

SCREAM



BY KERENSA

You get up  
And somebody tells you  
Where to go to  
When you get there  
Everybody's telling you  
What to do  
Thank you  
It's been another  
Bloody Monday  
And no one  
Is asking  
What you wanted  
Anyway

Scream by Tokio Hotel

## **Prologue: Or In the Beginning**

The first night it happened, at least, as far as Blair knew, he woke to find himself halfway up the stairs to Jim's bedroom. Sandburg was never sure what snapped him out of his sleepwalking—maybe a car backfired outside or he stepped on something sharp, maybe Jim farted in his sleep—whatever the cause, he was certainly grateful.

Definitely grateful, because heading for Jim's bedroom, wearing nothing but a ratty old t-shirt and a threadbare pair of boxers was not the safest thing to do, especially considering the Sentinel's behavior lately. Since The Fountain (he always thought of it in capital letters) and their return from Sierra Verde, Jim acted like Blair was a houseguest. An unwanted houseguest; one who ignored all hints that it was time to go home.

Blair was getting the message.

The second time it happened, Blair came to himself outside of The Loving Touch, a lovely dive that lived up (or down) to its name and encouraged people to touch one another or themselves, while enjoying their watered down drinks and badly played music. The grad student had heard a lot of nasty rumors about the place, but he'd never been in there himself.

"How the hell did I get here?" Blair asked, his voice panicky sounding, which nicely suited his heart, which was kicking and jumping in his chest like a Mexican Jumping Bean. The sound of his voice startled the grad student, because he hadn't intended to say the question out loud.

Benny, a fellow grad student and acquaintance of Blair's, had gone there one night and left with a traumatized psyche...and an STD. Blair had listened to the wild stories about the club and had never

planned, or wanted, to go into the club personally, let alone stand in their filthy, garbage strewn alley. In his haste to leave the bar area and its environs, the observer wasn't looking where he was going and tripped, landing face first in a puddle of some indeterminate substance.



“Oh, yuck, man!” Blair complained, wiping oily water-mud off his right cheek. Seeing as how his clothes were already soaked, Blair flopped back onto his butt, in a relatively dry spot, wondering what he'd tripped over.

Ooops, make that *who* he'd tripped over.

“Oh, man! Are you alright?” Sandburg asked the drunk who was lying on the ground. From the smell of him, the anthropologist could tell that the other man had drunk himself into an unconscious stupor. Nevertheless, no matter how he came to this state of being, Sandburg wanted to make sure the inebriated man wasn't hurt. Or heaven forbid, dead. Reaching out tentatively, the scientist touched his index and middle fingers to the man's neck—the only relatively clean spot on the man.

His clothes—the drunk's, not Blair's—weren't too bad; his khaki pants and blue knit shirt had most likely been clean at the beginning of the evening. However, after, no doubt, many hours in the bar, they were spotted with food and spilled drink—not to mention other soiled areas that Blair didn't want to look too closely at—and that was what Sandburg could see on the back of his clothing!

Blair's fingers glowed a bright reddish-yellow color. Startled, Blair jerked back and looked at his hand in surprise. It was then that he noticed that the drunken man's chest was glowing as well...as was the wall beside him. Glancing up, he noticed that the red neon sign for the bar's exit was shining down on his hand.

With a frown and shake of his head, Blair dismissed the red glow as a quirk of the light. The slight tingling in his hand and how he felt better after touching the other man were dismissed from his mind as easily as his concern for the fallen drunk had been.

Standing up, Blair noticed for the first time how he was dressed. Or, more importantly, that he *\*was\** dressed this time. Jeans and a single, thin t-shirt weren't Sandburg's normal pre-winter attire, but they were better than nothing but his boxers.

Not looking back, Blair failed to notice that the other man still had a very faint red glow about him, even where he wasn't directly in the neon light's path. The younger man also didn't realize that he had calmed down awfully quickly from his earlier fright, right after he touched the other man.

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"Where's Hairboy?"

Ellison gritted his teeth at the innocent question. Every day that Blair didn't come into the station, Jim was asked that question, in one form or another and he was mightily sick of it.

"Probably at the university, doing *his* job," the Sentinel ground out. He made a point of looking at the stack of paperwork piled up on the corner of Brown's desk. He looked up at the dark-skinned man, who was leaning one negligent hip against the Sentinel's desk. Henri was frowning, an unusual look for such a perpetually cheerful man.

"Sor-ry," he drawled, straightening up from his slouch before striding back to his desk and sitting down in his chair with a thump. "Asshole," he muttered, but of course, Jim heard him.

"Watch it, H," his partner, Brian Rafe, warned, giving Jim a knowing look. The detective frowned, giving the pair more of his attention. It almost sounded like they knew about his being a Sentinel.

"I don't give a crap if he *hears* me. I've known Sandburg as long as Ellison has and if I want to ask about a friend's wellbeing, I will; especially a friend who was clinically dead not that long ago. And if Jim doesn't like that he can shove that stick up his ass even farther."

"Henri...shhhh."

"Eh, forget that. If Ellison is too wrapped up in himself that he doesn't realize that a group of *de-tec-tives* would figure out he has some enhanced abilities, then he deserves to *overhear* me talking. For craps sake, it was obvious from the look on Hairboy's face during that biohazard case at Rainier that he was just as grossed out as the rest of us were about tasting that mud. That's not something that Blair would do, but it has Ellison written all over it.

Rafe blinked his dark eyes a couple of times. “Dirt?” he asked in disbelief.

H looked at his partner for a moment. “Oh yeah, that was before your time. Well, see there was this case at the university where this dude, posing as a bicycle delivery boy...”

“Ellison!” Captain Simon Banks called out. Because he’d had his sense of hearing dialed up in order to listen to Brown and Rafe’s conversation, Simon’s voice was like a bolt of lightning to his brain, causing the Sentinel to wince and just barely avoid clapping his hands over his ears—not that that ever did any good.

“Serves you right,” Brown muttered softly. Jim looked over at his colleague, wide eyed and amazed at the sentiment. “If you’re going to listen in on private conversations, Ellison, expect to hear some nasty things sometimes.” H’s dark eyes flicked up and down. “And maybe some pain, babe.” The nickname showed that the other detective wasn’t *too* mad at him.

Jim stood to follow his captain into the man’s glass fronted office. He gave Brown a nod of his head and a half smile in lieu of an apology. Henri, being Henri, forgave him immediately and gave Jim a full-blown, blindingly white smile. Thanking God for his friends’ largesse, Ellison walked into Banks’ office, closing the door behind him.

“Well, considering the reaction that Brown got, I’m almost afraid to ask, but where’s Sandburg?” the dark skinned man asked, eyeing his lighter colored friend warily.

Jim gave a sigh and ran a hand over his close shorn head. “As far as I know he’s at Rainier,” Ellison admitted.

Simon frowned at his friend. “As far as you know?” he queried and with good reason. Until recently, Jim and Blair had been together all of the time. Or, if not in the same location, Ellison knew exactly where the younger man was and when he could be expected at either the station or home. After almost four years, the two men were so close that they were generally referred to as one entity, JimandBlair, as if their names were all one word.

“Yes, sir. Sandburg and I aren’t joined at the hip,” he said querulously.

Banks snorted. “Since when?” he asked. Leaning forward in his chair, which made the black leather seat creak, Banks answered his own question. “Since Clayton Falls.”

Ellison jerked his head up at the, to his mind anyway, implied criticism. Seeing the thoughtful look on the other man’s face Jim realized that Banks was making an observation, not censuring him. Still, he felt himself tensing up as he took offense at what Simon was saying.

“That’s not true, sir. Sandburg has his own life and I have mine.”

Simon noticed that his friend’s gaze had drifted up as they were talking and his line of sight was now riveted at about three inches above the captain’s left shoulder. Taking in the way Jim’s shoulders had stiffened and his back had straightened into military precision—not to mention the icicles dripping off of every word—the older man knew that his friend had shut down, turned out the lights and left home.

Knowing that he wouldn't get any more information—not that he found out anything in the first place—from his friend, Simon decided to drop the subject...for the time being.

“Right. So, give me an update on the Tire Gang,” he requested, referring to a buffoonish bunch of thieves who, despite their pathetic attempts, had managed to steal quite a few high end tires; including the ones from the Mayor's daughter's Lamborghini.

Ellison changed in an instant and began to inform his captain of what they had discovered so far.

Blair drove into a parking spot right in front of the building—a rarity in this parking sparse neighborhood—killed the engine and looked around in trepidation. ‘I don't see Jim's truck,’ he thought with a relieved sigh. He didn't say anything out loud, just in case he was wrong. ‘No truck, no Jim. I made it home before him.’

With a tired sigh, Sandburg heaved himself and his overloaded backpack out of his car. Crossing the parking lot, Blair planned out his evening, as much as he possibly could. “Take a shower, and keep it brief,” he added, unconsciously mimicking Jim's mannerisms. “Start dinner. Let's have hamburgers and pasta salad. Hmmm...and some green beans,” Blair planned.

He was mentally crossing his fingers that the Sentinel would be pleased with the menu. Lately, nothing Blair did—from the food he fixed or the way he folded clothes—pleased the older man. If they'd been ‘together’, Blair would have decided that Ellison's behavior was a sign that he wanted to break up. But, since they weren't in a physical relationship, the anthropologist didn't know what to think. If Jim wanted him gone, all he had to do was toss Blair out; God knows he'd done it before.

Not wanting to dwell on that taboo subject and the resulting ‘incident’ at the Fullerton Fountain, Blair took his mind back to safer subjects, namely dinner. The grad student continued planning their meal as he walked up the stairs.

“Grade tests while the food cooks. Don't leave a mess lying around,” out came Jim again, if only for a moment. “Oh, hello Mrs. Bailey,” Blair greeted the young woman who was hurrying down the stairs for her late afternoon run. As always, the athletic woman nodded, in a friendly but not encouraging way. As she passed by him, her bare arm brushed against Blair's hand. Neither of them noticed the brief red glow that happened when they touched. However, Sandra's pace slowed considerably for a few minutes and Blair's flagging energy got a decided boost.

When Jim got home from the station, Blair was dancing in the kitchen while he was cooking. Well, not really dancing, per se, more like swaying back and forth to the music playing on the stereo. Sandburg had a smile on his face as he greeted Jim.

“Hey, man,” the curly haired man said, sounding happier and way more energetic than he had in months.

Jim nodded, but didn't reply to the greeting. He took in the picture that Blair presented—jeans and a long shirt, sock covered feet, slightly damp hair hanging in long curls and a bright smile—and for some reason it made the Sentinel mad.

“Sandburg, do you have to have the music turned up so loud?!” Jim stomped over to the music player and stabbed at the power button, instantly silencing the music. “Look at this mess,” he grouched, glancing around the dirty loft. “And what the hell is that smell?” he asked, wrinkling up his nose.

Ellison turned to glare at his roommate, who was now standing stock still by the stove, wooden spoon in one hand. The smile had dropped off of Blair's face and abject misery had taken its place. His body was no longer swaying; in fact, his feet seemed to be glued to the kitchen floor. With a resigned look on his face, the anthropologist reached over and turned off the burner on the stove.

Turning up his sight slightly, Jim saw that Blair was cooking pasta, the multi-colored kind that was made from different kinds of vegetables. Normally, Jim loved Blair's pasta salad; he couldn't imagine what smelled so bad before.

Jim watched as Blair walked towards his tiny room under the stairs, his shoulders rounded and a general air of dejection hovering over his head like a thunderstorm—the kind that came up during monsoon season. The older man walked over to the stove and eyed the rest of the meal that Sandburg was cooking. Everything was a favorite of Jim's and looked and smelled wonderful. Looking over at the closed French doors Ellison felt bad about tearing into the younger man.

The loft wasn't *that* dirty, he decided after glancing around the main room for a second time. In fact, to most people the lower level would have appeared to be almost sterile...unlived in. The couple of dust bunnies that were on the verge of multiplying in that far corner were small enough that anyone else wouldn't have even seen them, so missing them with the vacuum cleaner would've been easy to do. 'And that sock tucked into the edge of the sofa is mine,' the Sentinel realized. With a guilty pang he remembered taking his socks off a couple of nights before and being too tired to take them into the dirty clothes hamper in the bathroom.

Scooping up the errant sock, Jim spent the next couple of minutes looking for its missing mate. He didn't find the sock and finally gave it up as a bad job, hoping that the piece of outer garment turned up and hadn't disappeared into the ether, like so many others had before it.

Coming back from the bathroom, Jim decided that the loft was too quiet—he was used to Blair's witty commentary filling the silence—so, in a burst of irony, he decided to turn on the stereo. Ellison turned the music down, from a four to a two on the volume scale, noting to himself that his roommate hadn't had his music turned up very loudly at all.

Once he had the Stone's Satisfaction playing—yes, he did occasionally listen to someone other than Santana—Jim headed back into the kitchen. Taking a look at the preparations, Jim decided that the least he could do was to finish fixing dinner. After all, it was his fault that Blair stopped in the middle of cooking in the first place.

“Sandburg, dinner’s ready,” Jim called out about half an hour later. He placed the food on the table where the plates and silverware were already laid out. It didn’t take him long to have the table ready, but long enough to realized that his dinner companion wasn’t coming out to eat with him.

Tap. Tap.

“Chief? I finished the dinner you started.” He paused, waiting for a response. “Are you coming out?” he asked plaintively.

The silence continued for a few moments and then there was a quiet, “Yeah, I’m coming.”

The detective nodded his head decisively, even though Blair obviously couldn’t see it, and walked over to take his place at the table. Blair joined him a few seconds later.

They passed around the platter of burgers and the bowls of pasta salad and green beans, in relative silence. Oh, there was the occasional, “Pass the...mustard, beans, etc.” But no real conversation. To the taciturn Sentinel this was worrisome...and yes, irritating. He was used to the younger man providing most of the topics of their conversations and wasn’t sure what to talk about.

“How’s the Volvo running?”

Blair looked up in surprise at the abrupt question, forkful of pasta paused halfway to his mouth. “Uh, okay.”

Ellison nodded. “Good, good. So, it’s not losing oil?”

The grad student frowned, obviously thinking. “Not that I’ve noticed, but then again, I haven’t really been looking,” he admitted.

The strained conversation petered out and both men went back to their meals. The ex-Ranger flicked a quick look up from his dinner plate, just as Blair did the same. Ellison gave the younger man a helpless look, one that said ‘fix it’. Sandburg sighed and glanced to one side for a moment before giving in—there was no way he could resist Jim’s entreaty.

“Something really hilarious happened at the university, today.”

“Oh, yeah? What was that?” the Sentinel asked, looking up in interest.

“Well, Dr. Harley, he’s the head of the Sociology Department,” Sandburg reminded him. “Anyway, it seems that today was his birthday and somebody anonymously sent him a bouquet of roses and a huge box of Godiva chocolates.” Blair held his hands out to his side to indicate the size of the box. “Man, everybody was jealous. So, he was like, trying all day to guess the identity of his admirer. I’m not sure why, but he decided that Dean Edwards was the one who sent the presents. He marched up to where she was talking to one of the teachers, grabbed her and gave her a really big kiss.” Blair grinned and shook his head. “From the look on her face, she didn’t mind the kiss and I got the sneaking impression that she was the one who sent him the presents.”



“Oh yeah?” was Jim’s subdued reply.

The flush on Blair’s face when he recounted the kiss between the two faculty members made Jim feel sad that he had never acted on his feelings for his Guide and kissed him. Likewise, Ellison knew that Blair would also have appreciated flowers and candy on some of his birthdays or other special days. It shamed the Sentinel to realize that he had never really given Blair anything special for the four birthdays that Ellison had known him. In fact, they had only had one birthday dinner and that was just a frozen pizza.

Blair was looking at him expectantly, a slight smile curving up the corners of his mouth. Jim realized that he still didn’t know what to say and so he remained silent. When he looked up again, the younger man had lost his smile and he was pale. Jim hadn’t realized what a crappy color the anthropologist still was and that irritated him even more, because it reminded him of Alex and Sierra Verde and why Blair looked bad in the first place.

Jim snorted. “He’ll be lucky if she doesn’t bring him up on sexual harassment charges,” the detective said cynically. “It’d serve him right, making a big deal over nothing,” Ellison muttered under his breath.

Sandburg dropped his fork onto his plate. The Sentinel jumped at the clattering noise that it made. He glared at Blair.

“Watch it there,” he growled, letting out his frustration in the tone of voice he used.

“Excuse me?” Blair asked sarcastically.

“Watch the dishes, will ya.” Jim looked pointedly at the plate that Blair was using. “I don’t want **my** stuff messed up.” He emphasized ‘my’ the way he tended to when he was pissed at the younger man for a transgression of the house rules, real or imagined.

“Well, I certainly wouldn’t want to do anything to **your** things.” The grad student pushed his chair back abruptly and carried his plate into the kitchen. He scraped the rest of the food into the trash can and carefully sat the dishes in the sink. “I would offer to wash, but I don’t dare risk your precious plates,” Blair said sarcastically.

Jim sat at the table, his mouth hanging open, and watched as Blair went into his room. The younger man was out in just a few moments, his sneakers on and heading to the front door.

“Where are you going?” Ellison asked. He was stunned; Blair usually let Jim’s bad moods just roll off his back, but since...Alex he seemed almost as surly as Jim was.

“For a walk, if that’s okay with you,” Blair stated as he pulled his coat on.

“I’m...”

Brrring.

Whatever the Sentinel had been about to say was lost when the telephone rang. Jim noticed that even though Blair was mad at him, he still waited to see if Ellison would need him.

“Ellison,” Jim said snappishly, a lot of the anger from the fight (and earlier) bled through his voice. He listened to the voice on the other end before giving a curt nod. “Yeah, thanks.”

“Work?” Blair asked, still standing by the door.

“Yeah.” Jim ran a hand across his jaw, wondering what the hell had just happened.

‘Why were we fighting, anyway?’ His shoulders slumped in realization. ‘Okay, why did I start a fight?’ he admitted to himself.

“Do you need me to come with you?” Sandburg offered, ever the Guide and friend.

“No, but thanks for offering,” Ellison said with a half-smile. “That was one of my snitches who says that he has a lead on the Tire Gang. I can handle it. You go on and take your walk.”

Blair nodded. From what Jim had told him, the Tire Gang was more farcical than dangerous, so it was most likely safe for the detective to go without his Guide.

“Alright,” the anthropologist agreed.

The tension that had been so prevalent in the room just a few minutes earlier was gone now, so Blair didn’t feel the need to escape. However, he was still feeling hyped up for some reason and wanted to burn off some of his excess energy. He opened the front door and was half-way through when Jim spoke again, stopping him.

“Be careful,” the ever vigilant Sentinel told him. “Oh, and Chief, thanks for dinner.”

Blair nodded and looked over his shoulder to smile at his friend. “I’ll be fine and you’re welcome.”

Murray Glater, one time high school quarterback on his way to a full scholarship, leaned against the filthy brick wall outside of Minnie’s Hot Mama’s and wiped at his running nose. The young man’s glassy eyes darted around, either looking for danger or a chance to cause some.

*‘Crack!’*

The still young man winced at the imagined sound; sometimes he still heard the sound his left leg made when the thigh bone snapped during the Craigsville-Preston game. His leg was broken and his life was over in a fraction of a second. Any hope of a scholarship flushed down the toilet like yesterday’s lunch. Murray wasn’t very smart—all he knew was playing football—and so, getting a job that made a half-way decent living was out of the question.

The pain from his leg had been helped by the drugs the doctors gave him and the pain from his broken dreams and trampled heart were helped by other drugs. Ones that were a lot harder to find and more likely to get his ass locked up, if he was found buying them.

But, damn, they made him fly!

“Cocaine. Cocaine is my name,” the young drug addict muttered under his breath.

Murray giggled under his breath. The young man giggled, again. He stepped away from the wall and began to bounce in place. That was so fun that he really started hopping up and down and before he knew it, Glater couldn't stop. His heart was pounding out a staccato in his chest, which would have really worried anyone else, but the damaged man didn't care that much.

“Hey, man. Are you okay?”

The sound of another person's voice was enough to startle Murray into stopping his jumping around. It didn't help his heart much, though. He turned and looked, wide eyed, at the being in front of him.

“Angel?” he asked, breathlessly.

“Uh, no. My name's not Angel. It's Blair.”

The angel—because what else could he be—smiled beatifically at Murray. His hair was fluffed out around his head in a bright arc. His blue, blue eyes sparkled in the bright streetlights. And his hands glowed a pretty reddish-yellow color that looked like the tangerines that Murray loved to eat.

One strong hand reached out and touched Murray's shoulder. In seconds, the drug addict felt better than he had in months. His heart settled down to a more sedate pace and the feeling that he was flying out of his skin disappeared. He took a shuddering breath and only halfway noticed that his Angel was doing the same thing.

“Are, uhm, are you okay?” Angel asked. Now, his eyes had a wildish look to them.

“Yeah. Yeah, I am.” Murray decided to go back to the room he shared with three other, like minded friends, and crash for the night. “Thanks,” he said over his shoulder, although he wasn't sure what he was thanking Angel for.

Blair ran a shaky hand through his hair, messing it up.

‘Man, I feel pumped,’ the anthropologist thought with a frown. ‘I thought I had a lot of energy before. Wow! I feel...twice as, as...energized!’

All the while that Blair was thinking, he was running his hands through his hair and bouncing up and down. By the time his inner monologue had finished, Sandburg looked like he was on a pogo stick gone crazy.

He licked his lips and realized that he was hungry! With that thought in mind, Blair headed to an all-night diner that he and Jim sometimes frequented.

After a minute or so of walking, Blair started jogging.

That was not nearly fast enough!

So, he started running. Luckily, any cops that were on patrol weren't in the area at that time, because had they seen the young man, whose hair was sticking out in all directions, running down the middle of the street in the late evening hour, he would have been picked up just on general principles.

Brrring.

Blair, who had just walked in the door, paused mid-swallow, and walked over to answer the phone. Since he still had his backpack in one hand and a small bottle of orange juice in the other, the grad student opted to drop the carrying case in favor of picking up the receiver.

'Jim'd shot me if I got juice on the floor,' he thought with a wry grin.

"Ellison residence," he answered the phone.

"Chief. I'm glad I got hold of you." Ellison did sound very relieved.

'Hold of me. I wish,' Blair thought longingly.

"Uhm," Blair cleared his throat. "Yeah?"

"Yeah. I can't find my notebook and I'm hoping I've left it at home. If not, I am in big trouble."

Sandburg nodded, even though the Sentinel couldn't see him. Because, hey, *nobody* had that good of sight. He started looking around for the smaller black notepad that Jim kept notes in for the ongoing cases he was working on.

"Okay, hang on a minute."

He sat the phone down on the coffee table and started looking. The bathroom was easy to search, so he looked there first. Jim's room was spotless, as always, so it wasn't hard to look on and under the bed.

'He doesn't even have any dust bunnies,' Blair grouched to himself. 'Not even a dust Peep.' Sandburg snorted at the sad attempt at a joke.

Back downstairs, he looked all around the living room and in the kitchen, all to no avail. With a sigh, because he just knew that Jim was going to find a way to blame him for this, Blair reached for the phone. As he did, his foot nudged the backpack sitting there, which moved, just a little. It made a scratching sound. Blair frowned and picked up his pack and there, lo and behold, was the missing notebook.

'Figures. After I looked all over the loft, it turns out that it was right here, all the time.'

Blair shook his head and picked the receiver back up. "Found it," he informed Jim.

“About time,” Ellison grouched.

“Excuse me,” Sandburg said, icicles dripping off his answer.

The anthropologist could hear Ellison taking a deep breath. “Thanks,” he said. The unspoken apology could be heard.

“You’re welcome.” Blair was a big enough person to forgive his irascible friend. Heaven knows he’d done it enough before. “I’ll bring it down to you.”

“Thanks, Chief. I’m writing up reports and I really need those notes.”

“No problem.” Although it was; Blair was worn out. “I’ll be there in a bit.”

“Hi, Blair.”

Blair smiled and nodded at the uniformed officer, who he’d talked to maybe once. The way the man waved energetically at him, you’d have thought they were long lost friends.

“Sandburg,” Esteban Harrison’s more subdued greeting was more the norm, but still a bit unusual.

“Hello, Blair.” The observer’s eyes widened in surprise. Alecia Wells—no relation to Cassie Wells, thank goodness—had long blond hair, cognac colored eyes and a figure to die for...and she had never given Blair the time of day before. Now, her voice oozed sexuality and promises of wet, sticky sheets.

“Uh, hi.”

The grad student hurried across the lobby and into the, thankfully empty, elevator. Things were getting too weird and the last thing he wanted was another lecture from Captain Banks on not fraternizing with the people he worked with at the station.

“Hairboy!” came Brown’s enthusiastic greeting the minute Blair walked into the bullpen. That *wasn’t* unusual, Henri was always bubbling over.

“Hi.”

“Hey.”

“Hi, everybody.” Blair smiled and was pleased to see that most everyone went back to whatever they had been doing before he walked in.

“How’re you doing?” Joel Taggart asked, his sexy brown eyes looking concerned.

“I’m fine, Joel. Thanks for asking.” The bigger man looked into Blair’s eyes and although he wasn’t entirely pleased with the sadness and outright exhaustion he saw there, Taggart saw enough of the old Blair to nod.

“Alright. But son, if you need to talk, my door is always open.”

The younger man’s smile softened. “Thanks,” he said quietly, truly touched by Joel’s concern.

He patted the older captain on his shoulder and continued over to Jim’s desk. The detective wasn’t there, so Blair sat down in the visitor’s chair to wait on him.

“Hi, Sandy.”

Megan. Blair looked up to see her standing beside Jim’s desk. He smiled at the red haired Aussie. Even though they hadn’t known each other very long, Sandburg really liked the woman...even if she continued to call him by that annoying nickname.

“Hey, Megan. How’re you doing?” he asked in a pre-emptive strike, hoping to head off, and hopefully eliminate, her question.

“Doin’ great, mate. And how are you?”

Obviously strikes, pre-emptive or not, were about as useful as the grad student asking her not to call him ‘Sandy’. But really, Blair was tired of covering.

“I’m tired,” he admitted quietly.

Megan pulled out Jim’s chair and sat down, the rollers made a clacking sound as they moved. Blair winced.

‘Jim’s going to be pissed that she’s taken over his territory,’ he thought. The Sentinel in Ellison had deemed his chair, desk and anything on it as HIS. People took their lives in their hands if they asked to borrow a pen, let alone actually sitting in The Chair.

“That’s understandable. It’s not been that long since...well, you know.”

“Since I died,” Blair said and although it wasn’t said loudly, he was pretty sure everyone in the bullpen heard, judging from the way they suddenly found reasons to be anywhere but there.

“Yes, since you died.” At least Megan could say it out loud; no one else even wanted to admit that anything had happened to Blair. “The fact that you are sitting here is a miracle, especially after you left the hospital Against Medical Advice and traipsed around in the jungle after that ratbag mongrel+ Ellison.” The curl of her lip showed her opinion of Jim.

Blair’s expressive eyebrows shot up at that. He wasn’t entirely sure what ratbag or mongrel meant in Aussie speak, but he was pretty sure it wasn’t complimentary.

“Yeah, well. It’s more my being tired emotionally than physically. Although, there is some of that, as well,” he admitted, leaning his head back for a moment.

“Maybe you should...” she trailed off and looked uncertain.

“Should what?” Sandburg asked. He wasn’t sure what she was going to say and braced himself for most anything.

“Well, mate. Maybe you should find someone to talk to.” The teaching assistant frowned and waited for her to continue. “You know, go to one of those support groups.” Megan patted his arm. “I had a friend from university who was in a crash up. She was dead for several minutes before they revived her. Ammie had problems afterwards, until she found some people to talk to who had gone through the same thing. It helped her heaps.”

Blair looked down at the desk, absently noticing how much paperwork Jim had left to do, and thought about what his newer friend was suggesting. Having someone, or better yet, several someones, to talk to would be nice. It was a cinch he couldn’t talk to Jim; his reaction in the hospital said it all. Simon wouldn’t believe him and the rest of the guys would joke about it. Megan was nice, but he still didn’t know her well enough to talk about such intimate details.

“That’s a pretty good idea,” he admitted. “Let me think about it.”

“Alrighty.”

She stood up and moved the chair back into its position under the desk. It seemed to be exactly where it had been before she had sat down, but Blair knew that Jim would notice a difference.

“Thanks, Megan.”

“You’re welcome, Sandy.”

Jim’s hands were clinched into fists, so tight that his knuckles were bleached white. The Sentinel was standing just inside the door to the men’s bathroom. He had come in here just before Blair entered the building and had been about to go out to meet the younger man when he heard Joel talking to him. Knowing how much the captain’s friendship meant to Blair, the Sentinel decided to give them a couple of minutes alone.

Ellison wasn’t surprised at the amount of greetings Sandburg got, nor the sincere worry that he could hear in several people’s voices. Although, that skanky Wells bitch seriously needed her teeth rearranged.

Jim didn’t let himself consider how mad he was that the blond woman had come on to Blair, he just knew that it wasn’t right. Blair was his!

‘My Guide! Mine!’

And now, Megan was blithering on and on about a support group?! Jim was Blair’s support. If the younger man needed someone to talk to, he should come to Jim!

*“I’m not ready to take that trip with you.”*

Ellison winced as he remembered saying those words to Blair. It was in the hospital, right after Alex Barnes had tried to murder the anthropologist.

‘Maybe he does need somebody to talk to. The one time he tried to broach the subject with me, I shut him down,’ Jim thought. The idea that he was partly to blame for the distance that continued to plague their friendship had the older man’s shoulders drooping and his hands falling open, empty.

The body was lying on its side, face mashed into the side of a dumpster. Blair winced, hoping that the young woman had been dead when that happened.

Blair had gone to the station, after his classes at the university, to help Jim with his paperwork. The younger man was hoping that if he showed up at Major Crimes a little more often maybe the tension that was still hanging around the two of them would dissipate, at least enough to let them get along.

He had just walked in the door when Blair met Jim heading out to a crime scene. Trying to keep things pleasant, Sandburg had chatted as nonchalantly as he could, mostly about innocuous subjects. Jim, for his part, had seemed to be trying to heal their friendship, as well. The two of them talked back and forth until they got to Wang Chow’s Chinese Cuisine, the location of their murder victim.

Blair glanced around furtively when Jim bent over and began to sniff the victim’s clothes. He didn’t see anyone watching them, but couldn’t be too careful.

‘Geez, Jim didn’t even check before using his senses. I swear, sometimes I don’t think he has a sense of self-preservation at all,’ Sandburg thought to himself.

Ellison straightened up, a frown on his face. Blair watched him for a few seconds before asking, “So, you didn’t smell anything, did you?”

Jim shoved his hands into his jacket pockets and scowled.

“Oh, yeah, I smelled plenty. Thompson’s cologne, Smitty’s aftershave, Elliot’s hair spray and some weird electrical smell that wafts around that new tech, Anderson...”

“Yeah, yeah, I get the idea, Big Guy. What I meant was did you smell anything different?” Blair interrupted the Sentinel’s gripe session.

“Yeah.” This time Jim lowered his voice significantly and did look around to make sure that no one could hear them talking. “There was an odd smell to her jacket. It smelled like...” Ellison wrinkled up his nose as he tried to think of a comparison. “Actually, I don’t know what it smelled like.”

“Considering your diet, I’m not surprised.” Blair grinned at the older man to show that he was making a joke. “Fruit is practically a foreign word to you.”

Ellison snorted and allowed a smile to cross his face for a moment. “Huh. Just because I don’t live on roots and berries...”



Blair felt his shoulders relax as the old feeling of camaraderie that they used to enjoy seemed to be creeping into their relationship. Maybe even friendship?

“Damn!” the Sentinel cursed vehemently, but quietly, under his breath. “Sandburg’s supposed to be cooking supper tonight, so where the hell is he?”

The murder case of Shelia Craymour had taken several days to solve. It ended up being the oldest story in the book. Several, actually. Shelia’s husband, Edward, had been having an affair, so he wanted his older wife out of the way. His business had been losing money, so he needed her dead, for the insurance settlement, so he couldn’t just divorce the woman. And, to top it off, she had gone to a lawyer, intending to file for divorce. Since Shelia was the one with the money in the family, it would have left Eddie without a penny to his name.

Edward, his girlfriend, Tiffany, who was smarter than she seemed, and an old friend from college days were currently cooling their heels in lockup. The District Attorney was hoping for either conspiracy or outright murder convictions for all of them. Except for that first day, Sandburg had been too busy at the university to help out with the investigation and Jim was worn down.

Ellison ran up the stairs, because the elevator was on the fritz, again. He was still in military shape, so it was no problem and Jim’s ire certainly added pep to his jog.

“The last damn thing I want to do is cook tonight,” he continued to grouse. “And what in the world is Sandburg’s car doing here when he isn’t?”

Just a few minutes earlier, Ellison had pulled into the loft’s parking lot, happy to see Blair’s Volvo sitting in its usual parking space; that meant the younger man was already home and probably had supper just about finished. He’d extended his sense of hearing automatically, searching for his Guide’s heartbeat, and had been amazed to not hear it.

Jim’s good mood had plummeted to near desolation. “Kid’s probably out on a date,” he mused. The detective felt his hands clenching into fists over the idea of Blair going out with anyone other than Jim himself.

Turning the key in the loft’s front door, the Sentinel shoved it hard, making the battered door slam into the concrete wall. “Crap!” he yelled, giving vent to his frustration.

“What?!” Blair yelled, sitting up on the couch where he’d obviously been taking a nap, his eyes wide and heart racing.

‘Now I hear his heartbeat. I wonder why I couldn’t before?’

“Chief. What’re you doing here?” Ellison demanded.

Blair stood up uncertainly and eyed the bigger man. "I live here, ya know." The grad student's statement sounded more like a question and that irritated the detective even more, because Blair was apparently still afraid that Jim was going to kick him out...again.

"I know that, Sandburg," Jim said irritably. "But I didn't hear your heartbeat."

"My..." Blair looked astonished.

"Yeah, your heartbeat. Yes, I can hear it," he answered the unspoken question in Blair's sapphire colored eyes. "I use it to ground myself, sometimes." Jim shook his head, like a lion shaking his mane. "I saw the Volvo downstairs and listened for you, but I couldn't hear anything."

Ellison narrowed his eyes and looked at Blair's chest, causing the younger man to take a step back.

Blair was really worried. The last time that Jim hadn't *heard* Blair had been when Alex had been around and Blair had been greeted at the door with Jim's gun stuck in his face.

Not wanting a repeat of the whole Alex time, Sandburg backed up slowly. He only stopped when the back of his legs bumped into one of the arm chairs. Swallowing hard, he watched as Jim glared at him, trying to decide if he should run or not.

'Yeah, because that worked so well last time,' he thought to himself. Blair remembered breaking free from Alex's hold once they got outside of Hargrove Hall and making a run for it. He remembered the sharp pain in the back of his skull and the shock of the cold water of the fountain.

"Sandburg!" Blair, caught up in his memories, jumped at the yell. He stared at the Sentinel, wondering what set him off this time. Jim sighed. "I asked you if you were using the white noise generator," Ellison repeated.

"No, man. As far as I know, you haven't used that for a long time now."

"I didn't ask about me, I asked about you." Blair saw that vein on Jim's temple start to throb and would normally have seen that as a sign to make peace, but frankly, he was heartily sick and tired of being the peacemaker.

"Why would I need a white noise generator?" Blair asked. He placed his hands on his hips and planted his feet well apart, unintentionally bracing himself for a fight.

Ellison saw how his friend had positioned himself and listened to Blair's answer and tried to back down. "You're right, Chief. I'm sorry." He saw the surprised look on Blair's face and added. "I don't know why I didn't hear you, but it certainly isn't your fault."

The anthropologist nodded, silently accepting the Sentinel's apology.

Jim chewed on his pork chop and kept an eye on Blair out of the corner of his eye. The detective had been keeping closer tabs on Blair with his senses ever since the scare earlier that evening.

'I know Sandburg swears he wasn't using the white noise generator that he got for me so long ago, but what else could have been the cause. I didn't hear his heartbeat!' Jim's mind was awlirl remembering just a few hours earlier. 'I believe him, but... Damn! I hope my senses aren't messing up again,' Ellison thought, clearly remembering the last time they had gone wonky. 'The last thing we need is another damn Sentinel coming around.'

Chewing on his food like he was an animal gnawing its own leg off, Ellison glared off into space, effectively ignoring Blair.

This time when it happened, Blair was a little more prepared.

Very little.

'My bed's cold,' Blair thought with a frown. He moved a hand, seeking out his blanket to recover himself. Instead, what the young man's wandering hand found was cold metal.

"Huh?" Sandburg sat up quickly, and just as quickly screamed.

Stretching out in front of the grad student was a beautiful sunrise coming up at the far end of the valley. And below him? Nothing. At least, not for a very long way down.

Blair quickly came to realize that he was sitting on the hood of his car, which was on the edge of a bluff. For someone who was afraid of heights, this was not a good way to wake up. For a guy whose acrophobia was, at times, crippling, it was enough to send his heart into palpitations.

Sandburg gave a shriek and scrambled off the hood of his car to land on the relative safety of the ground. His legs were so shaky, and since he was still half-asleep, Blair kept on going down until he was actually sitting on the ground.

"Holy shit!" he exclaimed.

The front tires of his Volvo were less than a foot from the edge of the precipice. Blair put a hand over his mouth to keep in the whimper of fear, because he knew how dangerous the rim of a canyon could be; sometimes they crumbled.

'Especially when they've got a frickin' car on them,' Blair's mind reminded him.

\*

*The tension was thick in the air as Blair watched the car tensely. Just as he was about to stand up, there was a rumbling, grating sound which caused the grad student to scramble back even further. A crack appeared and quickly spread underneath the Volvo.*

*Sandburg wondered what he should do. Could he do anything? I mean, it was man—one man—against nature. Nature, in this case, being the side of a big old ravine.*

*The crack spread and soon was more what could be entailed a fissure. As quickly as it began, the widening ground stopped moving. The longer he watched and nothing happened, Blair's breath and heartbeat settled down into a more normal level. He gave a sigh of relief.*

*CRRrack!*

*In a matter of seconds the ground finished breaking away underneath the car. Blair's Volvo teetered on the edge for a long moment, like something out of a Roadrunner cartoon, and then tilted after the fast falling dirt. The crash, when it came, wasn't a surprise, but the younger man still jumped when the fire from the gas tank exploding lit up the morning sky.*

Blair stared at his car, but unlike in his furtive imagination, the vehicle stayed on solid ground. No disintegrating ground, no plunge like falls with exploding cars at the end of it.

Just his 'classic' car, sitting there. Still rusting, still a 50-50 chance that it would start. Nothing more.

He certainly didn't want to get into said car, but Blair had no idea how far away he was from civilization and didn't want to have to walk to find out. Let alone the fact that the student couldn't afford a new car if he left it where it sat. So, with great reluctance, and a lot of hand shaking, Sandburg slid into his car. For once, whatever capricious gods watched over wandering anthropologists, not to mention their bucket of bolts cars, had the Volvo starting on the first try.

Blair backed up the narrow dirt path, until he found a place that was wide enough for him to be able to turn around. With his heart slowly calming down, the observer drove until he found a place that he recognized. By the time he got to the university Sandburg was so tired that he almost couldn't get out of his car.

"That's it. If I'm so upset or have a stress disorder or whatever that I'm sleep driving, I think I'm going to take Megan's advice and find some people to talk to."

With that decided, Sandburg made himself get out of the car. He was standing there, trying to get up the energy to cross the campus and go into his office when a rattling noise startled him.

"Hey, Professor."

The grad student looked over his shoulder and saw Carson Lambo, captain of the football team, and a student of Blair's, walking towards him. The younger man's fast steps made the gravel on the road rattle; Sandburg was glad to know what that strange noise was.

"Hello, Carson."

Blair decided not to correct Carson over the use of the honorific, 'Professor'. Even though he had told his students—for 375 times, his superlative memory informed him—that, as a grad student, he wasn't a professor yet, they still insisted on calling him by the designation. Sandburg had long ago decided that his students were either flattering him, or were just too lazy to remember not to call him that. Either way, he let it go.

Besides, he was really, really tired.

"What can I do for you?" the teaching assistant asked, a strained smile on his face.

Lambo came to a screeching stop, metaphorically, right beside Sandburg. Blair watched in tired amazement as the young man asked a question about a paper that was due in a few weeks, waved to a pretty girl across the quad, wrote down something in his notebook, all while talking 90 mph and bouncing in place.

'Is that what I look like?' he wondered. 'Well, looked like,' Blair amended.

"...you alright?"

Sandburg blinked a couple of times, feeling suddenly energized. He noticed that Carson had caught hold of his elbow and rightly guessed that he must have been swaying or some such thing.

Blair smiled at the young man. "Yeah, I'm fine." At Lambo's continued perusal, Sandburg shrugged. "I guess I didn't get enough sleep last night and it has just taken me a little while to wake up this morning." He patted Carson on the back. "So, about your paper..."

The two men walked across the campus together. Only now, both of them were chattering and keyed up.

Blair came near to losing his resolve.

Alright, he almost chickened out. But, in the end, the younger man remembered waking up on the hood of his car, right on the edge of a bluff, and decided to go ahead and find a support group.

First, he looked in the Cascade Tribune. Then, the Cascade Herald.

Nada.

Next, he looked in the Yellow Pages. That was a long, irritating process which had him jumping from 'support' to 'grief' to 'help'. None of which actually helped him.

There were lots of ads for support groups for alcoholics—their spouses, their kids, friends. People with drug addictions could find help galore.

Sex Addicts Anonymous, the ad read.

‘Sex addicts?’ Blair thought, his expressive eyebrows shooting up when he read that ad. ‘Huh, I wonder if that’s more of a place where people go to find other people who are more than interested in sex?’ Sandburg shrugged and decided he had been hanging around with Jim for too long if he was that cynical about a newspaper advertisement.

After several days of frustrating, unproductive looking, the observer finally struck gold. He chanced upon an announcement on the billboard outside of the student’s lounge. It read:

**Have you or a loved one had a Near Death Experience?**

**Do you need someone to talk to?**

**Call 555-5555 for more information.**

Sandburg copied down the contact information on a piece of scrap paper in his jacket pocket.

Of course, with Blair’s luck as of late, it wasn’t that easy.

First, he had to call the number about a dozen times before he got a response, and that was an answering machine. Sandburg left his office number—he didn’t want to risk Jim picking up *that* phone call—and waited.

And waited.

And waited.

After almost a week with no reply, Blair had decided to forget all about the support group. ‘I’m doing fine,’ he reasoned, ‘and I can keep meditating. I’m sure everything will be alright before long.’

The anthropologist conveniently pushed the depression and lethargy out of his mind. He wasn’t always depressed; there were also times when his temper ran red hot.

That was, naturally, when his office phone rang.

“Anthropology Department, Blair Sandburg speaking.”

“Hello,” a male voice responded. “This is Brian, calling from the Back From Beyond Support Group.”

Blair had to swallow a couple of times before he could answer, because Brian’s voice was warm, deep and sexy as all hell. ‘Like roses dipped in hot fudge.’

“Uhm...” His mind blanked out as he tried to picture what the other man looked like.

‘Tall, undoubtedly, dark eyes and skin. Hispanic, maybe.’

“You called our contact number?” the other man questioned.

“Yes. Yes, I did,” Blair’s tongue finally untangled enough to admit.

"I am terribly, terribly sorry about the delay in returning your call."

'Indian, possibly.'

"The person who normally keeps track of the answering machine has been ill for the past week. And, quite frankly, we get so few calls that the rest of us had forgotten about the machine."

"It's no problem," Sandburg reassured the other man.

"Let me tell you about our meetings," Brian began to explain.

Since there were so few people who attended the Back From Beyond Support Group, there weren't a lot of different meetings to choose from, like there were in the AA meetings.

Blair went to the meeting that was scheduled the soonest, which ended up being the next night.

It didn't go very well. There were five people in the meeting, including Blair. Two of them refused to talk at all and one girl wouldn't stop talking...about anything and everything. The observer had lived with his mother, and around her alternative lifestyle friends, long enough to recognize the signs; he thought she was high.

The second meeting was three nights later.

It went a little better. There were eleven people in attendance and the chatter was mostly even; some talked, some didn't. However, it was unorganized and focused more on how friends and family reacted to the person's near death experience.

Sadly, Brian was at neither meeting, so Blair was unable to see if the man lived up to what Blair's imagination had pictured him.

Then...there was tonight's meeting, which, as luck would have it, was on the far side of town, as far away from the loft as Blair could possibly get and still be in Cascade.

"So, what happened to you?" the fifth man from the left asked.

"I died," Blair stated bluntly; he was tired of beating around the dead horse in the middle of the room, the one under a bush.

"Oh, you mean..." the woman with a blunt, Joan Jett haircut began.

The anthropologist interrupted her. "No, I did not have a Near Death Experience. I died. I was drowned by some whacked out bitch that drowned me in the fountain outside my campus office, like somebody getting rid of an unwanted kitten. I didn't have a heartbeat and wasn't breathing, and I had been without either one for an indeterminate amount of time." The Joan impersonator started to say more, but Blair just kept going. "The paramedics tried the shocking thing and the needle in the heart thing and had

given up. They had packed up and were waiting for the coroner when my friend...partner...oh hell, my roommate managed to bring me back. Now, everything's different. I'm tired all the time and just when I think I need to go to see a doctor, I'll suddenly feel better. I don't know what happened, but it has left me a mess."

Blair took a deep breath and glanced around. He could see that most of the support group he was attending didn't believe him; they either thought he was a whack job or brain damaged, or both. A few others were leaning away from him, as if Blair's dying was somehow contagious, and they all looked uncomfortable. Well, not all of them, there was one guy on the far end of the circle that Sandburg noticed was nodding his head, as if in agreement.

"Yes, well," the leader of the group, 'Just call me Amy, dear' played with her necklace nervously, sliding the cross back and forth on the chain. "Uhm, does anyone else have a story they would like to share?" she asked with an anxious 'nothing odd just happened' smile on her face.

"Yes, I do," a small, timid looking, middle aged man with a large comb over and a small chin began regaling the eager group with a tale about a bright light and tunnel that sounded like every movie of the week that Blair had seen about Near Death Experiences. The story was so clichéd that it had the scientist sincerely doubting its veracity. But then what did he know, his story wasn't believable at all.

Blair leaned back in his chair resignedly. If they wanted to ignore his story, so be it. But, he was going to do his best to corner that one guy after the meeting.

It turned out that Blair didn't have to corner the guy at all, because when the grad student came out after the meeting he saw him waiting beside Blair's car. The police observer slowed down as he approached the Volvo, his mind suspiciously wondering how the other man knew which vehicle was Blair's. Finally deciding that he'd already died once, so what did it matter if this guy was a psycho killer, Sandburg finished walking over to his car.

"Hi, Blair," the other man greeted him. Under the glare of the streetlight that Blair had parked under, he was able to get a good, long look at the speaker. When he'd first seen him, Sandburg thought the other man was young, maybe even a teenager, but up close and under better light, Blair could see that he was a few years older, probably about his own age of 28. "My name is Terry Grant," he introduced himself, sticking out a hand to be shaken.

"Hi," the grad student returned the greeting, even as his eyes flicked over to look at the car Terry was standing beside. It was with obvious reluctance that he shook the other man's hand.

Terry laughed, a carefree laugh that lit up his pale green eyes, which were the most outstanding feature in an otherwise average face. "Don't worry. I know which car is yours because I go to Rainier and I've seen you driving on and off campus before."



“Oh. Yeah?” Blair felt a few tight muscles relax at the explanation. “Have you ever taken any of my classes?” he asked trying to place the other man’s face and failing.

“Nah, I’m an archeology major,” Grant explained.

“Ah. And never the twain shall meet,” Blair quoted Rudyard Kipling with a grin. Anthropology and Archeology were similar fields of study, but had completely different classes. “So, do you take Maddison or Emerson?” the scientist asked, mentioning two of the best archeology professors at the university.

“Both,” Terry said with a wry grin.

“Ouch. You are either one daring s.o.b. or a masochist.”

Terry shrugged one shoulder. “A little of both,” he admitted. “So listen, you wanna go talk more about what you said in there?” he pointed to the hall where the support group had met.

Blair’s hesitation was so slight that even he almost missed it. Terry was the first person who hadn’t looked at him like he was a loon when Blair described what happened when he died. Even Jim didn’t want to discuss it with him and if the guy who brought you back from the dead wouldn’t talk, it was a cinch that nobody else would.

“Yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

They ended up going back to Terry’s apartment to talk, which probably wasn’t the smartest move Blair had ever made.

‘Right after talking to some whacked out bimbo at the station; one who started pulling off her clothes in the middle of the street.’

After all, the observer only had the other man’s word that he was who he said that he was, but Blair was tired and really didn’t care what happened to him at this point, so he went.

“Normally, I would have waited until you had been at a few more meetings and recognized me before I approached you, but from the group’s reaction to your story, I had my doubts that you would be at any more meetings.” Grant tilted his head, raised his eyebrows and gave Blair a questioning look.

“You’re right, I’m not going back there again,” Blair admitted. He’d gone to the Back From Beyond support group to be around people who had gone through what he had and were willing to talk about it, not be looked at like he was crazy.

“I don’t blame you,” Terry said as he sat a couple of cans of soda on the glass topped coffee table.

“Those guys aren’t exactly open to experiences that differ from the norm.”

“That’s for sure,” Blair muttered. He took a long swallow of his drink, letting his mind wander back to the *support group*. “Not a lot of support there,” he added.

“Hmmm, true. They have a hard time believing anything different.”

“Do you believe me?” Blair asked, looking Terry straight in the eyes; blue eyes piercing green ones.

“Of course,” the other man answered immediately. If he had hesitated, even for a moment, then Blair would have most likely gotten straight up and walked out. But he didn’t and Sandburg felt his body relaxing for the first time in quite a while.

“So...” the anthropologist paused as he thought how to phrase the question delicately. “Uhm, what happened to you?” Blair waved his hand, indicating anything and everything. “I mean...”

“How did I die?” Terry asked, a slight smile on his face. “It’s okay, I’ve come to terms with it.” Blair nodded encouragingly and so he continued. “I was on a dig in the Sudan. I was with a team that was excavating a gravesite out of a hillside.” Grant shook his head, making his light brown hair ripple along his neck. “The area where we were digging wasn’t shored up as well as it should have been. It was lunch time and I came back a few minutes before the rest of the crew because I wanted to look at one area without any distractions.”

Blair waited for Terry to continue. He noticed that the other man’s cheeks were quickly darkening into a bright vermilion and wondered why.

“One of the other students, Felicity, was very nice looking.” Grant gave a little laugh and amazingly, blushed even more. “Okay, she was really hot. Flic wore body-hugging, short shorts and t-shirts so tight that I don’t see how she breathed.” Terry gave Blair a glance before looking away. “All of the guys and most of the women couldn’t take their eyes off of her.” He snorted. “I think that was the idea, because after the expedition, Felicity suddenly dropped archeology and moved to Brazil. I hear she’s a very rich woman.”

“You think she stole some artifacts,” Blair said, his mouth tightening in distaste. As a scientist, he knew what a tragedy it was to have artifacts taken from a site without proper documentation of exactly where they had been found. To have them just disappear into some unscrupulous collector’s vault, mostly likely never to be seen again, was even worse.

“Yeah, probably.” Shaking his head, as if to jiggle loose the memories, Terry continued. “Anyway, she was distracting, so I headed back early to get some time to myself.” He stopped and took a deep breath. Blair could see that he was preparing himself to remember what came next. “I was crouched down, digging around what I thought might be a bowl, when I heard a rumbling. Looking up, I saw what seemed like half of the mountainside coming towards me. Like a damned deer in the headlights, I froze.”

Terry’s hand was up above his head, trying to ward off the long past dirt and rocks. Even though his voice was steady, Blair saw that Terry’s hand was shaking, ever so slightly. The grad student swallowed hard; he knew how hard it was for him to even think about Alex and The Fountain.

Grant seemed to come to himself. He lowered his hand and rubbed it absently. “I was buried under the landslide. Nobody knew what happened until the rest of the group arrived a few minutes later.

Everybody,” he paused and gave a little laugh, “even Felicity, dug like crazy. They don’t know exactly how long I was in the dirt, but when they pulled me out, I wasn’t breathing and I didn’t have a heartbeat.” Terry took a shuddering breath. “I was dead.”

“Then how...”

“There was a shaman that lived in the nearby village.”

Blair’s head popped up at the mention of a shaman. Since meeting Incacha, Jim’s Quechan guide, and being given ‘the way of the shaman’, the grad student had studied up on all things shamanistic.

“Luckily for me, he had a vision that something bad was going to happen and was at the site when they pulled me out. He, uh, brought me back from the dead.” It was Terry’s turn to give Blair an entreating look, uncertain if he would be believed.

Blair nodded. “I believe you, man,” he said with complete sincerity.

“Good.” Terry smiled brightly. “Good,” he repeated, softly. “Alright, now comes the hard part,” he muttered softly, but Blair, who was used to dealing with Sentinel hearing—and speaking—had gotten used to people speaking very quietly and therefore heard him.

Sandburg blinked. “The hard part?” he asked in trepidation.

“Yeah. Have you noticed how tired you get since you died?” Grant asked.

“Yes, I have. I’ll be exhausted and then...”

“All of the sudden you are full of energy,” Terry interrupted to finish Blair’s sentence.

“Right.” The anthropologist frowned, wondering where his new acquaintance was going with this.

“Probably right after you touched someone.”

“Well, I doubt...that...” Blair trailed off as he thought about it. “I guess it’s true,” he said thoughtfully. “I hadn’t really thought about it before, but I do feel better after I’ve been around people.” Blair brushed his hair back from his face, trying to hide his embarrassment. “I do have a tendency to touch people,” he admitted with a blush.

Terry nodded, not seeming to be surprised by Blair’s admission. “And how about the times when you’ve found yourself someplace odd and it turns out you got there by sleepwalking.”

The observer sat up straighter in the chair, his dark blue eyes widening in alarm. “Hey, man. How did you know about that?” He stood up and looked around nervously. “Have you been following me, or what?” he asked, his voice getting higher as he bordered on hysteria.

“Blair, calm down.” Terry stood up right after Sandburg did. The archeologist held out a hand in a placating gesture. “I promise that I’m not following you. Or having anyone else follow you,” he added when Blair opened his mouth to make another statement. “Please sit back down. Please?”

With obvious reluctance, Blair sat back down, but this time he sat on the very edge of the chair, ready to bolt at the first hint of duplicity on the other man’s part.

“I know about these things because they happen to me too,” Terry admitted.

“What happened to you?” Blair queried, his head tilted to one side.

“After I died,” Blair was amazed at how easily Terry said those words, “and I was still in Sudan, I found myself getting super tired. And then, I’d find myself someplace that I had no memory of going to.”

Blair leaned forward, unconsciously offering his support and encouragement. “Okay.” Sandburg waited and was surprised when Terry didn’t elaborate further. “So, since you said you used to have the same problem I guess that I can assume that you don’t anymore?”

“That’s right.” Grant sighed, looked over to the side and ran a hand through his light brown hair. “Alright, you need to keep an open mind,” he advised.

“Man, no problem. I am the most open minded guy you’ll ever meet.”

“Hmmm, yeah, we’ll see.” Terry gave Blair a bemused look. “To explain the fugue like state you find yourself in sometimes. I have to explain what you are, now. What we are.”

“What do you mean **what** we are?” the anthropologist asked, leaning back in his chair.

Terry gave a little laugh and shrugged ruefully. “We’re zombies.”

“Okay, I probably could have handled that a little better,” Blair admitted out loud.

He leaned his head back into the shower spray to rinse off the natural, mint shampoo. Opening the bottle of almond oil conditioner, the curly haired man quickly poured some into the palm of his hand and worked it into his hair. Now facing the spray of water, he loaded his washrag with oatmeal soap and began scrubbing the thick pelt of hair on his chest and the one between his legs, letting the conditioner set for a little bit. All the while he was automatically seeing to his ablutions, Blair’s mind was hopping around like a jack rabbit on speed.

‘Zombies,’ he thought with a snort. ‘What is this, a George Romero movie?’

Blair rinsed off his hair and body and was out of the shower a minute or so later. Living with Jim and his house rules had conditioned the grad student to be quick in the bathroom.

‘Terry’s a whacko. He’s gotta be,’ Blair thought to himself as he dried off. ‘His idea is just ridiculous.’

“A zombie.” Blair shook his head, making his wet curls rub against his t-shirt. He walked out of the bathroom...

“What was that, Chief?”

The younger man shrieked and jumped several inches in the air. He put one shaking hand over his now pounding heart. “Geez, man, don’t scare me like that. You almost gave me a heart attack.”

Ellison raised his eyebrows at the exaggeration, but didn’t call Blair on it. “I take it that you didn’t hear me come in.”

“No, man, I didn’t, what with my being in another room,” Blair replied, rather snippily, but he thought he had the right, all things considered. “I don’t hear like you, remember?”

Sandburg noticed that the Sentinel was standing close to the front door and that he still had his coat on. “You’re home early. Do you need to go back out?” he asked, waving a hand at Jim’s outerwear.

“No, I just thought I’d wait and see if I needed to rush you to the hospital.” At Blair’s questioning look, he added, “For that heart attack of yours.”

The Guide rolled his eyes at Jim’s attempt at humor. “Very funny, Big Guy.”

Blair continued on into his tiny bedroom. It wasn’t until later, when Jim was falling asleep, that he realized that he never did find out why Blair was talking about zombies.

## **Two Days Later**

Ellison gritted his teeth, making the muscles in his jaw twinge in response. The detective had a headache and all he wanted was a little peace and quiet.

“...so, I told him that he had to redo the paper with sources that were real.” Blair sighed. “You can probably imagine how well that went over.” The grad student shrugged, never taking his eyes off of the television set that was playing the news. “He said that he was...”

“Will you shut up!” Jim yelled. Blair turned to look at him in astonishment. “You have done nothing but yak yak yak since I got home. Just...be quiet for a while.”

Jim turned away from his roommate and turned back to the news. He ignored Blair staring at him, his mouth hanging open, until the younger man seemed to come to himself. Sandburg closed his mouth and turned to face forward, but even out of the corner of his eye, Jim could see that the younger man wasn’t looking at anything; he was staring at the floor. After a few minutes, Blair pushed himself up off of the couch and went into the bathroom.

Ellison hadn’t turned his head, but he had followed the younger man with his eyes. He waited, just daring the other man—who was living in *his* home—to slam the door. Blair didn’t and the Sentinel felt satisfied that he had calmed the observer down. That he had retained order in his home.

The detective refused to let himself think about why he was really angry. Against his will, his mind went back to earlier in the day. Just that afternoon, the Sentinel had been in a good mood, surprising everyone, who had put up with his attitude for the last few months.

Then Blair had arrived. Normally, that would have been a good thing, but today Jim listened to him talking and he heard the observer flirting.

With a man.

And not just any man, but Brian Rafe. Rafe was young, handsome, young, dressed to the nines. Oh, and did he mention...young.

Not that Jim thought he was old, or anything. But he was aware that there were eleven years separating himself and Blair. Eleven hard, long years that had taken a big toll on Ellison's body. He dressed just fine, but Rafe looked like a male model. And...he had all of his hair.

Blair flirting was no big surprise. Hell, Blair had mentioned a nurse he was 'tutoring' the second time Jim met him, so he was used to hearing about the babes in Sandburg's life. But flirting with Rafe meant that the grad student wasn't as straight as Jim thought. That meant Jim might have had a chance and didn't know it. And that pissed him off royally.

The curly haired, blue eyed dynamo had been the star of many a fantasy fueled dream for a lot of the last three years. To know that he might have missed out on the opportunity to really have Blair in his bed—not to mention, on the couch, in the bathtub—had made the Sentinel see red. Literally.

Jim had been sitting at his desk, listening as Blair flirted with Rafe and the handsome detective had flirted back. A red haze had rolled over his eyes, tingeing everything around him with the vibrant color. However, unlike when he was in the blue jungle, where the ex-Ranger felt the peace of having Incacha around, now all he felt was rage, boiling under his skin like lava waiting to erupt. Luckily, for all concerned, it was time to go home shortly thereafter. Which led him to this evening.

The Sentinel heard the slightest sound and dialed up his hearing. It was the brush of skin against metal; Blair was opening the bathroom door. Ellison hastily turned his sense of hearing back down to normal, just like Blair had taught him. When Sandburg came out, Jim made sure that he wasn't looking towards him. Blair came out, head down, and headed to his bedroom.

Even though he hadn't planned to, Jim listened to the other man, waiting to hear any grumbling after he was alone in his room. To his irritation—he'd subconsciously wanted something else to be mad over—and his astonishment, Blair didn't say a word as he changed and went to bed.

'At least it's quiet,' the older man thought to himself.

Now, if he could only figure out why getting what he wanted didn't make him happy.

After yet another long, sleepless night, Blair got finally got up. He shaved, tamed down his hair and got dressed before he realized how quiet the loft was.

‘And not just me keeping my mouth shut,’ the grad student thought.

Blair had thought, all through the night while not sleeping, about what had happened the night before. He wasn’t sure why Jim had exploded all over him, but it certainly hadn’t been the first time. The grad student had come to a few conclusions.

Firstly, it was Jim’s loft; he’d been reminded of that enough times. Secondly, because it was Jim’s place, he could, and did, make the rules, which, like it or not, Blair had to follow. And, lastly, because of all of this, the Sentinel could throw Blair out any time he wanted to. Just look at what happened with Alex. So, unless Blair wanted to be homeless he had to toe the line.

Not exactly thrilled with his realizations, Blair wasn’t paying that much attention and so it caught him by surprise to realize that he was the only one home. Jim had left for work early, either to avoid seeing his roommate, scratch that, his acquaintance, or he had been called in and just didn’t let Blair know. Whichever was the case, it just showed how close to being kicked out he really was.

‘I’m going to have to step back from the Sentinel stuff,’ Blair thought to himself as he locked the door behind him.

Sarah Jennings sat in the front row, facing the front of the podium, of her very favorite class. Anthropology 201 was, in her opinion, the best class offered that semester. Of course, that was because she had already taken the 101 and the 102 classes the year before. Professor Sandburg was such a wonderful teacher, so caring and helpful. Naturally, it didn’t hurt that he was cute as a button and had blue eyes to die for.

The nineteen year old student was eagerly watching—while trying not to look like she was—the classroom door, waiting for Professor Sandburg to come in. In truth, most of his students anticipated their teacher’s entrance, because the younger man always had a ready smile and seemed so happy to be there that his students were likewise happy to be in the classroom.

This time they were disappointed; Sarah doubly so. Blair walked into the room—walked, not rushed in like he was late, late, late—and over to the podium, a very slight smile on his normally happy face.

Students around the room looked at one another. This wasn’t their teacher! Something was obviously wrong. Sarah watched Blair intently, hoping for the return of his smile.

Looking up from where he’d been arranging his notes, Blair did smile at the class. Although it still wasn’t his usual bright, sunny smile, it was better than when he first came into the room. Picking up a stack of papers, the professor opened his mouth to speak.

But nothing came out.

With a surprised look on his face, Sandburg cleared his throat and tried again. Still, nothing. Not a word, not a sound, not even a squeak. Putting his free hand to his throat, Blair looked momentarily panicked.

“Professor Sandburg?”

“Are you alright?”

The questions were repeated by each and every student in the room, all with varying degrees of worry in their voices. Blair smiled and raised his index finger in the air. Setting down the papers he’d been holding, the professor turned to the dry erase board and began to write.

‘I seem to have laryngitis,’ he wrote.

Turning back around he motioned Sarah to come forward. The young woman was giddy at being singled out to help him.

“Yes, Mr. Sandburg? How may I help you?”

Blair handed her the stack of papers and waved a hand at the classroom. Sarah nodded and hurried to hand out the graded papers. When she returned to the seat with her own paper, the young woman noticed that her teacher had written more on the board.

‘Since I am ill, class is dismissed for the day. I will have someone leave a message on my answering machine about Wednesday’s class. Please remember about the test next Monday and use this free time to study.’

Not ones to look a gift horse in the mouth, the students left quickly. They were sure to wish their teacher ‘hope you feel better soon’, but they were out the door in a flash.

Blair walked slowly down the hallway towards the door leading to Major Crimes. His morning had been frustrating and a little frightening.

After the debacle of trying to talk in his 8 o’clock class, Blair had gone straight to the campus infirmary. Well, that’s not strictly true. First, he went to the secretary’s office and told—i.e. typed on his laptop—her what had happened and had asked the good woman to cancel the rest of his classes for the day and the next one. Millie, who had always had a soft spot for the young student, was happy to oblige.

The next few hours were spent waiting to see the doctor, being prodded at, having tests done, and being very bored—the time he waited was very long. The fact that Dr. Singleton couldn’t find any reason for Blair not to be able to speak had them both worried.

Blair eventually went back to his office and began to do research, via the internet, on sudden laryngitis, loss of voice...and zombies.



Blair smiled and waved to a couple of people who acknowledged his entrance, in lieu of speaking directly to them; he didn't want to risk his voice failing him again. Jim wasn't at his desk and Sandburg wasn't sure if he was upset or relieved by this. He did want to know if Terry's whacked out theory was true or not, but really he wasn't certain that he *did* want to know.

'Terry can't be right,' Blair thought to himself. 'It's just too crazy to believe.' A little voice in his mind reminded the Guide that sentinels, spirit guides and blue jungles were more than a little farfetched, as well. Blair told that voice to 'shut up'.

When called, Grant, who had been very obliging, especially considering how they parted after their last meeting...

*"Man, that is the craziest thing I've ever heard!" Blair had yelled.*

*"Blair, listen to me for a minute," Terry had tried to reason as Sandburg rushed out of his apartment. "I need to tell you..."*

*"Nothing. You need to tell me absolutely nothing. I can't believe I fell for your sympathy. You are one sick individual."*

*The slamming of the Volvo's door ended anything else the other man might have said.*

Terry had told Blair that zombie's could be controlled by the person who brought them back from the dead. So, when Jim told him to shut up, Blair was obliged to do as he was told.

Blair sat in Jim's 'visitor's chair' and nervously fidgeted, pulling on a loose thread that was hanging off the tail of his shirt. He was too anxious to get his own university work out and Blair didn't know enough about Ellison's current cases to do any paperwork for the detective.

"...let me know when you find out." Simon's deep voice suddenly filled the room as the door to the captain's office opened.

"Yes, sir. Right away," Jim answered his superior. "Sandburg," he greeted the grad student.

Banks glanced over. "Sandburg," he added. Blair nodded to the two men. Jim sat down in his chair, a surprised look on his face.

'I guess he's surprised that I'm not talking a mile a minute.'

In actuality, Ellison was more stunned than anything else, at the observer just sitting there. It took a few minutes of silence for the older man to realize what was bothering him. He was used to hearing all about Blair's day; who and what he's seen, etc. The intense quiet just wasn't natural and it was throwing the ex-Ranger off.

Jim gave the younger man a quick glance. 'He looks okay,' the Sentinel thought. Surreptitiously, he dialed up his senses, one by one, and checked Blair over. 'He smells fine; no taint of illness. Heartbeat is up a little, but not too much.'

“Everything alright, Chief?” he finally resorted to asking, a frown wrinkling the thin skin on his forehead.

Blair’s shrug wasn’t particularly informative, but it was irritating to the detective. He waved a hand, dismissing the other man’s silence. Ellison went back to his paperwork, at least he seemed to, but really Jim’s mind was going over what was up with Sandburg. Then it hit him.

“Is this about what I said last night?” he asked in a quiet tone. “I can’t believe you’re still holding a grudge,” said the man who still wouldn’t talk to his family without being forced to. Ellison sighed. “I only wanted it quiet for a little while,” he admitted. When Blair just stared at him, mutely, the detective finally lost his temper. “Say something!”

“Jim...”

Blair’s hands flew up to cover his mouth, as if he wanted to hold in the words. He jumped to his feet and stared at Ellison, wide eyed. Several people around the room stopped what they were doing to stare at the two men. The Sentinel eyed his friend, wondering what was wrong.

“I couldn’t talk,” Blair whispered through his hands. He spoke so quietly, that even the Sentinel with his heightened hearing could barely understand what he was saying through his overlapping fingers.

“What?” Jim asked, sure that he’d heard wrong.

Blair slowly removed his hands and Jim could see that the grad student had been gripping his face so tightly that there were red marks on the sides and across the top and bottom of his mouth. “I couldn’t talk,” Sandburg repeated, only slightly louder.

“What? I...”

“I went to class this morning and when I got up to lecture, I couldn’t make a sound,” Blair explained, his blue eyes wide with fright. “I went to the campus clinic and everything, but the doctor couldn’t find a reason why my voice was gone.”

Ellison eyed the anthropologist up and down, as if by staring at him Jim could somehow figure out what had apparently made him ill only to have him better just a few hours later. “You seem okay now,” he said tentatively.

“Yeah...I...I guess I am.”

Jim didn’t like the way Blair was looking at him or the way his heart was thundering in his chest. It was almost as if the younger man were afraid of him. The Sentinel knew that there had been times when he’d accidentally—and yes, sometimes deliberately—intimidated the curly haired man. But, as far as Jim knew, he hadn’t done anything like that recently; certainly not today.

“Chief...” Jim stood up and held out one hand, palm down, trying to get his friend to calm down. “...why don’t you...”

“I have to go,” Blair interrupted the detective. Jim blinked in surprise at the abruptly uttered statement. “I think...I mean, I have to...I need to talk to someone who might know what happened with my voice. I’m...I’ll see you back at the loft, tonight,” the Guide promised.

“Okay. Are you sure you’re okay to drive?” Ellison asked. His mind was screaming at him to not let the other man go anywhere by himself, but there really wasn’t any way to stop him.

“Yeah. Yeah, I’ll be fine.”

With that, Blair grabbed up his backpack and jacket and hurried away. Ellison’s eyes weren’t the only one who followed his departure.

Jim was aware that most everyone in the squad room was looking at him, wondering what the detective had done to upset Sandburg. Ellison, who was listening to his friend scurry out of the police station, was asking himself the same question.

Unlike what Blair had told Jim, he didn’t go to see Terry. Instead he got in his car and started driving. Sandburg didn’t stop until he had driven deep into the woods on the edge of a lake, out in the middle of nowhere. It was calm, quiet, and most of all, deserted.

The anthropologist got out of his car and walked along a track that led down toward the lake. Then, he veered off of a very faint trail that led to the left. Sandburg sat down on the cold, but luckily dry, ground. He was still fairly close to the Volvo but, more importantly, far away from the water. He could see the lake just fine from where he was. For some strange reason, Blair had an aversion to water—even the shower sometimes—since Alex.

‘Go figure,’ Blair thought sarcastically. ‘I can’t imagine why that blonde bimbo has caused me to have an aversion to water.’

The recently drowned man could take showers and being out in the rain didn’t bother him—if neither one was too strong of a downpour—but anything stronger than a mild spray had him gasping for breath.

‘But according to Terry, I’m dead.’

Blair opened his eyes and let the horizon capture his gaze as he thought. The grad student frowned at the implications of being dead.

“Terry says that I don’t always have a heartbeat.” Sandburg bit his lip as he ruminated on that. “That would explain the times that Jim came racing in, gun waving, when he didn’t realize I was there. He couldn’t hear me.”

Blair glanced down at his chest, wide eyed. He took several deep breaths to stave off hyperventilation. And then another thought came barreling into his brain.

“If I’m really dead, then I don’t need to breathe. Right? According to Terry, my autonomic functions are something that my body does because it is used to doing it and will probably keep happening for a while yet. Huh.”

Ever the scientist, Blair decided to put his new friend’s theory to the test. Wouldn’t Jim be amused that Blair was the one being tested this time.

Sandburg pulled out his pocket watch and held it in his right hand. He knew from a long ago dare that the longest he could hold his breath was 78 seconds. Since it wasn’t that long ago that he drowned—along with the subsequent fear, not to mention lung damage—the anthropologist imagined that his time would be considerably less.

He waited until the second hand reached twelve before taking a deep breath and holding it. Blair knew that he probably looked like an idiot, with his cheeks all puffed out, but he was reluctant to let go of the supply of precious air that he had trapped in his mouth.

Thirty-five seconds.

Okay, maybe this wasn’t too bad. He hadn’t panicked the way he tended to nowadays when his air was impeded for more than a few seconds.

‘Maybe being told that I *don’t* need to breathe was enough to calm my mind,’ Blair thought.

‘Unconsciously, I know that I’m not going to suffocate just sitting here, so perhaps being reassured by Terry’s theories has helped alleviate my fears,’ the grad student mused.

‘That would make an interesting study; to see just how much the mind can control the body. It’s obvious that phobias can make you afraid, so if you manage to convince yourself that there’s nothing to be afraid of, it could, theoretically, work in reverse.’

Sandburg narrowed his eyes, thinking of ways to test his new theory. It certainly wouldn’t be easy. There were plenty of people who wanted to get over their crippling fears, but convincing them that the fears were unjustified would certainly be harder.

‘Could it be possible to convince someone who is afraid of snakes to touch one? Even a harmless snake?’ the grad student mused.

Blair glanced down at his watch, which he had forgotten as his scientific mind had theorized.

Five minutes, thirty eight seconds.

Sandburg gasped, his eyes going wide. Maybe he had been breathing and just not realized it. But, no, when he had gasped, air had escaped from his lungs. He hadn’t been breathing automatically, he just hadn’t been breathing.

“Holy Shit!” Blair exclaimed out loud. “I wasn’t breathing.”

Before he could seriously start freaking out, the observer took hold of his wrist to check his pulse. Sandburg moved his fingers several times and eventually switched his watch to his right hand and checked the other wrist. Then he touched his throat. The evidence was conclusive. He didn't have a heartbeat.

No heartbeat, no breathing...ergo, Blair was dead.

"I really am a zombie," he said, shock coloring his voice, making it come out higher pitched than normal. "Oh...crap."

'Alex murdered me and I'm still dead. Jim brought me back, with Incacha's help, but not alive, as a zombie.'

Deciding that it was better to put Alex out of his mind, not to mention other, more disturbing facts, Sandburg shifted into a more comfortable position, i.e. crossed legs, and began to meditate. As he hummed to himself—chanting was so cliché—the teacher/student/Guide felt the tension from today and the night before flow out of his body and into the ether. He decided to be like Scarlet O'Hara and 'think about it tomorrow'.

Somehow, tomorrow ended up being three days later, and even then, not by Blair's choice.

It all started off, innocuously enough, at the university. The anthropologist was leaving the library, after returning a couple of books, when he came up on two students fighting. Blair only recognized one of the young men, Terry Thomason, from an Anthropology 101 class that he took from Blair. The other young man seemed familiar, but only slightly; more than likely he had seen him on campus.

But that was neither here nor there. As a teaching assistant it was Sandburg's duty to try and keep peace among the students. Even if he hadn't been a teacher, Blair would have felt it necessary to intervene. It didn't matter that both men were bigger than Blair—who wasn't?—and really whaling on one another. Blair stepped up next to them and yelled.

"Mr. Thomason! Mr. Bailey!"

Hee hee. It was a good thing the other kid had on his letter jacket. All the better to read your name, my dear.

Yelling their names in an authoritative voice was enough to stop the two of them. Terry immediately recognized Blair and backed off. Bailey either knew who Blair was or he was just reacting to the tone of voice, whatever the case, he too stepped back. All would have been fine, if only...

"Well, what do we have here?" a voice boomed out.

Blair jumped a few inches and turned to see who had yelled in his ear. To his utter surprise, a Cascade policeman was standing there.

'What the hell is a cop doing on campus?' Sandburg wondered to himself. And why was he intervening in a simple fight among a couple of kids?

"There was a fight, but it's been taken..."

"Yeah, I can see there was a fight." The cop looked at the two younger men sympathetically. "You boys can go on to class, or whatever. I've got the situation under control."

Blair's eyebrows shot up at that. He, meaning Blair, had handled the situation, long before the cop stuck his nose in. And it looked to him as if the two combatants should go to the campus clinic and get checked out, not just saunter off.

"Uh, I don't think..." Again, Sandburg was interrupted.

"No, you don't, punk." The officer grabbed Blair by the lapel of his jacket and hauled him forward and up onto his toes. "You are under arrest for assault."

"W-what?" Blair sputtered, unable to believe what he was hearing.

"You have the right to remain silent..."

Sandburg tuned out the reading of his rights as he was spun around and a pair of handcuffs slapped on his wrists. He looked around and noticed that the few people who had been watching the fight had scattered, most when he had interceded, but the rest had definitely scurried off when the cop showed up. It had been the grad student's observation that most people, even those who had done nothing wrong, usually took off when the cops showed up.

On the upside, it didn't appear that very many people would be witness to his arrest. On what charges? On the downside, though, not many people would be able to stand up for him, even if this blowhard cop was asking any questions.

"Move it, punk," the statement was punctuated by a push in the middle of his shoulder blades, one that made him stumble. Luckily, he didn't fall, but the motion did dislodge the backpack from his shoulder. Blair didn't lose that all important bag, because the handcuffs prevented it from sliding to the ground. The strap caught on his elbow and the heavy—one laptop, three books and a shitload of papers—bag thumped against his knee, also threatening to knock Sandburg's leg out from underneath him.

"Go on, stop lollygagging."

The observer gritted his teeth, knowing from protests with his mother that arguing would only get him a beat down. So, Blair walked to the police car, assisted every other step by the shoving and his backpack thumping against his leg.

'I'm going to have bruises,' he thought, knowing that the ones on his leg probably were going to be the least of his troubles.

No, no, no, no...

No, no, no, no...

Scream!.....Till you feel it

Scream!.....Till you believe it

Scream!.....And when it hurts you

Scream it out loud!.....Scream!...

Blair tried calling Jim from the station's phone, but it was either out of range or the detective had it turned off. The desk sergeant wouldn't let him make another call.

"One call per detainee," the older man told him; he didn't even bother to look up from the computer that he was typing away at. "No freebies, sonny."

Sandburg didn't think that the man had anything against him, it was just the rules. That didn't help when the arresting officer smirkingly led him back to the holding cells. The jerk slammed the grad student against the cell bars before unlocking the door.

The police officer removed the cuffs and before he could even move his hands from behind his back, a large hand was placed in between his shoulder blades and Blair was shoved into the cell, hard. As he heard the metal clank of the doors shutting, the anthropologist took note of who his cell mates were and felt his stomach clench in worry.

Three men, all as big, or bigger, than Simon. One had dreadlocks that hung down to his waist and looked like they hadn't been washed in a month of Sundays. Another of the men was completely bald, but it was hard to tell because the entire top of his head was covered in tattoos. The third guy's hair was nicely styled and gelled and frankly, looked like something that Rafe would sport. However, all three men wore dark leather jackets with a gang's name and colors stitched, and in some cases, burned, onto the back. Blair could only assume that they were allowed to keep their jackets because the arresting officers had been either too intimidated, or too scared to take them from the frightening looking men.

"Have fun, cutie pie," the cop said with a laugh.

The trio, who had largely ignored Blair's ignominious entry into the cell, turned at the officer's voice. The man with the dreads' eyes followed the cop, who hurried out of range rather quickly. He then turned back to Blair and gave him a long look. The other two men hadn't watched the officer scurry away; they had looked at the smaller man right away.

Blair licked his dry lips and watched the three men. Inside, he was trying to decide if he should say something, trying to ease the tension, or if he should keep his mouth shut. He was still deciding when

Dreads, as Blair dubbed him, turned away from him without saying a word. The other two followed his example.

'He must be the leader,' Sandburg thought.

He cautiously breathed a sigh of relief. Walking slowly and deliberately, the observer went over to the nearest bench and sat down. Relieved that his moving hadn't bothered them, Sandburg began to wait.

Captain Banks was sitting at his desk working without enthusiasm on the pile of paperwork that threatened to slide off of his desk into a messy, papery avalanche of death; one that would likely bury the unwary man alive! Or maybe not.

"No matter how much I do, how many forms I fill out and Rhonda files, there are always more waiting for me," the large man muttered. "They're like rabbits," he concluded. "They multiply when your back is turned."

Simon smiled at the mental image of pages of paper fluttering together and little bits of paper falling from them. The little bit of whimsy helped to lighten his mood, which could only be a good thing. He was still sitting there, letting his hand rest for a bit, when the captain heard a commotion in the squad room. Getting up from his desk, Banks seemed to be irritated, but in reality, he was happy with the distraction.

And what a distraction!

Jim Ellison, his best detective and friend...oozed over to his desk. No, really, there was no better word for it. He oozed.

The detective was covered from the neck down in a muddy, slimy looking substance that smelled like rotting garbage and human waste. His hair had a leaf in it; brown and missing a few sections. With every step that he took, the cop squished out a tiny amount of brackish looking water. A partially decomposed plastic bag was stuck to his right heel.

Simon bit his lip, trying not to laugh. Several of the patrol officers were snickering and Rafe had a suspiciously bright look in his eyes. Henri wasn't even trying to be subtle; he had a bright grin on his face. Ellison was glaring at everyone.

"Uh, what happened, Ellison?" Simon asked.

"I stopped to ask Collins here," he waved a hand at the handcuffed man sitting in Jim's visitor chair. At least, Simon assumed it was a man, because he was, if possible, even filthier than Ellison was. "...about the Mitchell case. He ran." Jim gritted his teeth so hard that Johnson down at the front desk probably heard him. "I pursued him, caught him and he resisted arrest, causing both of us to end up in the large pit behind the Tamberlin Slaughterhouse."



Banks winced. A slaughterhouse would explain a lot. The large man waved a hand in front of his face in a vain effort to clear the air somewhat.

"I see. Well, you two can't be in here in that condition." Turning to Rafe and H, he smiled. "Why don't you two chuckleheads take Mr. Collins down to holding, freshen him up and get him into some clean clothes."

The two men weren't laughing now. Brown gave the suspect a reluctant hand up and the ultra-fastidious and well-dressed Rafe looked like he would rather wrangle a snake than be close to the filthy man.

"Jim, why don't you go down to the locker room and hose off," Simon suggested.

"Yeah, good idea," Ellison admitted. He turned around and squished out of the room.

Simon looked down at the puddle of goo on the floor where Ellison had been standing and composed his features to make certain that his amusement didn't show. Looking up and around the room, he saw that almost all of the people still left were very obviously happy at Ellison's messy appearance.

"Jobson, Avery, clean up this mess," he waved a hand at the puddle and messy chair. The two men's smiles immediately turned to frowns. Banks raised his eyebrows at them.

"Yes, sir."

"Right away, captain."

Banks turned around and gave the room at large a slow stare. He inwardly smirked when 'his men'—and women—afraid that they would be given clean up jobs, suddenly found work to do.

"Hmph," Simon snorted slightly. 'It's good to know that I've still got it,' he thought to himself. Curling up his nose, the dark skinned man winced at the smell that still permeated the room, even after Jim and the suspect had left. 'Damn. If it smells that bad to me, I can't imagine how it would stink to a Sentinel...'

The captain gazed at Jim's desk for a moment, lost in the thoughts swirling around in his mind; his own personal zone.

'Damn! His senses!'

Simon belatedly thought about the Sentinel's extra strong senses and mentally smacked himself on the head. If the smell was so strong to Simon, who had average senses, what must it have been like for Jim? There was absolutely no telling whatever was in that muck was doing to Jim's skin. Or his internal organs. It was entirely possible that some of that crap could have gotten inside Ellison's mouth, and therefore, his body.

As Banks hurried towards the elevator he remembered numerous times when something as innocuous as a different hand cleaner or air freshener caused skin irritations on the sensitive man. Simon clearly remembered one time when an attorney's perfume made Jim sneeze uncontrollably and break out in hives.

‘So, what the hell will full immersion in that muck do to him?’

Considering the things that people flushed down their toilets, other than the obvious, there was really no telling what the sewage would do to anyone. Simon, for one, sincerely hoped he would never personally find out.

By the time that the captain reached the locker room he had whipped himself up into a fine state, imagining all sorts of worst case scenarios—some imagined, some, unfortunately, remembered. As he hurried into the room Simon could hear the shower running and Jim muttering about the state of his, now ruined, clothes. Banks’ shoulders relaxed. If Ellison was complaining, he must be feeling alright.

Sitting down on one of the benches—the one nearest to the shower enclosure, just in case—Simon spotted Jim’s watch, keys and cell phone, all sitting beside a change of clothes for the detective. Deciding to be proactive, Banks grabbed a hand towel and began to clean Jim’s personal items off. He wasn’t under any illusion that he could get rid of the pervasive smell or that he would be able to clean them enough to satisfy the fastidious Sentinel, but he could at least wipe them off enough that Ellison could use them in the short term.

Amazingly enough, Jim’s cell phone wasn’t that dirty. The dried mud was mainly on the outside of the case where a person would hold it to make a call; that and a few of the numbers were dirty. Banks surmised that Jim must not have had the phone in his jacket, as was his wont, and had gotten it dirty when he called for backup.

“Thanks, Simon,” Jim commented as he walked out of the showers, one towel wrapped around his hips, another in his hands, drying his hair off. “That is a big help.”

“No problem, Jim.” Simon casually (at least, he hoped so) eyed his good friend, looking for any signs that his senses were being bothered by the stuff he’d fallen into. Relieved at not seeing any scratching or rashes, the older man heaved a sigh of relief. He ~~so~~ did not want to try to do Sandburg’s job.

Glancing down at the phone, Simon noticed something. He handed the phone out to Jim. “Hey, Jim, looks like you missed a call.”

Frowning, Ellison took the proffered phone. “Huh, must have happened when I was apprehending Collins. I’m surprised I didn’t hear it ring,” he stated with a raised eyebrow. Giving a slight shrug Jim hit the redial button.

“Twenty-third Precinct, Sergeant McPherson speaking,” answered someone on the other end of the line.

Jim frowned and traded a swift look with Simon. “This is Det. Ellison. I received a call from your precinct sometime in the last couple of hours, sergeant. Can you tell me who might have called?” Ellison requested, politely, but firmly.

There was a hesitation on the other end of the line and Simon could tell from the way that Jim was tilting his head to one side that the Sentinel had dialed up his hearing. Ellison looked kind of like a dog that Banks used to have as a teenager when he did that. Not that the captain was going to tell Jim about the comparison.

Internally, Simon grinned. 'It would be funny to see what he thought about being compared to Hurricane.'

"He's looking through some papers," Ellison whispered, covering the mouthpiece of the phone. "Yes?" Jim asked when the sergeant came back. "Blair Sandburg called me?" he asked sharply. Simon's eyes widened in dismay. "He's been arrested?!" the Sentinel barked. "On what charge?" Jim ground his teeth together in a way guaranteed to make several dentists rich. "I see. Fine, I'll be right down."

Banks watched as Jim mashed the end button, with more force than necessary, and dropped the phone on top of the bench. He began shoving his clothes on, lightening fast.

"As you heard, Sandburg has been arrested. The desk sergeant wouldn't tell me the charges. Some crap about Blair's rights."

The captain frowned. Yes, a suspect's rights needed to be preserved, but that sort of information was usually available to fellow members of law enforcement. Something was up. Knowing Blair's penchant for getting into trouble, the two men hurried out of the station.

Clang! Sreeeee! Clang!

Blair looked up hopefully at the sound of the doors down the corridor opening and closing. After several hours in lockup, the grad student realized that he was the only one down this corridor, so whoever was coming was coming about him.

'Maybe it's Jim,' he thought, mentally crossing his fingers.

"Well, hello there, Mr. Sand-burg." It was the cop who had arrested Blair. Officer...Officer Jenkins, at least that's what his name tag said.

Blair watched warily as Officer Jenkins walked into his cell. The cop gave the metal door a hard shove and it clanged shut behind him. Sandburg could see the anger glinting in the other man's black eyes. He stood up from the bench he'd been sitting on and eyed the older man warily. Jenkins obviously didn't like him, although Sandburg didn't know why. Maybe it was the hair. Or his Jewish name. Sometimes there wasn't a reason. He seemed to inspire that sort of reaction in people; either they really liked him or they absolutely hated him.

Whatever the reason for the animosity, the fact that the biker trio from earlier had all but ignored Blair had only further infuriated the cop. He had come into the cell, where Blair was all alone, in a cell block where, ditto, and the younger man wasn't sure if the other policemen in the department would come if

he started yelling for help. Or, would they decide that he was 'getting what was coming to him' and let Jenkins do whatever he wanted to?

"I can see that the biker boys didn't mess you up." Jenkins looked Blair up and down disdainfully. "I guess they didn't see anything they liked," he added with a snort. It was easy to see that the cop didn't like what he saw, either.

Truthfully, the trio of cellmates that Blair had been incarcerated with had hardly looked at Blair, let alone bothered him. They had been released about half an hour ago and had left without even a backwards look. Sandburg had been neither glad nor sorry to see them go, but now he was regretting that he didn't have some witnesses to keep Jenkins away.

"I've been a cop for 20 years," Jenkins informed Sandburg with a curl of his upper lip. "In that time I've tried four times to make detective," he added, taking a step towards the smaller man. "FOUR!" he screamed. Sensing the aggression pouring off the officer, Blair took a step backwards.

"As you can see from my, oh so glamorous position, I didn't make it."

He kept advancing and Blair backed away as fast as he could. Jenkins was easily Jim's height, 6'2" or more, and really muscled. Sandburg knew that he had no chance of stopping the bigger man if he wanted to hurt him, which seemed more and more apparent.

"...little punk! You just waltz into a position in Major Crimes. Do you know how long cops—Real Cops!—wait to get in there?! Years!"

Blair's back bumped into the concrete cell wall; he had literally been backed into a corner. Jenkins was in his face, yelling as loud as he could. Sandburg winced at the force of his anger...and his breath—the older man had eaten garlic and onions, a lot of them, in the recent past.

As Sandburg looked up, way up, into the older man's reddening face, he wondered if it would do any good to call for help. Would any of the cops, who couldn't be that far away, come to his aid or would they let the 'hippie fag', as he'd heard himself referred to, get his comeuppance. Considering how loud Jenkins was and the fact that no one had come running as of yet, Blair didn't think that any help was coming from that quarter.

"I thought maybe those bikers would give you a good beat down, or take a piece of your ass." The shrug that Jenkins gave showed that he would have been happy with either Blair being beaten or raped, preferably both. "But since they didn't, I guess it's up to me." The cop gave a savage grin and the grad student realized that both options were still in his future.

"This is going to be fun, you little shit!" Jenkins yelled as he grabbed Blair's wrist, as he pulled back his other fist, ready to punch Sandburg.

Jenkins faltered, just a little and the savage grin that had been on his face slid off and turned into a confused frown. His right hand, raised to hit, lowered a bit. Shaking his head in confusion, Jenkins raised

his arm again; his hand was shaking. The older man gave his hand a glare, as if the appendage had betrayed him somehow.

Blair, too, was startled. 'What in the world?' he asked himself. Then it hit him. 'Is this the zombie thing?' he wondered silently.

Jenkins let go of Blair's arm and stumbled back a step. Sandburg watched him move and reacted instinctively; he reached out and grabbed hold of the cop's forearm. Jenkins, who had paled considerably in the last minute, automatically tried to get away from Blair.

Blair knew that if he let go of Jenkins, the cop would regain his strength and really attack him, so Sandburg tightened his grip, ever so slightly. The surge of strength and...and power, that Blair felt was nothing like he got from the brief touches he'd gotten from touching other people. He knew that feeling could quickly become addictive, but hoped that his innate goodness, learned from his mother, would keep the anthropologist from taking advantage.

The cop stumbled and dropped to one knee; Blair followed him down. Jenkins kept tugging weakly on his arm, trying to get Blair to let go. Sandburg didn't have a tight grip on the other man, but in his rapidly weakening state, Blair didn't need to hold on very tightly.

Jenkins slumped all the way to the ground and flopped over onto his side. Blair saw the glazed look in the cop's eyes—which was a darn sight better than the maniacal look he had been sporting—and the way he was gasping for breath. It was then that the anthropologist realized that he could probably kill someone, just by touching them.

Blair let go of Jenkins' arm and stood up. He quickly took a step back, just in case the cop recovered faster than Sandburg thought he would. Blair watched Jenkins for a few seconds and was relieved to see that his color and breathing were better, not great, but better.

He took a deep breath and called out, "Help! There's something wrong with the officer!"

That seemed to do the trick. Sandburg could hear someone yelling from a hallway or two away. The faint sounds of metal clanging seemed to be getting closer and Blair was pretty sure that he heard Jim and Simon's voices among the approaching crowd.

Simon glared at Sergeant McPherson. The cop, who was probably older than Banks by a good 25 years, winced at the look he was getting.

"What the hell was he doing in here, alone, with Sandburg in the first place?" Banks demanded with a fierce scowl.

Blair was sitting on the corner of the bench that was bolted to the wall, as far away from the chaos by Officer Jenkins as he could be. He had one cop who was guarding him and Jim, who was also guarding him, although, for different reasons.

Ellison and Banks had been right on the heels of the policemen who responded to Blair's calls for help. Jim had snarled at the two cops who were foolish enough to each pull a gun on the anthropologist. It was Banks, using his best captain voice, who had loudly pointed out that there was no way that someone of Blair's smaller stature could subdue a man of Jenkins' obvious size and strength; especially when the cop didn't have a mark on him.

Blair had frowned at the short comment. Just because he wasn't a towering giant, like Simon, didn't mean that he was helpless. Of course, he hid his real feelings; there was no need to fuel the other cops' wariness.

'I fought off Lash for several minutes,' he thought. 'Not to mention using the water hose on those criminals...and beating that one guy with a baseball.' Ingenuity certainly made up for his lack of height. 'Just who the hell do they think they are?'

"That's what I'd like to know," the sergeant stated.

Blair gave a start, thinking for a moment that he'd read the anthropologist's thoughts. Then Sandburg realized that the older man was answering Banks' question.

McPherson shrugged one shoulder helplessly. "The last I knew, Officer Jenkins was on his way to the locker room to get his coat. He already signed out for the day," the older man added with a frown. "He had absolutely no reason to be down here."

Turning to Blair...finally, the sergeant asked the younger man, "Did he say what he was doing here?"

Aware that most of the people in the room—save the medics who were working on Jenkins—were listening, Blair hesitated to say anything. He was well aware of how many times a day that he was by himself when at the station. It wouldn't take very much to have some of the downed cop's buddies come after him, intent on revenge.

'Oh, well, here goes nothing.'

"Officer Jenkins came into the cell with me. He expressed dismay that the three men who had been in here earlier hadn't either physically or sexually assaulted me..."

Several mouths dropped open at Blair's statement, especially the bit about hoped for rape. Sandburg was amazed to note that Jim and Simon weren't the only ones to glare at the prone cop.

'Huh. Maybe I'm not as reviled as I thought I was,' he thought in amazement.

"He grabbed hold of me," Blair rubbed at his upper arms absently, "after backing me into the corner. According to Jenkins he has failed the detective's test several times and he was mad that I am up in Major Crimes." The anthropologist tucked a lock of hair behind his ear. "I don't know why. It's not like I'm a detective, I'm an observer," he added, aware of his audience, some of whom might also resent his being upstairs.

“He actually threatened you,” Captain Banks asked, clarifying the situation, for the record.

Sandburg nodded. “Yes. He was about to punch me when...whatever, happened.”

“Damnation! There have been complaints before, but nobody would ever follow through,” the sergeant admitted.

Simon turned his head so sharply that it made Blair’s neck spasm in sympathy. “Complaints? Written ones?”

Blair tuned the men out as they talked—yelled in Simon’s case—about Officer Jenkins and his violent tendencies. He watched as the cop was loaded onto a stretcher by a couple of paramedics, preparatory to taking him to the hospital. Sandburg eyed the downed man and knew that he had been lucky, because if Jenkins had been able to beat him up, Blair might not have gotten up again.

‘Huh. This zombie thing may work out alright, after all,’ he thought to himself.

“Chief, are you alright?” Jim asked, a hand on Blair’s shoulder, expressing his concern. Since the detective wasn’t actually touching his skin, Sandburg didn’t have to worry about ‘draining’ Jim.

“Yeah, I’m okay, Big Guy,” Blair reassured his roommate, giving him a tired smile.

From the look on Ellison’s face, and the frown on Simon’s, Blair’s reassurances fell way short of the mark. The anthropologist was sorry that his friends were worried, but the concern felt nice after the distance over the last several months.

“I take it that Sandburg can go,” Banks said forcefully. The captain glared at Sergeant McPherson, letting the other cop know that any answer other than ‘yes’ would not be tolerated.

“Of course, Captain Banks.” McPherson gave a heartfelt sigh and rubbed a hand over his head.

“From what I’ve seen of Jenkins’ official report, I don’t know why Mr. Sandburg was arrested in the first place.”

They all turned to look at the newest addition to their little group. The man who was standing in the cell door was tall, almost as tall as Jim, with a \$50 haircut, expensive suit and shoes. He was groomed to within an inch of his life and his attire would have made Rafe weep with envy.

“Mr. Hectare,” the sergeant greeted the other man deferentially. Everyone, even Simon, stood to attention when they saw him, so Blair was able to surmise that he was some big shot.

“...want to reassure you, Mr. Sandburg, that this situation will be looked into, thoroughly. Officer Jenkins will most certainly be disciplined, as will anyone else who was a willing accomplice, either by contributing to your attempted assault or by willingly looking the other way.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Blair could see that everyone but Jim and Simon paled at Hectare's statement. The observer didn't think that anyone else was actually in on his attack, but even the suggestion was enough to make them worry.

"Thank you, sir." Sandburg shook the proffered hand. "It's nice to know that Officer Jenkins won't be able to harass anybody else."

"No, he definitely won't," the handsome, older man reassured Blair. And, incidentally, the listening audience.

"Come on, Chief. Let's get you home."

Blair glanced back and up at the soft tone of voice Jim was using. The Sentinel placed a proprietary hand on the small of Blair's back as he ushered him past the policemen who were waiting outside of the cell.

'Jim obviously thinks I've suffered a trauma,' Blair thought to himself. 'Understandable. Hmmm, I wonder what Jim would think if he knew what *really* went down when Jenkins tried to attack me?'

Sandburg kept a neutral look on his face, but inside he was smiling. The younger man was reveling in his newfound strength and promised himself that he was going to do lots of tests...on himself this time...to gauge the exact limits of his 'abilities'.

Watch out!  
Stay awake  
They're lurkin'  
Obsess you  
They're always  
Working  
Promising  
Everything you never  
Asked for  
And one day  
It'll be too late  
And you'll be back  
For more

Ellison ran a hand across his forehead, trying in vain to wipe away the tension that had resided there as of late. He thought of the bottles of pain pills, one in the kitchen cabinet and the other in the medicine cabinet in the bathroom, and thought briefly of getting up and taking some. Unfortunately, the Sentinel knew that getting rid of his headache would take more than a couple of pain relievers.



Jim wasn't sure what was going on with Sandburg, lately. He had figured, no planned, on being woken up by Blair having nightmares after his ordeal with Jenkins, but amazingly, despite Jim keeping his hearing turned up at night, there hadn't been a peep out of the observer.

'I guess he's getting used to being traumatized,' Ellison thought as he listened to Blair in the shower. 'What a crappy idea.'

The thought that the grad student was becoming immune to the fears of police life and work was, frankly, a frightening one. Not that Jim wanted Blair to be afraid, no, never that, but the way the younger man had just blown the incident in the holding cell off was rather worrisome.

Swish. Crinkle, crinkle. Sloosh.

Trying to distract himself from such depressing thoughts, the Sentinel instead focused on the sounds of Blair bathing. It wasn't hard to put sounds to mental pictures in his head. There was the sound of the washcloth as it rubbed across smooth skin and then the contrasting sound as it moved across the swirls of hair on Blair's chest.

Blair was so different from Jim, who had only a slight amount of hair on his chest. Sandburg, as Jim knew, from taping his ribs after Zeller had shot him, had a nice thick pelt. And it was so soft, not unlike the mink coat that Jim's mother had worn. The ex-Ranger remembered the feel of it—Blair's hair, not the coat—underneath his fingers as he wrapped the Ace bandage around Blair's chest.

Soft and silky to the touch. Laying in swirls that spiraled into...

"Jim!"

Ellison jumped and sucked in a startled breath. Blair was standing right in front of him. When had he come out of the bathroom? Forget that, when did he finish taking his shower?

"Are you okay, man?" Blair asked, his amazing blue eyes glittered like a pair of brilliant sapphires. "Are you alright?" he asked again when Jim didn't answer.

Jim saw the worried look on the other man's face and realized that he must have zoned, possibly even a couple of times. First, while listening to Blair shower and secondly when he was staring at Blair.

'Crap! I see a shitload of tests coming from this.'

"I'm fine," he said irritably, brushing the observer's hand off of his shoulder, an action he regretted the moment he did it. The worried look on Blair's face morphed into a pissed off, 'screw you, Ellison' expression.

"That's great. How about this, the next time I come up on you zoned out, I'll just leave you that way," Sandburg said with a roll of his eyes.

Before Jim could even think about apologizing, Sandburg turned around and headed into his cubbyhole of a bedroom. The French doors rattled into their frame as the anthropologist slammed them. Jim let his head thump back on the couch.

“Way to go, Ellison,” he muttered to himself. Despite his resolve to not be a jerk, the Sentinel kept causing problems, usually when Blair was helping him.

Jim bit his lip and tried to think about what to do. He wasn’t good at this sort of thing. You know, apologizing.

He and his dad. Nope, no apologizing there. He and Stephen. Ditto. When he was married to Carolyn, they just argued. Neither one of them apologized there.

Ellison was used to Blair handling the awkward moments. Jim would do something wrong, he’d then give the younger man a pat on the back or buy him some of his fancy schmancy teas and Blair would give him that dazzling smile and all would be forgiven. The Sentinel just wasn’t equipped to going begging for forgiveness.

With a deep, way down in the pit of your stomach sigh, Ellison stood up and walked over to stand in front of the French doors. He stared at the curtained glass for several moments as if he could somehow will them to open.

Knock. Knock.

“Chief?”

“Yes?” Jeez, even Blair’s voice was tense.

“Can I come in, please?” the Sentinel asked.

There was a pause of a couple seconds. Maybe Sandburg was stunned by the use of the word ‘please’. Then came a quiet, “Alright.”

Jim took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. He was being given another chance. Determined not to blow it this time, the Sentinel enter the lion’s—err, wolf’s—den.

Things went back to normal. Kind of. Sorta. Alright, not really.

The next day Jim drove Blair to the university, since the grad student had been forced to leave the Volvo there when he was arrested. The trip was unusually quiet and therefore seemed to take hours instead of the 20 minute drive. Possibly things weren’t as taken care of as Ellison had hoped.

‘Or maybe he’s dreading what the students and faculty are going to say.’ Jim didn’t know what to say, so he wimped out and said nothing instead.

After dropping Blair off, the Sentinel decided to do some reconnaissance and headed to the campus police's office.

As luck would have it, Jim's old friend, Suzanne Tomaki, the head of campus security, was in her office. The beautiful dark haired woman was sitting behind her desk.

"I know what you're here about," she said, holding a hand up for Jim to wait. "A car was stolen out of the faculty parking lot yesterday afternoon and that's why that cop was here. He was just supposed to take a few statements and file the report. It has to be all official or Mr. Harrison's insurance won't pay up."

"So, how the hell did Jenkins go from writing an incident report to arresting Sandburg?" Jim demanded, fists braced on his hips.

"That's what I want to know. I've already filed a complaint with his precinct. Of course, I found out that he's been taken care of." Suzanne gave Jim a grin and the detective returned it; neither one was a smile you'd want to see on somebody in a dark alley.

"Yeah, the bastard's being reprimanded and charged with false arrest, assault and a whole lot of other charges, I'm sure."

"It's a good thing, too. I've had almost a hundred complaints about the way Professor Sandburg was treated." She waved a hand at a large pile of papers on her desktop. "Two of them from the young men who were fighting." Tomaki snorted. "Nobody was happy."

"Good," Jim said with a nod. He sat down in the visitor's chair and chatted with his old friend for a few minutes. Inside he was relieved that this wasn't going to come back and bite Blair in the butt.

\*

Blair sat on the park bench feeling stupid. He glanced over at Terry, who was sitting beside him. On most days the two of them sitting on a bench in the park wouldn't have been anything unusual. However, today it was (a) cold, (b) raining and (c) getting dark. Unless they wanted to buy drugs—already been asked—sell drugs—ditto—or hook up, they were shit out of luck.

Grant, who was studiously ignoring the looks the grad student was giving him, seemed unperturbed by the attention they had been getting since they sat down almost an hour earlier. As Blair watched him, the sun began to set and it turned Terry's light brown hair into flames. The effect was amazing and Sandburg gasped at how beautiful his new friend's hair was.

Then, he turned his gaze to the actual sunset and was stunned. Instead of a few shades of pink and gold in the sky there were hundreds of different colors, each one having numerous subtle differences in the shadows.

'I could get lost looking at all the colors,' Blair thought. After a moment he blinked and looked at Terry and then back to the fading sunset, which already looked different. 'Is this what it's like for Jim?' he

wondered. Sandburg hadn't felt what he thought the pull of a zone would feel like, but then he'd had someone with him. A guide. 'A guide for the Guide.'

"Amazing, isn't it?" Grant asked quietly.

Blair paused before answering. He listened, really listened this time, to the park. He could smell the sharp, tangy odor that gave promise of coming snow and hear the brown, dead leaves crackle as they froze. Somehow he knew that his 'enhanced senses' were nothing in comparison to a Sentinel's, but they were a lot sharper than they had been when he was alive.

"Yeah, it is," Blair finally agreed.

The two dead men stayed on the bench for a while longer, looking and listening and feeling. It was awe inspiring and a little intimidating, but so much to learn.

### **Two weeks later**

Jim took a bite of his garlic bread and chewed on it like he was gnawing the leg off of a wild animal. He and Blair were eating the meal that Sandburg had prepared. Chicken Tetrazzini, salad, naturally, and the aforementioned garlic bread.

The food was wonderful; Blair really was an excellent cook. The company was good. Blair had forgiven him, again, and they chatted easily now. But, there was still something wrong, something...Jim couldn't quite define.

After dinner was eaten and the dishes washed, the two men sat down in front of the television and tried to watch a movie. Blair was preoccupied, as he always seemed to be lately, and Jim was so engrossed with watching his Guide that he couldn't have told what the movie was about to save his life.

Turning the t.v. off, Ellison placed the remote on the coffee table and turned to face Sandburg, who was sitting one cushion over on the couch. "Blair, is something wrong?" he asked quietly.

The younger man turned to face Jim, both men had one knee on the cushion between them. "No..." Blair began, automatically shaking his head. "Well, yeah there is," he admitted reluctance readily visible in the frown on his face and the tension in his shoulders.

"You can always talk to me."

Blair glanced up at that. He could remember Jim saying those very same words way back when Dawson Quinn had shot Blair in the thigh. The anthropologist had suffered from nightmares for a while afterwards. Not from being shot, mind you, but from being air lifted out of the woods. Jim had calmed him and been very supportive, but that was Before.

You know, before Jim had read the first chapter of his dissertation. Before Alex. Just...Before.

Now, Jim either didn't hear the nightmares that Blair had or else he ignored them. The anthropologist wasn't sure which option would be worse; that Jim had tuned him out enough not to notice the bad dreams or that he did hear them but chose to ignore the younger man's cries in the night. Whatever the cause, Blair was leery of the Sentinel's 'you can always talk to me' caveat.

'And that's just about nightmares. I can't imagine how Jim's going to react to my really big news.'

"Chief, just tell me what's going on," the Sentinel pleaded with the younger man.

Blair looked into Jim's blue eyes and sighed, letting his shoulders droop. "You're not going to believe me," Sandburg said.

"Try me. I've believed a lot of weird stuff that you've told me, haven't I."

Blair smiled. "Eventually" he admitted. "But, this is, like, so out there."

Jim waved his hands for Blair to continue. The worry that was plain to see on the anthropologist's face made Ellison frown.

"What makes you so sure that I won't believe you?" Jim asked.

"Past experience," the younger man replied. At the pained look on Ellison's face, Blair gave a small smile and added ruefully, "and the fact that I didn't believe it myself, at first."

The Sentinel gave his Guide a searching look. "I'm listening, Chief."

"Okay, here goes." Blair bit his lip before looking up. He looked the ex-Ranger right in the eye, trying to convey his sincerity. "You remember when Alex drowned me," he stated. Jim flinched at the other sentinel's name, but he nodded. "Yeah, well...when you brought me back from the dead..."

"When Incacha's spirit told me how," Ellison interjected, not wanting to take all of the credit. Or all of the responsibility.

"Yes, with Incacha's help. Well..." He swallowed hard, making his Adam's apple bob up and down quickly. "...you were only partly successful."

"Meaning what, exactly?" Jim asked with a frown, his eyes darting over Blair, looking for some recurring illness or injury he might have missed.

"I came back, but I'm not really...alive." The words came out slowly, showing how reluctant Blair was to tell his friend the news.

Jim's eyebrows flew up and he gave Blair a frank stare, looking for signs of insanity, presumably. From the look on the older man's face it was apparent that he wasn't sure if he found any or not.

"So, if you're not alive, then what are you?" Ellison asked.

Blair took a deep breath. "A zombie."

Jim had been staring at Blair, unmoving, for so long that the grad student thought he had zoned. “Hey, are you okay, man?” Sandburg asked as he touched Jim on the back of the hand. The older man jumped at the touch and gave Blair an incredulous look.

“Are you seriously asking me that?”

Blair shrugged and looked sheepish. “Yeah.” He ran a hand through his hair, messing up the long curls. “I know it’s a lot to take in...”

“Sandburg, someone has fed you a cock and bull story...”

“Something impossible to believe,” Blair stated. Jim nodded emphatically. “So, me being dead for an unknown time and you, on the advice of a *dead* shaman, brought me back to life—with no health repercussions, I might add—but what I’ve said is just too ridiculous.”

Jim frowned and opened his mouth to protest; still not willing to give up his argument. The howl of some far off animal stopped him in surprise and made both men look at the balcony doors for a few seconds.

“I wonder who that was?” the observer muttered underneath his breath. Ellison gave him a sharp look, naturally having heard him.

“So, you can go into and out of your blue jungle, see different spirit guides and talk to your dead friend, Incacha, but anything mystical that I’m going through is just me being easily led astray, right?”

Realizing that Blair was upset, and likely only going to get more so, Ellison relented. He held up one hand, in a ‘hold on a moment’ gesture. Sandburg leaned back against the sofa cushions and waited to see what he had to say.

“Blair,” Jim said his name slowly and carefully, as though he were talking him down from a great height. Just the use of his first name showed how freaked the older man was, because the only times that most people used Blair’s given name were in times of dire stress.

“I know things have been difficult the last few months.”

Now, there was an understatement if Sandburg had ever heard one. It had all started with Incacha and Blair’s friend, Janet Myers, dying and spun madly out of control from there. Jim going off on his own to Clayton Falls had only made things worse. It wasn’t that Jim wanted a vacation by himself—hellfire, Blair wouldn’t mind a little time alone, as well.

No, the big problem was that any time Blair suggested they spend a few days apart, Ellison went postal and accused the grad student of wanting out of their partnership, but Jim just took off, without a word beforehand.

From there it was all downhill. Jim read the first chapter of Blair’s dissertation—although Blair admitted that it was partly his fault for leaving it where Ellison could get to it—and, naturally, the Sentinel had had

a connoisseur fit. As if Blair could use anything other than professional, technical language in his doctoral thesis. It's not like he could write how his 'bestest friend was a well rounded guy who had good senses'. Jim wouldn't dream of writing his reports in anything less than a clinical, professional manner, but, when Blair did the same, he was 'betraying' Jim.

And, of course, there was the whole mess with Alex. Again, Blair was accused of betraying the Sentinel, who had thrown Blair out of the loft. Blair knew that if he lived to be one hundred years old—no pun intended—he would never forget the sight of all of his belongings tossed haphazardly into a bunch of cardboard boxes. He'd also never forget seeing his best friend kissing his murderer...twice!

Blair looked over at the detective as Jim continued speaking. "There have been a lot of problems, but you can't let somebody fill your head with a bunch of crap." Jim held his hands out in appeal.

Blair sat back down and put his head in his hands. "This is why I didn't want to say anything to you," he said quietly, his voice muffled by the palms of his hands. "I knew you wouldn't believe me."

"Chief," the Sentinel held out his hands in a placating gesture, "what else do you expect?" Jim asked in frustration.

"Not a damned thing," Blair admitted, looking up at the older man.

Jim winced at the resigned look in Sandburg's eyes. 'I promised to keep an open mind,' Ellison reminded himself. 'Instead, I jump on the first thing he says. Admittedly, it was a whopper of a statement.'

"Fine. You'll want proof; as always," he muttered the last two words. Before Jim could reply, or get bristly, the younger man continued, "I'll do for you what I did to prove it to myself."

"And what's that?" Jim asked, eyeing his friend warily. If the debacle with Alex had unhinged Blair somehow then there was no telling what he might do to 'prove' his theory. Ellison had seen the movie, Highlander, and remembered the main character proving that he was immortal by stabbing himself. Jim had no desire to try to keep Blair from bleeding out on the living room floor. Once, with Incacha, had been more than enough.

"I just won't breathe for awhile," the grad student said in a calm, rational tone of voice, like breathing was something that you could turn on and off at will.

"Okay."

That wasn't too bad. Jim could always stop him before Blair actually passed out or something. The worst that plan would do was give Sandburg a headache. But, the best that it would do would be that when he couldn't actually hold his breath for an extended period of time, it would disprove the observer's crazy theory.

Jim watched his friend, waiting for him to start his demonstration, when he realized that Blair had already begun. There hadn't been a deep inhalation to 'hold his breath'. Sandburg's cheeks weren't

puffed out and he wasn't turning red in the face, even though, as Jim thought back on it, it had been almost a minute, already.

Ellison shifted uncomfortably on his butt. Blair watched calmly as the ex-Ranger licked his lips and frowned at him. Jim's pale blue eyes kept looking from Blair's face to his unmoving chest and back again. However, each time the Sentinel repeated the process, he looked the younger man over, quicker and quicker.

After several, tension filled, minutes, Jim burst out, "Okay, stop!"

Blair calmly opened his mouth, but Ellison, who was watching him like a hawk—or perhaps a jaguar—noticed that he still hadn't taken a breath, which he should have needed quite desperately by now. Jim knew that it had to be a trick of some kind, because people couldn't just stop breathing.

"Okay, Jim, now, I want you to listen to my heart," Blair instructed him, softly.

The detective looked deep into Blair's eyes and saw the sincerity there. He automatically glanced down at Blair's chest—even though he didn't need to—as he dialed up his sense of hearing.

Nothing.

Ellison could literally feel the blood draining from his face. Not breathing...Blair might have learned how to hold his breath for a really long time. Or something. But no heartbeat, that couldn't be explained away, no matter how much he might try to deny it.

"No."

Blair, who still wasn't breathing, watched the Sentinel, calmly.

"No!" he expostulated sharply. "This can't be happening." Uttering those last words brought Jim out of his impending panic attack. He distinctly remembered saying them at The Fountain, when Blair was lying there...dead. That thought rocked him backwards, literally.

"I...you..."

"I am dead," Blair stated calmly, his voice soft, but firm.

Jim opened his eyes and looked around at the blue jungle. Glancing down, the former Ranger saw that he was in his fatigues. Ellison gave a resigned sigh and dropped his head so that his chin was touching his chest.

"What fresh hell is this?" he wondered aloud as he picked a random direction and started walking. The last time Jim had been in this azure landscape had been when he'd shot the wolf in his dreams. The wolf, which incidentally, turned into Blair after it died.



'No, I take that back,' he thought. 'We were both in this otherworldly jungle when I kept Blair's spirit from going into the light when he died.'



SoldierJim paused. "I brought him back from the dead, so it's my fault," he quietly admitted to himself.

"What are you at fault for, Enquiri?" asked a heavily accented voice.

Jim turned, and with no surprise at all, beheld Incacha, his late friend. The Quechan man had befriended Ellison when he had been the only member of his combat unit to survive a helicopter crash in Peru. The native man had been the shaman of his tribe and for a time, Jim's temporary guide. Incacha had been shot and killed when he and some of his fellow tribesmen had come to Cascade to stop a company that was intent on decimating their lands. They succeeded, with Jim and Blair's help, but the Shaman had died.

Since his death, Incacha had appeared to Jim several times, in dreams and visions, so it wasn't a great surprise that Ellison was seeing him again in this time of crisis.

"Incacha," the Sentinel greeted him. "My friend."

Incacha, clothed in tan colored Indian clothing and wearing his traditional face paint, nodded his head in acknowledgement of Jim's greeting. A slight smile hung around the other man's serious face, showing that he was just as glad as Jim was to see one another.

“What are you at fault for, Enquiri?” Incacha asked again, tenacious as ever.

Jim sighed. He glanced over at the nearby stream to give himself a moment to gather his thoughts. He watched as a fish—blue, naturally—leapt out of the water, only to splash back in a moment later.

“I brought Blair back. That makes it my fault that he is d...uhm, not really...a...a zombie,” he finally choked out. It was very weird using that word to describe his energetic and *lively* Guide.

The Quechan warrior tilted his head in agreement, causing Jim to grimace. It was bad enough to admit his culpability out loud, but to have his dead friend agree with him made it all seem so real.

“That is true,” Incacha stated. “However, what would the alternative have been?” The dark skinned man tilted his head to one side.

“Blair would have stayed dead.” Incacha’s dark eyes looked at Ellison steadily. “My friend and Guide would have been gone, forever.” Jim’s blue eyes lost focus as he contemplated a future without Sandburg by his side.

No more, “Dial it down, man.”

Never again to smell that special scent that was all Blair.

All alone...for the rest of his lonely, miserable life.

Jim felt his stomach clench and absently wondered if it was possible to throw up in the spirit plane. The Sentinel really didn’t want to find out.

“Yes, your Guide would be gone,” Incacha agreed. “Could you have continued with your sentinel abilities?”

“Maybe. Well, I’m not sure.” Ellison’s shoulders slumped. “No, most likely not.”

The other man nodded his head, again. “Could *you* have survived?” He emphasized the ‘you’ meaningfully.

“Maybe, but I’m not sure that I would want to,” the ex-Ranger admitted.

“Then his return is not a curse, but a gift. No matter what the form.”

Jim felt something pulling at him, a far off noise. The blue jungle faded, until all that was clear was Incacha’s face and then that began to blur, as well. Any more advice that his dead friend could give him was lost...

Beep! Beep! Beep!

...lost to his damned alarm clock.

Ellison cursed the timing as he slowly pulled himself up out of bed. He knew that the Shaman was right; Blair still being with him was a blessing. However, there was still a lot of unease in his gut.

Downstairs, Jim could hear Sandburg's typical morning grumbling as he hit the snooze button on his own alarm clock. Ellison gave a small smile at that small piece of normalcy.

"Maybe things aren't so different, after all," he mused, heading down to get in the shower first.

"No, no, no," the teaching assistant muttered to himself. "It was not the Anatoli Tribes, you twit, it was the Angoli Tribes." Blair made several red marks on the erroneous paper and added quite a few scathing comments in the margins, all but filling the blank spaces with his writing.

Slapping the paper on the finished pile, Sandburg picked up the next one, hoping against hope that it would be better written than the last one. "Or at least better researched," he spat out. If there was one thing the anthropologist hated, it was sloppy work. And not getting the name of the tribe you were writing about correct was the numero uno blunder in his book.

He was halfway through reading the next research paper, which was very well written, when his office phone rang, startling him out of the academic haze he'd fallen into. "Hargrove Hall, Blair Sandburg speaking," he said, answering the phone habitually despite the late hour.

"Hi, Blair. It's me, Terry. I was wondering if you wanted to meet up for a beer or something?"

Blair's heart lifted when he heard the other man's voice. Since Jim's fit two nights before, Blair hadn't felt comfortable at the loft, since his presence apparently made Jim feel uncomfortable. So, he'd stayed at the university as late as possible. A friendly voice and a sociable offer sounded wonderful.

"Hi, Terry. That sounds great. Where do you want to meet?" the grad student asked. He stuck his pen in the paper he'd been reading as a bookmark and started turning everything off in preparation off leaving.

"How about VitaBites?" Grant offered, naming a new vegetarian bar not too far from Rainier. They offered good drinks and vegetarian food at reasonable prices.

"Sounds good to me, I've been wanting to try it out."

"They have great veggie burgers and eggplant fries to die for." There was a pause and then, "Uh, so to speak."

Blair had to think what he was talking about for a moment and then laughed. "Yeah, I guess so." Two dead guys talking about to die for food was kind of funny when you thought about it. "I'll meet you there."

"Okay, sounds good. I'm about 10 minutes away, so I'm going to go on over, but take your time, I'm in no big hurry," the archeologist assured him.

“Alright, see you in a few minutes.” Blair slipped on his new jacket, the one Jim gave him, as he walked out the door. He double checked to make sure that it locked behind him before hurrying out to his car.

Blair made it to the bar in twelve and half minutes; it wasn’t very far from his office, after all. He was admiring the small, but tasteful sign over the door when Terry drove up.

The other man was laughing as he stepped out of his car. “How did you manage to beat me here?” he asked softly.

“It didn’t take me long to shut everything down and there wasn’t much traffic,” Blair informed him with a smile.

“Whereas I got behind a slow moving truck and was delayed a couple of minutes.”

The two new friends headed into the bar. Being a vegetarian bar, it was also a smoking free establishment, which made the atmosphere a lot healthier than most bars. Also, considering it was later at night and on a school night, there wasn’t a huge crowd, so the noise level was acceptable.

He wasn’t sure if it was the food, which was excellent—the baked eggplant fries were wonderful—or the company, but Blair had a really good time with Terry. And, if the smile on the other man’s face was any indication, he had a nice time, as well. It was a nice interlude in between the everyday, Sentinel related and undead stresses.

Ellison was in a quandary. His friend and Guide was here and yet, he was really dead. He was dead, but he wasn’t really gone. Sandburg still taught at Rainier and came to the station regularly. He still helped with—i.e. did most of—the Sentinel’s paperwork.

Jim wanted him, but he wasn’t sure he could have him. Yes, Ellison had finally admitted, to himself, anyway, that he loved Blair and wanted to have sex with him. Repeatedly. On any available, and some not so available, surface.

But how to let Blair know this? And, how did he find out if the younger man was interested in the Sentinel in the same way?

So, it happened that Jim Ellison, detective, Sentinel extraordinaire, began wooing his Guide. But since Jim had never wooed anyone before—Carolyn had been very straightforward, no wooing needed—he wasn’t quite sure what to do, so he fell back on the old standards.

The first time Jim brought home flowers for Blair gained him a puzzled look, but also a smile and, “Thanks, Big Guy”.

The grad student turned away and Jim contemplated what had happened. The reaction to the flowers had been fine, but not exactly what he'd wanted. The problem was, Jim wasn't sure what he wanted.

He heard a clink and looked over to see Blair's jean clad butt sticking out. The younger man was rummaging underneath the cabinet to find a vase for the flowers.

'Hmmm, nice view.' Maybe he had gotten a 'little' of what he wanted. Ellison grinned happily.

'That was nice, if a little weird,' Blair thought to himself as he rooted around in the cabinet for a vase or even a big bowl.

The grad student heard a noise, like a quiet growl, and glanced back at Jim out of the corner of his eye. What he 'observed' was the Sentinel eyeing his ass like it was a rare steak and he was mighty hungry.

'Nice.'

Blair leaned further into the cabinet and moved a few pots and pans around to make it look like he was still searching, although the young man had actually found a vase, tucked way in the back. He pulled it out, making sure to wiggle his butt, and stood up.

'That should get his attention,' Sandburg thought smugly. And he was right...

"Holy crap! Will you look at the dust on that thing!"

...just not in the way he wanted.

The grad student sighed as the vase was snatched from his hand and raced over to the sink. Blair was treated to the sight of Jim washing the glass receptacle to within an inch of its life.

'Oh well, it was really dirty,' he thought with a sigh.

Blair spent the next several minutes watching Jim's butt as he scrubbed the vase. Then the detective pulled everything out of the cabinet. They washed and dried the cookware and Ellison scrubbed the inside of the cabinet. Dinner was dried out and uneatable by the time they were done, so the two men ordered pizza and ate it in front of the television when it was delivered 20 minutes later.

The flowers made a lovely arrangement on the top of the t.v.

Jim saw Blair shiver a few days later. They were at a crime scene and the day had turned cold. Ellison felt a cold breeze and pulled up the collar on his jacket, thankful for the heavy duty coat. He saw a movement out of the corner of his eye and saw Blair give an exaggerated shiver. He was about to make a joke about 'wet and cold is my world' Sandburg when it dawned on him what the other man was

wearing. He had on that ugly plaid, quilted jacket that Blair had bought for a case, years ago.\* Sandburg had bought the jacket to make himself look as geeky as possible and it had worked.

'Well, as much as Blair can look geeky,' Ellison thought to himself.

The problem was that he bought it second hand from a thrift store and it had been worn even then. That was over two years ago, at least, and time had not made the material any warmer.

'Why isn't he wearing that jacket I bought him for Christmas last year?' he pondered, as the Sentinel used his senses to examine the crime scene. 'It's a lot warmer and...oh.'

The ex-Ranger paused as it dawned on him. Sandburg had been wearing that jacket when Alex drowned him at the fountain outside of Hargrove Hall. It had been soaked with smelly chlorine water and had been ruined.

"Wow, Jim," Blair thanked his roommate. He held the suede jacket out at arm's length and looked at it in awe. The coat was dark brown with a lining in a lighter brown lamb's wool. "Thank you. This is great!" Sandburg exclaimed.

On impulse he leaned forward and wrapped his free arm around Ellison's shoulder, giving his good friend a hug. It was a hug that Jim enthusiastically returned; he even turned his head so that his nose was buried in the loose hair hanging on the younger man's neck.

The Sentinel sniffed, actually sniffed, his neck. Blair held still letting him and felt a surge of arousal shoot down to his cock. The younger man held still, not wanting to spook Ellison, his mind awl. Did he want the Sentinel to smell his arousal or not? He wasn't sure which would be better.

The detective moved back so quickly that Blair almost did a header into the sofa cushions behind Jim. Luckily, he was saved that indignation.

"Uh, you're welcome, Chief." Ellison patted Blair on the shoulder in an almost painful 'manly love tap'. "Can't have you getting cold."

Ri-ight.

"Right," Blair agreed with a smile. He tried the coat on and modeled it for his benefactor, hoping that his appreciation didn't show **too** much.

Even as smart as Blair was, it took a few more gestures from Jim for the anthropologist to realize what was going on.

'He's courting me?' Sandburg wondered to himself.

Unfortunately this revelation—or was it a question—came to the grad student while he was teaching a class. Specifically, when he was lecturing to his Anthropology Through the Ages class, a 400 level class. These students were majoring in the field and therefore wanted to be in his class, as opposed to most of his 101 students who were there to get a humanities credit, so they noticed the second he faltered.

Blair was used to thinking on his feet—a lifetime of following his ‘go with the flow mother—so he gave a little cough and then continued with the lecture. It satisfied the insatiable curiosity of his students and helped to relegate the epiphany he’d just had to the back of his mind to be dealt with later.

‘Like during office hours.’

Sandburg did spend his office hours, those not used talking with students, thinking about Ellison’s behavior the last few weeks. From the flowers, to the jacket and several other times, it was now obvious that the Sentinel was carrying out some sort of courting ritual.

“Okay, why does he feel the need to court me?” Blair wondered aloud in the privacy of his office. “We’ve known each other for over three years and I’ve lived with him for most of that time. In all the time I’ve known him, he’s gone after several women and he never bought them things, at least as far as I know.”

Then Blair thought about his last statement. Jim had dated women, not men. Maybe that was the problem, or at least part of it. Also, add to the fact that there had been *several* women in the Sentinel’s life and not one of them had ended well. Maybe that had made the older man leery.

“I’ll just have to un-leery him,” the grad student said with a giggle before sobering up once again. “If he wants to go slow, we’ll go slow.”

Blair tried being coy. He made sure to brush up against Jim whenever he could. Of course, considering how much the two men patted one another or leaned one against the other, etc., Ellison didn’t seem to notice a difference.

So, he tried another tack. He started losing some clothing.

Ever since dying, coming back and becoming a zombie, Blair had found that he wasn’t cold anymore. Of course, he hadn’t really tested it yet. On fall days when the temperature hovered in the mid-40’s Sandburg would normally have worn two or three shirts, an undershirt, heavy socks, jeans, boots and a thick jacket, at least until he got to the university. Now, however, he found that one shirt, jeans, a jacket and his tennis shoes sufficed.

To his glee, the anthropologist found that he could run around the loft in a *lot* less. Like, for instance, after a shower. If he just happened to forget to bring a change of clothes with him and had to walk—very slowly—to his room in a skimpy towel, well, who could blame him? Certainly not Jim; not if the stunned look on his face was any indication.

He thought he had Jim then, but for some reason, he still hesitated. Blair decided to wait it out, give the Sentinel some time.

Dinner had been eaten. Dishes were done and the two men were sitting on the couch in front of the television.

There was a difference this time, though. Instead of sitting at the far end of the sofa, Jim sat on the middle cushion, right next to Blair. After the news ended, Ellison turned the t.v. off with the remote and then turned to face the younger man, who mimicked him, also turning to face the Sentinel.

Jim bit his bottom lip, just a tiny tug of his teeth on the sensitive skin, but still a tell of how nervous he was. Blair waited; the older man had to be the one to make the first move this time, because otherwise he'd feel pressured by Blair, and that was the last thing either of them needed.

After just a few moments, which seemed like a millennium or two, Ellison leaned forward. He slid one hand behind Blair's neck, underneath the curls lying there, and gently pulled, urging the younger man closer. Sandburg obliged and, for the first time in their friendship, their lips met. Well, that wasn't strictly accurate, since Jim did give the grad student mouth-to-mouth resuscitation after his drowning, but really, this was completely different.

Their first kiss was the briefest touch of Jim's lips to Blair's; the fluttering of butterfly wings. Since Jim had made the all important first move, Sandburg felt a little more confident in following up. He pressed his lips back to Jim's and opened his mouth, inviting the Sentinel's tongue inside.

Jim reciprocated and Blair's heart soared high in the sky.

Blair's hands were rubbing up and down Jim's spine and the feeling was incredible. Invisible sparks sent messages along his nerves. The circuit from his back to his dick to his mouth and back again, a never ending loop that had the rest of his body jumping on board.

'So good,' Ellison thought, his mind hazy with desire. 'Maybe this will replace the memory of Blair at the fountain.'

And, just like telling someone not to look down, Jim looked.

Blair's mobile lips were replaced with the younger man's slack mouth as Ellison frantically tried to breathe air into his still lungs. His soft, silky curls were suddenly wet and limp. Jim leaned back suddenly, his eyes darting around the room, looking anywhere but at Blair.

"Jim?" the anthropologist asked.

"I'm, uh..."



'He's dead,' Jim thought suddenly. 'Essentially, I've been kissing a corpse.' He winced at how unfaithful that thought sounded. He still shuddered at the images flashing through his mind and let go of Blair, all the while, trying to keep his actions to *not* seem like a rejection. From the frown on the younger man's face, he didn't succeed.

"Jim?" Blair leaned back, licking his lips.

Ellison subconsciously imitated him. Only, instead of tasting Blair's breath mint, the tuna fish sandwich he'd had for lunch and, under it all, the spicy, tangy taste that had to be the essential Blair, all Jim could taste was chlorine and moldy leaves.

"I've, uh, I'll be right back." Jim hurried into the bathroom, slamming the door shut behind himself.

The Sentinel leaned against the inside of the bathroom door and tried to calm his racing heart. 'A zombie. Blair is a zombie. He is a walking, talking corpse,' his mind kept repeating.

Images began flashing through his mind. The faces of friends and enemies long gone kept popping up.

He remembered Jerry Talbot, one of his men who had been shot down with Jim. Jerry had lived through the helicopter crash and lasted for almost four days before succumbing to his injuries. Ellison remembered when the young man had died and how slack his face had been. The thought of kissing him made the detective's skin crawl.

Feeling the wonderful meal he'd just eaten trying to crawl up his esophagus, Ellison raced over and dropped to his knees in front of the toilet. Not wanting to upset Blair, or hurt his feelings, Jim used every relaxation technique that he had ever learned to calm himself down. The fact that he had learned those techniques from Blair himself wasn't lost on the Sentinel.

'Okay, that was unexpected,' Blair thought as listened to the echoes of the bathroom door slamming shut. 'One minute everything was going great and the next Jim's running out of the room.'

Sandburg frowned and looked away from the bathroom door; he didn't want Jim to come out suddenly and find Blair staring. The younger man cocked his head to one side, unconsciously imitating the Sentinel when he was utilizing his enhanced hearing. Jim's heart rate was through the roof.

'Is he having a panic attack?' Blair asked himself.

The anthropologist thought about it logically for a few moments, his mind replaying what had happened when things started to go wrong. Yes, there did seem to be evidence of a panic attack. Although, why the repressed Sentinel would be panicking was anybody's guess.

'Wait, repressed...'

That was probably the problem. Jim, for all his interest in women, had never shown any indication of liking men before he started courting Blair. Maybe the detective hadn't thought his pursuit through to its

logical conclusion. If he were a virgin where men were concerned their making out might have been too much too soon.

The bathroom door opened and Blair was on his feet a second later. "Are you okay, Jim?" he asked in concern. The color of the cop's face was pasty and Sandburg automatically started to walk towards him, but an upheld hand stopped him before he took more than a step.

"Yeah, I'm, uh..."

Blair saw that Ellison's hand was shaking. That worried him more than anything, because he had seen Jim go through a lot, but had never seen him this upset before.

"I just need a little time, okay?" Jim requested, not looking at Blair directly.

"Sure, Big Guy. Take all the time you need, I'm not going anywhere," the Guide reassured his friend and hopefully soon-to-be lover.

"Yeah. Right. That's good." Ellison waved a hand upwards. "I'm going to bed."

"Alright," Blair said to the Sentinel's back; he was already at the top of the stairs before Sandburg finished. "Goodnight."

Blair hoped that given time to calm down, Jim would want to pick up where they had left off. Considering the amount of time and energy the Sentinel had spent pursuing him, Sandburg hoped so.

Upstairs, Jim lay huddled on the bed listening to Blair get ready for bed. He was lying under the covers, one hand clutching them like the long ago, and almost forgotten teddy bear that he used to cuddle as a child. Jim was still shaken by the realization of what Blair's non-living status really meant. Ellison only truly allowed himself to relax when he heard the futon creak when Blair laid down.

'Why is this bothering me so much all of the sudden?' Jim questioned himself. 'Sandburg let me in on the zombie situation a few weeks ago.' The detective wasn't sure what had caused him to panic, but he had and now had to deal with it.

By the next morning things had gone from bad to worse. Ellison had suffered through nightmares all night long. Every bad zombie movie he'd ever watched as a kid had shambled by, dropping bits of themselves as they moaned for 'Brains!

After about the fourth time the ex-Ranger had woke up shuddering in disgust Ellison decided to give up on sleeping for the night. He looked over at the clock on his nightstand and saw to his dismay that it was 3:30 in the morning; still way too early to get up.

Jim rolled onto his back and stared up at the stars, through the skylight on his ceiling. He watched the twinkling of the tiny lights and was amazed by what he saw. The stars weren't all the same color. No, in fact, there were blues and reds and golden colored celestial bodies. It surprised Ellison to realize that he

hadn't paid much attention to the nighttime sky, not since he came back from Peru, and those many months were largely a blur to the Sentinel.

Blair had taught Ellison well. The detective was able to avoid zoning by the simple expedient of concentrating on another sense, in addition to his sight. This time he added smell to the mix—the lingering scents from dinner—and was able to gaze at the sky successfully for a couple of hours.

Of course, after a while reality intruded on his peaceful interlude. The smell of lust and unfulfilled passion overrode the aroma of the food. This reminded him of Blair and making out with him on the couch, which, in turn, reminded Jim of exactly why they had stopped in the first place.

'I. I stopped it,' the Sentinel admitted to himself. 'Without one word of explanation to Sandburg.'

Jim realized that his relaxation time was over, so he got up and dressed in a pair of sweatpants and a worn t-shirt that he kept to work out in. Stuffing his work clothes into a gym bag, he walked quietly down the stairs. And quiet to a Sentinel is *very* quiet indeed. He picked up the pad of sticky notes and wrote a note to Blair.

Chief,

Left early to go to the gym. See you tonight.

Ellison

'Short and to the point,' Jim thought in satisfaction.

The Sentinel had dialed his eyesight up to dress and write the note, so he hadn't needed to turn on any lights to see. As a result, the detective was able to leave the loft with Blair unaware.

Blair and Terry were sitting in a couple of armchairs, watching television. Grant had a documentary about the Step Pyramid in Egypt. Blair had been complaining about missing the show when his newer friend mentioned taping it. That had led to their night at Grant's apartment, watching the show and now talking.

"Terry, can I ask you a question?" Blair asked as the brown haired man was removing the VHS tape from the player.

"Sure."

"Actually, I have several questions," the anthropologist admitted with a wry grin.

"Hazard of the job," the archeologist answered, laughing.

"Yeah," Blair admitted. "So, what do you know about our condition?"

“Condition?” Grant asked with a raise of his eyebrows and a smile. Blair blushed and gave a helpless shrug.

“I know, I know, a bad use of a euphemism. It’s just hard to get used to thinking of myself as...dead, let alone saying it out loud.”

“I know what you mean. It’s been a few years and I still forget sometimes.” Terry sighed and sat back down, cradling the video tape in his hands. “I know some things that I learned from the Shaman who saved me and other things that I’ve figured out on my own. What do you want to know?”

“Well, I’ve reckoned that we get our energy from touching other people, but can we kill them?” Sandburg asked, a worried frown on his face. “By, you know, touching them too much?”

“Kill?” Terry asked, his voice rising at the end of the word.

“Yes. See, I was arrested.” Blair proceeded to tell Grant about what happened with Officer Jenkins. “...he was on the ground. I’m wondering what would have happened if I hadn’t let go of him. Would he have died or just passed out or what?”

The grad student sat for a moment, thinking. “I’m not sure. Samir, the shaman who saved me, told me a great many things, but killing someone wasn’t anything he warned me about. And, I have to say, I’ve touched a lot of people since I was reborn and I haven’t hurt anybody yet.” Grant ran a hand over his chin as he thought. “I’m guessing that this Jenkins guy was all wound up and when you touched him it drained the adrenaline out of him in a hurry and he kind of crashed.”

“That makes sense.” Blair thought about what happened in the holding cell in a new light. The more he thought about Terry’s explanation the better he felt. Maybe he would be able to touch people after all. “What about sex, then?” he blurted out.

The archeologist bit his lip, trying not to laugh. “Do you mean, can you have sex? Yes, I can assure you that it is possible.”

“I don’t mean can I get an erection, I know that area is okay. No, I mean what about touching people during sex. Won’t that drain them?”

“That would kind of kill the mood, wouldn’t it?” Grant said wryly.

“Just a little,” Sandburg agreed with a grin. “Unconsciousness is not something I look for in a bed partner.”

Terry laughed. “No, me either. Well, the first couple of times I tried to have sex, it was a problem.”

“What happened?”

“The lady in question, my former girlfriend, kept falling asleep. There she’d be, passed out, and I’d still be...interested, if you know what I mean.”

Blair put a hand in front of his mouth to hide his knowing smile. He waved, "Go on."

"Well, I realized that I was taking energy from her inadvertently. I got to thinking about my problem..."

"And your girlfriend's," Sandburg added.

"Oh yeah, she was upset, embarrassed and horny, too." Terry scratched the side of his head. "I found out, quite by accident, that if I stocked up on energy beforehand, things worked out."

"Stocked up," Blair said thoughtfully.

"Yes. Think of it like a fancy dinner party. You don't want to get there and pig out because you are starving, so you eat a sandwich or burger before you go, that way you've sated your appetite somewhat and can eat a regular meal."

"And not pig out," the grad student reiterated.

"Right." Terry watched Blair thinking about what he'd said. "It's worked for me."

"But you said she, uh..."

"Ginny," he provided the name.

"Ginny was your ex-girlfriend."

"Oh, yes, well she got a job in New York, so we broke up. Not because of problems with sex or anything."

"Cool," Blair said. He scratched his neck, feeling embarrassed by the way the conversation had gone.

"How about the second part of the documentary?" Terry offered, feeling his face flush with awkwardness himself.

"Sounds good," Sandburg said enthusiastically; far too enthusiastically for a documentary, but hey, any port in a storm.

In anticipation of another night of cuddling, and hopefully more, Blair stocked up the next day. He made sure to touch a lot of people, appropriately, of course. A pat on the back, brush against an arm, that kind of thing.

Every time he touched someone there was the tinniest hint of red on his fingertips. Luckily the day was bright so no one noticed anything untoward, or if they did they thought it was a figment of their imaginations.

And Blair noticed something different. The more he touched people, even briefly, the less of a red look there was to his hands. The anthropologist wasn't sure if it was a daily thing and that tomorrow his

hands would be a brighter color or if the turning red thing was something that faded, like blushing over a pretty girl or guy. He made a mental note to ask Terry about it the next time they met.

He got back to the loft well ahead of Jim. Sandburg took a shower, dressed in a nice pair of jeans and a red velour button down shirt; something nice for the Sentinel's eye and hand. While dinner was cooking the grad student straightened up the living room, not that there was much to clean, so Jim wouldn't have any distractions.

Blair sat down with a novel he had been intending to read for months now, but never had the time. And he waited.

And waited.

And waited.

The anthropologist ate supper, as slowly as possible. The food, which by this time was slightly dried out, tasted alright to Blair. Not the same as if he'd been sharing it with the ex-Ranger, but not too bad.

Still no Jim.

He checked the phone, just in case he'd missed a message. Nope, and the phone was working fine.

The observer thought about calling the station to make sure nothing was wrong, but decided that was a bit too stalkerish and would probably just piss the Sentinel off. Besides, if there were a real problem, Simon would have let him know. Probably. He was pretty sure, at least.

By 11:30 Blair had put away the leftovers, washed the dishes and was in his room. He had completely given up any hope of Jim coming home in time to resume their kissing about two hours earlier.

The zombie decided to try out something he'd recently discovered, his gifts, if that's what you'd call them. Sandburg had begun to notice things a while back, but hadn't really thought much about it.

Like, when he heard Theresa McNally talking about a cute guy that she'd been blowing the night before. The only problem was that Theresa and her friend, Nina had been at the back of the lecture hall. There should have been no way that he would have heard her talking.

If he really concentrated—and squinted a little—the grad student found that he could see things really far off. Blair had seen Professor Lynch drop a twenty dollar bill on the ground, from halfway across the parking lot. The professor had been glad to have his lunch money returned and Sandburg had been kind of freaked out.

'I guess dying and coming back like I have has enhanced my senses,' Blair had thought at the time. 'Nothing like Jim's Sentinel senses, but better than I had before.'

Blair made an early night of it, only grading until about one in the morning. He was mostly asleep when he thought he heard the scratching of a key in the lock; too much asleep to get up and check, so he didn't know it when Jim came slinking in at almost two.

The next afternoon, Sandburg was at a coffee shop near Terry's apartment. The two men were talking again and Grant confirmed Blair's supposition about his senses. It seemed that the other zombie had improved sight, etc., too.

"What about dying?" Blair asked suddenly.

"Too late," Terry quipped, giving Blair a bright smile.

"Yeah, I guess so." Sandburg gave the other man a try at a smile, but it was only half of one at the best. "Seriously, though."

"The truth is that I don't really know," Grant admitted. "I've only ever really talked about this stuff to you and Samir. I've met a couple of people since I died who I think might also be," he glanced around the diner, "you know. But that was only guesswork and speculation."

"It's not easy working the Z word into a casual conversation, is it?"

"Not really, no," Grant said with a slight laugh. "All I know is that since I got back from Sudan," he said, alluding to when he'd died, "I haven't been sick, not even once. You remember when that really nasty flu was going around last year?"

Blair nodded. "Oh yeah, I was sick as a dog for a week."

"Right. Well, I was the only one in my Economics class that didn't get sick. Not a sniffle, a twinge or any fever whatsoever."

"Wow," Blair exclaimed his awe quietly.

"Yeah and that's not the only time I've avoided being sick. Now, mind you, I don't know what would happen if I was in a car wreck or hit by a train or had a satellite drop on my head."

Sandburg frowned. Blair forked through his salad greens and speared a chunk of tomato. His mind obviously wasn't on eating lunch or even his new friend, but the conversation they'd been having. He didn't like the idea of living forever, not that he wanted to die again anytime soon, but outliving Jim and his mom and everyone he knew and loved wasn't a comforting prospect either.

"You know, that salad isn't going to eat itself."

"What?" Blair asked, distracted by his own thoughts.

"I was talking about cannibalistic foodstuffs," Terry informed him dryly.

"Cannibalistic?" Sandburg's mind caught up with the conversation and he laughed. "Hmm, that would certainly be interesting to see."

Grant laughed back, glad he had pulled the anthropologist out of his funk. The two men laughing over their lunch attracted the attention of several other diners, but they didn't care.

"Jim."

The detective looked up. That had been Simon's voice, but the captain wasn't in the doorway of his office and instead of his usual bellow, Banks' tone was quiet, almost a whisper. With a casual glance around, Jim realized that none of the other members of the Major Crimes department had heard anything.

"Jim, come into my office, please," Banks repeated softly.

With an internal shrug, Jim stood and walked over to the captain's closed door. Rafe was the only one who gave him the slightest bit of interest and that was only fleeting. After a quiet rap on the doorframe, Ellison went in.

"Simon?"

Banks waved a hand at one of the visitor's chairs and waited until Jim had sat down before answering. He sighed and seemed to mentally brace himself.

"Alright, what's going on?" he asked in a resigned voice.

"I don't know what you're talking about, sir," the ex-Ranger answered untruthfully.

"Don't give me that crap. You've been dragging around for days like your best friend had died and Sandburg hasn't been around in all that time. So, what's the matter?"

Simon looked down at his desk and missed the surprised look at the best friend dying bit. When he looked back up at his friend, Jim had blanked his expression. Ellison thought about his answer for all of two seconds. He decided that Blair being a zombie was one secret that he wasn't going to share with his good friend. Frankly, he didn't think Simon would believe him. Hell fire, Banks still had a hard time with the Sentinel business.

Jim waved a dismissive hand. "Blair is busy at the university and I've been concentrating on this new drug that just came out, Lost Inhibitions."

"Lost Inhibitions?" Simon asked, successfully distracted from the Blair and Jim problem.

"Yeah. Sneaks called me a couple of days ago. He said there is this new 'wonder' drug that's recently hit the streets. It's called Lost Inhibitions, or LA for short, because it makes people's self-consciousness all but disappear. Someone who is very shy would strip off all their clothes and dance naked."

Banks frowned, remembering the incident where the mayor's niece had been found in the middle of the park, buck naked, dancing in the fountain. She had been embarrassed—and damned cold—once she



sobered up. The young woman had insisted that she couldn't stop herself, but drug tests had found no trace of any known drug in her system.

"It causes people to sleep around, mild mannered people to attack someone that they were mad at, stuff like that."

"Damn," Simon expressed. "That explains a lot of things that have been happening lately."

Jim nodded. "Yes, it does. So far, there hasn't been any other talk on the streets, that's why I haven't said anything before now, just in case Sneaks was wrong."

"Do you think he is?" Simon asked, leaning back in his chair.

"No, not really. He usually makes sure about his information before telling me and this time he actually contacted me, not the other way around."

"Hmmm," the captain answered looking thoughtful. "Let me know when you have more information. I want to nip this in the bud."

"Yes, sir." Jim stood up at the older man's dismissive tone of voice. He tilted his head to one side slightly and his eyes became unfocussed. "My phone is ringing," he informed Banks.

"Fine, fine." Simon waved a hand shooin' his best detective out of the room. Jim missed seeing the speculative look on Banks' face. He obviously hadn't been as distracted as the Sentinel had thought.

Jim had become good at playing the avoidance game. Now, with the possibility of a new drug hitting the streets of Cascade, he had a legitimate excuse not to come home.

Certainly, he didn't literally live at the station. Ellison managed to stay late at the station doing paperwork and arrive back at the loft after Blair was already in his room. Once, he timed it perfectly; Jim walked in the door while Sandburg was in the shower and went on up to bed. That hadn't really been that hard, because the Sentinel listened to Blair while lurking in the stairwell—yes, he actually waited for almost an hour—and then he snuck in.

Tonight, however...

"Jim, we need to talk."

Ellison jerked his head back out of the refrigerator and straightened up quickly. He could have sworn that Blair was in the shower, but apparently he was mistaken because Blair was standing in the edge of the kitchen with all of his clothes on and completely dry. The Sentinel's blue eyes darted towards the bathroom and then back to Sandburg who was giving him a very patient look.

“You don’t have to sneak in, Jim,” Blair said calmly. It was then that the detective realized that he had been outsmarted. While he had been listening for the younger man to start the shower, Blair had realized what he was up to and done an end-run by pretending to start cleaning up.

“I’m not,” Ellison denied weakly.

Sandburg raised an eyebrow at him, but didn’t contradict him. “Alright, but we need to talk about...” he gestured towards the couch where they’d been making out a few days before.

“No!” Blair jumped at the exclamation. “We don’t need to talk about it,” Jim said, modifying his tone.

“Okay, but if you’ve changed your mind...”

Jim interrupted. “No, I haven’t. I just...need time.”

Blair nodded. “Okay, I understand. But really, you don’t have to sneak around. I’m not going to jump your bones,” the anthropologist offered. “At least, not until you want me to,” he said with a grin before heading to the bathroom for his ‘real’ bath.

Ellison smiled at the quip, but the smile quickly faded. ‘You don’t understand, Chief. It’s not that we’re two guys it’s that we’re two guys and one of us is dead.’

Unconsciously, he extended his hearing and listened to Blair’s ablutions while he fixed himself a sandwich. Sound of water running, check. Sounds of the washcloth rubbing against skin, oh hell yeah, check. Blair humming a song in the shower, yep.

Heartbeat, no.

“Shit!” Ellison cursed quietly.

He had been allowing himself to bask in his aural voyeurism and had momentarily forgotten that Blair was a zombie. The beginnings of an erection died a quick and painful death. Jim wasn’t sure if he would ever be able to get past this hurdle.

Blair felt a little better. While Jim had been very nervous, and Blair had to trick him into coming home, he hadn’t given any indication that he wanted to end their romance before it even started.

As he rubbed the hair on his chest, Sandburg began to hum a little tune. He wasn’t sure what it was called, or even the words to the song, but Naomi used to hum it all the time and Blair liked to hum it when he was happy. And tonight, with renewed hope in his heart, the grad student was happy indeed.

Another call the next day with Sneaks led to a face to face meeting. Ellison made sure to come prepared. He went out and bought a nice pair of Reeboks and put them on for the meeting. Luckily he didn't have to walk far back to his truck, because walking in your stocking feet wasn't any fun in the cold night air.

Arriving back at the station—having put his regular shoes back on in the truck—the detective headed straight to his commanding officer's door. Jim was almost to the door when he noticed that Simon had company. Not wanting to intrude he turned to go to his desk.

"Ellison, come on in," the captain spoke loudly enough that anyone could hear him through the glass door.

Feeling a bit like a top, Ellison turned yet again and went into Simon's office. "You called me, sir?"

"Yes, Jim." Simon stood up. "Captain O'Neil, meet Detective Ellison. Jim, this is the new commander in Vice."

Jim and O'Neil shook hands and exchanged greetings. Then all three men sat down.

"Captain Banks has been telling me about possible information on this new drug, Lost Inhibitions. My men have been hearing rumors about the drug, but nothing concrete. Have you found out anything new?"

"Yes, sir," Ellison answered. "I have an informant named Sneaks," Jim told O'Neil the story and updated Banks.

'It is so typical,' Ellison thought sourly. 'Blair has been too busy to come with me to the station and now, here he is.' The Sentinel conveniently forgot that he had all but frozen Blair out, indicating to him that his time would be better spent at the university. But, after the mess with Alex, and the fact that Sandburg met her at the station, the Sentinel didn't want to take any unnecessary chances.

Sandburg did come back to the station and of course, it was just in time for the crap with Lost Inhibitions to finally hit the fan. It seems that the mayor's granddaughter had gotten hold of some of the drug and had decided to have sex with the volleyball team. The girl's volleyball team.

That hadn't gone over very well with many of the players, or the coaches, or the people watching the game. Yes, she had started jumping people in the middle of the game.

Needless to say, getting rid of the new drug was now their number one priority.

So, Jim had contacted Sneaks, who got in touch with a few people he knew and had found out about a couple of guys down on Murphy St. who seemed to be in with the main dealers pretty good. A stakeout was planned for the next day and guess who was roped in to be the sitting duck. That's right, everybody's favorite observer.

"No way in hell!" Ellison exclaimed.

“Excuse me, detective?” Banks asked, icicles dripping from his words as he gave the Sentinel his best—and damn, it was good—glare.

“Sorry. No way in hell, sir.” Jim had been a Ranger, faced down commanders, killers and his father; Simon’s glare was nothing compared to them.

“Detective Ellison,” Captain O’Neil spoke up, directing Jim’s attention away from Simon. “Using Mr. Sandburg, if he agrees, of course, was my idea. Most of my men are well known on Murphy St. and we just can’t take the chance that one of the Major Crimes people won’t be recognized either. Mr. Sandburg is young and unknown, he will fit right in.”

Jim transferred his glare to O’Neil and was happy to see Simon giving him an uncompromising look, as well. With the grad student’s long hair and laid back attitude, more than one person had assumed Blair was on drugs, but after almost four years as Jim’s ride along, such attitudes should have been a thing of the past.

‘It’s nothing like when I threw Blair against the wall of his office and threatened to search him for drugs,’ the Sentinel tried to reassure himself. ‘I didn’t know him at the time.’

Captain O’Neil held his hands up in a placating manner. “I’m not saying anything bad about the young man,” he reassured them. “It’s just that as someone younger who doesn’t give off a cop vibe, I’m sure he will fit in better than you or I.” He waved a hand, indicating the three of them, and in extension, the rest of the cops at the station.

“Sounds reasonable,” Banks said. Jim wasn’t sure if he believed the other captain, but he decided to give him the benefit of the doubt...for now.

“Yes, sirs.”

Casually glancing left and then right, as if he were checking the traffic, Sandburg visually made certain that his backup team was in place. And was that weird to think, or what? Him, Blair ‘You Are Not a Cop’ Sandburg with a backup team. But he did and yes, there was Rafe, looking over Henri’s cart at the selection of sunglasses for sale.

Blair snorted quietly. ‘As if Rafe would be caught dead buying anything off of a street vendor,’ he thought, mentally rolling his eyes. ‘Or even undead.’ The zombie managed to quell the smile that the thought engendered. ‘Who the hell thought up that assignment? Anyone with half a brain can see how expensive Brian’s ensemble is.’

Calhoun caught Blair’s eye and nodded casually.

Not!

Again, anyone who was paying the slightest bit of attention would realize that the well-dressed guy—who was, by the way, wearing an ear phone—who was nodding to other nicely dressed guys was odd and that something was up. Add to that the fact that most of these guys acted like cops and your stakeout was destined to be a 'sure fire hit'.

Again, Not!

Looking from Rafe—still perusing the cheap sunglasses—to Henri—who seemed to like what he saw filling Brian's pants—over to Calhoun—who was wearing a \$300 leather jacket in a neighborhood where spending ten bucks on a pair of sneakers was going all out—to Jim, who was the only one who really seemed to blend in, and Blair sighed. The only shot they had of catching the 'cooks' of the purported new drug lab was if Jim smelled or heard something with his senses.

'Huh. I have an idea,' Blair thought. Deciding to give 'his' senses a try, Blair listened to the people around him.

From what his nose was telling him, Brown did appreciate the way Rafe looked and Brian knew it. His ears, which were still not nearly as good as Jim's, let Blair hear muttering from people on the street; they wanted to know 'what the hell are all these cops doin' here?' It amused Blair to realize that he was the only one the local people weren't suspicious of.

'Hmph. Not a cop, huh. Won't fit in. Ha!' Blair mentally reviewed the criticisms and warnings Banks and a few other cops had given the grad student. 'Take that!' He gave them an internal 'up yours'.

Sandburg glanced over at Jim and wasn't surprised to realize that the Sentinel didn't seem to be using his senses. In a crowd like this, especially with a lot of other cops around, it wasn't safe to dial up his senses very much, particularly when Blair wasn't standing right there beside him to ground him if he started to zone out.

'Not really prudent either. Not with people who he worked with and knew him so well. But then, when was Jim ever careful? For pity's sake, here was a man who licked at dirt, in front of several people, no less.'

There! In the alley at the far end of the street, three men were talking about Lost Inhibitions. Pretending to window shop, Sandburg wandered amiably down the street, getting closer to the side street.

The Sentinel noticed Sandburg walking away almost immediately. His pale blue eyes narrowing for just a fraction of a second was the only indication that Jim gave that he noticed. It took Blair's other backup considerably longer to notice anything was up; the grad student was almost to the mouth of the alley by the time Henri stopped ogling Rafe's butt to see that something was up.

It was kind of interesting, actually, watching the 'undercover' cops trying to be nonchalant as they followed Blair down the street. Rafe was now window shopping a couple of stores away from Henri's cart. H, Sandburg was amused to notice, seemed to actually be doing a brisk business selling his sunglasses. Idly, the grad student wondered where the money Brown was making would end up.

'The widows and orphans Fund, most likely,' he mused.

"Chief."

Blair heard the faint hissing of his name and glanced casually to one side. Jim's jaw was clenched tight, making that little muscle in the corner jump merrily. Sandburg watched him for a few moments, wondering what had the Sentinel pissed off at him now.

"Chief," Ellison whispered through clenched teeth. He was astonished when half a second later the grad student looked carefully back at him.

'He heard me,' Jim thought. 'Wait a minute. He heard me! How in the hell did he hear me from a hundred feet away?' The Sentinel gave his head a little shake, trying to dislodge the millions of questions that one little look had swimming around in his mind.

Now wasn't the time to wonder. He would find out later—damn straight he would—after his wandering observer was safe.

"Why in hell is Sandburg going towards that alley?" The detective heard the question, both from his earpiece and from a couple of the other cops who were acting as backup.

'Sandburg never does anything without a reason,' Ellison thought a moment later. Keeping that idea in mind, Jim slowly began wandering closer, and as he did the Sentinel decided to risk it and dialed up his sense of hearing from a three to an eight.

The sounds of the street jumped up to a level that almost brought Jim to his knees. Henri was talking with someone who wanted to buy four pairs of sunglasses and only had a fifty dollar bill. A Mr. Henderson was arguing with a pawn broker over how much he should get for his television and somewhere a baby was crying.

Feeling himself about to be overwhelmed, Ellison heard, "Piggyback it, Big Guy." Nodding automatically, the Sentinel piggybacked his sense of hearing with his sense of smell and anchored himself to Blair's unique personal scent (cinnamon and oranges), and felt the extra noises settle back down to a more manageable level.

"I'm tellin' ya Freddie, we gotta get outta this."

"How the hell are we supposed to do that, Jonsey? Huh, answer me that."

"I dunno, but this Lost Inhibitions stuff makes people go nuts and I don't wanna be left holdin' tha bag when somebody dies because of it."

"Yeah, I know what you mean." The soft spat spat of tennis shoes on concrete followed as one of the men began to pace. "I just don't know how the hell we're supposed to get away from Patterson."

Jim sucked in a quick breath. He couldn't believe their luck in finding a couple of sellers, especially ones who seemed to know either the cook or the boss. Reaching up casually, Ellison pretended to scratch his right ear, in reality he scratched at the earpiece twice, which was an agreed to signal. The detective slipped unnoticed into the alley.

Frederick 'Freddie' Head and Ishmael 'Jonsey' Jones turned out to be goldmines. They were so desperate to get out of the drug dealing business that they gave up the inventor/cook/boss, who happened to be the same guy, without too much questioning. Terrence Patterson didn't go down as easily and again, Sandburg was right in the middle of it.

His lab was in a quiet residential neighborhood, only three blocks away from an elementary school. From the outside, the house looked like all of the other ones that surrounded it. There weren't any sleazy characters lurking in the azalea bushes. No dark cloud hung ominously over the roof. In fact, Ellison thought the house looked really nice and, quite frankly, wouldn't have minded living there himself.

It had been decided that Sandburg would be the one to knock on the door, since he seemed the least likely to be spotted as a cop. Patterson answered the door on the first ring and for a moment the detective, who was hiding behind the bushes, thought they had gotten the wrong address or that Freddie and Jonsey had fed them a cock and bull story to get a Get Out Of Jail Free card.

Patterson, if that's who he was, stood about 5'10" tall and was of medium weight. His medium brown hair was graying at the temples and his slight smile was warm.

"May I help you," the suspect's voice was inviting and helpful.

'Kind of like Blair's,' Jim thought.

"Yes, I've lost my dog, Friskie, and I was wondering if you had seen him," the grad student launched into his spiel as planned.

The ex-Ranger tuned out the conversation and instead concentrated on the man and the house beyond him. Immediately, his impression of a kindly man was thrown out on its ear. The house positively reeked of chemical smells and Patterson's heartbeat didn't match his calm demeanor, it was pounding like the man was running a race.

Standing up from where he'd been crouched, the detective raised his gun and said authoritatively, "Cascade Police, freeze."

That was when the drug runner threw a bottle of bright yellow liquid in Blair's face.

"I keep telling you I'm fine, Jim," Blair repeated for probably the tenth time. Maybe fifteenth. Certainly no more than twenty or twenty five.

The bottle of Lost Inhibitions that Henderson had thrown had sprayed all over Sandburg's head, covering his face and hair in the sticky liquid. Jim had rushed forward and knocked the drug dealer to the ground and handcuffed him, all the while panicking inside. No one really knew how the drug worked and the detective hadn't been sure if it had to be ingested or if, like Golden, just touching it could start playing with your brain.

Sandburg had seemed to be unaffected, but he managed to stay away from all of the other cops, the Sentinel especially, just to be on the safe side. Luckily, some of their backup had towels in the squad cars and Blair had been able to wipe most of the offending crap off. The EMT's checked the observer out and couldn't find any adverse reactions to the drug, but warned Sandburg that he should wash the drug off as soon as possible.

"No, I want to walk around with yellow syrup in my hair all day," the Guide muttered to himself. Of course, the Sentinel heard him and smiled, if Blair was making witty rejoinders, he was fine.

'Wait, if Sandburg is a zombie, with no heartbeat, how the hell did the paramedics take his blood pressure?'

Ellison listened and realized he could hear Blair's heartbeat, although it was growing slower by the second. Slower. Slower...gone. Jim stood there, straining to hear his friend's heartbeat once again.

"...go on to the station so the kid can clean that crap off." Simon's voice brought the Sentinel out of his mini-zone.

Jim looked away from Sandburg to the captain, in time to nod his head and say, "Yes, sir." Banks apparently hadn't noticed that the Sentinel had sort of zoned out.

"Come on, Chief," the cop called out to Blair, who was still wiping at his hair. The two men climbed into Sweetheart for the drive back to the station.

It turned out that Lost Inhibitions was permeable, however, for some unexplained reason, Blair was immune to the influence of the drug. At least that was what the lab determined. Jim and Blair, of course, knew differently, but they weren't going to tell anyone.

Blair opened the front door and let out a sad, disappointed sigh. All of the lights, save the one over the stove, were off. That meant that Jim was already in bed. The grad student had been looking forward to seeing Ellison. They hadn't seen each other all day, due to having missed one another that morning and Blair's overloaded schedule at the university.

'I was kind of hoping that we could get back to our kissing,' Sandburg thought to himself. In truth, Blair was hoping that Jim had gotten over his freak out from several nights before.

"Mmmm."



Blair froze, hand on the switch to turn off the light over the stove. The noise, which ironically sounded a lot like something you'd hear in an old zombie movie, was coming from upstairs in the loft. In Jim's bedroom. It wasn't an 'I'm in pain' or 'I'm sick' sound. No, it was a happy sound, one that sucked the happy glow Blair had been carrying around all day, right out of his body, leaving the anthropologist feeling cold and numb.

Almost of their own volition the observer's feet led him to the stairs. Blair followed the sounds, even though he already had an idea of what he would find and definitely knew he wouldn't like it.

He was right, on all accounts. Jim, who only the night before had been all over Blair, declaring his love and wanting to make love, was busy pounding into some woman.

Ellison's finely toned ass was jerking up and down as he pumped frantically into the woman, whose large breasts jiggled happily. The couple was so involved that they didn't even notice Blair standing there, at least until after the Sentinel growled out a quiet orgasm and the female—who had red hair, naturally—squealed out her completion.

The younger man felt detached from what he was seeing, which was a good thing, in a way, because for right now at least, he wasn't feeling the pain that would surely hit him sometime soon. Unfortunately for his pride, that same hovering outside of his body feeling kept his feet rooted to the spot just at the top of the stairs. Jim rolled over onto his back and lay breathing heavily. Lying next to him, also breathing rapidly, was a woman, about Jim's age, with short, red hair and pale skin.

Carolyn.

Jim's ex-wife, and apparently current lover, glanced over. "Damn!" she exclaimed, right into Ellison's super sensitive ear. Blair tried to tell himself that he wasn't pleased, even a little, when Jim jumped. She yanked the sheet over herself in a fit of modesty and then poked Jim in the shoulder with one pointed fingernail.

"Jim! Do something!" she demanded, a frown wrinkling the skin on her brow.

Ellison looked over at Carolyn and then seeing where her attention was, over to see Blair standing there. "Chief!" the ex-Ranger yelled as he jumped up out of the bed. Sadly, Blair was too distracted to enjoy the very nice view. "I'm..."

Sandburg didn't let him finish whatever excuse he was going to make. "A dick," he said facetiously, deliberately looking down.

The Sentinel's face flushed an angry red. He was embarrassed and upset, so he did what came naturally... he lashed out. "Why the hell didn't you make some noise? Or, better yet, not come up when you heard that I was engaged?"

"Funny. I thought that we were headed somewhere, considering you had your tongue down my throat and your hand in my pants last night," Blair shot back. He heard Carolyn sputter at the news.

Jim crossed his arms over his chest and gave Blair his best glare. The stance and look was somewhat a failure, considering the detective was standing there in the altogether.

“Why don’t you get the hell out!” the Sentinel yelled.

Feeling the compulsion of the order come over him, the younger man turned and hurried down the stairs. The feeling of apathy was fast fading and he was damned if he was going to let either Jim or Carolyn see how upset he was. Luckily, his jacket was on the coat rack right beside the door, along with his backpack, so he didn’t even have to slow down to grab them and head out the door.

Behind him, Blair could hear Jim’s footsteps as he ran down the stairs. Jim was saying something, which Blair couldn’t hear, and Carolyn was talking, which he didn’t want to hear. Out into the night he hurried and wondered when his life had gone straight to hell.

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“Jim!” Carolyn shrieked, right into his ear. The pain was so bad that Jim flinched badly and barely stopped himself from hitting her. He turned to find his ex-wife—oh god, what was I thinking—standing beside him. She had stayed in the bedroom long enough to dress, mostly, and he was aware that he was standing there naked and vulnerable.

“Carolyn, you don’t have to scream,” he informed her, teeth gritted.

“Huh. Yes, I did.” She paused to button her blouse. “You’ve been standing here, staring at the front door for several minutes,” Carolyn informed him. “And, I tried to get your attention, quietly, I might add, several times.” She shrugged, obviously not too worried. “So, I had to yell.”

When Jim had realized that he didn’t have any clothes on he had stopped his headlong race after Blair, thankfully before he went out into the hallway. Ellison realized that he must have zoned on the sound of Sandburg leaving the building.

‘Being thrown out,’ the Sentinel’s mind corrected him. ‘And you promised never to do that again, not after all of the crap that went down with Alex.’

Ellison distractedly watched as his ex-wife finished dressing. It was funny how he wasn’t aroused by the sight of her naked skin. Just a couple of hours before he’d gotten all hot when her skirt had rucked up a little, exposing the side of her thigh, but now...nothing. Except guilt.

He felt guilty for sleeping with Carolyn when he really wanted to make love with Blair. Ellison felt guilt-ridden over how he’d used the red haired woman and over how he’d betrayed Sandburg.

‘And myself,’ Ellison added to himself as he watched Carolyn silently walk out the door without a goodbye or a backward glance. He was gratified to realize that their encounter meant as little to his ex-wife as it did to Jim.

Jim shivered as the door shut and the cold air from the hallway swept over his body. After locking the door behind Carolyn, Ellison walked naked to the bathroom and stepped into the shower. He turned the water on full blast and as hot as he could possibly stand it; whether to wash away the evidence of his indiscretion or to get rid of his guilt, the ex-Ranger couldn't say. The former worked, the latter, not so much.

Blair was out on the street before he was even aware of walking there. Well, more like running. Damn! Jim had ordered him out of the loft and he had been compelled to do so.

'Not that I wanted to stay there anyhow,' Blair thought, his mind in a turmoil. 'I can't believe that Jim was all over me like a rash a few days ago and tonight I find him screwing his ex-wife. I got the impression that they didn't really like each other all that much.' Sandburg snorted as he opened the Volvo's door and slid behind the wheel. 'I guess it's true that you don't need to actually like someone to fuck,' he thought crudely.

Starting the car with a vicious twist of his wrist, the anthropologist backed up with a romp on the gas. He slammed on the brakes and made himself stop for a moment, even though he wanted out of here in the worst way, he didn't want to kill anyone else in the process.

Once his nerves had settled a little, Blair continued on, even though he didn't know where in the hell he was going to go. He had just left the university and for once was all caught up on his grading. Sandburg had no desire to sit at his desk and think about Jim stabbing him in the back as he stabbed Carolyn in the...

He forcefully cut that line of thinking short, wanting to remain as calm as possible. Along those lines, the grad student aimed his car to the park where he and Terry liked to sit and watch the sunset. Hopefully the good memories would be enough to calm his temper, which was bubbling under his skin like a pot on the stove.

Two hours later and Blair was still sitting there. Amazingly enough, sitting on a metal bench—a cold metal bench—after dark hadn't improved his mood. It wasn't as if he didn't have places he could go. No, he had friends, Megan, for instance would lend him her couch in a flash. But they would all ask questions and want answers why he and his good buddy, Jim, were on the outs.

After his drowning, Blair and the Australian woman had become really good friends. If she so much as got a hint of Jim's fun with Carolyn, Megan would definitely storm over to the loft and tear into Ellison. While a part of the grad student wouldn't mind seeing that, the Guide part of him didn't, wouldn't, cause any extra trouble for his Sentinel if he could possibly help it.

Damn! There were times when the Guide side of him really pissed Blair off.

Another hour and a half on the cold bench helped, though. He wasn't really sure when it happened in the intervening time, but at some point in the last hour Sandburg had gone from seething anger to

desolation. Blair was now slumped over to one side, like most of the bones had been removed from his body, and that's the way he felt too. Empty.

"This is more than a touch of homophobia," the grad student said, trying to convince himself. "It has to be. Jim's never shown any kind of distaste for the gay or bi people we've come across. Hell, he was flirting with me, first, so it's not like I pressured him or anything."

Sandburg sighed and forced his body into an upright position. He had to think about his own situation for the moment. Mentally he counted the contents of his wallet and bank account. \$175.43 in his pocket and \$358 in his savings account.

Okay, so he had some money and his next stipend was due to come in the following week. Blair reasoned that if he stayed in a cheap motel he wouldn't have any trouble for the next few weeks. Feeling a little better knowing that he wasn't literally homeless, Sandburg felt himself perk up, a little.

Pushing himself up from the park bench, Blair made his way to the Volvo. He knew of an inexpensive motel not too far from the university. Sitting on the cold leather seats—which, after the metal he'd been resting on, actually felt warmer—the anthropologist started the car and let it warm up enough to defrost the windshield.

The zombie looked down at his hands and frowned. Turning on the inside lights Sandburg examined his fingers more closely and noticed that they were a gray color. Not blue, as if they were cold, but gray like they were, well, let's just say it, dead. Flipping down the visor, the grad student looked at his face in the mirror on the reverse side. Yep, a nasty gray color as well, although not as ashen as his hands. Come to think of it, the younger man felt torpid all over, something that he hadn't felt since he woke up in the hospital after being drowned and revived.

Blair wasn't sure if it had been the upset or the cold, cold night, or both, but something had obviously given his body a setback. Sandburg hoped that the heat in the car would be enough to give him some color, so he didn't look like a corpse when he checked into the motel.

"Yeah, having the motel clerk scream and call the coroner would be a bad thing," Sandburg quipped, as he returned the visor to its upright position. "Maybe he'll be half asleep."

She turned out to be wide awake, but distracted by the book she'd been reading. Madeline, as her nametag designated her, barely looked at Sandburg as she typed in the information on the computer.

Blair wasn't really very surprised. While this wasn't a No Tell Motel, it was on the cheap side, so it's not like a night clerk would be paid enough to pay attention to the guest, especially one checking in at almost midnight.

Thanking his lucky stars for inattentive employees, Sandburg opened the door to Room 203. He went to the combination air conditioner/heater straightaway and turned it on, full blast. The room, which had been closed up since the last person checked out, wasn't much warmer than it was outside.

Sandburg pulled back the generic comforter before sitting down on the bed to remove his tennis shoes. Deciding that it was better to keep his clothes on and be warm, Blair turned off the light on the bedside table and slid under the covers.

'I don't have any other clothes,' his tired mind reminded him. 'Can't wear dirty, rumpled clothes to the university.'

Blair frowned before he remembered the couple pairs of jeans and a few shirts in the back of his car. Also, he remembered that there was a nice jacket and suit at his office, the one that he kept for emergency meetings.

'All I need to do is buy some underwear, at least for the time being,' the anthropologist realized.

With a sigh, Blair relaxed on the bed, knowing that this crisis was taken care of, for the short term. In a matter of minutes, Sandburg was fast asleep, worn out by the day's upheavals and the growing warmth of the room.

\*

Jim Ellison did not get a good night's sleep.

After his shower, Ellison had decided to go hunt for his wayward Guide; the one that he had made wayward. Unfortunately for Jim, he turned right, towards the university, not left towards the park.

The Sentinel drove all the way to Hargrove Hall. He looked in every conceivable parking spot for Blair's car, but the Volvo wasn't there. Ellison stood outside the locked building which housed Sandburg's office and extended his senses. He found evidence of Blair's having been there, but it was fading and obviously hours old.

God help him, he even checked the fountain. Luckily, that was also devoid of the younger man.

Remembering after Jim had been shot and seen the leopard and things had been tense between Blair and himself, Ellison knew that the observer had gone to the station. That was, after all, when he'd first met Alex.

'If only I hadn't...' Ellison stopped that thought in its tracks. Would've, could've, should've wouldn't help anything.

As soon as Jim entered the Cascade Police Department, he knew that Blair wasn't there, either. The scent of him here was so faint as to be nonexistent. Due to conflicting schedules, among other things, Sandburg hadn't been to the station much lately.

Ellison sat at his desk in the darkened bullpen of Major Crimes and tried to think where else to look. The trouble was he didn't know of any place else. The loft, the university and the station were really mainly where the observer hung out and had been for almost as long as the Sentinel had known him.

'When did Blair's life narrow down to nothing but school and work?' the detective wondered to himself.

Jim sat at his desk for a while longer thinking about what to do. He'd looked everywhere he knew for the observer, with no luck. There wasn't anyone he could call, even if it hadn't been late in the evening. And for certain he couldn't put out an APB.

What would he say?

Keep an eye out for my roommate, who is so much more to me. He left on his own—so to speak—after he saw me having sex with my ex-wife.

Hmmm, maybe not.

What did that leave, then? Going home and waiting. Hope that Blair came back and, if not, then he could go to the university in the morning and find the grad student.

Not thrilled with the prospect of waiting until morning, Ellison left the station and headed home. As he got closer to the loft the Sentinel mentally crossed his fingers and prayed that his Guide would be home waiting for him.

He wasn't, so Ellison trudged upstairs and settled down to wait.

The next day was Saturday.

"I can't believe that I forgot the weekend was coming up," Ellison grouched.

He was standing in the still empty parking lot of Rainier University. It was raining—what a surprise—and the detective was getting soaked. Jim had been so stunned to find the place empty that he'd gotten out of his truck, as if his standing there in the rain was going to make the parking lot magically fill up.

"Shit!" Jim glanced around one more time before getting back into Sweetheart. "Just, shit!" he reiterated, just in case the universe wasn't clear on how pissed off he was.

Less than two miles away, Blair was still asleep. He had remembered what day it was and had *not* set the alarm clock that the motel provided.

Exhausted after everything from the day before, not to mention the last several months, Sandburg continued to sleep until the heat woke him up. In his haste to go to bed the night before, Blair had left the heater on high. The grad student woke up sweating, as a result.

Still 90% asleep, he staggered out of bed—tripping over his shoes on the way—and turned the heater down to low. Now nice and toasty he stripped down to his boxers and t-shirt before getting back into bed. For once, his overly active mind was quiet.

Simon rubbed his forehead. Ellison was being a bear. No, wait, he was acting so nasty that bears were cheerful in comparison. The captain didn't know what had happened this time, but it was obvious to everyone that Ellison and Sandburg were on the outs...again.

It had been almost two weeks since Jim came to the station that Monday morning, pissed off and upset. Two weeks with a seriously territorial Ellison snapping at anyone who even thought about looking at his things, let alone the one time Henri walked by his desk and accidentally brushed a hand against it. From the ex-Ranger's reaction you would have thought that Brown had pulled down his pants and defecated on Ellison's desk.

'And then things got bad,' the captain thought to himself.

Jim had come close to trading blows with Joey Calhoun, a cop from Vice. Calhoun had dropped a file onto Ellison's desk, mistakenly thinking it was Rafe's. The Sentinel had been at the copier and seen the whole sordid affair—Jim's words—and stomped over, retrieved the offending folder and thrown it at the other cop's back.

Tina, the doughnut girl, was glared at when the young woman mentioned, 'That cute guy with the curly hair'. Simon wouldn't be surprised if she got another job.

Risking a peek out of the window on his door, Banks looked over at his friend, best detective and all around pain in the ass. Ellison was sitting at his desk doing paperwork and the scowl on his face was enough to make demons tremble in fear.

Banks sighed. 'I wonder how soon I could get a vacation?' he wondered idly. 'Nah, better not risk it. Wouldn't want to come back from a trip and find a crater where the bullpen used to be.'

There would be too much paperwork involved.

Jim attacked the computer keys vigorously enough that the keyboard bounced up and down a few times. Ellison closed his eyes for a moment and forced himself to calm down. The last thing he needed was to break off some of the keys and have to go down to the Supply Office and requisition a new one. He'd already torn through two keyboards this month. Anymore and they'd start docking his pay.

He could just imagine Elliot, the head supplies clerk, waving an invoice in his face and demanding payment. The Sentinel gave a small snort. Elliot was five foot nothing and weighed 95 lbs. at most. The idea of him threatening the 6'2" ex-Ranger was a funny one.

Seriously though, Jim knew that he needed to pull himself together. It wasn't any of his friends or coworkers fault that he'd messed up with Blair. It wasn't even Sandburg's fault. No, the blame stood squarely on his shoulders and it could be given one name, Fear. He needed to get over it. And yet. Blair was still dead and that still bothered him.

Jim went back to typing, but with a lighter touch.

Sandburg sat on the edge of his bed, eating a ham and cheese sandwich he'd made. He was still in the motel, even after almost two weeks. Lucky for him, they had a weekly rate that was a lot easier on the old wallet than a daily one. It was still expensive though and Blair knew that he was going to have to find a more permanent solution to his housing problem.

Blair's mind ran through about 30 things at once, as usual. He was making lesson plans, thinking up questions for the next test he was giving later in the week, mentally reviewing his clothing options to decide if a trip to the Laundromat was in order...and remembering his first phone call from Jim, after Jim's night with Carolyn.

*"Blair Sandburg speaking."*

*"Chief?"*

*"Jim," Blair answered steadily.*

*"I, uh, I'm sorry you had to see that." There was no need to be more specific as to what 'that' was.*

*"Yeah. I'm sorry that I caused such a scene."*

*"You were justified."*

*"No. No, I wasn't," Blair said quietly. "You and I kissed a few times and groped a little. That doesn't give me any claim on you. Besides, it's your place; you can have whoever you want over and do whatever you want."*

*There was silence on the other end of the line. Blair waited to see what the detective would say.*

*"It wasn't like that. I thought we were getting...together," Ellison sounded hesitant, something that Blair had never heard before and it made the Guide in him want to fix it somehow.*

*"I did too."*

*"Maybe..."*

*"Maybe," Blair spoke at the same time. "Maybe it would be best if I don't come by the station for a little while; let things settle down a little."*

*"If that's what you want."*



*'And we're back to him closing off,' the grad student thought, shaking his head.*

*"Not really, but I think it's best. As always, if you have any trouble with your senses, just call me and I'll come straight away."*

*"Yeah, okay."*

*"Bye, Jim."*

*"Bye."*

That had been more than a week ago. Since then, Sandburg had called Jim at the station to make sure he was alright. The icy barrier that had been around Ellison towards the end of that call had thawed when he realized that Blair was serious about not leaving him in the lurch, Sentinel-wise.

Sandburg finished up his sandwich and thought back to earlier in the evening when he'd gotten back to the motel from the university. Jim had called this time, asking to meet at the park. Just to talk, Chief.

The observer snorted and shook his head. "I'm spending more time in the park lately than a squirrel."

\*

"Chief, I'm sorry," the Sentinel blurted out, afraid that if he didn't say it quickly he would lose his nerve. Either that or Blair would kick him in the balls and leave, permanently this time.

The two men were sitting in Jim's 1969 truck. Blair had climbed in after he'd arrived at the park, because it was too cold to be sitting outside. For once, Sandburg hadn't known what to say. It hadn't been a problem, because apparently Ellison did.

"For what?" Blair asked.

'Oh crap!' Jim thought. 'This is like when Carolyn would tell me that I knew what I'd done wrong, even when I had no idea and no matter what my answer it was always wrong.'

"I'm..." Jim hesitated for a moment and then decided to just tell the truth. "I'm sorry I flaked out on you that night we were making out. And, I'm sorry about sleeping with Carolyn."

Sandburg nodded his head, a thoughtful look on his handsome face. "Was it because we're guys?" he asked.

"No." Jim swallowed hard and ran a hand over his face. "We were kissing and all of the sudden it dawned on me that you were...dead." At the confused look on Blair's face, Ellison continued, "I know we had talked about it, but it was suddenly so real. You were dead and I was kissing a..."

"Corpse," Blair continued grimly.

"Well, I wouldn't put it that way, but yes."

"I see." Blair's voice didn't condemn him, but there was an infinite sadness in it, one that made Jim's heart fall out of his chest and onto the ground.

"But, I've gotten over it," the Sentinel added quickly.

"I'm still dead and nothing is going to change that," Sandburg stated quietly.

"Yes, but you're still you." Blair turned to look at the cop. "You are still Blair Jacob Sandburg, observer, teacher, Guide, best friend and nothing will ever change that."

"Except that it has, changed that is. I don't have a heartbeat, unless I want to, I don't breathe, again, unless I specifically need to," the observer reminded Jim.

"You are still warm, you talk, you laugh, you teach and guide me," Ellison retorted.

"If I get too cold, I turn a grayish color," Blair admitted, unsure why he kept trying to put the Sentinel off.

Jim swallowed hard, his eyes getting bigger. "I, uh, see."

Sandburg nodded. He saw too. Jim might be sorry, but it still bothered him. Blair didn't blame the older man, it kind of bothered him too.

"I turn a funny reddish purple color when I get too cold," Ellison added.

Blair blinked, his eyes growing wider. Did Jim just try to put the Blair's zombieness in perspective? Maybe there was hope after all.

"I guess we'll just have to bundle up more," Sandburg replied quietly.

"Yeah, and remember to wear our gloves." Ellison arched a patrician eyebrow; Blair tended to lose and/or forget his gloves all the time.

"Yeah." Blair smiled and was thrilled when the Sentinel smiled back.

### **Almost a week later**

Jim and Blair had been slowly making inroads towards restoring their friendship. Sandburg had begun coming to the station again and, amazingly enough, Ellison had dropped by Blair's office at the university. Both men were working hard, but it was still an uphill battle.

"How come you don't come by the loft?" Jim asked suddenly.

Ellison and Sandburg were sitting in the park eating their lunch, bought from a nearby stand. The day was considerably warmer than it had been the last couple of weeks, sort of an Indian summer in the fall. Not wanting to miss out on the nice day, Jim had suggested eating out in the open instead of a diner. They had been talking about this and that, and nothing much at all when Jim asked his question.

Blair, who had been listening to Jim talk about a case they were working on, was surprised by the change in subject. Ellison saw a myriad of expressions cross Blair's face. First, confusion, then surprise and then worry. The confusion and surprise weren't a big surprise, but the worry bothered him. It was easy to see that the grad student was worried about what to say.

"Because you told me to get the hell out," he reminded the Sentinel. Blair wouldn't look up at the Sentinel and had stopped eating his chicken salad sandwich.

Jim frowned, about to deny the accusation and then he let his mind drift back to that night when Blair had come in on he and Carolyn having sex. The detective's face turned a bright red as he remembered the circumstances which had prompted those words. "I didn't really mean that," he said, trying to refute what he had said and done.

"Yes, you did. Maybe not now, but at the time..." Blair looked at him.

Ellison ducked his head in acknowledgement. "Alright, maybe I did," he admitted. "But it's not like you to stay away like you have."

Sandburg licked his lips and glanced away from Jim's intense stare. He shrugged. "It's not like I had a choice." Blair took a deep breath and explained, "You ordered me to leave; I couldn't stop myself."

"What? Why not?"

"You saved my life, Jim. Yes," he held up a hand to stop the Sentinel from interrupting, "I know Incacha told you what to do, but you were the one who brought me back from the dead. As a result, you are my, for a better term, master. I have to do what you say."

"You mean I could have complete control over you?" Ellison asked, a horrified look on his face.

"Yes."

"I'm surprised you haven't run for the hills, I would have," he admitted.

"I've thought about it, but I didn't want to abandon you," Sandburg muttered the last two words.

Jim looked at his friend and thought about how hard it must have been for such an independent person to know that the detective could have control over him. The fact that he had stayed went a long ways on healing the abandonment issues that the anthropologist was always talking about. After his mom left, his dad and brother crapped all over him, the debacle with his troops and then his marriage to Carolyn, even Ellison admitted that he expected everyone to leave, in one way or another.

"Is that what happened to your voice a few months back?" Jim asked, remembering when Blair came to the station and wouldn't talk.

"Yeah. You told me to shut up and I couldn't make a sound until you told me otherwise."

The Sentinel's mind was awirl. He knew his tendency to jump to conclusions and let his mouth work before his brain. What if he told Blair to leave and not ever come back? It could certainly happen and then he'd never see the grad student again to reverse the command. What could he do?

"Is there anything I can do to, I don't know, release you?"

"Actually, there is. You just have to say it and I won't be under your control anymore," Blair stated, a hopeful look on his face.

Ellison didn't think twice, he didn't hesitate, he just said it. "I, James Joseph Ellison, release you, Blair Jacob Sandburg, from my command."

Blair gasped, either in surprise or maybe he physically felt the hold on him lift; whatever the case, a bright, eager smile, one that Jim hadn't seen in months, lit up his face. Jim blinked a couple of times. He hadn't realized how tense Blair had been until that tension was gone. It bothered him that he hadn't even noticed and made Ellison wonder what else he had missed.

"I'm guessing that did it," Jim stated.

"Yes, I feel...freer." Blair stood up, held his arms out to his sides and spun around in a circle. The Sentinel smiled at his friend. He saw Sandburg's bottle of water about to fall over and abstractedly reached out a hand to catch it.

"I'm glad."

Blair stopped spinning, long after Jim would have personally fallen over and thrown up, and with a smile sat back down on the bench. He picked up his sandwich and began to eat it with a great deal of enthusiasm. Ellison watched him, having finished his own sandwich before 'the talk' and was relieved that everything was finally alright.

"Terry! You are not going to believe what happened, man," Blair enthused as soon as his new friend answered the phone.

"Wow, I imagine that it was something good," the other student answered.

"Oh, yeah! Jim..."

Knock. Knock.

Blair glanced up at the knock on his office door. "Damn," he cursed silently at the interruption. Part of him wanted to tell whoever to go away, but this was the listed time for his office hours, and he couldn't, in all good conscience, turn away someone needing help.

"Hold on a second," he turned the mouthpiece away from his face and called out to the person knocking. "Somebody's at my door. I'll have to tell you later."

“No problem,” Terry told him. “How about we meet at Antonelli’s tonight at 6:00?” he offered up the name of a popular pizzeria.

“Sounds good. See you tonight.” Blair hung up the phone and took a few seconds to compose himself before ushering the student in.

Jim thought that after he’d released Blair—whatever the hell that meant—that things would go back to normal. Boy, was he wrong.

Sandburg did move back into the loft, after almost two months. When he did return, it was to his small bedroom under the stairs.

Things were awkward at first, but then they loosened up and went back to the way they had been, before Alex had drowned Blair. They shared laundry, cooked and ate together and watched television. But, no kissing.

When they watched t.v., Blair either sat in one of the armchairs or at the far end of the couch. The few times that they had shared a couch and Jim tried to ease himself closer to Sandburg, the younger man needed a drink or to go to the bathroom and when he returned it was always back to one of the chairs.

Jim decided that the grad student needed some time. Time to learn to trust Ellison again. And Jim decided that he needed time too, because there were moments when he’d find himself studying the younger man, looking for signs that he really was dead. Blair let him watch and didn’t say anything, but Jim knew that each time he did, the possibility of getting closer to Sandburg was slipping away.

“So,” Terry said.

Blair looked over at his friend and replied, “So?”

The other zombie shook his head and smiled. “So, you’re back living with your friend, Ellison.” When Blair just nodded his assent, Grant continued, “How is it going?”

Sandburg held a hand up and waggled it back and forth. “So so. We’re back to being friends and roommates. Jim keeps trying to get close, but I just can’t do it right now.”

“You don’t trust him?”

The grad student shrugged one shoulder. “I do, mostly. With my general welfare, you bet. Following him around at the station, naturally. With my heart...not so much.”

“I’m sorry,” Terry told him as he laid a hand on Blair’s flannel covered shoulder.

“Thanks. I don’t think he would deliberately hurt me, again. But, that’s not the point. Jim never *deliberately* sets out to cause me pain, but despite his best intentions, he does. He keeps watching me. Not, like he wants to jump my bones, but like he’s afraid bits of me are going to start falling off. I don’t want to start making out and Jim freak out, again. If he pushed me away once more I’d be out the door, down the street and gone, this time for good. Right now, I’d rather wait than risk our friendship.”

“I don’t blame you.” Grant patted Blair’s shoulder once and then moved his hand. “I hope things get better between the two of you.”

“Thanks.”

The two men sat and looked at the television, neither one really paying attention to the program that was on. Every once in a while, one or the other of them would take a drink from the glasses set on the coffee table.

“So,” Blair said this time.

“So?” Terry answered, a slight smile on his face.

“We’re dead. Zoooombies,” Blair drug the word out, making it sound spooky. “We don’t know how long we’ll live or much about our current states. I don’t know about you, but I only know of one other person who is zombified and that’s you.”

Grant thought for a moment. “Yep, that pretty much sums it up.”

“I guess we’ll just have to figure it out, one day at a time.”

“Sounds about right to me.” Terry raised his glass and Blair raised his, they clinked them together in a toast.

“So...when do you want to meet Jim?”

**The End**

## **Scream**

Sung by Tokio Hotel

You get up  
And somebody tells you  
Where to go to  
When you get there

Everybody's telling you  
What to do  
Thank you  
It's been another  
Bloody Monday  
And no one  
Is asking  
What you wanted  
Anyway

No, no, no, no...  
No, no, no, no...  
Scream!.....Till you feel it  
Scream!.....Till you believe it  
Scream!.....And when it hurts you  
Scream it out loud!.....Scream!...

Watch out!  
Stay awake  
They're lurkin'  
Obsess you  
They're always  
Working  
Promising  
Everything you never  
Asked for  
And one day  
It'll be too late  
And you'll be back  
For more  
Back to zero  
Your time's about to come  
Let them know  
You're not just anyone

Scream...

You're time's about to come

Scream!.....Till you feel it.....

Shut up! (Silence)

No!.....Cos you feel it

No!.....Cos you believe it

No!.....And when it hurts you

Scream it out loud!.....No, no, no, no.....

Scream it out loud!.....Scream!