

# The Reward



Art by Virginia Sky

Story by Caro Dee

Jim slammed out of the door leaving behind the sight of Blair's confused and worried face. Too restless to wait for the elevator he jogged down the stairs and out into the Cascade night.

For a moment he hesitated, looking in both directions. The neighborhood bar two blocks down was tempting but he really needed to figure out what was going on so he turned and headed towards the harbor.

The view of the constantly moving water, the sound of waves splashing against the sea wall, the scent of the ocean brought to him by the cold breeze blowing in his face--all these caught his attention, distracting him from what had happened and allowing Jim to calm down. Without looking down at himself, he could tell that *it* was gone and he could feel it in his lowered blood pressure and the loosening of his shoulders.

God, what was the matter with him? Ever since the Rainforest Chemicals bust last week, he'd gotten weird and aggressive around Blair. Standing too close, grabbing him... tonight he'd even shoved Blair against the wall. Monitoring Blair closely as if he were suspicious. Feeling hyped up and angry. It reminded him uncomfortably of Barnes and that whole situation. Maybe there was another sentinel in town? But if that were true, then leaving Blair alone was exactly the wrong thing to do.

Jim turned his head toward the loft and opened his senses. He saw the lit windows and pushed past the glass until Blair was visible. He was alone and puttering around the kitchen, clearly unharmed and unalarmed. A sweep of the vicinity with his hearing revealed nothing unusual to worry about.

Jim relaxed slightly and turned back to staring out over the water. Maybe it was another sentinel but that didn't explain the other thing, the weird red glow he recently started seeing around himself. That was new. Jim's jaw clenched. Maybe he was hallucinating.

Ironically, that was the moment he heard a loud snarl and the panther came loping out of the dark, the glow of its blue eyes the most visible thing about it as it paced towards Jim. When the panther shifted upwards to turn into the Chopec warrior he'd seen once before, he wasn't at all surprised to find himself in the blue jungle.

Jim snorted. Just great. He knew already he wasn't going to like whatever was coming.

"Greetings, Sentinel," said the warrior. "You have finally chosen your guide. Now you will be at full strength and prevail over all enemies and troubles. But why have you not taken your reward?"

Jim's eyes narrowed. "I have no idea what you're talking about."

The warrior nodded skeptically. A red glow suddenly appeared around him--a familiar red glow--and Jim took a step back warily.

"What the hell is that?"

"You do not know? It is the reward."

"What does that mean? I've been seeing that glow on and off for the last week, but only when I'm around Sandburg."

The warrior nodded. "Your guide. He is the reward."

"I thought the red glow was the reward."

"That is how you know the time for the reward has come. Have you not done a great deed recently? Have you not saved the tribe from destruction?"

Jim shrugged. He supposed the Rainforest Chemicals arrest qualified if you stretched the definition of both great and destruction. He and Blair had caught them before the small chemical company had managed to seriously pollute more than their immediate vicinity. Blair had calculated that if they'd continued for more than a year the pollutants would have contaminated the ground water for miles around including two of the main reservoirs for Cascade's water supply. Jim had been miserable tracking the source of whatever was

causing his allergic reactions and he had had to fight several thugs trying to destroy evidence while struggling for breath and trying to see out of swollen eyes. An annoying but run of the mill case for Jim.

The warrior continued. "The senses can bring pain and suffering. If that is all he knows, how can the sentinel keep serving the tribe? How can he face each day with a full heart if every day is only hardship? That is why he is given the reward when he has fought through all obstacles to victory."

Jim rolled his eyes. "I'm a cop and I did my job. I already got rewarded. It's called a paycheck."

The warrior's face broke into a knowing grin. "Then the sentinel is rewarded better than the 'cop'."

"With what?"

"Great pleasure." The warrior lifted one red glowing hand and beckoned. A wolf came bounding out of the jungle and morphed into the image of Blair--a Blair wearing only a loincloth, some paint, and feathers in his hair. Like the warrior, there was a knowing grin on his face with something hot and primal lurking in his eyes. Jim shifted uneasily and looked away.

"When the red appears it is time. You and your guide will go to a place where you are safe. Then the reward will come."

"Aaand the reward is great pleasure, which will just appear when the time is right. Okay, thanks for that helpful information, bub. Are we done here?"

The warrior gave Jim an annoyed look but continued explaining. "Hold your guide close." He put a hand on guide Blair's shoulder and pulled him into a hug, Blair moving in eagerly, his face buried in the warrior's neck. After a moment, a blue glow began to surround him. "When the blue appears, the guide is ready. Now you can take your pleasure from the guide."

Jim's eyes flicked between them and his jaw clenched. Whatever this was about, Blair did not need to be involved.

"Do not fear; he will keep watch over you so that you do not lose yourself. Is that not so, Guide?"

"Yes, Sentinel," said the guide. Jim glanced at him sharply. Something about him was different. When he first appeared, he'd been full of energy. Now he was calm and gazing steadily and patiently at the warrior. He reminded Jim of nothing more than a soldier waiting for orders.

"You have earned this with your deeds. Do not hesitate to enjoy your reward. You will never feel as joyful or proud to be a sentinel as you will while mounting your guide," the warrior promised. Jim barely had time to boggle at the word choice--*Mounting? What the hell?*--when the two spirits sank to their knees and morphed again--guide Blair on all fours with the warrior, now wearing Jim's face, behind him, already inside and moving, ecstasy on his face.

Shock and embarrassment slammed into Jim and he jerked back a few steps and turned away. The jungle melted away and suddenly he was standing in Cascade by the harbor, the triumphant scream of the panther ringing in the night.

Damn this sentinel shit, Jim thought, his pulse racing. Of all the weird things it had brought into his life, this had to be the weirdest. He tried to shake off the image of the two doppelgangers fucking. It felt like an invasion of privacy, almost mocking, to see his and Blair's image used to show something that personal.

Even if it was something that they'd never actually done. Something had never even occurred to him. Blair and him? Ridiculous.

Jim snorted and began to walk briskly away from the place his vision had happened. It was ridiculous.

Wasn't it?

His steps slowed. He'd never thought about it before but... Shock had been his immediate reaction but he'd felt something in his gut at the same time. A burst of heat that might have been attraction. Maybe.

Suddenly his behavior over the past week came into focus. What he'd thought was restlessness and aggression could have been unacknowledged attraction. He'd known something felt wrong and incomplete and it had to do with Blair. He'd certainly had the urge to put his hands all over Blair.

He knew Blair was sometimes attracted to him. It was something vaguely noticed from time to time and set aside as irrelevant, the way he ignored stray signals of attraction from people around him to avoid embarrassing them with his own lack of interest. Blair flirted with most of the halfway attractive people he met. Jim had no reason to think it was anything more than the sentinel crush that was intensely annoying at the best of times.

Except things were different now. A person didn't destroy their life's work and their reputation for a crush. What Blair had done had been an act of protectiveness and love so fierce that Jim couldn't help but know to his core how much he mattered to Blair. It wasn't just Blair either. He was the most important person in Jim's life too. Someone he could trust completely. Someone that was always going to be there. Someone that Jim would die to protect. Wasn't that love?

So maybe it hadn't occurred to him before but he was starting to think about it now. He turned around and walked slowly home.

When he entered the loft, he found Blair seated at the kitchen table with his laptop and papers spread around him. Blair gave him a wary look before refocusing on his work. Jim looked at him with eyes newly opened and realized Blair was beautiful in his own way. He stared at the blue eyes, the cheekbones and strong jaw, the generous mouth and wondered that he'd never noticed before. Then he noticed the tension in Blair's shoulders and realized he was being ignored.

Jim cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Chief. I've been a bastard all week."

Blair took off his glasses and folded them, setting them on the table, and looked up at him sternly. "You really have, Jim. Are you going to tell me what I did wrong this time, so we can fix this?"

"You didn't do anything wrong. I was confused about something but I think I've figured it out now." Jim moved closer to the table.

"Okay?" Blair said. "I'm listening."

Jim took a deep breath and stepped right into Blair's personal space, staring down at him intently. Blair's eyes widened in surprise and his adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed nervously. The room was suddenly still and full of sexual tension. Jim's focus narrowed onto Blair's lips for one breath, two... and then he leaned down to kiss him.

Blair's mouth met his eagerly and Jim's shoulder muscles loosened in relief. Blair wanted him too. He buried his hands in Blair's hair, closed his eyes and lost himself in the deepening kiss. This was really, really good.

It took him a minute to notice when Blair's mouth went soft, still responsive but without the initial eagerness. Jim pulled back to look at him. That's when he saw his hands, still buried in Blair's hair, outlined in red and Blair was glowing blue. Blair was staring up at him calmly and patiently...

"Blair?" Jim whispered, suddenly feeling cold.

"Yes, Sentinel?"

...like a soldier waiting for an order.

*When the blue appears, the guide is ready. Now you can take your pleasure from the guide.*

From the guide. Not Blair.

Jim jerked upright and backed away from Blair in horror. Not Blair.

The thing sitting there wearing Blair's body just stared at him calmly, shifting around slightly to keep him in view as Jim backed toward the door. When Jim reached behind him for the doorknob, Blair stood up as if to follow.

"Stop!" Jim ordered and Blair froze obediently. "Stay there. Don't follow me."

Blair's head tilted in confusion. "You need me, Sentinel. I am yours."

"No! I don't need you. I don't want you. Stay here until..." Jim swallowed. "...until Blair comes back."

Jim backed through the door and closed it, shutting away the sight of Blair just standing there staring at him. All the way down the hall he kept an eye on the door but it never opened. If he needed any more proof, Blair never stayed behind no matter how many times Jim told him to.

Jim trudged wearily up the stairs. He hesitated a long moment before using his key. He'd hoped to miss Blair but no such luck. He could hear Blair's heartbeat inside.

The sound of the key obviously alerted Blair and Jim could hear him stand up and move from the sofa towards the door. With a heavy sigh, Jim opened the door.

Blair had his arms folded across his chest, stance aggressive and eyes narrowed.

"Get in here."

The curt tone had Jim bristling but as soon as he opened his mouth, Blair pointed a finger at him and said, "No. Shut up. You owe me an apology for last night."

Jim's jaw clenched but the heavy feeling in his stomach agreed. He did owe Blair an apology. "I'm sorry."

Blair nodded fiercely. "Damn right you are. You're the one who started that kiss and if it wasn't working for you, then you should have just told me and we could have discussed it like adults instead of you jumping back in disgust and running away. Not very flattering to me but sometimes it works out that way. You think you're interested in someone but when you kiss them there's nothing there. We deal with it and move on."

Move on? Jim frowned uneasily, then he realized what Blair had said. "You remember what happened after the kiss?"

Blair rolled his eyes. "Hello, I was there. Of course, I remember."

"But you weren't there," Jim said slowly. How could Blair remember if it was the guide running things? "You really weren't there, Blair."

"I... wasn't there," Blair repeated, one skeptical eyebrow raised. "You kissed me and yet I wasn't there. How does that work exactly, Jim?"

"Do you remember what you said? After the kiss?"

"Of course I do," Blair said softly, eyes falling. "I told you I was yours and you jumped away from me in horror."

"Do you remember calling me 'sentinel'?"

Blair glanced up at him sharply, then he frowned as he thought. "I said... sentinel, I am yours. That's weird, isn't it? I wouldn't say it like that. I know how much you'd hate it."

"Right!" Jim nodded, relieved. Blair believed him.

"What's going on here, Jim? What do you know?"

So Jim told him what had been happening. The red glow that started showing up a week ago and the blue glow last night and then, not quite meeting Blair's eyes, he told him about the vision.

"Huh," said Blair, looking stunned. "Wow. That's kind of freaky, Jim. I mean, you're an idiot not to have told me as soon as shit started happening. You know that keeping sentinel stuff to yourself never works out."

"Yeah, well, this time it kept me from a week of lectures on auras, so I think it worked just fine," Jim said drily.

"You know, red *is* the color of the base chakra which governs sexual functions, so that fits," Blair speculated enthusiastically, then caught Jim's eye and stopped. "Well, never mind about that right now." He frowned, drumming his fingers along his forearms. "This doesn't make any sense."

"Does any of this sentinel stuff ever make sense?" Jim pointed out.

"It always makes sense if you're willing to look at it with an open mind, unlike some people," Blair said sternly. "But this? This doesn't make sense."

He laughed suddenly. "Unless this is a porn fantasy and then it makes perfect sense."

"Blair!" Jim said, shocked.

"No, think about it," Blair grinned, waving at Jim. "Gorgeous sentinel with hyper-senses goes into heat with his--" waving at himself "--submissive sexual slave. Perfect porn material."

"Except I don't want a sexual slave," Jim said heavily. "This isn't funny, Blair."

"I know, Jim," Blair said gently. "That's why this doesn't make sense. Not in real life. What's the purpose of this whole thing? It's not like a male sentinel and male guide are going to have children. And if they aren't already interested in each other sexually, the potential for abuse is huge. I can see it creating a lot of resentment and distrust which is counter-intuitive to the whole sentinel-guide partnership."

"I know," Jim agreed. "So that's why we can't do this."

"But it would have to be hardwired into sentinel and guide genes and that kind of evolutionary investment means there's a survival benefit to it."

The speculative tone in Blair's voice sent a shiver of alarm through Jim. Blair couldn't possibly be considering this. "No. Absolutely not."

"We need more information, Jim, before we can make an informed decision here."

"I have enough information to decide no and that's what's happening."

"You need to seek out another vision and I'll make up a list of questions for you to ask."

"No."

"Be reasonable, Jim. We need to know how this works, the pros and cons. What happens if we do this; what happens if we don't? We don't have enough details here."

"I'm not using you as a sex slave, Sandburg!"

Blair grimaced. "It might not be that way at all. Or, if necessary, I can give consent beforehand."

"It is that way. You said you remembered what happened. You were waiting for my orders. You would have done anything I told you. Do you remember that?"

Blair frowned. "I remember feeling happy, alert. Very focused on you. It didn't feel bad, Jim."

"And if I told you to do something that you weren't comfortable with you'd be able to know it and tell me to stop."

"I..." Blair blinked slowly. "I don't know."

"I do," Jim said. "You wouldn't be capable of withdrawing consent. It would be like having sex with a victim under the influence of rohypnol. Is there anything in me that leads to you to think I would find that pleasurable?"

"No!" Blair exclaimed. "Jesus, Jim. Of course not."

"So why are we still talking about this?"

"I just think it's important to have all the information," Blair insisted.

"I know what I need to know and I'm not doing this. Case closed."

"Okay, Jim," Blair said, slumping a little. Then he tensed and asked, "What about us then? You kissed me before you knew so you must be at least a little interested in me?"

Jim stared into Blair's hopeful eyes, hesitated a moment and then slowly shook his head. "I can't risk it. There is no us." He winced internally as Blair's face fell. "I'm sorry, Blair."

Then he turned away and walked up the stairs to his bedroom.

Over the next few days he firmly shut down every attempt by Blair to discuss it. Eventually, Blair seemed to accept that Jim wasn't going to change his mind and stopped trying. Their routine returned to normal. Blair still went out on cases with Jim with the usual successful results and they came home, took care of chores and talked over dinner. Normal. Except for Jim keeping a careful distance from Blair and sometimes leaving the loft altogether when the red glow made an appearance. Blair took to meditating much more frequently than normal. But it worked. Life was good.

Jim should have known it wouldn't last.

Blair ambushed him at breakfast. "So, Jim," he started casually. "I had a long chat with Incacha last night."

Jim froze with his forkful of eggs halfway to his mouth.

"Yeah," Blair continued with a grim smile. "It looks like you're not the only one who can have visions anymore. It took me a while but I eventually connected just fine."

Damn it. "I don't want to talk about this," Jim said and bit down firmly on his fork.



"No? Well, then you can listen instead. Incacha says hi, by the way, and you're just as stubborn a sentinel as you ever were."

Jim narrowed his eyes as he continued to chew. Incacha could be just as stubborn when he wanted to be. But he was also practical and Jim wished Incacha had been the one to appear in his vision instead of the spirit guides. Maybe he would have known a way to work around this mess. But it sounded like Blair thought he had Incacha's support and the last thing Jim needed was two guides on his case, especially when he knew he was doing the right thing.

He pointedly took another silent bite.

"Jim," Blair said heavily. "Incacha told me that sentinels die younger than other men."

Jim shrugged. He knew there was a risk he wouldn't live to a ripe old age. He'd accepted that a long time ago.

"Even those that don't die of violence don't live as long. Incacha said being a sentinel was hard work and it wore them out but that the reward was a way of slowing things down." Blair swallowed. "I think he was talking about stress. That being a sentinel was more stressful on the body. There's a ton of medical research out there that proves stress is a killer. It weakens the body and the immune system. Hypertension, heart attacks, strokes, weakened organs, higher susceptibility to cancer and other debilitating diseases. You take good care of your body but your doctor has mentioned your blood pressure the last two times you went in."

"You're the one that refused to let me take any medication for it," Jim pointed out.

"That's because I wanted to try to control it with diet," Blair said, nodding at the green pepper and onion egg white omelet on Jim's plate. "But what if that's not enough, Jim? Incacha says that the reward is a necessary part of being a healthy, functioning sentinel."

"Oh please," Jim scoffed. "What does fucking have to do with health?"

"Tension release," Blair stated. "Endorphins flooding the nervous system equivalent to the amount of stress you've just been through. You'd be pretty mellow after hours of intense sex and stress by-products wouldn't have a chance to accumulate in your system."

"Interesting idea," Jim said. "So how do you explain the guide being a sexual slave?"

"Incacha implied pretty heavily the reward is the myth that's grown around this biological phenomenon. A way for sentinels and guides to have some way of understanding what was going on. No wonder it sounded like a porn fantasy; that's pretty much how they explained it. A period of intense stress would correlate heavily with danger to the tribe and the following tension release might seem like a reward but Incacha says the reward can and does happen any time the sentinel needs it to recover."

"But I saw your eyes grow blank and wait for orders. That was no myth, Blair."

"Incacha said that the guide doesn't share in the reward because he has to keep the sentinel from zoning. The sentinel is especially vulnerable during the reward and the guide has to focus exclusively on him. They simply can't afford the distraction. I do remember feeling very calm and focused like a deep meditative trance. Maybe my brainwaves shifted? Huh, I wonder how we could test that."

"Okaaay," Jim said, pursing his lips. "And the 'sentinel, I'm yours' crap? What's your explanation for that?"

Blair winced. "Uhhh, well, maybe in the meditative trance I accessed the Guide Collective Unconscious, tapping into the well of thousands and thousands of years of guides buying into the reward mythos?"

"How very Jungian," Jim said drily. "Sounds like you've got it all figured out, Chief. Neat and scientific. The only thing is they're all rationalizations for something that is just plain wrong." He placed his hands on the table and pushed up into a standing position. "I will not do that to you."

Blair reached out to grab Jim by the wrist before he could leave the table. "Jim, I don't want you to die."

Jim gently but firmly removed Blair's hand. "Everybody dies eventually, Chief. It's that cycle of life you're so fond of talking about."

Jim went up to change from boxers into street clothes. He really needed to get out of the house. With the weekend in front of them, he did not want to be trapped with Blair pushing and pushing to try to change his mind. The kid was like a dog with a bone where Jim's health was concerned. If he was convinced this 'reward' thing was necessary, Jim was in for a long siege. Not that it would make any difference. Jim had already made his decision and that was that.

When he came down the stairs, Blair was waiting for him. He stood, arms folded against his bare chest, in front of the door making it clear that Jim would have to go through him to leave.

"Get out of my way," Jim said, prepared to do exactly that. He marched towards the door, muscles tensed to move Blair aside.

"No," Blair said. He braced himself against the door. "Incacha said I should..." He took a deep breath, then spread his arms wide in an offering gesture. "Sentinel, I'm yours."

The red glow instantly surrounded Jim. He immediately backed away. He couldn't risk touching Blair now. "Please, Chief. Don't do this."

Blair shook his head regretfully. "I'm sorry, Jim, but we need to do this to keep you safe." He followed Jim, step by step, angling to keep between Jim and the door. Arms still open, he repeated, "Sentinel, I am for you."

Jim felt heat uncoil deep in his gut and adrenaline punch through him. Oh God, he was getting aroused. He backed around the table. "No, don't touch me. Stay away."

Blair paced him as Jim led him around the table and once Blair was far enough, Jim darted round the other side towards the door. His hand was on the knob twisting it when Blair slammed into him. Jim shoved him back and grabbed at the door again. But Blair was right there, arms going around him tightly and one hand sliding down to rub his crotch.

"Ah!" Jim cried as a bolt of pleasure ran through him and he jerked into Blair's hand. He reached down to pull Blair's hand away--he could have sworn that was what he meant to

do--but ended up gripping Blair's hand tightly against him as his hips began pumping without any seeming input from him. Within seconds he was harder than he'd ever been and moaning in disbelief at how incredible it felt. Just a few seconds... He'd let himself feel this for just a few seconds more... Just a bit more... He could feel the dials going up and the pleasure shook his whole body. It... he'd never felt anything this good before. He was going to have to stop... Just a few more seconds... he'd never feel this again... he'd never let himself... the dial crept up again... Jim wailed softly as he realized that he wasn't going to stop. He couldn't make himself let go of this building perfection. He was going to do this. He was going to use Blair. His eyes burned at the realization and the worst thing was that he almost couldn't care.

"Blair," he managed to utter between waves of sensation. "Blair, no, you have to stop this. I can't..." ...can't do this. ...can't hurt you. ...can't stop myself.

Blair was twisting him around. "Calm down, Sentinel. Breathe." His precious hand was gone leaving Jim shoving against air and Jim moaned in protest until Blair was pressed against him again, his ass pushing into Jim's cock. Jim's arms went around him tightly, holding him steady as he rubbed against Blair's jean-covered butt. Oh, oh, God. How could this be so good?

Blair reached up to pull Jim's head down towards his shoulder. "Breathe, Sentinel. Smell me. Taste me. I am yours. Focus on me."

Jim heaved in a desperate breath against blue-glowing skin and Blair's scent surrounded him, grounded him. The smell of his skin, his hair, his sweat... and another scent that punched him in the gut. Lube. While Jim had been upstairs, Blair had been preparing himself for Jim, opening himself up. Oh fuck. The visceral image of his cock sliding between Blair's cheeks into tight, slick warmth... If just this felt so good, what would it feel like to be inside him? Hunger roared through him and Jim groaned, hands grabbing and fumbling at Blair's belt.

Calm hands took over for him, the metallic clicks of unbuckling and unzipping, the tug of cloth pulling away between them, first Blair's and then Jim's, despite Jim's reluctance to stop rubbing against any part of Blair's body he could reach.

Then it was just skin on skin and Jim's cock sliding along Blair's crack, the friction so good that Jim had to speed up, had to keep rubbing faster and faster. It wasn't until a slight change in angle that his cock caught for a second against Blair's hole. A quick shimmy and he was sliding in with a needy, triumphant shout so loud it hurt his ears.

Oh God, so much better than he imagined earlier. Blair's ass was hot and slick, the ring of muscle massaging the length of his cock as he pushed forward and tightening to hold him as he pulled out. Jim sobbed as he began to thrust frantically, senses spiralling in to focus on the increasingly unbearable pleasure, so good it was starting to hurt.

Blair's voice broke through the haze and Jim latched onto it desperately. The painful edge retreated, leaving only the pleasure behind. Following Blair's commands, Jim mouthed at the back of Blair's neck, the taste and scent of the skin between his teeth grounding him just enough.

Powerful thrusts threw them off balance, sending them to their knees. Jim bent over Blair's back, forcing him forward on his hands and knees. A flash of memory--the two spirits fucking in this same position and the lust on the soldier's face--the same grimace that Jim could feel on his own face. He shook his head, trying to shove the image away, and tightened his grip on Blair's hips. This was the perfect angle for fucking. Jim thrust faster, grunting, as he chased the building orgasm. So close, so close. Just a few more...

The climax crashed into him, every muscle seizing, as Jim arched back and screamed through the waves of ecstasy shaking him. Every sense seemed to flicker, a white buzz of static. His only focus was the sensory impressions from his throbbing cock, each spurt of semen another blast of pleasure, one after the other, his time sense stretching, slowing down, greedily clinging to every second of bliss until the very end. He shook through the perfect storm of pleasure until slowly, slowly it ebbed away, leaving only a clean, sweet, relaxed haze behind.

Jim floated through that feeling for a few minutes, body lying limp and sated, breathing slowly and deeply. Then he opened his eyes, saw Blair crushed beneath him, and remembered. He scrambled away until he hit the side of the sofa. "Oh no, oh fuck no! I'm so sorry, Chief."

Blair--no, the guide still surrounded by blue--rolled over and sat up, calmly looking Jim over. "Come here, Sentinel. The reward is not over."

Jim shook his head frantically. "No, Blair. You have to leave. I order you to leave."

"I will never leave you, Sentinel," the guide assured him and looked down between Jim's legs.

Jim followed his gaze and swore. Despite that amazing orgasm, he was still hard. "No, it has to be over. We can't do this, Blair." But he could feel the urgency building again and the need to go to Blair, to touch him, to bury himself in Blair's body and fuck his way to another orgasm. His cock throbbed and Jim gasped.

Blair lay back down and lifted his legs, revealing his hole, puffy and red with Jim's come seeping out. He reached out to Jim and said again, firmly. "Come here. I am waiting for you."

Jim's control broke and he crawled over frantically, hand guiding his cock as he quickly sank back into Blair's ass, already chasing the pleasure that coursed through him.

Blair's arms went around him and Jim closed his eyes, hiding his face against Blair's neck. He couldn't bear to look at Blair's blank face, those calm, watchful eyes. Blair was all guide, focused on keeping Jim from zoning, freeing Jim to soar on his senses and chase the ecstasy without worrying about control or holding back. So fucking, fucking good and that was all it was--the senses. What it should have been--Jim and Blair exploring each other for the first time, sharing each discovery, trembling with joy at what was happening--was gone. Blair wasn't really there and Jim was all alone here, betrayed by his fucking sentinel senses that made this too amazing, too compelling, too addictive to pull away from.

And if his eyes were burning with unshed tears while he moaned and writhed into Blair's body, well he deserved that, didn't he? He was a fucking dog in heat, not a man in control of himself doing the right thing.

The angle of the sun crept across the floor, moving from morning to afternoon. Shadows shifted and crossed the two bodies clutching and moving together. Until eventually, they slowed, moving less urgently and finally stopped, both men falling into an exhausted sleep right where they lay.

Jim woke up with his face mashed into the floor instead of Blair's shoulder. He took a moment to check in with his senses. He ought to have felt dead tired and muscles aching from a marathon like the last few hours but instead he felt great, his limbs loose and energized, his mind clear and calm, the last traces of afterglow still zinging through him. He remembered Blair talking about endorphin releases and had to hand it to him. Give him a few scraps of data and Blair's weird ass theories were right nine times out of ten.

He could hear Blair moving a few feet away from him. Time to face the music. He turned his head and opened his eyes. Blair was rocking in place, his face buried in his hands. His shoulders were covered in red bite marks and he reeked of semen and misery.

"Chief!" Jim rolled up and crouched at Blair's side. "What's wrong? Are you hurt? Did I hurt you?"

Blair lifted his head, face twisted with grief and disgust. Jim flinched at the sight. "Did you hurt me? Are you fucking kidding me? I remember now what happened, Jim. Incacha told me... he promised me you'd be okay with it once it started. But you weren't okay. Not a fucking bit."

"I couldn't stop," Jim admitted quietly. "I'm so sorry, Blair. You have to believe me."

Blair groaned, hands digging into his hair. "I know. God, I know. You kept saying you were sorry all the way through. The whole time you were moaning and coming, you kept begging my forgiveness. You were crying, Jim!" Blair rubbed at his red eyes, his hands coming away wet. "You were so fucking miserable. And I did that to you, man."

"You thought you were doing it for my own good. You may have started it but I'm the one that couldn't stop it." Jim took a breath and made himself say it. "I'm the one that raped you."

"No way!" Blair protested. "You never would, man. I knew you had this biological imperative and I'm the one who chose to push it. You made it clear you didn't want this, so it was me. I forced you."

The two men stared helplessly at each other. Jim didn't know what to say. He knew he'd used Blair, that anywhere he didn't feel fucking fantastic, he felt scraped hollow and guilty, but he also agreed with Blair a little. The stupid little shit had forced it. Not that that absolved Jim one bit. The silence stretched.

Finally, Blair sighed. "This is such a mess," he said sadly. "What are we going to do?"

Jim shook his head. He had no idea.

"Do you want me to move out?" Blair asked miserably.

Jim thought about it long enough that Blair's face fell. "I don't know," he said at last. "It would be safer for you." He swallowed hard. "I couldn't stop myself before. Now that I know what the reward feels like, control would be even harder. Maybe you *should* move out."

"No, no, no!" Blair insisted. "This is not about me. This is about what would make you feel safe. What do you need? After today, I'm pretty sure you can't possibly trust me ever again."

"Of course, this is about you," Jim said sharply. "Do you think I could live knowing that any second I could attack you? Maybe hurt you badly? Do you think we can just go on with our lives like nothing's changed, knowing that the reward could show up any time I'm stressed or angry? What would that do to us? How long before we resent the hell out of each other?"

"I don't care," Blair said stubbornly. At Jim's glare, Blair crawled closer, only stopping when Jim flinched and edged backwards. "I don't care if that damned reward shows up every day. You didn't hurt me, Jim. The reward didn't hurt me. I'm fine and if you were okay with it, I wouldn't have a problem with it. I love you, man. Anything to keep you safe. You know that. But you're not okay with it and that means we have to figure something else out. But we can do that. Just don't give up on us, okay?"

Oh, Blair, Jim thought sadly. I used you and you're still trying to take care of me. He hung his head and sighed, "This isn't the way I wanted it."

Blair leaned forward, peering at Jim's face. "What way did you want?"

Jim licked dry lips and stared at the wood grain of the floor. "I wanted it to be different. That was our first time but you weren't there. I missed you so much, Blair. It was awful."

This time Jim didn't move back when Blair edged closer and rested one hand on his knee. "You wanted a first time with me," Blair said, hoarsely. "But the reward got in the way."

Jim nodded and flicked a quick glance at Blair. The intense hope in Blair's face was painful and Jim's heart started beating faster.

"That night you kissed me," Blair continued. "Was that going to be our first time?"

Jim shrugged and then nodded, still staring at the floor.

"Ohhh," Blair breathed in, almost reverently. "Oh man. Now I really fucking hate the reward. That was like the worst timing in the world."

"Yeah," Jim agreed miserably.

Blair reached out with his other hand to cover both Jim's knees. "Jim? Look at me, please."

Jim looked up. Blair was smiling. His face was still blotchy and his hair was a mess but the smile, though tremulous, was real.

"Would you like to go out to dinner with me tonight?"

Jim's jaw dropped. The surprise on his face must have been hilarious because Blair's eyes crinkled with amusement although, to his credit, he didn't laugh.

"You're asking me on a date?" *Now?*

"I want that first time that you wanted," Blair said.

Jim shook his head sadly. "First time's come and gone, Blair. You can't turn back the clock."

"No, not *our* first time," Blair said. He lifted his cupped right hand as if bouncing something in it. "Sentinel." He did the same with his left hand. "Guide." Then he made a tossing motion to the side. "That was their first time and they screwed it up. Now it's our turn. Jim and Blair. We're going to do it right."

"It doesn't work like that."

"It does if we say it does." Blair leaned in, his voice turning coaxing, a full-wattage smile spreading across his face. "C'mon, Jim. Come on a date with me. A fresh start for both of us."

Jim hated to be the cynical one here. He imitated Blair's throwing aside motion. "This doesn't actually work. It'll keep coming back."

"I know," Blair admitted. "But if we were solid? You and me, Jim and Blair, together and happy with our partnership. Would the reward coming every once in a while be such a hardship? Let the sentinel and guide have that, man. Compared to them, we'd be the lucky ones. We'd have each other for real. And I for one would really, really like that."

Jim hesitated, tempted by Blair's vision. He was surprised by it because Jim had always seen the sentinel as something separate from him, something resented, while Blair was the one insisting the sentinel was a natural part of him. If Blair was willing to compartmentalize, was that good or bad? Would he resent the sentinel for using him but not Jim? Would that even work? Could Jim let him do that?

Blair was leaning in, head tilted. Jim held still, letting Blair kiss him. It was soft and tender, nothing reminding Jim of the brutal passion of the past few hours. Blair broke the kiss and pressed his forehead to Jim's. "Please, Jim. This could be such a beautiful thing. Give it a try. I'm begging you here."

Jim closed his eyes and leaned into the pressure. Blair's hair fell like a curtain around them and his breath brushed against Jim's jaw. He reached out blindly, grabbing for Blair's hands, and was met with just as tight a grip. His heart ached and he wanted...

He didn't know if they could work it out. Cynicism and past history warned him they'd crumble under the pressure. Jim hated the way his guts tightened in anticipation of the next reward and he didn't see how Blair could just accept it and not start to resent him. But Blair wanted to try, wanted to love him and Jim couldn't push him away. Let it play out and hope Blair was right. God, he hoped Blair was right.

"Okay," he sighed and Blair sighed back, his whole body relaxing. They sat there, pressing into each other, silent and still, as the sun moved slowly across the floor.