



A Worthwhile Partnership

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Part 1: A Guide sought:

Dr Eli Stoddard's office, Rainier University, Cascade, WA

In one of the most coveted and prestigious offices in Hargrove Hall, the building which housed Rainier University's Anthropology Department, the lone occupant sat at his wide, antique oak desk, poring avidly over an obviously well-read and treasured tome. As the reader turned the page, his concentration was broken by the sunbeams which suddenly streamed through the tall windows behind him, illuminating the volume's yellowed paper and throwing the desk furniture and other books and files cluttering the surface into unaccustomed relief. Looking up, a wry grin tugging at his lips, he sat back for a moment and stretched his arms in front of him, rolling his shoulders to ease the stiffness caused by too much time spent at his studies. It appeared that Cascade's notoriously fickle weather was relenting for once, and as he looked out of the picture window across from him, he smiled to see that the cloud cover had rolled back to reveal blue skies and the welcome sunshine which bathed the landscaped grounds outside. He chuckled as he imagined Cascade's citizens emerging from their homes and offices to enjoy the rare warmth, facetiously comparing them to the tribal peoples and myriad creatures that inhabited the world's remaining rainforests – creeping out from their make-shift shelters to take advantage of the break in the incessant downpours to forage, hunt and generally survive as best they could as they had for centuries past.

Shaking his head at such fanciful notions, he turned back to the book, only to be distracted again by the way the sunbeams highlighted the hand resting on the open page, unmercifully drawing his attention to the signs of premature aging and blemishes on the otherwise elegant appendage. Placing both hands flat on the desk before him, his amiable expression hardened as he studied them objectively; noting the liver spots beginning to darken the thin, dry skin stretched tightly over brittle bones. Because he really wasn't that old.

Certainly his shock of white hair and weathered skin spoke of a life of active exploration, teaching and constant study, but the majority of the lines carved on his open but care-worn features were recent, and from another source.

Dr Eli Stoddard, renowned anthropologist and acknowledged expert in Sentinel lore, was dying.

As if to drive the point home, a sudden bolt of pain spiked deep within his gut, and he grimaced in resigned irritation, reaching for the bottle of pills in his pocket. Filling a glass from the carafe of water beside him, he swallowed down two of the tablets. He knew from bitter experience that he needed to act quickly if he was to keep the pain at bay long enough to function adequately for the remainder of his office hours, especially as he was expecting a visitor. Breathing deeply, he forced himself to relax until the pain subsided again to bearable proportions, sighing in relief as the powerful medication kicked in. His expression became rueful as he considered the inoperable cancer cells spreading relentlessly through his bowels. He envisaged them as small but vicious predators, to be constantly held at bay until the day that his concentration finally lapsed, and they closed in for the kill.

And it wasn't really for himself that he was most concerned. He had a responsibility he couldn't afford to ignore, a responsibility which would also affect his visitor, although the man didn't know it yet. But Eli was sure he would do the right thing once the situation was explained to him. Eli just had to last long enough to hand over the reins...

Sighing again, but in contentment this time, he began to read the familiar words once more.

The object of the professor's attention was a rare copy of a manuscript written by a 19th century British explorer, Sir Richard Burton. *The Sentinels of Paraguay* was a study of pre-civilised cultures; specifically the importance and reverence which the tribes' people bestowed on certain gifted individuals. These individuals; variously referred to as Sentinels, Watchmen or Guardians, were graced with enhanced senses. Through natural genetic variation, they could have from one to five senses heightened to exceptional levels, those with all five senses being particularly prized. Once they came 'on-line,' so to speak, usually through experiencing a period of prolonged isolation, they utilised their gifts to benefit the tribe as protectors and watchmen and so much more. Able to hear and track game or approaching enemies from afar, detect advancing weather systems and impending natural threats, amongst other useful functions, they were in their turn guarded jealously within their own tribe.

Unfortunately for Burton, his monograph was generally disparaged and discredited by his peers, and eventually almost forgotten. Those who cared to consider the phenomenon in later years concluded that there was no need for sentinels in modern society, so even if they still existed, the dormant genes would never manifest anyway.

However, in the latter half of the 20th century individuals with sentinel capability began to reappear and be recognised as such, and as the 21st century progressed, they became more and more commonplace on a global scale.

More enlightened academics and scientists such as Eli were convinced that it was because modern society actually had even more of the same needs and pressures that gave rise to sentinels in pre-civilised cultures. The 'urban jungle' of popular conception was no myth. Endlessly spreading conurbations where migrant populations tended to congregate in ethnic groups gave rise to gang rivalry and localised culture clashes such that there was a marked resurgence in those with heightened senses to act as their champions. The same was also true on a national and international scale, and the opposing factions and governments in warring countries were quick to adopt and utilise sentinel talents in specialised units within the military.

And unfortunately there were also many criminal elements both at home and abroad who were eager to muscle in on the act, such that sentinels were by no means restricted to law enforcement and other services beneficial to society in general.

And by far the most problematical facet of the current situation was a marked dearth of guides.

As Eli was sadly aware, Burton had neglected to include an in-depth study of the sentinels' partners beyond noting that each sentinel had a help-meet or companion who watched his or her back while they were using their senses. He had apparently assumed that such helpers, or 'guides' as they were later known, were simply chosen at random, and had no specific qualities which made them suitable for the task.

However, in the ensuing years, once sentinels were once more relatively commonplace, scientists belatedly turned their attention to the study of guides, and quickly discovered that their limited knowledge was mostly based on misconception.

Although it had long been recognised that the most successful guides seemed to be individuals who were more empathic than most, i.e., 'people persons', rigorous testing found that these same individuals actually had a specific 'guide' gene just as important as the variation found in latent sentinels. However, not only were they even rarer than sentinels, having never been nurtured or encouraged to come forward in the same way until relatively recently, but many potential guides were unwilling to tie themselves to such a one, since it was also clear that such bonds were usually for life. It made no difference to a guide that he or she was prized and respected by a grateful society if it meant giving up one's dreams in favour of supporting a sentinel.

The scarcity of willing guides ensured that those that were known and available were a valuable commodity, but there were other less savoury sources of procurement for those

rich and powerful enough to pursue them, and Eli had had firsthand experience of some of them.

Sitting back in his chair, Eli glanced at his watch and saw that it was almost time for his visitor to arrive. He knew the man would be punctual, as he was never anything but without good reason, but this time there would be more to discuss than usual, and for the first time, Eli felt a twinge of real trepidation as regards the potential repercussions of the upcoming meeting.

Same morning, Cascade PD Major Crimes Unit bullpen

Detective Jim Ellison sat at his desk in the busy bullpen, trying to concentrate on the thick file before him. A frown marred the chiselled features of his handsome face, and he unconsciously pinched the bridge of his nose between finger and thumb as he continued to read. Knowing that his constant low-grade headache was showing all the signs of blowing up into migraine proportions, he succumbed to temptation, and, unknowingly mimicking Eli Stoddard's action across town, popped a couple of pills out of the bottle in his pants pocket, dry-swallowing them with a grimace of distaste.

Aware that he was being approached, he turned to grin tiredly up at the owner of the hand that squeezed his shoulder gently in offered comfort.

"Hey, Joel. You need me for anything?"

The portly African American smiled down at him, but there was no mistaking the genuine concern in the warm eyes and broad, pleasant features.

"No, Jim, not yet, although I guess we'll be summoned soon enough once the other agents get here. I just wondered if you were OK. Looks like you've got another headache?"

Appreciating the other man's interest in his well-being, Jim's lips quirked in a wry half-grin as he replied, "It's OK, Joel, thanks for asking. Just the usual you know. Too much input all at once, but nothing I'm not used to. I'll be fine." And he offered a reassuring smile in return, not wanting to worry his older colleague and friend unnecessarily.

Still looking unconvinced, the other man patted his shoulder again. "Well, if you're sure, Jim. Better go and see when Simon wants us," and with another nod and smile, he moved away to enter their captain's office.

Watching his departing back, Jim smiled to himself, knowing that he had a good friend in Joel Taggart. The older man had once been Captain of the Bomb Squad before a crisis of confidence made him transfer to Major Crimes, a move which benefited both him and the department. A good man and tenacious detective, he was unswervingly loyal to his friends and colleagues, and stern but fair in his dealings with criminal elements. You could want no better man to watch your back, and Jim was grateful to know him.

Turning back to the open file, Jim was relieved to find that his headache had loosened its grip slightly, so it looked like the potential crisis had been successfully averted once more. Because that wasn't always the case, as Jim knew to his cost.

Jim Ellison was an alpha sentinel, having all five senses enhanced to a high degree. It had undoubtedly made him a force to be reckoned with both during his short career in the military, and now as a detective in Cascade PD, but as far as Jim was concerned, his so-called 'gift' was a double-edged sword. Yes, certainly his senses, when functioning as well as possible, could make the difference in seeking out and identifying enough evidence to close a case. However, when those same senses were spiking and out of control, his pain was intense, and the ever-present danger of zoning reared its ugly head.

The 'zone-out' factor was the most dangerous as far as sentinels were concerned, particularly if, like Jim, they had no guide to back them up. Zones occurred when a sentinel concentrated so hard on one sense that he or she became oblivious of their surroundings, and therefore vulnerable to attack unless their guide was present to ground them by touch and voice. And in situations such as stand-offs and firefights, such lapses could cause not only their own deaths, but potentially those of their colleagues or innocent bystanders also. And Jim knew that he would never forgive himself if that were to happen on his watch.

Unfortunately, despite his potential ability, he had never found a guide. Or at least, he had never found one that suited him amongst the few available, so he was forced to do as so many of his fellow sentinels did - rely on science and artificial methods and means to keep a measure of control.

Certainly, by following sensible guidelines as regards food, clothing and using sentinel-friendly natural products one could keep physical discomfort to a manageable level, but without a guide's backup, those same senses could never be used to their full potential. Instead, they had to be tightly controlled and dampened by medication, which in the general view was a criminal waste of a precious resource.

The constant search for compatible guides was therefore of paramount importance to those seeking to utilise sentinel abilities to their full extent, and that in itself opened the door to nefarious practices, and the opportunity to benefit from an extremely lucrative sideline as far as international crime and clandestine and/or illegal governments were concerned. If suitable and willing guides couldn't be found, then they could be bred, bought and sold for astronomical prices, and this dreadful trade was now the concern of law enforcement agencies both at home and abroad.

And Jim and his colleagues were about to become involved in an inter-agency task force formed to seek out, infiltrate and destroy one such pipeline known to exist on US soil, since there was a strong possibility that one of the more important destinations and distribution centres for the pitiful human cargo was based in Cascade itself.

As Jim continued to read and absorb the background information contained in the file, his anger and abhorrence grew exponentially as he imagined the dreadful conditions in which smuggled guides were kept. Human trafficking, slavery and the sex trade were bad enough for the victims involved, but Jim well knew that the sensitive and empathic nature of guides would undoubtedly ensure that their suffering would be so much greater. Frown deepening, his resolve hardened as his sympathy engaged on their behalf, and he knew he would do everything possible to play his part in shutting down at least this branch of the disgusting trade. Even though he was not aware of any breeding or procurement programmes originating in the USA; that was not to say that such programmes did not exist. And he and his fellow officers knew only too well that unscrupulous, rich and connected sentinels made good use of the black market opportunities to purchase 'imported' guides through global networks.

Sitting back in his seat for a moment, he checked his watch, aware that he had an appointment with Eli Stoddard shortly, and didn't want to be late. He had already cleared it with his captain, knowing that he should be back in plenty of time for the upcoming briefing, and was intrigued to discover what information Eli could provide, judging by the veiled hints his friend had offered when he had contacted Jim to arrange their visit....

Shortly after, Eli Stoddard's office, Hargrove Hall:

At 10.45 am precisely, Jim knocked on Eli's door, entering at the invitation issuing from within with a broad smile on his face. Dr Stoddard was more than a friend, having been introduced to Jim when his senses had finally come fully on-line a few years ago. As an expert on sentinel studies, the doctor had helped Jim enormously in both the understanding of his gift, and on how best to control it without access to a compatible guide, for which Jim would be eternally grateful. As time went on, both men had found a great deal more in common despite their very different fields, and visits now were as much social as business.

However, pressures of work had prevented Jim from seeking out his friend and mentor for several months now, and he was hard put to disguise his shock at his first sight of Eli for far too long.

Although the other man wore an answering smile as he rose from his seat, hand outstretched in welcome, even though Jim's senses were working on less than full capacity, he was easily able to detect the signs both external and internal of severe illness and debility in his friend.

Covering his dismay only with difficulty, he advanced into the room to take the proffered hand, responding cordially. "Eli! Good to see you, my friend! It's been way too long, and I'm sorry for that. It's just that things have been pretty hectic at the PD since I transferred from Vice to MCU, and the case load has doubled recently. But now I'm here, how are you doing?"

Chuckling knowingly, Eli replied, "Jim! I know you can tell already that I'm not too good, but don't worry too much on my behalf. For the most part I'm quite content. I just hate to cause my friends any unnecessary discomfort.

"But I do admit that I wanted to see you for a particular reason, my friend," he continued more soberly. "I honestly believe you're doing well as far as the senses are concerned – at least, without access to a guide – but there is something I wish to discuss which may well have a bearing on both your work and your personal life. It's just very difficult to explain in this setting," he added, looking around the office before meeting Jim's inquisitive gaze once more.

"Would you care to come around to my house for supper tonight? I think we would both be more comfortable there, and there's someone I'd like you to meet. Someone who could be of great help to you."

Curiosity piqued even further by Eli's cryptic comments, Jim found himself agreeing despite his internal disquiet.

"Yeah, OK, sure, Eli. Sounds good, although I don't want to put you out. Should I bring anything?"

"Just yourself, Jim," Eli answered with a grin. "Just yourself! And now," he continued, deliberately changing topic, "Tell me how you're getting on. Is there anything you'd like to revisit?" And Jim resigned himself to waiting until the evening to find out more from his friend.

That evening, on the way to Eli's house

Jim eased through the diminishing traffic as he made his way to Eli's house, which was situated in one of the more desirable suburbs of Cascade. Although lacking the brash opulence of more recent developments, the fading gentility of the older area appealed to those who were more inclined to seek understated quality rather than the 'in-your-face' pretention offered by a MacMansion. Nodding approvingly as he negotiated the broad boulevards, Jim reflected that this was the first time over the years that he had known Stoddard that he had been invited to the other man's home. He felt no offence at the oversight, since he hadn't seen fit to invite Eli to his own loft apartment. Their friendship was no less real because they didn't interact outside of an office environment, and he was simply curious to see not only where Stoddard lived, but also learn what information he had to disclose.

A few minutes later, Jim pulled up in the driveway of a large, Victorian house, situated in an acre or so of reasonably well-tended but natural-looking grounds, covered in grassy areas bounded by a plethora of shrubs and perennial plants. The overall impression was of colour

and unforced bounty which complemented the slightly shabby but still impressive glory of the house itself.

Nodding to himself in appreciation, Jim climbed out of his elderly Jeep and approached the front door, unsurprised when it opened immediately to reveal his host.

“Jim! Good to see you, son! Come on in,” and Eli led his guest through a lofty vestibule lit by a large antique chandelier. Tiled in black and white, and panelled in dark wood, it was a fitting entrance to a house of this size, and Jim grinned at his host.

“Very nice, Eli! Very nice indeed. How long have you lived here?”

“Ever since I got tenure at Rainier, which is longer than I like to contemplate,” Eli replied with a disarming shrug. “It actually used to belong to my old tutor. When he retired he went to live in Florida with his sister, and more or less gave the place to me. Wanted someone to have it that appreciated it. And I always have,” he added with a gentle smile, focus turned inward for a moment.

“Anyhow, I thought we’d be more comfortable in the library. It’s my favourite room,” he continued, leading the way across the hallway to a panelled door.

Jim was immediately drawn to the large room, and looked around him with blatant admiration. Despite its lofty ceiling and considerable floor area, it retained a comfortable cosiness due entirely to the way it was furnished. Floor to ceiling bookcases lined all the walls which housed Eli’s vast collection of books and papers. They were interspersed with display cabinets containing many of his artefacts gathered over the years. A pair of huge sash windows in the far wall ensured that there was light enough, and a wood fire burned cheerfully in the large, ornate fireplace, around which were arranged comfortable overstuffed couches and armchairs in soft, worn leather. The polished wood floors were partly covered with area rugs in traditional Indian and oriental designs, and occasional tables were dotted around bearing individual pieces of artwork. One corner at the far end of the room housed Eli’s large desk, and plainly served as his office space, and Jim could imagine him sitting there, working on his latest paper and looking up every now and then to gather inspiration from the stunning view to be had from the window in front of him.

“This is a great room, Eli. I’m impressed. And envious! And I can see why it would be your favourite.”

“Thank you, Jim. Mind you, my second favourite room is the kitchen, so I thought we’d have supper in there if it’s OK with you. The formal dining room’s much too impersonal. Blair and I never use it.”

Assuming that Eli was referring to a housekeeper since he knew Eli had never married, Jim let the comment go without further thought.

“Sounds good to me, Eli. So, what was it you wanted to discuss? It sounded intriguing.”

Eli studied him thoughtfully for a few seconds, then said, "Take a seat, Jim. Let's have a drink, and get comfortable. This may take some time."

A short while later saw the two men ensconced before the fire, Jim nursing a cold beer while Eli sipped at a large single malt whiskey. After a few minutes of comfortable silence, Eli set his glass down and fixed Jim with a serious look.

"I have quite a story for you, Jim, and for a while it may seem irrelevant to you. Old news. The musings of an old man!" and he grinned in self-deprecation. "But I hope you'll bear with me, because I assure you there's a point to my little history 'lecture'. Before we go in to dinner, how much do you know about the old Soviet bloc during the cold war? Specifically, the military and related scientific programmes?"

Frowning in puzzlement, Jim replied thoughtfully, "Probably not as much as I should. By the time I joined the military, the Iron Curtain had been down for some time. Why?" and he cocked a quizzical eyebrow at his host.

Settling back in his seat, Eli was silent for a moment, then nodding brusquely, he began.

"I'm sure you already know that the old Soviet Union was pretty paranoid – enough to spend a high proportion of its resources on defence and the military? Well, it may surprise you to know that the Soviets began to use sentinel and guide pairs far sooner than we did. In fact, they had isolated the 'guide gene' long before western scientists thought to do so. And they used the knowledge to develop testing and breeding programmes." Noting Jim's look of distaste, he continued, "Yes, reminiscent of the Nazi's Aryan breeding programmes isn't it? Needless to say, they had a stock of ready-made guides in the pipeline to replace those already identified and drafted into the military, although what has happened to them since is anybody's guess.

"Anyhow, be that as it may, once the cold war ended, the state-run programmes were discontinued, the sites dismantled and the scientists involved were out of a job. And that's where the rising criminal classes and 'entrepreneurs' stepped in.

"Having worked in Vice, I know you've already crossed swords with the 'Russian Mafia', for want of a better word, so it won't surprise you to know that it didn't take long for powerful and greedy crime lords to spot a potential lucrative sideline. With the unsettled state of the world now, what with vast numbers of migrant workers, refugees and otherwise displaced people, there are plenty of pickings for gangs involved in illicit human trafficking, whether it be as slave labour, prostitution or personal sex slaves. And of all those poor victims, guides are both the most vulnerable, and the most valuable. And by employing unscrupulous scientists, crime bosses have established their own procurement and testing programmes, often under the guise of legitimate establishments. Are you with me so far, or is this old news?"

Expression cold and hard, Jim nodded stiffly. "Yeah, Eli. I do know a fair amount about human trafficking, and about the black market in guides, but I wasn't aware of the full extent of the science and foreign money behind their procurement. But how does that help me and my colleagues? What we really need is a concrete example of one of these foreign enterprises, and then perhaps we have a chance to follow the links from the source to the purchasers over here. Because I have to say that, if our politicians already have such knowledge, they're keeping it to themselves. I have a feeling that there are some powerful people involved."

"And that's where I think I can help, Jim." Eli spoke quietly, a troubled expression deepening the lines on his haggard face.

"Let's go and have our supper, and I'll tell you another story. One I've kept to myself for far too long."

Seated in Eli's large, well-equipped if somewhat dated kitchen, Jim tucked in to a good helping of a delicious casserole, which he absently realised was both very tasty and well-suited to a sentinel palate. However, he was unable to give it the attention it deserved, because he was too busy absorbing Eli's continuing story. Although Eli was covering a lot of old ground as far as Jim was concerned, he was able to curb his impatience at what seemed to be a lot of irrelevant detail, simply because he knew his old friend was not inclined to waffle for the sake of it, and undoubtedly had good reason for his apparently long-winded introduction.

He wasn't disappointed.

"I need to tell you about an old friend of mine, alas, now deceased," Eli began. "Professor Aaron Levy. He used to live in Leipzig which was in the old post-war East Germany. His family had been there for many generations, and only left when the Nazi threat became too great. But once the war was over, and the communist power began to wane also, Aaron returned and took a position teaching Anthropology and Archaeology at the university. To cut a long story short, we became acquainted when I was invited to speak at a couple of international conferences, and he encouraged me to accompany him on several excavations in Europe and the Middle East. We became firm friends, and he invited me to stay with him and his wife Martha on several occasions.

"While I was there, I met what I assumed was a foster child, because Aaron and his wife seemed to be too old to have had a child of their own of that age. I became very fond of the little chap, and he seemed to take to me, and one day, Aaron took me aside and told me his story after I had promised him faithfully to keep his secret.

"One day, some years previously, Aaron and his wife had an unexpected visit from their niece. Naomi was a flighty girl, always travelling, to the despair of her parents, and

somewhat promiscuous. She had become enamoured of the hippy era and lifestyle, and took it seriously.

“Anyhow, by the time she visited her Aunt and Uncle Levy, she was heavily pregnant, and unwilling to go home because she was sure her parents would make her give the baby up for adoption.

“On the advice of a colleague, Aaron persuaded her to go to a private clinic outside Leipzig for the birth. It had a good reputation, being the sort of place where wealthier clients could send their errant daughters to ‘correct’ their little indiscretions – or have the babies adopted if the mothers wanted to carry them full-term. All legal, if a little unsavoury.

“Anyhow, Naomi gave birth, but the delivery was difficult, and afterwards she was told that her baby was still-born. She was shown a dead baby, and accepted the fact, although she was heart-broken, and left Leipzig as soon as she was fit enough to resume her travels. And that was the last Aaron thought about it for several years.

“However, the colleague who had told him about the clinic came to him one day in a terrible state. He claimed to be in danger from the local crime lord because he had inadvertently uncovered the truth behind the set-up, and he wanted to pass on the information to someone he trusted before trying to escape the country. I should mention that he didn’t make it, and was found dead shortly after in suspicious circumstances, but it was believed that his secret had died with him.

“But that wasn’t the case, and this is what he told Aaron. The clinic was the legitimate front for a behind-the-scenes state-of-the-art laboratory funded by the local Mafia on behalf of an international ring of slavers and drug lords. They employed scientists like the ex-Soviets in order to perfect existing genetic testing techniques so that potential guides could be spotted even in the womb. It has to be said that most of the mothers involved in the testing programme were the kidnapped victims of slavers who no one would miss, but opportunities like Naomi and other legitimate clients weren’t turned down. If the baby was normal, it was simply given up for legal adoption. If, however, it carried the guide gene, it was quickly removed and placed in a specially created facility resembling an ordinary orphanage where all the children were raised until they could be tested properly for their potential guiding ability; usually around five years of age. According to Aaron’s colleague, the ‘successful’ guides were sold off for extortionate amounts to wealthy buyers, and the others either disposed of, or sold as sex toys or slave labour in the usual way.

“Needless to say, Aaron was horrified, and began to wonder if Naomi’s baby had actually survived to suffer the same fate. Although it was horribly risky, he managed to track down one of the scientists via the university’s academic network, claiming to be willing to pay for a suitable child, implying that he wanted to groom it as a sex slave. He was put in touch with the director of the ‘orphanage’, and arranged a visit to check out the goods, so to speak. He knew the age of child he was seeking, but it was purely by chance he found the right one.

“After explaining what he was looking for, he persuaded the director, as one scientist to another, to let him look at the children’s files. Although all the children had numbers rather than names, he used the few facts he had, like the baby’s birth date and likely blood type to pinpoint the most likely candidate.

“And there he was extraordinarily lucky. The child he picked had just undergone the routine testing, and had failed to be rated on the ‘Guide Scale’ the scientists had devised. He had therefore been rejected for sale as a guide, but luckily he was an extremely attractive child. He escaped being euthanized and was to be sold as a child prostitute or sex slave instead. It would be a much less lucrative sale, but at a price which Aaron could afford.

“Suffice it to say, Aaron managed to purchase the boy, and took him home, complete with falsified paperwork good enough to pass as legal adoption papers. To be absolutely sure, at some point he had a friend at the university do an anonymous match of DNA from hair follicles retrieved from a hair brush Naomi had left at their house and a sample from the child. However, he never told Naomi or the rest of his family that he had recovered her child, for a very good reason.

“Apart from the fact that he and Martha adored the boy, Aaron soon discovered that he had failed the ‘guide tests’ because he was actually too talented. The readings were so far off the standard scale that the scientists who tested him couldn’t accept what they were seeing and assumed he was a reject.

“Anyhow, Aaron and Martha raised the boy as their own, but kept his ability secret for his own good. It was only because I knew what to look for that I realised his potential, but would never have betrayed Aaron’s trust. Until, that was, Aaron contacted me again.”

Here Eli broke off his tale to give Jim time to consider what he had learned so far, and wasn’t surprised when his guest got straight to the point.

“OK, Eli. I guess I’m correct in assuming that this clinic still exists, and should be the subject of investigation. It might even turn out to be the sort of link we’ve been looking for. But why do I get the feeling that there’s even more to it than that? And how will its exposure affect your friend?”

“Well, that’s just it, Jim. When their adopted son turned twelve, Martha died suddenly from a stroke. Aaron was devastated, and basically gave up. He wasn’t in the best of health himself, and he wanted to die, Jim. He missed her so much! But first he wanted to ensure the boy’s safety, so he contacted me. He asked me to take the boy home with me, and made me promise to keep him safe and out of sight. He was convinced that he was on a database somewhere along with all the other buyers so that the gang bosses could monitor them and their ‘purchases’ – and use the information for blackmail and extortion if necessary. And he needed to know his son was safe and under the radar before he could die in peace.

"I agreed. It took some doing, but I obtained a false passport, and I brought him home. And he's been with me ever since."

Eli smiled ruefully at the look of stunned amazement on Jim's face. He could see that his friend was struggling to come to terms with his bombshell, but trusted in the man's integrity both as a cop and a sentinel.

"Before I continue, there's someone I'd like you to meet," he murmured. Leaving the table for a moment, he crossed to an intercom on the wall. Meeting Jim's perplexed and somewhat apprehensive gaze, he spoke into it, tone gentle and persuasive. "Blair? Can you come down, son? There's someone here to see you. It's OK," he added reassuringly. "We can trust him, I promise."

Returning to the table, he sat down again, watching Jim carefully as his guest suddenly sat up straighter, attention fully focussed on the door.



When the door opened to reveal a small figure hovering anxiously on the threshold, Jim's jaw dropped in stupefaction. This was no 'housekeeper'! Blair was, in Jim's eyes, exquisite. He was of average height, probably no more than 5'6" or 5'7" but slender and compact, in perfect proportion. He appeared to be no more than fifteen or sixteen years old, and beautiful in a purely masculine way. Long, dark auburn curls brushed his shoulders, and Jim knew that when lit by the sun, the highlights would enhance the rich colour even more.

Beneath the smooth, broad brow, Blair's eyes were huge and deep blue in colour, fringed by obscenely long eyelashes. He had a small, neat nose, high cheek bones, strong jaw and the lushest, most sinful mouth Jim had seen in years, if ever. All in all, Jim thoroughly approved of the vision, if it wasn't for the nervous, deer-in-the-headlights look in the wide eyes.

And he was completely astounded at his instinctive reaction to the boy, wanting only to sooth away his fears, and to protect him from any and all threat of harm.

Realising abruptly that his stare was making the boy even more nervous, he consciously softened his expression and offered a welcoming smile instead. Taking his cue from that, and from Eli's beckoning gesture, Blair slipped quietly into the room, and moved quickly to stand behind Eli's chair, looking at Jim over his living protective barrier.

Reaching a hand up over his shoulder to take one of Blair's, Eli glanced back at his charge with an encouraging smile before facing Jim once more.

"Jim, this is Blair. Aaron and Martha's son, but who I think of as my own. You are one of only a handful of people I trust who have been told about him, and I know I can count on your discretion.

"Blair, son, this is an old friend of mine, Detective Jim Ellison. He's a good man, and you can trust him, I promise. And he's also a sentinel--"

His words were interrupted by Blair's shocked gasp and both Jim and Eli were momentarily stunned when the boy's already pale face drained dramatically of all colour. Knowing instantly that Blair was about to pass out in a dead faint, Jim leapt to his feet and reached the boy's side just in time to catch the slight figure as it crumpled into his arms. Scooping him up with an arm around the surprisingly wide shoulders, and the other behind Blair's knees, Jim followed Eli as directed back into the library where he laid his burden down on one of the sofas. He was peripherally aware that, though very slender, the kid was no featherweight, suggesting that maturity would see him develop into a sturdy and well-built young man.

And Jim realised that he had every intention of watching that development from close quarters.

Squatting down by Blair's feet while Eli patted the boy's face with a soothing hand, Jim offered his friend a wry grin.

“So, now I know the other reason for this invitation, Eli. It’s funny, but I could almost feel his presence even before he entered the room. It was as if, despite the residual effect of my last dose of dampeners, my senses seemed to lock on to him. He really is a guide, isn’t he? A strong one.”

Eli returned his grin with a sad one of his own. “That’s right, Jim. And I was fairly certain he would be a match for you. I just needed to be sure.

“Because I want you to look after him when I’m gone, Jim. You already know I’m dying, and I don’t have long. As your guide, he’ll have your protection, and your care, and he needs it, Jim. He says he doesn’t remember much about the orphanage, and, if that’s true, then I’m very glad. He loved Aaron and Martha, though, and I believe he loves me. And it’ll be so hard on him to lose another father figure!

“I know it’s a lot to ask, but I have every faith in you, and I wouldn’t do it if I didn’t believe that you two belong together.

“I hope you can forgive me for the burden I’m placing on you, but I hope that in time you’ll see why I kept him secret for so long. A guide this talented is a target for the very slavers he was rescued from. Keep him safe, Jim, please!”

And despite his tumultuous thoughts and emotions, Jim didn’t even consider denying him.

Later that night, Jim’s apartment, #307, 852 Prospect

Jim sat in front of the TV, sprawled comfortably in the sofa with a half-finished beer in one hand. To an observer, he would have appeared to be relaxed and untroubled, idly following the televised re-play of the last Jags match. However, far from concentrating on the game, his mind was actually working overtime as he contemplated everything that had happened this evening, and he fought to get both his tumbling thoughts and unruly emotions under control.

Once Blair had roused from his faint, red-faced in embarrassment, but still plainly shocked and scared as hell, Jim had taken his leave as soon as he could. He realised that the kid was in no condition to prolong their first meeting, even though he was surprised at how hard it was to make himself leave the house without his guide. Because he knew for sure that Blair was his. The instant connection had been so strong – so very different from any feeling he had experienced before upon meeting a guide. Any guide. It was as if the sentinel in him, the primal core of his being, cried out to touch and imprint the young man and carry him off to his territory. In fact, it had taken Jim the cop and ‘civilised’ man almost all the resolve and control of which he was still capable to say his farewells and turn his back on Blair and Eli, and he was ruefully aware that the primitive compulsion had taken him completely by surprise.

Well, shit, fuck, and damn it to Hell and back! He had finally found his true guide, and it was a kid with so much baggage Jim couldn't see how in hell they could ever have a working partnership. Sure, he had learned just before he left Eli that Blair wasn't actually as young as he looked. He had just turned seventeen, in fact. But he had lived such a strange and sheltered existence for the last few years at least that it was a given that he was going to have serious problems reintegrating into society. And Jeez, how was he expected to cope with guiding a cop?

And that was another thing. From what Eli had told him, Blair had arrived in Cascade five years ago, aged twelve. And that was around the time when Jim's senses came fully on-line. Coincidence? Hardly! And Jim wondered whether he ought to feel more resentful than he did that Eli hadn't introduced him to Blair earlier. He had worked with the man on and off ever since he joined the PD, aware that his senses could manifest at any moment, and, like most other latent sentinels, wanting to get a head start on learning what to expect if and when it happened. And when it did happen, following a period of solitary surveillance during a case, he had worked with Stoddard on a regular basis, totally unaware that Eli had the answer to his bonding problems sitting at home alone.

But having seen Blair, he found he couldn't maintain his resentment towards Eli. He understood how Eli must have felt, because he felt the same way, maybe even more so. Over-protective, to be sure; fully aware and deeply concerned that should he have been exposed prematurely to Cascade society, the kid would have attracted attention instantly, drawing unbonded sentinels to him like bees to a honey pot. And it didn't bear thinking of what avaricious criminals or even shadowy and clandestine government departments would like to make of him. A rare and unbonded guide of such prodigious talent – and beauty, let it be said – was a prize indeed. He was certainly a prime target for kidnapping, the very idea of anyone else laying a hand on Blair was enough to make Jim's blood boil, and he ground his teeth together hard enough to make the muscles in his jaw jump and twitch in stress.

Determinedly reining in his troublesome and distracting imagination, Jim forced himself to calm down and consider the position clearly and rationally, realising that no good would come of his going off at half-cock, blinded by unnecessary emotions. He could almost hear his old drill instructor growling in his recalcitrant cadet's ear, "Don't let your anger take you out of the game, lad!" Once more assuming the cold and calculating persona that had served him so well in his short but successful military career, and which made him such an effective cop, Jim made his plans.

He would report to his captain, Simon Banks, first thing in the morning, and would give him the information regarding the clinic as supplied by Eli, with that man's blessing. And what the Task Force's department heads decided to do with it would be up to them. Any investigation would have to rely on international cooperation anyway, which could take time to negotiate, even with existing Interpol connections.

But there would be no mention of Blair yet. His existence would remain a closely-guarded secret until Jim – and the kid himself – were agreed on the next step in their relationship. There was no doubt whatsoever in Jim’s mind that there would be a relationship, but he was prepared to bide his time, and pray that Eli lived long enough for Jim to get to know his future guide in familiar surroundings. That Blair might not actually want to bond had occurred to Jim, but he pushed the notion aside. They would cross that bridge when they got to it, although Jim sincerely hoped that he wouldn’t have to force the issue. Because they would bond, no question about it.

Same evening, Eli’s house:

Blair and Eli sat quietly side by side on the sofa facing the cheerful, dancing flames in the fireplace. Blair was nursing a cup of hot chocolate; a gesture of comfort that Eli had thrust into his hands as soon as Detective Ellison – Jim – had left. Blair was truly grateful for the consideration, but was still far too shaken to look Eli in the face yet. Deeply embarrassed and ashamed at his behaviour, he dreaded seeing disdain or mockery in his mentor’s eyes.

However, he knew he would have to speak eventually, so he took a deep, shuddering breath, and consciously tried to relax his tense body as he gathered his courage. Because of his distraction, he had failed to notice that Eli had been casting worried side-long glances at him, worried at his charge’s unaccustomed silence, and angry at himself for his part in upsetting the boy so greatly. Finally, Blair sighed again, and put his now empty cup down on the coffee table. He peeked up to meet Eli’s gaze, his eyes huge, shy and troubled as he nervously studied the older man’s expression. His relief was almost overwhelming when all he saw was Eli’s normal warmth and caring, although on this occasion tinged with concern.

“I’m sorry, Eli – Dad,” he murmured, voice deeper than usual due to his emotional turmoil. “I feel so stupid, swooning like a damsel in distress. I don’t know what you must think of me. Or Detective Ellison, for that matter. He must have been disgusted!” and his face twisted in a grimace of pure misery.

Smiling softly, relieved that Blair was talking at last, Eli, patted his knee with a comforting hand. “Oh, Blair, my boy! He’ll have thought nothing of the kind, I promise! And I don’t blame you one bit. It was entirely my fault – a thoughtless and clumsy way of bringing you both together, even though I believed I was doing the right thing. I should have been much more circumspect – more tactful. I’m sorry, Blair.”

Blair regarded him steadily for several minutes, plainly thinking things through. Finally he spoke again, and Eli wasn’t surprised at his next question.

“Why, Dad? Why did you wait so long? I mean, you said that Detective Ellison was an old friend, and you obviously knew he was a sentinel. Why didn’t you tell me before? You wouldn’t have introduced us if you didn’t want us to bond. I realise that. It’s just that...I

don't know...a little warning might have been nice!" and he chuckled wryly, although Eli was well aware that any derision was entirely self-directed.

"It's hard to explain, Blair, but you deserve to hear my reasons, at least inasmuch as I understand them myself," and Eli's eyes took on a faraway expression for a few minutes while he pulled his thoughts together before speaking. Finally, he twisted sideways in his seat so he could look directly into Blair's questioning eyes and began.

"I have to say that I'm not sorry I kept you secret at first. You had just lost your foster parents, whom I know you loved dearly, and then you were virtually smuggled into a distant and unfamiliar country like a piece of contraband, in the company of a man you barely knew. It goes without saying that you were deeply traumatised, understandably so, and you were in no state to be pushed into an immediate bond with a sentinel, however genetically compatible.

"And I knew that Aaron and Martha had kept your secret, and encouraged you to hide your ability. So it seemed to me that I should follow their example, at least until you were old enough to make your own decisions as to what you wanted to make of your life.

"But as time went on, conditions in the outside world didn't seem to improve as far as I could see. The threat of kidnapping and forced bonding seemed to be as strong as ever, and, to be honest, you were such a delight to teach. So intelligent and eager to learn. As you are still. I loved to have you here; studying with me and those few friends and fellow academics I could trust to interact with you and expand your education. You never fail to delight, Blair," and he smiled warmly as he took one of Blair's hands in both his own.

"And I suppose it became habit. And I became a selfish old man, keeping you here to myself, telling myself that it was for your own good. And I'm so sorry for that. In retrospect I can see that it was wrong to keep you so isolated – so cut off from normal, everyday life. A young person should have the chance to grow and hone their social skills. Learn how to interact with their peers. But I couldn't see how else I could keep you safe. Aaron was convinced you could still be in danger if the scientists at the clinic ever realised their mistake. And I knew I wasn't ready to hand you over into Jim Ellison's safe-keeping however much I trusted him. You were so very young and impressionable.

"But you know, and I know, that I don't have too much longer, and I have to put things right while I still have time. I need to know that you'll be taken care of, and the best person to do that will be your own sentinel. I just hope and pray that you'll like him. I only want for you to be happy, Blair. Happy and safe."

As Eli had been talking, Blair's expressive eyes had filled with tears. Yes, he knew Eli was ill, but he hadn't wanted to think about it – wanting to hide away from the knowledge like a small child in denial. But now he couldn't avoid it anymore, and it was breaking his heart.

Tears now spilling down his face unchecked, Blair threw his arms around Eli, finally accepting the man's frailty and the way his once-solid frame had become bony and fragile-seeming. He felt as if he was coming apart, his life disintegrating before his eyes again as his hard-won self-confidence withered away, and he didn't know how to deal. They clung together while Blair desperately tried to control his sobs; hurting so much, but aware that Eli was hurting so much more. Long minutes later, Blair eventually pulled away a little, wiping at his wet face with the handkerchief Eli held out to him. Raising pain-filled eyes to meet Eli's sad but affectionate gaze, Blair reached out and took both Eli's hands in his, holding as tightly as he dared.

Swallowing around the lump of emotion clogging his throat, he croaked out, "I forgive you, Eli. How could I not? You've been everything to me, and I don't want you to die! I understand why I've had to stay here – I do! And I don't mind, honestly. I've never really minded..." but he couldn't fail to see the faintly disbelieving grin Eli sent him.

"OK, perhaps I did – do - sometimes," he added sheepishly. "But I always appreciated our secret trips out, and I do love this house – your house. I want to stay, Eli..." and his voice trailed off, becoming tiny and childlike as he looked down at their clasped hands, his fear and uncertainty almost palpable.

Aware of Blair's fundamental insecurity – to which he was fully entitled, given his past – Eli desperately sought words of comfort and reassurance, even as he knew they would serve no useful purpose other than to calm his young protégé in the here and now.

"Oh Blair, son, I know you do. Or at least you feel that way right now. And it's quite understandable you should be apprehensive at another major change in your life. You've already lost people dear to you, and have been forced to adhere to rules and restrictions just to stay safe. You've never really had a childhood, Blair, and I'm so sorry for that also.

"But, grateful as I am that you say you've forgiven me, I can do nothing to prevent what has to come. I'm just so sorry I have to leave you. You're the son I never had, and I couldn't be more grateful to have had the chance to enjoy you for a few wonderful years. I'm a very lucky man."

Fighting determinedly to stop the tears from falling yet again, Blair held Eli's gaze as he spoke, trying to convey his total sincerity.

"And I'm lucky too, Eli. Although I don't really remember the orphanage much, and Dad never talked about it, I know something bad was about to happen to me before he rescued me and took me home. He and Martha – Mom – were good to me, and I miss them so much. But then you came and rescued me too, and I love you like another Dad.

"Hey, when you think about it, I've had three 'Dads', haven't I? I mean, I'll never know who my natural father was, but I've been lucky enough to have had two more since. Two

wonderful Dads. And I love you both. I'll never forget either of you, or what you did for me, and I just want to spend every minute we've got left together."

And they fell into each other's arms again, sharing tears of reassuring love and companionship until the lateness of the hour, their emotional exhaustion and Eli's failing body forced them apart and up to their beds.

Part 2: A Guide found

Three weeks later, MCU bullpen:

Jim sat at his computer, a frown of concentration on his face as he laboriously typed out the report from his most recent arrest. This was a facet of the boring grunt work he could do without, but he accepted it as part and parcel of being a cop, and there was no way he'd give his job up without very good reason. Like most sentinels, whether bonded or not, he had an in-built compulsion to protect the tribe, and the police force provided one way to accomplish that aim. With no false modesty involved, he knew he was a good detective, with or without fully functioning senses. And it just so happened that during the last few weeks, those same senses were functioning much better, thank you very much, although he had yet to disclose the reason why, either to his captain or his colleagues. As he saved the report and pressed 'print', he smiled to himself as he thought about the past couple of weeks, and the visits he had made whenever possible to Eli's house, getting acquainted with his new guide.

The visits were necessarily relatively brief and unstructured due to Jim's heavy workload, because despite a noticeable lack of recent activity on the Task Force front, there was still more than enough everyday crime around to keep Cascade's finest hard at work. And truth be told, it was also due to Eli's limited available time, filled as it was with increasingly regular doctor's appointments, enforced bed rest and the office hours at Rainier that he was still loath to give up. Nevertheless, Jim was glad to spend every moment he could with Blair, gently encouraging the young man to open up to him, and also basking in the fact that even a few hours spent in his company worked better than any medication when it came to controlling his senses. And he was well aware that, once they bonded fully, he would have no problem using his gifts to their maximum capacity.

In the meantime, however, he would honour Eli's wishes and keep Blair's existence secret, wanting to allow the youngster as much time as possible to get used to the idea of living and working with Jim because for sure the drastic change in his life was going to hit Blair very hard. And it was coming soon enough, Jim knew, as Eli had told him only last night that the latest prognosis suggested that he had no more than six months to live.

Jim returned to his desk with his printed report, intending to check it over before signing it off and putting it in his 'out tray' for Captain Banks' attention. He sat for a few minutes,

ostensibly reading whilst actually his thoughts were turned inwards, considering his progress so far with his young guide.

The kid was a complex mix of innocence and naivety tempered with bitter experience. Despite the seclusion of the last few years, or perhaps because of it, he had learned far too much about the dark side of human nature – of lust and greed – but still retained a refreshing hopefulness and belief in the fundamental good in everyone. And although the cynic in Jim knew it was inevitable that such innocence would eventually be stripped away, for Blair's sake he hoped it would be some time in coming.

He read and studied voraciously, and when encouraged by Eli, was a passionate, intelligent and compelling conversationalist, although he remained shy and diffident when faced with Jim one-to-one. Fluent in English and German, he had a working knowledge of French and Spanish, and a good grounding in basic core subjects, since Aaron and Martha had ensured that he had received regular schooling until their deaths. The added informal teaching he had received from Eli and his trusted fellow academics in the intervening years meant that he was more than capable of testing for and embarking upon an undergraduate programme at Rainier should the opportunity arise, and Jim was well aware that it was both Blair and Eli's fond hope that such an eventuality might come to pass in due course.

He was also earnest and eager to please, touchingly intent on doing his best for both Eli and Jim in terms of guiding his prospective sentinel even though his efforts were hampered by anxiety and a marked lack of self-confidence. But Jim surprised himself at his own patience with his jittery new companion. He understood how hard it was for Blair to put aside the habit of a lifetime and actually use the gifts he had been forced to repress since he was five years old. And despite his lack of formal training, both Jim and Eli were awed at the range and depth of his raw ability.

He seemed to know instinctively what to do to pull Jim out of a zone when the sentinel deliberately allowed himself to let go, and he was fully cognisant of the theoretical side of caring for a sentinel and managing his environment. But all three of them were well aware that theory only went so far, and the partnership would only work to its full potential once physical bonding had occurred and they were living together in a permanent relationship.

And right now, that was a major sticking point.

As far as Jim was concerned, Blair was far too young and innocent to be subjected to the full sexual bond, although he had to admit that he was extremely attracted to the lovely young man. Sure, Jim knew that they could achieve a valid and effective working bond by means of the sentinel imprinting the guide thoroughly with all his senses, and it was a fact that some pairs never progressed beyond that point by choice. But it was also true that the deepest and strongest bonds involved sex, and there was no way Jim would push for that until Blair was ready, if indeed he ever was.

In the meantime, he would keep working with Blair, gradually getting him used to the idea of being imprinted at least, as it would ensure that the kid was 'off the market' as far as other unbonded sentinels were concerned. That in itself would be a relief for both of them, and thereafter nature could take its course.

Just then, a voice from behind him broke his reverie abruptly. "Hey, Jimbo! Penny for them, mate! You're looking like the cat that swallowed the canary!"

Megan Connor, the most recent arrival in Major Crimes, thumped him none-too-gently on the shoulder. A tall, striking brunette, the Australian Inspector from New South Wales was in Cascade on an officer exchange programme, and had already proved to be an asset to the department. Intelligent, fit and eminently capable of looking after herself, she was a good person to watch your back, but until recently, Jim could barely stand to be in the same room with her, let alone have her as his partner. For some reason they rubbed each other up the wrong way, so that, although she had low-grade guide capability, they sniped and bickered like schoolkids, much to Simon Banks' disgust.

On the other hand, over the last few weeks Jim had had noticeably more tolerance, both towards her and to his fellow MCU colleagues, a fact that intrigued them all when they cared to discuss it amongst themselves. And it appeared that Megan had taken it upon herself to get to the bottom of the habitual loner's change of heart.

Well aware of her less-than-subtle machinations, Jim offered a sardonic grin as he replied, "Just glad to have closed the Madson case, Connor. Nothing wrong with that, I hope?" Over her shoulder he could see two of his other colleagues nudging each other and watching the exchange with interest.

The two junior detectives and partners couldn't have been more different, although they worked together very successfully. Henri 'H' Brown was an ebullient African American with a penchant for wearing outlandish Hawaiian shirts and a questionable taste in humour, whilst his dapper partner, Brian Rafe, always dressed impeccably, earning himself the nickname of 'Mr GQ'. Both now stood and made their way over to join Jim and Megan, making no effort to disguise their curiosity.

"Yo, Jimbo! You want to come to Barney's after work for a couple celebratory beers, then? You did good sniffing out Madson's drug stash. How 'bout spreading the cheer?" and H slapped him on the other shoulder while Rafe grinned cheerfully at his partner's antics.

This time Jim treated them all to a real smile, appreciating the genuinely friendly motivation behind the offer.

"Sorry, guys. Much as I'd like to, I'll have to take a rain check. I've got other plans for tonight."

“Hot date, Jimbo? Who’s the lucky lady?” Megan sniggered, eyebrow waggling suggestively.

And this time, Jim decided he may as well tell the truth, if not the whole truth. “No lady, Connor, sad to say. I’m visiting Eli Stoddard. Remember him? The Sentinel Studies expert from Rainier?”

When Rafe and H nodded in the affirmative, he continued more soberly, “Well, I’m sorry to have to tell you, he’s not in the best of health. And he helped me a lot when I first joined the PD, especially after I came on-line, so I want to see how he’s doing. Maybe another time, huh?”

“Fair enough, Jimbo. Give him our best, OK?” said H, his tone sympathetic. “Yeah. Tell him to get well soon, OK?” Rafe concurred, while Megan squeezed his shoulder again, gently this time.

“Thanks guys, will do,” and Jim turned back to his report, grateful to have averted more cross-questioning.

However, before he could settle down to work once again, a loud command issued from the direction of Simon Banks’ office. “Ellison! My office. Now!” and with a rueful glance at his openly inquisitive colleagues, Jim stood again with a feigned sigh, the report in his hand, since he might as deliver it in person.

When Jim entered the office, he took the seat indicated by his boss, nodding companionably to Joel, who was already seated. He could tell immediately that both Joel and Simon had something unpleasant to impart, so he sat back and waited patiently for the captain to begin. Although not intentionally stalling for time, Simon still rose from his desk and crossed to his personal coffee machine, pouring himself a mug and offering one to his visitors. Joel accepted, but Jim declined, because sometimes the exotic blends provided by Simon’s cousin were most definitely not to sentinel taste, and he could do without the distraction right now.

Finally seated behind his desk again, Simon stared at an open file in front of him, then looked up to meet Jim’s quizzical gaze, a ferocious scowl on his face. Jim was aware that the expression wasn’t directed at him personally, but began to feel a frisson of unease about what he was about to hear.

“OK, Jim, Joel, it’s like this. I’m giving you both an advance run-down of what’s been going on with the Task Force, as MCU’s official representatives. Captains Sullivan and Anderson will no doubt be doing the same for their own reps from Vice and Homicide before the next main briefing. And the FBI will do what the fibbies will do, and we’ll find out in their own good time,” he added sarcastically.

"The thing is, as I'm sure you're already aware, the whole joint project is getting nowhere fast. After all the promising hints and information from several well-known and trusted snitches, suddenly all sources seem to have dried up. Not just yours, but everyone's. It's as if someone or something has put the fear of God into each and every potential informant, and they've all gone to ground. And your guess is as good as mine as to where the intimidation is coming from," he growled, and Jim was left with a strong impression that Simon had his own opinions on that topic, and wasn't happy with any of them.

"What about the foreign connection, sir? Did that information about the Leipzig clinic pan out?" Jim asked, although he could guess from his boss' sour grimace that there was bad news on that front also.

"Sorry, Jim. That trail went cold a long time ago, I'm afraid. Although even if you'd been told about it earlier, we probably couldn't have used it back then. International relations weren't as good a while back, and we couldn't rely on cooperation, willing or otherwise.

"No, sad to say this time we received a response very quickly from the local police. Although they have absolutely no doubt that the main protagonists in the smuggling ring are still active, they have almost certainly relocated to other sites, possibly in Rumania or Armenia or some such. There's every likelihood that the network might even extend to the Middle East and Arab states. Who knows? Anywhere where there's the money and the motivation.

"Anyhow, apparently the clinic moved to new custom built premises in Leipzig, and is exactly what it claims to be, with no alleged 'research facility' attached. The old property was converted to high-end retirement apartments for wealthy locals.

"And as for the orphanage, it burned down mysteriously at around the same time. There were only a few children there at the time, none of whom were potential guides, so they just got adopted in the usual way. And that's it." And he offered Jim a sympathetic half-smile.

Absorbing the information, Jim found he wasn't surprised at the news. Disappointed, certainly, but realistically he knew it had been a long shot at best. Although in retrospect he might wish that Eli had told him about it years ago, it was likely that the criminal masterminds behind such an enterprise would already have had plans in place in the event that they needed to bail, and Aaron's death and Blair's disappearance may possibly have provided the final incentive to do just that.

It would undoubtedly hit Eli hard, though, because Jim was sure the man would feel guilty for keeping the information to himself for so long, even if his intentions were good.

Meeting Simon's assessing look, Jim grinned reluctantly. "It's OK, sir. I kind of guessed it was too old of a lead to do anything with, but it was worth a shot. Dr Stoddard had his reasons for withholding his information until now, but I think you're right, and it wouldn't have made much difference anyway even if we'd known sooner. So, what now, sir?"

However, before Simon could reply, Jim's cell phone rang, and with an apologetic glance at the other men, Jim pulled it out of his pants pocket and checked the caller ID. And was instantly alarmed to see that it was Eli's number – or at least that of the cell phone he had given Blair to use in case of an emergency.

"I'm sorry, sir. I have to take this..." and he was up out of his seat and exiting the office, leaving a momentarily speechless and astounded Simon staring at his departing back.

Seeing the deeply shocked expression on his friend's face as he listened to the call, Joel placed a gentle but restraining hand on Simon's arm, distracting him from bellowing at his wayward subordinate.

"Don't, Simon," he murmured. "There's something very wrong there. Jim wouldn't act so rudely if it wasn't for some good reason. Give him a few minutes."

Sure enough, as soon as he terminated the call, Jim quickly peered around the office door, but without entering. "I'm sorry sir, but I have to go. Now. I'll explain everything as soon as I can, but I don't have time..." and he was off across the bullpen, barely pausing to grab his jacket as he left a trail of astonished looks and worried eyes following his retreat.

Making his way down to the parking garage as quickly as possible, Jim replayed the upsetting conversation word for word again in his head, his need for urgency reaching alarming proportions.

"J. J. Jim? Is that you? P. P. please...can you help me? Jim?" The young voice sounded panicked and breathless, and Jim didn't need sentinel hearing to detect the sounds of sniffles and tears behind the plaintive request.

"Yeah, it's me, Blair. What's up, kiddo? What do you need?"

"Please, Jim. It's...it's Eli. H. h. he's dead Jim. Oh God, I don't know what to do!" and Jim's chest constricted in sympathy at the despairing cry.

"Whoa, babe! Take a deep breath. Try and calm down, OK? I'm coming to you, kiddo. Just try and tell me what happened. Where are you now?"

"I'm at the hospital. I. I... Eli collapsed this morning. He just clutched at his chest and fell! I. I tried to revive him, I swear, Jim! But he wouldn't wake up. I called 911, and the ambulance came, and they tried too, Jim. They really did. But they said it was no good. A. a. and they put him in the ambulance and took us to the hospital. The doctor came out and talked to me, but they won't let me in to see him yet. And I don't know what to do!" and the heart-breaking words tailed off into a wail of soul-deep hurt.

"OK, Blair. Listen to me. What hospital? Where are you?"

“Uh um, Cascade General. The ER unit....”

“OK, Blair. Hang in there, buddy, I’m on my way. Twenty minutes, OK? Thirty tops and I’ll be there. Just stay put and wait for me, and I’ll take care of everything, OK?”

“O. O. OK, Jim. Thank you. Thank you so much. I’ll be here,” and Blair terminated the call, leaving Jim with a desperate desire to teleport instantly to the distraught young man’s side.

Once in his Jeep, Jim slammed the light onto the roof and sped off in full emergency mode, uncaring if it wasn’t exactly official. His guide’s pain was enough reason as far as he was concerned, and he was in no mood to deal with uncooperative traffic or traffic cops for that matter. As he drove, he ground his teeth together in frustration and impatience.

Dammit to hell! Why now? Why so soon? The moderate and reasonable part of him knew that this was by far the most merciful way out for Eli. A sudden heart attack with no protracted and painful lingering; but it was so hard on Blair. Jim had hoped that Eli might have survived the few more months he’d been expected to have; time in which Blair could have become a little more reconciled to their parting.

Then again, would it have been fair on either of them once Eli had been reduced to permanent bed-rest, his bodily functions failing day by day even though his mind remained as sharp as ever? For sure Blair would have done his best to care for his beloved mentor, but how hard would that have been on a sensitive and gentle teen?

And Jim sped up even more at that train of thought. Because he knew only too well how much Blair must be suffering right now. A hospital emergency room was no place for an unbonded guide, who was at the mercy of his newly-awakened empathy.

But not for much longer, Jim swore to himself. Once he had Blair in his arms, he was never letting go. The young man would never be alone again for as long as Jim lived.

Shortly after, Cascade General Hospital’s ER

Pulling up abruptly in the nearest empty parking bay, Jim flipped down his sun visor to display his police permit, uncaring as to whether it protected him from getting a parking ticket or not. He raced through the automatic doors to the ER unit; senses already focussed on the thundering heartbeat and muffled sobs issuing from the waiting area within. In less than a minute he was in the room, pausing momentarily while he took stock of the most important person in the world to him.

Blair was huddled in a chair in the furthest corner, the picture of misery. His legs were tucked under him while his arms were wrapped tightly around his torso, and he rocked slightly backwards and forwards, down-turned face hidden by his long hair. To sentinel-sensitive nostrils he reeked of pain and fear, and when he looked up to meet Jim’s concerned gaze, his face was white and tear-streaked, eyes red-rimmed and swollen from too much

crying. Quickly striding across the room, Jim simply held out his arms and Blair immediately uncoiled from the chair and threw himself into the comforting embrace, tears starting anew as he buried his face in Jim's shoulder and wrapped his arms around Jim's waist, holding on for dear life.



Totally ignoring the looks they were getting from the other occupants in the room, Jim cuddled the trembling body close, murmuring comforting nonsense words until the harsh sobs began to abate, and Blair began to calm down a little.

Once he was satisfied that the worst of the emotional storm was over for the moment at least, Jim pushed the small figure away slightly, but still kept a supportive arm wrapped firmly around the shaking shoulders.

"Come on, kiddo. Let's sit down here, and you can tell me what's been happening. Once we've got things sorted out as much as we can, I'm taking you home with me. I don't think you should be at home by yourself right now, OK?"

Sniffing noisily, Blair blew his nose on the handful of tissues Jim grabbed from a box on a nearby table, and took several deep breaths, clearly trying to pull himself together. Finally he spoke, his voice low and roughened by his tears, shame saturating every word.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I don't mean to be such a wuss. Thank you for coming for me. I...I don't know what I'd do otherwise. I'm such a useless waste of space!"

"And that's quite enough of that, Chief!" Jim replied firmly, giving his companion a little shake to get his point across. "You've had a great shock and you're reacting accordingly. Anyone in your position would be the same. But you're not alone, kiddo. You don't have to deal with anything right now. Just concentrate on yourself, and let me do the rest. How's your head, anyway? I can tell you're in some pain."

"It hurts some," came the shy response, "But it's better now you're here. You're shielding me, aren't you?"

"Yeah. Yes, I am, Chief. It's a sentinel and guide thing," Jim answered with a gentle smile, pleased when it had the required effect and Blair's lips twitched in the tiniest of grins.

"Now, did the doctor tell you where Eli is? And have you been allowed to see him since you called me?" He wasn't surprised when Blair shook his head, since it wasn't that long ago anyway, but he was relieved. Although he knew Blair needed to see his surrogate Dad again to say his goodbyes, Jim was glad he didn't have to do it alone.

"OK, then. You just sit here for a minute, and I'll go see what I can find out. I'll be back as quickly as I can, I promise." And he was gratified to see a slight stiffening in the youngster's back and shoulders as he did his best to pull himself together a little for his sentinel, expression taking on a touching hint of determination. Smiling in approbation, Jim patted his shoulder gently. "Attaboy, Chief. Be back soon," and he left the room, searching to left and right for some assistance.

Spotting a harassed-looking young doctor who was just emerging from one of the cubicles, Jim apologised for delaying him, but quickly explained the situation. He stressed the fact that he was responsible for Blair now, and had the requisite authorisation to act on his behalf, thankful that Eli had expedited the process only last week for just such an eventuality.

Nodding briskly, his expression sympathetic, the doctor replied, "OK, Mr – er – Detective Ellison. Dr Stoddard is in the end cubicle, awaiting transportation down to the morgue. If his son would like to see him briefly, I'm sure no one's going to complain, as long as you'll be with him?"

"Thanks, doctor. I appreciate it. And no, I won't leave him alone," and Jim turned back to the waiting room to gather up his young charge.

As they approached the cubicle, Jim forged ahead a little, offering Blair a reassuring smile as he stuck his head between the curtains to check out the scene within. Thankfully, someone had gone to the trouble of laying out Eli's body tidily, so that he simply appeared to be sleeping, covered from throat to ankle with a light sheet. Relieved, he turned back to meet Blair's questioning gaze.

"It's OK, Blair. Just checking we had the right cubicle," he said, not wanting to reveal that the main reason for his brief look was to make sure Eli's condition was no more distressing than necessary for Blair's viewing.

If Blair saw through his obfuscation, he made no comment, simply grateful for Jim's support and so thankful that he didn't have to do this alone. Fixing his eyes on the curtain, he

straightened his spine and raised his hand to pull it back a little, but not before sending Jim a look of gratitude when the big man placed a supportive hand in the small of his back.

Taking a deep, fortifying breath, Blair entered the cubicle and crossed to the side of the gurney. His eyes were soft with love as he gazed for a moment on the peaceful face of his beloved mentor. With a tender smile and gentle hand he stroked the wide brow, memorising for the last time the strong features now relaxed in peace, the lines of pain and illness eased in repose.

“Oh, Eli! I love you so much,” he whispered. “I’m so sorry you had to go so soon, but I understand, I do. I’m glad for you that you aren’t suffering any more, and I’m so grateful for all your care. And for finding my sentinel for me. I couldn’t have been luckier. Say hello to Aaron and Martha for me? Tell them I love them too. Goodbye, Eli. Dad...” and his voice wavered as his fortitude crumbled once again. Turning away from the gurney, tears welling up anew, he was gathered up into Jim’s waiting arms, his near-silent agony more painful to behold than any loud and ostentatious outpouring of grief.

Tucking the shaking body tightly and protectively into his side, Jim carefully but firmly steered his guide down the corridor and out of the hospital, knowing that Blair had had enough and desperately needed to rest and recover. And where better to do that than in his sentinel’s territory?

That afternoon, the loft:

Jim pottered around the kitchen, cleaning the already pristine counters and cupboards more for something to keep him occupied rather than because he thought they needed it. While he worked, he used his senses to monitor Blair, who was finally sleeping soundly up in his loft bedroom. Jim had had no ulterior motive when he persuaded the young man to try and get some sleep in his own bed. The other small room under the stairs was temporarily full of boxes and camping equipment awaiting removal to the locked storage area in the building’s basement, and Jim wanted his guest to have a more comfortable and private place to crash than on his sofa. Jim intended to use it himself that night.

Deciding to watch TV for a while, Jim grabbed a beer and settled down, flicking through the channels until he found a Jags replay to watch, the sound turned down to its lowest so as not to disturb Blair’s much-needed rest. Mind only half on the basketball, he thought back over the last couple of hours.

The ride back to the loft from the hospital had been quiet. Tears over with for the moment, Blair was introspective and distracted, and Jim had respected his need for silence, simply concentrating on driving, and unobtrusively observing his passenger for any signs of a further breakdown.

When he had pulled up outside 852 Prospect, Blair had roused a little; his innate curiosity coming to the fore. He had looked around him with interest, and offered Jim a shy smile. "Thank you for letting me come home with you, Jim. I...I didn't really want to go back home – I mean, to Eli's house – by myself. But I guess I'll have to go back soon, won't I? To sort things out?"

"It's no problem, Chief. There was no way I was going to let you stay alone tonight, and I'll help you sort out whatever you need to do. There's no hurry for today. You need something to eat, and somewhere to sleep, and everything else can be dealt with tomorrow, OK?"

Jim was pleased when Blair offered no argument, but was a little concerned at Blair's disturbing ambivalence when he had spoken of 'going home', only to correct it immediately to 'Eli's house'. Surely the kid wasn't so insecure that he thought that the years spent in Eli's care were only temporary? But then again, he had been uprooted dramatically twice before, so perhaps he had never really understood the concept of permanence. In Blair's case, it would seem that adoptive parents, however kind, had not provided the requisite sense of security he had craved like close blood relations might have done. But as a product of a less-than-perfect childhood himself despite knowing both his parents, Jim figured he had no room to judge. He would just have to make certain that Blair realised that, once bonded, even if not fully for the time being, he had a permanent home with Jim for as long as he needed it.

As they had climbed the stairs to #307, foregoing the unreliable elevator, Jim had kept his arm around Blair's shoulders, enjoying the closeness, and the way the smaller man leaned into him.

"So, Chief. What would you like to eat? And don't say you're not hungry!" he added with a smirk when it appeared Blair was going to say just that. "Sentinel here, kiddo, and I can tell you're running on empty. But I don't want to force-feed you, so how about soup? I've got some great home-made chicken soup in the freezer that my old housekeeper, Sally, sent over. Fancy trying some of that?"

And Blair didn't have the heart to throw Jim's kindness back in his face, even though his stomach felt too queasy to eat. "Thanks, Jim. Sounds good," and he smiled up at the bigger man, touched by his obvious concern.

Satisfied by Blair's response, even though he appreciated that the youngster was less than enthused at the idea of eating, Jim opened the door to his apartment, and ushered the smaller man inside.

Blair gazed around, taking in the apartment's interior. Despite his emotional turmoil, he was still acutely aware of his surroundings, and his interest was piqued by this first sight of his sentinel's home. Because he truly believed Jim *was* his sentinel. He couldn't bear to consider the alternative.

The loft was immaculately clean, spacious and well furnished, although it seemed to be completely lacking in any personal touches. He was aware that sentinels tended to be sparing in their indulgence in anything that could disturb their senses unnecessarily, but Jim's apartment seemed to be almost clinical in its austerity. But the man himself provided enough human comfort for the hurting youngster, so he was content to give himself up to Jim's care, for one night, at least.

Jim watched his guide's reactions with interest, ruefully aware that the Spartan interior of his loft wouldn't compare too favourably with the slightly untidy cosiness of Eli's library-cum-den and kitchen, and although he hadn't seen the rest of the house, he suspected that the other rooms would be the same, except for the formal reception rooms.

Nevertheless, he was pleased when Blair whispered timidly, "It's nice, Jim. Nice and spacious. And you have a balcony! Can you see the marina and the harbour from here?"

"Yep, sure can, Chief. It's one of the reasons I bought the place when I got out of the army. Eli would have said it was because a sentinel likes to look out over his territory," and he could have bitten his tongue when the unthinking reference caused Blair to duck his head again, a brief tremor of grief shaking his frame.

"I'm sorry, babe. That was thoughtless of me," and he tipped Blair's face up to meet his apologetic gaze with a finger under the boy's chin.

Smiling bravely, Blair replied, "It's OK, Jim. Just shook me a bit is all. I do want to keep talking about Eli, honest. I think it's wrong to make as if the dead are a taboo subject. It's talking about them that keeps them alive in our memories. It's just a bit hard yet, is all..." and his glance slid sideways as he took a shaky breath.

Impressed by his guide's perspicacity despite his youth, Jim couldn't help but pull him in for another hug as he murmured, "You're so right, kiddo. Now, come on, and I'll give you the guided tour." And, crisis averted for the time being, he did just that.

While Jim had busied himself defrosting and heating up the promised chicken soup, Blair had gratefully taken him up on his offer of a hot shower, and a change of clothes. Since he had left home this morning with nothing but the clothes he was wearing, his cell phone and the keys to Eli's house, Jim had sorted out some of his own clothes as a temporary measure, and had been unable to completely restrain his grin at the vision that exited the bathroom. Blair presented a charming picture, looking for all the world like a small child dressing up in his father's clothes. He was wearing a pair of Jim's smallest sweatpants, rolled up several times at the cuffs, and draw-string pulled as tight as it would go to hold them up around his narrow waist and hips, an extra-large tee and Jim's Cascade PD sweatshirt. The tee and sweatshirt swamped him, and gave him an endearingly waif-like appearance, and Jim was slightly astonished at the depth of affection the sight engendered in him. Containing his grin

with difficulty, he said, "Come on over, Chief, and sit down. Soup's ready. Do you want OJ or milk with it? Or coffee? I had some tea somewhere, but it's pretty old, so it's probably not a good bet." He knew he was rambling a bit, but sought to distract Blair by keeping things as mundane as possible.

"Milk's fine, thank you Jim," came the soft reply. "Thanks for the shower and the clothes, man. I was feeling a bit grungy," and he offered Jim a shy grin as he took his seat at the table.

To his surprise, despite his earlier queasiness, the chicken soup smelled delicious, and tasted as good as it smelled, and he set to with a will. Looking on in approval, Jim ate his own meal, pleased when Blair finished up his own portion.

"Want some more, kiddo? There's plenty left."

Pushing his bowl away, Blair smiled up at him, his demeanour decidedly improved. "No, thanks all the same, Jim. That was really good, though. Did you say it was home-made?"

"Yeah. Sally was our old housekeeper – pretty much brought me and my brother up after Mom left. She's still looking after my father, and likes to keep in touch with me when she can. And send over culinary offerings, which are always gratefully received. You should meet her sometime."

"I'd like that, Jim," replied Blair, conscious that Jim hadn't suggested meeting his father also, but not confident enough to call him on it. It wasn't his business after all.

Wanting to keep the conversation as light as possible, but also needing to clear up one or two points, Jim steered him over to the sofa and got him settled comfortably before sitting beside him, not close enough to crowd him, but twisting sideways so he could monitor Blair's reactions.

"So, Chief, if you don't mind me asking, why 'Sandburg'? Not that it's not a good name, but I was just kind of surprised when I saw your passport. Care to share?" He didn't really want to put unnecessary pressure on Blair, but he wanted to know for future reference what Blair's preferred name was. And he needed to know for another reason also, but one he wanted to discuss a little later.

Staring at his hands for a moment, Blair took a moment to organise his thoughts, knowing that Jim had a right to any information with which Blair could supply him. Finally raising his head, he met Jim's kind but enquiring gaze, and began.

"Well, when Aaron adopted me, I only had a number. I mean, because all of us 'stolen' kids were officially registered by the clinic as orphans – foundlings really, parentage unknown. To satisfy the authorities, you know? And to keep any real parents or cops from snooping around their guide breeding and trafficking operations. Because it didn't really matter about

having a name, since whoever bought us, for whatever purpose, would probably have chosen another one anyway, if they could be bothered.

“Anyway, I know Eli told you how Aaron found me, and although I know he was forced to pay quite a lot of money for me, the adoption papers were accepted as legitimate. And because I’d already failed the ‘guide’ test, he and Martha thought it would be safer for me to take their surname, Levy. I think ‘Blair’ was one of the names my natural mother Naomi had toyed with when she stayed with them, and Martha liked it, so it stuck,” he mused, slightly off-subject, but said with a wistfulness that effectively quashed any impatience Jim may have had.

Anyhow, shaking himself briefly, Blair got back on track. “So I really do have some genuine paperwork, at least back in Leipzig. And as long as I was careful never to reveal my guide ability or my actual genetic relationship to Naomi or her uncle Aaron, I was safe enough being raised as an ordinary, adopted kid.

“But then Martha died, and Aaron was hit so hard. I know he cared very much for me – enough to want me to be kept safe – but he couldn’t live without Martha. So he contacted Eli, who was so cool, you know? He said he was happy to take me, but was worried that, with Aaron and Martha dead, the traffickers might come for me again, especially if they wanted to re-test me. So somehow he managed to obtain a fake passport, but one good enough to get me in to America under an assumed name. And he was reading some of Carl Sandburg’s poetry at the time. He asked me if I’d like to be called Sandburg, and I think I was probably too upset right then to do anything but agree, so I became Blair Sandburg. It wasn’t as if he could legally adopt me over here either, so I couldn’t become Blair Stoddard even if I wanted to. He believed – we *both* believed – I had to stay hidden. So I did...” and his voiced tailed off into contemplative silence as the ramifications of his concealed existence began to hit home.

Truth be told, Jim was well aware that, under normal circumstances Blair would be right to be worried, since for the last five years he had basically been an illegal immigrant. And that in itself would have created all sorts of problems and make it almost impossible for Jim to do as Eli requested, and officially take over responsibility for the teen. But the fact that Blair was a guide actually made all the difference, and Jim was glad of the opportunity to explain the position to his young guest.

“Look, kiddo, I know you’ve just had an ‘ah-ha’ moment, and you’re probably wondering right now what the authorities are going to do with you once they know of your existence. But as long as it’s truly what you want, I can put your mind at rest. You OK to talk for a bit longer?” this because Blair was beginning to look decidedly wilted as the day’s events and his tumultuous emotions caught up with him.

Determination warring with fatigue on Blair’s pale face, the youngster nodded his agreement anyway. “Yes, Jim. I’m OK, really. And I think I’d sleep better anyhow if you

have something good to tell me,” and he smiled shyly, eyes lighting up with a touch of real pleasure when Jim gently ruffled his curls.

“OK, then, here goes – and as soon as we’re done, it’s bed for you, OK? Anyway, it’s like this, Chief. Even though you’re an ‘illegal’, so to speak, the Sentinel and Guide regulations in the US can override the courts as long as we’re bonded. A sentinel – or guide for that matter, if the roles were reversed - can apply for guardianship of his or her partner where necessary to protect the pairing. I know we’re not bonded, kiddo – yet – but I hope you don’t mind that Eli and I made out that we were so we could get the official paperwork started for me to take care of you. That was only last week, by the way, but thank the gods we completed it in time. I’m sorry we didn’t tell you straight away, Blair, but both of us wanted to break it to you gently to give you as long as possible to get used to the idea of living with me. Eli arranged it with his lawyer so that on his death, the responsibility for your welfare transfers immediately to me. He wanted that for you, kiddo. He wanted to guarantee your security.

“Now, I’m not trying to force you, Chief. Even if you don’t ever want to complete the bond with me, as long as you’re happy to maintain the act, you’re safe under my protection. But having said that, I’d be honoured if you did decide to bond with me in time. I want you as my guide, Blair. Officially.

“But, in the meantime, you don’t have to worry about being deported, kiddo, and you are entitled to be granted citizenship as my guide. OK so far?” And he was overjoyed at Blair’s ecstatic response.

Throwing his arms around Jim’s neck, Blair began to cry again, but this time tears of relief, joy and love. He clung tightly for long minutes, then finally pushed back to look into Jim’s eyes. Although wet, his face was radiant, the huge blue eyes fairly glowing with adoration and hope. “Oh Jim, yes! Yes, I do want to be your guide for real. Thank you so much for wanting me. I. I. I mean, I don’t know how good I’ll be at first, working with you, I mean, but I’ll keep learning, I swear. And...and...I think I’d like to have the full bond – the sexual one...if you can show me how...” and he blushed deep red as he ducked his head in shy embarrassment, his brief show of courage deserting him.

Cupping the heated face in gentle hands, Jim raised Blair’s head again, the relief in his own expression almost palpable. “That’s great, Chief – Blair. And thank *you* for agreeing to bond with me. And I truly appreciate your offer of the full bond, baby, but I’m not going to push you yet. I don’t want to take advantage of you while you’re still upset and hurting. And you’re still very young, Chief. But we can certainly complete the imprinting, if you’re up for it,” he hurried on when Blair’s face fell in disappointment and mortification. “We’re already nearly there, kiddo. What we have already is as good as many pairs have. I mean, your empathy is online now, and I can shield you. And my senses have been so much better since we met. After all, we’ve already pretty much taken care of touch, smell, hearing and sight. It

only needs taste to complete the full set, and the superficial bond will be set. You up for it?" And his smile widened as Blair nodded determinedly, trust shining from his eyes.

Very slowly, not wanting to scare the younger man, Jim lowered his face to Blair's, and touched his lips to the soft, lush mouth. The skin was silky smooth, and Jim was instantly addicted to the feel of it. Raising his head, he monitored Blair's reaction, thrilled to note the shy pleasure and happiness colouring the expressive features. Cocking his eyebrow in a tacit request, at Blair's enthusiastic nod, he lowered his face again, this time gently licking the beautiful lips, which parted timidly for him. Controlling his urge to plunder the sweet cavern, Jim kept his kiss gentle, intruding just enough to catalogue the enticing flavour before pulling away again with marked reluctance. And as he did, they both experienced an intense burst of wonderment and a comforting mutual feeling of rightness and compatibility as the imprinting was completed, and the working bond was set.

They gazed happily into each other's eyes for long minutes, needing no words to convey their pleasure and sense of achievement, until Blair suddenly surprised himself with a jaw-cracking yawn. Laughing joyously at his new guide's fetching blush, Jim hugged him for a moment before pulling Blair to his feet.

"Time for bed, Guide!" he ordered, tone gentle and affectionate. And Blair's smile was wide and happy as he replied cheekily, "Aye aye, my Sentinel!"

Taking another pull at his beer, Jim smiled lazily in contentment as he heard the soft susurrations of his guide's sleeping breaths, and the steady beating of his heart. Already secure in the knowledge that he could safely use his senses whilst grounded by Blair's presence, he idly glanced out of the balcony windows, taking immense pleasure in cataloguing the individual feathers on a gull flying over the distant marina.

However, his slightly smug mood vanished abruptly as he considered the one occurrence that had spoiled an otherwise momentous afternoon.

Once Blair was settled upstairs in Jim's bed, and had fallen quickly into a deep and healing sleep, Jim had quietly moved out onto the balcony to call in to the office, knowing that he owed his boss an explanation for running out as he had. He hadn't been looking forward to it, but although he hadn't expected Simon to be sweetness and light, he also hadn't expected to have received such an angry and negative response either. For sure he hadn't been in the unit long enough to be able to call Banks a friend, but the other man's words had cut deep nonetheless.

"What do you mean, you've bonded? You go flying out of here like your pants are on fire, you don't answer your cell or your home phone for hours, and then you have the gall to tell me you had to go rescue some kid! Some kid *guide* you've known about for weeks and couldn't be bothered to tell me about? What the fuck am I supposed to do with you now,

Ellison? Fine, so you can use your senses properly now. But what use is that to me? You sure as shit can't take an untrained kid out in the field with you. Jesus, Ellison! It's a fucking disaster!" Banks' voice had risen in volume as his diatribe continued, until Jim was forced to hold the receiver well away from his ear, wincing at the final bellow.

And although Jim would have loved to give in to his own fury, and answer in kind, he controlled himself with an effort, and assumed the icy calm persona that had served him well on numerous other occasions.

"I'm sorry you feel that way, sir. And it wasn't my intention to go behind your back. I had good reason to keep my guide's existence secret until now, but circumstances have changed. If you'll give me a chance to explain in full, I'm happy to do so. Sir."

"You bet you will, *Detective!*" came the now equally frigid response. "I'll be round at your place as soon as I finish up here this afternoon. And you'd better be ready to let me meet this guide of yours so we can see what can be made of this mess!" and Banks had slammed the phone down before Jim could utter another word. So now he waited. Waited for his guide to wake up so he could tell him of Simon Banks' impending visit, whilst hoping against hope that the other man didn't cause Blair any more pain than he could bear in an already fraught day.

Because if he did, Jim had absolutely no doubt that he would throw the man out on his ear if he posed any sort of threat to his guide. The sentinel in him could do no less.

Part 3: A Guide bonded and claimed

Following morning, the loft

It was a tired-looking and rumpled Blair who stumbled downstairs to use the bathroom. Jim paused in his breakfast preparation for a moment to stare at the closed bathroom door in concern, trying not to use his senses too much to monitor the kid. Blair was entitled to some privacy, even if the over-protective sentinel in Jim demanded that he listen in. The young guide had had a troubled night, disturbed by dark dreams of Eli's death made worse by anxiety caused by Simon Banks' disruptive visit the previous evening. In the end, after having to go up several times in response to Blair's recurring nightmares, Jim had climbed into bed with him, simply to hold and comfort the distressed young man, after which they both finally managed to get a few hours' untroubled sleep.

Turning his attention back to preparing the eggs and toast he hoped to persuade Blair to eat, he waited more or less patiently for his guide to emerge from the bathroom.

In the bathroom, Blair used the commode, then washed his hands and face, trying to drive away the worst of his exhaustion. The face that stared back at him from the mirror looked

haggard, the eyes still reddened from all the crying he had done yesterday, and ringed with the bruised-looking marks of fatigue and distress which stood out starkly against his pale skin. He was deeply grateful for Jim's solicitous attitude towards him, particularly when the big man had held him in his arms during the night, but felt silly and ashamed of his own behaviour. He was mortified at how he had broken down in front of Jim's boss, certain that he had confirmed the man's impression that Blair was no more than an emotional and demanding child. However, he quickly shut down that train of thought for now, because Jim deserved better of him than more tears and depression. Taking a few deep breaths, he straightened his shoulders and exited the bathroom, a determinedly positive expression plastered across his face. After all, even Banks' disagreeable comments couldn't negate the delicious glow of security and protection he had felt after Jim's imprinting of him, and he smiled a little at the pleasant recollection. Yes, he freely admitted that he loved his sentinel already, and was pretty sure he was in love with Jim the man also. Or if not yet, he certainly soon would be.

"Morning, Jim. Sorry to be so late. Have I overslept too much?"

"No, Chief. No problem. As long as we get in to the office sometime this morning, that's all I ask. And if Simon doesn't like it, he'll just have to put up with it. And you needed some quality sleep, kiddo, so don't worry about it. Sit down, as breakfast's ready. Eggs and toast OK for you?"

"Yes, thanks, Jim. Smells great. Can I do anything to help?"

"Just eat, and that'll do me," Jim replied with a grin. "But you can help with the clear up afterwards, OK?" And he was rewarded by a bright smile which went a long way towards dissipating the marks of care sullyng his guide's lovely features.

Breakfast over and cleanup done, Blair felt an unwelcome return of his habitual diffidence as he psyched himself up to ask Jim for a favour.

"Um, Jim? Is it OK to drop by Eli's house on the way? I mean, I should get a change of clothes..." and his words tailed off as he looked down at the crumpled borrowed sweats he had slept in.

"Sure, Chief. I was going to suggest that anyway," Jim replied with a grin. "I wouldn't have made you turn up at the PD in my old duds. And we have to go see Eli's - and your - lawyer also. But we need to get a bit of a move on now, so if you'll grab your coat and shoes, we'll be on our way."

And a very relieved Blair smiled happily up at him as he willingly complied with Jim's request.

It was a quiet and introspective Blair who sat in the passenger seat as Jim drove towards the PD much later that morning, although he did his best not to appear too anxious, as he didn't want to worry his companion any more than he could help. He was well aware that the big cop was continuously checking him out with his senses – an instinctive reaction in a sentinel – so he concentrated on keeping his breathing calm and regular, even if he knew he couldn't do much about the racing of his heart as he considered the events of the day so far. Because it had already proved to be pretty stressful, and it wasn't even lunchtime yet.

It had hit Blair far harder than he had expected when Jim had driven up to his – Eli's – house. Even though the man had been dead less than twenty four hours, already the place seemed to have taken on a vaguely deserted quality. Although Blair's common sense told him that it was only his fertile imagination sparked by his emotional fragility, he was still extraordinarily thankful to have Jim's steadying presence at his side to keep the depressing shadows at bay. He had taken as little time as possible sorting out a change of clothes, not yet up to giving the house interior more than a cursory glance before making his escape; immensely relieved when Jim had wordlessly taken him into a warm hug before driving away.

Respecting Blair's silence for a few minutes, eventually Jim had squeezed his knee gently before saying, "You OK, babe? Are you up to seeing the lawyer now? If you can bear it, it would be best if we can get as much sorted out as possible straight away before tackling Banks and the PD. I called in while you were changing, and left a message with Joel to say that we'd be in later since Simon wasn't available. If it makes you feel any better, Joel was very sympathetic, and told me to tell you he's looking forward to meeting you. He's a good man, Chief, and he'll help you as much as he can."

Determinedly shaking off his dismal air, Blair forced a smile as he replied almost cheerfully, although he knew the effort sounded weak even to his own ears, and wouldn't have fooled a sentinel for a moment.

"Yeah, I'm fine, Jim. You're right. I should get as much done as I can for Eli's sake. And I'd like to meet your friend Joel. He sounds nice."

Admiring Blair's brave attempt at normality and appreciating the young man's determination not to trouble Jim unduly even if it wasn't expected of him, Jim simply smiled back and nodded agreeably in response, turning his attention back to the road as he drove on to meet with Eli's lawyer.

In keeping with what he would have expected from Stoddard's chosen legal representative, Jim ushered Blair into an older, comfortably furnished building which housed one of Cascade's oldest and most respected law firms. Not for Eli one of the ultra-modern chrome and glass high-end offices populated by sharply dressed – and sharp-witted – 'legal eagles.'

Instead his lawyer, Graham Guildford, of Guildford, Guildford and Meyers, was an old friend and contemporary, having studied Law at Rainier at the same time as Eli was specialising in Anthropology. And it was plain to see, when Guildford showed them into his own office, that he was genuinely upset at the death of his friend.

Although Jim had met him a couple of times before while he and Eli were thrashing out the details of his guardianship of Blair, this was Blair's first encounter with Guildford, and Jim was pleased to see how the older man made every effort to put the youngster at ease under impossibly sad circumstances.

After offering his sincere condolences and enquiring if they wanted any refreshments, he settled down behind his desk and began by addressing Blair directly, a courtesy that the young man appreciated.

"I know you've had a great shock, Blair, even if it was to be expected. I understand only too well that knowing a loved one has a terminal illness doesn't prevent a sense of grief and loss when the inevitable actually occurs. And because I don't wish to add to your burden of grief any more than I can help, I'll keep this as succinct as possible, alright?"

Swallowing hard around the lump of emotion suddenly clogging his throat, Blair nodded briefly, his words soft but fairly steady as he answered. "Thank you, Mr Guildford. I appreciate everything you're doing for me – and Eli. I...I'm not sure it'll all sink in right now, but I'd like to hear whatever you can tell me."

Nodding in understanding, his approval of Blair's candour matched by Jim's, Guildford smiled sympathetically in response and continued.

Barely an hour later, Blair slumped back in his seat, emotionally exhausted and unbelievably grateful for Jim's steady grip on his forearm.

Guildford had commenced by dealing with the practicalities surrounding Eli's death. He told Blair that he couldn't foresee any problems with the issue of the death certificate on account of Eli's long-term illness. Once the ME was satisfied, Eli was to be transported to a pre-arranged funeral home where he had specifically requested a closed-casket, brief and simple secular ceremony. This was to be followed by a wake, during which he specifically intended for people to enjoy themselves, and celebrate his life rather than his demise. He had confessed to Jim that he had never been able to stand the idea of being 'gawped at' although Jim was pretty certain his real reason was that he didn't want Blair to be any more distressed than necessary. And even Blair was able to conjure up a tiny, sad smile when he was told of Eli's choice for a biodegradable casket and cremation, in keeping with Eli's well-known 'green' principles. Most importantly, although it didn't have much immediate impact on Blair, Eli had set aside sufficient funds to cover everything, so at least the young man wouldn't be troubled with unexpected expenses.

Guildford had then confirmed what Jim had told Blair. That he was now Jim's responsibility and that his sentinel was his legal guardian, with the paperwork to prove it. Although Guildford didn't ask specifically if Jim and Blair had bonded, he trusted in Jim's integrity, so assumed it was a done deal. As Jim had also told Blair, the working bond created through imprinting was legally binding enough for Blair's illegal status to be over-ridden, and full citizenship would follow in due course.

Although Blair had undoubtedly believed Jim, they both knew that having the legal proof meant a great deal to the young guide, bolstering his self-confidence and sense of security more than anything else could have done, and his relief was palpable.

Guildford had then made an effort to prepare Blair for the reading of the Will, which would take place after the funeral. Although he couldn't reveal the contents prematurely, he implied that Blair should be aware that he was mentioned, so should be available for the occasion. And even though he had absolutely no preconception that he could be a major beneficiary, Blair was simply incredibly happy that Eli had loved him enough to include him, perhaps to bequeath him a few precious tokens by which to remember their time together.

After offering Guildford their heart-felt thanks and bidding him farewell for the time being, Jim escorted his guide back to the jeep, a little concerned at the young man's preoccupied air. He was well aware that, if they had completed the full, sexual bond already, he would have been able to link with the empath and therefore have a better understanding of what he was going through, but for the time being, he had to be content with being there for Blair in whatever capacity he was able, frustrating though it undoubtedly was.

Back in the jeep, and heading towards the PD, Blair was once again beset by anxiety as he envisaged the upcoming encounter with Jim's colleagues in MCU, and, more worryingly, with Captain Banks. His agitation grew as he could no longer ignore last night's confrontation despite his best efforts, and his thoughts fled back to the loft...

Previous evening, the loft

As it turned out, Simon Banks had arrived far earlier than Jim had expected, and Blair had still been asleep upstairs. Forewarned only by a matter of minutes when he detected Simon's car pulling up outside 852, Jim refrained from rushing upstairs and shaking his guide awake. Far better to let him rouse more naturally, and so what if Simon saw him come down from Jim's bedroom? Jim would simply explain the level of bond achieved so far, and if the man chose to think the worst, then so be it.

When he had opened the door, not giving his boss the chance to knock, Simon had stalked in, unlit cigar clamped between his teeth in deference to Jim's sentinel-sensitive nose. "Still

wish you wouldn't do that, Ellison," he growled as he made his way further into the loft. "So, where's this kid?"

"He's upstairs, sir, trying to get some sleep. So I'd appreciate it if we could keep this quiet, sir," Jim replied, tone just this side of civil. He knew it would serve no purpose to deliberately antagonise the man, but it was hard under the circumstances, in the light of Banks' less than sympathetic response to his earlier call. Simon stared at him for a long moment, his gaze shrewd and appraising, before nodding brusquely.

"Fine. Perhaps it's better to begin without him anyway. So," he continued, seating himself unasked on Jim's loveseat. "Just how long have you known about this kid?"

And Jim sat down opposite him and told him everything.

During his recitation, Banks had controlled himself remarkably well, and somehow managed to refrain from interrupting even though Jim could easily discern the man's growing anger and aggravation. However, at that point, Blair appeared at the top of the stairs, his expression a desperate mix of fear, hurt and anxiety. As Jim had already noted, he had woken up several minutes before, so had heard a fair amount of Jim's detailed explanation. But his empathy also told him that the words had again been received with little sympathy from Jim's boss, and he turned beseeching eyes on his sentinel, tacitly pleading for support and instruction on how he should behave.

He received his answer in Jim's gentle smile, his ice-blue eyes telegraphing nothing but kindness and encouragement as he stood and beckoned to Blair. Quickly descending the stairs, Blair ran over to Jim, to be pulled into a warm hug where he remained for a few seconds, soaking up the big cop's solid strength. Feeling better, he smiled gratefully up at Jim as the other man pushed him away slightly, but only enough so he could tuck Blair protectively against his side before approaching Simon.

"Captain Banks, sir. Allow me to introduce my guide, Blair Sandburg," Jim announced formally, releasing Blair enough for the young man to extend his hand politely, if nervously, towards Simon.

And Simon just couldn't seem to help himself. He stood up and deliberately towered over the kid, all 6'4" of solid and intimidating bulk, his huge hand engulfing Blair's much smaller one.

"Guide Sandburg," he ground out. "I wish I could say I was pleased to meet you, but I wouldn't want to lie. Prove to me I'm mistaken in my belief that you can't actually be of any use to Sentinel Detective Ellison." And the situation might very well have gotten extremely ugly right then if Blair hadn't been able to get Jim to back down.

Reacting automatically to Blair's surge of fear and distress, Jim had actually snarled at Banks, for all the world like the black panther that was his animal spirit. But before he could

physically attack the other man, Blair had hurriedly stepped between them despite his terror, instinctively understanding that he had to control his sentinel before giving in to his own fear responses.

“Please, Jim, no! I’m alright, really. Please, man,” and Jim had listened, and backed off. And that in itself actually earned Blair a modicum of grudging respect from Simon, even if he wasn’t prepared to admit it out loud.

Backing off himself, even if reluctant to offer a genuine apology yet, Simon had returned to his seat and studied the pair, who were now seated side by side, the small guide tucked firmly against Jim and with a strong arm wrapped uncompromisingly around his shoulders.

It was obvious to Blair that he had made a poor first impression on the captain, and once the man began to speak, he was dismayed to hear just how poor that impression was.

“OK, Ellison. Jim. I’m sorry if I upset your guide, but frankly, what did you expect? I have a police department to run, not a kindergarten, and I can’t see how that is going to include you unless you can persuade me otherwise. He’s a kid. An illegal at that! OK, I agree he needs protection. Shit, the so-called Task Force was created for that very reason. He’s talented, so you say, and I’m inclined to believe that, seeing how he calmed you down just now, and he’s pretty also. But why must you bond? Can’t you wait a bit longer and find someone more appropriate? There’s no way he can go out in the field with you for years, if ever, so is it worth risking your career for? Can’t you just break whatever you two have got going between you, and let him go into protective custody until the Immigration Department decides what’s best for him?”

Hearing the captain’s opinions stated so baldly, Blair couldn’t help but see them more or less objectively, as others undoubtedly would. And the self-confidence and happiness gained earlier melted like ice in the sun, leaving him trembling and hurt, just waiting for the axe to fall. Because Captain Banks surely had the right of it, and the past few weeks were no more than a dream. A glimpse of an unattainable future of love, companionship and security in which he had been foolish enough to believe.

But once again Jim had stepped up and defended him – defended them both – and he was hard-put not to weep in relief.

Words clipped, militarily precise and steeped in soul-deep conviction, Jim replied on behalf of them both.

“With respect, sir, you have no idea what you are talking about. Leaving aside your erroneous belief that Blair is unfit to be my guide, I wouldn’t reject him now even if I wanted to. Yes, it’s true that the type of working bond we already have could – with a huge amount of pain and hardship to us both – be forcibly broken, but it would damage us both for an unknown period. And even when we recover, it might be impossible for either of us to bond again. I wouldn’t do that to Blair, and would rather not do it to myself.

"You can rest easy insofar as we haven't bonded sexually yet, because if we had, this conversation would be academic. But I have no doubt that eventually we will have such a bond, and that bond will be unbreakable unto death.

"So, the ball's in your court sir. Either you accept us and try to accommodate us, or I shall be forced to seek employment elsewhere where my guide will be accepted. Your choice, sir," and Jim had sat back with an air of finality.

Face grim, Simon had sat back also, absorbing the full impact of his detective's impassioned words.

"Hmmm! Well, I guess that's it then, for now. But as long as you're holding off on the sex, I'm going to keep hoping. Keep hoping that you'll come to your senses – absolutely NO pun intended – and take my advice. Bring him in tomorrow, and we'll talk again." And when Blair could take no more, and unwanted tears began to trickle down his pale cheeks, Simon whirled about and strode to the door, letting himself out without a backward glance.

Present, Cascade PD

Jerking back to the present as Jim pulled into the PD's underground parking garage, Blair swallowed convulsively as Jim cast him an appraising and compassionate glance.

"How're you doing, Chief? Are you sure you're up to this? Because if not, just say the word and we're out of here."

Offering Jim a slightly wavering smile, Blair did his best to appear as calm and collected as possible, impressing Jim with his plucky efforts as he replied, "I'll be OK, Jim. I know I have to meet your colleagues and get to know the department, so I may as well make a start. I mean, you'll be there, won't you?" but his voice betrayed him with his last remark as his courage slipped a little, tailing off somewhat plaintively as he blushed in sudden shame at his weakness.

Pulling him in for a quick hug, Jim reassured him immediately. "All the way, Chief, I promise. I wouldn't dream of letting you face them alone. Don't be afraid."

"I'll try not to be, Jim. As long as you're with me, I can do it." And he was rewarded with one of Jim's best smiles.

The journey up to MCU wasn't without incident, which Jim had rather anticipated, since his new guide had lived the life of a virtual recluse for the best part of five years. Blair gazed around him with touching curiosity, although he never relinquished his hold of Jim's sweater, and was happy to remain tucked protectively into his sentinel's side. The worst moment came during the ride up to the seventh floor in the elevator. Having entered at the parking garage level, Jim had hoped somewhat wishfully for a straightforward ride up to

the MCU's floor, but it was not to be. The car stopped at the foyer level to admit several others, including Detective Mitch Kowalski - a man Jim had had the misfortune to have been partnered with on several occasions when he worked in Vice.

After openly eyeing Blair up for a few moments, he offered Jim a knowing grin as he leered lasciviously in Blair's direction. In a pseudo-confidential stage whisper he leaned in to address Jim. "Just like old times, eh, Jimbo? Got yourself a sweet piece of ass there. What have you pulled him in for? You want to hand him over to Vice? 'Cos I guarantee we'll take good care of him!" and he sniggered at his own pitiful excuse at witticism while reaching out as if to grab Blair's arm.

The next moment he found himself slammed against the wall, while the car's other occupants tried frantically to get out of the furious sentinel's proximity. Snarling in near-primal rage, Jim growled, "My guide, Kowalski! Don't you *ever* touch or speak to him again or I'll tear your arms off! And you know I can do it. What's more," he added in a feral hiss, which was all the more terrifying for its implacable resolve, "I wouldn't even be reprimanded under Sentinel Law. So BACK OFF!" and he shoved his victim away from him with a grimace of distaste.

As the onlookers kept their distance as best they could, and the frightened man held up his hands in supplication, Jim pulled Blair into his arms, uncaring of their companions' reactions, and only relaxing slightly once the elevator reached Kowalski's floor and he bolted out of the car as if pursued by all the hounds of Hell. Strangely enough, all the other occupants left at the same level also, leaving sentinel and guide to complete their short trip alone.

When they reached the seventh floor and exited the car, Jim turned Blair to face him, hands rubbing Blair's upper arms comfortingly. "I'm so sorry about that, babe. Kowalski's a first-class asshole, so I hope you don't think everyone in the PD is tarred with the same brush."

As he stroked the delicate skin beneath one large blue eye with his thumb, he was nearly overwhelmed with Blair's response, and the trust that shone out of the bright blue orbs.

"I'm OK, Jim, really. And I shouldn't be surprised by that sort of reaction. After all," he continued ruefully, voice and expression coloured by self-deprecation. "I probably look pretty weird to most people here. More than a little odd!"

"No, Chief!" came the immediate and fervent response. "Exotic, sure, and beautiful for certain. But never odd. Believe me on that one, babe."

And for his own peace of mind, Blair chose to believe him.

By the time they had completed the short walk to the Major Crime Unit's doors, Blair had done a pretty good job of regaining a certain amount of equilibrium, bolstered by the strength and comfort he was soaking up through Jim's possessive hold. However, it was

inevitable much of his hard-won courage would slip away once they entered the bullpen, and he had to fight his instinctive urge to turn and run. Jim sensed as much, and tightened his hold, murmuring, "Steady, Blair. It's OK, kiddo. Just stick close, OK?" And Blair nodded in nervous acquiescence as all eyes seemed to turn to them, and a momentary hush descended while the bullpen's occupants studied the new arrivals.

Although he tried not to 'read' too much into it, the empath in Blair could easily discern a mix of emotions varying from simple curiosity, avid interest, through to disdain and even a tinge of lust, so he slammed his mental shields down before Jim could react to his dismay. Looking down at the floor, he had a split second's thought that it was perhaps a good thing that he and Jim hadn't completed the full sexual bond yet. Because if they had, Jim would be there in his mind; linked and able to experience his guide's every emotional response. As it was, he was fully aware of Blair's physiological reactions, and that was enough for him to go on alert.

However, the moment passed when a rather portly African American man approached them, hand held out in welcome and a friendly smile on his pleasant face. Carefully observing sentinel and guide etiquette by addressing Jim first, even though his smile took in both of them, he said, "Jim, my friend. Good to see you back so soon, and with your guide. May I offer him my congratulations?" And Jim responded with real warmth as he grasped the offered hand.

"Thanks, Joel. It's good to be here. And yes, let me introduce you to my guide. Guide Blair Sandburg, this is my friend and colleague, Captain Joel Taggart."

Blair immediately warmed to the big man, feeling his genuine kindness and interest, so he held out his own hand politely, to have it grasped firmly but gently in both Joel's large hands.

"Um, pleased to meet you, sir," and he offered Joel a shy smile, instantly captivating the older man. Joel's own smile widened even further as he replied, "And I'm very pleased to meet, you, Guide Sandburg. May I call you Blair?"

At Blair's pleased nod of acceptance, he continued, eyes sparkling in mischief. "Well, Blair, I can see already that you're doing my friend Jim here a world of good," and here he winked cheerily at Jim. "It's more than time that Major Crime's own sentinel got to use his gifts properly. And it'll be good for his temper, too, so we can all relax a bit!" and Jim couldn't help but join in with his friend's chuckle.

"Thanks, Joel – I think!" laughed Jim as he squeezed Blair's shoulder comfortingly. "So, any more on the Task Force yet?"

The other man's face became serious as he answered, "No, Jim, I'm afraid not. No miraculous turnaround in circumstances. But maybe things will improve now we've got an official sentinel and guide team working for us," he added with a touch of fond hopefulness.

“And I gather that Homicide’s pair is looking forward to combining their efforts with you two.”

“Well, I guess that’ll depend on what Simon decides,” Jim replied with a wry grin. “Meanwhile, I’ll get Blair settled at my desk, and we’ll take it from there.”

“Sure, Jim. I’ll be getting along then. I’m meeting Megan at the mall. Been another of those jewellery store heists and she wants me to follow up some leads with her. See you soon, Blair, Jim,” and he patted Jim’s shoulder in passing as he exited the bullpen.

The atmosphere seemed to have lightened considerably following Joel’s welcome, and Jim nodded in response to a few words of greeting from one or two others as he led Blair over to his desk.

Reaching his destination, Jim was looking around for a spare chair when he suddenly spun around, pushing Blair behind him as if facing a new threat. However, when a startled Blair peeped around him, not having felt anything other than friendly interest, he saw Jim eyeing up a disparate pair of younger men, who had just entered the bullpen and were approaching Jim’s desk wearing grins of welcome and blatant curiosity.

“Shit! H, Rafe! Might have guessed,” Jim growled unconvincingly, although Blair could tell he was still on alert. “I suppose you want to meet my guide also?”

“Hey, Jimbo! How’re you doin’, babe?” and H bounced into Jim’s space, cheerfully unconscious of the social niceties when it came to sentinel and guide protocol. Apparently blissfully unaware of Jim’s frown, he peered around the taller man, and addressed Blair. “Hi, kid! Hey, good to meet you,” and he reached a hand around only to be pulled up short by his partner, who had a good deal more sense – and sense of self-preservation.

Grinning disarmingly up at Jim as he hauled his partner unceremoniously backwards, Rafe murmured, “Sorry about that Jim. You know H has no manners,” and when H shot him a puzzled look and opened his mouth to question his friend’s comment, he hissed, “H! You *know* you should never address a newly-bonded guide! Not if you want to keep your limbs intact, anyhow!”

And Blair couldn’t help himself. He giggled out loud at the new arrivals’ antics, and that worked like a charm to defuse the situation. Jim grinned sheepishly at his own over-possessive posturing when he knew well and good that his colleagues meant his guide no harm, and H and Rafe were totally won over by the young man.

“OK, guys. That’s enough. Let me introduce my guide, Blair Sandburg. Blair, these two reprobates claim to be MCU’s finest. Go figure!” and he sniggered at the mock-offended gasps and frowns his words earned him. “Seriously,” he continued, “Let me introduce Henri ‘H’ Brown, and his better-dressed – and better mannered – partner, Brian Rafe. They’re the MCU’s most senior partnership.”

Although he held his hand out politely for them to shake, Jim could tell by Blair's barely-concealed confusion that he was puzzled at H and Rafe's comparative youth. Smiling amiably at all three, Jim offered an explanation. "Yeah, I know they seem like babes in arms, Chief, but they are actually the unit's longest-serving pair. Most of my time at the PD so far has been spent in Vice, and I only transferred here a year or so ago. And I've never worked with a regular partner. By choice!" he added, with an only half-joking scowl. "As for Joel, he transferred in just before me from the Bomb Squad. And his partner, Megan Connor, is a newly-arrived exchange officer from Australia. So you see, they do actually qualify...!" and he deliberately let his voice tail off in assumed bemusement.

By this time, Blair was snickering uncontrollably, and his uncomplicated mirth was catching so that not only were Jim, H and Rafe chuckling along with him, but several others cops in earshot also. And that as much as anything served to ease Blair's acceptance into the unit, as it would be a hard-assed listener indeed who could fail to be entranced by the attractive and personable teen.

However, a bellowed command from the captain's office put an end to their enjoyment, and Blair paled dramatically as Jim sighed in irritation.

"Ellison! My office! And bring him too!"

"Sorry guys," he said, with a wry grimace. "Duty calls!" And as H and Rafe nodded in sympathetic understanding, he gathered Blair to him and made his way over to Banks' inner sanctum.

When the pair entered Banks' office, they took the seats indicated across from his desk, but pressed closely together as Jim maintained his comforting contact with his nervous guide. Lips thinned in irritation, Simon regarded them in silence for a few minutes, until Blair was almost squirming in discomfiture. When Jim was driven to almost sub-vocal growling, he held up his hands quickly, exasperation in his tone as he said, "OK, OK, stand down, Sentinel! No need for the attitude. I mean your guide no harm, even if I do disapprove of this," and he waved his hand at them, indicating their close proximity.

"Why do you have to do all this touchy-feely stuff anyway? If Sandburg got any closer he'd be on your lap. I know sentinels and guides rely on touch a lot more than us mere mortals, but you two seem to take it to extremes! Why is that? Because I've got to say it makes me more than uncomfortable! Donald and Shirley Michaels in Homicide don't paw each other all the time."

Quelling his own irritation only with a huge effort, Jim responded, his tone distantly polite and deliberately pedantic. "With all due respect, Captain Banks, the Michaels can hardly be compared to Blair and me. Not only are they an established couple of ten years' standing or more, but Donald only has two enhanced senses, sight and touch. The other three are within

normal ranges, if at the higher end. He doesn't need the same amount of grounding that an alpha like me needs, so Shirley is only a fairly low-grade guide.

"You should also be aware that any newly bonded pair needs the reassurance of almost constant touch. As a sentinel, I need to keep my guide safe, and ensure that others, particularly unbonded sentinels, know he has been claimed and is under my protection. I dare say that we'll touch less once we've grown into the bond, and have explored how long we can safely remain apart, but there's always going to be a fair amount. You know that, sir!"

"Yes. Well, maybe I do, but I don't have to like it," Simon replied with bad grace. "That is, of course, supposing you'll stay in MCU. Which remains to be seen.

"So, on to the important stuff. Here's how I see things, so just sit there and listen for a bit, then you can give me your reactions.

"I'm going to be completely honest with you, and say up front that I can't approve of this pairing. I think the kid's too young, he's had a more than difficult and unorthodox lifestyle so far, and he's completely untrained. I do believe you when you say you haven't bonded to the fullest extent yet. You're nothing if not a man of integrity, Ellison, but you've also said that it's only a matter of time until you do. Now, just how do you think that looks to me, Jim? You're what, ten years older than Sandburg? He hasn't even lived yet, man! Or do you intend to be some sort of father figure?"

At that point, both older men were taken by surprise when Blair, fed up at being talked about as if he wasn't there, found the courage to speak for himself.

"Um, no sir. I don't see Jim as a father figure at all, sir. I. I mean, I've been lucky enough to have two father figures in my life, both of whom I loved, and both of whom are now dead. And what I feel for Jim – for my Sentinel – is nothing like filial affection. I know you think I'm very young. And I am. And I also admit that I haven't seen much of the outside world in the past few years.

"But I've learned to trust Jim, and the love I feel for him isn't just based on gratitude and hero worship. When the time comes, if he'll have me, I want the full bond, but I don't want him to have to give up his chosen career just because of me. If...if that means Jim has to reject me, then I'll have to try and live with it. But I want to stay. I want to become what he needs. Please let me try." And his beseeching gaze held Simon's for long moments until his head dropped, courage exhausted and he waited in trepidation for the response to his fervent plea.

Incredibly moved, Jim pulled his guide actually into his lap, uncaring of his boss' precious sensibilities, so that both of them missed the look of amazement and even grudging admiration that crossed Simon's face. *Well, shit, the kid had real guts after all*, he thought to

himself. *Perhaps I've been too quick to judge them?* And the fair-minded man underneath the bluff and bluster listened to his conscience, and prepared to throw them a lifeline.

"Right. Alright. You've made your point Jim, and Blair also. I'm still not truly convinced that I'm doing the right thing, but I'm prepared to give you a fair trial. As it happens, I've already consulted with the PD's Sentinel Department liaison, and he confirms what I understood. You're both entitled to some bonding leave, so in this case, I want you to take at least until Dr Stoddard's funeral is over. I'm not quite so insensitive that I don't know how traumatic that is going to be for you, Guide Sandburg," and he actually managed a grim smile at the admission.

"So. Take a few days, and when you return, I'm putting you on desk duty, Jim, while you work out the details of how much grounding you'll need on a day-to-day basis, and how far you can use your senses without Sandburg's constant presence.

"And you, Blair. I expect you to look into formal Guide training, either through the PD's Academy Programme, or at the University. Whichever works for you, and whichever you're capable of.

"It's the best I can do; probably more than I should, but I'm not the ogre you undoubtedly think I am, Guide Sandburg. Believe it or not, I don't want to lose the possible benefits to my unit of a working sentinel and guide pair. But I want to do what I think is right for all of us, and that doesn't include putting young civilians in the firing line, OK?

"So, go home, think about what I've said, and come back after you've laid Dr Stoddard to rest. He was a good man, and you have my sincere condolences, Blair. Now, go! I've got work to do...!"

And he pulled a file towards him, uncomfortable with any possible emotional reaction, and intent on dismissing the pair without further heart-searching.

Taking the hint, Jim pulled Blair to his feet, and they made their escape, glad to have been granted more of a reprieve than they had expected.

Three days later, Dr Stoddard's funeral:

Monday morning, the day of Eli Stoddard's funeral, dawned bright and clear, which would undoubtedly have pleased him greatly. However, as an unpretentious and modest man, he would not have approved so much of the way his careful plans were changed despite Blair's attempts to follow them to the letter. The problem was that Eli had a great many more friends and academic acquaintances than he would have admitted to, not to mention the many 'great and good' folks of Cascade society who fully intended to enhance their own reputations by attending the send-off of one of Rainier's – and the world's – most renowned anthropologists. So although the actual secular ceremony went more or less as planned, with

only Eli's closest friends and family in attendance, the wake was well and truly hijacked by the university, so that it became a grand affair worthy even of the Mayor's presence.

And it was so very hard for Blair to deal with, even with the solid support of his concerned and over-protective sentinel. It was only his sense of duty and love for Eli that commanded that he attend.

*

The days following Jim and Blair's interview with Simon had been spent in relentless activity, with the pair travelling backwards and forwards between the loft, Eli's house, the funeral home and Graham Guildford's office. Blair needed to keep an eye on Eli's property as well as picking up changes of clothes since he couldn't bring himself to stay overnight alone, and had been sleeping in Jim's hastily cleared spare room under the stairs. No matter that he invariably ended up in Jim's bed when his nightmares and grief drove him up to take advantage of Jim's comforting arms. Jim certainly had no problem with that, and was also happy to accompany Blair on his trips to the other house, helping the young man to begin the sad process of sorting through Eli's personal possessions, and preparing the property and its contents for whatever their eventual disposition might be after the reading of the Will. Eli's long-standing cleaner, Rosa, grief-stricken but resolute, had continued to do her twice-weekly routine, so it looked neat and tidy, if increasingly un-lived-in and impersonal. Jim understood how Blair's feelings had to be somewhat ambivalent now as regards the place, because although he had considered it to be his home for the last few years, as far as he was concerned, he had no claim on it now its owner was deceased. It was hard for him to detach himself, though, and he was grateful for Jim's steadying arms when his emotions got the best of him.

As far as the funeral arrangements were concerned, Blair had been unable to do anything other than reach a compromise when put under pressure by Rainier's Principle and Board of Governors. With Jim's uncompromising backing, and Guildford's clear written instructions, he had been able to ensure that the simple ceremony remained just that. However, because of his previous uncertain status and unofficial relationship to the great man, he found himself over-ridden by both the university authorities, and also by some of Eli's distant relations, who had suddenly appeared as if by magic once the date of the funeral and the reading of the Will was made known.

In consequence, all Blair could do now was stand by unhappily as the gathering for the wake took on epic proportions, able to endure the occasion only because of the strength and unflinching protection of the sentinel at his side.

In truth, there were a few people in attendance who were kind and thoughtful towards the bereft youngster. The handful of fellow academics and close friends who Eli had introduced to Blair, and who had often tutored him, were openly sympathetic and supportive. He was also deeply touched when a contingent from the PD arrived, as Eli had consulted for them

on many occasions in the past, and not only in respect of sentinel and guide matters. Major Crimes was represented by Captain Banks, Joel Taggart and his partner Megan Connor, who immediately took to Blair and fussed over him despite Jim's scowling disapproval. Under less trying circumstances, Blair might have been amused at the way the tall, striking and very forthright brunette stood up to her glowering colleague, but for the moment he hadn't the energy to do any more than willingly embrace her genuine concern for him.

However, there were others whose interest in him was much less compassionate, such as Eli's relatives, whose reactions to him ranged from open curiosity to disgust and distrust to downright jealousy. And although he was completely unaware of it, he had also attracted some much more unwelcome attention.

Already stretched almost to breaking point by the poignant but beautiful funeral ceremony, Blair had shut down his empathic barriers as tightly as he could, and was now relying heavily on Jim's willingly-offered shielding. He was therefore spared much of the distress the other guests' emotions might otherwise have caused him, but Jim was well aware of several snide and downright cruel comments directed towards his guide, being able to listen in to their furtive and mean-spirited asides. In consequence, he was finding it increasingly difficult to contain both his anger and his instinctive desire to confront the offenders and take his revenge.

But even a sentinel as gifted as Jim couldn't isolate every word of every conversation spoken in the general cacophony of such a large – and loud – gathering, and so he missed the one which had the greatest potential to harm his beloved guide.

In a side room off Rainier's Great Hall wherein the gathering was being held, three of Cascade's most powerful men were deep in conversation. Sipping at a glass of champagne clutched in a meaty paw, Mayor Wayne Anderson surveyed the scene through the open doorway. His corpulent body looked relaxed and unthreatening, but the shrewd and observant expression in his rather piggy eyes belied his languid demeanour. Flicking his gaze back to his two companions, his smile was sardonic as he murmured, "Well, who'd have thought that the renowned Dr Stoddard could have led such an interesting private life? Keeping a tasty morsel like that a secret was no mean feat. The boy's quite beautiful, is he not? And a gifted Guide, according to my informant within the PD. Pity he's bonded to that Neanderthal Ellison," and he raised an eyebrow at the taller of his listeners, gauging the man's response. He wasn't disappointed at the other's reaction.

Leon DuRoy was an elegant, middle aged man, tall, tanned and fit thanks to the skiing that was his greatest passion outside of making money and pursuing his political goals. Already wealthy from the millions inherited from his established and well-connected family, he applied his impressive intelligence, Ivy League education and business acumen to achieve his desires; chief among which was to obtain enough backing to run for governor as a step

towards higher things. A man to be reckoned with, he had the ear of several politicians as well as government officials and local dignitaries, another of whom was the third member of the trio, Cascade's Police Commissioner.

Too well-bred to rise to the bait in any display of vulgar bile, yet both his acquaintances saw the minute tightening of the skin around his eyes and the tension in the wide shoulders.

"Yes, Wayne, you're right," he answered, tone deceptively smooth and untroubled. "Who could possibly have missed a boy like that?" and he shot a loaded glare at the Commissioner. "At least some of those out there," and he flicked a dismissive glance at the still considerable crowd milling around in the main hall, "were aware of him. The Dean told me that a few of them were actually tutoring the boy," and his mouth thinned in distaste.

Not able to resist pushing the matter further, Mayor Anderson changed tack slightly. "And how is your son, Leon? Still managing with the medication?"

And scored a direct hit.

Because Leon DuRoy Jnr., twenty-two-year-old only son and heir to the DuRoy millions and the apple of his father's eye, had manifested as a sentinel mere months ago, and was now fully – and painfully – online.

Signs of real irritation now plain to see in the tight jaw and the hand clutching the delicate champagne flute in a potentially disastrous white-knuckled grip, Leon forced himself to relax by dint of his considerable willpower before replying.

"Thank you, Wayne. He's as well as can be expected under the circumstances. But you can rest assured I won't stop searching until we find a compatible 'cure'." And both his listeners were aware of his true meaning.

Smiling somewhat wolfishly now, Mayor Anderson continued smoothly, "Perhaps you'll find what you seek in the next consignment, Leon? One can but hope..." he added in faux sympathy.

And DuRoy fixed him with a calculating look as he pondered aloud in response. "But then again, my dear Wayne, maybe I won't need to wait. Perhaps the answer has been here under our noses all along..." and his eyes flicked appraisingly back to where Blair was just leaving, flanked by the protective presence of Ellison and two of his colleagues.

The Commissioner's lips thinned uneasily at the comment, but he held his peace.

Part 4: A Guide in danger

Later that afternoon, Graham Guildford's office

Blair sat quietly in the furthest corner of Guildford's comfortable room, his body shielded for the most part from prying eyes by the comforting bulk of his sentinel and protector.

Almost too tired to think straight, he was pretty much running on fumes after an emotionally exhausting day, and the very last thing he needed right now was to be here for the reading of Eli's Will. But he could do no less, knowing it was what Eli wanted, so he concentrated his efforts on holding himself together for just a while longer. He knew Jim was studying him intently; worry uppermost in his expression, and Blair tried hard to grin, wanting to reassure his sentinel even though he knew the attempt was doomed to fail.

Taking Blair's tightly clenched fists in his own warm hands, Jim rubbed gentle circles over the taut skin of his guide's knuckles as he murmured softly, "Are you sure you want to go through with this, babe? I'm sure under the circumstances Graham will understand and allow you to have a private reading tomorrow when you've have some rest. Just say the word, kiddo, and we're out of here."

Smiling softly up at Jim, gratitude plain to see in his tired blue eyes, Blair whispered his reply, excluding the others present but knowing that sentinel ears would have no trouble in picking up every word.

"I'm OK, really, Jim. It's been a hard day, and I know you can tell that I'm pretty washed out, but I want to do this. I want to get everything done with and out in the open so I can start to plan my future. Our future..." and his voice tailed off completely as his expression turned shy, hoping that he hadn't been presumptuous in his assumption that their destiny really did include a lifelong partnership.

Jim's reply was one of gentle reproach as his eyes telegraphed his love for the nervous young man.

"Now you should know better than that, Chief. Our bond is for keeps, no question about it, OK? Anyway", he continued, head cocked in his unconscious 'listening' pose, "Graham's just about to enter, Chief, so we can get this show on the road, then make our exit. I'm thinking we both could do with some quiet time." And Blair nodded in whole-hearted agreement.

The door opened to admit Graham Guildford, who nodded and smiled at all present, his expression subtly warmer when his gaze landed on Blair and Jim. Seating himself behind his wide desk, he opened the file he had brought with him, and looked up to address his audience.

"Thank you all for coming here today. Dr Stoddard's Last Will and Testament is clear and concise, and as he requested, I shall read it verbatim. Are there any objections?" and he looked around him, eyebrow raised slightly in cool enquiry. Receiving everyone's assent, he removed the relevant document and prepared to begin, well aware that some of the attendees, specifically Eli's four cousins, leaned forward slightly, clearly hard-put to keep their expressions clear of greedy anticipation.

Without further ado, Guildford began to read.

“To my devoted cleaner and friend, Ms Rosa Mendez, I leave the sum of \$50,000.00, and the porcelain tea service I know she always admired--’ and got no further as the lady in question burst into tears, plainly overwhelmed with gratitude. As her husband comforted her, Jim and Blair exchanged satisfied looks, knowing that she hadn’t expected such generosity, but that she undoubtedly deserved it. Pulling herself together, she offered a shaky apology, and sent Blair a watery smile, which he returned with an affectionate and understanding one of his own.

Unruffled, Graham smiled reassuringly at Rosa, saying kindly, “You are most welcome to leave now if you prefer, Mr and Mrs Mendez. I shall contact you shortly to arrange for the payment of your bequest.” Thanking him for his thoughtful offer, the couple left, arms wrapped around each others’ waists as Rosa leaned into her husband’s welcome support.

“To continue,” Graham spoke, expression serious once more.

“To my cousins, Edward Stoddard, Michael Stoddard, Edwina Murray and Benedict Mercer, I leave the sum of \$50,000.00 each. Enjoy!”

And once again he was interrupted, this time by protestations and indignant exclamations as the disappointed recipients vented their annoyance. Taking upon himself the role of spokesperson, the oldest member of the quartet, Edward, demanded, “Is that it? We’re his closest surviving relatives, and he gives us the same as his *cleaner*? This is an insult! So where is the rest of his estate going? Don’t tell me he’s leaving it all to academia? Or some arcane anthropological project? This is absurd!”

“If you’ll allow me to continue,” Guildford responded politely but pointedly, “all will become clear.” So with decidedly bad grace, the four subsided for the moment, although their demeanours promised more discord to come.

“To Rainier University Department of Anthropology,’ and here Dean Wilson, acting as the university’s representative, leant forward slightly, ‘I wish to create a scholarship in my name for a deserving but underprivileged student wishing to specialise in Sentinel Studies, or more specifically, Guide Studies. To be funded by the monies set aside in the account created for that purpose, as administrated by my lawyer and friend, Mr Graham Guildford.’

Smiling approvingly, Dean Wilson muttered, “Most generous. Most generous, to be sure!”

Plainly sharing the sentiment, Guildford spoke again. “I also bequeath to Rainier University Anthropology Department, the contents of my formal library, to include all books, papers and my collection of artefacts housed therein’, and the Dean’s eyes lit up as his smile widened in appreciation. He was well aware that the collection represented a generous bequest indeed, and would be of great benefit to the department and the university as a whole.

“The contents of my private library, I bequeath to my dear young friend, Blair Sandburg; to include Sir Richard Burton’s monograph, *The Sentinels of Paraguay*, and all volumes listed herewith.’ Here Guildford met Blair’s astounded gaze with a kindly smile. “I have a copy of the list for your information, Blair, which you can take with you to look over at your leisure,” and all Blair could do was nod in mute thanks, the lump in his throat too big to speak around. It was far more than he had either expected or hoped for, and his gratitude and love for his friend and mentor knew no bounds.

However, even as the cousins sent barely-concealed sneers in his direction, there was more discontent to come as Guildford reached the final stages of the reading.

“The remainder of my estate, including my house and contents other than those bequeathed to Rainier University, and the balance of my savings and various bank accounts, I also leave to Blair Sandburg. The son I never had, but the delight of my final years. Be happy, Blair, and remember me kindly.’

And completely overwrought, Blair burst into tears, to be gathered up in Jim’s powerful arms, as the cousins erupted in fury. On the other hand, the Dean was kind and concerned, dismissive of Eli’s relations’ impotent but offensive behaviour. Crossing over to where Blair sobbed against Jim’s broad chest, Wilson nodded sympathetically to Jim, and patted Blair’s shaking shoulder comfortingly.

“Please tell young Blair that I’ll contact him later to arrange for the collection of Eli’s legacy. No need to trouble him until he’s had a chance to come to terms with all this,” and when Jim murmured his thanks and assent on their behalf, he nodded again and left the pair in relative peace.

With Dean Wilson’s help, Guildford managed to usher the still-protesting cousins out of his office, then exited the room himself, intending to give the distraught young man some privacy while he chatted amicably to Dean Wilson in the anteroom.

Inclining his head towards the closed office door, Wilson said musingly, “I’m glad young Sandburg has someone to take care of him. That was some surprise, was it not? But that was Eli for you!” and he chuckled in benign recollection. Then he regarded Graham for a moment, his gaze direct and open as he admitted candidly, “I did know of the young man’s existence, even though I never actually met him. Although officially I know I should have informed the authorities, I believed it wasn’t for me to make that judgement, so I chose to look the other way. After all, I’d never actually laid eyes on the lad, so I had no proof other than hearsay. And looking at him now, I have no regrets. He’s a fine young man, and a credit to Eli’s memory,” and with that, he shook Guildford’s hand and took his leave.

Back once more in the loft, Jim applied himself unreservedly to caring for his young partner. Once he had virtually carried the mute and trembling young man out of Guildford’s office

to his jeep, he had wasted no time getting back to his home territory, where he could see to his guide's immediate needs. Blair was so deeply shocked at the whole concept of being Eli's heir, that he simply couldn't get his head around the implications for himself and for Jim also. His overwhelming gratitude warred with terror at the prospect of being a man of property and the responsibilities that such a condition entailed, and for the moment it was completely impossible for him to deal with it. He had consequently shut down and withdrawn into himself, content to hide away from reality for a few precious hours and relying on his sentinel to care for him.

Understanding completely, even though he was concerned at the frightening blankness in his guide's beautiful but unfocussed eyes, Jim carefully led an unresisting Blair up to the loft bedroom, where he stripped him down to his underwear before coaxing him into bed. Stripping himself quickly, he climbed in beside his guide, his actions entirely devoid of any sexual intent, and designed purely to comfort, reassure and protect Blair until the young man was once more able to face the world. Taking him into his arms, he settled Blair's head against his shoulder, wrapping the still slightly shaking body in a warm embrace, crooning soothing nonsense words until the smaller man sank into a deep and healing sleep.

Two days later, MCU bullpen

When Jim and Blair entered the bullpen this time, it was a much more relaxed guide who looked around him inquisitively, although he remained tucked protectively against Jim's side. After a much more restful night than expected, undoubtedly due for the most part to Jim's unstinting care and comfort, Blair had awoken refreshed and determined to deal with his completely unexpected legacy. There was no way he wanted to deny or detract from either Eli's generosity or his memory by hiding away from or shirking his new responsibilities, so he and Jim had spent many hours in discussion, sharing their thoughts and plans, and deciding on the best course of action. They were here now to share the relevant decisions with Simon Banks, hoping that what they had in mind would satisfy the captain.

No sooner than the door had closed behind them, a piercing squeal made Jim wince as Megan Connor flew across the office to greet them. "Sandy! How're you doing, love?" and the irrepressible Aussie threw her arms around a blushing but pleased Blair, totally dismissing Jim's growls of disapproval. Pulling back a little to look down into the pink-cheeked and shyly smiling face tilted up to hers, she studied him carefully for a minute or two, stroking the soft skin of his cheek with her thumb.

"Well, you sure look a lot better than when I saw you last, Sandy. Guess this big lug's been looking after you well enough, huh?" and she shot a cheeky grin at Jim. "Are you going to be staying in Major Crimes, love? We could do with a fresh face – and some fresh ideas – in here!" and she ruffled his curls affectionately.

“Well, that’ll be up to the captain, Connor, as the final decision will be his,” Jim interjected stiffly, still uncomfortable with her familiarity with his guide, and trying to contain his possessive instincts to bundle Blair up and take him home to his territory. Unimpressed as usual by his glowering attitude, Megan was about to reply when H and Rafe joined them.

“Hey, Hairboy!” a grinning H addressed a bemused Blair. “How’re you doin’, babe? Jim looking after you OK?”

“Um, yes, thank you Detective Brown,” Blair answered politely, but couldn’t resist adding, “Um, Hairboy?”

And H also ruffled his curls, laughing cheerfully as he said, “Well, it sure suits you, babe. The mane and the name, my man!” and he gleefully nudged Rafe, who simply grinned and rolled his eyes at his partner’s irreverent but artless comments, knowing there was no malice implied or intended.

However, they were interrupted by a voice issuing from Banks’ office, although the summons was lacking in much of its usual belligerence. “Sentinel Detective Ellison, Guide Sandburg, my office! And you lot have work to get on with, so get to it!” And with rueful chuckles, the small gathering broke up and Jim steered his now rather nervous guide over to the open office door.

Once inside, Blair was grateful to note that although still unsmiling and speculative, Simon’s glare was far less ferocious than at their previous interview. Taking it as a good sign, he briefly lowered his shields and ‘read’ the big man, finding that there seemed to be more curiosity than hostility, so he dared to hope that his and Jim’s proposals might actually meet with Simon’s approval. Seating themselves at Banks’ invitation, Blair tried not to press up too closely to Jim’s comforting bulk, knowing that it made the captain uneasy, but was still anchored by his sentinel’s warm hand resting possessively on his knee.

Standing, Simon moved over to his coffee machine, offering his visitors a cup before pouring one for himself. Blair accepted with shy pleasure, and this time Jim also indulged himself, knowing that Blair’s grounding presence would anchor him should the blend prove rather too exotic again for sentinel-sensitive taste buds.

Once again seated, Simon took an appreciative mouthful before setting his mug aside and studying them for a moment before speaking.

“I’m glad to see you looking better, young man,” and he treated Blair to a brief smile. For a few moments the deep brown eyes shone with compassion and understanding as he continued, “You held up remarkably well during that wake, and I have to say I was impressed by your fortitude. It’s no easy matter burying a loved one, especially when you have so many unwanted interlopers trying to turn an intimate and heartfelt occasion into a three-ring circus. And I gather you had something of a shock at the reading of the Will?”

Offering the older man a smile, although his eyes reflected still-raw pain, Blair responded quietly but firmly, wanting to get the discussion started before he lost his nerve.

“Thank you, Captain Banks. I am much better, thanks to Jim,” and he shot a loving glance over at his stoic partner.

“It’s true that I had a hard time at the wake, but I really appreciated the support I received from Eli’s – and my – friends, and also from you, sir. I’m sure Eli would have appreciated your presence and that of the other members of the Police Department, so thank you for that.

“And as for the Will, yes, it was something of a shock,” he admitted, exchanging a brief wry grimace with Jim before meeting Simon’s gaze again, his expression now one of sober resolve. “Although I had never expected it, Eli has left nearly everything to me. There were a few other bequests, and he wanted Rainier to have most of his books, papers and artefacts, but the greater part of his estate, and his house, well, um, they now belong to me,” and he ducked his head quickly, still shaken by the realisation, especially when uttered aloud.

“Anyway,” he continued, looking up again with renewed determination, “Jim has helped me so much in coming to terms with my good fortune, and with deciding what I should do to plan my – our – futures. May I explain?” and he looked from Simon to Jim and back, seeking their agreement.

Simon nodded his assent, and waved his hand to indicate that Blair continue, while Jim sent him a reassuring smile. “Go ahead, Chief. Just let me know if you want back-up!” and he chuckled affectionately, pleased to see his guide relax a little again.

Taking a deep breath, Blair began. “I want to keep Eli’s house. I know he loved it very much, and he would want me to stay, I’m sure, and that’s why he left it to me. And I’ve asked Jim to move in with me. It’s too big for just me. Actually, it’s big for just two,” and he smiled fondly, recalling how Eli used to say they rattled around like two peas in a colander. “I know it’s further out than Jim’s apartment, but I believe it’s still within the PD’s accepted commuting limit? And if Jim keeps the loft, he can use it when he’s working cases that need him to be nearer at hand.” He couldn’t help but look over to Jim at that point, still unsure of his status, but Jim simply squeezed his knee as he confirmed Blair’s statement.

“That’s right, Chief. And as long as you’re happy with that, captain, that’s what I’d like to do. Blair needs to feel secure, and it’s a great place for sure. And like he says, when you need me to be on hand, we’ll stay in the loft. Go ahead, Blair, and tell Simon what you’ve decided to do about guide training.”

Blushing again now, Blair looked a little nervous as he anticipated Banks’ possible reaction. Praying that the big man would accept his reasoning, he said, “I’ve decided that I’d like to go to Rainier rather than the Academy, sir. The Academy Guide Training programme is very good, but it’s for guides who expect to end up as cops, and I don’t think I could do that. I

don't think I could ever carry a gun, sir," and he looked apologetically from Simon to Jim and back. He could tell from Banks' frown that that wasn't what the other man had wanted to hear, so he hurried on, hoping to stave off any forthcoming disapproval.

"Um, I've talked a lot with Dean Wilson, sir. When he called to ask about Eli's bequest. He said that he'd spoken to some of Eli's friends who tutored me, and he has Eli's own written references, which apparently were very detailed. He said that, despite my lack of formal certification, as long as I pass the entrance exam, he sees no reason why I shouldn't be accepted into the Anthropology Department, which also runs the Guide Training programme. If I take Sentinel Studies, and Forensic Anthropology, and get formal training too, I'll be able to help Jim when I'm not in class. And if I do well, maybe I could end up as a consultant to the PD, so I'll be able to ride with Jim when I'm old enough. Because that's what I want to do, sir. To ride with Jim and be his official partner and guide."

Sitting back in his seat as Blair wound down, Simon regarded the young man thoughtfully for a few moments while he pondered the kid's proposals. He had to admit that he was impressed by the youngster's determination and the fact that he had obviously put a great deal of thought into his options. And it didn't hurt that Ellison was plainly in full accord with his guide. Deciding not to keep either of them in suspense any longer, he leaned forward again and rested his elbows on his desk as he leaned his chin on his linked fingers.

"OK. OK, Guide Sandburg. I freely admit I hadn't expected you to have come up with such a lot of information in such a short time. And to make informed choices based on it. I can see why you'd prefer the university option, even though I'd personally prefer an academy-trained cop partner for Jim. But if you eventually did specialise in post-graduate Sentinel and Forensic studies, I don't see why you couldn't be employed as an official consultant. Which would give you a lot more money than just a guide's stipend, for sure.

"But, assuming you get accepted to start in the Fall, and you divide your time between the U and the PD, will Jim be able to manage in the field? I can't risk having him zone without his guide to ground him."

Here Jim patted Blair's knee reassuringly as he took up the discussion, needing to support his young guide even as he needed to convince Simon of his beliefs.

"Well, as to that, sir, as you already know, our working bond is set and strong. Although it's true that I can't use my senses to their fullest extent without Blair physically at my side, I can control them in the field now as well as before. Better, in fact, because I have little pain and no need for dampening meds. As long as I can get together with Blair regularly during the day, my performance will stay at least as good as before, probably better."

Nodding thoughtfully, Banks turned his full attention on Blair. "So, how about you, son? Can you manage without Jim?"

"I think so, sir. I mean, I've had to repress my empathy for most of my life, and Eli ensured that over the last few years stimulation was kept to a minimum. I think that I'll be fine, as long as we can meet up as often as possible. I can help ground Jim's senses, and he can boost my empathic shields. Of course, it would be different if we had the full bond," and he blushed and looked down at his hands, shy again.

"And why is that?" Simon asked more gently than even he expected, unaccustomedly sympathetic towards the young man. He knew enough about the phenomenon in theory, but wanted to hear it from his men in their own words.

It was Jim who answered first, smiling kindly at his guide, and wanting to help him out.

"It's OK, Chief. I'll take it from here," and Blair smiled gratefully up at him.

"As I understand it, captain, once we complete the full bond things will be both better – and worse - in one sense. The full bond means that the empathic link between us will be created, and both Blair's empathy and my senses will be greatly enhanced. I'll know where Blair is, and be able to trace him anywhere. Not exactly telepathy, but we'll be in each other's heads, so to speak. But we'll be completely interdependent, sir. It's a symbiotic relationship. Blair's normal barriers will be gone, and he'll need my shielding permanently to prevent him overloading on emotional input, and I'll need his touch to ground me and stop me from zoning when I use my senses fully. As a team, we'll be great, sir. But it'll take time and practice to determine how long we'll be able to stay apart without damage to either one of us."

"A double-edged sword indeed, then," murmured Simon, almost to himself. "But one which could be of great benefit to the department." Regarding both men frankly, he said, "I can see why so many guides choose not to come forward, Blair. It's a huge commitment to make, tying yourself to one person for life. And if you're still intent on doing so when the time comes, who am I to deny the gift of your loyalty to Jim?"

"So, in the meantime, we'll try it your way. I'll give my conditional approval for Blair to start work in the bullpen, and get used to the procedures and clerical side of police work. Once you've begun your formal training, you'll be expected to divide your time between the university and the PD, and we'll take it from there. But there'll be no going out in the field with Jim until I consider you to be old enough, OK?" he finished with a repressive glare.

And Blair was so relieved to have received Banks' go-ahead, even the fierce expression couldn't dampen his joy, and his wide smile lit up the room.

Even Simon couldn't remain unaffected by the guide's happiness, so he simply waved his hand in dismissal, growling, "Go, take the rest of the week, and I'll see you both here on Monday morning, ready to get some work done!"

Gathering up his guide with alacrity, Jim replied, "Sir, yes, sir!" and they left the office before the captain could change his mind.

That night, Mayor Anderson's mansion:

A smug and self-satisfied grin on his rather porcine face, Wayne Anderson settled back in his favourite armchair, a snifter of expensive brandy clutched in one hand and an as yet unlit Cuban cigar in the other. He was taking the opportunity to relax in his den after the conclusion of another successful evening's entertainment, and he smiled benignly at his remaining guests.

Anderson was in the habit of holding frequent dinner and drinks parties for the great and good of Cascade, for the purpose of both keeping in with the movers and shakers in the business world, and currying favour with those with social and political clout. Consistent favourable publicity and current information was everything, and he had every intention of keeping ahead of the game. He greatly enjoyed the honour and power embodied in his appointed position, and intended to hang on to it for as long as possible.

Content with the results of his latest hospitable venture, he waved the hand holding the cigar in a magnanimous sweep, encompassing the three other men who had joined him for a nightcap.

"Anyone care for a cigar? I have to say that this latest batch certainly lives up to expectations! Can't do better than Cuban, I always say. Goes well with the brandy," and he chuckled complacently, his jowls shaking at the action. Downing his drink, one of his guests set down his empty glass and stood up.

"No thank you, Wayne." Chief Warren refused the offer, mouth pursed primly in barely-concealed disapproval. "And I didn't hear you mention 'Cuban'," he added, not entirely jokingly. "I'll say goodnight, and thank you for a most enjoyable evening, as usual," and he nodded to the others present and left the room, collecting his coat on the way out.

Watching his departing back, Anderson's expression darkened. "Sanctimonious bastard," he muttered as he looked around him, gauging his remaining two guests' reactions.

Leon DuRoy simply sniffed in well-bred disdain as he took Anderson up on his offer, and reached into the box of ultra-expensive cigars on the table. "Don't let it get to you, Anderson," he drawled as he chose one, languidly rolling it between his fingers as he breathed in appreciatively. "The man has his uses, and we wouldn't want him to find out about our extra-curricular activities now, would we?"

"True enough," agreed Commissioner O'Malley, although with considerably less aplomb. "It does no harm to have a moral and virtuous prig like Warren to hide behind, even if he has no inkling that he's being used. But we can't afford to get careless, gentlemen. He's no

fool, and he's already suspicious of the possible sources interfering with his precious Task Force."

"Nothing he can pin down, I'm sure," Anderson huffed, aggrieved at the notion. "Anyhow, now he's left, are you going to tell us what progress has been made? It's been far too long since our last 'consignment'. We have orders to fill!"

Sitting back and taking his first unhurried puff of the fragrant cigar, despite his apparent indolence DuRoy fixed them with a sharp and perceptive stare. "Well, as to that, my friends, I can report that I've been in contact with Roscov's main US representative, and he assures me that our friend Dmitri does, in fact, have a suitable consignment ready for shipping. But whether Cascade is chosen as its destination will depend entirely on our containing the Task Force. We can't afford to let up on local intimidation, and I'm relying on you, O'Malley, to keep an eye on developments within the PD. The FBI isn't a problem as we all know, as long as SAC Greenwood remains in charge, and I know the Governor is looking forward eagerly to his share in the profits.

"So, gentlemen, as long as we continue to be vigilant, Roscov is prepared to use Cascade's established pipe-line. But any hint of compromise, and he'll go elsewhere. And he made it very clear that he had several other options. And I for one don't want to see that happen!" The cruel determination and pure greed in DuRoy's gaze was enough to sober his companions, and Anderson actually shivered a little at the menace the man exuded.

"No, no, of course not!" he blustered. "None of us want that, Leon. Goes without saying!" and he smiled a little nervously, suddenly intent on diverting DuRoy's attention to something a little less contentious, at least, as far as he personally was concerned.

"By the way, Leon, how is your son? And have you made any progress in acquiring that 'cure' you were looking for?"

Uncomfortable for his own reasons, O'Malley cut in quickly. "In case you're interested, that young man we saw at the funeral – Stoddard's heir. Did you know that the sentinel he's bonded with – Detective Ellison – is William Ellison's oldest son? That's William Ellison of Ellison Enterprises, Inc. I mean, the man has connections..." and his voice trailed off as DuRoy's cold and contemptuous stare fixed on him.

"If that's your idea of warning me off getting my hands on that guide, O'Malley, you can forget it," Leon responded sharply, tone steeped in calculated threat. "Of course I know of Ellison's family connections! But I also know that William Ellison has been estranged from his son for many years, and I don't anticipate any trouble from that quarter. I doubt he even knows that 'young Jimmy' has found himself a guide, so I'm sure he won't care if the good Detective loses him again.

“So don’t worry on my account,” he continued, smiling grimly at his listeners. “My plan remains the same, and procedures are in place for my son’s ‘cure’ to be delivered within the next few days.”

And both his companions knew better than to question him further.

Following morning, Blair’s house

Jim and Blair stood in the middle of the library, gazing around them, and each lost in his own thoughts. Jim had his arm wrapped lightly around Blair’s waist, offering tacit comfort and support to his guide, at the same time as reaping the benefit from the grounding touch. He knew that Blair’s emotional state was precarious at the moment, so concentrated on sending his most calming ‘vibes’ to his guide while considering his own feelings as objectively as possible.

For the first time, he and Blair had elected to stay in the house overnight, and it had to be said that Jim quite enjoyed the experience. The faded gentility of the neighbourhood and the buffer provided by the large garden ensured that the night passed quietly, insulated from unnecessary traffic noises and undisturbed by raucous neighbours. And ensconced once again in his own familiar room, safe in the knowledge that Jim slept close by, Blair had also had a better night than expected; although Jim admitted somewhat ruefully to himself that he had missed having a warm bundle of guide seeking the sanctuary of his arms from the demons in the dark.

This morning, however, Blair had to face the prospect of seeing Eli’s bequest being prepared for shipment to Rainier, although it was going to take some time to complete in the manner suggested by Dean Wilson, and willingly agreed to by Blair himself. It was undoubtedly the concept of a room stripped of its familiar aspect of book-laden shelves and over-stuffed display cabinets that disturbed his guide, although never in a resentful or mean-spirited way. It was simply that the library would lose much of its cosiness and purpose until Jim and Blair gradually remedied the situation – something that both of them were determined to do over the coming years.

In the meantime, Blair was more than thrilled with the actual number of books Eli had left him. Having studied the list provided by Guildford, Blair realised that virtually all Eli’s favourite tomes, plus those he thought of particular interest to Blair, had been ear-marked for his almost-son. In fact it encompassed all those Eli had kept in his own bedroom for easy access, and nearly all those in his office at Rainier. A couple of hundred books that Blair was delighted to own, and, in the light of the munificence of Eli’s bequest to Rainier, Dean Wilson was hardly disposed to be churlish about those left in Blair’s keeping.

Moving his hand up to squeeze Blair’s shoulder, Jim broke their shared introspection, asking gently, “You OK with this, Chief? I know it’s going to be hard for you to see all these

catalogued and crated. Are you intending to get involved, or just watch from a distance, so to speak?"

Turning to smile a little sadly up at Jim, Blair thought for a moment before saying, "You know, I actually think I'll be alright – eventually, at least. I think it was a good idea of Dean Wilson's to suggest sending a grad student over here to catalogue everything before shipping it over to Rainier in smaller amounts. It'll save them an awful lot of trouble at the U, not getting the whole lot in one go. And it gives me time to get used to the idea of seeing Eli's treasures go to a good home where they'll be appreciated. And perhaps I'll be allowed to help? I think I'd like that, if the student agrees," and he looked around him again, his expression wistful.

"Well, I for one think he or she'll jump at the chance, Chief. After all, you know far more than they do about where everything is, so you could save them even more time and trouble. When is this student due to arrive anyhow?"

"I think a bit later this morning, according to Dean Wilson. He asked if I could show him – or her – around, and once we're all happy with the arrangements, they'll come more or less on a daily basis until the job's done. Is that OK with you?" he finished a little timidly, seeking reassurance that Jim didn't consider it too much of an imposition.

"It's no problem, kiddo. After all, it's your house now, and you have every right to oversee the disposition of Eli's bequest. I'll stick around and help out in whatever way I can, OK?" And Blair's response was to smile and hug him, humming in pleasure as Jim hugged him back.

Less than an hour later, a knock on the door announced the arrival of Dean Wilson's student, and Blair hurried to open it, his smile of welcome shy but warm. The young man standing on the front step was grinning hugely as he held out his hand for Blair to shake. "Hi, Mr Sandburg? My name's Sam. Sam Okundu, at your service! Dean Wilson sent me to catalogue Dr Stoddard's collection. That OK with you? I mean, the doc was a great guy, and I guess you must miss him a lot, huh?" Then, taking in Blair's bemused expression, he laughed merrily. "Oh, man, sorry! I get carried away. Don't know when to shut up. You sure you're OK?"

Shaking himself out of his momentary funk, Blair nodded wordlessly as he quickly studied the student. Sam was about his own height, a few years older, and plainly a bundle of energy as he bounced on his toes, unworried at Blair's tongue-tied inspection. His attractive, dark-skinned face was lit by sparkling brown eyes behind wire-framed spectacles, and a wide smile displaying even white teeth. Tight black curls were clipped close to his skull, and his slim but sturdy frame was dressed in faded jeans, clean but scruffy sneakers and a shabby brown overcoat, under which Blair caught a glimpse of a brightly coloured shirt.

Briefly dropping his barriers, he 'read' the young man, finding nothing but friendliness and curiosity.

Belatedly realising he was still staring rudely, and must appear at the very least like some sort of idiot, Blair quickly shook the offered hand, stammering, "Uh, sorry. Uh, yeah, I'm Blair Sandburg. Pleased to meet you, Mr Okundu. Um, please come in." He stood aside to let the still smiling young man in, and continued self-consciously, "I'm sorry. I'm not used to meeting people yet. I really am OK with you being here, honestly. I mean, it's good that Eli's collection can be sorted and packed properly..." then he ducked his head. "I'm sorry, I'm babbling aren't I?" and he looked around, desperately seeking support from Jim who was still in the library but who would undoubtedly have listened in and heard his pathetic excuse at introducing himself.

However, even as Jim approached, Sam himself defused the situation. Gently touching Blair's arm to attract his attention, he said, "Hey, Mr Sandburg, it's OK. Don't worry about me, man. I understand how hard it is for you. I mean, I just appreciate the opportunity to work here, and I'll try to keep out of your way as much as I can, OK?" and Blair met his kind gaze and relaxed slightly. As Jim reached his side and casually wrapped an arm around his waist, Blair's smile became warm and genuine as his eyes lost their wide and somewhat panicked stare. Looking from Sam to Jim and back, he swallowed and tried again, more confidently this time.

"Jim, this is Sam Okundu. Mr Okundu, this is Detective Jim Ellison. My Sentinel," and he blushed endearingly in shy pride at the statement. As the two men shook hands, Jim offered his own welcome now that he was sure Blair was really OK.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr Okundu. And please call me Jim."

"And I'm Sam," came the cheerful response. "Very happy to be here! Can I see the collection, please?" he added, his excitement and enthusiasm charming rather than insolent.

"Please, come this way," replied Blair, much calmer now. "And please call me Blair. If I can help you at all, I'd be very happy to do so," he offered diffidently as he and Jim watched Sam's reaction as he entered the library and got his first look at the collection.

"Wow! Oh, man! This is so cool! I mean, Dean Wilson told me what to expect, but this is so much better! I'm one lucky guy to work with all this." He turned slowly in a three-sixty degree circle, eyes full of genuine appreciation as he took in the room. However, by the time he was facing Blair again, his expression was one of compassion and understanding.

"This is amazing, Blair, and I'm humbled to have been asked to work here. And seeing it *in situ*, so to speak, I really can appreciate your willingness to work with Rainier. And yes, I'll be more than grateful for any help you can give me, as long as it's not too hard on you."

And watching the two young men interact, Jim instinctively knew that everything was going to be alright, and that there was a real friendship in the making. And he was more than happy for his guide's sake. The young man had had little in the way of interaction with like-minded people from his own age group, and as a learning experience and potential friend, Sam couldn't have been a better choice.

Since it was around mid-morning that Thursday when Sam arrived, he and Blair spent the next couple of hours with Blair showing Sam the lie of the land, so to speak. As he didn't want to intrude on the two young men's business, Jim made himself scarce and took himself off to the kitchen to prepare the makings for a simple lunch of soup and salad. Although he didn't want to invade Blair's privacy, he couldn't quite prevent himself from listening in, telling himself that he needed to be aware should his guide get upset again. But that hardly seemed likely, since Sam's easy-going nature and uninhibited chatter had soon put Blair at ease, and Jim was secretly thrilled to hear his guide's occasional giggle and happy response. After a while, Jim began to think that, given a normal and more free-spirited lifestyle rather than the forced repression and seclusion to which Blair had been compelled to adhere, he would have been far more like Sam. The flashes of glee and witty rejoinders suggested a naturally outgoing and inquisitive personality, and Jim could only hope that he would be able to help Blair develop into the person he should be.

He was also interested to learn that Blair was a fast and accurate typist, and computer literate. When Blair quietly offered his services to Sam, he had admitted that he had done a lot of research for Eli, and had taken on a lot of the older man's secretarial duties, especially as Eli grew weaker and less able to manage on his own. Of course, he had never been able to do anything on his own account, but had used Eli's passwords and email to accomplish whatever was needed. Jim couldn't help but think that he could be on to a good thing, as long as Blair was willing, since he hated computers and his laborious two-finger typing meant that his reports were grudgingly produced and succinct to say the least.

Seeing it was approaching 1300 hours – Jim still couldn't get out of the military mindset when it came to telling the time – he entered the library and invited both Blair and Sam to come and join him for lunch.

Both young men agreed with alacrity, and it was a happy and relaxed threesome who enjoyed the simple but tasty repast.

The conversation during lunch flowed freely, with all three of them at ease with each other. Although Blair was reticent as usual regarding his upbringing, Sam had no problem entertaining Jim and Blair with tales about his early life in Nigeria before emigrating to America to escape from a military uprising, and obtaining a much-desired opportunity to study anthropology at Rainier. He openly admitted that he had relied on part-time jobs and loans to see him through his undergrad degree, cheerfully if wistfully bemoaning the fact

that, without some other form of support, his dreams of pursuing a Master's and doctorate would be very unlikely. And at that point, although he kept silent other than offering his sympathy, Jim couldn't help but think that Sam was ear-marked to be the first recipient of Eli's new scholarship....

After lunch, the two younger men returned to the library while Jim occupied himself with touring the house, making a list of routine maintenance jobs to keep him busy over the next few days. Still listening in, even though he was impressed with Sam and trusted him not to upset Blair deliberately, he realised that the two had progressed to looking at Eli's collection of artefacts. Blair shyly produced a large, leather-bound ledger in which Eli had painstakingly logged in every piece obtained during his long career, explaining that in recent years he had copied everything into an electronic database, which he was happy to share with Sam. Although he didn't really want to let go of the ledger as it had meant so much to Eli and to him also, Blair knew it ought to accompany the collection to Rainier.

"Hey, man, this is great. You've done a fantastic job with the database, saved me no end of work. And I truly appreciate the ledger, Blair. I do understand, believe me, how much it must cost you to hand it over, but I can assure you it'll be well looked after at the U. Dr Stoddard was highly thought of, and is already greatly missed. He was the best lecturer and tutor I ever had, and it's because of him that I decided that, if I can ever afford to continue, I'd like to pursue my Master's and doctorate in Sentinel Studies. Or, more importantly, Guide Studies. There's still far too little work done on guides. Dr Stoddard was very forthright on the topic. But then, you'd know that!" he added with a chuckle. When Blair smiled softly in response, Sam regarded him speculatively for a moment, plainly weighing up the suitability of his next proposal, as he certainly didn't want to distress his new young friend.

"There's something I'd like to ask you, if you don't mind, Blair," he began. "If it upsets you at all, just tell me to shut up, and I'll say no more about it, but I do have something I'd like to run by you." Blair regarded him inquisitively, with just a touch of apprehension, but he nodded anyway, indicating that Sam continue.

"OK, well, it's like this. As I said, if I can do it, and get my topic accepted, would you allow me to study you? I mean," he added quickly, when it looked as if Blair was about to refuse, "You are undoubtedly a strong guide. I can tell that by the way you interact with Jim. He's an Alpha, isn't he? So you have to be a top-ranked empath as well as personally compatible. If you would allow me to subject you to a range of tests – nothing awful, I promise - it would be an honour to write about you, but I assure you it would be anonymous. And I wouldn't submit anything until you'd read it and approved it.

"Look, you don't have to answer now. Hell, I might never get the chance to do any post-grad stuff anyhow. Just think about it, huh? Just in case...."

And although shaken by the concept, especially his unworthiness as a research subject, Blair hadn't the heart to turn him down flat.

Upstairs in the bedroom he'd been occupying, Jim frowned at what he'd heard. Blair had already undergone 'testing' as a child, and undoubtedly wouldn't have particularly fond memories of the process. But then again, he hadn't either freaked out or refused Sam point blank, so perhaps he would consider it eventually. And it might just boost his confidence in his own ability in the long run. But it wasn't a decision to be made lightly, and they had time enough to think about it.

It was late evening by the time Sam finally dragged himself away from the library, grinning apologetically as he took his leave. He had turned down Jim's offer of joining them for dinner as he told them his Mom was expecting him. Not being able to afford student accommodation, he was still living at home with his widowed mother, and it was plain that they enjoyed a good relationship.

"See you tomorrow morning, Blair. Is 8.00 am too early?" and when both Blair and Jim confirmed it was fine, he waved cheerfully and ran over to his beat-up old Corvair. As he drove off, badly-tuned engine complaining somewhat, Jim looked down at his guide, who was tucked under his arm. "You know, I guess you'll be needing to learn to drive, huh, Chief? Eli's car is still in the garage, and you won't want to rely on me giving you lifts every time you need to go out." And he was completely taken by surprise when Blair blushed and looked down at his feet.

"Um, actually, I can drive, Jim. I don't have a licence, of course, and I've never driven on public roads, honest," he added hurriedly, needing to reassure his sentinel that Eli hadn't been breaking the law, in that respect at least.

"It's just that, when he could arrange it, he'd take me for some sort of holiday, usually a self-catering cabin in a quiet resort in the middle of nowhere, well away from prying eyes. And he taught me to drive on the private tracks around the grounds. I know I'll need to practice driving in traffic, but I don't think it'll take me too long to pass my test. I've already learned the theory and memorised the State Traffic laws...."

He peeked up at Jim to gauge the older man's reaction, and was relieved when Jim just chuckled fondly, saying, "You're just full of surprises, kiddo! So, how about we go out for dinner? Fancy Olivetti's? I have a sudden urge to indulge in some good pasta."

Grinning happily, Blair nodded, already looking forward to the prospect, and as they prepared to set out, neither of them had any idea that prying eyes were actually following their every move.

Two of Leon DuRoy's most successful 'handymen' sat in their non-descript panel van, listening in to every word. They had been ordered to tail the pair since the day after DuRoy had seen the boy at Stoddard's funeral, and had been provided with the best surveillance equipment money could buy to do the job. They were also practiced in the intricacies involved in following a sentinel, thanks to learning the hard way through observing the example provided by Leon DuRoy Junior's recent manifestation, so weren't prepared to risk either their substantial bonus – or possible 'dismissal with extreme prejudice' – by screwing up. Working in tandem, and using different vehicles where necessary, they had tailed Jim and Blair undetected from the loft to Stoddard's house, to the PD, and occasional locations in between, establishing a routine as best they could and determining the best place from which to abduct the guide. When the state-of-the-art directional mic informed them that the pair was spending the next few days at Stoddard's house overseeing the transfer of Rainier's bequest, they relayed the information to DuRoy, who received it with malicious satisfaction.

"Perfect! We should have until Sunday to effect the capture. Stay in the area, and keep me informed of everything. Who goes in, who goes out, etc., etc. This shouldn't be hard to set up. They've actually made it surprisingly easy for me..." and he had laughed unpleasantly before cutting the connection.

So his men had found a secure place in which to park up – the well-hidden driveway of a neighbouring property whose occupants were on an extended vacation – looking, to anyone who might be interested – as if they were there to do routine maintenance in the owners' absence.

Sure, such stakeouts could be duller than ditchwater, but, in this instance, the lure of a lucrative reward, and the opportunity to play with DuRoy's uber-expensive technology, made up for it. And it never hurt to raise their standing in their powerful employer's eyes. There was a modicum of security to be had in making oneself indispensable.

Sunday morning, Blair's house

At 8.00am sharp, Sam knocked on the front door, to be greeted by a smiling Blair. This time he was accompanied by two undergrads, who had volunteered to help begin the packing of the collection in readiness for transportation to its new home in Rainier's Hargrove Hall. The fact that the task of cataloguing the collection had progressed so quickly to reach this stage was undoubtedly due to the long hours put in over the past two and a half days by Blair and Sam, and the work already put in place by Eli and Blair. Thanks to the existence of Eli's ledger, Blair's updated database and also his personal familiarity with the contents of the library, Sam had been able to accomplish his assignment in double-quick time; an achievement greatly appreciated by Dean Wilson and the Anthropology Department as a whole.

While Blair and Sam had worked side by side in the library, Jim had kept himself occupied by completing the DIY tasks he had set himself to do, preparing snacks to force on the two younger men, since neither of them were inclined to surface voluntarily from their labours for anything as mundane as eating, and making himself available for any other occasion where he could be of assistance. He surprised himself with his own relaxed affability, although he realised that it had a lot to do with Blair and how his guide was holding up under his self-imposed undertaking.

Although there was a certain poignancy involved in the task, Blair was also being given the opportunity to interact with a personable young man, who was more than willing to accept Blair's shyly-offered help and return his friendship. The fact that he felt needed and appreciated outside of his guiding duties did a world of good for Blair's self-confidence, and Jim's open support bolstered that even further.

And once Sam finally departed each evening, despite his tiredness Blair would give his whole attention to his sentinel, needing to show how much he loved and appreciated the older man; a gift Jim was only too happy to receive.

After dinner they would retire to the library, which, although now in a state of some disarray, had managed somehow to retain its feel of cosy intimacy, especially cuddled together on the largest and softest of the leather sofas.

And that was a habit that had become an unexpected pleasure for them both, as Jim had felt drawn to mention the previous evening.

Looking down at the curly head nestled against his shoulder, he smiled gently at his drowsy guide, who appeared more relaxed and contented than Jim would ever have expected to witness going by his first impression only weeks previously.

"Comfy, Chief?" he asked softly, stroking a gentle hand over the silky curls. Receiving a tiny nod and a lethargic "Uh huh," in response, he snickered, "I'll take that as a 'yes', then." Rousing slightly from his unorthodox pillow, Blair squinted up at him, eyes still sleepy but with a hint of curiosity and something else in the blue depths.

"Are you comfy, Jim? I'm not getting too heavy, am I?"

Replying quickly before Blair could get worried again, Jim grinned and continued, "No, not at all, Chief. I was just thinking how nice this is. Can't say I was ever encouraged to cuddle before, so I've never had any inclination to do it. But with you it just seems right. Neither know nor care whether it's a sentinel / guide thing or a Jim / Blair thing, or a bit of both. I just know I'm getting thoroughly addicted to it!"

Smiling at Jim's reassuring words, Blair relaxed again, then responded softly, "This is actually fairly new to me too. I mean, I had a good upbringing, truly, and Martha and Aaron

were more than kind to me. But they were from a generation who didn't go in for unnecessary hugging and such. Understated rather than demonstrative, if you know what I mean. They'd give me a hug to comfort me if I fell over and hurt myself, and they were never too busy to give me a kiss goodnight, but they didn't really cuddle for the sake of it. And to begin with Eli was a little uncomfortable with too much contact, although I knew he was fond of me. That did change towards the end, though," he added, sadness now clouding his expression. "We got so much closer when he was getting weaker, and he said he wished he'd cuddled me more when he first rescued me, but he hadn't been sure I'd've appreciated it. As a confirmed bachelor, he hadn't had much previous experience with little kids and young teens, after all!" and he chuckled fondly, eyes a little watery. "I think he found older teens and students much easier to deal with!

"But I do like this, Jim," he admitted, face now suffused with shy pleasure as he rubbed his cheek gently against Jim's shirt. "I feel so safe. So loved," and he tucked his head into Jim's shoulder again.

"Glad to hear it, babe," Jim murmured. "Now, I think it's time for us to get some real sleep. Big day tomorrow, and if all goes well, I think we'll see the job pretty much done." And Blair nodded his agreement as he allowed Jim to pull him gently to his feet before making their way up to separate beds.

As Sam and his student helpers entered, returning Blair's friendly greetings good-naturedly, Jim emerged from the library, a broad grin on his face.

"Hey, Sam! Got your willing slaves with you I see," and he snickered at the mock-disgruntled comments from the two undergrads.

"Let me know what you need doing, and I'll be happy to help. I can at least help you with shifting the heavy stuff. Meanwhile, I'm going to the kitchen. Anyone for bacon rolls a bit later?" and at the enthusiastic chorus of 'yes please's' and 'you betcha, Jims', he waved cheerily and headed off to retrieve the bacon from the freezer.

With everyone working non-stop – except for a brief pause to enjoy the promised bacon rolls and even briefer ones for the other snacks and drinks Jim produced to be more or less consumed on the run – by mid-afternoon the packing was finished and boxes labelled, ready to be transported to Rainier. The tired but contented group sat together in the library, enjoying a last cold drink and a few minutes' relaxation before the three students headed for home.

Gazing around him in unfeigned satisfaction and honest pleasure in a job well done, Sam smiled and addressed Blair and Jim. "I can't thank you enough, Blair. And you too, Jim, for all the help you've given us. This should have been at least a weeks' work, if not more, if I'd have had to do it all myself. I know it'll have been tough for you, Blair, but I've got to say

that you've been great. And I really hope to see you at Rainier in the Fall. You're destined to be a brilliant anthropologist, I'm sure of it. And a great guide also. Hell, you're pretty great already, even without the formal training! So, just wanted to thank you again, and I'll be on my way. I'll let Dean Wilson know we're done with the packing, and I'm sure he'll arrange for a pick-up as soon as possible, so you can get back to normal."

As all three students stood up to leave, he shook Jim's hand, and pulled Blair in for a quick but warm hug. "See you soon, my man!" he said, and once the other two had said their own goodbyes, they piled into the ancient Corvair, and drove away, waving cheerfully at Jim and Blair, who stood, arms wrapped around each other's waists, watching them go.

"You OK, Junior?" Jim enquired, suddenly realising that yet again he hadn't called his guide by his given name. Although Blair never mentioned it, or even seemed to notice, Jim resolved to change his ways. The kid had enough to deal with without being addressed by a string of nicknames, however kindly meant.

As he might have expected, Blair looked up at him, his usual soft smile on his face. "Yeah, I am, Jim. Honestly. I feel – I don't know – sort of energised? I mean, it was hard, in a way, to see Eli's things boxed up, but it's what he wanted, so who am I to bemoan that? He gave me so much, both in care and safety, as well as all this," and he gestured around him to encompass the whole residence. "And he gave me the chance to meet you. I'm one lucky guide. I have you. The best thing that ever happened to me."

"Me too, Blair," replied Jim with feeling. Then he tensed a little, causing Blair to look up at him, a small frown creasing his brow.

"You OK, Jim?" he asked softly, automatically rubbing Jim's upper arm to ground him.

After a few moments, Jim looked down at him, a perplexed expression marring his patrician features.

"Not sure, Blair. I just get this feeling that I – we're - being watched. It's nothing I can pin down. More an instinct, I guess. But I've felt it before. I didn't want to mention it, because it's really nothing concrete, and I didn't want to worry you. But I did mention it to Joel when he called yesterday. He sends his regards, by the way," he added, wanting to alleviate Blair's instinctive concern.

"I wouldn't be surprised if he didn't call in later on his way home from work. I hope you don't mind. He's going to love this place, and he's really taken with you, Chief – Blair."

"No, I don't mind at all, Jim. I like Joel, and it would be nice to see him. But are you OK? Can I do anything to help? You know, ground you while you use your senses?"

"You're doing a pretty good job of that already, babe. But as I said, if there is someone out there, they know how to keep under a sentinel radar! And it's nothing specific anyway. But

as a matter of interest, how well do you know your neighbours, Blair? It's a quiet area, but is it quieter than usual?"

"Um, I'm sorry, Jim, but I don't really know. It looks about the same to me, but I only ever observed the area from the upstairs windows. Eli didn't really socialise much with anyone local, mostly because of me, I guess, but when I apologised for spoiling things for him, he said it suited him as he wasn't a 'neighbourly' type. He preferred the company of his chosen friends, and most of them were from Rainier or other academic circles. I mean, he knew his neighbours by name, and was always polite to them if he met them, but he never went out of his way to develop friendships. And I never went out unless it was hidden in Eli's car. I don't think they ever knew about me. Probably most of them still don't."

Distracted by the underlying if subconscious sadness in Blair's voice, Jim squeezed his guide comfortingly for a moment. "Well, I'm sure you'll soon remedy that, babe. I know you've got a lot of lost time to make up, but I'm guessing that between us we might well shake up this neighbourhood just like we will the PD! Now, shall we kick back for a few and see if there's a Jags match on the TV? I think we both deserve a bit of down-time." And Blair smiled happily as he allowed his sentinel to steer him back inside.

Sunday evening, a short distance from Blair's house

A mere block away from where Blair and Jim relaxed in front of the TV, DuRoy's paid hitmen sat in silence in the cab of their latest vehicle. They now occupied a large van, complete with decals advertising a well-known delivery firm, and were attired in the company's authentic overalls. This vehicle was deliberately devoid of the sophisticated surveillance equipment they had used in their previous van, but they had kept as careful a watch as possible since the changeover. Although they had worked together previously, and were familiar with each other's capability, they were hardly on friendly terms despite long hours cooped up together on stakeout. In their chosen profession, all they needed to know was how far they could trust the other for backup, after which point it was every man for himself. Neither needed to be handicapped with worrying about the other except insofar as it could impinge on his own safety. The tension in the cab was palpable as they psyched themselves up for the upcoming snatch, and eventually one turned to the other.

The driver of the vehicle, a large, well-muscled but otherwise ordinary-looking man in his late twenties, eyed his companion, a grim half-smile on his face as he said, "You good to go, then, Brad? No one's driven past since the kids left, so I reckon they're alone now, and settled in for the night."

His equally unremarkable-looking companion returned the grin, eyes narrowed and expression greedy as he replied, "I'm good. Don't think it's going to get any better than this, and we've got our bases covered anyway if Ellison's suspicious. Let's get this done, and get out of here. And if the kid's as good as the boss thinks he is, I'm betting on him being

suitably appreciative!" The driver nodded once noncommittally, and started up, driving unhurriedly towards their destination.

Lounging comfortably in the library, having just watched the Jags win by the skin of their teeth, Jim and Blair desultorily discussed what would be the easiest option for dinner. Neither had the energy to cook a gourmet repast, or even go out to eat, so they had more or less decided on frozen pizza, knowing that Eli had always kept a good stock in the freezer. Suddenly, Jim sat up straighter in his seat; head cocked in a listening pose.

"Think we've got visitors, Blair," he muttered, a frown creasing his brow. "Whoever it is, they're driving something sizable, so it's not Joel. Stay here while I go see who it is, OK?" and Blair nodded in reluctant assent, even though his curiosity and his guide instinct demanded he accompany Jim to the door.

Crossing the hall, Jim paused to retrieve his service weapon which he had stashed in a drawer in the ornate hallstand, stuffing it in the belt at his back. Opening his senses as far as he dared, he approached the door to peer through the peephole. He noted the delivery van parked up in the driveway, and studied the two men who stood on the porch, both apparently unassuming and untroubled and dressed in standard overalls. One of them made a show of nonchalantly studying the clipboard clutched in his hand while his companion reached for the intercom. Answering the buzz, Jim demanded, "Who are you, and what do you want at this time of night?"

Despite their relaxed attitude, sentinel senses registered slightly raised heart rates in both men, and their scents were tinged with something akin to excitement or arousal, enough to put Jim on alert.

"Uh, Mr Sandburg?" responded the man who had rung the bell. "We're here on behalf of Rainier University? We were told to pick up some boxes. Sorry it's late, and all, but we were held up on our last job. We'll get it done as soon as possible, sir. Be out of your hair in no time!"

Unimpressed by the man's polite apology, Jim reached automatically for the weapon at his back, ready to react even as he cracked open the door. However, just as he released the deadbolts, the man holding the clipboard raised his free hand to his face, and blew long and hard on the dog whistle concealed in his palm. With his senses wide open, Jim was struck down by the piercing shriek, his hearing spiking uncontrollably so that he fell back, momentarily unable to react when the first man barrelled into the hallway, snapping the safety chain as if it was thread. A sickening blow to the head finished the job, and Jim fell helpless to the floor.

"Go! Get the kid!" the first man hissed, drawing a concealed pistol to hold on the downed detective. His partner was already on his way across the hall, pulling his own concealed

weapon as he went. Pausing in front of the library door for a moment, he took a deep breath and pushed it open, never expecting the sort of reception he was about to get.

When Jim had gone to answer the door, although Blair had no intention of disobeying his orders to stay in the library, he instinctively knew something was wrong and was determined to back up his sentinel in any way he could. Even as Jim had had his own suspicions, the empath in Blair could tell that the two visitors weren't all that they claimed to be, so he quietly reached for Jim's cellphone which he'd left on the coffee table. As the front door crashed open, he was dialling 911, and after uttering a terse 'Officer needs assistance', he dropped the still open instrument back on the table, hoping that the police and rescue services would be able to trace their location through the signal.

He knew he would be of little use in a physical confrontation with their attackers, so he moved quickly to the back of the room, intending to climb out of the large window behind Eli's desk so he could run for help. However, the second man was already at the library door, so he turned at bay, and grabbed the round glass paperweight sitting on the desk, hefting it experimentally in his hand as he faced the door, eyes wide with fear, but also dogged resolve. As Brad slid through the half-open door, eyes flicking rapidly around the room until he located his prey, Blair raised his arm, and let fly with the paperweight. The heavy object struck Brad right between the eyes, and he dropped without a sound. Sending a quick prayer of thanks to Eli, wherever he might be, for those hours of pitching practice he had encouraged Blair to do at every opportunity while they were on holiday, Blair cautiously approached the senseless would-be kidnapper, stepping over the still form to peep around the edge of the door.



He stared in horror at the tableau in the hallway. Jim was down, blood running down his face from a scalp wound above his left temple. A large man held a gun on him, and was looking from the detective to the library doorway, an expression of fury and disgust on his face.

“Brad! What the fuck are you playing at? Get that brat and get out here!” Then, seeing Blair duck back into the library, he moved slightly so he could cover Jim and get a better view through the open door. And saw his partner-in-crime flat on his face just inside the room.

“Shit!” he muttered to himself. “How the fuck could that moron let a kid get the drop on him?” Then louder, he shouted, “Get out here, you little bastard! If you don’t want your precious sentinel to get a bullet in his brain, come on out!”

Chewing his lip in terror and consternation, Blair prepared to do as he was told, having no intention of letting the man carry out his threat. Raising his hands, he sidled round the doorway. “Please, don’t hurt him. I’ll go with you, but please don’t shoot!” He hated the quaver in his voice, but that fleeting emotion was lost in his over-riding concern for Jim, and his need to get to his sentinel’s side.

However, at that moment several things happened at once. The sound of approaching sirens heralded units responding to Blair’s call, and as Jim began to rouse slightly, another voice cut through the scene as Joel called from where he was positioned behind the cab of the delivery van, gun at the ready as he stared intently at the house. Despite the gathering dusk, he could see enough of the activity in the hallway to know that he had to act fast.

“Drop your weapon! There’s no way out. You’re surrounded, and there’re more units on the way. Throw out your gun, and come out with your hands up!” Although his claim wasn’t entirely true right then, it soon would be, and DuRoy’s man knew it. But he wasn’t about to go down without a fight, so even as the other units pulled up in and around the house and grounds, he beckoned to Blair with his pistol.

“Come here, brat. You’re coming with me. And if the cops don’t want a dead hostage, they’ll let us out of here. Here! Now, or he gets it!” and he turned the gun back towards Jim. Hurrying across the hallway to the gunman’s side, Blair prepared to be grabbed and held by the thug, when with a roar of pure primal fury Jim erupted from his position on the floor, and tackled the man. It was over in seconds. However skilled the thug might have been, he was no match for a covert-ops trained sentinel in full Blessed Protector mode, and it was only Blair’s panicked insistence that stopped Jim from completing his intentions and snapping the other man’s worthless neck.

“Please, Jim! Please, no! Don’t kill him, man. I need you. Please don’t get arrested for killing him!” And Jim listened. Throwing the virtually unconscious man to the floor at his feet, he grabbed Blair and pulled him into a full-body hug, needing to reassure himself that his guide was unhurt. The pair was still reconnecting with each other when Joel and the other

uniforms pushed in to cuff the two perps, neither of whom was in any condition to offer any resistance.

A short while later, Jim, Joel and Bair sat in the kitchen, while an EMT did his best to treat Jim's scalp wound and take his vitals. Blair was tucked tightly into Jim's side as he rode out the worst of the shakes due to shock and reaction, although he was trying his best to hold it together.

Trying not to be too rude to the hapless medic, Jim concentrated his senses on his guide, needing to reassure himself that the youngster really was OK, and at least physically none the worse for his ordeal.

"Hey, babe, how're you doing?" he murmured, voice full of love and concern. "I'm so proud of you, Blair. You did everything right, and who knew you had such a good aim? We'll have you on the MCU softball team for sure." Although Blair didn't raise his face from where it was pressed against Jim's neck, Jim felt the tiny smile as Blair heard his words and tried to respond as best he could. Relaxing incrementally under the soothing pressure of Jim's large hand rubbing gentle circles on his tense back, he gradually eased himself backwards enough to seek Jim's reassuring gaze, and peep shyly over at Joel.

"S. S. sorry about that," he muttered softly. "Just hit me all of a sudden, I g. g. guess. Um, I didn't kill that man, did I? I. I mean, I threw that paperweight as hard as I could. I. I didn't think about anything except stopping him. But I didn't want to kill him...."

Before Jim or Joel could respond, the medic spoke up, his patient expression and kind tone designed to offer support and put the young guide at ease.

"Try not to worry too much, Mr Sandburg. The man you hit was still unconscious when we put him in the ambulance, but I can tell you his vital signs were all strong. When you get to the hospital, they'll be able to tell you more, I'm sure. In the meantime, you should both consider going to the ER yourselves. You'll probably need a couple of stitches, Detective, and it would do no harm to have your guide checked out also."

Jim glanced up at the man with grudging respect. He knew the medic had deliberately played the 'cherish the guide' card, and it had worked.

"OK. We'll go," he huffed, shooting the EMT a sardonic half-grin. "But I need to speak to Captain Taggart first. We'll go later once I can grab a cab--"

"No need for that, Jim!" Joel interjected quickly. "I'll be glad to take you both, and we can talk on the way, OK?"

Knowing he'd been well and truly railroaded, and not unduly angered at the realisation, Jim nodded in assent. "Sure, Joel. And thanks. Again. Your arrival couldn't have come at a better time."

"Just pure good luck that I was already on my way to you when that call came in," Joel responded with a smile. "Thanks to Blair's quick actions, the other units were despatched expeditiously. I only beat them here by minutes."

"But they all counted, Joel. We owe you. And *I* owe my guide! Thanks babe," and he pulled the young man in for another warm hug.

"Well, if you're going to be leaving for the ER, I'll be on my way," the young medic said, a smile on his face.

"I'll be travelling back with the other gentleman, but again, I doubt he'll be held overnight. He's still conscious. Just mad as hell...!" He waved cheerfully as he left them alone in the kitchen, to indulge in a few minutes' companionable silence and support before setting off in Joel's sedan for Cascade General.

Following morning, Cascade PD Major Crimes Unit bullpen

It was around mid-morning when Jim and Blair finally arrived in the bullpen, to quite the welcome. After being checked over at the ER, both men were proclaimed good to go, although Jim had a colourful bruise on his temple around the small dressing which covered three stitches. Blair had no physical injuries, but was understandably shocky, so both were released with the advice to take it easy for a few hours, and get some sleep. They had given their statements to Joel while they were there, and he in turn had informed Simon, who arrived post-haste, his urgency belying his customary exacting and reserved attitude towards his people.

Fully apprised of the events of the evening, Simon had handed the case over to Joel and Megan despite Jim's automatic protest.

"You're too close, Jim. I hear you, but there's no way you can interview those men. The threat to your guide has to compromise your objectivity, man. I'm not questioning your professionalism under normal circumstances, but I also know all about your protective instinct as a bonded sentinel. Shit, Jim, you would have killed Murphy if Blair hadn't stopped you! Joel will keep you in the loop, for sure, but you can't take the lead in this."

Jim had had no alternative but to back down, but couldn't help the upsurge of pride he felt on his guide's behalf when Simon praised the young man, treating him with unexpected compassion.

Telling them firmly to take a few extra hours to themselves, he whirled out of the ER as quickly as he had arrived, growling gruffly, "I'll see you tomorrow. When you're ready, and not before!"

So, here they were, having had a reasonable night's sleep, with Blair once more seeking the comfort of Jim's arms in bed. With his sentinel keeping the nightmares at bay, he awoke feeling far better than he would have believed, ready and eager to accompany Jim to the PD once they'd indulged in a leisurely breakfast.

Almost as soon as the door closed behind them, they were met by a small tidal wave of applause, back-slapping and hearty greetings, with H and Rafe in the vanguard. Even those who had looked askance at Blair on his first appearance in MCU were now prepared to give him the benefit of the doubt as to his suitability as Jim's guide after being told of his actions in defence of his sentinel.

Pink-faced and shyly smiling, Blair unashamedly soaked up the positive 'vibes' he could feel emanating from those present, allowing the energy to shore up his chronic insecurity against any tough times ahead. He was further shielded and encouraged by the warm cocoon of love and comfort Jim had wrapped around him, so he was relatively unconcerned this time when Simon's bellow issued from his open office door. "Ellison! Sandburg! Finally! My office, now!"

When they entered the office, they found Joel and Megan already there, having just returned from interviewing the two would-be kidnappers. Both rose to their feet to greet and congratulate the pair, hugging Blair unreservedly. Joel also patted Jim warmly on the shoulder, and even Megan unbent enough towards him to offer him a grin. "Glad to see you're OK too, mate. Sandy's something else, isn't he?"

Although Simon harrumphed impatiently at the impromptu socialising, there was a suspicion of a twinkle in his eyes as he growled, "When you're quite ready, people!"

Once they were all seated, the atmosphere sobered immediately as Simon got down to business and asked Joel to bring Jim and Blair up to speed on how the interviews had progressed so far. Taggart's normally genial expression was grim as he began, his eyes sympathetic when his glance met Blair's.

"First, Blair, I know you'll be relieved to hear that Brad Sullivan has regained consciousness. He has one hell of a bruise on his forehead, and no doubt a headache to match, but that's nothing compared to his embarrassment at being taken down by an empath with a paperweight.

"Anyhow, although his partner-in-crime, Joseph Murphy, is obstinately closed-mouthed at the moment, that could change once he finds out that Sullivan's singing like a canary on the back of an offer from the DA for immunity from prosecution and the chance to enter the Witness Protection Programme.

“From what Sullivan’s divulged so far, not only does the human trafficking operation involve high-profile members of Cascade’s business community, but more worryingly some individuals from the political and law enforcement field also. It won’t be easy to weed out the bad apples, and I know the PD is going to be reeling with bad publicity even the suggestion of deep-seated corruption will stir up, but if we can get to the heart of the intimidation that’s been hamstringing the Task Force, perhaps we’ll finally get to do the job it was set up for.

“So, that’s the story so far, and I’m sure Simon will agree with me when I say that we wouldn’t have discovered even this chink in their armour if it hadn’t been for the two of you.”

Taking up the thread, Simon agreed. “I know it’s been traumatic for you, Blair, on top of everything else you’ve been through in the last couple of weeks, but it’s a fact that, if it hadn’t been for some slaver’s greed in wanting to kidnap you, none of this would have come to light and we’d still be beating our collective heads against the wall trying to get a break. Your quick-thinking undoubtedly saved both you and Jim, and as far as I’m concerned, you’ve proved that you have the makings of a worthwhile partnership.

“But don’t let it go to your head, kid,” he added, consciously reasserting his authority. “I still expect you to get plenty of practical Guide Training, and a thorough grounding in real police work as well as your academic qualifications, so don’t let me down!”

And although Blair still gripped Jim’s hand tightly and glanced up to make sure of his sentinel’s full and fond approval, he met Simon’s searching gaze unwaveringly. His voice steady and determined, he replied, “I won’t, Captain Banks. I promise I’ll do whatever it takes to be the guide Jim needs me to be.”

“And that’s all I need to hear, son. Now, off you go, you two, and get Guide Sandburg’s paperwork started,” and he ushered them out of the office, sure that they were oblivious of the wide smile plastered across his face as he watched their departing backs.

Part 5: Epilogue: The Real Deal

9 Months later, MCU bullpen

Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison frowned at the screen in front of him as he laboriously typed up his latest report form. The pile of correspondence in his ‘in tray’ never seemed to diminish when he was working alone, and he was growing impatient. Suddenly his face took on a warm smile as he cocked his head in a ‘listening’ pose, and turned to face the bullpen doors. Across the office, a grinning Megan nudged her partner, her voice a staged whisper as she commented, “Hey, Joel! Sandy must be on his way! Jimbo’s gone all sappy-looking!” Giving her the finger even though his genial smile remained, Jim watched the

doors, face brightening even further as a small bundle of energy barrelled through and headed directly for his desk.

Blair almost bounced into his sentinel's welcoming arms, his own smile wide and uncontrived and an expression of pure adoration on his face. Completely unfazed when Jim buried his nose in the shiny curls behind his guide's ear, the two spent a few moments reconnecting and grounding each other. The sight was so commonplace now that no one in the bullpen, or pretty much the whole PD even gave them a second glance. Sentinel and guide pairs were no longer figures of myth and mystery, and they were simply accepted – and valued – for the blessing they were.

Eventually loosening their embrace, Blair pushed away slightly and peered around Jim's imposing bulk, his face taking on a cheeky grin as he murmured, "Oh my! Looks like you've got plenty of paperwork to keep you busy, Jim. I'll leave you to it, shall I? Come back later?" and burst into unrestrained giggles when Jim growled in reply, a furious mock-sowl on his face.

"No way, Guide Sandburg! This constitutes 'real police work', Chief, and I distinctly remember you promising Simon you'd get plenty of practice. Besides," he continued, his tone now definitely whining and wheedling, "you type so much quicker than me, babe, so if you help me, we can get to lunch sooner. On me...."

"How could I refuse, oh Sentinel mine," chuckled Blair. "Just as long as it isn't Wonderburger!" and he dropped his backpack down beside Jim's desk and pulled the first file towards him. Grinning widely, Jim returned to his own report, grateful for the reprieve and knowing that he was one lucky SOB to have such a fleet-fingered and talented partner to bail him out.

A short time later, Blair was fairly flying through the pile of forms, an endearing expression of determination and concentration on his attractive face. Jim paused for a few moments to contemplate his guide and treat himself to some undiluted pleasure, greedily soaking up the input as his senses revelled in the proximity of his beloved young partner.

In the past few months, Blair had certainly changed for the better. Although he still had a good deal of underlying insecurity, and undoubtedly always would have, he was gradually emerging from his shell, and his inherent happiness and optimism shone through a little more each day. It gladdened Jim's heart each time Blair's spontaneous smile lit his face, on occasion bright enough to dazzle everyone in the empath's vicinity such that a whole group or roomful of people might suddenly find themselves several degrees happier and more light-hearted than before.

Jim didn't delude himself that he had had nothing to do with Blair's rapid development. He was well aware that he had been unstinting in his support and had encouraged the young

empath to flourish and grow into both his natural talent and his confidence. But it also had a lot to do with the fact that Blair was happy and fulfilled on several fronts.

He was now well into his second term at Rainier, having aced the entrance exam as expected. Jim hadn't been the least bit surprised to find that his guide was far brighter than most of his peers, and his intelligence and enthusiasm ensured that he was coping more than adequately with everything he set his mind to. Sure, it hadn't been all sweetness and light for Blair. There was plenty of jealousy, not only because of his academic accomplishments, but also because he was a recognised bonded guide. However, in the main his gentle nature and willingness to help generally defused most situations, and it certainly didn't hurt that he had the friendship and support of a well-respected post-grad student. Because yes, Sam Okundu did turn out to be the first recipient of the Eli Stoddard Anthropology Scholarship, and Blair was so thrilled for him that he had agreed to be Sam's study subject after all. And far from being uncomfortable and distracting, Blair found the tests Sam devised for him to be helpful and imaginative, such that Blair's self-confidence increased every time he succeeded. And of course, Jim also benefitted as his guide used his new skills to improve their performance and teamwork.

Watching approvingly as Blair tossed another completed file onto the growing pile in the 'out tray', Jim pondered on how his own job satisfaction and results now bettered anything that he would ever have considered possible even a year ago. Blair had been as good as his word, and had studied police procedures and essential clerical and research duties avidly. Quick and thorough, he had taken charge of that side of their teamwork, often using his brilliant and unconventional thought processes to think 'outside the box' during investigations, and more than a few times had provided the final clue to solving a case. Although still not allowed to accompany Jim in the field on a regular basis, the fact that he spent at least part of the day in the MCU meant that Jim was able to continue to use his senses to a certain degree, knowing that his guide would be there to ground him when he returned to the office. On the occasions when Blair was required to accompany him to a crime scene, Jim's results were remarkable, as he could let his senses roam at will, secure in the grounding presence of his guide.

Of course, things weren't all plain sailing in the PD either, despite Jim and Blair's successes. The investigation into the human trafficking problem was ongoing due to the power and influence of many of the people involved. At a local level, both Mayor Anderson and Commissioner O'Malley had been indicted, with predictably sensational results. The tabloid press had had a field day with the feeding frenzy the scandal provoked, and the PD and local government's reputations did not go untarnished. However, the newly-elected Mayor was a woman of unquestionable integrity, who had no problem with getting to the root of the corruption existing in and around her office, and the new Police Commissioner was a man after Chief Warren's own heart. Between them they had shaken up the department, and a surprisingly large number of 'bad apples' had fallen from the tree. Since the FBI was also

forced to put its house in order, SAC Greenwood suddenly disappeared from the Cascade Field Office, and there was a noticeable resurgence in informants once more willing to work with the Task Force.

Unfortunately, there was one key player who had managed to escape the net thus far, as Leon DuRoy had wasted no time in removing himself and his family from Cascade. As soon as his plot to kidnap Blair had failed, he boarded his private Lear Jet at his private airstrip and left for parts unknown, although it was believed that he would probably be holed up comfortably enough in some accommodating South American country. And if he never re-emerged from his bolt-hole, Jim would be a very happy sentinel, although he wasn't naive enough to rely on that possibility.

Needless to say, Dmitri Roscov had decided against choosing Cascade as the destination for his latest delivery, and unfortunately the Task Force was no nearer pinning down the source of the international operation, but at least they had some satisfaction in shutting down their particular outlet for black market guides and slaves, so hopefully Cascade would remain off the smugglers' list of preferred locations for some time to come.

A sudden mental 'tug' broke his concentration and pulled him out of his introspection to see Blair gazing at him, head tilted slightly to one side and a wry half-smile on his face. "Um, I've finished, Sentinel Detective Ellison, sir," he murmured in a sing-song tone, eyebrows wiggling comically as he continued. "I thought you were going to take me to lunch?" and he sent Jim one of his best pleading puppy-dog looks.

"Cheeky young scallywag!" Jim responded in a truly awful attempt at an upper-class British accent, which sent Blair off into peals of laughter. Reaching out, Jim ruffled Blair's curls, and pulled him in for a one-armed hug.

"Come on then, Junior. Let's get out of here before Simon finds us something else to do. Thai sound OK to you?" and at Blair's eager nod, they collected their jackets and left the bullpen, laughing and joshing as was their habit.

When the pair reached the parking garage level, Jim saw that Blair had parked Eli's – now his – Prius next to Jim's elderly jeep. "We'll take mine, shall we?" he said, knowing that his legs wouldn't appreciate being squashed into the smaller car.

Blair grinned knowingly at him, saying "I know, I know! You just don't trust my driving," to which Jim replied, "Sure I do, Chief. It's just that your car was designed with midgets in mind!"

"Yeah, yeah," muttered Blair disbelievingly, although the quirky grin he shot Jim belied his words. Truth be told, Blair had turned out to be a very good driver, and had managed to pass his test during the Christmas break, although it still amazed Jim how he managed to

squeeze driving practice in amongst his course work, his duties at the PD and his Guide Training programme.

Without further demur, Blair climbed into the Jeep's passenger seat and buckled up. Then he looked over at Jim, an expression of love and a touch of wistful longing on his face. "It's a pity we can't go to the loft. We could have had lunch there."

"Yeah, I know, kiddo. But it wasn't really practical to keep up two places whatever we told Simon. And Megs needed to find a new apartment to rent, so it was the best solution all round. And we're more than comfy at your - *our* - place, after all!"

"Yeah, that's true. I thought it would never feel the same after Eli died, but it feels like home for me now. As long as you're there to share it with me," and Blair reached over to squeeze Jim's knee, eyes now slightly misty with emotion.

Covering the smaller hand with his own, Jim smiled gently over at his beautiful partner, untroubled at admitting to his own feelings.

"And I'll always be there for you – and with you – love. Sentinel and Guide for life, OK? Now, let's get to The Golden Palace. I feel crab cakes and Pad Thai noodles calling to me...!"

That evening, Blair and Jim's home

Snuggled together in the library in front of a glowing log fire, Blair moved a little to peer up at Jim's relaxed and contented face. Aware of his guide's scrutiny, Jim opened one eye and grinned lazily. "Go ahead and ask me, babe. I'm pretty sure I know what you're thinking."

Blair blushed a little with pleasure, the fact that Jim could read him so well a source of security and reassurance rather than indignation. However, he couldn't quite keep a note of worry out of his voice when he spoke up.

"Um, I just wondered, do you think Simon's really OK with it? I mean, I know it's early days, but I'm sure he'd have noticed even if we hadn't told him."

Jim's grin widened as he squeezed Blair a little tighter to him. "I'm sure he's OK, babe. And he certainly would have noticed the changes in our behaviour soon enough. That's why they pay him the big bucks as Captain. He would have been pretty pissed off if we hadn't given him the heads up first, though. He likes to keep on top of things. As do I," and he waggled his eyebrows suggestively. Blair snickered as his blush deepened most fetchingly.

Because the *'it'* that they were discussing was the full bond, and Jim couldn't help but relive the momentous occasion as he cuddled Blair close, the smaller man relaxing bonelessly once again against his side.

Less than three weeks ago it had been Blair's 18th birthday, and he had known for some time what he really wanted as a present from Jim, although he was too shy to ask for it. He had always known that as a sentinel, Jim dearly cherished the hope that they would eventually bond fully, and he was also well aware that the older man found him attractive, but the honourable man in Jim would never push him before he was ready and willing. The fact that Blair had lived such a sheltered existence meant that he had had no practical experience of even dating, let alone sexual activity except within his vivid imagination, and he was convinced that his timid and doubtless clumsy virginity would be a major turn-off for his buff and gorgeous sentinel.

However, after having thoroughly enjoyed a surprise party thrown for him in the Major Crimes conference room, he had plucked up the courage to make his case with Jim when they were settled together in front of the fire that night, just as they were this evening.

"Uh, Jim? I uh, I just wanted to say thank you so much for the party. I've never had one before, even when I was a kid in Leipzig. It was great, really. And so nice for everyone to get me presents. It meant a lot to me. And your present, well, it was mind-blowing, man! I mean, although I've used Eli's computer a lot, I've never had a tablet for my own use. I love it! It's easily as good as any of the ones I've seen the other kids using at Rainier.

"But there is something I would like, more of a shared present, if you know what I mean..." and his voice had tailed off into embarrassed silence as his anxiety got the better of him once again.

Turning his guide carefully to face him, Jim raised up the downcast face with a gentle finger under Blair's chin. His face and eyes held nothing but comfort and reassurance as he said softly, "It's OK, little one. You can ask me anything, you know that. I think – hope – I know what you're getting at, so don't be afraid, babe. Tell me what you want," and he mentally crossed his fingers and prayed to any and every god he'd ever heard of that his own hopes and dreams were about to be answered too.

"Um, if...if it's OK with you, Jim, I'd like to bond with you. Properly. The real deal. I mean, I love what we have already, but I think you want more. I know I do. And I'm ready, Jim. If you want me, I'm yours. Forever." He met Jim's ardent gaze with a nervous but determined one of his own, unaware for the moment that his fervent declaration had rendered Jim momentarily speechless; in awe of his guide's courage and love.

Pulling the slender body in for a warm hug, Jim rocked him silently for a while as he worked past the lump of emotion blocking the words in his throat. Long moments later, knowing that Blair might well interpret Jim's prolonged silence as a form of rejection in his fragile emotional state, Jim pulled himself together and gently held Blair away from him, looking intently into the empath's wide but rather worried blue gaze. His own eyes were more than a little misty with unshed tears of gratitude and appreciation for his soon-to-be-lover's precious gift, and he cupped the beloved face in gentle palms as he murmured, "I

shall be honoured, Blair Sandburg, if you would be my guide and partner in all things." And they came together again, cuddling close for long minutes until Jim stood, and taking Blair's hand, led his shy but eager partner upstairs to his bed.

Settling Blair even more comfortably against his side, Jim's smile became soft and dreamy as he reminisced about their lovemaking that night, knowing, through their enhanced link, that his guide was having similar thoughts. And the fact that the pheromones Blair was releasing were increasing exponentially led Jim to conclude that they would be reaffirming that bond very soon.

When Jim had led Blair upstairs that night, he had paused for a moment, wondering which bedroom to use, since he wanted to put the young man at ease as much as possible. "Which room, baby? Would you prefer to be in your room?" And Blair had shaken his head. "No, Jim. If you don't mind, I'd like to be in your bed. It seems right, somehow, that I should be in your territory."

Nodding his agreement, he had continued into his room, and there had carefully undressed his guide down to his boxers. Despite his nervousness, Blair hadn't demurred when Jim tacitly requested that the young man allow him to strip him completely. And when he had done so, Jim stood back for a moment, overcome by the beauty of the slender but perfectly proportioned figure revealed fully to him for the first time in all its glory. However, he didn't labour the point, seeing Blair tremble a little with both apprehension and the evening's chill, so he had quickly pulled back the covers and laid the young man tenderly down in the middle of the bed.

While Blair looked on, he swiftly stripped off his own clothes, and climbed in, gently reaching out to cuddle Blair against him, the action both warming and settling the smaller man. As soon as he felt Blair relax and heard the rapid heart rate slowing somewhat, he pulled back, and with Blair's shyly-offered permission, began to thoroughly imprint his guide, allowing his senses free rein as he touched, sniffed, listened to and gazed upon the beloved body without any barrier between them. And when Blair opened eagerly to him, he kissed his guide deeply, revelling in the taste and texture of the moist cavern of Blair's mouth, wanting to immerse himself in the addictive flavours. It was only when breathing became a necessity for them both that they broke apart, and Jim was gratified to see the wonder and pleasure suffusing the young face. His tone almost reverent, he murmured softly, "You are so beautiful, baby. So young, but so alluring. Can I touch you – prepare you?"

And Blair had nodded; his determination undiminished by the sweetly bashful blush tingeing his cheeks.

Jim had taken him at his word, and spent long minutes stretching his mate with exquisite care, sentinel touch delicate but sure as he was determined to make their joining as painless as possible for his virgin lover. And when the moment had arrived, they had climaxed within seconds of each other, and the merging of their souls and bodies was total and wondrous, and greater than either of them could ever have imagined.

In the lazy aftermath, with their newly enhanced mental bond linking them as one, and their physical pleasure in each other a source of comfort and delight, Jim had smiled into his guide's beautiful eyes and murmured softly, "Happy Birthday, Blair. Mine. My Guide. Always." To which Blair had replied, "Thank you, Jim. For everything. And for the best birthday present I could ever have. Yours, always." And he had promptly fallen asleep, secure in Jim's powerful arms.

Back in the present, Jim felt his guide stir against his side. Still tending towards diffidence, yet Blair was growing in confidence, enough now to feel able to fix his sentinel with a sultry smile and to whisper seductively, "I don't know about you, Jim, but I'd really like to go to bed now. Bond with me, My Sentinel? Please?"

And moving now with considerable alacrity, Jim was more than happy to oblige.

Following morning, Jim and Blair's bedroom

Waking before the alarm, thanks to a long-held habit developed in his military days, Jim took several leisurely minutes to study the warm lump of Blair-guide draped comfortably over his body. Grinning fondly, he luxuriated in the warm after-glow of their bonding, contemplating the smaller man, who was unconsciously rubbing his cheek, nuzzling kitten-like against Jim's broad chest.

Blair was indeed the best thing that had ever happened to him, and his heart swelled with love and gratitude as he thanked whatever Fate had brought them together. Although he still had the occasional pang of disquiet that he might have deprived Blair of a different path in life, his guide always disabused him of the notion, adamantly declaring that it was what he was meant to do, and that he was only too grateful for the opportunity to fulfil his destiny. And if Jim still wasn't entirely convinced by his lover's honeyed words, their shared mental bond hammered the point home.

Even in the dawn's early light, Jim was able to scan their room minutely, dialling his sentinel sight up with consummate ease. They now shared the master suite, having agreed by mutual consent after their bonding that it was right for them. They had redecorated and rearranged it to suit themselves, and Jim recalled how, when he was carefully packing away the last few of Eli's personal possessions for storage, Blair had smiled a little wistfully before saying that he believed that it was what Eli would have wanted. And when Jim fancied that

he occasionally felt the tiniest whisper of a benign presence in the room, he merely sent a few words of heart-felt gratitude to the shade for the precious bundle in his arms.

Smiling fondly down at the curly head under his chin, Jim began his usual 'wake-up' routine for his deeply-slumbering partner. For someone who seemed to exude pure energy during his waking hours, Blair was not a 'morning person' by any stretch of the imagination, so Jim had gradually perfected the best – and most satisfying – method of doing it. Cupping his guide's very fine ass in one hand, he stroked the smooth skin of Blair's back with the other, until he detected the first signs of rousing in the young man. This morning, Blair slid languorously upwards, his gradually spreading growth of chest hair a delight to Jim as the soft mat tickled his own muscled but hairless torso. Sleepy blue eyes and a lazy smile were directed at him as Blair moved up to drop a kiss on his chin, but Jim noted the tiny wince the movement elicited. Immediately concerned, Jim asked, "Are you OK, baby? I didn't hurt you last night, did I?" But Blair responded quickly, his smile wider and unworried.

"Only in the nicest possible way, Jim. Don't worry – I feel great!" and his guide's sultry gaze and the reassurance he felt through their shared link put Jim's mind at ease once again.

As Blair settled down again to enjoy a last few moments of comfort, the rumbling of soft laughter deep in the broad chest beneath his ear caused him to look up again, a quizzical eyebrow cocked as he regarded Jim's amused grin.

"It's OK, babe," Jim murmured, gently ruffling Blair's curls. "I was just thinking about what you said last night. You know, about whether Simon was really OK with us – with the full bond? And I have to say that I'm certain he is. After all, it was only a few months ago when he said to you that he thought we had the makings of a worthwhile partnership, and that he expected you to work towards that goal. So I think he should be well pleased with what we have now, don't you think?"

And Blair contemplated him for a moment before replying, smile now as bright as the sun as he wrapped his arms around Jim's neck. "I think you're right, My Sentinel. And it is. Worth every minute!"

The End



Still Worth It

Story by Katef

Art by stargatesg1971

Part 1: Introduction

Major Crimes Unit Bullpen

Seated at his desk, Sentinel Detective Jim Ellison scowled as he studied the thick file open in front of him. It was an on-going case which, in a perfect world, would have been closed many months ago, and all those involved arrested and sent down for their crimes. However, corruption in all the right places as far as many of the perps were concerned meant that the progress was slow, although not completely halted.

However, Jim's expression lightened considerably as he cocked his head in a 'listening' pose, having heard his guide enter the building, and the sentinel eagerly anticipated reconnecting with the most important person in his life. Leaning back in his seat, aware of the cheerful grins directed at him from his friends and colleagues, he allowed himself a few minutes' contemplation while he awaited Blair's arrival in the bullpen.

In a few days' time, it would be the one year's anniversary of the death of Dr Eli Stoddard, Jim's friend and mentor when he was an unbonded but fully on-line sentinel. He had also been the unofficial and clandestine guardian of Blair Sandburg, a young man destined to become Jim's guide and life partner. Certainly, Jim knew that both he and Blair would grieve for the premature loss of a great friend and renowned anthropologist, but the day also marked the moment when Jim willingly took over as Blair's legal protector, and for that he couldn't feel sorry. He had been instinctively drawn to the young man at first sight, and had imprinted him almost immediately to form a strong, working bond. And within a few months, once Blair had turned eighteen, they had completed the full sexual bond, and were now one of the strongest sentinel and guide pairings in Cascade's recorded history - indeed, in the whole of the Pacific North West.

On the other hand, things hadn't been all plain sailing for the pair by any means, mostly due to the secluded and restricted life his guide and lover had been forced to lead for the majority of his youth. Blair had been forced to repress his strong empathic gifts in order to stay out of the clutches of slavers and criminals who trafficked in slaves, sex workers and, most lucratively, black market guides. Constant fear of discovery and a secretive existence in Eli's large house, now bequeathed to Blair, meant that the youngster had been painfully shy and nervous when Jim had first met him. Chronically insecure and inexperienced in normal everyday social interactions, Blair had found it hard to face the outside world, only managing relatively successfully through the constant support of his sentinel and the new friends he had made in the PD and at Rainier University, where he was about to commence his second year of Sentinel Studies and Guide Training. Thanks to them, his own innate optimism and gentleness and his exceptional intelligence, he was improving by leaps and bounds, such that for much of the time he appeared as Jim considered to be his true nature; bouncy, inquisitive and helpful; his empathy ensuring that he was always willing to assist anyone who needed his support. And that was especially true where his sentinel was concerned, for which Jim was inordinately grateful.

Despite his remarkable progress, however, Blair still had a tendency to retreat into tongue-tied reticence and self-conscious diffidence under difficult circumstances, a habit that Jim understood but which could also cause him no little irritation. After all, he was only human, and not Superman, as Blair was wont to point out, and he was honest enough to admit that on occasion his patience wore thin, and his sharp words had the power to hurt Blair deeply; a power of which he was uncomfortably ashamed. Nevertheless, he always tried his best to make up for any discord his impatience triggered between them, and the fact that their empathic link was so strong meant that Blair could easily discern that his sentinel's remorse and apologies were genuine, and in his turn, Jim was assured of his guide's devotion and understanding, gratefully accepting his lover's unconditional forgiveness.

Just then, the doors to the bullpen burst open, and Blair entered, chatting happily with Joel Taggart, a particular friend and ally to them both. As they headed immediately for Jim's

desk, Blair continued his excited explanation, hands gesturing wildly in counterpoint to his excited words.

“See, Dean Wilson knows that I can’t study regular anthropology, as I can’t go away on extended expeditions without Jim, but he says it doesn’t stop me from studying Forensic Anth, ‘cos I can get practical training right here in Cascade as Jim’s guide and partner, and by working with the ME sometimes, if Dan Wolf’ll let me. As long as I don’t get too sick, of course!” and a comical grimace briefly distorted his attractive features. “Anyway, it’ll be a lot more use to me when I’m qualified and old enough to join the PD as a consultant. And then there’s the Guide training--”

“Whoa, partner! Breathe, Blair!” Jim interjected, reeling his young guide in for a hug. His fond expression took the sting out of his words, and Blair beamed up at him, knowing that Jim wasn’t mocking him. As Joel looked on, an amiable grin on his broad and pleasant face, Jim buried his nose in the springy curls behind Blair’s be-ringed ear, unconcernedly revelling in his guide’s presence and seeking out the enticing scent which automatically calmed and grounded senses on the verge of becoming uncomfortable. The blissed-out expression on Blair’s face showed that he too was benefitting from Jim’s boost to his empathic shields, and silence reigned for long moments as sentinel and guide reconnected. For the most part, the other occupants in the bullpen were as accepting as Joel, knowing that the display was merely part and parcel of normal sentinel and guide behaviour. And if they disapproved, then they had sense enough to keep their opinions to themselves within the considerable range of Jim’s hearing. On the other hand, the empath in Blair was well aware of the few hurtful thoughts and emotions directed at him in particular, but he was careful to block them from Jim, not wanting to provoke an unnecessary resurgence of Blessed Protector Syndrome in his partner and the likely dire consequences resulting from such a state.

Breaking apart, their individual needs satisfied for the moment once again, both turned back to face Joel.

“Hey, Joel. Now Blair’s brought you up to date with his goings-on, do you need me for anything? If not, we’ll take an early lunch break if that’s OK with you and Simon.”

“I think that should be OK, Jim. As far as I know there’s nothing--” and he was stopped short by a bellow issuing from Simon Banks’ office.

“Joel, Ellison, my office, now! And bring Blair too. He needs to hear this!” and Simon’s glowering face disappeared back inside the doorway as he waited for his subordinates to obey his orders.

Exchanging shrugs and quizzical looks, the three friends and colleagues made their way over to their captain’s inner sanctum, each uncomfortably aware that the news they were about to hear wasn’t anything good.

*

Part 2: A Recurring Nightmare

As the three men took the seats indicated in front of Simon's desk, Blair surreptitiously dipped his empathic shields and quickly 'read' the big captain, instantly relieved to find that the man's overt anger and tightly-controlled aggression wasn't directed at any of them. Blair ruefully admitted to himself that despite Banks' averred acceptance of him as Jim's guide, he was well aware that the man had had serious reservations when they were first introduced. Apart from the fact that Jim had presented Blair as his new guide as a *fait accompli*, which hadn't gone down too well with his superior, Simon had considered him to be too young and totally unsuitable as a match for his best detective, and had been quick to say as much. The situation had improved greatly over the intervening months, but Blair was certain that the man's approval was conditional on the young guide's continuing to perform adequately, and he was uncomfortably aware that the captain wouldn't tolerate mistakes willingly, whether unavoidable or not. However, it would seem that for today Blair had once again avoided becoming the focus of Simon's ire, so he relaxed slightly, offering Jim a small reassuring smile in answer to the sentinel's tacit glance of enquiry and concern.

Once sure of his listeners' undivided attention, Simon leant forward, hands clasped and resting his forearms on his desk. Scowl deepening, he reached out, turning his computer screen around enough to face them before resuming his previous pose. It displayed the first page of the electronic copy of the thick file on Jim's desk, and all three men were instantly alert since all of them had been involved in the case in one way or another.

Over the past few years, Cascade had earned the unenviable reputation of becoming a preferred outlet for smuggled slaves and guides; the victims of a powerful and wide-spread international human trafficking ring. However, despite knowing of its existence, local law enforcement agencies had been unable to progress with closing it down, thanks to the influence of several highly-placed local figures, some of whom had actually held office in said agencies. Although following a lucky break some months ago the pipeline had finally been shut down causing the foreign sources to turn their attention elsewhere, and some of the prominent players had been arrested, attempts to actually convict and close the case were moving at a snail's pace with prosecutors being blocked at every turn by high-priced and highly successful Defence Attorneys.

Knowing that his audience were hanging on his every word, Simon began. Voice rough with barely-suppressed emotion, he said, "I've just been speaking to the FBI's new Section Head for Cascade. SAC Bridges is way more forthcoming than that crooked bastard Greenwood – positively cooperative for a 'fibbie'..." he added darkly, a grim half-smirk tightening his features for an instant.

"However, I have to tell you that it's not good news. Apparently Brad Sullivan got himself iced this morning. The so-called 'safe house' where he was being held was blown up,

apparently by a sophisticated remote-controlled device, killing him and both his 'minders' instantly." He paused for a moment, studying the various shocked reactions in his listeners, well aware that each of them had a particular interest in the new development.

As the ex-Captain of the Bomb Squad, Joel Taggart was only too familiar with the grisly results of such horrendous incidents, added to which he had been involved in the case from the outset as a member of the inter-agency Task Force set up to tackle the trafficking problem. The distress on his normally genial face was plain to see, and Simon knew his old friend's sympathy for the victims was genuine.

Jim was predictably incensed, jaw muscles twitching and bunched as he ground his teeth in frustration, his expression a combination of cold fury, disgust and concern for his guide, and Simon knew full well that the sentinel's instinct to protect had kicked into high gear. Sure enough, a powerful arm was thrown around Blair's shaking shoulders, and a threatening growl rumbled in the big cop's throat as he tucked his guide against his side.

As for Blair, he sank back in his seat, white-faced with shock as he unconsciously pressed up against Jim, grateful for his sentinel's automatic moves to protect and comfort him while he wrestled with his tumultuous emotions, trying to absorb the implications of the bald statement.

Brad Sullivan had been one of the two erstwhile employees of a powerful local businessman and would-be politician, Leon DuRoy. DuRoy had tasked them with Blair's kidnapping, wanting to secure the empath for his sentinel son. However, when the plot was foiled, and the two men taken into custody, Sullivan had quickly agreed to turn state's evidence in return for immunity and inclusion in the Witness Protection Programme. He had proved to be a key witness in the on-going investigations into several local mafia-backed activities, including the human trafficking pipeline, and the loss of his testimony would seriously set back the DA's case against DuRoy in particular.

Eyes now softened with real sympathy, Simon addressed Blair directly, his tone far gentler as he sought the young guide's attention. "I'm truly sorry to drop this on you, Blair. I know it's going to hit you particularly hard, and bring back bad memories."

He was well aware that the gentle young man was always upset and hurt by any death, violent or otherwise, whether or not the victim might be lower than pond scum in Simon's considered opinion. And the very thought of the young empath being seized and forced into an attempted bond with a criminal's son just didn't bear thinking of. Trying to offer some comfort of his own, Simon continued.

"It's not all bad news on the trafficking pipeline front, although it could be better. Ex-Mayor Anderson and ex-Commissioner O'Malley," - these names uttered with a sneer and in a tone dripping in disgust - "will still go down, no doubt of it. However clever they thought they were being in covering their tracks, the FBI's forensic accountants and IT specialists have

been able to dissect their financial records minutely, and have managed to trace illicit funds back to their sources. There's no doubt of their complicity from that evidence at least, and they should be successfully prosecuted.

"As far as DuRoy's concerned, though, we definitely have a problem without Sullivan's evidence. His partner-in-crime, Joseph Murphy, is maintaining his silence, undoubtedly expecting a large financial incentive to protect his boss once he's served his time. And he probably knows that he would be a prime target for a shiv in the gut if he ever changed his mind.

"Not that we're likely to get our hands on the slimy bastard any time soon anyway. As far as SAC Bridges knows, DuRoy's still in South America – probably Argentina – holed up in his hideout there with the rest of his family. And since he's been far more astute in his business dealings and in employing a raft of extremely effective lawyers and accountants, he's covered his tracks as far as his financial holdings and properties in Cascade are concerned. They're pretty much untouchable by the law or the IRS, and without Sullivan's testimony, his involvement in the slave trade and in Blair's kidnap remains hearsay at best. Sure, his rep is badly tarnished both in social and legitimate business circles, and I doubt he'll ever achieve his political goals now, but prosecution is unlikely even if he has the balls to come back.

"And it goes without saying that if any of his other cronies had been contemplating taking him down with them, Sullivan's death while in so-called 'protective custody' will almost certainly dissuade them from trying. The man obviously still has his contacts, and his reach is long.

"I'm sorry, gentlemen, but that's the story so far. You'll still have to testify against Murphy when he eventually comes to trial on the kidnapping charges, Blair, but it's unlikely that DuRoy will be implicated as the instigator."

With a shuddering sigh, Blair managed to finally pull himself together enough to meet his captain's troubled gaze.

"Thank you, sir, for your concern. I'm really sorry about Mr Sullivan and his guards, not just for my own sake. I had hoped that at least DuRoy would be convicted in his absence for his crimes against humanity so he would be forced to stay wherever he is now. But I guess there's nothing to stop him returning if he wants to, even if he'll be *persona non grata* to a lot of Cascade's elite now.

"And I just hope he's managed to find a willing guide for his son," he added softly. "No guide should be forcibly bonded against their will."

Hugging his smaller partner close, Jim growled, "Whether he has or not, Chief, he's not getting his hands on you. I'll see him dead first!"

Knowing there wasn't much more to add, Simon dismissed his men. "Take a break, Jim, Blair. Have an early lunch, re-connect, or whatever you need, and I'll see you back here later this afternoon. And I wouldn't mind a working lunch myself, if you're of the same mind, Joel. Come with me, and let me bounce some ideas off you," and they all rose as one, and left the office, preparing to deal with the latest information in their preferred ways.

A short while later, Jim and Blair sat side by side in Jim's Jeep in the PD underground parking garage. Turning to study the unusually quiet and pensive figure at his side, Jim squeezed Blair's knee, saying, "Any preferences for lunch, babe? Whatever you want to do is OK by me, as long as we're together. I think we both need each other's company for a while."

Sad blue eyes regarded him, although Blair did his best to offer a smile of reassurance. "I don't mind, Jim, honestly. It's just a pity we can't go to the loft anymore to reconnect," he continued wistfully. "I mean, I know I've said it before, and I really love our house, but it's too far out to go there just for a quick lunch." *'And some cuddling and bonding and lovemaking'* headed silently to himself, knowing Jim was on the same page. He could feel the waves of care and concern warming him through their empathic link, and hugged the willingly-offered comfort to him.

"Yeah, I know, babe. But we agreed that Megan needed a better apartment, and she wants to buy it if she decides to stay in Cascade permanently. It just didn't seem right to hang on to two places, and we both love Eli's – *our* – house.

"So, what do you say? Shall we pick up some sandwiches and drive out to the marina? It's a nice day for a change, and you can tell me all about your meeting with Dean Wilson this morning. I mean, I heard a lot of what you were telling Joel, but I'm sure there's more."

Congratulating himself in distracting his young guide, Jim grinned and mentally high-fived himself when Blair returned his smile, his enthusiasm growing as he said, "Sure, Jim! It'd be nice to watch the boats and stuff. And I should tell you about what the Dean suggested about my helping out with the Guide Training Programme..." and he was off and running, his eyes sparkling now as Jim started up the Jeep, a satisfied expression on his face.

Cascade Marina, shortly after

Jim and Blair sat pressed closely side by side on a bench overlooking the marina, 12" subs clutched in their hands and sharing a large soda between them. Blair's was tuna on wheat with Swiss cheese and extra salad, while Jim was indulging in a huge and juicy Philly cheese steak sandwich, which in his humble opinion was almost as enjoyable as a Wonderburger with the works. And probably just as unhealthy, according to his health-conscious guide.

But Blair hadn't said a word when he had put their order in, and Jim wasn't about to make any comment which could put his treat in jeopardy.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, enjoying the rare early summer's warmth and sunshine while they ate and watched the activity in the marina with serene but somewhat distracted interest. Both men were deep in thought, but were grounded and comforted by each other's proximity such that neither of them felt unduly stressed for a few precious hours.

Because he didn't want to spoil their much-needed tranquillity, Blair deliberately refrained from contemplating the latest twist in the trafficking case, and concentrated instead on his conversation with Dean Wilson that morning, and his relief and joy at Jim's positive reactions to his news. The Dean had begun by running through Blair's grades for the past academic year, declaring himself more than satisfied with the young guide's progress. Although both he and Blair knew that Blair's bonded state meant that he could never take part in the type of lengthy expedition necessary for certain anthropological fields, he was more than happy to back Blair's desire to specialise in Forensic Anthropology, and had told Blair as much.

And as for Rainier's Guide Training programme, despite Blair's having been forced to repress his gifts for so long, the young empath had so much raw talent and pure guiding instinct that his trainers had declared themselves unable to provide him with anything more useful than a few basic pointers and guidelines, plus a whole lot of active encouragement. Add to that the enormous boost to both his practical exercises and the self-confidence gained through his being the study subject of his friend Sam Okundu's Master's thesis. In addition, the department was actually contemplating asking Blair to take on the role of private tutor for the occasional student who could do with some extra tuition. However, this would, of course, be dependent on whether he had the time and the energy outside of his regular studies, and more importantly, his work at the PD as Jim's guide.

Blair knew he would have to think carefully before committing himself, and would take no steps without consulting his sentinel first, but the fact that the offer had been made in all good faith had cheered him no end.

As far as Jim was concerned, Blair's shyly-offered additional news was all to the good. An unhappy and hurting guide made for an uber-protective and distracted sentinel, so it was in both their interests to allow Blair to explore and develop his talents in an acceptable environment. He freely admitted to himself that he was more than satisfied with Blair's devotion to him, and he was justifiably proud of his young guide's accomplishments thus far. Despite a lack of formal education in his teens, Blair had been the recipient of some high quality individual teaching in several fields by Eli and his trusted fellow academics during his seclusion. His precocious intelligence and ability to soak up information like a sponge meant that he had quickly caught up the few holes in his curriculum once he was accepted

at Rainier, such that to all intents and purposes he was fast-tracking with the best, and on course for completing his undergraduate degree in double-quick time.

Of course, there had to be something of a down-side to his stellar performance. Although his teachers loved him – apart from one or two who felt intimidated by his superior intellect – some of his peers resented his rapid development and prodigious output. He was also disliked by a few of his fellow trainee guides, but that was mainly due to jealousy on the grounds that he was bonded already, and to a gorgeous hunk like Jim Ellison to boot. Nevertheless, his kindness and willingness to help any and all those who approached him, plus the potential threat of retribution from his sentinel, tended to keep him out of harm's way, and he was generally contented with his lot.

Finishing up the last delicious bite of his sandwich, Jim grinned at his partner, saying, "OK to get back now, Chief? I've got a pile of reports needing filling out, and I really would appreciate your help?" and he fixed Blair with a pleading look.

Completely unable to deny his beloved sentinel anything, especially when he was on the receiving end of that particular expression, Blair giggled and began to gather up the trash from their meal as he replied, "Of course I'll help, Jim! But you know, maybe it's time you considered taking one or two basic IT and typing courses?" Laughing out loud now, he ducked the expected whap upside the head from a grinning Jim, and the pair returned to the jeep ready to face the rest of the day at the PD.

Leon DuRoy's ranch and compound, Argentina

At around the same time as Jim and Blair were enjoying their chance to reconnect before returning to the MCU, Leon DuRoy sat in his private study, the full force of his piercing gaze brought to bear on his recently-arrived visitor. Physically, DuRoy didn't appear to have suffered unduly from his forced relocation to his Argentinean ranch. True, he was even more tanned than usual, but his trim body remained in good shape due to Leon's somewhat narcissistic preoccupation with physical fitness and maintaining his handsome, if somewhat cold and severe, features.

Squirming somewhat under DuRoy's calculating perusal and uncomfortable to be the recipient of his boss's undivided attention, Bernard Maitland fought the urge to run his finger around the suddenly constricting collar of his dress shirt. Bernard was an old acquaintance of DuRoy's, but would never presume to call himself a friend. As a partner in a well-respected Cascade law firm, he was undoubtedly successful and talented in his chosen field, but had long ago decided that principles came a poor second to the sort of financial gains to be made by associating himself with an individual such as DuRoy. Certainly his retention by one of the Cascade business world's major players did the firm – and his own reputation – no harm, but it was what he did outside the law for his client which had provided the most lucrative rewards.

Until now, that was.

When DuRoy had been implicated in various nefarious activities, including the human trafficking ring, Maitland, along with other hand-picked and suitably devious accountants and financial advisors, had managed to contain the damage insofar as DuRoy's monetary interests and material possessions were concerned, but the scandal that tarnished the man had touched Maitland also, and he was now in a quandary. Because as much as he would have liked to sever his ties with DuRoy, he had first-hand knowledge of the consequences of crossing the man, and he was still greedily reluctant to give up the financial incentives.

Since DuRoy was unwilling to risk any chance of his communications being traced and recorded, he insisted on having reports of recent transactions and proposed deals delivered to him in person in a secure environment, well able to afford to have the messengers flown out on his private Lear jet, hence Maitland's presence here and now.

Finally letting his uneasy visitor off the hook, Leon smiled tightly and spoke, his tone compelling despite his ostensibly relaxed demeanour.

"So, my dear Bernard. You have some good news for me, do you not? Tell me everything, then I'll brief you on the next stage of my plans. Because this time I shall not be thwarted!"

And Bernard described in great detail how Leon's instructions to remove his treacherous ex-employee had been carried out by his remaining contacts in both Cascade's criminal underworld and law enforcement, leaving him technically free and immune from prosecution on any count, for the time being, at least. It never ceased to amaze Maitland at how a judiciously-applied combination of great wealth, pure arrogance and conspicuous intimidation could render characters like Leon DuRoy virtually Teflon-coated in the cynical eyes of Joe Public if not to an ethical judiciary.

Sitting back in his seat, his hands clasped beneath his chin, DuRoy's self-satisfied smile became shark-like as he murmured, "Good. Very good indeed! No more than that ungrateful worm Sullivan deserved. And I know I don't have to worry on Murphy's account. He stands to gain an impressive reward for his loyalty and silence. And I have plans for his brother-in-law also.

"Now, this is what I want you to arrange for me..." and Maitland gulped involuntarily as DuRoy outlined his next scheme.

Blair and Jim's house, Cascade, later that night

Jim lay in the luxurious king-size bed to which he and Blair had treated themselves when they refurbished the master bedroom suite in their shared house. The night-time darkness was no handicap to his sentinel vision as he gazed idly around the room, careful not to disturb the warm bundle of guide currently fast asleep in his arms. Blair was in his customary position, draped half across his sentinel's broad chest, with his head tucked into

Jim's neck and one leg thrown over Jim's thighs. Jim smiled gently at the soft snuffling sounds Blair was making, his heart filled with love for the young man as he carefully tightened his hold.

However, his smile became a little strained as he recalled Blair's earlier distress when troubled once again by nightmares.

Although their afternoon at the PD had indeed included a lot of paperwork, most of which was completed quickly and efficiently by Blair, they had been called out to examine a potential crime scene where Jim's senses were required to gather as much forensic evidence as possible before handing over to the regular Crime Scene techs.

Thankfully the scene hadn't been unduly harrowing for Blair, since it actually involved seeking out evidence for large-scale drug dealing rather than dead bodies, but on top of everything else that he had endured throughout the day, he had been mentally and physically exhausted by the time he and Jim had covered the site meticulously.

True, with Blair's grounding touch and focussed guidance Jim had been able to recover minute traces of drugs and other telling substances from the apparently clean house – enough to warrant the arrest of the building's occupants on suspicion – but the sustained effort had left the young man drained and drooping, such that Jim asked for and was granted leave to finish for the day and take him home.

Barely able to stay awake long enough to eat a few bites of dinner, Blair made no complaint when Jim steered him upstairs to bed, and after a few minutes of cuddling and gentle reconnecting, the young guide had fallen deeply asleep with Jim following him into welcome oblivion.

However, shortly after, Jim had awoken to twitches, mumbles and sounds of distress coming from the man in his arms, and he knew instantly that Blair was once more suffering from the recurrence of one of his worst nightmares: the one concerning the botched kidnap attempt which had left Jim with a messy if minor head injury and Blair with an excessive guilt complex; having almost brained one of the would-be kidnappers with a paperweight. The kidnapper-turned-snitch who had now been blown up by an assassin's bomb.

Through their empathic link, Jim was well aware that the most frightening part of the nightmare as far as Blair was concerned was the injury to Jim himself, and no amount of persuasion thus far had convinced Blair that his actions had been anything less than appropriate for the circumstances. So he had simply tightened his hold on the beloved body, and crooned soothing words of comfort until the restless thrashing ceased, and Blair sank once more into a healthy, healing slumber.

Although pleased with his ability to calm and comfort his guide even before the young man wakened fully, Jim was ruefully aware that the nature of his job meant that there would undoubtedly be many more incidents which would cause his gentle guide to suffer

undeservedly, and he felt his own pang of guilt at the gradual but inevitable erosion of Blair's innocence on his behalf.

Part 3: A Nightmare Revisited:

Several days later, Rainier University. Hargrove Hall's Parking Lot

Blair grinned happily as he threw his rucksack into the back seat of his elderly Prius, the car he had inherited from Eli. Although some of his fellow students teased him about it, telling him he ought to get something more cool, like a classic muscle car, he always smiled and refused on the grounds that the car represented a link to his deceased friend and guardian that he was in no hurry to break.

He had spent a busy morning, attending two classes and a tutorial followed by a short session with his friend, grad student Sam Okundu, discussing the results of his latest round of test data. As promised, Sam had shown Blair the rough draft of his first chapters, and Blair had been both impressed and humbled by the content. Even as a rough draft, the work was beautifully crafted, and the conclusions drawn from the series of tests Sam had devised for Blair were clear and compelling. Blair was certain the completed thesis would be of great help for future guides, and an important addition to the as yet too small corpus of literature dedicated to Guide Studies as opposed to the popular and well-established Sentinel Studies.

However, he found it hard to recognise himself as the Primary Subject, being far too self-effacing. He quietly admitted as much, only to have Sam give him a warm hug, chastising him gently.

"Blair, my man, some day you're going to have to accept the fact that you're a very special guide, babe! I'm glad that you're not some egotistical bighead. Someone like that would be a pain in the ass to work with. But you need to cut yourself some slack and take the compliments when they come. I for one am heartily grateful you agreed to let me study you, and I assure you that, if anything, I've played down your achievements rather than exaggerated them, for your own peace of mind. So stop worrying, OK? Your reputation is safe with me!" And Blair had laughed along with his friend, grateful for his kind words even if not totally convinced. But it was a nice feeling anyway, and he was still grinning when he climbed into his car, looking forward now to meeting up with Jim at the PD.

As it was a Friday, and many students – and teachers, truth be told – tried to get away early, the campus was relatively quiet when Blair drove away. Although automatically concentrating on his driving, yet Blair still let his thoughts roam free, mulling over his reactions to Sam's thesis, and briefly wondering what Jim had been up to in his absence. He was really hoping that they could also finish early at the PD, and perhaps have dinner out somewhere together, but he knew that crime in Cascade waited for no man. Still, he could but hope, and perhaps they could at least have a free weekend to themselves. The unexpectedly mild weather would be ideal for a camping or fishing trip, and Blair was just

beginning to understand why those pastimes were so beloved by his partner. Grin widening at the thought, he turned carefully out of the main gates and set off for the PD.

Unfortunately, he had no idea that he was the target for unfriendly eyes, which tracked him from the moment he left the campus.

Blair was blissfully unaware that he had been under observation for some weeks now, although the watchers, mindful of his bonded status, were careful not to approach him when his sentinel was nearby. They were also careful not to touch either him or his possessions, since it was entirely possible that they could come into contact with the over-protective sentinel in the workplace, and be incriminated by minute traces of guide-scent on their persons.

Because they also worked in Cascade's Police Department.

When the department underwent a major shake-up and internal investigation following the arrest of ex-Commissioner O'Malley during the trafficking bust, many of the bad apples in the force were uncovered, and either summarily dismissed or indicted, depending on the degree of individual corruption. However, some also managed to escape the net and virtually go underground, hiding within the ranks and keeping to the company of fellow crooked cops, or those that openly sympathised with them, such as the type of homophobic bigots which occasionally managed to slip through the recruitment process. And they weren't averse to continuing to receive remuneration for services rendered, if it could still be managed without further risk of discovery.

One such individual was a uniformed cop named Sean Kelly, who was none other than the brother-in-law of Joseph Murphy, presently doing jail-time for his part in the attempted kidnap of Blair Sandburg. It was a fact Sean kept to himself, since he was only too aware of the full extent of Murphy's exploits in the employ of Leon DuRoy, and he had no intention of endangering either himself or his wife and family by providing additional dirt on the man and getting his sentence increased. And he also was not averse to receiving a few back-handers himself when appropriate, happy to supply as much inside information to DuRoy and his cronies as he could glean by keeping his ear to the ground.

When he was approached and offered a chance to get back at the sentinel and guide pair who had caused Joe Murphy to be imprisoned, he agreed with alacrity. Partnered with a twenty-year veteran, Sgt. Bill Johansson, who was one of the old school when it came to opinions about the inclusion of gays and bleeding-heart liberals – and sentinel and guide pairings - on the force; they were perfectly placed and completely amenable to keeping a watchful eye on DuRoy's intended target.

Another such dirty cop who had managed to cover his back during the internal investigation, was Detective Mitch Kowalski from Vice. He had worked with Jim on

occasion when Jim was doing a stint in Vice, and it had to be said that there was no love lost between them. Even before his senses became fully on-line, Jim hadn't been able to stand the man, hating his penchant for unnecessary violence and mean-spirited bigotry on so many fronts. Jim was certain that the only reason the man hadn't been kicked out years ago was that the sleazy bastard was so successful in the particular type of undercover operations in which Vice excelled.

For his part, Kowalski had despised the ex-Ranger, considering his attitude to be holier-than-thou and arrogant in the extreme. And it certainly hadn't helped change his opinion when he had first encountered Ellison's pretty-boy guide. He recalled only too well being thrown up against the wall of an elevator by the sentinel in full-on primal Blessed Protector mode, and he never forgave an insult. He was therefore only too happy to offer his services to DuRoy's contact to assist Kelly and Johansson in their on-going observation task. And if that in turn led to his being able to help in the successful snatching of that little pervert Guide Sandburg, he was going to do it.

No one messed with Kowalski and got away with it. Especially not that prick, Ellison.

And now he was in a position to get his own back. He had eagerly agreed to back up Kelly and Johansson on another kidnap attempt, and was just now waiting in the wings, so to speak, for a call from the two uniforms. Everything was in place at last, and the snatch was about to go down.

Oh yes, revenge would be sweet indeed. He was going to help shaft Boy Scout Ellison, and enjoy every moment.

Just as his watchers expected, Blair took his usual route to the PD. Avoiding the heavy traffic on the major roads, Blair preferred to take a short-cut through a run-down commercial area, where traffic was light and pedestrians virtually non-existent. Most of the businesses were derelict and boarded up, awaiting re-development once Cascade's coffers were full enough to initiate it, so the only people who tended to hang out there were either homeless or up to no good. Blair was aware of this, and would never have stopped there, but it shaved many minutes off his travel time between the U and the PD, so he used the route regularly. He was also aware that Jim would definitely not approve of his choice, so hadn't told him, not wanting to cause his sentinel unnecessary worry. He was about to regret that decision.

As he rounded a corner at the heart of the area, a single whoop and flash of high beams in his rear view mirror warned him of the patrol car behind him, commanding him to pull over. Sighing despondently, he complied, wondering what the summons could be about, because he knew he hadn't been speeding. Perhaps there was some new change of road use he hadn't been aware of, and he had transgressed somehow? Whatever it was, he was sure that as long as he was polite, and showed the patrolmen his official PD Guide permit, they

would understand and let him go. Jim wasn't going to be pleased when he heard about it, though, especially as Blair would have to admit he'd been using the route for some time. But Jim would know if he tried to lie about it. Sometimes their empathic link could be a real nuisance....

Winding his window down as Officer Kelly approached, obviously alert, his hand hovering over his open holster, Blair offered the man a friendly smile even though his insides were quaking. As the second cop climbed out of the unit to join his partner, Blair didn't like the emotions he could feel coming from them. Curiosity, disdain and dislike hit him hard when he quickly dipped his shields, and he knew they were being deliberately intimidating.

"Can I help you, Officer?" he asked politely. "I didn't think I was doing anything wrong, sir. Do you need to see my driving licence?" He knew better than to simply reach into his pocket without warning. If the cops were that much on edge, they might shoot first and ask questions later.

"Get out of the car, please, sir," the first one, Kelly, answered gruffly. "You have a broken brake light, and I can see several other faults with this vehicle," he added, his eyes flicking contemptuously over the elderly Prius.

As his partner looked on with a mocking leer, Blair knew he had no choice, and climbed out of the car, his anxiety growing as the situation seemed likely to deteriorate quickly.

"Um, I had no idea, Officer," he stammered. "I mean, Jim makes sure my car is checked over regularly. What else is wrong with it?"

As Johansson started to list completely fatuous so-called defects, Blair's worst fears were being realised. He was being set up for some reason, although he had no idea why.

Just then, another unmarked car pulled up behind the patrol unit, and Mitch Kowalski climbed out, a hateful sneer twisting his harsh features.

"What have we here, boys? You need any help? Looks like you've got yourselves a real bad-ass there!" and he sniggered nastily as he looked Blair up and down.

By now Blair was truly terrified. If the emotions coming from the other two cops were unpleasant, the sheer malice, cruelty and even lust rolling off Kowalski shocked the empath to the core. Blair knew Jim and Detective Kowalski had a history, and he had always managed to avoid the man so far when at the PD, but now there was no escape. Desperate now, and scared beyond rational thought, the young man's fight or flight reflex kicked in, and he whipped around, intending to make a run for it, whatever the consequences.

However, Mitch was more than prepared for the reaction, and before Blair had even set off, he tackled the small guide, and had him in a headlock, easily subduing the struggling figure as a large SUV pulled up, its tinted windows obscuring the occupants completely. A dark-clothed and masked figure jumped out of the passenger door, and Blair got a swift

impression of focussed intent before a jab in his exposed neck told him he had been injected with something. He barely had time to think *'Oh, JIM!'* before the drugs kicked in and he knew no more.



A second man joined the first, and they wordlessly bundled the limp body into the back of the SUV and pulled away with barely a nod in the cops' direction.

After watching the vehicle pull away, Kowalski turned to the others.

"OK, guys. Have you got your stories straight? If we corroborate each others' versions we should be able to keep Ellison off our backs. And once the kid's bonded to Leon's son, I don't think Ellison'll be in any shape to do anything about it. Job done!" and he laughed spitefully, unsurprised when his fellow conspirators joined in.

Same time, MCU bullpen

Jim sat at his desk, staring fixedly at the fuzzy and indistinct images flickering across his computer screen. In a moment of weakness that morning, he had offered to check out some CCTV footage from the scene of an armed robbery - part of H and Rafe's latest caseload - to see if his enhanced vision could glean more detailed information from the film. Despite being cleaned up as much as possible by the department's IT techs, it remained very poor quality, so H and Rafe were hoping that Jim's 'super-sight' could make more from it. He frowned a little as the first niggling signs of a low-grade headache began to make themselves known behind his eyes. Pinching the bridge of his nose, he closed his eyes for a moment, fighting off the discomfort and dialling his sight back down to slightly below normal to compensate for the strain. In truth, he knew he had over-exerted himself, and his senses were letting him know that they were in need of Blair's grounding touch, and reconnection with his guide.

Glancing at his watch, he grinned slightly as he realised salvation was close at hand, and sighed in gratitude, having reached out as far as he dared through his and Blair's empathic link and 'feeling' that his guide was on his way. He sat back, sighing gustily as relief

suffused his taut features, eagerly anticipating the peace and instant release from tension that his partner's presence always bestowed on him.

Suddenly, however, he stiffened, sitting bolt upright in his chair, a feral growl rising from deep in his throat. The reaction was enough to startle Megan and Joel, who were working nearby, and they exchanged concerned glances before looking worriedly over at their agitated colleague. The next instant, Jim's face creased into an anguished grimace, and, leaping to her feet, Megan hurried over to Jim's desk, Joel hot on her heels.

"Jimbo? Jimbo! You OK, love? What's got you rattled? Is it Sandy?"

Jim forced his tightly-closed eyelids open, and dimly registered their presence, although it was obvious that his attention was elsewhere as he muttered through clenched teeth, "Blair! He's in trouble. Something's wrong...he's scared...no, terrified! Oh, god!!"

At that moment, a spike of agony shot through Jim's mind as he was blasted by his lover's mental shriek. *Oh, Jim!!!* Thenthe connection slammed shut, and he was left bereft and adrift, his sensory anchor gone. Clutching his head, he lurched up from his seat only to fall senseless at his colleagues' feet, chair clattering to the floor beside him, virtually catatonic and in a deeper zone than any he had ever yet experienced.

Instantly dropping to her knees beside her fallen comrade, Megan automatically began to stroke his hair, crooning nonsense words as her instincts as a low-grade guide came to the fore. She knew she didn't have the talent or the skills to bring him out of such a deep zone unaided, but she could at least try to comfort him a little.

Alerted to the disturbance by the crash of falling furniture – and the falling body – Simon rushed out from his office and hurried to Joel's side, gazing down at his comatose detective in real concern.

"Holy shit! What's going on?" he demanded. "What's happened to set Ellison off like this? He must have overloaded on *something!*" and he gazed quickly around the room as if he expected to see whatever had caused Ellison's zone.

Joel shut off his cell phone, having just completed his call to the Sentinel and Guide Medical Unit, demanding their urgent assistance for a sentinel-related medical emergency. Shaking his head in bewilderment, he answered as best he could.

"I don't know, Simon! One minute he seemed fine – a little stressed maybe – and the next he screamed in agony, and collapsed!"

Looking up at her boss, tears running unheeded down her face, Megan added, "It's Sandy, captain, I'm sure of it. I heard Jim mutter something about Blair being scared and in trouble, and that's when he collapsed. We *have* to locate Sandy, sir! And fast!"

Some hours later, Cascade General Hospital Sentinel and Guide Unit:

Simon sat beside Jim's bed, watching his detective intently for any sign of a return to consciousness and awareness. On admission, Jim had been administered with a strong dose of dampeners to suppress his potentially erratic senses and counteract any possible violent spikes from incapacitating the sentinel on waking, and since then had shown gradual signs of coming out of his deep zone. He was being aided and encouraged on a rotating shift by the department's three unbonded but professional guides, whose continuous and earnest efforts made up to a certain extent for their relatively moderate individual empathic capability. Nevertheless, it was nothing more than a temporary measure; as Simon and the medical staff knew only too well, but they all hoped that it would give Jim a little time and breathing space in which he could more or less function normally enough to help in the desperate search for his true guide.

Before they both succumbed to the loss of their bond, and perished alone.

Curbing his impatience with difficulty, Simon ruefully admitted to himself that his agitation was partly due to his unaccustomed feeling of futility, but more because he hated to see his friend in this condition. Because he thought of Jim as a real friend now, not just one of his people, though god knew he cared for each and every one of them. And who couldn't feel anxious for Jim's young guide? Blair was almost impossible to dislike, and Simon wryly acknowledged that the boy had grown on him despite his attempts to keep him at arm's length. Hell, he was more like a second son to Simon, and his possible loss was devastating. Forcibly pushing such depressing thoughts aside, Simon leant forward, having heard the softest hint of a moan escape from Ellison's lips. Realising that the sentinel was finally coming out of his zone; albeit in the tiniest of increments; he nodded to Guide Ellen Bowen, Jim's current helper, a hopeful look spreading across his troubled face.

"Finally! I think we're finally getting through to him! I can't thank you and your colleagues enough for working with Jim. To be honest, I thought it was a long shot, knowing how strong his bond with Blair is, but it seems to have worked – temporarily, at least."

Ellen smiled tiredly up at him, touched by the ferocious-looking captain's obvious concern for his detective. Like her fellow guides, she was well acquainted with Jim and Blair, and had to admit that, although they all thought Blair was a real sweetie, Alpha Sentinel Ellison was pretty intimidating. Having said that, he was also awe-inspiring, honourable, and drop-dead gorgeous, so she was more than happy to try and help him. And hoped to the depths of her soul that Blair would be found soon before either of them was damaged beyond healing. Or worse still, dead.

"It's a pleasure and an honour, Captain Banks, truly. Sentinel Ellison and Guide Sandburg are pretty much the heroes of the Sentinel and Guide Department, and we would do anything to help them. I just hope that Detective Ellison – Jim - can hold it together long enough to find and reconnect with Blair. I think I speak for all of us when I say that we

adore Blair. He's the best thing that could have happened to Jim, and even though some of us had our own hopes in that direction, their bond was meant to be. And although he probably doesn't know it, and wouldn't admit it if he did, he's one of the reasons that persuaded more of us to come out and embrace our guide capability. All of a sudden, bonding with a compatible sentinel looks like the right thing to do and it's happening with increasing regularity, in Cascade, at least."

Turning her attention back to the man in the bed, she continued to stroke his arm with a gentle touch, murmuring almost sub-vocally, "It's OK, Jim. You can come back now. Captain Banks is here to see you. You need to wake up fully now. Blair needs you!"

And that was enough to make Jim's eyes flutter open at last as the soft words registered.

Fighting his way back to full awareness, Jim blinked to clear his bleary eyes, and peered almost myopically over at his two bedside companions. "Simon? That you?" he croaked, voice hoarse due to his uncomfortably dry throat.

Quickly reaching for a beaker of water and a straw, Simon replied, "Yeah, Jim. It is. And Guide Ellen Bowen. Guide Bowen and her colleagues have been working non-stop on you for several hours now, trying to get you to wake up. How do you feel? And can you tell me what happened?"

Taking a few sips of water, Jim welcomed the blessed relief as the cool liquid soothed his sore throat. However, as soon as he felt able to speak, he pushed the beaker away with a nod of thanks, and turned his full attention on Simon, a frown of consternation on his face as he demanded urgently, "Have you located him? Do you have any clues as to where Blair is? I need him, Simon. I have to find him!"

"Easy, Jim. Settle down a minute. Don't go and undo Guide Bowen's hard work. In answer to your question, no, we haven't traced Blair yet. We have no idea of his status, but perhaps you can tell us? Tell me what you know, then I'll catch you up on what we're doing to find him."

Sinking back against his pillows with a groan, Jim muttered, "Christ! I feel like shit! Did they sedate me?"

Nodding gravely, Simon replied, "Yes, Jim. The doc reckoned that, since it was probably a massive sensory spike that caused your zone, you needed to wake up to normal level senses, basically to try and prolong your sanity!"

Sighing in resignation, eyes closed for a moment, Jim murmured almost to himself, "Thought as much. Everything feels muffled. Like I'm wrapped in cotton wool. I hoped I'd never feel like this again. Never be without my guide." Then, rousing himself determinedly, he spoke more firmly, addressing both of his visitors.

“Thanks for bringing me round, Ellen. And thank your colleagues for me, OK? I appreciate it, truly.

“As to what happened, Simon, all I can tell you is that I knew Blair was on his way to meet me. I know it’s hard to comprehend, but our link is very strong, and I could feel it when he left Rainier. As I tried to explain before, it’s not telepathy, more that we can share each other’s emotions, and interpret what they mean. He was happy, eager. Looking forward to seeing me so we could reconnect. Then suddenly he got distracted by something. I felt him get scared, then terrified. He screamed for me, then nothing. He’s not dead, Simon,” he added quickly when the older man flinched back in shock. “Believe me, I’d know it if he was. Even Ellen and her friends would never have brought me out of a zone induced by my guide’s death. But he’s not conscious. Probably heavily sedated rather than physically knocked out, because I think I’d feel that too. The link’s still there, but dormant, not broken.

“And he’s not in Cascade anymore, Simon. He’s been taken somewhere a long way away from here. And the gods help him – and me – if it’s the slavers who’ve grabbed him. But if it’s them, I swear I won’t rest until they’re finished! Somehow, I’ll keep going until I either get him back, or we’re all dead!” and the primal fury settling over his features was all the proof Simon and Ellen needed that he meant every word.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that, Jim. But you know I’ll do everything in my power to find Blair, don’t you? The department’s working overtime on this, I assure you.

“Now, as to what we’ve done so far. If Ellen will get the doc in here to sign you out, I’ll fill you in while we wait, then you can get started.”

Shortly afterwards, Jim and Simon entered the MCU bullpen, which was humming with activity. Jim had been discharged with strict orders from his doctor that he take the strong suppressant medication he had been prescribed as often as needed. Although Jim insisted he needed to utilise his senses to assist in the efforts to retrieve Blair, he was intelligent enough to know that without his true guide, he would have to use them sparingly, and resort to the tablets at the first sign of spiking or zoning. His primal instinct was to tell everyone to go to hell, and throw himself headlong into the search, but the reasonable man inside realised the stupidity of such a course, which could only lead to rapid burn-out, and the inevitable abject failure to rescue the most important person in his life.

Nevertheless, by working with the official department guides, or even Megan to help ground him as much as possible, he was determined to use his senses as much as he could, because what good were they, if he couldn’t even employ a modicum of his gift to aid the search?

And the first thing he needed to do was to sit in on a further round of interviews with the cops who had last seen Blair. As he told Simon, he insisted on using his senses as much as he

could to check out their veracity, even though Simon had confirmed that the initial reports suggested no procedural irregularity.

“Look, Jim, I know you don’t want to hear this, and god only knows what Blair was thinking of, but Kelly and Johansson were only doing their duty when they pulled him over in the Barnes-Meyer commercial district. It’s no good place to be unless you’re up to no good. And they said that Blair was driving erratically, which is why they pulled him over. They didn’t expect him to run!”

“I don’t believe it, captain! OK, Blair might have been taking a short cut, and we’ll be having words about that when I get him back, but he wouldn’t just have run without cause! And what was Mitch Kowalski doing there? I don’t buy that bullshit about him looking for a snitch in the neighbourhood. And even if he was, and his presence was no more than coincidence, I know him, Simon, and I know he has an axe to grind with me. It’s not unlikely that he would use scare tactics on Blair just to get back at me. Shit, Simon, I worked with the guy when I was in Vice, and I know he can be one vicious asshole when he wants to be! And I really don’t buy that crap about Blair jumping into some SUV voluntarily. He’s far too wary! He’s had the fear of slavers drummed into him since childhood. He simply wouldn’t do it!”

“I hear you, Jim! I do! But I asked Donald and Shirley Michaels from Homicide to sit in on the original interview, and Donald said he didn’t pick up on anything untoward. It was the best I could do, with you out of action.”

Sighing in frustration, Jim replied, “I know, captain, and I appreciate that everyone’s been doing their best, but like I told you before, Donald Michaels isn’t a full sentinel. He’s good, but with only two truly enhanced senses, I’m going to be more effective than him, even working way below par. And that’s not arrogance, Simon. It’s a fact. I need to interview them again!”

An hour later, Jim was grinding his teeth in frustration, the muscles of his jaw jumping with the strain. Although he was convinced of some sort of collusion between the three cops he had interviewed alongside Simon, it was more instinct than actual proof, sensory or otherwise. Kelly and Johansson had stuck to their story that they had seen and recognised Blair’s car driving through the derelict and mostly deserted commercial area, and were concerned that he seemed to be driving erratically. Knowing that he was Jim’s guide, they thought he might be having some sort of trouble with his empathy, so pulled him over to check him out. As they were interviewing him, they both claimed that he was anxious and jittery, and got positively panic-stricken when he saw Detective Kowalski drive up. He ran off, and although they gave chase, they said he cut through several alleyways, then jumped into a dark-coloured SUV which pulled up for him, and which then drove off in a hurry. And all three confirmed they were too far away to see a licence plate. And wouldn’t you

know it; there was no CCTV footage available from active cameras in that particular area, so there was no help to be had from that source. They called it in, and had Blair's car towed back to the PD. End of story.

And Jim knew they were lying through their teeth.

The problem lay in the fact that, with his senses working at less than full capacity, and without his guide's grounding touch, he was unable to pick up definitive nuances of guilt or falsehood in their physiological reactions. Although the legal system now generally accepted results obtained from recognised sentinel / guide pairs using their combined skills to act as organic 'lie-detectors', in this case all the measurable readings in each man remained within explainable parameters as far as legal purposes were concerned. They had all passed Donald Michaels' original test, and if the results of Jim's second attempt differed, then as Simon pointed out, not without a touch of asperity, Jim was an intimidating man. He was also a sentinel in full Blessed Protector mode, almost feral in his desperation for any hint of his guide's present location. He was easily capable of putting the fear of god into a suspect, and even innocent fellow colleagues were likely to react in some way to his fierce and unrelenting interrogation skills. Without the literal backing of his bonded guide, his findings would never be accepted by the courts, and it mattered not at all that Simon believed his allegations.

And since Kowalski had been careful to shower thoroughly and change his clothes after his encounter with Blair, there was no tell-tale scent left on his person to suggest that he had had any physical contact with the guide. A quick trip to the laundry took care of the contaminated clothing, and any residual scent left by the cops on Blair's car was in line with what would be expected when they searched it before having it towed away.

It was time for Jim to try other lines of enquiry, although he swore to himself that he would drag the truth out of the three once Blair was safely back in his arms and under his protection once again.

Part 4: A Rude Awakening

Leon DuRoy's compound, Argentina

Despite his best efforts to cling to the comforting darkness, Blair rose slowly to consciousness, his drug-befuddled brain fighting to make sense of his surroundings. He was immediately assaulted by the emotions of at least three people in the vicinity of the admittedly very comfortable bed in which he was lying, and tried to pull the tattered remnants of his protective barriers around him, with minimal success. Whimpering almost sub-vocally, he instinctively reached out to Jim through their empathic connection, only to come up with a frightening blankness, and he realised immediately that Jim was too far away for him to be able to 'feel' his guide's urgent and needy summons. He was unable to completely curb the soft sob of distress that rose in his throat, and he felt one of the men

approach, all the time keeping his eyes firmly closed in a futile attempt to disguise his return to the waking world.

Unlike the other two men close by, whose anger and irritation battered at the empath's mind as they carried on their heated argument, albeit in low tones in deference to the boy in the bed, this one's coolly dispassionate and professional demeanour suggested to Blair that he was some sort of doctor or carer. Whoever he was, his touch was gentle as he felt Blair's forehead, and his words were spoken in a heavily-accented but precise manner, carefully moderated to cause his patient as little additional distress as possible.

Dr Ferdinand Montoya was an acknowledged expert in sentinel and guide medicine, and had been retained by DuRoy to treat his son as soon as the family had relocated to Argentina. A capable physician and consummate professional, he disliked both his employer's attitude and the man's connections to many less-than-honest but powerful local 'businessmen', but his conscience wouldn't allow him to withhold his care for the man's troubled son, any more than he could refuse to treat this young newcomer.

"Senor DuRoy. The boy is waking up. Do you wish for me to administer another dose of dampeners? If he is as gifted an empath as you say, his shields will be very weak now after prolonged sedation, and he needs help."

At his words, the other men abruptly ceased their fierce, if hushed altercation, and approached the bed, and Blair's eyes reluctantly flickered open to watch them. His dismay ratcheted up even further as he recognised the elder of the pair. As he had feared, it was Leon DuRoy, and Blair moaned in pain as the man's anger and attention was focussed on him. However, the younger one, whose marked physical similarity to DuRoy confirmed that he was the man's son, grabbed his father's arm as he hissed, "No, Dad! You'll hurt him! Let me..." and he stepped in front of the other, unconcerned at his father's scowl of displeasure.

Ignoring Blair's automatic attempt to push himself away, the young man sat on the edge of the bed, his tone surprisingly gentle and understanding as he addressed the hurting guide.

"Sshhh, Blair. It's OK. Let me help you. I know your barriers are pretty much gone. Let me shield you."

His unprotected mind cringing from the roiling external emotions continuously battering at him, Blair had no option.

"Sentinel?" he whispered. "Help me. Please..." and sighed in relief as the young man pulled him into strong arms, and he felt the pressure in his head reduce to tolerable levels as the sentinel's shields wrapped around him. It was by no means as complete and satisfactory a remedy as connection with his own sentinel would have been, but as a temporary measure it would suffice, and Blair was grateful for the respite as he leaned into the young sentinel's embrace.

Unremarked by the two young men, a self-satisfied smirk spread across DuRoy's severe features, and he beckoned autocratically to Dr Montoya. "Come, Doctor," he said firmly. "I think your work here is done for now. Let's leave them to get acquainted," and he ushered the other man from the room, blatantly ignoring the disquiet on the physician's face.

Leon DuRoy Jnr. looked down fondly at the young man resting in his arms, revelling in how good his senses felt for once without the deadening and unsatisfactory effects of chemical suppressants. He was amazed at the depth of feeling he already had for Blair Sandburg, despite only just having met him, and he knew he could easily grow to love the attractive young man. He knew very well that his instinctive desire to protect and cherish Blair was an intrinsic facet of sentinel behaviour, and had no bearing on his perceived sexuality. He had always considered himself to be completely heterosexual, but it was a fact that between compatible sentinels and guides, same-sex partnerships were frequent and accepted by most of society. And who wouldn't want to have a relationship with someone as lovely as Blair Sandburg?

The trouble was that, for once in his privileged life, Leon knew that he couldn't have what he wanted. Despite what his father thought, a guide like Blair couldn't be bought, or forced. Blair was already claimed and bonded, and Leon knew it was to a far stronger sentinel than himself. And such a bond couldn't be broken without permanent damage to both parties. He was well aware that he had led a thoroughly spoiled and indulged existence thus far, and was unused to having his desires thwarted, but in this case, it couldn't happen. He could no more hurt this guide, or allow his father to hurt him, than he would willingly cut off his own arm. His lips twisted in a sardonic and self-deprecating sneer as he faced up to the truth. Who'd have thought it? Leon DuRoy Jnr. actually prepared to deny himself in order to help another?

But that's what had to happen, if Blair wasn't to die a painful and drawn-out death mourning the loss of his bonded sentinel. Now he just had to convince his father to do the right thing.

Just then, Blair stirred restlessly in his arms, and Leon helped him to sit up, keeping his arm around the younger man's shoulders as they rested against the padded headboard, propped up and supported by several pillows.

"How're you feeling, Blair?" Leon enquired softly, his concern entirely genuine for once. "Can you manage to make do with this level of shielding for a while until I can figure out how to get you back to your sentinel?"

Blinking up at the good-looking young man holding him, Blair whispered, "Yes, I'm OK, thank you. I mean, my head hurts some, but I'll be OK for a while. Thanks to your protecting me, that is. I mean, I wouldn't blame you if you wanted nothing to do with me.

As a bonded guide, I'm no use to you in the long-term, but I'll help you as much as I can while I'm here. But please, please don't keep me for too long. I can't live without Jim..." and his voiced tailed off in misery as his eyes filled with unwanted but uncontrollable tears.

Squeezing him tighter, Leon replied, "Hush, babe. It'll be OK, I promise. I mean, I wish with all my heart that you were free, because then I admit I'd have no problem with Dad acquiring you for me. You're beautiful, Blair, inside and out. I can tell. But I can't and won't allow you to be hurt because of me. Much as I hate to admit it, the sentinel in me won't let it happen, although god knows I hate myself for it!" and he snickered in self-disgust. "Who'd have thought I was capable of doing the right thing, huh? None of my family and friends for sure. They know me too well!"

Pulling himself up and around so he could look properly at his companion, Blair frowned a little as he 'read' Leon. Contemplating the other man for a moment, a slightly perplexed expression on his mobile features, Blair answered honestly, wanting to explain what his empathy was telling him. Voice quiet but determined despite his habitual reticence, he said, "I think you're being too hard on yourself, Sentinel. I feel the good in you," and then had to smile a little in response to Leon's unforced chuckle, realising that he must sound like he was channelling Luke Skywalker.

"OK, I asked for that, I guess," he continued wryly, blushing endearingly at Leon's wide and appreciative grin. "But it's true anyway. You could make some guide a wonderful sentinel, given the chance. The basic qualities are all there. I can feel them. Strength, determination and the capacity for love. Just because you've never been given much reason to exercise those qualities for the good doesn't mean you can't learn to in time. With the right companion to support and guide you.

"And I swear to you, if you'll help me get back to Jim, I'll do everything I can to find you a guide of your own. Rainier University in Cascade is one of the foremost centres for Sentinel and Guide Studies now, and more and more guides are enrolling to study there. Sooner or later there must surely be one who will suit you."

As Leon regarded him carefully, a frown of consternation on his handsome face as he tried to absorb the guide's words, he noted that Blair was struggling not to yawn as his exhaustion and reaction to his prolonged sedation caught up with him.

"Well, you've certainly given me pause for thought, babe, but for now I think you need to freshen up, have something to eat, and then get some more sleep. I'll show you the bathroom, and go and get you some fresh PJs. When you're done, I'll have a tray sent up for you, OK? I'll have to keep the door locked, I'm afraid, because Dad will expect it. But try not to worry. I'm going to talk to him, but if I can't convince him to change his mind, we'll have to come up with another plan. And I shall think of something, Blair. I promise."

Three days later, Leon was growing increasingly frustrated with his father's obstinate refusal to listen to his son's arguments, convinced as he was that he was following the only acceptable course of action. DuRoy refused point-blank to consider that his reasoning was deeply flawed, finding the notion inconceivable that he had in effect condemned a sentinel and guide to death. He could care less about what happened to Detective Ellison anyway, and remained certain that his son was strong enough to create a new bond with Sandburg. As long as Blair functioned well enough to ground his son's senses, who cared if the young guide's miserable life had to be prolonged indefinitely with a combination of drugs and forced bonding? And if his son and that idiot Montoya were correct after all, and Sandburg did eventually succumb to his pain and loss, then DuRoy would simply find another to take his place. Not that he wanted to have to resort to that course of action, though. It took a lot of time and trouble he could well do without to locate a suitable match, and in theory at least, young Blair was the perfect choice. Pretty, intelligent and a highly-rated empath, he should be the answer to all DuRoy's prayers....

"I'm telling you, Dad..." and his son's angry voice cut across his wandering thoughts again. "Blair will *die* if he can't reconnect with Ellison! He can't bond with me while his sentinel is alive anyway, and don't even *think* of having Ellison removed! Blair'll die for sure then! Are you even *listening* to me?" and Leon Jnr's voice rose to an aggrieved shout as he shoved his way aggressively into his father's personal space.

Patience at an end, DuRoy finally snapped, and did something to which he had never yet resorted. He slapped his son hard across the face, snarling, "Don't you *dare* raise your voice to me in that way again! Sandburg stays here, and that's final! Go to your room, fuck the little bastard, or whatever you need to do, and be grateful I don't cut off your allowance! You've wanted for nothing. *Nothing!* Ever, all your life! But defy me now and you'll find out just what it's like to have to earn your living for a change. At least you'll be able to do it in control of your senses, thanks to me!"

Hand raised to his sore cheek, Leon's stunned expression slowly changed to one of cold fury as he stared at his father, whose own face was incandescent with rage. He had never seen his father so out of control, his trademark cold, calculating and totally focussed demeanour completely deserting him for once. With the tables turned in behavioural terms, it was the younger DuRoy who now adopted a frigid and deliberate tone.

"Don't threaten *me* Dad. You may be able to use Mom as your own personal doormat, but it won't work with me. You've raised me too well for that, and I won't stand for it. And don't even *think* of hurting Blair! He's worth more to me than you and all your millions. And I still intend to see him reunited with his true sentinel. Out of character? Yeah, maybe. But it's a sentinel and guide thing, Dad, and there's nothing I – or you – can do about it." And so saying, he turned about, and strode towards the ornate and sweeping staircase, intending to go to Blair, but to offer comfort, not to fuck him.

DuRoy gaped in silence, aghast as his tall, handsome and furious son marched purposefully up the stairs, unable for long, confused moments to grasp what had happened between them. Although he was well aware that Leon Jnr. had a temper, he had never responded like that before, and had never defied his father so determinedly. No one, not even his own son, had ever dared to address him in that manner, and DuRoy didn't appreciate it one bit. An utterly ruthless and self-centred man, DuRoy was accustomed to getting his own way, and to being treated with respect and deference by all and sundry. Recently, however, things had started to go wrong for him. He had been forced to leave his beautiful property just outside Cascade, and had watched his political aspirations go up in flames as he was implicated in several illegal activities. Sure, he had managed to contain the damage, and even had hopes of returning to Cascade one day to reclaim his life there for his son's sake. But it would never be the same, and he would never regain the sort of elevated status he had once accepted as no more than his due. And, come to think of it, there was one common denominator in all his failures. Blair Sandburg. It was all his fault! For being the guide Leon Jnr. needed. For being bonded already to that Neanderthal detective, Ellison. For being smart enough to evade the first attempt to kidnap him, and for being the unwitting instigator of the investigation into DuRoy's affairs. Thanks to Sandburg, Brad Sullivan was captured, and the treacherous little shit had chosen to testify against his employer. And the rest was history.

But no more. His long-buried and rigorously-controlled resentment now boiled over, threatening his very sanity. To DuRoy's bitter and twisted way of thinking, enough was enough, and he had the option, no, the *right* to take his revenge on the helpless boy locked away upstairs. Sandburg had even turned his beloved son against him, so guide or not, he deserved to die. Painfully. And to hell with the consequences.

Mind made up, and acting for perhaps the first time in his life on pure, unreasoning animal instinct, DuRoy charged up the stairs after his son, growling in wordless aggression as he stretched out to grab the younger man's shoulder as he reached the top step. Leon Jnr. whipped around, his fist automatically raised to retaliate when the inevitable happened. DuRoy lost his balance, and, arms windmilling uselessly in an attempt to halt his backward momentum, with a despairing cry he crashed down the long staircase to land in a tangled heap on the marble floor below.

Momentarily stunned by shock, Leon watched wide-eyed as his normally timid and mouse-like mother emerged silently from her parlour and crossed the wide hall to stand over her fallen husband. She stood blank-faced for a moment, before kneeling gracefully beside the crumpled figure, reaching out to press her fingers against his awkwardly twisted neck, seeking a pulse. Moving carefully to avoid getting stains from a freely-bleeding head wound on her immaculate dress, she stood again, and looked up to meet her son's gaze.

"He's not dead, if that's what you're worried about. But I think he may well have broken something. Or several somethings. I'll go and call Dr Montoya. He'll know what to do." And

with a definite sneer of disdain on her pale face, she stepped fastidiously over the motionless body and returned unhurriedly to her room to pick up the phone and make the requisite call.

Meanwhile, in Cascade

While Blair was languishing in Argentina, Jim was driving himself to exhaustion and his friends and colleagues to distraction as he searched ceaselessly for his lost guide. Utterly convinced that DuRoy was behind this second kidnapping, he was pursuing every lead and calling in every marker he was owed to discover the location of the man's South American bolt-hole. He had even contacted one of Blair's teaching friends from Rainier.

Jack Kelso was an ex-CIA man, who had been crippled by a bullet in the back and was now confined to a wheelchair. Thoroughly disillusioned with his ex-employers, he had written a very popular but damning exposé on the dealings of the clandestine agency, and was now teaching political science at Rainier. He had befriended Blair early in the student's first term, and had earned Jim's respect when they had met up on occasion on campus. When Jim had contacted him and told him of Blair's disappearance, he had been genuinely horrified on behalf of his young friend, and had thrown himself into a search for information regarding DuRoy's likely whereabouts, promising Jim that he would call him the moment he had some news.

On the fourth day after Blair's disappearance, a pale-faced and wrung-out Jim sat hunched over his desk in the MCU bullpen. Stretched to the limit of his endurance, he had worked tirelessly to unearth some hint of his guide's whereabouts, but so far had come up against nothing but dead ends. His senses were cutting in and out on him despite a combination of medication and help from Megan and the department guides, and his despair was only intensified when he thought of how his beloved guide must be suffering also. He was still convinced that Blair was alive, but judging by his own increasingly rapid debility, the empath must be in a sorry state indeed. He rubbed at his sleep-deprived and itching eyes, then stared at his lowered hands, despising the faint tremors he could see in the elegant fingers. He knew very well that his friends and colleagues were watching him carefully, their concern evident even as they consistently adopted an air of false confidence and bravado, trying to project an optimism none of them really believed in any longer.

Angrily shaking himself out of his funk, he fought off the growing feeling of despondency, grimly determined to keep on looking until he finally collapsed under the strain. And it was at that moment when he caught his first real break.

When the telephone on his desk rang insistently, he grabbed the handset, barking out, "Ellison!" The caller identified himself as Jack Kelso, and the news he had to impart had Jim clutching the edge of his desk with a white-knuckled grip as he absorbed the man's succinct and urgent words.

“Where is this? You’re sure? OK. Thanks Jack. I owe you. We both owe you! You bet! As soon as I get there....” Jim put the handset down with exaggerated care, breathing deeply as he fought to control his tumultuous emotions. Glancing up, he realised that the bullpen had fallen silent, and that everyone was staring over at him, their various expressions a combination of worry, puzzlement, and tenuous hope.

“I know where he is! I’m going to bring my guide back!” and Jim whirled around and strode over to Simon’s office, leaving a trail of shouted questions and astonished looks and comments in his wake.

Pushing open the office door without waiting for his captain’s invitation to enter, Jim cut to the chase as he met and held Simon’s frowning and quizzical gaze.

“Simon! Jack Kelso just called. He’s located DuRoy’s compound, captain! It’s in Argentina. And I know Blair’s there! Don’t ask me how, but I promise you he’s there! I’m going to get him back. Now!”

“Whoa, whoa, Jim! Just one minute!” Simon replied quickly, holding out his hands in a staying gesture. “Don’t go off at half-cock, Jim. Just tell us everything you know, and we’ll take it from there. You’re going to need our help!”

Realising that Megan, Joel, H and Rafe had pushed into the office behind him, and were hanging on every word, Jim took a calming breath and fought to contain his impatience, realising that his friends had no intention of letting him go it alone.

“OK. OK! Kelso called in a few favours from his remaining contacts in the CIA, and they knew exactly where DuRoy had gone. He has a ranch-cum-compound in an isolated area of Argentina, and already had existing connections with the local crime lords, so as far as he’s concerned, it’s been business as usual. They’ve been monitoring the situation ever since DuRoy took up permanent residence, hoping to take advantage of the information gained through their surveillance to track down and neutralise even bigger fish who pose a threat to our national security.

“Kelso says his contacts are aware of the son’s sentinel ability, and they’ve been keeping tabs on the doctor DuRoy’s been retaining to treat him. The doctor’s apparently quite legit, and although the guy won’t admit it outright – patient confidentiality and all that – he’s been visiting the compound daily for the last few days to administer someone there with prescription drugs. Powerful suppressants. The type an empath would need to stop him overloading.

“Blair’s there, Simon. I know it. And I’m going to get him back whether you can help me or not. I still have my own contacts from my covert ops days, so you don’t have to worry that I’ll get any of you into hot water for doing something unofficial. I’ll just make some calls--”

“Wait, Jim!” Simon interjected sharply. “Just be patient for a little longer, man! Before you start organising some sort of clandestine commando raid or personal vendetta, let me do some calling around of my own, and see if we can’t get an official rescue mission set up? We all want that kid back, Ellison, and not just for your sake. He’s a good kid, and an asset to the department even if he isn’t full-time yet. Let us help you!”

Breathing heavily, jaw twitching again as he ground his teeth together in frustration, Jim finally gave a reluctant nod. “OK, captain. And thanks for the support. But if your calls don’t meet with success, I’m going ahead with my own plans. Blair doesn’t have long before permanent damage is done. He could even be dying as we speak.”



“I understand, Jim. Now, let’s get this show on the road...” Suddenly, Simon was interrupted by the shrill ring of his office phone. Grabbing the handset impatiently, he snarled “Banks! Cascade MCU!” only for his expression to change abruptly from irritation to shock. Despite his senses’ increasingly erratic behaviour, Jim was able to make out both sides of the conversation, and his friends studied his face closely, trying to gauge as much as they could from his rapidly-changing expressions.

The voice that responded to Simon’s abrupt identification was young-sounding, but firm and confident, although Jim could discern a slight undertone of anxiety also.

“Captain Banks. My name is Leon DuRoy Jnr. I think you’ll have heard of me, and I know you’ll be acquainted with my father, sir. I have something I wish to discuss with you regarding the return of a missing person.”

“I’m listening, Mr DuRoy. What can you tell me about this ‘missing person’? Is he in good health, and what does your father have to say about this? Are you doing this without his knowledge or permission?”

"Don't concern yourself with my father, Captain. He no longer has a say in my dealings. But if Detective Ellison is nearby, there's someone who wants to speak with him."

Almost snatching the handset out of Simon's hand, Jim barked, "Ellison here! Where is he? Where's Blair?" and his face betrayed deep shock, relief and distress in rapid succession as a tentative voice reached him.

"J.Jim? It's me. I.I'm OK, but I need you, so bad! Um...Leon's been shielding me, but I want to come home. Please Jim, listen to Leon. He only wants to help me...us..."

"Oh Chief! It's so good to hear your voice! I'll see you very soon, I swear it! Look, love, I'm going to put Simon back on to discuss the ways and means with your friend, but I'll be listening in, OK? Stay strong, baby, for a while longer, OK? Promise me?"

"I promise, Jim. Love you. Here's Leon again."

"Love you too, babe. Putting Simon back on now..." and Jim handed the phone back with marked reluctance, eyes filled with longing although overall his face and demeanour were lighter and noticeably less tense and troubled as he looked over at his friends.

However, there was more to learn, so he dialled up his hearing once more, and continued to listen in to the ongoing conversation.

"Banks here again, Mr DuRoy. How're we going to do this? Should Jim fly down to you, or do you have another pickup point in mind? You need to convince me you can be trusted before I let my man come to you. I don't want him walking into a trap!"

Jim could hear the pained sigh at the other end of the line, even though Leon was commendably patient. Although he must have been somewhat insulted by Banks' words, the only sign of offence was in the wry tone of his response.

"I understand, Captain Banks, and I can't say I blame you. But you can trust me, sir. As I'm sure Detective Ellison will explain to you, I can't hurt Blair. It's hard-wired into all of us sentinels whatever our usual behavioural characteristics are. Protect the guide. At all costs."

"So, this is what I propose. I'll bring Blair back to Cascade myself on our private jet. He'll need my continued protection until he can reconnect with his sentinel again. But I won't be staying in Cascade, even though I hope to return before too long. I have a lot to organise down here, and there'll be some radical changes."

"Oh, and I should advise you. You'll have no further trouble from my father. He no longer runs our business interests," the young man added cryptically, having no intention of explaining the current situation at home just yet.

“Anyhow, we’ll be leaving within the next couple of hours, and I’ll call you again as we’re about to take off. I’m sure Detective Ellison will want to be there to meet Blair on landing. So until then, goodbye, sir.”

And he terminated the call before Simon could utter a word in reply.

Truly shell-shocked, Jim and Simon stared at each other for long moments, stunned at the rapid turn-around in the situation. Then, realising that his other detectives were still unaware of the latest developments, not having Jim’s advantage of hearing both sides of the conversation, Simon met their rapt and curious gazes, a tentative smile pulling at his lips as he said, “Well, people, it looks like we’ll soon have our guide back where he belongs. That was Leon DuRoy Jnr. on the line, and if he’s on the level, this is what he proposes...”

Several hours later, Cascade private airport

The small contingent from Major Crimes sat together in the luxurious executive lounge at Cascade’s private airport, with the exception of Jim, who paced and prowled endlessly as he waited impatiently for DuRoy’s Lear Jet to land. Simon, Megan, Joel, H and Rafe were taking advantage of the comfortable armchairs and excellent coffee on offer, although they all watched worriedly as their driven colleague continued to wear a path in the plush carpeting. Simon had long given up trying to get his friend to sit and relax a little, but he knew full well that, when whatever adrenalin rush or other force of will keeping the exhausted sentinel on his feet finally deserted him, Ellison was going to crash, and crash hard. It was to be hoped that Blair would be in his arms when that happened, so that they at least had a chance of recovering together. Conversation was limited to brief interchanges and monosyllabic replies as each of them tried to deal with their nervous anticipation in their own way.

Suddenly, Jim stopped in his tracks, and his head came up as he turned to face the wide windows, head cocked to one side as a beatific smile slowly spread across his care-worn features. Although the other observers could see nothing as yet, they all heard his whispered words, and knew him well enough to believe him.

“He’s coming. I can *feel* him again. Blair! Oh gods, my guide’s come back to me!” As if in a dream, he moved to the window, both hands pressing against the glass as he stared out into the far distance, tracking the plane carrying his lover back to him long before his friends could make out any sign of the approaching aircraft. Although he remained silent, Megan at least was convinced that he was exchanging thoughts and emotions with Blair, picking up the pieces of their damaged empathic link, and forging it anew as they drew physically closer.

At last, the Lear landed, and taxied up to the main building. As the staircase was wheeled out across the tarmac, the small group of friends and colleagues waited just inside the doors of the arrivals suite for the passengers to disembark. Jim stood in front, barely restrained by

Simon's comforting grip on his shoulder, vibrating with impatience and tension as the aircraft doors seemed to take forever to open.

Suddenly, it was done, and the sentinel strode forward, his eyes fixed on one person, and one alone. The most important person in his life, who was so nearly lost to him because of another man's obsession.

In Jim's eyes, he was the most beautiful sight he could ever behold, but in truth, Blair looked awful. Weak and trembling, he was gaunt and pale, lines of pain and stress etched deeply on his youthful features making him look as if he had aged ten years in less than a week. He was being almost carried down the steps by a strong and good-looking young man, who held him firmly but carefully, solicitous of his charge's well-being even now. As they reached the tarmac, Blair offered him a small but genuine smile of appreciation, and then the next moment he was swept up into Jim's arms, burying his face in his sentinel's neck as he let go at last, and sobbed unashamedly in overwhelming gratitude, relief and love, their connection already beginning the healing process as Blair clung like a limpet to his life-partner.

Oblivious for the moment of everything around them, secure in the knowledge that Simon and their friends had their backs, Jim simply concentrated on the warm bundle in his arms, scanning, scenting, imprinting and comforting him, although both knew that the final reconnection of the full bond would have to wait until they were safely back in the privacy of their own home turf.

Long minutes later, Jim raised his eyes to glance over Blair's head at the young man, who still stood on the stairs, watching the touching reunion with a grimace of anguish and loss on his face. However, he met Jim's gaze unflinchingly as he offered a brief salute. "Your guide, Alpha. No other," he intoned, his voice firm as he spoke the formal words.

And Jim growled in reply, "My guide. Mine alone!" only to modify his near-primal tone and stance slightly at Blair's sub-vocal plea.

Nodding brusquely, he added, "My gratitude, sentinel, for shielding my guide for me in my absence. We are in your debt."

But that was as far as he could unbend for now, his urgent need to carry his guide back to the safety of his territory overriding any other consideration. Sweeping Blair up into his arms, he carried his precious burden back towards the arrivals suite, concentrating solely on following Joel, who had already offered to drive them both home. Blair hid his face in Jim's neck, unable to cope even with his friends' emotions yet, but he hoped they would forgive his poor manners for once.

Safely ensconced in the back of Joel's sedan, Blair fell deeply asleep in Jim's arms, able at last to relax completely, knowing that he was in the best of hands.

*

Shortly after, Jim and Blair's home

The drive back to Jim and Blair's house was completed in silence as Jim focussed his concentration solely on the sleeping guide in his arms, and an understanding Joel left them in peace, concerned only with getting his friends back to their home as quickly and easily as possible. On arrival, Jim lifted Blair once again into his arms, and carried his still-sleeping guide to the front door, offering Joel a brief but sincere word of thanks as the other man opened it for him to allow them to enter. Joel simply offered them both a warm and sympathetic smile as he patted Jim's shoulder, then left them to their own devices. Sentinel and guide needed to reconnect in the most fundamental way, and they didn't need an audience to monitor them, however understanding.

Although Jim had long passed the point of exhaustion, some last reserves of strength and determination kept him going long enough to carry Blair up to their bedroom where he laid the young man carefully down on the bed. Quickly stripping himself of his own clothing, he then concentrated on undressing his lover, murmuring encouragingly to him as the drowsy guide reacted to their mutual need, and roused himself enough to take a more active role in their lovemaking. Although urgent and swiftly accomplished, their joining was still worshipful, intimate and considerate, and at the moment of their mutual climax, their renewed bond shone bright and true, the fissure that had threatened their conjoined souls closing and healing to leave them stronger than ever.

In the aftermath, both sentinel and guide fell into a deep and healing asleep, wrapped snugly around each other, and able at last to begin their physical rehabilitation, drawing strength from each other's touch while their linked minds exchanged loving and comforting emotions. No nightmares troubled either man during the long hours of their much-needed rest, and their eventual waking was natural and untroubled, each man basking in the other's unconditional devotion.

Part 5: Truth and Consequences

Meanwhile, back at the airport

Once Simon was sure that Jim and Blair were safely on their way home, he sent the rest of his team back to the PD, wanting to deal with the next bit of the somewhat bizarre situation on his own. The cop in him wanted no more than to take Leon Jnr. into custody, on suspicion of aiding and abetting Blair's abduction, but the man who considered himself as a friend of Jim and Blair held back, knowing that Sandburg at least would have something to say about that. True, sometimes Simon considered that the kid's heart was too big for his own good, making him uncomfortable on several occasions when expected to comply with the letter of the law but, in all honesty, this time he was willing to give the empath's instinctive character referencing of the younger DuRoy some credence.

Simon looked appraisingly at the young man, who remained standing partway down the steps, eyes slightly unfocused as he gazed in the direction of the airport buildings, and Simon was certain he was monitoring Jim and Blair's departure. With a slight shake of his head, Leon came back to himself and met Simon's gaze, his habitual arrogance mitigated by a small, self-deprecating smile.

"Captain Banks, I presume? As I expect you already realise, I am Leon DuRoy Jnr. I do hope you're not considering detaining me for questioning?"

"The thought had crossed my mind," Simon responded with a small, wry grin, glancing up to where two very large and very professional-looking minders watched intently from the top of the staircase.

Leon's grin widened a little, then his face fell, and his expression sobered significantly as a flash of real pain darkened his eyes for a moment.

"I assure you, Captain, that I had no part in Blair's kidnapping, and I should be more than happy to submit to a sentinel and guide 'lie-detector' test to prove it. However, I hope that won't be necessary at this time, because I have pressing business back at the compound which I can't put off. Then again, I have a good half hour while the Lear is prepped for the return journey, and I should be glad to tell you as much as I can if that would be satisfactory?"

And Simon found himself agreeing, impressed by the young man's sincerity.

"That sounds fair enough, Mr DuRoy. Shall we take it into the lounge? I'm sure we can get some privacy there."

Sitting comfortably in the executive lounge area, the two minders watching unobtrusively from the doorway, Leon faced Simon and began.

"First off, Captain Banks, I want to reiterate that I had no prior knowledge of Blair's kidnapping, although my mother has since told me that it was actually my father's second attempt. I know he was only thinking of me when he did it. I'm afraid he believed, as always, that enough money and intimidation could buy him exactly what he wanted. And I freely admit that, if Blair had been free, I would have bonded with him, and kept him for myself. He's a beautiful person and gifted guide, and I know I could have grown to love him. He might even have grown fond of me, given time.

"But I knew as soon as I saw him that he was already claimed and fully bonded to Sentinel Ellison, and there could be no question of breaking it. Father simply couldn't – or wouldn't – understand that a bond between us was impossible. I knew I had to get Blair back to his sentinel before they were irreparably damaged.

"In all honesty, I'm not altruistic enough to claim that I was particularly concerned for Ellison, but no true sentinel can allow a guide to suffer so I knew what I had to do.

"And here we come to the difficult part," he continued, expression now dark and plainly disturbed.

"Father refused to listen to me, and we argued fiercely. And during that argument, he fell downstairs – without any help from me, I might add. He might have been a hard and ruthless man, but he is still my father, and I would never intentionally hurt him.

"Anyhow, his neck is broken, and he also has a serious head injury. Mother has had him transferred to a private clinic in Rio, and when I spoke to her just before take-off, she said that if he recovers consciousness, he will probably be quadriplegic, perhaps even brain-damaged. So you see, I have to get back. I have to see how he is, and take care of my mother.

"And I have to take over business as head of the family," and here he paused, clearly waiting for Simon's reactions to his words.

Simon looked back at the young man, his gaze speculative as he replied, "Well, Mr DuRoy, I find your actions and attitude highly commendable, towards Guide Sandburg, at least. But as to your other bombshell, does that mean that I am now looking at Leon DuRoy's son and heir in every sense of the word? Because I wouldn't want to have to face you across the table in an interview room somewhere down the line."

Leon glanced down at the floor for a moment, plainly trying to contain the automatic resentment engendered by the big captain's words. With a deep sigh, he looked up again, and met Simon's gaze steadily, resignation and sincerity plain to see on his handsome features.

"I guess I ought to be offended at your implication, Captain, but I can't say I blame you. It's true that I've always been aware that my father's business hasn't all been above board, but as long as I got what I wanted, I was never interested in where the money came from.

"I should tell you that my parents were never close. Mother was the orphaned heiress to one of my grandfather's long-time cronies, and was basically married off to my father as a business arrangement, pure and simple. She had no say in the matter, and as long as it meant that Father had access to her millions, he couldn't care less about her, except as the mother of his son and heir. And I haven't exactly been a loving son to her either.

"But thanks mostly to Blair's influence, I intend to try and make amends. When I get back to Argentina, I'm going to sever all ties with Father's criminal contacts, and concentrate solely on his legitimate ventures. I have enough money without trying to follow in his footsteps, and I want to come back to Cascade. I'm selling the compound, and when - if - he's ready to travel, I'll bring my father back to stay in a private care facility for as long as he needs.

“Having said that, I’m afraid I won’t be of any help to investigating authorities. I have no intention of painting a large target on either mine or my mother’s backs, so I won’t be pointing the finger at anyone. You and I both know how traitors are dealt with in the criminal underworld, especially in South America, so ceasing all future illegal transactions is as far as I intend to go.

“And once I’ve settled my affairs as best I can, I intend to return to college. I want to study at Rainier – maybe do an MBA – as I barely managed to complete my bachelors at Harvard thanks to my senses coming online. I’d like to learn how to take an active role in my family’s legitimate business ventures as soon as I can. And Blair has promised to try and find a guide for me. My own guide. And I trust him to do that for me.” Leon broke off there, a brief but soft smile reaching his eyes.

Simon was a good cop, and had a good cop’s instincts, and in this instance he found himself in agreement with Blair. The young man before him might well have been exactly what Simon despised in the moneyed classes; spoiled, wealthy and arrogant; but deep within, he was basically a good kid, who just needed someone like Sandburg to believe in him enough for his good qualities to come to the fore. And Simon well knew that that had a lot to do with sentinel and guide voodoo, so he wasn’t going to question it. Reaching a decision, he nodded briskly before speaking.

“Thank you for your candour, Mr DuRoy. Although I feel I should be pressing you to change your mind about passing on what you know about your father’s criminal contacts, I understand your reticence on the subject. Off the record, I can also appreciate your need to get back to Argentina to take care of business, and have no intention of trying to delay you further.

“But now Blair is back where he belongs, what about you? Can you continue to manage without a guide for as long as it takes until you find your own?”

Gratified by the older man’s obviously genuine concern, Leon grinned in response.

“I’ll be fine, Captain, but thank you for asking. I’ll have to resort to medication again, but Blair taught me more about controlling my senses in the few days he was with me than anyone or anything else since I came on line more than two years ago. I can certainly function well enough to do what I have to do, and hopefully, once I return to Cascade and Rainier, Blair and the Guide Training Programme can help me find my true guide.

“And now, Captain, I can see that my aircraft is ready for takeoff, so, if you don’t mind, I’ll say goodbye for now, although I’m sure we will meet again. And *not* in an interview room! Please give my regards to Sentinel Ellison when you see him, and tell Blair to take care of himself,” and getting to his feet, he held out his hand to Simon.

Clasping the offered hand in a firm grip, Simon replied, “It’s been a pleasure talking to you, Mr DuRoy. And I look forward to seeing you again when you return to Cascade. Safe

journey," and turning, he strode out of the lounge and returned to his car for the drive back to the PD. He had been given plenty to think about and things to do as a consequence.

Some while later, Jim and Blair's bedroom

Long hours later, a much more relaxed and contented sentinel finally roused, his full bladder warning him that he needed to make urgent use of the bathroom. Glancing over at the clock on the nightstand, he was slightly surprised to see that he and Blair had slept undisturbed for at least twelve hours straight. He grinned ruefully, thinking to himself that it was no wonder his bladder was complaining so much. Carefully wriggling out from beneath his still deeply-sleeping guide, he eased himself off the bed and took care of business, sighing in relief as he flushed the commode and washed up. Returning to the bedside, he paused for a moment, taking the opportunity to scan his young lover thoroughly, needing to reassure himself that his guide was on the mend, and not suffering from any permanent after-effects from their enforced separation.

While Jim was making use of the facilities, Blair had turned over on his back, an arm thrown wide as if seeking his missing partner, and nose twitching delightfully as a few strands of his long curls tickled his face. Jim smiled softly at the sight, but frowned slightly as he really studied his lover's body.

True, Blair looked 100% better than he had when he had first disembarked from the Lear Jet, but the remnants of stress and deep exhaustion still lingered on his attractive face, and he was even thinner than usual. Having said that, when the sleepy blue eyes flickered open to see Jim standing beside him, Blair's smile was one of pure love and contentment, and that did more than anything to set Jim's mind at rest.

Sitting down beside Blair on the bed, he reached over and stroked the beloved face with a gentle hand. "Hey, baby. How're you feeling? Bet you need the bathroom too, huh?" and he snickered softly at Blair's answering blush.

"Aw, man, you just had to mention bathrooms!" the younger man snarked unconvincingly, but he was grinning as he sat up. "Back in a few, lover. Are you going to keep the bed warm for me?" And Jim just grinned as he settled himself back in the warm spot Blair had just vacated, making shooing motions with one hand.

"OK, OK! I'm going!" and Blair trotted off to the bathroom to see to the needs of his own bladder.

When he returned, having taken care of business and taken a moment to clean his teeth and freshen up, he bounced up onto the bed and knelt astride Jim's lap, throwing his arms around the bigger man's neck and leaning his forehead against Jim's. He sighed happily as his sentinel's strong arms came up to cuddle him close, and almost purred in languorous

pleasure as the large hands began to rub soothing circles over the soft skin of his naked back.

“Mmmmm! I’ll give you ten years to stop doing that!” he murmured, pulling back slightly to look into Jim’s eyes, not surprised to see the heat and lust growing therein. When one hand came up to cup the back of his head and draw him in for a kiss, he went willingly, opening to Jim’s demanding tongue and happy to allow the sentinel to re-learn all the details and flavours of his mouth.

For long minutes, Jim indulged himself in tasting his guide, the minty flavour of toothpaste combining with Blair’s unique sweetness while he lazily explored teeth, tongue and gums, not leaving any part of the moist cavern untouched. Finally, they drew apart with a soft, slightly wet sound, and leaned their foreheads together again as they relaxed into their embrace.

“I want you, baby, but we need to talk.” Jim pushed Blair back gently so he could meet the younger man’s suddenly shy gaze. “You know what I’m going to say, don’t you? About your foolishness in using that shortcut and setting yourself up for trouble.”

Eyes flicking sideways for a moment, Blair sighed. He had been expecting as much, as he knew very well that he had had more than a hand in his own downfall, and he couldn’t forgive himself for the trouble and stress he had put Jim through.

“I’m sorry, Jim. I realise it was stupid, but it made the journey time between the U and the PD so much shorter. And I never expected ever to stop in that area, after all. I knew that would be asking for trouble. But I never expected to be followed, either. I still can’t understand why the cops pulled me over, unless it really was a set-up from the get-go. Gods, they were so full of hate. I could feel their disgust, and when Detective Kowalski arrived, he terrified me. And when he grabbed me, there was nothing I could do, Jim, I swear!”

“Hush, baby, it’s OK. I do understand, and I forgive you, but you must promise me that you’ll never do anything that foolish again. We’ve both had a taste of the anguish caused by separation, and I for one don’t ever want to go through it again. You’re everything to me, baby, and not just because you’re my bonded guide.”

“And you’re everything to me, Jim. I can’t live without you, and I never want to try. I’m truly sorry,” and he bent his head as a few tears of remorse leaked out from behind his closed lids.

Cuddling the trembling guide close, crooning softly to him and rocking him for a few minutes until the small but intense breakdown was over, Jim finally pushed him away again, and tapped him on his nose with an admonishing finger.

“So, little one, what punishment do you think you deserve?” he growled with a comically exaggerated scowl, hoping to lighten the mood again. “I’m thinking, maybe...a spanking?” and he was enormously gratified when Blair responded as he had hoped, with a look of total astonishment followed by no little mirth.

“A *spanking*? What, now?” and he tilted his head to one side as he studied Jim’s face, the twitches from trying to control his laughter only too obvious as the sentinel tried desperately to maintain his forbidding air.

Suddenly a spark of pure devilment lit up Blair’s huge blue eyes as he slanted his lover a sultry glance.

“OK, sounds like fun!” he chirped, and then fell over laughing at the effect of his words on his beloved sentinel. The big cop looked totally flummoxed for a second before joining in with the unrestrained merriment.

“Why, you cheeky young pup!” he gasped, pulling Blair back onto his lap and lightly smacking the delectable ass filling his hands. “Who would’ve believed you had a kink like that? Seems like you’ve got hidden depths I’ve never seen even when we’re bonding!”

A moment later, they both sobered abruptly, the seriousness of the situation returning once again.

“All joking aside, baby, I know you’re sorry, and so am I for not getting to you sooner. But what I want now is to bond. To make love to you again and take our time over it so we can savour every moment.”

And Blair was completely down with that.



Later still that evening, Jim and Blair sat in the library, cuddled together on their favourite sofa, and idly watching a Jags replay on the large TV which Jim had recently bought to replace Eli's old one. After their second leisurely – and highly satisfactory - bonding and lovemaking session, they had napped briefly again before growling stomachs reminded them that they hadn't eaten for almost twenty-four hours. Showering quickly and throwing on their most comfortable casual clothes, they had worked together companionably to create a quick but tasty stir-fry, and were now relaxing and enjoying the feeling of being replete, cosy and thoroughly in tune with one another.

They both knew that this was only a brief respite, and they would soon have to face the real world again. Jim needed to get back to the PD, and Blair needed to give his statement, but there was something else Blair wanted to discuss with his sentinel, and the thought of it disturbed his inner tranquillity, worried that Jim might not appreciate what he had to say. However, he trusted Jim not to hurt him, at least, not intentionally, and trusted in the big man's integrity and innate fairness and sense of justice, so he mentally girded his loins, and began.

Twisting around in his seat so he could face Jim, he chewed his lip in an unconscious nervous gesture for a moment before speaking. "Um, Jim...there's something I need to talk to you about..." and met Jim's quizzical gaze with his most appealing 'puppy dog' eyes, although Jim knew he was completely unaware of the effect it invariably had on its recipient.

"Hey, babe, it's OK. I guessed as much," he replied with a rueful grin, tapping Blair's forehead gently with his knuckle. "I knew there was something going on in that noggin of yours, so no need to get yourself wound up."

"I'm sorry, Jim," Blair murmured, a little shame-facedly. "I know that you can feel me through the link, and I should be used to it by now. Well, I am, really. It's just that you might not like what I have to say?" and he tailed off, unaware that he was automatically turning up the wattage on the puppy dog look. Jim sighed, but his expression betrayed nothing but fondness and mild exasperation.

"S'OK, Blair. Just spit it out. I have a feeling you want to talk about Leon. Am I right?"

And Blair nodded; part of him relieved that Jim had guessed already, but still nervous at how he would respond to Blair's thoughts and suggestions. Settling back to lean his shoulder against the sofa cushions, he reached over and took one of Jim's hands in both his own, wanting the security of their touch before unburdening himself. Receiving a gentle squeeze and encouraging look in response, he took a deep breath and said, "I know you don't want to hear this, Jim, but I want to help Leon. I know you don't like the idea of me working with unbonded sentinels, especially one who you perceive as a threat to our bond, but he deserves help, Jim. He was good to me, when he could have hurt me badly – hurt us

both – but he didn't. He chose to help me, and even defied his father to do it. I feel I owe him, Jim," and he paused to 'read' and gauge Jim's reactions before continuing.

Jim's expression had become tight and angry, but he controlled himself firmly. It was in Blair's nature to want to help all and sundry, and he couldn't fault him for that. Having said that, the idea of him being in contact with the young sentinel pushed all his Alpha buttons, and his spirit jaguar wanted to howl in denial.

But one look at Blair's anxious face was enough to make his inner sentinel back down, and he simply said, "You're right in that I don't want to hear it, but I understand where you're coming from, Chief. I know that it's pure guide instinct to want to help any sentinel in trouble, whether he's your own or not. It's just that, well, shit, Blair! Whether he wanted it or not, he was the reason behind DuRoy's obsession with you, and it could so easily have been the end for us!"

"I know, Jim, and I swear I'm not making light of it," Blair responded hurriedly, a brief shiver of remembered horror wracking his frame. "But since DuRoy did go ahead and grab me anyway, I'm deeply grateful that his son turned out to be an honourable guy after all. If he'd wanted to, he could have tried to force a bond with me, which would have been disastrous, I know, but he didn't. He offered me his shielding immediately without being asked, and kept me safe even when his father was getting mad. There was so much negative energy in that house, Jim. It was killing me even with Leon's shielding and their doctor giving me doses of heavy-duty suppressants. And he knew that, and would have gotten me out even sooner if he could have done.

"And I had no problem with helping him while I was there, Jim. He was being so good to me; it was the least I could do to give him a bit of grounding and some practical advice on how to control his senses. He might have had all the material possessions and the best medical support money could buy, but no one thought about basic training and sense management. Guess his father took it for granted that a bonded guide would take care of everything once he'd acquired one. There was no real familial affection or understanding in that relationship, believe me!" And Jim reluctantly nodded his agreement. After all, he had plenty of first-hand experience with a failed father-son relationship himself, so found himself in sympathy despite his simmering irritation.

The empath in Blair knew exactly what Jim would be feeling, so he offered his lover a brief but warm smile of understanding before continuing.

"Anyway, as soon as he got the chance after his father's accident, he contacted Simon. He wants out of the crime scene, Jim, and wants to return to live in Cascade. He'd really like to go to Rainier to study for an MBA or something, and, well, I sort of said that I'd help him look for his own guide through the Guide Training Programme..." and he looked up shyly to meet Jim's gaze again, believing that he'd already overstepped the mark without consulting with Jim first.

And really there was nothing Jim could do but accept his lover's words whether he liked it or not. If the inner sentinel wanted to drag Blair back upstairs to his lair and never let him out again, the honourable man in him admired Blair's forgiving and helpful nature. And as an Alpha, it was his duty both to support and protect his guide, and help new sentinels to cope with their condition.

Jim maintained his silence for long moments while he marshalled his thoughts, but knowing that the prolonged hiatus would be cranking up Blair's anxiety, he sighed deeply and began to speak, holding Blair's troubled gaze as he tried to put his guide's mind at rest.

"OK, baby. I still don't like it, but I'll give you my blessing, as long as you promise me you'll never try to work with him without me there, or at least, never one-to-one. As for the guide-finding thing, I know you'll do your best to find him a match, but I don't want you obsessing about it if it doesn't happen immediately – or happen at all. I know all too well that compatible guides are hard to find, even though they seem to be coming forward more now. Which, by the way, I believe has a lot to do with your influence, little one.

"But let's not jump the gun and get wound up unnecessarily. After all, it may not happen. Leon may not be able to return to Cascade for years, if at all, depending on how successful he is in dealing with the fall-out from his father's disability. But if he does, and he's still of the same mind, then we'll help him, Chief. I promise."

Blair's face lit up with a bright smile of relief and adoration as Jim's words sank in, and he threw himself into his sentinel's willing embrace as he buried his face in Jim's neck, snuggling into his favourite position as he kissed the soft skin beneath his lips before murmuring sentinel-soft, "Thank you, Jim. I love you, man, so much. I can't begin to tell you..."

"Oh, you do OK, baby. And I love you too," and they clung together, exulting in their joy and love for one another and exchanging their emotions without let or hindrance on either part as the link hummed between them and sentinel and guide were as one.

Part 6: Epilogue

Six months later, MCU bullpen

Jim put the finishing touches to his report, having successfully closed his most recent case. He still hated computers, and despite his guide's encouragement, his typing was no better, but at least he often had the benefit of his own secretarial support when Blair joined him at the PD; which truth be told was for a good portion of most work days. Grinning ruefully, he told himself to quit with the self-pity, knowing that his guide was on his way, just in time to tackle the rest of the outstanding paperwork. He hit 'print', and looked up as Joel clapped him on the shoulder in passing, his smile warm as he met his friend's amiable gaze.

“Hey, Jim. You’re looking smug. Is that because you’ve finished your report, or because you can hear Blair coming? Or both?” and he chuckled good-naturedly at Jim’s faint blush.

“Caught in the act, Joel!” he replied cheerfully. “I’m actually quite proud of having done my own paperwork for once, but that doesn’t mean to say I don’t prefer it when I’ve got my little helper here to do it for me. And yes, he is on his way, and by the sound of it, Megan’s arrived with him, so we both get our partners back.”

“Not a moment too soon. She’s going to love our next task. Chasing down leads amongst the homeless in the dockside warehouse district. Such a pleasure!” and Joel’s grin twisted momentarily into a comically wry grimace before returning to his usual genial expression.

“Anyhow, there’s a good chance that something’ll shake loose about the drive-by shooting, so the sooner we get down there the better. Are you going out later with Blair?”

“Nothing planned as yet, Joel, but I’m waiting for a call from Sneaks. He’s been listening out for me regarding those rumours of a new player in town, trying to muscle in where DuRoy’s influence has waned. If we can nip it in the bud before he gets established, just maybe we’ll be able to succeed in doing a bit of real ‘preventative policing’ for a change! One can but hope!” he added sardonically, enjoying the camaraderie.

Patting Jim on the shoulder again, Joel glanced towards Simon’s office. “Well, take care, Jim, and good luck with your snitch. I’ll see you again once I’ve checked in with Simon. Later!” and he wove his way purposefully between the desks to Simon’s office, leaving a smiling Jim watching his departing back.

Standing up to retrieve his printed report, Jim cocked his head, listening to the happy sounds of his guide chattering to Megan as they rode up in the elevator from the parking garage. He used his senses with ease now, having accepted them as the gift they were, and an integral part of himself. Not that he was conceited about them in any way. Although they gave him a definite edge, it was simply a facet of who he was, to be maintained like his body in as good a shape as possible in order to allow him to do his job of protecting the tribe to the best of his ability.

And he was well aware that this comfortable acceptance had its foundation in the devotion and support he received from his guide and partner.

Perhaps the most amazing thing was the dramatic improvement in both his and his guide’s individual gifts over the last six months. Despite the trauma of their enforced separation, or perhaps as a result of it, once reunited, their bond became noticeably stronger as their abilities grew progressively more enhanced. Although permanent separation would be unthinkable, they found that they were strong enough now to be able to spend a significant part of the day away from each other in reasonable comfort, which allowed them to have a little time to themselves to pursue their individual interests and duties. This state of affairs, far from damaging their partnership, actually worked to the benefit of them both insofar as

they could achieve so much more, each knowing that they had the other's full backing and understanding. And working together, they were formidable.

Still tracking his lover's progress, Jim returned to his seat, a tiny frown creasing his brow as he heard Blair's unforced laughter in response to one of Megan's pithy comments. He ruefully admitted to himself that he was still prone to be irritated by the Aussie detective's forthright manner, and her complete disregard for his occasional possessive posturing when he thought she was being overly familiar with his guide. On the other hand, he was glad she was so fond of Blair, like most of the people who mattered to them. In Major Crimes, Blair was easily accepted and jealously protected, as indeed were both sentinel and guide; their colleagues being justifiably proud of the pair's ever-improving success rate which benefitted the whole unit.

Nevertheless, it had to be said that Blair – and Jim – weren't universally popular in the PD, especially with those few who covertly sympathised with the likes of Kowalski, Kelly and Johansson. Jim's frown deepened as he spent a moment contemplating the fates of those three men.

Despite their insistent protestations of innocence, once Blair had been returned to Jim, there was no question of them not being found guilty as charged. Also, as a result of DuRoy's injury, there was no help to be had from his tame legal and criminal contacts, Leon Jr. having pulled the plug on all those contracts, both written and inferred. As a result, Mitch Kowalski was now serving his sentence in Starkville Prison for assault and kidnapping, and Jim was grimly gratified to hear that he wasn't having a good time there. There were many inmates there with grudges against the crooked ex-Vice cop, and after a particularly vicious attack by a vengeful fellow prisoner, Kowalski had been moved to solitary for his own protection. And Jim knew for a fact that at least a couple of the guards in charge of him were sympathetic towards Sandburg, so even if they were too professional to shirk their duties towards their prisoner, they certainly didn't go out of their way to improve his lot. The man was never going to enjoy any privileges on their watch.

Of course, Blair, being the gentle soul he was, expressed his sympathy for the man's plight, even though Jim insisted that Mitch didn't deserve his guide's concern. But that was Blair for you. He was always going to look for the best in everyone, even his attackers. Which is why Sean Kelly and Bill Johansson had managed to avoid doing time alongside of Kowalski. Although summarily dismissed without references or pension rights, they had escaped further punishment because Blair had refused to press charges against them. It might aggravate Jim intensely, but his young guide had explained that he would feel guilty – undeservedly so in Jim's and his friends' opinions – for unwittingly putting another member of Kelly's family behind bars, since Kelly's relationship to Joseph Murphy had come to light when he and Johansson were arrested. Blair hated the idea that he could be the cause for both brothers-in-law being incarcerated, but it was pretty certain as far as Jim was concerned that his guide's kindness and consideration wouldn't be appreciated.

Pushing the unhappy thoughts to the back of his mind, Jim turned to smile wryly at Blair as he and Megan entered the bullpen together, Megan's arm wrapped affectionately around the smaller man's waist as she grinned down at him.

"Hey, Jim!" Blair's already happy smile brightened even more as he beamed at his sentinel, almost bouncing with energy, and plainly bursting with whatever exciting news he needed to impart to his partner. Smiling gratefully up at Megan, he slipped out of her hold, and launched himself into Jim's open arms with even more enthusiasm than usual, not that anyone in the vicinity gave it a second thought. Sentinels and guides behaved as sentinels and guides would, and such displays of affection and reconnection were to be expected.

Nudging Jim none-too-gently in the side as she walked past, Megan grinned cheekily as she greeted her colleague, whose nose was presently buried in the curls behind Blair's ear. "Hi Jimbo! Good to see you hard at work, mate. How's it going? Managing to cope without Sandy's help?"

Raising his head just enough to glare at his irrepressible colleague, he growled, "Don't get too comfortable, Connor! Joel's going to be dragging you out again very soon. And look, there he is!" and he glanced towards where the man in question was just exiting Simon's office.

"Well bugger!" Megan replied, although she didn't look all that put out. "You can stop with the smirking, Ellison! It doesn't become you, mate! Makes you look like Shere Khan," and she turned her attention to her partner, already eager to hear what job he had lined up for the two of them.

As Jim looked back down at his guide, he couldn't help but snicker at Blair's almost sub-vocal whisper, "wrong cat, man!"

Pulling away to wrap an arm around Blair's shoulders, Jim replied, "I can see you're dying to tell me something important, Chief, so how about we go and see if the breakroom coffee's drinkable for once? I could do with some time out after all that typing..." and he donned an aggrieved and pitiful expression that had his guide sniggering openly.

"Sure, Jim. Sounds good to me," and Blair willingly allowed himself to be propelled towards the door by his eager partner. However, just as they reached it, it opened to admit H and Rafe, newly returned from a day spent testifying in court. Since H had to look smart for the occasion, he was dressed for once in a suit and tie rather than his preferred outlandish Hawaiian shirts, and Jim whistled in admiration.

"Hey, H, don't you scrub up well? Didn't think you even owned a suit!"

H preened for a moment, then said, "Hey, Blair! How's my 'mane' man? Get it? M.A.N.E. / main...? Good, huh?" and he reached out to ruffle Blair's curls as he laughed uproariously at his own well-used joke. Rafe rolled his eyes in mock exasperation, and they all joined in

with the merriment; not because of the quality or originality of the wit, for sure, but simply because H's laughter was so unforced and infectious.

"See you in a few, guys," Jim said a few minutes later, still chuckling as he pushed Blair ahead of him out of the door.

"Later, man!" replied H, and he and his partner headed to their own desks, stopping en route to share H's dubious witticism with Megan and Joel, who were just preparing to leave on their next assignment.

Jim was pleased to see that the breakroom was presently unoccupied, so he indicated that Blair take a seat while he checked out the coffee machine. Not at all impressed by the half-inch of lukewarm sludge sitting in the bottom of the pot, he set about making a fresh batch, glancing over at his lover while he bustled about.

In truth, Blair looked good enough to eat. He was bouncing slightly in his seat, his face radiant as he watched his partner intently, waiting with barely-contained impatience for Jim to join him. He had come a long way from the frightened boy Jim had first met and bonded with, and Jim was struck once again with the overwhelming love and pride he had in his chosen guide. One would have thought that Blair's traumatic kidnapping would have set him back months in his development as he grew into his new role, but if anything, the opposite had happened. Not only did the separation strengthen his empathic gifts, but it had given his self-confidence a surprising and completely unexpected boost. As long as he remained secure in the knowledge that Jim was always going to be there for him, he had discovered depths of inner strength and fortitude of which he had never suspected he was capable, and the discovery had been liberating.

Blair was well into his second year of study at Rainier, and was going from strength to strength as far as his academic work was concerned. He was also now tutoring three other students who were attending the Guide Training Programme, much to the satisfaction of his department head, Dean Wilson. And his contribution to the whole Sentinel and Guide Studies faculty was invaluable, especially when Jim could accompany him for practical demonstrations.

All in all, he was happy, busy and contented, and above all, never too preoccupied to support his adored sentinel, which to his way of thinking was the most important job of all.

And a contented but often bemused Jim frequently wondered where the kid got all his energy from, only to come to the conclusion that it was from the same source as his own – from the healing power of their shared bond, which continued to grow in strength and shone ever more brightly between them as time passed.

Finally finished with preparing their drinks, Jim set two cups of fresh coffee down on the table and sat beside Blair, automatically taking his partner's hand in his own as he gave the younger man his undivided attention.

"OK, baby. Tell me all!"

Taking a deep breath, Blair's grin widened even further as he began, his voice excited and also compelling as he spoke.

"Well, there's two things really, Jim, and man, it's just so cool! Sam's submitted and defended his Master's thesis, and it's been passed! Not that there was any question it would be. I mean, it was so well-written, and it'll be of great use to up-and-coming guides for sure. He's all set to start his doctoral programme now, and wants to carry on in Guide Studies. And he wants to continue to use me as a study subject..."

This last was spoken with much more diffidence, as, despite his new-found confidence, he still couldn't comprehend why his friend should consider him special and important enough to be his primary study subject.

Jim knew there was no point in trying to convince him otherwise, as no matter what anyone said, Blair just couldn't seem to understand his true value. At heart, he was simply too sweet-natured and unassuming, and always would be. So instead he squeezed his lover's hand, saying warmly, "That's great, Chief! I knew Sam could do it, from the first time we met him. And Eli would be proud, since Sam's a worthy first recipient of his scholarship fund. Couldn't be a better choice!"

"Anyway, what about your other news? I don't suppose it's about Leon by any chance?"

Instantly diverted, Blair's excitement grew again. "Yeah, Jim, it is. And just wait 'til you hear it! You're going to be amazed, I promise you!"

"OK, OK, babe, I'm all ears! Do tell!" Jim responded, chuckling in gentle mockery as he grinned fondly at his animated partner. He did have to quash a tiny pang of jealousy though, stomping it down swiftly before his sensitive guide could pick up on it. Despite how the younger DuRoy had protected his guide, Jim still felt uneasy every time Blair had any contact with the unbonded sentinel.

Because Leon had accomplished what he had set out to do in double-quick time. He had managed to extract himself from his father's criminal activities, convincing the man's ex-partners-in-crime that his withdrawal was final, but that there was no chance that he would inform on them in any way for his own and his family's self-protection. In a matter of weeks he had disposed of the compound in Argentina, which was acquired with gratifying alacrity and profound satisfaction by one of his father's erstwhile local contacts, and he and his mother had returned to take up residence in their Cascade property. He had also arranged for his father to be transported to a state-of-the-art care centre near Cascade. Although

conscious, the man was barely aware of his surroundings, and totally paralysed from the neck down, so was unlikely to ever be well enough to stand trial, which was a great pity, in Jim's admittedly cynical view.

Furthermore, the young man had arranged to take an MBA course at Rainier, and was doing well at his studies.

'Amazing what innate arrogance, determination and conspicuous wealth can achieve' thought Jim somewhat derisively before turning his full and rapt attention back to his partner, whose eyes sparkled in sheer uncomplicated happiness as he shared his news.

"Well, you know that mixer session we couldn't attend a couple of nights ago, because we were doing the Lawson Street stakeout? Thing is, I contacted Leon and told him about it, and also all the unbonded guides I could think of, not just students and trainees. And guess what? Leon called me this morning, really excited. He's found a compatible guide, man, and you'll never guess who it is! It's Ellen Bowen, Jim, from the PD! She called me as well, and she's really thrilled! Seems they were attracted instantly, and have bonded fully already," this said with a slight blush and delightfully shy grin. "They both sounded truly happy, Jim. And then they dropped by the U this morning just before I left to come here, to thank me in person for introducing them. And I could tell, Jim. I 'read' their love and joy in each other. I believe they'll make a great pairing."

He sat back then, carefully studying his sentinel's face, his own open and clearly joyful expression inviting Jim to share in his unaffected pleasure. And how could Jim deny an invitation like that? For sure, he was genuinely pleased when any unbonded sentinel and guide found their true match, but he was also honest enough to admit to a feeling of intense relief on his own behalf. Leon wouldn't be sniffing around Blair any more now, and Jim could rest assured that his guide was now completely immune from the other sentinel's unwanted attention.

His answering grin was real enough when he made his reply. "That's great news, Chief. Really. And I'm glad for them both. And so proud of you for engineering their meeting, babe. They owe you, for sure! Now, we should be getting back. I've a feeling Simon's got a new case for us." Leaning forward to kiss his guide's smiling mouth, he pulled the smaller man in for a brief but loving hug before shepherding him out of the breakroom and heading back to the office, sharing a smile and revelling in each other's company.

Simon Banks peered around his office door, his habitual fearsome scowl creasing his brow, and an unlit cigar clamped between his teeth. He was looking for any sign of Ellison and Sandburg, and his ferocious expression lifted a little as he grinned at the sight of the two men entering the bullpen. As usual, they were completely wrapped up in one another, Jim's expression one of pure devotion and simple enjoyment as he listened intently to something

his animated guide was telling him, Blair's hands gesturing wildly as he illustrated and emphasised his words.

Simon contemplated the pair for a moment, struck anew by the change in both of them since they had found each other and bonded. The original odd couple certainly, apparently mismatched and doomed to fail from the outset, but they had surprised their critics, amongst whose number Simon was ashamed to admit he had been one of the worst.

Under his guide's influence, Ellison had changed from the taciturn and self-contained loner who had first transferred to MCU to a well-respected member of the team. More disposed to be sociable, especially when his partner was around, he had a dry sense of humour and a surprisingly gentle side to him which Blair never failed to elicit and nurture.

As for Blair, Simon never ceased to be amazed at how the kid had changed – and how he had managed to pretty much reverse Simon's original opinion of him. Still gentle and self-effacing, yet the kid had emerged from his kidnapping stronger than ever, and the depths of love and trust he and Jim had in one another was awe-inspiring. Blair aroused the protective instinct in virtually everyone in Major Crimes, and was loved and cherished now by enough people in the PD as a whole to ensure his well-being at almost any time or in any location. And he had earned Simon's respect and affection almost in spite of his captain's negativity.

Yes, they had given him some grey hairs over the months they'd been together, and would undoubtedly give him plenty more over the years, but he didn't mind. They were worth it, no doubt about it.

Reining in his thoughts, he bellowed, "Ellison! Sandburg! My office!" gratified when they instantly turned to face him, Blair startling a little as he stopped mid-sentence, and both wearing identical quizzical expressions.

Simon chuckled contentedly as he withdrew his head. *'Still got it! Heh!'* he thought as he listened to their good-natured bickering as they made their way to his office, secure in the knowledge that they considered him a friend as much as their boss. Didn't hurt to keep them on their toes, though.

"What did you do this time, Chief?"

"Me? Nothing, Jim! You've been here all morning – must be something you've done..."

"Nah, not me, babe. It's got to be you..."

"Isn't!"

"Is too!"

"Not!"

Simon shook his head in affectionate amusement.

'Ye Gods! What a pair! Who needs TV when you can have in-house entertainment like this? Man. I love my job....'

The End