**Sentinel Island**

by Brumeier

**Summary**

When Jim, Blair and Simon crash on a deserted island, they'll have more to contend with than just survival when Jim's senses go awry. Pre-slash eventually changing to slash lite.

Originally posted on FanFic.net

**Notes**

**Standard Disclaimer:** I do not own these characters, though I keep hoping! It’s all just done in fun, friends.

**Warning:** Here there be slash.

**NEWS!** This fic has been translated into Chinese by ChangerSevenDay and you can find it [here](http://archiveofourown.org).
Chapter 1

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Cessna bucked wildly, throwing Jim into the wall as he staggered back to the bench seat. He automatically dialed down the pain, dialed down his hearing so that the whine of the engine and the curses of the pilot became mere background noise. He was in full Blessed Protector mode, one thought running over and over in his mind. Protect the Guide. He fell more than sat in the seat next to Sandburg, quickly strapping himself in as the plane banked steeply to the right.

“Oh, man. Oh, man. Jim…” Sandburg’s eyes were too wide, his face too pale.

“Jesus,” Simon said from his seat opposite them. His eyes were tightly closed, his hands clutching the arm rests.

“We’re going down!” the pilot shouted over his shoulder. “Crash positions!”

“Jim…” Sandburg gasped, breathless.

Protect the Guide. Protect the Guide.

Jim pushed him down and covered his back with his own body; it was the only protection he could offer his partner. “I’ve got you, Sandburg.”

The plane dropped, making Jim’s stomach lurch, and then they were at tree level. Even over the scream of the engine he could hear the snap of treetops as they came in contact with the landing gear. Lower still, and now there was the harsh sound of rending metal, and the frantic murmur of Simon praying.

Sandburg reached out and Jim grasped his hand, squeezing it tightly. He turned his head, getting a nose full of curly hair. And suddenly all the noise was gone. Everything narrowed down to one point, and the only thing Jim could hear as the ground rushed up to meet them was the sound of Sandburg’s heartbeat.

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Like all good things, Megan Connor’s time with the Cascade PD had to come to an end. Her stint in the exchange program had been extended as long as it could, but New South Wales PD wanted their Inspector back. Blair was sorry to see her go, but knew she must be missing her family. He’d organized an after-hours party in her honor, and sat back in his chair watching Megan and Jim challenge each other to a dart game.

Those two had a lot in common, which was likely the reason they butted heads so often. Blair had, from time to time, wondered why they had never hooked up, especially during their undercover stint as newlyweds. He ignored the twinge of jealousy that those thoughts carried with them and attempted to wash them away with a large swallow of beer.

“Sorry, mate,” Megan said, looking anything but. “That’s a win for me!”

“Best two out of three,” Jim grumbled, collecting the darts.

Blair wondered if perhaps the affection he could see between the Detective and the Inspector wasn’t
more familial in nature; they bickered and dared each other like brother and sister. Maybe that was why they’d never hooked up romantically. Not that Jim would ever talk about it, not even now with the way things had changed between them.

Life had become split into two halves – Before Alex and After Alex. Blair’s somewhat rocky relationship with Jim had smoothed out some, AA. He knew his friend had been frightened by the events that had transpired, and was still suffering guilt and shame over his role in them. Blair had forgiven, though forgetting was proving somewhat more difficult, and he’d done his best to keep things with Jim on an even keel. They were communicating much better now, and that was certainly a very good thing.

“He shoots, he scores,” Jim said with a grin.

“Tie breaker it is.”

“You okay, Chief?”

“I will be if you lose; my money’s on Megan.”

That earned him a scowl from Jim and a laugh from Megan. Blair made an effort to tune back into the conversation around him.

“I heard the girls there can go topless,” Rafe said with a sad sigh.

“You’re dreaming,” Henri scoffed. “Besides, what would Hairboy do with a topless Aussie bombshell?”

“Hey, now!” Blair protested in his own defense. “I think you’re forgetting who the ladies man is around here.”

“May I remind you gentleman that we’re going there to work, not indulge in hedonistic fantasies?” Simon, ever the voice of reason, sat at the end of the table nursing a club soda.

It had been the big news around the PD for weeks. Megan’s superior had contacted the Mayor and requested that his Inspector be escorted home by some of her new colleagues in the Cascade PD. Once there, they’d participate in an abbreviated, two week exchange. New South Wales would be footing half the bill, and they left it up to Cascade to decide which personnel to send.

The Mayor wanted Simon on the trip. It was good PR, and he knew Taggert would be more than capable of covering for him in his absence. Simon thought it would be a good experience for Jim, plus it would allow Cascade to show off their best Detective. It had taken some fancy footwork – and some premium cigars – on Simon’s part to get the Mayor to agree to send Sandburg as well. Though he was technically only a consultant, his work with Jim was well documented and everyone knew what a good team they were. Plus, it made Simon feel more at ease transporting his Sentinel to a whole new continent knowing Sandburg would be there to keep him in line.

“Oh, please,” Jim said, eavesdropping from his dart game. “We all know you’ll be fishing while we’re there, Simon.”

Everyone laughed, including the boss. Blair was really looking forward to the trip. While his wanderlust was mostly dormant, he still felt the urge to get away from time to time. This opportunity to immerse himself in a different culture was too good to pass up. He was hoping to get a chance to meet with some of the aboriginal people while they were there; Megan had promised to try and set something up for him.
“Drinks on Ellison!” Megan crowed as she beat him again. She dropped back in her chair, grinning.

“Lucky shot.” Jim resumed his seat next to Blair, bumping him a bit with his shoulder. Blair hid a grin. Jim’s Sentinel touchiness had really increased since...since the whole Alex thing had wrapped up. It was like he felt the need to constantly remind himself that the other man was there. Whatever the reason, he liked it.

“Oh, people, settle down.” Simon held up his hands and everyone quieted down. “Connor, we have a little something for you.”

“To remember us by,” Blair put in helpfully.

“Trust me, Sandy, I could never forget you.” Megan leaned over and kissed his cheek while the others whistled. Jim rolled his eyes.

“You made taxi drivers all over Cascade fear for their livelihoods,” Jim said, a smile tugging at the corners of his mouth.

“So how is that new car, Captain?” Megan asked Simon sweetly. More laughter around the table. No-one could forget Megan commandeering a cab to join in Jim’s car chase, which had ended up with both the cab and Simon’s new car being pretty well destroyed. And all that before Megan had been in Cascade even ten minutes.

“If I may finish?” Simon raised his voice and everyone piped down. “Inspector Connor, it has been a pleasure working with you and we hope you’ll stay in touch.”

Everyone clapped as Simon handed Megan a small, square box. Inside was a Cascade PD badge with her name on it, and a tiny enamel taxi cab affixed to the top.

“Oh,” she said, tears coming to her eyes. “I don’t know what to say.”

“There’s a first,” Jim replied. Megan threw a pretzel at him, which he easily dodged. Blair could see her lips moving but couldn’t hear what she was saying. When Jim choked on his beer, he assumed whatever it was had been meant for Sentinel ears only.

The party devolved from there, as cop stories were told and funny Megan moments shared. When Rafe, Henri and Megan got drunk enough they started singing. Simon winced at the inharmonious rendering of Waltzing Mathilda, and threw some money on the table.

“I’ll see you all tomorrow.” He stood, pulling on his overcoat. “I want everything tied up at work before we leave.”

“You ready to go, Chief?” Jim asked. Blair nodded, wishing he had a video camera to record the drunken warbling on the other side of the table.

“Don’t worry, Captain,” said Bill, who worked behind the bar. “I’ll get those three in a cab.”

“Appreciate it, Bill.”

Blair and Jim followed Simon out to the parking lot. It was late and Blair was tired. He had reports to
finish up tomorrow, and packing to be done before they left for Australia. He worked on his mental list of essential items for the trip.

“You were quiet tonight,” Jim said as they got in the truck and headed back to the loft. “Everything okay?”

“Yeah. Sure. Just thinking of everything we have to do before we leave.”

“I’ll help with the reports,” Jim offered.

“Thanks.” Blair didn’t bother pointing out that they were Jim’s reports in the first place. “Won’t be the same without Megan around.”

Jim just shrugged. “I guess.”

Blair wasn’t fooled. After almost four years of living and working with this man, he could read him well enough. Jim would miss Megan, miss the banter and the bickering. He just wouldn’t admit it.

“Still have you,” Jim said with a quirk of the lips that was almost a smile.

“No getting rid of me, big guy,” Blair said. He felt a happy little glow, as he always did when Jim said something unexpectedly nice. He tried to let that be enough, and for the moment it was.

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The flight from Cascade to Sydney took nearly twenty hours, when the layover at LAX was figured in. For Jim it was a misery. Even with Sandburg’s help, he walked off the plane with a splitting headache, exhausted and wrung out. He was certainly in no mood to meet and greet the throngs that were waiting to welcome Megan home. Again, his partner came to his rescue and got them in a cab as quickly as possible. Simon stayed behind with Megan.

While Sandburg chatted up the cab driver, Jim leaned his head against the cool glass of the window and shut his eyes, already over-stimulated and not at all interested in seeing Sydney all lit up at night. His Guide kept a hand on his shoulder, rubbing little circles there, and got them checked in to their room in record time when they finally arrived at the Sydney Harbour Marriott.

Jim didn’t start relaxing until they were in their room and Sandburg plugged in the white noise generator. Together they stripped one of the two double beds, re-making it with his own sheets; generic hotel linens were too scratchy on his sensitive skin. As soon as that was done he kicked off his sneakers and flopped down on the bed.

“Okay, big guy. Let’s get those senses back online, one at a time.” Sandburg walked him through it, his soothing tone doing a lot to push the headache back. After keeping his senses damped down for the duration of the trip, it was a relief to finally get them to a normal level.

“What’s that smell?” he asked, keeping his eyes closed even though the lights were dimmed.

“Eucalyptus. Is it bothering you?”

“No. I like it.”

“It’s supposed to be very soothing,” Sandburg said thoughtfully. “Maybe we should get some for the loft.”

Jim grunted non-committally. He knew there’d be eucalyptus scented candles or creams showing up
at home; whenever Sandburg found something his Sentinel liked and could tolerate, he usually jumped on it. It made Jim feel a bit spoiled at times.

“You should eat something,” his Guide said. “You haven’t had anything since breakfast.”

“Room service.” Jim had no desire to leave the room, not until tomorrow. He cracked open one eye when Sandburg sat on the edge of the bed, menu in hand.

“They got any kangaroo burgers?” he asked hopefully.

“No. And you should stick with something lighter tonight.”

“You’re such a nag, Sandburg.” Jim sat up and took the menu, giving it a quick once-over. “Is the cod okay, Mom?”

“You’ll thank me later, man.” Sandburg snatched the menu back and walked over to the desk to use the phone. He ordered Jim’s fish and a salad for himself.

Jim did a quick Sentinel scan while his Guide was otherwise occupied. As expected, he could see signs of exhaustion on the younger man’s face. He felt a stab of guilt, knowing that Sandburg didn’t get much rest on the flight because he was so busy helping him keep things under control. He dialed up hearing, listening to lung sounds; this had become a regular part of his routine after The Fountain.

“It’s gonna be about twenty minutes,” Sandburg said, hanging up the phone. “Why don’t you take a shower?”

A shower sounded like heaven to Jim, but he owed his friend. “I’m good right now. You go.”

“Oh. Well, if you’re sure.”

Jim waved him off. He rested against the padded headboard and closed his eyes again. He listened to Sandburg get in the shower, the combined sounds of flowing water and his heartbeat enough to lull Jim into a semi-doze.

The next thing he knew, someone was knocking on the door. Jim jerked awake, then grinned when he smelled the food. His headache was nearly gone, and suddenly he was starving. He eagerly accepted the room service tray and gave the delivery guy a tip.

“Quit primping and come eat!” he called. He could hear Sandburg in the bathroom, spraying that frizz control stuff on his curly hair. Jim wasn’t exactly thrilled that his own hair was thinning, but at least he didn’t have to spend so much time on it.

Sandburg finally emerged, ensconced in a big, fluffy white hotel robe. Damp curls clung to his scalp and Jim looked away; it didn’t always strike him this way, but sometimes a wet Sandburg was too much of a reminder of how horribly things had once gone wrong.

“Oh, man, this looks good!” Sandburg took his salad over to his bed. Jim normally would’ve insisted on eating at the small table, but he was just too tired to care.

The cod, coated in an herb crust, was delicious, but he’d been serious earlier; he wanted to try kangaroo while he was here. Even if only to prove to his partner that he could be adventurous from time to time. Besides, he needed something to distract himself from two weeks without Wonderburger.

“I’ve been researching restaurants,” Sandburg said between bites.
“Of course.” Jim rolled his eyes. As if he could go ten minutes without researching something. Anything.

“Sydney’s a harbor town, so the seafood should be really good.” Sandburg speared a tomato with his fork. “I’d like to try some of the aboriginal places, too. They have such an interesting culture, you know?”

“Don’t forget why we’re here, Chief,” Jim reminded him. “Can’t be all museums and cultural centers.”

“I know. But we’ll have time for some of it. Man, I wish we could get to New Zealand. The Maori are a fascinating group in their own right. They have this tradition of sharing breath…”

“I’ve had too long a day for a lecture, professor.” Jim yawned widely, cracking his jaw. “I’m gonna hit the shower.”

He put his plate back on the tray and looked for any spilled food on his nice, clean sheets, happily finding none. By the time he got out of the shower he was feeling much more like himself. Sandburg was already tucked into the second bed, one arm thrown over his eyes. Jim did his usual nighttime sweep – checked the door and the window, made sure everything was as it should be, turned out the lights.

He grinned when he saw that Sandburg had put his sleep mask and earplugs on his pillow. He climbed into his own bed, barely able to keep his eyes open. He was in a strange city, in an even stranger country, but with his Guide’s steady heartbeat filling the room it almost felt like home.

Chapter End Notes

AN: I was being silly one day and wondering what would happen if someone wrote Gilligan’s Island, only with the cast of The Sentinel. It was just a goof, but my gal pal latched right on the idea and it morphed into something much less campy. I did a boat load of research, but I’m still just making things up so if you find any mistakes, I apologize!

I probably owe a lot to Lost, Swiss Family Robinson, and Stranded, and won’t apologize for any ideas “borrowed” from those sources.

I hope you like this! Let me know, reviews make me extra smiley. ::grins::
Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was a whirlwind two weeks for Blair. Unlike Jim, who could spend a whole vacation – and it was a vacation, no matter what Simon said – quietly standing around fishing, he liked to be out exploring and learning new things. Megan was more than happy to play tour guide, which also gave her the opportunity to reconnect with her city. For all of Jim’s griping about being dragged all over Southern Australia, Blair suspected he was actually having fun.

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Megan’s boss at New South Wales PD, Chief Inspector Ryan Miles, had been very welcoming of Simon, Jim and Blair. He arranged for them to tour each department, as well as the NSW Police Academy in Goulburn. The Chief Inspector had been particularly interested in Blair’s role as a consultant for the Cascade PD and what his specific duties were. That had led to Blair giving a talk to the local cops; he’d been thrilled at the chance to lecture and inform.

“Consultants not trained in Criminal Science can be an asset to an investigation because we have different ways of approaching a problem. Sometimes a new perspective makes all the difference in cracking a case.”

He’d looked back to where Jim was sitting, and saw him smirking.

“A consultant can have more flexibility of thought, and not have to be as concerned about the rigid constraints that law officers are so often held to.”

Jim acknowledged that comment with a full-on grin and a nod of his head.

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As a student of anthropology, Blair was given the chance to visit the University of New South Wales, and specifically Dr. Ford, who headed up the Anthropology Department there. They’d spent an entertaining two hours swapping academic stories and tales from the field over lunch at a little tea shop near the campus.

While he was making friends at the Uni, Jim and Simon were doing the same at NSW PD. Jim was challenged at the firing range and of course he blew everyone out of the water, so to speak. Which led to a Saturday spent on a local paintball course. Simon, Jim, Blair and Megan teamed up against four of NSW’s finest, but they were no match for the Sentinel.

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When they weren’t doing ride-alongs with the local PD, Blair dragged the other two men to the usual attractions – museums, Sydney Opera House, the Royal Botanic Gardens. He really longed to take a trek into the outback, but the best he could manage with their time constraints was a day tour of the Blue Mountains. Simon had opted out of that one, preferring to learn more about the administrative end of the NSW PD.

“It’s beautiful here.” Blair sighed, leaning against a wooden railing. Before him stretched a brilliant blue sky and the Three Sisters, a well-known local rock formation.
“We should retire here, man. Just think – more sunshine than rain!”

“We should retire here?” Jim asked with a raised eyebrow. “I’ll be retiring way before you, Junior.”

Blair flushed and started babbling. “Well, you know, we have no idea what the effects of aging will be on your abilities. If things start to go haywire, you’re going to need someone to help you, you know, and…”

“Take a breath, Sandburg.” Jim looked amused. “If you’re gonna be this chatty as a little old man, I pray for deafness.”

“Very funny.” Blair slugged him in the shoulder, and then their group was moving again.

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As their trip neared its end, Megan introduced Blair to Vincent Mareno, the Minister of Aboriginal Affairs out of the Wollongong hub office. This meet and greet scored him a VIP pass to the annual Survival Day Festival, which was being held at Victoria Park. Jim and Simon had begged off that one as well, despite Blair’s insistence about the importance of the festival in Aboriginal history. Megan accompanied him while the other two went deep sea fishing with the Chief Inspector.

He talked with anyone who would give him the time of day, and picked up several books on Aboriginal culture and history, and their struggle to survive as a people. As punishment for a day spent engaging in less than intellectual pursuits, Simon and Jim had to listen to hours of enthusiastic lecturing as Blair drew comparisons to Native Americans and any other group of people subjugated in the name of progress and expansion.

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On the final day of their trip, Megan and several of their new friends in the NSW PD went to Bondi Beach for surfing and BBQ. Blair amused everyone with his attempts at Aussie lingo. It was a relaxed and cheery atmosphere, until Jim indicated his interest in snorkeling.

Blair declined to go even out in the boat with him, getting Megan to go instead. Just in case. It had been a couple of months, but he still couldn’t face the idea of submerging himself in water. Hell, it had taken nearly a week to work up the guts to even just take a shower.

“Just be careful, okay?” he said worriedly as Jim and Megan prepared to head out. “Double up, sight and touch, or sight and hearing.”

“I’ll be fine, Chief,” Jim assured him.

“I’ve got his back, Sandy.” Megan clunked him on the head with her snorkel. “Go have fun with the boys.”

Blair teamed up with Simon for beach volleyball, but couldn’t keep from worrying about Jim. He was only slightly comforted by the fact that Megan knew what to look for in case of a zone out. He couldn’t help feeling a bit like a failure as a Guide.

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Blair stood by the window, looking out over the city. The lights of Sydney sparkled in the dark, and he felt a little sad that they were leaving tomorrow. On the other hand, he couldn’t wait to get back to Cascade, and the familiarity of home. Still, he’d made some good contacts and new friends. And it was nice to get away from the troubles that always seemed to dog them, even for just a little while.
“You all packed up, Chief? Connor’ll be here early, don’t forget.”

Jim had all of his things packed and ready to go, except his toiletries and white noise generator and sheets. Blair smiled at him fondly.

“Mostly.” He turned back to the window. Jim came to stand beside him, close enough to bump him with his shoulder.

“Everything okay, Sandburg?”

Blair shrugged. “Yeah. I always get a little…I don’t know. I wish I could’ve seen more.”

“You miss it,” Jim said softly. “All the traveling.”

“Sometimes.” He gave his partner a sidelong glance. “There’s just something so invigorating about discovering a new place, you know?”

Jim didn’t say anything, just nodded, but Blair noticed that his shoulders hunched in a bit. He sighed.

“I’m happy in Cascade, Jim. Much as I like the thrill of discovery, putting down roots is more important to me.” He gave the Sentinel a poke in the arm. “So stop it.”

Blair was all too aware of Jim’s insecurities, and his persistent fear that his Guide would just up and leave him someday. He’d love to get the man in for counseling, something he knew he could never suggest. Jim had made a lot of progress in the last couple months, but he still had a long way to go.

“I had fun.”

“Me, too, big guy.”

They stood there a while longer, and then Jim went back over to his bed to get the television remote, presumably to find some sort of sporting event. Blair ran through a mental checklist, making sure he had everything he needed to get his Sentinel through the long return trip tomorrow. He wished he could just give Jim something to knock him out; that would sure make things easier.

“Hey, Chief! Look at this.”

Blair took one last look out at Sydney before sitting next to Jim on the bed to see what he’d found on TV.

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Megan was right on time the following morning, waiting to take her friends to the airport. Simon did most of the talking on the ride over; Sandburg was still half asleep and Jim was deep in thought. He’d felt guilty yesterday, watching his friend look out the window. When he’d volunteered to be Jim’s Guide, he’d unknowingly shackled himself to Cascade. He’d sacrificed his wanderlust, as well as his chance to travel as part of his studies. Like that trip to Borneo. These last two weeks he’d seen a side of Sandburg that he hadn’t even realized he’d been missing.

The thrill of discovery, he’d called it. Seeing that gleam in his eyes had made Jim nostalgic, just as it made him realize how much Sandburg was missing out on. If he could only figure out a way to get Sandburg back into the field without losing him.

“What are we doing here?” Simon asked.

Jim snapped out of his reverie and looked around. They were at the airport, but instead of the short
term parking lot Megan was pulling right up to one of the hangars.

“Surprise!” She parked the car and turned around with a big grin on her face.

“Wow, is that a Cessna Mustang?” Sandburg asked, now suddenly wide awake.

“I didn’t know you were into planes,” Simon said.

“He’s into everything,” Jim replied with a chuckle.

“Hey, that’s a very sexy little plane.” Sandburg grinned.

“Well, I arranged for you to take it back to Cascade,” Megan announced. “It’s my uncle’s company jet. I thought it might be easier on Ellison.”

Jim was taken aback. “You did this for me?”

Megan shrugged like it was no big deal. “No reason to be a misery all the way home.”

“Man, that’s so awesome! I’m really going to miss you, Megan.” Sandburg leaned across Jim to give her a quick hug.

“I took pity on you, Sandy. You’re the one who has to deal with the bear.”

They laughed at Jim’s expense but he could hardly get mad about it. When they all got out of the car to unload the luggage, he pulled Megan into a quick hug.

“Thanks, Connor. For everything.”

She looked up at him, her eyes bright. “Take care of Sandy, Ellison. And yourself.”

“It won’t be the same without you,” Sandburg said, moving in for his own hug.

Simon stuck out his hand, his mock-stern expression meant to keep Megan from hugging him too.

“Inspector. It’s been…interesting.”

The Aussie just laughed and dodged around that hand to give Simon a hug. He made gruff protestations, but Jim could tell he didn’t mean them. Megan had shared some really bad moments with them, things Jim would just as soon forget, but those shared experiences had made her a part of the team. Part of the family.

A man in an open-necked white shirt and khaki pants suddenly appeared and Megan introduced him as Todd Stuyvesant, the pilot and longtime family friend. He seemed amiable enough, shaking hands all around.

“Todd, these are my mates from Cascade. Fly straight, okay?”

“They’re in good hands, Meggie.”

Todd picked up Sandburg’s suitcase. Jim hefted his and Simon’s, trailing the pilot back to the plane. There were two storage compartments, he explained, one in the nose and one in the tail. Sandburg’s bag was the only one that fit up front, because it was already full of boxes.

“School supplies. I’ll be taking them Outback when I get back from dropping you lot off.” He made it sound like a quick trip to the mall.
Ever suspicious, Jim dialed up smell and confirmed that the contents of the boxes contained mostly paper products; no explosives, drugs or weapons. And then he smelled Sandburg, all oatmeal soap and cucumber shampoo, and he knocked the dial back down.

“Just relax, man,” his Guide said under his breath. “You look like you’re on full alert over here.”

“Better safe than sorry, Chief.”

“Okay, gents,” Megan said brightly. “I hate long goodbyes, so I’ll just remind you that Sandy has my email. Safe flight.”

Before any of them could say anything, she was back in her car and driving away. Jim felt a little pang, watching her go, but he knew Sandburg would add her to his lengthy list of pen pals; they’d keep in touch.

“You fellows ready?” Todd stood at the bottom of the metal stairway that led up into the plane. Jim chuckled as the watched his partner bound up the steps, obviously eager to check out the accommodations.

“Wow, this thing is swanky.”

The Sentinel had to agree. Two plush leather captain chairs facing a wide bench seat defined the passenger area. The windows were large ovals. Best of all, Jim could almost stand up without hunching over. This was definitely going to be better than flying commercial.

Todd pulled up the stairs and shut the main cabin door. He showed them where to stow their carryon bags, and how to fold the table halves out of the wall. There was no galley, but there was a cooler packed with bottled water and sandwiches.

“Shouldn’t there be a co-pilot?” Simon asked.

“Nah. This baby practically flies itself.” Todd showed them the cockpit, full of touch screens. “Smooth sailing, fellows.”

“I’ll never fly coach again,” Sandburg vowed, sitting on the bench seat.

“Cascade PD is not getting a jet, Sandburg,” Simon growled good-naturedly.

“Come on, Simon. A little creative budgeting is all I ask.”

Jim rolled his eyes. He sat next to Simon in one of the captain chairs and stretched his legs all the way out; it was heaven.

“Almost forgot these.” Todd came back with three gift bags in his hand. “Meggie wanted you to have them.”

“She’s really going over the top with this,” Jim muttered. He felt like they should’ve done something more, something bigger, for her. Especially since she’d gotten them a whole damn plane.

Simon opened his bag first, and whistled appreciatively. He pulled out a box of cigars. “Gurka Churchills. She really went all out.”

“What did you get?” Sandburg asked Jim.

He reached into his own bag and pulled out a fancy Gerber survival knife. He popped it out of the packaging and bounced it a little in his hand; it was evenly weighted and the rubber grip was
comfortable.

“She afraid we’d run into crocs on the way home?” Simon asked, amused.

“You’d never have got that on a commercial flight,” Sandburg commented. He pulled out his gift last. It was a shiny brass compass, with a flip-top like a pocket watch. Engraved on the cover were the words *To help you stay on the right path*. Jim could tell that his partner was moved by both the gift and the sentiment.

“Okay, fellows!” Todd called from the cockpit. “Let’s get this party started!”

Sandburg advised Jim to dial down hearing and touch; the vibrations could be too much for him sometimes. He put the earplugs in and closed his eyes, willing himself to relax. His Guide’s hand on his arm helped anchor him and focus him on getting all of his senses to manageable levels.

In no time at all they were airborne, leaving Australia behind as they began winging their way homeward.

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Blair looked up from his book, checking again to see how Jim was doing. He seemed to be tolerating the smaller plane better. The pressurized air, engine noise and vibrations of a plane could play havoc with Sentinel senses. He wished Jim could get some real rest, instead of just closing his eyes and concentrating on his dials.

“I’m fine, Sandburg,” Jim said testily.

Blair sighed and turned back to his book. He knew his partner hated to be coddled, but sometimes he honestly couldn’t help himself. Despite Jim’s outwardly stoic, manly-man demeanor, there was a lot of vulnerability hiding just beneath the surface. Most people didn’t see it, but Blair wasn’t most people.

The plane suddenly dipped, startling him. He looked up and saw that his Sentinel was on full alert. Uh oh.

“Everything okay, Jim?”

There was no answer, and the cocked head told Blair that his partner was listening into…something. An icy finger of dread tripped down his spine. Was something wrong with the plane? The engines? Simon looked between the two of them, confused.

“Something wrong?”

Jim shook himself, but before he could say anything Todd was talking to them over his shoulder. “Sorry for the turbulence, fellows. There’s a storm out here that was supposed to track south, but now it’s changed course.”

Blair looked out the nearest window, and all he could see was clouds. They were mostly white, but some were going a bit gray.

“We’re going to climb a bit higher and see if we can’t get out of the way.”

Blair couldn’t keep his eyes off the window. The clouds had assumed a malevolent air, which he knew was entirely in his head. Normally he was okay about flying – well, as long as it wasn’t in a helicopter – but now he could feel the distance between himself and the ground, and it was much too
far away.

He didn’t realize that Jim had moved until he was sitting beside him, blue eyes studying his face and no doubt reading every subtle twitch and tremor.

“Just a little turbulence, Chief.”

Blair laughed nervously. “Yeah. I guess you feel it more in a Cessna.”

His mind began drawing other comparisons between the smaller plane and the 747 they’d taken at the start of their trip. And he was grateful for Jim’s warm presence by his side. If he wasn’t worried, then there was nothing to worry about.

As the Cessna climbed, it became even more buffeted by winds. Blair wished there was an oh-shit handle to hold onto, like in the truck. Simon had given up on his book, instead watching out his own window. The only things to see were blackening clouds and the occasional flash of lightening.

“Dial it all down, Jim,” Blair advised, laying a hand on the Sentinel’s shoulder. The way he was clenching his jaw, all the combined stimulus was causing him pain.

“No,” Jim said through gritted teeth.

“There’s nothing you can do, man. Dial it down!”

The man stubbornly shook his head. Blair looked to Simon for help, and received none.

“When does he ever listen to me?”

“Big help. Thanks,” Blair muttered. “Jim, please. You’re going to hurt yourself.”

At that moment something thumped against the outside of the plane, and Jim’s reaction was immediate. He headed for the cockpit like a shot, knocking into Simon in his haste. That was all Blair needed to move from Condition Worried to Condition Scared. He strained to hear what Jim and Todd were saying to each other, but there was too much other noise.

There were several more thumps, and then the whole plane gave a great shudder and banked steeply to the left. Blair’s heart was pounding in his chest, and he shared a wide-eyed look with Simon.

“What the hell is going on?” Simon barked towards the cockpit.

“Birds,” Jim replied tersely.

Birds? What was he talking about? And then Blair understood. And his fear jolted up another notch as the plane shook, seemingly hard enough to pull apart at the seams. His eyes were drawn back to the window and when the clouds finally cleared enough the sight that met him pushed him straight into panic attack territory.

The Cessna was low. And getting lower. All he could see was wide, empty expanses of ocean. So much water. His chest grew painfully tight.

“Shit. Oh, shit.”

“Sandburg!” Jim’s authoritative shout was the only thing that could have dragged him away from the window.

“Jim…” he whispered. He wanted his partner with him, much the same way he’d wanted his ratty
old teddy bear when he was a child and had a nightmare. Jim always made him feel safe.

“Todd’s going to try and put us down on one of these islands up ahead. You hear me, Blair? We’re *not* going down in the water.”

“Get your ass buckled in, Ellison!” Simon ordered. He used his bullpen voice, which usually guaranteed results. He looked as scared as Blair felt, though, his skin gone grey as ashes.

As Blair struggled to control his breathing, he could see that Jim was engaged in a struggle of his own. It was clear that he wanted to stay in the cockpit and help Todd, though what he could do Blair didn’t know. As a Sentinel, he also had to be feeling the rise of the Blessed Protector, whose only goal was to protect the Guide, though there wasn’t much he could do there either.

The plane dropped, reminding Blair of a certain free-falling elevator, and suddenly he couldn’t catch a breath. All he could think was that he’d been brought back from a painful death two months ago, only to be faced with another one now. It didn’t seem fair. He was only dimly aware of Jim coming towards him, struggling to stay on his feet as the plane lurched and bucked.

As soon as he sat down and strapped in, Jim put his arm around Blair. And just like that he could breathe again, even if it was still too close to hyperventilating to be able to discern a difference.

“Oh, man. Oh, man. Jim…” He kept his eyes on his partner, too afraid now to look out the window. Too certain that any minute they’d be swallowed up by the ocean and the water would claim him a second time.

“Jesus,” Simon muttered.

“We’re going down!” Todd shouted. “Crash positions!”

“Jim…”

Blair felt Jim’s hand on his neck, and his head was pushed down to his knees. His partner pressed himself across Blair’s back, and the Guide wanted to cry at this last futile gesture by the Sentinel to protect him.

“I’ve got you, Sandburg.”

And even now he sounded so sure, so in control. But Blair could feel the tension in the other man, and the faint tremors running through his body. Was he remembering another crash, one where he was the only one who got to walk away?

The Cessna dropped again, making Blair’s stomach lurch. There was more noise now, a cacophony of rending metal, one whining engine, and Simon’s frantic prayers. He wanted to tell Jim to dial it down, to protect himself, but the words wouldn’t come. Instead he reached out his hand, knowing his partner would grab it tightly in his own.

That was his lifeline when the world broke up around him.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Yikes! Do our boys know how to end a vacation or what? I wasn’t sure how to fill up two weeks of vacation time, so I just did a general summary. Hopefully that gave
you a good taste without me having to detail everything. Besides, I know you all wanted
to get back to the plane crash. LOL!
There were birds singing. Jim absently tried to place them, but couldn’t quite focus. Their song wasn’t unpleasant, but there was some inherent wrongness about it. Something was missing, that was it. Some sound…city sounds. Where were all the city sounds?

Gradually his other senses came back online. He could feel something heavy pressed against him; Sandburg, judging by the familiar heartbeat. Jim took a deep breath and choked. Blood. He smelled blood. That snapped him out of his fugue and he blinked against the sunlight that flooded the cabin of the Cessna.

The sun was coming in from the gaping hole where the cockpit used to be; the whole nose of the plane was gone. Jim was squashed against the wall, an impressive lump throbbing on the side of his head. He was pinned there by his partner’s dead weight, and there was a flare of bright, white panic at that thought, before he remembered that the younger man’s heart was steadily beating.

“Sandburg,” he said thickly. “Sandburg!”

There was no response. Jim forced himself to calm down. Deep breath. Right. Now assess the situation. The front of the Cessna had been ripped off. Simon was…Simon! His seat was twisted and hanging drunkenly to one side, sagging towards the hole. The whole plane was tilted down.

“Simon!” Jim called. “Simon, where are you?”

Good God. Had he been sucked out of the plane?

“Simon!” Jim unconsciously cocked his head, listening. He let out a strangled breath when he heard his Captain’s heartbeat. He was somewhere close and getting closer. Thank goodness at least one of them was ambulatory.

Jim braced himself as best he could before he undid his seatbelt. As carefully as possible he slid out from under Sandburg’s weight and moved back a little, to get a better picture of the situation. His Guide was pale, bright red blood standing out starkly where it seeped down from a gash on his forehead. A Sentinel scan showed no other injuries.

“Sandburg! Come on, buddy.” Jim patted his cheeks. This time he was rewarded with a low moan and fluttering eyelashes.

“That’s right. Time to wake up, Sleeping Beauty.”

“Uhn. Wha…Jim?” Sandburg opened his eyes, clearly confused. Before Jim could say anything, his partner’s eyes widened and his heart rate went through the roof.

“Crash! Oh, God, the crash!”

Jim immediately went into comfort mode, rubbing Sandburg’s back. Protect the Guide.

“It’s okay, Blair. We landed. We’re okay.” He kept up a soothing dialogue until Sandburg got control over himself.
“I really want to get out of here,” he said finally.

“I hear that, Chief. Hold on to me.” Jim planted his feet as firmly as possible and then helped Blair unbuckle his seatbelt.

“Whoa!” The younger man fell against him, starting them both sliding to the new and much larger exit. Jim was able to stop their forward momentum before they fell. A quick glance told him that the plane was caught up in the trees, and the ground was about six feet away.

“I’m going to lower you down,” he said. “Be careful.”

Jim grasped Sandburg’s wrists, feeling the blood moving just under his skin, and helped him get safely past the jagged pieces of metal that ranged around the opening. Once clear, he followed, left knee giving a twinge of protest when he jumped.

Sandburg, still woozy, immediately sat down on the ground. Jim stood transfixed, looking at the remains of the Cessna. It was dented and slightly squashed, and one wing had been ripped completely off. With a bone-deep shudder he realized how lucky they were to be alive and relatively unscathed. He only hoped the same was true of Todd, but he didn’t think the pilot had much of a chance.

They’d landed in the middle of a virulent green jungle; Jim could hear the sound of waves and knew they were close to the beach. And then a monkey chattered somewhere in the trees and he was instantly transported back to Peru, standing by a different crash site. They were all dead, every man in his unit. He hadn’t been able to save them, though he’d tried. So desperately he’d tried. Now he was alone.

Sentinel hearing zeroed in on the sound of someone approaching. At the same time he realized he’d been mistaken; there was one other survivor, the most important survivor. And his mission here was crystal clear. Protect the Guide. Footsteps drew closer, and closer still, and the Sentinel reached for a weapon that wasn’t there. Hand to hand, then. Protect the Guide.

“Jim? Thank God!” A man stepped into view, bleeding and looking worse for wear. The Sentinel moved into a defensive posture in front of his Guide, balancing on the balls of his feet. He growled low in his throat, a warning.

“Jim?” The man seemed uncertain, and stopped walking. The Guide rose up on shaky legs and the Sentinel flung an arm back in warning.

“Stay back.”

“Jim, listen to me. I don’t know what’s happening here, man, but you’re scaring Simon. You need to calm down.”

The other man moved to the left and the Sentinel mirrored him, eyes never looking away. Protect the Guide. He growled again, louder this time.

“Okay, Jim. This seems like some kind of primal Sentinel…thing. And that’s okay. But you’re scaring me, too.”

The Guide moved forward again, but the Sentinel blocked his path without needing to look behind him; he could feel the heat emanating from the Guide’s body, and sense the changes in airflow as he moved.

The Guide put a hand on his back, a firm, warm pressure between his shoulder blades.
“Come on back now, Jim. I’m safe. Simon’s not a threat to you. Or to me. Simon’s part of the tribe. Remember the tribe? Remember Simon? Feel my hand on your back, Jim. Remember who you are.”

The Sentinel sniffed the air. He smelled blood and sweat. Jet fuel. And…cigars. Cucumber. He shook his head, trying to clear it. His vision wavered for a moment and he panicked, not wanting to lose sight of the threat. But the firm pressure of that hand remained steady.

“Listen to my voice, Jim. Follow it back. You’re Detective James Ellison. You’re our friend. We’re part of your tribe. Snap out of it, man!”

The Sentinel shook his head. The directive. He had to stay focused on the directive. “Protect the Guide.”

“Jim. Look at me.” The Guide moved, slowly, his hand remaining in constant contact, moving as he moved. He came around until he faced the Sentinel, his hand now over the Sentinel’s heart.

“You know me, Jim. Say my name. Who am I?”

“Protect…the Guide,” the Sentinel said, his voice becoming tremulous. He closed his eyes and leaned forward, scenting the Guide. Breathing deep of his essence. And suddenly all his strength seemed to ebb away, leaving him tired and confused.

“Blair?” he asked uncertainly, eyes still closed.

“That’s right, big guy. Can you look at me?”

He did what the Guide – what Blair – asked, opening his eyes to find a worried face peering back at him.

“I’m so tired, Chief,” he murmured. And fell rather gracelessly against Sandburg, knocking them both to the ground as his eyes rolled back in his head.

*o*o*o*

“What the hell was that?” Simon asked. He looked angry and scared. One sleeve of his shirt was bloody from a gash in his arm and half his face was scratched up.

“Sentinel overload.” Blair cradled Jim’s head in his lap. “He’s got a lump the size of a baseball here, Simon.”

Despite everything that had happened, despite the fear and uncertainty, he felt a desperate longing for his journal. In all his time as Jim’s Guide, he’d never seen anything so incredibly raw and primal. It was like Jim had ceased to exist, which had been equal parts terrifying and fascinating. Right now he was just concerned for his friend.

“Jim? You in there, big guy?”

“We need to get some help,” Simon said, resting wearily against a palm tree. “I hope Todd was able to get a mayday out.”

“Do you think he’s still alive?” Blair rubbed Jim’s temples with gentle pressure. “Come on, Jim. We could use the help here.”

“I didn’t see the cockpit.” Simon sighed. “There’s some debris on the beach.”

Blair closed his eyes. He tried not to think about how Jim almost stayed up there, wanting to help
Todd. He could have lost his best friend today.

“Chief?”

Blair opened his eyes, relieved to see recognition on Jim’s face when he looked down.

“Did I zone?”

“Not exactly. It’s nice to have you back.”

Simon came over and pulled Jim to his feet. “You okay, Jim?”

“I’ve got one hell of a headache.” He quirked one eyebrow at his two companions. “I feel a whole lot better than the two of you look.”

“Yeah, he’s fine.” Blair rolled his eyes. He hoped that was the last time Jim would go off the rails. They were clearly in a situation here and he needed his friend to be functioning normally.

“I’m going back in the plane.” Jim wasted no time getting down to business. “We’re going to need supplies. You two scout around, see if you can find anything that fell out. We’ll need to access the storage compartment, too, get our bags.”

Just like that he assumed the mantle of leadership, and Blair wasn’t about to argue. The man was a former Ranger, and had experience in survival situations.

“You got it, big guy.”

“Stand clear. I’m going to be tossing things down.” With that, Jim pulled himself back up into the remains of the Cessna.

“You alright with this, Simon?” Blair asked as they walked back along the debris trail, following the plane’s path of destruction.

“Yeah, Sandburg. I love falling out of a damn plane in the middle of nowhere.”

He held up his hands in a placating gesture. “Hey, chill out, man! I meant are you okay with Jim, you know, taking over. I mean, you are the Captain.”

Simon snorted. “I’d say we’re a little out of my jurisdiction here, kid. Jim’s been through something like this before, so it’s logical for him to take the lead.”

Blair was relieved to hear it. They had enough problems without two alpha males engaged in a pissing contest.

“I’ll be damned.” Simon pointed and Blair grinned. The cooler! It was dented and dinged, but still strapped shut which meant they had sandwiches and bottled water. Beyond that were some random chunks of metal, a piece of what looked like a seat, and Blair’s backpack.

“Oh, thank you!” He was unaccountably teary-eyed at the sight of his trusty old backpack, which was a bit torn but otherwise undamaged.

Simon and Blair widened their search, turning up Simon’s messenger bag, a scattering of cigars from Megan’s box, and Jim’s cell phone.

“You try his and I’ll try mine,” Simon urged, digging through his bag. Blair turned the phone on, waiting hopefully for the main screen to pop up. When it did, there were no service bars. Of course
not, he thought dejectedly. Why would it be that easy?

“Anything?” Simon asked.

“No. You?”

“Nothing. Damn!” He looked up at the sky, scowling, while Blair turned off the phone to save the battery.

“Someone will find us,” he said. “When they can’t reach the plane. Or maybe Todd got a message out. I’ll bet someone’s already looking for us.”

“The glass is always half full for you, isn’t it?” Simon asked. He rubbed a hand over his face.

“Just trying to boost morale,” Blair said with a grin. It wasn’t like he didn’t know they were in trouble. But if he was going to keep himself from freaking out, he needed to get some positive thoughts out there.

“Let’s bring this stuff back to Jim,” Simon suggested. “See what we should do next.”

*O*O*O*

Two hours later they were back on the beach, surrounded by the items they’d been able to salvage. Both Simon’s and Jim’s luggage had survived the crash, but Sandburg’s had been lost with the whole front of the plane. Jim had considered it lucky that he was able to find a first aid kit and several parachutes, which he could use to fashion a shelter with.

“Okay, Simon. You’re all set.” Jim had finished sewing up the gash in his boss’ arm. Luckily his backpack had made it through the crash intact, still stowed in the compartment beneath the bench seat; inside was his own first aid kit – a necessity when traveling with Sandburg – and a small sewing kit.

“Thanks, Jim.” Simon winced as he lightly touched the area around his wound.

“Hey, chicks dig scars,” Sandburg said helpfully.

“You guys get washed up and changed,” Jim directed, having taken care of that himself already. “I want to go a little ways up the beach, look around. I’ll be right back.”

He walked up the beach to where the rest of the plane debris was. Smaller fragments of metal here, one shattered touch screen from the cockpit, and a strip of rubber that must’ve come from one of the wheels. He turned towards the ocean and stretched out his vision, but he could find no sign of the nose of the plane. Or Todd.

Jim looked over to where he’d left his companions. Being even this far from his Guide was making him anxious. He thought back to the zone-out he’d had earlier, though he knew it hadn’t been a zone at all. No, it was different somehow. He had only a hazy recall of events, but he knew something wasn’t right.

He’d scared Sandburg. That he remembered clearly. And it scared him in return. He was supposed to protect his partner.

With a sigh, he headed back down the beach. He wished they’d had time to do some laundry before leaving Sydney. The shirt he’d changed into wasn’t exactly clean. Simon looked one hundred percent better now that he’d changed out of the bloody rag he’d been wearing and into a rumpled
dark blue polo shirt. Sandburg, who’d lost all his clothes, looked a bit like a child playing dress-up in one of Simon’s big button-down shirts. Jim stifled a chuckle.

“Hey, Chief. Nice threads.”

“Laugh it up, Jim,” Sandburg replied sourly. “It’s not your stuff that’s gone.”

Jim clapped a hand on his friend’s shoulder and froze. The Guide’s scent rose up, filling his flared nostrils. But it was wrong. The scent of the Guide was intermingled with the scent of the Captain, and that was unacceptable.

With a growl, the Sentinel tore the offensive piece of material over the Guide’s head and flung it aside.

“Ow!”

“What the hell?” The Captain moved forward but the Sentinel stopped him with a snarl.

“What the hell?” The Captain moved forward but the Sentinel stopped him with a snarl.

“Uh, I think Jim has stepped out again, Simon.”

The Sentinel scented his Guide, not pleased that he could still detect a lingering scent of the Captain on his salty skin. He pulled his own shirt up and off.

“I think this might be some kind of territorial thing.”

“Yeah, well, the Sibyl routine is getting old fast.”

The Sentinel jerked his shirt down over the Guide’s curly head. The scents of Guide and Sentinel swirled around each other, putting the Sentinel more at ease. The Guide was his, and only his.

“Mine,” he said with a challenging look at the Captain.

“I think…Simon, I think he just marked his territory.

Chapter End Notes

AN: As if our intrepid heroes didn’t have enough to worry about right now, right? Is Jim’s Sentinel screwiness going to be hindrance or a help? And just where did these guys crash land anyway? Stay tuned!
Chapter 4

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It had been a very long day, and Blair was exhausted in every possible way – physically, mentally and emotionally. Still, he felt compelled to write it all down in his journal, which he thankfully hadn’t packed in his suitcase. He took particular care in describing Jim’s über-Sentinel behavior.

He’d once called Jim an evolutionary throw-back, but now he was actually acting like one. He supposed he was lucky that Jim had only switched the shirts – better than being pissed on, which was a more traditional method of territorial marking. Mine. The Sentinel had claimed him in a way that Jim never had, and Blair wasn’t sure how he felt about that.

If he was being completely honest with himself, he’d have to admit that he liked wearing Jim’s shirt. It was like a security blanket that smelled comfortingly of home. The only thing he needed now was a cup of tea and something more substantial for dinner than a ham and cheese sandwich.

Jim had rationed out the food in the cooler and what they’d taken on the plane in their bags. It amounted to ten sandwiches, six bottles of water, Simon’s whisky flask, five granola bars, one Hershey bar with almonds, a bag of chocolate-covered raisins, and a pack of bubble gum. More than enough if they were being rescued tomorrow. If not…well, he didn’t want to dwell on that.

“You should get some sleep, Chief,” Jim said from the other side of the small campfire he’d made. “Almost done, man.”

Simon and Jim had almost come to blows after the whole incident with the shirts. The Captain wanted to go looking for help right away, but the Sentinel had insisted on setting up a base camp and doing an inventory of their supplies and gear.

“If someone’s nearby,” Jim had argued, “they’ll have seen the crash and will come looking for us.”

In the end Blair had been forced to intervene, siding with Jim. Simon had stomped off down the beach, leaving the two of them to construct a teepee with one of the salvaged parachutes. Jim had done all the hard labor, finding branches of sufficient size to use as poles and trimming them down with the knife Megan had given him. So for tonight, at least, they had a shelter big enough for the three of them that was also moderately protected from the elements.

Jim had also used a piece of plane debris to dig a rudimentary latrine, far enough from camp that it wouldn’t offend his sensitive nose. He’d been working non-stop all day and though he denied it, Blair could see the exhaustion on his face.

He closed up the journal. “Come on, big guy. Let’s get some sleep.”

“You go ahead, Sandburg. I’m gonna stay up, keep an eye on things.”

“The hell you are.”

“Sandburg…”

“Don’t you growl at me.” Blair ran a hand through his hair, wincing at the snarls he encountered. “You’ve worked harder than Simon and I put together. And I’m pretty sure we won’t be sitting
around soaking up rays tomorrow, so you need to rest.”

“That an order?” Jim asked, a look of weary amusement on his face.

“As a matter of fact, it is.”

“Okay, Chief. Back down. I’m coming.” Jim kicked sand over the fire, smothering it. Blair was sorry to lose the light, but the moon was nearly full and bathed the sand in a cool white glow. It was enough to help him find his way.

Simon was already asleep, curled up against the far side of the shelter. One of the remaining three parachutes had been used as a liner, keeping the moisture in ground from seeping into their clothes. This close to the shoreline the air was cooler, but Jim had found four blankets on the plane; they weren’t very big but would help keep some of the chill off.

Blair let Jim sleep near the door flap, knowing it would make him feel he was doing his Sentinel protection duty. He settled himself between his two companions, about a foot of free space all he had on either side.

“What do we do tomorrow?” Blair asked, pillowing his head on his arm.

“Recon. See if there’s anyone here on the island that can help us. We need to find fresh water, too.” Jim lay back, fingers laced behind his head. “Should be able to use my senses for both.”

“Um…do you think that’s a good idea?” Blair asked. He wasn’t sure that Jim should rely too much on the Sentinel senses, not until they figured out why he was acting so strangely.

“Relax, Sandburg,” Jim said, a slight edge to his voice. “It was probably that bump on the head, like you said.”

“I just think we need to, I don’t know, figure out…”

“Forget the tests. We have bigger problems right now, in case that escaped your attention.”

Jim was getting angry and Blair didn’t want that. He knew if he pushed, his Sentinel would leave the shelter and probably spend the rest of the night patrolling the beach.

“Okay, Jim. I surrender. I’m just worried about you.” Blair couldn’t see his friend’s face, but the softer tone put him at ease.

“I’m fine, Chief. Get some sleep, okay?”

“Sure. Good night, Jim.”

“Good night, buddy.”

Blair was sure he’d never get to sleep, not when his mind had so much to process. But almost as soon as he closed his eyes he was gone.

*o*o*o*

Jim was the first one up the next morning, and he took a minute or two to watch Sandburg sleep. He was still very pale, but a quick scan helped reassure him that his partner was physically fine. The thick square of gauze on his forehead was mostly hidden by his hair, the curls knotted up pretty good.
Very quietly he slipped out of the shelter and went to relieve himself. The sun was just coming up, and the colors streaking the sky were so incredibly beautiful and intense that he found himself teetering on the edge of a zone until a particularly strident bird call snapped him back. He returned to camp, pulling out his half-full bottle of water and using some of it to wet and rinse his toothbrush. While he did that he also ran a quick scan of the beach, but all he saw were bird tracks.

Jim wasn’t thrilled about the circumstances, but he couldn’t help appreciating the quiet of the island. Here there were no car alarms, no rumbling garbage trucks, no people crying out at the cruel hands of others. Despite everything, he felt much more at ease here.

More importantly, it would be easier to protect his Guide. They had no enemies here, no one to hold a grudge against one or both of them. Jim would never be able to forget the feel of Sandburg, cold and lifeless beneath his hands. He’d never allow himself to forget, because he never wanted his friend put in that kind of danger again.

By the time he’d completed his morning ablutions, Simon had joined him. They stood side by side for a long while, looking out over the water; another island was faintly visible on the horizon.

“Sorry for snapping at you yesterday,” Simon said after awhile.

Jim shrugged it off. “It’s a stressful situation. We’re all on edge. Forget about it.”

“Guess I’ll just take care of some business, then.” Simon headed off to the latrine, stopping only long enough to grab one of the two rolls of toilet paper that had come from the Cessna’s tiny lavatory.

Jim was fishing granola bars out of the cooler when he heard Sandburg’s heart rate skyrocket. He dropped everything and ran for the shelter. His partner was moaning and thrashing, blanket twisted around his legs, apparently in the clutches of a nightmare. Jim put a hand on his shoulder.

“Wake up, Sandburg.” He gave his friend a little shake, which only seemed to make things worse. “Blair!”

Sandburg came awake with a jerk and a strangled scream, terror stamped on his face for the briefest moment.

“Just a dream,” Jim said soothingly, his hand now moving up and down Sandburg’s arm.

“Sorry, I’m okay now.” And it seemed to be true. His heart was settling back to its normal rhythm and his breathing started to even out as well.

“Want to talk about it?” Jim asked uncertainly.

“No.”

“Oh. Okay.” He felt both relieved and annoyed that Sandburg didn’t take him up on his offer. “Well, I hope you feel like granola for breakfast.”

“Great. Wonderful. I’ll be out in a few minutes, okay Jim?”

He took the hint and left Sandburg in the shelter. But he kept an ear on him, to make sure he really was okay. His partner could be very self-contained sometimes, for as much as he ran his mouth.

Twenty minutes later they were as clean and fed as they could be; washing in salt water had left a film. Sandburg had his hair pulled back in a messy ponytail, and Jim didn’t envy him having to try and comb it out.
“First thing we need to do is get a sense of the island – try to determine if it’s inhabited.”

“So, what’s the plan?” Simon asked, seemingly pleased that they were finally doing something productive. “We could split up, each take a different direction.”

“Waste of time and resources,” Jim said with a shake of his head. “Better to let me do my thing, that way I can pinpoint a direction.”

Simon and Sandburg exchanged a look.

“I’ll be fine!” Jim huffed.

“Okay, big guy. I’m right here to help you.”

Jim turned to face the jungle and felt Sandburg come to stand beside him, placing the palm of his hand in the middle of Jim’s back.

“Just hearing and smell, Jim. We don’t want you getting overloaded.”

Jim nodded his agreement and leaned back ever so slightly, trusting his Guide to keep him grounded and steady. He stretched out with the two senses, closing his eyes for extra focus. The sound of the waves beating against the shore overwhelmed everything else until he catalogued and dismissed it, turning it into background noise the way Sandburg had taught him. He pushed his senses out into the jungle and he heard…everything.

A cacophony of bird song, each different variation needing to be tagged and filed and subsequently ignored. The chatter of monkeys and the grunting of some kind of animal – maybe a pig? Furtive movements of rodents, the almost inaudible scurrying of insects, the sound of the wind rustling leaves and palm fronds. He heard rushing water, which his nose told him wasn’t salt water – a river or waterfall, maybe.

Every noise, every smell, was a piece to the puzzle that was this island. But the puzzle wasn’t complete, and so he opened up his other senses one by one, stretching them farther than he ever had before.

*Jim? can you hear me?*

He could smell the earth, the sand, the individual scent of every flower. He opened his mouth slightly, catching the taste of salt and pollen on his tongue. When he opened up touch he could feel the mist of the ocean against his skin, and the breeze as it moved over and around him. There was a warm weight at his back that wasn’t part of the picture, but seemed to be part of him and so he accepted it and moved on.

*jesus, jim! what are you doing?*

He needed more, and so he opened his eyes, assaulted instantly with vibrant colors that he automatically classified and dialed down to a less painful level. He could see the veins of each leaf, the rough patterns of bark. He could see bees pollinating the flowers that grew where the jungle met the sand. He had the whole picture now, and it was as if the island was a living, breathing entity surrounding him.

*no, simon, don’t [whack]*

Using all his senses in a way he never had before, Jim was able to map out the entire island from his spot on the beach. It was all laid out at his feet, every tree, every cove. But now he wanted more. He
stretched out farther, mapping the ocean around the island, the currents, the sea life he could sense below the surface. The sky above him was impossibly big, a rich, deep blue that was somehow incredibly familiar. He started cataloging the clouds, the birds, the…

[bloodbloodblood]

Jim’s nostrils flared and he was instantly snapped back to awareness, brought back by a scent that didn’t belong. Blood. His Guide’s blood. He snatched at the hand that was under his nose, grasping the wrist and pushing it back. Blood dripped from a shallow slice across the palm.

“Chief? What the hell did you do?”

“Jesus, Jim!” Simon exclaimed. “What the hell was that?”

“Just a zone, Simon,” he replied dismissively. He was more concerned with Sandburg’s ashy pallor.

“You don’t look so good, Sandburg.”

“An hour. You were zoned for an hour.” He let out a shaky breath. “I could feel you drifting away.”

“What? An hour?” Jim carefully led Sandburg to the logs surrounding the fire pit, urging him to sit. “Let me clean that cut.”

“Your heart beat, your breathing…they slowed down. I was afraid they’d just stop.”

An hour. He’d never had a zone last so long, not once he had a Guide. It worried him a little, and he was sorry for scaring his friends, but he didn’t regret the experience. It had been incredible, being so attuned to everything.

Jim used the rest of his bottled water on Sandburg’s palm, before carefully patting it dry, applying some A&D ointment, and wrapping it in gauze.

“You couldn’t think of anything besides maiming yourself?”

“Hey, we tried everything else, man!” Sandburg protested, gaining some of his equilibrium back. “Simon even smacked you.”

Jim looked at his boss, eyebrow quirked. Simon just shrugged.

“When the kid starts to panic, so do I.”

“Did you find out anything?” Sandburg asked. Jim was happy to see he had some color back in his face.

“Yeah. It’s a good news, bad news thing.”

“Good news,” Sandburg said.

“Give me the bad news,” Simon put in at the same time.

The three of them laughed, dispelling some of the tension. As always, Jim deferred to his Guide.

“Good news is I know where we can get fresh water.”

“There’s no-one here but us, is there?” Simon asked, all traces of humor gone.
“Well, hey, that doesn’t mean help isn’t coming.” Sandburg jumped in with his patented optimism and Jim smiled at him fondly. “I mean, just ’cause this island isn’t inhabited doesn’t mean the others are too. I’m sure someone saw the crash.”

“I hope you’re right.” Simon ran a hand vigorously over his face.

“You’re forgetting the most important thing,” Jim said with a grin.

“What’s that, big guy?”

“Fresh water means proper bathing. Pack your soap and let’s get a move on!”

Thus rallied, they all hurried to grab their toiletries. Sandburg carried them in his backpack while Simon and Jim filled their bags with empty bottles and anything else they thought would hold water. In addition, Jim strapped on his shoulder holster. He’d filled out all the necessary paperwork to be able to transport his weapon with him to Australia, and now he was glad he did. Simon raised his eyebrows, but neither he nor Sandburg commented on it.

“Ugh. I can’t wait to wash my hair.”

“Good luck with that, Curly,” Jim said.

“He’s jealous of my luxuriant head of hair,” Sandburg confided to Simon in a mock whisper.

“Not after I watch you try and run a comb through it,” Jim replied, tagging his partner on the arm.

“That’s really harsh, man.”

Together, the three of them headed off into the jungle.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Another round of What’s-Up-With-Jim, for your entertainment! I hope you liked the zone-out scene, because I really enjoyed writing that. Blair is sure earning his Guide points in this story, poor guy.
Blair followed behind Jim as they made their way through the jungle, watchful and more than a little concerned. He was glad that the man had located fresh water, and understood that he could determine the distance to be just over two miles inland. What worried him was the fact that Jim seemed to know exactly where he was going; not a bit of uncertainty or indecision.

“You doing okay, big guy?” Blair asked. He watched the subtle clues that told him Jim was using his senses as they moved between the trees. Had he ever seen his normally tense partner this at ease?

“Fine, Chief. You keeping up okay?”

“No problem.”

Silence grew between them, to be filled with the sounds of the jungle – birdsong and monkeys and the wind in the trees. Blair barely spared a glance for the scenery around him. Jim held all his attention, as if just by watching he could divine what was going on inside his head.

_Tell the truth and shame the devil._ Alright, so it wasn’t only concern; there was a small amount of academic excitement there as well. Jim had gotten control of his senses years ago, and Blair’s initial enthusiasm for having found a true Sentinel had – not gone, exactly, but changed. Jim never was a good test subject, and had always seemed to resent his Guide’s attempts to understand the heightened senses. Part of it, too, was that he’d come to see Jim as a person and not just a thesis subject or big anthropology find. Had the bloom gone from that rose already? Somewhere along the line the senses had become commonplace to him, just another part of Jim and nothing amazing in their own right.

Of course, the last time the senses had gotten out of control was when Alex came to town, and Jim had shut him out completely. Which was probably why he’d been so eager to help Alex, who hadn’t even known what she was. It had been like the early days with Jim, full of the excitement of discovery. And that had blown up in his face in a spectacular fashion.

Now he was once again faced with something new, and he tried to temper his interest with caution. He didn’t know what was causing the über-Sentinel episodes, or what the hell kind of zone Jim had on the beach. He couldn’t come right out and ask, either. Jim was stubborn and reticent at the best of times, and these clearly were not the best of times.

“Hear that?” Jim asked, stopping.

Blair stumbled to a halt, listening.

“Water,” Simon said. “I hear it too. We must be close.”

They picked up the pace after that, Jim leading them unerringly through the trees. When they reached the source of the sound, Blair could only gape at the beauty of it.

Before them stretched an oblong pool of water, clear enough to see several feet below the surface. To the right was a waterfall, the water dropping a good forty feet from the cliff above. Surrounded as it was by the wild greenery of the jungle, it seemed to Blair like a secret, sacred place.

“A built-in shower,” Simon said with a grin.
“Age before beauty,” Jim chuckled. Simon glared at him.

“Last one in!”

Simon dug around in Blair’s backpack, coming up with his soap. Blair couldn’t help but laugh as he watched his two friends race each other to the lake, shoving like small children. He himself approached more slowly, awe giving way to trepidation. It was a lot of water.

Simon quickly stripped down to his boxers and waded to the waterfall with soap in hand. Jim waited for Blair at the edge of the lake, his expression hard to read.

“Who won?”

“Had to let the boss win.” Jim smiled. “You okay?

Blair took a deep breath and offered up what he hoped was a relaxed grin. “Sure.”

“Nothing will happen to you here,” Jim said softly. “I promise.”

For some reason his friend’s kind words only made Blair feel contrary. He was ashamed of his fear, though he knew he had a perfectly good reason for being afraid. He didn’t remember much about that day at the fountain, but he could recall with absolute clarity how it felt to be held under the water, lungs straining for air.

“I’m fine,” he said, a bit sharply. Jim merely shrugged and started stripping off his clothes. That was more than enough to distract Blair, who tried not to stare.

Jim the man was just as impressive as Jim the Sentinel. Lean and well-muscled, one was given the impression of coiled strength, ready to spring into action at a second’s notice. He neatly folded his clothes as he removed them, until he was standing there in his boxer briefs. With a sideways look at Blair, he waded into the water and then dunked himself, coming up wet and grinning.

“Come on in, Chief. The water’s nice.”

“What?” Blair choked out, but Jim was underwater again, swimming towards the waterfall. Had he deliberately used the words Blair had said in the hospital, when he hoped Jim would help him investigate the mystical side of being a Sentinel? He hadn’t been interested at the time. Blair shook his head and shrugged out of the backpack. It was just a coincidence.

Despite some deep breathing exercises, he was only able to wade in up to his knees before his chest started to constrict. He decided not to press his luck and washed up the best he could from there. He looked longingly at the waterfall when it came time to do his hair, but the water there was way too deep.

He tried to wash his hair as thoroughly as possible and load it up with conditioner to get some of the tangles out. He had to squat down and lean his head back to rinse it – he couldn’t put his face in the water. The cut on his hand stung a bit and he hoped there were no diseases floating around in the lake water; he didn’t need some exotic infection on top of everything else.

By the time he got done washing up, Simon was stretched out a few feet away, letting the sun dry him. Jim was doing laps. Blair used his pick to try and get the knots out of his hair, growing more frustrated by the minute.

“This is impossible,” he huffed, annoyed. He rifled through Jim’s pack and took out the survival knife. Seemed easier just to cut it all off. He had the blade to his hair when he felt a hand on his
wrist.

“Jim, it’s too knotted. I have to cut it.”

His partner took the knife from his hand and tossed it to the side, his expression stormy.

“No.”

“Jim, I…Jim?” Blair took a closer look at his friend, and saw that the Sentinel had taken over again. He didn’t know how he could tell, exactly, but there was something just a little bit…off.

The Sentinel released his wrist and grabbed the pick, settling himself down behind Blair. With a surprisingly gentle touch he began working out the knots and snarls.

Blair knew he should feel uncomfortable; this was not an activity two male friends normally engaged in. Instead, he found himself closing his eyes and enjoying the sensation of Jim’s hands in his hair. And trying not to feel guilty about it.

*o*o*o*

Jim gradually became aware that he had his hands full of Sandburg’s damp curls; those hands continued to move seemingly of their own accord, gently separating strands and untangling knots. He had a hazy memory of Sandburg and a knife, and figured the Blessed Protector had taken over again, though he was unclear about the nature of the emergency that precipitated it.

“…social grooming,” Blair was saying.

“Social grooming my ass,” Simon muttered. “I’m going to fill the water bottles. Tell Cheetah to wrap it up.”

Jim inwardly winced. Simon must think he was insane. But there was something undeniably soothing about running his fingers through those curls and clearly Sandburg had needed the assistance. And then he got a clearer picture of how the knife was involved.

“You were going to cut your hair?” he asked incredulously. Sandburg without the long curls? It was unfathomable. And a bit scary that he even cared about it. What difference did it make to him?

“Oh, hey. Welcome back.” Blair tensed up. “You can, uh, stop that now.”

Jim knew he should, but what the hell; he’d already embarrassed himself.

“Almost done, Chief. May as well finish it up.”

Blair gave a murmur of agreement, losing only some of the tension as Jim continued to work the last couple of knots. He was irrationally jealous of the Sentinel, which was the same as being jealous of himself; pointless, in other words. He’d never in a million years have offered to help Blair with his hair, no matter how much he may secretly have been preoccupied with thoughts of it. But here he was now, touching each springy curl, and only because the Sentinel part of him took over and did what he couldn’t.

Blair had certainly seemed at ease with the situation, and that was cause for thought. As much as Jim had come to terms with what he was, there were still moments when he wished he could just be normal, though they occurred much less frequently now. His biggest fear these days was other Sentinels.
Jim had thought he was the only one until Alex had shown up. The likelihood that there were others out there was high, though he hoped not all of them were as crazy. He was afraid of the way he’d acted around Alex, because he couldn’t explain it, didn’t understand it. He didn’t want to be at the mercy of Sentinel hormones again, but more so he didn’t want some other Sentinel to come and steal away his Guide.

He should’ve been keeping Sandburg closer, treating him better, but Jim was his own worse enemy. He often found himself doing the exact opposite of what he needed to do. It was a wonder he even still had a Guide, or a friend, with the way he’d been acting.

“Jim, we need to talk about what’s going on with you.” Sandburg pulled away and turned to face him. “Come on, man, talk to me.”

Don’t shut me out again. He didn’t say the words out loud, but they were still there, hanging between them. At a loss for something to do now that he couldn’t play with all that curly hair, Jim reached for his clothes and got dressed.

“I don’t know any more than you do, Chief.”

Sandburg pulled his knees up to his chest, seemingly in no hurry to put his own clothes on. His hair, now thoroughly detangled, hung in soft curls to his shoulders.

“When the Sentinel takes over…how do you feel? Are you aware it’s happening?”

Jim pulled his shirt over his head. “I don’t know it happened until it’s over. Like, I was swimming and the next thing I know I’m sitting here doing that…grooming thing.”

He could feel his face flaming in embarrassment.

“And you don’t remember anything?”

His first instinct was to say no, that there was no recall. But he didn’t want to lie, not to his Guide. They’d agreed not to have secrets between them and he was trying really hard to adhere to that.

“Not at first,” Jim admitted. “But then I get some flashes. I don’t remember everything.”

He sat down to put his socks and shoes back on, surreptitiously watching Sandburg. The younger man had his chin propped on his knees, a faraway look in his eyes as he processed this information. After a while he sighed.

“What we need is more data. The proto-Sentinel hasn’t shown up till now, so is it this place? Memories of your time in Peru, maybe? Was it the bump on the head? Man, there’s just so much we don’t understand about the human brain, never mind the Sentinel brain.”

“So you don’t know anything,” Simon remarked, coming back with full water bottles.

“It’s not like I have a lab or a library here,” Sandburg said defensively.

Simon put his hands up. “Don’t bite my head off, kid.”

“Sorry. It’s just frustrating, you know? I have no research options open to me here, and it’s all just guess work.”

“You’ll figure it out, Chief,” Jim said confidently. “You always do.”

Sandburg grinned.
“So what’s next, Jim?” Simon asked. “We build a signal fire or something?”

“Well, we can prep one if it’ll make you feel better.” Jim slipped on first his shoulder holster and then his pack. “We need to move base camp further inland. I know a good spot.”

“That doesn’t make any sense. We need to stay on the beach, so we can signal for help.”

Jim shook his head. “We need to be closer to fresh water, and there’s move cover around the far side of the lake.”

“But our rescue…”

“I’ll know if someone gets close,” Jim said, ignoring the intent way Sandburg was studying him. “But we can’t make this trek every day for water; it’s a waste of energy.”

Simon was clearly getting angry, but Jim wasn’t about to fold. He was the one with the experience, the one who’d shouldered the responsibility for keeping his friends safe.

“Damn it, Jim, we need to do something to facilitate our rescue!”

“Rescue will come,” he replied, wishing he felt as confident as he sounded. “Our immediate concern is survival. Those sandwiches are almost gone, Simon. We don’t have time to sit around debating this.”

Simon huffed and walked away, back towards the beach. Jim sighed and rubbed the back of his neck.

“Will he get lost?” Sandburg asked carefully, as if afraid of rousing his friend’s ire.

“He’s a good cop. He can follow our trail back.” Simon had taken all the water himself. Well, that would teach him to storm off. “You ready, Chief?”

“Yeah. Sure.”

As they walked away from the lake and the waterfall, Jim tentatively opened his senses up. It was as if the earlier zone had opened up some kind of pipeline; he was instantly aware of Simon’s location, wind direction, and the fact that there was a large sea turtle on the beach. He stopped walking, taking it all in.

“Jim?”

“Mmmmm hmmmm,” he replied absently. He zeroed in on the wild pigs, listening for their location. Besides fish, they’d be a good source of meat. He filed the information away for later.

“Jim!”

And now there was just the barest whiff of fear coming from Sandburg.

“You okay, Chief?” he asked, turning to look at his Guide, who was clutching his arm.

“No, I’m not okay! What were you doing? It was almost like you were zoned, but…not.”

“I found the wild pigs. In another day or so, we’ll have to do some hunting.”

Sandburg just stared at him, forehead furrowed. Jim tapped him on the head. “Sandburg?”
“You found the pigs.”

“Yeah.”

“What else?”

Jim shrugged. “There’s a turtle near camp. Pretty big.”

“Jesus, Jim!” Sandburg threw his hands up. “What the hell is going on with you? How can you tell there’s a turtle on the damn beach? And how did you know how to get here, huh? You didn’t make one wrong turn.”

He paced and gestured, growing more agitated with each word, and Jim could only grin. That was so Sandburg. His one constant, the one person he could count on to act the way he always did.

“Will you stop smiling at me and tell me what’s going on?”

“Geez, take it easy Chief.” Jim held up his hands. “Remember how you taught me to map out a building using hearing? It’s like that, only I used all my senses.”

Sandburg ran his hand through his hair and Jim had an instant sense memory of what those curls felt like.

“So, what? You mapped the island?”

“Yeah.”

“The whole island?”

“Yeah. And about a mile or so out to sea.” He said that with no small amount of satisfaction.

“Wow,” Sandburg whispered. Jim was surprised to see a look of wonder on his friend’s face; he hadn’t been able to impress him like this in a long time, and it felt good. He couldn’t help showing off a little.

“The detail is incredible. It’s like I can feel everything. And just now, when I opened my senses a little, it was all right there.”

Sandburg continued pacing and presumably processing. Jim waited patiently, doing a leisurely Sentinel scan just to make sure all was well with his Guide. Well, physically anyway.

“I wonder if it’s the jungle,” he said finally. “Your Sentinel abilities are off the charts, man. And that’s not even taking into account the split personality thing you have going on.”

“Can we walk and talk, Chief?”

They got underway again, Sandburg peppering him with questions that he tried to answer as best he could. The bottom line, though, was that neither of them knew why these things were happening to Jim. And that wasn’t likely to change.

“I need to write all of this down,” Sandburg muttered to himself.

“I don’t know why you…” Jim started to say, and then he could hear Simon’s heartbeat spike. “Simon!”

He took off at a run.
AN: Jim’s senses have certainly reached a new level, haven’t they? Poor Blair. I’m sure he’ll figure something out soon. Personally, I like the Sentinel. He knows what to do and just does it. LOL!

Be assured, there’s much more to come. I’ll just leave you with this thought – Jim just ran off and left Blair all by his lonesome in the jungle. Gee, I wonder what could go wrong? ::winks::
Chapter 6

Jim was running full out and Blair quickly fell behind, not having the benefit of Sentinel ESP to avoid things like snaking vines and half-buried rocks. He stopped and bent over at the waist, hands on his thighs, and tried to catch his breath. His recovery from drowning had been nothing less than miraculous, but his lungs had diminished a bit in their capacity.

“Or else I’m completely out of shape,” he muttered to himself. Maybe he should take Jim up on his offer to go to the gym, if they ever got home.

Blair shrugged out of his backpack and opened it up to get his bottle of water. He hoped whatever trouble Simon was in was minimal. Still, his friends might need him. He took one long swallow of water then bent over to close up his backpack. He reached out and put his hand on the nearest tree to steady himself.

“Ow!” Blair snatched his hand back, wincing. He checked his palm for a splinter, finding only a small, bleeding puncture wound; it burned like fire.

“Great,” he said to himself. “Now what?”

He looked closely at the tree and saw several spiky-looking caterpillars trundling busily to and fro. Had he put his hand on one of those?

“Only I would get bitten by a caterpillar.” Holding his throbbing hand to his chest, Blair slung his backpack over his shoulder and continued on to catch up with Jim.

The going was slow. He wanted to be sure he stayed on the same path, but he was no wilderness tracker. Getting lost was not an option; he didn’t want Jim to think of him as a liability out here. Suddenly inspired, he reached into the front pocket of the backpack and pulled out Megan’s compass. The beach was to the east, so if he kept on going that way he’d be in good shape.

He got moving again, though for some reason he seemed to be walking in slow motion even though he was trying to hurry. He could barely lift his legs and his whole body was starting to feel leaden.

“Jim?” Blair took one more dragging step and then he was just too tired to move anymore. “Jim. Caterpillar got me.”

He dropped down to his knees, unable now to even keep his eyes open. His last waking thought was that he really had the worst luck ever – survived a plane crash, killed by a bug.

*O*O*O*

Blair opened his eyes and found that he was still in the jungle. His whole body was sore, and he looked at his palm; the wound, though still relatively small, was red and weepy. Clearly that caterpillar was packing some venom. Was that why everything had a dusky blue tint to it?

He got to his feet, glad that the heaviness was gone, and looked around. Nothing here seemed familiar, and yet it felt like he’d been here before.

“Jim?” he called. In response he got a funny-sounding bark. Ahead of him on the path – had there
been a path there a second ago? – was a grey wolf.

“Oh, God. I died.” Blair and the wolf stared at each other. “I died again.”

Now he knew why this blue jungle was familiar. He’d seen it only once, during the vision he’d shared with Jim at the fountain, when Jim had saved his life. And his friend had talked about other jungle visions he’d had. He was in the spirit world.

“You are not dead, Shaman,” a voice called from further up the path. The wolf turned and loped towards it, and Blair followed. There must be some reason the spirits had brought him here and he was curious to know what that was.

The path led to a clearing and Blair froze when he saw the temple, the same one Jim and Alex had been drawn to. It should have been something to study, to learn from. How much information about Sentinels had been there, etched into the stone? But all he could see was Alex, trying again to kill him. And Jim, kissing her like none of it mattered.

“Why do you fear this place?” Incacha came from within the temple, standing at the top of the stone steps. The wolf joined him, sprawling at his feet.

“Jim was drawn here. I almost lost him.” Blair’s heart pounded in his chest. He couldn’t make himself move any closer.

“This construct of stone brought no harm,” Incacha said patiently. Blair could hear his words in English, but underneath that were the melodic sounds of his own native tongue, as if he were speaking both simultaneously.

“I’m afraid he’ll be called back here,” he admitted. He’d been left with more than a fear of water after Alex; he was afraid of the primal Sentinel urges that Jim had been unable to fight.

“There is nothing more for the Sentinel to learn here,” Incacha said with a knowing look.

“Why did you bring me here?”

“Enqueri is troubled.”

“Understatement of the year, man,” Blair replied dryly. “I don’t know how to help him.”

“He has become divided,” Incacha explained. “He desires that which he feels he does not deserve. It has pulled him in two.”

The Chopec Shaman could only be speaking of the über-Sentinel. Simon had sarcastically referenced Sibyl, but it really was similar to multiple personality. It was as if Jim’s higher brain and the part that belonged to the primal Sentinel had separated, acting independently of each other.

“How do I help him?” Blair asked beseechingly. “I don’t know what to do.”

Incacha shook his head. “Your animal spirits joined, yet the flesh does not follow. You have all you need. Let the Spirit guide you, Shaman.”

“But I don’t know how to be a Shaman!”

“Your heart knows the way.” Incacha reached down to scratch the wolf behind the ears, and then disappeared once more into the temple.

*o*o*o*
Jim sat next to the fire, his gaze never wavering from the unconscious form of his Guide. He’d been out for hours now, unmoving and just this side of feverish. Heart rate and respirations were slow, but not dangerously so.

“Any change?” Simon asked, coming to sit beside Jim.

“No.”

“You still you?”

Jim rolled his eyes. “Still me, Simon.”

He hadn’t been, though, not when he realized something was wrong with Sandburg. He’d lost some time again and came back to himself with his friend cradled in his arms back at the camp. At least this time the Blessed Protector had a valid reason for coming to the fore.

Jim didn’t know what the name of the caterpillar was, but he knew it by sight now and had warned Simon to be careful. According to his newfound instincts regarding this island, he knew it wasn’t venomous enough to kill but it could knock a person on their ass. Sandburg had been out cold for four hours. Long enough for Jim and Simon to fashion two rudimentary fishing spears. Tomorrow they’d try their hand at some surf fishing.

Simon poked at the fire with a stick. “I know I don’t understand a lot about this Sentinel stuff, but are you really okay? You’ve been making the kid nervous.”

Jim sighed. He knew Simon was worried too. But what could he tell him? He didn’t understand it either.

“Sandburg will figure it out. He’s the smartest guy I know.” He couldn’t keep the pride out of his voice, even though there was no real basis for it. He’d had nothing to do with his Guide’s IQ after all.

“Well, I hope he figures it out soon,” Simon grumbled. “Your alter ego is even less talkative than you.”

Jim snorted. He felt like he should apologize for adding to an already stressful situation, but it wasn’t like he had any control over his actions.

“I’m going for a walk,” Simon said after a while. “You okay here?”

“I’m good. Don’t go too far.”

Simon just huffed in reply. Jim tracked him for a minute or two, relaxing when his friend seemed inclined just to walk down by the shoreline. He’d had quite enough of the jungle for one day.

He turned his gaze back to Sandburg. Even out here so far removed from civilization he couldn’t stay out of trouble. Jim had thought he could relax his vigilance for a while, but that was a mistake. *Protect the Guide.* He wouldn’t forget again.

He fell into a semi-zone watching the way the firelight moved across Sandburg’s skin, but snapped out of it when he heard his friend’s heart rate increase. He was finally waking up, and none too gently.

Sandburg thrashed, flinging off the blanket Jim had draped over him. He started babbling seemingly random words – *no, wolf, how* – and it took Jim a moment to realize those words had been spoken in
Quechua instead of English. What the hell did that mean? He dropped down beside Sandburg and restrained him to make sure he didn’t accidentally fling himself into the fire.

“It’s okay, Chief. Wake up now. I’ve got you.”

Just like that the thrashing stopped and Sandburg’s eyes popped open. His chest rose and fell sharply as he panted for breath, but his gaze never left Jim’s.

“You with me, Sandburg?”

“Simon?” he gasped.

Jim stared down at him, filled with a mixture of disbelief and gratitude. That was his Guide in a nutshell, that one question. No concern for himself at all; he wanted to know if Simon was okay. Jim released his wrists and sat back on his heels.

“He’s fine, Chief. Just had an unexpected encounter with some wildlife.”

Slithery wildlife. Jim wasn’t a big fan of snakes and neither, it seemed, was his boss. The rather large snake that Simon had stumbled upon had frozen him in fear, though as soon as Jim was on the scene he knew it wasn’t poisonous. Just an extremely large snake sunning itself on a rock.


“Nice and easy, Chief.” He handed his friend a bottle of water and made sure he didn’t drink too much too fast. “How are you feeling?”

Sandburg seemed to contemplate that for a moment, staring at his injured hand. Jim had cleaned and dressed the puncture wound, and now he was sporting gauze on both hands.

“Sore,” he said finally. “And stupid.”

“Could’ve happened to any of us.”

“Didn’t, though. Did it.” With a look of disgust on his face, Sandburg got to his feet with only a bit of wobbling.

“I reclassified everything,” Jim said helpfully. “I have a better idea what the dangers are.”

“Of course you do,” Sandburg muttered.

Jim watched as he stumbled off in the direction of the latrine. He chalked up the grumpiness to his injury and tried not to take it personally that his Guide didn’t seem more interested in what he’d been able to do. It had taken a long time to go through all the plants, animals and insects he’d already filed away, letting his instincts – and perhaps the knowledge of the island itself – dictate which ones were a danger and which were not. His mind had worked on that while his hands made the fishing spear, multitasking at its finest.

Jim wondered at his own calm acceptance of the way his senses had expanded. He didn’t even mind, much, the frequent appearances of the Blessed Protector and that should’ve been much more worrisome to a man who liked to keep everything tightly controlled. Or maybe he could finally acknowledge that all his precious control hadn’t kept his friend safe in the past, had only pushed him away when he needed to keep him closer.

When Sandburg returned he was moving easier and seemed to be in a better mood. He asked about
dinner and Jim tossed him a sandwich. Simon wandered back up the beach and joined them.

“Welcome back, Sandburg,” he said pleasantly.

“Thanks.” He sat back against one of the logs arranged around the fire. “So what’s the plan?”

“Tonight we rest, conserve our energy,” Jim explained. “Tomorrow we’ll move our base camp closer to the waterfall. There’s a rocky outcropping nearby that will offer us better protection. We’ll also keep a secondary camp here on the beach, and gather what we can for a signal fire that we can light when someone gets close enough to see it.”

Simon nodded his approval. They’d talked it out earlier. “First thing, Jim and I are going to try and catch some fish.”

“I’ll need you to find something to cook them on or in,” Jim said to Sandburg, who nodded thoughtfully.

“Yeah, I can do that.”

Jim waited for more, but his friend had lapsed back into silence. Used to be he couldn’t shut the kid up and this stillness unnerved him.

“You okay, Chief?”

“What? Oh, yeah.” Sandburg waved away his concern. “I was just thinking about Selkirk.”

“Who?” Simon asked.

“Alexander Selkirk,” he explained patiently. “He voluntarily stranded himself on a deserted island, back in the early 1700s. He survived there for something like four or five years.”

“Five years?”

“Oh yeah. Lived off the land, made his own clothes, the whole deal. He was supposedly the inspiration for Robinson Crusoe.”

“I sincerely hope we’re not here that long,” Jim said. “Think of all the Jags games I’ll miss.”

“Yeah, funny,” Sandburg said, though he looked anything but amused. “We’re luckier than he was, you know.”

“How do you figure that?” Simon asked.

Sandburg shrugged. “It’s just, Selkirk was all alone. He’d just sit and read his Bible. Must’ve been incredibly lonely.”

Jim could imagine that only too well. Hell, he’d been living that way before his senses went crazy and he met Sandburg. He looked fondly at his two companions. Yeah, he was glad he wasn’t alone anymore. Especially here.

“Anyone up for a sunset stroll on the beach?” he asked, feeling a bit frivolous.

“Already had mine, thanks.” Simon pulled a cigar from his case and sniffed it appreciatively. “Think I’ll just sit here a while and enjoy a smoke.”

Sandburg stood and stretched. “I know I’ve been passed out half the day, but I’m exhausted. I think
I’ll turn in.”

Jim tried not to feel disappointed. Instead he just nodded and walked down to the water, letting the soothing sound of the lapping waves roll over him. The sky became layered with color as the sun went down. Reds and oranges of varying intensity stretched across the horizon. Jim let it all wash over him and felt some of the tension of the day slip from between his shoulders.

Simon and Sandburg were both okay. Another day and they were still alive and relatively unharmed. Tomorrow he’d have to do it all over again, but this time he’d be ready for possible dangers. He wasn’t losing anyone, not on his watch.

Not this time.

Chapter End Notes

AN: As usual, Blair finds trouble. Poisonous stinging caterpillar? Yup, Blair’s the one that finds it. Incidentally, my cousin had a run-in with a spiky caterpillar during a hike in Jean Lafitte Park in Louisiana. Not poisonous, but it sure looked like it hurt. One woman’s tragedy is another woman’s plot point. LOL!

Seems like Jim and Blair have quite a lot to think about. Let’s hope they get their mutual acts together soon. Fair warning – the next chapter is filler-ish, but the one after will have some action, I promise! Stay tuned!
Blair woke at dawn, panting and afraid. He couldn’t sleep without being assailed by nightmares; the plane crash mostly, as well as a new, horrifying version of Jim as the Sentinel, turning on him, hurting him. He flushed with guilt when he opened his eyes to see Jim looking back at him with a worried expression.

“I’m fine,” Blair said, holding up one hand. “Really.”

Jim clearly wasn’t convinced but he didn’t say anything, just nodded and ducked under parachute. Blair wondered how long he’d already been up, keeping watch. Simon was still snoring lightly on Blair’s other side and he was glad he hadn’t woken him.

Emerging from the shelter himself, Blair saw that it was another beautiful day in paradise. It was hard to appreciate it, not with the nightmare still echoing in his head and his hand throbbing from his insect encounter the day before.

Breakfast that morning consisted of a choice between the last sandwich or one of the two remaining granola bars. He chose the latter, hoping Jim would eat the sandwich; he was expending the most energy.

Simon joined them a half hour later, looking disgustingly well rested. Blair felt a pang of fear when the last granola bar was hastily consumed; what if they weren’t able to catch any fish? What if there wasn’t anything on the island they could safely eat?

“No time like the present,” Jim replied. “Sandburg, I’m going to need you to empty the cooler and fill it with water. That should keep the fish until we’re ready.”

“No problem.” Blair was glad to be given a task he could easily accomplish, because he wasn’t at all sure how well he’d do with the spearing. Not to mention the idea of standing out there in the crashing waves didn’t appeal to him in the slightest.

He watched Simon and Jim for a few minutes as they waded out into the ocean. There was something very primitive about the way they looked, bare to the waist and spears at the ready. Jim would have an advantage over Simon; his senses would alert him to the exact position of each fish. Blair felt a little electricity skate across his skin when Jim jabbed down with the spear and brought up a wriggling fish. He quickly turned his attention to his own chores, face flushed.

The cooler was quickly emptied – not much left in there now – and filled halfway with sea water to help keep the fish fresh. Finding something to use as a pan proved more difficult. He tried to think of how primitive tribes tackled this problem, glad to be able to put some of his knowledge to use.
Blair was finding it hard to focus, though. His eyes kept drifting out to Jim and Simon, and he wondered how many fish they’d caught and stuffed into the mesh bag that had once been used to keep Jim’s socks from getting lost in the laundry. He forcibly reminded himself that he had his own job to do; there was no reason to let Jim’s excessive masculinity distract him.

In the end he retrieved Jim’s knife and sharpened a few stout branches into spikes. For short-term consumption he thought it would work best to just roast the fish over the fire. He’d have to talk to Jim about setting up something so they could smoke whatever meat they caught, which would make it last longer.

“I’m gonna look for some fruit,” he said, knowing Jim would hear. “The cooler’s ready.”

Blair walked up to the treeline, being careful not to touch anything without looking first. He had no desire for another close encounter with the indigenous wildlife. There were some berry bushes, but he wasn’t sure how safe they were. He’d have to ask Jim, who seemed to be channeling the island in some extraordinarily creepy way.

Moving a bit farther into the jungle, he found some coconuts lying on the ground. He gathered them into a pile to take back later and kept looking. He was soon rewarded when he found a papaya tree, his mouth watering at the thought of sweet, fresh fruit. He studied the tree, looking for more of the spiny caterpillars because he was going to have to climb to reach the fruit.

“How, Jim, I found some papayas. When you’re done storing the fish come help me,” Blair said. He took off his sneakers and socks, and then attempted to see how good he still was at tree climbing. Pretty good, it turned out. He used his feet to tightly grip the trunk of the tree while he pulled himself up. A handful of papayas had been dropped down to the ground when Jim showed up, his shorts dripping and his skin dotted with droplets of sea water.

“Nice monkey impression,” he called up.

“Ha, ha. Catch this.” Blair dropped another papaya.

“Can I ask you something?”

“Not if it’s in any way related to primates.” Blair grinned, sending more fruit Jim’s way.

“How’d you know what I was doing? On the beach, I mean.”

“What?”

Jim sighed and Blair squinted down at him.

“How’d you know I was putting the fish in the cooler?”

Blair shifted a bit, getting better purchase, and tried to understand what it was he was being asked.

“Isn’t that why you had me fill it?”

“Yeah, but…you know what, never mind.” Jim scooped up all the papayas. “I think we’ve got enough of these for now.”

Blair shinnied back down the tree, then checked his feet for splinters before putting his socks and shoes back on. He’d pick the splinters out of his gauze wrappings later.

“I found some coconuts, too.”
“I’d say we’ve had a successful morning of hunting and gathering, Chief.”

“Yeah. I’ll keep on the lookout for more edible plants when we move camp,” Blair said. They came to the pile of coconuts and he gathered up three, hugging them awkwardly to his chest.

“Hey, Jim?”

“Sandburg.”

“Any more…uh…Sentinel spikes today?” Blair didn’t know why he felt awkward asking; as Jim’s Guide he needed to know what he was experiencing. On the flip side, he wasn’t sure he could take much more change right now.


“Throbs a little, but I’m fine.”

They walked in silence until they got to the tree line. Blair nodded his head at the berries.

“Those edible?”

Jim got closer to the scraggily bushes and sniffed at the small, round red berries. After a moment he shook his head.

“Stay away from them.”

“Poisonous?”

“Not lethal,” Jim said, shrugging one shoulder. “Just make you real sick.”

“How do you know?” Blair asked, curious.

Another shrug, and a subtle shift in his expression that told Blair to drop the subject. Clearly Jim wasn’t as comfortable with his new-found knowledge as he’d seemed the day before. Blair cut him some slack and changed the subject.

“Will we have time for a papaya break before we haul everything into the jungle?”

“Suppose so. Come see the fish we caught.”

*0*0*0*

It took the rest of the day to set up the new camp, and Jim had to push his companions to get it done even though they were all exhausted. He felt that it was important to get it all done today, though he couldn’t say why. Sandburg had complained good-naturedly, but Simon had been mostly silent while he lifted, carried, stacked.

The new camp was located on the west side of the lake, where an outcropping of rock created a natural hollow that was almost a cave and would offer much more protection from the elements. Being near fresh water – and running water besides – was a definite benefit and Jim knew how lucky they were to have access to it.

While he and Simon used the parachutes to enclose their new shelter, Sandburg got the fire going in the new fire pit so they could cook the fish. By the time it was ready to eat, Jim had dug a latrine, filled all the water bottles, and found a place off the ground to store their supplies.
“Sit and eat, man, before you fall down,” Sandburg ordered.

Jim might’ve ignored him simply out of spite but the roasted fish smelled far too tempting.

“Hot food,” Simon moaned appreciatively. “I missed this.”

Jim pulled a bit of white flesh from the fish skin and agreed wordlessly. This was so much better than the sandwiches, even if they had no lemon juice to put on it. He looked across the campfire at Sandburg, doing a quick scan. Both injuries on his hands were healing up well and he seemed relaxed, if not a bit worn out. Jim worried about his friend’s nightmares, but if Sandburg didn’t want to talk about it there wasn’t much he could do.

“So what’re you doing with the coconuts, Professor?” Simon asked around a mouthful of fish.

“Building a radio?”

“Funny,” Sandburg replied. “I’ll build you a radio just as soon as you two build me a nice little thatch-roofed hut.”

“I always thought that was a stupid show,” Jim said. “All the stuff they built and no-one could fix the boat?”

“Aw, come on Jim!” Simon protested. “Gilligan’s Island is a classic.”

He started singing the theme song and Sandburg quickly joined in. Jim winced and lowered his dial for hearing, his only defense against the off-key warbling. He knew for a fact Sandburg could sing better than that, and wondered if he was just hamming it up for Simon’s sake.

“You know,” his partner said when they’d finished. “There’s a popular theory that Gilligan’s Island was a representation of the Seven Deadly Sins. One of the pros in the Philosophy Department uses it in his class.”

Simon looked thoughtful. “Yeah, I can see that. The Skipper must be gluttony, right?”

“You got it. The Professor is pride, Mary Ann is envy, Mrs. Howell is sloth, Mr. Howell is greed, and Ginger is lust.”

“That’s only six, Chief,” Jim interjected.

“Oh, yeah. Wrath. That’s the Skipper, too.”

“Hold on,” Simon said. “What about Gilligan? The Skipper can’t be two.”


Jim couldn’t help but laugh. “Chief, it was a lame sitcom. Not Dante’s Inferno.”

“You can find these kinds of archetypes everywhere,” Sandburg explained patiently. “Just because they put a humorous face on it doesn’t make it any less compelling.”

“I always wondered why they brought so much with them for just a three hour tour,” Simon mused.

“Never know when you’ll need an evening gown on the beach,” Jim said, licking his fingers. “Anybody want to share a papaya?”

The three of them ended up splitting one, leaving just enough for breakfast the next morning.
Sandburg put the seeds aside to dry, explaining that their natural pepper flavor would make a good spice for cooking.

“I’m gonna see about hunting some of the wild pigs tomorrow,” Jim said. “Simon, if I leave you and Sandburg instructions, do you think you could rig up a smoke pit? Sandburg was right, that’ll be a good way to preserve our meat.”

“I think between the two of us we can figure it out,” Simon replied dryly. “Sure wouldn’t mind having a pig roast.”

“Well, I can’t promise you any hula dancers,” Sandburg grinned. “But I can score us more fruit. I saw a mango tree not far from here, and there’s probably bananas too.”

“How much longer do you think we’ll be here?” Simon asked, poking at the fire.

“I don’t know,” Jim answered honestly. “I’ve heard a couple planes, but they were way too high to be of any help.”

“It’s been three days,” Sandburg said. “Megan knows something went wrong. So do our friends in Cascade. People are looking for us, Simon.”

“I know they are, kid. I just wish they’d hurry.”

That put a damper on the conversation, and Jim stared at the fire, watching the flames leap and jump over each other. Once that might’ve made him zone, but he kept an ear on Sandburg’s heart beat to keep himself anchored.

As soon as the sun had set, Simon announced that he was turning in; there wasn’t much to do in the dark. Sandburg wrote in his journal the best he could by firelight, but he soon went to bed, too, leaving Jim out to keep watch. It’s not like he really had to, there were no threatening predators here, but it made him feel useful. He promised himself he wouldn’t sit up too long. After all, he had hunting to do in the morning.

*o*o*o*

Blair woke with a gasp, his heart pounding almost painfully hard in his chest. The dreams again, this time with Alex Barnes thrown in for variety. He was clammy with sweat and fear, missing his bed and missing home. Missing sleep as well, since it was still pitch black out. Most night noises were drowned out by the sound of the waterfall, and it made him a little nervous not to be able to hear if trouble was coming. There was sudden movement in the darkness, giving him another little jolt of fear until he realized it was Jim coming into the shelter from outside.

“You just turning in?” he whispered. He was worried about his friend working so hard and sleeping so little.

Jim crouched down next to him, felt more than seen, and leaned in close, breathing deeply.

“Okay…” Blair held himself very still. This was the Sentinel, not Jim. And he was sniffing around Blair’s face, his throat, his hair. He let out a huffing breath and stretched so that their hips were pressed together.

“Jim? Uh, hey, big guy. You in there?”

The Sentinel’s only response was to tug his Guide closer until the younger man was half-sprawled on top of him. Blair flushed to the tips of his ears, especially when Jim put an arm around him and
“Rest,” the Sentinel said.

Blair bit his lip against the wave of emotion that threatened to swamp him. He forced himself to relax, knowing that he couldn’t fight this primitive version of Jim, especially not without waking Simon and having to explain the awkward situation he now found himself in. The Sentinel pushed Blair’s head until it was pillowed on his strong shoulder. The implied meaning was clear. *Sleep and I’ll keep watch.*

Even when he wasn’t himself, Jim did what he could to keep the nightmares away.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** I know, not much action happening here. But I figured poor Blair needed a break, LOL! Plus, there was something important that happened…did you notice it? Those of you who are hoping that our favorite Anthropologist gets a chance to stop being rescued will have your chance soon.
Jim woke in the pre-dawn hours and all he could smell was Sandburg. His friend lay sprawled across his chest, snoring lightly, curly hair tickling at his neck. His first impulse was to hold him closer, his second to push him away; he did neither.

He had a hazy memory of Sandburg waking from another nightmare. It must’ve been what had brought the Blessed Protector out, though he still didn’t understand why this was happening, why it was so strong it just pushed him aside. Clearly Sandburg had needed to be comforted.

As slowly and gently as he could, Jim extricated himself from his partner’s languid embrace, earning no more than a few mumbled protestations before Sandburg slipped back to sleep. Feeling both relieved and dissatisfied, he left the shelter and stumbled over to the edge of the lake to get some water on his face.

He opened his senses to the island and realized why he’d felt so urgent about the move yesterday. The signs were all there for him to read – leaves that had flipped to show their undersides, animals acting outside their usual behavior, the heavy feeling of the air against his skin. A storm was coming.

Jim dressed quickly and quietly, wanting his companions to have more time to rest while they could. He slid into his shoulder holster, not bothering to pocket any extra ammo; he could get what meat they needed with only one or two shots. First, though, he had to get the wild pigs before they went to ground to ride out the coming weather.

As the first faint streaks of daylight revealed an already overcast sky, Jim slipped out of the camp, letting his senses guide him deeper into the jungle. Trusting Sandburg to stay in camp, he focused all his attention on the hunt, letting himself go for the first time in a very long time.

*o*o*o*

Blair woke slowly, enjoying the novelty of not having dreamed. He stretched, joints popping, and remembered lying curled up with Jim. Jim! Now he sat up, looking around, but there was no sign of his friend. Blair put a hand to his forehead and sighed. He couldn’t imagine what must be going through Jim’s head, waking up cuddled with another man. And he himself felt guilty for having enjoyed it so much.

Shaking off that train of thought, Blair left Simon sleeping and went out to look for Jim. There was no sign of him in the camp, though, and a closer examination of their supplies showed that both the gun and the knife were gone. He must’ve gotten an early start on hunting.

Unconcerned, Blair went about his morning ablutions. He dug through Jim’s suitcase for a change of clothes, making a mental note that they’d have to do some washing soon, the way they were going through them. He bit into a papaya, relishing the sweet flavor even as he noted with some concern that Jim hadn’t taken the time to eat before he left. He reminded himself that his Sentinel was perfectly capable of finding fruit on the fly.

When Simon got up, Blair took a quick trip into the jungle to find that mango tree he’d spotted the day before. By the time he got back, Jim’s big shirt used as a sling to carry the fruit he’d harvested, Simon had finished his own breakfast and was grumbling about the lack of coffee.
“Where’s Jim?” Simon asked, holding open his empty messenger bag for Blair to fill with the mangos. “He was supposed to tell us how to do that smoke pit.”

“I think he headed out hunting first thing,” Blair replied. The wind whipped up, tossing his curly hair in his face. “We’re going to get some rain.”

They both looked up, eyeing the darkening clouds overhead, and Blair closed his eyes against the sudden memory of being in the storm-tossed plane. He sincerely hoped he wouldn’t be adding a fear of thunderstorms to his already unmanageable list of phobias.

“I have a pretty good idea what we can do,” he said. “It’s similar to what the tribes in the Amazon use.”

Blair explained to Simon about making a type of miniature teepee with a fire in the middle and the extra parachute wrapped around the whole thing to keep the smoke in. The hard part was making do without Jim’s knife, but they did the best they could with Blair’s Swiss Army, stripping leaves off the slender lengths of wood they found. Simon sacrificed the belt of his flannel robe, which they tore into smaller strips to lash the teepee poles together.

“Not bad,” Simon said, pleased, when they’d finished.

“Yeah. I figure if we smoke the meat a couple days, it should keep almost three weeks. Not that we’ll need it that long,” he hastened to add.

The wind picked up then and Simon put a hand on their little smokehouse to keep it from blowing over.

“Better store this for now,” he said, carrying it into the shelter.

Blair pushed his hair out of his face, anxious now that the job was done and there was still no sign of Jim. A peal of thunder rolled through, heralding the first fat drops of rain. He turned and looked speculatively into the jungle.

“Great,” Simon grumbled. “Just what we need.”

“Can you batten down the hatches here, Simon?” Blair asked. “I need to go find Jim.”

“You think there’s trouble?”

“I don’t know,” he replied, though there was…something; he couldn’t quite work it out. “But I haven’t heard any gunshots and he should’ve been back by now. Maybe he zoned.”

“We don’t know where he went,” Simon argued. “All we’ll do is get lost.”

“I know where he is.”

“What? How?”

Blair shrugged, and Simon ran a hand over his head.

“I hate this mystic bullshit.”

“We’ll be back soon,” Blair promised. He grabbed a bottle of water and headed into the jungle. Like Jim, he seemed to instinctively know the way though he wasn’t at all as sure-footed. The rain, now coming down in sheets, didn’t help; he slipped and slid, all the while looking out for anything that might want to bite, sting or eat him. He couldn’t hear anything above the roar of the rain, but still he
moved forward.

Whatever instinct drew him on was unerring and soon enough he found his friend. Jim was crouched down, arms resting loosely on his knees, hands covered in blood. Blair had a moment of choked panic until he saw the wild pig at Jim’s feet, partially field dressed. There had been no gunshot because Jim had killed the pig with a crudely fashioned spear. His face was blank, his Sentinel in a zone as he’d feared.

“Jim? You in there, buddy?” Blair stooped down next to him and put a hand on his arm. “Follow my voice, Jim. Come back now.”

Lightening flashed, painfully bright even to Blair’s eyes, and was almost immediately followed by a thunderclap so loud he could feel it reverberating through his bones. Instantly, Jim sprang to his feet and reached out for the spear. Before Blair knew what was happening, he’d been backed against a tree, the sharpened wood at his throat.

“Whoa, hey Jim! It’s me!” He held his hands out, displaying the he was both unarmed and not a threat. “It’s me, Jim.”

There was a flicker of confusion in those blue eyes and Blair realized it wasn’t Jim he was dealing with. Better and better.

“Sentinel,” he said, hoping his voice conveyed some sense of authority. “I am your Guide. Put down your weapon.”

To his relief, the Sentinel lowered the spear. He stepped forward, scenting Blair’s neck, and then his eyes widened in surprise. He dropped to his knees, the ground squelching beneath him, and lowered his head.

“Shaman,” he said, his voice filled with reverence.

Blair blinked at him, water running down his face. Shaman? And then he remembered his fever dream, his vision of Incacha. He couldn’t think of anything that had been said or done to indicate a change, the change that Sentinel Jim seemed to recognize. But how else had he found Jim out here?

“Jim, man, I need you here. You need to shake this off.” Blair hauled the Sentinel to his feet and shook him. “Jim!”

His partner’s expression clouded over for just a moment, and then he shook his head as if trying to clear it.

“Sandburg? It’s raining.”

Blair laughed and dropped his head against Jim’s chest for a moment.

“You’ve got a future as a weatherman, Ellison.”

“What happened?”

“What do you remember?” Blair countered.

Jim looked down at the spear in his hand. “I remember wanting to get out hunting early because a storm was coming. But I brought the gun for that. I don’t…I don’t remember making this.”

“Something about the primal nature of the hunt must’ve brought out the proto-Sentinel,” Blair
mused. “You were zoned when I found you.”

Jim held out his hands, the pig’s blood reduced to pink rivulets in the rain; soon all traces of it would be gone. “Blood,” he said unnecessarily.

Blair understood that he was explaining what he’d zoned on. Lightning and thunder came again and he resisted the urge to clap his hands over his ears.

“Let’s get back to camp!”

“How did you find me?” Jim asked, talking loudly to be heard over the rising howl of the wind and the rush of the rain.

“I don’t know. Can we go now?”

“I want to know what’s going on with you!” Jim crossed his arms stubbornly, but Blair noticed he hadn’t looked him in the eye, not once since that first confused moment when the Sentinel left and Jim took over again.

“What’s with you?” Blair countered. “Why am I seeing the Sentinel every time I turn around?”

“You’re the professor, you tell me.” Jim’s lips tightened into a thin line, a sure sign he was getting angry, but Blair wouldn’t be put off. Not this time.

“Why can’t you even look at me?”

Jim raised his head and met Blair’s gaze for a half second before he had to look away; long enough for Blair to see the pain in his eyes.

“Look at me!” A plea now, instead of a demand.

“I can’t!” Jim cried raggedly, hunching in on himself. *Enqueri is troubled.*

“Tell me why!”

“Because you look like death!” He snapped. Then his eyes widened and he turned away, hugging himself tightly.

Blair stared at his back, shocked. And then understanding clicked in. He wasn’t the only one who’d come away from the fountain with horrible new fears, and now he could remember how often Jim made himself scarce whenever Blair took a shower. He didn’t have the slightest idea what to say, what to do. They’d never talked about this, not once.

“Jim.” Blair put a tentative hand on his partner’s back, grateful when he didn’t flinch away from that touch.

“I didn’t do my job,” Jim said, his voice choked. “I didn’t protect you. And you died! Even here…in the middle of the fucking ocean. The damned Blessed Protector has to take over because I…I can’t be…trusted…”

Blair put his arms around Jim, pressing himself against his back to offer some kind of comfort against the pain in his voice.

“It wasn’t your fault,” he said, his words echoed by a faint peal of thunder; the storm was passing. “I never blamed you.”
“You should have,” Jim said bitterly. “You should’ve screamed at me, decked me, something. You died.”

Jim was so tense Blair might’ve been trying to cozy up to a boulder. The words tore at him, his own pain still so close to the surface, but as always he put Jim’s needs ahead of his own. After all, Jim was the one suffering these weird Sentinel seizures.

“You saved me,” he reminded his friend. “You called me back.”

*Why? Why did you?* He wanted to ask but he knew how desperate it would sound. He’d had hope, after the shared vision, that things between them would change. That they could finally move forward instead of stagnating in all their usual routines. But Jim had retreated behind his walls, and if it hadn’t been for the extra, seemingly random moments of physical contact he might’ve accepted that nothing was going to happen between them.

The proto-Sentinel added a whole new wrinkle. Were his actions merely the primitive response of the Sentinel to his Guide, or was there something more? What had Incacha said in that dream? Something about Jim’s…

“We should get back before Simon comes looking for us,” Jim said, pulling away. He bent down and hefted the good-sized pig over his shoulder.

“We made the smokehouse,” Blair said, abandoning the other subject for now. If he pushed, Jim would just shut down completely. “We just need a pile of green wood.”

“Shouldn’t be too hard to find.”

“Never knew I could have such a craving for pork.” Blair sighed, imagining how it would smell cooked over the fire. Jim bumped him with a shoulder.

“Wipe up that drool, Sandburg, before you slip in it.”

The fell back into their usual joking repertoire, but Blair knew they’d be talking again, and soon. It’s not like they had much else to do while they waited for rescue, and he was tired of ignoring the space between them.

*O*O*O*

Jim sat on a rocky abutment halfway up the falls, watching his two friends play Gin Rummy with the deck of cards Simon had forgotten he’d packed. The conversation between them was easy, as it had once been for him and Sandburg. There was too much between them now, so many things unsaid. He’d revealed too much today, more than he’d ever wanted to. But then Sandburg had always been able to bully him into talking.

He took a deep breath, the smell of the roasting pig making his mouth water. He could remember a little of it now, the thrill of the hunt. Man versus animal. The Blessed Protector seemed to be thriving here, which was good for their survival but probably not for his relationship with his friends, especially Sandburg.

He knew he had to get over his thing about seeing Sandburg wet; it rained far too much in Cascade. Jim knew he couldn’t keep making excuses against it. It was just that those dripping curls, sodden and thick with water, flashed him right back to the fountain and Sandburg’s cold, dead weight in his arms. The fear of losing him, the guilt of his own culpability – they threatened to drown him just as surely as his Guide had drowned.
Mine. The Blessed Protector had said that, on the beach. Had claimed Sandburg in a way that Jim had never quite been able to. And for the first time he gave that the consideration it deserved and tried to work out for himself what the hell was going on.

*o*o*o*

The roast pork was succulent, thanks in part to Sandburg’s wizardry with the local plant life and the dried papaya seeds which added a little spice to the meat. There would be plenty left over to eat the next day, and strips were right now being smoked. Jim knew that helped put his Guide at ease, not having to worry about starvation on top of everything else. As it was, he kept monitoring his friend’s lungs for the slightest sign that all that running around in the rain would bring on an infection. So far, he seemed fine.

“Sandburg, I take back every bad thing I ever said about your cooking,” Simon said, grinning.

“Thanks a lot,” Sandburg replied. “I’ll be counting on your support when I open my new beachside restaurant.”

“Deserted Island Delectables?” Jim asked.

They all laughed and Jim let the easy camaraderie wash over him.

“If Rambo there could catch me some big enough birds, I could make a stew that would bring tears to your eyes.”

“As long as there’s no tofu involved,” Simon countered. “Then you’re on.”

“As long as there’s no tofu involved,” Simon countered. “Then you’re on.”

“Hate to break it to you guys, but there aren’t any sizeable birds here.” Jim pulled another piece of pork off his roasting stick. “No wild chickens and definitely no ostrich.”

“Yeah,” Sandburg said with a shrug. “No pot to cook it in anyway.”

“On the upside, Chief, no pot means no seaweed soup.”

“Hey, don’t cast aspersions on seaweed,” Sandburg protested. “It’s a leafy green so there’s lots of nutritional benefits there. Like spinach, only saltier.”

Simon grimaced. “I’ll pass, thanks.”

“I do miss those algae shakes,” Sandburg sighed.

“Hot showers,” Jim added. “And a nice, greasy Wonderburger.”

“Haven’t you detoxed from those yet?” his partner teased.

“I miss sleeping in a bed,” Simon put in. “Miss my boy.”

Jim and Sandburg exchanged a brief look. He sometimes forgot that Simon had family beyond the PD. For the most part, Jim and Sandburg had each other, and he couldn’t say with any honesty that he was missing anyone back home. Not really. He took a closer look at his companions, saw the exhaustion etched in their faces and knew it wasn’t just from all the manual labor; it was the emotional strain of the their situation, too. They needed a break, himself included.

“I think we should take tomorrow off,” he decided. “We’ve got food enough, the camp is moved – what do you say to some R&R?”
Sandburg looked relieved. “I’d say yes, man! Throw in a piña colada and I’m beach bound.”

“How about a bottle of refreshing island water?” Jim replied.

“Tell you guys what,” Simon interjected. “Since tomorrow is going to be our first holiday here, I might be inclined to share some of this.”

He produced a flask from his pocket and tipped it back and forth. Jim opened up scent and grinned appreciatively.

“Scotch. Bless you, Sir.”

“Wow, this is gonna be a party,” Blair grinned. “Wish I could bake a cake.”

“How about a fruit plate?” Simon suggested.

“Definitely doable.” Sandburg got to his feet and stretched. “Think I’ll take a walk before it gets dark.”

“Be careful,” Jim cautioned.

“I’m not going far,” his partner reassured him, and walked off into the jungle.

When he was out of earshot Simon asked, “What happened out there today?”

Jim shrugged. “I don’t know, Simon. I guess I went a little native.”

“There’s something going on between you and the kid. I can feel the tension, Jim, without Sentinel senses.”

“It’s complicated.”

Simon sighed. “It always is with you two. He loves you, you know.”

Jim started to run his hand through his hair but stopped at the last minute, mindful of the grease on his fingers. “Yeah, I know he does.”

“Do you…is it mutual?” Simon asked, sounding honestly curious.

Jim looked down at his hands. “Yeah. I do. For a long time now.”

“So what’s the problem? Are you worried about pressure on the job?”

“He deserves better,” Jim said softly.

Simon studied him for a long moment. “What about what you deserve?”

“I’ve already had more than my share. And I repaid it by tossing him out of the loft with no explanation. I let him die.”

“Come on, Jim. That wasn’t your fault. And you saved his life.”

“And look what I did with it!” Jim snapped angrily. “You were there, you know what happened. I was ready to fuck the woman who murdered my best friend! And he saw! Practically had his face rubbed in it.”

He buried his head in his hands. “He needs someone who loves him enough not to keep hurting him,
over and over again.”

“Jim, that stuff with Barnes, it wasn’t you. We all know that.” Simon reached out to put a hand on Jim’s arm but the other man flinched away. He stood, moving away from the fire.

“Don’t say it’s a Sentinel thing, okay? That’s not an excuse.”

“Jim…”

“Let it go, Simon. Just let it go.” Jim turned and walked away, heading back up the narrow path he’d found earlier, taking him up to his rocky perch. He sat up there and brooded, even while part of his mind tracked Sandburg’s movements through the jungle.

People always made it sound like falling in love was so simple. What’s easier than falling? But Jim knew the reality of it. Love changed things, and in his experience not for the better. It took simple friendship and turned it into a minefield. He knew he couldn’t keep Sandburg, not forever. Someday the diss would be complete and he’d be gone. Being in love with him would just make that loss harder to bear.

Jim stayed up on his lookout long after it turned dark. He saw Sandburg return from his walk and exchange some words with Simon; he didn’t dial up hearing to listen in. Simon went to bed but Sandburg stayed out by the fire, looking up in the general direction of where Jim was sitting; it was too dark for his friend to be able to make him out, but Jim could see his lips moving and so he opened up hearing.

“…come down and talk to me, big guy. I’m really worried about you.”

Jim sighed but made no move back towards camp.

“Don’t do this, Jim, please? Can’t you talk to me?”

Jim dialed back down. He didn’t want to listen to the disappointment in his partner’s voice. They couldn’t talk, not about Alex or the fountain or his damned feelings. Why couldn’t they just go back to the way things used to be?

Finally Sandburg gave up and went to bed, leaving the campfire burning low. Jim would go down soon, put more wood on the smokehouse fire and make sure the camp was secure. And maybe the Blessed Protector would let him sleep tonight instead of teasing him with an armful of Sandburg.

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The morning dawned bright and hot, not a cloud in the sky. Blair’s sleep had been troubled but blessedly free of nightmares, though he yearned for another opportunity to cuddle up with Jim. Typically, his friend had already been up at least an hour before Blair stumbled out of the shelter. He’d have traded all his possessions for a sleeping bag, something to offer cushioning between him and the hard, hard ground.

“Morning,” he said to Jim, who was checking on the smokehouse.

“Sandburg,” was the curt reply.

Blair sighed and gathered up his toiletries, going lakeside for a bath. He washed his hair as well, pleased that he was able to work the knots out himself this time. Not that he hadn’t enjoyed the attention but he’d prefer to have it from Jim and not his primitive lizard brain.
He watched the waterfall, little rainbows forming in the sunshine, and wished again that he was brave enough to step under it. His muscles could sure use the pounding; he was sore from sleeping on the ground and tense from worrying about Jim. He wished he could ask for a massage without sounding like he was propositioning someone.

Suddenly an internal alarm sounded and he whirled around, shouting “No! Don’t touch those!”

But it was too late. Jim had handled the mangos and Blair was already on the move, even as his friend hissed in pain.

“Get them in the water, now!” He pulled Jim back to the lake and submerged his hands, rubbing the palms gently with his fingers.

“What the hell?” Simon hurried over to join them. “What now?”

“Contact dermatitis,” Blair explained. “I forgot that some people could get that from touching mango skin. God, I can’t believe I forgot to wash them first!”

“Contact dermatitis?”

“It’s an allergic reaction, like poison ivy. Let me see, Jim.”

Blair pulled Jim’s hands out of the water and looked them over carefully.

“Not so bad. No blistering.” Jim’s palms were pink, turning darker red in some areas, and a little swollen. It could’ve been much worse. “Simon, don’t touch the mangos until I wash them.”

“You okay, Jim?” Simon asked.

“It’s nothing. Don’t worry about it.”

But Blair did worry, and berate himself for not taking the proper precautions. He’d had the thought yesterday when he picked them – his own skin was unaffected – but then he’d gotten distracted.

“Dial down touch, Jim.”

“I’m fine,” Jim said, catching his eye. “Relax, Chief.”

“Sandburg, why don’t you wash a couple of these things and slice them up, since they don’t seem to bother you. We all need breakfast.”

Simon doled out the assignment and led Jim back to camp. Blair gathered up his toiletries and put them away, hating that his negligence had gotten their holiday off to a bad start. He did what Simon told him – washed three of the mangos and used his Swiss Army knife to slice them so he wouldn’t contaminate Jim’s knife.

“These are good,” Simon said. “I don’t think I’ve ever had one.”

The sweet citrus flavor turned to ashes on Blair’s tongue as he watched Jim pick up pieces of the orange-yellow fruit with fingers that were obviously stiff and sore. He dumped the rest of his breakfast on top of Simon’s.

“I’m gonna go find those bananas,” he said. “I’ll be back later.”

“Wait! Sandburg!” Jim likewise pushed his food off on Simon, who cursed at both of them.
“Jim, it’s fine. I won’t get lost.”

“Will you wait? Please?”

Blair stopped walking, halted by the please. He let Jim catch up to him and waited impatiently, just wanting to be alone.

“What’s wrong with you?” Jim asked, clearly exasperated. “It was an accident, that’s all.”

“I’ve been a lousy Guide since we got here,” Blair sighed. “You’re going through a lot of stuff and I can’t do a thing to help you. And now your poor hands…”

“Geez, give the self-flagellation a rest,” Jim sighed.

Blair was shocked. “That’s not what…”

“It is what. Just because you’re my Guide doesn’t mean you know every last thing about being a Sentinel. No-one does, least of all me. You’ve always come through for me, but that doesn’t mean I expect you to know the answers to everything. Do you blame for the caterpillar sting?”

“What? Of course not!”

“Why?” Jim asked. “I could’ve sorted that sooner, known it was dangerous and warned you.”

Blair flapped a hand at him. “Fine, fine. I see what you’re saying, man. I just…I just need some time alone. Okay?”

“I’ll be keeping an ear on you,” Jim warned.

“Yeah. I know.” Blair spared him a half grin and walked off into the jungle.

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Jim’s hands were stiff, sore and just a little itchy. He supposed it was lucky they didn’t have much to do that day, because he’d be fairly useless. While Simon took a swim, he sat on the lakeshore and tried to figure out the problem that was Sandburg.

There was no doubt in Jim’s mind that his partner hadn’t been paying him the least little bit of attention, and then somehow knew when he went for the mangos, even though his back was turned. Just like he’d found Jim in the jungle when he’d zoned. How as he doing it? Was it the island itself, he wondered, bestowing gifts on both of them? Maybe Simon would wake up one morning able to read minds; Jim would really pity him in that case.

Jim, I’m going to the beach.

Blair’s words reached his ears and he focused his senses on tracking it back to his partner’s location. He was pretty close to the beach already, and Jim stretched his senses out to scan the shoreline and make sure there wasn’t any danger there. Much as he’d sensed the sea turtle, he could tell now that there was something on the beach that didn’t belong.

“Jim? Something wrong?” Simon asked, swimming over. Jim held up one hand, silencing him so he could concentrate.

Whatever the thing was, it wasn’t moving. Dead fish, maybe, wrapped in seaweed and tossed ashore by the storm? Definitely something organic. He felt Sandburg step onto the sand, marked his progress down the shore. And the instant he saw the thing on the beach, and Jim felt his revulsion
and horror, he knew what it was.

“Trouble on the beach!” Jim said, jumping to his feet.

“What is it?” Simon pulled himself out of the water and followed, pulling his shirt over his head.

“Dead body.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: Do Jim and Blair need an intervention or what? LOL! At least Jim is trying to come to some understanding about his feelings, instead of ignoring them like usual. And Blair is coming into his own special gifts. He sure could use the help. And now that they’ve touched on part of the problem Jim is having, how much longer until they really get to the heart of the matter?

So, dead body on the beach. I know what you’re wondering…has Todd finally washed ashore? Guess you’ll have to tune in to the next installment to find out! One thing’s for sure – even on a deserted island in the middle of nowhere, Jim and Blair can’t have a quiet day. ::grins::
By the time Jim and Simon got to the beach, Blair had covered up the evidence of his weak stomach under a pile of sand. Of course, there was no hiding it from his Sentinel, but he was kind enough not to say anything. He could feel Jim’s eyes on him, doing that scanning thing that always seemed so incredibly intimate, and he must have passed muster because Jim went right past him to the body.

“You okay?” Simon asked, hanging back.

“Been better,” Blair admitted. He couldn’t seem to take his eyes off the remains of humanity that had washed up on shore. God knows he’d seen his share of dead bodies working with Jim, but this was beyond anything he’d ever been exposed to.

“Is it Todd?” Simon asked softly.

“Couldn’t tell,” Blair replied absently, watching Jim inspect the body without touching it. He knew he should be over there helping, but he just couldn’t do it.

Jim walked back over, his face pinched and his lips so tight they’d almost disappeared. Blair was at his side in an instant, hand on his back.

“Dial it down, Jim.”

“Nothing to dial,” he replied tersely. “It’s not Todd.”

Blair let his breath out in a rush, relieved.

“You’re sure?” Simon asked.

“No doubts.”

“Can you tell…I mean, there’s not much left…” Blair stumbled over his words, and Jim slung an arm over his shoulder.

“Whoever he was, he was shot once in the back of the head.”

“Execution style?” Simon instantly transitioned from stranded beach bum to police captain; even his posture changed. If Blair hadn’t been so alarmed, he’d have found it fascinating.

“What are you saying? Someone murdered this guy?” He immediately scanned the horizon, looking for this new threat.

“Calm down, Chief.”

“Can you tell how long he’s been dead?” Simon asked.

“Between the effects of the salt water and the fish it’s hard to tell, Sir. A few days at most, or there’d be even less of him left.”

“This could be a problem.”
“What’s a problem?” Blair asked, feeling like he should already know. “What’s going on?”

“Pirates.” His partner had a decidedly grim expression on his face.

An image of Johnny Depp in pirate garb flashed through Blair’s mind before he got with the program. He’d heard plenty of stories about modern day pirates who preyed on tourists. None of the stories were good. Anyone traveling to Islands in the South Pacific or Caribbean on expeditions was warned about them.

“Can you tell if they’re close?” he asked Jim, who shook his head.

“I can’t go too far out, but all that means is we have no immediate concerns.”

Somehow Blair didn’t find that reassuring.

“We need to clear the beach,” Simon decided. “Get all trace of us off it.”

“Good idea,” Jim agreed. “They come through on a boat, they won’t see anything that’ll give us away.”

“If they’re airborne, we’re screwed. Plane wreck must be visible from the air, especially if they fly low.” Simon rubbed the back of his neck. “What do we do about this guy?”

The three of them looked back at the body, and Blair moved fractionally closer to Jim; the arm around him tightened.

“My first instinct would be a pyre, but we can’t risk that much smoke,” Jim said.

“Take a while to dig a proper hole without the right tools,” Simon mused. “We could cover him up with stones or something.”

Blair sighed. “We have to leave him where he is.”

“What?” Jim looked down at him, surprised.

“I know, it goes against every social more not to give this man a proper burial. But if those pirates do come here, and see him, won’t that be more proof that this island is deserted?”

Simon shook his head. “Scares me how your mind works sometimes.”

“That’s a good idea, Chief.” Jim nodded and Blair offered up a brief grin at the praise.

“Maybe we should…um…say a few words?”

“You have something in mind, Sandburg?” Simon asked.

Blair looked at the body, really just an indefinable lump from this distance. He knew plenty of death rituals from tribes across the globe, knew words of transition in several languages. But nothing seemed appropriate, so he spoke from his heart.

“I’m sorry we don’t know your name. And I’m sorry this happened to you. Whatever kind of life you lived, you didn’t deserve to end it this way. Most of all I’m sorry we can’t give you a proper send-off. But maybe you can help to keep us safe.” Blair lowered his head respectfully.

“Añanchaykin ñoqapi tukuy sonqoyki churasqaykimanta. Huq p’unchaukama.”

He raised his head to find Jim looking at him oddly, but Simon was just nodding his head.
“That was nice, Sandburg. What was that last bit you said?”

“He said, ‘I am very grateful. Until another day.’” Jim translated. “It’s something the Chopec say.”

“It is?” Blair asked, surprised. “I was just kind of making it up as I went along.”

“You were speaking Quechua.”

Blair stared at Jim, his mouth agape. He’d been speaking another language? One he didn’t even know? He wished he knew what the hell was going on. Panic began to wrap around his chest.

“Breathe, Sandburg,” Jim said mildly, rubbing the back of his hand down Blair’s arm. “We’ll figure it out.”

“I think I need that scotch now,” Simon said. “Let’s clean up the beach and get out of here.”

Glad for something to do, Blair jumped right in. “You can’t do any lifting, Jim, so why don’t you focus on clearing our tracks. Simon and I will take down the shelter and scatter the signal fire wood around so it doesn’t look stacked.”

“Sandburg,” Jim said, growling a warning. Blair refused to be intimidated.

“We can handle it, Jim. I don’t want you hurting yourself.”

“I’m with the kid on this one,” Simon said, backing him up. “You’ve been doing all the heavy lifting up till now. Let us do our share.”

Jim grumbled about being outnumbered, but he got to work. With his senses he’d be able to make sure they didn’t miss anything as they erased any and all signs that they’d been on the beach. By the time they headed back to camp, the only thing left that didn’t belong was the body.

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They managed to still have their holiday. Sandburg put together an array of fresh fruits, including bananas, on a tray made from a piece of airplane metal that he’d flattened as best he could. He’d also set up his MP3 player with the portable speakers, treating them to a wide variety of music that included blues, jazz, classic rock and Jim’s favorite Santana songs. Simon passed around the scotch and soon enough they were all feeling pretty mellow.

“I want a good, old-fashioned Irish wake,” Simon said.

“You’re not Irish,” Sandburg pointed out.

“So?”

“You make a compelling argument.”

“Thanks. What about you, Jim?”

He shrugged. “Just a regular funeral, I guess. Nothing fancy. No big speeches or anything.”

“Big shocker there,” Sandburg chuckled. “It’s your funeral; you should do it up big. Have one of those parades like they do in New Orleans, all jazzy and stuff. Live a little.”

“Can’t live a little at my own funeral, Einstein,” Jim pointed out. Simon snorted.
“See, that’s just the kind of rigid thinking that keeps you color coding the leftovers,” Blair replied.

“And I suppose you want to have some kind of tribal burial somewhere like Borneo or Katmandu, right?”

“I’ll be wherever you are,” was the off-hand reply. “Hey, Simon, pass me some papaya.”

Jim just stared at his friend, at a loss for words. Sandburg’s response had been so casual it had to be true, though he probably wouldn’t have said it if not for the scotch loosening his tongue. Did he really think they’d be together up till the end? Jim was surprised at how warm that made him feel inside.

“Naomi wants to be cremated,” Sandburg said. “A lot of tribes see that as the best way to send your spirit to the afterworld.”

Jim wondered if his afterlife would be the blue jungle. Maybe he’d spend eternity in the body of the panther, running between the trees. He thought that might not be so bad if the wolf was there, too.

“Do you have a will?” Simon asked. “I do. Had to change it after the divorce.”

Sandburg shrugged. “I don’t have anything to leave anyone, so no. But I bet Mr. Balanced Checkbook has one.”

“Sure. Because I’m a responsible adult,” Jim replied with a grin. He didn’t bother mentioning that a lot of what he had, including the loft, would be going to Sandburg; he’d made that change even before Alex.

“You ever think about how it’ll happen?” Sandburg asked, chewing thoughtfully on a wedge of mango. “I never considered drowning. Killed by angry natives, maybe.”

“That was a bad day,” Simon sighed.

“Except for Naomi, everyone I loved was there. Not a bad way to go, all things considered.”

“Stop it!” Jim snapped. “I don’t want to talk about that.”

Sandburg glowered at him. “Yeah? Well maybe I do. I’m the one who died.”

“Sandburg, enough.”

But he wouldn’t stop talking and Jim couldn’t stop himself from hearing it, no matter how much he wanted to dial down to nothing.

“You want to know what it’s like to die? It hurts. It hurts a lot. There’s pain and fear and helplessness, and it’s horrible. But then there was you, offering me a way home, pulling me out of the dark. It was a fucking miracle, man. Not talking about it doesn’t change the fact that it happened, that it means something.”

“How do you do that?” Jim asked, his skin flushed with his anger. “How do you ignore everything that came before and after?”

Sandburg looked at him with sad, sad eyes. “There’s no-one else in my life who could do what you did. No-one who would even try.”

“I’m the reason it happened at all!” Jim was desperate to make him understand, to show him how wrong it was to forgive him so easily. He wasn’t expecting Sandburg to explode into motion, surging
forward and pushing him with both hands so that Jim almost fell, tripping over his own feet.

“Why do you have such a hard time assigning blame where it belongs, man? You didn’t talk to me, I didn’t push. I kept a huge secret from you, and you threw me out. The whole situation was fucked up, can’t you see that?” Blair shoved him again and Jim made no move to stop him. “Alex killed me. And no matter what we might have done differently, the end result would be the same.”

Jim planted his feet and gave Sandburg a shove this time, though it hurt his hands to do it.

“So, what? It was your destiny to die? I don’t buy that bullshit, Chief. If we’d done things differently, I’d have been ready to fight her. She’d never have gotten near you.”

Sandburg shook his head in denial. “No. I can’t…I don’t accept that.”

“Now who’s the one in denial?” Jim laughed, the sound harsh and bitter to his ears. “I was so afraid for you, so worried I was gonna do something to hurt you. And I did.”

“No, you didn’t!”

“I dreamed I shot a wolf. I killed it. And the wolf turned into you.” Jim had never told him about that vision, the thing that had been the catalyst for everything that followed.

Sandburg sat down, heavily, as if he simply couldn’t stand anymore. “You never told me,” he whispered.

“I couldn’t. I was… I was too…afraid.” Even as he confessed his weakness, Jim berated himself for it. Had he thought his Guide wouldn’t understand? He could see now how it would’ve gone down – he’d tell Sandburg, who would tease him to help put him at ease. And then he’d have tackled the problem, worried it until a solution presented itself. “I’m sorry, Blair.”

Sandburg looked up at him, eyes too bright with unshed tears. “We both made mistakes, Jim. We can keep letting this eat away at us, or we can move on. There’s no changing the past.”

Jim could read so many emotions on his friend’s face; always could. He could feel answering emotions in himself – need, desire, fear. He told himself he couldn’t have what he wanted; it would just be one more way to shackle his Guide to him. Hadn’t he already done enough to Sandburg? It was a fight he was used to waging with himself.

“Jim…”

It was the broken entreaty that did it. This time when the Blessed Protector rose up, Jim could feel it coming. And he welcomed it.

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Blair watched, equal parts horrified and amazed as Jim’s face blanked out, all of the roiling emotion draining from his eyes. Then his friend was gone and there was only the Sentinel, standing alert and sniffing at the air.

“You fucking coward,” Blair whispered, feeling more disappointed than he could ever recall. The Sentinel squatted next to him, scenting up his neck, and Blair pushed him away.

“I don’t want the damn Sentinel, Jim!” he shouted. “I want you, you dick!”

He got up, trying to put some space between himself and the primitive Jim, which didn’t go over too
well. Simon watched, a weary expression on his face, and Blair was surprised to realize that he’d forgotten all about the other man while he’d been arguing with Jim.

“Give it up, kid. He’s not gonna stop chasing you.” Simon tipped the flask, catching the last drops of scotch on his tongue.

“This has got to stop, Simon.” Blair ducked out from under the Sentinel’s reaching arm. “I know Jim’s a master of avoidance but this is out of control.”

“Not disagreeing with you.”

“God, I would love to go and kick the ass of everyone who made him feel like he wasn’t good enough, especially his father.”

The Sentinel finally made a grab that landed and pulled Blair to his chest, patting and petting him as if to calm him down. Blair sighed.

“I just don’t understand why he needs to hide things from me,” he said, reluctantly resting his head on the Sentinel’s chest. “I know I screwed up, Simon. We all know that. I guess he just can’t trust me anymore.”

“Mine,” the Sentinel said.

“Yeah, I know.”

“You two are prime idiots,” Simon said, amusement in his voice.

“What?”

“Idiots,” he repeated. “You both want the same thing but you can’t get past all your baggage. Sad.”

“You don’t know…”

“Don’t I? Who knows your relationship better than me? I was there when it started, Sandburg. I know what you two go through, at least some of it.” Simon rubbed a hand over his face. “I may not understand it, but I’m not blind either.”

Blair closed his eyes. He’d always had this fantasy where Jim turned to him one day, said his name in that special way he sometimes did, and then kissed him. He knew it couldn’t happen. Jim was a heterosexual cop, rigid in his rules. The fact that he’d let Blair live with him, and relaxed enough to let himself be a friend, was amazing. And it should have been enough. But ever since the shared vision Blair had been wanting more, craving a closeness he couldn’t ask for.

The proto-Sentinel was probably just a sign that Jim was too over-taxed, emotionally and physically. And all the extra attention he lavished on his Guide was probably just a primitive response to that relationship, much the way that Jim had been drawn to Alex, almost against his will. In the end, it really meant nothing.

“Nature calls,” Simon said, getting up and heading for the latrine. Now that he’d mentioned it Blair was more aware of the pressure on his own bladder. It wasn’t anything too dire, not yet, and so he let himself be cuddled a while longer, hating that he needed it.

“Sentinel,” he said. “Do you…do you love the Guide?”

There was a rumble in the chest beneath his cheek that he could’ve sworn was a purr. “Mine.”
“Yours,” Blair agreed. And felt his heart breaking.

Chapter End Notes

AN: So…not Todd. Don’t worry, there will be Todd closure at some point. I promise I won’t leave you hanging!

Jim and Blair are having some very good arguments, getting things out in the open and all that. But they certainly can’t go on like this much longer, and I’m sure Simon is about ready to beat his own head in with a rock. Poor guy.
Chapter 10

Blair stood on the beach, bare feet warm in the sand. The sun was slowly dipping down on the horizon, filling the sky with every tonal variety of red – pink, crimson, orange. Despite everything it was very beautiful on the island; a nice place to visit but he wouldn’t want to live there.

He was so lost in the view that he didn’t hear Jim com up behind him, and gave a little start of surprise when his friend wrapped strong arms around his waist and nuzzled at his neck. Blair sighed. It was the Sentinel, not Jim, who held him tightly and scented his neck and up in to his hair.

“Hey there, Sentinel Jim.” Blair leaned back into the embrace; he wasn’t strong enough to fight it anymore. “God, this is so hard.”

“For me too, Chief.” Jim murmured in his ear.

Blair froze, heart pounding painfully in his chest. “Jim?”

“I decided it was time my Sentinel and I got on the same page.”

He turned slowly within the safe embrace, and rested his palms on Jim’s chest. He had to see his friend’s face, he had to be certain.

Cold washed over him, terror freezing him in place. Because Jim had no face at all, just a smooth and unbroken countenance of skin.

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Jim’s sleep had been troubled and broken. He was filled with some sort of free-floating anxiety that he couldn’t pin down and Blair’s question – Does the Sentinel love the Guide? – had echoed over everything. He finally gave up on sleep and lay there in the pre-dawn gloom listening to his companions breathing. Simon had a staccato snore buzzing from the far end of the shelter. Closer, Sandburg was twitching in his sleep, face pinched. Bad dream?

Tentatively, Jim reached out and put his hand on Sandburg’s head. Almost immediately his friend stilled and his face relaxed. Jim wondered what he was dreaming of, to feel so scared.

Does the Sentinel love the Guide? It wasn’t a difficult question to answer, at least on the surface. Of course he loved Sandburg; he had for a long time. And he knew his friend was attracted to him as well, there was plenty of physical evidence for a Sentinel to read. In some respects it would be very easy to take his relationship with Sandburg to the next level.

The problem, at least for Jim, was that he wasn’t sure that change in their relationship would be the best thing for Sandburg. He’d already given up so much to be Jim’s Guide, was it fair to ask for the rest of it? The kid had stuck around for longer than Jim ever thought he would, but that could change at any time. Would being Jim’s lover be the final nail in the coffin of Sandburg’s life, keeping him irrevocably tied to Cascade?

Or maybe you’re just too afraid, he derided himself. He was so dependent on Sandburg, and not just with the senses; the younger man helped keep him on an even keel, cared enough about him to nag about eating healthy, and always freely offered his friendship and companionship. If Sandburg left
him now, he’d be wrecked. He knew he was being selfish. This was a conversation that his friend shouldn’t be excluded from.

With a sigh, Jim pulled his hand from Sandburg’s head and left the shelter. The sun still wasn’t up but he could hear the island waking. He opened up his senses and sent them spiraling out, checking the perimeter; almost immediately he noticed something was wrong and arrowed straight into the jungle.

The Blessed Protector had set traps – pits, sharpened sticks, even a swinging log set off by a tripwire like something out of an Indiana Jones movie. Jim stood at the edge of one of the pits, looking down at the spikes inside with a kind of horrified wonder. He had no memory of doing this, not even the hazy recall that usually followed a visit from his alter ego. What if Simon or Sandburg had come out here?

“Jim?” Speak of the devil, here came Simon now. Jim moved to head him off.

“Stay where you are, Simon. I’ll be with you in a sec.” He made his way to the edge of the jungle, where Simon waited patiently.

“Morning.”

“Where’s Sandburg?”

“Still sleeping. There a problem?”

Jim sighed. “My evil twin set some traps out here; apparently he’s worried about something.”

Simon crossed his arms over his chest. “This isn’t good news, Jim.”

“I know,” Jim replied wearily. “Believe me, I know.”

“You gonna leave them?”

“Yeah, I think so. I can give you a route around them, but my instincts say we’ll need them.”

“I hope you’re wrong,” Simon said.

“So do I.”

*o*o*o*

The morning was spent doing chores. Jim and Simon did more fishing, well up the beach from where they’d had their first camp. Blair volunteered to do some laundry, using body wash in place of detergent. He hung the wet clothes from every possible surface and hoped they’d dry quickly. When he finished it looked like a gypsy camp.

At a loss for something else to do, Blair decided to explore. He skirted the edge of the lake until he found the trail that Jim used to climb up to the rock ledge that overlooked the camp. He moved carefully, mindful of loose rocks. It was worth the effort; the view was lovely from up there, though he kept as far from the edge as possible. He could see the whole camp, and a good portion of the jungle. If he squinted he could just make out the ocean, though the beach was hidden from his view.

Blair closed his eyes and folded himself into the lotus position. He let the steady roar of the waterfall become his focus, blocking out everything else. One by one he relaxed all of his muscle groups until he felt completely pliant and at ease. He let external stimuli wash over him as he endeavored to
empty his mind; not the easiest task for him.

Eventually the waterfall became part of the background, letting in birdsong, the hum of insects, and the rustling of leaves in the gentle breeze. With the new part of his Guide-mind he was able to sense that Jim was on the beach, not moving. Probably talking to Simon. Blair tried to feel for the Captain, but he could only lock on to Jim. It was fun to play with this new skill for a few minutes, but when Jim continued to do nothing but stand around he grew bored and drew his focus back to the waterfall.

Blair contemplated the changes that he and Jim were going through. Would they continue to develop once they were home, or would these new found skills fade away once they were off the island? It was possible that their primitive instincts had risen to the surface because of the survival situation and wouldn’t be needed once they’d been rescued. He hoped that wasn’t the case; he liked his new connection with Jim. Particularly since they weren’t doing so well with the verbal stuff right now. Maybe it would be the only level of intimacy they’d ever have, and he was loathe to give it up if that was indeed the case.

Nothing he’d read on Sentinels had hinted at the levels of sensitivity that Jim was experiencing right now. Information about Guides was almost non-existent – Sentinels always stole the spotlight – and he had no doubt there would be nothing to find about his ability to sense Jim’s location. He was filling up his journal and hoped that when they got back home he’d have some luck interpreting the data.

Blair’s Jim-sense flared and he knew that his companions were on their way back from the beach, hopefully with lots of fish that they could smoke and save. He thought he might consult with Jim on some of the leafy green plants that grew nearby to see if they were dangerous; if not it would be nice to fashion some kind of salad. They couldn’t keep living on meat and fruit alone, though he acknowledged how lucky they were to have both.

He took a couple of cleansing breaths and opened his eyes, blinking at the bright sunshine. Blair decided that he’d check the stockpile of green wood for the smoke house and add to it if necessary. He didn’t have any problem doing the domestic thing around camp while Simon and Jim did the manly-man hunting and fishing; he certainly had no interest in killing pigs, much as he enjoyed eating them.

On a whim he edged up to the end of the rock shelf and looked down; instant vertigo. He was reminded of another time he stood on the edge of a cliff, and how poorly that had turned out. The people who talked about the exhilaration of falling were insane.

He took one cautious, sliding step backwards and turned around, only to find himself face to face with a screeching bird, blue wings flapping angrily.

“Jesus!” It wasn’t a particularly large bird, but it was close enough to Blair’s face that the pointed beak and sharp talons looked enormous. Without realizing what he was doing he stepped backwards, hands held up in front of his face.

“All off!” he shouted, but the bird just kept at him like he had a personal vendetta against the anthropologist. Talons connected with his skin, drawing blood from several shallow slashes. His next backwards step met with open air and his skin was flushed with fear as his arms pinwheeled madly. All he could think as he fell into space was not again.

*o*o*o*

“You mind taking the fish back?” Simon asked as they stood on the beach.
“Where you going?” Jim held the net bag of fish in one hand and his spear in the other.

Simon gestured up the beach. “You might know everything there is to know about this island, but I’d like to see some of it for myself.”

“You have water?”

“And my pointy stick. I think I’ll be fine, Jim.”

“You’re the boss,” Jim grinned. “Watch out for caterpillars.”

They parted ways and he headed back to camp. He wondered how much progress Sandburg had made with the laundry; Jim was pretty sure he got off easy doing the fishing. A washer and dryer were only two of the many appliances he was missing, the foremost being a coffee maker.

He was suddenly suffused with a fear that wasn’t his own. Jim dropped the fish and ran, senses open and out until he got a general sense of the problem. A bird, one he wasn’t familiar with, but it was small and harmless. He started to formulate some teasing comments when fear became terror and Jim could sense that Sandburg was falling.

“Not again,” he said through clenched teeth, putting on speed.

He heard his Guide hit the water and now the fear was his own as memories of a cold and lifeless body filled his mind. When he finally reached the camp he was momentarily disoriented by all the hanging clothes that flapped in the breeze. Sandburg was floundering in the lake, his own memories of drowning likely hampering his efforts to swim to safety.

Jim dove into the water after hastily kicking off his shoes. With just a few powerful strokes he was able to reach Sandburg, who was choking and flailing. The frightened man pulled them both under and Jim shook him off, catching him around the chest with one arm instead.

“Calm down, Blair! I’ve got you.” He swam for the rock shelf behind the waterfall, which was closer now than the shore. He sat Sandburg down on it and joined him, waist deep in the water. He ran his hands over his Guide, looking for injuries.

Sandburg coughed up the water he’d swallowed, arms wrapped around his stomach. Jim didn’t find any injuries but couldn’t stop touching to reassure himself that this friend was alive and breathing; that this time he hadn’t been too late.

“Nice and easy, Chief.” Jim rubbed his back and pushed wet curls out of his face. “You’re okay. It’s okay.”

And now he was the one shaking from the close call, enough so that Sandburg reached out and put a comforting hand on his arm. It was too much. Jim could feel the Blessed Protector struggling to rise up in him but this time he ruthlessly beat him back. His Guide didn’t deserve to be abandoned that way; he deserved so much more.

“Yes,” he said, and that one word liberated him of his doubts and worries and fears. He pressed a kiss to Sandburg’s forehead. “Yes, God. Yes.”

Jim kissed his friend everywhere but his mouth, feeling positively giddy. He tasted his Guide properly for the first time, using his lips to soothe away the hurts until he could taste something else – arousal, hope, affection.

“Jim?” Sandburg whispered, his eyes wide and his hands clutching Jim’s shoulders. “What?”
Jim cradled his friend’s head in his hands and looked at him with unbridled adoration. “Yes. The Sentinel loves the Guide.”

He leaned in and kissed Sandburg full on the mouth, reveling in his full, wet lips. And sank into that welcoming softness until he knew nothing else.

*O*O*O*

It took Blair a minute or two to realize that Jim had grown still. When he pulled back he saw that his Sentinel had zoned mid-kiss, eyes closed and lips pursed.

“Oh, man,” Blair muttered. He took the opportunity to catch his breath, both literally and figuratively. One minute he’d been certain he was going to die, caught in a terrifying flashback of that day at the fountain, and the next his deepest wish seemed to have come true; he needed time to switch gears.

He rested his forehead against Jim’s and closed his eyes. What if this was just a reaction? What if his friend was just tripping on adrenalin? Of course, there had been plenty of similar circumstances throughout their friendship and kissing had never been involved.

Blair sat there, wet but warm, and wondered what the hell he was going to do. What had changed? Jim had rescued him, not the proto Sentinel, and that was certainly different. He decided the only way to know for sure was to go to the source.

“Jim? Can you hear me, big guy?” Blair took his friend’s hands in his own and squeezed them. “Follow my voice back, Jim. I really need to…”

“Blair,” Jim groaned. He opened his eyes and blinked dazedly.

“You zoned on me, man. And not at the best time.” Blair tried to make a joke of it, but he was feeling too uncertain to pull it off. “I think we need to…”

He was going to say talk, but apparently Jim was ready to pick up where they left off because his lips were on Blair’s again and he was holding him tightly. Okay, so maybe talking was overrated. Blair opened up to Jim, deepening the kiss and shivering now from the wonder of his friend’s tongue sliding against his own. Maybe he had died and this was Heaven. If so, he wasn’t about to lodge a complaint.

Jim broke the kiss, pressing feathery kisses to Blair’s cheekbones, his chin, his eyelids.

“The Sentinel loves the Guide,” he repeated. “I love you. And I’m tired of fighting it.”

“You don’t need to fight,” Blair said, running his hands across Jim’s chest. “Neither of us do. I love you too. Always have.”

“I don’t want to hurt you,” Jim murmured in his ear.

“But you will,” Blair said, fingers stroking lightly down his friend’s face. “And I’ll hurt you. It’s inevitable when you know someone so well, love them so much.”

“What do we do?”

“The best we can.”

“I’d really like to kiss you again,” Jim said. He has such longing in his eyes that Blair decided to save
the rest of that conversation for some later, far distant future. He didn’t want to waste any more time.

“Oh, yeah,” he breathed instead. “I can dig it.”

The curtain of shimmering water hid them from the rest of the world, and for a little while everything else faded away, leaving Jim and Blair the center of a universe made of sweet kisses and chaste caresses. And for the moment it was all they needed.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** This chapter is dedicated to Smiles2Go – here’s your waterfall scene, girly! And yes, the circumstances are completely contrived. As long as it leads to necking it’s all good, right? LOL!

I know this chapter was slow on action. Hoping to remedy that in the next one. And of course, more touchy-feelies for Jim and Blair!
Simon made his way back to camp, feeling a little more relaxed than he had when he started his hike that morning. He’d needed a bit of normality and that wasn’t going to happen around Jim and Sandburg. They had become very good friends to him, and he didn’t take that lightly, but they were way out in the Sentinel zone right now and that was never a place he felt comfortable visiting.

He’d never signed on for all the mystical bullshit that seemed to follow Jim around, but he’d be a fool to deny the results. Ellison, with Sandburg doggedly at his heels, had become a powerhouse in the department. His case closure rate was ridiculously high, which made the whole Major Crimes division look good. Moreover, that strange partnership had saved his life on more than one occasion; he knew he had no right to complain when things got weird.

Simon’s stomach was growling by the time he heard the waterfall. He made his way along the path, mindful of prickly caterpillars and oversized snakes that might happen to cross his path. When his new home away from home finally came into view he saw that his head detective and his brilliant consultant were engaged in the very domestic chore of folding laundry. Jim sat a little bit behind Sandburg, and they each had a pile of clothes that were being set to rights.

“Honey, I’m home,” Simon called out. He propped his fishing spear against the side of the little smokehouse and wandered over to where the guys sat quietly working.

“You hungry, Simon?” Sandburg asked.

“Yeah. What’s on the menu?”

He was passed the makeshift platter, which had sliced fruit on one side and strips of smoked pork on the other. He was handed a full bottle of water as well, and he reminded himself that Jim would’ve heard him coming well before he’d gotten there. Sometimes it was nice to have your needs anticipated.

“How goes the exploration, Livingston?” Sandburg asked with a grin, folding one of Jim’s shirts.

“Beautiful view, no matter where you stand. I didn’t see any ships or planes though.” Lord knows he kept looking. He didn’t want to be on this very lovely tropical rock forever; he had a job to get back to and a son he was missing.

“They’ll come,” Sandburg said confidently. “In the meantime, just think of this as an exclusive spa getaway, man.”

Jim snorted at that comment. He handed a pair of shorts to Sandburg, who took them without looking around. They were doing that creepy telepathy thing again, and Simon wondered what it would be like to be so in tune with another person. He also noted that the tension between the two men seemed to have lessened, and that was definitely a good thing; they were sharing close quarters and Simon didn’t care to be caught in the middle of their painful displays of wounded manhood.

“Fish already cleaned?” he asked.

Sandburg nodded. “We cut most of it into strips for smoking. Kept a couple out in the cooler to cook tonight.”
“Is there something we need to be doing, Jim?” Simon asked his unusually silent detective.

“I think we should set more traps,” he said, looking up for the first time. Simon noticed a reddened patch on the other man’s neck and wondered if he’d gotten into the mangoes again.

“You think someone is coming.”

Jim shrugged. “Yeah. It’s just a feeling, but it’s good to be prepared.”

Simon had learned to trust the man’s instincts and nodded his agreement. “Wish I had my gun.”

“I sincerely hope it won’t come down to that, Simon.”

“Me, too,” Sandburg chimed in. He tucked some of his copiously curly hair behind his ear and Simon saw that he had a red patch on his neck as well. He hadn’t made Captain because of his good looks, so it took him only seconds to make the connection. It had been a long time, but he could still recognize a love bite, particularly when it had a clear companion on Jim’s neck. Which went a long way towards explaining why Jim and Sandburg were so comfortable with each other today. It also explained why they were studiously not looking at each other, as if they’d give themselves away, and that made him chuckle.

“Something funny?” Sandburg asked a bit defiantly. Simon suspected that he’d drawn attention to the love bite on purpose and now waited to see how his friend would react.

“Just thinking that I won the office pool and I can’t even collect on it.”

“Simon?” Jim asked, confused. But Sandburg gave him an appraising look, and then nodded when he saw what he needed to see.

“Joel will be disappointed,” Simon said conversationally, eating more fruit. “He thought you two had been a couple since almost the first day.”

Sandburg laughed, but Jim flushed. “Simon, I…”

Simon held up his hand. “We don’t need to talk about this Jim. Just know that I’m happy for the two of you. And I’d like to remind you that we share sleeping quarters.”

“Geez!” Now it was Sandburg’s turn to blush.

“I do believe I’m going to retire with my book.” Simon got up and walked to the water’s edge to clean his hands. “Let me know when you want to talk traps.”

“Yes, Sir,” Jim replied. “And Simon…thanks.”

He merely nodded and headed over to the bag that held his carryon items, retrieving his Jeffrey Deaver novel. He cast a quick glance back at his friends and his breath caught in his throat. Jim and Sandburg had their heads close together, the consultant murmuring something in the detective’s ear. The look of pure adoration on Jim’s face was staggering in its intensity; how had he managed to bottle that up for so long? The whole tableau spoke of intimacy and Simon felt a momentary stab of jealousy. Would he ever have that kind of connection with someone? He’d certainly never had it with Joan.

He turned away, and headed around the lake where he could stretch out and read in the grass. He was glad something good had come of their forced stay on the island, and only hoped that things wouldn’t change when they all finally got home.
Jim couldn’t get enough of Sandburg’s mouth. Couldn’t, in fact, believe he’d gone so many years without acquainting himself with it. That mouth was pure, undiluted Sandburg – hot and welcoming, full of boundless energy and pleasure. If they never moved on from kissing, Jim thought that would be okay.

“God, you’re good at that,” Sandburg gasped when they pulled apart. They’d wandered into the jungle a bit, just far enough for some privacy. Jim was glad that Simon seemed okay about the latest development in their relationship but that didn’t mean he wanted to rub his face in it. He pulled Sandburg close, wrapping his arms around the smaller man. Everywhere his Guide touched him felt both soothed and energized, and he couldn’t get enough of that either.

“We should talk about this, Jim,” Sandburg nuzzled his neck.

“Whatever you want me to say, consider it said,” Jim replied. He rubbed his cheek over those thick curls, knowing how close he’d come to losing them. Was it normal to love someone’s hair this much?

“I just…what’s gonna happen when we go home?” There was a thread of fear in Sandburg’s voice that made Jim frown and pull back. His partner’s deep blue eyes looked up at him, full of more emotions than Jim could name.

“This isn’t a tropical fling for me, Chief.”

“No, I know it’s not. I do. It’s just that things will be…different.”

“First change is you moving out of that closet and upstairs,” Jim said with a grin. He knew what Sandburg meant, though. Here they only had to contend with Simon. Back home there were friends and family who might not be as understanding. Never mind societal pressures. He also knew that he had a history of not reacting well to change, especially when it messed with the status quo.

“I won’t let you down, not this time,” he murmured. “Whatever happens, we face it together.”

Sandburg pulled him down for a kiss. “You’ve never let me down, Jim. Never.”

“I have,” he insisted. “But I won’t lose you, not again. When you…when you died, I wanted to die too.”

“Jim.”

More kissing, though now it was salty from Sandburg’s tears. Jim knew he had a lot to make up for, and he was committed to making that happen. He wanted Sandburg in his life, a full partner in everything; he’d never wanted anything as strongly as he wanted this.

All of a sudden he could feel the Blessed Protector trying to surge to the surface. Jim jerked his head up and scented the wind, looking for signs of trouble.

“What is it?” Sandburg asked, going tense in Jim’s arms. “What’s wrong?”

Jim shook his head. “I’m not sure. Something…I can’t put my finger on it. Damn!” He had to stop himself from growling with frustration. He tightened his hold on his partner, afraid that whatever was coming would take him away.

Protect the Guide.
“Jim? Jim! Don’t wig out on me, man!” Sandburg put his hands up and pushed Jim back a few steps. “You still with me, big guy?”

It took an extreme amount of effort for him to be able to respond. “Still me.” Barely.

“Okay, let me think for a minute.” Sandburg started pacing, never getting beyond arm’s reach of his Sentinel. “Would it help to do a full sensory scan of the island? Like you did that day on the beach?”

“Yeah. That would help.”

Sandburg moved to face him and placed his hand over Jim’s heart. “This time you come back when I call.”

“I will.”

“Okay, Jim. Start stretching out those senses, but only a little at a time. Scan the area closest to you and then move slowly outward.”

With his partner guiding him, Jim opened his senses all the way and sent them out to find the source of his anxiety. He mapped Sandburg thoroughly, though he’d already done that several times. He could tell his Guide was nervous, but more so he felt the love that poured out of him. Love for Jim. It warmed him so much he had to force his senses to keep moving.

All was as it should be in camp. Simon had fallen asleep with his book on his chest. The senses moved out farther. It was quicker this time, to catalogue and file all the sounds and smells. The stench of the body on the beach made him gag, but his Guide was there to murmur softly and help him past it. Jim stretched out his senses until he had the whole island laid out before him once more, a living, breathing mass under his feet and all around him. A unique heartbeat made of birdsong and wind and waves and buzzing insects.

Jim closed his eyes and extended hearing, pushing past the shoreline, past the reef beyond, into the deep water. He felt as though he was tethered to his body by an increasingly thin rope that was getting stretched to its limit. He almost – almost – had difficulty feeling his Guide’s hand on his chest, and he knew he had to pull back.

And then it was there, felt but unseen like a dark malignancy. Danger was coming towards them in a swiftly moving speedboat that was still too far away to accurately sense-map.

Jim. come on back now.

He tried to get a head count or some idea of arsenal, but he just couldn’t get a lock on either one. He needed to know, needed to defend what was his, but the more he tried the less he could sense his own body.

pull it back, jim. you promised me.

His Guide’s words were a faint echo in his ears. There was power in them, though, a power he hadn’t felt since the day of the storm.

pull it back! NOW!

This time it was the Shaman who called him and every instinct Jim had compelled him to respond. With tremendous strength of will he started to pull back on his senses, drawing them across the deep water towards the shore. Towards his Shaman.
that’s right. follow my voice, jim.

Everything else sped by in a blur until he was staggering as he became aware of himself again. Sandburg held him up, kept him from falling, and Jim wrapped himself around the younger man like he was a lifeline.

“Jim? Are you okay?”

He just nodded, easing the strain on his senses by letting Sandburg’s scent and touch wash over him like a balm.

“Thought I might have to open a vein this time,” his partner laughed weakly. “That was intense, man.”

“Sorry,” Jim mumbled into Sandburg’s hair.

“Hey, it’s okay. You came back, right?” He gave Jim a tight squeeze and then pulled back enough so that he could see his face. “Is it what you thought?”

Jim nodded. “Pirates. They’re a day or so out, maybe a little more. It was hard to tell.”

“Well, that gives us some time to get ready, right?” Sandburg looked grim and Jim couldn’t blame him. Even here, on an uninhabited island in the middle of the ocean, trouble had found them. And they were ill-equipped to face it head on.

Jim kissed Sandburg, and it was frantic and full of fear. He couldn’t lose him, not now, not when they were finally together.

“It’s okay, Jim,” the Guide soothed. “We’ll be okay.”

Jim wished he could believe it.

*o*o*o*

*That night Jim dreamed of the blue jungle. He moved through it purposefully, looking for one of his guides to tell him what was needed. He found the panther first, pacing aggressively back and forth between the trees.*

“Take me,” Jim said.

The big cat favored him with a baleful look but obediently took off running. Jim had a hard time keeping up, almost losing sight of his spirit guide a time or two. They raced right to the edge of a cliff and Jim skidded to a stop.

“I know this,” he said, looking down. It took him a moment and then he remembered the vision he’d had in Peru, when he and Sandburg had gone to rescue Simon and Daryl. It had been a test, one that he’d had to pass to get his senses back when they’d mysteriously disappeared.

A short bark got his attention and he whirled around to see that the wolf had joined the panther, both of them standing shoulder to shoulder. The only time Jim had seen them together was in the vision at the fountain.

“What do you want me to do?” he asked, holding his hands palm-side up. “Help me.”

“Only you can help yourself,” a familiar voice said. Jim turned to the right and found himself face to face with...himself. Not the first time that had happened here in the blue jungle either. This version of
Jim Ellison wore the black camouflage streaks on his face and carried a spear, his clothes Army issue. It was the guise of the Blessed Protector.

“Your final test is upon you.”

“What test?” Jim asked apprehensively.

“You have given your mind to the Sentinel and your soul to the Guide. All that remains is that you give your heart to the Shaman. Then you will be complete.”

“Blair is the Shaman?” he asked, though he already knew. He’d sensed a new power in his partner, had seen it with his own two eyes. They were more connected then they’d ever been, which was both terrifying and exhilarating.

“It is for you to decide,” the Blessed Protector said solemnly.

“If I say no?” Jim felt compelled to ask, though he already knew what his answer would be.

“Your losses would be tremendous.”

Jim nodded. He’d suspected as much. “I’ve had enough of loss. I choose the Shaman. I choose Blair.”

“Then the circle is complete, Sentinel. Mind, body and soul committed willfully. Your trials will be many, but your rewards shall be boundless.”

With that the Blessed Protector walked forward, towards Jim. Into him. The Sentinel was complete. Wolf and panther howled and roared their approval to the skies.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Another easy listening chapter. LOL! A brief respite before we get back into things.
“What we need is a tiger,” Blair said with a sigh.

“Do I even want to know what that means?” Simon took off his glasses and rubbed his face.

“Oh, come on man! Haven’t you ever seen *Swiss Family Robinson*? They dug a pit and caught a tiger in it, which honestly didn’t turn out to be all that helpful. I mean, it was a Disney movie from the sixties. There was no, like, maiming or anything.” Blair looked back down into the pit they’d just finished digging. “All I’m saying is, it would be nice to have something with fangs playing for our side.”

“We could always toss you in there,” Jim suggested. “You could talk the pirates to death.”

“You might be on to something, Detective,” Simon chuckled.

“Oh, ha, ha.” Blair threw his hands up in frustration. Was no one seeing the bigger picture here? “Have either of you considered that we could be seriously injuring these guys? I mean, what the hell do we do with them once we have them?”

Jim looked up at him from his seat at the edge of the pit, all humor gone from his face. “If it comes down to a question of survival, it’s them or us. And I’m always gonna side with us.”

“So what? We just kill them?” Blair felt sick to his stomach. This wasn’t going to be anything like a Disney movie. Generally speaking, he dealt with criminals being killed *on the job*; when they were waving guns around, clearly he was more concerned that Jim walked away unharmed. Setting traps was something entirely different. Premeditated.

And if he was being honest with himself, he could decry the use of violence all he wanted but he knew what would happen the second Jim’s life was in danger. He’d be running in, metaphorical guns blazing. Did that make it any more palatable, to kill one man in protection of another? Well, if that other man was Jim he already knew the answer. It didn’t do much for his self image, though.

“Why can’t we just hide out? They won’t be looking for us, right? Just plane salvage.”

Simon gave him a sympathetic look, which didn’t ease his mind. “They’ll be able to tell the plane was stripped, Sandburg. And they’ll come searching, because they can’t be sure what was on board and what we might have taken that’s of value.”

“I don’t like this any better than you do,” Jim said firmly. “But I’m not gonna just surrender to a bunch of pirates. You saw what they did to our friend on the beach.”

“Well, yeah, but…”

“Trust me, Chief. There’s a lot worse things that could happen to us than a bullet to the back of the head.”

Blair winced, but stopped trying to argue the point. Jim and Simon were right, he knew that, but he couldn’t personally kill another human being. Good reasons or not, it was the worst possible karma. He shot Jim a panicked look, and saw his friend’s eyes soften.
“You’ll be out of the action. Leave the heavy lifting to the pros, okay?”

“Stay in the truck,” he muttered, which only made Jim frown.

“I’m serious, Sandburg. You stay out of sight, do I make myself clear?”

Blair glared at him, immediately forgetting that his own plan had been to hide out. He didn’t need Jim making the choice for him, casting him as the weak and useless one that needed to be protected.

“Oh, here we go,” Simon moaned, shaking his head.

“Fuck you, Jim. I’m not going to cower behind a rock while you two macho men battle it out with a band of testosterone-laden pirates! Just because I do the laundry instead of the hunting doesn’t make me the damsel in distress!”

“You’re not going to be any help if you don’t want to hurt anyone,” Jim argued, getting to his feet. Blair just glowered at that transparent attempt to use height as an intimidation tactic; that hadn’t worked the first day of their acquaintance and it sure as hell wasn’t going to work now.

“What’re you gonna do, strong arm me? Tie me to a palm tree?” Blair gestured wildly, miming what he’d just described. “God knows I can’t handle myself in a fight after four years driving around Cascade with you.”

“I’m not talking about fighting, Blair,” Jim said, and his use of his Guide’s first name was proof positive that he was getting worked up. “This isn’t about fighting. You can’t just throw coconuts at these guys and then wait for backup to roll in, for crissake.”

“You don’t trust me to watch your back,” Blair said quietly. And that hurt. It hurt a lot, because he’d had Jim’s back from day one, had done nothing but make a career out of watching Jim’s back. But maybe the Alex betrayal had negated all of that, maybe it had blocked out every other time Blair had come through and saved his ass.

“This isn’t helping, gentlemen,” Simon interjected. Jim just stared, his expression closed and unreadable.

Blair wondered if the honeymoon was over already, if things would go back to the way they were. He knew Jim had problems with change, and an even bigger problem letting his partner take the lead. Did Jim really see him as being more of a hindrance than a help? And then something else occurred to him and he turned to Simon.

“Could you give us a few minutes?”

“Take all the damn time you need, just work this out!” Simon stalked off through the jungle, back to the camp.

“You know I trust you,” Jim said softly once their friend was gone. “It’s not that, never that.”

“So tell me what it is, Jim.” Blair stood there, arms crossed, sure he already knew what the problem was but wanting to hear it from the source.

“It’s not fucking fair!” Jim exploded, hands clenched into fists at his side. “All we should have to do is hang out and wait for rescue, not fend off heavily armed men. I hate this!”

Blair nodded his agreement, easily hearing the vitriol and desperation in Jim’s voice. He felt the same way; just like all their vacations, this one had gone sideways and there was no undoing it. This shit is...
getting old.

“I hate it too, big guy, I really do. But…maybe this is the way it’s supposed to be.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Jim raked a hand through his hair.

“Maybe the universe has a plan. Think about it. If all this crap is destined to happen anyway, maybe some…force…is making sure it happens to us. Because we have a better chance of stopping it and saving lives.” Blair reached out and took hold of Jim’s hand. “Think of everything we’ve been through in the last few years, man. Maybe we attract all the crazies because we have to, because you’re a Sentinel and I’m a Guide-slash-Shaman and together we’re strong enough to make a difference, to turn the tide.”

“Christ, Blair.”

“It makes sense if you think about it.” Blair tugged Jim’s hand and pulled him close enough to wrap him in a hug. “I know you’re scared, Jim. So am I. But we have to work together. Sentinel and Guide, it’s a package deal.”

Slowly the stiffness and tension bled away and Jim gave himself up to Blair’s embrace. The Guide soothed the Sentinel, rubbing his hands up and down the other man’s back.

“I didn’t want any of this,” Jim mumbled against Blair’s neck. “Especially not for you.”

“I know. But you have to look at the bright side, big guy.”

“And that would be?”

“This.” Blair tugged Jim’s head down and kissed him, hard and insistently, claiming him. It was his way of declaring them as equals, partners; he was done waiting behind.

“Okay,” Jim panted when they finally came up for air. “I concede. Silver lining.”

“Good. Now let’s find Simon and make a plan.”

They walked back to camp, Jim’s arm around Blair’s shoulders. “Gotta say, as perks go that’s pretty good. But here’s the real question, Chief.”

“Yeah?”

“What about dental?”

*0*0*0*

Jim didn’t like Sandburg’s theory, didn’t want to be a pawn in some unknown something’s greater plan. How was he supposed to protect his Guide with every creep in the world drawn to them? He didn’t want this to be their lives. Didn’t want to take a fishing trip and worry about running into poachers or thieves. Didn’t want psychos breaking into his home. And he most definitely didn’t want Sandburg voluntarily moving up to the front lines.

“Once they hit the first trap,” Simon said. “They’ll know without a doubt that we’re here. We’ll lose the element of surprise.”

Sandburg nodded. “We need to split them up. Maybe lay a second trail so they’ll have to divide their forces.”
“Good idea, Chief. If we lead them this way,” he pointed on the rough map Sandburg had sketched in his journal. “We could hit them with a decoy trap here, and push them right into one of the pits or a deadfall.”

They had worked all morning on setting more traps – pits, snares, deadfalls, fulcrum spikes – and decoy traps that would confuse the pirates even more. Jim felt like he’d been channeling both Ellison the Ranger and Enqueri of the Chopec, drawing all his knowledge from both to defend his little piece of paradise.

“While we draw them in,” he said, looking at his Guide. “I want you to double back to the beach. Find some way of disabling their boat, but nothing permanent. We can’t let them leave and come back with more men.”

“And we can use their boat to get off this damn island!” Simon cheered.

“One step at a time,” Jim cautioned. There was no sense getting ahead of themselves. “We need to keep our heads in the game. These guys will outgun us. This is gonna be guerilla warfare, boys.”

“I won’t kill anyone,” Sandburg reiterated softly. Jim could feel this was true, as much as he’d already known it academically. Killing was never an easy thing, nor should it be, but Jim had learned to prioritize and compartmentalize. He wasn’t sure Sandburg could do the same, and knew he couldn’t ask it of him. The best he could hope for was that if it came down to his friend’s life or the other guy’s, his partner would make the right choice.

“We’ll load you up with coconuts, Chief,” Jim teased affectionately.

“Thanks, Jim.” It was said so quietly only a Sentinel could hear it. Jim knew his friend was thanking him for more than just the easy acquiescence; he was thanking him for understanding. Jim had never been so attuned to another person, and as much as it scared the hell out of him he was grateful for it too. It was nice to finally get an idea about what was going on with his Guide.

“I’ll go take care of the second trail,” Simon offered. “You and the kid can run through his part, make sure all the bases are covered.”

“Good idea.” Jim knew he would feel better if he did a dry run with Sandburg, looking for any trouble spots. And he was thankful that his Captain and friend knew him so well.

The meeting broke up and they each grabbed a spear and a fresh bottle of water. Jim pulled Simon aside before they parted ways.

“If you run into any trouble just give a shout out.”

“We’ll make this work, Jim.” Simon clapped him on the shoulder.

“I hope so.”

Simon headed straight for the beach, and Jim took Sandburg northeast into the jungle, skirting the traps as they went.

“You want to move fast, but as quietly as possible,” Jim instructed. “Keep low and know where your cover is. You hear gunfire, you drop immediately and stay down, got me?”

Sandburg just grinned. “This may come as a surprise to you, Jim, but this won’t be the first time I’ve been chased through a jungle.”
Still, he did as instructed and Jim was able to relax a little. He knew his partner had been through something like this before, namely in Peru when they’d gone to rescue Simon. Although as he remembered it, Sandburg had needed rescuing too.

“I’ve been on some pretty hairy expeditions, man. Unhappy natives, unhappy revolutionaries; sometimes both at the same time. I’ve gotten pretty good at duck and cover, and working with you has only helped me refine it. I’m like the poster boy for duck and cover!”

Jim glanced at his partner, surprised. He sometimes forgot that Sandburg had a life long before they’d met. Some days it felt as if he had sprung into existence fully formed just to help him with his senses.

“I know you can handle it,” he said. “Now look here. If you get in a jam, this is a good spot to hunker down. The ferns and tree roots will completely mask you.”

They went on along the path that Jim had mentally plotted out, all the time drawing closer to the beach. He told Sandburg about his vision, about it being the final test, when he wasn’t showing him places to hide. His partner listened, wide-eyed.

“Wow! That’s incredible, Jim! So now you really are the über-Sentinel. And you didn’t have any reservations about agreeing to that?”

“No.” Jim linked hands with Sandburg. “I know what I need to do. And if you’re right, if I don’t do it a lot of innocent people will die. Can’t have that on my conscious just because life would be easier for me.”

“I’m in awe here, man. I never thought you’d embrace the Sentinel thing, especially when you were so stubborn about it that first year.”

“Well, that makes two of us. I feel bad for you, though.”

Sandburg stopped walking and looked up at Jim with those deep blue eyes, and it was all he could do not to lose himself in them.

“Why?”

“Because no-one offered you a choice, Sandburg. I’ve been given the option of walking away more than once. Why not you?” And he honestly felt guilty about it. The Guide was just as important as the Sentinel, why shouldn’t he get to voice his acceptance or denial?

Sandburg just shook his head. “Jim, I made my choice the day I let a garbage truck drive over me. I made my choice when Kincaid took over the station and I came back the next day. I’ll always keep coming back. No-one needed to ask me, man. I volunteered.”

Jim ran his hand over his partner’s head and gave a little tug on his ponytail. “I’m really glad you did.”

They kissed, and this time it was Jim who did the claiming, Jim who threw up Property of the Sentinel signs. He couldn’t question Sandburg’s commitment, not after all they’d been through. He hoped that now his partner wouldn’t have to question his. There’d be no more boxes packed and waiting to greet Sandburg in his own home; never again.

“I love you, Blair,” Jim whispered in his ear. His friend shivered and clutched him tightly.

“Thank God for that!”
Blair and Jim stood on the beach, and the younger man was grateful that they were upwind of the corpse. Jim stood behind him, arms encircling his waist and his cheek resting on Blair’s head. Rotting body aside, it was nice here with the gently lapping waves and the breeze off the water.

“They probably won’t get their boat past the reef,” Jim said, his voice hushed.

“Probably not,” Blair agreed in a similar tone of voice. He knew where his partner was going and waited patiently for him to get there. In the meantime he let himself relax, his arms resting on Jim’s.

“Of course, the boat isn’t all that big. If they know the area they could find a better place to weigh anchor.”

“Presumably.”

“Either way, they’ll have to leave it afloat. It’s too big to drag ashore.”

“Sounds reasonable.” Blair patted Jim’s hands.

“You’re going to have to swim out to it, Chief.”

“That would be a fair assessment.”

“Would you stop being so damned agreeable? I’m serious!”

Blair turned his head to the side and tipped it back so he could look up at Jim, a smile on his face.

“Would it make you feel better if I had a freak out or something?”

“Yes. No. Jesus, Blair! I know how you feel about the water!”

He turned then, never leaving the comfort of Jim’s embrace, and rested his head on his Sentinel’s broad chest.

“I’m not afraid of it anymore.”

“Since when?” Jim asked suspiciously.

“Since your daring rescue and judicious use of mouth to mouth behind the waterfall.” It had already become a treasured memory. He’d been pulled from the water and enveloped in love; the power had been taken away and now it was merely water again, not some malevolent creature bent on his destruction.

“Just like that?”

“Just like that,” he confirmed. “You replaced the negative associations I had with good ones. Really good ones. Now water will always remind me of kissing you.”

“Oh. Well, good.”

“What about you, big guy? Does it still creep you out to think of me wet?”

“Hmm.” Jim kissed down the side of Blair’s face, licked delicately at his ear, then pulled back. “I think now it just makes me horny.”

“I can dig it!” Blair said wholeheartedly. “When this is all over, man, I’d really like to get to know
“You better.”

“Is that a come on?” Jim chuckled.

“Oh, hell yeah.”

They shared a playful, nipping kiss, and then Jim pulled away with a look of regret on his face.

“Time to go, Chief.”

“How close are they?” he asked, forcing himself back into fight-for-survival mode.

“Couple hours at the most. They’re coming faster than I’d expected.”

“Can you tell how many?”

Jim nodded, getting that faraway look in his eyes that indicated he was using his senses. Blair stayed tight to his side, one hand rubbing his back to help keep him grounded. He hoped that his hunch about the pirates was true, that they were coming for the downed plane. When he’d meditated that morning, the message had come through pretty clear. He didn’t know how the pirates knew about the plane, but with any luck they wouldn’t arm themselves too heavily for just a salvage mission.

“Seven men,” Jim reported, shaking himself a little as he pulled his senses back. “Lots of guns, Chief, but I’m hoping they leave most of them behind.”

“They can’t be sure of survivors,” Blair mused. “But the smart thing is to plan on them anyway.”

“That’s what I’d do,” Jim agreed.

“Well, they won’t be expecting you,” Blair said with steely determination. He mentally shrugged off his anthropologist persona and tried to get in a warrior mindset. His friends were counting on him; his Sentinel was counting on him. He’d save what lives he could, but there were two that took precedence and he wasn’t about to forget that.

“Let’s get this done,” Jim said. “I’ve got better things to do than fight pirates. “

“I hear that.”

Hand in hand they headed back towards camp, and Blair wondered if it would be for the last time.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Okay, so no real action happening here. Sorry about that. I was sure the pirates would be showing up in this chapter but clearly I was wrong. LOL! I can promise you lots of action and pirates in the next one, though. Stay tuned!

Smiles, that whole conversation about Blair never being given a choice was just for you! See? I listen when you gripe! LOL!
Blair was able to judge the proximity of the pirates by how self-contained Jim became with each passing hour. He stopped joking, didn’t speak unless it was absolutely necessary, and he would periodically blank out as he used his senses to get updates. While it was clinically very interesting to see Jim slip into Warrior Sentinel mode, it only served to make Blair more anxious.

They’d done all they could in preparation; the traps were set, strategies outlined, and Jim had spent a half hour slicing open the prickly caterpillars to access their venom sacks and coat the ends of their spears with it. He’d also daubed the three of them with ashes from the campfire and Blair wondered if he looked as Army Ranger as he felt. Jim, naturally, was every inch the deadly hunter, in his tight black t-shirt and green cargo pants and black smudges striped across his face.

As for Blair, he had too much time to think about the countless ways everything could go wrong. He was especially worried for Jim and Simon, who would be engaging the pirates directly while he only had to contend with an empty boat.

“It’s time,” Jim said, and Blair couldn’t help but let out a sigh of relief. He just wanted to get this over with.

“Stay alert,” Simon said before he slipped into the jungle. The false trail was his and he’d deal with whatever pirates chose to follow it.

“Chief…” Jim gave him a look full of emotion, and he felt his breath catch. The last thing he wanted was some maudlin farewell scene, and he refused to say goodbye, or good luck, or watch your back.

“I love you too.”

Jim nodded once, his expression saying more than words could, and then he melted into the jungle. Blair was left behind, with Jim’s survival knife strapped to his thigh. He mentally reviewed the path he would take back to the beach and kept a close eye on his watch; in fifteen minutes he was to make his way to the boat, disable it, then hunker down and stay out of sight until someone returned to the beach. If it was pirates, he was to quickly fix and take the boat to try and get help.

Blair had already rejected that plan. If he waited till the pirates came back, he might not have time to repair the boat. What he could do was move it further up the coast to a cove Simon had found on his hike. This was all hinging on the pirates dropping anchor off the beach where they’d made their first camp. Jim seemed certain that’s where they’d be, something about currents and the reef and the debris trail from the crash.

As Blair watched the second hand make its jerky sweep of the watch face he strained to listen for an indication that something was happening. Had the pirates found the plane? Were they even now searching for signs of the survivors? He closed his eyes and concentrated on Jim. His Sentinel was perched in a tree like a vulture, keeping absolutely still. Blair had to clamp his lips together to keep from distracting Jim with useless questions that he’d be unable to answer.

Fifteen minutes had never felt so long, particularly when watching them creep by. He pictured Jim as he’d last seen him, looking more like his spirit animal than he ever had; coiled and deadly, waiting to spring on the enemy. He imagined that’s what he’d been like during covert ops for the Army, too.
Blair had no doubt he’d be just as efficient a killer now as he was then, and that thought was far more comforting than it should have been.

The shocking stutter of automatic weapons fire made him jerk in surprise, heart racing. The plotting and planning were officially over. He looked at his watch, cursing when he saw he still had a minute and a half left to wait. The silence that followed the gunfire was absolute; even the birds had fallen silent.

Deciding that ninety seconds couldn’t possibly make a difference, Blair fled into the jungle without a backwards glance at the waterfall or their little shelter. Now was not the time for nostalgia; he had a job to do and Jim was counting on him to do it. He tried to put everything else out of his mind, which for him was almost impossible.

Jim had marked the path for him, leaving subtle signs that he never would’ve found had he not known where to look. Blair kept low, pausing frequently to listen. He was aware that his partner was still up a tree, which he took to mean that the gunfire was likely done out of frustration. Maybe when they’d discovered that there was nothing of value in the plane? If so, it had been a miscalculation on the part of the enemy; they’d compromised their position, revealed themselves to their prey, and so whatever edge they’d thought they had was gone.

Blair heard a rustling noise nearby and immediately dropped into a crouch, breathing as shallowly as he could. He’d never wished harder for Sentinel senses as he did at that moment, struggling to hear what was coming. He had to clamp a hand over his mouth to keep from laughing out loud when it turned out to be merely a large lizard, which didn’t so much as give him a cursory inspection as it hurried on its way.

Danger averted for the moment, Blair got back underway. His hand dropped periodically to touch the pommel of the knife. It wouldn’t be much use against guns, but in hand-to-hand combat it might give him a chance. He sincerely hoped he wouldn’t have to find out.

Someone shouted in Spanish and Blair stopped again, listening. Whoever had spoken didn’t sound close by, for which he was grateful. The trail Jim had laid for him was supposed to keep him out of the line of fire, which so far seemed to be working. He wiped his face with the bottom of his t-shirt, getting some of the sweat off; he forgot about the camouflage until he saw the grey streaks on his shirt and wondered what he must look like now. He mentally checked in with Jim and had a sense that the Sentinel was now on the move. Blair fought down his worry; there was nothing he could do except get to that boat.

By the time Blair reached the edge of the jungle his legs were criss-crossed with scratches and his hair was starting to come loose from the ponytail. He slipped behind a palm tree and scanned the beach, looking to see if anyone had been left behind on guard duty. Luck seemed to be with him – he was alone.

Leaving cover was a frightening prospect, even if the protection it offered was merely an illusion. He kept close to the edge of the jungle, moving into a position where he could get eyes on the boat. When he finally spotted it, his heart sank. It was larger than he’d imagined, a trawler instead of the skiff he was hoping for, and anchored out past the reef. He’d need to swim out, climb aboard, and hope no-one else was already there. He couldn’t see anyone, but distance and less-than-perfect eyesight couldn’t make that definitive. With a sigh, he realized he’d have to wing it.

“Jim, I’m heading out to the boat now.”

Blair stepped out onto the beach. Feeling horribly exposed, as if he had a large target painted on his back, he made his way to the shoreline. And grinned when he found the inflatable raft that had been
dragged up out of the water. Luck was still with him; he wouldn’t have to swim.

The grin fell off his face when more gunfire sounded from behind him, making him instinctively flinch. Automatic weapons again, plus single shots that might have come from Jim’s pistol. Jesus, it sounded like World War Three in there and it was all he could do not to turn around and try to help. Regardless of what might be happening with his friends, he had to do his job.

“If you’re dead I’m gonna kill you,” he muttered, fear making his heart pound in his ears. He pulled the raft back into the water and picked up one of the oars that lay inside. It didn’t take him long to think he’d made a mistake. Trying to paddle against the tide was using all his strength, and he thought swimming would’ve been easier. To be honest, though, the idea of swimming all the way to the boat was daunting. Despite his reassurances to Jim, he didn’t relish being surrounded by all that water. The paralyzing fear of it was gone, true, but it still made him uneasy.

Finally he got out to calmer waters and was able to make much better headway. A quick mental check on Jim assured him that his partner was still alive and once more on the move. He only hoped the same could be said of Simon.

Blair paddled up to the stern of the trawler and tied off the raft. Angelina was painted across the back, and he wondered idly if that was the name of a pirate’s girlfriend or mother. Pulling the knife from the sheath, he climbed aboard as quietly as possible. He forcibly shoved everything else in his head to the side so he could focus on his objective – get to the wheelhouse, pray the keys were still in the ignition, and get the boat out of there.

“This really is my lucky day,” he murmured to himself. The keys were indeed in the ignition. He started the engine, which seemed incredibly loud, and fumbled around until he found the lever that would pull the anchor up.

“Jim, I’m moving the boat, further up the coast. I don’t want to waste time disabling it.”

His Sentinel thusly notified, Blair readied himself to steer the boat as soon as the anchor was up all the way. As he should have foreseen, his luck couldn’t hold out forever. The anchor chain had no sooner stopped rattling when he felt something cold and metallic settle behind his right ear.

“Paso lejos, Señor.”

A thousand thoughts flashed through Blair’s head quick as lightning. The first being where the hell did he come from and the last being do I stand a chance of disarming him.

“Ahora!” The unmistakable sound of a gun being cocked was followed by the overwhelming desire not to screw this up. Jim had given him a job, had trusted him to get it done, and he was finished with letting his Sentinel down. Blair refused to be a liability.

“Easy does it, man,” he said. He held his arms out, knife still clutched in one hand.

“Suelte el cuchillo!”

Blair did so, his only weapon clattering to the deck. He took a deep breath, tried to channel his inner super soldier, then whipped around as fast as he could, making a grab for the gun as he did so.

He had only a vague impression of the man he grappled with. Swarthy complexion, thick black moustache, angry brown eyes. They both had hold of the gun, each trying to wrest it away from the other.

“¿Estás loco?”
“You have no idea,” Blair grunted in reply.

A shot was squeezed off right next to his ear, deafening him. The bullet smashed into the control panel, setting sparks flying. Blair struggled to keep his grip, feeling off-center and slightly dazed from the blast. The pirate freed one of his own hands and punched Blair once in the ribs, once in the side of the head.

Eyes tearing and vision blurring, Blair stumbled backwards against the wheel. The pirate leveled the gun at his face, but he kicked out and caught the other man square in the knee, feeling dazedly victorious when he heard it pop. The pirate dropped to the deck with a strangled scream but still kept the gun firmly clutched in his hand. He fired, but Blair ducked and the radio exploded into shards of plastic and metal.

“Stop shooting at me!” he yelled. He launched himself at the pirate, who was trying to get back on his feet despite the dislocated knee. They once more wrestled for the gun, and Blair narrowly avoided a head-butt. He jammed his elbow in the pirate’s throat, making the other man gag.

“Let. Go.”

He was lying half on the pirate by this time, who was trying to buck him off. The man had freakish strength and Blair was still dizzy from the blow to the head; the gun started to swing around.

Blair clenched his jaw and tried to compel whatever strength he had left into his arms. He refused to be shot, absolutely refused. He knew that that felt like and had no desire to feel it again. Going for broke, he pulled his head back and then rammed it forward into the pirate’s face.

“Shit!” he cursed, seeing stars as his vision wavered even more. It never seemed that painful when people did it in the movies. However, it had the desired effect of breaking the pirate’s nose and loosening his grip on the gun. Blair started to twist it, tried to wrench it out of the other man’s hand, when it went off again. He felt the recoil all down his arm and into his chest, vision darkening even more as blood ran down his face and into his eyes.

The pirate’s grip tightened on the gun, body still bucking beneath Blair’s; he knew he didn’t have any strength left, knew it was all over. And suddenly it was. The pirate stilled and he was finally able to pull the gun away.

Disoriented, Blair scuttled backwards and wiped an arm across his face in an effort to clear his vision. He was sorry he bothered. The last shot had taken the pirate in the jaw and blown the top of his head off. Blair covered his mouth with the back of his hand, his gorge rising. The dead man’s blood was dripping down his face. He lurched for the railing, reaching it just as his stomach forcibly emptied itself.

Jesus God, he’d killed a man! It hadn’t been his finger on the trigger, but dead was dead. He heaved again over the side, and then nearly went in himself when the boat shuddered and began to list. Blair looked around, confused, and realized they must’ve drifted towards shore and run aground on the reef. With laughter that sounded both hysterical and muffled, he realized he’d disabled the boat like Jim wanted. He dragged himself to the control panel, which was fried. The engine was still running but there was no way to steer or navigate, and the radio had been destroyed.

Blair turned the key, cutting the engine, and absent-mindedly slipped it in his pocket. His only objective now was getting back to shore. He didn’t much care what happened to him once he got there, but he wasn’t staying on this damn boat one more minute.

He stumbled towards the stern, clinging to the rail to keep from falling. Dizziness and the new angle
of the boat made the going tricky. He tried to get around the body without looking, but his foot slipped in the blood and he went down hard on one knee, coming almost face to face with the dead man.

With a wracking breath that was almost a sob, Blair pulled himself upright and half-slid towards the raft. He jumped in and cut the mooring line, surprised to see Jim’s knife in his hand; he had no memory of retrieving it. The trip back to the beach was quicker and easier; he eventually gave up on the oar and let the waves carry him in.

The loss of adrenalin left him exhausted and shaky; it was all he could do to drag the raft ashore. He sat next to it, legs drawn up and forehead on his knees. His head was pounding, his ear was ringing, and his whole body was one big ache. If the pirates were still out there, he hoped they’d just shoot him and put him out of his misery. He had no idea how long he sat there, shivering and half out of it, but the sound of his name brought him right to attention.

“Blair!” Jim came tearing out of the jungle and Blair felt ridiculously pleased that his partner looked as bad as he felt. His Sentinel’s shirt was torn and wet, there was blood spattered on his right arm and a bloody gash over his left eye. Blood and ashes had mixed together on his face in a very unpleasant way that had Blair fighting down another bout of nausea.

“Jesus, Chief! Are you okay?” Jim dropped to his knees in the sand and took Blair’s head in his hands, looking closely for injuries.

“I’ll live,” he sighed. “Hey, Simon.”

The Captain of Major Crimes was looking pretty rugged himself. He limped slowly towards Blair and Jim, a strip of cloth wrapped around a wound on his bicep. One of his eyes was swollen almost shut and his didn’t have his glasses on. He looked out at the boat, resignation on his face.

“I suppose it’s too much to hope that the boat still runs.”

“Sorry. Engine works but steering is shot to hell. Radio too.”

“You okay, kid?” Simon asked.

“Been better,” Blair admitted. Jim was slowly stroking his arms, no doubt looking for broken bones. “I’m fine, Jim. My head hurts is all.”

“I’m sorry,” his partner said, his voice tight. “I’m so sorry. I thought you’d be safer here.”

Blair put his hands on Jim’s, stilling them. “It’s okay. I’m okay. You didn’t know.”

Jim just shook his head. Blair leaned forward and pressed a quick kiss to the corner of his partner’s mouth. “How about you, big guy? You okay?”

He shrugged. “Yeah. I have pain dialed down, gonna need some Tylenol later.”

“Help me up?”

Jim got to his feet and pulled Blair to his. They were both a bit shaky and Blair steadied himself by pressing his hands to his Sentinel’s chest. The fabric was saturated, and he couldn’t wait to hear what his friend had been getting up to.

“What did you do, go for a swim?” he chuckled. The laughter dried up when he pulled his hands away and saw they were red with blood. Jim’s blood. “Jim! How far down are you dialed?”
He could see now how pale his Sentinel was. The big man was swaying on his feet. “Need to… secure…prisoners. Didn’t…didn’t…”

“Simon!” Blair cried.

They managed to catch Jim between them when his eyes rolled up in his head and he started to collapse, and set him carefully down on the sand. Blair clawed at Jim’s shirt, using the already torn section to shred it even further.

“No. No, no, no.” Blair and Simon exchanged a fearful look. “Jesus, Simon, he’s been shot!

Chapter End Notes

AN: Finally! Pirates! I was worried about writing all that action and mayhem, so I made it easy on myself and just wrote from Blair’s POV. I hope you don’t feel cheated! Smiles, I know you wanted a joint saving mission here, but I thought it was important that Blair got to save himself. Proof that he’s not the damsel in distress.

My hubby had suggested an alternative to writing this chapter, which would have looked just like this:

“Oh, no! The pirates are here!” Blair cried.

*o*o*o*

“Well, I didn’t think we were going to make it through that,” Jim sighed.

I told hubby if I’d posted that, my readers would flame me beyond all recognition. LOL! Such a goon. Anyway, I hope you liked this chapter. It’s the one I was most worried about writing.
Simon found himself viewing Sandburg through new eyes. He’d always known the kid had brains, and a spine of steel when it counted, but his respect for the anthropologist had tripled. Jim’s injury had taken them both by surprise, and Simon knew the risks involved. The bullet was lodged somewhere in Jim’s shoulder and besides the blood loss they also had to worry about infection; it was going to take more than Tylenol to fix this. And his bouncy, geeky, sometimes annoying consultant took care of everything without hesitation.

Sandburg, his face a horror show mask of blood and ashes, immediately took charge of the situation. Despite the fact that only moments earlier he’d barely been able to stand himself, he roused Jim enough to get the bigger man on his feet. Simon and Sandburg got on either side of him and made the laborious trek back to camp. Jim was far from lucid, and couldn’t do more than drag his feet, but the kid somehow kept him awake and upright.

“You’re doing great, big guy,” he said, visibly sweating under the strain. It was no picnic for Simon either, who had twisted his ankle and only had one good eye to see out of. “What did he mean about prisoners?”

Simon adjusted his grip on the waistband of Jim’s shorts. “Two of the pirates survived. They’re tied up out in the jungle.”

The irony of it wasn’t lost on him, nor to Sandburg who snorted disgustedly. For all the fuss the kid had made about taking lives, he’d had to kill someone while it was Jim who ended up saving lives. He’d also known, somehow, what had happened with Sandburg, and while Simon didn’t share the same level of horror over it, he was still dismayed. In all the time the kid had been riding with Jim, he’d never had to kill anyone, not in self-defense or defense of his partner. Though his own first kill on the job was years behind him now, Simon could recall all too easily how that had felt.

“Come on, Jim. Stay with me. We’re almost there.” Sandburg was panting now, and Simon was never happier to hear the waterfall. “Get him near the campfire.”

They set Jim down on the ground and as soon as he was horizontal he tried to curl in on himself, moaning. Sandburg knelt down beside him, one hand on his forehead.

“Shhh, it’s okay. It’s gonna be okay.” He stood and stopped just short of running his hands through his hair. “Simon, get a fire going. I…I need to clean this…clean up.”

Sandburg made a beeline for the lake, using the gritty sand to scrub the blood from his arms and his face. Simon watched him for a moment before doing the task he’d been given. Soon he had a decent fire going, and Sandburg returned looking much better; he still had blood in his hair and along his hairline, but it would do for now.

“I wish we had something to boil water in,” he muttered.

Simon stood back, letting Sandburg strip Jim out of the remains of his shirt, all the while stroking him gently and muttering softly under his breath.

“I could go out to the boat, they might have something on board,” Simon suggested.
“Not enough time. Can you get me a clean pair of socks?”

He quickly did so. The kid took one sock and poured half a bottle of water over it, soaking it. Very gently he cleaned the wound, revealing the ragged bullet hole. Jim groaned, his eyes winched shut, but he didn’t try to move away.

“Simon, get me Jim’s first aid kit. It should be in the suitcase.”

Simon didn’t mind being relegated to the role of go-fer. He had plenty of experience with gunshot wounds but never had to do more than wait for EMTs to arrive and do all the hard work. He didn’t know if Sandburg did either – the kid’s history was sketchy at best, at least to him – but he certainly was making an excellent show of competence.

Jim always traveled with an extensive first aid kit; he always joked that he needed to be prepared for anything with Sandburg around. Simon would bet he never expected to be the one benefitting from it now. He handed the plastic case to Sandburg, who set out the suturing kit, gauze, alcohol pads and anti-bacterial cream.

“You sure you know what you’re doing?” Simon couldn’t help but ask.

Sandburg looked up at him, face set in determined lines but eyes full of fear. “Doing the best I can, man.”

Simon nodded. He collected the rest of the water bottles and kept them handy, then sat down to take the weight off his bad ankle.

“Take some Tylenol,” Sandburg said absently. “And go soak your foot in the lake.”

“When you’re done,” he replied. The least he could do was offer moral support. The kid shot him a grateful look and didn’t press the issue. Simon did take the pills, though.

“Open your eyes, big guy. I need you to look at me right now.”

Jim did as requested, looking right at Sandburg. “Sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” The kid stroked his hair. “I want you to look at the waterfall, Jim, can you do that? Look at the way the water catches the sunlight, creating little prisms in the air. So many colors. Can you see them?”

Simon found himself looking too. The sun was sinking and they were catching the last rays of it where they were. Even he could see the way it seemed to be sparking off the water, though he didn’t immediately understand why Sandburg wanted Jim to look at it. But when he looked back at his friend, saw the blank look on his face, he got it. The kid had sent him into a zone.

“It’s gonna hurt,” he said, catching Simon’s look. “This is the best I can do, under the circumstances.”

Simon just nodded. He supposed it was lucky that Jim could zone; it would make what was coming easier on both of them.

“Okay, Jim. Bear with me.” Sandburg put one hand over the wound and closed his eyes, face scrunched up like he was thinking really hard. Simon couldn’t look away, much as he wanted to. He tried to keep away from the mystical bull crap that went along with this Sentinel thing, but even he could sense power in the air. It was like that day at the fountain, the day Jim had brought Sandburg back from the dead when everyone else had given up.
Seconds later Sandburg pulled back. “Good. Okay. I’ve got this.”

He pulled out his Swiss Army knife, opened up the narrowest blade, and wiped it down with an alcohol pad. He used another to give the wound a more thorough cleansing.


Sandburg didn’t acknowledge his comment. Instead, he leaned over Jim and slowly inserted the knife into the bullet wound. Simon could see his throat working, as if he was struggling not to puke, but his hand remained steady. Even Simon felt a little queasy, watching him root around in there.

After about half a minute of digging, Sandburg pulled the knife out and reached into Jim’s shoulder with his fingers, a look of intense concentration on his face. Moments later he pulled out the bullet, which thankfully didn’t seem to have fragmented upon impact. He solemnly handed the bloody chunk of metal to Simon, who held it in his hand and stared at it while the kid cleansed and stitched the wound.

Jim was lucky. With the automatic weapons the pirates had used it was amazing he wasn’t riddled with bullets. Maybe it was a Sentinel thing, but Simon didn’t want to dwell on it either way. Now they needed to stave off infection and Jim might just get through this.

“He’s gonna have some muscle damage,” Simon said.

“No, he won’t.”

“Look, kid…”

“No. He won’t,” Sandburg insisted. And there was that power again, just a brief flicker of it, and then the kid paled. “Okay, I…uh…”

He took off like a shot, his departure startling in its abruptness. Moments later Simon could hear him being sick, and marveled that he’d managed to hold off until Jim was stitched and bandaged; Simon gave him a lot of credit for that. The kid had really come through today, above and beyond.

“You’re a lucky guy,” he said to his zoned-out friend. “I hope you know how much.”

*o*o*o*

Jim stood in a jungle clearing, arms raised defensively. He was tired, his muscles burning and his chest heaving, but his work wasn’t done yet. The area around him was littered with bodies, those he had killed to keep his Guide safe. Four pirates lay sprawled, bloody from various wounds – one taken out in a deadfall, another impaled on pit spikes, two killed with Jim’s bare hands. He felt nothing for them, just thankfulness that they hadn’t touched Blair.

Beyond the pirates were others. Warren Chapel. David Lash. Alex Barnes. Garrett Kincaid. Dawson Quinn. Victor Smallwood. Frank Rachins. Lee Brackett. Klaus Zeller. Mark Cantor. Frank Rafferty. Maya Carasco. Colonel Oliver. And so many others, all of them who had dared to hurt his Guide before Jim could stop them. Well, he’d stopped them this time. All except one.

The man who stood before him now was lean but muscled, his features indistinct but definitely of South American origin. He had hurt Blair on a level that Jim wasn’t sure he could reach, not this time. Altered him in an unforgivable way. It should have been easy for the Sentinel to end him, but he was exhausted.
“Tiempo para morir, gringo,” he sneered.

“I’m not the one dying today,” Jim replied. Though all his focus was on the man in front of him, Sandburg buzzed in the back of his head. Fear, disgust, anger, shame.

Stop shooting at me!

A gun materialized in the enemy’s hand; a handgun, and it went off before Jim had time to do more than acknowledge its presence. Pain exploded in his shoulder and he ruthlessly dialed down to almost nothing, till it was a mere throb not worthy of his attention.

He dropped down and kicked up, and the gun went flying. He was back on his feet in an instant, circling his foe even as he was circled himself. The other man charged and they locked arms, striving for dominance. The warrior in Jim relished the battle, searching for his enemy’s weak points. He head-butted the pirate, who stumbled and then came back swinging, a knife in his hands.

Jim moved forward, and they were grappling for the knife. Jim had height but not power; he was so tired, had battled so many today. Still, he managed to wrestle the knife away only to get a punch to the gut and an elbow to the head, which opened the skin over his eye and filled his vision with blood.

And, oh God, Sandburg had killed someone. Had killed the very man he faced now. He’d been too late, but here he was nonetheless. Jim had to take him out, as he had the others.

The other man surged forward, trying to take advantage of his distraction, but Jim dodged to the side and grabbed his arm, swinging the pirate around and into a neck lock.

“Time to die, asshole,” he said. He twisted the man’s head, heard his neck snap, and dropped him to the ground. They were all dead now. None of them could hurt Sandburg again.

“You forgot about me,” a voice said behind him.

Jim whirled around, suddenly face-to-face with a darker version of himself, eyes bled almost totally black.

“I hurt him over and over again, and it hurts the worst because I call him friend and Guide and partner.”

Jim shook his head in denial. “That’s not me. Not anymore.”

“It’ll always be you.”

He could hear Sandburg screaming in the back of his mind, needed to get him. Needed to end this.

“I love him. And I won’t hurt him, not anymore.”

“You think you can kill me as easily as these others?” Other Jim gestured to the bodies scattered around the clearing. “I’m in too deeply. You can’t cut me out like a malignant tumor.”

“Maybe not. But I can refuse to acknowledge you. I can bury you even deeper, until you never see the light of day. Blair is mine, and I protect what’s mine.”

“We’ll see.” Other Jim smirked and vanished, and Jim shook with fatigue. Sandburg was still screaming, though, and so he marshaled whatever small bits of strength he had.

“I’m coming, Blair! I’m…”
“…coming,” Jim mumbled. He opened his eyes, blinking in the dim, flickering light. It took him a minute to sort out that he was lying next to the campfire and that it was full dark out.

“Hey, Jim.” Simon appeared at his side, talking softly and pressing his hand gently on Jim’s forehead. “No fever. That’s a good sign.”

“Blair?” he rasped, throat dry.

“Can you sit up a little?” Simon helped him, taking his weight long enough to allow him to swallow a couple Tylenol and some water. The water tasted like Heaven, soothing his throat. Jim’s shoulder was aching fiercely but he didn’t try to dial down, not this time.

“Where’s Blair?” he asked again, lying back down. A bundle of clothes had been placed under his head for a pillow, and he was covered with two of the airplane blankets.

“Sleeping, just over there.” Simon pointed and now Jim could see him, curled into a ball a few feet away near the fire.

“He okay?”

Simon settled beside him, favoring one leg. “I wouldn’t say that, but the kid’s holding. He was amazing, Jim. Did some field surgery, took the bullet out of your shoulder and stitched you up.”

“He did?” Jim didn’t know why he was so surprised. Sandburg was always taking care of him, even before he saw to his own needs. “Prisoners?”

“Tied up, under a nice shady tree in the jungle. Your boy wanted to bring them back here but I exercised an administrative veto.”

“Bet that went over big.”

“Oh, yeah. Couldn’t stop him from feeding them. I honest to God don’t know how he managed to stay on his feet for so long.”

“Stubborn,” Jim said fondly.

“There’s the pot calling the kettle black,” Simon replied dryly.

Jim tried to think of a biting come back, but he fell asleep. When he woke again the fire was burning low and Sandburg was curled up next to him, head pillowed on Jim’s stomach. He couldn’t help but run his hands over his partner’s curls, which were getting knotted again and matted with something he preferred not to think about just now.

“Hmmmm,” Sandburg hummed in his sleep; his breath was warm on Jim’s skin where the blanket had slipped down.

They’d been damn lucky today and he knew it. Battered and bruised though they may be, none of them was dead. It was only going to get harder from here on in, though. They had two extra mouths to feed, though that was the least of their problems. If these pirates were part of a larger group, the others might come looking for them. And Jim knew they wouldn’t stand a chance if that happened; none of them was in any shape to mount a second defense.

“Hey,” Sandburg said, keeping his voice low. He looked up at Jim, eyes dark.
“Hey.” Jim stroked a finger down his cheek. “Thanks.”

“How’s the shoulder?”

“Hurts,” he replied honestly.

Sandburg pushed himself up and leaned over, feeling Jim’s forehead with the back of his hand. “No fever.”

“You do good work, Chief.”

“I was scared,” he admitted, looking down at his hands. “You should be in a hospital.”

Jim cupped his face with one hand, tipping it up. “I was scared too. For you.”

“It’s okay, Jim. Really.” Sandburg closed his eyes and leaned into the touch. “He would’ve killed me. I know that. It’s not how I wanted things to go, but I’m pretty happy to still be alive.”

“So am I.”

“You want some water?”

Jim nodded, propping himself up on one elbow and letting Sandburg hold the water bottle for him.

“You should get some rest.”

“Only if you do,” Jim said. He lay back down and held out his good arm. Sandburg cuddled into him without any further discussion, his head resting against Jim’s neck. He pressed a kiss to his partner’s temple and held him as tightly as he could. Whatever else was coming, they’d deal with it. He promised himself that. He wasn’t letting Sandburg out of his sight, not again.

“I love you,” he whispered.

Sandburg didn’t reply, just pressed himself closer against Jim, his arm clutching the Sentinel around the waist like he was afraid to let go. The last thing Jim felt before he drifted back to sleep was warm, wet tears running down his collarbone.

*=*o*o*=

Jim sat propped up against a large rock, unable to take his eyes off the waterfall, though he was very careful not to zone this time. Well, he wasn’t so much watching the water as he was the naked man that stood under it scrubbing at his hair. He purposefully kept sight dialed down so he couldn’t see past the flowing water, wanting to afford Sandburg as much privacy as he could. He’d been at it for a while now and Jim was worried.

“Chief!” he shouted. “You’re clean!”

Jim frowned in annoyance when it was clear that he couldn’t be heard over the pounding of the water. If he could move without pain radiating from his shoulder he’d swim out there and bodily restrain Sandburg. He knew the younger man was trying to wash the taint of death off himself and Jim had been there often enough to know soap and water wasn’t going to do it.

Finally, after an additional ten minutes of intense scrubbing, Sandburg made his way back to shore. Jim averted his eyes, not sure he wanted to see all that his partner had to offer, at least not yet. He’d like to be in better shape first, which meant having the use of both arms.
When Sandburg had slipped back into a pair of shorts, Jim reached out to grab his hand. “Go get your comb.”

Sandburg looked at him for a minute, and then went to retrieve the comb and a hair tie. When he came back, he settled between Jim’s legs, elbows on his partner’s knees.

“You don’t have to,” he said.

“I want to,” Jim replied. It was a little awkward because he could only use one hand, but he did his best to gently work out the knots.

“Where’d Simon go?”

“Prisoner detail. Making sure they get food, water and a pee break.”

“We can’t leave them tied out there indefinitely,” Sandburg pointed out.

“I know.”

“I really want to go home, man.”

Jim tossed the comb aside and wrapped his arm around his partner, who sounded defeated.

“I know you do, Chief. So do I.”

“I always thought it would be kind of fun, being stranded on a tropical island. You know how people always joke about that.” He clutched Jim’s arm tightly with both hands. “But it isn’t. It’s scary and hard. Do you know how lucky you are not to have bled out or gotten an infection? I don’t want any of us to die here.”

“That’s not gonna happen, so put it out of your mind.” Jim rested his head on damp curls.

“Costa Rica. I was there with a group of students from other universities. We ran into some very bad guys and this girl, Leslie...” Sandburg sighed softly. “She bled out from a stab wound, and there was nothing we could do. By the time we were able to get anywhere near a doctor she was already gone.”

“I’m sorry, Chief.” Jim pressed a kiss to the back of his neck. “I’m sorry you had to go through that. And you’re right, it’s been difficult being stuck here. But... it hasn’t all been bad. Has it?”

Sandburg chuckled and a little of the tension went out of him. “No, I suppose not.”

Jim tugged his partner’s shoulder until he turned himself around, legs stretched out beneath the Sentinel’s bent ones. They shared a kiss, soft and tentative, and Jim felt that almost everything they’d been through was worthwhile because of this, because he finally got to have the man he’d loved for so long. The man who loved him back just as strongly; he knew what a gift that was.

He ran his hand up the smooth, damp skin of Sandburg’s back and the other man melted into him, being careful of the shoulder. The kiss deepened but remained languid and slow; there was no need to rush anything. Jim loved the way Sandburg tasted, loved the silky glide as their tongues moved together. And he desperately wished he wasn’t laid up with an injury right now.

“This part of the health care program?” Simon asked, startling both of them; Jim had been so wrapped up in Sandburg that everything else had just faded away.

“It’s not Medicaid billable,” Sandburg quipped. He grabbed the comb and got to his feet. “How’re
the prisoners?”

“Angry. Not inclined to play nice.” Simon shrugged. “They’ll change their tune soon enough.”

Jim hoped so. Having the men a bit more compliant would be helpful. Simon had hidden all but one of the guns, just in case, but they couldn’t have armed guard on them 24/7. He’d have to think of something. He rubbed absently at his ear, the drone of a bug starting to irritate him.

“Maybe you should talk to them,” Simon suggested to Sandburg. “You speak better Spanish than I do.”

“You think they’ll listen to anything I have to say?”


Jim tuned them out, listening instead for that droning buzz. It wasn’t a bug, and it wasn’t close by, but he was having a hard time getting a handle on it. He reached out for Sandburg, who instantly caught his hand, then opened up his senses. He scanned the island, then moved beyond to the deep water. The sound wasn’t coming from there, so he turned his senses upward. And found it.

“Jim? What is it?” Sandburg asked when he’d pulled back. “Is it…are there more coming?”

“I don’t know.”

“What did you hear?” Simon asked.

“A helicopter. And it’s headed this way.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: This chapter took me by surprise, in that I wrote it right after the previous chapter and I wasn’t planning on that. But I guess Blair and Jim didn’t want to leave things hanging for you guys. LOL! They also decided this wouldn’t be the last chapter, as I had originally planned. Nice to know I have control over all this. ::rolls eyes::

I have no practical knowledge of gunshot wounds nor how to go about tending one. Just making this up as I go. Luckily Jim has his own Shaman to make sure there are no complications. ::grins::

For those of you hoping to get Jim’s take on the pirate battle (and you know who you are!) I’ll just say that the dream sequence/flashback contained some of that. And that’s all you’re getting, because there was a reason I didn’t want to write it. ::grins::
Sandburg looked up, as if expecting the helicopter to suddenly appear overhead, but Jim shook his
head. “It’s not close enough yet, Chief.”

“If it’s rescue, we need to signal it somehow,” Simon said. He was clearly trying to remain level-
headed though he was surely hoping this was their chance to leave. Jim couldn’t help feeling
frustrated; they needed to know if it was more pirates, otherwise any signaling they did would be
their undoing.

“If I could get eyes on it…”

“Come on, Jim,” Sandburg interrupted. “I know you’re not feeling your best right now, but you have
a better sense to use right now.”

Jim looked up at him for a long moment before he finally got it, and rolled his eyes at his own
foolishness. He didn’t need a visual when he could just listen and hear who was in the ‘copter.
Sandburg squatted down next to him, hands on his shoulders.

“Just focus everything on hearing, big guy. I’ll be right here to ground you.”

Jim closed his eyes and stretched out his hearing, discarding all the island sounds lightning fast. He
found the droning buzz of the ‘copter and zoomed in on it, pushing that sense to the limit to hear the
voices inside over the sound of the rotor. When he was finally able to separate the sounds he thought
for sure he was hallucinating.

…getting sick of this.

You’re not exactly my bowl of rice either, you wanker.

It’s too much area to cover.

And we’ll bloody well cover it, Sal. You’re being compensated.

How much longer…

Until we find them. Now shut your gob and keep looking.

Jim pulled back, aware that he had a huge grin on his face. Never in his life had he been so happy to
hear that snarky Aussie accent.

“Is that a happy, pirate-free smile?” Sandburg asked. “Or a we’re-completely-screwed grimace?”

“It’s Megan,” he replied. “She’s looking for us.”

Simon threw his hands up with a whoop, and then he and Sandburg were dancing around like
lunatics. Jim let them cut loose for a minute or two before reining them back in.

“Not that the floor show isn’t good, Fred and Ginger, but we’re not out of the woods yet.”

Simon got extra points for going right from party mode to serious Police Captain mode. He saw,
sooner than Sandburg did, what the issue at hand was. “We need to signal her somehow. How far away are they?”

“About fifteen miles, maybe more,” Jim reported. “And they’ve got a lot of ocean to cover.”

“We have to blow up the boat,” Sandburg said, pulling on one of Jim’s Jags t-shirts. “If we cut the oil lines it’ll smoke up real well. They should be able to see it.”

“I’m really glad you’re on our side, kid,” Simon remarked.

“Can you two handle this?” Jim knew it was a stupid question but he couldn’t help asking it.

“Well, I’ve always been pretty good with accidental destruction,” Sandburg said with a grin. “Let’s see if I can do it on purpose.”

“Somehow I don’t find that encouraging,” Simon replied.

“Let’s get you up, big guy.”

Jim waved his partner off. “No, leave me here. You need to hurry and I’ll only slow you down.”

Sandburg shook his head, frowning. “No.”

“Chief, there’s no need to drag me along. All I can do is sit on the beach.”

“I don’t like it.”

Jim grinned. “Come on. This is your chance to tell me to wait in the truck.”

That got a reluctant smile out of Sandburg. “Yeah, okay. But Simon’s gonna give you the machine gun. Just in case.”

Jim knew better than to argue, accepting the weapon and setting it in his lap. He sincerely hoped there’d be no need to use it, because he knew his shoulder wasn’t up to that kind of punishment.

“Let’s go, demolition man,” Simon nodded his head towards the beach.

Sandburg squeezed Jim’s hand and gave him a look that conveyed his dislike of leaving the other man behind. Jim appreciated the sentiment.

“I’ll be fine. Go and make sure you get Megan’s attention.”

“We will.”

Jim watched Simon and Sandburg disappear into the jungle and cursed his uselessness.

*o*o*o*

Blair tried to stay focused and positive, but as usual his thoughts were all over the map. He had an irrational fear that the pirates would get free and hurt Jim. He worried that Megan wouldn’t see the fire, but more pirates would. More than anything else he wanted to get back to the loft, back home. Still, Blair was more than capable of compartmentalizing and so he could deal with the task at hand while his brain dealt with all the other stuff.

“We can use the inflatable raft to get to the boat,” he told Simon as they followed the trail to the beach. “Once we’re onboard it should be a pretty simple thing to cut the fuel and oil lines and get it
all burning.”

“You leave the lighting of fires to me, Sandburg. Last thing I need to explain to Jim is you doing an impression of the Human Torch.”

“Real funny. I’m perfectly capable of…”

“I know you are, Sandburg. Believe me, I do. But I want to do this, okay?”

Blair couldn’t argue with that. He knew how important it was to feel like you were making a contribution, and that could be hard when the Super Sentinel was around always taking the lead.

When they finally got to the beach, Blair stood for a moment looking out at the trawler. He was suddenly aware of the death that was all around him; one dead pirate on the boat, four others somewhere in the jungle, and the unfortunate corpse on the beach. The smell of rotting flesh and fresh blood made him gag, even as he recognized it as memory; the winds were blowing kindly today, carrying only the tang of salt spray.

“You okay?” Simon asked, looking concerned.

Blair nodded, taking several deep breaths to clear his head. “If Megan doesn’t…we’ll need to bury them. All of them.”

“We will,” Simon promised softly.

“Let’s go.”

They dragged the raft out into the water and with two people to row the going was easier this time. Blair only faltered when it came time to tie the raft off to the stern of the trawler; he could see the bloody smudges on the rail, remembered fumbling his way off only yesterday.

“The engine room should be below the main cabin,” Simon said. “I’ll take care of that. Can you look around, see if there’s anything worth scavenging before we set this burning?”

“Yeah, I can do that.” It was a good idea, particularly if Megan failed to spot their signal. Still, he hesitated before getting back on board the boat. He didn’t want to see the body.

The trawler was still heeling, so he and Simon had to make their way carefully forward to the main cabin. Luckily it was set behind the wheel house, though Blair could feel the body that lay just a few feet away. He didn’t want to see it, didn’t want to remember, but at the same time had to fight the compulsion to do just that.

“You gonna be alright for a few minutes?” Simon asked.

“I think I can handle this difficult mission,” Blair replied sarcastically.

He was left alone in the cabin when Simon went below, on hand braced against the wall. It was a larger space than he’d expected, with a galley kitchen and eating/lounging area. Clearly pirates weren’t the best housekeepers because there was trash everywhere. He wrinkled his nose at the faint hint of rotted food in the enclosed area.

Blair opened one of the cabinet doors, then stumbled back when the contents fell out on the floor. He shook his head, lips twitching into a half smile. The pirates were well-stocked with junk food – Ring Dings, Pringles, candy bars, boxes of what looked like licorice with foreign writing on the box, and German cookies. How many of them had come from innocent travelers who’d been robbed and
possibly killed? Blair decided to bypass the contents of that cabinet altogether.

He went through the other cabinets, tossing his findings into a pillowcase; someone had been sleeping on the cushioned bench seat by the table. Salt, pepper, matches, instant coffee – Jim would be thrilled! – a soup pot, frying pan and various utensils. He bypassed the variety of drugs, though he did grab a bottle of Percocet; it wouldn’t be good for Jim, who was too sensitive, but if something happened to him or Simon it would certainly come in handy.

Blair opened the last cabinet and felt his bile rise up; he pressed his hand to his mouth. There were pictures taped to the inside of the cabinet door, so many pictures. Families, terrified faces with guns pointed at their heads. Pictures of leering pirates holding young girls. Men with bullet holes in their heads, held aloft like fishing trophies. He slammed the door shut, gulping in air in an effort to fight off the nausea. Once he got himself under control he opened the cabinet back up and pulled the photographs down, stuffing them into the pillowcase; when they got rescued he’d turn them over to the authorities.

“You all set?” Simon asked, returning from the engine room and reeking of gasoline.

“Yeah. Let’s get out of here.” Blair hefted the pillowcase. “I feel a little funny, though. I mean, we’re destroying evidence here.”

He’d thought Simon would laugh at him for that, but the other man just nodded solemnly. “I know. But we don’t have a lot of options here. If we can get Megan’s attention she can radio the authorities and they’ll still have the two survivors to questions. It’s better than nothing.”

“Who knew rescue could be such a moral dilemma.”

“You get a lot of those when you’re a cop.” Simon said.

Blair gestured to the pillowcase. “I found…there’s pictures. I took them, for proof.”

“I don’t want to know the details, do I?” Simon asked, sounding suddenly tired. Blair shook his head.

“Probably not.”

“Well, that’s good thinking. It won’t just be our word against theirs.” He rubbed his arm across his forehead. “Get back to the raft. I’m going to leave a trail of gas that we can light from a safe distance.”

Blair noticed for the first time that Simon was carrying a rusted can full of gas. Not needing to be told twice he headed towards the stern with his bag of pirate booty. Evidence or not, a part of him was going to be very happy to see the boat go up.

He got into the raft and made ready to shove off, holding the mooring line. Simon joined him five minutes later, walking backwards and letting gas dribble out of the can as he went. When he got into the raft, he set the can down on the deck of the trawler.

“Get ready to paddle our asses out of here,” he advised, pulling out his butane lighter.

“You’re not gonna toss that on the boat, are you?” Blair asked. “They do that all the time in movies, usually with a Zippo, and that always seems like a waste of a good lighter.”

Simon stared at him. “What?”
Blair pulled out the box of matches. “We’ve sacrificed enough to these guys. No need to take a loss on your lighter.” He lit a match and tossed it, but the flame guttered out. He looked down at Jim’s t-shirt and sighed. He tore a strip off the bottom and Simon used the lighter to catch it on fire. Once it was burning strongly enough he tossed it in the can, which instantly ignited.

“Let’s go!” Simon bellowed. Blair loosed the mooring line and picked up his oar. He didn’t look back but could easily imagine the fire racing back to the engine room. He pulled hard at the oar, mirroring Simon who was doing the same on the other side of the raft, and quickly put some space between themselves and the boat. He hoped it was enough.

When the fire reached the engine room the trawler exploded with a mighty roar, debris shooting high in the air alongside a gout of flame and smoke. The resultant waves rocked the raft, enough so that Blair found himself gripping the sides instead of the oar. It was a near thing but the raft didn’t capsize, though they had to keep a wary eye on burning bits of wood. Hopefully the huge pillar of smoke would be enough of a signal.

They made it back to shore without any further problems and Blair secured the raft. He took a moment to focus on Jim, relieved to sense that he was still in camp and seemingly fine. He slung the pillowcase over his shoulder.

“Do we wait here, or go back to camp?” he asked.

Simon stood with his arms crossed, gaze fixed on the sky overhead. “I’ll stay here. Get that stuff back to camp and check on Jim.”

Blair didn’t need any further encouragement; he just headed for the trail that would take him back to Jim.

*o*o*o*

Jim had followed the expedition to the trawler as best his senses would allow. He’d felt what Sandburg had felt, and tried to put it all in context. He’d started hauling himself to his feet when he’d sensed his partner’s horror and revulsion, wishing he knew what the hell was happening. He’d taken a few stumbling steps toward the jungle when things seemed to settle down for Sandburg. Jim was looking towards the beach when the boat went up; hopefully Megan would see the smoke as easily as he did.

There was nothing to do now but wait. Jim cursed his inability to be of any help; his Guide shouldn’t have had to go back to the boat, not after what he’d been through. Instead of protecting his partner he’d done nothing but place him in danger since they’d been on this damned island.

Well, there was something he could do. Jim closed his eyes and opened up hearing. Without Sandburg to ground him he was able to stretch that sense out more quickly and he searched for the sound of the ‘copter; it didn’t take long to find it.

He could hear the air being displaced by each individual rotor blade as if they were moving in slow motion. *Whup. Whup. Whup.* He had to force himself away from the distraction of that sound, turning his focus to the people inside.

*Bugger me! Do you see that?*

*What?*

*There! Smoke!*
Roger that.

Jim could hear the ‘copter change direction, his attention once more drawn to the slow whup…whup…whup of the blades. It overwhelmed everything else, filled his whole head with rhythmic sound.

Eventually something else got through; a regular beat that he could feel under his hand, and it warred with the sound that filled his head. Whup…tha-thump…whup…tha-thump. It started to pull his attention out of the sky, away from the ‘copter, and he followed it back to its source.

that’s right

Slowly all of his senses started to come back, focused on one thing and one thing only – the Guide. He smelled of gas and smoke, sweat and musk. His heart beat steadily under Jim’s palm, and he could feel the thin cotton barrier between the two.

nice and easy. come on back.

The sound of his voice was a lure, drawing him in with deep, soothing tones. The Guide’s voice, underlaid with the Shaman’s, called him home. Jim opened his eyes and found himself looking directly into Sandburg’s wide, blue eyes. Every feature of his face well-documented and loved.

“You back with me, Jim?”

Jim’s lips parted, but he had no need to speak; there was still taste to be appeased. He leaned forward and kissed Sandburg, textures and tastes dancing on his tongue. With a full sensory image of his Guide achieved, the Sentinel was satisfied.

“Are you crazy?” Sandburg snapped, pulling away. “What were you thinking, using your senses like that without me? What if I couldn’t get you back?”

Jim blinked at him, momentarily confused until he recalled what he’d been doing while he waited.

“I wanted to do something useful,” he said defensively. “I should’ve been the one to go to the boat.”

Sandburg tugged him down until they were both sitting, shoulder to shoulder. “You’ve gone above and beyond useful since we’ve been here, Jim. Cut yourself some slack.”

“I can’t help worrying about you.”

“I know.” Sandburg leaned to the side, resting his head against Jim’s. “But I can take care of myself you know.”

“I know.” Jim sighed.

“So, did it work?”

“Yeah. Megan saw the smoke and she’s on her way.”

“Thank God!”

Jim could feel his partner’s happiness, and also a little fear. He put his good arm around Sandburg’s shoulders and gave him a squeeze.

“What?”
“What what?” Sandburg asked, confused.

“What are you afraid of?”

He sighed. “I’m just… is this gonna change when we get home? You and me?”

“I don’t want it to,” Jim replied honestly.

“I don’t either. But we’ll have to be careful. It could be dangerous for you if other cops found out about us.”

“Don’t ask, don’t tell?”

“I’m serious about this, big guy.” Sandburg began rubbing small circles on Jim’s chest. “Things are better for gays now, sure, but in law enforcement it can still be a detriment. You rely on those guys for backup and I don’t want you to have to worry about getting it.”

Jim pressed a kiss to Sandburg’s head. “I’m not gay.”

“What?”

“I don’t love men. I just love you.”

“That’s a pretty thin distinction,” Sandburg said, but he sounded pleased.

“We’ve got time to figure things out with the world at large, Sandburg. Hell, we still need to figure it out for ourselves.”

“Can we agree that kissing is good?”

“Absolutely,” Jim agreed amicably. He kissed Sandburg again, reveling in the other man’s lush lips. Yeah, the kissing was good. He could only assume the rest would be just as satisfying once they were ready for it.

“I won’t lie about my feelings for you, Chief,” he murmured. “But I can promise to keep a lid on them in mixed company.”

“Thank you.”

They sat there quietly for a little while, and then Sandburg’s head came up, his eyes wide. “Do you hear that?”

Jim just grinned at him. Of course he heard it.

“Sounds like our rescue had arrived.”

Chapter End Notes

AN: So much for the boat. But yay for the rescue! How will things fare for our boys now that Megan is on her way and civilization beckons? Stay tuned and find out!
It was all Simon could do to restrain himself when the helicopter came into view. As it was, he waved wildly to make sure they saw him. The chopper dropped down low, but there wasn’t room enough for it to land. It hovered at the shoreline and a rope ladder dropped out the side. Megan Connor, a sight for very sore eyes, climbed down with a big pack strapped on her back and jumped the last foot to the sand.

“Captain!”

This time Simon didn’t mind the hugging. He was so relieved he almost gave in to emotion and embarrassed himself. Almost. “Connor! Damn glad to see you.”

Megan was grinning broadly, though her eyes were bright with tears. “You gave us quite a fright, Simon. Daryl calls me every day.”

Simon nodded, not trusting himself to speak. He’d missed his boy, and it was nice to know the feeling had been mutual.

“Where are the other two?” Megan asked, looking around worriedly.

“Sandburg and Ellison are back at camp. Jim’s been injured.”

“I saw the smoke. What did you blow up? Did he get hurt in the explosion?”

“We had a visit from some pirates,” Simon explained. “Two of them are tied up in the jungle. Jim got shot.”

“Right.” Megan shrugged out of her backpack and pulled out a satellite phone. “Sal. Radio the authorities. We have an injured man and two pirates that need to be taken into custody.”

Simon watched with some trepidation as the chopper rose up and angled away. “He’ll be back, right?”

“We’ll have to get a ship in here, Captain. We can’t fit everyone in with Sal and someone needs to take charge of the prisoners.” Megan put her hand on his arm. “Someone will be here soon. In the meantime, let’s see this camp of yours.”

Simon led the way through the jungle, filling Megan in on their encounter with the pirates and how they set up their second camp. He left out all the weird Sentinel stuff; she was passingly familiar with the subject, of course, but he didn’t feel right discussing it.

“Here it is,” he said when they’d reached the camp. “Our home away from home.”

“Megan!” Sandburg ran over and gave her a bear hug, actually swinging her off her feet.

“Sandy!” she laughed. “You little ripper! You okay?”

“Better than okay, now that you’re here.” He let her go, but didn’t stop smiling.

“Connor,” Jim said, getting slowly to his feet. “Nice of you to drop by.”
Megan shook her head. “Jimbo. Even here beyond the back stump you manage to find trouble. Why am I even surprised?”

They exchanged grins and then Sandburg was there, one arm around Jim’s waist to help him stay steady on his feet. Simon wondered if he should mention the change in their relationship, then decided with a bit of gleeful anticipation that Megan could figure it out for herself. He didn’t know how open his two friends planned on being and didn’t want to out them unnecessarily.

“Sit down,” Sandburg said. “Fill us in. Mango?”

“No thanks.” Megan sat comfortably in the grass while Sandburg helped Jim back down in such a way as to help keep strain off his shoulder.

“So what’s going on out the wide world?” Simon asked, settling himself on one of the logs they’d set up around the campfire. “How long have you been looking for us?”

“Since the day the plane went down,” Megan said, all traces of humor gone. “We got a partial mayday and then nothing. When you failed to arrive in Cascade, we knew something had gone cocked.”

“I’m so sorry about Todd,” Sandburg said, reminding Simon that the pilot hadn’t made it. She looked at him for a minute, as if confused, and then laughed.

“No need to be sorry, mate. Todd’s alive and well and recuperating in Sidney.”

“What?” Simon couldn’t have been any more surprised at that news. “How?”

“He washed up on one of the inhabited islands. The locals took charge of him until they could get word out. If we hadn’t heard from him we’d still be looking in the wrong direction for you lot.”

Simon exchanged an incredulous look with Jim and Sandburg. They owed Todd twice over for their lives, it seemed.

“That’s amazing!” Sandburg looked relieved. He leaned against Jim, who threw his good arm around the kid’s shoulders.

“It’s not been easy,” Megan said. “Hard enough looking for you, but I’ve been fielding calls from the blokes at Major Crimes, Jim’s dad, Daryl, even the bloody Mayor!”

“What about Naomi?” Jim asked, his hand tightening on Sandburg’s shoulder. “Does she know what’s going on?”

“Are you kidding? Joel’s set up a task force just to try and locate her. Last I heard they’d tracked her down in Oklahoma or Kansas or some such, and were making arrangements to get her to Cascade.”

Sandburg laughed. “Remind me to thank Joel when we get home. I know how hard it can be to find Naomi.”

Simon would be sure to thank him as well. It was nice to know his men had been so concerned for their welfare, and he knew it must’ve been hard for Joel to run the department with everything else going on. He’d really gone above and beyond, and Simon wouldn’t forget it.

“So what’s the plan?” Jim asked.

“Plan is, my mate Sal is calling in backup. We’ll need someone to deal with your pirates, and you
could use a medical look-see.”

“We all could,” Simon said. “Island life isn’t as relaxing as they’d lead you to believe in the movies.”

“Oh, man, you got that right!” Sandburg chuckled. “I’m looking forward to a nice, hot shower. And tea.”

“Coffee,” Jim groaned. “I’d sell my soul for some coffee.”

“That all you think it’s worth?” Megan teased. “I’d at least hold out for coffee and Wonderburger.”

*M*o*M*o*M*

Megan made herself at home, since she seemed certain that backup wouldn’t be arriving before morning. Blair showed her around camp, pleased at how impressed she was with the smoke house he and Simon had built. She let them each use her satellite phone to call home with and Blair had stayed close while Jim talked to his dad. Their relationship had improved over the last year and he could see how touched Jim was at his father’s concern.

Naomi was still unreachable by phone, but Blair didn’t mind; she’d be in Cascade by the time they got home. He was pleased that Bill Ellison had asked after him, and wondered if Jim would tell his dad about their new relationship. Though, to be honest, a tiny part of him was still expecting everything to go back to the way it was once they were in their old stomping grounds again. That same part of him felt that Jim was a gift he wasn’t going to get to keep.

When Megan received a call that confirmed a morning pick-up, she convinced Simon to take one last hike around so she could see where they’d been living the last eight days. Blair didn’t mind having some time alone with his Sentinel. They lay side by side in the grass, playing footsie.

“I can’t believe Megan’s here,” he said. “I can’t believe we’re finally going home.”

“I know,” Jim replied softly. There was something in his tone that had Blair up on one elbow, studying his face.

“What?”

Jim sighed. “I know this sounds stupid, but…I’m going to miss this.”

Blair bit back his automatic claim of Jim being crazy and gave the statement some thought. He supposed he could understand it, if he considered things from a Sentinel point of view. He could be more open with his senses here, had in fact broadened them to an incredible degree. For the first time Blair wondered if his partner was going to have difficulty transitioning back to his regular territory.

“You know, Jim, all things considered I think this has been good for you. The island, I mean.”

Jim looked up at him, surprised. “Really?”

“Yes, really.” Blair traced Jim’s jaw line with one finger. “We’ve touched on this before, how a Sentinel needs time away to recharge. Clearly I underestimated the importance of it. From now on, big guy, we’ll have regular trips out of Cascade, and away from civilization. Okay?”

Jim wrapped one hand around the back of Blair’s neck and pulled him down for a kiss. “Why is it you always understand what I need?”

“Because I love you enough to listen,” Blair replied with a whisper.
“We’ll face it together. Right?”

“Always.”

They grinned at each other and then Jim cocked his head, listening. “They’re back.”

“Guess I should get something ready for dinner.” Blair helped Jim get to his feet. “Might as well finish up the smoked meats.”

“Might as well,” Jim agreed. He pulled Blair tight to his chest and held him fast with his good arm.

“You okay, big guy?”

“Yeah. I’m good.” He dipped his head down and captured Blair’s mouth with his own, the kiss searing and all-encompassing. Blair lost track of his surroundings, and almost his own name, by the time Jim pulled back. He was left breathless and shaking and wanting so much more.

“You guys hungry?” Jim asked, never breaking eye contact with his partner.

It took Blair’s lust-soaked brain a few precious moments to catch up, and then he flushed. “What are you doing?” he hissed.

“Marking my territory,” Jim replied with an unrepentant grin.

“Jesus, get a room!” Simon complained.

Blair closed his eyes and rested his head on Jim’s chest; he didn’t want to see the expression on Megan’s face. He sincerely hoped that Jim wasn’t planning on this kind of display for all their friends. What happened to staying under the radar? Didn’t anyone ever listen to him?

“Crikey! I thought you two’d never hook up,” he heard Megan say in amusement. “Should’ve strangled you a long time ago.”

“And here I thought I was being subtle,” he muttered.

“Not if you know what to look for.” Megan was standing right beside them now and Blair turned his head to look at her. She seemed genuinely pleased.

“I suppose you’ll claim you knew all along,” he remarked dryly.

“I am an inspector, Sandy.”

“Yeah. Right.” Blair pulled out of Jim’s embrace, shooting him a dark look as he did so. “I hope you like smoked fish and fruit.”

“I hope you like rum.” Megan produced a bottle of Captain Morgan from her backpack. “I was carrying it around just in case I had something to celebrate.”

Jim grinned. “You know, Connor, you just might have some redeeming qualities after all.”

*O*O*O*

Jim was pleasantly buzzed, the pain in his shoulder reduced to a distant throbbing. Megan’s bottle of rum seemed bottomless, or maybe he was the only one drinking it; at this point he didn’t much care. He kept finding himself distracted by Sandburg’s earlobe, nibbling at it every time his partner tucked his long, curly hair back.
“Quit it,” Sandburg said, giving him a little shove.

“We never doubted you were alive, none of us,” Megan said, picked at the sliced fruit. “You two especially. Nothing keeps you blokes down.”

“We’re irrepressible,” Sandburg agreed. “I mean, Jim here is pretty repressed, except when we’re being irrepressible.”

“You have a way with words, kid,” Simon said with a chuckle. He was smoking one of the cigars he’d rescued from the crash.

“I went to college,” Sandburg replied confidentially. Jim suspected his partner was a little drunk. Then the earlobe was back and he sucked it into his mouth, threading his tongue through the hoops.

“Quit it.”

“Get a grip, Jimbo. You’re like a horny kid with his first crush.” Megan leaned over and plucked the cigar from Simon’s hand, taking a few puffs before handing it back.

“Blair is my first crush,” Jim said with a grin. “He crushed me under a garbage truck.”

Megan stared at him. “I’m not off my face enough for that to make sense.”

“I miss my clothes,” Sandburg sighed. “Jim’s are all too big.”

“Bet you feel nice in flannel.” Jim slung an arm around his partner.

“And I bet your system’s all out of whack from that gunshot wound and you’re way drunker than you should be.”

“I’m not the one who tastes like the Captain,” Jim pointed out. He pressed his lips to Sandburg’s neck for another sampling.


“Captain Morgan, not Captain Banks.”

“And you’re officially cut off, mate.” Megan put the bottle out of his reach. “Don’t wanna to be hung over for your dramatic rescue tomorrow. I didn’t call for a booze bus, you know.”

“Will it be dramatic?” Sandburg asked. Megan nodded.

“You lot are international news. Three American cops go missing, foul play is suspected. Movie of the week time, boys.”

Jim made a face. He didn’t want to talk to reporters. What was there to say, really? They crashed, they survived. Well, the pirates might make good copy, even he had to admit that.

“I don’t want to be on TV.”

“Oh, come on big guy,” Sandburg nudged him with his shoulder. “I bet they’d get someone buff to play you. Like…like that guy on Hawaii Five-0. Or Channing Tatum.”

“They couldn’t get anyone good to play you. Only you can play you. No one else has the hair.” Jim ran a hand through it and – oh! – there was the earlobe.
“Quit it.”

“I’m coming back with you,” Megan said. “Just to make sure you get home this time.”

“Do we have to say goodbye again?” Sandburg asked. “I don’t want to.”

“We never did thank you for the gifts.” Simon waved his cigar. “They were greatly appreciated.”

“Wouldn’t have made it without the knife,” Jim pointed out. “We used it for everything.”

“I’m glad I got you that instead of the inflate-a-date,” Megan laughed.

Jim laughed along with her and then he started drifting, only half-listening to the conversation. At one point he must’ve fallen asleep, because the next thing he knew he was lying down with his head in Sandburg’s lap; his partner was stroking his hair while he talked to Megan about the history of piracy and rum in the South Pacific.

Before he drifted off again, Jim thought about how much he’d miss this. Sitting around the campfire, nothing to do but talk. No cases to solve, no city smog or traffic noise. Sandburg naked under a waterfall. Strange to have such a feeling of nostalgia for a place he hadn’t left yet, especially when all they’d talked about was going home.

“…like this,” he mumbled, already mostly asleep again.

“Me too, big guy,” Sandburg replied. “Me too.”

*O*O*O*

Jim was up before dawn the next morning, and happily hangover free. He did his morning routine for the last time, then quietly woke Sandburg and waited patiently for him to do the same. Thankfully he held off asking questions until after he’d dressed and brushed his teeth.

“What’s with the early wake-up call?” he asked, yawning.

“I want to do one last scan,” Jim replied, feeling a little self-conscious. Sandburg nodded and favored him with the little grin that said he thought his Sentinel was being cute.

“Ready when you are, big guy.”

Just because he could, Jim pulled Sandburg close and dropped a kiss on his lips. “You okay with a little climb?” He inclined his head toward the rocky shelf next to the waterfall, the one his Guide had fallen from. He dialed down pain enough that he could take the hike.

“As long as I don’t have to go near the edge,” Sandburg said. “After you.”

In the murky pre-dawn light they followed the little path up to the ledge, Jim occasionally reaching back to help steady his partner when he stumbled. The bond between them was still firmly in place, the one that tied him so intimately with his Guide, and he was afraid it would go away once they got home. He never thought he’d want that, particularly since it was a two-way kind of deal, but he found he didn’t want to give it up.

When they reached their destination Jim stood in the middle of the ledge, Sentinel vision giving him a clear view of everything below. There was a gentle breeze blowing, carrying a light mist of water and the scent of flowers with it.

Sandburg stood behind him, one hand firmly pressed into the middle of his back and the other
wrapped around his arm. “Take a deep breath, relax all your muscles. And if you don’t come back when I call, I’m pushing you over the edge.”

Jim twisted so he could see his partner’s face, noting the complete lack of humor there. Well, that was certainly one way to snap him out of a zone. “I love you, you know.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sandburg replied with a smile, and Jim could see the affection in his eyes. He turned back around, took a deep breath as instructed, and opened up his senses one at a time. The island washed over him, a sensory buffet that he wanted to sample in detail. He isolated the scent of every variety of flower, committing them to memory. He catalogued every spiny caterpillar, every bird, every wild pig rooting through the underbrush.

When he was done, he let all of it swirl together, colors mixing with scents. He tasted the breeze and drank in the first rays of dawn as they moved across his skin. Jim lingered on his Guide, absorbing the scent and feel of him, listening to the beat of his heart and the rush of blood through his veins. His new Guide-sense allowed him to feel his partner’s love and awe and he drank that in as well.

Jim stretched out his senses, wrinkling his nose at the stench of dead bodies. He could hear the grumblings of the captives, could hear Megan and Simon beginning to stir. He pushed out beyond the beach, following the tide. Wispy clouds moved steadily overhead and the sky lightened as the sun came up, coloring it red and orange and yellow.

He heard Megan’s satellite phone ring, and then picked up on the other side of her conversation. He followed that voice, tracked it until he’d pinpointed the source at the very edge of his sensory range.

_jim. pull it back now._

He did as he was told, pulling his focus back, the hands of his Guide grounding him while the voice of the Shaman called him back to himself.

_that’s right, jim. follow my voice._

He could hear Megan ask what was going on, heard Simon give her an abbreviated explanation. And then he was back in his body, his limbs weak and shaking. Sandburg steadied him when he staggered, murmuring nonsense words now.

“Everything okay up there?” Simon called. Jim winced.

“Dial down,” Sandburg whispered. When his Sentinel nodded, he called back, “We’re good, Simon.”

He turned his full attention back on his partner. “We’re good, right Jim?”

He nodded, blinking his eyes work the dryness out. He looked down at Megan, who was looking back up at him and holding her phone aloft.

“Our ride’s almost here!”

“Did you sense them?” Sandburg asked, rubbing his hand up and down Jim’s back.

“I don’t know how she did it,” he muttered, leaning just a little against his Guide.

“Did what?”

“Our ride, Chief. It’s an aircraft carrier.”
CRASH SURVIVORS RESCUED

Honolulu, HI: Three missing men, presumed killed when their plane dropped off radar, were rescued after surviving eight days on an uninhabited island in the South Pacific. Captain Simon Banks, Detective James Ellison, a former Army Ranger [see sidebar, 18 Months In Peru], and Dr. Blair Sandburg, all members of the Major Crimes unit in Cascade, Washington, had been on a cultural exchange with the New South Wales Police Department in Australia, when their Cessna got caught in a storm and crashed during their flight home. Inspector Megan Connor of the NSW PD led search and rescue efforts, and it was she that finally located the missing men. The pilot of the plane, Todd Stuyvesant, had been rescued from a different location two days prior and is convalescing at his home in Sydney.

The USS George Washington, in the area to participate in RIMPAC, volunteered their services as a personal favor to Ms. Naomi Sandburg, Dr. Sandburg’s mother, who is a close friend of Rear Admiral Edward Miles. In addition to rescuing the stranded men, the Law Enforcement Detachment of the Coast Guard, stationed aboard the Washington, took into custody two pirates and will begin an investigation in conjunction with NCIS. The whole story has not yet been released, but it is believed that Banks, Ellison and Sandburg were set upon by a large group of pirates and managed to capture two at great risk to their own lives.

The rescued men were taken to Honolulu to The Queen’s Medical Center, where they were given full examinations and subsequently released. Complimentary rooms were made available at the Hale Koa Hotel, where they will stay for the next two days before returning home to Cascade. “I’ve been dreaming of a hot shower like you wouldn’t believe,” Dr. Sandburg was quoted as saying. None of the men has as yet given any interviews to the press, though we are told there will be a press conference before they leave Hawaii.

These brave men held the world captivated while they fought for their survival, and it is with great relief that we see them safely returned. Now the world awaits their story, told in their own words. As does Hollywood, where there is a bidding war going on for rights to their tale of survival against great odds.

This reporter can’t help but wonder what Captain Banks, Detective Ellison and Dr. Sandburg think of this media frenzy.

CASCADE WELCOMES HOME CRASH SURVIVORS

Cascade, WA: Over two hundred residents of the city of Cascade gathered at the Cascade International Airport yesterday to welcome home three of their own, survivors of not only a plane crash but eight days on an uninhabited island in the South Pacific and a deadly encounter with pirates. Captain Simon Banks, who heads the Major Crimes division of the Cascade Police Department, had a tearful reunion with his son Daryl. In addition, the entirety of the police department was on hand to also welcome back Detective James Ellison, Cop of the Year for three years running, and civilian consultant Dr. Blair Sandburg.

“We’re just really happy to be back,” Dr. Sandburg told reporters. “It may sound trite, but there really is no place like home.”

All three men will be enjoying a week off to reacclimatize before heading back to their job of keeping the streets of Cascade safe. Additionally, Dr. Sandburg and Captain Banks will give a full
account of their ordeal on Good Morning Washington, which will air this Thursday at 8am. Detective Ellison is unavailable due to illness and we wish him a speedy recovery.

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**Casting News:** EW Magazine reports that Alex O’Loughlin has been cast as Jim Ellison, the lead in a biopic about three Washington State cops who crash land on a deserted island and fend off pirates. He’ll be joining Emma Stone, who was cast last week in the role of Blair Sandburg. Though Sandburg in reality is a man, the decision was made early on to gender swap the role in an effort to add romantic tension to the film. Casting for the third lead is still ongoing, though there are rumors that both LL Cool J and Don Cheadle have expressed interest in the role. Filming of the as-yet-untitled film is scheduled to start in January.

Chapter End Notes

**AN:** Megan’s here! Rescue came! And of course I had to give the boys one more drunken campfire. LOL! I figured after all the angst it would be nice to see a goofier side of Jim.

This is the last chapter, faithful readers. Well…almost. Cause my muse loves an epilogue and truthfully, so do I. ::grins::
The drive up into the mountains had taken four and a half hours, and it was an additional seventy-eight minutes by ATV to get to the campsite. Jim closed his eyes and stretched out hearing, relaxing in increments as his sensitive ears failed to pick up any human sounds for miles; there were just animals and swiftly running streams and the cool breeze blowing through the pines.

“Open them all up,” Sandburg whispered, his hand on Jim’s back. “I’ve got you.”

For the first time in six months he let himself go, opened all his senses and set about discovering the area that would be home for the next ten days. Jim steadily catalogued every sound, every color, every texture. He found moose, bear and eagles, and listened for the fish moving below the surface of the nearby lake. All of the tension seeped out of him and he favored Sandburg with a wide grin.

“Feeling better, big guy?”

“Almost.” Jim tugged his partner close and held his head in his hands, fingers tangling in the curls that framed Sandburg’s face. The kiss was long, unhurried and sweetly satisfying. When it ended, he pulled Sandburg into a hug, hands stroking up the back of the other man’s corduroy coat.

“This is perfect, Chief.”

“Yeah. It is.”

They stood there a moment longer before Jim decided it was time to set up camp. There would be less roughing it this time around; they’d packed a little coffee pot, a frying pan, and a satellite phone. Jim wanted to be unreachable but if recent events had taught him anything it was that he needed to be prepared for any kind of emergency; he didn’t want to be stranded again, not for any reason.

In short order the tent was up, a campfire was burning, and Jim was stretched out on his back watching a flock of geese fly overhead. There was a hint of snow in the air, but he was pretty sure they wouldn’t get more than a dusting.

Sandburg had arranged with Simon for time off every six months, so that Jim could get away and exercise his Sentinel abilities in a safe environment. When they’d come back to Cascade after the big rescue, Jim had been miserable. He’d had to work on his dials all over again and get re-acclimated to the city with all its sounds and smells and people. It was like his body had forgotten what home was after being away so long, and his overly-sensitized senses had made everything worse. It was merely a happy coincidence that he was too “ill” to do the first round of interviews.

“You want a beer?” Sandburg asked, opening one for himself.

“No thanks.” Jim was just happy breathing the clean air for the moment. He closed his eyes and followed his partner around the camp with his Guide-sense, pleased that it was so much clearer now. He’d had to work on his dials all over again and get re-acclimated to the city with all its sounds and smells and people. It was like his body had forgotten what home was after being away so long, and his overly-sensitized senses had made everything worse. It was merely a happy coincidence that he was too “ill” to do the first round of interviews.

“Can’t you sit still, Chief? We’re supposed to be taking it easy.”

“Hey, man, I’m relaxed. Just getting a feel for things. I don’t have the benefit of super senses, you
know.”

“Not sure the world could handle Super Sandburg.” Jim chuckled.

“Sad but true. One day the world will know my greatness, though, you mark my words.” Sandburg sat next to his Sentinel, legs crossed.

“They’ll know when the movie comes out next year.”

There was no response to that, unless you counted tooth grinding. Jim grinned and opened his eyes, watching his friend frown. He’d come to terms with the fact that some actor would be running around on a movie screen pretending to be him, even though they couldn’t get an American to play the role. The teasing had been pretty nonstop and he’d found it was just easier to roll with it. Unfortunately for Sandburg, he’d made out the worst in the Hollywood deal.

“Emma-friggin-Stone,” he muttered. “Why couldn’t they get David Krumholtz? He’s got the right kind of hair, at least.”

“I guess they weren’t looking to make another Brokeback Mountain.”

“Well, they could’ve left the romance out of it. How can they call it a biopic when they’ve made such a huge change? I don’t care how accurate they are with the Anthropology part of the character, it still sucks.”

It was a familiar argument, one they’d had often over the last six months. Jim shuddered to think what opening night was going to be like; the studio was flying them down to LA for the premier and the thought of walking the red carpet was terrifying. One thing was certain – their days of working undercover were officially over.

“Let it go, Chief.” Jim tugged him down so that Sandburg lay sprawled across his chest. “This trip is all about letting it go.”

“You’re right. It’s gone. I’m letting it go.” Sandburg gestured awkwardly with the hand holding the beer bottle. “I will think only of all the money they’re paying us.”

“That’s the spirit.” Jim curled his arm around his partner, relishing the warmth of having him close. It was nice getting to touch whenever he wanted. Jim had promised Sandburg not to be overt about their relationship, particularly at work, and for the most part that had worked. Their friends in Major Crimes knew and had been very supportive, and he was well aware of how lucky they were. Everything about his life was lucky, and he vowed never to become complacent.

“I love you, you know,” Sandburg said, pressing a kiss to Jim’s temple.

“I know.”

Eight days stranded on an island was a small price to pay for the fullness of his life right at this moment. He loved and was loved in return, and Jim was glad he’d been smart enough to grab hold of that opportunity when it had presented itself.

“I love you too, Blair.”

*o*o*o*

**LOS ANGELES, CA:** The long-anticipated premier of Guillermo Del Toro’s Eight Days took place at Grauman’s Chinese Theater last night, to a packed house. The film, a gripping tale of
survival and friendship, has received rave reviews from critics and theater-goers alike. The real story, though, is the three men whose experiences inspired the film. Producers flew Captain Simon Banks (portrayed by Don Cheadle), Detective James Ellison (portrayed by Alex O’Loughlin) and Dr. Blair Sandburg (portrayed by Emma Stone) to the red carpet premier event, where they made the interview rounds and accepted well-wishes from fans and actors alike.

In a lengthy interview with EW Magazine, Dr. Sandburg expressed his regrets that filmmakers chose to change the gender of his character in order to better support a romantic subplot for the film. “I would think that in today’s climate,” Sandburg said, “that a strong friendship between men would be enough to carry a story. It was certainly quite enough for us and we lived through all of that. I think it’s wrong to pander to the viewing public that way.”

Indeed, the only cloud hanging over Eight Days was the decision made by studio heads to include a female role where there was none. Gay and Lesbian rights groups have been protesting, saying that this would have been a chance to highlight a positive gay relationship on screen. While there are rumors flying that Ellison and Sandburg are in fact a couple, neither has come forward to confirm or deny those reports. “It’s not relevant,” Ellison told one reporter. However, a photograph taken at the Club Peel after-party shows Ellison and Sandburg in what appears to be a romantic clinch.

The actors had no comment on the gender issue, confining their interviews to their experience making the film and meeting the people whose lives they would be portraying. Said O’Loughlin, “The strong bond of friendship against insurmountable odds is what drew me to this project. And none of that had to be faked, because these men helped each other survive, supported each other, and that’s very real.”

Eight Days opens nationwide next week and box office grosses are expected to be high.

Chapter End Notes

AN: Well, that’s all folks. Sad to say goodbye to the Island and all the fun we had there.

For those not in the know, David Krumholtz is the actor who plays Charlie Epps on Numb3rs. Also possessing of some excellent curly hair, though on that series he kept it cut fairly short.

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