



## Walking the Maze

By Mab

Hargrove Hall, Blair's refuge from the insomnia that had hit a couple of hours ago in his motel room, was empty and quiet in the early hours of the morning. Now Blair's desk was strewn with loose notes and cassette tapes that held no answers, and Blair was probably going to damage his joints with the nervous knee jogging and finger tapping, the last resort of nervous energy because he was too damn tired to pace anymore. He stared distractedly at the mess, and then looked up as the door to his office opened.

His heart jumped when he saw the figure standing in the frame. "What are you doing here?" Blair sat frozen as one of the little carved stone fetishes on his desk as Jim strode to Blair's desk and hooked his hand under Blair's armpit. Blair went with it and stood, because it was second nature to follow instructions, verbal or physical, when Jim wore that hard, urgent expression. "What is it?" Blair asked, his heart racing again. Dirt smudged Jim's face and one of his buttons was done up in the wrong buttonhole. His shirt sat askew as a result, and that was so odd in his usually meticulous friend that Blair couldn't help but notice it, even crowded with anxieties as he'd been the last few days.

"We need to get out of here," Jim said, steering Blair across his office floor, before Blair wrenched away from Jim's hold.

"And go where? What the hell is going on, Jim, because this shit is way past a joke now, not that it was ever funny."

Jim bent a little, unexpectedly conciliatory for a man who'd thrown Blair out without explanation or apparent qualm just over twenty-four hours ago, and cupped both hands around Blair's face. Jim's hands were cool, and slightly sweaty, and the gentleness of them was belied by the intense blaze of Jim's eyes. "I need you to trust me," he said. "Things are going to get weird, really weird, but I need you to trust me, Chief. You think you can do that?"

Blair almost said no, because the argument at the PD still smarted, and the exile from the loft was a hard stone in Blair's chest. Blair was supposed to just hand his trust over to a Jim who felt that Blair had betrayed him, to a Jim who kicked Blair out of his home with no word of explanation? 'I don't think so', trembled in his mouth, but he swallowed it back. "Okay," was what he said instead.

An exhausted smile barely lit Jim's face. "Good," he said, and hustled Blair out of Hargrove onto a campus access-way that was dark and secluded in the early morning chill. There was a sedan waiting there, not Jim's old truck, and Jim moved ahead of Blair and opened the back door for him. "Get in," he said, and pushed Blair down like he was a criminal being forced into a cop car – a quick shove, a hand on top of his head to shield against any knocks. Then the door slammed shut and Jim got in the front passenger seat. Blair checked out who sat in the driver's seat; it was Alex Barnes.

Blair's mind blanked in astonishment but some survival instinct sent his hand unobtrusively crawling across the faux leather seat to try the door handle. The door stayed latched and shut. "The child-locks are on, so just enjoy the ride," Alex said as the car pulled smoothly away. Blair opened his mouth to demand explanations, to berate Jim, and then his mouth snapped shut because he'd thought he was in the Twilight Zone when he saw Alex driving, at ease and in control? That was before Alex laid her hand on Jim's thigh and Jim rested his hand over it. Just for a moment, but that moment was long enough to absolutely blow Blair's mind.

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They'd cleared the campus area at Rainier when Blair leaned forward, bracing his hands on Jim's seat, operating on autonomic function, because his conscious mind was still busy picking up the pieces. "Hey, Jim?" he said. "What about the VX? You remember, that stuff that could kill thousands of people, that Alex stole? You remember that?"

Jim looked straight ahead and even in the dawn grey light Blair had an excellent view of the corded neck and the jump of his jaw, and the razor straight line of his hair. Once a month, without fail, Jim got his hair trimmed. It was one of those things that Blair knew about him, things that Blair knew about Jim apparently being a shorter list than Blair had realised.

"Stop being a wise-ass," Jim said. He sounded terribly tired. "The FBI should have its hands on the gas right about now. It's safe."

Alex laughed. It was attractive and astonishingly carefree. "As safe as nerve gas is ever going to be, anyway." Blair couldn't bring himself to actually look at her. All of his attention was for Jim, but he wondered, in passing, if he was crazy to connect Jim's mis-buttoned shirt with the possibility that this bright and breezy Alex had got herself laid not so long ago.

"And Alex is – what? Driving herself to the PD?" Blair couldn't quite control his voice. The outrage and fear were way too obvious. "But no, that can't be it, because, wow, this route goes to the

interstate." Alex changed lanes. "Definitely the interstate." Blair's hands clutched at the edge of the seat, instead of clutching at Jim's shoulders and trying to shake some answers out of him.

"Sandburg, you said it yourself. There are no coincidences. We're two sentinels, there are sentinel things we have to do."

Blair banged his head against Jim's seat. "And these sentinel things are what? And why the hell do you need me?"

The sun was rising, and an errant ray cast a glowing line in Alex's hair before it was lost in motion and high-rise shadow. "You have your uses," Alex said, "and you know way too much about me, Blair. So it's this, or kill you and dump your body--"

Jim didn't make a sound, but he twisted his head to direct a feral glare in Alex's direction.

"And our boy here," Alex blithely continued, "would have a problem with that and truly, I don't want to do it anyway. I like you, believe it or not."

"I'm going with 'not'," Blair muttered.

"Whatever," Alex said, offended.

Jim went back to facing the oncoming road. In the growing daylight Blair could see that Jim's fists were clenched in his lap.

"Jim. Jim, come on, this is bullshit, man. Alex killed that guard at Oberon, and you two are just going to drive into the sunset to do sentinel things? You couldn't consider explaining any of this?" Blair was trying for persuasive, and was pretty sure that he was coming across as pathetically pleading, but Jim was as obdurate as he'd been since the beginning of this mess, only now he was saying nothing at all instead of things that Blair didn't want to hear.

Alex was the one who spoke. "No coincidences. That's the beautiful thing. Everywhere I went, everywhere we're going, I would have gone anyway, but now there's a better purpose. It's beautiful, and you're the one who helped me understand it. Don't you want to see how it all works out, Blair?"

"Maybe," Blair told her, hedging his bets. "If I knew what it was I was going to see work out."

"Patience, grasshopper," Alex said. She was almost euphoric, like she really had seen a vision of enlightenment. Her delight made a crazy contrast to Jim's rigid silence.

Blair had to try again. "Jim?"

"It's hard to explain, Chief."

"Try me."

Jim shook his head, and then he lifted his hand to place it on Alex's shoulder. Something hot and ugly wormed around in Blair's gut, as he offered Jim silent, bitter congratulations. Jim certainly knew how to give a message without saying a word.

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At a truck stop barely over the Oregon state line, they got out to find rest rooms and coffee, and in the dingy narrow hall outside the men's room, Blair grabbed Jim's arm and hissed, "This finishes right now, Jim. I don't give a flying fuck what's happening, it stops. Is it pheromones? Because you dealt with that with Laura; you can deal with this now, and just turn the fuck around, man."

Jim stared at him, unreadable. "You know she's listening."

"You think I care?"

"I think we have that figured out." Jim rubbed his hand over his face. "Accept that this is what it is."

"And what is that? You've gone from her presence in Cascade being all wrong to holding hands in the car like two kids going to the prom. You want to tell me how that one worked out, because I don't get it."

They had to shift as a man shouldered past them on his way to the restroom. He was big, in his fifties maybe, and his mouth curled with distaste at the sight of Blair's hand on Jim's arm. No way Blair was letting go, because he had to get through to Jim somehow.

"Look," Jim said. "You're the one who likes to ponder fate and synchronicity. Take notes for your thesis and let me do what I have to do. Or else take your chance now, and head back to Cascade. I'll protect you long enough for you to fast-talk someone in the parking lot into giving you a ride. Just don't interfere with us." Jim made the offer of protection as if Blair was a kid at summer camp too scared to walk to the latrines in the dark.

"Is she really that good a fuck?" Blair snapped, low and vehement, and had his guess confirmed by the flush that crossed Jim's face. "Oh my god," Blair said slowly. On one level, he hadn't really believed it. Couldn't. But Jim stood in front of him with a red face and no denials.

"I might show you how good a fuck I am later," Alex purred in his ear, neatly shifting back as Blair nearly jumped out of his skin. "Trying a little reverse psychology, Jim?"

"I didn't want him along in the first place." It was as if Blair's heart had slammed into his ribs, like he'd run into a wall. He wanted to believe that Jim made that flat rejection out of concern for his safety, but he was starting to think that as far as Jim was concerned Blair was just a third wheel to Bonnie and Clyde.

Alex shrugged. "And I did. Come on, let's get back to the car."

They walked out into the parking lot, Alex's arm curled around Jim's waist. Blair could try to escape, yell for help, get that ride that Jim had mocked him with. He could do any number of things that might work, or that might end, for all he knew, with Alex shooting up the rest stop. Would Jim try and stop her, Blair wondered, or would he pull out a gun and blast away with her? Jim stepped out ahead of them both as they reached the car. "I'll drive," he said.

Alex smiled at Blair. "Would you like to make a run for it?" She was beautiful, standing there and cheerfully taunting Blair.

"Maybe I want to see what your big sentinel secret is," Blair retorted.

Alex gently patted him on the cheek. "Or maybe you want to find out just how good a fuck I am."

Blair looked across the car at Jim. He was standing there, one arm leaning on the roof of the car. "It's a double whammy, isn't it, Chief. She has you by your curiosity and your dick. How can she lose?"

It just needed a single whammy – because Alex, however she'd done it, had Jim. Blair was overcome by a terrifying urge to cry. "Fuck you," was all he said, before he got back into the car.

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Alex was chatty on the drive through Oregon, turning around to talk to Blair, full of enthusiasm for her art, for her dreams, for Blair's help and guidance, and Blair couldn't help but listen and try to figure it out.

"So you feel... called. Is that what you're saying?"

"It's there," Alex said. "That's all I know, it's like a magnet."

"What about you, Jim. What are you dreaming?"

Alex looked at Jim then, poised, although what for, Blair couldn't say.

"Enough to know that there's nothing for Alex in Cascade, Sandburg." Jim kept his eyes on the road, and Alex breathed out a sigh, looking almost... disappointed? Blair felt a small lift of optimism, the hope that Jim had a reason for this, a plan, and he watched Oregon go by. Alex declared herself bored after the hours on the road and Blair offered her some drills – sight, checking how far ahead she could see road signs; hearing, making her separate all the noises of the car's engine. She figured out the piggy-backing trick, insisting that she could 'see' movement. There were no headaches.

Blair's hope that Jim had any sort of strategy he could understand was shattered in a motel room in the town of Ashland. He came out of the bathroom to see Jim and Alex kissing. Blair remembered the time that he'd come upon Jim and Laura McCarthy in that nightclub cloakroom. Jim looked just as lost, just as focused on Alex's skin. Alex's hands scrabbled up and down Jim's back, plucking at his shirt.

Blair coughed – it wasn't even fake, the sight made him catch his breath so hard that he half choked. "Hey," he said, "I'd tell you guys to get a room, but we have one, don't we, so tell you what, I'll go sit in the car and give you some pri-"

Alex turned in Jim's arms, her eyes slitted in pleasure like the cat with the cream, if the cream was Jim nuzzling against her neck. "Oh, honey, you aren't taking one step out of this room without either Jim or me right behind you." She smiled then, unambiguous bliss, nothing to do with the conversation and everything to do with tilting her head against Jim's. His hand was cupping her breast and Blair, mesmerised, watched the gentle rhythm of Jim's fingers as he rubbed at Alex's nipple through her clothes. "But you're welcome to stay and watch. Or join in, even. We're all friends here, right?"

Jim, Blair's friend, lifted his head to look at him over Alex's shoulder. If Jim had looked welcoming, Blair would have joined them without a thought. If Jim had looked pissed, Blair would have joined them just to get some sort of reaction. But instead Jim looked distracted, like Blair's presence would be neither here nor there, and Blair, faced with an invitation to a threesome with a beautiful man and woman, and the man someone he loved, did the one thing he'd never dreamed he'd do. He backed off at the speed of light and slammed the bathroom door behind him.

The soundproofing was worthless, and Alex's laughter came clear through the door, along with other noises, while Blair slammed around the bathroom space like a ping-pong ball in a jelly jar. His face in the mirror was wide-eyed with shock, and red with humiliation and shamed arousal. He leaned against the door, hiding his face against his folded arms. "Damn it," he said once, and then slapped the seat shut on the commode, sat down and took his dick out of his pants.

How the hell is this my life, he thought, and brought himself off with a speed born of a day spent surging with adrenalin. In the main room, he heard Alex come with a deep grunt as if she'd been fighting with Jim rather than fucking him. If Jim made any noise, it wasn't loud enough to be heard over the roar of Blair's breath and heart.

He gave it five minutes filled with make-work – flushing away tissues, washing his hands, straightening towels - before he stepped out into the main room. Alex lay on top of the covers, naked but entirely self-possessed. She sat up on the edge of the bed as Blair came in, and Blair couldn't stop himself from staring because, oh man, excellent tits. She grinned, a ridiculously impish expression at odds with her usual sexy blonde self-possession, and stood and walked past him, pecking him casually on the cheek before shutting the bathroom door behind her. The shower started. Jim had at least put his pants on, and was staring out through a crack in the flimsy curtains. Blair wondered what there was in the drab streetscape that was so fascinating.

Jim's gun lay on the motel night stand, and Blair took about three steps before Jim was beside him, one hand firmly gripped around Blair's forearm.

"Forget it." Jim's face was as forbidding as his words.

"For now," Blair said, and pulled away to sit in the single chair the room offered. All this adrenalin wasn't good for his nerves. "You weren't kidding me about the weird part of this, were you?" he said softly.

Jim shrugged, a poster-boy for stoically ignoring your annoying friends; apparently he'd burned off any emotion in the rut with Alex. "I warned you."

"No way did you warn me. I don't know what a warning for this would look like, but it should have involved, I don't know, sirens, and flashing red and blue lights, and-" Blair broke off. "We could walk out of this room right now and drive away. Why won't you do that? Just pull on your shirt and get the fuck out of this room?"

"You heard her today. Something is calling us."

Blair leaned forward, his hands out, questioning, begging almost. "And you are just so eager-beaver about it. God, you look like you're being dragged to the electric chair most of the time. When you aren't screwing about with the international criminal."

Jim's calm broke. He hauled Blair out of the chair, his fists bunched in Blair's sweater, the seam of the sweater and Blair's sweaty t-shirt jammed under his arm pits. "Shut the fuck up. You don't have the first clue what's happening with me."

"Then tell me!" Blair had a moment's déjà vu, as he poked Jim in the sternum with a finger. "Come on, man! I can't... I can't just be Alex's tagalong toy here. I'm your partner." His voice shook on the last word. Jim let him go with a grimace, and then turned away to pick up a small hold-all and take out another shirt. That was great for Jim, Blair thought, but they were really going to have to stop at a Target or a Walmart. He'd been abducted without so much as a change of underwear.

The shirt was laid over the top of the bag; Jim was waiting for his turn at the shower, Blair realised. While he waited, Jim leaned down to straighten the bed covers. "Alex knows someone who can fly us over the border to Mexico. When we meet up with the pilot, I can persuade her to let you go. We'll be headed out of the country and anything that you pass on to the Feds after that won't matter."

And what could I tell the Feds that wouldn't drop you so deep in the shit that you'd never surface again, Blair thought. "Mexico, huh? Alex keeps talking about a temple. In my research, I found legends about a temple of light where sentinels would go to receive spiritual guidance – and if anyone needs a little guidance it's Alex, right?"

Jim deigned to smile. "You could say that."

"What kind of guidance do you need, Jim? I want to help, but I can't do that if I don't know what's going on with you."

It was a mistake. Jim's smile was gone, and he spread his hand in a 'nothing' gesture. "I need to see this through, that's all I know, and Alex is part of the deal."

"But why?" Blair's voice rose in frustration.

He was warned by Jim's gaze, the way it looked beyond Blair with a sick, yearning expression, and so he didn't jump when a warm hand rested against the back of his neck. "Some things don't need a why," Alex said. "They just are." Her hand moved from Blair to Jim, to caress his jaw. "Bathroom's free," she said with a smile, and Jim grabbed his bag and shut the bathroom door behind him.

Alex shucked off her towel and pulled on a black tank top and underwear while Blair did his best not to react. "We'll get you something clean tomorrow. I'm sure that Jim might be able to lend you some boxers for tonight, though."

"Yeah," Blair said. "I bet I must smell pretty ripe to a pair of sentinels."

Alex smiled. "You don't smell so bad." She sat down on the bed, and patted a space on the mattress next to her. "Sit down." Blair hesitated a moment and then sat beside her.

"He's wrong about you staying behind."

Blair rolled his eyes. Of all the allies in dealing with a stubborn Jim Ellison.... "I'm not going to disagree with you ."

Alex chuckled. "You belong with us. You're fascinated by us, and you should see what happens. It's only fair."

"I wouldn't say I was fascinate-" Alex put her hand over Blair's lips. It smelled of something sweetly floral, the sort of scent that any pretty girl might use to pamper herself. Maybe Blair was just imagining that he could feel the gun callus on her index finger.

"Of course you're fascinated. You've filled tapes and journals with observations about sentinels. We're your holy grail." She giggled as Blair's eyes widened in outraged understanding. "Ignorance is not bliss, Blair. I had to check out what you'd found, not that I could interpret much of it, all set out in pretty academic language. Maybe the cops or the Feds could figure it out, but it'll take time without you there to tell them which file to check, what notation to interpret."

"So, me coming along is all for you, and the sentinel research is just a bonus."

"Bonuses are nice," Alex said. "You want to come along, don't you?" She smiled encouragingly. "You want to look after your friend, which is beautifully loyal of you. And with me, you know that you have an ally."

"I have an ally. Great." Blair held his face in both hands, trying to think. "What happens after, Alex? When you and Jim have accomplished your big sentinel purpose. What do you think is going to happen then?"

Alex settled her back against the head of the bed, crossing her long, long legs under her. "I don't know now, but I think I'll know later, when we've done what we need to do. We'll be one, Jim and I."

Her voice took on a dreamy tone, while Blair tried to swallow back his heart. "One? What does that mean? I mean, I'm getting the impression that you two are pretty 'one' already, if you know what I mean."

Alex spread her hands in front of her. It was a gesture that hurt Blair oddly, because it was something that he did, his hands reaching out to grasp that most ungraspable of things – an idea. "I don't know!" she said, a shade of irritation entering her voice. "But I'm willing to go with it and see, because it's big. And that's what I've always wanted, something big."

It was too easy to sympathise with that. Didn't Blair want something big, something important and meaningful? Wasn't that what the sentinel study was all about, making sense of Blair's obsessions, excusing them?

"Something big," he murmured in quiet echo. They stared across the space at each other, and Blair remembered the way that Alex had kissed him in thanks for his help. He'd felt ill at ease, uncertain with that kiss, and there was no pretending that Alex didn't scare the hell out of him. She was a killer. But there was a connection forged in that glance.



Jim came into the room then, trailing the scent of soap and shampoo, ineffectually armoured in a t-shirt and pants. He'd shaved, Blair realised with a funny little flop in his gut. Oh, Jim. Blair stood. "Nobody bothered to pack a bag for me," he grouched. "So on your sentinel noses be it."

Jim tilted his head in silent exasperation. "You don't smell that bad. "

"I'm sure you can lend Blair a pair of clean shorts for the night," Alex said.

"So, speaking of tonight, uh, how are we doing this? Because I figure that this bed here is fine for me, and I won't be going anywhere without Jim so there's no need for anyone to get paranoid and do stupid things like cuff me to the frame, right? I'll get a good night's sleep, and then tomorrow we'll all be on to the big sentinel destiny."

Alex laughed out loud. "Oh, Blair. You are going to sleep right between me and Jim. Isn't he?" she said, looking past Blair and raising her gaze to Jim and addressing him, not Blair. "Because he wants you safe, and I know he loves sentinels, but I wouldn't put it past our intrepid social scientist to try sneaking out in the night to call the cops. Would you?"

"No," Jim said shortly, and sat on the edge of the bed, his back to both Alex and Blair. "Go and shower, Sandburg. We'll sleep and we'll leave early tomorrow."

"That's it?" Blair said. "Alex says jump and you say how high?"

Alex smiled. "Looks that way, doesn't it. Like Jim said: go shower."

Blair went and showered.

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It took a while for him to get to sleep. Awkward could not begin to describe what it felt like to be caught between Jim and Alex. Blair kept half-imagining that at some point in the night that Alex or Jim would lunge across him in that irrational lust for each other. Gnawing anxiety and curiosity kept him awake too, his mind spinning as theories flew about in his head like wind-blown leaves, although he kept his body still and his breathing steady. Alex dropped off early and easily, and at some point her arm dropped over Blair's waist. He tried not to flinch. Blair had Jim's shorts and had put on some armour of his own in the form of his worn, creased pants, but that left plenty of skin for Alex to touch. There was nothing inherently wrong with a clean, curvy woman curled against his back, but the ownership of the gesture intimidated him and pissed him off.

Jim ignored Blair's studious efforts at stillness, and Alex's touch. He lay on his side, his back to them both, and Blair was certain that all the time that he was awake that Jim was too.

Blair dropped off eventually. When Jim flailed next to him, his heel hitting sharply into Blair's shin, Blair struggled out of sleep feeling sickly and heavy despite his startlement.

"Jim?" he said, putting out a hand to feel Jim moving.

"God damn it!" Jim said loudly, lurching upright and swinging his legs over the edge of the bed. Alex had shifted away from Blair in her sleep but she was awake now too, the mattress shifting as she lifted herself on an elbow.

Blair sat up. Jim was a bulky shape in the dark, tilting the mattress down with his weight. "Jim?" he said, placing one hand on Jim's shoulder. The reaction was immediate; Jim shoved Blair's hand away as if it was something foul and sprang up from the bed. "Hey, come on!" Blair protested, any gentleness in him doused by Jim's reaction. "What is it? A bad dream?"

Alex turned on the light. Jim was caught in the act of whirling around. He didn't look at Blair, although his hand jabbed in Blair's direction. Instead, he stared fiercely at Alex. "He's not coming any further. We dump him here, and we move on. Tonight if we have to."

"No," Alex said. "He knows too much about everything now. He's part of this."

"The hell he is!"

"Hey," Blair said. "Remember me? Blair Sandburg, right here in the room listening to all this?" In the room, and angry, furious, even as something inside him sank in despair.

Jim strode around the bed as Alex stood to meet him, and took her hand and lifted it between them, their hands clenched together. "You want this, you can have it." He shook their joined hands once for emphasis. "But he's not part of this, whatever you think."

Alex frowned. "What? Are you jealous, Jim? I'd have thought that you'd be glad that we were getting along." She rubbed her free hand sensuously up Jim's neck, and Jim shut his eyes like a man distracted almost beyond endurance. That was enough - more than enough. Blair shoved himself off the bed, and stood himself alongside the two sentinels.

"I'm not being dumped anywhere! Not out of the loft and not here! Look at yourself, Jim! This is crazy. You need one sane person along on this little ride, and I'm it, because you two are so far gone into sentinel la-la land that it's scary." He closed his hand over Jim's wrist, below the entwined grip of Alex and Jim's fingers.

Jim didn't look at him. His eyes remained shut and he took a deep breath. "I'll tell you who's jealous. Blair Sandburg, anthropologist extraordinaire, who can't believe that maybe, just maybe, something is none of his damn business." Jim let go of Alex's hand, dropping his arm and taking Blair's with it, white-knuckled with the force of his hold. "Isn't that just so, Chief?" he asked, turning to Blair, his eyes open now, narrow, his face flushed with emotion. "You're talking a good game about being the sane one here, but you just can't bear to miss out on your answers, can you? The really good chapter for the dissertation."

Jim's arm was yielding as rock under Blair's grip. Blair wanted to rip that arm off and hit Jim around the head with it. "You asshole!" he blurted. "This is not about the dissertation."

"Is that so?" Jim jeered. He made no effort to drag his arm away from Blair's hold. Instead, he loomed over Blair, his face twisted with anger and with something that sent a bolt through Blair because it looked way too much like the crazy intensity he'd seen between the two sentinels. "You just can't accept that there's anything about me that's not yours to dissect and play with, can you, Chief? What about this then?" One arm was still caught in Blair's hand, and it crossed Blair's thoughts that Jim was going to have bruises, Blair was hanging on just that hard. The arm that was free whipped across Blair's back to press them chest to chest, hips to hips, and Blair had time to

notice Jim's hard-on burning into his thigh before Jim kissed him, no gentleness in it at all, just a desperation to match any kiss that he'd shared with Alex.

Blair froze. It didn't stop Jim. He pulled his arm free from Blair's suddenly nerveless grasp and wrapped his hand in Blair's hair, tilting Blair's head. That was the moment that Blair reacted and he pushed his tongue into Jim's mouth, while a heat of irate frustration as much as desire scalded his skin, and his hands clenched into Jim's t-shirt.

"Well, this is certainly a surprise," Alex said, dry and stinging as windblown desert dust.

Blair jumped in Jim's hold; he'd forgotten her. He would have stepped away, but Jim held tight, a paradox that infuriated Blair and left him terribly turned on. This whole scene had begun with Jim telling Alex that Blair was no part of whatever was going on – and now the contrary bastard wouldn't let go?

"You and I ended up fucking on short acquaintance. At least I've known Sandburg a few years," Jim said, bitterly wry. Blair's eyes widened – when did this become a discussion of something more than a couple of impulsive, sour kisses, and why was his dick taking a serious interest in the possibility? Amazing the difference it made when Jim focused his attention on Blair instead of the glamorous blonde criminal.

Alex's expression was offended, but rapidly becoming speculative. "You know," she drawled, her gaze on Blair, "I'm pretty sure that I didn't see this mentioned in your notes."

Blair shrugged, acutely aware of the heavy warmth of Jim's arms around him. "I guess this comes under the heading of new data," he said with a nonchalance that sounded fake to his ears, let alone what it might sound like to Alex.

"Oh, I'm all for new data," Alex purred, and stepped closer to face Blair, who ended up closely backed against Jim, with Jim's arms wrapped across his chest. Jim was still hard, and so was Blair. Different, so very different when it was Alex who was the outsider, the one who had to seek permission. And she did. "May I?" she asked, not of Blair, but of Jim. Jim's breath hitched, a quick draft across Blair's skin, and then Alex leaned in and kissed Blair with the assuredness of a beautiful, experienced woman. It was practiced, nothing like the harsh passion Jim had laid on Blair, but Blair's dick really did not care. The idea that Alex sought permission from Jim should have pissed him off. It only added something darkly piquant to the murky, liquid arousal that was brewing in him.

Jim's hands slid against Blair's torso, a firm, sure touch and Blair thought dazedly that Jim's hands must be rubbing against Alex's body too. She was so close, as close in front as Jim behind him, and Blair was consumed with heat with no way of being sure if it belonged to the bodies enveloping him, or was his own want.

"I want to watch you blow him," Jim growled. Alex drew back to look into Jim's face. The offense she'd shown earlier was gone. The curiosity remained, along with a crooked eyebrow and a smirk that announced that she was going to have that curiosity satisfied. Blair stifled disappointment – Jim's hands on his skin, Jim's mouth, had been nothing but an idle, if occasionally intense, fantasy up to now and he hadn't realised how invested he was in the possibilities until that rasped command took them out of play. (For now, Blair thought. For now.) But Blair was disappointed, not stupid.

Alex was a dangerous woman with a gun and an attitude, and if Blair was feeling increasingly like a gazelle gambolling with a pair of hungry lions – well, he always had got off on adrenalin rushes, and Alex was beautiful and knew exactly what she was doing.

As did Jim. Even as Alex went to her knees and undid Blair's pants, Jim's wandering hand tweaked one nipple hard. The unexpected almost-pain made Blair grunt. "You're being awfully quiet, Chief," Jim whispered in his ear. His breath tickled, a stimulation that stayed just the right side of pleasurable.

"What could I say?" Other than a complaint that it wasn't Jim going down on him.

"Nothing coherent by the time I'm finished with you," Alex said.

Blair shut his eyes. "Oh, god," he said, at the first touch of her mouth. Alex's fingers, her pretty, carefully manicured fingers, travelled purposely around and behind Blair's balls, and he swallowed noisily. "Oh. My. God." Jim shook with quiet laughter behind him, but Blair was too grateful for Jim's strength supporting him to get that angry. He twisted his head, inviting Jim to kiss him. Maybe if he had Jim's tongue in his mouth he might not be so amusing. It was awkward, and Jim's tongue slickly sliding against his own just seemed to increase Blair's embarrassing vocalisations. Easier to simply lean his head against Jim's shoulder and clench his hands into his friend's corded thigh muscles. "I don't believe this," he said, his breath becoming increasingly shorter the closer he got to one hell of an orgasm.

"Believe it." Jim's voice rumbled in his ear like thunder, distant and ominous, and Blair took a high, gasping breath that turned into a pathetically grateful whine as Alex's talented mouth brought everything into focus, and that focus was how great he felt, the heavy stream of pleasure that fountained in him and out of him. He sighed, feeling peaceful for the first time in... days. Ever since this whole mess had started.

Alex rose gracefully to her feet, and peace was gone. "Did you like that, Jim? I know that Blair liked it." Blair had liked it, he liked it a lot, but now he was humiliatingly aware of his pants pooled around his ankles. He didn't betray his thoughts by so much as the twitch of an eyelash, but Alex's gaze dropped to Blair's ankles and back to his face again, and she smiled infuriatingly.

Jim's eyes narrowed, whether at the question or Alex's knowing look, but his chin tilted in sharp affirmative. He loosened the embrace he held Blair in. It became one arm caught around Blair's waist, while the other circled Alex's shoulders. A satisfied noise rose from the back of her throat and Alex ran fingers down Jim's cheek and under his jaw to his throat. Blair felt the shiver that went through Jim, and Alex hummed in anticipation.

"That was a sweet little warm-up," she said, "but I think that you and I need something more." Her hands cupped the back of Jim's head, threading into the short hair, and they kissed. Blair would have backed away, the hobble of his clothing around his legs notwithstanding, but even as he flinched, Jim's hand trailed down his arm. Comfort, or simple reluctance to let him go, Blair couldn't tell. No condom, Blair thought. He hadn't waited around to watch what happened when he was in the bathroom, but he realised he hadn't seen anything in the trash basket. Alex certainly hadn't suggested anything when she blew him and Blair, letting his mind wander to whatever had

happened between Alex and Jim that first time, was pretty sure that Jim didn't normally carry them on his way to an arrest.

Jim was kissing Alex's neck and easing his hands between her black cotton briefs and her ass, and the two of them headed for the bed in breakneck but surprisingly graceful fashion, while Blair hitched up his wayward pants and leaned back against the wall. No, he thought with the detached observer part of his mind, no condoms. The voyeur in him should have been in delighted engagement with the porn show happening right in front of him, but his fascination had a sickly back-taste. It was indeed great porn – but it was also Jim out of control and clearly, whenever the haze of lust cleared, desperately unhappy about it. Alex was riding Jim now, her head thrown back, the muscles in her legs working strongly. Jim's eyes were shut, and while one hand held Alex's waist, the other clenched in the bedding. On an impulse, Blair perched himself on a corner of the heaving mattress and took that hand in his. Jim's fingers closed around his, and Blair had to brace himself to take an element of the weight and force of Jim's body.

It took a while to finish. Blair was half-hard again, but distracted by the clasp of hot, sweating hands, by the slack, confused pleasure in Jim's face, by Alex's determined and successful pursuit of her own climax. He was taking anthropological mental notes, and felt a moment's shame, but only a moment. Alex came with a harsh, sobbing cry, and Jim's head tilted back. His arm was crooked to keep his hold of Blair's hand, and the muscles tautened even further, while his mouth opened but no noise at all came out except the rasp of breath, and then not even that for long seconds.

Gradually the two sentinels relaxed. Alex didn't move, but slumped over Jim's chest, her hands splayed across the pectoral muscles as her breathing gradually slowed. Jim's body also slowly loosened, the muscles gradually resting, all except that hold on Blair's hand.

"I guess I am part of this after all," Blair said. He tried to sound straightforward, but some acid leaked into his words in spite of his better intentions. Jim's head turned on the pillow to face away from Blair, but Alex lifted her head to look him in the eye. Blair smiled at her, with a lifting of lip that he was certain was not the usual placatory, 'Blair the friendly social scientist' smile. Alex's eyelids lowered in thought, and Blair knew that she was rethinking the dynamic that she'd thought she'd had here.

Fine, Blair thought. Let Alex do just that. Because Alex sat astride Jim, and room stank of sex – and Jim was still holding onto Blair's hand.

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Alex had contacts, and those contacts meant that right now she and Jim and Blair were passengers in a small cargo plane that was taxiing for lift-off on a private airfield comfortably close to the Mexican border. Blair had got on the plane without argument, although he hadn't missed the look that Jim and Alex had shared, and what sounded a lot like a resigned sigh as Jim sat down beside him.

Blair didn't know if it was nerves or the grass strip that made the plane's movement feel particularly nauseating. Alex was up the front, discussing what Jim blandly described as 'mutual interests' with the pilot, Orrin with no last name. Orrin was the epitome of good ol' boy calm, except when he spoke to Alex, at which point his attitude became that of a rattlesnake wrangler who knew his job and wasn't interested in taking any showy risks.

There was a set of four seats bolted to the floor behind the cockpit, while the remainder was cargo space. Blair and Jim sat there, Jim with the 'aisle' seat. Blair had watched the way that Jim watched Alex as she moved about the plane, and decided that he'd rather stare at the windowless metal and plastic around him.

"Take some slow breaths, Chief."

"I am," Blair said irritably.

"Then take them deeper," Jim told him.

"I hate flying. I especially hate flying in little tin cans that I know are going to be flying literally under the fucking radar, okay? Especially at night, especially when we're leaving the country illegally."

The engines roared, and Blair felt physics principles learned in high school press him harder against his seat as Orrin sped up for take-off. Jim wrapped a big, warm arm around Blair's shoulders, and leaned over to peck a kiss onto Blair's sweaty temple. Startled, Blair faced Jim, whose face was worn and exasperated in a way that didn't add up with the tenderness of the kiss. "What was that about?"

Affection filtered through Jim's small, tight smile. "I'm trying to get your attention away from your fear of flying. What did you think it was about?"

"Ah," Blair said. "Distracting me. Yeah, I guess that kissing me is one way to get my attention." He sounded weird – doubt and interest all tangled up in his voice, and Jim's smile became a little looser and then broadened, and Blair had no time at all for nerves as the plane abandoned the earth, because Jim leaned in close and kissed him on the mouth. Blair's eyes fluttered closed. This kiss wasn't like the hard, desperate touches back in the motel room in Ashland. It was quietly intimate, as if the domesticity of the last three years in the loft had been as comfortably sexual as it had been companionable. Blair's eyes burned suddenly, and his throat closed, and he pushed Jim away. "Don't." He regretted it immediately as he watched the first hints of openness in Jim's face in days disappear. "I didn't mean it like that..." he began, but Jim's arm was back in the enclosure of his own space, and Jim's eyes stared at the partition in front of them.

"I get it, Sandburg. Don't worry."

"No, you don't get it," Blair snapped. The plane lurched slightly, turbulence, and Blair winced, suddenly recalling where they were and that Alex, with her sentinel ears, was only a few feet in front of them. "You want to kiss me, fine. I am nothing if not flexible, but excuse me if I'm having problems with dealing with the fact that this all came along in company with Alex, and us breaking god knows how many state and federal laws. I'm not your and Alex's little shared toy. Get it?" he tacked on with bitter emphasis.

Jim held up one hand. "You're right. I don't get it. If you want me and Alex to leave you alone, then we can do that." He leaned nearer again, close enough to kiss if Blair hadn't just screwed that up. "But I got the impression that you were plenty interested in being kissed by me. The sentinel thing is informative that way."

"For once in my life I think I've had enough of the sentinel thing." The United States dropped away behind them, home being left behind, and Blair had known that feeling before – but on all those other occasions he'd had a lot more confidence about what was ahead.

"Then maybe you should have stayed on the ground," Jim said, acrimoniously sharp. Alex emerged from the cockpit, braced against the plane's climbing tilt with a grip on the door and then the two seats across from Jim and Blair.

She smiled, but Blair could see the thought behind the beautiful eyes. "Play nicely, boys." Her gaze went to Jim, and then she frowned. Jim, who had been sitting with his head bowed, looked at her, and Blair looked away again, wishing for a window to stare out of. Instinct made him glance sideways. Alex's hand on Jim's knee was absolutely not peripheral.

"Why don't I leave you two crazy kids alone," Blair muttered, and stood to step past Jim. The idiosyncratic arrangement of the plane's interior gave him plenty of room, and he looked briefly at the two sentinels – at Alex's satisfied smile, and at Jim's containment, emotion gone and sucked into some internal black hole. The sight made Blair feel frighteningly like a dark star himself.

He shouldered forward into the small cockpit. There wasn't actually anywhere to sit, just an awkward stand behind the pilot's seat.

"Hey, Orrin," he said. "How are we going?"

"We're going good," Orrin replied.

"So, how did you get into this business?"

Orrin shrugged. "Had an uncle who flew in the Korean war, so it's not like flying didn't run in the family. He encouraged me."

"That's.... not quite what I meant."

Orrin turned to grin, wide and easy. "I know that, but with my commercial interests, minding your own damn business and not gabbing about anybody else's is a good strategy." It was courteous, amused even, and clearly final.

"Discretion is the better part of good business?" Blair asked.

"You could say that. But if you're bored with the love birds, we can always talk sports." Orrin's glance at Blair suggested scepticism.

"I can talk sports. Basketball, baseball, boxing. Any of those work for you?"

"I do believe they might," Orrin said, and Blair passed some of the flight staring at moonlit wisps of cloud and vigorously defending the notion that Lewis was robbed in his bout with Holyfield.

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There were maps strewn across one of the beds in a shabby hotel room in Monterrey. Discoloured sun-filter curtains moved in the breeze from an open window, while Alex crouched at the foot of the

bed, and Jim stood, both of them staring at contour lines, while Blair stared at the two sentinels. "There?" Jim said, stooping to point his index finger across a green space on the map. Alex placed her hand over his, her blue eyes unfocused, and their hands moved together and then stopped. Alex stood, her hand still in Jim's.

"That's a little awkward," she said. "I always knew we'd be near Arguillo's territory, but it looks like we'll be practically in his backyard."

Jim lifted one eyebrow and said in his driest tones, "Then we'll have to be discreet, won't we?" He gently detached his hand and looked at the map again, a frown on his face.

Blair had already crossed the room, squeezing his way past Alex and alongside Jim. "Where are we headed?" he asked, crouching all the better to squint at the map. Jim bent down, and Blair was terribly aware of him, of Jim's shadow lying across his back.

"There," Jim said, tapping gently at the paper.

Blair looked up at Alex. "This isn't the temple that Santiago found. His is further north than that."

Alex shrugged. "Then it's another temple." She smiled, the curve of her lips almost affectionate. "Congratulations, professor. You may be about to make a whole new discovery."

"Yeah," Blair murmured. "I cannot wait..."

"Am I detecting a lack of enthusiasm for anthropology here, Chief?"

Blair stood. "More a lack of enthusiasm for being shot up by a bunch of drug-lords. That is what Arguillo is, I presume, and that's why it's so damn 'awkward' to be in his backyard?"

Alex nodded. "He... sponsored some of the money for the little venture in Cascade. His money is paying for our luxurious accommodation." Alex's hand gestured satirically at the room around them, the dingy curtains, and the carpet that had come unglued in one corner.

"Oh, that's just great. He's going to be kind of pissed that he didn't get a return on his investment then?"

"Probably. But as Jim says, we can be discreet."

"Discreet," Blair said quietly. "We'll hike up to the temple, and you and Jim will do whatever you have to do there, and then what?" He looked at Alex's hand, now resting lightly on Jim's shoulder. "Then what?" he asked Jim.

Jim reached across his chest to pat lightly at Alex's hand before he shifted away and went to the window, drawing aside the flimsy curtain to look at the street, in a gesture that Blair knew well. Jim always liked finding an excuse to look out at the world when he didn't want to look at the people in the room with him.

"I don't know. We'll go there, and we'll finish whatever we're meant to finish and we'll move on from there."



Which 'we' are we talking about, was a question trembling in Blair's mouth. And 'finish'? Did Jim really think that anything could be finished with this?

"I have a contact who can get us to Sierra Verde, and maybe get us a helicopter hire there. It will save us some time," Alex said. Her voice was clipped, and Blair looked at her. She was staring at Jim's back, a frown creasing her pretty forehead.

"Is he reliable?" Jim was still looking out the window. The aircon was barely worthy of the name, and his t-shirt stuck to the small of his back.

"Reliable enough. We'll need some equipment that it will be less noticeable to get here. You can do that, and Blair can come with me."

Jim turned back from the window.

"I figured that Sandburg would come with me." He crossed his arms across his chest. It was a gesture of control; it was a gesture of holding in considerable irritation. It was a gesture that cut absolutely no ice with Alex. She got in close and rubbed a gently curved index finger under Jim's chin, while Blair fidgeted at the room's sudden powder-keg atmosphere and tried to decide whose side it was most politic to be on right now.

"You and Blair have had all these years of male bonding, and really, I think I'm allowed a look-in. And you can go shopping all by yourself, Jim. Your Spanish may be limited but you have enough to play tourist and buy us the gear that we need." She smiled, as their gazes held in a fascination that might not always be happy, but was still entirely mutual. "Besides, I think that Blair is getting bored. He might appreciate an outing."

Jim looked past Alex to scrutinise Blair. "Is that what you think, Chief? That you might appreciate an outing?" He echoed Alex's phrasing with considerable sarcasm.

Blair's options whirred through his head – time with either sentinel meant the chance for questions without the absolute certainty of eavesdropping from the other, and it was hard to decide which sentinel he had more urgent questions for – granted those questions travelled distinctly different paths. And hell, yes, he wanted out of crappy little hotel rooms. "Hey, I'm easy," Blair said, and winced. They'd been on the move since the night in Ashland, but neither of the sentinels missed Blair's Freudian faux-pas.

Alex grinned, but Jim frowned even more thunderously than his usual, and snapped out, "Yeah, that hadn't escaped me."

Blair wasn't quite sure how he didn't explode with betrayed, humiliated fury. Just who had kissed who? "On consideration," he said, his words precisely enunciated, "I think I'll go with Alex." Jim said nothing, only turned his back on them both again.

"And now that we have our arrangements settled..." Alex, the one who always had planned on being on the run after Cascade, extracted various cosmetic items from her bag and made an amazingly speedy touch-up to her face. Her public presentation arranged to her satisfaction, she cupped Blair's elbow in one hand. "Shall we?" she asked.

"Yeah, sure," Blair said, and the two of them left a silent Jim behind. Alex threaded her arm through Blair's, like they were any ordinary couple out on a stroll, but when Blair experimentally tried to pull away, she hooked him back with surprising strength.

It was obvious very shortly into their excursion that Alex knew Monterrey well. The two of them travelled via two different bus routes, while Blair stared out the window. The city outside the bus windows was an insufficient distraction from the warm weight of beautiful criminal pressed against Blair's side. They disembarked, and Alex led them in a walk through the streets of a crowded residential neighbourhood, the two of them still hooked together like affectionate tourist lovers.

"You know this area pretty well," Blair said, practically the first thing he'd said to Alex since they left the hotel room. His usual garrulity was dammed behind seething resentment.

"Yes, I do. Carl and I worked together for quite a while, and he adored Monterrey. He had family here, and planned on retiring." Alex shrugged. "Best laid plans. Carl doesn't have to worry about planning for his retirement any longer."

That sent a chill down Blair's spine. He didn't say a word, but Alex turned to him anyway. "He really didn't want to give up the gas, Blair. Isn't it better for one man to die than thousands?" Her mouth shaped the words with careful provocation, and Blair would have jerked away from her, but Alex linked her arm all the more firmly through his and whispered, "Behave. We don't need to attract attention, after all."

"Fine," Blair muttered. They walked past a religious display, a shrine or a street altar; Blair wished he knew enough to say. Whether you called him curious or a nosy shit, he always did wish he knew. There was a huge poster of the Sacred Heart on the wall, garish in its blues and reds; the imagery familiar to Blair from his study at St Sebastian's. Under the poster was a small table set with a snowy tablecloth embroidered with red roses, holding a standing wooden crucifix and a small vase of flowers.

It made him think of Marcus; Blair had mentioned Jim's past army career, before everything went to hell at their little 'retreat' and Marcus had half joked that he'd ask Sebastian to intercede for Jim. "Sebastian was a soldier, too, you know," Marcus had said, his gnarled hands carefully working on the lead solder of some very delicate windows.

Blair hoped that Marcus remembered Jim in his prayers now and again. He had a feeling they were going to need all the intercession they could get.

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Alex's contact was a short, very lean, Mexican man, dapper somehow in his jeans and white button-down shirt. He greeted Alex like she was his long-lost niece at the very least, and Blair lost any hope of distinguishing meaning in the quick-fire exchange of Spanish. They were offered fruit drinks, but no alcohol, and the arrangements were made in an atmosphere of casual obligation that Blair associated with asking minor favours of fellow TAs. Eventually they left, with a hearty handshake and a piercingly inquisitive look for Blair, and an affectionate, chaste buss on the cheek for Alex.

Out on the street, Blair asked, "Is he one of Carl's family?"

"No, Andreas is just a contact," Alex said. She frowned as she looked about her, with an agitated, pained look that Blair remembered from her efforts to use her senses in Cascade. "And don't assume he won't sell us out just because he kissed me. But he's efficient, and right now he's discussing pilots with some woman who sounds like she smokes a hundred cigarettes a day. I'll call him later today and he'll tell me a name and a time. We'll head to an airfield, and then Sierra Verde, and then the temple." Her voice came out wistful at the mention of the temple. "Let's have some lunch." They found a little restaurant, Blair sipping at a cool glass of horchata before he slipped a notebook and pen out of his pocket, those items at least as important to have obtained as changes of underwear and t-shirts.

"I thought you were just worried about me trying to convince Jim to make a run for it again, but I'm getting the impression that I got the tour of Monterrey for practical sentinel reasons too."

Alex took a dainty sip of coffee. "You've taught me a lot – maybe I've learned to focus on you, on your voice and your scent. Maybe there's more to this than either of us knows. Make a note of that, Chief."

Blair's grip tightened on his pen at the sarcastic inflexion on 'Chief'. "Yeah. I think I've already figured that there are a few gaps in my knowledge."

"Oh yes."

Blair froze at the tone of Alex's voice. It was just two words, but the hair was going up on the back of his neck.

"If I thought you were doing it on purpose, I'd kill you, you know."

It was helpless reflex to sit back in his chair to put what distance he could between them, to lift his hands with his palms outwards towards her. Look, his gestures said. See how harmless I am, and in no way a threat and so you really don't need to kill me.

"I'm not doing anything," he protested.

Alex laughed at that. "You're scheming behind those big blue eyes every minute of the day. Trying to figure out how to pry Jim away."

"I don't seem to have had much luck at that, have I?" It was meant to come out guilelessly, harmlessly, but it came out far too bitterly instead.

"No, despite the rather delicious distraction you've ended up being. Fortunately for you, darling Blair, it was terribly obvious to me that the only emotion greater than your enthusiasm was your surprise." She leaned on one elbow, chin resting in the palm of her hand. "Now Jim, Jim wasn't surprised at all."

Blair made no comment about anybody's surprise, but kept his eyes on his notebook, and the neat writing there. Jim had been unflatteringly surprised at how legibly Blair wrote, way back, way back when they were new to each other. "Your point?" he asked as neutrally as he could.

"You're an open book to me now – I can smell you, I heard the way your heart skipped when I said that I could kill you, I can see the way your pupils open and contract, I can just about hear the blood flowing in your veins."

"No wonder you're getting a headache, then," Blair told her, watching the tiny flicker of annoyance that crossed her face and then disappeared. "You can tell what my body's doing. That's not the same as being an open book."

"You want him, which I think is entirely understandable. He's gorgeous. But he's mine, Blair, and you're here right now because I let you be."

Blair wasn't stupid enough to dispute this, even if he wasn't convinced Alex was right. Jim might be playing an incredibly frustrating game of 'push me, pull you' when it came to Blair's presence on this adventure, might kiss Blair one moment and demand him gone the next, but that was surely the point; Blair was still here, to irritate Alex and Jim both, and he was staying.

"You're in control," he said quietly. "I get it, Alex, I really, really do." And he's not yours, no way, no how, he thought, putting it in silent words while he gazed at her with a nervous respect that was convincing because it was entirely in earnest despite his mental rebellion. Open book? He hoped not.

She smiled and reached across the table to gently tap his cheek with two fingers. "Know your place, and everything will be fine."

Blair put a smile on his face. "One of my 'places' is the study of sentinels. Care to answer a few questions over your coffee?"

"For you to pass on to law enforcement later?" Did she really mean to let Blair go? To let Jim go?

"For science," Blair riposted. "For anthropology, for history." He meant it. Maybe that was why she agreed to answer his questions, while he wrote it all down.

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When they returned to the hotel room, it was empty of Jim Ellison, but there were some of Jim's purchases stacked neatly on the floor, a Spartan collection of camping gear. Blair sighed. Knowing how to rough it didn't equate to liking roughing it.

"Our boy has been busy," Alex said. "Why don't you watch tv, Blair, I need a shower." Blair nodded and then propped himself on a bed, reviewing his notes, extending out ideas and concepts, lost in consideration. He paid little attention to Alex when she came out of the bathroom in a tank-top and underwear, although his stomach turned briefly when she picked up her gun. But instead Alex herself turned on the tv, cleaning her weapon and channel surfing now and again. Her gun cleaned to her satisfaction, Alex settled on what looked like a soap opera, and lay down on her stomach to watch, her legs bent and in the air, her expression absorbed and young-looking without makeup; but then she was young, a year younger than Blair, according to the file Cascade PD had on her. Alex turned her head, clearly aware of Blair's scrutiny, and smiled provocatively. "I can feel you staring," she said, but she didn't sound offended about it.

"You're worth looking at," Blair told her, and prayed that Jim would understand if he was close enough to hear this obvious attempt at flirtation. He needed to keep Alex on his side. He expected that his motives were transparent to her, but let her be flattered and she might not care.

"Down, boy," she said, almost indulgent, and turned her attention back to the television. Blair watched it for a while, his Spanish up to getting the gist but no more. High emotion and sex were clearly more important than the dialogue anyway, and he was half-way to rooting for the heroine when the door opened and Jim walked in. He had his hold-all in one hand, straining at its handles, and a large carton under the other arm.

"Cosy," he commented, and put the bag and the carton down in one corner.

Alex turned her head, chin propped up on her hands like a 'parental guidance required' version of Gidget. "I can't call Andreas until four. It's not like there's anything else to do. While you were gone, anyway."

It was warm outside, and Blair could smell the deodorant-tamed sweat on Jim as he walked past. Alex rose to sit cross-legged on the bed, while Jim began unloading his packages, including a stack of freeze-dried meals, sorting things into neat piles. He fished one last thing out of the hold-all, and held it out to Blair. "Here," Jim said. It was a book.

Blair rose from the bed, putting his precious notes neatly aside, and walked over to be close enough to take the book from Jim's hand. Blair's Spanish was sufficient to understanding the title as 'Works of the Museum of Contemporary Art of Monterrey'. It wasn't a large book, but reasonably thick, and filled with photographs of paintings and sculpture, some of the artists names that he recognised. "What's this for?" he asked.

Jim rolled his eyes, uncomfortable and easing himself with sarcasm. "What does it look like?" He lifted one hand in an 'it doesn't matter' gesture. "Look, it was in the window of a store I passed, and I remembered that you like this sort of thing, and I doubt that you did much sight-seeing when you were out with Alex. Think of it as a souvenir."

"A souvenir." Blair stared at the bright printed cover, nearly buckling it in a two-handed grip. He was deeply moved, although whether his emotion was affectionate or homicidal was an open question. "Yeah, sure, why not."

"And what did you bring back for me, Jim?" Alex enquired from her bed.

"I've been organising our jungle honeymoon retreat, dear," he informed her, absolutely deadpan. "I'm assuming that you'll prefer to travel light."

Alex leaned forward, a predator's smile curving her lips. "How well you know me. Dear."

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Jim insisted on packing the gear, spreading their supplies over three packs, even after Alex's call to Andreas confirmed that their flight wouldn't leave until early the next morning. There was the search for a place to eat dinner, everyone apparently lost in their own thoughts and not inclined to make much of a meal of a rather ordinary tapas plate. Jim and Alex still eyed each other, but Blair's

perception was that Jim would rather look away sometimes. They found a bar, the three of them, and left early when Alex grew anxious and irritated with the obvious attention three foreigners were attracting in a part of town where tourists were uncommon, and hustled down a side street when Jim grimly told them to do so. Muggers at best had awaited them on one route, according to Jim's clipped explanation, but they made it to their hotel room safely.

Blair threw himself down to sit on one bed, kicking off his shoes, and rumpling the cheap cover, wondering whether he was any safer indoors than out. Alex's mood was still irritable, and Blair's intuition about what pissed women off might not be the most highly tuned in the world, but he was pretty sure that he traced the beginning of Alex's bad mood to Jim's return to the hotel room that afternoon. Maybe that was why Jim stood behind Alex, with barely a glance at Blair after they entered the room, to stroke a gentle hand over the nape of her neck. He carefully undid the loose bun that Alex had put her hair into, and smoothed the golden strands into order. Alex leaned against him, and Blair stayed on the bed like a child put into a corner, waiting, and watching.

Jim's gradual seduction was slower than the hungry sex on the US side of the border; not that Alex seemed to need much encouragement. But Blair had the feeling that Jim's approach here was more a conscious effort to soothe Alex's mood. He hoped so, anyway, until he saw Jim's face tauten with familiar hunger as he slid Alex's flimsy, pretty dress off one shoulder and bent to taste her skin, and that look on Jim's face only whetted Blair's own appetite. He wondered if the two sentinels could sense the jump in Blair's arousal. He wondered what he might smell like to the two of them.

Jim and Alex ignored Blair, however. Instead, they stepped gracefully to the bed, Alex pushing Jim down to lie on his back before she spread herself out over his body, and began kissing him, her tongue lapping at his skin, her hands kneading against finely honed muscle. Blair was getting ready to undo his pants (he was only human, he told himself, and entitled to be as comfortable as practical) when Alex shifted, snake-quick, and her hand stabbed down to close around Jim's neck in a grip that made Blair wince, all thoughts of sex forgotten. Jim was strong, probably knew a dozen covert ops tricks to loosen her hold, but the throat was vulnerable. Jim, lying under Alex, was vulnerable, and Blair leaned forward, slowly, slowly, trying to ready himself to move without Alex noticing him.

"Do you want to tell me why you're doing this?" she snapped. Doing what, Blair wondered, bewildered. What he'd seen of Jim was a man determinedly, albeit passively, intent on getting laid.

Jim lifted one eyebrow. "Why do you think?"

"Oh, I know you want to fuck me so much you feel like you'd die if you didn't get it." Blair watched from his perch on the corner of the other bed, fascinated by what was playing out here, and wondered if he could be fast enough to stop Alex from hurting Jim if that was how this went down. "But that's not why you're doing this." She released Jim's throat, and Blair's heart quieted a little. Alex took Jim's hand in hers, their fingers linking between each other. "We could be one. We can be one." She turned her head so that her eyes met with Blair's, and Blair fought the urge to flinch back.

"I told you he's not part of this," Jim murmured, his free hand cupping Alex's jaw to turn her face towards his.

"Then why?" Alex demanded, surprisingly distressed. She'd been so assured, so determined, ever since Cascade and now she sounded like any teary woman disappointed in a lover.

"When we reach the temple," Jim told her. "That's where we need to be."

Blair didn't wait to hear any more, or see any more. He scrambled to his feet and stumbled into the tiny bathroom, slamming the door behind him. He dropped into a sit, his back against the door, and tried to calm his breathing, but he simply couldn't do it. A week's worth of terrifying weirdness demanded its way with him. His heart felt like it would flop its way right through his ribs, and the sound of his shuddering, gasping breaths drowned out whatever was happening behind the door. The worst of the panic attack gradually wore down, and Blair stayed sitting on the bathroom floor, shaky and exhausted. He was sick with anxiety and jealousy; there was jealousy of the all-consuming, sexual thunderbolt connection between Alex and Jim, however dysfunctional it might be. But even without the long submerged sexual attraction to Jim, he'd have been jealous. So he was nothing to do with Jim, was he? No sort of a friend, no sort of a help, cut out of the loop of mystic vision? He was sick with jealousy, and sick with self-disgust too.

Time passed, he didn't really know how much, and then he heard Jim's voice through the door.

"Sandburg."

"What?" he asked.

"The can is behind this door, and I'd like to use it."

Blair hauled his unwilling body to its feet and opened the door, and tried to shove past Jim without looking at him. Looking past him only showed Blair the room, lit by a small lamp, and Alex huddled under the covers of one of the beds. Jim stopped him with one big hand burning through his shirt into the skin on his chest. "Stay in here," Jim commanded, and entered and shut the door behind them.

He really did need to use the toilet, heading for it and adjusting his shorts. Blair squeezed himself into a corner as far away as possible (not very far at all). "That is not my kink," he declared snidely, as the sound and scent of released urine hit the air.

Jim lifted one hand in a 'shut up' gesture. Blair had seen Jim without his shirt on plenty of times – Jim could never be accused of body-shyness, for all his emotional reticence – but tonight there seemed to be extra fascination in the movement of muscle under smooth skin. Jim finished, readjusted his shorts and washed and dried his hands.

"She's asleep," he said, looking Blair in the face at last.

"So?"

"So I figured it would make a difference to you. It's as close as privacy as we're going to get any time soon."

"Privacy for what? We start making it in here, Sleeping Beauty in the room out there will wake up soon enough."

Ellison displeasure made itself known. "If I wanted to 'make it' with you, we'd be out there on the bed and Alex would probably enjoy watching it."

"Maybe the other side of the border, man. But I think Alex is rethinking my role in this little ménage à trois." Wasn't this wild, Blair thought. Wasn't this crazy? He was talking about having sex with his best friend for the entertainment of an international criminal who kept herself fit and pneumatic all the better to break into secure facilities. Truth really was stranger than midnight fantasy.

Jim advanced on him and Blair was backed up against the door- again – while Jim leaned over him. The panic attack lurking in the background of Blair's head reminded him that it could indulge a triumphant encore, any time, any time now. Jim lifted his left arm and leaned it against the door just by Blair's head, and then his right hand cupped Blair's jaw, just as gently as Jim had touched Alex out there, before Blair made his not so great escape.

"And if Alex is rethinking that, then maybe this is the time for you get the hell out of Dodge. She has money; we could leave you some, enough to get the nearest consulate."

"No."

Jim visibly restrained himself from slapping the door.

"Damn it, Chief, I just want you safe. I don't want you hurt."

"Then that's great, Jim, we have joint and reciprocal aims, because I don't want me hurt, and I don't want you hurt, either."

"I can look after myself."

"What?" Blair's mouth twisted in a sneer. "Against all evidence to the contrary, huh?"

"And what are you going to do? To look after me?" Anger flashed across Jim's face, and Blair saw an uncomfortable reflection of himself in his friend's icy blue eyes – a man, of no particular height, of no particular muscle; a man who knew how to handle a gun but wasn't comfortable with that knowledge; a man shut out of the dreams and mysticism that drove the two sentinels.

"I'll know it when I see it," he said softly, stubborn and sullen. Maybe Blair wasn't the fighting man that Jim was, but it didn't mean that Blair was ignorant of how to handle himself. "And if you really don't want me to come along, then all you have to do is buy some duct tape and leave me here for housekeeping to find in the morning."

Jim muttered, "God damn you, Sandburg," and then he kissed him. It was gentler than Blair might have expected, and he opened his mouth without reservation while his friend wrapped them together and pulled Blair hard against his nearly naked skin. There was only the intimation of sex in it. Blair was still wrung out from the aftermath of his emotional melt down, and Jim's kiss had a clinical tinge, a thoroughness that suggested an experiment in taste as much as desire. Jim broke the kiss, and Blair leaned his head against Jim's shoulder. He had his hands locked around Jim's waist, and no inclination to let go.

"What's going to happen at the temple?"



A tiny shudder ran over Jim's skin. "I don't know," he said, chagrin clear in his tone, and Blair nearly chuckled.

"So after I ran in here, you managed to... make Alex happy?" Blair lifted his head to look at Jim's throat. So close, and barely marked. There was the smallest smudge of bruise about an inch below Jim's ear. "You want to tell me what that was about in there? Before?"

Jim shrugged, and Blair's heart leaped with the hope that Jim was actually going to explain something. "I think you figured out right from the start that I'm not quite as into this as Alex. It just took her longer to notice." It was no answer at all, and Blair opened his mouth to protest, but Jim briefly gagged him with a broad palm across his mouth. "We need to sleep. We're out at oh dark thirty tomorrow." Jim reached behind his back and carefully disengaged Blair's hands, then stepped back and reached for the door handle. Blair shifted enough that Jim could open the door, and the two of them walked into the main room.

Jim gestured at the bed that was empty, and Blair nodded and climbed into it, and watched with eyes burning with stupid emotions as Jim got into bed with Alex and settled himself around her. Blair turned over in the bed, facing the wall so as not to see, and curled around what certainties he had. Jim was in trouble and needed help. Jim might want him safe, but Blair was willing to bet anything, his life even and especially, that there would be no duct tape in his future come morning, no abandonment to the shocked mercies of a startled cleaner.

Come morning, his possessions and his life were safe.

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"At least the mosquitoes aren't so bad," Alex said tiredly. She was crouched over her backpack, exhaustion impressed into every line of her, but she still looked longingly further into the jungle. One more night's sleep and then another hike through unknown miles of jungle, according to her and Jim, and they'd be at the temple, and Alex couldn't wait, no matter how much tangled, verdant growth she had to force her way through.

Blair stood still, almost unwilling to shrug the burden of his pack off because of the way he knew his shoulders would ache when he did it. He took a breath and then dumped the load, where it landed with barely a sound on the soft ground. "What blood type are you?" he asked.

Alex stared at him. "You have a point?"

Jim swung his pack down, and looked around, narrowed eyes investigating the growth around them in a way that Blair found both comforting and endlessly fascinating. Blair opened his mouth to answer Alex, but was beaten to it by Jim.

"Mosquitoes like type O best. If you're not O then you're less likely to get bitten."

"You learn something new every day," Alex said, and brought out the bottle of repellent in her bag. "I'm B negative, for what it's worth."

"Uncommon," Blair said shortly.

"In every way," Alex replied.

Blair rolled his shoulders, trying to loosen the muscles there and his back. The long trek, and very sore feet, had driven Blair to what for him was notable irritation, and he wasn't sure if he was grateful for or annoyed by the way that Jim had appointed himself the official speaker to Alex. "Do you think we can get a fire together tonight?" Blair asked Jim. It had rained with the steady persistence of tropical forest earlier in their trek, and even though it wasn't that cold, Blair wanted the warmth and friendly noise of flame.

"We can try," Jim said. His face was dirty, and sweat marked his t-shirt, and he occasionally looked into the jungle in the same direction as Alex. His face wasn't yearning though. It was drawn, and Blair sometimes spotted Jim's most common stress tell-tale, the jump of his jaw as he clenched his teeth. Jim turned to Blair and Blair, caught watching, didn't look away, but stared at Jim, seeing weariness and strain, and something that was reminiscent of their old camaraderie but stripped back to its bones. Jim was travel-stained, and he smelled of the sweat marking his clothes and skin, but Blair couldn't hide the unwilling fascination that must surely be in his face. Maybe everything was stripped back to bone, but Blair knew that there was sex at the marrow of it now. Jim walked past him, his fingers briefly brushing the back of Blair's hot, perspiring neck, before he stooped over Alex.

"How are you doing?"

"How do you think?" she said sharply. "I'm tired."

"Try to eat something more tonight." Jim's voice was encouraging, patient.

"Like you're number one in the gourmand stakes. Physician, heal thyself." Alex tilted her canteen and took three gulps. "Is there water nearby?"

Jim nodded. "I'll get some," he said and stood, gathering all their canteens and water purification tablets.

Blair pondered his gear and their food choices. Something about the freeze dried food bothered Alex, and she'd barely eaten the night before. She was right that Jim hadn't exactly made a hearty meal either, although he'd done better than she had.

"Remember I talked about dialing down. It might help with the food. If you can expand what you're sensing, you can bring it down too."

Alex leaned against a tree-trunk. "I don't need your lectures right now, Blair."

Blair kept his voice even with an effort. "I'm not trying to lecture you, I'm trying to help you. We're doing heavy-duty work in terms of calorie expenditure here. You need to eat."

"I know what I need to do!" Alex yelled.

"Then why don't you damn well do it?" Blair yelled right back.

Alex thrust herself upright, the substantial hunting knife that she carried on her belt suddenly in her hand, suddenly sharp against Blair's throat.

"Do not tell me what to do. Am I making myself quite clear?"

"Look, Alex..." Blair began, regretting his temper, definitely regretting the knife blade way too sharp against his skin, but, despite all that, wishing that he could get his message through. Jim had almost always carried through on Blair's suggestions easily. Why was it harder for Alex right now? He was frustrated and curious together.

Alex, apparently, was also frustrated. "Am I making myself clear?"

Blair shut his eyes. "Yes. Clear." The blade, and the looming sense of Alex's presence, was gone. "Jeez."

Alex stalked back to her gear and dropped to the ground, and they both of them waited in sullen silence for Jim to return. His return took a while, and it was close to full dark when Blair lifted his head to peer into the increasing gloom and acknowledged the nervousness that turned to relief when his friend stepped into view.

"Water," Jim said tersely, and dropped canteens in front of each of his travelling companions. "Nobody bothered looking for dry wood or kindling?"

"Sorry. Sorry, man..." Blair began.

"It's not exactly going to be cold," Alex muttered.

"Maybe not," Jim said. "But not everybody here has eyesight as good as ours."

Blair wondered if maybe he should have been pleased by that show of consideration from Jim. But the word 'ours' took comfort out of it. And later, in what Blair's watch told him was the small hours, the glow of the fire that Jim made for him lost its charm when Blair shifted out of a doze to see, through sleep-heavy eyes, Jim and Alex caught up in a fierce, writhing embrace. He was tired (he was angry and a little turned on despite his exhaustion) and he turned his back to give them what pathetic privacy was possible.

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At first, Blair didn't even realise that they'd reached the temple. All he saw was the same round of moist, heavy vegetation, and then Alex turned to Jim with a luminous smile upon her face and said, "Finally! Finally!"

Jim put his hand upon her shoulder, looked around him and nodded slowly a couple of times, a gesture he made sometimes when satisfied. "Looks like you can rest, Chief. Put your feet up," Jim suggested in a gentle tease.

"Yeah, sure. Me and the monkeys and the deer and the jaguars." Blair peered around. "I'm not exactly seeing a temple."

"We need to go a little higher. This is the base, and it's pretty covered."

A haul of a climb saw actual stonework come into view. "Oh my god," Blair said, his hand pressed in awe to a rough, square carving of a jaguar which guarded a moss covered frieze. "We really are here."

"We really are," Alex repeated, and pushed her pack from her shoulders. "And look, here!" She drove forward, pushing vines aside. "Look!" An entranceway was revealed, broad, leading into a dim interior.

"Uh, do you think you should?" Blair said, slightly nervous at the thought of what jungle creature might have made its home inside the temple.

Alex only laughed, an echo of that carefree sound she'd made in the car at the beginning of their journey back in Cascade, and disappeared inside. Blair turned to look at Jim, who stood beside him, looking this way and that, and up again, where steep steps, just recognisable as such, led to the temple's summit.

He looked at Blair, a tired smile on his face. "Don't worry. Alex can take care of herself."

"Yeah, yeah, I don't think I ever doubted that," Blair muttered, and then shoved the straps of his own pack off his shoulders. The realisation of where they were, what he was looking at, overtook him again, and a broad smile stretched his face. "This is amazing," he declared. For all the worry, all the fear, all the emotions weighing him down, he was overcome with a silly joy to see their destination at last. "How can this be so comparatively close to a population centre and never have been found yet? These sites are a big deal here."

"Maybe being in Arguillo's backyard discouraged casual exploration," Jim said. "For all we know, this site is on someone's "someday" list."

"Yeah, and we are the "someday" people," Blair crowed. He felt nearly as euphoric as Alex, suddenly, and bent down to scabble in his pack for his notebook and pen. He stood, his tools in his hands, and saw Jim staring at him, shaking his head. "What?" Blair demanded, and then decided that he perhaps understood. "Yeah, whatever, drag me the length of a continent to somewhere apparently unexamined by modern scholarship and you bet I'm going to take notes. You have a problem with this?"

Jim grinned, a true, amused grin. "No. It's nice to see some things don't change." But his face altered, his head tilting to listen, and he headed for the entrance. "Sorry, Chief, Alex wants to show me something."

Blair barely kept back a crude retort to the effect that Alex had shown him plenty already, and nodded. "Go on. I think I can entertain myself."

Entertainment did not become enlightenment. Blair knew academic ecstasy and frustration in equal amounts when he realised that the script graven into the stone blocks wasn't one known to him, even in the most general way. There was no way to translate anything of what he was looking at; the mix of pictograms and glyphs refused to give up any secrets, but Blair doggedly made notes anyway, until he realised that Jim and Alex had been inside the temple a substantial period of time. He

hesitated a few moments, loath to interrupt them in case they were having sex again, and then decided that the peculiar lovers would just have to deal if that was the case.

Blair followed the low, echoing murmur of voices through narrow, sharp-edged passage ways that appeared to circumnavigate the surprisingly roomy chamber where he found Alex and Jim. They were hand in hand, Alex closest to the wall and brushing her fingers over more of the ubiquitous carving. "You see it?" she asked Jim, in intimate tones. Jim nodded, his face in a dream-like calm which broke when Blair ostentatiously cleared his throat.

"You don't need to be so subtle, Blair," Alex said sarcastically. "I think we could both hear you coming."

"You'd think so," Blair said with equal sarcasm, which he regretted when he saw the way that Jim's face closed up again into the weary stoicism that was habitual for him when he wasn't distracted by sex. "So, wow." It wasn't entirely sarcasm in his voice. The chamber was dim, lit by refracted shafts of light. A raised dais at one end held two great stone troughs, and Blair walked closer, fascinated. There was one pictogram that he saw all over the temple – the pupil of an eye inside a stylised sun, and it was here. "The eye of god," he said quietly.

Alex and Jim walked a little closer, their hands still clasped. "Yes," said Alex. "And we'll see it, Jim and I. That's what this temple is devoted to – the extension of sentinel abilities."

"You saw that information in a vision?" Blair commented. It was without sarcasm – he simply knew that was the answer as far as Alex was concerned, as far as Jim was concerned. "So how? How will you see?"

Alex smiled, triumphant in her possession of sentinel lore. "These basins are primitive isolation tanks. Jim and I will lie in them, we'll pour water into them. There's a drink, made of local plants and herbs. The instructions are carved into the walls of this room."

"A drink?" Blair turned, his voice sharp. "You two are going to swallow some concoction that'll do who knows what? I mean, hey, I'm all for exploration, but an emergency room isn't exactly a 911 call away." Alex's face remained calm, smug, even, and Blair turned his appeal to Jim. "Come on, you can't tell me that you think that this is a good idea!"

Jim shrugged. "I don't recall any of this being what you'd call a good idea. It is what it is."

Blair drew in a breath that was meant to calm him, meant to give him precious time to knit the shreds of his temper together, but all the breath did was fuel his anger. "You are fucking crazy," he said, his eyes solely on Jim, who only smiled with a sour twist to his lips.

"I'm not about to disagree with you, Chief," he said, and he and Alex left the room, leaving Blair alone with the venom he'd spouted bitter in his own mouth. God, what had possessed him to say that? However true it might be, it was a futile response born from frustration and jealous resentment, and the words had done nothing except wound.

Blair pounded the side of one fist against the rough stone wall. "God damn it!" he snarled, and then hauled in some more breaths, jerky, harsh breaths that didn't calm his heart pounding in his chest.

"Damn it," he said again, and whirled and made his way out into the humid jungle air. Jim stood waiting, one hand resting on top of the head of a carved jaguar.

"Where's Alex?" Blair asked.

"Hunter gathering," Jim said with mordant humour. "The plants need preparation, and she wants to get them before it gets dark."

"Great. Beautiful. You're happy with this?"

Jim turned his head to look down at Blair, his eyes hooded, and cold suddenly. "Happy? What do you think? I'm being led by hunches and my dick into doing something that we both agree is stupid. How happy do you think I should be?"

Blair's hands lifted in a gesture of apology and surrender. "Yeah, okay, I get it. I just wish...."

There was a pause, and Jim said. "You wish what?"

"I wish that I didn't feel like the piece of toilet paper dragged along on your shoe here. That I could get a handle on whatever this is. That I could help you get a handle on it."

"You do help."

Blair lifted his eyes. "Uh-huh." Some of his scepticism dispersed at the look in Jim's face – exhausted, intense, and earnest as Jim seldom was.

"You remind me that there's something before and after this fucking black hole of instinct that I'm falling into, okay? This thing with Alex – it's overwhelming, I admit that, but it's not everything, because you're here. And I'm sorry about the attitude that you cop from me. It's... difficult."

Jim's grudging admission was a precious artefact unexpectedly glimpsed in the mud. "Yeah. I got that impression. I..." He took a deep breath. "We'll work it out, okay?" And because Blair could never, never let sleeping dogs lie, he asked, "Those difficult things? Are we including the fact that the overwhelming instincts seem to include an occasional urge to tongue wrestle with me?" He winced at his crassness; it was a deprecating mechanism and it came out at the worst moments, like this one.

Jim was looking exasperated again. "Trust me, Sandburg. In the middle of this mess, wanting to kiss you? Wanting to touch you? Counts as the least of my worries right now." He laid his hand on Blair's shoulder, his fingers curling and grasping repetitively. His thumb lay along the sensitive skin above Blair's collarbone, and a shiver ran through Blair's skin. Jim smiled, gently predatory. "Like you said, we'll work it out." He looked down into the jungle below the temple. "She's coming back."

Blair stared down the steps, his curiosity rising. "Okay. Good. I want to take a look at these plants that she's collected."

Alex came into view, both hands clutching a bushy, green bouquet of plants, and she climbed the steps to the small space in front of the temple entrance.

"So you found what you were looking for?" Blair asked. Things had remained awkward between him and Alex since the brief quarrel the night before.

She brushed past him. "I think so. I need to steep some of these overnight. I think I'll have to use the trough, and we'll need water for that, and it'll be dark soon." She was matter-of-fact; focused, far more interested in her herbalism than she was in Blair, or even Jim.

"How much water do you think we'll need?" Jim asked her, just as quietly matter-of-fact, and Blair marvelled, in a resentful way. So prepared to help with Alex's potion, when Blair had been forced to resort to cajolment and outright nagging when he offered remedies that didn't come from a drug store.

"Several quarts. And it's going to be dark soon."

Blair dared a look at Jim, half expecting him to be offended at Alex's commanding tone. But he simply shrugged, as if expecting the implied order. "Then I guess I'd better get moving," Jim said calmly. Blair knew that there was a collapsible bucket among the gear that Jim had carefully packed and distributed among them, a completely mundane item to aid Alex's herbal mysticism. Watching Jim as compliant water boy stirred an irritation that was increasingly only shallowly hidden in Blair.

The time before dark passed with Jim's quiet, efficient provision of water for one trough, and Blair using the light to draw rough sketches of Alex's plants and write a full description of them before she laid some of them in the water, undisturbed by the gloom of the temple interior. With dark, they made a meal, sitting around a small, smoky fire. Alex rose after a while, and Blair watched her wander, a slim restless figure that would caress the stone around them. Occasionally, she would lay her head against the stone, like a mother pressing her cheek to her child's. Blair felt a strange companionship with her desire to know the temple better. Jim, by comparison, sat still, staring into the fire, his hands clasped around his bent knees. Both of them were silent, responding to speech unwillingly and curtly.

In the process of sorting his gear by firelight, in lieu of anything else useful to do, Blair found the illustrated book that Jim had given him in Monterrey. The fire was nothing bright, but Blair thumbed through the pages, detail of colour and shape lost to the gloom, before he put it aside with his obsessively picked over gear. Eventually he slept; he was over-tired, and restless as a result, and at one point he woke, nervous, aware that someone or something was nearby. It was only Jim. He murmured, "Go back to sleep, Sandburg," his hand finding Blair's head unerringly in the dark to stroke his hair once, and Blair did slip back into sleep. He woke well before dawn and lay quietly, listening to the noise of the jungle. He wondered if Alex's potion would be ready today, how long her preparations would take, how likely it was that she was about to poison both herself and Jim.

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"There are other ways to do this, Alex!"

Alex didn't look up from using a sharp-edged stone to strip fibres from a long leaf. "No there aren't," she gritted out between her teeth. "This has to be done here, not at some vacation retreat for people who want to expand their spiritual horizons." That stung more than it ought to, in part because it reminded Blair of Naomi and her restless search for novel experiences. Alex didn't know

his mother, he reminded himself, and he leashed some of his annoyance, trying for the tone of sweet reason.

"Look, there are meditation techniques, self-hypnosis, fasting, any number of ways to achieve an altered state without swallowing a concoction of unknown jungle plants."

Alex did look up then. The sap of the plants had stained her fingers a dark, grimy green. Her eyes looked a little glassy to Blair, and he stared in alarm at her hands, wondering what was already in her system. "This is ordained. Me and Jim, what will happen when this is done, it's ordained." She swayed where she sat, her eyes staring into herself rather than outward. But then her glance sharpened. "Feeling left out, Blair? I'd offer you some of my 'concoction', but it's for sentinels."

"No problem. I think it's a good plan if one person in this group isn't whacked out of their skull. But I would like some of that. To keep it, get it analysed when we get back to Cascade."

"Cascade can wait," Alex said, and piled her scrapings onto a hollow stone that was probably a mortar hundreds of years old.

Feeling left out? Maybe. Blair yearned for the insights that had come to Alex like a whisper of wind. Ordained. He scrambled to his feet, filled with too much feeling, and spent an hour trying to soothe himself with copying down some of the carved designs in the temple stone. And then he went in search of Jim.

"Hey, man."

"Chief," was the grave response.

"Tell me something. Can you do what Alex has done? Look at the walls and know what they say?"

Jim shrugged, and Blair bit his lip. Yesterday's admission of vulnerability was apparently all the concession that Blair was going to get. But then Jim nodded. "If I want."

Blair rolled his eyes. "If you want. You do get how utterly amazing that is, don't you?"

"I'm getting a little tired of amazing, Chief." Blair restrained an urge to smack Jim, to tell him that there was a part of Blair that would sell his soul to know what Jim knew right now. Instead, he made a request.

"Translate something for me."

Jim's eyes narrowed. "Is this the time, Sandburg?"

"What other time is there? We're here. Alex is brewing the potion of doom, and I think that if I want to know shit that I'd better get moving. Who knows if the people who can actually read this stuff will still be around tomorrow."

"You're a passive-aggressive little shit. You know that?"

"Yeah, I know it, and you know it. But god, Jim, it's so frustrating. These characters are something new, and we, by which I mean anthropologists and archaeologists, are going to need some sort of



Rosetta stone. I am surrounded by a treasure hoard of sentinel lore and I can't read it, can't understand it. God.Look. Just a few lines, come on," Blair coaxed.

Jim sighed. "Okay. A few lines. Pick some out."

Blair brought out his notebook. "I won't even ask you to strain your eyes on the temple stone. Here. I transcribed these."

Jim shook his head, affection breaking through the strain and tiredness.

"Of course you did. Okay." He scanned the marks, and then his face darkened. "Is this some sort of joke?" he asked, low-voiced and dangerous. Then his eyes locked with Blair, who stood there like a startled idiot. "Of course not. Not your joke, anyway." He wheeled away, clambering up the outside of the temple along the precipitous, broken steps.

"Jim?" Blair called after him.

Jim didn't turn but he answered, the not-an-answer that Blair had been forced to grow used to the last week or so. "I'm going to keep watch for a while."

Blair watched Jim revert to solitary sentinel, and then stared at the marks he'd written in his notebook. He could stew in unhappy ignorance, or he could approach Alex again and hope that she wouldn't bite – either metaphorically or literally.

He found her slowly grinding her precious herbs.

"Hey. How's it going?"

"It's going well," she said off-handedly, concentrating on her task. Blair wasn't yet forgiven, that much was clear.

"Can I ask a favour?"

Alex lifted her head to look at him at that, before her mouth smiled, if not her eyes. "If I can do it and do this at the same time."

"Hopefully, yes," Blair said. "I want you to translate this line for me." He presented the notebook.

Alex read, and then said, "How is it any use to hear for the miles of three moon's journey if you won't listen to your heart?" She chuckled. "But you'll want it all broken down, won't you, professor? So," and her fingers traced out the glyphs, "hearing – paces of three moons– what use – not hearing –heart. And these glyphs all indicate that it's a man listening. I wonder if they had no female sentinels, or if they just preferred them barefoot and pregnant."

Watching Alex's dirty fingers casually trace out a written language that she'd never seen before, hearing her parse out the meaning, finally put an atavistic shiver through Blair. He was face to face with something that he absolutely couldn't explain or understand, an open door into a beyond that he'd never seen before. It had been the case right from the start, but Alex's casual translation spooked him in a way that nothing else had so far.

And he was also no closer to understanding what it was about these words that had spooked Jim.

"Thanks," he said to Alex, and wandered away to the steps, looking up some twenty feet to Jim, perched like an eagle at the top. Blair sighed, and then he started climbing up the steep slope, cursing under his breath occasionally, and tried not to think about having to climb down again. The top area was maybe ten feet across. There was plenty of room for two men to sit, not quite out of the canopy here, because so many plants had grown up the lower slopes of the building.

"So what do you see up here?" Blair enquired, sitting down beside Jim.

"Enough," was the answer.

"I got Alex to translate for me. Which, I have to admit, when you actually think about it, is vaguely creepy, given that there is no understandable way that she could know what it says. Now with you, I could maybe posit that the Chopec had access to those glyphs, that you'd learned them somehow with them. Never mind that they're thousands of miles away, knowledge like that can travel and be kept in the damndest places. I could posit that for you, but for Alex, it's a lot harder to explain. Like finding temples by visions, shit like that."

"Yeah," Jim said quietly. "All one big mystery."

"You're really going to swallow Alex's magic potion?"

"Don't start this again, Sandburg. Yes, I am, because it's what's needed."

"Needed for what, Jim?"

"To finish this."

Blair rubbed his palms over his face. "Yeah, well, so long as it doesn't finish you too. This isn't exactly controlled con-" He was cut off by Jim's hand, gentle but heavy, on the back of his neck.

"Don't," Jim said.

Blair sighed. "Okay. Okay."

"I'm sorry that I blew you off. Over the translation. But I wasn't expecting it."

Blair stared into his lap, thinking that if he looked at Jim, the eager hope he was almost certainly radiating would scare Jim off saying anything. "Wasn't expecting what?" he asked, trying for a level tone.

"It's something that Gabe said to me, that crazy night-shift. 'What good does it do for a man to have ears that will hear a thousand miles if he cannot listen to the whispers of his own heart?' And seeing something pretty close to that written down in your notebook rubbed my nose in this whole damn mess, reminded me that something else is calling the shots here. And I don't care if it's some weird race memory, or the spirit world or whatever the hell it is. I want my fucking life back, Chief, and I get it back when Alex and I do what we came here for."

Jim's arm had moved; instead of an admonitory grip on Blair's nape, his arm was caught across Blair's back, his hand curled around Blair's shoulder. Blair was tucked in tight against Jim's side as Jim turned his head and breathed in, something that made Blair acutely self-conscious. He washed – they all washed – but roughing it in jungles didn't come with showers and freshly laundered clothes. They were all of them ripe with sweat. Blair had rinsed his hair with a cup that morning and resignedly pulled it back into a lank tail at his neck. But Jim didn't seem to care about that. He nosed his way across Blair's hair and face, and an intense, thoughtless shiver ran through Blair as Jim's breath ran hotly across the delicate skin of his ear.

Blair wasn't stupid enough to try asking again just what they'd come for. Instead he twisted so that he could cup Jim's head and bring their mouths together. They kissed for a short while, sloppy, hungry touches with no finesse to them, before Jim pulled him down so that they lay there, Blair's neck resting against Jim's arm. The trees and sky above were blocked by Jim's face as he leaned over Blair, his free hand scrabbling for the hem of Blair's t-shirt before he stopped, his face clouding with doubt.

One of Blair's hands still held Jim's head. The other he placed over Jim's hand at his waist and indicated that Jim continue with a drag upwards. "I'm good, man. If you want this, you can have it. I'm good." Don't be thinking of Alex, was his mantra, please, don't be thinking of Alex, even if Jim could hardly help it. For two sentinels, the distance between the temple roof and the stone below would count as nothing. For a long, delicately-poised moment, they stared at each other, and then Jim kissed Blair again, slowly, carefully. Blair felt tremors shiver under Jim's skin. Desire? Strain? He pulled away from those careful, drugging kisses to look into Jim's face again.

"Hey," he blurted, and bit back the words that would have followed. 'Don't be afraid' wasn't something to tell Jim now, maybe not for a long time after 'fear-based responses'. "It's okay," Blair muttered instead, chanted it with low tenderness as they rubbed off against each other with brutal efficiency on the hard, unyielding stone of the temple summit. Jim came first, with a groan that rose deeply from the back of his throat. He was still trying to catch his breath, probably barely past the aftershocks of pleasure when he shifted and wrapped his hand around Blair's cock. It was unexpected, wonderfully so, and Blair finished with a cry, not loud, but unmistakable to anyone. Then they lay there, their breathing gradually quieting.

Jim's arm was still wrapped around Blair, and the angle grew uncomfortable so Blair sat up, and then stood, briefly at a loss with the shared mess all over his skin. He stripped off his t-shirt and wiped himself with it. Then he extended the shirt to Jim. "Here," he said. "Use it, and I'll rinse it out."

Jim rose into a sit. His pants weren't as half-mast as Blair's had been, but with his clothes gaping and askew he was a debauched, vulnerable sight. "Thanks," Jim said and took the shirt, and silently wiped sweat and semen from his body, before he just as silently handed the shirt back.

Blair's thoughts were starting to run into panicked grooves. He'd wanted this since that night in Ashland, wanted Jim's hands on him without the intermediary of Alex's presence, but Jim's shoulders were bowed, and to Blair's eyes the release of sex had done very little for the stress that rode Jim all the time. He felt suddenly acutely embarrassed, an after-sex emotion that he hadn't experienced for a long, long time. Heat flushed through his skin, which just made his humiliation the

worse, since Jim would hardly be able to miss it unless he was paying absolutely no attention to Blair's reactions, and that would be just as bad.

Jim was standing now, tidying himself, doing up his clothes, and Blair turned away. Time to leave the scene of the crime, he decided, but Jim's arm stopped him with a gentle clasp on his shoulder. Blair turned unwillingly and then his heart lightened at the smile on Jim's face. It was a small smile, and Jim's face was weary, so weary, but he patted Blair's face, an old gesture between the two of them. "Let's go see what Alex is doing," Jim said, and not even that reminder could sink Blair's growing relief, because he chose to interpret that as the two of them together watching her.

"Yeah, okay," Blair replied. Jim went first down the precipitous steps, Blair behind him and slow with nerves. He wasn't getting any better with heights.

At the bottom, in front of the temple entrance, Alex sat working with her brew, and apparently serene. "Feeling any better, Jim?" she enquired. There was a bite in her words that made Blair wince, even if the venom was clearly for Alex's fellow sentinel. "Still looking for answers in the wrong places."

Jim stalked forward, glaring down at her. "What makes you think there are going to be any answers?" Alex looked up at him, with an expression that to Blair looked disconcertingly like pity.

"There are always answers if you listen for them."

Jim made a noise of disgust and turned away from her, and looked at Blair. Perhaps he was about to say something, but he was forestalled by Alex. "You probably want to go and rinse that shirt, Blair," she said, and then measured out limp, shredded plants into a rounded, broken piece of pottery that she'd found among the temple detritus.

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It was dark when Jim woke Blair, the only light the dim glow of embers. "Apparently the tea's brewed long enough," Jim said laconically.

Pulled out of a heavy sleep, it took Blair a moment to understand, and then he sat up quickly, awake and nervous in equal measure. "What time is it?" he asked.

"About three." Jim pulled him to his feet, and Blair's hand flailed briefly trying to get a grip on Jim's arm in the gloom.

"Scared of the dark, Chief?" Jim sounded amused.

"I have no problems with the dark, just with falling on my ass in the dark."

"I'll keep you upright until we get inside. There's light in there."

The two of them made their way inside, Blair's hand tucked into the crook of Jim's elbow, and as they approached the entrance to the inner chamber Blair could see a soft, warm glow of light. The chamber was lit with the one big flashlight they'd carried with them, pointed at the ceiling like a wannabe spotlight. Alex sat at the edge of one of the basins, refilled the previous afternoon and early evening in a tedious process of water carrying that they'd all shared.

"Make yourself comfortable. I don't know how long this is going to take," Jim told Blair, a sardonic edge to his tone. Blair nodded and leaned against the wall by the door, watching as Jim approached Alex. She held out a bowl to him, and Jim drank. Even in the dim light, Blair could see Jim's mouth twist in distaste, but he swallowed it down with about three hard gulps before handing it back to Alex. She drank too, before smiling at Jim and kissing him, her hand caressing his jaw. Alex and Jim might be the ones who'd swallowed the nasty potion, but Blair felt unexpectedly queasy. Anxiety, jealousy – and an uneasy anticipation for whatever would come next.

"Time to lie down now," she murmured.

Jim nodded, and the two of them climbed into the basins while Blair watched. Alex sank into hers like a true believer going under for baptism. Jim looked more like a man going to the electric chair, and Blair was filled with a foreboding that had nothing to do with the concoction the two sentinels had just swallowed.

He moved into the room, walking up the steps. "Am I... Can I ask questions? Can you guys tell me what you feel?"

"Cold. And wet," was Jim's comment. His eyes were shut, the line of a frown caught between his brows.

Alex looked Blair in the eyes. "Ready," was all she said, before she shut her own eyes, and her mouth too.

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Mystic vision quests, Blair thought, sucked as a spectator sport. He spent a long time sitting on the dais on the outer side of Jim's basin, his legs tucked under him in something between meditation and a doze. There was silence in the room, apart from the steady, gentle rush of breath in and out, in and out. When that paled as a time-passer, he stood, pacing to work the stiffness out of his legs, staring down in the dim light at the faces of the sentinels. They looked like they were sleeping, and Blair was almost overcome with the urge to touch Jim, to cup his cheek, to feel for the quiet movement of Jim's chest rising and falling. He kept his hands to himself, all too aware that the want in him didn't come from a particularly good or enlightened place.

The light changed in the chamber, as daylight grew outside. Some trick of acoustics clearly brought the noise of birds into the chamber. Blair wondered how that tied into the isolation that Alex claimed was the purpose of this room. Then he imagined this temple surrounded by chanting men and women, their voices repetitive and hypnotic. Unless there was something in the carved pictograms, that was one hypothesis that would remain forever unproved. The light changed, the sounds of the jungle changed, but nothing changed with the two sentinels, and worry and curiosity turned to a boredom that remained spiced with anxiety. Blair took to making more notes on the markings on the walls, wishing occasionally for good old twenty-twenty vision, let alone anything more classically sentinel. He gave in to the urge to touch Jim, taking his wrist to feel the pulse point, but no more. Jim's pulse was a little fast but steady and strong, and Blair gently placed his hand back in the water. Jim gave no sign that he'd noticed the touch.

More time passed. Blair left the central chamber just long enough to find something to eat and then came back. He was peering at some glyphs and wondering whether he'd correctly transcribed them, when he heard Alex gasp behind him. He stood and strode to the dais to stand between the basins. Alex's forehead was creased as if she was in pain, and her lips moved soundlessly in a silent chant. Blair knelt beside Jim. His friend's eyes moved continuously under his closed lids and then suddenly they opened, wide as if with horror. Blair said Jim's name, but he was ignored. Jim stared blindly at the ceiling, his chest heaving as if he was running a race. When Jim shouted, Blair flinched in shock and surprise.

"No! That is not me!" Jim was silent after that, still wide-eyed and unseeing, unheeding of Blair's soft, frantic repetitions of his name.

Blair had to make a choice – leave Jim to experience what was clearly becoming a massively bad trip by himself, or try to disturb or rouse him. "Ah, shit," he moaned, and then reached into the basin to place his hand under Jim's head. He nearly jerked back his hands in shock. The water was warm, not a tepid merge with the muggy ambient air temperature, but hot, like a comfortable bath. Blair supported Jim's head with one hand, and stroked gently along his cheek with the other. "It's okay," he crooned, "it's okay." Some of the physical evidence of Jim's distress eased. His breathing slowed. The wide-eyed stare became something calmer. Jim even blinked now and again, but he gave no sign that he knew Blair was there.

Unsure about the wisdom of his actions, Blair reluctantly let go. His eyes turned to Alex's basin. Steam rose from there too, and Blair shivered. He stood and stared down at Alex, who looked as blank as Jim did, before he turned back to his friend. He sank down and laid his arms against the edge of Jim's basin and rested his head there a while.

Maybe he even slept a few minutes. Then he thought he heard a man's voice and he lifted his head to check, but Jim was as still as before. Blair relaxed, assuming that he'd been dreaming, and then he heard it again, a man talking in Spanish, channelled into the room by the hinky acoustics. Fear prickled over Blair's skin, and he stood. What were the odds, he wondered, of the man or men outside being fellow scholars? Wouldn't that be a trip?

He took a deep breath. His luck simply couldn't be that good. He stooped and took Alex's gun in his hand, and with quick, nervous strides he headed for the temple entrance. He stopped just before stepping into the light, and took the safety off the gun and tucked it into the back waistband of his pants, wincing a little for the possible consequences.

Then he stepped out, walking to the edge of the small, overgrown plaza to look down the short slope of stairs almost covered in dirt and vegetation. "Hey. Who's there?" he demanded.

A man stared up at him, a man with a flattering haircut and what to Blair's eyes looked like expensively casual clothes. "Good morning to you, señor." His voice was pleasant but Blair had seen the expression in this man's eyes too many times before, a flat, careful stare that weighed options that most definitely included violence. "We don't see a lot of Americans here."

Blair put on his most harmless smile. "I can believe that, but I'm a student of anthropology, and I've been back-packing in this reserve because I really hoped that I'd be able to find this temple. And man, half by luck and half by determination, here I am. Beautiful. Absolutely beautiful." His voice hit

the right fatuous note, but Blair wasn't so sure about his face. Another man came to stand by the first, and this man was just as well-dressed for a jungle outing, and wore a watch just a little bigger than the other, a gold chain just a little shinier.

"Are you on your own, señor?" this man asked. "It's a little foolhardy, don't you think, to be wandering alone out here. So much can go wrong."

Blair waved his empty hands in front of him. "Oh, hey, what's life without some risk," he said, and realised with growing fear that he couldn't win here. If he presented as a threat, these men would take him out. But the fool that he was playing was easy meat. Screwed either way, and almost certainly facing down Arguillo's men, maybe Arguillo himself. Blair wondered who must have spotted Alex in Sierra Verde, and whether the reward for reporting their presence was worth it.

"Perhaps you aren't alone," shiny gold chain guy said. "Perhaps you are in company with some fellow Americans. A thieving blonde bitch perhaps?"

Blair shook his head and tried to put nervous reproach into his voice. "I was travelling with them, sure, but we parted ways back in the town. And man, that is no way to talk about a perfectly nice lady."

"Then you will have no objection to us checking out your little campsite."

"Actually I have some pretty strong objections. Who the hell are you – " The fake tirade was cut short by a movement that Blair was way too used to - someone moving for their gun. Blair didn't even bother to turn. He backed at speed, hoping that the slope and trajectory would give him some cover until he could get behind the stone of the temple entrance. A shot sounded, and Blair decided he needed the speed of forward momentum and scrambled for shelter. Braced against the wall just within the temple entrance he gripped the gun and watched the point where the steps allowed access to the plaza. "Back off!" he yelled. "You aren't the only people with guns."

One of the men, out of sight, laughed. "But if you're telling us the truth there is only one of you and four of us. Don't be a fool." There was quiet then, allowing for the roaring thump of Blair's heart and the harsh saw of his breath. "Oh fuck," he muttered, and despised the way that his voice shook. He watched the plaza. Two men erupted over the top, one from the more open space of the steps, the other just to one side. The man at the steps fired continuously, the one at the side headed across the open space for the comparative shelter of the stone wall.

Everything was cold slow motion. Blair lifted the gun. He chose a target, which was the man giving his companion cover because Blair wasn't sure that he was a good enough shot to hit something (someone) that was moving. He squeezed the trigger. Jim had taught him this, far away in Cascade, and Blair had agreed, albeit squeamishly, to learn. He'd shot over their heads on Storm Island. He was absolutely for gun control for fuck's sake. He squeezed the trigger, and the man in front of him crumpled and dropped out of sight.

His ears were ringing. The decibel range of a gunshot lay somewhere between 140 and 160, loud enough to hurt, and Blair didn't have a clue how close or how far away the man sheltering against the temple wall might be now. If he backed up a little, he'd see him coming, see him outlined against the daylight in the frame of the entrance. He backed up, leaning against the wall. The rough

stone dragged at his skin through his shirt, which was awash in terrified sweat. Everything was silent again. No gunshots. No words from the men outside. No sign that the racket of gunfire had roused the two sentinels in the central chamber.

Blair took cover around one of the corners of the corridor surrounding the chamber, and lifted the dark weight of the gun as he peered towards the entrance. Everything went very still inside him, except for his heart, which he ignored. The second man charged through the doorway, looking like something out of an action movie, half crouched, spraying the corridor with semi-automatic fire. Blair withdrew behind his stone shelter. Wait, wait, wait chanted in his head, and then as soon as the burst of fire ended, go, go, go. He rounded the corner and fired two times in quick succession. His opponent had made good progress down the hallway as he'd fired his gun. The whites of their eyes, Blair thought wildly. The grunt of the second man was nearly lost in the reports and the funnelling echo of the stone. He dropped to the floor, and Blair thought with relief that he must be dead; but then the shot man began to whimper, helpless, rhythmic sounds that lifted the hair on the back of Blair's neck, because he'd done that. He'd made another human being make that noise.

Also, there were two more men outside, and Blair realised that he didn't know how many bullets were in the clip of Alex's gun. He wasted time pondering his choices, and then scrambled back to the chamber and stuffed another clip from Alex's bag into his pocket, and then steeled himself to walk up the corridor, past the man he'd shot. He'd slumped to one side and was mercifully silent.

Blair edged past him and someone's hand clapped on his shoulder. Blair's finger twitched uncontrollably against the trigger. He flinched as the gun fired, and a ricochet whine told him how close he'd come to maybe shooting himself and whoever was behind him. He whirled, to find Alex.

She grinned. In the light coming from the entrance, she looked euphoric.

Delighted.Determined.“Would I have scared you any less if I'd said something first?”

“I think it's Arguillo out there,” Blair whispered, wary of how the creepy acoustics might work at this point in the temple.

“I know,” Alex said, with the certainty of a queen laying down law. “I'll deal with him. It'll be a pleasure.” She took Blair's hand, and he was startled for a moment, bemused, and then he realised that she was taking her gun back. He hesitated, and then let go. As Alex moved towards the light of day, Blair retreated, back to the inner chamber. If Alex was awake, then maybe Jim was. And if Jim wasn't awake, Blair remembered seeing his gun, discarded just as Alex had discarded hers, and right now, he really didn't want to be without a gun .

There were more shots outside, but this time Blair didn't flinch. He felt hollow, a Blair balloon wafting over the stone floor. Inside the chamber it was still dim, but the narrow shafts of daylight had finally provided more light than the flashlight. Jim still lay in the basin. His eyes were shut again, but the eyeballs continually moved under his lids. Blair leaned over him, and on an impulse, laid his hand against the side of Jim's face, and then dragged his fingers through the water. It was cooling. “Now would be a good time to wake up, Jim,” he said, soft but no whisper. “But if you're not going to do that, then I'm just going to borrow your gun, no biggie, I've done it before.” Jim stayed still. No rising in a shower of water and irritation to demand that Blair get his own damn gun, or make a blow-pipe, Christ, Sandburg, you've gone native with weapons before.



Oh yeah, have I gone native, Blair thought, and hefted Jim's Sig. He turned and stationed himself at the door to the chamber, listening, but after those first gunshots he'd heard there was nothing. He waited, probably not long, although it felt like a heavy eternity, and then he thought he heard the scuff of a boot on stone.

"Alex?" he murmured.

"You can relax, Blair. Everything's done." Alex rounded the corner. Her hair was dishevelled, whether from battle or a night spent in visions. The split lip, Blair was sure, came from the fist of one the men he'd left outside. "Well, nearly everything. I want to shift the body from the corridor. It seems... disrespectful to leave him there."

Blair gaped. "That's very considerate of you," he managed to stutter.

"I was thinking more of the temple," she told him with surprising forbearance, as if he should have known better but she'd be kind and make allowances. "You're a surprisingly good shot."

"Yeah," Blair said, reeling in through the door and stumbling across the floor to sit on the dais in front of the basins. "I have a decent aim." He kept hold of the gun, and looked up at Alex. "You came out of dreamland at just the right moment."

"I was ready to rise, but I needed a little extra time. You gave it to me, so thank you."

'You're welcome' didn't strike Blair as quite the right response to a situation where he'd shot two men. He shrugged. "It's a pity that you didn't 'rise' a little earlier."

"Everything is ordained, Blair."

"What the fuck does that mean? Did you just lie there and decide that I could kill a couple of people while you rubbed the sleep out of your eyes? Is that what you're saying?" His voice rose to a shout, and Jim, damn him, stayed silent and still.

"No. But I wasn't ready – it takes time to come back, and you were managing. I... I was home. I could hear the clouds moving in the sky. I could see the molecules in a drop of water. And when I killed Arguillo I could see the slowing current of the blood in his veins, like a river simply... stopping. All of it was beautiful."

Blair shivered. "So why isn't Jim awake?"

Alex smiled with a calm that reminded Blair of the satisfied, fascinated artist that she'd been in her room in Cascade. She seemed at peace, after the febrile determination to push on to the temple. The goal was achieved, Alex's quest ended.

"Jim," she said, again with that aura of forbearance. It was really starting to piss Blair off. She walked past Blair, and he scrambled to his feet, suddenly uncertain. Was this the point that she tidied up loose ends?

"Leave him," he demanded.

She turned her head to gaze at him, surprised, and then amused. "You don't have to worry," she told him. "I'm not going to hurt Jim. I owe him a great deal."

"Yeah, so I've seen," Blair said.

Alex shook her head. Her calm, Blair realised, was deep, and deeply genuine. "We were one, finally, the two of us." Jealousy stabbed at Blair. "And we journeyed together, but then at the end..." She was silent, staring at something unseen.

"At the end?" Blair prompted.

"He refused." Alex's face was a study in bemusement. "He let me go, but he turned back."

"Why?" Blair was fascinated, despite his jealous heart, despite his anxiety for Jim. "Why, Alex?"

"I don't know." She laughed softly. "Perhaps he didn't want to be a member of a club that would accept me. I came out the other end of the maze, but Jim has to retrace his steps."

"In a maze..." 'That is not me!' Jim had shouted, and Blair went to the basin again, and stared down at his friend. "So how do we get him out of the maze?"

"We don't."

"Excuse me? What the hell happened to owing Jim?"

"He chose." Alex shrugged. "By Jim's lights, he may even have chosen wisely. Things are going to change for me, Blair. Change quite a lot."

"You had a vision, and now you're converted," Blair said flatly.

Alex's serenity was unruffled. "Something like that. But only a little like it."

Blair got to his feet and walked around the edge of the empty basin to find the rough cup that Jim and Alex had drunk from. It was empty, the dregs of it spilled out on the floor. "Damn it!" he cried.

"It's not for you, anyway. You're not a sentinel."

"Why not?" Blair swallowed the lump in his throat. "Why the hell not?"

"You're not a sentinel," Alex repeated, with steel in her voice.

Blair's fists clenched, and he was struck by a sudden, biting fear that this was his fault. Incacha had tried to pass on the way of the shaman to him. He'd helped Jim before, maybe he should have helped him again somehow, guided him, led him to his animal spirit instead of muddying his own spirit with hating how Jim looked at Alex.

He knelt down beside Jim's basin, caressing his face again. "Come on, Jim, come on, come on..." He chanted similar nonsense for a while, a meditation almost, interspersing his pleas with Jim's name, with 'buddy', with 'sweetie', with 'you stubbornsonofabitch' once. He leaned down, one hand under Jim's head, the other bracing himself, and he kissed Jim full on the mouth, his tongue slipping in between the still, loose lips. Then he waited, leaning his head against the stone, while Alex moved

quietly and purposefully in the background. There was a dragging sound brought to him by the odd acoustics, a couple of grunts of effort from Alex, and Blair winced. But then, Jim's eyes fluttered open and Blair forgot everything else.

"Jim?"

Jim was silent for a while, but he gazed up at Blair, clearly present if maybe a touch confused. Then his expression sharpened, and he rose out of the water, his hands gripping white-knuckled at the edge of the basin. "Chief," he said quietly.

"So," Blair said, standing beside, wanting with agonising concern to hold onto Jim, to help him out, and not at all sure that his help would be welcome. "That was quite the trip, huh?"

Jim looked tired, as he'd looked tired ever since this started, but he looked more peaceful too. "You could say that." His smile was fond and, as he stood there, dripping on the floor, he reached out and put his hands gently on Blair's shoulders, unsure of his welcome. "But it's good to be back."

"It's good to have you back." Jim's touch was sweet, but there were things he had to know. Blair lifted his hands in a deprecatory gesture. "We had a sort of a... situation while you were under."

"What sort of situation?" Jim was instantly alert.

"Arguillo showed up. Well, not that I knew it was him, but I suspected it, and Alex certainly seemed to think that it was-"

"Whoa." Jim lifted a hand. "Arguillo? Was?"

"Alex dealt with it," Blair said, not quite able to admit to his own part in it. Guilt, but also a probably completely stupid desire to protect Jim. It had been their dynamic – Jim the action guy, and Blair the sidekick, and now Blair had really and truly killed people with the intention of killing them. He suddenly felt sick. Jim stared at him a long moment and then wheeled for the outside, Blair trailing behind him.

Out on the plaza, they found Alex. She was coming back from the steps, and Jim walked past her to look down the weedy, stony slope. Jim stared at whatever he saw there, and then turned to Alex. "Your doing?" he snapped.

Alex looked a moment at Blair. "Partly," was all she said, and Jim's gaze was riveted on Blair.

Blair swallowed, downcast, and then he jerked his chin up. "You always did want me to be able to back you up with a gun, man. Why take me to the range those coupla times if I wasn't going to learn anything?"

Jim stared at him, and then he nodded. "Yeah. That's what I wanted." Blair didn't know whether to laugh or cry at Jim's tone – he spoke with all the enthusiasm of a twelve year old commenting on an ugly sweater in a Christmas parcel. "Sandburg and I are heading back to Cascade," Jim said to Alex. "I think it goes without saying that it would be a bad thing if you came back there."

Blair had been ready, braced even, to hear Alex and Jim making their serenely enlightened sentinel plans to go somewhere else together. Detach with love – it was, he thought, a beautiful sentiment and one that he was more than happy to hear between these two.

Alex smiled. "I have other places to be, especially now. Perhaps I might send you a card now and again."

Jim grinned at that, honestly amused. "But how will you feel about me recycling them at the FBI?"

Alex grinned too; it lit her face with an unexpectedly urchin expression. "Oh, I expect that you'll do whatever's needed. And speaking of that, you smell the machinery? Arguillo and his boys rode at least part of the way here. I'll borrow a ride and leave an obvious trail away from Sierra Verde. There's a smaller town about ten miles up the coast." Jim frowned, but Blair saw him move his head, flare his nostrils. "I'll be safe enough," Alex continued. "Once the word gets out that Arguillo is dead no-one will be bothering about me. The jackals will be too busy moving in."

Blair might be pleased by this exchange of valedictory pleasantries, but he was bewildered by it too, and distracted by his knowledge of what was probably below the plaza. He left Jim and Alex to talk, and edged his way around them to the top of the steps. There were two men below, one fully at the bottom, the other crumpled halfway down, the two of them left there like so much trash. Blair supposed that by the judgement of many that trash was exactly what they were, but it bothered him to see them curled on the jungle ground like the limp, torn newspaper that sometimes straggled in the Cascade winds. He made his way down the steps, and awkwardly, with some effort, dragged the man halfway down the slope to the bottom to join his companion. The man that he dragged was the first man he'd shot. The second was the man shot in the temple, the one who'd whimpered and moaned before he died. Dead weight, Blair discovered, wasn't entirely a metaphor.

He suspected that taking time out to bury these men wasn't going to happen, but he arranged them more neatly. One of them wore a glass bead rosary, a bright lapis blue, that spilled from his neck to the ground, and Blair tucked it back between the man's shirt and skin and said the Catholic prayer for the dead that Marcus had taught him his first visit to St Sebastian's, for these two and for the other two that Alex had killed somewhere nearby.

When he climbed back up the slope again, Jim was waiting for him. "Are you okay?" Jim held himself warily, but his eyes narrowed in a familiar concern.

Blair thought about his answer for a moment. "No. Not right now. Okay?"

Jim nodded once more – stoic acceptance of hard facts. Jim could be good at that sometimes.

"We're bugging out, Chief. You and I are heading back to Sierra Verde, and then we'll work something out from there."

"Yeah. Sure."

Jim hesitated, and then, all business, he said, "I'll get the gear from inside the temple. You sort out what we have out here."

Blair nodded and went to his pack and blanket, left behind him when Jim had come in the middle of the night to collect him. He was stuffing things into his pack when he sensed someone behind him, and turned. It was Alex.

"This is good bye then, Blair."

He stood, feeling vulnerable, for all that Alex had declared that she owed Jim. She hadn't said anything about owing Blair. "Yeah," he said, unable to wish her well. It struck him that a serene, focused Alex was no less dangerous; quite likely more so.

She smiled, not apparently bothered by his lack of words. "Tell me, why did you use my gun? Why not Jim's? It would be more familiar."

Blair shrugged. "Yours was closer." He didn't want to have this conversation. The humid jungle air was suffocating, the heavy moisture all around him like drowning.

"I wondered if maybe you were taking thought for the future, in case anyone has the chance to carry out any sort of forensic examination. I expect it'll depend on how long you take to get to Sierra Verde. There aren't so very many animal predators left in the Yucatan these days."

"I didn't really have time to think that strategically, Alex." His voice was strong, sarcastic even. Good.

"So much for my admiration for your quick thinking. But it's okay, Blair. I'm resigned to you besmirching my reputation when you get back to civilisation. I'm okay with it, even. But I'd watch Jim, if I were you."

"I always watch Jim. I don't think that'll come as any surprise to you."

Alex laughed at that, carefree. "No, no it doesn't. Good bye." She kissed him on the cheek, like she had in Cascade; and even more so than then, Blair had no idea what to make of it. In Cascade it had been a volatile impulse. Not knowing what Alex was then, it had made him pause, sensing danger. But this? This kiss had the feel of affection, of a rueful compassion.

"Yeah. Good bye, Alex."

He didn't watch her as she left, and he was glad that Jim was still inside the temple, and that he hadn't seen whatever farewell they made. He sighed. He was building up a lot of bad karma right now.

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It had taken them about three days to reach the temple and it was going to take about three days to get back to Sierra Verde, and Blair couldn't even wish for one of the ATVs that Alex had hijacked to mark her alternate trail. That would just mean getting sooner to a town with electricity and telephones, and the need for explanations. He was weary and sore, as well as anxious. He'd carefully adjusted the shoulder straps on his pack before they'd started and they still chafed him. The extra padding he jury-rigged with spare t-shirts came too late.

Jim marched on like a machine, or a former Ranger. Rangers, lead the way, Blair thought once, and figured it was just as well that Jim was in front of him and couldn't see the inane grin that the joke put on Blair's face. There wasn't much conversation on the long hike; rough ground and heavy vegetation didn't leave much breath for talking, but Blair could tell that Jim wasn't particularly chatty anyway.

When they stopped for the night, Jim dumped his pack on the ground and crouched beside it, silent, for longer than Blair expected. He stayed standing himself. Once he sat, he wasn't going to be moving, but he dropped the burden of his backpack, wincing as the straps bit into the chafed skin. "Hey," he asked. "Are you okay?"

Jim's head came up, a veneer of a smile on his face. "Tired. I'm older than I used to be the last time I did route marches." Jim admitting to tiredness was unexpected; if he was admitting to it, then the pace he'd set must be a matter of pure will.

"If you want to go any slower, then this out-of-condition academic isn't going to complain."

"Not like you to slack, Chief. I'd have thought you'd be in a hurry to get back to Cascade and your dissertation. You must have a lot more material for it now." Jim was very efficient about unpacking their gear, very focused on his organising rather than looking at Blair.

"Well, see, that's something that I needed to talk to you about."

Jim's head was bent as he sorted the dwindling packets of freeze-dried excuses for food. "Hey, go for it. You academics can even make sex boring, right? Or do you think that you might have lost your objectivity again? Maybe you'll have to edit a few things out."

That angry, condescending argument in the Forensic enclosure at the PD garage was barely a month past; and not over yet.

"Fascinating as this whole experience has been, I can't see it making it into the dissertation, Jim. Because even expressed in the obscurest possible academic jargon I can't quite figure out how the hell it couldn't be used to put you behind bars." Blair dropped heavy, sarcastic emphasis on the 'quite'. Keeping Jim out of jail was going to be quite the issue very soon. "And the thing that I need to talk to you about is getting our story straight for when we get back to Cascade, not me getting back to writing my thesis, you asshole."

"Blair." The use of his first name distracted Blair from the fine head of anger that he was building. Jim used it so seldom. Jim abandoned the gear and sat plunk on the ground, his knees drawn up and gathered within the circle of his arms. His face was set, no longer at peace with whatever he felt he'd accomplished at the temple. "I aided and abetted a fugitive to escape the law. We illegally crossed the border. We abducted you, and forced you into a dangerous situation where you had to take some pretty extreme measures to defend yourself. What part of that story do you need to get straight?"

Blair's hands flew up, extra emphasis for his irritation. "The part where you don't get shanked in the prison lunch line, if they don't keep you in solitary for your own protection until you go insane! I can't believe that we're even having this part of the conversation! We should be working out an

explanation that's going to have even half a chance standing up to the cops - Mexican, US, whoever!"

"So you want us to lie?" Jim's voice was controlled, and much quieter than Blair's exasperated outburst.

Blair took a deep breath, unwilling to be outdone in calm right now. He suspected that Jim was trying to find some balance now, weighting the pure instinct of the past week or so with the set scales of the law, and Blair was going to need all his powers of persuasion to prevent stupid self-immolation. He nodded vigorously at Jim's question. "Hell, yes, I think we should lie."

Jim's eyes were cold. "You're as crazy as I am."

"We are neither of us crazy. We have been through an experience that is way outside the norm, yes, and as far as I'm concerned that means that the usual societal rules and restraints do not necessarily apply here. But I get that arguing that you were a sentinel... being called home, for whatever reason, for whatever motivation, isn't going to fly as an explanation in a court of law, so we don't let it get that far."

"Motivation." Jim's mouth twisted over the word, and Blair hurried into more speech, more distraction.

"Look, we need to keep it simple and as close to what actually happened as possible. So I approached Alex at the PD because she sounded like she fitted in with my interest in real life bases for certain Central American folk lore, and she went off the deep end with it, got way too invested in it and became obsessed. Abducting me was a sideline, you followed, but she was basically using us as hostages against the other; you figure you can play along until you get a chance to get the drop on her. We can play up the academic weiner aspects of my personality here, right?" Jim was shaking his head. "And then you do get the drop on Alex, we make our escape, tying her enough to get a good start on her, but not so much that she's going to die of dehydration, whatever, before we get back, and she makes her escape because we were too kind-hearted to forcefully restrain her. We present ourselves to the Mexican authorities as unfortunate abducted American citizens. Yeah, they're probably going to sweat us for a few days, but they can't prove anything. And then we go home."

Jim didn't look convinced. "And Arguillo and his men? Or anyone else back in the chain of Alex's contacts, if the authorities know who they are."

"What about them? We don't know anything about them. Hell, perhaps Arguillo was the one who freed Alex. The bullets in those guys aren't from your gun."

"Chief..." Jim's face was wretched. Guilty. The rigid pride was gone, and Jim's head drooped; he was just a tired man sitting on the ground.

Blair shook his own head. "Nuh-uh. Don't go there, Jim. I'm not happy about what I did, but they would have killed all of us, and I may not be so invested in Alex staying alive, but I am when it comes to you and me." They'd barely been in touching distance all the long day, and Jim's defensive position forced Blair into a cautious but determined curve of approach. "I am really, really invested in you and me staying alive, and I am not going to pretend otherwise. So I'll deal with what

happened, and so will you. Okay?" He stared down at Jim's back and then knelt, close to Jim, close enough that he felt the heat of his body even before he laid his hands gently on Jim's shoulders. It was easier not to look Jim in the face right now, his stubborn, difficult friend that Blair loved more than he'd ever thought he'd love anyone.

Jim's muscles were hard under Blair's hands; everything about him felt rigid enough to snap like an overstressed chain, and then he moved, shifted from his sit and away from Blair. "Come on, Chief. We have stuff to organise."

Message received. Jim didn't have any weird attachment to Alex anymore, and he certainly didn't need Blair Sandburg groping him either. Blair swallowed a disappointment that was dangerously close to grief, and noted the way that Jim's hands fumbled at his gear. He kept watching, and Jim kept on being uncharacteristically clumsy. There were cuts on the backs of his hands.

"Just how numb are you?" Blair asked. "Because maybe you might want to consider the message that your mind is trying to send to you."

Jim's glare channelled all the cold self-possession of his totem animal. "Just leave it. Maybe I'm a little conflicted right now." His brow rose, in ironic recognition that he'd picked up the psych speak from Blair. "And we both know that the senses can go haywire when I'm 'conflicted'. I'm tired, I want to eat, I want to sleep, so that I've got the strength to walk tomorrow. This will settle when I'm ready."

Blair was standing again, and he leaned against a narrow sapling. His arms were crossed in front of him, not to shield himself, but to try and keep himself contained, controlled. "When you're ready for what? Ready to stop being crazy?" Huh, he thought. So much for control.

His words lit a fire in Jim. He rose upwards from his crouch. "I was crazy before. With her. And maybe that was necessary, but it's over, and we have to deal with the real world now, not some bullshit mysticism." His eyes blazed, and he advanced on Blair, his hands twitching.

"It wasn't bullshit, Jim. You said it yourself, it was necessary. Maybe it even did some good. I don't think Alex is any less dangerous, but you two did something together. She's still dangerous, but the vicious streak doesn't shine out of her any longer. And you two did that; you did something healing."

Jim paused, but there was no sign of comfort in his face. "I don't think that 'healing' is going to mitigate a bunch of felonies. And if you think that Alex is heading out to meditate on a mountain somewhere, then you can think again."

Blair straightened. He shrugged. "Maybe healing is relative, especially with Alex. But she saw something amazing, and so did you. It can't... the system isn't set up to deal with what you did, so we need to bypass the system, Jim. You have to understand that. We can't go by the book with this, because there is no book, and why should you pay for that?"

"Guess you're right. The system sure isn't set up for me fucking my way down the US and Mexico with someone like Alex." Bitter, angry. And still Jim's hands twitched, and Blair was beginning to think he knew why.



"What do you want to do, Jim?" He slid his voice into deeper tones, rough, but quiet. "What do you want to do with your hands?"

Jim raised his hands, and fisted them into Blair's hair. Blair could see the desperation in his face, and feel the pull against his scalp as Jim misjudged his hold. Jim muttered something indecipherable under his breath, and then he kissed Blair, shoving his body close against Blair's as Blair clutched greedily at Jim's hips. But then Jim pulled away.

"I want to touch you. But my hands don't feel a damn thing. Not a damn thing."

Not how Blair had wanted this to go; he ignored the complaints of his way too easily impressed dick (because, god, a few kisses and the feel of Jim's body through his pants had left him aching) and put a careful hand on Jim's shoulder.

"It'll settle. You said it yourself. We'll lose the light soon, and I don't have your advantages. How about we settle down for the night?"

He'd known Jim three years, and he knew what tight-wound tension looked like in his friend. Jim nodded, but the lines of his throat were too defined, and his jaw jumped in the rapidly dimming light. Blair took one of Jim's hands in both of his, and stroked it with what he tried to make therapeutic care. He noted the point at which Jim's skin twitched when he rubbed his thumb up the skin of his inner arm – well above the wrist – and circled his hand down again, trying to coax feeling back to Jim's hands. They stood there a few minutes, and it was nearly full dark when Jim sighed and withdrew his hand.

"It's a nice thought, Sandburg, but the feeling will come back when it's ready. And in the meantime it's just as well that one of us has sentinel sight."

Blair nodded, and reached for the shadowy bulk of his backpack. "Yeah. Okay."

They made a rough camp and a meal, and sat quietly after they'd eaten. The fire was small, and smoked sometimes.

"Run out of things to say?" Jim asked. His face was distorted by the flickering light, but his voice was utterly familiar.

"I have to rest my mouth some time." Blair was resting his mouth only to exercise his thoughts.

"Miracles will never cease," Jim said, but he sounded amused, rather than snide. He kept watching Blair, who let the observation pass without comment. He was tired, and if Jim wanted to stare at him, Blair wasn't about to stop him. He had plenty to think about, and he lay down by the fire, his head towards but not quite touching Jim.

"I do get it," Blair said eventually. "After all of this, after all the instinct, you want something that you can predict and have control over in the sense that you know how things will play out, even if it's an utterly negative consequence for you."

Jim's voice came out a low growl. "Sandburg..."

"Just because I get it doesn't mean that I agree with it."

"I'm getting that impression."

"I want you to think about what I've said, Jim. Please."

Jim rose to his feet, and laid his blanket a pointed distance from Blair. "I'm tired. I'm going to sleep."

Blair leaned on one elbow and glared across the few feet of separation. "Fine. Sleep then. I'm still going to be here tomorrow, and I'll be telling you that you're making the wrong decision then too." He cocooned himself in his own bedding, and bit his fist against the litany of 'stupid, stupid, stupid.' Whether he meant Jim or himself was hard to say.

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He flailed out of sleep, his mouth open, a vague memory of shouts lingering in his awareness, and his hands landed against a warm solid body. It was dark, too dark for him to know anything except the sound of his own breathing and grip of Jim's hands on his arms.

"Chief, hey, it's okay, it's okay."

Blair quieted and his racing heart gradually slowed. "Oh, oh man. I'm sorry, I guess I woke you?"

"Couldn't have missed you yelling if I'd been a mile away." Jim took his hands off Blair, but he was still close, a comforting presence in the dark. There was a pause. "You don't remember what you were dreaming about?"

Blair pushed his hair back from his sweaty face, and then leaned against Jim's shoulder. "No." There was only a haze of panicked feeling left, and a flash of lapis blue. Okay, yes, he could guess what he'd been dreaming about, but there were no particulars left in his memory and he didn't want them, or want to discuss them with Jim. "Sorry," he said again, and then, "How are your hands?"

"They're okay. Better. I guess getting some sleep helped."

"Good. That's good," Blair said. Impulse struck him, and he reached for Jim's hand, stroking down his forearm to clasp his fingers in Jim's and lift their hands together.

Jim went with the movement, saying with quiet patience, "I told you, they're o-" Jim's reassurances choked off in a scandalised exclamation of "Sandburg!" when Blair took his index finger and gently sucked it into his mouth. He drew it slowly out again and ran his own finger along the webbing between finger and thumb. Jim had no more words, but his breathing was loud.

"This is better than nightmares, right?" Blair said softly. "You wanted to touch me, before, and now you can."

Jim could. He did, the two of them searching in the dark, and after they were done Blair spent the rest of his night's sleep curled into the curve of Jim's body. He still had bad dreams, though, and he woke from one to lie restless while Jim stroked firmly up and down his arm but kept his silence. Blair lay there, his eyes shut, thinking about Jim dragging his doubts about the dissertation to the surface again. The argument in the forensic garage kept playing in his head. "I'm not going to start shading any of it," he'd told Jim then. And now?

He had no choice but to shade it, to shade marvellous, amazing information, and leave his study a vitiated, incomplete thing. The prospect of a dissertation that couldn't present all the facts bothered Blair a lot more than the smokescreen of lies he was still hoping to wrap around their experiences with Alex.

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Their second day of walking, Blair tried a new argument. They'd stopped to rest a while, and Blair stared up at the green above them to the hints of blue sky beyond, before he looked at Jim, who was rubbing the back of his neck.

"So okay, you didn't like my first scenario, then how this one? I willingly aided and abetted Alex Barnes and Jim Ellison, led on by my own personal obsession as to how their sentinel-influenced interaction would play out, despite being given several opportunities by the aforementioned Jim Ellison to leave or report you to the authorities."

Jim took one look at him, furious and horrified at once, before staring straight ahead and taking some deep breaths that didn't look much like a man trying to calm himself; more like an angry bull preparing to charge.

"That would be just as big a lie as your first not so great idea."

"Bullshit. You're so big on telling the truth to the authorities, then that's just as much truth as anything else. You tell your version, Jim, I'm going to tell mine."

Jim stood and walked away from Blair. "It's a lie because I might give you shit about the sentinel study, Sandburg, but I know that you went along with all this crap because you were worried about me, not because you wanted to fill up your notebook."

"Filling up my notebook has been a pretty good perk, though." There were times when Blair could understand Jim's self-disgust, and the need for confession. His timing probably sucked, though.

Jim marched right back again and hauled Blair up to stand in front of him, and shook him. Blair had been here before – and he'd won that time. He had to win this time, too.

"Why the hell do you say things like that? Why the hell do you say it?"

"Because it's the truth! The study is important, the sentinel is important, but you know what? You're important too, Jim. When all this started, when I walked into that doctor's office under false pretences, yeah, I came for the sentinel." Blair's voice was rising with his anger. "But I stay for you, Jim, I stay for you, which is complicated because Jim Ellison and the sentinel are one and the same, no matter how much you try to divide them up. And I want you safe, and able to protect your tribe, not rotting in a jail cell somewhere. Why the hell is that so hard to understand!"

Shouting in Jim's face had stopped the shaking. They glared at each other, Jim's hands still locked painfully around Blair's arms, Blair hands digging into Jim's shoulders. "I dreamed I killed you," Jim blurted. "You were a wolf, and I fired an arrow and I killed you. I kept dreaming it, all the time. In Cascade, in the motel in Oregon, and god, all I wanted was you safe, and that's what I want now. If

we spin this big web you want, and it falls apart, you know what, Chief? I don't think that orange is your colour."

"I was a wolf?" After all the reminders that all this had been for sentinels only, the idea that he'd had a place in Jim's visions sidetracked his thoughts with startling force. It was comforting. It was infuriating. "And you couldn't have told me that? You are such a schmuck, Jim, such a fucking schmuck!"

Jim thrust him away, and stared at the ground with a face of stone. "This schmuck doesn't appreciate emotional blackmail, Sandburg."

"It's not emotional blackmail when I'm trying to help you! When I'm trying to protect someone that I care about!" His voice climbed in decibels and register, until it was nearly a howl. He spun around, ready to burst with fury. His hands were shaking. He picked up his pack and he threw it, trying to exorcise the emotion riding him. The pack thudded down and he grabbed it up again and swung it into a tree as hard as he could. "Fuck it!" he screamed, at the top of his lungs. Then he dropped to his knees and clawed his hands around the straps of his pack while he struggled for control. "I killed people to keep you safe, you bastard, and you are not pissing it away. You are not."

"That was self-defence. You had a right to keep yourself safe after Alex and I dragged you into Arguillo's territory." Jim's voice trembled. His words sounded a lot like a plea rather than a rebuttal. Blair could only shake his head. If he tried to speak he'd start crying and Jim would probably interpret that as the Fat Man of emotional blackmail, waiting its turn after Blair had just dropped Little Boy.

"Jim. Please." Don't be stupid, don't be stubborn, I know it's a risk, I know it could blow up in our faces, please.... Jim had been standing away, at a distance, but now his arms around Blair silenced the litany of wishes, of prayers. Blair had never heard or seen him move. They rocked together in desperate silence, and it was Blair who pushed away.

"Guess we'd better get going. Civilisation isn't going to come to us."

Jim nodded, then he pressed a quick kiss onto Blair's sweaty face, and stood. He extended a hand, which Blair took, and hauled him to his feet, and helped him adjust his pack.

"Chief..."

"It's a long walk ahead of us."

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"You know, Jim, in your dream your decision ends up with consequences that you didn't expect."

"Deductions like that, Sandburg, you could be a detective."

Blair gritted his teeth, and marshalled his thoughts. Sarcasm very much deserved to be blinded with science. "Also, it's unnecessarily pessimistic of you to assume a literal interpretation. Dream theory holds that death dreams represent change, or transformation. But dreams are of course coming out of your own self-conscious, so ergo a death dream can represent a change in the thinking and

attitudes of the dreamer." The slope changed to an upwards climb, and Blair's breath caught, but he kept on talking. "Also, you're dealing with an incredibly stressful situation where you're discovering things about yourself that aren't really welcome, and at the same time I'm.... I'm flailing, and much mainstream dream theory also posits that the death of another person in your dreams indicates a change in your attitude to an aspect of their personality that you see reflected in yourself." Blair had forgotten about wanting to piss Jim off – instead he found himself following the thread of speculation to see if it actually led anywhere useful. "And there's my thesis muddying the waters too." He stopped, uncomfortable with where he was going. Never ask a question if you weren't prepared to hear the answer.

"So I was scared of what this thing with Alex meant. With how it could change things for me, and for us, given the future is already an issue with your damn paper. Plus, I wanted to fuck you."

A giddiness assailed Blair that had nothing to do with heat or exhaustion. "Because you already knew that I wanted to fuck you, and that was another change, another reflection, that you didn't know how to deal with."

"So I decided to shoot the messenger." A completely human reaction, especially so for Jim Ellison.

Blair laughed, a barking grunt of surprise. "Deductions like that you could be a detective."

"Christ, you are such a smart ass," Jim muttered.

"Another reflection of a quality within yourself in another," Blair said, and received an instant 'message understood' signal in the form of Jim's raised middle finger. But the gesture was accompanied by a small, unwilling smile from Jim, and Blair raised his hands like someone receiving applause.

Jim's face changed. He halted their trek forward and stood still, and uncertain. "So interpret me this dream, professor." A different sort of sarcasm, this, and Blair stood ready, braced for whatever would make Jim this defensive. "Everything I saw, with Alex.... It's hazy, now, but one thing was pretty clear. Whatever I saw, you were the only good thing in it. The only damn one. You want to tell me what that means?"

"I...." Blair fumbled for Jim's hands, and grabbed them, needing the anchor as too many feelings threatened to swamp him. He took a deep breath. "I think that one thing that it might mean is that you should listen to me. You need to listen to me, Jim." He saw the understanding break in Jim's eyes – listen to me, do what the hell I tell you to, we are going to lie about Alex – and Blair waited.

Indignation cracked through Jim, but Blair saw something else besides the anger. Affection, and something that looked a lot like admiration. "You... are shameless," Jim breathed.

"God, like you couldn't have figured that out the first day you met me," Blair said.

Jim threw back his head and laughed, and then shook his head. "Chief, I'm listening. Okay?"

There had to be a deeper word than relief for the feeling that shook Blair – he'd felt it this intensely before, and it was always after Jim Ellison pulled some stupid stunt. "Okay. How about we work out

a basic cover story, and then we add the convincing details. A skilled interrogator like yourself will see the holes-“

“And a dedicated obfuscator like you will figure out the smoke and mirrors we need to direct attention away from them?”

They were still holding hands. “You see,” Blair said. “We make the perfect team.”

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They reached the town of Sierra Verde not long after three o'clock, after walking past fields since before noon. The wind blew in freshly from the sea, cooling the day's sweat on their skin, and they made their way to the tourist part of town without any trouble. The sights were the normal ones of any town, although Blair did marvel at two police officers guarding an armoured car. They stood nervously alert, and one of them smoked a pungent cigarillo that Blair could smell even though they didn't get that close. He silently nudged Jim, who raised his eyebrows in an 'I don't know, either, Sandburg' expression, and they walked on.

Their hotel room was warm but on the shaded side of the building and had been refurbished years ago with fake rustic white plaster and dark wood. There was a mirror with a heavy carved frame and a bed with four spindled posts, and Blair dumped his gear and laid himself flat on the mattress to stare up at the ceiling. Jim sat on the edge of the bed, and arranged an international call.

“Simon, it's Jim.”

Blair watched. He couldn't see Jim's face, but he could see the way that he held the receiver a little away from his ears. Simon's voice blasted through, and Blair basked in the reliability of Banksian ire.

Jim spoke again. “We're okay, Sandburg and me both. We're okay, but we could do with your help. Some back-up. Our passports.” Jim's voice was ruefully amused, and then there was another long pause at Jim's end of the phone while Simon vented his anxiety and fear as anger. Loud anger.

“I screwed up, Simon.” Blair shut his eyes, and waited as the moment stretched out for Jim's next words. “I let Alex get the drop on me.”

Blair exhaled, and softly exclaimed, “Yes!” Jim turned; the last time Blair got a look like that he'd used the wrong Tupperware container. Or left hair in the drain. Whatever. Jim had committed them and he could relax now.

“It's a long story. Some of it's the sentinel thing. They found the nerve gas? Good.”

Blair was so tired. He drifted while Jim and Simon made arrangements and Jim hung up, only reluctantly opening his eyes when the mattress moved as Jim stood.

Blair gestured languidly in the direction of the bathroom. “Take the first shower; go for it, Jim. You must feel like you're crawling.”

Jim said nothing, and his footfalls were soft as he walked across the room and opened the bathroom door. “There's enough room to share. If you want,” he said.

Blair sat up, on the alert suddenly. "If I want," he said, still soft, but with sharpness underneath. "I think the last week has proved that I definitely do want. What about you, Jim? Do you want me to join you?"

"Yeah, I'd like it. But don't strain yourself there, Chief."

Blair walked over to where Jim stood just inside the bathroom door, and casually leaned against Jim's hard muscled body, ringing him round with one possessive arm. "Yeah, there's room. God, does this place have a laundry? My t-shirt can nearly walk on its own."

Jim's hand was warm on his shoulder. "We'll work something out."

"Yeah, we will," Blair said, not meaning laundry.

"Here?" Jim asked. "Cascade?" It was a challenge.

"Wherever we need to, man."

"Optimist," Jim said softly.

Jim was rank, but Blair pressed his face into his neck and inhaled like the scent of Jim's skin was oxygen. "I try. I try." Jim's lips brushed another of those quick, affectionate kisses over his hair. Blair could get used to those. "Let's get clean."

"And then show time?" Jim sounded unenthused for the coming ordeal, and Blair raised his head to smile encouragingly. Optimistically.

"We'll knock 'em dead, Jim. We'll be great."