They Shoot Guides, Don't They?
by RoughDraftHero

Summary

Jake thought he could actually do it—he could get through life without anyone learning his secret, a secret that would ruin everything. And he almost did.

But then he met his brother.

Notes

This is an original work (original characters) set in the Sentinel AU little black dress that's so fun to write. As a basic primer:

-Sentinels are revered. They have super-senses (sight, hearing, etc) and are prized military assets. However, to keep from "zoning" on their senses, they need their counterpoints—guides—to keep them steady. Think alphas and omegas.

-Guides are basically empaths. There’s a guide for every sentinel who's just perfect, but they can also Guide sentinels who need help. They also have limited rights, so people aren't exactly thrilled when they learn that they're guides.
Out of the frying pan

Jake sat in the backseat of his mother's '91 station wagon, shivering. With the window down, crisp air seeped in but he didn't roll it closed. He wanted to hear.

"No, Sam," his mother said, shellacked nails clenched around the payphone. She was leaning in towards the privacy box, but couldn't keep her voice down. Not when she was talking to Jake's father. She was wearing a fur coat, her hair was about a foot tall, and her heels were sinking into the snow. She kept glancing at Jake with a nervous smile, and he'd smile back.

"No," she said again. "I've told you—oh—about a dozen times. He's not staying with you… I know it's Christmas. You've never cared about a damn Christmas for the past ten years, have you? Yes, we have a place to go, Jesus Christ. We're not homeless!" With that, she slammed the phone on the cradle and wrapped her arms around herself as she trudged back to the car and got in.

"Motherfucker," she muttered as she lit up a cigarette and stared pointedly out of the driver's side window. "I'm sorry, Jake."

"I'm not a baby, mom. I cuss."

"You certainly do, but I was talking about your father."

"Oh…"

"Close your window, baby." She exhaled a puff of smoke and sighed. "I just meant, he wants you for two weeks which is just fucking hilarious. Just—"

"Mom, you can't be alone during Christmas." Jake was already close to tears thinking of his mother sitting in their motel room with no presents and nobody.

"That's sweet, but not the problem." She dropped her head back. "Shit. I gotta find you some pills if we're gonna do this. It was gonna happen sooner or later. If I keep dodging that asshole, he's gonna know something's up." Twisting around, the fake leather creaking under her, she pointed at Jake with her cigarette. "If you forget one damn pill, boy…"

"I won't!" Jake's heart sped up at the thought of a Christmas with his father, with a tree and lights and a room and presents and everything a kid was supposed to have! "I promise I won't."

"Mmhmm." His mother sat back again. "Two weeks. Fuck. That's gonna cost an arm and a leg." She flipped the ignition and pulled away, snow crunching under the station wagon's tires. No one else was out—they weren't near any holiday shopping areas, not that Jake would know what those would look like.

They ended up at a diner where they often ate. While Jake inhaled his burger and fries, a man showed up, sat behind Jake's mother, and said something. She said something back. Then he got up to go to the bathroom, then she got up to go to the bathroom.

He left. Jake watched him leave and sucked on his milkshake.

"Okay, kiddo," his mother said, sliding into the booth seat across from Jake. She set a small bottle in front of him. "That's enough pills for three weeks. You take them every night after brushing your teeth, right?"
"Yeah."

His mother smiled and stole one of his french fries. "I love you, baby."

Jake knew she did, and never once had he doubted it.

His father lived in a cul-de-sac. Every house on the circle had Christmas decorations that rivaled the White House, or at least that's what Jake figured. He stood at the right address, duffel bag in hand, and waved his mom goodbye even though she was clearly going to idle there until he rang the doorbell.

But he didn't have to. One of the (two!) doors opened and a tall man wearing a Christmas sweater walked out with a big smile on his movie-star face.

Jake's mother took off. The man towering over him was his father. Jake knew that instinctively, right down to his gut. His gut said: Sentinel. And then it said: Oh yeah, also dad.

"Jake," Sam Marchiano said warmly, swooping down to envelope Jake in a loose hug. "Oh, and Cheryl..." They both watched Jake's mother disappear around the corner. His father chuckled. "Well, anyway, welcome home."

Through the flurry of activity following that first encounter, Jake didn't have time to correct him. Home was with mom, home was on the road, home was in the station wagon, home was whatever diner they camped out at for a few weeks. Home was not on this cul-de-sac. But Jake was shown to a room with flower wallpaper and a doily on the nightstand, and was told to put his bag in the closet; he could unpack later.

"You're twelve now, right, sport?" Sam asked him. They stood in the living room—Jake, Sam, and the Christmas tree. Jake kept nervously glancing over at the presents tucked underneath.

"Yeah," he said.

A hand landed on his head, stiffly patting him. "Good age."

Not really. Two days after his birthday—about six months ago—Jake felt an electric current run down his spine and then suddenly he could sense how disappointed his mother was with her burnt morning coffee. It all happened just like that, and then everything fell apart.

"Yeah," Jake said again.

There was a mantel over the fireplace, and sitting on it was a clock with a little door. Jake was looking at it when a bird popped out a chimed eight times. With a low hum, Sam checked his watch. "They should have been back by now." There was irritation in his voice. But he smiled as he gestured towards the couch and said, "That's fine. Leaves us a little time to talk."

So in the glow of the Christmas lights and the flickering light from the fireplace, Jake sat and listened to his father, who he had never met since the day he was born, talk about a family Jake wasn't really a part of. "My guide," Sam said affectionately. "Lisa. I met her at the Center and, well, it all just clicked into place—" There was a lull as if Sam were building up to the actual, important news. "And of course, your brother. Logan."

Sam smiled, his gaze far off. "Pretty sure that one's gonna be a sentinel like his old man."
'Why did you bring me here' crossed Jake's mind as Sam's proud feelings nearly overwhelmed him. "Oh," was all he said.

Sam's grin faltered a little as he looked at Jake and cleared his throat. "Not that, um, well. I mean, you're... not a sentinel, right? You're nothing?"

Jake thought of his pills tucked away in a scent-blocking bottle. "Right."

"Of course, I don't mean nothing, I just—well, Cheryl would have told me if you were a sentinel." He sounded so sure. He said Jake's mom's name like he hadn't abandoned her twelve and a half years ago. He didn't feel guilty, either. That's sentinel confidence for ya, Cheryl would have said.

Jake wanted his mom. He didn't understand why he had to do this, but she had been really clear that he did. So he would. "I'm not a sentinel," he said softly.

"And that's fine," Sam replied. "That's fine... How's school?"

Right. School. "I homeschool," Jake said mechanically. "Since I was eight."

"Oh, eigh—" Sam quirked his head. "Eight? I thought I remembered your mother mentioning an elementary school in that town you two lived in—"

"No, I homeschooled," Jake cut over him quickly. "Cause, you know, mom travels a lot for work."

"Right, right." Sam frowned. "I wish she had kept in contact with me a little more. It really was a pain to track you guys down this time."

Then why did you? Jake never thought he'd have to meet his father, let alone spend a holiday with him. Cheryl had always been quite clear that Sam Marchiano had no interest in their lives and never would. When she first told Jake that there would be an extended meeting, he thought she was joking. Then she brought up the family.

"He married his guide," she had huffed, and for the first time in his life, Jake had felt pain from her in regards to Sam. Old pain, but pain nonetheless.

"Jake," Sam started to say, breaking Jake of his thoughts, but then jerked, his gaze shooting to the window facing the driveway and stood up. A few seconds later, a car's headbeams turned onto the cul-de-sac, and out of the darkness, a fancy-looking SUV pulled up. No minivan for this family.

Jake stood too. He felt a little nervous watching the dark shape of his father's guide carry something from the car, which under the porchlight became Jake's half-brother. Logan. He was a baby. Well, maybe older than a baby.

Beckoned to the door, he followed as Sam strode over and pulled it open. A short woman with brown hair and a conservative sweater outfit came in. She was smiling, snow in her hair, and tilted her face up to receive a kiss from Sam. "Is he here?" she asked even as her blue eyes focused on Jake.

"Oh," she trailed off a little breathlessly, her gaze immediately flicking away. "Okay."

Whatever that was passed. She set the sleepy Logan down on his feet, and Jake, who never really cared about kid ages, vaguely placed him at five or six with a question mark thrown in. He had blonde hair like Sam's and blue eyes like Lisa's, and he stared at Jake without blinking.

"Hi," he said in that little boy voice.
Jake nodded. He really wished someone would get Logan to stop staring.

"Logan," Sam said magnanimously, crouching down to place his big hands on Logan's shoulders so that he and Logan were watching Jake. "I'd like you to meet your brother."

Detaching from Sam, Logan beelined straight for Jake, who barely had time to flinch before the little kid wrapped his arms around Logan's legs and pressed his face deep against Jake's belly.

"Well, then," Sam laughed. "Looks like we have a keeper."

#

"Honey, is this a private line?"

"Uh, I don't know…" Cheryl sighed. "Okay, well, keep it light."

Jake nodded even though his mother couldn't see him. He was sitting on the scratchy quilt draped over the guestroom bed, corded phone stretching from the desk to his hands. "Can you pick me up?"

He heard the flick of a lighter and his mother inhale, then exhale. "Baby…"

"I'm serious."

"You gotta stick it out. At least until after Christmas. Besides, I'm halfway to Florida."

He knew that was a lie, but he didn't say anything about it. "They're a whole family here, like with Sears pictures on the walls and everything. And, mom, they like worship this kid—my brother. I don't get why dad wanted me to come."

"Honestly, I don't know why either, sweetie, but I've held him off for two years. You know that. Any longer and he might have brought the court into it—and that's just something we can't have happen, Jake."

With a huge sigh, Jake flopped back on the bed, the phone stretching even tighter. "Mom," he whined.

"Did you get dinner?"

"Yeah. Meatloaf."

He heard her snort, and smiled. "And I took my—"

"Jake!"

He grimaced, about to apologize when he felt something tingling in his fingers. Craining his head up, he saw the bedroom door had been cracked open, and blue eyes were peeking through. "I gotta go, Mom," he said quickly, jumping off the bed and placing the phone back on the hook. When he turned around, Logan was standing there in a blue PJ set.

"What?" Jake snapped. Logan scratched his cheek, looking up at Jake without speaking.

"What?" Jake snapped. Logan flinched, backing up a step, and Jake cursed under his breath,
padding over to his half-brother and kneeling down so that they were face-to-face. "Do you need something?"

Finally, in a soft voice, Logan said, "Dad and mom's door's closed."

Jake shrugged. "So? Knock. They'll let you in."

From what he'd seen that night at dinner, Logan was spoiled as hell. After demanding that Jake see his room, his toys, his books, his everything that Jake had to give up six months ago, he then ordered Jake to sit right next to him at dinner, which Sam and Lisa obliged by moving the fourth chair to the other side. That was awkward.

But Logan didn't seem convinced this time. He stuck his thumb in his mouth and grabbed Jake's collar tightly in his little fist with his other hand. Stubbornness bled off him in waves.

Jake dropped his head. He'd been at this house for less than five hours and already he hated everything about it. "Okay," he said. "You wanna sleep with me?"

He got an armful of six year old, Logan latching onto him like a monkey. Jake was not exactly the buffest twelve-year old, and so he heaved Logan up and carried him to the bed. They fell in a tangle of limbs, and Logan's giggling was infectious.

It took some wrangling, but Jake got him under the covers. He'd had a few sleepovers with his friends, but never had a little kid tuck up against him. "Why were you scared?" Jake asked.

"Dark…"

"Oh."

"Dad says I can handle it."

Jake's lip curled up at that recited word. It was heavy with meaning. He could picture Sam, a big sentinel, looming over his son and telling him it was time to man up. It was hard seeing this little kid as a future sentinel, but they all had to come from somewhere, Jake supposed.

"Jake," Logan whispered.

"Yeah?"

"Are you here forever?"

"No."

A few moments passed. And then Logan spoke again, "Why not?"

Jake sighed. "Because I really, really don't belong here."

#

A sense of hurried determination woke him. Well, that and the thudding sounds. Jake sat up to a disaster; his bag was torn open, his clothes were strewn around, and Logan was in the middle of it all, grabbing things and stuffing them into the dresser.

"Oh my god," Jake wheezed, throwing the covers off and scrambling over to the mess. "What are you doing?" He started digging, searching frantically for his bottle of pills.
"You belong, you belong," Logan said. He was piling up a mountain of clothes in his little arms and hauling them off to the closet. "You belong to—"

"Logan!"

The kid jumped, dropping everything, and looked at Jake with wide eyes.

"Logan," Jake said more softly, holding his hand out in a calming gesture. "Where did you put… where did you put…" He couldn't say it. For six months he'd been drilled over and over about not speaking to strangers about the pills. But they were gone.

He started searching again—flinging clothes everywhere, brushing by a frozen Logan several times, pulling out drawers—when the bedroom door opened and Sam came in.
Chapter 2

Jake could still feel the cold press of his mom's hands on his cheek as she had said, with smoky breath puffing against his face, "Always stick as close to the truth as you can. Makes things easier."

And so, with his robe-wearing, arms-crossed father staring down at him, Jake quickly let out a nervous laugh. "I think Logan wants me to move in."

"He is, " Logan added petulantly from halfway behind Jake, where he was gripping Jake's shirt hem.

And, like a charm, it worked when it definitely would not have worked with Jake's mom. So much for extra special Sentinel senses, right? Jake's father just sighed and chuckled, knelt down to their height, and dropped a big hand on each boy's head. "Let's save the unpacking for tomorrow, shall we?"

"Okay," Jake replied happily. He nudged Logan forward a little, hoping Sam—Dad—would take the hint and get the him out of the room. He did. With one swift movement, he swept Logan up into his arms and up into the air above Jake. Blue eyes stared down at him, suddenly filled with panic. "Night, Logan," Jake chirped to stop any waterworks.

"Night…" came Logan's whispered, upset response. He never blinked, watching Jake as Sam carried him out of the room and closed the door.

He waited and waited, ear pressed to the wall. Finally, he heard nothing but crickets and then went about, as softly as he could, sifting through his clothes. If his father didn't hear that, then he definitely heard Jake's heart thundering. But laying in bed would have been just as terrible.

How far could a bottle of pills get with a little kid tossing shit around? Logan's arms weren't even that long—he'd only managed to stuff the bottom drawer of the dresser. Close to tears, Jake made an even worse mess until he finally calmed down enough to check under the furniture. When his hand closed around the bottle, which had rolled under his bed, he had to bite back a loud yes.

He clutched the bottle. He opened it and stared at the two-tone white and green pills. Each capsule contained a white powder that he'd preferred to mix into his morning hot chocolate until his mom finally made him learn how to swallow pills dry.

#

Their house wasn't actually that much nicer than the one Jake shared with his mom before the thing happened. It had two stories; living and kitchen area on the bottom, and bedrooms on the top. But there were other hints that this family lived well. Their flat screen television took up half the wall, and there was a shiny espresso machine sitting on the kitchen counter. None of the furniture was shabby, and their two cars were obviously expensive.

Funded by the DSA (Department of Sentinel Activities) —Jake had remembered the brochure from a school assembly that was organized after some kid a grade above him had presented as a Sentinel.

He was examining all the packaged, scentless soaps in the bathroom when his father appeared, sliding into a suit jacket. "I gotta go," he said in a way that told Jake he was used to saying that, was tired of saying it, but also didn't expect any pushback or reply.

Which is, of course, why Jake said, "Where? Why?"
Sam looked slightly confused for a moment. Then he nodded. "Right, you're not six. I have some important business to take care of at work—they'd promised not to call me in, but you know how it goes..." He cleared his throat. "Anyway, Lisa has to come along so can you babysit Logan?"

Jake could tell Sam had thought this was a brilliant epiphany: a kid old enough to watch the smaller kid! It make Jake want to scowl. But he nodded and muttered, "Sure."

"I know, I know, stranger in a strange land. You just met dad and now he's leaving you with the half-brother and I'm sorry about that, Jake. Feel free to scrounge around, I know Lisa keeps microwave pizzas in the garage freezer, but just make sure you cook them out there, okay? I can't really..." He shrugged uncommitedly and disappeared.

But Jake didn't have to wait long. Lisa appeared next and she was a bit more informative. With a friendly and warm—yet somehow utilitarian—tone, she walked him through the house, emergency contact list, and extra set of keys. There was a car honk from the driveway before she finally stopped. "Please take care of Logan," she ended softly.

"Um, where is he thought?" Jake replied.

Lisa's eyebrows rose. She smiled. "He's been napping in the guest—in your room."

"Oh."

With a nod, Lisa left, and Jake watched the SUV back out of the driveway, make a three-point turn, and zoom around the corner of the cul-de-sac. He didn't particularly feel like waking Logan, so he used the unexpected alone time to explore.

Obviously he found the locked door first. He assumed it was Sam's office, just because that seemed like the kind of thing that would be locked, but for all he knew there was an atomic bomb in there. He let it go. The backyard interested him most of all despite the chilly weather—it was huge. There was a swingset on steroids; two slides, a turret, and several rock-climbing walls. He had a hard time picturing Logan using all that. A hot tub was nestled in a fancy-looking deck with lights strung around it, but the cover was locked down. There was also a basketball court, and Jake was starting to think Sam had a lot of ambitions for Logan.

Well, he already knew that. He knew that his father thought Logan would be a Sentinel. Expected it.

Back in his room, he found Logan totally conked out and holding one Jake's shirts like a teddy bear. Just the slight tingle of contentment he felt wafting over told him it was time for another pill. Having decided against hiding the bottle anywhere weird in case Sam heard him digging around for it, he pulled the bottle from his other bathroom stuff and popped a pill in his mouth.

When he put everything away, and turned around, Logan was sitting up and staring at him sleepily. "Shit. Distract distract distract!" "Hey, dude, wanna play some video games?"

"We don't have any," Logan replied, but clearly Jake's gambit had worked—the focus had shifted to how unfair life was. "Dad says they're too loud."

"Hasn't he heard of mute?" Jake muttered, and then winced. But Jake just stared at him some more, this time looking kinda awestruck. "Okay. Um. Toys?"

"Yeah!" Logan swung himself off the bed and darted past Jake, but not before catching his hand and dragging him along. They ended up in Logan's room, on the floor, and surrounded by little action figures including train tracks, cars, and buildings.
Jake was quiet while Logan set up the scene, frowning as he caught sight of *Center for Sentinels and Guides* written in block letters on the front of a play...house(?) that opened up to reveal several levels and rooms. Logan was placing lab-coat clad figured inside, along with army men and people Jake could only assume were prisoners based on their clothes.

"Killer is gonna destroy the city," Logan said, tone somber.

"What?"

A figure was placed between them. Jake was pretty sure the character was from some kids movie he'd seen trailers for recently. "Killer. He had secret poison that's gonna poison everyone. The Sentinels have to stop him, but head Sentinel Theo still doesn't have a guide."

Two more figures: a man in a suit, and a man in prisoner gear. "That's his guide, but he doesn't know it," Logan said.

Jake felt slightly sick. "Why doesn't he know it?"

"Adam is a bad guide."

At that, Jake let out an anemic laugh. *Adam is a Bad Guide* was a children's story read early and often at elementary school. His hand shook slightly as he picked the figure up and inspected it closely, finally recognizing the prisoner clothes for what they were: the scrubs Guides had to wear while training at the Center. "Why is he bad?" he whispered.

"Adam is a bad Guide because he ran outside," Logan replied automatically.

"Why did he run outside?"

"He ran outside because he wanted to hide."

Jake really didn't feel like continuing the story. He set the figure down. "So what's going on here? Everyone's outside."

Logan's face scrunched, but then he huffed with determination. "They need to find Adam."

"Why?"

"For Theo."

"Why for Theo?"

This time, Logan shot his confused expression straight at Jake as if this particular plot had never been questioned before, and Jake was being a jerk. "Theo needs his guide!"

"But what does Adam need?"

That, clearly, was too much. Jake could practically see Logan shortwire. He shoved the figures aside and stood up, his face red. He stood there breathing heavily with his little hands clenched into little fists and just the tiniest specks of tears building up at the corners of his eyes.

And through the numbing haze of the pills, Jake distinctly felt his frustration. But not just that—he could feel the mixed, confused unhappiness of a child not old enough to understand the emotions boiling through him. Jake could feel how Logan wanted to answer but just didn't know how.

Jake shushed him. Palm on Logan's forehead, other arm at his shoulder, Jake pushed golden hair
back and blew gentle, cooling breaths against Logan's skin. The anger seeped out of Logan like heat rising from the shower.

They both sat down, Logan looking slightly dazed.

"Okay," Jake said slowly. "Let's catch Adam."

Lisa and Sam came back a few hours later looking slightly chilled but not much else. They didn't say where they'd gone, and Logan didn't ask, so Jake assumed that was status quo. Immediately, Lisa went to cooking dinner and Sam went to that locked room, shutting the door behind him.

So Jake and Logan sat at the kitchen table, watching with twin bored expressions as Lisa made chicken noodle soup. Jake noted the lack of seasoning. He would have said something, probably, but his mom had warned him: bonded Guides follow the strict diet of their Sentinels. And so does the rest of the household.

_Boring._ He'd have to sneak out for some curly fries and Atomic Wings from WingStop at some point. He wondered if Logan had ever eaten curly fries. Probably not. He couldn't miss what he'd never had. But still… that kinda sucked.

"You two want some juice?" Lisa asked, her back still turned to them as she stirred the soup. Only then did Jake realize he was a little thirsty.

Nothing else broke the monotony until Sam came out of his office-thing. The soup had already been served, Lisa was sitting at one end of the table, and Logan was sitting right next to Jake. Sam took his spot at the head, and smiled benignly. "Smells good," he said.

Lisa nodded. "Thank you."

Although Jake didn't really have any experience with married parents or whatever, he distinctly felt like his father and stepmother shared a strained relationship. But there had been that little kiss the day before…

He tried the soup. It was bland, of course. "How was work," he asked, setting his spoon down.

Sam, who had been happily slurping away at his own bowl, seemed slightly lost for a moment, unsure of who had spoken and why, but then his gaze lowered on Jake and his eyebrows rose. "Fine," he said, lip quirking up. "It was fine. In fact, I'd say they hadn't even needed us. Wouldn't you agree, Lisa?"

"Yes."

And then, again, silence (except for the sounds of eating soup). _Three weeks of this_, Jake thought to himself morosely. Three weeks of awkward silence and unappealing food. And he didn't even know if he'd be getting presents for Christmas or not. Already he was formulating different ways he could convince his mom to come pick him up. Because seriously, would Sam even care?

"What did you two get up to?" Sam asked. He was looking at Jake.

"Oh. We, uh, played. With Logan's toys."

"Oh, his Sentinel Set? That was sent over about a month ago, when he turned six." Sam started stroking his chin thoughtfully. "I knew, from the testing, and from how the Center has been keeping
a close eye, that they believe Logan will present as a Sentinel, but I wasn't expecting this level of support. It's truly astounding."

A creepy toy set was support? Jake didn't comment. He just murmured in agreement.

"Were you tested?" Sam asked.

Jake's heart thudded against his chest, and he coughed to give himself a second to recover. "No," he said. "I mean, yes. But I didn't come up as anything. I'm normal." All of that was a big, fat lie but thankfully Sentinels couldn't sense lies.

"I knew that, but I was curious if your mother had…"

Jake immediately recognized his mistake. Sam had already known he wasn't a Sentinel, and Jake's mom would never have gotten him tested anyway. He should have said no. "It was school," he said quickly. "Right before homeschool, they did testing on everyone… with a Sentinel in the family." The story came out flawlessly, and Jake mentally thanked his mom for giving him that Plan B.

"What about Guides?"

Another heartbeat hard against his ribcage. "Guides?"

Sam's eyebrows knitted, but he shrugged with a laugh. "Yeah, I guess that doesn't matter."

Whatever about that that didn't matter was unclear, but Jake didn't question his father. No, the next question came from Logan.

"What does Adam need?"

Everyone was quiet until Lisa spoke. "What, dear?"

Logan frowned. "What does Adam need?" He looked at Jake.

Jake was frozen. It took digging his nails into his palm to wake up. "Oh," he said, forcing out a laugh. "While we were playing with that Sentinel Set… we were talking about that old rhyme."

Sam shook his head. "Which one?"

Jake wanted to crawl under the table. "Adam is a Bad Guide."

Making a sound of recognition, Sam leaned back in his chair. "Wow, they still use that one? Well, Logan, a Guide needs a Sentinel. That's why they go to the Center—so they can wait for their Sentinel to find them."

For some reason, Jake felt the need to look at Lisa. But she was just vacantly eating soup, expressionless.

"Oh," Logan said. "So Adam needs Theo?"

"Yes. And Theo needs Adam. That's how it works."

Jake, as if detached and watching from a comfortable spot above the table, cut in. "But they don't say that."

All eyes turned to him.
"They just say what Theo needs. *Theo needs to find his Guide: Adam, who keeps trying to hide.* " It was Lisa's scrutiny that really made his skin itch. For someone who had been so placid a second before, she was suddenly laser-focused on Jake.

But Sam was the one to respond. "That's true, Jake. That is true. But what Adam needs is kind of, you know, wrapped up in what Theo needs. Adam needs what Theo needs. They don't have to say it."

*Bullshit,* Jake's mom would have said, cigarette between her teeth. "*Complete and utter bullshit.* "

Jake really wanted to go home.
"I mean, we can sell this. I don't need it."

Jake sat cross-legged in the back of the station wagon where his mom had ripped out the seats and installed a mattress. In front of him, arranged in a semi-circle, were all the gifts from Christmas: clothes, books, but most importantly—a brand new Nintendo console with a Donkey Kong cartridge. Unopened.

"Hmm." His mom also sat cross-legged, but she had to stoop a little with her elbow on the window and a cigarette in her hand. She gazed outwards, sucking lightly, her eyes half-lidded. "How do you feel about living with them?"

"No!"

She actually flinched, but wouldn't look at Jake. "You'd have a room…"

"And I'd be alone." Jake was a kid. But he wasn't stupid. He knew who was on his team—who would go to bat for him when everything had totally fallen apart. And none of that existed with Sam.

For three weeks, Jake was an imposter, a stranger, a weird kid that Sam and Lisa's son wouldn't leave alone for even ten seconds. They were probably relieved when it was time for him to leave.

His mom flicked the cig out the window, rolled the window up with a sigh, and started clamboring for the front seat. "Then let's go. I know where we can pawn those for almost retail."

****

Luckily Sam didn't bother them (or maybe he couldn't find them) until Jake was almost eighteen with a G.E.D. There was no telling whether he'd been in contact before then and Cheryl simply ignored him and didn't tell Jake, but either way—on a hot day in June, Jake's duffel was stuffed and he was headed back to the cul-de-sac.

"You gonna ignore me the whole way there?"

He kept staring out the window.

"It's four weeks. Plus, you're older now so you can just take off and hang out with the local kids whenever you want."

Jake snorted at that. His mom knew how adept he'd gotten at befriending the 'local kids' but the whole act was tiring. He didn't even know if that outgoing, aggressively friendly person was him. "I guess," he said.

"And let's be honest, I need the break from your teenage hormones."

Now he laughed. Sharing a one bedroom apartment with your mom was kind of a hassle. He could just see how delighted Cheryl was with the idea of having the place to herself for a month. "Did he say anything specific? Am I just there to assuage his fatherly guilt? Or are we all going to Disneyland?"

"No Disneyland—as for that other thing, you'll have to ask him yourself. I didn't understand how your father's mind worked when we were together, and I sure as hell don't understand it now."
Jake was happy to hear a total lack of pain in her voice when talking about Sam now. She'd completely moved on (had a boyfriend) and held no ill-will. Maybe. Except for one thing. "Do you think I have enough pills?"

"Do you? I don't know how it feels to be on them."

Jake thought about the three bottles of pills tucked deep down in the ratty backpack under his feet. They were a new kind… he'd was becoming a immune to each strain faster and faster—a concern he and his mother had been ignoring for probably too long. "It'll be good," he said. "And I know how to find more."

His mother grunted, her lip curling. She'd yet to approve of him finding his own sources, but the talent had saved him more than once, so she'd stopped complaining. "Look, just be on your guard. It's weird—to me, that he's come back into our lives right before you're legally an adult."

As a normal teen, Jake probably would have thought his mom was being crazy and paranoid. But he knew better. "Good point," he said.

She reached over and ruffled his hair. "Love ya, baby."

****

Six years since he'd seen the cul-de-sac. Nothing had changed except for the lawn ornaments and the fancy cars parked outside. Some little kids ran giggling through a sprinkler in one of the front lawn. He wondered if one of them was Logan. How old was that kid now? 12?

Jake swung the duffle bag over his shoulder and trudged up the front walk in his worn converse. He kept his sunglasses on, pressing the doorbell with extreme disdain. Then he waited, one arm wrapped around his cocked hip as he scowled at the lawn kids.

The door opened. He turned.

Standing there in a jean dress and a flower apron was Lisa, looking the same as Jake remembered, yet somehow more defined. She wasn't smiling.

"Hi, Lisa," Jake said with a quirked smile. There was a flash in her eyes, and then surprisingly she smiled too—just as wryly as Jake had. She stepped back and nodded towards the entryway. Jake stepped up into the house and walked past her.

Here, too, everything was the same minus Christmas decorations. Same soft carpeting, same nice furniture, same fancy kitchen. Jake dropped his bag on the kitchen table, looking around and trying to decide if he should just go up to the guest room without further instruction.

"Welcome back," Lisa said. She stood in the middle of the kitchen, as if unwilling to come any closer to Jake. "How have you been, Jake?"

He nodded. "Good enough."

"A teenager now, I see."

Was that a rib? He couldn't tell. "I guess."

This stupid conversation seemed like it might last until eternity, only he heard the front door open again and running feet. "Mom!" came a kid's demanding voice—older than Jake remembered. For some reason, his heart thudded once before he saw Logan round the corner and then there was a 12
year-old version of what Jake so clearly saw as six.

He was looking more like Sam. He had dark hair, freckles, and green eyes. He wore a tank top and board shorts. And he was pretty ripped for a little kid, like oddly so. "Where's lunch—" he said in a deep-squeaky-deep voice, when his gaze landed on Jake. He stopped.

"Hey, man," Jake said with a nod.

Logan nodded too, his lips parted a little. After a second, his eyes darted back to his mom. "Lunch?"

"Almost ready," she replied, opening the over. "I thought the three of us could eat together since your dad won't be home until late." Logan let out one hell of a sigh. Jake wasn't sure if he'd ever sounded that beleaguered. Well, his mom probably disagreed.

"Me and Tim and Kyle were gonna hang out later," Logan said.

"I don't see what that has to do with now," Lisa replied, pulling a tray of mini pizzas from the oven and setting them on the stove. "You can spare twenty minutes to welcome your—" She paused. They all did. And then she said, before Jake could interject with something snarky: "Brother."

Logan looked at him, their eyes meeting. Brothers. Distant cousin, maybe, but close family ties this was not. Jake raised his eyebrows, mouthing brothers, and Logan grinned. Same page? Same page. Jake could work with that. "Why don't I take Logan and his friends to the skate park?"

So many things happened at once—but mostly he could tell it was Logan and Lisa both figuring out at the same time that Jake was almost an adult and therefore could do things like ferry twelve year-olds around and also watch them if they wanted to stay out late. He could see the extreme thrill in Logan's eyes, and the extreme concern in Lisa's. "After mini pizzas, obviously," he tacked on. See? Mature?

He could tell Lisa didn't buy it, but whatever. She turned to pull some plates out.

Lunch didn't have any awkward silences. But only because they had so many questions! How was school? How was the neighborhood? Joined any sports? Blah blah blah blah. What Jake really learned during that conversation was that despite his surly attitude, Logan was well on his way to becoming a Star-Everything: athlete, student, and … Sentinel.

"You, uh, presented?" Jake asked.

Logan's expression closed off a little. "Not yet," he said. Ah. "Gotcha." Jake didn't say anything like, don't worry, or—it'll happen any day now. He knew better. And he had the feeling Logan would just resent him for saying stupid shit like that anyway. He popped the last mini pizza in his mouth, and slapped his palms on the table. "So? Where am I taking everyone?"

"You have a license?" Lisa asked quietly.

Jake smiled. "Of course, for more than a year now."

Maybe she wanted to protest, but in the overwhelming face of Logan's excitement, she couldn't. He was up and out of his chair in seconds, heading for the door. "Let's go, dude," he shouted.

But Jake knew better. "I can say I don't want to," he said to Lisa. "So he doesn't blame you. I mean,
sorry. I really didn't mean to jump the gun before asking permission."

Once again, he could tell Lisa didn't buy his good kid act. But she seemed to appreciate the effort. "No, that would just break his heart." In the same moment, she had slid a car key across the table. "And I suppose you should have access to a car while you're here anyway. I'll let you know if I'm going anywhere, but otherwise it's yours to use."

He swept the key up. "Thanks," he said, really meaning it.

****

On the way to Logan's friends homes, Jake tried to conversate. It went about as well as expected. "So… Sentinel, huh?"

"That's what they tell me."

He had to smile at that. Now he wasn't the only teen in the room. "When do you guys usually present?"

Logan didn't say anything this time, so Jake figured he'd touched on a sore spot. "Maybe it'll never happen," he continued, because god knows, he likes pushing those buttons.

"Good," Logan muttered.

Well.

Jake gave up after that, driving in silence. He knew Logan wasn't mad at him, he was just mad at the world—like Jake. So, they had that in common. Maybe, over the summer, things would smooth out well enough between them that they could form some actual brotherly bond and Jake could rely on Logan in hard times. Even better if Logan never presented as a Sentinel which—seemed kinda likely based on house dour he was being?

"So you and your mom not have a phone or something?"

Jake blinked at the sudden acidity in Logan's voice. "What?"

"My dad's always bitching and moaning about how he never hears about you and how you guys just stay off the grid. I mean, like, you coulda called."

Jake glanced over but Logan was staring hard out the dash window. "Yikes, Jake thought. "We actually didn't have a phone for a long time. So—yeah."

Then tension in Logan's frame lessened somewhat. "Oh," he said. After that, they drove in silence until Jake managed to navigate to both friends' homes.

Logan's friends were annoying. So was he.

Maybe that just came with twelve year-old territory—all the dumb jokes and farting. But Jake was really grinding his jaw as he drove them in Lisa's Mercedes minivan to the so-called skate park, which was really just a few concrete ramps the city had built to keep less ambitious delinquents from ruining any more benches. He unlocked the doors, unleashing a wave of obnoxious tween on the skate park, and then clicked his chair back as he pulled his phone out.

No texts from mom. No texts from his most recent friends. *I'm such a cool dude*. He scrolled through different fashion blogs he followed, tuning out the scrapy-rolly sounds of the skateboards.
After awhile, he looked at the webpage for the community college near his mom's apartment. He'd already enrolled, but there was slight hiccup: those who wanted subsidized tuition had to go through Sentinel-Guide screening. He hadn't even bothered bringing that particular pamphlet home. And when his mom asked about school...he told her to fuck off. Probably should apologize for that one.

Jake was done with high school and had no future plans. So, weirdly, this call from his dad to come stay for the summer made him feel better. It seemed like a start at least. A better plan than working at Starbucks until he was to creepy-old to work there anymore. Maybe he could even get Sam to find him some work…

Oh wait, no. Sam was a Sentinel. So… never mind.

Jake sighed, wiping the sweat from his forehead. The car had quickly become a hotbox, and with no pot, that was just painful. He slid out, putting his sunglasses on and blinking around as he looked for Logan and the other brats. There they were, with their skateboards, not going down the ramps. He smirked. Maybe it was time to really cement the whole cool older brother thing. (Why though?).

As he got closer, he could hear the three boys bitching at each other about being too scared. But they shut up when Jake reached them. "Everything okay?" he asked.

"Yeah," came the chorus of three, dismissive and annoyed.

He kept the laughter down. "So Logan, you gonna go or what man?"

Was that betrayal in Logan's eyes? Fear? Who knew—the only thing that mattered was that Jake had set the dare and now Logan had to answer or look like a pussy. With a set jaw, he dropped his skateboard and dropped a determined foot on it. Before anyone could say anything, he pushed off the ledge.

And did well!

For the first three laps.

And then he wiped out.

"Oh fuck!" his friends shouted, laughing and skittering down the slope to help Logan to his feet. Jake stayed at the top, arms crossed over his chest. He waited for the two friends to run off to the first aid kit nailed to a post before sliding down to check out how Logan was doing.

Logan was glaring. "Thanks for that, bro," he snapped.

"Stings?" Jake asked.

Logan's jaw clenched, but before he could curse Jake out, Jake nodded towards his two friends. "It may hurt now, but you're the one who went first."

With just those words, Jake could tell he'd won Logan's awe. Suddenly all the little scraps and sore knee didn't matter, clearly, as he stood up a little straighter and grinned. "Fuck yeah," he said. Jake returned his smile.

For the next half hour (after Logan was patched up) Jake sat in the grass and watched the three boys skateboard around the park. He checked his watch, figuring they had about an hour before Lisa would start to worry. Pushing the car thing was about as far as he was willing to go. Staying out too late? Not so much.
He wondered why he was putting so much effort into ingratiating himself with Logan above Lisa. It seemed like a weird tactic, but maybe Jake was so used to prioritizing friendship bonds that he didn't have a set gameplan with this new situation. But then again, he knew how spoiled Logan was, so maybe he'd made the right decision after all.

Like say he had to sneak out in the middle of the night to find pills? Could he trust Logan to cover? Probably now he could. So yeah. Good plan.

He was just about to text an update to his mom when the firecracker went off.

Jake flinched.

But it was Logan who screamed and dropped to his knees.

Up and running before he even knew what was happening, Jake slid and tripped his way down the slope to Logan. He was on the ground, on hand on the back of Logan's neck before he really came back to himself. But all he could see was the pain on Logan's face—he was clutching his hands to his ears, rocking back and forth, when—suddenly—he collapsed.

"Logan?" Jake breathed, staring at his brother's face. Logan's eyes were open, but unseeing. What the hell—

Zoned.

Logan had zoned. Because he was a Sentinel. It was all happening right now.

An eerie calm washed over Jake as he pulled Logan's head into his lap, and gently brushed his fingers through Logan's hair, shushing him quietly. The two friends had gone off to buy soda, thank god, but that was the last thought Jake spared on them.

Logan, he thought. Gone—Logan was gone.

And Jake would bring him back.
"Not a fan of pizza breath? Haha, well, it worked. So no bitching. Now just keep focusing on my—"

****

Logan woke up to nothing. He couldn't see shit, he couldn't hear shit, and he couldn't… well, he could feel the sheets underneath him (he was *naked?*), they were soft. Or light. But somehow also the worst, most scratchy thing that had ever touched his skin. Worse than the wool blanket mom kept at the bottom of the closet. Worse than—

He slapped his face and tugged the eyemask away, knowing that not a single light would be on. Sitting up, he pulled the plugs from his ears and checked his new room out, his eyes adjusting to the dark. As expected, everything was made of stainless steel, including the desk and chair to his right.

Next he leaned over to the nightstand and pressed the intercom. "I'm awake," he said flatly. "Send dad."

****

Sam came in wearing scrubs, and was followed by the intake team: two doctors, an analyst, a military representative, and Logan's handler, Reshmi. Logan didn't bother to drag the sheet up past his hips, it would have irritated him anyway.

"Logan," Sam said, smiling as came to sit beside him. "You're a real pro, you know that? Took me three days to come out of calm-down, and you woke up in three hours."

There was a cluck of disagreement behind him, and Logan glanced up to see Reshmi, with her arms crossed over her chest, staring very pointedly off to one side.

"Is that … normal?" Logan asked.

Sam grinned, dropping his hand on Logan's shoulder. "You set the bar for normal, Lo. Now every Sentinel-apparent is gonna be determined to cut their calm-down time. Hell, I bet we can get you into training tomorrow."

"Well—" Reshmi finally cut in, her voice strained. "Maybe not tomorrow. I'd like to spend a few days with Logan, just to see how he's handling emergence."

"Spoilsport," Sam said with a chuckle, winking at Logan. "Fine. We must do what the Center declares, after all." He stood up then, his hand still on Logan's shoulder. "I'm glad things went so smoothly for you, son. I wasn't worried, but I was curious how you might emerge."

Logan frowned. The clearness in his head was suddenly evaporating as a tremor ran down his spine. "How did—how did I emerge, exactly? Like the details," he asked, reluctant to admit he couldn't remember a single thing that happened.

"You'll have to ask Jake that," Sam replied easily.

*Take a big whiff, kid, that's onions and garlic. Waking up?*

Logan blinked, a phantom scent of tomato sauce and cheese in his nose. But then it was gone. He swayed a little, trying to recall anything beyond—oh yeah, they'd had pizza for lunch. That was it.
More stable, he looked back up at his dad. "Where is he?"

"He went home with Lisa, said he'd watch over her," Sam replied. "But there's a full transcript of his interview with the intake team, if you'd like to read it."

With a nod, Logan gave his dad a smile before everyone left, including Reshmi. No one would spend too much time with him for the next few hours as he acclimated to his new senses. They didn't want to confuse things. So he sat back in the darkness and tried to piece together the afternoon. He could clearly remember the pizza now, and picking his friends up for the skate park...

He could remember Jake practically forcing him to go first down that ramp... and then the fall...

There was a light ping, and then an orderly walked through the door carrying a folder. He nodded as he handed it to Logan, and then quickly left.

With the calm-down drugs in his system, he wasn't overwhelmed by the feel of paper. But he could feel each thread binding together into a single surface. It was crazy. He flipped the folder open, and ran his fingers down the first page:

**Interview Subject: Jake C. - 19029 - No Status**

So many lines were redacted, bolded out with pure black. Logan had to flip through several pages until he found actual dialogue:

*I:* He'd fallen?

*J:* Yeah [Affirmative]. Maybe that's when it happened?

*I:* Perhaps. What occurred after the fall?

*J:* We patched him up and kept going. Er, I sat and watched, but they skated for a while more.

Logan nodded, Jake's words filling in the holes. He could remember now—the sting of concrete on his knees, the smell of Jake's hair as he knelt down to apply a bandaid.

*J:* So maybe a half hour? I don't know. But some idiot shot off a firework in the park while Logan's friends were getting a soda so it was just me and him. He like fell over screaming so I ran to him. He was clutching his ears. That's when I called Lisa.

Logan frowned. That... was blank. He kept reading.

*I:* He retained awareness? Consciousness?

*J:* Yeah [Affirmative].

And the rest was redacted. Logan stared at the words. Now that he really thought about it, he could remember the Center's ambulance arriving, and his mother running towards him. He could feel the ice-cold injection of calm-down drugs. And as he was pulled up into the ambulance on a gurney, he just kept desperately searching for... Jake.

Jake must have been scared. He wasn't raised in a Sentinel-Guide household like Logan, who assumed that was the reason why his half-brother never came back after his first visit. Despite not being able to remember most of that Christmas, Logan could still perfectly recall the unyielding despair he'd felt the day Jake went back to his mother.

So witnessing Logan's emergence must have been weird. Good thing Jake had kept a cool head and
called Lisa.

Logan reread the transcript one more time, trying to glean feeling from plain words, but he knew it was useless. Tossing the papers aside, he flopped back on the bed and stared at the ceiling. He'd been in one of these rooms before; after a Sentinel-apparent turns twelve, he or she had to spend two days at the Center each week for training. Sam had Logan stay four.

Now he was actually a Sentinel. He could feel, beyond the hazy protective wall that was the calm-down drugs, well... *everything*. He could just tell that there were a billion sounds, smells, and sights out there just waiting to overwhelm him. He'd been prepared, of course, by Reshmi—practiced turning down his dials every day even when he didn't have dials. Soon, they would bring him first temp guide.

Everything was going according to (his dad's) plan.

****

Day two, and the drugs were of his system. His parents sat beside his bed in scrubs and he was trying to listen, but something kept bothering him: "Where's Jake? Did he go home?"

"He was thinking about it," Sam replied. "Said he didn't want to get in the way right now, which was mature of him, but I let him know he's welcome to stay."

"Is he here?"

"At the Center?" Sam seemed to catch Logan's *duh* expression and chuckled. "No, he's back at the house."

*Why* was on the tip of Logan's tongue, but he decided not to ask. He knew, because everyone kept telling him, that these first few days were "delicate." But now the whole summer was wasting away. "Can he come next time?"

Lisa spoke: "We'll ask him, sweetie."

He really hated having his parents sit there like he was sick at the hospital. In fact, his blood was singing. He wanted to jump up and start... start everything. He wanted to train with his senses, and continue the physical training as well. His energy made him twitchy.

"Are they gonna bring me a jump rope like I asked?"

"They're worried about the sound it could make," Sam replied. "If you dropped it or it snapped against the floor."

Logan snorted. "I won't zone over something like that."

"I know you're bored, but things will move along quickly before you know it. The Center is compiling a list of temp Guides who should be compatible right now. Once that's done, you might even get to come home for a few days a week." Sam wrapped his arm around Lisa's shoulders. "By the time you're in high school, they'll have found your bond Guide."

Those words had no impact on Logan, and he barely paid them any attention. "I want some books then, I'm so fucking bor—"

"Logan," Lisa admonished him quietly.
Before he could apologize (or not) the door opened with a *whoosh*, and in walked Reshmi with a couple of doctors, all of whom were carrying clipboards. "Logan," Reshmi said, standing straight and holding her hands behind her back, "How are you feeling?"

"Fine?"

Reshmi's lips tightened at his less-than-concrete answer, but she jerked her head towards the doctors. "They're ready for you to meet some Guides. How do you feel about that?"

Logan noticed Sam's happy expression from the corner of his eye. "Good," he said.

Nodding stiffly, Reshmi stood aside, and the doctors (a man and a woman, both wearing lab coats) bustled in closer, practically dislodging Lisa and Sam from their chairs. "Okay," the man said. "Hi there Sentinel Logan. You must be excited."

Logan just stared at him. The man's smile never faltered. "We have three Guides in-house right now that match your needs profile. We'd like you to meet them face-to-face…" He trailed off, passing a critical eye over Logan's bed-ridden unkempt state.

"Oh." Logan slid off the bed and ran his fingers through his hair. He was wearing the pajamas left for him, which while not distracting, still felt annoying against his skin.

The doctor must have realized that was all the effort he was gonna get, so he just beeped some gadget on his coat and the door opened. The guide who came through was older than Logan—older than Jake too, by the looks of it. His brown hair was buzzcut short, and he was buff as hell. He must have spent a lot of time in the Center's gym. "Both you and Clark enjoy football," the doctor was saying, "And other contact sports, so I think at least that commonality will help you."

Clark was coming closer and suddenly the doctor's words were drowned out by an incredibly *wrong* feeling.

Logan started shivering, his teeth clattering. "N-no," he garbled, putting his palm up to stop Clark from coming any closer. The guy's stare felt like ants crawling on Logan's skin.

"What's wrong?" he heard his mother ask, and then felt a gentle touch that was somehow both soothing and also *terrible."

"Don't touch me!" Logan screamed, whipping his hand around to make everyone back off. As he panted, he looked around and realized it was Lisa he'd driven off. Everyone was watching him, eyebrows furrowed. He felt like he was gonna puke.

"Lo?" Sam said tentatively, having angled himself in front of Lisa to stand in front of Logan.

"Why did it feel like that?" Logan barked, glaring at the male doctor and Clark. "No one said it would feel like *that*."

It was the female doctor who came forward this time, her voice calm. "Feel like what, Logan? Please describe the sensation."

"Like I was gonna die, like I was gonna throw up everywhere. I wanted to scratch my skin off."

Both doctors glanced at each other, and then their clipboards. The man sighed and asked Clark to leave. After the door closed, the male doctor said, "Logan, violent adverse reactions such as you described usually occur after a Sentinel has met his bond guide. If you're truly experienced those symptoms…"
"He's met his guide?" Sam cut over him. "Where?"

"No, he hasn't. We would know. For now, I'm tentatively diagnosing this as false-bond, which usually happens with another guide, but... it'll give us a course of action."

Sam was shaking his head. "I don't understand... what about his temp guide?"

Again the two doctors looked at each other. The woman said, "We can introduce him to the other in-house guides, but it's likely he'd have the same reaction—"

"I can't believe this. Logan needs a guide," Sam said. He nodded at Lisa and then stormed for the door. "Let's discuss it outside. I don't want Logan to have to deal with these stupid details." He led everyone, excluding Reshmi, out of the room without even a goodbye to Logan.

In the silence, Reshmi let out a sharp sound of annoyance. Logan crawled back into his bed. "So no guide," he said flatly.

"Those quacks came up with a dumb excuse on the fly, just give it a few more days," Reshmi replied, going to sit beside him. "And you won't need a guide for a couple of years, despite what your dad said. Your senses are in their infancy. For now, you can work on your own focus techniques."

Logan nodded. "Guess I'm going to the Center's school next year."

"Probably." There was no commiseration in Reshmi's voice. "You were on borrowed time anyway, thanks to your dad. They wanted you in the school from the beginning."

"I came to training..." Logan protested, flexing his arm just to get a laugh from her.

"That's true." Reshmi patted his knee and then stood up again. "But the Center's going to be your life now, Logan. Not just the gym."

****

It was the next day, and Logan was alone, when Clark came back. The door opened quietly, and Logan assumed it was the orderly with his lunch, when he suddenly felt the ants on his skin again—on his skin, and in his head. He gasped in pain, rolling around to see what was going on.

Clark had his hand outstretched in a gentle way, his eyes focused on Logan. "You're an A-Class Sentinel," he said shakily. "That's the rumor, at least."

"Get out," Logan hissed, his teeth chattering.

"I can help you. I can guide you... I'm A-Class too." Clark took a step closer and Logan howled, his senses fighting the approach with every nerve-ending. "Sh, no, why are you yelling? Just breathe—"

The door opened again, and... "Hey Logan, how--who the fuck are you? Get away from him!" Scuffling, slamming sounds, and then silence. Logan shook. He froze up completely when he heard footsteps, but then a gentle hand rested on his shoulder. A hand that felt like nothing but friendly weight. "What the hell was that about?"

He looked up into Jake's green eyes. "He's gone?"

Jake's lip quirked. "Yeah," he said, sliding over to sit down beside Logan. "Seriously, was he like... threatening you?"
"No, he was just..." Logan didn't even know where to begin describing the Center's culture. But he was breathing normally, and despite being covered in cold sweat, his skin was normal too. Everything was fine. "Anyway, um."

"Oh yeah, brought you these," Jake held up a plastic folder which Logan could see contained comics. "They had to put them through this giant dehumidifier machine thing...thought the steam was gonna wreck the pages."

Logan snorted. _Of course_ Jake had no idea what the sterilization process would entail. But he gratefully snatched the comics away, and pulled them out to flip through the covers. "Sentinel comics, huh?"

"Thought it was appropriate," Jake replied, nudging Logan with a friendly elbow. "How are you feeling?"

"Better now—" Logan paused, confused when Jake stood up. "Where are you going?"

"I got the feeling from that intake officer that I wasn't supposed to stay long," Jake replied. "But hey, I'll see about bringing your friends in next time."

Logan really didn't want him to go. If he left, there would just be more silence, more doctors, and more attempts at making him work with temp guides. "Wait," he said. "Hang out a little longer. They don't care."

Jake looked uncertain. Or nervous? Just once, Logan noted, Jake's eyes had darted for the door, his lips turning down in a slight frown. But then before Logan could really read into it, he smiled and sat back down on the bed. "They seem like tight-asses, though."

Logan laughed, his face heating and his heart thumping at the way cuss words tumbled so easily from Jake's mouth. "They are. They're dicks. But they try to keep up happy, so letting my brother stay for awhile isn't something they'll care about."

There was a beat of silence, and then Jake—his expression hidden from Logan—asked, "What do they care about?"

"Training, mostly. And bonding, although that's not this Center's specialty. Here they train us on combat techniques, technology, and the code procedure."

"Technology?" Jake said.

"Like guide-detecting stuff," Logan replied with a shrug, flipping through one of the comic books.

"So they teach you how to hunt down guides?"

"I guess that's part of it..." Logan suddenly got an idea that made him excited. He turned to Jake and said, "What if I asked if you could join me in training?"

Jake's eyes were somehow flat and unreadable. "Join you?"

"Well, yeah," Logan continued, deflating somewhat at the odd reaction. "You could learn all about how the Center's run and shit, too. You'd probably see more than any Normal ever has."

"Wow. How about that." Jake's voice was rough, shaky. He cleared his throat. "So all those secret guide-hunting techniques and stuff."
"Yeah, I guess. They've honed all that shit down to a science—every way a guide's evaded them, they know how to find them. But the combat stuff is way more fun. You'd learn how to fight Sentinel-style."

Finally, Jake smiled again. "Really? That does sound interesting, actually."

"So you want me to ask?"

He watched as Jake ran a hand through his hair, licked his lips, and then sighed. "Yeah," Jake said. "Let's do it."
"You what?"

Jake winced at his mom's tone, and shifted his phone to the other ear. "I'm gonna train with the sentinels..." Even as he said it, he knew how dumb his plan sounded. But how could he give up an opportunity like this? Seeing the inside workings of a Center would give him the kind of advantage that most off-the-grid guides could only dream of. And all he had to do was play the curious older brother of Logan, an—apparently—very important sentinel, whatever A-class meant. "Listen," Jake said, whispering as he huddled a little closer to a tree in the park across from the center. "They're practically begging me to stay because Logan threw a fit and said he'd transfer to a different Center if I don't get to join."

There was a beat of silence, and then his mother gave her clipped reply. "We can't talk about this over the phone. I'm going to drive up and come get you, and I don't want any complaints."

"Mom—think about it. How weird would that look?"

He could practically feel her restraining herself from screaming at him. Instead, she said, "Fine. But if you're staying for a year, then I am coming to visit a few times. You're gonna miss the start of junior college by doing this, you know."

"So I start a year later, so what." He couldn't even believe junior college was her main concern. He was being handed the keys to the kingdom—he would be walked through every facet of the Center's organization alongside Logan, and learn everything he needed to know to keep safe. Forever. "And of course you'll come visit."

"Okay," his mother said. "Here's how this will go: I will be the one to get your pills and bring them to you. If you're gonna be around that Center, I don't want you even remotely connected to anyone they might be watching. You understand me, kid?"

"Yeah, mom." He wasn't going to argue with common sense.

"And this is the last time we discuss anything on the phone. Use our code words in email if you have an emergency, but that's it."

Jake nodded as he said, "Agreed."

He heard her whuff out what was probably cigarette smoke. "Me and Waylon can probably make it down in September. You good until then?"

"Yes."

"Okay. Look... If anything—anything—seems like it's going sideways, you just call me and say come now."

"I love you, mom."

"I love you too, kid."

After they said their goodbyes, Jake exhaled an enormous sigh and dropped back against the tree, staring up at the leaves. He wasn't sure why he hadn't mentioned the real reason why he'd (first) said yes to Logan; that Jake had heard the excitement and fear and loneliness in Logan's voice and
somehow knew he had to be there for him. But that was just a passing thought so Jake quickly dismissed it as the real possibilities bubbled up.

A front row seat to the Center's operations. What more could he ask for?

****

Logan felt jittery after Jake left the room. He beeped the orderly and demanded that anyone making noise on his floor stop immediately. "Of course," the orderly had said without complaint.

"And get my brother," Logan added. It'd been awhile since Jake said he needed to take a walk outside, and Logan was wondering he'd just driven back to the house—which would have been dumb since Logan told him his stuff could be brought here. Maybe he'd changed his mind?

Beeping the orderly again, Logan asked for his dad. He didn't have to wait long. Sam came through the door in scrubs, looking slightly rushed, but he was smiling. "Your mom left," he said. "She asked me to say goodbye for her."

What probably happened was Sam ordered her to go home because he had work to do that didn't require a guide and he didn't like her being around a bunch of unbonded sentinels. Logan just eyed him with a flat expression before saying, "I thought it was okay for Jake to stay here while we were in training? You said it was okay." That had taken some convincing but eventually even Reshmi relented. Once Logan got the idea of Jake spending training with him in his head, he couldn't let it go.

"It is okay," Sam replied, looking confused. "Why?"

"Logan left. Well, he went on a walk but he's been gone for an hour."

"He probably just needed some air, Lo. This place can be pretty stifling to those who aren't used to it."

"He's not the one who's locked in a room."

Briefly, Sam frowned. Then he sat beside Logan on the bed. "I know you're raring to go, which is good. But you have to remember that Jake is a normal. He doesn't have any reason to be here other than to spend time with his little brother, right?"

Logan nodded slowly. "Yeah…"

"So I think he's really going out on a limb for you. He thought this would just be a boring summer month with his old man's family." Sam laughed. "And now this happened."

"He doesn't want to be here?"

"No, that's not what I meant…" But he didn't quite seem sure of that. He frowned a little, his gaze moving off Logan. "It took so long to get into contact with him again, I figured he wouldn't want to spend much time with us."

"That was Cheryl" Logan yelped, drawing up the spectre of the woman whose blood made him and Jake not quite full brothers. "She hid him from us."

His father looked a little uncomfortable with his outburst, yet didn't argue with what he said. "Well, that's by-the-by," he finally said. "I'm sure Jake wouldn't have agreed to stay unless he actually wanted to. Just wait a couple more minutes and if he doesn't show up, you can ask one of the
Logan nodded even though he wanted to ask his father to find Jake now. He also didn't want to be alone with his senses. "What are you working on?"

"Same as usual," Sam replied, sighing as he stood up. "Getting those ridiculous guide suppressants off the street, the unending battle."

****

Despite his confidence when speaking to his mother, Jake still shook as he crossed the threshold into the Center. It really did feel like walking directly, and knowingly, into the lion's den. Everything was so pristine and modern, and anyone who passed him looked like they had somewhere important to go—which, at the very least, felt like a blessing. Compared to all that, Jake was insignificant teen normal with a Visitor's Badge.

He was careful to look appropriately bewildered and awed, which he hoped translated into how he felt on the inside... because it wasn't the sentinels he feared the most. It was the guides.

Sentinels could be distracted by suppressants and scent-blockers. Guides, on the other hand, with their empathetic abilities, could cut through all that bullshit like a hot knife through butter. They could sense was people felt, but luckily they weren't mind readers. Jake could let some of his fear through, fear would be understandable. Terror would not. He also didn't try to hide his excitement. Just a bit of him wanted to crow out loud: you stupid sentinels! He was gonna learn every tip and trick it took to keep outta these assholes' grasp. And even better? He'd learn how to fight like a badass. All thanks to you, Logan, he thought to himself with a smirk.

He nodded at the security guard, flicking his badge as he passed. Logan was on the fifth floor—the "quiet" floor that was maintained for newly-emerged sentinels, and Jake was tempted to check out other levels on the way up in the elevator. He knew at least one of them would be dedicated to guide training, and despite himself, he was curious. But even for him, that would just be too stupid.

At the fifth floor, he got off. Most of the rooms were apparently empty, as sentinels didn't emerge in droves. He beelined straight for Logan's room, and opened the door without knocking.

"Hey, hey, hey!" Logan yelped at him, just pulling up a pair of white pajama bottoms.

Jake snorted at him, kicking the door shut. "I've seen worse."

"Shut up."

They sat together, Jake leaning back on Logan's bed. He was amused to see Logan try to effect the same nonchalant pose, but then made him vaguely comfortable. Well, he had been aiming to be the cool older brother, but somehow he'd thought the whole Logan-emerging-as-a-sentinel thing would negate all that. For a thirteen-year-old...nothing could be much cooler than a sentinel. Well, Jake supposed so anyway. He wouldn't know. "So, do I get my own room?" he said with a crooked smile.

Logan rose to the attention like a flower in sunlight. "I could get you one," he said earnestly. "But they said they could put ... well, never mind. Like I said, I can get you one." Disappoint suddenly rolled off him in waves.

*Oh boy, here we go.* "They could put what?"
"A bunkbed…"

It took a whole lot of willpower not to snort. Seems like even now, amidst his rich family and the sentinels, Jake wouldn't even get his own bed. Still, anything would be better than the back of a station wagon. "Only if I get top, bro," he said lazily, flopping back to rest his head in his palms.

Again, Logan copied him. Their elbows touched as they laid there. "I like the bottom bunk, anyway," Logan said, still too young to know he was just saving face.

"You nervous about training?" Jake asked.

"No. I've already been going through the prelims anyway." It was like Logan had just discovered a way to come off as hopelessly impressive. "Actually, I'm almost done with them, and I've gotten to course five outside… that's for the fifteen to eighteens."

Instead of impressed, Jake was vaguely reminded that he was nearly eighteen years old himself, and had no physical training of note except for high school PE. Would he have to start at bottom rung with a bunch of little kids? On the other hand, he didn't want to miss even the basics of how sentinels were trained.

Realizing he'd gone silent, he quickly grunted in an awed sort of way. "No wonder you're so buff."

And that remark had Logan launching into a detailed account of his numerous workouts led by Reshmi, which Jake listened to with interest. He hadn't expected to hear Logan be so passionate about everything that went on at the Center—not that Jake thought that was a good thing. "What about the guides?" he asked without thinking.

Logan, mid-sentence, paused. "The guides? What about them? They're kept across the base."

"No, I mean do they have their own gym or something?"

"Gym?" Another pause, and then Logan snorted. "I guess some of them do get training, if the Center thinks they'll be paired up with military sentinels. But mostly, I think, they have to work on stamina. Like running a bunch."

Jake's face scrunched with distaste. "Count me out on that."

"No problem. You'll be with me, remember?"

Woops. Fucking idiot. "Right."

They both lapsed into silence until Logan spoke again. "Um, so why did you say okay? About staying, I mean."

"I don't know, it sounded interesting."

"Okay."

Jake glanced over at Logan. "And I thought we could hang out a little bit? Do some brotherly bonding and shit."

That clearly made Logan happy, or at least feel better, and Jake was glad. Despite… everything, he knew what it was like to wake up one day totally different and having his world change completely in half a second. He knew about the loneliness. So, if he could spare Logan (who seemed like a cool kid) just an iota of that … why not, right? They were family, after all.
Besides. For some reason, whenever Logan looked happy, Jake felt happy.

...Weird.

***

This was a mistake.

Bent over, hands on his knees and sweat dripping from his face, Jake regretted every decision he'd made leading up to this fucking dumpster fire hell-pit. Reshmi was the devil. He heard a sharp whistle blast and winced. Standing up straight, he saw that Logan was already halfway around the track again and Reshmi was over by the stands waving at Jake and blasting that fucking whistle. "Alright, alright," he muttered, loping into a graceless, exhausted jog.

A few more steps and he wanted to collapse. This was stupid. Three weeks, and he hadn't learned anything except that sentinels seem to have a high tolerance for physical pain. He shoulda listened to his mother. With a groan, he tugged the Center-issued, sweat-drenched hoodie over his head and dropped it on the track as he kept going.

"About time," Reshmi said to him, tone clipped as she eyed her stopwatch. "...and two seconds slower than yesterday. That would be the opposite of improvement."

Jake just tossed his hand at her, turning away to clasp his hips and gasp. Logan had made his way to the other side of the track, catching up with some older sentinels. Well, if Jake couldn't be the pinnacle of physical supremacy, at least he could live vicariously through his younger brother. He held his hands to his mouth and whooped as Logan passed the others.

They all charged along… and then started to slow. Jake's eyebrows pinched as he watched the whole group of them come to a standstill, looking over their shoulders. And it kinda looked like they were sniffing? And looking?

Looking….

At Jake's hoodie.

"No," he wheezed.

It was Logan who broke away from the pack first, charging the way he came down the track. But the others were close behind him. One kid grabbed his sleeve, and he twisted around, snarling as he shoved the other sentinel back.

"Enough," Reshmi shouted through a foghorn.

They all stopped, tripping slightly and shouting in annoyance at how loud the horn was. Logan was still glaring daggers at the kid whose hand was clawed in his sleeve. "What the hell is that about," Reshmi said, striding across the field towards them, with Jake close on her heels.

He waited until she was with the sentinels, barking at them, before idling off down the track and grabbing his hoodie. He didn't even check what they were doing as he then sprinted for the changing rooms where he quickly scrambled into a clean outfit and stuffed his jogging clothes into a bag. It took scuttling past the dorms, past the cafeteria, and past the rec room for him to wake up and realize he had no fucking idea where he was going.

So he hid in some bushes.
Think. Think. Think. He seriously wanted to cry for being so stupid. Well, he hadn't thought he was being that stupid—he'd been wearing so much scent blocker, he could have found work as one of those dangly car fresheners. And he hadn't been caught yet, despite all the sweat wrung from body through Reshmi's torture. So?

So...what did it matter. New crisis, and there was going to be a new solution.

He stared at the bag of laundry. Laundry… he'd been to the Center's main laundry building once after he'd accidentally tossed his wallet in the hamper. That was the first time he'd met a guide his age.

The girl had been pushing a cart in and he asked if she worked there. No, she had said, *I'm a Guide Dorm RA.* He didn't know how to respond.

Why was that memory popping up now? How could that help him? The guides here wouldn't help him…

But their scents might. His fingers dug into the bag, his lip curling up.

Jumping to his feet, he beelined for the laundry building, careful not to look overly rushed whenever he passed someone. Luckily things weren't as regulated inside the base, or not as much as he'd assumed they'd be. Behind the walls, kids were free to roam around as much as they wanted like regular school, although sentinels and guides were not allowed to mingle. Jake, surprisingly, had been given more access than Logan because he was "normal."

When he reached the laundry building, he popped his head in and glanced around but there was nothing but rows of industrial-size washing machines and dryers. Oh, and lots and lots of laundry. Teen laundry.

He wrinkled his nose, stepping carefully as he glanced from bin to bin, wondering how he could figure out which cart came from which dorm. Once again, he was lucky. *Dorm Sierra* was printed on the side of a particularly smelly cart. That was the sentinel dorm, which meant… he looked around and finally found a Dorm Alpine cart.

"Hope this fucking works," he muttered. Pulling his bag open, he fished the clothes out and stuck them deep inside the pile of guide laundry. And then for extra measure, he twisted everything up and rubbed other clothes against his. Not even an A-class sentinel could unknot the tangle of smells in there.

Hands on the cart, he dropped his head back and sighed. *Too close. Too fucking close.*

****

He scrubbed himself raw in the shower. Like turned the heat up to max, and power-washed his body until there couldn't possibly be a trace of smell left. And then he covered himself head-to-fucking-toe in scent-blocking spray, which thankfully smelled like nothing at all. Not even aerosol. Finally, he rubbed his pits with Axe deodorant which in his opinion would be more misleading than anything else.

So, he was good. Hopefully. He went back to the dorms, towel around his shoulder, hair dripping, and kept an ear open. But there didn't seem to be any kind of uproar. As he passed each open door, all he saw were teenage boys and girls in their rooms playing video games or reading or sleeping.

No one turned their head. No one looked at him.
He reached his room, pushing the door open. Logan wasn't there, so with a beleaguered exhale, Jake climbed the bunk bed's ladder and collapsed. Crisis averted, he thought. Which is when the door busted open.

He sat up, completely sure his life was over.

But no. It wasn't. Logan stood there in the doorway, a grin on his face, and then he marched in like some kinda big-dicked mob boss, crossing his hands over his thirteen year-old chest.

Jake cocked an eyebrow. "What?"

Logan just smugly shook his head, leaning back against one of the standard issue desks where no one did homework. He was wearing the usual hoodie and sweatpant ensemble all the kids got there. "Where'd you go?" he asked.

Jake shrugged. "Wanted to shower before everyone crammed in there. What about you?"

Logan snorted. "Reshmi made us run a couple more miles because no violence is permitted or some bullshit, but she was probably just pissed no one would tell her why we were fighting."

Lying back down, heart-beat easing, Jake bunched his pillow up. "Yeah? Was it top secret?"

"Fuck yeah. I smelled it, Jake."

"Shit mother-fucker. Jake pushed up on his elbow, trying and failing to look relaxed. "Smelled what, buddy, your own fart? Because whew, about time—"

"No!" Logan had lost some of his cool, yet managed to still look ecstatic and frustrated. "It! It! The most—the best—" His chest was heaving with each breath, his eyes flicking back and forth as if looking for a perfect word that didn't exist. His fingers curled into fists and he looked at Jake. "Guide."

His smile was pure, light, and brilliant. "Mine," he said. "My guide is here."
Chapter Notes

posted on my phone, will fix any formatting errors if needed later.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Jake felt numb. “Your guide?”

In seconds, Logan had paced the room thrice-over, his face flushed. “Yes. The smell… I mean, it was so, but something was off. I could tell.” He stopped, eyes wide as he stared at Jake. “I have to find them.”

Jake pulled his blanket up a little. “What did Reshmi say?”

“About what?”

“About it being--” And Jake could barely say it. “--your guide.”

Waving his hand dismissively, Logan finally stopped walking in a circle. “She didn’t believe me because everyone else at the track said it was their guide too, but they’re wrong. They just smelled a perfect guide and were fucking jealous because they know it wasn’t theirs.”

His words fuzzed out a little as Jake exhaled with relief. So the hormonal tween sentinels had just been overwhelmed with guide scent and where all claiming it as theirs. “So,” he cut over Logan’s rambling. “What did it smell like?”

Logan gave him a look like he was an idiot. A frustrating idiot. “What did it smell like? Perfect. It made everything--every annoying little thing--go away.”

“Cool.” Jake needed to deal with this. He jumped off the bunk bed, careful to land a bit aways from Logan.

“Cool?”

“Yeah. Look, I need to go get something from the canteen, but we’ll talk about this more later.” He didn’t wait to hear Logan’s reaction, darting from the room like a anxious tweaker. He couldn’t keep his fingers from shaking. Less scared than before, he still felt like people were watching him even though he knew that wasn’t the case.

At the bottom floor of the dorms, he reached the open window into the canteen, where a clerk was waiting. The kid looked about Jake’s age, a bored sentinel about to graduate. Jake slid some money forward. “Give me a couple of those scent-blocking sprays,” he said, mouth dry.

The kid cocked an eyebrow.

“My brother,” Jake explained, trying to sound nonchalant. “Says I stink.”

“Gotcha.” The kid took the money and handed over the aerosol cans. “Also helps to wear diverting scents that don’t irritate, like natural oil colognes.”
Jake nodded. “Thanks for the tip.”

He was slower going back, twitchy still but calm. He’d have to talk to Logan now, and listen, because he knew nothing would distract him from this.

Inside the room, he found Logan at their shared laptop, scrolling down Google, face set with intense focus. It looked like he had a million tabs open. Jake tossed the scent blockers up on his bunk and then went to lean over his half-brother. “What’re you looking for?”

“Guide laws.”

The sharp response made Jake flinch. “Why?”

“Reshmi said I couldn’t hunt for my guide because I’m a minor and hunting isn’t allowed inside the Center. Something to do with guide protection sanctions or some bullshit.”

“Hunt?” Jake laughed. “Seriously?”

Logan finally tore his gaze away from the computer screen just long enough to shoot Jake a scowl. “Yeah? How else do you think sentinels catch their guides? Put an ad up on missed connections?”

Despite the situation, Jake snorted. “How does a thirteen year old know anything about missed connections--” he started to say, when he noticed Logan’s eyes had dilated slightly. He took a step back. “Anyway, what stupid kind of law are you trying to find, anyway?”

“Huh? Oh, yeah. Well, my dad always said that if a sentinel was sure they found their guide, then the law would go in their favor no matter what.”

“Shocker,” Jake mumbled as he retreated to the bunk bed and hoisted himself up. Something about Logan’s crazed clicking and scrolling was giving him a headache. He searched under his mattress for his pill bottle. “So when you find this mysterious law, what will you do with it?”

“Show it to Reshmi.”

“Not Sam?” Jake winced even before the words were out of his mouth. Wow, good job idiot.

Logan was silent for a moment. Then he swiveled around in his chair, grinning. “I should totally call dad. He’ll fuck this place up for saying no to me.”

Waiting until he was on the phone, Jake quickly popped one of his pills, and hid the bottle again. Then he listened as Logan had a tense conversation with their father, which quickly moved towards how soon Sam would be there. When Logan ended the call, there was a triumphant flush to his cheeks that made Jake uneasy.

“He’s going to demand a campus-wide scent test,” Logan said. “We’re going to find my guide.”

#

So personal terror aside, Jake felt a little guilty watching the line of guides waiting, bored, for the infirmary. This was day two of the “search” and the only thing it had resulted in so far was a slight scuffle when a visiting sentinel soldier realized a guide was theirs and several of his buddies had to hold him back from terrifying the poor girl.

Jake was half-assing his way through a training course as he watched the commotion. He could see the flash of anger, the defiance, and then the acceptance on the girl’s face as she considered the
soldier who’d just declared their compatibility.

From what Jake had learned about these things, underage guides were not supposed to have their scents catalogued in any accessible network until they had come of age and graduated from the Center. This was supposedly done to control exploitation and keep overzealous sentinels from harassing children.

But now Jake had a front row seat to the breakdown of these “protections.” He had no delusions about the scents being logged because of the search. He just didn’t know if this was something he should blame himself for.

The guides here were already in the Center’s grip, right? They would be given to their matched sentinels eventually.

Still.

Jake turned away from the line and prepared himself for another run through the tactical course. Logan hadn’t attended any of the training for the past two days, instead choosing to wait with Sam. The last time Jake had seen him, he was pale and tense.

“Jake!”

He nearly tripped over his feet coming to a stop, and found Reshmi waiting for him at the edge of the course. He jogged over to her, wiping at his sweat with a small absorbent towel which he carefully tucked away in his pocket. “What’s up?”

She looked stressed. Jake wondered if she had gotten in trouble over this particular mess. “You don’t have to do the training right now, your brother isn’t even here,” Reshmi said. She had her hands on her hips, and a small frown on her face. “Seems like your dad is quite the mover and shaker, he had admin nearly pissing themselves in minutes.”

“Oh,” Jake said, unsure of how to respond. He wasn’t used to anyone in the sentinel world complaining about his dad.

Reshmi considered him. “I doubted your brother. He’s barely a fucking teenager yet. But I know what a sentinel who’s found their guide looks like.”

Now Jake was really speechless. Mute. And also kinda sick.

“What do you think?” she asked.

“No way,” Jake started shaking his head. “You saw the way all those kids ran at the same time. They all think this was their guide.”

“But the rest calmed down.”

There were things about this situation that Jake couldn’t even let himself begin to think about. Right now he had to label it as *they might figure out the truth about me*. The other thing… the Logan thing… just couldn’t be right. He wouldn’t think about it. “He’ll calm down too,” Jake said with a shrug. “Once they get through all the guide scents.”

“Right.” Now Reshmi was frowning at the line. “This is a real fucking mess. They’ve never made concessions like this before, which tells me something.”

“Tells you what?”
“That Logan may be one hell of a sentinel.”

#

In some ways, Sam and Logan looked exactly the same when Jake found them sitting tensely, side by side, in the admin’s office. He’d brought some lunch up since apparently neither could be compelled to move a foot until the search was over.

“Burgers?” he asked holding out a bag to each.

This seemed to break their angry fugue. Both took what Jake offered, started eating, and finally relaxed the straight lines of their shoulders.

“I’m sure this must all seem very strange to you,” Sam said.

Jake shrugged.

“I’m just disappointed with Center admin. The second Logan said he’d found his guide, that should have become top priority. Instead they just let whoever this is slip away.” He shook his head. “And that’s the other thing I don’t get. Why isn’t this guide coming forward?”

“Maybe they don’t know,” Jake offered.

“With that line outside?”

Again he shrugged. It’s not like he could just come out and say the guide they were looking for wasn’t ever gonna show his face. “Maybe they’re not ready to be a sentinel’s guide yet, and they’re scared.”

Logan scoffed. “Why would they be scared?”

Jake could practically feel his anger rolling off in waves from the accusation, and couldn’t help getting defensive in return. “Well, you’ve had every guide in the place rounded up and their scents catalogued, which they know isn’t supposed to happen.”

Both sentinels stared blankly at him, uncomprehending. But then Logan said, “So he really is hiding from me.”

There was… something broken in his words. A deep fear that went beyond just Logan, a child, somehow echoing every sentinel that ever was.

“I don’t know,” Jake lied.

Sam patted Logan on the shoulder. “We’ll find him.”

Now they were both using him. Jake had been a little more comforted when Logan didn’t seem to know the gender of his supposed guide. He took a step back, the urge to run from the Center almost overpowering him. Even if Logan did realize that Jake wasn’t his guide, they would still know the truth…

Sorry your son is such a fucking idiot, mom. Running now would just make things worse, he knew that.

“How long will they search?” he asked.

“Until we find this guide,” Sam replied. “If Logan bonds with his guide early on, they’ll both
develop together into a very powerful duo. You can’t buy that kind of luck. But more importantly, he’s probably imprinted on the scent which will make working with temp guides harder.”

“IT will?”

Sam nodded. “Sentinels can be very sensitive about temp guides, and once they lock onto their bond guide, they tend to reject any others. Even highly compatible ones.”

“Yeah, but…” Jake waved his arms out. “Obviously the guide is here somewhere. And their scent would have been logged when they turned eighteen.”

“Like I said, the sooner, the better.”

In Sam’s expression, Jake could see the pride and ambition. He was already planning ahead when his son found his guide at thirteen years old and developed immense powers alongside this mystery person. The confidence there was chilling. He was dead sure they would find the guide. That they would find Jake.

Logan had been silent this entire time, and Jake wasn’t sure if he’d been listening. He was just frowning at his hamburger.

Sam took a bite of his and murmured his approval. “One thing I miss about the Center--their perfectly calibrated seasoning for sentinel food. By the way, why are you wearing so much scent blocker?”

After a wash of cold through his system, Jake tried to rally. “I figured it would make things less irritating for the new sentinels.”

“That’s thoughtful, son, but they need to get used to normal scents anyway or they’ll never be able to function outside Center walls.”

“And I like the way you smell,” Logan said absently as he chewed on his burger.

Jake literally felt like the air had been sucked from the room. But neither of the two sentinels seemed to notice. He took a shallow breath, focusing on his heartbeat and hoping they wouldn’t hear it pounding in his ribcage. “Thanks,” he said a little shakily, trying to sound sarcastic and failing badly.

Focusing on Logan helped. Instead of being overrun by his own panicked thoughts, Jake absorbed the way his half-brother sat there in a daze, excitement and fear wafting off him in equal measure. Jake wanted to go to him, pat him on the head, and tell him that everything would work out in the long run.

As if hearing his thoughts, Logan looked up and stared at him.

When their eyes met, everything could have gone to hell. But Reshmi walked in at that moment, giving Jake the perfect excuse to look away. Her back was rigid, as was her frown, and she seemed hesitant to speak. “Logan… they’ve finished gathering samples. Are you ready?”

Was he really just gonna smell swabs of sweat all day? Jake almost laughed. Now he really felt bad. But hey, maybe Logan would find his real guide because of all this.

Jake’s chest tightened. “Wait,” he said just as Logan stood.

They all stared at him. What the hell are you doing? He was starting to shake, but the sick feeling was muted, suppressed… “I mean,” he mumbled. “Nevermind. Good luck, Logan, I hope you find
Logan nodded without saying anything, mouth a thin line. He and Sam followed Reshmi out the door, and when it closed, Jake fell into one of the unoccupied chairs. Eighteen years of staying out of trouble, and he’d managed to screw up royally his first month away from his mom.

Later that evening, he sat in his dorm room reading, but kept looking up at every footstep that passed by the door. He was equal parts anxious for and dreading Logan’s return. Would he find his guide? What happened then?

Finally, he heard the knob turn and stood up without thinking, the book falling to the ground. And from Logan’s face—hell, from the rush of disappointment emanating from him, Jake could tell that no guide had been found.

“What now?” Jake asked.

Logan said nothing, brushing by Jake to drop onto his bed. He covered his face with his arm, his jaw set.

Jake wanted to comfort him. He wanted to sit by Logan, and brush his hair back, and tell him that tomorrow would be better—that the terror he was feeling would go away. But Jake wouldn’t do that. He sat down on the desk chair, and sighed. “You’ll find your guide, Logan. The Center is very thorough… they’ll have other compatible guides for you.”

“I don’t want a compatible guide.” Jake could hear the tears so close to the surface. “I want my guide.” A loud sniff, Logan dragging his hand under his nose. “I hate this. Why did he run away from me?”

Jake bent over, arms resting on his knees as he stared at his half-brother. “Maybe he was scared, or maybe he didn’t realize you were there. Logan, maybe there wasn’t a guide after all. Why would he be on the sentinel side of the Center? You could have picked up on some random scent that wafted over or something.”

Logan snorted. “Wafted?”

“Yeah, like fuck dude, this guide could’ve farted two counties over for all you know.” Jake saw a tiny smile, and grinned. “Think about it. If the guide was here, you would know it.”

“That’s the thing, though. It feels like he’s here. I can feel my senses reaching out for him, but they’re...lost. It’s like going in for a hug and the other person ducks away at the last second.”

“Going in for a hug? Really?”

“Shut up.”

Jake held his arms out. “Come on, baby bro. Let’s hug it out. Come in for a hug.”

Finally Logan moved his arm, revealing red-rimmed eyes as he sat up scowl at Jake. “You are so fucking stupid.”

“Don’t leave me hanging.”

Logan flopped back down. “So it was just a fart in the wind, huh?”
The lie came easily. “I bet it was. Like post-burrito fart.”

They both start giggling like idiots, making fart noises and rolling around, the weight of disappointment lifting from the room. “I guess that rules out some hot chick,” Logan said.

“Hey, hate to break it to you, buddy, but chicks fart all the time.”

“No way.”

“They do. But I bet your guide is some big hairy biker dude.”

“Dude.”

“Smokes all the time and plays pool.”

“Stop.”

“No wait, what if your guide is like your least favorite teacher from school?”

“Hell no, I’d rather have the biker. At least it would be funny seeing him all taking care of me and stuff.”

“What if you guide is like fifty years old?”

“That doesn’t happen! The largest age gap know was, uh--”

“Thirteen years,” Jake replied. “Don’t you listen in class? I’m not even a sentinel and I listen.”

“None of that shit matters.” Logan waved his hand out. “They only care that we’re fully trained for all the tactical shit, and that we can dial down our senses.”

“You should want that too, buddy. Remember what garlic pizza tastes like?”

Mournful, Logan replied, “Not really…”

“When you’re done and graduated from here, I will take you to the best pizza places, we’ll go on a fucking road trip. One pizza in every state.”

“Yeah?” Logan’s eyes were wide. “Seriously?”

“Pizza at the top of the Empire State Building. I promise,” Jake said, grinning. “Now, let’s play some Xbox.”

Logan dove to the tv, grabbing the nicer controller, with Jake right behind him. They played all night, until Jake didn’t feel a single trace of unhappiness or fear coming from Logan and then he slept peacefully, knowing to his core that he’d been a good guide for his sentinel.

#

And then he woke up. And denied everything.

He denied it all for the next three months. And then for another three months. He sucked up all the training he could, learned all the techniques the Center employed to hunt down guides, and made friends with Center guides to learn from them as well. But, deep down, he felt sick.

He watched as Logan trained too, becoming stronger and more adept with his sentinel skills. You
should be there alongside him, something screamed at Jake. You two should be together, growing powerful together. It made Jake want to scratch long angry red lines down his arms, and crawl out of his skin.

His brother.

He didn’t think about it.

He liked meeting with the guides at the Center. Even though he couldn’t say anything, he could listen and hear all the things he’d experienced as well. He could be with them and feel connected, even though he’d blocked that connection. Sometimes there would be brief moments where a guide really looked at him, but Jake would laugh and break the thought they were having, and then the whole thing passed.

He did steal one of their textbooks and hid it under his pillow.

He wanted to ask them if they wanted to be there. Or if the Center had come to their homes when they were children and took them from their parents arms? Did they try to avoid the guide test at school, how long had they managed to keep their status secret? He wanted to not be alone in this anymore, and here were all the other people like him.

But he would never give up the freedom of being “normal.” At least not intentionally…

He left campus grounds for the first time in months one day, and went to the McDonalds a few blocks away. He sat at a booth with his hamburger and his McFlurry and he called his mom.

“When are you coming home?” she asked.

“I was thinking of going to school.”

“Junior college?”

“Yeah.”

“No complaints from me, hun. But why the rush? I thought you wanted to stay for year.”

“Well…” He hadn’t told his mother about what happened. For one thing, it would be too dangerous to talk about that over the phone. “Logan thought he found his guide a few months ago, and they’re still looking for this person. They’ve moved on to a statewide hunt now.”

Silence on the other end. Then, chipper: “That’s too bad, dear, and that poor boy. But I can guess how busy things have gotten.”

“Yeah, and I’d rather not be in the way.” He couldn’t say it now, but he also felt like he’d learned about as much as he was going to from the Center. Apparently there were just some levels of knowledge they weren’t willing to share with a normal person.

“Does your father know about this?”

“No.”

“You should probably tell him soon, kid. I’ll head up in the car tomorrow and probably be there the next day.”

“Okay.”
They said their goodbyes, and Jake finished his food while mulling over his options. He should probably tell Logan that he was leaving first just in case Sam mentioned something before he got a chance to.

The walk back to the Center was slow, and somehow ominous. Maybe because he knew he’d be leaving in two days, but he felt like once he passed the gates, he wouldn’t be able to escape. Just nerves… probably.

He want to the dorm room, where he found Logan sitting on his bed in his boxers while feeling his own flexed bicep.

“You are so lame,” Jake laughed.

Logan flushed, dropping his arm. “Where were you?”

Jake tossed him a hamburger in answer, which Logan snapped up immediately. In the past few months, he’d gotten much better at dialing down his senses and could eat normal food as long as it wasn’t spiced too strongly. “I wish I could leave whenever I wanted,” he muttered through a mouthful of food.

*Rip the bandaid off.* “Listen,” Jake started weakly. “I just talked with my mom…”

Logan stopped chewing, cheek bulged out as he stared at Jake.

“I know I said I’d stay for a year, but I kinda want to get started with school so I don’t fall too far behind people my age.”

Logan swallowed. “What do you mean?”

“I’m going home so I can start at the junior college.”

It was weird. The first time Logan said “You’re leaving,” it was just sounded confused, but then he said it again, slowly, eyes dark, like a dog who’d hyperfocused on prey and had lost its sense of individuality. “You’re leaving?”

“Logan…”

The hamburger fell to Logan’s side, forgotten. “I mean, yeah, it must be hella boring here for you, I guess.”

“It’s not.”

“But I kinda thought we were having fun.” His voice was shaking. “This sucks. This really fucking sucks. I mean, it’s fine. I just, I don’t know why this sucks so much.”

Jake took a step forward, unable to stay away from the pain in Logan’s voice.

“Logan listen—” But then he stopped. Logan was staring at the ground, pupils dilated, and he was completely still. “Logan?” Jake knelt down beside the bed, looking at where Logan was, and noticed there was a little dead bug stuck in between the strands of the carpet.

Logan had zoned.

Logan felt nothing. Gone. He was nothing.
And then he felt warmth. He felt skin on his cheeks, a voice speaking softly to him, bringing him back from nothing.

And then he was staring up at the bottom of Jake’s bunkbed. He turned his head just so, and saw Jake sitting at the desk playing a game on the computer while drinking from a Red Bull. He could see the clock on the computer... 2am.

“Wha..?” Logan mumbled groggily.

Jake turned, eyebrows raised. “Hey dude, you went to bed early. Kind of lame in my opinion, but whatever floats your boat,” he said with a smirk as he tilted the can back. Logan watched his Adam’s apple bob as he gulped. His hand was shaking just slightly. Or maybe not.

Setting the can aside, Jake rolled the chair closer to Logan. “So listen, man. I gotta tell you something, and I don’t want you to freak out.”

Logan narrowed his eyes, feeling a little sick, like he’d been here before. But the ache of it was dull.

“I’m leaving,” Jake said. But Logan wasn’t really listening.

This was wrong. All of it was wrong, but he just couldn’t figure out how.

Chapter End Notes

thanks to everyone who has been following along!
“Hey dad, it’s Logan. I know you and mom wanted to do a big thing about my 30th, but they’re shipping me out next week and I’m not sure I’ll have time. Wanna bump things down a few days? I’ll be in a debrief for the next few hours, so just text me back.”

Outside, little baby sentinels were training in the snow. Logan hadn’t been to the Center near his parent’s home for almost four years, but everything was exactly the same from the uniforms right down to Reshmi yelling at all the kids through her megaphone. Logan almost felt like falling to the ground and doing 50 just hearing her.

He’d prefer that, or even just staring at the kids through the giant office building windows over this debrief.

Slipping his phone back into his jacket, he sat a little higher, feeling like the bad kid waiting outside the principal's office. He couldn’t hear what was being said beyond the sound-proofed walls behind him, but he could guess:

*Why is Sentinel Marchiano still working with a temp guide?* Or, *Has there been any luck in India?* Yes, they were now crossing oceans and languages to find him someone who could meet the bare minimum as his guide. And Logan would go in there, ask that they let him work alone--they would deny this request, respectfully, and line up another set of temp guides he’d have to try.

Exhausting. But mandatory.

A low-level note taker finally ushered him into the conference room. He sat before a line of commanders (all sentinels), a few Center employees, and one guide dressed in regulation uniform. She was unbonded, and immediately Logan knew she was his next temp.

She smelled like expensive hair products and a hint of perfume, which made Logan smile. Only disco-ball earrings could have made it more obvious that she didn’t want to temporarily guide a sentinel. His humor didn’t last, a slight headache from the stench taking over. He dialed back his senses to a muted roar and folded his hands serenely on the conference table.

One of the top brass, Commander Stewart, a man nearing his retirement, slid a pair of thin-rimmed metal glasses up his large nose and cleared his throat. “Since we’ve been here before, sentinel, we’ll keep it short. The department is disappointed that you decided to reject your temp guide in the middle of an operation, and feel compelled to leave a sanction on your record. Considering this has never seemed to deter you in the past, the decision was made against such an action.”

Logan nodded, expecting as much.

Stewart looked him in the eyes. “Sentinel, are you aware that you’re currently the oldest sentinel without a bonded guide by about five years?”

Again, Logan nodded with a frown.

“You’re putting yourself and others at risk, not to mention impeding your own career.”

“Yes, sir.”
“And as it stands, the Center has tried to place you with sixty-eight different guides, all of whom you rejected--”

“Stewart,” another commander cut in with a friendly tone, “Enough.” This was Marcel Dupont, slightly younger than Stewart, and had the reputation of being more generous towards wayward sentinels, perhaps because he’d notoriously stayed unbonded until he was twenty-seven. “I’m sure Logan is well-aware of the facts. Perhaps you remember what it was like to be assigned the wrong guide?”

Stewart seemed to acknowledge this sentiment. He sighed, and pushed the papers he was reading from aside. “Yes, but as it stands, we are running out of options.”

The conversation took a backseat when Logan felt his phone buzz against his chest. He pulled it out and glanced at the screen, seeing a text from his father.

Sure thing, kiddo. That works out great, Jake’s in town! Come home after your done.

He put the phone away again. “Sirs, if I may? I’ve always accepted any guide you’ve sent to me, with wholeheartedness. I want a guide. But I want my guide.” He saw them all visibly deflate, but pressed on. “I know how the Center feels about what happened when I trained here, however I am certain that person was my guide.”

“I believe you,” Commander Dupont replied. “The problem is biology, Logan. You won’t be able to survive like this forever, any day now could be your final zone. So triage at this point in time calls for an acceptable temp guide. We’d like you to try Christine.”

Logan had almost forgotten about the unbonded guide in the room. When he looked at her, she looked back, face placid. “Would Christine like me to try Christine?” he asked.

“I go where the Center tells me to go,” she replied.

Not one of those ambitious guides who wanted to be assigned to high-level sentinels, then. He liked that just fine. There was still the matter of the perfume, however… “And you have no sentinel waiting for you?”

A flicker of expression, perhaps wryness, crossed her face, but she just shook her head.

Logan turned his attention back to the commanders. “Then I find this guide acceptable for now.”

#

By the time they were in Logan’s car, Christine had showered and smelled almost like nothing. She openly stared at him, her empathic abilities poking at his shields like a bored teenager. In fact…

“How old are you?”

“Eighteen.”

Christ. “Soon to be nineteen?”

“My birthday was two weeks ago.”

He tilted his head, trying not to grind his teeth. Sometimes it really felt like the Center was just trying to see how far they could push. “Did you finish training?”

“Yes, and the supplemental post-grad courses.”
Well, at least that. He finally let her in a little, even though it felt like chugging month-old, chunky, rancid milk, some of the weariness ebbed away as her soothing guide abilities centered him. He imagined this was how ex-smokers experienced nicotine patches; nice, but not enough. Never enough.

And it did nothing for the yearning.

He hated coming home because that’s when he could sense it the most powerfully—the ghost of his guide, the missed opportunity, serenity slipping through his fingers like sand. He was too young when it happened, it hadn’t been fair, but if only he’d ran a little faster.

“It’s like you’re purposely trying to make this harder for me,” Christine muttered.

Logan blinked. Right. At the very least, he could try not blocking out the temp guide by fantasizing about that moment of bliss.

“Won’t happen again,” he said, bringing himself to a more neutral level. He turned down familiar streets, coming to the cul-de-sac where he’d grown up. When he saw a beat-up faded Corolla out front, he finally remembered the text from his dad. “My brother’s here.”

“Oh? Your file didn’t include a brother.”

“Well, half-brother.” Logan pulled up behind the Corolla. “I haven’t seen him for a couple of years, he moves around a lot.” Plus he always seemed to take off whenever Logan got close to home, or least he was never around during holidays or birthdays. Of course, it made sense that he wanted to spend those times with his mom.

Logan had only met Cheryl once. She’d pulled up in front of the Center that day, didn’t get out of the car, and left the engine running while Jake said his goodbyes.

Jake, who had been so cool back then.

Logan sighed. “So, just to recap: Dad is Sam, mom is Lisa, and my brother is Jake. Got it?”

“Yep,” Christine chirped.

“Okay, I’m heading in. When you bring the luggage up, just leave it in the entryway and mom will show you where to put it later.” He got out of the car, feeling better with each step he took towards the house. Despite her waning effect on him over the years, his mother was still a comforting port in the storm.

When he reached the door, he heard footsteps on the other side, and turned the knob just as the door pulled in. Jake was standing on the other side. “Oh,” he said.

He was shorter than Logan now. At thirty-four years old, he had a bit of a paunch from all that road food he ate, and crows feet at the corner of his eyes. His hair was no longer dyed jet black, and he’d given up on the hemp bracelets long ago. But after a moment of raw something, his expression turned to that familiar playfulness. “Man, almost missed you.”

“Taking off?” Logan replied.

“Well.” Jake’s gaze flicked over Logan’s shoulder, where Logan could hear Christine pulling the luggage from the trunk. “Possible job in Grand Junction, you know how it goes.”

Logan did, peripherally, know how it went. From the sporadic news updates he got from his father, it
seemed like Jake was terminally inept at finding a steady job. Whenever he settled down in some nondescript, mid-size city, he’d inevitably mention a few months later that he was gonna pull up roots and hit the road.

And it only seemed like he showed up at Sam’s house when he needed money.

Christine was coming up the walkway, rolling two suitcases behind her and cursing whenever one of them bumped into her heel. “Need help with that--” Jake started to call when he froze suddenly.

Logan’s eyebrows rose, but whatever he thought he saw in Jake disappeared. Actually, he disappeared. He spun around and dashed back into the house.

“Uh,” Christine said, as she came up alongside Logan. “I missed it, who was that?”

“My brother,” Logan replied flatly.

#

While Christine was getting settled in, Logan found his father in his office. Sam Marchiano was retired now, but still a sentinel through-and-through. He counseled the Center on sentinel matters and occasionally had to fly out to other countries to assist in particular engagements.

He’d also made finding Logan a guide his personal crusade.

“Lo!” He stood up, came around his desk, and embraced Logan in a tight hug, who gritted his teeth through the pressure. Normal contact like this would be nothing to a sentinel with a guide like his father, but to Logan it was just another papercut on his already fraying endurance. But he tried to keep all that hidden from Sam.

They pulled away, and Logan sat in the chair across from Sam’s. “I have a new temp guide, dad.”

Sam sank into his own seat. “Yes, I heard about that. They assigned you a child, which goes to show how desperate they are.”

Logan nodded.

“They’re afraid you’ll start looking outside of their system.”

That caught Logan’s attention. “Outside of their system?”

Sam, who had been shuffling through some papers, glanced up with an expression that said he wasn’t entirely sure he had wanted to divulge something. “Ah, yes, well, you know how the Center has been having trouble with those so-called guide match agencies.”

“Weren’t those made illegal?”

“Some of them, but some have managed to dodge regulations.” Sam tilted his head. “So you… haven’t gone that route?”

Logan had never considered it. He knew the Center had the farthest reach, and the best-honed abilities for finding his guide. Some fly-by-night guide match agency wasn’t going to have that same kind of muscle. But Sam sounded almost open to it.

Logan decided to change the subject. “So, Jake’s here? Or was, I guess?”

“Was?”
“Yeah, he was half out the door when I walked up.”

Clearly this was news to Sam. “He left?” He stood up, but right then there was a knock at his office door, and the tension seemed to drain. “No, there he is now. Come in, Jake.”

“Hey!” Jake plopped down in the chair next to Logan. “Sorry about taking off like that, Lo, I forgot that someone was um, waiting for me to call.”

“Right,” Logan said.

“But Logan mentioned you were leaving?” Sam said.

“Oh, yeah,” Jake laughed, “no, that’s not happening. The job fell through.”

Big surprise. Logan really wished his father would stop humoring Jake and tell him to get his act together. Or maybe it was time for Logan to step up and do it himself. “Was that the call?”

“Yes. And then I ran into your new guide, and helped her unpack.”

Logan really hoped Jake wasn’t the type to hit on young girls. He couldn’t imagine Christine being the shy type, but he could see her being uncomfortable with Jake cornering her in a bedroom. “Did she ask you to help?”

Jake just shrugged.

If only Logan had driven a little more slowly, than this wouldn’t even be an issue and Jake would be on the road to whatever destination he’d decided to screw up at next. He turned his attention back to his father. “I think this one will work out for a little while, at least for as long as my next deployment. I think we can put a pin in the guide search.”

It was like pulling teeth to say it, but he wanted Sam to have some time to relax.

But of course his father saw right through him. “No pin. This is an active investigation until we find you that guide, Logan.”

Logan sat up a little straighter. “Thank you, dad.”

Jake stood up, excusing himself, and when the door closed, Logan rubbed his forehead. “That last job barely lasted the summer, right? How much are you giving him this time?”

“Logan.”

He looked at his father, who was somber. “I never paid child support, I never… I can do this.” He crossed his arms over his chest, and leaned back in his office chair. “And, somehow, I sense that he really does need my help, that I need to protect him.”

“Protect him?” Logan snorted. “He’s almost thirty-five years old.”

“I can’t explain it,” Sam replied. “Maybe it’s a sentinel’s brood thing. Although I never felt this way about you, oddly enough.”

“Well I can take care of myself,” Logan said, smile crooked. “Has he been here for long?”

“You know he never stays anywhere for long.”

“Maybe we can find him some job at the Center.”
“I’ve offered that dozens of times,” Sam said, shrugging. “No interest.”

Logan frowned. It was definitely time to have a little chat with his older brother. Was he really in a place where he could be rejecting reliable work? Not really.

He found Christine sitting on the bed in her room, hair hanging over her face. She was pale. “Something wrong?” Logan asked, and felt a stab of irritation that he now had to babysit this baby guide.

She looked up at him with young, blue eyes. “No,” she said.

Well, that was obviously a lie. But he figured it was some kinda teenage girl angst and took her at her word. “Dinner’s soon.”

“Okay.” She had looked down again. And then she stood up, brushed her hair back, and smiled. “Do you want me to eat with your family?”

“I think that’s for the best. You should probably meet them, and they will certainly want to meet you. But don’t take anything my dad says personally, he’s just very supportive about finding my real guide.”

“Got it.” She was now looking at herself in the wardrobe mirror. “How long have your parents been married?”

“Well, they bonded about forty years ago, so I guess that long.”

“How long are we staying here?”

He looked at her curiously. “Did something happen?”

“What do you mean?”

“Did Jake do something to make you uncomfortable?”

“No!” she gasped, straightening up. She was definitely pale now. “No, I wasn’t even thinking about him. I mean, I was just. Well, maybe excited for deployment?”

Was she asking him a question? Logan closed his eyes. How was an eighteen year old girl supposed to guide him?

He’d been with male guides, and female guides. He’d been with one who was ten years older, and one who’d been born a day after Logan. None of them were right, but all of them had varying levels of compatibility and experience that made his life either slightly bearable or downright hell. He wasn’t sure where Christine would fall.

They went down to dinner together in silence and found the other three people in the house already seated. Lisa had made steak and salad, and the smell, thankfully, was more appetizing than overwhelming with Christine standing there beside him.

“Welcome,” Sam said, standing up. “Nice to meet you, Christine.”

“Nice to meet you,” she replied sedately.

Jake had cleaned up a little--his face was shaved, and his hair was washed. He was smiling along
with everyone else; the friendly loser. Logan’s gaze moved away from him like water sliding off a duck’s back. “Mom, how are you?” he asked as he sat down.

Exchanging pleasantries worked for about five minutes, and then the table fell mute.

“Where’re you from, Christine?” Sam finally asked in his charming, paternal way.

However, Logan’s new guide looked like a cornered rabbit for a moment. “Um, the Center.”

“You were born there?” Sam replied teasingly.

“Well, I was born in Michigan.”

“Oh?” Sam leaned back as if he’d caught a big lead. “Jake, you lived in Michigan for a while, right? Nearly three years?”


“Did you like living there?” Sam asked Christine.

She stared very pointedly at her plate when she said, “Yes. I did.” Her effect on Logan seemed to recede a little as the smells from the table nearly made him puke. She obviously noticed, because a second later her power was back again.

This was another thing Logan would always resent about temp guides. They had to actively support him, which was tiring for everyone, when his real guide could just… exist, and Logan would be fine. They could live normally together.

“When did you test as a guide?” he asked.

“Um, later.”

“Later? Isn’t the testing done in kindergarten?”

“Logan--” his mother said softly.

“I just missed it, I guess,” Christine said. “My family lived rurally, on a farm, and I was homeschooled, so…”

“So you dodged the test,” Logan replied a little icily.

Christine stared at him with her young face. He felt a little bad; she was here wasn’t she? So obviously she’d decided to do the right thing and turn herself in at a Center. But still, if she’d kept hiding, then her sentinel—whoever it was—might not have been able to find her until it was too late.

“Ah yes, homeschooling,” Sam was saying, apparently oblivious. “Thank god we’ve outlawed that particular workaround. I just can’t believe it took us so long to realize parents were using that to keep children under the radar.”

Logan noticed Christine glance at Jake. Was he doing something weird? But when Logan looked over at Jake, all he saw was… nothing really. Nothing interesting. Look away, something told him, and so he did.

Christine’s support was wavering again, and Logan felt a massive headache developing. “Dad,” he said, his voice rough, “I’m gonna take a break in your calm room.”
“Go for it, kid,” Sam replied, clearly worried.

He left the table behind and retreated to the room Sam had built for rough times. Soundless, scentless, soft, it was nothing but an oasis.

Logan pulled off all his clothes and laid down on the floor. This was about as close as he ever got to feeling even slightly normal and not constantly bombarded. And it was usually where he could really think, freely and clearly.

*Christine is not right.*

None of them had been right.

He was tired.

For some reason, these moments always brought back the memory of his first dorm room at the Center. He and Jake would be sitting side-by-side in front of the television, playing a muted, dulled version of Grand Theft Auto. Nothing had been as perfect as that had been.

*Where are you? Why are you running from me?*

Put a pin in it, he’d told his dad. That was laughable. Now, here, in the dark and silence, Logan could feel that ever-present pressure. *Hunt. Stop fucking around and hunt down your guide.*

He rolled over to his stomach, and crossed his arms under his chin. Maybe he should look into those guide match agencies. If the rumors were true, then there was a black market going on there--one the Center had been trying to bust for years. It could be possible that they had Logan’s guide. Slim chance, but possible.

He made a mental note to look into it later, while he wasn't under the watchful eye of his dad. But first he had another thing to deal with…

He found Jake outside on the patio, sitting on one of the rusted metal deck chairs and smoking a cigarette while staring up at the stars. When Logan cleared his throat, Jake looked up at him, muttered "shit, sorry," and dropped the cigarette on the ground where he ground his heel into it.

"Are you staying?" Logan asked.

Jake, who was wearing a hoodie, sleeves covering his hands almost to the fingertips, just shrugged while keeping his gaze to the ground.

*He should be looking at me when I speak to him,* Logan thought. But then apathy overroad that sudden, weird irritation, making him feel numb and bored already. *I should just go back inside, this is pointless.*

Jake was pinching the bridge of his nose. "God," he muttered. He shook his head, inhaled deeply, and then looked up at Logan. "I'm not staying, I'm leaving… A.S.A.P." He chuckled, but it seemed almost painful.

"You don't have to," Logan said before he could think. "Stay until my deployment, or even after. I bet dad would love that."

"What?" Now Jake looked stricken, of all things. What the hell had Logan done wrong? He stood up, the patio chair clacking backwards. The noise clearly startled Jake, who blinked and then backed up a step. "Uh, right. Thanks." Now he just looked like he wanted to run.
When he did (well, it wasn't really running, more speed-walking), Logan… followed. Something about the sight and feel of Jake brushing by him and skittering towards the house like a feral animal seeking shelter made Logan snarl. Made his blood hot.

Logan followed Jake all the way into the kitchen before Jake even noticed. He'd collapsed against the counter with a big sigh, head dropping back, and when he opened his eyes and saw Logan, he said, "fuck!"

Chest heaving, he looked away. "Fuck. You scared me."

"Sorry," Logan replied, confused. He still felt… agitated. But what could he do besides grab Jake's arms? What could he do besides rest his teeth against Jake's throat so that Jake would know to keep still?

Logan nearly shortwired. Why were those the things that came to mind? He really was losing it. Teeth? Really? No, he couldn't think about marking Jake's throat…

"Fuck," Logan muttered.

"Yeah," Jake laughed, his cheeks flushed. He brushed his hair back and sighed. "Why the hell were you following me like some kinda ninja? I didn't even sense you—"

He stopped talking, his smile fading. "Uh," he said, clearing his throat. "About that new guide."

"Right," Logan cut over him, remembering why he even wanted to talk to Jake in the first place. "I'd prefer if you didn't put her in awkward situations like being alone together. She is still just a teenager, even if she's a guide, and I want her to feel safe."

"You're a good guy," Jake replied. "And no worries, I don't have an interest in teen girls, or any girl for that matter."

Logan processed this news, suddenly compelled to ask Jake how he'd come to that conclusion and if he'd put theory into practice. Did someone touch Jake? Another man? "I…" Logan swayed a little, unprepared for the rage that tickled up his veins. "Okay," he said, remembering that he should probably acknowledge Jake's statement at least.

"You okay?" Jake asked, hand outstretched. And Logan wanted nothing, literally nothing, more than that touch, but then Jake's fingers curled into his palm and he backed away. "Let me grab Christine," he said softly. "She'll fix you."

Chapter End Notes

thanks for all the comments! glad people are enjoying this weird little au
Logan watched, irritated, as his brother tapped away on his cellphone while Christine rambled through the canned guide affirmations meant to calm a malfunctioning sentinel. She stood in front of him, half-blocking Jake, but Logan could still see him turned to the side, his phone held low, and the frown on his face.

“Can’t find a good dealer?” Logan drawled, and Christine stepped a little more between them. “You have to know that not even the biggest idiot would sell weed so close to a Center.”

There was a slight quirk to Jake’s lips, as if he found Logan’s words amusing but not worthy of acknowledgement. Logan tensed, ready to stand, when Christine grabbed his shoulder. “Dial down. One, two, three,” she said with a cheery voice.

He scowled at her. Every temp guide was the same in this way. They went through the motions, their basic abilities adequate enough to keep him from going full-bore feral. But there was always something there—maybe disdain, or hatred. Logan could never quite tell; he wasn’t the empath. All he knew was that they weren’t right. None of them were right.

“Where are you going?” he asked, just as Jake took a step towards the front door.

Jake had paused for only a moment before nonchalantly grabbing his coat off the rack, shrugging it on as he sighed. “Gotta find that dealer, right?” he said, a wry smile on his face.

Logan knew he was teasing him. But what irritated him most was that clearly Jake was not going to find a dealer, which meant what he was actually doing was an unknown, and Logan hated unknowns.

Christine clicked her tongue. “Jesus, chill.” She put her hand over Logan’s forehead like he had a fever, and the touch did soothe him although it made him restless in a different way. His eyes tracked Jake’s retreat, his jaw clenching as the door closed.

“I never know where he goes,” he muttered.

“Is that a problem?”

“Only because he’s a leech.” Logan sat rigid in the chair, not actively fighting Christine’s guiding, but not letting her in like he should. “My father thinks he needs to make up for Jake’s childhood, but there has to be a line drawn at some point.”

Christine laughed. “Isn’t he older than you?”

“Not where it matters.” Logan tapped his finger on the kitchen table. Three minutes had passed; enough time for Jake to start his car, but not enough for the windshield to thaw. He’d probably still be sitting out there. If Logan extended his senses, he’d hear Jake’s heartbeat.

He heard the car leave. His head hurt.

“Look, I’ve told you like five times that you need to focus, not keep spiking every other minute,” Christine snapped. “They told me you were an experienced sentinel.”
“I am.” The car had turned out of the cul-de-sac.

“Useless.” Christine slumped into the chair next to him. “Fine, zone for all I care.”

That finally broke his concentration. He looked at her. She was wearing jeans and one of those puffy jackets with the fur-trimmed hoods that teenage girls seemed to love so much, and her arms were crossed over her chest. She was staring out the window towards the driveway.

It was hard to believe this girl was properly trained for missions. In fact, Logan highly doubted that she was. The only reasonable explanation for her presence was that the Center finally scraped the bottom of the barrel trying to find him a temp guide. Once she stopped working, and she would stop working, what happened next?

Well, he knew. The incessant headache would creep out past his tired defenses. The buzzing would become louder. Everything would drown him out, shut him down, and end him.

Did he care?

“What are you thinking about?” Christine asked like she couldn’t help herself. “I didn’t actually mean you should zone.”

“I’m not zoning.” As with all moments of numb despair, he’d thought about that moment when he was thirteen years old, running down the track with the other sentinels, and he’d scented something so pure, so beautiful, that it had made him feel normal again. And that had made the pain leave. For a moment, anyway.

#

The third time Logan came out to the living room to look outside, and for the third time ran into Christine doing the same thing, he finally realized that she was waiting for Jake. This made no sense.

“Can I go out for a bit?” she asked.

“To do what?”

“Buy tampons.”

“It’s late. And the Center furnished you with appropriate supplies.”

“Yeah, appropriate,” she said. “I’d get better quality from the gas station dispenser. Look, I’ll be back in like thirty minutes.”

“No.”

“Then what are you doing?”

He frowned. And then he gestured at the couch. “I’ve come to discuss the next few months. Sit down.”

She threw him a look like she knew he’d just made that up on the fly, but didn’t protest as she fell onto the couch and crossed her feet on the coffee table. “Just want you to know, I can lodge a complaint with guide welfare that you’re not even letting me get basic necessities.”

“Yes, and I’m sure they’ll address your complaint in the next eight to ten weeks.” He glanced at the window, but there was no car. “Tell me about your training.”
“Guide basics, plus the sup courses I told you about.”

“Tactical?”

“Defensive, stay out of the way.”

He sighed. This felt a lot like they were decommissioning him. A top-level sentinel was one thing, but if they were giving him some baby guide, that meant the mission had become more important than the man. They weren’t sending him anywhere vital.

Lost in thought, he almost missed Christine check the window. He didn’t know why he was so sure that she was looking for Jake, but he was. What had they said to each other in the short time they were alone? Why did she care where a stranger was?

He was irritated again. This happened every time he came home: with each passing moment, he became more and more focused on what Jake was doing, what he wasn’t doing, and who he was talking to. Things were so much easier when they weren’t together. “Can you focus on me?” he said flatly.

She looked at him. “You’re not saying anything.”

He would have argued with her—argued with a teenager—if his phone hadn’t started buzzing in his pocket. He turned his back on her, and answered. It was the Center.

“Sentinel Marchiano, this is Commander Dupont, sorry for calling so late in the evening.”

Logan scratched his eyebrow. The commander from his review, the one who’d found his guide later in life… “Yes, Commander?”

“I’ve decided to call you directly because I don’t want anything lost in communication. You’re being rerouted, well, in a way. We’re keeping you here.”

How timely. Just as he’d thought, he was being decommissioned. “Yes, sir. When should I expect my desk assignment?”

Dupont chuckled. “No need for that, Sentinel. I know what you’re thinking, but it’s not the case. Yes, we’re concerned about the guide situation, but you’ve managed so far. I’d admit, this decision was mostly mine. You’re being assigned to the local precinct for three reasons: they need a new sentinel, you’ll be an excellent connection to your father, and most importantly, we have a special operation you need to head.”

“Sir?”

“There’s an operation smuggling potential guides out of the country.”

Logan froze, the wind knocked out of him. “For how long?”

“Not that long, Sentinel. Current theory is the past four years or so, maybe six. You’ll get the files soon.” There was a pause, and then Dupont sighed. “Logan, this is under my supervision and I want you to know now, I need everything to be… delicate. No storming the front, no violence, no anger.”

“No anger?” Logan tried to keep his voice steady.

“They think they’re doing the right thing. They think we’re the monsters.”

He loosened the hold on his phone, sensing he was about to snap it into little pieces. “I don’t see why
“I know you don’t, but it’s not your place to see it either. I need you focused.” Logan sensed Christine leave, walk out the front door. He turned, only to see her walk down the front pathway to Jake, who was climbing out of his car.

“I’m trying to focus,” Logan said. “But everything… doesn’t make sense.”

The two of them spoke to each other, Jake’s body language reading as evasive, and Christine was upset. Logan could only watch.

“Sentinel?”

He blinked. “So what’s my mission?”

“For now, you’re the 18th precinct’s sentinel, acting as a detective. You’ll be assigned standard cases, but we’re also going to have you looking into the guide smuggling.”

Christine was calm now. Jake had stopped trying to move around her, and he was speaking. She was nodding. They hugged.

Something so viscerally immediate and violent surged through Logan’s blood. With cold precision, he strode outside, down the pathway, and in a matter of seconds, had the two separated. He held Jake by his hoodie, pulling it tightly so that Jake would understand the importance of being still for Logan.

He felt fingers glance down his neck, and he snarled, knocking Christine’s hand away. She gasped, eyes wide. He could hear Dupont calling for him through the phone still clenched in his hand, asking him what happened. He looked at Jake.

The eyes staring back at him were dark, bottomless, terrifying yet irresistible. And then they were just Jake’s eyes. He laughed nervously as he swung his keys around his finger. “Okay, dude, I get it, no touching your guide.”

“What?” Logan didn’t have a guide. Oh, he meant Christine. Logan released Jake, and held the phone to his ear. “Sir, I’ll report in tomorrow.” He hung up. Then he exhaled. Why was he shaking?

“Christine,” Jake said. “Take Logan to the meditation room.”

“You do it.”

“Christine—”

“You do it, you fucking bastard!” She turned, and ran down the sidewalk, her shrieked words the last thing Logan heard because he’d zone on them.

#

He came back to himself on his back. Because of the silence, and the darkness, he knew he was in his father’s meditation room. There was something else familiar about this, something distantly familiar.

He felt good.

“Hey dude.”
Turning his head, he saw Jake leaning against the wall, arm resting on his knee.

“What happened?” Logan asked.

“Christine pulled you from a zone, but she needed a break after that. I think she took off, but she’ll be back.”

“She took off?” Logan groaned. He’d never lost a guide before… well, none that were important, anyway. If she didn’t come back within thirty minutes, he’d alert the Center and they could hunt her down. Problem set aside, he sat up slowly, marvelling at how fine he felt. Christine had done this?

“Yeah and dad and Lisa weren’t here, so I just, brought you in here I guess.”

“That was the right thing to do.” He sat cross-legged, blinking in the darkness.

“You totally lost it on the sidewalk, I had to keep you from falling,” Jake said. He was trying to sound amused, but there was a tightness in his voice.

“There are worse places to zone.”

“Has it been happening a lot?”

Logan rubbed at his temples. “What’s a lot?” he asked bitterly. “Enough that I want to kill myself? Enough that I almost get someone else killed?”

“I didn’t know it was this bad.”

He was about to snap at Jake again, to say something caustic, but he didn’t. He wanted to hear more sympathetic words, more caring words, more… words. “It hurts all the time,” he said, looking at Jake.

Jake avoided his eyes. “I called Lisa, she’ll be here soon. Logan, why don’t you retire? You’ve done more than enough, you’ve given more than enough to the Center.”

“If I retire, they won’t care about finding my guide,” Logan replied. He was annoyed again, hearing those defeatist words from Jake. Jake was always giving up and running away. Didn’t he care about anything besides finding the next shit town to live in for three months?

“What would you do if you found him now?” Jake replied, surprising Logan. “He’s been avoiding you for so long.”

“I don’t care.”

“You’re not mad?”

“I didn’t say that.” Jake was staring at him, so Logan stared back. “Revenge will be very, very sweet.”

He’d fantasized. He’d dreamt about the day he finally caught his guide. He’d jacked off to that moment of biting down, marking and scarring the flesh so that his guide would intimately feel the knowledge that there was no more running, no more escape. That he was now Logan’s. He’d surrender, finally, and everything would be healed.

Logan grunted.

Then, after that, there would be so much more than biting.
“Stop it,” he heard. Hazy, he struggled to come back to himself, and when he did, it was just Jake again.

“Stop what?” he asked.

“What?” Jake shook his head, looking confused.

“You said stop it.”

“No I didn’t.”

Logan’s eyebrows knotted. He was losing his goddamn mind.

#

The Center found Christine at the mall. In the car ride back, they asked her why she’d so deftly brought Logan back from a serious zone only to abandon him to go shopping. She didn’t say anything.

Despite his initial misgivings, after a day of rest, Logan felt better about the prospect of being a precinct sentinel. He wouldn’t have to live in a hotel, he wouldn’t have to fly anywhere across seas, and being closer to home meant being closer to the Center, which had the best resources to keep him from, well, dying.

He met privately with Commander Dupont who, along with a team of analysts, detailed what they knew about the guide smuggling operation (which wasn’t much), and explained in great detail what Logan’s job was.

“But I request that Christine further her training, since we’re here,” Logan said.

Dupont nodded. “I agree.”

They were all amassed in Dupont’s office—Logan, Dupont, and three analysts. After first, Logan had felt apathetic about these domestic missions, but the deeper they went into intelligence, the more intrigued he became. “There hasn’t been a single arrest?”

“No arrest, some suspects. The usual suspects, which tells me we’re not on the right track.”

This seemed true. Looking at the files, Logan got the distinct feeling that the old guard of trouble-makers were using their notoriety to act as red herrings. He flipped through a couple more pages. “Any estimate on how many guides have been moved out?”

“More than ten. And to countries without extradition policies. This was planned very well, and has been the most successful operation the Center’s ever faced. The standing opinion is that they have a nationwide network.”

This made Logan seethe. Any thought of people working together to keep guides away from their sentinels was infuriating. But he buried his rage. “I’m glad you pulled me in on this, sir,” he said. “I’d very much like to bring these people down.”

“I’m sure, but keep in mind, we don’t think they have your guide.”

Logan nodded. He knew that. No one knew where his guide was except his guide.

“Christine will go with you during working hours, but as you suggested, she will remain at the Center for training.”
“Good.”

“Is she working out? That apparently was a very deep zone she pulled you from.”

Logan shrugged. He didn’t like not being able to remember what happen, and for some reason he also didn’t like that everyone thought Christine brought him out even though it was the only plausible explanation. “She’s fine.”

They moved on. Dupont had a few sources Logan could follow up on later, but none of them seemed very promising.

“Why here?” he asked.

Dupont pointed at the map they’d pinned with every city a potential guide had vanished from. “We think this is the epicenter. Everything may be scattered, but for some reason, what little concentrated activity there is keeps occurring in this region.”

Logan tried to reason out the thought process behind orchestrating guide smuggling in a Center’s backyard. Was it based on necessity? And with all the obviously intentional scattering, why risk it for so long? “How long has the Center been on this?” he asked.

Dupont looked uncomfortable for a moment, before sighing as he dropped a file back on his desk. “A while, and truth be told, they’re getting tired of my so-called inaction. I know what people say, that I’m too soft, a guide-sympathizer—”

The door to his office opened, and a short, chubby man with a messenger bag trundled in. It took Logan a second to see the GPS collar. Dupont’s eyes tracked the man’s progress with hyper-vigilance until he disappeared into a room behind Dupont’s desk. When the door clicked shut, the tension in the room eased slightly.

Dupont cleared his throat. “My point being, I’m bringing you in as a pinch-hitter, Logan, and we really need to see results. I’m suspicious that the Center wants to get more aggressive.”

“What’s wrong with that?” Logan replied flatly.

“I’d prefer not to traumatize anyone.”

“What about the sentinels without guides? What about us? Weren’t you traumatized going so long without your guide?”

Dupont’s shoulders had gone very rigid. His gaze flicked towards the door that man had gone through, and then down to his desk. “Sentinel, it does no good for them to hate you.”

#

His parents’ car was gone when he got back, but Jake’s was there.

Logan hadn’t spoken to him since the zone.

The house was dark, and Logan had every intention of going to his own room. But he found himself wandering the house until he saw the stream of light underneath Jake’s door. Instead of knocking, Logan silently pushed the door open.

Jake was playing a computer game at his desk, headphones over his ears. Logan turned to leave, but paused.
The room was immaculate. He didn’t see laundry anywhere. But he stared at the bed, with its covers overturned, and pillows bunched up, and he sluggishly moved towards it, slid one knee on the bed, then collapsed into softness. He wanted to burrow down and deep.

“Jesus,” he heard.

Jake stood over him, pale. His lips kept parting like he was trying to say something, but no words came out. Finally he cleared his throat and laughed in a strangled way. “What’s up, Lo? You had dinner? I’ll go make you something in the kitchen.”

Logan sat up, wiping at his face. “I’m not hungry.”

“Okay…” Jake swallowed, lowering himself slowly into his desk chair. "Tired? Want to go to bed?"

He wanted Jake to stop talking to him as if he were helpless. And yet he didn't want Jake to stop at all. "I'm here for good," he said.

"Here? Like my room?"

Logan snorted. "No, dumbass. Like here home, like they're not shipping me out again because I'm a breaking sentinel with no guide."

"Wow, 'dumbass'. Can't remember the last time I heard that particular term of endearment." Jake was smiling, the earlier strange fear gone. He slid back in his chair, headphones around his neck. "So what? You're not Mr. Sentinel Agent Man any more?"

"No, now I'm Detective Sentinel Man." Logan made himself comfortable, crossing his legs with his hands in his lap. "I don't know if that's a good or bad thing."

"Did you like going overseas?"

It took Logan a moment to answer. He was tired of talking about guides and sentinels, and Jake would never understand, but leaving the country had always meant leaving his guide. It had always meant purposely making the distance between them greater, which was painful. It was wrong.

"Maybe, under different circumstances, I would have liked it," he said finally. "What are you playing?"

Jake blinked at the change in subject, but then he glanced over his shoulder. He seemed to consider something, looking at his watch, the empty doorway, and then back to Logan. With a small, tired smile, he said, "Call of Duty, wanna join? We can play in the den."

“Let’s play here.”

Nodding, Jake grabbed a second controller and tossed it at Logan before settling beside him on the bed. He was wearing sweatpants and a tank top, soft belly obvious. But his arms and shoulders were more muscled than Logan had expected.

As they played, Jake kept tsking at him until finally saying, “Goddamn it, Lo, we’re not gonna get anywhere if all you do is cover me.”

“Then stop sucking so much,” Logan replied, smirking as he took out another round of enemies aiming for his brother.

They smashed the buttons, cursing at each other and the game for what felt like only ten minutes
when the pause screen came up suddenly. “What the hell…” Logan said.

“It’s been like two hours, dude.” Jake had shuffled off the bed, and turned the screen off.

Logan stared up at him. “And now it’s bed time?”

Jake snorted. “No, now it’s baby sentinel Logan can’t handle bright lights for too long time.” His brown hair was a mess, and he had day-old stubble, but his smile and eyes were light. But then something happened… his gaze flickered.

Why had Logan thought his hair and stubble was charming? They were just laziness personified. Markers of a loser. Sure, Logan wanted to rub that belly just to make Jake laugh, and maybe rub those shoulders to…

“Stop it,” Jake muttered.

Logan looked up at him, ears ringing. His face was pale, eyes red-rimmed.

“You should go to bed,” Jake said. “Staying up so late and playing games after a zone, was a stupid thing to do. I shouldn’t have—” He bit his lip. “I’ll be right back.”

After he left the room, Logan leaned back against the wall, confused. Now that he thought about it, why were his feelings—not thoughts—feelings about his brother swinging so wildly? When they weren’t together, it was easy to forget Jake, but when they were close… the apathy would erode and a strange, budding feeling of missing Jake would grow until it was crushed by Logan’s disdain.

And then he’d think about how Jake never took him on that pizza road trip that he promised to.

Something buzzed under Logan’s leg. He fished around the blankets until he found the source: a cellphone. A… flip phone, like the kind someone could buy for five bucks at a flea market. Curiosity, or something else, made Logan read the text message that had come in.

Sender: Ferris

Need to talk about distribution. We have two new flavors in development and shipping has been greenlit. Meet up tonight?

Logan’s eyebrows furrowed, his gut clenching with unease. He clicked into past messages, but there was only more talk about flavors, shipping, and ice cream.

“What are you doing?”

He looked up to see Jake standing in the doorway holding a glass of water. He was staring at the open phone. Then he swallowed, trying to look more relaxed. Setting the glass on his desk, he then went to Logan and held out his hand expectantly.

“This thing is so old,” Logan said.

“I know.” Jake waved his fingers.

Not wanting to, but not having any logical reason to stop, Logan finally handed the phone over. He watched as Jake read the message with a frown, and then snapped it shut. “I gotta go.”

“Now?”

Jake ignored him, tugging off his tank with one hand, back turned. Logan found himself glued to the
sight, gaze cataloging each inch of revealed skin, following down the center dip to the edge of Jake’s sweatpants, and the swell of his—

Logan looked away, face warm. *What the hell?*

“If Dad and Lisa show up tonight, let them know I might not be back till tomorrow,” Jake said, zipping himself into a hoodie sans shirt. Logan frowned. He got up, following Jake down the hallway to the front door. He bristled at the sight of Jake turning the doorknob, and jammed his palm forward, the door slamming back into place. “Tomorrow?”

Jake was very still. And Logan couldn’t blame him because that one word had come out with such a dangerous growl that anyone else would be quaking with fear. But good. Jake should be a little scared. He shouldn’t think it was fine to go out there alone without Logan.

It took a moment for Logan to realize Jake was observing him closely. “You okay, dude?” he said pointedly.

Logan nodded, backing away. “Yeah, fine.”

Seemingly appeased, Jake opened the door again. “Maybe I’ll be back tonight, so don’t worry about it.” And then he left.

Two minutes later, Logan followed.

Chapter End Notes

Hey! Thanks for the comments, love them :)
Chapter 9

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The Corolla's ever-present death rattle was probably the least of Jake's problems, but he was really fucking tired of hearing it. At a red light, he flipped the radio on to cover the noise (pointless), and lit his cigarette, smoke curling up in the frigid air. No one was out this late except other nightowls.

Ferris wanted to meet at the diner. That was fine by Jake, he could go for some eggs and bacon, but he was running low on cash. Asking his dad for some pocket money was one thing, but he wasn’t sure how a request for a new car would go over. But considering how guilty Sam felt about everything, it might just work.

Over the radio, some late night host was considering the state of the world. “New referendum passed, did you hear about that? Centers have to divert more manpower, sentinels and guides, towards locating untapped and potential guides.”

He turned the radio off.

A neon oasis in darkness, the diner made itself known well before Jake reached it. He pulled into the parking lot and killed the engine, scanning the large plate glass windows to see if Ferris was already inside, but there wasn’t any sign of him. So Jake just scooted down in his seat, tucking his hands under his pits for warmth while he waited.

Those sadistic fucks at the Center must be laughing their heads off at the thought of sending guides to hunt guides. And Jake had actually thought... *believed*... that the referendum wouldn’t pass. Shows how naive someone can be even in the face of utter bullshit.

He rolled his window down and rested his elbow on the side, letting winter cold prickle his skin and also to let all the smoke out. “Fuck,” he mumbled to himself, and then snorted.

Despite Logan’s very specific image of him, Jake hadn’t been able to get his hands on any weed for a long time. But he could sure use some for fun now. Or a nap.

He rolled the window back up, snuggled down even further, and fell into a doze until a sharp tap at his side woke him up. Ferris was huddled outside, staring at him through the frosted glass.

They took one of the many empty booths and the first thing Ferris did was say, “you coulda froze to death out there,” and then the next thing he did was wink at the waitress.

Jake just grunted as he waited for coffee.

This diner was about five minutes from the Center. At any other time of the day, there could be sentinels and guides milling around, talking with family. Now it was blessedly quiet. Jake didn’t break that quiet until after he’d down half his cup of joe. “I need to get outta here,” he said finally.

“We haven’t even ordered,” Ferris replied even though he knew what Jake meant.

“My brother’s sticking around, like forever or a few months, I don’t know.”

“So?”
Jake clenched his jaw. This is why he hated dealing with Ferris, who seemed to finally notice his anger. “Ok, ok. Sorry. But you don’t have the cash to leave yet, do you?”

“I was thinking—”

“No, man. You know what I’m willing to provide and what I’m not. Speaking of which.” He reached into a backpack he had with him, and pulled out a paper bag which he slid towards Jake. “That should keep you for a while. Now, if you’re really facing problems, like I said before, come live with me for a while, Jake.”

“What was that about new flavors?”

Ferris nodded, acknowledging the change in topic. “I know you think we’re not ready to ship internationally yet, but word’s just come down the pipeline that this ice cream is gonna melt sooner than we thought. We have a way to ship it, safely, soon. Now.”

“We don’t know these suppliers,” Jake said through gritted teeth. When he was younger, he thought the doublespeak was funny. Now he was just tired of calling guides doublemint bubblegum. “No one’s vetted these people. They could be—”

“Jake.”

He was cut off both by Ferris, but also by a young couple slamming their way inside, laughing. For a second, Jake wrote them off as stupid teens in love, but then he was hit with a familiar sense. They took counter seats, but then one of the girls seemed to notice Jake. She whipped around and started whispering to the other girl.

“That’s so cute,” the second whisper-squealed. Jake narrowed his eyes. There had been something indulgent and humouring about this girl’s voice as she snaked her arm around the first girl’s waist and held her a little closer.

Meanwhile, Ferris was ordering his food. “Jake,” he said.

Jake just waved at the waitress.

“Jesus.” Ferris handed her the menus. “Bring two of the same thing.” When she walked away, he leaned forward. “Just how strapped for cash are you?”

More giggling from behind. Jake picked at groove in the table.

“Jake.”

He gripped his hand into his fist.

A light voice said, “Better answer you sentinel, guide.”

The second teen girl, with sleek black hair and appraising eyes, was smirking at Jake. He heard Ferris sigh, and say, “let it go.”

Oh, Jake had no interest in bothering with that baby sentinel. His heart was racing like crazy because how the fuck had she known he was a guide?

And then reality hit him. It was because that baby guide with her had sensed him like he’d sensed her. Had they always been able to do that?

Jake turned back to grin at Ferris. “Cute that they’d ever think I’d accept you as my sentinel.”
Ferris shot him a wry look before sipping his coffee. He was idly watching the girls, who’d turned their attention back to each other. It was easy to tell they were recent graduates of the Center, allowed out whenever they wanted and therefore would go to the all-night diner. Also recently bonded. They were flush with puppy love.

Instead of paying attention to them, Jake found himself watching Ferris. He’d known the sentinel for almost ten years now, but there were still times when he felt wary. Ferris was bonded. He’d exerted his rights over a guide. It wasn’t until his own sister, a guide, had committed suicide that he’d become fanatical about the movement.

But he watched these two girls with the sort of sentinelistic pride that Jake knew well. Another settled guide safe in the arms of her sentinel. It was practically wafting off him.

“She seems happy,” Ferris said.

“If that makes you feel better.”

“Jake…”

Truth was, Jake could tell the other guide was happy. She was centered on her sentinel, locked to the other girl’s emotions, her highs and lows. She was exuding such contentment that it made Jake sick. It made him tired. And worst of all, it made him doubt.

“I need to go,” he said, even though he really did want those eggs Ferris had ordered for him. “I can’t help you with this shipment, not with how things are going.”

“That’s fine,” Ferris said, placing his hand over Jake’s to keep him from leaving. “Truth is, we’ve been talking and the others think you might have the most impact right where you are now.”

Jake froze. He wasn’t dumb. This wasn’t the first time the movement had asked him to use his proximity to Sam. And he understood, but he sure as hell didn’t want to. He didn’t get to say that, though. “I can’t just hang around my dad’s house until I’m forty years old. They’re gonna start wondering why I don’t do anything. That will lead to questions.”

“Why don’t you do something? Get a job in town.”

Jake sneered. Get a job in town… as what? He’d never finished college, he’d never been able to hold a job because he was always moving from place to another, and therefore he’d never really been able to… know what he’d want to do even if he did do something. He didn’t have friends, he hadn’t seen his mom for months, and the last relationship he had—well that’s a joke, he’d never really been in a relationship. Just sex, of which he’d finally grown tired of.

His thoughts were interrupted by the diner door opening again. Three things happened at once: 1. Ferris snapped his hand back so quickly, he scratched Jake’s skin. 2. The girls went completely silent. And 3? Through all the suppressants, the scent-blockers, and the cologne, Jake was drowned in fury. He staggered, and Ferris didn’t help him because obviously Ferris wanted to live.

A few years ago, Jake had picked up an erotic novel that he kept tucked away. The back blurb had asked, have you ever seen a sentinel sick with jealousy?

Logan’s eyes were dark; inhumanly dark. But from the way he was standing rigid in his canvas army jacket, Jake could tell he was still trying to be… normal. He approached them in a stunted, strangled kind of way, stopping way too close to Jake, looming over him. Pinning him to the spot with his
hyper-focused gaze, like a predator.

Jake did not know how to handle this. His life was over.

There was a crinkling sound—Ferris shoving the paper bag into his backpack. “Sorry, I had your—brother, I’m guessing—out a little late, huh? My bad, won’t happen again.” Carefully plotted words, infused with appeasement; acknowledging Logan’s claim on Jake while denying any of his own.

This, stupidly, worked. Logan’s tension noticeably eased, even as he gripped the back of Jake’s neck and steered him to the door. The two girls giggled nervously as they passed.

Outside, Logan didn’t let up. He perp-walked Jake past the Corolla to Logan’s much nicer car, opened the door, and presided over the entire operation of clambering inside. His hand lingered on Jake’s shoulder for a moment before he withdrew and slammed the car door shut.

Jake was in unfamiliar territory. Despite the way he lived, he’d never really encountered an angry sentinel. He’d heard the word _feral_ before, but terrifyingly enough—he didn’t think this quite counted as _feral_. Yet.

So he defaulted to what he did know: Logan thought he was a loser. Jake would just rant about missing out on a good gig that guy had going for him, something sketchy, and…

His thought trailed off. He was struck with one very chilling, distinct point: Logan had followed him. _Why?_ “My car—”

“I’ll pick it up in the morning.”

“You?”

“You’re not allowed…” Logan shook his head, rolled his shoulders. Exhaled. “Right, we’ll get it together, tomorrow. I don’t think anyone would bother stealing that piece of shit,” he said.

Jake checked his watch. 2AM. They’d been sitting in front of the house, in Logan’s freezing car, for an hour. Why? Because Logan had clamped onto Jake’s wrist as soon as he killed the engine, and hadn’t moved or said a single word since.

He must have been able to hear Jake’s heartbeat crashing frantically against his ribs, but at least plausible deniability worked in this case, considering Logan was acting batshit crazy.

Well, he was acting like a sentinel without a guide anyway.

Jake looked at his watch again. He’d need to leave the car soon, otherwise the scent blockers…

“Who was that sentinel?” Logan asked, his voice misleadingly soft.

“A guy I met,” Jake replied, distracted. He was pretty concerned with the way Logan was now rubbing Jake’s wrist with his thumb. He noticed Logan was watching the movement as well, as if he were an impartial entity.

“What’re you going to do when dad stops subsidizing your life? Will you come to me next?” Jake tried to tug away, but Logan jerked him back, meeting his gaze. The grip was verging on painful. “You think that sentinel will protect you? He’s already bonded. There’s a better option.”

This was the wrong conversation. They should not be having this conversation. This was the
conversation some young, hot-head sentinel had with his flirty, little guide. This was the dance—the tug-of-war—a sentinel and guide played out for each other before succumbing to their desires.

This was not a conversation between brothers.

He was shaking, the emotions seeping from him haywire, and dark, and violent. His eyes were unfocused. *Finally* Jake stopped fumbling around on himself, and realized Logan was having some kinda meltdown.

His heart clenched and he practically lunged across the divide, slipping his hands at the base of Logan’s throat, where he could reach naked skin. Logan was trembling beneath him, grip moving to Jake’s sides where he held tentatively.

*Save me,* his entire being begged. *Heal me. I need you.*

Jake almost broke for his brother, his dearest thing. He would have, he knew. But then headlights streamed across them, a car pulling up beside Logan’s. Just as quickly as he’d come closer, he backed away. Logan slumped, defeated, in his wake.

Jake shoved the door open and jumped out hollering for Lisa.

#

Logan’s dream was crystal clear.

He was a kid, and he was watching a teenage Jake make out with some guy. The guy didn’t matter, he was just a blob. It was Jake, being touched by this blob, feeling things because of this blob, getting flushed all over and laughing and being shy and horny and *not* paying attention to Logan… all of it was pissing Logan off.

But, on the other hand, Logan felt very calm. Smug, even. Because he knew that, if he wanted, purely on a whim, he could make Jake belong to him. This feeling was magnanimous—by Logan’s grace, Jake was allowed to do what he wanted, as long as he was good. But if he were bad…

Logan woke up. His underwear was sticky. Kind of like a thirteen year old’s underwear.

He grumbled as he got out of bed, kicked his underwear off, and changed into something clean. He stared at himself in the closet mirror, wondering what he’d say to his parents at his thirtieth birthday party, now that he’d lived longer as an active sentinel without a guide than just as a normal person.

His face was drawn, pale. There were dark circles under his eyes. Even the carpet under his feet felt like a bed of nails. And he couldn't remember the night before, which was becoming an unwelcome routine.

But there was something different. Yeah, he felt sick as always, but there was a new vigor in his blood, and when he really put his mind to it, the carpet just felt like carpet. *Huh.*

Downstairs, he found his entire family eating waffles and sausage. Jake didn't look at him, but Lisa and Sam both rose when he came into the room, their expressions tight with worry.

"I take it I zoned again," Logan said flatly.

Lisa held his hands, eyes wet. Behind her, Sam looked… scared. Logan's sentinel father was scared. "I've called the Center," he said. "You need to have Christine with you at all times. This… this cannot happen again, I thought your mother wouldn't be able to pull you out, Lo."
Just then, the front door slammed open and Christine came stomping into the house with a bag slung over her shoulder. Her face was blotchy, eyes red and when she spotted Logan, she glared viciously. "You promised I could continue classes."

"I can't deal with a guide tantrum right now," Logan replied. Her eyes widened like she hadn't expected that response. "Go settle in." He watched as the girl flounced off. Lisa followed behind, leaving Logan, Sam, and Jake in the kitchen.

Jake, the leech. He just got to sit there with his waffles and his greasy hair and his stained hoodie, not giving a single solitary fuck about the world. He wouldn't even look at Logan.

An utter certainty directed Logan's movements as he snatched Jake's jaw and forced him to make eye contact.

"Lo!" Sam's hand landed on his arm, and he snarled, shoving his father away, standing between him and Jake. He saw, in his father's expression, first confusion and then wariness. Flat palms were held out in front of him in acquiescence. "It's okay, son. It's me."

Logan nodded slowly, letting his father's words reach the rational part of his brain, the part that didn't feel like it was on fire. He swallowed, and then stepped away from Jake. "Sorry," he muttered.

"It's fine," Sam said. "Right, Jake? Jake's fine too."

"Yeah, it's fine." Jake did not sound fine. He sounded petrified. He stood and inched away from Logan in a way that just made Logan want to pin him down.

"Pin him down? Logan was losing it. He was fucking losing it. He forced himself to look away as Jake skittered from the room, every movement making Logan flinch with the need to give chase. When he was sure Jake was gone, he looked pleadingly at his father. "What the hell was that?"

"You almost went feral."

A cold washed over Logan. Zoning he was used to. He'd never gone feral. He fell into the kitchen chair.

Sam sat across from him. "Have you ever felt like that before?"

"That? No."

"I've heard of sentinels going feral over protecting family members before, but not against other relatives, and honestly son I wouldn't have expected you to lose your cool for Jake. Guess that bond held up over the years after all." Now he was smiling.

"Bond?" Logan replied skeptically.

"You idolized him the second he walked through the door."

Logan snorted. But he knew that was true. He remembered every second he'd spent with Jake, every conversation, every moment alone… The time Jake had promised to take him on a cross-country road trip to find the best pizza. A promise which, of course, he never kept.

"Yeah, well, he's a bit different now," Logan said.

"That's true. Almost feels like I need to watch over him all the time."

There was a crackle in Logan's veins. He narrowed his eyes. "I watch over him," he snarled. But
then he thought, well he loved Sam and trusted Sam, and knew Sam was a powerful sentinel, so if Logan was ever away from Jake, his father would be adequate substitute. So he relaxed, content that he was a good sentinel because he put Jake's safety over his own right of ownership.

Sam stared at him, frowning.

Logan rubbed his forehead, feeling slightly dazed. "I'm going to work," he said. "And don't worry, I'm bringing Christine. I just have to move or I'm..." He shook his head. "I'll be back tonight for the party, so we can all celebrate me being the oldest sentinel to ever live without a guide."

"Logan..."

He stood, trying to smile jokingly at his dad, but couldn't bring himself to do it. Truthfully, none of them knew just how much longer Logan would be able to stave off that final, permanent zone.

#

Down the hallway, he heard voices. He slowed at Christine's room, listening as he realized it was Jake murmuring something. But then Christine spoke. "You promised me," she said, voice choked with tears. "You promised."

Logan strode into the room to find them sitting on her bed, staring at each other. She was bent over, hair a sheet around her head, face in her hands. But she sat up immediately, wiping the tears from her eyes and staring balefully at Logan. "What do you want?"

"We have to go," he said, trying to bury his irritation at being spoken to like that by a guide. He had to remember she was still a teen. At least she rose without complaining, and so he turned and expected her to follow, which she did.

The drive was silent except for a few small sniffles. When they were close to the police station, Logan's curiosity finally got the better of him, although he told himself he was just doing his due diligence. "What did my brother promise you?"

"Huh?"

"Look, don't play games. I heard you say that he'd promised you something."

When all he got was silence, he glanced at her. Christine's face was set. "I don't have to answer you," she said. "I don't have to say anything to you at all." And with that declared, she went quiet.

"Fine," Logan replied as he pulled into the station's parking lot.

He'd never been to this police station before, but a liaison was waiting for him outside. She handed him a standard sentinel police jacket, which he slipped on over his own. He glanced at the two insignias on his shoulder—one identifying him as an A-class sentinel, and the other declaring he was unbonded.

The liaison led them to a conference room where the police chief and several upper ranked officers were waiting. They all took turns shaking his hand, and he tried not to grimace at the sensory overload of all their smells, sounds, and skin. When that was over, he felt a light touch on his fingertips, and felt a little better. He tossed a nod at Christine.

"Sentinel Marchiano," the chief said warmly. "I heard you have your own dog in this fight." He sounded very glad about that. And Logan couldn't deny it.
"I heard you have someone smuggling guides out of the country," he replied.

"It's certainly based here," the chief replied, gesturing for him to sit at the conference table. When they all sat, he cleared his throat. "But I was hoping you'd lend at least a small portion of that sentinel power to our caseload as well."

"Certainly," Logan replied.

"Good. So now I'll share what we know." There was a projection screen waiting, and someone hit the lights. Logan expected a round-up of all the information Dupont had already given him, and wasn't surprised at the faces and info that popped up. The chief droned on for awhile, and Logan was losing focus, until the slide changed again.

"This sentinel has been working private security since retiring from Center activities, his name is Bobby White."

Logan's senses were centering, powering up. He was hyper-focusing on the profile in front of him, memorizing every detail, committing addresses and names to memory. Logan knew that sentinel. Well, he'd seen him. He'd seen him at the diner the night before, the night Logan had almost forgotten. He'd seen this sentinel move his hand across the diner table.

Logan had seen him touch Jake.

Chapter End Notes

hey!! Wow all your comments are so great (with some interesting discussion going on...) I'm glad you guys are enjoying so far.
Behind the gas station, Jake rifled through the green backpack Ferris had tossed at him, taking stock of its contents—pills. There were enough to hold him for months. He zipped the bag and slung it over his shoulder. “My brother’s birthday party is tonight, but I do wanna meet up again soon. There’s something we need to talk about.”

Ferris watched a car pull past them before speaking. “Something or someone?”

“Mint chocolate.”

With a snort, Ferris shook his head. “I knew you were going to lose your spine on that one. Maybe we could have done something if she were typical, but they’ve already pegged her as an A-class guide, which you know better than anyone. No way we’re getting her out of there.”

Jake glanced at him, frowning. “I’d still like to talk about it. I’ll send you a text later. Oh, and thanks for these.” He lifted his shoulder, nodding back at the bag, and all Ferris did in response was toss the toothpick he’d been chewing to the ground, and trudge away.

“Christ,” Jake muttered. He was used to Ferris being brusque, but… oh well, maybe someone had spat in the asshole’s coffee that morning. Not using code words? That was new, and the kind of sloppy Ferris would normally have cursed Jake out for, if he’d done the same thing. Maybe the sentinel was losing his edge. Or maybe he’d finally realized how stupid the codewords sounded.

Turning in the opposite direction, Jake trotted off, weaving between the pumps and cars until he reached the sidewalk, and then jogged across the street to the diner where his car still sat unmolested (not that he’d expected differently). The diner’s lot was empty, although he noticed the same waitress from the night before wiping down a table, and he wondered if her shift ever ended. She caught sight of him too, and stared.

He ducked into his car. Had he really made such a scene last night? Well, no, that was Logan who’d made the scene. But shit, from the look on her face—

Something rapped against his side window, and Jake flinched. It was the waitress. Using the hand crank, he rolled the window down, wondering if Ferris had left the night before without paying the check.

“You okay?” the waitress (Susanne, said her name tag) asked.

Jake glanced around in confusion, wondering if there was some visible marker alerting everyone that he might not be okay, before replying, “Yeah?”

“I’ve seen a couple of your kinds’ spats the past few years, but I honestly thought this one would end in blood.”

Jake rested his fist on the wheel. He chuckled in lieu of having anything intelligent, or even coherent to say, which Susanne apparently took to mean she should fill in the gaps. “I mean, yeah, there’s even been some fights between young ones—the sentinels. But your sentinel there… well, I was a little worried with the way he dragged you out, but the one you were with before told me you’d be fine.”
“He wasn’t my sentinel,” Jake finally said. Well, blurted.

The waitress, Susanne, cocked her head at him. “No? Because the last time I saw one get all, you know—” She waved her hand at him. “—He acted a lot like that guy last night. Look! I just wanted to make sure you were fine, okay.”

Was he scowling? Jake schooled his expression into something less hostile. “Sorry, thanks. And sorry about all the crazy last night.”

A snort. “Used to it.”

He nodded, smiling faintly.

“Oh huh. Well, I see you’re fine, and that’s good. Gotta head back.”

Jake said goodbye, and watched her leave with probably a dumb look on his face. He was sweating. He brushed, and then wiped at his forehead, gritting his teeth. Who had been there last night? Ferris, Susanne the waitress, and… some Center kids. That sentinel and her guide. They’d seen the whole damn thing.

And they knew he was a guide. How? Was he losing control of his abilities? Broadcasting them somehow? Wait. Logan worked at the Center. They had seen Logan… did they know who he was?

“Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.” Jake jammed his key in the ignition, rammed the clutch, and squealed his way out of the parking lot, barely registering the faint buzzing in his mind that made the hair on the back of his neck stand on end.

#

Parked between a rusting SUV and a new hybrid, Logan silently watched as his brother zipped down the road away from the diner.

That morning, after the briefing at the police station, Logan had followed Bobby White from his home to the gas station, where he only had to wait about five minutes before someone else showed up.

Jake.

Jake, wearing a pair of black, ragged jeans and a hoodie that looked like it’d never seen better days, plus his usual Converse sneakers. There were dark circles under his eyes, but unlike earlier when he’d nervously scuttled from the kitchen, he strode without hesitation towards White, his face set with a kind of determination that Logan had never seen before.

And all Logan could think, was what the fuck?

He had his hand on the door latch before Christine spoke. “Calm down, sentinel.” She’d touched the back of his neck; the only place she could reach from the back seat of the car. “I can feel you spinning, so I need you to take a breath and dial everything down.”

He hadn’t even realized that he was casting his hearing out across the street, out to where Jake stood talking to that other sentinel. But with Christine admonishment, he swallowed and grimly forced himself to sit back and deescalate the energy surging through him. Even so, he couldn’t (and wouldn’t) move his eyes.

Jake. Why was he standing so close to that sentinel? That close, and the sentinel would be able to
hear Jake’s heart beating, be able to corner him and take him—

“Sentinel.”

Christine managed to sound bored, which despite everything was what fully brought Logan back. He stared at her in the rearview mirror until she seemed to realize that he was waiting. “Just calm down, and think clearly.”

He looked down at his hands. Clearly. When was the last time he’d been able to think clearly? Her voice was a bitter medicine. At least it didn’t make him want to throw up like so many other temp guides had. His instinctive rejection of any guide other than his own had lessened throughout the years, maybe for the sake of survival, but still… most of them still made him sick.

“Thank you,” he rumbled.

She snorted, and sat back, crossing her arms over her chest. He noticed that she too was watching Jake, her eyebrows furrowed with concern she couldn’t hide.

Jake was taking a backpack from White. He unzipped it, and then the tension in his shoulders seemed to ease slightly. Logan gripped the steering wheel just a little bit tighter.

Only a few more words were passed between the two, and then Bobby White took off and Jake stared after him with a frown. He still had the backpack. He then turned and headed off to the diner across the street, got into his car, and left. Logan’s hand twitched for the key in the ignition, but he balled it into a fist, and exhaled.

Following Jake would lead to bad things. What kind of bad things? He wasn’t sure. He couldn’t put it into words.

“Aren’t we following that guy?”

Logan blinked. He’d completely disregarded White, instead focusing on the possible routes Jake would take home (if he was headed home). If he wasn’t… well, that was troubling. Logan regretted the decision not to immediately tail his brother, and turned the key, engine roaring. He heard Christine saying something about staying calm, but now all he could think was Jake.

Fingers touched the back of his neck again, but the touch infuriated him so he snarled in warning. They were gone in an instant.

He hit the road going twenty above the speed limit. He heard the click of Christine’s seatbelt. “You fucking crazy sentinel,” she kept saying, and he noticed in the rearview that she was typing something on her phone.

“Don’t warn him,” Logan said coolly.

She flinched, possibly not expecting him to sound so aware. He went back to analyzing the road; which turns would get him to Jake the fastest. His hearing was cast out again, searching for that telltale sputter of Jake’s aging Camry.

“Logan,” Christine said, and then softly, “Sentinel. What’s the plan?”

“Locate the target.”

“And then?”
“Subdue.”

Through the near-painful focus of his senses, he heard her snicker. “Subdue! Wow, romantic.”

Romantic?

The thought was lost when he finally caught sight of Jake’s car turning into a grocery store parking lot. As a rushing in his ears clouded out everything else, he zeroed in, and pushed the gas pedal to the floor.

#

There was only one word in Christine’s text: Incoming.

Jake stared at it, trying to puzzle out what it was supposed to mean, when he gasped. The phone fell to the ground.

A tidal wave of such potent, single-minded purpose had washed over him, sending him reeling. He leaned against his car, trying to catch his breath, eyes wide as he watched Logan careen into the parking lot and screech to a halt right beside him. The driver’s side door swung open, and Logan slid out.

His eyes were dark, flat. Like a predator’s.

Handle this, Jake thought to himself.

Instead of letting Logan get any closer to the Camry (and the pills, Jake remembered suddenly), he met the sentinel halfway, hand raised to calm. “Logan—”

A palm slammed flat against his, fingers curling over, and then Logan had Jake’s wrist to his nose, inhaling deeply, eyes still locked on Jake. He kept going, sniffing down the length of Jake’s arm, shoving the sleeve down as he went.

Jesus fucking Christ. Logan tossed that arm aside, and grabbed the other, repeating his scenting. Jake just stood there limply, unsure of what to do. Finally, he said, “Logan, do you want me to take my jacket off?”

Logan stilled for a moment, and then let go of Jake. But he stayed close.

With a steady hand, Jake unzipped his hoodie, and when he saw Logan expected more, he tugged it off, and slung it over his arm. “Now what?”

Logan was appraising Jake; his entire body. Slowly, his pupils became smaller, and the humanity returned. He seemed to shrink, just a little. “I still smell him on you.”

Jake didn’t bother asking who. “Well, I was gonna shower today, so—”

“Jake.” Logan’s lip had quirked, and he was just Logan again. Which… may not have been a good thing, because Logan was still kind of a cop. “What is your relationship with that guy? Do you know he’s a sentinel?”

Jake glanced beyond Logan, to see Christine watching avidly from the car. “I knew,” he said. “What’s going on?”

“You didn’t answer my first question.”
“I do some part time work for him,” Jake replied. “He owns a security firm…” The lie came out easily, and didn’t sound rehearsed—probably because he was making it up on the spot. He’d have to remember to mention this to Ferris later. “You know, if he needs a warm body to cover some graveyard shifts or something. Now that you know, why the hell are you following me? Also, you shouldn’t be driving like a maniac with Christine in the car.”

This apparently hadn’t occurred to Logan, because he glanced back at Christine like he’d forgotten she was even there. She ducked down a little when he did.

“You should treat you guide a little better,” Jake said.

“She’s not my guide.” Logan was staring down at him again, expression unreadable. “And I treat her exactly how any guide would be treated.”

“Yeah, I know.” Jake scuffed his shoe on the concrete. “Look, I’m actually here to grab a few things for your party, so I better get on it before Lisa worries.” He started angling himself towards the grocery store, but saw the way Logan tensed. “Okay?”

It was clearly not okay, but beyond that, Jake had no idea what Logan was thinking. He knew not to move—moving would set off something in Logan that was smoldering there, something that Jake could feel tingling against his skin like the slight brush of a feather. It made him want to touch Logan, to soothe this thing that was making Logan violent and sick inside, and most of it all, it scared him.

He couldn’t say anything; no repeated, snippy okay? He just stood there, and so did Logan.

A slight breeze grazed them, and Logan’s eyelids flickered as he must have caught onto some scent or another. He looked off into the distance. “That sentinel isn’t someone you should have any connection to.”

“I told you—”

“Yeah, but it doesn’t make any sense.” Logan exhaled slowly. “No one would hire you to guard anything, even as a temp.”

“Well, fuck you too,” Jake said, disbelief making his voice higher than he wanted. “Jesus.”

He expected an apology, but this time, unlike all the other times Logan had said something insulting, none came. Logan just looked… pained. “You shouldn’t be…” he said slowly. “Shouldn’t be the one doing that.”

“Doing what?”

Logan waved his hand. “That backpack the sentinel gave you, what’s in it?”

And fuck. Jake maybe took a slight step back, or twitched, or definitely fucked up in however way because Logan was all (everything, everything) focused on him and nothing else. “What do you think?” Jake barked. Wow, smooth.

Logan raised his eyebrows.

Jake said, “You dragged me out of the diner last night, remember? He was just giving my stuff back.” He nearly grinned at how nice that came out. It made sense! Good thing sentinels weren’t empathic, because he was smug as hell.
But did Logan believe him? He’d gone all silent again, as if considering Jake’s words, which was probably something that could be taken advantage of. Jake continued before Logan could speak. “Which answers your questions. Now mine: why are you following me? Why Ferris?”

That, apparently, was crossing the line. He could see—and feel—Logan shut down, but not before there was a spark of energy. “None of that is your concern,” Logan said roughly. “I’ll see you at home.” And, to Jake’s complete bafflement, he spun on his heel and strode back to his car, becoming the second person to walk away from Jake without a word of goodbye that day.

#

*Ferris.*

The word had slipped so casually, so carelessly, from Jake’s lips that Logan was inclined to believe his brother didn’t know that it wasn’t Bobby White’s real name. Which lead to the question: why wouldn’t Jake know White’s name if he worked for him? Also, why was Bobby White using an alias with Jake?

Like ink in water, anger seeped through him again. Most infuriating of all, he couldn’t quite pinpoint what he was mad at.

There were definite, obvious targets; Jake for lying, or for being a victim of some sort of scam. And Bobby White for… existing. Existing near Jake. That scent on Jake had been shocking. But not until now, as Logan thought about it, did he realize he’d never really smelled anyone on Jake before. So was it because White was a sentinel? It being that Logan was about to lose his shit.

“I’m hungry,” Christine said from the back of the car.

“We’ll stop for burgers.”

Silence, he assumed, meant approval. He was about to resume thinking about this whole mess when Christine spoke again. “Hell no, no more brooding. You’re giving me a headache.” He heard the creak of the car’s leather seats, and then Christine’s voice was closer. “You should have asked him more questions if this was gonna bother you all day on your birthday.”

“It doesn’t bother me.”

“I’m a guide. I know what bothers you.”

He glanced at her. “This is police business, not some…”


“What?”

The amusement died on her face. “Never mind,” she said finally. She started to move back but then Logan cocked his head.

“You and he talk sometimes right?”

“Uh, yeah, like a few times I guess.”

“How does he seem to you?”

A snort. “I don’t know, like an aging drummer of some midlife crisis garage band.”
Logan closed his eyes for a moment, and then opened them. “No, I mean, when you’re with him talking, how does he… feel?”

“Oh gross, are you asking me what I sensed from him?”

“You are a guide.”

“Yeah but not a creep. I’m not constantly monitoring people’s auras or whatever it is you think guides do.”

“I didn’t say anything about auras.” This was pointless and Logan was getting annoyed. The sun seemed particularly bright, and he could hear something screeching in the car’s engine that was probably nothing but felt like someone driving a spike through his eardrums. He pulled into the next burger joint they passed, and handed Christine some cash.

“You okay?” she asked.

He looked at her, and then tilted his head back, closing his eyes. He thought about the way Jake’s hoodie smelled… like nothing. Nothing was better than pain, though.

Again, fingers grazed along his neck. It felt wrong, made him nauseous, but it also muted all the external stimuli driving him crazy; the lesser of two evils.

“You’re really losing it,” he heard Christine say softly. She placed her palm on his forehead and shushed him like a mother shushed a child. He didn’t hate it.

What Christine said next was so quiet, soft and under her breath, that Logan wasn’t sure he was supposed to hear it.

“Jake’s a good guy. Like a really good guy.”

And then the car door opened and closed, and Logan was left alone.

#

Throughout the years, Jake had learned that the easiest way to hide things was—as the cliche went—in plain sight. It helped that he lived in such casual chaos; piles of un-recycled delivery boxes, half-empty drinks, clean and dirty laundry spread around the floor with only his nose to tell him which was which. Who would guess that the metal thermos tucked behind a stack of books on his dresser contained highly illegal guide-suppression pills?

With Jake, they’d probably just assume it was molding coffee mixed with scotch.

He unscrewed the cap. The thermos was empty, so he could fit all the pills inside (but not before popping one into his mouth). Almost instantly, a numbness spread throughout his body.

He placed the thermos back carefully behind the books.

After that, he did his usual get-home routine: took a shower, sprayed his body with several different types of things that were supposed to eliminate smells, and changed into fresh clothes. He, and many other people, were lucky that the suppression pills deactivated whatever it was in their scent that alerted sentinels, but he was still careful.

The mirror hanging from the back of his bedroom door framed a tired thirty-five year-old man. Vanity made him grateful that all the stress he lived with hadn’t brought on a single gray hair, and
maybe also pleased that aging had simply given him an almost sexy beat-up look, like a leather jacket that hadn't been taken care of, but was still worn with love.

He cocked a smile at that, knowing that he was the exact kind of person who would wear a jacket until it was hanging in tatters off his body. He needed to be more careful with his things.

He picked the room up a little bit, just in case someone from the party stumbled in, and then he went to the kitchen to organize all the random shit Lisa had asked him to buy for decorations.

Behind him, someone chuckled. Sam, his father. "Streamers, a bag of balloons, and candles. Jake, are we throwing a kid's party?"

Jake started peeling at the roll of blue streamers and sighed. "Come on, what was I supposed to get? How do you decorate a party for someone turning thirty, and the guests are his parents, brother, and friends from middle school?"

"Ah." Sam leaned against the counter, eyeing the decorations with amusement. "Well, and the sentinels."

"The sentinels?"

"Yeah, friends from the Center. They called us, actually, apparently my charming son hadn't bothered to tell them his birthday was today."

"So this is a surprise party." Logan would love that.

Sam laughed. "I guess, as much as you can surprise a sentinel."

Right. Logan would probably hear the muted breaths of every person hiding behind the couch. Jake dropped the roll and went for a glass of soda instead. "When's everyone showing up?" He had to rethink a few things if a bunch of sentinels were descending all at once.

"Lisa's got the details on that, but she's picking up the catered food right now." Sam had moved on to lining up paper plates, cups, and cutlery. He was wearing a Hawaiian shirt, which Jake found himself staring at for a moment, before blinking and taking a sip of his soda.

Sam was changing so rapidly, week to week, that Jake could barely keep up. It was jarring enough, when Jake would pop in maybe three times a year, and each time something would be drastically different: the sleek trousers replaced with jeans, the dress shoes with sneakers, and clean-shaven cheeks with a sprinkling of salt-and-pepper stubble. It was like Sam was evolving into retirement.

But Jake lived with them at the moment, and he couldn't believe it as Sam spent more time in the garden than consulting for the Center.

Now Sam was all about Logan; being proud of Logan, and worrying for Logan. Jake wasn't jealous about that of course, he'd never really fully seen Sam as his dad. More like he was the guy who'd donated an inordinate amount of money to Jake's cause, which in some ways made Jake gleeful, and in some ways, feel extremely guilty.

"And who knows," Sam was saying, "maybe if Logan spends some time with his sentinel friends, he'll feel a bit more optimistic about finding his guide."

"Why do you say that?"

Sam looked happy. "No reason," he said. "Don't worry about it."
Jake nearly snorted. Of course he was going to worry about it, not that he could say that to his sentinel father. He sniffed, glancing down at his drink. "Dad. What would you have done if Logan was a guide?"

"What?" The question had barely caught Sam's attention.

"A guide. Instead of a sentinel."

"I don't understand."

"A guide. You're a sentinel. Guides only show up in families with sentinel blood somewhere in the tree, so it could have happened."

Sam finally looked at him. "But that wouldn't happen—didn't happen."

*I'm just asking what you would do if it did...* Jake couldn't bring himself to say that aloud. He could already tell, from Sam's reaction, that such a possibility was incomprehensible to him. "Right," Jake said, and took another sip of soda.

He dropped the deep philosophical questions for the rest of the afternoon, helping his father decorate the house and choose which alcoholic beverages they'd serve from the small bar in the den.

That didn't mean he wasn't thinking, though. He had much more important things to worry about then the hypothetical (yet not) guide son Sam would treat like shit. Logan knew who Ferris was. Or did he? Why was he following Jake during work hours, and freaking out over Ferris being a sentinel?

It was giving Jake a headache.

Lisa showed up in the evening with two cakes, ice cream, and even more booze. She eyed the streamers Jake had bought without saying anything, and he felt only a little bit guilty. (He coulda used some direction!) Plus, he knew Logan didn't give a shit about decorations.

The normal guests came next, friends from middle school and thereabouts. Jake even recognized the two he'd driven to the skate park with Logan. They bum rushed the food and booze, nervousness oozing from their pores. Jake was confused for only a moment until he heard the whispers, and realized they were apprehensive about all the sentinels showing up soon.

He sighed. What did they have to be worried about, really?

Lisa and Sam were pleasant hosts, while Jake hung back like the black sheep he was, lurking near the sliding glass door to the backyard, so he could dip out for a smoke or two, if he needed that. He knew his own nervousness wouldn't end until the night was over, and all these sentinels that were supposedly coming were gone.

No luck. The doorbell rang, and what came next would be enough to give Jake nightmares.

Yes, sentinels.

But also guides.

They came paired, the guides trailing after each of their sentinels like a shadow. They were all wearing nice, casual party clothes—the men in sports jackets, and the women in cocktail dresses. All around Logan's age. All bonded.
Jake found he couldn't breathe. He darted, as subtly as he could, down the hallway to his room, where he doused himself in cologne. It would be so aggravating, that no sentinel would come near him, and therefore no guide either.

While he was checking himself out in the mirror, stupidly wondering if he was showing how scared he was, there was a collective shout. *Happy birthday, Logan!*

Well now he just felt awkward. He could hear the uptick in happy voices, people laughing, the tink-tink of ice in glasses. He could hear Logan. Thirty year-old Logan.

Steeling himself, Jake took a deep breath. And then he went back into the living room. People were clustered in groups by then, drinking and having fun. There was light jazz playing from somewhere, and the normal people had clearly relaxed. He could see Christine sitting on the couch with a couple of younger people looking artfully bored.

Jake stayed around the periphery. He knew he had to wish a happy birthday to Logan, so he waited until the right moment: Logan had broken away from a group of sentinels friends to go mix a drink for himself at the bar.

"Hey man," Jake said, sidling up to him.

Logan was looking at the drink he was making. "Hey."

"Sorry I missed the big… surprise, haha. I was in the bathroom." Jake internally grimaced and pushed onwards. "So, I wanted to say happy birthday."

"Thanks."

"About earlier—"

"Jake." Logan had turned to him, frowning. "What are you wearing? It smells disgusting."

"Oh uh, sorry, I put on some cologne."

"There's sentinels here."

"Yeah…" Jake backed off a step.

Logan downed the entire drink he'd just made, and that was...weird, but okay. He didn't look like he was particularly interested in talking to Jake any longer, so Jake inched away while other people took his place in Logan's space.

He found himself back by the sliding glass door, mostly for the fresh air and also because he didn't want to stand in any close proximity to another sentinel (or guide). But a few minutes later, someone came up. Christine.

"That better not be alcohol," Jake said, nodding at the cup in her hand.

She just smirked. "Man," she said. "What a day."

He wasn't going to take the bait. But, he realized, maybe she knew more than he did. "Why were you guys following me? And does he always drive like that?"

"Are you worried about me?"

Jake eyed her. She seemed to lose sober a bit, her smile fading. "He drives just fine. He only went
nights after he saw you with that sentinel guy."

He would have asked more, but the energy in the party had changed, and he looked up to see Sam and Lise gathering everyone into the living room, where a pile of presents was stacked up on the coffee table. Logan at in front of it, not looking particularly excited.

"Why is this party so weird," Christine muttered. "Like for a kid."

Jake replied. "They're just happy he's still alive."

He could she looked at him then, but he couldn't match her gaze. Not with what they both knew.

The guides were all hanging back… like butlers, in Jake's opinion. It was the sentinels who each, one at a time, handed their gift to Logan. Clapping and laughing surrounded the reveal of weird private ops gear and guns and weather-resistant clothes. Jake suddenly felt kinda stupid, thinking of what he'd gotten Logan.

Expressionless, Logan set aside a pair of specialty anti-UV sunglasses that must have cost a fortune. "Thanks, dad," he said to Sam, who was beaming.

"Those will… you could walk through the desert without zoning," Sam said.

Logan nodded, his smile looking so forced that Jake winced. There was a lull for a moment, as Logan considered the remaining presents. He dropped his hand flat on a box wrapped in newspaper. "Who is this from?"

"Uh." Jake cleared his throat. "Me."

Everyone looked at him, and he wanted to run outside to the backyard and smoke. But he didn't.

Logan unwrapped the present—a box about the size of large rubbermaid container—tearing the newspaper away to reveal what Jake had bought him. And then he paused.

He looked at Jake.

It was a brewing set. To make homemade beer. Jake chuckled awkwardly, his face hot, and took a step forward, sliding his hand on the top of the box, then pulling it open. "See, uh, you set it up in the garage and brew… you know, beer. I had these made too." He pulled out a beer bottle and showed Logan the label. There was an illustration of an alien holding a rifle. It was Logan's avatar from one of the games they used to play.

"Logan's Lager," Logan read from the label, voice oddly quiet.

"Yeah." Jake rubbed the back of his head, and set the bottle down. "I figured we could make brew it together, or something."

This was really going over like a lead balloon. He could feel the general bafflement from the other sentinels: he got him a home brew kit? And while the normals seemed a little less confused on that point, they were still quiet.

"Anyway, what's next," Jake said too loudly, laughing as he grabbed another gift and dropped it in Logan's lap before retreating to the hallway. He kept going. He went all the way to his room, and stood in the middle of it, breathing rapidly.

He sat on his bed, and dropped his face in his hands.
Stupid. Why had he imagined clearing out the garage with Logan, maybe setting up a garage sale so they could make some dough on all the old bicycles and sleds gathering dust in there. They'd use the cash to buy a good table to set their brew system on.

They'd fuck up a couple of times, but then there would be that first batch that tasted like crisp summer sunshine and they'd laugh as they both gulped it down.

Expectations. Jake should have known better than to let expectations creep into his heart.

His heart hurt.

The door creaked open, letting the sounds of the party rush in for a second before it closed. Jake looked up.

Logan stood there. He was holding one of the empty bottles with the stupid alien logo. He looked at it, just the corner of his mouth lifting a bit. "I notice you picked the game I always lost at."

Jake exhaled. And then grinned. "Wasn't that all of them?"

Only bits and pieces of Logan registered to him in that moment: the bunching of corded muscles at Logan's throat, the darkening of his eyes, and the surge of energy that charged his body. And then he was standing over Jake, fingers sliding under Jake's chin to grip his jaw. He bent down.

He kissed Jake.

Their lips parted for only a moment, the bottle dropped to the carpet, and then a flat palm was pushing Jake to his back, Logan rising over him, curving over him to kiss him again. And again, like Logan just had to make sure.

Jake's lips tingled. He raised his hand, brushed his knuckles along Logan's cheek.

He knew then, clearly and without a doubt: He couldn't fix this. This, he would not be able to fix. And so he would have to run.

Chapter End Notes

WOOO! A new chapter!

I have to say: I am so appreciating the comments and you readers. I was truly not expecting this story to have any kind of audience. I'm especially glad you guys are enjoying it ;)

Someone asked which Sentinel AUs I was inspired by, and the answer is most of them, but probably the most popular ones you're already aware of. I went on a Sentinel binge on Ao3 months ago, and this fic is the culmination of that. I really enjoyed the Hawaii 5-0 fics. I love that a whole canon AU has evolved from this random tv show (that I still have not watched.) Anyway, until next time :D
Chapter 11

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Classical music warbled from a speaker on the credenza as Karen turned to make eye contact with Ameet. Around them, one by one, every guide in the room looked at the hallway. Surprisingly or not (depending on who you asked), none of the sentinels present noticed this migratory shift in attention.

“Jesus,” Ameet said.

Karen very rarely had the benefit of time to think over her decisions. Of course, she rarely had to make decisions in her life. So later, when she thought about what happened that night, she wouldn’t hold the moment of hesitation against herself.

A very insistent violin solo was actually what weighed the scales, in the end. Her sentinel, a woman named Teresa who was three years older than Karen and always made sure she came first, flinched. Karen placed a gentle hand at the back of her neck and communicated what the younger guides liked to call “gentle vibes.”

Her trainer would have noticed immediately when Karen went too far. As it stood, every other guide in the room caught on after a few seconds. But seconds mattered. She didn’t know who would react, and what they would do. As the contestants on her favorite reality show often said, they weren’t there to make friends. Ameet was probably the closest to such a distinction but that was only because they were both lactose-intolerant.

Then it happened all at once.

An electric current zapped down Karen’s spine as the cumulative power of twenty or so guides enveloped the room in a haze of calm so powerful, she saw one sentinel fall asleep. She had to focus then, of course, but later she would think troubled thoughts about how easy the whole thing was, and why. Across the room, she saw something that made her heart stop.

Lisa, holding a tray of mini tacos. At least it wasn’t Logan’s dad.

Karen watched Lisa, who watched as Jake emerged from the hallway pale as a ghost with a backpack slung over his shoulder.

He stopped dead. What an interesting tableau he must have witnessed.

Karen was focused on her part, but she didn’t miss when the teenage guide Christine went to Jake and said go, go, go. Go.

He went.

#


“Jake.”
Logan blinked, the word dying on his tongue. The world tilted, and he steadied himself, palms heavy against the edge of Jake’s mattress. There was no one else in the room. But the door was open, and he stared out at the hallway expectantly, not quite sure why he felt so sure that he should wait. He had to wait.

No, that’s wrong. Why should he wait? He should follow. He should get up, which he did, and move quickly, which he did with utter purpose.

He slid past bodies of people who smelled familiar but whom were laughingly inconsequential, past his father who barely registered any more than the others, and strode out the door to the front walkway. He scanned the court road, cars lining every inch of free space.

Except for—right in front of the house—one spot.

Sam came up beside him, lightly gripping Logan’s shoulder. “Ready for cake?”

Logan spun around, shoved Sam aside, and briskly returned to Jake’s room, where he proceeded to rip the blankets from the bed and bring them to his face. One breath in, then another. Nothing.

Nothing.

Oh sure, there was laundry detergent, food crumbs, and the general pervasive din of outside smells transferred from body to sheet. But there was no Jake.

Logan smelled again, frustrated. He narrowed his eyes, letting the blankets fall as he realized— he had no particular scent attributed to Jake. Not like the ones he had for his mom and dad, or even his friends. Jake was more… the rubber of his sneakers, the smoky tobacco Logan hated, and greasy food.

That couldn’t be right. Logan pushed through memories. There was deodorant… Old Spice. Under that? Nothing.

“Dad,” he said, because he knew Sam now stood cautiously in the bedroom doorway. “When did Jake leave?”

“Leave?” Sam glanced at his watch, frowned, tapped it, then pulled his phone from his pocket. The frown deepened.

Something was off. Logan grabbed his own cell and stared unbelievingly at the screen.

“We’ve lost thirty minutes,” Sam said.

Only then did Logan fully catalog his own senses, analyzing how weak his scent and hearing was. But he did hear an uptick in rumbling from the living room, people speaking with confused tones. He followed Sam out to find the sentinels rubbing their faces and looking dazed—even the normals had slightly unfocused expressions. The guides were hovering around their sentinels.

Sam blew past them to the kitchen, where Logan heard him ask Lisa if she was okay and what happened (something happened).

“God,” one of Logan’s middle school friends said, “I feel like I just chugged a bottle of benadryl.”

There was a crash from the kitchen. He ran, and found Sam gripping the counter, his teeth showing in a snarl as Lisa stroked his back. “Dad—”
Another snarl came from Sam’s lips. Sweat was beading on his forehead. He jerked around and clasped Lisa in his arms, holding her so tightly Logan was afraid she wouldn’t be able to breathe. “Stay away,” Sam growled.

Things were moving too fast and Logan still felt like he was under water. He nodded just to show Sam he understood, but didn’t leave the kitchen either. Instead he spoke as if his father wasn’t caging his mother in a near-stranglehold. “Sentinel, give me a status.”

He saw Sam’s throat roll. A slight, shuddering exhale. “Home breached.”

“How so?”

“Twenty sentinels incapacitated, thirty minute gap unaccounted for.” Humanity was seeping back into Sam’s eyes as he loosened his hold. He was shaking. “Anything… anything could have happened to her,” he rasped. Then he let go completely, pushed his hair back, straightened his shirt, and he was Logan’s father again—a fortunate development considering the sudden outburst of yells from the living room.

Chaos would have been a good word for it. A group of normals huddled in one corner as several sentinels squared off against each other, standing protectively in front of their guides. Other sentinels were examining the perimeter while one alone in the backyard stood scenting the air.

These teams had been in war zones and yet Logan had never sensed so much confused rage as the miasma growing in his childhood living room. “Son,” Sam said beside him, “help me.”

He followed his father’s lead, forming a barrier between the normals and sentinels. That alone was enough to break some of the feral energy, as they recognized Sam’s authority and looked to him for direction. Logan found himself doing the same.

“Lisa,” Sam said, his voice still rough. “Call the Center and ask them to send a Sage team, also request one of the commanders.” He gestured at three sentinels. “Take your guides and go to my quiet room.” The three bristled, and then must have realized how close to the edge they were. Moments later, they retreated with their guides.

Sam sighed. Behind him, the normals were wide-eyed, some even crying. Logan could barely look at them, a sense of shame taking over. It was like strangers witnessing your family’s dirty laundry only this dirty laundry was a complete sentinel meltdown.

“Well then,” he muttered. “Happy birthday to me.”

The Sage team, which consisted of a center physician and three assistants, was interviewing the normals when Commander Dupont entered Logan’s house with his guide—that chubby man with the GPS collar. Once again, Logan was struck by the optics of their match; Dupont with his rigidly straight back and starched uniform, and the guide with his corduroy pants, soft belly, and wrinkled plaid shirt. The GPS collar almost seemed like a declaratory statement rather than a necessary precaution.

And, Logan wondered, how exactly had affable, gentle Dupont tightened that collar around his guide’s neck?

Logan definitely would do it while staring right into his guide’s eyes, so that he could see the exact moment his guide realized there was no more running; nowhere on Earth was far enough away to escape from him.
He would cinch the thing tight, activate the GPS, and then slip his finger underneath just to make sure there wasn’t a millimeter of extra space. He’d rub his thumb against his guide’s throat, feeling the pulse and shifting tendons and five o’clock shadow. Then he would bow his head just so, scent his guide’s hair—the cigarette smoke, the dollar store shampoo—and then he would finally kiss…

Logan barely registered the bile rising from his stomach before he vomited a wet pile of half-digested mini tacos and alcohol on his mother’s living room carpet.

With a shout, Sam was there, hand on his back as Logan doubled over. He heard calls for the doctor, questions, and murmured, concerned words.

Logan could sense everyone looking at him from the various spots the Sage team had ordered them to stand. With a grimace, he gripped his father’s arm for support, pulling himself up slightly only to catch Marcel Dupont’s appraising eyes.

Then Logan’s gaze slid to the collared guide. He reached out, stumbling forward.

With one swift, graceful movement, Dupont herded the guide behind him and stood squarely in front of Logan while seeming much more dangerous than he ever had before. “I don’t know what you’re experiencing right now, sentinel,” Dupont said. “But my guide can’t help you.”

“General,” Sam said while holding Logan steady. “Something is wrong with my son. The Center has to do something about this now.” His words were murky, barely penetrating the feverish heat of Logan’s brain. All he could do was keep staring at the collared guide, who was now staring back at him with brown, fathomless eyes.

_He won’t help me. Not can’t. He won’t._

_Who won’t?_

Logan slid to his knees. Hot tears rolled down his cheeks. Every inch of his body hurt; every bone, every vein, every blood cell.

Something deep in his core burned—not painfully, but with defiance. A dormant instinct, something without definition. It said _stand up, sentinel._ It incinerated the doubt. Most importantly, it made _everything_ clear. From the corner of Logan’s eye, he noticed Lisa dropping paper towels over his puke.

A weak chuckle bubbled up his raw throat.

Logan grasped his father’s outstretched hand for a second time, pulled himself up, and straightened his sports jacket. He smiled. “My apologies, General, I’m not sure what happened there. Perhaps a residual effect from whatever this event was.”

Pausing only briefly, Dupont then nodded. “Yes, this event…” His gaze shifted to his guide, who was staring off into space, and then back again. “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Fine,” Logan replied, even as he felt everyone watching him wipe the drying tears away. “Nothing worse than what I’ve already been through.” Beside him, Sam clasped Logan’s shoulder.

“Yes, I know the feeling well.” Dupont paused. “Alex? Are you getting anything?”

“Alex the guide’s short tone. Sure, Christine was rude, but she was a
teenager. This man was the guide of a top-brass sentinel.

Dupont spoke again. “Nothing at all?”

“Nothing you don’t already know about. An extremely powerful empathic force—” Alex had been glancing around, and Logan noted when he paused. He had made eye contact with a female guide. Obviously, he wasn’t well-trained in subterfuge because the expression of astonishment on his face was almost comical. But he did manage to school it to something neutral rather quickly. “Happened.”

“Happened?” Dupont said.

Alex swallowed and the sound was grating to Logan’s sensitive ears. “Uh. What I mean is… this sentinel—” He pointed at Logan. “—was whammied. By a guide.”

An assistant piped in. “All the sentinels were affected.”

“It must have been run-off from whoever whammied the sentinel.”

Now Sam spoke, his voice tight. “The sentinel is my son—Sentinel Marchiano to you. And would you stop saying whammied.”


Sam narrowed his eyes and once again Dupont stood protectively in front of his guide. “Sentinel, there’s no sugarcoating what happened to Logan. We may not like that phrase, but it’s pretty accurate.” He was smiling placatingly.

“I disagree—”

“Dad.” Logan, feeling steadier by the second, reached out to keep his father from jumping at Dupont. “What does whammied refer to?”

Alex snorted and all three looked at him. “It basically means a very powerful guide roofied you with his mind.”

The outbursts from his father, and subsequently from Dupont, were lost on Logan. He’d crossed his arms over his chest, deep in thought as Alex’s words fit quite neatly into the mental puzzle he was very close to solving.

But time had rapidly become the most important factor in his life, so some questions would have to go unanswered. For now.

“A powerful guide—” he said, interrupting a conversation that had devolved into Alex counting every time a guide had incapacitated a sentinel on his fingers as Sam’s face turned red. “We know the strength levels of every guide here. Are we saying one of them did it?”

“No,” Alex replied immediately. “No, I didn’t say that.” His jaw clenched, reluctance clear from the tense line of his shoulders. “This—this was a raw power. Whoever did that to you, they didn’t really have the precise control the Center trains guides to use.”

“An untrained guide?” Dupont said.

Alex nodded.

They all looked at the normals, who were staring back white-faced. But the Sage doctor, who was standing near them gave a subtle shake of his head.
“So that can’t be it,” Sam said. “Unless…”

Logan narrowed his eyes at his father.

“Unless this was a planned hit of some sort? In and out?”

Holding back a sound of irritation, Logan waited for someone to negate that, but Dupont and Alex just nodded along thoughtfully. This was taking too long.

“Where is Jake?” Logan asked.

“Jake?” Dupont responded, stepping to the side as Lisa brushed by him with a spray bottle and more paper towels, her eyes cast down.

“Jake, my half-brother.”

“He’s…” Sam’s eyebrows pinched as he glanced down the hallway.

“That’s where we came from when this happened, remember?” Logan said.

“Let me call him.” After Sam put the phone to his ear, they all heard the rings chiming from Jake’s room. Sam hung up. “Well maybe he took off. We can figure that out later, this is top priority. An unregistered guide just broke into a sentinel’s house and attacked you.” He finished the sentence by looking at Dupont. “What’s the plan?”

“Dad,” Logan cut over him. “Jake was with me before this happened.”

“What?”

“He was with me in his room.”

“So?” Sam turned to Dupont again.

“Dad. Jake isn’t here anymore.”

“Logan, I heard you the first time—”

Sam went completely silent. He was looking at Lisa’s back as she sprayed the carpet.

“Why don’t you show me Jake’s room, Logan,” Dupont said. “Alex will come with us. Sam, you stay here and supervise.”

There was barely more than a nod from Sam.

Logan followed General Dupont and Alex to his brother’s room. Now that he thought about it, he could remember slowly inspecting the gift Jake gave him, that brewing set with the personalized labels, and then walking, as if drawn by an invisible string, down the hallway. He could remember opening the door, and seeing Jake there. But that was it.

“How old is Jake?” Dupont asked, looking around at the mess.

“Thirty-five,” Logan replied flatly.

“Oh…” Dupont pushed some junk on the computer desk aside. “He lives here, then?”

“Off and on. Whenever he runs out of money,” Logan watched Dupont rifle through Jake’s clothes
and clenched his fists. He didn’t say anything, though.

“Marcel,” Alex said. He was standing at the closet, a can of aerosol deodorant in his hand.

“Is that it?”

Alex nodded.

Dupont scanned the room. “Such a mess.” His lips quirked into a smile. “No one could possibly tell what was out of place or not.”

*Out of place or not…*

Logan saw with new eyes. “Fucking idiot—” He kicked an open dresser drawer, the wood snapping.

“Calm down,” Dupont said softly. He went to Jake’s desk, fingers brushing over the surface. Then he glanced up to where Alex was standing in front of the closet. “Your brother isn’t an idiot, Logan, that’s for sure.”

“I didn’t mean him.”

Dupont frowned. “What you’re thinking… we don’t have proof of that, yet. He simply could have left during the party without you noticing.”

So they needed proof. Logan strode to the bed, ripped the sheets away and shoved them at Dupont. “What does that smell like to you?”

Dupont took the sheets, looking less than pleased, and sniffed. Then he sniffed again.

“Nothing, right?” Logan said. “Absolutely nothing. When was the last time a thirty-five year old loser seemed completely scentless?”

A barked laugh made him flinch. It was jarring and it was infuriating. It was the guide, Alex. “He played you,” he said. “He played your whole family under your own roof.”

“Alex,” Dupont snapped.

Alex just dropped the aerosol can with a shrug, and walked past them both, leaving the room. Glad he was gone (he was distracting Dupont, making him soft), Logan said, “We have to find him.”

“Yes.”

“We have to mobilize the Center and call in federal reinforcements.”

Dupont drew in a long breath. “Well, I don’t know about that. I’m sure the Center is equipped to track down one untrained guide.” He shook his head. “Thirty-five. Admittedly, that’s impressive. If he’s really a guide, there’s going to be a very happy, very tired sentinel out there when we catch this boy. That is, if the sentinel is still alive.” He looked at Logan then, his good humor fading as a question formed in his eyes.

Logan sighed. “Gives me some hope about finding my own guide someday, doesn’t it?”

“Ah? Yes, yes it does. We’re going to have to brief your father, and then we can mobilize a unit. I doubt, from what you’ve told me about Jake, that he could get very far. He’s probably just panicking.”
“I’d like to take lead on the hunt,” Logan said.

“Are you up for that?”

Logan grinned. “Without a doubt.”

They sent everyone home and Logan could have laughed at the sympathetic apologies about his ruined birthday. Instead he just nodded along and said *what can you do and there’s always next year, get some sleep.*

He, on the other hand, would not be sleeping.

After making sure an adequate team was being roused from their beds at the Center, he sat down with Sam in the living room while Dupont stood to the side. “We need to find Cheryl,” he said.

Sam had the kind of thousand yard stare Logan would expect from a newbie sentinel after his first mission. Clearly he would not be an asset during this particular mission, not that Logan had really expected him to. The question was whether he’d be an obstacle.

“Shouldn’t be too hard,” Logan continued. “She’s had the same residence with her new husband for years.”

“She must have known,” Sam finally said. “She knew.”

“Ah,” Dupont cut in. “Again, I’d like to caution you both. We don’t have proof that Jake is a guide.”

A chill ran down Logan’s spine. That was the first time he’d ever heard anyone say the words *Jake is a guide.* He wanted to think about every moment with Jake, question everything he’d thought then. But he couldn’t lose momentum. He also couldn’t snap at a commanding officer, so he chose to ignore Dupont instead. “Dad, of course she knew. That’s probably why she kept him from us for so long. We need to bring her here.”

“Heh,” Dupont cut in. “Again, I’d like to caution you both. We don’t have proof that Jake is a guide.”

A chill ran down Logan’s spine. That was the first time he’d ever heard anyone say the words *Jake is a guide.* He wanted to think about every moment with Jake, question everything he’d thought then. But he couldn’t lose momentum. He also couldn’t snap at a commanding officer, so he chose to ignore Dupont instead. “Dad, of course she knew. That’s probably why she kept him from us for so long. We need to bring her here.”

“Just wait a moment, Lo,” Sam said, waving his hand. “Just let me… You’re moving too fast.” He breathed deeply and exhaled. “Why would Jake keep this from us?”

He’d lowered his voice. That was the first thing Logan noted. He’d also leaned forward and looked straight into Logan’s eyes. His voice had carried the uneven tenor of *worry.* Worry meant protectiveness. Worry meant Sam would not be as ruthless about finding Jake as he would have for any other renegade guide. Worry meant he was useless.

Logan stood. “You’ll have to ask him.” He then snapped his fingers at Christine, who’d been shrinking off into a corner, and grabbed his coat from the rack by the door. “Work with the Center to bring Cheryl in, dad. I’m headed out so we can start this hunt.”

When he looked at his father, Sam barely met his eyes. “Call me with any new info.”

His father nodded.

Logan strode outside, Christine close behind. She said, “So we don’t get to sleep? It’s the middle of the night. Can’t some other sentinel find him? I feel like I could lay down here on the ground and sleep. Maybe freeze to death, if I’m lucky.”

Ignoring her, Logan unlocked his car, swung the backseat door open, and waited for her to jump in.
She scowled, but did so without any more bitching.

The roads were mostly empty by that time. Soon enough, however, there would be sentinels creeping out through alleys and abandoned buildings looking for Logan’s brother. He drove slowly, wanting to make sure his next move was the right one.

“Can we grab some coffee at least?” Christine said. There was a beat of silence. “Oh, so you’re not talking to me. That’s mature. Just so you know, I can feel you going haywire right now. We should probably pull over so I can dial you back a bit.”

Logan snorted.

“Fine, be an asshole. I was just trying to help.”

“You were lying.”

Logan didn’t need to be an empath to feel Christine’s sudden apprehension. “I’m not lying,” she said finally, apprehensively. “You’re all over the place.”

“I’m the most focused I’ve ever been.”

Another beat of silence, then, “Hey. Hey. We passed the Center! Hey, where—”

Logan pulled into the diner he’d dragged Logan from days before. He parked under a streetlamp, killed the engine, and then turned around in his seat. Christine stared at him with wide eyes. His lip curled up.

Then he lunged towards her as she screeched and clasped the collar of her jacket. Their faces were inches apart. “Listen to me, you little guide brat,” he growled. “While the Center is spinning its wheels, we’re going to find Jake. But first—you’re going to tell me every single thing you know about what my brother’s been doing for the past fifteen years.”

He pointed past her, at the diner. “Starting with who the fuck he was talking to in there.”

Chapter End Notes

What light through yonder window breaks? New chapter??

Hope you guys enjoyed ;) And I will try not to take so long next time. For those wondering, I MOVED across the country between last chapter and this. Fun times.
Chapter 12

Christine looked at the diner. "Who was he talking to?"

"The same guy we saw him with at the gas station. Bobby White."

Despite the fact that Logan had a tight clasp of her jacket collar, Christine seemed amazingly nonplussed. If she hadn't been tethered to the spot, she'd probably be lounging back against the seat with her arms crossed over her chest and smirking. "I have no idea who that is," she enunciated slowly. "And—"

"Don't say it." He pushed her back and turned around in his seat. If he'd even heard her mutter, "And even if I did, I wouldn't tell you," he might have legitimately—without remorse—tested the strength of that conviction. And that scared Logan.

He didn't care. The not caring felt manufactured, as if he was drugged into apathy. Well, not apathy. He was burning. He had one need, one thing he desired, and it was pushing out all other rational thoughts. Any rational thoughts. He turned around again. "You may not know who Bobby White is, or why he was talking to Jake, but you sure as hell know more than you're letting on."

She pursed her lips, staring at him with a sideways glance.

"You think you're helping him, and I don't quite understand why you'd want to, but you're really not. The sooner I—we, the Center, have Jake, the better."

"For who?"

Logan exhaled with exasperation. "For who? Are you serious?"

Her eyebrows pushed together, her lip curling with some kind of amusement. "...Are you?" She leaned forward, inspecting him. "You realize if Jake was taken in by the Center, his life would be totally fucked."

"Why?"

"He's been—" She'd waved her hand out, as if to indicate some wide-spread something that Jake had done, and clearly Logan should have known about it. Too bad that she'd stopped herself at the last second.

"He's been what?"

She sat back again, her eyes finding the passenger window. "You know, like, hiding. And stuff."

So she had confirmed it, not that Logan needed confirmation. But he did enjoy the look of sudden realization on her face. "Yes, and he'll have to face the consequences of that decision. But it doesn't mean he shouldn't surrender himself to the Center. He's just wasting time." Logan turned the car on. "And I'd find him eventually."

oOo

Maybe letting Christine think that Logan had given up finding answers from her was the wisest action, after all. He'd noticed in the rearview mirror how, after several minutes of driving, she'd slipped a cell phone out of her pocket and had started typing furiously. He'd relieve her of the phone
The Center was predictably teeming with activity when they arrived. As promised, Dupont had arranged a fully-trained guide detection team and designated a temporary search HQ from which to coordinate nationwide efforts.

Logan only listened to the briefing with half an ear. He was confident in the Center's ability to hunt a guide down, but he was slightly irritated by the level of interest from inconsequential parties—noting a few scientists had set up camp in one corner of the room. Dupont seemed to notice his point of focus.

"Someone let on that Jake is thirty-five," he said. "Which, as you might imagine, has made some waves. And bruised some egos."

Logan glanced at him, frowning.

"They have always declared that no guide could possibly go undetected in our country past the age of thirty." Dupont continued, nodding at the scientist Center flacks. "Clearly they were wrong. So they're going to be a pain in the ass trying to save face."

Again, Logan was losing interest. They had nothing to do with the search. He was about to move back to the topic on hand, when Dupont said something that truly made his blood run cold.

"They'll want to take him before the training happens." Dupont sighed. "Who knows how long it would be until Jake saw the light of day again."

"What do you mean?"

"This is just a satellite Center, as you know. The main research laboratories are—"

Logan tuned him out. He'd grasped the main factor: Once Jake was apprehended by the Center, he would be taken from Logan and hidden somewhere deep in the bowels of the Center machine.

"Fuck," Logan muttered.

Dupont paused. "I'm sorry," he said after a moment. "I was speaking as if Jake were a stranger. He's your brother."

"I know." Logan surveyed the scientists again. "Do they hope to find his sentinel?"

"I think they've assumed the sentinel is probably lost to a zone by this point."

"Tragic." Logan spun on his heel and went to his office a few hallways and doors down from the temporary search HQ. He locked the door behind him, closing off all extraneous sound, and sank in his chair, hands clenching over the ends of the armrests. He barely had a moment to order his thoughts before there was a knock at the door.

It was a lower-level sentinel from his crime squad holding a manilla envelope. "More intel on Bobby White," he said. "I know it's not top priority right now, but—"

Logan held his hand out, suddenly fully alert again. The envelope was satisfyingly thick, but Logan only got through the first page of information before his eyes widened. "Leave," he snapped.

"Yes, sir."

The door closed again.
Logan’s hand was shaking, the paper bowing under his grip. It was all handwritten notes from some nameless analyst, things Logan had already known; Bobby White’s associates, activities, aliases... but not dates. He’d never really noticed the dates before.

They all matched with moments of time Logan had memorized to the second.

You fucking remember every year he visited. And how long he stayed. And when he left.

Idiot.

One coincidence could be explained, even two maybe. But nothing like this. Logan quickly settled in to read every piece of paper in the stack, and then he read them again. He wouldn't rush; he would absorb everything, because somewhere in that scrawled handwriting could be the one clue he needed.

And then he saw it. Just a hint, just a whisper—a loose end, but it was enough.

Logan picked up the phone. His first call was to the National Park service, but he set the receiver back in the cradle before he finished dialing.

Those Center scientists… they could be a problem.

oOo

After tasking a few of his subordinates with research they thought had to do with Bobby White, and Bobby White only, Logan headed down to the lower levels of the Center, past server rooms and other miscellaneous departments until he reached the archival wing.

He only knew about it because of a dumb teen sentinel trainee game—scent your way through the stacks, through the smells of old paper and dust, to find the book most borrowed by guide trainees, something to do with conflict resolution. He’d found it within minutes, although the smell of all those guides’ lingering scents had given him a headache.

Most of the information in the archival wing had been digitally stored, anyway. But to Logan's chagrin, he'd realized the Center was probably tracking every entry read on their internal wiki. For once, old, moldy paper was his friend.

He used the ancient catalog, index card after index card bound by a metal ring, until he found what he was looking for, and then he stalked through the bookcases, scanning every title while trying not to hyperfocus on the fabric grains of the covers.

Aberrational Matches, was all the title said, and it wasn't a book. Case files had been laminated, hole-punched, and then collected in a plastic binder. Logan flipped through them, frowning.


G: Deaf, S: Won't accept substitutes guides.


And so on. Surmountable problems. Nothing like…

Logan paused. He should have heard it earlier, heard the door to the archive room opening, but only now did he realized someone was approaching. In fact, they were already there.

Alex turned the corner of the stack, some books held close to his chest. He didn’t look surprised to
see Logan, but he did look irritated. "Huh," he said. "A sentinel who reads."

Shutting the binder, Logan considered him. There was a small green light on the GPS collar that glowed in the darkness of the stacks, and for a moment Logan almost zoned on it, but then Alex snapped his fingers.

"Thank you," Logan said.

Alex's eyebrows rose over the frames of his glasses at that. And then his gaze moved down to the binder in Logan's hands. "Aberrational—"

"Should you be in here," Logan asked, sliding the binder back on the shelf. "Kinda seems like you're never with Dupont at all."

"He'll live." Alex took a step closer, and so Logan did too, blocking the binder he'd been looking at from view. There was a pause, and then Alex said, "You know, it may be strange that Jake has avoided detection for long, but I doubt he's aberrational in any way…"

Was Alex trying to comfort him?

"I just mean, if you're worried about him having to adjust to being a sentinel's guide, well, that sentinel has probably zoned irreparably by now if they're even alive."

"I'm not worried." Of all the things to think Logan cared about, why would Alex assume it was Jake's ability to adjust?

"Ah. I just figured, with him being your brother…” Logan continued to stare dubiously at Alex, who nodded. "Right, but why would that matter?" He sighed. "You must really feel for his sentinel, considering your situation."

Logan didn't have time for this, nor did he want to be near Alex, who's presence irritated him inexplicably. He shuffled his feet, ready to dismiss the guide, when there was a low sound of realization. Alex's eyes were wide. "You think he's your guide."

There was nothing to be said, so Logan remained silent.

"Why haven't you mentioned this to Marcel?"

Shit.

"If he knew, he could help you, he could make sure the Center doesn't send Jake off to some basement lab for the rest of his life!" Alex nearly dropped his books, swinging an arm out. "Don't you want your guide? Don't you want to keep your brother from that? Why keep it secret? It's not like you want to fuck him—"

Although Logan would always have the ability to hear a pin drop no matter the circumstance, he figured this situation would have been a perfect illustration of the phrase. Alex wasn't even breathing. But then he did. "You do want to fuck him."

There was a barked laugh from the guide. "Of course you do." His tone had turned bitter, as if Logan had confirmed something he'd always suspected. "And—" Alex glanced again at the binder on the shelf. "You want to know if the Center would stop you from doing it."

"Like they even could," Logan drawled. Alex smirked. Logan wanted to wipe that expression right off the guide's face, but he also wanted to know what was so amusing about this situation. "Or
would," he continued. "When they find out Jake is my…"

He'd never said it out loud, not in the past few hours that he knew the truth.

"Your guide." Alex had sobered, but now whatever he was thinking was a total mystery, his eyes shadowed. "Have you really considered what this means?"

Logan stared uncomprehendingly.

"I know you're all wrapped up in finding your guide, but think about it clearly—he's your brother. Jake."

Right. Jake. His guide. His. Logan was growing irritated with Alex's useless babbling. "What exactly am I supposed to be considering?"

"That maybe you should let him go? No, that's never crossed your mind. Okay, have you really thought past just I want to fuck him? Have you considered what it would be like to actually take his clothes off, to lay naked with him, and be inside of him? Your brother?"

Maybe there was a moment of hesitation, but it was drowned in the sudden white-hot rush of blood coursing through Logan's system. "You fucking guide," he said mockingly. "You realize Dupont spoils you, right? The way he lets you prance around the Center as if there were no rules and no consequences—he humors you, God knows why." He took a step closer to Alex, who had gone stark white. "I'm going to drench Jake in cum. He'll go blind from all the sweat and tears."

Alex was shaking slightly when he replied, "B-big words."

"Are they?" Logan loomed over him. "You're a guide. You can tell when I'm lying."

Alex stepped back.

"You say he's my brother," Logan continued. "But that's debatable. My family is made of sentinels with unequaled power and the guides who support them with obedience. Jake is a loser. In fact, he won't be good for anything but fucking. If that."

Alex jerked as if slapped.

"Sound familiar?" Logan said.

"You're…" Alex was looking at the ground, his bottom lip trembling. "You're right. I am lucky to have Dupont." He swallowed, and then met Logan's gaze, his eyes red. "Don't start calculating the risk in letting me walk away from here, I'm not going to expose your fucked up secret."

"Why not?"

"Because getting plowed by his own brother is still better than whatever the Center has planned."

"That's ridiculous." Logan really didn't have time for another guide's whiny rant about how the Center treated them, as if well-maintained beds, exceptional nutrition, and a career for life were somehow a burden. He did, however, need Alex to keep his secret for now. "Even so, I do agree that their… input is unneeded at this point."

"Yeah, their input." Alex shifted the books in his arms. "Well, be sure to find him before they do."

"I'm working on it." At that moment, his pocket buzzed lightly. He pulled his phone out to see a text from Dupont and went completely still.
"Oh no," Alex said, voice laced with wry disdain. "Too late?"

oOo

Logan could sense the rise of activity before he even entered the temp command center. People were shouting across the room, and then immediately chastised—there was no reason to yell when sentinels were present. Despite his growing migraine, he desperately tried to sift through the noise for any information that would give him a head start.

Dupont waved him down, headphones pressed to one ear. He was about to speak when his jaw twitched. "You were with Alex?"

"Just passed each other in the hall," Logan replied blandly.

Dupont was only fazed for a second more before nodding as he returned his attention to whatever was being said through the headphones. "He dumped his car," he said after a moment.

Logan relaxed. So Jake dumped the old beater, that didn't mean much. "Where?"

"Southside—way past the airport. Doesn't make much sense if he's trying to flee the country."

"He's probably not even thinking that far ahead." For all they knew, Jake had stopped at the closest burger joint to wait things out. He wasn't exactly an international spy. Logan checked his watch. "Time frame?"

"The sentinel on the scene clocks it at about an hour ago..."

Logan glanced up at Dupont, who had trailed off. He was watching Logan closely. "What?"

"Your pulse is incredibly steady."

The slight, slow curve of his lip was impossible to suppress. *You're always at your best right before the hunt,* Reshmi would often say during his training. The clarity he was experiencing was almost foreign for how long he'd been lost in excruciating brain fog. "We're closing in," he said, his teeth aching, skin vibrating.

Right on queue, there was a flurry of sounds, phones ringing and texts coming in. "They've located him," Logan said without having to be told. He considered several things in that moment—would he have time to go now and capture Jake before the Center closed in, would it be advantageous to tell Dupont, whom he trusted, the truth, and whether Jake would struggle the first time Logan penetrated him.

"They have a lead," Dupont answered, signalling Logan to follow. "We're taking a team out now, although this should be pretty cut and dry."

Logan suited up with the rest of the team, donning tactical gear he'd worn in home situations, and abroad, but never to hunt down his video game-loving brother who preferred sausage on pizza over pepperoni. He imagined all the times he could have just reached across the couch and pinned Jake down, who was too laden with greasy food to fight back.

And finally Logan would be able to smell Jake; the scent that he'd caught as a teenager on the Center's jogging track, the scent that had driven him over the edge and would never come back to him until now.

The scent Jake had hidden from him, intentionally.
Four unmarked SUVs left the center, with Logan in the first and Dupont sitting beside him, talking on his cell. It was now or never.

"Sir," Logan said softly. Dupont pulled the phone away and looked at him. "I'd like to have the opportunity to bring Jake in before you send the team."

"You think he'll come with you."

"Yes. He's probably panicking at this point."

"Well, you certainly know him better than we do. Fine, sentinel, you'll take lead unless something goes sideways."

They pulled into a section of town that consisted mostly of warehouses and abandoned bars that didn't have the right kind of parking and the right kind of customers to stay afloat. The city pier was only a few blocks away. "Think he was hoping to get on a ship?" Dupont asked.

Logan just made a sound of agreement. He was scanning the warehouse windows, seeing nothing but spider web-thin cracks and dust. He dug his nails into the fake leather of the car seat, growing impatient with himself, because he should be able to sense Jake. He was a failure.

"Sentinel?"

Dupont watched him. Logan fought the darkness twisting in his gut; tried to school his expression into something less hostile. But he couldn't shake the feeling that Dupont, and all these other people in these SUVs were merely in his way. He wanted to get out of the car and stalk these streets without obstacles like laws and procedures.

They'd be much more than merely an obstacle once he did find Jake, anyway.

"Keep the men back until I signal," Logan said, breaking decorum by giving Dupont an order, but this seemed to slip under the radar—Dupont just nodded before reaching across Logan and pushing the car door open.

"Remember," Dupont said," He's just a civilian."

oOo

On foot, he distanced himself from the waiting agents while appearing as casual as possible. He was wrong about how popular this area was (or wasn't). Within seconds of departing from the soundproofed Center SUV, he could hear a rave pounding somewhere in the distance; the multi-colored lights reflecting up against the clouds.

The first people he saw were several young women wearing neon fur-covered boots and polyurethane bikinis, their hair striped with glitter. They walked quickly, their blood pumping and hearts racing with excitement—he could sense it all. When they caught sight of him, one wolf-whistled and the rest joined in, waving as they moved past him across the street.

He gritted his teeth, more than happy to get farther away from the grating sounds he associated with pain, not a good time. Even the bright greens and oranges of those girls' costumes had made his eye twitch.

It took a moment for Logan to realize he was letting the rave direct his movements more than any instinct leading him towards Jake. "For fuck's sake," he muttered. Rookie move.
He stopped walking. He forced his senses to expand; to not hyperfocus on the rave or the speck of dirt on a window. He needed to feel everything.

Jake had been wearing a hoodie and jeans that evening. It was a black hoodie from some concert with the band's tour dates listed on the back. Logan had bought a few of their songs once, and now they were on his regular workout rotation, although he had to use the Center-provided calibrated MP3 player to listen to them comfortably.

That hoodie smelled like cigarette smoke. Of course, this whole damn neighborhood did too.

Logan kept walking.

The Center surmised Jake was there because of the location and where they'd found his car. A sentinel had also called in saying he'd caught a scent trail that matched Logan's house, although it had tapered off. Logan wondered if he was on a fool's errand.

What if they were lying to him? What if they knew where Jake was, and it was not here. They were taking him now and Logan would never see him again.

He smelled blood. It was his own, he realized—he'd gripped his palms too deeply.

A sudden thought blared in his mind: blood.

He brought his palm to his nose, and breathed in. He looked up at the sky, his lip curling. Spinning around, he leapt into a complete sprint, heading back the way he came as he dug high grade earplugs from one of his belt pockets.

The building was a converted warehouse with a roof bar and searchlights powerful enough to cast beams through the night sky. Logan could feel the strength of the speakers, as vibrating air practically singed the skin of his cheeks. He grabbed his Center badge, flashing it at the bouncer without stopping.

No one at the rave seemed to second guess Logan's tactical outfit as he waded through undulating crowds of people who all stank, determined to find the proverbial needle in a haystack. A siren call moved him, made his blood sing and made all the vibrations and smells and sights dim.

It was easy to shove people out of the way—they were too high to care. Logan didn't know where he was headed, but he was on a trail that glowed almost as brightly as the neon colors around him.

Suddenly, he broke free of the crowd near the opposite side of the warehouse, emerging at the edge of a line of table booths.

And there Jake was.

Hunched over at a booth, alone, his face was lit by a cell phone screen. He was frowning.

After all these years… he would finally have to explain what the fuck he was thinking.

Logan walked over to the booth and slid in, sitting mere inches from Jake, who dropped the phone, eyes wide. He was actually surprised Logan had found him. Fucking hilarious. Logan nonchalantly laid one arm on the booth behind Jake, leaning in to smirk at him. "Game over," he said.

A beat passed, with Logan looking into Jake's brown eyes, and his smirk died a little as he thought how nice it would be if Jake just leaned in too, closed that middle distance and relaxed against Logan's chest. If he would just whisper an apology, everything could be forgiven.
Unthinkingly, Logan curled a finger through a scrap of Jake's hair.

"Stop running," he shouted. "You've got to be out of cash by now."

Jake said nothing. Logan slid his hand down, first cupping the back of Jake's head, then his jaw, and then held his chin, rubbing his lower lip with a thumb.

"Amazing." Logan said mostly to himself. There had always been a persistent ache in his bones, the kind that twinged and pinched as he was trying to fall asleep every night, and now it eased. Its absence took his breath away. "The Center has my best interest in mind," he said. "They won't let anything detrimental happen to my guide."

Jake's eyes flashed. Logan felt a surge through his skin. He gripped Jake's jaw more tightly, so he couldn't pull away. "They'll take your family history into account, and see that you've kept close, even if you've kept your status secret."

After a beat, there was a slow, wry smile from his older brother. "You think that's all I've done."

Logan's eyebrows furrowed. Had he heard right through the earplugs?

He didn't get the chance to ask. Jake moved quickly, pulling something up from below the table—a small aerosol can, which he sprayed at Logan's face.

It was something weak, something any normal person could have ignored, like lemon water, but it was enough to send Logan reeling. He slammed his palm on the table, stumbling to his feet as he watched Jake dart out of the booth's opposite side.

"Why are you doing this to yourself?" Logan yelled, jumping right over the table and lunging into the crowd after his brother. He was uncontrollably furious, he knew, but Jake was running away from him, his sentinel.

They got midway through the crowd, shoving people out of the way, before Logan caught Jake's arm and jerked him back in a Center-trained hold, pulling him almost off the ground. "Stop," he said into Jake's ear, with a bicep pressed tightly over his chest. "It's over."

Jake gripped his arms, straining. It made Logan laugh. "Stop before you hurt yourself," he jeered, loving the feeling of this loser's weight trapped in his hold. He almost wanted Jake to struggle more just so he could really show how useless it would be, and to exert his strength over Jake, wrestling him into submission.

He laughed with the pure euphoria of it.

Jake went slack. "Good boy," Logan said, his tone just a bit mocking.

Then the hammer fell.

His brain spasmed, there was no other way to describe it—except for unmitigated pain. He gasped, the wind knocked out of him, and fell backwards, barely hanging onto Jake, who knocked Logan's hand away as he tripped forward. Logan hit the floor with a wince, pushing on his elbow just in time to see Jake rise.

Flashing lights of purple and green shrouded him as thunderous music beat around the pair, Jake's spine straightening, hands folding into fists as he stared down at Logan. People pulled away, excited for a fight. Logan was frozen. Never before had he considered that Jake might be able to give him one.
As their eyes met, and Logan saw the unflinching determination—the lack of fear—in Jake's eyes; saw the teenage boy he'd idolized, he realized he really was frozen. He could barely reach a hand out.

He saw Jake smirk. He saw him mouth, "Good boy," and then he watched impotently as Jake, his guide, walked away unbothered.

Logan was also hard as fuck.

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