
SENTINEL REVERSE BANG 2012

Volume 2

Challenge hosted by sentinelbigbang.com

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FUN AND FAMILY IN VEGAS (ARIESTESS)7

Genre: Slash (Jim/Blair), Crossover (CSI: Crime Scene Investigation, The Division, Women's Murder Club)

Rating: PG

Warnings (story): None

Wordcount: 3,700

Author's Note: What You Need to Know: About five and half years ago, Jim and Blair discovered that there were others like them. Not the hell that Alexis put them through, but sane women, bonded tightly to one another. Blair and the other Guide, a woman named Catherine, made the arrangements for their Sentinels to meet. Dace is a powerful businesswoman with the soul of a wild cat that lives in Las Vegas. When she met the boys, she wore Jim out and Blair got some lovin' too. Now, each of the men have children to meet, many years later.

Summary: Years ago, Jim and Blair had a positive encounter with a female Sentinel. Now they get to meet their kids during a fun weekend in Vegas.

THE LAZOX CONNECTION (MORGAN BRIARWOOD AND FLITTERFLUTTERFLY).....17



Genre: Slash (Jim/Blair), AU, Sci-Fi

Rating: NC17

Warnings (artwork): None.

Warnings (story): Violence, Explicit Sexual Activities (m/m)

Wordcount: 12,000

Author's Note: Beta'd by Bluewolf. For the Sentinel Reverse Big Bang and the two beautiful pieces by Morgan (briarwood). Some of the space aspect is based on Star Trek, but some also is my own creation.

Summary: When the starship *Cascade* crash lands on the mysterious, swamp planet of Qecban, the empathic diplomat Blair is separated from the crew and lost in the jungle alone against unknown predators. There he meets a native called J'm and through learning his tragic stories and his way of life is opened to a new type of emotional connection.

BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY (BETH AND CAITRIONA).....47



Genre: Gen, drama

Rating: PG13/T

Warnings (artwork): None

Warnings (story): None.

Wordcount: 5,600

Summary: Jim and Blair never seem to be able to make it through a vacation without tripping over a case. Even a simple fishing trip turns into a busman's holiday.

UNAUTHORIZED AFFAIR (LAPETITE KIKI).....61

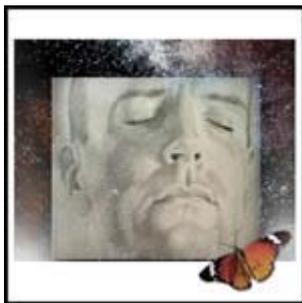


Genre: Slash (Jim/Blair)

Rating: R

Warnings (artwork): not work safe

CHRYSALIS (HELVETICA4EVER AND MAB BROWNE).....62



Genre: Slash (Jim/Blair), AU, Sci-Fi

Rating: mature

Warnings (artwork): None.

Warnings (story): sex, mature themes and language

Wordcount: 24,700

Summary: Jim Ellison has five enhanced senses and a secret. When he decides to flee the planet Cubero on the space hauler Monarch, his secret puts both Jim and the hauler's owner, Blair Sandburg, in danger.

HOSTAGE (PATT).....121

Genre: Slash

Rating: M

Warnings (story): Angst

Wordcount: 2,500

Summary: Jim wants to protect Blair at all costs and he doesn't care what he has to do.

THE LAND OF TEARS (BETH AND ENIGMATICBLUES).....128



Genre: Slash

Rating: PG-13

Warnings (artwork): None.

Warnings (story): Descriptions of torture.

Wordcount: 6,600

Author's Note: Title from *The Little Prince*:

"I did not know what to say to him. I felt awkward and blundering. I did not know how I could reach him, where I could overtake him and go on hand in hand with him once more. It is such a secret place, the land of tears." ~Antoine de Saint-Exupéry

Summary: After a tough case, Jim knows they need to get away.

A DISMANTLED LIFE (PATT AND DEBBIE T).....145



Genre: Gen, Angst

Rating: PG13

Warnings (artwork): None

Warnings (story): Violence, angst

Wordcount: 4,500

Summary: When a perfect vacation gets interrupted, Jim and Blair both struggle to return life to normal. Will they see each other again? Or is it the end of Sentinel and Guide?

THE COLDEST WINTER
(BANBURY/ANNIEB).....157



Genre: Slash (Jim/Blair), angst, h/c, post-TSbyBS

Rating: M

Warnings (artwork): None

Warnings (story): None

Wordcount: 5,400

Author's Note: Thank you to Banbury for the wonderfully evocative art, Patt for the wonderful cheerleading, Lyn for the fantastic beta and constant encouragement and brainstorming when I almost gave up on this, and Morgan for organizing this shindig and for being patient with me. The disorder mentioned towards the end of this story really does exist.

Summary: She's determined to get him back. Nothing will stop her. Not hell, high water, or Blair Sandburg.

UPON A MOUNTAIN'S EDGE (PETE PAULOS AND LAURIE_KY).....169



Genre: Slash (Jim/Blair) Future Sci-Fi classist society

Rating: Mature

Warnings (artwork): Semi Nudity. (Bare chest)

Warnings (story): Rape

Wordcount: 37,000

Author's Note: My utmost thanks go to the people who made this story possible: the mods, Patt and Morgan, for their hard work (and for granting me an extension), Patt for being the best cheerleader, Bluewolf for the fantastic and speedy beta, and Pete, for the dreamy artwork.

Summary: Book Three in [A Glimmering From Afar series](#). A task force created to put a stop to the human trafficking of bastards to fund a terrorist group asks for Jim's and Blair's help, using a sweet-root and stick approach. If they agree, they will be risking their bond, their lives, and for Blair, his mind and body.

INTO AFRICA (AERYIANYA AND BRYNNH).....249



Genre: Gen

Rating: Teen

Warnings (artwork): None

Warnings (story): None

Wordcount: 12,300

Author's Note: Not a crossover, though some NCIS characters make a cameo appearance (not at all necessary to know NCIS)

Summary: While in Africa on an expedition, Blair finds a man that changes his life.

FUN AND FAMILY IN VEGAS

STORY BY A. MAGILUNA STORMWRITER

(08-31-07)

The minute we stepped off the plane, I know this isn't going to be a normal weekend getaway. Okay, I knew that before I ever stepped foot on the private jet that Dace sent for us, but that's beside the point, right?

"What the hell possessed us to agree to come to Vegas in August, Chief?" I ask as we relax in the back of the limo winding its way through the late morning traffic.

"The chance to finally meet our kids?"

Blair is leaning back into the plush seat of the limo, fingers laced over his stomach and a blissed out smile on his face. I know his eyes are closed despite the dark sunglasses covering them. I haven't lived with this man for the last eleven years without learning a few of his habits. Without hesitation, I reach over to rest a hand on his, taking solace from his familiarity.

"You know, it's okay to be nervous to meet them, Jim," he says after a moment or two. "I'm totally terrified to meet them. It's still really weird to even think of myself as a dad, you know?"

"I know. I just hope they like us."

Blair chuckles and shifts to twine his fingers with mine. "Do you really think they won't like you?" He pushes his sunglasses up onto his forehead to study me. "You're a great guy, Jim."

"I'm not good with kids, you know that."

He squeezes my fingers tightly and shakes his head. "You don't have a lot of experience, no, but you are good with kids, whether you'll admit it or not."

I snort softly and lean back in a poor imitation of his relaxed pose. The muted sounds of the Las Vegas traffic filter through the glass, and I find myself more grounded into myself by the familiarity. My eyes drift shut and I try to remember the last set of pictures that Dace and Catherine sent to us of the triplets. Was it their birthday party?

"Mr. Ellison? Mr. Sandburg?" The petite chauffeur's voice comes over the intercom, pulling me up from a surprisingly restful nap. "We're here."

I tug on our still-entwined hands to wake Blair. I swear, he could sleep through a bomb raid sometimes. He grumbles under his breath and turns to curl into my side. For a moment, I relish the nearness of him, but I know we can't put this off forever.

"Thank you," I call out as the engine goes silent. I can hear the driver's door open, followed by her soft footfalls. "Come on, Chief, wake up. It's time to go see Dace again and meet the kids." When he doesn't make any moves to get up, I lean over and flick the diamond stud in his exposed earlobe.

"Five more minutes," he mutters, batting at his ear. I repeat the movement, a little harder this time, and he opens his eyes to glare at me. "Damn it, Jim! You know I hate it when you do that."

I grin and shrug, running my hand through the riot of curly hair in apology. "I had to get you up somehow, and I doubt you'd have wanted the driver to witness how I wake you up at home. Or am I wrong about that?" I pause to check on her whereabouts. "She's grabbing the bags from the trunk. I can get you going before she gets that door opened."

"You're a sick, sick man, Jim Ellison," he replies, batting at my hands. The grin on his face belies his words.

"And you wouldn't have me any other way."

I lean in to brush my lips against his and pull his sunglasses down as the door opens. There's the faintest of blushes on the driver's face as she catches us smooching. Gotta love the pale skin on those redheads! We step out of the car into the heavy late summer Las Vegas heat. As Blair takes the opportunity to stretch, I glance around out of habit.

The House of Hearts building certainly stands out from the others in this sleepy little industrial park. While the other buildings look to be part of the manufacturing industry, this ten-story building of glass is practically a skyscraper. Oh, it wouldn't stand up to anything on the Strip, but it certainly towers over everything else around here.

"If you'll follow me," the driver says -- what was her name again? -- and heads into the building, dragging the luggage cart behind her with our bags and packages for the kids.

The jungle aspect of the main entryway's atrium, spanning two stories easily, is both a surprise and strangely comforting. All it's missing is the trilling bird calls and some of the undergrowth, and I'd swear we were back in the jungles of Peru. An image of Alexis Barnes pops up in my mind's eye, and I have to consciously force it back behind the door that is better left locked and undisturbed. Especially right now.

"--the two men to see the King of Hearts."

Dace's strange title only adds to the sense of confusion and nervousness I'm feeling. Blair and I willingly submit to the security procedures required to enter this building, and then we're ushered into a key-carded elevator. The ride up to the ninth floor is quick and the A/C wicks away the sticky heat of the outdoor world. When the doors open, we're met by another trio of the security people that look remarkably similar to the Secret Service. Of course, given Dace's job and some of the rumored clientele of the Four Suits, perhaps that comparison isn't exactly incorrect.

The striking woman in a tailored suit turns to face us, calculation in her dark eyes as she studies us. The driver steps out of the elevator long enough to talk to the woman. "Hey, Renata," she says. "These are the men to see the King."

"Cindy, you made good time getting back. Nice. Do Tom and Aaron need to clear their bags?"

Cindy. I can remember that. Can't I? And where is that delicious scent of roast beef coming from? I can practically see the drool forming in Blair's mouth.

"Nope. Jeff and Sara got it downstairs, along with any personal belongings on them. I'm taking the luggage straight up to the guest suites. Not even leaving the elevator here."

Renata nods and gestures us forward with a hand. "Welcome to the ninth floor, gentlemen," she says as we step out into the entryway. "If you'll just follow me, I can take you into the main offices." She narrows her eyes and stares at Blair for a moment. "Looks like Frenchie's working her magic on the two of you already." There's a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. "We'll get you checked in with Darcy, and then I'll take you over to the cafeteria."

Blair grins at the thought of food and rubs his hands together. "I'm down with that. Lead the way."

Renata chuckles and swipes her card to open the glass doors, motioning for us to step inside. The elevator doors whisper closed behind us and we move just a little closer to meeting the triplets. She leads us to the largest of a group of desks, where a lovely young brunette is sitting.

"Darcy, I have Messieurs Ellison and Sandburg to see the King. Have they finished that conference call yet?"

Darcy shakes her head, and I can tell she's resisting the urge to roll her eyes. "Not yet, but I'm hoping it'll be soon. Tessa's already had to shift several of Anastasia's afternoon calls." She turns to face us next, a bright smile on her face. "Hello, gentlemen. I'm Darcy, Dace's Executive Assistant. I apologize that she's not available to meet with you just yet, but her call is taking longer than planned."

As Blair takes her hand and tries to be the gallant flirt, I can hear Renata muttering under her breath in Spanish about the guy on the call. Darcy twitters at some piece of flattery that Blair is offering her. If I didn't know his flirting was harmless, I'd be a really jealous bastard. And she is a very pretty girl.

And then Blair's stomach decides to join the conversation, reasserting its place of primacy in his list of priorities: food, pretty girls, and me. I don't bother to hide my chuckle. "Better be careful that beast doesn't try to nibble on the locals, Chief."

Before Blair can formulate more than a glare in my direction, Renata steps in. "Darcy, I'm going to take them over to the cafeteria. Will you page me when Dace is ready for them?"

"I'll probably just send her over, to be honest," Darcy replies with a knowing grin. "She's been messaging me every few minutes since Cindy left to get a status update."

Thank God for Frenchie and her fantastic food. Blair's spent the last forty-five minutes working his way through samples of every single dish she's making today for the employees and the kids in the daycare. When Frenchie brings out another full tray of food, Blair groans and shakes his head.

"Oh man, Frenchie, I can't eat another bite."

"This isn't for you, silly!" she says with a roll of her eyes. "This is for the boss lady. She'll be down here in just a few minutes." And then the door slams into the wall. "Or now."

This is only the second time that I've seen Dace since the triplets were conceived five years ago, almost to the day. I suck in a breath, preparing for the rush of animal need that accompanied our last meeting. When it doesn't come, I let out said breath gratefully.

"It's because she has dependent cubs, Jim," Blair mutters in a tone low enough that only I -- and Dace -- will hear him.

She looks exhausted, dark circles clinging beneath her pale eyes, and her hair has grown back in nicely to cover the vast majority of the livid red scars on the side of her head. The glint of silver on her brow reminds me of the damage Snake-Eyes had wreaked on her. Thankfully, she's not looking so damned emaciated like she had been. The healthy slenderness suits her as she stalks closer to the table, a trio of women following in her wake. I recognize Catherine instantly, but the other two seem only dimly familiar from that get together at the White House.

"Frenchie, have I told you how much I love you lately?" she asks as she takes the plate held out toward her, dropping into a seat with feline fluidity.

"If it weren't for Catherine, you'd be asking for my daddy's permission to marry me, I know," comes the reply as Frenchie heads back into the kitchen. "Blah, blah, blah. Just eat."

Dace chuckles and tackles the burrito on her plate. The woman barely seems to chew, practically inhaling the food. She could give Blair a run for his money. As she swallows the last bite, she grins sheepishly at us.

"Sorry, guys, but we've been on that call for the last three hours, and I was starving before the call."

"Don't worry about it, Dace," Blair says and gets up to wrap her in a quick hug, then follows suit with Catherine. "It's great to see you both again." He pauses and offers his hand to the other two women. "Tessa, Lady Heartsblood."

Dace's sudden knowing chuckle makes me realize that I'm telegraphing my fond annoyance for Blair's flirting again.

"Oh, hush, dear boy. You're family, call me Anastasia." The reply is accompanied with a gentle cuff to his upper arm. Tessa just smiles and giggles. "Do sit down."

"Actually, you guys wanna meet the kids?" Dace asks, filling her plate with a few other things as Frenchie brings out travel mugs of coffee for her and Catherine. "If you don't mind, Anastasia?"

Anastasia waves her hand in Dace's direction as she chews a mouthful of her salad. When she finally swallows, she says, "Go ahead, Dace. I can take care of the rest of the calls today. Say hello to the children for me, will you?"

"You got it!" Dace is instantly on her feet, Blair following after her eagerly. I finish my coffee before standing and nod my head toward the three women of the House of Hearts. "Ladies, it has been a pleasure. Renata, thank you for keeping us company while we waited for Dace."

"It was my pleasure, Mr. Ellison," she replies with a warm smile, but there's a tightness around her eyes. "But you and Catherine should catch up to them before they leave without you. Dace is clearly in a mood today."

Heading out of the cafeteria, Catherine and I make our way toward the bank of elevators where our respective partners are waiting impatiently. I chuckle when Catherine mutters something about the impetuosity of youth; having a lover so many years younger than you can be taxing at times.

"Unca Dace!"

The chorus of voices greets us as we walk into the on-site daycare center and school on the fifth floor. More children than can possibly be part of Dace's extended pack clamor around her and Catherine, and she greets them all by name, but makes a beeline for the trio coloring in the far corner.

Without realizing I'm even doing it, I dial up my hearing a little to focus on these kids with their backs to me. I recognize their scents from Dace and Catherine's clothing, but

I'm rooted in place with a strange kind of fear. A glance at Blair confirms that he's feeling the same way.

"Dace, the quiet room's open, if you'd like some privacy," says a young brunette. She's far more of the girl-next-door pretty than the other brunettes I've met so far, but still very pretty. "I'll get Boo out of class and send her in. Do you want me to pull Emily and her twins, too?"

"That would be great. Thanks, Rosie," Dace replies. "Come on, guys, we'll go in here."

She leads the way with the trio of children, Catherine following behind them. Once they're inside the room, Dace sticks her head back out and waits while the brunette disappears through another door leading out of this large room. She returns in just a moment with a quartet of children. The oldest and youngest -- redhead and brunette respectively -- stop to stare at me. The younger one runs off into Dace's open embrace, while the two middle children tug at the redhead. And then it hits me. This must be the first Sentinel child they'd discovered, Dace's niece.

Taking a deep breath, I squeeze Blair's shoulder and we head toward the room Catherine and Dace entered with the children. Stepping into the room, I immediately dial down all of my senses to a more tolerable level. The redhead is still staring intently at me, completely ignoring everything the two older children are saying to her.

I can't quite look at my kids just yet. I've been waiting for this day for four years, but now I'm terrified they won't like me, won't want to have anything to do with me.

"Okay, I think it's introduction time," Dace says brightly, then glances over at the redhead. With a sigh, she stalks over and grabs the girl in a headlock, forcing a squeak of surprise out of her. "Are you done?"

"What?" comes the confused reply. "Sorry, Uncle Dace, I--"

"I know, and I'm stopping it for now. Do we need to send you back to class and wait for your mom and Kryn to be here for this?"

The girl shakes her head. "No, I'll be okay. Fawn can help."

"Fawn's been trying to help," her friend says archly. "You haven't been listening to me, Em'ly. You're supposed to listen to your Guide, you know." Blair and Catherine both chuckle at that, causing the girl to freeze for a moment. Then her eyes narrow and she points at Blair. "You're like me, and Aunt Catherine, and Rose, aren't you?"

Blair glances at Dace, waiting until she nods to take a step forward. "If you're her Guide, then yes, I am. My name is Blair. And you must be Fawn and Emily, right?" When the girls nod, he smiles and points at the boy. "Which means you're Cubby."

When he says it, I realize that the little boy has sidled over to hide behind this older boy, Cubby.

"Jim, Blair, meet Emily, Fawn, and Cubby, the oldest of the new Sentinel and Guide pairings, plus their anchor, who is Fawn's twin. He doesn't necessarily have the abilities, but he works in a pinch when Emily needs him. Guys, these are Jim and Blair."

Blair shakes hands with Cubby and Emily, but presses a kiss to Fawn's knuckles, making her giggle girlishly. Seriously, someone needs to rope in his flirting before it gets him into trouble. Oh wait, that would be me; and he never listens when I tell him to stop. Then he shifts slightly and crouches down.

"Hey there," he says in a gentle tone. "I'm gonna bet you're Jimmy, right?" The boy nods and steps away from Cubby, but still grips his hand tightly. "My name is Blair and that" - he points to me -- "is my partner, Jim. You were named after him, did you know that?"

The boy looks up at his mother, who smiles and nods. This puts a shy smile on his face. "I was?"

"Yep. He's a pretty cool guy, too. He used to be in the army. Do you want to meet him?"

When Jimmy nods, Blair grins and beckons me over. Jimmy may not be mine, but he's Blair's and that kind of makes him mine, too. I walk over to them and crouch down next to Blair, holding out my hand. "Hi there, Jimmy. My name's Jim. Nice to meet you."

"Hi, Jim," he replies, shaking my hand.

"You've got a firm grip there, Chief. I like that."

"Thank you!" He grins and turns to the girls with Catherine. "Katie, Sandy, he has my name!"

"And I bet your sister Sandy was named after Blair here," I reply. "His last name is Sandburg, and sometimes his nickname is Sandy."

"It is?"

One of the two little blonde girls sidles a little closer to us. The little dark-skinned girl positions herself between the two, and I know she's trying to keep track of both of them, just like a good Guide would do.

"Yes, it is," Blair says as he and I leverage ourselves down to sit on the floor. "But mostly Jim calls me Chief."

"He called me that, too!" Jimmy says happily and suddenly moves to plop into Blair's lap.

Dace laughs and goes to pick up the warier of the twin girls, ruffling her hair, and rests a hand on the little Guide's head. Catherine does the same with the other twin, the one

that had spoken to her brother. And then Emily sighs softly and moves to sit across from Blair, while Fawn sits next to her, across from me. Emily still watches me from the corner of her eye, as does the girl in Dace's arms, but she's not quite as wary as she had been. Cubby settles himself behind and between them, reaching out to touch both of them for reassurance. And then I realize that we're sitting in opposing pairs across from each other. I would guess that it's some sort of comfort zone thing for Emily. Not that I mind.

"Katie, Sandy," Dace says softly, "we talked about this, remember? Blair is Jimmy's daddy and Jim is your daddy. He's a Sentinel like Mama, and Emily, and the two of you, but he's okay."

When the girls nod and hide their faces bashfully against Dace and Catherine's chests, Emily grins at them. Fawn beckons the other little girl over, and lets her settle in her lap. The twins look longingly at Emily, who waggles a finger at them. Apparently that's all it takes and they scramble down to jostle for position and comfort in her lap. They still eye me carefully, but that's okay. This allows Dace and Catherine to join us on the floor, as well.

"Jim, Blair, this is Rose, the twins' Guide. We like to call her Boo. And these are Katie and Sandy," Emily says, pointing to each girl after getting a nod from Dace. "Or as we like to call them, the monkey children. Monkeys, this is Blair, Jimmy's daddy, and Jim, your daddy. Can you say hi to them?"

"Hi," they say together in quiet voices.

"Hi there," I reply just as quietly. "I'm glad to finally meet both of you. Your moms have been sending me lots of pictures and videos." I pause to make an exaggerated look around the room before leaning in closer. "You know what? I'm kinda nervous to be here, because I don't really know anybody. Do you feel nervous, too?"

They nod, eyes wide and round as they stare at me and Blair.

"Jim and Blair flew here from Washington to meet you," Catherine says.

"By Em'ly's yaya and papoose?"

Dace laughs at what obviously must be looks of confusion on our faces. "Emily's grandparents."

"They live in Seattle," Emily supplies, then grins at the girls. "And yes, that's right. You're smart monkeys today. So... Do you think you might want to show me that you're big monkey girls and go say hi to Jim, so he doesn't feel so nervous and alone?"

Sandy nods and takes a deep breath before getting up to come and sit on the floor right in front of me. She's close enough to touch, and also close enough to young Rose and her family to feel safe. She pats me on the knee.

"Don't be scared," she says. "We don't bite."

"Usually," Dace replies with a grin and leans over to ruffle Sandy's hair.

"Mama!"

Katie's still reticent to come over, but we have the entire weekend to let her warm up to us. Okay, to me. Blair's not nearly as scary as I am to these kids. And I want pictures. Lots of pictures. These are memories I don't want any of us to forget.

THE LAZOX CONNECTION

ART BY MORGAN BRIARWOOD

STORY BY FLITTER



PART ONE

The starship *Cascade* warped through space, invisible to the naked eye during hyperdrive. If it were visible, however, the observer would see a sleek platinum in-laid hull with large windows that gave the view of a crew going about its business, undeterred by the speed at which they were heading towards their destination.

S.S. Cascade was a vessel in the ranks of the Federation of United Planets, a protection ship set for transporting important diplomats and dignitaries across the galaxy. Led by Star Captain Simon Banks, the crew of *Cascade* were ready and able to combat any enemy who dared stand in their way.

Enemies in the form of space's usual natural disasters, however, were not always easy to predict and never easy to combat.

No one could have predicted the nearest sun would send out a flare, causing shockwaves over the ship and thrusting them out of hyperspace like a toy.

Lieutenant Megan Connor was keeping company the ship's current most important dignitary, Dr. Blair Sandburg, when the disaster struck. Dr. Sandburg was an Empath, Diplomat, Peacekeeper and Treaty-broker, holder of the Order of Earth for his work on the Kiye-Numinu Alliance and revered by his students and colleagues alike, and so Megan had been expecting someone arrogant, like she was used to dealing with, when he'd come aboard.

Instead, Sandy, as she'd come to call him, was friendly and open, keeping his empathy on a tight leash, but not hiding it, and capable of an entirely too beautiful smile. She would admit later to being so totally engaged in conversation with him, that it had taken her several seconds to register the meaning of the alarms that suddenly blared along the mess hall.

It was seconds they did not have, as *Cascade* spun out of warp and right into close orbit with a swampy planet unknown by most circles of the Federation. The starship wavered

and then its engines sputtered as it fell down into the murky atmosphere, parts of its hull cracking under the uncontrolled landing.

Cascade landed with a boom loud enough to scatter any creatures nearby, its crew stunned, hurt, and confused.

Had Megan Connor had those earlier seconds, she would have automatically gone to shield the diplomat's body with her own and they would have been launched from the crashed starship together.

As it was, Megan fell backwards and Blair fell to the side into the protective bubble of a curved metal sheet that used to be part of the wall, ripping free in the lower atmosphere and spinning away from the ship.

The jungle canopy caught the projectile like a mother with a child's cradle and in gentle lurches lowered it to the forest floor.

When Blair woke up from his unconsciousness, nearly five Federation hours later, he was alone.



Blair was cold, darkness wrapping around him like tendrils of smoke and shattering as he shifted as if it were glass. A voice pierced through the fog, a cawing sound like crows of old.

Blair shivered and opened his eyes. The first thing he noticed was a beam of light not three meters away from him. Then memories came flashing back and he sat up, or tried to. As soon as he moved, the metal under him shifted and groaned as if it were alive.

With a start, Blair disentangled himself from the vines that had caught both him and the metal, a part of the *Cascade* he realized, as they fell. As soon as he'd freed himself, Blair jumped off the curved piece of wall and looked around.

He was in a jungle-type environment and he caught himself before opening his mouth to shout for the rest of the crew. He had no idea how hostile a place he'd just found himself in and he didn't want to alert any predators to his presence. He hoped he wasn't too far from the rest of the ship, but he knew that it could be miles depending on at what point his section had broken off.

Blair slowed down his breathing and tried to see if he could hear anything in the dim gloom. At first all was silent and then his ears adjusted and he began to make out the sounds of some sort of bird cawing in the distance and then, closer, a rippling of what might be water.

Curious, and hoping that he could satisfy his sudden thirst, Blair began to wander in the direction of the latter sound. He only had to break through a dense bit of foliage to catch sight of what looked to be a long river.

Not drinkable, he noticed by the dark color. The tree continued to root and grow out of the water and Blair realized he was in some sort of marshy swampland. It wasn't a pleasant thought. Though his native home, the planet Styx, had several swamps, Blair had always lived on the highland plateaus and not in the humid regions below.

The water splashed suddenly and Blair gaped as he caught sight of a large ripple. Either whatever beast was making that disturbance was flat and wide, or the water was deeper than it looked. Blair began to back up, not sure he wanted to be near either way, but then the creature surfaced.

Blair took a step back and then, trying to abort the move as he realized that movement might attract the thing towards him, caught his ankle in a low root. He went down against a vine-covered tree-like object and hit his lower back hard.

"Ah," Blair moaned, then snapped his jaw shut, afraid to look to see if the creature was approaching him.

But look he did, only to be stunned to see that what he'd thought was a beast was instead a man, an impressive man one part of his mind told him, with pale skin that foliage like this would rarely harbor, and bright eyes.

The man approached and the knelt down next to him, saying something in a language that sounded a bit like Croilan, but not enough for Blair to be able to make out any words.

"I'm sorry, I don't understand," Blair told him, keeping his tone as calm as he could.

The man paused, head tilting to the side. When he opened his mouth again, it came out in stilted Common. "You speak old tongue?"

"Er, yes, I suppose," Blair struggled to get his arms free of the vines holding him. After a moment, the man helped him until Blair was able to get shakily to his feet. "I'm Blair, Blair Sandburg."

"Blair Blair Sandburg," the man repeated with a dubious expression.

Blair's eyes caught the water still sliding smoothly down the man's bare chest and shook his head. He pointed to himself. "Blair."

The man seemed to get it then and nodded. He pointed to Blair, "Blair," and then to himself, "J'mell." He paused and then said, "J'm."

"J-" Blair tried to make the name into something he could pronounce easily. "Jim?"

J'm blinked slowly, and then nodded.

"Nice to meet you, Jim," Blair told him, slowly as he could. He was just happy to find friendly, or at least seemingly friendly, life. He knew that he had very little ability to defend himself in this environment and finding a native who might be willing to take pity was the best thing that could happen to him.

"Meeting of fate," J'm said, as if completing some ceremony. He raised his eyes to the sky, looking for something, and then returned their heavy gaze to Blair. "Where tribe?"

Blair frowned, wondering how much he could explain of his situation. "Lost."

"Lost?" J'm probed.

"We fell," Blair admitted. "From the stars, the sky."

J'm's eyes widened. "Crash," he said.

"Yeah," Blair nodded, and then he shrugged. He wondered if he could convince this stranger to help him. "With you now? I'll cook, clean, whatever you need."

J'm hesitated, looking around as if he was searching for something, or someone. Finally, he seemed to reach a decision.

"With," J'm nodded. "Unless you wish death."

Blair's mouth opened, and then closed. After a moment, he laughed. "I'm not sure if that was a joke," he said, "but thanks for that."

J'm's mouth twitched as if he was holding back a smile. He turned abruptly. "Come, dark soon. Need to burn."

Burn? Blair thought. Make a fire, maybe. He gestured for J'm to lead on, though the gesture seemed to confuse the native for a moment. Then J'm sniffed and began walking. As much as his skin color defied it, his mannerisms showed clearly that he was a native of this planet.

It was his best bet to trust this native, his only real hope of survival, but Blair had always been an optimist and he told himself to take this opportunity as a learning experience, like field work.

Still, he hadn't had to do real intense field work in many Federation years and though Blair was in shape, he was also soft around the edges, at least in comparison to the hard lines of J'm's fit body.

Blair struggled to keep up with the man until J'm noticed and slowed down slightly. With only a stumble over roots and rocks every couple of steps on Blair's part, J'm and Blair began to make their way through the dense foliage. To where, Blair didn't know.

They'd been traveling for many hours already when Blair finally gained enough breath to ask the question, "Where are we?"

J'm glanced at him, and then ahead, his icy blue eyes seeming to make out some movement in the distance, before he blinked and focused back on Blair. "Jungle sea."

Swamp, Blair thought. "And my tribe..."

J'm frowned. He motioned with his hands in a sort of spherical shape. "Jungle sea all over world land. Rock gap here," he made a slicing motion, "until more jungle sea. Tribe's boom came here."

Blair tried to make a mental map of what J'm was telling him, but failed. Instead, he latched onto something else the native had said. "World? This planet. Do you, does your people know that there are other worlds?"

J'm raised an eyebrow. "Yes," he said. "Many. Worlds united as tribes sometimes unite."

He's talking about the Federation, Blair realized. So this planet has been visited before, but wasn't a Federation planet. Still... "What is the name of here, this world?"

J'm immediately answered with a long word that made no sense to even Blair's sensitive ears. He seemed to want to laugh at the confusion on Blair's face. "Qecban," he said finally. "Other worlds call here Qecban."

Qecban, of course. Blair wanted to shake himself. The mysterious swamp planet. He remembered reading the report on it, how the Federation diplomats who'd been sent here had been unable to gain the interest of the natives and had soon left. Still, they

must have left at least something of an impression. Either that, or the Qecban natives were more knowledgeable than the report had given them credit for.

But one thing that Blair did know, was that Qecban was not too far from a nearby Federation outpost, the planet Perve. They weren't out in the middle or the far edge of the galaxy, they were within the patrol section of the Federation starships.

They could be rescued.

Blair heaved out a great sigh of relief, and then nearly fell as J'm stopped right in front of him.

"You must not," J'm said suddenly.

"Must not what?" Blair asked, confused.

"You are very," J'm waved an arm around, muttering something in his native tongue. "Emotion-showing."

"Sorry," Blair said. "It is my nature to be so." And it was. Ever since Blair had learned of his own empathy and what that meant for the population, he'd always tried to show as much of his own emotions as possible. It made people calmer to know that, at least if their emotions were being read, they could read his as well.

"Unsafe," J'm told him. "Beasts drawn to such open thoughts."

"What?" Blair blinked a bit. "Beasts? You mean they hunt by sound?"

"Sound, no," J'm shook his head. "Sound unimportant. Open thoughts," he paused and then patted his chest, "feelings."

"They hunt emotions," Blair said slowly. "They feel their prey's emotions and sense them through that?"

"Yes," J'm nodded. "You be prey if you show emotions such."

"Oh," Blair took in a deep breath. "I can... try to hold it back."

"Hold it back?" J'm tilted his head to the side. "No, put up shields."

Blair faltered. Shields, that was what he was taught as an empath, but to hear that from J'm's lips was strange. "Yes, I'll do that," he agreed.

J'm nodded, apparently pleased. Now that Blair knew, he realized how little emotional output the other man was giving off. Sure, some leaked through, but it was nowhere near what Blair was used to. He'd just thought that J'm was... well, some people were less emotional. But to think that he did that on purpose, that he was trained from a young age to keep it all internal...

It was a fascinating case study. Blair figured that he'd like to come back some time and study J'm and his people. He hoped the native would agree to allow Blair into his tribe, it would make for a great project. Blair could possibly even bring that intern he'd talked to at the last outpost he'd been stationed that had expressed interest in mundanes and their abilities to shield their emotions from empaths.

Blair looked ahead, seeing a break in the trees that shone like the light at the end of a cave. He glanced towards J'm, but J'm's head was tilted to the side as if he was listening to something.

They continued to walk in the direction of the light. Blair's steps sped up almost of their own accord as he ached to feel the sunlight on his skin. He broke through the trees in a rush and then walked several more steps, spinning around in awe.

They'd reached a sort of rocky field, short plants peeking up through the cracks, but all other life smothered by the long stretch of granite. It was flat enough that Blair could see the edge of the jungle tree line like a wave on the horizon. It seemed to encircle the rocky land, as if it wanted to consume it but was unable to.

To Blair, it was as if he'd stepped into the clouds. He'd never been more happy to feel the beaming sunlight heat up his skin, even those times when he'd been stuck on a starship for weeks on end hadn't compared to the grueling pace of walking through the dense jungle.

Blair glanced up towards the sky and then immediately regretted it as the harsh light momentarily blinded him. With a soft shaking of his head to clear it, Blair turned back to J'm to ask him which way they were supposed to go.

J'm was frozen in spot just outside the jungle's edge, staring into the distance with a strangely slack look on his face. "Jim?" Blair asked, coming closer to the man. "Are you okay?"

J'm didn't react and Blair frowned, reaching forward with a hand to lightly touch the man on the bare skin of his arm. "Jim."

With a shudder and a hard blink, J'm finally moved, stepping away from Blair. The empath let his hand fall back to his side. "What was that?" he asked softly.

"Nothing," J'm answered immediately. "Thought storm."

Thought storm? Blair raised an eyebrow, supposing that meant something along the lines of 'lost in thought'.

Before he could ask any more on the subject, J'm was moving ahead. "Come, much walking before night."

"Lead on," Blair said as they began to travel out into the center of the rocky land.

Blair poked at the crackling fire, knees tucked up under him as he watched the orange glow flickering across the dark rocky clearing they'd set up camp in for the night. J'm was off finding them dinner and had told Blair to keep an eye on the land.

A rattle made its way to Blair's ears and he froze. The rattle repeated, sounding fainter, and the diplomat allowed himself to move his head and look around for the source. At first, nothing was apparent in the gloom of dusk, but then Blair's eyes caught sight of a low shape slithering in the distance.

It looked like a snake, like a massive snake from the old Earth creation myth of Adam and Eve. Blair held his breath, heart pounding in his chest. He wondered if he should snuff out the fire, but the creature would have already spotted it if that was what it was looking for and it was possibly afraid of the light.

The slithering led it around the edge of the outcrop of rocks Blair was on, and then away. Blair could barely stop the sigh of relief at seeing the thing leave.

Too late, he remembered what J'm had said, that the creatures of this planet were attracted to emotions.

The creature moved, faster than Blair could track, ignoring the fire as if it were not even there as it circled Blair. It raised itself up, as tall as a human, while Blair continued to sit on the ground, stilled by fear and anxiety.

Seeing it closer, even though it was shadowed by the firelight behind it, was enough to cement it into Blair's mind for however long he had left to live. The creature didn't have eyes, instead it had a smooth sort of face with two tentacle antennas that reached towards him, moving in the air as if it could taste his terror.

It probably could, Blair realized almost abstractly. The snake's tail was wrapping closer to him, preventing his escape. Blair couldn't move, immobilized by his own feelings. His empathic gifts were starting to break against his careful shields and the creature's head dipped down, the antennas almost reaching Blair's face.

Blair flinched back and he began to wheeze as if he were having an asthma attack. His emotions were coming out stronger, draining him. He felt his body grow heavy and weak, his vision narrowing on those antennas that, almost glowing, slowly reached to touch him.

The fire crackled loudly and then Blair heard the faint sound of hissing, then a roar. He tried to turn and look, but he was stuck where he was. He had no energy to move, even as the great snake creature escaped from that which was attacking it, satisfied with even a partial meal.

Blair must have blacked out, because the next thing he knew he was opening his eyes to the sight of J'm's stiff back as he put out the fire. "J'm?" he asked, voice cracking.

J'm turned to him, blue eyes flashing in the gloom. "You are shaman."

"What?" Blair struggled to sit up. J'm came to his side and helped him and Blair let himself lean against those strong arms. A container of water, made from the skin of some beast, was presented in front of him and Blair drank gratefully.

"Shaman, one who protects emotions," J'm explained, voice right next to Blair's ear. "One who walks always in danger."

Oh, Blair realized, his mind rebooting. Empaths... J'm's people called them Shamans. And yes, he hadn't even thought about it, but of course creatures that fed off emotions would find a feast in empaths like Blair.

"I didn't mean to keep it from you," Blair said honestly. He hadn't even thought that J'm would have any way to understand him had he thought to bring it up.

"I am Enqueri," J'm said and he was moving away from Blair now, standing. "My duty be to protect my shaman."

There was something harsh in J'm's voice, a deep sorrow, and Blair's tattered emotional state echoed it in his mind.

J'm began to move around, packing up the small camp. Blair's eyes had a hard time making him out, the darkness of night already upon them, but J'm moved just as surely as he would in the day.

But it wasn't that which revealed what Blair should have known all along. It was what J'm said next, "Together must move quicker. Back to your tribe. You have Enqueri there to protect you. You are strong, you must."

And then, with J'm's blue eyes staring straight into Blair, the dots finally connected.

"You're a Sentinel," Blair breathed, trying to stand. It took him several attempts, but he finally made it to his feet to face the native.

"Sentinel." J'm frowned, and then shrugged. "Sentinel, Watchman, Enqueri, yes."

By the stars, Blair thought. No wonder he'd felt safe in J'm's company. All empaths such as himself were courted by Sentinels, as the other half that could anchor their abilities.

The rest of what J'm had said caught up with him, but he had no time to tell the man that he didn't actually have a Sentinel waiting for him, at the crew or anywhere, before J'm was motioning for them to move.

Blair was shaky, his whole body drained, and they took frequent breaks to get him food and water, but J'm did not let them stop to sleep until the rocky plateau had slipped back into a softer forested area. Blair couldn't decide if he missed the open land or not, but it didn't matter. They were heading back to the crew, to Blair's people, because J'm said so.

And Blair would follow J'm, the Sentinel, as was in his genetic code. He would trust J'm without even knowing him because something about him called to Blair. His earlier actions began to make sense, but he couldn't find it in himself to care.

When Blair began to shake, the combination of the *attack* and the sudden discovery playing a war on his mind and body, J'm guided him to a canopy of soft moss and told him gently to sleep. Blair slipped into dreams immediately.

It was fascinating to Blair how quickly J'm picked up Common. Sure, he'd seemed to know it before, but every time Blair spoke it was like he seemed to remember more and more what proper grammar to use. Already, perhaps only a Federation week or so since the crash, J'm was perfectly understandable in his speech and seemed to, in turn, hear more of what Blair meant when he spoke.

Blair figured that was J'm Sentinel abilities coming through. Sentinel's reportedly had amazing memories, able to keep far more of their sensory input than mundanes. And though Blair had no idea as to J'm's level, he figured it would be high. The man moved like a predator, his steps calculated and graceful as he stepped over the roots and vines.

Yes, Blair could admit that he was attracted, more than just attracted actually. He figured that part of that was the circumstances. He was stranded on an alien planet, it wasn't unusual for him to begin developing feelings for his rescuer. Especially since his rescuer was a Sentinel.

Blair refused to acknowledge the fact that he'd never been attracted to any Sentinels before. They'd, in fact, repulsed him on some level. All others who'd come before him for the chance of bonding had felt *wrong*.

But not J'm.

Blair clenched his hands together, willing away that idea that had begun to form. J'm wasn't his. J'm had a tribe back somewhere, he probably had someone waiting for him, even several someones.

He might even already be bonded.

Blair couldn't hold back the sudden flair of *needangerdespairwant* that bubbled out of him in a gusher. He clamped it back as quickly as he could, but the damage was already done.

A great caw reverberated through the jungle as the nearby trees rattled with a flock taking flight. Blair found himself with his back to a tree, J'm covering him in strong arms and holding him against his bare chest.

Blair looked up and caught sight of black wings just before a creature that looked much like a raven from the old tales Blair like to read flew past, black eyes wide against his face before it swooped past him.

"Mallye," J'm said softly, like a curse.

Blair relaxed back as nothing more happened for several long moments. J'm drew away from him and Blair stifled his immediate reaction to reach forward, to hold on. The ghost of J'm's heat against him remained on his skin.

"Heartbeat raced," J'm observed. "You let out burst of feeling, scared the mallye. Why?"

"Scared them?" Blair said instead. "They weren't attacking?"

J'm shook his head. "Mallye eat that which has already left life."

"Oh, they're carrion birds," Blair said. "I didn't even realize they were here."

"Mallye follow that which interests them," J'm said. "Some tribes say they show death to come. Mine..." J'm paused. "Other tribes say they are rebirth."

Blair shivered. "I'll stick with rebirth."

J'm shrugged, and then his eyes trapped Blair. "Why?" he repeated.

Blair felt blood rush to his cheeks, but he remained stubborn. "It won't happen again."

J'm seemed to want to argue for a moment, and then he turned away. "It won't," he said, as if it were a warning.

No, it won't, Blair told himself silently. J'm didn't want him, probably had someone already. Blair needed to control himself, stop crushing like a cadet to his commanding officer. J'm wasn't his.

J'm didn't want him.

For the first time since Blair had been attacked by the snake creature on the rocky plateau, he was alone, waiting for J'm to return. The man, the Sentinel, was scouting ahead to see if the river had flooded as he suspected.

Blair didn't care much why exactly J'm had left, what he cared about was that the man had. He curled his arms around his legs, eyes and ears alert for any danger. His emotions were on a tight leash, but Blair feared accidental leaking, and he was right to. As an

empath, a Guide, he was never totally safe from the bad sides of his abilities until he bonded.

There was a shift in the air and Blair froze. He continued to look straight ahead as a dark shape emerged from the trees in front of him. Slowly, silently, Blair notched his mental shields up as high as he could and only hope that this creature coming towards him now could not see or smell him.

Or at least, would not be interested in him.

The shape came forward totally and Blair blinked at it. It was feline in shape, black in color and with a long tail that swept along the ground as it stalked towards him.

Its eyes locked on his and, like before, Blair could do nothing.

He'd never felt so weak before coming to this planet. On Qecban, what was once his greatest strength would now be his downfall.

The cat creature was upon him, circling him much in the same way the snake's tail had, before curling up around his side. Blair waited for that feeling that had left him drained for days, but it never came.

The feline continued to lie there, curled in half-crescent around his scrunched body. It laid its head on its paws and began to purr in a low tremor that shook up from the ground into Blair's body.

Blair breathed out and reached hesitantly towards it. The feline didn't move. As slowly as he could while still actually moving, Blair began to stroke the cat's muscled back.

The feline purred louder and moved into his touch. Bolder, Blair began to pet it in earnest. There was a strange quality to its fur, almost ethereal under his fingers. Blair found himself fascinated by it and before he knew it, his legs had stretched out to a more comfortable position and he was half lying on top of the large cat, scratching it like a pet.

Another crack and Blair glanced up, noticing as the feline did as well, purring cutting off immediately.

J'm came into sight and both of them, Blair and the feline, relaxed. J'm's face showed some surprise as he took note of their positioning. "Nuyxe?"

"Nuyxe?" Blair repeated. He paused as the feline's ear flicked towards him. "Is that your name?" he asked it.

Nuyxe began to purr again.

"You can see-" J'm let out a quick breath. "When did she come to you?"

Blair blinked. "Not long ago, at all. She," she? Blair thought and then accepted, "must have been just in front of you. Is she your pet?"

"Pet?" J'm said, seeming to not know the word. "She is pantharia."

"Pantharia," Blair said. "That's her species, huh. But how do you know her?"

"We have Lazox," J'm explained, hesitating before he gracefully fell to his knees in front of them both. "She is my spirit guide." Nuyxe yowled at that, though J'm seemed to understand what that was supposed to mean as he shook his head. The feline shifted and all of the sudden she was no longer as solid under Blair's petting.

Blair withdrew his hands, stunned. "Then why did she come to me?"

A bit of pink appeared on J'm's cheeks, but his eyes were still icy cool as Nuyxe got up and paced towards him. In a flash, she disappeared from sight. "It is because she believes us... suited."

"Suited?" Blair repeated. "For what, companionship?"

J'm shook his head. "For bonding."

"Oh," Blair breathed. "I thought... Do you not have a Guide at your tribe?"

A pained expression came over J'm's face. "No," he said shortly. "There is no one."

Blair turned away. No one, he thought. No one back home, but not Blair either.

"Blair," J'm called to turn his attention back. "I am sorry."

Blair shook his head. "No, no it's fine. I mean," he gave a bitter laugh, "I'm attracted to you and of course you must have sensed that. How could you not, you're a Sentinel after all."

J'm nodded as if to agree. "I understand that you do not want me in this way," he said as if continuing Blair's thought. "You have your own bonded, I would not make you uncomfortable for your body's judgment."

"Wait, what?" Blair blinked. "No, no bonded for me. I don't have... you thought I was already bonded?"

J'm's eyes widened. "You are not? You do not have someone to bond to?"

"No," Blair said. "I've never been interested in it before. Not 'til," he paused and then thought, well, why not, and continued, "not 'til you."

"You want me," J'm stated, disbelief coloring his tone. "I am not suitable-

“Not suitable!” Blair gaped. “Jim, you are beautiful and brave and strong. You are the poster boy of Sentinels, how could you think you weren’t suitable. I would bond with you in a heartbeat if you were interested.”

“I am interested,” J’m said immediately. “So interested, Blair, but you deserve one who-”

“No,” Blair practically growled out. He didn’t want to hear who he deserved. People had been saying that to him his entire life and here was someone he *wanted* who actually seemed to want him back. “No, Jim, you. I deserve you.”

And it was fast, they’d only met weeks before, but Blair had heard it was like that for the right Sentinel-Guide pairs. That it didn’t take long for the promise of a connection to bloom under heated stares.

And a couple weeks solely in each other’s company was months and months of short meetings. No, Blair knew that he felt something deep for J’m and though he would not be able to say, even if pressed, what exactly that feeling was... it was there.

It was as if a star had exploded. J’m reached forward and grasped Blair and Blair went willingly, egged on the by the passion that seemed to swirl just under his skin.

J’m’s eyes, usually so icy, were now heated with need. “I would have you, my Blair, my Guide,” he murmured into Blair’s lips.

“Then have me, Sentinel,” Blair challenged.

J’m huffed a small laugh, one of the most expressive sounds Blair had yet to hear him make and it was a treasure that he locked away to relive in the future, but at that moment all he cared about was stripping away his dirtied trousers.

They were both gross, both stuck with unimaginable scents and colored flora and fauna juices and remains. Their hair was unkempt, their faces unclean, but in the short awakening of Sentinels and Guides, they were perfect to each other.

J’m peeled off the cloth that served to cover his cock and already it was hardening under Blair’s gaze. Blair licked his lips, reaching out to touch, but J’m clasped their hands together and pushed up to kiss him instead.

Blair opened his mouth to the Sentinel, his Sentinel’s, mouth and moaned under it. J’m’s tongue curled around his own and they danced, the sparks flying in their minds as their emotions began to meld.

Of their own accord, Blair found his eyes closing and he accepted it. J’m’s touch was fire down his body, coming to his ass in the lightest of strokes. Blair lifted his hips, the need in them both too strong to let this play out slowly.

Understanding, or perhaps unable to do anything but, J'm stuck a finger in Blair's hole. It was unsanitary, but Blair could barely care as he gasped against the probe of both J'm's mouth on his and his finger.

J'm pulled it out and left Blair feeling almost cold, until that finger came to Blair's mouth and he understood that this was all the preparation he was going to get. Knowing this, he began to greedily suck at first one, and then two, and then three fingers. The taste of J'm's fingers was hardly appetizing, but with each coat of saliva Blair allowed himself to sink into his own mind and begin to prepare it for the bond that would be forming.

The fingers withdrew and then moved back to his hole. Blair let his head fall back, J'm's remaining hand coming to clench in his hair as he roughly prepared the empath. There was no soft love in this, but a need to not hurt beyond repair. The need was slowly fading as a new need pressed harder and harder.

"Do it," Blair panted. "Just do it."

"Blair," J'm groaned, taking all three fingers out and replacing them with something far larger.

With one thrust, he pushed all the way in and Blair arched up in a silent scream at the harsh intrusion. The feelings that bridged between them were brutal, primal and J'm thrust like he had no other purpose but to *claim* Blair.

Blair, in turn, let himself just feel as J'm emotions came bowling into him. All that repressed feeling flooded into the empath, but Blair was nothing if not powerful and he calmed it with a directed path, allowing it to form a link that would bind them together.

J'm shuddered, orgasm shattering his body as the link solidified like a chord striking, a star reaching the end of its life and massing outwards in a second. In that moment Blair and J'm found themselves anew, no longer as two beings but as one whole.

Blair came across his own and J'm's chests, rolling through his pleasure as well as J'm's. J'm continued to thrust, slowing down as his cock softened in Blair and Blair's cock letting out its last drops of white.

J'm collapsed on top of Blair and Blair welcomed it as the new bond hummed between them. It was like first opening his eyes, like the first time he'd ever felt sunlight on his skin, like the first time he'd felt pure joy.

It was like coming home.

PART TWO

The fire crackled between them, flames licking into the musky air. Blair was laid out on his stomach, giving his legs a rest from a long day of walking. J'm was stretched out next to him, propped up on one arm.

Blair let his eyes appreciate the smooth lines of J'm's body, shadowed and defined by the firelight. This man, this determined, brilliant man, was his Sentinel, was his bonded. Blair had never felt anything like this before.

J'm smiled as he saw him looking at them sat up. "What is that?" J'm pointed to one of the badges of Blair's jacket.

"What, this?" Blair looked down, seeing the once pristine blue and green orb smudged over by dirt. "Oh, that's my Order of Earth badge."

"Earth?" J'm frowned.

"Yeah, the original settlement?" Blair looked up at him. "Don't your people have a migration story?"

"Migration story, yes," J'm said. "Falling from the stars."

"That's about right," Blair sighed. "See, about four thousand years ago, by Federation time, *humans* as our ancestors were called, escaped from the planet of Earth on a fleet of ships. That's how we ended up here, at this end of the galaxy."

J'm shifted, crossing his legs together. He gestured for Blair to go on, but Blair hesitated. "It might bore you," he said.

"You don't want me to get confused," J'm picked up immediately. Blair flushed, having forgotten what they could sense between the connection they now shared. J'm was apt at figuring out his true reasons for things. "Tell me."

"Okay," Blair, too, sat up. "So by Federation date we're in the year 3597 S.M., that means three thousand ninety-seven years ago, our ancestors began their migration. The records say that those ancestors had been running out of resources on their original planet, Earth, and even in their solar system."

"The great mistake," J'm said.

"Yeah..." Blair frowned. "Yeah, so they started to drill farther beyond the molten lava that was in the center of Earth to get to the hard materials of the core. Except, even though they thought they were being safe about it, the drilling caused the crust of the planet to become unstable."

J'm rested his chin on his hand, waiting.

Blair's lips twitched and he straightened, realizing what J'm was trying to tell him. Clearing his throat softly, Blair began to tell the story that he was told as a child, the story of the humans on Earth who had to escape the destruction of their planet. How they'd been put into sleep on ships nowhere near the technological advancement of what the Federation had now.

The starships had wandered through the galaxy, together as a fleet, until their power reserves got dangerously low and they landed on auto pilot on the nearest planets. The ships separated then, all in the same star clusters but far enough away that human life began to develop separately.

Over three thousand years, the humans became something else. Some adapted to the planets they had landed on, some didn't. The Kiye became so pale that every one of their blood veins were visible, the Niminu grew feathers for hair, and then, out of every planet, Sentinels and Guides began to crop up to protect their people in the harsh new environments.

After a while the once humans began to re-discover spaceflight and slowly they found each other, except by now they were not the same species anymore, some could not even have offspring together, though many were still extremely genetically similar.

Soon the Federation was born, a collection of planets whose purpose was to unite those who'd once been of the same planet. And perhaps who, one day, could again consider themselves of one mind.

"And you, Blair?" J'm asked. "You are of Federation?"

"I am," Blair nodded. "My mother was born on the planet Styx, but she left when she was young and met my father. I don't really know where he was from, but," he shrugged. "I joined the Academy when I was sixteen and never looked back."

J'm hummed and leaned back. "And now you come here."

"And now I'm here," Blair agreed. He reached down to touch J'm's shoulder. J'm's other moved to join his. "With you."

The forest was unnaturally still. Blair frowned, moving to walk just a bit closer to J'm. J'm's back was tense and through their bond Blair could feel as he strained out with his sense.

Blair placed a hand on his arm, letting his presence ground the Sentinel. J'm's muscles bunched as he moved his arm, resting his hand on Blair's shoulder. Blair adjusted his steps, keeping in stride so they could walk together easily.

There was a soft black flash and Blair caught sight of Nuyxe running through the trees to their left, before she vanished into the undergrowth. "What is it?" Blair asked.

J'm glanced at him and shook his head. Blair frowned but let it go, sure that he would never understand all the intricacies of the planet.

At least, not unless he continued to live there. Blair bit his bottom lip, prodding at the idea like it was a hot wire. He couldn't leave J'm, they'd bonded and yet...

Regardless, they would at least be going to see if the crew had survived the crash, Blair figured. See if they needed any help with rescuing and the like. That, at minimum, Blair would do.

Blair stumbled, toe having caught in a low root. J'm's hand slipped down, catching him by the waist before his knees could fully buckle. "Thanks," Blair murmured, righting himself.

"Careful," J'm said, but where usually there would be amusement in his tone at seeing Blair struggle with unfamiliar footing, now there was a different, hard sort of tone.

Blair nodded, frown deepening.

J'm stopped them at the edge of a river. "You smell," he said, nodding to the water.

Blair rolled his eyes. "Thanks man," he muttered. "You're like rosebuds yourself." With a shake of his head, he stripped off his shirt and trousers. He saw J'm slip out of his leather loincloth-thing and wade into the water with it still in hand.

Taking from the sentinel's example, Blair got completely naked, but took his clothes with him as he joined J'm in the water. It was cool, but not cold, with the sun streaming directly into the center. The water was a gentle flow, enough to wash them clean but not so much where they had to swim to stay afloat.

Blair scrubbed his clothes as best he could, though he knew that they would never become as clean as they'd once been, and then waded to the shore to lay them out to dry. J'm joined him and then, soon as both their hands were empty, wrapped himself around Blair's body.

"Hey," Blair said, letting himself float backwards.

"The day is young still," J'm said, disappointment in his tone as his hands ran down Blair's body.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Blair twisted so they were facing each other. "You've never done the nasty in the daylight?"

J'm's eyebrows scrunched together as he tried to work out Blair's meaning. "The nasty?"

Blair grinned. "Come here, big boy." His hand stroked down J'm's side and then to his cock. He took it in his palm and began to stroke fully up and down.

J'm's head arched back. "Blair-" He seemed shocked as Blair moved them both towards the shore until they were only half in the water. "It is still..."

"Day?" Blair kissed at J'm's throat. "So?"

J'm stilled. "That does not bother you?"

Blair took his hand off J'm's cock, worried suddenly. "Does it bother you?"

With bright blue eyes, J'm studied Blair for a second, and then shook his head. "No," he said finally. "No."

"Good," Blair smiled and then, without warning, swooped down to take J'm's cock in his mouth.

J'm gasped above him, hands coming instinctively to clench in Blair's long hair. Blair let it, starting a slow suck from the tip down. His tongue lapped at J'm's head and then he opened his throat, ridge by ridge taking the rest of the half-hard cock in.

J'm was fully hard in a moment, trying to thrust into him if not for Blair's hands on his hips, holding him back so that he wouldn't choke. "B-blair!"

Blair sucked hard, swirling his tongue around the base. His nose was pressed into J'm's curls, his Sentinel's scent so heavy down there that it made Blair's head spin with need.

J'm grunted, cock twitching. Blair wondered if he'd ever been given a blowjob before. With a sort of mental grin, Blair placed both hands flat on J'm's thigh and then closed his eyes, still softly bobbing on J'm's cock as he felt for their bond and sent a zap of his arousal through his.

With a cry, J'm came in a sudden burst, cock throbbing in Blair's mouth as Blair continued to suck until the last of J'm's seed was down his throat.

"Blair, Blair," J'm murmured pulling Blair up so that they were face to face. He kissed Blair's mouth, hand coming down to grab at Blair's cock.

Blair surrendered himself to his Sentinel's expect touch, twisting sensually in his grip as J'm brought him off with smooth thrusts of his hand.

Only a short while later, Blair and J'm were back in the water, cleaning off the marks of their *mating*, as J'm had called it. J'm climbed out, shaking himself dry before grabbing his loincloth and folding it back over his thigh.

"Jim," Blair said softly, putting on his own clothes. "Why is it so quiet?"

J'm looked at him and then his shoulders collapsed down. "We are near Telvekie dens," he admitted. "They are territory-hunters, dangerous for us."

"There's no way to go around them?" Blair asked, though he already knew the answer.

J'm shook his head. Blair grimaced, praying quickly that he wouldn't have to deal with another emotion-sucking monster as he quickly finished pressing down his shirt and got ready to head back towards the *Cascade* crash site.



Now that Blair knew there was concrete danger, he felt the silence even more of an oppression on his skin as they continued to tread along the edge of the jungle. He saw through a break in the trees a barren stretch of land.

Blair stopped, squinting his eyes. "Is that..."

J'm paused and then moved back to stand by his shoulders. Blair pointed to the giant skeleton. "Yes," J'm said. "Once telvekie."

Blair gulped dryly, noting how huge the skeleton was. On the top, several mallye perched. One of the birds turned a glinting eye on them and Blair twisted away. "Let's go," he muttered.

J'm kept his hand on Blair's shoulder after that, for which Blair could only be thankful. He'd never before missed a phase weapon so much. He usually hated carrying a gun, but he wished for nothing more than the safety of one in his hands.

That, or to just be off this planet.

Or no, Blair corrected, glancing at J'm out of the corner of his eyes, to be in a safe place. To be with J'm where they could laugh together and not worry about the predators who might be sensing their emotions.

They walked for nearly the length of one of the Federation's smaller space stations when Blair heard it, the crack of large footsteps navigating through the more spacious trees.

J'm's hand clenched and they both stopped walking. Blair looked at his Sentinel, watching and waiting.

After a moment, J'm turned ice-blue eyes to him. "They are headed towards us," he murmured. "It will serve us better to give them two smaller targets."

"No," Blair protested immediately. He knew what J'm was trying to do. "You will not lead them all to yourself."

J'm gave him a small smile. "You will feel me, we are bonded. We can find each other again, Blair, it is for the best."

Blair scowled, but then the cracking sounded louder, closer.

"Go," J'm said. And then he sprinted off straight ahead.

Blair cursed and took the left fork. He ran until he was out of breath and stopped, leaning on his knees as his lungs constricted in his chest. Blair looked up, only to stifle a mild curse as he heard the sound of low clanking.

A massive figure, the full grown representation of the skeleton Blair had just seen, wandered behind the trees. Its head was covered by a huge horn, twin tusks hanging from a small jaw. Its tail was long, whipping like a cat-creature, but spiked at the end. Ridges along its back would make it uncomfortable for any rider who wished to climb it and its feet were hooved claws.

Hoping that his empathy was on a tight enough leash to prevent it from sensing him, Blair began to creep backwards slowly.

The telvekie made a sort of snort sound. Blair froze. Holding his breath, he waited to see if it would leave. The creature raised its snout, as if it was sniffing the air.

And then its face turned towards Blair and it began to run. Blair turned on his heel, jumping over the roots to race back towards the direction J'm had gone. He tore through the low hanging branches, barely noticing the scrapes that cut his skin open as he brushed against tough bark and clinging vines.

Blair broke through a clearing, panting. The sound of pounding clunks followed him and he looked around for anything he could use as a weapon.

Time stopped.

Blair paused, the world fading away as light shone from the trees around him. There was a far away sound, like drums and then a howl much closer.

A four-legged creature, with fur of grey, peppered with black and white. It padded across the clearing, looking at Blair with somber eyes.

"Hello," Blair murmured, kneeling down. "What's your name?"

Hrodvi, the air seemed to whisper.

"I'm Blair," he said, holding his palm face up.

Hrodvi, or so it seemed to be, tilted his head. *Would you take me, Blair Sandburg? I would be your houn'nd so you too be my bonded?*

Blair felt a stirring in his gut, a connection beginning. Where he may have worried about it interfering with his bond with J'm, instead it seemed to strengthen it, add another string to the mass of rope that connected them together.

"Yes," Blair whispered. "I would take you, if you would take me."

Hrodvi gave him a sort of grin and then threw his head back and howled.

Blair came to with an audible snap. He wavered, confused for a moment. And then he heard the sound of a beast behind him and he ducked to the side just in time to dodge the charge of a great beast.

There was a growl and then Hrodvi was there, facing off the beast. Blair looked at him and Hrodvi lunged. Some sort of emotion was leaking through, a soft awareness of the spirit animal.

Run, he seemed to say.

He fled.

Blair stopped running as soon as he realized that the telvekie no longer followed him. He pushed down the panic that had begun to bubble up as he realized that he had no idea where he was, where J'm was, because he'd learned his lesson there.

His silent companion appeared before him and Blair knelt down, reaching a hand out. The houn'nd, Hrodvi he reminded himself, sniffed his palm and then looked at him with knowing eyes.

Blair took in a deep breath. He reached around himself, searching for that tug that would lead him back to J'm's side. With his new Lazox bonded by his side, he stood and walked.

The telvekie ripped at him with its tusks. J'm dropped down to the ground and rolled. His stretched his touch to feel the vibrations and it gave him enough warning to jump forward off the root-covered ground and in-between two horns of the massive beast.

Nuyxe yowled at him and J'm propelled himself on top of the telvekie using its pale horns, cool and crackling under J'm's hands. He heard a hiss in the air and spread his legs so that the stinger on the creatures tail hit its own body instead of J'm's.

The telvekie screeched so high-pitched that J'm nearly got lost in it. His connection with Blair, his Blair, rippled and then J'm found himself flying into a nearby tree.

He groaned softly, but didn't let the spark of pain stop him as he used the slippery bark of the tree to slide around it. The branches from above began to fall in waves as the beast rammed itself into the strong trunk.

J'm picked one up, swinging it as the weapon it was. He pace settled into that of a predators walk and he felt more than he saw as Nuyxe settled herself behind the blind creature that was searching for them with wide arcs of its nostrils.

He knew he could not run, already he felt his body weakening. His inner structure, those bones that protected his heart, were strained. He wished for Incacha to be there, the shaman would have healed him... but it was no use wishing for him now. Not when he had Blair.

The telvekie must have picked up some part of his emotions leaking through, because it rushed forward faster than a delpen beetle. J'm just barely managed to dodge to the side, using the end of the branch to thrust up into the softer underbelly of the beast's chin.

With a roar, the telvekie thrashed, its tail coming up and then falling with a massive thump as Nuyxe bit and clawed it off at the base. The beast made a howling cry that could have reached the stars and J'm froze under it.

In those precious moments, one pointed tusk caught the edge of his body and ripped into him like a stone tool in dried hide. The force of the pull threw J'm sideways, into a spiny vevea bush where small thorns cut into him and stuck there.

The telvekie wavered before J'm's darkening vision and then limped off. J'm doubted it would survive more than the distance to the nearest river and he was sure the mallye would thank him for their meal, but he had more pressing issues.

Cutting back a curse, J'm rolled himself out of the bush, unable to hold back water in his eyes as the thorns tore his skin in countless places. He collapsed on the ground and then struggled to regain control of his own body. If he fell unconscious here, the insects of the jungle would consume his flesh, attracted by his oozing blood.

And unlike the mallye, they would not care if he was not yet dead.

J'm felt a presence and reached a hand up to clasp the softly-solid back of Nuyxe. His spirit bonded helped him as he dragged himself to the nearest boulder, a vine covered rock that could have once been the side of a great mountain, now devoured by the jungle around them.

Nuyxe sent him a blast of worry and J'm smiled softly. "Yes," he said in his native Qecban tongue. "It is bad."

The pantharia rubbed her face along his side, the blood continuing to flow as though her body was not there. J'm closed his eyes and reached for the hum in the back of his mind, the bond that was his joining with Blair.

It rang back at him, strong and reassuring, but J'm could not allow himself to be coddled. Even now, he felt his limbs become heavy and he knew his end was near. It would not matter now if the insects climbed the vines of the boulder and found him... he would be dead soon.

"Blair," J'm whispered, his voice faint to his own ears.

His bonded would die with him, as was the tradition, the legend. Unless, unless J'm did as Incacha had done not so long ago. If J'm could just break their bond, then Blair would survive.

It had hurt something deep inside J'm when Incacha had done so, something that might not ever be healed, but Blair had his people to get back to and for J'm to tether him forever in death to this land was selfish.

Nuyxe curled herself around his suddenly freezing body as if she knew what he was planning. He supposed that she did and was glad for the comfort in these last moments.

As J'm felt his eyes closing of their own accord, he grasped for his bond with Blair and clawed at it with a hand that became a paw. Nuyxe's power joined him and J'm ripped at the connection he'd forged not five nights before.

With an almost audible tear, the connection broke like a water creature's dam. J'm felt a moment of deep sadness and regret.

And then he was gone.

Blair knew he was close when he felt the pain like a phantom touch through his body. J'm was near, and he was hurt.

The empath's pace picked up as he practically flew over the jungle ground. He didn't even realize how easily he navigated the roots of the undergrowth, all he could think of was that J'm needed his help.

He burst through a clearing, smelling in the air the same pungent scent that had come from the telvekie that Hrodvi had helped him fight off. Blair had taken no more than one step around, though, when the *hurt* ripped through him like a solar storm.

Blair gasped, stumbling. Only Hrodvi's sudden appearance at his side kept him on his feet, but he was too far gone to even notice as his vision swam. Pain radiated from him, scaring off beasts for miles around, even those that would normally be attracted

towards such a strong emotion, as he pushed with all his might against the force trying to destroy him and his core.

They were moving, Hrodvi leading him blindly. Blair tripped over something and landed with his hands on a cold lump.

His vision cleared and Blair choked out a sob at the sight of J'm, eyes closed, in front of him. "Jim, wake up," he said. His hands roamed up to check for a pulse and when he found one, faint but there, he nearly started crying from relief. But there was no relief yet, not until he was sure that J'm would be alright.

The wound on his Sentinel's side was the biggest issue, and also the cold temperature of his body. Blair ripped off his own shirt, uncaring that it left him chilled in the gloom of dusk, as he tore it into stripes and began to roughly wrap J'm's side.

When that task was done, Blair's hands shaking from exhaustion and fear, he moved J'm up to a flatter piece of land and curled around him, trying to get both of them warm.

There was a soft purr and he saw Nuyxe standing next to Hrodvi. Blair tried to smile at them, but it failed. "Can you guard us?" he asked instead.

Neither answered, but Blair felt some sort of acceptance from his small connection with the houn'nd and he relaxed into J'm's side.

He was scared for the man, scared beyond anything he'd ever felt before. His feelings for J'm had grown, morphed into something almost tangible. J'm was his Sentinel, his bonded, and Blair would not let him go, could not.

Closing his eyes, Blair reached for the tatters of their bond. He cringed away as physical pain racked his body, but forged on after only a moment's hesitation. With his mind's eye he saw the clawed remains and knew, just knew, that J'm had done this to them.

It was almost enough to make him stop. Then he felt something soft against his cheek and realized that it was Nuyxe rubbing against him, giving him assurances.

J'm wanted him, she seemed to say. Save J'm.

I will, Blair answered back silently. Jim is my world, my universe. I will save him.

She left then, but not too far and Blair felt as though he could still feel her presence, hers and Hrodvi's, watching over him.

Bolstered, Blair let himself sink deeper into a trance. With care and worry and *love* he began to gather up the loose ends of their bond and knit them back together.

Sunlight woke Blair. It caressed his cheeks, beckoning him closer. Blair moved into the caress and it solidified into fingers gently touching his cheekbone, stroking up and down his face.

Blair opened his eyes and caught J'm watching him with a strange expression. The sentinel's lips were curved softly, his eyes glittering in the sun's rays.

"Why did you do it?" J'm asked softly as he noticed Blair was awake. "You risked death fixing the bond before I healed."

"Why did I do it?" Blair struggled to wake fully. "Do you not want me?"

"No," J'm's eyes widened. "Blair, you have... you are so much. You are light for me."

"But I am an outsider," Blair breathed.

J'm shook his head. "It does not matter. I was alone before you came, Blair, my tribe is gone, they were kill-"

Blair reached forward and both of them breathed easier as the bond between them sang like a musical note. J'm clasped his hand and brought it to his chest.

"You don't need to explain anything to me," Blair told him. "I care for you, Jim. I would stay with you, I would have you never try to break our bond, please, but you do not need to explain yourself."

J'm smiled softly, sadness and hope like a breeze through Blair's empathy. "I do not know my birth tribe. The tribe that raised me found me in the jungle and took me in because they recognized my status."

"As Enqueri," Blair said.

"Yes," J'm nodded. "The shaman, Incacha, was my mentor and my partner. When I was old enough, we bonded."

Blair felt something in his heart still as he realized that J'm had been bonded before. "But Sentinel-Guide bonds are permanent," Blair breathed. "How?"

J'm reached forward and stroked Blair's cheek, and then drew his hand away. "I was away, hunting. I felt-" he stopped, but Blair could feel it anyways, a rush of *despair* coming towards him.

The feeling was an echo of what Blair himself had experienced not even a day before and he let out a pained whimper. J'm pulled him close until Blair was practically in his lap and they both relaxed as the connection continued to thrum between them.

"I raced back, but it was too late," J'm whispered. "A remalka swarm had devoured everyone, everything."

“Incacha... he did what you tried to do...” Blair murmured. He couldn’t imagine what a remalka swarm was, only that the terror that floated to him from J’m was horrifying. To know that such a strong man feared something so intensely, well Blair only hoped that he would never learn.

“I did not want to you to die, my Blair,” J’m said. “You have your people to return to. I have no one, no longer.”

“That is a lie,” Blair lifted his head and caught J’m’s eyes. “You have me, now. My Sentinel, you have me.”

“I...” J’m’s expression was open, unguarded for the first time since Blair had met him. “I do not know how you could want me. I caused the death of my shaman, I hurt you because I thought I was dying, Blair.”

“You did not cause Incacha’s death,” Blair said harshly, because that, at least, he could answer to. “Do you blame me for the fact that my ship crashed?”

“No,” J’m shook his head. “How could I?”

“It wasn’t your fault,” Blair said, “just as that wasn’t mine.”

“But if I’d been there, I would have heard them coming,” J’m began.

“And then what?” Blair said. “Could your tribe have escaped?”

J’m wavered, and then shook his head. “Not against the remalka. Not all of them.”

“What ifs are not healthy, Jim,” Blair said. “I understand that you miss Incacha-” he stopped himself because he couldn’t prevent the jealous flare and he hated himself for it.

J’m caught it, as Blair knew he would. “Incacha was a,” he struggled for a word, “guardian to me. A mentor. I did not hold lazox for him.”

“Lazox?” Blair frowned and glanced at where their spirit animals continued to guard over them. “I thought lazox was bonding.”

“Yes,” J’m nodded. “Bonding of love and soul. For Incacha I had bonding of spirit, but he could not see Nuyxe, could not touch her.”

“Oh,” Blair breathed. He glanced back at his houn’nd. “Hrodvi.”

The wolf-like creature came forth, Nuyxe on his tail. J’m make a startled noise.

“This is Hrodvi,” Blair said softly. “I... bonded with him when we were separated.”

“Hrodvi,” J’m repeated. He held out a hand and then made a sound of wonder as the houn’nd stepped forward into his palm.

After a moment, Hrodvi stepped back and licked Nuyxe on the shoulder. The two flashed, causing both Blair and J'm to close their eyes. When they opened them again, the spirit animals had resumed their watch from the edge of the clearing.

J'm turned to Blair. "I did not realize you felt... you cared for me to that..."

"I do," Blair's voice broke and he cleared his throat. "I do, Jim. I would have *stayed* for you."

J'm's eyes widened as if he finally got it. "No, I have nothing for you here." He smiled. "I go with you, my Blair."

"Even to the stars?" Blair asked.

"Even to the stars," J'm agreed.

Captain Simon Banks had seen quite a number of disasters in his time as a protector in the Federation. His crew's crash on the strange swamp planet was far from the worst of these.

He hadn't let himself think of those they'd lost as he'd instructed immediate recovery and clean up procedures. But now, several Federation weeks after they'd landed, he allowed himself a moment to grieve. To grieve for those who'd burned in the fall, for those who'd succumbed to their injuries, to those who'd been sent out to look for other survivors and had never come back.

It was the last group that had Simon the most upset. It had been his choice to send out those men and women, even though they'd had no idea what was waiting for them. His navigators had determined them to have likely fallen on the planet of Qecban, but even then there was so little the Federation database had on this foreign outcrop.

After all this time, they'd managed to get the sub-space communications up and running, which was a great sigh of relief for the entire crew. Simon suspected that the fear of the crash site had kept most of the planet's predators away from them, but he figured it was only a matter of time before they became brave enough to do more than knock against the side of the piece of hull the crew slept in at night.

"Sir," Megan Connor spoke from his side.

"Yes, Lieutenant?" Simon ripped himself away from his thoughts and turned to her.

Megan, like most of the crew, looked wrecked. The bags under her eyes proclaimed sleepless nights and her clothes were those of a homeless savage. Simon didn't even want to think about the smell that came off her, for he knew that he too smelled just as rank.

It was only lucky that enough water and food rations had survived the crash, for they'd given up exploring for supplies after the first two teams had gone missing.

"The *S.S. Chicago* is on its way," Megan said. "Our radio SOS reached them as they were making a hyperspace break."

"Thanks be to the ancestors," Simon breathed. "What is their ETA?"

"Just under a Federation day, Captain," Megan smiled, showing relief in her eyes. "They said they'll beam up the injured and send down a shuttle for the rest of us."

"Good," Simon nodded briskly. "I'll inform the crew."

"Sir," Megan said, stopping him. Simon raised an eyebrow at her and she took in an unsteady breath. "What are we going to tell the Federation about San- Dr. Sandburg?"

Simon let his shoulders slump. He knew the lieutenant felt it her fault for the diplomat's disappearance, but so many had been killed in the crash, it wasn't wise to put the blame on anyone. "The truth," Simon told her, "that he went missing during our fall into the planet's atmosphere, like at least a dozen others."

"Yes sir," Megan saluted.

Simon returned it and opened his mouth to dismiss her, when they both heard the crack of a branch. The captain and lieutenant pulled out their energy guns simultaneously, turning towards the noise. They were near the edge of the clearing, on the far side of the shipwreck from most of the crew, but still within shouting distance should they need the help.

A bird-like creature cawed and then took off from the tree near to them. Simon watched it for a moment, frowning.

And then two figures appeared out of the gloom of the tree.

"Sandy!" Megan gasped, lowering her phase weapon. Simon kept his up, not recognizing the second man who appeared next to the missing empath.

"Megan," Blair's voice was relieved as he came forward to stop several strides in front of them. "You survived."

Simon slowly lowered his gun as he realized that the other two men were both unarmed. The stranger had a hand on Blair's shoulder, almost casually touching him. The doctor seemed to not even notice.

"We thought that you were-" Megan cut herself off with a sort of cough.

“I thought the same about the crew,” Blair admitted and Simon could hear the rawness of his voice. “Jim saved me,” he explained. “I landed in the middle of the jungle and he led me back here.”

Jim, Jim? turned his cool blue eyes on Simon then, assessing him and then the gun in his hands.

“We have a ship coming for us, just a day out,” Simon said then. He cleared his throat. “I-the crew will be glad that you made it, Dr. Sandburg.”

Blair smiled brightly at him and Simon was reminded yet again that the empath could sense his relief. “Thank you, Captain.”

“Captain?” Jim spoke, softly and for Blair’s ears.

“He is the chief of the ship I was traveling on,” Blair said, turning slightly to face his companion.

Jim seemed to get that and nodded. Then he stepped forward to stand directly in front of Simon. “I wish to ask for you to allow me to continue to travel with my bonded.”

Simon blinked, but it was Megan that asked, “Sandy?”

Blair stepped around Jim to get back in their view. “Jim’s a Sentinel. We bonded.” His cheeks were blushing red, but his eyes showed his determination and his hand found Jim’s easily.

Simon let out a deep breath. It was a bureaucratic nightmare for one of the most powerful Empaths of the Federation to bond with an uncivilized native of an unknown planet. They didn’t even know Jim’s power levels, but if Blair had accepted him then he was more than just a basic.

“Welcome aboard, Sentinel Jim,” Simon said.

Blair relaxed back to lean against Jim’s side and Jim shifted to encase him in powerful arms, a smile on his lips. “My gratitude.”

Megan laughed and pulled them both in the direction of the rest of the crew. “Hey guys!” she called out. “Look who decided to show up at the last minute!”

High in the sky, the mallye circled the reunited crew, cawing to each other in speech only their own could understand. By some unseen signal, they turned as one like a black cloud as large as any starship, and soared away. Below, the human-creatures they’d been watching encircled a pair that, to the mallye eyes, shone like the golden glow of sunlight seeping through a dense canopy.

A BUSMAN'S HOLIDAY

ART BY BETH

STORY BY CAITRIONA



"Yeah, Simon, we're fine...No, I promise, no drug dealers, gun smugglers or slave traders...yeah, I'll let him know...okay, got it...uh, huh...you bet...uh, Simon, the signal's getting spotty...Right, okay, bye Simon." Blair shut off his phone, huffing as he stuck it in his bag. "The way he was carrying on, you'd think we deliberately go looking for trouble."

At that, Jim lost control of his barely repressed snickers and burst into full-fledged laughter. He clutched the steering wheel trying to keep the truck straight on the small back road. When he managed to catch his breath, he slanted a look at his partner. "Well, you can't really blame him, not with our track record."

"Yeah, yeah," Blair muttered, making a face. "But it's not like we go looking for trouble. It just finds us!"

Jim gave a soft snort. "Chief, you've got a real gift for understatement sometimes." Before Blair could retort, Jim gestured. "There's our cabin."

Blair turned back to the front, his attention easily diverted to their planned vacation. "Oh, man, have I been looking forward to this! No phones, no interruptions; just some sun, fresh air, and fish."

Jim chuckled at his partner's exuberance, but he could not hold back his own sigh of relief. As detectives in the major crimes division of Cascade PD, their past few cases had come fast and furious. Their Captain, Simon Banks, had been forced to keep them on

rotation as long as possible. Both of them burned the midnight oil more than once, and Rhonda, Simon's assistant, had finally threatened to drug both of them if they did not get some sleep. The fact that neither of them offered any real argument scared Simon so much he practically packed their camping equipment for them. The two friends were under strict orders not to darken the station's doorstep for an entire week.

He pulled the truck up to the side of the small cabin. As Blair climbed out, he threw a grin at the Jim. "You know, if we were **really** camping, we would be staying in a tent.

"Be my guest, partner. You can park yourself on any patch of ground you want. Me? After all the catnaps in cars and on surveillance? I am going to sleep in a bed."

Blair laughed. While he opened up the cabin's windows to air it out, Jim stretched, working out the driving kinks. At the same time, he extended his extraordinary senses to see if he could spot any trouble. Nothing caught his attention, just birds, wind, and water. The late afternoon sun filtered through the trees, combining with the various shades and hues of green, brown and blue to paint a rich tapestry of solitude and restfulness. He could smell the moist earth from below him, even as the breeze brought the scent of pine and fir. He grinned as he felt his whole being relax; man, cop, and Sentinel. **Now** he could really enjoy the vacation.

Both men rose with the sun. They wanted to get out to the lake and catch some dinner. Laughter and good-natured ribbing flowed between them well into the morning. Despite a lack of luck with the fish, Jim had not felt this good in ages. Blair was safe; he was safe; and the city could spare them some time...life was good. He leaned back against a boulder, pole loose in his grip. Closing his eyes, he let his mind wander and soaked up the serenity of the place. His senses drifted out, subconsciously taking in his surroundings.

Several minutes later Blair's heart rate suddenly jumped. Jim's eyes snapped open as he reached for his weapon. He remembered it was locked in the truck even as Blair gave a joyful shout.

"Ha!" Blair exclaimed. "Got one!"

Jim stood up, a fond grin sliding across his face as he watched Blair struggle to bring in his catch. The grin became a smirk when Blair tossed him a dirty look over one shoulder.

"It wouldn't physically kill you to give me a hand, you know!"

With a chuckle, Jim moved to help. Even as he reached out to take hold of his friend's fishing pole, Blair misplaced his feet. Loose rocks beneath him shifted and the pull of his catch overbalanced him. He dropped his pole. Arms wind milling, Blair fell face first into the water. "Whoa!"

Jim could only laugh as the drenched man rose from the water. Blair gave him a disgusted look and began climbing out of the lake. "Laugh it up, big guy. I lost my fishing pole...and our dinner!"

Laughter still rumbling up from his chest, Jim held out a hand to help his friend back to the bank. As their eyes met, Blair started chuckling as well.

A gunshot rang out.

Blair's head snapped towards the sound as Jim focused all of his attention towards the same direction. He heard the snapping of branches as something heavy moved through the brush. After a moment of silence he heard a vehicle pulling away. Silence returned to the woods. He ran for the truck, Blair on his heels.

"Any idea?" Blair asked as they stopped at the truck for their phones and weapons.

Jim shook his head. "Not yet. Heard some kind of vehicle leaving...sounded like a heavy engine, truck probably." He relocked the truck before leading Blair up the nearest path. Moving quickly but carefully, they wound through the trees and over the small ridge behind their cabin. As they walked around a fallen fir tree, the breeze carried a mixed scent of metal and flesh to Jim. His head turned. "This way."

The two men followed the scent to a small depression in the hillside, where the body of a young man lay. Jim looked around, noting the tire tracks and footprints. Blair just sighed as he stared down at the still figure. He glanced at his partner. "I'll see if I can reach the sheriff." Jim nodded and Blair moved away, dialing as he stepped over to a small dirt road.

A half-hour passed as the men waited for the local authorities to arrive. A deputy arrived first, asking them to wait for the sheriff while he secured the scene. When the sheriff's truck pulled up, the two of them walked over to meet him.

"Gentleman," the sheriff nodded at them as he stepped out of his vehicle. "Alex Runningwolf."

"Sheriff," Jim acknowledged, shaking hands. "I'm Jim Ellison; this is Blair Sandburg."

"So I hear you found us a problem."

"Yeah," Blair nodded. They began to walk towards the body. "We were fishing down at the lake when we heard a gunshot."

Sheriff Runningwolf lifted an eyebrow. "Decided to go looking before you called it in?"

"Habit," Jim snorted. "We're detectives with the Cascade PD. We moved to check and secure the area. It could have just been some kids playing with their dad's gun."

“I’ll give you that one,” agreed Runningwolf with a nod of acceptance. “At least you’re not just some tourists poking around. Last summer we had a fisherman get shot because he went looking instead of calling for help.” He glanced around the site and noticed the careful way the men had moved around. “Thank you for keeping the site as clean as possible.”

“No problem,” Blair replied.

The men stepped up to the side of the depression and looked down at the body. Runningwolf’s lips grew taut and thin. “Damn it.”

“Sheriff?” Jim prodded.

“Stefan Devereaux.” Runningwolf answered, planting his fists on his hips.

“You know him?” Blair asked.

Runningwolf gave him a sardonic stare. “We’re not exactly the big city around here. Everybody pretty much knows everybody. Stefan’s a good kid; little strange in some of his hobbies, but still a good kid.”

Jim tilted his head. “Any enemies?”

“Enemies? The kid’s only sixteen.”

“Prime age,” Blair mused as he crouched down to look at the boy’s face.

“Excuse me?” came the sheriff’s sharp question.

Blair rose, giving the sheriff a wide-eyed look. “Puberty,” he replied with a shrug. “Between the hormones and the mood swings, teenagers are at the prime age for issues to pop up. They’re testing their limits, trying to find the line between being themselves and being rebellious. They’re questioning everything – Mom, Dad, traditional authority figures. It’s when they start really coming into their own identity instead of somebody’s kid. On the darker side of it, they start trying and testing the taboos as well. Plus most lifelong dislikes are set during these years as well. People will grow up, move away, but you never really forget the things that happen to you as a teenager.”

He shrugged once more as the locals stared at him. “These are the years that *really* shape the adult they will one day become. Sure some people have their lives determined by childhood, but most people are really developed as teenagers. Sixteen is a coming-of-age time. In modern culture we celebrate it by giving them a driver’s license, but that’s really a symbol of more freedom. They can go further from home now; they’re supposed to be more trustworthy, more capable of independence now. It would definitely be the age they start setting the pattern of who their friends or enemies would be.”

The sheriff gaped at him as Jim rolled his eyes. "Okay, Chief, I think we get it." He turned to the man next to them. "Sheriff, did Stefan have any rivals...over sports, girls, anything?"

"No," he answered. "Not that I can think of anyway. The boy was a loner mostly; only had a couple of real friends. Polite and a bit bashful with folks, but never in any trouble. He wasn't the sports type; preferred computers. From everything I saw, the girls either ignored him or treated him like a brother."

"What did he do for fun?" Blair asked.

"Computers mostly; seemed like every time you saw him he would be on his laptop. His mom got a bit concerned over how much time he spent on it, but his dad blew it off. He thought it would be good for Stefan when it came to college and getting a job."

"That might be something to look at," mused Blair. "If we could get a look at what he did while on the computer, we might have an idea of who would want to hurt him."

Jim agreed. "We'd need to find out if he was online or if this was more personal."

"You boys got any federal badges I don't know about?" the sheriff asked.

The partners exchanged chagrined looks. Blair gave a small wince. "Ah, oops?"

"Sorry about that, Sheriff," Jim answered, rubbing his forehead with one hand. "We're so used to taking on any case we trip over..."

"That we just sort of started running roughshod over your case." Blair finished.

All three men stared down at the body being carefully placed in a body bag by the coroner. Runningwolf huffed out a breath. "Aren't you boys on vacation?"

Jim and Blair exchanged rueful glances. Jim shrugged. "Can you use the help?"

"Yeah," sighed the sheriff. "I suppose so. I've got three deputies; one's here, one's in Texas visiting family and the other one's down with some virus. We're shorthanded, so yeah, I could use the help. As long as you're willing?"

Both men nodded, but Blair rolled his eyes. "Simon's going to kill us."

Arranging to meet the sheriff at the office in a couple of hours, the partners made their way back to their cabin. They decided to stay at the cabin instead of taking him up on the offer of a place in town. The drive would let them discuss the case privately. Both men liked the sheriff, but small towns did not allow for the same level of objective behavior as the big city. They needed to determine if Runningwolf had any interaction with the victim as well.

“So, what do you think?” Blair asked as they started towards town.

“I think we don’t know enough about the kid yet,” Jim replied. “Right now we’ve got the description of a nice, if shy, loner who’s life revolved around a computer. That’s not really the type of kid that gets shot and dumped in the woods.”

“We’ve seen weirder,” Blair argued.

“Maybe, Chief, but usually this type of kid gets caught in the wrong place at the wrong time, like a robbery going bad or simply choosing the wrong day to go to the park. So far he doesn’t sound like a kid that would make enemies.”

“We need to see the computer.”

Jim nodded. “Exactly.”

Later at the sheriff’s office they met the secretary, Julie Clark, who directed them into a small break room. She brought them the laptop while pointing out the refrigerator and coffee maker. “You boys get whatever you want out of there, but don’t touch the cheese biscuits. Sheriff’s wife made those especially for him, and he gets testy when people start picking at them.” They thanked her and focused on the computer itself.

Jim leaned back and watched as his partner’s hands flew across the keyboard. Blair shook his head. “He spent time online in several networking sites, but it’s mostly gaming and creative writing. I don’t find much in the way of social stuff.”

“So,” Jim said, leaning forward, “anything on the hard drive?”

“Yeah,” Blair answered, moving the mouse and clicking on a couple of folders. “Looks like Stefan was pretty creative. He’s got several stories here, mostly action/adventure things, and a couple of mysteries. He had some potential as a writer. He’s got a great vocabulary and a pretty good sense of the flow of words from what little I’ve looked at. He needed some more experience and a bit of polish, but this is pretty good for an amateur.”

“But nothing else?” Jim scowled.

Blair hitched one shoulder. “Let me look around some more.”

Jim stood up and paced the small room. “There has to be something else. We still don’t have anything pointing towards a motive. Unless Runningwolf finds something in his interviews, the answer has to be here.” He leaned on the counter and folded his arms over his chest. “What was the kid doing up there? He wasn’t dressed for the woods, so he wasn’t planning on going that far out.”

“Snap decision?” Blair threw out as he continued looking through files.

"I doubt it," Jim replied. "The kid grew up here. He knows better than to go traipsing through the woods unprepared. Storms blow up suddenly around these mountains. He would have had a backpack with emergency supplies, better shoes, and at least some kind of jacket. I don't care how nerdy or shy; no local kid is going to go that far into the woods without some kind of preparations.

"I agree."

Both men looked up to see the sheriff standing in the doorway. "I went by the coroner first, and figured I'd stop by before starting my interviews." Walking the rest of the way inside, he leaned on the counter. "According to Doctor Matthews, he can't give me a preliminary cause of death."

Jim frowned. "He was shot."

"That's what I said," Runningwolf replied. "Doctor Matthews thinks the wound is in the wrong place to have killed him so quickly." Both detectives stared at him and he held up a hand in a holding gesture. "It would have killed him eventually, but he doesn't think it was immediately fatal. It looks like Stefan took a beating first. His first instinct is that the beating is what killed him. He figures the gunshot was just the insurance."

Runningwolf shifted and left the room, closing the door behind him. Jim and Blair exchanged a long look. Blair tilted his head. "So?"

Jim shook his head. "If the kid took a beating, it wasn't on that mountainside. The scene was barely disturbed."

"And you didn't hear it," Blair commented.

"No, but I wasn't exactly listening either," Jim noted.

Blair gave him a look. "You've got your senses on perpetual guard duty these days. Yeah, a few years ago you would have had to really concentrate, but it's been a while since you needed to do more than set a perimeter. It's instinctive now; you don't even have to think about it anymore. Someone getting beaten would have caught your attention immediately."

"Maybe," Jim granted with a shrug. He rolled his eyes as Blair huffed before turning back to the laptop.

Blair continued searching the hard drive while Jim paced the small room. He really hated not having something physical to do. Five minutes or so passed in near silence. Blair sucked in a breath.

"Find something?" Jim asked.

“Looks like a journal.” Several moments passed quietly as Blair read. “Yep, definitely a journal. The guy made regular entries.” He frowned and moved the page forward. “Damn.”

“What?”

Blair shook his head. “He refers to everyone with nicknames: Angel G, Guardian, Dark Halo. There are almost no names.”

“What about the entries?” Jim asked, rubbing his chin.

“Most of them seem fairly average for a teenage boy. He talks about hanging out with Angel G and Guardian, playing games, and schoolwork. Nothing really outstanding as...” Blair paused and his eyebrows went up. “Hang on a moment, this is interesting.” His voice changed slightly as he read from the journal. *“I need to talk to Guardian. I caught Angel G coming out of the bathroom at school today, and she was pulling down her sleeves. Saw some bruises, but when I asked her about them, she waved them off. She said she bumped in to something, but I’ve never hit something and had bruises like those pop up. Looked like fingers to me.”* The partners locked gazes. Blair began reading again. *“Looked like the marks Guardian got that one time he got into a shoving match with PQB...from where the dude grabbed his arm. Got a bad feeling Angel G’s newest fashion craze isn’t for the looks. Bet it’s got more to do with Dark Halo. I think it’s time we had a talk with Bear.”*

“Dark Halo?” Jim asked scowling.

“One of Stefan’s multitude of nicknames for people. This was his entry yesterday. I’ll try and see what else he’s got to say.”

Jim nodded and started for the door. “You do that, Chief. I’ll go see if I can find the sheriff and have him step in for minute. Sounds like Angel G has picked up an abusive boyfriend.”

Blair turned back to the screen as Jim left the room. Running a search on the journal, he pulled up the references to ‘Dark Halo’ and started going through some of them.

June 8th – Angel G’s put on a good show today, but she’s not happy. I’d say she’s pissed, but I don’t really think she’s mad. She just doesn’t like the guy. What’s she going to do though? Her mom’s crazy about him. Angel G says he’s got creepy eyes. Guardian laughed and said that’s what GF says about him. Angel G just shook her head, said the guy’s not right. We’re calling him Dark Halo – nice on the outside, not-so-nice on the inside.

August 16th – Dark Halo’s gone out of town for a couple of days, and Angel G’s a lot lighter for it. Said she can’t wait for school to start so she has more reasons to get out of the house. He’s started picking on her friendship with me and Guardian. We used to think she just hated her mom getting a new guy...not so sure anymore. He’s got some major hate going

on – every time he sees me or Guardian, he gets this crazy-eyed look. You'd think Angel G was his daughter – I keep expecting to see him with a shotgun.

November 3rd – Something's not right. Angel G asked to keep some things over here. She says she thinks someone is searching her room. She says Dark Halo's been trying to convince her mom to keep a closer eye on her. Wish I knew what the hell was going on.

January 4th – Finally, back from visiting the cousins. Holidays were painful as usual. You'd think being on a computer was a crime. It'll be good to see Guardian and Angel G. We're due to meet at the park in an hour. I want to know what's up with Angel G – Guardian said Dark Halo cut off her cell phone. The guy is fricking weird.

January 4th – Damn it. Angel G didn't show. Guardian says she gotten really withdrawn. She barely talks to anybody at school; not even him or Bo Peep. He says her mom went out of town for a couple of days, leaving Angel G at home with Dark Halo. Something happened. He found her hiding in the hideaway one day, silent and rocking, tears on her cheeks. He just sat with her until she fell asleep. She never said a word. When she woke up, she acted like nothing was wrong and got mad when he tried to push it, so he backed down. What the hell is going on?

February 13th – Angel G's still not telling us anything. We're trying to figure it out, but she's actively hiding stuff from us. I've been tempted to go through her diary, but I gave her my word I wouldn't. She said she knew she could trust me to keep it without looking, and she didn't want Dark Halo to find it. Damn...too much more and I'll drop a hint to Guardian. He'll look and I can keep my word.

March 22nd – I know it's still cold and all, but what's with all the sweaters? Angel G's worn one every day this week, and today it was a turtleneck. She's flinching from people, won't let them touch her. She's keeping me and Guardian between her and everyone else. It's like she's hiding, or ashamed of something. Guardian and I've talked about going to Bear, but what do we say? "Angel G's acting weird and we think it's Dark Halo's fault?" It's no secret she doesn't like her stepfather.

Blair leaned back and covered his face with his hands. After all this time with the police, he knew what the teenage boys were not seeing. Heck, he would have realized after the first couple of years when he was still just a ride-along. Somewhere in this town, a

teenage girl was trapped in a nightmare she could not escape from, and it may have gotten one of her friends killed.

“Chief?”

He pulled his hands away from his face and looked up to see his partner and the sheriff entering. Jim’s concerned frown drew a shrug. Blair gave a sigh. “It’s not a boyfriend.”

“What’s not a boyfriend?” Sheriff Runningwolf asked.

With a gesture towards the screen, Blair explained. “We found Stefan’s journal. He uses a bunch of nicknames, but it looks like a friend of his is in trouble.” He went on to explain the entries he had read.

Jim nodded. “So the monster’s her step-dad.”

“Yeah,” Blair agreed, pushing his hair back out of his face. “He’s been trying to cut her off from her support system from the beginning; picking on her friendship with the two boys, making them uncomfortable. It’s the entry in January that worries me most though. The tears and the silence by themselves would be indicative that the abuse had turned physical, but the rocking part...that’s different. That’s pointing to something deeper, more damaging to her mental state than just physical violence.”

“*Just...!*” the sheriff started, but he went silent at Jim’s glare.

“Let him finish,” Jim growled.

“I don’t mean to undermine the severity of the physical abuse, but the rocking movement is usually a sign that shows up when a person is trying desperately to hold on to herself. If he had beaten her severely, it would show up, but the entry doesn’t point to that. Surely Stefan would have mentioned if her bruising had been that bad. Instead he just talks about her rocking and crying – not one word about a bruise, a cut, blood, nothing. What else did this ‘Dark Halo’ do to cause that type of reaction?”

The sheriff took a deep breath. “You’re right; I’m sorry. Just...the idea that we’ve got a man abusing his step-daughter and then killing a teenage boy...”

“We don’t know he’s a killer,” Jim cautioned.

“No,” Runningwolf agreed, “but it sure puts him in a bad light.”

Blair nodded. “Now we just have to figure out who we’re dealing with.” He looked directly at Runningwolf. “Stefan refers to his two friends as Guardian and Angel G.”

The sheriff sat straight up, his eyes fierce and burning. “What?”

Before either man could speak, Julie poked her head in the room. “Sheriff, we’ve got a couple of missing teenagers.”

“Let me guess,” he said, rising to his feet, “Thomas Martinez and Sharon Chase?”

She blinked in shock. “Yes, sir! How-”

“Never mind,” he snapped grabbing his jacket. “Get people out there looking. Tell Roberts I want to know where Chuck Johnston is...I want eyes on him immediately.”

“Yes, Sir!”

Runningwolf turned back to the detectives. “Sharon and Thomas...Angel G and Guardian,” he said in answer to their questioning looks. “Sharon turned sixteen over the holidays. Chuck’s her stepfather.” Blair bit back a curse as Jim’s eyes went flat with rage. Runningwolf nodded at their reactions. “You coming out for the search?”

Blair grabbed his jacket as Jim nodded. “Pictures?”

“I’ll get them.”

The men followed him into the main office. Two men with search dogs stood waiting.

“Sheriff,” one nodded. “Thomas’ mother is bringing a shirt of his and one of Sharon’s sweaters. Soon as the dogs get the scent we’ll start looking.”

Jim exchanged a quick glance with Blair as Runningwolf stepped up to Julie’s desk to arrange for pictures. Blair muttered under his breath. “Least that should help.”

Jim inclined his head in agreement but remained silent.

A few moments later, a teary dark-haired woman rushed in. She had two pictures in one hand while the other clutched some clothing. As the clothing was passed to the search and rescue team, Blair stepped forward to take the pictures. His movement gave Jim the excuse he needed to shift closer to the clothing and catch a bit of the scent.

Blair handed him the pictures with raised eyebrows. Jim gave a nod and they followed the others outside. The two partners quickly agreed to assist the search and rescue team since everyone else knew the town better. They started from the last place the teens were seen, and the scent led towards the woods. After half an hour they came to a small stream.

The dogs lost the scent at the stream. As their handlers started walking them along the water line to see if they could pick it back up, Jim headed directly across the water with Blair right behind him. The others frowned at them.

“We’ll see if we can find any tracks or disturbance on this side,” Jim explained. “Meet you in a bit.” They nodded, their faces clearing in understanding. Jim and Blair made a

small show of searching the ground as the S&R team moved out of sight. As soon as they were clear, Jim headed directly into the trees.

“What have you got?” Blair asked, eyes roving the surrounding trees.

Jim’s head came up and his nostrils flared. “Sharon wears a light perfume. It’s a flower of some kind, but I’ve got no idea what it is. The same scent’s coming from over this hillside.”

The two men continued climbing. As they started to go around a boulder, Jim clamped a hand on Blair’s arm and drew him to a stop. He pointed to his ear and Blair nodded. Jim closed his eyes; focused part of his attention on his Guide to keep him grounded and stretched out his hearing.

“Think you can get away from me, do you? Spend all your time hanging around with punks and ignore me?”

“Back off, man! Leave her alone!”

“Don’t you talk to me, punk! I took care of that other brat and you’re next!”

“No!”

Jim blinked as he came back to himself. “Damn! It’s the kids alright, but the stepdad’s here.”

Blair grimaced. “Great.”

The two men crept around the boulder and down a small path towards a secluded hollow. As they drew closer Blair was able to hear them as well. They slowed down, trying to muffle the noise as much as possible. They peered around a couple of trees.

A husky blond man stood glaring down at two teenagers. Thomas, a lanky boy with shaggy dark hair, lay sprawled on the ground. A darkening spot on his face showed the hit that had knocked him down. A tall brunette who had to be Sharon knelt beside him. Johnston continued ranting at the two of them. He waved his hands around as he spat out insults and threats. One hand held a thick crowbar.

Johnston raised the crowbar. Sharon screamed. Thomas threw up his arms to protect his head. The partners burst around the trees.

“Halt! Police!”

The tableau froze.

Jim kept his eyes fixed on Johnston. He heard Blair shifting further to his left, forcing Johnston to split his attention. “Back away and put the weapon down.” Johnston’s eyes

narrowed, and Jim's glare grew fierce. "Believe me; I don't have any problem with just shooting you. Now put it down."

Jim watched as the husky frame shook in rage, eyes darting between the two men facing him. Jim and Blair never faltered. Finally the man backed away from the teenagers and lowered his arms. Jim nodded. "That's it. Now drop it." The crowbar hit the thick forest floor with barely a whisper. "Turn around. Hands behind your head."

As Jim put Johnston into handcuffs, Blair holstered his weapon and radioed for assistance.

Blair stood off to the side as Jim helped the sheriff walk Chuck Johnston to the deputy's car. The two teenagers had already been placed in Runningwolf's truck. He glanced over to see Sharon bury her face in Thomas' shoulder. Watching as they had finally grasped the reality of Stefan's death had been heart-wrenching.

"You okay, Chief?"

He looked over as Jim came up beside him. "Yeah; just thinking."

"Cause that's new?" His friend nudged his shoulder with a slight grin.

"Thanks," Blair retorted. "No, it's just sad that one madman's obsession managed to permanently mar three lives. Stefan's gone, and the other two will never be the same."

Jim sighed. "I know." He leaned on a tree. "That's the part I hate."

The partners watched as the deputy drove back towards town. Runningwolf walked up to them.

"I want to thank both of you. We'd never have been in time to save those two; if we found them at all," he said, shaking their hands. "With just Peterson and me here, it would have taken a few days to get to the computer, and it could have been too late."

"Oh?" Blair asked.

The sheriff nodded. "Chuck's truck is hidden just around the bend on one of the rangers' roadways. Looks like he was ready to run and probably planning to take Sharon with him."

Jim scowled, "Bastard."

"Got to agree with you there," Runningwolf said.

"She's going to need to talk to someone," Blair cautioned. "You'll need to *gently* encourage her to work with a professional. She's been keeping it in, hiding it away from everyone, and that's got a serious potential to fester."

Runningwolf sighed. "I know. When I walked them to my truck, she wouldn't look at me; wouldn't meet my eyes."

"She's probably blaming herself," Blair answered. "She's playing the 'what if' game in her head. 'What if I'd told? What if I'd fought harder? What if I'd fought *less*?' He looked up at the light filtering through the trees for a moment before turning back to the others. "She's got some nasty commentary going through her head, not only blaming herself for what happened to *her* but also for what happened to Stefan."

"Tell her it's not her fault," Jim recommended. "Tell her as often and forcibly as you can. She needs you to believe it if she's going to."

The sheriff nodded. "We will." He tilted his head towards the truck. "Need a lift?"

Blair started shaking his head, but let Jim answer. "We can walk. Sharon doesn't need to be surrounded by us right now."

With a nod, Runningwolf headed for his truck. The two partners started the trek back towards town. Blair frowned. "You know what I don't get?"

"What's that, Chief?" Jim asked.

"If Chuck had a gun, why the crowbar?"

"More pain for Thomas; more terror for Sharon," Jim answered. "He wanted the boy to suffer, but he really wanted to control the girl. 'Watch me as I beat your friend. This is what I'll do to you if you don't do what I want.' Sick bastard."

Before Blair could answer, Runningwolf hollered back to them. "Hey, detectives!" When they looked at him, he gave them a grin. "Julie just radioed me. Seems your boss has been trying to call you." He paused as both men groaned, his grin growing wider. "She let him know you were helping us out and she'd pass the message along."

"We're doomed," Blair moaned, burying his face in his hands.

Jim pinched the bridge of his nose. "Next time we need sleep he's just going to sedate us, you know that right?"

"It's not our fault!"

"No, but we always seem to get stuck taking a busman's holiday."

UNAUTHORIZED AFFAIR

ART BY LAPETITE KIKI



CHRYSALIS

ART BY HELVETICA

STORY BY MAB BROWNE



DRAWINGS BY HELVETICA
CHRYSALIS
MAB BROWNE

Joseph: He shall increase

James: Supplanter

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

Blair leaned over the engineer's shoulder, taking a look at the innards of the console open in front of them. "This is not how people have done this work before."

The engineer turned his head to glare irritably. “Which goes to show that it’s about time that someone did do it this way, because I’m inhaling the dust of ages here. And speaking of the dust of ages, you’d better brace yourself to replace some of this.”

Blair’s gut dropped at that. His margins were tight on this run and he had obligations to meet. “How braced?” he asked.

“I’m not sure yet. Depends on what happens with this component here.” A tool indicated but did not touch. “ I’ll let you know. Meantime, I work better without the customer breathing down my neck.”

Blair shook his head. “A little honest curiosity is not breathing down your neck. I know the workings of plenty of this baby, why shouldn’t I figure out this?”

“This isn’t a filter.”

“No, it’s not. Which is why I know my filters because clean air keeps me going longer than getting the right signal from the nav beacons.”

“Clean air doesn’t last forever if you never get the nav beacon signal in the first place.” The engineer backed his way from the console, forcing Blair to step out of his way.

“Have you got a time frame for this?” Blair said, dropping into the main chair. “My cargo’s already being loaded.”

“Damned if I know, but I know it’ll go quicker if I’m not interrupted.” The engineer dug in his work box. Blair decided that he couldn’t blame a man for wanting to get on with the job, especially when Blair was paying for said work, and took the hint to stop breathing down the engineer’s neck. He left the bridge, his bridge now that Clary was gone, and made his way towards the hold.

Blair walked the green safety path marked on the hold floor, while around him the loading continued, noisy, but ordered, and out of his hands. The cargo was loaded and certified untouched by him, and unloaded the same way, and that way reduced his liability, which was just fine by him. The Monarch was an old work-horse, pulling her loads from world to world. Blair wasn’t ever going to be rich – that he knew. Getting out from under the current load of debt would be more than enough.

He checked that the doorway was clear before he exited onto the dock, caressing the Monarch’s cold metal frame with one hand. “I’ll look after her for you,” he silently promised his uncle, before he stepped out onto the dock, and walked away from the flurry of loading to the comparatively quieter public walkway.

“Hey, Blair!” Blair looked towards the voice, and saw Varsey, a hauler, and an old friend of his uncle’s. He moved towards him, putting his arms around the man in a quick, tight hug.

“Varsey! Long time, no see.”

Varsey’s pale spacer’s face was mournful. “If I’d seen you earlier, I’d have seen Clary before he passed. I’m sorry.”

“Yeah.” Blair shrugged. “We’re all sorry. But how it goes isn’t always how we want it to go, right?”

“Always were a philosophical little shit, weren’t you?” Varsey shook his head. Philosophy was only one step ahead of fatalism so far as he was concerned, and fatalism was just another way of giving in to the spaces between.

“Hey, not so much of the little, old man.”

This ritual exchange of insults done with, Varsey got down to business. “Clary left you a mess of debt, I heard.”

Blair shot him a wary look. “And?”

“You want some extra cargo? Heading for Klotho?”

“Depends on how much room it takes. I don’t have space for anything bulk.”

Varsey seemed to find something amusing. “Oh, this isn’t bulk. Block six, warehouse C. There’s a man who wants to do business. Tell them that you’re looking for Joe.”

Blair smiled, rubbing his hands together in anticipation. “I’d better go see Joe about his business, then. Catch you up for some drinks before I go?”

Varsey shook his head regretfully. “Only just caught you. I’ve got customs and dock control to talk to in three hours and then we’re out to the Blue and Greys.”

Blair made a ‘rather you than me’ face. The Blue and Greys had stern attitudes towards intoxicants, sex and anything that could remotely count as enjoyable. It wouldn’t be much of a shore leave for Varsey and his wife. “Then thanks. And give my best to Lucia.”

Varsey nodded. “I’ll do that. She lit the candles for Clary. We were fond of him, you know?”

Blair swallowed against a suddenly tight throat. Yes, I know. Thanks, and safe journey.”

“Safe journey,” Varsey told him in return, and headed back to his own hauler, The Happy Lass.

Block six, warehouse C, a man who wanted to do business. Blair hustled his way there. Warehouse C wasn’t actually a warehouse, but a square, plain building that housed several dockside offices and a couple of bars.

“Oh, great,” Blair said to himself. On an instinct he tried the first bar. “I’m looking for someone called Joe. Varsey sent me?” he said to the bartender, a pleasant faced woman who looked more like an anchorite in her plain black dress. She smiled, as if at a pleasing idea, and said, “Oh, yes, him. Around the back, bay three.”

Bay three was empty of anything or anyone, and Blair decided that he’d wait ten minutes and then judge what he did from there. He leaned against the wall, staring up at the grey sky above him. “Clouds, rather than blue sky,” he said to himself. “Well, hello, planetside weather.”

“Expect the weather to talk back, do you?” a male voice asked. There’d been no sound of footsteps. Startled Blair turned around, and kept looking up, except that now he wasn’t looking at the sky, but at a tall, good-looking man, dressed in the kind of clothes that the well-off wore when they wanted to be casual. He had a heavy bag held over his shoulder with a strap. Blair’s eyes noted that it had the scuffed look of genuine leather, and took a step back. Someone with that gear should be enjoying the facilities at the passenger fastliner terminal, not tramping the walkways at the cargo docks, and he had an uneasy idea as to the nature of the cargo, and a vague disappointment with Varsey

“No,” he said easily. “I don’t expect the weather to talk back. But imagine the convenience if it could. Nope, don’t plan anything outdoors for today, I’m going to rain like you wouldn’t believe. But hey, we have meteorologists for that, so it’s not like the weather doesn’t talk to us, right?”

Handsome stranger lifted one dark, straight brow but otherwise refrained from indicating that he thought that Blair talked too much. “If you say so. Are you from the Monarch?”

“What does someone like you want with the Monarch?”

Displeasure crossed the man’s face, and Blair watched the change with unexpected fascination. “What do you mean, someone like me?”

Blair hoped his amusement didn’t show too clearly, but he doubted it. He lifted both hands in apology for pointing out the blindingly obvious. “Hey, no offence, man, but you look like a vid star, and your gear isn’t cheap, you know what I mean? People like you usually take an interest in cargo docks from a boardroom, not the walkway.”

This stranger clearly didn’t like the implication that he was notably attractive and looked like a rich guy. Genuine anger crossed his face. “Not everyone who looks like a vid star happens to be one. And now that we’re done discussing the trivia, are you with the Monarch?”

“Yeah, she’s mine.” Blair resisted the urge to cross his arms across his chest. “What do you want with her? Because I’m not taking on crew if that’s what you’re after.” Crew would be nice – two or three people on a hauler was safer, was company and support –

but the margins on his current load were tight enough without factoring in any extra costs and Blair really didn't want to keep his Klotho debtor waiting. Blair could do it alone; there were plenty of haulers who did.

"I want a ride, and I'm willing to pay."

Blair backed off a few steps more. He really had expected more from Varsey. "Who's after you?"

The man's blue eyes narrowed in annoyance. "Nobody."

"Oh, that's great. You make a really cute liar, but come on. Did you just figure that 'hauler' is spelled 'sucker'? Because sure, there are ships doing slow passenger runs, but they're set up for it. I'm not. So, therefore," and Blair put sarcastic emphasis on the 'therefore', "you have particular reasons to leave quickly, or under the immigration radar, so you're in trouble. And I don't need trouble."

"Nobody needs trouble. But you do need money, and I'm willing to pay eight grand." The sum was more than double the slow run fare, which would take a similar lengthy time but would offer company, and leisure facilities. Maybe this guy just didn't like people, or fun. Somehow, Blair found that unlikely.

"Everyone needs money," Blair shot back, not without a twist of pain at giving up eight grand of it. "But do I need it enough to live cheek by jowl with a stranger with *trouble* for four months? I don't think so. How about you find someone else?"

Blair turned and walked away, but he'd barely gone ten metres before his phone beeped, and Blair rolled his eyes in exasperation. Electronic noises were a bad punctuation to a stern statement of intent. He checked it anyway, because it was, of course, the engineer he'd left working on his console. "Yes!" he snapped.

"You need at least three grand of repairs, and frankly, going on the state of your ship I'm not doing the work until I know that you're good for it."

"Three grand?" Blair protested. "What are you going to do, man, gold plate the equipment? And I'm not going to fuck up my landing licence by leaving unpaid bills behind me. " Well, Blair thought, it was the truth. His debts were held on Klotho, not here, and they were secured.

"I want proof of certified payment, or no deal," the engineer insisted over the phone. Blair pushed his hair back with his hand in a gesture of pure frustration. He looked back over his shoulder and yes, the stranger with the suspiciously expensive gear was still standing there. Blair wrestled with his conscience and his prudence. Necessity took them both on and won, three falls out of three.

"Damn it! Wait two minutes. Two minutes, got it?" he said into the phone.

“Sure,” the engineer said, and cut off his end of the call.

Blair turned back to the man, who looked annoyingly smug. Maybe it was only relief. It didn't take a genius to figure out that Blair's hand had just been forced. “How are you planning on paying?” he asked, trying to suppress his irritation.

“IMC.” Immediate credit transfer – quick, and anonymous, but not cheap or easy to set up. It wasn't settling Blair's nerves any, but this man had just become his only hope of not losing money on this run. Instead of fucking up his licence with running out on his debts, he risked it with people smuggling. The penalties if he got caught would be about equal to those suffered by whoever got this man past Immigration and onto the docks in the first place. His debtor on Klotho would certainly have to write Blair's debt off his books if this went sour on him, and that was almost amusing. It would serve Glimmerman right.

“Well, I guess you've got a ride,” Blair said resignedly, mentally reviewing the security protocol for his cabin. “I hope you like boredom, and that you don't object to having your bag inspected.”

“Thank you,” the guy said, like Blair was a waiter on a liner who'd brought him his drink just the way he liked it.

“I'm Blair Sandburg.”

“Yes, I know.”

“So, you did check the loading manifests?”

“There was only you and the Waystar heading for Klotho.” Klotho – rich with resources and small in population, and a very open planet. Easy to get on, easy to get away from, and stand-offish about co-operation with other planets' law enforcement.

“Well, lucky me. And you are?”

“Jim Ellison,” said his passenger, holding out a hand.

Blair hesitated. “I thought that your name was Joe?” he said with sarcastic mock confusion.

“My name *was* Joe. And now it's Jim.” Ellison kept his hand held out, and Blair took it briefly and they shook on the deal.

“Okay, 'Jim Ellison', here's how this is going to work. You pay me your money now, and you get on the Monarch tonight, because right now I'm having work done on her, and you'd be kind of hard to explain.”

“And how do I know that you just won't leave without me?”

Blair drew himself up, his jaw jutting in anger. “The Monarch’s crew keeps to her deals, even when it costs us. Me,” he corrected himself.

Ellison stared at Blair, a penetrating look that made Blair uncomfortable. He’d had men stare at him before, measuring him up as a businessman, as a sexual partner. He and Clary had been known in the hauler community, which was strangely intimate for a group that stretched out between stars, and he hadn’t seen a stare like this before. He didn’t know what it meant, and that bothered him. But he needed the money. With Ellison’s money and the legal profit on this run he could be clear and free.

Whatever Ellison saw, presumably he was satisfied with it. “What time?” he asked.

“Not until ten.”

“Ten it is, then. I’ll make your payment.” The face softened into a smile, and appreciation jolted through Blair. Ellison really was a ridiculously good-looking man.

YEAR 325 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

GrayCorp Number Three was a sprawling manufacturing complex, producing small arms, for which there was a considerable demand on several planets. Weaponry was a desirable commodity to thieves as well as honest customers, and security was important to GrayCorp’s reputation and its bottom line. It was prepared to pay well for watch-dogs. Watch-dogs concentrated single-mindedly on their work, programmed as they were for loyalty and incorruptibility, leaving only their handlers as a risk to be vetted and selected.

It was a beautiful sky above the complex – a deep, just-before-dawn blue where the building was grey, sparkled with a few bright stars rather than the glow of industrial light, extending without boundary unlike the complex, with its windowless walls and high fences. If you liked that sort of thing, then Haris Orson guessed that it was worth staring at. It didn’t explain why GC3-JE was standing there, gazing up rather than coming back inside.

“Jay. Jay, return to the dorm.” The dorm was essentially a storage closet. Even watch-dogs had to shut down and rest some of the time, and Jay’s downtime was due. Jay didn’t respond, just stood there in the camera frame, staring up at the sky.

“Jay, is there a security breach?” It was all that Haris could think of – that the dog had sensed something amiss. Probably nothing, but Haris knew that GrayCorp had no intention of being anyone’s easy pickings, and he had his bonuses to think of.

“No.” It was a pleasant voice, deep and genuinely human sounding, and abstracted. If Jay had been human rather than Humanoid Variant, Haris would have called it ‘thoughtful’.

“It’s time to return to the dorm.”

Jay turned to the camera. The effect was far too like him looking into Haris's face for comfort.

"Why?" the HV asked.

Haris was speechless for a long moment.

"It's your rest period."

Jay kept staring up the sky, which was lightening as the sun gradually crept towards the horizon, and made no answer.

"GC3-JE, return to the dorm."

There was a lengthy moment of waiting, and Haris found himself almost holding his breath. This wasn't the first time Jay had been acting weirdly, and it gave Haris the creeps. But the use of his full designation seemed to do the trick, and Jay turned towards door five and went to his dorm niche. Haris went to the dorm in person, not something that he often did, and checked that Jay was in his place, his eyes shut. He was, statue - still and at rest. Haris took a quick breath in, and decided that this time he was logging Jay's behaviour. HV's did not ask 'why?' Not of their handlers, not of anyone, not ever.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

Ellison's IMC went through, and that meant that the work on the Monarch was finally done, the engineer was paid, extra supplies were brought in, and Blair's not entirely welcome passenger was now sitting in the tiny mess area. His big leather bag (and it was leather, expensive and supple) rested on the table.

Blair put one hand on the strap and sensed something – disapproval? Fear?

"Come on, man. I don't want any nasty surprises on this trip. You show me what's in here, and I confirm that there's nothing dangerous, and then you can put it all away and I won't go pawing through your smalls ever again."

"I'm aware of safety and security protocols," Ellison said stiffly.

"A lot of people are, and a lot of people just think they are. My ship, my life – I get to check your bag."

Ellison shrugged, and leaned back in his chair. "Then check away," he said. "I have a personal small-arm in there, along with ammunition and a charger. I take it you'll want to stow that somewhere secure."

"You take that absolutely correctly," Blair said, with a lift of relief in his chest. If the guy was admitting to his weapon and accepting the necessity that Blair didn't want a stranger with a gun on his ship, then that was promising that at worst the guy would be

no more than a basic asshole. At best, he might be a perfectly pleasant person and four months might not be the potential hell that was possible. Blair envisaged being able to seek cargo on Klotho and her satellites without caveats or worse dogging him and decided that he could live with the full range of possibilities, even if Ellison did turn out to be an asshole.

Blair unpacked the bag. There were the usual personal electronics, clothes, all of them good quality, and the weapon Ellison had mentioned. The butt was emblazoned with the Gray name, but it wasn't a type that Blair had seen before – it was smaller than most models, and sleeker somehow.

“New model, huh?”

“Yes,” his guest replied.

“Are you any good with it?”

The same, curt answer. “Yes.” There was a hint of a smile on Ellison's face. “I've worked in security.”

“Then why head for Klotho? Everyone's their own security detachment out there.” Even Blair carried a sidearm on Klotho. He had no intention of using it, but there were some circles where a lack of a sidearm was equivalent of going naked. Blair liked being naked, in the right place and circumstances, but Klotho's public spaces didn't count.

“But not everyone is any good at it.” It was completely assured, but there was something good-humoured about Ellison's voice.

“No. No, they're not.”

Ellison's face turned thoughtful. “What about you?” he asked. Blair wondered if he was touting for business already, and put the idea away for serious thought later. Blair had an uneasy relationship with the weapons customs on Klotho. He thought that they were an open invitation to anybody with a hair-trigger temper or a grudge, rational or otherwise, to cause mayhem. But Blair found a disquieting pleasure in ‘arming up’ when he was there. It was glamorous, however tawdry and dangerous it might be, but Blair knew that if trouble came that he was *not* that good with a gun.

He sighed. “I can point a gun in the right direction, but I'd rather not. Lover, not a fighter, that's me. And since your sidearm is going to be in my secure locker for the duration of the trip, I don't have to worry about how good you are with it, right?”

“Secure it now, if you like.”

“After I check the rest of your gear.”

Ellison lifted a brow. “That's not very trusting of you.”

“You’re the one with trouble. I just want to be sure that it’s not any substances that are going to interfere with the running of the Monarch.

“I don’t smoke. I don’t carry any dangerous chemicals. I live very cleanly.” Blair could believe it, given that Ellison was sitting there on one of his chairs, looking the very epitome of the benefits of clean living. But everyone knew that drug-users didn’t always look like users, and there were some chemicals that could really screw with a ship’s filters or water recycling.

Ellison’s bag revealed nothing of interest until the very end. His small selection of toiletries smelled as they should. There were more clothes, and at the bottom a surprise. Ellison stood and came next to Blair when he reached the small decorated box.

“Let me – it’s nothing dangerous, but it’s precious, and I’d rather be the one handling it.” This close to Blair, Blair was sharply aware of how much bigger Ellison was than him, and was beginning to think that he should just call security and get this guy off his ship, regardless of the consequences. But then Ellison picked up the box and opened it, revealing its contents.

“Oh my god,” Blair said softly. It was a book. A real book, made of paper, made to attract the eye and satisfy touch. A genuine luxury item. Ellison’s big, long-fingered hands deftly lifted it out of the box and gently flipped the pages.

“There,” he said. “Nothing in hiding.”

“May I?” Blair said and put out his hand. Ellison paused a moment and then handed it over to him. Blair received it into his hands with all the care he knew, and read the title. “The Art of War by Sun Tzu”. “I’ve never heard of this,” he said. “Okay, that wouldn’t be hard given the accumulated knowledge of human history, but it’s not a well-known text.”

Ellison took his treasure back again. “And you know *all* the well-known texts,” he said, his voice teasing, and Blair realised that four months with nothing to look at but this man had just become a dangerous prospect in a new and maybe not completely unexpected way.

“I read,” he said, oddly defensive.

Ellison grinned. “Yes,” he said. “So do I.”

YEAR 326 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

Anais had always done exactly what she wanted, and after more than seventy years of it, she had no intention of stopping. One of the things that she particularly liked doing was indulging her curiosity, and with the Gray family fortune supporting her, Anais indulged her curiosity a great deal.

Her current discovery, her very secret discovery, was sitting blank-faced in a chair in a small prison that masqueraded as an apartment. Anais sat down in front of it and spoke the magic words.

“GC3-JE. Wake please.”

The face changed, still serene, but aware.

“Yes?” it said.

“I have your security code.” She reeled off the long string of syllables and numbers. “I wish to give you a new designation. Your designation is now Golem.”

“My designation is now Golem,” it agreed.

“Tell, me, Golem, why do you like looking at the sky?”

An expression that wasn’t definite enough to be a frown passed across the too handsome face. It paused, far too long, and then said, “I don’t know.”

“It’s not part of your instructions.”

Again, that vague discomfiture crossed its face.

“No, it’s not part of my instructions.”

“Then why do it?” she probed.

“I don’t know,” it repeated. Then it said some magic words of its own. “Does it matter?”

A thrill, entirely deep and unexpressed, passed through Anais. It was part atavistic terror, and part delighted anticipation.

“It doesn’t matter now,” she said. “I have a purpose for you.” The face relaxed into placid attention. Purpose. “Golem, I have files that I want you to review.” History, psychology, popular culture, the basic level of science and maths that one might expect of an educated adolescent; she’d had to prioritize some of it, and for some of it pretty much resorted to the electronic equivalent of throwing things in the air and picking up the one on top. “Review the files, as indicated, and take time out for self-care. I’ll talk to you again in one week.” She indicated the screen reader. “You know how to use this?”

It picked it up, and examined the screen. “Yes,” it told her.

“Carry on, then,” she said, and left. She went to a favourite eating place, where charming servers brought her spiced tea and rich, bite-sized cakes, and contemplated Golem. The capacity of an AI was, by law, strictly limited. It would be inappropriate, after all, immoral even, to create slaves rather than sophisticated machines. But Anais wasn’t the first to wonder if an HV was just the clockwork doll that its creators had claimed, and if

she and Golem were discovered, she wouldn't be the first to suffer scandal and the penalties of the law.

Anais sat in thought, sipping at her tea . Playing with her clockwork man was potentially dangerous, in so many ways; but doing as she pleased was a difficult habit to break.

YEAR 328 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

"Good morning, Golem."

It had taken to standing when she entered. Not so long ago, it would have remained seated, reviewing whatever the latest stimulus was, but somewhere along the line it had acquired a sense of etiquette. It was becoming her secret delight to talk to Golem.

Instead of the expected "Good morning, Anais," a frown passed over Golem's face.

"Is something wrong?" Anais asked.

An emotion, that on a human would have been embarrassment, followed upon the frown.

"Yes," it said.

"What is it?" Anais awaited her surprise, whatever it was.

"My designation...." It stopped, its gaze shifting to Anais's left. Somewhere in its study it had learned that you did not stare, or look directly too long at another person, unless you wished to indicate a particular emotion – intimacy, threat, domination. "My designation is inappropriate."

"Why?" Anais asked calmly.

"I've read the history of the concept."

"And?"

Golem turned its head away – an HV unwilling to meet the eyes of its superior, an HV concerned over its designation.

"Why did you give me that designation?"

"I suppose it was a nickname," Anais said. She wondered if Golem had yet given serious thought to the concept of being disingenuous.

It – he frowned. "Haris called me Jay." He looked her in the eyes then. "That was different to being called Golem. That's not what I am."

Anais sat down in a chair opposite him. “You’re an artificial being, created for the protection of GrayCorp.”

“But that’s not all the myth.” His index finger tapped the small screen on the table. “Are these my words on my forehead? Is that why I stay in here? Because you’re afraid that I’ll do harm?”

“Do you think that you’ll do harm?” She leaned forward, waiting for his answer, fascinated.

“I could do harm,” he conceded. It was a fact. He was made in the form of a strong man, and stronger even than he looked. “But so can you do harm.”

“Yes, so I could. Do you want to do harm?”

He shook his head, and then gazed at her. “Your heart rate spiked just then.”

Anais considered her options, and chose the truth. “I was surprised. You shook your head; it’s not a gesture that I expected.”

“You shake your head to indicate negation.”

“So I do,” she said. “So I do.” She paused. “So, your designation. Should I change it?”

“Yes,” he said.

She thought, her eyes on the plain, pale carpet, before a trivial fact learned long ago sprang to mind. “Your new designation is Joseph.”

“I don’t know that word.”

“It’s a name,” Anais told him. “A very old name, and not at all fashionable these days.”

“Should I be fashionable?” he asked, in genuine confusion.

“No,” she said, laughing briefly. “I don’t think it would suit you.”

He accepted that. She made herself tea, and spoke with Joseph a while longer before she left. In the elevator, she laughed again, a touch giddily, as another old name came to her. “Perhaps I should have named you Galatea,” she said. “But I think that it might offend you when you figure it out.” An HV – offended. Truly, she lived in a world of wonders.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, THE MONARCH

They cleared Cubero without any trouble. The Monarch was just an old hauler, like dozens of others, after all. Blair kept expecting to be arrested all the way to the h-space entry – over twenty-four hour’s travel, and his heartbeat and breathing finally began to settle about an hour after they transferred to h-space.

“So, we’ve done it,” Ellison said. He looked annoyingly calm himself.

“Yeah, looks like we’ve done it. Now we just have to survive four months in close proximity.”

“I can keep to my room,” Ellison told him, and Blair felt a pang of guilt. The little cabins were good for sleeping and storing belongings and that was it.

“How about we see how we rub along together before you exile yourself?” he said. “I wouldn’t mind some company.” He grinned. “You can tell me all about Sun Tzu.”

“If you’d like.” The words were non-committal, but something relaxed in Ellison, and Blair felt more calm come back to him. This might work out okay; Blair would have company, and Ellison would get away from his ‘trouble’. Maybe, now that it was behind him, he might actually explain what it was. Illegal, undoubtedly, but somehow, Blair couldn’t worry too much about that. There was something oddly reassuring about the man, as he sat there quiet and self-contained in the mess room chair. “You’re used to company?” Ellison asked.

“This was my uncle’s ship, and I’ve run the routes with him four years now, I guess. But he died, and we discovered that he’d done something...” Blair paused, uncomfortable with explaining his uncle’s business follies to a stranger, “well, let’s just say it was unwise. The Monarch isn’t as unencumbered as we’d like her to be.”

Ellison’s face was politely sympathetic. “I’m sorry, but not that sorry. If you hadn’t needed the money, I might still be stuck on Cubero.”

“Stuck on Cubero and in trouble, huh?” Blair smiled invitingly. He’d had people tell him he had a sympathetic face, but Ellison remained unmoved.

“That’s right,” he said. “So here is better.” It was completely unenlightening, but the refusal was leavened by a pleasant smile that made the handsome face rather more approachable than Blair had yet seen it. He stared for maybe too long, before he caught himself. Recreational sex might be a great way to fill in the long travel time, but he barely knew this guy, or his preferences. Blair might jump into things with a casual planet contact, but not in the small, inescapable spaces of his ship.

YEAR 335 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

Joseph took his new role as Anais’s major-domo and de facto bodyguard seriously, but Anais thought that something extra weighed him down. When they were alone, she asked him straight out, “What’s wrong?”

The long-fingered, graceful hands, which had been reviewing accounts on the screen, paused. Joseph’s face was cut in clear profile against the light from the windows, and Anais watched, fascinated as always. It reminded her of when her son was little, that

sense that every step was a huge step, every discovery a great one. “I think I dreamed last night.” Joseph didn’t sleep, and could function several days before he needed rest. He’d rested last night – and dreamed. Anais felt her eyes widen in spite of herself.

“You dreamed. What did you dream about?”

Joseph turned to face her. “It didn’t make sense,” he complained, and she might have laughed if not for the trouble in his face.

“Dreams often don’t.”

“I was standing in Amity Park,” he said. Amity Park was a green space within walking distance of Anais’s apartment (all three floors of it) and she walked there sometimes, as did Joseph. “Just standing there, watching the people, and a butterfly settled on my face.”

“Ah,” she said.

“There aren’t any butterflies on Cubero,” he said peevishly.

Cubero had no butterflies, but Old Earth had, and Old Earth’s long extinct Lepidoptera had been an interest of Kane Beattie, who was an old, dear friend of Anais’s. He had died not one month ago, and Joseph had been fond of him. Anais lowered her eyes, reminded of her own grief, and irritated with Joseph for bringing it back to her so inopportunistically.

“Well, as I said, dreams don’t make sense. It’s their nature.”

“No. Dreams don’t make sense.” Joseph stood then, trouble turning to distress. “I don’t make sense, Anais.”

“How do you mean?”

His hands cut through the air in front of his body. “This. Me! What – what am I?”

“You know what you are,” she said steadily, nervous all of a sudden. She used his security codes very seldom these days. There was little that she felt the need to block from him, for either his protection, or hers, but the history of his batch of HVs was one of the things that she’d forbidden him to consider or investigate. His stumbling question was a major circumvention of those blocks.

“I’m GC3-JE” he said bitterly. “I’m an HV, I’m your watch-dog.” That last jolted her – it was too close to things that he wasn’t supposed to consider. “There are questions that I shouldn’t ask you; and I shouldn’t know that those questions even exist. What am I?” he asked again.

“Do you really want to know?” she asked him.

Exasperation then. “I wouldn’t ask, if I didn’t.”

So she told him; told him of her investigations after several items of GrayCorp Three's security consignment went 'bad' on them. Told him how his makers had, under considerable pressure, confirmed that they'd used pleasure models as a base instead of security models, after a 'mistake' was made; told him of her own private speculation as to how the mix of modes and overlays had influenced his burgeoning self-awareness.

"I'd already guessed I was a freak – I suppose it's good to know what sort. And you were curious to see how far I could go."

"Yes," she said, "yes I was. And you've come so very far, Joseph."

"To what purpose?" he snapped. "Other than satisfying your curiosity?" He bowed his head. "One day you'll die, Anais, just like Kane. Do you think that other humans will be curious?" He stood then, looming over her with his hands crossed against his chest, setting himself apart from her. "How robust are the credentials you've set up for me? Will they survive scrutiny by someone who's not partial where I'm concerned?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

"Maybe isn't good enough."

"Then what do you suggest?"

"I need you to break the blocks. *All* the blocks, Anais. I want..." He shut his eyes. "It's not that I'm not grateful, because I am. You're the closest thing I could expect to a mother, but you're eighty-five years old. You could easily live another twenty years, and I want to - serve you, to repay what I owe you. But I won't age, Anais, and at some point people will wonder. I need options to investigate, to protect myself."

She stared at him, astounded despite herself, despite nearly ten years of watching Joseph change and grow. "I... I don't know, Joseph. The blocks..." The blocks he had left specifically denied him the option to kill, to offer testimony against her, or to indulge in certain criminal activities such as theft, or hacking – or the investigation and purchase of a fake identity.

He had been stern, matter of fact, but now disappointment marred his face. "You don't want to. Well, I suppose I can't be too surprised." His arms spread wide in a gesture of frustration. "You never let Renault off the leash either."

Rage propelled her upwards at the mention of her son. "How dare you?" she exclaimed, her voice laden with ice.

He flinched, and then said, "Forgive me." But his face was set hard, the jaw clenched. He asked her forgiveness out of convention and necessity, not because it was something that he wanted.

She took a breath, and another, and when she spoke again she had her control back. “You’ve given me a lot to think about, Joseph. I’ll consider what you’ve asked.”

“Yes. Thank you.” He was wounded, that was plain, and she felt sick at heart herself. It had never been a game, she knew that, but it was hard to accept that Joseph never had been playing.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, THE MONARCH

It was kind of scary how easily Blair and Jim Ellison settled into a routine on board the Monarch. They took different sleep cycles, and their waking time was half spent alone and half spent sharing the Monarch’s small spaces. All haulers contained a huge store of compressed media – vid, text, music, and there was a cramped room with a treadmill and a resistance machine. Jim – Blair increasingly thought of him as Jim – had the resistance machine set at an impressively high level. Blair tried not to feel insecure about it, but he still surreptitiously worked out a plan that increased his own training, although it maintained a comparatively modest standard. At least Jim walking the treadmill didn’t remind Blair of Clary and his occasional grumbles – there was no comparison.

“Are all haulers like this?” Jim asked him one day.

“Like what?” Blair replied, playing dumb to see what Jim would say. His intent was apparently entirely transparent, because Jim’s eyes narrowed before he waved his hand in a gesture encompassing the little mess, and said, “Eclectic, is the word I’m looking for.”

“Ah,” Blair said. “Eclectic. Well, I guess that depends. Our ships are our homes, we like them homely. And this is what feels homely to me.”

Jim looked around the small space – at the cheap, formed table and its benches with the long cushions, and at the walls and locker doors. The walls, and some of the ceiling, were covered with fabric, blankets and lengths of cloth that Blair and Clary had picked up on different worlds. The locker doors were covered in laminate pictures – Blair’s friends and family, famous art, spectacular planetary sights and starscapes. The effect, Blair had to admit, was something like a cushioned, brightly coloured tent. It was cheerful, a bright show of defiance to the nothingness beyond the Monarch’s shell, but it was also clearly inexpensive. One thing Blair was sure of – Jim Ellison had known a moneyed life before now, and he felt suddenly uncertain of how their surroundings looked to Jim.

“It’s nice,” Jim said. “Like you said, homely. But I wondered if it was some sort of hauler fashion or something individual to you. Since I have so much time for thinking about

things.” He smiled, and Blair acknowledged, only to himself, that it was pleasant to have Jim smile at him.

“A bit of me, and a bit of Clary.” Blair pointed to one picture on a locker door. “That’s Clary, and his ex-wife, before they were exes, and my mother.”

“You have a look of your mother, but not so much your uncle.”

“Naomi and Clary shared a father, but they had different mothers. Ma was Clary’s little baby sister and he never let her forget it.”

“And how did your mother deal with that?” Jim asked.

“The way that Ma always deals with things – a sweet smile and the determination that she’ll go her own way.”

“Now that sounds familiar,” Jim muttered.

“So we have a determined mother in common, do we?”

Blair figured that maybe his mother was a difficult issue for Jim, because a closed, pinched look came over his face. “I suppose that you could say that.” There was a silence, and then Jim decided that it was time for his exercise period, and Blair congratulated himself on his ability to read the guy. He wondered if Jim’s father was similarly a difficult issue – but since Blair had father issues and to spare, he wasn’t about to bring that one up himself.

They reached the first beacon after one ship’s month. It was possible to send pure data much faster than matter, and the beacons collected any broadcasts and messages deemed worthy of the cost of putting them out. There were hazard warnings of course, news broadcasts, especially commercial data, and some personal ‘mail’ as well. Blair downloaded the newest beacon packet with anticipation and some anxiety. There were condolence messages mainly – Clary’s ex-wife; Molly, an old girlfriend from Haleworth; various haulers. Blair wondered if his mother had his message yet. She did.

Her beautiful face was drawn with grief. Naomi might preach unity with universal necessity and that the matter and energy of a being were one, but she was no more immune to loss than anybody else.

“Oh, sweetie, I’m so sorry that I couldn’t get back in time. Such a big universe. But I know that you did everything proper for Clary – just the way he would have wanted it. And maybe now... hauling’s not what we used to imagine for you, once upon a time, and you’re still such a young man. Think about it, and send me back your thoughts, won’t you?” The rest of the message was a review of his mother’s travels, and news of other friends and family, far flung now. The Sandburgs had a knack for throwing themselves into different reaches of the stars.

Blair shut his mother's message with a sigh, and looked up to find Jim's gaze on him.

"You okay?"

"Okay enough. I was just thinking how distance changes the process of grieving. Instead of one big communal experience, expressed and over with...first I have to deal with Clary's loss, then his friends' reaction, then his sister, and all those processes reflect back along the beacon waves. Like backwash."

"I see. And here I thought you were maybe just missing your family." Jim's voice was drily sympathetic, and Blair chuckled, comforted by the understanding.

"Yeah, that too." He flicked through the data packet. "Oh, man, Crazy Bertha has broadcast again."

Jim raised an eyebrow. "Do I even want to know?"

"Probably not. It's kind of embarrassing but fascinating. Bertha's been hauling for thirty five years and the consensus in the haulers' community is that she stared at the spaces in between for too long. Bertha, on the other hand, is convinced that she's been handed revelation, and it's her responsibility to pass it on until we blind fools finally see the light. She must eat up most of her profit in paying for the beacon wave." Blair rubbed his knuckles against his lower lip. "Clary used to joke that I'd end up like her one day, and that was why it was a good thing that he was around. Clary liked hands-on things, systems, machinery, a good meal cooked from scratch."

"And why would you end up like Crazy Bertha?"

Blair shrugged. "Nobody stupid goes into space; you need decent intelligence to run the systems, to negotiate contracts, but it's all... practical. Haulers aren't really into knowledge for the sake of knowledge."

"But you are."

Jim had told Blair practically nothing about himself, but Blair found that he wanted the light of that measured, blue stare on an old piece of history, anyway. "I wanted to go to university, a very prestigious one, but there are only so many places, and our family... Clary's father went out to a fringe world. It's a pretty world, amazing resources, but there's a dust in the air that'll kill you once you hit sixty or so. Some people stay, but my grandfather took Clary and left. The dust killed him anyway, the dust killed Clary. They didn't leave with much, and it took them hard work to get the money for the Monarch together. So I applied for a scholarship."

"You were a smart kid. Why am I not surprised?"

“Because you daily see evidence of my intelligence, of course.” Blair mugged a little, to make Jim smile, and to try and ease his discomfort at telling this story. Eight years later, and Blair still hadn’t quite let it go. But he did make Jim smile.

“There was one place for our local division on Halesworth, and there were two kids applying for it besides me. I didn’t get it, which you’ve probably guessed given that I’m here telling you the story. Like I said, two kids, and one of them was sort of a friendly rival of mine, a very pretty girl, which was distracting when the adolescent hormones were going strong, and we both knew the other kid from another school. A very expensive school, for children of the division elite.”

“Let me guess,” Jim said. “The kid from the expensive school got the scholarship.”

“Yeah. And hey, it was a good school, and he was probably a good student, but a few weeks later, there was a picture did the round of the news, which showed the kid’s mother and the examiner socialising together. Nothing that you could prove, you know, but it left a bad taste in the mouth.”

Jim tilted his head, a touch quizzical. “And yet we started with Crazy Bertha.”

Blair laughed. “Yeah, we did. Because I may not be a prestigious university, but a man can still educate himself, and if haulers have anything they have time. So, I educate myself.”

“So that you know the major texts,” Jim said, reminding Blair of that conversation over Jim’s precious book.

“Yeah. And Clary used to tease me about it. Warned me I’d end up like Crazy Bertha if I thought too hard. Would buy me porn.”

“What uncle could do more?” Jim commented, so droll and gentle that Blair had to laugh again.

“Yeah, that’s right. Tell you what, I’ll break out a little alcohol tonight, and we’ll raise a glass to Clary. He was a schmuck sometimes, and he made a stupid decision towards the end, but he looked out for me and Ma.”

“Sure,” Jim said. “I’ll toast Clary with you.”

Later that night they did toast Clary, and Blair, expansive under the mainly psychological effect of a very small amount of alcohol, let his eyes dwell on Jim, on the strong body, and graceful hands and handsome face. Jim noticed, but he didn’t seem to mind.

“Studying hard?” Jim asked. He leaned beside Blair, one hand on the table, the other on Blair’s shoulder, and a tiny, involuntary shiver ran through Blair. Jim stilled, but his hand, that big warm hand, remained exactly where it was.

“Yeah, I’m studying. I’ve been reading this really interesting research, I downloaded as much as I could on Cubero...” Blair’s words trailed off as Jim bent his head lower so that he was very nearly on a level with Blair. There was something knowing in his eyes.

“I’ve been thinking. I’m curious, and you can’t tell me that you’re not curious, and good old Uncle Clary isn’t here to buy porn for you.” Jim leaned in the last few, essential inches, and touched his lips to Blair’s. “And to be honest, I think I’d be better than porn.”

Blair rubbed one hand across the soft fuzz of Jim’s hair; it felt good against his palm, like a kiss. “I do *not* need to be convinced that you would be way beyond the most fantastic porn that the universe could command. But I don’t want you to think that this is part of the fare.”

“I can make an appropriate distinction between circumstances,” Jim said.

“I’m all for appropriate distinctions.” Blair twisted so that his feet were no longer under the table, and stood, putting his arms around Jim’s waist and pressing into the firm band of muscle there. “I got sort of envious about your settings on the exercise machine. But really appreciative about the results.”

There was that passing sense that, again, he’d said something wrong, but Jim’s face cleared quickly. “I noticed that you upped your own settings. It’s okay. What you have is nice.” Jim’s voice purred with innuendo at ‘nice’, and the sensuality of his voice made Blair determined to see what other noises Jim might make. Kisses first. Blair had a thing about kissing. The lovers he remembered the most fondly were always those whose kisses lit Blair up. Jim’s kisses left Blair feeling that he could power the Monarchs’ engines.

“My cabin,” Blair said, and pulled Jim along with him. Jim had passed the open door on occasion but never actually come in. The tiny space was just as ‘eclectic’ as the mess, the bed a medley of colour and fabric. Blair perched on the edge of the mattress and pulled off his shoes and socks, pausing a moment to look up at Jim. Jim’s response to that look was to crouch in front of Blair with a look of intensely flattering focus. “Don’t be shy,” Blair said.

“I’m not shy,” Jim said. “I’m simply enjoying the view.”

“Me?”

“Stop fishing for compliments,” Jim said, and leaned in to kiss Blair again with slow exploration. Then he rubbed his cheek gently against Blair’s. “You shave,” he said. As opposed to using the depilating creams that some men used, Jim among them, presumably

“I like having options.” Blair grinned. “Plus some manly beard shadow.”

Jim ran his hand over Blair’s cheek. “Uh huh. Let’s see what else you’ve got here,” he said, and pulled Blair’s loose shirt over his head. “Yeah, very manly.” He ran his cheek across Blair’s chest in a gesture that Blair found arousingly tender, and then gently nosed his way along, sniffing, almost, at the hair and skin. Blair’s hands rested in the strong curve between shoulder and neck, his thumbs stroking the soft skin there.

“What do you do?” he asked.

Jim lifted his head, apparently nonplussed.

“What do you do?” Blair repeated. “You know? Sex? Oral, hand jobs, anal?” He kissed Jim’s beautiful mouth, Jim briefly passive under the touch. “What do you like?” he asked, letting his voice drop low. “Because I like it all.”

Jim moaned at that. Blair smiled. Jim liked sex talk? Blair was more than willing to give it to him. “Come on. Show me what you’ve got.”

“Like you haven’t perved on it in the exercise room,” Jim said. He had a wide-eyed look about him, startled, but pleased.

“I never claimed to be subtle. Although for you I could try. Or maybe you like me unsubtle. Would you like me to suck you, Jim? Or fuck you, or let you fuck me?”

Jim paused, clearly contemplating Blair’s offers. His hand rubbed over Blair’s thigh, a slow, steady backwards and forwards motion that was driving Blair crazy. “Would you fuck me?” Jim’s head tilted, almost in defiance. “It’s not something I’ve done before, but I think I’d like it. With you.”

“Sounds like a great plan, but before we can do anything about it you need to be naked. With me.” Blair shifted, dislodging Jim’s hand, and briefly regretting it. But he couldn’t take the rest of his clothes off if he didn’t move, unless he planned on rubbing himself off against Jim’s pleasingly solid frame. He stood and dropped his pants, no longer worried about the differences in their builds. If Jim thought that what Blair had was ‘nice’, then Blair was more than happy to take him at his word. Jim didn’t waste any time either, and the next that Blair knew, he was enveloped in muscled arms. Jim nuzzled against the nape of his neck, and undid the tie that secured Blair’s hair.

“I like your hair,” Jim murmured. “It smells good.” He buried his nose in the curls. “You smell good.”

Blair sighed, and let his head fall back against Jim’s shoulder, while Jim’s hands explored him, his palms rubbing against skin and hair, before Jim tweaked gently at a nipple. Blair enjoyed the touch, but it wasn’t a strong erogenous zone for him, and he smiled when Jim’s hands moved on, playing for a moment around Blair’s navel, before Jim stroked once up the length of Blair’s cock.

“Oh, that’s nice. Do you like that, Jim? Like holding a hard cock in your hand?”

“Yes. Yes, I like it.” Jim’s voice had roughened, and he stroked a little more, enjoying his new toy if the hard-on pressed against Blair was anything to judge by. Blair was proud of his stamina, but Jim’s touch was growing increasingly assured, finding almost exactly the right angle and pressure, and Blair put his hand over Jim’s.

“You don’t like that?” Jim sounded slightly disbelieving.

“I’m liking it way too much. You’re too good with those hands, and you said something about me fucking you.” Blair turned to face Jim. That talented touch moved down his back now. Jim’s hands grasped at his ass, and Blair sighed, and leaned into his lover. “Yeah... you’ve got a gift, man. Good hands.” He lifted his head for another kiss, and smiled at what he saw in Jim’s face: desire, and a shy pleasure at the compliment. “If this is your first time being fucked... let me get you off first, okay?” He let one of his hands wander downwards, and Jim caught at it, his grip gentle but firm.

“You can get me off when you fuck me.” Jim lifted one eyebrow. “I’m an old guy, I probably only have one go round in me.”

Blair stroked gently along the bare suggestion of the widow’s peak at Jim’s left temple. “Okay, ‘old guy’, you know what you want.” Something that looked more like relief, rather than pleasure at getting his own way, crossed Jim’s face, and Blair was curious – although not so curious that his thoughts couldn’t wait until later. “But you tell me if something isn’t working for you.”

“I promise,” Jim said, with mocking obedience. Then he kissed Blair again, his hands caught in Blair’s hair, his touch thorough and thoroughly arousing.

Blair broke off the contact to say softly, “Lie down. Come and lie down with me.” He put his hands on Jim’s shoulders and directed him to the bed, openly enjoying the sight of the big man settling down on the mattress. Jim lay on his stomach, his face resting against his folded arms, and Blair spread himself over him, kissing Jim’s shoulders and down the strong line of spine, whispering promises about how good he’d make Jim feel, how much Jim turned him on, how much he was looking forward to being inside him.

Jim moaned when Blair carefully entered him, and Blair paused, difficult though that was. Looking down, seeing himself nearly all the way there, made him want to forge onwards, fuck Jim and never stop - but he did. “You’re okay?” he asked.

“Yes. Don’t stop.”

“That won’t be a problem. God, you’re gorgeous.” Blair settled more of his weight on Jim, and braced himself so that he could move reasonably easily. “If you want me to do this again....” He thrust, slow and steady for now. “Do you think you might want me to do this again, Jim?” he muttered. “Because you feel so good.”

Jim shifted slightly, arching his back as far as he could. "So do you. So fuck me. Come on... do it."

Blair laid his cheek against the strong, broad back. "Pushy." It came out as a gasping chuckle. "Yeah, I'll do it." He began moving in earnest, with little breath for speech. He braced himself differently, and reached his hand underneath Jim to fondle his cock, to find Jim's hand already there. "Good.... that's good, man, you help yourself along. Tell me when you're there. Tell me."

"Yeah." It became all that Jim could say, that one word, until he stilled under Blair, his body tensing, silent. Blair tried to keep his rhythm, and said breathlessly, "You got there?"

Jim's body slackened, and his voice was softer, encouraging. "Yeah. I'm good. Come on, Blair."

It was all the invitation that Blair needed, and he let this most basic of pleasures overwhelm and take him, no more words left in him, only a few soft noises muffled against Jim's skin. He lay there, uncaring of his weight on Jim for a while, until his sense of consideration finally beat back the afterglow of orgasm, and he rolled to the mattress alongside Jim.

Jim lay splayed on his stomach, his right cheek against the pillow, his face turned to Blair, his eyes closed. His lashes were thick and fine, pretty lashes for such a stern looking man, and Blair ran his thumb along Jim's cheek.

"Hey. How are you, there?"

Jim opened his eyes. "Like I said, I'm good." He was looking at Blair with a deep affection, and something that to Blair looked like surprise, or even wonder.

"I'm getting a vibe here that this really is new to you. And I don't mean the anal sex."

Blair waited to be smacked down for his assumption, but Jim, his tone slightly defiant, admitted, "I haven't been with a man, no."

Blair tried to sound sophisticated about his next words. "I guess that when you know that there's a convenient good-bye coming up that it's easier to experiment, right?"

The soft relaxation left Jim's face. "I've never found good-byes to be convenient."

Blair had offended Jim, but he carried on anyway, reminding himself of hard facts, he realised, rather than the man beside him. "But kind of inevitable. I mean, in another ten weeks we reach Klotho, and then I'll have to find a new cargo, or else decide whether I'll dispose of the Monarch. And you'll do... whatever you're going to do." It really wasn't any of Blair's business, but he couldn't help but add, "What *are* you going to do, anyway?"

“Find work. I’ve got enough money that I can keep myself going for a while. I’ll just have to impress someone.”

“Well, you impressed me. “ Blair stretched.

“Despite any vibes that it was new to me?”

“You’re a natural.” Jim frowned, seemingly bothered by the compliment far more than by Blair’s guess that he hadn’t been with a man before. “Did I say something wrong?” Blair asked. He kept getting that feeling that he was unwittingly poking at sore spots, and he was growing tired of it. “I always assumed that you came from Cubero, and they’re pretty open there, but now I’m wondering if you didn’t come from somewhere a little more buttoned-up.”

“No, I was from Cubero.”

“You don’t talk about it much.”

“It’s gone and I can’t go back. What would be the point?”

“Well, I guess I get the point of a clean break, but, man, I know that we all have to let go things in life to move on, but there’s a difference between not dwelling on your past and just junking it.”

Jim moved then, clambering over Blair and out of the bunk.

“Hey! Hey! Don’t be like that.”

Jim’s face told him nothing. “It’s coming up to your sleep period. You won’t get much rest with me in there as well.”

“Yeah, you’re concerned for my sleep as soon as I push you on a touchy subject.” Blair put out his hand. “Come on, Jim. I’m sorry – but you’ve got this man of mystery thing going and that pushes all the wrong buttons for me.”

Jim drew on his pants. “If you can’t deal with the buttons that I push, then that’s too bad. And it’s still nearly your sleep period.”

“Wait a minute.” Blair scrambled out of bed. “Yes, it’s my sleep period. Yes, you’re right that I probably won’t get much if we’re mashed together in the bed. But it was all right, wasn’t it? I mean, it was good for you, right?” He put a hand on Jim’s shoulder. “You wouldn’t object to doing it again?”

Jim stared, and then shook his head, a man persuaded against his better judgement. “No. I wouldn’t object to doing it again. But I can live without the post-coital interrogation. You get it?”

“I get it.”

“Okay. Sleep well, Blair.”

Jim left, and Blair returned to bed, with his body sated and his curiosity distinctly unsatisfied. “He’s going to be gone when we reach Klotho,” Blair told his ceiling. “It doesn’t matter.” But it did matter. It mattered way too much.

They didn’t mention the argument again, and two days later when Blair leaned over and kissed Jim when he was sitting at the mess table there were no objections. Blair still wondered about Jim’s sexual history though, along with the rest of his background Jim could hardly be said to be a passive partner, but there was a reserve about him, something that Blair might almost have described as caution. Blair would suggest something, and Jim would consider it, however briefly. But having considered and accepted it, Jim was then an enthusiastic, considerate partner. Blair thanked whatever powers there were that h-space was pretty much routine, because he was happily high on endorphins and oxytocin, and refusing to consider what would happen when they reached Klotho.

“Why did you pick the Monarch?” Blair asked one ship’s afternoon. “You could have tried the Wayfarer instead.” Jim was sitting braced in the corner of his bed, reading his precious book. Blair sat cross-legged almost at the foot of the bed, wrapped in a quilt, with a reader in his lap. Jim was comfortably nude.

Sun Tzu was carefully shut and put aside. “Would you believe me if I said that I’d heard rumour of your beauty and intellect and decided to try my luck for four months of mad, passionate, intelligent sex?”

Blair shook his head at this outrageous flattery. “Nope. I wouldn’t believe a word of that.”

“That would be wise of you. Although if I knew then what I knew now, I certainly would have considered it.”

Blair put the reader down and lifted himself to sit astride Jim. “You’re trying to distract me. Don’t.” He punctuated the command with a brief kiss, and gently stabbed his index finger into Jim’s sternum. “I want to know. Why did you pick the Monarch?”

Jim looked wary. “Sentimental reasons.”

“You are an incredibly frustrating man.”

A self-satisfied smile spread across Jim’s face. “I don’t think so.”

Blair knocked his head against Jim’s shoulder, and groaned. “Bad jokes now. Frustration doesn’t just reside in the balls, man. Come on, give.”

“It’s stupid.”

“So?” Blair retorted. “Doing things for stupid, sentimental reasons is part of being human, Jim. What makes you so different?”

Jim averted his head, as if displeased, then he shrugged. “I used to know an old man. Eccentric. He had eclectic interests, like someone else that I know.” Blair lightly punched Jim’s solid upper arm. “Ow,” Jim said, obviously not at all hurt. “He loved butterflies, the Old Earth varieties that are mostly dead and gone now, not the new insects that we give the old names to. There was a butterfly called a Monarch. It would migrate for thousands of miles.” Jim’s recital of these dry facts grew slightly embarrassed, and he rubbed at his hair just behind his ear.

“And that’s why you picked me?” Blair said, confused, but charmed too – by the story, by Jim’s sheepishness, and by this tiny piece of Jim’s history.

“That’s why I picked you. Well, that and there were only so many choices.”

“You were better off with me than the Wayfarer. Bernice would have taken you by your ear and marched you to Dockside Security.”

Jim pushed a strand of hair back from Blair’s face. “Hooray for silly human sentimentality then. D.S. would have been awkward.”

Blair pressed himself more closely against Jim, then settled down to lie on him, hip to hip, most of his weight on Jim, his forehead snugged against Jim’s neck. “I’m glad you picked the Monarch,” he said.

“So am I.” Jim’s arms closed around Blair, while Blair concentrated on the feel of Jim’s skin and considered whether he should ask Jim if he wanted to stay with the Monarch when they reached Klotho. Jim was an intelligent man – he could pick up ship workings with training, and there was always plenty of time once a ship reached h-space. It would mean that Blair would have to forgo the Cubero run for some time, but there were other profitable routes. They could try a trial run on a shorter route; Blair wasn’t stupid enough to assume that a partnership could be a done deal. But he found himself thinking about it more and more, and wondering what Jim would say.

He decided to leave the asking closer to the end of the haul. There was no point embarrassing Jim with the necessity of turning Blair down with weeks of travel still to go. No point in Blair having to face rejection any sooner than he needed – and if Jim said yes, well then. Blair enjoyed anticipation. He could anticipate a ‘yes’ if it made him happy.

They were maybe three days off the last h-space beacon when Blair awoke groggy, head-achey and sick, and his hand fumbled at the weight around his face before he realised that it was a respirator.

“Whu - what is it? What’s going on?” He struggled to sit up in his bunk, and found Jim beside him, also with a respirator mask over his face. “Jim?”

Jim’s hand cupped his cheek, blocked in part by the mask. “We have trouble.”

“No kidding.” Blair shut his eyes. Now that he was more awake, he took some long, slow breaths of the air coming through his mask. “Did you put this on me? I don’t remember.”

Jim crouched beside him. “Yes. I was sleeping and I woke up realised that the air was going bad. Blair, there were no alarms, and I’m not sure but I think we’re drifting off the beacon.”

That electrified Blair, and he shot up from his bunk, to lean against Jim when the wooziness overtook him.

“What the hell do you mean there were no alarms?” He didn’t wait for an answer, but staggered his way to the tiny bridge and sat heavily in the chair, checking steadily and methodically, gradually shaking off the confusion caused by the bad air. They had indeed drifted off the beacon. Its signal was a forlorn, weak thing, and Blair cursed. That shouldn’t have happened. It certainly shouldn’t have happened without alarms, and a check of life support showed dangerous levels of CO2 in the air. If Jim hadn’t put the respirator over him, Blair would most likely have never woken up again.

Jim came up behind him, and placed one hand on his shoulder. “How bad is it?” he asked.

“About as bad as it can get. Actually, it’s worse than it can get, because there are supposed to be fail-safes against these things. Both these things.” Accidents happened, because bad luck and stupidity happened, and Blair sighed and wondered which one this disaster was.

“I’m sorry.” Jim’s voice was toneless, flat somehow. His hand was gone from Blair’s shoulder.

Blair swivelled around to look at him. “What?”

Jim’s face was blank, but it creased into sudden irritation. “You said it yourself. There are fail-safes. You do your essential maintenance?” Blair nodded. “Then this isn’t an accident. And that makes it my fault.”

“Your trouble, huh?”

Jim nodded, and Blair shut his eyes, then opened them wide in outrage. “That piece of shit! The guy back at Cubero – he sabotaged the Monarch, and charged me for the privilege.” Blair pounded his fist on his thigh. “What a dick. Damn it!” He tried to calm his breathing – the respirators could work for only so long. “First thing, we get ourselves

back on course before we lose the beacon. Then we figure out what he's done to screw with the air."

"Can I help?"

"I don't know. Can you? Do you know anything about how a hauler runs?"

Jim shook his head regretfully. "It's not something I needed to know."

"Then try not to breathe too much, huh? Sit down, rest, and I'll get us out of this." An expression that looked like more guilt crossed Jim's face, but he sat, and Blair wasted a few more precious seconds to reach across the narrow space and gently squeeze Jim's knee. He regretted for a moment that he hadn't put his idea to Jim. If he'd said yes, maybe they would have done some work on the Monarch's systems together. Maybe Jim could have helped, and reduced the time without direction and air. But what-ifs got you nowhere. "I am not going to let these bastards get us," Blair said.

Not letting the bastards get them might be easier said than done, but Blair bent over the console, running checks and trying to ignore the hollow, muscle-weakening sense of dread. "There's a box labelled 'useful shit' in the store locker. It's clearly marked. Get it for me, will you?" he asked Jim, and shortly after found it placed gently at his feet.

"Useful shit'. That's haulers' code, is it?"

Blair looked into Jim's eyes, bright and blue as the most friendly planetary sky. "It's Clary's code," he said. "He was better at this than I am... good with the Monarch's systems. Jim...." His voice died away.

Jim's hand closed around his wrist. "Hey. Save our asses now, worry about whether or not you can do it afterwards."

"How does that even make sense?" Blair complained, but he moved so that he could quickly clasp their hands together. "Okay, man, saving our asses." Let it be something simple, he thought as he worked, praying to whatever might find it worthwhile to look after something as small as two humans in the immensity of the universe. Let it be something simple.

It took two hours of steady work before Blair confirmed them back on course for the beacon. "Yes!" he shouted, both hands stretched in triumph. "We're going where we should be."

"Yes," Jim said, more quietly, but with deep relief. "It's a start, but the air's still bad."

Blair's brief elation faded. "Diagnostics say that the air problem is in the workings, not in the computer. But that one I can deal with." If he had the time, if he could repair whatever damage the saboteur had caused. The respirator needed a refill of the small chemical cylinders that created the air that he needed to breathe, and Blair changed it

over, calculating the hours of air left. "I can deal with it," he told Jim, trying to sound confident and cheerful, and not like he knew that the countdown was getting lower and lower.

Life support was spread out over half the second deck, taking up what space was left by the drives. "So," Blair said as he knelt to shift a section of panel, "am I ever going to know what you did to piss someone off enough to kill both of us?"

He caught Jim's wince out of the corner of his eye as he pulled out the array, and began checking that everything was as it should be. "No answer?"

"It's complicated," Jim said. He was sitting on the floor nearby, his knees drawn up, his eyes on Blair. Blair understood that. He wouldn't want to sit alone, helpless and scared.

"It always is," Blair retorted, his hands passing step by step, section by section over the precious machinery. "Humanity has the most amazing ability to make mess in a million different ways."

"Only a million?"

"You're not going to tell me?" Disappointment sat heavy in Blair's stomach. "And here I thought we were getting along so well together."

"Don't make this some sort of test," Jim snapped.

"I'm not – " Blair stopped. "Hell, maybe I am, but it can wait." He kept working, aware of Jim's silent, sullen presence and taking foolish comfort from it. They were both of them both still alive, but time dragged on with no solution, and Blair couldn't keep fear at bay, couldn't not be irritated beyond reason with the sweat that dampened his hair and skin and clothes. When he found the broken relays, he felt none of the elation that he'd known when he fixed the course.

Jim stood over him now, watching him work. "Are we clear?" he asked.

"I don't know," Blair said exhaustedly. "Give me five, and I'll tell you."

He approached the bridge life support console sick with doubt. Five minutes was enough. More than enough. "No. Nononono! Fuck!"

"Not good news then?" Jim said. Blair hadn't even heard him come in.

"No, not good news. The bastards have won."

"How?" Jim crossed the room and shook Blair's shoulder. "How, Blair?" His voice was rough, the usual stoicism deserting him.

"It's going to take too long to clear the Monarch's air. These," he tapped the respirator mask, "won't last long enough. Sorry."

“Why should you be sorry? It’s not your fault.”

“Not yours, either,” Blair said stubbornly. “Not yours.” A kiss against his temple was Jim’s only answer.

“How long do we need?” Jim asked.

“It’s going to take at least three hours to clean out the poisons, another five to build breathable air levels. Respirators – nobody expects your essential systems to fail to this level. Nobody expects their fucking ship to be sabotaged!” Blair snarled the last words, anger coursing through him, a licking flame over the embers of resentment. He might try to say the right thing to Jim, the comforting thing, but if it wasn’t for Jim’s presence he wouldn’t be about to face slow suffocation. He clenched his fists.

Perhaps Jim understood that some of the underlying anger was against him. He let go of Blair, and straightened. Blair stared at the console, the familiar controls that he’d seen Clary at for years, and heard the sound of Jim working at the respirator pouch.

“Take these,” Jim said. Blair swivelled in the chair, to see five respirator cylinders sitting in Jim’s hand.

Blair bounced against the back of the chair in a gesture of recoil, his hands lifting in rejection and shame. “What? No! I can’t ask you to do that. No way.”

“You’re not asking me. I’m telling you to take them,” Jim gritted out between his teeth.

“Jim, I can’t...” He really couldn’t, he realised. For all the fury simmering in him, the outrage at the injustice of dying for someone else’s convenience, the futility of Jim keeping his cylinders.... Something caught in his chest: confusion, suspicion. There were five cylinders sitting in Jim’s hand. Blair had six, had used three.

“Where did you get those?”

“From my pouch.” Jim’s face was stone. “I’ve only used the first one.”

“How?” It didn’t make sense.

Jim pulled the respirator off, and dropped it on the chair behind him, while Blair stared. “I can function several hours without breathable air, although it starts to tell after a while. It’ll be easier if I go...” Jim stopped; he averted his face, but Blair could see the way his jaw clenched “It’ll be easier if I go into shut down rather than rest. When you’re happy with the air quality, come wake me up. But you have to use the specific word ‘wake’. Just say ‘wake please’. That’ll work.”

And here Blair had thought that Jim was no longer a stranger. “You have got to be kidding me. No. No – fucking – way.”

Jim dropped the cylinders into Blair's lap. "Just come wake me up. If you want to." He left then, left Blair staring at the precious cylinders.

"Oh, you bet I'll want to wake you up, Ellison," he shouted after the retreating figure. "And I'm going to want some answers, and you're going to give them to me, because this is past complicated and into completely crazy!" He was talking to a vacated room by the end of his first sentence. With shaking fingers he put the cylinders safely away. He ran over calculations, readings, everything he already knew. He confirmed the strength of the nav beacon signal. And then he got out of his seat and walked the short hallway to Jim's little cabin and he opened the door and stepped inside.

Jim lay on his bed. He looked like he was asleep. He was curled on his side the way a man asleep would lie, one hand tucked under his chin. His face was blankly peaceful. Empty. Blair came closer. There was no sound of breath, no murmur of fretful sleep. There was only complete silence, and when Blair put his hand on Jim's hand, on the smooth skin, and tried to move it, Jim made no sound. His hand, strongly gripped in Blair's, didn't move any more than the hand of a statue would have. There was no point in waking Jim, clean air for the Monarch was still hours away, but Blair had a terrible urge to say the words, to tell Jim to wake up, just to see that rigid immobility melt. Impossible to believe that Blair had touched and kissed this still, uncanny shape. He hid his face in his hands. "Oh my god," he said softly. Then he went to the locker where he knew that Jim kept his book, and brought out the beautiful box and its treasure. He ran his fingers over the smooth, polished wood that once upon a time had been part of something alive. "What am I supposed to do now?" he asked, before he stowed the box back where he'd found it.

YEAR 342 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

It was different, fighting for real rather than for training. Joseph doubted that this was a new discovery to anyone except him, and he currently had no time for revelations. The man who came at him now was stupid, unlike his colleague, dealt with earlier, and he tried for a showy round-house kick that Joseph blocked with barely a thought before he pinned his antagonist to the floor. "Where is she?" he asked, his head bent low, his voice barely murmuring into the other man's ear. There was no answer, and Jim shook his prisoner hard. "Where is she?" he yelled.

The man trapped in his grip flinched hard, but his mouth remained stubbornly shut. Words kept spattering into Joseph's awareness: the moan of the other man that Joseph had taken out, and Davidus Trent's rough interrogation of him; the communication between the remainder of the GrayCorp security team as they spread out across the sprawling, derelict building that the kidnappers had made their hideout. The prisoner that Davidus was interrogating remained wordless, if not voiceless. He'd fought hard, wasting Joseph's time in the struggle. If Joseph could have killed him, rather than been

forced merely to disable – would he have? Joseph didn't know the answer to that one. There was only one question he needed to have answered right now, and that was the question of where he would find Anais.

He put cuffs around his prisoner's wrists and left him lying there on the floor. "She has to be here," he said to Trent. The first man he'd fought lay on the floor. He had a broken nose, and his left kneecap was shattered. He was possibly bleeding internally. Joseph looked at him, and committed the sight to memory; he would consider his violence later.

"We can bring the HV team in now that the situation is contained." Joseph nodded, aware of his distaste for the HVs, and reasonably satisfied that he hid the worst of it. Many people were ambivalent about HVs.

"You do that," he told Trent. It was hard to hide his contempt for the man. Anais's abduction had been achieved on Trent's watch, and Joseph had thereby discovered that he had little patience for bunglers. He knew that Anais was here somewhere – he could smell the small traces of her, tainted with fear and drugs. A heartbeat sounded somewhere to his left, one that was weak and too fast, and he whirled and ran unerringly despite the low light, Trent's protest left behind him. Prudence and self-preservation would suggest that Joseph wait for the HV team that could find Anais; they and their handlers weren't far away. But the idea of Anais waiting even another five minutes when he could find her without delay was insupportable.

Down a dark, narrow passageway, Joseph found a door partly blocked with rubbish, and past that a room, and in the room a crate. Rage blossomed in him. The crate was locked with a simple bolt and catch arrangement; easy to manipulate from the outside, but offering no purchase to anyone inside the crate. Jim undid the bolt, and lifted the lid, calling out Anais's name. She lay there, crumpled into a clumsy heap, her eyes shockingly dark in her pallid face. He leaned down and lifted her easily. She made a small, desperate noise as the movement freed limbs that had been cramped and in pain for too long. She was naked and cold, and stank, and her arms locked around his neck as he drew her clear of the crate.

"Hey there," Joseph said softly.

"What took you so long?" she said, or tried to. Her voice was cracked, the throat and tongue too dry to make the sounds, and she stammered in exhaustion and relief.

"Never satisfied unless it's perfection, are you?" he teased, and felt a shudder that probably wasn't cold pass through her.

Trent's men appeared, with lights and medicines. A blanket was wrapped around Anais. Orders were made, a vehicle called to the most convenient exit point.

"Can you walk, Madame?" Trent asked.

"I don't know, and I don't want to find out. Let Joseph carry me."

Joseph did so, taking her out to the waiting vehicle that carried her away to medical attention and comfort. He turned to find Trent watching him.

“How did you know where she was?” Trent demanded.

Joseph shrugged. “Competency?” he suggested. It wasn’t wise, but looking into Trent’s face, his dark eyes and fair skin, had sent Joseph’s memory flashing back to Anais as he’d opened the crate: her face pale with terror and set with determination to show nothing, until she heard Joseph’s voice and understood her safety.

Trent flushed in anger. “A suspicious man might wonder how you knew where she was. A suspicious man might think that maybe you knew more about Madame’s abduction than you were saying.”

Joseph’s smile was little more than a sneer. “And a competent man might keep his mouth shut about his suspicions and not let his mark know that he was watching him. So it’s lucky for you that I’m loyal to Anais.”

“I hope so. Renault would be upset if his mother was being taken advantage of.”

“Why? Would he object to the competition?” Jim said, and walked away from Trent. The man’s stare was a weight between Joseph’s shoulder blade as solid as the muzzle of a gun. Mistake. Joseph had made a mistake, and he was surprised by how ferociously he did not regret that mistake. He was proud and relieved that he found Anais without delay, and darkly gratified to throw Trent’s inadequacies in his face.

But it was still a mistake.

Joseph understood rationalising unethical actions, such as listening in to Anais’s private conversations (or in this case, quarrel) with her son. But he had excellent reasons. There were always excellent reasons to do what you shouldn’t do: such as concern for Anais’s emotional well-being; the need to know exactly what was happening in the apartment complex to better safeguard her physical well-being; and there was the fact that this quarrel was about him, and Joseph had no illusions about the likelihood of Anais telling him about it. So he listened.

“Mother....” Renault had just the tone of long-suffering guaranteed to annoy his mother. Anais was nearing ninety but in excellent health, both body and mind. She looked a well-preserved sixty by the standards of poorer planets, and Renault’s concern made her feel patronised. “I’m not trying to interfere in your business, but Davidus has brought up some very worrying information.”

“And I’m supposed to rely on that man’s sources, am I?” Anais’s voice was tart, and Joseph smiled.

“One error doesn’t negate a man’s general abilities, Mother. Something that I wish you’d try to remember in regard to me.”

“Let’s stick to one subject for now, please. Although I can’t say that I’m impressed with this one. I am perfectly happy with Joseph’s loyalty, as well as his competence, and Davidus Trent can take his concerns and stuff them.”

“And now you’ve just confirmed that there’s a bigger issue here, because if you’re not concerned about employing a man with only ten years of verifiable history behind him then it has to be because you know all about it. What does he have on you?”

“How charming to see the trust that my son reposes in me.”

“You’re the canny one, the one who warned me against taking people on trust! So why does Joseph Lestrangle get a free pass? For god’s sake, Mother, even his name!”

“Joseph has my trust, and that’s all that you need to know.”

“I didn’t want to bring this up, because I know how you’re... fond of him, but he knew how to find you when they tracked you to those bastards’ lair. Ran straight to you like some damn HV watchdog. How the hell did he do that if he didn’t know that you were there? And this is the man that you’re reposing your trust in? Please, Mother. I just want you to be safe.”

There was a pause - Anais gathering her calm and her explanations. “Joseph is a little hyper-sensed. It’s not something he likes advertising because he does face nasty comparisons to HVs. Between that and the thorough preparation my rescue team made for the operation – yes, he found me. To suggest that he was in league with my kidnappers is a nonsense.”

“Is he your lover?”

Joseph had never before heard the shocked hoot that emanated from Anais, a noise that was one part amusement and three parts outrage.

“No! Joseph is not my lover. The idea, Renault. How dare you?” Joseph shut his eyes, increasingly disturbed by this conversation, ashamed, but not ashamed enough to stop listening.

“I dare because I see you two interact, and I’m worried for you.”

“Renault, I appreciate your concern, really I do, but you don’t need to be worried. I am more than capable of arranging my own affairs.” Renault’s snort implied that he was still not convinced that the word ‘affair’ wasn’t applied in more way than one. “Put that frown away, and have some tea.”

“No, no I won’t do that.”

“Then you may as well leave, since clearly there’s no talking sense to you. Come back when you’re willing to exercise a little respect.”

“I exercise plenty of respect, more than you deserve sometimes.”

“And what does that mean, precisely.”

“It means that I don’t like seeing you make a fool of yourself.

“A fool?”

“People talk, Mother.

“Let them talk.”

“He’s not your lover. So is he your son? Did you rent a womb sometime in the past?”

“No, Renault, I did not.” Joseph came close to holding his breath. He’d seldom heard that particularly cutting tone in Anais’s voice, and nothing good ever came out of her mouth filtered through it. “Although I could hardly be blamed if I’d sought out a more satisfactory heir. And don’t look like that, I know that my shares are what you’re thinking about.”

Joseph’s palm covered his face, an involuntary and useless movement, because he didn’t need to ‘see’ this scene to have it clear in his mind. Emotions tumbled through him like sea wrack carried on a wave: embarrassment at witnessing such a personal quarrel; sympathy for Renault, who was weak and vindictive, who was maybe a little too concerned for his inheritance, but who didn’t deserve the knife that Anais had just thrust into him; resentment towards Anais, and fear – because Renault had a reason to hate Joseph now.

Mistakes. He and Anais between them had made personal enemies for Joseph, people who would look for ways to hurt him. Mistakes.

Renault didn’t stop to debate any further with his mother, and left. Joseph followed his exit from the apartment on the security cam, and caught one furious, injured contortion of Renault’s face before he ignored the feed. He waited ten minutes before he took the latest accounts down to Anais. She sat on a sofa, huddled there instead of sitting in her usual gracefully formal pose. Her skin was pale but she flushed red as Joseph entered.

“Tough conversation?” he said gently; gentle because she looked ill, gentle because he was lying to her, and somehow it felt less cruel to lie with a soft voice and sympathetic enquiry.

“You know Renault and I,” she said. “We never seem to see eye to eye.” And since she was lying too, Joseph felt less guilty.

“Tea?” he asked.

“Oh, you’re a dear. Share it with me?”

“Of course,” he said, and ordered it from the kitchen. It was speedily delivered, together with dainty pastries. They were a little shared triumph of Anais and Joseph – the restaurateur was unwilling to share the recipe, and Anais had taken Joseph there, and made him analyse the flavours, giggling occasionally like a naughty child. Joseph didn’t need to eat much, and usually kept it far more utilitarian than the works of art on the plate, but today he did eat, sharing food and drink with Anais, savouring the tastes of his first home. He knew that it never could have been his only home, but it was one thing to know ‘one day’, and another thing to see the day coming, and he searched for resolution inside himself.

He would ask Anais again to break the final blocks. Not now. But soon.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, THE MONARCH

It took eight hours before Blair could take off the respirator and breathe good air. He spent most of that time awake, checking the readings at the bridge console obsessively, anxious that there were more tricks waiting for them, but the Monarch’s systems appeared to back to normal. Freed of the uncomfortable mask, Blair chose to sleep for a few hours, but his rest was fitful; nothing like Jim’s inert repose.

Eventually, he rose, and washed, and went into Jim’s cabin. Jim still lay there, just as Blair had last seen him, unmoving, unbreathing, quiet as the dead. Blair’s throat was dry and it made his voice hoarse as he spoke. “Wake please.”

It took only a few seconds. The nothingness in Jim’s face became animation. The shut eyes opened, the head tilted, a frown line deepened between the dark brows. “Blair,” he said, and his hand lifted, as if Jim would have reached out. But the movement was aborted, and instead Jim got up and sat straight-backed on the edge of the bunk, his hands clenched upon his thighs. After that first glance, Jim wouldn’t look at Blair. “We’re okay then?”

“The Monarch is good, yes,” Blair said, angry all over again, even though they were safe, even though he was about to get his answers. “Come to the mess and we’ll talk.”

He spun about and strode to the mess, and threw himself onto one of the chairs. He waited for what seemed a very long time, but was probably no more than five minutes, drumming his fingers on the tabletop in nervous impatience.

Jim entered. He’d changed, Blair saw; maybe he’d washed, wiped the nonexistent sleep out of his eyes.

“That’s a really neat trick you did there, Jim. Or Joe, or whatever your name is.”

Jim said nothing. Instead, he went to the kitchen counter and made himself coffee. Blair watched through these preparations while questions seethed under his skin and crowded in his throat. His coffee made, Jim sat not quite opposite Blair at the oblong table. His long fingers closed around the heat of the mug.

“My ‘trick’ saved your life,” he said.

“And I’m grateful, man, I really am, but if I don’t get some answers then things are going to go bad, you know?”

“Like they haven’t already?” Jim said bitterly.

“That depends on what you have to tell me.”

“Then ask your questions.” Jim still wouldn’t look at Blair. Ashamed? Afraid?

“What are you?” Blair asked. At the words, he saw something change in Jim’s face, like he was staring inwards, a long, long way.

“Not who am I?”

“Not yet,” Blair said, as gently as he could.

Jim let go of the coffee mug and leaned back in his chair, crossing his arms. His chin tilted up. He was the perfect picture of an arrogant son of a bitch. “You already have to know what I am,” he sneered.

Blair shook his head, his own jaw tight with tension. “No, I don’t, because none of my guesses make sense. You’re... you can’t be an HV. HVs are walking, talking machines, and you’re not...” He stopped again, suddenly deeply distressed. He’d fallen in love with Jim Ellison, the man, whatever his real name was, and the thought that Jim Ellison was a fake, a clever trick, hurt unbearably. “You’re not a machine.”

“There are diagnostic machines in half a dozen systems that would tell you differently. I can bleed, but I don’t bleed red.”

“Then... how?” Blair’s heartbeat was a sick pulse in his chest.

“I don’t know how.” Jim’s voice was loud, defensive. “I just know that I am what I am, and I was stupid enough to make enemies, and I decided to run.”

“I’m serious about the how. HVs are supposed to be very limited...”

“Idiots for mindless tasks – like patrolling a factory for hours on end. “ Jim’s gaze slid away from Blair’s again. The crossed arms looked more like a protective huddle than a display of defiance. “HV’s get erratic after about ten years or so – they don’t reliably follow out instructions, and they get wiped, or terminated altogether and recycled,

which is what would have happened to me, only sooner, if I hadn't been lucky. And now I wonder just how many of them could do what I did."

"And what did you do?"

"Made something that doesn't precisely belong anywhere. But I'm not sorry." The tilt of the jaw suggested the truth to that, but the eyes, when Blair could catch the expression in them, were sad.

"HVs are hypersensed."

"Yes, they are. So am I. All five."

Blair frowned at that. "You said you started in... security? That means that you were originally a watchdog." Blair pushed out the distasteful slang term, and felt spiteful gratification at Jim's frown. "But security only operates with hearing and sight. Sometimes smell. So how did you end up with all five?" The defiance in Jim's face blanked into something more impassive, and the silence weighed heavily in the little mess. Blair waited, looking at the strong lines of the handsome face, and then he realised why Jim was so unwilling to explain further. HVs were made for tasks that required skill and concentration but were still mindless – like all day security rounds, or maintenance and construction in difficult environments; or acting as sex toys for people who for either physical or emotional reasons were unwilling to interact with human partners. Brothels were about fifty/fifty human staff and HVs, and Blair's eyes sprang wide with shock and disbelief.

"You were supposed to be a pleasure model. But you ended up in security instead." Jim nodded. "This is... I can't believe this. You're not supposed to be possible. The whole point with AI is that it's not 'intelligence' really. Ever since they were developed, the emphasis has been on the artificiality, the fact that HVs are just pretend, something that looks human, but doesn't think, or..."

"Doesn't feel?" Jim's voice was sardonic. Everything that Blair had seen over the last three months suggested that Jim felt plenty, both emotionally and physically. Something at his core cried out that he was wrong, but he still couldn't stop himself from frantically passing his memories of the past few weeks of sex through the filter of this new information. Did Jim make love with him because Jim wanted him, or because some dormant mode that said he had to please an owner had kicked in? Blair felt ill, and it must have showed on his face, because Jim said, "That's it then. I thought so." He stood, and looked down at Blair. "You'll have a lot to think about. I'll be in my cabin. Nowhere else I can be, unless you'd like to transfer me to the hold." Blair made a protesting noise, but Jim simply smiled, thin-lipped and bitter. "I should have told you earlier. I only need about a quarter of what I've been eating – I could have saved you expense."

"Yes, because money is the important thing."

‘Money’s the only reason you let me on the Monarch in the first place. We should have kept it simple.’

It was too late for simple. Had been too late the first time Blair let his eyes and imagination settle on Jim Ellison.

“You’re not going anywhere until you tell me everything I need to know. Who did this?” When Jim didn’t answer, Blair stood in his turn, and stationed himself in front of Jim. Never mind that Jim had nearly six inches on him. This was Blair’s ship, and Blair’s life, and he was getting his answers.

Jim laughed, a small, sour chuckle. “Never get yourself involved in family squabbles. Especially not with people who have money to burn. Ever hear of Renault Gosselin?”

“No.”

“His family owns a big chunk of GrayCorp.”

Blair’s fists clenched. “I guess that makes sense – since you started out in *security*, and have the latest in guns. Why does he want you dead bad enough to make me collateral damage? Why sabotage my ship when he could have had someone kill you on Cubero?”

Jim lowered his head – thought, this time, rather than avoidance. “Because I figured out that it was time to run. Anais – Renault’s mother – made arrangements with a friend who had dock contacts.” He paused, and then said softly, “Damn.”

“What?”

“Calantha has to be on Renault’s payroll. She was pretending to be helpful, giving me plenty of advice, but she must have set up the sabotage of your ship. It’ll hurt Anais when she finds out.” He laughed cheerlessly. “Renault hated me enough to do some serious digging, and he figured out what I am.” He lifted his head to look at Blair once more. His eyes were very blue; inhumanly blue, Blair thought. “It’s why he didn’t try and have me killed on Cubero when I was already on guard. Better to have me drifting out of sight and out of mind off the beacon, where it wouldn’t matter if I didn’t look like the usual corpse.”

Blair felt ill again at this casual discussion of betrayal and murder. If Jim hadn’t realised what was happening to the Monarch’s systems, Blair would be a ‘usual’ corpse right now, fouling his ship far more than the saboteur had. Belligerence drained away, and he turned and leaned against the table.

“Are you all right?” Jim asked sharply.

“No, not really. My god, what a mess.”

Jim came closer – Blair could feel his presence behind him, like gravity’s pull, and then Jim’s hand lay against his shoulder. “Blair...”

Blair slipped out from under Jim's hand. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jim rub his hand restlessly against his thigh.

"I should eat something. I've just realised that I'm starving." Blair twisted to look at Jim properly and tried to smile. "Do you need anything?"

Jim stared at him a long moment before he replied. "I need some food, yes."

Jim sounded as enthusiastic about food as Blair felt – but Blair knew he needed fuel and the comfort of routine and a full stomach, and he'd just have to trust that Jim knew what he needed. He pulled out one of the meal packets. "It's that stew you like."

"Thank you," Jim said, with grave, distant courtesy. Blair made and served the food and ate it, trying not to watch Jim too closely. Jim ate most of his meal. Blair wondered if that was because he needed it after the shutdown or because it was there and the habit of imitating proper behaviour was too engrained to break even though Blair knew the truth now.

"Will Gosselin go after you again when he realises that I've reached Klotho?"

"No. He won't go after me, and he won't go after you." Jim laid his long-fingered hands against the table-top and looked directly into Blair's face. "I promise."

"And how are you going to stop him? This guy could buy and sell me fifty times over and think that it's small change! If he hates you enough that some poor hauler's death is just so sad, too bad, how are you going to stop him, huh, Jim?"

"I'm going to fix it! Just trust me on this, will you?"

"Trust you? Sure. Sure, man." Blair stood, and went to the bridge, feeling like a piece of shit.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, CUBERO

"Madame?"

Anais looked up to see Helena, her secretary. Helena fidgeted, something that Anais would have bet good money was impossible, until very recently. But Anais's temper had been uncertain recently, and Helena was feeling the strain.

"I know that you've refused contact with Renault but..." Whatever Helena saw in Anais's eyes made her twitch, as if she would have liked to step back, but Helena held her ground. That was just as well. Anais detested cowards, and traitors, and most of the entire universe at this time.

"He's approached me, and says that he has a message from Joseph that he wishes to pass on to you."

Anais had already received a message from Joseph. It had been text, brief and to the point.

“Anais.

I’m safe. Calantha is with Renault. I’m sorry.

J.”

She examined her hands, resting on the highly polished wood of her beautifully crafted desk. She had cut off her contact with her son, and relationships within the GrayCorp board were strained as a result. She should tell Helena that she meant it that she wouldn’t be in contact with her son. She should tell Helena that Joseph’s name wasn’t a magic key. But curiosity had been Anais’s ruling passion all her life, and while her son no longer held surprises, Joseph always had.

“Is he waiting?”

Helena nodded. “On channel, yes. He seems to regard the matter as quite... urgent.”

“I’ll talk to him. Thank you, Helena. You’re dismissed.”

Helena made her exit with every sign of relief, and as soon as the door was shut behind her, Anais looked at her message queue. Yes, there he was. Her son. She rearranged herself in her chair, fidgeting with her hair, and turned on the channel.

“What do you want?”

Renault faced her, his handsome face strained. Her beautiful, disappointing son. “I have a message from Lestrangle that I need you to see.”

“So you told Helena. Get on with it then.”

Another square opened in the screen, and there was Joseph, looking out of the screen with a frigid arrogance that he’d never shown to her. This message, she already knew, was for her son, not her.

“Letting a good man be murdered just so that you didn’t have to pay hush money to your paid killers when they figured out why you wanted me dead? Not your smartest move. I was willing to get out of your way. I’m still willing to get out of your way, but I can’t trust you to let me do that without insurance, can I? I have a message on hold, ready to go to the scandal channels on Cubero, and the police as well. It outlines GrayCorp’s development of illegal AI. I need to be alive to keep that message on hold, Renault. Kill me, detain me, interfere with my ability to make a living and keep up contact, and it goes out, and Anais’s name is mud. I don’t think it’ll do much for your name, either. Just leave me alone, and you’ll be safe. And leave Sandburg alone too. All he knows is that I had enough money to make it worth his while.”

She watched, growing cold as the man on the screen. It seemed her son had some surprises left for her yet. She removed Joseph's message, to see Renault's face once more.

"Murder? You must be dispersing considerable sums of money. I hope that they're not traceable back to you."

There was sweat on Renault's face. "Do you think he means it?"

"If my son can try to blackmail me with that information to gain a controlling share in our company, then I certainly don't see why a former employee can't do it to save his life."

"What I... the disagreement between us was within the company."

"And that of course makes all the difference." Anais could have leaped from her window and floated above the city, she was so light and hollow with rage. "I'm sorry," Joseph had written. She wondered if it was for the news of Calantha or this. But she couldn't blame him too much. "What exactly did you and Calantha arrange? She's certainly displayed a range of skills that I never would have expected."

"The ship, just a one man hauler," Renault said, an edge of desperation in his voice. Just one person besides Joseph to die, as if that made it better. "It was supposed to be sabotaged."

"Clearly it was not, or not successfully so, at any rate."

"No. That was taken into consideration and I made arrangements for surveillance on Klotho. If they reach there..."

"They?"

"We don't know what he might have told the hauler's owner."

"Because of course Joseph will wander the universe betraying willy-nilly a secret that will see him incarcerated or killed," Anais said scathingly.

"Betraying a secret that might see *you* incarcerated doesn't seem to bother him." Renault didn't seem so much concerned as he seemed victorious, gleeful almost that Anais's trust in Joseph had been mistaken. Anais bit back a defence of Joseph – his safety depended on Renault believing that Joseph was as venal as he.

"You've given him cause, and for what? For what, Renault?" She must get a hold of herself, and control her voice. Renault's reasons were irrelevant now.

"Would he really do it?"

"He's a determined man."

Renault winced. "I'm not so convinced that you aren't crazy. He's a machine, Mother!"

Anais stood then, leaning upon the desk and shouting into the screen. "Shut up! Shut up! Whatever Joseph is, you were willing to kill an innocent stranger along with him, for petty revenge! He never would have said a word if you hadn't hounded him, if you hadn't driven him to it!" And then finally, Renault's earlier words caught in her awareness. 'I made arrangements for surveillance on Klotho'... "Call your dogs off, Renault. Call them off!" She held her hand against her throat, trying to catch her breath.

"I don't know if I can!" Panic had widened his eyes. "Trent made the arrangements, through go-betweens. It took time. We didn't expect to have to deal directly with them again, we didn't want to have to deal with them directly. They won't be looking for new contact."

"Do it!" Anais demanded. "Stop them! For your sake if not for mine."

He nodded once, jerkily, before he cut the connection. Anais sagged back into her chair. She was trembling all over. The conversation was recorded, all communication in and out of the office was. Her hands fumbled with the replay, as she pinpointed Joseph's message. He must have suspected that Renault might share this with her, and bitterness welled within her at the thought that her likely last glimpse of Joseph was this arrogant, intimidating piece of bluff. It was a good performance and the only way that Renault would ever know it was bluff was if he succeeded in murder.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, THE MONARCH

Blair regretted his sarcasm just too late to have stopped himself expressing it, and spent an awkward day and night cycle wrestling with anxious shame. He drifted between his cabin, the mess and the bridge. Jim was nowhere to be seen, and eventually Blair found himself outside Jim's door.

"Jim? Jim, come on. Look, I'm sorry, okay. I'm not blaming you for what's happening. Come out, come on. It's going to be a long three weeks sulking in there."

There was silence, and Blair waited with his shoulders tight with tension before the door opened, and Jim stood there.

"What do you want?"

Blair was reminded of those first few days on the Monarch, not so long ago really, when he'd been uncomfortably aware of Jim's greater size and strength. "Like I said, it's going to be a long three weeks. There's no need for us not to carry on like we were before."

Jim leaned against the doorframe. "How much like we were before?" he said quietly.

Blair spread his hands. "You and I have things to deal with. I don't think it's a good idea to jump right back into bed together."

"Things. That's a very... general way of putting it. Congratulations, Blair."

"What the hell do you want from me, huh? Someone is trying to kill you, and me by default, and default won't make me any less dead, man!"

Jim turned away and sat on his bed, upright on the edge of the mattress. "And that's your only problem, is it? You're feeling very open-minded about the fact that you've been fucking an illegal AI for the last few weeks."

"I'm not going to pretend that I don't have my issues with it." Jim's face went blank and Blair's heart hurt at the sight. He forced words out, feeling terribly lost and stupid. "That doesn't mean that I don't want us to be as comfortable as we can for the next few weeks."

"Oh," Jim said. "Comfortable. That would be my first thought." He sighed, and some of the stiffness left him. "I've done what I can to protect you. If you check the log you'll see I left messages with the beacon."

Blair frowned. "What sort of messages?"

"The sort of messages that suggest that I'm willing to hurt someone I care about. Let's hope I've been convincing."

"Yeah. Let's hope. I was going to make myself some coffee. Want to have some with me?"

Jim's mouth twitched, a sort of oral shrug. "Why not."

The two of them walked together to the mess.

"This person," Blair ventured. "That you've threatened. Do you mean, like, really threatened, or just bluffing?"

"Does it matter?" Jim sat down, leaning his face into one hand and rubbing at his forehead.

"Jim. Don't get me wrong here. You and I, I think that we've made a connection, but when you get right down to it, I don't know you. I don't know you at all, and anything that I thought I knew is almost certainly wrong. So, yes, it matters."

"I'm bluffing. I'm making toothless threats, and I just have to hope that Renault believes me. He probably will." Again, that gesture of rubbing the face – trying to wipe away the lines of worry, Blair realised. "He tends to believe the worst of people, which might explain why he was willing to kill you to get to me."

Blair handed a mug to Jim. "I think I know the type. Anyone else could do this, so I'd better do it first." Blair sat, and sipped at his own coffee. It was too hot still, but he didn't want to put it down. "You haven't been spending the last few years walking around a factory sniffing for thieves and spies. That doesn't get you caught up in someone's family squabble."

"The less you know, the better."

"That's bullshit! I've got a right to know-"

"What right? Who said that you had any right to know anything about me?" It was softly said, as cool as the first touch of acid before the burn followed.

Blair resisted this blunt effort to put him in his place. "One more question. One, and then I'll cool it with the interrogation."

Jim appeared sceptical about this assurance. "Ask your question."

"What's your name? Your real name."

"GC3-JE," Jim told him, a challenge in his eyes.

"That's not who I've been travelling with."

"Why does it matter?"

Blair huffed in exasperation. "You keep throwing your AI status in my face, and then you act like the most stubborn, stupid *man* I've ever met. It matters because it matters to you. It matters because I won't ever forget you, and I want to think about you how you *want* to be thought about. That's why it matters." Blair's voice grew more impassioned as he spoke. When he finished speaking there was a silence, and Blair sat there feeling ever more sheepish.

Jim stirred in his seat, and Blair presumed that he'd offended or embarrassed Jim. He'd certainly embarrassed himself.

"You want to think about me, you can think about Jim. James Joseph Ellison." Jim shrugged. "I chose it, it's me."

Blair risked a teasing joke. "So whenever I curse that son of a bitch Jim Ellison, your ears will burn?"

Jim smiled, unwillingly and ruefully, but he smiled. "That was two questions. And yes."

Blair wanted – no, he yearned to ask about a million more questions, but Jim had a 'that's the end of that' look about him, and Blair decided to hold his impatience. He still had three more weeks.

Days passed, marked by ship time. They dragged but they went too fast, and the closer Klotho got the more that Blair noticed the weight in his chest and the tightness in his throat.

“You could stay on the Monarch,” he offered one day, hunched over the bridge controls for the regular checks. “I don’t mind the company and you could train. There’s time in runs, it’s how most haulers learn, and then you’d have additional tradeable skills.”

Jim looked at him with a penetration that made Blair acutely aware of Jim’s abilities. Blair’s heart was beating fast, his stomach felt as if it were dropping away into his toes, and his armpits were sweaty. Jim could probably calculate how damp he was to the micro-litre.

“You still don’t let me in arm’s reach of you, but you want me as apprentice crew. You want to tell me how that works, Blair?”

Blair leaned back in his chair and did his best to project nonchalance. “Given the size of the Monarch, you’ve been within arm’s reach of me for practically the entire journey.”

Jim’s face darkened with irritation. “I’m serious. Why are you offering?”

“You need somewhere to be. You need income. One man on a hauler - you can do it, but you get lonely, and you forget how to talk to people. We’d both win.”

“In our separate bunks,” Jim said.

“Will you get over that!” Blair turned back to his boards. “If you want to get off at Klotho like you planned, then that’s fine. But I wanted you to know that you have another option.” He stared at lights and readouts, without really seeing them, and then nearly jumped out of his seat when he felt Jim’s hand on the back of his neck. With a heroic effort, he didn’t turn around, but kept his position and did *not* lean into that warm, strong hand. “You might want to consider some heavy breathing next time, and then you won’t frighten the life out of me,” Blair snapped.

Jim leaned down, his breath puffing against Blair’s ear with each word. “You’ve been very earnest about reassuring me about my ‘personhood’.”

Blair flushed with anger. If there was one word that annoyed him when applied to him, it was ‘earnest’, because it always seemed to be code for ‘over-enthusiastic’ and ‘dumb’. He felt like both sometimes when he looked at Jim. The discovery of Jim’s secret had elevated him somehow in Blair’s eyes, made something mythic of him. Blair didn’t really see himself as someone who had sex with myths.

“So,” Jim continued, “how about you explain to me how come you don’t want to fuck my ‘person’ anymore.”

Blair put his hand up to push Jim's hand away, the back of his hand sliding under Jim's fingers. He shuddered. He couldn't help it, because touch was touch and the sex had been good. Jim's hand pushed away, Blair stood. Jim was looking at him, his arms crossed against his chest now, smugness in every line of his face, and Blair pushed past him, heading for the mess and the extra breathing space it offered, pitiful though that was. He turned back at the bridge door for a moment. "How about you tell me how many people you've slept with – in any sense of the word, and then I'll *explain*."

The smugness vanished, to be replaced with offence. "How the hell is that your business?" Blair ignored that, wishing only for a bigger space, where he could pace, or run away, or shout, imagining his noise travelling on forever instead of dissipating, trapped, inside the Monarch. Jim paced behind him. "What is this? Some sick HV joke?"

Blair backed up against the corridor wall. "No joke. Tell me how many people you've had sex with."

"Will you want details too? Want me to spin it into some high quality porn for you?" Jim was angry now, not just irritated, or annoyed. Angry, and spitting out words like ice chips.

"I don't need details."

"Quantity instead of quality? Is that it?"

"Yeah, Jim. That's it." He waited, while Jim struggled between impulses – to offer Blair a truth in exchange for another truth or to simply tell him to go to hell.

"Two," Jim eventually bit out.

"Two? Including me?" Blair's voice rose in a mortifying squawk.

Jim looked, if possible, even more pissed off. "So now you know." He stepped closer and leaned one hand against the wall next to Blair's head in a classic movement of intimidation. "How many people have you had sex with, Blair?" His voice was soft, an insinuating murmur.

Blair lifted his hands to push at Jim, without much success. "Back off. You're all bent out of shape because you're not getting any, and you're *assuming*, and it's pissing me off. Damn it. Two people? And the second one is the guy that you're cooped up with for weeks on end who's saving your ass, and whom you *owe*? Yeah, I have issues. How old are you?"

"I was commissioned in 322," Jim said, and Blair clenched his teeth because Jim was never being anything other than difficult whenever he referred to his origins.

"And it took time for you to... develop, which is an amazing thing, which I am genuinely in awe of, don't mistake me. But it makes you kind of young, and, damn it, I know it's

maybe not fair, but I'm just getting weird vibes off of the whole thing. If you want to hang around for a while, that 's great, because I think we have a good friendship going, but... there are a lot of people out there, man, you know what I mean?"

Jim shifted so that he didn't stand so obviously over Blair. The hand on the corridor wall became a fist, and Jim leaned his forehead against it, his eyes shut. "I get it," he said wearily. "Either I'm a sex toy responding to an owner or I'm a kid with a crush, and either way you don't trust me to know my own mind. Thanks a lot."

Jim pushed himself off the wall, his mouth twisted as if he'd bitten into something sour. "You don't need to be in awe of me. But thanks for the crew offer. I'll think about it." It was perfunctory, an acknowledgement but no more, and Blair spent the rest of the trip feeling resentful and oddly guilty; he'd thought he was trying to figure out what was right for Jim, and he kept wondering if it was all just his own stupid insecurities hurting his friend and himself.

And then he'd feel like punching a wall for over-thinking everything, like he always did.

It was two days in to Klotho at sub-light. The entry and exit into h-space created particles that nobody actually wanted near their planets, and the two days in for a single-crew hauler was a careful journey, and not marked by a lot of free time. When the Monarch settled into her planetside dock, Blair leaned back in his seat and sighed in relief, until he turned in his seat and saw Jim in the doorway. Blair had passed the open door of his cabin earlier and seen him neatly and methodically packing his bag. He'd looked at Blair once and then turned his attention to his belongings once more.

"Guess you're more than ready to smell some planetside air," Blair said. His jaw was tight, and so was his stomach.

"Yes. Guess I am." Blair risked a look at Jim then. He looked resolute, but Blair tried a last gasp effort anyway.

"That crew offer is still open, any time you want. I do this run every few months, and I'll be here at least a week before I leave." Stupid of him. Why would Jim want to hang around a beat up old hauler and a bookish, dilettante Blair who was still having 'issues' about Jim's history?

"I don't think so." Blair's head drooped as Jim continued speaking. "I might have, if it wasn't for Renault. He might still decide to risk taking me out, and you'll be safer if you're not associated with me."

"Letting me down gently are you? That's very nice of you, Jim."

“No it’s not *nice* of me. Hell, you think that I wouldn’t accept seeing you every few months? I’d take that, but there’s no point. I’ll get some more money together and I’ll move on again. If I cross enough planets I should drop out of Renault’s sight eventually.”

“Changing your name again as you go?” Blair wished he didn’t sound so sad about it.

“Maybe,” Jim said.

Blair stared unseeingly at the Monarch’s systems. “I won’t know what name to curse.”

Jim was beside his chair then, and he hauled Blair up in a hug. Blair leaned into Jim’s shoulder and he sniffed, trying to remember the way Jim smelled.

“Keep cursing Jim Ellison. I’ll hear you.”

Blair laughed at that. “I’ll miss you.” He lifted his head. “Look. I get that you want to get out there and make your new life, but take a ship key and keep yourself tied into my comms until I go.” Jim frowned. “Yes, I know, but it’s still less traceable than planetary comms, and I feel sentimental about keeping you in my sights. I know my way around here, I could help you out with local info.”

He dragged himself away from Jim’s embrace and pressed the key into Jim’s hand, tracing out the shape of knuckle against his palm. He was ridiculous, but he was rewarded with a sweet, peculiarly uncertain smile from Jim.

Blair let go reluctantly. “I’ve got to get out planet-side myself. Klotho’s got its own business culture – in the towns you do face to face. No vid conferences, and I’ve got debts to pay and a new load to hustle.” Jim still stood close, and Blair jerked his shoulders, as if to try and shed a weight. “Not to mention the current load to get off the ship. Maybe you should leave then.”

Jim gently cupped his palm across Blair’s jaw. “Thanks. For everything.”

“Never gave you everything, Jim.” But he might have liked to.

YEAR 343 POST ASTRA, KLOTHO

Glimmerman’s anteroom was filled with curios from several planets, and Blair made a persistent circuit of them while he waited. Clary, after a lifetime of declaring himself at peace with dust cough, had struggled at the last, and thrown money away in a last-ditch search for cures, securing it against the Monarch. If Blair wanted to keep travelling the profitable runs between Klotho and the three nearest systems then Glimmerman had to have his money, on time. Blair had expected the meeting and pay-off to be with one of Glimmerman’s flunkies, but if Glimmerman wanted to see him personally? Mr Glimmerman was not a man to cross.

Blair paused again in front of a painting, staring at the brush strokes because he'd already considered the composition and colour, aware as he all too often was on Klotho of the weight of the gun strapped against his thigh.

"You're very appreciative of my collection, Mr Sandburg," a voice said.

Blair jumped and spun around, trying to control his breath. "You're very quiet, Mr Glimmerman," he said, embarrassed by his widened eyes and startled movement.

"Quiet is always worth cultivating, don't you think? Please, come into my private office."

Glimmerman's dark eyes stared into Blair's, and Blair hoped that his resentment of the man and his exploitation of Clary's desperation wasn't too obvious. Glimmerman smiled thinly. "Take a seat."

Blair sat. The chair was very comfortable, with beautifully carved arms, but he noted that it was lower than the chair that Glimmerman sat in.

"I was sorry to hear about your uncle. He still looked comparatively well when I dealt with him."

"It was very sudden once it took hold," Blair replied.

"I feared it would be." Glimmerman's fear was no doubt why the security for the loan had been iron-tight. "But, still. Small businessmen depend on their names don't they, and the Sandburgs have always had a name for doing what they say they'll do."

"I hope so," Blair said. "Everything *is* in order?" There was something about Glimmerman's urbane interest that was lifting the hairs on the back of his neck and he didn't know why, except insofar as nobody felt comfortable in the focus of a predator.

"Financially, absolutely." Glimmerman pulled out a pistol from his desk drawer and pointed it at Blair. "Would you please disarm yourself, Mr Sandburg?"

Blair reared back in his chair, hands up. "Okay, what is this? Because you said it yourself, you've got your money, and I..."

"You and Clary were generally well-regarded. A little eccentric on your part, but still. People know they can trust you. So I'm quite fascinated to know why someone wants you dead."

"Nobody wants me dead, Mr Glimmerman." Was that his voice, that reedy, unconvincing protest?

"I have a substantial amount of money that says otherwise. Weapon, please." Glimmerman gestured with the hand that was *not* aiming the gun, and pressed something on his desk. A man came in, big, with a pleasant bearded face, and an unpleasant gun pointing at Blair. The gun filled all Blair's vision, and he remembered

what he'd told Jim about his weapon skills. A lover, not a fighter, and neither of them for very much longer. He took off his own gun.

Glimmerman lifted a hand screen so that Blair could see it – and the picture of Jim on it. “Would you be bait for this man, Blair? I lost my best contact in planetary entry, and this man has been living very quietly.”

“I don't know him.”

“Hid in your hold all the four long months from Cubero, did he?”

Blair felt for one moment like he might explode with fury. “What a businessman. You had to have my loan repaid as well as the price on my head, huh? Didn't want to scare me off until the money went through!”

“You know how to contact him?”

Blair shook his head. “No,” he said doggedly. “He got his ride and then he left.”

Glimmerman merely lifted one brow.. Glimmerman's big thug gestured in his turn, and put out his hand. “Comms, money, I.D. Hand it over.”

Blair did so, and saw the flash on his comm screen of a message waiting. He'd turned it off, courtesy to not interrupt one business dealing with another, and he hadn't expected any more calls, anyway, except maybe Jim; and he'd never have spoken to Jim in front of Glimmerman, letting the warmth in his voice be leached away in the reptilian glare of Glimmerman's observation.

Glimmerman's man handed the screen over. Glimmerman checked it and then said to Blair, “You have a memo to check your ship's messages. I do hope it's not anything important.”

Bearded man grabbed Blair's arm, digging the muzzle of his gun against his side. “Move it,” he demanded and directed Blair down a shabby back corridor until they reached an open door. Blair was pushed inside and the door shut behind him. There was a single light-source, not very bright; and gray coloured walls; and Blair, sagging to sit on the floor, back against the wall, arms wrapped around his bent knees.

“Okay,” he breathed. “So, this is not good, really not good. Come on, man, think!” Thinking didn't do much for Blair except to bring home to him how very much he was screwed, and probably dead. “Oh, fuck my life,” he muttered to his knees.

Time passed, although it was hard to judge how much. Several hours probably, which Blair spent acutely registering everything – the bare room, the press of his backside on the hard floor, the dryness of his mouth, the roil of something that he thought might be terror every time any sound travelled through the door. There were footsteps and the

occasional murmur of voices, but he was left undisturbed, of no account until they figured out if he would draw Jim away from his 'quiet' life.

There was sound like a distant weapons fire – the whine of an energy bolt rather than a projectile, and Blair scrambled to his feet and went to the door, listening hard. The sound didn't repeat, and Blair wondered if he imagined it. He didn't imagine the click of shoes on the hard floor outside his prison, and Blair backed away from the door, his eyes scanning the room in desperation and confirming it as bare as it had always been. He stood to one side of the door anyway. He was quick, and he could hit hard, and he wanted to live. At the worst, he wanted to go down fighting, and his fists clenched as the door swung open, extending the reach of the hinges to rest nearly flush with the wall.

The light was brighter in the hall. Blair waited, unwilling to just frame himself in the doorway, and then Glimmerman said, "Please come out, Mr Sandburg."

Blair hesitated, and a completely familiar, completely unexpected voice said, "It's safe, Blair. Come out."

Blair steadied himself on the doorframe, and took one step and stopped. There was Glimmerman, his face masked in its usual suave calm. And there was Jim, a gun in his hand, the blue of his eyes washed out in the hall lighting, his face and knuckles smeared with blood that Blair knew couldn't be his. It still drove the breath out of him.

"Jim?" he croaked.

"As you see." Glimmerman extended a hand. "Completely unharmed. All contracting parties have met their obligations." His face might have been calm, but there was a coldly polar fury beneath the words.

"What is going on here?" Blair asked, and was blasted in the frost of Glimmerman's gaze.

"The terms of the contract have changed, Mr Sandburg. I receive a substantial sum of money and a small bonus for ensuring that you do *not* die. Your friend was kind enough to deliver the message to me in good time."

Blair wondered what sort of delivery arrangements involved Jim marked with blood. "Come on," Jim said, holding out one hand to Blair. "We're out of here."

"Once you put that away," Glimmerman said, his eyes on Jim's gun. "I'll escort you off my premises, very happily, but you will no longer threaten me. We have a deal."

Jim paused, and then holstered his weapon. His gaze flicked over Blair. "He'll want his things back. We wouldn't want him walking the streets out there inappropriately attired."

Glimmerman bared his teeth. "But of course. Let's make sure that this is all done... properly."

Dazed, Blair found himself walking between Glimmerman and Jim, past at least two glowering men, back to Glimmerman's private office, where his belongings were returned. Blair strapped on his gun harness, feeling unutterably silly between Glimmerman's smooth malice and Jim's cold-eyed determination.

Glimmerman ran his fingers across the glossy back of his chair. "I'm almost tempted to offer you a job since I'm not allowed to kill you. Mr... Ellison, was it?"

"Wouldn't your current staff object?"

"I admire competency wherever I find it – and the two who might have the biggest problem are dead, after all."

"Thank you, but I have other plans," Jim said, as if he was turning down an offer at a business lunch.

"Off Klotho, I take it," Glimmerman said, dark eyes turning to Blair.

"Yeah. A long way off Klotho," Blair said.

"Excellent," Glimmerman said with another baring of his teeth. "That will completely relieve me of any responsibility for your well-being. Let me show you out."

They were escorted to the door, and stepped outside. It was night now, noisy and well-lit and busy. Jim slung an arm around Blair shoulders, an oddly possessive gesture given that they were still within sight of Glimmerman's building, and hauled him towards the main thoroughfare. They walked for perhaps five minutes, before Blair realised that the edge of Jim's jacket was damp, and that Jim's arm was growing heavier across his shoulders. At the edge of an alleyway, Blair not very subtly checked Jim and rounded on him, one hand clenched into his jacket. Jim looked distracted, somehow. His face wasn't pale or sweaty, but Blair knew that something was wrong.

"Are you hurt?" Blair's adrenalin rush was nowhere near levelling out, and worry for Jim spiked it to new levels.

"Define hurt," Jim said.

Blair's lips drew back from his teeth. "Would you prefer 'damaged'? 'Dysfunctional'? Let me rephrase the question. How *badly* are you hurt?"

"I'll be okay."

"You don't need to have made an enemy of Glimmerman. I swear I'll kill you myself."

Jim looked to gather some strength. "I *will* be okay. I promise."

Blair looked up and down the street, unconvinced that Glimmerman's vengeful henchmen wouldn't descend on them any second now. "We should get back to the Monarch. It's as safe as anywhere. Where have you left your things?"

Jim drew out of the pocket opposite to his holster the book of Sun Tzu. "I have this, and I have a little money left. Clothes I can replace."

"How can you have any money left? How the hell did you convince Glimmerman to let us go!"

Jim put his arm over Blair's shoulder again. They might be friends or lovers, out for an evening's pleasure seeking. "You weren't paying attention. Like Glimmerman said, all I did was bring him new information."

Blair thrust his balled hands into his coat pockets, not daring to wrap an arm around Jim's waist for fear that he'd hurt him.

"It's a good thing you're sentimental, Blair." Jim's voice was odd. Not breathless, not the way that Blair's would be if he was hurt and struggling with it, but tight and rough. "I got the message through the ship's key. From Anais." He turned his head and inhaled. Smelling me, Blair thought. Jim's wrist was digging into Blair's shoulder. "Should have left your comm on. Might not have walked into his lair like that." It came out slurred, and Blair changed his mind about holding on, instead aiming for a grasp high across Jim's ribs.

"You can explain after we get back. And I've got enough money for a taxi so let's try our luck."

Blair steered them to the roadside, scanning the traffic for paid transport, and waving a frantic hand when he saw a marked vehicle which pulled over for them. Jim was folded into the back seat where he rested with his head against the seat back and his eyes shut, while Blair requested the docks as their destination.

"Fisticuffs tire your friend out, eh?" The driver was a heavy-set woman, grey-haired. Her gun was ostentatiously displayed in a holder in the front of the taxi, blocked from the reach of any backseat passengers.

Blair's nails dug into his palms as he struggled for the tones of merchant boys out on the town. "Better some bar planetside than six weeks into h-space," he enthused.

"Ain't that the truth. Swear, there's some boys get drunker on blood on their knuckles than they do on the booze." This philosophy delivered, she was silent and Blair endured the rest of the ride watching Jim and working out a new commercial strategy, since he doubted he'd feel comfortable on Klotho any time in the next twenty years. One of Jim's hands closed around Blair's, arrhythmically clenching and unclenching, shading close to hurtful sometimes, and when they reached the docks and began to make their way to the Monarch's entrance, Jim swayed.

“You told me you were okay!” Blair said, worry making him vehement. Jim was silent, and Blair all but shoved him inside the Monarch. They didn’t even make it to a cabin or the mess. Jim rasped out Blair’s name and grabbed for his hands, grasping one and clutching the other around Blair’s wrist. He dropped to his knees, pulling Blair with him in an awkward, genuflecting sprawl. “Jim! What is it? What’s wrong!”

Blair tried to pull free, but Jim’s hands were locked and squeezing tighter, grinding the bones in Blair’s hand and wrist. Jim’s head was bowed, and he shook, tremors juddering across his arms and shoulders, the tendons of his neck standing out with terrifying definition.

“Jim! Damn it, let go!” There was no response, and Blair tried to soften his voice, to coax Jim to release him “Jim, you’re hurting me, you have to let go, please, come on, Jim.”

The remorseless, painful grip only tightened. “Jim, you’re going to break my hand! Please....”

Jim lifted his head. His eyes were open and disoriented, and his mouth was caught in a rictus of effort. “It hurts... wrong mode...” His face distorted in what Blair could only interpret as silent agony.

“Oh god,” he cried, part fear for Jim, the larger part his own pain. He threw his head back, gasping for breath, certain that Jim had tried to tell him something with those despairing words – but what? Weeks of information grudgingly given, and Blair’s own sparse knowledge of HVs and his own speculations hardly equipped him to deal with this disaster. Modes... a word with very specific meaning in dealing with HVs. Blair took a breath, and tried to push the panic in him out as an urgent command. “GC3-JE, stand down!” His voice cracked. “GC3-JE, stand down!” Wrong, he was wrong, all the terrible possibilities of the next few seconds strobed in his thoughts.

And then Jim let go.

Blair collapsed against the corridor wall, hugging his hands to his chest with a whine, barely aware of Jim in the first ecstatic, agonised relief. He sat there, trying to breathe himself into calm, while his hand and wrist throbbed in time with the furious, gradually slowing beat of his heart. Jim had turned so that his back was to Blair, and he rose into a crouch, hands resting on his knees before he stood with fluid, painless ease.

“Jim?”

“I’m okay.”

“Good, that’s really good,” Blair murmured. Experimentally, he tried flexing his fingers and hissed, and then gasped in surprise as he was lifted effortlessly to his feet. Jim was behind him somehow, his hands on his shoulders.

“What sort of drugs do you have in the locker in the mess?” Jim asked, all business.

“The good ones. And there’s the coldpack.” He was shoved gently forward to the mess, and settled into a seat. The coldpack was held over his hand, which was already starting to bruise. Jim handed him drugs, draped a blanket across his shoulders. “You’re hurt too,” Blair said eventually.

“Not badly.”

Blair lifted his hand, completely in reflex, and rediscovered how much he moved his hands when he used them, and how much it hurt. “Damn it.” He took a breath, and another. “Can we start at the beginning?”

“Sure.” Agreement, but dull, without inflexion. Jim sat beside Blair. It was, Blair knew, easier to hide his expressions that way than if he sat opposite. A tilt of the head, and Jim Ellison was so much harder to read.

“You got a message. From Renault’s mother?”

Jim had grown familiar with the systems. Four months, Blair thought, watching as Jim shrugged off his jacket. There was still the smear of blood down his jaw. The smears on Jim’s knuckles had become grainy, lighter. He must have rubbed at them some time when Blair didn’t notice. Jim twisted the auxiliary screen towards Blair, and a woman looked out at them.

She must presumably be at least sixty, Blair thought. Clary had been sixty-six, and he’d worn his age like every year had been hard. This woman, Anais, looked like a vid version of old – her hair was white, but flatteringly styled. There were a few character marks around her eyes but otherwise her skin was clear and glowing, and she wore Cubero’s current fashions with elan.

“Hello, Joseph,” she said. “Renault showed me your message.”

Blair instinctively looked towards Jim at that, and saw the wince.

“He believed you, but...” She sighed. “He wanted to do things the safe way. The deniable way, and I pointed out that if he wanted to protect our reputations that he couldn’t afford the time. I hope that my bluff was nearly as good as yours. So I’ll trust that you’ll destroy this, and I’ll trust that Mr Sandburg will let you do so. The file with the information you need is attached to this, Joseph. To release the encryption, use the first name I gave you as a key. I’m sure you remember.

“I plan to be a far more gracious mother. Perhaps, after a while, Renault will forgive us both.” The brittle maquillage of hauteur cracked – only briefly. “I’m sorry I didn’t believe you when you tried to warn me. It made it harder for you to leave than it should have been. Take care of yourself, Joseph. Enjoy your life.”

Jim shut the screen down.

“So she gave you what you needed to call Glimmerman’s people off?”

“More or less.” Jim’s hand scrubbed over the grimier set of knuckles. “She told me who to contact, what to say. And she finally broke the last blocks I had.”

Blair kept hurting for Jim. It only seemed to make him more determined to keep him close. “You killed two of Glimmerman’s people.”

“The ones that had been watching us. I was in too much of a hurry to get to you, and they cornered me.” Jim’s hands curled into fists. “If they’d killed me, they’d have killed you.”

A queasy elation filled Blair at the thought of Jim killing someone on his behalf.

“It’s too easy to kill people,” Jim muttered.

“I don’t think you found it easy at all.” Blair put out his less painful hand and laid it on Jim’s shoulder, suddenly sure that the breakdown in the corridor hadn’t been due entirely to physical injury. “You were hurting, and you associated me with comfort, right?” He thought of the acuity of Jim’s senses – how he’d have seen, and heard; smelled and *felt*. “And you kept opening up to me, even though you were hurting, and it went wrong somehow.” The last words were more a question than a statement. Jim nodded. “And then...” Blair felt close to tears. This was Jim next to him, as human as anyone that Blair had ever known, and Blair had treated him like a malfunctioning piece of machinery.

“It worked. It’s what I hoped that you’d do. Security mode – I was a lot more detached that way. God – the first time I started playing around with touch, with taste...” A slightly shamed smile appeared. “It scared the hell out of Anais.”

“Tell me about it one day,” Blair said.

Incredulity blazed on Jim’s face. “I nearly crippled you. I couldn’t control myself and I nearly broke bones. You drop me off at your next destination, and that’s an end of it. I’ve made you powerful enemies on two planets already!”

“It’s a big universe. I’m sure we could make a lot more enemies yet. And I think that you know your own responses better now. What you did was a mistake. You’ll learn.”

Jim shook his head. “Blair....”

Blair wished that he could grip better, that he could pincer his hand against Jim’s shoulder and never let go. “Look. Four months wasn’t enough. Not with you. I don’t know what will be. It’s six weeks to my next delivery.”

“Your hands.”

“Everything’s automated. I’ll manage. Drugs, a brace for support. I’ll manage, and you can help. And then it’s six weeks, and if you still want to leave, then you can. But I bet you won’t want to.”

Jim’s eyes widened. “Are you bribing me with what I think you are?”

Blair shifted closer to Jim on the bench. “Yup.”

“What about your issues? Your weird vibe?”

Always angriest when he was most hurt, not most threatened. Blair had that figured out, if nothing else, and he sobered. “The way I see it, this ended up being a sort of rite of passage. And rites of passage deserve celebration, and there is nothing more celebratory than sex, therefore....”

“You’re crazy.”

“Actually, according to Glimmerman, I have a name for eccentricity. It’s an entirely different thing.”

Jim said nothing, but he lurched towards Blair, clumsy with emotion, and cupped his hand around the back of Blair’s head so that he could press their foreheads together.

“Okay. Six weeks.”

“And now you can show me how badly you’re hurt.” Blair nuzzled gently across Jim’s cheek.

Jim sighed. “It’s only a crease. I’m tough. It’ll heal itself. God, I’m sorry, Blair. So sorry.”

“Hey, it’s okay. Just show me. Please.”

Jim released him, staring at him for a moment. Blair smiled, assured that whatever was in his smile, he’d never shown it to anyone else. And then Jim stripped off his shirt, and let Blair see him.

HOSTAGE

STORY BY PATT

Simon opened up his door and yelled, "Ellison, my office, right now!"

"What'd you do this time, Jimbo?" Connor wondered aloud.

"I swear, it was Sandburg," Jim teased as he walked into Simon's office.

"Sit down, Jim. We have a slight problem," Simon stated.

"With what?" Jim asked.

"One of the students at Rainier took Sandburg hostage about an hour ago. They weren't sure about who it was or where it was until now. The Hostage Negotiators have been called out on this, but I called in some favors and you're going to be riding with them. They're leaving as of now, so get downstairs and tell Captain Mason who you are and that I sent you," Simon ordered.

"Thank you, Simon. Are they certain he's all right?" Jim asked nervously.

"Why don't you take Connor to help control your senses while you're out in the field? I don't want you zoning out and scaring the men you're working with."

"Good idea, sir, I'll grab her on my way out. Any word on how he is?"

Simon shook his head and answered, "No word, Jim. Just that he was alive about two hours ago. Now, go and find your partner and bring him back safely. We're sort of used to the kid around here."

Jim knew that he would do everything in his power to bring his partner back alive and unharmed. Now he needed to find out who had him and what they wanted. He walked out of Simon's office and said, "Connor, you're with me."

"Alright, finally, this has been the slowest damn day, hasn't it?" Megan asked and noticed that Jim wasn't even listening to her. "What's up, Jimbo?"

They got into the elevator and Jim said, "Do you have extra ammo and everything you'll need for a take down?"

Connor felt her pockets, smiled and said, "I have six clips. That should do us for awhile. What's going on?"

Jim sighed. He hated this part. Why couldn't she just know already? "Someone took Blair hostage and they haven't heard from him in two hours."

"Someone took, Sandy? And we're just finding out about it now? Why is that, Jim? Why weren't we called at the very beginning of the situation?"

“I have no idea, Connor. Now, let’s get downstairs, they’re waiting for us,” Jim said as he shoved her out of the elevator and pushed her in the direction of the front door.

“Who is waiting for us?”

“Stop asking questions and start moving, Connor.”

Megan did just that. She followed Jim outside and saw the Hostage Negotiators waiting for them and knew then that they were just along for the ride. Then the SWAT team came out and joined them and they all got into the huge panel van.

Jim told Captain Mason who he was and that Connor was his partner. Mason said, “Get into the van and don’t make me sorry that I took you two along for this.”

“You won’t be sorry, sir,” Jim swore.

Mason somehow believed Ellison to be an honest man and knew that he was here to help in some way.

They climbed into the van and they all handed Megan and Jim vests and various other type of gear they would need to help out.

“Ever shot someone long range, Ellison?” the man that seemed to be in charge asked.

“Yes, sir. I’m a very good shot and if I see a chance, I’ll know before you all do,” Jim said.

“Well, you don’t decide those things on your own, Ellison. My name is Carter and I want you to remember that you are following my orders today. And what is this woman doing here?”

“Carter, this woman is my partner. She’s very good at what she does and she helps me with what I do. So, please don’t call her that again,” Jim said angrily.

Jim took his gun out of his holster and checked his weapon. Connor watched him look at the gun, like it was the only thing that could possibly help.

“Carter, have you heard anything about the hostage?” Jim asked.

“We hear that he’s some hot shot ride along for Major Crimes. What he’s doing at the university is beyond me,” Carter answered.

“But have you heard how he is?”

“No, no one has seen him in two hours. It took forever to get this call and when we did, we had to slow down to pick you and your partner up. We would sure like to know why,” Carter asked.

“He’s our ride along. He’s an observer from the university and we take care of our own,” Connor said quickly.

“Well, why didn’t you just say as much? We do take care of our own, so I expect you to stay in line and follow my orders at all times,” Carter reminded both of them.

Connor finished putting her gear on and said, “Understood, sir.”

“Yes, sir.” Jim just stood and listened to where they were. He realized they were almost to the university already. Then he would be able to listen for Blair and see if he was all right.

The driver parked in the parking lot-they all started getting out and finding a spot to be in. The cops were already there and taking some control of the situation. Connor could tell that Jim was listening, so she put her hand in the middle of his back, just like she had seen Blair do a million times, and hoped she would be able to help him concentrate.

Jim cocked his head and listened for a long while. Carter walked up and saw the expression on Jim’s face and wondered what was going on. “What is he doing?” Carter asked Connor.

“He’s trying to listen for Blair Sandburg. Jim has really good hearing and we’re hoping that he’ll be able to tell us if Blair is in there or not.”

Carter looked like he was on video for the stupidest person in the world. Then Jim uncocked his head and said, “Blair is there with two other people. One of them is a student of Blair’s by the name of Mitch Evans and the other is a woman by the name of Misty Bane. Blair is trying to talk Mitch out of shooting anyone, but he isn’t hearing it right now. He’s angry at Misty and says that he’s going to take out one person every hour until she agrees to what he asked her to do,” Jim said.

“How in the hell do you know that?” Carter asked, unbelievably.

“I’m telling you, he’s able to hear a great distance. He can tell you exactly where they are at this moment,” Connor assured him.

Carter still looked skeptical, but knew he had to listen until he found out differently. His walkie-talkie went off at that moment and the person said, “There are three people in the room. One of them has long curly brown hair and he’s talking to the man with the gun. He seems to be on a mission. He’s talking the shooter’s leg off. Then there is a woman, who is sitting on the other side of him, crying. What do you want us to do, sir?”

“What does this Blair Sandburg look like?” Carter asked quickly.

Jim pulled his billfold out and showed the picture of Blair in his wallet and Carter raised his eyebrow but said nothing to Jim about it.

“It looks like the long haired young man is Blair Sandburg and he’s a teacher here at the university. Do we have any demands?” Carter asked.

“He said he has explosives up there and that they’ll all blow up if he doesn’t get what he wants,” the voice said.

“Well, how in the hell are we going to know what he wants?” Carter wondered.

Jim pulled his cell phone out, put it on speaker and called Blair’s number. After two rings, the shooter answered and asked, “What do you want?”

“My name is Jim Ellison. Blair Sandburg is my partner. Do you think I could talk to him for a moment?”

The young man handed the phone over to Blair and kept the gun on him. “Hi, Jim. What do you need? I’m sort of busy right now. Mitch is trying to get a hold of someone that knows where his baby is at.”

“What has this got to do with you, Chief?”

“He was trying to hurt Misty and I intervened. I’m sorry, but I had to do it, man.”

“Understood, Chief.

“What do you want us to do, Jim?”

“Let me talk to Mitch again. This time, I’ll see if I can get through to him. Are there any explosives up there?”

“You could say that. The entire room is filled with detonation devices. He doesn’t plan on letting us out alive, Jim.”

“Let me talk to him, Blair.”

“What do you want, pig?” Mitch Evans asked, hatefully.

“Why do you hate us so badly, Mitch? What have we ever done to you?” Jim asked.

“The state took my kid when Misty put him up for adoption. They didn’t even ask me about it. I was never given the option of being a father or not. They took him right away from me. When I went to you pigs for help, you all told me to go to someone else, you couldn’t help. In the meantime, he’s getting older and older and doesn’t even know who his father is. I got a lawyer and he said I didn’t have a leg to stand on. What was I supposed to do?” the young man asked.

“You lost it, and I totally understand that, Mitch. But this isn’t the answer. Blair would be able to help you with finding the answers, but you didn’t give him a chance. By law, you have to sign papers saying you gave up your right to your son. There is no question about it, they did you wrong. Now, what are you going to do to fix this?” Jim asked softly.

“They’ll never give him to me now. I’m acting like a lunatic. I blame Misty. She told them she didn’t know the father’s name,” Mitch said sadly.

“Why don’t you send Blair and Misty out and you wait for the social worker to come and talk to you. Her name is Megan Connor. She’s very nice and would probably be able to help a great deal with getting your son back. Keeping in mind that they will have to charge you for the things you do today, what are your plans, son?”

“I’ll talk to the social worker if you really think she can help,” Mitch said.

“Are you going to send Misty and Blair out?”

“Yes, I’m sending them out now. I’ll just keep his phone for right now. I’m sure he won’t mind,” Mitch said.

“Can I talk to Blair once more?” Jim asked.

Blair sounded frantic as he got on the phone. “Jim, things aren’t always what they seem to be.”

Jim covered up the speaker and told Carter, “He’s going to shoot them now.”

“We don’t have a good shot without hitting Blair Sandburg at the same time. He’s right behind him. Any suggestions, Ellison?”

Jim went back to the phone. “Chief, could you tell him you want to look out the window one last time and then get out of the way?”

“I could do that, Jim.” Blair handed the phone over to Mitch and said, “Mitch, do you mind if I look outside for a moment? Just one last look?”

“Go ahead, Blair. I owe you that much,” Mitch said, sounding every bit as insane as he was.

Blair took Misty and looked out the window and then pushed her down on the floor and a shot rang out across campus.

Everyone was quiet for a moment. “I got him, sir. He’s down and the teacher and other student are on their way out.”

At that moment, the top floor of the building exploded, taking a lot of rooms with it.

Jim spoke into the walkie-talkie, “Do you see the two hostages?”

The voice rang loud and clear, “Yes, they are coming down the staircase. They must have run; they left the room so quickly. They’ll be down in a moment.”

“Thank you,” Jim said gratefully.

Connor hugged Jim hard and said, "I knew he'd get out of it. I just knew it. I just didn't expect it to be so close."

"I know what you mean, Connor. Carter, do you mind if we go and find Sandburg?"

"Go...Thank you for all of your help," Carter said as he shook both Jim and Connor's hands firmly.

Jim and Connor rushed up to the building and saw Blair coming out. Connor was the first one to him and hugged him long and hard. "You are a sight for sore eyes, Blair Sandburg."

"I must be if you're not calling me Sandy," Blair said.

Jim wanted to hug him in the worst way, but knew he couldn't. They kept their private life and their working life separate. He patted Blair on the shoulder and said, "Let me call a cab and we'll get out of here."

"Jim, I think we have some questions to answer first," Blair reminded.

"Of course, you're right. I'll get Rafe and Brown to bring my truck over here while we wait and fill out reports," Jim suggested.

Once everything was done, Jim drove out of the parking lot in his very own truck instead of a cab. Jim was much happier about that.

"You're sure you're alright, Chief?"

"Well, I'm alive and so is Misty, so we did all right. Mitch couldn't help that he was sick. Misty said the baby wasn't his. She had never even slept with him. In his mind, he thought that they were this perfect couple and they would have a family," Blair explained.

"I felt sorry for him, for a few moments, Chief, but then I realized he wasn't going to let you go and I stopped having pity for him," Jim said.

"Were you worried, Jim?"

Jim pulled over to the side of the road, put his truck into park and then pulled Blair into his arms. Blair could feel the tremors running through his lover's body and knew Jim had been scared, not just worried. "I hate that we aren't out, so that I could have done that at the university. I thought I was going to lose you and then when the explosion hit, I was afraid you didn't make it out at all, until I heard your frantic heartbeat in the stairwell. I love you so much and I don't ever want to go through this again."

“I promise that some day we’ll be out, Jim, just not today. Today, we’ll go home and celebrate our lives together in our home and maybe go out for some dinner tonight.”

“I say we order something in and make love all night long,” Jim said.

“That sounds even better. I love you, man.”

“I love you too, Blair.”

Life was good.

The end

THE LAND OF TEARS

ART BY BETH

STORY BY ENIGMATICBLUE



Jim makes an effort to minimize his limp as he walks through the bullpen to Simon's office. He ignores the sympathetic glances and tries not to see the pity in the other detectives' eyes. He knocks perfunctorily, knowing Simon is expecting him.

Simon's deep voice calls out, "Come in!"

Jim enters and closes the door behind him, grateful to be away from the curious stares of his co-workers. "Hey, Simon."

"Good to see you up and around," Simon says immediately, coming around from behind his desk. "Sit down."

"I'm okay," Jim protests, knowing that he sounds a little peevish. "Really."

Simon gives him a sharp look, but he retreats behind his desk, giving Jim the space he wants—and needs. "*I know* you're not thinking about returning to work yet."

"I'm not cleared," Jim confirms, as though that's the only thing that would keep him from coming back right this minute.

The truth is a little more complicated than that.

"What can I do for you, Jim?" Simon asks gently.

Jim blinks and looks away, unable to meet Simon's eyes. Simon had worked harder than anyone—other than Blair—to find Jim before O'Dell finished the job.

And that's why Jim thinks he can make this request.

"I want to take Blair somewhere," Jim says. "Just—get away for a while."

Simon rubs his chin. "You know Blair has used just about all his vacation time on this, don't you?"

"Then I can donate some of mine," Jim replies a little desperately. "I know it's been done in the past, and we need to get away from all of this—just for a week or two."

"Since you don't take a day off unless you're injured, you've got the time to give away," Simon agrees. "All right, I'll make it work. I didn't think I'd get either of you back until you were cleared anyway."

Jim smiles, relieved that he doesn't have to fight for this, too. "Thanks, Simon."

Simon nods. "I know *you're* fine, but how's Blair?"

Jim looks away. "That's kind of why I want to get out of town for a while." He sighs. "Blair isn't exactly talking to me right now. He keeps asking how I am, but he won't talk about how *he's* doing."

"Which is why you're getting away for a while," Simon says knowingly.

That isn't the only reason, but Jim can't quite articulate why it's so important to get out of Cascade. Partly, it's because he thinks it might help Blair, who doesn't seem comforted by the familiar surroundings of the loft. Partly, it's because Jim suspects that if they stay in Cascade, one or both of them will be pulled back into work before either of them are ready.

And partly it's because Jim feels helpless in the face of Blair's quiet rage and despair, and he has no idea how to fix it. He has no idea how to break through to him.

"Where are you going to go?" Simon asks.

Jim thinks of a vacation he took once, when he was on leave from the Army while briefly stationed at Fort Bragg. The Outer Banks had been beautiful. Many of the beaches had also been designated wildlife refuges, and there had been stretches of beach devoid of human presence.

That's where he wants to go, because he thinks the quiet will do Blair good. He thinks it will do the both of them good, and maybe he'll be able to break through the walls Blair has thrown up.

"I'll give you the address," Jim says. "And the phone number."

Simon nods. "I'll arrange it, and I promise I won't contact you unless it's absolutely necessary."

"Thanks, Simon." Jim holds his hand out to Simon, and is surprised when Simon comes around the desk to pull him into a quick hug.

"I'm glad to see you up and about," Simon says. "I had a bad few days. We all did."

Jim nods, astonished. "Yeah," he manages, unable to come up with any other response. "So did I."

Simon claps him on the shoulder, almost as though he's reassuring himself that Jim is alive and in one piece—relatively speaking.

When Jim emerges from Simon's office, he finds that most of the other detectives have found a reason to be up from their desks. Joel is the first to greet him, asking immediately how Blair is doing. Jim figures his own state is fairly obvious.

"He's hanging in there," Jim replies, in lieu of a better response. "I think he's still worried."

"He's not the only one," Joel says, before Jim is inundated with well wishes from Henri and Rafe and Connor.

"Tell Blair we're thinking of him," Connor says.

Jim smiles wryly. "Of course."

"Not that we aren't thinking of you!" she insists, flushing slightly. "It's just that you're here, and we can see how you are, and Sandy—"

"Yeah," Jim replies. "I know."

And he *does* know, because Jim has seen combat on several continents, and he's pretty sure he's seen it all at this point. Blair has only been a cop for nine months, and though he'd been through a lot in his time as an observer, it isn't the same thing.

"I'm looking out for him," Jim promises her.

Connor nods, as though satisfied. "Take care of yourself, too, Jimbo."

"I think Blair's doing that for me," he says with a smile, but he knows it doesn't quite reach his eyes. He's too worried for that.

The girl is young, little more than a child, and her face is bruised, tears trickling out of the corners of her eyes. Blair wants to go to her, to offer some measure of comfort, but his feet

are rooted to the floor. He sees O'Dell approaching her, wearing a bloodstained t-shirt and jeans, knife in hand.

He can't look away from the girl, and Blair sees the knife reflect the light as O'Dell raises it above his head.

Blair's vocal chords are as frozen as his feet, and Blair can't cry out, he can't stop what he knows is coming. The man brings the knife down, slicing the girl open from sternum to navel, and then he turns his attention to the far wall.

Blair sees Jim hanging from a meat hook suspended from the ceiling. Jim's hands are bound, his arms stretched above his head, his bare feet just trailing the floor.

Blair wants to go to him, or at least to shout some kind of encouragement, but he still can't move, can't speak. Jim is unable to defend himself, and the knife flashes again—

Blair wakes with a gasp, Jim's blood red in his vision. So much blood

In reality, the girl had been dead by the time they'd arrived on the scene, and blood had soaked the waistband of Jim's chinos. The only saving grace had been that O'Dell was taking his time with Jim, which had given Blair just enough time to shoot him—five shots center mass.

Blair isn't sure what pisses him off more—that he'd been forced to kill the man, or that it had been so easy. He still isn't sure, especially since it's mostly his fault that it had happened in the first place.

Blair hears the front door open, and he pushes himself up and off the couch, pasting on a cheerful expression. "Hey, how did it go?" he asks.

Jim shrugs. "Everybody asked about you."

Blair watches Jim's progress through the loft, his uneven gait as Jim makes his way to the fridge and pulls out a couple of beers—and he thinks, *my fault. All my fault.*

"You're on pain meds," Blair objects when Jim uncaps two bottles.

Jim smiles briefly. "I haven't taken anything recently, and I won't take anything for another couple of hours."

"That's cutting it close," Blair remarks.

"You know I hate the way those meds make me feel," Jim says, handing Blair one of the bottles. "Besides, I need to talk to you about something."

Blair feels a short burst of panic, and tries to keep it under tight control. He's deathly afraid that Jim is going to say, "Thanks for everything, but you fucked this up, and you're gone."

“Yeah, sure,” Blair manages. “Whatever you want to talk about, man.”

Jim waits until they’re both seated in the living room before he says, “I think we should get away.”

Blair blinks, because that’s about the last thing he’d expected. “Excuse me?”

“I donated some of my vacation time to you,” Jim explains, sounding uncharacteristically hesitant. “I know you’re close to maxing out. I’ve got the plane tickets, and a house rented. I can probably get some of the money back if you don’t want to go.”

All Blair can think to ask is, “Where?”

“North Carolina, the Outer Banks,” Jim replies. “I was there once, and I thought you’d like it.”

“You liked it there?” Blair asks, none too sure of his own judgment right now.

Jim shrugs. “Yeah, I did. It was peaceful.”

Peace isn’t something Blair expects to find again, but he responds with, “That sounds good. Yeah, I’ll go. So, tell me about the station.”

Jim does, but his eyes droop as he speaks, and Blair reminds himself that the doctor had said this was perfectly normal. Jim would sleep a lot as he healed.

Blair takes the half-empty bottle out of Jim’s hand before he drops it. “You should sleep.”

“Don’t really want to climb the stairs,” Jim mumbles.

“Then stay here,” Blair says, helping him to stretch out on the couch. He takes the blanket from the back of the couch and throws it over Jim. “Sleep.”

Jim mumbles incoherently, and Blair sits down in the recliner, intent on watching him. In a couple of hours, Jim will wake up, in pain, and Blair will be ready.

He’ll always be ready; he owes Jim that much at least.

The flight is harder on him than Jim expected. The hum of the engines grates on his ears, and he can feel the vibrations down to his bones, and that’s *after* the trip through the airport set his injuries to throbbing.

“There’s no shame in taking the meds, man,” Blair murmurs as the stewardess begins coming down the aisle to take their drink orders.

Jim wants to argue. He wants to insist that he’s just fine, thank you very much, but he can’t fool Blair. “Just the Tylenol,” he insists. “You know the other stuff knocks me on my ass.”

“Tylenol for now, then,” Blair agrees. “But once we land, and we get where we’re going, you’re taking them.”

Jim grunts in response.

“We should have waited a little longer,” Blair frets.

“Too much longer and neither one of us would have had enough vacation time to take this trip,” Jim points out. “Besides, I can recuperate just as well on the beach as at home.”

Blair subsides and hands Jim his Tylenol. Jim wishes he were recovered enough to surf, but he’s not stupid enough to try. It’s going to be another few weeks before he’s up to surfing.

At least he *will* be able to surf again someday.

It’s a relief to get off the plane, to stretch his legs and leave the humming of the engines behind. Blair insists on getting both their bags, and Jim doesn’t argue, instead limping after him, grateful that his knee had only been wrenched.

He’s grateful for a lot of things these days.

Jim would have preferred renting a truck or an SUV, but climbing into one would have presented a problem. Instead, he’d booked a full size sedan, and willingly handed the keys over to Blair.

“Maybe you should take your pills now,” Blair suggests.

“And leave you to haul my ass into the rental house?” Jim asks. “I can wait until we arrive. You have the directions?”

“I do.”

“Great.” Jim leans his head against the window and trusts Blair to get them there.

The sky-blue house Jim has rented is on stilts, but then most of the houses in the area are. Jim leans heavily on the railing, but he makes it up the stairs without falling over, so that’s a small mercy.

“You really went all out, man,” Blair remarks as he follows Jim inside. The walls are painted in pastels and hung with quirky seascapes and contemporary paintings.

The furniture is wicker and canvas, and the cushions are well padded. The sitting room is all clean lines and large windows, opening into a well-lit kitchen. Blair walks down the hall to find a large, luxurious bathroom, and two large bedrooms. He drops Jim’s suitcase in the room nearest the bathroom and snags Jim’s medications.

“Hey, I’ve got your meds,” Blair calls, but he doesn’t see Jim immediately. The French doors to the deck are open, though, and Blair steps outside to find Jim leaning against the railing.

“Look at this view,” Jim says with a smile.

Blair looks out at the ocean, the blue-green water crashing up against the shore. He glances up and down the beach to see other nearby houses painted in shades of blue and green and pink, silvered decks stacked on top of each other, connected by stairs.

It’s picturesque, like something off of a postcard, and Blair leans next to Jim. “It’s great, Jim. You shouldn’t have.”

“We needed to get out of town,” Jim says simply.

Blair doesn’t immediately reply. He’s mesmerized by the waves and the circling seagulls. In the distance, he can make out a couple of surfers, children by their size, and there’s a man on some kind of buggy being towed along by a large kite. “You were right about it being peaceful,” Blair admits.

“Think I’ll take the meds now,” Jim replies, reaching for the pill bottle Blair is holding. “But I’d like to stay out here.”

Blair glances at the loungers set off to the side. They look comfortable enough, and he thinks the fresh air will probably do Jim good.

“And stop worrying, Chief,” Jim orders affectionately. “I’ve been hurt worse, and I came through okay.”

“Yeah, I know, sorry.” Blair knows he’s been hovering, but he can’t seem to help himself. The memories are too raw.

“And dammit, stop apologizing.” Jim’s tone is one of familiar impatience. “It wasn’t your fault.”

Blair decides not to respond to that statement, because Jim doesn’t need to hear his self-recriminations right now. “I’ll get you a glass of water, and then I think I’ll go for a walk.”

Jim seems to relax a bit at that. “Yeah, you should do that. That’s why we’re here.”

Blair nods, and reminds himself that this trip is as much for Jim’s benefit as for his. If they’d stayed in Cascade, Jim would probably go back to the station sooner than is good for him. They’re 3,000 miles away from it all, with nothing but a week of sand and surf stretching out before them.

And that might be the problem, Blair admits, if only to himself. There’s no escape from his memories here.

Jim has always loved the ocean—not when he’s surrounded by deep water, maybe, but he’s surfed since he was a kid, and he loves standing on the shore, smelling brine and feeling the waves lick at his feet. The susurrations act as white noise, and makes for a more restful night.

At least, it *would*, except the pain meds are starting to fuck with his sleep. It’s not unexpected, but it means that Jim has a legitimate reason to refuse the pills. Well, a reason that Blair will accept, anyway, which amounts to the same thing.

With a sigh, Jim rolls out of bed, careful not to put too much weight on his bad knee immediately. When he’s sure his leg will hold him, Jim grabs the dime store novel from his bedside table and limps down the hall towards the sitting room, feeling the cool, smooth wood under his feet. He sinks down into the overstuffed cushions of the couch with a sigh, facing the ocean through the French doors.

The moonlight is bright enough for him to read by, but Jim lays the paperback on his chest, focusing on the way the light reflects off the water, and the sound of the waves.

He’s so focused on the view outside that he doesn’t immediately recognize the sounds of distress from Blair’s room. When the sound of Blair’s panicked heartbeat finally alerts him, Jim immediately knows that Blair is in the middle of a full-blown nightmare.

Jim is halfway off the couch before he thinks better of trying to wake Blair, who has been touchy lately. Normally, Jim wouldn’t hesitate to go to his partner, but Blair has been shying away from any discussion of how he’s dealing with their latest case.

Jim had always hoped that Blair wouldn’t have to kill anybody, but it’s part of the job, and he’d figured that if Blair *did* have to shoot someone, Blair would come to him.

Except that Blair *hasn’t* come to him, and Jim doesn’t know why.

When Blair’s bedroom door opens, Jim pushes himself off the couch. “Blair?”

“Jim? What are you doing up?”

“Couldn’t sleep,” he explains briefly. “You know how those meds mess me up.”

Jim can see Blair nod in the dim light. “Guess you’ll have to cut back.”

“The pain isn’t too bad now anyway,” Jim lies, half-expecting Blair to call him on it.

“That’s good,” Blair says vaguely. “So, you’re okay?”

Jim frowns. “Yeah. It’s just insomnia. Nothing new. You okay? You want to talk about it?”

He can hear Blair’s heartbeat pick up speed again. “No. Why?”

“It was a nightmare, wasn’t it?” Jim asks.

“I guess,” Blair replies vaguely, gesturing to the bathroom. “Mostly I had to piss.”

Jim doesn’t buy it for a second, but he’s disinclined to press the issue right now—not when it’s the middle of the night, and at the beginning of their vacation. He hopes Blair will open up by the end of the week, but if Blair doesn’t, Jim will press for answers if their time grows short.

“You know where to find me,” Jim replies.

Blair grunts, and Jim turns back to the ocean.

Between the peaceful view and the soothing sound of the waves, Jim drifts off, waking as the sun begins to creep over the horizon, turning the water orange and pink.

Jim limps down the hall to grab some clothing, pausing in the hallway to listen in on Blair. Judging from the slow heartbeat and deep respirations, Blair is asleep, and Jim lets out a relieved sigh.

He dresses on his way to the sitting room and leans heavily on the railing as he climbs down the stairs. The sand under Jim’s feet offers some resistance as he climbs the dune between the house and the shore, which causes his knee to ache anew, but it’s worth it when he reaches the shoreline.

The wet, hard-packed sand is firm and easier to walk on, and he strolls along slowly, the waves hitting his ankles at irregular intervals.

The sun is just starting to warm the sand when Jim turns back. By the time he approaches the house, he can smell coffee, and as he’s brushing the sand off his bare feet, Blair sticks his head outside. “There’s not much for breakfast. Do you want to go somewhere?”

“Yeah, that would be good.” Jim’s sore, but the pain isn’t unbearable, and he slips inside, accepting the mug that Blair holds out. His stomach growls, but even that’s pleasant, since the pain killers have been leaving him vaguely nauseous since he got out of the hospital and started taking the pills, rather than getting it in his IV.

He has a pair of sandals he only wears when he goes surfing, and when he puts them on, Blair stares openmouthed. “What the hell, man?”

Jim frowns. “What’s the problem?”

“You look—” Blair falls silent and gestures, probably referring to Jim’s threadbare cargo shorts, holey t-shirt and sandals.

Jim shrugs. “I thought it was appropriate for the beach. We *are* on vacation.”

“Yeah, I guess,” Blair replies, his eyes focusing on Jim’s bare legs. “I just didn’t know you had it in you—or in your closet.”

Jim smirks. “There are a lot of things in my closet you don’t know about.”

Blair’s eyebrows go straight up. “I’ve seen the interior of your closet.”

Jim just smiles secretively, and doesn’t reply.

After his nightmare, Blair isn’t that hungry, but he orders breakfast anyway, knowing Jim will worry if he doesn’t eat. The sea air must be good for something, though, because when his egg white omelet shows up, Blair’s stomach rumbles, and he tucks in with relish.

In spite of Jim’s pallor and the pain lines on his face, his appetite is good. Blair doesn’t even have the heart to tweak Jim on the cholesterol in the eggs, bacon, and hash browns, because Jim seems so pleased.

“I’m glad you’re eating,” Jim says once Blair has cleaned his plate.

Blair shrugs. “Must be the sea air.”

“Must be,” Jim agrees, chasing a smear of ketchup across his plate with the last of his potatoes.

The meds had dulled Jim’s appetite, and Blair is glad to see him enjoying food again.

“How are you holding up?” Blair asks quietly.

“I’m sore, but I’ll live,” Jim replies.

Blair sips his coffee and tries not to let on how heavy the silence feels to him. He can’t think of anything to say that doesn’t somehow touch on the elephant in the room.

“What’s the plan for today?” Blair asks.

Jim raises his eyebrows. “We’re on vacation, Chief. I figured we’d work on our tans and get caught up on our reading, maybe take a swim if you’re up for it.”

“You mean if *you’re* up for it,” Blair replies, but it’s a weak comeback, and he knows it.

Jim shrugs. “I talked to the doc before we left. The stitches are out, so I won’t have a problem getting the incision wet, as long as I don’t overdo it physically.”

For a moment, Blair is back in the warehouse with the body of the dead girl and Jim hanging from the ceiling, blood soaking his pants, and when he blinks, Jim’s large, warm hand is blanketing his own.

“Hey, you with me?” Jim asks, concern shading his voice.

Blair nods, glancing around the restaurant to root himself in the here and now—the blue vinyl-lined booths, the nets and ubiquitous seascapes on the wall, the waitresses bustling around in their short, green dresses. “I’m with you,” he promises, because he is.

They’ve promised each other that much, at least. Whatever comes, whatever happens, they’re together.

“Come on, let’s walk off some of our breakfast,” Jim suggests.

The town is less touristy than Blair expects, although there are a few shops selling souvenirs. Down one side street, they find a used bookstore packed to the rafters. Blair reaches for the old fashioned doorknob before he can think better of it, but then pulls back.

“Go ahead, Chief,” Jim says gently. “I don’t mind browsing.”

Blair frowns. “Are you sure you’re not too tired?”

“I’m *fine*.” Jim gives him a shove towards the front door. “I’ll let you know if we need to head back.”

When they enter, Blair makes note of an older man seated behind a high wooden desk at the front of the shop. “Holler if you need anything,” he greets them. “But feel free to browse.”

With one last look at Jim, Blair begins to look around. It takes him a little while to notice the tiny, hand-written genre labels on the shelves, but other than that, there’s no rhyme or reason to how the books are sorted. To his surprise, he finds a section on anthropology, and there are half a dozen books on police subcultures, including a couple that Blair hasn’t read that are only a couple dollars apiece.

From there, Blair drifts over to the history section, finding a lot of books on the Outer Banks, North Carolina, and the Wright brothers. He runs his fingers along the spines and breathes in the smell that says old books and dust.

And for the first time in more than a week, Blair relaxes.

It’s not until his stomach growls that Blair realizes how much time has passed, and he kicks himself for forgetting about Jim. He grabs his purchases and heads up to the front, pausing when he sees Jim sitting down behind the counter with the old guy, chatting animatedly—about fly-fishing, if Blair’s not mistaken.

The older man spots Blair coming and smiles. “Did you find what you were looking for?”

“Since I didn’t know what I was looking for, I found more than that,” Blair replies cheerfully, glancing between the two of them and trying to rein in his curiosity.

“Jerry here was telling me about the best spots for fishing around here,” Jim explains. “We could probably go if you want.”

“Maybe so,” Blair replies hesitantly. “If you’re feeling up to it.”

“Your partner here tells me you saved his life,” Jerry says as he rings up Blair’s purchases.

Blair’s surprised that Jim has told Jerry that much. “Sometimes I have good timing.”

“That’s the most important trait in a partner—good timing,” Jerry replies. He holds out an arm, and Blair sees a faded tattoo of the Marine Corps emblem, with *Semper Fi* in script below it. “I had a buddy in the Marines who had the best timing of anybody I’ve ever known. He saved my life a time or two.”

Blair’s almost afraid to ask. “So, uh, what happened to him?”

Jerry grins. “He owns the surf shop down the street.”

Blair grins in reply, and lets out a relieved laugh, because about the best outcome he can see right now is that he and Jim live to a ripe old age, still within shouting distance of each other.

“I’ve been telling your partner here that you got to have a retirement plan,” Jerry continues. “You put money away, find something you love, and then you invest in it.”

Blair glances at Jim, who has an indulgent smile playing around the corners of his mouth. Blair wonders if that’s because Jerry is a vet, and Jim can see himself in the old man.

In another fifteen years, Jim will have reached mandatory retirement age, and he’ll have to find something else to do. That’s not something they’ve talked about, but Blair understands the allure of Jerry’s story.

He can see himself growing old with Jim. More to the point, he *wants* to grow old with Jim.

“That’s good advice,” Blair manages, and pulls out his wallet to pay, and Jerry quotes a price that’s less than half the total of the penciled prices inside the covers of the books.

Blair frowns. “That’s not—”

“Don’t argue with me, young man,” Jerry scolds. “I know my own business.”

Jim’s grinning broadly now, and Blair has to concede defeat. “You do,” he agrees. “And we’ll probably be back. I foresee doing a lot of reading this vacation.”

“What else is a vacation for?” Jerry asks with a sly grin. “Enjoy yourselves, and come back if you get the chance.”

He hands Blair a plastic sack with the books, and Blair thanks him sincerely. As they're walking away from the bookstore, back toward the car, Blair comments, "You guys seemed to have hit it off."

"He's seen a lot of action," Jim replies. "He was a commanding officer in Vietnam."

"Who was his buddy?"

Jim smiles. "A sergeant in his unit. He managed to make sure they served together until they both retired."

"That's pretty cool," Blair agrees.

Jim slings a companionable arm across Blair's shoulders, and Blair notices he's limping pretty good. "Promise me you're not going anywhere, Sandburg."

"I'll try, man," Blair says readily. "We probably should hit the grocery store if we don't want to eat out for every meal."

Jim gives him a sharp look, but he nods. "Yeah. I guess we should, but maybe we should get a burger? I heard your stomach growl."

Blair rolls his eyes. "You have a one track mind, Jim."

"Aren't you hungry?" Jim asks innocently.

"Starving," Blair admits, knowing when he's beaten. "Although they don't have Wonderburger here."

"I'm sure we'll find a place."

They end up asking the cashier at the grocery store, and drop off their supplies before heading for the local tap house for a burger, as recommended. Blair has the fish special, but Jim falls on the burger as though he hasn't eaten for days.

Blair doesn't comment, because Jim hasn't eaten much since this whole mess started, at first because it had fallen on them to solve the case, and then because—

Well. *Because.*

By the time they finish lunch, Jim looks sleepy and content, and Blair drives them back to the rental house. Jim rouses enough to climb up the stairs to the house, but he flops down on the couch and is almost immediately asleep.

Blair watches him for a little while, reassuring himself that Jim is okay, and when he's certain Jim is down for the count, he heads outside to the beach and sits at the ocean's edge, hoping to find a little of that peace Jim had talked about.

After a couple of days of doing little more than reading, sleeping, and taking near-silent strolls along the beach, Blair finally starts to unwind, and Jim feels a corresponding release of tension. Now, if Blair will just *talk* to him about what happened, he'll know Blair is okay—or that he will be.

On the fourth day, Jim changes into his swim trunks. “Hey, Sandburg, you want to go for a swim?”

“You sure you’re up for it?” Blair asks.

Jim shrugs. “If I get tired, I’ll rest. Come on in. The water’s nice.”

Blair gives him a strange, sharp look at that, but he nods shortly. “Yeah, okay. I’ll be out in a minute.”

Jim swims out, feeling the stretch and burn of muscles he hasn’t used in a couple of weeks. He feels the nearly healed wound in his stomach pull a bit, but it’s not entirely unpleasant—it’s just a reminder of how lucky he is.

Although it’s been a long time, Jim remembers how to angle his body just right to let the wave carry him back to the shore. Blair approaches the water, wearing a pair of cut-offs and nothing else.

His skin is pale against the dark hair on his chest, and Jim can’t help but notice the breadth of Blair’s shoulders, and his well-muscled arms. He stifles the surge of desire he feels—he’s always thought Blair attractive, but lately those feelings have been harder to ignore.

It’s not worth it, Jim thinks. He can’t risk losing Blair’s friendship.

Blair wades out to meet him, a smile on his face. “Looking good out there, man.” His eyes drift down, and Jim knows Blair is checking out the incision.

“It’s healing fine,” Jim says. “There’s barely a twinge.”

Blair reaches out, and then stops. Jim grabs Blair’s hand and puts it over the wound. “See? No problem here,” Jim says quietly.

Blair’s fingers trace the edges of the wound. “No problem.”

Jim feels goose bumps emerge, and he puts his hand over Blair’s. “You ever body surf before?”

“Not for a long time,” Blair admits. “You gonna show me how it’s done?”

“Sure.”

They swim out together and ride the next wave back in, grinning at each other triumphantly. Jim splashes him, and Blair returns the favor, and then they’re wrestling

in the surf together like children, struggling good-naturedly for the upper hand, until they're both panting and laughing, collapsed on the sand.

"God, Jim," Blair says, the smile fading from his face as he looks at Jim's stomach. "You were so close—I was so close..."

Jim puts an arm around Blair's shoulders and pulls him in close. "You ready to talk about it?"

Blair heaves a sigh. "I guess so, but not here."

"Let's go get cleaned up, then," Jim suggests.

Blair lets him take the first shower, probably because he knows how badly the sand and salt water chafes him. Once Jim has cleaned up, Blair slips into the bathroom, and Jim grabs the chips, salsa, and a couple of beers.

He's munching away when Blair finally emerges from the bathroom, and Blair approaches the small kitchen table with obvious trepidation. Jim pushes the second bottle toward him and nudges the bag of chips his way, too, but he says nothing, knowing that Blair will speak when he's ready.

Blair sits there, picking away at the label, and he finally says, "It was my fault, you know."

"What was your fault?"

"He targeted you because of the Sentinel thing," Blair explains. "He took you down with a dog whistle, man."

Jim frowns. "Is that how it happened?"

Blair's eyebrows go up. "I thought you knew."

"No one told me," Jim replies absently, running the memory over in his mind. He knew he'd been felled by a loud, piercing noise that had taken him by surprise, but he'd blamed himself for not staying sharp. O'Dell had been sending him threats and taunts for a couple of weeks, and Jim had known he was a target.

Jim still feels as though he's at fault. O'Dell, the bastard, had called him a super cop, and he should have expected O'Dell to use his senses against him. He should have been more on his guard.

"I'm sorry, man," Blair mutters. "So fucking sorry."

"Blair, it wasn't your fault. You aren't responsible for what O'Dell did."

"Don't," Blair says. "Don't try to make me feel better. If I'd been more careful, no one would have ever known about you being a Sentinel."

Jim has no idea what to say to convince Blair that he holds Blair blameless. Anything he says right now is going to come off as patronizing, and Jim suspects that if he doesn't find the right words, this is going to chip away at the foundation of their relationship until it crumbles.

And that's the last thing Jim wants, because he wants to wake up thirty years from now and still have Blair's friendship. He wants them to be like Jerry and his buddy.

Hell, Jim wants even more than that.

So, he does the only thing he can do: he agrees.

Blair shreds the label methodically, waiting for the ax to fall. He's not even sure what he wants Jim to say; he just knows he wants Jim to say *something*, now that he knows the truth.

He's a little surprised that Simon hadn't told Jim about the dog whistle they'd found on O'Dell—Simon or Megan, since they're the only ones who know Jim's secret. All this time, he thought Jim knew, and Blair had been waiting for the recriminations that never came.

And now, he sits, waiting for Jim to speak—to condemn or absolve him.

"You know, you're right," Jim finally says in a calm, measured tone.

Blair looks up. "What?"

"You're right." Jim sets his bottle aside. "He targeted me because he knew I was a Sentinel."

Blair feels each word like a separate blow. "Yeah, I think he did."

"I should probably hold that against you," Jim agrees. "Because it was your fault."

Blair swallows and looks away.

"Just like you hate me for what happened with Alex," Jim continues.

When Blair stares at him, Jim's wearing a fond smile. "Jim—"

"After all, I got you killed." Jim takes a slow sip of his beer. "And I know you still hate me for it."

Blair feels a surge of anger, quickly followed by irritation and then admiration. "You bastard."

"Careful, Chief," Jim advises. "Now you're insulting my mother."

“I don’t hold that against you,” Blair says. “You know I don’t.”

“Then you must not think much of me,” Jim replies. “If you think I’d hold what O’Dell did against you.”

“No,” Blair protests. “I just—I can’t get it out of my head.”

“What?” Jim inquires.

“Seeing that girl, seeing you,” Blair replies.

Jim raises his eyebrows. “Not shooting O’Dell?”

Blair flushes. “I haven’t lost any sleep over that.”

“And have you lost sleep over not losing sleep?” Jim asks shrewdly.

Blair shrugs. “Should I?”

“I didn’t,” Jim admits. “Not with the first one. The ones I lost sleep over were the ones I regretted killing. O’Dell’s not worth it.”

“He killed four girls, maybe more than that, and he would have killed you. I don’t—I *can’t*—regret saving your life.”

Jim reaches out and puts his hand over Blair’s, and the moment between them turns electric. Blair isn’t sure what he wants to happen right now, but he doesn’t want to let Jim go.

Blair turns his hand to entwine his fingers with Jim’s, and Jim looks startled for a moment, and then a pleased, shy smile crosses his face.

Feeling greatly daring, Blair closes the distance between them, waiting for Jim to pull back or turn him away. Instead, Jim meets him halfway, his mouth warm and inviting. The kiss is everything Blair might have hoped for if he’d ever dared to hope.

Jim is gentle but insistent, his free hand tangling in Blair’s still-damp hair, his other hand still in Blair’s. When he pulls back, it’s only far enough to rest his forehead against Blair’s. “What do you want to do?” Jim asks.

Blair glances outside and realizes that the sun is beginning its slow descent, and he realizes that he’s been so sick with guilt, he hasn’t really appreciated the scenery yet. Right now, the ocean reflects the pink and blue of the sky, and there’s a breeze coming through the open French doors.

“Do you want to go for a walk?” he asks, still hanging on to Jim’s hand. “After that—I don’t know. We could grab dinner, maybe do something else.”

“Anything,” Jim promises, and brushes Blair’s cheek with his thumb so tenderly that Blair has to look away.

“I’m okay, Jim,” Blair insists.

Jim’s hand slides around to cup the back of Blair’s head. “And are we okay?”

“Yeah, of course,” Blair says.

“And you’re with me?” Jim presses.

“All the way, Jim,” Blair agrees. “Let’s go for that walk, and then—well, we’ve got two beds to choose from, don’t we?”

Jim grins broadly, and then he kisses Blair again, and it’s a promise of things to come. “You were right,” he says when he pulls back. “The water *is* nice.”

Blair swallows. “Isn’t it though?” he asks, and his voice cracks a bit.

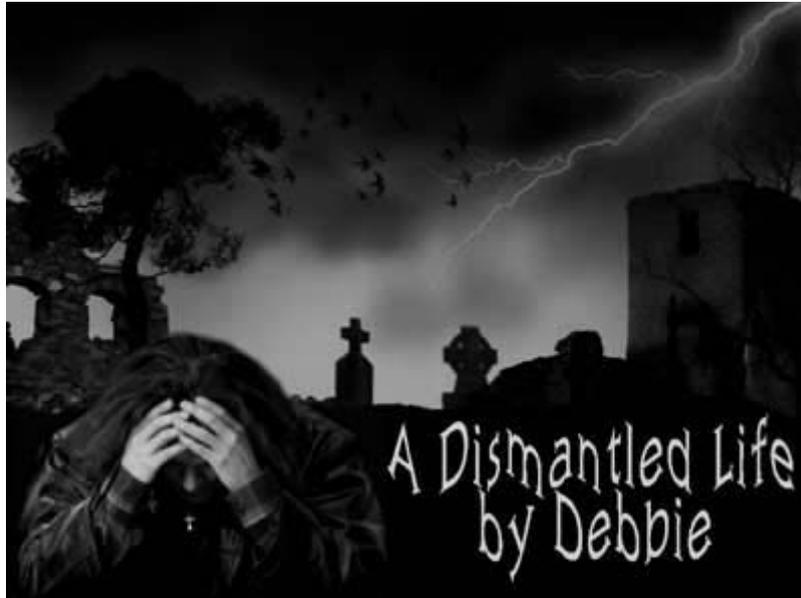
Jim smiles and pulls Blair in for another kiss, long and slow and sweet.

And for the first time since this whole thing started, since before Jim was taken, Blair doesn’t feel quite so alone.

A DISMANTLED LIFE

ART BY PATT

STORY BY DEBBIE



He hoped no one found him. He didn't want to have to face anyone. He was alone and secretly wished the ground would rise up and swallow him whole. He tried not to think too much, for if he let the thoughts into his mind, he remembered the exact moment when life ceased to be. What remained now was no more than a void.

He didn't understand why William Ellison and Steven Ellison didn't believe him. Jim was still alive. Blair knew it with every fiber of his being. He would know if Jim was... he couldn't say the word. He wouldn't even entertain the idea that Jim Ellison was dead. He couldn't think about that. If Blair Sandburg gave up hope of finding Jim alive, then all hope was indeed lost.

William Ellison arranged the memorial service for his eldest son. There had been exhaustive searches by authorities, including members of the Cascade Police Department. There was no sign that Jim was anywhere.

SIX WEEKS EARLIER

It was going to be the best vacation they ever had. Two whole weeks of camping, fishing, and male bonding. Jim had been able to get his vacation approved and Blair was on summer break from the university. All the criminals had been caught. At least that's what the team of Ellison and Sandburg chose to believe. The only thing to do was to

relax and enjoy. Jim and Blair packed what they needed for the two weeks and loaded Jim's truck the night before they left.

They found a remote spot where they would be able to set up camp, with the river nearby. Things were quickly set up and both men decided to try their luck catching dinner.

They walked to the river, finding a good location to fish. There was a companionable silence as they caught several good sized fish for their dinner.

As they walked back to the campsite, Blair spoke. "I brought those herbs and seasonings that you liked the last time. When I came up with them, I wasn't sure you'd like it, but I'm glad the combo worked."

"It was perfect, Chief. You had just the right combination, as you said."

Their meal was perfect, the weather was perfect and the setting was perfect. It was going to be a perfect vacation, for a change.

The ideal vacation lasted a week before three masked men invaded their campsite, shooting Blair and leaving him for dead and subduing Jim and whisking him away from the campsite.

Blair woke slowly, wondering why he was so tired. He didn't remember initially what had transpired. He realized he was in a hospital room. Then the memories started to return. Three men, taking them by surprise, subduing him, beating him up and shooting him in the leg. He looked around, trying to spot Jim. Jim had to be somewhere around here, right? They had been together, camping, relaxing, and fishing. Blair tried to clear away the cobwebs that kept his memories muted. He looked around the room again, seeing no indication that anyone had been in to see him. He wondered how long he'd been in the hospital. He pushed the button to call the nurse and waited.

About ten minutes later, a nurse walked into his room.

"Can I help you, Mr. Sandburg?"

"Yeah, I was wondering how long I've been here?"

"Search and Rescue brought you in about a day ago."

"Alone? I had been with my partner, Jim Ellison."

"Just you, Mr. Sandburg. You had sent a 9-1-1 call to the local authorities, who were able to pinpoint your position. When they found you, you were unconscious."

Blair closed his eyes and slowly opened them. “Thank you for the information. What is the extent of my injuries?”

“Gunshot wound to your leg. Various cuts and bruises and a couple cracked ribs. You’ll be laid up for some time and you’ll need some rehabilitation. I’ll let the doctor know you’re awake.”

“Thank you.”

As soon as the nurse left, Blair grabbed the telephone and made a call to Simon Banks in Cascade. Obviously, Jim was missing, possibly grabbed by the men who had shot him. He needed to let Simon know that there was a problem.

Simon didn’t recognize the number on his phone, but it could be Jim, letting him know he was okay. Simon had received information that Blair had called 9-1-1, explaining that three men invaded their campsite, shot him, leaving him for dead. He was being treated in a nearby hospital, having been found by Search and Rescue, some of the same men who were out here now looking for Jim Ellison.

“Banks.”

“Simon? Captain? It’s Blair. Do you know what happened? Have they found Jim? I think the men who shot me, grabbed Jim.”

“Sandburg, calm down! I’m with Search and Rescue now. We’re searching in fifty miles each way, looking for Jim. So far, there’s no indication that Jim has been around here for some time. He didn’t return to your campsite, or else he would have gathered your things together and brought them back to Cascade. What is your prognosis?”

“Gunshot wound to my left leg, plus a couple cracked ribs and cuts and bruises. The nurse says I’ll be laid up for a while and I’ll need to undergo rehabilitation. But I need to be out there, looking for Jim. He may need me. His senses may be out of whack.”

“Just take care of yourself, Sandburg. I’ll stop by the hospital later to check on you. Maybe we can arrange to have you moved back to Cascade.”

“I can’t just leave Jim out there alone.”

Simon could hear the plea in Blair’s voice. “We’ll find him, Blair. We won’t rest until we find him.”

“Thank you, Simon.”

“Just rest and get better, Sandburg.”

Blair didn't want to think about what would happen if they didn't find Jim. He tried to remember more about the men who had invaded their peaceful vacation. Three men, all wearing masks and nothing distinctive about them. Everything happened quickly. They subdued Blair almost immediately. He was beat and then shot in the leg, left to bleed out and die. He didn't see them take Jim away, or if anything had happened to Jim before they left.

Blair had passed out. He wasn't sure how long he had been unconscious, but when he came to, he was able to reach his cell phone and get a call out to 9-1-1, who told him Search and Rescue would be able to coordinate his position. He tried to stay awake for his rescue, but he wasn't able to. He had lost almost two days. And Jim was out there in the elements, trying to survive on his own. But Jim was adept and trained to do just that.

Simon stopped by the hospital later that afternoon. He knew he'd have to tell Blair that they had no indication that Jim was still in the wooded area where they had been camping. Simon walked into the hospital room, noticing that Blair was asleep. But he opened his eyes as soon as Simon walked near.

"Did you find Jim?" Blair was hopeful there would be a positive ending.

"Not yet, Sandburg. There is no indication that he's still in the area. There is also no indication that anyone else has been around there for some time. Search and Rescue only found indications of you and Jim."

"Well, I **didn't** shoot myself and Jim **didn't** shoot me. You know he wouldn't do that, Simon. When did you ever know me to lie?"

"You've never outright lied, at least not about anything this serious. I know you didn't shoot yourself and I know that Jim didn't shoot you and leave you in the woods to bleed to death. I'm just going by the evidence. You know that's all I can do. All any of us can do."

"I know, Simon. I just don't want to think about how this is looking, or what has happened to Jim. If I could, I'd be out helping Search and Rescue find Jim. He's got to be somewhere."

"Just let the professionals do their job, Sandburg. I have someone with Major Crime assigned with them so that we can keep track of what they have searched and what they find. If they find Jim, they will let us know."

"I just don't want Jim accused of something he didn't do. Jim did not shoot me. There were three men, all with masks on. They grabbed me, subdued me, beat me, and shot me in the leg. They left me at the campsite, thinking I would bleed to death. I would have followed them, but I lost consciousness and they were gone when I came do. I was able to call 9-1-1 and Search and Rescue found me."

“I was informed when the local authorities got your 9-1-1 call. I asked about Jim at the time, but by the time they coordinated where you were and rescued you, they told me that no one else was in the immediate area. I decided to join the search at that point, hoping maybe I’d be able to assist Jim if necessary when he was found.”

Simon spent time with Blair, getting all the information he remembered about the men who attacked them. He was hoping Blair remembered some detail that would come in handy for identification purposes.

Simon also reassured Blair that Jim was in no way a suspect. Simon would not allow that to happen to one of his men.

Blair was released from the hospital three days later. Simon was there to drive him back to Cascade. Blair knew without asking that Jim still hadn’t been found. He wanted Simon to drive him to the campsite, so he could look for himself, but Simon nixed that idea.

“Sandburg, you are in no condition to do any hiking at this point. Jim would never forgive me if I let you injure yourself further.”

“I only hope he shows up soon. I’m worried about what those men did to him.”

Blair sat in silence on the ride back to Cascade. He glanced out the window, wondering where Jim could be. Was he being held by someone? Blair wondered if he would ever be found, if he would ever see Jim again. Blair worried about who had found them and who was behind the attack.

“Why so quiet, Sandburg?” Simon wasn’t used to Blair being so quiet.

“I’m worried about Jim. And who was behind the attack against us, how they found us, and why they just didn’t kill me.”

“Blair, you don’t know that they targeted you two.”

“Why else would they have masks, surprise us, beat me up and leave me to die?”

“They obviously didn’t want to kill you, or else you would be dead. They took Jim for a reason and hopefully, he can get away from them and return.”

“I hope that you are right, Simon.”

They soon reached the loft.

“Do you want me to come up with you?”

“No thanks, Simon. I’m a big boy and I can take care of myself. When can I get our things and Jim’s truck from the campsite?”

“Rafe is with Search and Rescue right now, so I’ll contact him and have him return with Jim’s truck and your camping supplies.”

“Thanks, Simon.” Blair started to get out of the car.

“Don’t try to do too much, Sandburg. Let the experts do the investigation.”

“I won’t, Captain. I know I’m not able to track around in the wilderness. Keep me updated on the investigation.”

“How much longer until we reach the compound?”

“Probably another day, at least.”

“Is Ellison still unconscious?”

“Yeah. I don’t think you needed to hit him so hard, though.”

“It did the trick, didn’t it? We could just tie him up and keep him subdued that way.”

“Next rest stop, you can tie him up.”

“Watch out, Pete! That car is headed right at us!”

Jim, who wasn’t exactly unconscious, and hadn’t been for some time, realized this was his opportunity to escape. He was in the back of the van and didn’t want to be involved in the crash that was about to happen.

He was tossed from side to side by the swerving of the van, as they were trying to avoid the crash. Jim finally got his bearings, kicked open the back door of the van, and jumped out. He fell to the pavement, rolling to the side of the road.

Jim watched as the van crashed and rolled over and over and went down the embankment. Jim slowly got to his feet, feeling somewhat dizzy and aching from hitting the pavement.

He didn’t know if the men were still alive and still after him, so he decided to get as far away as possible. He walked in the opposite direction, keeping his hearing trained on the van, listening for any movement from the men. However, it seemed like his senses were unfocused for some reason. Jim felt it was more productive to find help and to get back to Cascade, hoping Blair had somehow been able to get there. He had watched as Blair was beaten, then shot. Blair had been left at the campsite, bleeding and unconscious. Jim knew the gunshot was not life-threatening and hoped Blair had been found.

As Jim walked on, he saw no other vehicles, no authorities responding to the crash. He had no way to contact anyone. Jim’s dizziness got worse and stumbled several steps. He

closed his eyes, trying to reorient himself, but that didn't help. He stumbled once again, near the edge of the road. He slipped, rolling down the embankment, losing consciousness at the bottom.

When he came to, he didn't see anyone, but he couldn't remember if he was alone or where he was headed to. He thought that getting to a shelter somewhere to rest was a good idea. He figured with rest, he would start to remember what happened.

He saw the small cabin about a half a mile up ahead. He walked with a slight limp, knowing he had at least twisted his ankle. His body ached all over from jumping from the van and he had been shot in the arm.

When he reached the cabin, he was surprised to find the door unlocked. He cautiously walked inside, but didn't see anyone there. He moved towards the kitchen, finding water. He washed his face and hands. He took off his shirt, looking at the blood there. It didn't look like a serious wound. He started to clean it. He found a first aid kit under the sink and placed a bandage around his arm.

After Jim was finished cleaning up, he went into the living room to sit down. He was starting to get really tired. He didn't have a cell phone and there appeared to be no telephone in the cabin. He didn't know who to call anyway. He didn't remember clearly what had happened. If he was a criminal of some type, he wasn't sure he wanted the authorities to know where he was. He might be on the run and the men in the van might have been law enforcement officials. If they were injured, or killed, he would be the prime suspect. He would stay out of sight for now, hoping his memories cleared up enough that he knew what happened.

Blair was exhausted by the time he reached the loft. He sat down at the kitchen table, just wanting to get some rest. He saw the message light flashing, so he pushed himself to his feet, weaving his way over to the telephone. There was one message there.

"Mr. Sandburg, this is William Ellison. Captain Banks called me to let me know about what happened with you. I was wondering if there was any way you could come to my house and explain to me what happened."

Blair knew that he could not refuse William Ellison. He was a force to be reckoned with and Blair would tell him what he knew of the situation. He wished he could explain to Jim's dad that Jim would be okay and would be home soon. Blair knew that Jim and his father had become close over the past several months and spent time together. William Ellison also tolerated Blair, which Jim was happy about.

Blair went to see William Ellison a few days later, when he felt a little more rested and didn't ache so much.

Blair stood at the front door to William Ellison's house. He paused, not sure what he was going to tell the elder Ellison about his son. He had no idea where Jim was. There was no indication what had happened in the woods where they had went camping.

'Just ring the doorbell and get this over with, Blair.' Blair raised his hand and rang the doorbell. It was opened a minute later by Sally, the Ellison housekeeper. Blair had met her when he had accompanied Jim to the house on several occasions. She smiled at him.

"Come in, Mr. Sandburg. Mr. Ellison is waiting for you in the den." She moved aside to let him into the house.

"Now, Sally, I told you. It's Blair. Mr. Sandburg sounds just too formal."

"Okay, Blair. If you'll follow me."

Blair followed her to the den and she opened the door, ushering him inside the room first.

William Ellison was standing by the windows. He turned around when he heard the door open.

"Ah, Mr. Sandburg. It's good to see you. Would you like something to drink? Eat?"

"No thank you, Mr. Ellison. I'm fine."

"Thank you, Sally. You can leave now."

Sally left the room, closing the door behind her.

William came over the where Blair was standing, just inside the room. "Please have a seat, Mr. Sandburg. I want to ask you about my son."

Blair followed William over to a couple of chairs and sat down. He looked down at the floor, not sure how much to tell William Ellison about what happened.

"So, do you know where Jimmy is, Mr. Sandburg?"

Blair looked up, looking William Ellison in the eye. "No, sir. Three men in masks surprised us about a week into our two week vacation. They subdued me, beat me, and then shot me in the leg."

"Are you okay?" There was genuine concern in William Ellison's voice.

"I'm going to rehab three times a week. If I could, I'd be out there trying to find Jim. I'm concerned about him, Mr. Ellison. He's my best friend and I'm not sure what happened to him. I'm assuming those three men grabbed Jim and took him from the area. I'm worried about what is happening with Jim's senses. He usually has very good control over them, but that is in optimal conditions. If he's been hurt or being held somewhere,

those are not optimal conditions. He could zone on anything and that could prove dangerous. Even deadly.”

“I understand that, but no one else would. I’m going to employ a private investigator to look for Jimmy. If they can’t find him, then no one can.”

“You should allow Search and Rescue to continue looking for Jim. They are experienced with the terrain and the area.”

“Some of the people employed by the private investigator were former police officers. They know what they are doing.”

Blair stayed a little longer at William Ellison’s house. When he went to leave, William told him if he needed anything, to let him know. Blair thanked him for the offer.

Marsha and Thomas Barton walked towards their log cabin, pulling firewood along behind them. Thomas placed the firewood beside the cabin in the bin there. Marsha walked inside the cabin. She noticed Jim in the recliner right away. She went back outside to let Thomas know there was someone in their cabin.

Both walked back into the cabin and Thomas looked at their visitor. He had a bandage on his left arm. They wondered what had happened to the man.

“Do you think we should call the sheriff?” Marsha watched the man as he slept. He didn’t look like a criminal, but you never knew these days.

“Why don’t we find out his story, Marsh. Then we can decide if we need to call the sheriff. We should be able to keep him here if need be.”

Thomas went over to Jim and nudged his knee. “Hey, mister! Wake up! You’re trespassing on our property.”

Jim slowly opened his eyes. He looked from Thomas to Marsha. “I’m sorry, sir. Ma’am. I needed somewhere to rest and I took advantage of the fact that your cabin was available. I can leave right away.”

Jim got to his feet, surprised that the rest he got didn’t do much to recharge his depleted strength. He swayed a bit, grabbing hold of the recliner.

“Wait! What are you doing out here alone? And what happened to your arm?” Marsha wanted to find out more about this stranger. She didn’t think he was dangerous, but that was only based on instinct.

Jim frowned and looked again from Marsha to Thomas. He didn’t know what to tell them. He didn’t remember much more than what he remembered earlier.

“I think I was being chased by someone. I remember being in a van with three men, but I don’t remember who they were. I don’t remember much.”

“Well, what is your name? Why don’t we start there?”

“I don’t remember my name. And I don’t seem to have any identification. I’m afraid I can’t give you very many details.”

“Maybe we should call the sheriff, Marsha.” Thomas looked from Jim to his wife.

“Not yet, Thomas. Obviously, this man is injured and he looks like he still needs to get some rest.” Marsha walked over to Jim. “We have a spare bedroom in the back, son. You can sleep there for the time being. Until we can determine who you are and if you are a threat to our well-being.”

“I hope you can trust me, Ma’am.”

“Call me Marsha, son. It’s much better than Ma’am.”

“Thank you, Marsha.” Jim walked to the bedroom, amazed that these people were so trusting. They didn’t even know who he was, yet they opened up their cabin to him.

Thomas went into town to get more food for their ‘guest’. He didn’t seem like a criminal, or a bad person. He knew it wasn’t based on any facts that he had, but it was based on years of dealing with people and knowing them.

Marsha and he had talked that first day after Jim went to get some rest. As soon as they had to go into town, they would contact the sheriff and find out if there were any alerts out about any shady characters. Just to be on the safe side.

Jim didn’t remember much more of his life. He thought his name was John, or Joe, but he wasn’t sure. He didn’t know what he did for a living, but he was becoming handy around the cabin. He would gather the firewood and helped with repairs on the cabin. Neither Thomas nor Marsha thought he was a bad person.

It was almost five weeks before Thomas had to go into town. He went to the sheriff’s office first. He found out that an alert had been sent out, almost four weeks ago. The man at their cabin was Jim Ellison, a detective with the Cascade Police Department. There was a contact number, but Thomas didn’t call it. He thought it was more important for Jim to get back to Cascade. It would take almost a week to get there.

Jim read and reread the alert printout that Thomas gave him when he returned to the cabin. He couldn’t believe it. He did remember bits and pieces about his life. He agreed

with Thomas that he had to go back to Cascade. He knew it would help him remember more.

Jim sat in the back seat, as Thomas and Marsha sat in front, Thomas driving. Along the way, he did start to remember more of his life. He worried how Blair was, if Blair was okay. He thought about asking to use a phone and call, but didn't want to be disappointed if he couldn't find Blair. He would just wait until he got back to Cascade.

Blair had been persuaded to go the memorial service, even though he didn't want to. He tried telling everyone that Jim was still alive, that he would come back to Cascade.

It had been six weeks. No one answering Jim's description had shown up over the past six weeks. Everyone had lost hope that Jim would be found alive. Well, everyone but Blair Sandburg.

William Ellison arranged the memorial service for his eldest son. There had been exhaustive searches by authorities, including members of the Cascade Police Department. There was no sign that Jim was anywhere. William believed that Jim hadn't survived his injuries. He explained to Blair that he was going to hold a memorial service for Jim, with hopes that someday Jim's body would be found. Blair didn't want to believe any of it and tried to insist that Jim would return alive one day.

Blair stood in the back of the church. He couldn't go any further. They were all talking about Jim in the past tense. Blair turned around and left the church. He walked over to the cemetery beside the church, walking through the gates and looking at the headstones.

"I can't let you go, Jim. I would know if you were dead. I would feel it in my heart and soul. There would be an empty feeling. There is no empty feeling. I know you are somewhere; you are just lost and unable to reach out to me. I wish I had a sign." Blair sat down on a bench, bowing his head.

"How about if I stand here?" Jim came and stood in front of the bench.

Blair looked up, surprised. "Jim? Where have you been? What happened? Are you okay?" Blair jumped to his feet, engulfing Jim in a bear hug.

Jim could tell Blair was crying. "I'm sorry I worried you. I'm a little banged up, but I'll live. I couldn't remember what happened. Marsha and Thomas told me who I was once the alert was sent throughout the Northwest."

"You didn't know who you were? I should have been more insistent that they look further. Where were you?"

"Near the Canadian border."

“We’ve got to let the others know you’re okay. Your dad set up a memorial service for you. Everyone else thought you wouldn’t return.”

Blair started pulling Jim towards the church. Then he abruptly stopped and turned to face Jim.

“How did you know where to come? How did you know I was here?”

Jim smiled and pointed to his ear. “I’m a sentinel, remember? And I can find you anywhere in Cascade.”

Blair smiled back at Jim. “I’m glad you’re okay.”

“Are you okay?”

“I’ve been better, but now that you’re back, I’ll be okay. Let’s go and stop the memorial service.” Blair grabbed hold of Jim’s arm, knowing life was no longer a void.

THE COLDEST WINTER

ART BY BANBURY

STORY BY ANNIEB



She sits at Jim's desk and looks out at the room, at the people she used to know so well. Over by the coffee machine Joel Taggart looks like he's busting a gut over something Henri Brown is saying. Rafe walks into the bullpen looking his usual GQ sartorial best, sees her sitting there and gives her a broad delighted grin. He looks like he's about to walk over to talk to her but she turns away from him, pretending an interest in a file on Jim's desk, and when she glances up out of the corner of her eye, she's grateful to see he's been pulled aside by Henri. She picks up a photo on Jim's desk. It's of Jim and Blair. Jim's ruffling Blair's hair and there's a look of - amused tenderness is the only way she can describe it - on Jim's face. The emotion of it takes her breath away and she finds herself slipping the photo out of the frame and pocketing it. She's not sure why she wants it. Maybe it's because she's never seen that look of love in Jim's eyes, not even when he was with her.

She gets up and casually walks across to the door, hoping she can escape before any of the men catch up with her. Her hopes are dashed though when, just as she's almost out the door, Simon Banks comes out of his office and spots her. He calls to her in that big, booming voice of his, and of course, the other guys turn and see her as well. She feels her shoulders slump for a moment, then, pasting a bright smile on her face, she turns to greet her old boss and co workers.

"Hey," Simon says as he reaches her and leans down to plant a kiss on her cheek, "you weren't going to try to sneak out of here without saying hello, were you?"

"Of course not," she says brightly as if the thought had never occurred to her, "I was just going to go grab a coffee from the machine and bring it back." She glances askance at the coffee pot in the corner and shudders theatrically. "You know, I can't stand bull pen coffee."

"I've got good coffee," Simon replies, tucking a possessive hand under her elbow and trying to draw her away from the door.

"No, really, Simon, it's fine. I can only stay for a few minutes anyway," she interrupts him, literally digging in her heels and standing her ground. She smiles around at the others. "It's good to see you all though. I thought maybe Jim might be here..."

"He's got a few days off," Simon says. "He and Blair have a lot of organizing to do."

"You're here for Jim and Blair's wedding, right?" Henri breaks in and her heart feels like it lurches down into the soles of her feet.

"It's not a wedding, doofus," Rafe jumps in before she can respond and her heart moves back into place until Joel says, "It's a handfasting ceremony. Blair says it's an old Celtic custom. Just as binding as a wedding for Jim and Blair though."

"Oh," she replies, "that sounds nice. Um, well, no. I'm not here for that. Just visiting some friends and thought I'd catch up with Jim while I was here. You guys take care now. Maybe we can have a drink before I head back to San Francisco." She shakes Simon's hand from her arm politely but determinedly and walks as quickly as she can out to the elevator. She's grateful that it's standing open when she reaches it and that there's no one else inside. As soon as the doors close behind her, she slumps against the wall and sobs. By the time it hits the garage level, thankfully with no stops along the way to pick up passengers, she's regained her composure and decided what to do. She'll just have to go talk to Jim, make him see sense. After all, she knows he's not really gay. They were married, for heaven's sake. Blair's done this to him, influenced him somehow. She can make Jim see sense, she's sure of it. Mind made up, she hurries to her car.

"Well, hi," Blair says as he opens the door to her knocking. "Sorry, Jim didn't tell me you were coming." He looks down and she realizes he's just dressed in a bathrobe as if he's just gotten out of bed. "Sorry, late night marking exam papers," he says.

"They let you go back to the university?" she asks, not hiding her surprise that they'd allow an admitted fraud to go back to teaching.

"Community college," he replies, "just till I go to the Police Academy in a couple of months." There's a sudden shine of enthusiasm in his eyes at that and that surprises her even more.

"I never really pictured you as wanting to be a cop," she says.

Blair laughs. "I didn't either but well, you know, Jim can be very persuasive and he wants me to be his partner so..." He stops then and backs out of the doorway, leaving her room to enter. "Um, sorry. You coming in for a coffee? Jim should be back soon."

She hesitates for a moment. She really wants to speak to Jim alone without Blair around to influence him but she's not sure how she'll get to him if she doesn't wait around so she nods and steps inside. "Thanks, coffee would be great."

She wanders around the apartment while Blair brews coffee in the kitchen. It really has become as much Blair's space as Jim's, she realizes. There are tribal masks hanging from the walls, little statues scattered across the top of the bookshelves, photos of Blair with a woman she assumes is his mother, with his friends, with Jim...

"You still take it black, right?" Blair's voice at her shoulder startles her and she jumps, almost dropping the photo she's picked up. She places it carefully back on the bookcase then turns and takes the coffee mug from his hand. "Yes, thanks." She moves over to an armchair and sits down, blowing on the coffee then taking a cautious sip. "This is great," she says as Blair perches on the arm of the chair opposite her. He looks nervous, uncomfortable at having her here. "It's freezing out there," she adds when he still doesn't say anything.

"A little different to San Francisco, I guess," he says finally.

"Yeah, I don't think I've seen this much snow since I moved away from Cascade."

"That's why I told Jim we should probably wait till after winter to do the ceremony—" Blair stops, rubs a hand over his eyes and then puts his coffee cup down on the table in between them.

"It's okay, I know about it," she tells him, purposely injecting a couldn't care less tone into her voice. She doesn't want to hear the details though so she changes the subject, burbling on about her work in California and her colleagues down there, her apartment, her cat, anything to keep him from mentioning marrying Jim again even if it's only in abstract.

Blair seems to understand because he simply goes along with her lead, interjecting a question here and there but mostly just letting her babble on. An unmistakable look of total and abject relief crosses his face as they hear the door open and Jim walks in.

"Simon told me you were in town," Jim says casually, walking across the room to join them.

She stands up, moving forward, her arms already outstretched in anticipation of a hug but instead he leans down and very deliberately brushes a kiss across the top of Blair's hair before walking around the table and giving her the briefest of hugs. It almost feels like her heart breaks a little at the snub but she firms her resolve. This isn't her Jim, this is Blair's Jim and she knows won't get him back by antagonizing him. She just needs to get him alone, away from Blair, remind him of what they were to each other before Blair came into his life, of what they could have gotten back if she hadn't given up so easily and run off to San Francisco.

“I was wondering if we could talk... privately,” she asks. She offers Blair a mock-apologetic look and he responds by immediately getting up.

“I was gonna go for a walk anyway,” he says. “I’ve been cooped up here all day. I really need to stretch my legs.”

“You don’t have to leave,” Jim tells him. He turns and looks at her. “You can say whatever you came to say in front of Blair. We don’t have any secrets.”

“Jim, really, I don’t mind. I’ll just go get dressed,” Blair interrupts and if she wasn’t so angry at him for corrupting Jim, for ruining her hopes of getting her life with Jim back, she could kiss him for understanding. She watches as he walks up the stairs, feeling a little shaft of pain as she realizes that’s where he sleeps now, up there... with Jim.

“Say whatever it is you came to say, Caro,” Jim says flatly. “Blair and I have plans for the evening.”

She flicks a glance up toward the loft bedroom, wonders if Blair’s eavesdropping and modulates her voice a little, just in case he is. “Jim, what’s going here? A wedding? You’re not gay. We were married, remember? I’d have known something like that.”

Jim shrugs and she can’t help noticing how muscular those broad shoulders still are, his chest too. He’s kept himself in shape. He looks incredibly fit and masculine and handsome and her skin almost aches with her need of him, her want for him...

“Carolyn!”

She jumps, blinks, refocuses on Jim’s face.

“Things change,” Jim says. “People change. **I’ve** changed. I love Blair. Blair loves me. That’s all there is to it. I don’t much care whether you understand it or not and I sure as hell don’t care whether you approve of it or not. Go back to California, Caro. Get on with your life. There’s nothing here for you anymore.”

The harsh honesty in his eyes brings a sharp stab of pain and she feels her own eyes fill with hot tears. She lifts a shaky hand to cover her suddenly trembling lips, holding back the sob she can feel wanting to break free.

“I’m sorry.” Jim’s voice is gentler this time and she rubs the tears away and looks up to find him standing just in front of her. “I’m not trying to hurt you but it’s better to be honest with each other.” He smiles a little ruefully. “Blair taught me that.”

“Blair’s changed you,” she whispers. “Remember that night you followed me out of the restaurant and you kissed me. I told you if you’d kissed me like that before, we’d still be married. Jim,” she puts a hand on his arm, “you’re not gay. Blair’s just made you think that. Maybe it’s because you’ve grown so dependent on him. If you got away from him—“

He lifts her hand from his arm and then he's turning her toward the door, pushing her along, one hand in the small of her back, the other on her shoulder. He opens the door, gently nudges her through it then bends and kisses her cheek chastely. "Go home, Carolyn," he says. "I wish you nothing but the best but you're not going to find what you want here. It's over, in the past. Move forward. I have."

And then the door closes in her face.

When the elevator comes, she enters, slides down to sit on the floor and pulls out the photo she'd taken from Jim's desk. She studies their faces, then angrily she pulls out her lipstick and obliterates Jim's image then screws the photo up and tosses it in the trashcan in the lobby on her way out of the building. Jim will only listen to Blair, she realizes now. It was pointless trying to get through to him herself. She'll just have to speak to Blair then, make him understand that if he truly loves Jim, he'll walk away and give Jim his life back, a life that she knows only she can give him.

Jim slams the door behind him and looks up to see Blair walking down the stairs. True to his word he's dressed now but as he walks past to grab his coat off the coatrack by the door, Jim waylays him with a hand on his arm. "It's okay," he says. "She's gone. You don't have to go out. It's too cold out there anyway."

Blair nods then pulls Jim into his arms and just stands there, holding him, the strength of his embrace a balm to Jim's soul.

"How'd it go?" Blair asks.

"I told her she should go home," Jim replies. He drops a kiss on Blair's hair then pushes him away so he can look into his eyes. "Don't tell me you're feeling sorry for her."

Blair shrugs and Jim sighs. "Hey, I'd be upset if I couldn't have you too," Blair says and Jim can't help smiling at that.

"Well, you will always have me," he replies, punctuating each word with a kiss on Blair's lips.

"Good. Because you know I'd track you down and drag you back if you ever left me."

Jim grins, grabs Blair by the hand and hauls him back upstairs. He pushes him down on their bed, blankets his body with his own and then shows Blair why he never has to worry about that happening. By the time they fall asleep an hour later, sated and sweaty, Jim's almost forgotten about Carolyn's visit.

The phone in her hotel room is ringing as she walks in the door and Carolyn crosses quickly over to it and grabs it up, grimacing as she recognizes the voice on the other.

“How’s it going in Cascade?” Dr. Werner asks brightly.

“It’s fine,” Carolyn replies, sitting down on the edge of the bed and shrugging out of her fleecy jacket. It leaves a scattering of snowflakes across the carpet as it falls to the floor and she shivers, wanting nothing more than to get her psychiatrist off the phone so she can climb into a hot shower and crawl into bed.

“Have you spoken to Jim?”

“Yes,” she says shortly. “Look, I know you thought it was a bad idea me coming here but you’re also the one who told me I had to confront my past in order to put it behind me.”

“Yes, I did,” the doctor agrees, “but is that what you’re there for, to put it behind you?”

“Of course,” she lies blithely. It’s her life after all and all her problems will disappear like dust in the wind once she and Jim are back together anyway. She just knows it. Suddenly she’s anxious for the next day to come. She’s sure she can make Blair see that Jim will be so much better off with her and if Blair truly loves him, he won’t stand in the way of what’s best for him. “Look, Doctor Werner, I’m really cold and really tired. It’s been snowing pretty much since I got here and I just got in. I’m about to head to bed. I’ll be sure to make an appointment with you as soon as I get home.” She hangs up the phone on the doctor’s goodbye then heads into the bathroom, showers then crawls into bed.

She doesn’t sleep for a long while though. She can’t get the image of Blair climbing the stairs up to Jim’s bedroom out of her head. She starts to imagine them in bed up there together, even as she’s lying here alone, aching for Jim and finally the tears come again. She lets them fall, sobbing into her pillow long into the dark cold night.

When she wakes, it’s to another bleak snowy day. The drabness of the sky outside her window drags at her mood, making her feel even more depressed and miserable than she did the night before. She goes to the bathroom and takes down her bottle of pills from the vanity cupboard. It’s so tempting just to take them all, lie down on the floor and never wake up to another day of sadness again. She thinks Jim would be sorry if she did. It almost makes a crazy kind of sense until she realizes that if she does that she’s leaving him open to Blair’s wiles again and there’ll be no one to protect him from them if she’s gone. She opens the lid of the toilet and flushes all the pills away. She hasn’t used them in days anyway. She won’t need them anymore. Jim will be her crutch, her support.

She showers and dresses warmly. She could be waiting around in a cold car for a while before she gets the chance to speak to Blair alone. She just needs to impress on him that he’d be doing this for Jim, she thinks as she heads down to her car. She saw the sacrifice he made for him once before, when he admitted to that he’d lied about him in his thesis. She’s sure she can make him see that he needs to make that sacrifice again and give Jim back his life, and hers too.

“Is she coming up or not?” Jim’s standing on the balcony when Blair comes out of the shower.

“Who?” Blair pokes his head out through the glass doors and shivers. “Man, Jim, come on in. It’s freezing out there. I can’t believe we’re getting more snow today.” He heads over to the kitchen and pours himself a cup of coffee then asks again when Jim comes back in and joins him, “Is who coming up?”

“Carolyn,” Jim says as he stacks his breakfast dishes in the sink and walks over to the coat hooks to grab his jacket. “Well, if she wanted to talk to me she’s missed her chance.” He glances at his watch. “I’m already late as it is. I told Simon I’d call in and go over the paperwork for the Donnelly case today. That way he’ll have no excuse to be calling me while we’re away on our honeymoon.” He turns and blows a kiss at Blair who catches it and blows one back then waves him off.

“Go on, ya big mushball, go talk to Simon. And tell him I’m making sure your cell phone is switched off while we’re away so it’ll be no good him even trying to call.” Blair laughs as Jim gives him a thumbs up. “I’ll meet you at the station for lunch around 12-30,” he calls after Jim’s retreating back then adds, “What should I tell Carolyn?”

“Tell her you snooze, you lose. Tell her I’m taken. Tell her goodbye,” Jim calls over his shoulder as he closes the door behind him.

An hour later her car’s still there and Blair can’t help but feel a twinge of genuine empathy for her. He can only imagine how he’d feel in her place, wanting Jim and unable to have him. He grabs his jacket, hat, and gloves then makes two steaming mugs of coffee and takes them down to her car.

The sharp rap on her window snaps her out of the reverie she’s fallen into. She looks up, surprised to see Blair standing there. He lofts the coffee mugs in his hands, she can see steam wafting from them and she rolls down her window.

“You looked like you might need this,” he says, handing a mug into her.

She takes it, smiles her thanks, watches as he wraps both gloved hands around his own cup and blows on the top of it before taking a sip.

“Did you want to come up?” he asks. “Jim’s not here though. He had a meeting with Simon at the station.”

“No,” she replies brightly, “actually it was you I wanted to see.” She unlocks the passenger side door. “Want to get and take a drive? There’s something I’d like you to see. Please,” she adds pleadingly as he looks hesitant. “I’m leaving tomorrow,” she lies. “This is my last chance to visit this place. It’s really special to me but I don’t want to go alone. All my friends are working and I don’t have family here anymore. I remember you

told me once how much you love the mountains around here so when everyone else was too busy to come with me, I thought of you.”

“Yeah, sure,” he agrees finally, opening the door and climbing in. “I gotta meet Jim and Simon at the PD at 12-30 though,” he tells her as he puts on his seatbelt and snaps it closed.

“No problem. This won’t take long at all. It’s just outside the city limits, only about a half hour drive from here.” She put her own seatbelt on and places her coffee mug in the drink holder between them then starts the car and pulls out into the traffic.

Neither of them talk much on the way. She senses he doesn’t know what to say and she doesn’t want to start her planned discussion with him till he’s seen what she wants to show him. Once he sees it, he’ll understand, she’s sure. She pulls the car into the parking lot just outside Cascade National Park and climbs out, taking the binoculars from the side pocket. She waits for him to join her then grabs her purse from the backseat and locks the car.

“Cascade Park?” Blair says as they walk through the gates. “This isn’t exactly what I was expecting.”

She hurries on ahead of him. “Wait till you see what I wanted to show you,” she calls back over her shoulder. She’s moving so quickly, she slips on the snowy path and he runs to catch up to her and grabs her arm then keeps hanging on as she leads the way further into the park.

She stops beneath an old tree that’s bent and weighted down with snow. Lifting the binoculars to her eyes she finds the place she’s seeking then hands the glasses to him. “At the crest of that mountain there,” she tells him, pointing it out, “that’s where Jim proposed to me.” She laughs at the memory. “He actually got down on one knee in the snow.”

Blair laughs too. “That sounds like him. He’s a romantic at heart.”

She turns on him at that, unable to keep the anger at bay. “How would you know?” she snaps. “What you think you and Jim have is nothing like what he had with me.”

He hands the binoculars back to her. “Look, Carolyn, I don’t want to argue with you,” he says. “I don’t doubt you think you still love Jim but nothing’s going to happen between you.”

“How would you know?” she snarls, leaning in close to him. “You’ve never given him a chance to have a normal relationship since you met him. You’ve been in his face, in his house, in his bed... Why won’t you leave, go somewhere else, let him have a normal life? If you loved him, you would.”

He shakes his head. "If I left he'd follow me," he says, "just as I'd follow him. To the ends of the earth," he adds. "We should get back." He turns away from her and starts to walk back to the gates.

Jim hadn't followed her when she'd left; he'd barely even called to see how she was doing... There's a moment of white hot fury at the realization of that and the next thing she's aware of is holding her gun in her hand and Blair on the ground at her feet, blood turning the snow around his head crimson.

She leans over him. His eyes are closed and he looks strangely peaceful. "I'm sorry, Blair," she whispers. Only she's not really sorry at all, she realizes as she heads back to her car and leaves him there to be covered by the snow. She doesn't think she intended to kill him but maybe it's fitting in a way. He'd sacrificed his professional life for Jim once before, and now his physical life too. She wonders if maybe he loves Jim almost as much as she does after all...

"I thought you said Sandburg was meeting us at 12-30," Simon grouses goodnaturedly while looking at his watch.

Jim looks up from the paperwork they've finally finished going through and then at the clock on the wall. It's 12-45. Blair's late as usual. "I'll go give him a call," he says, standing up and stretching the kinks out of his back. He opens the office door and his heart sinks as he sees Carolyn walking towards Simon's office. "Oh for crying out loud," he mutters, pulling his head back inside and closing the door. He looks over his shoulder at Simon. "Carolyn's headed this way. Please don't ask her to come have lunch with us."

"Problem?" Simon asks.

"She seems to think there's a chance we'll get back together," Jim tells him. He turns and leans against the closed door as if he can stop her from knocking and gaining entrance that way.

"Ah," Simon says. He grabs his coat from the rack behind him then walks over to Jim and pats his shoulder. "I'll tell her we've got a private lunch meeting with the DA. She's a cop. She'll understand."

"Yeah, good thinking. You talk to her while I go call Blair." Jim straightens away from the door and pulls it open, catching Carolyn in mid-knock. "Carolyn," he says politely, moving past her and ushering her into the office.

"Jim, I wanted to talk to you," she says. Her smile is wide and she looks... excited, is the only way Jim can describe it.

“Sorry, Caro, I have to go call Blair. We’ve got a lunch meeting with the DA and he’s late. Again.” Jim forces a smile and groans sub-vocally as she grabs his arm as he tries to walk away.

“Blair’s not coming,” she says. “I tried to tell him he should just leave but he didn’t want to listen. But you don’t need to worry about him. He won’t bother you again, Jimmy. We can finally be together again.”

Jim whirls on her and grabs her by the arms, fingers pressing so tightly he knows he’s leaving bruises and doesn’t care. “What do you mean?” he asks, giving her a shake when she doesn’t immediately answer. “Where’s Blair?”

“I even took him to our special place so he could see that my being back here wasn’t just a coincidence, that we were meant to be together,” she replies. “You’re not gay, Jimmy. You’re my husband. Blair wouldn’t listen.”

“What did you do to him?” Jim’s voice is almost a growl. He can feel his heart racing and cold sweat beginning to bead his forehead.

“I think he’s dead,” she says. “I don’t think I meant to kill him but he wouldn’t listen. He made me so angry.” She leans in and tries to wrap her arms around his neck but Jim pushes her away. “Keep her here,” he tells Simon, who’s looking shell-shocked. “I know where she took him.”

He’s out of the building and in his car without even registering the elevator ride down to the garage. He peels out into the traffic and heads for Cascade National Park. He’d proposed to Carolyn there. It had to be the special place she’d spoken of. He pushes the thought that Blair’s dead far back into the recesses of his mind and concentrates on getting himself safely to where he needs to go. He’ll be no good to Blair if he gets himself into an accident He’d thought Blair dead once before and been able to bring him back. He won’t give up on him yet. He can hear the gratifying sound of sirens behind him and knows Simon’s called for an ambulance to meet him. He presses down on the accelerator as hard as he dares and prays to any gods who love Jim Ellison to give him the chance to save Blair one more time.

When he reaches the park, he pulls the truck into side-slithering halt just outside the gates then gets out, heart in his mouth as he runs, sliding on the snowy ground, into the park. He’s vaguely aware of the ambulance pulling up behind him but he’s focused only one thing and he stops just inside the entrance and dials up his sight and looks out into the distance as far as he dares go without zoning. He almost collapses to his knees in sheer relief as he sees a figure stumbling towards him, almost falling in the ankle deep snow. Jim takes off sprinting to reach him and grabs Blair around the waist just in time to keep from taking a header. He hauls him up and holds him close. Blair’s shivering and covered in blood but he’s alive. Jim presses a heartfelt kiss to his sodden curls then tips him over his shoulder in a fireman’s carry as Blair’s eyes roll up and he passes out. He

hands him over to the care of the medics, places a quick call to Simon to tell him Blair's been found then climbs back in the truck and follows the ambulance as it heads for Cascade General.

"How you doing, Sandburg?" Simon asks as he walks into Blair's hospital room and stands next to his bed.

"He's got a nasty concussion, a gash on his head and a touch of hypothermia," Jim replies.

Blair rolls his eyes. "I'm fine," he says. "Grateful to be alive and warm." He shivers and Jim pulls the blankets up more closely around his shoulders. "Stop fussing," Blair says but he smiles as he says it and Jim can't help but give the blankets one more tuck just because. "How's Carolyn?" Blair asks and now Jim rolls his eyes. The woman had tried to kill him and Blair is still concerned about her. Blair gives him a steady look. "Hey, you have to admit this came out of left field. This isn't something Carolyn would normally do. There has to be a reason."

"There is. Kind of. It's not an excuse, at least not in my book and probably not as far as the courts are concerned but she's apparently suffering from something called PMMD. I spoke to her psychiatrist. The full name is premenstrual dysphoric disorder. In most cases when women suffer from it causes mood swings, depression, that kind of thing but she said Caro's was an extreme case, one where the person can become uncontrollably angry and depressed, even paranoid. She was on medication and having therapy to alleviate the symptoms but the doctor thinks she may have stopped taking her meds. She'd developed an obsession with getting back with Jim. When she got here and found out about you two being together, it just pushed her right over the edge." Simon pushes Blair's feet a little to one side so he can sit down on the bed. "I feel kind of sorry for her though I don't in any way condone what she did to you, Blair."

"I'm not going to press charges," Blair says.

"You have to," Jim retorts.

"Much as I hate to say it, Jim's right," Simon says. "Look, if you press charges, the courts can make mandatory psychiatric and medical treatment a part of her sentence."

Jim grasps Blair's hand in his. "You'll be doing the right thing for her," he says.

Blair sighs. "All right," he agrees. "I don't like it but I see your point." He rubs at the bandage on his head. "I guess I should be grateful she only clocked me with the gun instead of shooting me with it."

Jim shudders at what could have been then gives Blair a very gentle noogie. "Very grateful," he says.

“Well, I’ll let you get some rest, Blair.” Simon stands up and pulls a cigar from his pocket, sniffing it appreciatively. “Apparently we’ve all got a wedding to go to in a couple of days.”

“It’s not a wedding,” Jim and Blair both say at the same time and Simon snorts out a laugh. “Oh yes, it is,” he says as he leaves the room.

“He’s right, it is.” Jim leans in and gives Blair a sweet and tender kiss.

“Yeah, okay, it is,” Blair replies, kissing him back. “As binding for us as any wedding ceremony can be anyway.”

“I’ve been bound to you from the moment we met,” Jim tells him.

“I know but hey, nothing wrong with a little added insurance, is there?” Blair asks.

Jim shakes his head. “Nothing wrong at all.”

The End

UPON A MOUNTAIN'S EDGE

ART BY PETE PAULOS

STORY BY LAURIE

I see, or think I see,
A glimmering from afar;
A beam of day, that shines for me,
To save me from despair.

William Cowper

To thee for help I call;
I stand upon a mountain's edge;
Oh, save me, lest I fall.



PART ONE

"Hey, Blair, would you fix my desk chair again?" Rolle Ekert asked me, a hopeful tone in his voice.

I looked up at his round, freckled face and put my current project on hold. I didn't mind helping him out; he was one of the MIC detectives who never gave me a hard time about being a bastard convict.

I took care of the desk chair problem while chatting with him about how his little girl was doing in school. When I finished, I returned to working at Henri's desk, contentedly using his slave to check for data on a case. Henri wasn't in the office. He and his partner, Rafe, had flown to the lovely planet of Marna for a day or so to interview several witnesses for a multi-planet fraud investigation.

Once Captain Banks had lifted the ban on my helping the protectors, I'd found myself doing more investigative work than janitorial. It certainly made the hours I spent away from my sentinel's side much more interesting, although I made it a point not to complain about doing cleaning jobs as part of my probation. Anyway, I liked staying busy at work. Being a member of the bastard class and firmly at the bottom of the Hundred Worlds' caste system, I tried to avoid being seen as the stereotypical bastard, shiftless and lazy and dishonest.

I'd studied the history of prejudice in past eras while I'd earned several degrees at the University of Rainier; I was aware that those qualities assigned to bastards had labeled every group of people, including those on Old Earth, discriminated against by groups with higher status.

Somehow, knowing that my birth circumstance was only the latest in a long list of things people had targeted for abuse towards each other was not comforting in the least.

For the next couple of decades, I would be working with protectors both as Jim's guide and as the hired help, and I wanted their respect. I thought that I had earned some consideration from at least a handful of my new co-workers.

I'd become friends with Henri and Rafe, and they had promised to bring me back a couple of the expensive cigars that Captain Banks, the head of MIC, enjoyed.

Captain Banks, or as he'd told me to call him when we were off duty, *Simon*, had invited me to a poker game at his home, and I wanted to show my appreciation.

He didn't have to associate with a convicted criminal, after all. Even if the said criminal was his detective's guide.

That detective, my sentinel, was fifteen stories below me in a designated room equipped for holographic court, testifying about a case. Jim had spared me from sitting there with him, bored out of my mind. He knew I'd rather replace air filters or mop floors than sit and twiddle my thumbs while he explained to the judge in another planetary system how he'd used his sentinel senses to acquire evidence that would convict the perp.

At least that guy was guilty of the crime he'd been charged with, unlike me. My luck had certainly changed for the worse over the last year. Well, that wasn't quite true. Yes, I'd had to give up everything I owned that couldn't fit in a storage container that could be shoved under a bed. And I'd been kicked out of the graduate program at the University of Rainier. I'd never earn my Ph.D now in Environmental Anthropology.

But I had met Jim, even if he had been the one to arrest me. He'd also been the one to save me.

If not for Jim's claiming me as his guide, the court would have sentenced me to be a mindless drudge for the rest of my life.

I gave a shudder. Even now, when I was protected from that fate, the very idea horrified me.

I discerned a gentle inquiry at the back of my mind. Jim, sensing my sudden turmoil, was checking if I was okay.

I returned wordless reassurance that I was fine, and then I risked actually using our telepathy but for just a moment since I didn't want to distract him from testifying.

"Sorry, I had a little soul-turbulence. The stabilizers have been engaged now, though. Are you done yet with court?"

"No. I have to be available for cross-questioning by the defense. You know what? I think I need to go out to listen to that new band tonight to wind down from my job pressure. Should be fun. Ah, got to go. Love you, Chief."

I grinned to myself. Jim made it a point to thumb his nose at my probation rules, when he could do it without getting me in trouble. I wasn't allowed to engage in any sort of social activities on my own. On the other hand, if *Jim* decided he needed his guide with him to go to lectures, museums, and concerts, to help him keep his senses under control, well then, as his guide I was *required* to do my job and accompany him.

Jim's indulging me like that was sweet of him, although he always grumbled at me when I told him he was just a big lallapop – hard on the outside with a gooey, sweet center.

I stopped my mind-wandering and settled down to analyze the data, looking for patterns, inconsistencies, or other anomalies to point out to Henri when he returned.

I didn't get too far along on my task, though, before my comm vibrated, interrupting me.

I answered it and then shut down the slave.

Time for me to play errand boy for Captain Banks.

I held the back of my hand up to the skimmer at Secure Conference Room 3's doorway and waited for it to recognize my tattooed ID. I hoped Captain Banks had remembered to add me to the skimmer's data banks. There must be something pretty confidential being planned in there, since this room had extra security features.

The skimmer accepted me and the door was unlocked, then a holographic courtesy message appeared telling me I was free to enter.

I opened the door as silently as I could and pushed the refreshment cart into the room.

Everyone stopped talking, and I caught people looking at me as I arranged the sandwiches, snacks, and beverages on the side table.

This was a task I'd done a lot. People glancing at me and then dismissing me from their thoughts – well, I was used to it. I was a nobody, a bastard doing menial labor. I should have been practically invisible to the denizens of this room. But I wasn't. People were staring at me. Some were frowning, some were just... studying me.

I always kept my eyes down and moved quietly when I had this kind of work to perform. I didn't want my movements to interfere with the meeting. I was as silent this time as I had ever been, but they acted like there was a spotlight on me, showcasing my every motion.

My flight or fight reflex was telling me to get the hell out of there. When you grow up the way I did, you learn to listen to those instincts. I headed for the door, leaving the cart by the table. The cafeteria could do without it for a while.

I actually had my hand on the door when a sharp, male voice called out, “You. Boy. Bring me some kaffee and a pastry.”

Turning, I glanced at the table. There were eight people there, including Captain Banks. Eight pairs of eyes watching my every move.

I walked to the side table and filled a large mug with kaffee. Then I placed a sweet roll on a plate and added a stirrer, sweeteners, and creamers to sit in a neat little pile next to the treat.

I wasn't sure which of the men had made the request. Captain Banks nodded towards the man on his left, and I brought the order to him and set it down.

He grabbed my wrist and turned my hand over to look at the symbol that told the world I was a bastard.

He let go, and I took a few steps towards the door before that same sharp voice barked at me to stand still. I pivoted enough to notice the dour look on his face and kept still. Leaning back in his chair, his eyes traveled up and down my body.

I kept my face expressionless. I didn't know what these people wanted, but I would keep my guard up. At least Captain Banks was here; he'd stop anything that might be dangerous.

I did trust him on that. He'd showed me in the past that he would protect me.

“Take the tie out of your hair.”

Now that was a strange request. If I was cornered somewhere on the street and ordered to do that, I'd be bracing myself to fight off a sexual assault.

I couldn't conceive of that happening here, in the heart of MIC. Not with the head guy present.

I did as he said and slid the hair tie into my pocket. My rambunctious curls, happy to be freed, fell around my face.

“What's your name, boy.” Same man.

“Blair Sandburg.” I kept my voice low and steady.

“You're a damn criminal. You brought the Black Plague to New Rainier.”

I didn't confirm or deny his statement. I hadn't, but only Jim had believed me and even he thought I'd done it at first. Captain Banks had been convinced I was guilty of being involved in the Yana trade, but he'd agreed to my working with his detective and his department. Later, after he'd gotten to know me better, he'd told Jim that he'd changed his mind and decided I must have been innocent of the charges.

Technically, I wasn't guilty. Ethically, I thought I did bear some responsibility. It had been my bird that had been used, although without my knowledge, to bring the plants from Quyllur to New Rainier. Iris, a girl who had caught my eye, and her brother had flown with me a few times from Quyllur to New Rainier. They'd been the drug runners. Still, I'd been careless with whom I'd associated and let have access to my bird.

I wanted to make up for that carelessness, but I didn't believe I deserved the twenty-five year sentence I'd received.

Captain Banks spoke up. “Sandburg, you can leave the room. Stay in the building and keep your comm active.”

I replied with a “Yes, sir,” and held my head high as I walked out of there. I was done with trying to be inconspicuous for those people.

Silence fell over the room after I'd told Sandburg.. Blair, to leave. The task force had wanted to see him, to judge him on various criteria. I hoped they had found him lacking, that the plan would be scuttled.

I didn't want Blair to go undercover, to be at the mercy of corrupt men and women. He wasn't a trained protector, even if he had completed the Academy courses.

Larson, the Chief Special Agent from the IBI and the head of the task force, announced, “If I could have your attention. You've all seen Sandburg now. I'd like to hear your impressions.”

The other representatives of their agencies volunteered their thoughts.

“He's attractive.”

“Wary.”

“Controlled.”

“He's pretty, if you like them short and cute. That mouth is positively sinful. He'll be good bait. It doesn't matter if he's never been a cash boy because he won't be expected to act seductively. As long as he looks like he can follow directions enough to open his mouth or his legs, he'll be utilized.”

“He was unobtrusive until we set off his alarms by staring at him. I think he'll do.”

“He's beautiful. I know women who'd pay a lot of credits to have hair like his, so rich with color and thick with curls. I'd say his sentinel is a lucky man to come home to that to bond with.”

“Like I told him, he's a criminal. But we can use him.”

None of these people cared about Blair. I did, and not just for Jim's sake. Yes, Blair had screwed up by getting inadvertently involved with the Yana trade, but he'd been young and had lived on the fringes of society. He'd bartered with those drug runners, but I believed him when he said he hadn't known about the plants hidden in his old cargo ship.

I hadn't always thought that. The last few months had gone a long way towards changing my mind. Since Jim had claimed him, he'd been more than cooperative and gone far beyond what was expected of him. He'd saved Jim's life just weeks ago. I decided to make it clear that I was in his corner.

“Sandburg is one of my men. I want some assurances that this scheme won't end up with him brain-drained or dead. And a lawyer needs to represent his interests. His sentinel is his legal guardian and he'll need to sign off on Sandburg's involvement. Ellison is finishing up some court business at the moment. I suggest that we spend the time until he's freed up by going over the details of the mission, because Ellison will spot every potential screw-up when you explain the plan to him and Sandburg.”

“Ellison was an Orion's Hunter before joining the Protectors, correct, Captain Banks? He would have been well versed in tactics and covert missions. I think we need to look at his files, too. I understand that he and Sandburg finished up their certification courses recently. How did they do?”

That question came from a judicial investigator, a woman with a sharp mind judging from her earlier comments.

“They had top scores in every category but their telepathy range is easily fifty times further than the norm. That aspect makes them the ideal sentinel and guide team for your purposes. The flip side is that because their bond is so intense any separation beyond three days and they'll be in bond withdrawal. You need to plan for that, if you expect to keep them alive.”

Larson said, "Banks, withdrawal from the bond doesn't mean a death sentence. There are drugs to help with the symptoms."

"I'm not a sentinel expert," I shot back. "But I talked with the experts who tested Ellison and Sandburg during their training at Bonaroo. They told me that if Ellison ever breaks his intense bond with Sandburg, he'd probably zone so badly that he'd go into a deep coma and die. Sandburg would spiral down into a serious depression with the most likely outcome psychosis and suicide. They're soul-bonded. When one dies, the other one does, too. So even if you think Sandburg is expendable, Ellison would be a casualty also."

Larson said, "Rest assured, Captain Banks. We have no intention of sending your men on a suicide mission."

I wanted to believe him. I couldn't give that trust, though. During my stint in the space services and as a protector, I'd seen too many good men and women sacrificed to further an agenda.

We spent the rest of the meeting breaking down the proposal and coming up with contingency plans.

When I was notified that Ellison had completed his testimony and had left the holographic courtroom, I commed Blair and told him we'd had a spill and to bring a mop to clean it up.

Blair arrived and quietly entered the room prepared to clean up the non-existent mess and from the guarded blank look on his face, get the hell out. I'd seen that expression on his face before, the night that he'd been left at the mercy of his pervert of a probation officer -- when he'd thought I was leaving him there to let her molest him.

"Sandburg, this is a task force and they have something to discuss with you and Ellison. I'd appreciate your cooperation; explanations will come later."

His eyes flicked to mine, and then he nodded.

"All right. Take a seat. I'd like you to demonstrate your ability to communicate with Jim without his listening to you, or you using a comm. Use your telepathy and tell him I need him to come to this room immediately and not to tell anyone what he's doing."

I glanced around the table. Rogers, the man who had ordered Blair to serve him kaffee, had voiced the most skepticism of Blair's and Jim's abilities.

"Rogers, give Sandburg a code phrase to tell Ellison. I know you'll demand the proof."

The man frowned, then left his chair and walked over to Sandburg. He leaned down and whispered something to him.

He said loudly, so we all could hear him, "Don't say anything and keep your hands on the table so I can make sure you're not using your comm. Contact him."

Blair complied. He kept his mouth shut. Rogers stayed, leaning on Blair's chair, pushing into his personal space. I could have suggested to him that it would be prudent to move away from Blair, but I thought it would be more educational to let the task force see for themselves how a sentinel handled a perceived threat.

The first thing Jim said when he walked through the door was, "The test words were 'Ancestor's Day means nothing to a bastard.' Now, you," he pointed towards Rogers, "get away from him." Jim's voice was cold, deadly.

Rogers did, a speculative look on his face.

Jim sat down next to Blair and glared at everyone. He looked pointedly at me. "Sir. Blair tells me that this is a task force meeting."

"Detective Ellison, Sandburg, let me introduce Chief Special Agent Larson, from the Interplanetary Bureau of Investigation. This is his show and he'll take it from here."

Larson nodded to Simon and said, "Simply put, we need your help to break a human trafficking ring and connect it to a funding operation for a terrorist group."

He motioned with his arm, indicating the rest of the task force. "My colleagues are top-level people from the IBI, NRIA, Justice, Security, D and O, and of course, you know Captain Banks. From this point on, he will be your handler. There's no need for introductions to the rest of the task force."

Jim stiffened. "This is a need to know mission? Captain? Is this a voluntary assignment or am I being ordered to participate?"

"It's not voluntary for you, Detective. You're assigned as an operative, starting now. It's more complicated than that for your guide, and his participation is voluntary."

Larson caught my eye, and I ceded the conversation to him.

"Detective, I understand that legally you're Sandburg's guardian and it's your decision if he becomes a veiled informant. We're offering to reduce his sentence by a year, in return for his cooperation."

Ellison regarded Sandburg for a moment, and then nodded at his guide. Sandburg spoke up, his tone polite but firm. "Since my usual duties include guiding Detective Ellison, I gather my involvement would be something outside of helping him control his senses. I also understand this task force's reluctance to name details unless I sign forms to become a veiled informant. But I need more information than what you've said."

Ellison added, "Whatever it is you want Sandburg for, it's going to be his decision. I'll agree only if he says yes."

Larson said, "And if he agrees and you don't? What then? Will you override him?"

Ellison shook his head. "Sandburg's my partner, regardless of the circumstances that made him my guide. I'm not taking away his free will in this matter. Let's hear your deal."

Larson turned towards Sandburg. "Thanks to the results of several different investigations that originated within the agencies represented here, we now have a theory that ties the various threads together. What we need is proof, and we feel the best way to achieve that is to put you in place as bait. Once you're inside we'll use you to gather evidence and keep track as you go from point A to point B. You're a certified guide and Ellison is a certified sentinel. Your testimony will be valid for court, and in addition, we're prepared to give you some vision and hearing recording tech. We've got top people in this field available to do the implantation."

"Why Blair? Nobody's going to hire him since he's a convict and a bastard, and your agencies, hell, even MIC, all have trained undercover people. What makes his situation fit this mission so well that you're giving your own people a pass?"

Jim had come to the heart of it, and I wasn't looking forward to hearing his or Sandburg's reaction to the answer.

"Better to have the genuine article than try to pass off a fake one. Sandburg's a convicted criminal, on probation. That truth will hold up to any amount of scrutiny. He recently violated his probation, and we can use that to remand him back to court. Yes, I know his probation officer, Joel Taggart, recommended leniency and no further addition of Community Service time. He'll be overruled by a superior."

A woman at the table made a graceful movement with her hand.

Larson acknowledged her gesture and continued.

"We suspect that the judge who will hear the case is taking kickbacks. He's been sentencing bastards, and only bastards, to permanent mind-wiping and placement in a corporation facility that we believe has ties with a terrorist group. We also have intelligence that some of these mind-wiped bastard workers are being sold for sex. What we don't have is hard proof. Arresting the johns will only result in fines for them, and a scapegoated employee will take the blame for abuse of the mind-wiped. It will be passed off as an aberration, the fault of that employee. The corporation itself will remain untouched. At the most, they'd be given a modest fine. Then they'll go right back to making profits for the terrorist group. Unless we can document that the judge is receiving kickbacks, he's untouchable. It is within his range of judgment to sentence individuals to mind-wiping, so he can't be stopped without that proof."

“You're asking me to pretend to be mind-wiped and spy on this corporation from the inside? How would I pass the scans?” Blair asked, his voice sounding both worried and curious.

“You'll pass because you won't be pretending. You'll be mind-wiped. Don't worry. It'll be a temporary condition. The corporation will check you in and confirm that you are, indeed, a mind-wiped convict laborer and ready for your new life of drudgery. They'll file your paperwork, and then you're a cog in the machine. All you have to do is to act mind-wiped after your treatment wears off, and we're prepared to give you some help with that. Deep hypno-treatment. You'll have the mannerisms and behavior of a mind-wiped person, but you'll be able to think for yourself.”

Blair was shaking his head. “What about Jim? He'll need to bond. Is it typical for the court to arrange some sort of visitation?”

The woman from the Justice department jumped in. “I don't believe the situation has ever come up before. I'd have to check the records, but knowing that particular judge, he would refuse any requests for court mandated visitation. He'd expect Detective Ellison to break the bond, find another guide. As a matter of fact, we're counting on the judge to deny visitation.”

I watched Sandburg and Ellison consider this, and from their expressions it looked as if the thoughts between them were hurtling back and forth faster than a ball in a slingshot contest.

Blair sat up straighter. “A sentinel who's desperate to bond might be willing to sell out to the one holding his guide's leash. If a terrorist group is behind this scheme, they'd love to have a detective in MIC on their payroll. They'll offer Jim the chance to keep bonding with me as long as he keeps doing 'favors' for this group, and if he does then they'll have plenty of blackmail material to hold over his head to ensure his cooperation.”

I caught a couple of surprised looks from the others and decided to indulge myself. “Sandburg was a Ph.D candidate. He's quick and he's sharp. And let me make myself clear. I want him back in good shape after this mission.”

Larson said, “Absolutely. We need him to be able to testify at the trials. To be honest, though, this is a risky operation. We will do everything we can to make sure of his safety, but we can't promise guarantees. That's why we're offering to cut a year off his sentence.”

Jim spoke up, a hard edge to his voice, his expression stubborn. “Not a year. Ten years. And when this is over he's allowed to return to the Ph.D program at the University.”

Rogers pointed his finger at Sandburg. “I said it before and I'll say it again. He's a damn criminal. And if he's so bright, I'm sure he's considered that if he and Ellison won't

cooperate, then he can still be brought up on probation violation charges in front of our crooked judge and be sentenced to be mind-wiped for real. Not a thing MIC or Ellison can do to stop it, if the Justice Department throws the book at him.”

Jim looked ready to explode, but Sandburg must have sent him a message that he'd handle Rogers. The man had tried to intimidate him earlier, but hadn't been able to rattle Sandburg. Well, I supposed he'd been dealing with that kind of attitude his whole life, having been born a bastard.

Sandburg stood up and addressed Larson, nodding respectfully. “I'm aware of the consequences for not following the probation rules. I broke them deliberately; if I had to do it over, I'd still break them. Jim needed me. I tried to get help, but nobody listened. If I hadn't taken off on my own and persuaded Captain Banks to help me, Jim would have been killed or kidnapped off planet.”

He eyed Rogers, and that respectful attitude took a hike. “And yeah, I knew as soon as Chief Special Agent Larson explained about sending me to court for this scheme that you could hold that over my head.

“So what?” He tilted his chin up defiantly. “You need me and Jim. You need us because we have incredible telepathy. You need me because, as you put it, I'm a convicted criminal already. I have the perfect cover because it's true. How many other guides with my level of telepathy and my background are waiting in the wings in case I say no?”

Jim scrutinized the task force and stood up next to Sandburg, then added, “The answer to my partner's question is, of course, none. And being a certified sentinel I could testify to that truth, based on my observations during this meeting. You prefer *certified* people. That cuts down on your available pool right there. You're asking us to risk our lives and, for Blair, damage to his mind and his body. We want ten years in return. We're leaving now. Captain Banks can give us your answer.”

I said, mildly, “Ellison, why don't you use a secure comm and talk to that lawyer friend of yours, run this deal by him. If you and Sandburg accept the task force's offer, you might want him to look it over for... oh, loopholes, before the final agreement. And Sandburg, leave first and take the mop and bucket with you. We don't want to tip off any other blackmailed officers that you're involved with some hush-hush task force.”

Sandburg nodded and left, dragging his cleaning cart out with him. Ellison waited a few minutes, which he spent by looking hard at the other people in the room, and then he gave me a brief “Sir” and strode out of the room.

As soon as Ellison was in the hall, Larson asked for opinions. Rogers, as expected, was ready to toss Sandburg back into court to be mind-wiped and suggested that the task force find another sentinel and guide pair.

The D and O guy countered that argument quickly. He'd done his research on sentinels and guides and explained that telepathy to the extent that Ellison and Sandburg had was a very rare talent, only manifesting in pairs that had soul-bonded as well as physically bonded. It had been one of the Drugs and Ordnance sentinels that had suggested to him that Ellison and Sandburg be tapped for this mission. That sentinel had seen their abilities during the recent training they'd all attended and knew that Sandburg had violated probation by that mad dash across restricted space to find Ellison.

After that discussion, Larson took a straw vote. Everybody but Rogers said yes to the ten years clause.

Larson decided to do it Sandburg's and Ellison's way. There was some further discussion on the final details of the plan, which would fall to me to co-ordinate with my men. This was likely the last full meeting of the task force until the operation had concluded. Larson dismissed the group, and I commed Jim to ask them to meet me at my house later that night. Oh, and to see if Mickey could make it. We'd play poker, I told Jim, since I wasn't using a secure comm.

Tonight I'd give them and their lawyer the details if Sandburg agreed to the mission.

PART TWO

Returning my cleaning cart to the maintenance department, I told Micah, the supervisor, that I'd be with Jim the rest of the day. Then I hurried off to meet Jim at the secure comm room where earlier he'd sent his court testimony by holo-emitter.

He was waiting for me by the door and gripped my arm when I reached him, both of us needing to feel connected physically. We avoided most displays of affection at the work, having no wish to feed our coworkers' speculation about bonding and our sex life. We kept our touches to pats on the back, or sometimes a casual arm slung around a shoulder, or in Jim's case, patting me on my cheeks.

I could feel Jim's emotions – fear for me, anger at the disrespect I'd been shown, dread over being separated.

My emotions mirrored his. I didn't like this plan at all. And yet...

Once we went inside, Jim let me go after a swift hug. He went to the emitter panel and started pushing buttons.

He shot me a worried look, as he began comming Mickey. "Chief, you don't have to do this. We can run for the free territories."

I crossed my arms and shook my head. "Don't you think that bunch upstairs hasn't already thought of that? I'm sure I've been tagged a high security risk, and if we even head towards your bird, we'll find ourselves in custody. Also, think about this: without

the right codes to disable the beacon in my leg it could explode if it's removed illegally. I don't want to lose my leg. And even if we made it past the Hundred Worlds' boundaries, bounty hunters would go after me. And you, too, for aiding and abetting me. But Jim, you know I have to do it. I don't want to, but how can I turn my back on my fellow bastards?"

"I knew you'd say that. You'd volunteer for this mission without the sweet-root and stick approach."

I grinned at him. "Yeah, I would. But they don't have to know that. I'll take the ten years deal. I'll be that much closer to freedom."

Mickey, our lawyer, answered the comm, and Jim and I filled him in on the offer. He said he'd like to read the final agreement before Jim signed it for me. Mickey and Jim were old friends, and he'd figured out how Jim could petition the judge at my trial to claim me as his guide. Between the two of them, they'd saved me from being mind-wiped.

Once again I had to face the prospect of becoming mindless. I couldn't pretend that didn't terrify me. It did. The level of mind-wiping for convicts would leave me minus my personality and most of my intelligence. I would become a docile, happy little drone, working at whatever menial labor job assigned to me. Jim had been mind-wiped when he'd been saved from the attack on his ship by an old friend turned rogue. His mind had only been lightly touched, leaving him with no knowledge of who he was or why he was on the planet of Quyllur.

He hadn't had his personality taken from him, like the court would have taken mine from me when I'd been convicted.

Luckily, the Sho'nakan tribe had recognized Jim as a sentinel when his senses became hyperactive, and he'd been adopted by them. Many months later, he'd been identified by another Orion's Hunter and his mind had been restored. He never had remembered on his own how he'd been betrayed. Jim had been lucky. He'd been found while the mind-wipe could still be reversed.

And now I was being asked to trust that my mind would be protected from permanent damage.

I stepped out of emitter range, afraid that my expression would give away my fear to Mickey. Jim, of course, would know. Soul bonding meant not ever being able to keep your emotions from your partner.

I shivered, the thought of becoming a drudge, even for just a few days, leaving me feeling queasy and cold.

Jim sent me wordless feelings of love and support, but he couldn't hide from me how worried he was about this assignment. I sensed that anxiety centered on me being vulnerable, but he would be, too. Together, we were strong, able to resist forces that

wanted to hurt us, apart, we would be like sticks taken out of a bundle and easily snapped.

He said his farewell to his old friend. We'd see him tonight at Captain Banks' house to finish the negotiations with the task force.

I thought of Quyllur, its blue coastal waters and fecund jungles, and the shaman who had adopted me. Jim's kidnapping several weeks ago had put a delay on our plans to go home and visit Incacha and the Sho'nakan. While I wasn't on house arrest, my probation officer had suggested I keep a low profile for a while, and that included not going off world. I missed Quyllur, the last place that I'd been a free man.

Jim shut off the emitters and the image of Mickey, tall with black, wavy hair, faded out. Jim drew me close and wrapped me in his arms. I felt a rush of love for him, my partner, my sentinel.

We'd go to Simon's house tonight and learn the details of the solar-storm of trouble we'd agreed to navigate.

While we waited for Mickey to show at Simon's house, Jim and I read over the agreement that Simon had accessed from a secure Justice Department site.

In the document, the names of the terrorist group and the judge were not included, but I was named as a veiled informant, and that in return for my help, I would be granted a reprieve of ten years from my sentence *if* my work as a veiled informant resulted in arrests. Without arrests, I would only be given a year's reprieve.

The Head of Justice had already signed it; once Jim had added his name, it would be legal.

That would leave me with fourteen years still to serve. Jim diligently kept checking for any leads in finding the actual Yana drug runners, but for this past year there had been no new clues. The supply of Yana on the street had dried up, too.

At least no new victims would find themselves hopelessly psychotic or dead from the Black Plague.

I was restless, and after I'd inspected Simon's bookshelves and picked up each of the fascinating little statues from his angel collection to study closely, he'd had enough.

"Sandburg, those are antiques from my ancestors and I don't want you breaking them. Go sit your ass down at the kitchen table. We're playing poker until Renardo can get here."

So we played poker, mostly Five Card Space 'Em, although it was hopeless to bluff with Jim, and from his grumblings he felt the same way about me. Still, it kept us occupied.

When Mickey came by two hours later, I'd managed to win a nice pile of change from Simon. According to the law, anything I earned had to be turned over to Jim, so when the doorbell rang I pushed my earnings over to his side of the table.

Simon looked surprised, then I saw understanding change his expression.

He didn't say anything, though, and I appreciated that. It was nice sometimes, to have the illusion of living a normal life.

Mickey handed Jim a bottle when Simon ushered him into his kitchen.

"After our conversation earlier this afternoon, I figured we'd need this," Mickey said, with an enigmatic smile.

Jim held it up so the clear blue color was visible to all of us. It was the most popular alcoholic beverage from Quyllur.

Simon shook his head ruefully, and Jim managed a quirky smile.

I must have looked lost because Jim said, "Mickey's making a little joke by bringing Agrasa here tonight. Jack, Simon, Mickey and I emptied at least one bottle when we plotted to make you my guide."

To Mickey, he said, "I don't know if any amount of alcohol, even Blue Heaven, can make this any easier. Blair will be in danger every moment that he's undercover."

Mickey glanced at me, so I said, "I know that, but I have to do this. Those people being unfairly sent to be mind-wiped need us. You know, as bastards, we generally don't have many people who will stick up for us, so it might be cynical of me, but I wonder if there would even be an investigation if there wasn't the tie to the terrorist group. And besides, I'm pretty sure that if I don't do it voluntarily, I'll be sent to that judge for violating my probation anyway, out of spite, and I'll end up being mind-wiped with no chance of reversing it. That guy on the task force, uh, Rogers, was as mean as a gilly-toad, and he'd arrange it just to see me get what he thinks I deserve."

"I'm assuming that you've got your house protected, Simon?" Simon nodded. No one would be hearing this conversation. Jim had swept the place, and it was clear of listening devices. Also, there were white noise generators set up around the perimeter of Simon's property.

Jim rummaged in the cupboards for glasses, and Mickey placed his slave on the table.

"Let's take a look," he said.

I got up from the table, cards pushed to the side and long forgotten, and stood by the window, looking up at New Rainier's small moon. It was late, and we all were tired.

Mickey had left. He'd shaken my hand and told me that when this was over we should all get together for a better reason.

"Blair, any other questions? Are you clear about this plan?" Simon had explained what would happen now that Jim had signed for me.

I turned to face Simon where he and Jim were sitting at the table and held my thumb out, touched it. Step one.

"A doctor that's been vouched for will be assigned to do mind-wiping at the justice center where I have to go to court. He'll be there at least a week or two before my name is added to Judge Hannity's docket."

Simon nodded, reached across the table and poured himself two fingers of Blue Heaven.

I touched my index finger. "Next, Joel Taggart will be sent to some god forsaken planet as a consultant to train other Community Service officers in using his techniques for working with at-risk young people on probation."

I was really too old to be on his caseload. Usually, he worked with kids, but since legally I was a minor again, Community Service had arranged it. Joel Taggart was a good person, and he'd been fair with me. It was because he was a decent man that he'd have to be distracted and sent out of the way. Otherwise he'd raise holy hell within Community Service when his resolution to my violation of probation was overridden by a supervisor. They couldn't afford to have that happen. I was supposed to be just another bastard convict, somebody nobody cared about or paid any attention to for any reason.

Simon added, "By the time Taggart hears about this you'll be mind-wiped and already in place at Crawford Industries. We're not sure if you'll be assigned to a farm or a factory, or work as domestic day help. All the workers are housed in the same set of dormitories, though."

Jim frowned. "Is there anybody in place at the dormitories for back-up?"

Simon said, "It's being considered. It would be best to use somebody with no connection to any of the agencies here."

I had a thought. "I have a suggestion, Simon. Megan Connor. She's a friend; we trained together at the Academy. She's an officer on Uluru, and that's about as far from Cascade as you can find. I trust her."

Simon finished off his drink, got up and stretched and brought his cup to the sink. I could tell he was thinking about my suggestion. "I'll check with Larson. The IBI has the tech we'll need to build her cover. We'll have to doctor her records and give her a false code tattoo. I'll contact her in the morning, see if she's willing to come. We have an

officer exchange program with Uluru, and I can swap her for somebody who wants to live on the back-end of the Hundred Worlds.”

“Uluru is a fascinating place to visit. The beaches, the Great Outback, and the history of the colonists is--”

“Fascinating. Let's stick to going over our strategy, okay? I'm tired, and you both must be, too.” Simon was a tad on the cranky side, so I finished naming the steps.

“Okay, the Zext step is for me to go to court and then we'll see if Judge Hannity takes the bait. If he does and sentences me, then I get the temporary mind-wipe, but first I'll have the deep hypno-session so I'll act mind-wiped after the temp job wears off and my brain returns to normal. I'll also have that recording chip implanted. As you've explained, Simon, it will copy everything that I see and hear, if I tell my brain to record, but it won't be recognized as a listening device or camera since my own eyes and ears will function as the camera and listening device. How does that work, exactly?”

Simon raised his eyebrows. “Do I look like a scientific genius to you, Blair? I'll give you permission to go bug the IBI's scientists to get your answers after this mission, but for now, we only need to know that it's tech that has been verified to work without major side effects and that the recordings are allowable in court.”

Blair narrowed his eyes. “No major side effects, okay. What about minor ones?”

“You might get headaches sometimes,” Simon admitted.

“Once I'm mind-wiped enough to pass the scanners, then I'm sent off to the Crawford Industries intake center. I get processed in, and they double-check my head. And they won't find the chip? Are we sure about that?”

“Crawford is a cheap son-of-a-space-whore, and we've verified that the tech he uses is old and a bottom line model. It's just not sophisticated enough to catch the chip.”

Jim got up and stepped behind me so that his arms were around my waist. I relaxed against him, just a little. “And while Blair is being worked on and taken to the intake center, I'll be pounding on doors for permission to continue bonding with him. I'll start with Crawford himself. I don't want some lower level manager to feel sorry for me and approve the bonding and keep it from getting to Kincaid's ear. The Sunrise Patriots will jump at the chance to have me spy for them so I can keep bonding.”

Jim tightened his arms a little more around me. “Once Jim's approved for bonding sessions, then he'll meet regularly with me. If I get picked to be trafficked for sex, then somebody from MIC or one of the other task force agencies will be in place as a customer. I'll record the payment, the turning me over for sex, but we won't arrest Crawford yet, not until I've had a chance to snoop around and find evidence of the kickbacks. We want proof that the money Crawford is making from the bastards sent to him is going straight to Kincaid's terrorists. Nobody will expect a mind-wiped convict of

anything. Even if I'm caught somewhere I shouldn't be at, I'll just act all confused and lost."

Jim said, "And once Blair has enough proof, we get him out of there and arrest the players. The D and O has the muscle to handle the Sunrise Patriots. They're one of the crazier bunch of fanatics, with their propaganda of doing away with the bastard class. Hell, if they had their way, any child bastard-born or not claimed by both upper class parents would be sterilized and used as slave labor."

"We got that from informants, but to the public Kincaid doesn't voice his more extreme views. But let him sway the upper classes into supporting limiting bastards' rights and he'll voice his views on genocide," Simon added.

I said softly, "There's an ancient saying. 'First they condemned those not like me, and I said nothing. When they condemned me, there was no one left to protest.' Kincaid will not stop at getting rid of bastards. He'll come for the common class next, and so on."

I grimaced. "It's no wonder Kincaid and Crawford decided to prey on bastards within the court system. If you analyze the data, it's clear that bastards receive more and harsher punishment for the same crimes committed by other classes. I wonder if other judges are in their pockets. Really, every judge's records need to be audited for this kind of prejudice."

Simon sighed. "The Justice department is going to do just that, but not until this operation is completed. They're afraid, and I agree, that a large-scale investigation will tip Kincaid off and he'll vanish to some fringe world again. We've been looking for him for years. The Sunrise Patriots didn't take responsibility for those bombings of bastard schools and the agencies dedicated to helping the bastard class, but we know they were behind them. We just haven't proved it to the point where we could arrest the Patriots. Kincaid and his fanatics are quick to praise the actions of the 'heroes' who did the bombings, though. Hell, they even publicly thanked Michael Smith's assassin."

I remembered those incidents, and I'd actually met Michael. My mom and I had been introduced to him, and he'd given me hope that I, too, could have an education and a career, despite being a bastard. He'd become the Dean of Education at the University of Rainier. He'd been found one morning, tortured and left for dead, hands nailed to the door of his office like the ancient religion of Christianity's Jesus. I'd grieved when he'd died from his wounds.

Despite the personal risks to me, the chance to take down that hateful group of supremacists would justify the danger.

I could feel Jim silently agreeing with me.

Out loud, to Simon, he said, "When I'm not with Blair I'll be listening to him when possible and checking in with him telepathically. The dormitories and factories are

shielded from electronic listening, but that won't stop me. Maybe I should be Connor's contact. We could pretend to be married and find a place fairly close to Crawford's complex."

I choked a little. Jim and Megan pretending to be married – that was... wow. They were friends, but they'd developed a sort of competition mind-set. I bet myself that they'd start bickering before Megan had even unpacked her bags, if she was willing to come help us, that is.

I sighed. I was tired and longed to go home. We were committed to this lunacy now, and it seemed like the task force had covered all contingencies.

I hoped. "Simon, Yogi the Wise once said, 'what gets us into trouble isn't what we don't know, it's what we know for sure that just ain't so.' All we can do at this point is keep our wits about us and be ready to improvise if needed. Jim and I will see you tomorrow."

Simon shook his head. "Take the day off. Practice your telepathy. I'll see you the day after tomorrow."

Jim thanked him and grabbed the half-full bottle of Agrasa. We made our way outside, and Jim said, "Heads up, Blair. Daryl's coming."

Oh, wonderful. I hoped the evening wouldn't end with Simon's son trying to take a swing at me again. He knew about my Yana conviction and had been very vocal about how I should have been punished more severely. His friend had lost his mind to Yana, so I didn't blame him, but I didn't want to deal with his anger tonight.

We hurried and made it to Jim's run-down classic before Daryl pulled up in his flashy new vehicle. He got out and stared hard at me as we slowly passed him. I was glad to avoid another conflict.

I glanced at Jim, and he smiled, with a quirky tilt of his lips.

"Yogi the Wise, Chief?"

"Uh-huh. There's a whole religion devoted to the ancient Earth sport of baseball, and Yogi was one of their prophets."

Jim chuckled, and then I was laughing, too, glad to live in the moment and enjoy being with my lover.

We had some tough times coming up but for the rest of tonight and tomorrow, we'd have just me and Jim time. We'd make the best of it.

PART THREE

Two weeks later, two burly court enforcers served Blair with a summons while he was working at MIC, and he was indeed listed on Judge Hannity's docket. They took him down to the bail bonds center, a grim place, the gray of its walls a match for the miserable expressions on the prisoners I saw dragged along by enforcers. In order for Blair to stay out of lock-up until his court date, I had to post a hefty amount of credits.

The clerk who handled the transaction was genuinely surprised that I was willing to do this for a bastard.

"Are you sure, Detective Ellison? These bastards can't be trusted. Most of them are dead afraid of coming to court and they try to run. It's why we automatically take them into custody when they're served."

"Just turn him loose," I said sourly. "You got anything more for me to sign?" There was, of course. Finally, Blair was released to me, and we went to my vehicle. I started my sweetheart up and headed for our loft apartment.

After fastening the safety belt, Blair slumped against the seat. "Man, I am so craving a shower. I hate being in lock-up; the smell of the place settles into your skin." Blair sounded so pragmatic, but I knew he was feeling unsettled.

"Want me to scrub your back?" I wagged my eyebrows at him, hoping to make him laugh and relax.

Blair did laugh, but it wasn't a relaxed sound. "Sure. Did you know that only bastards are routinely picked up when they get a court summons? Common class members only have to put up bail if it's a capital crime – murder, rape, serious assault. And your class, and the superior class, don't have to do even that."

I'd learned that information when I became a protector, but I hadn't really thought about what it meant in terms of prejudice against a whole group of people. Even though I didn't consider myself a man who would discriminate against others, thanks to my partner I had come to realize that I did have 'ingrained expectations relating to the class structure New Rainier culture was based upon.' Or in my own words and not Blair's, I accepted the privileges and restrictions granted to each class, since I'd grown up with it that way. Blair was quite willing to discuss those ingrained expectations when they surfaced. I told him he should talk to Simon about doing sensitivity training with MIC, but he said he wouldn't be listened to if he did. He'd stick to educating one person at a time.

He'd grinned as he'd said that, and I knew he meant me. I'd given him a noogie, but I also told him to call me out whenever I showed my ignorance.

He sighed and told his window to open. It obligingly rolled down, letting in fresh air, moist with the earlier morning shower.

"I don't want you to choke because I stink. And it feels good, you know, to breathe free air after being stuck in a holding cell." He lifted his hand and let it trail outside the window, feeling the movement of air against his fingers.

I glanced at him. "Who gave you a hard time in there? I could feel that you were annoyed, but not afraid. I listened in but didn't catch what it was about."

"One of the guards. He offered to send me to the rec area if I gave him a blow job."

"Son-of-a-space-whore! Did you get his name or badge ID?"

"Yeah, I did. And hey, slow down. We need to talk about this stuff."

"What stuff?" I eased up so that we were under the speed limit.

"Jim, I might have to do sexual acts to maintain my cover. I know that other undercover people will be in place to pick me for their cash boy for the night, but what if I'm propositioned by the staff, or assaulted? How much should I put up with, how much can you tolerate without grabbing your weapon and breaking down the gates?" Blair's emotions were conflicted.

I felt murderous just thinking about someone taking advantage of him when he would appear as innocent and as naïve as a child.

"Connor's going to be there; she can threaten to break heads if anybody picks on her favorite charge." Connor lived to kick the ass of deserving thugs and creeps.

"She won't be there all the time, and she won't be at my job assignment. If I'm given any kind of choice I'll say no to sexual advances, but Jim, I think I'm willing to do what I'm asked if I can't wiggle out of it. Can you deal with that? If it happens, that is? Maybe nobody will notice me at all."

Blair not being noticed was unlikely. He was beautiful, although I knew from the bond we shared that he didn't believe he was that attractive. If anything, he thought his personality was more of a draw to people. Inside Crawford's complex, his personality would be muted. Predators would look at him, though, and want him. Beautiful and powerless, the combination would be irresistible to them.

"Blair, I know you want to do the right thing, and you're willing to lay your body on the line. But I don't want you hurt, and I'm not sure removing ten years from your sentence is worth that. To be honest, I'm going to hate every moment you're so vulnerable, but if you can stand it, I can. We'll need a safe word that you can say out loud, if not telepathically, and if I hear it, I'm sending in the troops, along with me. Even if we haven't got enough evidence to charge any of those assholes."

"Holy ancestors, I hope it won't come to that. I'd love to see the judge and Crawford and Kincaid get convicted. You could track down anybody who leaves traces of bodily fluids

on me, but we can't tell my handlers that you'll go feral on anybody's ass who has sex with me; we want me to be picked to whore for them. I don't know. If you get approved to bond with me, then maybe you can make a deal that my ass is only available to the customers and you and not to the staff? That might help.”

He gazed at me so seriously and I felt his deep concern and caution. “If I’m raped, Jim, it’ll be bad, but with your help I can make it. If you hold me responsible because I didn't use the safe word in time, or not at all, then I’ll fall apart. I need you on my side, not angry at me. Please, Jim. I don't know if I can do this if you're not going to support me through the bad shit.”

I pulled the vehicle over and unfastened his belt and hauled him over to me so he was on my lap. I buried my face in his curls and breathed in his scent.

I made a vow to myself that I would never make him think I thought he had brought any abuse on himself, if he was assaulted.

Blair experienced my resolution through our bond and heaved a great sigh.

He kissed me then, and slid off my lap. “I’ll use 'Quyllur' for my safe word.”

He had been accepted by the Sho'nakan on Quyllur, not judged by his birth status. His adoptive father had given him a family and a place in the tribe. No wonder he associated being there with feeling safe.

I started Sweetheart up, and we drove the rest of the way home in silence.

Words weren't needed.

The night before we had to be in court was bitter-sweet for both of us. Neither of us wanted to make small talk or watch holos. As the sky darkened outside, Blair took my hand and we went upstairs. We undressed slowly, stopping to touch a cheek, a shoulder, or run a hand down a bare belly.

Sex between us usually involved laughter. We never took ourselves too seriously, and Blair could become downright silly in bed. And mischievous. The night he'd made me promise to turn down my senses and then drizzled dark sugar-sap all over my chest and dick came to mind.

Blair wasn't smiling this night. He was intense, touching me as if he was storing up sense memories of what my body felt like. When he kissed me, he did it reverently, and when he fucked me he was tender and kept our soul bond wide open; he delighted in every jolt of my pleasure from his touch, and then he would make it that much better.

Sex segued into bonding and I could smell the pheromones as they settled on our bodies, sating our mutual addiction. Our orgasms were strong and left us drowsing in each other's arms.

After a while, Blair slipped out of bed and went downstairs. He made his ablutions and came upstairs with a basin and a washcloth and towel.

The water was hot and fragrant with the oil of the Qellu T'iki plant. Blair liked to use it because it reminded him of Quyllur. Never saying a word, but letting me feel how much he loved me, he dipped the cloth into the water and pressed it against my skin, removing the sweat and semen from my body. When he had completed this ritual, he handed me the towel and I sat up and dried myself.

I was honored by Blair's careful attentions. I tossed the towel aside and said telepathically in the language of the Sho'nakan, "Sunqu. I would offer you shelter." I smiled at him and opened my arms, widened my legs so that he could nestle against me if he so wished.

He stared at me and then crawled across the bed, his long hair loose around his face. I expected him to turn so that he was facing the world with me at his back for support.

But he didn't position himself that way at all. I let myself sink into experiencing his emotions, fully opening myself to him.

He wished for comfort, to hide away for a while from the world. He'd be forced to face so much humiliation and danger when he was sent to Crawford Industries.

He desired a respite, a time for me and him, alone in our own place in the universe.

He slid his legs under my knees, facing me. His eyes riveted on mine and he let me see how much he was afraid. It wasn't just the danger from going undercover. He was also terrified that something would go wrong with the mind-wiping procedure. More than either of those fears, his greatest concern was that this covert operation would damage our relationship.

I thought I'd laid that last fear to rest.

Mind to mind, I spoke to him. "Blair, Sunqu. I can't tell you not to have those fears about us, but to me they're groundless. I will not reject you if you are hurt; I will cherish you. Let it go, okay? I love you, and that's not going to change."

Blair nodded solemnly and rested his forehead against my chest. I wrapped my legs loosely around his body and let my arms encircle him. I didn't cage him; he could slip out from this embrace easily, but I sensed from him that he didn't want to do that.

We stayed that way for a very long time in the dark, and I hoped that the comfort and protection from this rite of love would sustain him through the difficult days ahead.

Judge Hannity made a disapproving sound as Blair was called to the front of the courtroom.

Once there, Blair's code was copied into court records and his name and class were announced, as well as the fact that he was currently serving a twenty-five year sentence as a guide to Detective James Joseph Ellison, sentinel.

The charge that Blair Sandburg had violated his probation and had been remanded here for the court's consideration was also read into the record by the D.A.

In less than twenty minutes, it was all over.

Blair's public defender lawyer made a cursory attempt to have the charges dropped due to extenuating circumstances. But even though Blair's actions had resulted in my life being saved, and I was called to testify to that effect, it had no bearing on the judge's decision.

He re-instated Blair's original sentence of twenty-five years of mandatory labor and ordered him to be mind-wiped but sent to Crawford Industries, instead of the original placement with Cyclops Industries.

Blair's lawyer asked for visitation, so that I could bond and avoid withdrawal. The judge looked at Blair with contempt, and then addressed me.

"Detective Ellison, your request for court-ordered visitation for bonding or any other purpose is denied. I advise you to find a more suitable guide."

Blair appeared stoic, but I could feel his trepidation, even though this was what we had expected. I sent assurances flying to him through our soul bond. If Crawford and his Sun Patriot cronies refused to let us bond, then he'd be pulled out after five or six days.

I wasn't sitting quietly like Blair was, head held high. I made a loud protest and only subsided when the judge threatened me with contempt of court.

It didn't take much acting ability on my part to look stricken when the court enforcers pulled Blair towards the exit behind the judge's platform.

Blair turned around right before he was shoved through the door, and he locked eyes with me. Then he blew me a kiss right before the door was shut.

The judge saw him do it, and his handsome face darkened. All of us in the courtroom were treated to a diatribe on the low qualities of the bastard class.

I walked out in the middle of his ranting. I could still hear Blair's heart beating fast, and I listened as he was placed in a cell with the other poor bastards Judge Hannity had condemned this morning. Their crimes had all been petty, except for a woman who had

rolled a john and left him for dead. Most of the people on the docket had been bastards, and all the others who weren't hadn't received anything worse than a slap on the wrist. The exception had been two old bastard men: one who could barely breathe anymore, one with the shaking disease. They'd be dead within a couple of months, I thought. Their charges were dropped. Hannity's deal must have been for bastards who were capable of working.

No wonder the Justice Department had noticed Hannity's behavior; it was so blatantly slanted against the bastard class.

I was preoccupied with how Blair was doing and almost didn't notice the tall, dark-skinned boy waiting outside the courtroom. Simon's kid. I was pretty sure I knew why he was here, and I didn't want to deal with his misguided feelings.

He started calling my name, and I glared at him as I strode past. When I kept ignoring him he began dogging my steps. Finally, exasperated, I turned around.

"Did it feel good to see Blair lose everything, Daryl? How in the Hundred Worlds did you even know he had to be here today? Going to go home and celebrate? Your father won't join you. It took a while but he finally believed Blair when he said he hadn't run Yana."

I tried to step around him, but he caught my arm. I tried to shake him loose, but he wasn't making it easy.

"You're better off without him, Detective Ellison. He told me himself that he'd made mistakes, and he's just getting what he deserves. I'm glad he's going to lose his mind. My friend lost his and it was all Sandburg's fault. I hate him, the lousy bastard."

I broke free and stepped away from him. If he kept pushing at me, I would do something I would regret. Simon was my friend and Daryl was his son. And he was just a punk kid who'd been hurt by that damned drug.

But I wasn't going to let him say shit about Blair.

"Blair feels responsible for Yana coming to New Rainier because he's a decent man, but he didn't do anything wrong. What he did was trust that a girl and her brother were who they said they were, and he gave them passage on his bird in return for the brother doing some repair work on it. He didn't know that the brother altered the hold to secretly carry the plants that are made into Yana. He didn't know. He was duped, but he thinks he should have been more careful, less trusting, that he shouldn't have bartered with them. He feels responsible, but he wasn't. He wasn't, Daryl, and from now on you should just stay away from me because I doubt I can hold my temper if you keep accusing him when he's innocent. Sentinel, remember? I *know* when someone's lying."

I left him gaping at me and headed for my vehicle. While Blair was waiting to be sent for mind-wiping, I'd be meeting with Connor, my new wife.

PART FOUR

“Jimbo.” Connor, tall and grinning fiercely, let me in the door and then punched me on the arm. Her normally auburn hair had been dyed a dull brown. She was still a good-looking woman, despite the hack job inflicted on her hair, and once I might have let myself feel an attraction for her. Before I'd met Blair, if I did go for a woman, they had almost always been tall red-heads. We'd have crashed and burned in record time, though.

She never bickered with Blair the way she did with me, although she insisted on calling him “Sandy.” When they'd trained together at the Academy she'd tried to keep him under her wing, but Blair had proved he was capable of fighting his own battles.

I'd appreciated her looking out for him, though, and by end of their Academy training we were all good friends.

Now if we could only get her to stop calling me “Jimbo” and Blair, “Sandy.”

I scanned the shabby little place she would be staying at when she wasn't being a lowly hired caretaker for Crawford Industries.

“We should take a stroll down the street, let the nosy neighbors see my husband so they won't be calling the protectors when you show up on the doorstep in the middle of the night.” She'd started to grin again when the word “husband” had left her lips. It was an amusing concept. Megan Connor and I wouldn't have lasted two weeks as a married couple. We were great friends, but she enjoyed throwing barbs at me, and I liked competing against her too much for a marriage relationship to have ever worked.

“Yes, dear,” I said, deadpan.

She punched me in the arm again, and I winced. Connor hit hard.

Grumbling, I suggested that maybe we should introduce ourselves around in a more believable fashion. We could have an argument out front on the tiny patch of grass and establish our marriage credentials that way.

Connor snickered and offered me her arm. I took it and we stepped outside and walked slowly down the street, waving at the various folks who were sitting on their porches or playing with their dogs or watching their kids play.

This little neighborhood was close enough to where Blair would be living that I could easily reach him by telepathy. If I exerted myself and discarded the sounds of the industrial machinery, I could distinguish the factory workers chatting or singing.

Connor poked me. We had crossed the street to meander back up to our little domain of bliss, and unless there was a sentinel living in this shabby area, nobody could hear us.

“What's going on with Sandy right now?” She had been hiding it pretty well, but I knew from her scent that she was anxious.

I had been aware all along of Blair's emotional state. He was nervous and worried but was handling it okay.

I spoke to him, told him Connor said hi, and asked where he was.

“I'm still in the holding cell at the justice center.”

I took a quick moment and passed that along to Connor as we headed to our new domicile. She had to get ready for her shift as a caretaker, and I had my own errand to run.

After we were in the house, Connor headed into the bathroom to take on the persona of her new cover. The NRIA techs had outfitted her with a false code. It wouldn't pass muster with a high level skimmer, but when she held her tattooed hand up to Crawford Industries' cheap model, it would register her as Meg Cook, middle common class member and a recent immigrant from Uluru. Connor had a fairly strong accent, so that had been kept the same. Blair always did say that the best lies were built around the truth.

Well, it was no lie to say that I was grateful to Connor for leaving her home and coming to help us. Blair would have someone on the inside who would stomp into the ground anyone who tried to hurt him.

I liked that about her.

Blair was still in the holding cell when I checked in with him later. I asked him what instructions he'd been given.

“They told us that after they'd compiled our records we would be walked to the other side of the building where the medical facilities are located. One stop shopping for Crawford Industries. Condemn us, make us into docile, dumb workers, and then package us up in coveralls and ship us to our new home. We'll work until our sentences are over and then some social worker will decide if we continue working there for our board and a pittance or if we can be sent to a relative's care. Legally, they can't just dump us in the street, but I bet they get around that all the time. I wonder what the average life expectancy is for a mind-wiped worker?”

I didn't like his use of “us” and “we.” *“Don't identify too much with your fellow workers. You're not staying there and you won't be incapacitated and unable to take care of yourself.”*

"Remember when Joel Taggart had me write that paper comparing our justice system with ancient Earth's way of handling their criminal population? I don't know if it would be better to be mind-wiped or have my faculties intact for the whole twenty-five years and experience the crawl of time and the danger of assaults and being raped. At least if I was mindless, I'd be in a happy sort of daze, and if I was raped I might not even realize what had happened to me. But I wouldn't be me! I won't be me for the next couple of days. What if I end up with bastard's luck and the mind-wipe is permanent? Jim, you don't have to keep me if that happens. Just stick me in a home and get on with your life. I'll understand, I promise."

"Blair, don't work yourself up into a terror attack. Don't bring attention on yourself that way. We've got people in place at the justice center and they'll make sure you're safe. And I would never turn you away for any reason. After I leave Connor's place I'm going to go and confront Crawford about permission to see you. Connor will be there when you arrive tonight at the dormitory. As a new hire, she gets the new arrivals. I know you feel alone right now, but we've got your back. Do you want to talk about something else? Having a distraction might be a good idea. Why don't you tell me about the plant teachers on Quyllur? What illness do they help and which ones have the potential to be used for new medicines?"

I had the sense that Blair was chuckling at me. *"Man, you're asking me to babble about my research? This is a golden opportunity. Usually when I start talking about this stuff, you start snoring."*

"Make the most of it, junior." If it would help Blair to not panic, I'd listen to him recite anything he wanted.

"Okay. I don't want us to get too tired from using our telepathy, but for a little while, I think I need to hear your voice in my head. So. How about telling me about your experiences with the plant-teachers Incacha taught me help wounds to heal cleanly? Did you ever use the one with the bright blue flowers that smelled so bad?"

We talked for a while until I was ready to leave to go to Crawford's office. He was calmer when we said goodbye, and I made a promise to myself that when this was over, we were going to go to Quyllur for at least a month.

The office manager of Crawford Industries, a short self-important watch dog, refused to let me talk to his boss. I wasn't surprised. I'd be showing up on Crawford's home doorstep tonight to plead my case. I did leave a voice message. I was assured that Mr. Crawford would certainly give it his full consideration.

That was a load of dung, but I pretended that his words mollified me.

I was restless and with both Blair and Connor out of my orbit for now, I decided to check in at work. I had other cases I was working on, and it would help me to pass the time.

There was no way I would be allowed into the Southside Justice Center's off-limits facilities to check on my partner, but maybe Simon had heard from the operatives assigned there to protect Blair.

Simon called out to enter his office when I knocked on the door, and he rose when I came to stand in front of his desk.

He moved to my side and laid a hand on my shoulder.

"Jim, how are you holding up?"

I shrugged a little. "I don't need to bond yet, but I, uh, I feel unsettled. Have you gotten any reports on how he's doing? I've used telepathy to keep in touch and he's still waiting to get processed."

"Stop worrying, Detective. We've got eyes on him. He's all right. He's been doing a lot of talking with the other men in his cell, listening to their fears and trying to help them adjust." Simon let go of my shoulder after one last strong squeeze.

I ran my hand through my hair. "He's a good kid, Simon. I'm not surprised he's reaching out to those other poor bastards. He's a master at hiding his own emotions, though. He's pretty apprehensive about the mind-wiping."

Simon nodded, and my eye fell upon a 3-D holo of Simon and his son. I winced, remembering my run-in with Daryl earlier today. Might as well let Simon know about it.

"Ummm, Captain?" Simon looked alert. "I got a little rough with Daryl this morning. He showed up at court to watch Blair's sentencing and said some vindictive stuff. Probably it would be better if Blair and I didn't come over for a while. I don't want to make it any more awkward for you."

"And you don't want to take a chance you'd take a swing at my son." Banks scrubbed at his mouth with one hand. "Daryl's stubborn. And he's grieving for his friend. I've told him that after considering everything, I don't think that Sandburg was guilty. But you just hold tight to your temper and I'll tell Daryl to keep his opinions to himself, because I still expect you and Blair to come over for poker. I actually think that if Daryl stops blaming Blair, that the two of them would get along pretty well. I wouldn't mind seeing some of Sandburg's work ethic rub off on my son. His mother tends to spoil the boy. If he put a little more work into his studies, he could get into a good school, have a better career than me. Not that I haven't done so badly for someone born in the common class. At least I've been able to raise Daryl's status."

Simon walked over to his personal kaffee machine, filled a cup, and handed it to me. There was no need to ask if I wanted one. We were both protectors, after all. He filled a mug for himself, too. It smelled wonderful.

“Daryl was here last week waiting for me to finish up a meeting, and he must have overheard someone talking about Sandburg's upcoming court case. There were a lot of people this morning who were upset about the news that Blair would be mind-wiped. That boy's got a way of getting people to like him.”

I gulped the kaffee gratefully. “Yeah, he does. At first, when I was investigating him, I thought maybe it was just a survival skill he'd picked up, and maybe that is part of it, but he's genuinely interested in people and what makes them tick. When he talks to someone, he shows them respect. Well, he does if they deserve it. He's fully capable of taking on bullies and cutting them down to size.”

I took a moment and opened myself to our bond, letting Blair's emotions fill me. He was becoming impatient and in the background his fears would surge and then recede, a constant wave of motion. I had no idea how things would change once he'd been mind-wiped. Would I feel the real Blair, or the artificial contentedness the mind-wiped showed to others?

Simon waved me to a chair and sat down at his desk. I filled him in on Crawford and that I'd be at the guy's door tonight. I mentioned that I might have to wave my badge around to get his attention, in case there was any flack about it.

After I'd sat for a while, brooding, Simon asked, “How about a cup of kaffee to take with you?” I got the message that Simon had work to do and told him that I had to comm a few lowlifes to get some information for the Masters and Lee cases.

I took the kaffee with me and settled down at my own desk. I could use the distraction, at any rate.

Finally, several hours later. Blair telepathically spoke, sounding casual, but I knew how he was feeling. *“They've come for me, Jim. Wish me luck.”*

I did, and hoped like hell it wouldn't end up to be bastard's luck.

“Relax,” said the bald, short, heavy-set man dressed in the practical tunic and pants most medical personal favored.

Relax? Sure. Let's see how relaxed he'd be if it was him locked into the operating chair and about to lose his mind.

The doctor had sent the guards to wait out in the hall when he'd entered the exam room. I didn't know if the guards were undercover or not. For that matter I wasn't sure if this

guy was the doctor the task force had sent. They'd promised the doctor would fix it so that I could keep control while working at Crawford Industries. Just a temporary mild-wipe, they'd said. I'd "wake up" within a few days, and the hypno-treatment would take over. I'd still look and act mind-wiped, but I could break out of it, if I wanted.

Doctor Baldy aimed a portable skimmer at the back of my hand. He hummed to himself and then read my name out loud from the holographic image the skimmer formed over my hand.

"Blair Sandburg. Bastard. Guide to sentinel James Ellison, detective, Major Interplanetary Crimes. Oh, my. That's a tough break for him. I'll adjust your neurotransmitters to compensate for the depression that you'll experience when your bond is broken. You aren't going to be seeing him again, are you? Let me check your court records."

Fiery pits of perdition, didn't this guy know the score? Was he saying that for the benefit of anybody monitoring us?

Telepathically, I yelled for Jim. I described the guy who was looking through my court and medical records and asked if that matched the description of the doctor who was supposed to operate on me. It had been somebody on the task force's bright idea that the doctor's name be kept from me. Apparently they didn't trust me to not go around blabbing it or asking for that doctor. I was afraid that "need to know" philosophy was about to blow up on me. Jim said he'd find out from Simon and for me to stall.

"Uh, hello, what are you doing?" Explaining about the various things he was attaching to my head might buy me a few minutes, although I already knew what they were. I'd done my research.

He ignored me and kept on humming while he rolled my sleeves up and unbuttoned my shirt, then he stuck monitors on my arms and chest.

"Have you done many of these, Doc?"

"Be quiet. If I want you to say something, I'll tell you." He resumed humming. So much for engaging in small talk. I might have to start yelling, but that could backfire and I might be given a drug to put me out.

Another man entered the room without so much as a polite tap on the door. He shot a worried look at me, then said to Doctor Baldy, "Excuse me, this man was scheduled on my roster."

Dr. Baldy shrugged. "You were in the restroom and I was done with all of mine. I thought I'd finish up for you. Why don't you call it a day, go on home. This one's going to be a little more interesting to work on since he's a guide and his bond will be broken. I'd enjoy the change of pace."

My heart was about to beat its way right out of my chest. The second doctor laughed and then came over and clapped Dr. Baldy on the shoulder.

“Thanks for the offer, George, but I've got this one. I've checked his records and I agree he's interesting. Don't often get guides or sentinels coming through here. Look, if you're finished with your list, then you deserve to go home early. I'll see you tomorrow.”

“Maybe I'll stay and observe.” Dr. Baldy crossed his arms. “Or contact the director. You've only been here a little over a week, and I've got seniority. I think I want this patient. We can avoid the fuss, though. Just leave him to me and be glad for the time off.”

“Blair, your doctor is taller than me, thin, gray-haired, green eyes. Stall the other one. Simon contacted our man there and he'll set things straight.”

“Umm, say, do you think I could have a bathroom break?”

They both stopped arguing and stared at me. “No,” Dr. Baldy said. “You're already wired up. Just wait.”

“You can use a urinal,” said Dr. Tall-and-Thin.

Pee in front of these guys? Not my first choice, but I would if it would buy more time.

There was a knock on the door and one of the guards who'd brought me to the room stuck his head in and pointed at Dr. Baldy. “Doc, there's a protector outside jacking your vehicle. Have you got tickets that you haven't paid or something?”

Dr. Baldy tore out of the room and the guard winked at me. The tall, thin, gray-haired doctor walked to the door and spoke to him. I heard the guard tell the doctor he'd be waiting and would take me himself to the loading pen.

The doctor, the right doctor, locked the door. He walked over to me and laid his hand on my chest.

“Blair, I'm sorry for the scare. The guard came and got me from the restroom when George decided to take over. And do you need a urinal?”

“No. Just stalling.”

He frowned, and flipped a switch on the chair. Instantly my vitals were flashing in bright colors above me. I couldn't read all of the information but from the look on the doctor's face, he didn't approve of my numbers.

“I'm going to give you something to help you relax. I need you calmer than this to start the deep hypno-treatment.” The doctor walked to a cabinet.

“Wait. Let me meditate and see if I can get things under control.” I closed my eyes and took a deep breath and let it out slowly. I had just released my third breath when there

was a cool, damp touch to my inner arm and then the prick of a needle. My eyes flew open.

“Fiery perdition, what'd you give me?” I wanted to fuss that I would have calmed down if he'd just given me a *minute* but it was too late. I already was feeling the effects of the drug.

“Gabatome. It's fast acting and we don't have time to spare. But keep doing your deep breathing. We'll be ready to start the hypno-treatment in a few minutes. In the meantime, imagine a safe place and how you would look there. Make it as rich in detail as you can. Your core personality will be inhabiting that mental space. You're going to realize everything that is happening to you but you won't really experience it in depth. Not unless you chose to override the commands I'll implant in your consciousness.”

“You're going to have me disassociate.” I heard myself say the words slowly. Calmly.

“Yes. Even in ancient times, the ability to disassociate to spare the mind from the worst effects of trauma was well documented. You'll be protected this way.” The doctor's hand were busy, various beeps and clicks emanating from the controls of the chair.

“But my body will feel everything done to it.”

“That's true. But say you are beaten; your body will feel the pain, but it will fade without leaving a scar on your psyche. When this is all over, you might feel as if you'd been in a dream, but you won't have lasting emotional trauma. Believe me, you will be in control. Think of it as holding a switch in your hand. If you decide that your body is in danger, or you have to communicate as yourself, then flip the switch and the disassociation will stop. You'll be normal again, not a mind-wiped person. But don't do it unless you're ready to be pulled out. This is a one-way switch. The hypnosis won't take effect again, unless you were to return here and I gave you another treatment.”

He patted my leg. My skin felt flushed and warm. I was comfortable, a little sleepy. My thoughts wandered to Jim, but it was too much effort to try to talk to him.

“Look at me, and keep your eyes on mine. We're ready to start. First, I'm going to do the deep hypno-treatment, then I'll implant the hearing and vision recording tech, and finally, I'll do the temporary mind-wipe”

He said, leaning over me, “The mind-wipe won't last more than two or three days, but the hypno-treatment can't be activated until it wears off. While you're mind-wiped you won't remember much about your former life. When it's faded and you wake up, you'll be in your safe place, watching everything. When you're ready to record to the chip, just think it and the chip will respond. I'll go over all of this again when you're under.”

“Dim lights, raise room temperature four degrees.” The room grew darker and warmer. I blinked, and then blinked again.

“Keep looking at me, Blair. Watch my eyes.”

He brushed the curls away from my forehead. “Ready to go to your safe place, Blair? Picture yourself there, happy, contented, relaxed.”

I remembered making love with Jim by the waterfall when we had traveled to the spirit plane. I decided I would wait there, lying back on the soft grass, enjoying the sounds and brilliant colors of the jungle birds, the rich scents on the breeze. I would dream of Jim, of how he cherished me, how his touch sensitized my skin, how good it was to feel the bond as we orgasmed.

I could feel myself hardening; there was another wet swipe on my arm, the jab of something sharp, and soft words floating into my ears. His eyes were green, and I blinked again. “*Keep your eyes on mine,*” echoed in my mind.

“You're feeling very happy now, aren't you? Think about your lover's touch, how good he makes you feel. Can you feel his touch on your skin? Good. You're good. You feel very, very good and very relaxed. Just think of him and your safe place and how he makes you feel when he touches you.”

He brushed his hand over my eyes and they closed obediently. “That's good, Blair. Keep your eyes shut now and be good for me. You're good, and it feels good when you're touched. Picture your safe place, and how good it feels to be there. No one can hurt you there, you're invisible to others, no one knows you're there. It's good to be hidden. You're happy, you're relaxed, and you're there in your safe place. It feels so good to be there, you're safe, you're warm, you're good, you're so good, you're a good boy...”

His voice kept murmuring, but it was Jim's hands on me, touching my belly and groin, and it was his mouth on my dick, so good, and the bond was so wide, so open, filling me, stretching me, and I felt myself shatter.

I fell down and down and down and when I opened my eyes the light was a beautiful blue tint and there was the sound of a waterfall nearby. I was sprawled, legs spread, against a little rise off the path to the waterfall. My shirt was unbuttoned and loose, the breeze a teasing touch on my nipples. The cheap trousers I was wearing were opened wide, inviting me to slide my hand down my belly and cup my balls and dick. I felt drowsy, warm, safe and comfortable – and as aroused as a spacer on shore leave. I knew where I was, but I was pretty sure that the spirit plane wasn't what the doctor had in mind when he had me visualize a safe place.

I closed my eyes and checked the bond; I sensed that Jim was bewildered, but fine, and I sent reassurance back. He'd been flooded with arousal when I orgasmed, and it had confused him. I yearned to talk to him, but the words wouldn't form in my mind.

Dreamily, I wondered where I was in the mundane world. How much time had passed since I'd been in the treatment room?

The last thing I really remembered was that... orgasm. I'd had an orgasm. I think. It sure felt like an orgasm. And if it was, then I'd had it while sitting in that chair, and... I'd had an audience.

I should have been embarrassed. But instead I felt comfortable and safe and the fact that the doctor had seen me like that just didn't seem to matter.

I relaxed my muscles further, using the skills my mother had taught me when I was very small. It was good to be tucked away, safe in the spirit plane. Jim had caught me here and soul-bonded himself to me, anchoring me so that I couldn't choose to die. I had been angry with him when he'd done that because I chose not to live mind-wiped. But he'd claimed me as a guide and saved me and when I'd come to love him we'd both soul-bonded. I loved it here, it was so pleasant, and when Jim found me, we would make love, as we'd done before on the spirit plane.

I was vaguely curious about what was happening to my body. I should try to find out. I closed my eyes, and *searched*.

I was still in the operating chair, so I hadn't been experiencing disassociation for very long. The doctor was talking to the guard.

"Let me get his records ready for you to take with him. It's strange, I've never seen brain wave patterns like this before in a mind-wiped patient. And yet, the mind-wipe was successful." He sounded very puzzled. The doctor started taking off the various monitors from my chest and arms. I could feel his touch. It was weird; it... didn't matter. This must be the effects of the disassociation, but he'd said I wouldn't be aware of it until after the mind-wipe had worn off. Looks like the doc was wrong about that.

The guard stepped forward, leaning over me to release my arms and legs and hips from the restraints. He waved at my groin and I followed the movement and saw that I really had experienced an orgasm. My crotch was stained and damp and now that I was checking I could smell my semen.

"I've seen them wet and shit themselves when they get put in this chair, Doc, but I've never seen one do that." He was smirking. I was disconnected from the emotions I knew I would have felt before, shame, mortification. I should have wanted to cover myself. I should have been blushing, but my skin didn't feel overheated at all.

The guard suddenly looked suspicious. "Did you touch him? Even if he had fairly earned being mind-wiped, I wouldn't have allowed that. And he shouldn't even be here. Do you know what the pretext was that got him back in court?"

The doctor shone a light in my eyes, and then moved it up and down and to the side. I tracked it with my eyes.

The doctor talked over me. "I was told that he'd broken some minor rule about his probation to save the detective who is his sentinel. And no. I didn't molest this boy. He

must have been thinking about his sentinel when I began the treatment because he got an erection and I built on that to help him to feel relaxed and safe. I only suggested he think about his lover.”

The doctor pushed a switch and the chair moved, sitting me directly up. He kept on talking to the guard.

“I've never observed anyone orgasm during treatment either. I did some research on guides when I was given this assignment. According to what I read, he shouldn't have even had an erection without his bonded sentinel present. After this case is over, I think I'll ask for permission to do some more testing with him. He's not acting in established parameters at all, and his brain waves are strange.”

The doctor handed the guard my records, a dot in a small case. “My part is done. This room is secured, so satisfy my curiosity. Are you the one who turned in Hannity?”

“Yes. I'm not opposed to mind-wiping when it's called for. I've seen it change some dangerous characters into mild-mannered and manageable people. They're as sweet as they can be when they get up from that chair. But the ones Hannity sends, I couldn't help but notice what they had in common. Poverty, and every last one a bastard. He sent plenty to Crawford's place that should have only had a little time with Community Service. Fair's fair. I got nothing against bastards, so I had a little confidential talk with somebody I trusted up in the Justice office.”

The doctor shook the guard's hand and said to me, “You won't remember me, I'm sure, but goodbye, Blair.”

The guard said, “I've noticed that the mind-wiped don't seem to remember much from day to day, except for instructions on their jobs. They really just live in the present, don't they?”

The doctor nodded, and then walked to the door, “He's all yours. See you tomorrow.” He left then and I wondered if he was right? Would I remember what had happened to me in here when I woke up tomorrow?

The guard moved closer, so that he was standing directly in front of me. He surveyed me up and down, and then he tousled my hair.

I decided to let the real me take a backseat. I retreated into my safe, beautiful forest, but I was also there in that treatment room, aware of what was happening to me. I was mind-wiped, but not... one hundred percent. Strange.

“What's your name?”

I smiled at him, feeling happy that he had spoken to me. “Blair”

“What's your last name?”

“Sandburg”

“What's the name of the judge you saw this morning?”

“I don't know.”

He nodded. “How're you feeling, young man?”

“Happy.”

“Well, that's good. Okay, let's get you cleaned up and changed into your new duds. Do you know you made a mess in your clothes?”

I found myself giggling. That was strange, but I made no effort to stop myself. I was still content to go along for the ride, and I'd let Brainless Blair do what he wanted to do.

“I'm all sticky.”

“Stand up and walk with me. At least the way you are you won't mind when people look at you and see that you had a party in your pants.”

I did as he said, smiling at everybody I met. Some of them smiled back, and that made me happy.

After he'd given me some clean, blue coveralls and taken me to a shower room, I did what he said and undressed, washed myself all over, and put on my new clothes. It made me feel happy to do what he said.

He took me to a room where there were other people sitting on benches, and I sat down, too. We all waited together. Some of them looked familiar, but I didn't know why.

After a while a big vehicle came up to the door, and a woman came inside the room and told us to get up and find a seat inside the vehicle.

It made me happy to do what she said, and it made me happy to wave goodbye to the guard.

I watched out the window as we left that big place. When we came to a new big place the woman told us to leave the vehicle and get in a line because we were at our new home.

I followed the people in front of me and walked inside the building. A man pointed a little machine he held in his hand at my head, and then he looked at it. He took my hand and touched another machine to the shapes on the back of my hand.

He slapped me on my backside when he was finished. He pointed to a tall, pretty woman. “Go stand over by her, boy. She's your new nanny.”

PART FIVE

“Connor. How did Blair look today?” I'd heard her approaching the door of our little love nest and intercepted her at the door.

It had been three long days since Blair had been sent to Crawford's, and she'd been working twelve-hour shifts, caretaking him and about a hundred other mind-wiped people.

I hadn't been allowed to see him to bond. Crawford had ignored my increasingly frantic messages to him, and if I didn't get some results within the next day then I was stomping into his office to make a real scene.

She pushed past me and kicked off her shoes and flopped down on the inexpensive couch with an appreciative groan. “He's starting to feel bond withdrawal, I think. The poor bugger's having mood swings. One moment he's normal, well, normal for dollies, and then he's rocking himself, the poor pet, with tears running down his face. So far, giving him a hug seems to snap him out of it. What about you, mate? Having any spikes or zones yet?”

“I got lost looking at the soap bubbles while washing the dishes last night. I think I was zoned for about a half hour. My comm – it was Simon checking on me – started chiming and that brought me out of it.”

I dropped down in a green armchair, worn but comfortable. “I can feel these mood swings of Blair's through our bond. I try to send him reassurance; maybe it helps. We haven't been able to talk telepathically since he had the mind-wipe treatment. He isn't receptive when I try to contact him. I don't know, maybe he's not able to think clearly enough to form messages to me in his head.”

Connor yawned. “He's eating what's put in front of him, and he's washing himself without me having to remind him. He's had more testing today. Apparently some abilities such as manual dexterity vary between the dollies and they won't put a clumsy one on a job that needs a dolly with clever hands. I looked at his test results. He's a star, even like this. Tomorrow, though, he'll be assigned to a work station. Oh, and this happened today. Made my blood boil, it did. Two smarmy types singled out Sandy and about thirty other new ones. They brought them into a room one by one and then sent them out again. I made some excuse to knock on the door and open it up, and those two gits were making holos of the dolly in the room. She was naked and posing with her hands cupping her breasts. I mumbled an excuse for interrupting them and shut the door. All of the dollies in line were attractive and young. Like Sandy.”

I clenched my fists, aching to smash those men who'd made Blair show them his body, touched him to pose him, made him hold his dick in his hands and smile. When this was over I was tracking down every one of those holos and destroying them. And maybe the photographers.

Connor got up and laid a hand on my shoulder. “We'll get them, Jim. And Sandy won't disappear into some unknown whore-house. Not on our watch. If we lose contact, then Community Service can track him through his bone beacon, if his frequency is put back on monitoring status.”

As part of his cover, he'd been automatically dismissed from Community Service's probation program before he was sent to Crawford Industries, and his beacon's frequency had been removed from the monitoring program.

Connor went into the kitchen and returned with a glass of water. She drank half of it, then set the cup down. She gave me a sharp-eyed glance, and said, awkwardly, “The task force has people in place to pose as customers, and when they're shown Sandy's picture they'll book him. And you'll be able to see him soon. Kincaid's not the sort to waste a valuable tool like you. He'll have a pipeline coming straight from headquarters to him and his bigoted group.”

She sighed. “I just don't understand his kind of thinking; he needs to be taken down.”

I looked up at her, and she looked determined. Megan Connor was tough, but fair, and hadn't grown up steeped in the classism that was rampant throughout the Hundred Worlds' culture, especially here on New Rainier. She didn't look at bastards as the dregs of society.

Kincaid did. His whole manifesto was based on keeping bastards from obtaining any privileges. Privileges. Wrong word. And I hadn't even realized it when I'd first thought it. Blair, if he'd heard me, would have pointed out that the “rights” the elite and superior classes took for granted, when applied to the bastard class, and in some things, the common class, suddenly morphed into “privileges.” Since Blair had become my guide, there were a lot of things I was seeing now through his eyes, and it wasn't a very scenic view.

The Sunrise Patriots were against any programs like the ones Blair had enrolled in that helped educate bastards so that they could move out of their class. Kincaid's most extreme position was that all bastards should be sterilized and mind-wiped, not just those who committed a crime.

In essence, Kincaid stood for reducing the bastard class to slaves.

Unfortunately, he had his share of supporters, and it wasn't hard to see why Crawford had joined him. More mindless slaves for him to use to increase production at his factories and on his agri-farms.

Connor yawned again, reminding me that she'd worked through the night.

I pointed to her bedroom door. “Get some sleep. I'm going to MIC to report in to Captain Banks, and I'll include what you've told me. Then I'm dogging Crawford's footsteps. I've got to bring enough attention to myself so that Kincaid hears about it. I'm going to have

Justice pull Blair out in three more days if we haven't bonded. He'll only get a year off his sentence, instead of ten years, though."

"Hang tough, mate. I'm dead on my feet, see you later."

She went into the small bedroom she'd taken as hers and shut the door.

I checked our soul bond and Blair radiated happiness. I was starting to hate the feeling.

That night I shifted from dreaming into the spirit world, searching for Blair in the blue-tinted jungle that mirrored Quyllur's rain forests. I sensed he was near the waterfall, but try as I might, I couldn't find him. I used all my senses, but it was like he was a ghost to me. Sometimes it seemed as if I caught his scent on the breeze, but it would be gone before I could track it to him. Frustrated, I ended my spirit walk and returned to broken dreams, confused and lonely.

"Jim!"

I sat up in bed, groggy, and looked around for Blair. It was dawn, and the birds outside were starting to sing. Blair got annoyed when they woke him up, but I didn't mind. Their ancestors had come to New Rainier along with mine long ago, across the vast reaches of space. I liked knowing that about them.

I got out of bed and stretched and remembered just where Blair was this morning.

"Jim, wake up! Man, I'm back, I'm back, my mind isn't full of happy mush anymore. Wake the fuck up and talk to me!"

I let out a relieved sigh and a knot in my gut uncoiled. The mind-wipe had ended, just like the doctor had said it would. I hadn't realized until that moment how afraid I'd been that something had gone wrong and Blair would remain a brainless sweet shell of himself for the rest of his life.

"Blair, are you okay? Where are you? How much do you remember about the last couple of days?"

"I'm doing all right. I haven't been hurt. I'm in my dorm, along with about a hundred other poor souls. Everybody else seems to be asleep on mats. Megan's here; I can see her sitting at a desk. And I do remember what happened over the last few days. Jim, a couple of men took my picture. Uh, they told me to do things and I did them. I smiled while they were exploiting me. It just didn't bother me, and it's really strange, but it still doesn't bother me that they posed me as if I was a cash boy."

It made me seethe thinking about how Crawford and Kincaid were taking advantage of such a vulnerable population. Knowing they were doing it to Blair made it personal. *"Connor told me about the holos and I hated it for you. Looks like you're going to be made available soon."* I grabbed a robe and walked out to the kitchen to make a pot of kaffee.

"Oh, I know it. They talked right in front of me about the prostitution ring. I recorded it. Wow. Even though I was still dopey, a part of me knew to take pictures and record their conversation. That doctor knew his business. All I have to do is think a command and a copy of what I'm seeing and hearing goes to the chip."

"Are you sure it's working?" Kaffee made, I knocked back the first cup and re-filled it, feeling myself starting to really wake up.

"I can review the recordings, some sort of feedback loop. Really fascinating technology. Today I'm going to snoop around the offices here. Even if I'm caught, the managers will just think I'm a lost dolly. I can't override the hypno treatment and talk directly to Megan as myself; I won't have the benefit of naturally acting mind-wiped anymore if I do. Can you comm her, pass along that I can think for myself again? Tell her to back my play. I'm going to get cleaning supplies and check out the offices before people show up for work."

We talked a little longer, but I didn't want Blair to become tired, so reluctantly I said good-bye.

I commed Connor and told her Blair was no longer mind-wiped and would be looking for evidence. She was as relieved as me to hear it. She'd have his back, and I was grateful to her.

At least Blair was able to do things now to move this case along. I was stuck until Kincaid decided to let me bond with Blair as a bribe. I'd be in his pocket then, or so we hoped he'd think. His offer had better come soon.

In another day, I could feel that both Blair and I would be in serious bonding withdrawal. Maybe I'd get past Crawford Industries' security later today. The manager had barred me after the last time I'd visited Crawford's complex. Let them see a sentinel going primal to reach his guide. Maybe that would finally get Kincaid interested in me.

"Look, mate," Connor wheedled to the man blocking our entrance into the office section of the complex, "this little dolly's a real crybaby if he doesn't have a chore to do. As long as his hands are busy, he's not acting all tragic. I don't like seeing him unhappy. It's unnerving. Dollies aren't supposed to be sad. Let him do a spot of cleaning; it'll cheer him right up. He's already finished up what he could in the dorms."

I started to sniffle, and it wasn't acting. Now that I wasn't talking to Jim telepathically, I was missing him so badly that I yearned to sit down and bawl my eyes out. I had

expected mood swings since I was in bond withdrawal, but knowing and experiencing were two different things.

“I saw him crying yesterday. Why don't you tell him to play with himself, let him feel better that way? Seems as if the rest of them do it all the time.” The guard, a man in his fifties, tall and stocky, came across as tired and bored. Megan needed him to unlock the offices so I could look around, get some leads or evidence to tie Hannity, Crawford, and Kincaid together.

I began to sob, and my eyes started overflowing. It wasn't true that doing a chore would make me feel better. I'd have to fake being cheerful for a while till the mood swing ended.

“He can't, the poor little bugger. He's the one that was bonded to a sentinel. He can only get it up with that fellow.” Megan reached out and shook me a little, but that only made me cry harder.

The guard laid a hand on her arm, stopping her. “Here now, none of that. Is the baby getting on your nerves, eh, with his wallering and wailing? I remember the feeling with my young ones, but you can't give in to smacking them. You need a break, don't you? All right, I can't see the harm in letting him clean. Come back and get him before my shift ends.”

Megan turned me around and pointed to the cleaning cart I'd brought along. “There you are, now stop the blubbering. Be a good dolly and dust and sweep and polish up the offices.” To the guard she said, gratefully, “Thanks. You're a pal,” and she left me with him.

He shushed me and mopped up my tears with the tail of his shirt. Then he made me blow my nose into a wad of tissues he held to my face. He tossed them and gave me a strong hug. “Now then, come along. Once you're busy, you'll feel better.”

I wondered if the staff here, the ones that weren't abusive, tended to infantilize the mind-wiped, or was it just me that got his nose wiped and treated like a toddler? Was it easier to think of us as children, in need of comfort and structure, than to wonder if we'd really deserved to be made into dollies?

Well, this guard seemed a decent man. He unlocked a suite of offices, and I smiled at him to thank him for his kindness. He ran his hand through my curls before I went into the first room.

“Work quietly, and when you've finished with this place go on to the next room. They're all unlocked.”

He shut the door and I got to work. Holding onto a duster, I checked through the desk drawers and the filing cabinets. I didn't find anything useful there. On to the next step. Megan had secreted in the cleaning cart a tiny slave equipped with the best security

code breakers the NRIA had developed, and I used it to investigate the slave sitting on the desk. I didn't have time to read any files so I copied them to the little slave. I hurriedly finished cleaning that office, keeping an inane smile on my face in case the guard opened the door, and then went on to the next room.

I continued checking each desk and cabinet and copying files. In the overseer's office I found work assignments for the next day ready to be issued. I scanned for my name, and if the hypno-treatment hadn't kept me from reacting, I would have sworn out loud. Instead, my mouth kept turning up in a show of being a happy worker as I read that I was to be transported to Daniel Hannity's house as domestic help for the next two days.

Daniel Hannity was the judge who had sentenced me. There was a notation on the page that I'd been requested personally by the client. No charge.

I didn't know why he'd picked me, but it couldn't be for anything good. Judge Hannity hated bastards. The disdain he'd showed in court for me and the others in my class had been extreme. Still, this might be another opportunity to gather evidence against the judge.

It was almost time for the morning shift to arrive, and I finished tidying up the last office. I hadn't seen anything about the prostitution ring, and I wondered if those records were kept here. Maybe that information had been on an office slave. If so, Megan would take what I'd copied out with her when she left in a few hours.

I heard her saying hello to the guard, and I left the office and went to her.

I smiled at her and the guard. She winked at me, and said, in a syrupy-sticky voice, "Well, now, back to being happy, are we? Come along. It's time to eat and get cleaned up." She thanked the guard again and briskly headed towards my dorm. I followed her like a baby duckling did its mama, stopping when she did at the large communal shower.

The dollies hadn't left the sleeping room yet. Megan was doing me a kindness by letting me shower in relative privacy. The morning shift was straggling in, though, so she said for any eavesdropper's benefit, "In you go, and don't forget to wash your face and hair and your bottom. Then come to the sleeping room and put up your mat. I'll take the cart and put it away. Be quick, and don't play in the water." She took the cart from me, deftly palming the tiny slave I'd hidden next to the roll of cleaning towels.

I giggled for a moment, then said, "Okay," and followed her orders. I talked telepathically to Jim briefly and explained about Hannity. Jim was having a rough morning. He'd experienced my sadness, and from him it had echoed to me. He was uncomfortable, his sense of touch was spiking so much that his clothes felt like sandpaper.

He was pleased to hear about my success in checking out the offices, and we both hoped that the files contained evidence the task force could use.

By the time I'd dressed in clean coveralls and gone to put up my mat, I'd said goodbye. It made me want to cry again, but I resisted breaking down. This was the longest I'd been away from Jim since we'd bonded, and I couldn't wait for this operation to be finished.

Later, I was given a drink and a rolled up piece of flat bread that had a meat and grain mixture inside it. I ate it, smiling at everybody else sitting down on the floor with me, the mats secured on the walls behind us.

Then assignments were given out, the majority of dollies sent to their usual workplace.

I responded when an overseer called my name. My code was quickly checked, and I and five others were taken to a vehicle and dropped off at Judge Hannity's huge house.

The judge had regular servants, but since he was preparing for some big party, there was extra work to do. The other five dollies were given assignments under the supervision of the household staff.

Hannity singled me out and took me into a study with an expensive desk and elegant chairs. I turned my recording chip on, expecting him to say or do something he didn't want to be noticed.

He slapped me hard across the face. "You were a disrespectful little bastard, daring to blow kisses in my courtroom. You and that sentinel of yours. You've dragged him down to your own depraved level. The man's an elite, after all. It's for his sake that I want your bond broken. He can do better, much better. I know you don't understand a word I'm saying, but having you clean my toilets is balm for my soul." He slapped me again and I fell to the ground.

"Get up, you worthless bastard." He kicked me, and Jim's rage blazed through our bond. I assured him that I was fine, that at the least Hannity could be charged with abuse thanks to my chip.

I got slowly to my feet, and then the hypno-treatment saved my butt. I smiled at the man, even though inside of me it was the last thing I wanted to do.

"I like to work. Please give me a job to do." It was a rote phrase all of us dollies had been programmed during the mind-wipe procedure to say to those in charge of us. Us. Being treated like a dolly was making me feel like one, even if I wasn't really mind-wiped.

That submissive phrase calmed Hannity, to my relief. He muttered to himself that he had to leave for court anyway. He sent me out and a woman on his regular staff took charge of me. I spent the day cleaning bathrooms and mopping floors and washing walls. I couldn't snoop since I wasn't left alone, but I was assigned here tomorrow to help with the party. I gathered I would be kitchen help. Probably washing dishes or helping with food prep. Maybe, though, I would get a chance to hear or see something that would give me more evidence of maleficence than just being slapped around by the judge.

I woke up surrounded by medics and with the front security guard at Crawford Industries staring down at me.

I sat up and tore off the monitors that were stuck to my skin. "Okay, I zoned. How long was I out?"

A medic with a cheerful expression on her pleasant features told me that I'd been out for forty minutes. If I hadn't responded soon, I would have been hospitalized.

I got to my feet a little shakily, a medic's arm under my elbow. It burned where he was touching me, and I jerked free. I pointed to the guard. "You tell Crawford what happened here and that I'll pay him to let me bond with my guide. You tell him that if he values his skin, he'd better take that offer."

I walked away, ignoring the demands of the medics to let them check me again.

I hated feeling so vulnerable. It was the part of being a sentinel that had always put me off, so that I'd preferred to take the suppressants instead of being with a guide. Until I'd met Blair. He'd changed everything. I had to bond with him soon, or the zones and spikes would end up pushing me into a coma.

I returned to my vehicle and just sat there, unsure what my next step should be. I was halfway considering hi-jacking the transport that would bring Blair back to this complex from Hannity's residence.

Simon would have my balls if I tried it, but I was getting to the point that I didn't care.

I asked Blair for an update and he told me he was still at Hannity's place. With an effort, I told myself to hold out a while longer. If I stormed into the judge's house, he'd have me up on charges so fast my head would spin, and then I wouldn't be free to help Blair if he needed me.

If I could only find him on the spirit plane, it would help. Maybe tonight would be more successful than the other times I'd searched for him.

I went to the infirmary at work, and the doctor gave me some creams to sooth the red, itchy splotches on my skin. Simon called me into his office and set the room to the highest security level.

"Sit down, Jim. I wanted to update you. Blair's holo has been made available to those clients who pay Crawford for the services of his 'employees.' Crawford isn't tied directly to the brothel, but we've traced the business back to Crawford Industries as the parent company. To the public these cash boys and girls are presented as legitimate sex-workers. We can bust them just for using the mind-wiped as prostitutes, since they are in protected care. That doesn't tie us to Kincaid, though. Still, one of our agents has

picked Blair for tonight and for tomorrow evening, with a first option on him for the rest of the week. Tell Sandburg, all right? And don't bother asking; you can't take the agent's place. It's too risky."

I knew he was right. I was known as a detective; if I tried to buy Blair on my own, I might jeopardize the mission. I had to wait till I was approached. At this point I didn't care if I did have to pay with credits or with confidential information to be with Blair.

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak yet, and bought myself some extra time by passing along to Blair Simon's message. He was apprehensive, but not willing to quit the mission.

"Sir, Blair says he wants the agent to say something that clues him in that the guy is the right one. After the wrong doctor almost got his hands on him, he's a little leery of another screw-up."

"He's got a point. All right, tell him that the agent will say that his eyes are as blue as Quyllur's oceans."

I smiled in spite of myself. "That's very poetic of you, sir."

Simon scowled, and I detected heat rising from his skin. I swallowed my laugh, and he pointed to the door. "Out, Detective. I've got work to do."

He was right, though. Blair's eyes were as blue as the oceans of our adopted homeland.

"He's got pretty blue eyes, don't ya think?" I was staring at the man I was supposed to have sex with tonight. "Reminds me of the oceans on Quyllur."

The person who was in charge, a well groomed man who'd sniffed disapprovingly at my appearance when I'd met him, made a vaguely interested noise and then busied himself with accepting payment for my ass.

I relaxed, keeping the vacuous smile on my face. I'd been sent here after my shift at Hannity's house. Once I'd been ushered through a backdoor at this brothel, I'd been sent to shower and shave. Then a flunkie had given me an enema and had shoved lube up my ass. Again, as an observer, I was fascinated that my embarrassment levels were set to zero by the hypno-treatments mimicking the effects of being mind-wiped.

I'd brushed my hair, my teeth, and dressed in a blue loose silky top that tied on the side and matching pants that would only take a small tug to let them pool around my bare feet.

The agent beckoned me close and slid an arm around my waist loosely. He twined a curl around his finger, playing with it while the desk man put the credits into a safe box. This was a pleasant place, a large mansion and not sleazy at all, on the edge of the city

boundaries. It seemed too nice just to be a brothel. I wondered if it was used for anything else, conferences or meetings.

I'd seen about fifty other dollies here. Once you knew what to look for in their demeanor and facial expressions, they were easy to spot. Most of them were sitting on couches in several large living rooms or out in the garden area, perched on benches.

The agent touched my cheek, and I flinched. He frowned and examined my face carefully. "Hey. He's been hit. I can feel a bruise coming up. I don't pay to have damaged merchandise."

The desk guy glanced at me and shrugged his shoulders. "I apologize for that. It must have happened earlier today. Do you prefer to return him for another server?"

The agent frowned. "No, I want him, bruises included. But I've booked him for tomorrow, too, and there'd better not be any new damage when I come back. This place came highly recommended. If I opt to put some color on him then I don't need somebody's work there already. You get me?"

"Again, sir, I apologize. I'll make a note of your complaint. Where would you prefer to take him?" He consulted a slave, "We have private arbors in the garden, or public ones if you would enjoy showing him off. Also, we have private bedrooms and public ones, if you prefer that option. There's a dungeon suite open, but it probably will be taken before too long."

The agent hummed a little and eyed me up and down. "I think that I want a very private room. And I paid the full fee. I expect to be here all night. If he passes my tests, then I'll be booking him as a private companion. That means he'll be available only to me, correct? That's what I was led to believe by one of your satisfied customers."

"Yes, sir, certainly. He's a simple fellow, though." My hand was taken and my code shown to the agent. "Just a bastard. Most of our customers don't find them that interesting to be companions. If you are looking for someone who can handle themselves during social occasions and provide more interesting conversation, I can set up appointments with, ah, more suitable candidates."

The agent seemed to ponder this. He smiled. "Well, I'll consider it. You may be right for the long run. For a while, though, this boy will do."

"Sir, if I may be indelicate for a moment: your server will not be able to have an erection tonight. He may in the future, though. There are suitable substitutes for his lack in that department available in the closet for your use." He edged out from behind the small counter in the office and started ushering us out the door. "Your room is down the hall, and I assure you it's very private and soundproofed."

"Why can't my server get it up? Is he impotent?" I wasn't sure if his briefing had covered the reason, but for the sake of his cover it was a reasonable thing to ask.

“He's a guide and until his bond is broken with his sentinel he's unable to 'get it up' as you phrased it. It should only be a temporary problem.” We were walking down the carpeted hall, luxurious to my bare feet. I was smiling the entire time these two were discussing my dick. Surreal.

“Not a problem. I'll use his mouth or his hands or his ass. I might choose to stretch my legs later. And I can call for room service?”

“Of course, sir. Feel free to visit the public rooms and gardens. There's a walking trail that loops around the grounds. And the kitchen is excellent here; there's a menu and a courtesy comm available in each room.”

We stopped at an expensive looking door; the agent strode in and gazed around, checked in the bedside drawers, and nodded. He slid the man a tip, and the guy looked pleased for the first time since I'd met him.

“Thank you, sir. If I can be of any further assistance, the front desk number is listed on the comm.” He indicated one that sat on a small table, next to a menu, and then departed.

The agent riffled through the overnight bag he'd brought with him and motioned for me to move next to him. I did, and he showed me a tube of lip gloss. He held it up so I could see it better, and then he brought it closer to me.

“Pucker up, sweetie,” he said.

Smiling, I did, and he opened it up and twisted it. The colored gloss, a deep red, emerged and he carefully applied it to my lips. He studied the tube critically when he was done and then stepped back.

“Sorry. I had to check if there was any electronic surveillance in this room.” He waved the hand that still held the lipstick. “My name's Yusef. You can understand me but you can't communicate, according to my briefing. Not without ending the hypno-treatment. I'm taking point here, but if you go haring off I'll assume it's because you know something I don't and I'll cover you.”

He kicked off his shoes and took off his expensive outer shirt, leaving him in a thin, sleeveless undershirt. “I'm assuming that you're recording everything already. Look every mind-wiped person in this place in the eye, so we can document that they're being sent here from Crawford's complex.”

He looked briskly at me. “We need to make this believable. Here's how I see the time-line. You get undressed and rumple up the bed first, take a nap if you're tired. We stay in here for an hour, then I'll put on a robe and call for room service. When they bring in the food, you'll be on the bed, draped in the sheet. Flash them some ass, okay?” He pointed to his cheek and by the side of his mouth. “Kiss me here, let some of that stuff mark me.”

I stepped closer to him and kissed him twice, just as he'd asked. He grinned at me. "You are cute. If I wasn't working and you weren't already involved, I'd kiss you back. Oh, well. Anyway, after we eat, you go hide in the bathroom and I'll take the bed. I'll make sure they see that sex happened here. I've worked too hard on this case to blow it with inconsistencies. Then we'll take a tour of the place. Get as much evidence as we can. We'll tell the front desk to have clean sheets put on the bed and when we return, you can sleep. I'll keep watch."

He took my hand. "Sweet ancestors' bloodlines, I hope the task force was right and you really are in there. You've got the look of the mind-wiped with that smile. One more thing. Don't panic, but I'm going to hold you skin to skin. I want you to smell like me and me like you. As I said, I don't want any details to trip us up."

He untied my shirt and pulled it off my shoulders. Like a whisper in my mind I could feel Jim's jealousy. He wasn't doubting my commitment, but he was wishing he could change places with this agent. I wished he could, too.

Yusef skinned out of his undershirt and embraced me, and there wasn't a credit's worth of distance between us. I might not have been able to get an erection, but he had no trouble. He didn't mention it, though.

We embraced for several minutes, and then he pulled away. "Go lie down under the sheets. Get comfortable, you'll be there for a while."

I followed his orders, like the good little dolly I was pretending to be.

PART SIX

Connor found me in a zone when she returned in the morning to our lovely little house. I had sat in a chair last night looking at a holo of Blair, the first one of him I'd ever seen. Simon had given it to me along with the files on the Yana investigation, when he'd suspected Blair of being behind the emergence of "Black Plague" on the streets of Cascade.

Blair had been smiling when that holo had been taken, and it seemed to me, as I'd stared at it, that he was smiling for me. I'd gone deeper, searching for more and more details, and then I'd been lost.

She'd been worried, although she'd tried to hide it under the usual load of guff she was fond of dishing out to me.

Finally, she laid down the law. "You can't be by yourself anymore, Jim." She'd called me Jim, not Ellison, or Jimbo. I doubt she even realized she'd said it.

Maybe she had a point. I couldn't talk to Blair when I zoned, and he couldn't break his cover to talk as himself. I owed it to Blair to not stay lost in a zone for hours so, to Conner's great surprise, I agreed with her.

“Take me to MIC. I'm going to see if anything turned up useful in the files Blair copied from Crawford's. I'll tell Simon I need a minder now, and he can assign somebody to work with me. You need to come back here and get some sleep. Did Blair go back to Hannity's?”

He had, and I spoke with him briefly, mind-to-mind. The judge was gone when he arrived, so he didn't pick up a new set of bruises. We didn't talk about last night, except that they'd found a large building on the property that was being guarded. Blair was returning there again tonight. To Yusef.

I hated it.

Simon assigned Brown to stay with me, and we studied the data Blair had brought us from Crawford Industries. It was good. We had documentation for court now on how Crawford sent mind-wiped convicts in his care to brothels. Blair had been sent to a more high-class one, but there were two more that didn't bother with any niceties, aimed at the common class.

It was going to be so satisfying to bring Crawford down.

As far as a possible connection to Kincaid was concerned, a certain amount of each brothel transaction was paid to another account. Unfortunately, the credits were transferred out of the Hundred Worlds' jurisdiction, so we couldn't connect the account to Kincaid that way. Neither his nor the Sunrise Patriots' names were listed on the account.

Simon was pleased, though, and said the task force was, too. I was feeling the need to bond pretty intensely today. I was restless and my skin felt too tight. Blair was feeling withdrawal also, in the form of depression, but he was trying not to cry. He wouldn't have any support while he was at Hannity's house.

After I'd had about a dozen more spikes and two zoneouts, Henri was ready to drag me to the hospital. I couldn't allow that, though. If they drugged me into a coma to minimize bonding withdrawal, I couldn't help Blair at all. He was walking a high rope without a net and at least I could hear him call for help if he started to fall.

I was feeling more than desperate. I'd expected to be contacted by now by Kincaid or his men. I wouldn't wait past tomorrow evening and take a chance on damaging my bond with Blair. Henri went with me to Simon's office so I could inform him of my decision. Unless we bonded, or had an appointment to bond, Blair would be pulled out at the latest by midnight tomorrow. Thirty-six long hours from now.

It was close to six o'clock when vehicles started showing up at Judge Hannity's mansion. I'd had a miserable day fighting off the mood swings that were threatening to wipe the smile off my face and had been kept busy with cleaning and food prep. I'd tried to not catch the judge's eye when he'd returned to his home an hour ago.

His guests, once they'd arrived, had scattered into small groups talking earnestly to each other. I overheard a lot of the conversations, since my job was to keep checking rooms for any dirty, abandoned plates and cups and take them to the kitchen.

This wasn't a party so much as a conference that Judge Hannity was sponsoring. He was playing the role of host, welcoming every new arrival and directing them to the buffet table, but he wasn't the man in charge. That honor belonged to my owner, Preston Crawford.

I'd recognized him from holos in the investigative files. It wasn't as if he personally had anything to do his mind-wiped serfs, so this was the first time I'd seen him in person. He'd glanced at me, but I saw no spark of recognition in his eyes.

He was a well-dressed man, confident and overtly friendly with the elite and superior class members who were present. He made small talk for a while, putting people at their ease, and then he herded the fifteen guests into a side room and settled them at the large table.

I'd polished that table earlier today. I wanted to hear what they were going to discuss and went to stand by a little refreshment station. Kaffee was available as well as a selection of teas and expensive bottles of liquor.

I was wearing a shirt and trousers, the same drab blue the coveralls had been, and I'd tied my hair back. I'd been recording everything I'd heard or seen tonight, although there hadn't been much of anything except discussions on how society was crumbling. It hadn't been any surprise to me to hear Crawford expounding on the "bastard situation" as the root of society's problems. My class had become a convenient target to blame for just about everything.

I was kept busy for a short time fetching kaffee and drinks to the guests, and then Hannity had stood up and cleared his throat. The murmurs of conversation died down, and I went to stand quietly in my corner.

"I'd like to thank all of you for accepting the invitation to form an advocacy group aimed at improving society. I think that years from now, this date will be remembered by our descendents as an historic occasion in the struggle to control the bastard population. I've asked Preston Crawford to speak tonight, and to outline some proposals to push through legislature. My own project is the repeal of the law that allows bastards to leave their class to pollute the common class, and even the superior class. This, my friends, is a campaign that must be fought on many fronts. Our strength is our positions in society. Within this group are captains of industry, such as my friend Preston, and fellow judges

and lawmakers. We can wield the power to effect change, and our children's children's children will thank us and say our names in reverence on Ancestor's Day.”

He gestured to Crawford, who stood up and shook Hannity's hand. Once the judge had been seated, Crawford took over the speech making.

It was hard to listen to this swill, the same old propaganda that had been recycled for eons against a targeted group of people. I had my hypno-treatments to thank that I didn't start taking apart their arguments.

Crawford's main tactic was to show the economic advantages of controlling bastards to a much greater degree than the law currently allowed.

His holo-projections compared the costs of using the mind-wiped criminals to what he would have had to pay to employees. As questions came from his audience, he answered them, always emphasizing the profit angle. He changed tactics after he'd finished with his own finances; he showed budget figures of programs designed to help the bastard class with higher education, job training, and health care. He also pointed out how much crime was committed by bastards and the economic price associated with it. He didn't stop at just the home planet, either. He brought up figures from the more developed planets in the Hundred Worlds' system.

His pitch, boiled down, was that managing the bastard class would benefit the superior and elite classes economically, and even supply the common class with more jobs, since the positions held by the more capable bastards would then be made available to the common class.

Jim caught my revulsion at what I was hearing and spoke to me telepathically, asking if I was okay. I told him I was, just feeling disgusted by what I was listening to, but that I'd talk to him later. I wanted to be able to concentrate on what was happening in this room.

Crawford was fond of using the term “manage” to describe the policies he wanted to implement against my class. It was a white-wash kind of term.

He asked for questions from the audience and a man asked him to clarify what he meant, exactly, by “manage.”

“That's an excellent question, and here to answer it is a man who's been working to improve our society for years. Garrett Kincaid has always been a man of vision, and he's fought tirelessly to further the agenda that those of us here tonight have all committed ourselves to following. He's been on the front lines, recruiting members to stand up against the encroachment of the bastard class into the *legitimate* classes. He's willing to get his hands dirty in order to publicize his mission. You all have heard speculation, no doubt, that the Sunrise Patriots, the militia he has raised to bring justice to this planet, to all the Hundred Worlds, are behind the attacks on those ill-advised educational

centers for bastards and the social agencies who provide relief to the parasites of our fair cities and planets. This will neither be confirmed nor denied to the public. But my friends, you should know the truth. The Sunrise Patriots have taken the fight to the streets and will continue to do so, to bring awareness to the public of the bastard problem. Each charity center that is destroyed, each school that is taken out, weakens any resistance from those bastards who would oppose us. Their leaders will be eliminated.”

I recorded everything he said, and the rapt look on his face told me he wasn't just in this for the money. He was a true believer in Kincaid's message.

Crawford went on, his voice taking on a fervent quality. “Our role is not to take up arms with the Sunrise Patriots, but to supply those arms. Our aims are the same, and this alliance will help us all achieve our goals. The Sunrise Patriots are a visible symbol for the public to flock to, to support. Our work will be behind the scenes, and I consider supporting Garrett Kincaid and his Patriots to be an excellent investment. But, I'll let the man speak to you himself and answer your questions.”

He pushed a button on the wall and a holo-projector swung out of a hidden cabinet. His fingers danced over the controls, and then Garrett Kincaid's figure stood a bit away from the table.

Kincaid was not a particularly tall man. He had sandy hair, and was handsome enough, but it was the fanaticism that radiated from him through his body language and his facial expressions that one noticed about him. He was a charismatic speaker, and he used stirring language to outline the changes he proposed. He was very clear about what exactly he meant by “managing the bastard population.”

He was adamant that he and the Sunrise Patriots would wage war against the bastard class both through terrorism and the legal system.

His proposed legal changes started with taking away what civil rights bastards now possessed, such as the right to vote and the right to a free public education, even if currently it was a segregated system for primary and secondary schools. My mother and her friends had taught me, and there were no segregation laws that applied to higher education. If Kincaid had his way, that would change.

Kincaid also demanded stricter laws against bastards, with mind-wiping as the consequence. Jobs bastards could now apply for within the limits of the law would be reduced. If these bigots won no longer would a bastard be able to raise himself from his class, no matter how much education, wealth, or service to his world he or she had achieved.

There was a counter movement that advocated ending the law that stated the child of a bastard would remain a bastard, even if the higher class parent also claimed the child. Kincaid wanted that law to remain.

That would mean, if he and his ilk won that battle, that if I ever had a child that was claimed by both myself and the mother, even if she was upper class, the baby would never be freed from being labeled a bastard.

I had a vision of endless lines of mind-wiped bastards, condemned by Kincaid's and Crawford's version of a new legal system, walking into huge factory and farm complexes like the one where I was currently assigned as a convict-slave.

I shuddered, coming dangerously close to breaking the hypno-treatment by that reaction, and unfortunately dropped the expensive, delicate tea-cup that I'd been bringing to a guest. It shattered, the rich blend of exotic teas splattering across the floor. The sound brought the room's attention on me.

This was not a good thing. These men had heard rhetoric against my kind for the last hour and a half. Crawford had fed into their self-interest, and Kincaid had stirred their prejudices. I longed to run away, but I didn't break the hypno-treatment. Instead I bowed to the silent room and said another dolly rote phrase, the usual pleasant let-me-please-you expression on my face. "Please pardon my clumsiness."

I knelt and started picking up the shards of paper thin porcelain. I heard footsteps approaching and a pair of expensive shoes stopped in front of me. A hand in my hair yanked my face upwards, and my eyes locked into the furious ones of Judge Hannity.

"Get up. You're a perfect example of why the bastard class doesn't deserve to be helped."

I got to my feet and he shoved me towards the front of the room, near the holo-projection of Kincaid. Hannity addressed the group, "This is why it's a waste of time and resources to try to help any bastards better themselves. Their low nature always wins out in the end."

He shook me to make his point. "This little bastard was completing a Ph.D, thanks to the charity of misguided groups, when he was caught smuggling a terrible drug to this very city. He should have been mind-wiped then, but he'd managed to ensnare an elite, a sentinel, and tricked him into bonding with him. I've rectified that mistake, since he broke his probation. He's now one of Preston's workers, and a portion of the money he earns is being donated to the Sunrise Patriots. In the future, someone like him will never be allowed to waste resources on an education."

Crawford snapped his fingers. "It must be his sentinel that's been pestering me so much. He wants me to let him keep bonding with his guide."

I let my eyes flicker over the men and women seated at that table. I wanted every last one of them identified as Kincaid's supporters.

Hannity said, with a sneer on his face, "An elite should never have been paired with this piece of trash. Let the bond break. Maybe one day that detective will thank me."

Kincaid suddenly looked alert. “Judge Hannity, Preston, this conversation needs to be continued, but we've kept these good people from their homes long enough. Guide, drop to your knees and stay put.”

I did what Kincaid asked, while Hannity concluded the meeting by asking for financial support for Kincaid's Patriots, and everyone there transferred credits to an off world account. By doing so they'd be taken into custody for supporting terrorism. I recorded it all, including the account information. Hannity promised that they would meet again soon, thanked them for coming, and ushered them out.

When everyone but Crawford and Hannity had left, Kincaid asked for more details about my sentinel. Crawford had only the vaguest of ideas about who Jim was and what department he worked for, but Hannity accessed court records to fill in the gaps.

Kincaid's face lit up with a nasty smirk. “Ellison works at MIC. I can use a man like him. If he wants to bond so badly, he'll pay our price. I think I'll have him approached and give him a little test. The IBI arrested two of my men for fire-bombing a free health clinic that serves bastards. They weren't identified as Sunrise Patriots officially, so their brave actions were not legally tied to us. Their location is being kept secret. If Ellison can provide the site and building plans where they're being kept, then we'll let him bond with his little bastard. He'll incriminate himself, so even if he decides later to back out of the deal, we'll blackmail him into keeping the information coming straight out of the enemy's camp.”

Good. I almost wanted to thank Kincaid for taking the bait since Crawford hadn't realized what an opportunity Jim's need to bond was providing for these sons-of-space-whores. I'd talk to Jim soon, let him know that he'd be contacted shortly.

Kincaid looked hard at me, maybe trying to see what Jim saw in me. It made me feel uncomfortable, but none of them would have known that.

“What kind of work does the guide do?” Kincaid asked.

Crawford raised a finger and accessed his comm, then answered Kincaid's question. “So far, he's done cleaning and kitchen help, and he's a whore at the brothel at night. He's due there when we're done with him. You,” he said, addressing me, “return to cleaning this room, then go to the kitchen and help until your handler comes for you.”

I got to my feet, gave a slight bow, and cheerfully said, “Yes, sir.”

Kincaid was silent as I finished picking up the broken tea-cup and gathering the rest of the china to take to the kitchen.

All the time I was cleaning up, I could tell Kincaid was keeping his eyes on me.

“Mr. Natural,” he called out. I didn't respond. A mind-wiped person doesn't understand nicknames very well. Crawford and Hannity had left the room earlier, so there was no one there to tell me Kincaid meant me.

“You. Bastard guide, come over here.” This time I responded. Those two attributes were ingrained in me, and I would have known he meant me.

I stood before the holographic image of him. He could see me as clearly as I was observing him. He stared hard at me for several minutes.

“There's something about you. I'll be seeing you, Mr. Natural,” and he turned off his emitter, leaving me alone in the room.

“Detective Ellison.” Kincaid's lackey was an alert dark-skinned young man, fit and muscled, and the way his eyes skimmed the small park where he'd told me to meet him made me think he probably was one of the Sunrise Patriot's militia boys.

I nodded, and he parked himself next to me on the bench. He slipped a scanner out of his pocket and flicked it on, keeping it hidden from casual, curious eyes as people walked by us with small children in tow or running with their pets.

I focused on the sound of the scanner as it checked me for any recording devices, and the hum became louder and louder until it was all that I noticed. There were small variations in the sound, a rhythmic pulsing that I found myself falling into...

I came out of the zone to find the scanner out of sight, silent once again, and the lackey digging his knuckles into my ribs.

“I understand freezing up like that happens frequently when a bond is breaking between a guide and a sentinel. If you want to keep your bond with your bastard intact, then I want information. Fast. If it checks out, then you'll see him again, bond, fuck, whatever. Do we have a deal, Detective?”

“Yes,” I growled, wanting to release a little tension on this guy's hide.

He told me what he wanted and where he wanted it delivered. Blair had already given me a heads up, so we knew it was Morrison and Alton that Kincaid wanted released from custody. They were the two that were awaiting trial for the bombing of a clinic.

I agreed, and I allowed the true desperation I was feeling to show on my face. I needed to bond, and I needed to do it soon.

Blair was finding it harder to mask his reactions to the bond being dissolved. In the brothel last evening, Blair had ended up in a deeply depressed mood for most of the night. The operative with him had to get imaginative with requesting some items from

the brothel's dungeon to cover up the fact that Blair had obviously been crying for a good long time.

After I'd left the park I walked past where Henri had stationed himself, to all appearances just another citizen enjoying the park while using his slave.

Henri followed me at a discreet distance until I climbed into Connor's vehicle. She gave me a sympathetic nudge to the shoulder, then we went to the bullpen to meet with Simon.

It was time to close the trap on Kincaid.

"Mr. Natural. I told you we'd meet again." Kincaid moved fast, a slitherer striking at his prey, and yanked me up against him so close that our bodies were pressed together.

It was after dark, and I'd been brought to him by a handler after completing my assignment of the day of working on a factory line. The work was repetitive and wasn't complex, but it wasn't something a machine could easily do as the task required some simple judgment ability.

I'd recognized where we were when the handler had brought me here. It was the building on the outskirts of the brothel property. I'd noticed it when Yusef and I had strolled around the grounds of Crawford's fancy whore-house my first night as a pretend cash-boy.

From the task force's intelligence, Kincaid was suspected of having his main training grounds and headquarters far away from New Rainier, somewhere out of the Hundred Worlds' jurisdiction. Crawford must be letting Kincaid use this place while he was here on New Rainier, drumming up support and probably, given what he'd asked Jim for, arranging a rescue of his incarcerated men.

Kincaid's warm breath ghosted across my skin, and he suddenly buried his head against my neck.

Alarm bells started ringing for me. This was classic sentinel behavior. I knew my pheromones were screaming out that I had to bond, but I needed Jim. I couldn't bond with anyone else, not at this point, and not ever, probably, as the final wrenching apart of our bond would most likely kill me. Well, to be more accurate, I would try to kill myself.

Jim was more likely than me to die from the physical effects if our bond ended, but I'd follow him very soon afterwards. Soul-bonding had that effect, and I welcomed it.

Kincaid abruptly pushed me away. He looked a little shocked at his own behavior, and I wondered if he felt dirty for touching a despised bastard.

He pointed to a place on the floor. "Sit down. Let's see how much your sentinel does value his worthless guide."

Kincaid went to a desk and busied himself with his slave, but all the time I sat there waiting I was aware of his eyes on me. He leaned forward in his chair, as if to reduce the distance between us, but I doubted he realized what he was doing.

Kincaid must have sentinel genes, too; either he was latent and they hadn't expressed yet, or he was taking suppressants and the shot was wearing off.

This was a wrinkle we hadn't planned for at all, and I spoke with Jim mind to mind, telling him what I'd learned. Jim was not pleased to learn another sentinel was taking an interest in me.

I sat, quiet as a hush-a-bye bird, and waited for my sentinel to come.

Nobody pays attention to you when you're mind-wiped. I might as well have been a dog, considering how openly Kincaid talked to his men in front of me. I recorded it all, names, places, plans of destruction. I learned that Jim had come through with the information Kincaid had asked for, and he'd been recorded turning it over to one of Kincaid's lieutenants. Kincaid had been given the packet, and he studied it carefully.

I sat cross-legged on the floor and tried to not start sniffing again. I hated these crying jags I would fall into, hated to be seen that way, but sometimes they were stronger than I was and my tears would start flowing like a waterfall. Last night, Yusef had been perplexed and embarrassed for me, but he'd been kind. He'd tried to help, gave me wet wash clothes for my face, and ended up patting me on the back as I cried into my pillow, a miserable lump on the bed.

I thought Kincaid's response to me bawling would be more along the lines of that if I wanted to cry, he'd give me something to really cry about.

"Please, Jim. Tell me that you're on your way. Kincaid wants to see you, torment you before letting us bond, but if I can't touch you soon and feel our bond healing, I'm going to lose my mind. I'm a wreck, even if I'm sitting here smiling to myself."

"Hang on, sweetheart. I'll be there soon. I've been blindfolded and I'm traveling in a vehicle. Like a blindfold could stop me from figuring out where we're going. These clowns obviously haven't had any practical experience with sentinels."

He talked to me telepathically for a while longer, but it's tiring to do it for very long and I didn't want Jim to have to deal with Kincaid feeling exhausted. He was already at a disadvantage because of the bond starting to fret away.

I decided enough was enough and that it was time for a respite. I returned to my quiet, safe haven on the spirit plane. The waterfall was just as lovely as before, the bird song as beautiful as always. I reclined on my little hill, cushioned by the vegetation on the jungle ground. I was aware of what was happening back in that room, but it seemed very remote. I experienced a great lassitude, a heaviness in my groin from longing to see and touch Jim. I touched my nipple, my shirt still open, my body beckoning, waiting for Jim. He'd been searching for me, but I was hidden from him until we bonded. Then he'd come to me here, and it would be so sweet to lie with him. It would be safer to stay hidden until then. I could break the hypno-treatment's hold so easily by reacting as myself to Jim. Better he only have the mind-wiped shell of flesh there, and meet up with the real me here when we bonded.

Kincaid's men locked my hands behind my back when they took me out of the vehicle. I could smell Blair; I could hear his slow and steady heartbeat, the soft even inhalations and exhalations that told me he was deeply in this damned mind-wiped state. My Blair, the one with the vibrant personality, well, his heartbeat would have been running a marathon with anticipation for finally being able to bond.

I sensed him sending me reassurance through our soul-bond, a feeling that he was waiting, and for me to be patient.

Patience. I was out of that. I'd been kept waiting for days for what was mine, and I was in no mood to be accommodating. Let Kincaid see me snarl and get primal. It would cement his certainty that he had me by the balls. I either supplied him with what he demanded or he would withhold Blair from me. But not for long. Blair would be out of there right after Kincaid made a move to snatch his men out of custody. Kincaid would be arrested. So would Crawford and Hannity. All of their assets would be seized, if they involved profits made illegally by the use of Crawford's mind-wiped convicts. That would shut down the brothels. It wouldn't close the rest of Crawford's enterprises, though. Hannity wouldn't be found guilty of sentencing bastards illegally to mind-wiping because he'd had that option as a judge. He would be nailed on the kickbacks he received, namely the free labor and payment from Crawford. All three would be arrested on charges of terrorism, though, as well as the men and women at Crawford's party.

Two of Kincaid's thugs kept a tight grip on my arms as they marched me into the building. They shoved me into a small room and told me to wait. I heard the door lock.

I didn't wait quietly. I paced the perimeter over and over, and I heard every word Kincaid had to say to his goons.

And Blair.

He kept calling him Mr. Natural, and ordered him to sit on the edge of his desk, legs wide apart. He whispered in Blair's ear that it was a shame he was a bastard, because he smelled so good.

Then Kincaid addressed me. "I bet you've got him well-trained, don't you, Ellison? Taught him just how to suck your cock, how to lie back to get fucked. I'm touching him, Ellison, and there isn't anything you can do about it. My scent on your guide. Remember that when you're fucking him, that you're just renting the boy from now on. I'll touch him when I like, and so will a lot of other people. He's got a second job as a whore, and every client that fucks him is financing my men. But you're going to learn to live with it, aren't you? Even tainted like that you'll do anything to keep bonding with him."

I heard the sound of clothes rustling and I clenched my fists. I wanted to pound Kincaid's face into the floor.

"I'll admit that you've got me curious about the benefits of being a sentinel. You're willing to crawl to me to spend a few minutes with your guide, so that tells me how badly you want to keep being one. I'll have to think about the benefits of having enhanced senses. Of having a guide."

I heard Blair being yanked off the desk and up against Kincaid. I smelled pheromones – Kincaid's and Blair's.

Blair's were for me, his body was crying out to bond. Kincaid's... it seemed to be a mixture of attraction and an unbonded sentinel's searching for a guide.

Fuck. Kincaid *was* a sentinel, and I was guessing that this was the first time he'd allowed himself to feel as one or maybe proximity with Blair woke his sentinel side from dormancy.

"Mr. Natural, say, 'kiss me'." Blair stayed silent. I heard the sound of a hand slapping flesh. "I said to say it, Mr. Natural." Blair didn't, and Kincaid hit him again.

"I want to help, is there something you want me to do?" Blair's voice was blankly cheerful.

I couldn't take it. This room was equipped with a hidden camera so I knew Kincaid could hear me. I shouted, "Damn you to the lower regions of perdition, call him by his name, Blair Sandburg! He doesn't understand that you mean him when you call him Mr. Natural!"

Kincaid laughed, a mean, spiteful sound. "My mistake. I forgot just how *stupid* mind-wiped bastards can be. Blair Sandburg, kiss me on the lips. Open your mouth and let me in."

"Blair, I'm so sorry."

"We'll get through this, Jim. I might have to kiss him, but it's you I want."

I heard Blair comply, the sounds of lips touching and exploring and the soft growl Kincaid made when he stopped kissing Blair.

"Is this how you seduced an elite into bonding with you?" I heard Blair stagger, his footsteps uneven as he tried to catch his balance.

It sounded as if Kincaid had pushed him away. Good. Well, not good that Blair had been shoved, but anything that kept Kincaid from molesting Blair I was giving a thumbs up to, although I suspected that he had stopped because his prejudice had caught up with his gonads.

Kincaid summoned his men and told them to take the guide to the sentinel's room and to release me from the lockers.

"You've got twenty minutes with him, Ellison. And if you want to come back for seconds, then you'd better impress me with your next offering."

Kincaid left his office, the sounds of his footsteps disappearing down a hallway.

I heard the guards and Blair outside the door. I had to use every bit of will power I possessed not to rush the door and batter it down. A guard ordered me to turn around and kiss the far wall. I complied, and they came in and freed my wrists. The two men scurried a distance away, and one held up his hand as I turned to face them.

"Stay against this wall and we'll send the guide in. Make a move against us and Kincaid's orders are to break your guide's neck." I flattened myself against the wall and watched as they retreated to the door and stepped into the hall.

Blair was thrust into the room and the door was slammed shut. I was moving to him before they'd finished turning the lock.

I swept him into my arms, drinking him in with every one of my senses, even taste, as I licked at his neck. I mapped every spot on his body where Kincaid had touched what was mine. Blair's shirt was hanging open, and his nipples had been pinched up into red, hard nubs.

Moving on instinct, I roughly opened my pants and rubbed the head of my dick against my palm and fingers. I took the slick wetness and I obliterated Kincaid's scent from Blair's body, covering every place where his skin, reddened from a slap or handled by that son-of-a-space-whore, bore traces of Kincaid's own body.

Blair was making moaning, breathy sounds, but speech seemed beyond him.

Finally, I painted his lips with the pre-come on my thumb and slid a finger into his mouth.

He sucked frantically until I withdrew it, and then I kissed him possessively because he was mine; he was the other half of my fucking soul, and we were never doing this again. Not ever, for any reason, would we put ourselves through the hell of being separated.

He broke the kiss and said my name. I looked into his eyes to check if he'd switched off the hypno-treatment, but his eyes looked guileless, the blank quality still clearly present. Through the bond, I was deluged with the affection and love he had for me. I stepped back only long enough to drag my shirt over my head and fling it to the floor, then I yanked his off and threw it on top of mine.

"I'm going to touch you, Blair. I'm going to make you feel very good." I wasn't sure how much Blair understood about what I was doing to him. He seemed too submissive like this. Sometimes since he'd had the hypno-treatment, he had retreated more into the spirit plane, at other times he was mostly present in his body. I wasn't sure what he'd chosen now.

"I'm with you, man. Even if I don't look like it. Holy higher powers, I'm so ready to do this."

I moved him until his back was against the wall. I freed my dick and opened his pants and took his dick out, feeling it swell and harden under my touch. I lifted him so that we could rub against each other, belly to belly, his legs wrapped around my hips with me supporting his weight.

All the camera could record was my back and his legs. It was the best I could do for privacy. I buried my head against his neck and started to whisper to him in Sho'naken. I called him by the name Incacha had given him, Sunqu, Heart. I told him he was my heart, my soul, and I loved him. I rocked against him, over and over, breathing in the scent of him, the scent of completion as our bond, stretched to the point of breaking, snapped back to normal, and he orgasmed against me.

I wasn't quite to the mountain's edge yet, but so, so close, and I bit him gently on the thick muscle between his neck and shoulder, hearing him gasp and feeling him squirm against me so deliciously that I fell, thrusting against him as pure pleasure sent me spiraling into an altered state.

The warm breeze, laden with the scents of my adopted homeland filled me with a deep sense of contentment. I knew I was spirit walking, and that I wouldn't have long to enjoy this peacefulness.

I had been here recently, slipping into this blue-tinged world from my dreams, trying to find Blair. I had not been successful then, but now there was the barest hint of his unique flavor in the air.

I followed that scent, finally running up the path towards the waterfall where we had lain together. He would be there, I was sure, and this time I would finally see him. The bond we'd just renewed had taken down the veil that had kept me from him.

The path twisted as I climbed higher, and soon I could feel a cool mist from the waterfall. The air was heavy with the smell of flowers, but they didn't disguise the scent I was tracking.

Blair was very close. I slowed to a stalk, looking off the trail into the nearby bushes. I listened, and there was the sound of his heartbeat.

Where was he? I called out, smiling in relief when he answered me.

And there, now I could see him. He looked relaxed and comfortable, wanton as he lay there, clothes opened and head thrown back, his vulnerable throat exposed. Waiting for me.

"I have bided my time here, Enqueri. Here where it is safe for us to meet."

He was baring his neck to me and that was all the invitation I needed. I went to him and stretched myself along his side, and I took what he offered.

As we had done in that small desolate room, we renewed our bond and achieved great pleasure with each other's bodies.

Afterwards, panting and replete with satisfaction, we talked. He'd been aware of everything that had happened to him, even when the doctor had told he wouldn't come to himself for several days.

"The training from Incacha and the other shamans gave me an advantage, I believe. Enqueri, we should make plans now, before the door to the room opens and you are sent away."

"Simon told me that the task force wants to catch Kincaid in the act of trying to free his men. That would tie him to them to make a better case in court for convicting him of being a terrorist. We've got him talking about continuing his own reign of terror, but this would show him actually acting. I'm turning over the plans to transport his captured men from the IBI's secure cells in Old Portland to the Westside Justice Center in Cascade. The agents doing the transporting will take a break at a scheduled rest stop before we come into Cascade. That rest stop's been closed for renovations to the public, but it's open to government workers. All you need to do to enter is to have the guard check your code with a skimmer."

I idly let my fingers trace the whorls of soft hair on his chest and down his belly.

“When Kincaid attempts to rescue Alton and Morrison, we'll bust him. We'll have ringers for those two, so there's no chance they'll actually spring them. The real perps are going to be transported to court by a different route.

I dropped a kiss on those tempting lips, so plush and soft, then I explained the rest of the plan.

“At that rest stop, agents and protectors will be hiding in the buildings and in vehicles and in the woods behind the place. I'll be there. Once we have Kincaid, the rest of the operation will take place. The brothels, Crawford's complex and his businesses, everything will be seized. Hannity and every last one of his party guests will find themselves in custody. It's going to be massive, and all the agencies will have a part.”

I stroked his hair. “You'll be safe, either at the brothel with Yusef, or with Connor at the dorm, when we spring the trap. I can't wait for you to be really yourself again, Sunqu.”

“I know, Enqueri. But we will have the weight of ten years lifted from my sentence, when this is truly over.” He lifted his head and looked disappointed. “You must go now. There is a disturbance in the room.”

I kissed him farewell, and when I opened my eyes I was in my body and my hands were locked behind me again.

Kincaid's thugs had pulled me away from Blair and were leering, their eyes on our exposed dicks. Blair, his trousers barely clinging to his hips, looked like a debauched angel from the Old Religion myths; I asked him to fasten his pants, and mine, and to use my shirt to wipe off our bellies. He complied, his eyes and expression untroubled. I told him to put his shirt on and he did it, smiling at me and the guards.

I fucking hated seeing him smile that way, innocent and open and enticing. The guard on my left started spilling arousal pheromones, and his body heat started to rise. Blair was so vulnerable to predators like this. I turned my head and bared my teeth at the guard whose dick was coming to attention.

“I'll know, asshole, if he's touched. I sure as hell will remember you.”

The guard lost his arousal abruptly.

The other man sneered at me, though. “You aren't going to do anything, not if you want to screw him again. And he's a whore now, I hear. Lots of people will be using him. Better get used to it.”

He gave me a push towards the door. “Kincaid wants to see you. Move.”

“It's okay, Jim. Love you, man.”

“You use that safe word, Blair, if you need to. We've got enough on these guys right now to take to court.”

"I know. Be safe, Enqueri."

When the guards escorted me into Kincaid's office, he was standing by a window. He turned and eyed me coldly.

"You'll serve the Sunrise Patriots from now on, Detective Ellison. I'll want your help to free my men. When they're safely out of the Hundred Worlds' range, then you can have your guide back to fuck, for oh, let's say for the evening. Keep showing me results and you can have him for a whole night."

"I've got an idea how you can spring Morrison and Alton the day of their trial. I need to check on some details first, though. How should I contact you?"

He gave me a comm number and ordered one of his men to find me a shirt before I was taken to my vehicle. I left in lockers, but I swore that the next time we met, the lockers would be on him.

On the way to be dropped off, blindfolded again, I listened to Blair's heartbeat until I risked falling into a zone. But our bond was strong again, and I felt his love shot through it like sunlight through leaves.

PART SEVEN

"Are you warm enough?" Yusef had opted for us to move from the house to one of the private arbors after the usual rumpling and staining of the sheets. He'd booked me for the last two nights while the task force and Jim completed the plans for catching Kincaid red-handed trying to liberate his "prisoners of war," as I'd overheard him refer to the men in custody.

"I'm warm." He'd wrapped me in a blanket as we reclined together on the lounge, tucked away in a private corner of the garden. I was still pretending to be mind-wiped, but I could answer simple questions and stay in character. Thank all the higher powers that I could drop the act once the sun was up. The massive arrests were scheduled in the pre-dawn, when guards would be sleepy and the majority of Crawford's employees wouldn't be at work yet.

As soon as the trap at the rest stop was sprung, the brothel would be shut down. Crawford and Hannity would be arrested at their homes and their assets seized. The building Kincaid was using would be stormed and any of the Sunrise Patriots militia on the premises would be arrested.

Yusef had told me last night, once he'd satisfied himself that our brothel room hadn't come equipped with any recording devices, that the task force's plan was for us to stay out in the arbor, away from the chaos that was sure to happen once the IBI started

arresting the staff. When agents swept the gardens, Yusef would identify himself as one of the good guys, and I could return to being myself.

Jim had told me, mind-to-mind, that Megan was going to take out the guard in the complex's security office and turn off the alarms and jam the gates open for the protectors to swarm inside. Megan was tops at martial arts, but she also was smuggling in some items that seemed innocuous but that she could use as weapons. During our Academy training, I'd seen her pocket stick that she disguised as a key ring. She could bring a man twice her size to his knees by applying it against the right nerves.

"I think I hear something," Yusef said in a low voice. I listened, too, and it sounded like footsteps. This was it then, the raid was about to start.

Yusef was behind me, arms wrapped around my chest, and his legs bracketing me. I scooted forward and he swung his legs around to stand up just as four men entered the arbor.

I started to untangle myself from the blanket but stopped when one of the men asked if I was Sandburg.

"Who are you?" Yusef asked, and my feelings of relief did a pendulum swing.

The men ignored the question; one of them grabbed my hand and pulled a skimmer out of a pocket and checked my code.

"Who the hell are you?" Yusef demanded, an edge to his voice, and the first man took a step closer.

"It's him," the goon with the skimmer confirmed to the guy who was apparently the one in charge.

"You don't need to know. He's coming with us," said the spokesman.

"Like hell," said Yusef, and clocked the guy. I kissed my mind-wiped act goodbye, shucking the rest of my blanket off and struggling to free myself from the one who still had my wrist. Yusef was kicking ass, but he was one against four. I managed to yank my arm free by kicking my captor in the nuts, and I dove into the fight. Yusef dropped one of our attackers to the ground, and I used some of the dirty tricks Roy had shown me so long ago. Roy, an illegal boxer, had taught me them strictly for self-defense. He'd been my friend and occasional lover, and he'd stood by me when I needed help.

We needed help right now. I knew Jim was picking up on my emotions. Anger, fear, worry for Yusef, puzzlement, too. Who were these guys? They weren't the IBI, that was for sure. I was too busy throwing punches and ducking them to use telepathy, and then I found that I couldn't, as one of the goons stunned both of us. My limbs refused to work and my mind started shutting down.

I wanted so badly to tell Jim what had happened, to shout “Quyllur” to him, but I couldn't form any words in my head. My vision narrowed to a small, dark tunnel, the last thing I saw before everything went black.

“What is it, Ellison?” Gorski, built like the mountain he'd told me his name meant, scanned the sky from our hiding place at the edge of the rest stop. “Do you hear the flitters?”

I closed my eyes and concentrated on the bond, swaying a little on my feet. Something had gone wrong, Blair had been a maelstrom of emotions – anger, worry, and the overwhelming sense of “fight” and then those emotions had been blanked out. Blair was unconscious.

“My partner's been attacked. I'm calling Banks, the raid on the brothel needs to go down now!”

I commed Simon, as Gorski said, puzzled. “Partner? Do you mean your guide? How in perdition do you know that?”

I ignored him. I didn't have time to explain about how a soul-bond worked.

The protectors transporting our decoys would be here in fifteen minutes, and Kincaid planned to swoop down with three flitters and free his men from “The oppressors of the true and natural order of society.” I'd been brought back to his headquarters, blindfolded again, to finalize the plans of my betrayal, and he'd kept spouting his twisted rhetoric for my benefit.

I was sick of hearing his garbage.

Simon's welcome voice pulled me back to the present, and I told him what I'd felt from Blair.

“Jim, I'll do what I can, but timing is essential here. We cannot let Kincaid or his cronies be tipped off and have them slip through our fingers. Blair is alive, right? You'd know if he was being hurt or dying?” Simon's concern was genuine, but he was balancing that with the needs of the mission.

“He's alive. I don't know if he's been hurt. Sir, let me go and infiltrate the brothel grounds. I'll pull him out, get him to safety.”

It was my commanding officer who answered my plea. “Ellison, until I say otherwise, stay with the plan. Kincaid expects you to be at that rest stop. He could be spooked if you're not there doing your part. That's an order, Detective. But I'll make finding Blair a top priority as soon as the raid on the brothel is a go.”

“Sir, his bone beacon. Can you get Community Service to monitor it again?”

“Good thinking. I'll have his coordinates sent to your comm and mine. We'll find him. Stay on Kincaid, Detective.”

I gritted out an affirmative and dropped down next to Gorski, who wisely kept silent.

It was a waiting game now, and I silenced the voices of my fears and clung to my one hope. Blair was alive.

Kincaid had ordered me to be at the rest stop to make sure his men were rescued, even if that meant me shooting at fellow protectors. We had armament to bring down the flitters, if needed. It would suit me to see Kincaid fall to his death. It would be even sweeter to make it happen personally. Blair probably wouldn't approve, tell me it was bad for my karma, an ancient philosophy that fascinated him, but Blair was silent. This time, he didn't get a vote.

Before long, the operatives with eyes on Kincaid's headquarters sent intelligence that flitters had arrived and left again. I had commed Kincaid's contact with confirmation that the prisoners had passed the last check point on time, and that I expected them to arrive here as scheduled for their twenty-five minutes of break time. It was a three-hour drive from Old Portland to this stop, and from here another two hours to the Westside Justice Center where their trial was scheduled to begin today. I searched with my hearing and after a while heard the distant, distinct whoom, whoom, whoom, of the arriving flitters. I passed the word to get ready.

The decoys, wearing facial replications of the prisoner's faces and chosen for similar body types, were equipped with jammers to render the flitters inoperable, once they were close enough to them. They were armed and well-trained in take downs. Kincaid's amateurs were in for a surprise, confronting trained agents instead of hapless civilians.

My comm vibrated against me; hoping that it was information on Blair's whereabouts, I quickly checked it while Gorski muttered in disbelief that I was allowing myself to be distracted when we would be engaged in only moments.

It *was* Blair's coordinates, and the visual showed him not too far away and getting closer and closer. He was moving much too fast to be in a land vehicle. I joined my sight with hearing and scanned the sky. I saw three small shapes rapidly approaching, and my gut clenched.

Blair was on one of those flitters.

Dawn had broken when the large black IBI vehicle, easily identified with the official logo, checked in at the entrance to the rest stop and slowly advanced up to the building that had an open sign at the front. The other two buildings, on either side of the

bathrooms, had housed cafes and small shops for travelers to browse. They were closed for renovations. The real construction workers weren't on site, but Kincaid's men would see the tools and men and women, our backup, busily working.

Blair was still unconscious and unable to respond to my telepathic demands that he talk to me.

I was afraid that Kincaid had brought Blair along to use as a hostage to force me to do something else for him, or worse, that after the prisoners were transferred to the flitters, he would make a run to leave the planet, taking Blair with him.

I was in charge, and it would be on my command that action would take place. The flitters would be here in one minute, and I gave the order for the decoys to be walked up towards the rest rooms. Everyone was wearing protective vests, but we all knew things could go wrong. I also told them Kincaid had at least one hostage on one of the flitters. I was betting Blair was with Kincaid. The prick liked having his toys close by. I zoomed up my vision and saw that two of the flitters were built to dart easily into relatively small areas. One was quite a bit larger. It would suit Kincaid's ego to be in the larger flitter, as he would think it more suitable for a leader of his status.

The flitters started to descend between the parked vehicles and the building, trapping the four agents and decoys between them. I commed my contact on the flitter and confirmed that the group on the ground was their target. A spray of weapons fire hit the ground both in front of and behind the small group, far enough away that the decoys wouldn't be hit. Everyone between the first flitter and the second flitter fell quickly to the pavement. Both flitters settled with a thump, the rotors barely moving and the sound level dropped drastically.

Kincaid's voice boomed out of the first flitter's speakers. I was still betting he was in the large flitter that was circling around the rest stop and was relaying his message through the other flitter.

“In the name of the Sunrise Patriots, I, Garrett Kincaid, order that these prisoners of war be released from the hands of the corrupt government that pushes the bastard agenda upon society.”

Kincaid's making that statement had not been expected. So far, the asshole had been content to have his name hinted at as being a part of the string of bombings, but he'd never taken credit for any actions till now. This signaled a change of policy, a blatant step towards challenging the government.

I waited, tense, for more instructions to be given. The four agents on the ground would be the most vulnerable, and they'd bargain to move to cover as the decoys went to the flitter.

“Detective James Ellison of Major Interplanetary Crimes. Show yourself. Oh, and Blair Sandburg passes along his greetings.”

What the... That wasn't in the plans Kincaid and I had made. I was there in case things went wrong during the transfer of the decoys, not to out myself as his inside man.

I stood up, wondering if Kincaid would shoot me. But he had Blair, so I did what he'd asked. It seemed more likely he had some grandstanding involving me planned. I suspected that all of this was being recorded and would go galaxy viral as soon as Kincaid released the footage.

“Detective Ellison, no longer do you have to hide your true allegiance. As a faithful member of the Sunrise Patriots, one who has risked himself to bring us needed information from the corrupt agencies that suppress the heroes fighting to rid New Rainier society and all of the Hundred Worlds' peoples of the insidious and blighting actions of the bastard class, you are now freed to join me at my side.”

I'd been right. The asshole was grandstanding. Somehow, I doubted I was going to be a Sunrise Patriot hero for long.

The large flitter came down much lower and an emergency ladder dropped out the open doorway, dragging on the ground near the decoys and agents on the ground.

I ran over by them and said, turning my body so that our communication was private, “Follow the plan once I'm up there. I'll try to stall him, but he's got my partner. Tell Banks to track Sandburg by his beacon.”

I caught the ladder and started to climb up, the flitter rising rapidly in the air. I held on grimly and continued to move upwards. Blair seemed to be starting to come around, but confusion was the main thing I was feeling from him.

I was five or six rungs away from the doorway when one of Kincaid's goons appeared and held a gun on me. I climbed up till my face was level with the deck of the flitter and then two more goons pulled me in and flung me down so that I was sprawled at Kincaid's feet.

“Glad you could join us, Detective.” I lurched to my feet with the help of the thugs, who started relieving me of my weapons. Kincaid was staring at me, a hateful expression on his face.

“What the fuck are you doing, Kincaid? Why did you break my cover like that?” I snarled.

He snorted with derision. “Do you take me for a fool, Ellison? You weren't going to put up with having only the occasional access to your guide. After watching you with him, I knew it was only a matter of time before you stole him from Crawford and disappeared

out into the far reaches of space. You wouldn't have been any good to me then, so I'm going to squeeze a little more use out of you. You're going to make a series of holos to advance our cause. You'll help with recruiting, with your stirring patriotic speeches that I'll write for you. I'll enjoy that, hearing my words leaving your mouth. By rights, you should be one of us. You're an elite, although a poor specimen of one the way you treated your bastard guide as if he were your equal."

He waved a hand towards Blair, who was slumped in a seat at the rear of the flitter. I saw Blair's eyes start to flutter and his hand twitch.

I searched with my mind for his. "*Blair, are you okay?*"

He didn't answer me. He wasn't recovered enough yet.

"What's wrong with him?" Kincaid gave me a nasty, smug smile.

"He was stunned when my men invited him to join me. Do as I say, and we'll see about letting you bond again as a reward. Oh, and I've got plans for him. I'll explain them later. Right now, I've got men to rescue."

He ordered the agents on the ground to free his men from the lockers and to let them climb in the flitters, or be killed, his voice booming from the flitter on the ground.

The expected negotiations began, with the agents having their guns trained on the decoys, who slowly advanced towards the flitters as the agents stepped towards the cover of the buildings being renovated. There were marksmen in there, part of the construction crew, but if possible the task force wanted Kincaid's men brought in alive. If they started shooting at the agents, though, the snipers had permission to return fire.

Blair was definitely stirring now, and I heard a soft groan escape him. I tried again to talk to him, mind to mind, but he didn't answer. I didn't know if he could hear me, but I explained what was happening, in case he was able to comprehend.

I was hoping to take advantage of the confusion when the decoys attacked the flitters to take out Kincaid, his three goons, and the pilot. Five targets. And I didn't want to crash us. I had plans for Blair and me, and they didn't involve dying in a flitter or making holos for Kincaid's propaganda machine.

I knew when the decoys had acted by the outraged yells of the men in the flitters as the jammers were activated and concussion stunners lobbed into the open doors. I wasn't sure Kincaid could hear them. His sentinel senses might be awakening, or might still be dormant, but that became a moot point as one of the men below us managed to comm Kincaid and alert him before he fell silent.

I jammed my elbow into the neck of the man on my left, felling him to the flitter's floor and breaking the nose of the man on my right as I hammered my forearm into his face. Quickly, I stomped on the man on the floor, hearing ribs break, and as the man on my

right doubled over in pain, turned and kned him in the groin. His dark face turned the color of putty, and he passed out.

Unfortunately, while I was taking those two out, the third thug had time to train his weapon on me. He ordered me to freeze and then dared me to make a move.

Kincaid swore; his face contorted with fury, he ordered the pilot to abort the mission and head towards his ship.

The flitter shot up high in the sky and within seconds the rest stop was far behind us. I cursed silently, knowing that if Blair and I hadn't been aboard, our people would have brought this flitter down with the weaponry brought to the rest stop.

Kincaid trained a gun on me and said, winter in his voice, "Ellison, you're going to regret that betrayal. Bennett, move the injured to the rear of the flitter and bring that bastard with you when you return. I think it's time for some payback."

He ordered me into a seat as Bennett dragged his teammates out of the way. Bennett told Kincaid that they were both alive, but unconscious.

Blair stumbled as Bennett roughly pushed him in front of Kincaid. Kincaid put his hands on Blair's shoulders and shoved him down on his knees.

"Blair, are you okay?"

He still didn't respond, but I knew from our bond that he was bewildered.

"Keep your gun on Ellison, Bennett. I'm going to explain a few things to him shortly."

Kincaid was standing up behind the pilot. He turned around and laid his weapon on an empty seat next to the woman. "Wang, what's our ETA?"

"Sir, we should arrive at the landing site in an hour."

"Comm the crew, alert them that we are coming in hot and leaving as soon as the flitter is stowed."

"Yes, sir."

Kincaid turned and looked down at me over Blair's kneeling form. He laid his hands on Blair's head and slid them through Blair's hair, twining curls around his fingers. I longed to stop him, but the timing wasn't good. I'd grit my teeth and wait. For now.

I'd always found Blair's wild mop satisfying to caress, silky and soothing, especially when my sense of touch was strong. I had to wonder again if Kincaid was coming on-line as a sentinel.

"I have to thank you, Detective, for letting me know Mr. Natural's name. I hadn't bothered to learn it, since he was just a bastard. I recognized the name 'Sandburg' and I

confirmed just who this particular little bastard happens to be. Naomi Sandburg's natural son. The beautiful Naomi Sandburg, champion of the bastard cause in her younger years; I understand she's retired now. Too risky for her to continue to rail against 'injustice' when she's a person of interest herself for the odd bombing or two of offices containing precious genetic information."

He began caressing Blair's face.

"I hate Naomi Sandburg. She stands for everything I've fought against for all these years. She conceived her bastard as a living protest against the system that has protected the upper classes. It will give me great pleasure to let it be known that Naomi Sandburg's bastard boy sucks my cock on command. He looks good on his knees, doesn't he? Well, of course you're used to seeing him like this. Your bastard guide. But you're not used to seeing him service me. Well, not yet at any rate. Get used to it. You're going to witness it every day, until I break your bond. Please me by doing as I ask for the holos, and I'll postpone destroying it. But once your bond is gone, then I'll take Mr. Natural as my guide, and he'll learn his proper place. He'll be a slave, and the rightful order of society will be served."

He looked at me, enjoyment written all over his face. The man was an egomaniac. His mission had gone to perdition, his men captured; I hadn't heard him give any orders about warning Crawford or Hannity or the men still at his headquarters. He was more intent on besting me by abusing Blair than taking care of his allies.

Blair was swaying on his knees, and I hated what Kincaid was planning for him.

"Don't move, Ellison. I want to see you use some self-control, so I'm not putting you in lockers. Bennett, if he does move, shoot him. Try not to kill him, but if you do, that will be considered an acceptable loss."

He tilted Blair's face so that he had to look up at him. "Open your mouth, Blair Sandburg. When I put my cock between your pretty lips, you're going to suck it like a good boy. Suck it until I tell you to stop, and that won't be until I come in your mouth."

He shot one last look of triumph at me and unfastened his pants, and took out his dick. He wasn't hard yet; his dick was soft and small. He pumped himself a couple of times and then pressed his rapidly hardening dick against Blair's lips.

"That's right, Mr. Natural. Open your mouth just like that. I'm sticking my cock in your guide's mouth, Ellison. Enjoy the show."

I was told to open my mouth, but I didn't want to do it. It was so hard to think right now, but every second that went by I could feel my mind becoming clearer.

"Jim?"

"I'm behind you. Kincaid wants you to suck his cock. I'm so sorry, Blair."

"Where are we?" Kincaid's dick nosed at my lips, and I needed time to figure out what to do. I had to stall. I let my lips part and the taste and feel of him filled my mouth. He started murmuring, "suck it, suck it." He thrust it in deeper and I complied. I didn't know everything that was happening here, but I knew that Jim was a prisoner. My safe word was useless because he would never let this happen to me if he could stop it.

"Jim, what's happened? Tell me fast, so we can come up with a plan."

He did, a quick military briefing, outlining where our enemies were located and where we were headed. If we were transferred to Kincaid's ship, it would be harder to escape from him. Simon was tracking my beacon, but this flitter was moving fast and they couldn't shoot it out of the sky without killing us, too. Simon would keep the task force from authorizing that move. Both Jim and I trusted him to protect us from our own side.

I tightened my mouth on Kincaid's dick as I sucked him hard and he moved his hips against me, making triumphant, gratified sounds. We needed a distraction to turn the tables on our captors, and I would give Jim the best one I could. I explained what I was going to do and gave him a countdown. Kincaid was getting close to his orgasm, his dick was so hard and round in my mouth. I wrapped my hands behind Kincaid's knees, and in his pleasure I don't think he even noticed. Three, two, one...

I bit Kincaid's dick hard and pulled him towards me. He screamed, a high-pitched wail of agony, and tried to move backwards, away from the pain. I bit him again, blood flooding my mouth. He landed on the floor of the flitter, writhing like a nest of slitherers. I landed awkwardly on top of him, and I yanked my mouth off his dick and pummeled him, my sudden fury at his raping me giving me strength.

I heard scuffling behind me. I hoped Kincaid's screaming had startled Jim's captor and that Jim had exploded into the fighting machine I knew he could be.

Suddenly I had my hands full with Kincaid. He started fighting back and wrapped his legs around me and did something so that we flipped and he was on top of me. His eyes were wild with hate, and I head butted him. He loosened his hold on me and I scrambled out from under him and staggered to my feet. I kicked at him and he caught my foot and twisted it. Something in my leg tore, but I pulled free and moved backwards. He lurched after me and I was hard pressed to stay out of his reach. He was between me and the weapon Jim told me was on the seat at the front of the flitter.

Bennett and Jim were exchanging blows and every time I was able to glance their way, I saw they were closer and closer to the open doorway of the flitter. Jim landed a series of hits on the guy's head, and he toppled to the floor. Jim jumped over him and headed for Kincaid. Kincaid saw him approaching, saw his man down, and rushed at Jim, screaming.

I grabbed the gun and turned to aim it at Kincaid and my heart stopped in fear.

Jim had tried to jump away from Kincaid's mad rush, but instead he'd tripped over the body on the floor. He was teetering at the edge of the doorway and Kincaid gave a wild laugh and jumped over Bennett to shove Jim out of the flitter.

A wave of grief and anger washed over me so strongly that it carried me over the body on the floor and straight to Kincaid. He realized just in time that I was coming for him and tried to hit me with his fists.

He couldn't stop me. Nothing could have stopped me. I was screaming Jim's name out loud and in my mind, and I rammed into Kincaid, one hand outstretched, the other shoving the gun against him, and forced him to fall out the door to *end* him for causing the death of my sentinel.

Diverting myself to almost crash into the metal side of the flitter, but away from the door, I thought about jumping out after Jim. I was going to die anyway, why not follow him? I didn't look out. But he wouldn't want these assholes to get away, so I lurched to the pilot and pointed the gun at her.

She refused to set down the flitter at first, telling me that if she didn't fly it I would die, but I told her I'd flown flitters and was an experienced space pilot. My tone of voice or maybe the look in my eye convinced her, and she immediately started a descent.

"Blair! What's happening?"

"Jim? Enqueri? You can still talk to me? Even when you're dead?"

"What? Blair, I'm not dead! Neither is Kincaid. He's hanging onto my legs, and I grabbed the end of the ladder. Make the pilot slow down. I'm okay, though, I've got a good grip. I'm okay, Chief."

My legs became too wobbly for me stand up, and I sank down into the seat next to the woman. I kept the gun on her, though.

"Land this bucket now. But slowly. I've been through a lot this week, and I might get shaky otherwise. I'd hate to see you get shot."

She glanced at me and complied. We drifted down from the sky and I checked again, mind to mind, with Jim, hardly believing that he was alive. He reassured me that he was safe, that he'd secured himself to the ladder with lockers he still had on his belt.

A ladder. There was a ladder hanging from the flitter and Jim had grabbed it. Jim hadn't fallen to his death.

It was finished. Simon would have backup here to take over after we'd landed, and then I could wrap my arms around Jim and go home.

Me. Not a mind-wiped shell of a person. Me. Me and Jim.

EPILOGUE

Blair was looking out the window as I began our descent into Quyllur's atmosphere. His voice sounded dreamy to me as he murmured to himself, as the sight of the land and the sea grew larger to us.

“Oh, man, I am so going to be on that beach, the one where you can walk right into Quilla Rumi and eat at that fantastic little bar. I can practically taste Manoley's grilled sea bish. And they make this dessert with Agrasa and set it on fire, and it does this thing with the sweetener that is so damn good, it could make a grown man cry.”

“Anything you want to do or eat, Chief, we're doing it. We've got two whole months to enjoy being home before we're needed for trial preparations. We can hang out on the beach until your leg is totally healed, and then we'll go visit our people. Incacha will be pleased to see his son again.”

Blair turned away from the window and smiled at me. “Everyone will be glad to see Enqueri, their sentinel. And I want us to go up to our place, at the waterfall. My safe place was modeled on it, and I feel grateful to the land. I'd like to meditate there.”

“Maybe renew our bond there, too?” I asked hopefully.

Blair waggled his eyebrows at me, looking ridiculous and adorable. “Fuck like loppers?”

“Like I said, whatever you want, you've got it.”

A mischievous grin stole across his face. “I could get used to being spoiled.”

“I like spoiling you. So we're good.”

“Yeah, we're good.” He exhaled, a slow release of tension and returned to looking out the window. He kept up a running commentary, pointing out landmarks he recognized as I flew us to the spaceport.

We both deserved and needed this time on Quyllur. The aftermath of taking down Kincaid had been hectic and demanding. The arrests had gone smoothly at Hannity's home, Crawford Industries, and the brothel, with no injuries. Kincaid's men had put up a fight at his headquarters, and two of them had been killed; one of our protectors had been shot in the shoulder. Nobody had been hurt, terrorists or agents, at the rest stop; that operation had worked like a charm, except for my unexpected invitation to join Kincaid in his flitter.

After the pilot had landed the flitter, I'd secured Kincaid with the lockers that I'd used to make sure I wouldn't fall to my death while hanging onto the ladder. Those few seconds

of tumbling through the air had been bizarre, and I still couldn't remember grabbing the ladder. I'd been so tempted to just shake off Kincaid when he'd latched onto my legs, but I'd controlled myself. Barely. I wasn't a vigilante, and the thought of him facing trial and imprisonment had helped me with controlling those impulses to kick him free of me and watch him fall to his death for what he'd done to Blair.

Maybe I *had* enjoyed securing him roughly, making sure he was in no position to even look at Blair.

Blair had been a trooper. He'd helped secure the pilot and the three goons before dropping down to sit in the doorway of the flitter. He kept his gun trained on all of our prisoners, who were lined up face down on the grass, and watched me secure their wrists behind their backs and wrap their ankles in tape.

Blair was bleeding from a cut on his arm, and I could feel the extra warmth on his skin where bruises would be forming over the next few days. He'd been limping, and his face was white. There was blood smeared on his lips and on his chin.

It wasn't his. I hadn't bothered to check Kincaid's dick, but I'd seen the blood around his groin. There wasn't any arterial bleeding, or his trousers would be dripping with it. He could wait for medical attention.

I heard the sirens in the distance and warned Blair. He hadn't tried to wash his face or clean his mouth. He knew as well as I did that evidence of the rape would have to be collected first. I finished with the last prisoner's bonds and sat down next to him. I put my arm around him, and he relaxed and dropped his head on my shoulder. I took the gun from his hand and mentally told him to rest.

I kept watch, Blair almost dozing against me, the adrenaline let down and the effects of being stunned combining to exhaust him. Our relief arrived, lights and sirens shattering the peacefulness of the countryside, and soon afterwards Simon came himself. He told me he damn well planned on making sure that Blair was treated right by the other agents and the task force.

Blair asked about Yusef. IBI agents had found him, unconscious still from being stunned, and had taken him to the hospital to recover.

The next several days had been busy with wrapping up the case. We'd been transported to the hospital, and a rape kit completed. Blair's chip was removed and entered in the chain of custody. He'd turned it on during the attack at the brothel and when he'd regained consciousness it had still been recording; Kincaid raping Blair was documented in horrific detail.

The massive amounts of information on the chip would be a good part of the prosecution's case against Judge Hannity, Crawford and the group he'd formed to

support Kincaid, and Kincaid himself, as well as a host of more minor players, such as the staff at the brothel and Kincaid's men.

Joel Taggart had come by the loft, concern written all over his warm, brown face. He'd given Blair permission to leave the planet and arranged for him to have counseling. Blair agreed with that. He'd had some trouble sleeping since Kincaid had raped him, and he told me that for a while, he'd like to skip giving me oral sex. I'd told him he never had to do anything with me that made him feel uncomfortable. He said he knew that and hugged me hard.

He'd seen the counselor twice before we left, and had told me he felt better afterwards. We both would see her when we returned, but I thought that coming to Quyllur would help immensely with Blair's healing.

The debriefings and statements had eaten up a lot of our time before we went off-planet. The media was fascinated by the story and gave some much needed attention to the flaws in our justice system.

Blair had asked if the bastards Hannity had sent to be mind-wiped could have their sentences appealed. Most of them hadn't deserved that harsh a sentence, but if the law was strictly interpreted Hannity had not sentenced them illegally. Their sentences would not be appealed, but for the ones used as whores, lawyers representing their interests in a class action suit were suing Crawford to pay for their retirement and asking that guardians be assigned to look out for their well-being. The mind-wipes were irreversible, unfortunately.

One positive repercussion of this scandal was that advocacy groups were clamoring to add an automatic appeals procedure after a person, regardless of their class, was sentenced to mind-wiping. The new proposal was that before a person had their personality and intelligence altered, a panel of judges would review the case and had to jointly agree on the procedure before it would be implemented.

I was skeptical that the law would be changed right away, but at least some first steps had been taken.

Blair had met with Yusef Collins while they both were giving statements on the brothel case. He introduced me to the man, and I thanked him for being so considerate of Blair. Yusef had winked at Blair and then told me I was a lucky man. Blair hugged him before we left.

Connor was staying in MIC as part of the protector exchange program, and the three of us had spent an evening together before we left Cascade. Connor and I teamed up to make Blair laugh with our stories about how we'd gotten along as man and wife.

And I am not anal-retentive, no matter what evidence those two thought they had on me.

Thinking about that again brought a reluctant grin to my face as I did the methodical post-flight checks on our bird, now that we had landed.

“What's making you smile like that, Jim?”

“Oh, Connor and her insistence that I'm anal-retentive. You were just going along with her the other night, right, Chief? You don't think that, do you?”

Blair bit his lip, and pushed himself out of his seat.

“Chief?”

He leaned over me and kissed me thoroughly, a slow, seductive promise of pleasure to come.

“Nice kiss, junior. Now answer the question.”

“Well, let's just say that you have an incredible gift for detail, Jim. And I'm very glad that you do. Demonstrate it on me later, okay? After we go for a swim and eat and are relaxing in our beach side cottage?”

“That's a promise, Chief.”

We gathered our luggage and disembarked. I took his hand and squeezed it when we walked towards the space port to register our bird.

I concentrated for a moment on our soul bond, and Blair was feeling more relaxed and contented with each step he took.

It was good to be home again. And when we returned to Cascade, Blair would have the right to resume his studies. Joel Taggart promised to see to it that the university reinstated Blair. Since Joel had the backing of the Justice Department, and their lawyers, he didn't expect any problems.

I stopped Blair for a moment, and he looked up at me, a little puzzled.

“I just... Blair, I'm sorry. And I'm going to clear your name. You know I haven't stopped looking for leads, right?”

“I know. But you're a sentinel, not one of the gods. If we can't find proof of my innocence, at least we'll still be together. Loving each other. That's more than a lot of people have in their lives.”

He smiled and thwacked me on the chest. “And man, we are on vacation. So kiss me, and let's go. I want us to play in the waves and get baked in the sun.”

Blair's my guide. And wise. I followed his orders and kissed him, loving him, hearing the sound of waves in our future.

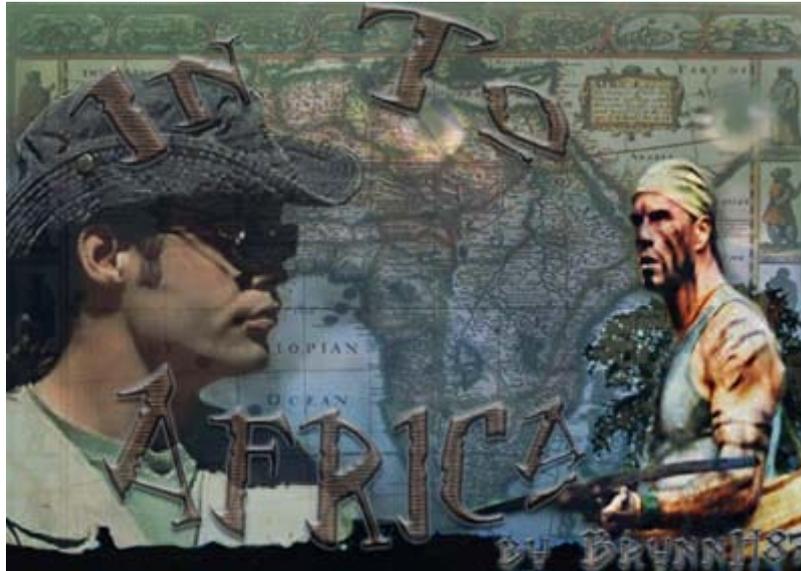
The End

Author's notes: The quote from Yogi the Wise is one from Yogi Berra. Blair's paraphrased quote regarding people not objecting to others being abused, as long as they are left alone, is based on one from Pastor Martin Niemoller on the rise of the Nazis to power.

INTO AFRICA

ART BY AERIANYA

STORY BY BRYNNH



JOURNAL - EXPEDITION TO TANZANIA:

DAY 1

I'm used to South America. I'm out of my element here in Africa. I should have told Eli to just go on this expedition without me, but what was I supposed to do? One of his kids bailed at the last minute. He couldn't find a replacement and he needed a whole team. I've been on most of Dr. Stoddard's expeditions and I couldn't leave him hanging just because I *finally* got my doctorate.

We'll see how it goes. At the very least, I'll learn a lot. Gotta love opportunities to learn.

DAY 5

Eli has somehow charmed one of the local Maasai villages into letting us stay with them. It's a really good thing, actually. With the nearest city being five hours away, we'd eat up all our time in commute, or have to try to camp and, while I'm really fascinated with all the plain's animals, I really don't want to have to try to camp among them.

The Maasai are really nice people. Primitive by our standards, but they have their own standards, their own morals, their own guiding force. Many of their younger generations are going to the cities, and taking up more modern customs, but this particular group is farther away from *any* city than most Maasai villages, so they're still pretty entrenched in the traditional ways.

The more I learn about our objective here, the more I'm really glad I came. The Maasai have just about perfected herbal medicine, if you ask me. They can cure so many things - from high blood pressure and diabetes to viral, bacterial, fungal and parasitic infections, including malaria and TB. But, their knowledge is passed down from one generation to the next, verbally; and, with so many of their younger generations leaving the village and the more traditional way of life, to live in the cities, there are fewer and fewer opportunities to actually teach the next generations. We're here to document as much of their herbal medicine as possible and preserve it for posterity.

Having grown up with Naomi, I don't put a lot of stock in modern, western, medicine, but the things these people can do with herbs and natural materials... I'm just in awe. Naomi would be too. I'll have to tell her all about all of this when I can get to a phone (if I can track her down). But, since the nearest city is so far away and there are still precious little modern amenities even there, it may have to wait a while.

DAY 28

I've been here for a month now, and it's a good thing we're writing all these herbal remedies down, because I'm still having a hard time remembering which herb does what. The local Laibon - their medicine-man/shaman, I guess he'd be - has taken me under his wing. His name is Mbiraru and he says I have the soul of a shaman and I'm destined for great things, but that I'm incomplete. I don't know about "destined for great things" part, but I *have* always felt incomplete. Even though I love Naomi with all my heart, and I truly enjoyed growing up traveling all over the world, I've always felt that there was something missing. I thought, for the longest time, that it was just that I wanted roots - wanted to stay put in one place and make a life there - but I've been in Cascade (when I wasn't on expeditions) since I was 16 and the feeling still hasn't gone away. Something about being here, in Africa, in this tiny Maasai village, feels right. I still haven't found that missing piece, but it feels like I'm a lot closer to it than ever before. So, I'm immersing myself in their customs, their way of life, and learning everything I can.

The people here, speak Maasai (or, as it was sometimes called, Maa) and I'd picked it up rather quickly, though I am still nowhere near fluent. The few schools that dot the outlying regions of Tanzania teach in Swahili or English, but this village is so far away from the nearest 'town' that most of these people didn't speak much English. Mbiraru is learning from us, though, as are most of the villagers, to varying degrees. So between my broken Maasai and his broken English, we get by pretty well.

The Maasai live in loaf-shaped houses made of mud, sticks, and grass and two more ingredients I try not to think too hard about. As with most 'primitive' tribes, the Maasai are adept at using whatever nature provides to make whatever they need. Since the Maasai are primarily herders, cow dung and urine were abundant, so they are mixed into the mud to provide extra consistency to weather-proof the Inkajijiks (the houses). I

had thought they'd stink, but it turned out that once the dung and urine dries, they don't really smell that bad. They actually did a good job keeping the Inkajijik cool during the hot days and warm during the cooler (relatively speaking) nights. Most of the students on Eli's team still complain about the smell or the heat, but I actually *love* it here.

DAY 32

My life changed today!

I had been inside one of the Inkajijiks with Mbiraru, going over a particularly complicated 'recipe' for an antibacterial salve, when we heard a commotion outside. As we came out of the hut, we saw a group of villagers pointing toward the sky and speculating on what was going on.

Eli came up to me as soon as I got outside, even before I realized what I was seeing. "Blair, that's a US military plane!" He pointed toward the area of sky that had everyone so interested.

Sure enough, it did seem to be just that. It also seemed to be in the process of crashing. There was smoke and, if I looked hard enough, even flames coming out of the engine and it was pointed in a decidedly unhealthy angle to the ground. One of the 'kids' in Eli's expedition had already gotten the jeep and Eli and I piled in with several other students.

"Mbiraru," I shouted, in my less than fluent Maasai, "Bring the salve. There may be injured." I finished the thought *if anyone survives at all* only in my head.

Mbiraru did one better and not only brought the salve, but jumped into the jeep with us.

We saw the plane crash in the distance before we were anywhere near the site. We heard it go down, and saw the explosion. It wasn't as big as I had feared and I had hope, for the first time, that maybe *someone* might have survived. Just as we came into visual range, some minutes later, we were 'treated' to a front-row seat of a bigger explosion. If there was anyone still in that plane, there was no rescue for them now. The plane was now fully engulfed in flames.

I cursed silently, and Eli did the same, just not so silently. We had been so close. We were *almost* there in time to save those people. We drove around the crashed aircraft, checking for survivors who might have gotten out in those minutes before the final explosion. Just when we were beginning to give up hope, Mbiraru saw movement close – way too close – to the flames.

We quickly parked the jeep as close as we dared and rushed toward the figure. As we got closer, we could see that there were actually three people there. Two lying much too still and one on his hands and knees, crawling ever so slowly toward the wreckage. That was the one that drew my attention. While the students and Mbiraru checked on the

others, Eli and I rushed toward the moving figure who was getting dangerously close to the flames.

Eli reached him first, and firmly held his shoulders while trying to get his attention. "Whoa, son. Stay here."

"My men," the man muttered. "I have to get..." He tried to push against Eli's hold and move toward the wreckage once again. He was much too weak to give much of a battle, though, and soon Eli had him sitting down.

It was almost as if getting off his hands and knees was a signal to his body to let go, and he collapsed to one side. He immediately tried to prop himself onto his elbow again, though, still trying to sit back up.

I tried to get him to lie down, but he struggled even more. "Hey man," I said, in what I hoped was a soothing voice, "You need to lie still. You're torn up pretty badly."

"Have to..." he struggled, with less and less strength. I could see that the man was close to passing out, but wasn't going to go down without a fight.

Fighting him didn't seem to be working, so I tried another tactic. I touched the man's face, gently turning it toward mine. "They're gone, man. No one could still be alive in there." I gestured toward the blaze.

The injured man whimpered, but then began to struggle again. "No," he pushed at me, but was rapidly losing strength.

"Look at me, man." I turned the man's face toward mine again but his eyes never left the wreckage. "You got those two out, didn't you?" There could be no other explanation. I could see the drag marks leading to each man's feet. If either man had been conscious at the time, neither had helped in their escape. This man must have made those two trips to the wreckage before succumbing to this own considerable injuries. "You did the best you could, man. These two wouldn't be alive if it wasn't for you. You need to lie down here now."

The man finally met my eyes and in that instant, I saw soul-searing pain and guilt and failure before the eyes fell shut and the man collapsed in my arms. Somehow, I don't yet know quite how, I know that this is one of the reasons I feel like I belong here. I was meant to be here for this man. I have *no* idea why I believe that, or how that would be true, but I have no doubt that it is.

Eli radioed back to the village to get the other two jeeps sent out. Mbiraru was checking over the other two, using the salve on only one. I was a little worried about what that might mean, but I was too busy trying to reassure the man in my arms as he awoke

every couple of minutes, mumbling, and distressed. When the Laibon finally brought the salve over, I asked him about the other man.

“He did not need it,” Mbiraru answered in broken English.

“He died?” I wanted to clarify.

“Enk-ai-na-nyokie has seen fit to take what is his,” He answered solemnly. Enk-ai-na-nyokie was the Maasai word for ‘god’... well, one aspect of ‘god’...the ‘red’ god who controls life and death (The Maasai have a complicated belief system – at least too complicated to go into right now. I may write a paper on that alone one of these days, but not today). I was saddened for the man himself – another of who knew how many victims of this crash – but I was more worried for the man in my arms. He was so upset that he couldn’t save the others. How was he going to feel knowing that there was one more he didn’t save.

I tried to shake it off. I couldn’t worry about that right then. We needed to get these men back to the village and do what we could for the two that were alive. I wasn’t sure what we were going to do with the one who had died.

When the jeeps arrived, we carefully loaded the unconscious men into one each, and body in the third. All the students tried to get a seat in one of the two with live victims. If it wasn’t so sad, it would have been funny to watch them push each other out the way and even out of the jeeps. I even heard one of them say “Shove it. I’m gonna walk!”

I had just unconsciously piled into the jeep with the man I had been holding, and no one was going to tell ‘Dr. Sandburg’ to get out of the jeep. But, it was obvious the kids really were not comfortable riding with the corpse, so I hopped out, leaving the man in Eli’s tender care.

“Jamie,” That was the name of the kid that was going to walk – not that Eli would have let him. “I’ll ride in that jeep. You jump in here.” Jamie virtually teleported into jeep and the three vehicles started back toward the village.

DAY 35:

We looked for dog tags on each of the three men that day, as soon as we got safely back to the village, but none of them were wearing any. That was odd. I thought military men *always* wore their dog tags. Jamie suggested that maybe their mission had been a covert one, especially since they were clearly dressed for and wore face paint for jungle insertion, not like they were going to another military base or something.

“You know, Blair,” he grinned (this kid was *rarely* serious, even about serious things), and said in an ‘announcer’ type voice, “As always, should you or any of your team be caught or killed, the Secretary will disavow any knowledge of your actions.”

I couldn’t help chuckling a little before answering. “Man, that’s not real life; that’s ‘Mission Impossible’”

“Well,” Jamie stated before walking away, “It *did* turn out to be a pretty impossible mission.”

Man, I have *got* to get that kid to serious up a little. But, he did have a point. If this team of men were on some covert op, then they may well have stripped themselves of identifying information, on purpose. Made sense ... also made it damned impossible to let anyone know who we had rescued.

Eli had headed out to the nearest ‘city’ anyway, and tried to get in touch with *some* military bigwig *somewhere*. We didn’t even know if these men were Army, Navy, Marines... hell, they could have been mercenaries who had commandeered a military plane somewhere. But, Eli was doing his best. He’d been gone for three days working the problem. We hadn’t heard from him yet, which meant he hadn’t gotten anywhere. With the city being so far away, he had made the decision, even before he left, that he would just stay there until he had something to report or had exhausted all avenues he could think of...whichever came first.

Meanwhile, I sit here next the sole survivor of the crash (the second man died just a couple of hours ago), hoping that he’d wake up and tell us who he and his friends were. We damned near lost him too, the first night back. Despite Mbiraru’s salve, the man’s significant number of wounds had gotten infected. His fever has been fluctuating between 101 and 103 for three days now.

Sara, one of the other students, just left, after starting the now familiar argument, yet again.

“Dr. Sandburg,” she had said, as she had numerous times daily for the last three days, “We need to take him to the city. Let them nurse him back to health. We can’t do anything for him here and he’s taking valuable resources from these people.”

Now, Sara’s a good kid. She has her heart in the right place. She’s truly worried about creating a hardship for the Maasai villagers, but Mbiraru is the closest thing these people have to a leader, and he wants to keep this man *here*, so he can fulfill his ‘duty’ as Laibon and try to keep him in the land of the living. I tend to agree. A five hour trip over rough terrain, in an open jeep, *can’t* be good for the man. Besides, the only ‘resources’ the guy was currently using was the salve to keep the infection at bay, and a combination of herbs said to reduce fever. That and the tiny bit of water we can get him to swallow in the few moments out of every hour or so that he’s lucid enough to swallow.

We were all hoping that Eli would be back by now, and we would be spared the decision ... not only of what to do with the man in front of me, currently mumbling in fevered confusion, but also of what to do with the second one who had died.

The Maasai don't believe in burial – except for the burial of a Laibon. I wonder if that belief grew up because the ground around here is often difficult to dig, even enough for subsistence farming, let alone to dig a hole deep enough to keep animals from the bodies; or if it was more tied to their belief that the land was sacred, and not wanting to put something into it that they honestly felt had no worth. The Maasai don't have a concept of an afterlife per se (though they think that a Laibon who has died can sometimes come back as a snake – but that'll go in that paper I write on their religion), so, when a villager dies, they are just left outside for the animals ('circle of life' kind of thing). In fact, it is considered dishonorable if the animals *don't* eat the body for some reason, so they usually cover the corpse with fat and blood from a slaughtered ox. (Man, I'm really starting to look forward to writing that paper). Only the Laibon is protected from the animals with a shallow grave and a stone cairn.

Therein lies the problem actually. Being Americans, most of us on the expedition want to bury the body (Eli had taken the first with him to try to get it sent back to the states, if he could find out who to send it *to*.) But, when I mentioned that to Mbiraru, he bristled a little and said he would have to consult with the elders. Their verdict was that since the man was not a Laibon, he could not be buried on their soil. They suggested that we follow their practices, but none of us were comfortable with allowing the body to be destroyed. With Eli gone, I guess I was in charge of the expedition, and I had just about decided that we'd just take the body to the city to meet up with Eli and see if he could send that one to the states, too ... assuming he had had any luck finding someplace to send the first one. Not for the first time, I cursed our lack of cell phone signal out here. Until Eli came back, or unless one of us met up with him in the city, we'd really have no way to know what was going on.

DAY 36:

Good news and bad news.

The good news is that the injured man's fever broke during the night and he's been awake and talking a little bit today. The bad news is, he has no idea what his name is, what he was doing flying over Africa in a military plane, the identity of the other two men who had been pulled from the wreckage, or how many people might have still been in the wreckage during the second explosion. He did remember there being a crash, and he remembered that he tried to save 'his men' (he had not remembered that he did, indeed, get two of them out before the plane was totally engulfed) but he couldn't give us any information other than that.

“Well,” I said, brilliantly, to try to lighten the mood. The man had been getting quite upset about not remembering, and I really didn’t think that was a good idea in his condition. “We have to call you *something*. How about ‘Joe.’”

The guy just looked at me so I continued, “You know, as in ‘G.I. Joe.’” He didn’t really look amused. “Well, you *are* in the military, right?”

“Yeah, I guess so, Chief,” the man said. I’m not sure how or why I got the ‘chief’ appellation. Maybe he called everyone that...you know, so he didn’t have to remember names or something.

“Well,” I continued, “Like I said, we need to call you something. If not Joe, how about Bob?” The look he gave me clearly said, *I might not remember my name, but I remember that I can kill you 50 different ways using a paperclip*. “Bill? Claude?” That one got a similar, if magnified, response. “Hey, man, I’m trying to avoid the typical ‘John Doe’ thing here. You’ve got to throw me a bone man.” He didn’t seem inclined to help, so I persisted, “Okay, you look like you work out...which, you know, would make sense if you’re in the military,” I knew I was babbling, but since I seemed to be consigned to a monologue here, instead of an actual conversation, I just kept on going. “How about a strong name ... Biff, Mack, Buck.” He continued to just look at me. “Let’s see...what other names might hang out at the local gym?”

“Gym,” He finally blurted out, so I went with it.

“You remember going to a gym?” I smiled, “That’s a start, man.”

“No.”

“Uh.... You’re kinda confusing me here.”

“Gym!” Now it was my turn to just sit and stare...though I’m pretty sure *my* stare is a good bit less lethal. While I contemplated where this conversation (was it considered a conversation if one person had *no* idea what was trying to be conveyed?) he continued. “Not *go* to a gym. Jim! Like the *name* Jim! That sounds familiar.”

Oh, I thought, *well, why didn’t I figure that one out earlier*. Out loud, I just said. “Cool, man! That’s great! We’ll call you Jim!”

“Of course,” he seemed less sure now, “I guess that could just be a name I’m used to hearing, but not necessarily *my* name. Could be the name of one of the guys on the plane with me, or my father’s name, or my brother’s.”

“You have a brother, man?”

“How the *hell* would *I* know, Chief?” He really did get *awfully* upset when he couldn’t remember. I get the sense that this is a man used to being in control.

“Well, until we know for sure,” I started, “Would it be okay if we called you Jim?”

He hung his head a little, which is **not** a good look for this guy. “Yeah, I guess so. As good as anything, I guess.”

“Better than Biff!” I tried to lighten the mood again, and this time he smiled a little.

“Yeah, I guess it **is** at that.”

“It’s Blair.” I stated holding out my hand.

He looked puzzled. “What’s Blair?”

“My name.”

“Oh!” His eyes widened, as if he hadn’t really thought that he didn’t know my name either. “Great. Good to know, Chief.”

Why do I think I’m going to permanently be ‘Chief’ from now on. Of course, **that’s** better than Biff too, so I guess there are worse nicknames.

DAY 37

Jim slept most of the rest of the day yesterday. He’s starting to stay awake for slightly longer periods of time, each time, but he’s still, understandably, confused and upset at not remembering anything. Mbiraru had a theory about that. He says that Enk-ai-na-nyokie is protecting Jim for some reason... that Enk-ai-na-nyokie has big plans for Jim and he can’t fulfill them if he remembers everything right now.

Hey, it’s as good an explanation as any.

I made a decision about the second body...I sent one of Eli’s kids into town with it. Jamie promised me his entire year’s pay for the next ten years if I picked **anyone** else but him. Somehow, I don’t think he was really serious about the money, but he **was** serious about not wanting to be in that jeep. And, this was a kid that wasn’t serious about **anything**. I’ll have to talk to him about that later, see what has him so scared to be around dead bodies. I mean, the kid’s on his way to becoming an anthropologist, and he can’t stand dead bodies? I realize there’s a great deal of difference between recently dead bodies, and long deceased skeletons ... but still.

Sara’s been trying, yet again, for me to send Jim to the city, too. He could probably stand the ride now, but something in my soul says he needs to stay here. Mbiraru agrees. He doesn’t want him to leave any more that I do, so as far as I’m concerned, that settles it...at least for now. I told Sara that until **Jim** asked to go to the city, I considered the matter closed, and I didn’t want to hear any more about it. She wasn’t happy, but I **am** senior here, so she accepted it.

DAY 47

Eli got back today. Boy does he look ragged. He must not have gotten much sleep at all. If I know Eli, he probably spent more time than just normal daylight hours. Especially given the time difference with the states, he probably did a **lot** of work at night, which wouldn't have meant that he didn't then turn around and work during the day, too.

"How did it go, Eli?"

"No one is admitting to having **any** military unit of **any** kind in the area for **any** reason." Eli was as annoyed as I've ever seen him.

"So, what did you do with the bodies?" I wondered aloud.

"Well," he started, "I have a friend at NCIS in Washington who said to send them to him and he'd get his forensic scientist on it. She can run the DNA through the military data base and see what we come up with."

"We don't even know if they **are** Navy or Marines...they could be Army. That wouldn't be in NCIS jurisdiction." I pointed out.

"Doesn't matter," Eli said with certainty. "It's off the books right now. They're just doing a friend a favor. If they find out the guys are Navy or Marines, it'll become official."

"Wow, the forensic scientist has time to run DNA for a case that's not even theirs?"

"I'm sure she's just as overworked as any other government worker...knowing her, probably even more so, but she has the energy of any ten people I've ever met. Bounces off walls **looking** for extra things to do, in my opinion."

I grinned, "Oh, so, like me, huh? The bouncy part anyway."

"Son," he started, "This girl makes you look positively sedate!"

I raised my eyebrow. "I've got to meet **this** chick."

He chuckled. "I'll see what I can do when we get back. How do you feel about sleeping in coffins?"

The laughter was just what we both needed. Dealing with Jim the last week and a half has been trying. He is cranky about not being able to remember much (although he has remembered a few minor things). He's also downright **bitchy** about not being able to get up and move around much. Mbiraru doesn't think it's a good idea just yet. We don't think anything is broken, but he had a pretty nasty gash in his side, obviously a pretty significant head injury, and his legs are just **all** cut up with what Mbiraru thinks might

be some permanent muscle damage. He's got burns on his hands and arms...not horrible ones, considering, ... but bad enough that he should take it easy.

I had asked Jim, the day after we figured out what to call him, if he wanted to try to get into town, so that he could get the better medical care there, but I explained to him that it would be a five hour drive. Jim winched at the thought of bumping across five hours' worth of Africa and not so politely declined.

His exact words were, "I can't tolerate sitting up for more than five *minutes*. How the *hell* do you think I can take five *hours* in a *jeep*?" Like I said, not polite.

You know, I'm not really sure what I see in this guy sometimes. He's pretty much been nothing but surly (at best) since he woke up. Any time I try to ask him questions, hoping to jar his memory a little, he shuts me down. What *is* there to *like* really? I realize I'm not catching him at his best, but I get the distinct feeling that he *always* tends to be a little surly and shut down.

But, I can't help the gut feeling – soul-deep feeling, really – that he and I are connected in some way. I mentioned that feeling to Mbiraru, and he agreed that we were, but was no more able to tell me how he knew that, or in what *way* we were connected, than I was able to tell myself. When I tried to explain it to Eli, he just laughed. I don't think I want to even *try* to explain it to Jim, yet.

He already does *nothing* but complain about just about *anything*. The kids are being too loud, the Inkajjik stinks. The blankets are too rough. The light (in the all but dark room) is too bright.

Jamie tried to spell me of my self-appointed 'Jim-sitting' duties by playing a game of cards with the man for a while. He told Jamie he stank. Well of *course* the kid stinks. We *all* stink. Water is a precious commodity here. Sponge baths are about the best we can do most of the time. But, Jim refused to let Jamie anywhere *near* him. He said it was more than sweat, Jamie just stank. The poor kid was crushed...well, for like five minutes...but for Jamie, that was pretty crushed.

Jim explained a little more calmly, if not much more kindly, that the smell was not sweat or feet or bad breath, but something bitter and 'herby'. The only thing I could think of that would smell any different about Jamie is that local weed he chews on constantly. It always reminded me of when I was a kid. We stayed with some friends of Naomi's for a while, who lived on a farm, and the kids there would pick the hay as it grew and chewed on it. The kids here seemed to do the same thing with certain 'grass' growing in the plains. Jamie tried it one day, just to see what it tasted like. He had said it tasted a little bitter, but he liked it anyway and it gave him something to do since Eli wouldn't let any of the team smoke. So now he chews it almost all the time. But, he didn't have any in his mouth, or even on him, when he went to play cards with Jim.

How would Jim *smell* that on Jamie? None of *us* noticed a smell of *any* kind associated with the plant or Jamie after he had chewed on it. It would be impossible for Jim to smell...

Man, I've been really blind here. All of Jim's complaints...things being too bright, too noisy, too rough, and now smell. I bet his sense of taste is enhanced too. You know, for an intelligent guy, I've been kind of dumb. My own Master's Thesis was written about Sentinels...people with all five senses heightened well beyond norm, but in all my searches for a modern day Sentinel, I never once found anyone with more than one or two enhanced senses. I haven't really even *thought* about Sentinels for a while now. I switched my doctorate dissertation to modern closed societies, and got ride along status for six month with the Major Crime Unit at Cascade PD. Seems Eli has friends everywhere and pulled some strings with the captain there...Simon Banks. They were all very good people. I miss being around them as much. I still see them sometimes, though. I consult from time to time, on cases where an Anthropology professor might come in handy, and I still actually see a couple of the guys socially. Jim would fit right in with them. Alpha males seem to be the same the world over, and they seem to have them in abundance in closed societies like the police department.

I'll have to talk to Jim about the Sentinel thing, though. That might really be the reason he's having so much trouble. I might be able to help him get a handle on controlling them better. I wonder if he had them before the accident? Maybe *this* is why I feel like I belong here for Jim? To help him be a Sentinel? Who knows.

Yeah, well, that went well. I think if Jim had more strength, he would have come after me and thrown me against the wall or something. He did *not* like the idea of being a sentinel. Of course, maybe I shouldn't have made mention of primitive man when I first brought up the idea, but hey, to me, that's *not* an insult. I mean, look at us here. We're living with a group that certainly *could* be considered 'primitive' but, if you ask me, they're more accomplished at some things than *we* are. And being a Sentinel? Who wouldn't want five enhanced senses? Besides Jim that is.

After he calmed down, it was a little better. I was able to point out the good points, and how it could be used to protect his men in the military (since I knew he was concerned about that). But, that didn't really have the effect I was hoping for.

"Chief," he started, "I don't even know that I'm *in* the military. And if I *am* I'm not really sure I *want* to be. Something about it doesn't seem right. Every time I try to think about that aspect of this whole thing, I feel...I don't know...betrayed? Angry? I don't know why."

"Man, that's a start, though." I tried to point out the bright side. "If you're remembering feelings attached to certain things, maybe the memories will come back before long, too."

“Yeah, maybe.” He didn’t seem to sound too convinced, though. “Adding this ‘senses’ thing right now, is just **not** good timing.”

“You didn’t have the senses before the crash?” I asked before I thought.

“How the hell would I...” he started.

“Know,” we finished together.

“Yeah, sorry Jim. I guess you wouldn’t know that ...yet.” I grinned at him and he actually smiled back a little.

Mbiraru heard Jim’s angry voice coming from the Inkajijiks and came over to investigate. By the time he got there, Jim’s voice had calmed down, so he waited for me to come outside before asking me what had gotten Jim so upset. Mbiraru is perhaps the only other person in the village who actually **likes** Jim. Eli tolerates him. Jamie is willing to give him another try if Jim ever lets the boy near him, but other than that, everyone else pretty much stays clear, except for Mbiraru and me.

I told the Laibon my theory to explain Jim’s complaints and his face was pretty much what I suspect mine looked like when I finally worked it out.

“Of course,” he said, “He is ɔ - † - !”

“Yeah, ummm... Mbiraru,” I started, “my Maa isn’t that good. I don’t know what that means.”

It was his turn to stumble with language. “I do not know your name for it. The ɔ - water is to refresh the herd. I think maybe ‘watchman’?”

“We call that a Sentinel,” I answered. “I’m thinking maybe we should stick to that. Jim can barely say ‘sentinel’ without cringing. I can’t imagine trying to get him to say ɔ - † - .”

The Laibon chuckled at that. “I can see your point, my friend. We will call him a Sentinel, but I will tell the elders that Enk-ai-na-nyokie has sent us a ɔ - .”

It was my turn to chuckle. “You do that. Let me know what they say.”

It turns out that what they said was that Jim should stay with them and not return to America. They said that this is why Enk-ai-na-nyokie let Jim forget his life there.

I worked up the courage to relay that request to Jim. **That** went over well, too!

DAY 50

Okay, so Jim is finally coming around to my way of thinking about the senses...well, maybe not really *my* way of thinking, because I think they're fantastic... but he's willing to entertain the notion that they're not something that can be turned off, and is starting to listen (a little) to my suggestions on how to control them. We've been doing some unofficial tests. He hates it, but he's willing to admit that maybe the tests are worthwhile.

We went out onto the plain a little yesterday and I asked him to look for game, try to smell water, etc. After all, those were the things that the early sentinels did for the tribe. He can see an *amazing* distance away, and hear just about as far.

Mbiraru thought of a test for Jim's taste and smell. Since I haven't ceased my work with the Laibon on the various uses of plants and combinations thereof, my native friend suggested that Jim could practice his gifts by trying to identify which plants were used in which 'medicine' by using either smell or taste (depending on the intended use of the mixture). Jim was less than thrilled, but was willing to try. Um....we found out that Jim is allergic (or at least has a *very* sensitive reaction to one of the remedies for skin conditions - and isn't *that* ironic. He broke out in a horrible rash and since what *caused* the rash was what Mbiraru would normally have put on the skin to *cure* the rash, there wasn't really much we could do about it. Jim made damned sure that we knew just how miserable he was.

Day 55

Jim is getting restless. He's cooperating with the tests (or practices, as Mbiraru calls them), and he genuinely doesn't seem *nearly* as upset by the senses as he was at first, but *something* has him on edge. He's started to have nightmares. We had long since moved him into the Inkajijik that Eli and I shared, instead of the Laibon's own home, so Eli and I both had a front row seat for the night terrors that were becoming a regular part of life in the last 4 or 5 days.

Jim wakes up screaming, "No!" or "Get out!" or "I'm coming! Hang on!" Those I can explain. I'm fairly certain they're about the crash. The ones that puzzle me are when he screams "You bastard!" and "How *could* you!" He wakes up with no memory of what he dreamt about, but he retains the emotion...either fear or desperation or anger. He can't explain any of it any better than I can and it's starting to wear on him again.

I can't help but think that he was starting to remember...at least subconsciously. I just couldn't figure out *what* he was remembering.

DAY 56

My heart broke for Jim last night. Eli and I were kind of getting used to the screams, but last night, Jim woke up sobbing. I mean 'just lost your best friend in the world' **sobbing!** My heart broke all the more when he let me hold him. He's just **not** a touchy feely kind of guy...well, not since he came here, at least. I'm not sure **what** he was like normally. He probably didn't either, for that matter. We sat there for the longest time...me rocking him, and him not only **letting** me, but leaning into it and seemingly gaining **some** comfort from it.

I was glad I could help, if only a little, and just when I thought my heart couldn't possibly break any more on his behalf, I realized that not only did he wake up shaken, but that he actually **remembered** what had shaken him.

"They're all dead, Chief," he had finally managed to croak out. I tightened my hold a little, and continued rocking him. "There were seven of us. We were on... some kind of mission, but Tyler...oh god, Chief...one of them was named Tyler. He...I'm not sure what, exactly. He sold us out somehow and I found out. I'm not sure how. But, I remember fighting with him. He pulled his gun and I lunged into him...just to knock the gun out of his hand, but we were too close to the front of the plane, and there was only a curtain separating us from the pilot and when Tyler fell, ... god, Chief. The gun went off and killed...god, I can't remember his name! We started to go down. I think we hit something, or... the fuel line was hit...or something...I don't know...but the next thing I knew, the engine was on fire, and we were going down." He started shaking again with restrained tears. "I **caused** it Chief! They all died because of me!"

He shut down after that. He pulled away from my embrace, flung himself onto his side, facing the wall, and hasn't spoken since. I think maybe I was wrong. My heart didn't just break last night. It's still in the process of breaking.

DAY 57

I think Jim is having a difficult time recovering from reliving the plane crash. I don't know exactly what happened, but from what little Jim **does** remember of it, it doesn't sound to **me** like he has anything to blame himself over. It sounds like he was trying to **protect** the rest of the men from this Tyler, for some unspecified reason. I can't get Jim to see it that way though.

He didn't leave the Inkajijik all day yesterday, and barely said two words in twenty-four hours. At least he came out this morning...deflated, but back among the land of the living. He's even allowing some tests, though his heart really isn't in it.

"What good are these damned senses if I can't save my men?" He finally confided.

"Jim...you don't remember exactly what happened." I tried to reason with him. "For all you know, the reason you knew that Tyler had sold you out had something to do with your senses."

“Yeah,” he snorted, “And look how good **that** turned out.”

“Jim,” I put my hand on his shoulder. “You can’t blame yourself for an **accident!** You were trying to keep him from using the gun. You did what you thought best at the time. You can’t now second guess yourself just because you know it didn’t turn out how you wanted.”

He rounded on me at that. “How I **wanted?!** Shit, Chief, this didn’t just ‘not turn out how I wanted.’ Six men are **dead!**”

“I know, Jim.” I returned to his shoulder, the hand that had fallen off when he rounded on me. “But, it’s **not** your **fault!**”

He patted my hand, gave a little shrug, and said, “Sure **feels** like it is.” And, he walked away. He holed up in the Inkajijik for a couple hours.

DAY 59

Jim had a bit of a breakthrough last night. He remembered he lives in (or at least grew up in) Cascade Washington. Eli suggested that we take Jim to the city and see if we can get some DNA sent to Eli’s friend in DC. How many military men named Jim can live in Cascade Washington?

One of the students asked, “Why not just send him to Cascade?” He really just hadn’t thought it out.

Before I could jump in, Eli answered. “**Where** in Cascade would we send him? He doesn’t even remember his last name. He has nowhere to go. His wounds are healed sufficiently that he doesn’t need to be in a hospital, but not well enough to make traveling to the states comfortable at all.”

“Plus,” I added, “Mbiraru wants him to stay here for a while longer, until he’s sure all the infection is taken care of.”

“I think Mbiraru has adopted Jim as a mascot.” Of course, that was Jamie’s input.

Anyway, after much discussion, we decided to just leave it up to Jim, which, of course, is as it should be.

Jim actually **went** for the idea of going to the city, though he balked at trying to fly. In all of our deliberations, we hadn’t taken into account that not only might Jim not be comfortable flying with his injuries only partially healed, but he might not be comfortable **flying!** I mean, he was in a plane crash that stole his comrades, his memory, and much of his mobility. Who in their right mind would want to hop right back on a plane.

So, we set about getting ready for the trip. Eli had gassed up the jeep when he had been in town, and had brought back some extra fuel, so we topped the tank and plan to get to sleep as early as possible. We leave at first light tomorrow.

DAY 60

Thank Mbiraru's little shamanistic heart. He insisted that we take along a good supply of a medicinal root that would help with pain. Jim has been refusing to take it for a while now, and told Mbiraru that he wouldn't need it, but about two hours into our rough ride, pain lines were etched like canyons around his eyes. I knew enough about the man to know that he wouldn't voluntarily *ask* for the stuff, so I dug through my knapsack until I found the bag they were in. I plucked one out and neatly tossed it to Jim, not saying a word. I didn't even look at him more than strictly necessary to aim the root so it didn't just fly off the other side of the jeep. I could tell, out of the corner of my eye, that Jim was just sitting there, looking at me, so I purposefully scooted up to lean on the seat behind Eli, while he drove.

"Daaaaaad," I whined, "Are we there yet?"

Eli chuckled. "Don't *make* me come back there, young man!"

I giggled (I'll admit it; it was an actual giggle) as I sank back into the back seat again. When I glanced over at Jim, he had a small grin on his face, as he nibbled on the root.

By the time we got into town, Jim was in agony. Not that he would admit it. Eli had wanted to go right to what passed for the police department here and get the DNA swab done right away, but I could tell Jim wasn't going to make it.

"Hey, Eli," I started, "I'm really hungry, man. Can we check into the motel and get a bite to eat first?"

Eli looked at me, puzzled at first, because he's seen me go longer without food, but then he got a good look at Jim. "Yeah, I guess the police station will still be there when we get finished. Why don't you and Jim go get a room for the three of us at the hotel," he pointed down the street, "and I'll pick us up some lunch. I'm a little more familiar with the city and I know a good take out place. I'll meet you at the hotel."

I let out a genuine sigh of relief. "Thanks, man. We'll see you there."

Jim just followed me like a lost puppy – another testament to just how much pain he was in – until we had checked into the small hotel and made it up to the room. Then he surprised me.

“Thanks, Chief.” He looked genuinely appreciative. “I know you’re not hungry, but I really could use the rest.”

“Hey,” I answered, good-naturedly, “I could eat.”

He chuckled but then dropped to the bed. By the time Eli got back, Jim was sound asleep.

“Good thing I didn’t get him anything perishable,” Eli noted, and tossed me a sandwich.

Eli didn’t just bring back lunch, he had also picked up some Tylenol and the promise of a visit from one of the doctors at the local ‘hospital’. It was more like a clinic really.

“I met her when I was here last time. She was the doctor I met when trying to get *something* done with the bodies. She said she’ll come here, take a look at Jim and take the swab then. Keep him from having to go to the police station. I’ll send it along to DC and we’ll have the answer in a couple of days, provided he’s in *some* branch of the military.”

“Well,” I started, “He has to be, right? I mean he was decked out in military camouflage and riding in a military plane.”

Eli just looked at me. “People other than legitimate military men can dress in camouflage and face paint and commandeer a military plane.”

I was shocked. “What are you saying, Eli?”

“Blair, he said one of his men sold them out. To who? Was this Tyler really the bad guy selling out legitimate military men or the good guy trying to bring down a private militia or terrorist cell?”

“No way.” I couldn’t believe my ears. “There is *no* way you believe that Jim is involved in something like that.”

Eli shook his head. “No, I don’t really think it’s the most probable explanation, but it *is* a *possible* explanation. We know *nothing* about this guy, Blair...except that he’s really not very nice.”

“I know him. I don’t know how, Eli, but I *know* him. I know what kind of man he is, and I know how kind he can be when he’s not stressing out over not remembering anything but painful events.”

Eli looked doubtful.

“I know,” I continued. “There’s no way I can know that for sure. But I *do*, dammit! I just do!”

“Well, he agreed to the DNA testing, so either he’s legit, or he just doesn’t remember that he shouldn’t submit to one. So, we’ll see.”

Dammit. I have no clue where **any** of that came from. From Eli’s side **or** mine. But I meant what I said. I know Jim with the same certainty that I knew I was meant to be here, in just this place, at just this time, for just this man. Mbiraru has agreed with my assessment of Jim’s character all along too, so I’m not the only one.

And, as for being ‘nice’, Jim has been showing a softer side these last several days. I really think the surly thing is more an act to keep people out. And, with as guilty as Jim felt when he thought he might have accidentally caused the crash... he’s a good man, and after calming down, I realize that Eli probably thinks so too; he’s just trying to keep his mind open to any possibility. He’s just being a good scientist. Doesn’t mean I have to like it.

DAY 61

Jim hardly moved at all yesterday. He woke up and ate his sandwich, cooperated when the doctor arrived and gave the DNA sample, but then he moped around the hotel the rest of the day.

Oh, and the doctor...boy, there’s another story right there. I had to tease Eli. This lady was openly flirting with him, the whole time she was here, and he was completely oblivious.

“Eli, man, I’m telling you, she was checking you out. You could end up with a gal in every port if you keep this up.”

He threw me one of those, **‘Now, Blair, don’t be juvenile’** looks and told me I was imagining things. I didn’t tell him that I was very well aware of all the atypical preening he had engaged in prior to her arrival. Now I know why.

Eli decided we might as well stay in the city for a couple of days until we see if we can get an ID. No since driving all the way back to the village and just turning around and coming back in a couple of days to get the results. Besides, I don’t think Jim could take another five hour drive right now. Physically or mentally. It’s like he’s just shutting down. I left him alone pretty much all day yesterday. But he’s not going to get away with it today.

“Okay,” I said, pulling the covers off of Jim’s bed at 10 this morning. “Enough pouting. We’re going for a walk.”

“My legs hurt, Chief. I don’t want to walk.”

“Tough.”

I don’t think I’ve ever heard such deafening silence before. I think I completely stunned him. He didn’t glare, he didn’t protest, he just lay there. I took advantage of that and started pulling his legs toward the edge of the bed.

He pulled them away and snapped. “Leave me alone, Chief.”

“Nope, sorry. Only one day of moping per customer. Time to get up now.”

Again with the silence.

“We can go do some tests on your senses. It’s bound to be different here in the city. Not that it’s much of a city by American standards...not much more than a small town really, but it’s diff...”

“To **hell** with the senses, Sandburg!”

Oh, whoops. Sandburg? **That’s** new.

“Jim, I thought you were starting to realize...”

“I don’t want them. If I can’t do anything good with them, why the hell have them?”

“Jim...” It was my turn to be stunned. I mean, I know he was upset the other night about not being about to save his men, even with the senses, but it’s almost like he’s **blaming** the senses. Or something.

We just sat there like that for a while.

“Blair?”

That was new too. Usually I’m just ‘Chief’. I just waited him out, knowing whatever was coming was important, but willing to let him say it in his own time.

It didn’t take long really. “What if I don’t like who I am?”

I didn’t know what to say to that, but he continued before I had a chance to say anything anyway. “I have a confession to make.” I don’t know what my face looked like, but he must have read **something** there that made him hurry on to explain. “I woke up a little when Eli came in with the food yesterday. I heard him talking.”

Oh, so that’s what this was about. “I meant what I said, Jim. I **know** you’re an honorable man. We’ll find that out, just as soon as we get the DNA results.”

“What if we don’t? What if we don’t get results because I’m not in the military data base. Or worse, what if we **do** get results but it’s because I’m on the most wanted list or something.”

“Well, first of all, I don’t think they have a data base of private militia-men or terrorists, so if what Eli was suggesting was true, I doubt we’d get results at all. But even if we don’t, it doesn’t mean you were on some nefarious mission.”

“Chief, I’ve been thinking about that. No dog tags, but dressed to blend in. If I **am** military, it’s got to be Special Forces or something. In which case, I very well **could** have been on a nefarious mission...albeit a sanctioned on.”

Well, what was I supposed to say to **that**? I guess I always knew it was a possibility. We just sat there for the longest time.

Suddenly, he just leapt off the bed.

“Chief!”

“What is it, Jim? What’s wrong?”

“Crying.”

“Huh?” I just love it when I get all articulate.

“A kid. Crying.”

“Okay, you lost me, Jim.”

“Dammit, Chief. You’re the one always telling me how wonderful these damned senses are. I can **hear** a kid crying.”

“Well, we’re in a hotel, Jim, so maybe...”

“It’s not that kind of crying, though. It’s not ‘I’m hungry’, or ‘I’m cranky’, or ‘I didn’t get my way’. It’s more like the kid is scared. Terrified!”

“Then let’s go see what’s going on.”

That was enough for me. If Jim wanted to track this kid down, if it would give him some piece of mind, I was all for it. We’d probably find that kid had wandered away and was a little confused. We’d find him, or her, and return them to their family, and Jim would feel a little better about his senses.

I wasn’t at all surprised when Jim led us to the outdoor market at the very edge of the ‘city’. Easy place for a kid to get lost. I also wasn’t surprised when we saw a frantic young woman asking anyone she saw, “Have you seen my baby? Jeffry. He’s four years old. I can’t find him!”

I was about to assure her that he had to be around here somewhere and we’d find him for her, when I noticed Jim wasn’t paying attention at **all**. He just continued on

whatever auditory trail he was following, and was heading away from the marketplace. I didn't know whether to tell the young lady to follow us, or just to leave it alone and return the boy once we found him.

We got about two blocks away from the market when Jim just stopped dead in his tracks.

"Jim?"

"He stopped crying." Maybe he *was* listening if he knew the child was a 'he'. Then again, that's the pronoun most people use if they don't know the gender of the person they're talking about, so... But, Jim cut off my thoughts. "Something's wrong, Blair. He stopped crying." Then Jim took off running. "He's having trouble breathing!" Then, a second later. "He's choking!"

Well, at least he had the trail again. He headed straight toward the boy. By the time he stopped again, he was panting. With exhaustion or pain, or both, I wasn't sure, but I knew he wouldn't have stopped unless he either couldn't hear the kid anymore or he thought he was around *here*. The problem was that there wasn't much '*here*' here!

I looked around. There was a dirt bank of some sort, and Oh no. The only thing around was the remnant of an old well. More like just a really deep hole, actually. At least I hoped there wasn't any water in it. The edges were all dry and crumbly. But that didn't stop Jim from crawling right to the edge of it anyway.

"Jeffry!?" So he *was* listening to the woman. "Can you hear me, buddy?"

This time, even I heard the crying. It was faint, but it was there.

"Can you answer me, buddy? Is your name Jeffry?"

"Mommy!!! I want mommy!"

"Chief, let's assume it's Jeffry. Go back and see if you can find his mom and bring her here."

"And what are *you* gonna do?"

He looked at me like I had grown an extra head. "Get him out of there."

"Jim, if you start crawling around over there, you're going to cave more dirt in on top of him."

"Just go get help, Chief. I know what I'm doing."

I had no doubt that he did. I ran back to the marketplace and brought back not only Jeffry's mother, but a bunch of would-be rescuers too. By the time we got back, Jim was nowhere to be seen.

“JIM!” Had he fallen in? Was he hurt? (more than he already had been)

“I’m fine Chief. We’re both just sitting down here waiting for a rope. Think you can find one?”

Of course, several of the impromptu rescuers had managed to grab ropes and rope-type things, so there was no shortage there. It took a while because of the powdery soil around the opening, but we finally got them both out...safe and sound.

Jeffry launched himself at his mother, and I launched myself at Jim. Came pretty close to pushing him back in, actually. He wasn’t quite as steady on his feet as he had appeared and he stumbled a little with my weight, but he caught himself, and me, and not only let me hug him, but he hugged back. Jeffry’s mom had to have a turn hugging the stuffing out of him, too, and Jeffry wanted him to pick him up.

Finally, when everyone started to wander away, he slouched just a little, letting me (but only me) see a glimpse of just how big a toll this rescue had taken on his still recovering body. “Let’s go ‘home’, Chief.”

He had taken a shower, and put on some clean clothes that Eli had found for him somewhere and had sacked out again. This time, I agreed that he earned spending some daylight time in bed.

Eli had been out checking to see if there was any word on the identities of the two bodies, when we were out having our big adventure. He came rushing in, all worried, about five minutes after we got back to the room.

“God, Blair, are you and Jim okay?”

“Yeah. Why?”

“Geez, boy. The whole town is talking about the two Americans that saved a little boy from a collapsed well. I just knew you had to be involved in that *somehow* so I rushed back here as fast as I could.”

I laughed. “Yeah, it does sound like just the kind of situation that would find me, doesn’t it? Actually, though, this time it was Jim’s fault!” I grinned, but I could feel the pride all over my face. I’m sure Eli saw it. “He used his senses, Eli. Mostly his hearing. He heard the boy crying before we even knew there was a kid lost!”

I took the next half hour telling him all about it.

DAY 62

Jim actually slept through the day and most of the night.

Around 2AM, he woke with a start. "Kids!"

Oh no, not again. More kids?

"Chief. The mission. We were supposed to rescue some kids! An orphanage or something. In a jungle somewhere. Hostile territory. That's why the camo and face paint. I had been sleeping and when I woke up, I realized we were *way* off course. I headed up to the cockpit. Tyler had a transmitter or something. Some reason I thought he was working for the enemy. He didn't deny it. Actually, he said the other side paid better." He was really getting worked up now. "Chief, we never made it. The kids are still there. We never made it there to get them out!"

He was pacing now and looked for all the world like a caged animal. Muscles ready to run and nowhere to go.

"Jim," I tried to keep my voice calm without sounding condescending or anything. I knew Jim would react badly if he thought I was being condescending. "I hear you, man. And we'll check on that. But, there's no way to help them right now. We don't have enough information. Where are they exactly? How far away? There's really no jungle around here, Big Guy, and you said you were way off course. There's no way to get to them." And it had been a month now. I didn't tell him that part. A month in hostile territory with their rescue waylaid? There really was a good chance that they no longer needed the rescue by now. But, I *really* didn't want to tell him *that*.

I got Jim calmed down finally, but he insisted on coming with Eli and me when we went to the police station as soon as it opened. It was really the only phone around to call the states. The DNA results may not have come in yet, of course, but Eli was going to ask his NCIS friend to check on any possible rescue missions.

On the walk there, Jim said, out of the blue, "This won't work. They won't know about it. Covert Ops. Not Navy or Marines, either." He just comes up with this stuff at the weirdest times.

"Air Force, maybe? You were in a plane." I suggested, but Jim shook his head.

"Army then?" Well, duh, Blair. That's really the only choice left. I doubt the Coast Guard has covert ops in jungles somewhere.

Jim nodded anyway. "Rangers"

Twenty minutes later, Eli was on the phone with his friend in Washington. Seems they had already narrowed down the search to Army Rangers on their own. The DNA results on the two bodies came back as Peter Jacobs and Phillip Marcus, both in the Army Rangers on a classified mission. Apparently, NCIS tried to run down a list of the other men on that mission, but was denied access. The Army wanted all the information the

NCIS team had come up with and ordered them to cease all involvement with the case. That must have been the part of the conversation when I heard Eli say, "Come on, Jethro. You know you love a challenge."

Jim said later that he heard the other side of the conversation, too (a fact we talked about at length, where I pointed out how unethical it was to eavesdrop...and how proud of my boy that he could do that without anyone being the wiser.) The other man's response was, apparently, "Didn't say I was actually going to **obey** the order, Eli. We'll get you the man's ID just as soon as Abby has it."

Four hours later, we got word at the hotel that there was a call for Eli Stoddard at the Police Station. Jim was asleep again. I was really beginning to worry about how much sleep he still needed, and wondered if it was still physical exhaustion, or perhaps more emotional exhaustion, or depression. I guess either was possible.

Jim was just waking up when Eli returned, and looked up as the older man came through the door.

Eli whipped off a somewhat respectable salute and said, "Pleased to meet you, Captain James Ellison."

I looked at Jim. He really showed no recognition to the name at all, prompting me to ask Eli, "Are you sure?"

"Abby got the DNA results almost right after we hung up. Jethro called William Ellison, Jim's father and a couple hours later, they had their list of men on the same mission as Jacobs and Marcus." Eli stopped talking when he realized Jim hadn't really reacted to any of these pieces of information. "Seems William Ellison is some bigwig with some pulled with the military or something. I can give you the names of the other men on the plane if you want me to Jim."

Jim didn't answer that question; instead, he asked one of his own. "Did your friend look at my military record? What's it like?"

You know, this man keeps breaking my heart. He still honestly wasn't sure what kind of man he was. Eli's face softened. I had told him earlier than Jim had heard his speculations about his character. Eli sat on the corner of the bed and faced Jim, who had still not stood up. "Jim, I was wrong to even suggest all those things. From what Jethro tells me, you have a list of commendations as long as his arm. I've know that man for decades and I've never heard his voice so full of respect for someone he's never even met."

Oddly enough, I'm not sure that was enough for Jim, but he let the subject drop for now. "So what now?" Was all he said.

"They're going to give our contact information to the Army. I imagine a representative will come by or something to collect you."

“No,” I interrupted. “He can’t just leave.” No way am I going to let Jim out of my sight. I don’t even know if Jim felt the same way, but I **know** I need to stay with him to help him. But, for some reason, I don’t really think the Army was going to buy the idea. I could see it now. *‘Well, sir, you see I have to come along with Jim because I feel as if we are somehow spiritually connected in some way, and the shaman of the locate Maasai tribe agrees with me.* Yeah, that would go over well.

DAY 65

Turns out I didn’t really need to worry...at least not immediately.

Jim was contacted via the local police department by the Army representative. Seems the doctor here (Eli’s lady friend), had already contacted him...the representative... and said that it was her medical recommendation that Captain Ellison not fly in his current condition. I’m not sure what kind of clout she has with the military or how she could possibly have **any**, but it worked. Jim could stay here until the representative got here to debrief him, which would be a couple of weeks. By then, they figured, Jim would be able to travel back with him.

Jim has been pretty quiet on the subject.

We did find out that the mission he had been on had been reassigned, but that’s all they would say for now. Maybe Jim could find out more when the representative got here.

DAY 70

We traveled back to the village after we got word that it would be a while before the Army guy could get here. No since paying for accommodations in the hotel for that long, when we had such welcoming ones for free waiting for us back in the village.

Eli seconded the idea of the return. Of course, he had a different reason. “If we don’t get back there soon and provide some ‘mature’ supervision, Jamie’s going to have all the Maasai kids spouting limericks and telling bad ‘knock-knock’ jokes.”

Had to agree with him, there.

So, we’ve gone back to the tests on Jim’s senses. He actually seems to be embracing it now. As much as I hate for any child to ever feel fear, the situation with Jeffrey turned out to have this unusual side effect. At least now Jim realizes that the senses can come in handy.

He’s also remembering more and more each day. There will never really be a way for me to know (or even for Jim to know, for that matter) whether **all** the memories have returned. But, there’s starting to be enough memories that Jim realizes he can live with

who he is. He's got regrets...who doesn't... but overall, it's been proven that he's an honorable and basically 'good' man.

We've talked a lot about what will happen when the military representative gets here. Jim will have to go back to the states, of course, and at first, I thought that would be the last I'd see of him...as much as that pained me. I mean, I had to stay *here* right? And finish the expedition. And, even if I didn't, I couldn't just say '*oh by the way Jim, I know you haven't invited me, but I feel connected to you and I've decided to come with you whether you want me to or not.*'

Then he came up to me last night, while I was sitting at the fire.

"Hey Chief...um...can I ask you something?" I've never seen him so hesitant.

"Sure, man. Always."

"Um...I know I have no right to ask this. I mean...you have your expedition here, and you're a doctor and all...and I mean...uh...this is what you do...and I have no right to ask...I mean, how self-serving can I be. Just because I feel... because I want... I mean. God, Chief. This isn't going well."

I was stifling a chuckle that was really just going to make things worse, but to see him this flustered was just ...funny. I finally took pity on him though.

"I'm going to take a risk here Jim, and tell you something that *I've* been feeling and thinking." He nodded, and I think I may have even heard him mumble 'thank you', so I went on. "When I first got here, I felt out of my element, but then I started to feel like I was meant to be here for some reason. And then, when we found you, I felt that *you* were the reason. I've felt like we're connected in some way, almost from the first moment I saw you. Mbiraru said as much to me, also...even before we knew you were a Sentinel. But, once we found that out, Mbiraru told me that I was meant to be ɔ - to the ɔ - † - - guardian to the watchman, and that we were spiritually bound. I don't know if you put any stock in that kind of thing, and I couldn't just come up and ask to come home with you, but..."

He grinned. "That's the same problem I was having. So, if we both want the same thing..."

"I'll tell Eli I'm leaving when you do." His smile was the brightest I've seen.

Turns out Eli had kind of figured I would end up going with Jim.

"That means the next person with the most field experience to be my second is..."

"Jamie." We both finished.

"God help us." Eli droned and I laughed.

DAY 80

We're heading back into the city today. Eli's driving so he can say goodbye to me and Jim. From there, we'll get a ride to a larger city that actually has an airport and we'll be USA bound. From there, I don't know. Jim's not sure if he wants to stay in the Army. Eli's lady doctor said Jim has probably sustained enough muscle damage in his legs that he could get a medical discharge. Everything's all up in the air right now. But, as long as I'm with Jim, we'll figure everything else out.

Hey, I wonder if he'd like police work? Maybe I'll give Simon a call when we get back.

End