

# Mystic Journey



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"I can't let you live."

As Blair stopped in front of the fountain, he turned – a final, desperate plea forming on his lips. “Alex, please.”

There was an explosion of pain in his skull and he felt himself falling backward, a creeping oblivion already clouding his vision, paralysing his limbs. A rush of cold washed over him and he gathered his rapidly fading strength to send out a last mental call for help to Jim. A silent echo of the words he’d said to Jim just the night before.

*You know where to find me.*

For what seemed like forever, all Blair could hear was the pounding, a constant thump that drowned out everything else. It hammered on his chest and against his eardrums, and he wasn’t even aware he couldn’t breathe... Until there was silence and peace.



Something cold and wet touched Blair’s cheek and he flinched away, a hand raising to swat the annoyance away. A soft growl sounded close to his ear and he started awake, his eyes snapping open at the same time as he surged up, scuttling backward when he discovered his legs would not support him.

A large grey wolf with icy blue eyes stared back at him. The ruff on its neck bristled at Blair’s sudden movement.

“So, your Sentinel has failed you again,” a voice said.

Blair risked glancing away from the wolf and looked at his surroundings. A jungle? A blue jungle. Was this Jim's dreamscape? If so, where was... Footsteps crunched in the grass and from the trees emerged a man, his face painted, familiar.

"Incacha?"

Incacha gave Blair a nod of acknowledgment then whistled softly. The wolf turned and ran to his side, rubbing up against the Chopec warrior like a large cat before settling down in the shade of a tree, next to a black jaguar.

Ah, Blair thought, there's Jim's spirit animal. So, is the wolf mine? Pretty cool if it is.

"The wolf is indeed your animal spirit," Incacha said, apparently reading Blair's mind.

"Cool!" Blair said and then fell silent, a lump rising in his throat. The last thing he remembered was cold, his heart pounding, pain in his head. Oh god! Alex! Incacha was here. Incacha was dead. Did that mean... "Am I dead?" he managed to croak out.

Incacha shrugged. "You are at a crossroads, as is your sentinel."

Blair sucked in a breath. "Jim? Jim's dead? Did Alex... the other sentinel—"

Incacha held up a hand to silence his frantic question. "Look around. Do you see Enqueri?" When Blair shook his head, he nodded. "This is your crossroads, Shaman of the Great City. This must be your choice."

"You said that to Jim the time you came to Cascade before you..." He couldn't bring himself to say the words 'were murdered'. "You told Jim that a sentinel will always be a sentinel if he chooses to be."

"Enqueri chose his path."

"But I'm not a sentinel."

"You are his guide... or once were. A guide can choose to remain as he once was... or go."

Blair thought about that. There was no question he wanted to live and equally that he wanted to be Jim's guide. The big question was, after all that had happened since Alex Barnes had arrived in Cascade, did Jim want Blair as his guide? Did he even think he needed a guide?

As if reading Blair's thoughts, Incacha said, "Enqueri's thoughts are muddled by the other sentinel. She knows what she wants, he does not."

"Why did she want to kill me?"

"To keep him weak, to have him with her."

"If I survive, will that stop her?"

"No," Incacha said, "that is a battle only they can fight."

"What did you mean when you said Jim had failed me again?" Blair asked.

"From the beginning, he sought to distance himself from the one who could help him most."

Blair sat up straight and stared at Incacha. Was Incacha speaking Quechua and Blair understanding it in this mystic realm? It seemed that way. "Only because he was scared, not that he'd ever admit to it, and I was pretty in his face about the sentinel thing." He shuddered, remembering Jim slamming him up against the wall of his office and then racing after Jim when he'd left, seeing him zoned and the garbage truck bearing down on him. Remembering again how he didn't even think before he launched himself at Jim, only after the truck had passed over them both and he realized they were still alive, had he freaked out, certain he was going to either pass out or throw up. Only Jim acquiescing to listen to him had calmed him down. "Once I was able to show him the benefits of his abilities, he came round. We helped each other out. I told you, he helps me and I help him."

Incacha laughed, the same laugh he'd given when Blair had said that in the loft. "He refused you shelter when your home was destroyed," he went on.

"Yeah, okay, he wasn't exactly thrilled with the idea to begin with, but hey, I told him I'd only be there a week and three years later, I'm still living there and he's never asked me to leave."

"Until now."

Blair shook his head, refusing to accept the truth in the words. "No, Jim did that because he thought he was protecting me from Alex. I can see that now. He thought she was after him, but she was after his guide."

"For what purpose? Why did she not claim you for herself?"

"I don't know! No, wait!" Blair thought a moment, summoning up all he could remember about Alex and Jim's reactions, even before they knew of each other's existence. "I've got it all wrong!" Blair stood up and began to pace, aware that the wolf and jaguar risen and padded over to stand beside Incacha. He tried not to make any sudden moves. "We both underestimated Alex. She never wanted a guide. She thinks she doesn't need one. By killing me, it makes Jim more vulnerable and this is about territorial rights. This was all my fault. I should have told Jim about her. I should have made him listen."

"His ears were closed to you," Incacha said. "All he could sense was the rogue sentinel."

"I have to help him," Blair cried. "This isn't just about the bond between sentinel and guide, Incacha. Jim's like my brother. If he has me with him, he can defeat Alex. On his own, he'll be drawn into her ruse, just like I was. Millions of lives could be lost if we don't stop her. Please! I don't want to die."

Incacha waved a hand. "Your fate lies in the hands and heart of your sentinel."

The wolf lifted its head and howled then fixed its steely gaze back on Blair as though he'd just discovered his next meal. Blair took a step back, raising his hands as the wolf leaped toward him in a futile attempt to stave off the attack.

There was a blinding explosion of light and a sizzle of electricity that coursed through Blair's entire body. He could see the jaguar opposite him and knew he was seeing it now through the eyes of his spirit animal. Incacha was fading and Blair somehow sensed that his memory of this meeting was drifting away too. He tried desperately to cling to it. Then he was racing



to meet the jaguar, both of them in full flight, colliding and merging into one being. Then... nothing.



Jim had never seen Blair so still. Even in sleep, he twitched, muttered and sighed. It was as though his mind never fully switched off. Until now.

Now, he lay on the damp grass, his eyes closed, skin chalky white, save for the blue tinge to his lips. He'd known Blair was gone before Simon had asked if he could hear a heartbeat, uncaring of the others who stood over them. He had already been casting out his sentinel hearing as he and Henri dragged Blair from the fountain.

Nothing. No breath, no heartbeat.

Dead.

"No! Don't you die!" Jim threw himself down at Blair's side once more, his hands pressing against his chest. "Breathe, damn it!"

The EMTs had arrived but too soon they were shaking their heads in despair.

"I'm sorry, guys," the younger man said as he stood and gathered up his gear.

Jim stared at him in disbelief. "What do you mean sorry? You can't give up! This isn't over. He's not dead." He pulled away from Simon's restraining hands and dropped back to his knees beside Blair. "Come on, Sandburg." He continued his frantic ministrations, blocking out the pleas of his friends. If Sandburg died, it would be his fault as much as Alex Barnes'.

She may have drowned Blair but Jim had cast him off, left him unprotected and in danger. He still couldn't figure out why he hadn't realized what Alex had planned. Now it all made sense. Without his guide, he was weakened, at her mercy.

Hands grabbed at him, pulling him up and away.

"Let him go. Jim! Jim! He's gone!" Simon sounded defeated and Jim felt his own hope dwindling.

"Oh, God, no." Jim stared down at Blair, bereft. Blair's face seemed to take on a bluer hue. Jim shook his head as the image of a wolf rippled over Blair's lax features. He had to be hallucinating. The wolf! He killed the wolf in his dreams and then it had morphed into Blair. Then the wolf was gone, replaced by a vision of Incacha.

Incacha raised a painted hand. "Use the power of your animal spirit," he intoned gravely.

Jim broke away from Simon and Brown and knelt next to Blair. Could he do this, just by trusting in Incacha? He placed a hand on Blair's neck, then cupped Blair's face in both his hands, feeling the chill of death seeping into his own flesh. In front of his eyes, the wolf bounded toward him and then both the jaguar and wolf were leaping at each other, merging together as one. A blinding flash of light had him wincing and blinking.

A rhythmic thumping filled his ears. He looked up at Simon. "Simon, I can hear a heartbeat." He began to press on Blair's chest again, urging Blair back to life. "Come on, Chief, come on, come on. Come on, buddy. Come on."

Simon was leaning over him now, cajoling Blair as well. "Come on, Sandburg."

Then Blair convulsed under Jim's hands and coughed up water.

Relief had Jim sagging, almost on top of Blair. He turned Blair onto his side, holding him as he coughed and more water dribbled from his mouth. "Hey, get those guys over here!" he called.

Standing on shaky legs between Simon and Brown, one arm over each of their shoulders, Jim managed a weak smile of relief. "See?" he said, silently sending thanks to Incacha. "It's gonna be all right."

Blair was not fully conscious. His face was still white beneath the oxygen mask, his flesh still icy cold. He didn't seem to recognize Jim, though he weakly squeezed Jim's clasped hand.

He'll be okay, Jim told himself firmly. Incacha wouldn't have allowed him to bring Blair back, just to let him die anyway.



It felt so good to be warm again. Blair rephrased that in his head as he grinned back at Jim. It was great to be alive again. He was pretty shocked at first when Jim said he'd had the same dream as Blair about the wolf and the jaguar merging in the blue jungle. There had been more to Blair's dream than that but try as he might, every time he caught a brief glimpse of the memory, it slipped from his mental grasp like quicksilver, edging his headache up a notch. The doctor had said he might have a degree of amnesia, understandable, they said, when one had been dead for a short time.

Dead.

He shivered suddenly and pulled the blankets up further over his chest. He wasn't sure Jim wanted to discuss the whole dream thing just yet. He'd looked discomfited when he realized they'd had the same dream, and the jokes he'd made when he'd first arrived about Blair still owing rent and chatting up the nurses made it obvious he was ready to go into any detail about his actions in the past few days. Blair wasn't sure he wanted to go there yet either, at least not until he felt a little stronger and less fuzzy in the head. He still couldn't help feeling that if he'd pushed harder with Jim, made him listen to what he knew about Alex, none of this would have happened.

He tried for an upbeat note when Jim fell silent. "I can't believe this. Einstein said the greatest experiences we can have are the ones with the mysterious. We are definitely there, my brother. Come on in, man. The water's nice."

If anything, Jim's frown grew deeper. "Chief, I don't know if I'm ready to take that trip with you." He smiled then but it didn't quite reach his eyes. "So, anything you need before I go?"

“Go where?”

“Just back to the station for now, catch up with Simon, and then track down Barnes.”

Blair reached out and grabbed Jim’s arm, suddenly apprehensive but not sure why. “I don’t think you should go after her alone, man.”

“I won’t be. I’ve got plenty of back up, Chief, you know that. I’m not letting her get away with what she’s done.”

“I know, and I know she needs to be caught, but I think... I think I need to be with you. I’m feeling a lot better –“

“You died, Sandburg. She drowned you in a damned fountain. I’m not giving her a chance to get near you again. And no way are you ready to get out of that bed.” He started to pull his arm away then stopped, leaning in closer. “You’ve got every right to be scared of her, Chief.”

“I know, and I am, but it’s not that. There was more to my vision than just the wolf and the jaguar. I just can’t remember it clearly enough. All I know is that you need me with you when you find Alex.”

Jim shook his head firmly and Blair knew it was no use continuing to protest. “Not gonna happen, Chief.” He pulled his arm out of Blair’s grasp. “Get some rest. I’ll call in later and check on you.”

Before Blair could say another word, he was gone. Suddenly exhausted, Blair sagged back on his pillows. “Not gonna happen, Jim,” he said, echoing Jim’s words. “If you go after her, I’ll find a way to be there with you.”

**End**