

A Sense of Discovery



Art by BrynnH87
Story by Katef

Part 1: Jim:

Present: Conover Psychiatric Hospital:

Seated at his desk in his well-appointed office, Dr Henry Rosenthal frowned as he concentrated on the open file before him. A caring and conscientious man, he was accustomed to treating each of his charges with whole-hearted dedication, but on occasion a particular individual would stimulate his interest that little bit more. Such was the case with the individual whose notes he was currently perusing; one Detective James Ellison.

Sitting back in his chair, Rosenthal's expression became speculative as he digested the information within the file, taking a few moments to consider his own circumstances before turning his full attention once again to the conundrum that was his new patient.

Of average height and build, Rosenthal was self-possessed, calm and stolid; his normally open and genial features inspiring confidence in his patients while the eyes behind his thick-

rimmed spectacles were shrewd and kind. Running a hand across his bearded jaw before pushing his fingers through his short dark hair in an habitual unconscious gesture, he knew himself to be a fortunate man. Although still in his late thirties, he was the senior resident psychiatrist in Conover's opulent private wing; his patients financed through conspicuous personal or corporate wealth and far removed from the unfortunates in the overcrowded public wards where facilities and treatment were limited by the perennial lack of state funding. Even worse were the separate high security wards for the criminally insane, which had more in common with prisons than hospitals, and where he had spent a difficult and soul-destroying stint in the early days of his training.

However, thanks to his hard work, driving ambition and talent, he had soon impressed the institution's governing body to the extent that in record time he had been offered a plum position in the private wing, and he had every intention of carrying out his duties to the best of his ability and living up to his employers' expectations.

Glancing at his watch, he noted that he had a few minutes more before his next appointed interview with Ellison, so he turned his attention once again to the notes before him, wanting to learn as much as possible in an effort to understand where the man was coming from.

Six months previously: Cascade PD Major Crimes Unit bullpen:

Detective Jim Ellison slumped in his seat, staring blankly at the myriad moving patterns and shapes swirling across his computer screen, the standard screen saver taking on new depths of colour and complexity in his sudden visual acuity. Abruptly realising what was happening, he fought valiantly against the temptation to lose himself in the enticing spectacle, and shook himself with an angry snarl, tearing his gaze away and rubbing his hands roughly over his face, all the while oblivious of the concerned looks directed at him by his friends and colleagues.

Shit! It was happening again! This time it was his sight that had caught him out, but who knew what would ambush him next? Hearing perhaps, when a whisper from another room sounded like the roar of a jet engine. Or maybe his sense of smell, when the tiniest dab of a colleague's cologne could make it appear as if the wearer had bathed in it. Then again, touch might decide to play up, as when the spray from his morning shower felt like razor blades slicing through his vulnerable flesh.

And who knew when Wonderburger had decided to add vast quantities of chilli powder and spices to their meat products?

And the worst of it was that none of his acquaintances had any inkling of what he was talking about. Or suffering. And why should they, since he himself had no idea as to what had caused his 'condition'? Unless, of course, he really was going insane, and that seemed like an increasingly possible explanation.

With a deep sigh, Jim adjusted the earplugs he had recently taken to wearing, and scratched absently at the niggling itch beneath his sweater cuff, despondently aware that once again he was likely to find welts and hives on his skin when he stripped off his clothing tonight.

Just then, he became aware of a presence beside him, and flinched automatically at the gentle squeeze of a large hand on his over-sensitive shoulder.

Quickly withdrawing his touch with a rueful and sympathetic grimace, Joel Taggart gazed worriedly down at his suffering colleague.

“I’m sorry, Jim. I didn’t mean to startle you. I’m guessing that everything’s feeling too much again?” His soft words and tone conveyed his real concern as he met Jim’s pained eyes, and Jim couldn’t help but offer him a slight but appreciative grin. A large and somewhat rotund dark-skinned man, the big ex-Bomb Squad Captain was a gentle and caring man and a talented detective in his own right, and Jim was grateful to be able to call him friend. Although he had no more idea of what ailed Jim than had anyone else, at least he believed him – believed *in* him – when the strange symptoms manifested themselves, unlike some of his less sympathetic colleagues who either thought he’d lost the plot or was bucking for discharge on medical grounds.

Realising that his hearing seemed to have returned to normal again, Jim removed one of his earplugs and offered his friend a wry grin, still squinting against the throbbing pain that had settled once more behind his eyes.

“Sorry Joel, I was distracted for a bit there. Didn’t realise you were there. But yeah. In answer to your question, ‘fraid so. Different senses seem to be cutting in and out without warning, and it’s impossible to guess which will be next. And it’s getting worse,” he added grimly. “God! I thought I was going to blank out again just from looking at my computer screen. It can’t go on...” and although he chuckled ruefully as he spoke, he quickly turned aside, not wanting Joel to see the despair in his eyes.

“I understand, Jim. I do! But I haven’t any idea what to say – what to do - to help you. Anyhow, Simon wants to see you, so perhaps you can thrash out something between you? I’ll see you later, my friend,” and he turned away to retake his own seat, but not before Jim saw the deeply troubled expression darkening the kindly face.

With a sigh, Jim rose to his feet, ignoring the speculative glances that followed his progress across the bullpen as he approached his captain’s office, already resigned to the fact that his days at the PD were numbered.

Seated comfortably before Simon Banks’ desk, Jim stretched out his long legs with a groan of pleasure as his boss busied himself in preparing a mug of gourmet coffee from his private stash. Jim had already declined his offer of a cup as he never knew when the brew could turn into toxic waste on his tongue. Even water these days had the power to nauseate him when his taste buds became so overactive that he could distinguish the actual chemicals used to treat the liquid.

Finally seating himself, Simon studied his subordinate carefully over the rim of his mug for a few moments before speaking, deeply disturbed by the changes he could already see in his friend. Ellison’s face was pale and pinched with discomfort as he tried to meet his boss’s perplexed gaze with a semblance of equanimity, but it was plain that he was fighting a losing battle. The buff man had already lost some weight, and the patrician features were grooved by new frown and stress lines and the residual evidence of fiercely-controlled pain. Although

never the most amenable of his detectives, Ellison was now short-tempered to the point of outright rudeness when afflicted by his spiking senses, and more and more of his colleagues were wary of being partnered with him.

Yet for the moment he was still the best detective on the squad, and his arrest and conviction record remained the highest in the department – in fact, any department within the PD – and Simon was loath to lose him. But something had to be decided, and decided soon, before he had out and out mutiny on his hands.

“So, Jim, I’m guessing that things haven’t improved any over the last few days, am I right? I’ve got a growing list of complaints against you, ranging from your fellow detectives through forensic staff right down to Rhonda, and that takes some doing. My secretary’s a saint, as you well know, and doesn’t deserve crap from you even if you’re not feeling on top of your game. What can you tell me, huh? Have you any more idea as to what’s going on with you?”

Jim sighed and pursed his lips for a second as he considered his reply. An ex-captain in the army Rangers himself, he truly appreciated his superior’s awkward position, and the fact that his friend had cut him as much slack as he could. Having said that, he also realised that his behaviour was having a detrimental effect on the MCU as a whole, and Simon was being driven to act on it. But he truly didn’t want to leave. The job meant everything to him, and he had no idea what he would do if it was taken away from him. The very thought was enough to bring him out in a cold sweat.

Having admitted that to himself, he knew he had to give his boss something to work with, so he leaned forward a little in his seat and fixed Simon with an earnest stare.

“To be honest, sir, things aren’t improving any yet, but I’ve had time to give this a lot of thought,” and his lips stretched upwards for a moment in a sardonic smile. “As far as I can recall, I was absolutely fine right up until that solitary stakeout a few weeks’ ago during the ‘Switchman’ case. I put down the sensory spikes then to tension and stress, thinking they would disappear once the case was closed, but it didn’t happen. I even considered that it might be some form of delayed PTSD from my days in covert ops, but I no longer think that, and all the doctors I’ve seen so far say I’m as healthy as a horse and nothing abnormal has shown up in any tests they’ve run on me.. I know I kept it quiet for a while, but I knew you’d picked up on my problem even before I ‘fessed up. After all, like you always say, it’s what you get paid the big bucks for, and rightly so.

“But I really am trying to control this, Simon. It’s hard, but I’m giving it my best shot. Our old housekeeper, Sally, has been sending me recipes and instructions for preparing bland foods. I’m using toiletries designed for sensitive skin which helps a bit, and I wear a sleep mask at night. And as you already know, I use earplugs night and day when my hearing gets out of whack. If I concentrate really hard I can control some of my reactions, but I admit I’m most afraid of the possibility of losing time. That’s the truly scary part, especially when it could happen at any given moment. And I’m honest enough to admit that I’d never have let on except that you saw it happen last week in the break room, so I could hardly deny it.

“But I don’t want to leave, sir. I need this job. It’s all I ever wanted to do, and I’m good at it. Give me a chance to work through this problem, sir. Even if it means being partnered temporarily with someone – like Joel maybe? Which is completely against my nature, I know. Loner to the last, that’s me.”

His appeal made, he sat back, waiting anxiously for Banks' judgement, even though logically he couldn't expect more than a temporary reprieve. But even that would be a blessing as far as he was concerned, and he would take what he could get. He had to hold on to the hope that there was some answer to his prayers somewhere down the line.

Sitting back in his seat, Banks set aside his empty coffee mug and regarded his man carefully; chin resting on his raised and clasped hands. After a long pause, he finally broke his silence and told Jim what he wanted to hear, even though he had a strong suspicion that he was making a grave mistake.

"OK, Jim. Thanks for your candour – it's much appreciated. Now the way I see it, there's only one real answer, and that's to put you on extended medical leave until you've got to grips with this affliction, whatever it is. But on the other hand, I need you here. We're short-handed, and even with your problems you still manage to be more effective than most. But I don't think I'm doing you any favours by keeping you here, man. I hope I'm not going to regret this decision, and I'm making it with a proviso. We'll take things on a day-to-day basis for the next few weeks, and I shall be pairing you with Joel while you're out in the field. Or Megan Connor if needs be, although I know you won't take kindly to that, the way you two bicker and snap at each other.

"But the moment I think you're no longer an asset but a danger to yourself and the department, you're out of here, OK? And you're to seek out any help you can in the meantime, my friend.

"Go now, and take the rest of the day to yourself. Think about what I've said, and we'll take it from here. Dismissed!" And when Jim rose to leave, an expression of guarded relief on his stern features, he was unaware of his boss' troubled gaze fixed on his departing back as he collected his coat and left the bullpen.

Fast Forward to one week previously: Simon Banks' office, Cascade PD:

Several months later, the scene was replayed in Simon's office, except that this time the situation appeared to be hopeless. As he gave himself a moment's respite by preparing coffee – once again unsurprisingly declined by his detective – Simon regarded Ellison from a compassionate but pragmatic viewpoint. In all honesty, the man looked terrible. Over the preceding weeks, the lines of pain and stress had become deeply engraved on the chiselled features, and the dull and pain-filled eyes bore witness to Jim's constant battle with ever more erratic sensory spikes. Reduced to eating the bare minimum of bland foods necessary to survive, he had lost a significant amount of weight, although he had continued doggedly to work out at the gym. He was still muscled enough, but with not an ounce of spare flesh on his haggard frame, giving him the appearance of an anatomical model of the type found in medical school.

And by far the worst thing in Simon's view was the utter despair and defeat in the cornflower blue eyes, which for once weren't hidden by Ellison's customary wraparound shades.

True, Ellison had been a bear in the field, his focus and effort unrivalled such that for the majority of the time he had continued to maintain and even break his own arrest record, but

the price in health, personal and social life had been high. Unable to waste his diminishing energy on anything outside of the job but trying to control his wayward senses, he had withdrawn from virtually all forms of social contact, with the rare exception of the occasional beer and Jags game in Simon's company.

And then, along with his declining health, the fugues had begun in earnest, despite Jim's best efforts to avoid them. And they were by far the most dangerous aspect, occurring most recently during a major sting operation just two days previously. Jim had frozen at a critical moment in the take-down, and if it hadn't been for the courage and quick thinking of two of his younger colleagues who had managed to pull him and his partner Joel out of the line of fire, the whole incident could have ended in disaster. It couldn't continue, for Jim's - and for his colleagues' - sake.

And Simon was going to have to tell him, and he was sure it would break both their hearts.

Sitting down and meeting Ellison's resigned gaze, Simon steeled himself to speak, only for Jim to beat him to it.

Carefully reaching into his coat pocket, Jim withdrew his badge and gun and a white envelope containing his formal resignation, which he placed with exaggerated care on Simon's desk. "It's OK, Captain - Simon. I already know what needs to be done, and I've already set my plans in motion. I knew it was only a matter of time, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate your continued support, but after that last fiasco, I know my time's up.

"I'd never be able to forgive myself if I'd've gotten Joel or anyone else hurt or killed so I'm going before I can do any more damage. I'd just like to thank you for everything you've done for me, and to wish you luck."

Swallowing hard against the lump of unaccustomed emotion threatening to choke him, Simon murmured, "Shit, Jim. You never cease to surprise me, my friend. But what're you going to do? Where will you go, and how can I help you?"

Jim could easily discern the real concern in his captain's face, and smiled slightly, wanting to ease his friend's hurt.

"I'll be OK, Simon. Well, out of harm's way, anyway. I've...um...been in contact with my Dad. I know that'll surprise you, given the bad blood between us, but he's actually worried for me, and has agreed to help. He's got good contacts and he's managed to arrange for me to be treated by a reputable psychotherapist at Conover's private wing. I've finally come to the conclusion that it could be in my mind after all, so I'll be staying there for as long as it takes, Simon. I'm ready to go. I can't cope on my own any more. It's time."

And there really was nothing more to be said. Simon stood and moved around his desk to where Jim was climbing wearily to his feet, holding out his hand for Jim to take. However, once Jim had grasped the offered appendage, Simon surprised himself by pulling the other man into his arms for a brief but sincere hug before pushing him gently away again, patting the broad back in wordless sympathy.

Not wanting to prolong the emotionally-charged moment, Jim smiled gently and replaced his wraparound shades before moving quickly to the door, to leave the office and the bullpen for probably the last time, mind already focussed on his plans for his immediate future.

Instead of going down to the parking garage as usual, he left the elevator at the foyer level, and crossed over to where his father sat waiting patiently for him. Eyeing his tall son with concern, the older man rose to his feet.

“Is everything OK, Jimmy? Are you sure you’re ready for this?”

And he received a small, sad smile in response.

“Yep, Dad. All ready. Take me to my new home....”

Present day, Jim’s room, Conover Private Unit:

Knocking softly on his patient’s door, Dr Rosenthal entered at the polite invitation from within, easing into the room and closing the door quietly behind him. He was reasonably certain that the room’s occupant posed no physical threat to him but, as a matter of course, a burly nurse stood guard in the corridor outside just in case. Rosenthal glanced around him, swiftly taking in the room’s condition before turning his attention completely to the tall figure leaning against the wall by the window.

As requested, the room was sparsely but well furnished, and as one might expect in the private wing, an effort had been made to decorate it nicely in an attempt to personalise it, money being no object. No need as yet to consider transferring the inmate to more institutionalised clinical surroundings for ease of treatment or, heaven forbid, a padded cell. And the room was certainly spotless and exceptionally tidy, Ellison apparently not satisfied with the efforts of the hospital cleaning staff. To Rosenthal’s experienced eyes, the whole room had been cleaned immaculately, and not one of Ellison’s few personal belongings was out of place. Rosenthal wryly considered that one could probably bounce a coin off the tightly-made bed, and the floor really was clean enough to eat off. OCD was obviously another of the man’s quirks, but of lesser concern than his other symptoms, and with that thought he focussed on his patient.

As a private patient, Ellison had eschewed hospital issue clothing in preference to wearing his own, which comprised silk pyjamas, a soft terry towelling robe and sheepskin slippers. However, Rosenthal was already aware that it was no affectation or vanity that dictated Ellison’s choice – it was rather that the man’s apparently ultra-sensitive skin couldn’t tolerate rougher or even synthetic fabrics.

Leaning nonchalantly against the wall, Jim suffered the polite but thorough inspection with a slight, if sardonic grin, but the doctor could easily see the actual tension in the long body and the deep-seated pain and distress in the man’s eyes couldn’t be fully disguised.

Indicating the two easy chairs on the opposite side of the room, Rosenthal smiled as he said, “And how are you this morning, Jim? Shall we be seated? I’d like to discuss what course of treatment I’d like to provide for you, but first I’d like to hear how you’re settling in. Shall we begin?”

After a moment or two exchanging pleasantries and general observations, Dr Rosenthal got down to business and began to outline his diagnosis thus far, and it wasn’t long until Jim felt his anger and despair building within him despite his determined efforts to control his emotional reactions.

“So, Doctor. I’ve been here less than a week; had two interviews with you, and you’re already certain you know what’s wrong with me. I have to say I’m impressed. For over six months I’ve researched my symptoms, dealt with them as best I could, had god knows how many physicals and even talked with the PD’s own shrink, all without satisfactory results. But you’re saying that it’s really all in my mind after all. Classic psychoses. Schizophrenia’s a dirty word in my dictionary, Doc,” and Jim couldn’t prevent the bitter anger and sarcasm that coloured his words.

“Now, Jim, I know that the term has often been used incorrectly to imply uncontrolled violence and paranoid delusional behaviour, but it really covers far more than that. Schizophrenic behaviour can mean no more than a temporary disconnection from reality, occasional hallucinations that affect no one but the sufferer--”

“So I’m delusional, am I?” Jim snapped, rudely interrupting the other man’s explanation. “Well, this looks pretty realistic to me!” and he hiked up the sleeve of his pyjamas to reveal a new set of angry-looking welts which had appeared despite the softness of the material.

Rosenthal looked uncomfortable but had his answer ready anyway. “Look, Jim, I’m aware that your medical records show that your skin is particularly sensitive, and that you have a propensity to allergic reactions, but have you considered that your symptoms could be mostly psychosomatic? Not that that would make them any less real to you, as the sufferer. But in all other ways, your examinations show no other abnormalities – a conclusion with which our own physicians here concur.

“So you must consider that your claims to see things that others can’t – to hear voices that others can’t – are in your mind. Again, no less real to you for all that, but something that can be treated with a course of antipsychotic medication such as clozapine and CBT; that is, Cognitive Behaviour Therapy. Once you accept that you need my help, the greatest step towards curing you will have been taken...”

Suddenly the doctor realised that he had lost Ellison’s attention, and that his patient had withdrawn into himself, apparently distracted by something else. He surmised that Ellison might be listening to one of his ‘voices’, so waited patiently until he could recapture Jim’s interest. He was a little surprised when the man’s faraway gaze suddenly snapped back to the present, and Jim rose to his feet and approached the window again. Voice firm but soft, Jim addressed him while once again focussing his gaze on something outside.

“So my ‘voices’ are all in my mind, are they? Have you never considered that they could actually be real after all? Just because *you* can’t hear them? Surely you could devise some sort of test for that? See what sort of range I actually have? How about if I tell you what that young man out there is saying? He has a lovely speaking voice, and I can hear every word. He’s talking to that big dog. Huh! Looks a bit like a wolf to me. He’s asking how come it can be so friendly with a cat? Some cat that is too...” he added musingly. “More like a black panther or some such. I didn’t know you allowed pets here, let alone ones that would be better off in a zoo! Kid seems to like them though, so I guess they’re tame enough...” His voice tailed off as he continued to listen, enchanted by the beautiful voice and unconcerned by Rosenthal’s presence as the doctor joined him at the window, a perplexed frown on his face.

Looking out, Rosenthal could see no one in the extensive private gardens beneath the window. The only people outside were the few figures enjoying the weak sunshine in the enclosed public inmates' recreation area at some distance away. Certainly not close enough for him to hear any conversations or make out any details or physical features. And the facility most definitely didn't have any animals present, except on the rare occasions when visitors were invited specifically to bring small, gentle pets as part of some patients' touch therapy. Frown deepening, he turned to address his patient when he realised that the man was completely unaware of his surroundings or Rosenthal's presence. Totally unresponsive to anything Rosenthal could do to arouse him from his fugue state.

With the first stirrings of real concern, Rosenthal hurried to the door to summon help.

He didn't realise it then, but Jim Ellison had zoned. Deeply.

Part 2: Blair.

Six months previously, Dr Eli Stoddard's office, Hargrove Hall, Rainier University:

"I'm telling you, Eli, I'm fine really. There's nothing to worry about, I promise. In fact, everything's great! Couldn't be better!" Blair Sandburg offered Stoddard his customary megawatt grin even as he squirmed a little in his seat before his mentor's desk, discomfited by the professor's shrewd gaze and doing his best to convince the older man that he was indeed perfectly fine. However, pursing his lips and regarding the young man with a critical frown, Stoddard didn't look at all convinced as he considered his response to his favourite student's claim.

In truth, Blair looked as good as usual; almost glowing with physical health, but Eli was certain deep down that the glow was misleading. The big blue eyes regarded him appealingly from an attractive face; one Eli considered to be beautiful in a purely masculine way; and he knew he wasn't alone in this belief, judging by the many glances and advances Blair received on a regular basis from male and female admirers alike. Blair's brow was wide and smooth above those arresting eyes, and his high cheekbones, neat nose, lush-lipped mouth and strong jaw completed the picture, all framed by a halo of dark auburn curls which Blair today wore down around his shoulders rather than pulled back in his usual ponytail. As he nervously tucked a stray curl behind his ear, the weak sunshine streaming through Eli's office window caused the twin hoops in Blair's left earlobe to sparkle briefly, but it only distracted his mentor's contemplation for a moment.

A little on the small side, yet the young man's figure was in perfect proportion, and far from being weak and effeminate, he was well able to hold his own during tough expeditions in trying conditions, such as that from which he and Eli had recently returned.

But something was definitely wrong, and Eli wasn't the only one to think so, even if Blair himself couldn't or wouldn't admit it.

Aware that Blair was growing decidedly uncomfortable with the continuing silence, Eli sighed and ran his tongue around his teeth for a moment before speaking out at last.

“Blair, my boy, I know you well enough by now to tell when you’re trying to pass me off with one of your famous ‘obfuscations’. I admit that you do look well enough, and you’re not neglecting your work, but I’ve noticed some disconcerting behaviour since our return from Peru. And I’m not the only one, you know.

“Your student helper – Jenny, isn’t it? – remarked to me only yesterday that she was concerned with something she saw. She said you were in your office, quite alone, but she was convinced that you were having some sort of deep and animated conversation with something or someone apparently only you could see. Now we all know how you like to talk to yourself – it’s part of what makes you who you are and is really quite endearing – but this is more than a little strange. It’s quite disconcerting to overhear, I can assure you, and seems to be happening more and more often.

“Is it something to do with your disappearance during our expedition which you can’t or won’t talk about? We want to help you, dear boy, but you need to confide in someone, even if it’s not me. You’ve never really offered much of an explanation about what happened to you in the Chopec village before you returned to us. Did something traumatic occur? Something that disturbed you so much that you’re having flashbacks? After all, normally I would have expected you to be bending our ears with every last detail about your impromptu stay, but for someone usually so eloquent you’ve been surprisingly reticent.

“Tell me what’s wrong, Blair. I want to help.”

Suddenly anxious, Blair dropped his gaze, his cheeks flushing as he nibbled his lower lip nervously. Eli deserved an explanation, but he didn’t know how to begin. Or even if he could, because it was so amazing – so incredible – that he was sure that even someone as broad-minded as Eli would have trouble getting his head around what Blair was now. Stoddard might be one of the world’s most revered anthropologists, but could he accept the whole truth from Blair? He was aware that he may well be doing the man a grave disservice, but he couldn’t risk it.

Couldn’t risk being diagnosed as crazy before he had fulfilled the destiny that had been predicted for him.

Staring fixedly at the floor for long moments, Blair relived the events of a mere few weeks ago. Events that had changed his life irrevocably.

Five weeks earlier: Peru:

Blinking rapidly, Blair gazed around him, totally disorientated in the damp, oppressive darkness of the rainforest’s night. Spinning around, heart beating wildly in his chest, he realised he was completely alone, having no idea of how he got here, or where the camp was. The camp where the other members of his anthropological expedition were no doubt sleeping soundly, unaware that one of their party was AWOL.

He and a small group of fellow students, under the leadership of his mentor, Dr Eli Stoddard, had travelled to Peru in an attempt to study the elusive indigenous Chopec tribe, who were rumoured to be in the vicinity of the spot where they had been advised to set up their base camp. However, up until now, the Chopec had indeed eluded them successfully, although

Blair had had the strangest feeling that that was going to change. Because ever since they had set foot in the country, he had been having the weirdest dreams. Dreams that he hadn't dared confess even to his friends in case they thought he'd finally lost it.

Every night he had been visited by a native figure dressed as a warrior who addressed him by name. He was accompanied by a beautiful black cat, which Blair recognised as a melanistic jaguar, and the dream was always the same. He was to prepare himself to meet his destiny. He would know when it happened, and it would be soon now, but first he had to receive vital instruction and a blessing. The dreams didn't frighten him, and the figure always faded away when he tried to question him, leaving him with a sense of loss. Until that night, that was.

Because now he remembered vividly what had happened. As soon as he had fallen asleep, the figure had appeared as usual, but this time he knew he had to follow when the warrior beckoned wordlessly. And Blair had. Unquestioningly. And woke up here, in the middle of nowhere, with no idea where he was.

Oh goddess! Where the fuck am I? This can't be happening! He could feel the onset of a real panic attack, but before he could succumb to his terror, he spotted a pair of golden eyes staring fixedly at him from the darkness of the undergrowth nearby. Eyes that glowed briefly in the palest blue, and which called to him; compelling him to believe and to follow. Eyes that belonged to a sleek black jaguar. And he wasn't afraid anymore. As the big cat turned to go, Blair followed eagerly close behind, never losing sight of the animal that led him unerringly through the shadows for an untold length of time until they reached a moon-lit clearing, where the animal stopped, turning to look at Blair once more before fading away.

But before Blair could panic at the loss of his guide and companion, he found himself surrounded by several native warriors, who emerged soundlessly from the cover of the dense forest greenery. Although armed with bows, arrows and spears, they didn't threaten him. Instead, one of them stepped forward to address him, and he was amazed to recognise the warrior from his dreams. Speaking in Quechua, a language with which Blair was fairly conversant, he introduced himself.

"We meet in the flesh at last, Young Wolf. I am Incacha, shaman of the Chopec. It is time for you to learn what you need to know to fulfil your destiny. Come now. There is much to do, and little time in which to do it."

And once again, Blair simply nodded, smiled and did as he was bid.

The next three days passed in a blur for Blair, such that he wasn't actually lying when he told Eli and his colleagues later that he couldn't remember much. He had flashes of memories of arriving at the Chopec village, to be greeted warmly by everyone he encountered, even those who were obviously the elders of the tribe. But then he was shown to Incacha's own hut, and didn't actually emerge from there again until it was time to leave.

He recalled later that he had been given some sort of drink which freed his mind so that he could take his first spirit walk, during which, and several subsequent ones, he learned about his designated role as guide to a sentinel. A sentinel who even now was ready and awaiting him back in the Great City of Cascade.

It was, in fact, the embodiment of everything he had ever hoped for from a very early age when he first fell in love with the concept of the sentinel and his companion guide.

Ever since he had obtained a rare copy of 'The Sentinels of Paraguay', a monograph written by the nineteenth century British explorer, Sir Richard Burton, he had been entranced by the subject. Those much-revered individuals, through a natural genetic variation, had greatly enhanced senses which allowed them to be watchmen, scouts and protectors and so much more to their tribes. Jealously guarded by their people, they used their senses to hunt game, predict weather patterns and natural disasters as well as provide an early warning system for approaching enemies.

However, the downside of this gift was that the sentinel ran the risk of getting so lost in one sense to the exclusion of all else that they could fall into a fugue state, or zone, in Burton's words, leaving them and their comrades open and vulnerable to attack. For this reason, each sentinel needed a guide or helpmeet to help ground him or her, enabling them to use their senses freely without fear. But what Burton didn't explore in any great depth was the fact that the guide was far more than just a convenient comrade-in-arms. He or she was deeply committed to his or her sentinel, caring for them and providing a suitable environment in which to live comfortably, like the most dedicated of married couples or life partners.

And it was this aspect that had fascinated Blair to the extent that, once he had been accepted at Rainier University at the tender age of sixteen, he had dedicated as much time and effort as he possibly could to his favourite subject of anthropology. In particular, the pursuit and acquisition of every last piece of information he could unearth as regards the obscure phenomenon of sentinel and guide partnerships.

He was well aware that most of his peers considered him to be more than a little eccentric, but he had persevered nonetheless, eventually graduating with his Master's degree at a mere twenty years of age with a thesis on the subject of tribal sentinels.

And it was his greatest desire that he write his doctoral dissertation on the topic of modern-day sentinels, if such marvellous beings still existed in so-called civilised societies.

However, so far he had had no luck in finding a subject, and had nearly given up hope when Eli asked him to accompany him on the expedition to Peru, because there was every possibility that the Chopec tribe they wished to study actually had a sentinel and guide pair.

Blair had been ecstatic, and overwhelmed with gratitude for his mentor, finally believing that he was on the way to realising his greatest desire – to meet a sentinel in the flesh. It may not have been the 'modern' urban sentinel of his doctoral dreams, but a sentinel was a sentinel, and as such demanded Blair's undivided attention.

And he had indeed met his heroes, who visited him while he was in Incacha's care, and they were indeed every bit as wonderful as he had hoped. And he had decided there and then that he would never reveal their existence to the outside world, for fear that they might be exploited by unscrupulous academics, or even criminals out to utilise their gifts for nefarious purposes.

But he had learned far more about himself, and that there was a whole spiritual aspect to the most successful partnerships that he had never envisaged in his wildest imaginings.

For while on the spirit plane, he was introduced to his spirit animal – a beautiful, blue-eyed wolf – and even more amazingly, he was introduced to the way of the shaman; his eyes opened to his own gifts, of which he had never before had any inkling. Incacha explained the presence of the jaguar also, it being the spirit animal of the sentinel with whom he was destined to bond. Both animals would watch over him during his journey of discovery, which would be no easy path.

He was told of Enqueri, the soldier who had been found by the Chopec some years previously. The sole survivor of a helicopter crash, he had discovered and mastered his sentinel abilities with Incacha's help, carrying out his mission to defend the Chopec pass for eighteen months, at the same time acting as sentinel to his adopted tribe.

He was also told that Incacha had foretold Blair's coming, knowing that he was Enqueri's true guide even if the sentinel no longer remembered who or what he was; his gifts, like his memories of his time in Peru repressed of necessity to maintain his sanity while he remained in the Great City unguided.

But now the time was near when they would finally meet and bond if the gods willed it, although Blair was also warned that the future is never set in stone, so he must beware of obstacles that would undoubtedly be set in their path. However, if his courage and spirit remained true, he would overcome all and achieve his most cherished goal. His very own sentinel.

Coming back to himself with a start, Blair blushed with embarrassment for keeping Eli waiting, aware that the other man's inquisitive but sympathetic expression was now tinged with no little impatience.

"Um...sorry, Eli. I was wool-gathering there for a few minutes. Didn't mean to blank you out like that," and he offered his mentor a self-deprecating grin.

However, he sobered immediately as his own expression changed to one of rueful apology, knowing that he needed to reassure his friend and mentor. He needed to tell the truth, albeit a judiciously much-abridged edition, because he owed the man that much for both their sakes.

Holding Eli's gaze with a candid one of his own he began, choosing his words with care as he thought through his explanation.

"Look, Eli, I'm truly sorry for being such a nuisance during the expedition, and if I've caused you and my friends concern since we got back. The truth is, I really don't know why I wandered off like that. My mom Naomi told me once that I used to sleepwalk occasionally as a child, but that was a long time ago, and I'd completely forgotten it.

"But maybe that's what it was? I honestly don't know.

"Anyhow, I do recall being given food and drink by the Chopec when they found me, so maybe there was something in it that affected me somehow? After all, we both know that indigenous shamans – heck, even young men reaching puberty – are in the habit of taking

hallucinogens to help them on their spirit walks! Perhaps I was given something like that, and that's why everything's blurred and muddled in my memory.

"Suffice it to say, I realise that it's a lost opportunity in terms of recording anything meaningful about the Chopec lifestyle, and for that I'm truly sorry. All I can say is that I really do feel fine, and if there's any residual side-effects left from whatever I may inadvertently have taken I'm sure they'll soon work their way out of my system.

"So please don't concern yourself on my behalf, Eli. I'm sorry I blew it in an academic sense, and I'm really sorry for causing you guys grief over my temporary absence.

"Am I forgiven?" and he treated Stoddard to his most appealing puppy dog look, unmercifully milking the other man for every last bit of sympathy and understanding.

He was rewarded by a noticeable melting and relaxing of Eli's expression and demeanour, which reflected his real affection and admiration for his exasperating young protégé.

"OK, my boy. Have it your way. We'll say no more about it for now.

"But be aware that I'll be keeping my eye on you, my boy, for your own good. I won't see you suffer alone should you have any more relapses or unexpected episodes, you hear me? Now be off with you, and I'll see you at the staff meeting tomorrow, bright and early!"

And with a cheery grin and jaunty wave, Blair jumped to his feet with alacrity to leave the room, mightily relieved to have gotten away so lightly.

Some months later:

Blair sat in his ancient car, parked in the shadows down the street from the building where the object of his deepest desires lived. He could see the entrance to 852 Prospect, eagerly anticipating a stolen glimpse of his prey, Detective Jim Ellison. He knew it could really be constituted as stalking, but he needed to feast his eyes on the handsome cop as well as reassure himself that the man remained unharmed, because for sure his chosen profession could hardly be called a safe one.

It had taken Blair remarkably little time and effort to locate his promised sentinel, thanks to some efficient research and no little help from the spirit animals, which were now more or less his constant companions.

But the Incacha of his dreams insisted that he must be patient for a short while longer, because Ellison – Enqueri – wasn't quite ready yet.

Responding to the quiet whine from his wolf, who was seated next to him, he grinned ruefully as he replied, "Yeah, I know boy. I'm tired too. But he shouldn't be too long now. And look, our friend's just as impatient as we are," and he turned his gaze back to the building's entrance, where Ellison's jaguar paced backwards and forwards, growling deep in his throat and lashing his long tail in overt feline frustration.

Resigned to waiting a while longer, Blair looked down at the well-thumbed back copy of 'Time' magazine on his lap. The issue which featured Captain James Ellison, sole survivor of a helicopter crash in Peru some years previously, who, with the help of the Chopec tribe,

continued to carry out his mission to defend the Chopec pass for eighteen months before being found and repatriated to the United States.

Smiling softly as he reacquainted himself with his hero, Blair carefully traced the handsome face with gentle fingers, wishing he could have been there to offer support and comfort, to wipe the sadness and hurt from the beautiful, ice blue eyes. He realised, however, that since he had only been a school kid when Jim Ellison was in Peru, it figured that he had needed the intervening years in which to grow up enough to be of any use to the man. And that was undoubtedly the reason why Ellison had repressed his senses until Blair was ready and able to become his guide.

But if all went as Incacha predicted, hopefully he would soon be able to do just that, if only the re-awakened sentinel would accept him for what he was and take the help he so needed to give. On the other hand, Ellison might well laugh in his face, which was a strong possibility. Because despite his formidable intelligence and personable nature, Blair had little in the way of self-esteem, so a constant, underlying anxiety deriving from a fear of failure weighed heavily on him during his darkest moods when his own need for comfort and affection was at its greatest.

Pushing such depressing thoughts aside, he looked up again to see Ellison's old Ford truck approaching to pull into its usual spot in front of the building. Eyes lighting up in delighted anticipation even as his palms grew clammy enough from nervous tension to make him rub them on the material of his jean-clad thighs, Blair almost drooled as the big cop climbed out of his vehicle and pulled out a paper bag of groceries from the passenger seat.

However, instead of simply slamming and locking the truck door and marching straight up to the entrance of 852, this time Ellison paused, head slightly cocked on one side as he took a long look around the area, eyes sharp beneath a furrowed brow.

Oh shit! Don't let him see me! Incacha'll have a cow! Blair quickly slid down in his seat, heart hammering in his chest as he waited with bated breath for discovery. An eternity later, Blair peeked through his side window to see the big man shake his head in irritation before continuing on his way, oblivious of the jaguar which was purring contentedly and winding around his legs as he walked.

Letting out the breath he hadn't realised he was holding, Blair exchanged a wry glance with the wolf at his side. "Sheesh! That was too close, boy. I'm going to have to be a lot more careful if we're going to keep doing this. Then again, perhaps it's a good sign. Perhaps Jim realises there's something about to happen. That his senses are trying to give him advanced warning of me.

"But not just yet. We have to be patient just a bit longer..." and he turned the ignition, waiting only for the light to go on in Ellison's third floor apartment before pulling away slowly from the kerb, sparing a sympathetic glance for the jaguar, which sat disconsolately beside the closed front door, yowling pitifully at being excluded once again.

Unfortunately for Blair, as time passed the situation at Rainier continued to deteriorate despite his best efforts to maintain the appearance of what passed for normal behaviour. He continued to teach and study, but his apparent lapses of concentration were growing more

frequent, and students and colleagues alike were beginning to watch him with growing concern. Some genuinely thought that the stresses of a heavy teaching load were beginning to tell on him, while others thought that he must still be suffering from some sort of after-effects from his traumatic Peruvian expedition. Others still, who didn't know him too well, snidely commented that he must be on something pretty darned potent to suffer from such neat delusions.

The trouble was that the boundaries between Blair's academic and 'real' life and his spirit visionscape were growing more and more blurred as time went by, so he was no longer able to differentiate between them quite so easily. Because they were real to him, he sometimes forgot that others could not see his animal companions, and he occasionally addressed them and petted them in public to the discomfiture of his observers.

Things came to a head when Jenny, his student helper, opened his office door one morning to usher in the group of grad students who were scheduled for a tutorial. The sight that met their eyes was more than a little bizarre.

Wearing nothing but his underwear, Blair sat cross-legged on his desk, talking animatedly to an audience only he could see, speaking in rapid Quechua, and gesticulating wildly in counterpoint to his comments. Glancing up to register the new arrivals, he didn't miss a beat, simply reverting to English as he said, "Hi guys! We're just finishing up here, won't keep you long. Hey, can I introduce you to my friends?" and he sent them a beaming smile before turning back around to wave expansively at the apparently empty room. He therefore missed the sight of Jenny backing swiftly out of the room, tears streaming down her horrified face as she muttered, "Nonononono!" before turning to flee down the corridor. He also missed one of the other young men surreptitiously placing a call on his cell phone, oblivious of anything but his pleasure in being able to finally combine all the important elements of his new personal reality.

Meanwhile, blinded by her tears, Jenny ran down the corridor to collide with another figure marching purposefully in the opposite direction. Steadied by firm hands on her shoulders, she looked up into the stern but concerned face of Eli Stoddard, who was responding to the other student's urgent summons.

"Oh, Dr Stoddard! It's Blair! I think he's really gone crazy this time! He's in his room, nearly naked and talking to his invisible friends again! We've got to help him, sir!"

Taking in Jenny's genuine distress and tear-stained face, Eli gave the distraught girl a gentle shake as he commanded firmly but softly, "Hush, now, Jenny. It'll be OK. I'll take care of Blair, don't you worry. I know what I have to do. He'll be just fine, I promise."

Gratified to see the immediate relief flooding Jenny's expressive features, he set her aside and marched resolutely on his way towards Blair's office. He was more than sorry that it had come to this, but he was bound and determined to help his favourite student even if Blair didn't appreciate it. He knew what had to be done, and wasn't about to put it off any longer.

Blair would be cured if Eli had anything to say about it.

Shortly afterwards, Conover Psychiatric Hospital, public wing:

Dressed in hospital issue scrubs and thoroughly disorientated, a bewildered and distraught Blair looked around him wildly, eyes wide with anxiety as he tried to make sense of his new surroundings. To say he was shocked by the rapid turn of events in the last few hours would be an understatement, but he knew he had to try and make some sort of sense of things for his sanity's sake.

Sanity? Hah! Hugely overrated in his opinion, and he bit the inside of his cheek to prevent himself giggling hysterically. Someone was sure to be watching him through that mirror-window. And no doubt would soon be coming in here to interview him. See what made the new loony tick. Beside him his wolf whined pitifully in sympathy, but the jag was elsewhere in the complex, yowling in frustration in the near distance.

Taking a deep breath, Blair settled himself in the hard chair and forced himself to recall everything that had happened since this morning; determinedly shaking off the residual fuzziness caused by the sedative he had been given.

He remembered being in his office, preparing for the morning's tutorial. Wolf and jaguar were with him, as they had been more often than not since his return from Peru. But he had been delighted and amazed when he had turned around to see Incacha standing before him, looking as corporeal to him as did the spirit animals. Usually, Incacha only came to him at night in his dreams, or if he put himself in a meditative state, deliberately attempting a spirit walk of his own. With a beaming smile, he greeted the shaman, eagerly anticipating what the man had to say.

And he had been thrilled when Incacha had said that the time had come to complete his final lesson in preparation for the imminent meeting with his sentinel.

Getting himself comfortable, he had stripped off most of his constricting clothing and settled himself on his desk facing Incacha, who was seated cross-legged on his worn rug, a spirit animal to either side of him.

"You have achieved much, Young Wolf, Child of my Heart. You have come a long way in the few months I have known you, and I believe you are now ready to take the final step and meet with your intended Sentinel. If the Spirits are willing, you are about to become half of a magnificent whole – a true Guide bonded to a true Sentinel in every sense of the word.

"I have to tell you that Enqueri was reacquainted with his senses at the same time as I awakened the shaman in you back in our village, but I must warn you that he hasn't coped well with their re-emergence. Enqueri was ever scornful of the spiritual side of the bond, and it would have been unfair to have thrown you together at that point before you were ready to cope with his denial and disbelief. But now you are as ready as I can make you, and the time is at hand.

"However, I have to warn you that things will not be easy for either of you. Like Enqueri, most of your people have long lost their belief in anything they cannot touch or see. They fear what they cannot easily comprehend, so it will be up to you as a pair to convince them of the true meaning and potential of the bond. And convince them that you are not insane," and his smile was soft but rueful as he held Blair's rapt gaze.

“It will not be easy, but I believe you will succeed, given each other’s love and support.

“Fulfil your destiny, Young Shaman Wolf. Make me proud!”

Bursting with joy at Incacha’s words, Blair had become aware that his students had arrived, and in his glee he had tried to introduce them to the inhabitants of his other reality, sure that they must be able this time to see as he did. But that certainly hadn’t been the case, and when Eli had arrived shortly after, he had confronted Blair with compassionate but implacable intent. He claimed that Blair had finally succumbed to stress, and had suffered a psychotic break. He, Eli, had taken it upon himself to make sure that Blair received the treatment he needed, so that when help arrived, in the form of two burly uniformed EMTs, he handed the vociferously protesting young man over to them.

Blair had struggled frantically, trying to convince them of their error, but had only succeeded in getting himself sedated, to wake up here in Conover’s public wing.

Sighing deeply once again, Blair came back to the here and now, considering his options. The upside of this new development was that thanks to the jaguar he knew for sure that his sentinel was close by; another recent admission. Now it was up to him to engineer their meeting by whatever means necessary.

Their very futures depended on it.

Part 3: A Propitious Encounter:

Present: Jim Ellison’s Room:

Dr Rosenthal entered his patient’s room once again, his face creased in deep consternation. Ellison had been completely unresponsive for hours now, and stubbornly refused to react to any stimulus either physical or chemical that Rosenthal could come up with. He was rapidly running out of ideas, and badly needed some inspiration; especially as Ellison’s father was due to arrive at any moment, having been advised of his son’s condition. He had never before seen such a complete shut-down for no apparent reason, and he was unhappily certain that his patient was slowly fading away. Ellison’s respiration was growing ever more shallow as time passed, and his heartbeat was getting steadily weaker. Rosenthal could only hope that William Ellison could offer some helpful suggestions, otherwise Rosenthal feared the worst. He would be forced to make the decision to transport Jim to Cascade General’s ICU unless something happened very soon.

Nodding to the young attendant who was just taking Ellison’s vitals once again, Rosenthal crossed over to the window to gaze outside for a moment while he waited for her to finish.

Staring out over the gardens, he let his gaze wander to the public recreation area, recalling what Jim had been watching immediately prior to his shut-down.

And finally got the inspiration he was looking for.

It was probably completely crazy, but hell, he was in the right place for it, and anything was worth a try. Fired by a sudden surge of nervous energy, Rosenthal quickly exited the room again after a word of explanation to the startled nurse, and hurried back to his office.

He had some calls to make.

In a relatively short time, he had obtained the information he was hoping for. Having contacted his opposite number in the public wards, he learned that yes, there was a patient who fitted the right criteria. The young man was a recent arrival, gentle and harmless but completely delusional according to his psychiatrist, who told Rosenthal that his patient spent all his time talking to imaginary animals. The doctor understood these to be a wolf and a big cat of some sort, according to the young man's freely-offered descriptions, and he had chuckled grimly as he had added that at least it wasn't another six foot rabbit named Harvey. His name was Blair Sandburg, and he was a TA at Rainier University. Or had been before his admission to Conover.

Thanking his colleague profusely, Rosenthal now had to decide what to do with this information. It occurred to him that he would have to see if he could arrange for Sandburg to be brought up here, because he had definitely run out of other options.

Hoping he was doing the right thing, he reached for the phone again. Time to see if his hunch would pan out.

Over in the public ward, Blair paced nervously around his tiny, bare room, almost fizzing with pent-up energy. He was as certain as he could be that something momentous was about to happen, and the wolf and jaguar sitting on his bed seemed to mirror his optimism, following his movements with curious and eager eyes.

Sure enough, a peremptory knock on the door announced the arrival of Riley, one of Blair's usual attendants, who told Blair that he was to accompany him to Dr Talbot's office immediately. And if he was surprised at the alacrity with which Blair responded to the unexpected demand, he kept it to himself as he guided his charge along the corridor and up to the second floor consulting room.

On entering Dr Talbot's office, Blair quickly took his seat as directed and waited impatiently for his psychotherapist to speak. Talbot looked even more distracted than usual, given his enormous work load, but he made a conscious effort to offer his patient a warm smile of welcome to put the young man at ease. Although he felt that had made little progress with Blair thus far, he couldn't help but like the young TA, and felt an unwonted protectiveness towards him. It was that protectiveness that dictated his tone of voice and choice of wording as he relayed the unprecedented appeal.

Candidly meeting the wide blue eyes which gazed expectantly up at him, he began.

"Good evening, Blair. I'm sorry to have troubled you at this time, but I have received an unusual request from one of my colleagues in the private unit. I have to say that I'm not entirely comfortable with it, but I have agreed to at least advise you of the substance. I should add that, if, having heard what I have to say, you don't wish to comply, then I can assure you that you won't be compelled to do so.

"But on the other hand if you do agree, then I trust that it won't adversely affect your treatment here thus far. Do you understand what I'm saying, Blair?"

Fiercely curbing his natural impulse to roll his eyes and mutter a scoffing response along the lines of, *'And what treatment would that be, exactly?'* instead Blair offered him a wide, uncomplicated grin and said, "Sure, Dr Talbot. No problem. I'm listening..." and he waited expectantly if somewhat anxiously, praying that what he was about to hear was what he had been waiting for.

"Fair enough, Blair. Anyway, my colleague, Dr Rosenthal, has a patient under his care who is apparently in a coma. He has failed to respond to anyone or anything thus far, but Dr Rosenthal feels that he may have some connection with you. I don't know the reasoning on which this theory is based, but Dr Rosenthal would be most grateful if you could at least see the man – see if you do recognise him, and if he might even respond to you. His name is James Ellison. Detective James Ellison."

And Blair was hard put not to leap to his feet to yell, "Yeah! Right on, man!" and pump his fist in victory. Instead he kept his seat, but couldn't quite contain his smug smirk as he replied with considerable restraint, "Sure, Dr Talbot. Anything I can do to help. Shall we go?"

And in the face of Blair's easy-going spirit of cooperation, despite his own reservations, Dr Talbot had to comply.

By the time Blair, Dr Talbot and Riley reached the private room where Jim lay, Blair was almost vibrating with nervous energy, such that Talbot felt compelled to halt the young man for a moment, placing a restraining but gentle hand on the smaller man's shoulder.

"Are you sure you're OK with this Blair? It's not too late to change your mind, son. No one will blame you if you do."

Determinedly forcing himself to calm down, Blair fixed the older man with his most conciliatory expression and obfuscated. "I'm fine, Dr Talbot, honestly. Just excited is all. It's just the anthropologist in me, enjoying a new experience."

Talbot looked at him appraisingly; his own expression both relieved and saddened. Relieved that his young patient was truly comfortable with the situation, but saddened to think that Blair might never again be considered competent enough to return to his studies and his teaching responsibilities. Shaking himself free of such negative thoughts, he offered Blair a small smile. "Fair enough, Blair. Let's go in," and he knocked on the door, to enter on the invitation from within, allowing Blair to precede him with a supportive hand at the small of the young man's back.

Stopping for a moment just inside the doorway, Blair quickly took stock of the room and its occupants before turning his full attention on the still figure on the bed. The room was certainly well appointed, and a far cry from his small, bare cell, but it felt crowded on account of the numbers present. Apart from the three new arrivals, there was another white-coated man, presumably Dr Rosenthal, a nurse, who was presently fussing around her patient, and of course, his wolf and the jaguar – not that they were visible to anyone but Blair. His wolf whined in greeting and pressed comfortingly against his leg, while the jaguar had its nose pushed up against Ellison's face, and to Blair it looked unutterably sad, but determined nonetheless to force Enqueri to recognise and accept it once and for all.

Taking a deep breath and ignoring everyone else in the room, Blair walked directly to the bed, sinking to his knees at the head where he could easily touch and speak to the comatose man behind the safety rail. With a searching look in his direction, the jag slunk to the bottom of the bed, plainly intending to stand guard while the shaman worked his magic.

Frowning slightly, Blair considered lowering the safety rail, but decided against it for the time being just in case Ellison should wake up disorientated enough to risk falling out of bed.

Reaching through the bars, he placed a gentle hand on Jim's cheek, cupping the handsome but too lean and angular face and turning it slightly towards him.

"There you go, big guy. Listen to my voice, and feel my touch. Come back to me, Sentinel. Your tribe needs you. I need you! I know you're still in there, Jim. Wake up and let me see if your eyes are as beautiful a shade of blue as your photos make out."

Keeping his voice almost sub-vocal, as he didn't want his audience to hear what he was saying, he kept up his patient litany for several minutes, all the while stroking Jim's face while his other hand gripped Ellison's. He was peripherally aware of some quiet but heated discussion going on behind him, but ignored it in favour of concentrating fully on Jim; praying that he was good enough after all to bring the sentinel back. That he really could live up to Incacha's expectations.

Suddenly he was rewarded by a slight flexing of Ellison's fingers around his own, and the tiniest twitch of an eyelid. More loudly now, Blair continued to encourage the man, saying, "That's it, Jim! You're nearly there! Come on all the way back now. I'm here. I'll protect you!"

Mere seconds later, the blue eyes flickered open, revealing the exact shade Blair had expected to see, and he grinned in gratitude, blatant appreciation and great relief. Blinking rapidly against the dryness of his eyeballs, Jim turned his head a little more to squint at the man leaning so close to him, holding onto his hand like a lifeline.

From Jim's point of view, his gradual return to consciousness had been almost pleasant for a change. Although this had been by far the deepest zone he could ever recall enduring, this time he had been brought back with gentleness and consideration, and he took a moment to savour the experience.

The first thing he had been aware of was a comforting, rhythmic thrumming which he would later identify as Blair's heartbeat, and which would ground him forever after. Almost immediately afterwards, he registered the lightest of touches to his face and hand, accompanied by the rich, mellifluous tones of a loving voice calling to him – a voice he'd heard before, and which he now felt compelled to obey. Next up was the enticing scent of a man. A man who smelled deliciously of chocolate and musk, the overlying scents of harsh institution soap and detergent unable to mask the natural and addictive aroma. And he knew he just had to see the person to whom all these delightful attributes belonged, so he forced his eyes open and took his first close up look. And instantly recognised the young man he had spotted in the exercise yard before he had made his trip to la-la land.

Shit! What the hell was going on here? Ellison's wondering gaze changed abruptly to one of suspicion and anger as he reached over the rails and grabbed the young man by the front of his scrub shirt, almost dragging him over onto the bed beside him.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing, you little hippy punk?” Ignoring the rasping of a voice emerging from a painfully dry throat, Jim continued his instinctive if unjustified rant. “Where do you get off bewitching me, eh? And just who are you to paw at me like that?” Glaring into the now devastated blue eyes, he shook the kid like a rag doll for a moment, peripherally aware that the young man was making no effort to defend himself. Suddenly, however, several things seemed to happen at once, and it was as if his eyes were well and truly opened once and for all.

Riley reached across to pull Blair away from the bed, although whether it was intended for his charge’s protection or Ellison’s wasn’t clear. At the same moment Jim registered the huge timber wolf crouched protectively beside the young man, snarling furiously at Jim; ears flat against its skull as he prepared to defend his shaman. Jerking back in horror, Jim released his grip on the kid’s shirt and looked down to see an equally angry jaguar at his feet. And if a big cat could look both pissed off and disgusted, this one surely did.

“What the **hell’s** going on?” he roared. “Who let those animals in here? Get them under control before they attack someone!”

And you could have heard a pin drop in the stunned silence that followed.

Despite his upset, Blair rose shakily to his feet, his eyes shining and expression awed as he broke the spell.

“Oh man! You see them! You really see them! It’s OK, Jim. They won’t hurt you, man. They’re our spirit animals. Wolfy’s mine and the jag’s yours. And he’s missed you something awful, Jim. Say ‘hello’ at least,” and he fixed Jim with eyes made huge with entreaty as he held out his hands in supplication, totally uncaring of the open-mouthed and astonished gazes boring into his back.

Frowning in consternation, Ellison seemed to retreat within himself for a long moment as he reluctantly dragged virtually forgotten memories to the forefront of his mind. As Blair stepped tentatively closer to the bedrail once again, Jim glanced up, torn between hope and bitter anger at what this beautiful little nobody had managed to unleash.

Because he remembered the jaguar now. He had seen it on several occasions while in Peru, and now he recalled its significance. Faster and faster scenes from the past flooded his consciousness; flashes of memories long repressed which now reared up gleefully to both haunt and taunt him.

Fond memories of a wise and gentle native shaman who had taken a traumatised soldier and newly-online sentinel under his wing, caring for him and teaching him how to control and use his enhanced senses for the good of the tribe. The same shaman – Incacha? - who had tried in vain to get him to accept his animal spirit, and who had told him that he would find his true guide in the Great City. How in the hell had he forgotten all that?

And he was certain now that this same little nobody, who was regarding him with such fear, hope and longing, was indeed his guide, goddammit. After all these years the prophesy had come true whether he liked it or not.

So, now what? How was he supposed to deal with this?

Suddenly the scene shifted again as Riley made another attempt to pull Blair away. This time acting on pure instinct, Jim sat up in bed with a roar which was every bit as fearsome as those the spirit animals were making. Lunging forward, he grabbed Blair's wrist this time in a punishing grip, growling "Mine! My Guide!" and flicking a glance at the snarling wolf he added, "That means you too!" Under any other circumstances, the identical open-mouthed and wide-eyed looks of astonishment on lupine and human face alike might have been comical, but Jim was in full Blessed Protector mode whether he realised it or not, and his first priority was to keep the guide close. Leaning over to drop the bed rail with his free hand, he tugged an unresisting Blair onto the bed next to him, tucking the smaller man against his side as he glared at the other occupants in the room, daring them to make something of it.

As Blair blinked rapidly in surprise, still too bemused to react just yet, Jim studied each of the others with a narrow-eyed frown, instinctively checking out levels of potential threat.

Frowning in irritation, Riley had backed off for now, obviously annoyed that he had been bested again and now looking for guidance from Dr Talbot as to what he should do next. The nurse, completely bewildered, was edging towards the door, looking to make her escape. This situation was way more weird than anything she'd signed up for, and she was already considering other employment options as she slipped out of the room.

As for the two doctors, they were both fixated on their own patients, and were already preparing their arguments regarding the next steps to take.

It was into this chaos that William Ellison stepped, his eyebrows rising momentarily in shock before his face settled into a grim and forbidding expression.

"Just what the **hell** is going on here? I thought you said my son was comatose? Explain to me why he's sitting up in bed with another man! And I do mean *now!*"

A powerful and respected businessman in his own right, William was accustomed to being obeyed, and wasn't about to be fobbed off with platitudes in these circumstances. His son's welfare was at stake, and he had every intention of throwing his weight behind anything that would benefit Jimmy.

Thinking quickly, Rosenthal responded first. "Ah, Mr Ellison. It seems that for some reason your son has fixated on this young man. Jim is refusing to let him go – indeed, seems very protective of him – but I am concerned for his safety. He is Dr Talbot's patient--"

"And I want him removed from here!" the other doctor butted in angrily. "I should never have listened to your half-baked request, Rosenthal--" and was interrupted in his turn when William snapped, "Enough! When I said I wanted an explanation, it didn't include your bickering, gentlemen." Then turning to face the bed once more, he addressed his son in a more moderate tone.

"So what can you tell me, son? I understood that you had gone into one of those fugue states you used to have when you were a child only this one was much worse. What brought you out of it? Do you know?"

For a fraught few seconds, Jim fought a fierce internal battle to push the primal sentinel within him back far enough to allow the pragmatic cop to resurface. Sighing heavily, he replied more calmly, although the wary frown remained.

“To be honest, Dad, I have no idea--” and he also was interrupted as Blair spoke up, voice firm and sure now as he squeezed Jim’s forearm in a gesture of comfort.

“I can explain, sir. It’s nothing unnatural, I can assure you, whatever the good doctors might believe. Will you give me the chance to show you? Please?”

Aware that Jim was regarding him with surprise, and that William’s face reflected the same degree of bafflement, he treated them to his most appealing expression, this time deliberately turning up the puppy dog eyes in a desperate attempt to win them over. He realised that it was vital to get Jim’s father on their side if they were to have any chance of getting out of here in the foreseeable future.

When both doctors spoke up together to voice their objections, William held up an imperious hand to quiet them, concentrating his attention on the small but well-made figure on the bed, impressed despite himself by the obvious sincerity and determination in the young man’s expression and demeanour. He didn’t respond immediately though, choosing instead to consider his son’s reactions to the boy’s plea.

Fixing Blair with a quizzical eye, Jim’s tone was surprisingly affectionate as he recaptured the young man’s attention.

“You sure you can do that Chief? I mean, do you really have the sort of power and knowledge I think you do? After all, I know nothing about you, and for all I know you might have an ulterior motive, although what that would be I don’t know. But only a shaman would be able to see them...” he added softly, indicating the spirit animals, who were sitting together at the foot of the bed, with a surreptitious jerk of the head.

Blair knew he ought to be hurt by the sentinel’s confusion and scepticism, but in all honesty he couldn’t blame the guy. The gods only knew he had had a hard enough time himself to get used to the situation and he’d had more than six months in which to do it. And he’d had the benefit of spiritual ‘back-up’ to help him. Jim had had to manage on his own during that time, and it couldn’t have been easy. Offering Jim a warm smile, he did his best to set the big cop’s mind at ease.

“It’s OK, Jim,” he murmured softly, treating Jim to his best trusting gaze. “I don’t blame you for distrusting me. Like you said, you have no idea who or what I am, and I’m sure the suspicious cop in you will have set off all your alarms, am I right? But I am what I say I am, Sentinel. I am your Shaman Guide – the one Incacha predicted for you. Just give me a chance to prove it. I’ll tell you everything I know, explain everything I can do to help you, but I’d rather do it out of here. Do you think we can leave?” and Jim frowned in sympathy as the young man’s voice suddenly lost its certainty and tailed off somewhat plaintively as his courage deserted him.

William studied the couple before him for a few minutes longer, his shrewd eyes missing nothing. Finally making an executive decision he spoke up, addressing all present, although his gaze never left his son and his new companion.

“Well, I think we can all see that there’s more to this than meets the eye, and I, for one, would like to hear everything Mr...er...”

“Sandburg. Blair Sandburg, sir,” Blair supplied politely.

“Right. Everything Mr Sandburg has to say. But I think I’d be correct in assuming that these aren’t the most comfortable conditions for such revelations, am I right?” and he cocked his head enquiringly as he met Blair’s suddenly shy gaze.

“Um, yes, sir. I...I mean, no, they aren’t,” and Blair looked hopefully up to meet William’s level gaze. Nodding briskly, William turned to face the two doctors, both of whose expressions reflected varying degrees of denial and discomfiture.

“This is how I see it, doctors. It’s obvious that we all need to get up to speed and learn everything we can in order to make balanced decisions as regards my son and Mr Sandburg’s future treatment, but first I’m sure Jimmy would benefit from a decent meal and a proper rest, seeing as he’s only just woken up from several hours in a virtual coma. I dare say a shower wouldn’t come amiss either. So I suggest that we adjourn to somewhere more comfortable for a while, and leave these two to get acquainted.”

Dr Rosenthal jumped in immediately. “I really don’t think that would be a good idea, Mr Ellison, and I’m sure Dr Talbot would agree with me. We have no idea what reactions these men might trigger between them. We’ve already witnessed Jim’s excessive physicality where Mr Sandburg is concerned, and I have no wish to see either of them hurt.”

“I agree, Mr Ellison,” added Dr Talbot, even more anxious now to remove Sandburg from Jim Ellison’s immediate vicinity. “However beneficial their meeting, it’s served its purpose. Mr Ellison is awake again, so I intend to remove my patient and take him back to his room. If you’ll excuse me?” and he made as if to approach the bed, determined to take Blair and get the hell out of Dodge.

However, Jim had very different views, as did Blair himself. As Blair instinctively shifted to press himself up more closely against Jim’s side, Jim snarled, “Touch my Guide and I’ll rip your arms off!” which probably wasn’t the best tone to adopt under the circumstances.

However, Blair responded immediately in an attempt to defuse the tension, holding up a warding hand towards Talbot as he murmured to Jim, “It’s OK, Jim. I’m not leaving. Cool it, man, or we’ll never get out of here.” His pleading tone had the desired effect insofar as Jim subsided slightly, so he turned to face his doctor instead.

“Please, Dr Talbot, let me stay. I promise Jim won’t hurt me. He can’t. It’s hotwired into him to protect the guide. If you’ll just give him a while to get comfortable like Mr Ellison suggested, we can all sit down and talk properly.

“And I’m praying that when you’ve heard everything I have to tell you, you’ll believe me when I say that I – that neither of us – are delusional, sir. Even if it will test the limits of your patience and understanding,” he added softly.

He could tell that Talbot wasn’t any more convinced than was Rosenthal, but was greatly relieved when William apparently picked up on a hint of indecision in both physicians’ expressions, and pressed home his advantage by ushering them politely but determinedly towards the door. Not giving either man a chance to demur, he closed the door behind them, leaving Riley hovering indecisively in the corridor as they retreated to the nearby visitors’ lounge.

Turning to meet Jim's still wary gaze, Blair grinned nervously as he muttered, "Alone at last, eh, Big Guy!" then retreated into blushing shyness at the penetrating inspection and accompanying wry smirk that the comment earned him.

Deliberately holding the expression until Blair was almost squirming with embarrassment beside him, Jim suddenly grinned boyishly, his whole face lighting up as he chuckled warmly.

"I think you have a lot of 'splainin to do, kiddo, but it can wait until I've at least visited the bathroom. Make yourself at home, Squirt," and the chuckle became outright honest laughter at the unutterably cute pout and irritated scowl the comment elicited in his new young friend.

As Jim made use of the bathroom, taking the opportunity to shower and refresh himself, Blair sat on the bed, looking around him and really checking out the room. Although Spartan and uncluttered, he noticed once again that the fixtures and fittings were good quality and the en suite bathroom gave it the appearance of an upmarket hotel room. Ruefully comparing it to the basic cell with shared bathroom facilities he had been occupying, he couldn't quite restrain a wry chuckle at the somewhat facetious thought that this was how the other half suffered.

Realising he was a bit punchy and jittery, which was hardly surprising under the circumstances, he was distracted by his wolf butting its head against his hand, and he looked down with a slight smile.

"Hey, boy. You OK?" he murmured, and was rewarded by a searching look. Suddenly realising that it had become second nature for him to chat to spirit animals, he snickered self-consciously, only for the sound to die on his lips as the jag pushed against his other hand. The cat stared longingly towards the closed bathroom door before turning to meet Blair's concerned gaze, then both animals faded from sight, leaving Blair feeling bereft. He was suddenly sure that he wouldn't be seeing them again, at least on a regular basis, and he knew he was going to miss them. But as he thought about it more, he supposed that it made sense. They had guided and supported him since his return from Peru, but now he had actually found his sentinel, it was up to him to persuade Jim to accept him as his guide. And that was a pretty daunting concept.

His train of thought was interrupted by the arrival of an orderly with a tray of coffee and tasty looking sandwiches, and he smiled in appreciation as he took the tray over to an occasional table, suddenly realising that he was hungry having missed his evening meal. He refrained from helping himself though, intending to wait until Jim had finished. Even as the thought crossed his mind, the man emerged in a cloud of steam, wearing nothing but a towel around his hips as he crossed the room, completely unselfconscious as he grinned at Blair.

"I see they've brought us some food. Help yourself, kiddo. I'll join you in a minute," and he wandered over to the closet to retrieve a suit of soft sweats which he donned unhurriedly, aware that his companion was surreptitiously checking him out. And apparently liked what he saw; only Jim knew he'd be keeping that information to himself for the time being. No reason to broadcast just how far his capabilities could take him until he was sure of this little guy's real intentions towards him.

Suddenly, he turned back to face Blair, a frown on his face.

“They’ve gone, haven’t they? The animals, I mean. Why do you think that is, Chief?”

Blair looked up at him, a thoughtful expression on his face as he replied, his words careful and a little diffident as he offered his opinion.

“Um, well it occurred to me that it’s probably because they aren’t needed any more. At least, not until something happens when we could do with their help. I mean, they were pretty much with me all the time up until now, but, um, now we’ve found each other, well, I guess it’s up to us to take it from here? That is, if you believe me...” and his voice tailed off as his expression sobered; his nervousness plain to see even without sentinel sight.

Jim regarded him thoughtfully for a moment before coming to a decision. It might be wise to be wary of Sandburg until he knew him a little better, but the fact remained that he really did have a positive effect on Jim’s senses, and he deserved a bit of encouragement. And it wasn’t as if Jim wasn’t drawn to him after all. He was a lovely looking young man – and where did that idea come from? It had been a while since he had had such an instant attraction to another man. Putting that distracting thought aside for the time being, Jim spoke frankly as he gauged Sandburg’s reactions to his words.

“Oh, I think that’s a given, Chief. I’ve been thinking about it, and I’m sure you’re telling what you believe is the truth, even if I may not like what it implies. As soon as I saw you and touched you I knew there was something special about you, and no one else has ever pulled me out of a fugue so easily, especially one that deep. And now I remember so much. Maybe not everything yet, but it’s coming back to me bit by bit. The time in Peru, Incacha, the senses, all that weird shit. I can’t believe I could have repressed all that, but at least now I know I’m not insane after all.

“Thing is, until now I’d never have believed I’d want or need a guide, but apparently I have one. So where do we go from here?”

While he was speaking, Blair’s mobile features had reflected the myriad emotions he was feeling, from open admiration and hope, joy and anxiety, along with a distinct tang of disappointment by the time Jim finished speaking.

“Um, well, as far as the repression goes, I think it was purely an instinctive method of self-preservation. It would be impossible to cope in a city environment without backup. Without a guide to help ground you. But once that guide had been located, the senses came back online so to speak. And I’m sorrier that I can say that you’ve had to suffer so much alone while you waited for me to get Incacha’s permission to approach you.

“I really am so sorry, Jim. I know it must be hard for you to accept. I mean, you could hardly have expected someone like me to come forward claiming to be your guide after all this time. I didn’t believe it myself until Incacha showed me what I had to do. But I can see how it must look to you. After all, you’re a respected cop even without the senses, so you probably can’t understand why they should come back now.

“But I truly believe that your destiny is as Incacha said. You are the Sentinel of the Great City, and you need your senses for that. And a Guide to help you use them to the full.

“And apparently that Guide is me,” and he hunched in on himself, hugging himself protectively and unhappily certain that Jim was going to deny him. And if he did, Blair hadn’t got a clue as to what the consequences would be.

The silence stretched uncomfortably as he waited for Jim’s response, hardly daring to breathe as he waited for the axe to fall. Eventually it grew too much to bear, so he risked peeking up to see how Jim was reacting, expecting to see scorn and ridicule in the handsome face, if not outright condemnation. However, instead of those emotions, Jim’s expression was one of sober contemplation. Not happy, to be sure, but neither was there any active disgust or dislike directed at Blair, so Blair dared to allow himself a modicum of hope.

“Don’t look so scared, Chief. I’m not blaming you, even if I’m not exactly convinced that this whole situation is something I’m going to embrace with open arms.

“Look, why don’t we keep the heavy stuff until we’ve had something to eat. I think you’re running on empty, Chief, and I could eat. And I think this time I’m actually going to enjoy it, so tuck in,” and he reached for a thick beef sandwich, taking a small, trial bite.

And his face lit up with pure delight as he savoured the tasty morsel, relieved and overjoyed not to be ambushed by over-sensitive taste buds for once. Perhaps this guide business might turn out to be useful after all.

Sending Jim a shy smile, Blair reached over and helped himself to a tuna sandwich, suddenly realising how hungry he was. As if to emphasise the feeling, his tummy chose that moment to growl loudly, and both men chuckled at the immediate release of tension between them. Finally relaxing, they set to with a will, and finished the rest of the meal in short order, discovering a mutual feeling of companionship as they exchanged pleasantries; the upcoming discussion set aside by tacit agreement for the time being while both men enjoyed a brief respite from their concerns.

A short while later, the meal finished and the tray set aside for collection, the two men sat opposite each other, a last cup of coffee clutched in their hands. Blair swallowed hard, knowing the respite was over, and it was time to decide on their best course of action.

He sighed deeply, grimly aware that the onus was on him in the first instance to make a persuasive argument for their release rather than get them put in adjoining padded rooms. As he planned the content of his upcoming lecture, he quaked at the thought that this was probably the most important one of his young life thus far. And if he blew it, it could be one of the last.

Not only was he terrified that he would fail to convince the doctors that he wasn’t some mad scientist playing out some sort of elaborate ruse, but he was also afraid that Jim might take exception to some of the information Blair would have to produce, and would take his anger out of Blair’s hide. The Sentinel might be underweight, but his musculature was still awesome, and Blair had no doubt that the man could break him like a stick.

Lost in his dark thoughts, he jumped in surprise when large warm hands cupped his, and he looked up into Jim’s slightly sardonic but quizzical gaze.

“Hey, Chief, take it easy. You’re beginning to hyperventilate, kiddo, and your hands are shaking enough to spill the rest of your coffee. Calm down and tell me what’s gotten you so worked up.”

Pinking in embarrassment, Blair ducked his head, taking a few deep, relaxing breaths before raising apologetic eyes to Jim’s face.

“Sorry, Jim. I guess everything’s suddenly getting to me. I mean, soon I’ll have to talk to the docs and your father, and I need to make a good job of convincing them that I – that we – aren’t actually nutso after all. And to do that, I’m going to have to tell them things you’d probably prefer to keep secret.

“The upside is that I do have faith in patient / doctor confidentiality, so I’m praying that Drs Talbot and Rosenthal are men of integrity who won’t do anything unethical with the information. I’m thinking too that your father would keep it to himself also, for your sake if not for mine.

“But what I’m really scared of is how you’re going to react. What you’ll think of me when you’ve heard everything. Because I wouldn’t blame you if you hated me for an interfering and gullible fool.

“I just hope you can bear with me long enough to persuade the shrinks that we’re good to go...” He knew his face and voice – and no doubt his physiological reactions – betrayed his anxiety, but he also hoped that his genuine sincerity was obvious too.

Jim released his hands and sat back, allowing him to place his mug down on the table. The ice blue eyes regarded him steadily, and Blair fought against the urge to turn away even as he shifted uncomfortably in his seat. Finally Jim spoke up, and Blair unconsciously tensed up in fearful anticipation, hands clenched tightly together in his lap.

“First off, I’m not going to hit you, Chief, so you can lose that deer-in-the-headlights look. I can’t pretend I’m happy with the situation, and I don’t claim to be the most patient listener, but I can promise you that I’ll try to keep my scepticism and my temper under control during the discussion.

“And once we’re out of here, we can begin to work things out between us. Find out what this bond is really all about. So give it your best shot, Teach, and get us out of here!”

Letting out his breath in a huff of pure relief, Blair returned Jim’s grin, even though his was rather strained. “Thanks, man. That means a lot to me. Thanks for giving me a chance and not denying me outright.

“Thing is, some of the stuff I’ll be spouting won’t be easy to accept, I know, and I’m going to down-play the spiritual aspect as much as possible. But I won’t be able to avoid it entirely, because after all, it’s the reason why I’m here, for better or for worse,” and he rolled his eyes and snickered in self-deprecation, eyes bashful when they met Jim’s wry gaze.

“Having said that, they don’t need to know everything, so I’ll give them the abridged version unless they push for detail, OK?”

“Suits me, Sandburg, because I don’t want or need to know that much either. Never could get my head around that side of things, so you might as well know now that you’ll have your work cut out to change my attitude.

“But enough for now,” he continued, holding up his hand when Blair looked as if he wanted to argue the point. “I can hear them coming, and by the sound of it they’re ready for your lecture, kiddo.

“You sure you’re up to it, or do you want more time to prepare?”

Blair straightened his shoulders; his resolve strengthened and buoyed up by Jim’s concern and support.

“Yeah, Jim. As good as I’ll ever be, so let’s get this show on the road.” And they turned as one to face the door.

Shortly after, in the doctor’s lounge:

Jim and Blair sat side by side, facing Drs Rosenthal and Talbot and William Ellison. The doctors’ lounge provided a more informal and comfortable venue, for which Blair in particular was grateful, even though he was still wound up tightly like the proverbial spring. The five men had drawn up their easy chairs around a coffee table whereon sat a tray set out with cups, saucers and a pot of fresh coffee, along with sweeteners and creamers, giving the whole setting the appearance of a casual social get-together. However, despite the thoughtful touches, it was still only Jim’s hand resting casually but supportively on his forearm that was keeping Blair anchored, and he was more than ready when Dr Rosenthal invited him to begin his explanation.

And as so often was the case, once he got started, he quickly settled into lecture mode, his initial nervousness gradually subsiding as his indubitable intellect and fluent, articulate speech came to the fore.

He knew he had to establish his academic credibility if he was to have any chance of gaining his audience’s respect, so he began by giving them a short autobiography, very light on the personal details but more comprehensive regarding his academic qualifications, particularly in respect of his interest in sentinel studies. He told them where they could access his Master’s thesis about tribal sentinels online, and also mentioned Burton’s manuscript should they wish to follow up on his chosen subject. And then came the difficult part as far as Jim was concerned.

Warming to his theme, Blair outlined the nature and role of the sentinel in indigenous tribes, quoting existing studies, particularly Burton’s monograph, and his own detailed research. He described the enormous benefits, and also the potential problems should the sentinel fail to find a suitable guide, particularly in the case of zones, of which they had now had first-hand experience. He knew Jim wasn’t happy with being the centre of attention, but was immensely grateful when Jim cooperated in providing a few simple examples of his capabilities, even though he was somewhat out of practice and Blair could tell that he resented being displayed like some circus act. Nevertheless, grounded by Blair, it was obvious that all three of his observers were impressed with the results, and that the doctors

in particular had definitely been given plenty of food for thought. However, unfortunately it wasn't anything like enough, as Blair had feared and suspected.

It was William Ellison who started the ball rolling, fixing Blair with a shrewd and direct gaze.

"So, Mr Sandburg. I admit to being quite impressed at the depth of your knowledge, and more so with you personally. If you'll forgive my bluntness, I expected someone much less articulate or demonstrably well-educated. More 'flaky', if you will, even though it is obvious that you have a beneficial effect on Jimmy. The fact is that I've always known Jimmy had problems, even as a child, but I had no idea what caused them, and even less how to help him until they seemed to disappear of their own accord. But it's a relief to know that there is a perfectly reasonable and natural explanation after all, and for that, I am in your debt.

"However, gratitude aside, I have to know just how you and Jimmy managed to meet up? I'm too cynical to believe it was purely by chance, and frankly you aren't the type of person I would expect him normally to associate with. So just how did you track him down? And, more to the point, how did you know that he needed you in particular?"

And Blair had no option but to try and explain, which naturally brought up the question of the spiritual aspect of the sentinel and guide relationship. It was the part he had been dreading, but he met William's gaze unflinchingly nevertheless. Keeping the details to the bare minimum, he described the expedition to Peru, and his being rescued by the Chopec after getting separated from his group. He described his interactions with Incacha, being sure to couch everything in scientific terminology and anthropological observation where possible in an attempt to dispel the image of some arcane 'witchdoctor voodoo'. However, there was no escaping the mention of drug-induced spirit walks, spirit animals and Incacha's prophesy; the accuracy of which could be in no doubt if Blair was to be believed. Glossing over the spirit animals' presence, Blair described how, armed with Incacha's information, he had done a little research and quickly identified Jim on his return to Cascade. Winding down, he sat back, trembling now from a surfeit of anxious tension and well aware that Jim was far from calm and collected, having sent him a brief but apologetic and searching glance.

It was Dr Rosenthal who continued with the Q and A session, his expression thoughtful as he offered his opinions.

"Well, I have to admit that you present a compelling argument, Mr Sandburg. I am almost persuaded that you may be correct in your diagnosis of Jim's condition, and if so, then I'm sure all of us here would be very relieved. A natural genetic variation responsible for heightened senses is infinitely preferable to schizophrenia, and I fully intend to follow up on your suggested research.

"However, I'm equally persuaded that the explanation for your own condition is far more complex, and may also reflect on Jim. I refer, of course, to your invisible animal friends, and I profess myself to be most uncomfortable with the whole question of shamanism. If it wasn't for the fact that we all saw Jim's apparent reaction to them earlier on, I would continue to agree with my colleague's assessment that you are indeed suffering from serious delusions. But on the off chance that you aren't 'mistaken', are they in the room with us now?"

Bridling a little at Rosenthal's somewhat superior tone and blatantly cynical attitude, Blair forced himself to curb his natural instinct to respond indignantly, knowing that such a reaction would reflect badly on him, and he couldn't afford to antagonise the man.

"No, doctor," he said quietly but firmly, exchanging a mutually supportive glance with Jim. "They disappeared when Jim and I were left alone together. It would appear that we no longer need their guidance now our connection has been made. I'm sorry, but I have no other explanation to offer, so make of it what you will."

At that point, Jim had had quite enough of watching his guide being put through the wringer, and decided to take a more active part in the discussion. Ignoring the others, he reached up to cup Blair's cheek and turned the young man to face him, expression gentle but resolute as he murmured for Blair's ears only, "My turn, kiddo. Take a break, Chief, and try to relax a little, OK?" Even as Blair offered a wan smile of relief and appreciation, he turned back to meet the eyes of each of their audience in turn.

"We've all heard some pretty amazing stuff today. Things that I would never have expected or believed until this morning. But for me, the single most important thing is that this condition I have, this sensory awareness, gift or curse, call it what you will, is real. It's not in my head. The demonstrations Blair just walked me through is proof positive that the senses exist, and more importantly, can be controlled if I know what to do. And I have the right support," and here he sent a quick grin to an open-mouthed Blair.

"I'm sure there are scientific tests that can be set up to check just how enhanced my senses are, should I ever need to confirm them, but for now I at least am certain that this is not where I need to be.

"Having said that, I fully realise that you need proof that Blair didn't create this whole scenario himself, and I've never believed in coincidence. But this isn't the product of an over-active imagination, because although I hate to admit it, ever since I saw him I've started to remember things. Things I had repressed and buried so deeply that they're only now coming to the surface. Things about my mission to Peru, and what I discovered there.

"I can't and won't tell you anything about the nature of the mission. Suffice it to say it was special ops, and leave it at that. But I remember meeting Incacha. The same shaman who told Blair about me. And yes, he did help me when my senses suddenly reappeared. He explained what I was and he helped me get through the days. And he helped me use my gifts to carry out my mission and help his people also.

"And he tried to show me that there was another side to my gift. A spiritual side that I couldn't – or wouldn't – take seriously. I also recall that he told me I'd find my true guide in Cascade. He called it the Great City, and he said that I was its sentinel. And I completely forgot. I repressed my senses and my memories for years once I got back. Didn't even remember when my senses returned suddenly a few months ago. At around the same time Blair was in Peru. Some coincidence, huh?" and he grinned wryly as he held their rapt gazes.

"Anyhow, can we say that I'm remembering more and more, that my eyes have been opened, however reluctantly, and I believe now that Blair is a guide. Is my true guide, and probably the only person who can help me unless I can turn them off again."

Blair had been listening in amazement, his heart full of hope and something akin to genuine hero worship as Jim spoke, but now his insecurities reared their ugly heads again. Voice deepened by emotion, and his eyes telegraphing both regret and concern, he murmured for Jim alone. "I don't think you *can* turn them off now, Jim. I think that's what the jaguar was trying to tell you. Unless you refuse the bond, and then I don't know what will happen to either of us.

"I'm sorry, Jim. I never intended for any of this to happen, even though it was my greatest wish. But I don't regret it, man. Not for myself, anyway."

Jim frowned in consternation, deeply disturbed by Blair's words, but managed to control his instinctive urge to deny them outright. This was neither the time nor the place, so he simply said aloud, "We'll talk about this later, Chief. But first and foremost, I'm exhausted, and I know Blair is also. So, if you'll excuse us, gentlemen, we'd like to return to our room now," but he got no further when Dr Talbot spoke up, voice and expression both indignant and incredulous.

"Oh no, Mr Ellison. Whether or not all this is true, I have to take my patient back to his room in the public ward. He can't stay here even if you want him to. As his doctor, I can't sanction it. It's completely against hospital policy, and unethical also. No, I cannot permit it. Dr Rosenthal?" and he appealed to his opposite number for confirmation.

William interrupted first, however. "If it's just a case of money, gentlemen, I'm prepared to finance Mr Sandburg in the private wing if it's what Jimmy wants and needs."

Rosenthal responded quickly, but with an air of finality. "No, that's not it, although I thank you for your offer, Mr Ellison. But Dr Talbot is correct. We all saw how Jim reacted when Mr Sandburg first arrived, and it would be criminally negligent on our part to risk a further assault. We'll continue with our deliberations tomorrow, but for tonight Mr Sandburg and Jim must return to their own rooms."

"Don't I get any say it this?" Jim almost growled, his face betraying his rising anger. "Didn't you hear a thing I said? I *need* Blair to ground me. He's the only one who can help me control my senses right now. He has to stay with me!" and he clenched his fists in overt aggression as he fought the urge to grab his guide and run.

"You just proved my point, Jim," Rosenthal spoke quietly but resolutely. "I'm asking you to back down and return to your room voluntarily, or I shall have to summon help. What is it to be?"

It looked as if Jim was about to argue, when Blair stepped forward and placed a gentle hand on Jim's bicep. "It's OK, Jim. I'll go. Please cool it, man. You don't want to give them any more ammunition, OK? I don't want to leave you, but I promise I'll be back tomorrow. Please, Jim?" and Jim couldn't resist the earnest entreaty. Releasing his breath in a gusty sigh, he gradually relaxed his aggressive stance and replied, albeit with ill-grace.

"OK, Chief. You win – or rather, they do – for now. But just for tonight, OK? I want you with me, Chief, as soon as it can be arranged."

“That’s what I want too, Sentinel. With all my heart. See you tomorrow, OK?” and Blair allowed himself to be led away even though it broke his heart to leave Jim, who stood there unmoving, pained eyes following his guide’s exit.

As Blair was taken back to his room in the public ward, escorted by Talbot and the inimitable Riley, who had been summoned in case of any recalcitrance on his charge’s part, he looked up anxiously into his doctor’s pensive face, desperate for any sign of reassurance.

“Um, so Dr Talbot. Do you believe me? I mean, that I’m not actually delusional after all? I mean, even I didn’t expect Jim to recall all that he did, and so quickly. And I’m really hoping that it means we have a real connection just like Incacha said. And like Burton hinted at.

“So, can I get out of here?” and he raised pleading eyes to meet Talbot’s perplexed and frowning regard.

Pausing in his stride to turn and really look at Blair, Talbot finally spoke, his tone considering, but not encouraging.

“I’m sorry Blair, but I can’t answer you right now. At least not to tell you what you obviously want to hear. I need to think about everything you’ve told me, and if I can I’ll try to do some additional research as well as compare notes with Dr Rosenthal. I want to do what’s best for you, but you must understand that I have a great many other patients who also need my attention, so I’m asking you to be patient. I refuse to hurry into a decision which could have an adverse effect on both you and Mr Ellison. Do you understand?”

And sighing in resignation, Blair had no option but to accept his judgement, for the time being, at least.

Back in the private wing, Jim returned to his room quietly and compliantly, to Rosenthal’s and William’s relief, but he was effectively on autopilot. What they had no reason to suspect was that he had his senses completely focussed on his guide, and he was tracking the young man’s progress as Blair was returned to his room in the public ward. He barely acknowledged his father’s words as the older man wished him goodnight and promised to see him the following morning, and his nod in response to Rosenthal’s quietly-voiced but similar sentiments was distracted to say the least. Exchanging worried glances, the two men turned to leave, but once outside the room, Rosenthal assured William that he would keep a careful watch on Jim during the night. Somewhat reassured, William left for home and Rosenthal returned to his office resigned to a long night.

Left alone in his room, Jim stretched further and further with his senses, desperate to keep in contact with the guide on whom his sanity depended.

And zoned hard.

Some hours later, Dr Rosenthal sat back in his chair and rubbed his eyes tiredly. He had intended to take a nap on the comfortable bed in the small room adjoining his office, as was

his habit when he was pulling all-night shifts at the hospital. However, he had pulled up Sandburg's thesis on his computer and had gotten so engrossed in it that he had failed to notice the passage of time.

The man certainly had a way with words, and the style was both erudite but easy to read. And the subject matter was intriguing, even to a pragmatic individual such as Rosenthal. He could understand how Sandburg could get engrossed in the concept, but he still failed to see how such individuals could fit into modern society. Surely advanced technological know-how had replaced the need for persons with enhanced senses, so in Rosenthal's opinion, it was hardly surprising that Sandburg had failed to find one. Until now, that was, if the whole bizarre situation was indeed as it seemed.

Yawning, he saved and closed the document, looking forward to an hour or two's undisturbed slumber when the phone on his desk rang shrilly, jerking him back to full alertness. Picking the instrument up, he was immediately struck by a sense of foreboding, and even before the urgent voice on the other end of the line spoke up, he knew without doubt that the emergency involved Jim Ellison, and he wasn't wrong.

Mere minutes later he was sprinting down the corridor to Ellison's room, bursting through the door to behold what he had both expected and feared. Seated in the same position as Rosenthal had last seen him hours earlier, Jim was once again in a deep fugue state, and Rosenthal was furious. Spinning around to face the worried-looking attendant who had called him, he addressed the man in frigid tones.

"Why the hell wasn't I alerted to Ellison's condition before this? I gave strict instructions that the man was to be checked on the hour every hour just because I feared this might happen! Where were you?"

Backing away from the normally placid doctor's unexpected anger and accusative glare, the man made a weak attempt to excuse himself. "I did check on him, doctor! Just like you said. But as he didn't seem upset, I let him be. And Cooper down on Ward C asked me to help him with something..."

"Help him with a hand of poker, I've no doubt!" snarled Rosenthal sarcastically. "So when did you decide to check on him again? Just now?" And the man's sheepish look was all the confirmation he needed.

Reining in his anger, Rosenthal dismissed the man from his thoughts, concentrating instead on the problem in hand, knowing that there was only one thing he could do. Striding quickly to the internal phone in the corridor, he dialed Dr Talbot's personal number. He needed Blair Sandburg to be brought up here pronto.

Down in the public wing, Blair was pacing up and down in his tiny room, his amorphous anxiety too great to allow him to settle. He was certain that there was something very wrong with Jim, but so far he had had no success in getting his fears taken seriously by the night staff. Indeed, the last time he had called out to repeat his request, the night attendant had told him in no uncertain terms that he either calm down and shut up or he would be sedated. Realising he would be of no use to Jim unconscious, he had stopped trying to get their attention, instead wearing a groove in the floor with his continual pacing.

Suddenly, just when he thought his nerves could take no more, the door opened to reveal a tousled Dr Talbot, who didn't seem surprised to see Blair awake.

"It's Jim, isn't it? Tell me what happened!" The young man's urgent demand pre-empted Talbot's intended explanation, so the doctor simply stood aside to let Blair out of the room as he turned to accompany his charge once more to the private wing, speaking as they went.

"I'm sorry to say that it appears that Mr Ellison is in another of those zones you described, Blair. For some reason it has only just been discovered, and Dr Rosenthal asked me to bring you to him immediately. He hopes that you'll be able to do whatever it is you do to wake Mr Ellison before any lasting damage is done. It would seem," he continued somewhat diffidently, "That you were correct in your assertion that you and Mr Ellison should share quarters. Do you have any theory as to why this should have happened?"

Despite his anxiety and urgent need to reach Jim as soon as possible, Blair managed to offer Talbot an answer, hoping that it might help persuade Talbot, and therefore Dr Rosenthal, that he and Jim needed to stay in close proximity, for the time being at least.

"Oh, um, well, I do, I guess, but I have no empirical evidence on which to base it, you understand? The way I see it, since the primary connection has been made between sentinel and guide, the sentinel – Jim – needs to keep me close until the full bond has been achieved. And no, I can't really say how that is accomplished, although I have a fair idea. Anyhow, I believe the relationship will stabilise once the bond is confirmed but until then, Jim will remain fixated on me in order to ground his senses. And you'll excuse me if I say that the psychiatric unit is hardly conducive to that happening. Does that make sense to you?"

To be honest, he was too preoccupied to be concerned whether Talbot agreed or not, his first priority being to reach and help his sentinel, but if he had cared to take note, he would have seen a look of reluctant admiration cross Talbot's troubled features.

On reaching Jim's room, Blair darted forward, his eyes focussed on Jim. Rosenthal and the attendant had managed to manoeuvre the zoned man into a more comfortable position so he was now lying on the bed, but the unblinking stare was unnerving, as was the shallow rise and fall of the sculpted chest. Falling to his knees beside the bed, Blair leaned over and cupped Jim's face between his palms, tilting it towards him so he could work. Stroking the lightly stubbled cheeks with his thumbs, he began to speak, voice soft and soothing for Jim's ears only, and completely excluding the doctors who watched anxiously from the doorway.

"Come on back now, Jim. Come back to me, Sentinel. I'm so sorry I had to leave you, but I'm here now. Hear my voice, Jim. Feel my touch. I'm sure you can smell me too, big guy. I'm well past due for a shower, man. Come back to me, or I'll have to resort to more drastic measures, and I so don't want to do that with an audience. Hear me, Jim...." And he was rewarded with a slight flicker of Jim's eyelids which rapidly progressed to blinking as Jim tried to lubricate his dry eyes. Seconds later, Jim took a deep breath, the air sighing out of his lungs as he focussed on the worried face so close to his own. Smiling softly, he murmured, "Hey, there you are!" and he raised a shaky hand to Blair's face, intrigued by the wetness he felt there as Blair's tears of relief began to fall.

“S’OK, Chief. I’m here. Sorry to scare you like that. C’mere...” and he wrapped his other arm around the shaking shoulders and pulled Blair up onto the bed with him, the smaller man almost on top of him.

Trembling with released tension, Blair buried his face into the crook of Jim’s neck and shoulder, trying desperately to control the urge to sob out loud. He threw one leg across Jim’s thighs, and an arm around the broad chest, clinging like a limpet now as his body shuddered with the scale of his emotional reaction. As Jim now took over the role of comforter, he allowed himself to relax at last, and before he knew it, he was deeply asleep, succumbing to his mental and physical exhaustion between one breath and the next.

Sending the doctors a telling glance over Blair’s curly head, Jim nodded briefly in appreciation when they backed out of the room, leaving the pair in peace at last. Smiling softly in satisfaction, Jim breathed in the scent of his guide and followed him into slumber.

Later that morning:

It was around 9.00 am when a tousled Blair finally roused from a deep and dreamless sleep, raising his head to peer owlshly up into Jim’s grinning face. “Oh man! I’m sorry, Jim. Did I sleep on top of you all night? Sheesh! You must be so stiff...” and he made to roll off the bed, only to be caught fast by strong arms.

“Not so fast, Chief. I’m quite comfortable, thanks all the same, so there’s no need to worry. Just relax for a bit longer, OK?”

Blair grinned happily, and yawned widely before saying, “What time is it, Jim? I feel as if I’ve been asleep for hours, but haven’t a clue how long.”

“Well, as far as I can make out, it’s after 9.00 am, but seeing as it had to be at least 2.00 am before I was discovered, you still haven’t had that long to catch up. Because I’m guessing you didn’t have to be woken up when they came to fetch you, huh?”

Blushing a little in mild embarrassment, Blair looked away briefly before answering rather sheepishly, “Yeah, you’re right, Jim. Somehow I just knew that something was wrong, but I couldn’t get the night attendant in my ward to listen to me. So I just had to prowl up and down, praying that they’d have the sense to come get me. When Dr Talbot finally brought me up here, I couldn’t believe how long they’d left you zoned, man. It’s unforgivable! But what did you zone on, man?”

Grinning appreciatively at Blair’s indignation on his behalf, Jim hugged him before replying. “It’s OK, Chief, but thanks for caring. Actually, I was trying to track you, babe, and stretched everything too far. No harm done, but I’d have preferred not to be stuck in la-la land for so long again. Anyhow, from what I can gather, it wasn’t all Rosenthal’s fault. Apparently someone was supposed to be checking me every hour, but it never happened. I heard someone getting chewed out earlier on, so I’m guessing that at least one of the night staff will soon be looking for alternative employment.

“Anyhow, looking on the bright side, at least it got you here, and all being well it’s yet more proof that separating us is a bad idea. And that your theories carry weight. Let’s just hope it’s enough to get us both out of here sooner rather than later.”

“Amen to that, Jim! Look, I hate to have to move, but I really need the bathroom. Is there any chance I could use your shower too? I must reek, man.”

“Sure you can, Chief. Help yourself. I’ll call up for some clean scrubs for you while you’re in there, and some breakfast also. Coffee and Danish do you?”

And Blair treated him to a beaming smile as he slid carefully from his ‘Jim pillow’. “Perfect, Jim. Just perfect!”

Some time later, Jim and Blair were finishing a leisurely breakfast, both men relaxed and enjoying a brief respite from their individual concerns as they explored a growing feeling of mutual companionship and camaraderie. Showered and shaved, Blair was now wearing fresh scrubs and had tied his unruly locks back in a neat ponytail at his nape. Eyes shining and expressive hands waving as he regaled Jim with tall tales from his peripatetic past, he made a lovely picture, and Jim was hard put to refrain from reaching out and pulling the small but perfect body to him; the urge to imprint fully growing stronger by the hour. However, by mutual consent they had agreed to hold off from anything too physical, not wanting to provide Conover’s staff with the spectacle of a full bonding ritual, which would almost certainly involve sex. And what was instinctive for sentinel and guide might not necessarily suit Jim and Blair as partners and potential lovers. Despite strong hints that Blair wasn’t indifferent to him, for all Jim knew, at this early stage in their relationship, Blair might be completely innocent on the subject of male/male sex. Jim therefore curbed his natural impulses, but only with considerable fortitude, forcing himself to relax and concentrate on his guide’s voice instead.

Blair was also enjoying the view, admiring the graceful movements of Jim’s tall figure, and thinking to himself how apt was Jim’s spirit animal. Jim did indeed resemble the sleek black jaguar, even dressed as he was at present in a suit of comfortable sweats which failed to disguise the beautifully sculpted body within. The man’s face was already losing its pinched look, and Blair knew that, now Jim was once again able to enjoy his food, he would soon put on the weight he needed to look completely healthy once more.

And could he say turned on? Just the thought of those strong but elegant hands on him triggered a flash of heated lust, quickly suppressed as he concentrated on keeping his anecdotes deliberately light and unprovocative.

Just then he paused mid-sentence as he saw Jim turn to face the door, his gaze sharpening as he cocked his head in an unconscious listening pose. Blair couldn’t help the small thrill that ran through him at the sight of his companion in ‘sentinel mode,’ and automatically reached out to rest his hand lightly on Jim’s knee, just in case he needed the grounding touch.

“What is it, Jim? What do you hear?” he murmured, sentinel-soft, and a few seconds later Jim turned back to face him, eyes warm and a slight grin stretching his lips.

“Dad’s here, Chief. He’s gone to have a word with Dr Rosenthal before coming to see us. Should I listen in, do you think?” and his eyes twinkled in mischief as he cocked an inquisitive brow at Blair.

“Um, maybe not, although I have to say the idea’s tempting. But I think perhaps we should wait until he gets here? You know your father best, after all.”

“Now there you’d be wrong, kiddo. We were estranged for years before I had to ask for his help. But perhaps we’ll get a chance to reconnect now, so maybe I’d better start by affording the guy some privacy.”

“Sounds good to me, man. If he was my Dad, I’d do the same.”

Detecting the tiniest hint of wistfulness in Blair’s tone, Jim studied the smaller man for a moment. “What’s your Dad like, Chief? I can’t see him being anything like mine.”

“Wouldn’t know, Jim. Naomi, my mom, always said she didn’t know who he was. She’s like this evergreen hippy, see, into free love and all. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. It doesn’t bother me.” But his dismissive shrug and carefree attitude didn’t fool Jim, who could easily discern the note of hurt beneath the throwaway words. Deciding not to make anything of it for now, not wanting to discomfit his guide further, Jim let the matter drop, simply giving Blair’s shoulder a comforting squeeze.

They sat in companionable silence side by side on the bed for a while until Jim nudged his guide gently. “He’s coming, Chief, and he’s bringing reinforcements. The good doctors are with him. Let’s hope they have some good news.”

“Oh, I’m down with that, man,” murmured Blair, and he couldn’t help but press a little closer against Jim’s side as the door opened.

Part 4: A Chance for Happiness:

As William entered the room, closely followed by Drs Talbot and Rosenthal, Jim and Blair rose to their feet only for William to wave them back to their seats with a nod and a brief smile of greeting. However, despite his amiable expression, his eyes remained as sharp and perceptive as ever, particularly when they rested on Blair, and his attitude was businesslike as he took a seat opposite the pair.

Wasting no time on banalities, he said, “I’m pleased to see you looking so well under the circumstances, Jimmy. And I think we all know the reason for your rapid recovery, eh?” and he sent Blair an approving glance as he continued, “I’ve been brought up to speed on last night’s fiasco, and it would seem that I – and Jimmy – are once again in your debt, Mr Sandburg. As far as I am concerned, you have proved once and for all that you have only Jimmy’s welfare at heart, and for that reason, if for nothing else, you deserve my gratitude and support.” Ignoring the faintly disgruntled huffing and shuffling from the doctors seated beside him, he sat back, his expression sober but self-confident as one would expect in a successful businessman. In fact, he looked for all the world as if he was chairing a board meeting, his decision-making capability without question.

Taken completely by surprise, Blair was hard put to maintain his composure as he stammered, “Um, thank you, Mr Ellison. But it was a purely instinctive reaction, sir. Something I had to do. As a guide. I...I mean, I would have done it for Jim anyway, but....Oh, gods, I’m not saying this well, am I?” and he blushed and ducked his head for a moment

before sending Jim an unintentionally cute sidelong glance of rueful apology. *Shit! That was really mature, Sandburg. And you're supposed to be a man of words. Hardly the way to convince Talbot that I'm of 'sound mind'! I sound like a mental midget, and now Jim's laughing at me,* and Blair groaned softly in mortification.

Unable to contain his chortle of pure glee, Jim wrapped an arm around Blair's shoulders and gave him a comforting squeeze. "It's OK, kiddo; you've just entered the Ellison zone. This reaction isn't unexpected, believe me! Hey Dad, I think you've managed to render Blair speechless!"

However, realising that Blair wasn't exactly enjoying the moment, he controlled his merriment with some little effort, and patted the young man's knee with his free hand. Getting down to business again, he addressed his father, allowing his guide a few moments to regain some measure of equilibrium.

"So, Dad, what did you have in mind? I get the feeling that you've been busy on our behalf? And we could certainly do with some good news..."

William contemplated his older son for a moment before answering. He had to admit that he was somewhat surprised at the easy familiarity with which Jimmy was interacting with the young Mr Sandburg, especially at such a brief acquaintance, but he couldn't say he was disappointed. For too long his son had been a loner, his emotions tightly reined in, and it was good to see a lighter, more playful side come to the fore. Yes, Mr Sandburg – Blair – was good for Jimmy. And William would do his damndest to at least give them a fair shot at developing a real friendship.

"OK, then. Down to business. Now, as regards getting the pair of you out of here, I have been doing a bit of investigation on your behalf this morning, and have discussed options with the doctors here. As far as you are concerned, Jimmy, there won't be much of a problem with your discharge. After all, you committed yourself voluntarily for treatment, and I think it's obvious to all that your problem is not a mental one. Correct, Dr Rosenthal?" and he turned to invite the doctor's corroboration.

Despite the drag of exhaustion from a difficult night, and no little indignation arising from William Ellison's somewhat overbearing attitude, Rosenthal was a fair man and honestly did have his patients' good at heart. Offering Jim a tired smile, he said, "I have to agree with your father, Jim. Despite my reservations, I was impressed with Mr Sandburg's argument, and your own reactions suggest to me that your problems are indeed tied up with hypersensitivity rather than psychosis. I have no problem in discharging you.

"On the other hand, Mr Sandburg is a somewhat different proposition, but as he isn't my patient, I'll have to hand over to Doctor Talbot for his opinion."

Talbot pursed his lips, his face reflecting his unhappiness at being summoned in such a cavalier fashion. Overworked and under-valued, as indeed were most of the staff in the public wing, yet he still retained much of the conscientiousness of his early years, when he was still young, impressionable and naively enthusiastic about his chosen profession. He knew he ought to be glad that one of his patients could soon be discharged, but he remained uneasy on Sandburg's account, and wasn't convinced he could agree with Ellison Senior's

demands or assumptions. As Sandburg's therapist, he needed to be reassured that this was the way to proceed.

Looking around him, his eyes settled on Sandburg, noting the hope and fear warring for dominance on the attractive face. Sitting pressed up against the bigger man, he looked very young and vulnerable in his anxiety, which added weight to Talbot's reservations.

"While I'm pleased to hear that Mr Ellison can be discharged, I'm afraid that in my opinion, Mr Sandburg's case isn't quite so straight-forward. He was, after all, admitted to this institution on the recommendation of a psychiatric evaluation carried out when he was first taken into custody – an evaluation with which I concurred. He did exhibit all the symptoms of a psychotic break, causing great distress to those who observed it; some of whom have since confirmed that it was but the latest in a series of uncharacteristic behaviours all of which seem to have manifested since Mr Sandburg's return from the Peruvian expedition. The consensus of opinion was that, although Mr Sandburg posed no threat to anyone else, being essentially non-violent in nature, he was a danger to himself during these 'episodes'.

"While I agree with Dr Rosenthal that Mr Sandburg's academic research and eloquence were very persuasive on the subject of these so-called sentinels, I am not happy to conclude that he is ready to be discharged yet, despite Mr Ellison's assertions and assurances."

Not unexpectedly, his audience's faces reflected their unhappiness, and the disappointment clouding Blair's mobile features was heart-breaking, but he refused to be swayed by an emotional reaction. He did expect an argument, however, and he got one.

"You can't be serious!" Jim spat out, face almost incandescent with fury and righteous indignation. He looked ready to physically shake some sense into Talbot, only being restrained by his guide's soothing words and the gentle but firm grip on his arm. Despite his own upset, Blair knew he couldn't let Jim act on his impulses, or there would be no chance of either of them securing their release any time soon.

William's reaction was much less excessive, but his determination was indubitable, and all the more compelling for that.

"Calm down, Jimmy, and leave this to me. You aren't helping!" He treated his son to a quelling glare before turning his attention to Talbot, trusting that Blair would keep Jimmy's temper under control.

"Dr Talbot, although I respect your opinion, can you honestly say that you were not impressed by yesterday's discussion? Surely you don't believe that the demonstrations we were treated to were in any way contrived? And as far as Blair's mental condition is concerned, if it would help convince you, I am happy to provide the means for an independent second opinion. And also stand surety for both my son and Mr Sandburg if necessary. What do you say?"

Even under pressure, Talbot was unwilling to back down so easily, and replied, "Who did you have in mind, Mr Ellison? As long as it is someone in whom I have confidence, perhaps I could be persuaded. But at the end of the day, it's Mr Sandburg's welfare that I am concerned with."

“And I appreciate that, Doctor, as are we all. And I intend to call upon an acquaintance of mine, Dr Julius Crispin. Would that satisfy you?” William named one of Cascade’s most prominent and respected private practitioners; a man who could be relied upon to give an honest and unbiased opinion regardless of his client’s social standing. Suitably impressed, Talbot nodded his agreement.

“I am familiar with Dr Crispin’s reputation, and would be happy to hear his evaluation. When do you propose to have him meet with Mr Sandburg?”

William smiled in satisfaction. “I admit I have already been in touch with Julius earlier this morning, and he tells me he has time available tomorrow morning. And as a favour to me, he is happy to conduct the interview here. Is that acceptable, doctor?”

And in the face of the hopeful entreaty suffusing his patient’s face, he hadn’t the heart to demur.

“I agree, Mr Ellison. Now, if you’ll excuse me, I have other patients to attend to. Until tomorrow, gentlemen,” and he made his exit before he could change his mind.

Sharing his guide’s sincere relief as the younger man sighed heavily, slumping in his seat, Jim pulled Blair to him in a warm, one-armed hug as he met his father’s gaze.

“Thanks, Dad. That was good of you, and I know we both appreciate it.”

Looking up also, his large blue eyes suspiciously moist, Blair concurred.

“Thank you so much, Mr Ellison, for believing in me enough to give me this chance. You don’t know how much it means to me.”

“Oh, I’ve a fair idea, Blair – may I call you Blair?” and at Blair’s pleased nod of acquiescence he continued.

“Having got that out of the way for now, there are several other questions I should like to discuss with you, concerning your plans for the future. If you are happy to share your thoughts with me, that is.

“But perhaps we can take a breather, if Dr Rosenthal is agreeable. Some coffee, perhaps?” and he glanced enquiringly at the doctor.

Unable to resist the Ellison juggernaut, and not overly unhappy about it, Rosenthal nodded, and answered with a small grin of acceptance.

“That sounds like a plan, Mr Ellison. If you’ll excuse me also, I’ll get back to work, but I’ll send someone in with a fresh tray. Make yourselves at home, but if you could let me know when you leave?” And on receiving William’s assurances, he also rose to go, leaving the three men to their own thoughts for a while.

While they waited for the coffee to be delivered, William took the opportunity to study the almost silent interaction between his son and Blair. Although obviously shaken by the morning’s events so far, Blair seemed more concerned with Jim’s reactions, overlooking his

own emotions in favour of offering support to his companion. As Jim frowned a little in discomfort, probably from a headache, William surmised, the smaller man stroked his arm, speaking softly and soothingly until Jim's frown cleared and he grinned down at his guide. It was plain that Blair's input was pivotal in maintaining Jim's control, but it was the extent of that input that concerned William, because it would ultimately affect both their lives.

Once the refreshments had arrived, and the men had enjoyed a cup of much-appreciated coffee over small-talk and generalities, William got down to business again and broached the subject that bothered him the most.

"So, Blair, it's plain to see that you play an important role in helping Jim to control his senses, but I hope you won't mind me speaking frankly about my concerns. Will Jim have to spend the rest of his life completely dependent on your presence? Because I can't see that a life virtually joined at the hip like Siamese twins is going to be healthy or desirable in the long term. How do you see your relationship progressing?"

Bridling at his father's perceived criticism, Jim was about to respond when once again Blair squeezed his arm, his expression pleading but his voice firm as he said, "No, Jim. Your father has a right to know what I think in view of everything he's doing for us. Let me speak, please?" And Jim couldn't deny that tone and expression, so he subsided, albeit reluctantly.

"OK, Chief, if you say so. And to be honest, I need to hear what you have to say also; because it's not something we've had the time or the opportunity to discuss in any detail yet. Go ahead."

"Thanks Jim," Blair murmured, but then he paused, biting his lip nervously as he was once more placed in the hot seat, and with only theories to offer. Gazing from one to the other, he turned slightly sideways in his seat to include both men in his proposition.

"Well, Mr Ellison, first I have to admit that I have nothing concrete to offer as regards your concerns, because I have so little data on which to base my assumptions. I may have cornered the market, so to speak, on current sentinel studies, but I'm only just touching the surface as regards the sentinel and guide bond. The small amount of data I have been able to amass regarding the true nature of the bond has concerned a limited number of examples from indigenous peoples, only one of which I was able to observe personally, and that was the Chopec sentinel and guide pair for a very limited time. And I dare say that the needs of a sentinel like Jim in a modern environment will differ considerably from theirs, so I'll be very much flying by the seat of my pants as I learn how to be a proper guide to him.

"Anyway, I believe that Jim is so dependent on me at the moment because although we have certainly connected, we aren't yet fully bonded, so that he feels the need to keep constant tabs on me to ensure my safety, and by extension, his own. Once we do bond fully, whatever that entails, according to Incacha our connection will be much deeper, and we won't need to be in constant contact all the time. Unless Jim needs me to ground him when he's using his senses, that is. I have no proof of any of this, you understand, but I do believe that eventually we will be able to achieve a certain amount of independence.

"I also have some ideas about methods Jim can use to control his senses to a great extent himself, given time and practice. And I'm thinking here about meditation techniques and dials

here, man. I'll explain later!" and he offered Jim a grin as he snickered at Jim's bemused grimace.

"Anyhow, if I'm right," he continued, "Once we're stable in our relationship, Jim should be able to go back to work. Think about it, man!" he said, enthusiasm once more creeping into his tone. "You'll be like an organic crime lab, Jim! With your senses, you'll be able to detect far more trace evidence at crime scenes and far more quickly than forensics, and you'll be able to overhear conversations without the necessity for a wire. And that's just two examples that spring to mind. It's all good, Jim, as long as the bad guys don't get wind of your abilities and try to use them against you."

Regarding his guide searchingly, Jim responded, still unconvinced. "That's all well and good, Chief, but I can't do it without you, so just how will we explain your presence? I mean, I know I'll have to confide in my boss, Simon Banks, to have any chance of getting my job back, and I trust him implicitly to keep my secret to himself even if he'll take some persuading. But he's going to need a good reason for allowing you to ride with me. One which will satisfy the Chief and Commissioner."

"Um, well, I had given it some thought, Jim," Blair admitted, looking a little bashful. "I mean, I was hoping that you'd want to return to work, and that you wanted to keep me with you. For as long as you needed me, at least. So I was thinking that I could say I'm writing my dissertation on closed societies like the police and fire services - 'Thin Blue Line' stuff - and that I need to ride with you to gather first-hand information. What do you think?"

Looking pensive, Jim paused for a moment before answering. "I don't know, Chief. I mean, it sounds like a possibility, but is that really the subject you'd choose? Because I thought you wanted to write about modern sentinels, which is why you were looking for me - well, someone like me."

Smiling gently, Blair rested his hand on Jim's knee, eyes full of understanding.

"I do want to write about modern sentinels, Jim, and I still can. I can study you and write up my findings as a sort of practical 'self-help' manual for your benefit. And any others like you if you agree. But not as my diss, man. It wouldn't be ethical to write about my own experiences with my sentinel and present it as an objective, scientific study. And even if I tried to keep it anonymous, it wouldn't do for people to put two and two together and come up with you, Jim. As I said, the last thing you need is for criminals to get the drop on you just because they know how to sabotage your senses.

"And I really do like the idea of changing my topic to the closed society one. My diss committee would prefer it, and I think it'll be cool, and a great reason to ride with you," and he almost bounced in his seat with renewed enthusiasm.

Suddenly he stilled, face falling in misery as he stared despondently at his feet for long moments.

As William looked on, Jim touched his shoulder with a gentle query. "Chief? What's wrong, buddy?" As he looked up again, Jim's heart clenched with the pain he saw reflected in the sad blue eyes.

“What if I can’t go back to Rainier, Jim? What if the Dean rules against me? How can he justify employing a teacher who has been committed, man? They might not even allow me back onto the doctoral programme...”and his voice tailed off as he swallowed audibly, trying to force down the sob of despair threatening to choke him.

It was William who spoke up first, his tone firm and supportive. “Don’t borrow trouble, young man. It might not be as hard as you think to get back into the doctoral programme at least. I have some influence at Rainier as a member of the Board of Governors, and a major benefactor to boot, so if you have any problems I’m sure I can help.

“I can’t promise I can influence the Dean of Studies as regards your teaching again any time soon, but I’ll do my best.

“Anyhow, I think I’ve heard enough for now, and you both look like you’re running on fumes, so I’ll take my leave. See you tomorrow morning, and don’t worry, Blair. Julius is a good man, and will give you a fair hearing.” And with a smile, he stood and exited the room, leaving two somewhat stunned and bemused men behind him.

Part 5: Epilogue: ‘What the Future May Bring’:

Two days later – the loft:

Jim looked fondly down at the young man bouncing at his side, having just given Blair a quick tour of the loft. Looking up to meet Jim’s enquiring gaze, Blair didn’t even try to contain his enthusiasm.

“Oh, man, it’s a great place, Jim. I can understand why you bought it. Spacious, airy, and a great view from the balcony. Just what a sentinel needs in order to look out over his territory!” and he grinned cheekily up as Jim huffed in amusement.

“Seriously, though, Jim, I really appreciate your offer to let me spend a few nights here. I’d have had a real problem trying to get alternative accommodation at this point in the academic year.”

His face fell slightly as he recalled yesterday’s events, grateful for Jim’s comforting arm around his shoulders as he lapsed into ruminative silence for a moment, both men taking in the distant view of Cascade Marina.

When Julius Crispin had arrived at Conover the previous morning, a jittery Blair had quickly been put at his ease by the very professional and eminent but also empathic and likable psychologist, such that despite his nerves the interview went very well, and Blair succeeded in making a good impression. Within a remarkably short time, he was given his marching orders, with the proviso that he remain under William Ellison’s supervision for a probationary period and attend regular therapy sessions as an outpatient during that time.

Greatly relieved, he had been more than grateful when William had offered to drop by Blair’s rather shabby apartment to pick up some clean clothes, only to find Blair’s landlord in the process of evicting the young man for non-payment of rent. Using his considerable influence and some small financial incentive, William had succeeded in getting Blair’s few belongings boxed up rather than dumped in the trash, and had had them delivered to the loft instead.

While Blair appreciated William's intervention, he was upset about the loss of his apartment, particularly should being effectively homeless influence the hospital's decision to let him go or not.

He was therefore more grateful still when Jim immediately offered him a bed for as long as he needed one.

Of course, what he didn't know was that Jim was secretly delighted at William's news, seeing it as a great opportunity to persuade Blair to come and live with him on a permanent basis.

And as far as Jim was concerned there was no time like the present to begin making his sales pitch.

"I'm glad you approve, Chief. It is spacious, I guess. Convenient and plenty big enough for two, for sure. But looking at it from your point of view, I suppose it must look a bit sterile? I've never really bothered about doing much to make it feel 'homey'. Couldn't see the point."

"Maybe so, Jim, but there again, I suppose a sentinel wouldn't like too much clutter anyway, even if you weren't aware that you were a sentinel when you bought it. You probably instinctively avoided anything that affected your senses unnecessarily."

"Perhaps you're right, Chief. But I'm thinking that some of your stuff here and there would add some colour and personal touches so that it would make it feel more like home for you, and for me too.

"How about it, babe? Will you come and live here with me as my partner and roommate?"
And lover and guide, for always, Blair?

"Oh, man! I don't know what to say! I mean, that's so generous of you, Jim. And...and I truly appreciate the offer. But although I'd love to take you up on it, you have to know that I'm not the easiest person to live with. I mean, people sort of get fed up with me after a while. I never shut up, and I'm untidy. A bit of a nuisance, and a slob, so they tell me.

"So I won't hold it against you if you withdraw the offer. A few nights to get my act together is all I really need, and I'll be out of your hair in a week."

Turning his guide around, Jim place his hands on the sturdy shoulders and held Blair's wide-eyed and apologetic gaze.

"If you're a slob, Sandburg, you're a slob with potential, and you'll be *my* slob. And I'll make up my own mind about the rest of it. And I'm not withdrawing the offer, Blair. We can work things out between us as we go along, but this is something I want and need, babe, and so do you.

"So, will you move in with me?"

And Blair didn't answer, but instead threw his arms around his sentinel and nodded enthusiastically around the lump of emotion in his throat.

The hug lasted for many minutes, with each man revelling in the closeness. However, it wasn't long before the contact grew more urgent as the heat of passion began to consume

them, and their affection morphed into the desire for physical completion. Moving in sync, they drew apart; Jim pushing Blair away from him just enough so he could look down into the upturned face, nodding with approval at the emotions he saw upon it. The bonding heat was upon them, and neither man had the strength or desire to fight it any longer.

“Mine, babe? My guide, and mine alone?” The words came easily to Jim’s mouth as he eagerly soaked up the love and lust swirling within Blair’s beautiful eyes.

“Yours, my sentinel. I’m ready. Take me – make me yours,” and Jim growled in satisfaction at the instinctive and heart-felt response.

However, his rational self refused to allow him to throw the smaller man to the floor and take him there and then, needing to make the joining mutually satisfying. Breathing deeply, he murmured, “Not here, baby. In our bed, upstairs. I’m not going to risk hurting you, my guide. Come on,” and he wrapped a possessive arm around Blair’s waist and led his willing mate up the stairs to the big loft bedroom.

When they reached the bedroom, Jim turned Blair to face him, the intensity of his heated gaze scorching his soon-to-be guide and lover, who shivered in need. However, even in his passion, Jim the man was still present enough to spot the tiny flicker of doubt and fear that sparked briefly in Blair’s eyes; eyes that otherwise held a fervent promise similar to his own. Forcibly holding back from stripping Blair there and then, he clenched his hands in an effort to control them as he murmured, “What is it, babe? What are you afraid of? I won’t hurt you, little one.”

Blushing deeply, Blair muttered, “I know. I know you won’t, Jim. But this probably isn’t the best time to tell you that I...um...*I’m a virgin.*”

Frowning in consternation, Jim responded, “Say again, babe? Please?”

“Oh gods! I’m so embarrassed! I said, ‘I’m a virgin’. To male/male sex that is. I’m so sorry, Jim. I should have told you earlier, but I want you so much! I...um...thought I could bluff my way through it?”

However, to his surprise and great relief, Jim merely smiled at his shame-faced confession.

“Oh babe! I’m not mad, Blair. Not at all! I’m honoured that you’re entrusting me with such a gift. I’m glad you told me before things got too far for me to control myself, but now I know, I’m going to take such care of you, I promise. Even the heat of the bond won’t make me hurt you. Can I kiss you?”

“Oh, yeah! I’m so down with that!” and Blair instantly raised his face to meet the lips descending to take his own, and their passion instantly reignited as they explored each other’s mouths, duelling tongues and moist heat stoking their desire even higher as the bond caught fire between them.

Reluctantly breaking the kiss, Jim pulled back enough to strip his guide before laying him on the big bed, greedily eyeing the beautiful body laid out like a sensory feast before him. As Blair groaned in impatient lust, he stripped off his own clothing and lay beside his guide, breathing in the young man’s wonderful scent, which was even more enriched with musk and pheromones.

“Gods! You’re so beautiful, Blair. Let me learn you, baby. I want to know everything about you – imprint you on my soul.”

“Yes, my sentinel. Learn me. Do with me what you will. I love you...”

And Jim took him at his word.

Blair would never know how long they lay there. Time lost all meaning as he was subjected to the most erotic experience of his young life. All he knew was that Jim inspected and imprinted every inch of him; scenting, listening, tasting, touching and looking his fill until Blair was almost mad with desire and trembling continuously with the need for release.

And then Jim prepared him, carefully and thoroughly, so that when the moment of taking arrived, pain morphed swiftly into desire, and the fire blazed between them as they tapped into an instinctive age-old ritual and moved in perfect synchronisation towards mutual completion and utter ecstasy.

And at that moment, they shared the most wonderful vision. In a blue-tinted jungle, Blair’s wolf and Jim’s jaguar raced joyfully towards each other, leaping to merge in a flash of blinding light, together again at last in this life as they always had been, and always would be.

And Jim and Blair experienced an identical merge, instantly learning everything they needed to know about the other, and becoming as one, two halves of one soul for ever after.

In another land, Incacha watched from afar, a gentle smile of satisfaction on his sweet and wise face as he raised a hand in benediction before fading once again into the rainforest’s comforting anonymity.

Some short while later, the two men rested in drowsy contentment, sated and warm. Jim lay on his back, slightly elevated with the pillows piled behind him, while Blair rested in the crook of his arm, head pillowed on Jim’s shoulder. The smaller man was humming softly, tracing shapes on Jim’s belly and chest with a gentle fingertip. Grinning down at the curly head beneath his chin, Jim closed his eyes, lazily experimenting with his sense of touch in an attempt to decipher the repetitious design, his smile widening as he made it out. *‘BS heart JE’*. Chuckling he dropped a kiss on the curly crown, murmuring, “JE loves BS too. So much!” and he seized the wandering hand in his own, bringing it up to his lips to kiss the fingertip before pressing it to his chest.

Shifting upwards, a smiling Blair raised himself up to lie on top of his sentinel, chin resting on his crossed forearms as he gazed into Jim’s face from his breathing mattress.

“Wasn’t it great to see the wolf and jag again? Do you think they’re happy now? They seemed so pleased that we finally did what they’d wanted us to do for so long. I wonder if we’ll see them again?” he added, eyes wistful.

Smiling gently, Jim replied, “Maybe we will, babe. I get the feeling that they’ll always be there when we need them.”

“So, how do you feel about asking Simon Banks around tomorrow? We need to get the ball rolling as soon as possible if I’m to go back to work. Are you ready to meet him?”

Looking pensive but resolved, Blair answered honestly. “The sooner the better, I guess. What’s he like? I’d like to have some idea of what to expect.”

“Well, he’s tall – bigger’n me, and he likes cigars...” and he broke off as Blair squeaked in horror.

“Bigger than you? Oh goddess! Talk about intimidating!”

His wide-eyed expression was so impossibly adorable that Jim couldn’t help himself. Laughing, he rolled the pair of them over so that he was on top, his weight on his elbows as he reached up to grasp a handful of curls on each side of his guide’s head. Leaning down, he dropped a kiss on the end of Blair’s nose before saying, “You’ll be just fine, babe. He’ll growl some, and undoubtedly will want some demos from the pair of us, but how could he not love you?” and he captured the lush-lipped mouth in a deep and demanding kiss.

Later still, Blair asked a little shyly from the vicinity of Jim’s neck, “Um, Jim? You know William asked if he could drop by tomorrow evening to see how we were getting on? Well, do you think we could invite him to stay for dinner? He’s been so good to me...would it be OK?” He raised his head to study Jim’s expression, hoping he hadn’t upset his lover. He was greatly relieved when Jim met his gaze, his face thoughtful as he said, “Yeah. Why not? It’s time we started to rebuild our relationship. And after all, he’s going to be your father-in-law, anyway.”

And he was more than satisfied with Blair’s astonished and delighted response.

“He is? Oh, Jim! I don’t know what to say!”

“Just say, ‘Yes, Jim’.”

“YES JIM!”

The End.