



Blessed Protector More Blessed

by Swellison

illustrated by AnnieB

Blair Sandburg lit the second candle taper and stepped back from the dining room table. He flicked the lighter off and closed it absently, checking the table for any last-minute adjustments. Two gleaming sets of white china plates lay on top of Blair's multi-colored woven place mats, origami-folded cloth napkins neatly centered on the plates. Silverware flanked the place settings, with water and wine goblets positioned at the top right-hand side. *One romantic dinner for two coming right up*, Sandburg thought as he popped into the kitchen, stirring the warm spaghetti sauce a final time. The doorbell rang and he set the ladle down on the chili pepper-shaped spoon rest, ditching the cigarette lighter at the same time. He walked over to the loft's front door and opened it.

"Hi, Blair," Kerry Norcen smiled as she entered the loft, "Happy Birthday"—they kissed—"Eve."

"Thanks, Kerry. You look stunning." Blair ushered his blonde fellow grad student into the loft's living room, closing the door behind her.

Kerry wore a black crumpled silk skirt with a floral pattern, and a fuchsia silk blouse. A pair of moderate heels in matching fuchsia made her as tall as Blair. "Well, you did send a formal invitation—even if it was by email." She dropped her tote bag and purse on the floor underneath the coat pegs. "I thought it'd be fun to dress up, for a change. Driving over, I started worrying that we'd clash, but look at you! You're not even wearing plaid tonight," Kerry teased, eyeing Blair's crisp white dress shirt with approval. "Must be a special occasion."

"Must be," Blair murmured, guiding Kerry over to the table. "Eef mademoiselle will be seated." He pulled out a chair, let Kerry get settled and scooted her chair towards the table. He continued with his French waiter impersonation, "I will get ze spaghetti."

Sandburg scooped up the china plate in front of his guest, then stepped into the kitchen. Moments later, he returned the plate full of spaghetti and meatballs, drowning in a thick red sauce and generously sprinkled with Parmesan cheese. He picked up his own empty plate and returned with it full, pausing to dim the overhead lights on his way back to the table. Blair sat down, immediately reaching for the already-opened Merlot in the wine chiller he'd placed by his side of the table. He poured the Merlot into the wine goblets and picked up his glass, while Kerry lifted her glass and touched it to Blair's.

"Happy twenty-eighth birthday—almost," she toasted, green eyes sparkling in the candlelight.

"Thank you. Bon appetit!"

"So, how do you like teaching the summer semester?" Kerry asked, nibbling on a piece of garlic bread.

"It's great." Blair sipped his wine, then lowered his voice. "I'll let you in on a secret—summer is the best semester to teach in the Anthropology Department."

"Really? Why is that?" she whispered back.

"A lot of the professors take the summer months to do field research, or start their sabbaticals, and most of them take along a couple of grad students as assistants. That leaves the school with a dearth of qualified teaching fellows, so they offer perks to get their quota of teachers."

"Perks?"

"Bonus pay and the really neat thing—no Friday classes. So even if tomorrow wasn't my birthday, I'd still have the day off."

"You lucky devil! I've got an eight o'clock class, myself." They continued eating and conversing, enjoying their tête-à-tête dinner immensely.

"That was delicious, Blair," Kerry said after swallowing her last bite of spaghetti. "Now, tell the truth, did you really cook it yourself or did Jim leave some of his famous Spaghetti à l'Ellison in the freezer before he left town?"

"I made it," Blair said from his side of the loft's dining room table. He pouted slightly. "Why do you even ask? You know I'm a good cook."

"And an even better liar," Kerry answered, her green eyes twinkling. "Your reputation precedes you." She had met the grad student anthropologist through mutual friends at the university, and they had been dating casually for almost two years.

"I think I've been insulted."

"I prefer the term left-handed compliment." She laughed ruefully. "You can tell we're a couple of academics, sitting here discussing semantics on what's supposed to be a special occasion—the night before your birthday." She rose from the table, gathering the dirty dishes and utensils. "Here, I'll do the dishes, as penance."

Blair stood hastily. "No, no. I'm the host and you're the guest, I'll get the dishes." He walked over to Kerry and took the collected plates and silverware from her hands. "You just relax. After living with Jim, I've become one of the fastest dishwashers in the west—er, Pacific Northwest."

"I see. Now, is that because you're such a gentleman, or because you don't want me in the kitchen, where I'd see—or not see—the evidence of your cooking? Y'know, things like empty cans of tomato paste, chopped parsley bits, spice shakers on the counter—the leftover trappings of a freshly home-made meal."

"Are you sure you're not doing your doctoral work in law, instead of macroeconomics?" Blair teased, and then swiftly changed topics. "Oops, I forgot the dessert!" He touched his hand to his forehead in the classic V8 gesture. "Stay seated, I'll be right back." He quickly stepped into the kitchen.

Kerry watched over the kitchen countertops as he opened the refrigerator door, extracted the dessert and quickly dished up two servings. Sandburg walked back to the dining area, carrying two bowls. He set one in front of Kerry, then reseated himself at the opposite side of the table.

"Yum, strawberry shortcake."

"Yeah, I'm saving the birthday cake for tomorrow night, but I figured we couldn't have a real dinner without dessert, and the strawberries are in season, so..."

"Mmm, it's delicious, Blair," Kerry said around a mouthful of the creamy light dessert. "Try some." Sandburg needed no further urging. "So, are you nervous about tomorrow?"

"Because it's my birthday? Of course not, I'm just turning twenty-eight, it's not even a big one, I'm still a couple of years shy of thirty. Besides, women get way more hung up on their thirtieth birthday than men do."

"You're right there, Mr. Cultural Anthropologist. I'm sure I'll be a basket case when I hit thirty. I meant, are you nervous about the date? Tomorrow is Friday the thirteenth."

"I don't believe it. You're superstitious?! Kerry, that's almost as unlikely as," Sandburg cast around for a suitable comparison, "as Jim being afraid of the dark."

Kerry kept her eyes trained on her strawberry shortcake, inordinately absorbed in her spoon as she scooped another chunk of strawberries onto it.

"I'm sorry," Blair apologized. "That comment was out of line. We all have our little idiosyncrasies and fears, I should've remembered that. In answer to your question, I figure I'm like people who own black cats."

"Huh?" Kerry's eyes met Blair's, puzzled.

"You know the old saying, if a black cat crosses your path, it's bad luck. Well, people who own black cats have the cats crossing their paths all the time, so they're immune to the bad luck. My birthday is always June thirteenth, and every once in a while it lands on Friday the thirteenth, but it's no big deal, just another birthday."

"That's a much more down-to-earth attitude than I was expecting you to have," Kerry admitted thoughtfully. She swallowed the last spoonful of shortcake and placed her spoon in the empty bowl. "Any plans for your big day?"

"No, not really. I promised Jim I'd spend most of the day at the station, so Simon can keep an eye on me until I pick Jim up at the airport." He grinned. "Jim got it into his head that I'd get into trouble, if left to my own devices."

"Imagine that," Kerry murmured, straight-faced. She had been around Sandburg long enough to know that the anthropologist's list of excused absences from the university ranged from an unplanned trip to Peru to overnight hospital stays. "So, how's Jim enjoying the convention?"

Sandburg snorted. "According to Jim, you don't enjoy law enforcement conventions, you endure them. Fortunately, his brother is also in D. C. on a business trip."

"His brother? I didn't know Jim had a brother."

"Yeah, it was a surprise to me, too." *Now there's an understatement and a half. I couldn't have been more surprised if Jim had suddenly announced he'd been a Hare Krishna in his younger days.* Jim hadn't seen Steven in years, until"—until he accused his brother of murdering Ben Prince—"uh, they bumped into each other unexpectedly a few weeks ago. They've got lots of

catching up to do, and touring the nation's capital together in their off-hours is at least a start." *Impersonal contact on neutral ground; I hope Jim'll let it grow from there.*

Blair rose from the table, collected the empty dessert bowls and carried them into the kitchen. He quickly rinsed the dishes and deposited them in the dishwasher, and then returned to the living room. Kerry had relocated to the sofa, waiting for him with a nicely wrapped flat package and a card that was almost larger than the gift.

Sandburg stopped at the table. "Would you like some more wine?" he asked, refilling his own glass after blowing out the candles. Catching her nod, he filled the second goblet and brought both glasses over to the sofa. She accepted her Merlot with a smile and then Blair joined her on the couch.

After a sip, Kerry put down her wine glass and picked up the present, handing it to Blair. "Happy Birthday. Your real present is in the card; it's unimaginative but useful. This is just a little something I thought you might enjoy."

"Thanks, Kerry." Sandburg began unwrapping the flat rectangular package which he didn't need Sentinel senses to know was a videotape. He read the movie's title doubtfully: "*Strictly Ballroom?*"

"It's a feel-good movie, like *Local Hero* and *My Favorite Year*. I thought you might need a pick-me-up, heading into your birthday and all."

"Thanks, I appreciate the thought."

"Besides, it's a great date movie. We can cuddle up on the sofa and watch it, our own private screening."

"Well..." It wasn't what he had planned for the evening, but Sandburgs were nothing if not adaptable. "Okay." Blair stood up, tape in hand. He skirted around the coffee table, removing the shrink-wrap from the tape as he crossed the room. Reaching the television to the left of the balcony door, he popped the tape into the VCR and plucked the remote control from the top of the set. He re-crossed the room and resettled himself on the sofa. Blair clicked the remote and the film flashed the FBI copyright warnings on the screen.

"It starts off kind of slow," Kerry warned lightly, "but give it a chance, it'll grow on you."

They watched the first few minutes, then Blair said, "Isn't that Pat Thomson? She was terrific as the nasty mother-in-law in *Sleepers*."

"She's very good in this, too. Just watch."

Blair leaned back into the sofa and Kerry smiled, resting her head against his shoulder. They enjoyed the rest of the movie, laughing at the funny parts and marveling at the sheer exhilaration of the dancing. After the end credits scrolled past, Blair rewound the tape. Kerry

stood up, walked around the square coffee table to the center of the living room, stretching her legs.

"Thanks, Kerry. That was a good movie, a lot better than I thought it would be." Blair joined her in the middle of the living room.

"Translation: you thought it would be a chick flick." She smiled. "It always puts me in a good mood, especially my feet." She began tapping her toes.

Sandburg picked up on the visual clue. "You want to go out dancing? Isn't it a little late, considering your eight o'clock class tomorrow?"

"No, I want to stay in and dance." She swayed slightly, shifting her weight from one foot to the other. "It'll be fun."

"Uh, I don't have any dance stuff in my CD collection, and I know that Jim's exhaustive supply of Santana doesn't include any dance music."

"No problem, we can use the movie's dance numbers." Kerry stepped back to pick up the remote from the coffee table and started fast forwarding the tape. "We'll have plenty of room, once we get the sofas pushed back." She shoved the love seat back two feet closer to the stereo system and bookcases.

"Hey, man, Jim's really anal about his furniture placement," Blair protested, right hand in nervous motion.

"We'll put all of it right back where it was. He won't notice a thing."

"I wouldn't count on that," Blair muttered under his breath. Nevertheless, he helped Kerry push the three-cushion sofa against the dining room table, and then move the large square coffee table out of the way. The living room was now much more open, leaving plenty of space for dancing. Kerry checked the tape, backing it up to just before "Time After Time", the first long dance song.

"Shall we?" Sandburg bowed from the waist and extended his right hand.

Kerry smiled and stepped easily into his arms. They slow danced, easing into the feeling of the music as the instrumental introduction to the song played and Fran and Scott rehearsed on the film. When the vocals started, Kerry and Blair became more adventurous, adding twirls, spins and three-second pauses for dramatic effect to their dance steps, marring the effect with occasional giggling. The song faded and they stopped dancing. "That was fun! What's next?"

Kerry walked over to the coffee table, snagged the VCR remote and fast-forwarded it to the next song on the tape, "Perhaps, Perhaps, Perhaps." They danced smoothly to the upbeat song, adding some spins and a couple of dips as the music progressed. When it was over, Kerry again used the remote and fast-forwarded to the next song. Placing the remote on top of the

television set, Kerry walked over to where Blair stood in the middle of the room, then back-stepped, leaving about a five-foot gap between them. As the music started, she rapidly stomped on the floor with her heels, long skirt swishing with the music. She ceased her stomping and dramatically snapped her hands above her head, her right palm touching the top of the left one, with all fingers extended. "Paso doble!" she exclaimed, naming the Latin dance that was the highlight of the film's Pan Pacific Grand Prix dance competition.

Blair, remembering the move from the film, lunged forward with his right leg, simultaneously raising his arms three-quarters upwards, index fingers and thumbs extended in matching 'L's. From this stylized version of a bull, he stepped quickly over to Kerry and they performed a spirited rendition of the Latin dance, making up their own paso doble steps as needed. They continued dancing through the song and the ensuing dialogue, then segued into the ending slow dance, "Love Is In the Air". As the music faded, Kerry clicked off the TV and VCR.

They continued dancing to invisible music as Blair gently guided them across the living room. Reaching the corridor separating Blair's room from the kitchen, Blair twirled Kerry, free hand shutting off the lights, plunging the room into faintly illuminated moonlight. Two steps brought them to the French doors of Blair's bedroom, left fortuitously open. They tangoed through and Sandburg maneuvered his partner so that they ended with a deep dip, leaving Kerry dangling only inches above the futon's earth-toned comforter. Blair withdrew his supporting hold on her back and she softly landed on top of the futon. Blair joined her on the bed, elbows and knees taking his weight as he locked eyes with Kerry. She reached upward, wrapping her arms around his neck and gently pulling him down. Their lips met in a long, lingering kiss, which he broke to nuzzle her ear.

"The horizontal mambo, now that's my specialty," Blair murmured.

Kerry's fingers traced lightly around Sandburg's neck to the front of his shirt, and nimbly began unbuttoning it. "We should start with The Stripper first, mm?"

Rriinnngg! Rriinnngg!

"Mmph," Blair Sandburg grumbled and reached for the snooze button on his clock radio, then settled back for his extra seven minutes of sleep. Before he could even get his hand back under the covers, the annoying ringing sounded again. He thumped on the snooze button again, only to be interrupted by more ringing. Blair opened his eyes and glared at his nightstand, realizing that it was more crowded than usual as the phone rang for the umpteenth time. He snatched it up crossly. "H'lo."

"Hi, sweetie! Happy Birthday!"

"Mom!" Sandburg hastily sat up; one did not talk to one's mother while reclining in bed. He reflexively glanced to Kerry's side of the futon, which was empty. He vaguely recalled receiving a good-bye kiss as Kerry left to go to class, earlier that morning.

"Did I wake you, honey?"

"No, M--"

"Because it's so hard to keep track of the time difference. I mean, here in Katmandu it's the fourteenth already—I kept wanting to call you yesterday, but then I'd have been early." A pause as Naomi Sandburg took a breath. "Are you sure I didn't wake you, sweetie? Because you don't sound very awake to me."

"Mom!" Blair protested, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes. "How can you tell how awake I am? I've hardly gotten a word in edge-wise." He chuckled. "A most unusual state of affairs, as Jim would say."

"How is Jim, dear?"

"He's fine. Spent the week at a law enforcement conference in D.C., but he's due back later today. Are you enjoying your visit?"

"Oh, I'm having a marvelous time! Nepal is so fascinating, you would love Katmandu, Blair. The city has retained so much of its ancient history and customs, it's a virtual anthropologist's paradise. Come and visit me, you'll love it! I've got enough frequent flyer miles to cover your flight."

"I can't," Blair said gently, "my work is here, in Cascade." *You know that.* He braced himself for a dose of Naomi-logic: *"If Jim can fly across the country for a week, certainly you should be able to come to Katmandu for some quality time with your mother!"*

Naomi surprised him, only asking, "Did you get my package?"

"Uh huh. It arrived in Wednesday's post. I'll go get—" Blair broke off, spotting Naomi's package, resting against the clock radio on his night table. Kerry had brought in the present and the phone before she left earlier. "No, wait—it's right here." Blair picked up the padded manila envelope and tore the opening strip along its top side. He extracted an inch-deep rectangular box that was almost as long as its packaging. "I'm opening it," Blair said into the phone, now cradled between his ear and left shoulder, leaving both hands free. He removed the lid from the box, revealing its contents: a Native American bone choker. Each row of the choker's four strands of bone hairpipe sections was separated by turquoise and black colored glass crow beads, with a vertical leather strip halfway between each bead group. The middle of the choker had an abalone shell disk with two intertwined pyrite cubes at its center, the visible points of the fool's gold somewhat resembling a Star of David. Two pieces of hairpipe and glass beads dangled like ribbons from underneath the pyrite cubes.

"Blair, honey, do you like it?"

"It's beautiful! The craftsmanship is awesome. Thank you."

"Amy made it," Naomi said, her satisfaction evident over the phone, "with Joe's blessing, of course."

"Amy? You mean the little girl who tagged after me, the summers we spent on the Lakota Reservation?"

"Yes, little Amy. She's become a remarkably gifted jewelry artisan. Her pieces are highly sought after."

"I can see why," Blair murmured, taking the choker out of its box to examine it more closely.

"I'm so glad you like it, Blair. Promise me you'll wear it. That way I'll feel connected to you, especially today."

"Sure, Mom," Blair readily agreed, running his fingers over the elongated bone hairpipe beads. *Can't wait to show this to Dan*, he thought, wanting the Native American coroner's opinion of the piece. *And Simon's reaction should be--interesting. Simon!* Blair glanced at the alarm clock and cringed. *Oh my God, I'm supposed to be at the station in twenty minutes!?* With an effort, he brought his attention back to Naomi's voice.

"—back in the States early next month. Hey, maybe I can see you over the holiday weekend? You always loved the fireworks on the Fourth. I remember that year I took you to Washington, D.C. and we watched the fireworks from the National Mall. The sky lit up with enormous, colorful fireworks and the Washington Monument stood stark and silent in the background. Remember, honey? You talked about nothing else for days."

"I remember. And I'd love to have you come visit for the Fourth, you're welcome here anytime."

"Thank you, Blair. I never seem to see enough of you these days, but I think about you all the time."

"I know. And speaking of time, it's morning here and I've got a busy day ahead of me."

Naomi laughed, "Which is your polite way of saying, 'Hang up the phone, I've got to go!'"

"I'd never--"

"Mothers are very good at reading between the lines. Happy Birthday, again, darling! I love you."

"Love you, too, Mom. Good-bye."

"Bye."

Blair hung up the phone, then carefully set the bone choker down on his night table. He sprang out of bed and took another despairing glance at the clock radio. Eighteen minutes to nine. *No way I'll ever make it to the station on time.* He picked up the phone and dialed the station. "Hello, Rhonda, this is Blair. Would you tell Si—er, Captain Banks that I'm running late? I'll be down there about an hour from now. Thanks. Bye."

Then Blair headed for the bathroom. He raced through his shower as if Jim had read him the riot act about saving some hot water for the next person's shower. Blair also took the time to clean the sink after shaving, knowing Jim would be way less than thrilled to come home to a stubble-filled bathroom sink. Scooting into his bedroom, he dressed in record time and was leaving the room when his gaze fell on the bone choker, still in its box on the night table. He carefully picked up the choker, tying it around his neck as he walked back to the bathroom.

Blair examined himself in the mirror, arranging his hair and readjusting the collar of the plaid over-shirt he wore to partially obscure the choker. Certainly, he had worn other necklaces and jewelry at the station, but the replica artifact necklace that Brackett had destroyed was much smaller and less noticeable than the four-strand bone choker currently around his neck. *Besides, there's a difference between how Simon reacts to me and how Captain Banks reacts, and I think, since I'm already late, I'll be getting a full dose of Captain Banks today.*

After a final glance in the mirror, Blair left the bathroom, stepped down the hall and into the kitchen. He walked over to the refrigerator and removed an already-mixed algae shake. *Breakfast of champions*, he thought as he poured a glass of the energy drink. He took a swig, and noticed an envelope with "Blair" written on it in Kerry's neat script, propped against the sugar container.

Blair finished his shake, then opened the envelope. He read the caveman-themed birthday card with a grin then looked at the unimaginative but useful enclosure: a gift certificate to University Books. *Practical, and just what I need. Now I can get that textbook for Phibsen's next class....*

He tucked the gift certificate and card back into the envelope and left it neatly leaning against the sugar canister on the counter. Then he rinsed out his drinking glass and shoved it into the dishwasher. Blair hurried towards the door, grabbing his keys from the basket on the way out, then stopped short as he remembered the state of the living room from last night.

*Damn! Jim'll kill me if he finds the sofas out of—*Sandburg had taken two steps into the living room before he noticed that the sofa and loveseat were in their normal spots, perpendicular to each other, with the red, white and black Afghan neatly covering the top of the sofa. *Kerry, you're a wonder*, he thought. *Jim is bound to ask me why the loveseat is .78 inches to the left of where it should be—at some totally unexpected time in the future, not today, though, not today.* Blair grinned as he turned and strode out of the loft, closing and locking the door behind him.

"Sandburg," Captain Banks greeted the anthropologist's arrival sourly, "nice of you to finally join us."

"Sorry I'm late, sir," Blair apologized to the Captain of Major Crimes as he set his backpack down on Jim's desk. *Captain Banks it is, indeed. I wasn't expecting to find the captain waiting for me, ready to pounce from word one. Guess I should've been....*

"Well, now that you're here, you can do something useful," Banks continued, brushing off any further attempt of Blair's to apologize. "Log onto Jim's PC and sort through his email. I don't want Ellison spending all of Monday morning getting caught up on the internet, I want him ready to hit the streets first thing."

"Yes, sir," Blair said, quickly logging onto Jim's account and opening up the detective's email box. Sandburg clicked through the first three emails by rote, stopping in surprise when the fourth post opened up an online graphic. The personal computer's audio file flickered into life, rendering a percussion-laden version of 'Happy Birthday' as a cartoon hedgehog cavorted onscreen. The hedgehog wore an Indian headband with an eagle feather sticking out of it, and brandished a small Navajo rug, which he flicked over the candles of the chocolate cake he was circling. Stunned, Blair watched the hedgehog's antics for over a minute before he followed the 'click here' instruction at the bottom of the screen. The hedgehog disappeared, replaced by the words 'Happy Birthday, Chief!' written in fluffy gray letters of smoke. 'Don't forget to pick me up tonight—Jim' was written underneath the smoke signals in normal fonts.

A chorus of "Happy Birthday, Sandburg!" made him blink in surprise and Blair found himself surrounded by Major Crimes personnel. Then Debbie, the doughnut girl, magically appeared, brandishing an enormous lemon poppy seed muffin with a lighted candle on top.

"Happy Birthday, Blair!" The blonde girl smiled and handed Blair the muffin. "Make a wish!"

Sandburg took the lighted muffin and closed his eyes. *More Sentinel tests*, the abbreviated desire crossed his mind before he blew out the candle. He opened his eyes to a wisp of smoke curling from the extinguished candle and the applause of the watching police force.

"Way to go, Hairboy!" Detective Henri Brown beamed. "Now, where's the rest of the treats, Debbie?"

"They're on the desk behind you," Debbie answered, indicating three open boxes of assorted doughnuts and muffins spread invitingly on Rafe's desk, with paper plates and napkins next to the leftmost box. Henri nimbly grabbed a doughnut with cherry icing and sprinkles and a napkin, then stepped next to Sandburg and watched while the horde descended on the doughnuts.

"This is really great of you guys, man!" Sandburg enthused as he took a bite of his favorite type of muffin.

"It was the Captain's idea," Henri said.

"Joel's? I thought I saw him in the crowd," Blair said, waving toward Joel Taggart, Captain of Cascade's elite bomb squad.

"No—mine." Captain Banks' imposing voice came unexpectedly from Sandburg's left. Blair whirled around, startled.

"Simo—Captain Banks! Thanks for the food and everything." Blair gestured towards the rapidly growing crowd around Rafe's desk.

"Well, you know what they say about cops and doughnuts," Banks said gruffly, letting only the slightest hint of amusement show in his dark face. "Doughnuts are an inseparable part of a cop's work day."

"I thought that was paperwork."

"That, too," Banks agreed after munching on his pineapple-banana muffin. "And speaking of paperwork, once the party's over, you can collect Jim's reassigned cases from everyone. Unless you and Rafe have cracked the Allingham case in Jim's absence, Brown?"

"Uh, no, sir," the African-American detective answered after swallowing the last bite of his doughnut. "We ran a few leads, but nothing panned out."

"Well, you tried," Banks said. "Besides, I imagine Jim would be peeved to come back and find that you and Rafe had solved his biggest case while he was gone. Just give Sandburg back the file and we'll let Jim tackle it Monday. Maybe the new crime-fighting methods that he picked up at the conference will help him solve it."

Twenty minutes later, the bull pen was back to normal. Sandburg decided to retrieve Jim's various open cases before plowing through the rest of Ellison's email. He started with the closest desk, walking over to the erstwhile location of the doughnuts. Detective Rafe, neatly turned out in a light gray three-piece suit, glanced up from his now orderly desk, all traces of doughnuts and doughnut boxes removed.

"Hey, Blair," Rafe greeted, "what can I do for you?"

"Simon told me to get the Allingham file back from you," Blair said, absently pushing a loose strand of hair away from his face.

"Sure, it's around here somewhere." Rafe flipped through his in-basket and extracted a thick manila file folder. He rose to hand it to Sandburg. "Hey, where'd you get the choker? Is it new?"

Of course, Mr. GQ is going to notice my new accessory. "Yeah, Rafe, it's a birthday present—from my Mom," he added, low-voiced.

"It looks very sharp—what I can see of it. Why are you keeping it hidden?"

"I don't want Si—er, Captain Banks to see it. It's not exactly regulation."

"No offense, Sandburg," Rafe smiled, "but you're not exactly regulation, either."

"Point taken, man." Blair tucked his hair behind his ears, and then readjusted the collar on his over-shirt, making the choker more visible for the fashion-conscious detective.

"Very nice," Rafe said after a quick but thorough appraisal. "The pyrite is an unusual touch."

"It's an Amy Rainwater original design."

"That explains the superior craftsmanship." Rafe looked past Sandburg's shoulder and spotted Captain Banks heading in their direction. "Simon's coming," he muttered.

Sandburg shook his head, his hair falling loosely about his shoulders and covering his ears. He re-straightened the collar of his over-shirt, concealing most of the choker. "Thanks for the file."

Rafe's answer was drowned out by a sudden crack of lightning followed rapidly by a boom of thunder. Blair whirled around, startled. The thunder had sounded more like a roaring animal than a clap of thunder, and the direction was off, too. It sounded like it came from Jim's desk! Sandburg glanced over at his partner's desk and took a hasty step back. An enormous, jet black panther sat on top of Jim's desk, covering every available inch of space, its fur brushing against the computer monitor. Whoompf! Blair's backwards step bumped him squarely into Captain Banks' solid chest and the Allingham file slipped out of his hands, spilling papers all over the floor.

"Sorry, sir," Sandburg mumbled as he hastily knelt down and collected the scattered papers, the line from one of his favorite movies playing in his head. *It could be worse. It could be raining.* By the time he reassembled the folder and was back on his feet, the rain splatters became a steady rainfall.

"Sandburg." Captain Banks pointed towards Jim's desk. "Sit."

"But I—" Sandburg's voice sounded odd to his own ears, he could just imagine what it sounded like to Simon. Blair tore his glance from the panther-occupied desk to the Captain's face. Simon was looking straight at Jim's desk, yet there was no expression on his face beyond minor annoyance. *He has to see the panther; he's staring right at it. Isn't he?* Sandburg's gaze returned to Ellison's desk: no panther. He rubbed his eyes with one hand, remembering to hold onto the Allingham file with his other hand. "Yes, sir." Blair walked over to his partner's desk and gingerly sat in Jim's chair. Nothing happened. He placed the Allingham file in Jim's in-box and turned his attention to the PC. No black panther hairs were stuck to the screen or anywhere else. Sandburg let out a deep breath and finished sorting through Jim's email then re-familiarized himself with the Allingham case for the rest of the morning. Rafe and Henri treated him to lunch at the corner deli, and it was still raining when they arrived back at the station, just after one.

Blair listened to the rain as he resettled behind Jim's desk. *This is sleeping rain*, he thought. *The kind of rain that used to lull me back to sleep, when I was just a student and could sleep in if I had late classes.* Nowadays, as grad student and police observer, he no longer had the luxury of ignoring the alarm clock and snoozing for a couple of extra hours. If he wasn't teaching or attending early classes, he was at the station, helping Jim with his caseload. *It's always something, Sandburg*, he mocked himself lightly. *But I like being busy and needed. Life is good, in fact it's just about wonderful. Yikes, I've gone from Saturday Night Live to Mr. Roger's Neighborhood in ten seconds. Sheesh, I'm getting sentimental in my old age.*

Sandburg quietly collected the rest of Jim's reassigned case files from the other detectives, then walked back to Jim's desk and read through them. Police work finished, he retrieved his laptop from his backpack and logged on, quickly burying himself in the rough draft of his first summer term paper.

"Sandburg!" A hand prodded the observer's shoulder.

"Hey!" Sandburg dragged his concentration back to the bullpen, and saw Simon Banks looming next to him.

"It's past 3:30, I figured you'd want to head out to the airport early and miss the rush hour traffic, especially since it's raining."

"It's still raining?" Casting a glance at the windows, Sandburg noted the rain streaking down the glass panes. "Sounds like a good idea, Captain." Blair quickly saved the rough draft he was working on, logged off and powered down his laptop. He snapped the lid shut and stashed the portable pc in his backpack.

"Say 'hi' to Jim for us and have a nice weekend, Hairboy," Brown called out as Sandburg made his way towards the Major Crimes door.

"Sandburg!" Banks' voice stopped Blair as he reached for the door. "Drive carefully."

Yes, Father. "Of course, Captain. I've got Jim's SUV. You know how picky he is about scratches." *Bullet holes in the line of duty? No problem, but drive too close to one little bush....*

Sandburg stepped out of the bullpen, and down the hallway. He took the elevator down to the garage and left the building. Walking briskly to Jim's Expedition, he opened the back door and dug his spare rain slicker out of the box of emergency rations and supplies. He donned the raincoat, then opened the driver's door and hopped inside.

The drive to Cascade International Airport took longer than usual, the combination of rain and early rush hour traffic keeping Sandburg's attention focused on the roads. He parked in the short-term parking garage, as close to the terminal entrance as he could get. Sandburg strode quickly down the pedestrian walkway that connected the garage to the airport, then through

one set of automatic doors. Entering the main hallway, he turned left and halted to check the closest arrival display board.

He quickly located Jim's connecting flight from Minneapolis, with a 'DELAYED' status next to its posted arrival time of 5:15. Several other arriving flights were also listed as delayed, which he attributed to the weather. Glancing at his watch, he noted that it was 5:10, a few minutes before the originally scheduled landing of Jim's flight at gate B8. He resumed his walk towards terminal B, passed through the security scan, and walked down the main corridor until he reached the waiting area for Gate 8. He flashed a smile at the young brunette attendant behind the check-in counter, then his attention was caught by the message posted on the board behind her. Underneath '1172 Minneapolis' the words 'SEE ATTENDANT' practically screamed at him.

Hurriedly, Blair strode the counter. "Uh, Miss, I'm meeting someone on the Minneapolis flight?"

"That flight's been delayed, sir, and we've moved the waiting room. If you'll follow me, please." She stepped from behind the counter and led Sandburg back down the corridor. She stopped at the closed door to the VIP lounge and unlocked it. She escorted Sandburg inside a few feet, then pointed to a woman standing next to a podium along the right-hand wall. "That's Mrs. DeLisle, she'll fill you in. I've got to get back to my counter now. Good-bye, sir."

"Bye," Blair returned automatically, then took a moment to get his bearings. The VIP lounge had a predominantly blue-green color scheme. Several groupings of leather sofas, chairs and mahogany coffee tables were placed throughout the large, airy room. The wall opposite the door was solid windows from three feet above the floor to the ceiling. Almost a hundred fifty people occupied the room, sitting or standing in little groups, some talking quietly, others just waiting. Blair's apprehension grew as he approached the trim middle-aged woman in a navy suit. *I've got a bad feeling about this....* "Mrs. DeLisle? I just got here. Could you tell me about" - his hands fluttered nervously—"about the flight?"

"Yes, I can, Mr.—?"

"Sandburg, Blair Sandburg."

"Mr. Sandburg. Unfortunately, the flight experienced an in-air engine malfunction," she started. "One of the engines is no longer working, but this is a two-engine jetliner, fully capable of flying with one engine out of commission. The captain and crew are very experienced flyers, and all of our pilots are well-versed in flying a plane with one engine disabled, so there really isn't anything to worry about. Of course, with only one engine operating, it will take the plane longer to reach Cascade."

"How much longer?"

"We're not sure at the moment, the air traffic controllers are discussing that with the crew. Once I know any further information, I'll immediately pass it on to you and the rest of the people here."

"Is this incident weather-related?"

"Not that we're aware of. We're not sure what caused the malfunction at this point. The weather is not helping the situation, but the situation is under control. Now, if you'd like anything to eat or drink, please help yourself." She indicated two tables flanking the podium. One had coffee, tea, soft drinks and ice, the other held assorted sandwiches, chips and fruit. "Do you need to call anyone to let them know about the flight's delay? I have a private phone, if you'd like to use it."

"No, thanks, not right now." Sandburg decided to wait until he had further information before spreading the news about Jim's flight to anyone else.

"Okay. I told the rest of the people here earlier that I'll be providing updates every half hour. Please make yourself comfortable here, I'll give the next briefing about fifteen minutes from now. It'll be a short one, since I really don't have any new information yet. Now, if you'll excuse me." Mrs. DeLisle stepped away from Blair, heading for a couple of women standing in front of the table with sandwiches.

Blair watched her for a moment, then moved over to the beverage table and poured himself a cup of hot tea. Real cups and saucers, not plastic, like they use on the flights, he noted idly. *First class treatment all the way.* He carefully walked over to an unoccupied chair and sat down, sinking into cool green leather. Blair removed his raincoat and draped it over the chair arm, then sipped his tea, assessing the state of his fellow occupants. *Everyone's just waiting, like me. Still, the airline brought us all here—a quick glance around at the small groups of anxious people confirmed his feeling that only people waiting for the Minneapolis flight were in the lounge—and relocated any VIP passengers to another room. An awful lot of trouble to go to for a simple delayed flight....* Not liking the direction his thoughts were heading, Sandburg concentrated on drinking his tea and waited impatiently for the promised 5:30 briefing.

A few minutes later, Mrs. DeLisle approached the podium and addressed the room. "Ladies and gentlemen," she began, her voice amplified by the microphone. The background chatter stopped immediately as the whole room strained to hear the announcement. "Northern Airlines thanks you for your patience. To recap, Flight 1172 has experienced an in-flight engine malfunction, resulting in the loss of the use of that engine. The plane can be safely flown with one engine out of commission, as is happening right now. Loss of the engine will lengthen the plane's flight time, however, and we estimate that Flight 1172 should reach Cascade about an hour and half from now. That's really all I can tell you at this point, but I will try to answer any questions you might have."

A woman sitting near the front of the room raised her hand. "Why aren't they diverting the plane to Spokane or somewhere else closer, so they can land it as soon as possible?"

"That's a good question. I told some of you earlier that the weather is not a direct cause of this incident, but it's not helping the matter, either. As everyone knows, it's been raining since noon here in Cascade. What you might not be aware of is that our rain is part of a large, slow moving storm system that has been hovering over Washington and Oregon for practically the whole day. Weather conditions are no better in Spokane or Seattle than they are here, and Yakima isn't equipped to handle a plane of this size. So the pilots and the Tower decided that the best course of action is for the flight to proceed to Cascade, and maintain the original flight plan.

"Any other questions? Okay. Northern Airlines thanks you all for your patience, and I'll give you another briefing in thirty minutes. Please let me or my assistants know if there is anything we can do to make your wait more pleasant. Thank you." Mrs. DeLisle clicked the microphone off and stepped back from the podium.

Blair absorbed the briefing, noting Mrs. DeLisle's body language as she spoke. Her positions and gestures indicated that she was being open and honest in her views, and Sandburg decided that the PR woman was very familiar with the concept of body language and was using it to her advantage. He wondered what would happen if he suddenly showed her his CPD identification.

Would she tell me anything else, anything more? If she would, do I really want to hear it?

Restless, Sandburg's gaze focused on the coffee table in front of him. The front page section of the Cascade Herald lay on the tabletop, top half showing. The dateline leaped out at him: FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 1997. Friday the Thirteenth, Friday the Thirteenth. The unlucky date ran repeatedly through his mind. *Why does Jim have to be on a plane with engine trouble on Friday the Thirteenth? This is not good.... And I told Kerry I wasn't superstitious....* Sandburg just had to get out of the chair, away from the newspaper. He rose and walked over to the windows at the far side of the VIP lounge. He stared out the window, but only saw his own worried face reflected back on the glass. He brought his hands up over his head and placed them on the window pane, then leaned his head forward, resting it on the edge of his hands. Now, he could see outside the window. Rain continued to fall, and he caught a flicker of movement, black on black, out of the corner of his eye. Blair's eyes widened and he stared again. *The panther? No, I've just got the panther on my brain, since Saturday night....*

He's doing it again. Blair felt Jim's eyes on him as he continued to read the current paragraph of his anthro textbook. Blair was stretched out on the sofa, his favorite studying place when he had a book or two to devour. Jim had learned the signs of Blair in intense study mode, and became very adept at leaving Sandburg at peace—usually. This evening, the older man seemed to have something on his mind, but he hadn't interrupted Blair's reading to actually say anything. Blair appreciated Jim's efforts to avoid disturbing him, but... *Enough's enough.*

Blair closed his textbook, keeping his index finger in it to mark the page. He glanced at Jim. "Hey, did ya finish packing?"

"I packed this morning."

Of course you did. Jim was strictly methodical and highly organized. *Probably linked to his control issues,* Sandburg mused as he shifted to a seating position on the couch. He noted the page number—258—as he put the book on the coffee table, and placed his reading glasses there, too. He was just about to offer to make a cup of tea when Jim spoke.

"You got a minute, here, Chief?" Jim shifted his feet and fiddled with the cuff of his long-sleeved rust-colored shirt.

"Sure, Jim. What's on your mind?"

"A couple of things, actually. First, I really am sorry I'm going to miss your birthday. When Simon told me about the conference a few weeks ago, I just didn't connect the second week of June with the thirteenth. And I should have. Birthdays are important--"

"Jim, hey, man. I told you before, it's no big deal—"

"Yes, it is a big deal, Chief. Birthdays are important." Jim's gaze moved to the black and white triptych on the wall behind his stereo, then back to Sandburg. "Especially family ones."

"Family, huh?" Blair grinned, amazed and delighted that Jim now included him in his family circle. "All right, birthdays are important. But it's still okay, 'cause you'll be back Friday evening, so you won't miss the whole day."

"Right. And speaking of families...." Jim coughed. "I talked to Steven this morning. Turns out he's going to be in D.C., too, next week. Some business meetings associated with that European conglomerate that he's merging with."

"Jim," Blair interrupted, "is this your round-about Ellison way of saying that you don't need a lift to the airport tomorrow morning?"

"No. Steven's flight doesn't leave 'til tomorrow night, so I still need you to drop me off. Steven and I have arranged to meet for some sightseeing while we're in the Capital, though. I wanted to thank you for your advice about—about listening. I'm trying to follow it."

"You're welcome, Jim." The room was quiet for several seconds and Sandburg reached for his textbook. "Now, if there isn't anything else—"

"There is something else," Jim interrupted. "Go get your notebook, Chief. I've got...call it an early birthday present."

Blue eyes met blue eyes and Sandburg realized that this was something special, something Sentinel-related. "I'll be right back," he said, rising to his feet. Blair walked into his bedroom

and grabbed the green spiral bound notebook that he considered his Sentinel journal, full of his testing notes, theories and observations. While grabbing his favorite pen from his cluttered desktop, Blair spied his tape recorder and took that, too. *Jim so rarely initiates these conversations, I want to catch every word.* Then Sandburg hurried back to the living room.

Blair noticed that Jim was now seated on the far side of the sofa, so Sandburg sat next to him and placed the micro-cassette recorder on the coffee table. "Mind if I tape this?" *Jim can be paranoid about the smallest things...*

"No."

It took a few seconds for Blair to realize that Jim's negative was actually his permission, since he'd almost convinced himself that Jim would veto the recording. Blair liked to write things down by hand—some of his students accused him of being "old school" in his writing habits, but facts and details just stuck with him when he put them down in writing.

"You remember what I said when we got back from Peru?" Jim started, his eyes straying to the closed balcony doors on the far side of the room.

Blair's gaze flickered over to the balcony and he had a vivid picture of them clinking beer bottles and celebrating their safe return from Peru. He reached over to turn the recorder on. "You mean, what you didn't say, about how your senses came back?"

"Yeah, and my dream... the Panther—it's all connected."

Sandburg bit back the temptation to say 'Start at the beginning' to his partner and patiently waited, giving Jim the time to collect his thoughts.

"We were in the Indian village," Jim started later in their adventure than Blair had expected. "I'd outfitted myself with the bow and curare-tipped darts and gave you the machine gun, then I went into the jungle, to reconnoiter the area. It started out normal; I was walking through the jungle, trying to be quiet and quick at the same time. Suddenly, I saw the Panther again.

"It was standing on a dirt mound, right in front of me. I looked up and the light changed from normal sunlight to blue light, like my dream. The Panther stared at me for a few seconds, then took off running. I ran after it, chasing it deeper into the jungle. Eventually, we reached a small clearing that had been overgrown and reclaimed by the jungle. There were ruins, with a couple of stone steps and a big sort of T-shaped statue or altar, carved in gray stone with symbols cut into it. The Panther leaped up the steps, and then halted.

"It turned to face me and while I stared back at the Panther's face, it changed, grew more oval-looking before my eyes. Then the Panther rose up on his hind legs, but it changed—transformed—while it was rising. By the time it was fully erect, I was looking at a man—a six and a half-foot tall Indian warrior. I recognized the red and silver-gray face paint and style of dress as distinctly Chopec—the tribe that took me in when I—my unit crash landed in Peru."

Sandburg couldn't keep himself from breaking into Jim's narrative. "The Chopec? That's the tribe that took you in? Did you recognize the man?"

"No, I'm sure I never saw him before, in the Chopec tribe or anywhere else. He had a very distinctive face, but it was nothing compared to his voice."

"His voice? He **spoke** to you?" Blair was tingling with excitement.

"Yes he did—in English. His voice was so loud it almost echoed, but at the same time I felt it reverberate in my bones. I should've been surprised by that, but it was just like everything else by then: nothing and everything amazed me."

"What did the Chopec say?"

"He said that my return to the jungle had been no accident, that I'd purposely been brought back to the place where I was reborn a Sentinel."

Blair jolted at those words. "Wait a minute, **reborn** a Sentinel? What exactly does that mean?"

"I don't know, Sandburg. He didn't exactly encourage questions, y'know?" Jim seemed almost defensive, but he continued speaking about the Chopec. "He said that he had taken away my abilities to remind me of what I had been." Jim held up his hands. "Yes, Chief, the Chopec admitted that he was the cause of me losing my senses earlier, after we first landed in the jungle. That makes sense, since the first time I saw the Panther was when we met up, after parachuting into the jungle. But we're getting off track, here."

"The Chopec said that I could go back and be an ordinary man, or go forward and be a Sentinel. He told me that what I'd experienced so far had been an initiation—"

"Whoa, Jim. Eighteen months in the jungle and a year here in Cascade was just an initiation period for your senses?" Blair scribbled as he thought out loud. "That's operating on a super-long timeframe for a tribal culture...assuming that it knew about you using your senses here in Cascade..."

"Ahem," Jim coughed and Sandburg gestured for him to go on. "—but now I had to choose to continue to be a Sentinel. He warned me that going forward would require my life and my soul, then asked if I was ready to make such a journey."

"I answered that I wasn't sure and he just stood there, frozen in place, while I thought about my decision." Jim coughed again. "At the time, I thought you were going to Borneo, and I wasn't sure I could handle this Sentinel thing on my own."

Blair glanced guiltily towards the kitchen, remembering their pivotal conversation. He'd been excited and flattered by Dr. Stoddard's invitation, even letting it overshadow his Sentinel research for a few minutes, despite the neediness that radiated from Jim's eyes when he asked about "our project, this Sentinel thing"—and then the phone rang again, its jarring news about

Simon's crashed helicopter sending them scrambling to Peru. Blair firmly brought himself back to the present. It didn't sound like he'd missed much of Jim's story. *Good thing I'm recording this.*

"But I knew I stood a better chance of rescuing Simon and Daryl if I had my Sentinel abilities....It was really weird, while I was thinking, the clearing disappeared and all of a sudden I was standing at the edge of a cliff, the Chopec a few feet behind me. I told the warrior that, and I said if I go forward, I'll die. He answered 'yes' in a voice that went right through me, and I knew what I had to do. I turned around and told him I was ready to go forward and—he vanished.

"Not only the Chopec vanished. The cliff, the clearing, all of my blue-tinted world was suddenly replaced with the jungle. Everything was normal, all green leaves and sunlight streaming through the trees. Then I heard this tremendously loud crunching noise, like Godzilla chomping on a building in one of those Japanese horror films, you know? I looked around and I zoomed in on a grasshopper, eating some leaves. My senses were back, stronger than ever. I heard children screaming and I knew that the village was under attack. I raced back through the jungle, and the rest you know."

Blair clicked off the tape recorder. "Wow, Jim. That's amazing." He shook his head. "I understand now why you couldn't talk about it when we got back to Cascade. Thanks for telling me about it now."

"You needed to know. But I'm not done yet." Ellison gestured towards the mini-recorder and Sandburg hit the record button, activating the machine. "Remember what I said when we first met, at your office at Rainier?"

"You called me a neo-hippie witch doctor-punk."

"After that. I told you I didn't remember much of what happened to me in Peru." Jim took a deep breath. "I wasn't exactly telling the truth, but you were hardly more than a stranger at the time. I remembered some of my experiences in the jungle then, and ever since we got back from Peru, I've recollected more. I guess being back in the jungle jogged my memory....I don't remember everything. I couldn't tell you what I did on April 12, 1990 or any other day from then, that's too specific.

"Mostly I remember my time with the Chopec: Chief Tahuu, the warriors, the women and Incacha."

"Incacha?"

"The tribe's Shaman, although I didn't know that at first. He was a young man, wise beyond his years. He had a quiet, almost gentle manner usually, but I've seen him stand up to the Chopec's strongest warrior, and take on their fiercest rival and win, hands down. And he put up with me for eighteen months; I learned a lot about my abilities from Incacha. He was instrumental in

adopting me into the Chopec tribe, and in getting me and the Chopec to accept me as the tribe's sen-te-nall."

"Sen-te-nall?" Blair's voice rose, excitedly. "Does that mean what I think it means?"

"Yes, it does, although I translated it differently at the time. I thought it was Chopec for watchman, or military advisor, which is what I was."

"Wow, man. This is so cool... What area of Peru do the Chopec inhabit?"

"La Montaña region."

"La Montaña, La Montaña--yeah, Burton was there, all right. He must've had a lot of contact with the Chopec tribe, if the Chopec co-opted his word 'sentinel' into their existing language. Hmm, I've got to re-read Burton's book, see if there's any Chopec references that I missed or glossed over before."

Jim reached forward and turned off the recorder, then rose from the couch. "You do that, Chief. I've had enough storytelling for now." Jim rubbed his forehead.

Sandburg touched his partner's arm. "Jim, thanks for sharing this with me. I know it wasn't easy for you to talk about it. I do want to discuss your time with Incacha and the Chopec in more detail, at a later date. No rush, man, you've given me plenty of material to sink my teeth into tonight."

"A later date, ok, Chief." Jim agreed quietly. "Right now, I need some fresh air. Don't worry, I'm only going out on the balcony for a while." Blair watched as Jim walked over to the balcony doors, opened them and stepped into the clear, night air.

"Excuse me."

A hand briefly touched Sandburg's shoulder and he jerked his head up, looking over his right shoulder. A young brunette-haired woman stood behind him, dressed casually in jeans and an I Luv Cascade t-shirt. "I thought you'd want to know that Mrs. DeLisle's getting ready to talk again."

"Thanks for telling me," Sandburg said. He glanced at his watch, then left the window to reclaim his earlier waiting spot. He sat down in the leather chair just as Mrs. DeLisle started speaking.

"Ladies and gentlemen, again thank you for your patience," Mrs. DeLisle began. "Flight 1172 continues to be on-course for Cascade. She is flying with one engine out of commission and our original revised ETA was 7 p.m. We have some good news, weather-wise. The storm is letting up slightly and the wind has shifted in our favor. Flight 1172 is now flying with a tail

wind, which is boosting the plane's air speed. We now estimate it will arrive in Cascade approximately forty minutes from now, at 6:40.

"The Tower has been in near-constant contact with the flight crew, and they want me to assure you that the passengers are all doing fine. We look forward to the plane being on the ground shortly, as I'm sure all of you do. Again, thank you for your patience and cooperation. We are doing everything we can to assure Flight 1172's safe arrival. I will give you a final briefing at 6:30." Mrs. DeLisle stepped away from the podium, walking briskly down the side of the long room and out the door.

She didn't ask for questions from the audience this time, does that mean anything? Sandburg asked himself as he watched the door close behind the PR woman. His gaze shifted to the newspaper on the coffee table in front of him, again marking the date: June 13th. Happy Birthday, Sandburg. Are there more auto accidents and plane crashes on Friday the Thirteenth than on the other, normal days? Oh god, not Jim's plane. Not today, not any day, not on my birthday. He froze, clearly hearing Jim's voice. "Call it an early birthday present." And then he told me about Peru, the panther, and Incacha. He really spilled his guts, not like Jim to be so open...unless.... Unless he had a premonition that something was going to happen to him? A dream, maybe? Oh, Jim, why didn't you tell me? Or maybe he didn't believe it, not really, but decided to cover his bases and tell me about Peru and the panther, just in case....

Sandburg shook himself, trying to escape his thoughts. He rearranged his legs so that he was sitting Indian-style, then drew in a deep, calming breath. *Not Jim's plane. Not Jim's plane.* Blair paused, reconsidering his mantra. Perhaps he should avoid using a negative phrase? *Safe landing. Safe landing.* Deep breath. *Safe landing. Safe landing....*

Blair ended his meditation, opened his eyes and glanced at his watch: 6:28. While he needed an alarm clock to end some of his heavy duty studying and paper writing sessions, he didn't need it to end his meditations. Years of meditating had given him the ability to time his sessions with his inner clock. He checked the podium to see if Mrs. DeLisle had returned to the lounge, then his gaze traveled back towards the lounge's door. It swung open as he stared at it and Mrs. DeLisle entered, then walked briskly to the podium.

"Ladies and gentlemen." she began, garnering everyone's attention. "I've just received final confirmation that Flight 1172 will be on the ground in ten minutes, at 6:40. We anticipate a safe landing, but we are taking nothing for granted. The airport has a full complement of emergency vehicles standing by, ready to assist if necessary."

A worried buzz of conversation started and Mrs. DeLisle spoke firmly. "Again, we don't expect any difficulties with this landing, we are just prepared for any contingency, however remote. I've mentioned the weather before. It is still raining. This will have no adverse effect on the landing itself, but the prevailing winds mean that the plane will be landing on an east-west airstrip and you won't be able to see it from the windows in this room."

Another wave of murmured comments started and Mrs. DeLisle waited for it to subside before speaking again. "Lastly, I have a favor to ask. I ask that you all please stay here for the next ten minutes. As soon as the plane is on the ground, I'll escort you over to the proper gate. I assure you that you will all be at the gate waiting before the first passenger walks down the jetway-- you won't miss a thing."

Except for the landing itself, Sandburg thought. They don't want us to look outside and see a line of fire trucks and ambulances standing by. And they don't want us to see the actual landing, in case it's a crash landing. That's why they're keeping us all here, so that they can tell everyone the news—if it's bad news—all at once. I know she said that all planes can fly safely with one engine out, but can they land safely? Oh Lord, we're about to find out.... Blair's thoughts were interrupted by the rapidly escalating beating of his heart. His breathing quickened. No, I am not hyperventilating, not now, man. What would Jim say? 'You've held it together for this long, Chief. Just keep it together for a few minutes more.' Do the right thing-- that's what. I can do that. Yes I can. Yes I can. Sheesh, now I'm quoting Sammy Davis, Jr. Doesn't matter, just keep it together for a few minutes more....I don't care if you start quoting Tricky Dick himself, you're going to keep it together. Be cool, calm and collected, the three 'C's of the Establishment. Naomi'd have a cow if she heard me thinking like this....

"Ladies and gentlemen." Mrs. DeLisle addressed the crowd, a huge smile upon her face. "The plane has landed safely!" The room erupted in a burst of clapping and cheering. "They touched down only seconds ago and are taxiing towards the gate as I speak. Now, if you'll follow me, I'll walk you over to Gate Seven." She turned and walked towards the exit, while the relieved mass of people rose to their feet and strode over to the door, creating a friendly bottle-neck at the exit as everyone tried to leave at the same time.

Blair leaped out of his seat, remembering at the last minute to take his raincoat with him. Once he made it past the door, he kept pace with the rest of the group as they trooped their way down two wide, practically deserted corridors. Arriving at Gate Seven, they huddled around the still-closed jetway door, watching and waiting as the counter attendant punched in the code to unlock the closed door. She propped the door open fully and seconds later the first passengers, a silver-haired man pushing an elderly woman in a wheelchair, exited the jetway. "Grandma! Grandpa!" a high voice shrieked from the crowd and a teen-aged girl ran up to throw her arms around the old man. The crowd parted and her parents joined the happy threesome, while other passengers streamed from the door.

Blair impatiently scanned the emerging passengers, looking for his Sentinel. He caught sight of Ellison as the tall man stepped from the entrance. He wore a short black leather jacket and squinted as a flashbulb caught him full in the face.

"Dial it down, Jim," Blair instructed Jim from three rows back in the crowd. Blair saw Jim motioning him to stay where he was and watched the taller man quickly work his way through the crowd.

"Let's get out of here," Jim said, gesturing towards the crowd-free corridor behind them.

Sandburg nodded and turned around, slowly making his way through the throng of waiting people. He started walking down the corridor towards the airport's main hub, Ellison right beside him. He ducked into the deserted waiting area for Gate Four, then turned to face Jim. "How was the flight, really, Jim? The airline told us that the plane lost an engine and it would take longer for the flight to reach Cascade, but that's about all they said. They did say that the passengers were all okay and doing fine, but I imagine you'd phrase things differently, from inside the plane."

"Different, yeah." Jim rubbed a hand over his eyes. "I knew something was wrong when I saw two of the flight attendants whispering to each other."

"Oh my god, Jim. What did you do?"

"I just sat there. And listened."

"Listened?"

"I heard the pilots in the cockpit, conversing with the tower, and vice versa."

"Jim! You heard both sides of the conversation?" *Duh, Sandburg, of course he did, he's a Sentinel, remember?*

"Yes. But really I did what all the passengers did, thought about coming home safely."

Sandburg nodded in understanding. *Picture yourself there.*

"Speaking of home...." Jim placed his travel bag on the end table they stood in front of and unzipped it. He reached in to pull out a small box. "Happy birthday—" He started to say, then they heard the unmistakable tinkling of broken glass as he picked it up. He glanced towards Blair, crestfallen. "It's broken. I'm sorry, Chief. I meant—"

"Hey, man. I just got the best birthday present ever! You!" Blair threw his arms around the Sentinel, whispering into the taller man's chest. "Safe and sound on the ground."

Jim stiffened and Sandburg immediately dropped his arms and stepped away. *Oops, violated the Number One Out of the House Rule: no hugging in public.* Sandburg coughed and glanced away, missing the quick shudder that went through Jim.

"So, where to? Down to luggage claims to get your suitcase?"

"And then home," Jim concurred. "I can't wait to get behind the wheel again. Too many crazy taxi rides in D.C."

"Wait a minute, Jim. Shouldn't I drive? You've already been through a lot tonight."

"And you haven't?" Jim countered softly. "Besides, it's still raining, and the wind's picked up."

"Ah, so that's the latest forecast from SWS?"

Jim looked blankly at him.

"Sentinel Weather Service," Sandburg explained, grinning.

"Yes, and I've got a news flash for you, Chief. The weather's nasty, and I'm driving. Period." An awful thought appeared to strike Jim. "Unless you came here in your Volvo?"

"No, man. I've got the Expedition." *You told me in plain English that I was only supposed to drive reliable transportation while you were out of town, then tossed the Expedition's keys at me. We were right outside the airport, last Sunday, and I got the message, loud and clear.*

They left the waiting area, heading down the main corridor to the baggage claim area. Sandburg could hear the hubbub of the crowd of passengers, their friends and families and a good portion of Cascade's local news crews camped impatiently around the unmoving luggage carousels. He glanced at Jim, concerned. "Hey, wait up, man."

Jim stopped and turned to look at Sandburg.

"The baggage claim area is, like, wall-to-wall people, and I'm guessing that your senses are just about peopled out, after tonight."

"I'm fi—" Jim started to say.

"Jim, this is me, your Guide. Listen to me. Go get the car and I'll pick up your luggage. Your car's parked in the garage, on the second level. Do you need any more clues?"

"I don't even need that much."

"Yeah, well, I figured you haven't been using your senses much while you were out of town, so we're starting off easy."

"Don't teach your grandmother to suck eggs," the Sentinel answered. He reached a hand towards Sandburg's head, which the younger man ducked under. "See you in fifteen."

Fifteen minutes later, Jim pulled the Expedition to the curb at the passenger pickup lane and a slightly wet Blair scooted inside. They pulled away from the curb, left the airport and caught the interstate back towards town.

"So, how was your trip?"

"Fine," Jim answered shortly, obviously concentrating on his driving as the rain increased.

Sandburg snorted. "Fine? C'mon, man, Washington is a city that is overflowing with history, wealth and power. Certainly you, of all people, must've felt"—his right hand gestured rapidly—

"something."

"You told me not to use my senses too much, since we'd have the whole country between us."

"Yeah, Jim, and I know how well you listen to me. So, level with me, man, what did you do?"

Jim's eyes contracted as they encountered a string of headlights from oncoming traffic in the opposite lanes. "Well, Steven and I were touring the Old Executive Office Building, and I saw some paperwork in one of the congressman's offices, so I—er, cranked up my vision for a better look. It was a bill."

"A bill? You mean a piece of pending legislature, history in the making? That's awesome!"

"No, I mean a phone bill. And judging by the size of it, our Congressman is an old windbag, he must talk even more than you, Sandburg."

"And that's all you did with your senses, the whole week?" Blair didn't bother to hide his skepticism.

"Uh huh."

"Jim—"

"Well," Jim admitted reluctantly, "I did use them at the last police procedures seminar."

"What did you do?"

"It was Captain Ferber's last lecture. I'd already sat through three of them. The man talks like a robot, Chief—very monotone. I slouched down in an aisle seat in the last row, as far away from the podium as I could get. Ferber was lecturing on the importance of observation, maintaining constant vigilance, yadda yadda yadda. About forty minutes into his speech, two armed men leaped out of the audience and rushed the podium. They grabbed his badge and wallet and fled down the aisle towards the nearest door. Yeah, Chief, he staged a robbery, a pop quiz to test everybody's powers of observation, or something."

"You, of course, described them perfectly."

"Hell, Sandburg, I stuck out my foot and tripped 'em on the way out. Then I marched them back to the stage, before Ferber got past the first 'What did you just see?' question."

"The captain must've loved that."

"Well, probably not. But the audience did; Ferber dismissed us early."

"You're incorrigi—" Sandburg broke off abruptly, then said, "That's it! Take the next exit, Jim. Now."

He saw that Jim was taken aback by his order, but his sentinel responded to Blair's Guide voice, as intended.

Jim switched lanes, heading for the exit lane. "Why are we—?"

"Because there's too much traffic for you on the interstate. You were squinting every time you saw headlights from the approaching cars. This road is less traveled, and it'll only take us about twenty minutes more to get home. Did this happen in Washington?"

"No, I don't think so."

"Okay, so you were coasting along with your normal, slightly elevated senses all week in D. C., being a good little Sentinel.... I wonder if the fact that you were just visiting made it easier to keep your senses at near-normal levels? It wasn't your territory, so your protective instinct was on low? But now you're back on home ground, and your territorial protectiveness is reasserting itself, so your background sensory awareness is higher than usual, and your vision is being affected by the headlights."

"My hearing must also be affected, Chief, because all this theorizing is giving me a headache."

"Oh, I'm so sorry, I just—"

"It's okay, just give me a little peace and quiet here, huh?"

Blair nodded and the truck cab fell silent. He stared out the windshield, noting that the wind had picked up and the rain had increased in intensity. After a few minutes of letting his thoughts wander, Blair turned to face his partner. "Jim! I can't believe I didn't tell you before! I saw the pan—" Sandburg broke off, concerned that Jim didn't seem to be listening.

The detective kept driving, staring unblinkingly out the windshield.

A zone-out? Blair put his hand on Jim's right arm. "Jim?"

Ellison's hand on the steering wheel jerked abruptly downwards at the contact, sending the Expedition off the side of the road.

"Ji-im!" Blair sought to wrest the steering wheel back, while trying vainly to connect his left foot with the far-too-distant brake. The Expedition's tires spun as it contacted the wet gravel on the shoulder in the sharp, abrupt turn. Speed and the difference in surfaces caused the Expedition to topple over and it skidded on its side for several hundred yards, the passenger side bumping along the ground before crashing into a large pine tree.

"Ungh," Jim groaned. It was dark and his chest hurt like a son of a bitch. His eyes widened in surprise, since it was never truly dark anymore for the Sentinel. His hypervision kicked in and Jim saw the starred-out windshield several inches in front of him. He was seated in a strange

position as well; the shoulder strap supporting him felt as unbending as steel and his right side was bearing most of his weight.

Wha' happ'nd? Jim looked through the shattered windshield, thinking that the law of averages had finally caught up with his kamikaze taxi driver. Then he realized that he was sitting behind the steering wheel. *You are the driver of the bus....* The beginning of an old joke floated through his mind as well as the lub-dub of a neighboring heartbeat. Blair. "Blair? Chief?!"

Silence.

Jim glanced worriedly to his right, towards the passenger seat. Blair, partially held in place by his shoulder strap, was half-lying against the padded passenger door, half in the passenger's bucket seat. The position looked uncomfortable as hell, but Sandburg wasn't complaining. Jim wanted to undo his seatbelt and give his Guide a thorough checking out, but he reached for the radio receiver instead. "Unit One-zebra-one to Dispatch."

"One-zebra-one. Go ahead."

Jim spoke rapidly, trying to stay focused. "One-zebra-one involved in TA. SVA on State Road 43 about 5 miles north of I-100 East. Two officers in vehicle, both injured, request medic and District Commander. Notify Captain Banks of MC."

"Copy that, One-zebra-one. Assistance en route. Is the road blocked?"

"Don't think so." He caught a strong whiff of pine tree. "Hit a tree?"

Jim's control slipped as he smelled the coppery tang of blood, as well. Ignoring the dispatcher, he reached for his partner, frantically needing to feel Blair's heartbeat as well as hear it. He touched Blair's neck and the world exploded in a searing flash of white pain.

"Sandburg? Blair?" The voice sounded faint and far away. "I thought I saw his eyes open, Captain."

"Sandburg!" Captain Banks' more strident tones penetrated the fog.

"Unhhhh." Blair's eyelids fluttered.

"Sandburg, can you hear me, kid?"

Blair opened his eyes all the way and saw Simon, towering over him. "Wha' happend?"

A relieved chuckle came from the other side of the bed. "Well, that's original."

Sandburg moved his head and saw Rafe, sitting on the edge of a visitor's chair to his left. By now he realized he was in a hospital bed, lying with his upper body slightly elevated. He raised

his hands to rub the sleep out of his eyes and winced, surprised to see a sky blue sling over his right shoulder. "Ow!"

"Easy, Sandburg. Your right side's pretty banged up."

"Banged up—?" Sandburg croaked.

"Rafe, can you get Sandburg some fresh ice water? I think he needs it."

"Sure, Captain." Rafe rose to his feet, grabbing an empty personal-sized plastic pitcher. "I'll be right back." The detective crossed the small room and slipped out the wide, swinging door.

Simon answered Blair's question. "Yes, you've got two cracked ribs on your right side, a broken collar bone and bruises from the seatbelt. It wasn't a head-on collision, so the airbags didn't inflate."

"Collision?" Blair felt the tug of bandages against his chest and a noticeable pain/burning sensation diagonally across his chest, where a seatbelt strap would normally rest. The pieces were slowly falling into place, but something—someone—was missing. "Jim! Jim?" Sandburg looked wildly around the room, then tried to get up from the bed.

"Ouch!" He hissed in pain and Simon's hand was touching his left shoulder, pressing Blair gently back against the bed.

"Lie down, Sandburg, that's an order! Jim's okay, d'you hear me? He's okay!"

Sandburg slumped back against the mattress, weak with relief. He watched as Simon lowered the bed rails that had been raised while Blair slept off the after-effects of the accident.

Rafe entered as Simon finished talking, returning with Blair's water. He walked over to the head of the bed and handed Sandburg the pitcher. "Here, drink this. It'll make it easier for you to talk, Sandburg."

Blair took a couple of small sips through the straw in the pitcher. "Thanks, Rafe." After another sip, he held the pitcher out to Rafe, who placed it on the rolling patient table against the wall. "So, where's Jim?"

"He was in the accident, too, Blair," Simon reminded the younger man gently. "He's here, in another room."

"Where is he? I wanna see him! Now."

"You can't; he's in the ICU."

"ICU?" Blair's eyes widened and if Jim had been in the room, he would've noticed the sudden increase in Blair's heartbeat.

"The doctor wanted to monitor Jim overnight, strictly as a precautionary measure, to make sure that the deep bruising he sustained from the accident didn't affect his heart. They're also running blood samples and a CT scan."

"His heart?" Blair paled.

"Jim's okay," Simon emphasized. "I spoke with Dr. Westphall and the monitoring showed no abnormalities. As soon as the test results are back, they'll be moving him to a regular room, later this morning."

"He's in ICU, that doesn't sound like 'okay' to me, Simon." Sandburg glared at the Captain of Major Crimes, voice dripping in sarcasm.

"Rafe," Captain Banks' voice was mild. "Go find Dr. Westphall or a nurse and get the latest update on Ellison's condition for Sandburg, please. See if you can get his new room number and when he'll be transferred as well."

"Yes, sir," Rafe said, quickly leaving the room.

"You're worried about Jim." Simon circled around the hospital bed and settled into the visitor's chair that Rafe had vacated. "So I'm overlooking that little outburst. Quick, tell me about the accident, while we're alone. What happened? Did Jim zone?"

"I—I don't remember."

"That's okay; it's normal for you to be hazy on the details surrounding an accident. Let's go back to earlier last evening. You picked up Jim at the airport. What time did you leave?"

Blair nodded, remembering. "A little after seven."

"Seven? Did you eat dinner at the airport, then?"

"No."

"I thought Jim's flight was due in shortly after five."

"Five-fifteen, originally. But the flight was—delayed."

Sandburg knew the Captain caught the catch in his voice and Simon's own voice rose in response. "The plane on last night's news, the one that lost an engine mid-flight? That was Jim's plane?! But that flight was from Minneapolis!"

"He couldn't get a direct flight and be home on time. So he had a connection in Minneapolis." Sandburg reached for his pitcher and took a long sip of water.

"Blair," Simon chided gently, "you should've called me."

"I thought about it," Blair admitted. "But then I thought that if I spread the news, that made it real, y'know? If I kept it to myself, then maybe it wasn't real. Childish, I know, but—"

"But it worked." Simon concluded. "Next time, call me. Jim's my friend, too—and you shouldn't have to face such news alone."

"I wasn't alone, Captain. There were about a hundred and fifty of us in the same boat, waiting."

"So you were alone in a crowd." Simon shrugged. "That's still alone. Next time, call—me, Joel, anyone."

"All right, I will—if there is a next time."

"Knowing you two, there will be," Sandburg barely caught the Captain's muttered words. "So Jim's plane landed and you finally left the airport. What happened next?"

"It was raining, and Jim insisted on driving. He started off okay, but after a while, the lights from the on-coming traffic were bothering him, so we got off the highway and took a back road instead."

Simon nodded. "State Road 43."

"Uh huh—how'd you know that?"

"That's where the accident was. Go on, you were driving down the road and—?"

"We talked, a little. Then Jim said"—Blair frowned, struggling to recall the trip—"he said my theorizing was giving him a headache." He shrugged, momentarily forgetting the sling and broken collarbone. A sharp stab of pain reminded him of his condition. "Ouch!" A few seconds later, he admitted softly, "I don't remember anything after that."

"That's probably just as well. Jim said you hit a tree—"

"Jim said?"

"Yes, he radioed the dispatcher to report the accident and they passed the information on to me."

Simon shifted his six foot-four frame awkwardly in the chair. "But he was unconscious when the paramedics got to the site; you both were."

His brown eyes met Blair's anxious blue ones and he sighed. "Jim still is unconscious—the doctors have been unable to rouse him. Dr. Westphall assured me that that's not unusual for someone in trauma after a wreck, though."

Before Sandburg could respond, Detective Rafe re-entered the room, smiling. "Good news, Sandburg. The rest of the tests came back okay, and they're moving Jim to room 371 at ten this morning."

"Is Jim awake?"

"Sorry. Not yet, Blair. Maybe later today."

Blair glanced at his wrist to see what time it was. No watch.

"It's almost 8:45, now," Rafe informed Blair. "Saturday morning," he added as an afterthought. "Don't worry, your watch and other belongings are in the hospital's safe. I'll get them for you, if you want."

"You can do that on your next visit, Rafe." Simon said, rising to his feet. "Sandburg looks like he could use some rest and I did tell the nurse we'd leave before nine."

"You need anything from home?" Rafe asked.

"A pair of pajamas and a robe would be great, man. Thanks." *How long am I going to be here, anyway? At least a few days.* "Uh, could you bring my laptop and the two textbooks on top of the kitchen shelf, too?"

"Sure. Anything else?"

"No. Damn, I'll probably have to call the University and arrange for a substitute."

"I'll take care of that, Sandburg," Simon said. "Rafe, be sure you get Jim's things, too. Get some rest, Sandburg—that's an order. We'll see you later."



"Good morning. Our top story today..." CNN's Headline News blared from the television set, mounted on the wall for easy bedside viewing.

Sandburg jerked his head up, angry at himself for dozing off. He anxiously checked the lower right corner of the TV screen, looking for the crawl's time stamp: 11:29 am MT. *Perfect. Jim's all settled in his new room, been there long enough that he's all alone.* He raised the top half of the bed to its maximum angle, then carefully sat up the rest of the way and maneuvered his legs over the side of the bed. Lowering his legs to the floor, he gingerly stood. He caught sight of himself in the mirror on the front of the bathroom door and realized that the light blue hospital gown was almost transparent from certain angles.

Blushing faintly, he scanned the rest of the room. The dark chest of drawers and matching built-in closet, along with a comfortably stuffed, upholstered chair reminded him more of a hotel than a hospital room. Blair walked slowly over to the closet, trying not to jar his right shoulder. He opened the door, hoping to find his clothes. The hanging rail was empty, but he found an extra hospital gown folded neatly in one of the side cubby holes. *Two heads are better than one, two gowns are better than one.* Gently removing his sling with his left hand, he reached for the new gown and put it on robe-fashion, so that the drawstring tied in the front. Then he replaced the sling and headed for the door.

He caught the number on his door as it swung shut behind him and grinned. 307. *Easy enough to remember.* Blair glanced down the hall, trying to figure out where Jim's room was in relation to his own. He spotted a cross corridor down the hall to his left and started walking towards it. *Hospitals always posted directions to rooms at intersecting hallways. Act naturally. Patients stroll down the corridors all the time. It's good exercise.*

He reached the intersecting halls without incident, and glanced at the arrow pointing down the left hall to rooms 331 to 371. *Just my luck. Jim has the farthest-away room on the floor.* Halfway down the hall, he was noticeably favoring his right side. The broken collar bone and cracked ribs were making their presence known and he was nowhere near Jim's room. Worse, a nurse's station was located about 30 feet away from him, and there was no way he could stroll by it without attracting the unwanted attention of the nurses on duty. *I need a breather.* He spied a familiar but unexpected sign two doors away: CLASSROOM. Intrigued, Blair shuffled down the corridor and walked past the open door into the classroom.

The first thing Blair spotted was a large wooden desk at the front of the room. He settled for leaning against the front of the desk, unsure how easy it would be to get up if he sat in the chair behind it. He glanced around the room and noted the standard accoutrements: large desk, two student's chairs facing the teacher's desk and the whiteboard behind it, a couple of bookshelves, maps, a globe and a computer desk with a pc along the far wall. A non-standard vinyl-covered couch occupied most of the room's back wall. A slight figure dressed in jeans and a loose-fitting t-shirt hopped up from the sofa and approached the front of the classroom.

"Mr. Edwards—?" the young girl asked, her brown eyes studying Sandburg underneath the Jags cap she wore. "You don't look like a teacher to me—more like a patient."

"Appearances can be deceiving," Blair said mildly. "I am a teacher, though. I teach Anthropology at Rainier."

The girl's eyes flicked away, then back to Blair. "You don't look like a teacher," she repeated, staring fixedly at Blair's hair, and sighed. "Mine used to be longer."

Sandburg had added up the girl's pale features, thin frame and concealing basketball cap and concluded he was talking to a young cancer patient, about twelve years old. "It'll grow back again. Shall we start over?" He held out his left hand. "My name's Blair. Blair Sandburg."

"Blair?" she scoffed, brown eyes twinkling as they shook hands. "That's a girl's name!"

"No, it's not. It's androgynous—Blair can be either a boy's name or a girl's name. In Gaelic, it means 'child of the fields.'"

"You sure sound like a teacher."

"A lot of people tell me that," Blair agreed.

"Very pedantic," she continued. At Sandburg's raised eyebrows, she added, "It was on last week's vocabulary list."

"Now, what's your name?"

"My name's Arlene Davids—I was named after my great aunt." She rolled her eyes. "But my friends call me Harley."

"Arlene, huh? That means 'a pledge' in the Celtic language—it's the feminine form of Arlen, a fine old Celtic name. Harley, on the other hand, is Old English for 'the stag's meadow.'"

"How do you know all that? Or are you just making it up?"

"One of my roommates in college was Hugh MacDougall—we called him the Super Scot. He knew everything there was to know about anything Celtic—all the firths and lochs, and the origins of every Celtic and Gaelic name in existence. He talked a lot and I have a good memory."

"Firths and locks?"

"A firth is a long narrow inlet, like a finger of the sea creeping into the surrounding land. Loch—l, o, c, h—is Scottish for lake."

"The stag's meadow?" Harley reverted to the earlier part of their conversation. "I like that." She smiled, and continued wistfully, "It sounds free, like a whole bunch of wide open spaces."

"Take it from me, Harley." Blair remembered his desperate trek through the Cascade Mountains, searching for the kidnapped Captain Banks. "Wide open spaces aren't always what they're cracked up to be."

"Oh," The young girl studied Blair's hospital attire. "Is that why you're here?"

"No, I was in a car accident, with a friend of mine." Sandburg abruptly pushed away from the desk. "I need to get going, now. Gotta see Jim. I only ducked in here to rest for a few minutes."

"Blair, wait." Harley reached for Sandburg's unfettered arm. "You're not supposed to be roaming the halls, are you?"

"I need to see Jim. You wouldn't understand, but it's important, Harley."

"Your timing's wrong, you know."

"My timing?"

"Yeah, it's too close to lunch-time. Now, me, I'd wait 'til shift change this afternoon. The nurses are all busy charting and getting up to speed on the patients. It's a great time to sneak off and visit someone. What's your friend's room number?"

"Three seventy-one, past the nurse's station."

"And yours?"

"Three-oh-seven."

"Okay, then. I'll walk you back to your room and show you a way to avoid the nurse's station when you go visiting this afternoon."

"You sound like you're very familiar with this place," Blair said. "Lay on, McDuff."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It's from a play, by Shakespeare..." Blair lectured as they left the classroom.

Sandburg gently nudged the door to Room 371 open with his good left hand and entered. Jim's room was laid out similar to his own: a hospital bed with a couple of visitor's chairs, a desk, a chest of drawers and a built-in wardrobe, and a private bathroom behind an extra-wide door. Blair thought about the furnishings only long enough to conclude that he couldn't drag the comfortable blue upholstered chair over to the bedside in his current condition. So he scooted the wooden desk chair over to the bed, lowered the left-hand guardrail and dropped into the chair.

Blair studied Jim for a moment, then reached for his Sentinel's hand. "Hey, Jim, long time no see. I'm sorry it took me so long, but I'm here, now. Open your eyes for me, Jim, I need to know you're okay. Just follow my voice back...." He trailed off, uncertainly. Jim usually responded quickly to his Guide's voice. Worried, Blair squeezed Jim's hand, then started talking again. "Hey, man, you missed Simon's visit, earlier today. He wanted to know what happened with the accident and all. And I do, too, but you'll have to wake up and tell me 'cause I can't remember all of it. C'mon, Jim, wake up. I—I need you."

He paused, expecting Jim's lashes to flutter and his eyes to open. *Jim always responds when I need him.* Blair let a full minute pass before reluctantly amending his thought. *Well, almost always.*

Dammit, what am I not seeing here? I was so sure that Jim's still unconscious because he zoned, but what if there's a medical reason? Sandburg's heart beat faster. *No, get a grip, Sandburg. Jim's only being monitored as a standard procedure, that IV just has saline in it. His doctor doesn't think there's anything seriously wrong with him and doesn't see any abnormality in his unconsciousness--or at least that's what Simon told me.*

But I want Jim to wake up now. Hmmm, what if it's not a medical condition, but a senses thing?

He pondered the events leading up to the half-remembered car accident. *Jim was on that flight with engine trouble, then the headlights got to him on our drive back--a pretty stressful day for my Sentinel. Plus, he's been out of town all week, removed from his normal territory. He told*

me he hadn't been using his senses much in D.C. So, he's gone from a significant period of low across-the-board use of his senses to an emotionally charged night of heavy sensory activity-- the plane, the airport, the car accident...It's not surprising that he was overwhelmed and zoned.

It is surprising that I can't get through to him, though. Blair tapped the back of Jim's hand, hoping that the change in stimuli would make a difference. Nothing. "Why can't I reach you, man? It's like we're disconnected, or something. I mean, I'm right here, Jim. You should know that just from my heartbeat. I'm here, but I could be miles away, for all the good I'm doing."

He stiffened, ignoring the momentary pain triggered by his movement. *Miles away!? Like this last week, when we were on opposite Coasts? Am I having trouble reaching you because we've been separated for the past week? Surely not. After all, Burton wrote that Sentinels honed their senses by spending isolated time in the wilderness. Ah, but were they isolated from their Guides?* Burton rarely mentioned Guides, they were just ordinary tribesmen to him. He was focused on Sentinels and their extraordinary abilities. And Burton wrote about Sentinels in the last remote South American tribes untainted by modern civilization. A Sentinel would never be 3,000 miles away from his partner back then, it was inconceivable.

But now?

Well, if that's the problem, how do I fix it? How do I get things back to normal?

Sandburg snapped the fingers on his right hand. *Positive reinforcement. Treat the situation as normal, and Jim'll react normally--eventually.* "Y'know, Simon would say that being in the hospital isn't all that removed from a normal situation for us.

"You told me a little bit about D.C. Let me tell you how I spent the last week. As you know, I'm teaching Anthro 201 for the summer semester. Most of the students who take the summer course are fast-trackers, trying to accelerate their programs and graduate a year early. We get a lot of pre-meds and engineers because anthropology is an easy way to get some humanities credits. Believe it or not, anthropology is a much less paperwork-oriented class than English or the other humanities courses. Well, the other day..." Blair told Jim about an interesting encounter with a couple of his students, then went on to describe the rest of his week, in anthropology-minded detail.

"--and I had a friend over for dinner Thursday night. I thawed out and reheated some of your famous Ellison spaghetti sauce; it was sensational. You'll have to give me the recipe one of these days." Blair glanced at Jim's face, hoping for some sort of reaction. Still nothing.

"I can keep this up for hours, Tough Guy." Blair resumed, and launched into Friday's events. "I got to the precinct late, and Simon wasn't too happy about that, of course. He put me to work right away, reading your email so you could 'hit the ground running' when you got back to work

on Monday. I was plowing through the emails when I came across your hedgehog greeting, smoke signals and all. By the way, thanks for the card."

"Y'r welcome," a drowsy voice answered.

Blair froze. "Jim, did you just say something?"

"Said 'y'r welcome.'"

"You heard me?"

"Course I heard you," Jim sounded grumpy as well as sleepy. "I'm the Sentinel, y'know."

"Yes, you certainly are. Can you open your eyes for me, Jim? Please?" Sandburg squeezed his partner's hand.

Jim's eyelids fluttered, then opened. After a moment, he said weakly, "You look like Hell, kid."

"Who cares?" Blair beamed. "You're awake. And I bet you're thirsty, too. Hang on." Sandburg rose before Jim could say a word, stepped over to the desk and grabbed the filled water pitcher on it. He walked back to the chair, conscious of Jim's silent scrutiny, then handed Jim the water and sat down by the bed.

Jim took a sip of water. "Thanks." He drank some more of the water from the melted ice cubes, then looked at Blair. "What happened?"

"Don't you remember?"

Jim frowned, thinking. "Car accident—you were there, too." He glanced sharply at the younger man. "Are you all right? No, never mind, that was a stupid question. Where do you hurt?"

That's my Sentinel, in full Blessed Protector mode two seconds after regaining consciousness. Better level with him. "I have two cracked ribs, a broken collarbone and some nasty bruising from the seat belt. As Simon put it, my right side's pretty banged up but I should be back home in a day or so. How do you feel?"

"My chest feels like I ran into a Mack truck." Jim rubbed at his temple. "And I've got a monster headache."

"You hit the steering wheel pretty hard, from what I heard, but don't worry. The doctor had you hooked up to a monitor last night and ran some tests. You're fine—now that you're awake."

"Last night?"

"Yes." Blair glanced at his watch, which Rafe had returned to him earlier that afternoon. "It's almost five-thirty Saturday afternoon. You've been unconscious since the paramedics brought you in last night."

"Unconscious? Did I zone?"

"I'm not sure; I think so." Blair answered hesitantly.

"What does that mean, you're not sure?"

"Jim, I've been talking to you since four," Blair said quietly.

"That long? But--"

"I couldn't reach you," Blair said, worried. "And I don't even know why."

"Hey." Jim reached for Blair's hand. "You did reach me."

"But it took way too long, man."

"It still worked. I'm here." Jim let go of Blair's hand and rubbed at his belly, lightening the mood.

"And I'm hungry."

"That's a good sign." Blair fidgeted. "Look. I kind of snuck in here—"

"I knew it!"

"—and I need to be out of here before the nurses catch me. So, can you give me a few minutes to get back to my room, then buzz the nurse and let 'em know you're awake?"

"A few minutes?" Jim looked at his partner skeptically. "Are you sure that's long enough?"

"Okay, make it ten." Blair rose from the chair. "Look, I want you to keep your senses down in the normal range, okay? Don't eavesdrop on me while I'm walking back to my room."

"That's a first, you telling me not to use my senses. What gives?"

"We're in a hospital and you could hear or smell all sorts of grody things if you extended your senses. I don't want you to do that, not when you just woke up and we're apart. Don't worry, you can use your senses 24/7 when we get home."

"Home. I like the sound of that." Jim looked ready to jump out of bed and into his clothes and head for the loft immediately.

"Jim, you're not going anywhere until your doctor says you can."

"But I feel fine!" Jim totally ignored his earlier comment about the Mack truck, and Blair didn't call him on it.

"Maybe you're fine, now—but you sure weren't earlier. And you're not going anywhere until Dr. Westphall releases you."

"Spoilsport!" Then Jim raked his eyes over his roommate. "You'd better get back to bed. I feel fine, but you sure don't look fine."

"Okay, okay, I'm going, I'm going." Sandburg stepped over to the door. "Ten minutes," he reminded, "and no listening. I mean it." Then he was out of the room, walking down the corridor.

Sandburg reached his room and unthinkingly butted open the door with his right shoulder. "Ouch," he hissed as he finally entered and walked over to the bed. He sank down on the bed.

His visit had taken more out of him than he wanted to admit, but the result—Jim awake and raring to go—had been worth it. He tried to relax by taking a deep breath, and managed only a short gasp. *What's going on? I can't breathe!* "Jim!" he called, before remembering that the Sentinel wouldn't hear him. Blair reached for the call light to summon the nurse. "Help! I can't breathe!"

Sandburg's nurse, a tall blonde wearing lizard-patterned scrubs, strode into the room and over to her patient. "Mr. Sandburg! What's wrong?" She efficiently removed the sling from Blair's right shoulder, noting that he was on top of the covers as she did so. She touched his arm; his skin felt cold and clammy. "Try to calm down," she said as Blair repeated, "I can't breathe!"

The nurse reached for the oxygen unit stored in the wall above the bed's headboard, taking the triangular mask and placing it over Blair's nose and mouth. She checked that the connecting tube was clear and freely supplying oxygen to the patient. "Is that better?" she asked as she untied Blair's gown and pulled it down. Spotting the second gown underneath, she asked, "How long have you been up and about, Mr. Sandburg?"

"Since a quarter to four." Blair's answer was muffled by the mask, but entirely distinguishable to the nurse.

She unsnapped the shoulder snaps and pulled the gown down, exposing Sandburg's taped ribs and bare chest. She watched as only the left side of his chest moved up and down as he struggled to breathe. Asymmetric breathing. Pneumothorax—a collapsed lung.

She hit the panic button on the wall. "Amy, get the house officer to room 307, stat! Respiratory care, stat! Page Dr. Hogan and see if she's still here, too." She turned to her patient. "Try to relax, Mr. Sandburg. The oxygen will help your breathing and I need to get your vitals." The nurse extracted the blood pressure cuff from its slot on the wall next to the oxygen and placed it around Blair's upper left arm. Placing the bell end of her stethoscope over the veins in Blair's arm, she pumped air into the cuff, then released it, taking his readings. Next, she pinched one of Blair's fingertips in a quick capillary refill test. When she released the blanched fingertip, she noted its pale, slightly bluish coloring. A check of Sandburg's mouth through the mask showed the same blue tinge. "Try to relax, Mr. Sandburg."

"Blair."

"Blair. Relax and stay calm."

"I tell Jim that a lot," Blair commented weakly.

"Shhh, don't talk, Blair."

"N he tells me that."

The nurse's mouth twitched as she caught the softly spoken words. "Easy does it, just breathe evenly."

The door opened and Dr. Nicholls, a young intern in his mid-twenties, strode in. "Linnie? What've we got?"

"Possible pneumothorax. Asymmetric breathing and his skin is cold and clammy," the nurse reported Blair's condition. "Respiration 45, pulse 130. Bluish tinge around his mouth and when I pinched his finger, it was also blue and pale. He called for help about"—she glanced at her wristwatch—"four minutes ago."

Dr. Nicholls walked over to Blair, fitting his stethoscope into his ears as he approached. "Breathe for me, Mr.—"

"Sandburg, Blair Sandburg," Linnie said.

"—Mr. Sandburg." The doctor listened to Blair's lungs for a few moments. "Good call. Let's get iodine, Novocain, a trocar and a chest tube. We'll need a consent form, too."

Linnie picked up the communications device from the bed and spoke quickly to Amy at the nurse's station.

"Mr. Sandburg, you have a pneumothorax," Dr. Nicholls said.

"Pneumothorax?" Blair questioned nervously from underneath the oxygen mask.

"It's a collapsed lung, a delayed injury from your accident," Linnie explained. "Don't worry, we'll have it fixed in practically no time."

"How?"

"Well, first we're going to numb the affected area with Novocain, then we're going to insert a small tube into your lung to release the trapped air."

"Sounds peachy," Blair grumbled while Amy, the nurse from the duty station, entered the room and handed Linnie a tray with the requested items. Linnie put the tray on the bedside table and picked up a clipboard. She approached the bed while a masked Dr. Nicholls checked over the items on the tray.

"Blair, we need your signature on the consent form. This is a standard procedure, but we need to do it ASAP." She gave her patient a quick run-down of the procedure, then watched as Blair signed the paperwork. "Is there anyone else you want us to notify, any family?"

"No, Mom's out of the country."

Dr. Nicholls wheeled the table closer to the bed and picked up the first Novocain shot.

"Hate shots."

"Then close your eyes or look away, it's easier." Linnie swabbed Sandburg's exposed chest with iodine, marking the right side with a red iodine 'R', then Dr. Nicholls injected the first Novocain shot. "One down," she said cheerfully, placing the used needle on the tray and handing the next one to Dr. Nicholls.

He positioned it and pushed the plunger home, this shot going deeper into Blair's skin than the first one. The doctor injected Blair with two additional doses of Novocain while Blair tried to picture himself somewhere else. "There, that wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Had worse," Blair admitted.

"Now we'll just wait a few minutes for the Novocain to take effect, then we'll get you all fixed up."

"Really lookin' forward to that," Blair grumbled, or thought he did. *Didn't think Novocain made the brain numb....Numbskull. Ha ha. Jim'll get a kick out of that, won't he?*

"He's ready, Doctor," Blair thought he heard the nurse—Linnie?—say through her mask.

Dr. Nicholls expertly inserted the sharp-pronged trocar into Blair's chest. The trocar made a distinctive pop as it penetrated the skin and muscle between Blair's ribs. Novocain notwithstanding, Blair whimpered and the nurse winced in sympathy, well aware that her patients felt this part of the operation. "Clamp," Dr. Nicholls ordered, and Linnie supplied the necessary instrument, which the doctor used to maintain the chest opening while he replaced the trocar with a tube. He then efficiently stitched the tube into place and applied a dressing. The chest tube was connected to a suction device that passed it through a water seal, creating a bubbling sound. "Finished," Dr. Nicholls said. "Let's get a chest x-ray, to check the positioning of the tube. Good work, Linnie."

"Halt," Jim Ellison ordered from the wheelchair. He was wearing tan slacks and a light blue polo shirt, his overnight gym bag in his lap. Hector, a young Hispanic orderly, paused in pushing the wheelchair down the third floor corridor. The third man in their little group, Detective Henri Brown, glanced at the 307 on the door where they stopped.

"You want to say good-bye to Hairboy? That's a great idea, Jim."

"Now, wait a minute," Hector objected from behind his soon-to-be-released patient. "I'm escorting you down to the patient pick-up area. We don't have time for any side trips. It's against hospital regulations."

"What's the harm in letting Ellison go visiting for a few minutes? It'll give me time to get my car and bring it around to the pick-up zone," Henri reasoned.

"Ellison?" Hector paled. Scuttlebutt had it that Ellison was being sent home early, and against medical advice, although Dr. Westphall's release papers did not include an AMA notation. Ellison had out-stubborned and out-argued the notoriously pig-headed "Dr. Fallout," which made him a rare and unusual patient, indeed. Not a good idea to disagree with him, under the circumstances. "Okay, Mr. Ellison, you can visit while your friend gets his car. How long do you think it'll take?"

"Ten, maybe fifteen minutes." Henri stepped around the wheelchair and picked up Jim's carryall. "See you in a bit, Jim." Henri headed down the corridor for the elevator and Hector swung open the door to room 307, wheeling Jim into the room. He parked the wheelchair by the bed. "I'm going down to the nurse's station and check the rest of my schedule. Be back in ten minutes."

Jim waited until the orderly left the room, then cleared his throat. "Hi, Chief. Just stopped by to see how you're doing."

"I'm fine," Blair said quietly, glancing out the window to his left, avoiding his partner's eyes.

"I also wanted to, uh, apologize for yelling at you on the phone earlier," Jim mumbled, addressing Blair's feet, which appeared as a slight bump under the thin, white hospital blanket. Blair was glad that Jim did not look at the other, unnatural bump under the covers, over Sandburg's chest, where the chest tube was attached.

"No, Jim. It was my fault." Sandburg turned carefully to face his partner. "The nurse asked if she should notify anyone. I told her Mom was out of the country. I should've mentioned that my roommate and best friend was down the hall, too. You have every right to be angry at me. I'm sorry."

"I'm not angry at you," Jim protested.

"Oh no? Well, you sure fooled me, on the phone this morning."

Jim winced as Sandburg tried not to dwell on the rather coarse language he'd encountered when he'd called and updated Jim on the latest developments with his injuries that morning. "Yeah, well.... I wasn't mad at you, I was really mad at myself. A pneumothorax! You could have di— You were in serious trouble, and I had no idea. I was just down the hall, listening to my stomach growl, totally oblivious, while you were—Damn it, Chief, I should've known something was wrong!" Jim smashed his right hand into the wheelchair's handrail.

"Ahh," Blair said, the light bulb going on in his head. "Look, I told you to **not** use your senses when I left last night, right?"

"Yeah, you were pretty forceful about it, too."

"So, did you?"

"No."

"Then how'd you expect to hear me—know that I was in trouble, without your senses? You're not Superman, especially with your senses off-line."

"I should've known," Jim insisted stubbornly. "You're my Guide, Chief. I should've known you were in trouble, with or without the senses."

"Jim, I swear you can out-guilt Grandma Sandburg! Only you lay the guilt trip on yourself, not everyone else in the family. Look, if you want to blame someone, blame Simon."

That stopped Jim short. "Simon?"

"He's the one who sent you to D.C., right?"

Jim nodded.

"I've been thinking. It took me an hour and a half to reach you last night, remember?" Blair's unencumbered left hand made a shushing gesture. "No, of course you don't; you were zoned. Take my word for it, it took longer than it should've, normally. And the only abnormality I can think of is that you were out of state for the previous week. We had the whole country between us, and I think that's too much separation for a Sentinel and his Guide. Burton never addressed the whole separation concept, because it was a non-issue for him, almost a century and a half ago. So... the next time Simon sends you to a police convention, he needs to get two tickets."

Jim brightened. "Or he can send someone else, I hate going to those things, anyway. What about the next conference of your International Anthropology Association?"

"If it's out of state, I won't go."

"Oh yes, you will. You need to attend those meetings and maintain your contacts for your doctorate. I'll just have to go with you. I mean, I don't have to attend the actual conference, do I?"

"No, of course not. Being in the same city should be close enough. You can go sightseeing."

Sandburg decided not to mention that the next meeting of the IAA was in Pittsburgh.

"So, crisis averted, next time." Jim emphasized the last two words.

"Hey, man, I'm well on the mend. Dr. Nicholls said I'd only have to stay an extra couple of days, then I'll be good as new, ready to be sprung, like you are now."

Jim glanced at his watch, it was a few minutes past eleven and his ten minutes were almost gone. "Don't eat lunch, Junior. As soon as I get a rental car, I'm coming back with some real food for you."

"Jim, Wonderburger is so not real food..." Blair objected, then considered the alternative. "On second thought, that does sound good. Could you bring me back a salad, please?"

Before Jim could answer, the door swung open and Hector appeared, to collect his charge.

"Ready to go, Mr. Ellison?" Jim said good-bye while Hector released the chair's brakes, then wheeled his patient out of the room and resumed their interrupted journey to the hospital's discharged patient pick-up area.

An hour later, an upright Jim was back in Sandburg's room.

"Beware of Sentinels bearing gifts," Blair joked as Jim rolled the tray over to the bedside and placed a white paper bag with a red and blue Wonderburger logo on it.

Jim extracted a chicken salad and a small cup of dressing for Sandburg, snapping the lid off the salad container before putting it on the table. He then stripped the cellophane wrapping from Blair's plastic ware and carefully placed the utensils in their proper places on the table. "Dinner is served," he intoned, as he used the hospital bed's remote control to lift the upper half of the bed, so that Blair could eat in a close to normal seated position.

He moved the overstuffed visitor's chair so that it faced the right hand side of the bed, closer to the bed, with the tray between it and the wall. Then he removed a Double Deluxe Wonderburger and Wonder-sized curly fries for himself. Jim handed Sandburg a chocolate shake and straw, then settled into the chair, balancing his burger on the chair's left arm and his fries on the right. After every couple of bites, he took a sip from his strawberry shake, placed on the floor to the side of his comfortable chair.

"So, what kind of rental car did you get?" Blair asked after a mouthful of salad.

Jim paused in mid-chew and mumbled something.

"I know, they gave you a Saturn, with its instantly-replaceable front and side panels, in case you have any more little accidents while driving it. Seriously, Jim, I'm amazed you can even get a rental car in this city, with your track record."

Jim finished the last curly fry. "I did not get a Saturn!"

"So what did you get? A Kia?"

"They gave me a two-year old Volvo sedan, said it was the only car they might get back in one piece," Jim admitted glumly. He grimaced. "It's orange."

Sandburg snickered. "Orange is the safest car color, statistically speaking." He wiped his face with a napkin. "Thanks for the food, man. You're right, it's much better than hospital grub."

"Aside from MRE's and living off the land, anything's better than hospital grub."

Blair sighed, unhappily reminding himself that he still had several days of hospital grub in front of him.

"Not much of a birthday, was it, Chief?" Jim rose to his feet and rolled the tray out of the way, collecting all the trash and stuffing it into the Wonderburger bag, which he then dumped in the room's waste basket. "Don't worry, I'll make it up to you, when you get home. We'll have a combined welcome home/late birthday party for you, how does that sound?"

"Hey, I already told you I got the best present ever, at the airport, remember? And I got some other nice pressies, too. Kerry gave me a video and a gift certificate for books, and Mom always gives me unbelievable gifts. Wait'll you see her present, Jim. It's awesome! In fact, I've got it with me. Henri got my stuff out of the hospital's safe, earlier." Blair motioned towards the desk, on the opposite side of the bed from Jim's chair. "It's in a manila envelope, in the desk drawer."

Jim walked over to the desk and snagged the envelope from the drawer, then returned, standing next to the left side of Blair's bed, between the bed and the desk. "Here you go." He handed

Sandburg the large sealed envelope. Blair slit open the envelope and reached in, taking out the choker with his left hand. It slipped from his grasp and fell onto the bed, next to Blair's injured right side.

He and Jim reached for the choker simultaneously and they both held it for a few seconds. Jim's eyes rolled up in his head and he slumped gracelessly forward, falling across

Sandburg's lower body, and then sliding bonelessly down the side of the bed to the floor.

"Jim! Jim?!" Sandburg half-rose from the bed, then his injuries caught up with him, painfully. He reached for the call button. "Help! My friend just collapsed! He was fine, then he just keeled over!"

Seconds later, the door to his room sprang open and Linnie rushed in. She spotted the still man on the white tile floor by the hospital bed and stooped over him, checking his vital signs. "What happened?" she asked her patient as Blair vainly tried to watch from his bed.

"Jim was fine, and then he just collapsed and toppled to the floor!"

"What's his full name?"

"Ellison, James Joseph Ellison. He was discharged from here this morning. He was in the car accident with me."

Two scrubs-clad men entered the room with a gurney. They quickly joined Linnie and, after a short, low-voiced conversation with her, transferred Jim from the floor to the gurney. Then they snapped the gurney to its full height and rolled it out of the room, leaving a very worried Sandburg in their wake.

"What happened? Is he all right? Where are they taking him?" Blair asked anxiously.

"Don't worry, Blair. I'm sure your friend will be just fine," Linnie soothed. "They're taking him to the ER—standard procedure. Do you want me to notify anyone?"

"No, I'll do it myself."

Linnie nodded. "I know you're worried about your friend, but he's in good hands. Are you comfortable? I can lower the bed, if you'd rather lie back down."

"No, thanks, I'm fine. Could you bring over my laptop, though? It's on top of the desk. I need to email some folks, let 'em know what's going on."

Linnie retrieved the laptop, setting it on the wheeled bedside tray to the right of the bed. She took a quick peek at the site where the tube connected to Blair's chest, then smoothed down the covers. "I'm sure your friend will be fine," she encouraged, then said in parting, "I'll ask the ER to notify me when they know anything, okay?"

"Thanks, Linnie," Blair answered absently as the nurse left the room. *What happened? What the Hell just happened?* he asked himself as he stared off the side of the bed, trying to see the empty spot on the floor where Jim had incomprehensibly collapsed barely ten minutes ago. His eyes flicked over to the visitor's chair, on the other side of the bed. *He was fine. We finished eating and kept on talking. He seemed to think that my birthday was a total wash-out, so I told him about my other presents; asked him to get Mom's present from the drawer.* Blair's eyes traced his partner's steps from the chair to the desk and back to the bed. *He handed me the envelope and I showed him the choker. No, wait, I dropped it first, we both reached for it, and then he—he just collapsed. Oh, God, Jim, what is going on?*

Blair brought his left hand up to his face, pulling on his lip as he frowned in thought. He sighed, getting nowhere, and dropped his hand listlessly to his side. It landed on the choker, which Blair had completely lost track of when Jim collapsed. Blair picked up the Native American choker and stared at it, eyes caught by the sparkling gold of the intertwined pyrite cubes at the center of the choker.

"The pyrite is an unusual touch," he heard Rafe's voice again, in his mind. Then his mother's bright, happy voice, "Amy made it, with Joe's blessing, of course." Amy's paternal grandfather, Joe Rainwater, the Lakota tribe's Medicine Man, or Shaman. "With Joe's blessing... with Joe's

blessing...." The words echoed in his mind, over and over. He thought about his mother, a unique blend of ancient beliefs and New Age philosophy, and, in her own way, highly protective of her son. *Oh, no!* Blair's eyes widened at the sudden, startling conclusion he'd just drawn. "No way," he muttered, but he dropped the choker, retrieved his laptop from the tray, and had it up and running in record time. He dug around in his files, looking for a list of URLs that Naomi had sent him, ages ago. He found it, swiped the address and pasted it into the command line. He clicked "go" and a few seconds later, the New Age website filled his screen.

"This is crazy," he mumbled, then stopped. *Are you a bigot, Sandburg? The mystical, metaphysical stuff is all cool and believable as long as it's part of the Sentinel thing, but if it's Native American, it's all hocus pocus and smoke and mirrors? Is that what I really believe?* Blair searched for pyrite under the crystal section of the site. He read the metaphysical properties of the stone, numbly.

"Pyrite is also a shielding stone. It is said to prevent negative energies from entering and altering your physical, emotional, and mental aspects."

"Pyrite is a good stone to carry if you must perform any type of dangerous work."

Blair stared at the words. *Negative energy? But Jim's one of the good guys! Although Naomi still retains some of her anti-cop attitude and Joe would've picked up on that.... And Jim, with his South American-influenced Sentinel abilities, could possibly be interpreted as being from an enemy tribe, to the Lakota Indians, and thus to the blessed stone. Damn, I sound like I'm buying into this, this—Jim would call it New Age mumbo-jumbo. I'm not. I'm not. I'm just exploring the possibilities.*

He then checked another crystal website, seeking a second opinion of the stone. "Pyrite is one of the most powerful preventive stones. It repels many forms of negative energy. Its protective qualities work on the physical, etheric and emotional levels. Pyrite is excellent to keep in one's possession when performing dangerous work."

Dangerous work, like being an observer for the Cascade PD. Mom got an up close and personal view of that when she visited. So, she asks Amy to incorporate pyrite into my choker. Then, she asks Joe to bless the choker, for more protection. Blair's gaze shifted from the computer screen to his choker.

A Blessed Protector. He already had one. Now it appeared he had two—and they were mutually exclusive.

Snippets of the recent past filled Blair's thoughts.

"Hey, man, I just got the best birthday present ever! You!" Blair threw his arms around Jim, who stiffened at the contact....

They were in the Expedition, driving back from the airport. "Jim! I can't believe I didn't tell you before! I saw the pan—" Blair broke off when he realized that Jim wasn't hearing him. Concerned that Jim had zoned, he reached out and touched Jim's arm. "Jim?" The Sentinel jerked the steering wheel and the SUV ran off the road, out of control....

"Here you go." Jim handed him the envelope and Blair tried to extract the contents left-handedly. He dropped the choker and they reached for it simultaneously, both of them in contact with the choker for a few seconds. Then Jim fell over on top of him, and rolled bonelessly onto the floor.

The choker. In all those instances, he was wearing the choker or in contact with it, when he also touched Jim.

"Oh, my God! This is all my fault!" The guilt overwhelmed him, and Blair's heart started beating rapidly. He began to hyperventilate, which aggravated the tube still in his lung. "Breathe, Sandburg." He swore he could hear Jim's voice, and he struggled to obey. Gradually, his heartbeat slowed to normal, and he took as deep breaths as he could, seeking to center himself.

Okay, mea culpa, but Jim's the one in trouble now. How do I fix this? Blair stared at his laptop, which had switched to his current screensaver, several dissolving, breathtaking views of Mesa Verde. He hit the space bar and he was back at the second New Age crystal site, the metaphysical properties of pyrite still displayed. Wanting to escape the stone, he clicked on the Home link and returned to the site's main page. The page had a starry background, with several prominent quartz crystals and Crystal Universe in slanted script at the top. A jewel-toned row of gem-shaped icons at the bottom of the page pointed to Introduction, Crystals for Sale, Metaphysical Properties, Crystal Cleansing, Stones of the Zodiac, and Bibliography.

Crystal Cleansing? Hmmm....

Blair clicked on the cleansing link and read about ways to purify stones. "Many people begin their relationship with a new crystal by cleansing it first. Cleansing can also be performed at any time to refresh the crystal, clear it of any residual unwanted energies, and 'recharge' it." *Recharge it? That's the last thing I want to do; more like remove it. Wait a minute, what about "clear it of any unwanted energies"?* That's exactly what I need to do. He pulled up a notepad window and reread the cleansing instructions, transferring the paragraphs containing useful information to the file.

Sandburg reached for the bedside phone and dialed. "Hello, Kerry?... Yeah, I'm still in the hospital... had a minor setback—no, no, it's nothing serious, I'm fine now, just added a few days to my release date...Uh, well, Jim had a setback, too...Look, Kerry, there's some things I'm gonna need, can you swing by the store on your way down here? Good, good, do you have something to write on? Okay, here's what I need..." He rattled off the recommended cleansing ingredients from the webpage. "Thanks a lot. See you later. Bye."

Blair hung up the phone, then picked it up and dialed another number. "Simon, it's Blair. Look, ah, Jim had a relapse.... No, it was after they released him, he came back here. He was visiting me and he just—collapsed. They rushed him to the ER, and I haven't heard anything since... Thanks, Simon. Bye."

Captain Simon Banks paused outside the door to room 307; he heard water splashing, then unmistakably feminine laughter. He knocked once, then stepped in, stopping a few feet away from Sandburg's hospital bed. A slender young woman wearing faded blue jeans and a slightly wet green t-shirt with "Rainier—The University, Not the Mountain" written on it stood next to Blair's bed. She held a wet sponge in one hand and a small container of sudsy water in the other. The sheet was pulled half-way down the bed, exposing Blair's chest.

"Blair, you splashed me!" she yelped, when she stopped giggling.

"You started it!" Sandburg charged back, laughing.

"Did not!"

"Did too!"

"You're supposed to get wet! I'm giving you a sponge bath."

"There's a difference between bathing and splashing," Blair started, then noticed the Captain. "Simon!" He grabbed for the bed sheet, ignoring the pain caused by his sudden movement, and succeeded in covering himself practically up to the chin.

The girl placed the sponge in the container of water and lowered it to the hospital tray, then turned to meet the new visitor. "You must be Captain Banks." She smiled, extending her dry hand. "Blair's told me so much about you."

"None of it's true, I assure you, Miss—?"

"Norcen, Kerry Norcen. I'm a friend of Blair's from Rainier."

"Hey, it's about time you remembered me," Blair grumped from the bed.

"He's a little cranky right now." Kerry said, "He doesn't like hospitals."

"Don't I know it," Captain Banks agreed.

"Look, if someone doesn't start talking TO me, instead of ABOUT me, I'm going to escalate liquid hostilities!"

"Sandburg, do you mean you're going to splash water all over Kerry, after she's been kind enough to come and visit you?" Simon asked sharply.

"Now, Captain, I only said I was going to do that if no one talked to me," Blair backpedaled.

"Since you're talking to me, obviously there's no need for further action now."

"Yes, I am talking to you. In fact, you have my undivided attention."

"That's my cue to exit," Kerry said, glancing at her watch. "I've got to get back to the library. Good-bye, Blair." She bent over and gave Sandburg a quick kiss. "Call me if you need anything else."

"Bye, Kerry and thanks for dropping by."

"Nice to have met you, Captain," Kerry said, then she grabbed a light blue backpack from the floor by Blair's bed and left the room.

Barely waiting for the door to close, Blair turned to face Simon, his restless hands pushing the hospital sheet lower. "How's Jim? Any news?"

Simon opened his mouth to make some cutting remark about how Sandburg's attitude had changed from care-free recipient of sponge baths to anxious, concerned friend of Jim's. *Look at his eyes -the kid's worried sick. His earlier lightheartedness was an all an act, probably to keep Kerry from worrying, too. Jim told me that Sandburg's a great obfuscator. I never connected his lying with acting ability. Have to remember that.* "No change, he's still unconscious." Simon sat down in the large blue visitor's chair, absently smoothing the crease in his khaki pants.

"Damn. Is he still in the ER?"

"Yes, but they're in the process of re-admitting him. Dr. Westphall stressed that Jim's vital signs and test results are all at acceptable levels. He thinks Jim's collapse is some sort of delayed reaction to the accident, possibly due to overdoing things. Jim did leave the hospital earlier than the doctor wanted him to."

"So he's blaming Jim for collapsing? That's not a very fair-minded diagnosis, is it?"

"He said Jim isn't in any immediate danger and he'll probably end up in the same room he vacated this morning."

Blair nodded. "Room 371."

"Yes, you planning on visiting him?"

"I can't." Sandburg shook his head. "Not until tomorrow afternoon."

Simon was startled a bit by that. "So you're not supposed to be up and about until then?"

"It's got nothing to do with me, I can't be near Jim for another—" Blair glanced at the alarm clock on the tray next to his bed—"twenty-three hours and fifty minutes, at least."

"What? Why?" Simon was confused. "You're not contagious or anything, you've had a traffic accident, complicated by a pneumothorax."

"I'm not contagious, more like infected, no, make that contaminated—from Jim's point of view."

"Contaminated? Is that the reason for your little water fight?" Simon nodded towards the water-filled receptacle on Blair's rolling tray.

"Sponge bath," Blair corrected. "But, yeah, you're right. The water has Epsom salt, peppermint and lavender oils and vanilla and almond extracts added, for better cleansing."

"Better cleansing," Simon echoed, then frowned. "Sandburg, is this a Sentinel thing?"

Blair squirmed under the sheets, then glanced away. "Yes," he semi-mumbled. "It's all my fault," he continued, in a stronger voice. "The accident, everything!" Blair's left hand waved in an all-encompassing gesture. "I didn't realize—" his left hand fell back on the sheet.

"Sandburg—Blair." Simon softened his tone and Blair's gaze shifted up from Simon's slate blue polo shirt to his face. "I don't know much about this Sentinel thing. There's no handbook on it; you and Jim have been learning as you go—so there's bound to be some mistakes along the way. Jim has told me more than once that he doesn't know where he'd be if you hadn't shown up when you did. He'll understand that whatever happened was an accident—and I don't mean the car crash."

"Thanks, Simon. I needed to hear that."

"Good." Simon cleared his throat. "Now that we've got that cleared up, how are you feeling?"

"I'm feeling pretty good. Doctor says I should be home free in a few days. Home—that reminds me. Can you get me a couple of items from the loft?"

"Sure, what do you need?"

"Some small, portable things that will remind Jim of home. Items he can feel or smell. Look around the loft and see what you can come up with, then bring them down to me before tomorrow afternoon. Oh, and I'll need a wheelchair, too, so I can go visiting."

"A wheelchair? How am I supposed to procure that?"

"If you can't find one on your own, go see a girl named Harley Davids in the children's ward. She'll tell you how to find one, trust me."

"'Trust me?' Coming from you, those are the scariest words in the English language," Simon didn't know what caused Sandburg to smile, but he was glad to see the observer in a better frame of mind than earlier. "Now I've got to get going, if I'm gonna swing by the loft before heading back to work. Get some rest, Sandburg. Someone'll bring Jim's stuff over later today or tomorrow morning."

"Thanks, Simon."

Simon left Sandburg's room and took the elevator to the Children's Ward. He stopped at the nurses' station. "Hello, I'm looking for Harley Davids' room? Another patient asked me to drop by and check on her."

The Asian nurse behind the desk said, "Room 535, down the hall and to your right."

"Thank you." Simon followed the directions, rapped on the door with 535 on it and then entered. Simon didn't recognize the figures on the band posters taped to the wall around the hospital bed and covering the tiny closet, although he was sure Daryl would've rattled them off instantly. His gaze shifted to the occupant of the bed, a small girl peering at him from underneath a Jags cap.

"Are you lost, mister?"

"No, Harley. I'm Simon Banks, a friend of Blair Sandburg's. I was just visiting him in 307"—Simon thought throwing in the room number might ease the girl's suspicions—"and he asked me to drop by."

"How is Blair? I haven't seen him in two days."

"He's feeling much better, thanks for asking. I'm sure Blair will want to know how you're doing?"

Harley pointed to one of the posters above her bed. "Like they say, I'm hangin' in there."

"Good to know, I'll pass that on to Sandburg." Simon hesitated. "Listen, Harley, I need some help. I have to get my hands on a wheelchair for Sandburg—"

"So he can do some end of shift visiting?" Harley interrupted.

"Exactly."

"The pick-up parking area by the front entrance is your best bet. There's always a row of wheelchairs by the glass windows, for patients coming and going. It's super-busy at lunch time, you should be able to snag a wheelchair then easily. Use the elevators farthest from the front door to get to Blair's room. You should be fine."

"Thanks, Harley. This'll help Blair out a lot."

"Glad I could help, sir." Harley met his gaze. "Could you pass a message to Blair for me?"

"Sure."

"Tell him I'm glad he's feeling better, and I'll be in the classroom tomorrow afternoon, if he's available."

"I'll let him know, Harley."

Blair nudged the door to room 371 open with his wheelchair and rolled himself in, stopping at the right side of Jim's bed. He kept the wheelchair parallel with the bed, so that the chair's left wheel and arm rest were inches from the bed and he physically faced the wall. This gave him plenty of maneuverability on his right side, where the chest tube snaked from his right lung to the chest tube canister on the rolling IV poll attached to the back of his wheelchair. Blair had carefully positioned his right arm so that the sling avoided getting tangled up in the tube. He lowered the guardrail and studied Jim, who appeared to be sleeping. "Jim." Blair checked for a reaction, but there was none. He busied himself with the Eaton's shopping bag in his lap. Simon had brought it from the loft earlier that afternoon, but Blair was only now examining the contents. He smiled as he pulled out the first item, Jim's navy Jags cap. He maneuvered the wheelchair as close to the headboard as he could get, then leaned over to place the cap on Jim's head, holding the cap by its visor and avoiding direct contact with him. "There you go, buddy. All ready for the next big game." He checked again for a reaction from the sleeping man: no flickering lashes, no head rolling, no restless movement anywhere.

Sandburg shrugged mentally and withdrew the next item. It was one of his vanilla candles, burnt to about half its original size. He placed it on the tray next to the bed and rummaged in the bag again. This time, he found a bottle of his strawberry scented shampoo, which he placed next to the candle, after uncapping it. Lastly, he removed Jim's colorful Afghan from the bag. He rolled backwards a few feet, then plunked the blanket left-handedly at the bottom of the bed, rolling forward as he carefully unfolded the Afghan until it completely covered the bed sheets. Jim's arms now lay between the Afghan and the hospital sheets. Blair hesitated a moment, then folded the blanket back and gently reached for Jim's left hand, the one nearest to Blair's side of the bed. Jim made no movement at the contact, and Blair released a breath he hadn't realized that he'd been holding. *It worked! Jim's muscles didn't stiffen or even twitch, which means that I'm not carrying any residual energy from the pyrite. I'm not contaminated anymore!*

Blair smoothed the corner of the Afghan back and laid Jim's arm on top of it, keeping hold of Jim's hand. No reaction. *Déjà vu. Like the first time I snuck into Jim's room and tried to wake him up. Wait a minute, Jim didn't react when I was holding his hand, trying to bring him out of a zone then, and that was **before** I did the cleansing ritual. That means that I was never contaminated by the pyrite in the first place; I'm only dangerous to Jim when I'm wearing the choker! I've wasted a whole day, stayed away for no reason. Why didn't I see this before?* "You know the answer to that, don't you, Jim?" Blair said, softly, "I got emotionally involved. Too close to the case. Let my emotions cloud my judgment." *And which emotion is that? Guilt, which is why I went through with the cleansing. Personal atonement. Besides, if anyone would be susceptible to any remnant or latent energy that I got from wearing the pyrite, it would be my Sentinel. Better to err on the side of caution....*

"Okay, Jim, let's try this again. Simon brought you all the comforts of home." *And half of the items are mine. Simon understands the Sentinel thing more than he lets on.* "Feel the slight weight of your Jags cap on your hair and across your forehead, and the rough, woven wool of the Afghan under your hands. Smell the rich, kitchen-y odor of my meditation candle and the fruity scent of the shampoo bottle on the table next to you. Believe what your senses are telling you, Jim. You're home. Open your eyes and come back home."

Jim lay stretched out on his back, drowsing on the sofa. He was in that delicious half-awake, half-asleep state which could easily slip back into full sleep. He felt the slight confinement of the Jags cap on his head, and the rough, woolen warmth of the Afghan under his fingers. Must've fallen asleep after the game, he thought, hazily, and the kid covered me up and let me sleep here. And he accuses me of being an overprotective mother hen. As if the thought triggered the act, he elevated his sense of smell slightly, searching for the familiar presence of his roommate. He smelled Blair's shampoo and a vanilla meditation candle and thought he heard Blair's voice, murmuring in the distance. If he cranked up his hearing a couple of notches, the soothing voice would form distinctive words—but he didn't want to do that, he just wanted to lie here, doing nothing, maybe drift back to sleep for a couple more hours...

Jim stiffened, with the overwhelming feeling that someone was watching him, staring at him. He cracked open his eyes, surprised at the amount of effort it took. It felt like he was bench-pressing 200 pounds, but his eyes were opened enough to see his watcher.

It was the Panther, sitting on its haunches, staring at him with those wide, mesmerizing blue cat eyes, only inches from his face.

Jim thought he jumped a foot in shock, but he really only succeeded in fully opening his eyes. He seemed to be immobilized by the Panther's stare; he couldn't move or speak. Beyond the Panther, he could see the rest of the living room, bathed in blue. Another vision. Great, just great. Now what?

The Panther tilted its head slightly and twitched an ear, as if listening to something. Without realizing it, Jim cranked his hearing up, too.

"—that's when it all started. Naomi gave me this great Indian bone choker, handmade by a friend of ours, Amy Rainwater. Amy's a well-known jewelry designer and the choker is exquisite—and unique, although I didn't find out how unique until way later—too late." Blair sighed.

"Anyway, Amy Rainwater is a Lakota Indian, and her grandfather, Joe Rainwater, is the Tribe's Medicine Man, which is really just another word for Shaman."

Sandburg?

In addition to Blair's voice, Jim heard a rhythmic thumping. The Panther was lashing its tail on the floor, as it absorbed Blair's words.

"Mom told Amy to use a protective stone, pyrite, as the centerpiece of the Indian choker that she commissioned for my birthday present. And she even went a step further, she asked Joe Rainwater to bless the choker, which enhanced the protective power of the pyrite."

The Panther's tail lashing increased in volume.

"To make a long story short, by having Joe bless the pyrite, she created a Blessed Protector for me."

The Panther rose to all fours and emitted a low growl. Then it stalked towards the end of the sofa, Jim's eyes tracking the Panther as it circled the couch. Slowly, the room changed. As Jim watched the Panther skirt the end of his couch, the blue monotone was replaced by white walls and the sofa morphed into a hospital bed. Blair was still talking, his voice seemed much closer.

The Panther approached Blair's wheelchair as Blair gently squeezed Jim's hand and concluded, "She doesn't know I already have one."

The Panther's tail twitched slightly and Jim watched apprehensively as it purposefully circled Sandburg's wheelchair, settling to Blair's right. Then the Panther purred, slowly moving its head from Sentinel to Guide. The Panther's ears pricked forward and it rose to stand on all four paws, then deliberately placed its two forepaws on the wheelchair's right armrest, increasing its height to sniff delicately at Blair's hair. Jim watched frozen as the Panther's wide jaws opened, then a long pink tongue emerged, and the Panther licked Sandburg's face while continuing to purr.

"I really wish you'd wake up, Jim," Blair said, oblivious to the Panther's presence. "There's so much I need to tell you."

The Panther dropped down to the floor and gazed at Jim, blue cat eyes locking with blue Sentinel eyes. The Panther crowded closer to the bed, resting its head on Jim's outstretched hand, which caused Jim to exert a slight pressure on Blair's hand, still clasped in his. Giving a final purr, the Panther vanished.

Blair glanced at their hands and Jim knew his Guide felt the increased weight on his hand. "Jim! Jim, can you hear me?"

"Whaa—" Jim mumbled.

"Attaboy, Jim! Wake up, can you open your eyes for me? Please?" Blair squeezed Jim's hand, lightly.

With an effort, Jim opened his eyes about halfway. "Bl'r?"

"Who else?" Blair grinned, beaming. "You came back!"

"Followed your voice," Jim said softly.

"That's great, Jim!" Blair enthused. He rolled the wheelchair forward a few inches and grabbed the personal-sized water pitcher on Jim's bedside tray, then handed it to Jim. "Do you remember what I said, or did you just latch onto the general tone of my words?"

Jim sipped from the pitcher's drinking straw, trying to sort out the last few minutes into vision and reality. He realized that Blair's part was the same in both worlds. "You were talking about Naomi's birthday present, a choker of some kind?"

"Yes, a genuine Indian bone choker, with a few unique touches."

"The pyrite."

"Wow, you do remember everything I was talking about!"

Jim hesitated. "I think I had help," he murmured, picturing the Panther.

"That's right, I was going all out to reach you. I used your senses of smell and touch, to reinforce my voice. And it worked, you responded a lot faster than the ninety minutes it took last time— although the length of response was more due to me than you, I know that now."

"Whoa, Junior, you said a mouthful, there."

"I've got lots more to tell you, too. You need to understand what happened and why." Blair extracted his left hand from Jim's grip and ran his fingers through his hair, restless. "I need to accept responsibility, because it's all my fault." He ended on a near-whisper, but Jim heard every word.

"Just tell me your story. I'll assess blame, if there is any, later."

"Okay, I started telling you this on Sunday, when I snuck into your room. It's about my birthday."

"Hang on, Chief," Jim interrupted. "Look, it's been a long day and I'm sure you need to get back to your room before some passing nurse discovers you're out roaming, so let's have the Cliff Notes version instead of the regular Sandburg lecture, all right?"

"Sure, Jim, whatever you say. Naomi gave me a Blessed Protector for my birthday, and it reacted violently to you, more than once. Is that Cliff enough for you?"

"Smart ass," Jim grumbled. "That's a little too succinct, even for me."

"'Succinct', ooh, been reading the dictionary again?" Blair teased, then got serious. "Let's treat this as a Q&A session. First, do you understand about Naomi giving me a Blessed Protector for my birthday?"

"You said pyrite is a protective stone, that's the sort of New Age mumbo-jumbo that Naomi would believe in whole-heartedly."

"Yes, and by having the stone blessed by a bona-fide Shaman, she increased its protective power substantially."

"If you say so." Jim accepted spirit guides and heightened senses because he had to, but he wasn't going to admit that thinking stones existed without some pretty solid evidence.

"I don't say so, I know so. Look at its effect on you." Jim remained silent so Sandburg continued. "Remember at the waiting area, in the airport?"

Jim nodded, not sure where this was going.

"We stopped at that deserted gate waiting area and you started to give me a present, but you said it was broken. I said I just got the best present ever and gave you a welcome home hug. You stiffened at the contact, and I stepped back, figured I'd violated your macho no-hugging-in-public rule. That was the first time. The first time you came into contact with the choker, or with me while I was wearing the choker. Either way, you got a jolt of something from the choker, more specifically the pyrite on the choker. That time, I'm guessing it was a pretty mild reaction, like a shot across the bow, a warning shot."

Jim interrupted. "A warning shot? Aren't you mixing your metaphors here?"

"I'm trying to put this in layman's terms, Jim. The pyrite saw you as an enemy, a rival power— "

"The pyrite **saw** me?" Jim asked, skepticism peppering his voice.

"Okay, so I'm anthropomorphizing a bit. On some level, the pyrite felt your presence and labeled you a threat. It reacted with some kind of energy, possibly psychic, possibly electrical or possibly a combination of the two."

"I felt something," Jim admitted, "but I thought it was a delayed reaction, an adrenaline spike, maybe. Or something to do with my senses, even. Guess I should've said so at the time, but I just wanted to get home."

"We both did, so I picked up the luggage while you drove the Expedition around. I noticed you were having trouble with the lights from the oncoming traffic, so we switched to a less-traveled road home. If we'd stayed on the highway, we might not have even crashed." Blair shook his head. "You must've zoned while driving. I realized it a little too late, and I reached out to touch you and bring you back. That instigated the second contact between you and the choker. You must've gotten a stronger jolt, because you jerked your hand away, to break off contact."

"Unfortunately, you were still driving at the time and the Expedition went off the road. It tipped over and eventually hit a tree, I'm kind of fuzzy on the details, there, sorry."

"Hit a tree," Jim echoed, frowning in thought. "That's what I told the dispatcher, when I called in the accident."

"Simon said you called in the crash, but I don't remember that."

"You were out cold, Chief, but I could hear your heartbeat. I smelled blood—and I knew it was your blood. I reached over to check you out, then everything went white. I must've passed out."

Blair glanced down at his left hand, lying still in his lap. "You didn't pass out, you must've been zapped by the pyrite, and only a few minutes after the other jolt you got from me. No wonder you were knocked into never-never-land." He sighed. "Like I said, it's all my fault. The accident, your being unconscious—"

Jim was determined to nip Sandburg's guilt trip in the bud. "The insurance company sees it differently."

"Huh?"

"I saw the police report, too. Single vehicle accident with driver fatigue and the weather listed as contributing factors."

"Driver fatigue? That makes me feel so much better." Blair's voice was heavy with sarcasm. He flung his left hand into the air. "I should've never let you drive in the first place!"

Jim bit back a roar of 'Let me drive!? The Expedition's my car!' "Sandburg. I couldn't tell them I zoned, and it was obvious that I wasn't paying attention, the report mentioned the lack of skid marks."

"Oh."

"Which means I must've crashed into that tree pretty hard. I'm sorry, Chief, I'm supposed to be protecting you, and I rammed you into a tree, instead."

"Jim, it wasn't your fault—"

"I was driving—"

"It was an accident, Jim, it wasn't your fault!"

"And it wasn't **yours**, either, Chief." Jim waited until he saw acceptance in Blair's face. "I zoned, and you brought me back, that's the way things work for us. SOP."

Sandburg looked like he wanted to continue arguing, blaming himself for everything they'd been through the past few days. Jim rubbed his forehead, feigning a headache, to try to curtail his partner's words. It must have worked because Sandburg's next words were conciliatory. "Okay, so after I talked you into rejoining the rest of us, I got that stupid pneumothorax and the shoe was on the other foot."

Jim abandoned his headache ploy. "And how is your 'stupid pneumothorax'?"

"Like you don't already know," Sandburg snorted.

Caught red-handed, Jim admitted to himself. He had used his senses to check Sandburg out head-to-toe just after he woke, mimicking the Panther's inspection of his Guide in the vision. "You're fine, as far as I can tell."

"The doctors are pleased with my progress, but they're not cutting me loose for a few more days.

"Getting back to my story, you came and visited me in my room, Wonderburger and all. At the end of our visit, you seemed bummed that I didn't have a good birthday, so I dragged out Naomi's present, to show you that wasn't true. I dropped the choker, we both reached for it at the same time, and you got zapped, again. It must be a geometric progression, because you keeled over immediately. I hit the panic button and called the nurse. They toted you off to the ER and I was left gawking at the floor, where you collapsed.

"I picked up the choker and stared at it, trying to make sense of what happened. I finally put the pieces together when I checked out a few crystal websites. Luckily one of the websites mentioned crystal cleansing as a way to rid the crystal of unwanted negative energies. I soaked the pyrite in the recommended salt and herbs for twenty-four hours, then I came to visit you." Blair sighed. "Naomi created a Blessed Protector for me, and it backfired."

"Because you already have one." Jim said firmly, knowing they both remembered that conversation in the elevator after the Lash case.

"Yes, it seems that Blessed Protectors are a one per customer arrangement." Blair smiled, and then shook his head. "Look, I'm really sorry about Naomi's meddling, but moms do that, especially my Mom."

"Naomi was just trying to keep you safe, Chief. I can't fault her for that."

"I promise from now on, I'll deal with her presents more circumspectly. This won't happen again."

"Glad to hear it, although I won't hold you to it." Jim waited until he caught Sandburg's eyes before continuing, "This Sentinel stuff seems to always be throwing us curve balls, but we manage. Now, why don't you scoot on back to your room, so I can tell the nurse I'm awake and get some dinner?"

"That's my Sentinel, always thinking with his stomach. I'm glad you're not blaming Mom, she might be dropping by for the Fourth of July. Bye, Jim. Give me a head start, then buzz your nurse." Blair grinned and started to back his wheelchair away from Jim's bed, then spun it around so that he wheeled it forwards out the swing door.

"She's **what**?" Jim called as Sandburg rolled out the doorway. Jim followed the rhythmic sound of Sandburg's wheelchair as it progressed down the corridor, then turned a corner. Another straight stretch, then the wheels stopped and he heard a door swinging open.

"Hey, Jim, I'm back in my room, 307." He heard Blair say. "Dial down your hearing and next time, check on me by phone, okay?"

Jim hastily dropped his hearing back to normal and shook his head, his expression a combination of amusement and acceptance. *Sandburg's got me pegged four ways from Sunday—and I wouldn't have it any other way.*

Blair knocked, then swung the door open and stepped inside the hospital room. He took in the boy band posters and pictures from magazine centerfolds. Posters of Mount Rainier, the Grand Canyon, and other National Parks appeared newly added, since they overlapped the musicians' posters at several corners. He spotted the bed's occupant. "Hi, Harley. Glad I caught you in, I thought you might be out visiting." He glanced at the elaborate Harry Potter clock on the desk, which said four-thirty.

Harley hastily sat up in the bed, her skinny right hand diving under her pillow for the Jags cap she crammed on top of her bald head. "Not today." She looked Sandburg over, noting the blue sling that he wore over his terry cloth robe. "You look good."

"I am good. I'm getting sprung tomorrow morning. So, I came to say good-bye, and thank you."

"Thank you?"

"For telling Simon how to get a hold of a wheelchair for me. I used it, without getting caught out by the nurses. A very successful operation, thanks to Simon—and you. So, again, thanks for teaching me the ropes." Blair smiled conspiratorially, as he settled into the hot pink visitor's chair, adjusting the black lumbar pillow with its red Harley-Davidson logo. He moved the chair closer to the side of the hospital bed. "Hospital Secrets 101."

She giggled. "You make it sound like a class."

"We met in a classroom, so that's appropriate, huh?" Blair indicated the newly-added poster of Mount Rainier. Their last meeting in the classroom had been a discussion of wide open spaces; Sandburg had cited several national parks as examples. "I see you're taking some of my teaching to heart and expanding your horizons."

Harley shrugged. "There's only so many boy bands out there. I got interested in stag's meadows and all that after you told me about the meanings behind those names. And I've always liked wide open spaces. I didn't really see national parks that way until we talked about them. My mom brought in the posters for me this morning and we hung them up. Mom said maybe we can visit one next summer."

"You should totally do that," Blair encouraged. "I think both of you would get a kick out of Rainier or the Grand Canyon. I spent a lot of time travelling with my mom when I was growing up. She was keen to give me an appreciation of all things natural. In fact, I've got something to show you, right here." Sandburg scooted the pink chair closer to Harley's bed and laid a long, thin rectangular box on the covers. "Open it."

Harley opened the lid and stared at the bone choker inside. "It's beautiful."

"This is a very special gift, it was made by a friend of mine. One of the places that mom and I visited was a Lakotan reservation. That's where I met Amy Rainwater and she's now a famous jewelry designer. She made this choker—it has a lot of traditional Native American elements in it. See these four bands of hairpipe, and the turquoise and black crow glass beads interspersed with the hairpipe?"

Harley nodded, as Blair pointed to the beads. "What is hairpipe, Blair?"

"Hairpipe bone, actually. Native Americans took small animal bones—like a squirrel's, or a fox's—and polished them, shaping them into tapered cylinders, as you see on the choker. Nowadays, all hairpipe and bone beads come from water buffalo horn and bone, imported from India and China. These beads are used by native and non-native jewelry makers today. The hairpipe, turquoise and black crow beads are then strung through these thin leather strands and an abalone shell—usually as close to circular as the designer can get—is placed in the center of the choker. Then, a centerpiece is selected, in this case, two intertwining cubes of pyrite. D'you know what pyrite is often called?"

"Fool's gold."

"That's right, because some people are fooled into thinking that it's gold, based on its shiny color. So, pyrite isn't nearly as valuable as gold, in the traditional monetary sense, but there's more than one way for a stone to be valuable. Some people believe that certain crystals have healing and/or protective properties, including pyrite. Pyrite's special ability is protection, according to ancient Lakotan and other Native American tribes' beliefs, and that's why Amy made pyrite the centerpiece of this choker. Then, her grandfather, who happened to be the tribe's Medicine Man or Shaman, blessed the stone, making the pyrite a Blessed Protector."

Harley listened, fascinated. "The story behind the choker is almost as beautiful as the necklace itself."

"Earlier, I said the choker was a gift," Sandburg continued. "My mother gave it to me—and now, I'm giving it to you."

"I can't take this, Blair! You just said your mom gave it to you."

"She thought I needed a Blessed Protector, but I don't. I already have one, and I've learned—recently, in fact—that one man can't have two Blessed Protectors."

Blair paused for breath and Harley asked, "Is your other Blessed Protector made out of pyrite, too?"

"No, more like iron and steel." Iron determination and steely blue eyes. Yep, that's Jim to a T.

"But that's beside the point. I can't keep this choker.. If I did, I'd have to lock it up in a safety deposit box, or bury it in the top bookshelf of my office at Rainier—and that's just not right. This choker is meant to be worn, and appreciated, not tucked away like some Old Masters painting bought on the black market. Please, Harley, I want you to have it."

Harley glanced from Sandburg to the choker. "But what about your mother? She gave the choker to you, not me."

Sandburg crossed his fingers out of Harley's sight. "My mom is a very sympathetic and understanding woman. Once I explain to her why I gave the choker to you, she'll agree with me completely."

"She will?" Harley seemed doubtful.

"She will," Blair repeated, firmly. "You'll be doing me a huge favor if you accept this choker."

"Okay, and thank you."

Sandburg put the lid back on the choker's box and handed it to Harley. "You'll probably have to shorten the choker before you can wear it, sorry about that. I have one condition, though: I want you to think about what I told you about the pyrite being a Blessed Protector when you put it on.

That way, you'll keep the tradition alive."

"Like a good luck charm?"

"Good luck and good health. Now that we've got that taken care of, we can visit for a while. You can start by getting me current on my Gen Y pop culture. Whose pictures are plastered all over your walls?"

Harley happily prattled on about the Backstreet Boys, Hanson and BoyzIIMen.

When it felt like they'd exhausted the topic of boy bands, Sandburg took his cue for the next one from the other posters. "So, Harley, have you visited any of the National Parks that you have posters of on your walls?"

"We went to Yellowstone, but I don't remember it very well. Mom says I was only four, and she and dad had to keep a close eye on me, because I was constantly trying to run off the trails and get closer to the geysers and hot springs."

"Ah, yes, Old Faithful is an amazing sight. Have you been to the Grand Canyon?"

"No."

"You should go. And if you do go, you need to do the donkey trip down to the canyon floor. Seeing the Grand Canyon from topside is incredible, but descending into the canyon on donkey back is unforgettable. They book reservations over a year in advance, so your family can set something up for next summer."

They discussed the other national parks until a nurse brought Harley's dinner and Blair had to leave. "Bye, Harley, and thanks again. My business card's on the bottom of the box the choker's in, so keep in touch, okay?"

Jim pulled the orange rental Volvo to a halt at the curb outside the loft. He cut the engine, opened the driver's door and was standing next to the passenger side door before Blair could undo his seat belt. Jim opened the passenger door and waited, ready to assist if Blair needed help getting out of the car, but determined to keep his mother hen mode in check. Jim's arms twitched as Sandburg pushed himself slightly forward in the seat, then carefully placed a blue jean-clad leg on the sidewalk, and pushed himself out of the car. Sandburg was dressed all in blue: blue jeans, blue plaid shirt, even the sling over his right arm was light blue. In contrast, Jim wore khaki Dockers and a red shirt.

"I'm wearing the wrong color." Blair jabbed his free hand in Jim's direction. "I should be wearing red, like you. Red's the color of celebration, not blue." He glanced at the street entrance to the loft, grinning. "And I am definitely celebrating, man. It's a gorgeous Saturday morning, the first day of summer and I'm free. No more hospital food! No more hospital noises, waking me up at all hours of the night! No more hospital, period."

"Sandburg, do you mean to tell me that blue isn't a celebratory color in any of the multitudes of cultures you've studied world-wide?" Jim asked, as they approached the door and he solicitously swung it open.

Blair mulled over the question as they walked towards the elevator, standing open and waiting for them. "Well, the Tree People of Benokai worshipped the sky, so I suppose they would consider blue a celebratory color," Blair mused as they left the elevator and walked down the corridor to the loft.

Jim unlocked the door to 307 and motioned for Blair to enter, then closed the door when they were both inside.

"SURPRISE!" A wave of sound engulfed them, and the living room/dining room area was filled with personnel from Major Crime, and students and faculty from Rainier. Jim had dialed down his hearing, to compensate for the party guests' expected noisy greeting.

Blair stood, speechless, as he spotted two large banners covering the triptych along the back wall: "Welcome Home, Sandburg" and "Happy Belated Birthday!" The banners were completely visible over the heads of the dozen or so people crowding the living room. Simon, Rafe, Brown, Rhonda, and Joel mingled with Kerry, Ted Braithwaite, Doug Logan and a half-dozen other university friends of Blair's. Blair's gaze traveled over the crowd, then he saw a stack of presents, heaped on the seat of his favorite yellow chair. "Wow, man. Cool!"

Jim patted Blair's good left shoulder. "Yeah, Chief. Cool."

"Ahem." Simon stepped towards the two men. "Well, as the signs say, welcome home and happy birthday, Sandburg. Now, are you going to open presents, or"—he pointed towards a white birthday cake on the dining room table—"eat cake first?"

"Presents!" Half the guests shouted, while the others yelled, "Cake!" Jim decided it wouldn't be politic to mention that all the cake-sayers were Major Crime personnel, as he easily identified each voice shouting "cake."

"I'll open the presents first," Blair decided. He walked over to the yellow chair and reached for the top present, Kerry joining him. As Blair opened each present, Kerry placed it neatly on the coffee table. Soon there was a sizable stack of books, gift certificates, CD's and movies.

Blair picked up the next to last present. It was a rectangular box wrapped in gold foil, about nine inches tall and three inches wide. Could be a heavy duty candle, he mused as he tore off the foil, exposing a maroon package with "SMITHSONIAN INSTITUTION" printed in silver up its length. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Jim pause in his cake decorating, and he knew that this was Jim's gift. Carefully, he opened the top of the box and reached in, pulling out his styrofoam-encased present. He lifted off the top half of the styrofoam, gently extracting a sleek black panther figurine. The ceramic panther sat on its hindquarters on top of a two inch base, its art deco style evident in the smooth, graceful curves of the big cat's form. Blair was thrown back to Jim's words from their Peru conversation: "...and my dream...the Panther—it's all connected."

He met Jim's eyes, realizing that the panther was more than a present; it was a commitment, a promise to continue their journey to understanding "this Sentinel thing" together.

Sandburg gently set the panther back in its packaging and then opened the last present, wrapped in red and blue striped paper with "Happy Birthday" scrawled on the paper in flowing white letters. The unwrapped present was a Popeil pocket fisherman. Blair picked up the wrapping paper and looked at the nametag. "Sam?"

Blair's lanky fellow grad student answered quickly. "Hey, that's a classic! I saw it advertised on late night TV when I was studying for midterms. I figured it's got to be better than that Cree fishing spear you're always carrying on about!"

"Now, wait a minute, I'll have you know that that Cree spear is—" Blair argued, half-grinning.

"Blair, you've got one more present," Kerry interrupted the spirited exchange of words. "Here." She put the wrapped parcel in Sandburg's hands.

Blair quickly unwrapped the package, revealing an oversized leather-trimmed portfolio cover. The front and back of the book cover were a thick woven tapestry with white geometric shapes and orange bands stitched over a rich brown background. Blair opened the elaborate cover and read the title of the hefty manuscript inside. "Avoiding the Steamroller: the Effects of Civilization on the Native Peoples of Borneo."

"Dr. Stoddard sent his manuscript to me when he heard about your accident. He wants your input on his preliminary findings, says he's eagerly waiting to hear your opinion and suggestions." Kerry said, smiling.

"Oh, wow, that's—that's fantastic." Blair reverently fingered the cover page of his mentor's research paper.

"I think it's time we served the cake," Jim interrupted loudly from the dining room table, where he had all twenty-eight candles lighted and evenly distributed on top of the marble cake. "Chief, come on over and blow out the candles, we've got some hungry people here."

"Okay, okay." Blair carefully set the manuscript down, walked over to the cake and smiled at the burning blue candles, arranged in an exacting "28" with "Happy Birthday, Blair" in green icing underneath the numbers. "No more hospitals," Jim heard him whisper, then Blair blew out all the candles to enthusiastic applause as the table was suddenly surrounded by people.

Jim proceeded to cut the cake into equal portions, placing each piece on a dessert plate. He waited until Sandburg had a forkful of cake in his mouth, and then smiled pleasantly. "So, Chief, why were you moving the furniture around while I was gone?"

Blair choked on his cake and Simon pounded him on the back.

Blair stopped by the Anthropology Department's office at the end of the day. It was his second week back after his hospitalization and he was looking forward to the weekend. Stephanie, the receptionist and girl Friday smiled at him. "Blair, I'm so glad you're here. You got a package today, wait a minute and I'll get it for you." She got out of her chair, rummaged around under the reception counter which separated the staff from visitors and handed him a well-padded manila envelope. "Here. This saves me the trouble of having campus mail deliver it to your office. Then you wouldn't have seen it til next week, with the Fourth of July weekend starting tomorrow."

Blair took the package and glanced at the return address: New York City. "Thanks, Stephanie. I've been waiting for this." Then Blair left the office, heading for his Corvair in the staff parking lot. He was ahead of the traffic, so he made good time to Prospect Avenue and soon opened the

loft door. He dropped his keys into the basket by the front door and then made a beeline for his yellow chair. Sandburg eagerly tore open the side of the envelope and extracted a fairly thin rectangular box. It was about an inch and a half wide and seven inches long. Blair unfolded the invoice, glancing at it long enough to make sure that it was for the proper item. He winced a little at the cost, but knew it was worth it in the long run. Designer jewelry isn't cheap, and one of a kind items from New York really aren't cheap, but this will be worth every penny if it works.

He carefully opened the box, unwrapped the tissue paper and examined the exposed bone choker. It was an exact duplicate of Naomi's gift. Blair had described the choker that he wanted in anthropological detail over the phone in his conversation with David Lenkowitz, the jewelry designer. He also included a few accurate sketches when he emailed his order confirmation to the New York jewelers. He'd used the long-established East Coast firm that a friend of a friend had recommended to insure there was absolutely no connection between this choker and Amy Rainwater or the Lakotan tribe. It was just a well-made four-strand hairpipe choker accented with turquoise and black glass beads, with two intertwined pyrite cubes in its abalone center. It also had two beads dangling from the pyrite, exactly like the original. This pyrite wasn't blessed by a Shaman, or anyone else, for that matter. No magical protective properties whatsoever.

Of course, Sandburg couldn't prove that until Jim got home, but he was banking on it. He picked up the jewelry box and went into his bedroom. Blair put the choker on, then added a light plaid overshirt and loosened his hair, rearranging it to help conceal the choker. Then he walked into the kitchen. Cascade was in the middle of a heat wave and it was just the third day July. Jim had worked last weekend, so even though it was Thursday, he'd already had a long week. Blair hoped to put his Sentinel at ease with a good home-cooked meal waiting for him when he got home. A little preventative cooking will put Jim in a better frame of mind, and pave the way for some covert testing. Or that's the plan, anyway.

Sandburg opened their ancient, slightly dome-shaped refrigerator—Jim teased that it was Sandburg-sized—and peered at the shelves, looking for inspiration. He immediately spotted hamburger, cheese and beer. The simplest is sometimes the best, he mused as he took the hamburger from the fridge and set it on the butcher block island, next to the gas cooktop. He knew they had some fresh spinach leaves and he could sauté some mushrooms, adding a little extra to one of Jim's go-to meals, cheeseburgers and beer. Blair quickly checked the breadbox for hamburger buns and then pulled out the frying pan and started cooking.

There. Sandburg just finished setting the table when he heard the front door opening. "Hey, Jim. Supper's almost ready. Good timing, man."

Jim closed the door and eased into the loft. "I smelled the cheeseburgers from Colette's."

"I knew you would. Go wash up while I dish up." Blair instructed as he placed the platter of cheeseburgers on the table. Blair went back to the kitchen to get ketchup, mustard and pickle relish. He set the condiments on the table, then went back to the fridge for the beers.

"Here," Blair passed Jim a Miller's Lite, making sure their fingers touched. He scrutinized Jim's face for any signs of a reaction. They sat down on opposite sides of the table, Blair carefully passing Jim the mustard, ketchup and pickle relish individually, with plenty of finger contact.

Blair saw that Jim didn't do anything but continue to doctor his burger, piling the ingredients on his cheeseburger, then putting the bun on top. Next, Jim took a big bite of his burger, chewing enthusiastically.

Relieved, Sandburg bit into his own burger, savoring the cheddar cheese and mushrooms.

"That's better." Jim said and Blair glanced inquiringly at him. "Your heartbeat's back to normal. It was accelerated when I first got home, right up til a coupl'a minutes ago." Jim took another bite of his cheeseburger, obviously waiting for an explanation.

So much for **covert** testing. I should've known Jim would pick up on my sense of relief. "You remember I told you about Harley?"

"The girl you met at the hospital, the young cancer patient." Jim identified immediately, as Blair knew he would.

"Yes. She helped me out tremendously during my enforced incarceration there, and I wanted to express my appreciation, so I gave her a gift before I left." Sandburg took a breath. "I gave her Naomi's bone choker."

Jim's eyebrows rose.

"Hey, man we both know that I can't ever wear it again. You can't deny the protective properties of that choker's pyrite, Jim—not after experiencing its power first-hand."

"You've got me there, Chief."

"I figured the choker and the pyrite are removed from us and Harley would benefit from its protective and healing properties—a win-win situation. Then after my birthday party, I remembered that Mom wants to come and visit later this month—"

"She's gotta stay at a hotel this time, Sandburg. I'm working nights starting next week—finally got a promising lead on the Allingham case," Jim interrupted firmly.

"Mom hates hotels," Blair protested weakly. "But if—when—she visits, she'll expect to see me wearing the choker." He pulled his hair back, exposing the necklace. "So I had a duplicate made, minus the shaman's influence. This came in the campus mail, from New York City."

Jim's eyes narrowed as he examined the choker. "So that's why you were extra touchy-feely passing the condiments. I thought you were just more klutzy than usual."

"Hah, hah." Blair rose from the table, circled around to Jim's side and leaned over, resting one hand on his partner's shoulder. "Do you feel anything? Electricity or resistance, anything unusual?"

"No."

"Good. So there's only one Blessed Protector in this room. Stand up, I've got one more test—it won't even take a minute, then you can get back to devouring your cheeseburger."

Sandburg stepped back as Jim rose from his red ladder back chair.. He turned to face Blair. "Now what?"

"This." Blair stepped in close and hugged Jim hard, as he had at the airport after Jim's flight had landed safely. "Feel anything?" Blair's face was almost buried in Jim's chest, the choker in definite contact with his Sentinel.

"No."

"Good." Blair released his hold, slapping Jim's biceps. He crossed back to his side of the table. "Let's finish dinner before the burgers get cold."

Epilogue: Five and a half months later

Blair Sandburg frowned at the spiral notebook on the dining room table in front of him. He was transferring his notes into a file on his laptop, editing and organizing the notes as he typed. It was way after one a.m. and he expected his travel alarm clock would be ringing shortly. He paused in his typing, flexing the fingers of his right hand. Ding! Blair reached towards the alarm, then recognized the musical tone as his email indicator.

He double clicked on his email icon and opened the new message, noting that its subject was a non-descript "Hello and Happy Holidays."

Hi Blair!

Wow, the year has sure flown by. I can't believe I've been in school almost four months. If you told me when we met that I'd be spending seventh grade in a real junior high school, I wouldn't have believed it, but here I am.

I am SO glad that Christmas vacation is almost here! Mom's talking about taking my best friend Maggie and me skiing over the break. I can't wait!! The last week of school was such a d-r-a-g. I'm attaching my Christmas photo, Mom wants to use it as our Christmas cards this year. You'll notice what I'm wearing. The girls at school are positive that I never take it off. They're just jealous!

Got to go! Merry Christmas!

Harley

P.S. How's your Blessed Protector?

Sandburg grinned, then opened the attached picture file. It was a shoulder shot of a smiling Harley. She was wearing a shiny green blouse with its top two buttons unbuttoned, and a black vest covered with tiny Santas and reindeer. The blouse's open neck emphasized her Indian bone choker, and the camera caught the golden glitter of its pyrite centerpiece. The last thing Blair noticed was the crop of short, dark curls underneath the red Santa cap on Harley's head. Harley had added a caption: *Me and my BP.*

Smile still on his face, Blair hit reply. If he stretched his hearing a little, he could just make out the soft snoring of Jim, sleeping upstairs. *Hi Harley,* he began to reply. *My Blessed Protector and I are just fine, thanks for asking. Have you been skiing before? I remember the first time I skied down an advanced slope and....*



The End
