Moonrise

by Stella (bella)

Summary

Inspired by Dolimir's "Moonhunt" and Kabi's "November." Blair is a carrier-guide who is caught outside during a moonhunt, and fights his claiming until he learns to accept and enjoy the life he was given.

Notes

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- Inspired by November by Kabi
- Inspired by Moonhunt by Dolimir
Caught.

There had been six of them. Blair knew that now, although he hadn't when he had caught the shadow of a lone figure moving across the parking lot. He leaned forward, trying to catch a glimpse of the outside through the tinted windows of the van, but saw nothing.

He tried to separate his hands, or wriggle them slightly, but the handcuffs they'd put him in were tight; his wrists felt pinched, just slightly, whenever he moved. Resigning himself to at least his momentary fate, Blair looked around, taking in his surroundings.

The van had been modified - obviously for exactly this purpose. There were bolted loops in the floor to tether a captive, heavily tinted windows and what appeared to be reinforced walls. What most concerned Blair, however, was the fact that the van also was stocked with a full med outfit, including two bolted-down shelves that held hundreds of small yellow vials behind glass doors. Blair's heart pounded in his throat, but before he had time to worry more about his situation, he heard a click, and the left door to the van was slowly opened.

There was no time to hide, and he was tied up too tightly to move anyway. Something tickled at the perimeter of his mind, then became an insistent nudge, then retreated. Blair was momentarily distracted, and when he refocused, it was to find a man leaning in the doorframe, staring unsubtly, but not unkindly, at him. Blair stared and said nothing. The man gave an easy, slow, assessing look over the bound young man before him.

"What's your name, sweetheart?"

Because he was scared, and because he knew this man was a sentinel and some small, stupid, well-trained part of him wanted to obey, he answered, "Blair."

The man's face broadened with a genuine smile.

"Hi, Blair." he said, in a voice that was both easy and intimidating. "It's nice to meet you."

The broad shoulders shifted, and the Sentinel changed his position against the doorframe.

"Let me ask you a question: do you understand what's happening right now, Blair?"

"No."

"No," the young captive answered, pitifully and truthfully.

Oh, Blair knew, of course, what was happening: he had been caught by a sentinel pack, unattached and unarmed, during a moonhunt night. He knew this, but any understanding of why him, why now, how this could have happened, and what dangerous god he'd pissed off to get such poor fortune completely escaped him. How could this have happened? Had he really been so unlucky? So naive? So foolish?

The man was nodding and looking thoughtful; over his shoulder, a cool breeze ruffled the leaves on the only tree Blair could glimpse through the door's open margin. There was a long moment of consideration and Blair caught the subtle turn of the Sentinel's head that indicated he was scenting something - most likely the breeze. In the pause, Blair felt it was his turn to give the once-over and sized the man up: tall, built like a warrior, and blue-eyed. Maybe about…40? Definitely a sentinel.

He looked quick - quicker than Blair, at least, and stronger, too. No hope for an easy fight, then.

"I see." the man said, interrupting the assessment and fixing Blair in a solid, piercing gaze that struck the Guide as being far too aware for his liking. "Well, do you know what tonight is, Blair?"

There was no point in lying; it had been his mistake. And a Sentinel could tell, anyway.

"Yes." he answered, quietly, while his hands shook. "It's the moonhunt."

The sentinel smiled again, and Blair found it even more intimidating than the first time.

"Yes, it is." he tilted his head, eyeing the handcuffed man with an intensely focused sort of interest.

"And did you mean to come out, Blair? For the moonhunt?"

Blair looked up and saw something in the man's eyes which gave him hope.
"No," he answered, honestly and plaintively. "I made - I made a mistake."
The man nodded affably, which comforted Blair. Perhaps it wasn't as big of a deal as the Academy had always made it out to be. Maybe there were ways to explain so that you got a mulligan, a forgiven night, some kind of do-over? Maybe the sentinel in front of him would take pity on a hapless, distracted graduate student who hadn't thought it would take so long to get across town. Even though things looked a little murky right now - between the outfitted van and the handcuffs and the suspicious shouts from outside - there might still be some way for them to sort it all out, right? And with any luck, Blair could be back in his bed by 4 am or so, catching some early morning Zzzs before finishing up notes for his lectures in the afternoon. Blair longed for his bed, suddenly, and to be at home and to be young and unchanged and to never have had any of this happen to him.
What were the chances, he wondered, that they would let him go?

"So why'd you come out, then?" the man asked, in a voice that seemed to be pure curiosity. "Seeing as you knew the risks."
Blair licked dry lips.
"Well, I mean, Daryl called me, you know, and he's sort of like - well, he's like a little brother to me, I mean, ever since we met at the Academy, and he just - he had a really bad breakup recently, and the Sentinel he was seeing left him and he's been on kind of shaky mental ground ever since, so I come over sometimes, you know, just to check on him and make sure he's not going to whoop! - go off the deep end or anything, and so he called me earlier, and I'm busy and everything myself, but I knew he was really upset, and I mean, he's just a kid, but I was worried he might do something - something, I don't know, irrational, and so I figured I would just stop by before it - before it got dark."
Blair paused to swallow a nervous breath.
"But I didn't mean to be out for the moon, not at all, definitely not, man, no. I just wanted to come check on a friend, really I did, and I don't want any trouble, please, I - I'm not that kind of guide, I promise."
Blair recognized that somewhere in that jumbled mess, his voice had gone from determined to uncertain to downright pleading.

The man gave Blair an indulgent look.
"This sort of thing happens all the time, you know," he said, shaking his head. "Especially with young guides like yourself. You lose track of time, forget to check the moon, think: 'Oh, I'll just run out for a second.' All kinds of things." While he spoke, the man had straightened up, pulling away from the doorframe to shake the stiffness out of impressive muscles. "In short: you make mistakes."
Blair exhaled a long breath of relief.
"Yes. Absolutely. Exactly right. A mistake. I just - "
"Unfortunately, all mistakes can't be corrected."
Blair felt his heart drop into his belly.

"Do you know where your friend is now?" the man asked, in an apparent non sequitur. Blair's throat felt dry and scratchy, and his breath seemed to be coming in heaves. He swallowed and tried to control his physiologicals - prevent the Sentinel from knowing just how close he was to panicking. "I thought he was inside the building when - when I got grabbed." Blair's mouth dried up a little.
"Was he not?"
The man raised one shoulder in a half-shrug.
"He's in one of the other vans."
"He's in one of the other vans."
Blair wanted to vomit.
"No!" he shouted, and lurched against the bonds, "No, he's a kid! I mean, come on, he's just a kid! He's just - he's 19, I mean, if he came out, he didn't mean it, you know? He was just looking for me! He wasn't - " Blair took a few moments to try to calm his rapid breath. "He's just a kid." he finished, weakly.
The man looked sympathetic, but stood firm.
"He's old enough to know what a moonhunt is."
Blair shook his head violently, his anger bubbling over. Who was this Sentinel to do this to him? To bring him here and ask him these questions and treat him like a child? Who were these people to grab him - to kidnap him!? What the fuck was wrong with the world that everyone felt this was all OK?

"This is not fair, man! That's not - that's not fair!"
The man rolled his eyes.
"So what would be fair? For me to send my hardworking sentinels home empty-handed? We catch and release more guides than any pack in the Northwest as it is. How many more should I relinquish because of their own poor decision-making?"
Blair's heart pounded again and adrenaline surged.
"I don't know, man - all of them?" he offered, weakly.
"All of them." the man repeated, flatly, obviously not amused.

Blair bit his lip and tried to think - think, dammit! - of some other answer. He had nothing - no bargaining chips, no rich uncle or controlling mother to bail him out, and not a leg to stand on in a wrongful capture suit. He was helpless, and with that realization came a sudden urge to just make a break for it and run and at least have the satisfaction of making them chase him twice. Blair tried in vain to tug his wrists apart; the cuffs were as unyielding as ever.
"Yes! I mean, yes, all of them! This isn't fair, man! You can't - you can't catch people like this!"
The man stared, unblinking.
"I can catch any guide who's healthy, unbonded, of age, and out under their own power during a moonhunt."
Blair shook his head furiously and cast around for something - anything - to make this man release him.
"But it was a mistake!"
"But not my mistake." the man answered, calmly, then came forward.
Introductions.

Blair tried to draw back, but the sentinel knelt by his right thigh and leaned forward, peering up into the guide's face intently. *Imprinting*, Blair realized and he shook his head and tried to avoid the gaze. "No..."
"I've never taken a guide before." the sentinel said, conversationally.
Blair felt horrified and sick.
"Stop it! You can't - can't do this!"
"I can. Don't fight me, Guide."
Blair shook his head, more vigorously this time. The psychic touch he'd felt before returned, pressing gently against his mind. Panicked, he tried any excuse.
"I'm not - I'm not your guide. I'm not anyone's guide! I can't guide!"

The man reached out and brushed his hand against Blair's. Blair jerked back.
"There's rules, man!" he cried, "You can't just - just *touch* me if we're not in the stages of bonding."
The man's expression turned decidedly more intense.
"Do you want me to initiate the stages of bonding?" he asked, in a voice so serious and full of longing and rich that it made Blair momentarily want to say yes. Trying to take deep breaths, he shut his eyes; the pressing feeling on his mind had spread, and now Blair felt as if his brain were being enveloped in it. *It's just the sentinel's touch,* he reassured himself. *The stupid, stupid, stupid, peaceful, enticing, soothing sentinel's touch."

The man's voice changed, and now it became gentle and even again.
"You’re shaking." the sentinel observed. "Why are you shaking, Blair?"
Blair coughed out a little laugh of utter disbelief.
"Because I’m scared! Because you’re - you're scaring me, man.” he admitted, his voice weakening just a little. The captured guide wriggled again, trying a different angle with his wrists, but his binds did not give. “Let me go home? Please?” he whined, willing to beg if that was what it took.

The sentinel cast him an indulgent look and settled into a more comfortable kneeling position on the floor, beside his guide.
"How old are you, Blair?" he asked, gently.
Blair glanced once into those eyes that were that piercing, frightening blue and had to look away.
The raw power of the man’s presence was both terrifying and intoxicating; idly, Blair reflected that it must be the pull of the bond-gap making him feel this.
"Twenty-seven.” he answered, eventually, feeling stupid and young and foolish.
The man nodded as if he approved.
"And what do you do? Do you work?"
Blair took in a stilted breath and wriggled in his seat again. A colder breeze that smelled of rain blew in through the now-gaping van door.
"I’m a student - I’m a - a graduate student.”
The man took this in.
"And did you go to Academy?” he inquired.
"Until they put me out." Blair answered, surly and bold with fear.
The man laughed.
"They couldn't manage you." he said - not a question. Then quietly, he added: "I can."
Blair quit responding at that point in favor of staring miserably at the floor and feeling to his heart pound in his chest. The sentinel leaned forward.
"I can hear your heartbeat." he said. "You're frightened. You shouldn't be. You're safer here than you have ever been anywhere in your life."
For some reason, Blair had serious difficulty believing that.
The sentinel furrowed his brow. "And I can feel your presence. It feels full, and young and fresh...and warm like daylight." he looked at Blair with open admiration. "It's amazing. And you can feel me, can't you? It's irresistible, the pull." At that, the man leaned just a little farther forward, inhaling deeply. Blair felt strangely invaded - the man was imprinting his scent, he knew, and the sounds of his voice and his heartbeat, and the color of his eyes and shape of his face...
"I don't feel anything." he lied.

The man smiled gently again and reached out to capture one of Blair's curls, stopping himself just in time.
"That's fine. Some guides don't, at first. But you will when we join and I'm inside of you." Blair recoiled.
"Leave me alone, man! Fuck! Just let me go!"
The sentinel turned serious.
"Blair, I think 27 is old enough to know that that isn't going to happen."
Blair felt floored, blindsided. He was losing control of the situation and of his emotions; he felt his mind starting to weaken and his energy begin to leak. Years in the academy had taught him to ground himself with a sentinel - If you're struggling, his professors had said, Just reach out for one of us and we will protect you. We will help you. That's what a sentinel is there for.

Blair had to fight to contain this reflex now. There was no help to reach out for; if he let this man touch his consciousness, then he would never get it back again.
"Are you struggling?" the sentinel asked, his head in a curious tilt that suggested he was observing something for the very first time. "Do you need my help?"
Blair bit back harsher words.
"No."
"I can feel your energy bleeding. You feel...edgy."
"I'm tied up in the back of a fucking guide kidnap van - of course I'm edgy!" Blair snapped.
The sentinel raised an eyebrow and went on.
"It's OK to touch me, you know - if you need to ground yourself. It's what I'm here for."

The man's voice was so soothing and so kind and just so damn easy to listen to that Blair felt tears pricking at the back of his eyes. He didn't need this. He didn't need one more person piling on, telling him what to do and what he needed. He didn't need to get grounded; he didn't need anyone's touch, mental or otherwise. He didn't need a Sentinel.
Blair sat alone in the van feeling sick for a while after his sentinel left. He thought about escape, then suicide, then escape again because suicide was ridiculous, then violence, then Daryl, then wanting to pee, then escape again. Eventually, he thought about nothing and a short time after that, he felt a brush on his mind and the door cracked open to reveal the sentinel again. Blair refused to meet his eyes.

"Hi, Blair." the man said, anyway, and opened the second van door briefly, giving Blair a sliver of a view of the outside.

In the sketchy light of a streetlamp, he caught sight of a sentinel group - at least a dozen of them, gathered in the parking lot. They were of varying looks, some old, some young - but all dressed in black and all obviously antsy for a run. Understanding began to dawn on Blair. This had been a pack hunt. They had come to Cascade to raid for guides, and there were probably more than a hundred sentinels scattered throughout the city tonight. There had never been any chance of escape; he had been caught the second he'd stepped out to walk to his car, 17 minutes before sunset.

Peering past the sentinel's broad shoulders, Blair could see another half-dozen black vans identical to his own, parked at angles across the empty lot. The doors were closed and lights shone from all but one.

"So this is Rafe." the sentinel spoke, drawing his guide's attention back. Turning slightly to the side, he indicated a man who stood behind him, wearing earth-toned scrubs and carrying a black bag and stethoscope.

"Rafe's a medic." the sentinel explained. "He's going to take a look you."
Blair shrank backwards as much as his bonds would allow and shook his head.
"I'm not hurt. I'm fine. Fine, man. I don't need a medic."
Blair felt a rising anxiety; an urgency to flee. The longer they went on in this vein, the longer the paper trail grew, and the slimmer the chance that they'd let him escape. The sentinel's voice had changed now, turning to that soothing, placative, calm-the-guide down tone that made Blair feel safe and irritated and terrified all at once.
"I know you're not. And Rafe's not here for that; he's here just to take a look at you. No one is going to hurt you."
Blair glanced warily at the medic, who smiled kindly, if tensely.
"He's a guide." the sentinel continued, "And from my pack. He's safe."

Blair must have shown some degree of capitulation, because the sentinel relaxed and stepped backward, giving Rafe access to the van. Blair eyed the stranger, but decided that his best option was to stay compliant until the sentinel left, then appeal to the medic for release. A medic might do that, right? Even a guide-medic? They were bound, weren't they, by the Hippocratic Oath? Or was that just doctors? Blair tried to remember, but found himself feeling very tired suddenly, as if all of the heat had been bled out of him. He glanced one more time at the sentinel, who was lingering just outside, watching the two guides and letting the cold air in.
"Don't worry," he appealed once more. "I'm your sentinel. I won't let anything happen to you."
Then he was gone, and Blair and Rafe were alone.
"Well," Rafe said, smiling that thin smile that he'd had before, "I guess we'd better get started."
He stepped forward, hoisting himself up into the van, and shut the doors behind him.

"Hi, Blair," he said, settling down into a kneel and placing his medical kit on the floor beside him. "I understand you got caught tonight."
Blair shivered. Should he answer that? It wouldn't be some sort of binding commitment, would it? Damn, he couldn't remember Sentinel-Guide civic law to save his life right now. Better to err on the side of caution - equivocate.

"That's what they tell me." he answered, dryly.

"OK." Rafe said, and gave a little grin before leaning over to unlock one of the cabinets that were bolted to the side of the van. "Do you know by whom?"

Blair shrugged in annoyed, careless defiance. There was no hope anyway - nothing he could say or do would make any difference, so why did they bother even asking him all of these questions? "I don't know. Some neanderthal sentinel asshole who thinks he owns me." he snapped, then added, "The same one who brought you in here."

"Jim." Rafe supplied, ignoring the insult without perturbation and pulling an array of items from his bag to place on a tray he'd produced.

It hadn't occurred to Blair before that moment, but he hadn't even know the sentinel's name.

"Yeah, him."

Rafe smiled a little more, then cast around and found a short footstool to sit on in the cramped area. Settled, Rafe reached into his bag again, withdrew a clipboard and a pen, and looked up at Blair.

"So we have three things we need to do before I can let you leave the van tonight. First, we've got a stack of paperwork for you to fill out - none of it's binding, but it's just an intake summary sheet, an acknowledgment form, and a self-assessment questionnaire. Once you fill those out, I'm going to interview you to get your medical history, and last, we're going to do a very quick, very painless physical exam." Rafe twiddled the pen between his thumb and forefinger.

"Is all this necessary?" Blair asked, both curious and irritated, "Since when do packs have intake procedures?"

As if he kept up with that sort of thing. Every law and regulation governing guide capture could have changed in the past ten years, and Blair would never have known. Rafe made an unimpressed face at the stack of forms.

"Most don't, unfortunately. We're one of the only packs that employs this kind of protocol." he looked up at Blair. "There's no procedure legally required until the bond is forged, and even then, it's just a registration with the Guide Centers. But in this pack, Jim likes to know who's present and what's going on at all times - and definitely before things get so far that he can't petition for release of a guide in case of extenuating circumstances." Rafe shrugged. "And he just likes to keep good records. Helps everyone stay safer and feel better."

The way Rafe referred to Jim made Blair curious. What was this guy? Some sort of pack manager? A high-ranking beta, maybe?

Rafe looked back down at the sheet, then up at Blair.

"So are you doing OK?" he asked, then added: "For right now, at least?"

For some reason, Blair didn't completely dislike the other guide. He had a sincerity that was disarming, and when he looked at Blair, there was an awareness in his eyes that indicated that he might be more sympathetic to Blair's position than the others. Blair sighed and blew a few stray curls out of his face.

"I'm fine. I'm kidnapped, but I'm fine."

Rafe looked relieved, but apologetic.

"Yeah." he said, tapping the pen against his left knuckle, "Good. Alright."

Rafe assessed Blair for another moment, then spoke with an air of divulgence.

"I'm a guide, too, you know. Evan - that's my sentinel." the medic-guide chewed on the inside of his cheek. "We've only been bonded about a year, so I know it's still really soon, but...he's good to me. Really good. I didn't...mean to come out, either. Ev caught me in an alleyway."

Rafe swallowed, and Blair could tell that the recollection was hard on him.
"I was trapped, and I knew I was trapped - I kept turning around in circles because I couldn't figure out where to run. I fought the bond so hard for the first three days that I landed us both in the hospital and on sedation until it could take." Rafe looked up at Blair, and his eyes seemed haunted. "It took a lot of time for me to grow away from all that, from all the pain. But I'm grateful that I managed it. Evan is a good man, and he's a good Sentinel. This is a good pack, and I'm lucky."

Blair resolutely, thoroughly ignored the other guide through the end of his little recruitment speech, offended and annoyed that the man he'd thought could be an ally had turned out to be just another sentinel sycophant. Seeing the tension return to his charge, Rafe gave up on salesmanship and turned his attention to the clipboard.

"Well, if you don't feel like writing just now, I can take your med history first."
Blair shrugged, and Rafe began.
"Name?"
"Blair Sandburg."
"Age?"
"27."
"Gender?"
"Guide."
"Biological Sex?"
Blair sucked in a breath and hesitated; he had anticipated this question, but it was always one he didn't want to answer. Lying passed through his mind as a consideration, but there was no point at this juncture; it might only serve to get him into more trouble than he already had.
"Twinned." he admitted, quietly. Rafe stopped, then peered up at him through shy, dark lashes.
"OK." he said, nervously, "A carrier. OK."

Blair hated that; the uncertain reaction that he always got from this - that sudden tension where the air thrummed with excitement and curiosity and exoticism and sexuality.

Rafe bit his lip, obviously uncomfortable with the next question.
"And are you...viable?"
Blair nodded, leaning miserably forward into his bound hands.
"How long since - "
Blair cut him off.
"I was 19. So 8 years."
Rafe froze and stared openly at him for a minute.
"You've been a twin-soul guide for 8 years and no one's claimed you?"
Blair blinked back sudden, thick tears.
"Yes."
I made it that far, he thought.

And it had been so easy. Once he'd gotten in the pattern of hiding, particularly as an adult, it had been so easy to maintain. There had been some troubles - the dreams, the loneliness, the occasionally violent pull of the bond-gap, the necessity of avoiding unattached sentinels that limited how he taught, worked, and lived - but they were tiny in comparison to what he felt he faced now. There was some measure of relief in being caught, of course, as there always is in admitting a heavy secret or facing an experience greatly feared, but the position he was in now terrified him.

Despite Rafe's awkward assurances, Blair had heard too many horror stories about life as a guide: sentinels who were cruel, who abused, who neglected and ignored; torturous bonding cycles, violent matings, mental sickness and psychic fatigue that left a guide homebound and weak; isolation from friends, family, and everything else in favor of the pack. The stories about what happened to twin-soul guides were worse.
In Blair's mind, the fact that Rafe had ever even felt the need to assure him spoke volumes. What if Jim was like that? Blair felt a sense of unease begin to build in the pit of his stomach. He really didn't know this man at all, and now he...Blair couldn't bring himself to say belonged to him, but there was no more fitting phrase.

"Everything's going to be OK, Blair," Rafe told him, as if responding to the other guide's thoughts. "Let's finish up your med history and your paperwork and your exam, and then get you out of here and into someplace nice and warm."

That all sounded great, but Blair knew pacifying words when he heard them. The only place he'd be going after the van was into a holding pen or a bonding hut, to wait, naked, for the sentinel who'd claimed him.

Rafe reached out and caught Blair's handcuffed wrist, and Blair sucked in a sharp breath. The skin of the other guide felt warm to touch, buzzing with the curious sensation of warm invitation. Blair blinked back tears. It had been so long since he'd been near enough to another guide to feel that, to get that sense of rightness, that glowing golden yellow mind touch he associated with friendship and belonging - he'd forgotten how good it felt. Determinedly, he shut it out of his mind.

Rafe glanced up at him, but didn't comment. Instead, he focused his attention on the handcuff latch. "I think I can get you out of these without calling Jim. But you know," he said, looking up seriously at the other guide, "If I take them off, you cannot run."
Blair swallowed down a prickly, tearful feeling in his throat. "Why not?"
"Because," Rafe said, reasonably, picking at the lock of the cuffs, "They will chase you." He looked up, meaningfully, at Blair's eyes. "They will all chase you."

Blair's froze. A frenzy? He hadn't heard of such a thing happening - actually happening - since the earliest days of the Hunt. What kind of Sentinel was this? What kind of pack was this?

Rafe popped the latch open on one cuff, then the other; briefly, he touched Blair's skin where a small bruise had formed. Blair snatched his wrist away, wanting no more of that bronzey-syrupy-warm guide's touch.
"It's OK." the man soothed him, "I'm a guide, too. I know how it feels."
After the interview had finished and Blair had signed all the proper forms and Rafe was done with his once-over, Blair was given a pair of standard issue Pack scrubs and slippers. Rafe grimaced as he handed them over.

"I know you'd feel better in your own clothes - hell, who wouldn't? But the scrubs will help reduce competing scents during the imprinting stage, and they'll help us keep track of new intakes so that nothing…untoward can happen to you."

Like escape, Blair thought but didn't say. Numbly, he took the bundle from Rafe and waited stoically for the other guide to turn away, giving Blair precious seconds with the illusion of privacy.

The scrubs were a pale blue-gray, and had Blair's name written in marker on the sleeve and waistband; Rafe must have done that while he'd been filling forms. The Cascade Pack logo - which Blair recognized from the rear window of the van - was printed on the chest pocket and left hip. Both pieces were made of a heavy cotton, suitable for all-season wear in the temperamental weather of the Pacific northwest. Blair slipped both on and found that in them, he felt a strange sense of comfort that he hadn't before. He puzzled this over for just a moment before being distracted by Rafe's voice.

"Wallet goes with your clothes, but hang on to your ID, OK?"

Blair balked momentarily, wondering how he was going to get around without his keys or money, before Academy training kicked in again and he remembered the protocol of bonding. He was fully at the behest of his sentinel from now until the bond was forged; he wouldn't be getting around anywhere without his permission.

"Again, I'm sorry about this."
Rafe cringed a little as he gathered and bagged Blair's clothes, underwear, and watch. All parts went into a sealed container, which Rafe double-taped and labeled before clipping the set of keys Blair had been carrying to the outside.

"You'll get all this back in a few days. It's just that sometimes the outside scents are too strong and can irritate a Sentinel's senses. Bonding is a sensitive time, and we don't want to trigger an adverse reaction, so it's scrubs and ID only until afterwards."

Blair shivered, and Rafe noticed this and rifled around in one of the bolted-in cabinets until he retrieved a Pack sweatshirt. It was black, and too large for him - Blair surmised that it must have been intended for a Sentinel's use.

"All set?" Rafe still wasn't looking directly at Blair. "All dressed?"
"In uniform." Blair responded, meaning to be caustic, but finding that all the fight had faded from him. He ran one hand through his hair and tied a ragged ponytail.
"I'm ready."

~!~

Cold wind blew in when Rafe opened the rear right door of the van, and the night outside seemed to have gotten much darker. Blair wondered how long he'd been here; the time since the first moment of capture seemed to stretch out infinitely behind him. Worried by his own disorientation, Blair tried to focus and puzzle out the answer - it was a welcome distraction from the events to come. It had been just after sunset when they'd grabbed him, and he'd sat in the intake van for...how long, before the sentinel had arrived that first time? Twenty minutes? Ten? Blair frowned. His sense of time seemed to be slipping away from him. He glanced covetously at the watch that Rafe had sealed
away; by the door of the van, the medic was zipping up a green 'MEDIC' sweatshirt and gathering the items he’d scattered around the floor. When he was finished, he looked up and met the other guide's eyes.

"Time to go, Blair."

There was a particular kind of gentleness in his voice - it wasn't the cloying sympathy of the therapists at the Guide Center, or the false affection of doctors with poor bedside manner; it was something deeper, and more sincere. Something so uniquely guide that for a moment, Blair felt as if a thread had been stitched through him, pulled through the ages and tying he and Rafe together in the rapture of this one shared moment. They were one guide, the Guide, the thing that gone without name before time and civilization had built up around it. And across the black tarmac of the parking lot, across the lightless expanse of space, there was the other, the Sentinel, the opposite and complement and there, in the middle, the inevitable joining that bound them all together.

Blair started to get up, wanting to say something to Rafe - about that moment, about the night, about the exam, about his fears, about what was going to happen, about the night to come, about all the nights to come in the future, about the Pack, about the billion and one tiny worries that had sprang up so freely from his frantic mind.

Instead, he swallowed, and took a deep breath and tried to remember one of the mantras that Naomi had taught him, and managed a squeaky:

"What, now?"

Rafe's eyebrow dipped almost-imperceptibly and he nodded.

"Yeah, now. Your ride's outside."

Blair passed his tongue over dry lips and swallowed again.

"OK." he said, and ran his hands over his hair again. "OK, man, OK."

Rafe's brow knitted together in worry.

"Do you need a little more time?"

"For what? Blair thought. It's not going to make a difference."

"No," he shook his head, "I'm fine."

They went outside of the van; Rafe did not cuff Blair again, and Blair deduced that this negligence must mean that he was no longer a flight risk. Indeed, if he tried to see himself as Rafe saw him, a shivering 20something in slippers and pack scrubs, he realized he wasn't a risk at all. What could he do now that the night had progressed this far? Where could he run when he had the name of the Pack stamped all over him like a return label? In clothes too light for the weather and a sweatshirt that obviously did not belong to him, with no money or keys - only an ID and a story?

"Over here."

Rafe directed him, touching lightly at the back of an elbow before leading the way towards a dark gray SUV, parked at angles to one of the black streetlights that had Blair had glimpsed before. That warm guide-buzz syrupy energy flowed over him from the point on his elbow, but Blair resolutely ignored it and moved forward into the night.

Looking around, he realized that most of the rest of the crowd had dispersed; of the half-dozen or so vans Blair had originally counted, only his own and one more were left. The sentinels who had been lingering around the parking lot were gone, as were the smaller vehicles he'd been too distracted to notice properly before. The whole place was just packed up and gone, like a circus skipping out of town, making the lot seem even more empty than it had before.

As they drew closer to the SUV, the driver's door opened and Jim exited and came towards them. Blair's heart skipped a beat. Here, in the wild and cavernous emptiness of the darkened parking lot, he felt more vulnerable than he had in the close quarters of the van. In an open space, he knew, the
sentinel had the advantage.

Jim passed close to him - too close - and opened the door to the backseat for Blair. "You want to hop in, Chief? Watch your head."

Blair felt a shiver of anxiety run through him, and for a moment he wanted very much, very foolishly to bolt. Instead, he focused his full attention on suppressing his physiologicals so the sentinel couldn't read his reactions. He turned towards the open door - it was so easy if he just went one step at a time - and began to go when something struck him and he turned back to Rafe. "Hey, thanks, man," he said abruptly, catching the attention of both the medic and the sentinel but meeting only Rafe's eyes, "For... you know. Being nice."

Rafe's expression altered minutely, but his voice was carefully neutral when he responded. "Of course. And if you need anything else, Blair, just ask for me."

The sentinel glanced quickly between the two of them, but then Blair turned with just a nod and climbed into the truck.

Rafe held out a few papers to Jim. "His intake sheet, summary, and first form." he said, somewhat more tersely than he needed to. Jim raised an eyebrow and took the papers, scanning each quickly. "Anything I need to know about?"

_The same thing you knew about when they caught me_, Rafe considered saying - but to do so would have been insolent, and he was far better trained up than that. "No."

Jim's gaze lifted and rested on Rafe for a long moment. "What's your ride home tonight, Rafe?"

Jim was using _that_ voice again, and so Rafe supposed that he must have been leaking emotions thickly enough that Jim had felt a sentinel's need to protect arise. "The van, I guess."

"Alright. Evan already waiting for you?"

Rafe shrugged, carelessly, and mumbled. Jim eyed him for another long moment. "Rafe," he began, his voice taking on a steelier tone, "Is your sentinel at home waiting for you?"

The compulsion was so obvious, so evident, but Rafe still found it difficult to resist the pull of the sentinel's power. Responsive obedience felt calm, safe. "Yes."

"Good. Then go home and bond before you get yourself in trouble."

Flushing, but still feeling the pull of Jim's presence, Rafe nodded and left to head back towards the van which he and Blair had left together. Jim skimmed over the bunch of papers once more, seeing nothing unusual until one word stopped him in his tracks: Twinned.

~:~
The Ride.

There was quiet inside the truck when Blair got in. The dome lamps had been turned off - ostensibly to avoid startling Sentinel senses - and so the opening of the door came and went with little fuss or revelation. Blair swung both legs in and settled into his seat; the SUV was cool, and smelled of new leather and a vaguely musky, very human scent.

Another guide - a woman, which gave him a moment's pause - was sitting restlessly behind the driver's seat. She smiled at Blair when he clambered in, nervously twirling the ends of her mass of long, dark, coily hair around her finger. In the front passenger seat, a young, well-muscled sentinel watched her every move in the rearview mirror.

She introduced herself as Moira, and she explained to Blair that yes, she had intended to come out for the Moonhunt tonight. She gave him a sympathetic look when he said that he had not.

They lapsed into silence after that, and were all momentarily alarmed when the driver's-side door popped open suddenly and Jim got in, thrusting a crumpled handful of paperwork at the other sentinel with a muttered, "Stick these in my bag, will you?"

The man complied quickly - almost obsequiously, Blair thought.

They pulled out of the parking lot and Blair leaned his head against the window and mournfully watched his little Volvo get smaller with the distance.

~

They left the neighborhood and headed for the highway; Blair's heart began to pound as he realized that he had no idea where they might be going. Irrational concerns blew up like bubbles, swelled, then burst in his mind. What if they left the city forever? Left behind Blair's car and his friends and his makeshift family and the only Guide Center he'd ever known? Left his books and his laptop and all of his things and never came back? Blair felt a pricking at the backs of his eyes and willed himself to control it.

It's just a bad night. It's just a reaction to the proximity. Relax, and it will fade.

He took a deep breath, but it came in more like a hitching sob, and Jim looked up sharply into the rearview mirror. Blair tried to breathe evenly and look inconspicuous; something warm and tingling and familiar touched his leg, and Moira's hand slipped into his.

He looked up at her and she smiled at him, hesitantly, as if divulging a particularly long-held secret, but her dark eyes were impossible to find in the flashes of light from the highway outside, and Blair squeezed her hand once, then pulled away.

Abruptly, Jim spoke.
"Ken, I'm going to drop you and Moira off at the rear entrance to Building Six." he said, his voice thoughtful and distracted. "You can handle things from there."

The younger sentinel nodded crisply.
"Yes, sir." he glanced over his shoulder at Moira, and Blair felt singed by the heat of his gaze as it strayed briefly in his direction. Moira smiled a shy smile, and Blair could feel, even at a distance, her empathy begin to rise and hum.

Jim glanced again at Blair in the rearview - briefly, but long enough for Blair to understand that the sentinel had felt her energy, too. No one commented on it, however, and Jim went on speaking briskly to the pair as the SUV continued its steady path up the highway. Blair counted the exits to
keep himself calm.

"Naturally," the sentinel said, "I wish you two the best of luck with your bonding and great happiness in your new life. Should any complications arise, you know how to hit the panic button, right? Kai briefed you on Emergency Services and the nearest Guide Help resources?"

Moira leaned forward and ran a soothing hand over Jim's shoulder. Blair did not like this at all, for some reason, but he found the exact point of offense difficult to articulate without accepting some uncomfortable truths that he would prefer to ignore. Moira had her guide-voice on, soothing Jim. "Yes, Sentinel. Your protocol was wonderful, and I'm going to be fine. Kenneth will take good care of me, and we'll see you in a few days."

Jim nodded and patted her hand appreciatively, but the tight set of his jaw and the intensity with which he watched the road did not fade.

~:~

They reached Building Six within twenty minutes or so, and Blair was surprised when the SUV pulled off a dark exit and up the long, winding driveway of what appeared to be a massively overgrown log cabin. Even in the night, he could see that the sprawling facility was beautifully built; he imagined the view it must have in the daytime.

The intermediate stop was only a few minutes; he and Jim waited while Ken helped Moira out of the SUV and down, shouldering his black hunt pack and then taking her hand to lead her into the only building with lights still on. From inside, they waved, and Jim pulled off.

They rode on for some time before Blair spoke, disrupting the fabric of quietude that had been woven inadvertently between them. "Daryl," he said, his voice tremulous. Jim glanced sidelong at his carrier, then back at the road. "What about him?"

The question was neutral - it gave no hint of trepidation or anger. Blair fiddled with the smooth hem of his scrub shirt.

"I want to see him."

"Not until his Sentinel's done with him, you won't."

The carelessly harsh answer took Blair by surprise, snapping him out of his slow-ride stupor and grounding him back in this world of caught and kept, of masters and saviors. He swallowed and tried again.

"I just want to know that he's OK." Blair hesitated before going on, his pride warring with sincere concern for his friend. "I'm just - just really worried, you know? He's in a tough position, you know, to need to form a bond so soon after he and the other guy just broke up. And Daryl's just - I don't know, fragile, you see what I'm saying? If I could just talk to him, I mean, just know that he's ok...Please, Sentinel?"

No discernible emotion was reflected on the larger man's face, but Blair saw his posture relax minutely.

"I'll see what I can do tomorrow."

Relief flooded Blair, and he relaxed back into his seat.

"Thank you, man, thank you so much. I - "

Jim cut him off.

"Tomorrow," he repeated, "If we bond tonight. Otherwise, I can't take the risk of exposing you to an early-bond Sentinel, or his unsettled guide."

Whatever idle fantasies of escape, negotiation, or resolution Blair had been entertaining slipped a
little farther away with Jim's words. This was real, and it was heavy, and it was getting closer. A Sentinel had caught him - he, a guide, and a carrier-guide at that - and would be claiming him before the night was out. The evening was marching on, and tomorrow there would be endless paperwork, and changing of names and accounts and the exchanging of keys and arrangements, and phone calls home and to work and to the local Guide Center, and aptitude assessments and occupational interviews and work to do. Tonight, there would be just the bond, the claim, and Jim.

That simple fact shut Blair up for the rest of the ride.

~!~
"This is it, Chief. All the way up."
They had arrived back in the city, in an area previously reserved for expensive condominium buildings and their equally expensive inhabitants. Jim had stopped the SUV in front of a rather nondescript concrete tower, but as they got out and came closer, Blair noticed the Pack's logo emblazoned on the large, metal security gates.

Abandoning the truck, the Sentinel led him down the short walkway and past the main door's biometrics on into the building. Inside, Blair trailed him through the spartan-utilitarian entry hall and towards the shiny silver elevators at the far rear of the lobby. Vaguely, Jim gestured upwards.
"Top floor's mine."

*The whole top floor? This guy must have some major social mojo to garner that kind of real estate,* Blair thought. *Maybe some kind of security director - that would make sense, given his haircut, his size, his attitude...probably had a military background. No wonder they put him in charge of the moonhunt.*

A little ding, and the elevator doors opened to reveal the interior of a massive penthouse loft. Blair looked around in awe. The apartment looked nothing like he'd anticipated - where he'd expected stark, lifeless furniture and sharp, metallic materials, there were instead hand-woven Peruvian carpets and warm, inviting leather sofas offset by a collection of exotic-organic artwork. The wide-open penthouse space was split by a wall of carved glass, but from his vantage point, Blair couldn't quite make out the images in it. The room was warmed by a central fireplace.

Jim dropped his keys on a table by the door, but held on to the hunt pack he'd carried up.
"Make yourself comfortable. I'll be right in the other room, back in five."
Then the sentinel was gone.

Blair sat on the nearest couch and didn't move, just toyed with the edge of his scrubs and listened nervously to the clattering and rustling that came from other parts of the loft. His mind raced, trying desperately to synthesize all of the data he'd collected into something usable - some workable understanding of this sentinel's nature and personality.

*Jim,* he reminded himself. *His name is Jim.*

Jim seemed OK enough; Blair had heard of worse. So far, he hadn't been cruel to Blair, at least. Hadn't snapped at him, or been rude or overly domineering. Hadn't hit him or raised his voice, not even when Blair had resisted capture and sworn a blue streak at anyone who'd listen. The sentinel had an unshakeable quality to him; a pervasive sense of *establishment,* of recognized authority and calm resolution. It made Blair feel there was a gentility about him; an otherness above his natural Sentinel standing. But there was a ruggedness about him, too, and an aggressive sexual confidence that Blair found difficult to confront.

It wasn't that Blair was a virgin, *exactly;* just that he was a carrier-guide, and being a carrier-guide meant living a life of restriction. It had been one thing to be a curious and free 18-year-old, using his natural Guide gifts to ease and empathize his way in and out of half the beds in the Academy dorms. It'd been another to be a shuddering 20-year-old, just barely recovered from the trauma of the Change, trying madly to hide in the midst of a crumbling world.

Jim hadn't mentioned Blair's Change. Blair hoped, wildly and foolishly, that the Sentinel didn't know; that he had only skimmed the medical report; that he would forget to ask him about it; that he
wouldn't be interested. These were the same wild hopes he'd had when he'd been diagnosed in the CEC in that summer he'd turned 19. They'd been futile then, too.

Jim reappeared in the living room, and Blair surreptitiously watched him pass by, then asked the question that had been nagging at him since they'd arrived.

"So why don't - I mean, shouldn't we - shouldn't we go to a bonding hut, or something?" he asked, remembering to keep his eyes respectfully lowered. From a distant room, Jim scoffed loudly enough to be heard, then re-emerged, crossing the room towards some destination behind Blair.
"Don't like 'em, don't believe in 'em, and I won't have them in my pack."

Blair suddenly very much wanted a bonding hut; even a small element of the standard and familiar might make his current situation feel less dire.

"They're supposed to reduce stress on the guide," he said, quietly. Jim harrumphed as he reappeared in front of Blair.
"Taking your time in the bonding process reduces stress, too." he countered, then gave Blair a long, lingering look. "We'll take our time."

Blair pinkened immediately, and Jim distracted him by setting down a bottle of red wine and two glasses. He said nothing as he poured a glass for Blair and a glass for himself. Blair snatched his up gratefully and took a long draw.
Jim raised an eyebrow.
"Easy, chief. That's got to last you all night." At Blair's irritated glance, he raised a defensive hand.
"Call me a prude, but I'd rather have you sober."

All at once, the reality of the situation came rushing in on Blair and he felt nauseated again. He set the wine glass back down and pushed it away.
"Maybe..." he began, before losing his nerve and retreating back to tampering with the edge of his scrubs. "Maybe we should just get on with it, you know? Get this over with."
Jim raised an eyebrow and lowered his voice.
"Sweetheart," he began, leaning forward a bit, muscles taut and tone edging low, "I'd be happy to get on with it." The sentinel paused, took a long breath, "But you're not ready. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to put you off of bonding because I pushed you too hard the first time. So we'll go slow, and we'll go when you say we can go."

Blair felt the urge to say something impudent, and resisted for a moment, then blurted,
"And if I don't? And if I never say go?"

Jim reached out to capture a lock of Blair's hair where it had slipped free from its binds and was hovering wildly around his face. Gently, he tucked it behind the guide's ear, careful not to contact skin.
"Are you asking me if I'll force you?" Jim asked, his voice picking up a note of that same seriousness he'd used with another wayward guide earlier in the evening. He caught Blair's gaze and held it. Blair's heart skipped once, then twice, then adopted a quick-but-steady pace. "I'm not that kind of Sentinel, chief."

Blair exhaled a little, and Jim leaned back, relinquishing his conquered sectors of Blair's personal space. He paused, and looked thoughtfully towards the fireplace.
"But I could be."

That was that, then. It was said.

"I'm a graduate student, you know." Blair piped up suddenly, wanting to give something to this man
- to yield something of his own accord so that there might be something to take back in his own time, as well. "Yeah, I um, I study the indigenous cultures of Peru. I'm doing a phenomenology, you know, or I'm trying to, but my advisor's had a few issues with the funding, but whatever, man, that's a story for another time. Anyway, I've got this project, this study, I guess, to look at the evolution of culture post-Catastrophe in that country. Who's survived, and how, and how well; what shifts have occurred in perspective, in life histories, in the collective and individual memories of the indigenous identity."

From the opposite end of the couch, a semi-reclined Jim was watching him with a curious gaze that encouraged him to go on.

"And um, I guess, I mean, let's see... I'm my mom's only kid - that I know about, of course - and I'm from here, from Cascade. I, uh, became guide-expressive when I turned 4 and spent the rest of my school days in Academy up in Birch Bay before I finally got turned loose for college early, at 16. Then I got my degree in physical anth, but it was cultures that I really dug, you know? Not bones. So I went back, went to grad school for cultural anth, and did it different the second time around." Blair swallowed. He'd felt like he was babbling at first; as if the words were just spilling out of his mouth, unbidden. Now he felt dry and empty, as if there were no things left to say.

"So that's where I am now."

Jim nodded, taking all of this in.

"And when did you become a carrier, Blair?" he asked, in the most direct attack on Blair's jangled nerves yet.

"When I was 19 years old." he answered, mechanically, as he had to so many doctors and counselors and intake officers and genuine shrinks.

"And are you viable?"

Blair's anxiety was strong enough to outweigh his déjà vu, and so he answered this, too, mechanically.

"Yes."

"Do you get the booster shots?"

"They make me." he answered, testily.

"When was your last?"

Blair's eyes flicked up to Jim's. Abject fear appeared on his face, but he answered his Sentinel nonetheless.

"In December."

"Ah." was all Jim said.

Blair took a few more mouthfuls of his wine and gathered up his courage.

"Are you going to get me pregnant?" he asked, trying to make the question sound casual enough to warrant an honest answer.

"I don't know." Jim gave back.

"Are you going to try?"

Blair tried to sound strong, but there was still a terrified 19-year old carrier inside of him who trembled when he spoke.

"Probably." Jim answered, truthfully. "Can't see why not."

Blair took another sip of his wine and wished for more.

"I'm still in school."

"Graduate school. You can do both."

Then Jim reached out to brush the back of one hand against Blair's cheek, and as the touch lingered, Blair felt his world swell up and explode into a cacophony of sensations, emotions, colors, and impressions. He saw stars and snakes and kings and jungle and smelled wild flowers and rain and the color of the earth beneath the branches of the swaying, tall trees and mist. Then it was there, moving towards him, present in the way that only this could be, zooming in - a sentinel. His sentinel. The
rightness of it nearly took Blair's breath away.

Then Jim was pulling back, and Blair caught ahold of himself and was angry again. "Fuck, man, that isn't fair, alright? It's not fair when you do that, when you - you -" Blair couldn't remember the word suddenly, although 12 years of Guide Academy training had pounded it into his head. "When I loop you?"

"Yeah, that. You're not supposed to be doing that until you're initiating..." Blair dropped off suddenly, realizing. He pinkened again and Jim watched him calmly. "Oh."

"Yeah." Jim answered. Blair glanced away and ran a hand over his hair. "OK. Yeah. OK."

"You're going to be just fine." Jim reassured the guide, "We'll go slow. When you're ready. I won't hurt you."

"Or overwhelm me." Blair amended quickly, voice almost pleading. "I mean, what you just did there? That was like wow man, I mean, whoa, you know?"

Jim furrowed his brow. "Whoa?"

Blair swallowed. "Too intense."

Jim's face relaxed, and Blair felt some measure of relief. "OK." he promised. "I won't overwhelm you. Although the bond itself is a pretty overwhelming experience, and I can't change that."

Blair nodded, trying to find some point of accession, grasping for agreement and control. "I know. I know."

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"Stop it! Stop! Get OFF of me!"
Daryl kicked wildly at his attacker who, upsettingly, did not seem the least bit perturbed.
"I bite!" the young Guide hissed.
The man who had restrained him, and was now carrying him in a fireman's hold over one shoulder, shook him lightly.
"Don't threaten me with a good time, sweetheart."
Daryl narrowed his eyes and aimed a particularly vicious kick lower than its predecessors.

The Sentinel who'd been carrying him stopped, wrapped one strong hand around Daryl's ankle, and said in a dark tone,
"You try that again and we're going to have a problem, kitten."
Daryl's heart leapt into his mouth, but he tried to sound reasonable, hoping for just a moment of distraction before they got too far from the building. If he had just an inch more of room, he could make a break for it - he could bolt back to the building and make it inside before the Sentinel knew what had hit him. If he could make it up to his apartment, he'd at least have sanctuary until the morning. A chase couldn't be pursued past his front door.
"Just - just put me down. I can walk."
The Sentinel scoffed.
"No."
"Come on!"
"No. You'll take off and I'll have to go after you. And after the fight we've already had, I do not feel like going after you."

Daryl allowed himself a momentary gloat before focusing again on the task at hand. From his upside-down vantage point, dangling over a man's shoulder in the darkness, it was hard to tell exactly how far they'd gotten from the building. Daryl listened for the sound of footsteps - they were on grass, which meant they'd already left the short stone pathway that led into the rear entrance. The farther they got, the slimmer his chances of reaching sanctuary. Daryl decided to try for distraction again.

"Where are you taking me?"
The man sidestepped the steep ditch in the dirt where Mrs. Lewis's dog kept digging holes by the azaleas, and kept moving across the parking lot.
"To the check-in center at the van."
Daryl's stomach did a little flip. There was a mobile checkpoint? Here? So this was serious. He struggled anew.
"Wait! I don't want to go to the van! Put me down! Stop! Help! Fire!"
The sentinel slapped his ass.
"Be quiet."
"Fuck no! I'll scream all night if I have to."
"Deal." the sentinel answered, and Daryl growled.
"I broke your nose, Sentinel, and I'll break anything else I can get my hands on. Consider yourself warned."

Ignoring him, the Sentinel crossed the grass to step down over the low barrier of the yard's retaining wall. For some reason, Daryl found this profoundly annoying.
"There's a path, you know."
"I know." the Sentinel replied, cavalierly.
"Savage." Daryl sneered.
They drew closer to the rest of the Pack, and Daryl could hear voices and noise - engines running, low conversations. Daryl exhaled and watched his breath crystallize in the cooling night air. Damn his stupidity. Damn Blair for not listening to him. Damn the Sovereign Fucking Sentinel Nation for organizing this whole thing to begin with. And damn his stupid luck, for having been born a Guide.

The Sentinel stopped walking, and Daryl caught sight of two pairs of boots like his captor's own. The boots circled around, out of Daryl's sight.
"And what's this?" an amused voice asked, "Has O'Hare caught himself a wee bunny?"
The only response was an annoyed grunt.
"Well," the voice went on, "Put him down and we'll get his basics."

The Sentinel hesitated, but began to shift his weight, bending at the knee to bring Daryl closer to the ground. The second his feet made contact, Daryl brought one knee up towards the man's stomach; he caught him on the side instead, but it gave just enough space for the guide to wrench himself free and take off running.

"Fuck!"

Daryl ran as if his life depended on it, tripping awkwardly over his jeans, nervously darting around cars and across the parking lot. Behind him, he heard shouts and laughter, and then the sound of boots, pounding the pavement. He risked a glance and counted 5 Sentinels in pursuit; he ran harder.

Up, he reminded himself, over the wall and to the door and then keep running, don't stop, KEEP RUNNING up the three flights to home. He was close enough to make it, just close enough to reach the door before them, to break free of the pack, to -

- to be tackled, unexpectedly, from the left.

Daryl lost his footing under the weight of impact and skidded across the concrete, unable to catch himself with his bound hands, feeling his skin scrape and tear as he hit the ground. The Sentinel who had tackled him went skidding, too, but never relinquished his hold on the Guide, crash-skating with him across the rocky ground until they spun to a stop.

Daryl tried to breathe. He hadn't hit his head, but his shoulder hurt. He estimated he was bleeding from at least a dozen small places. And furthermore, the body atop him felt familiar. He rolled over, trying to get to his knees to get up, and looked directly into the same set of green eyes that had startled him the first time. He groaned in frustration and anger.

"Yeah?" the Sentinel responded, "Well, right now, I feel the same about you."

The Sentinel got carefully to his feet, extricating himself from the Guide without releasing his hold on him. Around them, the pursuing Sentinels had come to a stop, and were pacing impatiently, circling the couple on the ground. Daryl's own Sentinel took one look up at them, caught a whiff of the wildness of their scent and the tension in their postures, and snarled.

Color drained from Daryl's flushed face, and he went rigid.
"Sentinel?"
"Frenzy. Be. Still."

There were more snarls, then three of the five backed off; two lingered, but a threatening move from the Sentinel on the ground dispelled them in short order. Daryl, Academy-trained guide that he was, stayed perfectly still throughout the challenge, his posture submissive, eyes focused downward. Once the Sentinel relaxed again, he looked up. The man was looking at him through entrancing gray-green eyes, his face an amalgamation of emotions. He stared at Daryl for a long moment.
"I seriously hope you are worth it." he said, at last, before getting to his feet and dragging the recalcitrant Guide behind him.

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Jim resettled himself against the arm of the couch and regarded his guide from a distance. Blair seemed stiller than he had before; muted, as if the weight of the night wearing on had pressed him down into half the rebel he'd been before. His fingers were dirty, Jim noticed - leaving gray smudges on the stem of the wine glass. He also had a sheen of fear-scent around him that was impossible to miss, coloring his natural allure and cutting into Jim's ability to imprint.

The guide rubbed the back of his neck suddenly, an anxious action that further mussed his ponytail and dispersed new scent-notes into the air in halting bursts. Jim tried not to lose himself in the sensation, to keep his head and keep his focus on the nervous little guide seated just over a foot from him on the couch.

His couch. His home. His guide.

Jim's panther purred, and he reached out one powerful arm towards his new mate. Blair startled, and recoiled, and Jim stopped. The fear-scent rose.

"I'm not going to hurt you, chief." Jim assured the guide, beginning to feel a bit put-out by the implicit rejection in his new mate's flinch. "I already told you that."
Blair looked up briefly at the Sentinel, then away.
"I know. Sorry."
"You don't have to be sorry. Just relax, OK? We're talking."
Blair swallowed.
"Right."

Blair smoothed his hair out of his face and cast around for something - anything to talk about, but it was impossible to concentrate on anything but the closeness of the Sentinel, the quiet of the isolated room, and the prowling sexuality of the bond-gap between them.

Sentinels in Jim's state were touchy, Blair knew - sensitive about their ability to protect, easily offended by rejection, and short-fused by the increasingly strong pull of the bond-gap. Blair shook a fuzzy head and tried to think (when had that become such a challenge?). What he needed to do was concentrate long enough to figure a way out of all of this. Think - if he could just think straight, it would be so easy, but Jim was sitting just a little bit closer to him now and he seemed so powerful and so solid and like he just radiated in some crazy way, and Blair couldn't get his mind to obey him.

The draw was powerful, and mixed up in it was a healthy dose of curiosity; he'd never been with a Sentinel before. He'd never even been alone in a room with an unbonded one for this long before, because the Academy had been very, very clear on that particular point: No Sentinel but your own. Never, not halfway, not a little bit, not just the tip, nothing, ever.

They'd been told awful horror stories in Academy, too - of Guides in a perpetual state of half-bond with a Sentinel who'd abandoned them; of Guides ruined by a bond-abort and unable to seek even the slightest grounding from a Sentinel; of the disgrace promiscuous Guides brought on themselves, on the Academy, and on their families.

Blair glanced out of the corner of his eye at Jim again. The Sentinel must be feeling the pull, too, because his posture was slightly more rigid than it had been before, and his hands were squeezing the supple suede of the sofa. Blair wondered if his emotions were leaking; that might be affecting the Sentinel, too.
Abruptly, Jim rubbed a hand over his stubbled chin and sighed. Blair watched the muscles move in his shoulders under the dark t-shirt he wore.

"Listen, why don't you hit the shower? I'll clean up here." The Sentinel said, in a voice that was light and calm, but firm. The Sentinel guide-soothing special, Blair thought snarkily. Jim got to his feet and began to walk away; at a few paces, he stopped and looked back at Blair expectantly. Blair stared blankly at him for a minute… until he caught himself and scrambled to his feet to follow behind.

Inside of the spacious, spartan bathroom, Jim padded barefoot across the chilly granite floor and opened a large white cabinet. Blair followed halfway, then stopped, standing alone in the middle of the dark grey room.

"Everything you need should be in here - the towels and the scent wash and the toothbrush and all. Just give a shout if you need anything."

the Sentinel padded back across the floor, and Blair noted the confidence in his stride. "And here's the privacy generator, here by the door. You can crank it as high as you want, but it's one of those new models, and honestly, I get blocked at five on that thing."

Jim headed towards the door, brushing past Blair but careful not to touch. Just outside, he paused and turned back.

"Take your time." he said, and then was gone, leaving Blair was alone with his thoughts.

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It couldn't possibly be so bad, Blair reasoned to himself as he collected all the items he'd need and lined them up on a glass shelf inside of the large, slate-lined shower. There were thousands of guides, after all, every year, who got bonded to Sentinels and none of them seemed overly miserable with it. Not any more miserable than anyone else on this miserable planet, at least.

And Jim seemed nice enough; traditional, maybe, but nice about it. And the Sentinel wouldn't be such a bad first time, either - he was by no means an unhandsome man, and he did have just enough Alpha tendencies to keep Blair's sexual self happy.

And it was inevitable, wasn't it? That was what his group leader at the Guide Center had said. There was simply no way that a twin-soul guide could go unbonded his whole life. Not that Blair wanted to go unbonded his whole life; just until he got tired of it. Until he finished school. Until he got settled. Until he finished his dissertation, at least. Couldn't this have waited until then?

Blair peed and brushed his teeth, then ran the shower and prepared to wash. The cleansing was an important part of the bonding ritual, he knew. The most important part, his health teachers at the Academy would have argued. Removing other scents, and thereby reducing competition for the Sentinel's attention, would ease the bonding process and allow the Sentinel to forge a strong bond with his Guide.

In the old days, the cleansing for a planned bond would have required up to three days of isolation, until the Guide had worn away all scents but his or her own. Three days, and the Sentinel would have gone half-mad with the pull of the bond-gap by the end of it, with his guide tantalizingly close and yet inaccessible. In a bind for time, Guides would have been sent to a heatroom, to sweat and intensify their own presence, hoping to overwhelm any foreign smells.

But Blair had none of that to worry about now. With the easy availability of the modern cleansing agents, a guide could be bond-prepared in just five minutes.

Blair stepped into the shower, immersing himself in the cascade and leaning forward to shake his hair
into it. He worked meticulously from top to bottom, soaping out every crevice until he finally reached his toes and stopped. He stood under the flow of the water for a few more minutes, trying to get his hands to stop shaking.

*You're caught, Blair,* he told himself. *It's over.*

Blair padded out of the bathroom into a seemingly empty apartment. For a brief moment, he felt panic and a sense of loneliness and loss that shot through him to his core. Then he got himself under control, wrestled his inner Guide back into its rightful place behind his logical self, and managed to think clearly. Jim had probably just moved on to a different part of the house. Blair felt sure he could guess which one.

He should go on upstairs, then. Blair swallowed; the iron stairs to the sleeping area of the loft loomed large before him. But he was an adult and this was his Sentinel. There was no reason to be afraid.

With this mantra in mind, Blair squeezed the towel he'd wrapped around his waist and forced himself to put one foot in front of the other - left, right, left, right - until he came to the end of the short hallway and was faced with the naked space of the main room. He paused there for another moment, and looked around. No Jim in sight; definitely up in the sleeping area, then. Blair looked to his left. The elevator bank gleamed in chrome. Farther across the room, he could see the door to the emergency stairwell. Blair's breath caught in his throat, then he silenced his reactions, ruthlessly.

But one breath had been enough. Upstairs, Jim rose, his senses alert to the Guide again. Blair felt frozen in place; he stood where he was, weight perfectly balanced, his mind operating in jumps and waves, but driven viciously forward by fear, the great ringmaster. Could he make it if he ran?

Just as he was about to decide, there came the unmistakable sound of feet setting down to floor. Then Jim's voice, commanding and calm. "Come to bed."

Blair looked one more time at the elevator, then turned and went towards the stairs.

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Heaven

Blair wasn't sure what he expected when he reached the top of the wrought iron staircase, but he was sure his imagination had conjured up something a lot scarier than this.

Jim's sleeping area looked...ordinary. Mundane, even. Less like the lair of a powerful Sentinel who had dragged home his prey, and more like the bedroom of a rather neat, but ordinary working man.

A large platform bed dominated the sleeping space, and to either side of it were rustic-looking shelves. These served also as nightstands, supporting two wrought iron lamps with tattered-looking shades; opposite the bed, a large loft window let in the moonlight, and a long, low bookshelf stretched solidly beneath that. Pairs of boots that appeared to have been hastily gathered into a pile spilled out from beneath an elderly captain's chair in one corner, and a miscellany of small items were collected in baskets on the top of the low bookshelf; dust laid a pale film over the untouched shelves below.

And there, in the middle of it all, a statue unmoving in the dim light - a vision of restrained power and primal heat - was Jim. It made Blair's chest burn just to look at him, to see the way his skin nearly shimmered under the light of the moon, the shifting color of his eyes as he followed Blair's every movement across the room. He was sitting on the edge of the bed, one leg extended to the ground, arms tensed as if ready to move. Blair swallowed as he imagined all of this - all of this unbridled brawn and innate authority - channeled in pursuit of him.

He stepped forward.

Jim rose, and met him in the middle of the room. Blair trembled like a leaf, and the Sentinel reached up, plunged two strong hands into Blair's wet hair, and kissed him. Blair returned the kiss; it was sweet, and unhurried, and it settled him more than Jim's words had.

Then he reached forward with anxious hands and touched Jim's bare skin; the Sentinel's belly clenched at the contact, and Blair drew back. Jim reached out and caught Blair's wrist in one swift motion, then pulled it back and laid the hand again on his skin. Blair, feeling bold, slid an exploratory touch along the muscled torso, resting at the juncture of hip and waist. Jim remained still, letting Blair move at his own pace, his breathing shallow and excited.

Then it was the Sentinel's turn, and Jim set upon Blair ravenously, unstoppable in his pursuit of understanding. He imprinted touch first, turning Blair this way and that, hands stroking firmly and then gently, fingers dipping into Blair's bellybutton and slipping between the round cheeks of his ass. This went on longer than Blair was prepared to tolerate, but a sentinel in thrall was not to be disturbed. When Blair shifted his weight agitationly and pressed a directing touch into Jim's shoulder, the Sentinel growled at him, then returned to his task.

After touch came taste, and after that scent, where Blair stood still while the Sentinel buried his nose in the bend of his Guide's neck, in the fold of his underarms, in the joining of his groin to hip.

"Jim?" Blair asked, nervously, and got a grunt in response. He tapped Jim's shoulder, and the Sentinel finally straightened up in response.

"What?"

Blair frowned.

"Listen, I hate to disturb you, big guy, but uh, can we maybe move this to the actual bed?"

Jim made a rumbling sound that could have been a laugh and then, without warning, caught Blair
around the waist, hefted him, and half-carried half-dragged him over to the bed. When they were
settled, Jim kissed him again, and Blair felt that now-familiar nudge at the edge of his consciousness.
Jim kissed him once more, ravenously, and then pulled back to meet his guide's eyes.

"Now?" he asked, in a voice that was full of longing and desperation. Blair gave him as much of a
smile as he could muster, and reached out to stroke his cheek.
"Yeah, now."

Jim released his shields and the restraint he'd been maintaining, and Blair gave a little involuntary cry
as he felt the sentinel's presence burst forward, all richness and strength and incandescence. It wasn't
painful, or even uncomfortable, but it startled him nonetheless. Blair had never before in his life been
in the presence of an unleashed sentinel; Jim was all he'd known.

Every inch of his body began to react. Blair had thought the pull was bad before, but he knew now
that it had been just a raindrop compared to the monsoon he was swept up in now. The attraction
was impossible to fight; the sentinel's presence blanketed his own, slipped tendrils into Blair's
consciousness and seemed to tighten its hold on the guide.

Blair took two deep breaths and let the sentinel's consciousness slip into his; Jim groaned with the
ecstasy of it, the early infiltration. Blair saw colors, then caught the scent of someplace unfamiliar;
then Jim reached a little further out towards him in their bond and Blair momentarily felt
overwhelmed with the presence of the Sentinel, full to bursting with the sensation of him. He saw
things from two perspectives - his own and Jim's. He felt things from two sides; he was outside of
himself, but also in, and he could slip back and forth between their merged space. Farther down into
their shared consciousness, he felt Jim's desire, possessiveness, and the hearty vigor of his panther,
growling inside of him.

Jim laid kisses over his jaw and cheek, down the line of his neck to his bared chest, then pausing to
scrape teeth gently over the crest of a nipple, making Blair arch in arousal. His hands followed,
seeming to be everywhere at once - entwined in Blair's hair, then firmly stroking the side of a hip,
then fondling his sensitive belly, then slipping between his legs to plunge into that sweet carrier's
heat.

Then, abruptly, it was time. Jim kissed Blair again, and nipped his neck, but the carrier was too
preoccupied with the strange double-sensation of the bond to deduce where this was leading. Then
Jim hiked one of Blair's legs up and steadied himself, then gave a short thrust that buried him
partway inside of the younger man. Caught off-guard, the Guide yelped and then bit his lip and was
quiet. Jim hesitated above him, muscles tense and nose buried in Blair's curls.

"You OK?" he rasped, and Blair nodded, trembling just slightly.
"Fine," he panted, trying to regain control of his breathing and let the discomfort pass, "Just fine."

Jim rested in place a moment longer, then began to move in long, languorous thrusts, driving his
aching cock fully into the guide, then retreating. Blair was so tempting, and so hot and tight and so
irresistibly appealing that Jim felt pushed, almost instantaneously, to the breaking point. He
luxuriated in the all-over sensation of being submerged completely in his guide's consciousness; of
losing all connection to the outside world. For now, there was only this moment, this bed, and his
hard dick buried inside sweet, wet Blair.

Being bonded, Jim decided, was heaven.

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They bond-mated four times more through the early dawn, then fell mutually into a peaceful, dreamless sleep. When either of them woke, it was to the mid-afternoon sun. Blair stirred first.

Turning over in the bed, he surveyed his surroundings. A white ceiling; skylight. Bookshelf; dust. Soft bed; Jim.

Next, he catalogued himself. No pain - just aches in sore limbs, a bruise where he'd accidentally hit the nightstand during one vigorous session, the half-moon of Jim's teeth in his shoulder - the mark a proper Guide always earned during bonding - and a little lingering sensitivity where Jim's thick cock had mercilessly plundered his eager passage.

The Sentinel was still sleeping, although Blair had no idea how soundly. He'd heard it said before that Sentinels never really slept; they only dialled down low enough to rest. It was against their nature to leave their territory unguarded, and a Sentinel with a new mate might be even less apt to drift off.

Jim was sprawled halfway over him, anyway, one long leg slung heavily over Blair's upper thigh, one arm tucked close to his armpit. Blair tried to think of a graceful way to extract himself, but none came. So instead, he laid still and tried to take slow and deliberate mental stock of his position.

What now? The bonding was done, over - there was no getting out of that. The Sentinel knew he was a carrier, too, and so there was doubly no escape. Although Blair might be able to talk him into some kind of contraceptive - he had seemed somewhat open to the idea last night - there still remained the sticky challenge of negotiating access to it during the sensitive bonding time. Jim certainly wouldn't let him out of the loft before the bond was fully forged, and it was doubtful that he'd let anyone else, Sentinel or norm, in.

Frustrated and annoyed with himself, Blair exhaled. He should have just done what the Guide Center had recommended, and been on the regimen beforehand. But they'd pressured, and he'd felt like it was too much, too real, too blatant of an acceptance of his new station in life.
So he'd refused.
If he ever needed it, he'd reasoned, he'd just come back and make an appointment.

There were other options, of course; he could take the late pill if he could get to it in time. But that would require the Sentinel's consent, and a trip to a pharmacy, and an expense - no parts of which lay within the domain of the Guide's Decisions To Make. He had no money, no car, and no permission to leave. The very thought of that made him irritated.

Jim snuffled and yawned himself awake.
"You up?" he mumbled, hiding his face against the smooth skin of Blair's neck. His breath tickled the hairs on the back of Blair's spine and made him shiver.
"Yeah."
"Hungry?"
"Not really."

They'd eaten last night, although Blair couldn't quite remember what or when. The bonding-pull had been powerful on him then; his wolf had been breaking through and reality had faded in and out.

Jim grunted, then shifted, pressing his erect length against Blair's hip.
"Turn over." he urged sleepily.
"I'm sore." Blair answered, automatically.
Surprised at the rebuff, Jim woke up completely and rose a bit.
"It wasn't a question, Blair."
Blair swallowed and yielded almost immediately. With the effects of the new bond, deference was nearly compulsive to Blair. The thought of defying the Sentinel - of resisting or rebelling - was nearly impossible to form, a fact that Blair found frustrating but also strangely relaxing.
"I'm still sleepy." he muttered, placative but sullen.

Jim sighed. Last night, Blair had been alternately sexually ravenous and naïve, pleading with Jim to fuck him in one moment, then shying away from a kiss at the next. The effect had become more pronounced and more rapid as Blair's wolf had continued to emerge, culminating in their final, ecstatic, unchained mental and sexual union.

Jim felt himself harden as he recalled the previous hours. Blair's head, thrown back in a portrait of ecstasy; his Guide's hesitation, his demureness, his natural submission. He wanted to take Blair, to claim him, to mark him again as his. They were locked together in this, this terrible febrile paroxysm, the heat of the bond bound to rise up between them again and again until it was fulfilled. Until it was satisfied. Until they were made one.

Jim groaned and spread his knees, rubbing his cock against Blair's hip, and was pleased to sense Blair's response through their bond. The Guide's presence was ever-eager, ever-welcoming. Jim mentally thanked the moon for her generosity, for her understanding. Before Blair there had been a loneliness of such magnitude within him that he had been unable to fathom its depths.

From the moment he had first seen the Guide - his guide - walking alone across the parking lot, his eyes wide and trusting, his hair wild and framing his face - Jim had felt the loneliness regress. There had been a glow about the Guide, an otherworldliness that had made Jim's panther lower its shoulders and growl. And so Jim had, for the first time, felt that pull that the other Sentinels spoke so reverently of: an overwhelming, irresistible need to take. An urge to possess. An instinct to mark this guide as his guide. Even if he had to hunt him a thousand times over again, the Sentinel would conquer his mate.

"Jim, please. You're squeezing me kind of tight, here."

Blair's voice brought him back to the present, and he realized how tightly he was holding on to his Guide's hips. Alarmed, he jerked his hands away and blinked.
"Sorry."
He shook his head and blinked again. Blair was watching him, cautiously, over one shoulder.
"Don't zone on me yet, man."
Jim quirked a lip upwards in a grin and patted Blair's bare ass.
"Not yet."

Blair glanced once more over his shoulder, but something in the smoothness of Blair's skin seemed to have caught Jim's attention; the friendly pat he'd just given quickly became an inquisitive stroke.
Blair tensed.
"I don't want to have sex again." he blurted, more from a fear reflex than any thoughtful response to the Sentinel's touch.

Jim stopped mid-stroke and stared up at him as if he'd grown a second head."Well, I don't know what they told you in Academy, but we are going to have sex again, Blair."

The guide's ears pinkened.
"I know that. I mean, eventually. But maybe we could just...take a break for a while? Until we have a conversation at least. Get to know each other, maybe? Do you like Scrabble?"
Jim's stare began to shift from confusion to bemusement to horror.
"You want to take a break…in the middle of bonding?"
Now it was Blair's turn to stare.
"In the middle? We're already bonded, man." he responded, slowly.
Jim shook his head and raised an eyebrow.
"Blair, we're only halfway done."

Slowly, Jim drew back from Blair's reach - when had separation begun to trigger that strange sensation of loss? - and sat up. Released from his restrictive position and the ministrations of a libidinous Sentinel, Blair also turned and got into a sitting position, covering his lower half with the twisted sheets. What did the Sentinel mean by half done? That was impossible, wasn't it? So many questions to ask; where should he begin?

"Uh…what?"
The Sentinel's expression was a mixture of annoyance and what seemed to be concern over Blair's mental competence.
Jim shook his head.
"We're only halfway done, sweetheart. I told you we'd take our time. Didn't you see how easy last night was on you?"

In reflection, Blair could honestly say that he'd been a little underwhelmed by the experience - at least after hearing the war stories of bonded guides back at Academy. Jim had seemed eager, but not ravenous; the forging of the bond had felt more like a strong burst of static electricity than the full-body jolt some had described. He'd woken up without the bond-gap headache that plagued new guides who slept too long without reforging. He even felt fully lucid today, and capable of sustaining a reasonable conversation.

"But how the hell did we do that?" Blair asked, desperately. "Was it me? Did I - did I stop something or mess something up, or - or reverse it or something?"
Jim shook his head, and put one hand on Blair's forearm to stop his wild gesturing.
"No, Blair, it was me." Jim frowned a little. "I gave an adjournment. I didn't want to hurt you."

Blair blinked slowly at the Sentinel.
"You stopped the bond?"
"I paused it."
Blair tried to work this all out in his head; Jim watched his eyes dart as the wheels turned.
"So we're not bonded."
Jim gave Blair a hard, serious look.
"We're bonded." he answered. "Just not all the way. A few more hours should do it; the forge will be full."

But that didn't make any sense. The bond was all or nothing - that was what Academy taught. Either you went all in or you fucked your brain. He had so many questions - did Jim know something he didn't? Did other Sentinel-Guide couples go halvesies into this? Could he still wiggle out of this if he could get a good pair of running shoes and his keys?

"It isn't hard to understand, Blair. We moved forward enough in the bond to establish it irreversibly, but not far enough to finish it. I gave an adjournment; I retreated to give you some space and some time to harmonize, mentally. Having me up in there with you," here, Jim tapped Blair's temple, "Is a big deal. Takes time to do it right."

Blair stared in amazement at the Sentinel.
"But…isn't this, I don't know, uncomfortable for you?"
Jim laughed.
"You mean is it difficult to sit here calmly when a half-claimed guide is naked and inches from me,
bearing my marks and smelling as fertile as a field after the rain? You're asking me if I want to just go primal, drag you down to the floor, and get us bonded as fast and hard as I can?"
Blair flushed, but nodded.
"Yes. That's exactly what I mean."
"Then yes." Jim answered, honestly. "But I won't."
Transfixed, Blair couldn't resist more questions.
"But why not?"
Jim gave him a long, considering look.
"Because despite what you may have been led to believe, I am a Sentinel - not an animal."

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They laid in bed a while longer, and then Jim checked Blair over with the med kit, recorded the guide's vitals on a pad of paper by the bed, and dragged them both off to shower.

Under the water, Blair became more sullen and less talkative. Now that the excitement of waking had worn off, he was beginning to revisit his anxieties from the night before. As if reading his mind, Jim spoke suddenly as he soaped Blair's shoulders.

"Listen, we'll get you something dropped off today. The late pill or whatever it's called."

Blair continued to stand silent and sullen, the sudden rigidity of his back the only indication he'd been listening. Jim exhaled slowly, trying to draw on a well of love to find patience with his guide.

"You understand that if you are pregnant, there's nothing either of us can do about it, right? If it's too late for precautions, it's too late, and that's that. I'm not going to worry about it, and you shouldn't, either."

Blair cut a glare at Jim, then went back to being sullen under the water. Jim continued his soaping work.

"There's nothing wrong with what you are, Blair." he said, suddenly.
Blair shivered, despite the steaminess of the stall.
"I know. Believe me, I know."
"Then why'd you hide it?"
Blair scoffed and unfolded his arms, shaking them out where they were numbing around his joints.
"I didn't hide it. I just didn't advertise."
Jim cupped his hands and rinsed off Blair's left shoulder.
"Well." he said, contemplating closely the beads of water on Blair's skin and the tacky-slick texture of the soap. "Either way, I found you just fine."
Darryl blinked his eyes open and groaned. His head felt like it was in a vice; the light was too bright around him. His mouth felt like cotton and his limbs didn't seem particularly eager to obey him. He tried to get a handle on his surroundings. He was in a bed - that much was made clear by the fact that he was tangled in the sheets. A ceiling fan was on above his head; the steady hum of its rotation sounded particularly loud. The walls around him were bare; the room itself looked barely used.

Darryl stumbled out of bed and got to his feet; his head pounded harder, and his body seemed to ache. How long had he been asleep? What had happened last night, exactly? He'd been bonded, obviously, but the details were fuzzy. He made his way blearily down the hallway, pausing twice to lean against the wall and try not to throw up.

"Sentinel?" he called out, weakly. He furrowed his brow and tried to remember the name of the tall man from the night before. Steve? Jimmy? Shawn? Dammit, he had no idea. There had been the Moonhunt, and he'd run - twice - and then there was some kind of a van and then it seemed as if very suddenly he'd been in an apartment, then a bedroom, and then there were shards missing from his memory.

"Sentinel?" he tried again, making his way carefully down the short, empty hallway. After a few feet, he stopped, leaning against the wall for support. His stomach roiled; the pain seemed to be getting worse. Light brightened, then faded around his eyes and his head ached more. Darryl pushed off of the wall again and swallowed, trying to wet his mouth. His tongue felt too thick for his mouth. He made it a few more feet before disorientation began to set in, and Darryl felt his energy spilling all over the place - he felt like a water barrel that had suddenly sprung several leaks. He stopped where he was, wobbled mightily on his feet, and collapsed.

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"Shit!"

Cav dropped the pan of eggs that he'd been frying and bolted towards the hallway of his small apartment. How had he not heard the guide wake? How had he not heard him moving around? The effect of the bond must be getting to him as well. Cav glanced at the clock as he skidded around the corner into the hallway. Almost ten hours since they'd last merged. Too long for a new bond.

Coming closer, he could sense the guide's energy, could feel the bond-gap telling him to bond, to seize, to take. It had definitely been too long.

Carefully, Cav scooped the Guide up off of the floor; he moaned and shook a curly, dark head.

"L'mme'dwn."

Cav ignored whatever missive had been meant and instead carried the slender young man back down the hall to the bedroom from whence he'd come. He placed the guide back onto the bed first, then laid down beside him, hooking one arm under the slim shoulders to bring them closer.

This close, he was overwhelmed with the scent of his guide; the almost-sweet flavour that reminded Cav of jasmine trees and spice and almonds. Cav released the restrictions on his sense of smell, focusing positively on the gentle, wafting guide-scent. Touch followed the first sense, heightening as Cav's bare skin touched the Guide's, his fingers tangled in the short curls at the base of the arched neck, and the slight pressure of the bare brown thigh laid beside his became an irresistible temptation.
It came so naturally, in this state - the reforging of the bond, the saturation of his senses with all things Guide, all things bright and ripe and fresh and spiced with comfort. Cav tried to force himself to go slowly, but the first nudge against his Guide's consciousness brought a wave of desire that was wholly impossible to resist; he plunged forward in search of the rope of connection.

The sudden intrusion of his mind hit Daryl like a bucket of ice water; he jolted awake, gasping for air, held still by the strength of his Sentinel's arms. His mind felt as if every circuit had lit up at once; the light suddenly seemed to bright, the colors too saturated, the smells of the room so strong he wanted to retch. He cried out and tried to pull away, to block out the invading touch.

"Shh. Just take it easy. Lay back down."
Daryl moaned again, and tried vainly to push against the thick arm restraining him, hoping to escape physically from his mental torment.
"My head…" he whined, and Cav nuzzled closer to his neck.
"It's rough, I know," the Sentinel soothed him. "It'll pass. You fought me too much last night; you're still sore, that's all. Let me in and it won't be so bad. We've waited too long to reforge. That's all that's wrong."

Daryl wasn't interested in hearing explanations or nonsensical platitudes; he was in pain, and he wanted it to stop. Blindly, he struggled against the arms that held him until the Sentinel growled and turned him on his stomach with a sharp yank.

"Be. Still." he ordered, and Daryl managed to swim through the fog of his aching mind enough to obey.
"Sentinel?" he asked, voice tinged with fear and muffled against the pillow. "I don't feel so good."
"I know." Cav repeated, "But that's just because you made it so hard last night. Just let me in, and I'll make it better, babe. Promise. Come on…"

Cav searched his mind for the link to Daryl's, which seemed to be fading in and out of engagement; it was there one minute, brilliant and bright and linking them together ecstatically - then it was gone in the next, dull and faded into the background and impossible to pick out as a shadow in the night.

Daryl felt a wave of nausea overtake him.
"Stop!" he moaned, "It's too much!"

Cav grunted his own frustration. The link was close, so tantalizingly close; if he could just reach it, just capture the tail end of it and draw himself back in then he'd be settled - they'd be together again and Daryl wouldn't be in pain and he wouldn't be so discontented and everything would be better.

"Just one more second, sweetheart. One more minute and we'll reforge, I'll be back in, we'll be fine, I promise."
It was close, so close, just right there; at his fingertips, at the edge of his reason, of his awareness, floating, familiar-but-not, teasing him, baiting him, drawing him deeper in - Daryl groaned and squeezed Cav's arm to bruising.
"Sentinel…" he whined again.
"I know, babe, but just give me a second! Just one more second and I'll fix it; we'll be together, it'll be better!"

Daryl shook his head fiercely.
"No…"
"Babe, I'm so close! I just need - "

And like a light shutting off, they were both subsumed into darkness as Daryl cried out one more time, and lost consciousness.
Out for A While

Blair stood in his scrub pants and a t-shirt in the middle of the room and peeled the edge of his thumbnail while he waited for Jim. The sentinel had agreed, after some coaxing and an all-afternoon bonding session, that they were well-linked enough to venture out for a while. His capitulation came completely as a surprise to Blair, who had already resigned himself to waiting. Jim had yielded, yes, but with strict stipulations.

"A while, Blair." Jim had made clear. "We can't go cavorting around the city like we've been bonded for years. Just to the med center, to Daryl, and back to finish this."

He was lacing his shoes, and Blair watched him jealously; he still had only his Pack slippers. Jim straightened up and stretched, a Cascade Pack logo distorting across his chest as he did so. Blair tried not to look, but it was nearly impossible sometimes to let his gaze stray over the cut lines of Jim's torso.

The sentinel had moved across the room now, crossing to the other side of the carved glass partition and making the unmistakable sound of retrieving keys. Blair began to move forward, tentatively, towards him. A burst of social paralysis held him back from going more quickly - Blair simply wasn't sure where exactly they were going to go. Stairs? Elevator? Some other, hidden entrance? Blair didn't dare make a move towards an exit without the Sentinel's direction, so until Jim gave a clear indication, he remained frozen in place in the middle of the room.

Thankfully, Jim reappeared from the other side in just a few seconds, his keys and cell phone clenched in one hand, tucking his wallet into his back pocket. He had a sweatshirt slung over one shoulder, which he handed to Blair.

"In case you get cold." he said, then placed a brief kiss on the top of Blair's head and led the way to the elevators.

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The city looked different. Or at least, so Blair thought. It was impossible to tell, however, what was really happening and what was simply a fiction of his fragmented mind.

They drove and Blair slowly began to realize that they were in the north end of the city; a place he'd rarely been, except to visit a classmate or two in University. There had been very little up here until only a few years ago, when the rebuilding had gotten a boost from the Sovereign Sentinel Nation. The gray SUV they were in today rolled slowly past the lingering wreckage of a gone civilization, and Blair tried to imagine in his mind what every place might have been. There, a coffee shop; across the street, a market. On that corner, a bookstore. He closed his eyes, straining to remember the sounds of the street - of people chatting, of bikes squeaking by, of cars starting and engines dying, of water chugging - of all the city life that had been extinguished in the War.

They drove on.
Jim cut the radio on and listened briefly to the news, then turned to a music station that played the kind of hippie songs Blair remembered hearing in his mother's home as child.

Soon, they were arriving at another of the large, nondescript buildings that obviously served as Pack housing. Jim parked the truck directly in front, then hopped out and came around for Blair who, knowing better than to risk igniting Jim's chase instinct by letting himself out of the car, had waited patiently to be let out.
As they began the walk up the main driveway, Blair glanced back at the truck.

"Won't you get in trouble for leaving it parked right in front like that?" he asked. Jim just shrugged. "If it needs to move, someone'll come and find me."

Confident, Jim strode up the driveway. Blair glanced away and followed behind.

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The hallway to Daryl was decidedly less impressive than their own, but this was not unexpected to Blair. Jim was undoubtedly more senior than whatever Sentinel had captured Daryl, and so would be entitled to a better home in the Pack housing.

At the end of the hall, Jim stopped at a plain white door and rapped his knuckles against the wood. "Sentinel! Open up."

This command was greeted only with silence, and Blair tugged at Jim's shirt hem. "Maybe you should tell him who we are?"

Jim cast an annoyed glance at Blair, which silenced him quickly, and knocked again.

"Sentinel! Open!"

This time, there was scuffling loud enough for Blair to hear, and the sound of movement inside of the apartment. Then there were footsteps, hurried, and the click of a lock and the door opened.

The man who greeted them was young, perhaps in his mid-twenties, taller than Jim by about 3 inches, solidly built, and ruddy. He was barechested and barefoot, clad only in a pair of dark pajama pants. He was also brightly flushed in the face, and inclined his head immediately upon seeing Jim - a sign of respect.

"Sentinel," he said, glancing over his shoulder at something that neither Jim nor Blair could see inside of the apartment. "It's not a good time."

Blair could practically see Jim's hackles rise. "Not a good time?" he repeated. The young man flushed again, glancing at Blair, then at Jim. "I'm mid-bond, Sentinel."

Something buzzed for Blair when the young man said that; it was an odd feeling, almost as if a small bug had brushed past his skin. It was fleeting, but clear. The young man was lying. Blair tilted his head in curiosity. Why would he lie?

"If I recall, Sentinel, you caught your guide last night. You should be established enough to accept an inspection by now. Unless you delayed your start?"

The younger man shook his head. "No, sentinel, it's just that - "

"Then you're able to be inspected. Let us in. My guide wants to check on Daryl."

A brief flicker of pride and delight crossed over the young man's face when Jim said his guide's name, but that was subsumed quickly by a growing anxiety.

"Sentinel - "

"Did something happen to Daryl?" Blair piped up suddenly, fear making his limbs feel cold. Was that why this man was lying? "Is he - Is he not OK?"

The Sentinel blinked at Blair for just a half-second longer than normal, but it was long enough for Blair to feel every panic button he had in his body light up.
"Oh, God." he said, and without a thought for anything, shoved past the Sentinel and burst into the apartment.

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Blair found him on the bed in the bedroom, stretched out on his back and clearly unconscious. His worst fears making him dizzy with worry, Blair dashed over to his friend's bedside, calling his name.

Jim and the younger Sentinel were right behind him, skidding around the corner just as he was kneeling at Daryl's side.

"Goddammit, O'Hare, what the hell did you do?!"
The younger Sentinel was pale and positioning himself for flight. Blair tried to shake Daryl to wake him; there was no response.
"Nothing! Nothing! I just - "
"You forced a bond against resistance?"

The younger Sentinel didn't answer, but the way he kept shifting his weight from leg to leg and glancing at the panicking Blair and the fuming Jim answered for him.

"Jim, do something!" Blair cried, hysterical. O'Hare cast a terrified glance between the two of them again and tried to calm the situation.
"It was just - "
"Just nothing." Jim's face was grim. "Pick him up and let's go. We're going to the Clinic."
Blair and Jim watched from the check-in desk of the shiny, modern waiting area while the nurses bustled Daryl off to a private room, his Sentinel trailing abashedly behind. Blair attempted to charge after them, but Jim's grip stopped him.

"They'll be fine, Chief."

Jim's tone was unyielding, and Blair risked a quick look up at the older man, trying to gauge his mood. It had been at least an hour now since they'd left home, and Blair suspected that the tension and heightened emotion of the afternoon might have worn the Sentinel's patience thin. The Guide cast one last, longing look down the hallway. He wanted to chase after them, after Daryl. He wanted to take care of the young Guide who he'd known since he was just a wide-eyed 7-year-old, crying on his first day at Academy. Tears sprung to Blair's eyes just thinking of it all, and the skin of his face felt tight and flushed.

"He's too young." he said to Jim, as time passed in nerve-wracking quiet. "I told you he was too young."

Jim frowned; he was filling out paperwork at the counter that Blair hadn't seen him collect. "It's O'Hare that's too young. If they weren't already too deep in process, I'd tell them to stop the bonding for this."

For some reason, this particular statement raked across Blair's already-raw nerves so much that he felt compelled to snap at Jim; to fight about it.

"And what the hell right would you have to stop a bonding?"

Jim glanced sideways once, then shrugged. "It's my right to intervene if the Guide is in jeopardy."

Blair narrowed his eyes. "If the Guide is in jeopardy."

"You're not." Jim answered without looking up; he paged through a document to check his signatures and handed it off to the young male Guide at the desk, then went on to the next set of stapled papers.

"Maybe I am. Maybe I hate you."

Jim's signature faltered. "Blair - "

"Maybe I hate it here. Maybe I - maybe this whole thing puts me in jeopardy. Parts of me. My self-worth. My sense of place, and home and value, and safety and all the - all the things that I wanted, that I did for myself and - "

Blair was hyperventilating, breath coming in heaves. Jim reached out with one hand to him. "Blair - "

The Sentinel's voice was calm and smooth and gentle and urging, and it pissed Blair off so badly that he tasted the fight in his mouth and the blood on his tongue. His wolf paced, anxious and frightened of nothing.

"Don't touch me, man! What right do you have?" he hissed. "What right do you have to any of this? I'd stop their bonding -- well, you haven't even finished your own! What kind of weak Sentinel are you?"

Jim looked up at Blair, silent, just observing him for a moment. Blair's heart pounded and his mouth went dry; he was just as surprised at himself as he imagined the Sentinel must be. Jim laid his pen calmly down on the stack of papers. Blair backed up, raising his hands in front of himself.

"Wait, Jim, I'm sorry, I didn't mean that, I - "
"Come here, Blair."

Blair's heartbeat went through the roof; he glanced around for help or witnesses, but they had been carefully left alone. And anyway, in an SSN Clinic, he knew that no one would question his Sentinel.

"Jim, I'm sorry! I don't know what I - "

Apparently tired of coaxing, Jim gave a grunt of irritation, caught Blair by his elbow, and began striding down a narrow hall on the south side of the waiting room. Blair felt a wild, irrational fear and lashed out at Jim with his fists; in response, the Sentinel caught both of Blair's wrists, squeezing as he maneuvered the two of them down the corridor.

There were doors on both sides, each with a single window set high off of the ground - Blair couldn't see inside any of them. They had no names, just generic labels, and no doors sat ajar, indicating activity. There were posters pasted up between doors, each displaying the seal of the Sovereign Sentinel Nation in proud technicolor. Blair struggled more and got a firm pinch to his side as a result.

Seemingly selecting a door at random, Jim jammed his hip against the door, thrust Blair inside, and kicked it closed behind them. Blair retreated to the opposite side of the room immediately.

His heart pounded and the lights felt too bright; there was no sense in running - the Sentinel would catch him - but he wanted to run. He had to run. He felt anxious, thinking about Daryl, wondering if he was OK. Blair itched at his wrist; he felt as if the Sentinel's touch had burned into him. Was Jim going to punish him? At least it wouldn't be public. Was that what these rooms were for?

Blair glanced around, trying to take stock of his surroundings. The light was dim and diffuse, and the room was bare, save a raised platform in the middle that appeared to be covered with blankets. Why? As he puzzled this, Jim began to approach him again, unbuckling his belt as he moved.

"Jim - "

"We need to bond, Blair." Jim interrupted him impatiently. "That's what this is about."

Blair backed into a corner, protesting. His wolf snapped her teeth fearfully.

"I don't need to bond! I need you to leave me alone!"

Jim rolled his eyes.

"Alright, Chief. That weird discomfort you're feeling? That irritability? The way you've been attached to my hip ever since we walked out of O'Hare's place? Those are signs. They're symptoms that you're exhibiting, signals you're sending that are broadcasting loud and clear that you need to bond and you need it now."

Blair gaped at him.

"I'm not - "

"Yes. You are. I know it, O'Hare knows it, any Sentinel within 100 yards knows it."

Blair flushed with embarrassment.

"You said we had hours!" he accused.

"I said an hour, and that was before you got me into an argument with an unbonded Sentinel and yourself all riled up over Daryl's process."

Blair felt himself draw up, and brief, unfamiliar thoughts of terror flashed through his mind. What could he do? Escape? No escape. Run? No run. Trust the Sentinel?

"But - but I - " he cast around wildly. "Here?"

"Here. Now."

Blair shivered with the power present in Jim's voice. He was, in this state, a Sentinel unbound - filled with primal power and leading Blair with a natural authority that was impossible to ignore.
But it's -
"Get on the bed."
Blair shook his head. Jim matter-of-factly began to unfasten his jeans.
"Jim, you don't want to do this."
"Bed, Blair. Now. Get on it or bend over it. That's your choice."

Blair felt a shiver go through him again, then a buzz that felt like it heated his skin. Slowly, he began to go. Jim watched him go hesitantly towards the platform before stepping up behind his guide, placing one hand at the center of Blair's back, and urging him forward.

His scrub pants came down easily; beneath them, he was naked and Jim reveled in this, letting his senses roam before divesting himself of his jeans and Blair of his shirt, stripping them both naked and then bringing their bodies together. Blair seemed nervous again, uncertain of himself, and so Jim slid one hand between his shoulderblades to settle him.

"Hush, sweetheart. Just relax - it's only me."

Blair took a deep breath and made a sincere effort to do just that. It was difficult with Jim moving behind him as he was; fluid and dark and impossible to locate. Seeming to be sometimes panther, sometimes man. Then Jim was kicking his legs apart, and Blair felt a spike of anticipation go through him.

Jim wasted no time on pleasantries; he laid a single kiss to Blair's shoulder, where the bond-mark was seared into his skin, then lined himself up and thrust forward. Blair yelped but did not pull away, and Jim began a series of urgent but unhurried thrusts that slid his cock deep into Blair, bumping against the very end of his canal.

Blair didn't realize until then how unshielded he'd allowed himself to be; the bond slipped back into his consciousness with no resistance and little sensation. Where there had been a jarring shift before, there was now only a startling adjustment into the bond - the drop had shortened, and each time seemed to make it a little bit easier. Jim was still holding back, Blair knew; the pace at which he went into the bond and the power he revealed to Blair were both strictly controlled. With a somewhat morbid curiosity, Blair wondered what bonding would be like if even a little bit of that control were gone. Would the Sentinel be as wild and violent as he'd been told? Would the bond be even more intense?

Jim thrust deeply into him, his rigid cock fucking Blair's hole relentlessly. The bond seemed to draw itself tighter around them. Blair scrabbled for purchase on the pile of blankets and moaned, inciting Jim to move faster. The sensations were almost overwhelming now; Blair felt, saw, tasted everything that the Sentinel did. He felt the slickness of his passage and the thick, pulsing heat of Jim's turgid cock. He caught the faint scent of rain from outside. Felt the tiny goosebumps rising on his own skin where Jim's hands gripped his hips. Tasted blood in his own mouth, from where Jim had bitten his lip too hard.

He was lost in the forest of feeling; punch-drunk on the sensations, the experiences, the intoxicating specificity with which his Sentinel experienced the world around them. He was cumming before he even realized it, crying out Jim's name and spasming on the Sentinel's aroused member. Caught up in the bond and the Guide-touch and the feel of tight, hot Blair around his dick, Jim chased him over the edge and came hard inside of his mate.

They laid together on the bonding bed for a while, still connected in consciousness, soaking in each other's scent and feeling and taste and presence. Blair curled up against Jim's smooth, muscled chest
and halfway-dozed, stewing in the buzz of reforging the bond while Jim's fingers played through his hair.

"I think that one might have done it, Blair." Jim said, suddenly. Blair lifted his head to look at the Sentinel.
"Done what?"
Jim just shrugged.

Blair wanted to feel irritated, or panicked, or to lecture Jim about Daryl. But the reforge afterglow was too good, and the bond felt too strong for him to bother, so instead he just shook his head and laid back down.

"Whatever." he said, drifting off to sleep.

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They woke about an hour later, and Jim hustled Blair with surprising swiftness out of the bonding room and into the car without a moment's thought for Darryl. Blair protested in the parking lot, glancing anxiously over his shoulder towards the clinic.

"But we could just peek in -"
"No."
"Just five seconds, Jim, I promise it'll just take -"
"No."
"He just went through some major trauma! It'll help to have another guide -"
"It was minor, he's fine, and there are 44 other Guides in the building. No."
"But I know how to -"
"No."
"But I can -"
"Chief. No."

They reached the gray truck and Jim opened Blair's door for him. "Get in."
Jim's mouth was in a short, tense line and Blair wasn't sure what exactly he'd done this time, but he sensed that his Sentinel was close to some kind of breaking point and he was too afraid to push him farther. Blair's shoulders sagged, but he climbed placidly into the vehicle. Once the door was shut and Jim was crossing in front of the truck to reach his side, he added quietly, "But I'm his friend."

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Back at the building, the routine was the same; Jim abandoned the truck - perhaps more quickly this time - in front and led him through a nearly-empty lobby to the shiny elevators that took them upstairs to his suite.

This time, though, Blair was a bit less fear-struck and more lucid; he noticed a few things he hadn't before. There was a door, for one, just to the side of the front doors that might lead to a cellar but had a frosted glass window that might also suggest that something far more interesting was tucked away there.

There was also the Sentinel who passed them just as they were reaching the front door, and the short jerk of his head that was damn near a salute in Sentinel-speak.

Then there were the security cameras, pointed at all angles of the entrance and lobby. So much for sneaking out and tidy exits, thought Blair.

Last, but certainly not least, there were the steel blast shield doors, neatly pushed back from the standard ones in an inconspicuous way beside the main entrance.

Despite noticing all of these things, Blair had very little time to mull them over before Jim was nudging him into the elevator and pushing the buttons - pressing his thumb particularly long, Blair saw - and propelling them upwards and back into their home.

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He barely made it inside before Jim was on him, hands tugging frantically at Blair's shirt, at his scrub pants, at Jim's own jeans. He kissed Blair's mouth roughly, then pulled back and pressed their foreheads together.
"I've gotta fuck you." he mumbled, and squeezed his eyes tightly closed. When he opened them again, they were dark and heavily dilated. Blair felt alarm rocket through him. "Need it, need you, fuck you, guide, mate, Blair, mate, smell so good, have him..."

Jim's words rambled off into nothingness; he was rubbing firm hands across every inch of Blair that he could reach, and nipping whatever he could catch in his mouth. He palmed Blair's cock, then slipped two fingers behind Blair's it to slide around his slit. Blair was surprised by his own wetness, by how easily his body reacted to Jim's touch and Jim's closeness and Jim's scent. The Sentinel made a sound of visceral satisfaction and plunged one finger inside the hot, grasping slickness; startled, Blair jumped.

"Jim! Geez, take it easy - " he complained, twisting vainly to try to remove himself from Jim's grip. The Sentinel shook his head against Blair's neck, growling.

"No. Need you, need it. Now!"

Against Blair's hip, Jim's cock was hard and leaking; he groaned and made urging thrusts. Blair trembled, understanding now that Jim was in frenzy - he was out of touch, lost in the primal beast, unleashed and unchained; a Sentinel in full.

He demanded his guide, his territory, his mate, his due. He was relentless in this state. There were no negotiations, no discussion, nothing relevant but the Sentinel's need. There was nothing but Jim, and his power, and his hard, aching cock and his nose buried in Blair's neck and his strong hands gripping Blair's bare hip. There was only one issue, only one demand. And there was only one answer: surrender.

Blair tried once more, for his own sake, to pull away; Jim's grip tightened and his breath against Blair's neck turned quickly into a bite. Blair gasped, and a maelstrom of confusing sensations - love, hatred, fear, desire, possession and belonging - swelled through him; he went still. Jim released his bite. The warning was clear. There would be no resistance.

Jim dragged them both down to the bare floor, and Blair managed to wriggle just enough to get them onto the soft carpet. His hands were shaking, but he set them to work on Jim, hoping to calm the Sentinel through participation. He stroked the strong muscles of Jim's back, squeezed his arms, traced the strong measure of his jaw, held tense.

Jim was interested in none of that, and pushed Blair back, holding him in place against the floor. Again, Blair yielded, and Jim released him just long enough to finish stripping himself before returning to his rightful place between Blair's legs.

The Guide was restless in him; Blair could feel it reaching, opening up for the bond, presenting itself to the man it knew to be its mate. He was terrified. If Jim took him now, in this state, what would it be like? He tried, frantically, to raise some semblance of his normal shields, but failed swiftly and miserably. Blair's heart pounded. The Sentinel was large, and Blair was inexperienced and the bond was new. Blair recalled warnings about a Sentinel in full heat; they had gone over this in Academy. But Jim smelled so good suddenly, so temptingly male and fertile. What was he supposed to do again? His own sense of reason was becoming fuzzy; how had they gotten into the apartment again? No matter, as long as they were in Territory. Mate's Territory. Blair's ability to reason short-circuited momentarily, then abruptly, it slipped away altogether. Why had he ever been frightened? Sentinel was mate. Mate does not harm.

Jim was fisting his cock in smooth, slow movements and watching Blair watch him; its length surging forward, the swollen head leaking eagerly. Blair's primeval Guide opened every channel wide. Mate was virile. Mate was strong. The bit of Blair that was still aware, that wasn't caught up in the mating heat, was afraid and trembled. But nature was too strong; nature could not be denied. The
guide beckoned for the Sentinel; it called to him, begging for the weight of Jim on his body and in his mind.

"Jim," Blair breathed out, and it was enough. Jim caught hold of Blair's thighs, jerked him closer and forced his legs apart. He prepared himself first, lining his heavy shaft up to Blair's enticing heat; then, without hesitation, he slammed his hips forward, spearing Blair and joining them. Blair cried out, but it was an exclamation of ecstasy, not of pain as every nerve in his body lit up in technicolor sparks.

The Sentinel was in him, everywhere, filling him, healing him, finishing him. Giving him that crucial part of self that had been missing; the buzz of the bond surged higher and higher, reaching some kind of feverish howl that compelled him to find more, get closer, be one. Jim began his thrusts slowly, taking his time sliding his heavy, turgid length all the way out of Blair then surging back in. Blair made a keening sound that would have embarrassed him with its wantonness, its utter sluttish plea for Jim's cock. The Sentinel grunted and got purchase with one knee to slam himself harder, faster into Blair, their bodies slippery with sweat and precum, their bond burning brighter and hotter, their joining growing more frantic and desperate.

Blair wrapped his legs around Jim's waist and the shift in position tightened his cunt so much that it spurred Jim over the hinge between awareness and euphoria, pushed him so roughly into a fierce orgasm that he almost blacked out. He came, copiously and vehemently, spurring his satisfaction inside of Blair; the sensation of this, of the Sentinel spending himself so powerfully into Blair's eager and sloppy cunt, forced the guide into over the edge of his own ecstasy and into his first bonded orgasm.

If Jim had been himself, he would have cum crying out Blair's name in worship; as it was, he was He, the Sentinel, who lived before time, and there were no names in his place. There was only himself and the Other - his mate, his lifeblood, his bonded. Joined now and forever more.
Chapter 15

Blair shivered in the bed next to Jim, in the little hotspot carved out for him under the blankets and by the Sentinel's side. Although he was lucid, his skin felt feverishly hot and his vision still blurred at the edges. He stirred restlessly beneath the heavy blanket. Jim slept on.

Everything was different now. Everything felt different now. His bare skin tingled; his body felt flushed and swollen with some new thing - some intangible part of self that had grown in size in the past few days and was now pushing at the seams of Blair's identity, forcing him to take a new shape. Blair brought one hand up from beneath the warmth of the blankets and touched his face. Did he still look the same? Or could everyone tell?

They would know by his scent, at least. They would know by the marking on his shoulder, by the touch of Jim's hand to his back, by the respect with which he spoke to his husband. They would know by the gentleness of Blair's guide-touch, refined with regular grounding to a Sentinel.

Blair ran a hand through some of his hair and caught his fingers in the tangles; he worked these through tenderly and hunted for more. Beside him, Jim slept deeply, or at least seemed to. Blair felt fitful. The space between his legs was slick and hot and sore; he shifted irritably, hoping to find some relief from the discomfort.

His stomach rumbled, and Blair briefly felt hungry again, then not hungry, then hot, then annoyed. A tingling at the back of his mind caught his attention; this was his Guide, making itself known. The Sentinel must be waking. Blair turned his head slightly; Jim's eyes met his.

The Sentinel growled.

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By afternoon, they felt sated enough to sit down for a meal. Jim clattered around in the kitchen, pulling out pans and pots and handing Blair a handful of apples to chop and stew with cinnamon while he scrambled eggs and laid thick slabs of bacon on to cook.

Blair took up a seat in one of the handcarved wooden chairs surrounding the small kitchen table and began to peel and slice the apples, chewing on some of the remains and depositing the rest into a small ceramic bowl.

Jim checked on the eggs, then rattled around in a drawer and swore - obviously not finding whatever he was looking for. Blair tried to focus on the apples, but his skin felt dry and his hands trembled. To distract himself, he spoke to Jim.

"Looking for something?"
Jim paused at the sound of his guide's voice, then resumed his clattering.
"Yeah. Goddamn spatula. Don't know where it is."

Blair hesitated to ask more, afraid of seeming a nag or pressing too much, but eventually spoke again. He needed this; some conversation that wasn't about the massive change in his life; some distraction from his turbulent mind; some respite, however brief, in the realm of the mundane.

"Well, where'd you leave it last?"
Jim exhaled in frustration as another drawer came up empty. Looking around at the kitchen space, Blair took in the tall piles of clean dishes waiting to be put away, the even-taller piles of dirty ones waiting to be washed, the empty takeout containers.
"I didn't have it last." Jim growled, mostly to himself. "I...had someone who used to come in and clean...and...cook and stuff."

Blair raised both eyebrows, sincerely surprised by this new information, his anthropologist brain kicking into high gear. "You had someone come in? To your space? But - you're a sentinel, man, and that's like, unheard of! How'd you deal with the invasion? Maybe there's some kind of tolerance threshold? Were they a non? Maybe the reactivity's reduced, or - "

"No. Not a non."

Jim hesitated at the next drawer, then clattered around rapidly, and Blair got the distinct feeling that he was avoiding something. The guide furrowed his brow, the apple receiving the business end of some intensified slicing.

"Another Sentinel?" he guessed, "What, like a junior one or something? Some kind of social hierarchy thing? Because you know, there's a lot of precedent for that; the reinforcing of status by servitude."

Jim's irritation seemed to have abated, because he went through the next drawer more quietly than the previous three. "Not a Sentinel."

Blair paused, slightly confused. "A Guide?"

Jim was silent. Blair tilted his head, a few wild curls slipping down in front of his eyes as he sliced another apple. "You had a guide who came in and cleaned for you? That's crazy! Everything I've read says that there's major home-entrance territorial issues with bonded guides. Didn't his Sentinel ever - "

Blair trailed off suddenly, realizing how naïve he sounded and feeling the comfortable illusion of his own objectivity shatter. "Oh," he said, quietly, "I get it." A moment passed and he added, a little bitterly, "I thought you'd never taken a guide before."

If there was acidity in his tone, Blair couldn't have helped it. Jim moved on to yet another drawer, his back remaining to Blair and his voice carefully calm. "I haven't."

"So what, you just fucked him a few times and got sick of him?"

Jim's back tensed. "Watch your language, Chief."

Blair scoffed, suddenly feeling a swelling of emotions that he had no idea what to do with, and shook his head. "Whatever, man."

They went back to the tense silence of earlier; Jim found a spatula at last, turned off the eggs, and began stirring batter for the pancakes. Blair finished slicing a fourth apple, and dropped all the broke-apart pieces into the bowl.

"So why didn't you pick him, then? Why me, huh?"

Blair had wanted his voice to sound brave, for his words to sting and wound Jim. Instead, it all came out plaintive; almost pleading. "Why'd it have to be me?"

At the counter, Jim went still. That was a question he'd asked himself a thousand times now, and he still had no answer. He didn't know what had drawn him to the brown-haired guide who smelled of rainforests and sunlight. He had no idea why it had been Blair and not others more beautiful, more obsequious, more subservient, more willing, more deserving. He only knew that his panther had
spoken, and when it did, there was no option but to obey.

"Didn't want him. I wanted you."
When Jim turned back to face him, Blair looked ready to respond. Under the Sentinel's gaze, however, he seemed to lose some of his fire and instead bit his lip and looked away. Tears stung at the corners of his eyes, but Blair ignored them.
"Still need the pill." he muttered.

Jim groaned; he had forgotten. In his defense, the clinic had been a messy situation and he'd been half out of his mind with the bond-gap by the time he'd just given up and dragged the guide off to a bonding room. That hadn't been the best thing he'd ever done, but Blair had had no idea how close his Sentinel was to breaking; it was either the bonding room or the floor of the lobby, and although Jim had no problem with a public performance, he doubted Blair would have been so amenable.

Jim sighed. This had been, all around, a particularly messy week. First, the business with the Lincoln pack had kept him in meetings for nearly 48 hours straight and still nothing was resolved - if anything, the situation had grown more dire. On the train back north, he'd had piles of proposals to go through for the Small Business Initiative that Kona had insisted on launching the week prior, and so he hadn't even been able to catch up on a few hours' worth of sleep. Then immediately after disembarking, he'd been dragged off to a wedding at the Great Falls Pack; he'd attended alone, which meant that he'd been deluged with both questions and offers of companionship - all of which he'd politely declined. Once he'd finally freed himself of that and returned to Cascade, there'd been yet another incident at the Juvenile Guide Center, and he'd had to deal with irritated parents, eager reporters, and the SSN Education Council.

In between, he'd been managing the water crisis out in Kennewick, weighing in on the new Police Authority Statutes, preparing for an upcoming conference with a local paramilitary faction, and trying to remember to water the houseplants. And just as he had finally been preparing to relax and end his week with a moonlit run, he'd gone and gotten himself pairbonded.

And now he had a particularly resentful Guide sitting at his breakfast table, weepily slicing apples and putting off so many mixed-message pheromones that Jim thought he might go insane.

"Come on," he said, coming over to lift the bowl and gently pry the knife from Blair's hands. "I'll show you how to make these."
Rising to follow him, Blair surreptitiously wiped his face with the sleeve of Jim's sweatshirt and blinked his eyes to clear them. In the cooking area, he leaned against the slate countertop and watched Jim dump the apple mixture into a shallow pot.
"Apples already come made." he said, quietly, and the corner of Jim's mouth crooked upwards in amusement.

While they finished the business of making breakfast, Jim turned on the radio and they caught the last of a local talk hour.
"Well, the trouble," the voice of an older man was saying, speaking in slow, deliberate tones. "Is that our education system just isn't designed to suit a carrier's unique brain chemistry - long, disciplined days, forced focus on a single topic; these are just more difficult for them than for us. So it isn't that they can't learn, you see; it's just that they must be taught differently."
Blair blinked up at the little black box and its omniscient noise.
The radio host made a sound of thoughtful accord.
"So you suggest we…accommodate them in the normal school environment, then?"
"Well," the older man answered, dubiously, "I don't suppose that's an option, for safety reasons. But yes, carrier-friendly pedagogy is what we've been calling it, and perhaps the best answer is to bring the same education standards we have in a normal school, augmented with these sorts of"
modifications, to the carrier's own learning environment."
"But, Dr. Komensky, is this 'carrier-friendly pedagogy' really effective? Is there evidence that they
can recall material at the same rates as our male students, for example? Can they perform on our
tests?"
The older man laughed.
"Well, I'm not suggesting we replace our highest military office with some sort of a - a carrier-in-
chief, but I do think that with proper training and proper supervision, they can do very well in certain
capacities. Schoolteachers, for example, of the very young children. Er, nurses, in some cases; em - "

Blair was flushed red. Jim reached out and cut off the radio. They cooked together in silence.

~!~
The room was colder than he would have preferred, sitting there in nothing but the white linen clinic clothes, but it was probably just right for a Sentinel. Beneath the warming blanket the nurse had given him, Daryl still shivered; his hands trembled where he rested them on top of his thighs, and his hand itched where the IV had been taped into place. His left wrist was bandaged and his hair was a mess where it had gone untended for days. The room had no scent in it - at least not any that were apparent to a non-Sentinel nose. He wondered how strong his bond with the other man - Cav, he’d been told - was. If it were strong enough, he could probably reach out and gather some of the information the Sentinel might be collecting about their environment. Daryl glanced up at the man sitting in a chair across the room, focusing intently on his hands. The Sentinel didn't appear to be watching him, but Daryl wasn't fooled; every other sense he had was trained on his Guide.

If he reached down deep inside of himself, he could feel the link between them. It sizzled and popped unpredictably and felt too hot, like a live wire slapping around inside his head. And that was the problem, wasn't it? The bond wasn't supposed to feel like that. It was supposed to be warm, and beautiful and good. Daryl squeezed his eyes shut, trying to block out the rising feelings of panic and despair. What was wrong with him? Why couldn't he just bond and have done with it?

At Academy, Oscar Daniels, whose father had founded the Daniels Consulting Group, had been bonded to a Sentinel in the middle of their 7th year, and he hadn't had any problems at all. He'd been back in class three days later, totally fine and excitedly planning the wedding they were going to hold once his sentinel returned from his special forces posting overseas. And Oscar Daniels had only been 16. So why couldn't he manage to pull this off?

They had been trying to reforge since he'd woken up in Cav's apartment the day prior, but nothing seemed to be going right. Daryl bit his lip. It wasn't his fault, he knew, but he still felt wildly guilty and wholly inadequate. The nurses in Bonding had been really kind about it, too, and that had somehow made the whole thing worse. He wanted, so badly, to reforge; his inner Guide was going insane and he could only imagine what the Sentinel was feeling. But it just didn't seem possible, and success only seemed to become more elusive with each passing hour.

First of all, it hurt - everything hurt anytime Cav so much as made a single move in the direction of initiating a bond. Even the nearness of him had become too much at some point, and so the Sentinel had been banished from curling up on the narrow hospital bed with Daryl and relegated to a chair across the room. And because the bond hurt, Daryl hated it, and try as he might, he felt an overwhelming wave of anxiety at the mere thought of it. The fear, naturally, only seemed to make things worse.

There was also the fact that Daryl hadn't asked for this bond at all. He hadn't intentionally gone out under the Moon - he never would have, and he wasn't exactly looking forward to explaining to his father how it had happened. And now he was bonded and he was stuck.

In heaping addition to those two, there was also the rather unpleasant matter of blame to deal with. Daryl knew that he'd played some part in getting them to where they were. He'd tried to fight the bond half the night when Cav had gotten him home; fought it so hard they'd both been sick to their stomachs and exhausted and headachy all the way up until the moment when they'd actually joined. That moment had been...there were no words, really. Euphoric and rapturous and wildly, wildly beautiful and too strong and too sweet and so perfect it bordered on painful, and it had been like having a thousand memories all at once and tasting sunrise and knowing, so much knowing.
Daryl scrubbed at his eyes with the heels of his hands. So if it had been so perfect, how had it gone so wrong? Why couldn't he do this? Why couldn't he make this work? He was a Guide; he was born to do this. So why couldn't he?

Feeling stupid and broken, Daryl reached out, tentatively, to try to find the bond. Across the room, the Sentinel shifted minutely as he felt the change, and that slight amount of attention made the bond fire up so brightly that Daryl felt immediately light-headed. Fearfully, he dropped the contact and retreated into his own head. The Sentinel across the room worked hard to keep his reactions limited, but Daryl was a strong enough Guide to feel the emotions coming off of him: hurt, rejection, disappointment, anger, resignation.

Daryl wanted to cry.

Why couldn't he bond?

The door clicked open, and the kind face of one of the nurses peeked in. This one was a little older than the previous; in his mid-thirties with short dark hair and olive skin, with the look of a bonded guide about him and a ring on his left hand. He smiled warmly at the miserable-looking pair seated on opposite sides of the room from each other and closed the door behind himself.

"Hey, you two. I'm Eli, and I'm going to be working with the two of you for the duration of your case."

Eli drew up another sliding chair and sat down in the middle of the empty space, balancing a clipboard on his knee.

"So first of all, let me congratulate you two on a successful bond! It's not easy, particularly with a Moonhunt pairing, so I know you two put a lot of hard work into making this union strong and I applaud you."

Daryl shivered a little. Was that what he was, then? A Moonhunt bride. It sounded so primal. Hell, it was so primal. He'd never anticipated bonding the way he had; six months ago, he'd had every intention of bonding with Aaron sometime after uni. Barring that, he'd supposed he'd just wait till he got a bit closer to graduation, then talk to his dad about being carefully introduced to someone. But a chase and capture? Daryl couldn't decide if it was horribly embarrassing or wildly erotic.

The nurse continued to speak, switching his attention between the two of them.

"But I understand that now you two have been having a little bit of trouble reforging your bond."

Daryl nodded; Cav gave a sharp head jerk of assent.

"He won't let me near him." Cav asserted, brusquely. "Acts like he's scared of me."

Daryl felt his face flush hot.

"I'm not acting like anything, and it's not that I'm scared of you." he snapped. Cav's attention swerved from the nurse and focused fully on Daryl, and the Guide immediately regretted his rudeness. Knowing it was just the effect of the recent bond, but feeling suddenly deferential nonetheless, Daryl dropped his gaze to the corner of the IV tape on his hand.

"It's just that it hurts, when we bond. Or when we try. I can't make it work." he bit his lip.

"Something's wrong with me." he added, quietly.

Cav bristled at this declaration.

"Nothing's wrong with you," he reprimanded, voice sympathetic beneath the curtness, "It's just a little trouble, and we're going to fix it."

Daryl nodded, and Daryl felt the other guide's warm, thick energy pulsing outward, calming the room. It felt like being wrapped in a soft blanket, and made Daryl homesick for his Academy friends again.

"Bonding is a challenging time, and it is different for all of us," Eli began. "So understand first that you've done nothing wrong. There's nothing wrong with you, and nothing wrong with your Sentinel.
Whatever the difficulty you're facing, we here at the Center are going to do everything in our power to help you overcome it, understood?"
Daryl and Cav both nodded, and Eli turned his attention back to his clipboard.
"Now, the first thing we'll do is interview you both separately - Daryl, I'd like to talk to you first."
Cav stood immediately, but hesitated about leaving the room, throwing quick, worried glances at his Guide.

Eli turned to him, his best Guide voice on and his energy surging.
"He'll be OK, Sentinel. I promise," Eli assured, blinking wide dark eyes up at Cav. "You can wait right in the hall, just for a little while."
Cav struggled with this, obviously, and Daryl wondered what it must feel like to be in the Sentinel's shoes - to have his Guide so close, but so untouchable while every instinct in his body screamed for him to bond. After a minute, Cav seemed to get a hold of himself, and looked once more at Daryl, then left.

Eli got up and turned on the privacy filter by the door, then returned to his seat and dragged it forward to sit next to Daryl.

"So why don't you tell me a bit about yourself, Daryl? What do you like to be called?"
"Just Daryl," he shrugged, then took a shaky breath. With their recent difficulty, he hadn't anticipated how bereft the sentinel's absence would make him feel. "Um, I'm 19 and I grew up in the Cascade pack. I go to - " Daryl stopped himself and took another breath, "I went to the University; my, um, my dad's a lecturer there, and they have good programs for Guides and carriers."
Eli nodded.
"And what do you study?"
He used the present tense, which gave Daryl hope. Maybe he'd recommend to Cav that Daryl remain enrolled?
"Psychology, Criminal."
"How interesting! How'd you choose it?"
"My um, my dad was a cop back before he started to teach. Told me all sorts of stories about the cases he used to work on. I guess I just liked it, is all."
Daryl rubbed his arm self-consciously, then began to peel the tape on his IV again; Eli's eyes flicked down to this, then back up to Daryl's face.
"And do you like going to university?"
Daryl shrugged.
"It's OK; it's kind of rough, sometimes, being there and being a Guide." Daryl glanced at him. "I mean, you know how it is. If there's a class with an unbonded Sentinel in it then I can't sign up, and my major's a lot more popular with them than it is with us, so it's been taking me a while to gather enough credits. They have special sessions for us and the Carriers sometimes, but...it's slow going, and I still feel like I'm missing out."
Eli nodded sympathetically.
"Are you a member of the SSN grounding group at your school?" he asked.
Daryl wrinkled his nose.
"No, not really. I think I went once or twice when I first started, but then I was...seeing a Sentinel and he didn't approve."

"Oh." Eli said, thoughtfully, "You were seeing someone."
Daryl flushed.
"It was sanctioned. He was non-manifesting," he explained, "And my dad knew about it and everything - even supported it. Aaron was really great, so everybody liked him. Just one of those people, you know? Really personable and really sweet."
Daryl trailed off, realizing suddenly that Aaron had no place in a discussion of his bonding experience with another Sentinel.
"Sorry. I didn't mean to…it's just still fresh, is all."
Eli nodded Understandingly.
"And so was Aaron your first?"
Daryl seized up immediately; half of him wanted to tell the truth, but the other half couldn't fathom being so foolhardy.
"No," he answered, "Cav was."
Eli tilted his head.
"Are you OK with that?"
Daryl glanced at Eli, then back to pulling lint off of the blanket.
"He's my Sentinel. Besides, it's done, isn't it? Not like I can go back and give it to Aaron, or - I mean, I can't go back to Aaron at all." Daryl shook his head, suddenly confused, and blinked plaintively up at Eli again. "I'm sorry; I don't mean to keep bringing him up. I can't seem to - I'm sorry." his voice was taking on a panicky tone, but Eli shook his head and reached one hand out to rest on Daryl's leg beneath the blanket. The buzz of his guide-touch seeped directly into Daryl's consciousness, soothing down all of the bursts of emotional pain.
"Hey. Hey. No apologies. We're Guides. We feel things deeply, and when we fall we fall hard." he smiled ruefully at the younger Guide in his care. "It's just part of the package."

Daryl blinked up at this man, this kind creature, this bundle of calm energy and safety and warmth. Was this what he was meant to be like? Was this what a Guide was? Was this who he could become? Daryl suddenly desperately, desperately hoped so.

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Blair woke on the third day feeling clear-headed and light, but tired - as if a long, heavy fog had finally lifted from his mind and his body was returning slowly to his own control. By closing his eyes and opening his empathy, he could feel the bond if he reached out to find it, but there was no urgency in it - no pressing, overwhelming drive to complete, to grasp, to mate. Blair blinked his eyes against the gray morning shine that angled in through the skylight and took stock of his body. His hip twinged where it had been held at an odd angle for too long, his shoulder ached where he'd been bitten, his neck had a bit of a crick in it, his nether regions were undeniably sore, and his hair was in a series of knots too complicated to consider. He lifted one arm free of the blankets and stretched.

Bonded.

The cold shock of it seized him suddenly - he was bonded. To a Sentinel he barely knew, and whose character and qualities were a mystery, yet with whom he had shared some of the most intimate moments of his life. Blair's heart began to race. What if the man was some kind of monster? A murderer, an abuser? Or one of those traditionalist Sentinels who never let him leave the house, or just a general dick, or he hated kids or he wanted twelve kids or he wouldn't let Blair go to school or he had terrible parents or -

Blair caught his breath as the man in question stirred, and his panicky Guide-mind went blank.

Oh God.

But Jim shifted and slept on, one leg cast lazily over Blair's thigh.

Even in sleep, Blair thought, he traps me.

Jim woke with the comfort of knowing that the bond was finished. He had slept a long and powerful sleep; the rest of a secure Sentinel. Even in sleep, he had known that their union was complete and safe. In fact, his first awareness - even before opening his eyes - was that his bonded Guide was next to him and the poor thing's heart was racing along at a million miles a minute.

His first reaction was alarm - was there some intruder? Some danger? He raised his senses to assess the area surrounding, but found nothing. He reached out experimentally for the bond, and Blair's heartbeat hastened. It was that, then. He rolled over, snaked one arm out to capture the anxious man, and pulled him in close. Blair's heart pounded and his tight muscles screamed for release.

Refusing to give quarter to fear, Jim hung on to his guide, nestling against his shoulder and murmuring gently (but firmly) over Blair's bare skin.

You can go back to sleep, he promised, we're OK.

By afternoon, the silence had become unbearable. Jim padded barefoot over to the bottom of his bedroom stairs and peered up, hoping to see his Guide at the top. Nothing greeted him but the amiable blankness of his bedroom ceiling and a sliver of the sunlight. Jim sighed and padded away to finish catching up on intake reports.

Blair had become uncharacteristically reticent to leave the bedroom since they'd woken earlier that morning. By this point of the day, he seemed to be taking cover under the blankets, where he'd spent the better part of an hour picking apart the rind of an orange that Jim had brought him and he'd
pretended to eat.

"Blair." Jim called, then listened for the increase in his Guide's heart pace. He wasn't disappointed; the pat-pat grew distinctly more rapid.
The Sentinel sighed.
It was natural, he supposed, for a guide to have some...anxieties once he'd come down from the endorphins and emotional bonding high, but this was ridiculous.
"Blair, could you come down here, please?"
Jim caught the scent of orange being more rapidly released and heard a squishy peeling sound that meant that Blair must have nervously picked his way through the rind.
"OK." a small voice said.
Jim waited. No movement; more orange scent.
"Now." he clarified, and heard Blair's sharp intake of breath.
"OK." the voice repeated.
Jim waited again. Still nothing.
"Blair," he began, Sentinel-firm, "Downstairs. Now."

He heard the sounds of movement, and then two feet setting slowly down onto the bare floor. Blair lingered a few minutes, making sounds of nondirectional movement - Jim supposed he was finding clothes. Jim listened patiently through the walk to the stairs, a pause at the top, and the slow descent of the iron staircase. By the time Blair arrived, Jim was sitting at the kitchen table.

His heart softened the minute his guide came into view. Blair stood nervously in the middle of the floor, his hair curling freely around his face, bare feet crossing and uncrossing - was he cold or nervous? - and looking immeasurably vulnerable in a t-shirt too large for him and his Pack scrub pants. Under Jim's gaze, he stilled and then ducked his head, avoiding meeting the Sentinel's eyes.

"Hi." Jim tried. Blair looked up, then rapidly away.
"Hi." he responded, flatly. Jim pushed a chair back from the table.
"Come sit down."

Blair bit his lip and his eyes glazed a little, and Jim wondered what internal struggle could possibly be taking place over such simple direction. Regardless, the guide came forward and took his seat without complaint. The table was scattered with papers, most of them pertaining to Blair. At the table, Blair sat with his hands in his lap and touched nothing, although Jim knew he must have seen his name on the files in front of him and was sure the curiosity must be killing the young man.

Jim ignored the array for the moment and instead waved his mug of coffee toward the Guide, wafting the scent in Blair's general direction.
"There's coffee in the kitchen. If you want some." Jim offered, gruffly. "Left a mug out for you." Blair looked up at him through dark lashes then hesitantly got up, returning moments later with a full mug. He took his seat at the table again, carefully not touching anything, and waited patiently for Jim to begin.

Jim watched the young man across from him with a growing sense of discomfiture. The guide was behaving as if he were terrified - terrified! - of Jim. Why? He was a Sentinel, dammit, not some out-of-control zoo animal. Although the difference might have been merely semantic the days prior, Jim thought, bitterly. Jim felt sick, then irritated for feeling sick, then angry, then lost, then angry again. The bonding was what it was; he hadn't made the damn rules. He hadn't given himself these instincts, these visions, these needs. If he'd had any choice in the matter at all, God knows he would've shunted it off onto someone else. But he hadn't had a choice. And neither, Jim supposed, had Blair.
"Got to fill out some paperwork, Chief." Jim began, swallowing down some of his own coffee. "Finish the intake process before I leave at the end of the week."

Blair turned his head sharply in Jim's direction, and Jim felt a buzz along the narrow thread of their resting bond, but the Guide asked no questions. The guide's gaze shifted up to him, then, though - and there was a sense of lost helplessness in the younger man's expression that pierced Jim right through the heart.

"OK." the younger man said, looking down and wrapping both hands around his coffee mug. "Alright." Jim reached out and drew one stack of papers closer to him. "We'll do it together so that you know everything that's going on. Anything you don't understand, you just ask, OK?"
Blair sipped his coffee and nodded. "OK."
Jim leaned forward in his chair, closing some of the space between them, and slid a stack of papers towards his end. "Let's start with school." the Sentinel said, brow furrowing a little. "I'm not asking you to quit your degree. I'm not that kind of Sentinel, and you're not that kind of Guide. I know you value your education, and I know you've worked hard to get where you are. In fact, I'm proud of you - proud of that."
Here was a tickle of excitement along the thread of the bond.
"But our bond is your priority. I won't tolerate anything that interferes with that. Understood?"
Blair nodded quickly. "When I need you, I need you. No excuses about classes, or studying, or assignments." Blair worked his jaw a little and Jim pretended not to notice. "And when it's time, and you give me cubs," Jim said, then wrinkled his nose briefly, "Then we will be your priority. Our family will be your priority. Understood?"

Blair blinked for a long time into his coffee mug. Words floated in it. 

I wish you didn't know. he read. I wish you hadn't caught me.
It had been inevitable - he'd known it was inevitable. From the day he'd been identified, he'd known that there would be a day like this - when he'd be sitting across from his Sentinel, negotiating out all the new laws of his new life. He'd known the day he'd manifested the Change that there would be conversations like this; assumptions.

When you give me cubs.
If it hadn't been Jim, it would have been some other - because this was the way of things. This was nature, at her finest - red in tooth and claw and rut.
Just deal with it, and move on. At least he wouldn't have to quit school.

Blair swallowed and gave another quick nod. Jim looked relieved. "Good; I'll sign the release for the university and we'll see about getting your courses scheduled for next semester. Now, the classes you take are obviously up to you and your advisor, but I'm going to set the cap at 9 credits to start. I don't want you overworking yourself in these first few months, especially when you've got SSN requirements to meet as well."
Blair looked up, curious, before averting his eyes again. "Baker sent over your file," Jim elaborated. "Says you went to Academy, but never finished?"
Blair tried - and failed - to look unaffected. "I had a...difference of opinion with the administration."
Jim sipped his coffee, wondering silently just what sort of guide he'd gotten himself bonded to. "I bet," he mused. "So how'd you finish your diploma?"
Blair shrugged and set his mug down. "Naomi tutored me at home 'til I could pass the exit exams and go to college."
Jim crooked an eyebrow. "Naomi?"
"My mom."
Jim's eyebrow dipped low in confusion.
"You call your mom 'Naomi'?"
Suddenly unguarded, Blair laughed and rolled his eyes.
"Man, wait 'til you meet her. You'll get it."
If Jim felt apprehension at this assurance, he didn't show it. Instead, he smiled, obviously happy to hear his guide open up - even for just a moment.
"Alright. Well, it looks like you're missing a couple of the later requirements - just run-of-the-mill training courses, but the SSN won't approve you as field-ready without finishing them. So you're going to need to get those done before I can take you off-territory with me."
Blair glanced up at Jim then took a long swig of his coffee.
"Off-territory?" he asked, trying to sound casual, "Where do you usually go?"
Jim looked up at him, and blue eyes met blue.
"Peru." he answered, then returned to the forms.

After long minutes, he spoke again.
"Listen, there's something I want to say, Blair." Jim steepled his fingers, then broke them apart in a gesture of conciliation. "I...know the past few days have been tough on you, and I won't lie - there's tough ones ahead, too. But I believe we've done our best. I'm not a cruel man, Blair. I don't want to hurt you, and I don't want to make you miserable with me. You're my Guide, and I plan to love you. That doesn't mean we won't both have to make some compromises sometimes, but it does mean that if you ever feel that anything I've done is unfair or unkind, you can always talk to me. I may not always agree, but I'll do my best to always listen. OK?"

Blair blinked, not sure what to make of all of this, and peered down into his coffee and felt a little teary and just nodded. Jim turned back to the sheets he'd been perusing.

"That said, I'm going to sign a four-month release to give you the option of going on a fertility suppression regimen. I know you've asked me for the late pill, and we'll get you that. I also want you off the booster shots; I don't like what they do to a Guide's hormones, and unless there's some major fertility challenge you haven't told me about, I don't think you need them." Jim frowned, concentrating on the paper and seemingly deep in thought. "However, I want to make two things clear to you, Blair. One: this is not a permanent arrangement. And two: In the event of anything... unexpected, " he began, and felt anxiety - then fear - flicker along the bond, "We call that that and life moves on. Elective termination is not an option for us. Understood?"
"Yes." Blair said, and squeezed his eyes shut for his next sip of coffee so that Jim knew he must be imagining the consequences of Jim's decision.
"At the end of four months, we can re-assess. Understood?"
"Understood." Blair said, quickly.
Jim exhaled.

"Alright. Now, about money - if you give me a sense of what your monthly expenses are, then I can..."
Blair made a noise of disagreement and shook his head to preempt whatever the Sentinel had in mind to say. Jim looked at him. Blair shook his head again, focusing on the coffee mug in his hand to avoid meeting Jim's eyes.
"You want to give me money? No way, man. No. That's a little...too close for comfort."
Jim narrowed his eyes.
"Too close to what?"
Blair blinked up for a moment, light reflecting in those gray-blue eyes, and Jim saw oceans and storms and twilight. Blair blinked it all away again.
"You know." he said, quietly.
Jim was momentarily stunned, then he shook his head.
"Blair, that's not what this is about. I'm your Sentinel, and I want to take care of you. You're my responsibility now."
Blair shook his head, unconvinced.
"The university pays most of my expenses anyway. And I don't even need that much stuff. Just a bed and a laptop and I'm good, man." Blair shrugged. "I'm a pretty low-maintenance guide."
Jim scoffed internally at that. The curly-haired man in front of him might not cost a pretty penny to support, but given the amount of time it had taken just to coax him downstairs, there was no way Jim would describe him as a 'low-maintenance guide.' Regardless, Jim was unwilling to engage in budget negotiations just then; they had more pressing matters at hand, and any energy he had was better spent delving more deeply into his Guide's personality and psyche.
"Alright, chief," Jim raised his hands in surrender, "If you insist."
Blair relaxed minutely, apparently satisfied with his victory. He raised the dwindling cup of coffee to his mouth and took a short sip.
"Alright. What's next?"
Jim drew a dark blue folder over in front of him.
"Do you need a car?"
Blair shook his head.
"I have a car."
Jim raised an eyebrow.
"A good car?"
Blair tilted his head and made a noncommittal noise.
"A safe car?" the Sentinel clarified, and Blair's momentary hesitation was enough for him to make his decision.
"We'll get you a new one."
Jim scanned over the table and picked out a few of the forms, then signed them and set them aside.
"That said," Jim began, "Now comes the hard stuff." and Blair had that horrible feeling of doom that presaged pain. Jim cleared his throat and slid one single sheet of paper across the table towards Blair.
"Transfer of assets."
They both stared at it for a long minute. Blair bit his lip and tapped his thumbnail on the lip of the empty coffee mug and just stared. Finally, he spoke up.
"Isn't there any - "
"SSN law, Blair. It's not my pack. We wouldn't - I wouldn't do this."
Abruptly, angrily, Blair picked up the pen and signed. All his material assets now belonged in full to Jim Ellison, his Sentinel.
Jim climbed the stairs to his loft carrying a canvas bag filled with the personal items Blair had been wearing on the night they'd bonded. He had left the loft early to meet with Henri; the sun was only now creeping over the scraggly edges of the city.

Blair had been sleeping when he'd left, and Jim expected the Guide would be sleeping now. As soon as he parked the truck outside of his building, he knew differently.

Jim first felt the pull on the stairs; he'd forgone the elevator, forcing himself to climb - to wake his muscles. The gap was calling him; he wanted his Guide. He wanted to bond. He wanted to claim.

By the time he reached the back door to his loft, the low hum of arousal had turned into a full-throttle growl and Jim felt arched apart with need.

He swiped his pass and kicked open the door at the top of the stairs; he could sense the Guide, already waiting - already wet and hot and open for him. He found Blair sprawled haphazardly on the sofa; Jim hesitated for only a second, wishing to drag the Guide upstairs - to his den, to his haven - but deferred to his stronger Self. The Sentinel hungered; he lusted; he prowled and called out to the rising sun and arched his back in silhouette and wanted to fuck.

Jim placed no restraints on himself. The Guide was found, his identity assured - this one mine? mine. - and he was marked, again. Blair yowled at the bite, and twisted a little and panted in a way that made the heat seem even more unbearable. Jim's cock swelled and he grunted and shoved Blair forward, onto his half-fours; straddling the floor and the couch and with one hip hitched up over Jim's bare leg.

Then Jim's cock was finding it - the place, the salutation, the salvation - that singular heaven that, since time immemorial, had bound Sentinel and Guide together. Blair keened and spread his legs wider, toes splayed on the tan carpet for traction. Jim was between his thighs, forcing them farther apart, preparing him.


Vaguely, they were both aware of scattered things; that the sun was rising, that the phone was ringing, that the sleep they'd slept last night had been that of the dead. But these things came in flashes - in points of irritation quick as a jab and minute as a fly's-mouth.

Jim's cock slipped out and bumped against Blair's thigh, trailing slick over the bare skin and the Guide shuddered and wrinkled and rutted himself on Jim's groin.


And Jim was in - he was deep, and thick and forcefully held; Blair was tight around him, and hot like the jungle and misty-sweet-thick-twilight-predawn-wet with fucking faerie lights prancing around Jim's eyes and his dick so hard and deep and the fuck so good that he couldn't have stopped;
wouldn't have stopped - was bound there and here and inside, in this wet sweet grasping that held him now and forever.

With a cry, Jim came - and in the heat of his savaging, Blair followed immediately after.

~

They came to more quickly this time, both a little embarrassed at finding themselves draped in unfashionable positions over the suede sofa. Blair removed himself first, finding his feet and flashing a shy, nervous grin at Jim before making his way off to the bathroom to bathe and change.

Jim had cast Blair's bag aside at the top of the stairs; the folder of introductory materials had scattered across the floor and his phone and keys were spilling out onto the ground. Jim gathered them all and set them delicately on the couch, then went to join his Guide in the bath.

They soaked each other, then soaped, then rinsed, then embraced, then soaked again, then rinsed - each feeling too tired to carry the dialogue further than an inquisitive kiss.

Blair shivered in the cool air outside of the shower, and Jim produced a towel from the heated rack for him. Blair took it gratefully, and wrapped himself up and peered at Jim from the safety of the wide cotton sheet. Jim glanced over at him, catching a glimpse of bare skin where the towel slipped from Blair's hand and fell down, revealing one pert nipple. Jim swallowed and turned deliberately away.

"Come on, Chief," he said, gruffly, "Let's get moving."

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Jim turned out to have meant that phrase literally, Blair discovered, as he trailed his Sentinel out into the living room.

"I believe these belong to you." Jim said, rather formally, handing over the stack of freshly-laundered clothes and the plastic bag containing Blair's cell phone, wallet, and keys. With them came a gray tote bag; a cursory glance inside revealed the contents to be an SSN welcome package - stacks of forms, a Cascade Pack t-shirt, a Cascade Pack notebook, a few pens and rubber bands, and a copy of The Guide Handbook. Blair took all of these things good-naturedly, too excited by the prospect of having his own stuff back to be irritated about having marks of ownership all over his new items. He settled down cross-legged onto the floor to try to engage his phone; the Sentinel glanced at the clock.

"Oh, man, have I missed this! Augh, stupid thing's dead, but I've probably got about a hundred calls from my advisor - I mean, I was supposed to TA on Thursday, and the undergrads get kind of crazy this time of year, you know - right before midterms. And I mean, I know these things are expensive, but it's honestly the only way to reach me 90% of the time, and the University subsidizes - " Blair stopped, mid-sentence, his eyes widening, "Oh, shit, man! I've got to get to the Uni!" he ran his hands through his hair. "I just - completely forgot how much I've missed; I had committee meetings, and classes, and a conference with the Ethics board, and - "

"Blair," Jim interrupted, his voice warm with affection. "Don't you think you're getting a bit ahead of yourself?"

The Guide blinked wide blue eyes up at him and pulled back minutely - then shifted his eyes downward.

"Sorry," he mumbled, setting the phone back down and carefully pushing his things aside, "Sorry, yeah. I mean, we haven't even really finished up here, have we?"

Jim shook his head.
"No. We haven't."
Blair looked up at him again and briefly met the Sentinel's gaze before turning his attention back to the floor.
"Right. Did you want to - " he glanced over towards the stairs that led to the bedroom, leaving his question unfinished. Jim shook his head, not trusting himself to refuse. The pull wasn't as strong as it had been, but they were still a new bond, and Blair was still a tempting Guide.
"Not that," he said in a rush, then cleared his throat. "You got your clothes back; now you need to get dressed. We've got to hit the clinic, the roundhouse, and your apartment - not to mention I'd like to stop and maybe pick up some food somewhere - and as of right now, we're burning daylight. So where to first, Chief? Your apartment?"
Blair dipped one eyebrow in consternation.
"My apartment?" Jim nodded, and Blair made a face. "OK, well…it's not so much an apartment…"

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"Squatting is illegal, Blair."
Across the dusty room, the Guide scoffed and stacked more books to get them out of his way as he dug around under the desk.
"I'm not a squatter! They gave me this office."
"Not to live in. And what the hell was an unbonded Guide doing sleeping in such an unsafe location? Not to mention a carrier. Jesus. Anything could have happened."
Blair didn't deny it; there would be no point.
"Well, that's all over with now, isn't it, Big Guy?" he answered, and Jim thought he caught just a hint of teasing in the Guide's voice. Blair straightened up and grinned an almost-cheeky grin at him.
"Now that my Blessed Protector's here and all."
Jim felt his face begin to flush, but covered it with an eyeroll.
"Just get your stuff."
Blair ducked down again - but not before Jim caught the faintest hint of an honest smile break across his face. From beneath the old pine desk, he called out:
"I can just grab a few things to take; books can stay here, I guess, since I'll be coming back." he peeked over the musty desktop and glanced anxiously at Jim, checking for any sign that the Sentinel had changed his mind.
"Sounds fine to me." Jim answered neutrally. He leaned against a bookshelf while he watched the Guide begin to pack the empty backpack he'd scrounged from beneath his desk.
First, Blair pawed through the stacks of paper on his desk, picking up a few sheets here, a journal article there, a composition notebook to add to the pile. Then he began rifling through his drawers, throwing toothbrush and hairbrush and soap and a pair of glasses and set of headphones into the bag as well. Jim watched him intently. There was something fascinating about watching Blair work in this haphazard, high-energy way; it was so different from Jim's own methodical approach.

By minutes, the Sentinel became aware that his interest had turned pointed; Blair stretched to catch hold of something far from him, the bond began to sing and Jim's cock thickened a little. Blair had his full attention turned to a heavily highlighted book on his desk; his curls came forward and framed his face in the lamplight. The Sentinel within began to arise.

"Blair," Jim said, and his voice was rough. "I'm sorry - I think I need…" Jim raised his hands helplessly; his Guide looked up at him in noncomprehension for a long moment, then abruptly blinked, understanding. He set his book down.
"It's fine." Blair said, quietly. "Just, um, turn off the light."
Jim did as he was asked, and when he turned back to find his Guide, Blair was already undressing.
"No." Jim stopped him with a hand on the hem of his shirt. "Just - "
Suddenly, every barrier was too much and Jim wanted urgently, quickly to be inside of his mate. Blair’s jeans were already unbuttoned, and Jim shoved those down with one hand, the other tangling in Blair’s hair to force the Guide backward, against the desk. Blair’s neck was bared to him; he dragged his cheek along it, irritating Blair’s skin and pulling a satisfied groan from himself. Blair had put his black briefs back on when he’d dressed, and Jim made quick work of those, too - exposing Blair completely. Still holding Blair by his hair, he slid the other hand around to sample the Guide’s slick cunt and noticed the younger man was trembling.

"What's wrong?" he asked, with as much focus as he could muster, given the fact that Blair smelled so good and Jim's fingers were busy memorizing the feel of his skin. Blair didn't answer at first; just tried vainly to turn his head in Jim's grasp.
"Can you please keep watch?" he asked, in a very small voice. "Please? My door doesn't really lock, and I - "

Jim growled and, with great effort, jerked away from the Guide. Blair cringed, half-expecting to feel the sting of Jim's hand and surprised when instead, Jim took four calming breaths, then began to zip up.

"Just - get whatever it is you're taking with you. This can wait."
Blair's forehead wrinkled in concern.
"Are you sure? We can maybe find - "
"There are no bonding rooms in this building; the nearest one's halfway across campus."
Blair swallowed, then took advantage of his reprieve and dressed himself quickly, still watching the Sentinel with a mixture of anxious fear and interest.
"Well, we can - "
"Just bag whatever you're bringing, Blair." Jim responded, patience wearing thin. The Guide’s energy was just so warm and smooth and kind of clung to his psyche… "I'll help you get it down to the truck."

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In the hallway, Jim pulled him along by his hand; nearly to the stairs, they ran into Dean Anderson, who started with surprise upon seeing them. Blair imagined they probably looked a sight; a clear Sentinel and his new Guide, rumpled and rushing out of the building. As if the damned academic committee didn't have enough reasons to give him shit already - now there'd be this on top of it. Blair's jaw tightened minutely, and Jim squeezed his fingers and pulled him closer.

If they went really quickly and kept their heads down, Blair wished vainly, maybe Anderson wouldn't see them? But no - he had already seen them, and he was approaching with what appeared to be…eagerness?

"Sentinel Ellison! We didn't know you'd be on campus today; I certainly didn't know, at least; I absolutely would have been happy to - "
"Not now, Steven." Jim cut the man off, navigating quickly around him to the stairs. The man's face flushed red, then lost its color again as he recognized the student attached to the Sentinel who'd just snubbed him.
"My God - Sandburg's a Guide?!" he called out, but Jim was too set in his mission to answer or turn back.

Blair furrowed his brow and just concentrated on trailing his Sentinel down the stairs.

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They drove straight to the SSN clinic, and Jim barely gave them time to park the truck and get inside
before he was dragging Blair off down the hall to a bonding room.

They re-emerged 30 minutes later and two bondings stronger; in the now-busy waiting room of the clinic, Jim handed Blair off to a kind-looking Guide nurse who had her hair tied back in a thick brown bun and a ring on her left hand.

She marched Blair off to a private sitting room of the type more commonly seen in Guide Centers - all done up prettily in calming shades of blue and cream, with soft chairs and plush carpets and comfort items in baskets scattered around. They had a quick interview - *Are you experiencing any pain or severe aches? No. Rashes or reactions? No. Discomfort or tenderness? Obviously - did you see that tall hunk of man out there? That one's mine.* - and a cursory exam before she disappeared from the room and brought back a small yellow pill and a glass of water.

"Down in one."

It was all rather anticlimactic, Blair felt, when he thought about it later. But a few swallows and his most acute anxiety faded into a more relaxed background hum of worrying. The nurse scribbled on his chart and made an appointment for him to come back for his contraceptive shot in a week; then she brought Blair back out to where Jim was waiting, then disappeared as inoffensively as she'd arrived.

As they passed the reception desk, Blair tried asking about Daryl again, but the middle-aged male Guide on duty met Jim's gaze first, then just smiled politely and told him that Sentinel O'Hare's Guide was doing well and would be in touch with him soon. Blair began to protest, but a firm hand on his elbow guided him out the door and toward their vehicle.

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They got back into the gray SUV, and Jim began heading out of the city. Blair set his chin on his hand and stared out of the window. No one turned on the radio. The beginning of the ride passed in relative silence.

As they began to approach the outskirts of the city, Blair suddenly piped up. "Hey...are you hungry?"

Jim looked over at him with an expression that Blair first read as irritation, but then realized was guilt. "Shit. We didn't even have breakfast. I'm sorry, babe, I should have thought of you. With the bonding, you're probably starved and I - "

"I mean, I'm OK. I would have said something. I could just go for a snack."

Truth be told, Blair could have eaten a horse, but damned if he was going to play right into the hormonally-charged-cravings-newly-bonded-guide stereotype. Jim nodded thoughtfully, as if considering this.

"OK. Well, can you wait until we get to the roundhouse? We can stop off at the kitchen there and see what's on the menu."

Blair glanced at the clock; if he remembered the other night's ride correctly, then they were still 20 minutes away from the Cascade Pack's main campus, at least. He sighed. He'd probably starve to death by then.

Blair had just gotten accustomed to the silence, was just in the midst of beginning to order his thoughts and contemplate the past few days, when Jim spoke unexpectedly and turned his snowglobe upside down again.
"So is there anyone else you want to talk to today, besides the university? Any family? Friends who might be worried about where you are? Do you want to call your mom?"

Blair blinked wide, blue eyes up at Jim and all his fierceness, his Guide-strength, his forced resilience melted away in that moment. He had child's hopeful, naked eyes; the raw emotion in them, the yearning for comfort and familiarity and mother absolutely broke Jim's heart.

"Yes," Blair said quickly, then: "Please."

"All of the above, Chief?"

"Just the last." Blair said, and swallowed. "Just the last."

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His first day back on half-duty (the Council had *unanimously insisted* he wasn't ready for full duty just yet, but they'd also allowed him to keep his mission commitments at the end of the week, and so Jim had kept his mouth shut about the whole thing) went just about as poorly as Jim could have hoped.

Henri's face was grim as he handed over the report. "Fact sheet just came in from PacNor."

Jim scanned down the page.

*Six Guides, two gravid.*

The Sentinel leaned back in his chair, his face pinched in horror. "Jesus."

*They killed the Guides and let the Sentinels die.*

It was the fourth such attack this month, and the worst. Packs all across the country were on high alert, but no answers were yet apparent. Yes, the Sovereign Sentinel Nation was under attack. But by whom? And why? Honestly, Jim couldn't care less about the motivation the murderer - or murderers - had. He only cared about finding them and stopping them before nine murders became more.

Jim looked again at the page. He forced himself to read their names. Sentinels. Guides. A female. A carrier. They had struggled. They had fought. The smoke, thankfully, had taken them before the fire. *Trapped.*

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"So don't worry - I'm only going to be gone for two days." Jim began, his back turned to Blair as he retrieved pants and socks and shirts from the bureau. "Not long enough to worry about the bond-gap by now."

Blair stood anxiously by the stairs, leaning back against the railing and trying not to seem as wildly nervous as he felt.

"OK." Jim gestured over his shoulder to where their new houseguest was dangling her legs from a barstool by the kitchen shelf.

"Moira will stay here with you."

Blair rolled his eyes, feeling particularly irritable all of a sudden.

"I can stay home by myself, Dad. I promise I won't have a rager." Blair said, sullenly.

Jim turned and cast an unamused eye over Blair. The Guide looked different now - the bond had taken hold of him completely, giving him a tired sort of glow that Jim found very appealing, if not so uncontrollably evocative as the gap-heat. The younger man had become inconceivably surly, though, and although the other Sentinels had assured him that it was just a phase that sometimes happened in the bonding process, Jim found himself beginning to take personal offense.

"Moira will stay here with you." Jim repeated, coolly, and by the door Moira's Sentinel shifted uncomfortably in his uniform. Blair couldn't help it - between the stress and the condescension and the awkward fact that he missed Jim already, he was nearly at breaking point.

"Fuck, Jim, I don't need a babysitter." he snapped, and suddenly Jim was in his face and realization
came like a cold rush of air and he was stepping backward, retreating from the inevitable violence he knew would come.
"Moira," Jim said again, through clenched teeth, "will stay here with you."

Then she was there, slipping in between them, her slight hands gripping either of their wrists - bonding them temporarily, linking them, reminding them. Warmth filtered out from her fingertips and she and Jim and Blair just blinked at each other for long minutes before she released them both and everyone stepped back.

Across the room, her Sentinel beckoned to her, and she came to him with an eagerness that Blair envied. He rubbed his cheek against hers, checking her scent, then kissed her and released her again.

Blair glanced awkwardly at Jim, then folded his arms across his chest. Jim seemed to take this as some sort of challenge, because he leaned over, kissed Blair - rather aggressively - then stalked across the room to pick up the black mission pack that waited by the door.

With the Sentinel halfway out of the door, Blair suddenly felt a pang and had to squeeze his hand shut to keep it from doing something stupid like reaching out for Jim. Halfway out of the door, Jim froze and looked back at his Guide again. He freed one hand from the straps of his pack and held up two fingers, and his eyes were soft.
"Two days." he promised, "I'll be back soon."

Then the door shut, and Blair felt agonizingly lost and free.
Talking.

Chapter Notes

And we're back. Hopefully more regularly this time. Post-move, pre-coursework. Should have time for writing.

Once the Sentinels were gone, Blair sat on the long leather sofa and sulked. What the hell had Jim left him with a minder for? It wasn't as if he were a flight risk - not now that they'd forged the bond, at least. And it wasn't as if he wanted for distractions, either - in fact, he had plenty of work he could get done in a Sentinel-free house: to wit, he was way behind in his seminar readings, his TAM summary of the Machiguenga's networked gift-exchange systems had been three weeks late before he'd been caught, he'd missed an exam in the statistical analysis class he'd been auditing, and his Ethics audit was now four days overdue. There'd been no reason for Jim to - to fucking subvert his personal authority and leave him with someone to monitor his time.

Blair shifted on the sofa, practically seething with irritation and hoping that Jim could pick up some of it through the bond. Moira, on the other hand, seemed perfectly at ease. She waited calmly for the door to shut and the two Sentinels to descend the stairs. She listened patiently for the sound of the garage doors opening and a truck on the road outside. She went to the window and waved placidly (albeit a bit mournfully, Blair thought) at the distant vehicle as it pulled off. Then she peacefully resumed her seat on a barstool at the edge of the kitchen and turned to Blair.

"Great. Now we can actually talk."

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By his third glass of aguadiente, Blair was feeling a lot less irritated and a lot more talkative.

"It's not that I never wanted to be bonded, you know?" Blair opened and closed his mouth a few times, wondering when the air had started to taste like licorice. "Like, it - it's not like I don't like Sentinels or something. You know? It's just - now. This is happening now?"

Moira nodded, her curly hair catching on the carpet and giving her a disheveled look as she lay limply on her side, one arm stretched out toward Blair, the other balanced incautiously under her head. The aguadiente had loosened her tongue somewhat, and Blair could hear now the whispers of Rio peeking out around the edges of her words. "Yep. Now." she said, as if the word held some deeper significance lost to the other guide. Instead of trying to puzzle it out, he took another swig.

Blair worried at his lip for a moment - an action which did not escape Moira's notice. "What are you thinking about?" she asked, gently, "Something you don't want to tell me?"

Blair shook his head, then tossed it back with both hands, smashing his curls down and away from his face. "I can't - I can't do this." he blurted, expression stricken. "What if I can't make this work?"

But Moira just smiled a loopy, tender smile and stroked the carpet just short of Blair's knee. "You can." she said, and it was a promise and a benediction and Blair felt infinitely better for just having heard her voice.
"I'm afraid." he confessed, "Of everything."
Moira's brow dipped, ever so slightly.
"Fear," she said, in a voice that was quiet and more vulnerable than Blair had yet heard, "gives us a chance to grow." She looked up at him. "Don't let it defeat you."
"It's the unknown." Blair responded. "It's the not knowing. Not knowing what he'll be like tomorrow, or the day after. Not knowing if I'll be able to still have my career; shit, if I'll even graduate. Not knowing whether we'll live here or move, or when I'll see my family and my friends again, or whether he'll want me at work, or if I'll just quit and become some stay-at-home Guide cliché." Blair swallowed more of the cool liquid. "Barefoot and pregnant and fucking bored as hell." Moira laid her head back to look at Blair upside down, and her eyes had a clarity in them which disturbed him.
Without judgment, she asked,
"You don't want to carry for your Sentinel?"
Blair hesitated, because here was the heart of his fear, and he could not tell whether Moira was sincere in her caring or a spy sent by the Sentinel side to learn all of his secrets and inform the tribe. Moira blinked slowly, and her eyes were open and dark and then she reached out, just a little - just a bit farther - and touched his bare skin and Blair shuddered and knew that she meant no harm.
"I don't know." he answered.
Moira shook her head, her hair catching on the carpet again. She'd have tangles before too long, Blair noted with sympathy.
"Oh, you know." she rebutted, fingers scratching lightly at his knee.
Blair stared at a sliver of moonlight on the floor.
"Of course I do." he confessed. "Of course. But I don't know him."
They passed a few moments in silence - Moira laid out on her back on the soft rug, gazing up at the artifacts and tapestries hanging on the wall of the primary sitting room, and Blair on the floor alongside her, sitting with his back against the legs of the leather sofa.
"Moira," Blair began, tentative. Writhing her way across the floor to lie closer, she looked up at him.
"Hmm?"
Blair hesitated before asking his next question, because it was too personal, too honest, and touched too closely to the source of his own pain. But he had to know! He had to - to understand. To see the light, and perhaps feel some kind of relief? Some easing of the stress of his past.
"Why did you come out?" he finally asked, his voice as easy as a terrified new Guide caught against his will could manage. "For the Moonhunt, I mean. What - what made you decide to come out?"
Moira blinked, then her brow furrowed. A smile broke across her face and she wrinkled her nose.
"I just knew. It was time."
Blair took another swallow and tried to hide his disappointment.
"You just knew?"
Moira smiled a self-satisfied smile.
"It was my owl. She wanted to be free. And my owl never lies to me."
Blair turned circles on the carpet with his half-empty glass. It hadn't occurred to him - he, a Guide! Blair, of shaman studies and metaphysical books and ayahuasca trips - to ask his wolf. He had felt so alone in this whole…thing, and yet hadn't been. Had never been. Blair had simply somehow overlooked her - his anima, his id, the other half of this twin-soul that had caused him so much trouble. He had managed, in his self-pity, to forget that this thing was a thing that was happening to the both of them. Together.
"My wolf hasn't said anything to me." he confessed, feeling silly and like the last kid chosen for the softball team. "I mean, she hasn't - " he paused, and there was that licorice taste again, "She hasn't talked."
It was a dually difficult pronouncement - Blair hadn't spoken of his wolf to a stranger in a long time...not since the forced counseling sessions back in Academy. And to add in the confessed pronoun - she...it was an acknowledgement greater than he'd made in eight years. He waited for Moira to recognize this and give another of her Guide-touches, or perhaps console him, or perhaps applaud his bravery in baring his soul and admitting his nature.

Instead, Moira laughed, and her eyes danced with an amusement that Blair didn't understand.
"That means you're doing well."
Blair gazed down at Moira with admiration and ire.
"My wolf doesn't talk to me, so I'm doing well?"
Moira tickled his knee again.
"A quiet wolf," she said sagely, "is a happy wolf. Even if you don't know what you want, she does."

Jim stared down at the charred remains of what had once been an outpost of the Sovereign Sentinel Nation. Good Sentinels had worked here. Good Sentinels and beloved Guides. Jim's heart ached for their loss.

He pinched the bridge of his nose, feeling thrown off and unstrung. Two days, he'd told Blair, and already he wished it were one. Their bond was strong, but not enough. He needed Blair with him. With this realization came a wave of regret, in which Jim almost didn't recognize himself. He wasn't that Sentinel; he wasn't like that at all. He wasn't selfish; he wasn't possessive; he wasn't ignorant. He wasn't a goddamn animal. He wouldn't force a Guide to quit their own job just to follow him around, and despite popular belief, he certainly didn't believe he'd be any less effective as a Sentinel without ongoing access to Blair's best parts.

No, he'd been a damned good intelligence officer long before he'd met Blair, and he'd be a damned good SSN leader without being attached to him at the hip. And still, there was that urge...

"Alpha - "
"Jim." he corrected, turning around to face the young Sentinel who was approaching him cautiously, much as one might approach a rattlesnake. "Just 'Jim' is fine."
The younger man blanched a little and glanced to the side, suspiciously, as if this were all a grand joke or a test.
"Yes, sir." he extended a hand, offering a clipboard which Jim accepted. "This is what they've found, Sir."

Jim's investigatory team had gone over the area with a fine-toothed comb and still come up with nearly nothing. Jim sighed. The attack had taken place just at the border with Salmon River, and Jody Evers' pack was nothing if not territorial. Evers had wanted to handle it herself; Jim had insisted it was a regional issue and had called up PacNor to get it assigned as such. Jody hadn't been happy.

Which meant that he had to produce answers to get her on board. Which meant that he needed evidence. Which meant that -
"Jim!" Henri's voice rang out over the scene. "Over here!"
Henri held up the small glass tube; inside were a cluster of tiny, barely identifiable hair-like fragments.

"Three fibers. Would have missed them if not for New Guy's close work. Guy's senses are working at double capacity, I swear." Henri gave a salutory nod to Ken, who had tailed behind Jim but now stood off to the side. Then he waggled his eyebrows at Jim. "Seems there are some benefits to being a bonded Sentinel after all."

Jim ignored this and took the tube, holding it up for his own inspection. He wanted to uncap it and sense over the evidence himself, but he'd had a headache for hours now and the bond-gap had been irritating him enough to make working difficult. Not that he would admit that, however - not to his men, and certainly not to his ill-tempered Guide. In fact, he hadn't attempted to reach out to Blair since he'd left Cascade, and other than a strange, short snap of emotion, he hadn't felt Blair try to reach out for him either.

Fine. He'd worked without a Guide for years, and taking one wasn't going to change anything.

Jim held the tube up against the light. He'd better get the sum of this quick, before Evers' team got wind of their discovery.

"Tell me."

Henri stood a little straighter and spoke.

"Three cotton fabric fibers, recently soaked in a strong antiseptic. Doesn't scent like the common alcohol-base, which means it's most likely a medical-grade sanitizer. Can't tell you origin without testing."

Jim nodded, his mouth set in a grim line.

"Medical. A doctor?"

Henri nodded slowly.

"That's what we're thinking."

"What else?" Henri hesitated long enough that Jim had to prompt him again. "What else?"

The other man took a deep breath.

"You're not going to like this."

"Tell me."

Henri looked away, then back up to meet Jim's eyes.

"I don't say this lightly. Jim's heart began to pound in anticipation. Henri wet his lips, then swallowed. "And understand that this is...well, it's just what we're picking up here in the field; a lab test might bring something else back. It's not certain, it's just - "

"Tell me." Jim growled, his worry multiplying by seconds. Henri glanced at his eyes, leaned back, and looked away.

"We think it was a Sentinel, Jim."

Jim's eyes widened and he took in a long, harsh breath.

"Leave me." he demanded reflexively, before hearing his own tone and correcting himself. "Ah, just...give me a minute here. Hold off the others."

With nothing more than a polite incline of his head, Henri turned on his heel and left, gesturing to Ken, who'd hovered by the fringes.

Alone, Jim dropped low to the ground, fingers in the ashes, wanting nothing more than to growl and pace as his panther would. Crouching there, by the edge of the burnt remains of the building with the only clue to the culprit clutched in his left hand, Jim saw nothing but the white mist of unadulterated...
rage.

A Sentinel had killed his own. A Sentinel was a danger to the tribe. A Sentinel was his enemy.

Jim's panther snarled. He would have his vengeance on whoever had done this - whoever had harmed the Tribe. He would make this right. He would find the betrayer; the usurper; the outsider and destroy him. He would make them all safe again.

A misplaced feeling of wetness brought Jim out of his fugue. Blood crossed the mount of his hand, slipping down his life-line in thin runnels to stain the sleeve of his shirt. The sight of it confused and disoriented him. Had he been fighting? Was he injured? He felt no pain. Bewildered, he turned his hands over and opened his clenched fists, staring in stunned horror as four thin white claws retracted from the wounds they'd caused and disappeared slowly into his fingertips.

Jim's heart pounded in his ears. He heaved in breaths. Desperately, he squeezed his hands shut and opened them again. Everything appeared blessedly normal. Every incision mark was gone, and there was no evidence on his skin that anything untoward had ever extruded itself.

The bloodstains on his sleeve, however, remained.

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The lighting in their room was dim; even dimmer than in a normal bonding room, and Daryl had to blink his eyes for almost a minute to get them to adjust. Cav was in front of him, near enough to touch - although Daryl still didn't dare. Some sort of suppressive scent suffused the room, making it smell of brass and chocolate.

The young Sentinel led the way to the bonding bed, and they laid down side by side. Daryl glanced up and caught sight of the break in the wall where the foundation ended and the observation screen began. Anxiety spiked in him, but before it could bloom into full-blown fear, a voice filtered into the room.

"Alright, Daryl. We're going to start the twilight now."

He and Cav moved closer in the bonding bed, and Daryl felt his skin pinging in sharp pin-points where their barreness touched. He ignored it and tried to lay as still and close as possible. The Sentinel's presence pressed on him, tinged with pain but at blessedly free of the overwhelming, violent desperation that Daryl had felt every time prior. They had given Cav something, he knew, to help ease the bonding. A Sentinel-saver, they'd called it; just a little something to take the edge off.

There was no noticeable change in the air of the bonding room, but bit by bit, Daryl began to feel calm and cool and dark; by minutes, he began to yearn for some sort of warmth to surround him, fill him. Cav smelled good. Everything was a bit hazy. Cav's side of the bond was present, but still. He seemed content.

The rise and fall of Cav's chest against his back was soothing; he took several slow breaths himself, trying to calm his heart. Cav pressed a single kiss to the back of his neck.

"Anytime you're ready."

His belly lurched, and Daryl squeezed his eyes shut for a moment to get his bearings.

"OK." he said, shakily. "OK."

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Short Trip

Jim woke up in a sweat, the cream sheets of Jody Evers' hospitality suite tangled around his bare legs and his own cum leaking down the skin of his thighs.

It took him four long breaths to realize that Blair was not sprawled atop him in the rainforest heat on the floor of his first hut in Peru - in fact, he was alone, indoors, and hundreds of miles from his Guide.

Disgusted and annoyed, Jim wiped the sweat from the little pools it was forming around his eyes and swung his legs over the side of the bed to rise. Dialing up his vision to help orient himself in the dark room, Jim scoffed at himself. Just 36 hours apart from his Guide and already he'd lost control. Reprehensible. At least he had a room alone - thank the moon for small mercies - and so none of his Sentinels would be quite so vividly subjected to how much their leader had weakened.

In the mirror of the small bathroom, he growled at himself. Taking a Guide was supposed to make a Sentinel stronger, and yet somehow, ever since he'd seen Blair, he'd been a mess of emotions and instincts that seemed to ball over and curl in on themselves and repeat ceaselessly.

And God, he wouldn't have it any other way, would he? They were bonded and it had been simultaneously the most thrilling and most wonderful and most terrifying moment of his life. And now Blair was in him in this crazy way; bound to him, inextricable from him. They were merged into one, and could not be undone.

Jim splashed water over his face and wiped off with the towel that hung from the wash bar, then peered critically at the shadows forming beneath both eyes and sighed.

If he went back to bed now, he could squeeze in a few more hours' sleep before the meetings began with Jody Evers and the representative from the Pacific Northwestern Regional Office in the morning. Hopefully that would be enough to get him through the day and through the drive back to Cascade.

Hopefully that would keep him lucid and able to resist the bond-gap long enough to get back to Blair.

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"We can't be gone long."

Blair startled out of his mope-fest in the car at the sound of Moira's voice. Across from him, she was applying something to her lips and checking her wristwatch.

Blair stared out of the tinted rear window as the gray truck in which they were currently contained headed north from the building that Blair now accepted as home with only a slight pang of regret or wistfulness; they were driven by a quiet, elder Sentinel with an observant eye and a stoic demeanor.

"Ken and Jim will be back before the afternoon, and we have to get things ready for their return."

Blair ignored the uncalled-for manner in which his heart short-circuited and pounded back to life in response to the mention of Jim's return, choosing instead to wonder skeptically what 'things' Moira felt needed to be 'readied'. He glanced at her across the bench seat of the gray truck. Her hair was free to her shoulders and she had a leather knapsack slung across one shoulder and resting on the seat beside her; she wore a yellow t-shirt that proclaimed her participation in a Guides' swim competition.
from the year prior; and she watched the passing road through wide, dark sunglasses. She seemed, as ever, perfectly at ease.

Blair viciously, viciously envied her. And as the truck carried on, through the half-abandoned part of town where the worst of the civil conflicts had been fought ('Future Revitalization Site' the government signs advertised; they might as well have read 'Forget What Happened Here') and deeper into Sentinel territory, he picked apart why.

It was everything and nothing. Moira was…wonderful. She was sweet, she was giving, she had a wicked sense of humor and absolutely no compunction about discussing things that made Blair blush or at least raise an eyebrow in surprise. She got up early, made perfect coffee, baked breakfast muffins and some Brazilian egg dish from scratch, kept her living quarters tidy and braided her hair every night so that her curls wouldn't tangle. Blair, on the other hand: drank too much; broke a vase trying to walk to the bathroom in the middle of the night; burned pancakes every time he tried to make them; had no idea how to wear a natori; had never been invited to be the mediating guide at one of the Pack community meetings; and was short, to boot.

And so in this way, Moira was almost a breed worse than the stuck-up purebreds he'd admir-hated in Academy. At least he'd been able to separate himself from them; they had been Those Spoiled Assholes and he had been unkempt and unruly and rebellious and barely in control of his own mongrel energy. And that had just been that; it was simple. He could never be one of them and he'd never wanted to.

Moira was different. She was…real. She and Blair were so alike - both half-breeds raised by single Guide parents whose non-Sentinel partner had long since abandoned them; both so desperate to be free of Academy that they'd left early; both hungry for meaning to their lives, possessed by the idea of seeking some greater Noble Truth; both caught in the same moonhunt by Sentinels of approximately the same position (although Jim appeared to be the de facto leader of whatever special ops mission he'd run off on, so maybe a slight designation above? But then again, Ken seemed to hold more firmly to cultural consensus, which often correlated with greater social capital….). They were so alike - but still so different.

Blair's head hurt trying to understand it. What was it that separated them? Was it privilege or biological sex or -

With a start, Blair realized that the answer was simple: Moira was deeply and imperturbably happy. Understanding this made Blair's heart ache.

They passed quickly through the city, arriving without delay or incident at a pair of large gates that Blair surmised must be the main entrance to the Cascade Pack's central Territory. The gray truck slipped easily through the security checkpoint - ugh, what was even the point of having the security stop if no one actually stopped you? - that marked the entrance to the interior, then slowed to a stop at the end of a wide brick walkway that led up a slight hill toward a long, low, tin-roofed warehouse building.

Moira sat up in her seat, adjusting her shoulder bag, eager to get out and get started.

Blair shut his eyes and opened them again, his anxiety coloring upward. His head swam. His lungs felt constricted. This was too much; this whole thing was too much. He felt overwhelmed again in that looming, abyssal way that had begun the first time Jim had looked at him and Blair had seen desire in his eyes.

They had arrived in the innermost part of Territory - in the Guides' Haven (or Harem, as Blair had
heard it called pejoratively by anthropologists who hadn't realized they were in mixed company). It was the only place where Guides were universally allowed to roam freely, but what should have felt safe felt terrifyingly confined. Blair had clambered deep into the heart of the Pack, to a place that he hadn't been in more than a decade. If he opened his mind just slightly, he could feel the glimmering-humming-pulsing pale yellow rise that came from so many Guides in such close quarters; he felt the energy as a Sentinel might, rising up and fading and rising again, calling him - a drumbeat; a heartbeat.

Blair sucked in the cool morning air in a muffled shudder and shut his mind.

"You ready?"
Moira was watching him, asking casually, giving no indication that anything unordinary had happened in the moment prior.

Blair squeezed his hands into fists and let them out again. Self-doubt overcame him. He wasn't like these Guides. He didn't belong here. He glanced again at Moira, all soft lines and sun-gilded skin and happy stories about her Sentinel, and felt sickly and inadequate.

In the rearview mirror, the driver watched Blair with unemotional eyes. Moira, ever the artist, reached sweetly forward and laid a hand on his arm; his attention shifted to her. She smiled kindly and Blair felt a satisfying tickle of her empathy filling the space.

"We won't be long, Sentinel Dumont." she assured him. "Just a short market trip; we only need to buy Blair some vegetables and meats and clothes so he can celebrate when Jim returns tonight." The Sentinel's expression flickered to Blair for a quarter of a second, and then his eyes were on her hand again. She gave him a smile that was mischief and cinnamon and the woman he had loved when he was younger.
"We'll be fine."

The Sentinel acquiesced without changing his expression.

"How long?"
It was a request and a command, but mostly it was a plea for Moira to stop and don't stop and warm him and take her hands off him and give his control back and let him surrender and be still and fill the space and guide me, please guide me. Blair watched from sheltered eyes with a mixture of anthropologic fascination and shyness because he could never and fascination and fear.
"Short trip." she promised again, then hesitated, before ask-offering: "Five hours at the most."
The Sentinel looked away, out of the opposite window and nodded curtly.
"Car'll be back for you then."

Moira smiled genuinely and released the Sentinel's arm, then turned brightly to Blair and cheerily reapplied some sort of a balm to her lips.
"Well, what are you waiting for? Clock's ticking and we're losing the light - let's go!"
Jim's blazer kept disagreeing with him. The fucking thing wasn't even necessary, and yet he'd been pressured by Henri to wear it to the meeting and now it was driving him crazy. He shifted positions again, scratched at a phantom itch on his shoulder, and stared across the table at Jody Evers and the PacNor representative who'd come to mediate the investigation.

Even after the Dream, Jim hadn't slept well the night prior; he'd woken to every broken twig, changing scent, or shift in the moonlight that had passed until morning. At some point, he'd been so caught between desperation and frustration that he'd even thought of just admitting defeat and reaching out for Blair through their bond - just a little bit; just enough to get a sense of his presence. Not even enough to wake the younger man, probably. Jim had felt immediately guilty for even considering such a thing, and had reprimanded himself that if he couldn't control his needs enough to give a day's reprieve to his new bondmate, then he was really no better than an undisciplined cadet and should just surrender leadership now and save his team the trouble of mutiny.

At least he'd be home soon. Jim checked his watch. Just two more hours before they were on the road, then seven before he made it back to Blair. Nine more hours before he could blissfully, blissfully bury himself in his Guide again; before he could open all his senses and take in that taste of mint and bitterroot and trees in summer and sweetness and musk that -

"Sentinel Ellison!"

Jim started, embarrassed, and found the two other occupants of the room regarding him with unimpressed expressions. Jody Evers' already-angry eyes darkened.

"You see what I mean? He's not even functional!"

Jim glared daggers at her that indicated just what he thought of that assessment.

"I'm fine."

Jody rolled her eyes.

"How the fuck he got lead on this investigation is just beyond me, unless it's some hyper-biased sex bullshit coming down from his buddies at Regional. Now that I could believe."

The PacNor representative, already a stiff man in a narrow suit and a frighteningly neat tie, straightened minutely.

"Jody, you've had full control of every investigation in this area for five years now - Regional has no bias against you, and never has. This is simply - "

"This is simply the fact that every other investigation hasn't had a ripe enough scent to attract all the fucking strays like this one has. I've got four Alphas encroaching on my territory right now. Fucking four!"

Now it was Jim's turn to straighten up, because he'd known about himself and Jody and the PacNor guy, but he hadn't sensed another Alpha in the area and that was just alarming enough to make Jody's earlier accusation sting with truth.
"I understand the stress this has placed on you, Alpha Evers," the representative began again, gritting his teeth, "And we appreciate your accommodation. However, Alpha Ellison - " "Alpha Ellison," Jody spat, "Is a newly-bonded Sentinel who can't keep his mind off his Guide's cu - " "REGARDLESS." the representative interjected, cutting off the prelude to what would surely be a particularly vicious Alpha fight, "He takes lead on this investigation."
"That's - " "Should I repeat myself, Sentinel Evers?" the representative asked, a bit too calmly, and the air in the room went still. Jody swallowed and tilted her head slightly to the left - an acquiescence. "No, sir."

The two stared at each other for another, long minute before the PacNor representative rose from his chair. "I trust you'll be able to manage from here," he said, looking meaningfully at each of them. "Sentinel Ellison, I'll expect an update once those lab results come in. Sentinel Evers, I understand that you possess some of the most skilled wilderness responder Sentinels in our nation. I thank you for putting them to use on this…tragedy."

A flash of unmasked emotion crossed the representative's face: pain. He crossed to the door of the Council Room.

"I know we all look forward to identifying our shared enemy," he said, pausing with his hand on the brass knob before adding, in a voice so dark that it drew light out of the room, " - and eliminating him."

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The scent of cinnamon buns and coffee lured Blair and Moira first to a small patio area at the far end of the building, where the walls were open to the stark hillside beyond. They looked around for a seat away from scampering children and the busy aisle, then ordered coffee, sweet rolls, and maple salmon on eggs from a pretty young native Guide girl who came around with bowls of fruit. Moira gently took the bill and sent it back with a small note that seemed to please the young Guide girl, then they rose and moved on with their shopping.

The inside of the haven's market space was, in the grand tradition of markets everywhere, a sprawling, half-ordered-but-mostly-chaotic, colorful, delicious-smelling, enticing, oh-is-that-coffee-over-there-I'll-just-be-a-second, calamity of patterns and textures and fruits and clothes and spices. The space bustled with activity, and Guides of all shape and age milled around in jeans and Northwestern-print natoris and short skirts. They were weighted down with leather satchels; with backpacks; with burlap shoulder bags; with babies slung over shoulders and bound tightly to bellies. They pushed wooden prams; soothed fussy toddlers with gummy sweets while older children darted around between the legs of their mothers and friends; instructed young teenage Guides on how to select fruit and cloth for purchase.

Blair had to admit that the anthropologist in him was having a field day. It wasn't often that a mere graduate student (and especially one fascinated with exploring the daily transactional politics of gender and social currency) got the chance to do an in-depth and up-close study of a cultural phenomenon never before witnessed by outsiders.

Blair couldn't help but preen a little, impressed with himself. Sentinels guarded nothing in the world more jealously than their Guides, and the safety of the Haven was considered paramount. Sentinels themselves felt notoriously uneasy setting foot in the haven; Sentinels from other packs were rarely allowed, and outsiders were an absolute non-starter. Fully tenured professors went their whole lives
wanting an opportunity like this one; guys who *thrived* on ethnographic work, who wrote whole texts on participant-observation and outsider status and -

Blair stopped short, the realization slowly dawning: *he wasn't an outsider*.

He might be a relative cultural neonate, but this…this was his life now. This was his home. This was where he *belonged*. His people; his tribe.

Blair ran a hand over his head, mussing the neat bun Moira had made and not caring. *This is home.*

Too bad he hadn't felt that way back when it would have counted. When he'd been young, and Naomi had been even harder to get a hold of than she was now, he could have used that feeling. He would have liked to have felt *at home*. But now? Too late. He'd grown so used to being on his own that he looked at a house and all he saw was a cage. Other people said 'family' and he heard 'obligations.' He'd made it this far on his own, and there was no way he'd change now. He didn't need a tribe. He didn't need a Sentinel.

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Late morning, and Blair still felt out of sorts. He milled around among stalls selling clothes and housewares, looking blindly at embroidered bed linens and quinceañera gifts while Moira stood at the neighboring stand and filled a series of glass bottles with spices and flavorings, tucking each full one into a small avoska that she had produced from one pocket and now carried on her shoulder.

She focused intently on her task, sniffing each spice jar delicately and then asking demanding questions of the shopkeeper in rapid Portuguese. The older Guide minding the shop responded patiently to each inquiry, and Moira furrowed her brow and made her decisions, slowly and with seemingly great skepticism, before going on to the next spice.

After forty minutes, Blair had grown bored with skulking around behind her feeling sorry for himself, and so he meandered a few spaces over toward an herb shop. Hundreds of jars filled with seeds, flowers, nectars, stalks were packed into the small space, all of varying shapes and sizes and all balanced carefully on handcrafted shelves. Their crisp, white information tags dangled from their glass necks and bounced in the slight breeze, giving the impression of falling leaves. Blair made his way in, deciding he could probably at least take note of the available herbs and perhaps even buy something interesting to make a tea.

He started with a section labeled 'For The Home.' The first tag read:

*For reducing anxiety; to clear psychic channels; to improve Guide health.*

Fair enough. Maybe he should give some of that a try. Clearing his channels might be just the thing to shake off this…gloom he'd settled into. Thinking of it instantly brought it back, and he found himself resenting the fact that he'd been left here like a dog at the kennel while Jim caroused around the country, living it up with his little proto-military work buddies. And the Sentinel hadn't even reached out to him once; not *once* since he'd been gone. Most newly-bonded Sentinels couldn't keep their hands off their Guides, and went half-mad with anxiety when they were separated. Not Blair's, though, *clearly*. No, Jim didn't even seem the least bit perturbed by a lack of Guide access. Blair couldn't decided at first if this was good or bad; eventually, because he was already sulky, he settled on bad. His mate was a dud. Leave it to ol' Bad Luck Sandburg to get the only anhedonic Sentinel in town.

Thinking of this made Blair's sulk return, and so he moved on to read another jar.

*For the treatment of exhaustion, backaches, and general Guide's fatigue.*
Ah, he remembered this one from Naomi - she'd insisted he learn herbalism for all of seven weeks before she'd gotten into tarot instead. At least...he remembered it as an exhaustion cure; god only knew what 'Guide's fatigue' was.

*For increasing the potency of a male Sentinel's essence* -

He dropped the tag as if it burned him.

A bold laugh erupted from behind him, and Blair spun to find himself face to face with a grinning, dark-haired male Guide of about forty.

"Looking for something in particular?" the man asked, one eyebrow arching. "I have more..." he squinted at the label, then turned brightly to Blair. "herbs of that nature. If you're in the market."
If Blair had been wearing pearls, he would have clutched them.

"No - I mean, I'm not - I was just - " The shopkeeper wrinkled his nose as he read Blair's face. "Hmm. You want something more immediate." the man snapped his fingers. "An aphrodisiac. Here; try the catuaba - your Sentinel'll be hard as a rock."
Blair flushed harder than he'd known he was capable and shook his head.

"No, I - "
"Oh! My mistake. *She*. Alright, try the damiana."

"Alright, man - " Blair stepped backward, tripped over a corner of the woven rug beneath his feet, and ended up almost knocking over a display case of colorful soaps. The man frowned. Blair held his hands up defensively in front of himself and shook his head again.

"OK, listen, buddy, you've got it all wrong. I'm not - " Blair took a deep breath and tried to control his pounding embarrassment, "I don't need anything for my Sentinel."

"Ah, ah..." the man shook his head ruefully. "Of course. I'm so thoughtless sometimes. Here - try the longjack; that should work for you. Should also calm some of your twitchiness."

Blair took some offense to this.

"I don't need - hey!" Blair yelped as the man reached out and, without warning, gave his cock a polite squeeze. The other Guide leaned back, regarding Blair thoughtfully.

"Hmm. A carrier. OK, try the damiana - but at half dosage, understand? Otherwise it might have - " he lowered his voice, "- fertility effects."

Blair's eyes went wide.

"I'm not a carrier."

The man gave him a weird look and tilted his head...then got exactly as far as opening his mouth before Moira arrived, a cloth bag full of root vegetables slung over one shoulder.

"Blair! Oh, thank God - I thought I'd lost you. What are you doing? It's almost half-eleven; we're going to miss all the good fruit if we don't hurry," she chided, bustling him away from the herb vendor. "And to think we have to do clothes as well. Running out of time! Let's go!"
"Separations can be difficult," Moira told him as she picked out twenty small brown eggs, then turned to look at him with sympathetic eyes. "I know this has been hard on you."

Blair bristled. "I'm fine." he responded. Behind Moira, the midday light danced across the surfaces of polished glassware and hand-carved amulets in the narrow, crowded aisle of the vendor's stall. The place was packed with more knick-knacks than Blair had seen in years, and it made him think of the little womyn's shop or whatever that Naomi had always taken him to in Portland. That, in turn, made him think of Naomi - who he still hadn't been able to get a hold of, damn her, and that made his belly ache, just a bit, on the left side.

"Mmm." Moira said, and made that pressed-lip assessing sound that she often made, and Blair felt frustrated with himself for both hating her and needing her.

Today had not been an easy day; he'd woken up feeling his energy was askew, and no manner of hot shower or prolonged car ride had eased it. He alternately admired and feared Moira, and now his control felt loose and weak. He wondered if his energy was bleeding. Inside the Haven, he'd felt a bit better, but his fingertips still itched to reach out and touch Moira, to anchor himself to another Guide and bind in to that steady pulse-pulse-pulse of her energy, controlled. Blair shrugged and adjusted his shirt, frustrated. His skin was achy and Jim was gone. The day felt long and bare and her voice was confusing him.

And so Blair stayed close to Moira, pressing almost to her shoulder as they edged out of the trinket stall and paused just outside to investigate a basket of lightly-speckled goose's eggs. Delicately, she picked one up and held it to the light.

"Well, nonetheless, it's difficult." she shrugged, and her voice had that carelessness to it that Blair envied, "A Guide's place is with his Sentinel; you're not meant to be apart."

Teachers had said that to him all the time in Academy, and it had made him feel as claustrophobic then as it did now. He'd scoffed and they'd insisted he'd understand when he was older -- when he was ready for the bond. What if I'm never ready? he'd asked them, but that had just earned him an indulgent smile and sometimes an offer to ground himself, as if his resistance were nothing more than an outgrowth of energy discomfort.

Moira spoke again, and this time, her voice was more cautious. "Sometimes, when a separation is particularly difficult," she began, placing a handful of the tan ovals atop the folded fabric in her basket, "Like if there is some trauma, or if one partner is ill or injured, or when the bond is new… then, sometimes, the reunion can be difficult, too."

Blair got the sense, suddenly, that she was trying to tell him something profoundly important. "Difficult…how?" he asked, wanting and not wanting the answer.

"When the mating bond is forged, it is powerful and full of energy, but fragile and easily broken. It must be reforged again and again to make it strong. It grows firmer when it's tended; it weakens when it's neglected or stretched too thin."
She moved on toward the next stall; a poorly-ordered display of dried fish and cured meats, dangling like windchimes from knotted twine.

"So when you are apart from your Sentinel for a very long time - or even sometimes for a short time - lots of things can happen. The bond can fray. Your channels can become blocked. Your mind might resist the reforge." She waved a dismissive hand. "These are things that can happen to a Guide. But most of the time, the problem is the Sentinel's, and the Sentinel's problem is that he is too much for the Guide."

She drew her finger along the edge of a basket as she walked by, seeming to contemplate its texture. Blair's heart pounded in his chest.

"Being apart, there's so much anticipation for the bond; so much unrelieved excitement and anxiety and need and power. These things set a Sentinel on edge. These things can make a simple reforge become...complicated."
Blair watched Moira's fingers dance thoughtfully over some salmon jerky and was quiet. "Complicated?" he asked, his voice small and wary. "Violent." she answered, as simple as the wind, and Blair's heart skipped a beat and his mouth became bitter. He recalled their first night together, Jim's easy promise of what he could be. Sentinels. Goddamn Sentinels, and they were all the same. It was those fucking instincts. Needing to stop, to think, he drew up short; without noticing, Moira moved on and put distance between them.

"Well, how do I avoid that?" he asked, because there must be a way, there must, and he wished suddenly for Naomi and he wished that he hadn't dropped out of Academy and he wished he'd had more Guide friends because then he would know this, wouldn't he? He'd be able to protect himself. "How do I - how do I control him?"
Sentinels were dangerous. Sentinels were possessive. Sentinels could be violent. Moira shook her head. "You don't control him; you help him."
"How do I help him?" Blair begged, knowing that desperation was seeping into his voice but damned if he could keep it out. Moira paused at another stall, by a display of knit socks hanging crossways over a taut string and played with the already-fraying edge of one. "Just make it easy on him. Help him release his energy slowly." she said simply, moving on, "Then he can maintain his own control over his instincts, over his senses."

Fucking instincts. Blair's skin prickled with fear and adrenaline and he shifted his shoulder bag from one side to the other, frowning. "But I already do that, don't I? That's kind of my gig, right? That's like, what we do. That's just - that's regular Guide stuff."
Moira regarded him again, with that look that was wisdom and pity and honest love. "Mmm," she said mildly, then added: "Monsoons are just regular rain."

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The distance was too great.

Jim stared out of the side window of the truck and thought about Blair. Then he tried not to think about Blair, which just made him irritated because it was like that don't think of pink elephants mind puzzle, so then he tried not to think about the annoying fact that he was in a very small space with another recently-bonded Sentinel. Then he tried, unsuccessfully, not to think of all the ways in which Ken might be a threat to his fledgling bond with Blair.

Fucking instincts.
The rest of the team had elected, for reasons not clear to Jim, to ride together in the second truck. Henri was bringing up the rear in the third, with the new trainees who'd been out for observation, and the PacNor representative followed that in his own car.

Ken was a fine driver, but Jim felt every bump in the road as if it were a canyon, and the wind whipping by seemed exceptionally powerful, and the vibrations of the vehicle seemed particularly intense. Besides, Ken was driving too slow; at this rate, they were never going to get back to Cascade, and he was never going to get back to Blair and another Sentinel would come and encroach on his territory and take his mate and he would kill him, Jim would slaughter the usurper.

He groaned and ran a hand over his face.

_Fucking_ instincts.

Leaning back against the smooth leather seats of the SUV, Jim watched the landscape pass by and tried not to think about anything.

The distance was too great.

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Blair actually saw the woman before Moira did, but he had other things on his mind and really, she was a rather unremarkable Guide and so he quickly forgot her. She had appeared from one of the food stalls across the lane, and seemed to be in her mid-forties, was dark-haired and well-preserved but unfashionably thin-boned, and carried an infant (didn't they all?) in a handmade sling across her chest. She stopped for a moment to check on the child, then looked up and spotted the two of them in the kiosk across from her.

"Moira!" the woman cried, "That is you!"

Blair looked up in curiosity, and from the corner of his eye, saw Moira straighten slowly from where she'd been bent over a display of honeycombs.

"Suzanne." she answered, with a voice that was no less cheerful than it was unsettled, "So good to see you again."

The woman named Suzanne beamed.

"I know! It's been far too long! Where have you been keeping yourself? We haven't seen you at the Guide Collective in ages, and - " the woman cut herself off with a gasp, obviously catching sight of the mating mark on Moira's left shoulder, just barely visible above the collar of her shirt.

"Well, look at you!" Suzanne smiled and tilted her head, then clucked her tongue. "And to think they always said it was harder for half-breeds."

Blair went still and felt the dull, cold ache of a bone-deep hurt; quickly came shame, and anger; then resentment, more powerful than anything else; then guilt and forgiveness and embarrassment and the untranslatable set of fears that only those born in two worlds could ever understand.

Suzanne continued, blithely, as if she sensed nothing amiss.

"So to whom do we owe the honor?" she asked Moira, although Blair - a master of the human animal - read and recognized this tone, and knew that it was not so much a question as an act of social subjugation. The person being spoken to would be obligated - required, even - by status, by situation, by subject - to reply.

Next to him, Moira flushed, clearly uncomfortable with sharing but obviously taking pride in saying her Sentinel's name.

"Ken Rochelle. He's Special Assignment for the Pack."

Suzanne clasped her hands together as best she could in front of her chest, jiggling the infant who
fussed and extended one chubby hand, then retracted it and quieted again.
"Mmm. Don't know him, but I'm sure he's wonderful. So good for you, I'm certain. And was this a
love match, or did your father's new Sentinel arrange it?"

Blair also knew this tone, and it was a predatory one; silently, he rooted for Moira to answer her, just
tell her, don't be ashamed, don't let her cow you -
- but Moira hesitated just a second too long, and Suzanne figured it out.
"A moonhunt!" she exclaimed, then smiled again, "How delightfully savage."

Moira stood still and calm, but her thumb flexed angrily around the strap of her bag where it crossed
her chest. She said neither yes nor no. She looked small, suddenly, to Blair, and her yellow t-shirt
was wrinkled and her ponytail was just a bit lopsided and her sunglasses were cracked at one edge.
He wanted to defend her; to step forward and growl at this barbarian which had breached the gate of
their little, quiet world.

Instead, he reached out and caught Moira's wrist in one hand, only meaning to give the comfort of a
friendly hand that said I am here. But, well-timed as ever, his control slipped when he grasped her
and the thick, warm sop of the Guide-touch poured quickly through the spot where their skin
touched. Panicked and embarrassed, he released her immediately, but Moira's eyes were widening
and their new audience member had already taken note.

As if seeing Blair for the first time, Suzanne tilted her head and turned hawkish eyes in his direction.
"I'm sorry," she said, all teeth and proper training, "We haven't been introduced. Who is your
Sentinel, Guide?"

Blair wanted to say something rude to her, but felt pressed on to be polite (Jim would have preferred
it, doubtless, and Blair was in no way secure enough in his relationship with his Sentinel to be certain
rudeness wouldn't result in some sort of discipline) and so he opened his mouth to introduce himself.
He was, however, interrupted rather abruptly by a chattering, anxious Moira who shoved him away,
saying something about the time and their ride and Blair not feeling well in rushed words.

Confused, Blair tried at first to talk over her, but Moira's voice had an edgy, disquieted quality to it
that made him think better of it. So instead, he raised one hand in a goodbye salute (so long, you
unpleasant hag) to Suzanne and let Moira tug him along toward the exit doors.

Once they were some distance from Suzanne, Moira released a tense breath and laughed, nervously.
"Well, that was serendipitous." she said, still walking briskly as she rooted around and pulled a cell
phone from the bottom of one of her bags and began to call for the truck.
"Your shields are weakening." she grinned at him. "So I think your body knows that Jim is coming
home."
Blair felt a flush of embarrassment - why, he wasn't sure - and adjusted one of the bags slung over
his shoulder. Moira looked up from where she was making a call and caught sight of his face, then
frowned.
"No, it's good," she assured him, "It will make things easier."

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"Alright," Moira said, when they were safely back in Jim's apartment, cloth bags of produce and
linens and other household miscellany spilling out over the kitchen table and chairs.

"Now we get started. We have a lot of work to do, so no slacking. You clean while I get dinner
started. We have to get the laundry out - gather up everything I've slept on; everything you've worn
outside; everything anyone else has touched. Put everything in a laundry bag and set that outside of
the door."
Moira paused, then narrowed her eyes at Blair. "Do you understand why?" she asked, and Blair stared at her with blank eyes. Of course he didn't understand why. He never understood anything anymore. Moira must have read this in his expression, because she went on, "It's because the unfamiliar scents will confuse him. And if, in his confusion, he thinks he senses that a rival has been here, he'll become jealous and will need to reclaim his territory."

Blair just blinked at her, and so Moira connected the dots a bit more explicitly. "He'll become aggressive, sexually."

Blair's eyes widened minutely, and Moira shoved a load of hand towels from the kitchen into his arms. "So if you want your gentle, sweet Sentinel lover, then clear out competing scents. If you want to get shoved down and fucked in the doorway, don't bother."

Blair drew back from her, scandalized, which made her raise one eyebrow and laugh at him.

Busying herself at the kitchen table, she began pulling out and separating the non-food items; soaps for the bath and for laundry, sense suppressants from the apothecary, cleaners, shampoo, a variety of tinctures for Blair, folded bolts of cloth and pre-made clothes, hair cream, scented oils. Blair took his armful of linens off to the hall closet, where Jim kept a bag for laundry. As he dragged the half-full sack out, Moira added further instruction:

"Open all the doors and burn a sage pot in the main room - Sentinels hate the smell, but it helps clear unfamiliar scents. You have to sweep the floors and clean the surfaces; his skin will be sensitive. Use the sensory sprinkle for the carpets and the lemon oil for the hardwood. Both are in that blue bag over there - just a spoonful in a bowl of hot water will do for now."

Moira moved through the kitchen like a whirlwind; she unpacked all their market bags - vegetables and fruits and meat and cheese and eggs and spices - and put things away in their mostly rightful places. She pulled pans and pots and dishes out of cabinets and began making preparations for roast pork loin; for some sort of vegetable soup; for rice and beans.

Blair half-watched her as he went about his duties; from the guest room, he listened to the comforting sounds of her chopping vegetables and singing quietly along to the radio.

The Guide-touch he'd given Moira earlier had seemed to brighten his mood enormously; Blair felt more grounded now, in this moment, than he had for days. With no small measure of embarrassment (getting really used to that feeling), he wondered if he had been wrong, after all, about his own neediness. He felt strangely relaxed; secure. Different.

When the sage pot had been set, all the linens changed, the floors swept and the furniture dusted to the best of Blair's limited ability, he made his way back into the kitchen.

At the stove, Moira was covered in flour in front of several simmering pots. She seemed to be concentrating deeply on her task; she paid no mind to either Blair's nervous pacing or the unhelpful documentary about Sentinel mating practices that had come on the radio.

Blair rearranged things on the countertop until she became annoyed enough to assign him a new task, and then he spent the next hour methodically vacuuming every room in the loft and sprinkling sense suppressants on all the carpets. Afterward, he returned to the kitchen to follow behind Moira as she made the final preparations for the pork loin.

When she bumped into him for the fourth time, she sent him off to turn on all of the white-noise generators around the house, then instructed him to set the radio to one of the Sentinel-soothing stations.
"It will create a sound barrier," she explained as she turned a flame down beneath the pot of boiling rice, "to block outside noise, to help him focus on you. Focusing, as you know, makes it easier for him to exercise his control."

Afterward, Blair returned to the kitchen, drawn in by the temptation of food and Moira's insight. Blair reflected that he felt strange suddenly. Antsy. Lunch had been light and small at Moira's insistence, and Blair felt hungry and playful and full of an undirected energy. Moira scolded him when he stuck a finger into her sauce, and then threatened him with a spoon when he tried to steal one of the apples she'd peeled for tarts. Her hands were still covered in flour and her hair (piled up in a frantic bun atop her head) was mussed. She scowled at him, and Blair couldn't suppress a happy smile.

She made an irritated sound between her teeth and shooed him away. "Well, go and get the shower ready, then, if you have so much time to - " she cut herself off mid-sentence, her breath catching audibly in her throat. She seemed in a fugue for a minute, but just as Blair was beginning to worry, she whispered, "They're getting closer," and seemed to come back to herself, her skin flushed.

She must have felt the touch of her Sentinel, Blair realized. He must have reached out for her. Jealousy flared in him, nipped at its heels by an uncomfortable nervousness.

Moira rushed through the end of the tarts, turned the stove low, and began frantically untying her apron. Outside the window, the sun had just begun to dip low in the sky, softening the light in the loft.

She turned back to Blair, shoving her apron and the potholders she'd been using off to the other Guide.

"Put that in the laundry. Set the sage pot out on the balcony. Turn the lamps on, but keep them low. Don't light candles - you'll only knock them over. Go to the climate controls and lower the temperature, but raise the humidity. Check the noise generators. Oh, and you'll have to wash the dishes. I'll get everything ready for the bath and then we'll meditate and get your channels nice and open for Jim."

Presently, Blair found himself standing awkwardly beneath the flow of water in Jim's granite-and-glass shower with Moira naked behind him, running soapy fingers through his hair in a way that he was beginning to find slightly interesting.

Blair squeezed his eyes shut. It's just like an ethnography, he tried to convince himself. Only this wasn't like that, because this wasn't him squatting naked in the mud, making dispassionate notes at a field site - this was him standing in his own shower in his Sentinel's apartment in Cascade, getting soaped down by another Guide. Her breasts brushed against his back and Blair shook his head and tried to steel himself.

Moira, for her part, seemed fully focused on the task at hand. She shampooed Blair with a near-painful vigor, then slathered a cream into his hair and produced a luffa, a razor, and a small jar of golden sugar scrub.

By the time she had finished, Blair had been buffed and shined to within an inch of his life. She'd scrubbed his heels with a pumice stone, rubbed what felt like half his skin off with the luffa, and then scoured him with the sugar scrub and soothed with the warm, scented oils.
Moira had even tried to shave him, but this was where Blair had drawn his own cultural line in the sand and had snatched the razor from her hand. Once he had been thoroughly trimmed, smoothed, oiled, and rinsed, Moira hastily bathed herself while she sent Blair to sit for fifteen minutes in the small built-in sauna across the bathroom. Blair had only a moment of surprise - they had a sauna?! He hadn't even seen that room before! - and then Moira was rushing him out and instructing him to rub himself down with enough Sentinel-specific scented oils to baste a turkey.

By then, his newly-shorn skin had positively glowed from all the abrasion/attention, and Blair had to admit when he looked into the mirror across the bathroom that he did look, if not feel, a bit closer to the Guide ideal. Touchable, scentedable, tasteable, markable, and eminently fuckable.

Last, Moira had him dress in the shortest natori he'd ever even been close to. Blair tugged at the edges of it, sure he must be exposing something indecent.

While he had been fiddling, however, Moira had suddenly disappeared; when she entered the bathroom again, she was carrying a small bottle of blue paint and a brush. "This," she said, determinedly, "Will make him happy." …and proceeded to paint designs onto every part of Blair's skin that she could reach.

~:~

The sight of the stiff, gray building rising up among the ashes of the broken city was the most welcome sight Jim had ever laid eyes on his life. Finally, finally, he was going to be reunited with his Guide. Blair. Sweetness and nectar and rainforest heat and the cold, crisp air that blew in from the Sound.

Jim wanted to groan with the utter want of it; the power of his desire. But there was still distance to cross, and stairs - obstacles - and keys to find - more obstacles - and goodbyes to be said to Ken - other Sentinel; threat? not threat - and Moira - Guide, warm.

He squinted out of the window and flexed the muscles of his arms a few times against the seatbelt, trying to focus himself on the physical sensation. God, he needed a grounding. He needed a bonding. His skin felt cold, then hot. He needed Blair. Blair - Guide MY Guide small chestnuts foxtails spice warm warm warm moss green wet wet warm spice safety ground - would make him feel better. Blair would ease this.

Ken - threat? not threat. fight growl space territory threat? - drove the SUV without speaking, without moving unnecessarily, and without glancing at Jim out of the corner of his eye, which the elder Sentinel appreciated. He tried to make a mental note reminding him to thank the younger Sentinel later for his discretion.

They stopped abruptly in front of the building and Ken unlocked the SUV's doors. "Alpha," he began, and Jim was too distracted to correct him, "Send Moira down."

Jim asked no questions; only clicked-out and cast aside the restraining seatbelt, threw the door open, and took off at a dead run toward the building and toward Blair.

~:~

Blair glanced at the clock from across the dim room where he and Moira sat in silent meditation. *Lower your blocks and open your channels,* Moira had urged him, before she'd lapsed into a trance-like silence that Blair found mildly alarming in its depth. *Be ready for him.*

Easy for her to say.
Back against the couch, Moira was sitting rigidly on the ground, her legs folded beneath her and her hands resting palm-up in her lap. She shifted suddenly and gave an almost-inaudible whimper, the only outward sign of distress she'd shown since they'd begun.

*It will be better for you if you are relaxed. Calm. Open.*

Blair closed his eyes and tried to focus on smoothing out the frayed edges of his energy to make a nice, welcoming space for Jim. It didn't feel welcoming, though; it felt jagged and confused and like the hopeless disorientation of waking up on a train in transit through an unfamiliar landscape.

In Academy, his teachers had always made this all seem so simple, but how could it ever be simple to teach someone else how to feel inside their own mind?

Blair glanced again at the clock. There wasn't time to reminisce. Only three minutes had passed since he'd last checked the time, but that was three minutes of travel that would have brought Jim closer to home.

Home.

Guilt surged up out of a long-forgotten place and struck Blair on the side of the temple. This loft was Jim's home, the safe space he'd made for his Guide and himself to sleep and be close and vulnerable in. He'd left his home to protect it - presumably, since whatever mission he'd gone on seemed to be in support of the Sovereign Sentinel Nation - and now he was coming back, strong and victorious and alive. He deserved a nice homecoming. He deserved a nice Guide. He deserved more than Blair felt he was currently capable of giving, and the very thought of that stung him, deeply.

He tried again to smooth down the edges - to find that even keel where everything had a little buzz to it but nothing was too jittery or bright.

It didn't work.

When he focused too hard, he squeezed his channels shut, and when he tried to relax, everything slipped from his control and it felt like half the damn city was trying to crawl inside of his head.

Blair shivered, a vague memory tickling over his mind and then disappearing.

Moira opened one eye and blinked at him.

"I know it's hard," she said, breaking the tense silence of the room, "opening yourself up like this. But if you are closed when he arrives..." she opened both eyes and moved her hands from her lap to her thighs, so that she leaned forward toward Blair, "...that will be much harder."

That was Blair's last lesson, because the next thing he knew, Moira was getting quickly to her feet and gathering her things.

"Moira?" he asked, wanting her to make an excuse, but she only turned and kissed the air just beside his cheek and gave a small smile and said:

"They're coming."

And then she was out the door, and Blair was alone.

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He'd thought he would have time to run.

Blair is still standing in the sitting room where Moira left him when Jim comes in from an unexpected angle; he's taken the stairs.
At first, Blair isn't even sure it's him, even when his skin lights up like the west coast ocean in pinpricks and green flashes and the bond is singing - belting - and it's all he can do to stay upright.

But Jim moves like an animal, like maybe he is an animal, and in the dim-to-darkening early evening light, he's all grace and long lines and the bright blown eyes of a predator.

Blair wants to be terrified. Shit, he is terrified. The Guide's not. The Guide is celebrating, or at least at peace and the Guide is powerful sometimes, so powerful it scares him. For now, all it means is that Blair's fear can't manifest, can't reach the surface of Blair's expression, can't change the framing of his body or the way he tilts his head ever so slightly or the beg in his eyes or the explosion of his scent. Everything is beyond his control.

The world narrows to a single slice of life. My Sentinel is here, come the words without words. My master. My king.

And there it is -- that thread again, tying him back to the past. Ever to the past. Black earth and green forest canopies where it rained for days and bird calls and sweet milk and he and the Other tied together in the midst of it all.

Then he's here again, and Jim moves around him and Blair spins to try to track him and the room keeps spinning afterward and Jim is on him more quickly than seems fair or possible and then, suddenly, he's still. Blair realizes that Jim is scenting: him, the air, their territory. Blair holds his breath.

Everything feels simultaneously more and less important than ever before. Jim scents the air again, then Blair, and now the fear is powerful enough for him to override his Guide and remember what Moira has said. Blair's heart pounds, and he waits.

Eventually, Jim chuffs and reaches a hand out to him, and perhaps Blair imagines for a second that he sees hesitation here, but if it were true, it is quickly subsumed and Jim is himself again. The Sentinel growls and tangles one hand in Blair's hair, just above the nape of his neck, and pulls back with a strength that reminds Blair, it reminds him, but mostly it forces him to lay his neck bare.

Because he is shirtless, Jim catches easy sight of his mating mark and matches his teeth to it. This seems to inflame him, or perhaps it's Blair and the bond is just exchanging so quickly that he can't discern. He isn't quite sure, but the next thing he is sure of is that he's on his belly (As you should be, croons the Guide and Blair rolls his eyes) and Jim is atop him, eagerly freeing himself from the confines of his Pack uniform.

Blair's natori comes off immediately; it wasn't even knotted, so the strip of cloth just slips away from his Sentinel's hands and falls to the floor and Blair worries momentarily about getting blue smudges all over everything, but if this is the price of the bond, he's sure Jim will be willing to pay it.

The bond is sharp now, a hot streak with metal edges that singe Blair's synapses as much as it calms him. Blair squeezes his eyes shut and tries to think of his channels - open - and it seems to be an invitation to Jim, because every inch Blair gains for himself Jim takes back in triplicate until his push is a full-on surge and Blair yelps because now Jim's got two fingers in him as well and he's still not used to this, still not used to taking it all.

A heavy thigh settles over Blair's hip and the bare skin touch makes him tremble. First and last and next and now, he chants to himself; a meaningless mantra but the point is to give comfort, not enlightenment.

Blair thinks about saying a prayer, then he thinks about the damiana, then a rush of bond-gap rises
furiously between them and he can't think of much except how badly he wants to get fucked.

Jim presses a hand carelessly down into Blair's shoulder to lift and balance himself, and the oof-minor-pressure makes the Guide's blood surge. Jim's cock crashes into him as he moves again, reckless and misdirected and clearly strung out on the bond-gap and his Sentinel instincts and memories of the jungle and whatever else might be going on in that head of his. The Sentinel keens in frustration and Blair takes pity on him and fights his way up to his knees so he can make this easier.

The Guide parts his legs further, spread at the knees to Present yourself, present for your mate, and Blair would feel embarrassed if it weren't all just eaten up by how badly he needs to finish reforging the bond, how he needs Jim inside of every part of him, needs to reconnect, wolf to panther, Sentinel to Guide, Blair to Jim.

Abruptly, the Sentinel pulls back and makes some sort of low, guttural noise which frightens Blair with its unfamiliarity and the loss of Jim's touch but when he looks over his shoulder, the Sentinel is watching him with dark eyes, mesmerized by the vulgarity of this little show he's putting on. Shame is hot, suddenly, and Blair flushes and tries to tighten up to hide himself, but Jim's reaction is violent - actually violent - and Blair flinches, but is still.

The Sentinel low-growls his satisfaction, or at least his acceptance of Blair's surrender. Then a hand on his neck again re-asserts the Sentinel's presence and it forces Blair forward - it reminds him - so that his cunt is now broadly exposed and then, unexpectedly, Jim leans forward to taste. Blair wants to yowl, but as it is he can't seem to move, can't seem to get the ground back under him and Jim's tongue is pink and rasping over his slit and messily from his perineum back over his cunt and up toward his cock, narrowing to catch up all the droplets of Blair's excitement.

The Guide is restless, purposeful. This is a waste of time. We were wet before, always wet for him. Always ready. This preparation is an insult.

Blair whines and arches and to do so makes his little slit open just a bit and the Sentinel makes another sound that Blair has no time to consider and no need to translate because in the next moment, Jim's cock is making that slow push inside of him.

And it still hurts a little, but everything is still new and so Blair ignores the twinge-twinge-pinch and focuses instead on how all his signals are lighting up and his channels are blown open like the goddamn Sound Tunnel and the bond is now wide enough to fill his entire mind and there's nothing but bright warm light and Jim's presence and his and the unity, oh God the unity.

The scent of the two of them is thick in the room, and the carpet he's lying on is soft enough and the white noise generators are keeping everything from being overwhelmingly loud and Jim is just the right amount of heavy on top of him and for a moment, Blair feels content.

Jim's seems half-sated just by the inslaught, and he stops there for a moment, breathing heavily and scenting the air and squeezing Blair's hip and just branding him from the inside out. Then the quietness passes, and he thrusts - once, deeply enough that it makes Blair jolt and protest. Then again, his cock so slick with Blair's drip now that any twinge is just a long caress and Blair rises up to meet this one and it doesn't go so deep, but it's just enough to bump against Blair's cervix and excite him more.

After that, it's a simple decline and Blair gets shoved up against the edge of the carpet and the threads imprint his hands and suddenly it's happening again and he's seeing what Jim sees and feeling what he feels and scenting what he scents and he's getting fucked, oh yes he's getting fucked but there are also the strips of leather that Jim tied himself with in Peru and the cold petrichor of Pacific rain and
the warm feeling of seeing Blair sleeping and the noise of the city before the war and a jumble of sensations that Blair can't parse and it's all rushing at him at once. Jim's mind does an upset, then a tumble, then suddenly things are clearer and now all he sees is himself.

Blair's tight cunt, Blair's eyes, Blair's mouth, the little space between Blair's thighs where Jim likes to rub himself off when he's half asleep, Blair's teeth on his skin and Blair's hair, tangled in his grasp and Blair's power and Blair's heat and Blair's *fucking fertility* and Blair's skin, tattooed blue, and Jim painting him with his cum.

Jim's thrusting haphazard and fierce and a little bit desperate and his eyes are so focused on Blair that it's intimidating. Then something gets right into the right place and Blair is making smutty, wet sounds and skewering himself on Jim and begging for more. Jim obliges as best he can, and he gets in so deep that it stings for a second, then there's a rush of heat and stars and Blair just *yowls* and Jim thrusts again, again, again, unstoppable, again, and the bond surges and then it's there, he's cumming and Jim overruns inside of him and they're slipping out together on a single plane of existence, bond reforged.

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"I won't be staying long, Sentinel Ellison, and I thank you for your accommodations."

From the other side of the polished expanse of Jim's raw red oak desk, the man from the Sovereign Sentinel Nation's Pacific Northwest Regional Office stood stiff-backed and watched his quarry pace.

Henri stood silently by the broad double door of the office, his mouth set in a thin line and his face uncommonly tense. The other sentinel had only one sense, but Jim was certain it was working overtime at the moment, tracking their visitor/intruder's heartbeat, his modulation, his tiny shifts in movement and pulse.

"The pleasure is mine, Representative Marshall." the Alpha Sentinel of the Cascade Pack answered, meaning *Fuck you for checking up on me.*

Marshall inclined his head, eyes sliding sideward. *It wasn't my idea.*

Jim gave a curt nod and turned his back to the room, hoping that Marshall would take it as a dismissal. No such luck; the man remained where he stood. Frustrated, Jim clenched his hands and refused to turn back, glaring instead out of the window at the panoramic view of Cascade that stretched out before him.

His gaze drifted across the staccato buildings at the far end of the city, jagged little structures stabbing up into the grey sky; across the rolling hills to the east, where civilization had long since run out and nature was churning over the land; across the patchwork homsites and neighborhoods of the west, where little children ran over crumbled architecture and the broken-up history of Cascade's former self.

This was the heart of his territory - of his pack, his place.

And not far from here, nestled down in the blue blankets of their warm bed, was his Guide. *His* Guide in *his* home with *his* scent all over the sheets and *his* coffee mugs making rings on the countertop. There was a satisfying sense of rightness to all that; there was the clicking in of thoughts and feelings and odd quirks and safety and warmth. It made the nights seem shorter. It made his panther feel at rest. There had to be a word for that kind of thing, didn't there?

Irritated, but acquiescing to social niceties, Jim sighed and turned back to his guest. He cleared his throat, jolting Representative Marshall from some sort of thoughtful stupor; the man's gaze was focused on the city that lay beyond the window. Marshall blinked twice, then glanced down to where his clasped hands rested atop a sleek black briefcase.

"The Central Office has asked me to do a pass-through of a few of your departments during my stay."
"Of course." Jim answered, meaning *This is all because of Jody's bullshit, isn't it?* Marshall straightened his shoulders even more. *This is uncomfortable, and you're not making it easier.*
"I'll try to keep things as brief as possible, but I am required to be thorough in my evaluations."

He opened his briefcase and retrieved a single sheet of paper, which Henri moved quickly to intercept. Marshall glanced at the other Sentinel, and Jim thought he saw something flash, briefly, in his eyes. Offense? It passed, and he was back to his normal stiff self.

"I've been asked to look in on your Taxation Compliance Office, Medical Central, Guide Center,
Bonding Compliance Office, Guide Liaison Service, Guide Intake Office, and Academy."
Jim gritted his teeth and rested his clenched hands on his desk.
"Lot of interest in my Guides, Representative."
Marshall stared evenly at Jim.
"Indeed." he said, simply.

Another moment of silence fell between them, and Jim stepped forward and perched on one corner of his desk.
"Will there be anything else, Representative Marshall?" he asked, just wanting to end this meeting and get out of this office, which felt all of a sudden too cold, too sharp, too unsafe, and too far from Blair.

The PacNor representative brought one neutrally-manicured hand up to adjust his tie.
"No, Sentinel Ellison. That will be all." he said, lifting the sleek black briefcase as he stepped away.

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Leaning against a counter in the Centre's reception room, Daryl blinked abnormally heavy eyes against the too-bright early morning sun and tried his best to stay upright.

Cav was beside him; he was sure of that, because he could smell the Sentinel's brisk, dark, very male scent just under the layers of medicine and antiseptic soap and chocolate brass and sex. Like cold water and alpine flowers, Daryl decided, before slipping briefly unconscious and waking up to find himself listing precipitously to port against the pamphlet table.

He pried open sodden eyelids and tried to wade through the slow, sticky feeling of the lingering sedatives. Pushing them back let some vague sense of awareness return, and Daryl realized that he felt mussed all over - the loose clinic clothes he wore were impossibly wrinkled, he needed a shower badly, his hair was a collection of tangles and flattened curls, and his mind felt like a thick soup. Somewhere, a door closed loudly and he winced.

The sound must have startled Cav as well, because he glanced over his shoulder again, for the hundredth time in an hour, to check anxiously on his guide. Daryl tried to smile comfortingly and managed some sort of half-paralytic grimace. Cav's brow furrowed even more deeply. Daryl blinked firmly at him, trying to communicate with his eyelashes. Cav stared at him for one further long minute, then hesitantly turned his attention back to where the Guide desk clerk was stabbing her intricately tattooed finger at the signature line of another form.

They were at rest in this semi-peaceful tableau (Daryl melting quietly toward the floor, Cav hastily signing releases and trying to keep him perpendicular) when yet another door slammed and then everything went to shit.

"You!" Professor Simon Banks' angry voice boomed out across the waiting room, his expression twisted in anger as he strode toward the young couple, "Just where the hell do you think you're going with my son?!"

~!~

It was half past eight, and Blair was just making his way fully into wakefulness. There was the sandy feeling of half-sleep, met by the chirp chirp rainfall movement sounds of early dawn. Blair wondered which world the sounds came from; was this all a part of the dream? He imagined the banana leaf curtain he'd first encountered as an adolescent, taking his first dreamwalk, and drew it aside to push himself out of the dream world and into the waking world. The scent of coffee grew stronger as he pulled himself out of the other place, and a voice filtered in:
"Wakey wakey, Chief."

Blair blinked twice against the gray light, sat up, groaned, and tried to roll back over. Fuck early mornings and the people who celebrated them. No way was this his usual wake-up time. The sun wasn't even at half-mast yet. His phone hadn't rung. Students hadn't banged on his door. The morning janitor hadn't jiggled his key in the lock for four long minutes before remembering that Blair was a live-in and moving on.

So that meant it wasn't wake-up time.

The person attached to the voice touched his shoulder, and Blair growled a little. The voice laughed then urged, soberly:
"Come on, babe. Wake up. I need you."

It was like a lightning bolt to Blair's brain. He sat bolt upright, nearly knocking Jim in the nose and narrowly avoiding the mug of hot coffee in the Sentinel's right hand.

"Shit! Jim! I'm sorry, I - "
"Whoa, whoa, Chief; I didn't mean to - "

Jim waved his free hand in a calming gesture that Blair completely ignored.
"What's going on, man?! Is it your senses?? Is it bond-gap? Are you in pain?!!" he asked in a rush, turning over and struggling to sit up, tangling himself in the sheets and Jim as he did so. His hair, wild from sleep, curled out at odd angles and made him look even more harassed than usual.

Jim couldn't contain a short laugh.
"Blair, I'm alright! It's not my senses."

Adrenaline filtered away from Blair's heart, leaving him with an empty post-rush feeling and a mouth that felt like wet cotton. He dropped his arms back to his sides, atop the knotted duvet. Of course it wasn't his senses. Blair was a bonded guide now. He'd know if it had been his senses. Any bonded guide worth anything could sense a Sentinel in distress. But what if he hadn't known? What if something had happened to Jim and he hadn't realized because he was that…stupid, or self-centered, or just goddamn ignorant? A bit of paranoia sneaked into Blair's awareness, colored by embarrassment and a powerful, unfamiliar kind of fear.

What if he missed something?

It didn't bear thinking about so instead, he just scowled.

"Well, shit, man, you scared me."

Jim tilted his head but didn't look apologetic. Blair blinked his eyes hard and patted around in the sheets, trying to get his bearings in the bed. After extricating himself from the tangled sheet, he managed to get into a half-sit that was upright enough for him to take the coffee mug from Jim's proffered hand.

The Sentinel was looking at him fondly - fondly? - and with something else that Blair had trouble identifying until he reached out through the bond.

*Lust.*

Self-conscious suddenly, Blair retreated and the guide inched backward on the bed to put his back against the headboard. Jim took a seat on the bed and watched his guide with an expression that was a mixture of amused and wary.

"You OK, Chief? That was quite a reaction."

Blair flushed.
"I'm fine, man, you just…startled me."
Jim let the excuse stand. Blair looked away and drank his coffee.
"Alright. Well, I just thought you might want to get the day started. It's almost nine already."
Blair tried to keep the scowl off of his face.
"Thanks, Jim."
Either ignoring his Guide's irritation or oblivious to it, Jim smiled and patted Blair's leg beneath the blanket.

"Any ideas about where you want to go today?"
"To get my car?" Blair asked, hopefully and cheekily.
Jim shot him a quick glare, but gave no further rebuke.
"I can drop you off at the University, or you can go to Moira's place. Haven's an option, too."
Blair took a long drag of his coffee.
"Well, hey, as much as I typically love toiling away at the bottom of the academic totem pole, I think I'm going to avoid my major professor and extend my unplanned vacation for another day or two."
Jim nodded affably.
"And I'm sure I've just about worn out my welcome with Moira."
Jim's jaw tightened and he shook his head.
"She'd be happy to see you if you asked. I'm sure of it."

Blair shrugged the suggestion away and played with the handle of his mug, not looking at Jim.
"Is there somewhere else you want to go, Blair?" the Sentinel asked, eventually.
"The clinic." Blair said, and snuck a quick, anxious glance to his Sentinel's face. Jim's jaw tensed, then relaxed.
"For your four-month?"
Blair nodded, looking nervously but searchingly at Jim. Had he changed his mind?
"They said…to come back in five days after the…"
Jim cleared his throat, interrupting.
"Yeah. Sure. Sure. I'll get a car to come and take you."

Blair bit his lip and frowned down at his coffee. When he turned his gaze up to meet Jim's, his eyes were bright and defiant.
"Well, I was kind of thinking that you should go with me."

Jim's expression shifted to something just past wary and teetering on the edge of angry, and all of a sudden Blair was fifteen again and in trouble for the umpteenth time because of his mouth, his big stupid mouth.

"I mean, I just - I thought maybe we could talk about the options, you know? Since, uh, since four months ain't really that long, Big Guy."
Blair hoped he had kept the bitterness out of his voice.

Jim's posture was stiff now, and he was frowning at some point just beyond the bureau. Blair tried to cover over his error with enthusiasm.
"And besides, that way I could go with you afterward! See what the work of the big, scary Sentinel in the big, scary city is really all about, right?"
Blair forced a grin and poked Jim's thigh with the toe of his left foot.
"Take some field notes, maybe. If you're good, I could get a dissertation out of this, you know. Something about organizational culture in a post-reconstruction context…"
"No."
Blair tilted his head, surprised by Jim's sudden fierceness.
"I didn't - "
"You can't go with me, Chief. I have to…work."
Blair looked injured for just a half second before making a hurried gesture of assurance with his mug. Jim eyed a spot where a few drops of coffee splashed onto the wood floor.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to like - to be a bother or anything. I'm not - " Blair laughed uncomfortably and ran a hand through his hair. "I'm not one of those guides who, like, needs to be with their Sentinel at all times. I just - I don't know, I kind of wondered what you did and I just thought it might be cool if I like, I don't know, tagged along or something? Just for the day."

Jim grunted. "Well, unfortunately, I don't have the kind of job where you can just 'tag along,' Blair."

The guide shrank back a little, curiosity warring with embarrassment, then meeting defiance and coalescing. "Well…what kind of job do you have?" he asked, finally, his chin raised.

Blair watched Jim watch him for a long moment, but anything he might have been ready to say was preempted by the sound of Henri clearing his throat at the bottom of the stairs.

"Jim?" the other Sentinel called up, voice serious but calm, "We've got a problem."

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By the time Jim and Henri arrived on the scene, Professor Simon Banks was in the middle of a full-on challenge to Junior Sentinel Cavish O'Hare.

The place was a mess. Chairs were overturned, a pamphlet table had been upended, the young newbond Guide in question was looking decidedly unavailable for comment, Cascade Pack authorities were anxiously darting back and forth, and worst of all, the Pack's recently-acquired PacNor guest was standing in the midst of everything, looking harried and hormonal and pretty fucking pissed.

"Ellison!" Representative Marshall shouted, upon seeing Jim enter, "Deal with this."

The entirety of the waiting room had eyes on the two men, including three receptionists, four unbonded Sentinels, two very nervous unbonded Guides who had been herded into a corner by one very growly Sentinel.

Then Blair caught up to them.

His breathing was fast and his energy kept spiking in little, sharp peaks that made Jim feel antsy and rude. Frantically, the Guide took in the scene, spotted Daryl in the middle of it, and began to surge forward. Jim stopped him with a flat palm to his chest. "Stay. Back."

Blair shook his head in frustration. "Jim, that's Daryl's dad!"

The Sentinel whipped around so quickly that Blair swore he'd almost spun his head off. "STAY BACK."

Blair relented, but gave a keening little whine. "Come on, man, I told you this kind of thing would happen! You wouldn't even let me see him, man, and now there's this shit!"

Jim actually growled that time, not a warning human sound, but a full-bodied roar that tore the fabric of sound in the room and had both Sentinels jerking apart, startled. "Stay."

Jim snarled, and it was such a moment of tension and authority that he didn't even take in Blair's shocked expression.
Then he was surging forward, into the midst of the two, a panther pouring like liquid black into the ring. The edges of the room faded away and he was in the jungle again, in the thick of wet leaves and mossy earth and the challenges Sentinels had made in centuries prior.

Banks was larger, taller, but O'Hare had speed on his side, and youth, and above all a yearning desire to keep his mate. There was no match.

Jim was between them, prowling and shouting orders and making sounds a man shouldn't have been able to make when there was a crash that came out of nowhere and both men lunged for the same spot at the same time.

Jim shoved Banks back and went to reach for O'Hare, catching the edge of his skin and firming that into a grasp to bring him down. The younger Sentinel howled and kicked and then turned on his master, reeling back and throwing a punch so hard that the crack of his knuckles against Jim's bone silenced the room and the Sentinel's vision swam for a moment.

Everyone was still.

Jim blinked once and then he recovered and was the very voice of rage, fury in motion.

Submit, his panther demanded, outraged at the audacity of this cub. Jim landed blows on Cav, flipped the younger man onto his back. Cav snarled at the Sentinel on top of him and Jim snapped his jaws back. Submit!

"Jim!"
The Sentinel jerked his head up. His Guide was near. Was in trouble? Was hurt? He caught the scent of blood on the air, but it was thick and musky and much more male than his Guide's would have been.

But Blair was frantic. Why?

Jim glanced over his shoulder in just enough time to see Simon Banks' irate, frenzied face as he drove forward, rolling over Jim in his effort to exact violence on Cav O'Hare.

Jim caught a shoulder to his ribs and he went down, onto his side - Get up! - and felt a run of fur appear, then vanish, down the middle of his back. That angered him more than the fight, because how fucking dare she do this to him now, the Moon, that ungrateful bitch and in seconds he was back up on his feet and coursing with energy and ready to tear out throats if it meant restoring the peace.

But then suddenly, there was Blair, pulling him back, grabbing his arm and telling him again and again to stop, stop, stop, I have this.

And because Jim was frenzy-muddled and had no idea that such a thing could even occur, he wasn't quick enough to stop Blair as he ran right into the middle of the fight, hands up and shouting to Cut the shit, guys, really, it's not cool.

Then he was using that voice, the Guide voice that Jim hadn't yet had the need or privilege to hear and his hackles rose and settled at the same time.

The dust settled, or at least paused in midair, and Blair wedged his way between the two men, both panting and angry still, and placed a hand on both their bare wrists.

Cav looked wrecked; Simon's expression just melted into something grim and disappointed.
Blair was saying something to them, too, but Jim couldn't figure out what it was, what it could possibly be.

But like magic, both the Sentinels stepped back and separated and Blair was all that was left in the middle of the room, standing like Moses between the split sea. Jim rushed for him, and he rushed for Daryl and Cav just stood aside, panting, uncertain, a looking as frightened and embarrassed as one could expect.

Blair knelt down beside the younger Guide, now completely unconscious on the floor, and shot a glare over his shoulder at Jim that stopped the Sentinel dead in his tracks.

Stay back.

There was a pulsing power in the room that reminded Jim of Haven and made him feel uneasy and a bit afraid, so he shied away as if it were his idea and Blair gestured two of the Guide nurses over who had arrived from the hall.

Then, slowly, all the rest began to move - picking up the chairs, putting thing in order, collecting the pamphlets from the table. The Sentinel in the corner released the Guides he'd been herding and the room began to right itself.

And the PacNor representative stood by the door, watching it all.

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"Sentinel Ellison," the PacNor representative said slowly, his left boot tapping an uneven rhythm against the leg of Jim's borrowed desk, "I understand that you have never taken a Guide before. So I'm going to say this slowly, and start from the beginning."

Jim growled under his breath and looked sullen.

"I'm sure you can see," the representative began, his tone ungracious and cold, "Why an untrained, unregistered, and newly-bonded Guide cannot be allowed to run headlong into a situation as volatile as a Challenge."

Jim's jaw twitched.

"I'm sure you can further see," the man continued, unfazed by Jim's indignation, "Why this is of particular concern when the Guide in question is the newly-inducted Alpha Guide of the second-largest pack in the Pacific Northwest."

Cold silence passed between them until the representative steepled his fingers and leaned forward, pressing into Jim's space and breaking their territorial truce.

"I'm also sure that you understand the...displeasure that hearing of such a spectacle would evoke among our more conservative Council members," he said, and his tone was urging now; coaxing Jim to give the right answer, say the right thing. "So I'm absolutely sure that we won't see anything like this again. Isn't that so, Sentinel Ellison?"

Jim thought a variety of cynical, violent, or rebellious thoughts, but in the end said none of them. Instead, he squared his shoulders and stared the representative straight in the eyes.

"I'm sure we won't." he answered.

The representative exhaled, and his countenance shifted from that of the heartless enforcer to something like a sympathetic, if beleaguered, schoolteacher.

"I need something better to take back to Central, Jim. I need photo-ops and press-ready success stories. Prosperity and order. Soul mates and strong leadership. Health care and infrastructure. I don't need insolent Guides shoving around half-feral Sentinels. I don't need daylight brawls and self-endangerment. I don't need half-finished construction projects, low intake retention, and recurrent tax inquiries."

Jim flushed, but was silent. The representative settled back in his chair, folding his hands mildly in his lap. His eyes drifted out of the window, over Jim's shoulder to where the trees were standing tall and red in the filtered late morning light.

"We're standing at the precipice, Jim. The future of Sovereignty depends wholly on what we do in these next months; these weeks. I love the Nation as much as you do, Jim -- and I know you do.
They saved your life. They saved my life. And yet all that we've accomplished -- all the Sentinels we've dragged away from zone death and the Guides we're still pulling out of the madhouses -- could be swept away if we don't get it right." The representative lifted his joined hands, then spread them apart. "We have to get this right, Jim."

Jim was impressed into silence for a moment, stunned by this reminder of the enormity of their task.

"The Union government is growing stronger every day. If we don't establish the SSN as an immutable entity now, we may never get another chance."

Jim opened his mouth to speak, but the Marshall interrupted him.

"One entity, Jim. One body. One unit. One set of laws, one set of principles." The rep held up one well-manicured finger, illustrating his point. "We're only strong when we work together."

More silence, and then Jim spoke, tucking his chin down in an uncharacteristic display of non-aggression.

"I'll…do what I can, here. I can promise you that. We're still working out the kinks a little bit, but I've got an incredible team of people here and we're all putting in triple time to bring this Pack up."

The representative's face melted into something gentler and he nodded.

"I know. I've seen the hard work your Sentinels have been putting in, and I admire it." Marshall clenched his hands around the armrests of his chair, then released. "And in that vein, I'd better let you get on with things." he stood to leave and Jim was too slow to stand in synchrony with him; for a brief moment, he loomed over the desk, ruling the space. "I wish you all the best, Jim, and I look forward to seeing a renewed vigor in your deliberations today."

Jim's expression flickered and his lip nearly lifted in a sneer before he caught himself. He lifted himself smoothly to his feet and extended a hand, directing the PacNor representative toward the door.

"Indeed. Thank you again for your visit, Representative Marshall."

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In the main lobby of the Cascade Pack's security headquarters, Blair Sandburg Ellison slumped in a chair and waited for his Sentinel to return.

After the fight had broken up, Jim had called two MPs and had everyone escorted to security headquarters to debrief. Cavish O'Hare and Professor Banks had been loaded into separate vehicles, Daryl had been re-admitted to the Clinic for further rest and observation, and Blair had been hustled into Jim's gray truck (along with a stony-faced PacNor representative) and brought along for the ride.

~

The main administrative offices of the Cascade Pack were located back at the log cabin campus that Blair had visited briefly on his first night, and although the circumstances were unfavorable, he was at least glad to get another look during the daytime.

They entered through the grand glass-and-log archway of a large, multi-story building with a 'COUNCIL COURT' sign outside, and were immediately attended to by a sweet-faced, sharply-dressed Guide in his 40s. He greeted and separated them with all the efficiency of a veteran ambassador, sorting Cav and Simon into a conference room and Blair into a coffee nook and
comfortable chair just to the side of the main waiting area.

Jim and the PacNor representative were met and then hastened off down a hallway by a young female Sentinel dressed in black hunt gear, who nodded curtly to the Rep and handed Jim some sort of list. They began to speak in urgent, low tones as they went, Jim not even sparing a glance for his guide, and then their voices faded down the hall and Blair was alone.

He had a brief, embarrassing burst of emotion that made him almost call out for his Sentinel, and when he turned away, he found the Guide receptionist looking at him with a kind expression.

Feeling embarrassed and jittery, Blair made himself an herbal tea in the coffee nook, then wandered out into the great room-cum-waiting area.

Adherent to the architectural style of the compound, the great room was a mix of modern and traditional styles. The massive posts that elevated the cathedral ceilings had been made in the ancestral Pacific Northwest style, and later-era craftsman adornments linked them to the minimalist glass and steel features that finished the room. From his perspective in the doorway of the coffee nook, Blair counted four small side rooms, each of them quiet, dim, and beetling back from the main chamber.

To his right, the receptionist's desk faced the entry arch, although the receptionist himself was half-turned in his chair to keep a discreet eye on Blair.

To his left, the redwoods burst into sight in a cacophony of color and texture behind a massive floor-to-ceiling polarized window. The backdrop made the immense wall of glass into something like a naturalist mural, broken up only by the requisite (but surprisingly understated) central fireplace.

Blair found a seat on the far side, close to the glass and the trees, where he could prop his feet up on the raw wood coffee table and gaze at the south wall.

Unwilling to mope - he wasn't moping, dammit, no matter that he'd been ditched again -- Blair looked around for items of interest, and his gaze landed on the only other occupant of the waiting room.

Seated in a cluster of difficult-looking chairs nearest the western hallway, the kid was jerking his leg up and down in a trembly, tense motion and biting his lip. His knees were pressed together, hands covering them as if he were holding on to himself.

The kid was an unbond, for sure, because when Blair focused, he could feel his bouncing, bright energy even across the room. What was he doing in the Council Court?

Curious and grateful for anything to take his mind off of his own tension, Blair slumped in his chair, picked up a dog-eared hunting magazine and used it to shield his observation of the other guide.

The kid couldn't have been more than 19; he had a mop of fashionably unkempt reddish-brown hair and no stubble to speak of. Was he a carrier? Blair couldn't tell. He wore a pair of bright green shorts and a slim-fitting white t-shirt, and the way he bounced his left knee up and down in rapid, agitated motions made Blair think of a fighter just outside of the ring.

Shoved up on his head were a pair of expensive-looking sunglasses that checked his mussed hair off of his forehead. Blair glanced at his face and first saw irritation and rebellion, but with a more discerning eye caught the delicate tremble of the young man's hands; the tense set of his mouth; the grey pallor of his face. The kid was terrified.

Blair wanted to reach out to the other guide, but opening up his empathy wasn't an option so soon
after such an intense experience as he'd had earlier. He could say something, though, couldn't he? Ask him what was wrong. That was the right thing to do; the nice thing to do. The goddamn human thing to do.

Blair had just opened his mouth to speak when the door to the first room down the hallway swung outward with a whoosh and every muscle in the young guide's body pulled taut.

A group of Sentinels about Jim's age emerged, their faces calm and satisfied, but all strangely silent. As some of them breezed into the main chamber, Blair took one look at their stiff blue uniforms and recognized something he'd only seen in his Academy textbooks: a Deliberation Council.

Blair slouched down a little farther in his chair, feeling slightly intimidated by the sudden influx of so many Sentinels in such close quarters. Three of the group broke off, filed through the waiting room and went out the door, giving only a curt nod to acknowledge any of the guides. The kid across the waiting room barely blinked at them as they passed; his attention was riveted to the remaining group of four - a Council member and a non-uniform sentinel who had lingered by the deliberation room door to speak in hushed tones with two men in everyday suits.

After long, tense minutes, one of the Sentinels split off from the group and departed, leaving just three to approach the young Guide. He was in a full-body tremble now, Blair noticed, but his look had grown more sullen and more determined. The men came to stand in front of him and the youth looked up at one of them with pitifully hopeful eyes.

The man crouched down, met the young Guide's eyes with an expression of resigned sorrow, laid one strong hand on the boy's knee and said, simply:
"No, Jeremy."

The Guide sucked in a breath so sharp that it sounded like a sob. "What?" he asked, in that dry-mouthed, breathy sort of way that indicated true and abrupt fear. The elder man stood up; his brow wrinkled with pity, and his eyes were soft and gray. "The Alpha said no. Our plea for an improper get was denied."

The young man began to shake again, his agitation growing by the second. "So what are we - what am I supposed to do now?" he implored, desperately. The man looked down with regret and kindness at the young Guide. "Now you go home with your Sentinel."

Jeremy glanced up at the third man, the Sentinel, whose eyes he had avoided meeting during this exchange. The man was tall and strongly built; about 30 years old, and wearing a Cascade Pack t-shirt and jeans. He had close-cropped hair and a formline tattoo over the tanned skin of his left bicep. He was watching the kid carefully; in that moment, a glimmer passed between them, and Blair suddenly understood everything.

"What?" the Guide asked again, weakly. The second man, wearing a tailored navy suit and carrying a dark briefcase, leaned forward. "It's OK, Jeremy. We're going to appeal the Council's decision and file an express motion to call this case back up."

The young guide looked miserably up at the navy-suited man; in a rush, it was as if all of the resistance, all of the fight went out of him. "But if you send me home with him…"

The unspeakable promise hung in the air. It was true; they all knew it was true, but there was nothing to be done for it now. The elder man leaned forward again. "We're going to appeal. Just hang in there, and we're going to appeal."

Jeremy began trembling so hard that Blair thought he might vibrate off his seat.
"Blair?"

Hearing Jim's voice jerked him out of the observational trance he'd been in. Blair looked up from his seat; his Sentinel was standing over his shoulder, looking down at him curiously.

"You zoning on me, Chief?" he asked, playfully.
Blair laughed, nervously, and glanced around. Where had Jim come from?
"Sorry. I was just thinking."

Jim cast a quick look over to the young guide across the room, who was now slowly getting to his feet to receive a farewell hug from the man Blair had deduced was his father.

"Ah." he said, then turned his attention back to Blair. "You ready to come with me, Chief?"
Blair tried not to look too eager as he nodded. Jim glanced at the receptionist and gave a short nod that allowed the man to turn back to his desk -- and presumably get back to whatever other work he had that wasn't babysitting Blair.

"Hungry?"
Blair shrugged.
"I could eat." he said, and his stomach rumbled quietly.

A smile bent the corner of Jim's mouth as he began to lead them towards the receptionist's desk first, where he handed over a thin stack of paperwork before making a 180-degree turn to lead Blair toward the hallway opposite.

The young Guide had been left alone with his Sentinel, and both now stood at Jim's approach. Jim's eyes flickered sideways to Blair, and he pressed one hand to the small of Blair's back, urging him forward more quickly.

Just as they began to enter the hall, the other Sentinel gave a curt nod to Jim, and said, simply: "Alpha."

That single word made the ground buckle and the world shift sideways. Blair spun to face Jim, who only steeled his expression, grasped Blair by the elbow, and propelled him forward, down the hallway and into an unoccupied office.

"Alpha?!!" he demanded.
Jim glanced at him sidelong, then nodded.
Blair ran two hands over his face.
"Oh, man! This is...this is big, man. How could you keep this from me?!!"
Jim shrugged. Blair shook his head, curls flying, and then squared up his hands and framed Jim's face.
"Let me be sure I'm getting this right. You're the Alpha of the Cascade Pack."
Slowly, Jim dragged his eyes up to meet Blair's.
"Guilty as charged, Chief."
Blair ground his jaw, and his brain seemed to be working overtime for a minute.
"So then you were responsible for the raiding party during the last Moonhunt."
Jim blinked at him.
"Yes, I was."
"You're responsible for the catch-and-releases and the reprieves."
Jim's jaw twitched.
"I am."

There was silence, in which Blair tried desperately to wrap his head around this new development and Jim listened to his Guide's heart pound in his chest.
"So then you're responsible for me."
Jim frowned.
"Of course. You're my -"
"No. I mean that you were responsible for my keep. They said - they told me I couldn't appeal. That the Alpha wouldn't have allowed it. They told me there was no chance of a release."
Jim stared hard into his eyes.
"There wasn't."
Blair made fists with his hands and released them, wiggling his fingers as he tried to work out the situation.
"But you could have set me free," he finally said, and his voice was quiet and mournful. "You could have let me go."
Jim's expression softened immensely, and he took one step closer to his guide.
"I couldn't have let you go."
Tenderly, the Sentinel pulled him close and pressed a kiss to Blair's forehead. "I could never have let you go."
Blair squeezed his eyes shut, accepting the kiss, accepting the possession. Whether it was madness or love or some lingering artifact of bonding, Blair didn't know. But his heart ached, suddenly, and he saw again and again the face of the young, terrified Guide from the waiting room.

"What about that - that Jeremy kid, though?" he asked, arms snaking around Jim's waist. "He's just a kid."
At this, Jim rolled his eyes and his expression hardened.
"The Council's already made a decision, Blair."
Feeling bold, Blair shook his head.
"But you're the Alpha. You sign off on deliberations. And he's just a kid."
Jim tensed, but he didn't pull back from their embrace.
"He's eighteen, Blair. Almost two years past the age of consent."
"He's just a kid." Blair repeated, more slowly in case the Sentinel hadn't heard him the first time.

This time, Jim growled low and stepped back, out of Blair's arms. His shoulders were raised, muscles bunched in his arms. Blair felt the tension coming off of him in waves and tried to reach out through the bond. Jim resisted.

"He's just a kid who's had two reprieves already. You know how his Sentinel found him? He jumped the fence of the Guide School - which is a safe zone, you know - during moonhunt to go drinking with some young unbonds in the woods all the way down by Boarman's Creek. Got into some kind of altercation with his friends over some Sentinel who one of them had blown the week before and decided to head back home alone."
Blair's eyebrows both shot up, unbidden. Jim was shaking his head.

"Edge of the territory, judgment compromised, bad company or at least bad relations with them, in violation of Guide School rules (and dress code, I might add), breaking the law, delinquent history, and wandering out alone in the middle of the moonhunt. The kid made a rash of bad decisions. Getting bonded to Wilson is damn near a reward at this point."

Jim paced the room for a minute, wriggling and clenching his fingers. And there it was again -- that presence of the animus, that overtaking of the human half and it was as if Blair could see it happening, could see the panther pacing his cage and see the yellow light of his eyes and feel the shadow of the trees and then it was gone. Blair wondered how being an Alpha fit into all of this. Jim was still growling.

"And I can't have this. I can't have this in my Pack. I tolerate a lot, Blair, but I won't have a bunch of oversexed little brats playing fast and loose with Pack unity and Sentinel-Guide morality."
Blair felt his stomach clench. Was Jim really so dogmatically conservative that he couldn't see that there was a kid out here who was terrified and hurting? What if it had been Blair? What if it had been -

"What if it were our kid?" Blair asked, quietly, and perhaps Jim sensed the importance of his answer because he hesitated before shaking his head. "It wouldn't be." he answered, and it was a promise and a justification and a plea.

Then he was tensing again, and crossing his arms over his chest and he had that firm look in his eye that Blair was beginning to recognize.
"And I'll be damned if I'm going to deny one of my most honorable junior Sentinels a perfectly healthy, viable carrier-guide just because this hot-to-trot kid told you a sob story in the waiting room."

Blair opened his mouth as if to say something else, but Jim cut him off with a raised hand and a firm look.
"Two reprieves, Blair. That's the limit. No more."

They were in the car, nearly back to the tall concrete tower that Blair was starting to recognize as home, and the guide was thinking about pancakes and coursework and the dull hum of desire that kept pulsing through from Jim's side of the bond when Jim's comm rang and everything changed again.

"Ellison." the Sentinel answered briskly, cutting Blair off in the middle of an explanation of the potential health benefits of fried kale. Then: "Shit. I'll be there in ten minutes."

Jim closed the connection, his fingers gripping the steering wheel with a ferocity that Blair had seen just earlier that day, in the fight at the clinic. Its reappearance now frightened him.
"Jim, what is it? What's happened?"
Jim shook his head, and his jaw pulsed and his face nearly contorted with the effort to control his emotions. Their bond shut, abruptly.
"Nothing, Chief."

Blair felt blinded for a moment, the rage came over him so fast. He slammed both hands into the dashboard, startling Jim.
"No! No!" he slammed a fist into the dash again, harder this time. "No, man, no way. You don't get to do this. Not my whole life. You can't just…just cut me out of everything. You don't tell me you're an Alpha, you don't tell me what's going on, you don't tell me anything!"

Jim's countenance shifted again, from anger to shock, as Blair went on.
"I'm your partner, Jim, don't you get that? I'm your Guide, your buddy, your other half, your soulmate, your equal! I have your back and you have mine. And I'm pretty sure -- correct me if I'm wrong here, since I guess I missed a class when I was 17 that makes me unqualified, but I'm pretty sure that if you're the Alpha Sentinel, I'm the Alpha Guide. I'm not a goddamn child and I'm not a goddamn pet! Tell me what's going on!"

Jim turned to look at his Guide for a long, considering moment. Blair felt a bit sick momentarily, unsure whether the moment would explode into violence or bitterness or any of a thousand potentially troublesome outcomes. But it was out now -- it was said, and he couldn't take it back. If Jim hit him, then so be it. Blair raised his chin defiantly. Across the bond, he felt flickers of alarm, then concern, anger, interest, and finally, pride. Blair's guide preened. Jim turned his gaze back to the
"Fine, Chief. You wanted honesty, you got it. There's been another attack on the SSN. Fifth in a string of group murders, clustered in PacNor and in NoVa South. One strike in the Great Lakes. Thirteen Guides murdered to date, nine Sentinels if you don't count the ones dead of zone death when we didn't find them in time."
Blair's heart leapt into his throat.
"Someone's...attacking us?"
Jim's mouth remained set in a grim line, but he managed a dark, wry grin.
"A lot of people are attacking us."
The Sentinel gripped the steering wheel again, and the next part seemed difficult for him to say.
"But this one hit a lot closer to home."
Blair's mouth went dry.
"Where?"
Jim steered the car into a sharp left, getting onto the highway.
"Boarman's Creek."
All things considered, Blair's first time at a crime scene went surprisingly well.

"There we go, Chief. Get it all out."
Jim rubbed his guide's back with distracted gentleness, his other hand occupied with reading over the first responder's notes and his face fixed in an expression of stoic detachment. Beside him, Blair shuddered, coughed, and then dropped his forehead to the cool wood of the lookout spot's railing. Jim's hand stilled momentarily, until the Guide made a groaning sound that prompted him back into motion.

"Happens to the best of us." the Sentinel assured, and Blair rolled his head to the side just enough to glare at him.
"Ever happened to you?"
Jim shrugged.
"No, but I'm not a Guide."

Blair narrowed his eyes, then lifted his head just enough to look meaningfully over to where Rafe stood with a medical team, looking perturbed but definitively non-vomitous.

Jim folded aside the responder's notes, then followed Blair's gaze and frowned.
"Rafe's not a high-access, newly-bonded Guide with only half a year of real field training under his belt and no prior experience with crime scenes."

He slid the hand that had been rubbing Blair's back up to tangle in the under curls of his hair.
"Don't compare yourself to him." he said, gently.

Blair closed his eyes, but the sight of the four bodies in the gorge wouldn't leave him, and his mind kept running back over what Jim had said in the car. A lot of people are attacking us, Blair.

Us. Us. Our tribe.

~

Blair had been three years old when the first peace accord had been struck; it had collapsed the following year, and the Great War had raged on. He'd been four when he'd presented as a Guide, and thirteen when his mother had finally confessed to the nascent Sentinel Sovereignty registrars that she was one, too.

Then it had been all activist anti-SSN rallies and rants about Sentinel hegemony and and Naomi's vague allusions to hedonism as the most naturalistic way to live life.

Blair hadn't thought much of the SSN by then; in his 16-year-old mind, the still-forming Sentinel Sovereignty was just a bunch of annoying teachers, coercive Sentinels, and simpering Guides. So when his mother had asked him if he wanted out; when she'd met him in the kitchen, her eyes bright and shining and her face eager, with one of her friends from the outside world standing behind her, his eyes weirdly soft but hard on Blair, he'd said yes. Absolutely, yes. Anything to be free of the fascist system that thought it was fair to force Guides to take one set of classes, and Sentinels another.

He'd been so proud of himself when he'd found a college to accept him, erratic homeschooling and all -- and he'd felt invincible and 16 years old and knew he'd have all the time in the world to find a place for himself in the world. He'd been so excited, despite the constant headaches and the fact that the rain would sometimes make his skin itch and his energy feel crackly and insecure. He'd smiled at
Naomi and Steve (at least it had probably been Steve) and packed up his car himself to make the drive out to his newfound (if temporary) home.

After that, the loneliness had come.

It had settled in less as fog than as a flock of feelings; distinct little landing-points, each weighing down his wires, weakening his branches. Each one, he ignored. Each landing became felt more acutely.

But he'd rather die than go back to the SSN, as he'd proudly declared several times to the grounding group at the university and to his anthropology classmates. It was a corrupt system, based on highly contentious criteria of inclusion (this was before the existence of non-manifesting Sentinels had been conclusively proven), and he'd have no part of it. He'd taken a stand, and it had earned him at least the respect of his classmates, if not their acceptance.

Blair had never hidden his Guide-nature from anyone; in his eyes, it was the linchpin of validation for his neo-revolutionary status. He was a guerrilla fighter against minority fascism, and his Guide-nature was a badge of honor in the war (and it definitely hadn't hurt that this particular badge of honor had turned out to be a pretty reliable catalyst for getting some quick action from starry-eyed coeds).

He'd spent most of his college years in that place -- in a kind of personal limbo, wherein he was both hero and the conqueror; where he was outwardly a fire-hearted rebel and inwardly aching for the simplest kind of Guide-touch. It had taken everything in him to sublimate the urges. Drugs helped. Parties helped. Hopping bed to bed, fucking everything he could get his hands on helped. He found a pattern. He found something not-quite relief, but damned close.

But when he'd turned eighteen at a remote field station where he'd been collecting data for his senior thesis, there had been nothing to read and just three neighbors to talk to. One had been a Sentinel, stationed in a local patrol for who-knew-what reason, and although Blair had been a rebel and an iconoclast, he'd known well enough to be shy of him. Still, they had been bound together by the remoteness of place and the silent undercurrent of *tribe* that echoed in the space between them.

In that space, Rodrigo had taken to leaving Blair books -- typically to be found in the morning, lying in neat, straight lines on the doorstep of his little shared house. Looking back, Blair wondered if this had been some ersatz attempt at seduction, as presented through the lens of isolation and scholarship and a goddamn war. Or maybe it had been a simple gesture of friendship; perhaps an effort to draw him back into the fold. Four of the books had been about Sentinels; a fifth had been about birds.

Blair never knew what the sixth would have been, because Rodrigo had been killed on an SSN reconnaissance mission two weeks later, and Blair had never even learned his last name.

The books had gone with him, though - wandering widdershins around the country from bookshelf to bedside to stacks of papers to plastic containers to closets to windowsills to taped-up cardboard boxes. Blair had meant to read them, but something always got in the way. He'd picked up one once, though. It had been a dark blue book, a faded cloth cover over compressed cardboard. It had been about their history. He'd never finished it.

Then the Change had come, and Blair had been doubly cursed. It had started at home, (thank the Moon, because that would not have been fun in the middle of a lecture hall) and he had just become able to crawl to the phone to call Naomi when his roommate had walked in, taken one look at Blair on the floor and the bloodied sheets wadded up between his legs, and had run out to call a nurse. It had been just after Peace and at the height of the Union's 'It's Your Duty To Report' campaign, and the nurse had called it in straight away. Blair had been packed up and moved back home before he
could blink, and he'd only been spared the terror of national registration because of his citizenship in the SSN.

He'd been too stupid to be grateful.

So he'd filed the paperwork with the local Sentinel office and then promptly ignored his caseworker's phone calls for the next month and a half, until he graduated and he and Naomi moved again.

And that had been that. His only contact with the SSN afterward had been to check in once a year, and whatever Daryl happened to mention during their coffee meetings just off-campus. At some point, around the time he'd turned 25 and no men had shown up in black cars to take him away, Blair had started to feel free. He'd started to feel, gleefully, that he had won.

In a strange way, the SSN had been everything to Blair. It had been origin and destination, monster and machine, safe haven and sanctuary trompe l'oeil. It had been the thing that he'd misunderstood and hated and believed in and forgotten and moved around, toward, away from, but inexorably with. It had meant so much to him, curiously; been so central to his rage, his self-righteousness, his war.

So how was it possible that this…thing, this entity that was the Big Bad from his nightmares and hero dreams, the mountain he'd conquered to live a free life…was weak? Could be injured and attacked?

Last Blair had heard -- the last he could remember, at least -- the flag flew high over the SSN. Bouyed by an huge uptick in the international market for military-grade Sentinels following the Great War, the SSN had developed an economy based incredibly, but solidly, on contracting their services in localized conflict zones.

Soldiers-of-fortune turned statesmen. That was the SSN in a nutshell, and Blair hated it. He'd hated it as a child because all the dark uniforms and talk of war had frightened him; he'd hated it as a teenager because he'd seen images of the war and equated Sentinels with hypocrisy. Now, his hatred had faded into something more like acceptance.

~

Abruptly, there was a flurry of activity near one of the bodies that lay sprawled over the rocks, and Blair felt a rise of sharp energy -- anxiety and guilt and grief and anger -- and the susurrations of a large number of Sentinels working at high power nearby.

"Whoa…" he managed, before turning back to the railing to empty whatever else might possibly be left in his stomach.

When he came back up for air, Jim was gone and Rafe was standing in his place, giving Blair a wan, weakened half a smile.

"Sorry," Rafe said, with an apologetic grimace that tightened the stress lines around his eyes. "PacNor Rep just arrived; Jim had to report." Rafe tilted his head just a bit, in that slight, sympathetic way he had, and stepped forward, extending a bare hand to Blair's energy.

"But he said you're not feeling well?"
Gale.

Rafe rode next to Blair in the backseat of the nondescript gray truck as it banked down the steep hills leading away from Boarman's Creek, heading back toward the gray-black stalactite city of Central Territory.

Their driver was the same orderly elder Sentinel who Blair remembered from market day, and he inclined his head politely to both of them before setting off on his assigned course.

They approached the center of the territory, passing the now-familiar little loops of Pack family housing, nestled between smalls hills and half-emerging from copes of trees. Blair had been pressing his cheek against the cool glass of the window and feigning sleep, but he peeked out, just a little, as these passed. They always fascinated him -- these little rings of protection in which Sentinel families lived. Twenty or thirty sturdy brick homes, all facing outward from a little circle, linking arms around a safe central zone. In their interior would be a cleared space, with lines for laundry, a shared kitchen for large meals, a little clinic, a little library, a grassy field overrun with happy kids chasing a ball or swinging sticks. The older developments would be ringed with tall-grown trees, all but invisible from the road, blended into the history and landscape of this part of the Sentinel Nation.

When Blair had been younger, he'd often thought about growing up in a place like this. But they'd moved too much and too often, and Naomi had always had some friend or the other who had to come with them and those were the days when half-breeds were not understood, barely welcomed, and Blair was sure he would have felt out of place anyway.

They passed another development, busy with activity and flush with life: a mass of children playing an energetic game of tag; a toddler with a scraped knee crying in his Guide-father's arms; a window opening to vent a smoky kitchen; four middle-aged Guides taking laundry down from the lines, folding linens into baskets and laughing; an elder Sentinel taking a slow, quiet walk around the ring alone; a cat preparing to leap onto a windowsill; music, distantly heard, and someone shouting about it; two heavily pregnant Guides bent over a pram and chatting; two teenagers, thinking themselves unseen, kissing behind a tree at a little distance from the core.

It was perfect and painful and all too much at once. Blair blinked his eyes to make the scene go away, but the feeling of overwhelm didn't fade, only rose and now he could feel too much at once -- excitement, novelty, fear, acceptance, arousal, anticipation, pain, anxiety, shyness, humor, longing, anger, incipient love (a dull, throbbing feeling underlying the anxiety), confusion, loss, desire -- all happening over itself. Overlapping and overlapping and doubling and tripling and bending back and folding to a knot that wasn't right, wasn't right, wasn't -

"Blair!"

Rafe's hand on his bare arm snapped him out of his reverie, and when he looked over at the other guide, he could see that his companion's eyes were wide and his heart was racing. The truck had stopped.

"I'm OK." he said, automatically, before he even knew if it was true. "I'm OK. What's wrong?"

The elder Sentinel had turned fully in his seat to stare at Blair, and Rafe's eyebrows were knitted together in a little peak of fear. Blair frowned.

"Hey, guys, seriously -- I'm OK. See?" Blair held up both hands in a placative gesture. "All in one piece, just got a little spacey for a minute."

Rafe exchanged a perturbed look with the driver.
"You were…strange."
Blair blinked back at them.
"Strange?"
"Not right." the Sentinel said from the front.
"Different." Rafe amended, averting his eyes.
Blair gave a little chuckle to try to cover his discomfort.
"Boy, you guys really know how to make a Guide feel welcome."

Neither Rafe nor the driver laughed. They exchanged another look. Blair swallowed nervously.
"Alright, guys, you're freaking me out here. What happened? What'd I do?"

Rafe hesitated, glanced at the driver as if begging for help, then looked away.
"I don't know, really. You started to - to get lost. You got lost. I called your name. You didn't answer. It was…almost like a zone, but it - "
"But it what?" Blair asked, mouth dry.

"It felt like you'd changed." Rafe kept his eyes averted a second longer, then looked up to meet Blair's gaze. "Your eyes were different. Unfamiliar." Rafe looked uneasy, and turned so that his gaze only met Blair's sidelong. "Animal."

~

Great. That was just what Blair needed. Another reason to be weird. Honestly, Sandburg, he scolded himself, you could teach a masterclass in Making Things More Complicated.

Annoyed and still nauseated, Blair leaned against the cool steel wall of the elevator for comfort and closed his eyes, trying to ignore the awkwardness emanating from the other Guide. Rafe had been keeping a strange distance from Blair ever since the car ride -- shrinking away when Blair's attention turned to him, then drawing nearer when the other Guide turned away.

He'd resisted coming back to the loft, asking instead to be dropped off at the Medical Center to finish up some paperwork he needed to do, but the driver had calmly informed Rafe that his orders were to "carry the boys back to the Loft" and nowhere else.

For a minute, it'd looked as if the dark-haired Guide was going to argue, and his lip had curled in an expression of irritation, but then he'd sighed and sat back in his seat -- probably realizing the argument would be fruitless. Jim's orders were law, as Blair was slowly realizing. He wondered if all Packs treated their - would 'Mayor' pretty much cover it? - elected officials with such deference.

And so they'd found themselves ushered out of the truck at the entrance to the tall concrete tower, and Rafe had just stood still in front of it for a minute before shaking his head and going forward, trailing after Blair. Now, the other Guide had leaned against the far side of the elevator and was tugging near-imperceptibly at the sleeves of his black Cascade Pack sweatshirt in an expression of annoyance or anxiety -- Blair wasn't sure which.

Then the tiny bell rang announcing their arrival to the top floor, and the doors of the elevator opened to reveal Moira, waiting by the door in bare feet and rolled-up yoga pants. Blair groaned.
"Oh, man, I'm sorry. Did Jim call you?"

The infirm Guide staggered past his friend toward the kitchen, making a not-quite-beeline toward a loaf of bread that looked temptingly bland. Moira smiled that amused, indulgent smile of hers, then turned back to make her introductions to Rafe, who was shifting foot to foot just outside the doors of the elevator.
The third Guide was looking anywhere but up, and Moira took up her weight all on one hip, a sinuous drop that was equal parts raw and graceful.

"I'm Moira." she said, smiling at Rafe. He glanced up, eyes blue and anxious. She wrinkled her nose, as if trying to call down a memory from a shelf too high to reach. "I think I've seen you around the Pack before, haven't I? But I don't know that we've been introduced."

Rafe flushed a little, influenced even at a distance by her glow, by the gentleness of her bright energy. He extended a hand for a quick shake, then withdrew and stuffed it back in the pocket of his sweatshirt again.

"Yeah. Nice to meet you." he tucked his shoulders in a bit -- more a gesture of embarrassment than defensiveness; although it was that, too. "I'm Rafe." he added, hastily, and glanced over her shoulder to where Blair was making noises about finding something simple to eat.

Then Rafe's gaze scattered and tickled over the iron stairs to the left of her shoulder; to the jute runner laid over the dark wood of the hallway; to the smooth leather of the furnishings, the intricacy of the art; the incredible liquid beauty of the panther carved into glass. Moira's expression took on a hint of amusement, which she quickly tucked away behind politeness.

"Well, are you going to just stand there all day, or are you going to come and help us uncover lunch?"

Rafe glanced up, and for a moment he had the eager, unabashed eyes of a child arriving at the doors of the candy factory. Then he looked away again, face flushed.

"I haven't been -- "

At that moment, Blair reappeared from his seclusion in the kitchen; he gestured to Rafe.

"Hey, what are you doing still standing there, man? Come in, come in! Let Moira make you one of these amazing health shakes she does -- Moira, do we still have bananas for that?"

Rafe quirked a lip up in a grin and stepped forward.

"I'd love to, but my Sentinel -- "

"Ah, come on." Blair waved this concern down. "Your guy - Ethan, right? - he'll barely miss you. It's the middle of the afternoon! He's probably still on patrol. Just a quick quinoa shake, then. Something to say thank you, man, for taking care of me once again."

An expression of wonderment crossed Rafe's face, but Moira had already come up behind him, and Blair was walking on into the kitchen and gesturing with wild hands, and so he found himself caught up in the gale of their twin energies and blown on into their lives.

~!:~
Two days since Boarman’s Creek, and still no progress had been made. Secretary Plummer, head of Cascade Pack’s Communications Office, worked overtime to keep the incident out of the papers. Forensics ran every sample twice. Sentinel-Guide emissary pairs sent to Lincoln Pack returned with condolences, but no new resources. Calls to Jody Evers were aggressively unanswered. The Guide Center representatives fretted over the possibility of gender-based crime, and among it all, Representative Marshall lurked in the frantic halls of the administration complex, making disapproving faces at Jim while ostensibly awaiting his long-delayed train ride back home.

And throughout the city, it rained.

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“Where’s everyone else?” Henri asked, entering Jim’s office with his coat slung over one shoulder and a fresh cup of coffee in hand. He shut the heavy wood door behind him; across the room, Jim stood sentinel over a drafting table of photographs and reports, newspaper clippings and possible suspects.

“Sent ‘em home.” Jim grunted. “They’d had a long day.”

Henri hung his coat on the discreetly-placed rack near the exit, sipped his coffee, and said nothing. He had learned, while in the Alpha’s employ, that saying nothing was often the best approach for Jim’s most difficult moods. Instead, he simply waited. True to form, Jim paced another minute more, then spun around, eyes blazing.

“What am I missing, H?” he demanded, only half-rhetorically. “Three Guides - all friends - and one Sentinel boyfriend. But why them? Why come here? What do the victims have in common? I can’t figure it out, and I don’t think…”

Jim trailed off and paced again, slowing to a stop by the plate glass of the office’s major window. It was night, and beneath them, the stars of Cascade’s little house lights twinkled on and off. Jim watched for a moment, transfixed by the movement and flash. He shook himself out of it and turned back to the other Sentinel.

“We need to move on this, Henri. Now. Before word gets out that we can’t carry our own weight, can’t stop…whoever this is from invading our Pack. Before word gets out and Marshall comes back with his goons from Central.”

Henri lifted both eyebrows.

“Comes back?” he inquired.

Jim nodded, absentmindedly picking up a pen from the desk and slapping it against the knuckle of his left hand.

“Central called him in for a Southern Borderlands problem. He took off this afternoon.” Jim looked up and met his advisor’s eyes, then gave a small grin. “Why — do you miss him already?” Brown chuckled.

Jim stared at the papers for a minute, unseeing, closing his fists then opening them again. He splayed his hands across the page. His fingers felt hypersensitive; itchy.

"We need help with this. Experts. Our Forensics guys are good, but…this kind of thing is beyond their scope. We need to call someone in."

Henri crossed his arms over his chest in a gesture of respectful defiance.
"With all due respect, Jim, we can't pull in outsiders on this one. We don’t want word of this leaking any farther than it has to; this kind of thing will only weaken our standing in the international community. SSN’s too fragile; the Union can't know what's going on."

Jim scoffed.

"I wouldn't be surprised if the Union was behind what's going on."

Henri held his hands out and shrugged.

"Lab results say Sentinel, Jim."

Jim shot out an exhale that was mostly a growl.

"I know what they say, H."

A solemnness came over them, over the room. Henri closed a file.

"I'm sorry, Jim." the younger Sentinel said, and it was so sincere and so heartbreaking that Jim’s panther chuffed and butted heads against the black wolf. Jim stood, crossed to where the other man stood and patted his shoulder.

"We all are."

A knock disturbed their memento mori reflections; Henri shook away from Jim and straightened his back, a clear tell that he was listening into the hallway.

“Come in, Joel.” he greeted, and his wolf sniffed and disappeared into a shadow.

The genial, portly man entered the room briskly, but without his usual aplomb. His face was blanched and his trench coat dripped inconsistent rainwater onto the Klagetoh rug. His right hand held an ineffective hat, and his left was squeezed tightly closed.

“Jim.” he said, pausing to catch his breath - and perhaps, prepare himself - “Wire just came in from Central. Great Falls got hit tonight — noise bomb went off in the middle of a crowded playhouse.” Henri swore. Jim’s eyes went cold.

“A massacre.”

Joel shook his head, still not meeting either Sentinel’s eyes.

“Some kind of malfunction. No casualties.”

Relief flooded into Jim as acutely as if he’d had his own head lifted from the lunette.

“And?” Henri demanded, and Jim saw that the other Sentinel was alert, primed, almost aggressively poised to hear the incursions of further information.

“And there are two witnesses.”

Rafe and Jim were both immediately on alert; Jim’s eyes flashed.

“Where?”

“Great Falls HQ. I told them we can get down there tonight, lend a hand to the Alpha’s team.”

Jim was already past Joel, shrugging into his jacket.

“Any suspects in custody? Any ideas about motive? Any idea who’s behind this? Tell me this thing’s contained; if we’re looking at a psychopath with a grudge, this is probably the time to find him. The bomb thing is new; he’s inexperienced if he made a mistake. We can — “

“Jim.”

Jim stopped, one hand halfway to the door.

Joel exhaled and lowered his gaze to his shoes. Jim waited for a moment, then prompted: “We don’t have all night, Taggart. It’s four hours to Great Falls, and I’d like to have some facts before I go.”

After a long, regretful moment, Joel met Henri’s eyes, then Jim’s. A chill ran along the Sentinel’s spine, chase by that prickly feeling of fur breaking skin and the anger that came after it.

“Who is it, Joel?”

The silence in the room was thick; the distant sound of rain, clattering along the roof, filled the space.

“Taggart! Tell us, goddamnmit!”
Joel shook his head, closed his eyes.
“It’s not one man, Jim.”
Silence.
“It’s…a network of them. A spiderweb.”
“Who.”
Jim’s voice was flat, low and curdled. Joel hesitated, looked out the distant window to the shadowy, flickering outline of Cascade.
“They call themselves The Purity.”

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“What in the hell was that, princess?”
On the close end of the line, the caller cringed.
“You know I don’t like it when you call me that. It’s not funny.”
“It wasn’t a joke.” Stormclouds; lightning snapped. Then: “You could have jeopardized everything we’ve been working for these last six years. You do understand that, don’t you?”
“It wasn’t my fault. Something was wrong with the set.”
“Excuses, excuses. It’s never your fault, is it?”
The sting was painfully felt; the retort was hot, sharp.
“Never yours, either.”

The regret was immediate.

“What’d you say to me?”
A cold, frightened silence, then:
“Nothing. I’m sorry.”
“Did you interrupt me?”
“No, I - “
“Did you talk back to me?”
“No, Theo, I - “
“Who?”
“…no, Sentinel.” Quietly said.

There was more silence, and over the line, Theo’s rage simmered and striped and gnashed its teeth. Then there was that tone again, that flatness; that casual wisp of warning at the edge of sheer destruction.

“You know,” the Sentinel said, drawing his words out, “I don’t like it when I have to punish a Guide.”
“I didn’t - “
“I don’t like it when I have to punish you. I don’t like it at all.”

Stillness. Be still and he can’t see you.

“Please don’t, Theo, please don’t, I’ll — “
“I F***ING DECIDE WHAT YOU’LL DO!” the Sentinel exploded, then drew back, regained his control.
More silence.
“I’m trying to be good.” the caller whimpered, desperate and resentful and terribly, terribly afraid. The Sentinel sighed like some long-suffering father of a wayward child.
“I know you are, sweetheart. I know you’re doing the best you can. It’s not your fault you’re weak. You need a Sentinel, and you’ll have one soon. Not much longer, now.”

Hopefulness.
“I can stop soon?”
The Sentinel’s voice was gentle, reverent.
“We can all stop soon.”

~:~

“We need a specialist, Jim. Our boys are good, and the guys from Central and Great Falls are even better, but this isn’t exactly our forté. It’s not an everyday crime, you know, and we thought the Purity was wiped out 20 years ago. We need someone who knows this kind of thing.” Joel reasoned, hands held outward, beseeching or soothing or something in between.

Henri stepped in front of the Alpha Sentinel, shaking his head.
“No outsiders.” he repeated, beginning to sound like a broken record. “No nulls.”
Joel opened his mouth to argue, but Jim held up a hand.
“I’m sorry, Joel. But H is right. It’s not safe.”
Joel shrugged his shoulders.
“Alright. Then we call an expert from the Pack. Just name the guy and I’ll find him, Jim.”

Jim looked over his shoulder at Henri; the other man shrugged and made a little moue of helplessness. Jim furrowed his brow and glared down at the truck keys clutched in his right hand. Thought about the war. Thought about the dead kids at Boarman’s Creek. Thought about their nation, their little precious egg. Thought about love. Thought about Blair.

"Hey, what about that kid, Daryl?"
Henri raised an eyebrow.
"What about him, Jim?"
"His father's some kind of a specialist in this stuff, right? I remember reading the file after the fight — criminal profiler. Professor. His dissertation, early work — it was all on the Purity. ‘Capacity Reduction of an Organized Subversion Movement’ or something. Something unique about it, too; some kind of behavioral mumbo jumbo or something.”
Henri didn't respond, just looked worried, but determined.
"I think he's still in custody.” Jim went on. “If not, find him at home.”

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Professor Banks was less than impressed with the Pack envoy that arrived, at 10:26 p.m., to extract him from his small two-story condominium in Pack housing on the southwestern side of Cascade (small, but now too empty without Daryl’s music blasting from the other room and shoes scattered over the floor) and bring him up to the top floor offices of the Administration headquarters, downtown.

He was much less than impressed by the heavy green folder that was pressed into his hands; by the brief, stilted explanations of his handlers; by the growing suspicion that he would be working pro bono on what he could only presume was a particularly intractable case.

Professor Banks was considerably less than impressed by the rumpled, unshaven figure presented to him in the form of Jim Ellison, Alpha Sentinel of the Cascade Pack and Protector of the PacNor Region.

“I haven’t seen a sorrier sight since my hazing days at Hudson.” Banks said, settling into the chair he’d been offered and retrieving a cigar from the inner pocket of his trench coat. “And I pledged Full Territory Patrol. So that’s saying something.”

Jim’s jaw twitched.
“Thank you for coming, Professor. I -”
“Please, call me Simon.” he patted his pockets to find a matchbook. “You help a man win a fight, you call him by his first name.”
Jim inclined his head slightly.
“Simon. Please call me Jim.”
“I’d intended to.”
For the first time in days, the corner of Jim’s mouth quirked up in half a smile.
“Glad we’ve got that settled, then. And since we’re all on the same team now, I’ve got something I’d like to show you.”

~:~
Blair rolled over for the thousandth time, lifted Jim’s old watch from the bedside, and checked the time. Nearly midnight, and no sign of his Sentinel.

The skylight dripped starlight into the loft’s sleeping rafter; downstairs, the dim glow of the hallway lamp kept company with the curves of the panther of the glass wall.

Not that he needed his Sentinel to sleep. Blair wasn’t one of those Guides, after all. But it would have been nice to hear the thud of the big guy’s feet across the hardwood, catch a whiff of his comforting alive-scent, hear him drop his keys into the little basket Moira had placed there to keep scuffs off the table, feel his arms wrap around Blair once, bare and strong and a bit too tight for true comfort.

It felt too quiet in the apartment, and lonely in a strange way.

The day had been short, but slow; he’d woken late to a note from Jim and the elder Sentinel driver waiting in the front room. After dropping in to the University, he had delivered paperwork for his registration to the Guide Center and waited bitterly through yet another exam. Moira had met him at Haven for lunch, and Rafe had stopped in briefly, but had fled at Evan's call. Feeling overburdened and unexpectedly vulnerable, Blair had seen Moira off to Ken’s eager arms, then called the driver to go home himself. It had been late afternoon then; Blair had settled down with the radio and his notebooks, done some typing, and caught up on the latest journals. In a flurry of domestic overexcitement, he’d cooked a nice dinner and done a bit of straightening up. Taken the laundry into the bathroom for washing; unpacked the small garden of duffel bags he’d tossed on the bedroom floor; put things back in their proper place.

Then there had been hours of nothing. He’d sent the driver home to his own family. Darkness had fallen; he’d dressed for bed.

Unbidden, Blair thought of the spatula, and felt jealousy and embarrassment and a clear, biting snap of anger. It retreated almost immediately, and Blair got an empty feeling instead; a back-swelling of emotion. He checked the watch again.

He wished he could kick himself.

Angrily, he turned, slapped his pillow around, and settled determinedly into the middle of the bed to sleep.

When his energy began to itch, giving him that antsy-strange-chalky feeling just under his skin, he glared at the wall until the urge sublimated. He’d been fine for years without a Sentinel. The hell if he was going to need one now.

~:~
Blair tried to sleep, but sleep didn’t come easy with the bond-gap zipping and snapping away in his head. Unconsciousness felt like a maze; he tried first one door, then another — all to no avail. Jim wasn’t behind any of them. He wandered through a craggy forest; sprained a paw on an unseen ferret hole. The room spun backwards. He was a child, whimpering in his bed. There were broken dishes; then violent words, then the splatter-paint white red sound of people shouting, and he covered his senses and tried to cower. His mother’s anguish felt like burn marks on his skin; he cried out and was silenced.

Somewhere, distantly, the drip-drip drop of the canopy beat out a forest rhythm that called his name.

Blair woke up, wet between his legs and gasping for breath.

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He was still there, lying in the dark with his eyes staring unseeing at the skylight and his arm sprawled into the place where Jim would be, when the phone rang. Across the clear, dark silence of the apartment, it cut like a yellow blade; Blair’s teeth ached with the startle. He couldn’t discern its origin at first; felt around in the dark like a cat, then crawled to the end of the bed and found it on the shelf.

Wakefulness hadn’t come upon him yet; he cringed at the cold receiver when it touched his skin and squeezed his eyes closed, trying to preserve some sense of insensibility. Who could this possibly be, calling at such an hour? Who would be looking for him? Who would notify him? Common sense told him that only bad news came in the middle of the night, but Blair didn’t think that true; late-night calls were good calls — Blaaaaaar! Come to the party. — Hi, honey, my flight’s just landed and I can’t wait to see you. — I’m alive, sweetheart, and I’ll be home soon. The Laureth Prize, he’d heard, only rang in the middle of the night.

“…hello?”
“Blair, it’s me.”

The line was gray, and instinct came before understanding.

“Mom? Where are you?”
A pause on the other end of the line.
“No, Chief, it’s me.”

A habit formed early in life and never broken slipped out before he could stop it; the urgent concern of his earlier years burst forth.

“Are you coming home tonight?”

There was a pause, and Blair felt once again that sinking-sucking feeling of an answer known, but not believed. He steeled himself for the break.

“No, Chief, sorry. We got a lead on the deaths at Boarman’s, and we’re headed down to Great Falls Pack to investigate.”
Jim’s voice was sincerely mournful; Blair, in his half-behind-the-banana-leaf state, could not possibly have recognized this.

“Oh.”
“But I’ll be home in the morning. As soon as I can.”
“Before noon?”
“Before noon.”

There hung a space in the air between them; a pause of words unsaid, of a script unwritten or perhaps rehearsed poorly.

“Oh.”
“I’ll be home soon, Chief. Sorry.”

Blair shook his head; he was awake, suddenly; violently awake and the world was in colors of rainfall and absence.

“It’s fine. I’ll see you then.”

Jim swallowed; his side of the bond-gap burned, singed him, and he tried to reach out a little through it, toward Blair, not pushing but not ignoring, just a gentle nudge. Briefly, Blair’s energy enveloped him.

“I’ll see you in the morning, Chief.”

And then the phone was clicked-silent-off, and Blair felt a feeling like the last minute before the applause, like the long breath the priest takes before the benediction, like the bending of the chair beneath the arm of the officer who’s come to tell the bad news. He shivered, then set away the receiver, crawled backwards, and returned to the night.

In the driver’s seat of the Cascade Pack van, Jim gripped the steering wheel and glared at the lights on the road ahead of him. No one spoke. He felt a feeling like hunger, and then need. He drove.

~:~

Blair woke up to an empty loft and the radio playing quietly in the kitchen like he’d left it, tuned to the local university station instead of the SSN broadcast.

He found Jim’s old blue bathrobe, put it on, decided it was wretchedly dirty, and shoved it into the pillowcase he was using as a makeshift laundry sack.

Downstairs, the kitchen still had food and he still didn’t feel like going in to the university, and so he sat down in Jim’s office and filled forms that required his Sentinel’s signature for twenty minutes or so while the coffee cooked.

He climbed the stairs with his mug, took one look at the bare bed and the few bags still remaining to be unpacked, and decided he wanted none of it. Feeling mopish, he took stock of himself.

Naomi was missing. Jim was gone. Moira was no doubt sick of him, and every other friend he’d had was separated from him, either by distance or ideology. His energy burned in a sharp, queer way. He rubbed his belly.

He fell asleep on the couch in the main room for an hour; when he woke, the sun was heavy in the sky and peering through mist. He got up and went to the shower.

~:~

The water of the shower felt precious and hot; Blair ran his hands through the mixed-up strands of his hair and reveled in the decadence of being completely wet. This was something his ancestors hadn’t enjoyed, he thought. Water had been cold for them; always cold, and always a risk. This was
good, hot, clean. He tilted his forehead back, got some of it in his eyes. Warm.

Footsteps in the hall that he felt before he heard; he suppressed his alarmed reaction and relaxed into Jim’s touch.

Jim was already hard and didn’t have words to ease his reentry into Blair’s life. His hands looped around Blair’s belly, stroked lower to rub over his cock; not curious, just sure, assuring. Wet and slicking, hands slid across his shoulders, went up his neck, down his ass, between the meat of legs to his knees — everywhere, checking, confirming. Moira had warned him about reunions; it was a good thing he was clean, and the house had held only him for hours.

A hand on the back of his neck was a command; he spread his legs for balance and leant over. Jim growled (as much as the coursing stranger was Jim) and took his rightful place; he thrust and jabbed at Blair, more a test than an entrance.

Blair turned his head and tried to bite away the buzz-roar-spurring of the bond-gap, but it would not be ignored. His inner Guide flexed, stretched her muscles, flipped her tail up to avoid the nuisance. Blair hated her, hated her silence, hated her grey pelt that looked like the rain, hated his loneliness.

Then Jim was inside him and despite himself, Blair was swept away.

~

When they came out of it, the water was beginning to run lukewarm. Jim reached around him to shut off the taps; Blair stopped him and turned them hotter, tried to preserve the time. He found shampoo and soaped his hair; from the opposite end of the shower, Jim watched him in fascination. Blair turned his back.

“You can’t just do that, you know.”
Jim tensed, although Blair couldn’t see it.
“Do’ what, Chief?”
“Leave me like that.”
Jim adjusted his jaw.
“I had business, Chief. Work. It’s the thing that keeps this town running. I can’t exactly play hooky.”

It came out as an insult, for reasons that were unclear to Jim. He cleared his throat. “And anyway, it was an emergency situation. I didn’t exactly have time to check in with you about it.”
Blair felt actual pain from that; a jellyfish sting of words.
“You called Simon.”
“He was essential to the case.”

Another strike.

“Did H call his guide?”
“I doesn’t have one.” Jim shifted impatiently.
“But you do.” Blair reminded him, or pleaded with him to remember.

Jim felt guilt and discomfort and crossed his arms over his chest to alleviate them both.
“It was a simple overnight exercise, Blair, and if you think — “
“I think you should keep your fucking promises, man.”

There was quiet, save the soaping of Blair’s curls and the beginning of a war.

“Blair, I have obligations — “
“You said you wouldn’t leave me behind.”
“I never promised you — “
“You said I was your partner. You agreed.”
"I know I did, and I -- "
"You promised you wouldn’t leave me out anymore."
“I did, but I meant when — “
“You said that I could trust you.”

Jim shoved off of the wall; his arms slipped over the tile. His face was reddened, splotchy beneath the water.

“You *can* trust me, Blair, but that doesn’t mean — “
“It doesn’t mean anything, so far as I can tell.”

Then Blair was looking him directly in the eyes, a wolf on the ridge and a thoughtless, loping partner and Jim lost all sense of dignity and could suddenly think only of losing him, of the cold nights and utter loneliness and he lost control of himself.

“Blair, I had obligations, and I cannot — “
“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ve heard all the excuses, Jim. You think this is the first time — “
“Blair, I don’t want to talk about this.”
“— anyone’s said something they didn’t mean, made a promise they couldn’t live up to, forgotten —“
“Blair, this isn’t the time.”
“— their partner’s feelings, forgotten the fact that other people count, too, man and you can’t just pretend they don’t; you can’t just — “
“BLAIR!”

Jim slammed his hand, flat-palm serious, against the white tile; it cracked under the force of him. Blair jumped, then froze; stared at the tile under Jim’s hand, cracked in a way that was too close, too familiar, and those blue eyes that Jim had seen across the parking lot glazed over and Jim was pained and regretful and angry all at once.

“Blair,” he began, trying to be calm, but the panther was arisen in him now and he felt he had gold eyes and an inability to back down. “I’m the Alpha!” he snarled and leaned forward, braced by the broken wall. “Do you have any idea what that means?”

Blair’s eyes were still on the tile; with some effort, he dragged them up to meet Jim’s.

“Yeah, Big Guy, I got it.” the Guide snarked, and his eyes were the blue and hard eyes he’d had with his mother’s boyfriends in childhood. “It means you’re in charge.”

Jim snarled, curling his fingers in toward his palm.

“It means that these people belong to me, and I belong to them. It means that I am here to protect them. I am responsible for their health, their lives, their safety. I am not just their leader, I am their….” Jim lapsed into non-speech, failing to find a word that conveyed what he meant. Blair rolled his eyes.

“You’re their Alpha?” Blair prompted, and Jim nodded.

“I am their Alpha Sentinel, Sacred Leader, Holy Protector of the City. And my authority is absolute.”

The moment that followed was one of the stillest Jim had ever known. Blair shook his head.

“But you’re — “
“The Alpha, yes.”
“No, I mean — that’s crazy. How could — “
“Modern people live like that? It’s just our way, Blair.”
“But what if you — “
“Go mad? Then my second-in-command will kill me, and take over the Pack.”
Blair gaped, then drew his jaw up tight. He bit his tongue, then released it.

“But you’re — “
“You have no idea,” Jim hissed, suddenly seeing black and rouge and feeling an aching pain of a bond too quickly made and not deeply forged, “…what I am.”

Blair was near him, but far; his voice loomed from too far away, his scent was off. Jim growled and released and tried to get a hold of himself, dragged his hand away from the wall to touch his chest, try to ground him. He took in seven gasping breaths, pushing back his anger, pushing away the pain, thinking only of his duty, his love, his obligation.

When he had the pieces of himself re-framed into a man again, he looked up at Blair. But Blair wasn’t looking at him; the Guide had gone pale, his hair slicked back and dark in the cooling water, his gaze irretrievably on the white tile of the shower wall where Jim’s hand had been.

Four thick gash marks had broken the tile.

~!~
Made a little update to add a missing scene between Simon and Jim.

There were long minutes when Blair's heart raced, blood pounding through his veins and he saw stars, then grayness, then a dull white. His anima stood up and howled, her shoulders lifted, green fire in her eyes, and Blair felt that overwhelming sense of weakness, of inadequacy, of fear, of —

“Blair! Don’t freak out.”

Jim held both hands up to his Guide, pleading. The younger man jumped backwards, almost tumbling over the lip of the shower in his evasion of Jim’s touch. The Sentinel wiggled his fingers and turned his hands over, then back.

“See??” he said, a desperate tinge to his voice, "All normal. See?"
“Whoa, man.” Blair’s voice wavered as he leaned away from his Sentinel. "Blair, it’s fine. It’s fine, it’s just - “
"Whoa, man!” the Guide repeated, his voice growing higher in intensity. “Whoa whoa whoa, man!”
“Blair,” Jim began, trying to use his Sentinel voice, “I don’t know what you think you saw - “
“What I think I saw?!” Blair demanded, disbelieving. “I saw your fuckin’ hands change, Jim! Claws, man, real claws — not the metaphysical, in-my-other-vision, channeling kind. Real fuckin’ claws, Jim!”
The Sentinel tried to placate again.
“It’s just a little thing that sometimes — “
“There’s nothing ‘little’ about this, Jim! What was that?! What are you?!”

As soon as Blair said it, he regretted his words, hearing them through the sharp, disgusted tones of people he’d once loved. But the words were out, and now Jim’s tone was flat, small, despairing.

“...I don’t know what I am.”

They stood there, in the rapidly cooling water, all thoughts of everything else — love, costs, vehicles, paper forms, classes, companions, necessary clinic visits and elective social events — slipping away forgotten while they picked together over the pieces of what this could mean.

Blair considered his options. He could run away now, that was for sure; not even the SSN would make him stay bonded to a —

Not knowing how to finish the sentence, Blair let it hang in his mind.

It was irrelevant, besides, exactly what Jim was. At the end of the day, his condition was bizarre enough to be an out... and if Blair just fought hard enough, bent his morals enough, humiliated his Sentinel enough, went to the SSN and made a fuss and talked about abominations and genetic errors and expressed concern for the future of the Pack and said the right buzzwords and laid Jim out on the chopping block like a fucking sacrifice to Blair’s self-interest —

It wasn’t going to happen.
Blair’s anima knew before he himself did; she slapped her tail once, side to side, and settled down. The edges of the bond sizzled light yellow and warm at the periphery of his mind. The Guide lifted his eyes to Jim.

“Alright, Big Guy.” Blair ran a nervous hand through his hair, feeling damp and wrung out and like half a guide in a whole guide’s body. “I can try to help you.”

The Sentinel’s head jerked toward his Guide, and Blair felt a push of lavender-yellow-cut-grass anticipation through the bond and laughed a short, mirthless laugh. "Yeah, don't get excited yet. I've got some terms."

The Sentinel adjusted his stance, uncomfortably.

"Something's gotta give here, Jim. You've gotta respect me, man. And you've got to trust me.”

Jim looked at him through eyes that were gray and hopeful and afraid and something catacorner to love.

“I do.” he said, and Blair blinked away a silly thought.

“Good. Then — “

A ringing telephone (that permanently uninvited dinner guest) interrupted them from the outer room, breaking the shell of their golden détente space, and Jim groaned but slopped out of the bathroom and slunk off dutifully to answer it.

When the Sentinel reappeared a minute later, he was pulling a t-shirt pulled hastily over his still-wet shoulders, boxers clinging to his damp thighs and jeans halfway up his hips.

“Alright, Chief. That was your friend Simon.” Jim cast one critical eye over his guide, then shook his head. “He says some new intel about the murders at Boorman's came in this morning. Thinks he might be ready to make some arrests.”

Blair’s eyes shot up into his hairline. Jim fastened his jeans, grabbed a towel from the nearby heated rack and handed it over to Blair.

“And since I'll need someone to watch my back until I get this whole…” he glanced at the broken tile, then away, “…thing figured out…”

Blair stood up very straight and shut the water off, then took the towel. Jim cast one more hungry, sidelong glance at his guide before turning his attention back to fastening his jeans.

“If you still want the job, you’ve got it. You can come with me today.”

~:~

The crisp, gray morning felt like afternoon to Cavish O'Hare, who opened one eye, closed it, and rolled over to sleep. If the sun wasn't getting out of bed, then neither was he. He felt more content than he had in ages; he had his mate (finally), a safe place to nest, enough food to eat, and no obligations for the next three days. What in the hell should he bother getting out of bed for?

"Get the hell out of bed, O'Hare."

Cav startled fully awake and bolted upright in a panic, arms flailing in the linens as he checked around frantically for his Guide.

“Daryl is safe. He's in the kitchen, talking with Blair." Cav's eyes shot to the closed bedroom door, and he extended his senses to check. Yes - there was his guide’s heartbeat, steady and calm. And the sound of the radio, and the smell of eggs and bread.

Reassured, the Sentinel relaxed. Then he tensed again, because he was naked and unshowered and tangled in three-week-old bedsheets and Jim Ellison, the Alpha Sentinel of the Cascade Pack was glowering down at him.
Jim stared for a long minute.
"The doctors tell me you’re fully settled and recovered from your bonding ordeal."
Cav swallowed.
"Yes, sir." the young Sentinel glanced down at himself again, eyes darting nervously. "Alpha Ellison, I - I'm sorry, I didn't realize you would - would be - if I have known you'd be here, I'd - sorry, I - um. Well, shit." Jim's glare became more potent and Cav barely kept himself from recoiling.
"I'd at least have put on pants, sir."
Jim cut straight to the point.
"Were you aware of what bond neglect trauma could do to a guide, Sentinel O'Hare?"
Cav's face flushed.
"Sir, I - "
"Because correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm pretty sure they went over it in Academy."
"I - "
"And twice a year in Postsec."
Cav swallowed.
"Sir - "
"In fact, I think I remember making personally sure that every Sentinel under my command knew just what the hell would happen if he or she neglected a Guide in bond crisis."

Cav gritted his teeth, his cheeks red with embarrassment and just an edge of challenge.
"I didn't mean to hurt him, sir; it was late, and we were both tired, and we fell asleep and by the time I realized —"
Jim's lip curled up in a snarl of disdain.
"He's your Guide; he's your responsibility." Jim leaned closer, menacing the younger man. "A Sentinel is supposed to be in control, O'Hare."
Cav felt compelled to lower his gaze.
"I apologize, Sentinel."
Jim shook his head.
"You don't owe me an apology; you owe your Guide, and you owe his father. So get up and come with me — you can work while you're making amends."
"Sir?"

Jim gave Cav a look that clearly said that any further explanation was a generosity of the Alpha Sentinel, not an entitlement of his subordinate.

"Professor Banks is in the employ of the Cascade Pack now, and as long as he's working for me, you're working for him. Get up."
Cavish's jaw dropped in disbelief. Jim glanced pointedly at his watch, then turned for the door.
"My guide and I will meet you in the car in three minutes."

~:~

They met Simon in the lobby of the Court; the big man was standing unobtrusively by the far wall, blending neatly into the scenery and finishing a mug of coffee. Jim entered first, trailed by Blair, then Cav O’Hare. As they approached, Simon handed the mug off to a passing young Guide, raised an eyebrow and set his jaw, then cast back the sides of his open suit jacket to put his hands on his hips.

"You must like testing me, Jim."

The Alpha Sentinel raised his hands appeasingly.

"Not my fault, Simon. Your son," he said, putting special emphasis on the ownership and its implicit responsibility, “Insisted on it.” Jim half-turned to look over his shoulder, “It was out of my control;
we stopped in to check on him this morning and then Daryl had this idea and got Blair involved in it, and…” he trailed off into a vague hand motion and a shrug, as if that were all that could be understood of Guides. “Listen, when your son’s unhappy, my guide’s unhappy. That’s all I know.”

Jim cast a fond look over to Blair, who was talking animatedly to Cav in hushed tones, hair flying as he gesticulated wildly. Then his gaze fell on Cav, and his expression hardened.

“So your son-in-law is here to apologize.”

Simon growled.

“The only apology I want to hear out of him comes in the form of an annulment signature.”

Jim made an ironic face.

“Well, bond dissolutions aren’t in our national interest, Simon.” he said, earning a dark glare. Jim sighed. “Listen, O’Hare is here to work for you. Make amends the traditional way. He’ll help us with the investigation: run down leads for you, bring you coffee, drive you around…whatever you want, until you release him from service. If he messes up, I’ll give you fifteen minutes in a room with his hands tied behind his back. How’s that?”

Simon exhaled long and annoyed, shifting his weight from one foot to the other.

“Do I really have a choice, Jim?” he asked, in a tone that belied his acquiescence.

The Sentinel gave an inaudible sigh of relief.

“It’ll be good, Simon. I know it’s not easy, but…he’s your son-in-law. What’s done is done. Daryl won’t leave him, and he won’t go. Maybe you should just try to get along.”

Simon gave Jim a long, long stare.

“I can’t wait until you two have kids. Then we’ll see how easy it is to ‘just try to get along.'”

Jim flushed a little more than he’d expected at that, but Simon hardly noticed; he was already pushing off of the wall again and raising two fingers to call over O’Hare.

“You! Let’s go. We’ve got work to do.”

~

“This is all the intel we've gotten out of Great Falls." Simon dropped one heavy folder on the desk beside him. "And that's all the intel we have. They’re neo-primalists. Call themselves ‘The Purity.’”

Banks crossed the room to gesture toward a pinboard of names, faces, and maps. “We thought they’d dissipated years ago, after that failed rebellion in the middle states just before the first Peace attempt.”

Jim crossed his arms and studied the board in front of him; half a dozen faces and a litany of other names were tacked up with little silver swords.

“Doesn’t look very dissipated to me.”

Banks raised an eyebrow.

“Well, not to me, either, Jim. But that’s a new development. And new developments like that typically mean one of two things — new money or new leadership.”

The four men studied the board in silence for a few seconds before Blair piped up.

“Neo-primalists?”

Simon cast an uneasy look at Blair, then back to Jim; the Sentinel shrugged and Simon frowned, but spoke.

“They’re lunatics." he said simply, pursing his lips. "Claim to be looking out for the rights of Sentinels, but it’s a short walk from there to Sentinel-Guide supremacy. They say we have to protect ourselves from the rest of the world; some load of hooey about being too distant from our animal natures. They even want to dismantle Central Command, for working too closely with an 'inferior genetic line.' That's their thing: non-expressives are an evolutionary dead-end, and Sentinels are the future of humanity."
Blair's eyes widened.
"But that's crazy!"
Simon gave a resigned sigh.
"Just crazy enough to amass a couple thousand radical followers back before the SSN was strong enough to shut them down."

Blair went silent, mind working overtime, and Jim spoke up again.
"And they're responsible for the attacks?"
Simon lowered his gaze.
"We believe so." he glanced over to where Joel Taggart was clenching his hat in his hand by the door, looking mournfully down at the ground. Simon exhaled, then went on. "They've got some new manifesto floating around; our guys down in Great Falls got their hands on a copy of it that came up from the Big Bowl. It's not pretty. Calls for complete separation from the nons."

Compelled to speak, Blair interrupted again.
"And if we can't separate? If we won't?"
Here, Simon ducked his head as if embarrassed or horrified or appalled by his own next words.
"Then the alternative is that we exterminate them."
Blair sucked in a breath.
"The kids at Boarman's Creek…"

Simon raised sad, tired eyes to meet Blair's again, then slid a file across the table toward he and Jim.
"Three Guides. Two were pregnant, and each of their partners was a non-Sentinel."

Tears bit at Blair's eyes, but he held them back, determined not to look weak in front of Jim, not on his first day.

"And the other Guide and Sentinel?"
Simon heaved a sigh; his shoulder slumped.
"Collateral damage."

~:~

"And HOW LONG should we be subject to the false laws of so-called mankind? HOW LONG should we be shackled by the rules of a civilization that we NEVER BUILT? This is not our lot, friends! This is not OUR DESTINY! We were born to be free, to RUN WILD IN THE PURE WIND, to feel the earth at our feet and the sun on our shoulders! Let them have their bookkeepers and lawyers and all the prissy little things they make to shelter them from the REAL WORLD! We are not afraid. We are Sentinel. WE ARE REAL."

Here, he paused to let the wild cheering dwindle down.

"We are REAL. We are WILD. And we are the KINGS OF THIS EARTH! It is our RIGHT to fight and hunt and hunger and BREED. No more of this WEAK, FALLEN, FALSE society. The nulls don’t understand us. They don't feel what we feel; they don't taste what we taste; they don't see what we see; THEY DON'T LOVE WHAT WE LOVE! Long ago, we were the same, but now I STAND APART! You stand apart! WE ARE SENTINEL, and THIS WORLD IS OURS!"

The crowd burst into raucous applause, hooting and whistling, and Theo Marin took two deep bows to the tune of his admirers chanting, ‘All Land Is Sentinel Land!’
He waved triumphantly to them, shook the sweat-soaked strands of his shaggy, dark hair back from his face, then stepped off the rickety stage. Immediately, his handlers and publicist and several starstruck admirers rushed over to surround him, each talking over the other. Theo smiled at them all, shook their hands with his wiry, strong forearms, and signed a paper or two before slipping beyond
the rope barrier guarded by three large Sentinel bodyguards.

With his publicist chattering from his left, the inaugural head of the new Purity Movement headed back into the bowels of the little building that served as their current meeting-house. As he passed the viewing room off to the right side, the Guide who had been waiting for the group to approach fell into pace behind him. Theo turned, caught sight of him, and offered a broad smile that made the Guide’s heart skip a beat.

“Sweetheart. There you are.”
The Sentinel looped one sweaty arm around the guide’s shoulders, squeezing the smaller man into his space before nuzzling the crook of his jaw. The Guide bared his throat immediately, nearly tripping over his own feet in an effort to keep up with the striding Sentinel who held him. Theo grinned and growled low in his throat, nipped the pink skin of the Guide’s neck. “Now,” he whispered, eyes hungry and delighted, “Wasn’t that lovely?”

~!~
Simon was in the front seat for this ride, paging through a folder while Jim drove and pulled frustrated faces at the traffic, checking on Blair constantly in the mirror. Although he mostly ignored the young Sentinel who was his latest assignee, he spoke loud enough for everyone in the car to hear.

“So this morning, we got a call from a Guide, telling us she’s got information about what happened at Boarman’s Creek. And I’m betting even about the noise bomb down in Great Falls.”

Jim’s face took on a slanted glow, a golden side-structure, as he navigated the truck down the narrow streets of downtown Cascade under the light fog of late morning, where gray twilight finally gave way to a brighter day.

“She was terrified to come up to Headquarters; wouldn’t even consider setting a foot in the Round House. I had to promise her complete anonymity and a safe meeting location.”

Jim grunted and the truck turned left at the park that Blair recognized from recent familiarity. Sunlight burst through the window on Blair’s side; his skin ached with the burning nearness of Guide-power. Across the seat, Cav O’Hare was staring out the window, thoughtful or thoughtless or transfixed; Blair wasn’t sure. He considered reaching out with his Guide-touch, opening his empathy to uncover the answer, but felt too shy to try anything — not with Jim watching and a new person and the half-assed training he’d had. He’d probably singe Cav’s senses. When he came back to the conversation in the truck cab, Simon was still briefing Jim on their informer.

“…says her husband’s part of some neo-primalist gang right here in Cascade; she wants protection in exchange for her testimony.”
“Protection? She’s that scared of him?”
“Not for her; for her daughter.”
“Her daughter?”
Simon met Jim’s gaze and held it.
“Girl’s pregnant. And, if this is related to what we found out about those two Guides at Boarman’s, I’m guessing the little sweetheart’s partner isn’t someone Daddy would approve of.”

~

The Guide Center was a stout stone building located in the heart of the city and surrounded on all sides by yards of pretty landscaping — and an 8-foot stone-and-iron fence.

Like Haven, the Center practically shouted its importance: tall walls, Sentinel guards in watchtowers at the fence perimeter — the whole shebang. If Blair hadn’t found it annoyingly obvious, he might have even been fascinated at the performance.

But even if it had been housed in a cardboard box, the Center still would have given itself away; it vibrated with energy, syrupy and laconic and sucking-down warm enough that Cav shuffled in his seat and adjusted himself with a subtle press of his hand to his cock. Blair, embarrassed, turned his attention to his window and pretended he hadn’t seen it.

Jim parked reasonably for once, in a polite space across the street from the main gates, then got out
quickly and began leading his ragtag investigative team toward the building. Blair hesitated by his door, eyes flickering over the gates, over the too-high wall, over the distant stone building with an impersonal facade, over the consideration of lives unlived, places that he’d known-but-not-known. “Chief! You coming?” Jim called from where he’d stopped in the middle of the street, his voice casual but abrupt. “Coming!” Blair called back, and nearly tripped off the curb in a rush to catch up with his Sentinel.

Inside the Center they were greeted at the front desk by a pretty, black-haired girl with a trail of star tattoos across the left side of her face. She smiled warmly at them as they entered, then averted her eyes respectfully.

“Alpha.” she acknowledged Jim, then stole a glance at Blair, who was looking obliviously around the room.

The receptionist looked up briefly at Jim again, curiosity bleeding into recognition, then excitement, then unease as her suppressed energy began leaking into the space between them all. Neither Simon nor Cav spoke, although both exchanged wordless glances with the Sentinel. Jim raised an eyebrow and exhaled.

“Right, well, he knows now, so I guess the gag order’s gotten ridiculous.”

Drawn in by this curious statement, Blair looked quizzically at his Sentinel, hoping for some clue to help contextualize whatever was going on.

Jim, however, was looking between Simon and the Guide girl; eventually, he pulled Blair into a stiff embrace and said, behind an awkward cough:

“This is my Guide, Blair Sandburg-Ellison.”

The receptionist squealed and bounced up onto her tiptoes to extend both hands over the countertop, making grasping motions at Blair.

“Alpha Guide Blair, it’s so badass to finally meet you! We didn’t know if something was going on, since you hadn’t made the announcement or anything and we hadn’t even gotten official word from Central, but everyone knew that you were here, right? Like, the vibe is different now; it’s like… pinker or something, maybe? It’s outward and fresh, like what a lotus flower sounds like. You know? And it’s like - Alpha Jim, before he was all ‘grrrr’ and now he’s all ‘purrrr-grrrrr-purrrr’ and we can feel it, you know? And some of the Guides at Haven said they saw you but we weren’t supposed to say hi or anything and everyone’s been talk — um, hearing about you, but nothing for sure yet and we just had to sit here and stew in it and it’s been torture - just torture! - not knowing what you were like or whether you’d like us or anything and ohmygod I can’t believe I’m the first one who gets to greet you!”

Blair, bewildered by the spectacle of her outburst and trailing about five minutes behind everyone else in the conversation, let her capture his hands in hers; immediately, he felt the sweet warm lick of their energies crashing into each other.

“I’m Luna! I’m a first-generation Guide and this is only my first Pack, but I love it so much here that I never want to leave!” she gushed, “Ohmygod, we have the best food here, seriously we do, and the rockiest crash-house music scene in the country. And our guides are cooler than anyone’s in PacNor, and we’re smarter because Birch Bay’s, like, a really good school, and we’re allowed to do more stuff than anyone else in PacNor because our Alpha’s the best, even if in general the Sentinels here aren’t as hot as the ones in Salmon River.”

All three of the sentinels behind Blair stood up a little bit straighter, and Luna wrinkled her nose.
“Uhh…except for you guys, of course.” she said, hurriedly, then looked away from Jim’s annoyed gaze, back to Blair.

“Luna,” Jim began tiredly, “If we could just — “

“Ohmygod, the other guides are going to be so jealous that I got to meet you first! I mean, and I wasn’t even going to come in today — I only did it ‘cuz Ephraim got sick and he made me take his hours since he took mine the week my boyfriend was in town.”

“Luna - “ Jim tried, again, but the edge of Blair’s mouth was quirking up in a grin and the Guide glanced up and met his eyes with a special kind of amusement and Jim couldn’t begrudge him a few minutes to enjoy this.

“Well, it’s really great to meet you, too, Luna!” Blair said brightly, cutting off the apparently-unending flow of words and squeezing her hand where she still clung to him. “I’m lucky I came in on your shift — I don’t think I could’ve gotten a warmer welcome anywhere else.” he grinned. “And thanks for the crash course intro to the Pack. I’d love to hear more about that music scene of yours sometime.”

Luna’s eyes widened and her cheeks flushed, as if Blair’s reciprocal kindness and interest was wholly unexpected and almost overwhelming.

“Oh, anytime, anytime! Definitely! You know, I actually play in a band that — “

“Luna.” Jim growled, and his voice was pitched in that low, rumbling, way; that immovable tone; that dog-whistle to instinct that evoked a particular feeling in Guides. Blair grimaced to hear it; Luna was silent immediately.

“Sorry, Alpha.” she said, and ducked her head deferentially. Jim set his jaw.

“We’re in the middle of an investigation, Guide. Blair will be around to answer your questions later. But for now, you answer mine.”

Luna nodded obediently and Blair felt a mild wave of disgust that he split open and discovered was self-consciousness. Was this how Jim always talked to Guides in his Pack? Was this how the Sentinel had expected him to behave? All charm and energy, undercut with immediate acquiescence and stretched out over willingness-to-please? An interesting little container of charm and amusement who nevertheless did exactly as told? Blair was angry at Luna, suddenly, for the sweet way her lashes fell across her cheeks when she ducked her chin, and the way her eyes blew dark and wide when Jim said her name. He wanted to be violent; he wanted to shake her and wake her up; he wanted to run; he wanted to strike Jim. More than anything, he wanted to tell the Sentinel how he felt.

But there was no time for that now; not in the business of uncovering a predator and saving a life. Jim’s hand on his shoulder drew his attention to the fact that the Sentinel had concluded his conversation with Luna; with a quick wave, Blair was steered away from the reception desk and ahead of his Sentinel toward the hallway down which Simon had already disappeared.

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“And has he ever hurt you? Hit you, or pushed you, or struck you with an object, Ms. Ransom?”

Simon’s voice preceded him, and Blair rounded the corner expecting to see the professor sat in a chair across from their new informant, doing his typical comforting-voice-calm-gaze thing that he used with students. Blair did not expect to see another familiar face sat across from Simon Banks.

Suzanne Ransom shifted the infant in her arms, anxiously, and tapped nervous fingers against his little blue onesie-clad back.

“No, he hasn’t. But he - “ she bit her tongue, cut herself off. After a minute of deep breaths, she went on. “Fiona isn’t his daughter; she’s from my first marriage, and he - he said that she’s - he said that
Suzanne fell apart suddenly, keeling forward onto one arm and sobbing. “I don’t know why she did it, stupid girl. My stupid, stupid, stupid girl. But he’ll kill her for this. I know he will.”

“How do you know, Ms. Ransom?” Simon asked, as gently as he could manage, his face wrenched into an expression of deep concern.

Suzanne sucked in two jagged, airy breaths and pressed her infant to her chest again. She touched a trembling hand to her brow and did not meet Simon’s eyes. When she spoke, her answer was so quiet that Blair had to strain to hear her.

“Because I think he’s done it before.”

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In the lobby, Jim stopped to give instructions to the new Guide at the desk; Luna had evidently finished her shift. This one was a slim, olive-skinned young man in his early 30’s and distinctly more reserved than Luna had been. He was sitting calmly at the desk, cradling a book on his lap and wearing a tattered white Aran sweater a few sizes too large for him. He peered up shyly at the group as they approached, then looked away.

“Alpha.” he acknowledged, then: “Alpha Guide.”

So the news had traveled already, Jim supposed. Nonetheless, he grunted an acknowledgement before delivering instructions.

“Guide, I want this facility locked down for the next 2 hours until Fiona Ransom is safely booked into a temp room with her mother. Until then, no one gets in or out without the express permission of Professor Simon Banks — this gentleman right here. He’s my lieutenant on this matter until further notice, and you’ll follow his instruction to the letter, you understand?” The Guide nodded sharply, all attentive obedience and focus.

“To the letter, Alpha.” the young man responded, dark eyes meeting Jim’s, and Blair saw the Sentinel’s expression soften around the edges. Jealousy bit at him, but he pushed it down and called it annoyance.

“Very good.” Jim said. “Now, we’ve left some orders with the security personnel regarding Ms. Ransom — her daughter should be on the next train down from Birch Bay, and when she gets here, both she and her mother will be under Professor Bank’s protective custody until I say otherwise. Fiona’s not to go out and no one’s to come in to see her, understood? No Sentinels whatsoever, not even her father. That clear?”

The young Guide nodded briskly.

“Yes, Alpha.”

“If anyone suspicious stops by, asking about Suzanne Ransom or Fiona, you call Headquarters immediately. Understood?”

the Guide nodded again.

“Guide…” Jim said, his tone a warning.

“Yes, Alpha.” he said, quickly.

“Very good. Now, the only other thing - “

“Hey, does anybody smell that?!”

Four pairs of eyes turned to Cavish O’Hare, who shook his head and wrinkled his nose. “Ah, sorry, I didn’t mean to interrupt, but it - it’s so strong! It’s like…lemons, but sweeter. Man,
where is that coming from?"

The Guide behind the desk blushed to the very tips of his toes and folded his arms over himself. Jim and Simon both sighed.

“O’Hare, maybe you should wait outside.” Simon said, stepping toward the younger Sentinel. “Hang on, hang on, just a minute.” Cav sniffed the air again. “It could be something dangerous.”

“It’s not anything danger -“

“Wow, it’s like, everywhere, too. Man. Just permeating the air. Is it some kind of chemical? No, it doesn’t smell like that. Perfume? It’s uh…lemon and elderflower, I think? Man, I know this scent — it’s so…familiar.”

The Guide busied himself with sorting papers on the check-in desk and decidedly did not look up at anyone. Jim closed his eyes as if in a prayer for strength. In the hallway leading away from the desk, a small group of gathered Guides began to giggle.

“O’Hare - “
Cav’s face turned serious. “Oh, it’s weird! And it’s doing weird things to my senses, too.” Cav wrinkled his nose and began rubbing his forearms agitatedly.

“O’Hare!” Jim said, a bit more strongly, at the same time Simon took another step forward, preparing to escort the younger Sentinel outside. “It makes my skin feel…tingly.” Cav looked, alarmed, up at Jim. “Alpha, I think there’s something going on here.”

“Alright, that’s enough.” Simon said, taking Cav by the arm. “My sense of smell’s not even emergent! Do you mean to tell me you two really can’t sense it?”

Both Jim and Simon froze, and in the moment of surprise, exchanged looks that Blair wasn’t certain how to interpret. Jim recovered first.

“O’Hare, get out. You’re embarrassing yourself.” he snapped, and the stress in his voice made it come out more alpha and so Cav took a step backward, then hung his head, then beat a hasty, red-faced retreat under Simon’s close, angry watch. Blair glared at Jim for his harshness, but offered no further rebuke.

Once they were gone, Jim exhaled shortly, then turned to the Guide behind the desk. “Thank you for your help. And sorry for the - “ he glanced over at Cav. “- for our friend, here. He, uh, hasn’t learned all his Sentinel manners yet.” Jim said, and smiled winningly. The Guide gave a nervous half-grin and teased at the very end of one short coil of hair behind his left ear. “It’s no problem.” he mumbled, although he glanced once over his shoulder at the other Guides, who were still huddled in the hallway, watching curiously.

Blair felt a pang of sympathy; how many times had he been on the receiving end of those curious stares? Little bites they took out of you, no matter how hard you tried to ignore them.

“Still,” Jim continued, looking down benevolently at where the Guide had rested his book against his belly. “Congratulations to you and your mate. Is he Cascade Pack?” The Guide glanced up at him guiltily, then shook his head. “Salmon River, Alpha.”

Jim’s lip lifted in a half-grin. “Ah. Of course.” he hesitated then, wanting to let this Guide maintain at least the last shreds of his privacy and feeling out of place in asking. But Blair didn’t know any better, didn’t know it was his place to speak up, and his Guide was currently lost in his own head in that curious way he got sometimes…and so it fell to Jim to look after his Guides; he was the Alpha, and order in the Pack
mattered. Small infractions often indicated larger problems. “What was your name again, Guide?” The Guide gave it. Jim rubbed his chin. “I don’t recall seeing you listed as having submitted a bond application recently.”

The Guide flushed again, making his tanned skin turn darker. “We haven’t…done that yet, Alpha. She - the sire, um, she doesn’t know yet. She’s away on mission in Big Bowl and won’t be back for three more weeks.” His gaze became distant for a moment. “And I didn’t want to tell her by phone.”

Jim raised both eyebrows in surprise, then corrected his expression. “Well, I’m sure she’ll be thrilled. I’ll look forward to approving your expedited bond application.” The Guide nodded, and Jim lingered, his senses pricking in an unusual way. “And, uh, if you need anything, Guide — anything at all, in the way of support, you know that the Cascade Pack is here for you.” Jim said, meaningfully, and The Guide glanced up with bright, happy eyes. “Yes, Alpha.”

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Blair lagged behind Jim as they left, taking slow and measured steps until the Sentinel was forced to change his pace or else lose his Guide on the journey. The Sentinel stopped; Blair came at a slow approach. Jim felt his Guide’s eyes on him; a touch of the bond gave off vapors of determined curiosity and fear and fatigue, and Blair’s unique baseline emotional blend. When he was close enough to be understood easily, the Guide spoke.

“Gag order?”

Jim’s eyes flicked down, then to the side. “I didn’t want them to overwhelm you. The move and the bond were a lot to deal with without the drama of…this to boot.”

Blair’s brow wrinkled, just a little. “So you’re not like the mayor.”

Jim suppressed a grim smile. “No, I’m not like the mayor.” “You’re more like…the king.”


Jim’s lips quirked, and Blair was uncertain whether the expression was regret or triumph. “For the most part.”

Blair exhaled and lifted his hands to run them through his hair; Jim unwillingly tracked the pale stretch of skin on his belly that the action revealed, then forced the thought away, cornered it. The back of his neck tingled and the moon called his name. Not now, he swore at her. For fuck’s sake, not now.

“I wish you’d just told me everything at once. Getting it all in bits and pieces is - almost harder, I think. I feel like something’s always right around the corner, now. I’m on edge.”

Jim stuck both hands in his pockets and looked out across the expanse of the Center’s yard. “I did what I thought would be best for you. Easiest.”
“Yeah, I know you did, Big Guy, but I - “
“Blair, do you think we could drop this for now?” Jim asked, suddenly feeling testy and tired and angry and in no mood to have his leadership questioned.
“Fine. All I’m saying is, if you’d told me what was going on from the beginning - “
“Alright, Chief,” Jim placated, “Alright.”
Frustrated, Blair shifted his weight and shook his head.
“No, come on, don’t ‘alright’ me, man. This is the kind of big stuff I’m talking about here! We’ve got to talk it out. We’ve got to — “
“Blair.”

And there it was, again, the quick shattering of whatever illusion of camaraderie they’d built up between them.

Me, Sentinel; you, Guide. Roll over.
It stung, but Blair was still too stunned by the revelation of his position and too worried about preserving the privilege of his inclusion on the case to fight over it.

“You could’ve told me. That’s all I’m saying. I can handle it. I don’t need you to filter my life for me.” he said, firmly, then let the matter drop.

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Blair didn’t speak as they finished the long walk down the main entrance back to where Simon and Cav waited by the gates; his belly ached strangely and his energy felt sapped from the morning, the questioning, and trying to track all the strange Sentinel activity. Feeling tired, he fell a bit behind Jim and Cav in turn fell a bit behind him, sheltering in the gray of Blair’s outsized shadow.

When they reached some distance from the main building, Jim rounded on Cav.
“What do you mean your sense of smell’s not emergent?!” he demanded in a low voice. “Then how the hell could you smell that?”
Cav held his hands up helplessly.
“I don’t even know what I smelled, Alpha! But I’ve got three emerged senses: sound, sight and touch. Not scent.”
Blair cocked his head, his curiosity overriding his sense of malaise.
“Can senses emerge this late? I thought it was all at once?” All three Sentinels looked at him, then back to each other. Jim and Simon exchanged meaningful looks; Cav was churlishly silent.
“If his sense of scent’s not emergent, Jim, then…”
“It must be emerging.” Jim said, rounding again and leading the group back into a rally toward the gates of the Center. “It must be new.”
“His senses are changing.” Simon said, matching his pace.
“Expanding.” Jim corrected, his voice detached and cold.

There was a lull of silence between them, then Blair burst in.
“Well, could someone please clue the Guide in about what’s going on?”

Before Jim could answer, his phone rang again and with a single raised finger, he stepped aside to take the call. The three of them fell into a conversational stasis in his absence; they wavered in place, uncertain of direction and unwilling to activate.

When Jim stepped back, his expression had changed again from the sort of grim hope he’d had since that morning into something angrier; something unfair, unkind, quilled and poised to launch; something inhuman.

“That was Henri. Says they just stopped a vehicle heading into Cascade at the eastern border checkpoint. Suspicious behavior. Trunk search turned up four cases of Marin’s manifesto, printed up
down in Big Bowl — and a body. Suspects fled toward the east; three units are in pursuit.”

Jim hung his head a little, then lifted it again and was back into action.

“Simon, I need you here — stand guard, keep an eye out for anything suspicious, and stay close to Suzanne. If you can, organize an ambush unit to arrest Colin Ransom at his house tonight. Cav,” Jim said, then exhaled, “If you think you can refrain yourself from any more unsolicited revelations about early-stage pregnancies, you can stay here with Simon.” as an afterthought, Jim added, “And if you don’t drive him crazy, you can join that ambush unit.”

Before Blair had any time to process any of this, Jim’s gaze fell on him.

“Blair, playtime is over. You can stay here at the Center or I can send a car for you to go back to the loft. I don’t want you at University today. Not until these guys are caught. Understood?”

Blair flushed.
“I guess I don’t have a choice, do I?” the Guide ventured, his tone a blend of bitterness and capitulation.
“No,” Jim said, his eyes clear and unyielding and tinged with gold, “You don’t.”

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Chapter End Notes

Alright, and with this, we begin the short journey to the end of the story. Forty chapters. Happy times will come again -- I promise.
There's an (increasingly) clear possibility this story may extend beyond Chapter 40 for a few chapters.

“So you’re the Sentinel who’s supposed to protect me.”

Professor Simon Banks turned to find Suzanne Ransom staring at him from the doorway of her temporary room, one hip jammed against the doorframe and her arms full of swaddled infant. Simon’s flush was thankfully masked by his dark skin, but something felt…unsuitable about seeing her like this — as if he’d intruded on a moment too intimate for strangers.

“You don’t look like a bodyguard.” she said, glaring him over.
Simon raised an eyebrow.
“I can assure you, ma’am — “
“How many senses do you have emergent?”
“Which ones?”
The Sentinel in question took a deep breath to fortify his patience.
“Taste, touch, and sound.”
Suzanne made a pitched sound that struck land somewhere between alarm and disdain.
“Well, I hope at least one of those is useful.”
Simon worked his jaw a little.
“I expect I’ll suffice for tonight.” he answered. “Tomorrow, you’ll get to decide whether you’d like to stay in Cascade, or whether another pack might offer a better start for you and your daughter.”

Suzanne sighed and turned a little in the door; her profile revealed the shadows of pain on her — arms that were too thin and eyes just a bit bagged under.

“I can’t imagine where else we would go.” she said, the end of her sentence trailing off into some sort of yearning not unlike wistfulness. She turned back to Simon. “Cascade is all we know. Cascade is home.”

Simon’s mouth turned in a sympathetic moue and he sighed.

“Ms Ransom - “
“Suzanne,” she said, and shook her head, scoffing. “Please.” Then she turned away, and in the bending of her head, there was something vulnerable and hurt in her, and Simon felt his wolverine stumble forward, then retreat.
When she looked back up at him, her eyes were wet.
“It’s just Suzanne.” she entreated/confessed.
Simon inclined his head in recognition.
“Simon.” he said.

The rest of this would be difficult to say, but Simon Banks had been a police officer for years before coming into the accommodating discomfort of a professorship, and he still remembered all the tact and ceremony of his time before.
“Suzanne,” he said, finding it better to say these things clearly and quickly, so that there could be no anticipation and no opportunity for mistakes, “It’s unlikely that your husband will be allowed to retain his bond to you.”

Then Simon waited; the waiting never got any easier. After a silent moment, he felt compelled to continue.

“Given the circumstances,” he began, by way of explanation/consolation, but Suzanne cut him off. “Given the circumstances,” she parroted, “I’d really rather not retain my bond to him.”

Simon nodded. “It’s understandable, Ms. Ra — Suzanne.”

She glared at him, then rolled her eyes. The infant in her arms stirred minutely and made a small sound; she shushed him with gentle rocking.

“Hush.” she whispered down at him. “You don’t want to wake your sister, now, do you? She needs her sleep.”

Then she glanced over her shoulder, into the dark set of rooms that lay beyond the barrier of herself; she turned back to Simon.

“She won’t wake up, most likely. Out like a light these days, just like I was with my first. That’s how I knew.” Suzanne looked away, into the middle space just above the meeting of the floor and the wainscoting. “She’s a silly girl.” she said, so quietly she could barely be heard.

Her eyes lifted suddenly to Simon, as if seeing him there again for the first time.

“Thank you.” she said, and it was so unexpected that Simon wondered momentarily if she actually meant him and had to straighten his tie to cover his surprise.

“It’s what we do, ma’am.” he said, and felt a tug in his belly that could have been pride or responsibility; he wasn’t yet sure, and wouldn’t know for some time.

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Jim threw the truck into park, jostling Ken Rochelle forward; the Sentinel jerked out a hand to catch himself on the dashboard and looked sidelong at his Alpha.

“Sorry.” Jim suggested, unconvincingly, and was out of the door before Ken could offer a response.

They came upon Rafe first, standing at some distance from the scene and pacing in an agitated way along the side of the road. Jim greeted the Guide medic with a sharp nod.

“Rafe. You’re not on scene?”

Rafe glanced up at the Alpha Sentinel with an expression that was a strange mix of curiosity, wariness, and anger. Then he turned away, lifting his chin indignantly.

“H put me off.” he said, and his energy bristled up in little unhappy spikes. Jim’s brow furrowed.


Rafe ground his jaw, squeezing his thumbs in frustrated fists.

“I had a little leak. A tiny one, and it was just one, and it was only for a second.” Rafe exhaled in annoyance. “I’m fit to work, but he put me off.” the younger man growled, the growl leading off into something closer to a whine.

Jim examined the unsettled Guide skeptically. Ken Rochelle shifted his stance once, then twice; Jim read this correctly in the Sentinel as a sign of agitation and discomfort.

“Ken, why don’t you go relieve Henri — send him back to HQ for counseling and debrief.” Rochelle nodded once, shortly (the Sentinel salute) and jogged off toward his comrades. Jim’s attention turned back to the anxiously pacing Guide.

“Alright.” he soothed. “Alright. H just asked you to take a break, that’s all. So ground yourself and get back over there — we’re gonna need you on this one.” Jim cast around, his eyes falling on the black patrol car that was had just pulled in behind his own. “Look, Bautista just pulled up; why don’t
you let him ground you?”
Rafe blanched slightly, then drew down his features into a scowl.
“I don’t _need_ to get grounded, Jim,” he hissed, and the way he said the Sentinel’s name bordered on disrespectful. “It was a _little_ leak. I just overran for a second trying to help Santos pull clues off the body of the victim. I’m not injured, I’m not hurting, and I don’t — ”
Jim raised a hand to cut him off.
“Rafe, enough. It’s procedure and you know it. I don’t want my Guides getting overexerted in the field. You’ve got to either ground yourself here and now, or we’ve gotta send you home so Evan can do it.”
Rafe stared at him.
“Are you serious? Jim, I barely — “
“Guide.” The strength of Jim’s tone made Rafe take a step back and avert his eyes. Reaching the limits of his patience, the Alpha Sentinel repeated: “It’s procedure.”
“Well, _fuck_ procedure!” Rafe barked at him, and the Sentinel went deathly still.
Rafe took another step back, his eyes already downcast and his shoulders now hunching in an effort to appear small. Jim could hear where his heart was racing, could smell the sour scent of fear cutting slices into the mask of cologne he normally wore.

Jim took in two long breaths, asked the Moon what the fuck she’d been thinking making him Alpha of anything, and ground out in a voice so low it shook Rafe to the core:
“Listen to me, Rafe. I don’t know what kind of territorial pissing contest I’ve stepped in the middle of, but I also don’t care to know. This is a crime scene, and there are bigger things at play than your ego. Get yourself together, now, or I’ll make sure this is the last scene you’re called to. Understood?”
Rafe swallowed and nodded, quickly.
“If Henri has been unfair to you, bring it to me when we’re back at HQ. But right now, we’re in the field and in the field, you follow the orders of the Sentinel on lead or you go home. H says you’re leaking, and even a norm could tell that your energy’s erratic. You’re strong, and you’re spiking _me_, pissing _me_ off, and that’s going to be a problem.” Jim drew in a long breath and tried to ease his voice back toward something more civil. “Leaking is OK. It happens. It’s part of being a Guide. Take a break, walk around a little bit, ground yourself on a Sentinel and I’ll clear you back in. But I’m not letting you stay in the field like this. The victim’s dead; you or us getting hurt won’t help him.”

Rafe listened carefully, then exhaled a little more, but quietly; Jim could tell he was trying to get a handle on his physiologicals and calm himself to calm the Sentinel.

“Alpha.” he bit out, as respectfully as he could manage, then turned cautiously imploring eyes on Jim. “Jim. I’m fine — honestly.”
Jim shook his head.
“Enough. I don’t have time for this, Rafe. You won’t follow orders, you’re off the scene.” he jerked a thumb over his shoulder. “Go back to town and keep your Alpha Guide company.”

Considering the conversation over, Jim turned to walk away; when he glanced back from the corner of one eye, Rafe was staring after him, looking heartbroken.

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Ken Rochelle was standing off to the side of the scene now, speaking in low tones with two other Sentinels in stripped-down patrol uniforms. They were sweaty, whispering urgently. Even at a distance, Jim could tell the outcome of the chase. He met Ken’s eyes just to be sure; the Sentinel averted them and gave his answer.
The body they’d pulled out of the truck was lying on the ground, lying still and supine in a half-zipped carry bag that had come with the first wave of backup. Henri was the only Sentinel bent over it; four others stood back at a distance, including Ken Rochelle, and looked uneasy.

Even at a far approach, Jim could read the tension in the Sentinel’s energy. He could feel the sharp red splash over him; the anger that would not shatter, would not move, that did not make room for Henri’s energy to shift or grow. It felt ugly and sick and there was no wonder that the others were avoiding him.

Jim came over slowly, loudly, and knelt down beside Henri, resting comfortingly just inside the other Sentinel’s peripheral view. H was as near to a zone as Jim had seen him in months, his gloved hands working frantically over the man, cataloguing clues, checking for other injuries, scanning, remembering.

Jim could hear the man’s heart thumping — a surprisingly steady beat, but that was battle trauma for you — and could see the sweat forming on his focused brow.

“Rochelle’s here to relieve you.”
“I don’t want relief.”
“You led a foot chase and fired shots at two men, H. You get relief.”
“I’m fine, Jim.”

The Sentinel hesitated, and Henri kept working, muscles flexing and relaxing as his hands flew over the victim.

“We can call up a Guide for you.” Jim suggested; a rare offer. “Sobiesky’s on shift at the Center.” he added, in a lower voice, but this did not evoke even a momentary flicker in Henri’s attention. Jim cleared his throat. “H,” he said again, “You’re relieved.”

The man on the ground shook his head.

“I have to finish this. I have to — there could be clues.”

“Henri —”
“T’m not —”
“Get up.”
“I said I have to —”

“Stand up, Sergeant!” Jim snarled. “You’re relieved; you need it.”

“I need,” Henri growled, looking off into the distance and expression growing vicious, “to catch those fuckers that got away.” he sat back on his haunches, and his expression was haunted. The Sentinel exhaled and clapped on hand on his sergeant’s shoulder.

“It’s not your fault, H. They got the drop on you. But we’ll find them.”

“We’d better.” the younger Sentinel answered, staring hatefully off in the direction they’d gone.

“They could be anywhere. They could be planning anything.”

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“This is bullshit, Moira!” Blair swore, hurling a decorative pillow at an uninhabited corner of the sofa. From the broad leather chair in which he’d taken up residence only moments before, Rafe flinched. From her perch at the other end of the couch, Moira raised an eyebrow.

“It’s not so bad as all that, Blair.” she soothed, stretching to retrieve the injured ornament and stroking her hands over the black-and-orange dart frog that adorned it.

“I’m sick of being treated like a child!” Blair snapped, frustration pouring out of him and making his energy bounce around and fracture the light in the room. “I’m really trying here, Mo, really trying to make this work, but he’s not helping me! I’ve been doing everything I can for him, and for our bond, and for this stupid Pack that I didn’t even ask for! I’m - what do you call it - I’m embracing, even
though I don’t know what the hell I’m embracing, or why. But I’m here, right? I’m here and I’m trying to trust him, and I’m trying to trust my wolf, and I’m trying to trust that someone up there — “here, he gestured wildly at the ceiling, “Doesn’t have it in for Blair Sandburg. And what do I get? Lied to, pushed around, ignored! He didn’t even want to tell me he was the Alpha! Let alone that I’m the - the Queen of the Damned Guides or some shit, but what do I do? I’m a patient Guide, I’m a calm guy, I try to talk to him about things, and just when I think we’ve got an understanding — BAM! — I GET LEFT BEHIND!”

Blair finished with an angry arm flourish that sent a bunch of Jim’s small wooden figurines crashing unmercifully to the floor. Rafe, who had shifted to a tense-looking position on the awkward edge of his chair, startled again and Moira cast a curious, measuring look up at him before turning her attention back to righting Blair’s mess.

With a disapproving glare at the Alpha Guide, she lifted herself gracefully from her seat and stalked over to pick up the little carvings.

“Stop it, Blair. You’re not a child and you’re scaring our guest.”

Blair glanced over to Rafe, for whom the day had already been full of startling emotional challenges, and felt instant regret.

“Uh, sorry, man.” One hand gave a vague, conciliatory wave. “I know it’s been a real hell of a day for you.”

“It’s fine.” Rafe answered, distractedly, and frowned down into his unasked-for mug of kombucha. Moira’s eyes scanned him, in that tickling way they did when she was reading energy.

“Don’t mind his temper, Rafe.” she said, softening the consonants in his name to make something lyrical, like a coo. The tonality shifted; she was first mother, soother, urger, and then became gamine, playful, a girl again. “I think it’s just been too long since he laid down with his Sentinel.” she said, and winked.

“No. I don’t need to bond.” Blair snapped at her, his energy ruffled and his hackles on the rise.

“No?” Moira repeated in mock surprise. “Maybe just get fucked, then.” she rejoined, enunciating her words and meeting Blair’s angry gaze unrepentantly. Across the clear space of the center of the room, they faced off, all shining eyes and sparkling energies — direct in their aggression, clear; not the mincing territorial prowl of a Sentinel, but something fiercer, more head-on.

The energy in the room grew drawn out in taut, long, grey strings; Rafe cleared his throat and spoke.

“Blair, I don’t think Moira meant — “

Blair ignored him, growled low in the back of his throat and Moira’s eyes grew sharper and then suddenly the risen tide fell back into the ocean of their merry energy and disappeared. Blair laughed; at the same time, Moira’s face crinkled into a smile and the energy in the room relapsed into something gold and soft and Blair swiped a hand over his face. Rafe relaxed, but his eyes were still comically wide.

“See?” Moira told their guest victoriously, tossing a saucy grin over her shoulder at the other guide, “I’m right; he just can’t admit it.”

Blair rolled his eyes and Rafe’s eyebrows both lifted; business-like, he set his tea aside.

“You know, Blair, if you’re experiencing aggression as a symptom of bond-gap, then — “

“Aggression as a — Rafe, come on, man!” Blair laughed, holding his hands out as if to ward off any further assessment questions, “You’re off work today, remember?” he said, teasing gently. “Don’t go all official on me. Just relax; we’re just a couple of Guides, having a chat, right?”

Where Blair could not see her, over his shoulder, Moira made a face of amusement. A small grin snuck across Rafe’s face, and Blair clapped him on the shoulder.

“See, that’s the spirit!”
Rafe felt a shiver in the space where Blair touched him; there was a powerful energy there, muted by the cloth between them, but still trickling through. Moira laughed and pushed past Blair on her way back to the couch.

“Rafe’s not like us, Blair.” she teased, checking the other guide’s reaction out of the corner of her eye. “He’s not used to just lying around all day. His Sentinel makes him work, you know.” She made an exaggerated face of disgust and winked at Rafe, who flushed at the attention.

“Hey, I work!” Blair answered, even as he made his way to the opposite side of the room, opening cabinets in search of the last of the aguadiente they’d hidden. “I’m just on a…little sabbatical.” Moira laughed.

“Oh? And is that how your professors are seeing it?” Blair groaned and began to return, empty-handed, to the sofa. “Oh, don’t remind me.” he pleaded. “We’re in such a good mood; I don’t want to talk about the University. And I haven’t even had time to deal with my department yet.” Moira stopped teasing and raised both eyebrows.

“Deal with them? What’s the problem?” she asked, folding her legs up to give Blair a space in which to fit comfortably.

The Alpha Guide settled in and closed his eyes, then opened them to meet her gaze. “My program’s terminating me. As of next month. Breach of contract, they said, which is totally fair because I have missed like, three weeks of classes at this point. I was AWOL for an ethics audit, haven’t picked up my phone in five days, and when I saw the Dean on campus, I was so caught up that Jim and I just made a run for it.”

Moira’s eyebrows knit down into two short lines of worry. “But they must understand why. You were — “ “They don’t.” Blair stopped her, with finality. “They don’t understand. They’re not…” he shifted in his seat, drew the monkey frog pillow to him and clutched it to his belly. “They’re not like us. They don’t get it.”

Moira’s lips tightened. “Then let Jim talk to them. He can make it — “ “No.” “No?” Blair shook his head. “No, come on — I don’t want Jim to talk to them. I don’t want him involved at all! This is my thing, you know? My dissertation, my project — not Jim’s.” Blair loll’d his head back to rest on the back pillows and stared upside-down at the frost-markings of the glass panther etched out behind him. “Jim’s already in charge of everything else I’ve got. I just don’t want him to own everything.”

Moira was silent; whether she understood or was just willing to accept was unclear, but she did not protest. “Fine. Then go to them and explain that you had a sudden medical problem, but that you’re ready to come back now, and you can work for the next months without a problem and — “ “Well, that’s kind of the thing, right?” Blair hedged, rubbing the back of his neck with one hand. “I don’t know if I’m ready to come back.” Moira raised a skeptical brow. “Not ready to go back?”

Blair looked at Rafe, who was watching with the sort of enthralled, intimidated look of an adolescent witnessing the elder Guides’ toilette for the first time. Then he shook his head, scared it away, and was back to himself — perfectly calm Rafe, never an exciting moment and not a hair out of place.
“Not…because of me.” Blair said, and wondered how much he should tell Moira. How much did she already know? Had anyone else seen the same side of Jim he’d seen? Had they seen the change? Was it a sort of secret of Polichinelle, or was there real danger in revealing to Moira what he’d seen his Sentinel do?

Best to err on the side of caution; Blair demurred without meeting her eyes.

“Jim thinks it’s too dangerous to have me in the field with him, but I think it’s more dangerous without me. He can’t keep going out there alone, Moira. All it takes is one zone, one dead-drift, one inopportune over-focus…it’s not safe. Not with the — it’s not safe.”

Moira’s head tilted sharply to the side, but only for a moment.

Silence reigned in the room, during which Blair ran his hands through his hair for the thousandth time, Rafe nervously played with a little dent in the leather of the armchair, and Moira watched both of them, observing more than she spoke.

“Well,” she said, eventually, suppressing a small smile that began to spread over her face, “So what are you going to do about it?”

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Colin Ransom went down quickly.

The ambush team was in place before 7; Colin’s patrol shift ended at 8. And the whole thing was a short operation, and it was easy. Almost petty how good it was, but it gave the Sentinels something to do and it made for splendid practice for the younger soldiers.

Cav recalled it as a burst of excitement; something similar to the suddenness of a balloon going apart, or a wall collapsing, a dam bursting; something that seemed to happen with slow, tumbling rock-over-rock before TAH! and it was all done.

They had waited more than an hour in the dark, twelve men (as if that many were needed to take down a 5’10” two-sense Sentinel with no combat experience, just a degree in engineering) and the low-singing crickets that announced them.

Then the low blue sedan had churned up the drive, and the gravel had scattered beneath tires and the lights had flickered as he rode over one small hill, then another. And the next thing Cav knew, there was a voice in his ear (at least it had felt as if it were in his ear) and the man beside him was moving, running, and he was with him and their weapons were drawn and someone was screaming at Colin Ransom to get down, get down on the ground, but he was already doing it and it was as if he knew.

Cav did not sleep well that night.

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Simon woke to the sound of footsteps and an unfamiliar hum, low and broken in with a muted squeal of familiar tenor and origin. He sat up on the sofa where he’d been taking his five-minute vigilance nap, and reached over to shut on the couch side lamp. It sparked, then glowed to life just as the door to the rooms beyond — the rooms where Suzanne was sequestered with her infant son and teenage daughter — creaked open and stood at attention, awaiting further instructions.

Suzanne appeared in the gap, her infant son clutched to her chest and her eyes wide in a way that made clear she’d been frightened. She stood still for a moment while the baby made fussy cry-gurgling noises and hitched his breath, bare and fat little legs kicking out at anything. Suzanne lowered her eyes and stepped forward, crossed the threshold in a way that implied permanence or
sacrifice or admission, or perhaps was just the only choice she’d ever been offered when confronted with such a positioning.

“I’m sorry we woke you.”
Simon shook the sleep out of his head and raised an eyebrow at her.
“Oh, no, I was just taking a quick nap.”
Suzanne smirked, upper hand regained.
“Of course.”
Simon coughed to clear his throat and linked his hands together, stretched them. He was in his shirtsleeves and the room was a warm one. Suzanne crossed the corner at a distance from him; she went to the short counter that provided an extension to the small kitchenette and began to root in the cloth bag resting there.

Simon rose and began to go to her.
“Anything I can help you with?”
Something skittered across her energy then, showed itself and raised its spine and flashed colors then disappeared.
“I’m fine.”

Simon stepped back, found his footing and retook his seat on the couch.
“I’ll just be here, then, if you need anything.”

Suzanne turned to look at him; just once, and then her gaze was away again, distant and cold and preoccupied with the infant.

“If I think of anything, I’ll let you know.”
In the end, Colin Ransom told them nothing they hadn’t already suspected or been terrified of. Yes, Theo Marin had called him the Gentler of the Sweet. Yes, Theo Marin had sent him to ‘seal the leaks’ in the northwest — to do away with those who threatened the future purity of the Sentinel/Guide line. Yes, he had gentled those four young ones up at Boarman’s Creek, and three others since he’d come into Theo’s service. No, he wasn’t alone.

Jim had shimmered with rage, had growled and slammed his fist hard enough to splinter the skinny interrogation table, and had even felt that feeling ripple along the back of his neck, at the base of his spine, down his legs.

Yes, there were others like him. Yes, they were planning to take action. Yes, they were already in Cascade, and all over PacNor. And no, they were not afraid.

Jim had barely made peace with his anger in the end, but he’d done it, he’d held himself together, he’d fought the moon. Whatever he was, whatever he was becoming, it would have to wait.

And Colin Ransom had laughed. Had jeered at Jim’s posturing, had told him he wasn’t half the Sentinel that Theo Marin was. That Theo Marin had already become.

The moon shone; clarity descended; Jim went still. He could not afford to move. He could not afford to breathe. He could not afford to be more animal than man.

Yes, they were already in motion.

When Jim came back to himself, he was still standing in the holding room next to the splintered table, but Colin Ransom was gone and Blair was in front of him, growing steadily closer with each breath.

“…that’s it, Big Guy. I’m here; I’m right here. Just follow my voice.”

Blair had his wrists in a grip just a bit too tight to meet Academy standards and his eyes were moving too quickly to get full marks; he looked up into Jim’s face and it was clear he was afraid. There was a bit of light from the left (mild, pointed downward, twilight-low), and those bright eyes of Blair’s (that blue, that blue, that ocean/sea/sky/cold watercolor refraction) and Blair’s scent (full and fresh and just a little sweeter than before) and for a second, the axis spun again and Jim was back in the parking lot, heart pounding, eyes gold, seeing Blair for the first time. **Seize.**

Jim blinked, then jerked into awareness and caught violent hold of his Guide; Blair startled and almost fell backward, trying to retain his control, to keep his voice from the edge of panic.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Jim, calm down, calm down, it’s OK!”

Jim growled and fought the moon again, again, did it ever stop? and wrestled back the panther and released Blair’s arm.

Blair kept talking, trying to bring Jim down, trying to bring himself down, trying to get the Sentinel up to speed.

“Jim, I need you back with me, OK? I need you here, Big Guy, and I need real Jim, not the other Jim, not the panther, tell him I need you, OK? Colin Ransom gave us names, he gave us locations, and he said the next attack’s already in motion. He’s under lockdown, in a cell, and Ken’s cleared
the floor.” Blair took a breath and lowered his voice. “And no one saw anything.” he said, in such a
low whisper that Jim knew it was expressly for his benefit and could only refer to the unspoken, ill-
begotten thing that he was.

Immediately, he remembered what Colin Ransom had said, his warning that Theo Marin had already
become and he knew it was too late. Whatever glimmer that man had seen, the others must have seen
also.

His mind reeled with the magnitude of it, but he had been a soldier long before he’d been a king and
so he fell back, as he always did, on the clear lines of advance. Jim straightened up, shook off Blair’s
kind hand, stood at his full height.

“I need to get in touch with Central. Tell them about Ransom’s confession, warn them — “

“Ken’s already on it. He’s on the line with Central right now; they’re working on a warrant for
Marin’s arrest in Big Bowl and sending Marshall back out to help us keep a lid on things until
something’s clear. Joel’s working to track down any known photographs of Marin, but they’ve been
a real bitch to find — this guy’s a shadow. I had Ken call Simon and keep him on guard at the
Center but send Cav to provide some temporary relief if he wants to go home and pack a bag or
anything.”

Blair exhaled, blew his hair out of his face.

“And H snuck out of his post-incident debrief at Roundhouse to try to track those two fugitives;
apparently he thinks he stands a better chance at night. Colin Ransom told us his cabal’s got a base in
Salmon River — we’re not sure if we can trust his intel, but we’ve gotta follow up. And Ken
suggested we set the security level at all Guide facilities to orange and send additional personnel,
so…we did.”

Jim was completely silent, still. The low light of the lamp fell in odd strokes across the wood floor,
the table, the polish on the chairs.

“We did?”

Blair’s heart pounded and he didn’t bother trying to slow it.

“We did.”

Jim stared at his Guide as if Blair had grown three heads, and the Guide shrunk back. He’d
overstepped, he knew it, he’d known it when he was doing it, but he couldn’t not help, he couldn’t
let them all run around like they were, scattered and nervous and the energy in the Court had just
been horrible when they’d come calling for him and for a moment, it had terrified him because it
was as if Jim were dead already.

A shiver tickled his neck, skipped down his shoulders into his hands.

“…how long was I out, Chief?”

“Not long. Everything happened really fast, man, like immediately.”

Jim tilted his head, turning an evaluative look on Blair.

“It’s forty minutes from our place to here, Blair.”

Blair’s eyes widened and Jim could practically see the wheels turning. The Guide did his best to look
both innocent and deferential.

“I was nearby.”

Jim’s expression darkened.

“Nearby where?”

Blair shrugged in the sort of helpless way he’d used effectively as a defense once or twice, when he
was still young and his curls were rakish and adorable and his mischief was endless. Jim scowled.

“I told you to stay at the loft or in Haven.”
Blair’s expression took on that challenging, stony look that Jim remembered from the cracked tile of the shower.

“I told you that I was your partner, not your pet.”

Jim growled in frustration.

“This is dangerous, Blair. These people are dangerous. This isn’t some remote tribe in the Amazon. These are criminals. This isn’t a joke, Blair.”

Blair narrowed his eyes.

“You think I don’t know that, Jim?! I came down here to help you. I came down here because you need me to help you, and it’s a good thing I did, too, because you zoned out trying to do everything on your own!”

Blair’s eyes stung and his throat felt hot and sore, but he ignored this; what mattered was that in the spaces where he and she were connected, his Guide was calling his name and speaking with his voice. He felt powerful, and merged, and settled in the right place. And there, close up against that consciousness, seeping into the places where he’d left space for his Sentinel was Jim’s need; Jim’s fear; Jim’s worry and want and the cool yearning of the pull of the bond. His Sentinel needed him.

Blair set his jaw, determined, and stepped forward.

“You’re not on your own, Jim — you’ve got me. A Guide completes a Sentinel, and a Sentinel completes a Guide; you need me, just like I need you. You’ll work better with me there, and right now, there’s an entire city out there — hell, an entire country — of Sentinels and Guides and innocent bystanders who need you at your best.”

Blair exhaled, chest heaving with emotion: panic and love. His eyes met Jim’s, beseeching and afraid.

“This is not your best.”

Jim’s heart ached; his pride stung; his neck burned with embarrassment. But his panther was calm. Unwilling to fight. *Guide goes with.*

“Fine.” he said. “You’re with me, Chief.”

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“As I’m sure you’ve heard,” Theo Marin hissed, “our timetable has been accelerated.”

A swallow, and the Guide on the other end of the line took a breath.

“Theo, I don’t think — “

“If you had thought a little, I wouldn’t have to do this.”

The Guide sucked in a short, painful breath.

“I didn’t have anything to do with the failure at the drop point — nothing!”

“Well, you didn’t help.”

“I tried to — “

“It’s too late now. Ransom’s theirs. It’s just a matter of time.”

“Please — “ the Guide pleaded.

“No.” the Sentinel said, and his voice was bordering on frantic. “It begins now. When I give the word, we go. Understood?”

“Theo!”

“What’s the word, Guide?”

Theo waited a half a beat before his voice snapped into a rage again. “I said what’s the fucking word, Guide?!”
On the other end of the line, a swallow, then a whisper.
“Purge.”

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Given the urgency of things, Jim decided that checking in with the Salmon River Border Guards and undergoing the formality of an announced arrival to the Salmon River Roundhouse was redundant and unnecessary.

And so just after sunrise, the gray truck and its sleek silver companion turned off of the main road and onto the long dirt drive that led directly to Jody Evers’ home.

Jody’s place was a cabin just north of Salmon River itself, nestled in a copse of trees at the edge of a sharp rise of rock, looking down over the river and the city.

Jody Evers met them outside with a shotgun.

“I don’t like prowlers.” she announced, leaning casually against the unpolished wood post that supported the west end of her porch, shotgun braced against her hip. She was barefoot, wearing a field jacket over a familiar pair of jeans and a white t-shirt, braless. Her short blonde hair fluttered in the wind, fell strand by strand into eyes which bore holes into Jim.

Jim rolled his eyes and got out of the truck.

“We’re here on official business, Sentinel Evers.”
“Why didn’t you check in, then?”
“It was too important to wait.”
“Ah, see, but now we’ve got to do this — the shotgun and the questioning, and you explaining why the fuck you’re walking up my driveway at 0600 hours.” Jody gestured sharply to the second car.
“And with backup to boot. This all takes time, doesn’t it, Jimboy? So you’re gonna have to wait.”

Casually, she shifted her grip on the gun.

Jim bit back a growl.

“Jody, it’s been a long drive — ”
“I didn’t ask you to come.”
“— and we’re burning daylight. You and I need to talk. I’ve got — ”

Blair, who had been watching the scene unfold from the front seat after receiving very strict instructions to stay in the car, opened his door and got out. Jody’s eyes shifted to him, but her body remained tense and turned toward Jim.

“Who’s this?”
Jim glared at Blair across the hood of the car, then slid his gaze back to Jody.
“My darling, obedient bondmate, Blair Sandburg.”
Jody rolled her eyes.
“What is this, a playdate?”

Blair smiled as affably as he could at gunpoint.
“Hi — Jody, right? I’m Blair. Listen,” he said, brushing back a curl as he took two cautious steps forward, trying to let some of his Guide-energy seep out of him and into the space between them. “I know we broke protocol, but it’s an emergency situation. We’ve got information that we couldn’t trust to couriers and didn’t want to convey over the phone. It’s important.” Blair swallowed, projecting nervousness. “It’s about the attacks.”
Jody scoffed and rolled her eyes. “I thought you had that case completely under control, Sentinel? You took lead, if I remember correctly. Didn’t need my help, if I recall.”

Jim’s eyes narrowed and Blair interrupted before the ill-tempered Sentinel could respond. “But we need your help now.” Blair pleaded, shivering a little in the cool morning breeze. “The SSN needs your help. Could you please let us in so we can talk to you about it?”

Jody looked him over slowly, and Blair saw her eyes soften at the same time her energy relaxed. Her gaze slid back to Jim.

“I don’t want you in the house.” Jim growled, and Jody responded in kind. Blair took three more steps toward the porch.

“Aw, come on, Jody — I promise I’ll keep his leash on, and I brought his food and water with me.” Blair teased, earning himself another Jim-glare. Jody’s lip quirked up just slightly, before dipping back down in a frown. She turned her head just slightly to the left, scenting. When she turned back, her expression was even sharper than before. She cast another assessing look over Blair before turning a scathing one on Jim.

“Don’t go thinking this makes us friends.” she said, stepping backward to let them both approach.

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Inside the sparse front room of the cabin, Jody pulled up two spare wooden chairs to a rustic table littered with wood shavings and dropped herself into her own seat.

“Alright. You wanted to talk, so talk.”

Blair looked to Jim, who silenced him with a look.

“We found out who’s responsible for our murders up at Boarman’s Creek, and for the noise bomb in Great Falls. They’re called — “


Jody raised an uninterested eyebrow and, picking up a knife, resumed the carving she’d been working on before their intrusion into her cabin.

Jim was momentarily stunned; he recovered quickly.

“So then you also know that they’ve got — “

“Sleeper cells all over PacNor, transport linkages down to Big Bowl, and a network of corrupt contacts across three regions that have been allowing their operations to continue.” she shrugged, then looked up to meet Jim’s eyes. “Yeah, I know. But I take it you didn’t.”

At that moment, they were all interrupted by the unexpected (and, until that moment, unnoticed) arrival in the room of a petite, young, distressingly nubile female Guide, dressed only in a sleepy gaze and a bright smile.

“Jody?” she cooed, meandering languidly over to the shocked female Sentinel’s chair and curling her hand over a shoulder. The Guide’s skin, so dark it was almost midnight, milky-flawless and matched by her dark, short hair, made her seem lithe and liquid, and the purring, low-rumble of warm energy she gave off lent her an unshakeable impression of felinity. Completely unmoved by the presence of two guests, she padded delicately around Jody’s chair and came to rest in her Sentinel’s lap. “You said the cabin was our time.”
“Oh, hell, Kitty.” a red-faced Jody said, standing quickly and hauling up the young woman by the waist before carting her, firmly but not unkindly, into another room.


“Sorry, Chief, sorry —” the Sentinel shook his head to clear it. “What were you saying?” Blair laughed.

“Now I see why you didn’t want to bring me along.” Jim gave Blair a lopsided grin of amusement and affection. “I promise you, Chief, this isn’t typical.”

“Don’t worry,” Blair winked, “I’m not the jealous type.” Jim meant to glare again, but his gaze got caught on the lushness of Blair’s bottom lip and he leaned over for a kiss and a low growl: “I am.”

The two were interrupted again by Jody, who stood over them with an unimpressed expression on her face. When she spoke, she addressed Jim.

“This isn’t a cathouse. Claim your rights on your own time.”

She took her seat again.

“Now: talk.”

“Congratulations on your recent bond.” Jim responded, barely suppressing a smirk. Jody’s ears reddened and her eyes got steelier.

“Talk.”

“Are you sure you’re functional? If you think you can’t keep your mind off your Guide’s — “

Jody picked up the knife and slammed it, blade-down, into the table.

“Talk.”

Jim raised an eyebrow and a low rumble began in his chest. Blair reached out, quickly, and squeezed his leg; the temporary distraction calmed him, and Blair spoke for both of them.

“We’ve got one guy in custody. He was directly responsible for the deaths of those kids up at Boorman’s, and he’s confessed to a litany of other crimes. Says he’s controlled by a guy named Theo Marin, leader of the New Purity Movement. We’ve got a binder of information collected by our guys and the team down in Great Falls, but you clearly know more than we do, and I’m sure you want to catch these guys just as bad as us. So let’s work together on this — find Theo Marin and shut down the Purity once and for all.”

Jody regarded Blair for a minute, and the flicker of emotions across her face would have been impossible to determine if he hadn’t already had his shields down, his energy up, and his Sentinel grounding him. There was affection, then fear, worry, and last — chagrin.

“It’s not so simple as all that, Guide Ellison.”

“Blair, please.” he let his energy open up a bit more, trying to parse the mysterious Sentinel in front of him. “Call me Blair.”

Jody looked to Jim, who returned her stare flatly, then nodded once.

“Blair. Not so easy.”

“Why not?”

Jody pulled the knife out of the slot it’d made in the table and it over and over in her hands; she seemed to be contemplating the gentlest words to use.

“There are not so many Sentinels opposed to the Purity as you might think, Blair.” she said, and her energy shifted to something like regret, or at least reflection.
Blair clenched his jaw, held back the words and the painful reminder of what the world was.

“You — “

“Not supportive, of course. But not opposed — you understand.”

Blair swallowed; Jim did not interject, just eyed them both.

“I don’t think I do.”

Jody gave him a wan smile.

“We’re special, Blair. We’re a special kind of human. Sometimes, I wish it weren’t the case — just like you, I’m sure — but the older I grow, the more I thank the moon for what I am. We’re different; closer to our anima selves.” she tilted her head, squinting at him. “The feeling of the hunt, of the bond…these are things other humans will never know. They aren’t like us. They don’t know what drives us. The urges; the needs. To hunt, to guard, to bond, to breed. It’s uncontrollable. Our instincts make us who we are, and they are powerful. You can’t ignore that. We have to do things differently.”

Blair’s throat felt parched; he leaned back, away from Jody, toward Jim’s safe and watchful presence.

“Do you understand, Blair?”

Blair swallowed.

“Let’s talk about the Purity.” he heard himself say, but he was disconnected, in the forest, deep in the grass, far from this cabin and this place and these stark reminders of how little — or how large — he was. “What don’t we know?”

“Everything,” she said. “We’ve been paying attention to the Purity for seventeen years, and Marin for five. In the last three, we’ve seen an uptick in violent activity and we’ve started to hear that the movement’s taken on a new direction — more vicious than before, more…extreme. More murderous. Led by a faction whom, ironically, calls itself The Gentlers. It’s all violence with those idiots; kill this, purge that, smash smash smash.”

Jody made a crude, disdainful hand motion.

“They’re bloody and charismatic and Marin seems to be at the head of them. But despite what appears to be an alarming growth of power, we still don’t have a clear picture of the man. No idea where he came from, who he is, where he even is half the time. These rallies he has are all guarded by more subterfuge and shadow than anything we’ve ever come across, and no one’s ever gotten a photograph. And his guys are good — they keep him far, far from anything messy. We’ve got nothing — just a couple thousand fanatics, some dead kids, and an occasional arrest.”

“We’ve had some successes; Kitty herself came out of a Purity Guide rescue that we ran some six years back — you know they traffic in Guides, don’t you? If you’re missing a fertile citizen or two, I suggest checking the parturition records in the small towns down in Big Bowl — but on the whole it’s been a tough road. As soon as we seem to make any headway, the whole damn thing disappears again.”

Jody shook her head.

“I can only do so much; I’ve been trying to call the attention of the other packs to this for seven years now. We’ve been worried that they might grow too large, get too out of hand for us. We could keep them contained here, like the disease they are. Got too much space between too few folks for it to really spread, but… once they got down to Big Bowl, it was only a matter of time…”

She glanced sidelong at Jim, then continued.

“And now we’re just starting to realize that Marin’s got little rats buried everywhere. More places than you might think.”
Blair jumped forward, to the edge of his seat.  
“Then we’ll find them, and we’ll dig them out.” he snarled, and his fervor startled nearly everyone except Kitty, who had sauntered back in a few moments prior (clad in a coral sundress) and now smiled a quiet, secretive smile at him from the doorway.

Jim, who had been contemplating all this, finally spoke up again.  
“We’re going to have to go to Central Command. Ask for multi-pack reinforcements and launch an offensive into Big Bowl. They won’t want to do it, but it’s the only way to stop this now. The Purity’s scattered, weak — they can’t hold their ground against a full force.”

Jody shook her head, for what was probably the thousandth time in two hours.  
“No. Won’t work.”
Jim gritted his teeth and exhaled his frustration through them.

“Why not?”

Jody shrugged, picked her nails with her knife, leaned back in her chair. Jim waited, impatiently, for her to explain herself. Eventually, she began:

“You recall that I wanted to take lead on this investigation.”
Jim slammed his hand onto the table.
“Dammit, Evers, this isn’t the time for some fucking power play. Marin is out there, and he’s active, and he’ll kill us all if we give him half the chance. Nobody’s got time for your fucking ego. You want lead — fine, you take lead. I just want this man caught and killed.”

Blair jerked up to look at the Sentinel, startled by his mate’s violence. Anger hummed through their bond; rage at an unknown enemy. Blair shivered.

Jody waited, patiently, for Jim’s tantrum to resolve, turning a small piece of wood over and over in her hands.

“Jim, I asked for lead on this investigation because I know more about this than anyone — as I’m certain you’ve learned today. Salmon River’s been a hotbed of Gentler activity for the last seven years. I asked to take lead, and I was denied that lead.”

“Jody — “

“Jim! For fuck’s sake, let her finish.”
In the doorway, Kitty raised an eyebrow. Jody went on.
“I initially believed that I’d been denied that lead at your request.”
“I told you I never — “
“I was also denied the opportunity to present the results of our seventeen years of work to the Standing Council of Central Command. I initially believed that I’d been denied also at your request, that you had somehow disparaged the work of my wilderness team.”
“What the hell do you think I — “
“When I followed up with Central Command, I was told that my report hadn’t even reached the desks of the Council before my presentation was denied.”
Jim stared flatly at her.
“Let me guess.”
Jody shrugged, unapologetically.
“I know you’ve got friends at Central.”
“I don’t — “
“I know that some of the alphas of the older packs still cling to their human ways; they’re still suspicious of a female Sentinel, Changed or not. And I know the appointments for PacNor will be announced next spring.” her eyes flickered away, then back to Jim. “I believed that my outright denial reflected an act of sabotage on your part.”
Jim rolled his eyes, and Jody ignored him.
“I believed these things because it didn’t make sense otherwise.” Jody set down the small piece of wood -- a half-hewn little bear. “Because I couldn’t see what was right in front of me.” There was silence, and Blair’s face fell.
“It was sabotage.”
“Yes.”
“But it wasn’t Jim.”
“No.”
“Someone in Central Command — “
“Worked hard to keep me away from the investigation, yes.”
Jim paled and swore.
“Who?”

Jody leaned far enough back in her chair to put her feet up on the table; Kitty appeared and curled against her side, and was rewarded with an arm around her waist.

“The simplest explanation is typically the best.” she said, and met Jim’s eyes. “Representative Marshall.”
Forgive me for the long delay, dear readers! I am just finding time to crawl out from a massive pile of paperwork: dissertations, contracts, grant requests, etc. -- all the things Blair *would* be doing if he didn't spend all his time chasing after Jim. ;)

The silence in the room was deafening.

“If Marshall’s in on this, if he’s behind this…”
Jim trailed off as everything began to grow clearer; as the vastness of the uncharted landscape around them began to reveal itself.
“…then he knows everything.”

Blood rushed to Blair’s head; he found himself breathing so quickly, so harshly, that he might as well have been panting.
“But why? Why would he do this? Why would he — why would he help them?”

Jody looked at Blair with a sorrow reserved especially for Guides who had been lucky in their lives, and did not know the world outside.

“I told you, Blair. Not so many opposed as you might think.”
Blair shook his head, half disbelief and half anger.
“Then he’s a murderer. They’re all murderers — Marin and Ransom and whoever else have been helping the Purity.”

Jody nodded, slowly.

“I don’t disagree.” she said, and met his eyes. “So what do we do now?”

~:~

The late morning sun was beginning to rise over the cabin; in the front room, it laid long, silver boxes out across the dusty wood floor. Kitty stretched out her toes to tickle one while the others sat, scattered, around the room and moped.

“We can’t go back to Central; that much is sure.” Jim said, flexing his arms and shaking the tension out of his shoulders. “I’m sure Marshall’s heard about the request for a warrant. He knows we’re on Marin’s trail, and he’s probably halfway back to Cascade already.”

Blair perked up from the spot he’d taken in a cracked leather armchair, set aside of the room.
“So that’s good, right?” he said, hope sneaking into his tone. “We know where he’s going — or at least, where he’s going to be. We can trap him in Cascade, take him in for questioning.”
Jim contemplated this.
“Possibly, Chief. It’s also possible that he’s smart enough to know that we’re not just on to Marin — we’re on to him, too. They might both try to go to ground.”
Blair’s brow furrowed.
“You think they’ll make a run for it together?”
Jim shrugged. “Not likely, but impossible to tell without knowing their relationship. Is Marshall Marin’s right-hand man or just another footsoldier? Is he a true convert, or just a fairweather fanatic who’s looking out for his own bottom line?” Jim held his hands up. “Without knowing more about Marin, we’ve got no idea what these two might do.”

“So what we need is information.”

“What we need,” Jody interjected here, her voice sighing and impatient, as if she’d been listening to them do this all day, “Is Marin. Find him and we’ll figure out the rest.” “Kill him, and we’ll figure out the rest.” Jim corrected. Jody’s lip quirked in a rueful pout. “Much as we are in agreement on that matter, I don’t think it’d be wise; not yet. If he’s as much a madman as I think he is, I’d be willing to wager his death won’t be the end of it. At best, he’s set a bunch of booby traps and at worst, he’s set himself up for martyrdom.”

Jody frowned, and stroked one hand down Kitty’s leg where it draped over her own. “Either way, more people could get hurt. We’ve got to put a stop to that. Bring him back, run him through the systems and see what else we can figure out.”

Blair’s eyes went, involuntarily, to the place where Kitty’s dark leg wound over Jody’s own; he looked quickly away.

“Then we’ve got to find Marshall,” he said, and fell so deep into his own thoughts that he was out of the cabin, momentarily — hours in the past, at the interrogation, at Jim’s zone, at the HQ back in Cascade, under the skylight in the loft, at home.

~:~

Moira Rochelle sat at the large, dusty desk in the south-facing corner of the Guide Center and hated everything about her current status in life.

Who the hell knew there’d been a six year backlog of Guide Concerns?

With a small, subverbal whimper, she picked up the next folder in the pile that stood taller than her head and forced herself to open it.

Of course, it wasn’t as if Blair had wished this on her — he’d simply said one sentence, a passing sentence, as he’d handed off the spare keys to he and Jim’s apartment in the middle of the night (charming that he’d even thought that was necessary). But the fact remained that he’d said it, and he’d said it in front of witnesses — in front of Ken and Jim and Joel Taggart, who had been anxiously waiting in the hallway to leave.

“Take care of the Pack for me, will you?” he’d joked, and grinned and squeezed her hand.

Only it wasn’t a joke, and Ken had beamed and kissed her cheek in congratulations, but she hadn’t felt honored at all, because he hadn’t meant it, hadn’t known what he was saying, and therefore had asked it of her unwittingly.

But he had said it, and now she was it, she was Dama Grande, the stand-in for the Alpha Guide, a temporary Alpha in her own right. Settling disputes, chasing down old troublemakers, completing inquiries and setting precedents for new rules, soothing petty hurts, and doing a lot of outcome report writing — that was the Alpha Guide gig, in a nutshell.

…and Moira hated it.

A new, slow knock came at the door, and she took this as a reprieve, a last-minute governor’s call.
“Come in!” she called out, shutting the unread folder and trying to mentally prepare herself for the next Guide-to-Guide interaction. True, this job was unasked for, but Moira had never been one to shirk responsibility — whether chosen or not. And seeing as this was only Cascade’s second week with an Alpha Guide, she’d be damned if she’d let it go to pot so soon. She put on her best, calmest smile to greet her doubtlessly upset guest.

It was a pleasant surprise, then, to find Daryl poking his head around the door just moments later and smiling broadly into the room.

“Hey. I heard what Blair did, and I figured you could probably use some lunch. And a break. And a hand, if I can? Maybe with the non-confidential cases? Or whatever else I can help with. Blair’s my buddy, but he kind of blows over the details sometimes, and it looks like you caught the brunt of it. So…I’d like to help if I can, at all. But at the very least — lunch.”

Moira looked up at him with a kind of desperate, pleased, beautiful hope and her energy (amplified since the anointing) picked up and hummed happy and loud.

“Oh, please, yes please!” she cried, and was out of her seat before he could even enter, making papers scatter and Daryl laugh.

“Alright, well come on, then — I called for a car for you, so someone’s waiting outside. You want to go to a café or go to Haven?”

Moira rushed to get to her bag together, to find her sweater, to unfold her sunglasses and get them onto her head.

“Café, please — I won’t get two minutes to myself at Haven.” she was halfway to the door when she stopped, furrowed her brow, and looked at him “…aren’t you meant to be back at the uni today?”

Daryl had the good grace to look sheepish.

“Cav got home so late last night that I barely got any sleep.” he defended, then smiled a weak smile and his energy did a funny little dance and Moira wondered about it. “But I’ll go tomorrow. Just one day won’t hurt.”

Moira raised one eyebrow, but was too preoccupied by the promise of the café to belabor the point.

“As long as you go tomorrow.” she said, hurrying to the door. “I’m sure it’ll make no difference. Hey, should we pick up Rafe?”

Daryl frowned.

“I had the same idea, but the clinic said he’s called in sick.” Daryl wrinkled his nose. “Maybe we should go and check on him?”

Moira glanced at her watch, then stopped and thought, tilting her head.

“Maybe we should.”

~:~

In the rising light of the late morning, Salmon River looked more like a village than a city under siege.

From the exposed, dusty hill on which Jody’s cabin sat, Blair could see halfway down the dry valley — too far — and he suddenly missed the damp, green altitude of Cascade.

Across the dirt driveway, Jim and Jody were each holding court with their little factions of loyal Sentinels-at-arms, and Blair watched enviously as Jim gave Ken Rochelle commands in hushed voices and gestured around. Jody stood at a distance, facing her group, voice pitched low and eyes dark and angry. One of the Sentinels on her side, a young woman, heard a command and reeled
back, swore and stomped around. Jody stilled her with a glance; the young woman fell back into line, mouth taut but silent.

Then both the Sentinels were breaking apart, moving away from their groups and governance and going back into that space of being, of unity with the ground and the trees and the cold wind and the anima, the animus, the living id.

To hunt, to guard, to bond, to breed. To hunt.

~

They decided that they’d take Jim’s truck back to Cascade; Jody would lead a team down to Big Bowl.

The two groups had come together inside of the cabin — there were four from each side; three on Jim’s without counting Ken Rochelle, who had been sent back to Salmon River HQ to check in officially with Jody’s second in command and return.

In the cabin, there was the kind of between-beats anticipation that comes with waiting for all things to proceed. The energy sparking between the Sentinels was fast, and directionless; collectively, they rested on cliff-edges of emotion, prepared at any moment to launch into violence, into pursuit, into protection.

Still, nothing happened.

After the main decisions had been made, Kitty had poured off into the small attached kitchen and begun packing cloth bags with hard tack, canteens of water, and cured meats. Blair sat in the small chair by the front window and stared at nothing; he felt suspended, unfinished, drawn out between two halves of something he couldn’t define.

Apart from him, his wolf paced and waited. Blair reached for the bond; Jim was present for a moment, soft and green and welcoming and Blair felt a rush of relief, of constancy, of safety — and then it was away, the Sentinel was pulling back, pacing off, moving in that way that was not a lope, but something more arboreal, more predatory, more alone.

Blair realized that his stomach hurt, and decided he wanted some water. Jim and Jody took no notice of him as he left, caught up as they were in the rituals of departure — they were both soldiers in this moment, and beholden to learned patterns and rote ceremony.

Without meaning to reveal his alignment, Blair found himself in the kitchen; there was a sort of swaddling comfort in the narrow galley, cramped with heat from the potbellied stove in one corner and scattered now with the accoutrements of Kitty’s preparations. Blair felt a pang in his belly that seemed to reverberate through his psyche; he shivered a little and ignored it.

In the outer room, Jody dropped a tool belt on the blocky rustic table and began disassembling it.

Kitty spared him a long glance; her eyes were neither condemning nor consilient; merely observing. He stared back; she tilted her head and her energy rose up, arched its back and began to approach him. In response, he stepped away, pretending that he’d heard his name called in the outer room.

Sticking his head out of the kitchen won Blair a good sniff of the strange energy susurrating through the front room — expectancy, maybe, or nostalgia, or bloodlust. Both Alpha Sentinels were silent, but there was a togetherness in their motions; an unbelting here, a movement there, a tool handed back or forth. And that had been the point of the exchange, hadn’t it? Underneath it all, we are all social animals and even when going to war, do not want to go alone.
Jody found a whetstone and pocketed it.

“We don’t have a lot of time. Marin’s men will be — “

And before she could finish, there was a bang and a burst and a sheaf of paper on a dusty shelf in the corner fell, shocked by the sudden noise, loose to the ground. Jody lifted herself up and growled; Jim went low and tense and the Sentinels all flew into movement; both Guides rushed to the doorway of the kitchen (foolhardy, reckless), pulses racing and energy spiked wildly.

A young wolf tumbled down a snowbank and into the realm of the lupus majorus, throwing the door open wildly and rolling messily to a stop with a two-guard detail trailed soon after.

Jody was at his throat so quickly it was as if she hadn’t moved at all.

“Who the fuck are you?!”

“Jody!” Jim growled in annoyance, “That’s Ken. I sent him to your HQ. That’s my pack.”

With a severe shake of his collar, the blonde Sentinel released Ken Rochelle, snarling.

“Out of the fucking woodwork…” she scoffed, muscles releasing and anger coming down, draining away.

Jim glowered at her for a minute, then shifted his attention back to Ken, who was standing at attention as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all.

“My apologies for surprising you, Alpha Evers.” he said, and his eyes glimmered something that Blair found, from the kitchen doorway, confused and hard to read. Jody rolled her eyes.

“Since you invited yourself in so pleasantly, I expect you have something critical to report, Sentinel.” she said, resting herself against the desk, shielding the bag she’d been packing from the new intruder’s eyes. Ken glanced once at Jim, then nodded sharply and began addressing Jody.

“Vehicle stopped at the Southern Border, Alpha Evers.”

“And why would I be interested in the traffic report, Visiting Sentinel?” she interrupted, voice dropping several decibels and edging into something with claws.

The younger of the two trailing Sentinels cleared his throat and spoke up.

“It came up a strange way, through Salt Lake’s territory, Alpha.” he explained, and the expression on the young Sentinel’s face was eager and grim. Blair tried to read the group, lower his shields and open his energy and get some sense of the Sentinels around him, but there was too much happening, too many emotions rising and falling and the emotional cacophony confused and overwhelmed him. His pulse raced and the bond singed and he shut his shields back up, shuttering himself against the onslaught. (Across the room, Jim’s brow furrowed, and he glanced sidelong at his Guide.)

Rising from her post, Jody lumbered over to the three Sentinels, standing tall in front of the last one to speak. Without malice, she met her young footsoldier’s eyes. The boy swallowed and lowered his gaze, deferring to his Alpha out of respect or fear or admiration or everything all at once, plus love.

“And?” she demanded, and now she was swelling up again — she had read the energy, or Kitty had, and had relayed to her, or maybe she had just seen her packmate’s eyes and known.

“…and it’s him, Alpha Sentinel.”

Jim had been growing silently more agitated, and now flexed his shoulders, crossed his arms, and nearly snarled.

“Him who?”

Blair’s heart began pounding; the energy in the room had suddenly changed, and was taking on a
fringed, spastic quality and Ken felt/looked nothing like himself. Everything was shades of black and purple and gold inside/outside Escherian edges and the Sentinels were restless and frantic and had an air of disbelief about them, passing strange looks between themselves and sending odd emotions skipping like flat stones over Blair’s Guide-skin.

Ken Rochelle collected himself before the others, and his voice and his emotions hardened into something recognizable, sensible: anger.

The confusion faded away, falling back like scales and Blair realized that the Sentinels had merely been insensate with it before, numbed by the complexity of processing, but that in that scant few moments he had seized control of his Sentinel-self and now he stood, a clear product, a neat package, a black stone with smooth sides and on every side was rage.

“Theo Marin. He’s here.”

For a moment, the room hung silent; the air was a spiderweb of thinned-out emotions, little lines that crossed and wove and drug down toward the central weight of this new fact. Blair blinked. Jim stared. Jody narrowed her eyes, annoyed.

“Well, why the fuck didn’t you say that in the beginning?” she demanded and, with no one but Kitty quick enough to follow, was out the door.

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The Truth.

In the time before he became the thing he had become, Theo Marin had run through the driftwood forests of his coastal home, played at the licking edges of the bayou and smelt cypress, traipsed across wet ground and tasted sweet salt in the air and known the ocean was near and that he was alive.

Then time and duty and obligation rose up between the thing he had been and the thing he had become and now he was here, far from the ocean, far from home, in this place, in this time — waiting.

Theo stared blankly at the wilting paper mug of cold coffee in front of him — a weak hospitality from a surly Sentinel whose fear of accidental diplomatic catastrophe had outweighed her desire to impugn his dignity.

They weren’t sure who he was.

For that reason, and that reason alone, Theo Marin was not dead yet.

Instead, he sat alone and unhandcuffed in a loosely guarded room that was distinctly not a prison cell while he waited alongside his cold coffee for the Alpha Sentinel of Salmon River Pack to arrive.

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The Salmon River Council Court building was a two-story, forty-room gray stone building that sat at the heart of the packlands and had, in ages past, been home to: a prospectors’ bank, a frontier school, a hospital, a mining company’s strategic headquarters, a regional deployment center, and a fallout shelter.

Now it seemed bent with the indignity of its current profession — the administrative headquarters for a motley pack of less than 3,000 that had only barely carved itself a space out of the rock and shrubland of the weakly-contested Interior West.

This was a desk job if it had ever known one, and on most days the building seemed to have given up all hope of seeing battle again and resigned itself to a future of wilting fluorescent lamps and the scraped floors of repeated administrative reorganizations.

It was thrilled, therefore, to sense on the horizon the rumbling pulse of engines, following one after the other — a caravan of action. It lifted its windows a bit to catch hints of a fight on the wind, a tension in the aether that tugged at its magnetic arrangement. It livened to hear the back-and-forth shouts of commands, the orientation and re-orientation, the pounding of feet moving…not in unison, but in something like it: alliance. The steady pulse of Sentinel energy that spoke of war.

It was no surprise, then, that by the time Jody and Jim’s vehicles (now in a tightly-ordered caravan of six with Jim’s gray truck at the lead) crested the mount of the hill that led visitors into the town center, the building had changed.

So when Blair peered out of the window from the backseat of the gray truck and caught sight of the Salmon River HQ for the first time, his eyes fell on a tall brick edifice whose face was scarred and proud, whose architecture hinted at many past wars fought and won, and whose spire gave it a point of observation that was unrivaled in all the land surrounding.

This was how the building would appear on that day, and forever after.
Blair shivered a little, for reasons that were not clear even to himself, and wished suddenly, strangely, that Kitty had ridden in the truck with him — that he could read her energy and feed on some of her bitter-honey Guide touch and feel soothed. But Kitty had chosen to ride in the van with her Sentinel (they did not like to be apart at such tense times), and so Blair was alone.

In the front seat, Jim was driving, swearing lowly while being briefed thoroughly by Ken. There was little information that Jim hadn’t already had; Salmon River was a small pack, but strong in heart; they had no money to speak of, but had built a local culture that thrived on self-reliance and the marginal survival of the plains.

They had, as Jody said, been watching the Purity for a very long time, and yet had made no plans for how to go to war with them; so when Theo Marin had come, they were caught by surprise. He had asked for the Alpha, taken a cup of coffee, and made no further statements, threats, or confessions since then.

If they wanted information, Jim and Jody would have to retrieve it from him.

The caravan reached the parking area adjacent to the main building and fell into a neat line behind it; the Sentinels unloaded from cars like a fog, spilling out over the tarmac.

Jody and Jim met in the space between their vehicles and joined together to lead the charge, but in the low-tempo furor of activity, Jim did not spare even a glance for Blair. This pained the Guide, but only minutely. Already, he was becoming distant from the hurt.

Then everything began.

The two Alphas, trailed by Ken Rochelle and the small army of supporting Sentinels, flowed, black-clad and swallow-like, into the lower level receiving room at the rear of the old building; they were at once an advancing force and — in a flicker or trick of the eye — a flock in motion, a black mass, a murmuration.

Blair flowed along with them, not out of motivation but rather inertia; he was swept up in the drive, pulled along as the weak dog in the center of the pack, pressured to keep pace.

Kitty felt no such obligations; she trawled along at a distance, lingering behind the group as if the effort did not concern her. Blair looked back for her, over his shoulder, and she did not smile that mysterious smile at him, but instead looked once at his eyes, then turned her attention to watching (from a distance) Jody.

Their party ascended the stairs, orders and discussions shouted between the Sentinels, their soldiers, their messengers, the administrative assistants who jogged alongside the group. Each partition of which peeled off into one room or another as the convoy advanced down the hall.

They reached the third floor and rounded the corner into the long flat hall, the old marble floor of the Court building echoing back their footsteps and the stairs creaking with relief.

They passed the portraits of SSN leadership, one or two peeling SSN-distributed posters, and a massive, still-life painting of a moose, drinking at the falls.

And ahead of them, growing larger as they neared their destination — as all their language and chatter fell away, as their steps began to coincide until they were one machine, one movement, one pack, one thing — growing larger was the end of the hall, and the old crank window that sat foolishly half-open, leaking in the biting, bitter, cool mountain air.

On approach, Jody’s Sentinels broke apart and flanked the hall, lining up shoulder-to-shoulder, their
backs against the cheerfully plain grey-yellow tile. Ken Rochelle took a position of attention just to the left of the door; Blair saw this and thought of ancient warriors preparing to go into battle; of young men spearing lions on an endless plain; of dogs, paired in gladiatorial battle in the name of the prince.

Jim stopped at the door and looked again over his shoulder at the two Guides. Blair glowered at him unrepentantly. Jim frowned, brow bending inward, and turned back.

“Jim.” Blair said, softly, and came up close to his Sentinel (taking a lesson from Kitty), winding his arm around his mate and burying his fingers in the soft cuff of the Sentinel’s jacket.

There was a moment of tension, of silence, of possibility and loss. Jim nodded once, tightly, and they went in.

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Moira’s first inkling that something was wrong came when Rafe did not answer any communication sent to inquire about his well-being, after their return from lunch.

Daryl had hung around once they’d returned from a quick bite at the café, ostensibly to help with the non-confidential case backlog. But he seemed preoccupied with a small notebook he had with him; supposing that it must be some note-taking or assignment from the university, Moira left him to his private notes and slogged through the caseload alone.

But despite her apparent focus on the work, Moira had (in truth) been wondering about Daryl all day. Even with their growing familiarity, (built on their shared obligation/affiliation to Blair) this young Guide was still essentially a stranger to her. She was, of course, privy to the most recent, salacious bits of knowledge about him — who wasn’t, in a Pack as small as Cascade? — but that only told her that he was young and his father was important and his Sentinel was hotheaded and horny and inexperienced.

And it revealed nothing about what had prompted his visit today. So she had sat at her desk and worked studiously, and her energy had run curious and eager to see what would happen. But Daryl had said nothing, done nothing — simply sat at the empty desk across the office and hummed a pleasant tune as Moira felt a simple, occasional bubbling that must have been his young, bright energy pulsing against hers.

And now, if she half-closed her eyes as she read over her papers, she could almost hear his energy bump and burst in the shared space of the room, regular and steady. A heartbeat; a drumbeat; the tide. Soothing, smoothing, calm, and relaxed.

Young, but not untrained, she realized slowly.

Because Daryl wasn’t like her, wasn’t like Blair, hadn’t grown up all messy and hodgepodge and here/there, shifting community to pack to town to city life.

He’d been born in Cascade, revealed his manifestation at an early age to parents ready to receive and understand him, had been schooled in the Academy, raised in the Pack, (trained in the ways of thinking that would form the new tradition) and reared as the precious only progeny of a prominent Sentinel father.

So of course his Guide-touch was bright and gentle, and of course he’d known that she, strong as she was, would need help as Dama Grande, and of course no one had protested when he’d inserted himself into her office, and of course he’d slipped his Touch so subtly into their interaction that she
only noticed it an hour after he’d begun.

Across the room, Moira looked at him, smiled a grateful smile, and then went back to her work.

Two hours passed, and Rafe still did not call to say that he was alright. He did not stop by, nor did he radio, nor did any message arrive on his behalf.

After three hours, with the sun getting low and the day nearing an end, she began to worry.

~:~

From the hallway, the Sentinel’s power had been apparent.

Blair hadn’t spoken on it (one doesn’t speak of such things), but he had felt it, sensed the pull like a run of prickled hairs along his nose. Now, faced with an empty interrogation room, a Sentinel pulling ever farther from their newborn bond, a rush of adrenaline and the cooing up-sweep energy of a second Guide wandering somewhere behind him... now Blair really felt the pull.

And that was even before he turned around.

The group tromped into the waiting chamber, all boots and determined faces and grimly restrained Sentinel violence. Blair slipped himself in, against a wall, and tried to hide in the shadows of other men.

Theo Marin lifted his head, looked at them, and smiled.

“Now that’s what I call a welcome wagon.” he said, drawling out his amusement. “Two Alpha Sentinels, come to greet little ol’ me. To what do I owe the honor?”

Blair pressed even farther back, as far as he was able; something powerful wafted off of the seated Sentinel — something sinful and decadent and dark gray damp and familiar, like the feel of bare feet pressing sneakily into leaf litter.

“Oh.” the man said, his shoulders squaring and pupils dilating as he caught the scent, and Blair shivered and shimmered and thought no please, but it was as pointless as it ever was, as it ever had been to every guide and woman and running deer who had ever tried to hide an undeniable truth.

“And a wet-pussy Guide, to boot.”

Then Theo Marin turned those dark, vivid, impenetrable eyes on Blair and relinquished that wicked, charming smile of his...with imperceptible speed, the Sentinel’s eyes flipped from Blair’s eyes to his hair to his mouth, and he inhaled. Unbidden, Blair felt something thrum through him that made his wolf go pliant and still.

When Marin spoke again, his voice had dropped to a low, private register and his tongue darted between sharp white teeth.

“Mmm. You smell like ripe fruit in the hot sun, little Guide. All slick and tender, just for me.”

Theo’s drawl poured the words out like syrup, sprawled their syllables out beyond all reason into something decadent and profane. Blair flushed to the tips of his toes and Theo’s eyes darkened.

“What’s your name, sweetheart?”

Then, in the manner that a tide builds and builds before breaking, loosing, falling frantic and white over the rocks, Jim snarled and lurched forward, placing himself angrily between Blair and him, the
beast, the monster, the encroacher, the hunted murderer. Theo didn’t flinch, but he did match Jim’s
growl, did tighten his muscles enough to make their presence felt.

“Dance card’s already full, I see.”

Then that wave came again, a push like a thrust of heat and Blair almost trembled with the sensation
of it; he concentrated instead on pacing his heart and keeping the goosebumps down on his skin. The
effort made the bond between he and Jim tremble and pulse a strange flux of colors, and Blair felt the
momentary feeling of being pulled strongly in one direction. Abruptly, it was gone. To his right, just
visible in his peripheral vision beyond the frame of the door, Kitty slipped into the room. Theo’s eyes
flicked to her for a half-second, but Jody caught it:

“Look at her twice and I’ll cut your throat before you ever get to trial.”

Theo curled his gaze away from the two Guides and cocked his head, looking up to meet Jody’s
eyes.

“Trial? Should I be expecting to speak before the Council, Sentinel?”

“Alpha Sentinel, and why the hell else would you come here, if not to confess?” Jody’s voice was
deceptively mild from where she lurked, half-revealed, in the sliced shadows of the room’s far
corner.

“Confess to what?” Theo demanded, the scowl on his face making him look young and sullen, “The
only mistake I am guilty of, Alpha Sentinel, is believing that I was within my rights to state my
opinions about the future of the SSN in what I believed to be a free and fair society.”

“Oh,” Jim said, prowling closer to Marin, stopping when he stood right next to the man’s chair. “Is
that your only mistake?”

Theo met Jim’s eyes and in them was laughter and violence and a challenge.

“I’ve committed no crimes, and I have no enemies in the Nation.” Theo stretched his fingers along
the arms of the chair in which he was seated, laying them down one-after-another to make a
concussive arpeggio. “I come bearing gifts and information.”

Theo glared pointedly.

“And I did not make the long journey up from the down coast in order to flay my soul on the altar of
the Northern Packs’ egos.”

Jody’s body tensed for action; even in the shadows, Blair could see it. She did not prime as Jim did,
who was all muscle-into-muscle like music, flowing. She simply prepared like it was nothing —
loosed her strength and raised her head and was ready.

“So why did you come here, then? To admire your handiwork? See the bodies, check out how much
chaos you’ve created?”

Theo scoffed out a bitter, full-bodied laugh.

“Chaos is exactly what I’m trying to avoid.”

“By ordering murders, setting off bombs and threatening public safety?” Jim demanded, slamming
both hands down on the table. “Four dead kids in my pack, and one of them only 16 years old.”

Jim growled, flexing his fingers involuntarily, and Blair’s eyes flew to them, tracked them, watched
cautiously for splits in the wood or pinpricks of blood or any such indication…
“They were children, Marin. Children! And yet you have the nerve to sit here and tell us you’re innocent, tell us you don’t want chaos. Thirteen Guides, nine Sentinels, and four dead kids: I’d call that fucking chaos.”

Theo turned, and in the turning of his head there was something other, there was something inhuman, there was something chillingly familiar to Blair. He was looking into a place between all of them — into a middle distance that seemed farther away than the cramped room would allow.

“I swear to you both, here and now and before the Moon, that I had no part whatsoever in any of the crimes you’ve listed here. I killed no children, nor did I order any deaths. I set no bomb, and I never, never —” here, his accent caught on the end of the word and stretched the consonant nearly to breaking — “never told anyone to kill for me.”

Impatient and discomfited, Jody rose and came across the room in a lumber.

“So why did you come, then?” she asked, meeting Theo’s eyes — gray into black.

Theo’s eyebrows lifted, and in those black eyes was a zealous passion that both awed and terrified.

“I came to show you the truth.”

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The tension in the room reached new heights.

Blair’s heart pounded; he felt dizzy and sick and that creeping feeling of a thousand voices clamoring, rising like a low sun over a dark esker. He swayed where he stood, veering instinctively or accidentally a little closer to the Sentinel, perhaps wishing with his wolf for that zooming-in aura buzz that would tell him that the bond was close.

If only he were as clever as Moira — then he’d know what she knew, have learned all the Guide’s tricks for slipping the bond open, for sidling up to the pulsing low earth energy of the Sentinel, for flirting his way across the barriers until they were together again — smooth, gliding, rejoined before the sentinel even knew what’d happened.

If not, then at least he wished to be as bold as Kitty, as raw in his urges and urgent in his desires. Then he would paw his way into the center of the scene, ignorant or uncaring of his role as a disruptor, and demand (command?) the attention of his Sentinel.

But Blair had not been born or trained to be either Kitty or Moira, and so instead he just observed the scene from the outside, lingered on its edges and ached.

“Well?” Jody Evers demanded, as she paced across the room with movements that were controlled and firm, but a voice that was the jagged wall at the back of a cave and fat paws slapping against wet ground.

Theo Marin sat at the head of the table, spinning his index finger lazily around the lip of his paper coffee cup and saying nothing to anyone. Lined against the wall, Ken Rochelle and the other Sentinels shifted anxiously, a septet of horses dressed for a ride and impatient to depart.

Jody’s anger rose.

“Start talking.” she commanded — slurred, really, and Blair jerked his head up and felt a bump of Kitty’s energy brush curiously against his. Then the female sentinel was pacing down to her end of the table again, only there was something odd in her gait; some new weight, previously uncarried.

Theo saw it, too, or seemed too; for half a moment, he looked distant, distracted, pained. His eyes had diminished in their zealous shine now, but his hips still canted slightly to the left in his chair and his legs splayed beneath the table — a disdain for the severity of the situation. Then, shaking his head, Marin refocused and bared his teeth like a dog waking up angry from a poor dream. His mouth formed a macabre grin, unafraid.

“Where shall I begin?”

Jim entered the scene, interrupted the duel, and dropped a fat beige folder on the desk in front of his detainee and flipped to the top page.

“Why don’t we start here?”

Jim leaned in close, looming over the other man’s shoulder in a way that would have been overt aggression in their ancestors, and Theo drew himself up tightly.

Blair sucked in a sudden breath; the two Sentinel energies were now sparking up in weird little energetic clashes — bright spots in the room, locking and releasing, testing each other — where the two men came too close to do anything but borrow each other’s air. There was a rumbling, distantly, and it could have been anything but Blair supposed it must be rain and was relieved. Something else
Jim snaked an arm between his own shoulder and Theo Marin’s, and ran a finger down the first page.

“Theo Marin. Head of the New Purity Movement for the last three years — ”
“Five.”
“I’m sorry?”
Theo cocked an eyebrow at Jim.
“It’s been five years.”

The eyebrow went back down, and then Theo added, in a voice fatigued and sincere, “Believe me — I’ve counted ‘em.”

Jim’s jaw twitched.

“Five years.” he parroted back. “And what a five it’s been.” he turned to the next page, bending the bright white sheets of paper (still warm from their reproduction in the Salmon River printing room downstairs) back against the tarnished nickel of their binding tacks.

“You’ve been charged in absentia with six counts of Inciting to Riot.”
Theo rolled his eyes.
“Frivolous.”
“Nine counts of Disorderly Conduct.”
“Spurious.”
“One hundred and thirty two counts of Unlawful Gathering, Dangerous Speech, or Sedition.”
“Subjective.”
“Sixteen counts of lewd behavior.”
The more mischievous corner of the Sentinel in question’s mouth pulsed upwards, briefly.
“Probable.” he said, and the low-earth warmth was back in his voice.
“— and two of sexual violence or coercion.”
The grin fell away, and a distinct vexation replaced it.
“Unlikely.”
“Not to mention numerous complaints filed against your movement and its affiliates: conspiracy, intimidation, racketeering.”
“Uninvolved.” he said, dismissively.
“Theft. Incursion. Trespassing.”
“Not hardly.”
“Unsanitary use of public grounds.”
Theo scowled and leaned his head back, seeking patience in Jody’s tin ceiling tiles.
“We hosed it down after.” he defended, sounding churlish and put-upon and as if he were reengaging in a oft-repeated argument.

Jim didn’t bother to look at him.
“And last but doubtlessly related: illegal take of wildlife.”

Theo’s expression changed then; his energy softened, warmed, and his eyes darted to Jody, then up to Jim; he seemed to be searching each Sentinel’s expression, and having found or read what he was looking for, a grin spread across his face like a freed bird, stretching its wings.

“Would you like to know a secret?” the detained Sentinel inquired, speaking slow and in that warm, low rumbling that tipped paratactically between challenge and seduction.

He stretched, letting the tension flow out of his body and his head fall into a loll on his neck, loosening tight muscles. His hair, a dark mane of curls that belied no origin, gleamed momentarily in
the shifting light. As Theo rose and resettled, his movements brought him even closer to Jim — who did not yield ground — and so their faces became pressed near to each other, noses nearly brushing in the contested space. Theo’s pupils, when Blair caught a glimpse of them, were dilated and fathomless.

Startled perhaps by the tone or the proximity or perhaps (optimistically) some sensation read from Blair’s response to the situation, Jim abruptly pulled back, watching the other Sentinel distrustfully. Theo lifted up, sat tall to chase Jim into his space, kept the air between them narrow and tight.

“She was fast,” he said, eyes flickering back and forth to hold Jim’s gaze, and he took a quick breath, as if recalling a scent-memory, “She was a doe, and she was fast. And strong, and musky, and not too young to chase. Clever girl, clever girl, she led me over the river’n through the woods, had me after her like a dog goes after a tail and I was hungry, hungry for it. I could taste her — taste the sweet bite, the red, the satisfaction — oh! I wanted to catch her, I wanted it, wanted it, wanted it more than I wanted breathing. I ran and ran and ran and ran. Don’t even remember most of it. I ran and ran and the night turned black and the sun went away and the ground was frozen in time and place and I was, for a one brief, pure, inviolable moment, the thing I truly am. I don’t recall my pull-down; I don’t recall her collapse. I remember nothing about catching her. But I remember that chase.”

Marin shut his eyes, overcome. When he opened them again, his gaze seemed somehow dusky and livelier — lit by a powerful desire, by a green fire from within.

It was this naked, dusky, ravenous look that he brought to bear on Jim’s startled face; there was heat in his eyes and something Blair didn’t understand in Jim’s and they exchanged a look — just one look — but in that look there was a flickering of knowledge between them; an incisive, seeking thing that was as ancient as it was intimate and unknown.

“You ever chase a deer like that, Jim?” Theo Marin asked, already knowing the answer.

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Simon had spent almost 26 hours now in the private company of Suzanne Ransom, and he was — to put it crudely — sick of her shit.

If she wasn’t finding fault with the food they’d brought to the safehouse, then she was criticizing Jim’s handling of the investigation (and, by extension, Simon’s role in it). One minute the air was too dry — it would hurt the baby’s nose — and the next minute, too damp and they would all catch their death of cold. First there weren’t enough guards, then she couldn’t find a moment’s privacy.

For someone who had recently declined the opportunity to leave Cascade Pack, Simon reflected, she sure did have a lot of complaints to make about it.

Simon had also forgotten the pleasures of sharing small quarters with an infant; it had been more than 18 years since Daryl had been pint-sized, and in that time he’d had little cause for keeping close company with one of the newly-arrived.

And so perhaps it was the result of a night unexpectedly spent in a strange environment; or the nearness of an agitated and anxious Guide; or the absence of the Alpha Pair; or a general lack of sleep thanks to late night crying-and-feeding sessions. Perhaps he was coming down with something. Or perhaps these were simply the creeping consequences of approaching middle age with no bondmate in sight.

Whatever the reason, Simon’s senses had been kicking up a fuss in the last 24 hours: agitating his
skin, making his ears ache, and giving him an unshakeable but inarticulate discomfort that made him snippy and irritable.

In the late morning, Cav had arrived with a relief contingent, and Simon had leapt at the chance for a break from duty, eager to spend the afternoon getting clean in his own shower, sitting on his own sofa, and making his own sandwiches. But then Suzanne had caught sight of the new officer — a brash female Sentinel with dark hair and pitiless eyes — and had looked just once, desperately, at Simon and he had thereafter found himself unable to leave her.

So he’d waved away his relief, thanked and dismissed the female Sentinel, and instructed Cav to come back with all of their current casefiles. Then he’d fluffed up the pillows on the couch and settled in for another day with the Queen of Unnecessary Criticism.

Suzanne made a noise that might have been a chitter, or a scoff.

“You didn’t have to stay.”
Simon opened one eye, and Suzanne shifted Tig in her arms.
“I mean, not if all you’re going to do is nap anyway.”
Simon closed his eye.

Eyes closed, he could hear Suzanne lingering; without stretching his senses far, he could pick up the subtle brush of her shirt against her jeans as she bounced Tig on one hip; the thrum-thrum-thrum-thrum-thrum of her heartbeat, now that it had calmed again.

“You didn’t have to stay.” she repeated, unexpected and awkward in the quiet room.
“But I have.” Simon said, and that was that.
“OK.” Suzanne said. “Thank you.”

Her voice was placid, but there was something beaten in it and Simon’s skin prickled with awareness of her, suddenly; with images unbidden of Suzanne, crouching in a corner, arms sheltering her head. Of nervous apologies that did no good, and anxious, long nights and repression — so much repression that it made it difficult to breathe — that he choked on it.

Whatever annoyance he’d felt faded away, and he exhaled.

“It was my pleasure.” Simon said, and in the moment when he said it, there was a tectonic shifting between them — a movement of time and place so that they were not, for just a fraction of a second — themselves. Simon was only himself and she the Other, the One, the Guide who lived before time, and she was in danger and in pain and there was an embodied doing of these things that would not be denied.

Simon was prepared to defend her, even from herself.

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“Tell us about your relationship with Representative Marshall.” Jody demanded, and Blair mentally scoffed at her. She was still treating this encounter as if it were an interrogation; he and Ken Rochelle had long since realized that it was to be a negotiation, if it were to be anything at all.

“Who?” Marin asked, disinterested.
“Your co-conspirator in Central Command.”

Theo’s right eyebrow shifted in a way that disbelief and amusement.

“Sentinel Evers, I assure you that if I had a co-conspirator in Central Command, I would have made
the drive up here in a much more comfortable vehicle.”

Jody growled, and Jim spoke up again.

“You’re telling us you’ve never heard of a sentinel named Smith Marshall; that you two are not working together, and that you two have not conspired to pursue the destruction of the Sovereign Sentinel Nation?”

Marin looked at his fingernails.
“Am I under arrest, Sentinel?”
“You are under detainment, and as such, you will answer my questions.”

Theo glared up at Jim and for a moment, the two parried back and forth, their energies flicking up tensely.

“Fine.” Marin conceded, eventually, not taking his eyes from Jim. “I will answer your questions, as a gesture of good faith and goodwill. I am not your enemy, Sentinel.”

“Alpha.” Jim corrected.
Theo sighed, heavily.

“As I said: I have committed no crimes and I have no enemies in the Nation. I have ordered no one’s death — dramatic as that might be — and I have certainly not asked anyone to murder a child in my name. I do not know your Representative Marshall, nor do I have any other co-conspirator in Central Command.” his mouth twitched, and he added: “Although if you’d like to make a few introductions, I can assure you that you’d receive an appreciative mention in my ascension speech.”

Jim glared.
“Stop dancing and start talking, Marin, or you’re going straight into an underground cell until we can figure out what the hell is going on.”

The detained Sentinel took a long, serious breath, and there was a rushing-out of the tension in the room, as water might be pushed along by the power of a blowing wind. Blair felt it slip across his skin, felt it soothe the places where his own energy had begun to feel spotty and itchy, and slide out of the room.

The man sitting at the head of the table seemed to take this in and consider it; he dipped his head and folded his hands in front of him, leaning forward onto his elbows.

“I am Theo Marin, and for the last five years, I have been the head of the New Purity movement on the North American continent. We are not a violent movement, and we do not condone any harm done to our kind — certainly not our breeding kind — in the Purity’s name.”

“Our beliefs are simple: we are Sentinels; we are not men. Our destiny is written in our blood and in our bonds. We are entitled to live a pure life — to hunt, to defend territory, to fight, to claim mates under the moon, to breed, to roam, and to rule the wild land around us.”

Theo’s voice rose in pitch as he spoke, and his pupils became darker, dilated, blowing out the rest of his dark eyes with an even purer blackness.

“This is our duty and our right. This is what we were made for. And Central Command has done a poor job of reflecting it, if you ask me. They have failed, repeatedly, to defend the tribe and to keep those not of us at bay. So look at where we are — beaten back by bureaucracy. Cowed by a central office. Slaves to concepts of civility that were never meant to fit us. Caged.”

Theo finished and fell back into his previous pose, relaxed and ready, in his chair.
“We want to be free, Sentinel. No more and no less. We do not want violence, and we do not want a war. All we want is to live, together with our kind, in a free land.”

Jody settled herself lazily and more deeply into her chair, before throwing her feet up onto the table as if she were alone.

“Not so free for Guides.” she observed — an idle statement that was anything but.

Theo’s expression darkened.
“All Guides and Sentinels are liberated and fairly treated, and can leave at any time.”
“Can they, now.” Jody answered, flatly.

Theo’s eyes narrowed, and whatever animal had been before disappeared again under the Louisiana businessman’s shuttered exterior.
“Those Guides ran away from home,” he snapped, in a failure of his typical stonewalling defenses. Jody was unaffected.
“Did they, now.”
“They did.” Theo jerked forward; in the quickness of his motion, a fringe of his dark curls loosed itself and fell, untended, toward his face. “They wanted to see for themselves what life was like in the Free Lands.”

Jody picked at her fingernails.
“You mean that scrap of earth too undesirable for anyone to fight you over?”

Theo sucked in a breath.
“Libre Terre is the beginning of our Empire, and those Guides were delighted to be a part of it. Not a single one of them has chosen to return home.”
Jody snorted.
“Half those Guides have cubs by now. They’re hardly free to go.”
Theo blinked in simple acknowledgement, neither rebutting nor supporting her statement.
“It is a poor mother who would abandon his den.” he said, yielding nothing.

Something gurgled, quickly, across Blair’s energy; he turned to look at the source of it, and found Kitty in the doorway, her own dark eyes flat and troubled.

Theo leaned forward, toward Jody.
“And tell me something, Alpha Evers: if life was so lovely for those Guides up here in the Nation,” he pressed, saying the name as if it were a theory and not a fact, “then why the hell’d they run away in the first place?”

There was an uncomfortable silence, and a thrumming pause in the room; a pregnancy of noise and commotion that drummed up, got busy, beat harder, and never bore fruit.

It fizzled out instead; a vein showed itself, briefly, in Jim’s forehead. Theo retreated into a relaxed posture at the back of his seat. The conversation went on.

“The truth is much simpler and less dramatic than you might imagine. They’re happy to live with us. They like living free, and they like living in a place where we consider being born a Guide to be a blessing — not a burden. We don’t treat Guidehood as if it were some consolation prize for not being born a Sentinel.”

Theo did not look at Blair, but nevertheless the guide felt a buzz of gentle energy slip toward him, unexpectedly more tempered than anything that had come from the strange Sentinel before.
“Unless they break your rules.” Jim amended, innocently. “Isn’t that right? Not such a blessing then, hmm? Once they piss you off? Step too far outside of your philosophy?”

Theo stared coolly at Jim and did not respond.

“Come on, Marin — am I not getting it right? You love ‘em until they violate some tenet of your so-called...what is it — schema, right? Until they hunt in the wrong place? Guard the wrong thing? Breed with the wrong kind of mate?”

Theo’s brow folded inward a bit, as if he were having trouble processing Jim’s words. The elder Sentinel had pulled back in the time while Theo and Jody were speaking, and now he spoke from his leaning perch against the corner of the table farthest from the door.

“Then they don’t get to live at all, huh? Isn’t that it? Isn’t that what you do? Punish the transgressors. Seal the leaks. Isn’t that what happened with those kids up at Boarman’s?”

Jim’s questions, which had been rising in agitation, now peaked in something more voluminous and piercing than rage. Blair felt his heart pound; Jim’s energy was streaking all over the place, making crazy patterns in the Guide’s head that seemed to take on new colors and shapes as they shrank and expanded.

“I told you I had nothing to do with — “
“Well, I told you I don’t buy that — “
“— the crimes that took place in your pack, Sentinel Ellison — “
“What about the crimes in my pack, Marin — “
“— think you’re a lying sack of shit, and I oughta — “
“— demand you put a stop your attacks on myself and my people — “

“Attacks!” Jim called out, nearly falling out off the table with incredulity. “Us!”

Theo growled, low.
“You rang up Central and demanded a warrant for my arrest on no grounds other than your own suspicion — “
“Other than a signed confession by a known member of your movement that — “
“I don’t know the man of whom you speak, but if he was indeed one of mine — “
“Oh, he’s one of yours for sure, we know that much — “
“— then I should have primogeniture in handling it, and you’ve — “
“Primogeniture?! You’re not a Pack Leader - you’re a criminal! You’ve got no idea — “
“— gave us names, locations, the meeting details of your cell in my packlands — “
“— only undermining yourself if you refuse to acknowledge my saliency as a leader in the Sentinel community — “
“— what the hell it means to take on that honor, you’re nothing more than a snake and a liar, a wannabe cowboy — “
“— and you can fight it all you like, but you know — “
“— my fucking pack, you son of a bitch, and I’ve been watching you for years, years, and I know you’ve — “
“— that this kind of thing can’t be stopped so easily; it doesn’t just go away, much as you and your lazy friends at Central might want it to — “
“— been spreading your anti-SSN bullshit all around the Western packs — “
“— an ignorant little boy whose ears still hurt — “
“— it won’t all just disappear — “
“— but it stops now, it stops here — “
“— who’s so weak and so afraid of the world outside — “
“— I won’t just disappear.”
“— it stops today.”
“— that he resorts to murder.”

“Enough.” Blair shouted, high-pitched and fevered with anger, and he leapt up and slammed his hands down on the cool wood of the table. The sound reverberated in the room, shimmered up like musical notes in the cold air and crystallized, then floated, fell apart into mist.

Theo’s drooping coffee cup jarred wetly and sloshed its contents. Ken Rochelle snapped to attention; the other Sentinels did the same. Jody looked at him with a steady, wary gaze from the other end of the table. Jim watched him and said nothing, but his end of the bond was distant and held-away.

At the slam of Blair’s hand, Theo had frozen, head turned as if by a blow, and now a groan shuddered through his body. For a moment, Blair thought he saw it ripple down his neck and along the length of his back, but the illusion disappeared as quickly as it had come, and Theo’s muscles were loose again and his good humor was back. He smiled.

Then Blair felt it again — that push, that magnetic draw, that _l’appel du vide_, that low thrumming of power and contact. His wolf stood with stiff legs at the edge of the room, eyeing the usurper. She watched, then shook her coat out, turned her tail, and disappeared into the hall. Blair’s legs felt weak; he fell back into his seat, eyes on his trembling hands. Theo Marin watched him calmly, unperturbed.

“As I was saying.” Theo cleared his throat, looking wistfully at his limp cup of cold coffee, and then meaningfully at Blair. “I am not your enemy.”

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Rafe had indeed not been in to the Clinic all day. By evening, he had also not been at Haven (as the sweet girl who sold cinnamon buns informed Moira when she asked), nor had he been seen at the Guide Center, Daryl discovered. He’d had no appointments, medical or otherwise, that they could uncover, and his attendance had not been noted at any of the evening concerts or other events in the center of town. A knock at the door of the townhouse he shared with his Sentinel went unanswered, and although Moira thought she heard movement inside, the lights remained unlit.

Giving up on the undertaking as night neared, Moira and Daryl collected themselves for a brief dinner in Daryl and Cav’s cramped, messy apartment (never hurt to get a home visit in), as she smiled at them both over their glasses of wine and Cav squeezed Daryl’s leg nervously.

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In my estimation, ” Theo Marin began, settling back into his chair and drumming his fingers at the group, generally. “We are burdened with three problems. First: that I am in command of the Purity, but I am not in command of the Gentlers. Second: that your SSN intelligence operations are so poor that you did not know this. And third: that the Gentlers are even in existence at all.”

Blair, Jim, Jody, Ken Rochelle and the female Sentinel who seemed to serve as Jody’s occasional man-at-arms had taken up seats at the table, and now they seemed to form a sort of ad hoc junto; Blair felt almost as if he were perhaps part of some revived wild tribunal. The other Sentinels, too low-ranking to be involved in what was proving to be an extended confabulation rather than a simple interrogation, had been sent out to patrol the halls and ensure the privacy of the meeting.

“We’re agreed on one count at least: the existence of the Gentlers is a problem.” Jim responded. “On everything else — I’m afraid you’ll have to persuade us.”
Theo Marin took four deep breaths, each longer than the last, and visibly dragged himself back from whatever place he’d been drawn into.

“I’m told you have a man of mine in custody.” Theo said, and his gaze was downcast, almost abashed. “I’m told he committed a terrible crime.”

“We do. And he did. You’re admitting that he’s your man?”

“I’m of the understanding that he claims to be a follower of mine.” Marin said carefully, and his eyes were cool, but clear. “I’d like to meet him. Talk to him. Understand why he did this…terrible thing.”

the sentinel locked eyes with both Jim and Jody, “I want to help you.”

“And why should we believe you?”

Theo smiled again, showing sharp white teeth.

“Because if you’ve got names and dates, then you know those wild men have got a plan already in motion — and it’s an urgent situation, if the flurry when I was driving in was any indication. I’ve got both Alphas here for what has been a rather extended questioning, which means you two’ve got nowhere better to be, which means no one else to interrogate. And if you’re asking me to help you chase the rats out of Central Command, then I expect you can’t go back to them for help, either. That leaves you two with as little options as intelligence, and I’m your only, tentative link to any of the answers you’re looking for.”

Theo leaned back in his chair and heaved a sigh so dramatic it was almost sarcastic.

“So the way I see it, Alpha Ellison, I’m the best — and only — chance you have at stopping more bloodshed.”

The antipathy in the room began to rise again, a lifting mist, and Blair felt woozy suddenly; light-headed and giddy and he suddenly wondered what would happen if he just swooned right here in the interrogation room.

Theo Marin was already looking at him with something primeval and piteous in his eyes.

“Oh, and, Alpha Ellison,” Marin said, slowly and with his best charm on, “Would you please go and fuck your Guide before I do it myself?”

Jim stuttered backwards as if he’d been slapped, and his attention shifted rapidly to Blair, then back to Marin, who was looking sullen and hungry.

“What are you waiting for? Instructions?” he shot out, jerking his chin toward Blair. “Your guide’s leaking like a sieve, and it’s gotten to the point of neglect.” Marin narrowed his eyes at Jim. “Put him on his belly so we can all get back to work.” then he glanced sidelong at Blair again, “And so he can feel better.”

Blair’s face got hot, and he felt spotlighted and alone; Jim had been too busy defending him to care about him, and now the deficiency in their relationship was being laid embarrassingly bare for the most painful mixture of audiences — the strange and intimate.

“Blair’s fine.” Jim said, trying for a growl but missing it by a far yard and striking somewhere around uncertain instead.
Theo held his hands out ahead of himself, in a motion that could be seeking or grasping — its intention remained unclear.

“Right. What do I know? I’m just a savage little wolf cub, come up by jalopy from the south.”

There was an undercurrent there, but it slipped away too quickly for Blair to read it, and he was left grasping at only its tail and shadow, and a vague suggestion of what it might have been. Blair tried to focus on it, but there came that thundering in-head commotion again, and the world slipped a bit into the gray. Theo’s head tilted toward him again, and Blair flushed, feeling once again caught out.

“Well, ‘Blair’ needs to leave, Sentinel Ellison.” Theo Marin said again, this time with greater vehemence. Then he looked at the neonate Guide again, and this time his expression shifted to something more sorry, more tender. “This is too hard on a Guide like him.”

“A guide like me?” Blair demanded, before he was able to stop himself. His skin felt hot and itchy; his cheeks burned with unshed tears and limitless, inarticulate anger. “What’s that supposed to mean: a guide like me? You mean that I don’t belong to your privileged class? I’m not one of you?” he sneered, and was proud of the fact that his voice only wavered a little bit. “You mean because I’m half?”

There. It was out; he’d said it. Now the blow.

Theo’s gaze flicked again over Blair’s eyes, his lips, his hair, and he took in a quick, subtle breath through his nose, brow wrinkling in an expression that would have been concern in any other context.

“I mean that you’re a beautiful, very open Guide,” Theo Marin said, slow and simple and pacifying and full of that urging Sentinel strength, “And your channels are wide as the Panama Canal right now. Your Sentinel isn’t grounding you, so you’re leaking energy. Your hormones are all over the place, your heart’s beating like a drum, I can’t hardly even smell anything sweet and pink anymore, over all that anxiety — ” at this, Blair turned a thorough red, completely mortified, but Theo went on as if his catalogue of Blair’s present physiology was the most natural thing in the world: “— and the anger in this room is hurting you.”

Blair paused, then, not so much taken aback as knocked breathless; there was a cool wind at his side and the scent of the forest in the air, and Blair felt something — a meaningfulness, a consilience — and the feeling that they had known each other a long, long time ago.

Theo leaned across the table, toward Blair, eliciting a low warning growl from Jim that he ignored.

“And I don’t know what rot they’ve been teaching you up here in the mountains, darlin’ — but there ain’t no rank built into blood.” Marin’s voice turned firm and serious. “Being half-kin don’t make you half a Guide. You’re just as much one of us as anybody else.”

Theo’s words were simple and unadorned, but decorating their interiors was a world of apologies and forgiveness and the healing of a thousand small hurts.

After a moment, Theo’s expression became thoughtful, then dark, then there was that green fire in his eyes again and he fixed on Blair; “And besides — ain’t no ‘halves’ in the second generation. Long as you lay your pretty ass down with a Sentinel, your belly’ll breed true.”

Theo turned away from him then, and the energy that he had been holding beneath his skin, that had been cooling under his gentle aura, suddenly peeled away — rising/flowing outward and pushing Blair back. His attention turned to the table at large.
“Now, if you good kin don’t mind terribly, could we get this show on the road? I’d like to get back to Cascade, foil these bad men, and clear my good name before the night’s out. I know a pretty little Guide with very loose morals on the edge of the border, and he’s expectin’ me for dinner.”
It was very late in the evening by the time they got back to Cascade, and the sun had gone out of the sky.

The cells where Colin Ransom was being kept were unkind and unforgiving. There was no daylight; timed fluorescents gave the only hint of passing time — a false, buzzing day ran flush up against a silent, solitary night.

Blair stuck close to Jim’s side as they tromped down the primary staircase and entered the lower levels; in a burst of terror or anxiety, he grasped his Sentinel’s hand, but it was inconvenient in the passing of the halls and so the Sentinel gently disentangled him and let it go. This was work, and horror, and darkness, and he couldn’t make a space in his head clean enough in the midst of it to be doing something so gentle as holding Blair’s hand. There would be time, later, for all the kindnesses which Blair was owed; for now, they would both have to endure.

As they entered the lower levels, the walls narrowed toward them, and Blair pressed closer, and the scent of the cold metal walls was oppressive and mildewed.

Jim led the pack; this was his home, after all, and his territory, and his prisoner’s keep. These mistakes were his to make, and these victories were his to hold.

Jody had (out of respect) fallen behind with Kitty, and Theo Marin was margined between them with a backing security team. Ken Rochelle led a team of three, and they kept a tight, watchful eye on their target; he was an interloper too expensive to lose.

The walls narrowed as they advanced and Blair pressed closer. Against Jim’s left side, his presence was warm and humid — a summer rainstorm; dewy, hot earth. The panther chuffed, padded across the bent grass, raised its head for a sniff. Jim ignored him and pressed on; this was no time for that.

“Ransom’s given us a confession — dates, times, conversations. How the orders were given, and how they were carried out. Says an attack on Salmon River is imminent.”

Behind him, he sensed Jody tense, felt her energy spike up, met immediately by Kitty’s soothing, cottony presence. Beside him, Blair was a heated, but unreachable entity. Embarrassingly, Jim felt a pulse much like arousal swirl through him; he shuttered his interior ruthlessly and turned his attention back to the manner at hand.

“And he gave us more background on the Gentlers.” Jim said, by way of apology. Jody brushed it off. “I’ll get a timeline out of him.” she said, instead.

The name of those bastards had left a terrible taste in Jim’s mouth, and he scraped his tongue with his
teeth afterward to get rid of the feeling, then addressed Marin.

“Sorting fact from fiction’s been a major challenge here. That’s where you come in.” Jim turned his attention fully to the zip-tied man in their midst, tucking Blair unconsciously against his side as he did so. “If you are the man you say you are, then help us stop the next attack before more people get hurt.”

Then there was a moment’s pause, and Theo asked to no one in particular, but to Jim especially: “I’ll do what I can.” Then, that piercing energy, that flagrant undressing: “And did that bad man say… anything else to you?”

Jim thought about the Moon, thought about the ripple of sensation like a cold river in his spine, the run of fur down his back, the rending anger of that word — become — as it had spilled from Ransom’s traitorous mouth.

“No,” the Alpha Sentinel heard himself saying, “That was all.” — and did not know whether or not he was believed.

Then they were approaching the safety corner and the reflecting mirrors were showing the guard stationed just on the other side and the temperature was up just a bit, and Jim caught a whiff, unexpectedly strong, of Colin Ransom’s scent.

As they rounded the corner, the guard on duty (a three-sense Sentinel who had been standing at attention since he’d heard Jim’s approach) held his spine a bit straighter and nodded, once, in Jim’s direction.

“Alpha.” he said, and Blair pressed a bit closer to Jim’s back, brought that airless sex heat into closer contact. “Sentinel.” Jim responded, reminding himself that there wasn’t time, wasn’t time — and turned to the cell.

“Ransom.” he called out, and the body lying on the cot on the far side of the room shifted, then turned, then sat up.

Colin Ransom was a thin, unassuming man with a scent like heat rising off of a cornfield in August. His movements in the cell were unhurried, unconcerned. He calmly took off the plain black glasses he’d been wearing and folded them before addressing his visitors.

“Alpha.” he said, but did not bow his head.

Jim crossed his arms, broadening his shoulders. “Visiting hours. I’ve brought a friend of yours.” “A friend of mine.” Ransom’s voice was skeptical, and he did not budge from the bed. He narrowed his eyes in the darkness, trying to peer through the shadows of his cell into the silhouetted faces of the hallway. He lifted his nose to take a rude sniff. “I don’t know these people.”

“Sure you do,” Jim said, and wished suddenly, fervently, that Blair hadn’t been here for this, that Jim had had the audacity or the strength or the foresight to leave him upstairs, to hide him away. Colin Ransom was too evil and too close and the overwhelming sense of danger that he’d had ever since he’d foolishly let Blair hop into the truck was growing stronger. But now his Guide was pressed against him, a little loop of love and warmth at his back and vulnerable, so vulnerable that Jim caught sight of his cat prowling down the corridor to his right.

“Theo Marin’s here to see you.”
Colin Ransom leapt to his feet, came running over to the bars of his cell. He peered over their shoulders, between them, seeking, seeking, seeking…

“Where?! Where is he?!”
“Here,” and Jim made a short, jerky motion with one hand as the zip-tied sentinel stepped forward.

Colin Ransom burst out laughing.

“Well, you might as well go and get your money back, then. That ain’t Theo Marin.”

The group of nine watched him and did not respond, waiting for further revelations, for accusations, for violence or confession or anything more than this dull, fat silence.

“Theo Marin don’t look nothing like him, don’t act nothing like him, and don’t smell nothing like him.” Ransom coughed, then continued. “I know Theo Marin. I took my orders from Theo Marin. I serve Theo Marin. That —” here, he gestured sharply toward the Sentinel standing pillion to Jim. “ — ain’t Theo Marin.”

And with that declaration made and concluded, Ransom paced back to the far side of his cell and cast himself down onto his bed.

“You come back when my real friends get here. Or when you come to kill me. But I’m going back to sleep.”

As Colin Ransom retook his bed, the Sentinel in custody stared grimly at him through the bars of the holding cell, then turned to face a glaring Jim and Jody.

“Well,” Theo said, reflectively, “Now it seems we are burdened with four problems.”

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Moira felt it when they crossed the border. The edges of the Pack’s territorial boundary flexed, curved, and released the Alpha and Alpha Guide back into its midst, and Moira felt the low-level hum of the Guides’ shared energy buzz gold and then brighten, turn white, sparkle, and reduce again to a pleasant milk of consciousness. At the same time, Moira felt her own awareness rise up warmly, then crest and fall back into its natural resting place. She gave a sigh of relief; the duties of being Dama Grande had weighed on her more than she’d expected, and she’d been anxious to hand them over again.

She had only a moment to savor her newfound freedom before she felt the next mental wave rising to cover her: Ken. He had reached out to her at least once every day while he’d been gone; just a fingertip brush of the bond, a slight touch to say you are mine and i have not forgotten you. But now she received a stronger touch and a different message: I am coming home.

Moira looked at her watch and hurried across the street. If the caravan had just arrived in Cascade Pack territory, she had another hour before they would be disembarking at the administrative headquarters, then another half hour before Ken would arrive. She could finish her business in town quickly, and still have time to get home and shower before her Sentinel returned.

Ducking her head against the cooling air, she pushed open the door to the Guide Center and ducked inside.

The burst of lemon and elderflower sweetness greeted her like good news, and she smiled under the warmth of the greeting lamps in the reception room.

Behind the tall, freestanding oak of the receiving desk, a young guide with dark hair and a trail of
“Dama Grande! Wow, twice in one month — this job is awesome!”
Moira graced the girl with a bright smile and a squeeze of her hand.

“Hello, Luna,” she said, pulling back to knock gently on the smooth, flat surface of the desk. “I wondered if you could help me with something.”

Luna’s eyes widened.
“Sure, sure! Anything I can do, I’m happy to! Ohhh, man, this isn’t about that thing that happened with those six Guides after Fall Festival on Friday, is it? Because I really feel like the Sentinels are blowing this WAY out of proportion, and it’s only because they have these, like, antiquated ideas about — “

“No, Luna,” Moira interrupted, uninterested in burdening herself any further with the difficulties of leadership. “This is a simple one.”

Luna bit her lip, and her energy flickered.
“Is it about Guide Rýj-Lorne?” she asked, quietly. “Because I know he’s your friend, and I haven’t seen him since he ran out of here last night. But I mean… he looked bad, Dama Grande, so someone should definitely like, call him or something.”
Moira’s mouth dried up.
“Rafe? Rafe was here?”

Luna shrugged one of her agreeing shrugs and tapped long nails along the edge of her side of the desk.

“Yup, uh huh; he only came in for ten minutes or something, though. I think he had some kind of a counseling shift that he couldn’t take? So he just popped in to grab some meds from his locker and then he left.”
Moira nodded, trying to remain calm and betray none of her rising concerns.
“And he looked bad, you say? Like, sick?”
Luna wrinkled her nose.
“Well, I mean, that car accident really fucked him up.”

Moira couldn’t stop herself; her eyebrows leapt into her hairline.
“Car accident?”

Luna was busy half-spinning her chair around.
“Yup, that’s what he said. He was all bruised up and like, kind of limping and stuff.”

Moira’s skin began to crawl; her Guide-energy raffled with an uneasy, displeased feeling that was unfamiliar.

“Bruised?”
“Really bad.”
Moira felt sick.
“And he said he’d been in a car accident?”
Luna nodded and glanced at the phone, which was flashing a gentle orange light.
“Yup, uh huh. But I don’t think he was gonna go to the Clinic. I told him that he should! But he was all ‘Ooh, I’m a medic, I know when it’s serious, blah blah blah.’”
“So he didn’t go to the Clinic?” Moira quizzed.
“Nope, don’t think so.”
Luna glanced at the phone again.
“Yeah, so I think he’s just like, off for a few days or whatever. I hope he feels better. So if you see him, tell him that his First Aid class misses him! And also no one picked up his Tuesday shift, so…”

Moira nodded, slowly.
“Right. I’ll tell him.”
Luna smiled brightly. The phone stopped flashing and she gave it a hopeful, sad look, before coming to a sort of acceptance.

“Well, anyway,” she said, meeting Moira’s eyes, “I hope Guide Rafe feels better.”

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The group of nine emerged from the cellar in an arc of violence and disparate intentions, reborn into a land of light, of movement, of fury and sound. In the subterranean halls that led to Colin Ransom’s prison cell, everything had seemed slow and dim, and now — upstairs, out of the darkness, into the light, it all seemed too much, too fast, too loud.

Jim wanted to stop, to cover his ears with his hands, to clench Blair tightly against him, to shelter in a corner until he could get a hold on things, get a sense of where they were and what was safe.

But there was no time, and he was late already for other things.

The moment that they broke ground, their tightly-flying sedge broke apart and became a winding, unleashed animal, set upon at all sides by attendants — by the Alpha Office security team; the Salmon River ambassador; the Great Falls resident liaison; the Deliberation Council’s châtelain; two Guides from the Cascade General Secretary’s office; an elder Senior Council Sentinel requesting a representative statement on the status and reason of this unannounced Alpha departure; by his personal counsel and the young female Sentinel who was serving as dogsbody for the latter.

Blair was broken apart from him, segregated by the rapidity of motion, and Jim felt a sharp pang somewhere between his ribs; a pungent sense of loss that he had time to neither acknowledge nor repair.

An ink pad was pressed under his thumb; the liaison briefed him on the situation in Great Falls; the Council’s châtelain ran through a list of outcomes — a yea or nay from him followed each one; the Guides from the General Secretary’s office had news from Kennewick — water now critically low, drought not abating; and the young dogsbody took his jacket and shirt, helping him to strip to the waist and swapping in a black Cascade pack t-shirt, shoulder holster, and hunt jacket.

Jim glanced backward, hoping to spot Blair but instead finding Jody, who had her own place in the middle of a following swarm. She was signing papers with one hand as she directed her own team of sentinels, paced Jim, answered logistical questions for an anxious-looking Guide from the InterPack Diplomatic Office, soothed the ire of the Salmon Pack ambassador, and kept one arm draped solidly around Kitty’s slim shoulders.

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Two sentinels and a Guide clerk whom Blair had not met before surrounded him, pressing into his small space with questions and new demands. There were Guides’ matter deliberations for him to sign — he signed off on deliberations? — answers to give about his well-being, Jim’s well-being, the success of the mission — he couldn’t talk about that, could he? — approvals that urgently required his authorization along side Jim’s — new what for the Guide school? — inquiries about his further plans — would he and Jim be staying at home? — and the three carloads of guests — where should
Jody’s sentinels be housed? — and tiny intimacies of command for which he was wholly unprepared — would he like fish or beef served to the Salmon River visitors for dinner tomorrow? — and Blair was very quickly beginning to feel overwhelmed, but it was a happier feeling now, and he felt surprised to find himself taking comfort in the chaos of home.

As they approached the lobby, the solicitous Guide receptionist whom Blair had met a few days prior approached him with a steaming cup of tea, wrapped with a napkin, and pressed it into his hand.

“Welcome back, Alpha.” he said, giving a small dip of he head, “Cascade hasn’t felt the same without you.”

Blair smiled, meekly; he did not deserve the attention he was receiving, and the voices felt overwhelming and his energy still felt cool and distant where Jim wasn’t reaching out to him, but there was a buzzing like Haven, like music, like locks clicking into place and then through an opening in the crowd he saw a familiar face and felt relief.

Moira.

She was leaning against a wall near the door of the Court, her blue quilted jacket bunched up underneath the straps of her brown bag, and she smiled at him.

“Blair. My Alpha. Welcome home.”

And just like that, like it was something magic, the energy shifted between them and everything was back, as it should be. Blair signed two more sheets, decided on the fish and a vegetarian meal, informed the liaison that he and Jim would be returning home that night, and stepped away from the fog of demands.

“Moira!”

She crossed the space, her smile dimpling her cheeks and her curls tied back, but not restrained, on her head.

They embraced, but only briefly; she was here as a delegate, not as a determining force. She glanced uneasily over his shoulder, toward where Jim was still beseiged, where Jody was being ferried away, where her own Sentinel, fiery-eyed and focused on her, was finishing his duties.

“There’s something you should know.”

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Four knocks, and footsteps came rushing quickly across the cold wood floor.

“I’m coming! I’m coming! I’m — oh, Blair. Hi.”

Rafe greeted them in the doorway, his voice surprised and cautious. He was dressed in a crisp white t-shirt and blue silk pajama pants, over which he had thrown a maroon Birch Bay hoodie with a broken zip and stretched-out cuffs.

To the casual observer, he looked completely ordinary - clean, crisp, and not a hair out of place on his well-combed head. Blair saw something different; the slight tension in his mouth; the minute widening of his eyes; the nervous way he tugged the sleeves of his old sweatshirt down to cover his arms.
Blair gave a small smile that was meant to be encouraging.

"Hi, Rafe."
The guide's gaze shifted over Blair's shoulder to where Jim stood, agitated by the distance/nearness of his untaken Guide, but obedient to the demands Blair had made of him.

He was flanked by two unfamiliar MPs with Great Falls Pack logos on their epaulets — exchange programs. Capacity building. Alongside them stood an unfamiliar female Guide, nurse’s bag in hand. Rafe's gaze shifted back to Blair, and his eyes were bright with something -- panic, or fear, or realization.

"What's going on?"
Blair tried to smile again, but the residual ache he felt from Rafe’s reaction was too raw.
“Jim and I just rolled back into town. Checking up on a few things.” Blair said, tiredly. “Can you come with us for a minute, Rafe?”
The guide’s eyes flicked to the MPs, both of whom stared straight ahead, impassively, not meeting his eyes. He tugged nervously at the sleeves of his frayed sweatshirt.
"Am I in some kind of trouble?"
Blair shook his head vigorously.
"Nope. Not at all, man. No, we just want to talk to you."
Rafe eyed the Alpha Guide, his gaze flicking boldly up to Blair’s eyes, then skittering away, landing somewhere about his shoulders.
"What about?"
Blair felt another swipe of Rafe’s emotions and hesitated; in his weakness, Jim stepped forward, tall frame filling the doorway.

"Evan didn’t report for duty today.” the Sentinel said, his voice as nonchalant as if he were telling the truth. "We thought something might be wrong — some kind of emergency."
Rafe shook his head and all the tension fell out of him. He released the sleeves of his sweatshirt and dug his hands deep into the pockets instead.

"Ahhh, right, I'm sorry, Jim -- he's sick, but it's nothing too serious. I meant to call it in, but I guess between taking care of him and trying to keep up with my clinic paperwork, it just slipped my mind.”
Rafe put a hand to his face as if embarrassed; to Blair, this action was strangely unreal — almost theatrical. “I'm sorry about that; it's my fault, but I'll make sure it gets done in the morning.”

Jim bowed his head agreeably.
"Alright. Well, thanks for looking after one of our best. I'll let his CO know that he’s alive, and tell him to expect a call from you.”
Rafe nodded and smiled brightly.
"No problem. Sorry you guys went to all the trouble of coming over here, but I'll be sure to let Evan know how worried you were about him."

The guide gave one more bright smile and began to step back into the apartment, clearly expecting the end of the conversation and the departure of his guests.
No one moved. Blair spoke.
"There's just one more thing, man."

The two guides locked gazes, and Blair's eyes were clear and open, transmitting. Rafe felt it half a second before Blair spoke it.
“Do you think you could tell us how you got that bruise on the side of your head?”

Rafe's eyes took on a hunted look, and he touched his head self-consciously, fingers drawn irresistibly to the tender spot just under the fringe of his hair.
"It's just a little one." he said first, then -- seeming to realize his misstep -- added, "I was playing soccer, took a header."
Blair shook his head, his eyes never leaving Rafe's.
"You sure about that, man?"
Rafe chuckled - a brittle, high-pitched sound.
"Yeah, I'm sure. You can ask Moore; he was there. Almost finished the play, but Avery's too damn slow getting up the field."
Rafe's eyes darted to the MPs, then to Jim, checking anxiously for signs of belief.
"It probably looks worse than it is," he added, “But I keep forgetting it’s even there.”

Blair continued to watch the other Guide evenly, giving no response. After a moment of silence that stretched on too long, Rafe swallowed. Blair felt the cold wind of fear run past him, with a desire to hide right on its heels. The other guide bit his lip, then released it.

“And you know what? I think I got nailed in it when a patient smacked me the other day. Poor guy was a new Guide, had a seizure trying to do his first deep retrieval without any help. Anyway, he flailed and - bam! It's in my file at the clinic; you can check."
Blair’s eyes widened a little. This was the worst part yet, because if Rafe had altered medical files to cover this...
"Rafe — "

Glancing between Jim and Blair, still not receiving the reaction he’d wanted, not seeing the smoothing-out of brows and the relaxed happy smiles that meant he was believed, Rafe added:

“And, you know, the other day — I remember this now, but I forgot it before — I was getting record books down from this shelf, and one came right down on me and - "
“Rafe.”

Blair's voice was the voice of the Alpha Guide; patient, firm. Rafe's shoulders went up and down in a jagged, unsettled imitation of breath. He looked again at the MPs and the unknown nurse, then away.
"I fell.” he tried at last, sounding cornered and tired and weak.

"OK," Blair said, his voice dropping into its Guide-state, calm and reassuring. “OK. Well, maybe we could go for a walk, and you could tell me more about it.”

As he spoke, Blair reached forward, almost brushing Rafe's bare hand with his own. The Guide jerked backward to avoid the touch, then tried to cover the movement with a shrug.
"Evan's sleeping." he said, not meeting anyone's eyes. "I don't want to leave him while he's sick."

Blair recognized this for what it was; an attempt to stay close to the perceived safety of the Sentinel's lair.

Jim spoke now, and the compulsion in his voice was heavy and intemperate. Standing this close, however, Blair could feel as his energy flickered from golden-gray to silver, then back to gold again.

“Then we'll come in.”

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Inside, the townhouse was meticulously clean and sparsely decorated with a mix of modern and revivalist furniture. Blair found a seat on the reclaimed leather sofa that faced the fireplace across the expanse of a deep blue woven silk rug.

Rafe hesitated in the doorway, then burst forward in a jerky spasm of movement, as a deer suddenly freed from the spell of bright headlights. He followed Blair into the living room, leaving Jim to trail behind them at the perimeter. The MPs and the nurse entered and splayed out, filling more space than their few number would suggest.

Rafe glanced nervously at them, then turned his attention back to Blair, clearly deciding that the best strategy was to win over the Guide in charge.

"Sorry, I - I wasn't quite ready for company." he said, lifting a scattered newspaper from the sofa and righting a pillow. As he moved, Blair's gaze drifted momentarily to the slight darkening of skin at the edge of his shirt sleeve.

"No, please -- I'm sorry we barged in on you like this."

Rafe stood anxiously, folding the newspaper into uneven squares.

"It's just that with Evan sick -- sorry, can I get you anything? Some chai or something?"

Blair smiled genuinely.

"I'll definitely take you up on that next time. For now, maybe we could just sit down for a minute."

Rafe found a narrow perch on the edge of one of the wing chairs opposite. He glanced over to where Jim was quietly taking inventory of their home, then back to Blair. His posture was tense, unyielding. He lowered his voice and braced his trembling hands on his knees, then held them up, as if a world were suspended between them.

"We had a fight. Alright? Just one fight, and he's temperamental because he's sick, and we both got angry. It's fine, it's nothing to worry about, and it definitely doesn't require calling in the calvary or the Alpha Sentinel."

The last bit of this was said with a touch of anger — viciousness, even — as if such sinister subtext would scare the Alpha Guide away.

Blair nodded as if this were all very regular.

"I understand. Jim can get temperamental, too. Would you mind, though, if Sarah just had a quick look over you?"

Rafe's gaze jerked to where the nurse had begun approaching, her steps measured and even.

"I don't need a check-up, Blair, I'm fine."

The edge of Blair's mouth flexed in a grim smile.

"I know. But she's just going to take a quick look at you and make sure."

Rafe looked as if he might bolt; as if he might jerk away or fight, and his energy was spiking in strange places, and so Blair reached out and put one hand on his bruised wrist.

"Hey. You helped me before; let me help you now."

Rafe met his eyes, and for a moment, Blair felt a wave of calm come over the medic-Guide and thought all would be well. But Jim caught the rapid acceleration of Rafe's heartbeat, the heaving breaths he was taking, and knew the situation was escalating before Blair did.

The nurse took two more steps and Rafe just lost it.

A fast break for the kitchen had him crash into Jim, bounce off the Sentinel's rib cage and jab his thigh on the dining room table before spinning around to the clear expanse of hallway leading toward the door. Without so much as a yelp of pain, the Guide kept moving, kept running, went for it - and found himself lifted bodily from the ground in the arms of the two Great Falls MPs.
Then they were wrestling him down to the ground and he was kicking and squealing and trying to get free but they pinned him, quickly, very accustomed to this sort of thing from men twice the Guide’s size.

On his back, captured and pinned down, Rafe began to cry. Blair appeared above him, scolding the MPs and trying to get control of the situation again.

“Hey, hey, hey, it’s OK, it’s OK. Don’t fight them, don’t fight, just calm down for a second. It’s OK, Rafe, come on, guy, just calm down.”

Then Blair tried it again — that push he’d been trying to master, only his energy was off and it came off more like a shove and Rafe flinched and groaned a little bit and the MPs loosened their grip. Then, from the corner of his eye, the guide on the ground saw the nurse approaching with an extended syringe and spooked like a wild horse; howling and thrashing.

Everyone was talking at once — Jim was giving orders to the MPs and Blair was trying to calm down Rafe and the Nurse was telling Blair that the sedative would be fast-acting and Rafe just howled and then suddenly, as the needle approached his arm, speech came to him again and he gasped out:

“I’m pregnant!”

Everything stopped, and the nurse released his bicep immediately, raised her hands and stepped backwards.

“I’m six weeks pregnant, you can’t tranq me, please, please, please, I’ll be good, I’ll be still, I’m complying, please, I’ll be - “

This rapid-fire confession was interrupted by a roar and the unexpected sound of furniture breaking as Evan, clearly now awake and in full fury, launched himself across the dining room table at Jim.

Rafe screamed his Sentinel’s name, and Jim’s eyes flashed gold and Blair barely had time to process the fact that Evan was…not himself, not normal, not even fully human.

Jim had just enough time to shield his face, to throw his weight, to protect himself from the thing that Evan had become.

~:~
Little Dog.

The fight was short, and violent.

Evan landed — in some lights, sideways, in others, fully frontal — on Jim’s right side, knocking him to the ground and scattering a coatrack. Time slowed; Blair cried out — the MPs were up and on their feet, unprepared for the violence of the attack — there was blood, spattering across Evan’s mouth, which was too long for his face and twisted, and then here was Jim shouting and growling — Blair’s skin felt yanked tight; his energy was searing him — and now a flash of something white; claw or fang, not clear — and the two men rolled over and Evan made an unholy shriek and Jim relented — and now they were both engaged on their sides, Jim gaining the upper hand — blood blood blood and Jim flinched again and again and again, Evan freed the other hand and half of it was claw/paw/inhuman — the MPs hesitated because Jim was near the win and to take a victory from the Alpha was taboo but something must be done — and the nurse was sheltering Rafe, dragging him behind the overturned sofa — a lamp was knocked by a thrown chair, hit the ground, shattered, sparks flew — Jim roared and Blair felt a shockwave come through the bond that felt like a seizure, like a stopping-start-stopping, like something silvery and unreal, and he knew that it was the ripple again, the moon, the run of fur, the broken tile… — and then Evan was on his back again and shrieking and whimpering and Jim had his throat between human teeth and everything felt as if it were washing away… — and Blair cowered, he cowered, because what was that and what was Jim and this whole thing was a mess and the MPs had finally got a tranq into Evan and he groaned and the fight desisted, slowly slowly like falling down the stairs, an endless series of affronts until a flat ending was reached.

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Moira met them at the Clinic. She had marks of her own, which Blair yanked her collar aside to peer at with worry until she flushed, embarrassed, and slapped his fingers away, and a warm feeling like a sunny glow warmed his energy where he reached out to her.

Jim was being seen by the doctor — taking X-rays of wrists and hips, just in case — and although Blair had not been pried from his side since the fight, they had had to be separated for the duration of this procedure.

And now he was pacing, cold and alone in a private waiting room while Jim’s energy rose and fall and bumped into the general glow and bumped into his, the trailing end of their bond bobbing in the ocean of Cascade Pack like a buoy seen from a distant shore.

His Guide-sense was buzzing, picking up on everything, seeming to want to burst from his skin — stronger than he’d ever felt. He wanted to cry and run and scream and mostly burn off all this extra energy, all this anxiety, all this fear, all the unfed id within.

Blair scrubbed at his eyes, red and aching, and mumbled that he was fine, he just needed some water, he was fine, but Moira hugged him and he felt loved anew. Her touch was honey-sticky warm and after they parted, he found that his own energy felt calm.

Moira hugged him again, as gentle as ever, and Blair stuck his face close against her shoulder and
took in her scent. He permitted himself two counts — one breath, two — then pulled away before she could.

Then he squeezed her arm (thank you) and stepped back.

“Rafe?” she asked, and in just his name lay a multitude of questions. “Safe. Under observation. Can’t be sedated because of the pregnancy.” — at this, Moira’s eyebrows lifted, then settled in an expression of understanding. “Evan?”
“Jim’s going to be another hour.” Blair interrupted, and his voice sounded dull and scratchy to his own ears. “Is there somewhere we can talk?”

~:~

Suzanne Ransom paced in the small space of the safehouse room, bouncing a fussing infant in her arms. From the square desk by the barred-over window, Simon looked up at her and set down his pen.

“Alright, give him here.”
Suzanne’s brow furrowed and she turned her upper body away from the Sentinel as if to shield her son.

“What for?” she asked warily.
Simon raised an eyebrow. “Give him to me. I’ve got this trick that used to work on Daryl when he was a kid. Let me try it.”

Suzanne’s shoulders relaxed, but her wariness did not ease. “What’s the trick?” “I’ll show you.” Simon said, patiently, extending his arms toward her. When she did not immediately approach, he tilted his head and conceded: “It’s a Sentinel thing.”

She came close, slowly, bouncing Tighearnach all the way, and placed the infant into the large man’s outstretched arms.

“Here we are.” Simon said, settling Tig delicately into the crook of his arm. Suzanne watched him closely; Simon looked up at her. “Alright, give me a sock. Or a pillow. Anything soft.”

Suzanne looked briefly stricken, but it passed and she looked around the room — seeing nothing (she had tidied in a bit of a fit earlier), she glanced sideways at Simon, then brought her sweatshirt over her head and handed it over. Simon carefully did not look at her, bare shouldered in her thin camisole.

“Now, then,” he said, and placed the finger of one hand into the fussy infant’s tight fist; the other hand he squeezed around the warm softness of Suzanne’s sweatshirt. “Let’s see if this gets your attention.”

~:~

Blair and Moira passed together through the public waiting room of the Clinic, the space spotted here and there by all the vulnerable populace of Cascade: Sentinels being patched up after accidents, young Guide mums comforting weepy toddlers, older teenagers flushed with fever.
They made their way to a small late-night café not far from the Clinic. It was empty but bright, and Moira made her way to the counter to exchange a few quiet words with the elder Sentinel who operated it. The man gave a brief, nearly-imperceptible bow and came to the front, greeting Blair with a nod and passing him to lock the door and turn the metal hanging sign to ‘CLOSED.’

Blair considered protesting for a moment — what if some poor Clinic visitor needed a coffee and a quiet place to cry? — but decided that it was, perhaps, a fine time to exercise some of his apparently endless privilege in Cascade. After all, he’d come here to talk to Moira about something best unheard by passing ears.

The entire ride from Rafe’s townhouse to the Clinic, Blair had clung to Jim in the backseat of the truck and thought. He’d thought about the Moonhunt and about the first nights with Jim and the humiliation at the university and Daryl lying in the hospital bed and that time in the bonding room and the fight and the tile and the ride out to Salmon River and Jody’s Guide and Theo Marin’s dark eyes and stopping the fight and everything, everything piling up so fast and so much that he was like a glass getting overfull, like a falling tree, like an avalanche, like anything reaching its breaking point and he just fell.

Then he fell and fell and he’d just kept falling for the entire car ride, with Jim all bloodied in the backseat, curled into Blair’s arms but still barking orders and the Nurse trying to calm Rafe with threats and bribes and one MP driving and another guarding the tranqed-out transmog in the back cargo space.

He’d fallen until all his pieces seemed to come together at once, until everything seemed so broken that it all suddenly had answers, that things all suddenly became outrageously simple, outrageously clear.

Protect your friends.
Stay with your mate.

Maybe his wolf did speak to him, after all.

~:~

Rafe lay on his side in the Clinic bed, listening to the quiet humming of his assigned Guide caretaker and letting the tears run, unstopped, down his face.

He had been labeled a flight risk (orange wristband), a self-endangerment case (gray wristband), a pregnancy with risk (red wristband) and a Temporary Guide Instability situation (black wristband) — and this was more than enough justification for him to have been admitted without consent to the Clinic. Since he could not be sedated, he would have to be watched.

And so they had wheeled the hysterical Guide, weeping and curled up like an animal, into the wing of the Clinic reserved for inpatient cases, and they had dimmed the lights and diffused a gentle scent and set a white noise generator that sounded like a distant ocean and assigned him a 24-hour caretaker in the form of an elder, unflappable female Guide who knitted and hummed and didn’t mind if he sobbed or punched the bed or yelled hoarsely at her to get out.

The Guide was in her mid-sixties and wearing a long denim dress under a tatty cardigan and she tutted over him and made tea in the room’s corner kitchenette and gave him a bit of touch every now and didn’t ask about his Sentinel. She was good, and Rafe wondered if she’d done this before; if he was just one in an embarrassingly long list of Guides who’d been unable to say no to their Sentinels,
who had bent and caved and compromised until their very selves had been infringed upon — and
who, even then, had tried to compromise more, until the soul itself was caving.

He didn’t know, and she didn’t tell him. She just sipped her glass of lemonade — he knew it was
lemonade because she’d offered him some — and rocked in her chair in the cool, dim room and
knitted her way through what could have been a scarf or a tablecloth or a tea cozy, for all Rafe was
familiar with it.

She had clearly been chosen because of her calmness — her easy stability that said ‘I am here and
you are safe’ and nothing else. She could have been watching him, or not. Most often, when he
peered over his shoulder, she was concentrating on some crossing of needles or looping of yarn.
But Rafe had no idea what she saw when he turned away.

A new wave of self-pity washed over him, and he thought about his bruised-up arms and the stupid
mark on his stupid head and how Blair had looked at him, as if he were foolish and an
embarrassment and a failure, all at once.

And nothing to show for his effort, nothing but the phantom idea that there was something growing
in his belly and a busted-up phantasmagoria of what a bond should be.

Why had he hidden it? Why had he lied?

~:~

It could be a plague.

It could be a plague, or a genetic disorder, or a vulgar mutation. Whatever it was, it was clear to him
now that the broken tile in the shower was not an isolated incident. What was happening to Jim was
happening to Evan Lorne, and who else? Colin Ransom? Theo Marin?

And Blair’s mind had run through a thousand more frightening possibilities. If it was a disease, was it
something contagious? Had Jim spread it to others, infected his own people? Infected Blair himself?
Had someone spread it to him? And if it were a genetic disorder, then what? Could they correct it?
Fix the error in the code? Or if it were something more sinister — a biological weapon, perhaps, with
which they had all been infected and whose symptoms were only now beginning to show?

Blair stuck on that possibility for longer than he liked — Jim had said that they were under attack. By
who? By someone with the madness and heartlessness and capability to create something like this? A
virus to turn them all mad, turn them against themselves, turn them into…

“Blair.”
Moira was staring at him, her expression tight and worried, as he blindly stirred a spoon of honey
into his mug of tea. Blair blinked; he didn’t remember ordering, and the elder Sentinel was no longer
anywhere to be found in the closed café. Moira had a mug, too, but hers steamed with a soft lemon
scent. There were tight lines around her mouth and eyes — fatigue, or frustration.

“Moira, we have to talk.”

Her eyebrows lifting, Blair recognized the strangeness of his own behavior, remembered his position
and influence, felt guilty, but could not assure her without weakening his own resolve. He wrapped
both hands around his mug.

“It’s about something strange. That I saw.”

Now Moira’s face was guarded; she did not meet his eyes, but then suddenly did. And the moving
light of an arriving car reflected through the windows of the small café and disturbed his image of her and suddenly her eyes were larger than normal, wider. Then the car’s light passed and she was herself again.

Blair peered at her, suddenly curious. Had what happened to Jim and Evan happened to Ken, as well? Had Moira seen it, too? Blair swallowed. His energy felt off and rickety; fragile.

“Moira, has Jim ever — I mean, has Ken ever — have you ever seen —”

Blair took a deep breath and steeled himself. Moira could freak out, he knew. She could run screaming and tell everyone there was a plague, or she could think he was crazy, or she could panic, or —

“Have I ever seen Ken change?” she interrupted.

Blair blinked at her, still cautious himself.

“Change.” he repeated, slowly.

“Mm.” she sipped her lemon water.

“Change into what?”

Moira looked down into her mug, and Blair felt her energy pull back and turn gray and he realized that she was afraid, she was as afraid as he was, as wary of sharing.

“Into something he was not.”

There was silence between them for a moment. Moira seemed unwilling to say more. Blair sat back in his chair, spread his fingers across the table on either side of his tea.

“Moira, tonight, I saw something that…I’ve never seen before.”

Moira watched him, intently; a lock of her hair fell over her shoulder and dangled precariously close to her mug.

“Evan Lorne was not…”

“Human?” she asked, and her energy shifted, crashed up against his. A challenge.

“Not human.” Blair confirmed, calmly. Moira scoffed, a strained and indignant sound.

Now Moira’s face was half-turned, and she was regarding him sidelong with some sort of reservation that he couldn’t understand.

“What was he?” she asked, flatly. “If he wasn’t human.”

Blair hesitated — the word was there, on the tip of his tongue, burning, ready to spill out, but there was also something not right about it, something ugly and unfair that tasted sour in his mouth. **Animal.** He swallowed again.

“He had claws.” Blair said instead, carefully. “And teeth — sharp teeth.”

Moira blinked at him for a long series of moments, and it was as if she already knew… but he had to tell her. He had to say. He had to make the confession.

Absently, anxiously, he reached out for the bond and was unsurprised that he had to scrabble to find it, and that when he did, it was gray and low. Another deep breath.

“Jim had them, too.”

Moira’s head snapped to Blair, then she looked away again — an affected casualness that did not hide the trembling of her jaw. There was a long, long silence between them.
“They call it the Becoming.” she said, finally.

~:~

Blair found Theo Marin standing on the upper balcony of the Council Court, smoking a cigarette.

He wrinkled his nose and stayed back, did not approach. Two guards blocked Theo’s way to the balcony edge; two more guarded his sides.

“Who are you?”

Marin did not stop smoking; nor did he look over at Blair. He merely took a deep inhale and stared off into the night ahead.

“That hot-headed Alpha of yours know you’re here?”

Blair ignored this.

“I asked you a question. Who are you?” he repeated. Theo Marin sighed, puffed twice more on his cigarette, then stubbed it out. Blair frowned at the stub. “That usually dims Sentinels’ senses, you know.”

Marin shrugged.

“Doesn’t dim mine.” he said, and his eyes looked tired and shadowed.

“What did he mean?” Blair demanded, growing agitated.

“What did who mean?” Theo’s tone was slipping toward annoyed, verging on disrespectful, but staying just this side of gentle. Always gentle with Blair.

“The prisoner. Ransom. If you’re not Theo Marin, then who are you?”

Theo laughed and lolled his head back, stretching his neck and shoulders.

“I am Theo Marin, little dog, of that much I can assure you.”

This was reckless, and perhaps Jim would be angry later, but for now Blair felt the cold wind on his face and felt dangerous himself.

“And what are you?”

Theo stared at him for a long, long time.

“You know, sometimes I wonder that myself.” he said. Blair exhaled; Theo’s energy was doing that thing again, that winding sinuous thing where it all rose up in lumps and rises and fells and made Blair’s wolf want to curl her tail.

“Answer the goddamn question.” he hissed, and his fists balled and his Guide-energy flashed out, white and hot and territorial.

Theo’s eyebrows lifted to his hairline.

“Alright, alright.” he said, letting a bit of undertone of capitulation into his voice — more than he’d ever done for Jim. “Alright.” “Well?” “I’m a Sentinel, a southerner, and a loyal if dissatisfied citizen of the Sovereign Sentinel Nation. I’m the leader of the New Purity movement — and we are a peaceful, albeit demonstrative, little pack based down in Libre Terre.” Blair’s eyes narrowed.

“What else are you?”

Theo’s brow dipped, confused.

“I am…an unbond?” he guessed, to no avail. “A Pack leader?” he tried. Blair glared at him. "...a
Sagittarius? A good Catholic boy?"
Blair stared him down; Theo shrank back a little.
“A wolf?” Theo tried, hopefully.
“Are you become?” Blair demanded, tired of the game.

Theo’s eyes snapped to him and somehow they were visible, even on this dim balcony, even in this light — there was a light in those fathomless pools, those depths, endless depths, like something not of this world. Like something that made a hole in the universe.

Then Theo’s energy pulled back from him in a fast tide of retreat; the Sentinel straightened his shoulders and his eyes became shuttered again.

“No, sir,” he said, “I am not.”

Blair waited for it — for the skittery feeling of bugs across his skin, of a sudden and imposed itching — the tell that he had come to realize indicated that a Sentinel was lying. Nothing came.

Theo was watching him now, his head tilted to one side, his eyes tracking the Guide’s movement, his energy newly restrained.

“And are you really Theo Marin?”
“Yes, sir. I am.”
“Prove it.”
Theo rolled his eyes.
“How?” he asked, in a tone that was equal parts curiosity and frustration.
Blair hadn’t thought this far, but an idea occurred to him.
“Call a rally. Of your followers. Set up one of your secret meetings here in Cascade. Then we’ll know.”

Theo raised both eyebrows, gave a snort of disbelief.
“I can’t do that.”
“Why not?”
Marin scoffed at Blair’s naïveté.
“I call my people up here, they all come a-runnin’, and your Big Man steps out straightaways to arrest ’em all. You heard him read me the riot act back at Jody’s place. Ain’t no way I’d put my people in that kind of danger.”
“I thought you said you hadn’t done anything wrong.” Blair argued.

Theo positively rolled his eyes.
“And when did a little thing like innocence ever keep a troublesome beggar out of a rich man’s prison?” he came forward and tapped Blair’s temple. “Open your eyes, little dog.”

Immediately, the two guards were at his side, wresting him back from the Alpha Guide, prepared to shackle him at a blink from Blair. Blair’s skin flushed into a little warm spot where Theo had tapped him; he shook his head clear, shook his head at the guards, and Theo was released.

“Alright.” Theo stared at Blair for a long, silent minute, and his breath made a plume of mist in the cold air. “Alright, big dog. I’ll make you a deal.”

~:~
Daryl woke to Cav’s heavy, warm hands sliding back and forth over the rise of his hip. He mumbled his way to consciousness in the dark of their bedroom.

“Again…” he groaned, and Cav pressed his nose into the slope of Daryl’s neck and nodded, apologetically.

“Last time, baby, I promise.” the Sentinel mumbled, his voice low and rough in the dark room. “But you smell good.”

Daryl tried to roll over into proper wakefulness, but before he could complete the motion — light flashed; an intruder; the bedroom telephone phone buzzed and jumped to life. They both pawed for it across the bed; Cav reached it first and glanced at the name.

“It’s Jim.” he said, surprised, then clicked the phone on: “Alpha?”

“Is Blair with you?!”

Jim’s voice was thin and angry, with a tinge of desperate violence, and if Cav had had a tail, it would have tucked between his legs.

“No, Alpha. We haven’t seen him for…since you two left.”

“Has Daryl had any contact with him?”

Cav looked toward his mate.

“He wants to know if you’ve heard from Blair?”

Daryl’s eyes widened; if Jim was calling them, then that must mean he had no leads, no idea…

“But since he left a few days ago. Felt him come back to the city earlier today, but nothing since then. Jim isn’t with him?”

“No, sorry, Jim. He — “

“I heard.” Jim’s voice was grim.

“He’s not gone far!” Daryl interjected. “I don’t feel an absence; he’s here, somewhere, in Cascade territory.”

Jim was silent on the line.

“Alpha?” Cav ventured.

“If you do have any contact with him, you are to report to me immediately. Is that understood, Sentinel and Guide O’Hare?”

Cav nodded quickly.

“Yes, Alpha.”

Jim hissed his frustration.

“It’s just ‘Jim,’ Sentinel.” he said, and then clicked off.

~:~

Suzanne gawked at her son Tighearnach, who was now balanced in one of Simon’s large arms, his tiny hands clenching and unclenching pleasantly around the corner of her sweater. His eyes were bright and he had a happy flush to his face.

“What are you doing to him?” she demanded, still wary.

Simon smiled.

“Oh, just a little transference trick. Like I said, Daryl used to love this when he was a kid. Tig’s a guide, right? Like Daryl? See, Guides are so open when they’re babies that you can pretty much just
link right up to them. It’s just a temporary bond, but it’s good enough for little tricks like this.”

Tig kicked his legs a little, excited as he stared cross-eyed at his bit of cloth.

“As long as we’ve got some skin contact and a bond, I can share my experiences with him. He can feel things the way I feel them, hear things the way I hear them.” Simon chuckled. “It’s like a whole new world for them; they just get fascinated. Guaranteed, 100% pure Guide baby calming results.”

Suzanne was looking at him strangely.

“I’ve never seen anyone do that before. Did you learn that at Hudson?”

Simon’s brow creased as he tried to remember.

“Ha. I doubt it. Back then, they didn’t give us Sentinels much in the way of parenting classes. Not like things are now.” he chuckled again. “Nowadays, they teach you everything but how to breastfeed up there. In my day, the baby stuff was all down at Birch Bay.”

Central Cascade had long since faded away from them, slipped out of sight and grasp. All the rebuilt parts of the city; all the Sentinel patrols wandering the streets in pairs or in triplicate; all the soft warm buzz of Pack activity — all grew smaller on the horizon of Blair’s awareness.

They were heading toward the water, toward the coast, toward the thousand fingers of the Pacific tributaries and the nearness of the ocean. Above and alongside them, the dim crescent of the moon ran like a dog between the dark rises of the Cascades.

The road was fast, and dark, and Blair’s heart was an angry hammer slamming jungle drumbeat — boom boom repeat boom boom repeat boom reverb thunder/noise — inside his chest.

This was stupid, this was stupid, this was stupid. Theo Marin — or whoever the man sitting next to him turned out to be — could be anyone, taking him anywhere. He could be driving them both to their deaths, for all Blair knew. He could be a Purity trafficker, here to capture the ultimate prize, an Alpha Guide, and drag him screaming down to have his bond broken in Libre Terre.

Theo Marin might be a murderer, or a thief, or a stalker or a madman. He could be planning to drive Blair off a cliff, to shoot him in the head, to hand him over to one or a thousand grisly deaths.
Or he might not.

Blair’s palms sweated onto the knees of his jeans and he tried to be cool, man; to be still; to control his physiologicals so that the Sentinel would not know how out of control he was.

But he was afraid.

And hadn’t it been like this before? A thousand times before, and a thousand times before that? Hadn’t every vulnerable Guide, every woman, every young, pretty boy who’d ever gotten into a car with a charismatic stranger had to wonder…

Theo shifted in his seat.

“Sweetheart — “
“‘It’s ‘Blair.’”

Theo glanced sidelong at him, then refocused his attention on the road.

“You ain’t in danger, you know.”

Blair stayed silent. He was no longer certain whether he was definitely in danger, or definitely not. He was only sure that there was no going back, no turning around on the road. The only option was to forge ahead.

The blue clock in the dashboard of the car glowed a late hour; Jim was going to be angry.

Something fluttered in him around those words — something primal and desirous and terribly, terribly fearful. He thought of Rafe, lying on his side in the hospital bed, not even cognizant of Blair’s presence or the Guide nurse’s ministrations. He thought of Moira, melting into Ken Rochelle’s arms and Daryl, having to be sedated to suppress his resistance.

He thought of all the unfairness in the world, all the broken promises and shelled buildings, all the weeping children and broken families and aching hearts. All the dust and the flames.

He thought of his mother.

“Blair!”

Theo was speaking to him again, his accent thick with frustration. Blair’s skin tingled; the hairs on his arms stood up.

“You asked me to bring you out here. You ain’t kidnapped and you ain’t hurt. So if you wouldn’t mind turning the volume down on the emotional broadcast, I’d appreciate it. The last thing we need is your raging bull Sentinel feelin’ how upset you are, and I can’t stay on the road with you pushin’ like that.”

Blair uncrossed his arms, then crossed them again.

“I’m not broadcasting to Jim. I’m not — I’m not saying anything to him.”

Why had he said that? The cold burn of shame came, again, as it had when he had been fourteen and strung up before all the guidance counselors and school officials, confessing that he and his wolf were silent.

“Well, I’m sure he feels it anyway, strong as you are.”

Strong as you are. People kept telling him that. Blair, such a strong Guide! Blair, the Alpha Guide of
Cascade. Blair, such an open Guide. Blair, we could feel you as soon as you came back. Blair Blair Blair Blair Blair. And what the fuck did he have to show for any of it?

A cold and distant Sentinel, an unfinished dissertation, a throne atop a crumbling city riddled with violence and ghosts. And a mother who couldn’t even call him back. Nothing.

So how could he possibly be strong? Strong meant that you could make the world give you what you wanted, and Blair had gotten a lot of things in the last month, but none of them were what he wanted.

And now it had all come down to this: a dark night, a strange man, and Blair Sandburg riding off like a reincarnated Bass Reeves, chasing an outlaw across a gray empty landscape.

“Little dog.”

Blair looked up and glanced at the clock, and somehow twelve minutes had passed. Blinking made him feel warm and slow and heady. Theo had stopped the car and was sitting stiffly in his seat, both hands on the steering wheel.

“It’s going to be alright.” he said, and Blair realized that Theo was doing that thing again, that push. That slow, erotic wave that made it difficult to focus, to act, to decide.

“Stop it.” he slurred, his tongue feeling too wet and too heavy in his own mouth, thumping against his teeth. Theo huffed and pulled back; Blair felt the tide recede.

“Stop it.” he repeated more clearly, fear creeping into the spaces left by the retreat of the warm wave. “That’s not okay!” he snapped, blinking hard into the blueish light of the dashboard. “You don’t get to push people around with…whatever that is. You don’t get to — to make me do what you want. You don’t get to tell me how to feel!”

Theo seemed surprised by his anger, and met it with his own annoyance.

“Well, a hit dog hollers, don’t it! I was just trying to help you! You’re leaking all over the place, stinkin’ up the car and puttin’ us both in danger. I gotta drive, you know, and here you are, bitin’ at me for using my influence. And when you rub my nose in yours all the time!”

Blair’s face screwed up in an expression of irritated incomprehension.

“I don’t…”

Suddenly, a rush of moments came back to him at once. The fight between Cav and Simon. Jim’s confession about the severity of the attacks. Jody’s capitulation on her porch. The conference room at Salmon River. Theo’s surrender on the roof balcony.

“Oh, shit.” he said.

Theo stared at him across the cab of the car; in the dim blue light, his eyes seemed to glow a burnished, copper tone. His voice was disbelief and wonder.

“How could you not have known?”

~:~

The Alpha’s office in central Cascade was the coldest place that Ken Rochelle had ever been. Jim’s anger was like a icy wind, whipping into every crevice and every orifice, leaving sentinels frozen with terror in its wake.
His words for Ken had been choice: ‘How the fuck could you lose your Alpha Guide!? What the fuck kind of bullshit security team are you heading? This is what’s wrong with the Nation now — fucking idiots everywhere!’

Ken reached out for Moira through their bond; like clockwork, there she was. A purring cat, a warm hand, a soft voice. The bond crept in at the edges of his vision, turning Jim’s glowering face a sort of goldish-cream color, and Ken loosened his hold to let the color take over a little more before pulling back. Across the bond, he felt Moira’s gentle, worried smile.

“Yes, sir. I apologize, sir.”

He sent Moira an image of Blair, as best he could. She sent back an owl’s-eye view of the cerrado — an empty field, tall grass waving silently and no footsteps to disturb it.

“Apologies aren’t good enough! I want my Guide!”

Jim slammed an angry fist from his unbandaged arm into a lamp that had been resting, fat and purple, on the edge of a table. It bounced off of the ground, shade dented and switch sitting at a broken angle. Ken didn’t look at it.

“We’re making every effort to track them — “

“You never should have let him go off on his own! He’s the goddamn Alpha Guide, and you let him trot out of here with our most valuable prisoner like they were two teenagers off to a sock hop.”

“With all due respect, sir — “

“Shut the fuck up, Ken.”

The room fell silent. Ken reached deeply into himself, took hold of the bond. His eagle clenched its talons; he unclenched his fists. Jim was silent, perhaps a bit cowed by his own anger — or at least as surprised as the rest of them.

Ken took in a short, impatient breath, and continued.

“With all due respect, sir, his orders were that he go alone.”

In a stroke, Jim was across the room, Ken’s collar in his hands, his furious face inches from the other Sentinel’s.

“He doesn’t get to order you; I do!”

Ken raised both eyebrows. Unsure how better to express himself, he simply said: “He’s our Alpha Guide, sir.”

A discreet cough from their left caught everyone’s attention.

“Gentlemen.”

It was Jody Evers, who was leaning against the doorway with her usual lazy disdain.

“I see that things are as well-managed as ever.”

Jim released Ken — a relief, to be sure, but a worry because now the Alpha was turning his frustration on Jody, who would not back down, who would not be cowed, who would not submit…

“I don’t have time for this, Jody.” Jim growled, and she waved one hand in that elegant, lumbering way that she had.
“Yes, yes, I know. You’re missing your Guide. He’s run off without your permission, your men are obedient to him, and you can’t figure out who to beat to get them back on your side. Stop me if you’ve heard this one before.”

Jim just growled, a low rumble that seemed too deep to come from his throat.

“Don’t talk to me like this is a joke, Jody. My Guide is gone, and all I know is that he’s somewhere in Territory and with the man who might or might not be the most wanted murderer of our time. That monster could be planning to do anything to him. Could be taking him anywhere.”

“Mm.” Jody said. “Well, if only we had someone around who might know more about the clandestine movements of Purity-taken Guides than we do.” she mulled this, exaggeratedly. “Oh, right. Of course.”

Then, turning a bit to her right:

“Kitty? Where’d the Purity hide you when they took you away from home?”

The pretty, dark Guide appeared from behind her sentinel, curling around the other woman’s body like a housecat. She blinked wide eyes up at Jim with an expression as inscrutable as ever.

“The farthest edge of territory,” she replied, “nearest to running water.”

Jody turned back to Jim.

“So that would be….?”

“Boarman’s Creek.” Jim responded, and his face fell like a stone.

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Theo pulled the car off the road at a rough shoulder, shut off its headlights, and began winding his way down a series of narrow wyndes between the trees. Blair thought at first that he was wending aimlessly, and panic came over — was Theo intending to confuse him? To get them lost?

But then out of the forest emerged suddenly a new road; a cleared path, as if made by thousands of animals, walking the same path, over time. Theo slowed the car. Overhead, a half-moon lit up the darkness, and Theo rolled down the driver-side window and took a thick, full sniff.

“Got ‘em.” he said, eager and pleased. “You ready, little dog?”

Blair’s heart was pounding again, but now his skin tingled with a sensation of strange anticipation; of a penitent ushered into the chamber of the priest; of a captive hearing distantly the sound of rescue; of an archaeologist brushing back the dust over a dim formation in the sand…

Could he go back? No, it was too late now; the world was changing, and his life along with it. The days of blissful unknowing seemed so far past — that first night with Jim seemed years away, although suddenly he could taste the red wine on his lips again, could feel the tremble in his hands, could sense the panther etched in glass…

“Ready.” he said, because there was again nothing else left to do, nothing else left to distract, no other route but forward. “Let’s go.”

Theo grinned at him, impressed.

“Well, alright, little dog. Let’s go and meet my congregation.”

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Chapter Summary

Apologies again, and as usual, for the delay. Dissertation + wedding planning (eep! <3 <3 <3) = a very busy Stella. Enjoy this next chapter -- not too steamy in itself, but setting up for a big, juicy one in the next.

The Purity meeting point was sizable and remote, and by the time their vehicle wound its way to the edge of an outer break in the tree line, there were already more than a dozen figures emerging in slinking black silhouette from the forest to meet them.

Theo rolled his window down farther and cut the engine. The cool black night air came rushing in at them; Blair felt it was full of promises and water and unknown animals and old, fermented things.

The figures were coordinating their movements, coming closer in stages and from all sides; Blair did not doubt that their vehicle was also flanked from behind, and that they had been observed since the moment they had breached the first hidden forest road. Leaves rustled; something darted by in the distant darkness. An owl hooted and there was a breathy cry that might have been a bobcat or a desperate, hungry dog.

“Now, you just be still and let me do the talking.”

Blair raised both eyebrows at Theo Marin, concerned that these were not the words of a man as in control as he had previously implied. The Sentinel, however, seemed at ease and unperturbed.

“Don’t worry.” he assured Blair. “They’re my kin, alright. But I don’t make personal appearances out this way too often, and we in the Purity tend to get a little…tetchy about unknown visitors. You understand.”

Theo turned his head to speak out of the window, but did not raise his voice.

“Kin, my name is Theo Marin, and I have come up to visit you from Libre Terre, the free lands in the South.”

The figure that had been advancing most quickly shifted immediately into a posture of acute interest and jogged closer; in the half moonlight, Blair’s eyes were able to make out a young, pale Sentinel, lanky and unvarnished in his nakedness.

The young sentinel looked briefly through the windshield of the car at Blair as he approached, then padded up to Theo’s open window and leaned forward. This close, Blair could not only see, but feel him — How could he feel so much these days? — feel the hang of his limbs, long and loose, lanky in the way of the newly-grown, but comfortable in a way that Blair was not; feel his energy as it slogged along, water-heavy but unworried. There was, in this young man’s approach, a comfort and curiosity that pulsed like happiness — and (focusing hard) the long-familiar low-buzzing always-ready sharp-bounce of energy that told Blair that this one was unbonded.

The sentinel bent down and smiled a crooked, pleased smile at Theo Marin. A weapon of some sort was slung over his back; Blair couldn’t make out its shape and vague embarrassment at the sentinel’s nudity kept him from staring too long.
“The-o Ma-rin!” the young sentinel crowed, “I recognize you from the talk out at Bo Creek two years ago. I was way in the back of the crowd, but you don’t forget a face — or a scent — like yours. Welcome, Alpha. We weren’t expecting you for days.” he turned his back to Theo to face the others, raised an arm. “Stand down, kin. It’s him, alright.”

In the moment that the young man turned away, he had something in his profile — something with a parallel in the old tinotypes of young men who had gone away to war too often and too soon — that struck Blair. It was the black-and-white of it, the clarity of it, the awful humanity of it, the terrible closeness of death and realness of personhood that made this war -- as all wars -- so painful. There was a purity in Blair's seeing of this man's face; a raw, shared humanity that for all of history had both sewn and undone the fabric of conflict.

Blair shuddered with the sudden fear of seeing this young man again, later, as a casualty. And who was this sentinel? Who was this pale, naked young man greeting them in the dead of night at a Purity checkpoint? Who had he been before he’d decided to make a run for Libre Terre? Was he one of their own -- a member of Cascade Pack, turned rogue? Did he have parents, a sibling, a younger brother? Did his family wonder where he was, why he hadn’t come home? He had been a child once. Had he come of age in a small town, perhaps felt the first flickerings of Sentinelhood when he’d accidentally held some young Guide’s hand? Had it felt strange? Had it been confusing? Had he been afraid? Had he been loved?

Blair tried to squint through the darkness. Perhaps the young Sentinel would be familiar in some way; perhaps Blair had known him, or seen him around town, or taught him at the University. Perhaps he and Daryl had been in school together; perhaps they had even been friends.

See, this — Blair thought, raggedly — in this space where you realize that someone is loved; this is where revolutions get messy.

Blair felt a wave of fatigue, suddenly, and tried to quickly shutter up his emotions before he lost control. It was exhausting, this business of being a Guide. And Jim was far and didn't want him anyway and Theo's wolf was so close --

Heart racing, he snapped upright, surprised by his own mental infidelity and embarrassed of the very idea. How could he have even considered...? Stockholm syndrome could set in quickly, Blair comforted himself. In a matter of hours. Was this what it felt like? A guilty, honest part of Blair thought not. It was allure, plain and simple. And if he dug deep, and remembered what he knew about being a Guide, he could think of other reasons, too.

It was not just the comfort -- and make no mistake, Theo Marin was comforting -- but it was the terrible simplicity of it all. Jim's demands were ambiguous, and strange. Theo Marin's expectations were simple, and clear. Theo's desires were clear. Theo's wolf stood high on a ridge; it didn't slink through the trees, hiding. It made Theo easy to understand. It made it easy for Blair to relax. By and by, Blair realized that he was feeling too relaxed - not right. Blair yawned, and turned his head toward Theo; the Sentinel was watching him, from the corner of his eye, intensely.

Shame flooded him, and guilt, and he reached out to Jim. Desirous, jealous, and hopeful, he tugged and tested the bond, but Jim’s half of their link lay cold, and the bond slopped around like a dead thing inside of him.

A loud thump on the roof of the vehicle startled Blair and made them both jump. Theo laughed at
himself, turned a grin over at Blair.  

“Sky detail.” he explained, just before another sentinel’s face popped into shadowed view. This one was female, grinning, and upside down in the driver-side window. 

“Alpha Theo!” the dangling face whooped.  
“In the flesh.” Theo answered, a grin spreading further across his face.

The upside down face broke into a wide smile and disappeared; Blair was startled again by the sound of very light footsteps, darting across the roof of the car. The original Sentinel straightened up and readjusted his weapon, tilting his head and giving a slight bow.

Were all the freelancers this dramatic? Blair wondered, cynically, then felt cruel for the thought.

“Well, welcome to Pont du Nord, Alpha Marin. We’ve followed your orders to the letter. Hid the tents and everything. Much better cover, much newer — “ the young man cut himself off suddenly, looking closely at Blair. “Alpha?” he ventured, in a tone that was too respectful to reflect as much curiosity as the young Sentinel must have felt.

Theo smiled and gave a short side tilt of his head, indicating Blair. 

“Alpha Guide Blair Ellison is a very important guest of mine. Here to act as a liaison as we begin negotiations.”

Blair tensed at this, and the young sentinel picked up on it, turning his chin warily.  

“Negotiations, Alpha?”

"To bring our people out of the forest, Sentinel." 

"This forest?” the young man asked, incredulously.

Theo’s voice was even, but his eyes — when he glanced at Blair, shadowed in the moonlight — had a fervor in them that was almost frightening.

“All the forests.” he said, and his voice was low and melodious, like a song.

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They were led on foot another half-mile into the trees, escorted by the same young sentinel (Blair now knew that he was called Ralph Andrew) and backed up by three others from the camp (Khalifa, Sarah, and Joseph). Theo walked side by side with Ralph, the two chattering away as if Theo were a visiting uncle or a local artist — someone with whom perfunctory formality could be dismissed, but for whom performative friendliness was indispensable.

Khalifa padded quickly up beside him in a quiet moment, her sandaled feet quiet on the rough grass. Though he hadn’t recognized it before, Blair felt the pulse and rise of her energy as she came closer, and it was obvious that she was a Guide.

“Hi.” she said, shyly, glancing behind her before speaking.

Blair studied her, glanced behind them as well. The two others — Sentinels, he presumed — were giving them plenty of room.

“Hi.” he said.

Khalifa walked alongside him for a minute, bit her lip. As they passed between clearings, he caught glimpses of her face in the moonlight, lined and beautiful. Up ahead, Theo was still chatting with Ralph. And as much as he might prefer to walk in silence, to play with his lifeless bond and wish for the mate that never was, Blair realized that this might be the best moment for reconnaissance he’d have for a while.

“So you’re the Alpha of Cascade Pack.” Khalifa said, eventually, when it was clear that his energy...
had been reigned back from the anxiety he must have been broadcasting earlier. He tried to remember what Theo had said in the car, tried to stop his feelings from leaking out. He focused on Khalifa's face.

“At the moment, yeah.”
“I heard you didn’t grow up in a Pack, though.” her statement was a question; Blair understood.
“No, I didn’t. Did you?”
She glanced over her shoulder again, seemed embarrassed for some reason Blair couldn’t parse.
“No. I came to the Nation when I was 14, when my Guide-mother got sick of bouncing us from motel to motel and we had to get housing here. Well, there. I'm from the Las Cruces Pack.”
Blair nodded.
“Las Cruces. I spent some time around there when I was a kid. What brings you this far north?”
Khali blushed, bit her lip again.
“I’m on my way to Libre Terre.” she explained. “And this was the waystation they brought me to.”

Blair nodded again, as if this were all very common.
“Who’s they?” he asked, as casual as if he were not asking for Very Important Information.
Khalifa shrugged; she had no weapon -- which Blair cursed himself for not realizing earlier as a clear marker of non-warrior status -- so her hands were free to gesture as she pleased.
“I was…seeing this guy, this Sentinel, but…” she frowned down at herself. “He left me. Had to marry a purebred, he said.”

In front of them, Theo had paused at the mention of the word ‘purebred,’ but was now walking as if he had heard nothing.

Blair’s heart pounded. Kali walked on, stepped over two tree branches and a startled frog.
“I’m sorry.” he said, reflexively. “That he did that to you.”
Khali shrugged again; her hair bounced like a fluffy cloud in the moonlight.
“I don’t mind. He was a jerk. At least he got me into a passel and on to a waystation, so I could go to Libre Terre.”
“Waystation, huh?” Blair continued. “Is that what this is?”
Khalifa glanced behind them, gave a little grin to the two Sentinels bringing up the rear.
“Yup. I was going to move on to Terre and live in the Guidehouse for a year or two, but…” she looked over her shoulder again, and Blair realized that her glances had not been nervousness, but coyness. “I think my plans might have changed.” she confided, happiness bubbling over her energy like a warm, slick balm.

This was the kind of talk that was easy, and universal. Blair leaned in conspiratorially, although both knew the Sentinels could hear them if they chose.
“Sarah or Joseph?” he asked, and Khalifa laughed, happiness floating high over the lake of her emotions.
“I haven’t decided yet.” she answered, and winked.

They walked on a little farther.

“So do your parents know where you are, Khali?” Blair asked, both wanting and not wanting to hear the answer.
“My mom knows.” she said, pleasantly, then frowned. “But lots of Guides’ parents don’t.”
She scratched her nose, took a careful step over a fallen log.
“It’s hard, when they don’t understand.”
“Don’t understand what?”
“What it’s like to be free.”

After that, Blair kept quiet, focusing on his steps in the low light and trying to remember the trees, the
path, the placement of the moon. Anything to help him if he needed to escape. He wondered if Jim knew where he was.

If the Big Guy knew, he sure wasn’t letting on. Blair hadn’t felt a move — not so much as a flicker — along the bond in hours. And if Jim wanted it dead, then let him have it. The thought made Blair sick, sick to his stomach; but beneath that sickness, underlying it, there was a rising hunger that the Guide didn’t know how to name.

And so he walked, and he tried to remember the trees.

Theo and Ralph were now arguing merrily about the movement; some sort of philosophical argument too drenched in jargon for Blair to understand. After a while, they switched to practical matters — the conditions here, at the other transport camps, in Libre Terre. The abandoned waystations they’d previously used, and the vitriolic ruthlessness with which Central Command kept wiping them out.

Blair was surprised by the passion in the young sentinels’ voices, although he should not have been. The events of the last few weeks had been like a splash of cold water; or a bell struck directly beside his ear, painful and loud. But despite it, the politics of the SSN still felt like something foreign to him, something so strange as to escape comprehension — these discussions were for some other people in some other place, some other time. He had nothing to do with it.

Except that now he did, and perhaps always had. He was…a liaison? A guest. An expensive hostage.

These sentinels were youthful, and they were passionate, and they had been raised in or alongside the SSN — they lived and breathed it — they cared about it, they cared for it — they felt responsible — they wanted power — they wanted freedom — they were angry — they felt oppressed — they wanted to run, to run (here, they glanced at him, strangely, but Theo urged them on by ignoring it) — they wanted to fuck, and to bond (here, some joke that Blair didn’t understand, too personal for outsiders and two of the Sentinels in the rear jabbed another with their elbows and cackled) and if Central Command wanted them to live their lives as slaves to the nulls then they would rise up and resist and at last, be free.

Then, seeing some marker or scenting some direction that Blair would never be able to discern, the Sentinels in the lead turned off sharply and began to descend a steep hill.

In the shadows, Theo reached out and caught his arm.

“Hold on to me.” he said, and there was a low murmur in his voice that Blair heard but wished had been left disguised.

Soon, they could hear music and smell smoke and closer still, there were voices and the grass got softer and then there was the bursting scent of mud and sex in the wet, cool night air. When they were almost upon the encampment, they were greeted by the keening, pitched cry of a hungry newborn and Blair started involuntarily. The Sentinels smiled among themselves and Blair felt his cheeks burn, although no one had said anything to him directly and he had no reason to be embarrassed.

They went on descending, and shortly the ground began to flatten out and a structure emerged from the shadows of the forest. It was a longhouse, hidden by a low copse of trees and glowing a welcoming, warm yellow through squat windows. Blair felt a sudden shift, a chill vibrating over his skin, and when he looked behind him, the two escorts at the rear had vanished.

“Well,” Theo exhaled, low, “We’re here. Pont du Nord. As beautiful as she ever was.”
A low buzz of pride bounced between the escorting Sentinels and splashed against Blair’s energy, staining it with a pleasure that felt treacherous and unwarranted.

“Sorry for the small reception, Alpha — like I said, it’s just that we weren’t expecting you yet.”

Theo shrugged this off.

“What’s your rate? Who’s out walking?”

“13%, but we’re trying to get it up to 35. Mostly the stronger Sentinels go first; some of the strong Guides, too. Unbonds struggle more, unless they’re pre-bonded. Kids are a mixed bag, and the doddies don’t bother.”

Theo grunted, a sound of dubious intent, and Ralph pulled back defensively.

“It’s hard, Alpha. It’s not safe here, not from the Packs or the Gentlers. Everyone’s too scared.”

Blair felt this, like a crush of cold water against his skin. Theo grumbled low in his throat, a sound that was almost a growl and made Blair do a double take.

“They won’t be scared in Libre.” he said, and Ralph’s face glowed with comfort and gratitude.

They came to the front porch of the longhouse and stopped. Theo stood at the bottom of the four short stairs, looking around. Blair squinted to get a glimpse of the landscape farther down the hill; in the darkness, he could make out the outline of a steep rift just beyond the settlement, masked by the trees and therefore of a depth impossible for him to determine.

Another sudden pang hit him, as sharp as hunger, and he longed as he had not before for the scent of Jim, for his rough touch; for his closeness.

Then they were interrupted by the slapping creak of an ancient screen door being flung open. Blair looked up and there, standing in the doorway of the longhouse, silhouetted in the screen, was a woman who looked to be a carbon copy of Kitty Evers.

Her energy, fair and smooth, wove out toward Blair. She looked him over, then gave a blank look to Khalifa (who slunk backwards, then away into the darkness), then said to Theo: “I see now that reports of your death have been greatly exaggerated.”

This made the Sentinel crow with laughter, and he bounded up the stairs like a child to greet her, tucking her into a close hug and crying out, “Hey, Henrietta! Well, now I know I’m home. Now, I know I’m home.”

And Henrietta laughed, looking entirely out of place in a well-tailored dark blue suit, her neat black glasses pushed up on her shorn head.

“You couldn’t have called? All we’ve had are two days of rumors flying over the radio, and I had no intel to counter them. Two men dead at the border? Another bomb plot out in Salmon River? A warrant issued for your arrest? Detained by the Cascade Pack? What the hell is going on, Theo?”

Theo released her from the hug, but didn’t step away.

“Two men dead and likely more, if we don’t move quick.” he confirmed, gruffly.

“And the arrest?”

“Just a misunderstandin’.”

Henrietta’s eyes shifted to Blair.

“And him?”

“Houseguest.”
Henrietta met his eyes, and there was an ugliness in the moment between them, in the space where two Guides’ energies rose up and met and struck in a shower of sparks and silver shards. Blair heard a single rustle of movement, and when he looked around again, the other Sentinels were gone.

Theo broke the tension, clapping his hands together and cutting a swath of moving energy through the dark.

“Henry, darlin’, if you could ask these good kin to fix us up with some cool water and hot food, I’d be much obliged.”

Henrietta gave one more look to Blair; her energy seemed to pulse in a way that felt defensive and cornered — with a start, Blair realized that she feared him.

“Already waiting, Alpha.”

“Oh really?” Theo’s slung an affectionate arm over Henrietta’s shoulder and began to walk with her into the longhouse. “I could do with something else warm, too, you know.” he said, and Henrietta laughed, and Blair felt the low push-hum of *phileo* that flowed between them.

“Well, he’s around here somewhere. Probably went into town with the supply run. Back tomorrow, I’m sure.”

“Well, then I guess I’m obliged to wait.”

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Later, Jim wouldn’t remember anything about the drive up to Boarman’s. It all seemed to pass in a kind of fugue, a trance from which there was no lifting and no relief.

He’d insisted on driving himself — Ken had tried to take the wheel, but Jim had growled and lunged at him and the other sentinel had fallen back. Nothing about it had registered with Jim except the muted satisfaction of having removed one more impediment to reaching his Guide.

Halfway out to the vehicle, a light too bright for the dark night caught his eye and blinded him, momentarily — he flinched backwards, stunned.

Ken was at his side immediately, not speaking, but present. Jim ignored him and blinked until things looked right again, then charged on to the truck.

His Guide had gone away from him. Gone.

A deep, eternal ache pulsed in him. Why had this happened? Why had the Guide left? He needed the Guide, the Other.

The moon left weird shadows on the pavement as he crossed. He felt as though they were in the ruins of a cathedral of death. Across the parking lot, his panther was pacing — silent paws on cold ground.

Was this a test? Maybe the moon didn’t believe he was worthy. Did he even deserve a Guide?… she may have asked… *Fickle bitch*, he snapped, then shook his head to clear a sudden hazy wave.

Of course he didn’t deserve Blair. Blair was soft and innocent and righteous and vulnerable and complicated and handsome and perfect; Jim had never and would never deserve him.

But by the moon, he wanted him, and that was a power unto itself.

Jim’s belly ached as he walked to the truck; he felt sick and violent and like curling back his lips to show teeth. His hands were fat and clumsy, unsuited for delicate work.
Somehow, they got into the car. Jim swerved oddly as they pulled out, barely missing a fire hydrant and threatening a park bench.

Ken sat tensely in the passenger seat, poised to spring forward. Without looking at Jim, he said: “I had the roads cleared between here and Boarman’s.” and Jim felt a wash of human love — of gratefulness.

He put the truck in gear and pulled out.

They headed north. Around them, the mountains were black cutouts against a paper sky, pricked with light.

And where was Blair now? He was alive — Jim knew that much — but was he in danger? Was he hurt or frightened?

From the back of the truck, his panther growled an insistent growl and scratched at the upholstery.

Jim took a curve in the highway with particular force, and the big black cat bounced against the side window and disappeared, hissing in annoyance.

Control. Control. A Sentinel was supposed to be in control.

Jim took two deep breaths; the road wobbled in front of him.

Swearing, he pulled off onto the soft shoulder of the highway and lurched out of the truck.

Ken met him on the side of the road, where he was bent over, hands on his knees, trying to get control of himself under the light of the fucking half-moon.

The gravel crunched behind him — his cat, making itself known. No time for that. No time for jungles and chases and stupid, animal desires. This was human work, and human hands were needed.

Ken was standing at a side-angle to him, good man that he was, not looking at Jim directly but also not looking away.

“Use your bond, Sentinel.” Ken said, quietly and in that calm-flat way of his, as if he were telling Jim to wash his face or hang his coat up.

Ken was making it seem simple. And of course he would, because it was. Because any Sentinel worth his salt could simply open his bond to his Guide and find him.

Any Sentinel but Jim, because Jim had no control.

Control control control control control control control control control…

Jim flexed his hands; that feeling ran along the backs of his skin like water, trickling and changing what was touched in its wake. Jim shuddered and remembered that he had no time for this, no time for error or weakness. No time for wildness and the unpredictability of his cat.

“Jim.”

Ken’s voice was firmer now, and he spoke low enough to avoid being audible to the sentinel recovery teams in the vehicles trailing up the mountain behind them.

“You’re the Alpha. It’s not my place to tell you what to do with your Guide or your senses, but…this
is important.”

Jim looked up at his man-at-arms; Ken was a gray outline against the darker night behind him.

“You have to use your cat. You have to use your bond.”

And damn if that wasn’t the very message Jim didn’t want to hear. He didn’t need the damn cat and he didn’t need the damned bond; he’d been a Sentinel long before Blair had blown into his life, and he’d be a Sentinel long after. He was a man, first and foremost, and all the messy shit after.

“It’s all messy shit.” Ken answered, and Jim realized he’d been speaking aloud. “The whole of the world. But nature also makes order. The bond is order.”

From the darkness, a rustle and a growl.


But Blair had left. So what life did Jim even have left?

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“They’ll be coming after him.” Henrietta said, looking quickly back and forth between Theo and Blair. “They’ll be coming after him, and they’ll be mad.”

Theo waved a dismissive hand over his mug of fish soup. “Let ’em be mad as they want. I’ve done nothing wrong.”

Henrietta’s eyebrows shot into her hairline. “You’ve kidnapped their Alpha Guide.”

Theo paused, turned a slow black look on Blair. “He decided to come with me.”

Henry was shaking her head. “Mad sentinels are dangerous. I can get the doddies and the nursing Guides out of here. We can caravan them now, have them out of Cascade territory by sunrise, out of PacNor tomorrow, down to Libre Terre by the day after.”

Theo seemed to contemplate this, his expression drawing down into something that made him look older, more burdened.

“Guide Ellison has come here because he wants to know who we are. I’ve told him. I’ve told him that we’re peaceful, and I’ve told him that we’re honest. I’ve told him that all we want is to live a free, wild life, and I’ve also told him that it’s high time we were recognized. We’re a legitimate Pack and a legitimate movement to bring more freedom, not less, to the SSN.”

Now, Theo met Blair’s eyes. “He told me to prove it.”

Henrietta watched him, waiting.

“I can’t prove it if we run.” he finished, and Henry’s shoulders dropped.

“They’ll kill us, Theo.” she said, quietly. “They’ll kill our Pack.”

Her voice wavered then, and Blair felt so horribly sorry for her that he set down his meal, reached out, and seized her forearm. Henrietta was not quick or attentive enough to dodge his grip, and she
gasped at the unexpected touch — at the milky meeting of she and Blair’s fear-love.

“Look, Jim’s not like that.” Blair said, and a thousand instantaneous question ran through his mind. “You’re not in danger.” he assured her, or maybe himself. He swallowed. “Listen, Jim knows by now that I left — I wasn’t kidnapped. The AG’s must have told him that I ordered them to stay back, so if anyone’s in danger, it’s the poor messenger who had to deliver that gem of a story.”

Theo cracked a tiny bit of a smile.

“You’re right — Jim’s going to get here, and he’s going to be pissed. But he’s not going to kill anyone, especially not some innocent kids and pregnant Guides just waiting for a ride down south.”

Henrietta’s worry was not appeased, but she listened without interruption.

“He’s worried about the Purity because he thinks you guys are going to kill us. But, somehow, I don’t think that’s the case, and as soon as he gets here, I’m sure he’ll agree. But there is someone out there who wants us all dead, and who won’t stop until we stop them. And we’ve got even bigger problems than that. There’s some kind of…sickness breaking up Cascade Pack. We’ve got one guy lying in the hospital right now, in an induced coma and his Guide going insane. Two prior cases that resulted in death, and — “ Blair swallowed, thought deeply before continuing. “— and an Alpha showing symptoms.”

“And all I’ve got to go on are a bunch of legends about Becoming and a two-page annotation from a 1,500-year-old history book. We’ve got to figure this shit out. So every minute we wait is another minute we waste.” he stood up, here, and looked directly into Henrietta’s eyes. “I need Guides, I need help, and I need it now. Help me figure out who the good guys are. Teach me how to call Jim. Help me call my bond back, make it live again, and I’ll get my Alpha here so we can talk.”

Henrietta’s smooth, dark brow furrowed.

“Becoming’s not a legend.” she said, eventually, and Blair felt something like static pulsing through his mind, “It’s real. And it’s what we’re all trying to do.”

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Joel Taggart sat behind his desk and glared at the visitor. He did not want to be the man who had to tell the Alpha Sentinel this piece of news at this time of the day. Where was Henri? He’d always been Jim’s favorite, and just as hot-tempered as the Alpha, a point which on which they seemed to find mutual ground. Maybe H could go and talk to him.

“Listen, Mister, uh — “
“Representative Marshall.”
“Representative Marshall. Listen. I’m sorry, but the Alpha just isn’t available at this time.”

The thin, narrow-faced man turned a shade of purple that Joel had heretofore been naive to.

“Then make him available.”

Joel gritted his teeth.

“I would if I could, Representative Marshall. But his Guide’s been taken -- uh, to an interpack meeting, and the Sentinel is indisposed.”

Marshall sat up straighter in his chair, narrowing until all that seemed to be left of him was a straight black line.

“If the Alpha Guide is out of territory, then a Dama Grande needs to be established. Anything else is a breach of protocol.”

Joel held up his hands.
“Whoa, now. All I said was that Blair was busy.”
Representative Marshall gritted his teeth so hard Joel thought they would crack.
“Then un-busy him.”
~!~
Theo Marin Tells His Story

I don’t remember the day I was born; I don’t think that any living thing does. But I remember my childhood, if you’ll permit me to call it that. I had four brothers and sisters, I think — never quite sure, because we didn’t count and didn’t have names, but I remember Her and Her and Him and He. Every presence feels different. I remember four.

My momma got shot by that man who used to visit us all the time. Didn’t know his name, either. Didn’t know what a bullet was, or a gun. Only that that loud sound must have put a hole in the world because here suddenly my mama was laying down in a bad way and there was wet stuff everywhere and a smell like when we eat. But it wasn’t eat.

Wasn’t food. I’m sorry; words get a little funny with me sometimes. Anyway, we were on our own. Time passed, and we ran out of food and one by one, my brothers and sisters just…drifted away. They were unmoved, unbroken. But someone must have put the wrong heart in me, because I couldn’t go. I stayed, and I wept. I fell asleep crying, laid up beside my mother’s corpse. And I guess the moon took pity on me.

When I woke up, I was like this. I had strange legs that I couldn’t move, and feet that didn’t fit right at the ends of my legs.

I stumbled my way toward food; towards light. All my young little life, I had been running from lights, but now, with the world dark and dimmed, the light drew me.

I found a little settlement first, but I suppose a naked white boy with no teeth, walkin’ funny, showin’ up in the middle of the night was too much for them. They were afraid of me. They thought I was a roux garoux. They thought they should kill me. I didn’t quite understand it then — I didn’t know the words they used, you see — but I knew the look in a man’s eye when he decides you’re going to die.

I ran.

I spent the night under a big drooping cypress tree, hungry and alone. I missed my brothers and sisters then, but I had no tears in me to cry.

In the morning, before the light, I left the big tree and walked until I found a house. I stood on the path and looked up at this place that was Where They Lived and I was too tired to walk any further.

Part of me said I should go on; that I should keep moving until I found somebody who knew what I was, but I couldn’t make my legs move. I was tired to the bones. If they kill me, then they kill me, I said. And I was just a child.

Then the door swung open, and my new mama came out. I don’t know how she knew I was there, but she looked at me, this dirty naked boy in her yard, and she stood still. I didn’t have nothing in me left to make me run. I just stood there and hoped she wouldn’t hurt me.

And would you believe that this woman looked at me like she knew me?

I suppose she was what y’all would now call a Guide, but I didn’t know those words then and neither did she.

But as true as the day I was born, she knew me.
She took me inside and tried to feed me, but I couldn’t eat nothing but milk and I wouldn’t take nothing from her hands. Her husband — my new daddy — woke up to find his wife struttin’ around barefoot, trying to cook up all the milk in the house, and a naked wild child hidin’ in a corner of their kitchen.

By the time my teeth came in, she had me eatin’ bread and fish and eggs. Still no meat.

This mama of mine was a Creole lady and a good Catholic, to boot. And she taught me, bit by bit, to follow her motions and to understand her words. When I could write my name, she started to read to me from the Bible. When I could read back, she decided I was mostly set.

My daddy used to catch fish and sell ‘em, and he didn’t mind havin’ another pair of hands around.

After a time, a strange man came to our house. He wasn’t like no man I had ever seen before, and he and my daddy used to set up late at night, just talkin’ down by the old shed. I could hear ‘em across the fields, which I didn’t know meant anything at the time. See, my daddy could do that, too, and I thought that’s just how things was for some of us.

That man didn’t talk to me much, but I heard some of what he said.

We ain’t like everybody, he said, and everybody ain’t like us. We’re something special, and we don’t know what that is yet, but we know it’s there. We don’t see things the same as other people. We don’t taste things the same. We don’t feel or smell or hear things the same. We’re somethin’ growing, somethin’ moving. We can only join together and wait, and see what we are destined to become.

That man went away sometime when I was still figuring out how to use my words quite right, and I didn’t see him again for a long, long time.

But that’s when my daddy started talking about the Nation. In fact, he used to go into the big town and step up on one of them old benches and try to tell everybody about it. And you know, most folks didn’t believe him — I guess they were Nons, and didn’t have much business with his experiences. But every now and again, someone would stop.

Now, I was gettin’ wiser then, and older. And I didn’t always understand the words my daddy was sayin’, but I knew power when I saw it.

It’s inborn, you see — the recognition of power.

When I had been with my mama and daddy about nine years, that man came back. He was all in rags and skinny as anything I’d ever seen and my mama hugged him and fed him some warm soup and he looked at her as if all the world were in her eyes. And she talked to him real low and quiet and bit by bit, he warmed up.

He stayed with us about five years after that, livin’ out on a shed somewhere on our property, stopping in to see Mama here and there.

One day, I came across him going naked out into the woods. I asked him what he was doin.’

“’I’m trying to make the change.’ he said, and I didn’t know what that meant, so he said ‘I’m trying to become.’ I still didn’t get it, so he said: ‘I’m tired of living this way. I’m tired of being trapped in this body, in this place. I have an owl in me, and I want to fly to find my mate, and my home.’”

Not long after he told me that, he took off in the middle of the night. Half a year after that, my little brother was born.
Well, all that talk about finding mate and homes made a hell of a lot of sense to me, and the War was on and it was around that time that the government was recognizing what we were and folks were starting to believe it. The idea of the Nation was just starting to spread, but there was so much warrin’ about it — people saying that folks like us ought to be the property of the government. People saying we weren’t safe to be around. People saying we weren’t really human.

The Nation was just barely an idea, far far from getting built up into something. Nothin’ really to be proud of back then — just a social club orgy full of studs and bitches going hunting together and fucking in the woods (we were ignorant in those days, you see, and twisted by the ideals of the Non world); but there was a simmering kind of scent to it — like something building up, like a summer just beginning.

Then the Cataclysm came, and the whole world turned sideways again. We hid out on our land, just waiting — waiting for a sign or a message or somethin’. Five years, and we heard nothing. The War was done, but we still kept our heads low. I looked after Mama and Cat until my daddy stopped preachin’ in the city; the sickness was up there, after all. So many of our neighbors disappeared. Things were strange.

Then my daddy took ill with a cough one week and I had to make the fish run up to town. My mama — even more precious now than she had been before — had caught me three weeks beforehand killing chickens over at the neighbor’s farm and she had been makin’ me do penance by reading to the baby for an hour every night. So I was real good at readin’ by then, and Cat used to fall asleep to the sound of my voice.

Anyway, that week, I made the fish run for my daddy and stopped in to see if I could persuade the barman at the local to let me sip some whiskey out of a soda can. And there in the bar was this paper somebody had left — and I guess it, well maybe it looked like a puzzle or somethin’ so the barman had just left it — and it said that if you could smell the perfume on this letter, or read the words on the back, or feel the shape of the imprint in it, then you ought to get in touch. And there was a date, and a time, and a location two towns over.

Well, I drank my whiskey and ran back home and told my daddy that the Nation had started, and I’ll never forget how he said: Thank God, Thank God, Thank God.

When the time came, we went, just my daddy and me, out to meet these folks. And would you believe it: there were about a hundred people at that meeting, all kinds, all ages, and just a little under half of ‘em were women. That was the first miracle, and the first sign of times to come.

There were two representatives from the Nation at that meeting, and they told us how everything was going to be: how the Nation was going to protect people like us; how we would be called Sentinels and Guides; how we could be made citizens by passing the test to show we were Kin; how we would make money on the skills we possessed, aiding groups during this terrible war; how we would have a mandatory training period and draft; how we would be organized into Packs, and those packs into families, and that a family was a Sentinel and Guide and whoever else they chose to bring into their home.

My daddy wept, and it wasn’t until much later that I understood why. Years of longing, of loneliness, of isolation will do that to you. Sure, he had my mama and my brother and me — but none of us had a place where we belonged in this crazy world. Now we did.

They asked Daddy if he would like to run his own Pack out of our hometown and he said yes. And they tested us both right then and there, and let us in, and wrote down our names and our numbers — 2 for my daddy, and 5 for me — and we were citizens of the Sovereign Sentinel Nation. And have been ever since.
Then my daddy started preachin’ again. But not in the city like he used to — now his sermons were private, shared around in the Nation and nowhere else. People started to ask for him by name, and soon he was givin’ talks in old barns and they’d be full to the brim. The Nation started askin’ him to help them recruit, help with the search.

After a time, it got to be where he had too many obligations to meet them all. And I was nineteen then, and my brother was twelve.

I had started goin’ out alongside him sometime years before, and as I got older and my words got better, I started to draw crowds, too. And so after a time, I spoke with him, alongside him, and then eventually — in place of him. That was when the Nation was just beginning to get strong, and we were just starting to understand who we could become.

But I still remembered my first mama, and felt strange.

But there was so much more to think about that I sometimes just plain forgot. And my brother was nearly tall as me by then, and we were inseparable. Despite my strange origins, he was my brother in every sense of the word. We grew into men together. We learned together, traveled together, loved together, and hurt together.

But the day our daddy laid on his deathbed and told me to carry on his work, to lead our kinfolk to their true destiny and guide the future of the Nation…that was the day my brother learned to hate me.

Inheritances can be a funny thing, can’t they?
Henrietta

It started for us the same as it did for you — just little strange incidents, here and there. Marks where they shouldn’t be; urges that came out of nowhere; strange behaviors and patients complaining that impossible things seemed suddenly, shockingly real.

It came to Libre Terre six years ago, and as far as we can tell, we were the first Pack to have it. We’ve got more experience with it than all the other Packs combined: we’ve documented 62 full transitions to date, and 522 symptomatic or partial ones.

We treated it like a disease at first, too. But it’s not. It’s something beautiful.

Every Sentinel or Guide has a spirit animal, right? We know this. We expect this. We expect the apparitions. What are they? We don’t really know. The prevailing thought is that they’re simple hallucinations, showing up during times of intense physical or emotional stress. Maybe it’s the way that Sentinel and Guide brains are wired; maybe the hallucinations is just part and parcel of how we process all the sensory input we get. But then why so consistent? Why always an animal, and always one — across cultures, across continents, across languages? In places where, sometimes, those animals don’t even exist?

Subconscious cultural transmission? Our brains can pick up a lot, even when we think we’re not listening. Until six years ago, we’d been content with the mystery, more focused on making sure every Sentinel and Guide was functional than on picking harmless apparitions apart.

Six years ago, everything changed.

We think it’s triggered somehow by the way we live down in Libre Terre. Down there, we feel we’re truly what we were meant to be: wild and naked, bathing in the sun, swimming when we want to, running when we want to, hunting when we need to, and spending every night fast asleep under the moon and stars with our mate and cubs. It’s an honest, beautiful, pure life.

— Behind her, Theo laughs. “That’s how we grew up, city girl. That’s just life to me.” —

So although we were shocked at the time, it should have come as no surprise that those of us who had been living in Libre Terre the longest began to change first.

Theo’s brother was the first one to show signs, and we had no idea what to do. It started with his behavior: he started getting…erratic. Angrier than usual, more emotional, more sensitive to stimuli. He started to spend a lot of time wandering alone through our territory, scenting things, seeking who-knows-what.

Then one day, a bunch of us were playing football out on the grassy meadow in the square, and I broke free and ran the ball up the field. Cat tried to stop me, but I dodged him and kept running; when I looked back over my shoulder, I saw him chasing me. When I looked again, I saw his eyes flash gold. Before I knew what was happening, he had pinned me down to the ground, and he was growling, stripping my shorts off, getting me ready to mount.

That was when we realized the transition could be dangerous.

— “And when we realized that chase games oughta just be for grown-ups.” —

The Sentinels pulled him off of me, but his eyes stayed gold and he was all teeth and savage anger — ready to fight, ready to kill.
So we isolated him.

It was awful; idiotic. And we’d never do that now, of course. But that was the early days of Becoming, and we didn’t know half of what we do now.

We thought it was the safest thing to do, and we were afraid. Some of the Guides protested — one or two of them even offered to go in with him alone, to try to help. We didn’t know it at the time, but this was their empathy rising; they were feeling, keenly, the Sentinel’s distress and anguish.

In fact, Cat was as powerful a Sentinel as Theo is, and although none of us realized it, we were all feeling him suffer.

Sentinels aren’t meant to live in isolation, you know, and the transition is a difficult process. They need to lean on a Guide. But we were ignorant, and we were afraid. So we kept him locked up.

Two days later, he seemed to have calmed down again. We let him out, and he took off.

We haven’t seen him since.

But then we started getting reports — that what had happened to Cat was happening to other Sentinels in Libre Terre. Then it was happening to our Guides.

Over the course of a year, the symptoms got more common, and worse. It felt like an attack. It felt like a condemnation. It felt like an aberration, an embarrassment. The other Packs distanced themselves from us. The Nation — so concerned with appearances, so worried about what the fucking nulls might think — declared us rogue.

Libre Terre, one of the first Packs in the southern lands, and we were rogue? They offered us no help, they sent us no doctors.

We might as well have been forced into isolation ourselves.

The symptoms got worse.

One night, Charlie Greenfoot went to sleep outside with a group of other young Sentinels and woke up half-transformed into a fox. Luckily, his Guide-mate had slept beside him, and while the others were all screaming and shouting for help, she held tight to her half-fox Charlie and used her voice to bring him back into this world.

By the time Theo and I got there, Charlie was Charlie again. Thirsty and surprised, but definitely a man and seemingly unharmed. We studied him for six months, but he was never able to do it again.

When we saw what his mate had been able to do, we knew we’d messed up with Cat. But it was too late, and he was gone.

In the meantime, ten more Sentinels started showing signs — then twelve, plus six Guides. Three pairs formed from that group, and under the guidance of Charlie Greenfoot and Clementine Morales, they were the first ones to fully Become.

The others were terrified when it happened, but Charlie wasn’t scared. “As long as I have my Guide,” he told me, “She can bring me back from anywhere.”

But we’re not sure if that’s a law or just pure luck. We’ve only got a handful of successful transitions to learn from: Charlie and Clementine, and the 30 couples they’ve ushered through since then. They’ve all been fine, but what if…
Anyway, those two are our experts, bless them, and they’re the best we’ve got. They’ve taught us everything we know about the trip to the other side. It’s sublime, they tell us. Amazing. A whole new world, a whole new universe, opened up just for us. It’s not easy, but the end product…

— ...is worth it. —

This is the ultimate freedom, Blair: the freedom to walk in two worlds. Charlie and Clementine can change back and forth now, at will. As long as one of them remains on this side, their bond is strong enough to reunite them.

But that’s the trick: we know how to get bonded Sentinels and Guides all the way through the transition, but we still haven’t figured out a way to help the unbonds. For now, we just try to get them in a holding pattern: a stable place where they can more or less control the transition just like they control their senses.

But who knows how long that will last?

We’ve got to figure something out soon. We’re up to more than 500 reports of Sentinels and Guides showing signs of Becoming. This thing is moving, and we’ve got to get out ahead of it. And if Central Command can’t be convinced, then we’ll have to move on without them. They abandoned us long ago, anyway.

The other Packs don’t trust us. We’ve been incommunicado for too long, I guess. They don’t know what goes on down here, but they don’t like Theo and they don’t like what they hear. To be honest, I think the other Sentinels just don’t like losing out on their territorial shot at pussy, and that’s what happens every time a Guide gets the good idea to run away and join us.

Some of them come because they believe in us; some come because they like our lifestyle; some come because their instincts are telling them to; some come because they’re rebelling against a too-strict Pack; some come because they like the way we treat our Guides; some are escaping abuse; and some come so that they can become.

Some go home. Most of them stay. It’s hard to leave Libre Terre once you’re inside of it.

It’s hard to go back to living in a cage once you’ve lived free.

I don’t know what’s going to happen next, Blair, but I’m terrified. I’m terrified of taking Libre Terre to war, and I’m terrified of seeing our other Sentinel and Guide brothers and sisters hurt.

If what you’re saying about your bondmate is true, then Jim will be the first Alpha of any pack to Become. I don’t know what that means — for us or for you. I don’t know if it’s happening to all the packs. I don’t know where it will go next, or how quickly.

But I do know that Central Command wants nothing to do with us, and that every other Pack is suspicious of us, that they blame us for every murder and every missing Guide and every clerical error. I do know that, as always, we’re on our own. And I do know that whoever’s doing this now — whoever’s hunting us, or we’re hunting, or whatever — if they’re saying that Theo Marin has become, then their Theo is a lie.

Because our Theo is this man right here, and he’s an unbond, and he’s never changed a day in his life.

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Blair looked between he two faces sitting across from him. Henrietta’s looked tired, but determined;
Theo’s just looked pained. And Blair had shut himself off because he’d already been overwhelmed, but he couldn’t resist lowering his shields just a minute, just to feel —

— their pain was jumping into cold water; it was the terrible moments of impact, of regret, of error. It was missing brothers and dead parents. It was the War, and the Cataclysm, and all the madness that had come after it. It was two wandering children, trying to hold together some semblance of life. Blair shut his shields back up. He said the first thing he could think of, although later, he would wonder why he hadn’t said something — anything else.

“We have to tell Jim.”

Henrietta nodded slowly, her eyes meeting Blair’s, then drifting toward Theo. “I expect we’ll be telling him very soon.”

Then Theo lifted his head and leaned into her — a touch of comfort — and she took in two deep breaths, then pulled away.

“There’s something else.” she said, and rose to leave.

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The ground was cold and untouched when they pulled the trucks into the parking lot at Boarman’s. Jim was out of the car first, heart pounding, feet moving faster than his brain as he scanned his surroundings for Blair.

But there was nothing — only the lonely imploring of a barred owl and the soft whistle of wind between the trees.

“Shit!”
Jim slammed his fist into the side of the truck, ignoring the dull sound of injury and the sharp tang of blood in the air. “Shit! Shit! Shit!”

Ken Rochelle observed him from four feet back, his gaze level and energy calm.

“Alpha.”
Jim whirled on him, ready to fight or negotiate or maul or do one of a thousand things that his panther instructed. But Ken only stood calmly, still, like a tree.

“Use your cat, Alpha.” he urged, and Jim snarled.

Use your cat. What a silly suggestion. Because if he could use his cat — if he could access his senses, his advantages, his inner Sentinel being — then he wouldn’t be in this bind to begin with. But it was too hard, walking the fine line between animal and man, between the places he wanted to go and the places he knew he should. It was too hard, trying to keep a leopard on a leash.

So no, Jim couldn’t use his cat. Because if he let the cat in, who knew where it would go? And then all control would be lost, lost, lost, and without Blair here, who would save him? He’d be all alone…

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By the time Henrietta returned, they had finished the soup and bread, and Theo had had his evening tea augmented with a dram (or three) of what looked to be home-brewed whiskey. Then the door to the longhouse slapped open again, creaking and shuddering, and Henry came in. She carried a cumbersome and bulky crate, but still entered the room with an unaffected grace, flowing into the
space and seizing it as her own.

She set the crate down heavily on a bench next to Theo. Theo scowled at it, sourly. “That better not be paperwork.”
“It’s not.” “I hate paperwork.” “I know you hate paperwork.” “It’s all just a pile of words what don’t mean nothing.”
Henrietta rolled her eyes. “Revolutions don’t run themselves, Alpha.” she said, with the weariness of frequent repetition. “But
anyway, this isn’t the time for that. We’ve got to figure out what to do about the Gentlers if we want to keep Cascade Pack — and I guess, the Central Office — off our backs. For now, at least.”
Theo finished his drink and lowered his voice. “I got a plan. Figure out who this is. Find their Alpha. Kill him. Simple as.”
Henrietta glanced at Blair, then back to Theo. “Simple, yes, but also impractical at the moment, as the Gentlers all seem to believe that their Alpha is you.” Theo growled. “Well, it ain’t me. It’s someone pretendin’ to be me.”
“I know that, Theo.” Henry said, and her voice was surprisingly gentle. “But half the world doesn’t.” She reached out and squeezed the Alpha’s hand, and in their shared touch Blair saw the weight of a thousand memories, a hundred loves, the tiny hearts of friendship.
“So try to stay alive long enough to show them.”
Theo’s expression softened, and Henry ducked her head in an uncharacteristic attitude of shyness. She cleared her throat. “So that means we need another plan.” “Alright.” Theo said, “I’m all ears.” “We lure him out.” “Who?” “The imposter. Find him, lure him out, and turn him over to Cascade Pack.” Henry made a careless gesture toward Blair. “Cascade takes him to Central, our name is cleared, and we’re all on our merry way. Simple as.”

“Simple as nothing. We ain’t been able to find the Gentlers yet. Cascade Pack’s just running around with their heads up their asses. Jody’s the closest we ever got to tracking these folks, but now she’s just as pissed off and bullheaded as that old dog up the road.”

“Well.” Henry said, and turned to look at the young Guide who had followed her into the longhouse. “Martin here thinks he might be able to help.”

All eyes turned to the wide-eyed young man, who was standing nervously just behind Henrietta. Even without the benefit of his Guide-sense, Blair could have felt Theo’s energy shift. “Well, hello.” the Sentinel drawled, “And who’s — “ “Martin,” she interrupted, with meaningful emphasis in her voice, “is a rescue, and a recent arrival.” Again, Theo’s energy changed, and what had at first been red embers and smooth brandy was now crisp, cool forests and gentle breezes.

“You’re safe here, Martin. No one is going to hurt you, or make you travel against your will. Are you here of your own accord?”
The young man looked up at Theo from beneath a fringe of dark hair and nodded.
“Well, we’re very glad you came, and pleased to have you join us.”
Theo leaned forward in his seat — not intruding on any of the space between the young Guide and himself, but merely present, and in that moment, Blair understood what it was that made Theo so magnetic. He waited, tensely, for that feeling to come around again, to begin to tug at the air in the room, to urge his wolf to submit, to remind him of the power this man held (concealed).
It did not come.

Instead, Theo’s gentle question:
“And how long have you been with us?”
Martin lifted his eyes to meet Theo’s, then turned away — made shy by the boldness of speaking directly to a powerful, unattached Sentinel like this.
“Three days, Alpha.”
Theo finished the dregs of his mug and set it aside, turning his attention more fully to the Guide in front of him.
“And what kind of a place did you come from?”

Martin looked desperately at Henrietta; his heart began to pound and his energy dipped. Henry moved to stand closer to him, and her energy was a warm red blanket of comfort around the Guide’s shoulders. At the same time, Theo extended one hand, palm turned outward.
“You can ground yourself on me.” he offered. “If you’d like. I know this is stressful, and hard to share. But I’m sure Miss Henry has brought you here for a reason, and I’d like to find out what that is. Can you share a little more of yourself with me?”

Tentatively, anxiously, the young Guide stepped forward and placed his own hand against Theo’s raised one.

“I escaped from the Gentlers.”
Blair’s heart fell into his belly.
The kid kept talking.
“I was in one of the…the…” he trailed off, shivering, and Theo closed his hand around the Guide’s own. This seemed to bolster the young man, who swallowed and looked straight at the Alpha.

“Um, in the Pure Sentinel Nation, they taught us that Sentinels — Sentinels have needs, and Guides are meant to — to serve those needs. And I did, I was really good, and I did everything I got told, but I didn’t — I didn’t like — they wanted me to um, to do something I didn’t like.”

Now Blair looked again at the young Guide, seeing him cast in a different light this time: thin lines of stress around his mouth and eyes; a tightness to his face; the rapid rise and fall of his Adam’s apple as he swallowed.
Not shyness, then.
Trauma.

Theo nodded, slowly, broadcasting all his movements and keeping his energy as flat as possible.
“What did they want you to do?”
Martin fidgeted.
“The Alpha — Theo Marin — sorry, the Other Theo — he, um, he had this ritual that all the new Guides in the Pack had to do, um, to get initiated, and I didn’t —”
Martin’s voice wavered and his energy jumped into crazy, staccato patterns across Blair’s vision.
“Martin.” Theo’s voice was solid wood furniture and the low smell of cigars, “What did the Other Theo want you to do?”

Martin shook his head, violently, and looked desperately between Blair and Henrietta.
“I can’t — I can’t — “
“Hey, hey. Hey. That’s OK.” Theo soothed. “Why don’t you just tell me more about the Gentlers?”

This seemed to help Martin clear his head; he took deep breaths in for a few seconds, then pressed harder where he and Theo were still touching.

“The Other Theo liked to claim that all the unbonded Guides in the Pack were his. He had his pick of us, whenever he wanted. If he came to your town and he picked you, then you weren’t allowed to say no.”

Martin frowned, as if forcing himself to remember.

“And sometimes, Guides would say no or their families would or sometimes they had a bonding planned, but then the Moon would punish them for their disobedience and they would…have accidents.”

There was silence, and a very low, nearly imperceptible thrumming that Blair knew must have been Theo Marin’s anger at what this young Guide had endured. But neither he nor Henrietta let on; they both projected comfort and evenness.

“So the Sentinels liked to keep a lot of Guides around, so that there were still enough of us.”

A vein seemed to thrum dangerously close to the surface in Theo’s neck, but he kept calm.

“And where did they keep you?”

“Nowhere specific; the Sentinels in my den said we were always being hunted, and that we mostly had to hide. We moved a lot, between different safe houses, along the paths Marin takes between the Packs. I don’t know where the other Gentlers might be. I think some of them live in Packs, like normal. I’m not sure. We weren’t allowed to go far.”

Theo’s jaw twitched.

“And did you ever meet this Theo Marin?”

Martin shook his head.

“No. I only knew his followers — the other den leaders, and the other Guides. But I saw him once, at a gathering we went to in the forest. A rally.”

“And what did he look like?”

“When I saw him, he looked like a wolf.”

A strange, thready tension crept over the room.

“I see.” Theo said, evenly.

“He — he doesn’t come around very often. I don’t know what he does most of the time, or where he is.”

“Did anyone ever mention to you where he might be from? Or where he might be going?”

Martin looked almost embarrassed; he took his hand away from Theo’s, used it to rub his arm.

“Sentinels don’t talk about that kind of stuff with Guides. We’re… not supposed to be worrying about um, politics and stuff. Our den leader would punish us all if he caught one of us eavesdropping. They said thinking about stuff like that would stress us out, impact our fertility.”

Theo’s eyes flicked downward for just a hundredth of a second, then back up to the Guide’s face.

“I see. What else did they tell you, little Guide?”

Martin bit his lower lip, slid his tongue along his teeth. Theo watched him, closely.

“We were told — I was taught — that the true leader of the Pure Sentinel Nation was Alpha Theo Marin. That only he could lead us to better lives, help us fulfill our potential, help us — “ here, Martin paused and looked at Blair, then looked back at Henrietta.

“It’s alright.” she assured him. “He knows.”

Martin nodded.

“— help us Become.” he finished, then looked down at the ground. “He said we’d never do it
Theo Marin looked over the boy with an expression as inscrutable as his energy, which felt drawn-back and distant to Blair. Then he leaned forward, still holding his hand up to Martin’s.

“Now you know that wasn’t right, don’t you? You know that all that mess they taught you — it wasn’t true. Becoming don’t belong to one of us or the other; it will happen, when the Moon is ready, to every Kin who lives a natural life. You know that, don’t you?”

Martin nodded, eyes dropped back to the ground.

“Yes, sir.”

“What else did they teach you about Theo Marin?”

Martin scratched his nose.

“They taught — he said that he was the only true descendant of Jean-Claude Amoux, the man who first Became. That the Gift came to us through him.”

Theo’s jaw flexed.

“And you also know that to be untrue.”

Martin looked up at Theo Marin through dark lashes.

“I know, Alpha. The Gift came from the Moon.”

“Good boy. And what else do you know?”

Martin thought for a long minute, then spoke.

“I know that the Gentlers move at night, and that the rounds they make aren’t random — Alpha Theo Marin — sorry, their Theo Marin, Alpha — follows a lunar plan. He, um —“

Martin paused, tripping a little over his words.

“He likes — to — to plan his next actions during the new moon, and he likes to, um, to visit his favorite Guides during the full moon.”

Now Martin’s energy felt different; smaller, somehow. Henrietta stepped over to stand closer to him, rested one hand on the back of his neck.

“Alright.” Theo prodded. “And?”

“And I still know who his favorites are.”

~!~

“Try again.” Ken Rochelle urged, his face as expressionless as his tone.

“It’s not working.” Jim growled in frustration, swiping at the side of his truck.

“Try again.” Ken repeated, calm as a mountain.

Jim closed his eyes and blocked out everything he could — the smell of the wet tarmac, the sound of Ken’s heartbeat, the taste of salt on his tongue, the distant but insistent push of a rising gale — and focused instead on Blair.

Blair, who had been an apparition of beauty and wildness on that night in the parking lot.

Blair, who had touched his hand and made him feel, for the first time in his life, that the loneliness might abate.

Blair, who had filled up the loft with his scent and his energy and his sunlight-warmth.

Blair, who had challenged him and pushed him and taken more from him than any Guide had, ever.

Blair, who maybe loved him, even if he didn’t know it yet.

Blair, who he desperately loved.

In the back of his mind, another voice sneered at him: stupid Sentinel, half a man, failure, no control,
fucking moon hates you, can’t even keep a Guide — and Jim blocked that out, too; pasted over it with a mental picture of Blair arched in ecstasy, and turned up the volume on Blair humming to himself while chopping vegetables in the kitchen.

He focused in on the minutiae — the sensation of Blair’s hair on his skin; the color of Blair’s eyes in the shadowed light of a rainy morning in bed; the pace of his footsteps falling behind Jim and his million-and-one questions, pouring out.

Last, Jim focused on the giant hole he felt in the center of his core when he forced himself to confront the fact that Blair might be gone.

And suddenly, that hole seemed to narrow to a pinpoint, then move — slowly at first, slowly, then faster, then so fast, speeding past light, past time, across all distance, leading him, dragging him, and then —

“Got him.” Jim declared, and ran for the truck.

~:~

As soon as Martin was out of the longhouse and on his way back to Haven with a Guide escort, Theo Marin slammed his fist into the table.

“Theo!” Henrietta tutted immediately, rushing to look at his knuckles.

“That son of a bitch.” Henry’s eyes widened.

“Who — Martin??” Theo shook his head, threw off her ministrations.

“No, of course not. You let me know, by the way, when that one’s all healed up, alright?” Henrietta rolled her eyes.

“Theo, what — “

“That Guide said he was taught that the Other Theo is the only true descendant of Jean-Claude Amoux. Jean-Claude Amoux. You recognize that name?”

“No. Should — “

“Of course you don’t. But I do. Jean-Claude Amoux was my grandfather.”

Theo hung his head, and for the first time since Martin had left, Blair felt him let go of his control — anger and frustration, and a deep, howling pain surged out and bounced around every corner of the room.

“It’s Cat, Henry. It’s Cat.”

Then he reached out for her, and she welcomed him, and Theo Marin held onto his Alpha Guide and just cried.
Despite Theo’s claims that he was not a prisoner, Blair found himself jostled forthwith toward a private room at the end of the longhouse, with a small bathroom attached and a Sentinel guard outside.

Theo and Henrietta had lingered by his doorway, speaking in low, dark tones about Martin and Becoming and the revelation of the false Theo’s likely identity. But things were not as they had been in the hours prior; Theo had been inconsolable — after the tears, there had been anger, and violence; he’d broken a mug and kicked the table until Henrietta had stopped him.

Theo’s aggression had spiked something in the room; something thorny and too-familiar, and Blair had realized he was shaking long before he gained the control to stop it. Henrietta caught sight of this from the corner of her eye, and reached out her energy to his…a slow creep that felt menacing at first, until their existences met and he realized that she was just as open, just as frightened.

Something in her expression had shifted then; Blair had seen glimpses of dirty rugs and hot pink stickers and the smell of a nursery and the shouting, loud and incessant, and a Guide mother who appeared half Blair’s age. And then the Guide mother’s face had moved and Blair was looking at his own mother, at the apartment they’d occupied for only seven months but which had been his favorite, at the potted plant on the windowsill they’d left behind in a panic, and then he was looking at Henrietta’s face and understanding.

Blair hadn’t heard what she’d said to Theo, but her words had been clipped, firm — and the Alpha had taken off, out of the longhouse, fast-moving even on two legs, a burning comet into the night, furious, intact, ready to exact his revenge against the immovable fates and the indifferent stars of the night sky. Blair had shrunk back into his room, and waited for his heart to slow down.

In a few minutes, he’d calmed down, but his head had still spun with all he’d been told over their simple dinner: that the Becoming was real; that it was (Theo believed) the natural consequence of Sentinels and Guides living as wild and free as they were meant to; that (Henrietta believed) the Becoming was the next step in the evolution of their kind; that it hadn’t happened to all of them; that it had happened to many; that it was nothing to be afraid of (Theo insisted); and that it hadn’t happened to Theo yet.

What Blair hadn’t been told, but had nevertheless known, was that this last fact — this lack of movement, this failure in Becoming — was a point of great sorrow for Theo Marin. Hadn’t he done enough, after all? Hadn’t he suffered, and hoped?

Theo had told Blair his story, and in it, Blair had sensed an echo of longing so strong that it made his heart ache, even now, to remember.

Blair took a drink of the water he’d been left and paced the room.

Jim had, as far as Blair knew (and despite Theo and Henrietta’s expectations), drawn no closer. At least, there had been no psycho-physical indication within him to that effect. The bond lay as cold and weak as ever, pulsing through occasionally, but always without response or welcome — only enough to keep it barely alive.

Blair’s head felt full of cotton, and zipping, rushing thoughts; birds in panicked flight. He stood at the wall, gone as far as he could on this path. Swinging one foot over the other, he turned to go back, nearly stumbling over a bit of thread; his shoes, a rare survivor of his Time Before Jim, had suffered...
greatly from the journey with Theo and were now tattering around the edges. Blair blinked at them, considering, suddenly, the ease with which he could replace them. It would be just a matter of asking Jim, or Moira, or one of the other ladies-in-waiting with which he’d been laden…

Abruptly, awkwardly, Blair realized that Henrietta was standing at the door.
“I thought you might be interested in a tour.”

The anthropologist in Blair woke up and brushed the dust off. In the time between, while they waited for Jim and any ensuing combat, there was nothing more for Blair to do as a diplomat; he might as well serve in the capacity of scientist. And perhaps, spy.

“Yeah; that’d be great. Thanks.”

Try to sound grateful. Grateful but not obsequious; Henrietta’s misgiving were not yet assuaged.

He looked up at her, and there was that damn expression of hers again, so unreadable and so, so… absorbing. Blair felt adrift in the blackness of her eyes for a moment, thinking of Kitty and the memories of the near past. He reached for the glass of water again, took a fortifying sip — as if he were departing for a long journey.

She acknowledged his response, and flicked her gaze briefly to the guard.
“I’ll take you down to the Guides’ Parish first.”

Blair raised his eyebrows. He’d never heard of this — “Guides’ Parish?”

Henrietta nodded as she began to walk, indicating for the sentinel who had been left guarding Blair to trail behind. They crossed the longhouse swiftly, and let themselves outside.

“Most of the new converts we get aren’t anywhere near bonded yet. But they’re excited to be away from home, and they’re ramped up on the energy of a new Pack, a new place, a bit of rebellion, and feeling free, for the first time in their lives, to take the shackles off their primal selves. We love it, we celebrate it, but we also have to put boundaries on it. Otherwise, it’s easy for…irregularities to occur.”

And Blair almost laughed then, at the ridiculous primness of it all, the precious sense of self that let these neo-primalists walk around naked under the full moon but balk at unbonded sex.

Henrietta must have sensed this, because she elaborated, without turning her head:
“Newly freed isn’t Primal yet; they’re still all dosed out on all that shit you guys use in the null world — all those abrasives and perfumes and scent blockers and fertility suppressants. They screw with our scents and pheromones, confuse our instincts. It takes at least six weeks to completely flush it out of your system. We don’t permit anyone to select a mate before that.”

Now Blair understood, and felt a little sheepish for his initial, arrogant laughter.

Come on, man, you’re supposed to be an anthropologist, here! Have a little humility, why don’t you?

“I see.”

They were making their way downhill now, and Blair looked back once over his shoulder to see his Sentinel guard still following them with ease, his gun resting comfortably over his back.

Blair tried once more to reach out for Jim, but the line buzzed silver and quiet, then slipped away. He turned back to the path.
With Henrietta in the lead, their little caravan wound its way down the rest of the incline to the lower-lying and apparently more central part of the camp. The smell of smoke intensified, joined with the familiar scents of camp life — roasted meat; hot, sugary tea; damp earth; chalk; sweat. Blair took it in, recalling an earlier time in his life, and a Sentinel he had never had the chance to know.

As they went further into camp, they encountered more and more people — Guides, mostly — all barefoot, but many in sweatshirts or oversized sweaters, wandering here and there in pairs and small groups, all their energy sometimes pinging and buzzing, sometimes erratic and sometimes low.

A number of them were darting around, laughing, playing some sort of game without immediately obvious rules. Blair had to keep turning his head to try to take them all in — there were so many more people here than he’d expected. Several looked curiously up at him as he and Henrietta passed, but just as many seemed to be watching the sentinel who followed behind.

“You’ll have to forgive the Guides tonight.” Henry told him as they passed by a row of a half-dozen large, portable yurts. Out in front of them, a mixed group of Guides and Sentinels of varying ages were lounging around a small fire, grinning at each other and sharing some sort of flask.

“It’s the half-moon,” she continued. “Gets them all...giggly.”

Their Sentinel guard snorted.

“Nah, I’m pretty sure it’s the moonshine what does that.” he said, under his breath.

They passed between the second row of yurts; just beyond the housing, Blair could see the rise of a central tent: Haven. They were passing the third row when Henry abruptly diverged from their main path and headed directly for one of the huts. Curious, Blair followed her.

She stopped in the doorway, and rapped twice on the wooden frame.

“You protest? Congratulations. I’d be pleased to register your intended bonding now, if you like.”

The Sentinel paled a little.

“Well, I think we were just — “

“Because — as I’m sure you’re aware — there’s no sneaking permitted between unbonded Guides and Sentinels.”

“Of course, Dama Grande.” the Sentinel answered.

“Then I expect you were just on your way out of the Guides’ Parish.” she continued, coolly. The Sentinel bit her lip and Blair caught a whiff of aggression; a sharp poke of energy that Henrietta politely ignored. “Out of the Guides’ tents and off for an hour of firewood collection and processing, if I’m not mistaken,” she amended.

The Sentinel gave her a disdainful look.

“My work detail ended an hour ago.”

“This isn’t work; it’s discipline.”

The Sentinel straightened up, and Blair was surprised by how tall she was.

“It’s bitch work, is what it is.” she groused. “And Sentinels don’t do bitch work.”

Henry tilted her head just slightly.
“Two hours of firewood collection.”
The Sentinel’s shoulders tensed.
“You don’t have that authority.”
“I’m the Dama Grande; I have the authority — “
“I only take orders from the Alpha.”
“And I am the Dama Grande, the — “
“You’re not even the Alpha Guide. I only take orders from the Alpha.”
“You will obey me; I’m the — “
the sentinel rolled her eyes.
“I obey the Alpha, not some cunt with a clipboard and a whistle.”

Henry’s jaw twitched, but before she could answer, a body came lunging past her, headed right for the Sentinel, and caught her around the collar.

Theo Marin dragged the Sentinel bodily across the middle of the yurt and out into the walkway.

“Lie down!” he snapped, and all eyes turned, startled, to them. Theo advanced on his subordinate. “You.” he growled, and his voice was all claw and hackle and bared teeth. “Lie down.”

The young sentinel was flushed red, and her energy was a rolling cannonball of red and copper.
“[I didn’t do — “
“Lie. Down.”
“Alph — “

And then, moving more quickly than Blair had ever seen, Theo Marin knocked the younger Sentinel off her feet and landed her on the ground; their impact made an alarmingly loud thump against the soft ground. Then Theo pinned her there, held in place with her face pressed to the earth and one arm twisted up against her back. The Sentinel was panting, but did not try to get free.

“You don’t ever,” Theo said, conversationally, “Ever, ever, ever again in your life talk to a Guide like that. You understand?”
The pinned Sentinel did not respond, and so Theo wrenched her arm a bit higher, digging a knee into her back.
“Ahhh!”
“Nobody in this pack — not nobody — does ‘bitch work.’ I don’t know where you came from, but here, we all matter. And here, we don’t disrespect our Guides with ugly language or licentious behavior. Understood?”

The pinned Sentinel silently sucked in angry, shallow breaths. Theo shook her, and he grunted.
“Alpha — “
“Tut tut tut. Now, Henrietta is the Dama Grande of the Libre Terre Pack, you see? Which means that she outranks you. And you know what that means?”
The young sentinel on the ground lifted her head slightly, taking a half-turn to glare at Theo.
“What?”
Theo snarled right next to the youngster’s face.
“It means you follow her fucking orders.” he said, and jerked the younger Sentinel’s arm upward so that she cried out.

“Now, I’ve had to put you down on the ground here, and I don’t like doing that — it’s embarrassing, you understand. All these pretty Guides standing around watching you get your hair cut. But your Dama Grande here would have had a much harsher lesson in store, isn’t that right, Ms. Larkin?”

Henrietta stood by, unmoved and unmoving.
“So you might not realize it now, but I’ve saved you from yourself. I’m gonna let you up, but not before you apologize to sweet lil’ Ms. Larkin, who let you off so gently this time.”

The pinned Sentinel growled, and for a long minute, Blair thought he would see another fight — a vicious one — but then Theo did that push again and the Sentinel huffed and complied.

“I’m sorry.”
“I’m sorry, who?”
“I’m sorry, Guide Larkin.” she snapped.

Theo’s knee pressed into a pain point.

“Ahh!”
“I’m sorry, Dama Grande Larkin, she on whom all my happiness depends.” Henrietta rolled her eyes. Theo leaned a little harder.
“I’m sorry, Dama Grande Larkin, on who — she on whom all my happiness depends.” the sentinel rushed out.
Theo looked up at Henry.
“Well, Henry? Whaddaya think?”

Henrietta snorted, but the edge of her mouth quirked and — just like that — Theo removed the pressure and released the sentinel’s arm. She wriggled away, getting angrily back to her feet, then opened her mouth as if to say something to Theo. Before she could speak, however, the Alpha tilted his head and reached out, caught hold of the younger sentinel’s arm, and pulled her into an affectionate embrace.

“It’s over. Show them you can take a lesson. Walk away.” he urged, and Blair saw the fury start to drain out of the sentinel’s body. “You might be able to beat me someday, but it won’t be today. Walk away.” Theo repeated, then released his grip.

The sentinel gazed at him for one long, considering moment, and then with just a glance backward at the Guide who had been her companion, took off toward the woods.

Blair turned to see Henrietta watching Theo with that same unreadable expression.

“And dare I ask,” she drawled, not breaking his gaze, “what you’re doing down here in the Guides’ Parish?”

~:~

Don’t think about Blair, don’t think about Blair, don’t think about Blair, don’t think about Blair, don’t —

Jim drove, pounding the truck over rising highways and around the looping curves of the mountain road, not certain exactly where he was driving but knowing he was growing closer. The needs of the moment pressed in on him from all angles — save Blair, kill Theo Marin, destroy the Gentlers, again and again until he felt numb with the vastness of it all.

— don’t think about Blair —

The bond was a pinprick of light dancing on the highway; Jim followed it semi-lucidly, swerving more on the road than he or Ken Rochelle would like, delirious with the terpsichorean rhythm of the light, the light, the bond, the brightness.

— don’t think about Blair —
His cat was awake, pupils dilated, ears pushed back, vision caught on a passing of the moon through the canopy.

— don’t think about Blair —

they were close now, very close, and when he got to him, when he got there, his Guide was going to be his again, be his forever, he was going to forge the bond again, again, again, no distance, never distant, never —

Ken jerked the wheel, pulled the truck back in line.

— don’t think about Blair —

They reached the edge of the forest and Jim knew Blair was inside.

— don’t think about Blair —

Jim stopped the truck and ignored the complaints, ditched his shoes, got out and ran….

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“I came for Martin.” Theo Marin explained.
“Of course you did.” Henrietta responded, rolling her eyes again. Theo shook his head.
“No, I mean — I came to ask him for his help.”

Henrietta stopped walking and turned to face Theo. “Help with what?”
Theo hesitated.
“Help with finding Cat?” she guessed. Theo nodded a confirmation.
“Help with drawing him out.” Pain flashed across Henrietta’s face; Blair watched her eyes get large, then darken.
“Absolutely not. He’s had a lot of trauma, and now he’s got a move and primal beginnings going on, on top of it. No. Hell no. No. It’s a danger to his health.”

She began to walk off, and Theo ran up beside her and cajoled her, like a child begging to be allowed a treat — an orange, a candy, a late bedtime.
“Henry, please. It’s the only trap we can lay for Cat.”
She frowned.
“No.”
“It’s necessary.”
“It’s not. How do you even know that getting Martin to play a honeypot would work? You think Cat’ll be missing one Guide out of a thousand? Enough to show up if he’s found? Impossible.”
Theo shook his head.
“Naw, this one’s special. He’ll be looking for this one.”
Henry flexed her jaw.
“How can you know that? You can’t know that.”
“I can.”
“How?” she demanded. "How can you be so sure?!"

Theo’s shoulders fell a little, and his voice was rueful and achy:
“Cause Cat and I always liked the same girls.”

There was a moment that passed between them, so rapid and slippery that it was almost mute — Blair strained to sense what they were saying, but he still felt in tatters from all the shock and the late
night, and worried if he let his shields down that he wouldn’t be able to get them back up again.

At last, Henrietta closed her eyes and spoke.  
“He’ll be at Haven.”

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The Haven at Pont du Nord Waystation was a little round tent, sheltered deeper in the forest than the rest of the encampment and warmed with the twin glows of firelight and Guide presence.

The two Sentinels had lagged behind as Henrietta led them closer, and now they lingered at a distance, clustering around some invisible line of demarcation that Henrietta must have set in prior encounters. They milled around at the periphery, each of them unwilling to breach that invisible threshold. Ahead, the Haven buzzed with some kind of strange energy that Blair had never felt before; as if everyone were waiting permission for a release of some kind, a breaking-out, an expression...

Then they had stepped into a little entry-room attached to the tent, and Henrietta was talking to him, telling him to take his shoes off, and his jewelry, too. It occurred to Blair then, briefly but sharply, that Jim had never given him a ring. It seemed a silly thing to demand, but in the face of their limp bond, it felt like one more betrayal.

Henrietta was undressing, stripping down to her underwear and folding her glasses neatly atop her clothes. She laid their effects down gently on the ground, and Blair had just enough time to be grateful she hadn’t made him undress before she lifted the tent flap and ushered him in.

“It’s hard to tell,” she said, glancing sidelong at Blair in the darkness, “What will happen in here.”

The heat of the fire hit him first; in contrast to the cold Pacific air, it was a shock to the senses. The tent had no other light; the fire smoked out through a ventilation shaft at the top of the rounding. Blair coughed a little; the air inside the Haven was thick with blood and birth and fresh bursts of new life.

Back from the fire, a cluster of Guides were sleeping, naked underneath half-bunched blankets, with infants pressed to their chests and their heads resting on each other’s thighs and hips. Blair blinked, his eyes adjusting, and he saw that against the far wall were a group of older Guides, seated in low chairs and laughing, eating around the small children hanging out of their laps and arms.

Blair felt woozy with the rush of it all — an overwhelming combination of life and heat and blood and sex.

A trio of young teenagers, barefoot and wearing only small cotton pants, were lying on their stomachs near the fire as well; they looked up at Henrietta as she entered, then back to the game they were playing, drawing some kind of designs on a rough paper canvas.

“Just come of age.” she explained. “In this season's first Moon. But still far too young to go out with the grownups at night. Once we move this passel down to Libre Terre, they'll be starting with the older children in the Guides’ school, and we'll have their emergence celebration.”

Blair nodded as if he understood. But no one had celebrated when he’d emerged. No one had celebrated when he’d changed; it had been just one more danger, one more inconvenience for his mother to overlook.

The fire flashed in Blair’s eyes; the top of the tent seemed to tower above him, and in the dim-lit interior, the room began to spin.
Henrietta was talking to him, but Blair couldn’t hear her over the sudden roar of sensation, of abjured experience, of broken line stealing forward base mine mine held fought agonizing rejection bright light stretch moonlight moonlight moonlight silver Blair’s eyes go that passed through his head.

Blair gasped, caught his breath, and came back to himself with Henrietta rubbing his back.
“I — I’m sorry, I’m not sure what that was.” Henrietta regarded him with sympathy.
“I think your Sentinel has arrived.”

~!:~
The Fugitives

Chapter Notes

Warning: explicit sex that pushes boundaries of consent. Read with caution, and recall that this is fiction -- not real life.


A twig broke at his left; he stopped for only a moment, a pause — there was blood on the wind. A thorn, tangled in the thin of his skin. The moonlight was gossamer, flickering; he pulled it, absently, kept running.

Run.

In his belly, his inner Guide felt swollen and aching; she was heavy with something, although he wasn’t sure what.

Run.

He wished for wolf paws, short legs to make the land go faster, to churn up the earth and make every mile pass in a blur.

The world was a spinning glass globe, silver star-speckled and dangling under a churlish indigo night. He focused on the ground, tried to watch where he was going, and dug too deeply; now he was buried in the scent of fermentation, of health and black soil. A cricket chirped and leapt, fleeing him. A worm inched along wet leaves. A spider clambered up a rock, perching in anticipation.

He blinked his eyes, drew himself back into the big world, out of theirs. The wind turned; he felt a pulse of control lurch into him — the Sentinel. Slowing him, calming him.

He blinked, more slowly this time.

Run.

It became harder, suddenly, to remember what he was running for. Or from? Toward? Hooting in the distance, and a lazy cricket call. Everything seemed slower.

He forced himself to move, go forward — push push push past the quicksand slowed-down lazy Sunday record player soft rug musical feeling —

Go!

Putting one foot in front of the other made sense; he stumbled on a rock caught himself on his hands and the adrenaline rush spurred him back into action; he was on a fast break now, pushing down hard on cold earth scrabbling between branches.

Runrun RUN rUn runrunrun

There was something familiar about this, but the explanation was too human and too far to be easily
recognized;

Run

And then a feeling sang through him like a gusting wind a cut of icy whirl, and he nearly fell back, but caught his footing and slowed instead, panting, his breath coming in heaves

another twig, a crack to his left and it wasn’t far enough yet

MOREdistanceFarther. Run

There was a clearer path. He could see it, suddenly, in stark lines and sharp relief patterns against the smoothness of the forest, lit up like candles emergency exit signs neon lights and bar lanterns — Ah, yes, break through there, go — toward the water (his kind liked to run near water) and the bond sizzled and popped inside his brain and suddenly the path was clear no longer; he had run to the end, because here the forest grew thicker and he could hear fast water — danger — a high cliff, he had to turn back —

and there was Jim, a shadow emergent from the wilderness.

Blair froze, and dropped his gaze, and stood still.

The panther chuffed at him, making breath like clouds of jungle heat against the cold Pacific night air and Blair clenched his fists to warm his fingers and prayed he’d done this right.

Slowly, slowly, slowly, he sat down on the ground and closed his eyes. Put his hands out, palm first, and spread his fingers on the ground. Silence — too silent, which meant that the panther was really here, was on the move, was leaping forward —

Jim’s hands caught him around his waist, a shoulder crashed into his, pushed him to the ground.

Blair went, willingly, his belly swaying and hot and full, and Jim made a sound like a warning and pressed a nose against his hair and along the back of his neck and growled. Goosebumps pimpled Blair’s skin, but he was still.

Jim flowed over Blair like water; his lines were longer and sleeker than usual, and Blair knew-without-knowing what was in play. Even his wolf was startled; a sharp bark of surprise twas his fast-beating heart.

He met Jim’s eyes once in the darkness. In the shadows, his Sentinel was a smudge on the page; a broken movement toward ascension; a dark flourish on the night’s canvas. Warming, bending, Jim slunk between shadows to appraise his Guide. Blair watched.

Then the Sentinel was on him, all hands and teeth and strength. Jim’s fingers tangled in his hair, tugged at the shortest curls; his hand broadened to palm the nape of Blair’s neck and grew firm — this was control.

Blair did not resist; his guide-wolf yowled and rolled over and flipped her tail and begged to get fucked. Jim’s growl thrilled him, lit his veins up with promise and intent. Blair melted into the embrace — Sentinel was here, and wanted him again, needed him. Jim’s cock bulged slapped naked against Blair’s clothed thigh, half-hard already and demanding.


Blair didn’t need to be told this; it was evident in the stance of the Sentinel — in the way he took
hold of Blair, pushed him, moved him — that the Guide was going to be mounted and now, now, under the moon; he should prepare himself to accept it, should lay low and arch his back and strip himself of all delusions to enter into the sacred space, the joining, the BAM meeting combination place.

Beneath his skin, the bond was thrumming, sharp and hot

For a moment, he wanted to run again, but it passed — a silly, human urge. Weakness, and the Guide would have none of it.

Clothes were an annoyance, but they were gone quickly; Jim had the presence of mind to wait, but only moments

Jim kicked his legs apart to open him up, splayed a hand at the small of his back; the Sentinel’s palm felt cool against his skin; a trade wind against a rising heat.

Then there was moaning somewhere in the distance and it was Blair, whining, separate from himself — they were in the waiting room again, and the Guide’s shelters were down, it was obvious, the *mount me mount me mount me* supplication and the panther would oblige

Jim found a place behind the Guide; a hand at the back of his neck forced his cheek against the earth and Blair pushed back, resisted, fought against his traitorous body still begging that he needed it, needed this, was burning up to have it, was hungry to be pushed, to be held down, to have the luxury of fighting back to no avail, to be held and prized and claimed again and again in the bitter cold of the nighttime under the watchful eye of the moon, the moon, *that heartless bitch*, the moon

Blair snapped teeth over his shoulder and the Sentinel ducked left, growled and threw his weight against the Guide, pressed him into the ground, against the dirt and the dry fronds

*Submit*

Blair’s fingernails scrabbled in the dirt by his head as Jim stroked into him, pushed deeply into his cunt, his female-ness, that searing pink stripe of vulnerability and it was all too much suddenly — there were a thousand voices in his head and the unprocessed data dump of a long night in a strange place and the panic of fear, of anxiety, of imprisonment and no Jim, no Jim to make it better or offer comfort or even assure Blair he was coming back and now suddenly he was here, here, either a promise or an apparition or a damned bad decision but Blair was angry, suddenly, at the horror of it all at the weight of it all, and he growled again at Jim and threw his hips back, a threat to Jim’s control that made the Sentinel growl and seize his hips and rut against him, thrusting deeper and harder into the Guide, that magnificent cock filling him, finding all the swollen spots of untouched tension, all the yearning itch, the hunger

*Submit!*

Blair’s mind swam and his energy buzzed that delicious pink at the edges that meant that an orgasm was on the horizon, and Jim was relentless, single-minded in his focus, and Blair felt the bond buzz hotter in between them, jerking between yellow and ice-blue and that sloppy pink like a tongue lolling out after a long day’s run

Jim fucked him remorselessly, forced his hips against Blair’s as if punishing them both, excoriating them both for their stupidity, their foolishness, this was wasted time and danger and separation and *no cubs* and loss and territory *BAD* other male other male *Destruction* — Blair heard the words as he saw them, and realized that this was the panther speaking now, but Blair’s wolf laid low and did not respond, but Blair felt that rising feeling in the center of his core and knew it wouldn’t be long
before he was slipping over the edge, sliding down the precipice into a long cum and Jim would go with him, as they went together (were supposed to) in all things

Submit came again, with a tongue across the back of his neck and Blair surprised himself with his resistance —
Make me

Then Jim surprised him, and stuttered a growl, and Blair realized that these were Jim’s sensations, Jim’s feelings, Jim’s instincts and demands, and that he was merely seeing through Jim’s eyes

Here clutched in his hands was the prize, the mate, the other half — and beyond was the darkness, in which any Sentinel could wander and get lost.

But not he; no longer. The panther had a mate, and would never release him — would destroy worlds and civilizations and good men before he would give up his prize.

And Blair saw, for a fleeting moment, himself through the veil of Jim’s instincts and wondered why he hadn’t seen this before, why why because it made sense of out of madness out of nothingness out of the complete randomness of life, but nothing was random nothing was unexpected everything was as it was, as it was meant to be, its own pure essence its own flower spore scent exploding across the world —

Blair moaned, and spread his legs farther apart. Jim’s hips faltered and he growled, arched his back, and came; the world tilted sideways and the wolf said nothing and Blair lost track of the direction of up and which sensations were his and which were Jim’s and whether he was on the up or the downswing of cumming and just gave it all up and fell into the feeling, orgasming so hard that it dripped from him, ran down his thigh.

Jim fell on top of him, growling softly against the moonlight, his weight a soft comfort, a warmth in the nighttime. If his weight felt softer than usual — more liquid, more of a melting shadow — Blair was too far gone, and did not know it.

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When they returned to camp, Theo Marin was standing in the center of a circle of Jim’s armed men, and Henrietta was clinging to him for dear life.

Martin, delicate and trembling, sat between two armed guards on the steps of the longhouse.

Ken Rochelle paced over to them as soon as they approached; his ears were tight, body alert and tense — practically prowling, himself — and Blair caught hold of Jim’s sweatshirt, snagged his hand into the pocket to pull his Sentinel back.

“Remember what I told you.” he urged, just as Ken broached their small space.

“Target is secured, Alpha. Five casualties, all their own. Wounded Sentinels are being transported back to Cascade General, all in stable condition.”

“Jim —“

Blair’s face paled at the mention of injuries, and he thought again of that young Sentinel ranger with the tintype face and long body lines. Jim ignored Blair’s stunned reaction, but slipped one arm around his Guide’s waist.

Ken gestured, with some irritation, toward the armed circle over his shoulder.

“But the Guide refused to be separated from him.”

Jim nodded.
“Excellent work, Sentinel, but we’ve had a change of plans. Drop arms and get everyone into the longhouse. Push the perimeter back; keep the rest of the Marin’s civilians down in the camp if you can. Send an outreach team in to do a welfare check for medical emergencies and supply needs. Tell Outreach to keep an eye on them for the next few hours, while we’ve got their Alpha bit tied up.”

Ken tilted his head in salute and turned toward the armed circle. Blair lowered his shields just enough to feel Henrietta’s panic, her frustration, her determination, her sense of betrayal — he rushed forward four steps; she was meeting his eyes.

*You promised he wouldn’t hurt us.*

Blair’s skin went cold, but Ken had already given the order to lower their weapons, move and march the fugitives inside, and so the guards were making Martin stand up and then forward, forward, they all went, like beetles returning to a sand home.

Inside, Theo Marin sighed an aggrieved kind of sigh and sat down at the longhouse table. Henrietta was beside him, still clinging close, still fearful of sudden movements, of irreplaceable losses.

Theo stroked her hand, and she relaxed. Jim dropped angrily into the seat across from Theo; Blair flanked him on his right. Martin had crept into a space next to Henrietta, and Ken Rochelle and the guards stood all around.

“If you ever, ever take my Guide out of my sight again — at his request or yours — I’ll kill you.” Jim said, simply and without preamble.

Henrietta’s energy rose, making Blair feel anxious and queasy. Theo was unfazed; he blinked slowly at Jim, then turned his attention to Blair.

“Alpha Guide Ellison, be a dear and hand me that bit of whisky I left here, will you?”

Under Jim’s disapproving glare, Blair cautiously leaned to his right to retrieve a half-drunk cup from farther down the table, returning it to Theo. The Sentinel took a long, thick sip before setting the mug back down. Blair wet his lips and tried to gauge Jim’s anger.

“We’re short on time, Alpha Ellison, and I’m short on patience. Now, I expect in the time you’ve had with your Guide to reconnect, you two have gone over the situation in detail. So you know what we’re dealing with here. You can either work with us to find my brother and stop him from makin’ all our lives hell, or you can sit here and play the big man, waste our time, and put every Sentinel in the Nation at risk.”

Blair saw Jim’s shoulders tense, and he braced himself for sharp, unmitigated violence; but Jim just hunched forward, eyes dark and focused, and said:

“Tell me your plan.”

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In the end, it was quite simple.

A fertile moon was approaching, and Martin swore Cat would never miss a chance to visit when it was up. It was likely, the young Guide admitted — reluctantly — that the den leaders would have tried to hide their loss of Martin. There were severe punishments ready for those who displeased the Alpha, and they would have been scrambling to cover their negligence.

But the fertile moon was approaching, and if Cat came looking for his favorite unbonds…well, under such circumstances, the den leaders were likely to be feeling a bit desperate. Searches might have been intensified; they might also have been abandoned altogether. Difficult to tell; they would have
to hope.

A single, unmarked vehicle would dump Martin off on the side of the forest road that the den leaders used — the very same one along which Martin had fled towards light, toward sound, toward freedom. They’d leave him three miles or so from where he’d been found; far enough from the den to be plausible, but not far enough to be overlooked.

Martin would wear the clothes he’d been in when he’d disappeared; they would be appropriately dirtied, dampened with his scent and the stink of fear.

(Later, Blair had asked Henrietta how they’d gotten that particular scent to ring so powerfully from the young Guide, and she had looked at Blair with those unfathomable eyes and said, “I asked him to tell me his very first memory.” and Blair had been reminded of what a killing rage felt like)

Martin would be alone — the most dangerous part of this, but there was no way to change the fact without risking exposure. He would go alone, but not unmonitored: a single, small tracking device had been stitched into the waistband of his pants.

Ken Rochelle provided the hardware for this part; the Libre Terre technology was too bulky, too big, and had too short a range to be useful if things went south and a rescue was in order. Cascade Pack’s trackers were no bigger than a postage stamp.

Blair said nothing when he saw this, but he remembered that night, and wondered whether such a device had once been stitched into the waistband of his pants, the scrubs he’d been given when he’d been lost and alone — the clothing meant to help him feel more comfortable, to keep him safe.

Jim stood beside Blair and pushed presence through the bond and said nothing.

After the tracker had been fitted and tested, they gave Martin something to make him feel a bit sick; it had to appear he’d been scavenging food for the short while he’d been gone.

Then last, they had him drink a tincture from a little glass bowl, and Henrietta had smiled at him and he’d smiled shyly back, and then Theo Marin had stepped closer to get a whiff and shaken his head, stepping back, and said, “Yeah. It’s working,” which made Henrietta and Martin giggle.

Theo had flushed, and Blair had tilted his head at this curiosity, until he felt Jim’s glare on him and realized he’d been staring a bit too long.

“This is a long shot if I’ve ever heard of one.” Jim grumbled, changing the subject and Blair felt a pulse of that same presence shift through their bond, like a little golden egg slipping along unused railway tracks, bursting through to his side in a pleasant buzz of warmth. He squeezed it until all he heat went out of it, then let it go.

“Still our best shot.” Theo grunted, watching Henrietta bundle Martin off, out the door to wait. “You just keep hold of your half. We’ve got this part settled.”

Then Theo’s brow furrowed, and he looked over at the sentinels with Ken Rochelle, then at Jim.

“Where’s Jody?”

“Back at Salmon River, moving her Pack to safe zones and interrupting any immediate plans your brother had for an imminent attack.”

Theo’s eyes got distant for a minute, and he blinked.

“Of course.”

Then Theo shook himself and came out of the fugue; he turned to Blair and clasped both hands
behind his back. Blair was unsure whether this was a display of courtly manners or an effort to avoid triggering Jim’s protective instinct, but he decided to read it as the former.

“Alpha Guide Blair Ellison, I want to thank you — formally — for your help in bringing a very troublesome situation to a satisfactory result. We ain’t done yet, not by a long shot, but by your help, you’ve been able to bring myself and your Alpha together to put a common enemy to rest.”

Theo bowed slightly and held Blair’s gaze, and in his eyes there were again those cypress trees and slippery branches along the riverbank and cool boulders for small paws to rest upon. Underneath it, Blair sensed that push, that tickling realization of Theo’s power.

Awkwardly, tentatively, he countered it with a push of his own, which made Jim jump and Theo smile that roguish smile.

“You made a decision to trust some odd-talkin’ stranger, and for that, I thank you.”

Then he straightened up and faced Jim again.

“You still don’t trust your panther, and you still don’t trust me. But at least you trusted your Guide, and that’s the best I suppose any of us could hope for. I know there’ll be more to fight about, when this is all said and done. We’re not alike, you and I. But for now, we’ll show Central that we can work as one. If you can get back to Cascade and get hold of that crooked Representative Marshall, then you and I can bring those two together and bring this all to an end. And then we can all live to fight another day.”

Jim’s eyes tracked Theo as he spoke, and Blair felt, through the bond, a curious sensation — as if Jim had stepped away, as if some distance had come between them. Then it turned, made a back-cross into a new place; a feeling of likeness, of clear and basic understanding…before Blair could speak, Jim had yanked himself back and was regarding Theo with an expression of unrepentant distaste.

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I’ll go lay a trap for Marshall; you go and find your brother. And don’t kill him before I get a chance to.”

Jim slung one arm over Blair’s shoulder, ruffling his hair.
“Come on, Chief — you’re with me.”

~:~

Jim nearly fell asleep, leaning against the window with Blair curled into his side in the back of the truck. In a moment’s-flash dream, he was walking with his panther; the cat was leading him deeper, deeper into the forest — trying to tell him something?

Then Jim was awake, and his phone was in his hand, ringing. He answered it, jostling Blair, who made a little noise of protest and sat up, mussed.

“Ellison.”
“Hey Jim, it’s Joel. Listen, Marshall’s here, and he — “
Jim barely kept himself from bellowing.
“Marshall’s there?!”
Joel paused.
“Well, he was here; I just put him in a truck to guest quarters out at Building Six.”
“Building Six -- the Bonding Center?!”

Without being told, Ken Rochelle gave a nod of assent and switched his route.
“Said he wanted privacy! Came in with a lot of papers from Central and a bad attitude about Cascade Pack. Made two of our Guide assistants cry before I even got into the meeting room with him. Said he was looking for you, and that it was a ‘matter of some importance.’ I tried to calm him down, but —“

“That’s fine, Joel, listen, we’re on our way back now; about 30 minutes out —“

“Well, I’m sure he’ll be easy to find up at Six; just follow the trail of crying Guides.”

“— but Joel, I need you to send a team immediately to secure him at Building Six. The situation has changed.”

On the other end of the line, Joel Taggart was rushing to his feet, grabbing his coat from the rack by the door, gesturing to two Sentinel cadets to follow him.

“Changed how, Jim? What can I do?”

“Theo Marin’s not the man we’re looking for. Well, he is, but - look, we’re not looking for Theo, we’re looking for his brother, Cat Marin. He’s been going by Theo’s name and running the New Purity movement from secret locations around the country. They’re responsible for all the recent attacks, and more to come if we don’t find him now. We think he’s working with an inside man in Central Command, and we think that the insider might be Marshall. It’s how they’ve blocked Jody’s investigations, and it’s why Marshall’s been snooping around ever since I got lead on the inquiry into the attacks. We knew Marshall would be heading back this way -- he probably got tipped off when we sent the request for Marin’s warrant up to Central. He must know that we’re closer than ever to figuring out the truth about Cat Marin, but I didn’t think he’d get to Cascade so fast. Get a team out to Building Six, now, and hold him until I get there!”

~:~

“Hey. What are you still doing up?”

Suzanne brushed a hand over the Sentinel’s shoulder as she made her way to the little kitchenette.

“It’s so late it’s almost early.”

Professor Simon Banks closed the manila folder he’d been holding, rubbed his eyes, and swung his legs over the side of the sofa. He glanced over at the bassinet tucked safely between himself and the coffee table, but Tighearnach was still sleeping, solid and peaceful as ever.

“My idiot son-in-law dropped off some additional case notes that came over from the Eastern packs in the Central Rise. They’ve got a good criminal profiling team out there; all Guides, you know. Just trying to see if I can get more of a handle on what we’re dealing with here.”

“Oh.” Suzanne got two mugs out of the sink, checked that they were clean, and began to make tea. Her energy panged; Colin’s betrayal was still poignant, still stung. She covered it with brusqueness.

“Anything useful, or just more speculation?”

Simon paused a moment.

“Actually, something strange.”

Suzanne flinched, for just a fraction of a second, her hand hovering above the mug and the teabag dangling.

“Oh?”

“Some of Theo Marin’s speeches — they don’t think a Sentinel wrote them.”

Now she turned, entirely, to face him.

“Huh? How would they be able to tell that?”

“Some linguistic forensic mumbo jumbo that I can barely understand, to be honest. But they all agree.”
Suzanne stirred milk into one mug.
“So what does that mean? Some kind of paid speechwriter? Interference from the Union?”
“Well, for one, it means he might not be the brains of the operation.”
Suzanne handed one mug over to Simon and raised both eyebrows.
“…and for two, it means we’re looking for more than one leader of the New Purity movement.”

Suzanne’s throat felt tight, as it did whenever she thought about her husband and all the suffering he’d caused.
“A null?” she said, hopefully.
“A Guide.” Simon said, and they both watched Tighearnach stir in his bassinet. Simon returned his attention to Suzanne.

“I’m sorry to do this to you, Suzanne. But something about this feels…wrong. Urgent. It’s making my hands itch with how bad I want to uncover something here.” Simon swallowed, his voice feeling suddenly scratchier than usual; he was getting too little sleep. He blinked his eyes and felt normal again. ”Did you ever see a Guide speak at any of the rallies, Suzanne?”
“I never went to a rally.”
“Suzanne.” Simon said, more slowly. “Did you ever see a Guide speak at any of the rallies?”
Suzanne blinked, clenched her pale hands around the mug of tea.
“No.”
“Did Colin ever mention it to you — any kind of Guide as a leader in the movement?”
Suzanne shook her head firmly.
“No. No. No way; that was definitely not allowed in the NP. I didn’t listen to most of the crap my husband spewed, but I definitely remember that. Guides don’t lead. Those people in the movement… they never would have accepted that. Guides must be controlled.”
“Did he ever tell you that you should try to be more like a particular Guide — a representative ideal or leadership figure?”
Suzanne swallowed.
“He told me I should try to be more like a lot of other Guides.”

Simon flinched, but carried on — he could comfort her later, if she would let him.
“Any one name in particular?”
Suzanne looked down into her mug, and Simon could see that she was trying, really trying to remember.
“No. I’m sorry; I really don’t think there was anyone. Not that I can recall.”

Simon sighed and sat back on the couch.
“Well, I’ll just have to keep reading.”

~:~
Bretheren

The tremors were getting worse.

Setting down the receiver of the phone took effort; the light tremble in his hands surged into a full-blown shudder as he laid himself down on the low, wide bed in the unoccupied bonding room they’d assigned him in Building Six.

What was he doing here?
Unclear. No idea.

A push, powerful and slow — albeit distant.

you’re done for the night

Done for the night.
The trembling spread to his shoulders. He blinked his eyes. The backs of his hands itched, the skin feeling taut and dry. Little goosebumps kept appearing, then disappearing on his legs.

He curled up on the bed, trying to absorb the quiet, not caring that he was wrinkling his clothes and mussing his hair.

There was a gape in the air of the room, an absence of something that kept calling him, agitating his already-desperate need. He felt aroused, then sick. He gagged on his own scent. Wretched. He should try to sleep. The trembling moved down, shook his belly and made his neck vibrate with need.

Sleep was a pointless goal. The moon would keep him awake.

He had to get out of here.

~

When Joel’s men arrived at Building Six, the only occupant of Marshall’s room was a half-drunk glass of water and a miasma of strange scent.

Jim arrived seventeen minutes afterward and kicked the door so hard it dented.

“His scent’s still here. And it’s sick. He can’t have gone far.”

Joel held up his hands, trying to soothe the enraged Alpha Sentinel.

“No, and we’ve already got teams working the grounds in south and north loops. We’ll find him, Jim.”

“We should have found him already!” the Sentinel snapped, teeth shining white in the dimly-lit room.

Blair stepped forward, an impression of gold energy and pressure in the periphery of Jim’s senses. He rejected the distraction; Blair was safe and Blair was here, but Blair could not take his attention from finding the man who’d done this to them.

“Get everyone on this.” Jim ground out, his voice lowering in pitch and dragging like boots across gravel. “Call in the field teams, call H, call Carolyn — hell, wake up the thing formerly known as Lorne if we have to —“

“Jim.” Blair’s voice was low, and serious, and disapproving. Jim thought of the forest, of what he’d seen rise out of his Guide, of the moon above, glowering. His frustration suddenly had teeth of its
“Get everyone on this.” he repeated/relented, turning to storm out into the hallway.

At the border of where the light of the hall met the dark of the bonding room, he nearly collided with the appearance of Ken Rochelle. Through the doorway of the room, a tail flicked and Ken Rochelle stepped forward, around the Alpha. Jim licked his teeth. Blair’s energy pulsed a green, irritated feeling like catching fur on thorns and the Guide was suddenly closer to him than before.

Ken Rochelle was looking around the room, tracking and taking in clues and carefully not looking Jim directly in the eyes.

“Joel’s right — he can’t have gone far. Alpha, I suggest we chase Joel’s team ourselves — you and I can track him by scent.”

“Just the two of you?” Three pairs of Sentinel eyes turn to look at Blair. “Alone?”

Blair met Jim’s gaze and there was another flash of shared memory between them; of the silver air in the forest and of communion and flesh on the stairs of a temple that wasn’t there a moment later.

“If that a good idea?”

Jim’s lip curled.

“He’s just one man, Blair. But if we don’t find him now, we might be too late. We don’t know what he and Marin are capable of, or what they have planned.”

Then, as if an aside from the universe, Jim felt a pang of regret; guilt. He reached out one hand, awkwardly, and laid it on Blair’s shoulder. The Guide lifted an eyebrow.

“And I can’t — lose anyone else.” he confessed, and Blair’s eyebrows both lifted now, spiking upwards like his pale-yellow flat stone energy, even waves on a river surface and the salmon jumping inside.

Blair laid his hand over Jim’s; where they touched, the blood sang.

“We’ve bought time, Big Guy: Jody’s back at Salmon River and evacuating her pack to Eureka. Libre Terre is backing us up, laying the trap for Marin. We can call Great Falls on the off-grid channels if we get desperate — they’ll keep it off of Central Command’s radar. We’re still in a strong position, Jim. We’re still winning this.”

Jim wasn’t so sure, and he knew better than to count a mission as complete before the last chopper landed. A few feet in front of him, Ken shifted his stance in place — his desire to run was driving him to anxiety, making him itchy, and Jim felt his own instincts respond.

“Not winning yet, Chief.” he corrected, beginning to move out of the room, toward the double glass doors at the end of the central hallway in Building Six.

“But soon.”

Blair followed, nearly clinging to his side.

“Just remember what we’re doing out here, Jim. We’re working together, right? One big happy Sentinel family? Us and Libre Terre and Salmon River and Great Falls, right? No one goes it alone.”

Jim grunted a vague assent and turned his attention to Joel.

“Listen, Joel: I know this is a retrieval mission, but this guy isn’t worth a single Pack member’s life. Let your teams know that if Marshall makes one false move, they put him down. And that’s an order.”

Blair said nothing, but his energy flashed hot in the room and Joel glanced at him, nervous.

“Alright, Jim.”
“Ken?”
Ken Rochelle appeared at the Alpha’s right side, shoulders square and pupils dilated.
“Yes, Alpha?”
“We’ll go west first, then head north and circle back to Building Six.” Jim checked a fastener on his pants, stretching the Pack tactical shirt tightly across his back. “I’ll take lead. We’ll track him by scent until we lose the trail.”
Ken assented.
“Joel — send out an emergency alert. I want all Guides indoors and safe as long as this nutjob’s out here, and I want every set of Sentinel senses focused on finding him. Round up everyone even vaguely competent to canvass neighborhoods; let’s make sure this guy isn’t hiding in plain sight. And get H to get a medical team up here ASAP; when we do bring this guy in, we want him to live long enough to answer a lot of questions.”
“Got it, Jim.”
The portly man nodded firmly and headed toward the other end of the hallway, toward the main offices and their easy points of contact to the outside world. A low buzzing, throbbing underneath his skin, brought Jim’s attention to his Guide.

“And Blair — “ here, Jim turned, ready to tell his Guide to wait here, don’t get into anything, stay out of the way, but Blair was looking at him with an expression of such determined expectation that Jim stopped mid-sentence.
“Blair, just —“
Blair exhaled, and his breath in the coolness of the room was a burst of wintergreen essence, earthy water and mud between his toes.
“ — just follow me.”
Jim headed for the exit, and all the Sentinels in the building fell into step behind him.

Then there was a crescendo of Sentinel energy, a sense of desire, of yearning, of anticipation like the first few moments of an unrestrained gallop or the stinging tear of muscle in a fight and they were primed, all primed and ready to fight for this Pack, for this world, for this order…and Blair was a humming calm behind it all — a goddess unassailed at the reins of a thousand horses, a shadow lying in wait under the moon, a steady and present rise and fall of the ocean against the mountain and the rain unto the earth.

They were halfway to the exit door when another familiar face cut into the scene, surging in from the main lobby and looking with disdain at the weapon a Sentinel guard reflexively leveled at him.

“Jim!” Simon’s voice rang out, clear and urgent.
“Let him through!” Jim commanded, and the weapon fell.
Simon hustled over and Blair almost laughed — he was a caricature of himself, his usual trench coat replaced with a fluffy bathrobe and shined black oxfords exchanged for tattered slippers — but his expression was as stern and his case file as crisp as ever.
“Ten seconds, Simon. Marshall’s got a head start on us, and if he gets to Marin before we do, we’ll lose them both.”
Simon’s eyebrow dipped as he tried to take this information in, but he integrated it quickly, and plunged ahead.
“Marin and Marshall might be the Sentinels you’re looking for, but you need to know that they aren’t working alone. There’s a Guide in here somewhere, Jim, and when you find them, you need to find him, too.”

Blair’s energy surged up, filling the hallway and pushing all of the Sentinels back a step.
“A Guide? How do you know?”
Simon turned his gaze to the Alpha Guide. “Call it an instinct.” he said in his insouciant way, “Backed up by unverified intelligence.” he handed over a slim manila folder. “Profiling work from a friend out in Baltimore. The linguistic patterns in those speeches Marin’s been giving don’t match the vocal pattern we’ve identified from a radio broadcast; they were most likely written by someone else. Vowel frequency tells us it was probably a Guide, probably Northern and well-educated — and probably as complicit in this whole thing as Marin and Marshall.”

Every sentinel in the hall widened their stance as something rippled through the room — a serpent moving under the earth, a tremor, a quaking of energy.

“Why?” Blair demanded. “Why would a Guide help to do this? It’s bad enough that there have been Sentinels involved — Sentinels killing Sentinels! — but this…I mean, this guy’s killed kids and Guides and he’s tortured Sentinels and he just — I mean, in case you overlooked it: we Guides? We’re empaths, man! That violent shit, it just — it isn’t our style.”

The sentinels in the hallway seemed to be giving each other anxious looks to the contrary, but Blair tactfully ignored those.

“I don’t know, Blair. Maybe…maybe this Guide isn’t quite right in the head. Maybe he’s sick or something. I don’t know. I can’t tell you why anyone would do this, but I can tell you that my profiler’s never once been wrong.”

That seemed to settle the argument, and Jim touched Blair’s elbow, urging him on. “Blair, it’s now or never. We have to find Marshall.”

The Guide seemed to snap into wakefulness; he startled and nodded, swallowed and ran a hand over his hair.

“Yeah, man, you’re right. We gotta — we gotta go.”

Simon stepped aside, but to their departing backs, he shouted: “Look for Marin and Marshall, yes — but also look for a Guide!”

~:~

Theo Marin crouched down lower in their hidden observation point and watched the little green dot on the screen move around. It was the witching hour and the temperature was beginning to drop; any wise Sentinel or Guide had long since settled in for the evening, curled up with some warm body and some bright stars to keep them company. Marin thought of this and felt a satisfying wave of self-pity, which he pushed toward Henrietta. She looked up at him, narrowed her eyes, and turned her attention resolutely back to their screen.

Theo flinched backward a little and also refocused his attention on the mission. On the screen, the dot pulsed strong, moving a few yards one way, then another. “Good boy. Keep moving. Attract attention.” Theo muttered.

Next to him in the dugout, Henrietta’s scent rotated between anxious and fearsome, and her energy was jagged and unwelcoming. “He’ll be alright.” Theo tried to soothe her, and she lifted her eyes again to give him a withering glare before turning her gaze back to the screen. Theo said nothing further.

Above them, the moon lit the nighttime full and green. The dot pulsed, pulsed, pulsed — and suddenly began to move, too quick for human legs.

“He’s picked up!”

In a flash, their whole operation was up — the sentinels in the forests nearest Martin confirmed the
movement, said they had eyes on him from their perches. Henrietta’s stomach flipped and Theo sensed the exact moment her anxiety began to rise; her energy rumbled like a train, distant but looming and powerful; he clutched her forearm once, to comfort and warn her, and not again.

They started the jeeps.

~:~

Blair kept up better than Jim had anticipated — he was quick on his feet in the forest, ducking between branches and bouncing over felled trees, roots, boulders.

Jim moved around him, slowly, certainly, trying to keep his nose full of the rotten scent of Marshall; twelve yards away, Ken Rochelle was doing the same.

The trail was elusive; it rose, then fell, then rose, then disappeared into nothingness before emerging wholesale, powerful, from the night.

Blair was a bundle of breathless, terrified energy alongside him; he was silent, but Jim knew that the wheels must be turning in that head of his — and was sure he’d get the business end of it later, when there was time for questions and demands.

But right now, there were no questions and no demands — only the rage at the death of his bretheren urging him onward, onward, and his fear for the future, for Blair’s future, for his future, for the nations they might yet found and the cubs they might yet have. There was no room for questioning, no room for uncertainty.

There was only Marshall, and there was only the hunt.

~:~

“Where are they taking him?” Henrietta demanded, fingers flying across her screen as she frantically tried to anticipate the path of the Purity vehicle. The dot was cutting across fallow fields now, tracing some unknowable path through the briars and stems.

Theo Marin was next to her in the back seat of the jeep, half leaning out of the side window with his nose in the air while one of Jim’s sentinels drove and one of the Waystation Sentinels navigated on a screen much like Henrietta’s, racing to track Martin across the landscape.

“Fuck shack, if I had to guess.”

Henrietta blew out an aggrieved breath.

“Apologies, Miss Henry. A bonding hut. Out in the forest.” Theo turned to look at her. “I’d bet you anything those are their hidey-holes. Gentler idiots ain’t dumb, I guess. Private, unmonitored, clean well water and no neighbors — and every pack’s got a rack of ‘em scattered across the countryside. And no one passin’ by would think anything different ‘bout hearin’ a fuss or catching some ripe Guide-scent inside.”

Henrietta swallowed and blinked, and her energy pulsed small and purple.

“It wouldn’t be the first bad thing to happen in a bonding hut.” she said, quietly. Then, as if whispering to avoid waking a memory: “We have those in Libre Terre.”

And her energy fluctuated, did a strange pirouette and fell low. In the lurching jeep, Theo scented something strange on her — despair — and was moved to action more immediately than he knew how to process. He dropped back into the vehicle and caught her chin in his hand.

“Miss Henrietta? When we get back to Territory, I promise you that I will personally search them all. They can stay private, but they will not stay unmonitored.”
“Or we could just get rid of them,” she mumbled, pulling her face away. Theo’s brows drew together in disquiet.
“Yeah, well. You just hold back the tide while you’re doin’ that, too.” he said, slowly, and her energy sharpened again. The jeep took a sharp right, and they were thrown together in the backseat. Henrietta shifted to help Theo get back upright, elbowing him in the ribs as she did so.
“Hey!”
“Accident.”
Theo raised an eyebrow, but Henry’s attention was fully refocused on the black screen, and the little green dot.
“They’re still peeling.” she muttered, worried. Then she looked up at Theo, and her expression was bleak and terrified.
“What if we lose him, Theo?”
Theo laid a hand on her bare forearm, and caught a flash of something — anguish, and an early morning, and the fading memory of her twin sister’s face — before her shields went up. She swore and yanked her arm away.
“Don’t pull that shit with me.” she snapped, a growl at the edges of her words.
“Hey.” he snapped back, and his voice was a warning — *I have indulged you thus far.*
Henrietta rubbed her arm, but acquiesced.
“I’m fine,” she protested. “I don’t need you to ground me.” she held up a finger. “And don’t you dare push on me.”

The jeep jerked sharply to the left; she fell into him.
“Why do we have to keep the bonding huts?” she asked, lowly, and the effort to be calm and diplomatic was apparent in her energy and on her face. Theo pitied her, could feel the strain of effort she was exerting to control her physiologicals. He wished he could truss this up for her, but it was a pig, and not a duckling.
“Because the Sentinels will riot if we don’t, Henry.”
She shook her head.
“There has to be something better to facilitate a bonding.”
Theo closed his eyes in a way that suggested embarrassment, and regret.
“They ain’t…just for bonding, Henry.”
Henrietta’s eyes widened and for a long minute, they sat in the silent jeep, feeling the bump and rise of the ragged field and waiting to see which way the dot went. Then suddenly:
“It’s slowing.”

The driver brought the jeep down to a crawl and made the hand motion for *silence.*

“They’ve stopped.” the sentinel from the front seat whispered, Sentinel-soft, to the vehicle. “We need to track him on foot.”
Theo took in a deep breath.
“Alright, Miss Larkin.” he said, looking once more at her, then out at the pitch black night. “Wish me luck.”
Henrietta’s knuckles were tight around the edge of the screen she held.
“You’ve already got luck. I wish you the favor of the Moon.” she said, quietly, then reached out in the dark to squeeze his hand.

In the places where their skin touched, Henrietta’s energy felt frantic, leaping, fearful — then it slowed. She was grounding herself.
“Please come back.” she said.
Theo nodded and their touch released.
“I always do.”
Dear readers -- it has been nearly eight years since I started this series, and finally, it is coming to a close. I feel creaky and old and slower than Jim running through molasses after two days on a Kale cleanse. I may rework these final chapters yet, but for now, here we are.

Theo hadn’t had a run like this in a long time. The night was rolling and fecund and his lungs felt full with the exhilaration of the hunt. He opened his mouth to suck it in, all the needled greenness of ice and soil and dark earth matter, and meanwhile his Sentinels raced at a distance behind him, darting out through the trees and the canopy and over the grasses, chasing the retreating shadow of their dominance over this place. They were fast, but he was himself and he had certain advantages that were rarely noticed, never discussed, but he owned them fully now; only his scout could keep pace with him, remarkably fast as she was.

Theo vaulted over a fallen tree, landing with one foot on a patch of dry earth that crumbled away but recovering, still running, still running, pitching haw and yee across and between the lurching shadowed trees. It was too late at night for his Sentinels to have this much energy, he thought, but there were Guides at stake and war afoot and that made them all tap into those primal batteries of muscle and action.

Theo thought of the doe, and of the mess afterward.

At a gallop, he had burst through fields long left fallow, leaping over broken old fences that once might have held horses but now held nothing; ahead of them, the rise of the hills were a dark panther, laid out in wait.

Theo thought of his brother’s scent — remembered it the last time they’d seen each other, when Cat had been barely alive and angry as hell. Thought of it swept through with mercurial anger, with something liquid and toxic and sharp that had stung his eyes and heart.

They had made so many mistakes.

He had made so many mistakes. And in that field of errors, he had sown death and suffering and horror. Theo thought again of his brother, of his child-scent: grass and old milk and mud and pecans. Thought of his brother’s dark arms intertwined with his own in a hug, in a fight, in a welcome home. Thought of them sneaking ham from the Christmas table and the aunties scolding them both. Thought of swimming faster, faster, and then losing unexpectedly one day in the summer Cat had grown four inches. Thought of long walks into town and hot summer evenings with the radio going while their father whittled and mother rocked in her chair. Thought of his mother — Second Mother. She’d mourned too often, and too deeply. Mourned Cat long after he’d left, cooking always enough food for two boys, not one. Theo missed her; missed her warm and easy presence, her comfort.

But he was glad she hadn’t lived to see him kill her son.

The run continued, Theo taking the lead, the scout falling behind; she was respectful — this kill was her Alpha’s, and not hers. The flock of it all shifted left, pitching closer to the hills; Theo caught a
distant scent of Martin and it stuck in his nose, pungent, then grew stronger. He broke five branches, loud and sharp, as a call back to his Sentinels — the hideaway was close.

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Peru had been nothing like the cool damp of the northwestern forest, but Jim had liked it all the same. The earth there had been easier to tramp across, or maybe he had simply been fifteen years younger and not had a Guide in tow. Glancing behind him, he caught Blair’s figure moving between the thin shadows of the fading moon. The Guide was cleverer than he’d let on, learning quickly to blend into the forest, to shelter in the absence of light.

Jim’s panther prowled ahead of them, leading and huffing. Jim wondered, viciously and perversely, what would happen if he killed it. As if hearing, the panther turned and looked at him. Jim stilled, and Blair stopped moving.

Across a short distance, the Guide tilted his head — a silent question. Jim ignored the panther and the Guide and moved on.

He and Ken had picked up Marshall’s rancid scent half a mile outside of Building 6 and tracked it for the last eighty-two minutes, making slow but dutiful progress over the scrub and toward the treeline. It was nearer to morning than night now, and the last sliver of the moon — having made clear her intentions — paused to rest before continuing her downward arc in the sky. Jim wished he could rest, too, but there was no rest when lives were at stake, and his Guide was behind him and he couldn’t settle, couldn’t sleep, couldn’t do anything until this threat to his people was ended for good.

But tracking was slow when he was this tired; Ken seemed to be having an easier time of it, but Ken had an easier time of everything. Jim glanced sidelong in the direction of his man-at-arms and wondered, not for the first time, what Ken’s anima was.

But that didn’t matter now. Anima. Jim scoffed. The beasts inside of them, that great treachery of nature, that disgusting weakness — Jim’s father had been sure to tell him in great detail of their violence and depravity — and Jim shut that thought aside as quickly as it had appeared because he did not talk about his father and did not think about dead men. He checked the bond to be sure it had been shut off, so that Blair would not suspect, would not hear these private and hateful thoughts… but the wall he had erected had not been moved and so he could hold out his mind toward the end of the bond and hear it, crackling, on the other side. Dimly, he regretted handling things this way, but that regret was a whisper and his father’s hatred was a yawning canyon with his anger like rushing water inside of it and he had never known his mother at all.

Ahead of him, his panther growled, but only he seemed to hear it because neither Ken nor Blair’s footsteps faltered.

Jim wanted to stretch his senses but knew that was unwise; in this condition, at this point of exhaustion, he would be risking a zone and a zone was the last thing he needed when tracking a killer through the woods with his Guide trailing behind him.

A horrible fear struck Jim suddenly — of Blair seized, snatched in the forest, and it took his breath away enough that he had to pause and drop his hands to his knees to take in air again; as it happened, Blair caught up to him and laid a silent hand on his back, asking.

Jim shrugged it off, embarrassed that his Guide had seen him like that: weak, and slow. Old. He stretched his neck and moved forward; this time, Blair lingered behind, putting space between them. In front of him, the panther growled.
“Well!” Suzanne’s low voice was pure Guide irritation, her presence spiky and piqued. “Took you long enough to come back.”

Simon dismissed the temporary guard with thanks and stepped back into the room, blinking hard at the rangy woman in front of him.

“Well, I’m sorry that delivering critical information to the Alpha on a matter of national importance took a few minutes longer than I’d anticipated.” he snarked, and she ignored it.

“Tig cried.” she said, firmly, and nothing else.

Ah.

Simon set his briefcase down on a table, began to untie the robe he’d rushed out in, shuffled over toward the little kitchenette with ideas about a late-night coffee. There was a peeled-open can of spaghetti in the sink, and a few dishes.

“Fiona’s awake?”

“She was. For twenty minutes.” Suzanne answered, following him but hovering just out of reach.

“But she went right back out after Tig calmed down.” she rubbed her arms, which was unnecessary in the warmth of this room, this little den.

“They’re both sleeping now?” Suzanne nodded.

“You should get some rest.” Simon told her, noticing not for the first time the gaunt, exhausted look in her eyes.

She looked back at him cagily, cautiously.

“Go on.” he said, shooing her towards her room. She frowned and stayed in place.

“Are you going to sleep?” she asked, nervously.

Simon shook his head.

“No, I suspect I’ll be up a little while longer.”

She paused then, hesitating in place until his voice moved her again.

“Suzanne,” he said, dropping into a lower register, wandering into that Sentinel-space that he both relished and denied and that suddenly seemed irresistibly near, “Go to bed. I’ll keep watch while you sleep.” he turned back to his briefcase, popping the old brass lock and beginning to draw papers out.

“I can assure you — I’ll be up.”

Comforted, or perhaps just compelled, she gave a single, affirming nod and disappeared into the cool darkness of the bedroom.

~!~

It was the weight of Cav that woke him; the Sentinel was doing something strange on his side of the bed, stretching toward, then over Daryl in a way that felt particularly unfamiliar — although it had only been two weeks and nearly everything still felt unfamiliar. Then the unfamiliarity concentrated into something very familiar, and the heat of his hard cock and tickling hair of Cav’s thighs pressed against his, one knee anchoring itself between Daryl’s legs and making room.

“Cav?” he mumbled, refusing to lift his head from the pillow. The Sentinel didn’t respond. “Cav, I’m tired.” Daryl groused, and wondered why it had to be like this — why his Sentinel couldn’t be a bit more thoughtful, a bit merciful, a bit more considerate than this? They’d been up half the night half the nights since he’d arrived, and if Cav thought he was waking a joyful bed partner, he had sorely misread the situation.

But then the young sentinel caught the tail end link of their bond in his mind and something buzzed through to Daryl that was tender and wanton and deliberate and that was enough — he was off and rising, cock swelling and cunt slicking and instinct urging him to raise his hips to be filled, to be fucked, to be mounted in all the animal ways his Sentinel could mount him and sleep was a long-past
irrelevancy.

Then there was another movement — a lunge, and Cav was over him, teeth at his shoulder, fingers slipping down his back, across the expanse of ass and thigh and probing at his entrance and Daryl made a little whimper for more and bit the pillow beneath his cheek and canted his hips farther upward.

Cav was time and a half his weight and in this position, pinned him down easily; Daryl resisted, wanting control and his Sentinel’s cock, and Cav bit down a little, into the mark long-since healed up on Daryl’s shoulder that nevertheless set off fireworks in the hindbrain of his inner Guide. Daryl’s anima seemed wrecked already, lolling around on her back and presenting again and again and again; he tried to ignore her, pull away from her, but he felt an unfamiliar fog descend and he could think only of Cav, of the Sentinel, of the mating, of this moment.

In the dim light of the room, Cav’s weighty cock found the hollow of his inner space and pressed inward, less a thrust than an unceasing advance and Daryl whined for it to be more, harder, faster — the bond sizzled and pirouetted between them, elbowing instinct aside to make space for that deeper need, that desire, that *eat hunt bond breed* drive that separated the things which they were from the others.

Then something glorious was happening, and the Sentinel bit down harder to hold him in place, to remind the Guide that he was *not the alpha not in charge*, and Daryl bucked up to demonstrate his rejection of that idea and to make the Sentinel prove his point and now Cav was fucking him, rocking both of their hips into the mattress and groaning against Daryl’s skin and then they were both subsumed into something that felt a lot like a whirlpool before finally landing on solid ground.

Sprawling in the afterglow, Daryl flipped over and — in the mirror that sat atop the dresser, its angle reflecting their bodies, their bed, and the floor of their messy bedroom — caught a glimpse of yellow eyes.

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There were seven other scents in the wind besides his own — Jim catalogued them, methodically, mind elsewhere and here at once, trying to keep track of his guide and his sentinel and the distance to the isolated spot that Marshall seemed to be heading toward directly, deliberately — as if he had been here before. This path had not been the wandering of a rogue Sentinel or a madman; there had been purpose, and a crow’s-path (or as near as it could come in this terrain) and now, seemingly, with the scent growing stronger and a palpable sense of *arrival* in the air — slowing down.

*Jim stretched his hearing, careful not to reach too far, and wished he could do more, but he couldn’t trust his panther and he didn’t know Blair and he couldn’t trust himself. What if the moon decided it was now, now that he should lose control? Jim couldn’t risk it, and didn’t need to, so long as Marshall’s sour scent was all he needed to find the man.*

*Then an eighth scent appeared and Jim lifted his lip because he knew this one — it was Theo Marin’s, ringing out clear and strong, and Jim scoffed at the amateur arriving from upwind.*

*But the arrival of Marin’s scent heralded good things, too, because it meant that they had been right — that Marshall had sought out his partner in crime and was meeting him now, here, in the forest. Jim hoped the man was too far gone in whatever sickness he had to notice the arrival of five other scents; then he realized, on reflection, that he had no idea which senses Marshall had emergent — and furthermore, it had not been in his file.*

*He had no time to ponder that mystery, because Blair was suddenly coming close to him and trying*
to gesture silently, but frantically. Jim frowned, not understanding, and Blair's eyes widened — he made a gesture: watch me and suddenly the Guide was holding his hand, so Jim took a deep breath and dialed his vision up just a bit beyond comfort, just for a second, to see Blair mouthing the words 'open the bond.' Jim snatched his hand back but Blair seized it again, squeezing tight, and scowling mulishly and Jim had no choice but to comply.

The wall could not come down, but he imagined himself removing two, then four bricks and suddenly the bond was a dancing dragon on the other side of it, loud and bright and vibrating and he didn't want to do this but Ken and his cat were watching him from behind a pine tree six yards away and there was an owl hooting and Blair narrowed his eyes and seemed to throw his weight into the bond.

For a moment, Jim felt bowled over with the shock of it, the sheer volume of emotion, and Blair seemed surprised as well but after a moment, managed to get a hold of it and narrowed it down to a single stream: Fear. Reflected. Blair pointed across the darkness, to the northwest, toward the water. Then he was drawing back from the bond, retreating, and everything was cold again.

Ken was a thudding heartbeat yards away from him; Blair was a sweating, soft glow behind. In between, Jim felt suddenly suspended in the moment, dangling in a valley of peace between two peaks and almost something like calm; in the next moment, Ken was breaking into a run, and the war was beginning.
What They Found In the Cabin

The painful, howling drone of Martin’s distress call had been clear — a quarter of a mile away, even an exhausted Blair had been able to read the surge of wounded Guide energy. For so much anguish, the Guide must have been completely unshielded; his emotions were flying haphazard in a way that suggested he’d been drugged, but was not unconscious.

Marshall’s fetid scent had grown stronger as they’d drawn closer, as had Theo Marin’s and two unknowns — Jim had guessed that those were Cat Marin and their third accomplice.

But then they had crossed over a wet spot in the forest, gotten even closer, and Marshall’s scent had begun to fade away strangely — subliming into some sort of ephemeral vapor and quickly clouded over with the sharp funk of anger, and illness, and fear.

At the same time, one of the unknown scents had begun to resolve into something more familiar… Jim frowned in confusion, then disappointment, then anger: they had not caught the third accomplice.

No; instead, Joel had been as dutifully efficient as ever, and Henri had received Jim’s message to come now and had done just that — beating them to the chase, and to the quarry. Jim had growled low at the realization, and the frustration of a spoiled hunt had bit and stung at his belly, even though he knew it was wrong — had felt silly and puerile for the very thought. Embarrassed again, he’d stacked the walls around his bond higher.

On the heels of that realization came another: that Henri was alone and under-informed, confronting Cat Marin and Marshall in the cabin. Jim’s heart pounded — this was Henri the fearless, ever-ready fighter; Henri the warrior medic, healer and destroyer; Henri the wild thing who could not be tamed or brought to heel; Henri who never backed down, never knew when to quit — alone, and facing off two of the most dangerous men known to the Sovereign Sentinel Nation.

It had been as if a fire were lit in him, and Jim had felt a surge of strength he hadn’t known he’d had.

Hunt. Find. Protect.

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The moon was just disappearing behind the mountains when they arrived at the cabin.

Theo watched it for long minutes from his vantage of approach, approaching at a steady clip as his breath gathered and fogged, silently, in the cool night air. The location was nearer to a main road than they’d anticipated, but in retrospect, Theo decided that it made sense for the Gentlers: they were lazy, thoughtless louts, after all. He doubted they spared much time for thoughtful subterfuge in their mission of murder and destruction.

Just as he had predicted, the "cabin" was a short, stilted hut of a home — a fuck shack in the middle of the woods, equally as useful for sequestering stolen guides as stolen goods. It was one of a million in these landscapes, and Theo shook his head a little at the enormity of the task he’d promised to Henrietta in the jeep.

But he surged forward, senses still drilled down to only Martin’s scent and as he came within a hundred yards he felt a pain like a shot go through him; the sensation of nearness of his long-lost brother hit him like a punch. The love of it, and the agony of circumstance, was so strong that Theo had to work to dial down his sense of touch — the pain felt physical. His brother’s scent would have been aged by time and changed by diet and circumstance, but the tones of his energy were always
the same. Pecans and mud would underlie all other complexities. So yes, it was him -- and it had been him, and there was no chance of reunion or rescue; only capture and death. The realization broke Theo’s heart, which had never once been whole, not since his mother had bled out in the forest with four cubs by her side.

He would go to his parents’ graves to apologize. When this was all over, he would make things right. But first, he had to kill his brother.

Theo reached the clearing around the cabin first by a large margin (his scout wasn’t far behind, but the others had long since fallen back from his punishing pace) and slowed to a jog. In the distance, he caught the sound of Jim and Blair and Ken Rochelle approaching from the south and wondered, suddenly, how it could be this easy to sneak up on a fugitive Sentinel.

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They gathered beyond the treeline and mapped it out as quickly and silently as they could: Jim and Ken would approach from the front door (offset to the western side of the small plank cabin) while Blair waited out of sight and Theo and the scout entered through the back, kicking their way in and sheltering themselves with the element of surprise.

Jim unholstered his weapon and was surprised to realize that Theo was unarmed — but it was too late, and the Libre Terre sentinel shook his head and showed his teeth when Ken offered up a spare. So they split apart and went for their posts, Ken offering a gun one last time and Jim meanwhile insisting that Blair stay behind them all, stay safe.

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What they found in the cabin was not at all what they expected.

Jim had expected a bloodbath; the materialization of nightmarish visions of Henri on his knees, refusing to beg for his life and slaughtered by the half-mutated psychopath that Marshall had become. Blair had expected a tableau of violation; had been certain they’d find a sobbing Martin, weeping and raped and spread out like a sacrifice for some kind of monstrous creature. Theo had expected the creature that Cat Marin had once been, aided in his violence by his fellow conspirators, the three of them spearing through their opponents with teeth and claw until finally, finally, coming for him. Ken Rochelle and the scout, loyal and pure-hearted as they were, had expected nothing but to follow their Alphas into war.

None of them had expected to tear into the cabin and find a half-mad Henri choking Representative Marshall, his eyes burning yellow with the Becoming while his hands tightened around the other man’s throat.

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Jim raised his firearm as he took in the scene.

“Cascade Pack! Get down!”

The cabin was in a state of disarray that suggested a fight, and was stocked with a level of supplies that suggested an extended — or expected — stay. The construction of the place was rough: one long room with doors on the front and back sides and double-hung windows at each end. In one corner burned a small wood stove, which even now was pushing an earthy heat out and into the room. There was a handmade table and chairs, and against a wall near the stove, a rough-hewn bed, covered with assorted furs and old blankets. A sway-backed sofa, likely scavenged, haphazardly split one end of the cabin from the rest.
Henri and Marshall looked as though they’d been engaged in battle for some time; Henri’s skin shone with sweat, and Marshall was bleeding profusely from a superficial head wound. Martin had been cast, forgotten, into a corner, where he lay in an unnatural position, pupils blown and breathing shallowly but otherwise apparently unharmed.

Jim leveled his weapon at Marshall.
“H! Stand down! Let him go!”

Henri didn’t appear to be able to hear them; he seethed and roared and only tightened his grip. Theo reacted first. Without any warning, he threw himself into a lunge for Henri’s throat, startling him into releasing Marshall; but Jim was right behind him, yanking Marin back from Henri, snapping his jaws at the interloper, the intruder, the untrusted, calling for Ken to back him up even as a ticker-tape ran in his mind telling him that this scene made no sense, no sense, none at all — what had Joel told Henri about Marshall? And where was Cat Marin?

In the background of the fight, Theo’s scout was already helping Blair to lift Martin and get him out of the cabin. Jim noted it, gratefully, but could spare no further attention because Henri’s roaring had grown into a bellow and now he stood in front of them flickering — the only way Jim could describe it — switching back and forth between the man that he usually was and the animal he clearly wanted to become.

And through all of this, the restrained Theo fought against Jim and Ken like a drowning man — vicious and remorseless, sinking teeth into the meat of Jim’s forearm in an effort to get to Henri. Jim yowled and punched him with the butt of his gun, but Theo seemed surprisingly unperturbed by either this or the shuddering, flipping image of the man/wolf before him; if anything, the evidence of Henri’s clear Becoming seemed to spur him to even greater rage.
“I’m gonna kill you, you goddamn animal!”

Marshall, released from the chokehold but bowled over in the fray, was now lying curled up on the floor, sheltering his ribs and sucking in grateful breaths. Henri’s visage flickered again — he was wolf, then man, then wolf, then man again — and he snarled, dragging frustrated hands across his own skin.

“Marin, no! Stand down! That’s our man!” Jim was trying to reason with him, and Ken joined him in trying to get a hold on the sentinel in their grasp — trying to restrain him enough to make him see sense. Henri was standing back, panting, surveying the scene, a small lift in the corner of his mouth. Theo turned his head briefly to growl at them; it was a full-bodied, primal sound.

“That’s my brother.”

Then there was true chaos, and Jim realized a thousand things at once — like a dam breaking, like the shatter of a glass, like a dawning.

All the distance — all the missions — the disappearances — Henri, the wild one, the mysterious one — skilled but never quite under control — the trips away — the arrival, as if from nowhere when Jim first rose to power — the family never mentioned — the Guides rejected — the challenges of authority — the access to everything: their schedules, their files — the medical training — the security clearance — the dead men at the border —

and ‘Brown’ — an inconspicuous last name.
On the floor, blood was seeping from Marshall’s nose and Jim caught the scent of it — no longer the fetid, off sick-sentinel stink it had been before; now something like old flowers and brass came off of the man, strengthening in waves as he slipped closer to unconsciousness.

“Fix me.” the flickering Henri demanded, and his voice was a broken warble between language and inhuman vocalization. Then, more urgently: "Fix me!" and he kicked Marshall viciously in the ribs.

“Willem!”

Theo cried out, and his tone of anguish — of familiar anguish — was also a revelation to Jim, but before he could make sense of that, Theo howled and lurched again, swung out wildly for his brother’s throat, struck Ken in the jaw in the process and clawed at Jim’s neck. “Stay away from him!” he boomed across the room at the other sentinel, still twisting and tearing to get free of his restraints.

Henri laughed, turning his attention back to Marshall, who lay fetal and moaning.

“Look, Willem — he wants you now. And it only took three years.”

Then, while the other three sentinels watched in horror, Henri dropped a heel into the wounded man’s side, again and again as if he were crushing a bug, as Marshall yelped and cried. The shock of the violence gave Theo time to break free from Jim and Ken’s hold. He went once again for Henri’s throat; Henri slammed his heel once more into Marshall, and this time Jim heard a distinct cracking sound just as Marshall screamed. Then Theo made contact with his brother across the lurching shanty room and suddenly, the animal Henri had been retracted and he was himself again — all humanity and murder. He laid into Theo as if he had been born for this fight.

Impossible to pick apart from the shadows and the wolf, the two brothers rolled into each other, flowing, snarling, crashing together like colliding rivers — they slammed into one wall, shaking the entire structure — and roared and tried to crush skulls and fingers into floors and walls; nail marks raked down Henri’s chin; they bit, drawing blood from both.

Jim holstered his weapon and leapt into the fray, intent on winning; intent on laying down the law. This was a mistake, because they were all the subjects of Nature’s Law, and the slivery moon presided over the court tonight. Whatever thing Henri had become was stronger and faster than the man himself had ever been — Jim caught a shoulder to the chin, then an elbow to his injured shoulder, then found himself thrown bodily to the side, cast away by the force of Henri and Theo’s assaults on each other. He lay, stunned, on the floor of the cabin for a moment before finding his feet and retreating behind the overturned sofa, backlit by the wood furnace’s light. Ken arrived beside him momentarily, having been tossed briefly into the air like a ragdoll and landing on his side on the ground. They conferred, hastily, in their sofa safehouse, but neither could get a clear shot and anyway they weren’t certain who exactly they should be shooting.

Distantly, Jim became aware of the bobbing approach of other energies; floating corks in the sea, and then Blair was appearing at the open door, running into the cabin and toward Jim. Ken and Jim both reacted, Ken leaping out from their hiding space to bodily seize the Alpha Guide and ricochet him toward a safer corner of the room.

But Blair was far too stubborn for that lecture, and too angry — Jim and Ken both felt his energy rise, pulse, and grow into a sharp spiking thing, a beast all its own, and all the sentinels in the room momentarily paused — except for Henri, who in the distraction dealt a ferocious blow to Theo, rocking his head sideways and splashing blood across the rough wood of the cabin floor.

Stunned, Theo took two more blows to belly and face before dropping to the ground.
“Pathetic.” Henri growled, and his voice warbled again in that human-not-human way. “I should’ve killed you when we were cubs.”

“You always had to have what was mine, Cat.” Theo growled back from his position on the ground, and the eyes he turned up at his brother were black and fathomless, “Mine!”

And there was a resurgence of power in the room that nearly took the wind out of Jim and sent Ken rocking back on his heels. Then it was Theo’s turn to land a blow on his brother’s ribcage, his jaw; they towered over Marshall, who was keening in pain and trying desperately to avoid the fight.

Henri threw his brother backwards, laughed when he tripped over the low desk pushed against one wall. Then he sneered down at Marshall, and kicked the man again, savagely.

“I don’t want your broken toys.”

After that, it was as if both men lost any sense of their former human selves, and the fight became unimpeded by any sense of grander morality: there was only the violent desperation of war and survival. Theo laid blows as if he never intended to stop and Henri flickered again and roared into motion, his wolf appearing in his place and snapping just inches from Theo’s throat. But Theo remembered more from his early days than even he knew, and this was not a fight unfamiliar to him; his movements became quicker, more deceptive as he dodged his brother’s bite.

“You disgust me.” he spit out, “Just like you disgusted our father.”

“My father!” Henri screamed, and Theo smirked like he knew the blow had landed. While his brother was distracted, he lashed out at his legs, knocking him to the ground. He scrambled to find an advantage over the man who was now furred in the face, flickering again; Marshall was slipping slowly into unconsciousness.

“If he’d known what you are — ” Theo began, then trailed off, catching Henri around the neck, dragging him into a chokehold that the other man — suddenly sleeker — slipped away from.

“I’m exactly what he wanted me to be.” Henri snapped back.

And then, like stepping through a waterfall, the image of him wavered and danced and fell apart — and there was a wolf in his place. The wolf growled at Theo for one long second before it saw a break in the line at the open door and ran. And Theo, fearless sentinel of the fathomless eyes, ran after him.

Blair rushed over to where Marshall was still lying, collapsed.

“Blair!” Jim yelped, still reeling from the fight and the declarations and the incomprehensible fact of Henri’s betrayal, and more determined than ever to protect the one thing he knew, and loved.

“Get away from him!”
Blair spared only a second to show his teeth and slap his Guide-energy at the Sentinel — a warning.

“I have to help him!” he insisted, distraught, “He’s a Guide! Go after Theo — he needs your help.”

Jim hesitated, wanting to argue — but then Blair shouted, “Jim!” and looked at him and in those eyes was the promise of a hundred years more, if only now, if now — “Trust me.”

Jim gave only a short pause before he was on his feet and on Ken Rochelle’s heels, chasing him as he chased Theo Marin out of the door — all breaking fast after the disappearing wolf.

Works inspired by this one

Angels Descending Series. Part 1 Echoes of Mercy by Blue Rose (Grovehove), Angels Descending Series. Part II Whispers of Love by Blue Rose (Grovehove)
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