

# Sentinel Gap



Art by Kernel  
Story by Scarlet\_Gryphon

~Prologue~

**March 1900**

Dust rose with every impact of the horse's plodding hooves, throwing fine particles into the air. Heat shimmered off rocks and scrub-covered ground alike. The air was stagnant with the ponderous weight of the temperature it bore, even this early in the year. The horse's rider

was dressed in lightweight clothing in deference to the heat, the cotton fibers of his shirt sticking slightly to his skin thanks to the fine sheen of sweat there. The horse drew to a stop at a tug on the reins and a quiet word, blowing air irritably out of its nostrils. In the distance, a faint plume of smoke traveled low and long, showing char-gray against the unsettling light purple-blue of the sky that was tinged with the taint of the Miasma that had been an ever-pervasive presence over North America for over a century. The rider cocked his head, bright blue eyes going unfocused as he listened to the far-off sounds of a train lumbering along.

Train tracks usually meant civilization at some point, and this far west, the rider doubted that anyone would've heard the news about his supposed disgrace and fall from the rank of deputy US marshal. Even if they had, frontier towns usually didn't turn away sentinels, bonded or not. It was more often than not the difference between life or death; a town with a sentinel living in it or nearby tended to do far better than one without.

After all, sentinels and guides were, due to the same quirk of blood and mind that gave them their unique gifts, immune to the slow and insidious hazardous effects of the Miasma, unlike other humans. Some simply grew sick and died, some wasted away slowly, and some--some went mad, driven to the heights of insanity, yet also produced works of intense genius theretofore unseen in the world. The elderly and very young were the most susceptible, though the effects were found to be far worse in the large crowded cities of the East than out in the open plains of the West. Animals didn't seem to be affected by the noxious fumes of the taint, nor, thankfully, was the water or ground. It was purely an air-based contaminant, though what its original source had been, no one knew.

With a click of his tongue, the rider urged his horse onwards, heading in the direction of the train tracks. They looked to be several miles off, but distance wasn't always easy to calculate without any prominent landmarks. Only time would tell just how long it would take. It didn't really matter to the two travelers; so long as the rider found water and paused occasionally to rest, both would be capable of going for quite some time. The pair kept moving, always heading westward.

\*

## ~Part One~



Blair stared out at the passing landscape through the train window, chin propped up on his hand. He sighed, feeling extremely bored, having finished all his books some time ago. He'd been on the train for several days now, starting from New York City and heading towards Seattle. He'd had to transfer trains in Chicago and had been on the move ever since. The train he was currently on was called the *North Coast Limited*, and was one of the newest additions to the fleet of the Northern Pacific Railway. The train had passed into southern Washington several hours ago, and Blair knew it would be at least nine more hours to get to Seattle, depending on the conditions of the mountain passes and rail tunnels. Delays were part and parcel of rail travel, as Blair well knew, so nine hours was being generous.

Blair had been hired by the Bureau of Ethnology to go study the Duamish native peoples of that area; they were counting on the fact that him being a guide would help ingratiate him into the often secretive cultures of the native peoples. It usually did, as the native tribes held great esteem for sentinels and guides regardless of race or gender. Blair's mother, Naomi, hadn't been fond of the fact that he was heading into what she called a hopeless wilderness filled with danger and depravity. Blair had barely managed to keep from rolling his eyes at that when she'd said goodbye to him at the train station in New York. For all of Naomi's

professed worldliness, she was still bound by most of the social mores of the day; even if it was a few years into the new century. Not so with Blair.

Being a guide already put him in a different subdivision of society as it was; being what was called a 'Dark Guide'-- a guide that was a more primal and ruthless version of a normal guide who, along with the mirror counterpart of a Dark Sentinel, had historically been used as a sentinel Pride's enforcer amongst both Gifted and non-Gifted communities --just heightened that disparity even further. If the Pride was severely wronged, the Dark Guide and Sentinel would be sent out to right those wrongs. Historically, any Pride that could boast a Dark pair thrived, especially in the midst of great adversity.

Blair groaned as he stretched his legs out, trying to keep them from cramping up. The Bureau of Ethnology had provided a second-class ticket, but that didn't mean there was an abundance of space available to him, even with his short stature. He sighed and then turned back to his books, trying to decide which one to reread. He was in the middle of finalizing his choice when the train began to slow down.

Confused, Blair looked up to see what his fellow passengers were making of it. As far as he was aware, they weren't due to stop for quite some time, and certainly not this far east. The others looked to be as confused as Blair was; a quick and light brush with his empathy confirmed the general atmosphere of mild surprise and bewilderment.

Before he was able to pull his empathy back, Blair found that there was suddenly another empath on board the train. Whoever it was felt sharp and cold, leaving an icy imprint lingering after Blair withdrew. He got the sense that the empath wasn't friendly; Blair doubted he wanted to meet up with them. With that in mind, he drew in his mental shields as tightly as he could, doing his best to seem as normal as possible. He had the feeling that the empath was connected to the train slowing down-- and now it seemed like it was coming to a halt --which didn't bode well.

Blair took his seat once more, tucking his books into his knapsack and then setting the bag on the seat next to him within easy reach. He might not believe too strongly in fighting without reason, but he was ready and able to defend himself both physically and mentally regardless. Blair's worry kept mounting with every passing minute. The train eventually slowed to a complete halt with a groan of brakes and a gout of steam that obscured the outside of the windows for a brief time. Before anyone could say anything, four roughly-dressed people came into the compartment.

Three had cloths over their noses and mouths in place of more expensive breathing apparatuses; their eyes were covered by goggles with green-tinted glass in the eyepieces. It wasn't the most effective protection against the miasma, but it still worked for what they needed. The train itself was nominally shielded against the effects of the Miasma thanks to the slipstream it created as it moved. The filters on every window and door protected its passengers when it was at rest so the slow creep of the Miasma couldn't sneak in, though their protection wasn't, unfortunately, foolproof.

The fourth man was bare-faced; his skin was weathered from the sun and wind. He had eyes that were the pale, washed out brown color of dried mud, and his clothes were as ragged and patched as his compatriots'; a weather-worn Stetson was perched firmly on top

of his head. Blair pegged him for the empath immediately, as the lack of protection against the Miasma was a dead giveaway.

“Which of you is the other empath?” one of the masked intruders asked. “We know they're in this part of the train, and there's only baggage cars after this one.”

Blair held his tongue, keeping his shields locked down tight. He'd only make a move if he absolutely had to-- for example, if any of the other passengers were in danger. He wasn't *that* much of a selfish bastard, after all. The empath looked around the car, gaze moving from person to person. He focused on Blair, his eyes narrowing.

“Him,” he rasped out, pointing a dirty finger at Blair. “He's got the Gift, though he's trying to hide it. The rest are all *mundies*, so you can ignore them.”

Blair winced. He hated that term-- *mundane* –and any variation of it. Non-Gifted was far better in his opinion, but unfortunately, he was in the minority in that respect. Blair slowly got to his feet, carefully slinging his bag over his shoulder.

“What do you want me for?” he asked warily.

“You won't need to worry about that,” the empath said dismissively. “Or anything else, for that matter.”

Blair didn't have time to parse the meaning of that sentence before he drew in a sharp breath at the feeling of a sudden mental bombardment. It felt like he was standing in the middle of a fierce winter's gale; icy spears of empathic power slammed against his mental shields. His knees hit the thinly-carpeted floor without his notice; Blair was too busy trying to fight off his attacker to worry about his physical state of being.

He did his valiant best to hold the empath off, but his shields weren't strong enough to stand up to the constant rain of sledgehammer-like blows. He eventually collapsed fully to the floor; his body twitched violently. His bag fell unnoticed to the floor, the books sliding out. Blair made one last-ditch effort to protect his essential core of being: he let the Dark Guide come fully to the fore, curling his vital essence into a tight ball and then hiding away in the deepest corner of his mind behind the mental equivalent of thick steel walls stronger than any known bank vault. Only when it was truly safe would he reemerge.

The rogue empath grinned, showing off broken and yellowing teeth. “Interesting,” he said, cocking his head to one side in a dog-like motion. “A Dark Guide. It's been a while since I've had one of you to play with.”

The Dark Guide-- simply called Wolf in honor of Blair's spirit guide –bared his teeth in a snarl at the empath, pushing himself up to a seated position. It was easy to see the difference between Blair and Wolf; while Blair tended to move with little thought for his actions, Wolf was all feral grace and wild power that was barely restrained. He growled, the sound low and rumbling as he glared at the empath with sharp blue eyes that glowed with his anger. The empath snorted softly.

“Please,” he drawled, “that don't scare me. Boys? You're up. Don't make me tell the boss you bungled such an easy job.”

One of the kerchiefed bandits stepped forward, drawing an odd-looking weapon that bore only a passing resemblance to a firearm. The bandit aimed it at Wolf and then fired, though instead of a bullet, a crackling wave of energy erupted from the muzzle. Spasms wracked Wolf's body before he slumped to the floor, unconscious. Another of the bandits stepped forward and then scooped Wolf up before slinging him over his shoulder with as much ceremony as a bag of potatoes. The empath mockingly tipped his hat at the remaining passengers before leading the way out of the car and off the train. Not long after, the train jerked back into motion, while outside the thud of hooves could be heard disappearing into the distance.

## ~Part Two~

### ~Three Months Later~

James Ellison, formerly of the United States Marshals Service, leaned back in his chair and wiped the back of his hand across his brow. It was far too hot indoors, even with the windows and door wide open and the two double-bladed ceiling fans lazily stirring the air; the filters over the windows and door shining a near-translucent blue. He shook his head and got to his feet, intent on getting water. Sure, it'd be lukewarm, but anything was better than nothing. As he poured his water, James-- more commonly known as Jim --reflected on the streak of good luck that had gotten him to where he was. First was the chance spotting of the train that had led him to tracks, which in turn had led him to Cascade, a little town near the banks of the Columbia River and the nearby pass that had been bridged by the railroad: Sentinel Gap. It was rather appropriate, or so he'd been told. A sentinel for Sentinel Gap.

Jim wasn't much for coincidence, to be honest, but he didn't mind this one. He'd found a surprisingly warm welcome in Cascade, as well as an offer to join the sheriff's office as a deputy. The sheriff of Cascade was a man by the name of Simon Banks. Jim had barely blinked at the fact that the head lawman was a black man; he'd worked with the legendary Bass Reeves in the Marshals, so seeing someone with dark skin in a role like that wasn't too shocking. Simon was tough but fair; something Jim had learned quickly. He didn't play favorites amongst the townspeople, instead preferring to set a good example for his young son Daryl to follow. Simon had quickly won Jim's respect for that: family was all important to sentinels, and even more so to Dark ones.

Jim drank down his tepid water, nose wrinkling at the temperature, and then stepped out of the jail house to look around. The summer heat shimmered and danced over the land, though every now and then a breeze would come up off the water to the east and bring with it some much needed relief. A few chickens roamed the main (and only) street, pecking lazily at the ground in search of bugs or seeds. What grass there was had been dried out by the intense heat, turning crisp and brown. If they didn't get rain soon, Jim was sure there'd be a brushfire at some point. All it took was one spark.

If that wasn't enough to worry about, there'd been signs of bandits around Devils Canyon, some two hours away by fast horse. Even worse, rumors of train robberies in the area had reached Jim's ears. He suspected the two were linked, and had broached the topic with Simon. His worries hadn't gone unfounded; it turned out that Simon was well aware of the bandits and had been gathering men and supplies to stage a raid. Rumor had it that there was at least one rogue empath amongst the bandits' crew, something the raiders would have

to be wary of. Said raid was due to begin that evening once the heat started to taper off into something bearable.

Jim stuck his hands in his trouser pockets, the lightweight canvas rasping faintly against his skin. He usually kept his senses of touch and smell locked down relatively tight, the better to keep from reacting to the dust and grit in the air. With a sigh, Jim went back into the jail house, figuring that some shade was better than none. He settled in his chair, tipping his head back and closing his eyes before letting his senses roam. Said task would be easier if he ever found a compatible guide, but Dark Guides were few and far between, and he knew that the feral power of his mind would likely burn out an incompatible guide's mind. He definitely didn't want that to happen, so he kept his senses toned down unless absolutely necessary.

Jim stayed at his desk until Simon came to fetch him, lazily getting to his feet with the lithe grace of the panther that was his spirit guide. "Everything ready?" he asked as he grabbed his hat.

Simon nodded, not bothering to remove his breather. "Yes," he said, his voice coming out faintly tinny thanks to the breather. "The horses are all saddled and ready to go. The rest of the hunting group is waiting outside."

"Wonderful." Jim followed Simon out of the jail house, letting out a soft hum at the rapidly cooling air. He mounted his horse, settling easily into the saddle. The party moved out once everyone was ready, Jim and Simon at the lead. The sky was starting to slowly darken, the horizon becoming the color of a bruised peach. This first night would be used for scouting and figuring out just how many people they were dealing with; they'd commence the raid early the next morning to keep the element of surprise.

The plan was to camp about a half-mile away from the suspected bandit lair and sneak in on foot, leaving the horses behind with a few guards to keep away any nighttime predators, be they animal or human. They found a good spot in a sheltered gully when they arrived, securing the horses and putting up their shelters for the night. Jim led the small scouting party once everything was set up, moving ghost-like across the scrub land with the grace and silence of his spirit guide.

Movement to his left caught Jim's eye when they were several hundred yards away from the mouth of the broad canyon the bandits were rumored to be hiding in, making him pause. He tilted his head curiously, focusing intently. Movement again, and then the ghostly form of a timber wolf glided out of the dark, its paws barely bending the blades of grass as it walked. Jim's eyes widened. A spirit guide? What was it doing out here? Surely it didn't belong to the rogue empath? Spirit guides didn't suffer evil lightly, after all.

*Follow me,* the wolf said, its voice transmitting itself to Jim's brain without any direct input from his ears. *I have been waiting for you for a while, sentinel. My guide-brother is in need of your help. I am Tala. Come; we don't have much time.*

With that, Tala turned around and ghosted away, leaving Jim little choice but to follow her. He signaled for the others to accompany him as he went, keeping his eyes on the near-translucent tip of Tala's tail. The scouts spread out once they reached the camp, with Jim keeping pace a few feet behind her. Tala led him past the main bunch of tents, ignoring them

entirely and taking him to a dead-end branch of the canyon some hundred yards or so away from the main camp. What looked like some sort of workshop was set up there underneath a series of canvas tarpaulins that stretched from one side of the canyon to the other, anchored by ropes and hooks into the rock itself. Tables made from rough-cut wood and flat rocks were scattered around the workspace, with all manner of equipment and trinkets placed on them.

For the time being, the area was deserted, though the presence of a kerosene lamp on one of the rock tables told Jim that someone had recently been there. Tala wound her way through the tables, her gaze fixed on the far end of the area where what looked like a very large cage had been set up; its roof was covered with even more tarpaulins, while its front was made almost entirely from wire fencing, save for a heavily padlocked wooden gate abutting one of the walls. Jim's eyes widened when he saw the contents of said cage. A sleeping pallet with threadbare blankets on it was in one corner of the cage, while a bucket for what smelled like waste was in the one opposite.

Sitting on the pallet was a scruffy-looking man, his long and curly hair snarled and matted around his heavily bearded face. He had manacles around his thin wrists and ankles, with a short chain linking each ring of iron to its opposite partner. The man looked surprisingly sanguine about his situation, as he appeared to be meditating, of all things; his hands were laying loosely in his lap, the connecting chain pooling between them. Tala, ignoring all sense of proper reality, stepped directly through the front of the cage before taking a seat next to the man, her tail curling around her forepaws.

*This is the one you need to save, she told Jim, who had come to a halt in the thickest patch of shadows he could find. He has been trapped here and beyond for far too long. Only you can help him. Only you can return him to his rightful mind. The Wolf and Panther have walked alone for far too long; it is time that their paths converge and align once again. Save him, and you might even be able to save yourself.*

Before Jim could say anything to that, the guide (and yes, now that Jim truly focused his senses, he recognized the other man for what he truly was) opened his eyes, the vibrant blue shining even in the low light. He spoke, his voice raspy from disuse and dust.

“Hello, sentinel. Come to play, or to kill?”

### ~Part Three~

Wolf watched the sentinel with a calm outward expression, though inwardly his curiosity was piqued. Tala wouldn't have brought this sentinel here for no reason, after all, though Wolf did have to wonder just what this sentinel was doing so far into the camp of the enemy. After all, he highly doubted that Jeremiah Walsh, the leader of the ragtag crew of raiders and bandits, would have allowed a sentinel to join his gang. Sentinels were far too aligned with the law, both by sheer nature and societal upbringing, to go rogue like that. Besides, anyone who volunteered to join the gang ran the risk of being experimented on or worse by Gideon Talbot, the empath who had captured Wolf in the first place.



While Talbot shared many of the same gifts that a true guide did-- including, at the very least, a partial immunity to the Miasma --something deep within him had twisted the wrong direction, forever barring him from ever accessing the true reaches of his gift and never allowing him to find a compatible sentinel to bond with. The urge to do so, however, had never left Talbot, leaving him with a deeply-rooted craving that would never be fulfilled. That craving had led him even further into the depths of madness, drawing him ever downwards until he could never see the light of day again.

Walsh had taken great advantage of that madness, using Talbot's gifts to aid in raids on trains and settlements alike. It had proven useful, even with Talbot's more... unsavory habits of capturing any guide or empath he came across and then experimenting on them in various ways. Wolf had so far not been subjected to any of the more strenuous experiments, though currently Talbot seemed to be seeing just how long it took before Wolf begged him for more than just the one meager meal of thin beef stew given to him each day. It hadn't really bothered Wolf much, though he knew that in his current state, he wouldn't be much of a help in a fight, especially if it came to fisticuffs.

This sentinel, however... He looked capable enough to handle just about whatever came his way. Tall, with broad shoulders and a determined expression, not to mention the deadly power that all but radiated from him. That was the sign of a Dark Sentinel if Wolf had ever seen one, not to mention one that felt highly compatible to himself. Still, that was neither here nor there at the moment; any sort of exploration into a possible bond with the sentinel would have to wait until they were safe and Wolf's health-- both mental and physical --was restored.

Wolf waited patiently for a reply from the sentinel and then sighed when he didn't get one. "Well?" he prompted. "What are you here for? You're obviously not with Walsh and Talbot, that much I can tell, but unless you're going to get me out of here, I'd rather not be stared at like some animal in a zoo, even if I am in a cage."

The sentinel blinked, coming out of the surprised daze he'd been in. "Who are you?" he asked. His voice was pleasant and surprisingly cultured, a welcome change from Talbot's harsher tones and vocabulary.

"Call me Wolf. Who're you, sentinel, and why are you here?" Wolf replied.

"I'm James Ellison, and I'm here to rid this area of bandits," the sentinel-- no, *James*, Wolf corrected himself --told him. "I don't take kindly to having strangers in my territory, especially not this close to my home."

"And just how close is that?" Wolf asked.

"Close enough." James eyed the padlock keeping the door to Wolf's cage shut. "Where's the key?"

"With Talbot, I'd assume," Wolf said. "He's the only one I've seen use it. I'd suggest leaving soon if you don't want him finding you here. I doubt he'll take too kindly to having intruders this deep in the camp, especially not a sentinel. I have little doubt he'd have you caged up as quick as possible. If you're telling the truth about getting rid of this crew, fair warning: they have energy weapons of some kind. They looked to be some sort of electrical perversion of a pistol that Edison or Tesla might've come up with in a fit of Miasma-inspired madness."

“Good to know. I’ll make sure to keep an eye out for them,” James mused. He glanced away, head cocked to the side momentarily, before he returned his attention to Wolf. “We’ll be attacking early in the morning. Be ready to run.”

With that, he left, Wolf watching him go. Wolf sighed and then settled back into his meditation, praying to any higher power that might be watching over him that James’ raid went smoothly, if not for his sake, then for that of the raiding party.

Dawn came with the sounds of surprised yells and gunfire, startling Wolf out of the light slumber that was all he’d managed during the nights these past few months. He pushed himself up, hesitating for a moment before curling up in the nearby corner, trying to present as small a target as possible in case someone should come his way. He was a sitting duck, after all, given that he was trapped so handily. He doubted that Talbot or Walsh would want to take him along alive if they managed to escape the routing out that James and his compatriots were performing. Still, it wouldn’t do to antagonize his captors any more than he had to, especially with the chaos that was currently going on.

The fighting seemed to be located primarily on the other side of camp, over where Wolf was vaguely aware that the cook fires and bedrolls were kept. The sharp and panicked neighing of the horses was suddenly drowned out by a great rush of noise and a vertical gout of flame that appeared and disappeared in a flash. Silence reigned after that. Wolf blinked, surprised, and then cautiously sent his empathy out, curious to see what had happened. From what he could gather, someone had poured cooking oil on a fire, creating a diversion of some sort. Whether it was James’ crew or Walsh’s, Wolf didn’t know. He just hoped it wouldn’t be too long before he found out.

Thankfully, it wasn’t. Not ten minutes after the flash-flare, Wolf heard James’ voice ring out through the air. “Hey, Wolf, fancy switching places with a few people?” James came into view, all but dragging a bound and gagged Walsh along behind him. The other members of the raiding party were similarly occupied, each having one or more bandits trussed up and trailing behind him. A predatory grin broke out across Wolf’s face, the corners of his bright eyes crinkling dangerously.

“Why, sentinel, I thought you’d never ask. I’ve got to say, these accommodations have been getting pretty tiresome; I’d love a chance to stretch my legs.” Wolf rose to his feet, taking care not to trip over the chains binding him. Jim handed Walsh off to one of his fellow raiders before heading over and unlocking the door.

“You know where the keys to those cuffs are?” he asked Wolf, who shook his head as he carefully shuffled out of the cage.

“Sadly, no. Walsh or Talbot would, though. Good job on capturing them.”

James shrugged. “It’s nothing I haven’t done before. Old habits die hard, I guess you could say.”

“I’m certainly not complaining,” Wolf told him, getting out of the way of the others, who, once they’d stripped the bandits down to little more than their underclothing, shoved them into the cage with little more than a fare-thee-well, making sure that they didn’t have anything they could use to escape with. The keys to Wolf’s manacles and shackles were eventually found

in Talbot's possession, though the deranged empath fought valiantly to keep from being stripped of them.

“Hold his head still for a moment, will you?” Wolf asked once he'd been divested of the chains. James arched an eyebrow at him.

“Why?”

Wolf merely smirked. “I have unfinished business with him.” He held up a hand to stave off any protests. “I'm not going to kill him, don't worry. I'm just going to make sure he can't prey on a guide or empath ever again.”

James thought it over before nodding tersely. “Alright, but nothing more.”

Wolf let out a soft hum of agreement and then caught Talbot's gaze with his before the empath could close his eyes. He unleashed the full brunt of his empathy, ruthlessly tearing through Talbot's mental shields and then locking away any trace of the empathic Gift he could find. It wasn't long before Wolf withdrew, leaving Talbot alive and unharmed save for the complete erasure of his talents. No longer would he be able to subdue anyone like he had Wolf and an unknown number of people before him. He was merely normal, just like one of his hated '*mundies*'.

“Can you ride?” James asked as Talbot was thrown into the cage and then the padlock reattached, sealing the bandits within. Wolf shrugged.

“Enough to stay on the horse and not fall off. Is that good enough?”

“For our purposes? Yes.” James turned to the others. “The Sheriff and I will be returning to town with our guest here,” he told them, gesturing at Wolf as he spoke. “We'll be sending out a message via telegraph to the Marshals as soon as we get there. You'll be keeping watch and making sure none of these idiots escapes, as well as taking in any others that might come looking for them. Hard supplies for at least two weeks will be sent here before the day is out, since we'll need to stay here until the Marshals arrive. Any questions?”

There was a general negative consensus, which seemed to make James happy. Wolf followed him and the Sheriff-- soon introduced to him as Simon – to where the raiders had camped during the night. The ride back was annoyingly hot and humid, with storm clouds lurking dark and heavy on the horizon. Wolf knew the rain would be welcome, especially after the long dry spell, but that was only if lightning didn't come along with it. A grass fire could be set off by a single spark, and a lightning bolt had more than enough heat to set the whole of the Columbia Basin ablaze.

During the ride, Wolf tried to answer as many of the questions that were put to him by James and Simon as possible, though were quite a few that he either couldn't or wouldn't. Those he wouldn't were more of Blair's expertise, anyways, and Wolf didn't feel like it was safe enough to relinquish control just yet. After all, he had no idea if James and Simon were trustworthy, regardless of the pull he felt towards the former and the general feeling of goodwill coming from the latter. The questions he couldn't answer usually related to how many people were in the gang and how long it'd been around. He had no idea for either of them, just that it had been at least three months, since that was how long he'd been held captive, give or take a few days.

Wolf fell silent for the last few miles into town, contemplating the days to come. He doubted that his post in Seattle was still available, nor was he sure he really wanted to go to it even if it was. Ignoring the fact that he was probably presumed dead after he hadn't shown up and the tale that had been likely spun by his fellow passengers of his abduction off the train, the thought of leaving James behind as he went off back to his old life greatly disquieted Wolf, even this early in their acquaintance. He'd never felt as strong a pull towards a sentinel as he did towards James, and he'd be a damn fool if he gave up the chance to bond with what was likely one of the only sentinels in the country, if not the world, who was highly compatible with him. Wolf-- and Blair --might be many things, but neither was a fool, nor stupid. A message could be sent via telegraph saying that he was alive and relatively unharmed but, other than that, Wolf had no plans on returning to the course he'd been ascribing to before his abduction. He'd been through far too much to go back to the ivory towers of academia and lock himself away once more.

Book learning was all well and good, but it hadn't done him much use during his captivity. If only he'd been given some self-defense courses at the Conclave before he'd gone off into the world! If only he knew how to pick locks or wield a weapon! Wolf smiled wryly to himself. *And if only I could have wings, I would fly like the birds in the heavens,* he thought to himself. It was no use thinking about what might have been. The past was in the past; he couldn't change it no matter how much he wished he could. He'd have to set his eyes on the future and hope-- no, he told himself, *work* --for the best. He owed it to himself and to James, should the sentinel be amenable to having him, faults and all.

With that thought in mind, Wolf let go and Blair sat up straighter in the saddle, eyes set on the horizon and that which was to come. Somewhere in the distance a wolf howled, joined in an impromptu duet by the shriek of a giant cat. The Wolf and the Panther rode side by side, never to be parted again.