



Background Love

By Mab

Art by Debbie Stone

Jim usually preferred clear boundaries but recently the boundaries had gotten blurred. He wasn't a soldier anymore and he wasn't a cop yet; while he was in this in-between mood, why not check out Seattle's gay community? It had been a while since he'd indulged in sex with guys, and after tonight it would no doubt be a while again.

Eight o'clock on a Friday night things were humming but not yet crazy, and Jim entered a bar that he'd heard was 'friendly' without being wild. It was like any other bar – dimly lit, noisy, smoky, a quiet buzz of voices melding into incoherence. If Jim met anyone here, then great, and if he didn't, there were a couple of clubs he'd visit later, after he'd had a couple of beers. Whoever set the music liked The Rolling Stones – Mick Jagger was suggesting 'Let's spend the night together.' Sorry, Mick, you're not my type, Jim thought and leaned against the bar and got himself a drink. Then he turned back and took a good look at the bar and its patrons.

There was a party of women in one corner, giggly and loud, and Jim passed them over. The men ranged in build and ages, but Jim's eye fell on a tall, well-built man with thick, springing dark hair and big brown eyes. Jim noted him as a definite possibility, but turned back to his survey to check out other opportunities. Jim wasn't a guy to kiss his biceps after a workout, but he knew that in the currency of what he was looking for tonight that his medium of exchange was gold standard, and he didn't feel like rushing anything yet.

There was a young man at a small table in another corner, drinking a beer and with his nose buried in a book. That made Jim smile, at which point the guy lifted his head and spotted Jim. His eyes widened, as if to say 'Me?' and Jim was nearly ready to avert his eyes and move on when impulse pushed him off from his spot by the bar and sent him walking across the room to the guy in a gay bar reading a book.

He wasn't Jim's usual type. It was harder to tell when he was sitting, but the immediate impression was *not* tall. He had wavy hair, cut to curl just above the collar of his shirt, and a neatly trimmed beard, and he was leanly built but no fan of the gym.

"Good book?" Jim asked, grabbing a chair and sitting down beside the guy, who looked gratifyingly wide-eyed. Then he smiled, suddenly cock-sure like Jim sitting down was no more than his due.

"It's interesting, even if I'm disagreeing with a big chunk of the author's conclusions."

"So do you come here often? To read?" Jim didn't try to hide the teasing. The guy was cute if you liked them short and geeky, and Jim was genuinely amused by the bibliophile tendencies.

"They have good sandwiches." The book was shut and placed front-cover down on the table. "And earlier in the evening this place didn't have such stimulating company."

Jim grinned at that. "Is that what I am?"

The smile that spread across the guy's face lit him up like a candle in a lantern. "I'm certainly hoping so."

This guy wasn't Jim's usual; the usual was more like the built, dark-haired man Jim had seen earlier. But there was something likeable about this guy, and something attractive; still, Jim had to wonder how young he was. It wasn't necessarily universal law, but in Jim's experience young men who grew face fur like that did it because they were the baby-faces of the universe, and they were baby-faces because they were *babies*. The big blue eyes measuring him up through those wire-rims weren't making him change his mind.

"I like you, chief, I really do. But tell me, are you legal to be in this bar?"

The guy leaned back, like a cowboy at a poker table getting ready to go for his gun. "As it happens, you bet that I'm legal to be in this bar. What, do I have to be carded to get laid as well as a beer?"

"I'm no chicken hawk."

"No problem, man, because I'm no chicken." Although Jim would be prepared to bet good money that he was barely the bar-legal twenty-one years of age. A broad, salacious grin spread over the guy's face. "Actually, I'm pretty adventurous." It came across half-way goofy and should have been a turn-off, but it wasn't.

Jim's back was to the main part of the bar; he leaned in, stroking one hand up the inner seam of the guy's jeans, back and forth in a tease that stopped short of the crotch. "I'll let you know if I feel like party tricks. You want to do this?"

“Absolutely. But I don’t fuck on the first date.” Disappointment must have shown on Jim’s face, because the guy spread his hands in front of him. He was still playful, but the gesture was definitely one of denial.

“Fuck or get fucked?” Jim liked to top, but that cheerful, boyish face was sharpening into something assessing, and maybe a little disappointed as well.

“Either, or. Anal isn’t my thing when I’m casual.”

Jim lifted one eyebrow. “What happened to adventurous?”

Defensiveness came over the guy’s face, together with something that looked a lot like stubbornness. “I’m adventurous within my boundaries. Everyone has boundaries. That’s the deal, take it or leave it.”

He could have simply walked away and checked out somebody else, but instead Jim nodded. “If that’s the deal, then I’m taking it.”

The guy stood. “I know a place...”

Jim lifted his hand in a staying gesture. At best, this guy had some crappy room. At worst... Jim hadn’t paid good money for this ‘vacation’ to have any encounters with the alley stink of urine in his nose. “I have a room in a decent hotel in the downtown area. That way I don’t have to scrub anything with bleach afterwards.”

“Oh, fastidious. So long as you’re down and dirty when it counts.”

Jim rolled his eyes, but the lewd bravado entertained him anyway. “Don’t make me regret this, kid.”

“Don’t call me kid and neither of us will need to regret anything.”

Feisty little fucker, wasn’t he? Although Jim was certain that if he actually called him that to his face that he’d be looking for another ‘date’. “Then what should I call you?”

“Blair. And you?”

“Jim.”

Another of those radiant grins spread across Blair’s face, and Jim decided that an evening of oral or frot or whatever Blair actually did would be just fine. “Nice to meet you, Jim.”

“Charmed, I’m sure. Come on, Miss Manners. Do you have your own car?”

“No.” Blair shrugged. “I don’t usually meet big spenders with downtown hotel rooms. Things stay more local, if you know what I mean.” Jim was standing now too, and noting that Blair really wasn’t that tall, not next to Jim’s six foot one. He didn’t seem at all worried about the idea of getting into a car with a man who could probably bend him into a pretzel, or fuck him whether he wanted it or not. Jim guessed that bravado might count as ‘adventurous’ and a flash of irritation came and went, a stupidly protective impulse towards this bright-eyed, chance-met friend of the evening. They shouldered their way to the exit – the place had got busier even in the last few minutes, their table

claimed by other patrons as soon as they stood, and then they were outside in the comparative fresh air of the street. Blair slung an arm around Jim's waist. "So where's the transportation, man?"

"This way," Jim said and, with an arm over Blair's shoulder, steered them through the walk to his hired car. The streets were getting busier with people for whom the night's fun was only just beginning, and Jim was suddenly aware that he was heading back to his hotel room. He looked towards Blair, who was neatly snuggled into Jim's side and didn't seem to be regretting any lost chances. Early to bed, Jim thought, and grinned.

"What?" Blair asked.

"I just realised that the night is still young and I'm planning on spending it in my room."

"Private parties are cool too," Blair said. His voice dropped low with innuendo.

"Yeah." Jim pointed ahead. "Car's over there."

They drove back downtown, Blair holding his book in his lap.

"So, what are you reading, professor?"

"It's anthropology. This is a study of tribes in Papua. Very interesting, but one of my tutors has pointed out areas where this writer has the blinders on. From her point of view, anyway. Leonie, she's at Rainier, she and this guy," –Blair's finger stabbed at the cover– "I get the impression they hate each other's guts actually. And I've read a couple of other papers that mean I'm leaning to Leonie's side of the argument."

"So much for academic impartiality," Jim commented.

Blair made a very weird noise somewhere between a laugh and a snort. "Impartiality my ass. Humans have a lot of trouble being impartial, and academics aren't any less human than anyone else."

"So, have you been to Papua?"

"Not yet. But Fiji, and Brazil, yeah."

"A world traveller," Jim said.

He got another of those engaging grins. "I guess so. What about you?"

"I like home," Jim said. It wasn't a lie, and some people, especially young, liberal, *academic* people got their panties in a twist over the military and cops. Jim didn't see any need to complicate the evening's enjoyment.

"Home is pretty big when home is the US of A, that's true." Jim was nearly ready to silently congratulate Blair on this surprising tact when he added, "But it broadens your perspective to see more of the world. If you get the chance, you should give it a try."

"I'll keep it in mind," Jim said, and found a parking space. His voice was dry, but Blair was oblivious.

“If you could go somewhere, where would you go?”

“Bali.” Kuta Reef had some fine surfing, if you got there before the crowds. Sun, beaches. Lila.... Jim looked at the young man next to him, and was grateful that he wouldn’t get himself tied into emotional knots over this liaison.

“Touristy.” Blair sounded disdainful.

“We’re not all adventurous,” Jim said, but kept it the right end of playful. He’d got Blair here, he liked what he saw, and he wanted sex.

Blair took the hint, and was gracious enough to look abashed. “Oops?” he said.

Jim chuckled at that. The ingratiating look and tone was cheekily overdone, but it worked anyway. “Come on,” he said, and slung one arm over Blair’s shoulders.



Jim had left the lights on low in his room. “Help yourself to something from the bar if you want,” he suggested to Blair, but he didn’t get anything for himself. Instead he sat down in the hotel armchair, his legs stretched out in front of him, and watched as the young man crouched with easy grace. The fridge light cast a glare over the clean, broad bones of Blair’s face as he reached in and drew out... candy.

“The sandwiches at the bar not enough for a growing boy, chief?”

Jim got a light-hearted finger gesture sent his way, before Blair sat cross-legged on the bed in an encouraging display of flexibility and unwrapped his candy while keeping his eyes almost entirely on Jim.

“I have this rule. Healthy food, nutrition for the body and the brain, but on the other hand, you should have moderation in all things and that includes moderation. And that means that I eat junk food when it’s ‘found’ junk food. Serendipity.”

“Serendipity. I see.” Their gazes never left the other – two men, alone together in a comfortable room with a comfortable bed, both of them liking what they saw. They chatted while Blair savoured his candy with a nibbling, steady progress. When the last of the sweet was gone, Jim stood and walked to Blair to take his face between his hands. He gently rubbed his palms over the beard covering Blair’s jaw. “Smoother than I expected.”

Blair grinned at that. “I think I should be insulted.”

“No,” Jim said and, sure of his welcome, leaned in to kiss Blair. He liked kissing, men and women, and Blair’s mouth was still sweet with the candy and strong and enthusiastic. Jim broke off the kiss, but only so that he could stand straight and strip off his shirt.

Blair scooted up the mattress to the head of the bed. “Nice,” was his only comment but it sounded wholehearted. He pulled his own shirt off and the t-shirt underneath, and was making a start on his jeans when Jim, naked now, stayed his hand.

“I think that I want to do that,” Jim said.

Blair leaned back on his elbows, and lifted his eyebrows in invitation and agreement. “Be my guest, man.”

Jim sat astride Blair’s legs, gratified by the look that Blair directed towards his growing hard-on. He ran a hand over the hair on Blair’s chest. It grew thickly across all the upper torso; a further dark line of hair ran from the sternum down Blair’s abdomen. Jim’s eyes followed it, and then he lifted his gaze to the neat beard. “Baby Bear?” he queried, amused and almost affectionate.

“Not as funny as you think you are,” Blair said, but it was lazily relaxed. “This isn’t my bed, but do you want to figure out if it’s just right?”

Jim’s hands moved to the buttons of Blair’s jeans. “Don’t mind if I do,” he said.

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Jim stuck to women when he joined the police force. It wasn’t a hardship, because he liked women as much as he liked men, even a little more. Maybe he didn’t like the jokes about fags in the Vice locker room, but gay rights weren’t the hill that Jim was prepared to die on. Maybe in his quieter moments he wondered about just what his motivations were for sleeping with Emily the night that Jack disappeared. Clever, smooth, *straight* Jack, who wasn’t crooked, no matter what.

He liked Carolyn Plummer’s cool poise and pretty face, but the pretty face turned ugly with resentment, and the cool poise became cold rejection. Jim knew that it took two to dance the separation tango, but he couldn’t seem to unlearn the steps. When the divorce papers came through, he spent a ‘man’s weekend’ in Seattle, and then he fucked around with women in bars for a few months until he realised that he was rubbing a sore patch raw rather than soothing an itch.

There was always work.

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Something bothered Jim about the guy at the hospital. Actually, scratch that; there were a lot of things that bothered Jim about the guy, enough that he dragged out a few of the more recent mug shot albums in an attempt to refresh his memory. The edge of the paper dug into his palms; an unpleasant, chemical smell rose from the books, and the hum of the PD, interspersed with occasional ruckus, seemed to vibrate in his head. It was in no good mood that Jim navigated his way through Rainier's campus to Hargrove Hall, to find the smell of old wood and floor polish and yet more ruckus coming through the door. He considered the handwritten 'name plate' on the door, and the grind of bass and guitar within the room and nearly turned on his heel and fled.



The chance that anyone, even some academic with weird and too loud taste in music, might have an answer for him forced him on and into the room, and lo and behold it was the squirrely guy from the hospital, full of words and nerves. The fidgety manners began to irritate the hell out of Jim, and it was one insult too many that propelled him out of his chair to grab handfuls of squirrely academic's shirt and push him up against the wall. The guy was swept off his feet like Jim was a wave.

"Listen, you hippie, witchdoctor punk," Jim began, and then he stopped, staring at the face that was level with his only because Sandburg's toes were barely touching the floor. "I know you," he said.

"Well great, man, now how about you put me down instead of going all Joe Friday on my ass." The guy, Sandburg, *Blair*, poked Jim in the sternum, before his own face creased with confusion.

"Seattle?" he asked uncertainly. "Have you ever done the scene in Seattle?"

Jim pulled away, no longer pressing Blair with the length of his body, but he kept his hands clenched in the shirt while he searched his memory for a face that he hadn't thought of in years, and stripped away the beard, lengthened the hair, and noted a stronger resonance to the voice - the difference between a man of twenty-one and one who was twenty-six or so. Blair Sandburg's appearance had changed substantially over the last five years. Jim's had not, even allowing for the gentle retreat of the hair above his temples, and he was overcome with suspicion and scorching anger. The 'Shakespeare stuff' to get Jim into Sandburg's space took on an aura that was more sinister than opportunistic.

"Yeah, I've done the scene in Seattle. And if you think that you can use that to get me into whatever bullshit you're planning, professor, then you can think again."

Blair's hands thrust through the gap between them and against Jim's wrists, and with this reminder that he still gripped Blair's clothing Jim let go, stepping back in disgust and quickly buried anxiety.

"I'm not planning any bullshit. I'm the guy who can tell you what's going on with you, which is that you have this amazing sensory ability, this absolutely wild genetic advantage." Blair straightened his clothes as he spoke, rubbing once under one arm before he noted Jim's observation and immediately stopped.

"What do you want from me?" Jim asked. Blair showed no sign of being bothered by Jim's sour lack of enthusiasm. But then he probably thought he had Jim in the palm of his hand, a queer cop who wouldn't want his secret life outed.

"You're my thesis. The way I see it, this is a quid pro quo. You get help to fine-tune your abilities and I write my dissertation about you."

"You must have felt pretty pleased with yourself when you gave me your card. How could I say no?"

Blair looked almost like he was about to crow, and Jim felt as if he was about to vomit. "Hey, a real live sentinel? That's not something I can turn down, man, and if even half my theories are correct, you need my help. Look, hang on a moment." He hustled around the clutter of his office to grab something off his desk. "Here, take a look," he said and presented Jim with the open pages of a book, old and leather-bound. Blair cradled the book like a father with his baby, while Jim stared at a sepia toned picture of some tribal warrior and wondered how this could possibly be relevant to him. "You see, sentinels were tribal watchmen, looking out for enemies, the best game, using their abilities to-

Jim backed away. "This is a cute story, Sandburg, but I think I'll pass. And if you know what's good for you, you'll let it pass too." He turned smartly and strode out into the hallway. The seams of his sports jacket were a vise that compressed the muscles of his back, and his fury and disappointment left a roaring in his ears that drowned out whatever Sandburg was calling out behind him. Jim nearly ran up the stairs from the basement and stepped out of the polished-wood shade of Hargrove Hall into the high contrast light of a spring day on Rainier campus. He charged down the steps with no delay and stepped out onto the road. Something, a vibrating mass of colour, riveted his sight, before there was a thump and a fall, a rumbling noise, and diesel oil stink and the heat of metal literally on top of him. He waited for the truck to pass, with his face pressed to the road surface. The bitumen-coated gravel looked as edged as cut diamonds.

There was space and quiet above him again. Jim pushed himself to his feet, everything around him sharp with the force of adrenalin as well as the unwanted sensitivity that had brought him here in the first place. There was a garbage truck and its horrified driver. The machine smells had overwhelmed Jim earlier but now the parked truck was surrounded with a thick, stale miasma of the trash in the back. There was a mass of gawking students. And there was Blair Sandburg, rising from the ground in a graceless, twitchy jig, his face twisted with surprise and left-over fear from leaping in front of a truck to push Jim down and save his life.

Unwilling admiration rose in Jim. He was a ballsy little bastard, he would give Blair Sandburg that.

“And this, man, is why you should have stayed put and listened to me, because then you would have known about this.” Blair looked around him at their rubberneckerers. “Come on,” - he shoved at Jim’s shoulder, - “let’s get out of here. You’ve got a car? Come on, let’s go, I don’t think you want to have an audience.”

Still shocked, Jim permitted a certain amount of mutual pushing in the direction of his car. As they crossed the grass, he saw a red Frisbee lying on the ground, and shook his head in disgust before he stopped, aware that a killer headache was developing. He was nearly road kill for a Frisbee, a red Frisbee still new enough to have only a minor patina of scratches. Jim eyed the young man almost trotting beside him and decided that maybe he was just desperate enough to hear him out.

They got in the car, and Jim wrinkled his nose. There was a sharp, acrid stink coming from Blair – the literal smell of fear. Jim put the window down. “So talk to me, Sandburg. I guess that saving my life gets you a pass that far.”

“You’re not big on the thank yous, are you?”

“You’re using pretty skeevy methods to get me into your little research project here. I’m glad I’m not dead. Thank you. Now talk.”

Blair’s big blue eyes widened. “Hey, hey, my intentions are pure.”

“Just not so much your approach.”

“There is nothing wrong with having contacts, man. There’s this nurse that I’m – you know – tutoring, and I asked her as a favour to let me know if anyone came into her department with hyperactive senses.”

“And it’s not as if that couldn’t get her fired,” Jim said silkily. “But that’s not what I was talking about.”

Blair stared at him. Jim could almost see the process of review going on in his curly head, before he faced a Sandburg explosion. “Oh man, you are a piece of work! You thought I was going to try and pressure you into working with me because we met in Seattle?” The word ‘Seattle’ crested new pitches of outrage.

Jim snorted. “You’re going to tell me that you didn’t recognise me when you saw me in that hospital room, that you had no idea that we’d... that I was bi?”

“Hey, you’re very cute, but I don’t remember every single guy that I’ve had sex with.”

Jim’s eyes rolled almost involuntarily.

“No, come on! I am not that sort of person, okay?”

“Not the sort of person to blackmail anyone, or not the sort of person to remember sexual partners?” Jim enquired nastily.

“Well, of course I remember you now – I was reading a book on Papua. You have a really talented mouth.” Whatever was on Jim’s face, it suggested to Blair that he should change the subject. “Look. We’ve kind of got off on the wrong foot here. You’ve been pretty damn stressed, and that doesn’t help anything. Let’s start again. I can help you, you can help me. This could be the start of a beautiful friendship.”

Jim pressed his lips together in doubt and mortification. He hadn’t been thinking straight this whole terrifying week, and he wasn’t convinced that he was thinking straight now. The noise of the campus around him was like a sea roaring in his ears, and Jim was hard-put to not try to shelter behind his hands. Instead, he clenched them in fists around the steering wheel, and spoke quietly in defiance of the noise all around him.

“Okay, chief. How about you lay out exactly how you can help me.”

Blair was full of ideas, some of which he laid out in the Harbour Mall, 'because I think best walking, just kidding, but this would be a great place to try a few starter concepts out,' and Jim had nearly begun to relax when Blair casually ordered him (Radar up? Like Jim was Blair's personal pimp?) to eavesdrop on the two young women they'd met. The blonde thought Blair was 'adorable'. Jim told Blair she thought he was a dork. The fallen disappointment on Blair's face might have spurred Jim to guilt any other time, but better to not let this little lecher get any more bright ideas.



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The air was briskly cool in the PD garage but Blair looked totally mortified to a red hot level that must have been keeping him warm. Since Jim believed that he deserved every particle of his mortification he simply reminded himself that Blair had complained a couple of times about feeling the cold.

"I've got to admit, Sandburg, this is adding degrees of excitement to my life that I wasn't anticipating. Bombers, the Sunrise Patriots, a catfight in the PD foyer between your girlfriends."

Blair stared out the window. Whatever he saw made his eyes narrow, or maybe he was just pissed off. "Catfight is a pretty un-PC way of putting things, man."

Jim grinned, unrepentantly amused. "I'm not a PC sort of guy, and watching those two yowling at each other was definitely a catfight. I think you need to co-ordinate your love life a little better."

Blair shrugged, and when he turned his head back from the window there was a rueful smile on his face. "The irony is that I'd made a sort of resolution about that. Bargained with the universe or the fates, or whatever, that if I got out that mess with Kincaid's people that I'd stop lying to Ann and Denise, and-." He paused. "Try and balance my karma."

Jim looked over his shoulder, checking that the lane entry onto the expressway was clear. "In that case, Chief, I think that you can safely say that the universe has intervened on your behalf."

"This is true," Blair said gloomily. "I can't lie to anyone if they never want to speak to me again. Still, it could have been worse." Jim could feel rather than see the mischief. It radiated the way that the heat of Blair's embarrassment had done earlier, and Jim had no idea if that was a 'sentinel' thing or just a 'getting to know Sandburg' thing. "It could have been Adam and Daniel instead of Ann and Denise."

The temperature in the car didn't actually drop but it might as well have. "So, that counts as not funny," Blair said softly.

"Look, Chief... I don't have a problem – obviously - but the Cascade PD isn't PFLAG. You get me?"

"Discrimination is something that can be fought, you know. On a principle, even, you don't have to have a horse in the race."

"The PD has some pretty progressive policies in place."

"But what happens in Seattle stays in Seattle. I get it, man, you're not comfortable with that side of yourself being fodder for the bigots, and you'd rather not be tarred by association."

It probably wasn't good for Jim's driving to have that hot little ball throbbing in his chest. "That is *not* what I meant."

"It sure sounds a lot like it, Jim."

"Look. Most people won't care, but some will, and the ones who do care will be assholes about it. Just be discreet, Chief, for your own sake, okay?"

"I can look after myself," Blair said.

"Then do that. Look after yourself, and stick to women for a while. You like them. They like you when they don't catch you cheating on them--"

"I wasn't cheating!" Blair protested. "I've never promised exclusivity to anyone."

"I got the impression that you hadn't exactly mentioned it was off the table either as far as the young ladies in the foyer understood things. But that's a tangent." Jim took a breath. "Just, be careful. I don't give two shits what anyone thinks about me, but if you still need an observer's pass in ninety days time then the paperwork will be easier if people with their minds in the gutter aren't suggesting that you have an ulterior motive to hang with me."

"I'm impressed by your devotion to this project," Blair muttered, his gaze again fixed out the side window of the car.

"The senses made a difference with Kincaid. They helped, but they were a liability too. Sewers and my nose are not a good mix. You've said you can help me? I want to be helped, Chief." It was said as softly as was practical over the noise of the car, dragged out of Jim by an unexpected desire to wipe that tense, disappointed look from Blair's face, to make Blair look at him instead of the streets going by.

Blair sighed. "I get it, man, I do. Around the cops I'll be circumspect, but plenty of people at Rainier know I walk both sides of the street. I can be circumspect, but I'm not going to lie, either."

"I don't expect you to," Jim said.

"Okay. We have an understanding. And as far as those gutter-minded people are concerned, it's not going to do a lot for my academic credibility to be dicking my subject. Your honour, and your ass, is safe."

"Let's leave my ass out of this. Unless you think it has some fancy sentinel ability."

Blair burst out laughing. "Oh, don't tempt me. The test parameters would be sooooo much fun." He sobered. "I can imagine - or maybe I can't - what it would be like to be in a sewer with a hyper-sense of smell. That one we are definitely going to have to figure you out a fix."

"Yeah, well I'll be waiting with bated breath, Einstein. Trust me on that."

"You can trust me, I am on it." Blair nodded as if in affirmation to the both of them, earnest and determined. He relaxed somewhat in the passenger seat. "It's going to take a while to live that scene in the foyer down, isn't it?" He sounded discomfited, but also almost... proud?

Jim grinned. "The tales of Sandburg begin. You'll be a legend in my lunch time."

"God, you can be a jerk," Blair muttered, but he didn't sound that pissed off about it.

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Jim didn't even think about it until a few days afterwards, because the Juno mess had all-consuming aspects. Not until they were home, and Blair was bending to put some of Jim's groceries away in the fridge did Jim remember the strength of Blair's grip on him at the court house steps, the way that Blair apparently didn't stop to think any more than Jim had thought.

"You're stronger than you look," he said.



Blair paused, a bag of carrots in one hand. "I didn't know that hauling groceries was so physically impressive. Altruistic, of course."

"Hauling me, not hauling vegetables. I've just realised I have a bruise on my arm from where you grabbed me at the court house."

Now there was an interesting reaction - Blair's face reddened. "Someone had to be using their head, man, and you certainly weren't just then."

Jim shrugged agreement. He hadn't been thinking about anything except maybe punching Juno in his smug, evil face. Blair had had his back all through that mess, even if he wouldn't carry; Jim found that he liked the thought.

"There's an apple that's going to roll off the counter there, Charles Atlas."

Blair's mouth scrunched into exasperation. "Always with the nicknames." He grabbed the apple and placed it neatly back inside the paper bag, which he then put by the fruit bowl. And then he paused,

took it out again and took a bite. "I guess it's a family trait, being stronger than you look. Naomi looks like she'd blow away in a high wind, but man, she's got a grip like a terrier."

"I'll keep it mind," Jim said, and put the potatoes away. Then his mind produced an image of Blair in the famous Charles Atlas leopard print trunks and he grinned.

"What's so funny?" Blair asked.

"I was just thinking that next thing I'll be calling you Tarzan."

"You are incomprehensible some times, in addition to being a smart ass all the time."

"You're eating my apple, Chief."

Blair shook his head, before he took another bite of Jim's hard-earned groceries. "You know, I know that there must be a point to this conversation, but I'm not seeing it."

"Welcome to my world," Jim said. He reached across the counter to put more of the food away, and indulged a quick tug on the tail of Blair's hair, just to make it clear that Blair stealing Jim's food didn't go unnoticed.



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"You see," Blair said, rubbing Larry's back, "he didn't even trash your place."

"This time," Jim said. "You wanna put Kong there back in his cage?"

"No!" Blair protested. "Look at him, man, he needs affection."

Jim eyed Larry doubtfully. "Yeah, but what if he goes, pardon my pun, ape-shit again, professor? I've already cleaned this place up once."

"He'll be fine," Blair said. "You want a beer?"

"If you're getting it. Since corralling this little monster cost us supper at Ms La Croix's."

Blair grinned at that but headed for the fridge, retrieving two bottles in a single-handed grip since the other was busy hanging onto the little ape nestled against him.

"Those are the last two beers, aren't they?" Jim asked suspiciously.

"I'll get us some more tomorrow," Blair said. "Be a good guest and all that jazz."

"Be a good guest again and call for pizza, will you? I want some food and maybe some liniment on my shoulder and then I plan on crashing."

"Hey, if you want to die young that's your business, but I was going to do a stir fry."

"What, with baby makes three there hanging off your shoulder?"

Blair sighed regretfully. "You're right, he is going to have to go back into his cage. Come on, little guy, let's put you in here."

Larry went quietly.

"So," Blair asked. "Stir fry?"

"Breakfast and dinner in the same week. You sure do know your way around a kitchen, honey."

Blair took this as agreement that the pizza place would not see their cash tonight, and walked to the kitchen. "Honey! You forget, man, I've seen your pretty apron."

"Yes, you have. I haven't seen you wash your hands before you start cooking dinner. I don't want to pick ape hairs out of my teeth."

"Sheesh. Some people are so damn anal." Blair detoured towards the bathroom; there was the sound of running water before Blair emerged to go back to the kitchen and then paused. "Hey, Jim, talking about a week..."

Jim looked up from his beer. "Yes?" He knew what was coming, but he waited to see how this panned out.

"We've both been kind of busy, what with the case and everything." Blair shrugged in graceful apology. "I haven't really had the chance to follow up on alternative accommodation, although I promise that Larry is definitely going to be out of your hair come Monday. It's just... with me it's a little trickier."

"No cages big enough for you at the primate lab, Chief?"

"Oh, cute, Jim. Definitely cute." But Jim's tease visibly increased Blair's assurance. "Can I get an extension on the deadline, man? I know that I said one week, but-"

Jim knew that he was probably going to regret this; but Blair was useful, and surprisingly fun, and Larry was going to be out of their hair very shortly. "It's not a problem, Sandburg. So long as you hurry up and cook some dinner."

"Dinner coming right up. And there will beer in the fridge tomorrow night."

"I can live with that," Jim said, and watched Blair move assuredly around his kitchen - the perfect guest who knew where everything was because he was pulling his weight, and looking scenic while he did it. Pity about those pants. "That suit is going back to the Goodwill, isn't it, Chief?" he asked.

Blair's hands lifted as his head dipped to consider his clothes. "Oh I don't know, man. You never know when I might need some formal wear again." He straightened, a broad grin on his face.

"You keep those plaid monsters, it'll be more than a good enough reason to kick you out on your ass. Even Social Services pays better than that."

Blair laughed, and started chopping vegetables. His food maybe didn't have the comfort level of pizza but it wasn't so bad. Neither was the mini-history of beer that Jim got while Blair temporarily liberated Larry, who'd become restive again.

So this was Jim's life these days, to have a young man of unexpected competence and disconcerting attractiveness sit on his couch in god-awful plaid pants and cuddle a Barbary ape.



Jim never slept well the first few days after he killed someone – and wasn't it some commentary on his life that he had experience enough to judge that process. He slept better than Blair, though. Blair seldom called out that loudly, but Jim would be lying awake in the dark and instinctively he'd find his hearing tuned in to Blair: the murmurs, the restless movement in bed, the increasing heart rate and ragged breathing. It would come to a climax of distress and settle, sometimes without Blair fully waking, only to repeat the whole cycle once again.

The fourth night, he woke at 3.17 am and heard the usual accompaniment to Blair's nightmare merry-go-round - the rustle and stretch of twisting sheets, rough breathing, incoherent sleepy noises, and then a sharp 'no!'. Jim was in another room but it was easy to follow Blair through the motions of waking as he leaned on an elbow that sank into his bed, as he pushed his hair back from a sweaty forehead, as he cursed softly and then dropped back to the mattress to stare at the ceiling. Jim didn't need to be in the same room to know it all, and then he decided he did.

He did need to be in the same room as Blair. Right now.

He marched down the stairs before he could talk himself out of the idea and approached Blair's curtained door to gently knock on the doorframe.

"Chief?"

"Jim?" Blair's voice was rough with fatigue and embarrassment. "God, I'm sorry, I didn't mean to wake you up."

"Can I come in?"

A pause. Then Blair said, "Sure. It's not like I'm sleeping here."

Jim slipped between the cool kiss of the curtains, to stand just inside the door. "You don't have to turn the light on if you don't want to," he said. "I can see okay."

"Sentinels don't stub their toes in the dark. Now there's an advantage I need to make a note of." Blair sounded amused. He was trying to put Jim at ease, when Jim was the one invading his space in the middle of the night.

"That's right," Jim said, and realised that he had two options if he wanted to sit down; the floor, or the edge of Blair's bed. He chose the edge of the bed, close to the foot.

"Chief, do you need to talk to somebody?"

"Now why would I need to do that?" Bitter.

Jim took a breath. "Because something bad happened to you, and you're a talking kind of a guy, and I figured that maybe it could help."

"I don't know if my insurance can dredge up counsellor's fees."

"Then you can talk to friends," Jim suggested.

Blair was silent.

"I'm pretty sure you have friends," Jim continued, trying to make something light-hearted of it.

"Yeah, I have friends. But..." Another pause. It wasn't like Blair to be so quiet. "Remember I was talking about the thin blue line and closed societies?"

"I remember being pissed off that you were trying to shovel a load of bullshit at my boss," Jim said dryly.

"You're one of my friends, right?"

"I'd like to think so," Jim said. "When I'm not being your lab rat."

Blair's hands waved in something that looked like irritation. "Closed societies, hell, any society, part of that is shared experiences, expected norms. The average Rainier drinking buddy doesn't actually know what it's like to be part of a serial killer investigation, and get yourself abducted and end up in fucking *chains* - " Blair made a choking noise, and Jim couldn't keep his decorous distance at the bottom of the bed. He was up close, his arms folding around Blair's shoulders.

"Hey," he said softly. "Hey." He couldn't think of any words that could have said more.

Blair sat stiff and unyielding inside Jim's arms. "It's not something that's easy to bring up in casual conversation."

"Okay," Jim said. He didn't move. Instead he kept Blair within his arms, encircled and held tightly enough that the movement of Blair's breathing was unmistakable, a rhythmic pressure tensing and releasing against the skin of Jim's arms. The warmth of Blair's body was soaking through the t-shirt he wore in bed and when he twisted unexpectedly in Jim's hold the rub of warm cotton against Jim's naked chest was shocking.

"Stay," Blair asked.

Jim hesitated, too long to make even remotely plausible a strategic suggestion that he thought that Blair meant only to sleep, to keep him company against the nightmares. The telling silence dragged on, and Blair's hands closed around Jim's jaw.

"I know we said that we weren't doing this. But this doesn't count, man, this only the equivalent of taking me out and getting me drunk, except that it's cheaper, more convenient and will work a hell of a lot quicker."

"Chief..."

"Come on, Jim. Please." Blair's mouth found his in the dark of the room, energy and desperation in the kiss.

"Getting you off won't fix the nightmares."

"I don't care!" Blair said, soft but fiercely determined. "Get in this bed with me or get the hell out."

Jim shook his head briefly, resigned to his own stupidity, and grabbed at the hem of Blair's t-shirt. "Shift a little," he suggested; obedience made an easy job of taking the t-shirt off. He put his hands

on Blair, on bare skin that was more than the grip of forearm or shoulder; he put his hands on a Blair whose eyes glittered with life instead of staring with glassy emptiness from a bathtub, and pushed him down onto the mattress. One hand went to the waistband of Blair's shorts and pulled the elastic down and over Blair's cock, which was already more than half-hard. "You weren't kidding about this being quicker than getting you drunk, were you?" he joked.

"Always prepared, man, that's me," Blair murmured and then hauled Jim closer and stuck his tongue back in Jim's mouth, while his hands grabbed everywhere with no finesse or consideration. Selfish little shit, Jim thought, but it was affectionate and concerned. On one level he was almost relieved that this act would be this transactional; get Blair off, shut him up, get him back to sleep.



He was going to jerk Blair off when his friend indicated, with some vigorous tugging, that he wanted Jim on top of him. Jim hesitated a moment, unsure as to exactly what was wanted. Blair's legs spread wide and Jim settled between his thighs, his arms folded close to Blair's head. "You want to rub yourself off on me, is that it, Chief?" Jim murmured.

"Yeah, that's it exactly," Blair told him, and pushed his hips up, while his legs twisted around the back of Jim's. They got a rhythm going, and Blair gave up on even trying to kiss Jim. His eyes were shut and the hold of his body on Jim's was harsh, pinching even. Jim was getting close himself, but he was too fascinated by the sensory information all around him to let go enough to come. Blair's heated face and increasingly desperate noises were all his aim, and when climax took Blair over Jim held him through it, and kissed the side of his neck, half-imagining that he was tasting blood as well as sweat.

"Better?" he asked softly.

"Sex makes everything better," Blair told him.

"Tell that to my ex-wife," Jim said, and was immediately uncomfortable with both the carelessness of the revelation, and the small disloyalty to Caroline.

"Well," Blair said, "men and women *are* different." His voice was slurred and lazy, but he sounded very sure, like this banality was profoundest truth. He perked up slightly, apparently more aware of the hard bar of Jim's erection still lying against his skin. "What do you want to do with that hard-on, man? Anything in particular you feel like?" His hand stroked across Jim's left buttock before it grasped at the muscle. The scent of his semen was strong and sour between them, and Jim leaned into Blair's neck for one last breath before he rose up on all fours above him. The separation from the shared heat of their bodies cooled his skin.

"How much can you see?" Jim asked. One hand still supported his weight. The other moved to his cock, and stroked along it. Promise. Pleasure, and he shut his eyes in reflex, and then they snapped open. He was looming over Blair, leaning over him just the way that Lash had. Right at this moment, Jim didn't want to *be* Blair, no creepy bullshit psychic ingestion here, but instinct drove him and instinct wanted to know Blair, to possess. He could do that without laying a hand on Blair, because he had the senses. And because he had the senses, the brief panic ebbed, because Blair lay calm and still beneath him, and his voice was relaxed and amused.

"It's dark in here, Jim. I can see your shape. I can make an educated guess that you're jerking off right now."

"I don't have to make any educated guesses, Sandburg. I can see you pretty well. Your hair is a goddamned mess, by the way. I can smell you. And even with my eyes shut I can follow the shape of you by your body heat."

Blair stayed lax and unmoving beneath Jim, but he could see the appreciation in Blair's face, the interest that animated him even though he stayed still. "What, like those infrared goggles?"

Jim was stroking himself, and getting close. "No, not like those stupid goggles," he said, peremptory and a little breathless now. "Different." The arm that pressed into the mattress shook with fine

tremors of strain. "Better," he said, and hoped that his tone could convince Blair of just how much better. "You're warm," he choked out, and came, everything in his body aware of the man with him – his breath and his heartbeat, the shape of heat that made up his body, his scent. Blair's hand rose to rest across the nape of Jim's neck. Warm. Yes.

Blair gently pulled Jim back down again. "You see," he said, quietly smug. "I needed that, and so did you."

You don't know what I need, Jim thought, anxious again at what he might have given away. "You think you know it all, don't you?" He was too drained by orgasm and worry to put any real bite into it, and Blair only chuckled.

"No-one could know it all, although it'd be nice." It sounded wistful.

"It would certainly do wonders for my solve rate."

Blair laughed again, and rolled unselfconsciously into Jim's body, assuming his rights over Jim's space the way he had from the start. "Thanks, man. I really did need that."

"No problem," Jim said. He was about to say more, to add a caveat that this wasn't going to be a regular thing, but Blair's limbs became a dead weight against Jim's skin. He was asleep, tipped into oblivion between one breath and another.

Jim wondered if he should go now that Blair was asleep. Blair's bed wasn't that big, not for two men. It would be sensible to return to his own comfortable bed upstairs but instead Jim lay there, watching Blair's sleeping face in the dark room. I'm in love with you, he thought. Jim had been there before, with Carolyn, with Jack, with Veronica. None of them had worked out. This probably wouldn't either, but the heat of Blair's skin was like the sun on a chilly day, assurance and comfort, and Jim stayed where he was for a while, dropping into sleep.

He woke close to dawn, and carefully got out of Blair's bed and stretched, trying to work the cricks out; the futon was too small, and too soft for Jim's taste. Muscles relieved, he headed for the bathroom. Bladder relieved, he had a shower and a shave and went upstairs to his own room for clean clothes. He came down and made coffee and Blair slept through it all. It wasn't until Jim was washing dishes and wiping away toast crumbs from his counter top that Blair appeared in the kitchen area. He wore his ancient plaid robe over a pair of boxers and an undershirt. His hair had been brushed into order compared to the night's wild disarray, but his morning beard was as disreputable looking as ever.

"Hey," he said.

"Good morning," Jim replied. "Rainier or the PD today?"

"Rainier." Blair sat at the table and when Jim turned he saw Blair staring at him.

"What? Have I got breakfast still on my face?"

"No." Blair's hands gestured. "Thanks. For last night."

An unexpectedly uncertain Blair roused similar discomfort in Jim. He tried to dispel it with a smile. "You already told me thanks."

"Yeah, I know, but still. You didn't have to."

"No," Jim said, nettled. "So if I did it follows that I was okay with it."

"I know, I know," Blair said, recognising that he'd somehow irritated Jim but clearly not sure how. "But it's not the deal, I know. I was being a pushy needy shit, and I don't want things screwed up between us."

"Things aren't screwed up, Sandburg."

"Because I'd like to think that we're genuinely friends here, dis notwithstanding, and friends are valuable and shouldn't get messed up with sex."

Jim felt one eyebrow rise. "It's my understanding that friends and sex do occasionally go together. A lot of people seem to think it makes for a successful marriage." He shrugged. "Not that I'd know about that."

Blair looked awkward. "Well, neither would I. But..."

"It's okay, Chief. Last night was a special circumstance. I won't tell your committee." Jim turned to head for the door, and looked back over his shoulder. "The PD awaits. Leave yourself time to clean up the kitchen before you go."

Blair rocked in his chair, as if he was thinking about getting up and then thinking better of it.

"Yeah, sure. I.... Just, thanks, Jim."

"Sure. What are friends for?" Jim hoped that the word 'friend' wasn't as bitter on his tongue as it felt, and walked out the door. Christ, it was like Jack all over again, except that this time he didn't have to fantasise about what the sex might be like with that person that he had all the inconvenient feelings for. Friends. Sure. Whatever the hell that meant when Blair was writing a study about him.



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By the time that they'd made it back to Cascade from the train line, and done the necessary paperwork, it was more like getting lunch than breakfast. There was an IHOP near the PD and despite Blair's protests, Simon growled that if he was buying, then he was picking the place. Blair gave Jim a beseeching look, but all that Jim did was clap an apologetic hand on his shoulder. "Sorry, Sandburg. I can't go against the boss."

"Damn straight," Simon said, and led the way over the crosswalk.

"Oh man. Half a banana sliced over your french toast does not make for balanced nutrition."

"Who said anything about french toast? Eggs. Sausage. Mmmm," Simon rumbled, and Jim grinned.

"Blimps," Blair complained. "We are all gonna look like blimps."

"But blimps who had breakfast on the boss's dollar," Jim reminded him, while Simon frowned.

"You're sounding a little too happy about this, Ellison."

"I'm always happy when management shows appreciation for the lower ranks, sir."

Simon turned to give Jim an unbelieving stare, and Blair broke into a choked off laugh.

"Something funny, Sandburg?" Simon inquired.

Blair didn't even try to wipe the grin off his face. "Just noting the workplace dynamics."

"Don't I have to sign a waiver to end up in your study?" Simon's face was only slightly forbidding - he was more than willing to give Blair back a little teasing of his own.

"I'll bring the forms down for you. You'll have to sign them in triplicate, though."

"Triplicate? Did you sign in triplicate, Jim?"

"Sandburg and I have more of a verbal agreement, sir." Jim noted that he was getting a headache and that his ears were starting to hurt. Again.

Blair lifted one eyebrow. "Hey, I gave you the usual disclaimers."

Jim might have argued that one, but then Simon pushed the IHOP door open and Blair charged ahead, commenting, "Oh god, but at least it's warm in here."

They were well into their breakfasts when Simon said, "Caroline was worried about you - when we didn't know what was going on."

Jim paid attention to cutting up his pancake, even though he actually wasn't that hungry now.

"We've stayed friends. I don't think that she generally wants me dead."

"I look forward to reaching the same state with Joan," Simon said sourly.

"Things will settle, Simon," Jim told him. "It's what they do when people have a little time."

"You ever think that you and she..." Simon sounded wistful, and Jim didn't fool himself that Simon was looking to fix up a friend's love life.

"Anything's possible." Jim looked across the table at Blair, who looked thoughtful over his own food.

They had another couple of cups of coffee before Simon shoed them away. "Go and get some sleep. You can fight crime and spread germs tomorrow."

Jim nodded and stood, hiding a yawn that turned into an awkward sneeze behind his hand. Blair still looked annoyingly chipper. "Come on, Chief."

Out on the street, Blair said, "It sounds like that cold is making a comeback. Does this mean the Nyquil is out of your system?"

Jim nodded. "Yeah, I'm back to the normal miseries of the common cold."

"You're sure that I can't convince you-"

Jim cut Blair off with a swipe of his hand through the air. "Don't even think it. I'm not swallowing some weird plant, I'm not taking another Nyquil trip and there had better not be any drumming when we get back home."

Blair's face turned rueful. "Like there's any chance of that. I have a one o'clock class. I assumed that I'd have time for a power nap, but last night's expedition overran its anticipated schedule."

"You're a glutton for punishment, aren't you?"

"The joys of the academic life, man. What about you?"

"How do you mean?"

"I was thinking it sounds like Caroline's over being pissed off about the taxes, if she was worried about you *and* in front of Simon. Do you ever think about trying again with her?"

Jim took a good look at Blair. "You know, some things are off limits. And that includes making me repeat drug trips, and being nosy about my feelings about my ex-wife." A man walking past them did a clear double-take - Jim presumed at the mention of the drug trip.

"I'm just enquiring as a friend. I may have pointed out that anthropologically speaking relationships never end, but that doesn't mean that you should keep going around in circles. Onwards and upwards, onwards and upwards."

"A friend, huh?" Jim wondered if Blair thought about that night after Lash.

Blair rolled his eyes in sudden exasperation. "Yes, damn it, a friend. It's not all about the disclaimers and the diss notes, okay?"

Jim had been going to tell Blair that it was a onetime thing anyway, that sex in his little room, so it was stupid of him to feel disappointed about this confirmation that they were on two separate pages. "I'll keep it in mind. But before I think about my next foray into a 'relationship' I want two things. I want at least a solid nap, and I want to be able to breathe properly through my nose."

"How about I drive? We were both up all night, but I figure I probably have more reserves than you do, right now."

Jim was ready to say 'no', and then he sneezed again.

"Come on, Jim. Keys. All you're going to do is leave germ droplets all over your dash. If I drive at least you can keep the worst of your bugs in a tissue." Blair held out his hand like this was a foregone conclusion. Jim paused, and then dug his keys out of his pocket and dropped them into Blair's palm. "Good."

They got in. Blair made a certain point of passing Jim a packet of tissues. "Use them," he said. "Niktabi root can only protect me so far. And in case you are nursing any sentimental thoughts about your ex, the rumour around the station is that David Perano has got his eye on Caroline, so if you want a second chance you'll have to move fast."

Jim fumbled with the safety belt, thoroughly lethargic with food and lack of sleep and the resurgence of his cold. "Dave's welcome to her," he said. "We had our chance."

"Good," Blair said with such emphasis that Jim turned his head to look at him.

Blair caught the movement, and a look that was goofily embarrassed crossed his face. "Hey. Like, I said, no point in going back, man. Onwards and upwards."

"Yeah, sure, Chief," Jim said, and shut his eyes. "Would Isobel count as onwards and upwards? It's a shame I wasn't quite man enough for her."

"Well, neither was I, Jim, so what chance did you have? Clearly the woman has impossible to meet expectations." It was pleasant sitting in his car with his eyes shut, and familiar smells around him, listening to Blair's voice, deep and humorous and pitched just right.



traps, and base officials talking about security in low, angry voices. Blair stood close to Jim, his body heat a thinly persistent radiation; after a period of quiet shock, Blair had begun talking. It was a day where Blair had been abducted and narrowly avoided both electrocution and being shot while taking on at least part of the responsibility for thousands of people not dying a disgusting, bloody death, and he was now in no state to shut up. Jim listened without paying deep attention; Blair's voice, rough and wired as it was, unstrung some of his own stress. He wondered vaguely if he could get away with putting an arm around Blair's shoulders, before he was jolted by a vision of Brackett, still some distance away in a turning police car, looking past the shoulder of a watchful officer with a smirk that only Jim could have seen before the car was gone up the road.

I'll take the wire in your pants. Unless you want me to have Mr. Sandburg get it out for you.

Did Brackett know that secret too, or was he simply going for a low blow? Jim could imagine Brackett digging that deep - and he'd investigated Blair, and Blair had made it plain from the beginning that he wouldn't lie about being into men as well as women. Brackett didn't need to hold Jim's temper over him; he had something a lot better. Jim swallowed nausea and an equally bitter fury and then put his arm over Blair's shoulder anyway. Screw Brackett.

Blair didn't even notice, just kept talking. They reached the parked cars and then Blair twisted from under Jim's hold and said accusingly, "You haven't heard a word I've said, have you?"

Caught. Jim lifted his hands in apology. "Sorry."

"Oh, man. I guess I can't blame you for being busy with your own thoughts." Blair's eyebrows lifted. "You have been busy with thoughts there, Jim, right?"

"I can think, Sandburg," Jim said, and Blair chuckled.

"Never doubted it. But Brackett made me think too - I've been thinking that it's all about you, but it looks like it's kind of about me as well, and that's blowing my mind."

Jim frowned.

"The guide thing," Blair said, mild exasperation fixing itself on his face.

Jim shook his head. "Sandburg, you've been telling me from the beginning that I needed somebody to back me up. Why get all excited because some agency asshole puts a name on it?"

Blair was leaning against the black and white, his face shadowed with exhaustion, but his eyes were bright with the fire that ideas always lit in him. "Why take me? I was an extra person, an extra threat, well maybe not that much of a threat but definitely an encumbrance."

"Because Brackett's a son of a bitch and the government is used to contracting out?" And, Jim thought, he could use you as an extra hostage against me, like the whole city wasn't enough. "Why bother taking time out from the grand plan to handle me when you could do it?"

"Yeah, yeah I did, didn't I?" Blair was gazing up at Jim. The sun was behind them and casting shadows over the ground. "Handle you, I mean." Being Blair, he couldn't keep the double meaning out of his tone, and Jim rolled his eyes.

"Down, boy," he said. "You did good," he offered.

"You think so?" Blair looked wary, as if he didn't believe Jim. That just pissed Jim off again, sliding him along the downward slope of the post-crisis emotional rollercoaster.

"I don't say stuff I don't mean, Sandburg."

"Hey, no offense, I'm... I'm just feeling weird now that the adrenaline is finally clearing the system. Man, stress hormones exhaust you just as much as the crisis that they're meant to help you with." He was finally quiet, and stayed that way when De Castro eventually got around to giving them a lift back into town.

Blair climbed into the familiar space of Jim's truck and leaned back in the seat, shutting his eyes. Jim wished he could do the same, but not even sentinel senses were going to let him drive in downtown Cascade while asleep.

"Guide," Blair said softly, clearly hardly even aware that he'd spoken.

"Does that mean that Brackett's going to get a credit in your dissertation?" Jim tried to make it a joke, but even saying the name felt wrong in his mouth.

"I don't think so. But it's something to think about along with everything else that I have to think about." Blair sat silent a moment, getting some of that thinking done right now. Whatever he was thinking about looked like it troubled him. Jim could understand that about any idea initiated by Lee Brackett. "How would you feel about me teaching someone else to help you handle your senses?"

Where did that come from? Jim swallowed. "Looking forward to getting me off your hands once you've completed the study, are you? " His ability to play it cool was wearing thin after a hard day.

"No!" Jim couldn't quite avoid gratification at the answering hurt in Blair's voice. Blair calmed.

"That's not what I meant. I like working with you, man, but what about the long-term? If you want to use your senses on a regular basis then you need back-up, and I might not always be able to provide that." He gave Jim a sideways look. "For whatever reason. So, I guess, the question is whether you'd be happy with someone else knowing about you, and if so, who? Simon is kind of desk bound...."

"Do we have to think about this right now? Like I said, you did good. Unless 'whatever reason' is more imminent than I thought, I am perfectly happy for you to keep on giving me a hand." 'Perfectly happy' came out sounding more as if it should be 'perfectly pissed off'.

"No, Jim, nothing is imminent except me maybe falling asleep on the drive home." Blair sounded pissed off too. "You're right. This isn't the time to think about this. What we do need to think about is dinner."

"Fine, Chief. But no South American food tonight, okay?"

"Thai," Blair said instantly, like a man happy to take up cues about changing the topic of conversation. "The Thai Garden does these little curry puffs, man, they melt in your mouth."

Curry puffs? Sure. A truck-load of paperwork and irritating interviews with Agency types? Definitely. Blair spending a day (and a night) showing Sonia Price around Cascade? Regrettable, but only one day and one night.



Jim waited warily for a week or so but Blair didn't raise the question of his potential replacement again, and Jim was keeping his mouth shut.

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The Corvair was still in the shop and Blair, by the same alchemy that had somehow put Jim on a podium ready to discuss his Chopec experience in front of a bunch of students, had convinced Jim to pick him up and drop him off at Rainier more often than not. Some of the alchemy was Jim's guilt at putting a civilian in harm's way. Concussions, machetes, big-eyed girls with naively disappointed ways – Blair had come out of that situation the worse for wear. Falling in love with Maya Carasco - god. It was hardly approved undercover protocol. It could never have gone anywhere. (And how relieved was Jim about that?)

Blair wasn't waiting out the front, nor was he in his basement office. Jim could have been sitting in his truck, he could have been home cooking his dinner, but instead he was tromping over Hargrove Hall tracking one elusive anthropologist, catching threads of scent and, finally, hearing.

"It's not like that, Gordy." That was the sound of Blair being carefully civil, and it was unusual enough that Jim paid attention. Blair's usual mode was a 'tell me all about it and then I'll tell *you* all about it' enthusiasm - he wasn't often polite with an edge.

"Oh come on, you're going to tell that you've never thought about it?"

"I thought about sprouting wings and mooning Professor Tennison from the air back in the day, but it wasn't actually going to happen. The guy doesn't have any interest in me that way."

Jim paused in his walk down the hallway, uncomfortably sure that he was the topic of conversation. He wondered if Blair was lying to his companion, or if he really was that oblivious. Jim wouldn't put it past him - 'Professor' Sandburg displayed tunnel visioned qualities sometimes.

Gordy, whoever he was, asked with mock innocence, "Do you think he could be convinced to have an interest in me?"

"No," Blair said shortly, not even going for civil now.

"Oh, poor baby. It's always harder to exert the Sandburg charm on the straights."

"When they're straight women, I do just fine." Jim winced at that - he had a suspicion that Maya wasn't far from Blair's thoughts. "Look, thanks for taking those labs, but my gratitude doesn't extend to gossiping about the roomie. See you later." Jim waited the period of maybe thirty swift steps, before Blair came around the corner and saw him. "Jim!" he called, wiping obvious irritation away with a hastily put-on face of surprised welcome. "Hey, thanks, you didn't have to come and look for me. Have I kept you waiting? Sorry about that, I had to drop some paperwork off to another TA."

Jim shrugged. "I tracked you down."

"Yeah, you did. Care to tell me how you did it?" Jim knew danger signs when he saw them. That pleasant apology for not being easy to find was being rapidly subsumed by displeasure.

"Why don't you guess, Chief?" Jim said, shouldering his way through a fire-door and holding it open for Blair to get into the stairwell.

Blair's full mouth thinned. "Hearing seems to be shaping up as a sense that you use the most automatically..."

"Some scent too, to start with," Jim said, just to be irritating. He didn't want to think why - it wasn't Blair's fault that Gordy was a nosy shit, Blair had been doing the ethical thing and shutting good ol' Gordy's speculation down, but suddenly Jim was just as pissed as Blair clearly was.

"Yeah, scent to start off and hearing to finish off with, and eavesdroppers never do hear good of themselves, do they?"

"I dunno," Jim said. "Gordy seems to think I'm a fox."

"Gordy thinks anything with a pulse is a fox," Blair muttered, shoving ahead of Jim in the stairwell landing and pivoting left to head towards his office, a sturdy torpedo on a straight path down the hallway. He shot over his shoulder, "How about you head back to the car, Jim. I'll get my things and probably catch you up anyway. No need for you to trail me all over Rainier."

The words were one thing, the tone was another, and Jim nodded. "I'm parked down the north side. You'll see me when you get there."

Out on the street Jim took a breath of cool, damp evening air before he jogged down the steps of Hargrove Hall towards his truck. He leaned against the side of the vehicle, waiting for Blair, whom he could hear clattering down the interior stairs. What was it with listening out for him right now? He couldn't turn it off, and it irritated Jim the way it plainly irritated Blair.

Blair appeared around the side of the building, his pack slung over his shoulder, and a large box in his hands. Jim opened the back door of the Ford and Blair shoved the box onto the seat and then pushed some errant strands of hair off his face. "Another night grading essays. The joy of teaching," he muttered. Then he looked up at Jim with an apologetic grimace. "Sorry about the attitude. Gordy always gets me the wrong way."

"No problem," Jim said, and went around to the driver's side and got in. He stared at his dash and said what was on his mind, even though it was almost certainly a stupid decision. "You didn't say that you weren't interested in me."

"What?" Blair asked, frowning in the street-light dimness.

"You told indiscriminating Gordy in there that I wasn't interested in you, but I note that you didn't claim that you weren't interested in me. That way," Jim finished stupidly.

"Gordy doesn't need to know anything about what you may or may not be interested in, but I told you way back that I wouldn't lie about myself, Jim, and it would be really stupid to do that in front of him. He's known me for years, we used to move in the same social circles before I detached because Gordy and his friends can get a little toxic. But he knows me, he knows I'm bi and yes, he thinks you're a fox and that I'd be in your pants if I had a half a chance. And he wouldn't be wrong about that, regardless of my supposed broken heart over Maya. Happy now?"

"Chief, it's not a problem."

Blair's voice rose, running ahead of Jim's attempt to explain something he didn't understand himself. "Yes it is, Jim, because that's not the deal, we agreed on that in the beginning. You are hot, and I'm

not blind, but we're trying to do something important here. I mean, god, look at Maya! I got distracted, I forgot what I was doing, and that put her in danger."

"Sandburg..."

"No, I don't want to hear it. I know that her father being a big time international arms dealer put her in danger regardless, but I was just screwing around with her, and I don't want to be screwing around with you."

"Too much sex and not enough academia, is that it?"

"So what, you want me to be screwing around with you? Come on, you've seen the disaster that's the Sandburg love life."

Jim stared out the windscreen. His hands were white-knuckled on the steering wheel.

"Oh my god." It was the voice of a man looking at something awe-inspiring, and terrifying. "I'm not saying that it wouldn't be amazing. It has been amazing, but come on, Jim. You've got a little crush on me, and that's perfectly normal, there are all kinds of emotional attachments inherent-"

"Shut up. I do not want to hear you talking me down from my stupid, emotional *crush*."

Fraught silence filled the cab of Jim's truck, before Blair broke it with a nervous chuckle.

"Oh man. You and me, we're butting heads this evening. I... how about you and me go and drown our sorrows in a bar somewhere, Jim. Point our libidos in the direction of some lovely ladies and just have some fun? Process."

"Is that what it's called? Processing?"

"It could be." Stubborn. It hadn't escaped Jim that Blair could be stubborn.

"Fine, Chief. Let's figure out a night for processing."

Jim sounded sour, and he didn't lighten up much when he and Blair went out bar-hopping a few nights later. Blair, being Blair, always figured that a bird, or a girl, in the hand was worth two in the bush and Jim couldn't help asking why Blair had to pounce on the first two girls to smile at him. Blair gave him some bullshit about having to hit it, and Jim was pretty ready to roll his eyes and head home and brood. Brooding sounded at least a little more adult than sulking.

And then *she* walked in.



*

Blair parked himself on the arm of the couch with his sock feet resting on the seat cushions. There was a tiny, worn hole in his sweat pants just on the knee. "So I guess that if I suggest that we go out to a bar that you'll just go get your gun and shoot me?" He sounded diffident. Gentle.

Jim stretched out more from his slouch, leaving the soles of his shoes to press against the side of the coffee table. "No, because I'd have drag my ass out of this chair to grab my weapon." He hated the weary tone of his voice. He needed to snap out of this funk if only because Blair feeling sorry for him added extra humiliation to the last week or so. He could put up a good front in the bullpen and joke about this mess there because, damn, Simon needed to believe that Jim had a handle on things, but keeping up a perpetual good front for Blair in the privacy of his own home was too much like work. Simon knew that Jim had the hots for Laura. Blair knew that Jim had entertained hope that the attraction could go somewhere deeper, be an alternative to something that was probably never going to happen, and of course it just had to be Blair who blew away that wispy castle in the air with the cold wind of biological fact. Blair could take the consequence of a morose Jim Ellison.

Blair had wrapped his hands around his knees, something noted in Jim's peripheral vision rather than straight on. "You may make the effort to get your gun for my next suggestion."

"Let me guess, Chief. Tests?"

"Bingo."

"So what's my prize?"

Blair's voice turned dry. "That thing you're always telling me you want. Control. Knowledge is power, et cetera, et cetera."

"I think I know plenty at this point." Get it together, Ellison, Jim thought. That sounded downright whiny. He turned his head to Blair. "Sorry, Sandburg. It's just... it's been a long week and I should get some sleep." Blair's observation was intense. "What? Did I miss a spot shaving this morning?"

"The reason that it didn't work out with Laura, Jane, whatever her name was... that was her, not you, Jim."

He didn't want to talk about Laura with Blair. He stood. "I figured that one out, thanks, professor. It's a shame that criminality doesn't produce pheromones, huh?"

With a quick pivot, Blair spun himself off the couch's padded arm. His feet hit the floor and he was up, and standing in front of Jim. "I'm serious. What you were feeling - it could have just as easily resulted in you two together and producing cute little red-headed kids, and the reason that it ended up the way it did is not your fault."

"What I was feeling? What I was feeling wasn't real, whatever the 'scientific' viewpoint. How was it going to go anywhere when I ended up losing my head over a user and a murderer, Chief? Looks like biology just isn't that discriminating."

"Damn it, you're still pissed off about that, aren't you? About me trying to *explain* things, and you just want to shoot the messenger because you don't like the god damn message. That's why you haven't had two words to say to me all this week."

Blair lifted his hands, talking with them as eloquently as he did with his mouth and Jim wanted him to just shut up, and he caught one hand around Blair's wrist - irresistible force meeting immovable object. All Jim could notice was the gap in Blair's distress here; so sorry for Jim. Not at all jealous on his own account, obviously.

"I haven't had two words to say because there's nothing to say."

Blair didn't try to pull his hand away, but his face set in even more determined lines. "Jim. What I said wasn't meant to dismiss your feelings then or anything that you feel now. Everything that makes a human is made up of chemicals and electricity, and I'm not about to downplay my humanity or anyone else's based on that. Think of the chemicals as building blocks, man. Sometimes you get to build something beautiful, and sometimes the foundations aren't there and everything collapses."

"Sandburg, that's even more incoherent than usual for you."

Blair looked crestfallen. "Maybe. But my point is that I don't want you thinking that I was being dismissive. I was trying to explain how something confusing happened. That's all."

Jim nodded. He still had his hand around Blair's wrist. The pulse throbbed gently under his hand, and scent rose from Blair's skin. Pheromones. The word, and the idea behind it, curled tauntingly around what Jim felt right now. Resentful. Confused. Turned on. He tugged at Blair's wrist, urging him closer,

and put out one hand to cup Blair's jaw and tilt his head to a better angle to kiss. Blair resisted, the mobile face creasing into a frown.

"Come on," Jim said. "You're not going to deny a pity fuck to a guy unlucky in love are you?"

"Is that what you want? A pity fuck?" Blair sounded scornful, but that feeling, that scent that Jim barely even identified as scent, rose more strongly into the air. It was always there. Blair might talk a good line about friendship and the dissertation but Jim had been walking through a mist of Blair's want as well as his own right from the beginning. It might not possess the compulsive magnetism of Laura's attraction, but it was there, and right now...

"I'm in the mood to take what I can get, and I'm pretty sure that you'd be lying if you tried to tell me that you didn't want it too." Jim tapped the side of his nose. "Since you've illuminated a whole new talent for me."

Blair scowled. "I have never denied that we are... physically compatible. Trying to head that off is what started this whole mess with Laura to begin with."

"The mess is made, Chief. And you and I are 'physically compatible' and we're here." Jim moved in closer still, close enough to kiss, and he did so. Blair hesitated only a moment before his mouth opened, and that was all the encouragement that Jim needed. The scent and the taste were the same, and the kisses turned deeper and more demanding from both of them.

Blair pulled away after a while. His expression was sheepish, but his skin was flushed with heat and his pupils dark. His lips were full and reddened. "I'm probably going to regret this."

Jim finally let go of Blair's wrist. "Oh I doubt that, somehow."

Blair rolled his eyes. "Never let it be said that you'd admit to doubt."



Jim shrugged away the sting of that observation, and took Blair properly in his arms. "I'm assuming that you'd prefer upstairs, and my large and comfortable bed?" The soft cotton of the t-shirt that Blair wore shifted under Jim's hands and he laid his palm against the small of Blair's back and felt the little shudder.

Blair smiled. "Yeah, I think that I could deal with a large and comfortable bed."

Jim reluctantly let go. "Come on then," he said and led the way up the stairs. Blair was barely off the stair risers when he tugged his t-shirt off and then, with a teasing grin, very carefully folded it and laid it down on one side of Jim's dresser.

Jim kicked off his shoes and sat down on the bed. "Oh, yeah, baby," he commented, a softened version of a strip club catcall.

Blair walked over, and stood in front of Jim. "Was your appreciation for my skin or my laundry skills?"

"Both," Jim said, and pushed his hands into the waistband of sweats and underwear both. Blair was as quick off the mark as ever, and Jim was careful as he eased the clothes down his hips. They dropped and Blair stepped back and out of them with little fuss and some speed, before he came closer again, nude now.

"More skin for you," he said.

Jim grinned, and looked Blair up and down. He was still dressed; having Blair in front of him like this was making that uncomfortable. He undid his jeans, and watched how Blair observed the movement, before he settled himself on the edge of the bed and took Blair's hips in his hands and pressed his face against the hard cock in front of him. A small gasp came from above him. Easy, the kid was easy, and Jim took Blair's cock in his mouth. Taste this time was different to smell. Scent was something heavy and dizzying. Taste was sharp and a little sour and focused Jim on what he was doing, which was trying to elicit more noises from Blair. He wanted something more than just a gasp, and his efforts were rewarded with a low moan.

"Oh. Oh man." Blair groped as if blind before his hands settled on Jim's shoulders. Jim spread his own hands possessively across Blair's ass, determined to get the real deal out of his pity fuck. He drew back and looked up at Blair, who returned his look with a heated, questioning gaze.

"Let me fuck you."

One of Blair's hands moved to the nape of Jim's neck, and his fingers pressed strongly against the line of bone under the skin. His eyes dropped to Jim's crotch and his cock, and the usual parade of emotions crossed his face: amusement, agreement, want, and something a little harder to guess. It flashed across his face and then was gone. Blair shrugged. "Why not? I don't think that you count as a casual hook-up anymore."

Jim squeezed Blair's ass a couple of times, enjoying the feel of Blair's body, and then let go and cocked his head towards the mattress. "Lie down, Chief. Get yourself comfortable."

Blair sprawled himself over the bed, smiling as Jim stripped off his clothes and got down to the serious business of giving Blair the best head he knew how. When the noises coming out of Blair's mouth grew increasingly urgent, Jim lifted his head to look up Blair's body to his friend's definitely indignant face. "You want to come now, or when I'm inside you?" Blair's face flushed even more, and he unthinkingly licked at his lips.

"Just get me off, then I'm all yours." It was pleading, and Blair dropped back like his head was too heavy and rewarded the return of Jim's mouth with an especially lush groan. He'd insisted on a condom for this before Jim got too busy and Jim regretted that (because scent, because taste, because he wanted this at too deep a level) but he determined not to think too hard about why. Condom or not, he couldn't miss the moment when Blair came, and eased him through it until Blair lay still with closed eyes. Jim sat up on his heels and simply looked his fill for a few moments while he stroked his hard-on. Blair's eyes opened; his gaze moved to Jim's hand with something like surprise before he grinned. "You said you wanted to fuck me."

"And you said something about you being all mine."

Blair leaned up on his elbow. "I did, didn't I? So how do you want me, man?" He was still half-hard, and Jim spared a moment's fleeting amusement and nostalgia for a younger man's refractory time.

He knee-walked his way along the bed and straddled Blair. "You're a limber guy, Chief. How do you feel about face to face?" Blair's hair was spread out over the bedding and Jim pulled a strand of it carefully between his fingers, for a moment unable to avoid comparing it to Laura's - shades of natural brown where hers had been a red at least highlighted out of a bottle, kinked with wave where hers had been sleekly, chemically smooth. Blair's hairy, masculine body forestalled any other comparisons. Jim was with Blair, not anybody else.

"I could go with that," Blair said, tugging at Jim's shoulders to bring him in for a kiss. Jim indulged them both for a while, enjoying the feel of Blair moving underneath him and aware of it, pleased by the feelings but not confusedly awash in them the way he'd been with... and he'd promised himself that he wouldn't think of Laura, and how it had been with her. He buried his head in the crook of Blair's neck and inhaled, and that was better, and ran one hand down Blair's upper arm which might not be gym defined but was solid and strong. Better again, and he leaned back and smiled at Blair who smiled right back at him.

"Want to put on a show?" Jim asked. "Get yourself ready for me?" He pressed a tube of KY into Blair's palm, and moved so that Blair could reach for his 'show'.

"And here I thought you'd be more into touch," Blair said. He had gel on his fingers, and nobody could be graceful sticking his fingers up his ass, but Jim found himself rapt with the image anyway.

Jim ran one hand along Blair's thigh, against the grain of hair there, and pressed into the muscle near the top where thigh became groin. "I like to appreciate the full range of sensation," he said. His voice was rough, and Blair reacted to that - a pause with the movement of his hand, a shiver across his skin. "You're worth appreciating."

Blair didn't respond to that. Instead he moved Jim's hand directly to his cock, and Jim played with him while Blair played with himself and eventually judged himself relaxed enough. "All yours, man,"

he said, and watched while Jim pulled on a condom and positioned himself. It was an easy entrance, and Blair's legs caught around Jim's body with that strength that Jim had come to rely on. "Yeah, that's it, Jim," was all he said as Jim began to move with steady thrusts, and a strength of his own. Then the words were lost in a trail of grunts and Jim gradually lost himself in the sensations - the heat and tightness of Blair's body, the touch of his skin all around him as Blair caged him in with arms and legs and cried out. No surprise, that Blair could be noisy, that he smelled so good, that the way his face twisted as Jim fucked him ratcheted Jim's own pleasure higher and higher. Orgasm was there for the taking, just like Blair was, and Jim held on, barely, until he'd made Blair cry out one last time before he let himself come, growling some incoherent noise against Blair's skin.

It lasted a long time, and afterwards Jim found himself aware of his body in an almost surreal way, as if he could unzip his skin and step out and enumerate all the ways he felt. It was scary in its way, and Jim relaxed into something less spacey as he gradually returned to normal and fumbled the spent mess of the condom away and over the side of the bed. Blair lay next to him, his eyes closed and a small smile curving his full mouth; Jim figured that he'd close his own eyes only for a moment but he thought that he slept anyway. He partly woke at the sensation of Blair moving on the bed and lay there pleasantly wrapped in a half-sleep that prickled into the awareness that Blair was getting out of bed. Why not, Jim rationalised. He didn't invite Blair to sleep the night here. He probably needed to wash - Jim had already noted, in an entirely different context to now, how the hair that furred Blair's body collected and retained scent.

He wasn't asleep any longer, not really, but he kept his eyes shut anyway. The mattress dipped as Blair leaned unexpectedly and Jim breathed gently through his irritation. Get up if you're going to, Sandburg, he thought, and then there was the brush of hair on his skin, and the brief press of lips on the ball of his shoulder. Irritation was washed away by surprise and Jim's concentration on the way that the impress of lips lingered on his skin. He stayed in his pretence of sleep while Blair gently clambered out of bed and went downstairs: to wash, to have a drink of water, to sleep in his own room. Too many chemicals, or not enough, Jim wondered, and dropped back into genuine sleep.

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Jim had told himself at one point that he and Blair should keep their sexual distance, and now he told himself that a lack of distance didn't make any difference so why worry? A few regular, casual overtures and Blair's active libido was easily seduced into contact even if what Jim privately called his little professor side still had reservations. Blair stayed the night in Jim's bed sometimes, and they would chat about nothing in particular.

"You don't fuck me that often," Blair said one evening.

Jim felt his shoulders tighten. "Is this a complaint?"

"No-ooo."

"Then what is it? You don't seem to have any issues when your dick is down my throat."

Blair leaned up on an elbow. "No, no, this is not a complaint, man. God, ego much? I just wondered, because you strike me as the kind of guy who likes to fuck a little more often than we do." Some of

his irritation lessened and melted into a reminiscent smile. "I vaguely remember you being pretty interested in the idea all those years ago. Remember?"

"Yeah, I remember. You weren't interested, so why would I push the issue now?"

"It's not that I don't like it, Jim."

Jim had noticed that, yes. Blair liked practically everything about sex, and had a not very subtle fascination with whether and how things were different with Jim's sentinel perception. Jim didn't like dwelling on how easy it was to get lost in sensations, especially when he fucked. He didn't need to hear any bullshit about primal man.

Blair continued. "With hook-ups - people assume, you know. They look at me and they see that I'm of *average* height and they look at my hair and my face and say something about cocksucker lips and they *assume*, and that pisses me off. It's different with something like this."

"And what's this, Chief?" Jim waited, and shut down hope as soon as he saw Blair's face shadow. He was grateful that he had more of a poker face going than Blair, who did the 'eyes are the mirror of the soul thing' in concert with what seemed like his entire body.

"Well, you were the one who said something about friends with benefits, so I'm taking you at your word."

"Fair enough," Jim said, and saw undeniable wariness pass over Blair's face. It was gone and Blair settled on his belly, his chin resting on fisted hands, and said, "So, fucking. As in anal. Why aren't you pounding my ass with gay abandon, Jim?"

"Because it's hard to get it up when I'm forced to listen to bad jokes?" Blair remained where he was, but his expression firmed once more into something serious, and Jim found himself averting his eyes. "Come on, you frame a question like that, you're not exactly likely to get a serious answer."

"I always want serious answers, regardless of how the questions are framed."

Jim shifted on his mattress, a lying down version of a shrug. "Sometimes I just want to get off. And rubbers.... sometimes they're okay, and sometimes they piss me off. They feel wrong, or they smell wrong." He grinned broadly, and hoped it actually reached his eyes. "Unless you're offering me some exclusivity so that we can stop using them?"

Blair propped himself up on his elbows and rubbed his face against his opened palms before he looked at Jim. "And there's a question that you want a serious answer to even though you're pretending you don't give a shit. Friends don't need to talk about exclusivity."

"It's not like you've ever promised it to anyone," Jim murmured, almost to himself.

Any pretence at relaxation in Blair was long gone. "Jim. Don't. Don't go there, okay. We're good just the way we are, aren't we?"

Jim thought about that. Blair in his life, at least occasionally in his bed. He could live with that. Who was he to preach some undying love with his history? He wanted to cup Blair's face in his palm but he knew that gentleness wouldn't soothe the anxiety in his friend. He wanted to force Blair to the

mattress with his weight and extract as many promises as he could get - which would be exactly none. Instead he tugged at a lock of Blair's wildly curling hair. "Yeah, Chief, we're good."

Blair nodded, but then he climbed out of bed. "Work to do." He paused and looked back at Jim. "Good night," he said, almost formal, like he was making his good-byes at a faculty mixer.

"Night," was all Jim said, and he rolled over and figured that he'd find out just how much he'd spooked Blair once he had time to work, or process, or whatever.



The suggestion a couple of days later that Jim needed a break (a break where Blair would accompany him) was heartening. Heartening? It was wide, expansive relief, even if Blair was cagey about the exact nature of what his cunning academic mind had planned. Jim entertained a few fantasies about exactly how they could relax during this little break, but he didn't get too tied up in them. Blair hot for Jim's bod, and Blair hot for sentinel discoveries, had distinctive attitudes, tones of voice, and even smells, and Jim was getting a notable scent of academic fervor. A man could hope, though, and crowd Blair's space on the bus with his nose practically in Blair's hair and tease out scents that weren't quite academic in nature.

That amounted to a day as the respected but still trapped guests of various authorities who were pleased to have a major drug operation destroyed, but somewhat nonplussed as to how two Cascade cops, one teenage boy and an anthropologist ended up being instrumental in quite so explosively taking it down.

Captain Sandoval brought them back to his home for dinner, given that Jim and Blair hadn't exactly packed for formal dining before they left Cascade. Sandoval had a plump, pleasant faced wife, and a teenage daughter who studiously ignored Daryl and was disconcertingly kittenish when she talked to Blair. Sandoval looked both pleased, and harried. Simon looked relieved and ready for a good dinner, and Daryl was awkward in a strange place and in front of a strange girl, but managed to hold on to his manners. Blair looked thoughtful, in between enthusiastically complimenting the food and asking Sandoval questions about the structure of his local police department and courteously ignoring the doe-eyed glances from their host's underage daughter. He looked tired too, despite the fresh clothes that were courtesy of one of Sandoval's minions making a laundromat run. He was clean and unsmudged by dirt, all set for civilisation, and Jim tried not think about the fact that they were heading back to Cascade and a decision about Eli Stoddard's offer.

The Policía Nacional del Perú paid for a taxi back to the hotel, and a half-asleep Daryl was hauled out and propelled into the foyer. "You go up, son," Simon said. "I need to have a quick word with Jim." Blair's head lifted at that. "With Jim, Sandburg. Go check out the palatial accommodations." This was Simon's unsubtle joke. They'd obtained a room in the same hotel but they weren't even sure yet whether Blair and Jim had a bed to themselves or not. Blair looked like a deer caught in the headlights but Simon quailed him with a look and Blair turned towards the reception with uncommon meekness.

Jim's stomach decided that Senora Sandoval's delicious meal wasn't sitting as quietly as it used to. There was no reason Simon shouldn't want a word with Jim - there could be anything, personal or professional that he might want to say to him, but Blair's obvious anxiety boded no good.

"I owe you a drink," Simon said.

"So how bad is the news, Simon?" It wasn't quite a joke.

Simon's eyes were unexpectedly bright. "Yes, I have things I want to talk to you about without the little pitchers hanging around, but I owe you a lot of drinks after this, and Daryl is too young to buy his share yet."

Jim shrugged. "You've already said thanks."

"Be gracious, Ellison. As far as I'm concerned, you're the man of the hour. Shut up and accept your free beer." Simon didn't quite haul him into the bar, and they found a couple of comfortable chairs in a corner. Beers were consumed in companionable quiet, but Jim waited on edge.

"What do you want to discuss without Sandburg around?"

Simon looked over the top of his glasses. "The kid looked like he was going to the chair rather than his bed, didn't he? Have to admit, that pretty much confirmed that I was going to say something."

His tone of voice was thoughtful, and Jim stared into his glass, suddenly nervous. Had Blair given something away about their personal situation? Simon was a liberal man for a church goer, but Jim had never even hinted to him that he walked both sides of the street. If Blair chose to stay... maybe that would have to be addressed, but it would be a crowning irony if Blair was to go and leave Simon knowing something about Jim that he hadn't yet been ready to reveal.

"It's a good drive to the village from that son of a bitch's camp, and then we had to wait a while for you to get back from your starring role as Rambo." Simon tipped his three-quarters empty beer glass to Jim in a small salute. "Sandburg was getting antsy. Worried about you."

"I was fine," Jim said.

"Obviously, but we didn't know that at the time. I was trying to convince Sandburg about that while worrying about you myself, and wondering if we shouldn't simply evacuate the village now that we had transportation. Just in case right didn't triumph." Simon's eyes communicated a good cop's knowledge of how right's triumph was not a foregone conclusion. "And he blurted out a whole lot of questions about who would be trustworthy with knowing about your senses, and who might be good to work with you."

Something twisted in Jim's chest. "Ah."

"So you did know? I figured that with this sentinel thing that you'd keep me in the loop yourself if something was important. You'd do that, wouldn't you, Jim?" The question was all steel.

"Yeah, Simon. I think I learned after Juno."

"Which meant either that Blair's interest in alternate support for you was a new thing or he hadn't told you. So it's a new thing?"

Jim nodded. "Yeah. He has an invitation from some anthropology bigwig to go on an expedition to Borneo."

"Borneo!" Simon's brows lifted. "That's one long way away."

Thousands and thousands of miles. "Yes, yes it is."

"Is it a done deal?"

"Not yet, but he's tempted."

"It does sound like career advancement - if you're an anthropologist." There was no edge to Simon's tone except a tolerant amusement for academics. "Look, Jim, if Sandburg's indulging in separation anxiety that's one thing. But if you do need a hand with this sentinel thing, I would hope that you wouldn't let pride stand in the way. Your long-suffering boss would appreciate a heads-up in good time so that I can use my crisis management skills for other things."

A small devil stirred in Jim. "But you have such great crisis management skills. Sir."

"You are using up my goodwill at a frightening rate, Ellison." Jim looked up at that, but Simon's face was almost fond. "It can be hard mixing the personal and the professional, damn it. I hope I haven't stepped on any toes here."

Jim shook his head. "No, no, it's okay. This is just a... heads-up, like you said. We both know what's on the horizon, and maybe Sandburg will stay put." Do you really think that, Jimmy? Really, asked a soft, taunting voice in the back of his mind.

Simon swallowed the last of his drink. "Hell, it's going to happen someday, whatever day that is. Sandburg isn't going to be writing his dissertation forever. Unless you think he'd be interested in a law enforcement career."

"Sandburg?" Jim was startled, in part because Simon sounded almost hopeful.

"A cop he's not, but he brings something to investigations. Do *not* tell him I said that, by the way. And there are areas opening up for people like Blair in profiling and forensics. It's a thought. For career advancement." Simon's voice was kind, and Jim realised that Simon might not know that Jim and Blair fucked now and again, or that Jim loved the reckless little son of a bitch 'that way', but he hadn't been fooled by Jim's careful mask of detachment over his beer.

"Sandburg will make up his own mind," Jim said. He looked at his watch. "Guess I'd better turn in. Our flight out leaves early tomorrow."

"Good night," Simon said.

Jim hoisted his bag and collected his key from the desk and headed for the elevators. Exhaustion was catching up with him, and the conversation with Simon had only increased that sense of a timer counting down - to implosion rather than explosion. A lack of Blair Sandburg; that space in Jim's life crumpling down into nothing. The room was on the fifth floor, and it was small, dimly lit and had only the one bed. It was a bed that was certainly big enough for two people but it was notably and singularly one bed.

"Great," Jim muttered, thinking back to how Blair had kept his distance across the camp fire when they were looking for Simon and Daryl. So, okay, they'd both had too much going on to worry about sex, but Jim could have dealt with Blair wanting the comfort of a warm body close up. Jim could hear him in the bathroom, and he suspected that Blair would be less than pleased at the enforced closeness.

Blair came out smelling of soap and humid, showered skin; he wore a t-shirt and shorts. "Oh, hey. You found the room."

"Smooth, Sandburg. I think that following a hotel layout is within my capabilities. I wouldn't even need to use the senses for it."

"I didn't mean it like that."

The two of them looked at each other a moment, and then Jim waved a hand in apology. "Yeah. Sorry, Chief. It's been a long day."

Blair relaxed. "Following on from a series of long days. It's okay, man." He draped his street clothes over the top of his backpack and then eyed the bed. "Close quarters again."

"I think we can survive," Jim said.

Blair shifted nervously on the balls of his feet. "I guess Sandoval's accounting division has a good deal with this hotel, huh?"

"Sandburg, it's okay! Or if you'd prefer me to sleep on the floor then say something. After a couple of nights in the jungle it's practically a mattress!" Jim's voice rose.

"I don't have to guess what Simon wanted to talk about to you, do I? Because the Ellison pissiness is a big clue." Blair's hands lifted in exasperated surrender before he took a deep breath, trying to calm himself. "Look. I know that I shouldn't have discussed it with Simon right then but it was a stressful situation and you know me; when I'm nervous, I talk. But the discussion was coming out of me wanting to do the right thing by you."

"The last time you'd seen me, my senses were still shut down. You don't think you were jumping the gun?"

"Well, I was living in hope that your senses would come back, which they did, for whatever reason." Blair sat on the bed with a certain deliberation, as if to make the point that he wasn't uncomfortable. "So, how did they come back?" he asked. He was uncertain how the question would be received, but this was Blair, so of course he was going to ask.

Jim realised that he hadn't put his bag down yet. He'd been standing there, arguing with Blair, and his hand was screwed tight around the handle of his hold-all. With a sigh, he put it on the top of the little desk. "They just came back," he said. "I'm going to have a shower." He did that, enjoying the run of hot water on his skin despite the faint scent of mildew that he tracked back to behind the wall, and put on a t-shirt and shorts of his own.

Blair was under the covers when he came out, sitting up against the head of the bed and writing in his notebook. He looked at Jim. "Tell me something."

Jim steadied himself, because it was clear that this wasn't an anthropology question coming down the pike. He leaned against the wall, rather than get into bed; Jim Ellison, lounging at his leisure.

"If you could wave a magic wand and make me your obedient slave--"

Jim snorted. "Like that would ever happen."

"No, if I was your little wind-up Blair, would you turn my key and point me in the direction of Borneo or Cascade?"

"That's not a fair question."

"Why not?" Blair's voice was steady, but he was looking at his notebook rather than Jim. "You've got the right to an opinion."

"You're not my toy, or my servant. If you want to stay then you should stay, and if you want to go, then you should go."

Blair heaved a noisy, exasperated sigh. "Jim. I am asking this question because I want to know what you want."

Jim shut his eyes. Jim Ellison's lazy lounge against the wall was beginning to feel terrifyingly like being backed into a corner. It would so easy to lash out at Blair right now - to be sarcastic, to point out that if Blair didn't know what Jim wanted that he was a lot more stupid than he looked. Jim swallowed that down.

"Back in the jungle, I told you that I was glad that you came with me. That hasn't changed. I like having you around. If I got a say in things, then you'd stay in Cascade. Happy now?"

"Yeah, you were glad that I came, but it's not like I was actually any use to you, was I? You, uh, seemed to be doing most of this gig on your own, man, with or without the senses."

Jim pushed himself off the wall and sat down on the mattress, but with his back to Blair. "It's not all about the senses. Sometimes what you want is a friend. Knowing that you've got someone who's on your side, and not just someone who's working out the quid pro quos."

"I will always be your friend. Which sounds way too much like a Star Trek quote, but it's true, Jim." Blair's voice was tight.

"Yeah, I know, Chief." Jim got into the bed and lay on his back, staring at the smooth, white ceiling and its plain fluorescent lights. "Look, you said it yourself, this thing with Stoddard is a real opportunity."

Blair lay down, moving the mattress as he settled himself. "You don't mind if I turn the light out?"

"You're the one with the bedtime reading, there."

The light went out. The window didn't face the main street and the curtains were thick, and it was dark. Jim could see if he wanted to, but the night was what he wanted right now. "Do you still want to know how my senses came back?"

There was a smile in Blair's voice. "Yeah, if you want to tell me."

"Even if I didn't," Jim said dryly.

"I don't have thumbscrews in my backpack. Tell me if you want to, or don't." It was patient, but Jim could hear the edge of anticipation.

Jim rolled on his side and realised that Blair had done the same. They lay side by side, breaths mingling, and Jim gathered his memories and his words. 'Your life and your soul', the figure in his dream had told him, and he had to clench his fists against the urge to touch Blair.

"So what happened?" Blair asked, like a child nearly at the climax of the story rather than an adult at the beginning of one. Jim felt stupidly, sweatily nervous. It was just a dream, but he regretted offering to tell it to Blair. Reviewing it all, he didn't know if it would seem profound, or only juvenile.

Who was he? Men Jim's age should have that worked out by now, surely? But tonight he had no choice but to jump off one cliff, at least.

Blair listened to Jim's fumbling recounting of the dream - the spirit guide figure, their conversation, the final ending by the edge of the gorge, and then Jim's awakening to his senses.

"Wow," was all Blair said.

"Yeah."

Blair laughed, but Jim didn't feel offended by it. Then he stilled, and said, "Your life and your soul, huh? You take this thing seriously, don't you?"

"Shouldn't I? You do, don't you?"

"Yeah." Blair cupped his hand across the side of Jim's head, sure despite the dark. It lay there, broad and comfortingly warm and then it was gone. "Man, when you go deep, you go really deep. But now isn't the time to work this out. Let's get some sleep."

*

They got some sleep. They woke early and made their plane, and their LAX connection to Cascade. They grabbed a taxi from the airport (because Jim refused to pay for open-ended airport parking, and Blair had laughed at Jim's occasional moments of parsimony before now) and they reached the loft thirteen hours after leaving Lima. Jim let Blair have the first shower, satisfied to sit on the edge of his bed amid familiar smells and sounds, and know that he and the people he cared for were safe.

"Bathroom's free," floated up from below, and Jim went downstairs. Jim took pride in his ability to manage hardship, but he spared a moment to appreciate the utilitarian beauty of his very own modern plumbing. He showered quickly and dressed in clean clothes. Stepping out, he meant to head for the kitchen drawer with the take-out menus stored in it, and then his steps slowed. Blair was standing over the phone, checking the messages on the answer machine. "This is Janet from Dr. Stoddard's office. Dr. Stoddard needs a final answer about Borneo. If you're still interested, please call us at 555-4678."



Jim went to the fridge and took out a couple of beers. He could do this. He could choke down pettiness and be Blair's friend. He walked across the room and extended one bottle of beer.

"I guess you should call him back."

Blair took the bottle from him, and ducked his head. Here it comes, Jim thought.

"Actually, I've decided not to go."

Jim stared. He couldn't speak, he couldn't move.

Blair lifted his head and there was this shy, open expression on his face that Jim had never seen before. "It took me a while to get it, and I'm sorry. I didn't exactly have role models for this type of thing, and there's no guarantee that I won't mess it up. But I'm staying. And being your friend, um, exclusively. If that's what you want."

"Okay."

That shy happiness didn't shift but it received an overlay of quizzicality. "Okay?"

Jim didn't have a lot of experience with this level of relieved delight. "Good. Great. It's great, Chief."

"Good." Blair pressed his palm against his mouth, the way that he did sometimes when he was thinking, when he didn't want to interrupt the workings of his brain with the workings of his mouth. "God, I think I need that beer."

"Go for it," Jim said equably, and sat down next to Blair on the sofa. He extended his own bottle, and they made a silent toast, and then Blair chugged about half his down. Jim barely touched his - he was more than buzzed without it.

"I didn't want to go, Jim. But I kept telling myself that it was all about sentinels, I was telling myself that a *lot*, and I didn't get how there was other stuff - other feelings - in the background." Blair swallowed a less prodigal serving of his beer. "There's still a lot of other stuff in the background, man, and not all of it is good."

Jim knew that. There was still the dissertation, the question of what Blair would do now that he'd turned Stoddard down. Just how out they could be, and how much arguing they'd do about that. In the peace of this moment, though, none of it looked insurmountable.

"Shut up, Chief," Jim said gently, and leaned across to kiss Blair. "We're home. Let's enjoy it."

