

Cold

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by [Daydreamer](#)

Summary

Blair disappears while on a three month expedition to Brazil. When he suddenly reappears, he's been broken and it's up to Jim to put the pieces back together and figure out what happened.

Part 1

Cold

Part 1

Blair was coming home today. The Sentinel had missed his Guide, and Jim had missed his friend. Jim waited impatiently, surrounded by crowds and yet alone. He forced himself to outward stillness, amazed at how ridiculously excited he was that his partner was finally coming home after three long months. He glanced up at the display monitor; Sandburg's flight was due in ten minutes. Jim shifted awkwardly, too restless to stand here much longer and too disciplined to give in to the urge to pace. He scanned the crowd again, wondering if anyone noticed his tension, but he was ignored. He was alone. It was almost comical how that point had been driven home to him while Sandburg was away.

He sighed softly, then looked around to make sure no one noticed. He'd missed Blair so much. Everything was lonely, empty, when Blair was gone. The loft was a barren place, good for nothing more than sleeping, and even that came hard most nights. It was too quiet -- no CDs of tribal drums or Buddhist chants, no Discovery channel specials, no long-winded explanations of mundane things. It smelled wrong, too. No herbal teas, no algae shakes, no organic shampoos. Mostly though -- no Blair. After three months, his scent had faded even beyond the ability of Sentinel senses.

His heart pounded in his chest, the rapid staccato of beats almost painful in their intensity. The tightening in his chest made it hard to breathe, and he forced himself to slow down, breathe deeply, willing himself to some semblance of calm. He'd missed Blair. And he'd been lonely. Nothing had seemed right -- not for three whole months. Jim chuckled out loud at the thought, grateful he'd not voiced it aloud since he sounded like a petulant child who'd been denied a sweet. And he was. He was a child denied his sweet and Blair was the sweet he'd been denied. Was it his fault that when it came to Blair, he was fanatically possessive, protectively territorial, and obsessively insistent that the Guide belonged to him? Of course not. Sandburg would have some convoluted and involved explanation about territorial imperatives and primitive bonding rituals. Jim shrugged. It didn't really matter. All that mattered was that Jim had been lonely and Blair had been gone too long. But -- he looked at his watch again and then at the monitor -- in four minutes, he'd no longer be the child denied.

It was really strange when he tried to separate how he felt now. There was this primal *urge* coursing through him, threatening to eclipse the modern man. He just wanted to get to his Guide. No matter what. It was taking an enormous amount of energy to keep from stalking up the concourse, flashing his badge at everyone in his way and forcing his way onto the plane so that he could *get to the Guide*. That was where it all got mixed up in his head. Jim missed Blair. They were friends, buddies, pals. They hung out together, roomed together, spent time together. They were partners. They worked together and took care of each other. The loss of Blair from his life had left him bereft, and it was a loss the enormity of which he had never imagined when Blair had first mentioned the opportunity to go to Brazil and help map out the locations of some of the most isolated tribes in the country.

"Jim, man, it's an incredible opportunity. Funai -- that's the Brazilian Indian Agency -- is launching an expedition to search for isolated tribes living in the Amazon jungle and map their territory. They're looking for volunteers. It could be so incredible, man. The team they're putting together is going out on the Amazon, up several of the tributaries, all along

the border of Colombia and Peru."

Jim had laughed, delighted at the excitement in his friend's voice. "How do they know where to look?" he'd asked, wanting only to keep Blair talking, to hear the rapturous joy that came from him when he talked about something he loved.

"Planes, man. Funai -- the Brazilian ..."

"Indian Agency. I know, Chief, I got it the first time."

"Oh. Yeah, well, Funai has these monitoring planes. They make sweeps looking for roads and huts and then an expedition can come in and map it out. They've gotten quite a list of sites, lots of indigenous population sightings in the last few years."

Sandburg bounced around the loft as he spoke. And Jim had smiled. "Any contact, Chief? You gonna get to visit with these indigenous populations?"

"Nah. Not this time. This is just about tracking and identification. Find 'em and then demarcate the territory. We're talking people that have been isolated for a loooooong time here, Jim." Sandburg bounced into his room, and Jim heard the sound of books being shuffled, pages being turned. Then he was back, plopping onto the sofa next to him, a large, heavy book dropped in his lap.

"Look," Sandburg said, pointing to a map, "this is the Amazon forest. Funai estimates some 53 Indian tribes live in isolation in Brazil, most of 'em right here." He ran a finger longingly over the page, then looked up. "The expedition is gonna travel about 4,000 kilometers over ten weeks, all in areas of the Amazon basin that are accessible only by boat." He hummed a happy little hum of excitement. "Can you imagine it, Jim? Can you?"

Jim laughed again. "You imagine it well enough for us both, Doctor Livingstone."

"It's not just mapping and tracking totally, though. There've been reports of illegal miners and loggers in the area." Sandburg hopped up again, too excited to sit. "And you know me, if there's a protest, I'm there. A chance to try and set things right."

"Sounds like important work, Chief." Jim leaned back, sipping from the cold beer bottle he held. "You got an invite?"

Blair swallowed, suddenly nervous. "Well, uh, yeah, I did. One of my old professors from U Wash -- he, uh, recommended me." He was studying Jim as he spoke.

"Sounds like a good opportunity, Sandburg," Jim said quietly. "I think you should go."

"Yeah." The bounce had disappeared and this time when Sandburg sat, it was on the other couch and it was far too quietly for Jim's liking. He wanted the bouncy Sandburg back -- the one who was too excited to sit and who kept tripping over his words as he tried to speak. "It is a good opportunity, but Jim, it's *ten* weeks."

"More like twelve," he'd said quietly, "when you add in travel and prep time."

"Three months." Blair looked up as if he hadn't really considered the concept of having to be away in order to avail himself of this 'good opportunity.' He shook his head. "Nah. It's too long. I can't be gone that long."

He'd hopped up and come to retrieve his book, but Jim had held onto it, his hand resting over Blair's in a very unequal struggle for control. "Wait a minute, Chief. Before you put this away, show me again where these tribes are ..."

And so it had gone most of the night. Blair getting excited, talking, explaining, *teaching* about the native populations of Brazil. Jim asking questions. Then Blair settling, talking about how long it was, how he couldn't go, why it wouldn't work. It had taken most of the night, but Jim had convinced him he needed to go. Needed to do this for himself. Needed to keep up with the research, participate in the expeditions, stay in the field work loop.

In the end, he'd almost convinced himself it would be all right. That it was just three months. That he was a big boy now, and he could take care of himself. That he didn't zone like he used to. That he could control the senses, stay on top of things. It had been a hard sell, to both Sandburg and himself, but he'd made it. He smiled as he thought back. The deciding factor was probably the weather. The promise of three months in jungle warmth as opposed to Washington winter was more than Sandburg could refuse. Three months to be *warm*. Once Jim reminded him of that fact, the rest hadn't been all that hard after all.

People were coming down the concourse now, and he drew in a deep breath, searching for that unique Sandburg scent, but not finding it. Puzzled, he opened himself a little wider, reached out a little further but still got nothing. Could three months have made him forget? He shook his head. Not possible. Sandburg's scent was as imprinted in Jim's mind as ducklings on their mother. He'd never forget it, never fail to recognize it. He shrugged. Sandburg would get here when he got here. He couldn't make it happen any faster.

He'd wondered about his senses over these past three months. He'd had some trouble with spikes, some sensory overloads, and even a few zones. Two with Simon, one at the loft. He'd lost hours on that last one and he blushed to admit to himself it had happened when he'd picked up a flannel shirt of Blair's, held it to his nose, and breathed deeply. He'd been lost in traces of his Guide. That was why he knew now, he should be able to scent him.

He'd been so lonely. He'd gotten increasingly moody as the weeks wore on, his temper a fragile thing that flared without provocation. And afraid. When he'd seen Blair onto the plane three months ago, he'd been clutched by a moment of fear. What if something happens to him? What if he gets hurt? What if he needs me and I'm not there? What if he decides he wants to do this kind of thing all the time? What if he leaves me? What if he never comes back? It had taken every ounce of self-control he'd had not to race onto that plane and haul his Guide out, to keep him where he belonged -- by the Sentinel's side.

But he'd refrained. Sandburg needed this. Hell, he deserved this. A chance to do something he loved with people who loved it too. An opportunity to talk about his passion with people who felt that passion. Time to be who he was -- Sandburg, the anthropologist -- not Jim's partner, or the Sentinel's Guide.

But the fear kept coming back. It made him tense. His head hurt. He couldn't concentrate. He'd lose focus -- not a zone, really, just like when you're reading and you lose your place. Only for him it happened everywhere. In conversations, he'd lose the thread. He'd be in the truck, driving, and suddenly realize he had no idea where he was. Questioning people. He'd look up and realize he didn't have a clue where he was or what case he was working on.

And the fear was oppressive. The longer Blair was gone, the more the fear ate at him. One time he was in a meeting, and the fear washed over him, so thick, so real, he bolted from the room without a word and raced to the bathroom, tears on his face, his stomach churning. He'd lost his breakfast, then stood there, limbs shaking, hands trembling, gasping for breath, trying in vain to remember what it was that Sandburg always told him. Breathe, Jim, breathe. It had finally come to him. That was what Sandburg was -- the air in his universe. Without him, he couldn't breathe.

He allowed himself one small shifting of weight from left foot to right and then weakened and lifted up on tiptoes to scan over the heads of the crowds. Still no Sandburg.

"Mr. Ellison?"

The voice startled him and he dropped back on his heels, embarrassed. He looked down to see a young woman, little more than a girl really, staring up at him.

"Are you meeting someone, Mr. Ellison?"

Jim frowned. "Do I know you?"

She bobbed her head, blond curls falling forward to partially conceal her face and Jim's gut tightened as he realized that was a familiar motion. Blair did that thing with his hair, making it fall forward to hide his face when he was uncomfortable. "I'm Amanda Winters. From Mr. Sandburg's 102 class."

Jim stared at her blankly.

"I went on the expedition. Mr. Sandburg put me in for it. Got me a spot."

Now Jim nodded. "I'm here to meet him."

Her eyes widened. "Meet him? Where did he go?"

Jim looked at the girl. She had to be bright for Sandburg to take her on this trip of his, but she wasn't coming across that way. He spoke slowly, enunciating carefully as if that might help her comprehension. "To Brazil. With you. To study the natives." He forced a smile, cocking his head to the left. "Remember?"

But she was shaking her head, her heart was racing, and her hand was coming up to her mouth. She was biting on her fist as she stared at him, and he had to clamp down on his own fear to keep from ripping her hand from her mouth and forcing her to speak. "What's wrong, Amanda?"

She shook her head, still biting her fist, and mumbled round the obstacle. "I'm sorry, Mr. Ellison." She turned and started to dart away, but he reached out and caught her before she got far, startling a cry of surprise from her.

"Where's Sandburg?" he demanded. "What happened?"

She was tiny in his grasp, not more than five feet tall and barely a hundred pounds. He loomed over her and could just imagine the picture it made to the people who were starting to gather. He heard comments, but shut them out, focusing only on Amanda. Her eyes were wide and horror-stricken as she stared up at him and she paled visibly. She was beginning to shake and he tightened his grip, causing her to strangle out a little cry. "I don't know."

The murmuring of the crowd was growing louder and he reached in his pocket with one hand, pulling his badge. Holding it up, he announced, "Police," and the crowds backed away, everyone returning to their nice, safe, normal world. The world that no longer existed for him. There was no nice, or safe, or normal. The fear was rising up, threatening to engulf him, and he still didn't know where his Guide was. "Where ... When did you see him?"

"On the plane." The girl was crying now, pulling at his fingers where they dug into her arm.

"The plane home?"

She stilled under his hand, tears spilling down over pale, pale cheeks, as she shook her head. "N-n-n-o," she whispered. "The plane down."

Reality crashed.

It broke into tiny little pieces of sharp, painful hurt and rained down on him, slicing him open from the inside out. He tried to breathe but there was no air. Sandburg was the air, and he was gone. He felt the ground give way and dropped to his knees, no longer sure of where he was or why he was there. He was rapidly losing the thread of who he was -- Jim Ellison, Cascade PD, was disappearing beneath the Sentinel of the Great City. And the Sentinel had lost his Guide.

Pain!

Anger!

Fear!

Take action!

Protect the Guide!

Jim's head whipped around, eyes searching. His nostrils flared as he sought the scent of the Guide.

There was a noise, an insistent ringing sound and he patted himself until he found it. He lifted the black box and stared at it without recognition. A hand appeared and the box disappeared and then it was quiet.

Good.

Now he could listen.

He closed his eyes and began to filter out all the other sounds, straining to hear just one voice.

The Guide's.

There was a hand in front of his face, a voice hissing insistently into his ear. "Mr. Ellison!"

He jerked back with a start, surprised to find himself looking up at the young girl who had just told him Sandburg was missing. What was her name? He stared at her in confusion and then realized she was holding his phone. Why did she have his phone? He looked around again. Why was everyone so much bigger than he was? It took a few minutes, but he finally got it. He was on his knees. Figuring that out had exhausted him. He didn't have the energy to try and figure out why.

The girl was talking to him again, calling him Mr. Ellison. He shook his head. "Mr. Ellison's my dad," he mumbled.

"You have to come with me," she ordered, pulling on his arm to make him stand.

He looked up at her. He was too tired to go anywhere. She was really pretty. Blonde hair like spun gold. Lights dancing in it as she turned her head. Not as pretty as Sandburg's, of course ...

Sandburg!

Gone!

Pain!

It shot through him again and he clutched his stomach, doubling over. The girl was still buzzing at him. Something about Simon on the phone. A car coming for him. Something downtown. He shook his head. He just couldn't focus on it all right now. He started to slump forward again, thinking maybe he could just lie down for a few minutes, take a little nap. It was suddenly very quiet, and he stopped sliding down, puzzled. He opened his eyes, and saw the girl again. Her mouth was moving and she looked really worried. Probably because she wasn't making any sound. To not make a sound when you talk, well, that would worry anyone. He reached up and patted her on the arm, said, "Don't worry. You'll be able to make sounds again soon." Only he didn't make any sound either. Nothing. Nada. Zip. Zilch. He straightened back up, kneeling upright in the middle of the concourse and looked around. People were moving, people were talking, but there was no sound anywhere. Damn! His hearing had gone.

He shook his head. Sandburg would fix it. He'd know what to do.

And it hit him again, the pain rippling through his body. The physical reaction as real as if he'd just been sucker punched. And then the hearing was back and everything was painfully loud. He winced and slapped his hands over his ears, struggling for a dial that seemed suddenly impossible to access. He needed his Guide!

"Come with me, Sir. Your Captain said he knows where Mr. Sandburg is. You have to come with me!" The girl was pulling him again and this time he rose at her insistence. He followed her down the corridor, his large hand nestled trustingly in her small one. She'd said the magic words. She was taking him to Sandburg. His head was pounding and the lights were all too bright, but he could handle it now because this girl -- Amanda? -- was taking him to Sandburg.

They got to the front of the airport just as a police car pulled up. One of the cops hopped out and opened the back door. Jim looked at Amanda in confusion. "Sandburg?" he asked.

"It musta been a misunderstanding, Mr. Ellison," she replied. "These guys are here to take you to get him."

He nodded once and then climbed into the car, actually thankful when the cop pushed his head down a little in a habitual action to keep him from banging the roof. He'd have probably knocked it if he hadn't been helped. The man shut the door and got back in the front, asking him something as he did so. Jim just shrugged. He didn't understand. The words were too loud and garbled and it hurt his ears. He needed to see his Guide.

The ride was too long. The road was bumpy, every dip and turn exaggerated a hundred fold to his magnified touch. His pants hurt. They were too rough, too tight, too hard. Breathing was difficult, like someone had caught his chest in a vise and tightened it until there wasn't room for the oxygen. It all hurt and he was so tired. Like he'd been running on empty for three months and now there wasn't anything left.

The car stopped and the same cop opened the door, but he didn't move. What did they want now? Someone was screaming, a painful, non-stop yowl that plucked at his nerves before it suddenly crashed into a recognizable sound.

Blair!

That was his Guide!

Someone was making him scream!

He flew out of the car, racing toward the sound and stopped in amazement at the sight before him. Huddled naked in a snowdrift, backed against a building, was his Guide, mouth open as he screamed in wordless fear. He clutched a dirty duffel bag to his chest, clinging to it as if he might draw warmth or comfort from its presence. Jim drew in a deep breath and finally -- finally -- he smelled Sandburg. But it wasn't right. There was something else mixed with the Blairscents. He worked at it carefully, cataloging the odors.

Old dirt.

Urine.

Blood.

Reality crashed again and he pulled himself to a stop. Simon was suddenly there, blanket in hand, and Jim took it gratefully. "Get rid of these lights, Simon," he whispered. "They hurt my eyes and they're scaring him."

Simon nodded and within seconds the area was plunged back into a semi-darkness lit only by the streetlight on the corner. Jim moved forward slowly. "Sandburg," he called softly. "Hey, Chief? It's Jim."

There was a break in the screaming as the frightened man stared up at him.

"Yeah, Chief, it's me."

"Ambulance is on the way, Jim," Simon said. "We've got to get him out of the snow. It's 30 degrees out here. He's gonna freeze."

Jim waved a hand at him, hearing the words, but ignoring them. All that mattered was getting to his Guide. Protect the Guide.

"Blair," he whispered as he moved closer. "C'mon, buddy, it's Jim. Let's get you out of the cold, okay?"

"C-c-c-cold," Blair mumbled, looking around fearfully.

"Yeah, it's cold," Jim reiterated. "C'mere." He crept closer. "Let me put this around you, okay, Chief?"

"Jim, ambulance is here." The words were hissed in his ear, and as he watched, Sandburg drew further back, burrowing deeper into the snow. His teeth chattered and he shuddered convulsively.

"Damn it, Simon," Jim growled, "you're scaring him."

"You've got to get him out of the snow. Now, Jim. He's bleeding."

He breathed in again. The same odor of blood mixed with Sandburg's own unique scent. As he watched, Blair looked up, saw Simon, and began to keen.

"Hushhhhhh, hushhhhhh," Jim murmured. "It's okay, Chief. I'm here."

The head came up and dull blue eyes stared at him without recognition. The eyes lighted on the blanket, and for just a second, there was a spark in them, and then it died, too

quickly to have ever been fully born. "C-c-c-c-cold," Blair whimpered. "C-c-c-c-old."

Jim moved forward again, almost within touching distance. "I'm just gonna wrap this around you, okay, Chief? I know it's cold. This will help warm you up." He moved forward once more, this time reaching Blair and wrapping the blanket around him. He was kneeling in snow that came nearly up to his groin but he didn't feel cold or wet. He felt inordinately happy and ridiculously pleased that he'd managed to get a blanket around his terrified partner. The resonance of his emotions was vaguely surreal.

"Ambulance, Jim. His lips are blue."

Jim growled wordlessly and Simon backed away. Reaching out, he wrapped his arms around Blair, pulling him forward to rest in his lap, mostly out of the snow. He pulled the blanket tighter, increasing his grip as the smaller man began to struggle. Jim leaned forward burying his head in Sandburg's neck. He breathed deeply, rubbing his face against the icy skin. Cold, but it finally smelled like Sandburg. He wanted nothing more than to stand his Guide up and sniff him up one side and down the other. He needed to see, and touch, and hear, and feel his Guide. One hand slipped inside the blanket, skin to skin, and he began to touch the younger man. His head was still buried against Sandburg's neck as he breathed deeply of the restorative scent of his Guide. Without conscious thought, his tongue slipped out, lapping at the pulse point in the neck. Salt. Sweat. Fear. Pain. He could taste it all.

Sandburg's struggling had stopped in some primal reaction to his Sentinel's needs. He curled inertly in Jim's lap, not helping as the big man touched and smelled and tasted him, but not objecting either.

It was this acquiescence that caused the problem.

Everyone else saw them sitting there quietly and assumed Jim had calmed down his friend and partner, and it was okay to approach. The EMTs came forward, reaching out to take Sandburg's arms and help him onto the waiting gurney, but at first touch, the small man exploded. He arched backward out of Jim's arms, screaming at the top of his lungs, his head slamming painfully into the wall of the building, and then the screaming stopped abruptly as Sandburg slipped down into unconsciousness.

Part 2

Cold

Part 2

Simon sat in the small office he'd commandeered, the borrowed TV/VCR unit in front of him. There were 15 tapes, all neatly labeled with date and time, and he spent a few minutes putting them in chronological order. The tapes weren't continual. They covered the entire period Sandburg had been gone, but there were gaps, sometimes of a whole week, in the dates. Of course, to cover every day, there would have been 92 tapes. Sandburg had been gone for 92 days.

He studied the pile of black plastic critically. Who had made the tapes? What was on them? Why the hell had Sandburg been wandering around in downtown Cascade at two in the morning, in 30 degree weather, wearing nothing more than a terrified expression and a duffel bag containing these tapes? How had he gotten back in the country? And where the hell had he been?

Simon pinched the bridge of his nose, then seated his glasses there more firmly. He'd stalled long enough. It was time to get the show on the road.

Get things started.

Get it in gear.

Get things moving.

Shit, he was still stalling.

He reached out and plucked the first tape from the top of the pile and held it in his hand. He had a very bad feeling about this. It was one of those times when he wished he wasn't in charge, wished he wasn't the boss. It would be nice to delegate this to someone else, because he had a feeling he wasn't going to enjoy this particular show.

He'd seen the scars on Sandburg when Jim had been working so hard to calm the younger man, to get him out of the snow, out of the cold. New scars that he was sure had not been there when Sandburg went to Brazil. He'd seen long, thick scars on Sandburg's back, and several ugly, puckered scars on his abdomen that had to have come from a puncture or possibly burns.

And there were the still open wounds. The oozing places on Sandburg's feet. The weeping places on his thighs. The bleeding places on his back and chest and arms. He took off his glasses again and then scrubbed his face with both hands. He didn't want to do this. He didn't want to see what had been done to his friend. He didn't want to watch those wounds be inflicted, hear Sandburg's cries. He didn't want to know what had been done to the bright, enthusiastic bundle of nonstop energy that had caused him to cry in fear at anyone's approach, to flinch from a touch -- even Jim's, and to now lie curled in a bed unable to speak or interact with them in any way.

He didn't want to know.

But because it *was* his friend, and because he *was* the Captain, and because someone *had* to do it, watching was all he could offer Jim and Blair now. That he would be the one

to see it, to know what had happened. That he would spare Jim this and take it on himself. It would be his burden, his nightmare, his helplessness. And hopefully, by watching, it would be enough to help Sandburg get through this, help Jim survive it all, and maybe even find the assholes who'd broken that incredible mind and spirit.

He moved swiftly now, replacing glasses, inserting the tape, pushing the play button. The silence was quickly broken by an earsplitting scream. The time date stamp on the screen showed it to be the day Sandburg disappeared.

And then Sandburg's voice echoed in the room.

"Shit, man. Talk to me. What's this all about? C'mon, man, tell me what you want. Tell me what it is. Maybe I can ..."

The patter was interrupted by another earth shattering howl.

Simon tightened his jaw as he watched the red-hot metal point make contact with Sandburg's abdomen, joining two other wounds that he could see, and he listened to the last helpless screams as his friend writhed in agony on the ground. The camera focused on Blair, his face contorted, tears streaming down his face as he gasped for breath, and then it faded to black.

The next date stamp showed it was several days later. Sandburg was a mass of bruises, more burns, and there were long, open wounds on his back. A whip, maybe? He huddled in the corner of a bare room, shivering on the concrete floor and leaning against concrete walls.

He was naked.

Someone off screen must have spoken, because Sandburg looked up and for a moment the old Sandburg spark was there. "I'm not going to choose, you fuckers," he snarled. "I'm not playing your game."

The camera followed as Sandburg was dragged down a hall and then forcibly immersed in a tub of apparently frigid water. He fought frantically, cursed loudly, and then squealed in helpless frustration as larger, stronger arms and hands forced him down and a metal plate was secured over the tub.

"No, man, 's cold. Hey, what do you want? Tell me what you want? Why're you doing this? What's the point?"

Simon saw the rapid twitch of Blair's head and could only imagine the full body shudder that was occurring beneath the metal plate. Already, Sandburg's teeth were chattering and he had begun to stutter.

"C-c-c-c-cold, man. N-n-n-ot g-g-good. G-g-g-g-otta t-t-t-t-ell me w-w-w-what you w-w-w-want."

Blair kept up the patter, kept trying, for another twenty minutes. Then he fell silent. He struggled to keep his eyes open for another ten minutes, then he lost that battle as well. When he was unconscious, the metal lid was lifted off and he was taken out, still naked, still battered, and carried back to the bare concrete room. The camera focused on his form, curled fetally on the floor, and then faded to black.

Simon hit eject. He fumbled through the tapes skipping ahead three weeks. He inserted the new one and hit play. Sandburg lay curled on the floor of the same bare room. He rose slowly and carefully, moved to the far corner and urinated. Then he went back and

sank to the floor again. His mouth was moving but no sound made it onto the tape. Simon narrowed his eyes as he tried to make out what Sandburg was saying. Jim would know. Jim would be able to tell. But Jim would never see this, of that Simon would be sure. He studied the anthropologist's dry lips and suddenly it became clear. Jim. He was calling for Jim.

Over and over and over again.

Jim. Jim. Jim. Jim.

It was unbearable.

Sandburg's arms were wrapped around himself and without thinking Simon mirrored the action. Sandburg rocked back and forth, and so did he. When Sandburg suddenly froze and looked up, Simon's unconscious movement halted as well. Once again, something was said off screen and Sandburg shook his head. "I won't choose," he said as he dropped his head. "You're not making me take responsibility for any of this."

Something else was said and Blair raised his head, horror on his face. "No," he panted, "no. I'll choose." Arms appeared, grabbing him, dragging him out of the room, down the hall and into the room with the tub again. "I'll choose, I'll choose," Sandburg begged. "Let me choose. I choose the cold. Cold. You hear me? Cold."

The hot poker appeared in the frame again, and Sandburg's eyes widened once more. "Nooooooo," he screamed. "Not both. I choose! I choose!" But he was held implacably in place and this time the metal headed for his thigh. The image moved in slowly, so Simon had a good chance to see the other three burns on Sandburg's belly, all red and weeping, as it panned in closer and closer to the new wound on the thigh. The metal touched and there was a raw, sizzling sound that seemed to crash against his ears, then Sandburg howled and his bladder released. The hands let him go and he dropped like a stone, legs splayed apart, hands hovering over, but not touching his new brand. The camera recorded it all unemotionally, with no commentary, just the unending screams and tears, the inability to do anything to ease the pain, the renewed cries of "Jim, Jim, Jim ..."

Simon was about to turn it off and move on to another tape when the arms appeared and Blair was once again dumped into the tub of water. He screamed as the cold made contact with the burn, and then ice was dumped in on top of him. Buckets and buckets of ice, until he was completely covered, only his head visible. The metal plate went back on, and this time Sandburg didn't try to talk. And the cries of "Jim, Jim, Jim," changed to stammered whimpers of "cold, cold, cold."

Simon reached out and turned the machine off. My God, this was only the third week. He still had nine more weeks to get through. Rage boiled in his chest, racing through his body, commandeering his limbs. He leapt up and began to pace, frantic little steps because the damned office wasn't big enough for anything else. His hands hung in fists at the end of arms so tight they could be made of stone. He wanted to break something. Hit something. Kill something. He moved more rapidly, back and forth, struggling for control, not finding it. On the next turn by the door, he paused, leaning up against the wall as he dragged in deep ragged breaths and fought the battle not to explode.

It was a battle he lost.

He watched as if it were happening to someone else as his arm lifted, and he drove the fist into the wall. He pulled back and did it again, and then again. And then, the pain signals finally connected in his brain, and the rage short-circuited, and he sat down and cried. Not long, and not hard, because he wasn't a man who cried, no matter what the

provocation. But tears were shed; they crawled down his cheeks and dried there.

He studied his hand, ignoring the tears, and wondered how much it was going to cost him to get the damn wall fixed. He wondered if he'd broken anything in his hand. He idly thought that at least he was in the right place to have a broken hand. Bound to be a doctor around somewhere in a hospital. The wry thought made him chuckle and it was that sound that made him realize he was almost in shock. That seemed to be what he needed to force himself back into himself. He pulled his handkerchief and wrapped his hand, then shuffled through the tapes again, slamming the sixth week into the slot.

It started with a slow panning over Sandburg's inert body. He looked awful. He was rail thin with ribs visible through paper-thin skin. His hair was a filthy, matted mess -- the only part of him that hadn't been subjected to the brutal cold water baths. But the burns on his belly had healed now, the fresh puckered scars visible against the pale flesh. There were four on his thighs now too. Simon had only seen the first one administered. These were at various degrees of healing, from a fairly new one that still wept to two that appeared healed. There was a new one on the bottom of his foot as well, and Simon winced at the thought of Sandburg having to walk.

As he watched, Blair urinated where he lay, then pushed himself up and crawled a few feet away. Simon hit pause and covered his face in his hands. There was such helplessness in that action. Such a loss of control. Simon studied his mouth, but the lips didn't move. There were no more silent pleas for rescue by his partner. Something inside Simon's chest tightened at that silence. This was where Blair had begun to break.

The arms appeared again, and the off screen question was asked. Simon had the hang of it now. He could almost hear the words. "Choose. Hot or cold?" Sandburg hung limply in the arms, not even lifting his head to mutter, "Cold." He was dragged down the hall, strapped into the tub, covered in ice, and again, the camera ran until he was unconscious and he was removed.

He was dropped on the floor of the concrete room where he curled into himself, shivering and shaking and began to moan.

Simon ejected the tape, moved forward again to the ninth week. The room was different this time. The tub had been moved into the concrete room. Sandburg sat against the wall, shivering as he stared at it. There were no obvious new wounds that Simon could find as he studied the naked body on the screen. Sandburg stared at the tub, then murmured, "Cold." He glanced around the room, eyes darting fearfully into all the corners. "Cold," he whimpered as he began to crawl towards the tub. Simon watched in complete shock as Blair pulled himself shakily to his feet and once again looked around the room. He held himself erect on shaky legs, half bent over as he supported himself on the side of the tub. Tears began to stream down his face as he murmured, "Cold, cold, cold," over and over again. His body shook and his limbs trembled as the force of his fear spilled over, but he clung to the tub, eyes again staring around the room, tears glistening on his face. Slowly, and with great reluctance, he climbed into the tub.

He sank into the frigid water, closing his eyes helplessly as he was wracked with shivers that were so severe they bordered on convulsions. A hand appeared, patting him on the head, and then the ice was added. When he was unconscious, he was removed, and dropped back to the concrete floor.

What the hell was that all about?

Simon fast-forwarded the tape, stopped at an almost identical scene near the end.

Sandburg on the floor, eyes darting furiously around.

Muttered chant of "Cold, cold, cold."

Slow creeping towards the tub.

"Cold, cold, cold ..."

Frantic glances into the corners of the room.

"Cold, cold, cold ..."

Pulling to his knees by the tub.

"Cold, cold, cold ..."

More searching looks. Tears began to fall.

"Cold, cold, cold ..."

But this time, before he made it into the tub, the hands were there and he began to scream at their touch.

"Cold! Cold! Cold!"

He heard the response this time -- the first voice that wasn't Blair's on the tape.

"Not fast enough."

That was all.

Just "Not fast enough."

Simon quickly put it together and realized Sandburg had been conditioned to choose and inflict his own torture of the tub, or face something else, something worse. Though what could be worse than repeated hypothermia to the point of unconsciousness?

It was the whip this time, and Simon finally saw where the long scars on Sandburg's back had come from. How the bleeding stripes had been incurred. It was five quick blows and Sandburg screamed non-stop, crying over and over, "Cold! Cold! Cold!"

Sandburg was dropped onto the concrete again, still conscious and moaning, and this time, when his bladder released, he didn't even bother to roll over and move away.

It was all he could take today. He couldn't watch anymore. There were 90 hours of tapes, and he'd sat through barely two hours, and hadn't gotten past the ninth week, but it was all he could do. He couldn't face it anymore. He reached out to stop the tape and froze, eyes glued to the screen.

Even with all he'd seen, all the thinking and convincing himself nothing else could surprise him, all the time he'd had to get ready, nothing could have prepared him for the last image that flickered onto the screen.

A bold red background.

Shining white circle.

Black swastika.

Simon hit pause, staring at the screen in complete shock until the nausea hit. And then, he simply pulled a trashcan over and emptied his stomach. When he was done, he rose, arms wrapped tightly about himself and moved to stand by the single small window in the room.

Simon looked gray when he came back a few hours later. His shoulders seemed permanently slumped and his hands shook ever so slightly. Jim could hear the other man's heart still racing. He carried extra blankets that he dumped unceremoniously on the end of Blair's bed. Jim started to rise, but Simon held out one hand.

"No," he said shortly.

Jim cocked an eyebrow. "No?"

"No." Simon pulled the second chair around the bed and placed it next to Jim. He studied the still figure in the bed, then pulled a blanket from the pile of extras and laid it over the sleeping man. At Jim's quizzical look, he said, "I don't want him to be cold." He stepped back and sank into the waiting chair.

"Let's go back to 'No,' Simon," Jim said carefully.

"I said no." Simon bit the words off angrily but the anger wasn't directed at his detective.

"I want to see the tapes." There was a hint of anger in Jim's voice now too, though he kept his tone low to avoid disturbing the man on the bed.

"No, you don't." Simon sighed, removed his glasses and ran one hand tiredly over his face. Silence stretched between the men until the older finally replaced the glasses and turned. "Look, Jim. You **DO NOT** want to see these tapes. You may think you do, but you don't." He shuddered slightly and rose again, his hand coming out to touch the brow of the man on the bed. It was warm and the frightening pallor of the man on the tape had been replaced with a natural ruddiness. "He looks better," he commented as he straightened the blankets, making sure they were tucked in tightly around Blair's shoulders so that no stray current of cold could invade his warm cocoon.

Jim nodded. "They had to tranq him again -- he woke up and went ballistic. Leapt off the bed, huddled in the corner. He kept saying, "Cold, cold, cold," like it was his mantra or something. He let me get near, let me put a blanket on him. But he wouldn't get back in the bed, wouldn't let anyone else touch him. He barely tolerated my touch, and only for a moment." Jim rose and began to pace. "Damn it, Simon, I need to know what happened to him!"

Blair moaned at the angry outburst and Jim hurried to the bed, reaching out to stroke the younger man's forehead, to push unruly strands of hair away from his face. "Shhh, Chief," he soothed, "it's okay. I'm here." He started to pull the blanket back, to reach for Blair's hand, but Simon stopped him.

"Keep him covered," he said softly. "Keep him warm."

Jim's brow furrowed as he stared at the bigger man, but he smoothed the blanket back down, tucking it in around Blair's hand. He went back to stroking his partner's forehead and murmuring assurances. "You're safe, Chief. It's okay now."

When the man in the bed had settled and was once again sleeping soundly, Jim turned on Simon. "Outside," he demanded in a terse whisper.

Simon nodded and led the way to the hall. He stopped to speak to the uniform by the door. "Detective Ellison and I are going to the family waiting room down the hall. I want you to remain in the room with Sandburg, and if he so much as moves or makes a single sound -- no matter how slight -- you come and get us immediately. Understood?"

The man nodded and ducked into Blair's room as Jim exited.

"What happened to him, Simon?" There was the beginning of panic in Jim's voice. "What was on those tapes?"

Simon shook his head and led the way to the small waiting room. It was empty and he closed the door behind them, then waited until Jim sat down. "You are not going to watch the tapes," he said in a rough, emotion-laden voice.

"I need to know what happened ..."

"I'm going to tell you. I'll tell you and the doctors and anyone else who needs to know. I can answer your questions. I can tell you what happened. But right now, James Ellison, you need to accept the fact that you are not viewing the tapes."

Jim stared up at the larger man, gauging the level of his determination, then asked, "Why?"

"Because you don't need to see it." Simon began to pace, one hand scrubbing at his face as he marked out a trail across the small room. "It was," he stopped and threw his hands up in frustration as he searched for the words, and finally settled on, "bad."

The simplicity of the statement seemed to affect Jim more than anything else Simon could have said. "Jesus," he whispered, face paling slightly. He forced himself to breathe and then closed his eyes briefly to listen to the man in the bed down the hall. Heartbeat steady, respiration normal. It was comforting. He focused on the sound of his Guide, let the comfort wash over him, relishing the ability to do that which had been denied him for over three months. Time began to stretch and he was lost in that wonderful world of Guide, heartbeat, breath. Guide, heartbeat, breath.

It enraged him to think that anyone would dare to take that from him -- from them. That someone would dare to take his Guide, hurt him, *damage* him, and think that they could just drop him back off at home with impunity. He was more determined than ever to know what had happened to Blair -- to find the ones who had injured him in this way.

"Jim."

"Jim."

"Jim!"

The sound was suddenly loud in his ears and he winced as he opened his eyes to find his boss kneeling in front of him, hands on his arms.

"You with me now, Jim?"

His eyes narrowed, cold and hard, as he studied the other man, and there was a part of him that was pleased to see the larger man drop his hands quickly, rise and back away. Jim was willing to bet Simon wasn't even aware he'd done it.

When he spoke, his voice was tortured and harsh. "That man in there..." he paused as his voice grew ragged for a moment, fought for control, and went on, "that man is *broken*,

Simon. *Broken*. Someone, somewhere did things to him that have *damaged* him."

"He's back, Jim. He's alive." The words were spoken quietly. "What's broken can be fixed."

"Not always! And it's not the same -- the mending leaves its mark." It was his turn to rise and pace now. "God damn it, Simon! Can you imagine Sandburg not able to talk? Afraid of everything? Unwilling to be touched?" He ran his hand through his close-cropped hair. "How's he going to work? Finish his dissertation? Shit, Simon -- how's he ever going to be able to be alone again?" He stopped, looking at his Captain who stared back evenly. Jim drew himself up, forced himself to speak calmly. "I need to see the tapes. You know I need to see the tapes. I may *see* things, *hear* things no one else can. I may be able to tell who did this to him."

"What's your priority, Jim? Being here for Sandburg, helping him through this? Or tracking down the perps?" Simon exhaled audibly, not quite a sigh, not quite a groan. "You can't do both."

Jim rose angrily and headed toward the door. "Fuck you, Simon. I need to see them."

Simon grabbed Jim by the shoulder, spinning him around, and used the element of surprise to slam the smaller man against the wall. "I. Said. No."

"And I said fuck you." Jim's eyes narrowed when his boss didn't release him. "Do you really want to do this, Simon?" he asked.

The older man's grip was implacable. "No. I don't. But I'm telling you, Jim, I'd rather beat you senseless than let you see those tapes. You hear what I'm saying, Jim?" The tension in the other man eased minutely. "I'll do it. You can take a beating better than you can take seeing what's on those tapes." Jim pushed against him again, and he tightened his grip once more.

"Don't make me hurt you, Simon." The words were low and dangerous.

"You can hurt me, Jim. Hell, you can probably kill me. But I guarantee I can give as good as I get before I go." He laughed a shaky little laugh that seemed to mock his decision to handle this in this way. Who the hell was he to take on a man with the kind of training Ellison had? He'd be lucky not to end up dead. "And you're not viewing the tapes." Simon shuddered and added, "Ever."

It was the shudder that did it. The tension leeches from Jim in an instant and instead of fighting to hold him still, Simon found himself fighting to hold him up. He wrapped an arm around his detective and led him to a chair, pushing him into it gently. He watched as Jim leaned forward, burying his face in his hands and rocking back and forth in silence. Simon turned away, moving to the small coffeepot in the room and busying himself with the task of making coffee, finding cups, and straightening up the little area. When the coffee was done, he filled two cups and turned back to find Jim sitting in the chair, watching him with eyes like cold blue steel.

"Tell me what they did to him."

Part 3

Cold

Part 3

It was late the second day when Simon popped his head in the door. Facing over 90 hours of tapes, he'd had no choice but to delegate some of the viewing. Given the nature of Sandburg's disappearance and the swastika symbol on the tape, he'd contacted the FBI. He couldn't bear the thought of making anyone in Major Crimes sit through the tapes -- hell, he didn't want anyone in the Cascade PD watching those tapes. Not for their own sake, and not for Blair and Jim's. It would be better if knowledge of what happened to Sandburg came from reading the transcripts, which he knew everyone in Major Crimes would do. It was too hard to watch and this one was more than personal.

Even as he stood here, there were people watching what Blair had gone through, and transcripts were being typed up. It was going to be a very thick file by the time all this was over. And even though he'd had to bring in others to get through the tapes, he'd still forced himself to sit through another six hours. It was painful, and vaguely masochistic, but for some reason he felt that he owed it to his men, that someone who *cared* should view these tapes, and not just the nameless, faceless strangers of the FBI.

Jim was seated in the same hard plastic chair he'd been in for the past 36 hours. It was close to the bed, within touching distance, but Simon noted that Jim hadn't pulled Blair's hand out to hold onto and the blankets, at least four by a quick count, were still tucked tightly around the sleeping man. As he watched, Blair shifted on the bed, a little moan escaping his dry lips. Jim rose immediately and pressed a hand to his partner's forehead, murmuring quietly into his ear. Once Blair was still again, Jim methodically retucked the blankets, making sure there was no possibility that a single molecule of cool air could invade the warm nest he had created for his Guide. He rummaged in the drawer of the bedside table and pulled a little pot of lip balm. Dipping his little finger in the ointment, he carefully, almost reverently, anointed Blair's dry and cracked lips. It was an oddly intimate moment, and Simon turned his head to offer them a bit more privacy. A soft sigh escaped those lips as Jim's finger lingered a moment and then the Sentinel wiped his hand, and replaced the balm in the drawer.

"How's he doing?" Simon asked, knowing Jim was aware of his presence.

Jim shrugged. "They keep drugging him. When he wakes up, he freaks out. Won't stay in the bed, won't keep his clothes on. Keeps ripping out the IV line." Jim moved a few feet from the bed and ran one hand through his hair in frustration. "He keeps wetting the bed." His eyes were averted from Simon's as he spoke.

"It didn't look like he had bathroom privileges while he was gone, Jim."

The detective nodded. "I know. You told me. I'm just wondering -- what if he's ... What if he can't?"

"Can't control it?"

Jim shook his head angrily. "I know it's stupid. It should be one of the last things I'm worried about. But I have a feeling it would be a big deal to Sandburg." He dropped his voice as he looked at his Captain. "They're pressing to catheterize him."

"And you said no?"

"I've got his medical power of attorney. A catheter is not what he needs." Jim turned and paced two steps then turned back. He was restless, angry, exhausted, and there was nowhere to go. "But every time he voids, they have to change the sheets, and he has to get up. Then he gets cold, and then he gets upset, and then they pump him full of drugs again." He moved back to the bed, checking the blankets almost obsessively, then dropped wearily into the seat. "I can't get him clear enough of the drugs to even try to talk to him." His head flopped forward, resting on the edge of the bed and one hand snaked out to lay protectively over his partner's leg. "I don't even know if he knows I'm here."

"He knows, Jim, he knows." Simon moved forward and laid a large hand on the detective's shoulder. It rested there comfortably for a long moment and then the older man said, "You need to get out of here for a while. Come with me. Let's go get something to eat."

"I can't, Simon. I can't leave him." Jim's eyes were haunted as he lifted his head to meet his boss's gaze. "What if he wakes up?"

"What if you exhaust yourself to the point that you're non-functional? What if you don't eat and then zone on the hunger pangs? What if you wear yourself down to the point that you're no good to him at all? Then what is he going to do?"

Ellison shuddered slightly, and let his head drop back to the blanket that covered his Guide. "I can't leave him. I've been sleeping some. I can sleep when I hear his heart."

Simon gave the shoulder beneath his hand a slight squeeze. "Come eat with me. We'll get Murphy to sit in here. We'll just go to the cafeteria and Murphy will call us if Sandburg so much as rolls over." He tugged gently and was rewarded when Jim got to his feet reluctantly.

"They just gave him another shot of the sleepy stuff. He shouldn't move for a couple of hours."

"We're not going to be gone that long." Simon was moving the exhausted man toward the door, his hand on Jim's arm now. "Murphy will call us."

The door opened and Simon leaned over to speak to the uniform in the chair. "I want you to sit with Sandburg, Murphy, while Detective Ellison gets something to eat."

The seated man rose and nodded. He was as big as Simon, but heavier. An older man who had worked a beat all his life and liked what he did. He was experienced, and knew all the detectives in Major Crimes and had volunteered to take some of the shifts guarding Sandburg. "Not a problem, Sir."

Simon passed him a card. "My pager is on that card. You page me if Sandburg wakes up - or if anything else happens. Got it?"

Again the man in the uniform nodded.

Simon pulled on Jim's arm again, but he broke away and moved back to the bed. He checked the blankets again, tucking in corners that didn't need tucking, and stroking Sandburg's cheek as he murmured to him. "Just gonna get a bite to eat, Chief. Murphy's gonna sit with you." He leaned in low and spoke right into the sleeping man's ear. "Coming right back, Chief. I'm coming right back."

Murphy moved past Simon and took Jim's chair. "I'll take care of him, Detective," he said quietly. "Go take a break." He reached out and patted Sandburg's leg. "How you doing,

man? It's Murph, from downstairs."

"You call us if he moves, okay?"

Murphy nodded but still Jim did not move. Simon stepped back into the room, took Jim's arm again, and drew the man away. "He'll be okay. We'll be back within an hour. I promise."

The walk to the elevator was silent. The ride to the second floor was silent. They threaded their way through corridors lined with offices and meeting rooms and eventually found the cafeteria. Jim followed Simon blindly, still not speaking, and when asked what he wanted to eat, just shrugged. It was up to the Captain once again to make decisions. He grabbed two trays and then got two plates of the main course, roast beef. He choose mashed potatoes and peas for them both, added rolls, and then, with a slight glance back at his still silent friend, grabbed a couple of pieces of apple pie. "What do you want to drink, Jim?" he asked as he stood in front of the fountain machine. When Ellison just shook his head, Simon added bottled water for them both and pushed the trays forward to the cash register. He paid, then lifted his tray and nudged Jim. "I can't carry them both, Ellison."

The words seemed to break whatever spell Jim was under and he looked down at the full tray, wrinkled his brow as he took in the large amount of heavy food, then lifted it and followed Simon to a small table in the back corner. Once seated, he just stared at the plate until Simon took the fork and passed it to him.

"Just a few bites, Jim. Get something in your stomach."

Again, Jim nodded. "Did you see what they fed Sandburg?" he asked as he took the first bite.

Simon shook his head. "Meals weren't on the visuals."

"But he ate."

"Had to. He's thin -- lost a lot of weight -- but it was too long for them to have not fed him at all."

Jim was eating almost methodically. Fork, lift, chew. Not thinking, just acting. "Wonder what he ate."

"What're you gonna fix him when you take him home?"

Jim shrugged. "Something goopy. Some tofu thing, or ..." He shrugged again. "Hell, I don't know. Something he likes." Jim forked another mouthful of mashed potatoes and swallowed. "Maybe he'll be talking by then and he can tell me what he wants." Jim finished the mashed potatoes and started on the peas. "FBI find anything?"

"Not yet." Simon wasn't really hungry, but he kept eating. It seemed to keep Jim going. Every time he lifted his fork, Jim did the same. When Simon put his down, so did Jim. There was more silence as he finished everything on his plate and looked over in satisfaction to see Jim had done the same. He didn't really want the pie, but he shifted plates and pulled the smaller one in front of himself.

" 's okay, Simon." Jim offered a half smile as he looked up at his boss. "I don't really want the pie either."

"Damn, Ellison. How do you *know* these things?" The older man laughed as he spoke and pushed the pie away in relief. He really didn't need it.

Jim lifted the water bottle and drank. "I want to go back." He rose and stretched, looking around for a place to take the tray and dump the trash. Spotting several bins by the door, he headed that way, barely acknowledging that Simon was following quickly behind.

With their table cleared and the trays returned, both men headed back for the elevator. "Thanks, Simon," Jim offered once they were in the small car and riding up. "I needed to eat and I needed to get out. It helped me clear my head." He stood relaxed against the wall of the car, looking steadily at the other man. "I know what Sandburg needs now." There was a short 'ding' and the elevator stopped, doors whooshing open. Jim exited and set off down the hall, Simon trailing in his wake.

Even before he had reached the door to Sandburg's room, he tensed and began to move more quickly. Simon could see him breathing deeply, sniffing the air, and when he entered Sandburg's room, he immediately pounced on the older cop sitting patiently in the chair.

"Why the hell didn't you call me?"

Murphy looked up in astonishment. "He's sleeping, Ellison. He never moved." He rose and his eyes cut to the bed to see if he had missed something obvious, but Sandburg still lay curled into himself, totally still.

"You were just going to let him lay here like this? Leave him like this?" His hands were running over the younger man now, stroking him through the blankets as he leaned down and whispered into his ear. "'s all right, Blair. "'s okay. I'll get you cleaned up. It's all right. Nothing to worry about."

He turned back to the uniform and glared. "Get out."

Murphy still looked baffled and seemed ready to say something else, but Simon took his arm and led him out, closing the door behind them.

"Look, Cap'n, I don't know what the hell that was all about, but I swear to you, Sandburg never moved ..."

Simon shook his head. "Not your fault, Murph," he offered. "Ellison's -- prickly -- when it comes to his partner."

"I understand that, but what the hell was he going on about? Leaving him there like that? What's he talking about?"

Simon cleared his throat. "Look, Murph, this is -- personal. I don't want this getting around."

"Soul of discretion here, Cap."

Simon looked up to see that the big man who had volunteered his time to be here was seriously confused and a little bit hurt. "Sandburg's had some problems with -- incontinence."

Murphy looked at the door, then back at Simon. "Oh. Shit. I didn't know, Cap'n. He never said anything." He ran one hand through his hair. "Hell, he never moved." Murphy looked at the Captain, then sighed. "You gotta believe me. If I'd known, if I'd realized, I'd a called you."

Simon reached out and patted the big man's arm. "I know, Murph. And believe me, Ellison does, too. He's just on edge now. You were a convenient target."

The cop nodded. "Not a problem." He glanced at the door again. "You guys need any help, you know, cleaning things up?"

Simon shook his head. "No, thanks anyway. We can handle it." He reached out to the door, hand resting on the handle, then turned back as Murphy settled into the chair again. "Look, Murph, I know you volunteered to be here. Ellison shouldn't have jumped you like that, but ..."

"Nah, Cap, it's all right. I like the hairy little guy." He grinned up at the dark-skinned man. "And I'm big enough, I can ignore Ellison."

Simon patted his shoulder. "Good man," he said as he opened the door and went back in.

Jim was slowly stripping the blankets off the bed. He was down to just one, and now Simon could smell the faint odor of urine as well. Sandburg was moaning and shifting on the bed. Jim reached out and stroked his face, once again soothing the half-asleep, half-drugged man.

"Cold ..."

"Shhhh, Blair, 's all right." Jim ran one finger down Blair's cheek, letting it rest against the jawline. "I just want to get you cleaned up. Clean sheets, clean clothes."

"Cold." Simon watched as Blair's eyes opened fully, resting on Jim with crystal blue clarity, and then he shivered violently. "Cold. Cold ..." He began to struggle to get out of the bed.

"He thinks he has to choose again, Jim," Simon said quietly. "He's choosing the cold."

Blair turned to look at Simon, no recognition in his eyes. "I. Choose," he mumbled as he shivered again. "No choices, Chief," Jim said softly, his voice low and husky. "You're safe now."

Blair closed his eyes again, still shivering and began to cry. "Cold," he whimpered.

A nurse came in just then, an older woman with a sour expression on her face. She took in the scene by the bed and said, "He's wet again, isn't he?"

Jim just nodded.

"He needs a catheter, Mr. Ellison."

Jim rounded on her, one hand still on his partner, stroking, soothing, even as he spoke icily to the intruder. "You only want to catheterize him to make your job easier." He looked back at the man in the bed, spoke softly to him as his hand continued to rub gently. "Just get me clean linens. I'll take care of him."

The nurse started to say something, but a hand on her arm from Simon silenced her. She nodded shortly and ducked out. In short order, a young aide appeared with clean sheets and two fresh blankets. "I can get more blankets," she stammered, "if the others are dirty, too."

"Won't be necessary," Simon said, accepting her bundle. "Thank you."

She bobbed her head quickly and left, leaving Simon to wonder exactly what Ellison had done to cow the staff so completely. He looked up to find Jim staring down at his partner with such an expression of sadness, it broke his heart. He cleared his throat gruffly, then asked, "How do you want to do this?"

"They want to cut his hair."

Simon waited a moment to see if Jim would offer more than the nonsequitur. When nothing more was forthcoming, he focused on the matted nest that topped Sandburg's head. It had been washed, but even he had to wonder if the snarled, tangled mass could ever be made right again. Twelve weeks was a long time.

"I don't want them to cut his hair."

Simon eyed the matted rat's nest again, then said, "I don't know, Jim. It looks pretty bad." He shrugged. "I don't know if there's anything to do but cut it."

"I can fix it." Jim touched the thick snarls gently. He looked up at Simon and the older man could see the sheen of unshed tears in his eyes. "I can fix him, Simon," he whispered as his gaze returned to the man in the bed. "I have to."

Simon waited a few beats, then asked, "What do you want to do now?"

"Let's get him up and into the shower." Jim studied the IV. "Call that nurse in here and let's get the line out for a bit."

Simon started to argue, but then decided that when it came to Sandburg and what he needed, Jim probably knew best. He stepped to the door, asked Murphy to get the nurse, then came back. "Do you think he's ready for a shower? All that time in water ..."

"This will be warm water -- not cold. And a shower -- not a bath." Jim looked up. "And I'm getting in with him. He's not going to be alone -- not for a minute." Jim began to strip down until he wore nothing but his boxers.

The nurse came in, looked at him strangely, but under the weight of the glare he gave her, she didn't comment.

"Take the IV out," he ordered. "I want to give him a shower."

"We need to check with the doctor first, Mr. Ellison."

"You can take it out, or I can," Jim growled. "Then you can check with the doctor while I give him a shower."

The woman stared at him for a moment, then gave a little 'hmmph' of annoyance, but she bent over Blair's bed and in seconds the IV was out. "You know he's going to scream again, Mr. Ellison, and then we're just going to have to hold him down and stick him again to calm him down."

Jim narrowed his eyes. "No one's going to stick him again. And I'll calm him down."

The woman rolled her eyes, giving Jim a 'you're crazy' look, but she left without another word.

Simon watched with growing trepidation. "Are you sure this is such a good idea, Jim?"

"He needs to be clean. Sandburg likes showers."

Simon didn't ask how Jim came to know this.

"And he needs to feel safe, Simon." Jim ran his hands over the man in the bed, a gentle, soothing caress. "How can he feel safe if they keep him drugged to the gills?"

Simon studied the other's man face. Exhaustion was etched in every line. He was pale, and his normally bright blue eyes were dulled with worry and fear. He sighed and moved forward to lay a hand on Jim's back. "Okay, Jim. What do you want me to do?"

"Start the shower." Jim nodded his head over his shoulder, pointing to the bathroom. "As hot as you think we can take it. Then come back in here and help me get him up. I'm going to try and wake him, explain what we're doing, but he's still liable to panic when the blankets come off."

Simon moved to the bathroom and the sound of running water was heard. Very shortly thereafter, steam began to billow out of the open door. Jim nodded approvingly. The bathroom would be warm. If he could just get Blair out of the bed and into the bathroom, it would be warm.

He shook his partner gently. "Sandburg -- Blair -- wake up, Chief."

Blair rolled back toward Jim, eyes opening as he shivered under just one blanket. He stared at Jim with no recognition, then closed his eyes and once again said, "Cold."

"No." The word came out more harshly than Jim intended, and Blair's eyes shot open in fear. Gentling his tone, Jim reached out and stroked the other man's face. "No more cold, Chief," he whispered. "But I need to get you up. You understand? You need to get up."

"Cold ..."

Jim lowered the rail and pulled back the last blanket. Sandburg immediately began to buck and strain against Jim's hand. "Give me a hand here, Simon," he said softly, even as he cooed reassurances to the struggling man. "You gotta get up, Sandburg," Jim murmured. "Don't fight me, Chief."

Blair arched on the bed, then twisted out of Jim's grasp and darted out of the bed. He dropped to the floor and scrambled to the far corner, an unearthly yowling issuing from his lips. Jim winced and had his own struggle to turn down his hearing, then he moved slowly toward the terrified man in the corner. He held a blanket with one hand, and extended the other in supplication. "C'mon, Chief, it's just me. Jim. I just wanna help."

The yowling stopped. Blair blinked cloudy blue eyes and looked up fuzzily. "Jim?" he croaked.

"Yeah, buddy. Jim. It's me. Jim."

"Jim." Blair stared at Jim as if he were an apparition, then his eyes darted fearfully around the room. "Cold, cold, cold," he chanted, seeming to have forgotten Jim's presence as quickly as he acknowledged it.

Part 4

Cold

Part 4

Simon closed the door again, assured that Murphy would keep the medical people out, but still relieved to know that Blair's howl had made them come running. He studied the man in the corner. His movements were familiar. The eyes darting around as if looking for silent watchers. The chant of 'cold, cold, cold.' The terrified expression that nevertheless held a smattering of acceptance. A 'this is my fate' kind of look. All that was missing was the slow crawl forward and the reluctant climb into the tub.

"He's seeing it again, Jim," he said.

"Seeing what?" Jim looked back from his crouch on the floor in front of his partner.

"The room. The tub." Simon nodded at Blair. "That's what he looked like on the tape. Terrified. Backed into a corner."

"I'm not backing him into a corner. I'm not going to force him to do anything." He turned back to Blair. "It's your choice, Chief."

At his words, Sandburg began to keen, pulling back even further into the corner and curling up fetally. Jim looked up, panicked.

Simon shook his head. "Wrong thing to say, Jim," he said. "That was what *they* kept doing. Making him make the choice."

Jim dropped his head into his hands. "Shit. Shit. Shit." He jerked his head violently. "I knew that. God damn it. I *knew* that!" He scrubbed roughly at his face, then turned and began to murmur again. "Shhhhhh, Chief. 'm sorry. It's all right. No choices. No cold. It's all right." He reached out, rubbing little circles on Sandburg's back. The gown was soaked with urine and reeked to his sensitive nose. He wanted nothing more than to get it off his friend, and get him into the shower for a real clean up. For some reason he couldn't understand, he just felt that if he could get Sandburg in the shower, things would be okay. Didn't make sense, but he'd learned to trust his instincts when it came to the Sentinel/Guide thing.

He moved forward again, sitting on the cold tile floor and reached out to Blair. He wrapped both arms around him and pulled and the small man rolled into his lap. He continued to rub and whisper soothing words, and the keening quieted until all that was left were sobs intermingled with the occasional cry of "cold." Content that the man was off the cold floor, he looked up at Simon and mouthed, "blanket," nodding gratefully when the other man dropped it over Sandburg and helped to tuck it around him. More rubbing, more whispers and the sobs eased into quiet tears and sniffles.

"Shower, Chief," he whispered into the now still man's ear. "Gonna get you cleaned up. "Ho --"

Simon cut him off quickly. "Warm. Warm shower, Sandburg."

Jim nodded. "Yeah. Time for a real clean up. A warm shower."

"C-c-c-c-old." Jim had thought Blair was asleep again. The word slipped out through

suddenly chattering teeth and the sound tore through his heart like a knife.

"No more cold, Chief. Warm. Now." He looked up at Simon. "Let's get him up, shall we?"

"You want me to pick him up? I can just carry him to the bathroom."

Jim looked down at the man in his arms. "I don't know, Simon. He's still pretty skittish." He looked around for other ideas, found none other than putting Blair back down on the cold tile floor. Not an option. "Look," he said wearily, "I can carry him if you can just give me enough leverage to get my feet under me."

Simon nodded, bent over and placed his hands under Jim's arms. "On three," he said. "One. Two. Three." He gave a big heave, and Ellison rose to his feet, Sandburg still cradled in his arms. The younger man moaned, but made no other protest. "What about all the bandages?" Simon asked.

Jim shrugged. "They get wet. I can patch him up again later." He began to move toward the bathroom. "At least we're in a hospital. No shortage of supplies here."

He reached the steamy bathroom and lowered Sandburg to his feet. The other man stood there, groggy and swaying, but he stood. Jim untied the wet and smelly gown and pulled it off, passing it quickly to Simon. "You need the toilet, Chief?" he asked on a whim, and was shocked when Sandburg nodded. It was the first breakthrough. He'd asked a question. Sandburg had replied. A quick shuffle step brought them there and Jim was pleased to see his partner quickly take care of business, even if he seemed unaware of what he was doing. He refrained from offering a 'good job,' or 'way to go' comment, and instead said, "Shower, Chief."

Sandburg nodded and shuffled toward the curtained area, then stopped. "Not cold?" he whispered.

"Not cold, Chief. Warm." Jim took a step forward and tugged gently. Sandburg followed. They stepped in and Blair let out a sound that could almost have been a sigh of contentment.

"Not cold," he murmured, dropping down to sit under the warm flow. Tears quickly mingled with the water as he wrapped his arms around himself and began to rock. "Not cold. Not cold. Not cold."

Jim sat too, legs extended on either side of the crying man, wrapping him in his arms, rocking him gently, and echoing his chant. "Not cold, Chief. Not cold. Never gonna be cold again."

Sandburg stilled for a moment, head twisting around to look at Jim and for a moment the spark of recognition was there again. "Jim," he whispered, and then he began to rock again.

"Yeah, Chief. It's Jim." He tightened his grip on the smaller man. "I've got you, and you're not gonna be cold again."

"What do you need, Jim?" Simon asked from the door.

"Soap. Shampoo. Washrag. Lots of towels."

Simon nodded as he passed the first three to Jim. "I'll get someone in here to do the bed while you take care of him." He looked around as if not quite sure of what to say next. "I'll get some extra towels, and bring in some blankets too." He watched a moment as Jim

poured out shampoo and began to wash Blair's matted, tangled hair. "And I'll see if I can find a comb or a brush or something."

Jim looked up, smiling a real smile for the first time since they'd realized Blair was missing. "Thanks, Simon." He nodded at the door. "You wanna shut that on your way out? Don't wanna let the warm air out."

Simon nodded and took that as his cue to leave.

Jim watched the door shut, then turned his full attention to the man who sat on the floor of the shower with him. He was rubbing the shampoo into the tangled mat of hair, massaging the scalp and even rubbing behind Blair's ears. As he worked, Sandburg leaned back in tiny increments until he rested fully against Jim's chest. It made it a little harder to wash his hair, because the man's head was practically in his face, but the even beating of his Guide's heart, the steady respiration and lack of all fear responses, made the slight inconvenience well worth it. He finished and whispered, "Let's rinse, Chief. Close your eyes." He placed one hand over the other man's eyes, and then tried to rinse the soap out with one hand funneling the shower's flow where he wanted it to go. It took a very long time, but Sandburg seemed content to sit beneath the warm water and let Jim do whatever was needed. He was concerned to see that quite a bit of the younger man's long hair was coming out in his hand, but chalked it up to a combination of poor diet and lack of care. Once he was convinced the shampoo was out, he said, "Don't have any of that conditioner stuff you put on it, Chief. Gonna have to make do without."

There was the slightest shrug of shoulders against his chest, and he had to contain himself from actually leaping with joy. They'd communicated. He'd made a comment and Sandburg had responded. Sandburg had heard him, understood him, and acknowledged it. Jim grinned. He'd known the shower was the right thing to do.

"Let's get you washed now, Chief, okay?"

There was no answer this time, but Jim didn't let it bother him. It was enough that they'd connected the one time. He took a few minutes to remove bandages, letting the water soak them completely so that the adhesive wouldn't pull. He soaped up the rag and ran it over the other man's chest, arms and legs. It was a slow process and he had to be careful of the various still healing wounds, but eventually he finished. He leaned the other man forward and washed his back, this the most tender area as it was clear he'd been treated to the whip shortly before being released. Finished, he soaped up the rag one more time and carefully washed Blair's genitals, afraid the contact would upset the other man, but it evoked no response whatsoever.

Setting aside the rag, he felt the slight decrease in water temperature and knew it was almost time to get out. "Simon?" he called. The dark head appeared almost immediately.

"I got you a razor, Jim, and some shaving cream." He looked at the pair on the floor. "You want to try and shave him?"

Jim nodded and accepted the items Simon passed over. "Adjust the shower head, will you? So it doesn't hit him on the head?"

Simon placed several more towels and two blankets on the sink and then laid a clean gown on top. He stepped to the shower, reached up and shifted the flow so the water streamed down Blair's chest, instead of over his head. "Call me when you're done. I'll help you get him out."

Jim nodded, then began to lather his friend's face. Sandburg never spoke, but he seemed

aware of what was happening, holding his head up, being still, shifting as Jim needed him to so he could get the jawline and the sensitive area by his ears. He finished quickly and Jim was surprised to find that shaving another face had not been as difficult as he'd thought. He wiped the last of the shaving cream off with the rag, then nudged Sandburg forward until the spray of water once more covered him. The smaller man sighed and leaned back into Jim's embrace. "Not cold," he said softly.

"No, not cold."

Jim sat with him there, under the flowing warm water, soaking in the heat and contentment, until he was sure even Blair could feel the difference in the water temperature. Then he rose, pulling the smaller man up with him, his back to Jim's chest. "Time to get dry," he whispered.

Sandburg tensed at his words. "Cold," he whimpered.

"No, Chief. I'm gonna get you out and wrap you up so quick, you're not gonna have time to get cold." He hugged the too-thin form before him, rubbing his hands up and down Blair's arms. "It's gonna be okay. We get out. We get dry. We get you dressed and then you're back in the bed, snug under as many blankets as you want."

Blair twisted in his arms, turning to look into Jim's eyes. "Jim."

"Yeah, Chief. It's me."

The spark of recognition faded as quickly as it had been born, but once again Jim was encouraged. "It's me, Chief," he repeated, as he stepped out of the shower and began to quickly towel dry the other man. The room felt warm to him, too warm, and the steam from the shower made it hard to feel anything could be completely dry. But to Sandburg, it was all moot. The minute he stepped from the warmth of the water, he began to shiver. Jim worked as quickly as he could, rubbing carefully over the wounds to dry the frail body before him, but the shivering just grew more violent, more convulsive. When tears began to fall, Jim threw the towel aside and wrapped his partner in the blankets Simon had left beside the towels. Being completely dry wasn't worth the misery he was witnessing.

Still dripping himself, he pulled the blanket-wrapped man to his chest, enfolding him in his arms and drew a deep breath, struggling for control. Something primitive, something primal seemed to arise in him, and he buried his head in his Guide's neck, again breathing deeply. "Better," he murmured to himself. "More Sandburg."

Sandburg's shivering stopped, and Jim began to unwrap him, not really conscious of the other man at the moment. He began to make a scent journey around the too-thin man. His hands flowed down with him, his nose pressed against the clean smelling skin. "Too much soap," he muttered. But when he got to the genitals, he smiled. "More Blair." He sniffed his way to Sandburg's feet, not even aware he was kneeling or that Sandburg stood still, calm, beneath this odd scrutiny. The shivering, the protestations of cold, were gone. The Guide stood ready, awaiting his Sentinel. Jim worked his way back up, breathing deeply again at the most "Blair" part of the body, and then his tongue came out to lap at one of the ugly puckered scars on Sandburg's belly. "Wound," he murmured, tongue snaking out to taste again. "Burn." He rose and sniffed his way back to the neck. He liked the neck. Buried there, beneath the hair, behind the ear, it smelled almost as Blair-like as he remembered.

He turned the man and began on his back. There were wounds here. He didn't like this. Scabs, not scars. He sniffed deeply and made a face. This was not good. He ran his face across the Guide's back, breathing deeply before he settled on one particular stripe. It

smelled wrong. Even for a still healing wound, it smelled wrong. He focused on it, staring intently and could almost see the problem, when something grabbed him, pulled him away. He whirled, ready to defend the Guide, only to find Simon staring at him.

"I'm trying not to yell here, Jim. I don't want to upset Sandburg."

Jim shook his head, eyes closed, trying to remember what had happened. Blank. He looked up at Simon. "What?"

"You were taking forever, Jim. I stuck my head in the door, and you were -- sniffing -- Sandburg. All over." Simon made a slight face.

Jim rubbed his face, the modern man moving to the forefront, the primal Sentinel still there, but controlled. "It's a ..."

"Sentinel/Guide thing. I figured." Simon looked at him. "What *were* you doing?"

Jim rubbed his face again, then realized Blair was beginning to shiver. He quickly dressed him in the hospital gown then wrapped the younger man in blankets and walked him toward the bed. "I was checking him for myself, Simon. I needed to know he was okay."

"Is he?"

"One of the wounds on his back is infected."

"You could tell that?"

"I smelled it." Jim shrugged. "I think I could have seen it if you hadn't walked in." He turned Blair, pushing gently until the other man sat on the bed, then bent and lifted his legs, swinging them into the bed. He pulled the sheet and blankets up, tucking his partner in well, and watched as Blair drifted off to sleep almost immediately.

Simon held out a pair of dry underwear.

Jim raised an eyebrow.

"They're mine. From my gym bag. I went down and got them while you were in the shower. They're clean," he added unnecessarily.

"Thanks," Jim replied as he stepped into the bathroom to strip off the wet ones and dry himself. He was back in an instant, and quickly pulled his jeans, T-shirt, and sweater back on. "You, uh, didn't bring me any clean socks by any chance, did you?"

Simon smiled and reached into his pocket, holding out a pair of thick athletic socks. "Ta-da!" he said triumphantly, grinning when Jim laughed. "You feeling better?" he asked when Jim had the socks on his feet.

"Yeah. Sandburg and me -- we communicated."

"He talked?"

"Not really. Not much beyond the 'cold, not cold' thing. But he used the toilet. And when I told him I didn't have any conditioner for his hair, he shrugged." Jim's eyes were filled with unshed tears again as he looked at Simon. "He heard me, he understood, and he basically said it didn't matter." He reached out and touched the man on the bed. "That's progress, right?"

Simon laid a hand on Jim's arm. "Absolutely that's progress." He too studied the man on

the bed. "He looks a lot better. Calmer. The shower was a good idea." He looked up, met Jim's eyes. "What now?"

"Did you get that comb?"

Simon nodded.

"Good." He reached over and slipped an arm behind his partner, lifting the sleeping man up. Blair never stirred. "Here, help me hold him up."

Simon stepped around to the other side of the bed so he could get a better grip and then took Blair in his arms. "What're you gonna do, Jim?"

The Sentinel was sliding into the bed now, working his way behind his Guide and once settled, Simon rested the sleeping man in his arms. The smaller man was a warm, solid weight against his chest, and he had to restrain himself from dropping his head to sniff once more at the neck that lay exposed to him. "Hand me that comb, Simon," Jim asked as he wriggled a little to get settled. "I'm gonna get this mess straightened out for him."

Jim started at the bottom of Blair's hair, taking small little sections and working the comb through carefully. When he got to a really snarled or matted place, he worked slowly, with extraordinary gentleness to assure that Blair didn't feel the first pull, or the slightest bit of discomfort. It must have worked because the man in his arms slept on, oblivious to the world. "This is gonna take a while, Simon," Jim said. "You don't have to stay." He stopped his ministrations for a moment, wrapped an arm around Blair and hugged. "I know what he needs now."

"What does he need, Jim?"

"He needs to come home."

Part 5

Cold

Part 5

Simon knocked softly, then entered. Sandburg was sleeping and it looked as if Jim had been as well. His chair was pulled over close to the bed and one arm still stretched out over his charge's leg. As Simon watched, he rubbed his eyes, yawned and then raised his arms over his head and stretched.

"Sleep well?" Simon asked.

"I gotta take him home, Simon," Jim said ruefully as he rose and stretched again, this time working on kinks in his back. "I really need to sleep in a bed."

"So I would imagine," Simon said as he studied his friend. Despite the unorthodox sleeping arrangements, he looked better than he had three days ago. Of course, three days ago, he'd been at the end of a three-month separation from his friend and Guide, and now he'd had three days to reconnect with his partner. And despite Sandburg's obvious -- problems -- Jim had benefited from that reconnection. He held up the bag he carried.

"His clothes?" Jim held out a hand and accepted the bag.

"And yours. I put extra shorts in there."

Jim nodded again.

After the first shower, Sandburg had decided he liked the warm water. Just about every trip to the toilet was followed by a shower. Sandburg would use the toilet, then shuffle over to the shower and wait. Jim hadn't had the heart to say no, except for the one time in the middle of the night. At that point, he'd reintroduced his partner to the joys of washing your hands after using the bathroom. That also involved warm water, and Sandburg had accepted the change without another fit.

Of course, three showers with Sandburg meant Jim was completely out of dry shorts, and had been. His underwear and the pair Simon had brought both hung in the bathroom in a thus far fruitless attempt at letting them dry. Fruitless because, even though he was 'going commando' under his jeans, he kept climbing back into the shorts for the showers with his partner. Drying was going to take a really long time at this rate.

"You get the hair stuff?" Jim asked.

Simon pointed at the bag. "I went to that place you said. Shampoo, conditioner, gel." Simon raised his hand and touched his own hair, slightly embarrassed. "Jesus, Jim, do you know how I felt asking for that stuff? Guys don't ... I mean, men ... Well ..." He gave up and shrugged instead, smiling at the man in the bed.

Jim chuckled. "Yeah, well, he does. You've heard him enough. 'Don't touch the hair, man,'" Jim mimicked and Simon laughed.

"I got some of the rubber band things too, the cloth-covered kind?" Simon made a vague pushing motion on either side of his head. "So you could pull it back for him."

They both looked back at the man in the bed. Blair was awake now, laying silently within his nest and studying them. There was no recognition in his eyes. Jim moved to the bed and touched his face, pushing back the hair he had just been speaking of. "Hey, Chief, howya feeling?"

Sandburg's eyes blinked but that was all.

"You wanna get dressed? Put some real clothes on?"

Another blink.

Jim looked back at Simon. "I'm gonna get him up. He's gonna want to shower." He shook his head ruefully, but couldn't hide the smile. "This is gonna take a while."

Simon nodded. "I've got to get to the station anyway. Take care of Sandburg. You need anything, you call."

"Thanks, Simon," Jim said over his shoulder as the older man left. As soon as the door closed, he focused entirely on his Guide. Letting down the bed rail, he pulled and was pleased to note that Sandburg helped push himself into a sitting position. Jim took a minute to sit on the bed and pull the younger man into a hug. Sandburg squirmed at first, but Jim soothed him with quiet words and then buried his head in the Guide's neck. It was the best place, the best way, to keep the Sentinel reassured that the Guide was back, the Guide was safe, the Guide was getting well. And as odd as it seemed, when Jim was busy 'sniffing,' Sandburg stilled beneath his touch. Blankets or not, warm or cold, in the bathroom or on the bed, the Guide stilled for the Sentinel even though the man was still too damaged to respond.

Jim breathed deeply again, inhaling the heady Blairscents and let his hand wander over skin and bandages briefly before he pulled back. Almost at once, the man on the bed began to shiver. Jim touched him again -- skin warm to the touch, skin naturally ruddy -- there was no reason for his partner to be so cold. He shook his head sadly and wondered if he would ever be able to get the younger man completely warm again.

As if reading his thoughts, Sandburg turned to him and whispered, "Cold..."

Jim shook his head. "Not cold," he reminded his friend. "Let's get you in the bathroom, then when we're done, I'll help you get dressed. Maybe that will help chase the cold away."

He rose and tugged gently until Sandburg followed. The younger man shuffled barefoot to the bathroom and Jim made a note to work on getting slippers for him. Not only was the shuffling hard on the bandage on the burn on his foot, the tile floor had to be cold and if there was one driving force in his world right now, it was keeping Blair Sandburg from ever feeling anything cold again.

He stood next to the younger man as he used the toilet, then watched with a small smile as he moved to the sink for hand washing. Sandburg made no move to turn the water on, however, just standing and waiting as if he had all the time in the world. Jim smiled, moved the taps until the water ran warm, and watched as Sandburg simply held his hands under the running water. He reached out, touched the smaller man's face and brought it around to look at him. For a moment, recognition flared, and he heard his name from familiar lips. "Jim."

He nodded. "I'm here, Chief. I'm here. You're safe. It's okay now. You're with me."

There was the slightest nod and then Sandburg returned his focus to his hands and the

water. "Not cold," he whispered, "not cold."

Jim moved behind the other man, enfolding him in his arms. He pressed tightly against him, willing himself to keep the other man warm, and dropped his head to rest lightly against the now soft, now smooth, now sweet-smelling hair. "Not cold," he echoed, "not cold again."

Sandburg leaned back slightly and Jim braced himself to accept the weight, supporting his partner while he played in the water at the sink. When he felt a slight tremble in the body he held, he reached out and turned the water off. "C'mon, Chief. Shower."

Sandburg turned obediently and shuffled to the shower. Jim had vetoed floor sitting after the first time and now a stool sat in the enclosure and Sandburg moved to it and sat. "Gown, Chief," Jim reminded softly. "Take your gown off."

Sandburg looked up at him, confusion in his eyes and his hands fluttered helplessly in the air. Jim waited a moment longer, then leaned over and untied the gown, drawing it off carefully. There were tears in Sandburg's eyes now, and Jim patted him gently. "'s okay, Chief. You're getting there. It's okay." He turned the showerhead down so he could set the temperature before the water hit his partner. Once it was nice and warm, he stripped down as well, rummaged in the bag Simon had brought and pulled out the shampoo and conditioner, then climbed into the shower and turned the nozzle so it sprayed on the man in the chair. There was the softest sigh of contentment as the almost too-warm water began to cascade over the too-thin body. Jim stepped behind his partner catching just a hint of a smile on the drawn face, and smiling to himself in return. The shower had certainly been a good idea.

For a non-talker, Jim had certainly done a one-eighty. He spoke almost non-stop as he touched the younger man, keeping up a running commentary on everything he was doing. "Put your leg out, Chief. Let that bandage get nice and wet so I can get it off without pulling." He moved the appropriate leg as he spoke. "Thaaaat's right. Feel that water soaking in? That's good, eh, Chief? C'mon, lift your foot. Don't make an old man bend down." He bent anyway, lifting the foot and slowly unwrapping the gauze that covered a healing burn on the side of the left foot. "Looking better, Chief. Almost healed." He continued his patter as he pulled off all the bandages, checking each wound as he went. Blair sat unresisting in the chair, his head tilted slightly upward into the water, eyes closed and that hint of a smile still on his face.

When all the bandages were off, he moved to stand behind the seated man, resting his hands on the younger man's shoulders. Blair tilted his head a bit more, turning to the side and looked up at him. His blue eyes were completely clear and he stared right at his partner as he said, "Jim. Not cold."

Jim felt his throat close up. His chest grew tight and his heart raced. He tried to speak but his mouth was dry. All the moisture had apparently traveled to his eyes, which were suddenly shiny with unshed tears. He bobbed his head, swallowed hard, and still couldn't speak. Blair was staring up at him, complete trust and faith shining from his eyes as he waited patiently for his Sentinel to respond. Jim nodded once, then leaned over, wrapping his arms around the younger man and burying his face in his neck. He breathed deeply, his chest suddenly clear, his lungs functional again, and murmured into his partner's ear, "I'm here, Blair. And you're never gonna be cold again."

He could feel the nod -- the full-fledged, 'I heard and understood' nod -- and then felt the first few tears spill over to mingle with the water that flowed over them both. He sniffed again, basking in the Blairscent, and realized that with his tears, there was now Ellison mixed into the scent. Jim nodded. That was as it should be.

He held the younger man a moment longer, then stood and flipped open the bottle of herbal shampoo. "This is your stuff, Chief. Simon went and got it." He held the bottle out for inspection and was pleasantly surprised when Sandburg took it and appeared to study it for a moment before his fingers went lax and the bottle slipped from them, dropping to the floor. Jim grabbed it before all the shampoo spilled out, capped it and placed it in the corner, then lifted Sandburg's head to look at his eyes. They were cloudy and dull again, the tiny spark that had lit them gone, and once again he felt tears prick at his own eyes. "It's okay, Chief," he whispered. "You can come out. It's safe now." There was no answering nod or glint of acknowledgement and Jim bowed his head a moment, feeling the weight of his partner's pain and fear. He leaned down and placed a kiss against the other man's temple, letting his lips linger a moment longer than perhaps they should, then rose and began his commentary again.

"Gonna wash your hair now, Blair. With your shampoo. That's good. It'll smell like you do. I like that. It's familiar. Comfortable. Did I tell you I missed that while you were gone? Who'd have thought, huh? All those times I bitched at you about the mess in the bathroom, hair in the drain, hair crap spread out all over the sink, and then you're gone, and I miss it. Am I a sap, or what?" Strong fingers worked the shampoo into a lather, massaging the scalp and working through the few tangles that had dared to nest in the now well-cared-for mane. He spent extra time just rubbing the head beneath his hands, feeling as Blair unconsciously shifted so his hands would go where the younger man wanted. He liked being rubbed behind his ears. "You like that, eh? Feels good? I'm glad. You just sit back and enjoy it." Jim reached out and gently pulled Blair back until the younger man's head rested against his abdomen. "Just lean here, Chief. I've got you." Jim spent several minutes alone on each of those spots and when he peeked around, Blair's eyes were closed in contentment.

He finally finished the wash cycle and began to rinse. Once again, it was a long process as he made sure no soap got into Blair's eyes. "Keep your eyes closed," he said as he placed one hand over them as an added protection. The younger man sat quietly, unmoving now unless Jim shifted him, and waited patiently. When the hair was clear of shampoo, Jim picked up the bottle of conditioner. "Never used this stuff, Sandburg. What do I do?" He wasn't surprised there was no response so he spent a minute reading the directions, then filled his hand with the creamy white lotion and began to work it into Sandburg's long locks. Once again, he spent extra time massaging the other man's scalp, murmuring soothing reassurances all the time. "You're here with me now, Chief. It's gonna be okay. You're safe. Nothing bad is gonna happen. I'm really glad you're back, you know that? Missed you. Not gonna let you go again. Sorry. Just can't. If you gotta go somewhere, I'm gonna have to come. Together. Can't let this happen again. Gonna be all right." He finished working the conditioner into the long hair, and wrapped his arms around his friend again, holding him close. "You're here, Chief. That's all that matters now. We'll work this other stuff out, okay? It's gonna be all right. You're safe and you're here." He kissed the temple again, arms holding the bony body against his chest. "'s all that matters. You're here."

"Not cold, Jim."

Jim gave a strangled half-laugh, half-sob and kissed him again. "And you're not cold. That matters too, Chief." He pulled back reluctantly and began the process of rinsing the hair again. Once more, it took a long time, but finally it was done and Sandburg's hair hung silkily against his back. Jim leaned down and sniffed appreciatively. "Now -- smells like you." He nodded approvingly. "Let's get you shaved and bathed." The shaving didn't take long. Once again, Blair tilted his head as needed, cooperating with the process, even when his eyes were closed and he seemed otherwise unresponsive. Bathing was quick as well, and Jim took the opportunity to check all the wounds as he worked his way over his

partner's body. As he had before, he washed the man's genitals last, slightly uncomfortable with the task and half-angry at himself for feeling that way. And as before, he was relieved when his handling of those private areas didn't evoke any sort of response. He did a visual survey, studying the testicles and flaccid penis and was relieved to see there really hadn't been any injury there. He snorted. There'd been more than enough damage in other areas, but he was sure that when Blair was back to himself, he'd be glad he was unmarked here. Jim shifted his gaze to study Blair's face. The younger man was still painfully thin but the pallor that had bleached his skin almost colorless had been replaced by a healthier complexion now. And Sandburg was eating, so he'd eventually fill back out.

"Time to get out, Chief," he said quietly, watching as the closed eyes opened and the flicker of recognition sparked and then died. "Get out? C'mon, buddy." He pulled the other man to his feet and turned off the water, watching in amazement as he began to shiver almost immediately. Jim had learned the trick now -- he skipped the towels completely and went straight for a blanket, wrapping it around Blair and pulling him in close for a hug as he rubbed vigorously with the blanket. The shivering stopped immediately.

"Not cold," Blair whispered.

"Not cold," Jim agreed. "Not while you're with me." He finished the drying process, then grabbed a second blanket and wrapped his partner again. He used a towel to get the worst of the water out of the long hair, then tried unsuccessfully to wrap it around Blair's head in a move he'd seen on TV countless times. It was harder than it appeared and he gave up quickly, leaving the towel draped over the smaller man's head in a parody of a woman's scarf. "Let's get you patched up and dressed, Chief," he offered as he led the other man out into the hospital room.

The patching up took a little time. They'd almost worked out a routine. As long as Jim handled everything, Blair remained calm. Unfortunately, everything really did mean everything. Sandburg would eat, if Jim fed him. Sandburg would use the toilet, if Jim took him. Sandburg would allow his wounds to be checked and cleaned and rebandaged, if Jim did the checking and cleaning and rebandaging. It tended to make the doctors just a little snarky. They got through this last bout of bandaging and the concomitant snarkiness, and then, since Blair was not in immediate physical danger, and Jim was capable of handling him, it was agreed that the best thing was for Jim to take him home.

"Home, Chief. You hear that? We're going home." Jim thought longingly of his bed and the chance to actually lie down and sleep. He couldn't wait. Blair cooperated as he got him dressed for the first time. "Lift your leg." And he did. "Other leg." And he did. Jim pulled the sweat pants up and then bent again to slip socks onto Blair's feet before he could get chilled. The bandage on the left foot was a little bulky and caused a few problems, but Jim got the sock on without causing his friend any discomfort. T-shirt, sweatshirt, flannel shirt. All the standard layers went on without problems. He got Blair settled in the bed again, then sat next to him, the tube of hair gel in his hand. He studied it a minute, wrinkled his nose in confusion and finally set it aside. "It was a nice thought of Simon's, but if you want that stuff, you're gonna have to do it yourself." He shook his head and shifted on the bed, moving slightly behind the other man. "I'll comb it for you though." With the detangling from the conditioner, the comb ran through smoothly and easily and Jim finished the job quickly. He used another towel to dry the hair again, wanting to get all the moisture the combing had brought to the surface, and then combed it one last time. When he was done, he leaned back against the wall, legs hanging off the bed. Blair followed immediately, resting his head against Jim's chest. He turned on his side and snuggled in, one arm coming out to drape across Jim's abdomen. Jim dropped an arm over the other man's shoulder, then pulled the blankets up and tucked him in.

"Let's just rest a bit before Simon gets here to take us home, okay?" he whispered in Blair's ear. There was no answer but the in and out of breaths, the solid rhythm of a steady heart.

And yet, it was enough.

Leaving the hospital, the ride home, coming up to the loft. It had all gone much more smoothly than Jim had anticipated. Sandburg had ridden in the wheelchair without fuss, as long as Jim kept one hand on his shoulder and walked beside him. He'd climbed into Simon's car obediently, but clung to Jim's hand and the Captain of the Major Crimes Division had ended up a true chauffeur, with two passengers in the back. And when they reached the loft, not even the biting cold wind of mid-winter in Cascade had done more than cause Blair to close his eyes and wrinkle his nose as he moved into the building, Jim's arm wrapped around him and holding him tight to his side.

Entering the loft, the young man had paused, eyes staring around with interest. Jim watched for a flicker of recognition, but while there was curiosity, nothing seemed familiar to his partner. "Home, Blair," he said softly as he drew the tired young man all the way into the room. "You're home now."

Jim led him to the center of the room, then released him.

"You want me to stay a while, Jim?" Simon asked from the doorway where he held the single bag containing Blair's and Jim's things.

"Thanks, Simon, but no." Jim glanced back at Blair still standing motionless next to the coffee table. "I think we need to get a routine, see if anything seems familiar to Sandburg."

"I'm keeping a guard outside," Simon said gruffly.

Jim looked up, surprised. "That's not necessary. I can, you know, check things."

"You need to sleep, too," the older man replied. "Guard outside. For a while." He shook his head and ran a hand through his hair. "We still don't have a clue who did this or why."

Jim moved to stand in front of the other man, one hand reaching out to take the bag. "If you'd let me look at ..."

"No," Simon said sharply, then glanced up guiltily as Sandburg jumped and then began to shiver. He shook his head again and there was real sorrow in his face as he said, "No, Jim. Just trust me on this one, okay?" He jerked his head toward Sandburg. "Go take care of your partner. Let us be the detectives this time."

"I want to *do* something, Simon," Jim said in frustration.

Simon laid a hand on Jim's shoulder. "You are, my friend. You're keeping him warm." He pushed gently and Jim began to move toward the skinny form in baggy clothes who was now adding tiny little moans to the increasing shivering. "Just keep him warm."

Jim nodded, his attention already focused on Blair, and Simon slipped out, locking the door behind him. Jim looked at Blair. His mouth moved but there was no sound, no words. His heart was racing, his breathing shallow. His shivering was rapidly moving into uncontrollable. Jim grabbed an afghan from the back of the couch and wrapped it around the younger man. "It's okay, Chief. You're home now. No more cold." The shivering slowed, but did not stop. "C'mon, buddy, let's get you settled." He gently seated Blair on

the couch, lifting his legs and curling them under him when the other man made no move. Jim darted into the downstairs bedroom -- Sandburg's room -- and brought out several brightly colored hand-made throws the anthropologist had picked up on his many travels. He swept the comforter and blankets from the bed as well and carried them all out to the living room.

Jim added two more wraps to the afghan, set the rest of the bedding on the floor and then sat beside Blair. The other man's violent shivers had calmed to slight tremors and he swept his partner into his arms, holding him close as he murmured, "You're not cold, Blair. You're not. It's okay now. It's over. You're here with me, Chief. Home. Home with Jim. It's all right now. You're home with Jim."

Sandburg curled against him, his head a solid, comforting weight against Jim's chest. The trembling slowed and then ceased and finally his heart had slowed to a normal rate. His breathing deepened and slowed and his eyes closed. Jim held him there, wrapped in blankets, safe in his arms, and thought that he was asleep. The older man was leaning his head back, resting against the couch, intent on a little nap of his own, when Blair spoke.

"Jim," he whispered.

"Yeah, Chief, it's me. I'm here."

"Not cold," Blair mumbled into Jim's shirt.

"No. Not cold." Jim tilted his head down and sniffed the comforting Blair's scent in the crook of the neck so trustingly revealed to him. "Home," he whispered back into the ear beneath his lips. "You're home now."

There was the slightest nod against his chest and then Blair fell asleep, and Jim followed him. When he awoke several hours later, his back hurt, his neck ached, and he was kicking himself for not taking his partner upstairs to the big bed. They could have taken a nap up there just as easily and much more comfortably than they did on the couch.

He shifted slightly, trying to ease the kinks in his back and Sandburg woke immediately. "'s okay," he said quietly to the waking man. "You're home. See?" He lifted his arm from around his friend and gestured at the loft. "Home."

Sandburg shifted uncomfortably and stared up at Jim with clear eyes, but did not speak.

"What?" Jim was out of his league. He looked at the other man. Blair's eyes were focused, tracking him, trying to tell him something, but no words followed the look. "You gotta talk to me here, Blair," Jim said in frustration. "I don't know what you want."

Sandburg shifted again and then, very softly, said, "Cold."

Jim reached out, touched the younger man's brow. He felt warm. He studied the other man. Color in his cheeks, no shivering or trembling. Just the awkward shifting from side to side that was increasing.

"Cold," Blair said again, a quiet but more forceful complaint.

Jim shook his head. "I don't know what you want, Chief." He reached out and touched the other man again. "You're not cold. You're home now. Safe." Jim leaned down and grabbed one of the blankets off the floor. "You want this?" He wrapped the blanket around the younger man and watched as Blair's eyes filled with tears. Jim reached out and captured his Guide's face in both hands, using his thumbs to wipe away the tears. "It's all right,

Chief. It's over. You're home." He tried to soothe the younger man back to sleep, but the eyes were crystal clear, staring at him, beseeching him to -- something. He shook his head in frustration. "I don't know what you want, Chief. You gotta help me here." Sandburg stared at him a moment longer, then seemed to close his eyes in acceptance. Jim watched. The younger man wasn't asleep, but he seemed to have retreated back into himself, no longer accessible to the outside world. "Chief?" Jim called softly. "How about something to eat?" No response. "Or a drink?" No response. "Well, how about you rest here a while, and I'll fix us something?" Still no response. Jim sighed softly and extricated himself from his partner's grasp, settling the younger man back in the corner of the couch and adding yet another throw to the growing cocoon of covers that swaddled his partner. "You just sit here, Chief. I'll be right back."

Jim had expected that to at least rate startled eyes opening to stare at him, but there was no reaction. He rose and moved swiftly to the bathroom. Business first, then a meal. He was washing his hands when it hit him. Sandburg needed to go to the bathroom. He hadn't been since before their shower that morning. It was late afternoon now. He smacked himself on the head, muttering, "Stupid, stupid, stupid," and flew out to the couch.

"Blair, buddy, c'mon," he said as he began to peel the layers off the other man. "Bathroom, okay? Let's get you to the bathroom." He finally reached his partner and pulled him to his feet, startled as his eyes opened and he stared at Jim. His face, his eyes, his whole expression said 'Thank you' as clearly as if the words had been spoken. For a minute, Jim wondered if they had, but then he just said, "Sorry it took me so long. I forgot." He led the other man to the bathroom, one arm wrapped around his waist. "And you're welcome," he added as he stood Blair by the toilet and then stepped back. Sandburg didn't move for a minute, then he fumbled at the waistband of his sweats. His movements were jerky, slow, and uncoordinated and Jim found himself mourning the loss of the those hyper-active hands as they illustrated some far-fetched tale flowing from the non-stop mouth. It took a minute, but eventually Sandburg finished and Jim checked him to make sure he hadn't missed and gotten his clothes wet. The operation confirmed to be a success, he turned on the water in the sink and watched as Sandburg smiled and moved to extend his hands and luxuriate in the warm water flowing over them.

He looked up at Jim, recognition in his eyes and a smile on his lips -- a real, honest, true smile. "Not cold," he said and Jim could hear the happiness in his voice.

Part 6

Cold

Part 6

It was frustrating. Jim looked over at his partner who stared unseeingly across the room. He broke off another piece of bread and held it out. "C'mon, Sandburg," he said softly, "take another bite." The lips remained closed until Jim nudged them with the bread, then the mouth opened, he popped in the food, and Sandburg closed his eyes and began to chew. With his eyes closed and the expression of sheer *enjoyment* on his face, it was almost possible to think there was nothing wrong. But then, his partner swallowed and opened dead eyes and Jim wondered once again what it was going to take to really bring his friend home.

Food was good. Sandburg really got into eating. He'd made lasagna after the bathroom thing. He'd led Sandburg back to the couch, settled him once more in a nest of blankets, afghans and throws, made a mental note to take him to the bathroom every couple of hours, and then he'd come to the kitchen and made lasagna. He'd bought the meat and ricotta the day Sandburg was due to come home, never expecting that he'd be at the hospital for four days. But it was still good, and he needed something to do while he tried to figure things out.

The assessment at the hospital was brain damage. Specialists suspected the repeated freezing had caused brain damage of some kind. But it wasn't totally hopeless. Blair's aphasia seemed to be at least partially psychological -- a defense mechanism against what had happened to him. Perhaps there had been some slight damage that made it difficult for him to find the right words, and he had then just decided it was too much work to keep trying. He just didn't have the energy to deal with the torture and maintain that incredible vocabulary. And now that he was home, he should be able to rest and recover and when he felt safe again, he would begin to speak. Jim sighed. That had to be it. He couldn't bear to think of that brilliant mind trapped without words for a lifetime.

He was pulled from his thoughts when his partner gave a little mew of complaint. It was the closest to a request Jim had gotten and it made him smile. "All right, already," he grumbled with a laugh, "it's coming." He picked up a bite of the lasagna and held it up to Blair's lips where it promptly disappeared. Sandburg had pretty much stripped the world down to two states of being - cold was pain, discomfort, a need of some kind. Not cold was safety, security, contentment, and of course, being warm. He forked up another bite of lasagna and held it up, then offered the bread again. It was repetitive and a little messy as he hadn't mastered the fine art of feeding his partner completely, but they got through it. Jim cleared the dishes while Blair sat unmoving and then he led the younger man back to the couch, turning the TV on low to an episode of *Archaeology*. He laughed at himself then and gently tousled his partner's hair as he perched on the arm of the sofa. Sandburg had been in his life for so long, he now recognized John Rhys-Davies as the host of *Archaeology*, and not just Indiana Jones' buddy. Sandburg leaned into his touch, so he spent a minute rubbing his head, running his fingers through the long hair and pushing it back out of the other man's face. When the younger man began to lean against him, eyes drifting shut, he stood and shifted him on the couch, helping him curl onto his side and wrapping him in blankets. Without realizing what he was doing, he leaned down and kissed the cheek that lay exposed to him. "Rest now," he whispered. "You're safe."

He sat in the chair across from the sofa and allowed himself the indulgence of just

watching his Guide sleep. One would think that with all the time he'd spent doing just this thing in the hospital, the novelty would have faded. The reality was that, after three months of separation and the agony of thinking Blair was missing -- gone! -- it had been such a shock and surprise to find him only to discover he had been so horribly mistreated. Something inside this good and generous man had broken. Watching him was a luxury he didn't think he would ever tire of, just as being with him was a privilege he would never take for granted again. Blair moved a little, sliding more deeply under the blankets and his lips moved soundlessly. Even with Sentinel sight and hearing, Jim couldn't make out what the other man was saying. If indeed he was saying anything at all.

He let himself sit and watch the sleeping man and was astonished when his own eyes opened again and he found almost an hour had passed. He ran a silent scan over his partner -- sleeping soundly, breathing normally, heartbeat steady, and most importantly, comfortably snug and *warm* -- and then hefted himself from the chair and padded into the kitchen. He quickly wrapped the remaining lasagna and stored it in the refrigerator then turned to the sink. Dishes stacked to one side, plates on the bottom, silverware on top, glasses next to the sink. He turned on the tap, adjusted the water and began to rinse everything prior to loading the dishwasher.

Almost immediately there was movement from the couch. Jim turned to watch. Sandburg sat up, looking warily around the room but with none of the fear responses he'd evidenced before. He rose a little unsteadily, blinked twice, his head turning from side to side as he took in the room. When his eyes lit on Jim, he froze, swallowed hard, and his mouth moved silently. "Jim," he said without saying, and Jim answered, "Right here, Chief. I'm right here."

Sandburg took a few steps forward, stopped again, then began moving toward him. His footsteps were muffled by heavy socks and he walked awkwardly as if he were favoring the injured left foot, but trying not to. Once in the kitchen area, he stopped again, looking around in confusion. Jim could see the eyes clear in recognition and then see the light fade as some internal struggle was waged somewhere deep inside his friend, far beyond his reach. " 's okay, buddy," he said softly. "Everything's okay here." Jim was torn between moving to his partner, trying to convince him that he was safe, and holding his place, just to see what Sandburg would do next. He'd already demonstrated more independent action in the last 2 minutes than he had in the last four days.

He compromised, asking, "You want something, Blair?" in a soft and quiet tone. This earned him a clear look of recognition that once again faded quickly, but then Sandburg moved forward to the running water, holding out his hands beneath its flow and sighed.

He stood unmoving, staring at the floor as the water sluiced over his hands, between his fingers, splashing up to dampen the cuffs of his flannel shirt. "Not cold," he whispered Sentinel-soft, and once again Jim smiled.

He moved to stand behind his partner, wrapping his arms around the younger man and taking the smaller hands in his own. Holding them carefully beneath the flowing water, he said, "No, Blair. It's not cold anymore."

They played in the water for a while, Sandburg resting his weight against Jim, apparently confident that the larger man would support him, would take the weight and never falter, and then Jim reluctantly pushed Blair forward, waiting patiently until the other man stood steady on his feet. He rinsed the glasses, working his way to the water between Blair's hands, taking the hand-me-down drops that slipped off his partner's wrinkling-wet skin. The forks and knives were next, easier to slip into the water without depriving his friend of its comforting warmth. He had to work at the plates -- the hour he'd napped had allowed melted cheese and tomato sauce to harden and they didn't rinse quickly. As he was

picking at a particularly stubborn spot, another hand slipped onto his, another finger traced the plate, and another arm moved back and forth against his own. Sandburg was helping.

He swallowed hard, murmured, "Thanks, Chief," and kept picking. When the plate was completely free of any possible spot of remaining food, probably cleaner than the dishwasher could ever get it, he pulled it from their shared grasp and added it to the bottom rack. "That's about got it now," he said softly. Water off, soap in dishwasher, close the door, turn it on. Sandburg still stood by the sink, his hands held out to water that no longer ran. Jim took a towel and dried Blair's hands, then led him back to couch. He settled him once more, wrapping him carefully in the layers of blankets and afghans and throws that cocooned him and kept him warm and feeling safe, then sat on the floor beneath him. Reaching up, he took the remote and scanned through the channels, searching for something else that might capture his anthropologist's interest. A History Channel program on the Great Wall of China caught his eye, and he put the remote down, then turned to look at his friend. Sandburg lay on his side, staring at the TV, not really totally there, but not with the vacant, dull look he carried so often now. Jim smiled. Things were getting better. He turned his attention to the show. "Thanks for helping with the clean up, Chief. I appreciate that."

A soft hand touched his head and he had to refrain from pulling away or turning to look. Slowly, and without a sound, Sandburg began to rub his head and this time, it was Jim who leaned into the touch.

It was comforting, the touch on his head, the fingers in his hair. He'd missed the touch of his Guide. Somewhere deep inside, a wound he wasn't even really aware of seemed soothed by the balm of this touch. Jim drew his legs up and dropped his head, burying his face against his knees and ignoring the damp spots that appeared beneath his eyes. Sandburg's hand slid down from his head to the base of his neck and two fingers stroked him there. He closed his eyes and shuddered, the thought of never knowing this, never having this connection with this man crashing against his consciousness like waves against the rocks in the midst of a violent storm. He felt battered and beaten and more than a little scared. Sandburg's touch, so trusting, so sure of his acceptance, placing so much faith in him -- what if he couldn't live up to it? What if he wasn't enough to really bring his partner back from the black hole of hell? What would he do then?

He lifted his head, straightened his shoulders, and turned to look at the man on the couch. Sandburg's hand still rested on his neck, no longer moving, and his eyes were fastened on the flickering screen of the TV. "Hey, Chief," Jim murmured, as he turned to face the other man, suddenly bereft at the loss of his touch, "let's get you covered up, okay?" He took the exposed hand, held it for a long moment before gently kissing the palm, then carefully slipped it beneath the covers, and tucked his partner in. "I'm gonna start a fire for you."

He pulled himself up and stacked wood in the fireplace, threw in a firestarter and lit it. Soon there was a roaring fire and it had every bit of Sandburg's attention. Completely ignoring the TV, Blair stared at the fire, watching Jim's every move as he poked at the wood and shifted the stack to allow the chimney to draw better. Satisfied at last, he came and sat on Blair's couch, settling into the opposite corner. He glanced up at the TV, resting an arm across the other man's legs, and commented, "I had no idea there were people buried in the Great Wall." He looked over at this partner. "Bet you knew, didn't you, Einstein?" He rubbed Blair's legs gently through the blanket. "Why don't you come on back and tell me all about it?"

There was no answer, but he hadn't really expected one, so he settled in to watch the last half of the program. Sandburg, however, seemed lost in watching the fire. When the final

credits rolled, Jim rose and stretched. He was hot now -- too hot. Keeping the thermostat set higher than usual and then adding a fire on top had created just a little more heat than his Sentinel sense of touch could handle. He needed to cool off for a bit. He looked at the balcony longingly, then looked at his partner. "Don't get too involved in the next show, Chief," he said as he headed for the fire again. "We're going to bed."

He lifted the poker and stirred the fire, letting the logs break and settle onto the concrete flooring. Once he was sure the fire was banked for the night, he hung the poker on the rack and replaced the screen. He walked back to the couch, laid a hand on Sandburg's head, saying, "I'm going onto the balcony for a bit, Sandburg. You stay here. I'll be right back." There was no response, no reaction. It was as if the other man had not heard him speak. Jim shook his head. If this on again, off again interaction was frustrating for him, how much more so it must be for Blair, trapped in his own mind and unable to make his way out?

He stepped out on the balcony, the cold air welcome to his overheated senses. He paused only a moment before closing the door. He didn't want Blair to think he was alone, but he also didn't want to let the cold air seep in and make its way to his partner. There'd been progress tonight and Jim wasn't taking chances.

He could see Cascade from the balcony. Stretching out his vision, he looked west over the ocean and watched two ships pass in the night far away in the shipping lanes. Two ships in the night. It was a well-used euphemism for so many of the relationships in his life. He turned and looked back into the loft. Sandburg still lay unmoving on the couch. His relationship with Sandburg -- the Sentinel with the Guide -- was the most stable relationship he'd ever had. Even his marriage had been haunted by a sense of transience, while there had been something permanent about Sandburg from the moment he'd set foot in the loft.

Jim drew back his sight and watched the lights of the city as a normal man. It was pretty. White lights shone in the clear, crisp air, their reflections twinkling in the snow. It was quiet in the building, quiet on the streets and he began to stretch outward, listening. The Sentinel of the Great City protecting his people. He could hear people talking, cars, doors opening and shutting, phones ringing, televisions -- a great cacophony of sounds, but somehow oddly comforting by the very normalcy of it all. He listened a bit longer, then began to slowly draw back, filtering it all until there was only one thing, one sound that echoed in his ears.

One heart.

Sandburg's heart.

The only sound that really mattered.

He piggy-backed smell onto sound and sought out his Guide's unique scent. This threatened to overload him as he breathed in deeply and was suddenly engulfed in the familiar, comforting scent of Blair. Hands reached out to grip the balcony railing and he reached out mentally, slamming the dials down before he could zone. It still left him reeling. He swayed where he stood, clinging to the rail for stability, then turned and hurried back into the loft. Drawn by the powerful compulsion, he almost stumbled to the couch, scooped up the now-sleeping man, and buried his face in his neck. "Blair," he whispered, almost desperate to make contact. "Blair, come back. I miss you. I need you." He breathed deeply, drowning in Blair's scent, being swallowed by Blair's skin as his hands ran over the lax body in his arms. His emotions were raging -- he felt out of control -- and it was only by the thinnest of threads that he managed to pull away from his Guide, pull back from the overload, and struggle to his feet. He stumbled into the kitchen and turned

on the tap, splashing cold water on his face, then standing erect, muscles trembling as the modern man fought for control with his primitive Sentinel.

He heard a sound behind him and turned. The sound of the water was drawing Sandburg's attention. Jim quickly turned it off. Just the sight of those confused eyes looking warily around the loft was enough to pull Jim firmly back into control of himself -- senses and emotions.

"Time for bed, Sandburg," he said softly, not wanting to startle the skittish man. He checked his dials -- scent, touch, hearing -- all turned firmly down. He stepped forward and placed an arm around the other man's waist, pulling him close and leading him to the bathroom. He waited patiently while Sandburg once again fumbled through toileting, then played in the water. He helped him back to his bedroom, scooping up blankets and comforter as he passed the couch, then waiting again as Sandburg studied the bed as if it was a foreign object. "Bed, Sandburg. Time for bed." The younger man looked at him, eyes clear for a moment as if he wanted to say something, and then his eyes darted about the room as if searching out hidden enemies. "It's safe here, partner," Jim said, gently pushing the man forward, seating him on the bed. He lifted Blair's legs, pulled up the sheets and then proceeded to swaddle him in covers. Once he was sure that the younger man was completely covered and well tucked in, Jim sat on the bed and began to rub his back. Sandburg moved beneath his hand, rolling onto his back and staring up with clear and lucid eyes.

"Jim."

It was one word, but it was enough.

"Jim," the older man repeated back, "I'm Jim and you're home." He looked into the other man's eyes, waiting for the dull and vacant look to return, but they stayed clear, watching him patiently but without any weight of expectation in the gaze. Jim's hand made lazy circles on the smaller man's stomach as he met Blair's eyes steadily, trying to *will* it into the other man that he was home, he was safe, they were together. Finally, he said, "Close your eyes, Chief. Time to go to sleep." And the eyes closed obediently. "I'm just going to sit here until you fall asleep. Then I'll be right upstairs. If you need me, I'm here."

It didn't take long for Blair's breathing to settle into the steady rhythm of sleep, but Jim sat a few minutes longer, once again allowing himself to drink in the presence of his Guide. He ran his hand lightly over the long hair, brushing strands back from his face. He let his hand linger on the raspy jawline, rough with evening beard, and settled two fingers against the pulse point on the neck, counting each beat, synchronizing his own breathing to the steady pulse beneath his touch. And then he leaned over and brushed his lips against the forehead, breathing in the scent of soap and shampoo and Blair, tasting salt and sweat and Blair, and forcing himself to pull back abruptly as he once again threatened to get lost in the presence of his Guide.

He rose on once more shaky legs and climbed slowly to his room.

He awoke in the dark, confused at first as to what woke him. He scanned the loft. Blair was awake and moving around in the living room. That wasn't so unusual. Sandburg often worked in the middle of the night, fingers tapping on his laptop or pen scratching across papers he was grading. Jim turned on the bed, and looked down into the living room. The comfort of waking to normal Blairsounds faded quickly as he caught sight of his Guide standing by the fire, the metal poker heated to red hot and held out in horror as Sandburg began to cry.

The memory of the last few days crashed in around Jim, erasing the comfort of first-waking, and he leapt from the bed, almost falling down the stairs in his race to reach Blair. He pulled himself up hard when the younger man turned around, the hot poker still in his hand. Tears ran down his face and he looked at Jim in desperation. "I choose," he whimpered, hand extending toward the red hot metal as if he would grasp it.

"NO!" Jim roared, jumping the last few feet to reach his partner, and quickly wrestling the poker from his terrified friend. He threw the metal onto the hearth and gathered Blair into his arms. "Shhhhhh," he soothed. "No more choices. No more choices."

Blair sobbed relentlessly, chanting, "I choose, I choose," shivering violently beneath Jim's touch.

"No more, no more," Jim whispered, "never again."

"Cold, cold, cold, cold, cold ..." The words were wrung from Blair's lips, pouring forth as if they would never end.

"Not cold," Jim challenged him, dragging the man away from the fireplace and back toward the couch where he could reach the blankets and begin to wrap his partner in as many layers of warmth as it took to make him feel safe. "Not cold." He had one blanket over his shoulders and was working on the second when he smelled it.

Urine.

Blair's bladder had released.

"Cold, cold, cold, cold, cold ..."

Blair was shaking so hard now, he couldn't stand on his own and he leaned heavily into Jim, then began to slide downward, settling on the now wet floor. Jim followed him down, refusing to let go, refusing to let Blair be alone for one second longer. "Not cold," he whispered fiercely. "You will not be cold with me." He pulled the man close, oblivious to the wet, the smell, the discomfort and chanted, "You're home, Blair, home. You're with me, Blair, Jim. You're safe, Blair, safe. It's all over now. It's all right. Nothing can hurt you here."

Slowly, very slowly, the tears stopped and the shivering lessened. Blair's cry of "cold, cold, cold," quieted until he could barely make out the word. And then, the word changed. From a whispered "cold," to a murmured "Jim."

"Jim. Home. Jim. Home."

"Yeah, Chief, you're home. You're with Jim. I've gotcha. It's all right now. Home, Blair, home. You're home safe. With me. With Jim. It's all over and I've gotcha." He held the shivering man to his chest, stroking his back, his arms, his hair. Burying his own face in Blair's neck, murmuring reassurances directly into his ear and comforting himself with deep breaths of Blaissance.

Even the odor of urine couldn't distract him from the scent of his Guide as the man stilled beneath his ministrations, and calmed at his touch. But it was getting uncomfortable.

"Home, Blair," Jim repeated over and over again. "Safe. Jim. Home. Not cold." All the right words, spoken over and over again as if sheer repetition could make Blair finally believe and be at peace.

When the man in his arms stilled completely, Jim dared to move. He stood, dragging the

limp form he held up with him, and then waiting patiently as Blair looked around with unfocused eyes but finally stood on his own feet. "Bathroom, Chief," Jim said quietly. "Shower. Let's go get cleaned up." He snagged two more blankets from the pile on the couch and gently pulled his nearly somnambulant partner toward the bathroom.

Once inside, he started the shower, letting the bathroom fill with steamy heat before he began to undress the many layers of Blair. Two flannel shirts, a T-shirt, sweatpants, two pairs of socks and the boxers all came off, leaving his partner looking very thin, very small, and very uncomfortable as he sat on a towel on the closed toilet seat. Jim stripped quickly as well, not even leaving his boxers on as was his wont: everything he had been wearing now reeked of urine. He pulled Blair to his feet and said, "Shower, Chief," and was rewarded when his partner moved forward and stepped beneath the warm water. He followed quickly, wishing he'd thought to put a chair in the bathroom, but resigning himself to sitting on the floor until the hot water began to run out.

Blair stood passively for several minutes. Jim used this time to move everything he would need from the shelves to the floor; soap, shampoo, conditioner, and the cup he had thought to put in the shower to help with rinsing all of Blair's long hair. He touched the razor and then decided to wait until morning to shave his partner again. Just as he placed the washcloth on the floor, Blair stepped back, leaning against Jim. That lasted a few more minutes and then his legs seem to begin to give, and Jim lowered him to the floor, sliding down behind him and settling him back against his chest.

"It's okay, Chief," Jim murmured. "You're safe now. Just rest and let me get you cleaned up." He began to wash Blair's hair again, rubbing gently and spending extra time massaging the scalp.

"Feels good," a sleepy voice said softly.

Jim froze.

"Sandburg?"

"Yeah?"

"You all right?"

"Tired, Jim. And my head hurts."

"Your head?" Jim reached up and touched the bandage gently.

"Inside, not out."

"You're talking."

"I'm warm."

"But you're talking."

Sandburg leaned back, resting his head against Jim's chest. "I'm really warm," he said contentedly.

"You know where you are?"

"Home. Safe. With you, Jim." The words drawled out slowly, comfortably, and with total assurance.

"You remember what happened?" Jim bit his tongue as soon as the words were out of his

mouth. Blair was talking and the first thing he does is ask him to talk about what happened. "I'm sorry," he whispered. "Never mind."

Blair shook his head. "'s okay, Jim. I remember. But I don't want to talk about it now. I just want to sit here and be warm and let you finish washing my hair." He turned around and looked up at his friend. "Can I do that?"

Jim swallowed hard, ridiculously pleased that the water from the shower masked the tears falling down his face. "You can do anything you want, Chief," he murmured huskily. "Whatever you want."

"Good." Blair turned back around and let his head rest against Jim's chin again. "Wanna stay warm. Wanna stay here. With you."

Jim wrapped his arms around his partner, his friend, his Guide, leaned in close and spoke softly into his ear, "I'm so glad you're back, Chief." He squeezed the younger man tightly, drawing him close. "God," he shuddered, "I missed you. And I was so afraid."

Blair nodded, his arms coming up to cover Jim's. "I missed you, too, Jim. I called for you over and over but you didn't come."

His mouth dried up and words strangled in his throat. "I didn't know, Blair, I didn't know ..." he finally choked out.

Blair nodded again, and patted his arm. "That's what I figured. If you'd have known, you'd have come."

Jim sobbed, a single cry ripped from his bowels and swallowed harshly back. He would not do this. He was not the injured one here -- he would not let his emotions, his feelings pull from what Blair needed. And Blair needed him strong, needed him in control. Blair needed him to fix things. He leaned forward and buried his head against Blair's neck, smothering the sobs there, mixing the tears with the water that flowed over the other man's skin. "You're okay now, Blair," he whispered when his voice would function again. "You're home. It's over and you're home. Safe. With me."

"Hair, Jim," Blair prompted, and Jim set to work.

He finished Blair's hair, shampoo and conditioner, then washed the man and himself and then sat in contented silence, flesh to flesh, skin to skin, Sentinel to Guide. He let himself breathe in Blair's scent and touch Blair's skin and listen to Blair's sounds and feast on the sight of Blair. He even permitted himself to reach out and lap at the water that pooled in the hollow of the younger man's neck, tasting of the Blair's skin that cradled the drops. Blair didn't speak again, and when the water began to turn, Jim realized he had fallen asleep.

He spoke softly into the ear that rested beneath his chin. "Hey, Chief. Time to get out." The relaxed body stirred in his arms. "Gotta get out, Water Baby. Time to dry off." Blair nodded agreeably and when Jim stood, allowed the older man to pull him to his feet. Jim wrapped him in a blanket and began to dry him, using the same trick he'd learned at the hospital.

"Not cold," came a whispered voice, Blair's, but different from the voice in the shower. Jim looked down to see the younger man staring ahead with dull and vacant eyes.

Jim stopped and closed his eyes. Like a statue, he stood unmoving for long minutes, waiting, praying that when he opened his eyes again, his Blair, his Sandburg, his Chief would be looking back at him. But when he looked, there was no one there. His breath hitched and he fought back another sob. He could look at this two ways. This could be a

set-back or -- the conversation in the shower could be a sign of hope that things would eventually be fine. Blair would heal and things would be normal again.

He decided to hold on to the hope.

His hands began to move again, rubbing and drying and then, because his heart was breaking and he needed *something* to connect him to this incredible man who still lay trapped in his own mind, he let the Sentinel out. He unwrapped his Guide and began to journey over him. Eyes examining him, ears listening to his breaths and heartbeats, hands caressing soft skin covering hard bone. He dipped forward, breathing deeply and began to sniff. Slowly, carefully, with none of the primal urgency his prior experience with this had, he began to travel down the planes of Sandburg's body. He sniffed neck and arms and abdomen, allowing his tongue to slip out and add taste to the whole sensual experience. He paused at the genitals, then buried his face there and breathed deeply, repeatedly, and once again allowed himself the smallest of tastes. Legs and feet and toes. Sound, and sight, and scent. He was lost in a world of heightened awareness, heightened enjoyment -- lost in a world of Sentinel and Guide.

Beneath his touch, his Guide stood silent. Waiting, accepting, patient.

Jim moved around to Blair's back and worked his way up again -- slowly, carefully, caressing the skin, reveling in the touch. Drawing Blair in with each breath as if he were the air, and of course, he was. He moved upward, firm, round butt, the dip in the small of his back. That dip had a unique scent, a softer feel and Jim lingered there, touching, tasting, breathing, before moving up over the newest scars on the back and finally diving in beneath the wet hair to nibble kisses across the base of the neck. He was floating in Blair, drowning in Blair, willing to die in Blair.

Sandburg shivered then, a slight tremor that nonetheless drew Jim back to himself. He pulled back, wrapped the man in the blanket and covered his head in a towel. Wrapping another towel around his waist, he padded out holding Blair's hand and led the way to the stairs. At the foot, Blair stopped and Jim looked into his eyes. They were the eyes of his friend. "Upstairs," Jim said softly. "I want you to sleep with me."

Blair nodded once and murmured, "Not cold," then followed Jim up the stairs and settled quietly into the bed, falling asleep almost at once.

"Gonna be hell doing you hair tomorrow, Chief," Jim whispered as he did his best to towel dry the heavy curls. He let his hand rest on the stubbly cheek. "You rest, Blair. It's all gonna work out."

He put on his boxers and then slipped downstairs, making sure the fire was banked and dying, replacing the poker, cleaning up the floor, checking the doors. He grabbed clothes from Blair's room, knowing the younger man would need to dress when he woke in the morning and might be disconcerted to find himself naked in Jim's bed if it was indeed Blair who awoke.

He climbed the stairs again, then slipped into the bed and rolled onto his side. He indulged in Blairwatching a bit longer, then glanced at the clock. Late, and a comfortable lassitude was stealing over him, his limbs relaxed and the horrible knot that had stayed in his stomach for four days had faded almost beyond acknowledgement once he'd gotten his Guide home. Oh, it still flared when he let himself think of what Sandburg had gone through or when he struggled to understand the other man's needs, but just having his partner here with him seemed to make all the wrong things in his life go right. He turned his head and gazed out the window, watching the lights of the city and staring at Blair's reflection in the glass at the same time.

He was a sap.

Sandburg was facing such an uphill battle to return from wherever his brilliant mind had taken refuge, and there was no one to really help him except one stubborn, middle-aged cop -- not necessarily the most likely choice of companion for the journey ahead, but certainly the most appropriate. For this was a journey to be undertaken by the Guide, and the Sentinel protected the Guide. And yet it was a journey to be taken by a man as well -- Blair Sandburg, the man. It was a journey that would require support, and patience, and comfort, and -- love.

And for that there was no better companion than Jim Ellison -- the man who loved Blair Sandburg.

End

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