Too Sweet by Scribe

Summary: Fandom: The Sentinel
Rating: FRT for a few words
Archive: Yes
Summary: Blair has to come to terms with a diagnosis of diabetes, and Jim is determined to see the man he loves stay alive and healthy.
Credits: Thanks to Foxy for the art and Elaine for the beta. Illustrated version is at My Mongoose.
Notes: This story is as accurate as I could make it. I myself was diagnosed with diabetes three years ago and did *not* take care of myself as I should. I recently had a crisis where my blood basically went to syrup consistency. I was lucky--I didn't go into a coma. This story is my way of dealing with the rage and grief. I want to urge everyone who reads this: if you are suffering from the symptoms recorded here, or if there is a history of diabetes in your family, please get tested. It could save your life. Do it for the ones you love.
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Chapter 1: complete
It woke him up. Of course it woke him up--he hadn't dialed his senses down since the *last* time it woke him up. He was a Sentinel, and if he didn't dampen his hearing down he'd hear it when someone else in the house got up to use the can in the middle of the night--again.

//Jesus,// he thought. //That's his third trip since lights out, and the night is only half over. Is he taking diuretics, or something?// Because it //was// urination and not the runs or vomiting. The second time it had happened he'd dialed his smell up to check, and there had been no fecal odor, nor the sour tang of stomach bile. There was, however... Jim sharpened his sense of smell, sifting through scents that drifted up from the bathroom. He wrinkled his nose in distaste. //What is that? Pineapple? Something fruity.//

The hiss of recycled water hitting water seemed to go on for an awful long time. Finally there was a flush and Jim prepared to settle back down. Then Blair's footsteps, instead of padding sanely across the hall into his bedroom, swerved and headed for the kitchen. There was the chunk of the refrigerator being opened, then a brittle cracking sound. Jim rolled on his stomach, got on his knees, and peered over the headboard down into the living area. "Sandburg." Another chunk //No change in light--the fridge bulb must be burned out. Better change it tomorrow,// he noted, almost unconsciously. Again he heard the pad of bare feet, and Blair appeared in the living room, looking up at him. He was carrying a bottle of water--that explained the cracking sound. It had been the plastic cap snapping free of the anchor ring. The bottle was already half empty and, as he watched, Blair tipped it to his mouth and gulped. Wiping his mouth with the back of his wrist he said, "Sorry I woke you, man."

"Christ, Chief, you've just pissed like a racehorse and now you're //reloading?//"

Blair sighed, raking a hand through his hair. It was already a mess, and Jim thought that he must've been doing a lot of tossing and turning. "I know, I know, but I can't help it. I'm thirsty."

Jim studied his friend. Blair was wearing boxers and a tank tee-shirt--his usual concession to sleep attire. ("I'd rather sleep nude, man, but if I happen to run into you on the way back from the john some night I don't want to enflame your libido.") //Big joke, Sandburg. You don't know how close to the truth you were.// "Didn't you put away close to a quart of tea before you went to bed?"

"Yeah, I was hoping it would help me sleep." Jim quirked an eyebrow. "It's caffeine free. I don't understand it. Chamomile and peppermint have always eased me into the arms of Morpheus before."

"Well, settle down or I'll //punt// you into the arms of Morpheus."

"Yeah, right. Sorry," he mumbled. He was draining the last of the water as he disappeared into the hallway. Then he turned right instead of left and entered the bathroom //again/. In a moment there was another brief hiss of dispensed urine, another burst of pineapple-y scent. Then Jim heard Blair enter his room and crawl into bed with the weariest sigh he'd ever heard.

//Damn, Chief. What's wrong with you?//
He had circles under his eyes when he came out to breakfast the next morning. Jim was standing over a pan of bacon and eggs when he shambled into the kitchen and got the orange juice out of the refrigerator. "Did you get //any// sleep last night?"

"If I did, I didn't notice it." He poured himself a tall glass of juice and drained it in two swallows, then rinsed the glass and filled it again. "Say, Jim, could I talk you into fixing me some of that?"

Jim tried not to gape. "What about your usual kelp shake?"

Blair shrugged. "I'm hungry this morning."

Jim got the bacon and eggs out of the refrigerator again. "One or two eggs?"

"Three." He looked at the package of bacon, then pointed, "And the rest of that."

"Chief..."

"I'll kick in extra on the groceries, man. Come on, I'm starving."

As Jim started the food he noticed Blair rubbing one foot against the other, then reversing the process. "What are you doing //now//?"

"I'm trying not to scratch my feet in the kitchen. They've gotten really dry lately, especially around the heels. Have you been having anything like that?"

"No, haven't noticed it."

"Really?" Blair frowned. "I was thinking it was something with the water, or the laundry soap. But if there was an irritant in either of them you'd notice it before I would."

Jim was sliding the eggs onto a plate when Blair put down the glass and headed toward the bathroom. "Are you going to pee //again//?"

"Jim, it's either that or wet my pants, and I was potty trained at a very early age, despite our nomadic existence. I won't be long."

While he was gone, Jim thought //Ever since I've known him he's had one of those green monstrosities for breakfast. Add to that the fact that he's restless and pale, and pees every ten minutes... If he wasn't a guy I'd guess he was pregnant.//

Blair came back. He sat down, showing Jim his hands, palms out. "Clean hands, Dad." He tucked into the food with a will. "Are there any bagels left? I could go for a bagel with cream cheese and strawberry preserves. It's kinda like having cheesecake."

"If you keep on at this rate and don't come to the gym with me, you're going to pork up."

"No way, man." Blair had gotten up and was slicing a bagel. He turned and pointed his butt toward Jim. "I've been //losing// weight. Check it out."

//Oh, I do *not* want to look at his ass! I mean, I *do*, but I *shouldn't*.//

"I'm right, aren't I?"
//He's asking me to express an opinion--it's okay to look.// Jim looked. "I don't know. It looks normal to me." //Screw normal--it looks fantastic.//

Blair sighed. He reached back and grabbed the waistband of his jeans, tugging upward. The worn denim molded itself to him, painting itself over two firm curves. "Look--slack."

//Shit! And now *I* have no slack in my *fly*!* Jim casually used one hand to lay the paper he'd been planning to read across his lap while picking up his coffee with the other hand. He figured it was safest to have both hands occupied lest he, without thinking, reach out and caress. "Yes, they're a touch looser. Now total strangers will not be able to look at your crotch and guess your religion." //Oh, *shit*! I did not just say that.//

"Wouldn't work, man. We may be Jewish, but Mom's got a few Pagan leanings, too, and she didn't give me a bris. She wasn't about to go cutting off something that Nature had put there."

"Excuse me." Jim got up and went to the bathroom. It took two applications of a cold washcloth before his erection went down enough for him to venture out.

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Rafe had a court appearance cancelled. He owed Jim a favor, and Blair's birthday was coming up soon, so he suggested that they all go out to lunch--his treat. As they entered the restaurant, a nice new Cuban establishment, Blair headed directly back to the men's room. Jim's eyes followed him with a hint of unease, but Rafe was asking him what he thought of Cuban sofrito (onion, green pepper, garlic, oregano, and ground pepper quick-fried in olive oil) as compared to the Cajun 'trinity' of onion, green onion, and bell pepper, and he didn't want to be rude to their host.

When they were all at the table Jim warned Rafe, "You may end up spending more on Sandburg than on me. He's been packing it away the last couple of weeks. I even caught him eating my donuts."

"Two of them, Ellison--*two*. And I went right out and bought another dozen, didn't I?" Blair said as they were seated.

"And you ate..." the waitress placed a glass of ice water before each man. The instant her hand left the glass Blair picked his up and drank deeply. "half of them."

Rafe had opened a menu. "I'll just have one of the sandwiches."

"Sounds good," said Blair. "You can double that, and some black beans and rice, and oooh! Fried mushrooms. I'll decide on dessert later." Blair closed his menu, finished his water, and asked the waitress, "Could I get a *large* glass of iced tea?" He noticed Rafe and Jim looking at him. "What?"

"Where do you *put* it, Sandburg?" Rafe marveled.

"He's been eating like that for weeks and *losing* weight," Jim said.

"Really?" The waitress had refilled Blair's water glass, and he was sipping. "You're putting away liquids like a camel back from two weeks in the Sahara."

"Well, they run out again just as fast," Blair retorted.

Rafe studied Blair as Jim made his order. When the mushrooms arrived he accepted one, then said, "Tell me something, Sandburg. Have you been having problems with dry heels lately?"
Blair and Jim both stopped chewing and exchanged glances. Blair swallowed and said, "How the hell did you know that? I know I haven't been picking at my feet in public. That would be gross."

"Have you been feeling tired lately? I mean more tired than you *should* be in relation to your activities. Had a hard time sleeping?"

"Well, yeah. But then again the trips to the pot haven't let me have too long a stretch of sleep at a time."

"Is there any history of diabetes in your family?"

"No! I... //Dia--//? Christ, Rafe!"

"I'm hearing the symptoms. Excessive thirst and urination, fatigue, dry skin on the feet, increased hunger, but with weight loss. It's pretty suspicious. If your family had a history, I'd say it was almost sure."

Blair laughed nervously. "That's ridiculous. I know I didn't have it when I was a kid, and if you don't have it as a child, then you have to be, like, middle aged to get the other kind."

Rafe was shaking his head before Blair finished speaking. "That's like saying it's impossible for someone in their twenties to have a heart attack or stroke. It all depends on the individual."

"I am *not* diabetic," Blair said firmly. "There's no family history."

"Chief," Jim said quietly, "You can't say that for sure."

Blair opened his mouth to protest, then closed it. He *couldn't* say for sure. His mysterious father made that an impossibility. He finished his mushrooms without further comment, and when the rest of the food came he found that he'd lost his appetite. He ended up getting a container for most of his sandwich.

As he handed his credit card over to pay the check Rafe said, "Look, it's none of my business, but I really think you should be tested. Diabetes is nothing to mess around with, and..."

"You're right," Blair didn't quite snap, but his voice was sharp. "It *isn't* any of your business. I know you mean well, man, but..." His face suddenly tensed. "Shit." He jumped up and hurried toward the restroom, and his friends exchanged worried looks.

 Blair was a little surprised when Jim asked to borrow his laptop that night. Ellison wasn't *quite* cyphobic, but he definitely wasn't at ease at the keyboard. Jim hooked into the Internet and spent the evening cruising the web. Blair offered to help him with whatever it was he was doing, but Jim (usually so eager for any assistance when it came to computers) waved him off.

He finally shut the laptop down just before bedtime and came to sit beside Blair on the couch. Blair noticed his grim _expression, and said, "Did you find what you were looking for?"

"Yes. We need to talk."

"Shit. That is one of the most ominous four word sentences in the universe."

Jim didn't smile. "This is serious, Blair."
Blair scowled. "It's about what Rafe mentioned at lunch, isn't it?"

"Diabetes--say the word, Chief. Diabetes. There's a lot of information available on the 'net. I had no idea that it was so widespread. It's the most common chronic childhood disease. One in six hundred children have it, and are insulin dependent."

"I told you, I have never had that problem."

"Chief, they also say that between five and six million Americans are undiagnosed. The onset can be so gradual that the symptoms aren't recognized. Well, you have some highly recognizable symptoms, and I think you need to be tested." Blair looked away from him, angrily raking a hand through his hair. "And don't try to tell me it's none of my business, because it *is*, and you know it."

"Jim, I feel fine! I don't want to go getting poked just to find out..."

"Either you agree to be tested tomorrow or I throw you over my shoulder and haul your ass to an emergency room tonight."

Blair was quiet, studying him. "You're not serious."

"Look in my eyes and tell me that."

Blair's voice was pleading. "For Christ's sake, Jim, I'm a grown man."

"Then act like one."

Blair sighed. "Fine. I'll go to the university clinic tomorrow before class. Happy now?"

"No. Now I'm mollified. After you have the test and it shows that you're normal, then I'll be happy."

Blair snorted, but some of the grimness faded from his _expression. "I thought you *liked* me abnormal."

Jim gave him an answering snort. "Abnormal, but healthy, Chief. Don't eat anything before they do the test--it needs to be done fasting."

Blair stood up. "Well, I'm gonna go drain the lizard one more time..." He paused, then sighed. "Who am I fooling? But maybe if I do it right before I lay down I'll get a couple hours sleep before I have to do it again."

Jim watched Blair shuffle to the bathroom, his eyes concerned.

Blair watched as the nurse swabbed his finger with alcohol. "You don't need a doctor to do this?"

"Oh, not for a simple sugar level reading," she assured him. "It's not like it was a few years ago. Then you'd have had to do the OGTT."

"What's that stand for--Oh, God, Terrible Test?"

She chuckled as she took what looked like a thick ballpoint pen from a cabinet. "Oral Glucose Tolerance Test. You did the fasting, then you had to drink a glucola. That was this horrible, syrupy tasting drink. Then your blood was tested two hours later to see how you handled the sugar. But since they've come up with the
personal glucometers we usually just do a FPG, and before you call it the Fat Person's somethingorother, it stands for Fasting Plasma Glucose."

She showed him a small, square, flat machine that looked a little like a personal pager. "You see? The testing strip plugs into this teeny slot on the side... Pay attention--you may need to use one of these."

"I will *not*.

"Well, positive attitude is important. Anyway, you touch the end of the strip to a drop of blood and it's just sucked on up. The machine counts down, and *beep*, your reading appears on this little LCD."

"Fascinating." He watched as she plugged the tiny, flat, greenish strip into the proper slot. The machine beeped, and a set of numbers flashed on the screen, then settled down to 110. "Hey, it's already got a reading."

"That's just the last reading it took." The screen blanked. "Very handy for if you forget to record your reading."

"I won't have to worry about forgetting, because I'm not going to have to do it. Is that a good level?"

"Oh, it's excellent." She had taken a hollow plastic cap off one end of the 'pen'. Now she pushed a little plastic stick into the revealed notch. It descended till there was a click. When she let it go, it stayed there. "Now it's loaded." She twisted a bulbous plastic beebee off the end, exposing a short, but wicked point. "You'll need to be careful if you do this--these are *sharp*"

"Will you please stop instructing me on this? Really, it's more information than I need."

She shrugged. "Most people like to have it explained." She fitted the clear plastic cap back over the now armed point. "Give me your hand." Blair did, and she pressed the tip firmly against one fingertip. "Okay, when I push this button it releases the spring. You'll get a jab, just enough to draw a little blood. Hang on."

She thumbed the button on the end of the 'pen'. There was a click, and at the same time there was a sting. The nurse laid the device aside, keeping a tight hold on Blair's finger. There was a tiny red speck visible at the point of the sting. She squeezed, stroking upward, and the speck grew into a bright red bubble, like a tiny garnet. She picked up the glucometer and touched the end of the slotted strip to the drop.

Blair blinked as most of the drop was sucked up into the strip. There was a beep, and numerals appeared on the LCD. 59... 58... 57... The nurse set the meter aside and once again pressed an alcohol dampened cotton ball to his finger. "Hold that."

"Right. Like I'll bleed to death." Blair took off the cotton and started to suck his finger.

"Don't do that!" the nurse said sharply. When he looked at her in surprise she said, "Diabetics are susceptible to infections, and the human mouth is a hotbed of bacteria. You said you hang around with cops--you should know that already."

He did, logically speaking. Aside from getting shot or stabbed, a cop's least favorite thing was being bitten by a suspect. Tetanus shots were a routine thing in law enforcement.

//*Beep*//

"Already?"
"It doesn't take long." She picked up the glucometer and examined the display. When she looked back at Blair her face was grave.

"What?"

"I'll be back in just a minute. Don't go anywhere."

Blair felt a spike of anxiety. "What was the reading?"

"I'd rather have Doctor Bowers tell you." She left, taking the glucometer with her.

Blair slumped in his chair, staring blankly at the chart that showed a map of the human digestive system. //Oh, *fuck*. When they want the doctor to tell you something it is *not* good.// He briefly considered just picking up his back pack and sneaking out, then telling Jim that there was nothing to worry about, but three things stopped him. One, he probably couldn't sneak out because he'd have to pass the reception desk. Two, Jim was a human lie detector, and three... He swallowed hard. Three, there apparently *was* something wrong—big time.

He got another indication of how serious it was when the doctor arrived in less than five minutes. Waits were usually long at the university clinic. He'd figured that the only things that would get you a doctor this fast would be unconsciousness, lack of respiration, seizures, or spurting blood (//dripping blood// would just get you a towel and a number).

A further hint that All Was Not Well was the fact that the doctor was carrying a hypodermic.

"Mr. Sandburg," the doctor said, "we have a situation here that needs immediate attention."

//Oh, crap. He's using the 'let's all stay calm' voice. I'm dead meat.// "I take it the blood sugars weren't so good?"

"Your reading was over three hundred, and the nurse said you told her you were fasting."

"Didn't eat or drink anything but water since about seven last night."

"Then it's *very* bad." He set the hypo down and got a length of rubber tubing off the counter. "Hold out your arm."

Blair crossed his arms. "Why?"

The doctor stared at him. "I have to give you insulin. We need to get that level down *now*."

"Can't you give me a pill or something?"

"I'm going to be giving you medication before you leave, but it doesn't work fast enough."

"I *hate* needles."

Blair could see that Bowers was trying not to lose his patience. He knew he was being unreasonable, but he just couldn't help it. In fact, he thought he was reacting pretty well, considering that he was screaming inside. The doctor said firmly, "If you don't deal with this *right now* you could have to get used to needles. You're at risk of a diabetic coma."

"Shit," Blair said faintly. He held out his arm, and the doctor wrapped the tube around it.
He found a vein quickly, swabbed it with alcohol, and picked up the hypo. Flipping off the cap he said, "Don't worry--I'm good at this."

He was. It didn't sting any more than the first jab had. As Blair crooked his elbow around the wet cotton ball, he said, "Had practice, have you?"

"At this? More than I'd like. Diabetes seems to be getting more and more prevalent. You're the second case I've diagnosed this term."

"Wait a minute. I thought that you had to have two separate blood tests on different days to be sure."

The doctor gave him a disbelieving look. "If the numbers are borderline, but with a reading of 385 on an empty stomach? Don't think so."

"It could be a fluke."

"Yes, and pigs could fly. With all the symptoms listed on your report and this reading there is no way you are *not* diabetic, Mr. Sandburg. You'll just have to deal with it. I'm going to go pick up some literature for you and get some sample medication. Who's your doctor?"

"You are."

"You mean you don't have a regular doctor?" Blair shrugged. Bowers sighed. "No wonder it got this far before it was caught. You need a regular doctor. If you can't find one on your own I can get you a list of possibles. Now, excuse me."

Blair was left alone again, now feeling shell shocked. His eyes drifted around the room aimlessly, till they were caught by the word DIABETES, in boxy black letters at least three inches high. He read the information under it, and found that diabetes was the leading cause of blindness in America. It could also lead to renal failure, heart trouble, and amputation due to circulation problems.

"My life," he murmured, "just gets better and better."

Jim looked up from paperwork to find Blair sitting at his own desk, not five feet away. //And I didn't hear him come in. No accidentally slammed door, no thump from a dropped backpack, no immediate chatter. What's wrong with this?// "Chief?"

Blair, his face stiff, silently opened his backpack. He pulled out a bulging paper bag and emptied the contents on the desk, then began pointing to the disgorged items. "A blood testing kit. I get one free because I qualify as indigent. Strips to test my blood and lancets to do the poking. I had to pay for those, and I guess it's just as well that I have to give up goodies, because they //seriously// cut into my budget. Pills--samples for now, but when I get a prescription I'll have to buy my own retail because the university clinic pharmacy doesn't dispense them." He slapped a stack of pamphlets, booklets, and leaflets. "Approximately five pounds of health care literature. They have a fucking //video// but they were all out of them. They said that if I want it I'll have to come back later. I told them I'd wait for the Blockbuster release." He collapsed face first onto the pile. "Jim, you have your service revolver? Shoot me, would you?"

Any other time this sort of comment would have made Jim smile, but Blair's voice was so bleak that it made him question whether or not he was joking. What could he say? 'It could be worse'? 'At least it's treatable'. 'Be happy you caught it before it killed you'. No, he couldn't say any of those things. Mostly it was because
he knew that Blair, being an intelligent man, already knew that. It was also because Jim knew from personal experience how crappy it was to be grateful that something wasn't any more awful than it was instead of being grateful for something good.

Blair tilted his head, peering at Jim. "No 'I told you so'?'" Jim shook his head. "No jokes about all the kelp shakes I've drunk and still this happens? Nothing about the times I've called your suppers from Wonderburger 'suicide in a sack'?"

"Blair, from what little I've learned about this disease and what I know about your lifestyle, I don't think there's really anything you could have done to prevent it."

Rafe came into the bullpen, humming to himself. As he passed them he glanced at Blair's desktop, then stopped short. He silently catalogued the items, then turned a concerned look on Blair. "I'm sorry, buddy."

Blair sighed. "Oh, don't be. Hell, Rafe, it's not like you infected me, and I've never believed in killing the messenger." He smiled faintly. "Besides, you're too big to hide the body easily, and I live with a police detective." Reassured by his flippant reply, Rafe went on to his desk. Jim, though, wasn't fooled.

"You can do this, Sandburg. When you have to, you can muster as much determination as anyone I've ever known," Jim said quietly.

Blair, repacking his backpack, didn't look up at him. "Sure, Jim. Piece of cake." He gave a short bark of laughter that was completely unlike the rich, happy sound Jim had become familiar with. "Oops! Can't have that any more, can we? Piece of sugar free candy." He drew something out of his pocket and showed it to Jim. It was a lurid green disk on a stick, wrapped in plastic. "I even got a lollipop." He slammed it viciously into the wastebasket, then stood up. His voice shook a little as he said, "I wanted grape, but they were out, and I have to go pee again." He hurried out.

Jim slowly reached into the trash and retrieved the candy. He sat back, twirling it between his fingers and allowing himself a minute to curse the universe for being so unfair. Then he put the lollipop away and pushed that thought aside, because it wasn't going to help his partner.

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Blair shook a tiny white pill into his palm, then spent a moment staring at it resentfully before he popped it in his mouth and took a sip of water. "I've spent most of my life trying to use holistic, organic cures where ever possible. Now I may be at the mercy of the pharmaceutical companies the rest of my life."

Jim took a beer out of the refrigerator. "Once you get it under control, maybe you can control it with diet and exercise. I've heard that works for a lot of people with Type II."

"Yeah," Blair said morosely. "They told me to do the meds, watch my diet, and exercise regularly for a week. If the numbers got below normal, then I could try it without the meds."

"So normal is what?"

"Somewhere between 90 and 120. If it gets to, like, 75 or below I have to eat something sugary fast."

Jim nodded as he opened his bottle. "Diabetes can screw up your system and cause a lot of gradual damage, but hypoglycemia will kill you outright. While I was working vice I thought I had a drunk trying to pick me up, but it was a diabetic having a crisis, and I was the closest thing to grab onto. Luckily he was wearing a medical alert bracelet, and I had a roll of Lifesavers." He took a swig. "One of life's little ironies."
"Yeah. Are you going to offer me a beer?"

Jim pointed at the chart laying before Blair. "Is it on your list?"

Blair stared at him. "It has to be."

"Check."

"Jim, it's //one// beer."

="/"Check.="/ 

="/"Fine!/" // Blair flipped pages, running his finger down the list, muttering to himself, something about //made it *this* far without a father.../" "Beer, beer, beer..." His voice was becoming more agitated. Finally he said, "//A-ha!/ It's under alcoholic beverages. Yes, I can have one." He frowned.="/"One="/ 

Jim got a beer and handed it to Blair. "You gotta remember, Darwin, that fermentation involves sugar, and beer is made from grain, which is...."

"A carb, yeah, I know." Blair drained half the bottle in one long glug. When he lowered it he said, "You know what the pissy thing is? A lot of the stuff I'd eat to diet, I can't have. Rice cakes." He waved the bottle. "No salt, no sugar, practically no calories..."

"No taste."

Blair ignored him. "but I can't fill up on them because they're //carbs//."

"Blair, you //hate// rice cakes. I've heard you say that you'd rather eat the Styrofoam popcorn that they pack electronics in."

"That's not the point--I can't eat them."

Jim was losing patience. /*"You don't want to eat them at *all!*" Blair looked hurt, and he was immediately sorry that he'd raised his voice, but //my God// he was being unreasonable."

Blair was silent for a moment, then said, "And speaking of popcorn, I can't even have a really //big// bowl of even that oil and salt free air popped crap. Pretzels. Chocolate. Potato chips. Doritos. Pancakes with butter and syrup. You know I love your pancakes..."

Listening to Blair's wistful tone as he listed his favorite snacks, Jim went from irritation to sorrow. "You can have most of those, you just have to eat them in moderation."

"I //don't want// to eat them in moderation." He gulped the last of the beer and tossed the bottle in the trash, using more force than he had to. "I'd rather have nothing if I can't have as much as I want. I can't help it if that sounds stupid." He stalked away, going to his room and shutting the door. 

Jim stared after him. //No, Chief, it doesn't sound stupid. I know how you feel. I guess you haven't noticed it, but that's why I haven't been patting you on the back or arm, or hugging you like I used to. If I can't touch you as much as I want to, I can't stand to touch you at all.//

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"You'd think that by now they would have come up with a sugar free pre-sweetened cereal." Blair poked
dispiritedly at the bowl of corn flakes.

Jim set down his coffee. "I thought you //liked// cornflakes."

"I prefer frosted flakes, but with plenty of sugar the plain kind are okay." Jim pointed to an object that had just recently become part of the household: a small bowl containing pink and blue paper packets of artificial sweetener. "Jim, I can barely tolerate that stuff in tea, but on cereal it's //brutal//." He dipped up a spoonful, then let it dribble back into the bowl. The flakes plopped soggily. "I think that shit makes it get soggy faster, too. Some sort of chemical reaction." He got up and went to scrape the mess into the garbage disposal.

"Blair, how much of that did you eat?"

"Don't start up with me about wasting food, Ellison. At this point in my life I could care less about starving people. If they want the corn flakes, they're welcome to them."

"But you need to eat something."

Blair threw up his hands, then grabbed a banana out of the fruit bowl. "Here, one of nature's most perfect foods. I'll eat it on the way to class, okay?"

"Okay." Blair started out of the kitchen. "Don't forget your lunch."

Blair went back to the refrigerator and took out the paper sack he had packed under Jim's watchful eyes the night before. "I feel like I'm back in fucking grade school, man. I bet if I forgot it you would have showed up with it and embarrassed me in front of my students."

"Why be embarrassed? It's not like it's in a Snoopy lunchkit."

"Ha, ha."

"Remember, we're meeting at the gym at four."

"I've told you, man, I'm not parking myself on one of those torture devices."

"That isn't the type of exercise you need, anyway. You need something aerobic. There's a track, and there's usually a pick-up game of basketball or volleyball going on."

Blair looked mildly interested. "That might be okay. See you at four."

Out in his car, Blair dropped his backpack on the passenger seat--or actually on the banana. "Shit!" The bag was full of texts, and the banana was much the worse for wear. The skin was even split in one place. Blair considered it, then dropped it into the litterbag. He hated mushy fruit. //I'll eat lunch in a few hours. No problem.//

But when lunchtime came he was deep in a pile of paperwork, then a student came by to pick his brain about the possibilities of a career in anthropology. Before he knew it it was three-thirty and time to run for the gym.

Jim was waiting for him in the reception area and they went to the locker room together. In the locker room Blair tried not to let his eyes roam over Jim's body too closely. Jim tried not to ogle Blair as he changed into his gym shorts and tank top. He could see the curls of his chest hair peeking over the low neckline and had to resist the urge to reach out and tweak it. Maybe it was a good thing that Sandburg didn't want to go to the weight room with him. If he'd had to watch Blair working out, watch the play of muscles... Well, gym
clothes weren't good for hiding erections.

They separated in the hall--Jim going to the weight room and Blair going to the basketball court just a little farther down. Jim heard the squeak of tennis shoes on the hardwood floor, so it was in use, and Blair should have no trouble getting into a game. Jim smiled. Sandburg might not be a talented player, but he was /enthusiastic/.

Jim went through his usual routine. One good thing about pumping iron--the mindless repetition left you free to think. Blair just didn't seem to be able to work up any enthusiasm for getting into his new lifestyle. He did what he was supposed to /at least as far as I know/, but he did it grudgingly.

//It has to get to be natural for him, or he's going to deteriorate, and I don't want that. God, I *can't have* that.// Jim thought of all the things that could go wrong if Blair didn't take care of himself. Blindness--the idea of those lively blue eyes going cloudy and unfocused, dead, was too terrible to contemplate for long. Circulation problems--they could lead to amputation. The image of the energetic Blair limping along on a prosthetic was just *wrong*. Renal failure... //Renal failure *kills* you, sometimes after putting you through the hell of dialysis for a few years. Blair wouldn't be able to stand being hooked up to a machine for hours on end...//

Jim stopped in his exercise, wiping the sweat from his face with a towel. The movements had been getting too steady, and he'd been nearing a zone. He took a swig from the bottle of water he kept nearby. //I *have* to keep after him. I *can't* lose him. But he's got to *want* to stay healthy, *really* want to. God help me, I almost wish he had a serious girlfriend. Maybe then he'd feel like he had something to live for, if he had someone to love--or someone who loved *him*.//

Jim looked up alertly. Somewhere nearby there had been a cry that didn't sound like the usual yells of excitement for a hard played game. He concentrated.

//Is he drunk?//

//I don't think so. He just passed out. Damn, it made a crack when his head hit the floor.//

//Don't they have a nurse? They should have smelling salts or something...//

Jim was running toward the hall as soon as he heard 'passed out'. It *could* be someone overdoing it and fainting, or working themselves into a heart attack, but somehow he knew what he'd find.

People were milling around the body sprawled out under the basket. Jim didn't really need to see the spill of red-brown hair to know that it was Blair. He raced over, knocking people aside to fall on his knees by his partner, ignoring the flaring pain as he lost skin off his knees.

"Blair!" Jim grabbed his shoulder, slapping his face lightly. He felt a surge of relief when there was a weak groan and Blair's eyes fluttered open. "Blair, did you eat lunch?"

Someone said, "Where did he eat? Is it food poisoning, or what?"

"Damn, I feel weird." His voice was slurred, and the hand he raised to wipe his damp brow trembled.

"Answer me, Darwin," Jim used his /no bullshit/ voice. "Did--you--eat-lunch?" The sheepish look he gave Jim was answer enough. "You're hypoglycemic. You need sugar, fast." He looked up and spoke to the thickening crowd. "I need something sugary--a soda or hard candies. Lifesavers would work."

A young woman pushed her way to the front and held out a bottle of orange juice. "Will this work?"
"Perfect! Bless you, sweetheart." Jim sat, pulling Blair into his arms. He tipped the bottle to Blair's lips. "Drink, Blair." Blair swallowed, weakly at first, then with more determination. When he'd finished it Jim set aside the bottle and watched Blair anxiously.

Gradually color returned to his face and the tremors stopped. He pushed at Jim, trying to sit up. "I'm okay now."

Jim didn't let go. "We don't know that. Stay still for a little longer. We ought to test your blood sugar, to be on the safe side."

"My glucometer is at home."

Another gym patron spoke up. "I have mine in my locker, and I have fresh lancets. He can borrow it. Just a sec." He trotted off and returned in a few moments. "Wait fifteen minutes, then try it. If it isn't up around normal he'll need more sugar. I'll go get a soda from the vending machine, just in case."

The crowd thinned out, now that it seemed that no one was going to die. They tested Blair's blood and got a reading of 114. Jim finally relaxed a little. The man took back his glucometer, saying, "He should eat something more solid now--meat and carbs."

"If I'm not mistaken he has a perfectly good tongue sandwich in his backpack." Blair blushed.

The glucometer man, a pleasant looking fellow in his fifties, looked at Blair sternly. "How long have you been diagnosed, young man?"

"Two weeks."

"And you've already managed to almost kill yourself. Son, you've got to be more careful, or you're going to leave somebody grieving."

As he walked away Blair muttered, "I dunno. I suppose Naomi would miss me--if they could find her to notify her."

"I'd miss you, Blair," Jim said quietly.

"Yeah." Blair rubbed his neck as they started for the locker room. "Maybe I ought to start looking around and see if I can find someone else with Guide capabilities, in case anything happens to me."

Jim turned away from Blair as he began to change back into his street clothes. He didn't want the man he loved to see the pain in his eyes.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~

//beep\\ //grumble//

"What is it?"

"Too high. Damn, I didn't think a handful of crackers would make //that// much of a difference."

"How high?"

"//Too// high, okay?"
"Show me." Blair jerked the testing strip out of the glucometer and threw the bit of plastic in the trash, clearing the display. "Darwin, you know that all I have to do is plug in a strip to get the last reading."

"You do and I'll flush the damn thing!" He took a look at Jim's expression and said grudgingly, "I'll take another pill."

"Sandburg, you can't //do// that! You could lower your sugar to a dangerous level. Didn't you learn anything from that incident at the gym? You have to follow the prescription or you'll screw up your body chemistry big time. Why don't you go for a walk? You know that exercise lowers it."

"It's freezing outside."

"It's brisk." Blair stared at him defiantly. Jim stared back. Blair's shoulders slumped and he went to get his jacket off the peg by the door. Jim started after him. "I'll come along."

"Don't bother." Blair stuffed his arms into his sleeves.

"It's no bother."

Blair zipped up, then jerked the door open. "Then don't come because I don't //want// you to come."

Stunned, Jim could just stand there as the door slammed.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

Blair turned his collar up in an attempt to keep the breeze from creeping down the back of his neck. He shoved his hands into his pockets, hunched his shoulders, and started down the street. He had no destination in mind. This wasn't walking toward a goal, and it wasn't a pleasure stroll.

//It's a fucking mortal obligation. I'd rather be inside having a hot toddy but *no*, that's got alcohol *and* sugar, two no-nos. Or I could have a long hot bath, but *no*. Can't soak in hot water because it could aggravate circulation problems. I'm not even supposed to kick my shoes off to be comfortable in the house because I could step on a discarded straight pin. Right. Like Jim Ellison would ever allow such an obscenity in *his* loft, but tell *that* to the diabetes experts.//

He didn't want to walk, dammit. He came to a bus stop two blocks from the loft and dropped down on the bench inside the kiosk. At least this way most of the wind was blocked, but strands of his hair still waved around his face. Cursing quietly he undid his tail and began ruthlessly scraping the flying hair back into one mass. The wind gusted, whipping strands around like frightened snakes. He threw up his hands, letting it have its own way. //Maybe I should just chop this shit off,// he thought angrily.

//What does it get me, anyway?// He recalled all the derogatory terms his long locks had earned him through the last couple of years. //*Hippie, punk, fag...*// As he thought he was reaching into his pocket. //*pretty boy, fairy,* Rock stars can have hair down to their butts and most people don't doubt *their* sexuality. People never think David Lee Roth is anything but a chick magnet. All right, so I *am* bi, but they shouldn't just assume that because I have long hair I want to suck cocks. I *don't*. Not just anybody's cock, anyway. I wouldn't say no to a certain Sentinel.//

He snorted again, more softly this time. //Again, yeah, right. Like that would ever happen. Mister Uptight-Ex-Ranger-Cop-of-the-Year-Butcher-Than-Butch-So-Fucking-Gorgeous Jim Ellison. Right. He's just *waiting* for a neo-hippy witchdoctor punk to confess his desire and undying devotion.//
Blair suddenly realized that he was holding his pen knife. Someone had once expressed surprise that he'd own such a 'guy' sort of thing. What did they mean, 'guy' thing? It was just *useful*. He always had to cut cords on packages that came to the anthropology department, and pencil sharpeners didn't always work, and...

Now he realized that he'd opened it. The watery sunlight glinted on the edge of the tiny blade, and it caught Blair's attention. He stared at it, almost mesmerized, idly winding a strand of hair around his finger with his free hand. Slowly, mind almost blank, Blair pulled on the strand of hair till it was stretched taut. He brought the knife up and slipped the blade under the stretched tress, and paused.

He slashed. There was a tugging pain in his scalp that made tears prick at the corners of his eyes. //Yeah, the pain, that's it. Or the wind. Wind can bring tears to your eyes.// He unwound the hair and watched as the wind took it, strand by strand. He began to twist another hank around his finger, a thicker chunk, and brought the pen knife up again.

Blair stopped, lowering the knife with a sigh. //He already thinks I'm off balance emotionally. If I show up at the loft with my hair chopped off he'll drag me to a head doctor and tie me to the couch. Even *I* know that hair cutting is a form of self-mutilation, and a sign of depression or something else emotionally icky.//

A young woman leading a pre-schooler approached. She hesitated, looking at Blair carefully. Making a decision, she entered the kiosk and sat next to Blair, lifting the little girl up to sit on her other side. Blair was gratified—he knew he wasn't looking his best right now, and it was a vote of confidence for the woman to allow her child this close to him.

He watched as the little girl pulled a chocolate drop out of her pocket, unwrapped the foil and popped the candy into her mouth. //That should have been two bites for you, kid.// Blair thought. //There's chocolate oozing out the side of your mouth. You look like the world's youngest tobacco dipper.//

The little girl pulled another shiny silver blob out of her pocket. She looked at it, then peered across her mother, meeting Blair's eyes. She held out the candy. "Mister, you want a kiss?"

Blair had to smile. "Now, why would you want to give me a kiss?" He exchanged an amused look with the mother.

"You look sad."

Blair sobered. He cleared his throat. "Thanks, sweetie. It's really nice of you, but I can't have those."

Her forehead puckered. "Why? Did your mommy say it was too close to dinner time?"

"Monica..." the mother started.

"It's all right, ma'am," Blair assured her. He leaned down so his face was on a level with the little girl. "I can't eat it because I'm sick, Monica. I have... I..." the mother was starting to look a little alarmed, and Blair quickly shook his head, knowing that she was thinking AIDs. "I just can't eat sweet stuff, or it makes me sick." The mother's _expression_ cleared, then puckered again. Blair looked away so he wouldn't have to see the pity in her eyes. He stood up. "Tell you what, sweetie. You eat it, and think about me when you do, okay?"

Monica nodded, starting to unwrap the candy, and Blair hurried away. There was a coffee shop nearby. He could handle coffee without sugar, and he should be able to resist the tired pastries they kept for anyone who *had* to have a sugar fix. Anything, anywhere, so long as he didn't have to go back to the loft right away. He couldn't stand the thought of Jim's eyes right now. He didn't want to see the irritation that had to be there
after he'd been such an asshole. But most of all...

Most of all he wouldn't be able to stand it if he looked into those cool blue eyes //the cool of a gas flame, so cool that they're hot// and saw pity looking back.

~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*~*

When two hours passed with no Blair Jim considered going out to look for him. Considered, hell. He had his jacket on and was fishing his keys out of the basket when he heard the elevator stop on his floor. When the footsteps headed for the loft he quickly threw off the jacket and rushed to the sofa. He grabbed the remote and flipped on the television, his butt hitting the cushions a split second before the door opened.

Jim dropped the remote and leaned back, crossing his legs and peering at the screen in an attitude of rapt attention. There was a moment of silence, and he fought the urge to turn and look at Blair, to be sure he was all right. The door closed and he heard Blair unzip and hang up his jacket. Keeping his voice casual he said, "See? I told you it wasn't so bad." He heard footsteps approaching. He turned his head to look back at Blair, saying, "I bet that put..." Blair had bent down, resting his elbows on the sofa back and his chin on his forearms. His face was very, very close. So close that strands of his wild, silky hair brushed Jim's face. "roses in your cheeks," he finished faintly.

Blair looked at him, smoky blue eyes wide and unblinking, _expression solemn. Then he glanced at the television, looked back at Jim, and arched an eyebrow. "The Home Shopping Network?"

Jim felt himself flushing. "Sometimes they have some good hardware or electronic bargains."

"Yeah, but during the Diamonique Hour?" He leaned down across Jim's body, reaching for the remote.

Jim froze, involuntarily shutting his eyes as he felt Blair's hand land on his thigh to brace himself as he grabbed the remote. //Oh, God! Don't let him move his hand, don't let him move his hand, because I'm getting hard.//

He heard Blair's voice, right beside his ear, as the pressure disappeared from his leg. "Hell, Jim, I'm not gonna *bite* you." There was a click and the tv shut off. "I just don't care to hear about the five carat Diamonique and Emeraldesque tennis bracelet." Now he felt Blair's hand on his shoulder. "I... uh, I'm sorry about earlier, man." A sigh. "You're just trying to help."

Jim forced himself to open his eyes. Luckily Blair had straightened up. If he'd still been close it might have all been over. Jim would have just kissed Blair, and then he'd have had to watch him turn around and walk right back out. "I don't mean to get in your face, but you know that subtle isn't exactly my long suit."

"No shit." Blair came around and sat next to Jim and started to pull his hair back into a tail. "The wind is a bitch out there. Maybe it'll keep the junkies off the street tonight."

Jim's answer was automatic. "*Nothing* keeps the junkies off the streets except a sweep." He knew he shouldn't, not with him this close, but he allowed himself the luxury of looking, really *looking* at Blair. He frowned. Something was wrong. It was subtle, but it was there. If he looked close enough he'd recognize it.

"Yeah, well, it might blow some of their sad, skinny butts away." Blair let the tail drop, then gave his hair a final smooth.

Jim followed the passage of his hand, and there it was. There was a patch of short bristles, right at the hairline on the left side. It wasn't very big at all, not much bigger than a pencil eraser in diameter. "What's that?" He pointed.
Blair went still. He'd been relaxing, and now he tensed back up. "What?" Jim brought his fingertip close enough to brush the short, spiky bristles, and he thought that something so soft really shouldn't be termed 'bristles'. Blair said quietly, "Jim, I'd appreciate it if you'd get your hand out of my face."

Jim lowered his hand and said slowly, "That wasn't there when you went out." Silence. "Blair, it isn't normal to come back from a walk missing a chunk of hair. Please tell me what happened."

More silence, then, "I knew you'd freak."

"I'm not freaking, but the more you evade, the more concerned I get."

"Oh, for crying out... I cut it, Jim. I was in a weird mood, and I took out my pen knife and whacked it off, and I *knew* you'd freak so that was *all* I cut, just that one hank. I did something stupid. It wasn't the first time, right?"

"Chief..." Blair looked at Jim sharply, his eyes wide and vulnerable, and Jim couldn't say any more. How could he say 'don't hurt yourself, because when you do, you hurt me'? Blair had enough to deal with as it was without finding out that his tight ass roommate had loosened up enough to fall in love with him. "Chief, the next time you feel like doing something stupid, talk to me instead, huh?"

Blair watched him, then said slowly, "You don't like to talk about feelings."

"You're changing the way you deal with things. I can, too."

"I have to. You don't."

//He's too close.// Jim stood up and walked behind the sofa. He stood, staring out at the balcony, and said, "Yeah, Darwin, I do." Blair turned slightly, looking up at him. All he saw was the muscular wedge of Jim's back and the back of his head. He suddenly thought that the skin on Jim's neck, below the clipped, almost brutally straight line of his hair, looked surprisingly smooth. He wondered what it would feel like to lay his hand across the back of Jim's neck, curling his fingers around and stroking the short, soft hair with his thumb. He was startled when Jim whispered, "When you care about someone, you do."

Blair felt a sense of unreality wash over him. //Care? Jim doesn't throw that word around. He uses it for family. He uses it for Carolyn. I haven't heard him use it for anyone he's dated, though. When he says 'care' I've always thought he meant love. That would mean...//

Blair hardly recognized his own voice. "You mean the Sentinel thing, right? A Sentinel takes care of his Guide, and vise-versa." //That's it. That's *got* to be it, because I can't be hearing what I think I'm hearing, because I fucking *want* to be hearing it.//

Jim closed his eyes. //Oh shit, I said more than I should have. I should tell him yes--he'll accept that. He'll be able to deal with it, and all it will take will be lying through my teeth.// He heard Blair shifting behind him.

Blair moved, kneeling on the sofa, chest to the back of it. "Jim? That's it? Friendship? Partners? Just a Sentinel-Guide thing?" //God, I sound so fucking needy. Tell me no, Jim. For God's sake, tell me that it's more than that.//

"It's... it's..." His head dropped slightly. "God, Chief. This is..." He took a deep breath. "It's more than that, Blair."

"Oh, shit." He saw Jim tense and realized he'd said it aloud. "No! That isn't... That came out wrong." He
reached out and put his hands on Jim's waist. He could feel how rigid the big man's muscles were as he pushed and pulled, basically hauling Jim around to face him.

Jim, pale faced, stared down at him. "I'm sorry, Blair. I shouldn't have just blurted it out like that."

"What blurt? I was just startled, man. I just..." he hesitated, then slowly laid his hand flat on Jim's belly. "I just thought that if either of us ever cracked, it'd be me first."

Jim cocked his head, gazing down at him. "You're not running?" Blair shook his head, smiling faintly. "I didn't say that. I said I cared about you."

"For saying you love me?"

"Haven't you been listening, Jim? What bothers me is that I haven't heard it a long time ago. But I take credit for some of that because *I* didn't say anything. Okay, here goes. I love you, too. C'mere."

Jim blinked rapidly. "You want to talk this out?"

"No. This is not the time for talking. However, other activities involving the lips are *definitely* called for. Now, come here."

Jim was smiling slowly. "You don't think it would be a little fast?"

"From my point of view you're looking slower than Christmas, man." He reached up and wrapped his hand in the material of Jim's tee-shirt and started to pull. "Come--here." Jim let the material stretch for a moment, then he went there. He went there by climbing over the back of the sofa and on top of a startled, but delighted, Blair.

Blair found himself flat on his back on the sofa with his Sentinel crouched over him on hands and knees, grinning down at him. He laughed. "Damn. How long has this been coming on?"

Jim bent down and kissed him. When he finally lifted his head the smile had softened to something very tender. "A long time, Chief. A long, long time."

Blair slipped his arms up around Jim's neck. "Me, too. I knew I wanted you the second you slammed me up against the wall in my office. I knew I loved you when you let me move in here. You don't let people into your life easily, Ellison."

"I got you beat, then. I knew I loved you before that. Why do you think I let you move in?"

"I think you thought you were going to get housekeeping out of me. Boy, did I have *you* fooled." Blair chuckled, and Jim felt his heart soar. It was the old Blairsound, one of the things that had captivated him in the beginning.
Blair pulled Jim back down for another kiss. This time the tongues got into it, too, and it lasted a long time. When they finally broke apart they were both a little breathless, and Blair's lips were a little kiss-swollen. "Damn, you sure can lock lips."

Now it was Jim's turn to laugh. "It helps that you taste so damn good. Now I have a question to ask you."

Blair sighed. "Yes, I walked. Yes, I took my medicine. Yes, I ate like I was supposed to. Yes, I tested..."

"I was going to ask you if you really wanted our first time to be on the sofa, or if you wouldn't rather adjourn to my bed."

Blair grinned slowly, reaching up to caress Jim's cheek. "Sweet," he whispered. "Too sweet."

END

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