



As
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as
it Gets

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Introduction:

Ft Leavenworth Maximum Security Facility:

Through the two-way mirror, the observer watched avidly as the prisoner was escorted into the interrogation room, noting every detail of the man's physical appearance and general demeanour. Despite the shackles hampering his movements, he still managed to convey a confident, even slightly arrogant air, and the eyes in the studiously neutral face missed nothing; alert and sparking with intelligence. However, faint signs of bruising on the handsome features hinted that the man's period of incarceration at the D o D's only maximum security institution had been less than easy, and the watcher smiled grimly to himself as he considered that Lee Brackett must surely be ripe and ready to accept the proposal he had in mind.

Once Brackett was seated, the watcher waited patiently for some short while longer in order to increase the impact of his entrance. Nothing like a little build-up of trepidation to soften up a potential agent and subordinate, even one as accomplished as Lee Brackett. Not that the man betrayed any outward sign of anxiety - he was too professional for that - but he must have been wondering what this meeting was about, and it was time to apprise him of the watcher's plan for his fate.

From Lee Brackett's perspective, this meeting was a break in routine that had the potential to be of benefit to him, or at least provide a welcome change in his present circumstances. Outward nonchalance notwithstanding, Brackett was finding it increasingly hard to maintain his sanity in the confines of Leavenworth's environs, and had had to resort to violence on several occasions just to preserve his person and his dignity. If there was the remotest chance of shortening his sentence, he was going to take it, no matter what. So when his visitor finally entered the room, Brackett's interest and curiosity spiked even if he still managed to control his tension and his expression, merely raising a quizzical eyebrow at the immaculate officer who moved into his line of sight. He deliberately refrained from making any effort to stand even in the presence of one whose insignia proclaimed him to be a colonel, no less; interested to note that his small act of insolence was met with nothing more than a wry twitch at the corner of the other man's thin-lipped mouth. The man looked imposing, intelligent and shrewd, and even as he studied Brackett steadily for several long moments, Brackett had the uneasy feeling that nothing was going to get past him, and he knew he was going to have to be on his guard.

Finally, with a slight nod of satisfaction, the man sat down opposite Brackett, and took a moment to brush non-existent creases from the sleeve of his already perfect uniform coat. Looking up again, he met Brackett's gaze head on and spoke, his tone compelling and authoritative.

"Mr Brackett. My name is Colonel Collins, and I have a proposition for you..."

Several long minutes later, Lee Brackett had to admit he was more than a little impressed with the breadth and audacity of Colonel Collins' plan, and knew that he wanted to be involved. However, there was a lot of detail to be discussed before he gave his consent, and there was no way that he'd capitulate immediately. He might be desperate to escape, but he needed to know that he wasn't jumping out of the frying pan into the fire, so to speak. His sense of self-preservation, always well-developed, had increased to gigantic proportions following his arrest and incarceration, and he had no intention of leaving himself open to unnecessary risk. Sitting back in his seat, his gaze speculative even as a sardonic smirk pulled at his lips, he began to bargain.

“So, Colonel. I know you won’t expect me to answer right away before I have more to go on, so you’ll forgive me if I begin by asking you for a little more information. Like, for instance, what branch of alphabet soup do you represent? I know you’re not CIA. D o D? NID? Homeland Security? Not regular army, I’m sure.”

The colonel smiled inscrutably for a moment. “None of the above, Mr Brackett. Shall we just say that there are higher authorities at work here, whose identities are on a need-to-know basis. And I assure you, you don’t need to know, for your own safety.”

Brackett held the other man’s gaze for a long moment before answering. “Fair enough, Colonel. I accept your word...for now, at least. But why me? What qualities do I have that make me right for this job? You say you need me to seduce a detective who is working on a particularly big case - one which may have national or even international repercussions – and pump him for information. Now I may be good, but I’m no Mata Hari. Who is it?”

And he was so taken aback by the answer that for a moment even he couldn’t contain his astonishment.

“Your target, Mr Brackett, is Detective Jim Ellison, Cascade PD. Or should I say, Sentinel Ellison? And you’d know all about that, now, wouldn’t you? It was you, after all, that put two and two together after Ellison’s return from Peru and realised he had enhanced senses. And tried to make use of them,” he added disapprovingly, with a slight grimace of distaste.

“And before you ask, no, we have no intention of reactivating his commission, however useful his ability might be. He’s too old for prolonged active service, and this country is better served by his maintaining his present career. As long as he can be manipulated, that is. And that is where you come in. You understand where he’s coming from, and can ‘persuade’ him to divulge secrets that we can use for our own purposes. You can control him, once you’ve won his trust.”

Brackett’s forehead creased in a frown as he digested the colonel’s words. Jim Ellison, huh? Now that was a turn-up for the books for sure. It might just be fun after all to seduce the arrogant asshole of a Boy Scout and involve him in some dirty tricks, just when he thought he’d put his covert ops days behind him. But there was another catch, and he needed to know if the colonel was aware of it.

“That’s all well and good, Colonel, but what about his Guide? You and your people *are* aware of the importance of his companion, are you not? What do I do about him? Because I have to say, that of the pair, I’d much rather seduce young Mr Sandburg,” and he allowed himself a somewhat cynical leer.

The colonel chuckled mirthlessly. “Yes, Mr Brackett, we are aware of Mr Sandburg’s role in watching Ellison’s back. After you identified the ‘Sentinel’, we made sure we kept up our surveillance of him; all in the cause of national security, you understand; and observed the actions of Mr Sandburg in the light of what you had surmised. For the time being he should be allowed to continue his role, but we expect you to supplant him in Ellison’s affection in due course. They aren’t a couple yet, after all, even if they seemed to be heading that way for a while. And we may eventually have a use for a proven Guide, so it won’t be necessary to eliminate him permanently yet. Unless he proves to be too much of a nuisance, anyway.

“So, what do you think? Are you interested in working for me and my group? Because if you are, then I shall be able to go into further detail.”

And Brackett needed no more time to consider. He was in, and had every intention of making the most of this unexpected opportunity.

Once Brackett had agreed to cooperate, things moved very fast. Colonel Collins arranged for Brackett’s release into his custody, and Lee found himself swiftly transferred to a safe house, wherein he was to be fully briefed about the operation. Intellectually, he was intrigued by the role he was expected to play, all

the time contemplating how he could turn it to his advantage, and, more importantly, protect himself. He had no illusions that he was in any way indispensable, so it was up to him to take care of number one. He was even more determined to do so when he met the colonel's colleague – the man who was obviously in charge of the whole set-up.

Introduced simply as 'Mr Black', Brackett realised immediately that the man was far more dangerous than Collins and his fellow military types. Although he carried himself like a military man, Black wore a beautifully cut but austere formal suit, with no indication of rank or status. He was of medium height and build, and his features were regular and unremarkable rather than handsome, but it was his eyes and the expression in them that warned Brackett that this man was truly one to watch out for. And as the briefing progressed, Brackett discovered that he was right to be wary. It soon became obvious that Black was utterly ruthless in his determination to protect his country at all costs; necessary collateral damage notwithstanding.

The case on which the whole operation hinged was a complex one. As far as Jim Ellison and his fellow detectives were concerned, they were to be simply members of a proposed task force involving PD personnel as well as local FBI agents who would be tasked with trying to take down a powerful member of the Russian Mafia. Andreas Rostov was a known drug supplier and arms dealer who had thus far avoided capture and prosecution, but unbeknown even to the FBI's Cascade Field Office, he was actually far more dangerous than they realised. Rostov had connections with the highest echelons of the Russian government, and as such had to be handled with the utmost care by the most powerful and clandestine agency in the US in order to avoid any possibility of a damaging international incident. By placing Brackett in a position where he could both infiltrate the task force via Ellison, and also be 'available' for potential recruitment by Rostov, he could essentially act as a double agent for Black and his team.

It was a dangerous proposition, to be sure, and there were no guarantees that either Ellison or Rostov would fall for Brackett's charms, but Black considered it worth the risk to throw out the bait to see if his agency could hook a significant catch. If everything went to plan, Rostov would be eliminated from the Cascade crime scene but not before hopefully divulging a few state secrets and nuggets of information which could provide useful leverage for various top-secret US government agencies in their dealings with their Russian counterparts. On the other hand, if everything went belly-up, he would just have to turn his attention to other options and wash his hands of the failure. Because even if Brackett was successful, Black actually had no intention of letting the ex-CIA agent outlive his usefulness....

Nonetheless, with a willing Brackett on board, the team went into action, and within days he was fully briefed, primed and good to go.

Part 1: A Disaster in the Making:

Blair:

Seated on his unmade bed in his tiny understairs room, Blair stared disconsolately at the sheaf of papers clutched in his somewhat shaky grasp. Today – or rather, last night - had to have been one of the worst he had ever spent, and he was still reeling from the events and their potential consequences.

The papers comprised the opening chapter of his Sentinel dissertation, long overdue and deliberately delayed for myriad reasons known mostly only to himself, and in itself should have been harmless enough. Except for the fact that his nosy friend, roomie and study subject had succumbed to temptation and read it even though he had promised not to, and now it looked as if Blair's cherished dreams of earning a doctorate using that particular material were about to come crashing down about his ears. It had cut him to the quick when Jim had accused him of a breach of trust, even though in effect it was the Sentinel who had broken his promise, and despite their tentative reconciliation at the end of that devastating night shift,

Blair felt certain he was on borrowed time. Jim hadn't been convinced that the words that had offended him so much weren't what they seemed at first reading, and now Blair wasn't at all sure that he could continue in the face of such antipathy and distrust.

Oh, he knew that he had promised that Jim could read the finished article before he submitted it; it was part of their initial agreement after all; but he had been certain that Jim would have liked the paper and appreciated its conclusions. After all, the opening chapter was merely setting out a scientific, objective proposal which would be discussed in detail in the ensuing argument and presentation using the mass of data Blair had collected; and without any false modesty, Blair knew that his writing was excellent. And as he had told Jim previously, he had actually gathered enough data for several dissertations so all he needed to do was get the thing done and dusted.

But then again, if he was truly honest with himself, would it reflect what he really thought now about his so-gifted roommate? If Jim really wanted to know how deeply his friend and Guide loved him – was *in love* – with him, all he had to do was to sneak a peek at Blair's private journals, which were full of detailed observations interspersed with clandestine confessions of admiration and desire; ample proof that the anthropologist had committed the cardinal sin of 'going native', and falling completely under the spell of his subject. Ethically speaking, his objectivity was out the door, and he knew it. But he so wanted to write the paper anyway. It had been part of his life for so long, and he wanted the world to know that such amazing watchmen still existed, even if he couldn't identify Jim by name.

Blair sighed deeply, his attractive face uncharacteristically morose. Sure, he could cobble together an alternative paper on some type of 'thin blue line' topic as he had initially suggested as a cover for his real reason for obtaining his observer's pass so many months ago now, but his heart wasn't in it. He had found his Holy Grail, and committed himself heart and soul to his study subject, and if he wasn't able to write about Jim Ellison even in anonymity he couldn't dredge up sufficient enthusiasm right now to tackle an alternative. Perhaps he *should* let it go, and try to keep the friendship that had come to mean so much to him. Surely his love for Jim Ellison the man outweighed his fixation with Ellison the Sentinel, and even his long-time desire for those three letters after his name?

Still conflicted, he decided that he was too tired to continue with his inner debate for the time being. His thoughts rattled around in his mind as unproductively as a hamster on a wheel, so he decided that he might as well try to catch up on some much-needed sleep. He didn't have any classes today, and Simon had told them both he wasn't expecting them at the PD until the afternoon. Grimacing wryly, he told himself that perhaps things wouldn't look so bleak when he was rested, and maybe – just maybe – he could actually persuade Jim to listen to him after the detective had had time to cool off.

Yeah. That's what he'd do. And he didn't even try to contemplate what would be the outcome if he failed to get through, because for sure leaving Jim would break his heart.

Jim:

Out on the balcony, looking out over his city which was bathed in the weak morning light, Jim was having his own version of an emotional crisis. He too was conflicted, hovering between affront, hurt and guilt with a dollop of fear mixed in for good measure. Yes, he freely admitted that he had been seriously offended by the clinical tone and terminology of Blair's chapter, even as the content hurt him deeply. Christ! Sandburg had as good as called him a coward! Fear-based responses, indeed! Fear of intimacy? How could someone who professed to be his friend write about him in those terms? And how on earth could he live up to his promise to allow Sandburg to publish, even if he took Jim's name out of the paper? It wouldn't take a genius to put two and two together and come up with the identity of Blair's Sentinel, and then where would Jim be? Up shit creek without a paddle, that's where.

But then again, he had made that promise, because he had been so desperate for the grad student's help at the time. And he also acknowledged with a pang of guilt that he had broken his word not to look at that accursed chapter, so in that sense he was in the wrong when he accused Blair of betrayal. It truly was a mess of the first order, and he couldn't yet see how they would get over it.

Because deep in his heart he knew that he wanted to mend the rift between them. He had grown accustomed to his energetic, untidy and talkative roomie, and he knew that the loft would feel empty without Sandburg's warmth and presence. And then he had nearly lost the poor little guy yet again to that mad bastard at the precinct. He recalled his terror at the sight of Blair in the grip of the angry criminal, understanding only too well how simple it would have been for that beefy arm to tighten enough to snap his partner's neck. The gods alone knew what would have happened if the escaped alligator hadn't intervened, adding another layer of craziness to an already bizarre situation.

And then there was that lunatic who thought he was some sort of angel – Gabe, wasn't it? He had had the temerity to take Jim to task. What was all that about anyway? All that stuff about being able to see a thousand miles but not being able to hear the whispers of his own heart or some such rubbish. He simply wouldn't *allow* himself to believe that the guy had had any concept of what Jim really was. *Who* he really was. It was unthinkable, he told himself firmly.

But Blair had been truly upset when the guy had been shot, and Jim couldn't fault his young friend's genuine compassion for those less fortunate than himself. *As if Sandburg has much going for him anyway*, a less charitable side of Jim snickered snidely with a snort of disdain. Suddenly struck by a burst of self-righteousness, he told himself that surely Sandburg should be grateful that Jim had opened his door to the newly-homeless student, albeit with some reluctance, and had even found him a job of sorts? And graciously allowed him the opportunity to study his 'Holy Grail' and help Jim out with controlling his senses when he was needed.

And isn't that worth everything you can do for him in return? the voice of his conscience murmured snarkily in his ear. *Where would you be now if he hadn't found you? In a rubber room somewhere, trussed up in a straitjacket drooling and insane?*

Enough! he snapped at his conscience, hugging his grievance tightly to him so that he wouldn't have to wallow in guilt but feeling mightily uncomfortable anyhow.

Deliberately curtailing such unsettling thoughts and their associated emotions, he automatically opened his senses to check on his roommate, hearing the shuffling and rustling from within Blair's small room that indicated that the younger man was getting into bed.

Good idea, he thought. He suddenly felt the weight of his own exhaustion hit him, and turned to re-enter the loft to follow suit. A few hours' sleep would do them both the world of good, and perhaps when they awoke they could put this all behind them. And hopefully he could dissuade Sandburg from trying to analyse the situation to death, because all he wanted to do was forget the whole incident. Pretend it had never happened. Until next time the spectre of that damned diss reared its ugly head again, at least....

As Blair might well have commented had he been aware of Jim's train of thought, 'the King of Repression rules again'.

Later that morning:

Jim was in the kitchen making up a fresh pot of coffee when the door to the small room under the stairs opened to reveal a tousled and dishevelled Sandburg. The young man didn't look as if he had benefited at all from the few hours' sleep he had managed to grab, unlike Jim, who felt rested and reasonably refreshed. The sight of his rumpled partner reawakened his sense of guilt about the way he had behaved towards his friend, and that in turn prodded unmercifully at his anger and resentment. It was all well and good knowing

that he was in the wrong, but he was only human, and the desire to turn that resentment back on Sandburg was strong. However, he managed to curtail his instinctive urge to snap at his undeserving target, and held out the coffee pot instead like a peace offering.

“Well, you sure look like shit, Chief. Will a double dose of caffeine help?” He surprised himself by the mild tone and affable delivery of his comment, and was gratified to see a slight grin appear on Blair’s pale and beard-stubbed face. The young man was plainly relieved to see what he perceived as a softening in Jim’s earlier attitude, and was going to do his best to reciprocate.

“Sure, Jim. You know me. A good dose of the nectar of the gods, a shower and shave, and I’ll be good to go. What time does Simon expect us to get back to the PD?”

“I said we’d be in after lunch, Chief, so you’ve got an hour or so. And yes, I’ve left you some hot water, but not enough to prolong your daily ritual for longer than necessary. Grab a mug, and by the time you’ve showered, I’ll have brunch ready. Eggs and toast OK?”

“Yeah, man. Thanks, Jim,” Blair replied feelingly, helping himself to a large black coffee. Closing his eyes in bliss at the first delicious mouthful, he hummed his appreciation. When he looked up at Jim again, his eyes were warm, as was his smile, and Jim was struck once again by his friend’s beauty, even in his current state. Sandburg’s beauty came from within as much as from his physical appearance, and Jim suddenly experienced an unsettling jolt of desire for his very male roomie.

Covering his momentary discomfort by turning away to the refrigerator to retrieve eggs, he muttered gruffly, “Hurry up, then, Chief. You won’t want cold food, do you?” and was relieved to hear Blair making his way towards the bathroom, apparently unaware of Jim’s dilemma.

By the time Blair had emerged from the bathroom, Jim had the food on the table and himself back under control. Deciding that the unaccustomed feeling was just a reaction to the stressful events and confusion of the last few hours, he shoved the thought to the back of his mind and concentrated instead on keeping the atmosphere between them as light and uncontroversial as possible.

“There you go, Chief. Get that down you. Got to say you look a whole lot better now.”

“Thanks, Jim. I appreciate this, man. Your eggs are the best, and just what the doctor ordered,” and he took a large forkful, grinning around the succulent mouthful.

Tucking in to his own portion, Jim began to relax. Perhaps they could avoid a deep discussion after all, and things could get back to what passed for normal between them. He could but hope, anyway.

Brunch finished and clean-up done, the two men seemed to be on the same page, their banter light and amicable. It wasn’t until they were preparing to leave for the PD when Blair turned to face Jim, his expression and tone apologetic.

“Hey, man. Just wanted to say that whatever you thought when you read that chapter, I’d never run you down, Jim. I love you too much for that.”

Afterwards, Jim would never be able to explain what inner demon prompted him to say and do what he did in reply. Maybe it was a subconscious urge to explore his own feelings, or something completely different, but he couldn’t prevent what issued from his own mouth. Daring to bait his skirt-chasing young partner, he grinned seductively as he drawled, “Love, Chief? Love me? Go on then, prove it!” and he pointed to his own face, his lips puckered in an exaggerated moue.

And was totally shocked when Blair’s face lit up like Christmas as he took his partner at his word; throwing himself against Jim and locking lips with his Sentinel in a completely lusty and unmistakably sensual kiss.

For a moment, Jim was too surprised and – he had to be honest – too taken with the passion of the moment to react, but then rationality tardily kicked in, and he reacted instinctively.

Shoving Blair so violently away from him that the younger man fell over the coffee table on to the floor, he wiped his mouth roughly with the back of his hand before grating out, "What the *Hell* do you think you're doing, Sandburg? What was that all about? I was only joking, Darwin!"

And then was struck by the deep hurt and shame telegraphed in the smaller man's wide blue eyes and stunned expression as he pushed himself slowly up from his position on the floor, cradling his right wrist which had borne the brunt of his fall.

"I...I'm sorry, man. I mean, I thought you were serious, Jim. I mean, yeah, I love you in that way too, and thought that maybe you felt the same way? I'm sorry, Big Guy. Really. Um. Just forget I did anything, OK? I...I promise I won't do anything like that again, Jim. Please, can we still be friends?"

And Jim was too honest a man to deny that he had provoked the incident, intentionally or no, so there wasn't much else he could do but swallow his own shame and ire and offer a grudging olive branch to his distressed partner. It was either that or throw him out, and for sure Jim wasn't ready to do that yet.

"Yeah, well, sure. I agree that we forget it, OK? It was a simple mistake. A joke that went wrong. Sorry. *Mea culpa*.

"So, if you're not hurt, shall we get a move on? Simon'll be wondering where we are," and he hurried towards the door, needing to put space between himself and the young man he had just wounded so badly.

And what else was a good Guide to do but follow meekly in his Sentinel's footsteps, pushing down his own grief in favour of shouldering the responsibility of his role as Jim's backup and companion?

It didn't stop the pain of his breaking heart, though, however much he tried to deny it.

Cascade PD, later that afternoon:

It was a subdued and unnaturally tense pair who entered the MCU bullpen a short while after, having spent an uncomfortable journey from the loft wrapped in silent introspection. Jim knew his stupid action had backfired big-time, and wondered just what sort of reaction he had really expected from Blair. He told himself that he had expected Blair to chuckle disbelievingly and respond with a sardonic, "Yeah, man. Riiiiight!" and they would share an honest laugh. But that annoying little inner voice insisted that he had suspected otherwise all along. Because although Blair certainly did appear to make a big deal out of dating pretty much every available woman in the PD and on campus, he had never made any effort to settle down with any of them, always returning to the loft and their comfortable companionship. And the whiff of pheromones Jim often caught which he had always assumed to be associated with his roomie's contemplation of his current date might just as easily have been stimulated by Jim himself.

Well, shit. Now what? Because no way was Sandburg Jim's type. After all, it wasn't as if Jim didn't have a certain amount of familiarity with male/male sex. During his years in the army, and also during his stint in Vice he had had occasion to turn to an accommodating male partner to scratch a mutual itch with no strings attached, but those partners had always been the same type as him. Built, prosaic and easily satisfied, with no kissing involved. Blair was – well, *different*, - and Jim had the feeling that sex with his roomie would entail much more than Jim was prepared to give, especially since Blair had blurted out his love for Jim so spontaneously. And thinking back, the evidence of his senses told him in no uncertain terms that Sandburg had been completely genuine and honest in his declaration.

It was a quandary all right, and one which Jim had no idea how to resolve. On top of the misunderstandings and arguments of the previous night, he felt more conflicted than he could ever remember being before, with no inclination to offer himself up for in-depth analysis or emotional blood-letting however unfair that may be. Perhaps Sandburg was right in his description of 'fear-based responses' after all, but Jim was damned if he was going to admit it. He just hoped, however forlornly, that Blair would respect his

boundaries and not try to force the issue, because then perhaps the whole incident could be quietly forgotten.

Yeah, right. Fat chance of that, his inner cynic sneered.

For Blair's part, the journey was pure agony. Worrying his full lower lip in anxiety, he had shot a few sideways glances at Jim, noting the granite-like profile and the muscle jumping in the strong jaw, indicating just how much stress Jim was inflicting on his dental work. Jim's eyes were steely, and a frown line bisected his brows as he drove, and Blair felt so bad for causing his partner so much conflict. He simply could not believe that he'd misread the signals so very badly. Jeez, he was supposed to be the Guide – the 'people person' in the partnership - yet he'd completely blown it with Jim. Perhaps it was because he'd been so off-kilter after the traumatic argument of the previous evening, but he'd truly believed that Jim had forgiven him, even so far as to finally admit his real feelings for his Guide. But how wrong Blair had been!

So now what? He knew he couldn't abandon his Sentinel. His duty lay in remaining at Jim's side until such time as Jim didn't need him anymore. Hell, Naomi's little boy had finally learned all about commitment, beginning way back after that mission to rescue Simon and Daryl when he had told Jim that it was 'all about friendship'. Now it was far more than that. It was all about love and duty, and he had no intention of letting Jim down, even if it broke his own heart. Jim may have issues with trust and abandonment, but Blair had no intention of inflicting either on the man he had learned to admire and love above all others, so it looked like he was just going to have to suck it up and survive as best he could.

It was all he could do. Perhaps all he deserved. Who knew?

Seated at her desk, Megan Connor looked up as Jim and Blair entered the bullpen, a welcoming grin on her face which was particularly directed at her friend Sandy. But the Australian exchange officer's friendly smile quickly changed to a frown as she took in Blair's haggard expression and uncharacteristic reticence. Rising to her feet, she could no more ignore the young man's pain than kick a puppy, so she strode purposefully over to greet the pair.

"Hey, Jimbo, Sandy! How're you doing, mates? Sandy, love," she continued, pinning him with a shrewd gaze. "You look awful! What's wrong with your arm?"

Opting for nonchalance, Blair summoned up a wan smile for his friend, trying not to glance furtively over at Jim as he replied, "I'm fine, Megs, really! Just a bit tired after last night. And the arm's OK, honest. You know me, clumsy as hell. I just tripped over in the loft and knocked it, is all. I'm sure it's no more than a bit of a sprain."

Frowning now, Megan studied him speculatively for a moment. "Well, I guess if Jim's checked it out for you, it must be OK. I mean, you *have* looked at Sandy's wrist, Jimbo?"

The barely-veiled accusation in her tone caused Jim to blush, much to his chagrin, as he realised he had failed to check out his Guide after the altercation.

"Mind your own business, Connor," he grated. "Of course he's OK. We wouldn't be here otherwise!" But he was saved from further interrogation by a customary bellow from Simon Banks' office.

"Ellison and Sandburg, my office now! You too, Connor!" and all three exchanged quizzical looks as they forgot their immediate discussion in favour of learning what their boss had lined up for them this time.

As the three entered Banks' office, Jim's frown deepened further as he beheld the room's other occupants. Although he nodded respectfully to Simon, and offered his friend Joel Taggart a word of greeting, he couldn't help but glare at SAC Mulroney and one of his clones from the FBI's Cascade Field Office.

Oh great. Another potential interdepartmental fuck-up, he thought cynically. Wonder what POS operation Mulroneys come up with this time? And just how much are we going to get shafted?

His attention was diverted back to his boss as a decidedly uneasy-looking Simon brought the meeting to order.

“Be seated, people. We have been ordered to cooperate with SAC Mulroneys and his team in taking down an important Russian Mafia boss who is moving in on Cascade. It is non-negotiable, people,” he added grimly, glaring forbiddingly at Jim in particular since he well knew the mans low opinion of working with the ‘fibbies’.

“The mobsters name is Andreas Rostov, and Ill hand over to SAC Mulroneys to explain what he expects our role to be....”

Part 2: Bracketts Game:

By the end of the week, the atmosphere in the loft was tough enough to cut with a knife, and Blair was tip-toeing around Jim as if he were walking on eggshells. For despite his protestations that nothing had changed significantly between them, Jim was treating him with palpable suspicion, as if he expected the younger man to jump him at any moment without warning. It took all of Blair’s considerable willpower to refrain from retaliating in anger at so many of his Sentinel’s unjustified barbs, though if he did but know it, there were friends in the MCU who not only recognised Ellison’s crabbiness, but who also did their best to offer comfort and support to his hurting partner. Even Simon was looking askance at his lead detective, wondering from where the hell this latest persona had spawned, given that he had improved and mellowed so much after Sandburg’s introduction to the department.

Even on the job, Jim couldn’t seem to contain his antagonism towards his Guide; the most hurtful episode still crystal clear and corrosively painful in Blair’s consciousness.

They had been doing a preliminary surveillance on the luxurious property newly leased by Rostov, when Blair had automatically begun his practiced Guide spiel, only to be shut down by Jim’s sneering riposte.

“It’s OK, Sandburg! I don’t need the on-the-job tuition anymore! I don’t need you to hold my hand and dictate my actions at every turn, OK? I’m not a child, Chief, whatever you may think of me!”

Blair had retreated into stunned silence, wondering what he had done wrong, so uncharacteristic was Jim’s reaction. But he knew there was nothing to be gained by trying to have it out with the irascible Sentinel right then so he held his tongue and sat back in his seat, nursing this new hurt along with all the others he had brought down on himself after his pitifully pathetic misreading of Jim’s little ‘joke’.

A few days later, he had cause for real concern when his friend Jack Kelso contacted him in his office at Rainier.

Blair was seated at his desk, marking test papers when the phone beside him rang, its single tone indicating that it was an internal call. Stifling a momentary pang of disappointment that it wasn’t Jim calling him, even to bawl him out over some perceived minor infraction, he reached for the handset.

“Blair Sandburg. How can I help you?”

“Blair, it’s Jack Kelso here. Can you spare a few minutes to come to my office? I have some important information I think you should have right away.”

Intrigued by the cryptic request, because he knew that normally Jack would be far more open and forthcoming if it were something more mundane he wanted to divulge, Blair readily agreed, and after terminating the call, he packed away his paperwork and left his office, locking it behind him.

As soon as he was seated comfortably in Kelso's office, Jack wasted no time in bringing Blair up to speed. And Blair was truly shocked at what he heard.

"I've just found out through one of my contacts that Lee Brackett has been released from Ft Leavenworth. God only knows what he did to earn it, but it'll almost certainly be something suitably underhand and devious. I haven't been able to find out anything more, which is in itself suspicious, but the fact remains that he's out. And he has returned to Cascade, where he's been reporting to a Parole Officer.

"I know the history between him, you and Jim, so I just wanted to warn you to be on your guard. Whatever Brackett does, there's always an ulterior motive, and it's always self-serving. Until he went rogue, he was one of the best and the most ruthless of the CIA's operatives, so if he contacts you or Jim, beware. Don't trust him, OK? And if I can manage to find out more, I'll let you know immediately, OK?"

Shaken to the core, Blair thanked his friend and hurried back to his office to collect his backpack. He didn't have anything else other than office hours today, so he quickly posted a note on his door postponing any likely student meetings until the following day, and left for home, driving as quickly as he safely could.

Back at the loft, Jim had already arrived some short while before, having earned a few hours down-time in lieu of the long periods spent in apparently useless surveillance of Rostov's mansion. Although Mulroney insisted that the Mafia boss was about to make the mistake that would lead to his downfall, it hadn't happened yet, and Jim and his fellow MCU colleagues were growing impatient. While he, Joel and Megan were kicking their heels doing Mulroney's grunt work, their own caseloads were building up, or being shoved onto the already overburdened shoulders of other detectives in the department. He was also well aware that Simon's temper was growing shorter by the day as he tried to run his unit satisfactorily with a depleted staff, his anger exacerbated by the knowledge that there was as yet no end in sight for the on-going operation, and no help to be had in the form of his superiors, since both the Chief of Police and the Commissioner were more interested in the potential kudos to be gained with the arrest of such an important international crime lord.

It was hard on Sandburg also, as the younger man insisted on doing his share of stakeout duty with Jim on top of his teaching and studying, so it was hardly surprising that the grad student was looking increasingly run-down and haggard.

Then again, Jim knew that a lot of that stress was down to him and his treatment of his Guide and friend, but despite his guilt and self-disgust, he didn't seem to be able to prevent himself from snapping at the young man at every opportunity. He honestly couldn't explain, even to himself, why he was punishing Blair for something he himself had instigated. Perhaps it was because he truly was scared of his own ambivalent feelings towards the direction in which Blair wanted their relationship to go.

And just maybe it was the reason why he was pushing the young man away. Making the break on his own terms before Blair finally got fed up with Jim's attitude and left on his own accord. It was a sobering thought, and it brought an even harsher expression to his troubled face.

Just then, his heightened hearing picked up the tell-tale engine noises that told him Blair was approaching 852, and his jaw clenched automatically as he tensed in anticipation of his Guide's arrival. He promised himself that this time he would try to be friendly; try to reproduce some semblance of normality for Blair's sake. And even as he lectured himself he knew deep down that he would most likely fail, mortally afraid that the damage to their relationship was already beyond repair.

Sure enough, minutes later Blair opened the door to #307 to find Jim standing there, arms folded across his chest as he gazed quizzically at his Guide.

“What brings you back so soon, Chief? I thought you said you had offices hours until 19.00 hours?”

“Oh, man! Have I got some news for you!” Blair began urgently, running his hands nervously through his long curls in agitation.

“Jack Kelso called me into his office today. You’ll never believe who’s been released!”

Suddenly he realised that he had lost Jim’s attention, and that the Sentinel was looking towards the door, his head cocked in a ‘listening’ pose as a puzzled frown creased his brow.

Moving slowly towards the door, his hand reaching for the gun at his back, he murmured quietly, “I think I already know, Sandburg. Keep back!” and he threw the door open to reveal a grinning Lee Brackett.

In the time period during which the relationship between Sentinel and Guide had steadily deteriorated, Lee Brackett had been busy. Released from the safe house, he had been transported to Cascade, and ensconced in his new temporary home; a cheap but functional unit in a blue collar area of the city, situated not far from the office of the Parole Officer to whom he had to report. Ostensibly following a standard routine for a newly-released parolee, he knew that this particular officer, although genuinely qualified, had another undercover role to play. He was also acting as Brackett’s ‘handler’, and liaison with Black and his team, as well as being the man on the ground best placed to drop hints in the right ears that Brackett was out and available for hire.

Sure enough, within a few days, Lee found himself riding in a limo in the company of three taciturn but business-like professional minders, on his way to a secret location to meet with Andreas Rostov. The upshot of the meeting was that both men liked what they saw, and Brackett was hired provisionally on the basis that he had promised to infiltrate the PD and relay any information regarding the task force back to Rostov. And of course perform any suitable duties his new employer might require of him.

Now all he had to do was win over Jim Ellison also, and the double agent would be all set up and ready for business.

There were also bonus factors in that he had already been moved to a far more comfortable apartment, and provided with a new sedan for his personal use. And he had been secretly overjoyed to find out that his PO/handler, Ritchie Martin, had a personal axe to grind regarding Jim Ellison. Because years before, Ellison had been instrumental in getting Martin dismissed from the PD academy on the grounds of unsuitability, forcing him to seek employment as a lowly PO instead. It wasn’t surprising then that the disappointed and resentful man had been easily turned to the ‘dark side’ by Black’s clandestine agency, proving to be more than competent when utilising the sly and devious side to his persona.

And it was a given that he would do his utmost to help Brackett bring down his Nemesis, Detective Jim Ellison, once and for all.

With everything falling neatly into place, Brackett took another couple of days in which to observe his intended prey, intrigued and gratified to learn that even though they were still living and working together, Sentinel and Guide seemed to be at odds. Ellison seemed to be in a permanent bad mood, while Sandburg followed him around like a whipped puppy, all spark and energy apparently extinguished. Thinking that this might well work in his favour, Brackett was optimistic when he finally approached the loft, his face displaying an amused and knowing grin when the door was thrown open before he could knock.

This was going to be fun.

When Blair recognised their visitor, he literally saw red for a moment. All his fear and hurt, gathered and compounded over the past couple of weeks, burst out, coupled with seething resentment over his treatment plus a desperate need to protect his Sentinel, who he instinctively knew was in grave danger. It mattered not one whit that the same Sentinel had been treating him like shit. All he knew was that Jim was somehow under threat from this man – this Lee Brackett – and it was up to him to do something about it.

With a low growl, he completely ignored Jim's belated attempt to hold him back, and in seconds he was in Brackett's face. The man's sardonic sneer was replaced by an expression of pure amazement and shock when Blair's uppercut knocked him off his feet, to fall on his ass out in the corridor, momentarily stunned.

"What the fuck was that for?" Jim grated out, himself astounded by his normally peace-loving Guide's behaviour. Blair simply met his gaze with a forthright one of his own.

"Brackett's dangerous, man. He's the one Kelso warned me about; and I just wanted to protect you. I'm not sorry or ashamed for doing it either."

"Well, perhaps you ought to be, Darwin," Jim snarled testily in response. "I told you to stay behind me. Who's the warrior in this partnership, eh? And the senior partner at that. Since when did I need you to resort to fisticuffs to protect my honour, Chief?"

His anger fading as quickly as it had arisen, Blair deflated under the withering gaze and harsh words, the fight knocked out of him by Jim's ingratitude. However, he refused to be cowed or to back down in the face of Brackett's wry amusement as he picked himself off the floor, fingering his sore chin as he chuckled at Blair's discomfort.

"You certainly pack a punch for a self-proclaimed pacifist hippy, Mr Sandburg. Anyone would think that you were a boxing fan."

Deliberately avoiding Jim's icy regard, Blair muttered, "Yeah, as a matter of fact I am. And it's come in handy on occasion, like now. So, what are you doing here? And why aren't you serving life somewhere for your crimes?"

"Well, if you would care to invite me in, I could explain it to you. To both of you. I think you might be surprised," Lee replied, his words directed at Blair, but his eyes just for Jim. Who stunned Blair once again when he holstered his handgun and stood back to let the other man enter.

"Jim! What are you doing, man?" Blair gasped in horror.

"Inviting our unexpected guest in, that's what," Jim growled. "If you don't want to hear what he has to say, maybe you should make yourself scarce, Darwin. Go back to Rainier and finish off your office hours."

The derision in his tone cut Blair to the quick, but there was no way he was leaving those two alone together, so he simply plopped down on the nearest chair and waited silently for the fun to begin.

From Jim's perspective, the situation was completely under his control. He honestly believed that he owed it to the PD – and to himself – to find out what was behind Brackett's visit, and he was certain that he didn't need his Guide's intervention on his behalf. Sure, perhaps he should be grateful that his smaller, and less-than-buff partner should feel the need to stand up for him, but Jim didn't appreciate being made to feel like a damsel in distress. Who was supposed to be the 'Blessed Protector' in this outfit after all? And of course at that point he had conveniently forgotten that in fact it was Blair who had saved his life first, pushing him under that garbage truck while he zoned on a red Frisbee....

Indicating that Brackett should take a seat on the sofa, Jim moved to stand in front of him in a deliberate attempt at intimidation, only for Lee to look up at him with a gentle and understanding smile. And his

senses told him that the other man was as relaxed as could be expected under the circumstances, so either he had great control over his physiological reactions, or he was honestly unthreatening.

In fact, if he had but known it, Brackett did indeed have incredible control over his body, learned over years of operating as the best of the best in his field. As long as he stuck to the literal truth and didn't attempt to second-guess his interrogators, he was able to pass virtually any lie-detector test; even an organic one.

"So, talk, Brackett. Just what are you doing back in Cascade, and why are you here?"

"Why, Jim! So paranoid? Can't I just come visit for the sake of apologising to someone I wronged? Or two 'someones'?" Brackett replied smoothly, his eyes almost caressing Jim as he looked the big cop up and down.

And damned if Jim didn't feel himself responding to the increasingly smouldering gaze. Perhaps this was what he needed – proof that a simple, freely-offered buddy-fuck would scratch his itch as it always had, and allow him to set aside the deeper, more unsettling feelings he had been harbouring towards his roomie.

But first things first. He needed to hear Brackett's full explanation before he decided anything, so he ignored the incredulous look his Guide was sending him, and sat down opposite Brackett, prepared to listen to the man's story.

Projecting nothing but his considerable charm, and knowing that, if he put his mind to it, his training could make him all but irresistible under the right circumstances, Brackett settled himself more comfortably in his seat. His gaze brushed speculatively over Blair, who hunched in the seat furthest away, arms wrapped protectively around his torso. In truth, the young man was far more of a danger to Lee, however much Jim's own covert ops training posed a more physical threat. Because the young Guide's suspicion and antagonism were based on instinct, and from what Lee had already observed, that instinct appeared to be very sound. He would have to keep a close eye on Mr Sandburg.

On the other hand, he was confident that he could pass any test Jim could throw at him, because he intended to tell the truth, even if it wasn't anything like the whole truth. And he also knew for sure that he could be extremely persuasive.

"Once upon a time," he began facetiously, chuckling at the snort of pure derision that issued from Blair, whose attractive face wore a mask of disgust. Exchanging a telling glance with Ellison, whose own expression registered no little exasperation at his partner's behaviour, Lee recommenced his tale.

"OK, no fairy tales then. So, how did I come to be released? The answer is simple. I'm too important to be kept incarcerated. Sounds arrogant, I know, but it's true. Before I decided to 'do my own thing' using you – and I'm truly sorry about that – I was one of the best in my field. And now I've been rehabilitated, I've been given a second chance. You know how these people think," he added, directing the comment to Jim, who nodded in rueful agreement.

"I have to prove myself, though, and have to report regularly to my PO like every other parolee, and part of my on-going therapy, if you like, is to make my peace with those I endangered for my own gain, like you guys.

"So I've been provided with accommodation, and a job, and it's now up to me to keep my nose clean and stay out of trouble until such time as I can be trusted to return to active duty."

"What job?" The growled question once again was from Sandburg. "What sort of job would be entrusted to a criminal like you?"

“So cynical, Mr Sandburg,” Lee affected a hurt tone as he met Blair’s interrogatory and distrustful stare. “What happened to that nervous young grad student I first encountered right here in your home?”

“He grew up, Brackett,” Blair snapped. “Working with a Sentinel and at the PD opened my eyes to the seamier side of society. And no one’s more seamy than you.”

“Oh, I’m hurt, Blair! Can I call you Blair?” Brackett responded, smirking at the smaller man’s angry indignation.

But that anger morphed into hurt once again as Jim failed to back up his Guide. “Zip it, Sandburg!” Jim growled, accentuating the peevish command with a furious glare. “Let the man speak. I want to hear this!”

Brackett smirked internally in grim satisfaction as the younger man withdrew into himself, his cheeks pink with hurt and embarrassment. This was even better than he had hoped; the partnership far more dysfunctional than he had surmised. *Which makes the Sentinel all the more vulnerable*, he thought gleefully, although the smile he turned on Jim was sympathetic, implying an understanding of what the big cop was having to endure from his increasingly unstable partner.

“Shall I continue?” he asked Jim in *faux* concern, certain that Sandburg must be gritting his teeth at the patronising tone.

And at Jim’s nod of assent he did just that.

“I’m a security consultant,” he declared triumphantly, which was indeed the literal truth, or part of it. When he had met with Rostov, it was decided that his cover would be as a part-time consultant to a *bona fide* security firm in which Rostov had a controlling share under an assumed name. It was indeed a legitimate enterprise, and as such served to provide lawful employment for those whose extra-curricular activities included doing Rostov’s dirty work. Since it would pass even the most in-depth scrutiny by the PD, Mr Black had also agreed that it was the perfect cover for Brackett from both sides’ point of view.

Blair couldn’t help himself. “What? You? A security consultant? Are your employers crazy? Do they know what you are? What you’ve *done*?” The shock and disbelief in his expression and tone drew the other men’s eyes to him, and the reactions of both to his outburst were deeply disturbing for the young Guide. Jim’s glare was that of a man whose patience has finally run out, and Lee’s face reflected sadness, and no little pity. Inside, he was cheering madly, because it would seem that Sandburg had basically shot himself in the foot. His unrelentingly antagonistic attitude had plainly got on his partner’s last nerve, and the cracks in their relationship were getting wider by the minute. All Lee had to do was keep the pressure up by belittling Sandburg while offering comfort and sympathy to Ellison, and he’d soon be home and dry.

“That’s enough, Chief! I don’t want to hear any more of your paranoid outpourings! Why don’t you go and do some studying or something in your room? Or better still, go out?”

Jim was too angry to acknowledge the real pain in the wounded blue eyes that turned to him in shock, feeling only relief when Sandburg got unsteadily to his feet and shuffled away towards his room, now desperate to escape the other men’s annoyance and derision.

As Blair retreated, Lee took the opportunity to hammer a few more nails into the coffin of the Sentinel and Guide’s broken partnership. In a stage whisper intended for Blair’s ears he murmured, “Does he always behave like this, Jim? I mean, it must be really demeaning for you when you’re treated as if you were just a test subject, and unable to look after yourself. I could never have done that, even if I’d been allowed to keep studying you after your return from Peru. Doesn’t he understand that you’re a respected cop in your own right now, and covert ops trained at that? I mean, his heart might be in the right place, but how is a hippy academic necessary for backing up an ex-army ranger? Except for grounding your senses, that is. There is that, I suppose...” and he allowed his words to tail off, as if in real consternation.

Allowing himself the luxury of wallowing in righteous indignation, Jim was only too pleased to accept the attempts of this man – this very attractive man – to sooth his injured pride. Rationally, he should have realised that he was being unreasonably unfair to Blair, who had given him so much over the past two or more years. His time, his dedication, hell, even his love. But he still couldn't bring himself to face his own fears, and his Guide was the one to suffer the consequences.

“Yeah, well, I guess he does mean well, but you're right. It can get really old sometimes. Maybe we need a little distance. A little time apart to make new connections. New friends....” And this time it was Jim who tailed off uncertainly.

Yes! Bait taken! Lee was pretty sure he had sown the seed of discontent, and all he had to do now was nurture it. The Guide had been effectively side-lined in Ellison's eyes, and the cop was ripe for the taking.

Job done.

As intended, Blair had indeed heard every mean-spirited word, and was hard put to not sob aloud in despair. But Naomi's boy wasn't a quitter, whatever Jim might think. He had dug in his heels and stuck it out as a too young, too smart undergrad, and he had held his own when derided for choosing modern Sentinels as his dissertation subject. He had borne the jokes and snide remarks levelled at him at the PD with commendable aplomb, and even managed to forge a few friendships along the way.

He simply refused to believe that Jim hated him so much that he wanted him out of his home and his life for good, whatever their present dissonance. All he needed to do was suck it up and weather the storm.

And if he had to do some of his own investigating into Lee Brackett's real circumstances, that's what he would do.

He felt to the bottom of his soul that the man was up to no good whatever his protestations, and the Guide needed to watch his Sentinel's back. Even if the Sentinel came to hate him in the doing.

Jim's safety was paramount, and that would be Blair's goal.

Following morning:

Blair:

When Blair emerged from his small bedroom, he wasn't surprised to find the loft already empty. He knew that Jim had an early start, and thought that perhaps he had decided to let Blair sleep in since the young man had classes today, but he suspected that it was simply because he wanted to avoid Blair's company. He grimaced in discomfort as his empty belly growled at him, and made his way quickly to the bathroom to take care of business before grabbing something to eat. He hadn't actually eaten anything since lunchtime yesterday, because although Brackett hadn't stayed late last night – probably because he needed to check in with his PO – Blair hadn't felt like coming out of his room to prepare and eat dinner with his moody roommate. He had spent the evening instead trying to get some of his dissertation notes in order, but his heart hadn't been in the task, so he had finally given up and climbed into bed in the hope of catching up on some much-needed sleep.

But that hadn't worked either, as he had been plagued with recurring nightmares which even now made him shudder in remembered terror as he showered and shaved quickly. He had dreamed about Brackett forcing Jim to use his senses to cross that booby-trapped bridge. When Jim had zoned halfway across, Blair had had to go to him despite his own fear and had talked him out of it, and they had all completed the crossing safely. But in his dream, he failed to pull Jim out of the zone, and they had all been blown up when he had inadvertently stepped on one of the mined sections. The terror he had felt on waking wasn't so much on his own behalf, but in the fact that he had let down his Sentinel and caused his death. Considering

the dream's contents in the cold light of day, Blair decided that it was proof that he shouldn't give up on his role as Guide even if he wasn't appreciated. If he wasn't there to pull Jim out of a zone, then the unthinkable could happen, and he would be responsible for Jim's injury or death. And there was no way he could live with that.

There was nothing for it. He had to do what he was destined to do, and that was back up the Sentinel. Decision made, he finished getting ready in double-quick time, grabbed a mug of lukewarm coffee and half a bagel, and headed out for Rainier, his first port of call Jack Kelso's office.

He would tell Jack about Brackett's visit last night and ask his friend's advice as to how he should proceed. And if that meant doing some investigation on his own time, then so be it. Even if it meant antagonising Jim even more with his interference, he would willingly do it. Because if he could dig up some dirt on Brackett, perhaps the man would be arrested and put away again, this time for good.

Jim:

Jim strode into the MCU bullpen with a face like thunder. However, it barely registered with the majority of his colleagues, since the expression had become par for the course of late. They would have been far more likely to remark upon it if he had sported a beaming smile, because that look was as conspicuous in its absence as was his partner. Not that Jim was remotely interested in their reactions, so most of his friends kept their opinions to themselves in the cause of self-preservation.

Not so Megan Connor, though, or Joel, but since they were normally out of the office when Jim was there doing their shift on the Rostov surveillance rota, Jim wasn't usually present for her pointed interrogations regarding her friend Sandy. However, today it appeared that he was going to be out of luck, because Simon had called all three of them in for an update in the case, and Jim sighed internally in exasperation as the Aussie cop strode determinedly towards him.

Nevertheless, it appeared that Simon was aware of his arrival, and the potential altercation, so he effectively headed Megan off at the pass in his usual tactful manner, bellowing, "Ellison, my office, now! You too, Megan, Joel," he added, in a markedly less aggressive tone, nodding in grim satisfaction as all three did an abrupt about turn and marched to do his bidding.

On entering the office, Jim's frown deepened even further, his lips thinning in an aggrieved grimace as he saw that SAC Mulroney was there already, and he didn't even try to disguise his sigh of irritation, unconcerned when Mulroney treated him to a disapproving glare.

It appeared that Simon was also having difficulty containing the aggravation he usually experienced when dealing with the hide-bound and dictatorial FBI agent, so the atmosphere wasn't exactly conducive to an amicable discussion. However, he had no alternative but to work with the man for as long as TPTB dictated, so it was up to him to attempt to keep the animosity to a minimum.

"OK, people, take a seat. SAC Mulroney here has some information pertinent to this on-going case, so take note," and he nodded to the other man, tacitly inviting him to begin.

Straightening in his seat, Mulroney's expression was both stern and a tad self-important as he met everyone's gaze in turn. He was well aware of the universal dislike and distrust in which he was held, but he didn't let it bother him. Let them all hate his guts; as long as they complied with his orders, that was all he cared about. He wasn't there to win any personality contests, just get results. And if he had to use these MCU throwbacks in order to achieve that aim, he'd do so. And it was especially satisfying to be able to dictate to Ellison, because the man had an attitude he would never tolerate in any of his personnel. He was hard put to mask the insincerity in his tone when he addressed the glowering and overtly suspicious detectives.

“Lady and gentlemen. Firstly, I want to say how much I appreciate the hours you have all put in so far helping my team carry out continuous surveillance on Rostov. However, we have now received some additional information that will make the surveillance much more specific, as we believe that a sufficiently significant deal is soon to go down. One which will provide the means by which to put Rostov away for a long time, if not for good.

“One of our more trustworthy sources has informed us that Rostov is expecting a large shipment of illegal arms to arrive within the next few weeks, possibly through his Russian connections, and most likely coming in on one of his own container ships. We know of at least one such ship, registered in Panama, with which he transports miscellaneous cargoes regularly between Europe, South America and China, and we believe that it is this ship on which the weapons consignment will be carried. So far nothing illegal has ever been discovered on board, but this time we will go through the ship with a fine toothed comb if necessary until we find what we want.

“So, what I propose is a change in the surveillance pattern to concentrate on Cascade harbour and its environs plus the adjacent container yards rather than Rostov’s mansion and known businesses. We need to look out for any suspicious activity, and identify likely locations for the storage and/or distribution of the arms cache. It goes without saying that we will still require your assistance in this, but since we will also be utilising the existing security measures and personnel, it should free up some time for you to concentrate on your own casework again. Which I am sure will please both you and Captain Banks, am I right?” and he offered them all a somewhat supercilious smirk.

“So, how much time are we talking about, Mulroney?” It was Jim who spoke up first, wanting to be clear on how much longer he had to waste his time and effort doing the fibbies’ busy work. He was a cop, not a snoop, and he needed to get to grips with real detective work again. Perhaps then he could recover some form of equilibrium, and even mend a few fences with Blair, if it wasn’t too late.

“I think we’d all like to know that, Jim,” Simon growled, pinning Mulroney with a pointed glare. “I need my detectives back at work as soon as possible. There’s more than one active operation in Cascade, you know, and my people have been struggling for too long to keep up with the back-log of cases!” and he didn’t even try to hide the sarcasm in his voice.

Raising both hands in a placating gesture, Mulroney smiled slightly in *faux* sympathy. “I’m well aware of that, Captain, believe me! But this isn’t your run-of-the-mill crime lord or local ‘gangstas’ we’re talking about here, is it? Having said that, I think perhaps we can cut your detectives’ hours on watch by half, don’t you? That should leave them with some time to tackle their own outstanding casework, shouldn’t it? I leave it up to you as to how you assign their shifts within our new timetable.”

And the MCU team just had to accept it, whether they liked it or not.

Once Mulroney had left the office, Simon dismissed Megan and Joel, but asked Jim to remain behind. He needed to get to the bottom of his detective’s recent unacceptable behaviour, and he wasn’t going to take any more bullshit. He might have been irritated initially by Sandburg’s presence in the bullpen, even if he understood why the young man was there, but he had grown to like the bouncy anthropologist despite himself, and appreciated the grad student’s contribution to so many of Ellison’s cases. And he wasn’t about to forget Sandburg’s role in saving both his and Daryl’s lives on more than one occasion, so he owed it to Blair to find out just what was going wrong with his best team.

“OK, Jim, out with it. What’s the problem between you and Sandburg? Why is it that you’re even more antisocial now than you were before he arrived on the scene, and why hasn’t he been seen in the PD for so long?”

Gritting his teeth in an effort to keep from telling his boss in no uncertain terms to mind his own business, Jim forced himself to get a grip and respond in a reasonable manner. After a tense minute or so, he looked up to meet Simon's shrewd and assessing gaze before allowing his eyes to slide evasively away in discomfort. Simon deserved to know the truth, because it impacted on the department, and would very likely affect his own performance in the future if he couldn't rely on his senses anymore, so he took a deep breath and began.

"We...that is, I upset Blair a while back. It was over something stupid, but on top of our argument during that damned night shift, it escalated into something worse. I said some things I shouldn't, and I can't seem to bring myself to act the same towards him anymore. I mean, I know he's hurting, and he says he still wants to be my Guide, but it's so awkward between us now. I feel uncomfortable touching him, and I know that hurts him too. I just...can't..." and his voice tailed off miserably as he stared at the floor, unable to make eye contact with Simon. He was shaken to the core by his boss and friend's next words, the man's perspicacity unnerving.

"So, he finally told you then, did he? He admitted his love for you and you couldn't take it? What did you do, Jim? Couldn't you have let him down gently if you couldn't reciprocate?"

"What are you talking about, Simon? How did you know he felt that way towards me? Shit, I've lived with him for over two years, and I didn't know!"

"Hell, Jim," Simon responded with sympathy and no little frustration. "For a detective and a Sentinel, you sure can't see what's under your nose! The rest of the bullpen has had a book running on when you two would finally become a couple. Anyone who knows Blair, and sees how he looks at you knows he's in love with you. It's not just hero-worship either. He lights up like a Christmas tree when you say something nice to him, just as he looks like his world's ending when you snap at him for any reason. That kid has it bad, and I gotta say, Jim, that if you've hurt him as much as I fear you have, I'm not happy. Not happy at all."

For a long moment, Jim stared at Simon in open-mouthed astonishment. When he finally spoke, his voice was deep and scratchy with emotion.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe that you and the rest of MCU think that I could be attracted to Sandburg! I'm not gay, sir! Shit, I've even been married!"

"And how long did that last, Jim? Look, no one's saying you're gay, or even bi. It's just the way things seem to be between you and the kid. Sentinel and Guide, Jim and Blair. I mean, he has one hell of a rep as a skirt-chaser, but how many ladies does he date more than a couple of times? As far as I can tell, they're just a means of enjoying some temporary company until he gets what he really wants, and that's you, Jim. Can you really tell me in all honesty that you don't find him in the least attractive?"

And Jim couldn't lie. Oh, he wanted to, all right, but he knew Simon wouldn't believe him. The man knew him too well, and wouldn't appreciate anything less than the truth.

"OK. OK, I admit it. I do think he's attractive, but I can't let myself get attached to him, not in that way. Look, Simon. Look at it from my point of view. He's close to finishing that diss, and what happens then? Once he's got those letters after his name, he won't need me anymore. It'll be 'thanks for your time, Jim, see you around', and he'll be off on some expedition somewhere."

Shaking his head in disbelief, Simon replied sadly, "Oh, Jim! If that's what you truly believe, I feel sorry for you! And even sorer for Sandburg. That kid's never going to leave you, unless you kick him out. He's got it too bad for you. Can't you even try to give him the benefit of the doubt?"

And Jim, in all honesty, had no reply for him.

"I'm sorry, Simon, but right now I can't deal with this. But I do have something I need to tell you, and in the light of what Mulroney said earlier, I think it could work to our advantage. Did you know that Lee Brackett has been released? And that he's in Cascade?"

Unsurprisingly, Banks' face was a picture of anger and disbelief, but he somehow managed not to give voice to his fury. At least, not to direct it at Jim.

"What the bloody *hell* are they thinking of? After what that bastard was convicted of, how could he even be considered for release? It's unconscionable! When did you find out?"

"Just yesterday, sir. Blair came home early, because he'd heard it from Kelso, and wanted to warn me. And before you ask, sir, yes. He did come around to the loft.

"Ostensibly, he said it was because he wanted to apologise to us both for what he put us through. But he also told me that he had a job as a security consultant. And get this – it's with the firm that covers the Cascade harbour district. So, I'm thinking, perhaps I should keep in touch with him. He could prove to be useful to Mulroney's operation if I play my cards right. What do you think?"

Internally, he was praying that Simon would respond positively to his suggestion, because not only could it be beneficial to their scheme, but also give Jim a good excuse to see Brackett again. Because like it or not, he felt drawn to the man, and he desperately needed a valid reason to respond to his overtures. And he was sure he could use any relationship that developed to his and the PD's best advantage.

Simon took a few minutes to consider his subordinate's proposal. Part of him couldn't help but feel that Jim might be biting off more than he could chew, especially as it might strain his relationship with his Guide even more. But then again, it could provide the extra advantage they needed to put Rostov away as soon as possible, and get Mulroney out of Simon's hair. Although he wasn't convinced he was making the right decision, he grudgingly agreed.

"OK, Jim. We'll play it your way for now. But don't let this whole situation get any more out of hand, all right? I want to know everything Brackett says or does, OK?"

"And give the kid my best, OK?" he added meaningfully.

And a very relieved Jim nodded his assent as he rose to leave the office, already planning to call Lee at the first opportunity.

Lee:

While Jim and Blair had been agonising as to what their next moves should be, Lee had no such problem. Although far too experienced an operative to take anything for granted, he was smugly sure that he had engaged Jim's attention enough to be able to use the big cop to his – and his employers' – own ends. It didn't matter whether he was destined to be the love of Ellison's life, or merely an available and willing buddy-fuck. What mattered was that he was confident that both Rostov and the enigmatic Mr Black would be pleased with his performance so far. He had therefore reported to Ritchie Martin as scheduled that morning, and had been put through to Mr Black on a secure line.

And had finally learned the true nature of Black's interest in the whole Rostov affair.

It appeared that Black and his fellow ultra-secret associates had long suspected that a Russian 'mole' had been working avidly within the Pentagon to hack into and steal information regarding the USA's most secret defence mechanisms. After much intensive surveillance, the subject had been identified, and was known to be on the run. Through his Russian governmental sources, Rostov had been ordered to aid the fugitive in his escape, sheltering him in a safe house until he could be smuggled on board the very same container ship that was bringing Rostov's latest consignment of illegal weapons into the country. It was perfect.

Brackett would be in the ideal situation both to monitor the FBI and PD's operation in and around the harbour, and gently pump Jim Ellison for information. He was secure in his self-belief that he could both manipulate the Sentinel and feed Rostov with enough selective information to believe himself to be one step ahead of the FBI's trap.

And even better, he could supply Mr Black with the information he needed to capture the 'mole' during the FBI's take-down. Everyone would be happy, the mole and Rostov would be in the bag, and Brackett would be home free.

Because whatever Mr Black might believe, Lee was well aware of the long game. He knew that he was expendable, and had taken precautions to secure his own safety. As far as he was concerned, the future looked – if not certain, then at least as promising as he could make it. And anything that didn't involve death or incarceration had to be good.

Grinning as he climbed into his car to drive to the harbour and to his work, he dialled Jim's cell phone number. Seducing a Sentinel just had to count as one of the perks of the job.

Part 3: The Game's Afoot:

Having left Simon's office, Jim was on his way down to the parking garage when his cell phone rang. He had arranged to pick up Blair at the U as his Guide had insisted on doing his share of stakeout duty, their present awkwardness notwithstanding. Jim knew he should be grateful, and he was, but the long hours cooped up in the truck were wearing on both of them. Jim had nothing to say that might not be misconstrued, so kept his few words either inconsequential or prosaic. For his part, Blair would retreat into an unnatural silence, and bury himself in some tome or other in order to avoid the necessity of trying to make conversation. It was a depressing situation, and as far as Jim was concerned, it was getting worse, and he knew it was mostly his fault. Which did nothing to improve his temper, so when the call came he was both distracted and irritated.

"Ellison!" he snarled aggressively, not recognising the caller ID, and was shocked when he heard the amused response.

"And hello to you too, Jim. It's Lee here. Just wanted to see how you were doing?"

"How the hell did you get my number?" Jim growled.

"Why, Jim, you gave it to me last night!" Lee lied smoothly, and Jim was too agitated to pursue the issue.

"Oh. Well. What do you want, Brackett?" Jim demanded ungraciously. He really wasn't in the mood for this, whatever he had just been discussing with Simon.

"Just keeping in touch, Jim. And to invite you to dinner tonight. You know, a sort of 'thank you' and apology rolled into one. I'm a good cook..." he added enticingly.

And damned if Jim wasn't tempted.

"So, what sort of time were you thinking of? I should be free after 20.00 hours. I don't know about Blair though," he added as an afterthought.

"Well, I guess that would be OK," Lee replied, a little diffidently, before deliberately allowing his voice to deepen seductively as he continued. "Actually, I was really thinking about just the two of us. I mean, I don't think young Mr Sandburg approves of me, does he?"

And Jim couldn't quite keep the relief out of his own tone as he said, "I think you're probably right, um...Lee. So, shall we say 20.45?"

“Wonderful! This is my address...” And Lee mentally patted himself on the back as the Sentinel fell neatly into his honey trap.

From Jim’s point of view, the stakeout that afternoon and evening was even more interminable than usual, as he couldn’t quite contain his feeling of eager anticipation for his upcoming dinner date. He was aware that Blair kept glancing askance at him, and it was irritating him immensely. Sandburg always had been a perceptive little shit, and it was almost as if he could read Jim’s mind on occasion. So Jim decided that he might as well ‘fess up, and satisfy Blair’s curiosity, even if it made matters worse between them. He honestly didn’t want to hurt his Guide, but keeping his social life secret when it involved a character like Brackett would only distress Blair more if he was to find out for himself further down the line. Because Jim was hoping that this evening wasn’t going to be just a one-off. From a professional and personal standpoint, he needed this relationship to develop, even if just for the duration of the Rostov case. He therefore huffed out a heavy sigh, and turned to face his Guide, determined to do the right thing.

“OK, Chief. Confession time. I know you’re dying to ask me what’s got me so fired up, so here goes. I know this is going to upset you, but I can’t help it. So I’ll just come straight out with it.

“I’m going to dinner tonight – with Lee Brackett. He invited me earlier, and I agreed. I’m sorry if that offends you – or hurts your feelings,” he continued adamantly, even though the pain and shock on Blair’s expressive face stabbed him like a knife to the ribs. “I just thought you ought to hear it from me rather than find out for yourself, OK?”

And it was a sign of just how badly Blair was wounded in that he didn’t say a word, not even to remonstrate with Jim. He just turned his face away, and stared sightlessly out of the side window, silent tears tracking down his cheeks despite his best attempts to control them.

“Oh, for god’s sake,” muttered Jim, reaching out to offer some sort of comfort even though he knew it wouldn’t be enough. “I’m sorry, Chief, really. But it just happened...”

He tailed off uncomfortably as Blair turned back to face him again, his voice breaking and hoarse with emotion. “Don’t, Jim. Just don’t, OK? I get it, man. Just leave me be, all right? I need to process...”

And there really wasn’t anything Jim could do but comply with Sandburg’s request, so he faced front again, trying to concentrate on the stakeout, and feeling lower than pond scum.

From that point onwards, the tension between them was excruciating, and Jim was heartily regretting having told Blair of his plans so early in their shift. It was therefore with profound relief that he saw the next team arrive to take over from them, and drove back to the loft as quickly as he could. It was hardly surprising that Blair should head immediately for his room, and Jim decided that the best thing he could do was leave his Guide in peace to do whatever processing he needed to do to regain some sort of equilibrium.

Heading for the shower, he quickly freshened up and jogged upstairs to change, feeling torn between undeniable excitement for his dinner engagement, and guilt at once again causing his roommate such pain. Just before he left the loft, he paused in front of the closed French windows, trying not to listen to the harsh breathing that told him Blair was probably trying hard not to cry.

“Um, see you later, Chief. Don’t wait up, huh? Get some rest, OK?” And when he received no reply, he shook his head in self-directed frustration, but left anyway, knowing that staying around and trying to make more excuses was only prolonging Sandburg’s agony.

And if he returned to an empty loft, then he only had himself to blame.

When Blair heard the door close behind Jim, he couldn't help himself, but gave in to his tears. For several minutes he let his grief and loneliness pour out, before taking himself in hand and giving himself a strong, mental shake. This was getting him nowhere, and was no help to either Jim or their struggling but still existing partnership. Telling himself to suck it up he turned his thoughts to really considering the problem, and deciding on a suitable course of action, even if it led inevitably to the final breakup of their unexpected, but so wonderful relationship. Until now, at least.

OK. So Jim had made it very clear that Blair wasn't his type. Blair couldn't help but be hurt and humiliated at learning that sad fact, but it was what it was. The problem, as far as he was concerned, was that apparently Lee Brackett *was* Jim's type, and that Blair couldn't stomach. Yes, he acknowledged that he was undoubtedly jealous, but underneath that selfish gut reaction was a very real belief that Brackett was a material danger to Jim, and it was up to him to protect his Sentinel from that danger, even if it alienated them for good. He therefore determined to follow up on the strategy he had already considered, and if it led to Jim throwing him out once and for all, so be it.

It could be that Brackett was truly rehabilitated, and if so, then it was also possible that he could be a suitable companion for Jim. He did, after all, understand about Jim's sentinel ability, so would be in a position to support Jim if Blair was out of the picture. On the other hand, if he was up to no good as Blair truly believed, then Blair had to try and do his best to get the proof to back up his conviction.

So, beginning tomorrow, he would put his plan into action. Without telling anyone at the PD, in case they should spill the beans to Jim, or try to stop him, he intended to follow Brackett whenever he could, to see if the man made contact with any suspicious characters. He had already arranged to borrow a friend's car for this task, because his Volvo was way too conspicuous, and he had also borrowed a camera so that he could back up his claims with pictorial evidence. He knew Jack Kelso wouldn't approve if he knew what Blair was up to, so Blair had kept his plans to himself. Because if they blew up in his face, he didn't want anyone to go down with him. This was his decision, and he would live with it. Or not. Decision made, he stripped off and climbed into bed, knowing that come what may, he would have at least tried to live up to his own expectations.

At the same time as Blair was readying himself for bed, some miles away across town Jim was pulling up outside a very impressive apartment building in a nice neighbourhood not too far distant from the harbour. Gazing appreciatively around him, Jim decided that Brackett had really landed on his feet to end up here, and was all the more determined to find out exactly what the ex-CIA agent was up to. If anything. It was going to be up to Jim to come up with concrete evidence of malfeasance, and if no such evidence existed, then perhaps he could simply enjoy a little R and R.

Approaching the lobby of the building, Jim located Brackett's name on the intercom panel, and announced his arrival. When Brackett buzzed him in, he took a deep breath, and headed for the elevators, noting with approval the building's décor, which was both modern and fresh-looking. It would appear that Lee Brackett had connections somewhere to find something so nice, and Jim decided that it was something else he was going to explore. The ex-agent intrigued him, and he had to remind himself that he was here to get information, not just for his own pleasure.

But when he reached Brackett's door, and the smiling occupant opened it to let him in, it was his libido that stood up to take notice, and the delicious aroma of cooking all but wiped out his good intentions.

"Welcome to my humble abode, Jim," Lee's smile was unaffected, and the warmth in his tone was unmistakable, and Jim found himself grinning in response for the first time in what seemed like forever.

"Nice place you have here, Lee. And something smells good. Spaghetti Bolognese?"

"It certainly is, Jim, and hopefully not too spicy for your senses. Come on in and get comfortable. Beer?"

And Jim nodded amicably as his host crossed to the well-appointed kitchen to retrieve a cold bottle for each of them from the refrigerator. Popping the tops, Lee handed one over to Jim, then clinked them together in a friendly toast.

“To a better relationship. And a better understanding. Cheers, Jim!”

And what else could Jim do but reciprocate?

Some while later, Jim was relaxing on the sofa cradling another beer while Lee put the last of the dishes into the dishwasher. The meal had gone well, the food perfect for Jim’s taste, and the conversation had flowed easily between the two men. Jim felt mellow in a way that he hadn’t enjoyed for far too long – ever since his argument with his Guide – and it was a good feeling. He couldn’t even bring himself to feel guilty about it yet. He deserved some small pleasures in life, and he wasn’t about to spoil things. However, when Lee approached and sat down easily beside him, he couldn’t help but tense up, feeling uncomfortably gauche as the other man looked questioningly at him.

There was no recrimination in Lee’s expression when he spoke, however. Just understanding.

Holding Jim’s gaze, Lee raised his hand unthreateningly to rest on the powerful shoulder next to him. He raised a quizzical eyebrow, and when Jim didn’t rebuff him, he slid his hand along to gently knead the taut muscles at Jim’s nape.

“Jim, my man, you’re wound up tighter than a coiled spring! Is there anything I can do to help?” He allowed his voice and expression to become more sultry as Jim returned his gaze, the Sentinel unable to find enough breath to reply as his treacherous body responded to the knowing touch.

“You know, Jim, there’s something I can do for you, and it would be no hardship. And nothing more than you want or need. You’re a very attractive man, Jim Ellison, and I’m sure this is nothing new to you.

“After all, we’ve all been there on occasion, haven’t we? When the best way to relieve stress and physical tension under dangerous circumstances is the willing and undemanding attention of a comrade. Would you like that, Jim?”

Still unable to find his voice, Jim studied Lee’s expression carefully, finding only sincerity there. The man’s heartbeats were slightly elevated, but consistent with arousal rather than anxiety, and there was no trace of fear in his scent. God, it was so tempting! His body cried out for the release he had been unable to achieve ever since Blair’s dramatic revelation, and he found himself leaning into Brackett’s touch.

“Tell me, Jim. Tell me what you need. Do you need me, or would you prefer a woman?”

“No!” Jim’s response was immediate and almost panicked. “No, Lee,” he continued more calmly, but averting his eyes in momentary embarrassment.

“I haven’t had much luck with women ever since the senses came fully online. When I want to take a woman to bed, sometimes it’s just too much, and I either come almost immediately, or can’t get it up at all. And I’m terrified of zoning in the heat of the moment. I mean, what woman wants to open her eyes to a comatose bed partner? She’d freak, for sure. So I’ve been making do with my right hand for some while now.”

Lee knew he was about to tread on dangerous ground with his next question, but he had to know where he stood.

“Can’t your Guide help you, Jim?” he asked gently. “I mean, young Blair is a very attractive man, and I’ve seen how he looks at you. Why don’t you turn to him?”

Jim's face was suffused with shame at the quiet words, but Brackett's expression bore no signs of reproach or salacious glee, just simple curiosity, so he took a deep breath and confessed.

"I can't. I mean, yes, I know he would do anything for me. Anything. But I can't ask him for simple sex. Not knowing the way he feels about me. See, not so long ago we were horsing around, you know, just messing about, and he misunderstood my actions. We'd just had one hell of an argument, and I wanted to clear the air between us. I still don't know what made me do it, but he thought I was coming on to him, and he...um...reacted accordingly. Told me he loved me, and kissed me. And he meant it.

"I was so shocked, I shoved him away. I mean, I'm not gay, right? So I told him I couldn't love him like that; that he wasn't my type.

"I hurt him so badly. I thought he'd leave me, and I couldn't blame him if he did. But he's still there. Still hanging on to what's left of our relationship even though I'm treating him like shit. I just can't seem to help myself," and he stared at the wall opposite as his shame washed over him.

From Lee's perspective, it couldn't be better. Ellison only needed friendship and physical release, and Lee was an expert in providing that to whatever extent it was required. There was no need to worry about romantic involvement, because whether Jim admitted it or not, Lee realised that the other man had far stronger feelings towards his Guide than he could or would confess. In all honesty, he couldn't help but feel sorry for Sandburg, pining for something Jim wasn't willing to give, but it did leave the way clear for Lee's advances, and he wasn't going to waste the opportunity.

Rising to his feet, he held out his hand to Jim, an inviting smile on his face.

"Come with me, Jim. I know just what you need. What a Sentinel needs. Let me show you..."

So Jim did.

Next morning:

Pulling up outside 852 Prospect, Jim allowed himself a luxurious stretch as he savoured a feeling of physical well-being he hadn't experienced in far too long. He felt rested and relaxed in both mind and body, and a smug smile touched his lips as he recalled a few of the previous night's activities that had worked such magic on him. However, as he automatically extended his hearing to track his Guide, he was struck by a flash of real anxiety when he failed to pick up Blair's heartbeat, a feeling that remained with him until he entered #307 and scanned the empty loft. His fear left him in a rush of relief when he peered into Blair's small bedroom, to see it in its usual state of disarray, and receded even further when a glance into the bathroom located the young man's toiletries in their usual place.

Thank the gods! Blair hadn't walked out on him, even if he deserved it, but had simply left early.

With a sigh of pure relief he returned to the kitchen, to pour himself a cup of the reasonably fresh coffee his Guide had left him, running his eyes curiously over the scribbled note Blair had propped against the pot.

Dear Jim, it said. Hope you enjoyed your night out. Have gone in early to the U to catch up on some paperwork. See you tonight? My turn to cook.

Have a good one,

Blair.

Jim couldn't help the pang of guilt that pierced him, but couldn't really be sorry that Sandburg hadn't been here waiting for him. Blair would have been able to tell at a glance that Jim glowed with the well-sated aura left over from a satisfactory sexual encounter, and Jim didn't think he could bear to see the wounded and accusatory look that would undoubtedly colour his partner's big blue eyes.

Shrugging off his unease, he finished his coffee and went to the bathroom, intending to have a long, hot shower before getting ready to go to the PD. He knew he would have to report his meeting with Lee, but no one needed to know exactly what had passed between them. That was nobody's business but their own, for the time being at least, and as long as he succeeded in gathering the requisite information, he intended to keep seeing Brackett for as long as he could.

His self-satisfied grin returning, he stepped into the shower, happy to recall with sentinel precision just why he felt so well.

Lee had been as good as his word, and had played Jim's body like a virtuoso musician. His touch firm and sure, or gentle and soothing as required, Lee had understood exactly what Jim's senses demanded, and brought him to climax more than once until he had more or less passed out from exhaustion. And so what if it had been clinical and erotic rather than loving and tender? It had been what Jim had needed, and he told himself that it was enough. And would always be enough.

And perhaps now he wasn't sexually frustrated anymore, he could manage to touch his Guide once again without that feeling of unwanted sexual tension rearing its ugly head and making him react so unkindly towards his friend. He just had to hope that Blair would forgive him, and accept him and his friendship for what it was.

Back in his apartment, Lee was also preparing to leave for work, and he too had a smug smile on his face. Last night had gone better than he could possibly have believed, even knowing his own capability. Jim had responded to his advances, and he had been careful to provide only as much as the Sentinel required, the results mutually satisfying and definitely pleasurable. It wasn't love, because neither man wanted that, but it was more than merely scratching an itch, and Lee was confident that he would be able to continue to play Ellison for as long as necessary. And he was equally sure that he had been successful in allowing Ellison to believe that it was the cop who was doing the 'playing' by casually admitting to certain non-incriminating details of his employment in response to Jim's somewhat clumsy interrogation technique. He grinned lazily at the recollection, thinking of the awkward way in which Ellison had tried to lead their post-coital conversation. He may well be a competent enough interrogator in his role as a detective, but he was a rank amateur in comparison to Brackett. Jim knew where Lee worked now, and would undoubtedly be watching closely, so Lee just had to make sure he fed the detective with just enough information to keep him coming back for more.

Part 4: An Unwilling Pawn:

Two weeks later: Jim:

Jim pulled into his usual spot in the PD's underground parking garage and turned off the engine. His face was set in grim lines as he prepared himself for entering the MCU bullpen. He tried to pretend that the disapproving glares that would inevitably be sent his way didn't bother him; that he was indifferent to the snide remarks that his colleagues didn't even try to keep to themselves; but it wasn't true. Deep down, it hurt that the camaraderie he had established when Sandburg had become his partner had dissipated, and even worse was knowing that it was his own fault.

Yes, Blair still stayed on at the loft, and still resolutely sat with Jim throughout the long hours of the on-going surveillance at the harbour, but he no longer entered the bullpen willingly, and it was as if a great part of the life and vigour of the department had drained away in his absence. Jim's colleagues had given up asking where his Guide was, and when he would be returning, because they all knew why now, or thought they did.

They knew for a fact that Jim had been seeing Lee Brackett on a regular basis, and a few of them guessed that it was more than a mutually beneficial relationship between a cop and a useful snitch. And those individuals found it inconceivable that Jim should push aside his unofficial but popular young partner in favour of a potentially dangerous ex-con.

But Jim couldn't stop now. Couldn't give up his meetings with Lee yet. Because not only was the man an integral part of the rapidly-approaching take-down attempt, but he had become an important part of Jim's private life. It wasn't love – never would be – but Jim found that he actually enjoyed the other man's company. It was undemanding – the very satisfying sex was no-strings-attached, just as Jim believed he wanted – and they both had enough in common to ensure conversational compatibility. And since Lee had never, and would never make any declarations of undying love, once the break came – as it undoubtedly would – there would be no recrimination on either side.

The only drawback, as far as Jim was concerned, was in how the relationship affected the other man in his life. The man to whom he owed so much; and the man who he had basically treated like shit.

He hadn't meant to. He truly hadn't. Yes, he freely admitted that the diss had come between them, or at least, he had allowed it to. What was it Blair called it again? Fear-based responses? Yeah, that was it. And it still rankled, however Blair had tried to explain away Jim's misinterpretation of his scientific jargon.

But that wasn't the real reason for their estrangement. Jim simply couldn't handle an intimate relationship with someone like Blair. Someone, who, when he gave himself, gave himself heart and soul, no holding back. And Jim didn't think he could cope with that. The pedestal had yet to be built that was wide enough to allow him to keep his balance.

Not that he was ever likely to find out now. He had accused Blair of betraying his trust, but he knew that in fact it was he who had been guilty of betrayal. What sort of 'Holy Grail' spurned his hero-worshipping, adoring Guide to have sex with a known criminal? Even under the guise of using him to glean information?

Because that was another thing. Jim was no longer sure who was leading that particular dance. Most of the time he was satisfied that he was in charge, and Lee had certainly provided some useful snippets of intelligence for Jim to feed to Mulroney, but sometimes he got the impression that Lee was playing him for a fool. The man was charming, witty, and a wonderfully inventive sex partner, but he was also a talented spy; highly intelligent and probably completely amoral.

And Blair didn't trust him at all.

But perhaps he wouldn't have to worry about the whole situation for much longer. The container ship allegedly carrying the arms shipment was scheduled to arrive at Cascade dock within the next two weeks, after which everything would change, whether or not the take-down was successfully accomplished. Whatever happened, at least the joint operation would be done with, and MCU could get back to normal without FBI interference.

With an exasperated sigh, Jim pushed open the driver's door and climbed out. Straightening his shoulders, he strode towards the elevators. Time to face up to his detractors again. Oh joy.

Lee:

While Jim was riding the elevator up to the MCU's offices on the 6th floor, Lee Brackett was just pulling into a visitor's parking space outside his PO's building, on his way to his routine morning check-in with Ritchie Martin. The unit was small, utilitarian and depressingly shabby, situated at the end of an equally shabby strip mall, and right next door to a heavily-protected pawn shop which blatantly advertised guns both bought and sold. Lee couldn't quite contain the wry half-smirk that pulled at his lips at the irony of it, but for the most part he was sombre and introspective, his normal cocky grin absent from his handsome face.

Because, truth be told, he was tired. Exhausted from the endless tap-dancing he was required to do simply to keep his head above water in his role as double agent.

But at least things were finally coming to a head, and as long as he had played his cards right, he would soon be home free. Mr Black and his cronies would be happy; Rostov out of the picture, and Lee would disappear.

He had succeeded in earning enough of Rostov's trust to have been able to find out who the government mole was; or at least the alias under which he was presently known; and where he was currently hiding. He had been moved around several times over the past weeks to throw potential investigators off the scent, but Brackett had consistently managed to discover the location of each safe house in turn. By passing on the information to Mr Black and his team via Ritchie Martin, he had convinced them of his trustworthiness, safe in the knowledge that they had no intention of moving in until the combined PD and FBI operation went down.

And as far as Andreas Rostov and SAC Mulroney were concerned, each believed that they were one step ahead of the other, thanks the information Brackett was able to juggle and share judiciously between them in his diverse personae as *bona fide* security consultant, confidant to Rostov, and as Ellison's lover.

But it was getting so hard to keep up the act, and every day he worried that he might slip up and hang himself out to dry. It couldn't go on much longer. He was essentially alone and self-dependent, and was beginning to discover his limitations, and he didn't like it.

It was an indication of his fatigue that he failed to notice the small, nondescript blue Ford parked discreetly behind the chain link fence at the back of the scruffy, weed-dotted parking lot. Because if he had seen it, he might possibly have recognised it, since this wasn't the first time it had appeared in his vicinity.

And he might also have recognised the vehicle's single occupant, despite the wool knit cap pulled down low to cover the man's hair and most of his face. A man who was presently holding a borrowed camera in the hope of catching his target in the act of doing something suspicious.

A young man who went by the name of Blair Sandburg.

Blair:

Stifling a yawn, Blair settled down lower in his seat as Lee Brackett's sedan came into view and pulled up outside the Parole Office. He was well-enough acquainted with the man's routine now to be at the right place at the right time whenever he could, but it was getting harder and harder for him to keep up with his manic lifestyle. Because he wasn't the only one running himself ragged trying to live a double life, although he was equally determined to see it through to the end.

And he certainly hoped that would be soon now, before he collapsed in exhaustion.

During part of the day he was still taking and teaching classes, but as soon as he was free of his duties at the U, he became Blair Sandburg, amateur sleuth. In his borrowed car, he would locate and keep watch over Brackett, photographing him when he could, in the hope that he could catch him on camera meeting with someone Blair recognised as suspicious. Because although he no longer visited the bullpen, believing that Jim neither wanted or needed him there when he had to check in, he still kept his Sentinel company during the continuing long hours of surveillance. He needed to know that Jim would be able to use his senses to their fullest extent without worrying about zoning without his Guide to watch his back. And it wasn't as if Jim didn't appreciate his support, even if what little conversation they had was now stilted and limited to the type of platitudes one might expect between virtual strangers. Indeed, he had made a point of thanking Blair for his continued dedication to duty, although he had had the grace to look more than a little sheepish as he did so.

And despite his own hurt, Blair had been quick to reassure Jim that he would still be there for him whenever he was needed, even though it was breaking his heart a little more each time Jim came back from visiting Brackett. Because Blair didn't need to follow Jim to Brackett's apartment to know what was going on between them. He might feel more like a casual lodger now than a real roommate, but on the occasions when he was in the loft when Jim returned from one of his dates, it didn't take a genius to note and understand the reason for Jim's relaxed and well-satisfied demeanour.

He supposed that one good thing about the affair was that at least Jim wasn't jumping out of his skin on the rare occasion when Blair had to touch him, the cynic in Blair believing that Jim now thought himself immune from his Guide's physical presence and any advances he might still make. As if Blair would ever do anything so stupid and embarrassing again. He had learned his lesson well, and from now on would keep his hands to himself unless circumstances dictated otherwise.

He tried not to think about the future, because that was far too painful to contemplate. Convinced as he was that Brackett was up to no good, he knew Jim still wouldn't appreciate Blair's interference however well-intentioned his Guide's motives were. Jim had made it very clear that he didn't want or need the grad student's efforts to back him up other than in the senses department, so Blair had no intention of revealing his secret agenda. But there was no way he was going to abandon his Sentinel, or his friend, unless he was told unequivocally that he was no longer wanted in Jim's loft or his life. And unfortunately that moment could well come soon enough once Jim was forced to recognise the proof of Brackett's treachery that Blair intended to provide.

Rousing himself from his gloomy introspection, he sat up a little straighter when he saw Brackett emerge from the PO's office, only to climb into his car and drive away. With a despondent sigh, Blair was about to put down his camera, believing that it was another wasted effort, when the door opened again to reveal a thickset and muscular man, whose shaven head and distinctive tattoos on neck and forearms were instantly recognisable to Blair. He had seen this guy more than once during their surveillance of the harbour area, and he was a known associate of Andreas Rostov. Blair could hardly contain his excitement as he quickly took several shots of his unsuspecting target. Perhaps this was the break he was looking for! Of course, just because he was at the PO's office at the same time as Brackett didn't necessarily mean anything, Blair admonished himself. After all, the guy could simply be doing a routine check-in like any other parolee. But on the other hand, Blair hadn't seen him arrive, so he must have been inside for a while before Brackett got there, and in Blair's fertile imagination, that was ample time for them to be exchanging information.

Smiling grimly, he watched while the man walked casually towards a large, flashy truck, intending to tail him if possible for as long as he could. However, before he could turn on the ignition, the passenger door was wrenched open and a hand reached in to grasp his bicep in a cruel grip. He barely had time to utter a cry of surprise and shock as he was bodily hauled out of the car and slammed down across the hood by his unseen assailants, who dropped a bag over his head even as a sharp prick in his neck told him he had been injected with some fast-acting drug.

And that was all he knew.

That afternoon, Rainier University:

Jim frowned in irritation as he walked back to his truck, having been unable to locate his Guide. He had arranged to pick Blair up at the U in order to drive together down to the harbour for their shift of surveillance duty, but for once the young man wasn't there to meet him. He had gone to Blair's office, only to find it locked, and he had learned from one of the departmental secretaries that Blair had left immediately after his early morning tutorial, and hadn't been seen since. There was no sign of the Volvo in the parking lots, so Jim assumed that Blair had either forgotten or perhaps was running late. Either way, it annoyed Jim intensely as he cursed this evidence of Sandburg's thoughtlessness and unreliability.

It never occurred to him to recall the many times Blair had come through for him; even giving up his own time and activities in order to accompany Jim on some case or other. No, as far as Jim was concerned, it was just another instance of his Guide's increasing dissatisfaction with their struggling partnership, so he had better start learning to rely on himself again from now on.

It wasn't until much later that night, after hours of boring and fruitless solo stakeout duty that Jim had any inkling that something wasn't right. Nursing the headache from hell which had arisen from trying to use his senses without his Guide's grounding presence; Jim was in no mood to be charitable. Therefore, when he saw the Volvo parked outside 852 in its usual spot, he gritted his teeth in fury, prepared to rip the hapless grad student a new one for his failure to show.

However, on entering the building, he soon realised that his Guide's heartbeat was noticeably absent, so the first spark of unease began to flicker into life. *Nah*, he told himself. *He's just gone out for the evening, is all. Probably found some pretty young thing's shoulder to cry on, and she's come by to pick him up. It's not like he doesn't deserve a bit of company.* Jim tried to reassure himself, forgetting that only seconds before he had been cursing Sandburg's perceived selfishness.

When he unlocked the door to #307, the spark of unease burst into flame as his senses told him that no one had been here for at least several hours, and Blair's precious backpack lay abandoned in his room. Looking around him in growing alarm, Jim saw that the phone's message light was flashing, so he picked up the handset, hoping to find that Blair had called to explain his absence. There was no such message, however, although there were several others which caused him no little concern.

Deleting a couple of sales calls, Jim listened to the first message, received just after lunchtime from one of Blair's fellow TAs from what Jim could make out.

"Hey, Blair, man, it's Jazzer here," a cheerful young man's voice began. "Just wanted to remind you that I need my car back by 6, man, OK? Got a hot date with Barb, so don't be late! Later, man."

The next message was received an hour later, and was from someone in the Anthropology Department's office.

"Blair? Are you there, Blair? Pick up please, it's Janice. You missed your appointment with your Dissertation Committee, dear, and Dean Evers is not happy! Call me back as soon as you get this message, dear. I'm worried. It's not like you. Um, speak soon? 'Bye!"

The third message was from Jazzer again, received at around 4.00 pm. "Hey, Blair. Me again. Since you're not answering your cell, I'm assuming you've either left it at home or forgotten to charge it again. So I just wondered if you got my last message? Call me back, buddy. I need that car."

The fourth message was Jazzer once again, received at 5.45 pm, and the man wasn't happy.

"Shit, Blair, where the fuck are you, man? Look, I'm going to have to get a cab tonight, and I expect you to pay for it. Don't expect to borrow my car again anytime soon, man. Just hope you haven't banged it up. Later."

Since it was now after 10.00 pm, Jim decided to call this Jazzer person back. He didn't care if the 'hot date' was still on-going, he needed information right now. After several rings, a slightly slurred and definitely irritated voice responded.

"Blair, man, if that's you, get the fuck off the phone and call back tomorrow. You can grovel then. You're damned lucky I got to the club on time, and I haven't got time to talk now." Jim easily picked up a sultry female voice in the background, urging Jazzer to 'come on, baby, I need you,' and spoke quickly before Jazzer hung up on him.

"This is Detective Ellison here, Blair's roommate. He didn't come home tonight, and his car's outside. Why is he in your car? And what do you know?"

The voice at the other end of the line sounded suddenly much more alert, and Jim wondered briefly if it was because his reputation had preceded him.

"Detective? You're the cop Blair lives with, right? The one he works with?" When Jim answered in the affirmative, Jazzer continued, albeit warily.

"Look, man, I don't know the details, right? But Blair said he was working a case with you, and that he needed to borrow my car for some sort of surveillance stuff, because his Volvo's too noticeable. I thought you'd have known all about it? He told me it wasn't dangerous or anything, but I think Jack Kelso can tell you more, so perhaps you should call him?"

"And look, if Blair's in trouble, I didn't mean it, you know? Getting mad with him and all. He's good people. A good friend. Shit, I hope he's OK..." the worry in his voice carried easily down the line.

"I'll tell him as soon as I see him," Jim replied. "Thanks for the information. But just in case I need it, can you give me your car's make and tag number?"

"It's a dark blue Ford Fiesta, man. Older model. The tag number's FE29 ONZ. And Detective? Will you keep me updated?"

"Will do, Jazzer," and Jim hung up.

Minutes later he was on the phone to Jack Kelso, and Blair's friend and colleague wasn't happy either, but not on account of being disturbed at that time of night.

"Oh, good grief!" Kelso breathed in dismay once Jim had told him all he knew. "I told him not to go off on his own after Brackett. The crazy young fool!"

Even more anxious now, Jim couldn't help himself. "Brackett? What do you mean, he's gone after Brackett? Tell me everything!"

"Just hang on a minute, Jim. Look, I want you to call me back on my other line. I'll give you the number. It's a secure line and can't be traced, then I'll tell you what I know. But it isn't enough!"

Jim did as he was bid, and what he heard shocked him to the core. Kelso didn't pull his punches, but got straight to the point.

"Look, Jim, I know about the joint operation, OK? Doesn't matter how. Just let's say I still have my sources. Anyway, when I told Blair about Brackett's release, and that I believed he was up to no good, I wasn't kidding. And when you started seeing him, ostensibly to gather information about Rostov and his plans, I guessed that you probably suspected that he might actually be involved, but intended to try and use him anyway. But you don't 'use' someone like Brackett. And yes, I can confirm that he is involved with Rostov.

"But I didn't tell Blair everything I knew, because I suspected that he might go off and do something stupid, just because he loves you and wants to protect you. And it looks like I misjudged him anyway, and he's been trying to get his own proof. Goddam his soft heart!"

"Oh, my god!" Jim gasped in distress. "What the hell have I done? I mean, yes, I did start seeing Lee for the reasons you said, but I was so sure that he was on the level for once. I mean, I couldn't pick up any signs of falsehood during all the times we were together."

"That's because he's so good at what he does, Jim," Kelso answered more gently. "I suspect he even had your senses fooled, am I right?"

And Jim was too distraught to wonder just how much Kelso knew about his ability. That was of far lesser concern right now. He jerked back to reality as he realised Kelso was talking again, and swallowed hard at the man's next revelation.

"There's something else you have to know, Jim. And it might well be relevant to what's happened to Blair. There's a third party involved, but it's so deep undercover that even my best sources haven't been able to give me more than hints. All I know is that there is another level of interest in Rostov, over and above the arms deal, but by whom, and what it entails, I have no idea. I don't even know if Brackett is involved to that extent. That's something you'd have to find out for yourself.

"But for now, I suggest that you look at Rostov first as a kidnapping suspect, and take it from there."

"Right. Yeah. OK," Jim was too distracted at first to offer a more coherent response. Then he pulled himself together. He couldn't help Blair by falling apart, so he gave himself a firm mental shake and replied crisply, his anger and guilt buried beneath a layer of cold control of the sort that had made him so effective on covert ops.

"I'm going to call Simon now, tell him that I think Blair's been snatched, and have him put out an APB on the borrowed car. Then I'm going to see Brackett and find out what he knows. Don't worry. I won't tell him or anyone else what you've told me. I don't want to endanger Blair or sabotage the operation by spreading rumours and causing panic.

"But I'm going to find Blair, or die trying. I've been all sorts of fool trying to avoid what I should have admitted all along. I love that kid, and if it takes me the rest of my life, I'll keep trying to prove it to him and hope he can forgive me."

"Then I wish you luck, Jim. You're going to need it," Kelso murmured feelingly, and broke the connection.

Shortly afterwards, Jim was driving as fast as he could towards Lee Brackett's building, his face set in lines of grim determination. He had just roused a grumpy Simon out of bed to tell him that he believed Blair had been snatched, and had asked him to put out the APB. To his credit, Simon hadn't even questioned Jim's abrupt demand, but had merely agreed to do so immediately, his own concern for the young observer uppermost in his mind.

Having said that, Jim hadn't told his boss everything that he either suspected or had just been told, because there was no way he would chance word slipping out and putting Blair at potentially even more risk. And the first thing he had to do was find out for certain if Lee was involved in any way. He had no intention of letting on to his lover that he knew of the man's connections to Rostov, but fully intended to use his senses to monitor any signs of guilt. Forewarned was forearmed, as they say, and there was no way he was going to allow himself to be distracted or fooled this time.

Arriving at Brackett's building, Jim threw the truck into park and jogged up to the lobby, quickly identifying himself to his lover over the intercom. Sounding curious, and somewhat suspicious, Lee buzzed him in, and he took the elevator up to Brackett's floor.

As soon as Lee opened the door to him, he waded straight in, not giving the other man a chance to get himself under control. This time Jim was going to use his senses to the best of his ability to monitor his lover's responses and physical reactions, because Blair's life might well depend on what he found out.

"Blair's been snatched. As far as I know it was some time this morning. Do you know anything about it?"

And this time he was utterly convinced of Brackett's innocence. Whether or not he was really on Rostov's payroll, he certainly didn't know anything about Blair. His shock and surprise were entirely genuine, as was the spike in his heart rate and a sudden tang of fear in his personal scent.

“Blair? Blair’s been taken? No, Jim. I don’t know anything about any kidnapping attempt. I swear it. Believe it or not, I like that young man, even if he hates my guts. He’s smart and feisty, and I never wanted to hurt him or see him hurt.”

And Jim believed him. His senses told him without a doubt that no one could fake Brackett’s reaction. Lee really didn’t know anything about Blair’s kidnapping.

But that didn’t mean that he couldn’t find out about it.

Part 5: High Stakes:

Blair:

Blair woke up to darkness; a darkness so intense that for a few panic-stricken moments his disorientated mind thought he had gone blind. The next thing he was aware of was that he was cold. Which probably had a lot to do with the fact that he was naked and was also lying on a rough, concrete floor. His head ached, his mouth felt dry, and the taste when he ran his tongue experimentally around his teeth was truly disgusting. *Has to be from whatever they pumped into me*, he thought muzzily. *Guess it means I’ve been kidnapped again. What is it about me? Do I have a big sign tattooed on my forehead saying, ‘Blair Sandburg, kidnap victim extraordinaire’? My karma sucks, man.*

Pushing himself shakily up into a half-sitting position, he paused for a moment to let his spinning head settle, then carefully began to feel around him. He was trying hard not to give in to his terror, and decided that the best way to do it was to try and find out what sort of place he was being held in this time. He therefore reached out until his hand made contact with a wall, only a couple of feet away from where he sat, and he pushed himself backwards to sit against it, with his back pressed to the comforting solidity. He knew the immediate feeling of safety it lent him was only psychological, but he’d take what he could get. After a few minutes spent practicing his deep breathing and relaxation techniques in an attempt to calm himself and find his centre, he felt ready to explore further. Rolling to hands and knees, he crawled slowly along the base of the wall, feeling his way without losing contact with the wall itself. After a few feet, he came to a corner, so he continued to follow the line of the adjoining wall, trying to gauge roughly how far he had gone. He reckoned it was only about twelve feet until he hit the next corner, so he continued the process along that wall also. Again, about twelve feet further on, he came to another corner, but when he followed that wall, he felt something different. He paused, and ran his hands over a smoother surface which gave a metallic clunk when he rapped his knuckles against it. He’d found a door, but further exploration couldn’t locate any interior handle or bolt. He sighed in bitter frustration and disappointment. It was obviously a cell of some sort, and there would be no escape that way.

Nevertheless, he continued his slow circuit around his prison, just to make sure he hadn’t missed any other potential exit, such as a grating or drain, before painstakingly crawling back to the door. He was just about to try crawling diagonally across the floor to see if there was anything in the centre of the small space when suddenly the room was flooded with a blinding light, while a klaxon sounded simultaneously, so loud that he was momentarily deafened. Whimpering in distress as he tried to protect both his ears and eyes, he was utterly helpless to defend himself when he was hauled upright by cruel, unseen hands and a sack was thrown over his head. He cried out loud when cold water deluged over him, struggling wildly as the soaked material threatened to suffocate him. He was on the point of passing out, when the sack was removed, and he was carelessly dropped to the floor, barely aware that the light had been turned off and he was alone again; shivering in shock and fear.

Gasping for breath and coughing harshly to rid his lungs of the small amount of water he had inhaled, he huddled in a tiny, miserable ball until he felt able to move, and then crawled back to the wall, not stopping until he found a corner. Pressing his back into the angle of the walls, he pulled his knees defensively up to

his chest and tried desperately to regain some measure of equilibrium. It was virtually impossible, however, as he strained to hear something – anything - in the now oppressive silence, which was as impenetrable as the darkness surrounding him. His skin crawled as he imagined hidden eyes watching his every move, and waiting until he dropped his guard so they could hurt him again.

And although he couldn't know it then, that was exactly what was happening in a purpose-built room adjacent to his tiny, bare cell.

Peering through an observation panel high up in the cell wall, Mr Black wore night vision goggles in order to study his prisoner. As he avidly absorbed every detail, a grim smile tugged at his thin-lipped mouth, and he murmured to the man at his side, knowing that the sound-proofed walls would prevent anything reaching the young man's ears.

"I have to say I'm quite impressed by young Mr Sandburg. For an academic, he's really quite practical and resourceful, don't you think? Taking it on himself to try and watch our Mr Brackett was quite enterprising, even if it was doomed to failure, and it certainly demonstrates his dedication to his Sentinel. I believe that it might be very enlightening to study him further rather than terminate him immediately. In fact, if we can break him, and control him, he might prove to be useful if we ever need a tame Guide. Or bait to catch a Sentinel of our own. What do you think, Collins?"

Removing his own night vision goggles for a moment in order to rub the bridge of his nose, Colonel Collins frowned thoughtfully as he replied.

"I think you could be right, sir. According to Brackett's earlier observations, and from our more recent ones he certainly seems to be a very gifted Guide. But I wonder if he could work with another Sentinel besides Ellison? Perhaps there is something in Brackett's theory that there is only one compatible Guide for each Sentinel.

"Then again, even if that were so, as you say he could still be useful to us should we explore the possibility of recruiting sentinels for our own uses. He is, after all, the nearest thing to an expert that we know of at present, apart from Brackett, that is. And since Brackett will no longer be available to us once this operation is done, he will be our only source. I suppose it depends on how much time and effort you want to spend on breaking him and getting him under control."

"As to that," Black replied, "We have four more days until the container ship is due to dock, and I think that will be time enough. Keeping him off guard, coupled with sleep deprivation and starvation should do the trick. He is only a civilian, after all, and not trained in withstanding interrogation techniques. If it works, we'll take him with us when we have completed our mission. And if he proves to be too intractable, he can be terminated along with Mr Brackett."

Colonel Collins nodded his agreement and replaced his goggles, and both men returned to their observation.

From then on, time ceased to have any meaning for Blair as he existed in a constant state of terror and trepidation. He could never gauge the intervals between the assaults on his person. Sometimes they were within minutes of each other, and other times after what seems like several hours had elapsed. And always when he dropped into an exhausted sleep. He learned to dread the blinding light and blaring klaxon, because it always preceded the horrifying near-suffocation from the saturated sacking hood, and he never once had the chance to see his attackers.

He was never given any food, only existing on the small amounts of water he inevitably swallowed during his torture, and he was forced to use one corner of his cell as a latrine, so the smell soon became almost

unbearable. And he was always cold, lying wet and shivering on the hard concrete until he felt his muscles ache from the constant spasms, and his bones felt brittle like icicles.

He could barely even think coherently, he was so tired and frightened, but when he did, it was to pray for rescue. Or even death, as long as it was through natural causes. Anything to get away from the unending chill and terrifying darkness, and the constant fear of drowning.

It was late in the evening on the third day when there was a change to the dreadful routine, and by that time he was near to breaking point. He was huddled in his usual corner, eyes drifting shut as his head drooped until his forehead touched his drawn-up knees, when the light flashed on again, but this time without the accompanying klaxon. However, already conditioned to expect to be grabbed and hurt, he cringed away with eyes tightly closed against the blinding light when he felt rather than saw someone approach. Hands once again gripped him and hauled him upright, but this time there was no hood, and a powerful, supportive arm was wrapped around his waist, keeping him on his feet. Another arm wrapped around him from the other side, and his own arm was dragged over someone's shoulder. Thus braced, he was half carried, half dragged from the cell, and he moaned softly as he felt warm air touch his bare skin. He still couldn't open his eyes, so painful were they from the enforced dark of his cell, but his fuzzy brain was working just enough to suggest that he was being taken down a corridor or hallway, and that the floor had some sort of covering rather than cold concrete. By the time he and his handlers paused before another door, he had managed to open his streaming eyes a slit, but couldn't make out anything much through the bleary tears.

However, as he was dragged into the room, he could hear running water, and he screamed and tried to struggle against the restricting grasp, believing that he was going to be tortured again. This time, however, he was shaken hard, and for the first time since his capture, a voice barked commandingly in his ear.

"Be still, Mr Sandburg! It's just a shower. You stink, and you need to get cleaned up, so stop wriggling!"

He was so shocked that he froze instantly, panting in fear as he tried to focus on the owner of the voice. But try as he might, he couldn't give voice to any of his own questions yet. He was far too traumatised for that.

"That's better, Mr Sandburg," the voice said approvingly. "Now, let's get you into a nice warm shower, and then we can talk. I think you might like something to eat and drink also, wouldn't you?"

And suddenly Blair could speak, or at least, croak out a word or two. "Clothes. Need clothes."

"We'll see. Behave yourself in the shower, and let my men clean you up, and I'll see what can be arranged." The man, or at least, the blurred outline that Blair could make out, backed away, and Blair sagged into the arms holding him, his last energy reserves depleted, and too weary to do anything but allow them to do with him what they wanted.

A short while later, Blair was showered, shaved and dressed in an orange coverall and paper slippers, his damp hair pulled back in a ponytail at his nape. Too weak to help himself, his two guards had taken care of him with business-like competence, and had then half carried him into another room furnished simply with a table and two chairs and a cot against one wall. And most importantly, it was well-lit by ceiling lights protected by heavy-duty mesh grilles, so Blair began to feel some of the worst of his anxiety receding slightly.

Not that he was in any condition to ponder his new situation in depth. His beleaguered mind was shutting down fast now, and the pull of oblivion was growing stronger by the second.

However, when a bottle of water and a tin mug of tepid soup were placed before him, he reached out shakily to grasp the bottle, only to find his hands wouldn't cooperate enough to allow him to twist off the

top. He gazed up in mute gratitude when one of his blank-faced guards simply reached down and opened it for him before handing it back with the calm admonishment to, "Take it easy with that. Don't want you throwing up."

Blair recognised the sense behind that, and sipped obediently for a few moments, pushing down the desire to gulp down the whole contents in one go. Once his thirst had been slaked, he reached for the tin mug with both hands. The soup was a generic chicken variety, and smelled heavenly to the starving man. He raised the mug to his lips and concentrated on getting the delicious, viscous liquid inside him, not stopping until the mug was empty. He placed it carefully back down on the table, and looked up, intending to thank his guards for the treat. But he wasn't able to accomplish even that small task as his brain finally shut down. His eyes rolled up in his head, and he slipped sideways, to be caught by his guards, who had been expecting just such a reaction. They placed him on the cot, cleared the table and left him, locking the door behind them.

Outside they were met by Mr Black, who was looking as self-satisfied as his customary inscrutable expression allowed. "Thank you, gentlemen. Give him exactly two hours, then wake him. I shall begin his interrogation then."

Black returned to his office then, to join Colonel Collins, who was sitting in front of a monitor. The screen displayed the inside of Blair's new location, his every movement caught by the cameras hidden within the light fittings.

"Everything seems to be satisfactory so far," the colonel murmured, his voice conveying nothing but cool, scientific interest. As far as he was concerned, as long as Sandburg was of potential use to their department, he was to be protected and treated accordingly. But should he turn out to be valueless, the colonel would have no qualms about ordering his termination. He couldn't afford to let his humanity rule him when the good of his country was of the utmost importance.

Mr Black was of the same mind-set, if not even more ruthless, but he did admit to a certain academic interest in Sandburg as a man. He had studied the prisoner's reactions intently, satisfied when he behaved as predicted, since it meant that Black's strategy was working. More used to trying to break tough military types or trained agents and spies, it was interesting to see how the brain-washing of a civilian compared, bearing in mind that Sandburg was undeniably intelligent and determined, and stronger than he looked.

When Sandburg had been led into the interview room, Black hadn't quite been able to prevent his lips from curving into a slightly amused smirk. The man was dressed in a coverall meant for a far taller person, so the cuffs and sleeves had had to be rolled up several times. With his wide-eyed, anxious deer-in-the-headlights expression, Sandburg had resembled a child dressing up in an adult's clothing, and for certain, anyone with a more sympathetic turn of mind would have been enchanted by his unconscious air of waif-like fragility. But Black had no such softer side. To him, Sandburg was a tool to be honed, used, then discarded. He couldn't afford to be swayed by sentiment.

"I've told the guards to allow him exactly two hours' of sleep. We'll start processing him then. And see if he knows as much as we think he does," he murmured, almost to himself. "In one sense, it would be better if he knows little or nothing about our connection to Rostov. I prefer a blank page to work with. Too much prior knowledge would make him difficult to educate in our ways."

"I think it's likely that what he knows will be minimal," Collins replied. "He was acting simply as a Guide watching his Sentinel's back. Even Kelso knows nothing about us other than baseless rumours."

"True enough," Black concurred. "That treacherous bastard might be a thorn in many a government department's side, but as long as he remains in ignorance about our activities, he's relatively safe. He's too high profile to assassinate without good reason, sad though it is."

And Collins nodded in assent as he gazed at the unmoving figure on the monitor's screen.

"Sleeping Beauty," he muttered with a sardonic half-smile. "Let's find out what you know...."

Lee:

To say that Lee had been shaken by Jim's revelation would be an understatement. He was disturbed on several levels, none of which boded well for his own survival, and that was uppermost in his mind. Having said that, he had been telling the truth when he told Jim that he wished Sandburg no harm. He genuinely did like the feisty young man, impressed by how much he had changed since their first meeting, when he had appeared to be nothing more than a highly intelligent but ineffectual student, lacking in self-confidence. He had soon proved himself to be far more resilient than Brackett had believed possible, and he had taken himself to task for underestimating Blair as an opponent.

From what Jim had told Lee before he had left again for the PD, Lee understood that Blair might have been tailing him with the intention of getting proof of his perceived nefarious activities in order to wean Jim off his unwelcome lover. Undoubtedly the young man would have been doing it out of a sense of love and duty to Ellison, but it was entirely possible that the PD, through Ellison, did already suspect Lee's involvement with Rostov, even though Jim didn't actually come out and admit it.

If that were so, then Lee kicked himself mentally for not noticing that he was being watched, and by a rank amateur at that. He really must be slipping to allow such a monumental oversight. Or perhaps he was just exhausted.

In which case it was just as well that the operation was due to go down in less than a week. The container ship was due to dock in four days' time, and Brackett had thought he had all his ducks in a row.

Damn Sandburg for getting himself into this mess. Lee was fairly certain that Rostov wouldn't be overly concerned about the activities of a lowly grad student. But Black might well be interested in a Guide, and what value that Guide might be to him and his covert department.

Lee knew he would have to find out for sure, and then decide what to do. He hated himself for his weakness, but he felt an undeniable urge to do the right thing. And as long as it didn't impinge on his own safety, which was paramount, he knew he was going to do it. He would help Ellison find and rescue his Guide. And then he would disappear - with a clear conscience, for once in his life.

Jim:

His face set in grim lines of care and determination, Jim drove back to the PD for an emergency meeting with Simon. He had left Brackett's apartment without a backward glance the moment he had ascertained to his own satisfaction the man's innocence of anything to do with Blair's disappearance, every fibre of his being now concentrated on finding the man who meant the most to him in the world. As he drove, he pondered inconsequentially on his easy dismissal of Lee, faintly surprised to recall that he had felt not the least bit of desire in the presence of his erstwhile lover. It was a sobering thought that, the moment Blair had been threatened - not least because it was on Jim's own behalf while trying to back up his Sentinel - it had been almost like the proverbial light bulb going on in Jim's skull. He had realised without a doubt that he loved and needed his Guide above all others, and however much he had enjoyed recreational sex with Lee, it was just a transitory distraction from what was the most important relationship he would ever have.

As long as he wasn't too late, and the object of his concern was already dead. But he wouldn't - couldn't - think that way. Blair had to be still alive, and it was up to Jim to save him. And then convince him of his importance to the newly enlightened Sentinel and partner. Nothing else was acceptable.

When Jim entered the MCU bullpen, he saw that Megan and Joel were already there, as was Simon, despite it now being the early hours of the morning. Having said that, the pair had been his relief on the dockyard surveillance rota, so no doubt had returned to the PD the moment their shift had ended. Both of them had a particular soft spot for Blair, and there was no way they would want to be excluded from searching for their friend.

Looking up at Jim's arrival, Simon wasted no time on niceties. Beckoning to him from his doorway, he called out, "My office, Jim. And you, Megan and Joel. I want to know everything."

As soon as he entered Simon's inner sanctum, Jim spoke up. "I've just been to see Brackett, sir, and I'm absolutely sure he has nothing to do with Blair's disappearance. His shock when I told him couldn't be faked." He was aware that Megan and Joel were looking at him rather quizzically, not understanding the reasoning behind his positive declaration, but Simon nodded in acceptance. He knew how Jim could be so certain even if the other detectives were plainly dubious, but now wasn't the time to start explaining about enhanced senses. If Jim wanted to come clean after this operation was over – and after they had rescued his Guide – then that was up to him.

"Fair enough, Jim. But what about the possibility of Rostov's involvement? What do you think about that?"

"Honestly, sir, at the moment I couldn't say. I mean, I would have expected some reaction from Brackett if he'd been aware that Blair was following him, but he obviously wasn't. And when I spoke to Jack Kelso he only told me that Blair was doing his own surveillance on his own time, against Kelso's advice at that. And all because he was trying to get proof that Brackett was up to no good.

"To protect me," he added softly, his expression a mixture of fond exasperation and rueful self-deprecation.

"Damned kid! Stubborn, courageous young fool!" Simon couldn't help himself. However stupid he considered Blair's actions to be, he couldn't fault his motives or his dedication to his partner. But if Brackett had nothing to do with Blair's disappearance, who did? Was Rostov aware of the upcoming operation after all, or was there some other party at work here? One thing was for sure, and that was that Jim's eyes had apparently been opened, and he finally realised just how important Blair was to him.

"So, Jim. How do you want to play this? Because at this stage we can't jeopardise Mulroney's operation. There's too much at stake. But if you want to pursue this alleged kidnapping, then I'm happy to take you off the surveillance rota. Mulroney can do without your input for the next few days."

"What about us, sir?" Megan spoke up hurriedly, concern written all over her pretty face. "What can we do? Do we have to keep up with this bloody boring stakeout duty or can we help Jimbo?"

"I'm sorry, Megan," Simon replied, his regret genuine. "But right now it's too early to do more than follow up leads and do some telephoning, just in case there turns out to be a less dangerous reason for Blair's absence. We can but hope. And Jim can be going on with that. You two need to get some sleep."

"With all due respect, sir, I'm volunteering to help Jimbo. I can sleep once this bloody Rostov deal is over and done with. Right now, I want to help find Sandy."

"I realise that, Connor. But I can't in all honesty pull you from surveillance duty too. Having said that, if it doesn't impinge too much on your on-duty hours, then you have my blessing to help Jim as much as you can in your own time."

As Megan sat back with a satisfied grin, Joel spoke up also. "Can that go for me too, Simon? I can pass up on a few hours' sleep if it means finding Blair."

And Simon didn't argue with him. He knew just how important Sandburg had become to his department, and was sure that there would be move volunteers coming forward to help in the search once the news spread throughout the bullpen.

It was Jim who spoke up next, because although he very much appreciated his colleagues' willingness to help out, he didn't think much could be done yet, and he needed to explain what he believed.

"Look, Megs, Joel. Thank you for your offers of help. I know Blair would really grateful if he knew, as am I. But right now I don't think there's much you can do. I mean, since Blair's not been working any cases with me lately, other than the Rostov surveillance, I don't think it's likely that his disappearance has anything to do with any other case than that. And if it's not, then there must be some other reason. Perhaps something involving the U? I mean, I haven't been taking a lot of interest in his work there for a while," he continued, looking suitably sheepish at the admission, "So he might have been having trouble that he didn't want to bother me with.

"Thing is, it's far too early to start ringing Rainier yet, which is what I'd really like help with, so why don't you both grab a couple of hours' sleep, and I'll see you back here around 8.30?"

Both Megan and Joel looked somewhat dubious, but after a moment, Joel nodded. He could see the sense in Jim's suggestion, and knew he'd be of more value to the search if he managed to get some rest.

"Fair enough, Jim. Sounds like a plan, but we'll be here in time to start the phone work, don't you worry. But what are you going to be doing?" he added, real concern for his colleague on his genial face.

"Me? I'm going to start by going back to the loft to see if there's anything – any clue – that Blair might have left that'll point me in the right direction to start searching. I have to believe that I can find him. I *have to*..." And as his words tailed off, Megan rose to her feet and squeezed his arm in sympathy.

"We will, Jimbo. You'll see. We'll get him back."

Three days later, Jim was at his wits' end. It was less than twenty four hours until Rostov's container ship docked, and the task force members were concentrating on their final preparations for the raid. However, despite his every effort, and those of his colleagues in MCU, whether involved in the operation or not, there had been no trace of Blair. It was as if the young man had simply vanished into thin air. No one at Rainier had any clue as to where Blair might have gone, and as far as anyone knew – or was prepared to admit – he hadn't been having any problems with students or fellow staff members. His Dissertation Committee, although frustrated with his continued procrastination over handing chapters in, were to a man – and woman – fond of Blair and effusive in their praise of his intellectual capacity and written work to date. They all professed themselves to be deeply concerned about his disappearance, and Jim had no reason to doubt their sincerity.

As for other lines of enquiry, none of either Jim's snitches, or those of his fellow detectives claimed to know anything about a kidnapping, and Jim was inclined to believe them, particularly as he knew that most of them approved of the young grad student and his friendly, non-judgemental attitude. On the other hand, Mulrone had adamantly refused to allow any approach to be made to Rostov or his associates before the proposed bust went down, in case the operation be compromised. Although he claimed to sympathise with Jim and his MCU colleagues, it was obvious to them all that he considered the fate of a lowly observer to be of far less importance than a successful arrest, and in all honesty, Jim could understand that, even if it made him sick to his stomach. He was far too professional to either incur Mulrone's wrath or risk causing the possible death or injury to any of the task force members through over-aggressive intimidation or questioning of potential suspects. And more importantly as far as he was concerned, he knew that Blair would be desperately upset if any of the above occurred because of Jim's efforts to save him. He had never

had a particularly high opinion of his own value, and it simply wouldn't occur to him that his colleagues and friends considered him worth every effort they made to free him.

A despondent Jim mulled over his lack of progress, coming to the conclusion that unless something turned up soon, he would have to consider the possibility of a completely new player, or third party's involvement, and with time running out before the Rostov bust, he was at a loss as to how he could proceed.

He was on his way back to the loft later that evening, intending to have a quick shower and grab something to eat before returning to the PD, when his cell phone rang, and he stared at the caller ID in surprise. He hadn't given more than a passing thought to Lee Brackett since he dismissed the man as innocent of having any hand in Blair's abduction, and he had to wonder why his ex-lover should call him now. Perhaps he had found out something of use to Jim in his search, and there was only one way to find out.

"Lee! What can I do for you? I'm kind of busy right now--"

"I realise that, Jim. But I need to see you. Alone. I have some information for you, and it's urgent. Meet me by the fountain in Cascade Memorial Park. One hour. Tell no one, I mean it!" and the call ended, leaving a perplexed Jim staring at the phone in his hand.

No way was he passing up this opportunity, so Jim immediately turned the truck around and headed back downtown. This could be the intelligence he needed to save his Guide.

Over the past three days, it wasn't only Jim and his colleagues who had been busy on Sandburg's behalf. Lee had been busy too, even if his efforts hadn't been entirely altruistic. The time was fast approaching for the culmination of his plans, and timing was also crucial as to whether or not he would succeed in securing his own escape. During his stay in Cascade, and right under the noses of his 'employers', he had been in contact with various individuals from his less-than-honourable past. People he wouldn't dream of trusting under normal circumstances, but who could and would meet his requirements as long as he paid them enough. And lack of money was definitely not one of Brackett's concerns. Before the failed attempt to steal an aircraft which led to his capture, he had had several other smaller successes which had still netted him a substantial amount of money, most of which he had secreted in untraceable off-shore accounts. He had already secured a new identity and the appropriate passport and paperwork to go with it, and his travel plans and ultimate destination had also been finalised. All he needed to do now was make sure all aspects of the upcoming operation were timed to perfection, and he would slip away undetected during the ensuing activity.

It had all been going to plan except for that one unforeseen occurrence, and Lee cursed himself for even caring. Because despite his inherent and freely-acknowledged self-centredness, he honestly didn't like to think of Blair Sandburg in Mr Black's hands. And that was exactly what had happened to the hapless young Guide.

After Jim's visit, Lee had found out from Ritchie Martin about the abduction carried out from close by the PO's office. He was angry that Lee hadn't spotted his part-time tail earlier, especially as it could have had serious consequences for Martin himself. As he had snapped angrily at a bemused Brackett, "It's a good job the agency had someone watching the 'watcher', or he might have seen something much more important than you leaving my office just before Mal Leach. Not that he'll ever be able to tell any tales now. He's been taken to the Forest Centre for interrogation, and from what I understand, there's some interest in his work with your boyfriend Ellison.

"Not that I know anything about that, or want know. All I do know is that he'd probably be better off dead than working for them, and if that hurts Ellison, then good. I hope the bastard suffers in hell!"

A little more careful fishing had confirmed Martin's information, so Lee knew what he had to do. Blair Sandburg and Jim Ellison were going to owe him big-time, and you never knew when you might have reason to collect on such outstanding debts.

Part 6: Game, Set and Match:

Seated in the deep shadows behind the ornamental fountain, an alert Lee Brackett kept watch for his expected contact. Cascade Memorial Park was pretty much deserted at this time of night, but he was still careful to keep out of the feeble light cast by the scattered lamps, although he needed that same light in order to track the contact's approach to ensure he was alone. Any duplicity on Jim Ellison's part would lead to Lee's rapid departure from the scene, after which young Mr Sandburg's fate would be out of his hands.

But Lee was pretty sure that Jim would obey his instructions. His Guide's safety was paramount, especially as the Sentinel had apparently embraced the inevitable and recognised how important Sandburg was to him. There was no way Lee could see Jim compromising Blair's safety by informing on some rogue agent, even one such as he. He was wryly aware that their previous connection wouldn't have any bearing on Jim's decision either. It was purely down to necessity now, and Lee knew Jim would do everything in his power to carry out a successful rescue attempt.

It was to be hoped that the object of that attempt was still alive, because that was one thing Lee couldn't guarantee. Although he was realistic enough to recognise the possibility that Sandburg had already been terminated, he chose to be optimistic on this occasion, knowing he had done his best to enable a favourable outcome. Who'd have thought he still had a softer side after all?

Snorting softly in self-derision, he suddenly sat up straighter as he saw a figure approaching, alone as requested. Jim Ellison had arrived, and in the dim light playing across the path of his approach, even Lee could see the lines of care and worry etched deeply into the patrician features. The man was suffering for sure.

Brackett smiled grimly when Jim called out softly, "Come on out, Lee. I'm alone, and I can see you are also. Tell me what you know."

Unsurprised that Jim's enhanced sight would have allowed him to recognise his target even in the shadows, Lee stepped out with a wry grin tugging at his lips.

"Hey, Jim. Glad to see you took me seriously. I know I can rely on you to warn me if we're likely to get interrupted, so let's sit down here and I'll tell you everything I know. Believe it or not, I trust you not to have set a trap for me. I think you're far too concerned about your Guide to risk Blair's safety just to get some sort of revenge.

"And just because I was acting under orders, doesn't mean to say I didn't get some enjoyment out of our 'affair'," he added with a sardonic grin, even though Jim was sure he saw a flash of genuine affection in the bright eyes which studied him so intently.

"OK, whatever," Jim grunted uneasily in response. "Let's cut to the chase, Lee. How much time do I have?"

Sobering immediately, Lee sat down again on the bench beside the fountain and reached for a small duffel bag at his feet.

"Only a few hours, Jim. And you have to agree to my terms and follow my orders exactly if you want to see Blair again, understand? I'm going to tell you everything you need to know, even if it's not the full story. Too much rests on you maintaining your silence for you to break your word now. What do you say? Do we have an understanding, or am I gone?"

"We do, Brackett. I swear it," Jim replied, and there was no mistaking the sincerity in his voice. He was a man of honour, and had always considered loyalty and obedience to his superior officers an indispensable part of being a good soldier or cop. But in this instance he was willing to transfer that loyalty to his Guide and partner, whose importance to him overrode his previous orders. As long as acting alone and under the radar didn't endanger his colleagues, or jeopardise their mission, he was prepared to go along with Brackett's plan.

"OK then. Here we go. First off, it's true that I had no idea that Sandburg had been following me, or that he had been abducted, but I guess your senses have already confirmed that. Not my finest moment to have missed him, I know, but I've been pretty busy lately," he added with a grimace of self-disgust.

"Anyhow, yes, I was working for Rostov, and you don't need to feel embarrassed that you didn't pick up any hints from me while we were together. I'm good at what I do, Jim. No false modesty necessary. Thing is, I was setting him up also, on behalf of another party. A party far more secretive and dangerous than anything you've ever heard of or dealt with even in your covert ops days. One who has a more –shall we say – politically sensitive interest in taking Rostov down? And I'm saying no more on the subject than that, for your own safety." And Jim knew exactly what he meant by that. What Jim didn't know, he couldn't let slip under duress. SOP for covert ops.

"Suffice it to say," Brackett continued, "Mulroney isn't aware of it either. As far as these people are concerned, they are quite happy for him to go ahead and arrest Rostov and his cronies tomorrow as planned, and while the FBI and the PD are dealing with the arms shipment, they will be carrying out another, simultaneous arrest.

"Anyhow, regarding Sandburg's part in this. From what I understand, he was simply acting on his own, trying to get proof that I was somehow involved in shady dealings, whether with Rostov or anyone else. All for the love of his Sentinel, I should add. But the other party I was working for couldn't risk him turning me in before I had completed my part of the bargain. So they snatched him.

"If that was all they were concerned with, then he would simply have been interrogated then quietly disposed of as collateral damage. But I believe that they might well have some interest in my theories about Sentinels and Guides, and the fact that I identified Sandburg as your Guide could lend him some importance in their eyes. He is, after all, even more of an expert on the subject than I am, so could be of value to them. And if so, then he will still be alive. And undoubtedly is being held in their complex outside Cascade."

Pulling a folder full of papers out of the duffel, he held it out to Jim. "If I'm right, this is where he will be. It's one of many such small but secret locations around the country that the agency's teams use when needed. They call this one the 'Forest Centre', and superficially it resembles some sort of dilapidated survivalist's compound, both from the ground and in aerial reconnaissance. Underneath, though, it's anything but. These plans aren't complete, but they're the best I could come up with in the time I had. But I'm sure with your senses you'll be able to overcome the security systems, especially if you take something of Blair's along with you to help ground you. On the plus side, I believe that there will be minimal presence there, as most of the personnel will be at the harbour, carrying out their own operation.

"So you see what I mean about timing and coordination, don't you? You have to go in while all parties are involved in the two raids, and you can't risk any possibility of them pulling the plug just because you can't keep your mouth shut. If all goes to plan, then everyone will be happy. Including you and Blair," and he fixed Jim with an earnest gaze, willing the man to agree.

And Jim did. What else could he do? With Blair's life at stake, he could do no less, and he salved his conscience by telling himself that his unofficial actions wouldn't affect the outcome of the operations anyway. He would deal with any consequences arising from freeing Blair from this clandestine agency as and when it happened.

Nodding as he clutched the sheaf of papers to him, he muttered, "Thanks, Lee. I appreciate this, truly. I don't know why you're being this generous, but I'm not questioning it. But what about you? What are you getting out of this?"

Grinning as he rose to his feet, Lee replied, "That's something else you don't need to know, Jim. Let's just say I have my own plans, and leave it at that, OK?"

"Good luck, Jim, and give my regards to Blair when you see him. Don't try to follow me, OK?" and he moved away, keeping to the shadows until even sentinel vision lost sight of him.

As soon as he was sure Brackett was no longer in the vicinity, and his senses told him he was alone in the deserted park, Jim stood and hurried back the way he had come, not pausing until he had reached the spot where he had parked his truck. Glancing around again to make sure he wasn't being either watched or followed, he climbed in, putting the precious papers down on the seat beside him.

He had work to do.

At around the same time as Jim and Lee were conducting their meeting, Blair was being woken from his allotted two hours of sleep, and the waking wasn't gentle. He was jerked from the depths of exhausted oblivion by the feel of water being poured on his face. Not that much, to be sure, but to the shocked and disorientated man it was a horrifying experience, instantly reminiscent of his recent torture. He woke up screaming in panic, heart thundering, arms flailing and legs thrashing as an adrenalin-spiked surge of energy had him shoving backwards across his narrow cot to huddle against the wall, arms wrapped protectively around his head as he moaned and whimpered, the animalistic sounds issuing from his throat barely recognisable even to himself. Hands gripped his wrists, and forcefully pulled his hands away from his face, and he gazed up with terror-rounded eyes in a pasty white face, mouth working in a vain attempt to plead for a mercy he knew he wasn't about to get.

Slowly, a modicum of rationality returned, and he was able to take in his surroundings, eyes flicking anxiously back and forth as he was hauled unceremoniously to his feet by the two guards who had been in charge of him before. He realised he was still in the same cell where he had been given food and water, but this time there was another man seated at the table. One who was regarding him with the cold, impersonal eyes of a scientist studying an interesting specimen. Or an emotionless killer. Either way, he knew instinctively, with a crawling primal fear that flooded his system and filled his over-burdened mind with terrifying images of hurts past and to come, that this man held Blair's fate in his hands. This man; Mr Black, if he did but know it; had the power to inflict more fear and pain on him than he could ever have believed himself capable of bearing. If indeed he could bear it. And at that moment, he had no faith in his own courage and willpower, especially as the adrenalin rush had dissipated, and his limbs shook uncontrollably on bones turned to sponge.

Drooping in the strong grasp of his handlers, he finally met the direct and faintly curious gaze of the man seated at the table, and swallowed audibly as the cold features finally displayed a hint of emotion. And Blair felt his heart lurch at the cruel disdain that pulled at the corners of the thin lips, feeling even more like an exotic specimen. Or maybe something similar to a smear on a microscope's slide or a blob of cells in a Petrie dish. Certainly nothing as important as a human being. And then Black spoke, and Blair shuddered anew at the flat, uninflected voice that was way more frightening than if he had bellowed and ranted in anger.

"My, my, Mr Sandburg. Such an extreme reaction to a little splash of water. That must have been some dream you were having. You've made quite a mess of yourself, haven't you?" The last comment finally held an undertone of sardonic amusement, and for a moment, Blair stared stupidly at his tormentor, before belatedly realising that he felt uncomfortably wet in a region far lower down than his face and neck.

Glancing down, his face flushed bright red in shame as he realised he had wet himself in his terror, even as the stink of urine teased his nostrils. As he cringed in bitter embarrassment, a tiny, mocking voice from within murmured snarkily that it was just as well that he hadn't eaten anything worthwhile over the past few days, or the mess would have been much worse.

He was pulled back from wallowing in self-reproach when the man spoke again, and he raised his head to meet the cold-eyed regard, working hard to maintain eye contact when all he wanted was for the ground to open up and swallow him whole.

"Take off that coverall, Mr Sandburg. I'm sure none of us here want to put up with that smell, do we? If you behave, you can have a clean one. *After* we've had our little talk, that is," and now the implied threat in his tone made the short hairs on the back of Blair's neck stand on end.

Nodding nervously, he fumbled at the unfamiliar buttons, only to find that his trembling fingers wouldn't cooperate, and he raised pleading eyes to beg mutely for assistance. Black's lips thinned in irritation, and he nodded to the guard on Blair's right, who reached over and took over the task, his face impassive as the coverall finally slipped down and pooled at Blair's ankles. With strong hands supporting his shaky movements, Blair stepped out of the garment, which was gathered up by the other guard, who carried it to the door presumably in order to dispose of it and retrieve a replacement.

Meanwhile, Blair shivered as the man looked him up and down, hating his nakedness and the added feeling of vulnerability that came with it. He was horribly certain that he wouldn't be given anything else to wear until this 'interview', or whatever it was, was over, and was hard put not to cover his genitals with his hands in the age-old urge to 'fig leaf' himself from view. However, there was no way he was going to give his interrogator the satisfaction of witnessing the true extent of his shame and embarrassment, so he straightened his shoulders as best he could, and forced himself to face front and centre. Even so, his fears as regards clothing were realised when Black finished his unnerving inspection and indicated the vacant chair opposite him.

"Please sit down, Mr Sandburg. Now, tell me everything you know about Andreas Rostov. How long have you been working for him?"

Virtually collapsing into the chair, Blair gawped at his questioner. "Me? Working for Rostov? Whatever gave you that idea?" Suddenly able to speak again, his words tumbled out in a rush as he tried to defend himself. This was bad, and his desperation to explain himself was completely genuine and spontaneous. It was to be hoped that the man could be suitably convinced of it also.

"Look," he babbled. "I'm nobody, honestly. I mean, I'm a grad student, working on my doctorate at Rainier. I work with one of the detectives at the PD, OK? And I wanted to try and help out with some surveillance on my own time. He didn't know, honest, and I don't know anything about Rostov. That's just one of the cases Jim...the detective I ride with...has been working on. The guy I was following was nothing to do with that case. Or, at least, I have no proof that he was..." And he tailed off, his eyes begging his listener to believe him.

Tilting his head a little to one side, Black studied him carefully for a few moments before murmuring, "So who was he? This man you were following? And what do you know about him?"

Blair knew instinctively that his only chance for survival would be to tell as much of the truth as he could. He was sadly aware that he couldn't withstand any more of the awful water torture, but even so, he wanted to try and protect Jim as best he could. And he felt no compunction about fingering the rogue agent who had his claws in his Sentinel.

"Um, the man's name is Brackett. Lee Brackett. It's true that I don't know if he's involved in anything right now. That's what I was trying to find out. He told my friend...Detective Ellison...that he's on the level now,

and is working as a security guard. But I don't trust him. Not after what he did to us. To a whole lot of people before he was arrested. I just couldn't understand how he could have been paroled after that."

"And just what would that be, Mr Sandburg?" his questioner asked with a touch of asperity, although if Blair did but know it, he was fully acquainted with the whole episode. He just needed to make sure that Sandburg wasn't trying to hide anything.

So Blair told him everything, only omitting anything overtly sentinel-related. That much he could do for Jim.

And was completely floored when Black fixed him with a stern and knowing glare before continuing matter-of-factly, "So Brackett was trying to utilise Detective Ellison's heightened senses in order to steal that aircraft, isn't that so, *Guide Sandburg*? And you helped him, didn't you, *Blair*?"

This time Blair was rendered speechless in shock, his mouth opening and closing soundlessly like a stranded fish for long moments before he found his voice again. And when he finally replied, that voice was so hoarse and cracking with horror and denial that Black was hard put to hear him.

"Wh...what do you mean? I don't know what you're talking about..." he stammered.

"Why, I'm talking about Sentinels, young man. You know, the subject of your Master's thesis. And I believe the subject of your doctoral dissertation also, am I right? Why else would you be working with Sentinel Ellison?"

Suddenly, the penny dropped, and Blair stared at Black in despair. "He told you, didn't he? Brackett, I mean. He told you that he believed that Jim is a Sentinel. He works for you, doesn't he?"

"A dangerous assumption, Mr Sandburg, and one I suggest you don't repeat," Black replied, the threat implicit in his expression and tone. "But for your sake, I hope that his theory is correct. Because if it is, then I may have a use for you after all. I may be able to use your expertise and talent as a Guide, even if I have no use for an overly-curious and meddling grad student."

And Blair truly didn't know what to make of that. Part of him wanted to admit everything if it meant he could live, but at what cost? What sort of life was this man talking about? Nothing good, for sure. And did he intend to force Jim to re-enlist too? Blair couldn't have that on his conscience, and since he had no real belief in the importance of his own role, he didn't understand why Black was describing him in terms of 'expertise' and 'talent'.

But he didn't want to die. And he didn't want to suffer any more torture. He didn't know what to say, so he looked up into the cold and assessing gaze, his own eyes telegraphing his misery and inner conflict.

Which actually turned out to be enough for Black for the present. Black was an expert in breaking men after all, and these were early days as far as Sandburg was concerned. He would allow the man to ponder his fate in seclusion while Black and his team took care of their immediate business, and then he would have a little more time to concentrate on Sandburg's conditioning. Because he was suddenly quite taken with the idea of exploring the question of sentinels and guides further. Young Sandburg struck him as quite an interesting and complex subject after all. And so delightfully ingenuous and unrestrained in revealing his every emotion. His training should be quite entertaining.

Deciding that it would be much more effective if he left Sandburg to stew in ignorance, Black stood up without another word to the shaky and troubled young man. Instead, he turned his attention to the second guard, who had reappeared in the doorway with a clean coverall and a tray bearing another bottle of water and the ubiquitous mug of chicken soup. He indicated that the man should place everything on the table, then beckoned to both men to follow him from the room, leaving Blair staring after them for long moments until finally turning his attention to the offerings laid out in front of him.

So now what? Did this mean he could help himself? Or was it a trap, and he would be punished if he as much as touched anything? It went without saying that every move that he made would be closely monitored. It was his growling stomach that decided him, so he reached out a shaky hand for the mug of soup, unbelievably relieved when nothing untoward happened as he took his first sip.

Some short while later, dressed in the clean overall, his thirst quenched and hunger at least partially satisfied, he curled up again on the cot and fell once more into a deep and mercifully dreamless sleep.

While Blair caught up on a few hours of much-needed sleep, Jim was putting that time to good use. Returning to the loft, he quickly showered and changed into close-fitting, dark clothing, then went upstairs to the bedroom where he accessed a compartment hidden behind his closet. Even Blair had no idea of its existence, and Jim had had every intention of it remaining that way. From it he removed several questionable items, two of which were powerful and unregistered handguns. There was no way he would use his service weapon for this mission, because it would be far too easy to trace should he have to resort to using it, and he didn't want to involve the PD in any way if he could help it. As with Brackett's plan, what they didn't know couldn't hurt them, and should he fail, or be captured in the act, he wasn't going to take them down with him.

For that reason he didn't phone Simon either. Let his boss believe that he was getting some of the sleep he was entitled to prior to the upcoming day's operation. And if he failed to show later on, he hoped that his absence wouldn't be noticed – or at least acted upon – until the excitement was over since he had been assigned no specific role in this instance. If it had been down to Simon, he suspected he would have been asked to act as a human 'sniffer dog' to locate the arms cache, but as it was Mulrone's show, and thankfully that weasel had no idea of Jim's special ability, he was safe enough from undue attention.

He did ring Jack Kelso, however, on the secure line, unsurprised when the man answered on the second ring despite the lateness of the hour.

He described succinctly what had been discussed at his and Brackett's meeting, and explained what his intended course of action was to be. Kelso listened carefully without interruption, but when he did respond, Jim could tell he wasn't happy. However, he made no effort to dissuade Jim, to Jim's great relief. Although he wouldn't have allowed anything to stop him, it was good to know that a man of Kelso's calibre and experience had given him his blessing, even if he didn't like it. What did give him pause, though, and an equal amount of relief, was the one condition Kelso asked of him.

"I wish you luck, Jim, and wish I could come with you, but sadly that's not going to happen. But one thing I would ask of you. When you get Blair out – and I'm sure you'll succeed – bring him here. Neither of you will be able to return to the loft until we find out what the repercussions of your rescue attempt are likely to be, and I have some resources I can employ to help keep you safe. Promise me you'll come here, Jim!"

And a very grateful Jim had no problem with that.

They discussed the details of Jim's plan for a few minutes longer, with Kelso adding a few suggestions, and then Jim rang off. He needed to get moving. There was no time to waste if he was to be in a position to act as soon as the coast was relatively clear, and according to Brackett's information, the 'Forest Centre' was several hours' drive out of Cascade.

In the grey, pre-dawn half-light, Jim pulled in to a secluded off-road parking area, within hiking distance of his destination. He had driven steadily for the best part of the night, resisting the temptation to burn rubber, since he knew he would be no good to Blair dead at the bottom of a ravine, and the roads winding through much of the Cascade National Forest could be treacherous if not treated with respect. Even though

he hadn't slept, he felt invigorated. There would be time to rest once Blair was safe and in his territory – and his arms, if he had anything to say about it – once again. But for now, he needed to banish all such distracting thoughts from his mind. He needed to concentrate on the mission ahead, and only when that had been accomplished successfully, could he allow himself to feel softer emotions.

Taking out the papers Brackett had provided, he studied the map, and the accompanying grainy aerial photographs, getting the details of the layout firmly imprinted in his mind's eye. With Kelso's help, he had verified the coordinates he had been given, and was as good to go as he would ever be. With a determined nod, he grabbed his pack and climbed down from the truck, locking it behind him. If all went to plan, the next time he saw his beloved vintage Ford F150, 'Sweetheart', he would have Blair with him. And if he didn't succeed, then he didn't care if he never saw the truck again, because it would mean that his Guide was dead.

Determinedly pushing such morbid thoughts aside, he shouldered his pack and set off, moving through the trees with the silence and grace of his jaguar animal spirit. And with equally deadly intent.

By the time a faint glow on the tree-covered horizon heralded the rising sun, Jim was secreted under cover on a wooded ridge overlooking the shabby compound that was the so-called 'Forest Centre'. From his vantage point, he could study most of the camp and surrounding area, so settled down to locate and memorise the CCTV cameras he could see hidden around the perimeter, timing their rotation so he knew when he had a window of opportunity to approach unnoticed. He also listened out for the faint hum of electrified fencing; pinpointing the panel he would have to access in order to disable the perimeter alarm systems. He could also see a few other traps, such as concealed tripwires strung across the more obvious approach routes, which would almost certainly be invisible to normal vision. But to the Sentinel, they stood out like ship's hawsers, and for once he was truly grateful for his gift.

But by far the most important of his heightened senses right now had to be his sense of hearing. Clutching one of Blair's hair ties to his nose in order to ground himself on his Guide's enticing scent, because a zone at this time would be catastrophic, he concentrated on listening out for the sounds he really wanted – needed – to hear. Filtering out the background humming and soft clicking noises coming from the security systems, and the natural sounds from his surroundings, he listened intently for human heartbeats. For one specific heartbeat which would tell him that his planning wasn't in vain, and that his Guide and partner was actually present and alive.

He counted no more than half a dozen unknown heartbeats, bearing out Brackett's claim that most of the personnel would have already left in order to carry out whatever mission they had planned at Cascade docks. As Lee had asserted, Jim neither wanted nor needed to know the nature of their intentions. He was simply grateful that the numbers left behind guarding Sandburg were few and should be easily dealt with. Dating back to his covert ops experience, he also knew that any holding cells in such a compound were normally sound-proofed, in order to add an extra level of sensory deprivation to already unnerved and anxious prisoners. But what constituted sound proofing to ordinary hearing was anything but for Jim. True, he had to strain to hear it, but to his infinite relief, eventually there it was. Faint but steady as if at rest, Blair's heartbeat instantly soothed him, and he realised just how much he depended on that sound. During Blair's enforced absence the loft had seemed to echo with loneliness, which is why Jim had only returned there when necessary for a shower and change of clothes. And he knew to the depths of his soul that, should he not succeed in rescuing Blair, he would never call the place 'home' again. In fact, nowhere would be a real home for the Sentinel ever again if Blair wasn't there with him.

Rebuking himself sternly for harbouring such melancholy notions, Jim shook himself and concentrated on some positive thinking. He would succeed, or die trying. There was no other way.

Mind made up and purpose firmly re-established, Jim settled himself down to wait patiently for the optimum time to carry out his mission. Knowing that it would take the best part of the day for the members

of this secretive agency to complete their task and make the return trip to the compound, he decided to wait until it was close to nightfall. He knew that at this time of year, dusk fell quickly in the Pacific North West, and the overcast, drizzly weather today would shorten daylight time even more. He would therefore bide his time and take advantage of the covering darkness, which would be no inhibition at all to sentinel sight.

Several hours later, Jim moved stealthily away from his hideout, totally focussed on his goal, and primed for action. During the seemingly interminable hours of his watch, he had taken care not to leave anything behind that could be traced to him at a later date, carefully disposing of waste and packing away every piece of trash. Now he carried on his person only that equipment he needed for the rescue attempt, having stashed his backpack in the undergrowth for retrieval on their escape.

Picking his way carefully over and around the various obstacles in his path, he reached the cleared area that lay before the compound's fence. The moonless, cloud-covered night sky offered a reasonable amount of concealment, his dark clothing and black camouflaged face paint helping him to blend in with the deep shadows. However, he was taking no chances, and waited patiently until the cameras he had noted previously were turned away from him before quickly crossing the open ground and hunkering down beside the box that housed the control panel for the electric fence. His prior experience from his black ops days, plus the added bonus of sentinel senses, allowed him to disarm the system with relative ease, so that he was then able to use wire cutters to create an entrance. Sentinel hearing told him that the only two perimeter guards were presently at the furthest point of their circuit away from him, so he swiftly crossed the compound until he reached the dilapidated cabin which hid the entrance to the underground heart of the small secret complex. From now on, according to Brackett's inside information, he knew that the complex's security would mostly rely on CCTV coverage and coded touch panels, monitored from a central station, so he was going to have to use every bit of skill he possessed to disable any and every form of electronic device that he came across if he was going to reach the holding cells undetected. A complicated system such as this had plainly been developed in order to maintain this type of complex with minimum staff, but in this instance the creators hadn't had reason to take sentinel skills into consideration, so that had to work in Jim's favour. And he wasn't going to waste a moment or the slightest of advantages.

Listening carefully, he pinpointed the other remaining personnel, gratified to confirm that his initial conclusion was correct. Apart from the two perimeter guards, there were another two in the central control station, no doubt monitoring the CCTV screens, and two others, who appeared to be in another part of the complex; probably the accommodation section. And judging by the desultory conversation going on between them, it seemed that they were packing up in readiness for leaving as soon as their colleagues returned from Cascade.

And more pleasing still, it appeared that Blair was alone in the cell block, his guards apparently satisfied with the security provided by CCTV coverage. This was most definitely doable, and the Sentinel's inner jaguar growled in grim but gleeful anticipation. The Guide would be rescued, and the sooner the better.

It was unlikely that any of the remaining personnel would afterwards recall the fleeting shadow that flitted among them, sensitive fingertips dealing with every electronic and mechanical obstacle in his path. A ghost would have been more conceivable, and when that ghost finally appeared in the control room, to disarm and disable the two men on duty, neither man ever after would be able to describe just how they came to be overcome with such ease.

But when that ghost finally presented himself in Blair's cell, the Guide had no such recognition problem.

Throwing himself into Jim's open arms, he sobbed aloud in his relief and fear.

“Oh, man! Oh, Jim! It’s so good to see you! Thank you. Thank you for coming for me!” But then reality kicked in, and he was far too honest to hold back from adding, “Jim, they know about you! And me. I swear, I *swear* I didn’t tell them, but they already knew! I’m so sorry, Jim. I’m so sorry I got myself captured so they could confirm Brackett’s theories. I did it for you, Jim. For us! And I’ve completely screwed up.”

Relishing the compact body finally encircled in his arms, Jim had to force himself to get with the programme and keep focussed. “It’s OK, Chief. Not now, all right? We’ll have time to sort this whole mess out once we’re free and clear. So stop angsting, and let’s move it, OK? And just let me add, I love you, Chief. Just so’s you know. Now, shake a leg. We need to move!”

And an astounded Blair could do nothing else but obey his Sentinel.

Although he was at less than his physical best, Blair had no intention of allowing his weakened condition to slow Jim up any more than he could help, so he gritted his teeth and followed gamely as Jim led him out of the complex. On emerging into the rustic cabin ‘front’, Jim indicated some old clothing he had previously noted, hanging up beside the door. Grabbing a dark-coloured, if oversize and dusty parka, he thrust it at his Guide, murmuring, “Put this on, Chief. It’s pretty cold out there, and that orange coverall stands out like a beacon too. And grab some boots. You won’t be getting very far in paper slippers. I have your hiking boots with me in the pack I hid in the woods, but you’ll need something in the meantime.”

Thankful for his Sentinel’s forethought, Blair picked out the smallest pair of boots he could find and quickly pulled them on. They were still too big for him, and not very comfortable, but that was of minor importance right now. Nodding to indicate his readiness, he followed closely as Jim crept cautiously out of the cabin and darted over to take cover behind the nearest ramshackle outbuilding. His starvation-weakened limbs were shaking with exertion already, and his heart thundered in his chest, but he trusted Jim to get them out, and watched with awe and no little pride as the Sentinel checked for threats, grounded by his Guide’s hand resting lightly on his shoulder. Apparently satisfied that the perimeter guards were still ignorant of the break in, Jim indicated that Blair follow him and headed at a crouching run for the gap in the fence. With his Guide almost glued to his back, he climbed through the wire, and they both sprinted across the open ground until they reached the cover of the trees.

“Watch out for booby traps, Chief,” Jim whispered. “Tread exactly where I do, and keep hold of my belt, and we should be OK. Let’s go.”

Nodding nervously, although his eyes conveyed nothing but trust in his partner, Blair did as he was bid, and they set out for the spot where Jim had secreted the backpack.

A short while later, the pair had reached their destination, and Jim retrieved his pack from its hiding place. He quickly pulled out Blair’s boots, and a thick pair of socks, and thrust them at the younger man, who had sunk down onto the damp grass, panting from a combination of exhaustion and anxiety.

“There you go, Chief. You should be more comfortable in those, and we still have a way to go before we get to where I left the truck. Are you going to be OK?”

And Blair nodded, the determination in his face warming Jim’s soul. “Yes, Jim, I’ll be fine. Promise. I won’t let you down.”

“You never do, Chief,” Jim replied with a rueful grin. “Come on, then. The quicker we get out of this vicinity the better. The dockyard raids should be over by now if they were successful, which means your friends at the compound will be on their way back. We don’t want to be anywhere close by when the balloon goes up!”

And Blair offered him a wry grin. “You’re so right, Jim. Let’s go.”

Jim held his hand out and hauled Blair to his feet. They were going to make it, of that he was sure.

Cascade Dockside, that morning:

For the umpteenth time, a glowering Simon glanced at his watch, not really to check the actual time, because he knew it was still early, but to see how much time had passed since the last time he looked. One of his team had failed to report for duty this morning, and he was growing more concerned by the minute. Although he, Megan and Joel were all present and correct, along with three FBI agents including Mulroney, Jim had failed to materialise, and it was so out of character that Simon was getting worried for his missing detective. Not that Jim wasn't late on occasion, but as yet he had never failed to call in to explain his reasons. Getting to his feet, Simon prowled restlessly around the small and unobtrusive cabin, which was located close to the unremarkable and semi-secluded warehouse where Mulroney claimed that Rostov's arms cache would be stored after being unloaded from the container ship. The same warehouse where he was sure that Rostov would come to check out his goods later that afternoon, along with potential buyers. And the same warehouse which was presently surrounded by hidden cops and agents, only waiting for the instruction from the cabin to move in and make the arrests.

Looking up from where he was idly flipping through an old magazine, Joel's genial features were strained as he tried to offer his friend some encouragement.

"I'm sure he'll be here, Simon. And if not, he must have a good reason for not calling in. Perhaps he's found something out about Blair, and is going to check it out?"

Turning to face his colleague, Simon tried to relax his expression as he met Joel's concerned gaze. "If only that were the case! I know it's been hard on Jim. Hell, it's been hard on all of us, not even turning up one single clue as to where that boy's got to! But I just wish he'd call to let me know. I have a bad feeling about this, I admit, and I'm just concerned that he might have done something stupid."

This time it was Megan who spoke, her pretty face also betraying her concern, even if her words and tone were sure and forthright.

"He wouldn't do anything like hurting himself, Captain, if that's what you're thinking. It's still only been four days since Sandy disappeared – three since we found the burnt-out wreck of that car he borrowed. Jim wouldn't give up so soon, so maybe he has discovered something, and didn't want to call in in case you tried to talk him out of following it up? It would be just like the bloody daft drongo to try and go it alone!"

"And that's what worries me!" Simon snipped back. "It *would* be just like him to go off half-cocked on his own rather than involve the department, especially if it involves something questionable. I just wish he'd trust us to back him up!"

Joel nodded in reluctant agreement, adding sadly, "But that's Jim all over, isn't it? I've never met a man with a stronger sense of honour and duty, so if he thought any of us were likely to either get hurt or have our reputations suffer because of something he feels the need to do, he'd keep it to himself. And if it's something to do with Blair, he'd be even more determined."

"Well, there's something I *can* do even if we're all stuck here for the duration! I'll call H and Rafe and get them to drop by the loft, and call me back." So saying, Simon pulled out his cell phone, and after checking for messages just in case there was something from Jim, he called H and relayed his orders.

As he finished the call, Mulroney addressed him, not even trying to disguise his disapproving grimace. "I hope Ellison isn't going to do something to jeopardise this operation, Banks. There's too much at stake to be high-jacked by your undisciplined detective going off on some self-centred, private escapade! I'd never have such a loose cannon on my team!"

Controlling his anger and disgust only with great difficulty, Simon growled in response, "You should be so lucky, Mulroney! I count my lucky stars every day for having such a loyal and honourable man in my department, and that goes for my observer too. Ellison and Sandburg have the best arrest and conviction

record of any partnership in any department in Cascade PD – maybe even in the whole damn State - and don't you forget it!"

"Whatever!" The other man shrugged dismissively, plainly unimpressed. "Just let's concentrate on closing this case successfully, then you can go off and do your own thing."

"Works for me!" Simon muttered mutinously, turning his back on Mulroney and resuming his seat as his cell phone rang. He listened for a moment, then turned to address his people, blatantly ignoring the FBI agents as he brought them up to speed.

"That was Rafe. He and H are just leaving 852 Prospect. They said that there's no one in, and Jim's truck is gone. So now we'll just have to wait. I don't intend to put out an APB yet, in case it interferes with whatever plan Jim's working on. At least for the time being anyway. But once Rostov's in the bag, I'm putting every person I can spare back on the search for Sandburg!" and he deliberately ignored the snort of disdain coming from the other side of the cabin.

At the dockside, a security guard looked on with interest as a small container ship was unloaded. It had docked on schedule, and the unloading was already well underway. A tiny smile of approval crossed the guard's face as he watched a certain container being hoisted aloft, ready to be transported to its place of storage. *So far so good.* The guard, aka Lee Brackett, turned to amble nonchalantly back towards his small office. A word in the right ear had ensured that the combined FBI and Cascade PD task force was in place, so now all he had to do was make sure that Rostov and his cronies appeared on time. He chuckled softly to himself as he walked. He really liked it when a plan came together.

And now for the next part, he thought. One down, one to go.

On reaching the office, he checked that he was alone before pulling out an untraceable cell phone. Pressing number one on speed dial, he called the only number listed, unsurprised when it was answered after the first ring.

"Brackett. Where are you?" Mr Black's clipped tones sounded in his ear.

"In my office, sir. Everything's going to plan so far. The ship docked on time, unloading's going on as we speak, and the container of interest has just been taken off. Mulroney and team are in place at the designated warehouse, and all I have to do is contact Rostov and tell him he's good to go. He thinks Mulroney is staking out another warehouse out beyond the business district downtown. Your target will arrive at the same time with Rostov's group, so you'll be able to intercept him on his way to the ship."

"That will be satisfactory, Mr Brackett. My men are also in place and will watch both the warehouse and the ship. I don't anticipate any difficulties in intercepting the target as planned.

"By the way," he added, as if as an afterthought. "That other little package is of interest to me, and will be coming with me. I just thought you might like to know," and he terminated the call, leaving Lee gazing at the instrument in his hand in bemusement for a moment. So, young Blair had caught Black's attention, had he? Not really surprising, he thought cynically. If he didn't know differently, he'd feel sorry for the kid. A life lived under Black's thumb wouldn't be anything to envy, for sure.

But if everything had gone to plan, Ellison should have arrived at the Forest Centre by now, and hopefully Sandburg would soon be free once again. And what happened after that wasn't Lee's problem anymore.

Several hours later, Lee was on the move again. At the appointed hour, he left his office, casually ambling across the dockside towards the far end of the container yard. Sure enough, right on time a convoy of three limousines drew up next to one of the entrances, and with a genial smile, Lee moved forward to open

up the gates. His relaxed demeanour was belied by the sharp-eyed inspection of all the vehicles and their occupants, but his grin was genuine as he ushered them through. All present and correct. *Not long now.*

He watched carefully as the cars pulled up outside the warehouse, and one of Rostov's minions jumped out to open the big sliding doors so that the vehicles could enter. Once inside, a small, undistinguished figure dressed in labourer's clothing and carrying a battered duffel climbed out of Rostov's limo, and slipped through the door without a backward glance, to stroll nonchalantly back across the yard towards the ship. The mole was on his way, but he was never going to reach his destination. Mr Black and his team would make sure of that.

Meanwhile, the other limos disgorged their passengers, and Lee noted with satisfaction that one of the potential buyers was none other than Kwan Li Chan, a Triad warlord whose criminal empire stretched from Seattle to San Francisco. Mulroney should be well pleased if he could carry this off.

Lee watched from the rear of the building as the group approached the pile of crates that had been unloaded from the container earlier in the day. Labelled as 'machine parts', he sniggered to himself as Rostov instructed his men to open the nearest one, unsurprised when the group gathered round to admire the contents. Sure enough, even from where he stood, Lee could see that the crate held a large quantity of both top-of-the-range automatic and assault rifles at the very least. All that was needed now was for a deal to be struck, and the trap could be sprung. Time to go.

Slipping unobtrusively out of the building, Lee disappeared silently into the shadowed maze of narrow gaps left between the stacks of containers in the large yard, making his way unerringly towards another small cabin where he had stashed everything he needed. Within the hour, a nondescript, bespectacled mousy-haired man was leaving the harbour area unremarked, to disappear without trace.

Lee Brackett was gone.

Back at the warehouse, and completely unaware of Brackett's departure, Mulroney, Banks and their team made their move. After a brief but vicious fire fight, Rostov and his surviving men were in custody, as were the few remaining Triad members. The others had fallen, as had Kwan Li Chan, but since only one of the good guys had been wounded, and not too seriously, it was considered to be a good result. A relieved Simon left a very smug Mulroney to deal with the clean-up, and, gathering his team together, made haste to return to the PD, intending to start the search for the still missing Ellison. After one hell of a day, it was going to be a very long night, but no one even thought of going home. They had friends to find.

Epilogue:

Six months later, Vancouver, British Columbia:

Waking suddenly from a deep and restful sleep, Jim automatically reached across the big bed for his Guide and now lover, only to find that Blair's side of the bed was empty. However, the residual warmth told Jim that his lover hadn't been gone that long, so he opened his senses to locate the young man, tracking him to the balcony of their new, shared apartment. A faint trace of saline and whiff of distress was all he needed to know that Blair had had another of his flashbacks, and was probably trying not to disturb Jim. Sighing in fond exasperation, Jim rolled out of bed and pulled on his robe, intending to offer the comfort that Blair desperately needed, but was still often too shy to ask for.

Although Jim knew Blair was working hard to overcome it, he was still suffering from PTSD from his kidnapping and ill-treatment at the hands of Mr Black and his agency, and as he kept telling Blair, it wasn't something that would just go away. Having said that, since they had relocated to Vancouver, the flashbacks and panic attacks were gradually growing fewer and further between, so Jim considered that real progress

was being made even if Blair couldn't see it, and was sometimes prone to bouts of depression and self-disgust.

As he made his way across the comfortable yet airy loft apartment, Jim briefly considered the changes they had made to their lifestyle in order to accommodate Blair's anxiety, thinking to himself that all in all, he was totally in favour of everything they had done. Of course, the move to Vancouver was a major decision, but he liked the apartment they had found together, which even had a balcony from which they had a spectacular view of the city. And although it was light, it wasn't overly so, as Blair still had trouble with sudden and unexpected flashes of brightness which reminded him only too acutely of the episodes of manhandling and near-suffocation he had had to endure during his captivity and conditioning. Likewise, he had also learned to hate pitch black, so Jim had ensured that there were plenty of night lights scattered about so that the apartment was never completely dark even in the dead of night. He knew Blair was often embarrassed about his fears, claiming that he was acting like a big baby, but Jim always reassured him that it was no problem, and was even good for him too, as his senses truly appreciated the muted lighting.

Reaching the balcony, he quickly scanned his lover, who was standing with arms folded protectively across his chest, staring off into space. He was obviously chilled, despite the thick terry robe he had pulled on over his sleep sweats, and Jim could easily see the slight tremors rattling the smaller man's frame as well as the gooseflesh on exposed skin. Jim opened the sliding door, deliberately making enough noise so that Blair wouldn't be startled by a silent approach, and moved up behind his lover. Wrapping his arms around the slender waist, he gently tugged Blair back to lean against his chest, pleased when Blair complied without demur.

Snuggling into the warm embrace, and relishing the feel of strong but gentle arms around him, Blair covered Jim's forearms with his chilled hands, and settled more comfortably before tilting his head up to glance sheepishly up into Jim's warm eyes.

"Sorry, man. I didn't mean to wake you, but I guess it's pretty unrealistic of me to keep trying, huh?"

"Hush, Chief," Jim replied in gentle reproach. "You know I don't mind being woken when you need me. Even if it's just for a reassuring cuddle, I'm happy to offer my services. But what was it this time? It must have been a doozy of a dream to send you out here in the cold."

Looking away again, Blair nodded slightly, his eyes bleak. "Yeah, man. It was. A real bad-ass nightmare I could do without."

"Wanna tell me about it, babe? You know it always seems to help when you talk about these things."

Blair paused for a moment, obviously engaging in a brief internal argument before glancing back again. "OK, man. If you're sure you don't mind?" And at Jim's encouraging nod, he continued.

"Well, you know I told you about how they used to put that sack over my head and pour water over me until I thought I would suffocate? It was the worst feeling, man. I mean, I thought I was like, drowning on dry land, and it scared the shit out of me. Usually when I dream about it, I dream that they go too far, and that they don't stop in time, and I'm dead, man. Helluva way to wake up," he added sadly, attempting a wry grin before sobering again.

"But this was far worse. This time they made me watch while they did it to you. And I couldn't do anything about it. I was tied to a chair facing you, and I couldn't move, man. And they started to pour the water over you, and they didn't stop. They didn't intend to. And they just laughed at me screaming for them to stop, and made me watch while you died. Oh, man," he sobbed, his tears beginning to fall anew as he paused for breath. "It was so bad, Jim. So bad..." and his voice broke as he tailed off into painful silence.

"Well, shit, Chief. No wonder you're upset." Jim kept his voice soft and soothing, even though he was hurting on Blair's behalf. Wishing that Black and his cronies could be consigned to the depths of hell for

what they had done to his gentle Guide, he did his best to offer what comfort he could. Squeezing his partner gently, he leaned down and kissed Blair's throat and cheek, lapping up the salt tears before continuing.

"I know it's easy for me to say, babe, but try not to dwell on it. We're here, I'm here, safe and sound, and I intend to stay that way for a very long time. We've done all we can to protect ourselves from those bastards, so let's just do the best we can to enjoy the life we've made for ourselves, OK?"

And Blair nodded again as he whispered in reply. "OK, man, I'll try, I promise."

"Good enough, babe. Want to come in yet?"

"Not just yet, if you don't mind, Jim? I'm warmer now you're here, and if it's OK with you, I'd just like to stand here a while and process a bit longer."

"No problem, babe. Take your time," and Jim dropped a kiss on the curly crown beneath his chin, settling down to give his lover as much time as he needed. It was a good opportunity for him to contemplate the events of the past few months also, so he relaxed into the soothing thrumming of his lover's steadfast heart and let his thoughts run free.

Six months previously, Jack Kelso's apartment:

Hearing a pre-arranged code word muttered through his intercom, Jack glanced at his private CCTV screen to positively identify his visitors, enormously relieved to see Jim and Blair. He buzzed them in immediately, waiting at the door to welcome them. Although he was far too professional to let his emotions show on his face, he was distressed at the sight that met his eyes when he opened the door and ushered them in. A hard-eyed and coldly-focussed Jim had his arm wrapped possessively around Blair's shoulders, and Jack was deeply concerned at the state of his young friend. Blair was haggard and pale, plainly exhausted, and dressed in hiking boots, a dirty and disreputable parka over torn and filthy orange coveralls. He looked ready to drop, and Jack quickly wheeled his chair out of the way and over to the nearest sofa.

"Get him over here, Jim. I can't tell you how glad I am to see you both, but first things first. Blair," he said, addressing the younger man directly. "I have some clean clothes that should fit you, and some PJs also. I'll get you a hot drink, then I suggest that you have a hot shower and then get some sleep. You look all in, my friend."

Blair managed to rouse himself enough to offer Jack a wan grin. "Thanks, man. I know you helped Jim in his search for me, and I can't tell you how much I appreciate it. How much we both appreciate it. But I'm sorry, man. I'm nearly asleep on my feet here. Can I skip the drink and get straight to the shower and bed bit?"

Jack couldn't restrain the small, understanding grin that pulled at his lips as he studied the younger man. He had always believed that there was far more to Sandburg than met the eye at first glance, and now he knew for sure. The kid might look down and out, but he was still there. Still functioning whatever had been done to him, and Jack just had to give him credit.

"No problem, kiddo. Jim knows where everything is, so try and rest. We can deal with everything else in the morning."

Jim recalled how he had led Blair into Jack's bathroom, helping him undress before leaving to let him shower in private. However, he had barely turned back the bed in readiness when he heard the muffled sound of sobbing which Blair was clearly trying to hide beneath the sound of the running water. During his captivity, Blair had refused to cry, however much he had been hurt and afraid, but now it was all hitting

him at once and he couldn't hold back. And there was no way Jim was going to let him suffer alone, even if his Guide didn't appreciate it. Without further ado, he had opened the bathroom door, stripped off his own grubby clothing and stepped into the shower to take Blair in his arms. And to his intense satisfaction, Blair hadn't rebuffed him, but had clung to him with a fierce desperation, so very grateful to be alive and in his partner's arms at last.

That night, despite Blair's exhaustion, Jim had made gentle love to him, and awoke to the sight and feel of his Guide's beautiful body draped over him, the tousled, curly head tucked into his shoulder while one arm encircled his waist and his thighs were trapped by the leg thrown across him. Even in sleep it appeared that Blair didn't want to let him go, and Jim had no intention of ever trying to get away now from this beloved captivity. Blair was his now, as he always should have been, and Jim belonged to Blair. And that was how it was going to be from now on.

Later the following morning, Jim, Blair and Jack had pooled their ideas and come up with a workable plan of action. It was going to mean big changes for Sentinel and Guide, but despite Blair's real concerns about what Jim in particular would have to give up, Jim had no such qualms. Yes, the decisions they had made during their intense discussion would inevitably cause an upheaval in both their lives, but as he pointed out to Blair, he didn't hold his Guide responsible for that. They had both made mistakes, but had both been victims of agencies out of their control, but as long as they stayed together, Jim was sure they'd make it, with help from good friends like Kelso.

And he could hardly forget the contribution made by Simon and his colleagues at the PD either.

While Jim had been taking care of Blair that night, a reluctant Kelso had contacted Simon at Jim's insistence. He wanted his boss and friend to know that he and Blair were safe enough for the moment, but had also insisted that no one else should be informed just yet as to where they were, or their condition. All anyone needed to know right then was that the partners had been located, and that the search could be called off. Simon had been as good as his word, and had passed on the briefest of messages to his unit, but had also in his turn insisted on visiting Jack so he could see for himself that his best team were indeed safe and as sound as could be expected. He had therefore been present for the better part of their discussion, and had been fully briefed on what Jim and Blair had decided.

Jim smiled a little ruefully to himself as he recalled the big captain's response, knowing that their choices had hit his friend hard. But Simon had resolutely pushed aside his own reactions and feelings in deference to what he realised were the only real options available to his friends, especially when faced with the physical evidence of Blair's condition before his very eyes.

And he had controlled his own outrage with considerable fortitude as he had listened to Jim's words, Blair having long since retreated into uncharacteristic but understandable silence.

"The thing is, Simon, that whatever clandestine agency kidnapped Blair was already aware of the sentinel phenomenon, thanks to Brackett. They knew about me, but apparently didn't consider reactivating my commission because in their eyes I'm past my sell-by date. But they might well be interested in locating other, younger recruits with the same gifts, and for that they need Blair's input as the nearest thing to an expert they know about. So what I – we – have decided is that I'm going to go public about the senses. I fully realise that I can't be a cop in Cascade any longer. I'll be too much of a target for those low-lives who want to make a name for themselves taking the 'super-cop' down. And I don't want to have to deal with all the testing and reassessment that would have to take place in the judicial system to allow any evidence I submit to be accepted in court.

“So I want Blair to submit his diss and get his doctorate. I want it to be as public as possible. Because if Blair becomes a *bona fide* professor, and a celebrity to boot, it’ll be that much harder to snatch him again. And if we’re over the border in British Columbia, it’ll be that much harder still.

“So we’ve decided to relocate to Vancouver as soon as we can. I’ll hand in my formal resignation immediately, and Blair will get stuck in to completing his paper. It won’t be easy keeping under cover, but Jack has agreed to let us stay here for the time being, and has called in a few favours in order to keep us protected. I’m sorry it has to be this way, Simon, but it’s just the way things have turned out. And we’re prepared to make the most of it.”

Simon hadn’t answered immediately, plainly hard hit by Jim’s revelations. But when he spoke, both Jim and Blair had cause to feel the utmost gratitude and respect for their friend.

“Shit, Jim! This is hard to take. But having seen what I’ve seen over the last few weeks, I think I do understand. Mulroney, Rostov and this mysterious group have all been played one way or another by Lee Brackett, and MCU have been dragged along for the ride. So much for law enforcement and intelligence agencies cooperating, huh? But one thing I will say. I may not be able to make it official, but I think I can guarantee that there’ll be plenty of volunteers willing to do protection duty for you both in their free time. All I have to do is pass the word.

“But what will you do in Vancouver if you can’t be a cop? What will Blair do?”

And Jim had smiled affectionately at his old friend, even as he had hugged his Guide to his side.

“Why, I think I might sign up as a security consultant, Simon. Who better than an ex-cop, and a Sentinel one at that? And I feel sure that the University will open its arms to an acclaimed Doctor of Anthropology, don’t you?”

And so it had turned out. It hadn’t been easy, and both of them had lived on their nerves over the following weeks, but they had achieved their goal at last. Blair had submitted his paper, which was accepted with the highest accolades. The subject matter, as Jim had predicted, had caught the public’s imagination, such that they both experienced rather more than fifteen minutes of fame. They had travelled to Vancouver, and rented an apartment while they looked for one of their own, during which time Jim had applied for and been accepted as a consultant to a large and well-respected security company. As he had told a still anxious and uncertain Blair, it was just another way of protecting the tribe, even if it was another city and another occupation. One which furthermore took him out of the firing line, for which Blair was extremely grateful.

As for Blair, as Jim had also predicted, he had been accepted as adjunct Professor of Anthropology at the U, with a strong likelihood of tenure not too far down the line, so he was looking forward to taking up his new position in the Fall.

They kept in touch with their friends and colleagues at the PD, and Megan had rented the loft with a view to buying it if her application for US citizenship was successful. So all in all they had much to be grateful for, and were probably as safe as they could be as far as the government and its agencies were concerned.

But Blair still had to face his demons on a daily basis, and for that, Jim could never forgive Black and his ‘untouchables’.

Feeling Blair stir in his arms, he quickly turned the younger man around to face him. “Ready to go in now, Chief? It’s getting pretty cold out here even for me.”

And Blair smiled fondly up at him, even if his eyes still held traces of sadness. "Sorry, big guy. Yeah, I'm ready to go in. Can you hold me for while though? Until I get to sleep?"

"Always and forever, babe. You don't have to ask," and Jim led his partner back up to their room, there to love him until he purred with satisfaction.

Long minutes later, a warm and sated Blair cuddled close to an equally smug and sated Jim. "Oh, man! This is as good as it gets, man. Couldn't get any better. Thank you, lover. Thank you so much. For everything."

And Jim just had to agree.

Sitting alone in his office in an anonymous building in Washington DC, Mr Black closed the file he was reading, and put it to one side. So Sandburg and his Sentinel had crossed the border had they? Well, why not? Neither man was a fool, and Black should have expected as much. In a way, he actually respected them to a certain extent, even though they had bested him this time around. But he was a patient man. He could wait. And when he got the chance, he would make the most of it. If he and his masters in the government decided that there was a future in recruiting personnel with enhanced senses, then he intended to make certain they got the best training and advice available. And that meant Dr Blair Sandburg.

But for now, let them enjoy what freedom they could. They'd earned it, after all.

Lazing on his lounge on a sun-kissed beach in his island paradise, Lee Brackett sipped his ice-cold Marguerita and grinned at his charming and nubile female companion. She preened visibly at his glance, but had she known it, his thoughts weren't on his latest squeeze. Instead, he was thinking of an ex-lover and his Guide, and of the latest news he had received concerning them.

He was quietly gratified that Jim had managed to rescue Blair after all. And that they had taken the sensible course and left Cascade. He had grown fond of the pair in a bizarre way, and despite everything that had happened between them he wished them well. He harboured no illusions about himself and his self-centredness, but in this one instance he had cause to feel just a little pride.

Let the Sentinel and his Guide enjoy their freedom. And let them both remember on occasion that they owed that freedom to Lee Brackett.

THE END.