



Hearth and Home

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There was a cheery fire crackling in the fireplace and Amiga was a furry rug draped over my feet. I could hear Blair as he pattered around in my kitchen, despite his efforts to keep quiet. If I hadn't felt so lousy, I would have been about as near to happy as I'd managed in a long time. But it's hard to be pleased with life when your stomach is staging a revolt and your head feels like someone tried to squeeze your brains out your ears.

When Blair reached out and stroked a hand down my arm, the worst of the effects receded enough that I could open my eyes and look at his concerned face.

"Can you sit up?" His voice was only just above a whisper, which I appreciated. Rather than answer, I levered myself up, which earned me a sigh from Amiga. She didn't appreciate her mattress wriggling.

Blair smiled slightly and handed me a mug. "Not the best tasting, but it will help, I promise," he assured me.

From the smell, I knew he was underplaying, but what the hell? I'd tasted worse. Given my luck with medicine, it probably wouldn't help, but it would at least make Blair feel better. And I really wanted to know what he had to tell me about my senses. All things considered, I preferred to find out when I could actually follow a thought from beginning to end.

I spared a moment to hope very fervently that if I got it down, it would stay down and swallowed the contents of the cup as quickly as I could. Even so, my eyes filled with tears and I coughed several times before I could stop myself. "If I didn't know you better, I'd think you were trying to finish me off, not help me," I told him, surprised at how hoarse I sounded.

"Yeah, sorry about that. But I figured you probably don't do well with most chemicals or pharmaceuticals."

A slight uplift at the end made the statement a question, and I nodded. Whatever the stuff was, it not only stayed down, but, it started to reduce the drumbeat in my head almost immediately and the nod didn't even rattle my teeth. Definite improvement.

Blair stepped away to get me a drink of water. When he came back, he resettled us on the couch so I was propped against his side, one arm draped protectively over my chest. He pulled the afghan up higher to cover more of me, and I eyed the multi-colored blanket now that the colors didn't make my eyes water.

"My mom and I lived on a ranch for a summer. The family matriarch was eighty if she was a day, but she put in full days like everyone else. When she relaxed in the evenings, she would watch Steven Segal movies and knit," he explained, his eyes distant with the memory.

Part of me wanted to ask more questions. I wanted to know about all his summers, and his springs and winters and autumns. But there were more important matters at hand. Besides, if I had my way, there would be plenty of time to indulge my curiosity later.

We sat in silence while I enjoyed the fact whatever was in the concoction Blair gave me seemed well on its way to making all my usual symptoms back the hell off. It occurred to me to ask what it was, but I didn't; I highly doubted anything that tasted that bad was made from anything I wanted to know I'd eaten.

Beside me, Blair took a deep but careful breath. "So, if I heard you right, you smell things no one else can, noises are loud to you that shouldn't be, your taste buds are off the map, and you see scarily well."

Put that way, I wasn't sure I like the sound of all of it, but it was too much effort to be defensive now that I was reasonably comfortable. "I don't know that I'd put it quite that way, but yeah, I guess I do."

I could feel it as he tensed, but outwardly, Blair only nodded. "And you have a hyperactive tactile response?"

It took me a second. "Extra sensitive touchy feely, you mean? Yes." I reached up to run my hand down his arm and smiled. "But it has its compensations."

That made him grin at me. "I just bet it does. But no fair distracting me during my explanation. I don't know how much they told you about me, before they sent you out to find me, but I'm an anthropologist, and I've been studying a particular phenomenon known as a Sentinel – a person with enhanced senses. In pre-civilized times, every village had one, a scout to watch for approaching enemies, changes in the weather, movement of game. Tribal survival depended on it."

"In modern times, I've only found reference to or met those with one or two enhancements." He paused then and when he continued his voice was softer, almost tentative. "If I'm right, you're the real thing, the Holy Grail for my work, if you will. It sounds bad, but in a lot of ways, you're a throwback to a time before modern society got in the way."

It was an effort, but I took a deep breath and snapped a leash on my temper. "Please don't tell me that your explanation for all of this basically boils down to the idea that I'm some sort of caveman."

"No, no. Not at all." Blair shook his head so hard his hair lashed my cheek, and I could feel the heat of the blush that stained his cheeks. "Oh gods, it did sound like that, didn't it? But no. All I meant is that the need for your type of abilities and the instincts that control them are much older than most people can understand."

"I've been studying Sentinels for a long time, since I first heard about them on safari with my mom when I was still a teenager, actually. I can give you all kinds of examples of those with enhanced senses from just about every culture you can think of. But most of the examples I've heard about these days don't have all five senses enhanced the way you do. No wonder you ended up with problems; you don't have any way to control the input you're getting."

My temper strained again. "Tell me something I don't know, why don't you?" Blair's explanation shouldn't have made me so angry, but my voice was louder than it should have been and if I didn't still feel like I'd been run over, I'd have stood up to pace.

On the one hand, I was thrilled to have an explanation for what made me a freak. On the other, I had to wonder if Blair was here because he felt the same connection I did or because he saw me as the fulfilment of some kind of lifelong dream. As enthusiastic as he was, I already knew I had no desire to become some kind of science project.

It took effort but I sat up and slid over to put some distance between us. "Look, Blair, I think you might have the wrong idea here. As much as I appreciate the explanation, I'm not interested in being some kind of specimen for study. And I sure as hell don't like the idea of being anyone's research subject, not even yours."

I watched temper tighten Blair's jaw, but then he held his hands up and shook his head. "I won't lie to you, man. I do want to write about you, if you'll let me. But that's not something that we need to address now. Right now, all I want to do is help you, if you'll let me."

"After all of that I'm just supposed to believe you'll help, out of the goodness of your heart, no strings attached. I'm not that naive, Chief. I don't think I ever was." Much as I hated my cold, sarcastic tone, the familiar defence mechanism made it easier to get the words out.

"I'm trying to see things from your point of view, Jim. And I'll admit, I probably could have explained this whole thing a bit better," Blair retorted. "But don't you dare imply I'd let you suffer when I know how to help you. And while we're at it, don't pretend you don't feel the same connection I do, or I'm calling bullshit. We both felt it out on that damned mountain and it's still there. And in case you forgot, you saved my life. It can't possibly be that hard to understand that I might want to repay you in some way."

He opened his mouth to say more, but Amiga sprang off the sofa and barked once, high and sharp. The noise made me wince and I stared at her, positioned between the two of us and clearly not impressed with our behaviour.

It's not the first time I've been reprimanded by my own dog, but it was the first time Amiga had been so insistent about it. And now that she'd made me stop to think about it, the truth of Blair's words resonated too loudly for me to ignore. I remembered how driven I'd been to find him and the spark of energy that jumped between us when I did. And I couldn't argue with how much better he could make me feel with just his presence. Just because I didn't like what his explanation meant didn't mean I had the luxury of ignoring it, especially given that I knew he was smarter than just about anybody I'd ever met.

"Dammit, I hate this, all of it. I wish I didn't have any of it," I told him. I'd wished to be normal pretty much my whole life, but never more than right now. It wasn't an apology, but it was the closest I was going to be able to come right now.

"I can imagine," Blair agreed gently. "But I really can help. If my research is correct, there are ways to control the amount of input you get and when you get it. And there are definitely ways we can see to it that you don't get overwhelmed. I'll tell you what, you let me finish what I was going to say and then if you want me to leave, I'll leave. No questions, no arguments. I'll email instructions on how to do the exercises I have in mind instead."

It's a good thing I have a decent poker face; I managed not to show how much I hated even the idea of Blair leaving and nodded slowly. "Alright."

Blair let out a relieved sigh, and slumped back against the couch. "Good." He stopped and gestured at me. "Relax, okay? You're still not looking so hot." And he looked pointedly at me until I stretched out again. Amiga jumped back up to cover my feet and I absolutely did not wish I was still using Blair as a pillow.

Still, I couldn't hold back a smile when Blair reached over and covered me up again, then retreated to his perch on the other end of the sofa. "Thanks," I murmured.

"No problem," he answered while he gave me a careful once over, presumably to be sure I hadn't managed to make myself sicker in the last few minutes.

We stared at each other and I felt myself go cold. After what we'd already covered, whatever made him hesitate now couldn't be good.

"Look, Jim, I wanted to get to know you better and spend time with you before I knew anything about your senses. I've felt drawn to you since we met, and not just because you have that tendency to rescue people.

I could go on for hours about what it means to be a Sentinel. Hell, if you asked my friends, they'd tell you I have, numerous times. I'll admit it's something I'm passionate about. But you already know more than I do, in a lot of ways, because you've lived it. I'm not going to sit here and claim to be an expert in how to be Jim Ellison. But the theory behind what makes Sentinels tick, that I am an expert in. And everything I've read, all the shamans and tribal leaders I've talked to – it all supports the idea that you need to learn how to control your abilities or they control you. You'll end up totally zoned out, completely disconnected from the world around you."

My stomach knotted and the chill I felt intensified. "I know," I admitted. "It's happened more than a few times. Amiga managed to bring me out of the latest ones though."

Blair nodded as if that made perfect sense. "Most likely she was able to shift your focus to your other senses and that brought you away from whatever you hyper-focused on," he explained.

He reached out and stroked a hand down her flank in appreciation but kept his eyes on me. "I'm glad she could help, really I am. But it's not going to be enough in the long term. Every Sentinel is meant to have someone to help them manage their abilities, keep them grounded and properly focused, keep them safe while they protect everyone else. There's not nearly as much written about this person, or the relationship between them and their Sentinels. Apparently, most cultures view it as an intensely private matter. But those I've talked to called them the Guide."

He stopped talking then, which was good, because my heartbeat was so loud, I'm not sure I would have heard him. The word Guide echoed in my ears in time with my heartbeat and my head went so light it seemed it would float up to the ceiling.

Somehow, I found the energy to object. "If you think I'm going to tell even more people in some misguided attempt to find this Guide person, you're not nearly as smart as I thought."

For an instant, I saw surprise cross his face and then Blair burst out laughing, but his expression was warm and open, far too pleased for me to take offence. "No man. I'm not saying you need to go find a Guide, I'm volunteering for the position. Well actually, I'm telling you I think I'm already in it. It would explain why I get such clear impressions of your feelings. Though I have to say, when I read

that the Guide would feel what his Sentinel felt, I didn't think they meant it literally." He chuckled as he finished, clearly unable to contain his amusement.

If I was completely honest, I knew I'd have to admit Blair was the only person I would even consider as my Guide. It was actually a relief to have a reason for all the protective instincts he triggered in me. By the sounds of it a Guide was meant to be of special importance; clearly some part of me was already tuned into that fact. But on another level, that made me more confused.

"That's all very interesting," I admitted. "But how am I supposed to know if you're you here because you think I'd make a great research subject, because you think you're meant to be my Guide or because you actually want to be here?"

"Do I have to pick one?" Blair's tone slid towards plaintive and he leaned in to close the space between us. "Just because I think someone should document proof of a real, live Sentinel doesn't mean I would ever allow that information to put you in danger or interfere with your life. Given what you told me and what I've experienced the last little while, I think it's a good bet I am your Guide. But that's not why I came or why I'm still here. If you really want to know the truth, the idea scares the hell out of me; there's way too many different ways I could screw it up. But I'm still here because I want to be here, because ever since we met, I can't stop thinking about you. I want to discover everything there is to know about you and let you do the same. And that's a new thing for me, man. I get to know people, but I can count on one hand the number of people I've let return the favor."

It was so close to what I'd thought earlier I almost smiled. Nice to know I wasn't the only one going there. But that didn't make this whole situation any less weird or scary.

"Look, I know what this sounds like. And plenty of people would probably tell you I'm a little nuts. But, I'm right about this, Jim. And I think you know that, or you wouldn't be so scared right now."

Distantly, I noted my elevated heart rate and respiration. The tension in my body was less than comfortable. But that's not how Blair knew I was scared. Perhaps the strangest thing about all of this so far was the fact that he could pick up on my emotions didn't bother me.

Even so, I had to resist the urge to argue with him out of reflex. I learned a long time ago that if you reacted out of fear you did stupid things that could get you killed. Didn't mean I didn't do it anyways a lot of the time, but something about Blair made me want to make the effort.

"I'm not saying I'll go along with everything you have in mind," I began. "But do you actually have a plan?"

That brought another laugh, but quieter this time. "I'm not really a planner. Nothing says we can't figure it out as we go."

I held back the sigh that wanted to come out. I'm very much a planner and I really liked the idea of knowing what to expect. Still, it's not like this Sentinel stuff came with a handbook. I thought I managed to keep my expression neutral but Blair spoke again.

"I get it, you're not a seat of your pants kind of a guy. I can see if I can come up with some structure, if that's what you want. But this is only one facet of whatever this thing is that's building between us. So, in the meantime, why can't we just do what people do when they like each other and see what happens?"

He paused and his expression turned serious. "I cleared my schedule for a week before I came out here. Turns out there's an upside to the fact that I never take vacation days and most of my colleagues owe me a favor. I could get a room at the hotel in town and we could plan as many outings as you want."

I shook my head. "No can do," I answered without hesitation.

Blair shifted back, looked like he would stand up and I sat up and put a hand on his arm to stop him. "I meant you can't get a room in town. The hotel and both B & Bs are booked up. It's the Fielding Founding Festival. Besides, I'd like it if you stayed here, assuming you don't mind."

For just a second, Blair's gaze went heated and then he grinned at me and settled back into the sofa. "Well, they say you don't really know someone until you live with them. Of course, I'm not sure that applies to people who met after one of them fell down the side of a mountain and the other one found him."

"No, probably not," I agreed, and ignored the twist in my stomach at the thought of how easy it would have been to miss finding Blair that night.

"I wouldn't have let you leave when we were done talking," I added, even though it seemed safer to keep it to myself.

"Wouldn't have mattered if you did. I said I'd leave no questions asked. I never said anything about not coming back." Blair kept his tone light, but his eyes showed he was completely serious.

Somehow, that made me feel better.

You would think that life changing conversations would come with some kind of warning: a fanfare of orchestral music or something. The only warning I got was the same I had all along, the bone deep sense that this man was important. After the way we met, I told myself he was important because he found me, saved me from what could have a very bad outcome.

I don't think I've ever been so glad to be wrong and so terrified all at once. Sure I could make it sound good, but I didn't really have the first clue what it actually meant to be a Guide. And I'd always wanted to meet a real Sentinel, but now that I had, I almost wished he was just a normal guy – almost. It just figured, I finally meet a guy I really like who hit all the right buttons: funny, interesting, sexy as hell, and there just had to be all the extra layers to complicate the hell out of it.

The only good thing about how conflicted the whole thing made me was the fact that it helped keep me from picking up too much from him. Ever since I started with the whole emotional impressions thing, I've tried my best not to let it invade anyone's privacy. And I wanted to get to know Jim, not accidentally know way more than he wanted me to.

For the moment, I took a few deep breaths and decided to focus on the practicalities. The man still looked like death warmed over on the couch, it's not like we were gonna start testing his abilities today. That meant I had time to figure out exactly how we would do that.

"So, how's the headache and the rest of it?" It seemed like a safer question than any of the others that crowded in my head.

Jim's eyes slid shut for a long moment while he took an internal inventory. "Better. A lot better, actually..." he trailed off.

"But?"

"It was better when we sat closer," he admitted, his voice low and his eyes looking down at his lap.

Hypersensitive tactile response or not, Jim didn't strike me as a guy particularly comfortable with admitting to needing contact, so I only nodded matter-of-factly.

It didn't take long to re-settle us in our previous position. I had to admit, I liked it better too. It played hell with my ability to concentrate, but I couldn't bring myself to care.

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Eventually we made it off the sofa and into the kitchen for some food. It was late for dinner but who cared? Not like we had reason to be on a schedule. Dubious ingredients aside, Blair's cure had

worked well enough I was actually hungry. I didn't quite feel up to tempting fate, or my sense of smell with my cooking, but that was alright, since he volunteered to cook instead.

I couldn't help but wince when he opened the fridge door. I hadn't had time to keep it properly stocked lately and I hadn't planned on having the contents critiqued by anyone but Amiga any time soon. When I looked over to check on her, she looked back with evident amusement while Blair tsked at me. I resisted the urge to tell her she would be in trouble soon enough. That was just petty.

Dinner was surprisingly tasty omelettes that Blair claimed would have been spectacular if I kept decent ingredients in the house. I got up to feed Amiga when we were done, and tried to help with the dishes, but he banished me back to the couch. He didn't seem the clean freak type, so I kept an eye on him while he washed and dried and put everything back to rights, but he was thorough. Turned out he was right about my need for rest too, since I was drowsy by the time he was finished. I barely managed find the energy to let Amiga back in when she barked once to let me know she'd finished her business.

Blair insisted we go to bed at that point, so I heaved myself to my feet and gestured down at the couch. "This thing pulls out; the bed's not the most comfortable, but it'll beat trying to keep from falling off the sofa all night. There's clean linens for it on top of the closet by the door," I gestured toward it to make the point.

A big part of me wanted to tell him to come upstairs with me, but we'd had a fairly momentous conversation and I needed to process. Besides, whatever else was between us, I wanted to be completely awake when we took that next step. And it was too soon for that anyway. My head knew that, even if my heart and hormones didn't.

"There's clean towels in the bathroom, if you want to take a shower in the morning and help yourself to whatever you can find for breakfast if you're up before me, though I don't see that happening. I'm an early riser; Amiga insists on it; she's very strict."

"Good to know," Blair replied as he walked towards me and crowded into my personal space. He kissed me with the sort of intent that seriously tested my resolve.

I returned the favor, tangled my tongue with his and explored his mouth until my blood felt heavy in my veins and my jeans were definitely too tight. Somehow I found the self-control to gentle things back a bit, but that didn't make me want any less. "Sleep well," I told him, a bit surprised at how rough my voice had gone.

The smile Blair gave me in return was a bit strained for a moment and he laughed quietly. "A guy can hope," he replied as I walked up the stairs.

Fortunately for me, I've gotten a lot of practice at overruling my libido over the years so I got myself settled down on the pullout bed with only a few short mental wanderings. I laid between the soft, powder blue sheets and very carefully didn't think about Jim as he settled into his bed upstairs in the loft that ran the whole length of the front of the cabin.

He'd made it clear he didn't want us to get past kissing tonight, though he hadn't said anything out loud, which I had a feeling should probably have bothered me more than it actually did.

I'd done the jump into bed fast thing before. Sometimes it went great and other times, it caused more problems than it was worth. Jim was already way too important to me to risk the second option. And the fact that he was that important was something I needed a chance to wrap my head around. One of the first lessons I ever learned was that it was better not to depend on anyone, to really need them, because sooner or later, you had to leave or they had to. And letting go of people hurt, no matter who did the leaving. The only person it was safe to really count on having at the end of any day was myself.

But that wasn't true anymore. Jim already proved I could count on him; the man found me in the middle of the night in completely unfamiliar terrain for god's sake; what else did I want?

I couldn't get comfortable so I flipped the pillow to the cool side and rearranged myself into a new position, on my side this time, and hoped all of my movement wasn't a problem for Jim. I tried to be quiet but for someone who could hear as well as he did, I doubted that would help.

My mind was too jumbled to settle, and a tiny voice in my head insisted on reminding me how much better I slept with Jim beside me. Sometime later, I heard Amiga start to snore lightly. That's when I felt it, a surge of loneliness and longing, threaded through with fear.

I glanced up at the loft quickly but there was no movement. Jim was still safely tucked up in his bed. My good angel told me I needed to ignore what I'd felt. My bad angel reminded me there was no harm in both of us taking comfort in the presence of another person, especially after so much upheaval. I tried to think of other things, to block out the feelings, but the idea of Jim in distress made my shoulders tense and I caught myself with my jaw clenched. Hell with it. Worst that could happen would be that he'd ask me to go back downstairs.

Enough moonlight spilled in through the large picture windows that dominated the front of the cabin that I found my way easily. I climbed the stairs slowly and when I stepped into the room, Jim propped himself up on one arm from his position on one side of his oversized four poster bed.

"I heard you trying to get comfortable. Something wrong with the pullout?" he asked quietly as I crossed to the bed and looked down at him.

The duvet had slipped down enough to reveal his chest and I had a vivid flash of how it'd felt beneath me that night on the mountain. I swallowed hard and ordered my brain to let me access my vocabulary.

"Yes," I admitted. "It didn't have you in it." I kept going when he opened his mouth to speak. "I know there are good reasons not to rush into things. But, I also know I sleep better with you than I do alone. And I think the same goes for you."

For a long moment, he said nothing, and I thought I'd asked too much of him, pushed him to confront too much of what he felt on top of an already emotionally taxing day. When Jim shifted, I thought he would tell me to go back to my own bed. Instead, he flipped the sheet back on the other side of the bed and patted the mattress.

There's not really a graceful way to climb into bed with someone, but I managed it without injury to either of us at least. I left a careful amount of space between us at first, but the contrast between us highlighted how cold I was and I edged closer, even as my fatigue showed up to join the party.

"You're freezing," Jim noted with dismay. I didn't object when he pulled me closer. Hell, it was all I could do not to purr. Not only was he my own personal furnace, something about being that close to him felt right in ways I decided not to look too closely at just then.

Protectiveness swirled up to join fatigue and I couldn't tell if it was from him or me, but it didn't really matter. "Much better." I didn't realize I'd said it out loud until I felt the chuckle vibrate through his chest.

"Can't argue with that," he agreed.

"You could have just asked, you know," I told him, despite the interruption of a huge yawn.

"I'm not good with asking for things. Too many years of being completely self-sufficient, I guess."

"We'll work on that," I promised, just before my whole body went warm and lax with the edges of sleep.

I woke obscenely early the next morning and despite attempts to fall back asleep, my brain declined to cooperate with my plan. I was irritated for the split second it took for my still sleepy brain to inform me that it woke me up so I could enjoy the fact that I was curled up in bed with Jim, sleep warm and dead to the world beside me.

When he was asleep, the lines of tension of his face eased away. I supposed it made sense that the strain his abilities placed on him would show, but in that moment I was particularly glad we would soon be doing something about that. I lay there, more comfortable than I had any right to be, while the light went from gray to pink and then edged toward the golden tone that promised a brilliantly sunny day.

Just when I thought I'd have wake Jim and get up, Amiga yawned and stood up, more quietly than I expected. Her toes clicked on the planks of the floor as she looked over at me, then paced over to nose at Jim's hand.

"Past time I was up, is it?" Jim asked her, his voice amused and affectionate.

Glad not to be the culprit behind his wakefulness, I shifted to roll over, then paused when Jim reached over and put his arm around me. The gentle pressure rolled me to face him instead and he kissed his way up the side of my neck and landed a light one against my lips.

I reached up to cup the back of his neck before he could pull away and nibbled on his lower lip just a bit. "Good morning."

"Yeah, I guess it is," Jim agreed, while Amiga shifted from foot to foot with impatience.

"Alright. I'm coming," he told her with a little frown of impatience I knew was a lie, since I could still feel his amusement at his wake up call. It was almost the same light pink as the earliest sunlight, somehow blurry, probably because he wasn't all the way awake yet, but it made me smile as I headed for the bathroom tucked at the end of the loft.

The contented happiness of the morning stayed with me as we got on with the day and I tried to figure out the best way to teach Jim what I knew about Sentinel abilities – and more importantly, how to control them.

The first sign of a problem was a headache. Granted, I wasn't prone to them, but I stayed up late a few nights before I drove up here. I had a lot of work to get through before I could take my time off without guilt. The late nights meant extra coffee – a lot of extra coffee. I figured that explained the pounding in my cranium.

I was stupid enough to think it couldn't get worse, but then Jim came back in from chopping wood. Normally, that would have been cause to eye his delightfully sweaty body, but I was a little distracted, since his satisfaction from a job well done all but hammered me between the eyes as he stepped through the door. Hard on the heels of the satisfaction came a wave of frustration, though I couldn't tell what that was directed at. The sudden change from one emotion to the other was so intense it left me dizzy and short of breath. I gripped the counter to stay upright and breathed slowly through my nose.

"What's wrong?" Jim demanded as he came over to examine my face. "You've gone pale and your pulse and breathing are all screwed up."

In spite of the rampaging buffalo in my head, I raised an eyebrow. "You can tell that just by looking at me? That's awesome." Because really, that had all kinds of fantastic potential applications, especially for someone in law enforcement.

"I'll tell you what, Blair. Why don't we talk about that when you don't look like you're about to collapse?"

I didn't answer, only let him lead me to the couch. He helped me sit down, then went to the door to let in Amiga, who walked directly to me. She nudged my hand, licked me and looked like she

would have whined, but didn't. I wouldn't put it past her to know how much my head hurt. Like handler, like dog, after all.

I slid my hand into the super soft fur behind her ears to comfort both of us. "Thanks," I told her.

For her part, Amiga sighed and went to curl up on her rug in front of the fire, careful to face us, so she could be sure we behaved ourselves.

"It's just a headache, Jim. I'm fine." I did my best to sound calm and certain, but even I could tell I didn't make it.

Jim reached to brush a hand gently down the side of my face. "Looks like more than a simple headache. I thought they were my forte. I wonder if you're coming down with something. You don't have a fever," he noted.

As he took his hand away, another wave of emotion rolled over me, concern this time – so bright and hot it felt tinged with red in my mind.

When I moaned, the red got brighter and clenched my fists while I tried to do the centering techniques I'd learned from the man who also taught me yoga and tantric breathing. I'm not sure if it helped or if things backed off on their own. Either way, after a few minutes, the worst of the pain receded. I breathed out shakily and realized I'd ended up all but draped over Jim. At least he didn't seem to mind. I could still feel his concern but there was no trace of discomfort. That made me feel a little bit better about the situation, but it still felt like I'd been caught with my hand in the proverbial cookie jar. People's feelings were supposed to be private.

"I'm not worried about what you can pick up from me," Jim told me in what I figured was his best firm tone.

"What, you've taken up mind reading now, so you know what I'm worried about," I retorted.

"Nope. And I don't need your abilities either. What you feel tends to be written on your face, Chief. And if this is the price being able to read people the way you do comes with, I'm actually kind of glad I can't."

I blinked and looked up at him too fast. Despite all of my supposed expertise on the subject, the possibility that my abilities were making me physically ill wasn't something that occurred to me. I don't have the best track record when it comes to taking care of myself; I prefer to make sure everyone else is taken care of. I have a habit of being a bit run down and prone to problems. I may have gotten overly used to the downside.

The information I had about Guides was quite sparse in comparison to what I knew about Sentinels. Both the written records and the verbal histories tended to focus on what they saw as the primary role. A lot of what I know about my function as a Guide, I'd had to infer or extrapolate. Not that I planned to tell Jim that, but I wished I had more source material to draw from.

With a frown, I realized that actually, I did. But it was at my place in Cascade. I always kept my current research journal and one or two pieces with me, but carting everything around wasn't practical, and besides, I was way too good at accidentally leaving things behind to want to take the risk with most of it.

The last thing I wanted to do was leave Jim and go back to the city, even temporarily. But it would help to be able to go through everything. I didn't remember any reference to Guides with problems with their empathy, but then again, I hadn't realized until recently exactly how literally that word was apparently used in this context.

"You could be right, that this is something to do with how I read people." The admission was tinged with the reluctance I felt. "I'm not sure. I think I need to go pick up some more of my notes, see if I can track down any references to similar problems. I might have to stay overnight by the time I get there and get it all loaded. But, it's likely I'll be able to come up with some more stuff that

will help you too. So there's another upside." It didn't really make me more enthusiastic about leaving, but it was true.

Jim's face was neutral, but I could feel his dislike of the idea before it faded away. "Well, I suppose this is a case where information is power." He looked like he would say more, but he only shook his head and frowned.

The furrow between his brows was actually kind of adorable and made me want to smooth it away with my fingertips. "Believe me, if there was any other way to get the info, I'd take it, but I haven't put most of it on computer yet, so picking up the hard copy it is."

Jim's lips twitched in a slight smile. "Worried someone might steal your big dissertation idea?"

"Nah. My computer died and I don't have the money to replace it. And even if I did, my schedule's been insane this year, with my hours as a TA, and meetings with my advisor, plus paid work."

"Should I feel guilty keeping you here?"

I didn't hesitate. "Not a chance. This is more important."

Jim insisted I eat first but all I could manage was cereal and juice. When I was done, I set the plate in the sink and tried to shake off the gloom that wanted to crowd into my thoughts. This early in the morning it was there was still a slight chill to the air that came in the windows. But I knew that was not why I was so cold. I hated the thought of leaving Jim, even for such a short time.

"Hold on," Jim called out as I moved to the door. "Here, put this on before you put your coat on." He held out a sweater that looked hand knitted, dark green and only a bit too big for me.

I basked in the softness as I pulled it over my head. "Thanks. This is great, really."

Jim shrugged off my gratitude. "It was a gift but it's not my size and I never got around to returning it. I figured the heat probably takes a while to actually do anything in that relic you call your car, so I thought more layers would be better."

I fought the impulse for all of a minute before I stepped in close and put my arms around him and drew him in for a kiss. When I broke away, I rested our foreheads together and tried to remind myself I actually needed to walk out the door. I like my alone time, and the last thing I would call myself is clingy, but everything in me told me to stay here, as close to Jim as possible. Part of me was certain something terrible would happen to him when I walked out the door. But that didn't even make sense, since Jim was more able to take care of himself – and everyone else, more so than anyone I've ever met. And that assumed that Amiga would let any threat anywhere near him, which I wouldn't want to make any bets on.

I gave myself another moment to procrastinate, stole one more kiss that got a bit heated at the end, and forced myself to walk to the door. Every step forward took far more effort than it should have and the closer to the door I got, the more dizziness made my head go light. I reached for the doorknob as black spots danced their way into my vision and barely managed to hold back a whimper at the sudden onslaught of muscle pain in my shoulders that travelled down with sharp intensity I really could have done without.

Still, I would have left, but then I heard Jim moan. It wasn't a loud sound, but it made me turn before I even thought about it. The movement churned nausea through my belly but I ignored it. I reached to put my hand on Jim's shoulder before I spoke. "What's the matter?"

Jim blinked up at me in confusion. "My head felt like it was about to split open as you opened the door, but the pain stopped, just like someone flipped a switch."

It didn't hit me until he spoke that the same was true for me: headache, dizziness, muscle pain, they were all but gone. Only faint echoes of the unpleasantness remained and the longer we stood

that way, the more they faded. Still, correlation was no guarantee of causation. I took several deep breaths, then dropped my hand and moved to the door.

Everything slammed back into me before I made it half way to the door. By the time I put my hand on the knob, the dizziness, headache and muscle aches were bad enough that only stubbornness kept me upright. By the time I made it back to Jim it had eased off again, but the echoes were stronger and I had to fight to keep the contents of my stomach where they belonged.

That answered one question, but it raised so many more I could only shake my head. "I want to say I don't believe this, but my body would mutiny if I test my theory again." My tone was more serious than I intended, and for the first time I felt fear that had nothing to do with my ability to be a Guide.

"Let's not and say we did," Jim answered. "What do you say we drop Amiga at Dylan's for the day and I come with you to pick up what you need?"

"I thought you'd never ask," I told him gratefully.



It shouldn't have mattered; it was just a place, but I was still a bit embarrassed to have Jim see my rather run down current home. But the artwork and artifacts I'd scattered around the place caught his attention; he seemed too distracted to have noticed.

After a quick check to make sure he didn't need anything, I headed for the other end of the warehouse to the shelves we'd put up to hold all my boxes. I've always been compulsive about the labels on my storage materials and once again, that tendency saved my ass. It only took a few minutes to narrow down which shelf I needed.

Before I lifted down the first box, Jim was beside me with an inquiring look on his face. "Which ones from this shelf do you need?"

My eyes dropped to the ground and I felt my cheeks heat. "Uhm...all of them?" It became a question when I realized exactly how many trips back and forth to load that meant.

But Jim only laughed, and the sound boomed out to fill the space. "Good thing I put my foot down about the leg room in my truck."

"Yeah. I guess so," I agreed, amused.

I noticed Jim seemed distracted while we schlepped boxes out to his truck, but I chalked it up to the menial job and didn't say anything. Once the last of the boxes were safely under a tarp he produced from behind his seat, I went back one last time to grab some more clothes and few of the photos and small bits I didn't like to be without that I hadn't wanted to take the time to stop and get in my haste to make it to Jim's cabin in Fielding.

We were back out at the truck, about to climb in when Jim spoke again. "I'm hearing some strange noises from the place next door, the one your place shares that long wall with. Who did you say your neighbours were?"

It took a second but then I remembered. "No one. I mean someone stored a boat and a couple of RVs but he moved his stuff out a few months before I met you. The landlord hasn't found new tenants yet. So far as I know, anyway, the place is empty."

Just as Jim would have answered, there was a chorus of shouts from the supposedly empty building and then windows shattered outwards an instant before flames shot out of where they had been. A half a minute later, a second explosion tore the roof off the whole place and flames leapt up to paint the night sky with smears of orange and red. The force of the explosion knocked us both down. Gravel bit into my hands and my ears rang with a high pitched tone.

But my first concern wasn't for me; the noise of the explosion, the sharp chemical tang that lingered in the air, hell, even the different colors in the flames; any one of those could cause Jim to hyper-focus and zone out.

When I moved, every muscle screamed in protest, but I shoved that aside and scrambled over to Jim. At first, he was so still I worried he'd already zoned out. Then I noticed the large hunk of mangled metal that lay almost right next to his head. The edges were scorched and one of them had blood on it.

At the sight of the bright, red smear, fear spiked my heart rate and left me weak and shaky. I considered praying for the first time in years. The idea that I could lose Jim so soon, and so senselessly was intolerable, especially since I was the reason he was here at all. A closer look and I could tell the wound was bleeding, but not too heavily which was good. The fact that I heard sirens in the distance was better. I dug my handkerchief out of my pocket and folded it up so I could use it to apply pressure to the area.

"Jim, I know you probably have a bitch of a headache but I'd really appreciate it if you woke up now, man." My voice shook, but I figured I was entitled. I hadn't realized how much I depended on what I could pick up from him until all I could sense from Jim was an empty sort of blankness that felt wrong on more levels than I could put a name to.

It was so wrong, I resorted to begging, but the other man didn't stir. It was an effort to stay where I was and keep pressure against his head. Part of me wanted to run my hands over the rest of him and check for more injuries, but I resisted. The only thing that kept me from panicking was the fact that I could see his chest rising and falling as he breathed. The movement was a bit too fast, but steady.

The sirens grew closer, then the ambulances rounded the corner and I allowed myself one quick sigh of relief. "The paramedics are almost here, Jim. They'll get you fixed up." I said it for my own comfort, but at that moment, Jim moaned and opened his eyes, then shut them again in a hurry.

"No. No hospitals," he demanded, then winced at the sound of his own voice.

I'm not fond of hospitals either. Too much indoctrination from Naomi about the evils of Western medicine, I guess. But under the circumstances, I put my foot down. "Sorry, Jim but when you come within an inch of being blown up, the rules dictate you have to go to the hospital. Amiga will never forgive me if I don't make sure you're okay."

Jim grimaced but didn't object. When I went to step back and let the professionals do their job, he reached up and grabbed my wrist.

I squeezed gently and ran my other hand soothingly down his arm. "I'll be right here. I promise," I assured him.

A pretty brunette whose nametag read Carasco turned her attention to me while her partner, a stocky man who looked better suited to football, worked on Jim. I filled her in on what little I knew about what happened, my own history, and an abridged version of Jim's issues. It was easier to pass his symptoms off as allergies and PTSD, and the symptoms were all there. She didn't need to know what really caused them to do her job. I emphasized the fact that Jim had medical anxiety, which was mitigated when I was with him. Without hesitation, I emphasized that he was a combat veteran, and had experienced isolation trauma. He might hate having his personal life on display, but if it kept me with him, I didn't care.

Carasco looked at me, and her eyes made it clear she knew there was more to the story, but then nodded. "Alright. I'll do my best to see to it the hospital staff knows to keep you together. You're in luck, I've known the people on tonight forever and a day. And most of them owe me one."

I resisted the urge to hug her, barely. "Thank you. Really."

Don't ask me what she did to convince them, but staff at the hospital kept us together while we were assessed. They even let us go to X-ray together. About an hour later, we'd both been a little too thoroughly poked and prodded. We were a bit worse for wear but at least we didn't have to deal with a repeat of the earlier issues caused by separation. I perched on the end of Jim's gurney so I could casually rest against his feet.

When the doctor finally came in to talk to us, he seemed distracted and looked more like someone's grandfather than a doctor, but from what I could pick up he actually gave a shit about all of his patients, which I appreciated.

"You're both luckier than proximity to an explosion would indicate," he began. "Other than the minor cuts and scrapes and what promises to be some spectacular bruises, you're basically fine." He paused to look at each of us pointedly, then pointed to Jim. "The worst of it for you was the head wound, but as you probably know, head lacs bleed like nobody's business. It looked worse than it was. But, you'll need to be careful to keep it clean." He waited until Jim nodded before he continued. "I'd like to keep you overnight just to be on the safe side."

Jim shook his head before the doctor could even finish his sentence. "Sorry, Doctor, I need to get home to my dog," he answered, his tone so careful even I knew he was perilously close to losing it on the poor old guy.

"Maybe you should stay here for the night. We'd already planned to stay over, after all," I offered. I'd read way too many medical journals when I went through my "I should be a doctor phase". Visions of worst case scenarios danced through my brain. Then I thought about how much Jim could probably hear and smell right now, and considered what hospital food would taste like to someone with Sentinel senses.

Before Jim could disagree with me, I held up a hand. "Sorry," I apologized. "My neurons aren't firing as fast as they should. Unless there's an urgent medical reason to keep either of us here, it really would be better if we go home," I agreed.

Of course, it wasn't that simple. There were waivers to sign and insurance forms to fill out. One of the nurses gave us some supplies to change the dressing on Jim's head wound. So far as I knew, Jim's truck was still back at whatever remained at my place, so as we finished up, I figured we would need to find a phone. We needed to get a cab, and let Dylan know we were coming back tonight after all.

A burst of tired satisfaction swept through me just before the door opened. It took a second to recognize Carasco from earlier. She'd changed into street clothes and looked surprisingly different.

"Well, you two look better," she commented and then held up her hand so I could see Jim's keys as they dangled. She dropped them into my hand with a wide smile. "Figured you could use your ride, and I was off shift after we dropped you off. One of the cops who responded to the scene is my brother-in-law. He bent the rules and let me bring it over here."

I jumped off the bed, and ignored the dizziness that made everything spin as soon as I wasn't leaned against Jim.

"That was really nice of you," I told her. "Thank you, again."

Jim echoed my sentiments as he came up behind me and rested a hand against my waist unobtrusively.

"After everything you've done for us, I don't even know your first name," I managed to tell her, despite the lump in my throat. After a second to think about it, I held out my hand for a shake. "Hi, I'm Blair."

"Pleased to meet you, Blair. I'm Maya," she replied with a smile that lit up her dark eyes.

She shook my hand firmly and I smiled back.

"Pleased to meet you, too," I answered, then added. "And you can add me to the list of people who owe you one."

Maya laughed and led the way out of the room. "Well, it is a long list. But I'm just glad you're alive to be on it."

"Me too," I agreed.

Jim's agreement was silent but no less heartfelt, a cool, blue green ribbon of relief and gratitude that flowed through me as we walked down the hall to the door.

I'm not a great passenger. I hear too many things that the driver doesn't, I guess. Whatever the reason, the passenger seat usually makes for an uncomfortable ride. But, even I could see the sense of it when Blair suggested that perhaps the one who hadn't nearly been brained in the head should drive.

I waited for the usual discomfort to make me want to crawl out of my skin as we left the parking lot and Blair navigated the turns that would take us to the highways, but it didn't come.

As confused as I was, I couldn't help but be relieved too. I should have guessed if I could be comfortable with someone else in the driver's seat, it would be Blair.

For his part, Blair concentrated on the road, and his expression was neutral. I wondered what he might have picked up of my feelings in the last little while, then decided it didn't really matter.

"You can sleep if you want," Blair offered. "I don't mind."

I nodded, acutely aware just then of exactly how tired I was. I still didn't think I'd actually doze off, but the next thing I knew, the truck was stopped and I opened my eyes as Blair called my name.

The light from Dylan's front window was a welcome beacon in the dark and I rubbed my eyes and enjoyed the warmth of Blair's hand on my shoulder.

"Rise and shine, handsome," he told me, his voice quiet but pleased. "You looked like you were sleeping so well I hated to wake you, but I imagine Amiga will want to see you. She probably wants to read you the riot act."

"More than likely," I agreed, my voice still rough with sleep. I felt a bit better, still stiff and sore but more alert than I'd been. My head should have been clearer, but I didn't move to get out. It was like I was hyperaware of Blair as he sat patiently in the driver's seat: the smell of his skin, the faint traces of the soap and shampoo I kept at the cabin, all overlaid with the chemical smells that screamed hospital.

My chest went tight, and my heartbeat thudded in my ears but I fought off the panic as best I could. Blair was alright, of course he was. I couldn't quite believe it though and I clenched my fists to stop myself from reaching out grab a hold of him. If I did, I wasn't sure I'd let go.

The soft sound of fabric against fabric filled the cab of the truck as Blair shifted over so he could put his arms around me and tucked himself under my chin.

My arms tightened past what I knew was comfortable but I couldn't help it. Blair not only didn't seem to mind, he burrowed in closer against me, and ran his hands up and down my back.

"God, Jim. For a second today, I thought you died," he choked out, voice muffled against my chest.

He started to tremble as he admitted it, and I had to clear my throat before I could answer. "I'm okay. We both are," I reminded him. I felt him nod just before I felt warm wetness on my shirt. My muscles tensed against a surge of protectiveness that told me in no uncertain terms that I needed fix the cause of his distress.

If what Blair told me was true, the instincts that screamed at me were as much a part of me as the color of my eyes, but I'd be damned if they were going to overrule the rest of me. I knew how scared he was at what could have happened because I felt it too. But I also knew there was no way to fix what he felt now. I couldn't protect him from it unless I was willing to walk away, and that wasn't going to happen. I didn't say anything, just let him hang on while he cried. To anyone else, it would have been silent, but I heard every catch of his breathing, every choked back sob that wanted to claw its way out. I tried to contain my emotions as best I could, since I figured he didn't need to deal with mine on top of his.

When he had himself back under control, Blair shifted back slightly and I loosened my grip but didn't let go. "Okay now?" I asked.

"Yeah, I think so. Sorry about that."

I waved away the apology and handed him some tissue from the center console. "It's okay. It's been a tough day."

That got me a small smile. "You're the master of understatement, Jim."

It was an effort, but I managed to hold on to the lighter mood. "It's a gift." I brushed a kiss across his forehead. "Now let's get Amiga so we can go home."

Dylan opened the door before we could knock, her expression concerned. "Am I glad to see you two. What's going on? Your truck looks fine. What kind of little accident were you in, exactly?" The questions came as she stepped aside to let us in, but I was saved from answering as Amiga stood up from the pile of dogs in the living room and arrowed straight for me to press herself into my legs. She began to sniff every inch of me she could reach, and told me exactly how unimpressed she was in her own unique combination of growls and whines.

"Just a minor complication," I explained while I rubbed her ears the way she liked. "We're fine. Blair took very good care of me.

"We had some trouble at my place," Blair explained while I tried to make up with Amiga. "From what we were able to find out, my neighbors were running some kind of drug lab and things went wrong. My building kind of exploded."

I heard Dylan's heart rate increase and her eyebrows went up. "Kind of exploded?" she echoed in disbelief. "You fall off a mountain, then your building blows up. What next?"

I cut in before Blair could answer, defensive on his behalf. What happened today hadn't been his fault, just bad luck. "We go home. Thanks for watching her." I nodded down at Amiga, now plastered up against my side.

Dylan shook her head but answered readily enough. "You're welcome. Anytime, of course." She reached over to hug me, carefully gentle, then did the same to Blair. "I'm glad you're both okay. Call if there's anything else you need."

I assured her that we would and we went out to the truck. The trip back to the cabin was mercifully short and before long, we trudged up the front steps. Amiga followed us in the door rather than head for the yard. No surprise she didn't want to let us out of her sight and I gave her some more ear rubs once the door was safely shut. I let her follow me into the bathroom while I took a quick shower and we both sat on the sofa while Blair took his turn.

When I headed up to bed Blair followed without comment and we settled under the covers with him draped over me in what seemed to have become our usual fashion. As exhausted as I was, my brain wasn't ready to let me sleep. But that was alright because Blair started to speak after only a few minutes.

"When I was growing up, we travelled a lot. And there wasn't a lot that was consistent; I mean sometimes we had a house, sometimes we had barely a hut. I never knew where we were going to land, or what I'd end up doing. Mom wasn't really into structured education. She liked it better off the grid, and she liked to keep me off it too." He kept his tone even and his eyes on his hands. "But no matter where we went someone could teach me something, there was something I could learn."

I didn't want to ask, but the words came out before I could stop them. "Is that what I am, something you can learn?"

Instead of his usual levity, Blair looked at me, his expression more vulnerable than I think I'd ever seen. "No. I mean, I do want to know more about you. I hope I keep discovering new things for a long time," he explained carefully. "But you're not an experiment. How could you be, when I think I'm..." he trailed off and then when he spoke again his voice was so quiet even I could barely hear him. "When I think-" He stopped and then after a slight pause, started again. "I'm falling in love with you."

It took a long second to remember how to breathe. I wanted to ask how he could know that so soon, how he could sound so sure. Instead I leaned down so I could brush our lips together once, then again.

He was braver than me, because as much as I wanted to, I couldn't say the words. Too many times listening to my father tell me that real men didn't talk about anything as messy as feelings, that to do so was a weakness that would be exploited. And I went from that to the army and then the force where you didn't show your feelings either.

Everything I'd learned screamed at me to stay silent. But I had to say something, let him know he wasn't alone in this, whatever the hell this was. I'd come so close to losing him before we'd really had a chance to be together, I couldn't just assume we had all the time in the world to say what needed to be said.

"I know exactly what you mean," I murmured. I'd like to think he heard how much more I meant.

And maybe he did because his smile lit his eyes with warmth. "Good. I'm glad," he told me, right before he pressed our mouths together again for a sweet, slow kiss.

After Jim fell asleep, I tried to follow him, but it quickly became apparent it was a lost cause. My brain was so busy chasing after the what ifs crowding in, I couldn't relax, despite the fact I was warm and comfortable. The last thing I wanted was to wake Jim, so I slid out from under the covers and padded back downstairs. Amiga lifted her head to look at me in clear disapproval, but she didn't move.

I would have explained myself, if it wouldn't have risked waking Jim. He needed rest as much as I did, if not more. I didn't have to deal with the after effects of sensory overload on top of the whole mess. Deliberately, I pushed away thoughts of the first few moments after the explosion. So not going there again.

I knew there was a TV behind the closed door in the entertainment unit, but that wasn't the kind of distraction I was in the mood for. The bookshelf caught my eye, but that didn't grab me either. I shook my head. I knew things were bad when I couldn't settle enough to read. I devoured books the way most people did oxygen and I've read in some pretty hair raising circumstances.

Oddly enough, I thought I would be more unsettled over the fact I'd admitted how I felt. But that didn't bother me. I hadn't meant to admit it so soon, but I was okay with the fact it was out there. And I knew Jim well enough not to take offense that he hadn't said it back. Love isn't about reciprocity and besides, what he'd said was a big step, for someone so emotionally closed off.

I didn't have a plan when I came up here; I just knew I wanted – maybe even needed - to spend time with Jim. I hoped I'd be able to help him, but more than that, I figured I owed it to both of us to create a chance to see if we actually clicked as much as I thought we would. But now I was smack dab in the middle of the consequences of my choices, and they scared me a hell of a lot more than I expected. I've never been one to turn my back on the chance to experience something and that included relationships, but this one was different. I'd never been with anyone I wasn't willing to lose before. Oh, I let them down gently when I left, but there was always a certain amount of relief in moving on to the next adventure.

And now I had pleasure of being on the other side of the equation and I felt vaguely guilty. I'd never been less than honest about what I looked for, but the realization that I was much more invested than Jim made me distinctly uncomfortable and left me with a tight feeling in my chest I couldn't quite shake.

I'd brought in the most likely materials to start on when we came in for the night and ended up reading by the light of a small lamp at the table. I didn't let myself have coffee, since I did want to go back to bed eventually.

I dove into the material in search of a solution to the current problem and all thoughts of sleep faded. Curiosity often gets me into trouble and it trumps sleep, even when I'm exhausted.

My transcription of some of the oral records of one of the West Coast native tribes in Canada had some very interesting references to what they called the pair bond – their name for what existed between a Sentinel and their destined Guide. They could have solid relationships with almost anyone who stood as Guide, but the true potential of the relationship and their individual abilities couldn't be realized unless they were with the one who was their destined Guide.

There were few specific details of exactly what that bond entailed. It was clear the bond was thought to be spiritual, sacred even. Just as clear was the fact that each bond was unique to the pair involved and needed to be initiated and tended to. As hard as I looked, I couldn't find any reference at all as to how that was best done.

Another record, this one from Africa, spoke of dire consequences if you forced a Sentinel and Guide to bond without their explicit consent or if either person was mistreated. I went through those notes with extra attention, but there was nothing included about physical ailments on either side of the equation.

The closest I could come to anything that paralleled our current situation were references to problems with power imbalances that could cause both the Sentinel and Guide's abilities to become unpredictable. They didn't spell out the exact nature of the problems, but the shaman who wrote the accounts was positive the situation could only be remedied through proper validation and balance of the pair bond. I came to the end of that section and resisted the urge to bang my head against the wall. Of course they wouldn't explain what exactly the validation might entail; that would make the solution to my problem far too simple.

I kept at it for another half hour or so, made some notes based on what I'd found so far but then I started to see two of the book in front of me and headed back to bed.

Jim was still asleep. Though he twitched restlessly as I came in, he didn't wake. His brow was furrowed and I worried for a moment that he might be in pain, but it wasn't worth waking him up.

Amiga watched me for a moment, then huffed her disappointment in how long it had taken me to return. Fatigue rolled over me in a wave as I climbed back under the blankets and I slid into sleep before I could even smile at what I imagined she would say if she could.

I woke to the sound of a shout sometime later. My brain felt packed in wool, my body too heavy and slow but adrenaline took care of that when I realized Jim had cried out.

"What's the matter?" I asked, while I looked him over. "Nightmare?"

"Not exactly," Jim replied slowly, like he'd misplaced his words and wasn't sure he'd found the right ones.

He reached out and flicked on the little bedside lamp and I resisted the urge to demand answers because he didn't look so good: face flushed, eyes wide, skin clammy with sweat.

"What were you dreaming about?" I asked instead, careful to keep my tone gentle.

"I'm not sure," Jim replied, his eyes far away. "But I think I was back in the jungle. I don't remember much of my time there, not when I'm awake anyway, but it all seemed familiar in a way a place only gets if you know it really well, like you could find your way blindfolded."

Now was definitely not the time to get into the mechanics of memory repression, especially not if I wanted to get to the bottom of whatever Jim's subconscious – and very likely his Sentinel instincts – were trying to tell us.

"What were you doing?"

"At first, I was just walking. I walked for a long way, but I didn't feel tired or thirsty. I didn't even wonder why everything was washed out, almost like it should be see through but it wasn't. Then I was back in the village where I stayed. And I knew where I was supposed to go, knew that it was urgent I go to Incacha's hut." Jim paused and then answered the question he saw on my face. "Incacha was the shaman who helped me while I was there. I guess he would have been the closest I've come to a Guide until now. I never had the same awareness of him that I do with you. And if he could sense my emotions, he never told me. He did like to keep secrets though."

Despite how determined I was to be calm, cool and collected, my eyebrows went up. "What did he want?"

"Well, my Chopec is a little rusty, but I think he said he needs to see me, that there are lessons I've yet to learn and that they could be a matter of life and death. Guess my brain is a little more fixated

on this problem than I thought. And it makes sense. He was the last real expert I had access to." Jim flopped back down onto his pillow and looked up at the ceiling.

It took me a second to work out what bothered me. "A conversation with an old friend got you this worked up?" I asked.

Jim's eyes met mine and he shook his head. "No, not the conversation. He was just really intense about it, ya know? Like he had to see me right now. I told him that wasn't possible, but he wouldn't accept that. I thought he'd be angry, but he was more disappointed and almost scared." He stopped to clear his throat. "I guess I just don't like feeling like I let him down. And at the end of the dream, I turned around and the hut was empty and cold. I don't know how but I knew in that moment that he was dead."

Off the top of my head, I had a theory but it made for tricky ground, since I was pretty sure it was more out there than Jim was going to be comfortable with. Still, it wasn't really in my nature to keep quiet about it.

"You know, there would be records that detailed where you were found. Maybe it would be worth a look to find out what it would take to go back. I mean, you said it yourself, the man is an expert. And with the problems we've been having, we definitely have a reason to go talk to him face to face. I mean, if you discount the fact that it's possible he really did ask you to."

There was a pause, then Jim sighed and shook his head. "Are you saying you think that somehow Incacha came to me across thousands of miles in a dream to tell me he wants me to pay him a visit?"

Put that way it sounded more out there than even I expected, but I nodded anyway. In for a penny and all of that. "Yeah, something like that."

"And you think we should fly thousands of miles based on my dream? Because, I have to tell you, Blair. That seems a little bit crazy."

"I'm the wrong guy to say that to, my man. I guarantee you I've done crazier." I couldn't help but grin over at him. "And I've enjoyed it, every single time."

"You're crazier than I thought," Jim retorted, but he smiled when he said it, then paused to add. "I'll think about it."

Over the next few days we made several discoveries. It turned out that my dream was the first of a series. Every time I closed my eyes, or even let my mind wander, I would return to my time in the jungle. Bits and pieces came back to me at first, the smell of the pipe Incacha liked to smoke in the evenings, the taste of the ever present flat bread. Then words and phrases: more and more of the language I'd painstakingly managed to pick up. It was as if my fluency in Chopec was only waiting in some dusty corner of my mind, and when I picked it back up, it slotted back into my mind quick and easy.

I thought it would bother me, but it didn't. It was familiar and useful and more than that, it fit. I didn't want all of the pieces from that time back, but the language was beautiful in its own way and I liked having access to it again.

Blair speculated that perhaps I was just more ready to face my memories because enough time had gone by to dull the sharper edges. I nodded at him, and made my usual noise of agreement, but I knew it was more than that. With his help, I believed I could control my senses, or at least that I would eventually. And with him beside me, I felt safe for the first time in a very long time. I didn't have to worry I'd get lost in the darker memories with no way out. I already knew right down to my bones that Blair would never let that happen.

And he made good on his word, as far as helping me with my senses went too. I got the impression he made a lot of it up as he went along, but that was alright. I didn't care where he got

his ideas, as long as they worked. We progressed from using the dials to control the level of input, to learning how to piggy back one sense on another to increase my range. Somewhat reluctantly, I learned mindfulness exercises to keep me grounded in my environment to help decrease the chances of a zone out.

I thought Blair was nuts the first time he asked me to trigger a zone out on purpose, but the more we did it, the faster he got at bringing me out of them, which made them somewhat less terrifying. I still had no desire to try one without Blair on hand though.

The problems we experienced if we had to be apart continued. We compensated by living pretty much in each other's pockets, but I was surprisingly okay with that. Blair told me with a smile that he grew up without much concept of personal space anyway. With a bit of unpleasant experimentation, we determined that we functioned best if we were touching and started having problems at a distance of about three to five feet. If we were out of each other's sight, things got unpleasant fast. And as the days went by, the amount of time we could stand to be out of each other's sight only got shorter.

Over late morning coffee, after I'd had to cut my shower short because I ended up too dizzy, Blair brought up the question I'd already gone over too many times without an answer.

"Jim, not that I don't love spending time with you, man. But, this is getting out of hand. I have to go back to work eventually. And I'm pretty sure most of my classes would bore you stiff. Besides, I don't think you would fade into the background well. Though I guess I could pass you off as my bodyguard." His crooked grin couldn't hide the worry in his eyes.

"Well, if the last few days are any indication, maybe you need one," I retorted with a grin of my own.

As I answered, my mind went back to the dream of Incacha. Part of me wished I could ask him how to deal with the whole mess but the rest of me was terrified of what it might bring back. My early days in the jungle were some of the darkest of my life. Some things are forgotten for a very good reason.

"You can't have been through all the materials you brought back. Maybe we just haven't found the answer yet."

Blair shook his head. "I've been through most of the relevant stuff, at least skimmed it. I don't sleep much when I'm trying to figure something out."

I raised my hand to object to that, but he was still talking.

"Thing is, the stuff about Guides is pretty sparse in comparison, and there's no reference to these kinds of issues. When they talk about problems, they're light on the details. Even if we could find another Sentinel and Guide to ask about it, chances are their experiences would be different. This is a pretty subjective experience."

I had to nod in agreement. It made sense. But there had to be a way we could come up with a solution without trekking into the jungle.

"Actually, I had one other idea," Blair broke into the loop of my thoughts.

"Do I need to brace myself?" I asked, only half joking.

"Probably not. I was just thinking that maybe we need a fresh perspective a little closer to home. I think we should tell someone you trust, Dylan or Simon maybe. I don't know who you would be more comfortable with but I think it would help to talk it through. We're inside it, so we don't see it clearly."

I took a minute to think it through, then let out a long breath. It definitely went against the grain for me, but I trusted Blair's judgement about everything else, and I didn't think it was a good idea to stop now.

"Dylan's invited the whole team to the yard party she's having tomorrow. We can talk to her then, maybe Simon too. Damned if he didn't turn himself into my friend while I wasn't looking, like the rest of them. The team will just assume we're talking about my status."

"Actually, I was thinking about that too. We've got you in a much better space senses wise. You could think about shifting from alternate to full-time or whatever the equivalent would be."

I'd actually had much the same thoughts, but I wasn't ready to go there just yet. Still, his enthusiasm was exactly what I needed just then, and I couldn't help but laugh. "Let's tackle one issue at a time, Chief."

"I've always been good at multi-tasking," Blair told me, as he set down his coffee and came around the table to hug me.

We went to Dylan's early so Jim could help with setup but even an hour early, things were still a bit crazy. Amiga ran to join the seven dogs already in the back yard while we followed at a slower pace. The stereo on the deck pumped out rock while Dylan wrestled with the chairs stacked against the fence and Megan and Simon were on fire pit duty but hadn't started it yet. Simon's dog, Calista, was helping by sticking her nose into each step in the process. Amiga started a rousing game of chase with Montague, Capulet and Othello and since they were outside and off duty, their barks rivaled the music for volume and soon drew in Apollo.

I watched Jim jump in to help bring the wood through to the back yard, and enjoyed the energy for a bit before I volunteered to go help get the food sorted out. Typical party stuff, it wasn't a huge challenge, but I figured it would give me a chance to make sure some of the food wasn't too spicy for Jim. Even with things working better senses wise, better safe than sorry.

Dylan popped in to see how things were going, which gave me a chance to let her know we wanted to talk to her later. She promised to pass the word on to Simon and we went back out to join the festivities as Rafe and Henri arrived.

Once we all ate far too many hotdogs cooked over the fire, we had to have marshmallows, though Amiga was put out that I ate her share. The conversation was a bit too loud and punctuated by a lot of hand gestures. That probably accounted for how Jim ended up soaked with the wine Simon had in his plastic cup.

After a bit of good natured ribbing about his coordination, Jim excused himself to grab a spare shirt from Dylan and deal with the stain.

I wanted to follow after him, but didn't want to come across as the overly needy guy. It would only be a few minutes. I could hold it together that long without too much trouble.

Once he was out of sight. I shook my head to clear the ringing out of my ears and ignored the surge of dizziness that followed. It was harder to follow the conversation, but I managed. The pain came out of nowhere, a sharp burn that stabbed through my arm.

I must have made some kind of noise because everyone turned to look at me in concern. The conversation went distant and tinny, like it came from the end of a long tunnel and then I felt myself start to slump over as I passed out.

When I opened my eyes, the noise in my ears and the dizziness were gone, though it felt like jackhammers were having a party on my temples.

"What the hell?" I asked, careful to keep my voice down.

"That's what we'd like to know," Jim answered. He was perched on a chair beside the bed. His tone was calm but I could see how tense he was, and his eyes only got that dark when he was worried.

"I was in the house dealing with my shirt. I smacked my arm into the sink, and the next thing I know, they were all yelling that you passed out," he continued, and ran a hand down my arm in reassurance.

Even groggy, I could feel the heat rush into my cheeks at the thought that I had fainted in the middle of a party: a small one, mind you, but still. There was a quiet knock and Dylan and Simon came into what I could now see was a medium sized guest bedroom.

"How are you feeling?" Dylan asked, her voice low.

The only emotions I could pick up from her were care and genuine worry, but in the state I was in, even that was almost too much and I winced. "I'm okay," I managed to tell her.

Simon came around to the other side of the bed before he spoke. "You want to tell us why when Jim gets hurt, you pass out? We both figure it has something to do with why you wanted to talk to us today."

There went my faint hope that they wouldn't make a connection. I kept quiet as Jim gave both of them the edited version of the Sentinel and Guide playbook, such as it was, and then outlined the problems we'd run into in the last little while.

"We can't function very well if we're separate at all," he summed up. "But other than the fact that we've assumed it has to do with all this Sentinel stuff, we haven't been able to figure out what's gone wrong."

"Maybe it's just a combination of time and proximity," Simon commented. "Didn't flare up when you met because you hadn't spent enough time together."

"Or maybe it's a reaction to something else that's changed between you," Dylan suggested in a carefully delicate tone.

I was torn between surprise they were taking this so calmly, and more embarrassment. "We're so not going there," I declared. Some things were private, even in this context.

"There's a bit more relevant information." Jim addressed the two of them and quickly outlined who Incacha was and how he might be able to help. He made no mention of his dream, but that was probably for the best.

"Well, it seems like a long way to go to get answers, but I think this shaman of yours might be your best shot," Dylan said, after a long pause to think it through.

"You need to deal with this now, before one of you ends up more seriously hurt," Simon added.

It was that last point that changed my mind. I didn't really mind if these issues caused us discomfort we could work around, but the idea that Blair might be seriously hurt wasn't something I could live with. And besides, if I was completely honest, the pull to go back to the jungle had gotten stronger every day since I had the damn dream. It was actually a relief to be able to tell the part of me that was so anxious to be there that we were on the way.

Blair was the one who called and got all our travel immunizations sorted out and reminded me to update my passport, and this was all while coordinating another two weeks leave of absence with an option for more time if he needed it. I have no idea what he told his advisor or his fellow TAs but, then again, I'd already learned how persuasive he could be.

All I had to do was make arrangements for Amiga to stay with Dylan, since we didn't have the time to get her paperwork in order, even if I was willing to subject her to quarantine, and reach out to some of my contacts in the military to be sure we were headed back to the right place.

It turned out there was a humanitarian effort ongoing near the village in the wake of severe mudslide. The last leg of our journey was spent in a tiny charter plane no bigger than a tuna can, and not much sturdier either. We landed at the edge of the aid camp and spoke to some of the locals who served as guides to the relief workers. They confirmed my recently restored memories were right; we were less than a day's hike to the village where Incacha lived. There was a working phone in the home of one of their village elders but it was hit or miss, and apparently we'd come during a long stretch of miss. I shrugged that off. At this point, it didn't matter if we told him we were on the way. Besides, maybe Blair was right and he already knew. The thought tugged a tired smile onto my face and I turned to follow the man who led the way to the tent that had been set aside for us.

"Do you want to stay here and rest a bit before we move on?"

It was still early, not much after dawn and all I could think about was getting on the trail, but Blair didn't have my training or my stamina so it was his call.

"No way, man. I'm good to go," Blair answered. He practically vibrated with contained energy as he looked around what we could see of the camp. I could see the questions he wanted to ask, but he kept quiet.

"Alright. We'll double check our supplies, change, let someone know where we're going and head out," I decided.

The trail wasn't the best, and the humid heat was just as unpleasant as I remembered after a few hours under a pack in it. Blair remained cheerful; he asked questions about what he could see versus what I could see and told me all about some of his trips to other jungles over the years.

It jarred me a bit at first to be back in such familiar territory that still somehow felt foreign, but the darker memories I worried so much about were chased away by Blair's contagious smile, and his steady presence just behind me. I still got flashes, but they faded before they could catapult me into panic.

The light had changed from golden to orange and then into the blues and purples that came before it got dark before I started to see landmarks that told me we were close to the village. Blair moved closer to me as we walked onto a section of path that had been cleared far better than anything else and widened until it was nearly a road, lined with logs on both sides. I could see huts in the distance and we walked past docks that jutted out into the river, with rows of boats tied firmly to each side.

I saw the man weave his way through the underbrush and trees, but Blair jumped when he appeared and moved to the middle of the path to bar the way.

"It's okay, Blair. He's just doing his job."

It took a few false starts, but I found the words to tell him who we were and that we needed to see the shaman.

At this, the man smiled briefly and nodded. "You are expected, Enqueri. Be welcome in our village." He turned to walk away, then looked at me over his shoulder. "I hope you find what you're looking for."

I didn't bother asking how he knew I was looking for something. Almost everyone in the village had cryptic down to an art form. Instead, I looked over at Blair to explain. "Enqueri is my Chopec name. He says we're expected."

"Yeah, I followed that much," Blair said. "I'm not perfect but I'm catching most of it."

He looked so proud I couldn't help but smile at him. I stopped smiling when we walked into the center of the village and were gently but firmly separated and led into different huts. The people were relaxed and friendly, but they wouldn't allow me to go after Blair. Once I was in the hut they wanted me in, they left me alone, though one of the women came back with a cup full of dark liquid. I could tell it had a greasy texture and it didn't smell like something I wanted to put in my mouth.

"Drink it," she instructed. "Our Shaman has asked that you do this, and bids me to tell you that your Guide is safe and will be cared for but you he cannot join you until you have cleansed and centered yourself. This will help."

She didn't show any of the signs that she lied and I didn't have a lot of options. After a moment or two to reflect on why this was probably a bad idea, I swallowed it in two gulps. It made me cough and I shuddered reflexively at the taste, but thankfully it stayed down. Only moments after I finished the drink, everything went blurry, and I only distantly felt the woman lead me over to the sleeping mat in the corner.

When I awoke again, I was on the same mat, but I was outside beneath an endless canopy of stars. I could feel dried paint on my skin and when I looked at my arms, I recognized the markings I'd worn for ceremonies that required the Sentinel to attend. There was a fire burning near me, close enough for the heat to feel good against my skin. I wasn't surprised to see Incacha seated across the fire from me. For long moments we only stared at each other.

"Was it truly so difficult to come back here?"

It wasn't what I thought he'd ask. "Sometimes, yes. You asked me to come back before I was ready," I admitted.

Incacha's gaze went sharp as tendrils of smoke curled in the air between us. "I asked you to come back because what ties you to your Guide is out of balance. The bond must be equal and freely made, but more than that, it must be accepted totally in order to be sealed. Without balance, each of you carries too much of the other, and what each of you carries is not shared."

It took a conscious effort to not grind my teeth in frustration. "Good to know, but that doesn't actually tell me what I'm supposed to do now."

"In the past, the ceremony to bind a pair together went on for days, but you and your young Guide do not have the luxury of such things. For now, you must reflect on your feelings for him, try to truly accept them and what that means for you. If you can do that, you will know what comes next."

The older man rose from the ground then, and walked away. I stared into the fire and ran through the conversation again. The whole thing was definitely proof that some things never changed. As a shaman, Incacha was bound by a strict moral and ethical code so I knew there were limits on what he could tell me. But I also knew he had a strong flair for the dramatic and enjoyed his secrets as much as the next person.

My instincts told me I needed to do as I was told, and after all this time I still trusted Incacha, so I shifted around until I was in his favoured meditation pose: hands on my knees, spine straight, while I breathed so deeply it seemed to come up from my feet.

It was all well and good to tell Blair I believed what he had to say about Sentinels and Guides, that I wanted him to fill that role for me. Out here in the flower perfumed air with only the night animals and the stars for company, I could admit I hadn't really let him in behind the walls I put up between me and the rest of the world. I'd let my ex-wife in, just a little, and she had done a thorough demolition job. Besides, I was never a people person. I deal in facts and logic. This whole Sentinel thing had layers to it that creped me the hell out.

The small but insistent devil's advocate part of my brain pointed out that Blair was the only person I could see myself admitting that to, that a part of me actually wanted to. There was still a small, deeply buried part of me that thought that controlling my senses might lead to a way to make me

normal, but if I did that, I'd have to give up a big part of my relationship with Blair. Even the thought made me go cold all over. Not happening. I may not have had a handle on much else but I was crystal clear on that.

Not that he was perfect, but we helped fill in the gaps of each other's shortcomings already and I had a feeling we would only get better. I closed my eyes, ignored the night sounds and smells as best I could and thought about my life in five years. Amiga was there, a little slower but still playful and willing to kick my ass if I needed it. Dylan and Simon and the rest of the team were there too, all of them better friends but the brightest part of it, the foundation of it all, was Blair. I don't know when a wannabe hippie grad student had become more important than anyone else in my life, but in that instant I knew I wouldn't have it any other way. And if I wanted to keep him, then he needed to know that.

As I opened my eyes, I thought I heard the triumphant howl of a wolf, but I shrugged it off. There were none in the area that I knew of. Besides, I had things to do. It only took a few moments to put out the fire and then I started walking. With only the moonlight to show me the way, the twist and turns still looked familiar. After a bit of thought, it came to me: this was the path I walked in my dream.

The hut I came to wasn't quite in the village. It sat alone in a cleared area that looked as if it might revert to pure jungle any minute. Without hesitation, I strode over to the door. I'd been away from Blair long enough.

When we arrived at the village, I was too fascinated to be too angry at the fact they separated us. I figured it would be temporary until Jim could explain things. But they left me alone for long minutes and the symptoms of separation got unpleasant. A young boy who spoke slow but careful English came in and told me that his grandfather was sorry to take me from my Sentinel but that it was necessary to cure our ills and allow our bond to grow.

I accepted that with a nod and didn't even put up a fuss when he moved me to a different more isolated hut, kindled a fire in the hearth that was big enough to brighten the whole interior, stacked enough wood for the night along the wall and left. I settled myself on the bed that was on the opposite wall. It was larger than I expected, covered with a plain sheet and piled high with blankets. Only a few moments later, the shaman appeared in the doorway of the hut. He carried a mug full of some hot liquid and seemed to look right through me. I recognized the arm bands and necklace he wore that signified his office, plus he matched the description Jim had given me.

"We must re-teach the two of you how to be separate before you can be together," he said, his eyes grave. "Because of how you are connected, this will be difficult. This will help." He held out the drink and I took it before I thought about it, then gave a mental shrug and downed it. I did my best not to taste it, but my eyes still teared and my throat burned.

Almost immediately, my head went light and the room spun dizzily. The emotions I could read from Incacha, already muted, slid away, along with the ache that came from Jim's absence. And though I was still dizzy and light headed, there was no pain which was an improvement.

"Rest," Incacha directed me, before he paced out the door. Once he was gone, I drifted on the feelings of pleasant well-being the drink had brought and enjoyed the fact that there were no stray emotions that vied for my attention.

I missed Jim, and I worried about him, but even that was just out of reach, the feelings couldn't take hold of me. And underneath it all, I knew without any doubt whatsoever, that he would come.

My sense of time was more than a bit off, so I couldn't be sure but it felt like hours later when I finally heard footsteps outside. I looked at the door and held my breath in hope, but it was Incacha who stepped inside.

"Your Sentinel will be here soon. Before he comes, I would ask you: what you are willing to do, in order to be sure of a proper bond with him?"

My stomach pitched down toward my boots, but I answered steadily. "Anything."

For the first time, Incacha dropped his serious demeanor and smiled. It warmed his eyes and transformed his face into that of a much younger man.

"That is good," he said simply. Then he went to the hearth and set down the bag he carried to mix something in a bowl. Whatever it was, it smelled of spices I couldn't identify and something sweet that was so strong I could almost taste it. His body blocked the view of what he did then, but I heard something drop with a metallic clank.

My curiosity was just distant enough that I could leave well enough alone and I stayed where I was. I could feel my heartbeat throughout my body and it distracted me and drew me in until I heard footsteps again.

This time it was Jim who stepped through the door. He wore the pants I'd seen him in last and the same boots but his shirt was gone. There were tribal markings on each side of his face and chest and banded around both his arms. The colours: red, white, and yellow gleamed in the firelight and made me want to touch them.

Incacha gestured for me to sit on the edge of the bed, then directed Jim to sit beside me. With him so close, the urge to touch intensified but when I shifted to move, Incacha spoke.

"No. Be still until we are done. There will be time for that later."

I settled back, but it took an effort to keep my hands at my sides. Jim looked over at me, and I could see him cataloging all the input he could get as he verified for himself that I was alright. Still and quiet in the hut, it seemed wrong to speak, though I couldn't have said why. We sat side by side and waited.

After a few more minutes, Incacha came over to the bed. In his hands, he carried a shallow wooden bowl. When he was close enough, I could see that it contained a thick black paste that steamed in the air.

He came over to the bed and knelt in front of me first. "Take off your shirt," he instructed. His voice had gone soft, but was no less commanding.

I swept the shirt over my head and waited to see what would come next. I spared a thought to hope that I wouldn't lose all of my clothes, at least not until after Incacha left.

"This part of the validation of your connection calls for you to accept that every gift will bring pain along with joy. Can you do this?" His voice was still quiet, but it was all I could hear. The night sounds, the crackle of the fire, all of it faded away. The distance I'd felt since I drank whatever was in the cup vanished and I could feel Jim's trepidation, but also his unwavering faith that we could both face whatever came next.

"Yes, I can." It didn't matter that I didn't know exactly what I agreed to. Whatever it was, I could face it if it meant we could build from there.

Incacha turned to look at Jim then, and repeated the question.

Jim's answer was equally certain. "Yes, I can."

Incacha nodded once, then dipped his index finger into the paste and painted a shape over my heart. It was hot and it stung, but I stayed still.

"This is the symbol of your Sentinel's spirit animal, the jaguar who guards you just as he does. To wear it so shows that your spirits, like your everyday lives are better when they are together."

The slight burn from the paste began to fade as he repeated the process on Jim, a wolf this time, which didn't surprise me for my spirit animal. I watched closely, confused as to why he'd warned us of pain. This was little more than discomfort.

When the symbols were fully formed and shaded to his satisfaction, Incacha moved back until he was just in front of the hearth. I couldn't understand the words he said, but something about his tone raised the hairs on the back of my neck.

There was a heartbeat of a pause, and then pain knifed into my chest and stole my breath. It was so hot I thought my blood must have boiled but when I looked down, there was only the black lines that now glowed white at the edges. The brighter the white turned, the more intense the pain got.

I couldn't move, couldn't scream, couldn't remember to breathe. The hut and Incacha faded away in the wash of white, but I could still sense Jim beside me. Slowly, inch by hard fought inch I moved my arm until I could cover his hand with mine. The worst of the pain receded just enough that I could look over at him, caught in the same pain induced paralysis that had me in its teeth.

Long minutes later the pain slowly backed off. I gulped in air and wiped my eyes. "Are you okay, Jim?"

"You mean other than the fact I think I got hit by a truck? Yeah I'm okay." Careful not to jar me too much, Jim reached out and pulled me to him for a long hug. When he drew back to kiss me, I tasted the salt from his tears but it didn't matter.

"Now things are balanced between the two of you. But you must give yourselves to each other to complete the process." The last pronouncement was delivered with a sparkle in his eye that belied his calm tone.

If I hadn't just been through the ringer, the fact that Incacha knew what we were about to do would have bothered me. But in that moment, I didn't care. Finally I could touch Jim all I wanted. The timing had never seemed right to take this step but now it felt like I would burn all over again if we couldn't be together right now.

We took our time, made sure to explore every inch of each other's bodies. I learned what made Jim arch and moan, what made him demand more. We tormented each other until neither of us could stand it, only then did he slide into me.

It was so good, I wanted to wallow in it. But I could feel the control Jim still exerted on himself, even now. "It's alright, Jim. I've got you. And you won't hurt me," I murmured in his ear.

He must have believed me, because he began to thrust harder and deeper, no longer careful. He took exactly what he wanted and it was completely perfect. When I felt him start to come, it triggered my own orgasm, and everything washed away in white again, but it was the complete opposite of pain.

On the plane home, Blair dozed against me until I nudged him. "You know, it occurred to me that you don't have anywhere to stay when you have to go back to Cascade. I have a perfectly good loft that I'm not using. I thought about selling it but I really love the place, despite the fact that I'm not overly fond of the city these days. I'd really like it, if you would consider staying there. It's in a great neighbourhood, and I wouldn't have to worry so much about you."

That wasn't the only reason. It was better to have someone in the place for security reasons of course, but more than that, I've always been better at showing my affection through tangible things and actions rather than romantic declarations.

There was such a long pause, I thought Blair would refuse, but he finally nodded. "I think I'd like that. But we'd have to work out some kind of arrangement, rent or something. It's only fair."

"I can handle that," I agreed. I didn't need the money, but I knew better than expect Blair to want charity any more than I did. "Now that my senses are behaving most of the time, I could join you there sometimes."

"I'd definitely like that," Blair declared before he kissed me again.

And just like that, the tension in my jaw eased and air was easier to take in. I hadn't really let myself think about what we would do at the end of all of this, when Blair had other responsibilities to go back to. All I knew was that even now that we could be separate without any problem, I didn't want to be apart more than we had to. My home was wherever he was now, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

