slammed into the roof of a grav-van. There was no net, only the roof of the van to catch them. The force of the impact made the van rock and it lost altitude quickly. Jim saw Blair's body roll as the van tilted and he slid toward the edge. Blair seemed to make no effort to save himself.

Barnes caught his clothing with one hand just as Blair slipped over the edge of the van. A door in the side of the van slid open and someone pulled him inside. Barnes remained on the roof as the van sped away.

The vid ended, the data lost once the van entered traffic.

He was alive. Blair was hurt, but he was alive.

"How accurate is this?" Jim asked, aware that the vid was essentially a simulation.

Daryl answered, "Up to the point where the grav-van lost altitude, I had security vid from the apartment opposite. After that point, much of the action is unclear. Fifty per cent accuracy at best."

"But before that, it's right?" Jim pressed.

"What's wrong, Jim?" Simon asked.

"It looks as if Blair didn't try to save himself after the van wobbled. Was he hurt? Unconscious maybe?"

"It is certain he was damaged," Daryl answered with his usual lack of tact. "At that descent velocity and given the density of the surface –"

"Bottom line, Daryl!" Jim snapped.

"It is certain Doctor Sandburg was badly bruised. If he struck the van as in my reconstruction, it is highly probable he sustained broken ribs. Internal injuries are likely. In this point of the simulation I could not tell if Doctor Sandburg struggled. My sole source of data there is police tracking and that monitors the vehicle, not the people."

"Can you track the van back to the Wolfpack?"

"Confirmed."

"So we know he's there," Megan said as she entered the room.

Jim nodded. "Daryl, locate Blair Sandburg."

There was a hesitation. Then the holo-display came on and showed them the tactical map of the Wolfpack territory. An area of the wireframe was lighted in red, but it was a large area: hardly a specific location.

"Both the grav-van and the Jupiter airvan entered this area. Neither Doctor Sandburg nor Alexa Barnes have left the zone. They are most likely within it."

"But you can't be sure?"

"Confirmed. This zone had security monitoring on the Wolfpack matrix but it has been disabled. I cannot see into the area."

Simon said, "Makes it a good bet. They could have disabled the cameras because they suspect we hacked their matrix."

Jim nodded. "I agree." Now all he had to do was figure out how to get to Blair and out again...in the middle of what might turn out to be a full scale battle.

## CHAPTER EIGHT: "TIME SENSE IS THE FIRST THING YOU LOSE"

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...reliance on the so-called sentinels seems ridiculous when cybernetic modifications can produce heightened senses in a far more reliable fashion. The sentinel programme is now thirty years old and it is evident that sentinels are unreliable at best, unsuited to combat and potentially emotionally unstable.

The Sentinel Programme, third evaluation ©2160 Federal Government of the United States of America

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Jim sat patiently while Connor poked and prodded at his face. The glue stung his skin and the scent of the metal made his skin crawl.

"Keep still," she ordered for the third time. "I'm almost done." She smeared dirty oil onto her fingers and then onto Jim's face. Its scent blended with the others unpleasantly. Finally, she stood back and studied him critically. "It'll do," she decided. "But Jim, this won't fool a scan for a second."

The Wolfpack did not use the scanners to detect mods for legal checks. For them, there would be very little point. But they did use cybernetics detectors. The Wolves liked to know what each person was carrying into their territory.

"I know. I can avoid the scanners with Daryl's help. I just need to blend in once I'm inside." Jim reached up to touch the eyepiece. It covered one of his eyes with a polarised screen that was linked to Daryl so he could receive data like the helmet visor but it did not impair his vision. It was attached to a bar of metal that curled around his ear, providing him with an audio link. To a casual glance, it should look like it was embedded in his skin: a mod.

Jim rose from his chair and picked up his leather coat. He had spent some time roughening up the leather so it looked old and poor quality. He felt the weight of his weapons as he stood. Beneath his jeans and shirt, he wore light body armour. It was sturdy enough to absorb even high calibre standard ammo, but was barely visible. Some protection was sacrificed for freedom of movement: the thigh, neck and head were the weak spots as well as the shoulder joint that Alex had found with her bullet in their first confrontation.

Over the shirt Jim wore a shoulder harness that held a HK Riot series automatic – it fired .60 calibre armour-piercing rounds, cycling fifteen rounds per second with three hundred in the magazine. The gun was heavy and kicked like a bucking bronco, but it would put down a room full of Wolves on a single clip, and Jim carried five spares on his harness. He wore thigh holsters on each leg with two handguns in plain view. He also carried a pouch of tools for breaking and entering, plus a remote link for Daryl in case he was lucky enough to get an encrypted lock.

He pulled the coat on and looked at himself in the mirror. He did not like the look of himself with mecha on his face. He did not like that one bit. But it did the trick. The polarised eyepiece drew attention and it took a conscious effort to see the face beneath it. Connor had smeared oil around the false mecha and under his eyes, creating bruise-like shadows that gave him a menacing look. The worn leather coat covered the HK Riot while leaving the thigh holsters visible, but the Riot and its ammo bulged under the leather, giving the impression he had further mecha on his back. There was a bulge built into his glove, too. He could not pass a scan, as Connor warned, but it would pass a casual inspection and that was all he should need. He looked like a Wolf.

"I'm ready," he announced. "Connor?"

She stood, and lifted a round device from the table. "Give me a hand with this?" she asked.

"Sure." Jim clipped it onto her belt at the back. "That's pretty heavy. Can you still move?"

"I'm good. Maybe you should drop a clip or two if you're worried about the weight."

"If I need to drop the weight, I'll empty the clip," Jim scowled.

Colonel Brackett appeared in the doorway. "If you two are finished grandstanding," he said. "We're on a schedule."



Jim stiffened. "Daryl, synchronise countdown on my link."

"Confirmed," Daryl responded, and Jim felt the faint tingle as his link reacted.

"We move at 0400," Brackett said. "No later. You paint the targets whether you're setting the charges or not."

Connor replied with a crisp, "Yes, sir."

"Understood, sir," Jim replied. He didn't need the reminder. He knew the plan. It was his plan, damn it.

"Radio silence from the drop. Break it only when you're at the rendezvous point. If you screw up and need an extraction, you're on your own until you're out of the designated combat zone."

"Yes, sir." Jim looked at Simon. "Is Daryl ready?"

"He's ready," Simon confirmed. "But he won't pull out until I get signals from both of you." This was the most risky part of the plan. Daryl had full access to the Wolfpack matrices and as far as the quad could tell, the Wolves had no idea he was there. That had been useful, but now there was a greater priority. When Jim and Connor were safely inside Wolfpack territory, Daryl would back out of the matrices, leaving traces like a regular AI. The Wolves would be alerted to the hack. Daryl was confident he could re-enter the system when he needed to.

"Then good hunting," Brackett said.

Jim nodded. "See you on the other side."

\*

"You're going after Sandburg, aren't you?" Connor asked as the car ascended.

Jim looked at her. "Not at the expense of the mission, but yes, I am. Given the objective, it would help to have a doctor with me."

"Only if he won't hold you back," Connor said harshly.

The truth of that stabbed him in the gut. Jim remembered that terrible scream. If Blair was injured, unable to run, his rescue mission could get them both killed. If Blair wasn't dead already.

"Connor," he said stiffly, "just fucking drive." He touched his link, switching it to combat frequency. "Poacher to Mercury." You never used any names except callsigns on the combat frequency, not even if your trans was encrypted.

"Mercury," Daryl responded.

"Any report on target?"

"Negative report, Poacher, but I can give you the unknown zone."

"Send it through."

"Confirmed, uploading to your eye link."

"Receiving. We are approaching drop zone. Poacher to Gladiator."

"Gladiator," Simon answered at once.

"Two minutes to midnight," Jim said: the code they had agreed beforehand, confirming his plan.

"Acknowledged. You are clear for drop, Poacher."

"Roger and out." Jim deactivated his link.

Megan brought the car down outside the Docklands monorail station. "Good luck, Jim." Unexpectedly, she leaned across and squeezed his hand. "I hope you find him. I really do."

Jim reached for the door. "Connor, if I don't make it to the extraction point in time, don't wait for me. Get out before it hits the fan."

"If we don't both get out, you know Brackett will call it," she warned him.

Jim knew. He had put a doomsday weapon into play and Jim knew when he revealed its existence that Brackett would use it, given any excuse. That was on him.

"I know," he told her. "I'm not leaving without him, Megan, and he could be hurt. If we can't extract we'll find a safe place. Don't wait for me."

Megan looked unhappy. "Alright, Jim," she said, but Jim heard the words she wasn't saying: Don't make me regret this. He was grateful for her concern.

"Be careful out there, Connor. Don't deviate from the plan."

"That's funny, coming from you." Connor wasn't smiling.

Yeah, Jim had played a little fast-and-loose with the regs on this mission. Maybe a lot. "Just the same," he said.

"I'll be careful."

Jim left the car without another word. He walked toward the monorail station but didn't enter it until he felt the push of her car's repulsion at his back. Connor was on her way. He went to the machine and punched for a ticket into the Wolfpack sectors. He paid with a credit chip under the Ellsworth alias.

As he waited on the platform, others watched Jim warily; his disguise fooled them, at least. He doubted it would fool the Wolves for long. The difficulty with a disguise like this was always the little details. Jim could modify his military bearing and wear fake mods, but he would give himself away as an outsider the instant he opened his mouth. He simply didn't speak the language of the Wolfpack.

At this hour the trains were frequent but the monorail was busy. Jim stood in a corner of the carriage, keeping some distance between himself and the other passengers. Travelling this way he would reach Wolfpack territory after Connor was already in place. There was a risk in that, but it was better for him to be the one taking it. If their timetable allowed, he would have delayed longer, hoping Connor would be out before he risked revealing their incursion. If this came down to a fight, it would be ugly and he was better suited to that kind of combat than Connor.

He idly studied the monorail carriage as it rumbled along. The seats were battered and pitted with scorch marks from cigarettes. Litter lined the edges of the carriage and Jim saw a couple of discarded needles under one seat. There were advertisements pasted on the walls: for legal narcotics and alcohol, for a local employment agency guaranteeing minimum wage for experienced dock workers and a poster for an adult club that didn't even attempt to disguise that it was a brothel. That last underlined for Jim how different Sky City and the undercity Cascade could be. Jim wasn't unfamiliar with the concept of paying for sex. Though he never had, it was common for wealthy men and not even illegal if the quid pro quo was couched as a "gift". But the kind of entertainment offered by that advertisement didn't look fun or consensual. He found his eyes drawn back to it again and again, but wasn't sure why.

The monorail looped around the Honeycomb and new passengers crowded into the carriage at each station. The Honeycomb looked like a slum: ancient, rusting shipping containers in a haphazard pile, each container converted into living space by people who could afford nothing better.

As the train became more crowded Jim found it difficult to keep his distance from other people. One woman headed toward the corner where Jim stood, but when she saw him an expression of fear crossed her face. Jim's impulse to reassure her warred with the role he had to play. He turned, feigning indifference, to gaze out of the carriage's rain-streaked window as the train reached Docklands. This was the only part of Cascade not in the shadow of Sky City: here

the rain fell from clouds and not from the city above. Above the shipping containers and crumbling warehouses towered the huge cranes and gantries of the dock.

The train turned sharply and the rail began to descend. Its internal lights flickered on as the shadow of Sky City blocked out the sunlight. In two more stations Jim would be in Wolfpack territory.

\*

Daryl monitored Megan Connor as she flew into Sector 346 and discarded the aircar. Her link was turned off in line with combat protocol, depriving him of the usual constant stream of biometric data. Daryl had no way to assess what she was feeling, but the Wolfpack matrix provided sufficient data for him to track her progress and report it to Base.

In another part of his artificial brain, he was monitoring Ellison, but that was a simple task because the monorail travelled on a predictable vector. Ellison's link remained active and would until he entered the combat zone. He sent no transmissions, but the data stream of his movement and vitals was automatic.

When the monorail train crossed the invisible boundary into the sectors controlled by the Wolfpack, the datastream cut off abruptly. Ellison's link was deactivated. A moment later, the additional link built into his faux-mod also went dark. All of this was expected and Daryl relayed the information to Simon without concern.

"Execute two minutes to midnight," was all Simon said.

"Confirmed," Daryl answered. He began to back out of the Wolfpack matrix.

Daryl could have left the matrix as easily as he entered it, leaving no trace of his passage nor any evidence he was ever there. But that was not Ellison's plan. He wanted them to know they had been hacked. More, he wanted them to trace the hack to the military. He thought that would keep Blair Sandburg alive. Not safe, but alive, because the Wolves had already pinned the original hack on him.

It was not Daryl's place to question Ellison's decisions.

The task was a delicate balancing act. He had to ensure his footprints would be noticed, but it was essential it seem accidental. Daryl had been inside the Wolfpack matrix for long enough to assess the skills of their engineers. They were good. Good enough to be suspicious if the bait he left behind him were too obvious. He also needed to ensure he could get back in if they needed him.

He was out of the main core when he caught a lucky break: one of the Wolfpack techs was jacking in. Daryl reacted as if panicking: he sent a brief flare toward the intruder and fled, closing the last doors behind him too quickly. Then he waited for half a second – an eternity – then pulled out completely, leaving a subtle trail that would lead a tracker to a military satellite. They would not get past the military firewall, but it would be enough to reveal the source of the hack.

But what would the Wolves do to Sandburg when they found out?

\*

Consciousness returned slowly for Blair. His first awareness was of pain, bringing the memory of falling and his body hitting...what? It couldn't have been the street. He would be dead if he'd fallen so far.

Wherever he was, it was quiet and cool, and there wasn't much light. Blair was lying on his back. After a while, he risked opening his eyes. He was in a windowless room, probably underground. The only light came from a single globe light in one corner of the room. The ceiling was grey. The walls that Blair could see were pale and smooth. The air had the familiar scent of his surgery and he was lying on a medical bed, the type with rails at the sides to keep the patient from falling. The medi-bed was reassuring: Blair knew he was hurt and it suggested help was coming. But this was not his surgery.

With that thought, he tried to assess his own injuries. His left shoulder was most painful. He tried to raise his right hand to examine it and found a handcuff around his wrist. Instinctively he tugged hard on the cuff, but it achieved nothing. He was firmly chained to the bed. He tried his other hand and pain shot through him when he tried to move.

The shoulder was dislocated, Blair was almost certain, and his left hand was handcuffed to the bed, the same as the right.

He took an experimental deep breath and felt more pain across his chest. Broken ribs? It seemed likely. He closed his eyes to sharpen his concentration and tried to be aware of more than just the pain. Could he smell blood? Was there anything sticky or damp against his skin? He didn't detect anything like that, but he tasted blood in his mouth, which might have been his fear-fuelled imagination. But if it was real, it meant internal bleeding was a possibility.

What the hell had happened to him?

Blair thought back, replaying the morning from his last clear memories. Breakfast with Jim. Researching Daryl's mod and inspiration to design something new. Then Jim called and...and...

Alex! He remembered Alex. Explosions and gunfire. The agonising pain when she kneed him in the balls. Then falling, the certainty that he was going to die. But he wasn't dead, so what happened?

Alex. Pain. Gunfire and smoke. Shattering glass. Jim's balcony. Falling.

Impact. Pain.

Nothing. There must have been something under the balcony that he hadn't seen. A platform or maybe an aircar. He'd hit it hard enough to dislocate his shoulder and break bones and he must have lost consciousness. Blair had treated victims of crashes and falls many times. When a body suffers an impact at velocity, the internal organs crash into the rib cage. If the impact is sufficient to crack the ribs, sharp edges of broken bone can tear those fragile organs, causing internal bleeding. If a chamber of the heart is torn in this way, the patient can bleed out very quickly. Blair decided he didn't have to worry about that: he would already be dead. But a slow bleed into his lung was a real possibility. Blair heard the whisper of his own breath, loud in the silent room, and it frightened him.

Everything hurt. The handcuffs made it impossible for him to find a position that gave his shoulder any relief. He tugged uselessly at the restraint.

He did not call for help. He was certain of only two things. First, he was a prisoner and second he was not in Alex's territory. His best guess was this was the infirmary of some other pack and if it was, he was really, seriously screwed. He knew how to deal with Alex.

How long had he been here? He seemed to be drifting in and out of consciousness. His brain would go fuzzy then pain or something would wake him again. Not good.

I don't know how long it lasted, Jim had told him. Time sense is the first thing you lose.

Blair shivered.

\*

After an endless time that could have been anything from half an hour to a whole day, someone entered the room where Blair lay chained. The olive-skinned man wore a Wolfpack tattoo on his right cheek. He had several mods: the most garish was a set of wires that ran from the thick dreadlocks of his hair down to his jaw on both sides of his face. Blair couldn't guess what their purpose was, but it appeared to be wired into the brain. His clothing was ripped denim and a shirt stained with oil. It was not appropriate clothing for a medical bay, which Blair assumed this was.

The man said nothing, barely glanced at Blair but raised his hands to turn on the medi-scan. Blair saw metal on both of his hands: chips and servos embedded in the flesh.

Blair heard the medi-scan fire up. He craned his neck to look at the display, but the pain held him back. He just couldn't see. His own medi-scan reported in sound as well as visuals, but this one was silent.

"What..." he croaked. He swallowed and tried again. "What does it say? Are my vitals okay?"

The man made no reply. Blair saw him reach up toward the display. The metal of his hand mods glinted in the dim light.

"Please. I'm a doctor. Just tell me what the scan says."

His silent carer did not even look his way. Was the man a deaf mute? Blair dismissed the idea. Mods to restore hearing were readily available and he could think of no reason why someone who clearly had no problem with cyber mods would intentionally remain disabled.

The man touched Blair's wrist and he flinched, instinctively expecting pain. Pain didn't come. He heard a click and the clink of metal and the man removed the handcuff from his wrist. It was Blair's left wrist – the dislocated arm – so he didn't try to move it.

"Thank you," he said.

The man slid his hands beneath Blair's body, helping him to sit up. Blair gritted his teeth against the pain, but cooperated because he thought the man was trying to help him. Once again, he tried to get a look at the medi-scan display, but the screen was turned away. Under the man's silent directions, Blair ended sitting up with his legs over the right side of the medi-bed, his right hand still cuffed to the rail. The man placed a hand behind Blair's dislocated shoulder.

"Wait!" Blair yelled. "Are you a doctor? Do you know what you're doing? Please, talk to me!"

He was wasting his breath. The man moved him into position as if he were a life-sized doll. He smelled nicotine on the man's breath and the sweet scent of comet – the Wolfpack's narcotic of choice – and hoped the man had only been around others smoking it, not getting high himself. He had not once met Blair's eyes, so Blair couldn't check his pupils, but Blair had no choice but to submit. Still, he recognised the technique the man was using and was satisfied he understood what to do for his shoulder. With no meds, it was going to –

Blair screamed. White hot blades ripped through his shoulder and chest, but only for a moment. He felt the bone pop back into its socket and the relief was immediate. Automatically, he tried to raise his right hand to rub his shoulder but was held by the handcuff.

The man pushed him back onto the medi-bed and deftly fastened the other handcuff around his left wrist.

"What does the scan say?" Blair asked again. "Are my ribs broken? They feel broken. There could be bleeding in my thoracic cavity. Man, just tell me! Please!"

The man looked at the medi-scan again, then pulled out a surgical tray, adjusted its height and began to lay out instruments. He was behind Blair's head, so Blair could see very little of what he was doing. Enough to recognise he was prepping for a procedure, but no more. The man hadn't scrubbed or made any attempt to sterilise himself or the room. So this couldn't be surgery...could it?

"What's going on, man? Could you please say something?" Blair kept trying, growing more and more frustrated with the man's silence. "Does the scan show a problem? Do I need surgery? I guess I might, but this isn't sterile enough for that. Hey, I'm fucking talking to you, man! At least look at me!"

The man moved back into Blair's field of vision. He pulled Blair's left sleeve up and tied a band around his upper arm. Prep for an injection. Adrenaline began to pump through Blair's veins.

"Wait, man! What are you giving me?"

He approached with a syringe full of a yellowish liquid. Still he said nothing.

"No!" Blair pulled at his arm, though it hurt like hell to do it. "No, you're not sticking me with that! Tell me what it is!"

He felt the sting of the needle piercing his arm and continued to thrash, not allowing it to happen. The man held his arm firmly, but Blair's struggles had the desired effect: he could not find a vein. Blair continued to struggle, yelling no.

But oh, it hurt so much! His so recently repaired shoulder burned. Pain shot up and down his arm and across his chest. He tasted blood.

Just when Blair thought he couldn't stand it any longer, the silent man released him. He replaced the syringe on his surgical tray. Blair wasn't certain, but he thought it was still full. The man walked out of the room, leaving Blair alone.

Jim, I know you'll come for me, but you'd better come soon. I'm in trouble, man.

\*

Blair knew he would not be left alone for long. Perhaps the man genuinely couldn't talk and had simply gone to find someone who would speak for him. As much as Blair wanted to believe it, he thought it more likely he would return with heavier restraints.

He pulled and pulled at his chained wrists, hoping to loosen the restraints or maybe work his way loose. Whatever was in that syringe, he did not want to give them a second chance to drug him and he was more unnerved by the silence than he wanted to admit, even to himself.

His wrists were bloody from his effort when the door opened again. Three people entered the room this time and his earlier silent medic was not among them. Two of them were Wolfpack enforcers: big men with light body armour and heavy guns. The third was a woman Blair knew by sight: the mechanical arm was a dead giveaway. Dee Kane was a pack alpha. Her left arm had been amputated at the shoulder and replaced with a unique cybernetic limb. Unique because the lower half of the arm was detachable. She used a range of different 'hands', each a weapon of some kind.

Kane strode up to the bed and ran her steel fingers over Blair's wrist where the skin was cut and bruised. He winced at the pain.

"I heard you were smart, Sandburg." Kane's voice was low and gravelly, almost masculine. "This wasn't smart."

It seemed safest to keep his mouth shut, so Blair simply watched her.

She raised her hand in front of his face, showing him the barrel of a gun built into the cybernetics. "This fires .22 calibre SD-Prime," she said. "Do you understand what that will do to your body if I shoot you? Say about here?" She pressed the metal into his abdomen.

Blair froze. Yeah, he knew exactly what that would do to him. The bullet would break up as it passed through his body. At point-blank range, if she fired right where she was touching him, there would be enough momentum for the core of the bullet to damage his spine. If that didn't kill him quickly, the bullet fragments would continue to disperse through his body, ripping apart his intestines, liver, spleen...he would still die, but slowly and painfully. And he would be dead the moment she fired, unless a surgeon as good as he was – or better – got to him within minutes.

Kane smiled. "I see that you do. Good." She leaned over him, her face close enough that Blair could smell the alcohol on her breath. "Now, I'll tell you what I think would be smart. I think it would be smart if you do exactly as I say, when I say it. I think it would be smart if you didn't make a single fucking sound without my permission. Think you can manage that, boy?"

Blair swallowed. His mouth was dry. "Yes," he croaked.

She stepped back and gestured to one of her enforcers. "Take the cuffs off him," she ordered.

Blair lay perfectly still while it was done. Her threat reminded him of Alex, but she was different. You could change Alex's mind. Kane would do exactly what she threatened.

"On your feet," Kane ordered.

Blair tried to get up. But his struggle to escape had left his right wrist badly strained as well as bruised and bloody, and his left arm still hurt from the dislocation. It seemed to take him forever to get into a sitting position. Someone dragged him off the medi-bed. Blair fell to the ground, his foot slipped and his leg twisted under him.

"On your feet," Kane ordered.

Somehow, Blair managed to get up. Keeping most of his weight on one foot, he straightened. His clothing was damp with sweat.

"Take your clothes off. All of them."

Again, Blair obeyed, but his movements were stiff and slow. Someone – it could have been Kane but he wasn't sure – fired a gun. Blair felt it graze his already hurt leg. He yelled involuntarily.

Kane sighed. "Help him," she said.

One of the enforcers handed his gun to her and went to Blair. He grasped Blair's t-shirt in his hands and ripped it from neck to waist. Every instinct told Blair to flee, but if he tried, he was going to die. He let the ruined fabric fall to the ground. The enforcer stripped Blair roughly, hands pushing his body, bending his limbs. Blair endured it and tried to cooperate. Finally he stood before her, naked and shivering. His clothing was in a useless pile beside him. He did not try to cover himself. It would have annoyed Alex.

Kane looked him up and down. Her next order was directed at the enforcer who had stripped Blair, but she didn't speak it aloud. She simply nodded to him.

The enforcer pushed Blair toward the medi-bed. Blair stumbled, for an instant uncertain, as Kane hadn't told him to move. Then he was bent over the bed and had a whole new set of fears as the enforcer bent over his body. Blair closed his eyes. He felt rough hands in his hair, combing through his curls, then a hand pressed into the middle of his back, holding him down. His feet were kicked apart so his legs spread wide. Fingers probed between his ass cheeks and thrust into his body painfully. But the pain lasted only a moment and the enforcer withdrew his hands. Blair stayed where he was, too afraid to move a muscle, even though he was in a horribly vulnerable position.

He knew this – forcing him to strip, the rough search – was designed to humiliate him. Leaving him nude and helpless was supposed to break him. He thought of Jim and silently vowed it wasn't going to work.

"Stand up," Kane ordered.

Blair stood with some relief, but that faded when he saw what she held in her hands. It was a control collar: a thick strip of leather with metal spikes on the inside and a power pack fitted at the back. The collar was controlled by a remote device; Blair couldn't see who held it. Collars like this were most commonly used as a punishment device, but the spikes were versatile. Depending on the programming, the spikes could be used to deliver pain from electric shocks, could pierce the flesh of the wearer, could inject poisons or drugs...or could kill.

"It's a loyalty test," Blair had told the quad when Alex's Red Sky summons went out. "Anyone who fails to respond will be named traitor. Meaning me." It was a death sentence.

Kane fitted the collar around Blair's neck. He felt the snick of the lock. Felt the pressure of the spikes against his skin and the weight of the power cell and reservoir at the back of his neck. It was primed with something, but he had no way to know what it was. It could be a narcotic, a sedative or a poison. Once, Blair treated a man who had been injected with an adrenaline cocktail through one of these collars, regular doses increasing each time, keeping his heart in v-tach until cardiogenic shock made his heart simply stop. Blair's heart beat faster just thinking about it.

"Put your underpants back on," Kane instructed.

Blair reached down to the pile of his clothing. The t-shirt was a useless scrap of material and he knew his underpants had been ripped as well. He lifted them up to check and found the waistband was intact. He bent to put them on and stifled a cry of pain. Don't! he warned himself. No sound. She said no sound. He straightened and waited for the next order.

"Hands behind you."

Blair obeyed and the handcuffs were replaced around his wrists.

Kane gestured to her enforcers and they moved back to flank her, leaving Blair standing alone in the middle of the room. "You behaved," she said, "so you get a reward. You can ask one question."

A reward. That wasn't a reward. It was a piece of torture. Blair knew that if he asked the wrong question she would either lie or tell him she hadn't promised an answer. If he asked something she was willing to answer, he wouldn't know if her answer was the truth. And what could he ask, anyway? He had a thousand questions, but was sure he didn't really want to know most of the answers. What was in the control collar? Were they going to torture him? Were they going to kill him, and if so, how long was it going to take? Where was Alex? Did she know what they were doing to someone she considered her property?

He thought about Jim. Jim had Daryl, and Daryl had access to the whole Wolfpack matrix. So Jim knew what was happening to him. Jim would come for him. Blair just had to survive long enough.

Blair let his gaze drop to the ground. He made his voice quiet, barely more than a whisper. He didn't have to feign the fear, only the defeat.

"Am I going to die?" he asked her. The answer didn't matter. What mattered was what the question would tell her about him.

Kane allowed him to see the briefest smile touch her lips. "That will be up to you. Do exactly what you're told and you might be allowed to live."

Time. He had time. Blair fought not to show his relief. Jim, please come soon.

\*

At that moment, Jim was entering a dark and apparently abandoned building. There was no such thing as a truly abandoned building – even in the undercity, real estate was just too valuable – but Jim detected no sign of anyone as he eased through a door that was halfway off its hinges. Jim moved as quickly as he dared in the dim light. He ran through the building: it was some kind of warehouse, with boxes stacked in haphazard rows. He found a staircase and ran up as silently as he could.

In a room on the fourth floor, Jim found what he was looking for: a dirty window with a view in the right direction, cracked and with a palm-sized piece of glass missing. The room was cold and damp, the floor uneven and slippery with mildew. Jim was forced to move more slowly across the floor. Once he reached the window, he rapidly assembled the sniper rifle and loaded it, but not with bullets. The ammunition was a passive locator beacon which would give an accurate fix for the attack drones. Jim set up a tripod to steady the rifle and knelt on the damp floor with the rifle positioned just inside the broken window. He peered through the night-vision gunsight at the first of his targets.

It was the right location, but from this angle Jim couldn't see much that was helpful. There was an open grate in the wall, through which he could see movement within the target room. Those people were going to die when the target was hit, so Jim wanted to be as sure as he could be that it contained the real stockpile. If he didn't launch the beacon, the drones would target by co-ordinates, and that would be accurate enough. If Jim wanted to prevent the attack on this target he had to make it out in time to give the report. As much as the loss of life would matter to him, he would rather trust Daryl's analysis than his own doubts. He had to be certain.

The gunsight gave Jim excellent magnification but he still couldn't see everything he needed to see. He remained where he was for five minutes, frowning in concentration as he focussed his gaze on the grate, hoping against hope that something would shift enough for him to see clearly. A glimpse was all he needed: hazmat gear, biological storage. Anything to indicate the presence of the pathogens. He saw nothing but white and green light and the grey shapes of people. Three people, he estimated.

Damn it all, his own eyesight was better than this. His sentinel gift, so often a disability, could help him now. Jim thought of Blair, remembering their night together, the way his senses opened up without pain when they made love. Jim had experienced no after-effect at all. So he knew it could happen. If only he could get complete control of his senses for just a few minutes.



If Jim could find Blair more quickly by using his freakish senses, it would be worth the headache. But there were more risks involved in that than pain. Sometimes if Jim overused his senses his control didn't just slip, it tanked. Jim couldn't afford to get lost in a maelstrom of sensory input right now.

He thought of Blair again, of the recording from his apartment. Blair's scream of pain, the terror in his voice when Alex dragged him through Jim's shattered window. They haunted him. The drive to find Blair and keep him safe was almost stronger than his need to complete his mission. Almost.

Jim had little time to make a decision. He weighed the odds as coldly as he could: the possibility of finding Blair more quickly versus the chance that his senses could disable him enough that he might not reach Blair at all. It seemed like even money, but instinct told him to take the risk.

Jim set the rifle down and moved closer to the window. He raised the eyepiece of his fake mod so he could use both of his eyes. He focussed on the building opposite and tried to open himself to his erratic ability. For a moment, Jim feared it wouldn't work. Then he felt that odd inner shift and suddenly the sensory input was overwhelming. The damp and mildew in the room made him gag. He felt the damp clinging to his skin and clothing. It was a struggle to focus on anything outside the room. The pain began, a dull ache behind his eyes.

No! Not this time! The grate across the dark street was about half a metre square. The slats were about 0.75 centimetres wide, spaced 0.5 centimetres apart, so the grate could close with the slats overlapping. It was a ventilation duct, but the air circulator that should have been on the other side appeared to be missing. The vent was partially closed now. Jim had a clear view through the gaps into the room beyond but it was like looking into a kaleidoscope: too much, too fragmented.

Pain throbbed behind his eyes.

His vision blurred at the edges and Jim feared he would have to give up. But suddenly it was as if the grate became transparent. Jim's sentinel vision focussed on what Jim most needed to see and everything in the room was pin-sharp. He was inside the room.

The glass-fronted cabinet he'd thought he saw through the gunsight wasn't a cabinet at all: it was a row of refrigeration units, each with a keypad lock. One of them stood open. Inside were black canisters with aluminium seals, neatly stacked in a rack. Two were missing, but those remaining in the refrigerator were all labelled: white laminate labels with neat writing in block capitals.

BACILLUS ANTHRACIS 10-27-42

BUNDIBUGYO VIRUS (BDBV TYPE-C) 05-30-39

Jim read the names with both satisfaction and fear. If the numbers were dates, the Wolfpack had been stockpiling this stuff for longer than Sandburg estimated. But that was no longer important. Jim had the confirmation he needed. Without taking his eyes off the canisters, Jim felt for the rifle at his side.

"...ain't something we need to know," said a male voice.

Jim jerked back from the window. That sounded like someone in the room with him! Pain stabbed his forehead and he squeezed his eyes closed.

"I do need to know," a female voice argued, "because it affects how I do this. Timing is important."

Jim refocused his gaze on the room. He saw the woman who was speaking, working over some small containers set out in a rack. She was wearing gloves and a surgical-type mas. Jim wouldn't have entered that room in anything less than full HazMat gear. But the risks she was taking weren't his business. What mattered was his conclusion: the Wolfpack were preparing the pathogen for delivery. They were mobilising for battle. This was not unexpected: it meant the Wolves had traced Daryl's hack to the military and were panicking.

Turning his back on the window, Jim closed his eyes and counted slowly to ten. He could taste the mildew in the air, bitter on his tongue. The smell was disgusting. He heard the timber beneath his feet creaking under his weight. The pain in his head was overwhelming.

Finally, slowly, it faded. Like a volume control dialling down, the sensory storm retreated to what Jim thought of as a more normal level. He sighed with relief, but he wasn't ready to open his eyes. His head still hurt. The gear he carried weighed him down, the fabric of his clothing chafed his skin where before he had barely felt the weight. His senses were still heightened, though not as much, and his control was fragile as spun glass. If he had the option, he would have gone straight home to sleep it off. But he could not stop now.

Jim set the rifle back on its tripod but discarded the gunsight. He might as well use his eyes while they were working for him. He selected a point in the brick above the grate. He felt the rifle steady in his hands, an extension of himself. Wind direction was predictable in these streets: the tall buildings formed wind-tunnels and the laws of physics were immutable. In this part of the city cables were strewn between buildings and it wasn't unusual for clothing or sheets to hang from them. The flapping of a shirt in the periphery of Jim's vision gave him the measure of the wind. He breathed, deep and steady. Slowly, he squeezed down on the trigger. He felt the kick as the shot left the rifle and knew he was dead on target before the puff of dust from the wall confirmed it.

He smiled grimly to himself. One down.

Jim checked the time: it was 0012. In less than four hours all hell would break loose in this part of Cascade and that storage facility would be history. Only one doubt remained: that snatch of conversation which confirmed they were preparing to use the pathogens. Would some of the bio-weapons get out before 0400?

\*

Time sense is the first thing you lose.

Jim had told him that and Blair now fully appreciated it. He seemed to understand everything else pertinent to his situation, anyway. He knew he was underground, in a sub-basement of Kane's pack headquarters. It was an old building: the roof above Blair's head was arched and vaulted, not flat, supported by pillars not iron beams. This part of the vault had been converted into a prison at least a century before, partitioned into cells with rust-pitted steel bars separating each one. Today (tonight?) Blair was the only prisoner. Outside his cell, a single guard – one of Kane's enforcers – sat at a table, laying out cards in a complicated game of solitaire.

Shifting his weight to his left foot, Blair tried to stretch his cramping toes. The stone floor was cold as ice under his bare feet and though every other detail about his situation was crystal clear to him, Blair had no idea how long it had been since Kane left him here. But Kane didn't just leave him. She left him to suffer.

Incredibly, Blair actually felt relief when he realised Kane was only going to lock him in a cell. After his treatment in the medical bay, he had anticipated questioning, torture, perhaps even rape. The cell was cold and he was almost naked, but being locked up in the cold seemed a whole lot better than what he'd been imagining would happen to him.

"Stand there," Kane snapped, pointing to the middle of the empty cell.

Blair did as she ordered. She told him to stretch out his arms parallel to the floor and to turn on the spot. Blair obeyed, confused but not really caring at this point. As he turned, the tips of his outstretched fingers brushed the bare bricks at the rear of the cell, but otherwise he touched only the floor.

When he faced Kane again, she was studying him with an odd, intense concentration.

"Lower your arms. Feet apart," she ordered. "Good. You will remain there until we are ready for you. You will not move from that spot. You will stand up straight. Do you understand?"

"I understand," Blair croaked, but he didn't understand, then, what it truly meant.

She set the remote control for his collar on the table outside the cell. "Watch him," she told the enforcer. If he moves, you know what to do."

Standing still should not be so difficult, Blair thought then. But that was then.

Time sense is the first thing you lose.

Cold seeped into his bones, making it hard to stand. His feet, naked on the stone, were frozen. His muscles started to cramp. He felt like he had been standing for hours, even days. He swayed and caught himself before he fell.

The enforcer sat at his table, playing solitaire, but watching his prisoner with regular glances. The remote control was on the table. Blair had no idea what the collar would do to him if he moved. He shivered and his teeth chattered.

How long could a man stand in one position without moving?

How long had he been standing there, without relief or warmth?

Time sense is the first thing you lose.

He shifted his weight again and moaned when his cramped toes protested. The enforcer looked up from his cards and his hand moved pointedly toward the remote. Blair watched it. His legs trembled. At this point, he would almost welcome the pain the collar could inflict. It would be something new. A distraction.

His tongue felt huge in his mouth. Thirst scratched at his throat. When did he last have a drink? Breakfast at Jim's apartment. Yesterday? A week ago?

Time sense is the first thing you lose.

Blair yelled in pain as his calf muscle cramped. There was no thought in his mind except the pain. He crashed to the floor, doubled over and grabbed for his muscle. He felt it, stone-hard under his touch. He cried out in short, sharp moans as he struggled to straighten the leg and stretch the muscle. He cursed and moaned and fought and finally felt the muscle ease under his fingers and the awful pain receded.

Only then did Blair recall Kane's orders. He whipped around to face the enforcer, knowing he would be hit by pain or worse before he could beg for mercy.

The enforcer was watching Blair and talking on his link. "...Yes, he's ready." A pause, a brief smile. "Right away."

He's ready. What did that mean?

Blair's leg still felt wrong, like the muscle would cramp again any second. Even so, he climbed awkwardly to his feet.

The enforcer unlocked the cell. "You're coming with me," he said roughly.

\*

The chair wasn't as cold as the stone floor had been, but that was the only positive thing Blair could find about his new situation.

He was in the old theatre. Some remnants of its former glory remained: flecks of gold clung to the walls and the floor of the stage beneath Blair's feet was solid wood. Curtains hung above the stage: once plush red velvet, now faded, thick with dirt and full of holes. Close to the stage, the old seats had been removed: people sat on the floor instead, the sloping platforms where seating had once been providing places to sit. But behind them, the old seats remained, the padding rotten or missing, the fabric as dirty and ragged as the curtains.

Straps around his wrists and ankles bound him to a chair, which meant the next time his muscles cramped he wasn't going to be able to help himself. The control collar was still around his neck and he still had no idea what it might do to him. Spotlights had been positioned to shine into his eyes. Beyond the lights, he could just make out the other people in the room. They sat in a half-circle around him, as if Blair were on stage to give a performance. Maybe he was.

Kane was there, of course, seated with her enforcers flanking her like bodyguards. Beside her sat a man Blair had never seen before, but he knew who he was. Dinizwas tall, his frame wiry more than bulky, his features ordinary. Blair knew him by the two teenagers who sat at his feet: a boy and a girl. Each wore a wide leather collar around their neck;

not a control collar but something else. The collars had leashes, held by the man above them. Blair had heard a lot of stories about what those kids did for their master. Stories that made Alex seem like an angel of mercy.

Alex was in the circle of watchers, too. Her cyber-eye flashed red as Blair looked her way. She returned his look with fury and resentment. Blair understood both. He had betrayed her and declared his new allegiance so publically everyone who knew them must have seen or heard of it. It was a humiliation. Blair was sorry for that, sorry he had hurt her again. They had lived together for too long for him to be indifferent to her suffering. She hated him now; Blair deserved it.

Alex rose and strode toward him. There was some stiffness in her arm and Blair thought she must have hurt herself in the fall from Jim's apartment. Then he looked for the other explanation: her mecha. Did he imagine the darkening of her veins? She had a treatment the night she found Daryl's link on him. She couldn't need more so soon. But Blair hadn't been able to supervise that treatment: he'd been locked up. Maybe something wasn't right.

She leaned over him and gripped his upper arm. Her face came close enough that he felt the whisper of her breath when she spoke.

"You are going to tell us everything," she told him, her voice low and menacing. "They want to know how you compromised the matrix, but I don't care about that."

"Go to hell," Blair muttered.

She smiled maliciously. "You first." Her claws pierced his arm.

Blair drew in breath through gritted teeth. He would not cry out. He would not give her the satisfaction.

Her lips brushed his ear and her voice became even quieter. "You are mine, Blair. You have always been mine. If you let him fuck you, I'm going to rip off your cock and feed it to you." Her hand tightened on his arm, driving the claws in deep.

Blair felt his blood begin to flow. He turned his head away, gritting his teeth hard enough to hurt. I will not scream. I will not –

Pain exploded between his legs and Blair screamed.

Satisfied, Alex released him. She took a step back and straightened. "Do it," she said curtly, speaking to someone Blair couldn't see. She turned her back on him and returned to her place.

"Hold still," a male voice ordered, as if Blair could do anything else. He felt the sting of a needle in his neck above the control collar. Something cold flooded his veins. Pain had been his entire world a moment before: his balls, his shoulder, his bleeding arm. It was easing. He knew, then, what they had injected: a narcotic. There was no way to fight it. Maybe Jim had some kind of training for this, but Blair was just a doctor.

Someone was speaking, the voice compelling, amazingly beautiful. Blair smiled happily, his concentration floating away on a narcotic haze.

\*

Even the security guards were watching the show. Jim slit the guard's throat in a smooth, practised motion that gave him no time to cry out. He caught the man as his knees buckled and lowered him to the ground. There had been almost no sound, but cutting a man's throat makes a hell of a mess. In a short time, that wouldn't matter but if someone came along in the next thirty minutes it might. Jim shoved the body back into the alcove from which he had been watching the show. He cleaned the blood off his gloves using the dead man's jacket. Only then did he look down into the theatre below.

The alcove where Jim stood was one of five that looked down into the circular room. They were almost at the level of the ceiling: looking straight ahead Jim could see the tangle of chains and wires that supported the lighting rig. But the lights were trained on the only thing Jim currently cared about: Blair.

Sandburg was bound to a chair, almost naked, his head bent to his chest. Drugged? It was depressingly familiar, but this time Jim had a lot more than one guard to contend with. They had Blair trussed up in front of an audience at least twenty-strong. There were parts of the room Jim could not see from his vantage point so he wasn't sure of the numbers. He did not like that uncertainty. He checked the time.

Forty four minutes to zero.

He had barely enough time to reach the extraction point if he left right now. But Jim had always known he wasn't going to make it out. Not without Blair.

Everyone in that room was Wolfpack. They were the enemy. Jim wasn't concerned with preserving their lives or taking prisoners, but he needed to get Blair out alive and unharmed. The rest of them were dogmeat.

Quickly, he ran through his inventory of tools and weapons. The two pulse bombs he was carrying would certainly take care of everyone below, but that would hurt Blair, too. They were his last resort. The only other options he had, given the time constraint, were guns or hand-to-hand. Jim had no illusions about his own ability. From the regular army, to the 75<sup>th</sup> Rangers, and then to UMIAC, he had received the best training the military could offer and ample opportunity to test those skills in the field. There was an old saying that one Ranger had to be worth a platoon of regulars, and Jim figured that was about right. But he would prefer better odds than this when he was going in without backup.

He had the element of surprise on his side and the alcove where he stood was a potential entry point, though not a clean one. His hand went to the grapple at his belt.

Surprise. The distance between his position and Blair. Twenty-plus targets. More than enough ammo.

He could do it.

But there was one element Jim had forgotten. One of those twenty-plus targets was a sentinel.

As he thumbed the safety off the grapple-gun, movement from below caught Jim's attention. Alex Barnes turned her head and looked directly at him.

## CHAPTER NINE: "IT'S GONNA BE A BUMPY RIDE"

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...prone to sensory 'spikes' in which one or more of the senses becomes unmanageably acute. This causes distress to the sentinel and in extreme cases may generate a physical reaction. The case studies below describe several examples of this: a skin sensitivity that manifested as a painful rash, hearing spikes which caused severe pain to the subject and a spike in the sense of taste that caused the sentinel to choke, placing her life in danger. There is sufficient evidence to posit that these extreme sensory spikes are linked to emotional distress, therefore these may become self-reinforcing if a sentinel does not receive immediate assistance.

Psychology of the Sentinel: Case studies, ©2132 Dr A Tomes, MSc. PhD

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He was blown!

Jim reacted on instinct, his sole imperative now to reach Blair's side. He drove a spike into the wall behind him, wincing at the unavoidable sound. He took the rope and knotted it to the grappling hook from his utility belt. He couldn't abseil down the wall. If he tried that his back would be exposed all the way down and that was more than enough time for a hail of bullets to put an end to him, even with his body armour. He needed to get down there faster.

Alex was on her feet. She moved toward Sandburg.

Jim took aim and fired the grappling hook into the lighting rig in the middle of the ceiling. It hit one of the chains, began to fall and one of the barbs caught. Jim tugged on the rope, uncertain it would hold, but it seemed to be secure. There was no time to try again. He pulled the rope taut, tied the other end to the spike, sliced through the slack and used the leftover rope as an improvised carabiner. He took a breath, swiftly calculating distance, speed, where he would land. Then he grabbed his carabiner with both hands and threw himself over.

There was the familiar breathless moment as he fell before the painful jerk as the rope caught his weight. He began to slide down the zip-wire, faster than he expected. The weight of his body pulled on the lighting rig and it shifted. Below him, Jim heard voices, then gunfire as the Wolves realised he was there, but he was a fast-moving target and he wasn't hit. The lighting rig shifted again and Jim knew it was about to break. He let go of the rope an instant before the rig fell. He was in motion as soon as his feet touched the floor. He whirled, letting the coat billow around him to make him a more difficult target and drew the HK Riot. As he completed his spin, he squeezed the trigger, firing on automatic to pepper the room with bullets. Blair was behind him, but so was Barnes. Giving her his back was a tactical error, but not one he could have avoided.

Bullets hit him, square in his chest. Jim's flesh was protected by his armour but the impact of the high-velocity slugs knocked him off his feet. He fell backward, took the fall on one buttock, rolled and was on his feet again, seeking the source of that shot. He returned fire, risked a glance toward Blair, and kept firing, cycling through his ammo quickly.

Alex was with Blair and his swift glance told Jim she was untying his bonds. Jim let her save him the trouble, backing toward them as he fired. His ears rang with gunfire.

More bullets hit him, but Jim was braced for the impact and was very glad none of them appeared to have armour-piercing rounds. Even his armour could only take so much, though. His HK clicked empty. Jim released the magazine, let it fall as he pulled out a fresh load and slammed it home. He turned back to the battle as an alarm blared a belated warning.

There was a lot of smoke in the air, mostly propellant from the HK: it was not designed for use in a confined space like this. It was hard to breathe. Jim could use that, he realised. He carried a single smoke grenade. He pulled the pin with his teeth and threw it high.

Beneath the smoke and propellant Jim could smell death: spilled blood, shit and piss. Those remaining were entrenched in two positions but the firing stopped even as Jim raised his gun again. The smoke was doing its job.

Jim whirled to face Alex and Blair. Blair was weak, perhaps drugged, and offered little resistance as she dragged him to his feet.

"Let him go, Barnes!" Jim ordered. He thumbed the HK's control, switching it to manual fire.

"Fuck you!" she snarled. She held Blair before her like a shield, one arm hooked around his neck.

No one was shooting at him now. Jim heard movement and suspected the others were taking advantage of the cover to escape. The alarm still blared.

Jim kept his gun trained on Barnes. "Let him go and you can walk away." Thirty minutes to zero. She could walk away for that long.

"He's mine!"

Blair tried to pull her arm away from his throat. "Jim...okay..." he mumbled.

Jim ignored it. "Last chance, Barnes. Let him go." Jim knew she wouldn't do it. He gave her half a second to comply, then pulled the trigger.

Her cyber-eye exploded in a shower of sparks. Jim missed dead-centre or his bullet would have killed her, but even so she dropped Blair and clutched at her face, screaming in rage and pain.

"Blair!" Jim called.

Blair stumbled forward. Jim met him halfway, shifting to keep Blair at his unexposed side. He trained the gun on Alex, aiming for her power pack. At this range, he couldn't miss.

Blair saw what he was doing. "Jim, don't kill her," He looked up at Jim, his eyes begging. "Please. Let's just go."

Jim took in Blair's expression and knew he would never be forgiven if he killed Alex now.

Twenty nine minutes to zero.

\*

They could not escape. Blair stumbled at Jim's side as they ran. He could still hear Alex screaming behind them and didn't know if the sound was real or in his head. He couldn't bear to hear her in pain. Even after everything she had done, Blair could not wish Alex ill.

An evacuation alarm was blaring and the halls were full of people rushing for the exits. It covered them, to an extent: no one seemed to notice Blair's state of undress or that Jim was a stranger. They were too focussed on themselves.

Blair's muscles burned with the effort of running. He stumbled again and Jim caught him before he hit the ground.

"Jim," he panted, "please. I can't." Everything hurt.

Jim pulled him through the nearest doorway. He covered each part of the room with his gun before he closed the door behind them. "We can't rest long."

Blair sank to the ground gratefully. He hugged himself tightly. "Maybe...maybe you should leave me." It seemed logical. He was slowing Jim down and it wasn't necessary. If he could find his clothing, he had a better chance of getting out alone. Blair knew the Wolfpack territory well.

Jim crouched down beside him. "I don't want to hear you say that again, you hear? Either we escape together, or we stay here together." He shrugged the leather coat off and laid it across Blair's shoulders.

The coat smelled of Jim and was warm from his body. Blair tugged it around him, thankful for the warmth.

Jim put his arms around Blair and held him close. "I won't leave you, Chief. Not tonight, not ever." As Blair laid his head on Jim's shoulder, Jim stroked his hair, a comforting touch. But then he froze, his fingers tense.

"What's this collar?" he asked, his tone suddenly wary.

Blair had almost forgotten it. At Jim's words, he became aware of it again: the spikes against his skin, the weight of the mysterious mechanism at the back of his neck. Fear fluttered in his stomach again. "It's a control collar," he explained. "Can you get it off me, Jim?"

Jim moved to Blair's back and pulled the coat and his hair aside. "I've heard about these but I've never seen one before. Why can I smell...? Oh. Oh, shit."

"What is it?" Blair asked sharply. He felt safe with Jim, but he didn't like this. He didn't like it one bit.

"Just a moment." Jim shifted so he could look into Blair's eyes. "Stay calm, Blair. I'm going to fix this, okay?"

"Just tell me!"

"The collar is wired with an ampule of liquid cyclonite. Explosive. I think it's set to detonate if the connection is cut. Do you understand?"

Blair felt all the air leave his lungs. He was cold. So cold.

"Blair! Do you understand?" Jim repeated, raising his voice a little.

"If you remove the collar," Blair answered hoarsely, "it will blow my head off. I get it." He thought he sounded calm. He didn't feel calm.

"Yes. But if I'm right, there's a remote detonator, too. Those things can have a long range, so I've got to try to take it off. Still with me?"

Blair started to nod, then got scared that even movement might trigger the worst. "Kane," he said. "Dee Kane has the detonator. Or maybe her enforcer."

"It doesn't matter who has it, only that we don't." Jim stood and offered his hand. "Stand up, Blair."

Trembling, Blair allowed Jim to help him up. The leather coat slid off his shoulders and pooled around his feet. He ignored it, shivering from fear far more than cold. "You know how to do this, right?" he asked shakily.

"Sure," Jim answered a shade too quickly. "I can disarm all kinds of explosives."

Jim picked up the coat and held it open for Blair to put it on. It was too big for him: Jim was taller and much broader in the shoulders, but it was warm and it covered his nakedness. Blair buttoned the coat up.

"Okay, now turn around," Jim instructed.

Blair stayed where he was. "Jim, tell me the truth. Can you do this?"

Jim looked into his eyes. "I've disarmed bombs before, so yes, I know what I'm doing. But this is something I haven't seen before. Most of the wiring is inside the collar. I can't see it without taking the collar off, and I can't take it off without triggering the detonator."

Blair understood. "Then don't try to see," he said.

"What?"

"Don't see. You've got four other senses, Jim. Use them."

Jim nodded his understanding. "Turn around."



This time, Blair obeyed him. He heard Jim take a deep breath.

"Stay as quiet as you can and don't move." He pulled the coat away from Blair's neck and ran his fingers over the collar.

It was harder than standing still in that cell. Jim explored the whole of the collar with his touch. His fingers caressed it lightly, warm where they brushed Blair's skin. He moved back and forth, circled Blair, took his time. He said nothing at all while he worked. It was torture for Blair, but he remained as still as he could, letting the sentinel work.

Finally, Jim spoke. "I need to pull this tight for a second. It might hurt. Don't move."

The collar squeezed tight around his neck and Blair gave a strangled yelp. Every instinct told him to pull away. His body jerked with the impulse but he stayed where he was. He heard a click and Jim let out his breath.

The collar loosened and Jim threw it across the room. He dropped something small onto the ground and crushed it under his boot. He looked at his link.

"Twelve minutes. Blair, we've got to go right now!"

\*

By the time they reached the street, they were down to seven minutes. Blair simply couldn't move quickly and Jim was worried, but couldn't stop to examine him or ask what was wrong. He had stolen a skybike earlier and hidden it near the building; it was still there. He pulled the dumpster away from the bike.

"Get on!"

Blair was pale with shock and obviously cold: he wore only his underpants and Jim's coat. "I can't drive that," he protested.

"Get on!" Jim insisted.

Blair obeyed, his bare feet dangling awkwardly. Jim climbed on behind him so his body and more importantly his armour would shield him.

He reached around and guided Blair's hands to the crossbar. "Hold tight," he instructed. "I've got you, but it's gonna be a bumpy ride." He kicked the bike into gear and turned the repulsion on for altitude. They headed for the street as fast as Jim dared to fly. The bike was capable of quite some altitude but Jim didn't dare go much above street level. Nor could he go extremely fast in this rabbit warren of streets, but the bike was responsive and he thought they would get out in time.

There was a burst of gunfire from behind them and Jim felt a bullet graze his armour. He looked back and couldn't quite believe what he saw.

Alex was behind them but not on a bike or driving a car. She was running, impossibly fast. Even with mods, no one could move like that.

"How the fuck can she keep up?" Jim demanded.

He hadn't meant it as a serious question but Blair tried to look. His movement unbalanced the bike. Jim swore and leaned the other way to compensate, which gave Blair a view of the woman pursuing them.

"Keep still!" Jim yelled.

They had five minutes. Perhaps less – he couldn't check the time while fleeing for their lives. They needed to get out of Wolfpack territory, past the police perimeter. And they had to find somewhere to go to ground. Fast.

Jim saw the monorail station ahead. He almost turned to go past it, then an idea hit him. He pushed the repulsion for more altitude and hoped there wasn't a train due.

"Jim, you can't – " Blair began.

Jim zoomed above the monorail then angled down, following the rail itself as if it were a road. He increased speed, letting the rail guide him. The wind and rain were cold in his face and he worried for Blair. They had to get out from the shadow of Sky City – out of the rain. Docklands was ahead of them and that would be a safe zone once it all started. If they could make it there...

Jim's link buzzed an alert – he had set it for thirty seconds. He looked up and saw sky above them. They were just barely out of the city's shadow.

"Hang on!" he shouted to Blair.

Jim drove the skybike off the rail, headed down to ground level in a steep dive. He pulled up abruptly and cut both speed and repulsion so fast the engine screamed. Jim wrenched the bike around in a sharp turn and the skybike skidded across the asphalt. Jim struggled to keep the bike upright and them both on board. He yelled aloud with the effort. His armoured knee scraped the floor and he dragged the bike upward with all his strength. Then it was over. The bike came to a halt, upright and still. The engine cut out without Jim touching the control.

Blair was still holding the crossbar in a deathgrip.

Jim slid an arm around Blair's waist and turned to look back toward Sky City. The concealed battery beneath the great engines began to move. Sky City's ultimate defences had never been fully tested. Until the day before, only a select few within Ellison Industries even knew what the company built into their city after Red Night. Adrenaline surged through Jim and he turned his back on the view, instinctively shielding Blair, though if they were within range of what was coming there was no shielding from it. That was the point. He heard the explosion and the city lit up with blinding light.

Unexpectedly, Blair fought him. "What's happening?"

"Wait!" Jim ordered, but they didn't have to wait long. If the shockwave was going to reach them, it would have already. Jim released Blair and turned back to look at the bright sky. He felt laughter bubbling up inside and clenched a fist to suppress it. After all the tension and adrenaline it was a natural reaction, but Blair would think he was crazy.

They were out. They made it.

But it wasn't quite over yet.

\*

Blair looked at the fading light over the undercity. "What the hell is that?"

Jim swung his leg over the skybike, dismounting. "EMP," he said curtly. "A pre-emptive strike."

Blair stared at him, horrified. "How strong?" he asked. He didn't know if that was the right word, but he knew the answer. Strong enough.

"I wasn't told," Jim answered.

A sound drew Blair's attention and he looked seaward quickly enough to see a missile launched from the naval base fly over the Docklands. He whirled, following it with his gaze. Over the city the missile flashed brightly and divided into four falling stars, like fireworks on the fourth of July.

"Targeted warheads," Jim explained. "They'll take out the locations where the bio-weapons are stockpiled. The rest of the fight will be on the ground." He touched his link. "Poacher to Mercury. Come in." He waited. "Do you have my signal? ETA to pickup?" He looked at Blair, appraising. "Alright. Pass word to Gladiator, extraction plan delta. Confirm." And after a brief pause, "Negative, Mercury, thanks for asking. Poacher out."

"What's going on?" Blair asked.

"We have to wait a while for a ride out of here. Come on. We've got to find you some shoes at least."

But Blair shook his head stubbornly. "No. Jim, an EMP? How could you let them do that?"

"It was my idea," Jim said grimly.

"That's..." he stumbled, lost for words. "It's genocide," he concluded.

Jim's eyes narrowed. "Genocide applies only if a specific ethnic group is targeted. The term you're looking for is mass murder. But it doesn't apply here. Our projected fatalities from the EMP were well within acceptable numbers given the circumstances." He turned and began to walk. "Come with me, Blair. We can argue about this later."

If he were a more courageous man, Blair thought, he would turn and walk the other way. Screw Jim Ellison and his soldier's values. But he was cold, and barefoot on the concrete ground. He was bone tired and hurting and he had exactly one friend left in the entire world, even if that friend was the reason he had no others.

He followed Jim.

\*

Blair did feel a bit less helpless once he had clothing again. He had forgotten that the Docklands stores never closed: in the streets he was used to, you could buy food or guns at four in the morning, but not shoes or pants. The clothing was simple and practical, and he'd returned Jim's coat. It was much too big for Blair to wear comfortably.

Next on Jim's agenda was breakfast, and he took them to a grubby diner near the union building. The customers were mostly dock workers but few were around at this hour. By the time they reached the diner, Blair was really feeling the effects of his ordeal. Pain reminded him he was injured and needed the attentions of a doctor. A certain fuzziness lingered in his vision: the after-effects of the drugs. But his head was clear: pain helped cut through the cotton candy in his brain and he could think clearly.

"Jim, what – " he began, but Jim interrupted him.

"Not yet. Let's get settled then you can ask me anything you want." He looked around the diner and selected a booth. "Sit down. What would you like to eat?"

Blair hadn't eaten since the last breakfast he shared with Jim, but his stomach rebelled at the thought of food. "I'm not hungry."

Jim headed to the counter and returned with coffee in tall mugs. He placed one in front of Blair. It smelled like regular coffee – the kind Blair was used to drinking, not the real filtered coffee Jim usually drank. He sipped it cautiously. It was much too sweet: Jim had added sugar or syrup to mask the bitterness.

"Alright, Blair. It will be a while before Daryl can send a pickup for us so we'll stay here for a while. We can talk now."

Talk? Blair gazed unhappily into his coffee. "Not to sound ungrateful for the rescue, but what the hell were you thinking, man? An EMP? Don't you know what that must have done?"

"Of course I know," Jim snapped. "Anyone with cyber mods would have them knocked out. It would also kill any electronic surveillance in the zone: comms, computer-targeted weapons."

"I thought you were going after the pathogens. Not the whole city!"

Jim was silent for a moment. "Maybe I wasn't clear about that. We were sent to investigate bio-weapons, but the mission for any quad is to eliminate the threat. Taking out the stockpile wasn't enough, Blair. We have to make sure it can't happen again."

"So you're taking them all out?"

"You accused me of mass murder back there," Jim said, his tone very neutral. "You still think that?"

Blair understood his accusation hurt, but he thought that meant Jim knew there was some truth in it. He drove the knife home. "Do you know what some of those cheap fuel cells can do to a human body when they blow? Even if that didn't happen, there are mods people can't live without, Jim." Blair thought about Ami, the child whose cyber-leg he had replaced only days before. He thought about his elderly neighbour who had a mod in her chest keeping her heart beating, and some of the other women in the Wolfpack who had spinal implants like Alex's to enhance sexual pleasure. All of them could be dead because of what Jim had done.

"Yeah," he insisted bitterly. "Your EMP has killed a lot of people. I won't play word games about it. The dead don't care if you call it murder or collateral damage. And you didn't care, either, did you?"

"Not much, no. They made it a war. I'm just fighting it." A thread of anger crept into Jim's voice.

Blair wished that were true. He would have understood that. Forgiven it, even. "No, Jim. You're not fighting this war. What the hell happened to you on Red Night?"

Jim flinched. He sipped his coffee. "That's not what this is about."

"I think it is. It's been on your mind since you started this." Blair broke off as a waitress approached with a tray. He waited while she unloaded it: a short stack with sausage for Jim, sweet bagels for Blair, though he hadn't asked for them.

Jim nodded toward the plate of bagels. "You should try to eat something." He ignored his own food, though. "Of course it's been on my mind. As soon as I realised we were going up against the Wolfpack I couldn't help being afraid of setting off another street war. But what's happening today was a military decision and it wasn't even mine. My idea, but not my decision. A whole committee agreed to it, including the governor and the chief of police."

"But for you to suggest something like that," Blair argued, "it means something, Jim. Would you have suggested this against any other civilian population?"

"Not on US soil," Jim admitted.

"So why here and now? Is it personal? What happened to you on Red Night?" Blair had to ask. If Jim refused to tell him again, he wouldn't push it.

"You really want to hear that story? Now?"

Before, Blair thought he'd had no right to ask. Now it seemed important. "Yeah. You must have been, what, fifteen?"

"Sixteen," Jim corrected. "It was my sixteenth birthday." Jim's voice had fallen back into that carefully neutral tone he used when he was hiding his emotions.

Blair didn't call him on it. "Hell of a way to spend your birthday," he said.

Jim was gazing out of the diner's window, his eyes unfocussed. Suddenly he looked very young, almost vulnerable. "I had six tickets for the big game at the stadium. I'd been looking forward to it for weeks. Before the game, we went out for food. Not some fancy restaurant and not with my family: I was sixteen. I took my friends out to the mall."

Blair knew then. Not the specifics of Jim's story, but he understood what happened. The old stadium and the mall were besieged and occupied by the Wolfpack during the riot.

"It was like...I don't know. I've been in real battles since then, but I've never been so scared. It was like some alien invasion movie, you know? Completely overwhelming. Because of the family money, I wasn't allowed out without security, but my bodyguard died in the first wave of the riot. I remember all these people...monsters with metal faces...guns, knives... We had no idea what was happening. We were sitting in this noodle bar with people outside yelling, smashing windows... Like idiots, we wanted a closer look. I headed for the window. Then Logan was in front of me. He yelled at me to get down and...suddenly I was covered in his blood and I could see through the hole in his chest. The window shattered. People were screaming. Dying. And all I could think was he took that bullet for me. It's what a bodyguard is supposed to do, but I couldn't quite believe it." He shook his head. "Hell of a way to spend a birthday, like you said."

Blair wished he could take the question back. He didn't want to know all this.

"My best friend, Graham, was shot. In all the confusion, I didn't see it at first. But after the first wave had gone through, it got quiet for a while. We started looking for each other. Regrouping. Tried to call for help but the links were down. Gray was losing a lot of blood. I remembered some stuff about how to help, but they don't tell you in class how to deal with someone fighting you when it hurts him too much for you to put pressure on a wound."

"With a bullet wound it would," Blair said softly. "You can't learn that in a classroom. You did well if you stayed cool enough to remember what to do."

"It didn't feel like I was doing well. I felt useless. Worse than useless. I... We..." Jim broke off.

"You don't have to tell me anymore," Blair offered.

Jim met his eyes, then, for the first time. "I think I should, Blair. You asked a fair question and you deserve an answer. Just give me a moment, okay?"

"Sure." Blair selected a cinnamon bagel and nibbled on it. It tasted of nothing.

Jim gazed out of the grimy window for a moment. "I always saw myself as a hero. A leader. I was a big sports star at school. I was rich. Yeah, it mattered to me then. But when I was tested I found something different in me. My first instinct wasn't to fight back. It was to protect my friends. Hide, or at least find someplace we could defend."

"That sounds natural. I mean, with the training you have now it would be different, but you were a kid, Jim. There's no shame in hiding."

"I wasn't a kid. I was a spoiled brat. And not all of my friends agreed with me. Paolo and Mike wanted to make a run for it. They were sure the cops would be outside. I couldn't stop them, but I didn't try too hard. Gray needed help and I thought if they got out, they could send someone."

Blair didn't ask if his friends had made it out of the mall. He thought he could see the answer in Jim's grim expression.

"I carried Gray into the kitchen of the place where we'd been eating. I stayed with him as much as I could, but we were alone back there and I had to see what was happening. When the Wolves came back, we hid in a store room. Then the power went out. The door had an electronic deadlock, so without power we were stuck in there." Jim paused again. "The only good thing about it was Gray didn't die alone. We had air and water at first but no food. At least nothing edible, it was all uncooked rice and dry noodles. And when he was gone, I was alone in there. Six days, but I only know that because they told me later."

Blair nodded, speechless. Jim had told him before: the Ellison billions were worthless when the worst happened. This was what he meant. Blair began to glimpse, then, the forces that had shaped this man. It was just the beginning of understanding, but it was enough.

"I could hear what was happening outside. They had prisoners and I heard..." Jim shook his head. "I heard enough to stop me calling for help. It wasn't until the National Guard were going through the place that someone found me. I don't remember the man's face or his name, but I remember the uniform. I remember what he said when he found me...us...there. He was kind. I was a mess...well, you're a doctor. You know what kind of condition I would have been in."

Blair nodded again. Six days without food for a healthy young man would not cause long-term harm. Jim would have been weakened, he would have lost weight and might have been suffering some electrolyte imbalance, but most likely nothing more serious. But having no water for that long was much more dangerous. How long had he been without water? Two or three days at most, Blair estimated, since Jim suffered no permanent damage.

Jim fell silent for so long that Blair thought he was finished. But then he spoke up again. "Blair, if you think I want the Wolfpack wiped out...I honestly don't know. My Dad does. He has good reasons. My mother was killed in the riot, my brother was hurt and I almost died. I think that's why he had the pulse bomb built into the city. It was a closely guarded secret, Blair, never meant to be used unless we were facing another Red Night." Jim sighed. "The Wolves

killed a lot of people, and we had to be prepared to war with them again. Since what they are best known for is illegal mods, an EMP was the obvious defence. But you are proof there are good people in the Pack and I'm not blind to that. What I do want is to keep my city safe. When the Wolfpack started to stockpile bio-weapons, they made action against them inevitable. My intention was to strike so hard and so fast that there would be no chance of another Red Night. Was I wrong, Blair? Really?"

Blair had no answer. His mind just didn't work that way. He couldn't see it in terms of some lives sacrificed for the sake of others. He saw men and women he knew who would die when their cyber organs failed. He saw the thousands of mech addicts reliant on cheap fuel cells that exploded under the stress of an EMP, flooding their bodies with corrosive fuel – an excruciating death. He saw Alex, reliant on her mecha to keep her body moving and her sentinel ability in control. All the things that might have happened if things were different, if, if, if...they meant nothing. They were phantoms, unreal. Never happened.

"I don't know," he said helplessly. "I just know people are dead, and they didn't have to be."

After a moment, Jim nodded. "That's fair. Thank you for being honest."

Blair watched Jim pick up a table knife and slice into his short stack. He brought a bite to his mouth. It was a perfectly ordinary gesture. Jim kept his eyes on the plate, though, not looking up at all. Blair glanced down at his own plate, though he had no appetite. He had eaten only a small bite of the bagel, but looking down at it he understood what Jim had done. Sweet coffee, though he knew Blair didn't usually sweeten his. Bland but nutritious food. Jim thought Blair was in shock and knew how to treat him appropriately. He was probably right. Blair reached for the partly-eaten bagel, thinking he should try to eat.

Jim choked on his food.

Blair looked up as Jim dropped his fork and grabbed blindly for the coffee cup.

He jumped out of his seat and rushed around to Jim's side, shouting to the waitress, "Can we get some water here, please!" He leaned over Jim. "You're okay, man."

Jim, still coughing, sipped the coffee and instantly spat it out, swearing.

Blair knew what was happening then. "Jim, try to relax," he advised, keeping his voice low and soothing. He ran a hand down Jim's back, over the bulge of his weaponry to find a spot, low on Jim's back, where he could touch and Jim would feel him. He continued to speak. "Listen to my voice, Jim. Concentrate on this, just the sound. Breathe and relax." The words were not important, only the tone. But Jim had to do this himself. He had to trust Blair to guide him back. Blair didn't know if Jim could do that.

Jim was still coughing, but less violently now, and he leaned into Blair's body. Blair felt the moment when the sensory spike began to fade.

"Alright, Jim. Breathe a bit deeper now. It will help."

The waitress finally appeared with a bottle of water. Blair uncapped it quickly and offered it to Jim. "Slowly, Jim. Just a sip," he cautioned.

"Is he okay?" the waitress asked anxiously. "Was there something in the food?"

"He'll be fine," Blair murmured, his attention on Jim. He was still holding him.

Jim's eyes were bloodshot, his cheeks flushed. The spike hadn't lasted long, but it had been bad. "Blair, I..."

"A spike," Blair said quietly. "I know the signs. Are you okay now?"

"Think so. Maybe." Jim rubbed a hand over his face. "I guess I'm lucky you were here."

Blair returned to his seat, but reached across the table to touch Jim's hand, maintaining a physical connection between them. It always helped Alex, at least in the beginning. Before she decided it was a weakness. Blair shrugged off thoughts of her.

"I had to use my senses a lot tonight," Jim confessed. "I knew I'd pay for it later." He turned his hand over and curled his fingers around Blair's.

"Do you have a headache?"

"Yeah. I have for hours. I'm used to it, but I've got no meds."

Blair remembered Jim had used codeine before. "If there's a pharma nearby we can get you some Tranquil."

Jim frowned. "How? That's prescription only."

"And I'm a licensed doctor, board certified and paid up. I don't have Ident® but I know my codes. I can prescribe for you on site. But I think we should wait here a while first. After a spike like that you should take some time."

"Sure." Jim's fingers idly stroked Blair's hand. He didn't seem to realise he was doing it. "Since we're staying, I have a question for you."

"Okay."

"How could Alex run like that? I've seen what mods can do for soldiers but I've never seen anything like that. She was as fast as the bike."

Blair remembered his brief glimpse of Alex behind them. He hadn't wanted to think about what it meant. "I'm not sure. But I think...I'm afraid... Jim, she's been really ill. She replaced a power pack without telling me and she drained the new one so fast, I couldn't figure out how. But maybe that's the answer. She's souped up her mods somehow."

"Is that possible?"

"Well, sure, if you want to die. It's like..." he struggled for a comparison that would make sense. "You know how athletes talk about pushing through the pain barrier?"

Jim nodded.

"Well, pain is there for a reason. You can do it, but there's a price. In athletics, it's lactic acid buildup. If you let it go on too long your heart can fail. Mods work the same way. There are ways to push them harder, but there's a price. It burns through fuel faster. The power cells overheat, which hurts and it can do permanent damage. And the residue build up would be... If Alex found someone to fuck with her mods like that, it explains a lot."

"So you didn't do it for her?"

"No! I've gone too far with her, I know, but I would never take out the safeties. It's murder!" Blair sank back in his chair. "Or suicide. Which is why she didn't ask me. Damn her!" Then he stared at Jim. "Did she follow us out, Jim? Was she in range of that EMP?"

"I'm not sure. I took the bike up to the monorail so she couldn't follow. But everyone knows where the monorail goes. If she kept running at that speed she could have made it out of the zone."

Blair shivered. He didn't know which to hope for. If Alex was caught in the pulse, she'd be in a lot of pain right now. If she got out, though, she was looking for them.

\*

Blair was not very familiar with Docklands, but Jim said there was a clinic close by with a pharma next door. Blair made a note to ask later how an Ellison was so well acquainted with the area. It was a short walk. When Blair saw the place, he worried: it seemed very small and might not stock what they needed. He asked, and was told they didn't stock

Tranquil, but had a similar, cheaper drug. The pharmacist allowed Blair to use his computer to check their version against the official directory and he decided it would do.

A little embarrassed to be doing this in front of Jim, Blair gave his name and credentials, filling out an electronic prescription for Jim. Despite what he'd said, his credentials were not strictly legal, as his license to prescribe was based on his partnership in a medical practice that didn't exist except for the purpose of obtaining the proper paperwork. His codes were accepted, though, and Jim paid for four shots of the drug.

Blair gave him the first right there with the pharmacist watching them. "Keep the rest with you. If you need it, you can take another shot in three hours. No more than four shots a day, okay?"

Jim pocketed the other three syringes. "Thanks, Doc. I appreciate it." Then his expression changed. He whirled and pushed his coat back, exposing his gun.

"Jim, what is it?"

"Quiet!" He touched the gun but didn't draw, and walked toward the door. It was a solid door with a small square of glass in the upper half. Jim avoided the glass and flattened himself against the wall.

"What's going on?" the pharmacist asked.

"I don't know," Blair admitted, "but I trust him. Is there a back way out of here?"

"Uh...only through the clinic. It's – "

The rest of his words were drowned by gunfire. Bullets ripped through the door. Blair hit the floor, dragging the pharmacist down with him.

"Down!" Jim yelled.

Blair was already down. He crawled behind the pharma counter for cover. The pharmacist followed him.

"Where is that exit?" Blair demanded.

He pointed to the corner. "There. But it's the clinic!"

Gunfire rang out as Jim returned fire.

The white-painted door led into the clinic. But they couldn't escape that way if they were going to be followed by someone shooting at them. Blair, still sheltering behind the counter, looked around for an alternative. He spied the walk-in closet where the restricted and dangerous drugs were stored.

"That store room. Does it lock from the inside?"

"Yes, but – "

"Get inside. Lock the door and stay low." Blair added, "You'll be safe," and fervently hoped it was true.

He waited until the pharmacist vanished into the store cupboard. The roar of the guns made it impossible to hear the lock turn.

Jim stopped shooting and Blair turned to see him swapping out the magazine in his gun. It was, to Blair, an unusual weapon: too big to be a handgun, small for an assault weapon, but obviously a powerful shooter.

"Jim, what is it?" Blair called.

"Alex," he snapped. He made a beckoning gesture. "Come here, if you can. Stay low." He turned back to the shattered window ready to fire again.



The gunfire seemed to have stopped for the moment. Scared, but trusting Jim, Blair scampered out from behind the counter and across the store to Jim's side.

"Base of the blue crane. Can you see her?" Jim asked.

Nervously, Blair peered through the bullet holes in the wall. He could see the crane, but when he looked at the base of it he saw something that might have been movement, but nothing he could recognise as Alex.

"No. I see the crane, but that's all." It wasn't exactly a surprise that Jim could see better than he could.

"Alright. Get behind me."

Blair moved as directed. He knew Alex wouldn't give up. Not if she had come this far. He also knew it wasn't really about him any more, if it ever was. Jim had challenged her. Twice, he had invaded Alex's territory and taken Blair from her custody. He had taken Blair to his bed. And Jim was a sentinel. It was a challenge she could not refuse. She would not back down until one of the three of them was dead.

"Help me get this coat off," Jim instructed.

Why? Blair wondered, but he raised his hands to Jim's shoulders, a twinge of pain reminding him of his own injuries. He grasped the coat and pulled it off Jim. It revealed the arsenal of weaponry strapped to Jim's body armour.

Jim was still watching through the window, his gun aimed. "Do you see two disks on my back, about the size of my hand?"

Blair touched one of them. "Yes."

"Take one off the strap. Careful – they're live."

"I don't see how – " Blair began. A fresh volley of gunfire interrupted him. Jim shifted his stance and returned fire. His movement showed Blair how the two devices were held to Jim's back. He reached for one and carefully detached it. "Got it."

The device was circular, flat like a discus and much heavier than it looked. On one side it was smooth metal, marred only by the etched serial number. On the other side were two buttons in the middle surrounded by a glowing green ring.

Jim turned to face Blair. "There's no time, so listen. That's a short range EM pulse grenade. If I can get close enough to her to use it, we have a chance to get out of this with all three of us alive. If I don't use it, I have to kill her."

Blair stared at the grenade in his hands. "How close?"

"Closer than this. It's your call, Blair, but you've got to make it right now."

Why me?

But Blair knew. He had to decide because he was the one who begged Jim to let Alex live.

He couldn't do this! Yes, he wanted Alex to live. But it sounded like Jim had to risk his life to get close enough and Blair didn't want that, either. How close was close enough?

Blair looked at Jim helplessly.

"Now, Chief!"

"I can't," Blair said. Then, hating himself, "I can't let her die. I'm sorry. I know it's wrong, but I can't." He offered the grenade to Jim.

Jim nodded curtly. He took the grenade, touched one of the buttons and its glowing circle turned red. He gave a swift, bitter smile. "See you on the other side."

He threw open the door and strode out into the street.

\*

Jim knew before he asked what Blair's answer would be. He hoped Blair would choose the practical option, but he didn't truly expect it. So when he walked out of the pharma, he already knew exactly what he needed to do.

Getting close to Barnes wasn't the problem. It was getting sufficiently far away from Blair. Jim would be an easy target for her out in the street, but it was a calculated risk.

Alexa Barnes was a sentinel, which might mean she was as accurate a shot as Jim, but he had already destroyed her cyber eye when he shot her back at the theatre. Even if her remaining eye was good, she would not have depth perception or her normal range of vision and that would affect her aim. Jim remembered Blair's warning about her ammunition – SD-Prime – but that was not what she'd been firing at the pharma. The gun she was using now had heavier, solid rounds. If Jim was lucky, that was all she had.

The real problem was how fast Alex could move. Jim was gambling that making himself a target would be too tempting for her: she would try to kill him rather than escape. So when Jim walked out, he expected to be under fire. In fact, he wanted it: he needed her fire to tell him her position. One way or another, Alex Barnes was going down. Today.

He reached the next doorway before she took the bait. Jim smiled grimly to himself. The wolf moved fast, but she didn't think fast. Her first bullet splintered the wood a short distance from his shoulder and instinctively Jim jerked back into the doorway. It was a pointless gesture: the door provided almost no cover. But it gave Jim the confirmation he wanted. He checked the load on his HK, calculating how long it would take him to cross the distance between them. There were two hundred rounds remaining in the magazine. It might be enough.

Jim slipped the grenade into his belt, took the HK in both hands so he could hold it on target and squeezed down on the trigger as he stepped out into the street. He saw a single muzzle flash as Alex attempted to return fire, but her bullet flew wide of his position as she dived for cover. Jim smiled grimly: she must be almost out of ammo. Jim's gun bucked in his hands, firing on automatic, but he held his aim and kept her pinned down. If she so much as peeked out from the cover of the crane, he could have killed her. His wrists and forearms ached from the effort of holding the HK steady as it kicked, but the constant thundering stream of automatic fire allowed him to cross.

As Jim's ammo got low, he took one hand off the gun. An accurate aim became impossible, but he didn't need it any longer. With his free hand, he pulled the grenade and pushed the charge button. The HK clicked empty. Jim ducked down and threw the grenade like a frisbee across the space.

He saw Alex rise from her cover, emboldened by the sudden silence. He saw her gun rise with her. The grenade blew: not an explosion, but an intense, localised pulse of electro-magnetic energy that overloaded any live circuit in its range.

Jim was too close. He felt the ripple of the pulse across his skin. His HK emitted a brief burst of sparks. The link in his eyepiece died. He felt a burst of searing pain as the link embedded in his wrist overloaded, too, cutting off his contact with Daryl and the rest of his team. The unexpected pain made him cry out.

"Jim!" Blair shouted and before Jim could tell him to stay put Blair was running toward him. Jim turned swiftly toward where Alex had been, reaching for a fresh gun, but there was no need. She lay on the ground beneath the crane, her body shaking. Jim was satisfied.

He got to his feet as Blair reached him. "I'm okay," he said quickly. "See to Alex."

He was a little disappointed by how quickly Blair moved to obey. Jim walked more slowly to where she lay. He holstered the now-useless HK Riot: he would have to replace its circuitry before it would fire again, but frying the gun had been worth it. As he came close to Alex, Jim watched her closely. He wanted to be certain she was truly defeated this time. He saw the darkening of the veins in her exposed skin. He saw the wreck his earlier bullet had made of her cyber-eye: the circuitry was exposed and blood dripped from the empty socket like tears. Her skin around the metal was scorched. Her hair hung limp and wet from the rain. But most telling were the tremors that ran through her body. Jim didn't think she was faking the convulsions.

Blair knelt beside her and lifted her head into his lap with a tenderness that broke Jim's heart. "Alex, it's me. Can you hear me?"

It was clear to Jim that she couldn't hear anything. But something else was clear, too: Blair's feelings for this woman, despite his insistence that it was in the past. Jim knew what he had to do.

"Blair," he said.

Blair looked up, his expression defiant as if he anticipated Jim saying something he wouldn't like.

"Go to the clinic," Jim told him. "See if they can help. I'll bring her." Jim hadn't forgotten that Blair, too, needed a medic.

"Can you carry her?" Blair asked.

Jim didn't think Blair was asking if he was strong enough. "I'll take good care of her," he answered.

Blair still didn't move, so Jim crouched down and began to arrange Alex's body so he could lift her. The tremors in her limbs didn't seem like a fit; it was more the kind of shaking that denoted hypothermia. Her skin felt warm to his touch, though, and the air wasn't cold enough to affect her core temperature. Jim slid his arms beneath her knees and her shoulders and lifted her easily.

"Blair," he said again. "Go."

Jim followed him. Alex weighed little, but she lay as a dead weight in his arms. She was unconscious. Jim's wrist was still smarting from the burn of his link and that wasn't even a true mod. Alex had so many mods – hadn't Blair said there were twelve power cells in her body? The pulse grenade must have been agony. Jim intended to spare her life for Blair's sake, but this much shock could be fatal, regardless of his best intentions.

The clinic doors had been open when they entered the pharma; it was locked now, a steel security screen covering the doors. Blair pounded on the screen and Jim saw a slot open in the screen.

"I can't let you in," a woman's voice announced before Blair could say anything. She sounded frightened.

"Please! She needs help!" Blair protested.

"Police are on the way," she warned. "You should go."

Someone bent on trouble might have taken it as a friendly warning; Jim heard it as a desperate attempt at distraction. He stepped up to Blair's side. "All the police in the city are busy fighting the Wolfpack. It will be a few hours at least before anyone responds to your call. We need emergency care for this woman and the use of your comm. No one is going to be hurt."

"I can't let you in," she repeated.

"You saw some of what happened out here and you're scared," Jim told her. "I understand. If we had time I would explain it all, but she will die if you keep us waiting. I can pay for your help."

The woman hesitated. "Will you surrender your guns?"

Jim wished he could give a different answer, but he said, "No. I'm an officer on duty. I can't give up my weapon." If she'd asked only for the HK he could have given it to her. His reply asserted he was a serviceman of some kind but he had no Ident® to prove it.

"Please," Blair said again. "She needs O<sub>2</sub> and an IV. Probably a beta blocker. I need a medi-scan to see the rest of the damage. We won't make trouble, I promise."

The slot in the door closed.

"Hey!" Blair protested.

But Jim could hear what was happening inside. "Blair, wait a moment," he said. "She's going to let us in."

The security screen began to roll upward.

The dark-haired woman wore a white lab-coat. "I'm Doctor Roberts," she said. "Come with me."

She led them through a wide hallway to a curtained medi-bed. Jim laid Alex down without waiting for instructions.

"Blair, do what you can to get her stable. I'll get us transport to a hospital." Jim turned to Doctor Roberts. "May I use your comm?"

Her eyes narrowed. "Don't you have a link?"

Jim raised his hand and drew back his sleeve to expose his ruined link. "It's burned out." There was a dark bruise around the wrist.

She nodded. "Over there."

Jim headed where she directed and found the comm unit on the wall. He was relieved to see it was a good one, with an integrated bio-scanner. That would make this easier. He punched for voice and said, "Ellison Tower."

"Ellison Industries, how may I help you?"

It was an AI speaking, so Jim didn't bother with pleasantries. "This is James Ellison," he announced, placing his palm on the scanner. "Verify by voice and palm print. Connect me to security."

There was a brief pause, then a human voice said, "Mr Taggart is not in the building, sir."

"I didn't ask for Joel, I said security. Whoever's minding the store is fine."

"Hold, please."

Jim heard a click, then a new voice. "Blake," the voice announced, then evidently surprised, "Mr Ellison. How can I help?"

"I need a pickup from the Southside clinic in Docklands and transport to Rainier Surgical Hospital."

"Are you injured, sir?" Blake sounded startled.

"Not me," Jim answered. "Two others. One walking. I also need my Ident® and contact cards. My assistant has them." He would give Doctor Roberts his card with the promise of payment. The Ellison name should reassure her. The pharma would be able to invoice him for the damage, too.

"Yes, sir. ETA fifteen minutes. I'll alert Rainier."

"Thank you, Blake." Jim disconnected. As he walked back to tell Blair their pickup was en route, he wondered about the battle he was missing. If all went to plan, it should be over in a few hours.

## CHAPTER TEN: "I NEED A GUIDE"

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...suggested my subject visualise his senses as a set of 'dials' which he could control. Once he mastered this technique, his control over his senses was nothing short of phenomenal. He could not only 'dial' his senses 'up' – making the sense he needed more acute at any one time – he also found he could 'dial it back'. This technique proved a significant advantage in several situations, detailed below.

The Sentinel, an unpublished manuscript believed written in 1999

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Blair was still half-asleep when he heard a light tap on the bedroom door. He had been thinking vaguely that he really should get up, since there was most definitely daylight out there, but the bed was so comfortable and warm a part of him wanted to stay there forever. He sat up reluctantly and pulled the comforter up to cover his chest.

The tap came again, quiet enough that it wouldn't have disturbed him if he were still sleeping.

"Who's there?" Blair called. He still felt a little disoriented. The room was so unlike anything he had ever slept in before. The bed alone was as big as the bedroom of his own tiny apartment. The mattress was miraculously both firm and soft, the sheets made of cotton, the comforter beautifully embroidered in silk. He didn't know what to do with himself in this place.

"It's Cathy," a woman answered. "I've brought you some breakfast."

Cathy. Catherine Ellison, Jim's stepmother, Blair's mind translated. He made an effort to shake off sleep. "Come in," he called.

The white-painted door slid open and Catherine came in, carrying a large tray. She was as beautiful in her simple white blouse and blue pants as she had been in her diamond-encrusted gown at the ball. Her blonde hair was held back by a wooden clip and she wore no makeup.

"Good morning!" Her greeting was sunny and warm. "I didn't know what you'd like, so I brought a little of everything."

"Coffee?" Blair smiled eagerly.

Her answering smile would have lit up the darkest room. "Of course." She set the tray on the bed beside Blair.

There was enough food for three! Pancakes, waffles, a little jug of syrup, fresh berries, crispy bacon, two kinds of egg, three kinds of sausage, toast, cheese, a golden pastry something, orange juice...and coffee.

Blair looked at the tray, then at Catherine. "I thought you said breakfast. Where's the army?"

"Just eat what you want, Blair." She poured coffee into a cup for him.

Blair sipped the coffee gratefully. It was a lighter flavour than the coffee Jim served, but he liked it a lot.

"How are you feeling?"

Blair rubbed his broken ribs with his free hand. "Much better," he admitted. The coffee was reviving him. "How long did I sleep?"

"It's almost eleven."

Blair wasn't sure what time it had been when Jim put him to bed. He wasn't in any condition to notice at the time.

A security team from Ellison Industries had flown the three of them – Blair, Jim and Alex – from the Docklands clinic to Rainier Surgical Hospital. It was the place Blair did his surgical residency but this time he was admitted as a patient. All three of them were. Jim's injuries were minor, but Blair's were not and Alex was barely stable when they reached the

emergency unit. Doctors would not allow Blair near Alex until his own injuries had been assessed and treated. He had torn muscles from the dislocation of his shoulder, three broken ribs, a lot of bruises, lacerations on his feet from running so far without shoes and lingering effects from the drugs he had been given. Most of all, he was simply exhausted. Yet Blair could not rest until he was satisfied Alex was getting competent care. He knew the quality of the hospital, but her mods were so complex only an expert cyberneticist could handle it.

The chief of surgery at RainierSurgical Hospital had been one of the guests at the Ellison ball. He remembered Blair favourably and on Jim's word allowed him to stand as next-of-kin for Alex. It helped that there was no one else. Having been designated her family, Blair was not permitted to operate but when he began discussing her condition with the cybernetic specialist assigned to her, it quickly became clear that no one knew her mods like Blair did.

Blair joined the team for her surgery. He did not touch a single surgical instrument, but he was in the operating room through the whole thing, talking the surgeon through the interconnections, explaining how each component was installed so they could safely be removed. Every mod and power cell in her body was rendered useless by Jim's pulse grenade. To save her life, every one of them had to be removed. But without her mods, Blair knew, Alex would never be healthy again. Her body had become dependent on the mecha. When the surgery was over, Alex needed a machine to breathe for her, but her heart was beating on its own. She was alive. There was hope.

It was only when he knew she would live that Blair could allow himself to stop. He had pushed himself beyond his limits and it all seemed to hit him at once; he collapsed in the hospital corridor. Blair recalled few details of what followed. Jim was there, insisting they leave. He said something about taking Blair home and half-carried him to an air-car. Blair woke when they landed, not at Jim's apartment or Blair's but at his father's home: the island mansion where the ball was held a few days before. Jim took Blair to this bedroom, undressed him and put him to bed like a child. He had kissed Blair before he left and told him to get some sleep. Blair remembered nothing more until Catherine woke him with breakfast.

"Is Jim here?" he asked as he ate.

"He left early for Cascade, but he said you can comm him if you want to leave. There's no hurry. You are welcome here for as long as you wish to stay."

That should have been reassuring, but to Blair it felt intimidating. Why was he welcome in the home of the most powerful family in the state? He was nobody. He laid his fork down. "What has Jim told you about me?" he asked.

Catherine smiled again. "Nothing."

Relieved, Blair said, "We're not...what you think."

"I don't think anything," Catherine answered. "I know that you are someone who matters to Jim. He's a good friend to me, so that's all I need to know." She patted Blair's knee through the comforter. "Blair, may I tell you something about Jim?"

"Sure," Blair agreed, though he didn't really want to hear confidences. He wasn't part of this family. It wasn't right to pretend he could be.

"We didn't get along when we first met." Catherine's eyes wandered as she spoke. "Jim thought I was a gold-digger who married Bill for his money. I understand why he felt that way, but he wouldn't give me a chance to prove him wrong. Then Jim was sent to war and he didn't come back. He was listed as missing in action but Bill's military contacts made it clear they didn't expect to find him alive."

"That must have been hard," Blair said sympathetically. He remembered it, a little, though he paid little attention to the news headlines at the time: the disappearance of James Ellison, lost in action; the mourning of the family; and a legal battle over his will that was still being fought in the courts when the lost hero returned from the dead.

"For William, it was devastating," Catherine said, "but in a way, I think it was harder when Jim came back to us. We had begun to move on. Don't get me wrong, it was wonderful that he was alive. But he came home a changed man."

Blair nodded. Jim had told him a little of his experience as a prisoner of war; it made complete sense that it would have changed him.

Catherine shook herself. "I'm saying more than I meant to. What I'm trying to explain is that it wasn't until Jim came home that we became friends. We spent time together while he was recovering and we both learned that we'd misjudged one another."

Blair watched her for a moment after she fell silent. "What are you really telling me?"

"That he's worth the effort. Jim is a good friend to have. He's intensely loyal and protective of the people he loves. He doesn't trust easily, but when he decides he trusts a person, he trusts completely. If there's more to you and Jim than friendship..." she smiled wryly, "well, I wouldn't know. Even if I weren't married to his father, I'm not Jim's type."

At that, Blair had to smile. "No, I guess you're not," he agreed wryly.

Catherine stood. "Well, I'll leave you to your breakfast. Your clothing is in the closet, when you're ready. If you want some company, I will be downstairs on the terrace. If you need anything else, just use the link."

\*

It was past noon when Blair finally emerged from the bedroom. He felt like himself again. Sleep, good food, a shower and a shave – it was the best prescription ever. In the bedroom closet he had found his own clothing, not new clothes in his size. He was grateful for something familiar to wear, but frankly embarrassed that Jim – or someone Jim sent – had seen his home. His unit in the Honecomb was a slum, compared with this.

Blair used the link to get directions to the terrace and headed there. He felt horribly out of place in his scruffy jeans and flannel, in a house that was all old-fashioned opulence. Even when it wasn't decorated for a ball, the mansion was stunning.

As he opened the door to the terrace, the first person he saw was not Catherine but Jim. He looked up and saw Blair. He smiled. "You're looking better, Blair."

"I feel good," Blair admitted. "The ribs are a bit tender but the repair is holding. You?"

"Nothing wrong with me. I just killed my link." Jim turned his hand over, revealing the healing patch covering the skin where his link had been. "Doc says the skin has to heal before I can get a new one. I'd rather get it implanted now, then I only have to heal once, but..." he shrugged. "I guess the doc knows best."

Blair stepped through the door and saw Catherine in a seat beside Jim. He smiled a greeting for her then turned back to Jim. "It sounds contradictory, but a link is implanted just under the epidermis. If you put it under damaged skin, it will heal too thickly over the comm chip. But if you don't want to wait you can get a new link implanted in a different site, where the skin is okay." Blair realised he was babbling. Jim knew all this; his doctor would have explained it. He shut up.

Jim stood. "I was just about to come and find you. I want to ask a favour, Blair."

Blair headed for the table where Jim and Catherine had been talking and pulled up a third chair for himself. "What can I do?"

"I have to go back into the city. This isn't an army thing; it's an Ellison thing."

Blair grinned. "The Ellisons own half of Cascade. You're looking to buy up the other half while property prices are down?"

Catherine laughed. "I like him," she told Jim.

"I knew you would," he returned. "The battle, as you pointed out, hurt a lot of people who aren't Wolfpack. This isn't about buying property, though I might if it seems like a good idea. I think while the Wolfpack is hurting, we've got an

opportunity to invest in making things better down there. I want to look around, meet some people and see where some investment can make a real difference. I need a guide. Will you join me?"

Blair shrugged. "I guess I can. But to do what? Show you around?"

"Show me the territory as you know it. Help me meet some people. Good people who want to change things."

Blair thought about it. He knew where money was needed, but there was a reason no one ever invested in the under-city. It wasn't just about the Wolfpack. "I don't know if there's much profit to be found," he said dubiously.

"Profit isn't the point. Will you help?"

"Sure. I've got nothing better to do." The words came out more bitterly than Blair intended. But it was true. His medical practice was gone: all his records were in his matrix, which must have been destroyed by the EMP. It seemed unlikely he could ever go back to rebuild. Most of the Wolfpack leaders were either dead or in police custody, but Blair had no way to be sure if everyone who knew he had betrayed the Wolfpack was off the streets.

Jim's expression said he understood, or thought he did. "Do you want to get lunch first?" he offered.

"No, I just finished breakfast."

"Let's go then." He kissed Catherine on the top of her head. "That's for the advice," he told her. "We'll be back for supper."

Catherine gave him a cheeky smile. "I'll warn Bill."

\*

Instead of his usual car, Jim selected a much older vehicle from the garage: a rugged grav-car with hints of rust around the rims. It was still a good car, but perhaps less likely to be stolen than his own, flashy Hercules. Blair strapped himself in, feeling a bit awkward because of the protective vest Jim insisted he wear. They were returning to Wolfpack territory, and though Jim did not expect trouble, he refused to take chances with Blair's safety.

The Wolfpack was not gone, and it was too soon to know if it was broken. In the joint military and police action, the Wolfpack alphas had been killed or arrested and jails were full of others whom the police believed they could successfully charge with crimes. This did not, however, account for the whole of the Wolfpack. There were too many people affiliated with the pack for them all to be arrested and of those, some were guilty of crimes, others were not. Blair was honestly not certain in which category he belonged himself. He had never officially joined the Wolfpack and his medical practice was largely legitimate. He bought his mods from legal sources and never cut corners with cheap components. But it was also true that he had supplied mods to people beyond safe limits and his formal records were necessarily often falsified. It was enough to lose him his license if he were ever fully investigated and he was sure a prosecutor could build a criminal case against him. But he didn't consider himself a criminal.

"Blair," Jim said quietly, "I think I owe you an explanation."

Blair shook off his gloomy thoughts, but his stomach was still churning. "About what?" he asked apprehensively.

"You were partly right, the day of the attack. I was influenced by my memories of Red Night. But not in the way you think. This wasn't about revenge."

Blair looked at Jim. "I would understand if it was. You had a terrible experience."

"Where were you that night?" Jim asked him.

Blair had been expecting the question. Jim had told him his story; it was reasonable for him to expect a quid pro quo. But Blair had no Red Night story to tell. "My mom moved us around a lot when I was little. We were in Texas that year, I think. I didn't really know about Red Night until I came back to Cascade, when I was ten."



"Then where do you get off pretending you understand?" Jim demanded, an edge of anger creeping into his voice. He flipped on the autopilot, told it to maintain course and speed and turned to look at Blair.

"I never said I understand what it was like for you, Jim! I know I can't."

"I didn't mean my experience. I mean Cascade's. If you weren't here, Chief, you don't get it. So listen up."

Blair swallowed. "I'm listening."

"On Red Night, the Wolfpack was just a street gang. Powerful, yes, and with a reputation for viciousness, but nothing special. By the time you came back to Cascade, the Wolves were in control of the undercity. Is that where you and your mom lived?"

"Not my mom. I was living with my grandparents then. We lived on the east side of the undercity. Sector 335."

"So tell me about the Wolfpack in those days. What was your experience?"

Blair thought about it. "Well, it was difficult to avoid being involved with them in some way. A lot of kids my age wanted to be in the Pack. It was a way to have a better life. Things were different for me. I didn't much want to live in Cascade and I was looking for a way out."

"Were you afraid of them?" Jim asked.

"Everyone was. If you crossed the Wolves, you could end up headless and handless in a dumpster. But that made them exciting, too. Teenagers like danger, you know? Grandma Sandburg told me to stay away from them, but I didn't need telling."

Jim nodded grimly. "In the years since then, the Wolfpack has only grown. The territory they control is bigger now. They are more powerful within their territory. There are more of them now and they are more organised. Parts of the undercity haven't been policed for years. I knew all this, but it didn't seem like my problem. I'm not a cop. But when you told us they were stockpiling bio weapons it raised the game to a whole new level. I was afraid of what it meant because there's only one purpose for weapons like that: war."

Blair considered that, watching the great towers of the city getting closer as they flew. "You think they were planning an attack?"

"Do you think they weren't?" Jim challenged.

"I don't believe there was a specific plan. But even if I'm wrong, Jim, I don't think you really understand what you've done to the people down there."

"That's why we're going there today." Jim sighed heavily. "Blair, war destroys, but that provides opportunities for reconstruction. The leaders of Cascade – including my family – wasted that chance after Red Night and we handed power to the Wolfpack. What I'm looking for now is a way to give people a chance to rebuild in a good way."

"Without the Wolves," Blair said.

"Without the Wolves. Let me ask you a question. I don't want you to answer right away. Think about it and tell me later, okay?"

"What's the question?"

"If you had a lot of money, where do you think it should be spent to do the most good for these people?"

Blair opened his mouth to give the obvious answer, but stopped himself. Jim wanted him to answer later. "I'll think about it," he agreed.

\*

Jim flew between the buildings and finally descended to the street near a police station. He parked the car and unbelted. "We'll walk from here, if that's okay."

Blair understood he was thinking the car would be safer here, so he nodded. During the drive he'd had time to consider Jim's question and to think about what parts of the undercity Jim needed to see. Jim's chosen parking spot was a long way from one place Blair wanted to go but it gave him another idea.

"Where are we going?" Jim asked as they walked away from the car.

"Let's start with the market," Blair suggested. He pulled up the hood of his slicker and headed that way. Jim fell into step beside him.

The market took up the ground-level of two buildings and the intersection between them. It was deep under the shadow of Sky City, where the sun could not shine. Perhaps because there was no sun, the denizens of the market filled the space with light and colour. This was one of the places where the people of the undercity came to make merry. Lanterns hung in chaotic strings. Between the lanterns hung plastic streamers, shiny from the rain and swinging at the slightest breeze.

In the building sections where it was relatively dry were the permanent stalls: the water-sellers, bakers and fishmongers; the suppliers of matrix components, clothing and hardware. In the intersection, mobile stalls appeared and disappeared every day, vendors bringing their wares by car or on wheeled trolleys, setting up tables and colourful waterproof curtains for a few hours or days, then disappearing again until they had more to sell. There was music day and night: by day performers of varying quality plied their trade for a few coins or credits. By night the square became a cacophony of rock music and dancing where the trade was narcotics and alcohol, prostitutes and gambling.

Here, if you had no money you could usually barter for what you needed, though you had to be careful. Traders were sharp and unscrupulous and if you were desperate enough you could find yourself bartering away your own body after dark for the sake of a hot dog that could well contain actual dogmeat. But if you were savvy it was a good place to trade.

Most days, by the time the sun was high enough for a little light to filter into the lowest streets the market was full and bustling. You had to keep your hands in your pockets to hang on to your wallet. As Jim and Blair reached the place, it was immediately apparent to Blair that there were far fewer stalls open than usual. He had expected fewer, but the market seemed almost deserted.

"At this hour, the market should be full," Blair said, distressed. "I can't see any signs of property damage or fighting here. Jim, what happened?"

"It's two days since the attack. A lot of people were hurt," Jim said grimly. "Or killed."

"Yes, but this is one of the places people would come to reconnect. If the market is this empty, it's worse than I thought." Blair was thinking it through as he spoke, and the conclusion was inescapable. "It's more than just the Wolfpack being broken. Jim, what would happen to Cascade if Ellison Industries vanished overnight?"

Jim frowned. "Hypothetically? It would destroy our economy. The company supports half of the city."

"But the Wolfpack supported the other half," Blair said.

"That isn't true."

"Look around you, man! This is what happened in less than forty eight hours. This place wasn't touched directly in the attack, but that EMP touched everyone. I doubt there's a single person in the undercity who isn't close to a mech user."

"I hear you, Blair," Jim said uncomfortably.

Blair looked around them. "Jim, I know you want a tour but I'm really worried about my friends. Can we check on them? They're not Wolves."

"We can do anything you want," Jim answered, "as long as it's safe."

Blair gave him a grateful smile. "Did you bring any money with you?"

Jim narrowed his eyes in mock-suspicion. "A little. Why?"

Blair simply grinned and headed into the covered market. Even here, many of the stores were closed, security screens or simple canvas sheets covering entrances. The place Blair was looking for was open, though: a brightly-painted stall where Luis sold freshly-cooked Mexican and South American food. Outside, several rickety tables were surrounded by mismatched chairs but none of them was occupied. That wasn't too unusual, though: people bought Luis' food to eat while they browsed the rest of the market, or while they headed home.

He smiled for the elderly Mexican man behind the green and red sign. "Hola. How's business today?"

"Slow, man. Slow." He gestured to the depopulated market.

"Two of the usual, then. Make mine with extra chilli."

Luis gave him a big smile and threw meat into a pan. The smell was amazingly good.

Jim moved up to Blair's side. "I thought you weren't hungry."

"Luis makes the best burritos I've ever tasted," Blair gushed. "And I lived in Mexico for a while, so trust me on this."

"I'm not a big fan of rat," Jim said dubiously.

Luis answered with a torrent of angry Spanish and Blair held up his hands in a placating gesture. He answered in the same language. "He is a stranger, Luis. He saw the crap they sell outside. He will love your cooking, I promise."

Slightly mollified, Luis wrapped the first burrito and offered it to Blair. "No rat."

Blair grinned. "Luis, if you served it, I'd even eat the rat." He passed the burrito to Jim. "Trust me, man."

Jim exchanged the burrito for some money, then brought it to his face and inhaled deeply, scenting the hot food while Blair paid for it. Blair watched him and evidently Jim detected no scent of rat, because he took a bite. He raised eyebrows as he chewed. "This is really good," he conceded.

Luis gave Blair the second burrito. "Extra chilli," he confirmed. "You enjoy and come back for more."

"Not today, Lou. But soon, I hope." Blair bit into his without hesitation. "Delicioso." He smiled and gestured to Jim. "Let's go, Jim. There's one more person I've got to see."

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There was nothing in the exterior of the building to indicate its purpose. The walls were red-brown brick beneath peeling paint. The windows were tall slits blocked by vertical bars. The glass within the windows was painted on the inner side, so Jim could see nothing within. The door was large and wide, reinforced with rusting metal.

Blair walked up to the door and punched a code into the keypad beside the intercom.

A woman's voice answered. "I'm sorry. We're full."

"It's Sandburg. I came to help."

There was a silence, then, "Damn, Sandburg, I thought you were dead. What took you so long? And who's with you?"

Blair ignored the first question. "He's a friend. It's okay."

The door slid open. Blair turned to Jim. "Your Ident®. James Ellsworth, right?"

"Yes." But if Blair didn't want him to be Ellison, Jim was wary. "What is this place?"

"I guess you could call it a hospital. Not the kind you're used to, though." Blair walked in and Jim followed him.

The woman waiting inside was clearly a medic, but she looked like she was working in a combat zone. A scruffy surgeon's cap was her only real uniform. She wore no scrubs or lab coat, but a kind of sleeveless tunic over street clothes. The tunic was stained with blood and other liquid splashes. Her greying hair was drawn back in a braid under the cap, but a lot of strands had come loose. On the left side of her head, half-hidden by the cap, was a white bandage held on with surgical sealant.

Her tired eyes crinkled as she smiled at Blair, opening her arms. "You're a sight for sore eyes, Sandburg."

Blair hugged her. "I can't stay long, Lise. Are you okay?"

"I'm just tired," she said as she stepped back. She touched the left side of her head. "I could use a second opinion, though."

"Of course," Blair agreed instantly. He turned toward Jim. "This is my friend, Jim Ellsworth. I want to show him what you do here. Is that alright?"

She appraised Jim with a glance. "Why?" she asked, her tone a shade hostile.

Jim answered before Blair could. "Blair thinks I don't understand what life is like here." He shrugged. "He's probably right."

"What life is like is too damn busy to play tourist guide," she snapped. "But you can look around, if Sandburg vouches for you."

"I do," Blair said.

"Alright, then." She pulled off the surgical cap and rubbed her hair before offering her hand to Jim. "Lisette Dean."

Jim took her hand. "Jim Ellsworth." He felt as if he should offer help: she was clearly exhausted. But he wasn't yet sure what he could do, or even why Blair had brought him here.

Blair took Lise to a nearby room and made her sit down while he carefully peeled the dressing away from the side of her head. "It's a nasty burn," he said grimly. "Did you seal it at once?"

"There wasn't time," she answered. "Sandburg, it was crazy in here."

He gave her an affectionately exasperated look. "You need to take care of yourself first, or you're no good to everyone else. You taught me that, Lise. You need an antibiotic shot and a proper seal on the bandage."

"I've taken a shot," Lise said.

"Good. Stay put. I'll get a fresh dressing." Blair ducked out of the door, leaving Jim alone with her.

"You look a bit lost," Lise said.

He smiled wryly. "Like Blair said, I'm a stranger here. What happened?" He looked at her injury.

"You're kidding, right?" Her look was no longer friendly. "My link blew up in the attack."

"Oh. I'm sorry, I should have realised." Was that why Blair brought him here? To confront him with the consequences of the EMP? If that was the case, Jim was not happy about it. He understood the consequences very well.

Blair gently lifted her hair out of the way and began to pat down the edges of the seal. "Lise, I installed an upgrade for Ami Cheung a few days ago. Is she here?"

Lise nodded. "She came in with the first wave. I expected you sooner or I'd have had her in surgery."

"You didn't operate?"

"I only operate on mods if the work is shoddy. Yours never is, Blair."

"Better take me to her," he suggested. He ran his fingers over the seal. "There, that should do it."

Lisette checked the seal herself by touch and thanked him before she led them further into the building.

The room was huge, the domed ceiling held up by iron pillars. Tungsten lamps hung from chains: old fashioned devices that provided heat as well as light, but not enough of either. Row upon row of beds filled the room and every one of them was occupied. Jim's skin prickled in the oddly damp air and he half raised a hand to his face, wanting to cover his nose. The scent was unpleasant. It wasn't a smell of death, but of sickness: the accumulation of too many people in poor ventilation, sweat, waste and vomit. Many eyes watched them as they entered the room. Other patients were unconscious or sleeping.

Was Lisette taking care of all these people on her own? There had to be a hundred and fifty patients, perhaps more.

Lisette led them to a bed where a girl lay, moaning softly. She was perhaps ten years old, perhaps an undernourished twelve; Jim wasn't sure. There was a frame over her lower body, keeping the blanket from touching her skin.

"This is Ami," Lisette said to Jim.

Blair knelt beside the bed. "Hi, Ami. I'm Doctor Blair. Do you remember me?"

"You fixed my leg," she said, her voice high and clear.

Blair smiled. "That's right. I know it's not working too well right now. I just want to take a look, Ami. I won't hurt you." He waited for her nod before he raised the blanket away from the frame. From where Jim stood, he could not see what lay beneath, but he saw Blair's expression before the young man masked it. Her injury was bad.

"A medical prosthetic?" Jim asked.

Lisette nodded. "Tong justice."

Jim was about to ask Blair to decode that for him when Blair rose and beckoned to him. "Come and look. It's okay."

Jim moved around the bed.

Speaking quietly, Blair explained. "Ami's family ran afoul of the Tongs. They couldn't pay the protection money, so the Tong took it out of their daughter. Her knee has been ruined. You see?"

Jim could see. The kneecap was missing and the joint was oddly twisted as if the bones didn't fit together. He could see that much even under the mecha. "Who are the Tong?" he asked. He was familiar with the term: unofficial brotherhoods among families of Asian descent. They were a support network, part of the culture. But that didn't cover this sort of brutality.

"One of the factions that will be looking to take over if the Wolves are gone," Blair answered. "Ami was lucky. I was able to get a cyber-replacement for her knee. That's expensive for a child because it has to be upgraded regularly as she grows. I didn't charge for the first replacement, but I had to for the upgrade. I don't know the details, but her family did a deal with the Wolfpack for the cost. And they will still have to make good on that, even though it's useless now."

Right. "You've made your point, Blair."

Blair turned to him. "No, Jim. That's not the point I'm making." He looked at Lisette. "Is your OR stocked?"

"Emergency supplies only," she answered.

"My own supplies are gone, too, but an emergency pod will be enough for this. I'm glad you waited for me."

Lisette smiled tightly. "I trust you. I've got consent; I could see what was needed."

Blair nodded. "Jim, Ami needs surgery. I've got to remove the mod before the fuel starts to leak into her blood, and I think I'll have to amputate. Lise could have done that much, but she waited for me because I can prep the limb ready for a new mod. If we can get her one."

Jim understood. "What will that cost?" he asked.

"I'm not asking for money for her, either. I'm trying to answer your question. You know, in the wider sense."

"Tell me anyway. What will a new mod cost?"

"A few thousand for the hardware, but the real cost is time. Money can't buy that."

"You're going to operate now?"

"I have to. While I work, Jim, let Lise show you around. We'll talk after."

"You don't need help?" Jim asked, surprised.

Blair shook his head. "This isn't Rainier Surgical, Jim. A team would be nice, but I can do this alone."

Jim frowned, but decided it was best not to argue. This was Blair's world, not his. Blair said money couldn't buy time, but he wasn't wholly correct. Money could buy a lot: more people, better equipment, things that translated to more time to do the work. If this place was legitimate, there could be a lot Jim could do to help. If.

Lisette moved to the other side of Ami's bed while Blair replaced the blanket over the girl. He crouched beside the bed again. "It hurts, huh?" he said to her.

"Yes," she answered.

"Well, I'm gonna fix that for you. Be brave a little bit longer, Ami." Blair touched a control and began to move the bed with the girl in it.

Jim turned to Lisette. "I'd like to be useful. Is there something I can do to help, rather than take a guided tour?"

Her eyes narrowed suspiciously. "Do you have any medical experience, rich boy?"

Jim didn't take insult. "US Army Ranger. Field medical training, triage, basic battlefield surgery. Not pretty, but effective."

"Good enough. Come with me."

Five minutes later Jim was holding a tray of medical supplies and following Lisette from bed to bed while she examined patients, changed dressings and administered medication. She hadn't asked him to do anything that required medical knowledge.

"Blair said this is a hospital?" he said while she worked. "Are you a doctor?"

"Technically, we're a sexual health clinic and I'm a nurse. That and addiction treatment are the only kinds of medical care that can be delivered free of charge around here. Even emergency care is limited to the licensed hospitals. These people can't afford that, so we stretch the definition as far as we can."

"All of these people were hurt in the attack?"

"Most of them," she agreed. They aren't Wolves or addicts. Mecha is a cheap and fast alternative to proper medical care. Down here, a lot of people have mods of some kind."

"I understand that," Jim told her. "But I'm not sure I understand why you have to masquerade as an STD clinic."

"Legally we aren't licensed for general practice. Getting that license costs a fortune upfront and keeping it costs more every year. That money is better spent on patients. It's a no-win situation."

"Are you a charity?"

"Legally? No. Realistically, we sure ain't making any profit. Patch, please."

Jim looked at the injury she was treating – burns across a man's chest – then at the supplies he carried. "I don't think there's one big enough."

"Just give me the biggest." Lisette took the patch Jim offered and began to work it, stretching the fabric out. That would dilute the healing gel, making it less effective. "We do the work we're licensed to do – STD testing, treatment and education. But truthfully that's just a way into the community. When people trust us, they come to us for help." She placed the stretched patch over the wound.

"You sound like there's some ulterior motive," Jim suggested.

She patted down the edges of the seal. "Nothing sinister. There are more ways to help than the medical, that's all. Sometimes it's as simple as talking to someone, helping them see they have choices. Then again, sometimes we have weeks like this."

"It's a lot to deal with all on your own."

"I'm not usually alone. The past two days were crazy for everyone, so I sent them home. Today it's just me until the night staff arrive."

"I'm glad I'm here to help, then."

They continued for several hours, until Jim saw Blair pushing Ami's bed back into the room. To Jim's eyes he looked tired, perhaps more than he should be if the surgery were as routine as he'd suggested. Blair had been through a lot; physically he was recovered but perhaps there was more than the physical to worry about.

Blair fixed the bed in its place and set up a portable medi-scan beside it. Jim couldn't read a medi-scan as well as Blair, but he recognised enough of the readout to know Ami was doing well.

Blair looked up with a weary smile. "She'll sleep for a few hours, Lise, but she's okay."

"Thank you. Her parents will be relieved."

Blair stroked the child's dark hair and straightened up. "Time to go?" he asked Jim.

"We can stay longer if you need to," Jim offered, though he thought Blair needed rest.

"I want to stay, but I'm too tired for another surgery. I guess it's catching up with me." He turned to Lisette. "Lise, my contact codes are dead. I don't know when I'll have a new one but I've got yours. I'll see what I can do about a replacement mod for Ami, and I'll be in touch."

She nodded. "Isn't there any way I can contact you?"

Jim stepped in, offering her a company card. "Leave a message at Ellison Industries. As soon as we've got a new link for Blair, he'll give you the code."

Lisette looked at the card suspiciously. Jim knew it looked strange. Now she would be speculating about who he was and why he was speaking for Blair. It couldn't be helped.

\*

Blair's hand shook as he tried to belt himself into the car and it took him three attempts to fasten the belt. What was wrong with him? He wanted to go back to the mansion and sleep for twelve hours...but he wasn't free to relax.

"I need to check on Alex," he said to Jim. "Can we go to the hospital?"

A fleeting frown crossed Jim's face, but he nodded. "Sure. I'll drop you there and send a car to pick you up. I've got some things to do. See what's left of my apartment. Call that cop."

"Okay." Blair was a little relieved he wouldn't have to hurry, but disappointed he wouldn't have Jim's company.

Jim started the car and headed up to the lower traffic lane. "So...that question," he prompted.

"You asked me where I would spend money." Blair tugged at the seatbelt uncomfortably. "Jim, I needed you to see the infirmary because I wasn't sure you'd understand what the real challenges are. You won't like my answer."

"So tell me."

"Whatever you think of them, the Wolfpack was – is – necessary. They were too powerful, I know, and you were right: they had to be stopped. But the Wolfpack keeps the undercity stable. They weren't planning another Red Night. Just the opposite, man, the Wolves are the reason there hasn't been another one. That poor kid, maimed for life because her dad stood up to the Tong..."

"The Wolfpack didn't stop the Tong hurting her," Jim interrupted.

"Yes, they did," Blair argued. "When I reported what happened to Ami, Alex sent a team to find out who ordered it. She let me repair her leg pro bono. Sure, her dad owed the Wolfpack after that but he wasn't forced to join. That's not how it works. You asked how I would spend the money?"

"Yeah?" Jim's tone said he already knew he would hate it.

"I would fund the infirmary so they can provide proper care, free of charge for those who can't afford to pay. I would find the people who used to be leaders in the Wolfpack – not the alphas, but the ones who managed the businesses and know the streets. I would pay them to keep doing that, legitimately, with discounts on care for their mods as an incentive to stay legit and police backup against bastards who maim children. And I would hire some good people like Lisette to help with education so kids have a way to get out of the undercity if they want to." There. Take that.

"You're talking about funding criminals, Blair."

"Criminals, yes. Not crime. It's called rehabilitation."

"Maybe." Jim sounded thoughtful. He was silent for a moment while he took the car higher. "I agree that the infirmary needs funding. If they'll accept the strings that come with it that will be easy."

"What strings?"

"I'll have to work out the details, but I think the best way would be if I hire a business manager to sort out the license issue. It would mean they'd have to tighten up hiring. No more random volunteers. They might have to close while the premises are brought up to code. Lisette said they can't afford what it would take to get licensed because the money has to be spent on patients. But that's a lack of vision. They need to give that up in the short term so they can help more people, and help them better, for the long term."

"How long would they have to close?"

"I don't know. From what I saw, I'd guess a few months. A year at most."

"Lisette would never go for it, but she's not in charge. It could work, Jim, but there wouldn't be much profit in it."

"No, I'd set it up as a non-profit and expect to take a loss for at least the first few years. The rest, though...I don't know. Your idea is sound, Blair, but it's not as easy as you make it seem."

Blair was surprised. If Jim was prepared to consider working with the Wolfpack, perhaps he had changed more than Blair thought.

\*



Jim stood at the edge of the swimming pool, his toes curled at the rim where the water lapped gently. As Blair watched from behind the glass, Jim raised his arms. He took a deep breath in...and out...bent his knees and dived into the pool. His body flew in a graceful arc and entered the water with barely a splash. He plunged toward the bottom of the pool then turned in a smooth curve, kicked out and began to swim toward the surface.

Blair opened the door and walked into the room. The humidity hit him like a slap in the face. The air was thick with the smell of chlorine, but Blair, transfixed by the sight of Jim, barely noticed. He thought he had never seen anything as beautiful as this. Jim's tanned skin was scarred, but that was a superficial flaw. Beneath the skin lay hard, flat muscle and sinew: a strong, healthy body. But the real beauty of the man was the way he moved. Everything about that dive, each breath, each motion, each muscle was under perfect control. Blair understood, watching him, how important that was to Jim. Control defined him. Control over himself was paramount: his body exemplified that, but it wasn't just physical control. His mind and his emotions were equally controlled. It was why control of his senses mattered so much.

Jim's head broke the surface and he waved to Blair. "You're back! Want to join me?"

Blair took an involuntary step back, though he was nowhere near the water. "I don't know how to swim."

Jim came toward him, cutting through the water with strong, even strokes. At the edge of the pool he looked up, treading water. "I can teach you," he offered.

Blair had enjoyed the water when he was a child, but he had never learned to swim. He and his mother never lived in one place for long enough. But when he was nine he almost drowned in a disastrous attempt to cross a river. He'd never gone near the water again. He wasn't phobic, he would be willing to try again...but he didn't want to make a fool of himself in front of Jim.

"No thanks, man. I'm good."

Jim hauled himself out of the pool and sat on the edge, his lower legs still in the water. "Alright," he agreed easily. "I was just cooling off after my workout." He pulled his feet out of the water, stood and walked toward Blair.

Water beaded on his skin and ran down his face and chest. Blair couldn't take his eyes off it. When he finally raised his eyes to Jim's, he saw a big grin there. You like what you see, that grin said, and Blair felt his face heat with embarrassment.

But Jim simply picked up a towel from the bench beside him. "I need to shower." He winked. "Want to join me?"

Blair's mouth dropped open. Oh, boy, he wanted to say yes! But...

"Catherine asked me to tell you supper is ready."

"Oh. Raincheck, then. I'll make it quick." He flipped the towel over his shoulder and walked away, leaving Blair to watch his ass.

\*

Blair pushed open the library door. Jim looked up as he entered, smiled a greeting then dimmed the matrixdisplay and put whatever he had been doing into standby mode.

"How was Alex?" Jim asked as Blair walked toward him. "I didn't want to ask in front of everyone at supper."

Jim didn't really care about Alex, but Blair appreciated being asked and appreciated even more Jim sparing him having to explain in front of his family. He smiled uncertainly. "She's still unconscious. Jim, she might never wake up."

Jim clasped his shoulder comfortingly. "You've done everything you can for her."

"I know." Blair sank down onto the plush couch. "Jim, about that deal we discussed..."

"Deal?" Jim's familiar frown appeared, but then he remembered. "Oh, you mean for Alex? The army's rehab programme?"

"My machine is gone, and the plans," Blair admitted, not mentioning that it was Jim's EMP that destroyed them, "but I think I can recreate it."

"Your original technical plans – were they in the Wolfpack matrix?" Jim sat beside him.

"Yes."

"Then they're not gone. Daryl has a copy of everything."

Blair stared. "Really? I lost more than just my designs..."

"If it was in the matrix, it was saved. Daryl retains a full copy of any data he scans until we wrap up each mission. Then he archives what's important and deletes the rest." Jim leaned back comfortably. "About that deal. I've already spoken with some people to see if there'd be interest. One told me flat out that what you claim isn't possible."

"That's a lie!" Blair began hotly.

Jim smiled. "Cool down. I believe you. He didn't. Which just means he's not as smart as you are. I want you to talk with a patent attorney about your process before I go any further. There's a lot of money in what you've created and you should safeguard that before you try to cut a deal. Which reminds me..." Jim reached into his pocket and offered Blair a data chip. "You were working on something back at my apartment. These are your files."

Blair accepted the chip. He had almost forgotten: that amazing rush of inspiration when he understood what Daryl had made of himself. He indicated the matrix where Jim had been working. "May I?"

"Of course." Jim blanked the screen and shifted position to give Blair access.

Blair inserted the chip eagerly and scrolled through the stored data. "It's all here. Thanks, Jim! I'd forgotten about this." He opened the design spec and switched on the holo display. He sat back to watch as the design built itself up before their eyes.

"What is it?" Jim asked curiously.

Blair smiled, his misery over Alex's condition forgotten. "It's a mod design. I got the idea from Daryl's mod."

"Daryl's AI mod has some faults," Jim warned.

Blair waved the objection away. "No, it doesn't. Jim, I started out as a designer. But you can't design really exceptional mods without understanding neurology. So I went to med school to learn, and went on to surgery for the same reason: the better I understood the brain's internal wiring, the better my designs would be."

"Okay, but..."

"Jim, Daryl's mod was designed and built by someone who didn't really understand neurology. The design of the mod is advanced even by today's standards. The firmware is the best I've ever seen. But the physical position of it is all wrong. Here..." He had a copy of Daryl's brain scan in with his design. Blair pulled it up to the display. "See? The only fault is the fuel cell."

"Sorry, Doc. I don't really know how to read these things. I thought a single mod was safe. Fuel is only a problem if you have too many."

Blair nodded. "Usually, yes. But this mod is implanted in the brain. The tissue is more delicate and even the best hardware can develop faults. With most mods it's a simple procedure to replace a faulty cell but see here?" He pointed to the display. "The way it's positioned makes the extraction really tricky. No one who understands neurosurgery would have designed it like that."

"So, you're saying it's inoperable," Jim concluded.

"No way, man! It's a difficult surgery and there are risks, but with a few weeks to practice in VR, I could do it." Blair flicked the brain scan off and returned to his own design. "My design is similar but it avoids that problem by placing the fuel cell here." He rotated the diagram. "You see?"

It was clear from Jim's expression that he didn't really understand the technical diagram. Well, it was incomplete. Maybe Blair was expecting too much from Jim. He gestured to the couch. "Sit here, I'll show you."

Jim sat where Blair indicated, and Blair shifted to sit on the arm of the couch. He ran his fingers over Jim's head, tracing a line from the topmost point of his skull to the back of his occipital bone. "This is where Daryl's mod is situated. To get to it surgically, I would have to remove a portion of the skull, and send a probe between the two hemispheres of the brain and then through the brain tissue. It can be done safely, but if anything went wrong, the surgery could do permanent damage."

Jim nodded. "I understand."

"My design places the mod in roughly the same location, but with a key difference." Blair pressed his fingers into the hollow beneath the occipital bone, where spine met skull. "The fuel cell and the key memory chip in my version are here, just at the foramen magnum of the skull. So if anything goes wrong, the surgery to replace those components would be much more straightforward."

"So, what does this mod do?" Jim asked.

For a moment, Blair was speechless. Wasn't that, at least, obvious? What else would he have been working on?

"Jim," he said slowly, "it's for you. For your senses, if you still want it."

Jim's eyes returned to the diagram. "Which of my senses?" he asked, frowning a little as he studied it more closely.

Blair smiled proudly. "All of them. I figured it out."

"All senses on just one mod? You said that wasn't possible!"

"Well...it's not, technically. But studying Daryl's AI interface gave me the answer. Jim, your problem isn't really your senses. Your senses work just fine. Better than fine – that's the point. Your problem is what happens when your brain can't process all the information your senses are sending to it. So that's what this mod will do. It gives you control over the sensory input. Like a filter. It will be like adjusting the sound on a music station – when you get used to it you'll have a fine control over all your senses individually."

"So if one of them spikes..." Jim began.

"You can choke it off without affecting the rest. Yes!" Jim got it! And Blair knew it was what Jim needed. Exactly what he'd asked for, in fact.

"How long would it take to get that sort of control?" Jim asked. He still sounded dubious.

Blair's eager smile faded a little. "I have no idea. This is unique. It doesn't even exist yet so there's no data. But Jim, if I can get Daryl's help with the firmware, I think I can make this mod adaptive."

"You're losing me, Chief. What does that mean?"

Blair paused, marshalling his thoughts. "When it's first installed, I think you'll need a few hours practice to learn the basics of how it works. If the firmware can be programmed as I envisage, that will give you the control you want right from the start: you'll be able to increase or decrease your sensory input. At first, it will be all your senses at once. Over time – I don't know how much – you will learn to isolate the controls for each of your senses and manipulate them individually. That is the first milestone you should aim for."

Jim nodded. "That's all I need from it, Blair. Are you saying it can do more?"

"Yes. Jim, when you get to the point where you can control all your senses through the mod, it will be natural for you to find your own baseline – what's a comfortable level for you. The firmware I planned will let the mod adapt to that baseline. It will learn you as you learn it. What that means is, over time, your natural control over your senses will strengthen. If you work at it, eventually you won't need the mod."

Jim rubbed a hand over his face. "That's a dream, Blair. I can't imagine. How long?"

"Until you can do without the mod? Minimum five years. Maybe as much as fifteen...maybe never. And it is just a dream unless I can get help with the firmware. I can spec out firmware but I can't write it myself."

Jim studied the holo closely. He understood the basics of cybernetics but he couldn't read a technical blueprint like this one. Studying it, though, gave him space to think about what Blair was offering. The design wasn't even finished. It could take months, even years, to perfect a new mod. Jim simply didn't have that time.

He had less than two weeks before he had to report to Arlington. He would have to submit to an evaluation. It was possible – a one-in-a-thousand chance, but possible – that Jim could get through it without revealing his sentinel ability. But whatever the outcome of the evaluation, Jim was a sentinel and he did need control of his senses. Blair's design – if it worked – was a lifeline.

He turned to Blair. "When something sounds too good to be true, it usually is. What's the catch?"

Blair turned off the display. "There are two potential downsides that I can think of. Well, three, but the third is the cost."

"And you know I can afford it. Okay. What are the other two?"

"The first is the risk. Jim, this would be a unique mod. I'm a good designer but there's no way to test this without installing it."

Meaning, Jim understood, that he would be the test subject. He would be risking more than his life. If this mod went wrong, Jim might live through it, but with damage to his brain or mobility. Those were not small risks. He thought death would be preferable.

"And the other thing?"

"No more EMPs. If you were in range of a pulse like the one you used on Alex, with this in your head you would die. Or best case scenario you'd end up with permanent brain damage."

"I understand that. It would blow up like my link did. But what about detection?"

"Oh, that won't be an issue." Blair dismissed the subject with a careless gesture.

"How so?" Jim frowned.

"A standard scan like they use at checkpoints won't react to this as mecha. It doesn't enhance your body and it doesn't link to anything outside you. A sophisticated scanner will pick up the hardware, but because this is a unique design even the most sophisticated scanner will identify it as its closest match. Which is a memory replay chip. Not a mod. There's no way for a scanner to identify its real purpose."

That had potential Jim hadn't considered before. It fit well with his original plan; the plan he had in mind when he originally sought out an underground cyberneticist. He had hoped to use a mod to convince Brackett that his enhanced senses were the result of cybernetic enhancement, not sentinel ability. With this mod, that would work...but there wasn't time. Was there?

Jim made a decision. "Are you sure you need Daryl for this?"

Blair nodded. "I design hardware, Jim. I can build a working model, but not a quality prototype. To make this work, we need an engineer to build the mod, a software expert to build the firmware to my specifications and a good surgeon

to install it. I need Daryl for the firmware. It could be done by someone else, but my work is based on his design. No one knows his firmware like he does."

Jim nodded. It meant he had to tell Simon everything. Well, it was time.

## CHAPTER ELEVEN: "THAT SOUNDS LIKE DENIAL"

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...demonstrated a remarkable recall of sensory information from even distant or childhood memories when triggered under hypnosis. This ability has obvious applications for surveillance or espionage (see section 6.34 below). However, it also presents the potential for severe psychological difficulties; for example the 'flashbacks' symptomatic of post-traumatic stress disorder are statistically more common among sentinels.

Assessment of the sentinel as a military asset, ©2136 Federal Government of the United States of America

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There was no sign of violence remaining in Jim's apartment. The glass Alex shot out of the window had been replaced. All of the furniture was back where it belonged. No smell of smoke lingered in the air and the walls had been scrubbed clean. Only the new front door and the missing e-mirror gave a hint that anything had happened. It was a great relief to Blair, who had dreaded being faced with reminders of the horror of his abduction. Though he did remember – how could he avoid that? – there were good memories here, too: talking with Jim on the couch, making love with him, laughing over breakfast.

Jim had ordered Japanese food and it was delivered just as Simon and Megan arrived at the apartment. For a few minutes there was friendly chaos as everyone grabbed their favourite dish and Jim served beer and wine.

Blair accepted a beer and chose a bowl of ramen and chilli chicken. It went very well with the sweet-and-bitter taste of the beer.

Jim sat beside him, dunking gyoza into soy sauce with his chopsticks. "Simon, ask Daryl to link into my matrix. I've got something to discuss with everyone."

Simon spoke briefly into his link and a moment later Daryl's simulation of a face appeared on the large screen.

"Is this a formal meeting?" Connor asked.

"Absolutely not!" Jim declared. "What I want to talk about is personal. Do you want out?"

She answered firmly. "No, Jim. I'm here."

There was a subtext there which Blair didn't follow, but he was glad Megan seemed to be on Jim's side.

"Simon?" Jim asked.

Simon leaned back in the easy chair, his eyes never leaving Jim. "This is about our new orders, isn't it?"

"In a way. I think you all need to know what Brackett really wants from me. And I need to ask for your help."

Megan set down her chopsticks. "Jim, if you intend to disobey your orders, I think I should leave now. Please," she added quickly, "it's not about me. I hope you know I will always help you if I can. But one of us has to be able to say we knew nothing if –"

"Connor, stop," Jim interrupted. "I want you to stay. You won't hear anything about disobeying orders."

She looked relieved and picked up her food again.

Blair felt some of the tension drain out of Jim's body. He had really feared Megan would leave. Again, Blair had the feeling he was missing something important. He would ask Jim later.

"Since Connor brought it up, I'll start with those orders. Brackett wants me to submit to an evaluation but it's not intended to help me, whatever you think, Megan. Brackett believes I'm a sentinel. This evaluation is supposed to prove it."

Simon swore. He put his carton of food on the table and picked up his beer. He looked at the glass for a moment then replaced it without drinking. "You got any bourbon?"

Jim nodded toward the mini-bar. "Help yourself."

Simon headed for the bar.

Megan simply looked puzzled. "A sentinel? That sounds familiar, but..."

Blair, glad to have something to contribute, explained. "It's a rare genetic quirk. A sentinel has hyperactive and highly adaptive sensory awareness."

"Speak English, please, professor," Megan said with a self-deprecating smile.

"Super-normal senses. Sight, hearing, everything off the scale of normal human ability. But though it sounds like some kind of superpower, it can be a disability, too." Blair glanced at Jim.

Jim picked up the cue. "You know I've been struggling." He leaned forward, meeting Megan's eyes. "Connor, these attacks are not PTSD. It's my sentinel ability."

Blair was watching the others as Jim spoke. Simon showed no sign of surprise, but Megan did not seem convinced.

She frowned. "Jim, that sounds a lot like denial."

Jim made an impatient gesture. "Then you're not listening. I have a diagnosis of post-traumatic stress because of my two years in prison. I've never denied that, but I have a handle on it now. I know what triggers me. The problem with my senses is different."

"What do you think, Major Banks?" Blair asked. He could tell Megan was sceptical and thought perhaps Simon could convince her.

Simon nodded, returning to the group with a glass of bourbon on the rocks. "I've been with Jim long enough to have suspected this before." The ice clinked as he sipped the bourbon. To Megan he said, "I hadn't connected Jim's attacks with the sentinel thing, but it does fit." He turned to Jim as he sat down again. "I know damn well you won't go along with Brackett's scheme. So what's the plan?"

"What is this scheme?" Blair asked. "You haven't really explained what's so horrible about Brackett knowing about your sentinel abilities."

"Later, Blair," Jim said.

Blair nodded, though he really wanted to get an answer at once.

Jim resumed his story. "The reason I agreed to take this assignment in Cascade was to look for a solution. I've coped with the attacks, but with this evaluation looming I had to find something. That's how I first met Blair. I was very lucky to find him."

Simon's eyes shifted to Blair. "You think you can fix this with a mod?" he asked sceptically.

"It depends how you define 'fix'," Blair answered. "I designed a mod that will give Jim the control he needs over his senses. It will stop the sensory spikes – what he calls his attacks. But I don't know how Jim thinks that will help with the rest."

"Jim thinks he can convince Brackett he's had a mod for a long time," Simon said. "Am I right, Jim?"

"Nothing will convince Brackett," Jim said. "He wants this too much. But yes, that was my plan. Not a great one, but the only shot I've got at this point. There will be no medical record, so Brackett won't be able to prove it's a lie."

"I guess you can't do it in nine days," Simon said, sipping his bourbon again.

"More like nine weeks," Blair agreed. "The mod hasn't even been built yet."

Jim added, "That's why I've asked you to come tonight. I'm hoping we can come up with a way to do this that doesn't involve me going AWOL."

Blair felt the tension in the room as Simon and Megan exchanged a look.

But it was Daryl who spoke. "I believe the only way to achieve this without alerting the colonel is for the rest of us to obey his orders. Agent Connor must accept her promotion and keep the quad together."

For a moment, there was silence.

Megan broke it. "He's right, Jim. It will take time to select a new junior active and the first few assignments will be routine so we can shake down the team. That could free us up to watch your back...if you don't do anything reckless, that is."

Simon smiled tightly. "Jim won't have to." He turned to Blair. "Are you sure you need nine weeks?"

Blair took a deep breath. "Eight weeks is the absolute minimum. The design is ready but I need Daryl's help with the firmware. The mod has to be built and tested and we'll need to make arrangements for surgery. There's recovery time to factor in, too...nine or ten weeks would be better but we can do it in eight."

Simon nodded. "I'll get you the time."

"How?" Jim asked.

"Never mind how. I'll get you the time."

Blair looked at Jim, not sure he liked the sound of that.

Jim frowned a little, but made no objection. He held Simon's gaze for a moment, then he nodded. "Alright."

\*

It wasn't until much later that Blair had a chance to talk to Simon about Daryl's mod. It wasn't a question he could raise in front of the group. He had told Jim he had a solution for Daryl's problem but little more. He shouldn't have said even that much about someone else's medical problem.

While Megan was in the bathroom, Blair took the opportunity to approach Simon. Though Daryl was an adult, legally he could not speak for himself and Simon was his de facto guardian. But as soon as Simon understood what Blair was saying, he insisted they include Daryl in the conversation.

Blair called up the scans on Jim's matrix and outlined what he saw: cell degeneration which was, to his experienced eye, clearly the result of a faulty fuel cell.

"Doctors who only deal with legal mods wouldn't see this much," he explained. "I've seen it too often to mistake the signs. You see here, where the degeneration is densest? It's right next to the fuel cell."

"Can it be repaired?" Simon asked tensely.

Blair wasn't willing to give a straight yes or no to that question. "There are options," he answered cautiously. "What I usually recommend in cases like this is removing the mod, but I know that won't seem like an option for Daryl. I do want you to consider it."

"No," Daryl answered instantly.



"Daryl, just give it some thought. Removing or deactivating your mod, even if only temporarily, would allow us to assess your situation properly. There have been a lot of advances in treatments for conditions like yours. You could recover, or get some of your mobility back at least."

"No," Daryl said again.

"What's the alternative?" Simon asked, his tone giving nothing away.

Legally, this was Simon's decision, so Blair answered him seriously. "Surgery to replace the faulty cell. The problem with that is the design of Daryl's mod will make it a very tricky surgery. I can do it, but I'll need a neurosurgeon with me."

"Blair," Simon interrupted, "are you offering to do this surgery yourself?"

"Well, sure. I mean, if you trust me. But you obviously don't have a good cyberneticist or this would have been spotted sooner."

Simon turned to the displayed scan again. "Go on," he invited.

Blair rotated the scan. "The cell is here. To get to it, I'd have to use a micro-probe. I've done it before, but you have to understand there are risks. If I can successfully replace the fuel cell you could look at stem cell therapy to repair the cellular damage. It's not beyond repair if we act soon."

"That's expensive," Simon commented.

"If UMIAC won't cover it," Jim said from the kitchen, "I will." He had kept his distance while they talked, giving them the illusion of privacy, but of course he could hear every word.

Simon turned toward him. "We can't ask – " he protested.

"Stop right there. Daryl's on our team. UMIAC should cover the cost of lifesaving medical treatment and this definitely qualifies. If they try to weasel out of it, we'll call it a birthday gift or something. Daryl is what's important here."

"Thank you," Simon said. "Thank you both."

"When can you do the surgery?" Daryl asked.

"First, you two need to talk over the options. Then we can make arrangements. Daryl, I need to examine you in the flesh before I can be sure about this. I don't even know where you are."

"I'm right here," Daryl answered with a hint of impatience. "My body is in a hospital in Virginia."

\*

Blair carried the used glasses into the kitchen and stacked them carefully in Jim's dishwasher. Unlike many of the gadgets in Jim's apartment, Blair knew how this one worked. He closed the door, checked its seal and then turned to the matrix terminal to set the programme. It was easy: Jim's matrix was very logically organised. Household – cleaning – dishwasher – set. Blair grinned to himself, pleased he'd been able to do it unaided.

He found Jim smiling at him. "Is washing dishes that much fun?" he asked.

Blair laughed. "No. Using your matrix is."

"I love it when you laugh," Jim said. He moved toward Blair, his expression changing.

Blair caught his breath. He had half-expected this, but he wasn't prepared for his own physical reaction. Heat filled his body as he met Jim's eyes. No matter how much confusion there might be in his mind, his body had no doubts. He wanted Jim.

As Jim came close, Blair felt the warmth of his body. Jim's fingers curled under Blair's chin and gently tilted his head up. Blair could not resist the pull of those blue eyes. He looked up, his lips parting, anticipating a kiss.

But the kiss did not come. Instead, Jim traced the shape of his jaw with his fingertips, the touch light and teasing. He brushed Blair's lips with his thumb.

Blair moaned. His body swayed toward Jim.

Jim smiled. "We should talk," he said huskily.

Blair reached up to him and touched Jim's cheek. The skin felt a little rough against his fingers.

"Talk," Jim said again. Gently, he moved Blair's hand away from his skin.

Blair pulled back, sanity returning in a rush. "Jim, I can't. I want you...so much. But – "

"But there's Alex," Jim said, and there was a harsh edge to his words.

"Alex?" Blair repeated. She had been the last thing on his mind. Then he understood what Jim was thinking. "No! Not the way you think!"

Jim was right. They had to talk. They had to clear up this misunderstanding.

Blair turned away and headed for the couch. All signs of the evening's meal and drink were gone and the matrix screen was back in standby mode, displaying an underwater scene with glowing sea anemones, coral and fish with weird phosphorescent patterns drifting through a tranquil, dark ocean.

Jim sat beside him. "I know you've been involved with her for a long time," he said quietly. "You say you don't love her, but I think – "

"Stop," Blair insisted. "Jim, what ties me to Alex is guilt, not love. I am responsible for what she has become. It would be very wrong if I don't do all I can to put it right."

"What I saw in Docklands was more than guilt," Jim disagreed.

"We've got a history. I care. I hate myself for caring. She treats me like a sex toy. A slave. If I say no when she wants to fuck, she forces me. You think that's love?" Silently, Blair begged Jim not to ask for details. He couldn't bear it if he had to explain what it was like to be Alex's lover.

Jim simply held him. "Blair, I'm so sorry. I didn't know."

Blair closed his eyes, resting his head on Jim's shoulder.

"But if Alex isn't the issue, what's going on here? Why are you resisting me? Us." He drew back from Blair suddenly. "Is it me? Are you...?"

Blair wasn't sure what Jim was thinking, but he shook his head. "It's not you, man. Jim, the biggest mistake I ever made was getting involved with Alex. She was my patient. I should have kept our relationship professional. I don't want to repeat that mistake."

Jim's frown cleared. "This is about medical ethics?" he said incredulously. "Blair..."

"The rules exist for a reason. If I am your lover – " – and I really want to be – "then I can't be your doctor. I can't operate on you."

Jim's expression shifted into his neutral mask. He met Blair's eyes. "Blair, I would never ask you to install unsafe mods for me or anyone else. I would never force you into my bed. I don't want to have sex with anyone unwilling. Not ever."

"I know that."

"But you still believe in that rule."

"Man, it's not about what you might ask of me! Emotional attachments have no place in medical care. I learned that the hard way. I want to help you, Jim. I want you to have this mod. But that means I can't have you."

Jim looked at him for a long moment. Finally, he nodded. "I understand."

Blair relaxed. "Thank you." But Jim's next words were the last thing Blair ever expected.

"Screw it," Jim said harshly. "Forget the goddamn mod. If those are the choices, I don't want it. I want you."

Blair's eyes went wide. "You don't really mean that," he protested.

"Yes, I do." Jim slipped off the couch and knelt in front of Blair. He looked up into his eyes and rested his hands on Blair's knees. Jim's hands were warm through the denim.

"Blair, listen to me. There's a reason I want a mod, but without it, I still have options. Not good ones, but that doesn't matter. With you..." he hesitated, searching for the right words. "I don't know what we have, but I want to find out. I don't know if it will last. Most of my relationships don't. But I want to try. That's more important to me than a mod."

Blair shook his head in denial. "I know it's important to you to keep your secret. I don't understand why, but – "

"No buts. That's irrelevant now. Just tell me whether you want to be with me."

The confusion in Blair's eyes was painful to see. "Jim, I'd never fit in your world!"

Jim snapped, "That's an excuse." Impatiently, he said, "You can't lie to me. I'm a sentinel, remember." He slid his hands up Blair's thighs. "Your heart beats faster when I touch you." He gently squeezed the big muscles under his hands, letting his fingertips reach toward Blair's groin. "I feel the blood rushing under your skin. I hear it in your breath. I smell you. I know your body wants me." He looked into Blair's eyes again. "But I don't know what you want. Please, tell me. Drop the excuses and the evasions and just say yes. Or no."

Blair stared at him, open-mouthed. There were tears brimming in his eyes. For an agonising moment, he didn't say a word. Jim could barely breathe, looking up at him, waiting.

Finally, Blair leaned forward. He kissed Jim on his lips.

The world started turning again.

Jim reached up to take Blair's face between his hands. He returned Blair's kiss, holding Blair close. He would not let him go now. Jim's cock hardened as he pushed Blair back onto the couch. Blair's fingers tugged at Jim's shirt, and though he had not spoken his answer aloud, that was answer enough. Jim pulled the shirt off over his head and went back to kissing Blair.

After what Blair said about Alex, Jim did not want him to feel pressured into anything. Jim had forced an answer and miraculously got the answer he wanted. Now he resolved that was the last time he would ever pressure Blair into anything. Lust arrowed through him, almost painful. It took a supreme effort to keep his hands gentle, his kisses passionate but not demanding. He explored Blair with tongue and hands, reacquainting himself with his body, with the curves and angles of his face, the taste and smell of him.

Blair needed no encouragement to return the favour. His hands roamed Jim's bare back, his fingertips tracing the ridges of scars in Jim's flesh. He brushed his fingers down Jim's spine and the light touch sent an unexpected shiver through him. His warm hand traced the curve of Jim's shoulder as Jim straddled his body. He kissed Jim's collar bone and left a trail of feather-light kisses from there to Jim's nipple. Jim gasped when he felt the scrape of teeth on the sensitive skin. He arched into the touch.

More. Please, more. His plea was unspoken, but Blair seemed to understand. He bit harder, then let go with his teeth and licked the mark he had left there as it faded. Jim reached for Blair's t-shirt and pulled it up, but Blair's back was pressed into the couch, preventing Jim from removing it. Reluctantly, Jim moved away from Blair's mouth. He stood,

reached down for Blair's hands and drew him upright. Then he could undress Blair properly and the t-shirt joined Jim's shirt on the floor.

For a moment, Jim simply drank in the sight of Blair. Blair was noticeably shorter than Jim, shorter than most of Jim's previous lovers, but his body was compact and wiry, in perfect proportion to his height. The muscles of his chest and arms showed a strength developed through hard, physical work rather than in a gym. He had a thick mat of dark hair across his chest which thinned to a line down his flat stomach and disappeared into his denim pants. The bulge of his cock strained the tight fabric and brought a smile to Jim's lips and an urge to taste him again. But he restrained himself. Let Blair lead.

Jim unbuckled his belt. Blair's eyes followed the movement of Jim's fingers, and Jim saw no sign of fear or reluctance in his eyes. Only desire, Blair's blue eyes dilated, his full lips parted and moist. Delicious. Jim slowly pulled the belt out of the loops. He heard Blair's breath catch in his throat. He likes to watch, Jim thought, remembering Blair watching him in the pool. The knowledge pleased him. He opened the first button of his pants then paused, watching Blair closely. Blair's eyes lingered at Jim's groin and then, when Jim did not continue unbuttoning, his gaze rose slowly upward as if he were drinking in every inch of Jim's body. Jim heard his own breathing deepen as their eyes met.

Jim stretched out a hand toward Blair. "Let's go to bed," he suggested.

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Blair ran his fingers lightly down Jim's forearm where it lay across his chest. They were nude on Jim's bed. Jim lay on his belly, one arm stretched across Blair possessively. For now, Blair's lust was spent, but he wasn't tired. He wanted to savour every moment of this night with Jim.

His fingers reached the scar on Jim's forearm. There were a lot of scars on Jim's body, but this was the first of them Blair had seen – that day in Jim's office. He knew now that Jim showed him the scar deliberately, to see his reaction. This scar wasn't like the others. Most of Jim's scars were superficial, the skin marked but not at any depth. The scar on his forearm was a deep indentation that indicated some serious muscle damage.

"How did this happen?" he asked, tracing the ridge again.

Jim ran his own fingers down the mark, following Blair's touch. "It was an accident on a training exercise when I joined the Rangers. A piece of shrapnel went through my arm. I should have bailed on the exercise and gone for medical help."

"But you didn't?"

Jim rolled onto his back. "I was new and I thought I had something to prove. Rangers are supposed to be able to treat their own injuries in the field, so I pulled the metal out, bound it up and kept going."

That explained how the scarring got so bad. "It got infected," Blair said. It wasn't a question.

"Yeah. I did complete the exercise, but I was really getting sick when I reported in. The medic told me if I'd been much later she would have cut off my hand. After she fixed it up – " he raised the hand to show off the scar again, " – like this, she told me I could get it made pretty again once it healed."

"She was right," Blair said. He examined the scar more closely, with a professional eye this time. Though the muscle was slightly misshapen it clearly wasn't disabling to Jim. "It would take more than laser treatment, I think. Maybe minor surgery or an implant to smooth out the muscle. Nothing very difficult or complex."

"I know. I kept it as a reminder. Next time I got hurt training, I went to the medic right away."

"Is that why you kept the scars on your back, too?" Blair asked.

Jim's expression turned grim. "A different kind of reminder. I did have the worst of those scars removed. I got no medical treatment in that prison and the scar tissue was thick enough to cause problems. What's left is nothing. It reminds me I survived."

Most guys would get a tattoo. Blair thought about the tattoos some of the Wolves wore: coded images of animals. A predator indicated a kill. A snake meant a big score. Jim had not chosen the way his skin was marked, but he chose to keep it. Perhaps it wasn't so different. It filled the same need for a visible symbol of a test that had been passed.

Jim leaned in to kiss Blair, then touched the wolf tattoo on his neck. "Will you get this removed?"

Blair shivered at the touch – and the reminder. "As soon as I can, yeah. I never wanted it." He moved back as Jim tried to kiss him again. "Jim, I want to know about Brackett."

Jim sighed. "Yes, of course. But I don't want to talk about him in bed. Are you hungry?"

Blair wasn't, but he smiled. "I guess I could eat something."

It turned out that Jim's notion of "a little late-night snack" was pancakes, which he made himself, bacon and scrambled eggs. He squeezed oranges for juice instead of making coffee.

Blair accepted a plate of food, but merely picked at the eggs while Jim attacked his share as if he hadn't eaten for days. Blair was willing to wait...but not for too long.

When Jim's plate was empty, he looked up at Blair. "How much do you know about UMIAC? The history, I mean."

Blair shrugged. "Not much. It's been around for a while but it's the newest of the intelligence agencies. It started as a counter-terrorist unit in the twenty-first century. It's supposed to be an elite corps, bringing together operatives from military intelligence, federal law enforcement and special forces. Aside from that, all I know is their reputation. Is it important?"

"To explain about Brackett's plans, I've got to fill in some of the background."

Blair nodded.

"The original charter that gave UMIAC legal standing gave the agency a clear mission: to identify, investigate and eliminate threats to national security, by any means necessary. There's a lot of small print about what constitutes a threat within our jurisdiction but that's not important. It's the 'by any means necessary' that matters. We can prosecute. We often do, but we don't have to. That's the heart of why Colonel Brackett wants a sentinel programme within UMIAC. But it's not easy to recruit sentinels."

"Because they're considered unstable," Blair guessed.

"Right. But I'm already an agent. So if he can prove I'm a sentinel, he can use me to demonstrate how his programme could work."

"Makes sense. But why is that bad?"

"Because we're an elite corps. You saw how quickly we can act when we have credible evidence."

Blair shook his head. "I'm still not following you."

Jim sighed. "Okay, let me put it this way. Hypothetically, imagine you and I go out to dinner. It's one of those nice restaurants that has a couple of private rooms for business dinners or parties. While we're there, in one of those private rooms a group of people are planning a terrorist attack of some sort. Because I'm a sentinel, I can hear enough of their plans to be sure what's going on. A lot of people are going to die if they succeed. What would I do?"

Blair frowned, imagining the scenario Jim proposed and considering what he knew of Jim. "I don't know your rules. I guess you'd report what you heard. Maybe stay in the restaurant until someone comes?"

Jim nodded. "In reality, yes, that's what I'd do if there was enough time. But as a UMIAC agent, even if I'm not on duty, I could walk into that room and kill every one of them. It would be legal – a justified action against a credible threat."

"But you couldn't prove anything!" Blair protested. "I mean, I know it's made up, Jim, but you said it was just something you overheard. Where's the proof that it's legal?"

"That's what I'm trying to tell you, Blair. The proof is my word. Oh, if that scenario were to happen for real, I'd have to submit to an examination under polygraph and drugs. I couldn't get away with lying about it. But it's sufficient that I hear it. That's how Brackett sells his sentinel programme – as a surveillance tool that can't be blocked by tech and involves less risk than most of our infiltrations. But what he really wants is an assassin. He would only deploy a sentinel when he wants a kill."

Blair absorbed that in silence. There were obviously nuances he was missing, but perhaps that didn't matter. He could understand why this was something Jim wanted to avoid. Jim was watching him closely, looking for some kind of sign, but Blair didn't know what Jim expected from him. Uncomfortable with the scrutiny, he finally broke the silence.

"Jim, please don't take this wrong, but I'm still not sure I understand. How is that different from what you do now?"

Jim looked hurt. "Maybe I deserve that in your eyes, but I don't think it's fair. I'm a soldier. I'm not a killer."

Blair had no safe answer. Twice Jim came to save him from the Wolfpack and he killed people to do it. He killed Alex's enforcers the first time. He killed everyone in the old theatre the second time. Blair would not be alive if he hadn't so he couldn't really complain. But the fact remained that Jim killed.

Something of his thoughts must have shown on his face.

Jim answered, "Yes, Blair, I've killed people. You know better than most what I'm capable of. Please try to understand this." He waited for Blair's nod. "Whatever blood is on my hands from this mission in Cascade, I can live with it, because I made the call each time. It was my choice and I did it to save lives. Brackett's way would turn me into a weapon. He would take away my choice. I don't know if I can live with that."

Blair looked down at his plate, troubled. If Jim's best hope of avoiding becoming Brackett's "weapon" was to conceal his sentinel ability, why had he given up his best chance to be with Blair? Was he hoping Blair would change his mind? Was Blair wrong to stick to his ethics now, when the rules meant so little to him before? He thought about Alex, comatose in a hospital bed because he had been unable to refuse her the mods she wanted. Blair could not risk Jim in that way.

But what was the alternative? Was there any way forward that didn't end with him hurting Jim?

"What's wrong?" Jim asked.

"Your mod. Jim, what are you going to do without it?"

Jim sighed and pushed his empty plate away. "I don't know. Maybe I can fool them. I've kept it to myself so far. If not...well, I have other options."

"Like what?"

"Don't worry about it, Blair."

But Blair would not be put off. "No way, man. Not after the speech you gave me earlier. Did you mean what you said, Jim? Because if I'm part of your life, if I'm important to you, then I deserve to know about this. It's a consequence of my decision."

"No, it's not, because I'd be in exactly the same position if I never met you. And you are important to me."

"So, what will you do?" Blair persisted.

Jim reached across the table for Blair's hand. "I don't know. That's the truth. I don't always know for sure what I'll do until I'm faced with the decision. But my options seem obvious. You want to hear them?"

"Yes."

"One: I can refuse the order and transfer out of UMIAC back to the army. The army doesn't want me back so I'd end up with a discharge on medical grounds. PTSD. Two: I can apply for a promotion, give up my active status. The trouble with that is I'd need my CO's support and I wouldn't get it. So, three: I can resign my commission and find something else to do with my life. Or, four: I let Brackett try to use me and hope I'm wrong about how it will turn out."

"None of that sounds good," Blair said uncertainly.

Jim shrugged. "I've survived worse."

\*

Simon looked up as the office door opened. He expected to see an assistant or secretary, but the man who emerged was the senator himself. They had met before, two years earlier at a party for Jim's birthday. Simon thought it unlikely the senator would remember.

Senator Ellison looked his way, but approached the receptionist's desk. He spoke to the young man briefly, his voice low. Then he turned to Simon with a smile.

"Major Banks, it's good to see you again." The senator offered his hand. "I'm sorry I kept you waiting. I was on a call that couldn't wait."

"Thank you," Simon said, shaking hands, surprised by both the greeting and the apology. The senator owed him no explanation.

"Please, come in. Would you like some coffee? Perhaps something stronger?" He headed back into the office.

Simon followed him. "Thank you, no. I won't take much of your time, Senator."

Senator Ellison took a seat on a plush white couch, inviting Simon to join him. "You work with Jim, don't you?"

"Yes, we're on the same team," Simon answered carefully. He had to be careful. Although the senator had links with UMIAC and almost certainly knew the truth about his brother's work, UMIAC was a covert agency and Simon could not openly admit he was an agent.

"Then, please, call me Stephen," the senator invited him. "How can I help you, Major?"

"Simon," he reciprocated. "I'm here to ask for your help for Jim."

Stephen seemed to tense. "If Jim wants my help, he will ask me for it."

This was tricky. Simon answered honestly, "He doesn't know I'm here, but I hope you'll hear me out."

"I'll listen, but I won't promise to keep this conversation from my brother and I'm not going to go behind his back."

Simon nodded. The terms were fair. "Jim has orders to report to an evaluation centre in eight days. I need a way to delay that for at least eight weeks. Longer would be better."

"Why?"

"All I can tell you is it would be very bad for Jim to head into the evaluation too soon. Someone is trying to prove something about Jim. If he succeeds, Jim will be backed into a corner. I suspect he will have to resign his commission."

Stephen looked at him suspiciously. "Are you implying Jim is guilty of something?"

"No. Absolutely not. But I can't explain more without Jim's permission."

Stephen rose from the couch and walked away a few paces. "Why will eight weeks make a difference?" he asked.

Simon took a deep breath. Here, he had to bend the truth a great deal. "It will give Jim's friends a chance to help him prove that Colonel Brackett is wrong. We need at least eight weeks to do it."

Stephen turned around. "I've met Colonel Brackett. What does he have to do with this?"

"He's our CO. To put it bluntly, he wants Jim in another unit. One Jim doesn't want to join." Simon smiled suddenly. "You know Jim's stubbornness. He doesn't see resignation as an option but if Brackett has his way he'll turn Jim into something neither of us will recognise. Jim won't ask you for help, Senator. I'm not sure why." That last was the only pure untruth Simon would risk: he knew why Jim didn't want to owe his brother a favour, but he didn't want to get into a discussion of it.

"I understand, but what is it you think I can do? I'm a senator, not the President. I can't change Jim's orders."

"But you have influence with those who can, Senator," Simon argued. "I don't know any other way to buy the time we need."

Stephen walked to a bureau and poured a drink from a crystal decanter; Simon wasn't sure if it was brandy or bourbon. He waited while the senator finished his drink. If Senator Ellison refused to help him...well, this wasn't Jim's last option, it was just the last good one. All the other choices involved Jim going AWOL.

Stephen poured a second glass then turned back to face Simon. "Tell me exactly what you need. Eight weeks or longer I understand, but what has to happen in that time?"

Simon relaxed. Stephen was going to help. "The time is the most important thing. Jim may need to disappear for a few days. We all need to be in contact: Agent Connor, myself and Jim. That's all the essentials. We can work around anything else."

"And you won't tell me why." It wasn't a question.

"No more than I have, Senator."

Stephen nodded. "Very well. I do have a marker I can call in. But, Major, nothing comes free."

Simon stood. "I understand I owe you for this," he agreed.

Stephen shook his head. "That's not what I'm saying. If I use my influence to get you and Jim the time you've asked for, it will bring Jim to the attention of people he may not want looking his way. There may be consequences. Do you understand that?"

Simon frowned. "I think I do."

"Is it acceptable to you?" Stephen pressed.

Simon considered. Given what he knew Brackett wanted from Jim, he thought Jim would be willing to risk this. When he answered, he was confident that Jim would say the same as he, if not be easy about it. "Yes. It's acceptable."

"This is that important?"

"I believe it is, Senator."

Stephen offered his hand again. "In that case, I have work to do. It was good to see you again, Major."

Simon shook his hand firmly. "Thank you."

He headed for the exit. As he waited for the elevator, he heard Senator Ellison's voice behind him: "Get me General Carter on the link."

\*

Jim poured himself a fresh mug of coffee and returned to his workstation. He was alone at the quad's Base, trying to write his close of mission report. Once this last task was completed and the report filed with UMIAC, he would be on downtime until he reported to Arlington.



He looked over the lists of statistics Daryl had compiled from the other agencies involved in the Cascade action. The official estimates of the casualties supplied by Cascade Police didn't track with what Jim observed in the infirmary. He sent a message to query the figures, requesting more information about what they'd classed as a 'casualty', but he included the figures in his report anyway. He appended a note stating his opinion that the police estimate was on the low side. The rest of the data seemed sound. Jim saved the report. To add his electronic signature, he placed his hand on the palm scanner. It verified his identity and signed the report. Jim then set it aside; he would wait a few hours in case the PD responded to his query before he filed the final copy.

Sipping the lukewarm coffee, Jim thought about calling it a night. Maybe he could submit the report in the morning.

"Priority signal from Command for Major Ellison," Daryl announced.

Jim pushed his coffee away. "Route it to my station, Daryl."

"Standard encryption. Verification required."

Jim placed his hand on the scanner again. The decryption key was coded to his palm print. "Decode and accept."

"Confirmed."

Jim's AV screen flashed on and he found himself looking at a face he could not fail to recognise. General Carter was the overall commander of UMIAC.

Jim straightened, coming to attention automatically. "General Carter, sir."

"Major Ellison," the general greeted him. "I understand you are expected at Arlington in a few days."

Jim schooled his features to neutral, wondering what this was about. "Yes, sir," he confirmed. "Colonel Brackett ordered me to report for a performance evaluation."

"How would you feel about delaying that?" General Carter asked. He added quickly, "This is a request, Major, not an order. I know about your PTSD and if you feel you need help from the psych team at Arlington, you should go."

This felt like a trap of some kind. Cautiously, Jim answered, "I believe I have it under control, sir. Colonel Brackett disagrees. If I am needed elsewhere, I'm willing to delay."

"The governor's office has requested your assistance with the reconstruction of the Cascade undercity. If you accept, you'll remain in the city for another twelve weeks. You will be assigned to Governor Lo's office on special detached duty. She'll give you the details, but you'll have a staff and a budget. It's not exactly what you've been trained for, Major."

Jim smiled. "No, sir, it's not, but I have some experience. I assume she wants me because I'm an Ellison?"

The general hesitated for the briefest moment. "It was my impression that your political connections were more significant, but I doubt your family's reputation counts against you."

It was the same thing. Political connections meant Stephen, of course. Jim nodded. "If I accept, sir, where does that leave the rest of my team?"

"Their orders are unchanged. I can't take the whole quad out of rotation and there is a mission awaiting them once Agent Connor has selected her junior."

It was the answer Jim expected. "Understood. I accept the mission, sir, but I should warn you, Colonel Brackett –"

"The colonel is my problem, Major," Carter interrupted crisply. "I'm well aware of his feelings on this matter. You will receive your new orders in writing within the hour."

"Yes, sir," Jim said, chastened. "Thank you, General."

For the first time, Carter cracked a smile. "Don't thank me, Major. I just handed you a tiger's tail. Try not to let it go." He signed off without giving Jim time to respond.

Jim leaned back in his chair. A tiger's tail. Three months of playing diplomat and herding cats. It was the kind of job you gave someone as a subtle punishment, and perhaps that was it. There could be a message underlying the offer: you broke Cascade – now fix it.

On the other hand...it was twelve weeks. More than enough time.

Was Simon somehow behind this? He would have to find out; Jim liked to pay his debts and this was a big one.

First, Jim called Blair to tell him the news.

## CHAPTER TWELVE: "THE SENTINEL"

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...and even the sound of the electricity in the street lighting became a constant irritant. Whether this is a general disadvantage of the sentinel gift or specific to my subject whose sentinel ability was developed in the more natural setting of the jungle cannot be established without further study. However, where modern technology created problems for the sentinel, it also created solutions. A white-noise generator proved effective...

The Sentinel, an unpublished manuscript believed written in 1999

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He had been here in Interlaken less than two days and already Blair felt anxious and on edge. It was the weather. In Cascade, the rain never stopped. The sky, when you could see it at all, was grey. The rain permeated everything: the air smelled of it; you could hear rain on rooftops or dripping from gutters; you felt the chill in your bones when you walked outside. Here, the sky was blue as Jim's eyes, the sunlight brighter than Blair had seen since his childhood. As beautiful as this region was, it made Blair uneasy. But it was beautiful. Blair gazed out over a lake that outshone the sky above. Glacier-fed, the lake almost glowed an impossible blue-green and the houses around the water's edge with their exquisite gardens looked like something out of a painting. In the garden where Blair stood, the air was full of the scents of flowers and fresh grass.

Blair walked down the steps toward the lake and leaned upon the polished wood rail watching the sunlight glint on the water. It had been a hectic two months. Blair spent the first month in intensive work with a nanotech expert and engineer, who worked with him and Daryl to refine the mod design and build it. He spent most of the second month with lawyers and in the search for a cyber-surgeon qualified to install the mod. He compiled a list of candidates for Jim, who quickly settled on this place: an exclusive and very expensive hospital in Interlaken, Switzerland. It met the single criteria Jim considered most important: secrecy. There would be no record that they were even in the country.

While Jim was finalising arrangements for their trip to Switzerland, Blair and his lawyer completed the paperwork to begin the patent application process for his convus treatment. Two days after the application was submitted, Blair signed a contract with the army, giving them the right to use and develop his treatment and his machine. There were a lot of zeroes on the final fee attached to the contract, conditional on the treatment showing results in full clinical trials, but Blair had no doubt the planned trials would be successful. He would be a wealthy man in a few years. The money, though, was not important to him. What mattered was the element of the contract Jim negotiated for him: the clause that gave Alex a place in the army's cyber rehab programme.

Alex was in the army hospital now. She remained in a coma but the doctor assigned to her care was confident that she would wake up. Even so, Blair had no illusions about her chances. Alex might never recover from the damage the mods did to her body and even if she did, she might never beat the addiction. But she was in the best programme that existed: if she had any chance at all, it would be where she was.

Blair's days were busy; his nights ecstatic. He was crazy in love with Jim Ellison and the really crazy part was Jim seemed to love him, too. Though their work kept them apart by day, they managed to spend most evenings together. And every night. The relationship still felt new and fragile. They were still learning each other's quirks and needs and it wasn't always perfect. Jim had warned Blair that he wasn't an easy man to live with and it was true. Jim was stubborn as hell and had a way of withdrawing to nurse anger or resentment in private instead of explaining what Blair had said or done to piss him off. But once Blair figured it out, the habit became easier to deal with. Jim's sentinel gift was the trouble. Far from enhancing his sensory experience of the world, Jim's uncontrolled, hyperactive senses forced him to live in a world of confusion and overstimulation. He couldn't trust his own senses unless he exerted a control and concentration that he paid for with pain.

The cry of a bird of prey high above the lake caught Blair's attention and he looked up. For several minutes he watched the eagle's soaring, graceful flight, entranced. It seemed as high as the snow-capped mountains that surrounded the valley: a miracle of nature in a sky free of aircars. They were not permitted here – a Swiss law that would be unthinkable back home. Blair smiled to himself; the eagle had freed him of his worries, if only for a moment. His thoughts returned to Jim. Doctor Rusch would come for him as soon as the surgery was done. She had promised.

The mod would work. It had to work. The time Simon bought for Jim – at what cost, he hadn't said – came in the form of a revision to Jim's orders. Jim was instructed to remain in Cascade to assist with the reconstruction effort. Officially, he was assigned to the Governor's office; the reality was he was working for his brother and Jim wasn't happy about that. But it bought him nearly three months before he had to report for the evaluation that so worried him. They had not wasted the time. In Cascade Jim worked hard, finding projects like the infirmary that tried to make life in the undercity better but needed money or direction. He lobbied the governor and Congress for funds and he got them, then added to the budget from his own resources. He hired business advisors from the top firms in Sky City but where possible he also hired people from the undercity – the ones who really understood what life was like down there. Blair could see the difference he was making already. If they could keep up the momentum, Jim's work would have a real impact.

It made Blair all the more determined to help Jim with his senses.

Blair turned around at the sound of footsteps behind him. Rusch descended the steps, still wearing her surgical scrubs and cap. She had come straight to him, and Blair was grateful. He searched her face for some indication of the news: good or bad. Her face remained unreadable until she reached him at the railing.

"Mr Ellison is in recovery," she said. "The surgery went well, but we won't know how well until the neural connections are fully formed. I want to keep him sedated while that happens. It will take several hours."

"Six to ten hours," Blair agreed. Daryl programmed the nanobots to integrate in seven hours but it was always impossible to predict. Every brain was unique.

"Yes."

"Can I stay with him?"

"Yes, of course." Doctor Rusch gestured toward the steps, inviting him to return to the clinic. "The recovery suite is comfortable, but you won't want to sleep there."

"I won't sleep," Blair answered. "Not until I know he's okay."

\*

When Jim woke, the first thing he was aware of was Blair. He was sitting beside the bed, gazing anxiously into Jim's face. The shadow of a beard on his cheeks and dark rings beneath his eyes testified to his lack of sleep, but those blue eyes were the loveliest sight Jim could imagine.

"Hey," he whispered by way of greeting.

Blair smiled. "Hey."

"You look worried, Chief. Did it work?"

Blair brushed his wild hair back with one hand. "The surgery was a success. The mod was installed perfectly and you're awake and talking, so all the connections are good. Whether it works or not, we can't know yet. How do you feel?"

Jim had a mild headache and his mouth felt like sandpaper. They were minor irritations, and the initial grogginess from the anaesthetic was already fading. "I feel fine," he answered.

"Any pain? Headache?"

Jim closed his eyes and ran through a quick inventory of his body. He became aware of the sticky surgical seals at the back of his head and neck and then the medicine patch on his forearm. "I feel fine," he repeated, then admitted, "a bit of a headache, but nothing bad." Then Jim frowned. "Shouldn't I feel different?"

"No, not yet. The mod isn't active."

"I thought you said it would work straight away," Jim protested.

Blair squeezed Jim's hand. "It will, Jim. You have to be awake when we activate it, that's all. Doctor Rusch wants to examine you first."

"Then go get the doc!"

"Jim, it's nearly four in the morning. She'll be along as soon as she can."

Jim let his head fall back onto the pillow and felt a mild jolt of pain. He was bruised back there. It took some time to readjust his thinking, because it didn't feel like the middle of the night to him. It was morning when he went into surgery. But once Blair told him, he became aware of the stillness and quiet. Night.

"You should sleep, Jim," Blair said softly.

Jim turned his head to look at him again. "I'm not tired." He tried to sit up and Blair sprang to his feet to help him. A wave of dizziness washed over Jim but Blair quickly stuffed a fresh pillow behind him and Jim was able to stay upright without effort. He raised a hand and gingerly felt the back of his head.

"It's just a suture patch, Jim. Leave it alone."

"Then talk to me. It's...distracting."

Blair looked uncertain. "Well...if you're awake enough I can explain a bit about the mod."

"I'm awake."

"Okay." Blair straightened a little, and took a deep breath. "There are a couple of things you need to understand before we activate the mod. And it's really important, so if you don't understand, ask me, okay?"

Jim smiled. "It's in my head. Believe me, I want to understand it."

"The first thing is the way the nanotech works. The basic neural connections are already in place but it will continue to build connections for about three months. The mod has to 'learn' your internal wiring."

Jim frowned a little. "So it won't work right away?" That wasn't what they had discussed.

"Oh, it will!" Blair said quickly. "What I'm saying is it will improve steadily over time. So if you have trouble with it at first, you've got to remember that you're starting at the bottom. Keep working at it. You should notice a difference every day at first."

"I think I understand. But I need this thing to work well enough for me to keep my senses secret."

"I think I've figured out how to do that. The firmware is a basic-level AI. It will learn you as you learn it. So what we should do is focus on a few simple things at first and practice over and over until you can do it without thinking. The mod will adapt to you as we work. I think that will mean it's easier for you to learn the more complex functions on the fly."

"How long will I have to practice like that?"

"I don't want to guess." Blair ran a hand through his hair. "But, a few days at most, maybe only hours. It's good firmware and Daryl designed it specifically for you."

Blair said he didn't want to guess, then did just that. Jim studied him more closely. "Blair, you look exhausted." He patted the bed beside him. "Why don't you come up here?"

Blair hesitated.

Jim said, "Please."

Blair climbed onto the bed, careful to avoid the medi-scan quietly monitoring Jim's every breath. He curled up against Jim's side and Jim reached down to tilt Blair's head up. He kissed him, slowly, his tongue probing lazily. Then he held Blair close and felt his body relax against his side. Within moments, Blair was asleep.

\*

Jim's house in Virginia was very different from his apartment in Cascade. A small, two-storey house set in its own grounds, the whitewashed building was surrounded by a neatly trimmed lawn and clipped cypress hedges. Though Jim gave no signal Blair could see, the door of the upper garage rose as the aircar approached it. The house's matrix must have recognised the Hercules. Jim parked with the ease of long practice and lights came on as the garage door closed itself behind them.

A secure door led from the garage directly into the upper floor of the house. After unloading their bags from the car, Jim gave Blair a quick tour. There were three bedrooms, each with its own bathroom, all downstairs. Blair, of course, would be sharing Jim's room, but Jim invited him to choose one of the other bedrooms to convert into a room of his own – "an office, or whatever you want".

The upper floor was the main living space. There was a large kitchen with a comfortable dining space, a small room set up as an office and a comfortable living room. Where Jim's apartment in Cascade was minimalist and compulsively clean, this house was undoubtedly lived-in. There were photographs on display. The worktops in the kitchen were worn from long use. There was a sweater draped over the couch, a pile of movie chips beside the matrix.

What really caught Blair's attention, though, was the painting that dominated the living room. It took up most of one wall, a clever combination of textured paint and subtle holos that made the scene seem real. The painting depicted a rainforest scene with a black jaguar stalking out of the centre as if focussed on the room as its prey. As Blair gazed at it, mesmerised, other details appeared: the movement of the trees, birds and the glint of water from a hidden pool. It was a scene a person could watch for hours and never see all of it, and the holo elements could change: infinite variations. Jim could live with this scene all his life and never get bored with it.

"This is your home," Blair said.

"Of course it is." Jim turned to him, surprised.

Blair smiled. "That wasn't a question. I mean, I can see you here. It has your personality and it feels lived-in. I like it."

Jim slid an arm around his shoulders. "Hm. You're right. I do spend more time here than in Sky City. But it's our home now, not just mine."

The words warmed Blair as much as Jim's touch. "I hope it will be, but it's not yet. It will take me a while to feel like this is mine."

"Your things will arrive tomorrow," Jim reminded him, "and it's your home whether you feel like it or not."

"I know, but it's not just about my stuff. I won't have time to settle in before you have to go."

Jim sighed. "Yeah, I know. This damned evaluation could take a while, but I won't be confined to the facility after the first few days. I'll be able to sleep here." He kissed Blair. "With you."

Blair returned his kiss, enjoying the promise it held, but he drew back, not wanting to be distracted just yet. "How long will it take? You haven't said."

Jim led him to the couch and sat down. "It's hard to say. An honest evaluation of me will be over in a few days, but we know Brackett's behind this. It may not be all that honest. In theory they could stretch it out for a month or more."

"A month!"

"UMIAC is careful about its agents. I'm fit for duty; they won't be able to prove otherwise...thanks to you. So don't worry about it. Stay here – I've got something I've been wanting to show you."

Blair watched Jim bound toward the stairs. He was going to worry, no matter what Jim said.

Jim returned with a steel attaché case. He set the case on the coffee table and produced two pairs of gloves from his pocket. "Put these on," he instructed, handing one pair to Blair.

Blair obeyed, curious. The gloves were white cotton, too thin to provide any protection from the elements, but he understood that wasn't their purpose.

Jim unlocked the attaché case with both a code and his thumbprint, then drew on gloves himself. "This isn't valuable except in the sense that it's old enough to be an antique, but it's of great value to my family. It's very old and getting fragile, but there are no copies. When it was originally given to the Ellison family, it was a condition of the bequest that it could never be duplicated or copied."

"What is it?" Blair asked.

"An unpublished manuscript. Do you remember when you asked me why I was so sure the sensory spikes weren't part of my PTSD? It's because I knew the sentinel ability runs in my family."

"It does? How have I never heard about that?" Blair had read everything he could find about sentinels, including the known families. He would have noticed the name Ellison.

"It's not public knowledge, Blair," Jim said. His fingers stroked the still-closed case. "The Ellisons have lived in Cascade for a long time, but we weren't always rich. One of my ancestors – my six-times-great-grandfather, I think, was a police detective. He was one of the earliest sentinels to be studied but the results of the research were discredited before they were published. This is the only surviving copy." He lifted the lid of the attaché case.

Blair reached out and turned the case toward himself. It contained a book. The cover was dark green, but plain, providing no clue about the contents. Blair glanced at Jim for permission then carefully lifted the book from its protective case.

Jim moved the case so Blair could set the book on the table. Blair lifted the cover, revealing the first page. The paper was yellowed with age and seemed very fragile, the ink faded but still clearly legible, revealing the book's title and author. Blair stared at Jim.

"I know what you want to ask. I don't know the answer, Blair. I thought when we first met that your name was familiar, but it took me a while to make the connection. Maybe you're related."

"I don't know anything about my family history," Blair confessed. He reached out to touch the page, but drew his hand back, afraid of damaging it.

"It's okay," Jim assured him. "You can read it. I have."

"I will," Blair said, but made no move to read further than the first page, where typed letters read:

The Sentinel

by Blair Sandburg

The End