

Friendly Fire



Art by PattRose

Story by Katef

Part 1: Cascade General Hospital ER:

Unable to sit still, Jim Ellison paced restlessly around the ER's waiting area, his movements unconsciously graceful despite his obvious distress. Indeed, the similarity to the feline elegance of the black jaguar - his spirit animal - might have been cause for conceit had he been so minded, but for Ellison it was far from the case. Under normal circumstances he had little time or patience for the spiritual aspect to his sensory gift, and now he positively detested it, certain that it was at least partly responsible for his being here now for the second time in a matter of days. In this place full of the sounds and smells of suffering.

The place where his guide fought for his life.

The place where Jim Ellison had put him.

A sudden disturbance made him stop in his tracks, and he swung around to see the impressive figure of Simon Banks barrelling through the doors, his frowning expression a combination of anger and impatience, overlaid by concern. Striding up to Jim, he paused to study his subordinate, not liking what he was seeing. The man looked terrible, and not just because he was still liberally splattered with blood. Blair's precious blood. His face was a mask of pain and devastation, worse than Simon had ever seen, and he knew for sure that it wasn't all to do with spiking senses.

"Shit, Jim, you look terrible, man! Sit down before you fall down. And where's your sling? I thought you were supposed to keep that arm supported for several more days?"

For a moment, Jim regarded him distractedly, a puzzled frown creasing his brow. "Huh? What? Oh, right. Took it off. I couldn't help Blair with it on...couldn't help Blair...oh, god, Simon. What have I done?" and Simon was truly shocked when his stoic and self-contained detective began to cry. Not loudly or demonstratively, but with slow, silent tears, all the more distressing to witness in its soul-deep misery. Squeezing Jim's shoulder in compassion, Simon steered his unresisting friend over to a couple of hard chairs and pushed him down into one, shifting his own seat a little so he could study Jim's face. After a minute or so, Jim scrubbed roughly at his face, impatiently wiping away the tears and blowing his nose on the handful of tissues Simon passed to him. Deeming it an appropriate time to push for answers, Simon caught and held Jim's troubled gaze as he began.

"OK, Jim. Tell me everything. Is it true what you told the attending EMTs? Did you shoot Blair Sandburg? For God's sake, why, man? It was a mistake, right?"

"Yes. I did. I can't say it was an accident, exactly, but I didn't mean to, I swear it, Simon. Not Blair. I just...reacted. It was instinctive. I can't explain it yet, if ever. I...I need Blair to help me understand that esoteric crap. If he lives.

"He *has* to live, Simon! I can't do this without him! I realise that now," and he stared into his friend and captain's eyes, the despair on his own face piteous to see.

To say that Banks was stunned at the open admission would be an understatement, but he shook himself out of his momentary stupor and responded, his expression darkening even more as he chose his words with care.

"Are you sure about that, Jim? Seems to me as if you were already working on cutting the kid loose. All that stuff about wanting a partner you could trust, and wanting to go back to how it was before Sandburg came on board. Had you reached the limit of your patience, Jim? Did you want him gone so much that you decided subconsciously to take extreme measures?" Simon prayed he was wrong, but he had to know. In his own way he had grown fond of the annoying little anthropologist, and hadn't liked how Jim had seemed to turn on him. But if it was a sentinel thing, he was pretty sure it was going to take some explaining, and Jim was probably right in that case. It needed Blair's input, and right now that was looking increasingly doubtful.

"No! Yes...I don't know, Simon! I mean, yes, I was upset after I read that chapter of his. I mean, it made me look like some sort of coward. I couldn't believe he'd write stuff like that about me. I thought we were friends. But I wouldn't have hurt him, Simon. And whether I wanted to admit it or not, I still need him. Need him to help me with my senses...."

Abruptly Simon realised he'd lost Jim's attention, and the sentinel's eyes became slightly unfocussed as he appeared to be concentrating on whatever was going on in the next room.

"What is it, Jim? Is it Blair? What can you hear?"

Shaking himself in response to Simon's words, Jim sought the other man's eyes as he forced his words through a dry and constricted throat. "They've stabilised him, and he's going to be prepped for surgery for the gunshot wound. But they're concerned about the blow to his head. They're going to send him for a scan to make sure there's no skull fracture or internal bleeding.

"Shit! He hit his head so hard against the door jamb as he went down," and Jim squeezed his eyes shut in remembered horror as he replayed the awful sound of Blair's head smacking against the solid object, and the look of pure agony and terror that had flitted across the mobile features as the young man collapsed.

"Simon, I need to ask you a favour. I know you'll need my badge and gun while this is being investigated. And I know it has to be. But I need you to let me stay here until I know he's going to be OK. Please, Simon. I'm not going to hurt him again, I swear. But I need to know he's alive and...and not damaged," and his voice tailed off, leaving Simon in no doubt that it was brain damage to which Jim was referring.

And he understood that sentiment only too well. The thought of that brilliant, quirky mind being irreparably compromised made Simon feel sick. But he had to obey the rules. And until this mess was sorted out, no way could he let Jim have unrestricted access to Sandburg.

"You know I can't do that, Jim. Not unless you're accompanied at all times, and even that's being optimistic. But I'll wait with you until we at least know officially what's going on with Blair. And while we're waiting, you can give me your statement. And I want you to tell me everything you can remember, however arcane. We'll try and make sense of it later, and absolutely *no* pun intended," he added grimly.

Some time earlier, the loft:

Jim pattered around the kitchen, irritated by the sling immobilising his left arm. His temper, already uncertain, wasn't helped as he dropped the wooden spoon he was using, and he cursed under his breath as he bent to retrieve it, knocking his shoulder slightly as he stood up again. The pain shot through him, making him grit his teeth in agony until he managed to wrestle his pain dial back down to tolerable levels and he breathed out in relief as he regained some measure of equilibrium. Even though somewhat grudgingly, he had to admit that it was a great sense management mechanism that Blair had come up with; yet another reason why he should be grateful for the young man's continuing support and devotion.

But he still couldn't get over that damned chapter. His common sense told him that it was foolish to take it out of context, just like Sandburg had tried to explain. And in truth he shouldn't have read it anyway after Blair had asked him not to, so in all honesty it wasn't really Blair but himself who was guilty of betraying the other's trust. But the contents still riled him, and he found it so hard to forgive. To wonder whether Sandburg really did view him like that.

Then again, perhaps Sandburg was correct when he talked about fear-based responses, and it was that truth that Jim didn't want to face up to. Because he was certainly worried now. The damned visions were occurring more frequently, and he really could do with some help in interpreting them. But he didn't feel like confiding in Sandburg right now even though he knew it should be the way to proceed. And even more so since that nightmare about shooting Blair's wolf. Damn Incacha and that nonsense about passing the Way of the Shaman to Blair. As if the kid needed that burden too on top of everything else in his crazy life.

Shit! He hated this spiritual crap. Bad enough that he had cause to see his jaguar every so often, but now he was seeing another one, and it could only mean bad news. Pausing to consider its possible significance, he frowned as he recalled its appearance during the shoot-out in the store. It had certainly distracted him enough to have gotten himself shot, albeit not too seriously, and he couldn't help but wonder if it meant that there was another sentinel nearby. The thought was simultaneously welcome and intolerable. Welcome because it meant that he wasn't the singularity he thought he was, but intolerable because he couldn't bear the thought of another such as he in his territory. Or anywhere near his guide. The guide was his, and his alone. And where the hell did that notion come from?

Suddenly he was struck by a flash of totally primal disquiet, and he reached for the service pistol close to hand on the countertop which was in itself an indication of how generally unsettled he was feeling. Someone was coming, and the logical part of his brain automatically registered his partner's presence as his sensory scan confirmed Blair's person. But the familiar scent was overlain by another. A feral scent that screamed 'danger' and drew his own animal instinct instantly to the fore. His pure aggressive/defensive mode in overdrive, he swung around as the door opened. He had a fraction of a second in which to react, and even as he pulled the trigger to destroy the intruder, he saw Sandburg's horrified face, and he knew he would never forget that expression as long as he lived. An expression which morphed into agony as the bullet smashed into his chest, and he was thrown backwards to collide with the door frame before falling back into the corridor, blood pouring from the wound as Jim stood unmoving, momentarily stunned into inactivity.

The next second, Jim was on his knees beside his fallen guide, the gun put aside as he reached for his partner. Savagely pulling off the restricting sling, he strove to press his hands over the pulsing chest wound in an attempt to stop the bleeding. As one of his neighbours from up the hallway stuck his head out to see what was happening, Jim yelled at him to call 911, grateful when the man nodded briskly and withdrew to do as requested so that Jim could concentrate on his friend. The true friend who certainly hadn't deserved this.



Although it was only a matter of minutes until the EMTs arrived, it had felt like hours while Blair's life-blood continued to drain from his lax body, and the period between them stabilising Blair for transport until his arrival at Cascade General passed in a blur for the sentinel, who had insisted on accompanying his partner in the ambulance despite the EMTs' disapproval.

Forcibly dragging himself back to the present, Jim raised stricken eyes to meet Simon's. There was nothing for it but to tell his captain everything he could within reason, however difficult it would be for a man renowned for his taciturn nature. Taking a deep breath, Jim began.

Long minutes later, Jim finally ran out of steam and his words tailed off. The recitation had proved to be surprisingly exhausting, both mentally and physically, and Jim felt drained. Although he had described and admitted to his emotional reaction to Blair's paper, and the increasingly strained relationship between them in recent days, he had deliberately glossed over the spiritual elements and visions leading up to the incident. He knew that Simon, with the best will in the world, found it very hard to comprehend what he termed 'sentinel voodoo shit'. Having said that, he recognised that the bald account he had provided left him looking decidedly cold and unfeeling if not actually guilty of carrying out a premeditated assault. It was as well therefore that Simon knew him well enough to give him the benefit of the doubt, because any other listeners would have been hard put to recognise the real distress beneath the stoic exterior.

Once he was certain Jim had finished, Banks sat back and considered his response. "OK, Jim. I'm pretty sure there's a lot more to your story than you've told me, and I guess I know why. I mean, I've never given you or Sandburg any reason to believe that my tolerance level for the arcane has improved any over the years, and I appreciate your trying to spare my feelings. On the other hand, you must know how weak your version will sound to the investigators from IA? Whereas it could possibly be explained as a mistaken home invasion by Joe or Jane Public, it doesn't ring true for a cop with your experience and proven capability. They're going to try and make you look guilty of getting rid of your partner in the most permanent way.

"After all, man, you know there are still people in the PD who can't or won't understand why Blair's still riding with you years down the line. I mean, how long does it take to write a dissertation? And there's jealousy too, your drastically improved arrest and conviction rate notwithstanding.

"Anyhow, I don't believe that the Jim I know would do anything so cruel. You can be a cold and ruthless bastard when you want to be, but you're no cold-blooded killer. Having said that, I have no alternative but to put you on suspension with immediate effect. Because until Blair wakes up and confirms your story one way or the other, people are going to assume the worst.

"So we'd better pray that he wakes up soon."

"Amen to that, Simon," Jim breathed fervently. "And you know what? I don't even care if he does press charges. I wouldn't blame him if he did. I just want him to be OK."

And nodding his assent, his expression compassionate and understanding, Simon reached over and patted Jim's knee with a comforting hand.

Just then, a harried and blood-stained doctor emerged from the trauma suite where Blair lay.

"Are you here for Mr Sandburg?" and both men rose with alacrity, their faces wearing identical masks of deep concern and trepidation.

"Yes, doctor. I'm Captain Banks, Cascade PD Major Crimes Unit, and this is Detective Jim Ellison, one of my men. Mr Sandburg is a consultant with my department, and Detective Ellison's partner and roommate. What can you tell us? Will he be OK?"

"I understand that Detective Ellison is Mr Sandburg's legal medical representative? Is that correct?"

When Jim quickly confirmed it, the doctor nodded his satisfaction and continued. "OK, then. This is what I can tell you so far.

"The scan has shown no evidence of a skull fracture, or internal bleeding thus far, although Mr Sandburg remains deeply unconscious and there may well be complications further on down the line.

"The bullet passed directly through the chest wall and exited at the right shoulder. It broke a rib, and did a lot of damage in its passage, but missed vital organs. Having said that, we have to repair and re-inflate Mr Sandburg's lung, and he has lost a significant amount of

blood. He's being taken down to the OR as we speak, and we anticipate that he may be there some while, so if you intend to wait, Detective Ellison, I suggest you get washed up and changed. Someone will come for you when Mr Sandburg is ready to be admitted to ICU.

"Now, if you'll excuse me?" and the man shook their hands quickly before hurrying away, leaving two stunned men behind him.

As Jim sank down into his seat again, knees suddenly too weak to bear his weight, Simon squatted down beside him, frowning in worry.

"You OK, Jim? You look like you're ready to pass out, man! Look, it sounds hopeful, doesn't it? I mean, Sandburg's a real fighter, so I have to believe he'll pull through OK. And *you* have to believe it too.

"Now I know it's pointless asking you to leave yet, but the doc's right. You need to get cleaned up and get those clothes bagged for forensics. You know the drill. So I'm going to go get us some coffee, and I'll call Joel and ask him to pick up some clean stuff from the loft and bring it over. And then he can sit with you until I can get back here.

"Because I need to leave soon and get things started back at the PD. Especially if I'm to try and finagle you some leeway in remaining here for any length of time. And you need someone with you, for moral support as much as a legal requirement. Are you hearing any of this?" and he grasped Jim's shoulder, forcing the other man to meet his gaze.

Jim's expression was bleak, and the pain and entreaty in his eyes was hard for Simon to witness, but he nodded nonetheless.

"Yeah, I understand, Simon. Do what you have to do. But don't ask me to leave. Not until we know for sure how he is."

"I'll try Jim. For you and Blair both," and, patting Jim's shoulder again, he rose to leave.

Several hours later:



Joel watched Jim Ellison closely, his kindly face wearing an unaccustomed frown. Over the past few hours since he had arrived here, Jim had alternated between sitting in an almost fugue state and bouts of frenetic energy, when he would pace up and down like some large predatory cat. Although he had washed and changed into the clean clothes Joel had brought with him, he still looked frazzled and disarranged, and had barely spoken except in distracted one or two word responses to Joel's gentle questioning. Now Joel was a good soul, who liked and respected Jim, so although he was desperate to learn the true nature of the incident that had placed Blair in hospital, he held off for the time being. However, it was hard for him, as he had developed a real soft spot for the young anthropologist, considering him to be more like an adopted son than just a good friend. But he supposed Simon had his reasons for not filling him in when he arrived, so he determined to wait patiently until they at least had news of whether Blair would pull through or not.

And if he had but known it, Simon's reasons were sound insofar as he was attempting to contain the levels of antagonism that were sure to erupt within his department once the truth came out. By limiting the information to the bare basics, he hoped to minimise the recrimination to which Jim was sure to be subjected, at least until such time as they knew Blair would survive, and in doing so, whether or not he would want to press charges. Because once they reached that stage, there would be recriminations aplenty, whether charges were levelled or not.

Suddenly Joel's worried musing was interrupted by the entrance of a tired-looking doctor, whose scrubs still bore the bloody evidence of recent surgery. Pulling off his scrub cap, the man rubbed a hand through his hair as he said, "Detective Ellison? I'm Doctor Blackwell. I've just finished working on Mr Sandburg, and thought I'd give you an update." He wasn't surprised when the large, distraught-looking cop strode immediately over to him, closely followed by his companion, who placed a comforting hand on Ellison's shoulder.

"How is he? Will he live?" Ellison's tone was anguished as his urgent gaze bored into the doctor's eyes, desperately seeking reassurance.

"Well, it was touch and go for a while, and we lost him once on the operating table. But we managed to get his heart re-started and have repaired the damage to his chest and lung, which has been successfully re-inflated. He's on a respirator to help him breathe and allow the lung to heal, and will be kept in a drug-induced coma for at least another twenty four hours to give his system a chance to rest.

"However, although at this stage I would give him a fighting chance of recovery, he isn't out of the woods yet, especially should there be any complications arising from his head injury.

"He's in Recovery now, and will be taken up to ICU in another hour or so, where you'll be able to see him for a few minutes once he's settled. Having said that, you probably already know that visiting is strictly limited to ten minutes per hour, so I would suggest that as soon as you have seen him you go home and get some food and rest, Detective. You'll be no good to your friend if you collapse from exhaustion."

He could tell from the mulish scowl on the other man's face that his words were having little impact right now, so he simply added, "I'll send someone to collect you once Mr Sandburg's settled. If you'll excuse me, I need to get on," and he left them with a brisk nod and a tired but polite smile.

Letting out his breath in a gusty sigh of relief, Jim virtually staggered over to the nearest chair and collapsed onto it, dropping his face into his hands as he fought to contain the tears that threatened to fall. He was vaguely aware of Joel's comforting presence as the older man sat beside him, but was grateful that his friend maintained a thoughtful but sympathetic silence, as Jim wasn't sure he could cope with any words right now, however well-meant. Eventually, however, he regained enough control to raise his head and make eye contact with Joel.

The older man spoke at last, his tone gentle as he asked, "Are you OK, Jim? Can I get you anything? Coffee, perhaps?"

When Jim shook his head, but offered a tiny smile of appreciation, Joel continued.

"It must be good news, what the doctor said, right? And we all know that Blair's a tough little guy. And brave too, although he's always at pains to make out that he isn't. But he won't leave you, Jim. We all know he cares too much about you for that."

And Jim didn't have the heart or the energy to gainsay his kind-hearted colleague, even though his conscience was howling in denial. Why the hell would Sandburg want to stay with him now, after everything that had passed between them? He would be mad to keep trying in the face of Jim's ingratitude, surely? Even someone as loyal and obstinate as Blair must

finally get the message that Jim simply wasn't worth his devotion, and would give up and leave him like everyone else he had ever cared for.

Jim just prayed that the leaving wouldn't be in the form of the young man's death, because he could never live with himself if that were the case. He'd eat his own gun before he tried to live with his guilt and shame. And maybe – just maybe – he'd meet Blair again in some other time or place, and he'd beg for forgiveness.

Stamping down fiercely on that line of thought, he pulled himself together. Time enough for self-recrimination once he was assured that Blair would survive, because that was all that mattered right now.

Shortly after, although it seemed like another eternity to the impatient cop, a nurse approached Jim to take him up to the ICU. Knowing that only one person at a time would be allowed in to see Blair, and that person needed to be Ellison, Joel smiled in encouragement as he waved Jim off.

“Go on, Jim. I'll wait here and give Simon a call. He'll want to be updated, and no doubt will be over here again as soon as he can. Say hello to Blair for me,” and he watched Jim's departing back with a sad smile. His friend and colleague was barely holding it together, and would surely shatter if Blair failed to pull through after all.

But Joel refused to consider that possibility. Blair would survive, no doubt about it. The alternative was unthinkable.

Up in the ICU, Jim sat beside Blair's bed, his senses automatically scanning the young man, and not liking the information he was gathering.

In all honesty, Blair looked dead already, his pallid face and bruised-looking eyelids almost corpse-like in their waxy immobility. Despite the regular fall and rise of his chest as the respirator breathed for him, his skin was cold to the touch and simply felt wrong beneath Jim's gentle hand. His torso was swathed in thick dressings, and there was a wide bandage around his head, covering the deep gash in his scalp. Jim hoped that he hadn't had to lose many of his abundant locks to the doctor's scissors when it was sutured, although that was of little concern in comparison to the possible internal damage which could still threaten Blair's life.

A unit of blood and what appeared to be antibiotics dripped steadily through IVs in both of Blair's hands, and he was hooked up to various monitors which beeped as they registered the young man's life-signs.

Not that the sentinel needed them to hear for himself how his guide fared. The familiar heartbeat was slow but relatively strong, and the living pulse beneath Jim's fingers belied the clammy coldness of Blair's flesh, but he was still frightened by the utterly motionless body. Blair was never still. Even when he slept Jim could hear him moving about and muttering under his breath in his small bedroom under the stairs. And Jim had never confessed to how comforting he found the soft sounds. Or how he used Blair's heartbeat to ground himself.

But Blair deserved to know. And Jim swore to himself that if only the kid would wake up, they would talk. Really talk. And Jim would try and tell Sandburg just how much he depended on his partner for friendship and guidance.

He just had to live.

He knew that he had scant minutes remaining before he was told to leave until the next hour's visiting time, and was about to drop a kiss on the smooth forehead when the heart monitor screeched in alarm at the exact same moment as sentinel hearing registered a sudden stuttering in the steady rhythm. Jim was pushed hurriedly aside as the room suddenly filled with medical personnel, and even as the monitor flat-lined, a voice yelled, "Emergency! He's crashing!"

From outside Blair's cubicle, Jim watched stunned as the medics fought to save Blair's life, unaware of the appearance of Simon at his back, his captain having just this minute arrived. The controlled but urgent activity seemed to continue forever, until the attending doctor stood back, a defeated look on his face.

"He's gone. Time of death noted as 10.52 pm," and almost under his breath, "Poor little guy."

"NOOOOO! No!" Jim's scream of denial rang through the ward as the doctor hurried out to try to quiet the distraught sentinel.

"Please, Detective Ellison! Please calm yourself! You'll disturb the other patients! Look, if you calm down, you can come in. Say goodbye, OK?" The man's sympathy was genuine, but he had others' welfare to consider and he would have no problem with having the big cop removed if he had to.

Controlling himself with a gargantuan effort, Jim nodded quickly, desperate now to see Blair for one last time. Satisfied with Ellison's hard-won restraint, particularly in view of his captain's supportive presence, the doctor stood aside and let Jim in.

Hurrying to the bedside, Jim ignored the other personnel moving quietly about their business as he sank to the floor on his knees, cupping the lax face in his palms as he whispered urgently.

"You can't go, Chief! I need you! Come on, Blair, fight! Fight for me – for us!" *For pity's sake, Incacha! Do something! I need him; it's not his turn yet!*

And suddenly the dead shaman appeared in his mind's eye, a look of reproof on the kindly face.

If you believe that, Enqueri, then you know what to do. It is within you to bring him back if he desires it.

The vision faded before Jim could press for an explanation, but before he could panic, it was replaced by the blue-tinted jungle scene of previous visions. He saw his jaguar, greatly distressed, staring longingly at a beautiful, blue-eyed wolf. Blair's wolf, which whined piteously before turning to face a bright and welcoming light that grew steadily in the distance. As the animal turned to go, it looked over its shoulder, an expression of soul-deep sorrow and resignation on its face as the jaguar yowled in anger and pain.

“No! I won’t let you go!” The words were uttered through clenched teeth as Jim saw the wolf turn back, hope lighting its eyes at it move steadily towards the jaguar, until both animals were running full-pelt one towards the other, to leap and merge in a blinding flash of light.

And beneath his hands, Blair coughed hoarsely around the tube in his throat, the sudden sound accompanied by a tentative *thu..thump* of the beloved heart.

And the next moment Jim was once more hustled from the room, this time happy to comply while the astonished medics closed in around his guide once more, this time to confirm his life-signs and stabilise him once again.

As he sank bonelessly into the nearest chair, Jim was vaguely aware of Simon’s presence as the older man collapsed into the seat next to him. The captain’s face was awe-struck as he gazed from the activity in the cubicle to Jim and back.

“My god, Jim! What did you do? How? I can’t believe it, man!”

And all Jim had the energy to murmur was, “It’s a sentinel and guide thing, Simon. A sentinel and guide thing...” and he lowered his face into his hands again and wept.



Part 2:

Two days later, Blair's room, Cascade General Hospital:

With a slight groan of discomfort, Jim eased his tall frame in the chair beside Blair's bed, muscles protesting at being in the same position for too long. However, there was nowhere else he would rather be, so he dialled back the discomfort and concentrated on his guide. Blair was still unconscious, but yesterday had been weaned off the drugs keeping him in a coma and he was now in a natural healing sleep. He had also been transferred to a private room just off the ICU earlier that morning, having made huge strides in his physical recovery since his miraculous return from the dead. A return that continued to baffle the medical staff, but was accepted gladly even without a logical explanation. The respirator had been removed, and he only had the IV port for nutrients and medication now, and his colour was slightly better also.

However, Blair had yet to regain full consciousness, so Jim was still waiting with no little trepidation for the discussion he had promised himself that they would have. One which had the potential to make or break their relationship, if indeed they still had one. And even when Blair woke fully, he would be in no condition to engage in protracted dialogue for some time, so Jim would have to curb his impatience in the meantime.

Glancing quickly across the room, Jim looked at Megan, who was his current babysitter. She was apparently reading a magazine, having given up on her efforts to engage Jim in any sort of conversation, but Jim was sure she was surreptitiously checking him out also, and keeping a close eye on Blair, of whom she was particularly fond. With a soft sigh, he turned his attention back to Blair, reaching up to push a stray curl out of the peaceful face. He was feeling a growing tenderness towards the young man, which surprised him, as well as an increasing possessiveness which he wasn't sure Blair would appreciate. On the other hand, everything was moot if Blair refused to have anything to do with him on his awakening, or even worse, was damaged in some way. But Jim refused to consider that possibility. He was sure Incacha wouldn't have allowed him to bring back a permanently damaged guide, for Blair's sake, if not his own.

A barely restrained sigh of frustration drew his attention back to Megan, and he smirked sardonically to himself as he imagined how hard it must be for the garrulous and forthright Aussie Inspector to contain her desire to probe for information. But he agreed with Simon that for Blair's – and his own - sake they continue to keep a lid on the information they disseminated until such time as Blair could speak for himself. He knew very well that the rumour-mill would have been churning out all manner of speculation, but no way was he going to add to it for fear that his automatic suspension should be upgraded to being charged. Whether he deserved it or not, he desperately needed to avoid that stage until Blair was out of danger. He therefore intended to avoid the PD for as long as possible, and kept communication with his 'babysitters' to a bare minimum.

Rubbing a hand wearily over his face, he was surprised at the amount of stubble on his chin. Then again, it was only to be expected considering the time he had spent at the hospital. He had barely left Blair's side since his guide's admission, apart from a few hours the previous day. Once Blair had been declared out of immediate danger after his 'resurrection', Simon had insisted that Jim return with him to Simon's house to shower, change and get something to eat. And a few hours' sleep if possible. Anticipating his detective's denial, and backed up

by the attending physician, he had made it an order so that Jim had had no choice but to obey. Reassured that Blair would remain unconscious for hours yet, and that he would be contacted immediately should there be any change, he reluctantly agreed and sulkily complied with his boss's demands.

And to be honest, it had done him good. He had felt immeasurably better having had a proper shower and shave, and he had even managed to force down some food. And a couple of hours' of unexpected but welcome sleep on Simon's spare bed had done wonders in pushing back his exhaustion; enough so that he felt refreshed and able to resume his bedside vigil for as long as it took.

But that was yesterday, and right now he felt every one of his nearly forty years after yet another night spent in this godawful chair.

A twinge of protest from his bladder demanded his attention and pulled him from his thoughts, so with a softly murmured, "Back soon, Chief," he stood, stretched and made his way over to the bathroom, nodding to Megan as he passed. Quickly taking care of business, he washed up and opened the door, only to stop dead, momentarily riveted to the spot. As Megan stared up at him, a puzzled expression on her pretty face, he strode forward to the bed. Sentinel senses didn't lie, and he touched a gentle hand to Blair's cheek.

His guide was waking up.

Ignoring Megan's softly-spoken but worried query, "What's up, Jimbo? What is it? Is Sandy OK?" Jim subjected Sandburg to a thorough sensory scan. The young man's heart rate was increasing gradually and tiny flutters in the delicate eyelids warned of the return of consciousness. Gently squeezing Blair's hand in his, mindful of the small wound where the IV port had been removed, Jim cupped Blair's face in his free hand, stroking the smooth skin over a prominent cheekbone with a sentinel-soft touch.

"Come on, Chief. You can do it. Come on back to me, babe. That's it. Wake up for me." And if he was aware of uttering the small endearment, he gave it no mind, concentrating fully on the increasing signs of wakefulness.

He was soon rewarded by a small moan of distress as Blair seemed to try to take a deeper breath. However, the action set off a painful-sounding coughing fit that had Jim bracing the smaller man with a strong arm around his shoulders as he tried to prevent Blair from doing himself any further damage or tearing open his stitches.

"Easy, Chief. Try to relax. I've got you. I know it hurts, kiddo, I know," and he kept up his encouraging words until Blair slumped back against his arm, apparently exhausted once again, and Jim lowered him carefully down onto his pillows.

Just then, the door burst open to admit the duty doctor, who had been summoned by Megan.

"How long has he been awake? When did this happen?" and he hurried over to the bed to check on his patient, whose face was now creased in real agony as he fought to take shallower breaths.

“Literally just now,” Jim replied curtly, his anxiety plain to see. “He tried to take a deep breath and began to cough. He’s in pain,” he added forcibly, frowning at the doctor as if it were his fault.

However, refusing to be intimidated, the doctor merely replied quietly, “Hardly surprising. The poor guy must feel as if his chest’s been torn open. Which it has, of course. I’ll get him something for the pain now,” and he turned and swiftly issued an order to the nurse who had followed him in.

A few minutes later she returned with a full syringe which she injected slowly and carefully into a port on Blair’s IV line.

“There you go, Mr Sandburg,” she murmured with a small smile. “You’ll soon feel better,” and she gently patted his shoulder irrespective of whether he was conscious of it or not, her professional attitude plainly enhanced by genuine care and concern for her patient.

Sure enough, as they watched, Blair’s face gradually lost its agonised expression and smoothed out again as he drifted once more into a healing sleep.

The capable-looking middle-aged doctor, whose name tag identified him as Dr Murray, subjected Blair to a quick but thorough check before meeting Jim’s quizzical gaze once more. Indicating that Jim move with him away from the bed while the nurse bustled about straightening the sheets and making Blair comfortable again, he addressed the big cop firmly but compassionately. It was obvious to Murray that the bond between Ellison and his patient was far deeper than anything he had ever yet encountered in police partners, and the extent of the older man’s concern was easy to see. He had also been told in great detail about Sandburg’s apparent return from the dead at this man’s insistence, so he was therefore prepared to cut him a little slack as long as it didn’t interfere with Sandburg’s treatment and recovery.

“I know that was distressing to witness, Detective Ellison, but it was to be expected given the extent of the damage to Mr Sandburg’s chest. And believe it or not, it is very encouraging. Despite phasing out the drugs keeping him in a coma, I am somewhat surprised at how soon he has shown signs of waking up of his own accord. All in all, things are looking quite hopeful.”

Rubbing a hand roughly over his face, Jim sighed as he responded, offering the doctor a wry grin. “Yeah, I know, Doctor Murray. I was trained as an army medic, so I’ve seen plenty worse in my time. It’s just that my partner means a lot to me – he’s not even a real cop – so it’s hard to see him like this. Hell, he didn’t even get as far as opening his eyes fully before he drifted off again.

“I need to see him properly awake, doctor. I need to know there’s no lasting damage.”

Patting his bicep, Murray grimaced in sympathy. “I know, Detective, but you must be patient. Easy to say, I know, but I really do think it will happen soon. He’s already made amazing progress, and he’s lucky to have so many people looking out for him. He must be a good man.”

“The best, doctor; the best. And he so didn’t deserve this,” but Jim bit off whatever else he was going to add. Now was not the time for public confessions, especially with Megan

Connor listening in unashamedly from her position by the door. If what the doctor said was true, that time would be here soon enough.

Over the next twenty four hours Blair roused several more times, each time a little more alert than the last. His breathing was not unexpectedly still very difficult and painful, and his distress was hard to watch, but the heavy-duty painkillers he was offered quickly alleviated the worst of his waking agony. Doctor Murray told Jim that, once Blair was fully awake and capable enough to manage, he would be put on a morphine pump so he could help himself to fixed doses as and when he needed them.

And finally the moment arrived when Blair's eyes opened, and there was no doubt in Jim's mind as he almost lost himself in the beautiful blue depths that his guide was truly awake and aware once more.

"Jim?" The single word rasped from a throat still raw and painful from the breathing tube, and Blair's forehead scrunched in discomfort as Jim hurriedly reached for the pitcher of ice chips on the nightstand.

"Sshhh, Chief. Let me get you something to ease your throat. Suck on these now, and talk later, OK?" he murmured in gentle humour, and he offered the other man a rueful and sympathetic grin as he spooned a few chips into Blair's open mouth.

Sighing in grateful relief as the cool, melting chips soothed his sore throat; Blair relaxed back into his pillows for a moment before trying again. After a moment, he opened his eyes, turning his head slightly to look at Jim, and indicating with his eyes and expression that he'd like some more.

Grinning in response, Jim offered him another spoonful, too happy to see this return to full comprehension to hurry the moment.

He repeated the action once again before Blair licked his lips appreciatively and offered Jim a tiny smile.

"Thanks, man. Gotta say I feel like shit. Chest hurts and head wants to fall off. What did I do this time?" The low and laboured words tailed off as he tried to control his breathing, and Jim held his own breath in shocked and temporarily stupefied silence. Was it true? Did Blair not realise what had happened? Was this a good or bad thing? His thoughts whirled around in his brain as he stared at his guide, completely incapable of making any sort of lucid response for the moment.

They were both distracted when the door opened and Simon entered, having made a brief foray down to the nurses' station for fresh coffee and taking the opportunity to call in to the MCU with a progress report. Taking in the scene before him, a wide and incredulous smile broke out across his face as he hurried over to deposit the mugs of coffee on the nightstand.

"Sandburg! Blair! You're awake!" If he was stating the obvious, he couldn't have cared less, his joy and relief too great for such trivial concerns.

However, his expression sobered to one of apprehension when Blair's answering smile of welcome faltered, and the younger man's puzzled gaze flicked back and forth between a still silent Jim and Simon.

Oh shit! He's remembering! thought Jim. And he knew he was correct when Blair shrank back against his pillows, breaths hitching painfully as he fought to control his incipient panic, and the look of fear and hurt on his face was heart-breaking to see.

Galvanised into action, Jim leant forward, but refrained from touching Blair when the younger man gasped and cringed in horror.

"It's OK, Chief! I promise I won't hurt you. Please, Blair, calm down," he pleaded urgently. "Look, Simon's going to get the doctor for you, OK? Just try and relax a bit – you're going to hurt yourself..."

All further talk was suspended when Dr Murray hurried into the room. He had been in the process of doing his rounds, so was conveniently available when Simon had spotted him in the corridor outside. Taking one look at his patient, he made a unilateral decision. "You, Detective, out! You too, Captain Banks. I'll speak to you when I've checked on my patient. Out!" and the two men had no choice but to obey, albeit with bad grace on Jim's part. He couldn't, however, ignore the strong grip Simon had on his upper arm, and his own guilty conscience forbade him from staying when it was plain that Blair couldn't bear his presence.

Leaving the doctor to take care of Blair, the two men retreated to the corridor, and collapsed into the nearest available chairs. Jim dropped his head in his hands as Simon squeezed his shoulder in mute support. He barely made out the words when Ellison spoke again.

"Now it begins, god help me!"

Blair:

Blair lay back propped up against his pillows. Calmer now, and feeling little pain, thanks to the mild sedative and strong painkillers the doctor had dosed him with, yet his internal anguish was raw and unrelenting, and he couldn't prevent the slow tears that slid down his pale cheeks. He remembered everything now, right up to the point where the bullet slammed into his chest. The bullet fired by the man who he had considered to be his best friend. He didn't know whether he had blurted that bit of news to the doctor while he was having his meltdown, but he supposed it would come out soon enough anyway. Jim was too honest a man to try and cover it up.

From the physical perspective, the doctor had explained exactly what his injuries were, and what he could expect during his recovery. And that certainly hadn't cheered him any. He was going to need help and support, and was at a loss as to who was going to be available for him to call upon. He supposed he could try to contact Naomi, if she could be traced from whatever far-flung place she was currently visiting, but that didn't guarantee that she would actually come. Or rather, stay for as long as he needed her. Naomi, his evergreen hippy mom; the perennial wild child and ethereal will o' the wisp. He loved her dearly, and knew she loved him in her way. But trying to pin her down was beyond him, or anyone else for that matter. His mouth twitched in a wry smirk as he fancifully compared her to a handful of cool,

sweet water. You could hold it just long enough to take a sip – just enough to tantalise you – then the rest would drain away through your fingers as if it had never been. Yep, that was his Mom.

He sighed as deeply as his healing chest would allow. Of course, in any other circumstances he might have hoped that Jim would do the honours, just like he had when Blair had been shot during the Quinn episode. And after Lash, and the ‘golden’ incident, and so many other times. Times when he had grown to truly love and appreciate the man as much as the sentinel, and had dearly hoped that the feelings were reciprocated.

But ever since that dreadful night when Jim had read his opening chapter, things between them had changed fundamentally for the worse. Although Jim had relented when Blair had offered to destroy his work and just go back to being friends, things had never really gotten back to normal, and Blair couldn’t help feeling that he was on borrowed time. Jim no longer trusted him, and it was just a matter of time until he’d tell Blair that it was all over, and to get out of the loft, and his life. Blair knew it had to come – was resigned to the fact – but had continued to hang on in the mistaken belief that perhaps he could change Jim’s mind.

And he’d really thought he had a chance to put things right, which is what he’d been going to explain to Jim that fateful day at the loft, only he’d never had the opportunity.

As much as he had hated to do it, he had gone to his dissertation committee and told them that he wanted to change his topic. After witnessing Jim’s extreme reaction, he knew he couldn’t go through with it, so had decided to follow through on the ‘closed societies’ subject instead. He had, after all, collected more than enough data to make a real go of it, even if it wasn’t as dear to his heart as the sentinel paper. And just maybe Jim would forgive him and they could resume their friendship.

However, he hadn’t actually told Jim yet, because he had been afraid of having his pass pulled. After all, if he wasn’t riding with Jim to help with the sentinel stuff, Simon had no reason to keep him on indefinitely. So he had kept quiet, and worked on both papers – the ‘Thin Blue Line’ one for submission, and the ‘Sentinel’ paper for his own satisfaction - and for Jim’s benefit, should he ever care to read it. He had hoped to be able to confront Jim with his successful doctorate as a *fait accompli*, then ask if he was happy for Blair to apply for an official consultant’s position with the PD. The intention was to put Jim’s mind at rest regarding the sentinel study, and also convince him that Blair very much wanted their partnership to continue. So much for the best laid plans....

And then the miracle had happened. To his great excitement, he had discovered Alex. The female sentinel had gladly accepted his offer of help, and it had occurred to him that he could perhaps use her as his primary dissertation subject instead. If so, he could complete his original paper after all, using her data and his previously gathered material, and Jim wouldn’t have to be involved at all. It was a heady thought, and Blair had been bursting with excitement as he had rushed back to the loft to tell Jim everything, eagerly anticipating his friend’s reaction.

It wasn’t the one he’d been expecting.

The stream of silent tears increased as did his misery, and he wasn't at all sure that the growing pain in his chest wasn't due to his heart breaking rather than the damage from the bullet.

And what was he to do about the whole shooting episode? The doctor had told him that Jim had remained by his side for virtually all the time since his admission, so that fact in itself told him that Jim hadn't been arrested. He presumed that the detective would have been suspended pending investigation, as was normal after a shooting, but perhaps Simon was waiting for Blair to press charges. And he wasn't sure he could do that, even though he supposed he should. He was certainly angry enough, but this was Jim. The best friend he'd ever had – up until recently, at least.

The man who had really seemed to care for Blair, and had let him into his life and his home. The much-admired sentinel and protector who had won Blair's love and respect.

There had to be a reason for the sudden attack. Blair couldn't believe it was simply to do with their recent disagreement, and he owed it to Jim to hear his side of the story.

But he was so scared now. Not only because Jim might hurt him again, but also that he wouldn't like what the man had to tell him. And would he ever be able to trust Jim again? After all, he had never believed Jim could harm him – had always believed that the guide's safety was of paramount importance to the sentinel, judging by everything they had experienced together so far. Hell, he'd written a whole chapter covering that very premise.

Seems he'd been quite wrong. There were obviously circumstances he'd never even considered, which didn't say much for his recent observational skills. And that was probably because he's gotten too close to his subject, which was another reason for abandoning the sentinel paper as a factual, scientific study.

All in all, he was as down and depressed as he'd ever been, and for once hadn't the energy to pick himself up and dust himself off as he'd always managed to do before when life had kicked him in the teeth. Always a 'glass half full' type of guy, his normally sunny nature had reasserted itself soon enough in most situations up until recently, but now he felt drained of hope and joy, his optimism crushed by more than a bullet's path through his body. His soul was deeply wounded, and the sense of loss he felt was like a growing ache tearing his very heart in two.

Unable to bear his dismal thoughts any longer, he succumbed to the tempting pull of the sedative, and drifted off once more into a dark and troubled sleep.

The next time Blair woke, it was to find Simon at his bedside, and he was surprised to experience a momentary pang of disappointment at Jim's absence. Correctly interpreting Blair's anxious expression and the questing eyes searching the room, Simon bought himself a little time by offering the young man a drink from the pitcher on the nightstand. When Blair gratefully accepted the cool water, and indicated that he had had enough, Simon murmured, "It's OK, Blair. Jim's waiting outside. He knows I want to talk to you in private, and he's promised not to listen in unless you give him the go-ahead, OK? Are you up to giving me your statement, son? I can't keep tap dancing around any longer, making excuses for Jim, you understand?" and he fixed Blair with a compassionate but compelling gaze.

He could almost pinpoint the moment the kid's eyes changed, and he clicked into what Simon privately referred to as 'obfuscation mode'. He knew then that this wasn't going to be easy or straight-forward. As if anything had ever been straight-forward in this whole sentinel set-up from the beginning. And to be honest, Simon had had enough of it. But the kid deserved his patience and understanding one more time. And hopefully for the last time, if the young man had finally learned any common-sense. Because Simon was certain that however much Jim might protest, the best thing for both men, particularly Sandburg, was for them to part company as soon as this latest business was settled one way or the other, and go their own ways. Yes, he truly liked Jim as a friend as well as his best detective, and sympathised with the problems his enhanced senses had caused him. But he had also grown fond of the bubbly, eccentric and irritating Sandburg, and he hated to see the kid hurt yet again, particularly by Jim's own hand. The kid had given Jim years of his life to help him gain control of his gift, and had nothing to show for it, not even his doctorate.

Offering Blair a surprisingly gentle smile, he tried again. "OK, son. Tell me what happened when you returned to the loft..."

So Blair did. And lied through his teeth.

Steadily meeting and holding Simon's disbelieving gaze, Blair kept his story succinct and impartial, almost as if it had happened to a third person, not himself. Because he knew that Jim would be listening in, and he didn't want to cause the man any more grief. He still loved him that much.

He simply recounted how he had returned to the loft after his interview with the female sentinel and potential study subject, and had opened the door only to see a gun pointed at him.

No, he didn't see who was holding it, and no, he didn't know why the shooter opened fire. End of story.

And pigs might fly! was Simon's immediate conclusion.

And it was obviously Jim's also, as the door burst open to admit the angry and dismayed sentinel.

Approaching the bed, but stopping short at Blair's instinctive flinch and fearful glance, Jim held out his hands almost in supplication as he said, "Tell him, Chief! Tell him the whole truth! I know you saw me, and I'll never forget the expression on your face when you did. Or forgive myself for putting it there. When the time comes, I hope you'll listen when I try to explain my reasons, such as they were, but you have to give Simon the evidence he needs. I have to be punished for what I did to you."

Drawing on an inner core of strength with which Blair would never have credited himself, the young man turned his full attention on Jim, his solemn face for once betraying none of his inner turmoil as he repeated firmly, addressing his remarks to Simon. "I didn't see who pulled the trigger, Captain Banks. I don't wish to change or add to my statement. I'm really tired, man. I'd like to be left alone now..." and he closed his eyes and sank back down onto his pillows, deliberately shutting both men out, and didn't open them again until he heard the door close behind them. Then he turned his face towards the wall and wept.

Simon led a still stunned Jim to a small nearby waiting room which luckily was presently unoccupied. Steering the other man to a chair, Simon sat down opposite and waited until pained ice blue eyes rose tentatively to meet his assessing gaze.

“Why, Simon? Why didn’t he accuse me? I *know* he was lying! *He* knows that I can tell! Shit, if these senses are good for anything, it’s as a human lie-detector! I can’t understand it...I don’t deserve it!”

“Amen to that, brother,” Simon answered grimly, his own expression hardening even in the face of Jim’s tangible distress.

“But how about this for a reason, Jim? That boy loves you. He thinks the world of you. His capacity for love astounds me, and the greater part is reserved for you, if you could only see it and give him due credit. Now, don’t even think of throwing his sacrifice back in his face and confess to something I don’t want to hear, unless you intend to go back and finish the job. Because despite this unholy mess, I think he needs you here and now, not cooling your heels in lock-up.

“Well, do you? Want to finish the job? Because if I believed for one moment that you had it in you to deliberately hurt Blair again, I’d arrest you right now and throw the book at you. But God help me, I think you need the chance to iron things out between you, and you can’t do that from a prison cell. I’m as certain as I can be that there’s some complicated sentinel shit involved that I don’t want to know about, because I probably wouldn’t believe it anyway.

“So I’m trusting you do to the right thing, Ellison, and I’m going back to the PD to confirm a case of accidental shooting. It doesn’t let you off the hook as far as an IA investigation goes, but you shouldn’t be looking at jail time.

“And you can have as much personal leave as you need to look after Blair and help him get back on his feet.

“And if you do anything to make me regret my decision, I’ll come after you and shoot you myself, are we clear?”

And a thoroughly astounded Jim looked up to meet his eyes, swallowing down a lump of emotion as he struggled to speak from a constricted throat.

“I hear you, Captain. And I swear, if I hurt Blair again, I’ll let you shoot me if I haven’t done it already.”

Simon studied him carefully for long moment before nodding briskly.

“OK, Jim. I’ll hold you to that. Now, I’m going back to the PD, and start the ball rolling by letting your colleagues know what happened – Blair’s version. You’ll just have to live with the speculation and rumour since there’s no actual proof of intent other than self-defence and no charges laid by your victim. You’ll soon be called in to see IA, and obviously in the meantime you’ll remain on suspension until you’re cleared to return to duty. So I suggest you get your act together, and go and see your partner. I think you both have a lot to talk about once Blair’s well enough to bear it.

“Meanwhile, take care of him, and don’t give me a reason to take my anger out of your hide.”

The next few days fell into a routine of sorts, with Jim making short daily trips to the loft for a brief shower and change of clothes before returning to Blair’s room to help care for his slowly recovering guide. Not having been told anything of the actual cause of Blair’s injury, Dr Murray had been pleased to accept Jim’s offer of assistance, especially in view of his medical training as it relieved the pressure a little on his own hard-working nursing staff. To Jim’s surprise and relief, Blair hadn’t enlightened the doctor, and even allowed Jim’s presence without complaint, although it was obvious that he was unusually reticent and diffident about actually asking for help while he was awake. He also refused to talk other than offer necessary and basic replies to Jim’s gentle queries, unable as yet to face up to the heart-to-heart discussion he knew had to come. Instead he was happy to take refuge in the long periods of sleep which were a necessary part of the early stages of his recovery.

And that was strange in itself. Because this time it was he who was consciously delaying the inevitable moment, not the normally repressed and taciturn Ellison.

But he knew himself to be scared of what Jim had to say, certain that it spelled the end of their partnership despite Jim’s present care and attention, and he couldn’t yet face up to that.

He supposed it was a form of weakness in a way, this pathetic attempt to cling on to a remnant of their previous closeness, knowing it was merely postponing the final breakup. After all, he was pretty sure that it was guilt that was driving Jim to keep coming back to the hospital, the sentinel working out some sort of self-imposed penance for what he had done to Blair. But as soon as he felt he had done enough by way of atonement, he would go. And where would that leave Blair?

Homeless, hopeless and helpless, that’s where.

But while he could, he would take what comfort he could from his sentinel, and count himself lucky.

Part 3: The road to reconciliation:

As far as Jim was concerned, this period of time was nothing short of torture. Forced to confront the repercussions of his actions day in and day out in the uncharacteristically nervous behaviour and extensive if healing physical damage to his partner, his guilt knew no bounds. He would have liked nothing more than to run and hide away from the beaten-down evidence of his unwarranted anger and cruelty, but his conscience wouldn’t let him. This time there was no place for repression and denial, and it was incumbent on him to do his best to at least try to fix things between them. Blair deserved no less of him. And if at the end of the day it was too much for Blair to forgive, then Jim would let him go and even wish him well, although it would undoubtedly destroy his own soul in the process.

And surely he deserved that also.

As Blair improved daily, and grew slightly more mobile, he insisted that Jim go home at night to sleep at the loft. It was partly because he felt guilty about the stress and exhaustion he could see on the older man's face, but also because now he was out of danger and feeling less doped up, he was growing increasingly embarrassed and awkward accepting help from Jim. The despised catheter had been removed fairly quickly, and he was now being encouraged to leave his bed for short periods both to improve his mobility and prevent the risk of pneumonia. But he really hated to have to ask Jim to help him get to the bathroom, and as for helping him after he'd taken care of business, well, it was just too much. And now he was fully aware of what was going on, the intimacy of bed baths was too painful to contemplate.

Oh, he'd have given anything for such intimacy when their relationship was still close and growing closer, but this was agony. So he asked if his nurse would mind if he could be bathed during Jim's absence. And although his scalp wound was healing well, it was too much trouble to deal with his long locks, so he asked her if she would cut them for him. And the effect on Jim shocked him.

In truth, although Jim appreciated being able to stretch out on his own bed for a few hours, he wasn't getting any more sleep than he would have done in the chair beside Blair's bed. The silence of the loft was deafening, and the place felt more than just ordinarily empty. It felt as though it had been drained of the joy and energy with which Blair's presence had filled it, and without the soothing anchor of his guide's heartbeat in the downstairs bedroom, Jim simply couldn't relax. It was a relief therefore when morning arrived and he could get back to the hospital, because that place, and the person it sheltered, had become the centre of his universe.

The strange thing was that, despite his guilt over the whole ghastly incident, somehow he assumed that Blair would return to the loft once he was discharged from hospital where Jim could take care of him properly. It never occurred to him that the young man no longer felt welcome in his own home, having already forgotten his own harsh words spoken in the heat of the moment so recently. But he was soon to get a reality check, and it began with the shock of Blair's new hairstyle.



Approaching his guide's room, Jim allowed himself a small smile as he glanced down at the large bag clutched in his hand. He had gathered together the many 'Get Well' cards Blair had received but had not been able to have while in ICU, intending to present Blair with them in the hope that it would both cheer the young man up and maybe even initiate a proper conversation between them.

However, as Jim entered the room with his customary greeting on his lips, he did a classic double-take as he absorbed the drastic change in his guide's appearance. Although in truth the amateurish cut wasn't short by any means, most of the length was gone and the remaining curls haloed Blair's head.

"Holy shit, Chief! What've you done? I thought you said back when we first met that you would never cut your hair? What the hell brought this on?"

Taken aback by Jim's vehement reaction, Blair replied somewhat worriedly, "It seemed like the best thing to do. I mean, I can't really manage to do anything with it at the moment, and probably won't be able to for a while yet. And I guess it looked kinda silly with a big chunk hacked off the back. So I asked Kathy to cut it..."

Suddenly angry with himself for his defensive tone and for feeling the need to justify himself to Jim, Blair abruptly realised that he had had enough. Enough of feeling like one big, sore mess; of feeling scared all the time; of waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Eyes flashing with emotion too long suppressed, he growled, "Look, Jim, if all you can do is criticise me, why don't you just leave me alone? I've had it with your snide remarks and you

belittling me in front of the guys in the bullpen. I know you think I'm a joke and a nuisance, and that I've outlived my usefulness. I get the picture, OK? You could have just told me to get out, you know. You didn't need to actually kill me...." He snapped his mouth shut on the last words, ashamed of the tears that sprang to his eyes, and also of being the cause of the open-mouthed shock on Jim's face.

Turning his face away, he whispered plaintively, "Go away, man. Please. Just leave me alone."

Shaking himself out of his stupor, Jim crossed the room to look down on his partner, his expression now sober and his tone gentle but resolute as he responded.

"No, Chief. I won't go. It's time we had that talk and cleared the air finally between us. I'm going to start, and I want you to listen. And if after you've heard everything I have to say you still want me to go, then I will. But you have to hear me out first, OK?"

"And you'll get your turn afterwards Chief, and I promise that I'll listen too."

So saying, he pulled the bedside chair around so he could face his guide properly, and reached over to place a hand on Blair's blanket-covered leg to ground himself as he began.

"First off, I'm sorry if you feel like I'm making fun of you with the guys. It's not meant maliciously – well, mostly, anyway. Truthfully, Chief – Blair – you're the smartest guy I know, and it's really just a sort of defence reaction on my part, I guess. And as for the others, well, they're way fonder of you than you seem to think. They're all worried about you, and want to come see you, but Simon's asked them to wait until you give the go-ahead. He didn't want you upset any more than necessary. And in that bag I dropped by the door are all the 'Get Well' cards you received from friends in both the PD and the U. I was going to give them to you today to cheer you up. You couldn't have them while you were in the ICU, but you can have them now, and I think you'll be pleasantly surprised at just how many people care about you.

"I also want to say I'm sorry about the way I reacted after reading that chapter, especially when you asked me not to. But I have to tell you, Chief, that I hate that diss. I know I gave you permission to write about me, but it was only because I was desperate for your help. And it's poisoned our relationship, for me anyway, because once it's done, you'll have no reason to stay with me any longer. It's like having the Sword of Damocles hanging over my head all the time, and I still sometimes feel like I'm more your study subject than friend even though you've shown me time and time again that you care for me.

"But the most important thing I need to tell you is more directly to do with my recent behaviour, Chief. And why I did this..." and he reached out and touched Blair's bandaged chest with a gentle finger.

"This is going to be hard, Blair, because it involves visions. And you know how I feel about that spiritual shit. And yes, you don't have to tell me that I should have confided in you from the outset. I *know* that, Chief, but I just couldn't bring myself to do it. So it's my fault that things got so out of hand."

When Blair made as if to interrupt, Jim held up his hand to silence him. "I know what you're thinking, Chief. Incacha passed the Way of the Shaman to you so that you could help me

with the esoteric stuff as much as the senses. But I hated that he landed you with that burden on top of everything else you had going on in your life. So I deliberately down-played it and made a joke out of it – of you. And I’m sorry about that. It was cruel, and wrong. And it’s come back to bite us both in the ass.

“Anyway, I started seeing another jaguar. Not my spirit animal – one with normal markings, not black like mine - and it looked so angry! Spitting mad, in fact. I saw it first before I got myself shot, and I knew it meant trouble, but I didn’t know why. And it was seeing it again that distracted me,” and he tapped his newly-healed shoulder. “And it seemed to be tied up with another vision I had, Blair. A real nightmare. It still makes me sick to think about it, but you deserve to know.

“I dreamed I was in the jungle, and I was following a wolf. I shot it with my crossbow, although I didn’t feel right doing it. And it died, and turned into you. It was your spirit animal, Chief, and I killed it. It frightened me badly, so I tried to push you away. If you weren’t with me, you wouldn’t be in danger, you see? But I couldn’t help feeling out of sorts and antsy, and when you came back to the loft that day, I could smell something alien on you. It reminded me of that damned jaguar, and I felt threatened. Threatened enough to kill it. Except it wasn’t the jaguar – it was you. And my nightmare nearly came true. *Did* come true! And I don’t know what I would have done if you hadn’t come back to me when I called.”

He paused there, emotionally choked as he studied Blair’s reaction, and greatly disturbed at the depths of hurt and pain he saw reflected back at him from the wide blue eyes.

“Why, Jim? Why did you bring me back?” Blair’s voice cracked as he whispered the words.

“Because you’re important to me, Blair. I still need my friend and my guide, and I want you to come home as soon as you’re allowed. I don’t know if you can ever get past what I did to you, but I need you to trust me enough to know that I’ll never do anything like that again. If I ever have any more of those visions, I swear I’ll tell you about them first.”

Blair looked away, dropping his gaze to his blanket-covered lap where his left hand picked nervously at a loose thread. His right arm was in a sling to help keep his shoulder immobilised to give the exit wound there a chance to heal more quickly, but the itching of the healing tissue was a distracting irritant he could have done without. Sighing, he raised his head again and met Jim’s worried gaze.

“I think I need to say my piece now, Jim. I think it will explain some of the things you’ve described. Goddess knows I wish that we could have talked sooner. And we’re both at fault for that.

“I need to tell you about the diss first, because it obviously bothers you, and I think it probably had a big hand in what’s happened between us.

“Anyway, I asked you not to read that chapter because I knew how it might look, taken out of context. It was the opening argument, stated baldly and impersonally for a reason. Because the main body of the work would fill out and explain, argue and rebut until the conclusion was reached. And you would have liked the conclusion, I’m sure.

“But I realised I couldn’t justify continuing with it, because not only had I lost my objectivity, but you hated the very thought of it so very much. Which is why I went to my diss committee

and changed the topic to the 'closed societies' one. They were more than happy, especially as it's nearly done. I had plenty of data to work with after all, 'cos like I said, I've gathered enough for ten papers in the time I've been riding with you. But I didn't tell you or Simon because I thought I'd get my pass pulled, and I still wasn't ready to go back to the academic merry-go-round. It was stupid of me, I know, but I've really enjoyed our partnership – up until now, anyway – and I'm still writing the sentinel paper. But in its present form it's intended for you, man, not for public consumption unless you want it to be.

“And then I thought I'd gotten a second chance to submit the sentinel paper after all. See, I met this woman at the PD, who was exhibiting all the symptoms of hypersensitivity. I introduced myself, and we talked. And she really does have all five senses heightened like a full sentinel. I asked her if she would accept my help, and she agreed. And I thought that, if she didn't mind, I'd write about her instead, using her data in the diss instead of yours. Her name's Alex Barnes, not that I'd have referred to her by name in the paper, of course.

“Man, I was so excited. I couldn't wait to get home and run it by you. I thought it would fix everything between us again and we could go back to how we were.

“Goddess, I was so wrong...” and he hung his head in sorrow.

“Oh Chief!” Jim's soft words held a world of pain and compassion, and he ached to take Blair into his arms, but he figured that he had forfeited any chance of that with a bullet from a 9mm Glock.

“I wish I'd known about the diss. It would have been such a weight off my mind. But now I'm pretty sure I know why I acted like I did. That other jaguar I saw just had to be the other sentinel's spirit animal. And I could smell her on you, Chief. I hated that someone else had touched my guide. I don't think I've ever felt jealousy like it. It was so wrong, and I felt compelled to destroy the intruder, which I guess must be a normal reaction for a caveman throwback, huh? But the instant I pulled the trigger, and saw what I'd done, nothing mattered any more except to help you. To save my guide. And my dearest friend.”

And suddenly Blair was crying, with great, gulping sobs that wracked his injured frame. Moving quickly but carefully, Jim could hold back no longer and gently took the shaking body into his arms, cuddling his guide against his chest. As he crooned words of comfort, his own tears fell to drip softly onto Blair's curls, and he revelled in the fact that Blair snuggled closer, apparently accepting his sentinel's protection.

Perhaps this was the catharsis they needed, and just maybe it would be enough.

It was into this tender scene that Simon walked a few minutes later, but his immediate reaction wasn't one of sympathy and understanding. Swiftly taking note of the positions and emotions of the two men on the bed, he sprang to an understandable but incorrect conclusion.

“What the hell did you do now, Ellison? Have you hurt him again? I'll have your hide for this!” The big captain's bellow was enough to bring the nearest nurse running to see what the furore was about, and she threw the door open to come to a halt beside Simon.

Startled by the interruption, Blair pulled back with a gasp which was partly shock and partly pain as his body protested the movement, but he quickly held out his free hand towards the glowering Simon, needing to defuse the situation as quickly as possible before Jim had a chance to erupt.

"It...it's OK, Simon," he stuttered out, swiping at the tears on his face with his now shaking hand.

"Jim hasn't hurt me, honest. We were just talking, and...and I'm afraid I had a bit of a melt-down. I'm so sorry you had to see it, Simon. I hate for people to see me acting like a wuss." His imploring eyes and embarrassed blush melted the older man's heart instantly, and as Jim once again wrapped a strong but gentle arm around Blair's shoulders, captain and nurse alike smiled in empathy.

"If you're sure you're OK, I'll leave you in peace, Blair," and the nurse – his favourite, and most ardent admirer, Kathy – smiled warmly and eased out of the room, closing the door gently behind her.

Huffing out his breath in a sigh of relief, Simon approached the bed, his smile now rueful as he met and held Jim's still wary gaze. "Sorry about that, Jim. My bad, jumping to the wrong conclusion like that. But you have to admit that from my point of view it looked suspiciously like the kid was hurting badly again, and in your arms at that. And I sincerely hope I never have to see that kind of pain on your face ever again, Blair," and he reached down and gently ruffled a bemused and bashful Sandburg's curls.

Relaxing himself as he quickly scanned the older man, confirming Simon's veracity to his own satisfaction, Jim offered a wry grin in response.

"It's OK, boss. I understand, and I appreciate your concern on Blair's behalf. As I'm sure he does, hey, Chief?" and he too ruffled Blair's newly shorn curls.

Blair batted at his hand, his mobile features assuming a delightful frown and pout as he growled indignantly, "Not the hair, man!" And both Simon and Jim grinned in pleasure at witnessing the brief return of the Sandburg they knew and loved.

However, his energy was short-lived as his healing body quickly reminded him, and he paled even as Jim gently lowered him back down onto the pillows.

"Take it easy, Chief. You still need plenty of rest, so if you don't mind, I'll do the talking, OK? If I miss anything, you can fill in the gaps afterwards, OK?" and Blair nodded, the relief evident in his eyes.

"Yeah, OK, go for it man. Tell Simon what we've come up with between us," and he settled his head more comfortably in his pillows as his glance flicked between Jim and Simon. And if he or Simon were conscious of the fact that Jim was still holding his free hand, neither of them made anything of it.

So once again Jim explained the conclusions they had reached to his boss, in as much detail as he thought the older man could cope with. Although still light on some of the minutiae regarding the 'sentinel stuff' like the visions, Simon had to understand that it was central to his best team's recent difficulties and the barely-averted disaster of the shooting.

They both trusted him to keep it to himself as he had kept their secret already for so long now, and it wasn't stuff they needed or wanted IA to know.

Finally winding down, Jim finished by saying, "So you see, Captain, a lot of this was down to lack of communication between us. There were things both of us should have confided in the other, but I know I should take the lion's share of the blame for that. I've hardly encouraged Blair to talk to me, and when he tried, more often than not I took no notice or shut him down. Didn't *want* to listen in case it was something I didn't want to do and couldn't avoid. I have to work on this tendency to repress and deny what I don't want to hear, I know that. And I need to let Blair do his job as my partner and backup. He can't do it when he hasn't got all the facts. That's what nearly got him killed, and I'm never going to forgive myself for that."

Although fighting off the pull of sleep, Blair needed to add his own comment.

"Oh Jim, man, it wasn't all you. I should have tried harder to make you listen instead of backing off. I never used to back off so quickly. But I was so afraid that my ride was coming to an end, and I realised I didn't want it to.

"But when it really mattered, you came through for me. You brought me back, man, and that has to mean that we're meant to be together as a team. Sentinel and guide. Together we're strong, Jim. I just hope you believe that too."

"I do now, Chief. Even though it's taken a while to get it through my thick skull. You know, the other night when I read your paper, I talked to that homeless guy, you know, Gabe? And he said something like 'what good is it to be able to hear things miles away when I couldn't hear the whispers of my own heart?' I didn't think anything of it at the time, but I think I know what he meant now. And I'm listening."

Watching them closely with a grave and thoughtful expression, Simon spoke up at last.

"So I take it this means you two have ironed out your difficulties – or at least, are working on them. And I'm glad to see it even if I'm not entirely comfortable yet. I'll still be keeping a close eye on you, because like I said before, I never want to see Blair like that again." And they all knew he was referring to the young man's death and dramatic resurrection in the ICU.

"Anyhow, having heard your side of things, I think I've got more to add now I think about it. It may be coincidence, but it could be relevant if all this sentinel stuff is to be believed. When you mentioned the name Alex Barnes I just now put two and two together.

"When you said you thought she was another sentinel, kid, I guess you could be right, but she was nothing like Jim here. You told me that sentinels were guardians and protectors, right? Well she certainly wasn't. You won't know about this, Jim, because you've been out of the loop for a while, but she broke into a lab here in Cascade and stole two canisters of VX Nerve Gas. Guess she used her senses for nefarious purposes, huh? Anyway, when she made her escape from Cascade, it was out of our hands, but I've heard since what happened to her.

"Apparently she intended to sell the canisters to some drug lord, but her helicopter was shot down by the local law enforcement officers in Sierra Verde. Although her body wasn't recovered, they assume that she died in the crash, and luckily they recovered the canisters.

“So if she was the source of your perceived threat, Jim, it’s not surprising you got territorial when Blair interacted with her. Hell, she might have had designs on keeping Sandburg for herself!”

While he was speaking, both Jim and Blair had listened in amazement, the final pieces of the puzzle falling into place.

Blair’s reaction was in character as he automatically took the blame on himself.

“Oh man! It’s all my fault. I’m so sorry, Jim. It never occurred to me that you’d feel threatened like that. I should have considered the territorial imperative. Some scientist I am...Not! I just thought I was doing us both a favour by finding another subject to write about. And she needed help. I didn’t feel right leaving her hanging.”

“And you can stop that right now, Chief. It’s in your nature to want to help people, so I can’t fault you for that. And if I’d told you about the visions, you would have been aware of the possibility that she was a threat. And we could have dealt with her together. I’m just glad she’s gone.”

Although it looked as if Blair wanted to make some sort of comeback comment, he was suddenly overtaken by a wide yawn, and it was obvious to the others that he was losing the battle to keep his eyes open.

“OK, kid, that’s enough. You’re wiped.” Simon’s tone was firm and brooked no argument. “I’ll be on my way after I’ve had a word with Jim, and leave you to get some rest. I’ll be back to check on you soon, OK? By the way, can the guys come and visit now? They’re all desperate to see how you’re doing?”

Blinking tiredly, Blair managed a grin. “Yeah, thanks, Simon. Tell them thanks too, and it’d be good to see them,” and he allowed his eyes to drift closed as he sank back into the welcoming comfort of the pillows.

With a wry grin, Simon got to his feet, and accompanied by Jim, made his way to the door. Just before leaving however, he suddenly turned back.

“Hey, Sandburg! You cut your hair!”

He was rewarded by a tiny smirk and a raised eyelid as Blair waved a lax hand in a ‘yeah, whatever’, gesture, and grinning widely, he closed the door behind him, leaving Blair to catch up on some much-needed healing sleep.

Out in the corridor, Simon took Jim’s arm and led him towards the small private waiting room. Jim accompanied him without complaint, knowing that they had other things to discuss that Blair didn’t need to be concerned with yet. Reaching their destination, they took a seat and made themselves comfortable as Simon studied his subordinate for a moment before speaking.

Jim suffered the appraisal placidly, wondering what his friend and boss was thinking, but surprising himself with his own composure. Blair would be proud of his new, laid-back attitude, he was certain, and smiled to himself at the thought. Having said that, he knew he

wasn't off the hook by a long chalk, and he had absolutely no intention of avoiding the fallout he so deserved.

"So, Jim, how is he really? I mean, physically he looks better, even if he looks like a strong wind would blow him over. At least he doesn't look like he's at death's door now. But what's going on in his head? Has he forgiven you?"

"Seriously, Simon? I can't really tell yet. This is the first time we've really talked. I mean, you said before that he has a huge capacity for love. Well, his capacity for forgiveness is almost as big, but it's going to be strained to the limits by this business."

"Well, that's a given, I guess, Jim. And he'll have anger management to deal with too. But as long as you two communicate, I'm sure you can work it out between you."

"Gods, I hope so, Simon. But like I said, this is the first time we've talked in – um, how long has he been here?"

"He's been here eight days, Jim. Well, today is the ninth."

"Shit!" Jim's face took on a troubled and distracted expression for a moment while he absorbed this information. "That long? Guess I've lost track of time. Yet sometimes it seems like an eternity...."

"Anyhow, to tell the truth, we hadn't been communicating properly since that godawful night shift. I tried to put it behind me, but I guess I couldn't manage it. And this time it was only because I made some crass comment about cutting his hair! Shit! Can we say tactless? So yeah, he'll be stretched to the limit all right."

"Yeah, that he will, but once he gets home you'll be helping with that too, won't you? So, when are they letting him out?"

Jim smiled a little at that, a hint of genuine relief and pleasure colouring his tone as he replied, "All being well, in a couple of days' time, barring relapses. As long as there's someone there for him, that is. And yes, I have told him I want him back in the loft."

"But what I haven't told him yet is that I've had his name put on the lease, so it really is his home now, should he choose to stay."

Simon's answering grin was equally pleased as he said, "Good. Very good. And as long as you're looking after him, I'm sure you can have all the time you need."

"Which brings me to the outcome of your hearing with Internal Affairs. Have you told Blair about it yet?"

"No, Simon. It's not something I wanted to worry him about until I knew the outcome myself."

"Fair enough. Well, they weren't thrilled as you'll already know, but as you stuck to the bare facts, and Blair made no accusations, there actually wasn't much they could do as regards disciplinary action. It'll go on your records, of course, and you'll have to re-qualify in firearms – not that that'll be a problem, 'Deadeye Dick' – but your suspension is lifted as from Monday next. Having said that, you'll be on desk duty for the time being, but you can fit that around the personal time you'll need for Blair."

This time Jim's relief was palpable as he met Simon's understanding gaze.

"I don't know what to say, except, thanks, Simon. I'm sure your influence had a lot to do with this. Sheila Irwin would've loved to make a lot more of it, I know. God, that woman hates me!"

"Well, don't expect too much sweetness and light in the bullpen for a while, Jim. The guys – and Megan in particular – are fond of Blair, and until they talk to him, they're going to be on your case. Having said that, knowing Sandburg, he'll do his best to smooth things over. He hates bad feeling, especially if it concerns you."

"I know it, Simon. I still don't know what I did to deserve him. I just hope I can convince him to stay after all."

"Oh, I don't think that'll be a problem, Jim. Especially if he's got something concrete to look forward to. Because if I understood it correctly, he's nearly done with the alternative diss, right?"

"Yeah, I think so, Simon."

"Good. Well, as soon as he's gotten those letters after his name, I'm hoping to have an official permanent consultant's position open for him at the PD. I've already started the ball rolling, and it's looking good. Despite everything, the Chief and Commissioner both want their best performing pair back in action as soon as possible, as do I.

"So tell him to get his ass into gear, get well, and get that paper submitted, OK?"

And this time, Jim's smile was wide and as bright as the sun.

"Oh, I will, Simon, I will! And I can't thank you enough. For both of us."

Epilogue: The loft, one week later:

"I'm fine, Jim! Not that I don't appreciate the 'mother-henning', but you need to get moving!" Blair's expression was one of exasperation, although his grin and tone took the sting out of his words.

"I've got my meds and my laptop; I'm mobile, and quite capable of nuking the soup you've left me for lunch. I promise I'm not going to do anything more energetic than work on my diss, OK? So, shoo! Go to work. You need the break too."

Looking down on his roommate, who was presently comfortably settled on the sofa, Jim couldn't help his automatic sensory scan to reassure himself that Blair really was OK.

"And you can stop that with the 'look', man. I know you're checking me out, and I know you can tell I'm not trying to hide anything. Give the guys my best, OK, and see you in a few hours."

Finally satisfied, although still loath to leave his guide, Jim nodded and offered a wry grin.

“OK, OK, I’m going! Sheesh, this is what I get for caring!” but his eyes and tone were warm as he said it, and Blair’s reciprocating smile was affectionate and understanding.

“See you in a few Chief, and call me if you need anything....”

“You know it, Jim. Have a good day at the office!” and Blair’s warm chuckle followed him out as Jim exited the loft to go to work.

As he made his way down to the truck, Jim continued to focus his hearing on his partner, a small grin on his face as he heard Blair muttering to himself. He had obviously booted up his laptop, and seemed to be re-reading part of the final chapter of his diss, judging by the almost sub-vocal comments. Smile widening at the thought, Jim wondered if Blair was aware of the way he talked all the time, even in his sleep. It was as if that brilliant, active mind needed to share whatever it came up with, whether or not there was anyone to hear it. And Jim knew the days were gone now when he had deliberately and often rudely either ignored or tried to shut Blair down. These days, even if Jim wasn’t particularly interested in the content, the soothing cadence of Blair’s speaking voice was a gratefully accepted source of relaxation for the sentinel, grounding him as he let the sounds flow over him.

It shamed Jim now to recall the number of times when he had snapped impatiently at the student, thankful that it was yet another thing for which Blair had apparently forgiven him. Because things were certainly so much better between them now.

Blair had become much more comfortable about accepting Jim’s help, and now he was sure of both Jim’s and the PD’s support, he was attacking the alternative diss with renewed vigour and relish, and Jim knew it was very close to completion and submission. And how much Jim was looking forward to that. Not only did Blair deserve his doctorate, but he had gladly accepted the offer of a consultant’s position in the PD, and his glee and excitement had been a joy to behold. Although they both realised that Blair would be on call to other departments that required his anthropological insight and academic expertise, he would always give priority to accompanying Jim as and when he was needed, and best of all, he wouldn’t be asked to carry, because the whole issue of firearms still bothered him and probably always would.

Not that everything was plain-sailing though. When Blair was tired and in pain he got irritable enough, and his residual anger would boil over into harsh words, but Jim generally accepted them as only to be expected. And as he always apologised profusely afterwards, they made up quickly enough.

And that was another aspect worth consideration Jim mused as he drove to the PD.

They were even more ‘touchy-feely’ now than before, and both seemed to accept it as perfectly natural. Only a day or so ago Blair introduced the topic, albeit a little shyly and nervously, plainly relieved when Jim simply agreed with him rather than erupting in affronted rage.

“Um, Jim? I was thinking, that is, if you don’t mind me asking...um...how did you feel when we merged? Do you remember?”

Jim had been changing Blair’s dressings at the time, and he paused for a moment, brow wrinkling in thought.

“Tell the truth, Chief, I think I was too glad to see you back with me to give it much thought at the time. But now you mention it, I felt...um...I don't know – complete? As if we'd become one. Does that make sense?”

“Yeah. Yeah, it does, Jim,” and Blair's face had lit up with happiness.

“I felt the same. And I wondered if that's what Incacha meant for us when he passed the gift of shamanism over to me. After all, to be accepted as a true shaman, one is supposed to have some sort of near-death experience, and I guess I certainly qualify. And don't start with the guilt again, please, Jim. If it was meant to be, it was meant to be, and we're both here now to enjoy it.

“But there was something else I wanted to run by you...” and here his face had pinked with an endearing blush.

“Um...do you think that there might be another aspect to consider? That is, a sexual bond which would make the sentinel and guide relationship even stronger? I mean, if you're dead against the idea, forget I said anything, OK? I promise I won't mention it again.

“But just to let you know...um...I'm happy to try it if you are?” and he had bitten his lip, almost cringing as he had fixed Jim with his most appealing, wide-eyed puppy dog look.

And Jim hadn't been mad at all. In fact, quite the opposite.

Although he'd never seriously considered a relationship with another man, Blair was...well... Blair. And the thought of a more physical relationship actually appealed to Jim. After all, there wasn't any part of his guide that he hadn't seen by now. Or disapproved of. Far from it, in fact.

So yes, he had been happy to put Blair's mind at rest.

Not that they'd done much about it yet. Blair was still healing and certainly not up to any acrobatics in bed. But just last night they had shared Jim's big bed for the first time, just cuddling together, and had both had the best night's sleep either of them could recall.

Pulling into his spot in the PD's underground garage, Jim realised he was grinning from ear to ear. Despite enduring one of the worst crises a partnership could ever undergo, given the courage to pursue it, the future looked bright for sentinel and guide.

The End