Kas and Angel At Sentinel School

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Summary

This fic picks up shortly after the previous Kas and Angel story, and continues their adventures at Army Sentinel School. OC-centric.

Notes

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The Story

“Goodbye, Uncle Kas! Chua, Tio Angelito! Bye!”

Angel leaned over the back seat of the cab, waving at the bevy of small nieces who were waving at him and calling out their good-bYES. Finally, when the cab turned a corner, he turned around and sat properly in his seat, with a sigh.

“You okay?” Kas asked him.

“Uh-huh. It was a good visit.”

It was. Kas had thought that Angel was the sort of Sentinel who needed a lot of help controlling his senses, and when they first arrived, the way his mother and grandmother and aunts had fussed over him did nothing to dispel that impression. They were always offering him choice tidbits of food, making sure he was sitting in the most comfortable place, that he wasn’t in a draft, that the music wasn’t too loud. But he handled every sensory challenge with ease, from the incredibly spicy meals his mother and grandmother cooked to the Christmas concert at his nieces’ elementary school. He even volunteered to escort two teenage cousins to a basketball game at his old high school, where the sheer volume of cheering every time one of the home team players made a basket was enough to give Kas a headache.

It must have been the high stress levels of basic training that kept his hearing and eyesight painfully acute, and his touch, smell, and taste so muffled he dropped things and could barely eat. At home, he was comfortable and happy, and his dials were rock steady. His family fussed over him because they loved him, and because as the only boy he was frankly spoiled.

The family home was a building where his grandparents and his mother shared a large, ground-floor apartment, and the aunts, cousins, and others (whose exact relationship to Angel Kas never quite figured out) lived on the upper floors. Everyone drifted in and out of each other’s apartments constantly, and while Kas was sometimes a little overwhelmed by the chaos, Angel happily bounced from one apartment to the next, reading a story to this young niece, admiring that cousin’s new dress, accepting a small glass of rum or a demitasse of wickedly strong coffee from one uncle or another, and always, constantly, being pulled into kitchens to be cuddled and fed sandwiches or pastries.

After being accused by the Sentinel Recruitment Board liaison officer and the Sentinel medicine expert at Basic Training of manipulating Angel into Bonding with him, Kas had been more than a little worried about what Angel’s family would make of him and of his motivations for Bonding with Angel. But to Angel’s family, there was nothing more natural or unsurprising than that Kas would want to spend the rest of his life loving and taking care of their precious little prince.

But now the visit was over, and they were on their way to the airport to board a plane for Sentinel School, located at Fort Lewis in Washington state. Sentinel School ought to be better for Angel than Basic had been—they were used to Sentinels there, anyway—but Kas had no idea what to expect, no idea what to prepare Angel for.

He had talked with Mrs. Temas about Basic, not admitting quite how bad it had been, but explaining that Angel hadn’t eaten or slept well at all, and she had helped him pack up some things to make him feel more at home—his favorite pillow and blanket, some of his own pajamas, cassettes of music, the beeswax devotional candles that she said he’d always liked the smell of, cedar sachets to put in his drawers and with his linens. Angel’s grandmother was a fanatic about moths, and while Angel professed not to care one way or the other about the smell of cedar, Kas thought it would remind him of home. He had no idea, though, if Angel would be allowed to use any of these things. Plenty of active-duty Sentinels were fussy about their bedding and food, requiring their Guides to track down
all sorts of non-regulation items for their comfort, but nothing like that was allowed at Basic or in Guide training, so Kas just didn’t know about Sentinel School.

Angel said he was usually all right on planes, and had been fine on the shorter flight from Fort Benning to Miami, but halfway through the flight to Washington, he began complaining that the engine noise bothered him, and when an infant seated a few rows up started crying, Angel barricaded himself in the bathroom and refused to come out. When he was trying to persuade Angel to, if not actually come out, at least let Kas in, the flight attendant frostily informed him that, “Only one passenger at a time is permitted in the lavatories, sir.”

She melted away, though, when he snapped, “I’m his Guide.”

By the time Kas coaxed Angel back to his seat, they had missed the meal service, not that Angel would have eaten anything, anyway. Kas decided that once they landed, he’d try to get Angel to eat something at the airport before getting a cab to the Army base.

His plans were foiled, however, by an SRB liaison officer waiting for them at the gate. Kas saluted him sharply, Angel a moment later after Kas elbowed him. The liaison returned his salute, saying, “Sentinel Temas. How was the flight?”

“Hellish,” Angel said, looking up at Kas for help. “Uh, sir.”

The liaison took no notice, saying, “Good, very good. The car is this way.”

Kas eventually had to speak up to say that they had checked baggage, which earned him a glare from the liaison officer, but it was evident that Angel wasn’t going to mention it.

Throughout the process of retrieving the bags and going to the car, the liaison officer stayed too close to them to allow for any private conversation. Kas had explained to Angel about the protocol that would be expected between a Sentinel and Guide in public, but had planned on a refresher lesson on the way to the base. Now that was impossible, and Angel kept giving him these looks, clearly confused by Kas’s quiet and stiff behavior.

According to G-TAC training, Guides were expected to be seen and not heard, to speak only when directly addressed by their Sentinels, barring of course any time the Sentinel was in sensory distress. Guides most emphatically were not part of any conversation their Sentinel happened to be having with anyone else. How closely these rules were followed in the field depended on the individual Sentinel’s preferences, but liaison officers practically fetishized them. Since they were already in hot water for Bonding before Angel’s Sentinel School, it was inarguably in their best interest to toe the line now.

Fortunately, the staff car that was waiting for them had a driver, so Kas and Angel were both in the back seat, while the liaison officer sat in the front. They still couldn’t talk, but Angel huddled close to him and squeezed his hand for reassurance.

After passing security and entering the base, they were driven past the residential section, to a small, two-story building. Kas held the door while Angel got out of the car, then went around to the trunk to deal with the luggage. As he was trying to figure out how he’d carry all of it—it was bad enough that Angel had been carrying his own bag when they got off the plane—a Guide in G-TAC uniform came out of the building and started helping him with it.

“Thanks,” Kas said. “I didn’t think I had enough hands for all—”

The other Guide gave him a sharp, disapproving look, like he’d just farted in church. Kas shut up.
“The training day begins tomorrow at 0800, Sentinel,” the liaison officer was saying. “Guide Collins will see that you’re settled.”

Collins saluted. He shouldn’t have, technically—Angel was still a private and the Guide was a corporal—but Kas wasn’t too surprised that that was how they wanted to play it. Angel stood there, clearly waiting for Collins to say or do something else. Collins, on the other hand, was waiting for Angel to acknowledge him. Finally, when it was clear that Angel wasn’t going to figure out what he was supposed to do, and Collins was prepared to wait all night, Kas said, “Collins, my Sentinel is very tired.”

Kas wasn’t sure if Collins would have responded to that or just kept pretending Kas didn’t exist, but Angel said, “Oh. Yeah. Um, tired.”

And finally Collins said, “Your quarters are this way, Sentinel,” and showed them inside. Angel’s quarters were on the second floor, a small room furnished with a single bed, desk, dresser, and wardrobe, the bed already made up in correct military style.

“The schedule on your desk explains where to report for meals and training. Is there anything else you require, Sentinel?”

“Um.” Angel was looking around. “Where’s Kas supposed to sleep?”

“The Guide quarters are downstairs, if you prefer not to have him with you.”

“Oh. Okay. Thanks.”

Collins saluted again and left.

“That wasn’t so bad,” Kas said, putting the luggage on the bed. “Looks like they’re going to leave us alone to get comfortable.”

Angel still looked pretty shaken, but nodded bravely. “Yeah. It’s, um. You will stay with me, right?”

“Yeah, of course.” They were probably expecting Kas to sleep on the floor, but Angel liked sharing beds with him, so they’d be fine. As he began unpacking Angel’s things, he found a schedule on the desk. Headed, “Schedule to be followed on all training days (Monday-Saturday) unless otherwise instructed,” it showed breakfast at 0700, then the beginning of training at 0800. The training day was broken into two blocks before lunch and two after, finishing up at about 1700, but the schedule didn’t specify what would be happening in the different blocks, just what rooms they were in. Dinner was scheduled for 1830 which—he checked his watch—was coming up soon. Everything on the schedule was listed by room number with no mention of buildings, so Kas guessed that everything would be conducted in the building they were already in. He passed it to Angel, saying, “Here, have a look at this.”

Angel studied it carefully as Kas put their gear away. As he worked, he observed that the room was as optimized for Sentinel comfort as anything he’d ever seen. It had thick, sound-muffling walls and the ventilation system was—he checked—filtered, and separate from the ventilation in the small attached bathroom. The overhead lighting was an incandescent bulb on a dimmer switch, not the florescent tubes usually found in Army buildings, and there were separate lamps on the desk and by the bed. It was all very nice, but Kas wondered why the Army went to so much trouble here, when at Basic the Sentinels were expected to put up with the same rough conditions as everyone else, and usually did just fine. The room could have been set up especially for Angel, after all the trouble he’d had, but nothing in it looked particularly new.
“Do you suppose we’re supposed to just go to dinner, or will someone come get us?” Angel asked.

“I’m not sure,” Kas admitted. At Basic and in Guide training, you were escorted everywhere, but in most other settings, soldiers were considered capable of getting themselves to the chow hall without supervision. “Is there anyone else around?”

“Hm? Oh!” Angel took his hand and linked up. Kas felt his hearing dial edge upward. After a moment he said, “Some people downstairs. Nobody on this floor at all.”

Kas glanced at the schedule again. Meals were listed in room 103, which had to be downstairs. “Okay, let’s see if we can find it.” He wasn’t entirely sure that was right, but if they were being set up to make mistakes and get in trouble for it, like in Basic, there was no getting around it, and if they weren’t, somebody would still tell them if they were supposed to be doing things differently.

But they didn’t see anyone on the way to 103, and when they got there, several Sentinels and some liaison officers were helping themselves from a small buffet or already sitting down eating. The dining room had small tables, each seating four people. Two were occupied by two Sentinels each, others by liaison officers.

Looking around, Angel whispered, “Where are the Guides?”

“They must eat somewhere else,” Kas said.

Angel clutched at his arm. “You can stay, right?”

“Well,” Kas said, “in places where there are separate dining facilities for officers and enlisted, it’s customary for Sentinels to take their Guides with them to the officers’ one if they want to. So I would say yes, unless somebody tells you differently.” He hoped to hell they didn’t; he didn’t trust Angel to eat if he wasn’t watching.

“Good.” Angel loosened his grip on Kas’s arm. “What do we do? Where are we supposed to sit?”

“I don’t know.” It didn’t look like anybody was going to tell them, either. “Ask somebody.”

Eventually, Angel nerved himself up to approach the two female Sentinels. “Hi,” he said, looking over his shoulder at Kas for reassurance. “Is it, uh, are the seats assigned? I just got here.”

One of the girls, a Nordic-looking blonde, made a small exasperated sound and rolled her eyes. The other one, a brunette with curly hair, returned the blonde’s exasperated look but said, “You can sit here. You get the food yourself; it’s over there.” She pointed.

“Thanks. Um, okay. We’ll be right back.”

Kas followed him over to the buffet, where Angel picked up a plate and held it in front of him with both hands, like a shield, looking skeptically at the food. “You’re okay,” Kas told him. “Here.” He took Angel’s plate and served him some of the rice, bizarrely flabby-looking chicken, and limp green beans. The dessert was vanilla pudding. Angel hovered by his shoulder as he filled his own plate, and they returned to the table where the two girls were sitting.

“I’m Angel,” he said as he sat down. “That’s Kas.” Kas decided to pretend that Angel flapping his hand in his direction was an order to sit down, since Angel had clearly forgotten he was supposed to give him one. “He’s my Guide.”

“Oh,” said the blonde. “You’re him.”
“Him who?” Angel asked, looking alarmed.

The blonde girl just gave him a superior smile, but the brunette took pity on him and explained, “They mentioned one of the boys in our class had already Bonded, that’s all. I’m Laura Grover, and she’s Bernadette Kadinsky. The boys are Troy Aponte and Ethan Savard.”

“Is that everybody?” Angel asked. “The whole class?”

“Uh-huh. You’re the last one. Troy got here this morning, Bernadette’s been here like three days, and Ethan and I got here yesterday.”

“Oh.” Kas could tell Angel was worrying that he was late, but he wasn’t. Their orders had said to report by 1900 today. They were three hours ahead of the deadline. But since they were playing by the rules, he couldn’t say anything unless Angel asked. The two open seats at their table had been across from each other, so he couldn’t lean over and whisper to him, either. Angel poked despondently at his rice with his fork.

He was also effectively muzzled from telling Angel to stop playing with his food and eat. Instead, he nudged Angel’s foot with his, under the table. Angel smiled over at him weakly and cut off a tiny piece of chicken.

By the time the girls got up and left, Angel had eaten that bite of chicken and two or three grains of rice. Kas moved over to sit next to him.

“I know, I have to eat,” Angel said.

“Try the pudding,” Kas suggested. “It’s not bad.”

Angel managed a few bites of the pudding. “I’m really not hungry.”

“I know.” Kas separated out a couple of green beans, a few spoonfuls of rice, and another bite of chicken. “Can you at least eat that?”

Angel made a face and poked at his food some more.

“Think of the starving children in Cuba,” Kas said, echoing what one of Angel’s aunts said to her children when they turned up their noses at her cooking. “Your poor abuelo and abuela sacrificed everything so you could live in America.”

“Hah.” He poked some more. “Consuela says it wasn’t quite that bad, anyway.”

“Hm?” Consuela was another of the aunts, Kas knew that much, but as far as he knew, although loving and detailed descriptions of the houses and cars the family had owned before the coup were trotted out on a regular basis, present-day conditions in Cuba were not much discussed, apart from the occasional dinner-time injunction.

“She and Marco just came here over the summer,” Angel said, eating a bite of rice. “Didn’t you know that?”

“No. I thought your family came here before you were born.”

“Most of us did. They didn’t get out in time. They’re the ones who said my father isn’t in a prison camp after all; he’s living with some puta in Santiago.”

“Wait, he is?” Kas asked. This topic apparently didn’t add to Angel’s distress; he ate another green
“Uh-huh. That’s what my mother was crying and praying about all the time.” He chewed meditatively on a piece of chicken. “I guess it was mostly in Spanish, that they talked about that.”

“I guess so.” Angel’s family spoke both Spanish and English, and switched between the two languages constantly.

“I don’t know; I’m kind of relieved that he’s OK down there. I’ve never met the guy, so I don’t care if he never comes to Miami. But mami’s a little upset that he’d rather live in a communist dictatorship than with her. She’s wondering if he already had a mistress by the time they left—they had only been married about a year—and that’s really why he sent her on ahead with my grandparents.”

“I guess there’s no way to know.”

“Anyway,” Angel said, eating a forkful of rice, “Tia Consuela says they weren’t actually starving. You couldn’t always get what you wanted when you wanted it, even on the black market, but if you weren’t picky you could get something. Things like clothes and shoes were the real problem. And soap, medicine, anything that has to be manufactured. Toys for the kids. That’s why Enrique and Rolando and Maria Jose got so much stuff for Christmas. The first day Christmas toys turned up at the supermarket, she bought one of everything because she couldn’t believe it would still be there the next day.”

“Ah.” That probably also explained the large packages of socks, underwear, and soap she had given to both him and Angel. Angel was still eating; clearly, getting him to talk about his family was helping his appetite. He tried to think of another question. “So she’s your mother’s oldest sister?”

“No, Ignacia is the oldest. Consuela is the next-youngest after my mother. Well, she is now; Eva who died was in between….”

This proved to be a rich topic; after determining the birth order of the sisters, Kas got Angel through the rest of the meal by sorting out which children belonged to which mother, something he had been genuinely confused about for some time since Angel referred to anyone more than a few years older than him as an aunt, and anyone more than a few years younger as a niece, even though many of them were, once the genealogy was untangled, actually cousins of one degree or another.

By the time Angel pushed his plate away, and plaintively asked, “Can we go now?” he had eaten about half of his dinner, which was more than Kas had expected. Kas was uncomfortably aware of the liaison officers, who had long since finished eating but who clearly were not going to leave until they did. They were across the room, but it wasn’t a big room, and he was sure they could hear enough to get the impression that Kas was bothering his Sentinel with inane questions while he was trying to eat.

“Sure,” Kas said. He quickly put their dishes in a pan by the buffet and they returned to Angel’s room.

Angel paced around the room, flopped on the bed, got up and paced some more, and finally sat in the desk chair.

“Why don’t you write home?” Kas suggested, getting out paper and a pen. “Let them know you got here all right.”

Angel sighed. “Okay.”

Once he was started, Kas said, “I thought I’d go talk to the other Guides, see what they can tell me
about how all this works.” He figured Angel would be more comfortable if Kas could give him an idea what to expect, and he was sure the Guides would know.

Angel looked deeply unhappy, but didn’t actually forbid him to go. “I won’t be long,” Kas told him.

“Okay.”

Collins had said that the Guide quarters were downstairs, so Kas started by going down to the first floor. Down there he found several classrooms in addition to the dining room, and something labeled “Sensory Lab.” Well, at least he’d know where they were for tomorrow. Continuing to the basement he found a small gym, where Bernadette—or, he had better think of her as “Sentinel Kadinsky”—was jogging on a treadmill, a laundry room, and finally, the Guide quarters.

There were five Guides, all men, ranging in apparent age from about 50 to Collins, who might have been Kas’s age. They were in a small lounge with a vinyl couch and a couple of chairs, with a TV playing quietly in the corner. Several were polishing boots, one was looking at a newspaper, and all were completely silent.

It was downright weird. Kas had long amused himself by thinking that the collective noun for Guides ought to be “a conversation.” It was the first time since G-TAC training that he had seen a group of Guides not talking—and even at G-TAC, where they weren’t supposed to talk amongst themselves, people did anyway. A couple of the men glanced up at him when he entered the room, but didn’t speak.

He sat down on the couch next to Collins, who he had at least met, and said, “Hi. I’m Kas Temas.” That still sounded weird.

Collins answered, “Yes. We know.”

This was not going at all the way Kas had expected. Every time he had arrived at a new posting, the Guides already there had immediately filled him in on what he needed to know about the place. He hadn’t even had to ask. It was just what Guides did.

But you never saw Sentinel School Guides anywhere else, and it was unusual for a Guide to turn up there with his Sentinel. Maybe they didn’t remember how to behave around strange Guides. “Uh… how do they wake the Sentinels up in the morning?” he asked. If there was an alarm, that was something Angel would want to know about.

“We wake them up,” Collins said.

“Okay…. No further information was forthcoming. “I’m going to be in the room with him, so….” Still no one said anything. “We didn’t bring an alarm clock or anything.”

After a pause long enough for Kas to begin wondering if he had actually spoken out loud, Collins said, “What time?”

“I’m sorry?”

“What time does your Sentinel want to be woken up?”

“Oh. Uh…they report to breakfast at 0700, right?” Nobody confirmed this, but Kas continued, “So I guess 0630, unless there’s something else they’re supposed to do before.” He waited for someone to say, “No, they have PT first,” or “Yes, that should work,” or something, but no one did. “He’s, uh, he’s pretty sound-sensitive.”
No one had anything to say about that, either. Kas decided to try another question. “He wants me to eat in the dining room upstairs with him. Is that going to be okay, do you know?” Nothing. “Where do you guys eat?”

After a long moment, one of the older Guides said, “We eat down here. You should do what your Sentinel tells you to do.”

“Right. I, uh, I wasn’t sure if the instructors would want us to do it differently.”

“If they do, they’ll tell your Sentinel.”

Of course they would. “Okay. Thanks.” Moving on to what Angel would most want to know, Kas asked, “What’s the training like? What do they have them do?”

The oldest Guide looked up from the boot he was polishing. “You don’t need to know that.”

Kas hastily said his goodbyes and retreated back to Angel’s room, where they played cards until Angel decided he was ready to go to bed.

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In the morning, Collins woke them by gently tapping on the door, and Kas was able to get Angel up, dressed, and on his way in plenty of time. When they got to the dining room, however, they discovered that the other Sentinels were all wearing the class B uniform of tailored slacks and shirt, while Angel had put on his fatigues.

Angel tugged him back out into the hallway. “How come they’re all wearing that other uniform? You said to wear this one.”

“I was guessing,” Kas whispered back, with a glare at the School Guides, who were lined up outside the dining room. What, they couldn’t have filled him in? “We must have missed a briefing or something. You want to go change?”

“I think I’d better.”

So they raced back up to Angel’s room and got him changed. Angel had some trouble with his tie, and when they made it back down to breakfast, there wasn’t nearly enough time left for Angel to come to grips with a distressing subject like oatmeal before the rest of the Sentinels began leaving. By Kas’s watch, they had fifteen minutes left before the next item on the schedule, but Angel was nervous about being late, so they left as soon as Kas had finished his own breakfast.

The Army called a lot of things “school”—Jump School, Ranger School, and so on—so Kas was surprised to learn that Sentinel School was a lot like….school. They met in classrooms with chalkboards at the front and small tables for each of the Sentinels, and were issued textbooks and workbooks. The Guides stood at the back of the room.

In the first class of the day, Sensory Theory, a liaison officer named Captain Ketner started off by lecturing about sound waves, complete with diagrams that Kas vaguely remembered from high school physics. Then he took them all to the Sensory lab, where he got out a tape player.

“You’ll hear a word. If you can understand what it is, or if you can guess, write it down. If not, leave the space blank.”

When Captain Ketner pressed “play,” Kas heard nothing. Two of the Sentinels, Grover and one of the boys, apparently didn’t, either. Kadinsky and the other boy both frowned in puzzlement and
occasionally hesitantly wrote something on their worksheets. Angel was the only one writing something in every space.

Ketner stopped the tape and rewound it. “Not so easy, is it? Now, I want you to imagine a dial that controls your hearing. Close your eyes, if that helps you to imagine it....”

While everybody else had their eyes closed, Angel turned and looked at him. Kas nodded—yes, they had already gone over all of this.

Once the rest of the class had been introduced to their dials, Ketner played the tape again. This time, all four of the others were able to fill in some answers, but, as Kas gathered when Ketner went around checking their papers, not correctly.

“All right,” he said. “Now you’ll see what Guides are for. Sentinel Aponte, you’ll work with Lamotte; Sentinel Grover, I’ll give you Vosburg today; Sentinel Kadinsky, you take Signorelli; Sentinel Savard...Doolan, I think; and of course Sentinel Temas, you have Kas.”

Four of the School Guides left the group at the back of the room and knelt next to the Sentinels’ desks. After only a moment’s hesitation, Kas followed suit. Angel looked down at him in puzzlement; Kas shrugged fractionally.

“When you’re doing sensory work, you need to have your Guide within arm’s reach, but out of the way. Having them kneel is often the most convenient option,” Ketner explained.

Except that it absolutely wasn’t. In the current circumstances, where the Sentinels were all sitting at desks, maybe, but in the real world, Sentinels hardly ever did sensory work at desks. If every class was told the same thing, though, that explained why brand-new Sentinels were always making their Guides kneel and then getting annoyed when they tripped over them.

“Place your hand on the back of the Guide’s neck.”

Angel did that, and Kas, anticipating the next step, opened the working link. That left him and Angel with nothing to do for the next several minutes, however, as Ketner explained what a link was and how to initiate one. The explanation was accurate—it matched in many ways with what he’d learned from another Guide at his first assignment—but Ketner seemed to be under the misapprehension that it was Sentinels who did it.

This time, before he turned the tape on again, Ketner brought another tape player and a pair of headphones over to Angel. “It looks like you’re ready for something a little more challenging. On this tape, the words are masked by other sounds—it’s page four in your workbook. See what you can do with it.”

By the time the class finished, Angel was three workbook pages ahead of the rest of the class, and looking rather pleased with himself. For homework, they were asked to read a chapter about hearing and write a page about the factors that make it difficult to distinguish sounds.

The next class was Health and Hygiene. To Kas’s relief, the course material didn’t appear to have anything to do with VD. Lieutenant Shiffley, a liaison officer and RN, explained, “Sentinels’ special gifts also come with some special challenges. There are many prescription and over-the-counter drugs and other everyday products that Sentinels can’t tolerate. You may also discover that as you begin learning to use your senses actively, you have difficulty adjusting to normal levels of stimulation.”

That explained the bland food and sound-proofed rooms, Kas supposed.
“Over the next few weeks you’ll be learning about common problems and what to do about them, as well as what signs or symptoms may indicate a serious problem that requires the attention of a specialist in Sentinel Medicine.”

Then she showed a training film that depicted Sentinels of all races and both sexes, in the uniforms of various military branches, wincing in pain as trains rattled past their offices, growing dizzy when mimeographing something, breaking out in dramatic rashes when their base laundry changed its fabric softener, and so on, and resolving these problems through earnest conversations with their SRB liaison officers.

Kas decided that the Sentinels in the film must live in some Bizarro world where there were no Guides, because in the Army he worked in, the first Sentinel would have had his Guide arrange for him to get a better office, the second problem would never have arisen because the Sentinel would have had her Guide do the mimeographing—or photocopying, in the current decade—and the third one would have thrown a royal shit-fit upon finding out that his laundry had been entrusted to the base laundry instead of being done personally by his Guide.

Apparently, he wasn’t the only one who thought so. After the film, Kadinsky raised her hand. “Ma’am? I’m not sure why we have to learn this. Isn’t this the sort of thing Guides are supposed to take care of?”

Shiffley looked down at some papers on her desk. “Ah. Sentinel Kadinsky, your parents are a Bonded Sentinel-Guide pair, is that right?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Suddenly, Kadinsky made a lot more sense to Kas.

Shiffley explained, “In a long-term Bonded pair, yes, the Guide would become familiar with the Sentinel’s sensitivities and understand how to accommodate them. However, in the early part of your career you’ll most likely not be Bonded, so you’ll be assigned a variety of Guides. You’ll need to orient each one to your specific needs. Does that answer your question?”

“Yes, ma’am. Thank you.”

Except, Kas thought, that wasn’t how it worked at all. You learned about a Sentinel’s specific needs, if you were lucky, by having the previous Guide leave you a briefing letter. If not, you figured it out as you went along. As far as he knew, he’d never met anyone who’d actually been briefed by a Sentinel.

Shiffley smiled. “After all, you don’t want to rely on a Guide for your health and comfort.”

When they reported to lunch after Health and Hygiene, Angel was feeling well enough to help himself to macaroni and cheese, stewed tomatoes, and fish sticks without complaint. He turned toward the table where Kadinsky and Grover were sitting. “Mind if we sit here?”

Grover said, “Sure,” but wilted back in her chair and ducked her head when Kadinsky shot her a withering glare.

Angel was oblivious, though, and put down his tray. Kas got him settled and made sure he had everything he needed, then started around to the empty seat at the other side of the table. Before he got there, though, Sentinel Savard stepped in front of him and plunked his own tray down, leaving him standing there wondering what to do.

“Sorry,” Sentinel Kadinsky said insincerely. “Looks like there’s no room here for your Guide.”
Angel looked around for support, first at Grover, who carefully didn’t meet his eyes, then up at Kas. Kas wasn’t sure what to do. It would be better, probably, for him to stay with his classmates, but it wasn’t Kas’s place to suggest that. And if he did, what was Kas supposed to do? Staying in the Sentinels’ dining room when he wasn’t with his Sentinel wasn’t appropriate, but leaving when Angel hadn’t told him to wasn’t appropriate, either. The best answer would be to stay in the room but not eat, but he already had a tray full of food that he had to do something with.

Angel said cheerfully, “No problem,” and stood up, collecting his tray. Kas followed him over to another table.

As soon as Angel left, Sentinel Aponte moved into his vacated seat, leaving the other four Sentinels together and Angel off to the side with Kas. That…might be a problem, if the rest of the group developed unit cohesion and left Angel on the outside. In most training situations, it definitely would be a problem. But Sentinels rarely worked together in the field, and the instructors seemed to be focusing on individual work so far. It might be all right. And there were plenty of extra tables in the room, enough that each Sentinel could have sat alone if they had chosen to. It probably wasn’t expected that they would form into a group, Kas decided.

Angel, he noticed, was looking over toward the other Sentinels with a distracted expression. They were talking about him, Kas suspected. “You okay?”

“Yeah,” Angel said, bringing his attention back to the tray in front of him. “This isn’t too bad so far,” he said, poking at the food with his fork. “School, I mean. This looks awful.” He took an experimental bite, then started mixing the stewed tomatoes in with the macaroni.

At the other table, Grover yelped and spat out a mouthful of food. “What’s wrong with this? It’s burning my mouth!”

Kas started to get up. She was eating the same thing the rest of them were, and it was tepid and bland, so Kas knew the real problem was a sensory spike. But as a Bonded Guide, there wasn’t much he could do, really—and anyway, he was supposed to be keeping his head down.

Angel had turned around in his chair to look at her. “What’s wrong with Laura?”

“Spike,” Kas answered.

“Oh. Should we, um…?”

Kas still wasn’t sure, until he saw Vosburg coming into the room. “One of the school Guides is helping her,” he said, relieved.

“Oh.” Angel glanced over at the other Sentinel again. “All right.”

They finished eating, while Vosburg talked Grover through adjusting her taste dial. Kas reflected that this was Angel’s first meal in a military dining facility where his behavior hadn’t made him the most conspicuous person in the room.

The next class turned out to be “Guide Management.” Lining up the back of the room with the other Guides, Kas couldn’t help but worry that this was not going to go well.

Captain Bedell, a G-TAC liaison officer, opened with, “For most of you, the Guide assigned to you upon completion of Sentinel School will be your first command. Most of you will be going on to Officer Candidate School, so demonstrating leadership ability is essential.” That part wasn’t so bad, but at the next sentence, Kas’s suspicions were confirmed. “Your first assigned Guide will be older and more experienced, so it’s vital to establish your authority over the Guide from the beginning.
Over the next few weeks I’m sure we’ll all be seeing what can happen when the Guide is allowed to gain the upper hand.”

Everyone turned to look at Angel, who, to Kas’s relief, seemed completely oblivious.

“Some particularly weak Sentinels have a tendency to become dependent on their Guides. In reality, they’re no different from any other subordinate, and there is no need to become sentimental about them. You’ll be issued a number of Guides over the course of your career, and one is pretty much the same as the next.”

And now Angel was raising his hand. It was only years of military discipline that kept Kas from hiding his eyes behind his hands. He had a new appreciation for how Angel felt on the rifle range.

“Yes, Temas?”

“What are Gaines scores for, then?” As an afterthought, he added, “Sir?”

“Gaines scores are a means for rating the compatibility of Sentinel-Guide pairs.”

“Yes, I know,” Angel said. “But if all Guides are pretty much the same, what’s it for?”

Kas made a mental note that Angel feeling confident was not necessarily a good thing, and to schedule some after-school tutoring on self-preservation.

But Bedell just said, “Sentinels are assigned Guides with a Gaines compatibility score of at least four on each of the scales. Statistics show that higher compatibility scores do not result in improved performance,” and fortunately, Angel didn’t argue with him.

After a few more remarks about weak Sentinels, which seemed to sail straight over Angel’s head, Bedell moved on to his next topic. “There are primitive superstitions about Sentinels and Guides going back hundreds of years. If you watch the television or go to the movies you’ve probably seen some of them. In real life, while Sentinels have special abilities that, with proper training, can be very useful in a military situation, there is absolutely nothing special about Guides. Physical proximity to a Guide grants a Sentinel increased control over his or her senses, but this requires no skill or training on the part of the Guide. The only operational requirements for Guides are that they stay near enough to their Sentinels to be of use and obey their Sentinels’ orders.”

It was the first one that Kas always had trouble with. If his Sentinel didn’t need him—and most of the time, they didn’t—he wanted to be doing something, not just standing there like a fencepost.

“In some services—notably the Marines—it’s customary to assign the Guide additional duties, but this is to be avoided because of the risk that the Guide would be unavailable when needed.”

Funny, he’d never heard that about the Marines.

Not that it mattered, anymore. Although he supposed since Angel was going to be the first Army Sentinel since World War Two who was also a doctor, they might have some leeway to make up the role of a Sentinel-doctor’s Guide as they went along. The program Angel had enlisted under had him in the classroom for six years, doing an accelerated undergraduate degree that overlapped somehow with the first part of medical school—Kas was a little vague on the details. Angel had showed him the paperwork, but he had only looked closely at the parts that detailed what Angel had to do to keep his “guaranteed” slot in the program—namely, that he had to pass all of his classes and keep a decent GPA. Most of the people in the program wouldn’t be obligated to stay in the military if they didn’t make it through the accelerated program, but because of Angel’s status as a Sentinel, if he was kicked out of the medical school, the Army would assign him to do something else. Angel was
confident that it wouldn’t be a problem; Kas just hoped he was right. The usual place that a Sentinel would go after Basic and Sentinel School was Officer Candidate School, as Bedell had said, and Kas was pretty sure that Angel would do about as well there as a snowflake on a griddle. But Sentinels were always officers, and Army doctors, along with lawyers and chaplains, were the only ones who could get an officer’s commission without the sort of training to which Angel was so obviously unsuited.

Chaplain might be a possibility, except that Kas couldn’t quite imagine the Catholic church accepting a Bonded Sentinel as a priest, particularly one with a same-sex Guide. Maybe if Angel was willing to change religions? But while Angel didn’t seem to be especially religious, he was very culturally Catholic. Probably not, then.

Maybe it was best not to worry about it. Angel thought he’d be fine, and the Army apparently though so too, or they wouldn’t have admitted him to the program—it was very selective.

When he started paying attention again, Bedell was saying, “—new recruitment policies, SGRB was split into the Sentinel Recruitment Board and the Guide Training and Assignment Center in 1962. G-TAC is charged with providing initial and ongoing training to Guides…."

So, how much support would Angel be likely to need at the medical school? Kas would probably be stuck going to classes with him, whether he needed it or not—which was fine, actually, since the alternative was probably sitting around in their quarters or the hallway waiting for him. It would make the most sense if he was allowed to actually take classes, rather than just sit in on them. If he had some kind of credential of his own, he’d be able to help Angel more. But if it was up to a G-TAC liaison like Bedell, what made sense probably wouldn’t enter into the equation. Maybe the medical school faculty would be more reasonable—but then again, he probably wasn’t even qualified to be a student there, even in one of the nursing or technician programs, given that after being identified as Guide he hadn’t exactly bothered exerting himself in high school.

On a third hand, though, if Angel managed to develop the appropriate Sentinel attitude over the next few weeks, he could probably get Kas into some program just by demanding it.

Bedell wrapped up talking about Army Sentinel-Guide policy, then passed out textbooks and assigned the Sentinels to read chapter one and answer the questions at the back. After Bedell dismissed them, Kas came up to collect Angel from his seat. With a sharp glance at him, Bedell added, “Temas, write an additional two pages on the importance of maintaining appropriate Guide discipline.

Kas dragged Angel out of the room before he had a chance to object.

“What was that about?” Angel asked, once they were safely out in the corridor.

“Apparently that’s what they do here instead of push-ups,” Kas said. “Luckily for you. You don’t really mind writing, do you?”

“No,” Angel agreed. “But I didn’t do anything.”

“You might want to avoid being a smartass to the instructors,” Kas told him. “They really don’t like that kind of thing.” He glanced back at the door, irrationally worried that the G-TAC man was standing just inside the door listening to them. He took Angel’s books and said, “Come on, what room are you in next?”

The last block of the day proved to be Strategy and Tactics, taught by another SRB liaison officer, Captain Nagley. “Here, you’ll learn about the myriad ways that Sentinel abilities can be used in the
field, in combat and non-combat situations.”

Angel looked about to object, doubtless on the grounds that he wasn’t going to be anywhere near any combat situations, but thankfully, thought better of it.

“After several weeks of classroom training, we’ll move on to field exercises.”

That couldn’t possibly be good. Angel spun around in his seat to give Kas a panicked look.

Kas made a calming gesture. He’d have to find out more about what the field exercises were like, and figure out how to prepare Angel for them. At least they had a few weeks before he had to face them, whatever they were.

Today’s lecture, anyway, seemed to be historical background. “Sentinels first proved their value to the American military in the Revolutionary War. The Continental Army employed a unique tactical style based on techniques used by the native Indians…”

By the end of the block, they had only made their way up as far as World War II, a period that was sufficiently remote not to be actively upsetting to Angel, so he was in fairly good spirits as they made their way back to their quarters. They had over an hour free until dinner, which Kas figured would be a good time for Angel to get started on his homework. He was expecting a struggle, or at least a lengthy series of protests centering around the theme that Angel didn’t want to do it, it was too hard, or wasn’t fair, but to his surprise, Angel settled right down to it.

Kas puttered around with his uniforms and Angel’s for a while, but since he’d cleaned and organized everything when they’d packed, in case there was an inspection when they arrived, there wasn’t much to do. Eventually he sat down and took a look at Angel’s textbooks.

“Kadinsky kind of had a point,” he remarked as he looked through the Health and Hygiene book. There was plenty of stuff in there that he didn’t know—Sentinels had a 25% higher risk than the general population of developing a sensitivity to latex? That was news to him, and given that doctors spent a lot of time wearing latex gloves, it was something he really ought to know.

“What do they teach Guides?” Angel asked.

“Not much of anything,” Kas answered. “You heard what Bedell said; all we have to do is stay near the Sentinel and do what we’re told.”

“Yeah, but that’s not true, is it?” Angel asked, looking up at him searchingly.

Kas looked away and sighed. No matter what the liaison officers thought, he hadn’t wanted to Bond with Angel because he was a “weak Sentinel,” whatever that meant, but he had to admit he did like the way Angel looked up to him. He had known it couldn’t last—the part of their lives where he knew more about everything had ended with Basic—but he hadn’t figured he’d have to be the one to tell Angel exactly how insignificant Guides were, in the eyes of the Army. And sure, there were plenty of other people here who were willing to tell him, but it looked like Angel wasn’t going to believe them if Kas said differently. Finally he said, “Yeah, basically.”
“But—what about that thing you did?”

“What thing?”

“With my hearing, the first day.”

Kas winced. He wondered if he could try, “What thing?” again, but—no. He had done it, and Angel knew perfectly well he had. “We’re really not supposed to do that. I don’t think G-TAC even knows we can.”

“Oh,” Angel said. He thought for a minute. “I guess I better not tell them, huh?”

“Probably not,” Kas agreed.

“And then—you taught me about the dials and everything,” Angel said uncertainly.

Kas nodded. “Right. I’ve been a Guide for a few years, you know, so I’ve picked up a few things. Things they teach you in the first couple days of Sentinel School, it looks like. Normally it’s the liaison officers who teach you this stuff. They’re the ones with all the training.”

“And that thing with my feet. The socks.”

“That’s in the book, too,” Kas said. “There’s a chapter on chemical sensitivities. I knew about it because I happened to bump into a guy who had the same problem.”

Angel gnawed at his lip, looking like he was about to cry. Kas felt almost like he ought to apologize, except for what, he wasn’t sure.

Instead he said, “I tried to tell you,” even though he wasn’t sure he had, or maybe he hadn’t tried hard enough. He wasn’t even entirely sure what Angel had thought he was, apart from something different, better than he was.

After a long moment, Angel turned back to his desk.

It was a very subdued Angel who made his way down to the dining room a short while later. Kas trailed after him, still feeling as if he ought to apologize, or something. Angel looked anxiously between the instructors and the table where three of the other Sentinel students sat. “I wonder where Laura is,” he said, his voice sounding flat and artificial.

“She’s having a tray in her room,” Troy—Sentinel Aponte—volunteered.

“You can do that?” Angel asked.

“Evidently,” said Kadinsky.

“Do you want to sit here?” asked Aponte.

“No,” Angel said. “Thanks. I think I want a tray in my room, too.” He half-turned to look up at Kas, like he hadn’t quite grasped yet that he wasn’t supposed to be asking.

Kas nodded. “I’ll take care of it.”

Angel stood over by the door like a lost sheep while Kas fixed up a tray with enough food for both of them. With a little nudging, Kas was able to get him to lead the way back to their room—the sheepdog was supposed to be behind the sheep, after all.
Once they were there, Angel sat down at the desk again with his plate, leaving Kas to take the tray and sit on the bed. Angel poked dispiritedly at his food, but Kas didn’t say anything. He wasn’t feeling particularly hungry himself, either. After about a half an hour of pretending to eat, they gave up and Kas took the tray back downstairs, while Angel went back to his homework.

After a bit of poking around, he found the kitchen. The school Guides, minus Vosburg, who he supposed was with Sentinel Grover, were cleaning up and washing the dishes. Kas thought about asking them if he could help, then thought better of it, and just found something that needed to be done and started doing it.

For a long time, no one spoke, until, Signorelli asked him, “Don’t you have somewhere else to be?”

Kas thought through several possible answers to that question before settling on simply, “No.”

After that, the Guides still remained eerily silent, but somehow, it didn’t seem quite as pointed. Collins even went so far as to hand him a dishtowel and motion for Kas to take over drying. Kas wasn’t sure if they thought Angel had put him in his place, or what, but whatever it was, he decided to let them think it.

They were nearly done with the cleanup when Vosburg came in.

“How’s Grover?” Signorelli asked, proving Kas’s guess correct.

“She’ll do.” Vosburg scraped her uneaten dinner into a trash can and rinsed the plate. “Lamotte might want to camp out on two between rounds.”

“It’s me tonight,” Doolan said. “New schedule, since they don’t need all of us in Lab. Night Guide gets to sleep in.”

“Well, whoever,” Vosburg answered.

After a while, Lamotte asked, “So is he on the watch schedule now?”

“Oh course not,” Signorelli said. “He’s Bonded.”

_He_ was him, Kas realized.

“Oh, right,” said Lamotte. “I forgot.”

And that was all the conversation there was, until they finished working and the rest of the Guides went down to their quarters, while Kas headed back up to his Sentinel. Still, he had learned a bit more about how this place worked. The Guides did the chores, which wasn’t a surprise, and kept a rotating third watch, probably so that there would be someone available if the Sentinels needed anything in the night. And there wasn’t enough evidence to be absolutely certain, but it looked like each Guide looked after the Sentinel assigned to him in Sensory Lab that day. There were five Guides, so probably they always had five Sentinels in the class at a time. And finally, his being here made a little less work for the others, which he supposed was a good thing on general principles, and might be of some practical use later on, if he needed a favor or something.

A pretty good amount of intel to piece together from the little bit he had seen and heard—but then, he wouldn’t have to piece it together if anyone would just tell him things.

Angel glanced up when he came back into the room, then hunched over his books again. Kas knew he ought to say something to him, but had no idea what, so he just put himself at parade rest by the door and stayed there until Angel stacked up his books and said quietly, “I think I want to go to
Angel was quite sure that he did not like Sentinel School. The instructors weren’t particularly mean—not so far, at least—but they had only been here for a day, and already Kas was mad at him. Or something.

It was still early, a couple of hours before they had to be up. He sat up quietly, so he wouldn’t wake Kas up, and sat with his back against the footboard of the bed, cranking his hearing up so he could listen to Kas’s heartbeat from there. It made the birds outside too loud, and he could have heard better if he had his head on Kas’s chest, but somehow, he had the idea Kas didn’t want him doing that anymore.

He wasn’t a baby, anyway. Maybe Kas would like him again if he didn’t act like one.

Back at boot camp, Kas had said something about him turning into a “raging asshole” after Sentinel School. He hadn’t known what he was talking about at the time, but now that he was here, he was starting to figure out that he was…sort of supposed to. He wasn’t such a baby that he hadn’t figured out the point of that essay the G-TAC captain had made him write. He just hadn’t cared, because none of that stuff applied to him and Kas.

Except Kas, apparently, thought it did.

Back at boot camp, Kas had made everything make sense. The drill sergeants, except for maybe Hixon, weren’t really that bad, they were just pretending. Sometimes they tried to trick you, like when you were on firewatch and you weren’t supposed to let anybody in, but then they said you’d get in trouble if you didn’t let them in, and—well, Kas had straightened all that out. You weren’t supposed to let them in, period, and the point was that when you were a soldier, somebody might try to trick you. Like maybe the enemy.

So he had figured that the way things were here wasn’t real. The way the Guides were all quiet and scary, and they had to kneel when you linked up with them, and he wasn’t supposed to talk to Kas when people were around. It was maybe a trick—the instructors told you to do it so you’d see how stupid it was—or maybe it was like the bed-making, and nobody cared after you got done with training. People didn’t actually live like that; in the real Army your Guide was your best friend and took care of you. Right?

Only Kas hadn’t said that. He’d said, *I tried to tell you*, because Angel had had it wrong all along.

Angel hugged his knees to his chest and gnawed on a thumbnail. Kas had never been to Sentinel School before—he said that a lot. So maybe he didn’t know the tricks they did here.

But he had been in the Army for a while. He must have had other Sentinels before Angel.

Which was all kinds of weird to think about, so he stopped.

But anyway, Kas knew what it was like *after* Sentinel School.

And apparently it was a lot like Sentinel School.
When one of the scary Guides came and knocked on the door, Angel pretended that he had only been awake for a few minutes. He put on his slacks-and-button-down-shirt uniform, the one everybody had been wearing yesterday, but he was glad that Kas put on his normal uniform from boot camp. It would just be too weird if he wore one of the blue uniforms like the Guides here wore. At least this way he still looked like Kas.

Downstairs at breakfast—was it “chow” here? Nobody said—anyway, Laura still wasn’t there. He could have sat with the other Sentinels—and maybe Kas sort of wanted him to—but Kas didn’t say so, so he and Kas got a table by themselves again.

This time it was cornflakes instead of oatmeal. He wondered if they ever had Cheerios. He liked those. Or maybe Frosted Flakes. Abuela didn’t buy sugary cereal, but he had them sometimes at Tía Ignacia’s.

Now his cornflakes were soggy. He pushed the bowl away and drank his orange juice instead.

He thought Kas might tell him to eat his cereal, but he just said, “Do you want some toast or something?” and then got quiet when Angel shook his head.

When they went to Sensory Lab, Laura was there, and she looked like she was all right, so Angel supposed that was good. They listened to tapes some more, which had been sort of fun yesterday, but he wasn’t enjoying it much now. He tried to pay attention, though, because Ketner was the best one out of the captains, and anyway being able to distinguish sounds would be useful for being a doctor.

He’d had high hopes for Health and Hygiene—he thought being a Sentinel Medicine specialist might be interesting—but so far, it was really boring. It also reminded him about what Kas had said last night, about how Guides didn’t learn anything.

There was a chapter in the book about sex, but he’d read it already, and it was mostly about all the reasons why if you wanted to have sex, your Guide was probably the best person to have it with. Angel would have thought that was obvious, but apparently not.

It also talked a lot about how you couldn’t have sex with your Guide if they didn’t want to, which, again, seemed like something you shouldn’t have to be told.

But Lieutenant Shiffley wasn’t talking about that, she was talking about chemical sensitivities and personal care products, so he really ought to try to pay attention. He had no idea toothpaste was so dangerous. Not to mention shaving cream. It was a good thing he wasn’t a girl; apparently makeup was a real minefield.

“Keep in mind that the products worn by anyone you are in close physical contact with can also affect you,” Shiffley added. “So, gentlemen, you need to be aware of the makeup risks as well.”

Except for Angel, but he didn’t say so.

Laura raised her hand, was called on, and asked, “So how does this work in, you know, combat? Do the enemy know that they can incapacitate you with lipstick?”

“Generally these kinds of sensitivities develop with extended exposure,” Shiffley explained. “And reactions are so individual that personal care products are unlikely to be used systematically in combat.”

Well, that was a relief, even though Angel wasn’t planning to be anywhere near combat if he could help it.
“But Sentinels are more susceptible to chemical weapons, and improvised attacks are not unheard of. You’ll be learning more about that in Strategy and Tactics.”

Angel sighed. Strategy and Tactics was definitely not his favorite, even without the “field exercises” looming up ahead. It wasn’t very relevant for being a doctor, that was for sure. He supposed it was like learning to use the rifles in Basic—they just made everybody do it. He wondered if there would be a test, and what was the least he could learn and still pass it. Since there was no way to know, he’d better try to learn everything.

If he had to be an Army doctor, he supposed, it might be a good idea to have some idea what went on in combat, anyway.

“So if you do end up having any of those problems, can you just take a Benadryl or whatever?” Troy wanted to know.

“No,” Shiffley said. “Antihistamines are not recommended for Sentinels; most Sentinels have atypical reactions to them.”

“Chemical sensitivity isn’t a histamine reaction, anyway,” Angel pointed out. “It’s a metabolic process, not autoimmune.” Troy looked confused, so he added, “An antihistamine wouldn’t do any good even if you could take it.”

“O-kay,” Troy answered, the way people did when you said something in class that showed you were a geek.

“Sentinel Temas is right,” Shiffley said. “That’s a little more detail than we go into here, but it’s a different physical cause, so antihistamines won’t alleviate the symptoms of a chemical sensitivity reaction, even if you are one of the lucky ones who can take them without ill effects.”

After class was over, Lieutenant Shiffley asked to speak with him. He was a little worried about that, and looked back at Kas, who shrugged a little.

“I understand you’re going to Bethesda after this,” Shiffley said. “To USUHS.”

“Oh-huh.” Only that was one of the things you weren’t supposed to say. “Yes, ma’am.”

“I have some books on Sentinel Medicine, if you’d like to borrow them for some extra reading.”

“Sure. That would be great. Uh, ma’am,” he added.

“I’ll bring them to class tomorrow.”

“Thanks.” He collected Kas at the back of the room and explained what Lieutenant Shiffley had wanted.

“That’s nice,” Kas said, sounding like he didn’t really think so at all.

So they hadn’t made up yet. “I thought so.”

The dining room smelled like everything they’d eaten that week, and everybody was talking at once, even the other Sentinels, who Angel thought would know better. He slumped down in a chair and put his hands over his eyes, which didn’t help very much with either the sound or the smell, but made him feel better somehow. Kas patted his shoulder and went off toward where the food was.

Over at the other table, Ethan was saying, “—different metabolic process. I can’t believe that little
shit.”

“He’s gotta be a fag,” Troy said. “Have you seen the way he hangs on that Guide of his?”

“It’s gross, man,” Ethan agreed.

Kas came back with the trays. Tuna casserole. Blech. “My head hurts,” he said. It was true—he’d had a dull ache in his head since that morning, but he mostly said it because if he was sick, Kas might be nice to him again.

It sort of worked. “You’ve barely eaten anything since lunch yesterday,” he pointed out gently. “Think that might be why?”

He opened one eye. “Tuna makes me sick.”

The tuna went away, along with Kas.

Bernadette said, “Maybe he’s not completely hopeless as a Sentinel. At least he’s got his Guide serving him now, instead of letting the Guide drag him around. A big brute like that needs a firm hand. It’s a shame they wasted him on Temas.”

“Kas is better-looking than any of the school Guides,” Laura said.

“He’s probably a fag, too,” Troy answered.

“He’s a Guide,” said Bernadette. “It doesn’t matter what he is.”

“I think it would be weird to have a man for your Guide,” Laura said hesitantly. “How do you make them listen to you?”

“My father says it can be a problem,” Bernadette answered. “They think you’ll be soft on them just because you’re a female. You have to make sure you take charge from the beginning.”

“Your dad’s a Guide?” Ethan asked, sounding like he thought that was funny.

“No,” Bernadette said scornfully. “He’s a Sentinel.”

“So your mom’s the Guide?” Troy asked, like that was funny too.

“Shut up,” Bernadette said. “My father married and Bonded his Guide. It’s normal. And Father made sure to set a good example of how a Sentinel treats a Guide.”

Angel wondered what that meant. He was kind of glad he wasn’t Bernadette. It had to be better to have no father at all than one who treated mami the way it seemed like the Army thought was normal. Kas came back, and a new plate appeared in front of him, with a cheese sandwich cut into triangles and half a canned pear sitting on a lettuce leaf.

That was a little better, anyway. It didn’t taste like much of anything, but at least the way it smelled wasn’t actively offensive. He managed to eat half of the sandwich and most of the pear. Kas was right; he did feel better.

Only now he had to go to G-TAC class, and he was pretty sure he really hated G-TAC class. He thought about maybe just not going, but he’d never cut a class before, and anyway, with only five of them somebody was going to notice if he wasn’t there.

So he went, and felt like he was going to be sick as Captain Bedell talked about what you should do
on the first day with a new Guide.

It wasn’t really that Bedell was telling them to do anything too bad, if you looked at it one way. You were supposed to leave him waiting for a few minutes when he reported in, so he’d get the idea you had more important things to do than talk to him, even if you didn’t. Have him stand at attention and check his uniform—Angel knew what that was all about, thanks to boot camp and Kas’s explanations. Don’t use his first name, or let him use yours. Keep him busy with chores all day—cleaning or whatever you could make up. Guides don’t sit while you stand. Things like that.

It was all about power—it would have been obvious enough, but Bedell came out and said so. And that was what was so wrong about it. It was like Sentinels and Guides were enemies or something, like if you didn’t make somebody be your Guide they wouldn’t be.

But that couldn’t be true, because he hadn’t done any of that stuff, and there Kas was.

After about the fifth or sixth time Bedell said, “You gotta show ‘em who’s boss,” Angel asked, “Why?”

“Excuse me, Sentinel?”

Angel thought about that one for a second and came up with, “Why, sir?”

And maybe that hadn’t been what Captain Bedell was going for, because he just stood there and looked at him for long enough for Angel to start wondering if he was having a seizure or something, before he finally said, “Because your Guide is your subordinate.”

He raised his hand again.

“Yes, Temas?”

“What happens if your Guide outranks you?”

“They don’t.”

“Mine does.” He glanced back at Kas, who did not look at all happy. “He’s a sergeant,” he pointed out helpfully.

Bernadette frowned and looked back at the school Guides. “Aren’t they all Sergeants and Corporals, sir?” she asked.

“You’ll receive your commissions when you leave here,” Bedell said. “The school Guides are under the supervision of the teaching staff.”

Angel was about to point out that Kas wasn’t, then thought better of it at the last second. They could probably fix it so he was, and Angel didn’t like the idea of Bedell being in charge of Kas.

“Guides are subordinate to Sentinels, regardless of your respective ranks,” Bedell finally said. That sounded extremely fishy to Angel, but he let it pass. “That sort of confusion is exactly why you should never have been allowed to Bond in the first place,” he added. “Although I suppose at least this way no other Sentinel has to deal with the mess you’ve made of him.”

Angel glanced back at Kas again. He looked perfectly fine as far as Angel could tell.

Bedell went back to what he was talking about, and at the end of the class, told Angel to write another extra essay.
Kas didn’t talk to him on the way to Strategy and Tactics. Angel didn’t know what he wanted him to say, but he wanted him to say something.

At least they weren’t doing field exercises yet. That was the only good thing Angel had to say about Strategy and Tactics. The class was mostly about what Sentinels had done in Vietnam. If “you gotta show ‘em who’s boss” had been the catch-phrase of G-TAC class, this one was “It’s not like in the movies.” Angel thought war movies were too scary, and in any case, he thought the topic could best be summed up as, “Stuff he didn’t want to know about.” After the first couple of stories, he decided to stop listening.

Not-listening was working pretty well for him until Captain Nagley said, “Sentinel Temas, am I boring you?”

Damn. “No, sir.” It was worth a shot, anyway.

“Do you have any idea what we’ve been talking about?”

“Guy who stepped on a land mine?” Also worth a shot, going by the odds.

Apparently that wasn’t the right answer, and, to make a long story short, Angel ended up getting more extra homework.

In retrospect, tackling his extra assignments before dinner, to get them out of the way, wasn’t the best decision he’d ever made. To do them he had to think about subjects he really didn’t want to think about, and also it made him a little nervous to have all his teachers mad at him, even if he didn’t like them.

To make matters worse, Kas was doing that thing where he stood by the door like he wasn’t even really there.

By the time they went down to dinner, everything was too loud and too bright, and his tongue felt like it was choking him, oversized and stiff. He stumbled over to their table and sat down. He probably should have done that tray-in-his-room thing again, but he forgot that he could, and now that he was here, he didn’t want to get up again.

Everybody else was eating already, and it felt like they were banging the knives and forks directly on his eardrums instead of on the plates. He was dimly aware that he ought to turn down his hearing, but he couldn’t find his dial and just whimpered instead.

“What do you want to eat?” Kas asked him. “It looks like pork, and there’s mashed potatoes and carrots.”

“I don’t want anything.”

“You know you have to eat, sweetheart.”

Kas hadn’t called him that in a long time, and now it struck him as a mocking reminder of what ironically seemed like happier times. Maybe he had been desperately unhappy at boot camp, but at least things between him and Kas had been blissfully uncomplicated. “Don’t call me that,” he said. “You don’t call me that anymore. Leave me alone.”

He had thought that Kas was cool towards him before, but now he was positively icy. “Yes sir,” Kas said, and walked away.

Well, fuck.
By the time Kas had pretended to eat dinner in the Guides’ room—regular food sent over from the base’s chow hall—and helped the school Guides clean up the kitchen and dining room, he knew he’d made a mistake. It had been obvious from the start that Angel hadn’t meant “leave me alone,” as a serious order—he was just stressed and cranky. But the only defense a Guide had against a Sentinel who was being an asshole was to take what they said literally, and play dumb when they called you on it.

But it wasn’t like that with him and Angel. Angel wouldn’t understand it, and if he did understand, it wouldn’t help. He also hadn’t missed that Angel had run straight back to their room, and he had realized that Angel did not want to be left alone at all.

On the other hand, this day hadn’t exactly been a picnic for him, either, and it wasn’t like it was his fault Angel didn’t like learning that he was supposed to be treating Kas like a dog he didn’t like very much. So he’d kept himself busy with other things, and pretended he was only doing what he’d been told, even though he knew it was a shitty thing to do.

Now, though, he had run out of other things to do, so he didn’t have much choice but to go back up to Angel’s room and try to fix things. Unfortunately, he didn’t have any good ideas about how to do that. When he got upstairs, he wasn’t even sure if he should knock, or go right in, or what.

Finally, he knocked once and went in. Angel was curled up on the bed hugging his pillow and crying.

“Ang? Hey--”

Angel sat up and sniffled. “Kas!” He scrambled to his feet. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean it. Don’t be mad anymore.” He stopped awkwardly just short of where Kas was, like he wasn’t sure if he was allowed to touch him or not.

As if he didn’t feel bad enough already. “I’m not,” he said, pulling his Sentinel into a hug. Angel tuckled his head up against Kas’s chest and held on tight. “Okay. It’s okay,” Kas said, steering him over to the bed, where he sat down and Angel promptly crawled into his lap.

It was a good start, but Kas didn’t think they were quite finished. “Look,” he said, patting Angel. “It’s not…” He wanted to say, “It’s not that bad,” but honestly, he still wasn’t sure what it was. Finally he settled on, “We’re okay.”

Angel squirmed around so he could look up at him. “Yeah?”

“Sure.” Not really, but he knew they would be. Eventually, Angel would adjust to reality and they’d be fine. It was just the short term they had to work out. “Okay. Help me out, here. What do you need to feel better?”

Angel held out his hand for a link.

Easy enough. They should have done it sooner, really. As usual when he was upset, Angel’s dials were all out of whack. By the time Kas had talked him through adjusting them back to normal, he had settled down some too, and the sense of him that Kas got through the link didn’t radiate quite so much confusion and unhappiness.

“Okay. You still have some work to do, don’t you?”

Angel nodded.
“Are you ready to get back to it?”

“Stay with me?”

“Of course.”

It turned out that Angel wasn’t emotionally prepared to actually sit at his desk, so he brought his books and notebooks over to the bed and worked there, using Kas as a combination backrest and sounding board. Every so often he asked Kas what he thought of an answer, apparently more for reassurance than because he thought Kas knew the answers. At least, Kas hoped so—he hadn’t exactly been paying close attention to every detail of Angel’s classes.

The rift that had sprung up between them wasn’t completely healed but it was, at least, scabbed over enough that they could tread carefully across it. Kas temporarily gave up both on trying to get in on good terms with the other Guides and on getting Angel to socialize with his colleagues, letting them both slide into a tight orbit around each other. Angel continued to do well in Sensory Lab, but Captain Bedell gave him an extra assignment every day, even when he refrained completely from speaking in class.

On Friday, each of the instructors announced that they would be having a test the next day, which threw most of the Sentinels into a flurry of activity, taking pages of notes and asking lots of questions. Angel had been doing those things all along, and didn’t seem to be doing any extra. Kas hoped he would be all right—he seemed unworried, but it was possible he’d freeze up and forget everything he’d learned under the pressure of a test.

Heading back to Angel’s room after Tactics, they passed the other Sentinels in a tight huddle. Grover broke off from the group and came after them. “Temas!”

Angel stopped and turned. “Yes?”

“We got permission from Nagley to have a study group after dinner in his classroom.”

“Okay.”

“Do you want to come?”

Angel glanced up at Kas, who tipped his head. Probably not a bad idea, but it was Angel’s call.

“I guess.”

“Okay. Bring your notes and everything. See you then!”

Angel still sat apart from the other Sentinels at dinner, and seemed a little nervous about going to the study session, but he went. Even if he didn’t get much out of the study session, Kas thought it was good for Angel to push himself out of his comfort zone a little.

When they went to the Tactics classroom after dinner, two of the School Guides were standing outside, ready to be available if any of the Sentinels needed them. Kas wondered if he should wait with them, but Angel took his arm and tugged him inside, so that was that.

Once the group started studying, Kas thought it was pretty clear that the others, particularly Kadinsky and Savard, hadn’t been paying much attention in class or putting much thought into the homework. Grover and Aponte had done a little better, but Angel had the most thorough notes of anyone, and, judging by the others’ reactions to the notes he had taken while doing the reading assignments, it had never even occurred to them to do that.
Admittedly, Kas couldn’t remember ever doing that when he had been in school, either, but he did vaguely remember that teachers suggested it, and it made sense that an A student like Angel would actually do it.

Savard was copying down some definitions from Angel’s notebook when his pencil point broke. “Shit!” He looked over at the pencil sharpener that was by the door, then said, “Guide, sharpen this for me.”

Angel looked confused, and even Kadinsky raised an eyebrow.

She didn’t say anything, though, so after a moment Kas said, “Giving orders to another Sentinel’s Guide is not something that you do. It’s offensive.” If Savard had tried that with any Sentinel but Angel, he would be in a world of shit, innocent mistake or not. “But you’re still learning, so I think Sentinel Temas will pretend that didn’t happen.”

Savard sputtered for a minute, until Kadinsky said, “Actually, he’s right. What you’re supposed to do is ask the other Sentinel if he’d mind having his Guide do something for you.”

“No,” said Angel. “Sharpen your own fucking pencil. What, did you break both your legs since you walked in here?”

“Why don’t you use one of the School Guides,” Kadinsky suggested. “That’s what they’re there for.”

So Savard glared at Angel and then yelled, “Guide!” until one of them came in and sharpened his pencil for him, and then they all got back to work.

Saturday’s exams proved to be anticlimactic. Angel had been preparing the others for the possibility of essay questions, but the actual tests were mostly true/false and fill-in-the-blank. He worked through them quickly and confidently, with no crying or other signs of panic.

After the last class, the Sentinels were directed to form up in the dining room. “What’s going on?” Angel whispered to Kas as they filed out of the classroom.

Kas shook his head. “I guess we’ll see.”

The school Guides were absent from the formation, but Kas took up a position just behind Angel, and nobody said anything about it. Captain Ketner addressed them. “Sentinels, tomorrow is a day off from training. You are expected to remain within the school facility or its immediate grounds. Sign out a Guide if you are leaving the building. We recommend that you use this time to relax and study. The exercise room and TV lounge will be open throughout the day. Meals will be served at the usual times. Training will resume promptly Monday morning. There are some schedule changes for next week; the revised schedule will be posted outside the dining room. Now, the United States Army has figured out where you are, so some of you have mail.”

Kas thought that these announcements were no big deal, but when Ketner started calling out names for mail, Angel turned to him and asked, “What about church?”

Right, he had promised his mother, again. “I don’t know—we’ll have to ask.”

“I don’t want to,” Angel said.

“You like Captain Ketner,” Kes pointed out.

“I still don’t want to. Can you do it?”
Kas wasn’t sure how to answer. On the one hand, Kas knew perfectly well that the liaison officers thought Angel had an unhealthy dependence on him, and that Kas was encouraging it. Doing this simple thing for him would do nothing to dispel that impression. On the other hand, saying no would in effect be refusing an order—even though the order had been phrased as a question—which he shouldn’t be doing at all if he wanted to help Angel come into his authority as a Sentinel, and shouldn’t do in front of the liaison officers in any case. It was equally unclear which approach would be better for Angel—keeping him comfortable or pushing him toward independence. Angel was starting to look worried, now, and went for the option that would at least keep the temporary peace. “Yeah, okay.”

It was good timing because Savard was walking off with an envelope and Ketner called, “Temas.”

“Oh!” Angel scampered up to accept a large box. When he had it, though, he looked disappointed and said, “Oh, Kas, it’s for you.”

Sure enough, the box was addressed to “Charles Dillinger III” and his old ID number. Well, that made it easy to tell who it was from, anyway. “Thanks,” he said, deciding not to explain just then that the Army would be making a habit of giving Angel his mail.

“What is it?” Angel asked.

“I don’t know,” Kas said, even though he had a pretty good idea. “Sir,” he said to Captain Ketner, “Sentinel Temas requests permission to attend chapel tomorrow. The Catholic service.”

Ketner glanced back and forth between him and Angel, and addressed Angel, “Sentinels don’t usually leave the immediate area of the school facility during the first half of training.”

Kas glanced over at Angel, who was not talking, but looked mulish. “Sentinel Temas does have a right to attend the religious service of his choice, sir,” he pointed out.

“They’re very prone to sensory overstimulation at this stage in training,” Ketner explained.

Kas supposed that was true; the others in the class were spiking and zoning regularly. But Angel looked over at him and raised an eyebrow. He had a point. Now they were worried about that? “He had substantial sensory issues in Basic, but he’s pretty stable now, sir.”

Ketner nodded. “What we usually do,” he explained to Angel, “is have the chaplain come serve communion if a trainee requests it. But I’ll write you a pass to chapel if you think you can handle it.”

“Thank you, sir,” Angel said.

Ketner wrote out the pass and told them where the chapel was and when the Catholic service was held. “If you have any difficulty, your Guide will bring you straight back.”

He was looking at Angel, but it was clear who he was really addressing, so Kas said, “Yes, sir.”

Before going back to their room, they stopped by the dining hall to see if the new schedule was there yet. It was. It turned out that on Monday and Wednesday they would have a double period of Theory and no Health, and on Tuesday and Thursday, they’d have double Tactics and no Guide Management. Kas wasn’t sure how Angel would take that—he did seem to like Health, or at least Lieutenant Shiffley—but he seemed pleased.

Back in the room, Kas plunked the package down on Angel’s desk. “Christmas present from my parents, I think,” he explained, starting to cut the tape. He checked the return address—Dean and Deluca, this time. “They always forget that military mail takes extra time.” “Forget” wasn’t really the
accurate word, but he didn’t want to get into that.

“Oh, wow,” Angel said when Kas finally got the box open and revealed an enormous gift basket, topped with a giant green-and-gold bow and crammed with little jars of jelly, cookies, and other treats.

“Yeah,” Kas said. “They always send one.” His first year in the service, his mother had asked what they could send him for Christmas. Really, there wasn’t a lot that he had any use for—he wore uniforms 99% of the time, didn’t have quarters of his own to furnish or decorate, and had to travel light in any case. So he’d suggested care packages—“you know, snacks and stuff.” He supposed it was a little ungrateful of him, but elaborate gourmet gift baskets from Dean and Deluca, Harry and David, or, when they were in Europe around Christmas, Harrod’s, were not exactly what he’d had in mind. The one that came with the set of four bone caviar spoons had been particularly hard to live down. For a while the housekeeper had sent him normal care packages, with Oreos and disposable razors and gum, but she’d stopped working for them at some point, for reasons Kas was never entirely clear on.

This year, though, the usual gift was more-than-usually appropriate. Small amounts of different interesting things to eat would be perfect for tempting Angel’s touchy appetite. “What do you think, dinner in the room tonight?”

“Hm? Oh, are you going to share?”

“Of course.”

Angel pawed through the gift basket, saying, “Oh, this looks good,” and “I’ve never even heard of this,” for a while, then settled down to get some homework out of the way, “So I won’t have to do it tomorrow, Kas.”

When dinnertime came around, Kas ventured downstairs. The dining room had rotated back around to the first menu of chicken, rice, and overcooked vegetables. After rounding up extra plates and utensils for their snacks, some bread, and a jug of hot water they could use to make the teas, hot chocolate, and cider that were in the basket. He fixed them each a small plate—he knew he would want some real food, not just snacks, and there was at least a chance that once Angel got started he might want a full meal.

It proved to be a good idea. After starting off with an assortment of cheeses, salami, and prosciutto, Angel began experimenting with the little jars of sauces, spices, and condiments. Once the chicken was smothered in olive tapenade, and the rice was mixed with sun-dried tomatoes, pickled peppers, and capers, Angel pronounced it entirely worth eating and polished off the entire plate. He was less satisfied with the stone-ground mustard and anchovy experiments, but Kas was willing enough to eat those—he wasn’t sure he’d want to eat them regularly, but at least they made a change from the usual tasteless fare.

In retrospect, he should have realized that part of Angel’s problem with eating—the part not caused by stomach-churning anxiety—was its unrelenting blandness. A lot of Sentinels were easily overwhelmed by intense flavors, particularly spicy ones, but, well, that was just one of the ways Angel was different. Fortunately, there was plenty left—most of the ingredients that Angel had opened would keep at room temperature, and there were plenty of packages they hadn’t opened yet. The only thing Kas was really worried about was the cheese, which he decided to stash on the windowsill.

Turning to the basket again, Angel asked, “What’s for dessert?”
“I don’t know; what do you want to try first?” There was a large assortment of dried fruit, some candied figs, several kinds of cookies, chocolates, and hard candy.

“What’s this?” Angel was examining a small jar.

“Let me see. Oh, caviar.” And here he had left his caviar spoons in Kuwait.

“What’s that?”

“Fish eggs.”

Angel made a face. “I thought it looked like blackberry jam.”

“Yeah, totally different. It’s…kind of good, but not for dessert.” Instead, they had hot chocolate and butter cookies, with Angel leaning companionably against him. Once they had finished, Angel slid his hand over Kas’s, lacing their fingers together, and asked for a link.

“What’s up?” Kas asked, opening it.

Angel looked up at him significantly, and Kas obligingly bent his head so Angel could kiss him.

So far, despite Angel’s admission—and the obvious evidence—that he was really gay, and not just willing to do a male Guide if one was available, as most Sentinels were, they hadn’t done more than kiss and cuddle. He also seemed to take for granted that they ought to link up when they were fooling around, and Kas hadn’t quite figured out how—or whether—to explain that it wasn’t standard practice. You saw it in movies, sometimes, but most real Sentinels thought it was kind of perverse to have sex that way. Kas wasn’t sure why—it was nice enough feeling Angel’s pleasure and love through the link when they made out; sex while linked up almost had to be fantastic.

For now, though, Angel seemed to find kissing with tongues to be sufficiently exciting. After they did that for a while, Kas suggested, “Want a backrub?” It might just be a way to move things along a little—and even if not, he thought Angel would like it.

“Okay,” Angel said, sounding a little puzzled, but game.

“Okay. Take off your shirt, lay down, and get comfy.”

Kas puttered around a bit while Angel did that. He’d given Angel backrubs before, but that had been in the barracks at Basic, where they’d had no privacy and Angel had usually been sore and cranky. Now, they had all the privacy they could use, and Angel was, if not exactly happy, at least reasonably comfortable. This time was going to be different, and he wanted to set the scene. Lights dimmed, check. Candles? Sure, why not. Music? Not a bad idea, except he didn’t know which of the tapes would have something sexy on them. Better not.

Angel was stretched out on the bed, face down, his head resting on crossed arms. “Comfy,” he reported.

“Good.”

Usually, when they had done this before, they’d done it sitting up, or else he’d have Angel lie down and sit next to him. Now, though, Kas straddled him, careful to keep most of his weight on his knees on either side of Angel’s hips.

“Uh, Kas?”
“This okay?” he asked.

“Uh…yeah.”

Putting his hands on Angel’s shoulders, he opened the link again. Angel was slightly wary, but definitely interested. That was fine, then. As Kas started stroking him, the wariness was replaced with contentment.

Kas was good at massage, but it was a little difficult to give a proper massage to someone who was all skin and bones, as Angel was. There weren’t much in the way of muscles to work with. So it was really more of a flimsy pretext for heavy petting, but Angel liked it, anyway.

To be fair, so did Kas. Angel relaxed beneath him, making small sounds of contentment, and Kas felt very close to him, the Bond between them feeling somehow…sticky, but pleasurably so, as if it were something surrounding them in comfort.

It wasn’t an entirely spiritual experience, however, and before long Kas’s physical appreciation of the situation became apparent.

“Uh, Kas?”

This was the part where most Sentinels could be counted on to either become offended or demand an immediate reversal of positions. Or both. Kas had absolutely no idea what Angel was going to do.

“Yeah?”

“Um, you know I have church tomorrow?”

“Yeah?”

“Um, you know I have church tomorrow?”

“Yes?” Kas wasn’t sure what that had to do with anything. They didn’t have to get up any earlier than usual for it—later, in fact—and anyway, it wasn’t late. “We don’t have to do anything you don’t want to,” he said, thinking that maybe Angel was using church as an excuse to slow down something that was going too fast for him.

“I do want to—lemme up.” Kas got off of him and he turned over, revealing to Kas’s practiced eye that yes, he did want to. “But I can’t. Right now. There won’t be any time to confess it before mass.”

“Didn’t you say it was okay, for Bonded Sentinels?” Kas asked.

“It’s okay, but it’s not *that* okay,” Angel answered, which didn’t really shed a lot of light on the situation.

Kas thought about that for a while. “I could, you know. Give you a hand,” he suggested, gesturing toward Angel’s lower body.

Angel gnawed at his thumbnail.

“That’s no good either, huh?”

“It’s not that I don’t *want* to,” Angel said. “I think I should ask the priest about it.”

“Okay. Whatever you’re comfortable with,” Kas said. He just hoped that didn’t mean he was never having sex again for the rest of his life.

A little while later, he took a long shower, and tried not to think about the fact that Angel knew damn well he was masturbating in there. After he was done, though, Angel took a long shower of his own, and Kas didn’t need Sentinel senses to have a pretty good idea why. Apparently doing it by *himself*
was okay.

Not that Kas was bitter or anything.

"Father?" Angel said to the priest, when most of the rest of the soldiers had filed out. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Yes, my son,” the priest, a man not that much older than Kas, said.

“It’s, um, a private question.” He wished he didn’t have to discuss this with a complete stranger. The parish priest at home, who had baptized him and saw his entire family every week, was right out, but he could have asked Father Dougherty before they left Basic. That would have been okay.

“One of those, hm? Let me finish putting these things away, and we can talk in my office.”

Angel waited while the priest cleared the altar and replaced the crucifix with a plain wooden cross, explaining, “The Protestants are next, so we clear away the evidence of our idolatry before they come in, and then after they finish, they put away the evidence of theirs.”

The priest’s office was a little cubbyhole down the hall from the chapel. On the way there they passed Kas, who had elected to wait outside while Angel was at mass. Angel waved.

“Good luck,” Kas subvocalized as they walked by.

Once the priest had taken off his vestments and was just in his regular uniform and clerical collar, Angel felt a little less shy about asking him sex questions. “So, um, Father…."

“Romero,” the priest supplied.

“I’m, uh, a Sentinel.”

“Yes, I noticed,” Father Romero said, nodding at the insignia on Angel’s uniform.

“Right. I’m, er, Bonded. That was him, outside.” That seemed the easiest way to make clear that he was asking about the kind of sex that couldn’t be sanctified by holy marriage.

“I see.”

“So I was wondering about, well, you know. Sex.”

“Yes,” Romero said, nodding. “It’s a difficult issue. The Church encourages opposite sex Bonds so that both Sentinels and Guides may enjoy the full expression of their Bond through the sacrament of marriage.”

“I know,” said Angel.

“But for you, it’s a little late for that,” Romero acknowledged. “There are two things that you have to consider. Sex outside of marriage is a sin, true. But within marriage, sexuality strengthens the bond between husband and wife and is a mirror of divine love. The Church teaches us that within marriage, each spouse has both a duty and a right to those things that belong to conjugal life.”

“Uh-huh.” They had done a whole unit on Marriage and Family in Religion class at school; it wasn’t like any of this was news.
“And a Bond, while not a sacramental marriage, is not unlike a marriage. It could be argued that to deny your Bonded Guide the full happiness of conjugal life is cruelty, which is also a sin.”

“Okay,” Angel said doubtfully. It sounded like Father Romero was saying that he both should and shouldn’t have sex with Kas, which was not exactly helpful.

“So if a Bonded pair engage in sexual acts for the purpose of strengthening a Bond which is pleasing to God, it may not be a mortal sin, and may even in some cases be an unavoidable one.”

“So,” Angel said, “you can do it, but you still have to confess it?” That was pretty much what he’d thought to begin with.

“The official position of the Church is that same-sex Bonds should be avoided so that these concerns don’t arise,” Father Romero said carefully. “So you understand that I can’t tell you to go ahead and do it. But yes, in practice, that is the way most Sentinels in your situation resolve the issue. To be on the safe side, you should not receive Communion when you have sins of this nature that you have not confessed.”

“Okay.” Angel nodded. That had been what he wanted to know.

“However,” Father Romero added, before he could get up, “the Church is very clear that even inside marriage, the purpose of sexuality is procreation—which doesn’t apply here—and the expression of love and unity between spouses, which does apply. Expression of power and dominance is not an acceptable use of God-given sexuality, nor is mere satisfaction of physical urges, regardless of what kind of plumbing you and your spouse have.” He opened a filing cabinet and thumbed through it. “Here,” he said, handing Angel a pamphlet titled, “Sentinel-Guide Marriage in the Catholic Church,” and keeping one for himself. “Some parts of this aren’t relevant, of course, but this part is.” He read, “‘The whole essence of the marriage contract consists in the surrender by the persons of their bodies to each other.’ To each other. It’s not a surrender of one to the other. Do you understand?”

“Yes.” He didn’t have a problem with that. In fact, in terms of what Captain Bedell was trying to teach him, it was how much he didn’t have a problem with that that was the problem.

“If your Bond has any chance of being pleasing to God, it must be founded on that basis. In the eyes of the Army, your Guide is your subordinate, but in the eyes of God, you are equal at the soul. You belong to him as much as he belongs to you.”

“Yes, Father.” Angel had absolutely no argument with that.

“Your instructors over at the Sentinel School teach you that your Guide’s consent is required for sexual activity—right?”

He nodded. “Well, not yet, but I read ahead in the textbook.”

“God holds you to a higher standard. The Church teaches that sexuality should be a willing and joyful expression of love. Obtaining half-hearted consent, or gaining consent through manipulation or through an exercise of authority isn’t good enough, and is always a mortal sin and displeasing to God.”

“Yes, sir. Father.”

Father Romero glanced over at the door. “I saw your Guide, and I can see why you’d think it’s pretty unlikely that you could ever make him do anything he didn’t want to do. But you are his Sentinel, and that gives you a tremendous amount of power over him. It’s absolutely essential to avoid any hint of coercion, both for his well-being and your own spiritual welfare.”
Angel nodded soberly. He hadn’t really thought about that, and now that he did, it was scary. Even though he didn’t want to boss Kas around, it was clear enough that Kas was prepared to obey him if he did. This whole issue was a lot more complicated than he first thought.

#

Angel was very subdued when he came out of the priest’s office. “Bad news?” Kas asked. Maybe he should have encouraged Angel to talk to the priest back at Basic; he was pretty sure that guy, at least, was as non-homophobic as it was possible for a Catholic priest to be.

“Hm? No, just…a lot to think about.”

“I see,” Kas said, even though he wasn’t sure he did.

Apparently eating breakfast was another thing you weren’t supposed to do before communion, or so Angel had said that morning. By the time they got back, the kitchen and dining room were empty. Kas, on the grounds that no one had told him he couldn’t, commandeered the kitchen to fix Angel some toast, served with two kinds of jelly from the gift basket, and what he hoped was a reasonable approximation of café con leche, while Angel perched on one of the counters, idly swinging his feet.

“Does your grandmother let you sit on the counters in her kitchen?” Kas asked him. Kas had certainly never seen him doing it.

Angel paused in kicking the cabinet. “No.”

“But you think you should be doing it here?”

Not having a good answer for that, Angel hopped down.

“Thank you.”

There was a table in the kitchen where the Guides sometimes ate, but Kas wasn’t sure if it was appropriate for Angel to sit there, so they took breakfast back to their room. Angel pronounced the orange marmalade nasty, but happily ate several slices of toast with plum-quince jelly. “This isn’t bad. It would be better on Cuban bread. I wonder if I could get mami to send us some? Is that allowed?”

“What, your parents sending you food? I hope so,” Kas said, gesturing at the giant basket. “Bread might get stale, though.”

“She could overnight it.”

“That just means the Army will get it overnight. They can still take extra time to get it here.”

“Oh.”

“But since we’re in the US, it might not be too much longer. Might be worth a try.”

“I’ll ask when I write today,” Angel decided.

“What else is on the agenda for today?”

Angel shrugged. “I don’t know. I did all my work yesterday. What do you want to do?”

“I have no plans.” He sort of wanted to go for a run—being cooped up in this building for the better part of a week had left him with a need to stretch his legs that the short walk to chapel hadn’t filled.
But he wasn’t sure if he was restricted to the building and immediate area, too, or even if he wasn’t, if Angel would be happy being left on his own. Better just to forget it.

But Angel said, “Captain Ketner said there was an exercise room.”

“You…want to work out?” That seemed highly unlikely.

“No, but I thought you might.”

“I’m pretty sure the gym is just for the Sentinels.”

“Oh.” Angel looked thoughtful. “Well, I could go with you and pretend to be exercising if I hear anyone coming.”

Kas was reasonably sure that any of the liaison officers would see through that in a second, but on the other hand…no one had actually told him he couldn’t use the Sentinels’ exercise room. No one had told him anything, in fact, except for Signorelli, on the first night, saying he should do what his Sentinel told him to do. And it was entirely plausible that Angel might have reasons of his own for wanting Kas to be in peak physical shape, so… “Okay. If you want to.”

“I want to if you want to.”

Okay.”

Angel decided to write his letter next, so Kas took their dishes back downstairs and washed them, taking the opportunity to scout out where the others were. Sentinels Kadinsky and Savard were outside playing basketball on a hoop tacked to the side of the building, watched over by Collins and Vosberg, and Lamotte was washing windows in the classrooms. The other two Sentinels, Signorelli, and Doolan were nowhere to be found, and neither were any of the instructors. The coast was relatively clear, then.

Back in their room, Angel wasn’t quite done with his letter. Sitting down on the bed, Kas picked up the pamphlet he’d brought back from the priest’s office and tossed aside in favor of breakfast. “Sentinel-Guide Marriage in the Catholic Church.” Now that was a case of closing the barn door after the horse had already run off and Bonded with another man.

Glancing through it, he saw pretty much what he expected. Sex outside marriage a sin, opposite sex Bonds encouraged, sex permissible only if Bond sanctified by holy marriage, yadda-yadda. Reading between the lines, Kas gathered that there was no sex in his immediate future. Probably best to let Angel make the next move, or at least wait a good long while. Angel might be the Sentinel of the two of them, but he was also used to doing what Kas said, and was a lot younger, besides. They had plenty of time, and Kas pressuring him, even inadvertently, wouldn’t do either of them any good in the long run.

Angel took the giant medical textbook Lieutenant Shiffley had given him along to the gym, and remained happily occupied long enough for Kas to run a couple of miles on the treadmill. He would have liked to lift some weights, too, but by that point, Angel was starting to get a little antsy, so Kas decided not to push things.

They went exploring and found the lounge, which, unlike the lounges in Basic, appeared to be used for actual relaxation. There were a couple of couches, a TV, and a shelf with a few books, puzzles, and board games. After Angel had wandered around the room for a few minutes, shooting anxious glances at the TV, Kas suggested, “Why don’t you see if there’s anything on?”

“Are you sure we’re allowed?”
“Yeah, I’m sure.”

“It seems weird that the Army lets you watch TV.”

“The Army isn’t like Basic,” Kas reminded him. “They get that everybody needs some down-time.” Well, everybody except Guides, anyway.

Angel warily turned on the TV and found an old movie, eventually settling down enough to curl up on one of the couches with his head on Kas’s shoulder.

After they had been watching for a while, Angel suddenly tensed and sat up, looking anxiously at the door. He settled himself down again without explanation, but a moment later, Kas heard Savard and Aponte coming down the hallway. He supposed they had been lucky to have the lounge to themselves for this long.

When they came in, though, Savard immediately went up to the TV and changed it to a channel that was getting ready to show a football game.

“We were watching that,” Angel pointed out.

“And now we’re watching this,” Savard said. He continued in a mock-friendly tone, “Why don’t you go play with dolls or suck your Guide’s dick or something?”

“Why don’t you go fuck your mother?” Kas answered, getting to his feet.

Savard stepped closer to them, all pretense of friendliness gone. “What did you say, Guide?”

“I said, why don’t you go fuck your mother? And it’s Sergeant.”

Leaning in even closer to them, Savard opened his mouth to say something.

“Kas!” Angel yelped, hanging off of his arm.

“Yeah?” Kas said, not taking his eyes off Savard.

“Let’s just go.”

That was—well, that was pretty much an order, or the closest he was going to get from Angel. “Yeah. Okay,” he said, tearing his eyes away from Savard.

“This isn’t over!” Savard called after them.

“You bet your ass it’s not!” Kas answered.

He had to hurry to keep up with Angel, who was still clutching his arm and speeding toward their room.

Once they were there, he explained, “You don’t, uh, you don’t want to back down from a guy like that.”

“Why not?” Angel asked, sitting down at his desk.

“He’ll think he won.”

“So?”
“So…” Kas floundered.

“Is there anything he can do to us?”

“Well….” Apart from tell the liaison officers that Kas had mouthed off to him, not much. And Kas wasn’t really sure how bad that was. Talking to his own Sentinel like that would land him up to his neck in shit, but Savard was nothing to him. “Not really.”

“Then I don’t care. Five weeks from now we’ll leave and we’ll never see him again. He thinks he won—big fucking deal.”

For a moment, Kas wasn’t sure he had heard right. “You get that it was a deliberate insult, right? Stomping in and changing the channel like that, without even asking?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you don’t care.”

“Well,” said Angel, “I kind of want to know how the movie ends.”

Unbelievable. Sentinels were notoriously competitive—put more than one in the same area, and the first thing they’d do was establish a hierarchy. Kadinsky had established herself as alpha bitch from the beginning, followed by Savard as top dog, then Aponte and Grover. Angel was the only one without a clear place in the pecking order. Kas had assumed, without really thinking about it, that he was at the bottom by default because he didn’t really understand what was going on, or was too scared of his own shadow to fight for a higher place, but…apparently he just didn’t give a shit.

That was…fine. Weird, but fine.

But was the reason that he wasn’t taking up his rightful authority over Kas also that he didn’t give a shit? That was…less fine, somehow. He was right that in the long run, it didn’t matter where Angel stood in relation to Savard and the others; after five more weeks, he would never see them again. But what was between them was for life, and it mattered a lot.

“Okay,” he finally said. “I mean, I guess you’re right. Fuck ‘im.”

Angel nodded. “Fuck ‘im,” he echoed. “There is one thing I don’t get.”

“Okay.”

“What he said about, um, sucking your dick?”

“That was an insult too.”

“I got that,” Angel said. “I don’t get why.”

“Because….” Well, it was obvious.

“I get why it’s normally an insult,” Angel added. “He’s saying I’m un maricon, a faggot. But we’re Sentinels. It’s normal for Sentinels to have sex with their Guides, isn’t it?”

“Um, right,” Kas said. “It is.” He wasn’t sure if it was better or worse that they were having this discussion before actually having sex. “But normally the Sentinel is the one, uh, getting sucked,” he explained.

Angel gnawed at his lip. “That makes a difference?”
“Yeah. The one getting sucked off is still a real man.” Angel was starting to look worried, so Kas quickly added, “I mean, that’s what people think.”

“People like Savard,” Angel said.

“Right.”

“But you don’t think that.”

Kas said, “No, of course not,” because that was obviously the right answer, although he hadn’t given it much thought. He certainly didn’t think that sucking off the occasional Sentinel made him less of a man. But was Angel implying that he wouldn’t have a problem with doing things the other way around? Kas wasn’t sure how he felt about that. He guessed there wouldn’t be anything wrong with it, really, if that was something Angel wanted to do. But it was a little weird.

“Okay,” Angel said, nodding.

And, really, Angel seemed perfectly content. Later, when they went down to dinner, Kas was poised for a confrontation when they saw Savard again, but all he did was brush past Angel and mutter, “Faggot,” in a tone obviously meant to be heard. Angel just looked back at him and shrugged, as if to say, “Yes, and your point is?”

Kas was glad that Angel decided to eat in the dining room that night—if they had gone back to the room, it would have looked a little too much like he was allowing himself to be chased off yet again. He had brought down several jars of condiments, but if Angel had no problem with being seen as a bit eccentric, then Kas didn’t, either.

After they had eaten, though, Captain Bedell said to Angel, “Send your Guide down to see me, once you’re through with him.”

Well, shit. Still, Angel was looking up at him anxiously, so Kas was careful to just nod and not look upset.

“That’s an order, Temas,” Bedell added.

Angel at least remembered to say, “Yes, sir,” before dragging Kas upstairs again. “What was that about? What does he want?”

“Probably to tell me not to tell the other Sentinels to go fuck their mothers,” Kas answered. Angel went wide-eyed and he added, “I’m not worried.” Not much, anyway. He was glad that Bedell had asked to see him without Angel. There was sure to be yelling, but Kas was not particularly bothered by that. Ten or fifteen minutes of looking contrite and saying, “Yes, sir,” and it would all be over.

Still, he figured the sooner he could get back and show Angel that he was completely fine, the better off he’d be, Kas got him settled down with a book and reported down to Captain Bedell’s office.

When he got there, he almost wished that Bedell had started with the yelling. Instead he led with, “Guide, do you know why I’ve called you here?”

And there wasn’t really a good answer to that. Finally he went with, “Yes, sir,” because answering only the question that was asked, without elaborating, was always a good way to keep your ass covered.

“And why is that?”
Damn. “There was an altercation between Sentinel Savard and my Sentinel in the lounge today, sir,” he answered, figuring that was the least provocative way to put it.

“Incorrect. There was an altercation between you and Sentinel Savard in the lounge today.”

That was not entirely accurate, but Kas sensed that Bedell would not be interested in hearing his side of the story, and just said, “Yes, sir.”

“I realize that Sentinel Temas allows you to do whatever the fuck you please, Guide, but that is not acceptable in my School. You will treat the other Sentinels with the respect they deserve, do I make myself clear?”

“Yes, sir.”

“And you do not outrank any Sentinel in this building, whether you’re a Sergeant or not—which you will not be for much longer, if I have anything to say about it.”

“Yes, sir.” Captain Bedell did not, Kas knew, have that much to say about it. He could recommend that Kas be busted down to Corporal or otherwise disciplined, but it would take more than one report for anything to actually happen. Probably.

He went on in that vein for some time, and Kas went on saying, “Yes, sir,” every time he paused, until he wound up with, “And by God, your Sentinel will learn to control you, or I will take you in hand myself. You might want to think about that next time you take it into your head to sabotage his training. Am I understood?”

Could he do that? The main reason G-TAC liaison officers had to be placated was that they could see to it you were assigned to the worst Sentinel they could find. But he and Angel were Bonded; he was Angel’s, and that was that. Not even a G-TAC Captain could come between a Sentinel and his Bonded Guide.

Except…well, it was Angel. What would he do if Bedell decided to “take him in hand”? Cry, probably.

Bedell got in his face and bellowed, “Am I understood, Guide?”

Careful not to flinch back, Kas said, “Yes, sir.”

“Dismissed.”

Kas took his time going back upstairs, making sure he’d be ready to convincingly tell Angel that everything was fine. If Angel knew what Bedell had said, he’d just be upset, and then he’d need even more reassurance, and it would be even more difficult to make it look like he was controlling Kas properly.

“What happened?” Angel asked when he came in. “Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” Kas said. “He just told me to treat the other Sentinels with the respect they deserve.”

“Hmph.”

“Yeah.”

“You sure you’re okay?”
“Uh-huh.” He gave Angel a hug, to reassure him.

He was still worried, though, and after a while made an excuse to go down to the Guides’ room. The others, he thought, would have some idea whether Bedell’s threat was an empty one, and if not, what the best kind of damage control would be.

When he got there, though, he realized that he had forgotten where he was. He had thought that the other Guides were starting to warm up to him, but if anything, they froze him out more thoroughly now than they had when he and Angel had first arrived. None of them so much as looked up when he said hello.

He supposed it made a certain amount of sense. Bedell was their commanding officer, and they were going to be stuck with him long after Kas and Angel had left. Regular Guides, assigned to Sentinels, knew that no matter how difficult a given Sentinel was, they would eventually get to make a fresh start with another one, and really, most of the Sentinels were all right, once they got used to you. But nobody he knew had ever heard of a School Guide being assigned somewhere else, so probably the five of them were stuck with Bedell indefinitely.

After a few awkward minutes, he left. He wasn’t going to get any help there, and shouldn’t make things worse for the other Guides by asking.

He paused on the stair landing and took a lean against the wall, taking stock of the available resources. The other Guides were a washout. So were the other Sentinels. While ordinarily he’d be loath to ask a liaison officer for anything, desperate times called for desperate measures. Captain Ketner, he decided, was the best choice for a possible ally. He and Lieutenant Shiffley seemed to like Angel well enough, and Ketner was the senior of the two of them.

He might not even be around, of course. Kas decided there was no harm in swinging by his office, just to find out.

Ketner was in. Or, at least, the door to his office was ajar and the light was on. Hoping he wasn’t making a terrible mistake, Kas knocked.

“‘Yes?’”

“It’s Sergeant Temas, sir.”

“Ah.” The door opened the rest of the way. “Come in. I’m glad you stopped by.”

“Uh, yes sir.”

“Have a seat, Sergeant,” Ketner said, once he was back in his own chair.

Kas sat down, awkwardly. He decided to wait and see if Ketner would volunteer why, exactly, he was glad Kas had stopped by.

“Well,” Ketner finally said, after looking at Kas for a long time. “I understand there was a problem in the lounge earlier today.”

“Yes, sir.”

“And I understand that Captain Bedell took it upon himself to address the problem with you, without your Sentinel present.”

“Yes, sir,” Kas said again.
“He shouldn’t have done that, and I’ll be speaking to him about it. As G-TAC’s representative, he has command over the School Guides, but you are not a School Guide. And he certainly should have realized that undermining your Sentinel’s authority is not at all productive at this point.”

That was the opening he needed—what Bedell had suggested went a step beyond undermining Angel’s authority—even if that authority was entirely theoretical at the moment. “Yes, sir. Captain Bedell had suggested that if Sentinel Temas doesn’t…” Kas hesitated over the word choice.

“Manage me to Captain Bedell’s satisfaction, he’ll do so himself. I’m concerned about the effect that would have on Sentinel Temas.”

“Yes, and you’re right to be. It would not be appropriate for him to interfere in matters of discipline between you and your Sentinel unless Sentinel Temas were to ask for his help.”

There wasn’t much of a chance of that happening, at least. Kas relaxed fractionally.

“I’ve seen your service record, and the report sent to me by Sergeant Macon over at Fort Benning. The situation isn’t ideal, but I think it’s fairly clear that you’re doing your best to do right by your Sentinel.”

“Yes, sir,” he said promptly. It was good to hear that somebody had noticed.

“Your position here is very irregular, and I think there’s a lot of uncertainty about exactly where you stand, on everyone’s part as well as yours. Add in the complete mess that was your chain of command at your last assignment, and it’s not at all surprising that you’re confused.”

“Yes, sir,” Kas said, with a fervency that made Captain Ketner smile.

“I’m still trying to sort it out myself, but rest assured, we’ll have some clarity on the issue in the next few days. That should make things a lot easier for you. You aren’t supposed to have to figure this sort of thing out on your own.”

Kas was aware that he was being condescended to, but didn’t mind it quite as much as he usually did. If the situation was confusing to a Captain, it was no surprise it was over the head of a mere Sergeant, Guide or not. “Yes, sir.”

“It’s also unsurprising that Sentinel Temas is having some difficulty adjusting to his role as your Sentinel. I understand that at Fort Jackson you were carrying out Sergeant Macon’s orders in regards to Temas’s training, but the irregularity of the situation may have inadvertently left him with the impression that you had more authority than you did.”

“It may have, sir,” Kas agreed. In fact, he had had more authority than he was supposed to, because Sergeant Macon had really just signed off on the training plans Kas developed. “I have been trying to follow his lead, now that we’re here, but…” He wasn’t sure how you said, “But there is no lead there to follow, so it’s not going well,” to your Sentinel’s CO.

“I understand. The situation should never have been allowed to develop in this way, but it’s not your fault. I’ll be personally making sure that Sentinel Temas gets the support he needs to develop his leadership abilities.”

That wasn’t so different from what Captain Bedell had said, but Kas felt better about it coming from Ketner. He could believe that Ketner actually meant to help Angel, and not just use Kas to punish him for not living up to expectations he didn’t understand. “Thank you, sir.”

Ketner nodded. “Thank you for coming to talk with me, Sergeant. The Guides here see more of the Sentinels than we do, outside of classes, so it’s important for you to keep us in the loop about what’s
“Oh. Kas had been thinking that Savard must have tattled to the instructors about what he’d said, which had surprised him because he would have expected Savard to deal with it himself. But there had been a couple of Guides hanging around in the hallway outside the lounge. That explained it.

“Yes, sir.”

“All right, you’re dismissed. Go take care of your Sentinel.”

#

“Good morning, Sentinels,” Captain Ketner said Monday morning in Theory. “This week we’ll be starting scent work. Scent, along with hearing and eyesight, are the three senses that will be most useful to you in the field. Today we’ll start with an overview and do a little work in the lab on establishing control of your scent ability. The process is very similar to what we worked on last week with hearing, but many Sentinels find it a little more difficult to establish control.”

That made sense, Angel supposed—most people didn’t pay much attention to scent, unless they were Sentinels. That was probably why they had the double period today.

“Tomorrow in lab we’ll work on understanding how scent evidence changes over time—how you can tell a more recent scent from an older one—and on Wednesday we’ll have an outside lab, because you’ll find that doing scent work outdoors is very different from working in a closed room. We’ll be scheduling several more of those to give you practice working in different conditions. Later we’ll get into scent discrimination, identifying different substances that you may encounter in the field, and also understanding what you can learn from a human scent trail.”

Laura raised her hand.

“Yes, Sentinel Grover?”

“What about dealing with adverse scents?”

“We’ll talk a little about that today, and in the last week of our session we’ll be doing a lab on that.”

Angel glanced back at Kas. Back at boot camp, when the rest of the squad had done the gas mask drill, Kas had mentioned that Sentinels did something with tear gas at Sentinel School. That was probably what Captain Ketner meant. He wasn’t looking forward to that at all.

“By the time we get there, we’ll be sure that you’re prepared for it,” Captain Ketner added.

Next, he talked for a while about how scents were recognized by the brain and olfactory nerve, which Angel thought was very interesting.

“The only objects that have a scent are those that give off molecules. As Sentinels, with proper training you will be able to detect these molecules at much lower concentrations than ordinary humans, but you will not be able to use scent to detect objects that are completely inert, because they give off no molecules for you to detect.”

Ethan raised his hand. “So you’re saying that when you smell something, that means little pieces of it are actually in your nose?”

“Yes, that’s correct.”

“So if somebody steps in dog crap and you smell it, that means…”
Captain Ketner nodded.

“That’s gross, sir.”

“That may be, but I didn’t design the human body. You’ll have to take that up with the Creator. Now, some items do not have a scent of their own—for example, a weapon that is made entirely of steel. But you may be able to detect and identify these items through other scents that are associated with them: gun oil or gunpowder, for example, or rust if the steel has begun to break down. But a gun that has not been fired or cleaned recently, but has not yet begun to rust, will have no odor. For that reason, you cannot, for example, be absolutely certain that an individual is unarmed based on scent alone, no matter how good you are at scent work.”

For a moment, that seemed like a strange example to Angel, until he remembered that the rest of the Sentinels were going to be soldiers. He supposed it would be a good thing to know, if you were. Not so much for being a doctor. Would scent work be much use for a doctor? Hearing, definitely, since that way you could hear heart and lung sounds without a stethoscope, and maybe get more information from them even with one. Scent…well, there were a few metabolic diseases that produced characteristic scents. He remembered reading about how in a long time ago, before chemical testing, doctors used to diagnose diabetes by the sweet smell of a patient’s urine. There were probably more ways that he could use it that he hadn’t learned about yet.

After Captain Ketner talked a little more, they moved into the lab, where he handed out little racks of test tubes, with a cotton ball inside each one.

“Each of these scent samples contains a decreasing concentration of essential oil. These should all be pleasant, familiar scents. Open the first sample and give it a try.”

Angel opened the test tube marked “1” and sniffed at it. Peppermint. That was easy.

“If at any point during the exercise you begin to feel overwhelmed, you can step over here by the air filter for a sensory break.”

Angel wasn’t sure why anyone would be overwhelmed, but he noticed that Troy was recoiling away from his sample and looking a little green. Maybe he didn’t like peppermint.

Captain Ketner had the Guides come up to them for the next part, which was nice. Angel always liked having Kas with him in class, even though it was a little weird to have him kneeling next to him. There were only five chairs in the room, so there wasn’t exactly anywhere else for him to sit, but it seemed like since they always had Guides with them in Lab, the school could have invested in some more seats.

He worked through his next four test tubes pretty quickly, filling in the answers in his lab notebook. Vanilla. Orange. Some kind of flower he didn’t know. Cinnamon. For each one he had to ease the dial up a little bit.

The last sample, though, didn’t smell like anything. He nudged the dial up twice; still nothing.

“I can’t get this one,” he told Kas.

“Where’s your dial?”

“Um…six and a half.” He usually stayed below five.

“That’s not too high. Try turning it up a little bit more.”
By taking the dial up to seven and a half and concentrating very hard, he got the faintest whiff of Christmas trees.

Some time later, he heard Kas saying, “—voice, Angel. Follow me back.”

Oh. He must have zoned. “Sorry,” he said, pulling out of it.

“You’re fine,” Kas said. “I think what you did there was, you turned down all of your other senses when you turned up your scent dial. That does make it easier to detect something very faint, but it also makes it easier to zone out. Why don’t you take a minute, and then try again when you’re ready.”

That sounded like a good idea, so Angel put the stopper back on test tube six and had a look around. Captain Ketner was watching him, but he didn’t look mad or anything, so that was okay. And then he had to go help Ethan, who was zoning on…it looked like sample three.

Angel reminded himself that he did not care about being better than Ethan. Even though he obviously was. He should be more charitable, anyway, since he had Kas and Ethan was stuck with Collins. He had never worked with any of the other Guides, but it stood to reason that Kas was the best one.

He decided to try sample six again, starting out at six and a half on his dial. “I think I can smell it, but I’m not sure,” he told Kas. “Since I know what it is now. I might be imagining it.”

“Smell one of the others,” Kas suggested. “Then come back to six.”

He did the cinnamon one, then tried six again. “I was imagining it.”

“Okay. See if you can bring up your scent dial a little more, but keep the others ones where they are.”

He tried, but each time he got scent up above seven, the others slid down. “I can’t get it. Help me?”

Kas didn’t answer, but the next time Angel edged his scent dial up, he felt Kas steadying the others. “I got it.”

“Good.” When Kas released his other dials, Angel felt them waver, but got them under control.

Captain Ketner came over and looked at his notebook. “How are you doing here? You had a little trouble with four?”

That was the one where he’d written “Flower?” “Not really,” Angel said. “I could smell it fine; I just don’t know what it is. It’s not rose or gardenia. Those are the flowers my mother likes. It’s nice, though.”

“Fair enough. It’s supposed to be lilac.”

“I’ve seen lilac-scented soap and stuff in the store, but I’m not sure I’ve ever met a real lilac,” Angel said.

“Hm. You’re from Florida, aren’t you?”

He nodded.

“Now that you mention it, they might not grow that far south. All right—and you made it up to six?”
“They don’t grow in Florida, either, but they bring them in on trucks at Christmas. I zoned a little bit on that one,” he admitted.

“That’s normal. All right. There’s a little time left in the period, so run through these again.”

That was a little boring, but as he did them he played around with his dials, figuring out how low he could go on each one and still detect it, and how high he could go before it started bothering him. He was able to do six this time without zoning and without Kas holding his dials, so he finished the lesson feeling like he had learned a lot.

Lunch was beef stew, which he didn’t think was so bad, especially once he had touched it up with some pepper flakes from Kas’s Christmas present, but Bernadette dropped her plate and gagged, and was helped out by one of the Guides, presumably so she could throw up in private. Angel tried very hard to feel sorry for her.

That was even harder, though, when they went to G-TAC class and he heard another of the Guides telling Captain Bedell that she was resting in her room and wasn’t well enough to come to class. Maybe he should have made more of a fuss over the tuna last week. He was pretty sure he could have thrown up if he tried, and to get out of G-TAC class, it might have been worth it.

“Today we’re going to watch a training film that some of us should benefit from.” Since Captain Bedell was looking right at him when he said, “some of us,” Angel was pretty sure he wasn’t going to like this.

Unlike most of Captain Bedell’s training films, the way it started off was not so bad. As the picture followed a Sentinel in uniform walking across an Army base, the voice-over announcer said, “When Lieutenant Miller went to his first assignment after Officer Candidate School, he wanted to be well-liked by his men and his Guide.”

That sounded reasonable enough.

The film showed Miller meeting his Guide, shaking his hand and smiling. Then Miller did some paperwork while the Guide sat and looked at a newspaper.

“After his duty shift,” said the announcer, “Lieutenant Miller took his Guide to the Officer’s Club for a friendly drink.”

“When we’re off duty,” Miller said, “you can call me Bill. Don’t worry about that ‘sir’ stuff.”

The film showed Bill and his Guide, Tom, talking and laughing, the accumulation of glasses on their table suggesting the passing of time. Then there were some more little scenes of Bill and his Guide around the base—in Bill’s office, in their quarters, hanging out with some of the other men from the unit. It all looked perfectly fine to Angel, but after a week of Guide Management class, he knew that if it looked fine to him, it had to look completely not-fine to Captain Bedell.

“After a few months, Lieutenant Miller’s unit is deployed overseas.” Some more shots of Bill and Tom getting settled in an Army camp. “One night, Lieutenant Miller is on guard duty. All is quiet for several hours, until Miller hears the enemy approaching.” A tight shot of Miller’s ear was apparently meant to show exactly what he was using to hear the enemy, in case anyone wasn’t sure.

“Hey, Tom, I think I hear the enemy,” said Bill, reaching for his radio.

The announcer continued, “but the enemy are aware that the Army has a Sentinel, and employ sound-baffling devices to send him into a zone.” A low buzzing sound stood in for the sound-baffling devices, whatever they were.
The next shot was a closeup of the Guide character’s face, showing a terrified expression.

“Tom lacks the appropriate discipline to keep him to his duty.”

Tom was shown running away, leaving Bill standing at the gate, where the vaguely Asian-looking enemy soldiers came up and shot him. “Since Lieutenant Miller was unable to warn the rest of his unit, their position is quickly overtaken by the enemy. Those who are not killed are taken prisoner.” A few more shots showed actors pretending to be dead, the Asian people grinning manically, and other soldiers being led out of the camp with their hands behind their heads.

“Lieutenant Miller’s desire for popularity has cost him his life, his unit their freedom, and may even cost the United States the war.”

The film ended, and Captain Bedell turned the lights back on. “What mistakes did we see Lieutenant Miller make? Sentinel Temas, why don’t you start.”

Angel wasn’t stupid; he knew what the film was trying to show. He also knew what the post hoc, ergo prompter hoc fallacy was. After briefly considering giving Bedell the answer he was looking for, he instead said, “He fell afoul of the rules of narrative irony, sir.”

“Excuse me?”

“Well, sir, since he’s a character in a movie, it’s obvious that whatever he did in the beginning was going to come back to haunt him in the end.” Angel had always been good at language arts. “It’s like that one story they have you read in English class about the lady who borrows the necklace and then ends up working her fingers to the bone for the rest of her life to replace it after she loses it. It only seems like it was inevitable because it’s a story and the author made it happen that way. You’d have to be pretty stupid to read it and decide you should never borrow anything from anyone because you might end up paying for it for the rest of your life.”

Captain Bedell did some yelling after that, but Angel was ready for it. He did feel a little shaky inside, but he cranked down his hearing dial so it wasn’t too bad, and concentrated on the spot in his head where his Bond with Kas was, and it wasn’t so bad.

“I said, Sentinel, are you calling the United States Army stupid?”

Whoops, maybe he had turned down his hearing a little too far. “No, sir, I’m comparing the film to a classic work of literature.”

More yelling. Eventually, Captain Bedell turned his attention to the others members of the class, who were more willing to give him the answers he wanted. He wrote everything out on the chalkboard and told Angel to copy it over ten times for tomorrow.

“We don’t have this class tomorrow,” Angel pointed out.

“Bring it to my office.”

“Yes, sir.”

“By lunch time.”

“Yes, sir.”

Once they were out in the hallway, Kas pulled him into an alcove and hugged him. “You all right?”
“Yeah,” Angel said. It was nice to be held, though, and he leaned against Kas for a while before pulling away. “I think he’s tired of reading my essays.” He had a feeling he never wrote quite what Captain Bedell was looking for.

Kas smiled. “Maybe. We’d better get you to Tactics—we can talk more about it later if you want to, okay?”

Angel nodded. He did have some questions—he thought he already knew the answers, but it would be good to check with Kas to be sure.

Tactics that day was about the different ways they could use scent “in the field.” Captain Nagley talked about tracking an enemy, identifying where enemies had been, how many were in a party and how they were armed. None of it was particularly relevant for Angel, but he could see how it fit in with what they were doing in Lab, and he got a few more ideas about what he might be able to do in his actual career. One of the things Nagley mentioned was how Sentinels in Vietnam had been able to tell whether a camp had been used by Vietnamese or Westerners by the scent of their waste, which left Angel wondering if dietary deficiencies could be diagnosed by scent. He made a note to ask Lieutenant Shiffley.

“Okay,” he said to Kas when they were back in their room. “I think that if Guides running away when their Sentinels were in trouble was a real problem that exists, Captain Bedell would have said so instead of showing us that stupid movie. Right?”

“Right,” Kas agreed. “But remember what we talked about in Basic—a big part of the reason for military discipline is to keep people doing their jobs even when they’re scared.”

“But it’s not a particular problem with Guides. Is it?”

“Not that I know of.”

“And I don’t have to worry about it anyway, because I’m not going to be in combat, and even if I were, my Guide is you.”

Kas smiled slightly. “True. Although…he’s not wrong. I mean, Sentinels have to be able to trust that their Guides are going to stick with them when they really need them. If you are using a lot of different Guides in the years before you Bond, like most Sentinels do, you have to know you can count on them, even if you don’t have a close personal relationship with them.”

“That makes sense,” Angel agreed. He supposed if he was Ethan or Laura or one of the others, the idea of trusting a bunch of different strangers like that would be scary. “Except the movie made it look like if you do have a close relationship with your Guide, that makes them less likely to help you. I can see how it’s not necessary, but I don’t see how it can hurt.”

“Well,” Kas said, then stopped. “It’s like….” He stopped again. “I have to think about this a minute.”

“Okay,” Angel agreed. “I’ll start my copying while you think.”

“I could do the copying,” Kas suggested. “He only did that because of what I did yesterday. I think Captain Ketner told him he’s not allowed to do anything to me, so….”

“He’d know,” Angel pointed out. “He’s been seeing my writing all last week.”

“Right, but you’re supposed to make your Guide do the stuff you’re too busy and important to do. He might think you’re actually learning something.”
“Definitely not, then.” He’d rather copy until his hand fell off than give Bedell the satisfaction.

“Suit yourself.”

Angel got halfway through his first copy of the list—and really, writing down the stupid things Ethan had said really was a punishment almost as bad as push-ups—before Kas said, “Okay, I can’t think of a reason it would hurt, either. I mean, you’re not exactly—well, but I would have to be dead before I wasn’t there for you when you needed me.”

“I know,” Angel said.

“I’ve never met a Guide who would run away from a Sentinel in a situation like that. Even if it wasn’t his own assigned Sentinel. But I’ve also never met a Guide who hasn’t gone through G-TAC training, or one who wasn’t with a Sentinel who’d been to Sentinel School and does things more or less the way they teach you.”

That was post hoc, ergo prompter hoc again. “That doesn’t mean that’s why, though. It’s like the thing with the storks.”

“What storks?”

“The storks that don’t bring babies. People used to say that storks bring babies, because they both show up in the spring. But the real reason is that nine months before the storks show up is when it stops being too hot to sleep together.” That was not actually how it was in Florida, but Angel’s math teacher had explained it so that it made sense. “It looks like the reason Sentinels aren’t dropping like flies when their Guides abandon them is that what they’re teaching here works, but it could just be a coincidence.”

“Okay,” Kas said, nodding. “It could be. But you can see why they don’t want people just ignoring everything they say, because they think it does work. And maybe it does.”

“But I don’t have to worry about it either way,” Angel checked.

“Right. But everyone else in your class does. So you can see how Captain Bedell doesn’t want you undermining what he’s trying to teach, since for all he knows it might save your classmates’ lives.”

Ooohhhhhhh. Angel hadn’t thought of it that way before. “So it’s like how when you have a question in Religion class, you should think carefully about whether your question might serve to weaken the faith of those who are not as intellectually curious as you are, and if it might, you should ask the priest privately instead?” He had gotten that lecture a lot in school.

“Yes. Very much like that.”

Angel thought for a moment, and spotted a flaw in the analogy. “But Captain Bedell keeps asking me things, when he ought to know by now that I don’t see things the way he does.” Father Ruiz at school had known better than to ask Angel to explain a lesson when he knew that Angel might have faith-weakening-type questions about it.

“Yeah. He does that because he’s an asshole. Most G-TAC liaisons are.”

“Oh.”

“That’s another thing about the Army. Sometimes the people in charge of you are assholes, and you just have to get by as best you can. Keep your head down and don’t make waves.”
But Angel had Religion class on his mind now, and couldn’t help but think of all the early Christians who had decided that sticking their heads up and making waves was the right thing to do. Not to mention Jesus. Jesus made lots of waves.

And had gotten nailed to a cross for it. Angel didn’t really want to end up like that.

But Jesus had thought it was worth it. Only it wasn’t like anyone was going to be damned to hell if Angel didn’t tell Captain Bedell he was wrong. Also comparing yourself to Jesus was committing the Sin of Pride.

“You don’t have to let him scare you,” Kas added. “Just play along a little bit. Once you’re done here, you’ll have a lot more latitude. Most Sentinels start out doing things the way they’re taught here, I guess, and then they gradually calm down on some of that stuff, as they figure out what parts work for them and what isn’t really necessary. So after this, you won’t be the only one who isn’t stomping around like a constipated Drill Sergeant.”

Kas was trying to make him laugh, and it worked. “Okay. Good.” At medical school, he’d be the only Sentinel there, wouldn’t he? It was an Army place, but they wouldn’t have G-TAC and SRB guys around just for him.

He got most of his copying done before it was time to go down to dinner. Bernadette was there, with Signorelli hovering behind her. “Feeling better?” Angel asked her.

She stared at him for a moment, then said, “Guide, this food is completely unsuitable. Bring me some toast and an egg in my room.”

Signorelli—who, Angel couldn’t help but notice, was old enough to be Bernadette’s father—said, “Yes, ma’am.”

Angel was reminded of a family story about the time his mother, back in Cuba when they had still been able to afford household help, had scolded the cook for not making the dish she had requested for her birthday dinner. She’d been sent to bed without supper, and had spent the rest of the week helping the cook with her work after school. “Rosita was a grown woman, and your mother was a little chit of a girl,” Abuela always said. “Birthday or not, she had to learn to respect her elders. And if we hadn’t had to come here,” she would add, looking around their apartment’s small kitchen, “she would have to know that a woman who does not treat her help with respect gets the help she deserves.”

Usually, when Angel heard that story, he thought about what it would be like if they were still in Cuba. Abuelo would still be a doctor, and they would still live in the big house mami had grown up in, that he had only seen in pictures, and his mother and grandmother would have help around the house and wouldn’t have to work as hard as they did in Miami.

Now, though, he thought that if abuela were here, she would...well, she wouldn’t do anything, since Bernadette wasn’t her daughter or granddaughter, but she would think that she was very badly brought-up. Angel definitely agreed.

“Isn’t she the one whose parents are a Sentinel and Guide?” Angel asked Kas, once they had collected their food and gone to their table.

“Kadinsky? Yeah.”

“Huh.” In that case, she definitely should have been raised to know better.

“Yeah.”
On their way out of the dining room, as they passed by the table where the instructors were sitting, Captain Ketner said, “Temas, I’d like to see you in my office.”

“Me, sir?” Angel asked. After all, it was Kas’s last name, too, and Kas had been the one that Captain Bedell wanted yesterday.

“Yes, you, Sentinel Temas. Go on ahead, I’ll be there in a few minutes.”

“What do you suppose he wants?” Angel asked, as Kas showed him the way to Captain Ketner’s office.

Kas shrugged. “It didn’t sound like he’s mad.”

Angel nodded. He wasn’t sure what Captain Ketner would be mad about, anyway. Maybe if Bedell had told him about class today—but that didn’t really make sense. He was doing great in Ketner’s class. Too well? Maybe he thought he was cheating.

Except he wasn’t sure how you could cheat in Sensory Lab, even if you wanted to.

On the other hand, since he was doing so well, maybe he wanted to give Angel some extra work—the interesting kind, not the punishment kind.

Or maybe it was a version of the lecture about not asking the wrong kind of questions in Religion class. That was probably the most likely, he thought. Captain Ketner didn’t know that Kas already had that covered.

Captain Ketner showed up a few minutes later and asked Angel into his office. Kas started to go with him, but Captain Ketner said, “I’d like to talk one-on-one, if you don’t mind.”

It was pretty clear that he was supposed to say he didn’t mind, but Angel was suspicious. He glanced up at Kas, who patted his shoulder and said, “I’ll be right out here.”

There wasn’t much he could say after that, so he went into Captain Ketner’s office and shut the door.

“Have a seat, son,” Ketner said. “You’re not in any trouble; I just thought we should have a talk.”

“Okay,” Angel said warily. “Um, sir.”

“You’re doing very well in Theory and Lab, of course, and well enough in your other classes. Lieutenant Shiffley has mentioned that you’ve sought out extra reading to help prepare you for the career you have planned, which is very good. You’re the first Sentinel that we’ll be sending to medical school; our curriculum here is geared toward the more traditional career paths. But you appear to be working hard and trying to get as much as you can out of most of your classes.”

A slight emphasis on most gave Angel a hint where this was going. “Yes, sir.”

“I understand that much of what Captain Bedell has been covering in Guide Management is not entirely appropriate for a newly-Bonded Sentinel. I’m looking into finding some supplementary reading for you there, too. It’s highly irregular for you to be Bonded this early, but at this point, there’s nothing to be done about it, so whether we approve or not is immaterial. What is at issue is teaching you to manage your Guide effectively in the circumstances in front of us.” That was, Angel thought, a surprisingly reasonable attitude for him to have. “Now, I know you care a lot about Kas.”

“Yes, sir.” Angel agreed cautiously, thinking that this might be the one where they say several things that are true and then after you’ve agreed to them all, end up with a conclusion you didn’t agree with
at all. Faulty syllogism, it was called.

“He takes very good care of you.”

Angel nodded. “Yes, sir.”

“And you want to take good care of him, don’t you?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, of course. That’s completely natural.” Ketner smiled. “Now, Kas is older than you are, and more experienced. But he’s still a Guide, and he’s relying on you for leadership. Your job is to give him the structure and discipline that he needs to feel secure. Sentinels lead and Guides obey; it’s the natural order of things. It’s better for everyone—Sentinels and Guides—when the hierarchy is maintained.”

Angel didn’t think that Kas was feeling particularly insecure, but he decided to wait and see what Ketner had to say next.

“Now, I’m not saying that you have to hurt him or be mean to him. I understand it would be very difficult for you if you had to be especially firm with him. But Kas is a good Guide. I wouldn’t be surprised if he’s a little resistant to restoring the natural order of things—he has developed a few bad habits—but once you get back on the right track, I doubt he’ll give you a hard time. And you’ll both be happier and work more effectively together.”

“We work pretty well together already,” Angel pointed out. “Sir.”

“You do. Kas is trying his best, but your actions are putting him in a little bit of a difficult position, and I know you don’t want that. The school Guides are under Captain Bedell’s command as the senior G-TAC man here. But Kas’s commanding officer is you. It’s not surprising if you find that a little bit intimidating, but it’s time—past time—for you to step up to your responsibility. All of us are here to help you learn, but you’re the only one who can be Kas’s Sentinel.”

Angel gnawed at his lower lip. He wasn’t sure he could believe that Kas was scared and needed Angel to give him “structure,” whatever that meant. But he wasn’t sure he could dismiss it, either. He definitely did want to be a good Sentinel to Kas.

“The other day, you had an argument with another Sentinel, and Kas stepped in to protect you. Over-stepped, in fact. And then Captain Bedell felt that he had to step in and discipline Kas. As you can imagine, that was very upsetting for your Guide.”

“He said it was fine,” Angel said.

“He was trying to protect you. He came and talked to me about it.”

“He did?”

Ketner nodded. “Yes. And it is appropriate for a Guide to come to a liaison officer if he has a concern that he isn’t comfortable discussing with his Sentinel. But it does seem that he’s feeling a lack of leadership. And no-one is blaming you for that; you’re still learning. The incident the other day—it’s not a serious problem, by the way; when a group of Sentinels are brought together there is always some friction—but it wouldn’t have happened the way it did if you were fully accepting your role as Kas’s Sentinel. Kas felt that he had to defend you, instead of being able to trust that you would protect your Guide. Captain Bedell felt that he had to discipline Kas in order to maintain order over his subordinates, because you weren’t living up to your responsibilities. Nobody’s angry with
you, but this is something you need to work on.”

This was the part where the faulty conclusion was supposed to be, but what Captain Ketner was saying sort of made sense. He didn’t think Kas needed Angel to protect him—but maybe he had sort of wanted him to anyway. And Kas didn’t mind people yelling at him as much as Angel did, but he still probably didn’t like it. The way Bedell talked in class it sounded like taking control over Guides was something you did to them, but now Captain Ketner was saying they sort of liked it that way.

“Think about it this way,” Ketner suggested. “You had a hard time in Basic because everything was new to you and you didn’t understand what was expected of you. Right?”

Angel wondered for a moment how he knew about that, but he supposed the Army guys talked to each other. He nodded.

“Well, accompanying his Sentinel to Sentinel School is new to Kas, and so is being Bonded. He doesn’t know what’s expected. And you’re his Sentinel—you’re the one that’s supposed to be telling him.”

“I don’t know, either,” Angel pointed out.

“That’s what the instructors are here for. It’s not fair to Kas to expect him to make it up as he goes along, is it?”

When he put it that way, Angel supposed it wasn’t. “I guess not. But he’s doing fine. Great, really.”

“Have you told him that?”

Ohhhhhhhhhhh. Fuck.

“Captain Bedell has been focusing on correction so far, but letting your Guide know what he’s doing right is just as important. And if that part is going to be easier for you, as I think it is, you might as well start there.

“I can do that,” Angel agreed.

“I know you can. What I want you to work on is making your expectations clear for Kas, and also letting him know when he’s doing well. All right?”

“Yes, sir.”

“Good. We’ll talk again in a week or so and see how it’s going, but if you run into any problems, feel free to ask me or one of the other instructors for help. And if Captain Bedell or anyone else feels that Kas needs more discipline than you’re providing, we’ll work with you on how to resolve the problem, instead of going over your head. Fair enough?”

“Okay. Sir.”

“I know you have some homework to do, so I’ll let you get back to it. Dismissed.”

He met up with Kas and walked slowly back up to their room, thinking about what Captain Ketner had said. Was he making things harder for Kas, really? Back before they had come here, Kas had talked about what was expected between Sentinels and Guides in public, and how they should play by the rules to avoid trouble. Kas had stopped doing that after the first couple of days, and Angel had sort of forgotten about it. It didn’t seem to have caused any trouble, except for people like Ethan and Bernadette saying mean things about him, which he didn’t mind. Was it causing problems for Kas?
Kas hadn’t said so, but maybe that was another thing Kas was protecting him from.

“What did he want to talk to you about?” Kas asked, once they were safely back in their room.

“Um…leadership.”

“Oh?”

“And how I should start showing you some.”

Kas winced. “You okay?”

“Uh-huh. He says you don’t really understand what I want you to do.”

“Oh.”

“Is that true?” He kind of hoped it wasn’t, but if it was, well, it was better that he knew.

“Well…kind of. I mean, I have a pretty good idea, but…” Kas trailed off. “Okay, it’s like this. I know what you want from me is not exactly what, say, Captain Bedell would prefer. Or what the other Sentinels and the school Guides think is normal.”

Angel nodded, worried.

“And that’s okay, if that’s what you want and you don’t care what they think. As long as I’m doing what you want me to do, all anybody can really do about it is disapprove.”

Good. Sort of. He still didn’t like the idea of Kas doing what he said. He liked having Kas, and liked that Kas took care of him, but there was just something creepy and wrong about the idea that Kas was doing it because he was told.

“I don’t want you to have to do what I tell you,” Angel said. That was the main point, the real problem.

“I know you don’t. But that’s how it is.”

Right. Captain Ketner said it was natural. It didn’t feel natural.

“And it’s fine, really. I knew what I was getting into when I Bonded with you, remember?”

He nodded again. Right, they had talked about it then. That helped a little. Maybe. “What would you do if you were in the one in charge?”

Kas thought about that. “You know, I don’t think it would be that different. Now that I think about it, that goes a long way toward explaining what Bedell and the others have so much of a problem with.”

“That’s good, then,” Angel said. “Everything is basically okay.”

“Yeah. Everything’s basically okay. Now, if I were in charge, I’d tell you to start doing your homework, so we can go to bed at a reasonable hour.”

Angel laughed and reached for his textbooks.

After he had made a start on his Theory homework, he realized that he hadn’t, actually, worked on that other thing Captain Ketner had asked him to do. He had to tell Kas to do something.
He glanced around the room, looking for something for Kas to do.

“You need something, sweetheart?” Kas asked.

“Um…hot chocolate?”

“You got it,” Kas said, patting him and getting some hot cocoa packets out of the gift basket. “Be right back.”

Angel wondered if he should tell him that he could have some too, if he wanted to—except it was his gift basket, so, obviously. “Thanks.”

There, that was done.

Kas came back a little while later, and got out some sweet crackers to go with the hot chocolate. “If I was the one in charge,” he said, putting them on Angel’s desk, “I’d also try to get you to exercise a little bit once in a while. We worked really hard to get you in shape for Basic, and if you put in a little work over time to stay that way, we won’t have to go through all that again when you have a fitness test.”

“Fitness test?” Angel asked.

“Everybody in the Army gets a fitness test every year.”

“What do you have to do?”

“Running, sit-ups, and pushups. This can’t be the first you’ve heard about it,” Kas added.

“Maybe I blocked it out.” That seemed like something he would forget. “When do I have to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Kas said. “They give you about a month’s notice so you can make sure you’re ready. So you can exercise a little bit a few times a week now, or bust your ass for a month when you have the test coming up. Your choice.”

“What happens if you don’t pass it?”

“You take it again in a month, until you do. Usually your CO or somebody will set you up with an exercise program to make sure you pass the second time. It’s not a very hard test,” Kas added.

“What do I have to do, if I pick the exercise a little bit every week one?”

“Hm, maybe run a mile or so, and do some sit ups and pushups, or work with weights. About a half-hour three times a week should do it, if you work and don’t piss around.”

That didn’t sound too bad.

“Okay. When?”

“When do you want to? Mornings or the hour between class and dinner are probably your options, while we’re here.”

“I guess mornings,” Angel said doubtfully.

“Okay. I’ll find out what mornings the gym is likely to be free.”

It occurred to Angel that they might have gotten a little off-track from what Captain Ketner had told
him to work on. Maybe not, though. Kas liked exercising—for some reason—and he wasn’t supposed to use the gym here by himself, so if Angel was, then Kas could too. So Angel was taking care of him. In a way. And Kas was going to set it up, so that was a second thing Angel asked him to do.

Except, he realized, he hadn’t asked. Kas had guessed. But the other thing he was supposed to do was tell Kas when he was doing something right—which was pretty much all the time, but now was as good a time as any to mention it. “Great. Um, that’d be good. Thanks for telling me about the fitness tests.”

Kas gave him a funny look and said, “You’re welcome.”

#

Over the next few days, every now and then Angel would remember that he was supposed to be showing leadership, and would tell Kas to do things he was already doing or about to do, and then tell him he was doing a great job of whatever it was. He had clearly missed the point of whatever Captain Ketner had been trying to teach him, but he was trying so hard that Kas thought it was kind of sweet.

Wednesday’s “outside lab” turned out to be a sort of tracking exercise. Captain Ketner, or someone, had created trails for them to follow in the field next to the School building. Kas thought it was pretty interesting to see what his Sentinel could do. And watching the other Sentinels try to do it while their Guides were kneeling at their feet was comedy gold. Or would have been, anyway, except for the five-minute, breathless tirade that Kadinsky launched at poor Collins for “getting in her way” after the fourth time she tripped over him. Collins hadn’t exactly been friendly, but Kas supposed it couldn’t be easy being a Sentinel School Guide.

Even though Kas knew Angel had an advantage over the other Sentinel trainees, having started working on controlling his senses months ago instead of last week, and being Bonded besides, it was still very satisfying to see him outshine his classmates in at least one important area. Kas thought that Angel’s assigned trail was a little more difficult than the others—it looped around a few times and even crossed over a path, while the other Sentinels were more or less going in straight lines with maybe one turn. Angel figured it out, though, and when he was done, said, “That was kind of fun.”

It was funny, Kas thought, that Angel was anxious about the upcoming “field exercises” in Tactics, but was fine with “outside lab.” Kas wasn’t entirely sure what the difference was, but he was willing to bet it was mostly the name.

At lunch, Captain Ketner made an announcement that Angel was Kas’s commanding officer, and none of the other Sentinels had any authority over him. He also mentioned that even though Kas was “technically a Sergeant,” as he put it, he had no authority over the rest of them, and wound up by saying that if any of them had a problem with Kas, they should take it up with Angel, which made Angel squeak a little in dismay. Savard took to calling Kas “Sergeant” in an annoyingly sarcastic way; every time he did it, Angel looked uncomfortable but didn’t say anything.

On the day that Captain Bedell was planning to talk about “discipline” in Guide Management, Angel seemed reasonably all right, if a little tense, when he went into the room and took his seat. As Captain Bedell walked past him on his way to the front of the room, though, Angel jerked his head slightly and stared after him with a thoughtful expression on his face.

“Usually,” Bedell began, standing close to Angel’s desk, the way he always did when he was talking about something he knew damn well Angel wasn’t going to like, “you can keep a Guide in line using the management techniques we’ve been learning about so far. But if you get a stubborn one—
or if you make a lot of mistakes and let him develop bad habits—you have to step up your discipline plan.”

Angel suddenly curled up and started gagging. By the time Kas rushed to his side, he had flopped out of his chair and was on his hands and knees on the floor. “Sweetheart, what’s wrong?” he said, getting down beside Angel and patting his back.

Raising his head with a visible effort, Angel looked over at Bedell and choked out, “Aftershave.”

God damn it all to fucking hell. “Sir,” Kas said to Bedell, who was still looming over them, “my Sentinel appears to be having a reaction to your cologne. I’ll have to ask you to step back.”

Bedell probably wasn’t happy about that, but he did it, so Kas didn’t care. He got Angel to sit up a little and took one of his hands, establishing a link. Reaching for Angel’s scent dial, he found that it was…rock steady at about three.

Angel’s hand squeezed his slightly.

So Kas pretended to talk Angel through adjusting his dial, asking, when he was finished, “Do you need to go rest in your room for a while?”

Angel sniffled and nodded, so Kas made a show of helping him to his feet and out of the classroom.

He remained the picture of misery, clinging to Kas and shuffling along, hunched over as if feeling extremely queasy, until they were in Angel’s room with the door shut. Then he straightened up and said, “I’m feeling much better now.”

“I bet,” said Kas.

“He should know better than to wear that godawful cologne around Sentinels. I’ve been waiting for the right time to do that since the day Bernadette threw up at lunch.”

“You know,” Kas pointed out, “the reason you’re allowed passes to chapel is that you aren’t having any trouble with your senses.” Even if everybody bought Angel’s act, he was likely to lose that privilege if he tried it too often.

“Yeah. Once should be okay, I thought. Anyway, if I’d stayed, I’m sure it would have made me sick.”

He had a point. Still, since he was supposed to be sick, Kas got him settled down with something to read. If he was going to pretend to be sick, he had better be as quiet as he would be if he really was.

After a while, Angel looked up from his book and whispered, “Quick—get me a wet washcloth and something to throw up in.”

Slightly puzzled, Kas obeyed, bringing him a damp facecloth and the wastebasket from the bathroom. When he returned, Angel was huddled on the bed in a position suggesting internal discomfort. All was explained when there was a knock at the door, followed by, “Temas? It’s Captain Ketner.”

Slapping the cloth onto his forehead and looking wan, Angel called weakly, “Come in.” Kas sat next to him on the edge of the bed and tried to look concerned.

Ketner came into the room. “How are you feeling, son?”
“A little better,” Angel said bravely. “I’m sorry I’m missing class.”

“That’s all right, son. These things happen.”

“What time is it?” He appeared to make an effort to look at his watch, but found that raising his arm was too difficult. “I hope I’ll be able to make it to Tactics.”

“Don’t push yourself too hard. Rest up and take care of yourself.”

“Kas is taking good care of me.”

“I’m sure he is.”

Captain Ketner took his leave, and after waiting long enough for him to be out of even Sentinel earshot, Angel sat up. “Now I feel a little guilty,” he said, but Kas didn’t miss that he still skipped out of Tactics.

Thursday morning, Angel went to his first workout session like a lamb, which was slightly worrying. By the second one on Saturday, though, he was complaining openly about nearly every step, which was reassuringly normal.


Kas glanced at the mileage counter on the treadmill Angel was running on. “A quarter-mile.”

“Fuck me,” said Angel.

Kas decided not to take him literally. “You could finish it slower,” he suggested. He was trying to do two miles on the other treadmill in the time it took Angel to do one—and actually, if Angel kept up the way he was going, he wasn’t going to make it.

“Good idea.” He slowed down to what amounted to a brisk walk.

Kas was in sight of the end of his two miles—and Angel was barely plodding along—when Savard came in. “Temas,” he said. “I’m going for a run. Tell your Guide to get out of my way.”

“We’ll be done in about two minutes,” Angel said mildly. “You can have the whole room to yourself then.”

Kas didn’t think he could have coached Angel to a better answer—it gave Savard a way to save face, without Angel backing down—but Savard bellowed, “I want to get on that treadmill now.”

“Well, you’re going to have to wait your turn.”

Finishing his second mile, Kas slowed to a walk, not prepared to give ground without a signal that Angel wanted him to.

“You think you can fuck with me, you little faggot?”

“No,” Angel said, switching off the treadmill and stepping down from it. “I think you’re acting like a baby throwing a tantrum. Is it supposed to be scary? It really isn’t.”

“Fucking little shit!” Savard lunged at Angel, who now did look scared.

But Savard had turned his back to Kas, so Kas caught him mid-lunge, adding his own momentum to Savard’s and making a slight course adjustment, so that instead of attacking Angel, Savard ended up
slamming himself face-first into the wall. Once he was there, Kas twisted his arm up between his shoulder blades. “Are you done?” he asked.

“Fuck off,” said Savard.

Having a pissed-off Sentinel pinned against a wall was quite a bit like having a tiger by the ears, Kas realized. Now that Savard was no longer any actual threat to Angel, he was pretty much at the limit of what he could expect to get away with, but if he let Savard go now, he was just going to have to stop him again. Also, there was Angel to think about. Glancing over his shoulder, Kas saw that he was wide-eyed and chewing on his thumbnail—so, unhappy, but not completely freaked out. Good. Completely at a loss for any better ideas, he asked, “What do you want me to do with him now?” There was always a chance Angel would have some idea, and if not, establishing that he wasn’t doing this completely on his own initiative couldn’t hurt.

“Um, well, I don’t think it would be smart to let him go while he’s still so mad,” Angel said.

Savard confirmed his opinion by saying, “You fucking little bastard,” and trying to throw an elbow into Kas’s stomach.

“Yeah, I think you’re right,” said Kas.

They stood there for a while, Kas pressing Savard into the wall, Savard struggling and cursing, Angel chewing on his thumb and rocking slightly from one foot to the other. Then Angel said, “You know what, one of the other Guides is coming. I’ll go tell him that Ethan, uh, needs some help.”

“Just so you know,” Kas said conversationally, after Angel had scampered out of the room, “I would have absolutely no problem putting you in traction. You’re lucky Angel’s such a nice guy.”

“I’d like to see you try.”

“Unfortunately, I’m not supposed to take orders from you. I don’t know, though, maybe if you ask Angel nicely he’ll oblige you.”

Apparantly having run out of new ideas to contribute to the conversation, Savard replied with, “Temas is a fucking fag,” and continued in that vein until Angel and Signorelli came into the room.

“—said we’d be done in two minutes, and then he could use it, and he flipped out. I don’t know why; he was pretty out of control. Kas has been, um, making sure he doesn’t hurt himself or others.”

It was very hard to tell whether Angel was describing exactly what he understood what had happened, or putting a very effective spin on it. In fact, Kas would have a hard time explaining how, precisely, Angel’s version of events wasn’t gospel truth. Savard had been pretty out of control, and if he had succeeded in hurting Angel, Kas would have had to hurt him.

“I see, sir,” Signorelli said.

“Do you want me to let him go now, sir?” Kas asked.

It took Angel a minute to figure out Kas meant him; then he said, “Um, well, I guess he’s starting to calm down. Do you think you can look after him from here?” he asked Signorelli. “We kind of have to get ready for breakfast.”

“Yes, sir,” Signorelli said.

“Okay, then.”
Kas wasn’t so sure, but when he released Savard, the Sentinel just glared around mutinously and didn’t try to attack Angel again.

“Um, I hope he’s okay,” Angel said.

“I’m sure he’ll be fine, sir,” said Signorelli.

On their way up to Angel’s room, Angel said, “That was really weird.”

“Yeah,” Kas agreed.

“What do you think is wrong with him? Could he be sick or something?”

“Um…Sentinels can get territorial and aggressive with other Sentinels sometimes.”

“Hm. Is that why they have our rooms in different parts of the building?” Angel wondered.

“Probably,” Kas agreed.

“Maybe they should have people sign up for the gym or something, so stuff like that doesn’t happen.”

“Maybe,” Kas agreed, wondering if he should leave it at that. But if he did, Angel would probably go and suggest it to Captain Ketner or something. They might figure it’s good for you to have some practice working that sort of thing out in a controlled environment.”

Angel shook his head. “I will never understand the Army.” They went into his room. “You want to go first?” he asked, gesturing toward the bathroom.

“Okay,” Kas said. Usually Angel couldn’t wait to get in the shower after exercise. Kas wondered if he was smelling another Sentinel on his Guide, and didn’t like it, even if he didn’t know what it was.

After a quick shower, Kas opened the bathroom door so Angel could come in and start his shower while Kas was shaving. They only did that when they were in a hurry—Angel had strongly ingrained habits about bathroom privacy—but Kas liked it; it seemed very married somehow.

Also, since they weren’t having sex yet, he had to take his fun where he could get it, and if that meant watching Angel brushing his teeth in a towel, so be it.

Savard was conspicuously absent from breakfast, but turned up for Theory, glaring daggers at Angel, Kas, and anyone unfortunate enough to get in his way. Angel seemed unfazed, but Kas was waiting for the other shoe to drop. If Signorelli hadn’t reported what he’d witnessed to Captain Ketner yet, he would soon, and Savard himself certainly wasn’t going to let the matter rest for long.

Health and Hygiene that day was about sharing territory with other Sentinels—whether by coincidence or a last-minute schedule change, Kas wasn’t sure. “While most of the time, you will be the only Sentinel assigned to your unit, there will be times that you have to share space and even work together with other Sentinels. At Officer Candidate School, for example, you will each be assigned to a different training group, but you will all be there at the same time, and another Sentinel School class will probably overlap with yours at OCS. Altercations with other trainees—other Sentinels or not—will not be tolerated there.”

Meaning they were tolerated here? That was probably better news for Savard than it was for them, although Kas supposed it did mean that the worst Angel was likely to get from the liaison officers was another lecture on “leadership.” Kas would just have to make sure Savard didn’t have any
opportunities to get at Angel on his own.

“The hierarchical organization of the Army provides a means for managing the natural friction that occurs when Sentinels have to share space. You will be expected to defer to Sentinels who have higher rank or longer time in service. Things are more complicated when you are of equal status. It’s critical to respect the other Sentinel’s territory, which can include their belongings and Guide, and often even the rest of the Sentinel’s unit.”

Savard raised his hand. “Ma’am, what happens when the other Sentinel is a whining little pussy who hides behind his Guide?”


“I think it might be relevant for us to know, ma’am,” Kadinsky said.

“You will be expected to get along with other soldiers, Sentinels and non-Sentinels, regardless of any personality conflicts that may arise,” Shiffley tried.

“But is it ever appropriate for a Sentinel to have his Guide protect him?”

“Hey,” Angel said. “Look at Kas, then look at me. How stupid would I have to be to expect Kas to stand there and watch while some testosterone-crazed meathead mops the floor with me?”

“I think we’re getting a little off topic here,” Shiffley said. “Why don’t we take some time for individual reflection. Get out your notebooks, and begin making a list of appropriate ways to manage the natural frustration that may arise when sharing space with another Sentinel.”

It was a good try, Kas thought—and any of the Sentinels who didn’t get the message that one item on their lists should be, “shut your mouth and walk away,” were clearly not paying attention—but it didn’t work very well. When the students were asked to share their lists, Savard kept sniping at Angel until Lieutenant Shiffley assigned him an extra three-page essay on the topic.

When the class ended, Angel opted to have lunch in his room. “Run away, little pussy!” Savard called after them as they left the dining room. Angel gave him a bewildered look over his shoulder.

“I don’t understand what that guy’s problem is,” Angel said as they went upstairs.

Kas was pretty sure that his problem was that he was basically a normal Sentinel, and Angel was not reacting to him in any of the ways that he expected. But he couldn’t think of any way to explain that to Angel.

In Guide Management, Savard tried to start things up again, but Bedell quickly stopped acknowledging him when he asked to speak, and shouted him down when he tried to talk anyway. That didn’t stop Bedell himself from making more than the usual amount of snide comments about Angel, but apparently he was the only one allowed to do so. By the time Tactics came around, he had apparently learned his lesson, and restricted his contributions to the day’s topic, ways to confuse or disable the senses of an enemy Sentinel. Kas wondered whether he ought to point this out to Angel as an object lesson that Bedell’s methods did at least work.

When class was over, Angel waited for Savard to be out of earshot and said, “I wonder if we should go talk to Captain Ketner now, instead of waiting for him to pounce on us.”

“Maybe,” Kas said. It was difficult to get over the instinct to avoid liaison officers whenever possible, but sometimes it helped to get the jump on them.
“He did say to come see him if I ran into any problems.”

“Right,” Kas said. He’d probably meant problems with Kas, but…well, it wasn’t like Kas had any ideas about how Angel ought to be handling this situation, other than not being quite so Angel, which wasn’t really an option. Maybe if Captain Ketner told him he had to stand up for himself, Kas would be able to turn that into something Angel could understand.

They found Captain Ketner in his office. “Ah,” he said when Angel knocked. “Sentinel Temas. I had planned to talk to you today. Come on in.”

Angel nudged Kas in ahead of him, and Captain Ketner didn’t say anything about it, so Kas took up a position by the door while Angel and Captain Ketner got seated.

“Well,” Ketner said. “I understand there was another incident with Sentinel Savard today.”

“Yes,” Angel said cautiously.

“It appears that you handled the situation more appropriately this time.”

“I did?” Kas wished Angel didn’t sound quite so surprised about that.

Ketner nodded. “Yes. Somewhat. This time you at least provided your Guide with some direction in how to respond to Sentinel Savard. That’s an improvement.”

So Kas telling Savard to go fuck himself was a problem, but shoving him into a wall and threatening to maim him was okay, because they had sort of made it look like it was Angel’s idea?

What was he thinking; of course it was.

“You shouldn’t be relying on Kas to fight your battles for you, but it’s a step in the right direction.”

It was no wonder Angel thought to go to Ketner for advice, Kas realized. He had taken that move—lots of praise for the smallest sign of progress—straight out of Kas’s playbook. He’d mentioned reading Sergeant Macon’s reports. Kas knew he ought to be glad Ketner had learned from them, and was trying to teach Angel in a way that would work for him, but he still had to suppress an irrational stab of jealousy. It wasn’t as if Captain Ketner was trying to be Angel’s Guide. A liaison officer would probably rather be shot in the face than be anybody’s Guide.

Angel turned around to look at Kas, a puzzled expression on his face. “Didn’t you say I was supposed to be having you do the things that I’m too busy and important for?”

They really needed to talk about what kinds of things not to repeat in front of liaison officers. Also about the likelihood that Ketner was not expecting him to be a participant in this conversation. But since Angel had asked him a direct question, he had to answer it. “Something like that, yes.” He probably ought to throw in a “sir,” but he could never tell when that was going to freak Angel out, so he didn’t.

“Then fending off bullies definitely qualifies.” Angel relaxed, seeming satisfied.

“Surely you can see how appearing to, ahem, hide behind your Guide, presents an appearance of weakness.”

“No.”

“No?”
“Oh! Um, no, sir.”

“Would you care to elaborate?” Ketner asked patiently.

“Kas is good at that stuff. And I’m not. So it just makes sense.”

“But he’s your Guide.”

Angel craned around to look at him again, and this time stayed twisted around in his chair so he could look back and forth between him and Ketner. “So?”

“So?”

Angel went back to the well with, “So, sir?”

Ketner took a few deep breaths. “Other Sentinels—like Sentinel Savard, for example—won’t respect you if you appear weak.”

“Oh,” Angel said, glancing at him, then at Kas. “What happens if they don’t respect me?”

Ketner looked completely flabbergasted by the question, which Kas supposed meant there were things about Angel-wrangling that you couldn’t learn from reading reports. Angel was looking at him again, which he decided meant he could treat it as a question for him, and said, “For one thing, Sentinel Savard will keep hassling you.”

Angel thought about that for a moment. “That’s really his problem, isn’t it?”

He had a point. There wasn’t really much Angel could do that would get Savard to stop hassling him—apart from either beating the shit out of him personally, which was clearly not going to happen, or giving Savard the complete capitulation he was looking for, which Kas wouldn’t want to see him do anyway. And as long as Kas made sure that Savard didn’t have a chance to get at Angel when he wasn’t there to help, what could Savard really do?

Ketner added, “You might also want to think about the sort of example you’re giving Kas. Taking into account the disparity in your combat skills, do you really want to give him the idea that physical confrontation with a Sentinel is ever appropriate?”

Kas thought that the nasty little implication would be lost on Angel, but to his surprise, after looking puzzled for a moment, he said, “I’m very sure that Kas can tell the difference between me and someone like Ethan.”

“Well,” Ketner said. “You will have to live with him long after Savard is out of your life. It’s up to you.”

“That’s good to know, sir.”

Ketner dismissed them not long after that, with nothing really resolved. Kas couldn’t help but be just a little bit glad, though, that Angel was clearly less impressed than he had been with Ketner as a source of help and advice.

That night Angel elected to have dinner in his room—Kas wasn’t sure if he was avoiding Savard or Captain Ketner, or maybe just the meat loaf that was being served in the dining room. But the next day after church, he again scooted straight up to the room—probably not the meatloaf, then.

“What the fuck,” Angel said when he entered their room.
“What?”

“Ethan was in here.”

“He was?” That was…really surprising. Even less than halfway through Sentinel School, Savard should know better than the trespass on another Sentinel’s territory.

“Yes.” He held out his hand for a link, and Kas took it. Angel walked further into the room, turning his head from side to side. His first stop was his desk, where he flipped through his notebooks, showing several pages that had been ripped out. “He’s grown up, at least. Now he’s acting like he’s twelve, instead of two.” He then followed Savard’s trail over to the bed. “He did something over here.” Angel sniffed, sneezed, and yanked back the covers. “There’s some kind of grit here,” he said, running his hand over the bottom sheet. “Sand? No, salt. And there’s pepper in the blanket. What a fucking asshole.”

Kas was just glad that Angel was handling this as well as he was. Ethan’s prank had been clumsily executed, but back in the bad old days at Basic, it would have been enough to incapacitate him, and even now Angel could have been at very least inconvenienced and made uncomfortable if he hadn’t discovered the sabotage before actually getting into bed.

“Did he tamper with anything else?”

“No,” Angel said, and sneezed again. “Can you, um.” He flapped his free hand at the bed.

“Sure.” Letting go of Angel’s hand, he bundled up the contaminated bedding and dropped it in the hallway, to deal with when they’d finished the inspection. “What about your clothes?”

Angel nodded and went over to the dresser, but then said, “No, he wasn’t over here. This way.” The trail led into the bathroom. “He touched a bunch of stuff in here, but I’m not sure he actually did anything.” He opened the medicine cabinet and inspected several items, apparently the ones Savard had touched, but found nothing wrong with them. Then he gingerly touched the towels and smelled them. “There’s some kind of cleaning product on these. Windex or something.”

Savard had the same Health and Hygiene textbooks that Angel did; he knew that Sentinels were advised to avoid close contact with chemical cleaning products, especially while they were still gaining control over their senses. Clearly, he had been hampered by the fact that the Sentinel School was designed to be a safe sensory environment; he’d have had a hard time getting his hands on anything more dangerous than black pepper and window cleaner. “We’ll wash those, too.” That part of the cleanup was fairly straightforward. Kas was less sure of what to do about Savard.

“Should we tell Captain Ketner?” Angel wondered.

Definitely not that. “No. You don’t go tattling to officers unless somebody almost got you killed. Maybe not even then.”

“What am I supposed to do, then?” Angel asked, then answered his own question. “Oh—‘take care of it myself’ right?”

Kas nodded.

Angel showed what he thought of that with a dramatic sigh, then said, “All right, where do we go to wash my stuff?”

The normal answer was that they didn’t go anywhere; laundry was something Guides did for Sentinels. And Kas had already done Angel’s twice since arriving at Sentinel School, without him
seeming to notice. But since Savard had already demonstrated his complete willingness to invade Angel’s room, Kas had better not leave him alone. “I’ll show you.”

The laundry room was down next to the Guide quarters. Vosburg was already there, ironing uniform shirts that looked like they belonged to one of the female Sentinels. Kas was uncomfortably aware of his eyes on them as he loaded Angel’s stuff into a machine and started it up.

“What now?” Angel asked.

“Now let’s see if we can find you some breakfast,” Kas answered.

“I’m not really hungry.”

“I’m shocked.”

No one had said anything about the special food Kas had fixed for Angel so far, so he decided he could probably get away with scrambling an egg. Once he got Angel thinking about what new and weird ingredients to mix into it, Angel decided he was possibly just a little bit hungry after all, and ate most of it, along with a quarter of a piece of toast.

“Now I guess I have to re-do the homework that Ethan stole,” he said glumly, when he was finished.

“I guess so,” Kas agreed. “We have to put the laundry in the dryer first, though.”

Angel was normally good about doing his homework, even for the classes he loathed, but he complained nonstop for the entire two hours it took him to rewrite the lab report and Health and Hygiene questions that were missing. Kas was pretty sure that, with all the bitching, it took him longer to re-do than it had taken the first time, even accounting for the brief break they took to get the laundry back.

When Angel was finally finished, Kas persuaded him to give the TV room another try. He really didn’t want to spend the entire rest of the day hiding from Savard in Angel’s bedroom, both because of the message it would send and because being penned up with Angel feeling cranky and put-upon would fray the patience of a saint. It was entirely possible, he told himself, that as irritated as Angel was, if Savard did show up to give him a hard time, he might stand up to him in a way that would make him back off a little.

The TV room was, fortunately, deserted, so Angel was able to curl up with his head on Kas’s lap and watch the second half of a Western. He only mentioned three or four times how he might know what was going on if he had been able to watch the first half instead of re-doing work he had already done.

When the credits rolled, Kas opened the subject of lunch.

“We just had breakfast,” Angel pointed out.

“Three hours ago.”

“Huh.” Angel contemplated his toes for a while—he had shed his boots at some point in the proceedings—then said, “I could eat some popcorn.”

“We don’t have any popcorn.”

“There’s probably some in the kitchen.”
“Why do you think that?”

“Because it smells like popcorn in here. I think the others had some when they watched a movie Friday night.”

“The others watched a movie Friday night?”

“Yes, and they had popcorn. And they didn’t invite me. So I have popcorn coming to me.”

Kas couldn’t really argue with that, and they trooped off to the kitchen to investigate the popcorn situation. There was indeed some, and an air popper to make it in. Kas shrugged and started setting it up.

“You know what would be good on it? Some of that cayenne pepper from the thing. If you mix it in with the melted butter before you put it on? It’s good. I’ll go get some.”

“Uh,” Kas said.

Angel paused and cocked his head to one side. “Don’t worry; Ethan’s in his room.”

Angel fetched the cayenne pepper without incident, and then went back to the TV room on his own, to avoid missing the start of whatever was coming on next.

As he was putting the finishing touches on Angel’s snack, Signorelli came in and gave him the stink-eye. “Angel wanted popcorn for lunch,” Kas explained, with a “Sentinels, what can you do?” shrug.

“I see,” Signorelli said frostily.

“I’ll just wash this,” Kas said, indicating the popcorn machine.

“I’ll get it.”

He had the distinct sense that Signorelli wanted him gone, so he left.

Fortunately, no one had come to bother Angel while Kas was in the kitchen, and he happily munched on the popcorn. “This is really good. Here, have some.”

Sampling a kernel, Kas thought he might have overdone it with the pepper, but Angel seemed to like it, so he dug down to the bottom of the bowl, where very little of the spiced butter had penetrated.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Angel said after a few minutes.

“What?”

“Guess.”

A moment later, Savard arrived, this time with Kadinsky in tow. “Clear out, fag,” he told Angel. “You can leave the popcorn.”

“Seriously, Ethan,” Angel said, not sitting up from where he was reclined on Kas’s lap, “you have got to learn to share. I have no idea how you got out of kindergarten the way you act.” He added generously, “You can have some popcorn if you want. We made plenty.”

Once again, Kas was unsure if Angel knew exactly what he was doing, or if he only meant to set a good example about sharing. Savard strutted over, clearly interpreting Angel’s offer as a sign of the submission he was due. Before Kas could decide whether to warn Savard about the popcorn’s secret
ingredient or not, the other Sentinel had scooped up a handful and crammed it into his mouth.

Either he had planned the whole thing, or Angel had grown remarkably jaded about the sight of his classmates in sensory distress, because when Savard fell to his knees, gasping and choking, Angel just plucked another popcorn kernel out of the bowl and munched it delicately before saying to Kadinsky, “You might want to get him some help or something.”

Kadinsky left the room and returned with Signorelli, who took the time to glare at Kas while helping Savard out of the room. Kadinsky looked at Angel and said, “What the…I don’t even…” and then flounced out after Savard.

“I guess he didn’t like the popcorn,” Angel said.

“Guess not.”

Nobody bothered them for the rest of the movie, although Grover and Aponte each showed up and looked around for about a minute each. Kas could only suppose that they were intimidated by Angel’s badass taste buds.

But shortly after they had executed a dignified withdrawal to Angel’s room, Collins knocked on the door and, looking past Kas, who had opened it, said, “Sir, Captain Ketner would like to see you and your Guide in his office immediately.”

Angel looked at him in alarm. “That’s new."

“Yeah.” It had to mean something that Ketner wasn’t bothering to pretend that this was a friendly chat. Kas took a minute to straighten out his own uniform and Angel’s before heading downstairs to find out what the Captain wanted.

Ketner started with the usual, “Come in, son,” and an invitation for Angel to take a seat, but Kas could tell that something was different this time.

“When we talked before, we discussed how if a disciplinary situation arose with your Guide, we would work with you on how to resolve it,” Ketner began.

“Yes, sir,” Angel said cautiously.

“A very serious situation has indeed arisen,” Ketner told him. “Your Guide has committed sensory assault against one of the Sentinel students.”

“What?” Angel turned around in his chair to look at Kas. “That’s ridiculous. Who is it? Ethan? He’s lying.”

“Sentinel Savard was the victim; the incident was reported to me by the School Guides. While your unusual status does give you a certain amount of latitude in matters pertaining to your own Guide, this is not something we can permit you to overlook.”

Angel shook his head. “What are they saying happened?” It was a good question, but Kas was surprised that Angel was holding himself together well enough to ask it.

“Sentinel Savard was escorted from the lounge area earlier today in severe sensory distress after ingesting popcorn that had been laced with cayenne pepper.”

“Your Guide was seen by one of the School Guides preparing the substance, and offered an excuse that the Guide in question only later realized was not believable.”

Angel leaned forward. “Uh-huh. Was the not-believable excuse that I asked him for it?”

“Yes, which--”

“Which I did. Ethan came into the TV room and asked for some. Well, demanded, really. You know how he is. But I said he could have some. Is he okay?”

Slightly disarmed, Ketner said, “He’ll recover.” He managed to get back on track. “But he’s been in considerable distress for the last four hours. You expect me to believe that you just happened to be eating popcorn with enough cayenne pepper to incapacitate a very strong Sentinel?”

“Yeah,” Angel said distractedly. “Maybe I should have warned him about the pepper, but, you know.” He looked over his shoulder at Kas again. “I figured either he’d notice before he stuffed his face with it, or else he just wouldn’t like it very much.”

“During Basic Training, you experienced near-daily incidents of sensory distress,” Ketner said.

Angel, predictably, missed his point. “Yeah. Um, I’m sure it wasn’t very nice for him, and I’m sorry, but it wasn’t anything we did on purpose.”

Ketner closed his eyes briefly. “Your history makes it even more difficult than it would ordinarily be to believe that you were innocently eating what could be classed as an anti-Sentinel weapon. If you did in fact ask Kas to make the popcorn, then I’m afraid an even more disturbing possibility presents itself.”

Kas knew exactly where he was going, but Angel just said, “What’s that?”

“That you were the intended victim.”

“I don’t think I follow you,” Angel said, but Kas could tell—because Angel didn’t turn around to look at him with wide-eyed bafflement—that Angel did, in fact, follow.

“Kas may have intended that you would eat the contaminated popcorn, perhaps so that you reaction would reinforce your dependence on him.”

Most Sentinels would consider the implication that they were dependent on a Guide—even though all Sentinels were, pretty much by definition—to be fighting words. But Angel just said, “I did eat it. And I liked it. Kas knows I like spicy food.”

“But you found the normal rations at Basic inedible.”

“Until I started putting enough hot sauce on them to cover up the taste of the chemicals, yes.” Now he did turn around to look at Kas. “You know I’m Cubano, right? If I couldn’t eat spicy things, I’d have starved to death.”

He most certainly would not have—his mother and grandmother would have cooked special food for him, had he given the slightest sign that he didn’t like what they normally made—but Kas kept his mouth shut.

“Most Sentinels, regardless of their ethnic backgrounds, avoid foods that pose substantial sensory challenges.”
“Well, I find food that doesn’t taste like anything challenging.”

Ketner didn’t start to believe him, though, until Angel described everything he’d been doing to his food since the arrival of the gift basket, and wasn’t fully convinced until he took out the bottle of hot sauce Kas had taken to carrying with him everywhere, doused a cracker with it, and ate it.

“Okay,” Angel said, once the demonstration was over. “So you see? Ethan caused his own problem.” He turned to look at Kas. “But maybe since we’re talking about sensory assault with weaponized condiments, I should tell him about the other thing.”

Kas would still have advised against it, but Ketner was already saying, “What other thing?” so all Kas could do was nod.

Angel explained about Savard’s little pranks. After a lot of questions about what, exactly, had been done and how Angel was so sure it was Savard who had done it, Ketner asked, “Why wasn’t this brought to my attention immediately?”

And Angel, of course, said, “Kas said I shouldn’t.”

The room suddenly got very quiet. “And why is that?” Ketner asked.

“I…don’t really know,” Angel said. “Kas?”

Well, shit. He thought fast and said, “I didn’t think it was necessary to tell you about something so petty, sir.”

“I see,” Captain Ketner said. To Angel, he said, “I, and the rest of the teaching staff, rely on the School Guides to keep us informed about any problems the students are facing.”

“Oh,” said Angel.

“Since you aren’t using the School Guides, naturally we would expect you to have Kas bring this sort of thing to our attention.”

“Now we know,” Angel said, with another glance back at Kas.

“I hope this incident underscores why it is not appropriate for you to be relying on your Guide for direction. I understand that while you were at Basic Training, he may have been at least somewhat competent to advise you, but that is no longer the case. This is not something you should have been left to deal with on your own.”

Angel looked back at him again, biting his lip. “Okay,” he said. “Great. What should we do?”

“I’ll have the School Guides begin decontaminating your quarters.”

“Oh,” Angel said. “We already did that.”

“I see,” Ketner said, giving Kas a stern look. Kas had a feeling it was the “we” that troubled him, but Kas would be speaking out of turn if he tried to explain that Angel’s role in the cleanup had been entirely supervisory. “Are you sure everything has been thoroughly taken care of?”

Angel nodded. “I mean, yeah, everything in the room. Ethan was the part I actually wanted help with.”

“Ah. Well, it isn’t exactly our role here to mediate in disagreements between students.”
“Oh.”

“As we’ve discussed before, Sentinel Savard is reacting to what he sees as signs of weakness on your part. My stepping in would not do anything to resolve the situation.”

“Okay,” Angel said, clearly waiting for Ketner to say something helpful. When he didn’t, Angel said, “Do you have any suggestions?”

“If you begin to conduct yourself with more authority, you can expect your fellow Sentinels to regard you with more respect.”

Angel’s response was a huffy sigh—probably accompanied by an eye-roll, although Kas couldn’t see it from where he was standing—which Ketner, fortunately, pretended not to notice.

“Now, when it comes to your Guide—”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

That, apparently, was a little too much for Captain Ketner to overlook. “You’d better watch your attitude, Sentinel.”

Kas started forward, ready to catch Angel if he opted to slump to the floor and cry, but Angel just hunched up a little and glared at Ketner, saying an occasional, “Yes, sir,” as Ketner explained how “taking a firmer hand” with his Guide would apparently somehow fix all of his problems.

By the end of it, Ketner had gone back into friendly-uncle mode, and said, “Now, will you be all right, son?”

But Angel was having none of it. “Are we done, sir?”

“Yes. Let me know if there’s anything further I can do for you.”

Angel waited until they had reached the end of the hall before he said, “Okay, so he’s not going to do anything about the actual problem that I’m actually having, did I hear that right?”

“Yep.”

“And that’s why you said not to tell him about it.”

“Right.”

“So it turns out that was perfectly competent advice.”

“Apparently.”

“Okay,” Angel said, starting up the stairs back to their room. “So here’s what I don’t get.”

“What?”

“Me not doing anything about—whatever it is he thinks you’re doing wrong—is bad leadership. Right?”

“That seems to be the gist of his argument, yes.”

“But him doing nothing about Ethan being an asshole is—what?”
“I have no idea,” Kas admitted.

“Great.” He stomped the rest of the way up the stairs and into their room and flung himself down on the bed.

“I really don’t have any good ideas for what you should do. About Savard, I mean.” Captain Ketner’s emphatically hands-off attitude left him wanting to give Angel the help—or, dare he say it, leadership—he was asking for. But he really didn’t know. “My only idea is that I could beat the shit out of him for you, but that might make things worse.”

“Yeah, let’s call that plan B.” He sat up and hugged his knees to his chest, resting his chin on them. “It’s not even just Savard, really. I mean, he ought to just leave me alone, and I don’t know why not, but I really don’t care. We’re here for another month; I can just avoid him or whatever.”

Kas wasn’t entirely sure that would work, but he said, “Okay.”

“But Ketner is acting like it’s somehow my fault he’s doing all this shit.”

“It’s not,” Kas said.

“I know. But I don’t get why he thinks that.”

“Because…” Kas really didn’t know how to answer that question.

“Don’t you know, either?”

Despite strong temptation to agree that he didn’t, just to avoid this conversation, Kas said, “I do.”

The strategy of protecting Angel from the less pleasant realities of their situation was clearly not working anymore, if it ever had. “I don’t know how to explain it.”

“Try,” Angel suggested.

“Okay,” Kas sighed. “You’re not going to like it, though. You’re weird. I like you—I think even Captain Ketner likes you—but you’re weird. The Army likes people to all be the same, and people who are really happy in the Army like that, too. And it’s just normal to pick on the weird kid. You must have run into this before. At school, maybe?” he added.

“Not really,” Angel said. “Well, at first if anybody was mean to me, my cousins would beat them up—”

“Your cousins, who are all girls,” Kas said.

“Yes.

You met them.”

“Right. And having girls beat up people who pick on you did not bother you at all?”

“No.”

That figured. “Just checking.”

“And then later my cousins and my friends wouldn’t go out with any boys who gave me a hard time.”

“Right,” said Kas. “And your cousins aren’t here.”

“Yeah. But I don’t get it. I don’t care if other people aren’t like me, as long as they leave me alone.”
“I know. That’s one of the things that’s weird about you.”

angel tilted his head back to look at the ceiling. “Okay.”

“So you can blend in more, and make yourself less of a target, or…not. That’s really the choice you have.”

Kas knew Angel wasn’t going to like either of those choices, and predictably, he asked, “What’s option C?”

“There isn’t one.”

After mulling that one over for a while, Angel asked, “So—theoretically—if I wanted to make myself less of a target, what would I do?”

“You already know,” Kas said.

“Pretend I don’t.”

“Act more like everyone else. Stop asking difficult questions. Pretend like you care what the other Sentinels think about you.” He hesitated, still not wanting to touch the last one, but knowing that he had to find a way to say it.

But before he could manage it, Angel saved him. “And act like I think you’re my slave or something. I mean, that’s the big one, right?”

“Right,” Kas said. “That’s what Captain Ketner is saying.”

“But you don’t think he’s right?”

Kas answered carefully. “I think he’s right that the other Sentinels find it provocative.”

“I don’t understand why.”

“I know you don’t.”

“Anyway, I’m not doing that.”

That was kind of what Kas had figured. “Okay. But that means the others are going to keep giving you shit, and we already know Captain Ketner isn’t going to do anything about it, unless maybe things get really out of hand.”

Angel shook his head. “That doesn’t make sense. I mean, I believe you, but it doesn’t make sense.”

“I know.”

“So I guess we just…keep doing what we’re doing, and deal with Ethan’s next thing when it happens.”

Kas nodded. It wasn’t a great solution, but it was all they had. “Right.” He went over to sit next to Angel on the bed. “If it helps, I don’t think it’s going to be like this all the time.”

Angel nodded. “There won’t be any other Sentinels at med school.”

“Right.” Kas considered letting it go at that, but now that he was down this path, he had to do it right. “There might be other people who don’t like you,” he warned. Angel was used to being the
adored center of attention—in fact, he had only really begun to function well at Basic once he became the pet of the girls’ platoon—but that was not something he could expect to encounter everywhere he went. “And they might hassle you some, and the officers there aren’t going to think it’s their job to deal with it unless something serious happens. But it’s a bigger school—there’s, what, 50 in your program?”

Angel agreed, “Plus there’s the regular med school class for people who already have their Bachelors, and the nursing classes.”

“So ignoring them and hoping they find something else to do is probably going to work a lot better there than it does here. And I imagine they’ll keep you pretty busy at med school, and with any luck, the people there will be a little more mature. It shouldn’t be as hard as this. But Captain Ketner’s not wrong that figuring out how to coexist with people who don’t necessarily like you is something you have to learn to do.”

Angel nodded soberly, but then said, “I don’t know why anyone wouldn’t like me. I’m very likeable.”

“Sure, you are,” Kas agreed, but didn’t let the conversation get derailed into reassurance. “But you’re going to be the only Sentinel there, which some people might find threatening, and then there’s….”

He tried to think of a way to express Angel’s general Angel-ness, failed, and settled on, “the gay thing, which people are going to notice. I know it’s allowed, for Sentinels,” he added, anticipating Angel’s next objection. “But it’s not exactly approved of.”

He half expected Angel to pull away from him and retreat into himself, the way he did when he was upset but not quite ready to cry yet, but he just thought for a while and then said, “If we’re all right, that’s what really matters.”

“You’re going to be fine,” Kas reassured him.

“No, I mean—” Angel gestured between them. “Us.” He did some more knees-hugging, then said, “I mean, you said it’s my choice if I want to blend in and be less of a target or not.”

“Right,” Kas said. “It is.”

“But isn’t it sort of ours? I mean, when people give me a hard time, you have to deal with it.”

“Yeah. That’s just how it is,” Kas pointed out.

“I believe you. But that means I shouldn’t have to—or get to, whatever—decide what we’re going to do about it all by myself.”

“You’re the Sentinel,” Kas said. “That means you do.”

“Yeah, but we’re not doing that.”

That made, as Angel would say, no sense. “You can’t just decide not to be a Sentinel.”

“I know. But the part where we pretend it doesn’t matter what you want, we’re not doing that.”

Angel looked thoughtful. “Unless you want to do that. Which would be weird. Because I can’t use my powers of I’m-the-Sentinel-and-I-say-so to say that we are, because once we started I wouldn’t have them anymore, and…”

While Angel was rattling on about that, Kas had other things to think about. Could they just…not do that part? His first impulse was to take issue with the idea that other Sentinels pretended it didn’t
matter what their Guides wanted. They weren’t pretending; it really didn’t matter.

But that was semantics. If he imagined Angel was asking, “Why don’t we pretend it does matter what you want?”…was there really a reason they couldn’t do that?

It wasn’t How it Was Done, but when they were living their lives out from under the eyes of the liaison officers, how much did that matter? Sentinels pretty much made the rules for their own Guides—Bonded or assigned, but especially Bonded.

Before, when Angel had returned from that lecture on “leadership” that had rattled him so much, Kas had said that all the others could really do was disapprove. He’d meant that about things like Kas calling Angel by his first name and speaking before he was spoken to, but really, it applied to this much more radical suggestion, too.

“Compromise,” Angel was saying, “but I don’t know what that would look like. I get to be an absolute dictator every other day? Maybe we could figure something out.”

Right, Angel was still fretting over the possibility that Kas might for some reason want to be treated like his opinions didn’t matter. “That’s not the problem,” he said. “The problem is that the Army is still going to hold you responsible for what I do, because you’re the commanding officer.”

Angel nodded. “That’s why we have to decide things together.”

“There isn’t always time for that,” Kas pointed out. “That’s why the Army has ranks, because you can’t always sit down and vote.” Realizing that Angel might not be swayed by that argument, he added, “What about when you’re a doctor? You’ll have to give people orders then. Nurses and aides, definitely. Possibly even me.”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Then I’ll be in charge because I’m the one with the medical degree. Anyway, that’s work. It’s different when it’s our life.”

“Okay,” Kas said. He supposed that did make sense. Even in the Army, for most soldiers, there was a line between what your job, when you had to follow orders, and your private life. It was only between Sentinels and Guides that that line was erased. Guides were always on duty.

What Angel was suggesting…could work. It might not always be easy, but it could work. “So what happens when we don’t want the same thing?”

“I don’t know. We figure it out. Like people do.”

“What people?”


Oh. People who weren’t Sentinels and Guides, he meant. Those people.

He was right, though. Being a Sentinel and Guide was a relationship, as much as it was a job. They had the same options that people had in other kinds of relationships. Except for the option to end it, but since neither of them wanted to, was that an issue?

Apparently not. “Okay,” he said. “Then that’s what we’ll do.”
Kas was surprised to find that after what seemed like a momentous decision, nothing really changed. That night they ate dinner in the room; the next day they went to classes and Savard made some cutting remarks, which Angel ignored. The difference was that each time Angel made some misstep, instead of cringing inwardly and thinking of how to shield him from the consequences, Kas reminded himself that Angel had made his decision.

Then he reminded himself again, they had made their decision.

Nobody seemed to notice that anything had changed, possibly because nothing had, except that Kas now understood what Angel had been trying to do all along. There had been plenty of times even before now that Kas had wondered whether Angel was really as happily oblivious as he seemed—from asking Bedell about Gaines scores on the first day of Guide Management to offering Savard the “weaponized” popcorn—or if it was all a massive put-on. Now he suspected that the truth was something else: the innocently naïve behavior was often his natural impulse, but he had a quick enough mind to think that impulse through…and then end up doing it anyway, with at least some idea of the effect it would have. Kas thought Angel could use some work on seeing consequences a little further ahead, but that was a minor problem.

That, at least, was the theory he was going with, until he found out what it was like when Angel really lost control of his impulses.

They were doing another “outside lab” in Theory, this one involving locating and identifying distant objects. There was a light drizzle, which Angel was predictably unhappy about, and groused about the rain dripping down his neck until Kas stood behind him, wrapped his arms around him, and rested his chin on Angel’s head. “Better?”

“Lots.”

Time to add “living umbrella” to his job description, Kas supposed.

“Sentinel Kadinsky,” Ketner said, “you’re up next. Try target two.”

Kadinsky flipped her damp hair and stepped up to the front of the group, motioning for poor Signorelli, who was stuck working with her again, to kneel next to her. Kas winced in sympathy. Getting that mud out of his uniform trousers was going to take some work. Of course everybody except Kas and Collins, who was the lucky one who got out of assisting at Lab that day, was in the same boat.

In a bored voice, Kadinsky listed the objects that were hidden in her target area and their locations.

“Excellent,” Ketner said. “You only missed two.”

She turned to pout at him, then, as she turned back around, shifted her stance slightly and tripped over Signorelli, barely stopping herself from ending up face-down in the mud.

Savard laughed unpleasantly, which Kas thought was what really set Kadinsky off. “You idiot,” she snarled. “Don’t you even know how to stay out of the way?”

“I’m sorry, ma’am,” Signorelli said, helping her to her feet.

Kadinsky slapped him across the face with a mud-slimed hand.

Angel tensed in Kas’s arms, then pulled free. “What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” he demanded.
She gave him a share of the contemptuous look she was directing at Signorelli, and said, “I’m disciplining this pathetic excuse for a Guide. You might want to try it sometime.” Turning back to Signorelli, she said, “You won’t eat, or so much as sit down, until this uniform is spotless, do you understand me?”

“Yes, ma’am.”

“Are you out of your fucking mind?” Angel asked.

“Mind your own business,” Kadinsky said, and smacked Signorelli again.

“No.” He turned to look at Captain Ketner. “Are you just going to let her do that?”

“Yes,” Ketner said. “Stand down, Temas.”

“But--” Angel turned his incredulous look on Kas.

She hit Signorelli twice more while Kas was still trying to work out what to do. At that point, Angel was bouncing a little on his toes and making aborted reaches for Kadinsky’s arm, like he was seriously considering trying to stop her by force. That couldn’t happen—if it did, Ketner would do something about it, and Angel would be the one in the wrong. Kas grabbed him and pulled him a little away from the group. He knew what Kadinsky and the others would think of that, but really, it was the better of a short list of bad options.

“You need to calm down,” Kas told a pissed-off and struggling Angel.

“She can’t just--”

“Yeah, she can. He’s her Guide—today, at least—and it’s not any of your business what she does with him.” That argument didn’t have much of an effect on Angel, who was still shaking with rage as Kadinsky’s hand once again connected with Signorelli’s face. “And now she’s beating up on him because she knows it’s pissing you off, so if you really want to help, simmer down.”

Angel looked about to protest, then set his jaw grimly and nodded. Meanwhile, Captain Ketner resumed the lesson as if nothing out of the ordinary had happened.

Which, really, it hadn’t. For everyone except Angel, a Sentinel hitting a Guide for something that was really no one’s fault was business as usual.

Kas wasn’t sure whether to be surprised, or not, that Captain Ketner didn’t call them in for another meeting. Even leaving aside the other aspects of the situation, Angel had at the very least come very close to disobeying a direct order. But the only fallout of the situation was that the other Sentinels now knew how to get under Angel’s skin—and that was bad enough. Kadinsky and Savard took to smacking the School Guides around at every opportunity, and while Aponte and Grover didn’t go quite that far, they did make a point of publically disciplining the Guides. Angel was livid every time it happened, and while he managed to restrain himself from responding directly, it was still obvious that he was bothered—he wasn’t exactly good at hiding his feelings. The others developed some sort of scoring system based on how visibly upset they could make Angel become.

To minimize the damage, he and Angel took to spending as much time as possible in their quarters. If Angel wasn’t there to react, the other Sentinels would have less reason to put on a performance. But they still had to go to classes, and the hallways between classrooms became an especially dangerous place to be a School Guide.

After dinner one evening, Kas took their dishes back down—giving a sympathetic nod to Collins,
who was scrubbing the floor with a toothbrush on Sentinel Grover’s orders—and found Signorelli
and Vosburg in the kitchen, getting a head start on the cleaning up. Between the other Guides being
busy with ridiculous punishment details on top of their regular work, Angel trying to avoid providing
an audience for the other Sentinels, and Kas staying with Angel since he still didn’t think it was a
good idea to give Savard or anyone else a chance to corner him alone, Kas hadn’t had a chance to try
to talk to any of the other Guides. But Savard and the others were still in the dining room, and would
have to walk by the kitchen to get to the stairs that led to Angel’s room, so now was as good a time
as any.

He picked up a dishtowel and started drying the pots that Vosburg had just finished washing.
“Look,” he said. “I know this thing with Angel is making things hard for all of you. If there was
anything we could do about it, we would, but I don’t think there is.”

Neither of the other Guides spoke, although Vosburg did look in his general direction and hand him
the next pot to be dried, which Kas supposed was something.

Three pots later, Signorelli said, “They always get heavy handed about halfway through the session.
It’s not really worse than usual.”

These guys really did have the worst job in the Army. Being a Guide always had its rough spots, but
if being routinely hit in the face by a bunch of eighteen-year-olds for no better reason than that they
thought it was funny how much it bothered one of their classmates didn’t qualify as a particularly bad
week, clearly Kas was not appreciating his advantages in life. If he had to work here, he’d kill
himself.

“So you can tell your Sentinel it’s not his fault,” Signorelli added.

“Thanks.” Kas wasn’t sure that he would, given that Angel would find the information more
disturbing than comforting. But would that fall under the heading of protecting Angel from things
that he really ought to know? It was hard to tell.

They worked in silence for a few minutes, until Signorelli looked over his shoulder and said, “When
yours finally decides to take charge, it’s going to be hell. The ones that start out afraid of their own
authority always make up for it in the end.”

“Oh, okay,” Kas said. Signorelli was wrong, but Kas was surprised to hear him finally, after almost three
weeks, giving him advice like a normal Guide would.

“You can’t do much about it,” Signorelli added. “Just….” He shrugged. “Try not to be too
surprised.”

There was no point saying that it wasn’t going to happen—Signorelli wouldn’t believe him, and if he
did, it would amount to nothing more than rubbing it in that his life didn’t suck as much as the
School Guides’ did. He decided to stick with, “Thanks.”

#

“You going to fire that sometime this week, Temas?” Captain Nagley asked.

“Yeah, okay,” Angel said, shifting his grip on the rifle uncomfortably. When Kas elbowed him in the
side he quickly amended that to, “Yes, sir.”

They were on the rifle range for the first Tactics field exercise. Kas tried to convince him it was
really the same thing as an outside lab, but he wasn’t fooled. The fact that there were guns—rifles—
with live ammunition made it different.
Shooting the rifles had been one of the worst parts of boot camp, and what they were doing now was the same, except that the targets were further away. “I guess you can’t do this part for me, huh?” he asked Kas.

“I can barely even see the targets, so no.”

“I can see them just fine.” Hitting them was the problem.

“Temas!” Nagley yelled again.

He turned his head away, closed his eyes, and fired.

After four shots, he paused and asked Kas, “How many did he say we were supposed to do?”

“Five.”

He fired once more. There. Done.

He was the last one to shoot, so after he was done, Nagley sent one of the school’s Guides out to collect the targets. Angel wasn’t surprised to see that he hadn’t managed to hit his own. Nagley apparently was, though. After reminding the others about things like accounting for the bullet’s drop due to gravity, he asked Angel, “Are you sure you’re really a Sentinel?”

If only he wasn’t—then he wouldn’t have to be in the Army. Except then he wouldn’t have Kas, and before he found out about being a Sentinel, mami had been talking about getting a second job to help pay for his medical school. So maybe it was good that he was, except—

“Temas! Are you paying attention?”

Oh. “Yes, sir. Yes, I’m sure I’m a Sentinel, sir.”

Ethan thought that was funny, for some reason. Angel carefully ignored him.

They took turns shooting some more, then did even more shooting, this time while lying down.

“Sentinels Kadinsky, Savard, Grover, and Aponte, you are all qualified,” Nagley finally said.

Oh, good. That sounded like they were done.

“But we will not be returning to the School facility until Sentinel Temas has managed to make contact with a target.”

“We’re going to be here all fucking night,” Ethan said. Nagley either didn’t hear him or pretended not to, but Angel had to admit he had a point. This could take a very long time.

After signing for a lot more bullets, he nodded and said, “Yes, sir,” while Captain Nagley repeated the same instructions he’d heard about fifty times. Really, not being able to remember “Steady, trigger squeeze, aim, breathing,” was not the problem he was having here.

And Kas saying things like, “Try to relax,” was only marginally more helpful.

By the time he’d fired about a million more shots, and had gone back for more ammunition and another repeat of the lecture from Captain Nagley three times, what little patience he had for the situation was exhausted.

He stood, the rifle slack in his hands, while Captain Nagley held out the next box of bullets. “Is there a problem, Sentinel?”
Yes, he wanted to say. This wasn’t funny, it wasn’t proving anything, and if anyone in the Army ever really needed him to shoot at things from 500 yards away—or any distance, really—they had way worse problems than he ever wanted to think about. This was nothing but a fucking waste of time, and he was done.

Kas leaned in and said, too soft for anyone but a Sentinel to hear, “Whatever you’re thinking, don’t do it.”

He was right, of course. Kas was always right. Kas could probably hit the fucking targets even if he couldn’t see them.

Sometimes, it was enough to make you sick, Kas being so perfect all the time. Well, if he knew everything, he could just take the fucking rifle and fix everything.

Angel spun around, the rifle still in his hands, somehow managed to whack Kas in the stomach with it. He wasn’t sure what he thought was going to happen. Later, he’d think that it was like when you stood at the edge of a precipice, thinking about stepping over the edge for the giddy horror of it, but sure, in your heart of hearts, that the laws of the universe wouldn’t allow you to actually fall. At the time, he didn’t think at all.

He was never quite able to piece together the events that followed. He remembered thinking, oh, shit, that was bad, and Kas taking the rifle out of his hands and knocking him down, and someone—the school’s scary Guides, maybe, but he wasn’t sure—pulling Kas off of him and picking him up off the ground.

Somehow, he got back to his own room at the Sentinel School building. Kas wasn’t there. He didn’t know where Kas was. Kas probably didn’t want to be with him anymore, since he clearly wasn’t any better than the rest of the fucking asshole Sentinels.

He cried about that for a while, hugging Kas’s pillow, which at least still smelled like him.

When his eyes were all red and puffy and his head felt like it was full of wet newspaper, he dragged himself off the bed and got a drink of water. What now?

Kas, if he was here, and wasn’t mad at him, would ask, “What do you need to feel better?”

The answer was, he needed Kas. Only—

Only, he realized with sick dread, Kas wasn’t not-here because he was mad at him. As far as Nagley and the other Captains were concerned, he was allowed to hit Kas. And Kas was not allowed to hit him back, so Kas was probably in really big trouble.

And since he was the Sentinel, he had to fix it. Somehow.

Step one had to be “Find Kas.” Once he did that, maybe Kas could tell him what step two was. He opened the door to his room and found one of the other Guides out there.

“Is there something I can help you with, sir?”

“I need Kas.”

“Yes, sir.” The Guide picked up an in-house phone that was near the stairs, punched a button, and said, “Sir? He’s asking for his Guide.”

“I’ll be right there,” someone said on the other end. Angel wasn’t sure who. Not Kas.
A few moments later, Captain Ketner came up the stairs. “Sentinel Temas,” he began.

“Where’s Kas?” Angel blurted out.

“He’s downstairs.”

“I want to see him.”

“I understand. We need to talk first.”

He hesitated. If talking first was the easiest way to accomplish Step One: Find Kas, then he’d better do it. “Okay.”

They went into his room. “Son,” Ketner said, shaking his head and sitting down in Angel’s desk chair. “This sort of thing is exactly why it’s better for everyone if you set appropriate limits with your Guide.”

Angel was curious about exactly what Ketner thought, “This sort of thing” was, but asking wouldn’t help Find Kas any sooner, so he just said, “Yes, sir.”

“Allowing your Guide to take all sorts of liberties and then striking out at him in anger is not good leadership.”

That, at least, Angel could agree with. “Yes, sir.”

“But to create a situation where your Guide could even think of disarming, subduing, and restraining you in response to a disciplinary action is completely unacceptable.”

What was really unacceptable was calling what he did a “disciplinary action.” He had no idea what the right thing for Kas to do when somebody who was supposed to love him hit him for no reason, but stopping him from doing it again seemed like a pretty good start.

“Since allowing you to make your own decisions regarding your Guide’s conduct has had such disastrous results, from here on out I and the rest of the instructional staff will be providing you with more supervision.”

“But Kas is coming back?” He had to be; they were Bonded, but Angel wanted to hear it.

“Since you’re Bonded with him, there is no alternative. He’ll be provided with sufficient additional training to ensure your safety and his correct performance.”

His safety? What a fucking joke. “Can I see Kas now?”

“Yes. We’ll go over the standards you’ll be expected to follow later.”

He didn’t like the sound of that, but at least Step One was about to be accomplished.

“Show him down to the holding room,” Ketner told the other Guide as they left the room.

“Yes, sir.”

The Guide was the older one, who Angel thought was the scariest one of them all. He led Angel down two flights of stairs, across a little hallway near where the laundry room was, and then down another half-flight of stairs. Another of the school’s Guides was there, standing outside a metal door with a little glass panel in it.
“Are you going in, sir?” the older Guide asked, taking a set of keys from the other one.

“Yes.”

The Guide opened the door. “We’ll be out here if you need anything, sir.”

The room was a bare cell with cinderblock walls and a single lightbulb hanging from the ceiling in a wire cage. Kas sat on the floor opposite the door, dressed in his t-shirt and uniform pants, barefoot.  “Um. Hi,” Angel said.

“Hey.” Kas got awkwardly to his feet. Angel noticed that his face was bruised—and he certainly hadn’t hit him there—and his hands were bound behind his back.

“Fuck. Are you okay?”

“Yeah. You?”

He nodded. “I’m sorry.”

“Me, too.” Kas looked away. “I have a feeling I’m in pretty deep shit here.”

“We’re in pretty deep shit.” He leaned up against Kas for a minute. “I don’t know what to do now.”

“What did they tell you to do?”

“I don’t know. I just kept saying I wanted to see you until they brought me down here.”

“Good start.” Kas looked over at the door. “Do you want to find out if I have to stay in here?”

“Oh. Sure.” He opened the door—it wasn’t locked. “Are we allowed out of here yet?” he asked the Guides.

They exchanged a look. “You are, sir,” the older one said.

“And Kas?”

“We’re to keep Kas here until Captain Ketner orders otherwise.”

Great. “Can I at least get these handcuffs off of him?”

After another look, the older Guide said, “Yes, sir,” and handed him a key.

“Thanks.” Kas turned around so he could take the cuffs off; Angel handed them and the key to the other Guides and closed the door again.

Kas rubbed his wrists a little bit, then gave him a hug, and they sat down again, this time with Kas’s arm around Angel.

“What now?”

Kas shook his head.

“I’m really sorry,” Angel said again.

“Yeah. Not exactly my proudest moment either.”

“You were right, though.”
“About not doing what you were thinking, or about knocking you down?”

“Both.”

“Thanks.”

Some time later—maybe half an hour—Captain Ketner came into the room. “Are you finished here, Sentinel?”

“Finished with what?”

“Report to my office in five minutes.”

“What about Kas?”

“Kas will stay where he is for now.”

When Ketner had left, Angel buried his face in Kas’s shoulder, saying, “Aw, shit.”

Kas patted his back. “Yeah.”

“He said there’s going to be some new discipline standards,” Angel remembered. “Something about supervision—I don’t remember exactly what he said.”

“Yeah,” Kas said again. “Listen, as long as we get to leave on time, we’re only here for a little over three weeks more. I’m sure you’re not going to like it, whatever he has in mind, but if you just go along with it, we’ll be leaving soon.”

“Do you think he can make us do this over again?”

“Maybe,” Kas said. “But the only thing you’re not doing terrific in is Guide Management, so if you can really sell that you’ve turned over a new leaf when it comes to that….”

He had a point. Angel nodded.

“And I’ll be fine. I might be in for an unpleasant couple of weeks, but it’s not going to do me any permanent harm.”

Angel gulped and nodded again.

Another hug and he left, one of the two school Guides falling into step behind him, the other one locking the door on Kas.

As he neared Captain Ketner’s office, he could hear him talking to someone inside. Soon he recognized Captain Bedell’s voice, saying, “—him to one of the other students to train?”

“Because the point is to teach Temas how to manage his Guide, not send him completely around the bend,” Ketner answered.

“Taking his pet away from him would teach him a lesson,” Bedell said.

Were they talking about taking Kas away from him? He wasn’t going to “go along” with that, no matter what Kas said.

But Ketner said, “You can’t reassign a Bonded Guide, even temporarily, even if it was a good idea in this case. And it’s not. Temas isn’t stupid; given what’s happened, I’m sure he understands why
letting his Guide behave the way he has been is dangerous. We'll turn him around.”

Completely untrue, but...a convincing motivation for the performance he was supposed to be putting on. He took a deep breath and tried to imagine what it would be like if he was scared of Kas. Maybe if Kas was like that big guard dog Tio Gustaivo used to have down at the factory. He wasn’t mean, exactly, but you had to be careful how you acted around him. If you ran away he would chase you.

#

“You have fifteen minutes before you have to wake your Sentinel.”

Kas sat up, rubbing his neck. Signorelli was standing in the doorway to the cell, backlit by the hall lights, looking down at him. “Okay.” Angel hadn’t come back after his meeting with Ketner—no one had—and at some point, Kas had eventually fallen asleep. Now he was stiff and sore from sleeping on the cold concrete floor.

Signorelli walked him to a small bathroom at the end of the hall. Kas was unsurprised to find that the shower had only cold water. The uniform that had been left for him to change into was a blue G-TAC one, too. No points to liaison officers for guessing that a real soldier would not be amused by having to wear that shit.

Once he was ready, Signorelli escorted him upstairs and stood in the doorway while he woke Angel up. Glancing over his shoulder at the other Guide, Kas poked him. “Hey. Angel.”

Angel sat up, rubbed at his eyes, then grabbed Kas’s hand and dragged him into the bathroom. He looked Kas over. “You okay?”

Kas nodded. “You?”

“Yeah. I’m supposed to make you call me ‘Sentinel Temas’ now,” he added with a wince.

“Yes, sir,” Kas said smiling a little to soften it.

That was the only opportunity for private conversation they had all day. Signorelli said, “Sentinel Temas, if you’re finished with Guide Temas, he has other duties downstairs.”

The new regime turned out to involve Kas being locked in the cell down in the basement any time he wasn’t either standing at attention in the back of a classroom or doing chores or PT under Captain Bedell’s direct supervision. He was allowed to wake Angel up in the mornings, and sometimes, if Bedell thought the day had gone well, he took him his dinner in his room, too. Signorelli or one of the other Guides always went along, and they only had a minute or two together.

Every day Angel asked him if he was all right. Even though Bedell had him on half-rations, if he was lucky, and usually kept him up well into the night on work details, and roughed him up some getting him in and out of the cell, Kas always said yes. He’d worked harder on less food and sleep in Ranger School; by comparison, this wasn’t anything to complain about.

When asked the same question, Angel said yes, too, but Kas could see that he was getting pale and twitchy, and suspected that he wasn’t eating or sleeping much better than Kas was, although he never saw him at meals or at night. Kas was able to watch him in classes, and he was withdrawn to the point of sullenness, not mouthing off in the classes he didn’t like, or showing off in the ones he did. He did keep up, in at least a minimal way, with what was going on in the classes, and gave brief answers to direct questions, so things weren’t quite as bad as they had gotten in Basic.

On Sunday, Bedell apparently had better things to do than watch him do push-ups and shine every
boot in the building, because after waking Angel up he was tossed back into the cell and left there for hours.

When the door creaked open, he figured that either Bedell had come to bother him some more, or else Angel had talked his way into another visit. He was surprised to see a Chaplain in fatigue pants and clerical collar.

Chaplains were officers, so Kas got to his feet and saluted.

The chaplain returned the salute. “As you were.”

He sat down again. “I’d offer you a seat, but…” He gestured around at the empty cell.

“Yes. I’m Father Romero. Angel asked me to come see you. Insisted, actually, after I clued him in that he had a right to insist on a pastoral visit on your behalf.”

Trust Angel. “Thanks.”

“He’s been to see me several times since…this, happened.”

“That’s good. He’s…not doing very well, is he.” It wasn’t really a question.

“He’s pretty upset,” Romero agreed. “He asked me to speak to Captain Ketner about ending this… whatever it is, and I’ve agreed to try, but I doubt it’ll help.”

“Yeah, probably not.” Angel was getting better at making good use of the resources at his disposal, but there wasn’t much a chaplain could do against the liaison officers. “There must be a Sentinel Medicine specialist around here somewhere.”

“I’m sure there is,” Romero agreed. “But he’s not sick, exactly.”

“Yeah, but if he could get one to say that he needs more contact with his Guide….”

“I’ll suggest that,” Romero hesitated. “If you don’t mind my asking, what exactly happened? Angel says he got angry at one of the training instructors, tried to hit you, and you stopped him, because you knew that after he was feeling better he’d regret it, and now you’re in a great deal of trouble with Captains Ketner and Bedell.”

Kas had wondered exactly how Angel would sum up the incident. “That’s…pretty much what happened. He’s leaving out that I stopped him by knocking him down. And that he’s allowed to hit me if he wants to.”

Romero nodded. “I’m aware. The amount of spousal battery, so to speak, that the Army considers acceptable in Sentinel-Guide relationships is a problem for the Church. Angel and I have talked about it.”

Kas winced a little at the terminology—spousal battery, really? “They’ve been saying all along that he isn’t strict enough with me; this just pushed them over the edge enough to do something about it.”

“It’s a difficult situation,” Romero said. One of those things that didn’t mean anything. “He did ask me to make sure you understand that he doesn’t feel like he’s not safe with you.”

“Oh, I know.”

“And that he’s very sorry he tried to hit you.”
“I know that, too.”

“He insisted on a fairly hefty penance for that, too. It seemed to make him feel a little better about things.”

“Good.” Kas rubbed at his jaw. They hadn’t let him shave this morning, for some reason, and he was getting stubbly. “Try to convince him that I’m really all right. This isn’t exactly fun, but it’s not anything I can’t handle. Thinking about him being on his own and upset is really the worst part.”

“I’ll tell him,” Romero agreed.

One of the Guides outside knocked on the door.

“Sounds like our time’s up,” the chaplain said. “Oh—did you want a Bible?”

“What?”

“I’m allowed—required, actually—to give you a Bible, if you ask for one.”

“Okay,” Kas said. At least he’d have something to read, when the lights were on.

Romero handed him one of the little pocket-size Bibles that chaplains and Red Cross people were always trying to give away.

“Thanks.”

After the chaplain left, he tried reading it for a while, then got bored with that and played the game where you tell your fortune by flipping it open to a random page and putting your finger down. After getting a couple of “begats,” the copyright page, and “Then Peter opened his mouth and said, Of a truth I perceive that God is no respecter of persons,” he gave up on that and switched over to making paper airplanes out of some of the more boring sections.

He managed to get three in a row to land in the drain in the corner of the room, then it occurred to him that Angel just might find this activity a little bit sacrilegious, if he were here. Gathering the airplanes back up, unfolding them, flattening them out, and putting the pages back where they had been killed a little more time.

Once he abandoned the Bible, he had nothing to occupy his mind but worry. On most days, he at least got to see Angel, even if they couldn’t talk, so he at least knew how he was. Anything could be happening up there—what if Angel started having spikes again? Or if the other Sentinels were giving him a hard time? The other Guides couldn’t be taking care of him as well as Kas did.

Kas’s fears grew increasingly lurid as the day wore on. What if Angel tried to kill himself again? He’d insisted that his suicide attempt at Basic hadn’t been serious—he’d just wanted to sleep, he said—but it could have worked. Or what if he decided to run away, and froze to death, or got picked up by a serial killer, or…

Enough, he told himself firmly. Angel was safe, just a little scared and unhappy, which he’d survived before. If he fell down the stairs and broke his leg—great, there was a new thing to worry about—the instructors and the other Guides would help him.

Still, the next time Signorelli unlocked the cell door and let Captain Bedell in, Kas couldn’t shake a feeling that something was wrong. He got to his feet and saluted as sharply as he could. He had to be imagining it; Bedell just looked him over contemptuously and said, “Go sweep the courtyard,” the same sort of thing as ever.
But he knew he wasn’t imagining it when Signorelli said, “Sir!” like Bedell had just done something outrageous.

“And you go with him,” Bedell snapped.

“Sir,” Signorelli said again.

“I gave you an order, Guide.”

Signorelli stared at Bedell for a full minute before he about-faced and headed for the courtyard. Kas trotted after him. “What the hell’s going on?” he asked once they were out of Bedell’s earshot.

Signorelli didn’t answer until they were out in the courtyard. “Sentinel Temas was attacked by Sentinels Savard and Aponte.”

“What the fuck--”

“He’s in the infirmary.”

“I need to be there.”

“Obviously,” said Signorelli. “Captain Bedell’s gone too far this time.”

“Who’s with him?”

Fortunately, Signorelli understood that he didn’t mean Captain Bedell. “Vosburg. And Lieutenant Shiffley. Just--” He grabbed a broom that was standing by the door and shoved it at Kas. “Do what he says, in case he comes looking for you. I’ll find Captain Ketner. He outranks Captain Bedell.”

Signorelli dashed off, and left Kas holding the broom. He looked over in the direction of the rest of the base. The infirmary had to be over that way somewhere. Anybody he bumped into could tell him where it was.

At this point, he reminded himself, blatant insubordination could only make things worse. That Bedell was flat-out wrong to try to keep him away from his injured Sentinel wouldn’t be an excuse, either. Signorelli’s plan was better.

He’d give it five minutes, then re-evaluate.

At four minutes, fifteen seconds, Ketner came out of the School building, Signorelli at his heels. Kas belatedly realized he ought to have at least tried to look like he was sweeping the courtyard, or whatever stupid fucking thing he was supposed to be doing, but fortunately, Ketner didn’t seem to notice. “Come on,” he told Kas, without breaking stride.

They jumped into Ketner’s staff car and Signorelli drove to the infirmary. “Park it,” Ketner told Signorelli, and he and Kas both went into the infirmary, straight up to the second floor where the Sentinel ward was.

Kas had no idea what to expect, and went weak-kneed with relief when he saw that Angel was sitting up, conscious and alert. When Angel spotted him, he dropped a handful of bloody Kleenex into his lap and held out both hands, calling, “Kas!”

Kas took his hands and linked with him, checking his “touch” dial. Already turned down. Good. Angel’s shirt-front was bloody, and he had an impressive collection of bruises developing on his face, but he didn’t seem seriously injured. “You all right?”
“Yeah,” Angel said, like he did every day. This time he added, “I only lost consciousness for about a minute. I don’t think I have a concussion. I might need stitches in my lip, though.” He displayed it for Kas to examine.

“Yeah, maybe,” Kas agreed, wincing.

“I’ll tell the doctor your Guide’s here,” said a nurse.

“I asked the doctor to wait to do the stitches until you were here,” Angel explained. “He was really ticked off when he found out I had my own Guide and the school’s one couldn’t actually link with me.”

Kas started to say, “I bet he was,” then remembered that they were in a room full of rank and changed it to, “Yes, sir.” Angel pouted at him a little, but mostly played along.

Over by the door, Lieutenant Shiffley was telling Ketner, “He’s fine, really. A little shaken up, obviously. The doctor is thinking about keeping him overnight for observation, just to be safe.”

Angel immediately remembered to look pathetic as Ketner turned to look at him. It really was not that difficult, given that he hadn’t been eating lately and was covered in blood.

“Yes, of course,” Ketner said. “I suppose you want to keep your Guide with you.”

“Yes, sir,” Angel said.

He nodded, and said to Kas, “Stay with him, and behave yourself.”

“Yes, sir,” Kas said, doing his best to look obedient.

Ketner ordered Vosburg to stay, and the two officers left. Soon after, the doctor, a Sentinel Medicine specialist, came in to have another look at Angel’s lip.

“This one is your Guide?” he asked, sounding exasperated.

Angel nodded. “That’s Kas.”

“What’s the other one doing here?”

“I have no idea,” said Angel.

The doctor shrugged, asked Angel a few questions about drug reactions, and got to work. He ended up putting in two stitches. “Stay linked for a minute,” he said when he was finished. “I want to check for concussion again.”

“Does being linked affect the pupillary reaction?” Angel wanted to know.

“It can,” the doctor said, shining a light into first one of his eyes, then the other.

“How?”

“If your dial is set very high or very low, the eye may not react normally to light. Are you feeling any nausea or dizziness?”

“No.”

“If you start, let us know right away. Headache?”
“Little bit.”

“I’ll prescribe 500 milligrams of acetaminophen.”

The doctor left, without giving Angel a chance to ask any more questions about Sentinels and concussions. A few moments later the nurse returned with two Tylenol in a paper cup and a set of scrubs for Angel to change into. “Do you need any help getting changed?”

“Kas will help me.”

“Of course. Let me know if there’s anything else you need.”

Kas helped Angel into the bathroom to get cleaned up and changed. When they came back, Vosburg had re-posted himself just outside the door.

“Ketner’s still here,” Angel whispered as Kas got him settled on the bed. “You’d better…you know.”

“Got it,” Kas nodded, and put himself at parade rest between Angel and the door. After a few moments he asked, “So what happened?”

“I was trying to watch TV, and Ethan came in.”

“Oh.” Considering that Angel had only tried to watch TV at Sentinel School twice, and both times had led to a confrontation with Savard, that might not have been the wisest choice Angel had ever made, but Kas didn’t say so. If they had a little more privacy later, he might mention it.

“And Troy,” Angel added. “They sent the School Guides off to get something for them.”

“I should have been there,” Kas said.

“Yeah, I know.”

An orderly brought Angel a dinner tray, which he poked at despondently. “Did you eat yet?”

“No.” Not unless last night’s dinner counted, anyway.

“Then you’d better help me with this.”

The orderly had shut the door on his way out, so Kas perched on the edge of Angel’s bed to share his dinner. Kas ate most of the Salisbury steak, mashed potatoes, and peas, while Angel took care of the Jello and milk.

After that he did more standing by the door, until Angel said, “Okay, Ketner’s finally leaving.”

“What about Vosburg?”

“He’s still here, but he’s down at the end of the hall. And I doubt the doctors and nurses will be paying much attention to us—Ketner told them to, but everybody else here is actually sick.”

“Oh?” Kas had wondered why the infirmary had a whole area devoted to Sentinel Medicine—the Sentinel School couldn’t possibly have that many injuries and illnesses.

“Yeah, there’s a guy next door with some kind of chemical burns, and the one after that sounds like antibiotic-resistant pneumonia, and across the hall is some kind of traumatic brain injury. I don’t know; this must be where they send Sentinels for long-term care. The doctor didn’t really want to
talk to me about it.”

“I see.”

“Yeah, so, anyway…” Angel patted the edge of the bed.

Kas sat next to him and let Angel curl up with his head on his chest. “Better?”

“Better.” After resting there for a few moments, Angel asked, “Don’t you want to know what I was doing hanging out in the TV room by myself where all past experience would lead me to expect that Ethan would try to bother me?”

“Yes,” Kas said. “I was wondering about that.”

“Well,” Angel said, “I heard Captain Ketner telling Bedell that they’d have to watch very closely to make sure that I wasn’t suffering any ‘undue distress’ while they were keeping us apart.”

That was good to know, at least.

“So I figured I’d better be suffering. I thought about faking some zones and spikes, but then I thought we’d be in a lot of trouble if I got caught. This way I didn’t have to fake anything.”

“You got Savard to beat you up on purpose?” It sounded like that was what he was saying, but Kas must have misunderstood somehow.

“I was trying for a close call, but it worked out all right. Do you think it was a good plan?”

“I’m not crazy about the part where you ended up with a concussion and stitches.”

Angel shrugged. “But do you think it’ll work?”

“I’m here now,” Kas pointed out.

“I’m hoping they realize on their own that it’s not a good idea separate us again. Since we’ve been doing it their way for almost a week now and all it got me was stitches.”

Kas had had no idea his Sentinel was such a devious little monkey. Kas would have expected Angel to try a lot of complaining about how he was sad and depressed and lonely. He’d also been bracing himself for tearful scenes when they were separated at the end of the training day, both of which Kas was certain would only further convince Ketner and other liaison officers that they were doing the right thing in keeping them apart.

But the way Angel had played it, the fact should amply demonstrate that Angel was better off with Kas than without him. On Kas’s watch, he had at least remained entirely unhospitalized.

“If it doesn’t work, they’re idiots,” he concluded.

“Obviously, they’re idiots, but I’m hoping it’ll work anyway. My only other idea was murdering Bedell in his sleep, breaking you out of jail, and embarking on a life of crime.”

“Yeah, let’s not do that. It’s only two more weeks, even if they don’t let me out.”

“They’re not keeping you locked up for two more weeks,” Angel said firmly.

“It’s not that bad.”
“I am a Sentinel, you know,” Angel pointed out, touching the faint outline of a bruise on Kas’s jaw. “I know you’re tough and everything, but this has gone on long enough.”

Kas realized with a jolt that if Ketner’s intention had been to push Angel to develop some independence—rather than, say, simply to re-mold him into the SRB’s idea of how a Sentinel should behave—it had worked. Being separated from his Guide and knowing, or suspecting, that his Guide was being hurt was a situation that would rattle any Sentinel. Hell, SERE for Sentinels included special training in how to handle the extreme versions of that situation. What they’d been going through wasn’t even close to that level—Angel did see him every day, and had to know that what Kas was experiencing was closer to inconvenience than actual torture—but it was completely natural for Angel to be upset about it. When he was upset, his first impulse was to rely on Kas to fix it, but deprived of that option, he’d still managed to identify what he needed and use the resources at his disposal to get it.

And while Kas didn’t consider himself in need of protection, it was a pleasant surprise to find that Angel was not only willing, but capable, of rescuing him. He’d fallen into the same trap that Savard and Ketner had, of underestimating Angel. He might be small and cuddly, but he was still a Sentinel. “Okay. So what are we going to do if they try?”

“Well,” Angel said, “which do you think is better: having hysterics every time Ethan looks at me funny, or arranging to get beat up again?”

That was a tough call. “Fake hysterics?”

“Eh. It would more be a matter of not trying very hard not to have them. It’s kind of scary, being beaten up.”

“Then try that first,” Kas said. Apparently, Angel was going to rescue him whether he wanted it or not, so the option where he didn’t expose himself to any more physical violence was the better choice. “But try not to oversell it.”

Angel nodded. “I figure it’ll work better if I don’t actually say I need you to protect me from the big scary Sentinel.”

“Yes, I think you’re right.”

“And I bet we’ll have to keep playing along with their rules when anybody can see us,” Angel added. “So they think we learned our lesson.”

“Right.” That was another way the punishment had worked, even if not in the way Ketner and Bedell had had in mind. Even though they had agreed that they would have a more equal relationship, Angel refusing to conform even superficially to what was expected of him as a Sentinel would make their lives a lot more difficult than they needed to be. Being able to strategically pay lip service to the usual Sentinel-Guide dynamics was an important lesson for Angel to learn.

They managed to get at least portions of a decent night’s sleep, despite the nurses coming in every few hours to check on Angel. Sleeping in a hospital bed with a concussed Sentinel on top of him was not exactly comfortable, but it beat the hell out of a cold concrete floor. In the morning there were two breakfast trays—Kas ate one and a half of them—and Collins came to relieve Vosburg, and brought a fresh uniform for Angel. Kas had to wear the uniform he’d slept in, but he had a shave, and felt better about things than he had in days.

They reported straight to Sensory Lab, so Kas couldn’t tell yet if anything had changed about his status. He kept himself at attention at the back of the room throughout the class, then marched with
the other Guides to Health and Hygiene, and did the same thing. The day’s lesson was about injuries and first aid, and Angel did bestir himself enough to share what he’d learned about concussions.

The first sign of anything new came when they were dismissed to lunch, and Savard was escorted off in the direction of his own quarters by Doolan. Apparently it was his turn to be on house arrest. “Will you be dining in your room today, sir?” Signorelli asked Angel.

“Yes,” Angel said, shooting a glance over at Bedell, who had turned up outside Shiffley’s classroom. “Thank you.” Usually this was the part where Bedell dragged Kas off for some form of punishment detail, but this time he just glared, so Kas followed Angel up to their quarters, very properly staying three steps behind him and not speaking. He half-expected Bedell to come after them and order him away, but they made it safely to the room, where Angel closed the door behind them and leaned against it. “All right. The coast is clear.”

“Great.” Angel’s bed was unmade and some of his clothes were out of order, but Kas made a quick decision that straightening up would not be the best way to use what might only be a few precious minutes of freedom. Instead, he gathered Angel into a hug. Angel soon upped the ante to a kiss, only breaking off to say, “He’s coming with the food.”

Kas put himself at parade rest by the door, then opened it at Signorelli’s knock. “Your Sentinel’s lunch,” Signorelli said, handing him a tray.

Kas glanced down at the tray, which held only one plate, but two servings of food. He raised an eyebrow slightly. Signorelli looked carefully blank. When Kas turned to take the food over to Angel’s desk, Signorelli said, “Will there be anything else, sir?”

“No, thanks. Dismissed.”

Signorelli closed the door behind him.

“He’s staying in the hall,” Angel said softly. “We have to be quiet.”

Kas nodded. “Yeah, but he’s not going to hear anything if he can possibly not-hear it.”

They sat on the bed to eat, with the tray balanced between their laps, Angel tucked up tightly against his side. Angel ate a decent amount, but all too soon the brief reprieve was over and they had to go to afternoon classes.

After Tactics, Captain Ketner summoned Angel to his office. Kas was braced for something unpleasant, especially when he saw that Captain Bedell was there, as well. He took up parade rest by the door. Angel copied him, managing to look almost military about it.

“Are you feeling all right, son?” Ketner asked.

“Yes, sir,” Angel said.

Ketner smiled tightly. Message received. “We’ve decided to return your Guide to your control, on a provisional basis, provided you can enforce correct behavior from him.”

Good. No hysterics would be required. “Yes, sir,” Angel said. “What does that entail, exactly?”

Bedell said, “He will follow your orders. Address you with respect. Refrain from excessive familiarity and inappropriate physical contact.”
Kas was glad Angel didn’t ask for clarification of that last one.

“You can review your textbook for additional guidelines.”

“Yes, sir. Kas, is any of that going to be a problem?”

After taking a split second to think about how funny—although disastrous—it would be to answer, “Sure thing, sweetheart,” Kas said, “No, sir. No problem.”

“All right. You’re dismissed.”

Angel managed to wait until they were safely back in their quarters with the door shut before bouncing into Kas’s arms and proclaiming, “I’m a genius.”

“Yes, you are,” Kas agreed, hugging him.

Angel stuck close to his side through homework, dinner, and more homework, apart from the few minutes where Kas pried him away so he could have a shower and change into clean clothes. Kas really didn’t mind; after the week they’d had, he felt better having Angel close, too.

“Do you want a backrub or something?” he suggested when Angel finally stretched and took his textbooks back to his desk.

“Yes, please,” Angel said promptly.

Some time during Kas’s absence, Angel had apparently picked up the habit of saying “please” and “thank you” to Guides. Earlier, Kas would have thought it was adorable—which it was—but now he realized it was clever, too. God knew it wasn’t something other Sentinels bothered to do, but there wasn’t a rule against it, and even Captain Bedell would have to realize that he’d only make himself look ridiculous if he objected.

But it was still cute. “Okay, lay down.”

Angel languidly took off his uniform shirt and t-shirt, and stretched out on the bed. Kas took advantage of the opportunity to look him over for suspicious bruises. Apart from his black eye and split lip, he also had a large, mottled bruise over his ribs. “What’s this?”

Angel twisted around to look at it. “Oh. I think that’s where I fell on the coffee table.”

“Fell?”

“Well, where Ethan pushed me onto the coffee table. It doesn’t hurt,” he added.

“Good.” Kas straddled him and opened a link as he settled his hands on Angel’s shoulders. “How’s this?”

“Nice.”

This time, when Angel noticed Kas’s erection pressing against him, he didn’t protest. He did squirm a little. “You okay?” Kas asked after a moment.

“Uh-huh. Lemme up.”

He did. Angel crawled into his lap and kissed him. He had barely started, though, when he yelped and pulled back. “Damn. We can’t do that until my lip gets better.”

“Right,” Kas agreed. “How about this?” he suggested, finding an unbruised section of jawline to kiss
“That works,” Angel agreed. Several times he tried to return the favor, only to remember about his lip. Clearly, Kas was going to have to think of something for him to do, but he hadn’t quite figured it out when Angel slipped his hands under Kas’s shirt.

“Good choice,” Kas murmured. Second base was a little bit of a formality when neither of you had breasts, but there was something to be said for tradition.

When it came to things he actually wanted to learn, Angel was a quick study, and fortunately, this qualified. He quickly figured out how Kas liked to have his chest stroked—something that was a surprise even to Kas, since almost his entire sex life had been with Sentinels, and they tended not to go in for heavy petting.

At the moment, Kas wasn’t sure why. Angel certainly seemed to be enjoying himself. He’d dialed up his tactile sense and was humming happily as he stroked Kas’s chest. Kas soon stopped nibbling at his neck to let Angel focus on exploring.

Before long he found his way down as far as Kas’s waistband. He glanced up. “Can I…?”

Kas managed to say, “If you want to,” instead of, “Oh God, yes.”

Angel advanced steadily southward until he was looking down at Kas’s cock with an expression of studious concentration. He tried a few experimental strokes and soon fell into a rhythm.

The thing about Sentinels was that they could be very good lovers, when they wanted to be. After all, they could identify exactly what got their partner’s heart rate going, as well as the subtle changes in scent that accompanied arousal. They didn’t generally make the effort when their partner was a Guide, but Angel was clearly applying himself. He soon found out what kind of strokes Kas liked best, and sped up just as Kas’s arousal crested.

Kas closed his eyes as he came. When he opened them again, Angel was sitting back and watching him with a satisfied expression. “Good?” he asked.

“Good,” Kas confirmed. “Here,” he said, reaching toward Angel. “Let me get you.”

“You don’t have to,” Angel said.

Kas misunderstood. “I know,” he said patiently.

“No, I mean, you don’t have to.” Now Angel looked slightly embarrassed.

_Oh hhhhh_. It felt like it had been a long time since Kas was a teenager, but he did remember what it was like. “Next time, we’ll take care of you first.”

#

As the week wore on, Kas thought it was likely that the liaison officers would have had to give Angel more access to him, even without Angel’s clever plan. They were beginning to work on dealing with “adverse sensory experiences,” and it would have been not only cruel but dangerous to put a young Sentinel through that without the full support of a Guide. Even if the liaison officers had been willing to try, the Sentinel Medicine doctors and nurses who were on hand for most of the exercises almost certainly would have objected.

The sound sensitivity exercise started with simply playing loud sounds. By this point, all of the
student Sentinels, not just Angel, were completely familiar with their dials, so they adapted quickly.

“Keeping your sound dials adjusted is easy enough when that’s all you have to do,” Captain Ketner explained. “But when you encounter adverse sounds in a field situation, most often you will have to continue working with your other senses. To simulate that experience, we’re now going to do a simple scent discrimination exercise.” He had Doolan, who wasn’t working with any of the Sentinels today but was still on hand—possibly in case Kas flipped out again—hand around some scent samples, and started the tape again.

Angel’s hand tensed on the back of Kas’s neck. Kas thought that Angel would have done much better if the adverse sound tape had been something other than mortar fire and screaming, but had to admit it was a realistic choice for the kind of work most of the Sentinels would be doing.

That it was a sound test also meant that he couldn’t talk Angel through it, which Angel still relied on more than many of the other Sentinels did. While Ketner wasn’t looking, he sneaked one hand out from behind his back and gave Angel’s ankle a reassuring squeeze.

Angel glanced down at him in acknowledgement, nodded, and got to work.

The last part of the exercise was the hardest. Captain Ketner said, “Out in the hallway, Lieutenant Shiffley and Captain Nagley will be speaking, at normal conversational level. Your task is to filter out the irrelevant sounds and report the substance of their conversation.”

Angel looked down at him with a panicked expression.

“You can do it,” Kas said. He hoped he was speaking too softly for Ketner or the School Guides to hear, but he threw in a, “sir,” just to be safe. “You’ve done sound discrimination before.”

“But this!”

Every possibly useful thing Kas could say would undoubtedly fall under the liaison officers’ definition of “excessive familiarity,” so he just said, “Yes, sir,” and pressed on the Bond in what he hoped was a reassuring way.

“Thanks,” Angel said.

It was the third time for the adverse sounds tape, and Kas was getting tired of it. He didn’t have any dials to turn down; they ought to give the Guides ear plugs for this stuff. Angel tried all kinds of weird things with his dials during the test: turning them up and down rapidly, something Kas thought might have been an attempt to piggyback on the scent of Shiffley’s shampoo. Angel only managed to write down one thing in his workbook. When the exercise was over, Kas glanced at it—he’d written, “Something about spaghetti??”

It turned out, though, that none of the others had done much better. Grover had gotten the most, a few scattered phrases, but Savard had nothing at all.

“This was a difficult exercise,” Captain Ketner said. “If time permits, we’ll try it again later in the week.”

The exercises for the remaining senses followed the same pattern: first simply enduring the stimuli, then doing other sense work, then working with the affected sense. Angel didn’t like any of it, but held up fairly well. Kas hated not being able to help him as much as he would have liked, but he thought he held up fairly well, too.

One evening before dinner, Angel wandered out of the bathroom and said, “What do you do in the
Army when you run out of toothpaste?"

"Go to the PX and get some," Kas said. "Why, are you out of toothpaste?"

"Just about."

Kas winced. He really should have been keeping track of that. Or should he? That seemed to fall into the kind of Sentinel-Guide dynamic that Angel said he didn’t want. “Actually, what you do right now is send your Guide to the PX to get some.”

“Oh,” Angel said glumly.

"Do me a favor, and don’t mention that I didn’t notice."

"Okay."

"Now that I think of it, they might not let me go, but I can probably ask one of the School Guides to do it.” He hesitated. “Either way, I’ll need some money.” He’d spent the last of what he had from before the Bonding on Angel-snacks and Christmas shopping in Miami.

“Money?” Angel looked alarmed. “I don’t have any money.”

That could be a problem. “What have you been doing with your paychecks?” Sending them home, maybe? They probably should have had the talk about how Angel’s checks would have Kas’s pay on them, too, but honestly, he hadn’t thought about it.

“Oh!” Angel rummaged through one of his desk drawers. “Here,” he said, holding up a handful of Army paychecks. “I don’t think I lost any.”

Of course Angel had been stashing his paychecks in his desk and forgetting about them. What else would he have done? Kas took them and checked the dates. “Yeah, they’re all here.”

“Where are yours?”

“They put both of ours on your check,” Kas explained.

Not long ago, Angel would have asked, “Why?” and Kas would have had to try to explain. But now he just said, “Fuckers.”

“Yeah. Here,” he said, pointing to the check. “This line is your base pay, this one’s your Sentinel bonus, and this one is my base pay. Meal allowance and housing allowance we only get if we’re living somewhere that the Army doesn’t house and feed us. Actually, you won’t get meal allowance because you’ll be an officer.”

“Huh?”

“It’s an Army thing. If you’re enlisted, the Army has to feed you; officers are on their own.” He really had no idea why, so he changed the subject. “Do you have a bank account?”

Angel shook his head.

Why was he surprised? Apart from Christmas shopping—which Angel’s mother had given him a wad of cash to do, and Kas had made up the difference—they hadn’t had to spend a cent the whole time they were in Miami. Everything Angel wanted just appeared, as if by magic. “Okay. Then we’ll have to get you one. You do have to come along for that, so I don’t know....”
Angel nodded. “Last week, they said we could ask for base passes now.”

“Great. Okay, ask for one. If we can leave right after classes tomorrow, we can get to the bank while it’s still open. The PX is open in the evening, so we can get toothpaste after. Do you need anything else?” They had plenty of soap, thanks to Angel’s Tia Consuela. They weren’t using much shampoo, since Angel was still growing out the last of his Basic Training haircuts. Kas ran a hand over his own head. “I could use a haircut, actually.”

“Can we do that here?”

“Yeah. It costs five dollars.” He’d last gotten one before they’d left Basic, when he still had money.

“We’re running out of snacks, too. Can we get snacks?”

“Yes, we can get snacks.” He went into the bathroom to check if there was anything they actually needed. Angel was getting critically low on deodorant, so he added that to his mental list. “Do you have any razor blades?” He had half a box left, but he didn’t see any extras for Angel’s razor. On the other hand, Angel probably didn’t go through them very fast—Kas wasn’t entirely convinced that he actually needed to shave and wasn’t just pretending.

“Um…there’s one in the razor.”

“Maybe we should get some more—what brand is this?”

Angel came to the bathroom door and shrugged. “I don’t know. My mother gets them.”

Of course she did. “Okay, we’ll try to figure it out.” Kas hesitated. Angel was clearly accustomed to living in a world where toiletries and other household necessities mysteriously appeared without his intervention. It would probably be easier, at least in the short run, just to keep doing that. Chances were, Angel wouldn’t notice, the same way he didn’t notice the process by which clean uniforms and underwear turned up in his dresser. During their visit to Angel’s family, it had taken careful observation for Kas to determine that Angel’s grandmother was responsible and not, say, laundry elves.

Angel certainly loved and respected his grandmother, so maybe he wouldn’t see a problem with saying that he and Kas were equals, while still expecting Kas to take care of all of that stuff.

But Kas did, because while he had grown up with a similar arrangement—superficially very similar, in that all of the laundry, cleaning, and household re-stocking had been done by an older Hispanic woman. In the Dillinger household, however, she was the maid. So the question was, should he try to explain, or not say anything, and let Angel believe that they had the kind of egalitarian relationship he claimed to want?

When he put it that way, the answer was obvious. “C’mere and sit down with me a minute;” he said, tugging Angel over toward the bed.

“Okay…,” Angel said, tucking himself in against Kas’s side.

“After we leave here.”

“Yes?”

“Do you want me to just take care of this kind of thing, and not bother you about it? Making sure you don’t run out of toothpaste and stuff?”
Angel looked confused. Kas asking him to sit down had clued him in that this was important, but he didn’t seem to quite know why. He held out his hand.

Kas took it and initiated a link. “You’re allowed,” he said. “If you want to. Toothpaste is one of those things you’re supposed to be too busy and important to worry about.”

Now Angel got it. “No, then. Not if you don’t want to.”

“Not particularly. But I don’t mind.” The second part was a lie; he had no idea why he said it.

Angel shook his head. “You don’t have to. I’ll, um, I’ll ask mami what kind of razor blades they are.”

“Okay. Thanks.” Kas gave him a squeeze.

Before dinner, Angel went to Captain Ketner’s office to ask for a pass. It was weird, going there and asking Captain Ketner for something when he didn’t like him anymore.

“What can I do for you, son?”

Angel was careful not to look back at Kas for reassurance. “I’d like a base pass for tomorrow, sir. We have some errands to do.”

“What kind of errands?”

“Bank, PX, and Kas needs a haircut.”

“I see. Maybe I should send one of the School Guides with you, in case you need any help with Kas.”

That wasn’t good at all. He wouldn’t be able to treat Kas normally if one of the School Guides was watching them, and he was going to need help getting the bank account set up. Besides, getting to leave school and do things with Kas would be sort of fun. “I think we’ll be all right, sir,” he tried. Captain Ketner looked skeptical, so he continued, “You were right that he’s--” What would someone like Ketner say? “Not giving me any trouble now that I--” He was going to have to say it, wasn’t he? “—showed him who’s boss.”

Ketner bought it. “Very good,” he said with a smile. “I’m glad things are going better for you.” He wrote out the pass, authorizing them to leave right after the end of the training day tomorrow. “I’ll write it for three hours, just to make sure you have plenty of time.”

“Thank you, sir.”

Angel watched while Kas collected their dinners, and they went back up to their room. “That was good,” Kas said. “What you said.”

“I thought I might be laying it on too thick,” Angel admitted.

“When it comes to liaison officers, if you start with, ‘you were right,’ there’s no such thing as laying it on too thick.”

The next day, the sun was out for a change, and they got out of Tactics a bit early since Captain Nagley had been helping with the tests they were doing in Lab—today had involved smelling nasty things, so it hadn’t been fun at all. But now they were done for the day, and he was out for a walk.
with Kas, and he was determined to enjoy it.

They went to the bank first, where the teller gave him a bunch of forms and sent him over to another counter to fill them out. The part with his name was easy enough, and he got his Army ID number off his tags, but immediately after that, he started having problems. “What do I put for my address?”

Kas said, “Just put—you know, that’s a good question.” Kas peered over his shoulder at the form. “Okay, you want to put your family’s address there,” he pointed at the “alternate address” line. “For the first one, that should be where you actually are, so I guess you have to put the Sentinel School and change it when we get to the next place. But skip that for now and we’ll ask.”

“Okay.” He did that, then hesitated over the next part. “Are you a ‘joint owner’ or an ‘other authorized to access the account’?” he asked.

“That’s entirely up to you,” Kas said.

Another one of those things. “I know. What’s the difference?”

“Um…well, you can use either one for a Guide. A joint owner is usually a spouse. Other person authorized to access the account is usually your parents or somebody who might have to handle things for you if you’re stationed overseas.”

Joint owner it was, then. He hesitated before checking the box. They were supposed to be playing along. “Will they know, if we put joint owner now?”

Kas thought about that. “I don’t think so.”

He checked “joint account” and wrote in Kas’s name. “What’s your ID number?”

“Yours with a G on the end.”

Angel’s first thought was that that was a weird coincidence, until he realized that of course, the Army must have changed it when they Bonded. Next he had to have Kas explain the difference between a checking account and a passbook account, and pick out checks, and decide if they wanted a credit card. He didn’t think they did, but Kas pointed out that it would be handy if they wanted to rent a car or something, so he checked that off, too.

After they turned over the first set of forms to the teller and signed their names a bunch of times, they went back to the counter to fill out deposit slips for all the paychecks. “What are we supposed to do with all this money?” he asked, re-checking his addition. It sure was a lot.

“Most people like to exchange it for goods and services,” Kas answered, straight-faced.

“I mean, since we don’t have to pay for food, or a house, or electricity, or anything. Or do they start charging us for that stuff sometime?”

“No. But you can buy stuff for your quarters, eat off-base sometimes…a lot of people send money home, too.”

He hadn’t thought of that. “Do you need to send some to your parents?”

“No,” said Kas, sounding like that was a funny question. “My parents have more money than they need. You might want to send some home, though. I bet they had a lot of extra expenses from when your aunt Consuela moved there.”
“Good idea,” Angel agreed. Mami hadn’t said anything, but…well, money always came in handy.
“How do I do that?”

Kas went through the forms on the counter and found the right one. “Once your checkbook comes you can just use that, but for now you can fill this out to have the bank send a check.”

It was a good thing Kas knew all this stuff; he had a feeling the teller would have gotten tired of answering all his questions. After all that, there was one more form to fill out to get some of the money they’d just put into the account back out. “How much do we need?”

“Twenty dollars should be more than enough for what we have to do today, but get some extra in case something comes up when the bank isn’t open.”

Angel wasn’t sure what might come up, but he figured that if something did, they might need a lot of money. Like for embarking on a life of crime, for example. He filled out the form and collected their money from the teller. As they walked out of the bank, he counted off half of the money and handed it to Kas. “Here.”

“Thanks—what the fuck? What are you giving me two hundred dollars for?”

Angel shrugged.

“How much did you take out?”

“Four hundred.”

“Christ. Don’t lose it.”

“I know.” He wasn’t a baby. “What’s next? Haircut?”

“Yeah, they might close at six.” Kas lead the way. “By the way. They might ask you how you want it cut.”

“Huh? I’m not getting my hair cut.” Was he?

“No, how you want mine cut.”

“Seriously?”

“Yes. Unless they think I’m one of the School Guides,” he added, glancing down at his uniform. It was the blue one that they both hated, but they’d agreed that if Kas kept wearing it, it would help give the impression they were cooperating.

Every time he thought he must have heard everything, there was something new. “That’s just weird. Okay, so what do I tell them?”

“High and tight,” Kas said.

“Will the guy know what that means?”

“Uh-huh.”

As they walked along the strip mall—which had the bank, a dry cleaner, and a uniform store, as well as the haircut place and the PX down on the end, he noticed a familiar scent of grilling beef and onions. “What smells like Burger King?” he asked, when he thought the scent was strong enough for Kas to notice it, too.
“Is that a riddle, or—oh, now I smell it, too. My guess would be that it’s a Burger King. A lot of Army bases have them.”

“Really?” Why had no one told him about this? “Can we eat there?”

“I’m guessing I can,” Kas said. If Angel said he could, anyway. “When Captain Ketner told you about the passes, did he say anything about what you were allowed to do?”

“Just not to leave the base.”

“Then I guess we can.”

They went to get Kas’s hair cut first. There was somebody having his hair cut when they got there, but no one else waiting, and fortunately, the other guy didn’t take long. When it was Kas’s turn, the barber looked back and forth between him and Kas, revved the clippers, and said, “High and tight?”

Angel nodded, and Kas said, “Yep.”

When the barber started cutting Kas’s hair, Angel discovered that he really didn’t like having some stranger putting his hands all over his Guide. It was weird—the barber seemed nice enough, and with the safety guard on the clippers, he couldn’t accidentally cut Kas’s ear off or anything, and anyway, even if he was any kind of a threat, Kas would be more than able to handle it—but Angel found himself tracking the man’s every move anyway. He folded his arms around himself and waited it out.

Why did this seem to be taking so much longer than the other guy had?

Finally, Kas was released from the chair. “You okay?” he asked on his way to the cash register.

Angel nodded.

And he was, really, by the time they got outside. “I think the Burger King must be over there,” Angel said, pointing toward the PX. He couldn’t see it, but the building was big enough to hide it.

“Oh, we’re doing that first?”

“It’s not a good idea to go to the store when you’re hungry,” Angel said.

“Very true.”

Angel tracked down the Burger King, which looked like a normal one except that it was full of people in uniform. “Why does the Army have a Burger King, anyway?”

“They bid lower than McDonalds.”

“Huh?” Sometimes Kas just made no sense.

“Never mind. What are you getting? I’m not sure if I want a Whopper or a double Whopper. And a Coke or a chocolate shake.”

“You might as well get both,” Angel said. “We have three hundred and ninety five dollars.”

“Good point.”

When they collected their food and found a table, Kas looked at what Angel had ordered and shook his head.
“What?”

“The first Burger King you’ve seen in months, and you’re having the fish sandwich?”

“And onion rings,” Angel pointed out. Not to mention the root beer. “They wouldn’t have it on the menu if they didn’t want people to order it.”

“I guess not.”

They ate.

“This is really good,” Kas said after a while. “I practically had wet dreams about the Whopper in Ranger School.”

“…why?”

“cause I was hungry,” Kas said.

“Oh.”

“They barely feed you there. Toughen you up, you know. You go on hikes and stuff like that all day, and they give you two C-rats a day.”

“Oh.” He munched an onion ring. “And you volunteered for it?” He thought Kas had, but maybe he had misunderstood, and he was being punished for something.

“Uh-huh.”

“You’re certifiable.”

Kas shrugged.

“At home, we get these,” he pointed to what was left of his fish sandwich, “on Fridays during Lent sometimes.”

“It’s not Lent now, is it?”

“Not for a couple of weeks.” They’d be in Maryland by then, and he wouldn’t have to go to church, because he’d specifically only promised about boot camp and then Sentinel School.

Well, maybe he’d do Ash Wednesday, Good Friday, and Easter anyway.

They finished up dinner and walked over to the PX. After picking out some toothpaste and shaving stuff, they looked at the groceries. They didn’t have anything as good as what Kas’s parents had sent, but Angel found some things he supposed would be all right—some crackers, cheese, salami, and fruit. “Anything else?” Kas asked.

“No. What time is it?”

Kas switched the shopping basket to his other hand and glanced at his watch. “About six thirty.”

“Let’s look around,” he suggested. “No sense going back before we have to.”

They wandered through the clothing department and then housewares. “Hey, this would be good,” Angel said, looking at a quilted mattress pad. He might want another pillow, too.
“Keep in mind anything we buy now, we have to take on the plane to Maryland,” Kas pointed out.

“Oh.” Angel frowned. “How much can we take?”

“I don’t know,” Kas said. “If we go on a commercial flight, we can pay to take extra, but if the Army sends us…actually, I still don’t know. For Guides they say forty pounds, but then half the time when you get there they say there isn’t enough room and you have to leave some stuff there. It probably works differently for Sentinels, though.”

“Hm.” Angel was getting the impression things usually did.

“It probably makes more sense to wait to buy anything big until we get there.”

“I guess you’re right.” They looked some more. “We should get a coffeemaker, too. When we’re there. And our own plates, and oh, maybe some towels…I like the yellow….”

Finally, Kas said, “It’s about time to head back,” so they did.

It had been nice being away from the Sentinel School for a while, but returning was like squeezing into a set of clothes that were too small. Kas got stiff and distant, and Angel, still not completely confident about what he was allowed to do and say here, just stayed quiet.

#

Angel seemed cheered by their visit to the outside world, but it didn’t last long. The next day, Captain Nagley announced that the day after, they would be taking a field trip to the base’s tear gas chamber, for what he referred to as, “An exercise.”

No one was looking forward to it, but Angel had had a traumatic gas chamber experience at Basic, and by the time they made it back to their room, he was in a tizzy.

“—really, really awful, last time, Kas. I really don’t want to do this.”

“Easy,” Kas said, taking him by the shoulders and steering him over to the bed. “You’ll be fine. Everybody does the gas chamber, and Sentinels don’t have to take their gas masks off, remember?”

“You don’t know that for sure.”

“They made the Sentinels do it at Ranger School. They wouldn’t have bothered if they’d already done it here.”

“They might.”

After three or four more futile attempts to reassure Angel, Kas declared that he would Find Out, and went looking for Signorelli.

The older Guide had warmed considerably to him since he’d been sprung from the holding cell, to the extent of greeting him when he saw him and even occasionally making eye contact. Given how rattled he had been when Angel was beaten up, Kas thought that he might be willing to help.

But he couldn’t find Signorelli anywhere—not the laundry room, the kitchen, the Guides’ quarters, or anywhere. Finally Vosburg, who had been watching Kas’s search for some time, asked, “Where are you supposed to be?”

“I was looking for Signorelli,” Kas said, not quite answering the question. “Do you know where he is?”
Vosburg stared at him for a long moment, then said, “Yeah.”

“Where?”

Vosburg grunted something that sounded like, “Rated.”

“Pardon?”

“Rated,” Vosburg said more clearly. Seeing Kas’s confusion, he pointed to the floor and said, “Downstairs. Where you were last week.”

“Oh. Uh, why?”

Vosburg gave him a withering look. “Why do you think?”

“Oh,” he said again. “Uh, sorry.”

Vosburg ignored his apology. “What do you want?”

Kas managed not to say, “Oh, um,” again, and just said, “Sentinel Temas wants to know what to expect from the gas mask drill tomorrow.”

After another long, reptilian stare, Vosburg said, “He’ll find out tomorrow, when the rest of them do.”

“Right. Of course. Thanks. See you.”

Kas fled back to their room.

He could understand Vosburg’s attitude—Signorelli seemed like a decent enough guy, even if he did have a stick up his ass, and Vosburg’s comment left little doubt that he had gotten in trouble for going over Bedell’s head to help Kas and Angel—but it left him without many options for calming Angel down.

He was as bad as he had been at Basic, looking perpetually ready to cry and refusing to eat, even any of the tempting new snacks they had bought. Then, instead of sleeping, he spent most of the night thinking up new worst-case scenarios to worry—and ask Kas—about.

After a long discussion on the unlikelihood of the gas-chamber door becoming stuck and trapping them in there for the rest of their lives, Kas suggested, “Maybe Godzilla will come over from Tokyo and stomp on it before we get there.”

He hoped he could get Angel to realize how ridiculous he was being, or at least lighten the mood a little, but Angel just said, “I don’t have that kind of luck.”

Finally, morning came and they dragged themselves up. For once, Angel wasn’t the only one who played with his breakfast more than he ate it. Afterwards, Nagley marched them across base and gave the lecture on gas mask procedures—review for everyone, including Angel. Next, a SenMed nurse had them form a line and roll up their sleeves.

“I’ll be performing a test to see if any of you have a skin reaction to the chemical we’ll be using in the drill,” she explained. “If anyone does, you will observe the rest of the exercise.”

“Oh,” Angel said, sounding impressed. “That’s a good idea.”

Several of the other Sentinels turned to give him withering looks, but the nurse only said, “It’s just a precaution—most Sentinels do just fine, but we don’t want to put anyone at risk.”
When Angel’s turn to be tested came, he insisted that he thought the test site was turning a little red.

“No, it isn’t,” the nurse told him.

“It itches,” Angel said hopefully.

“If you were having a reaction, it would be more of a burning sensation.”

“That, too.”

She gave it another five minutes, clearly humoring him, but the test remained stubbornly negative.

“Do you mind if we start now, Lieutenant?” Nagley asked the nurse.

She nodded. “We’re good to go.”

Nagley addressed the group. “On my mark, you will proceed into the chamber. At my signal, you will have five seconds to don your protective gear before the gas enters the chamber. If you fail to don your mask properly so as to create an air-tight seal, you will know.”

Last thing before they went into the chamber, Signorelli passed out masks to him and the rest of the Guides, which Kas had started to worry a little about. Once they were inside, Nagley yelled, “Masks on,” and the trainees all scrambled to put them on, while Kas, Nagley, and the other Guides followed suit more calmly. Nagley lit the tab, and smoke slowly filled the chamber.

The next step, every time Kas had ever done the exercise, was for the instructor to order everybody to take off the masks and recite something—usually name, rank, and serial number. Here and now, they just stood there and watched the tab burn down. Eventually, when even Angel’s posture began to suggest that he was a little bored, they all trooped out.

“Well,” said Angel as they turned in their masks. “I’m not sure what the point of that was.”

“Not as bad as you thought it was going to be, huh?” Kas asked, after checking to make sure Nagley wasn’t paying attention.

“No,” Angel said crossly.

“There you go.”

“I hate this place,” Angel groaned.

After a few more days of classes, and another set of exams, the Sentinels were told to pack their gear for three days in the field. Angel took the news quietly, which worried Kas more than the usual complaining would have. They were woken early, and after a quick breakfast the entire school was loaded into two vans, the instructors and Sentinels in one, the Guides and gear in the other. Angel, seeing the School Guides going off to their separate transport, clutched anxiously at Kas’s arm.

When it was their turn to board, Captain Ketner looked at them and raised an eyebrow. Angel jerked his chin stubbornly in response, and in the end, Ketner waved them on, then climbed in after them, taking the seat directly opposite theirs.

They drove for a few minutes on the highway, then for about an hour on increasingly narrow and winding roads. Throughout the journey, Angel gave Kas quick, worried looks, but didn’t say anything, and under the watchful eye of Captain Ketner, Kas couldn’t either. At least with him watching, the other Sentinels couldn’t try anything to make Angel even more miserable than he already was, which was probably more helpful than anything Kas could have said, anyway.
Finally, the van turned into a rutted dirt lane, and then pulled over at a wide spot where several other Army vehicles were already parked. As they were getting out of the van, Angel tugged at his sleeve and whispered, “Who are they?”

Five small companies were forming up in the field next to the parking area. “I’m not sure.”

“They’re not Sentinels,” Angel said doubtfully.

That was a relief. “From other specialized training units, maybe?” Kas hazarded.

There was no more time to talk about it, since Ketner had them form up as soon as everyone was out of the van. He assigned them each a Guide, ending with, “And Temas, Signorelli will go with you.” Angel opened his mouth to protest, but before Kas had a chance to think about how to stop him, Ketner added, “Yes, Kas will Guide you, but Signorelli will be with you.”

Angel looked slightly mollified, but said, “Why?”

“You need to have a School Guide with you.” Before Angel could ask any more questions, he continued, “Each of you will be assigned to a training squad.”

That was what Kas had been hoping for. Angel would probably do better working with a group of soldiers who had never met him before than he would with the other Sentinels in his class.

“For the duration of the exercise you will consider yourselves under the command of the officer candidate in charge of your squad. Aponte, you’ll report to Lieutenant Palmer in Green Team…” After assigning Angel to, “Lieutenant Hsu, Red Team,” Ketner said, “Collect your Guides and your gear, and you’re dismissed.”

Kas and Signorelli divided Angel’s gear between them and, after waiting a moment for Angel to remember that he was supposed to be in charge, set off for Red Team.

When they were about halfway between the vans and Red Team’s position, Angel bumped up against him and asked, “Why’d they send him with us, do you think?”

“Probably to keep an eye on you and report to the instructors,” Kas answered, glancing over his shoulder at Signorelli, who didn’t deny it. Ketner had mentioned that he relied on the School Guides to keep him informed about what the Sentinels were doing when the instructors weren’t around, and it was abundantly clear that he wouldn’t so rely on Kas.

“Oh.”

When they reached Red Team, Angel was able to locate Lieutenant Hsu—Kas wasn’t sure if he actually noticed his Lieutenant’s bars, or worked it out based on the fact that the rest of the squad was all white guys, so the one Asian had to be Hsu—and managed saluting and reporting in without any help.

Hsu returned Angel’s salute and glanced between Kas and Signorelli. “And—Sergeant?”

Guides didn’t generally report to anyone but their Sentinels, but Kas could understand why Hsu was confused. It was obvious enough what Signorelli was doing there—all of the School Guides wore the blue jumpsuit that was GTAC’s field uniform, and there was one to a Sentinel—but none of the others had sergeants in fatigues following them around. “Guide Temas, sir,” he said.

“And that’s Signorelli,” Angel said helpfully.
Signorelli looked uncomfortable at this faux pas, but said, “Sir.”

Hsu finally just nodded and said, “I think we’re waiting for one more,” and gestured to where the rest of the squad was sitting on the ground in a loose circle.

It was a damp day, and when Angel joined the rest of the team, he looked at the muddy ground in fastidious distaste before digging out his poncho to sit on. Kas managed, barely, to avoid groaning out loud. It would have been nice to introduce the rest of the team to the depth of his daintiness gradually, at least.

He left a space beside him, and, when he caught on that Kas was waiting to be told to sit, patted it. Kas sat. Signorelli remained standing behind them.

“What do you suppose they’ll have us doing?” Angel asked, mostly to Kas, but also glancing around at the others.

“This sort of thing usually comes down to some version of capture the flag,” Kas answered, when it looked like nobody else was going to. There were four others in their team, in addition to themselves and their CO—two Infantry privates, a specialist first class with a sapper’s tabs, and a sergeant. Most of them looked young, about Angel’s age, and their badges and insignia suggested that they hadn’t seen active service yet. The exception was the sergeant, who looked a little older than Kas, and had a Combat Infantryman badge, as well as a collection of marksmanship badges. He must have been pulled from active duty for some kind of specialized training, but his insignia didn’t give Kas a clue as to what.

At the same time as he was sizing up Ward, the other sergeant was sizing him up, too. Finally he said, “I’m here from sniper school; what about you?”

The rest of the trainees might not have known better, but Ward should have known not to address him and not his Sentinel, when Angel was sitting right there. Belatedly, Kas realized that the angle he was sitting at gave Ward a clear view of his Ranger tabs, but not of his Guide pins or the nameplate that said, “Temas,” which would have given a man with his level of experience enough of a hint to figure out what he was doing there.

But Angel was as blithely unaware of that solecism as he was of the half-dozen others he committed himself every hour of the day, so he wasn’t going to explain things. Kas half-wished he could let the misunderstanding stand for as long as possible—it would give him a chance at being treated like something other than Angel’s baggage on this exercise—but Ward would get a good look at him sooner or later. “Sentinel School. I’m Sentinel Temas’s Guide.”

From Ward’s expression, that didn’t clear things up much at all, but he now knew better than to ask about something that didn’t concern him. The others didn’t, though, and one of the privates asked, “Why do you have two of them?”

Kas winced inwardly at the question. He didn’t much like the implication that he and Signorelli were essentially the same thing, duplicate equipment.

“I don’t, really,” Angel said, glancing back at Signorelli. “Kas is my Guide, Signorelli’s just, um, here. He’s one of the ones from the school.”

“But why--”

“That’s enough, Lang,” Ward said. He did ask Angel, “So is he an observer, or is he part of the exercise?” That was all right, though, because that much was the rest of the team’s business.
“Um…I don’t know,” Angel said.

“You might want to find out,” Ward advised, saving Kas from having to find a way of saying it that wouldn’t compel Signorelli to report the incident to his superiors. “If he’s part of the exercise, you’re in command of him.”

“Oh,” Angel craned around to look at Signorelli again. When Signorelli didn’t volunteer anything, he said, “Um, well?”

“I’m assigned to you for the duration of the exercise, Sentinel,” Signorelli said.

Angel digested that. “Maybe you should sit down, then?” he suggested.

Signorelli sat, a little back from the rest of the group.

After a little while, an instructor—not one of theirs—came around and gave Lieutenant Hsu a thick envelope. Opening it, he found red armbands, which he passed around to the rest of them, and several smaller envelopes. He tucked several of these inside his jacket and opened the remaining one as he sat down.

“What’s that?” Angel asked, abandoning the effort to put on his armband.

“Orders,” Hsu said shortly.

“What does it say?” Angel asked, leaning over to peer at them.

“Angel!” Kas said.

“What?” he asked, in a tone of injured innocence.

“If you were supposed to read them, they would have given them to you.” Now that, Signorelli was going to have little choice but to say something about…but he couldn’t exactly let Angel get himself into trouble with his CO in the first fifteen minutes of the exercise, could he? Still, he resolved to keep unsolicited advice to a minimum.

“But how are we supposed to know what’s happening?” Angel protested.

“Lieutenant Hsu will tell you.” Hsu included Kas in the glare he was giving to Angel, and Kas added, “When it’s appropriate to do so.”

“Everybody check your gear,” Hus said, instead of explaining. “We’ll be setting out as soon as our seventh man gets here; we have a lot of ground to cover.”

No one exactly jumped to obey this order; apart from Angel’s poncho, everyone’s gear was probably exactly as ready as it had been when they packed it. Still, after a moment Ward made a show of checking his, and the others fell in line. Kas took the opportunity to fill their canteens. Angel trailed after him, which meant Signorelli had to as well, but at least it gave Kas a chance to suggest that Angel visit the latrine, without making himself sound like a nursemaid in front of the entire team.

When they returned, their seventh man had arrived, only she turned out to be a woman.

“Do you have your entourage ready to go now, Temas?” Hsu asked, a little snidely.

Angel glanced at Kas and Signorelli. “I’m ready. Are you guys ready? Yes, we’re ready.”

He stared at them for a moment before turning away and saying, “We’re moving through territory
presumed to be friendly, but everybody stay sharp. Sergeant Ward, you’re on point. Move out.”

As they moved out, Angel whispered, “‘Presumed to be friendly’? He does know we’re still in Washington State, right?”

“He means friendly in the game,” Kas whispered back. “Probably later on some of these other teams will be the enemy, but they’re not right now.”

“He could have said that, then.”

“He did.”

The first part of the trail was broad and level. Despite Hsu’s warning to stay sharp, they were really just strolling along, strung out and casual. If he was Sergeant Ward, or Lieutenant Hsu, Kas would have said something about it. But he wasn’t. He was Angel’s Guide, and since Angel was not in any sensory distress, his only job was to keep walking.

Angel fell in beside the woman soldier and said, “Hi. What are you? For your job, I mean.”

Trust Angel to latch on to the only female in their group and try to make friends. Unfortunately, she didn’t know Angel, and probably had plenty of experience deflecting unwanted male “friendliness.”

“Linguist,” she answered. “Russian.”

“I’m Angel Temas—I’m a Sentinel, I guess you could tell.”

“Specialist Warren,” she said with a tight smile.

Continuing obliviously, Angel asked, “What does a linguist do in the Army?”

“Translating,” she said.

“Oh, right,” Angel said. “That makes sense. I don’t think we’re going to run into any Russians out here, though.”

In the face of Angel’s unrelenting friendliness, and his ability to speak four times without hitting on her, she unbent a little. “Probably not. I think they just sent us out here to remind us we’re in the Army,” she said. “I’ve been stuck in a classroom for most of the last year.”

“Lucky you,” Angel said.

“That’s enough chattering,” Hsu called back to them.

Warren looked contrite, but Angel just muttered, “Oh, please.”

It wasn’t long, however, before the terrain got challenging enough that Angel had to concentrate on hiking and not complaining. Ward, fortunately, kept an eye on them and set a pace that wasn’t too rigorous, stolidly ignoring the way Hsu kept running up on his heels in an effort to get him to speed up. Not his problem, Kas reminded himself. Angel was still fine, nothing for him to do here.

After about an hour of hiking, they came to a stream where a Captain—not one of theirs from the Sentinel School—was waiting.

“Ick,” Angel said, looking at the stream in dismay. “We’re not wet enough already?”

But the Captain said, “The bridge that is shown on your map at this position was washed away by flooding. The river remains too deep to ford and too rapid to swim. Additionally, on this side is a
supply cache of gear you may use to complete your mission.” He indicated some plastic crates that were stacked on the bank.

Wandering closer to the bank, Angel said, “It doesn’t look that deep to—oh, this is one of those pretend things?” he asked Kas.

“Yes, sir,” Kas said, trying not to look at Signorelli and telegraph that the “sir” was for his benefit.

“So what do we do now?” Angel wondered.

Kas had several ideas, but only said, “Wait for instructions from the lieutenant.” If he was the team’s sergeant, it would be his job to avert the mistakes Hsu was in the process of making, but it wasn’t; it was Ward’s.

Angel frowned up at him. “What did I do now? You’ve got your ‘you’re making a terrible mistake but I’d better not say anything’ face on.”

Well, since he’d asked….Kas herded him a little further away from both Hsu and Signorelli, and said, “Not you. Him.”

“Really? Glad it’s not me for a change…what’s he doing?”

“See if you can figure it out,” Kas suggested. Angel was going to be commanding people, eventually, somehow, so he might as well learn something while they were standing around waiting.

After a few moments, Sergeant Ward said, “You’ll want me to post a guard, sir?”

Hsu looked around in surprise, flushed, and said, “Yes, carry on, Sergeant.”

“Was that it?” Angel asked.

“Part of it.”

Ward gave him another hint by posting the two infantrymen as watch, leaving Hsu with the linguist, the Sentinel—and his entourage—and the sapper, also known as a combat engineer. The wheels turned slowly in the lieutenant’s head, and finally he said, “Specialist Gillespie, we need a bridge.”

Gillespie had apparently been thinking about the problem already; he shot off a quick, “Yes, sir,” and went to the crates to see what he had to work with.

“Oh,” Angel said. “That was just silly.”

Privately, Kas thought that if Hsu had tolerated a bit more “chattering” at the beginning of the hike, he probably would have thought of it faster. It was important for an officer to know his men’s abilities. He ought to be grateful Hsu wasn’t his problem; Angel at least knew enough to ask for help.

It didn’t take Gillespie long to work out that the planks they had been provided with weren’t quite long enough to span the stream, and to come up with a plan. He soon had Warren helping him get things in position, and called to Angel, “Sentinel, I could use another set of hands over here, if your Guide….s... aren’t busy.”

Angel looked a little startled, but said grandly, “My entourage and I are at your disposal.”

Now that Angel had offered them up, it was acceptable for Gillespie to direct them. The work really did involve little more than being a spare pair of hands, holding boards and ropes once Gillespie had
them where he wanted them, but it was at least something to do.

When the bridge was constructed, Hsu said, “Temas, take your men and secure the other side.”

Angel looked doubtfully at the bridge. “If that creek was actually deep enough to drown in, you wouldn’t get me on that thing at gunpoint,” he told Kas confidentially. “Should I mention that?”

“No,” Kas said.

“Okay. Come on, Signorelli. Um, what does ‘secure the other side’ mean?” he whispered to Kas.

“Check if there’s anyone over there—look and listen,” Kas added, holding out one hand for a link.

Angel did that. “Um…well, there are some people about two hundred yards that way,” he said, pointing. “But they’re still on this side. Trying to make their own fake bridge. I think it’s Savard’s group, actually.”

“That should be fine, then,” Kas said.

“Okay. Um, you go first, and then me, then Signorelli, I guess.”

Every time the makeshift bridge shifted underneath them—which was often—Angel stopped, clutched at Kas, and looked offended, but they eventually made it across. Kas quietly advised Angel on how to position them to best guard the other side, and Hsu started the others making multiple trips back and forth with all the supplies.

“See if you can figure out what terrible mistake he’s making now,” Kas suggested, when Angel started to look a little bored.

“Hm? Well, he’s got us guarding this side, and he’s standing there watching everybody else work, which I guess he’s supposed to be doing…I don’t know. Only I wonder how we’re going to carry all that stuff, since it’s taking forever to even get it across the bridge.”

“That’s it,” Kas told him. “The captain didn’t say we were going to need all of it, and there’s no way we’re going to be able to carry it all, so what he ought to have done is worked out what we needed and left the rest on that side.”

Angel chewed at his thumbnail. “Should we tell him?”

“No,” Kas decided. Hsu already didn’t like Angel, and sticking his head up wouldn’t help any. Besides, it was more efficient in the long run to let brand-new officers make their own mistakes. “He’ll figure it out eventually.”

By the time all the crates were shifted, it was early afternoon and nearly everyone except Angel, Signorelli, and Kas was muttering about when lunch was going to happen. Angel, Kas figured, knew he wouldn’t like whatever was provided for them to eat, Signorelli wouldn’t complain if he was on fire, and Kas didn’t see any reason to upset Angel by saying anything.

Fortunately, shortly after figuring out that they were going to have to open the crates and prioritize the gear, Ward found that the supply cache contained both packed lunches from the chow hall and C-rations, and prodded Hsu into figuring out that the C-rats should be saved for later and the bag lunches distributed and eaten now. Angel was predictably unwilling to eat his, opining loudly that bologna sandwiches that had been sitting outside all day were likely to give everyone either botulism or ptomaine poisoning, and that the hard-boiled eggs were better off not even spoken about.
Kas privately thought Angel was likely to wish he’d eaten it when he was faced with C-rats for dinner after a full day on the move, but withheld comment. Hsu wasn’t the only one in their group who would benefit from making his own mistakes.

Deciding what of the gear they had to carry with them took some time. Hsu eventually had to unbend enough to tell them that their training mission had them proceeding into enemy territory to retrieve an item of strategic importance from a concealed and moderately-guarded base.

“See?” Kas murmured to Angel. “Capture the flag.” Listening to the rest of the instructions and taking a look at the map, Kas didn’t have much trouble figuring out what they would need. The training weapons and all the fake ammo they could carry, definitely. Since Private Puckett had just been in shoulder-mounted mortar launcher training, something would probably come up where they’d need that. Lang had just been trained as a minesweeper, and the map indicated that some of the territory they would be crossing had recently be re-taken from the enemy, so they were sure to need the mine-detecting equipment. The location of the concealed base was indicated to be uncertain, so there would probably be some tracking for Angel to do once they got there. Unless they made much better time in the afternoon than they had so far, they would do well to stop for the night just inside “friendly” territory and start the infiltration part when it was light again, so they would need to be ready to make a rough camp. Gillespie’s obstacle had already happened, but there might be something more, so he should make some judicious choices from among the ropes, hardware, and tools provided. At some point, Kas supposed, some Russian-speaking “locals” would turn up to give Warren a chance to do her thing, but he couldn’t see any equipment that she would need for that.

Ward, Kas thought, probably came to the same conclusions that he did, and about as quickly, but they both hung back and exchanged long-suffering looks while the youngsters worked it out on their own. Kas did step in toward the end to locate the openers for the C-rats mixed in with some other flotsam at the bottom of one of the crates—somehow, in training games they tended to get separated from the C-rats themselves; funny how that never seemed to happen in real life—and make sure they were put with the rest of the things they were taking.

Since Angel had no specialized equipment to carry, and had two convenient packhorses with him, Hsu quite correctly assigned him to carry a lot of the general gear. He looked appalled for only a moment before realizing that Hsu hadn’t given Kas or Signorelli anything to haul—also quite correctly, since Hsu was Angel’s commanding officer, not theirs—and quickly showed that he had been paying attention to the morning’s object lesson on delegation by assigning Kas to divide the stuff between the three of them.

The afternoon proceeded much as Kas had predicted. There were no more “rivers” to cross, but Gillespie did have to engineer them a way over a very large fallen tree. Partway into the formerly-enemy territory section of the trail, Angel started peering through the trees and frowning, and eventually said, “There’s somebody in that shed-thing up there; d’you think I should say anything?”

“Yes,” Kas said. What, did he think they were just out for a stroll?

A little hurt, Angel said, “Well, it’s probably one of the instructors; I didn’t want to ruin the surprise.”

Suitably warned, Hsu had them cautiously approach what turned out to be a mockup of an abandoned village. “How many inhabitants, Temas?” Hsu asked in a whisper.

“Just the one,” Angel said cheerfully. “In the third building on the left.”

“Christ, keep it down!” Hsu hissed. “We don’t know if he’s friendly.”

Angel rolled his eyes.
“You could enter into the spirit of the thing,” Kas said when Hsu had moved on to order Ward and some of the others to secure the third building on the left. He liked this kind of exercise—or would if he had anything to do, at least.

“I choose not to,” Angel answered.

As Kas had suspected, the village proved to be Warren’s exercise. After translating the “villager’s” pleas not to shoot him, she began pumping him for information. Apparently, the rest of the village had fled in advance of the Orange Militia, while their informant, old and leaning unconvincingly on a crutch, had stayed behind to avoid slowing his family’s escape, and had hidden in the surrounding woods while the militia occupied the village for several days. Hidden in his explanations were the key pieces of intelligence that the road on the other side of the village had been salted with land mines and that the group they were following had had the Object of Strategic Importance.

Kas nudged Angel at this news.

“What?” Angel asked, rubbing his arm where Kas had poked him.

“You’re probably going to be tracking those guys sooner or later.”

He didn’t need more of a hint than that to start looking for clues while Lang got to work on the minefield. The instructors had made this part of the exercise much easier than it really had to be for Angel, with some conspicuously-placed areas of very clear footprints, rather a lot of fragments of orange fabric, and even a discarded shirt that Kas bagged and took along in case they needed a scent article later.

“Remember what those footprints look like,” Kas warned him. “If they want to make it tricky, they’ll have a place where the track we’re following crosses with another one, and that’s one way you’ll tell the difference.” He didn’t think it would be that tricky, but there was a chance that whoever had set up the exercise didn’t underestimate Angel.

Crossing the minefield took up most of what was left of the afternoon. By the time they were moving out again, the shadows were beginning to lengthen, and after another hour or so of hiking, Ward began pointing out likely campsites to Lieutenant Hsu. It took, however, Ward saying pointedly that a given site looked defensible, which they’d need this close to enemy territory, before Hsu seemed to realize that nobody was going to call a halt if he didn’t.

Ward quickly assigned everyone except Hsu, Angel, and the two Guides to various camp tasks. Kas reminded himself that he was glad there was somebody else there to do all the sergeanting, so he wouldn’t be tempted to make trouble for himself and Angel by doing things outside his station, but the excuse was growing thin. No one here had the slightest idea that he was anything more than one of the two men who followed the team’s Sentinel around, and wouldn’t have cared if they did. In any other exercise, he’d have made a point by now of proving he was more than that.

Angel ought to have been having them set up their own smaller camp within the larger one, but instead sat down on his rucksack to complain. Kas and Signorelli both stood near him in attitudes of alert expectation.

“It’s going to rain, you know.”

“Is it, sir?” Kas asked. He had little doubt that Angel was correct; they’d only had one brief Sensory Lab lesson on predicting weather, but Angel had been good at it.

“Uh-huh. Shortly after midnight, I’d say.”

“I see, sir,” Kas said. With Signorelli inches from his elbow, there wasn’t much else he could say.
“I’ve never actually tried sleeping outside in the rain before, but I don’t think I have to try it to know I’m not going to like it.”

“Probably not, sir.”

“I suppose you had to do a lot of it at that awful place,” Angel said, by which Kas supposed he meant Ranger School.

“Some,” Kas allowed. Deciding it was time to give Angel a hint, and that Angel’s latest observation was close enough to a direct question for him to get away with expanding, “But they taught us lots of techniques for building survival shelters while we were there.”

“That’s nice—wait.”

Kas waited.

“Could you do one now?”

“Yes, sir,” Kas said promptly. At last, he could do something. “I’m going to need your poncho.”

Using Angel’s poncho, his own, and some nylon cord he happened to have in his pack, he got to work. “Do you think the wind’s going to shift when the rain starts?” he asked Angel. Most likely it would, but involving Angel in the process seemed like a good idea.


He strung the cord between two trees, tying one end about three feet from the ground, and the other at the very base of the trunk. Next he draped one of the ponchos over it, securing the corners with rocks. The result was like a small pup-tent that slanted down to the ground at the northern end. The southern-facing end was open, but if Angel was right about the wind, they should stay dry and cozy. He had considered using both ponchos for the shelter roof—using only one basically meant they had a one-man shelter—but given that Angel was little, and liked to sleep as close to Kas as possible, he thought they’d have enough room. Since the ground was already damp, it was more important to use the other poncho as a ground sheet, so their bedrolls wouldn’t get wet. Once the basics were done, he covered the whole thing with some lightweight brush, so that they would be concealed from above, in the unlikely event that Orange Team had air support.

“Nice,” Angel said, bringing over their bedrolls. He had sent Signorelli off on some errand—delivering the communal gear they had been carrying to the middle of camp, it looked like—so they had a few moments’ privacy.

“Thanks.” It wasn’t his best work—he knew how to build shelters that would be invisible from ten feet away—but they weren’t as comfortable, and he figured that in this particular situation, Angel bitching was a much more significant consideration than enemy action. Besides, the rest of the team, except for Ward, had parked themselves out in the open, and it looked like they were even going to build a fire, so there wasn’t much point to making a serious effort at concealment. “It should be comfortable enough.”

Lieutenant Hsu, making an inspection tour of the camp, snorted derisively at Angel’s bower. Angel just glared back at him and said, “It’s going to rain.”

That was good; Angel ought to report things like that to his CO. It wasn’t his fault if the lieutenant didn’t take it seriously. Ward, however, who was trailing Hsu at a discreet distance and making his own review, nodded thoughtfully and had Lang and Puckett start setting up some extra plastic sheeting to funnel the rainfall into containers, so they could filter it into their canteens in the morning.
Kas found himself wishing the other Sergeant was a bit less competent, which was foolish. Being stuck on the sidelines would only be harder if Ward wasn’t doing things right.

When everything was set up, Hsu called them to assemble for some announcements. “We’ll be setting out at first light. We’re about half a klick from enemy territory, so I want everyone alert from the time we move out. Not skipping down the trail whistling and picking daisies.”

He looked straight at Angel when he said it, which Kas thought was a little unfair. If he’d said, “Not complaining about how your feet hurt,” he’d have had him dead to rights, but Angel didn’t whistle.

“Sergeant Ward will be posting two-hour watches. See him for your assignment. Specialist Warren, you hand out the chow. Dis-missed!”

“That was worth standing up for,” Angel said as they wandered away.

Ward sought them out first. “The lieutenant wants the last watch—are you all right with first, Temas?”

Kas frowned slightly. It was conventional to give a unit Sentinel his choice of watches. On the other hand, first would suit Angel just fine, since it would have them under cover before the rain started.

“I guess,” Angel said doubtfully.

“Will you be all right standing watch on your own?”

“What?” Angel yelped.

Realizing the problem, Kas said, “He means just us,” indicating their little team with a gesture.

“Oh. Yeah, that’s okay. You could even put Signorelli on another watch if you need to.”

Kas was a little surprised that Angel thought to make the offer, though pleased. If a Sentinel didn’t have enough work to keep his Guide busy, it was considered polite to volunteer him for anything else that needed doing. Angel was probably thinking that they’d be able to speak more freely if Signorelli was elsewhere, but still, it looked good.

“We have enough men, but thanks. You’re on watch until 2200.”

Angel watched Ward go, then said, “Was that all right?”

“Yeah, that was good.” Most people would have applied a little military courtesy to the situation, probably addressing Ward by his rank, but he had covered the essentials.


“Thanks—uh.” He glanced over at Signorelli.

“Yeah, that’s all there is,” Warren said. “I don’t know.”

“Okay,” Angel said. “Thanks, I’ll take care of it.” He looked over at Kas. “Didn’t we already do this one?”

Kas nodded.

“All right, so I have to go talk to Hsu about it?”
“That’s up to you, sir,” Kas said, mindful that Signorelli was watching. If this was a test, he’d better not be seen to interfere.

“Yeah, yeah. All right, I’ll be back.” He handed Kas the rations and went over to talk to Hsu, seeming more irritated than anxious.

Kas thought he ought to be blinking back a tear of paternal pride—his little Sentinel was growing up. Instead, he set up the boonie stove he carried in his pack, and got out the seasonings they’d brought along from Angel’s private stock. “You might as well sit down,” he suggested to Signorelli, who had been on his feet the entire time they’d been setting up.

“I’ll wait,” Signorelli said.

“Apparently, that’s all there is,” Angel said, returning. He flung himself down next to Kas, adding, “Why don’t you sit down?” to Signorelli. “Start opening those; I’ll figure something out.” He started poking through the seasoning options, apparently looking for something that went with Ham and Lima Beans or Beef Slices with Potatoes. “Only it’s not really all there is—there’s two crates of twelve dinners, but that’s enough to last eight of us three meals, and for some reason it’s my problem that there are nine of us….” Kas let him natter on; it was perfectly acceptable for Sentinels to complain about things.

He eventually settled on mixing together the two entrees and adding several pinches of things from different spice packets. If he’d been consulted, Kas would have told Angel to eat as much as he could of the beef and potatoes, which, while not exactly gourmet cuisine, weren’t too bad, and he and Signorelli would make do with the rest. Since what he was doing was an ostentatiously fair way to go about it, Kas figured Angel was doing it that way to make a point. While the stew was heating, Angel shared out the crackers, candy, and fruit cocktail in scrupulously equal portions. “I can’t tell what this is, and I don’t want it,” he said of the last small can that had been in with the crackers and candy.

“It’s supposed to be peanut butter,” Kas said. “Hang on to it; we can burn it if we run out of fuel tablets.”

Angel started to hand it over to him, then hesitated. “Did you want it?” he asked Signorelli.

“Ah…no, sir,” said the other Guide, who had finally sat down, but looked highly skeptical of their dining arrangements.

“I’ve heard it’s good for dysentery, but I’ve never actually had to test that,” Kas added.

“I guess that’s good to know,” Angel said doubtfully. He tipped his fruit can back to get the last of the juice out. “I’m actually sort of hungry; it’s too bad we don’t have any real food.”

“The crackers aren’t that bad,” Kas said. Belatedly, he remembered to add a, “Sir.”

“Did you want this, sir?” Signorelli asked, offering his own share of the fruit.

“I’m not actually that much of an asshole,” Angel answered.

“Sir?” Signorelli said uncertainly.

“No, you go ahead.”

Angel fussed with the stew, making small adjustments to the seasoning. Finally he said, “I think that’s the best we’re going to do,” and dished it out into the now-empty fruit and cracker cans.
Faced with actually eating the vile concoction, Angel quailed. Kas tried his, and found it...well, not as bad as he'd feared. The gravy from the beef meal actually did something to tone down the nastiness of the lima beans.

“How is it?”

“I’ve had worse,” he said, truthfully.

Angel tasted his cautiously. “Oh, that’s...the worst thing I’ve ever eaten.”

“I know tricks for some of the other meals, but there’s not a lot you can do with Ham and Muthafuckas,” Kas said. “Except put so much spice on that you can’t taste them,” he added, taking out the Tabasco sauce he still had stashed in his cargo pocket and adding some to his portion before passing the bottle to Angel.

Angel must have been hungry; he managed a few more bites before he stalled out and put his spoon in the can with an air of finality. Distraction was still a tried-and-true trick for getting Angel to forget he didn’t want to eat, so Kas tried to come up with some conversation. “You know, this trip might be the last time you have to eat C-rats.” There, that was valuable military intelligence, and if Signorelli didn’t like him sharing it, he could suck eggs.

“Mm. We’re supposed to have field exercises in med school,” Angel said without enthusiasm, but taking another bite.

“Yeah, but they’re coming out with new rations this year, I heard,” Kas said.

“I’m sure they’ll be just as nice.”

“I met a guy stationed at one of the places they tested them,” Kas answered. “He said the new ones have more little snacks and stuff in them. You’ll probably like that.”

“Oh, yeah? Maybe.” Angel ate a few more bites before handing Kas his leftovers. “Here, do you want this?”

“Are you sure you’re done?”

“Very sure.”

“Okay, but you have that,” he said, indicating the one piece of candy that had been left over when Angel evenly divided the original four pieces.

Angel ate it without complaint, then glanced at his watch. “We have a few minutes before our watch starts.”

“Great.” Kas forced down the last of the stew. “Want some hot chocolate?”

“Don’t tease me.”

“I’m not.” He “did the dishes” with a little bit of water from his canteen and a bandanna, then heated some water over the other half of the fuel tab. They weren’t really going to run short enough to have to use the peanut butter, unless this exercise ended up lasting a lot more than three days; he had packed plenty.

He considered asking Signorelli if he wanted some of the cocoa, then decided to just go ahead and make three cups, since he’d probably say no whether he wanted any or not. As he expected, the
other Guide attempted to demur when offered his share, but drank up when Angel told him to.

“Okay,” Angel said, putting down his cup. “Tell me what I’m doing now.”

Well, now Signorelli couldn’t exactly complain that Kas was telling Angel what to do, since Angel had told him to do just that. “Most people start by walking the perimeter.”

“Okay.” He wandered over to the edge of camp and looked around vaguely. “Am I looking for anything in particular?”

He was looking for a lot of things—anything that might provide cover or strategic advantage in the case of an attack, obstacles that would be difficult to avoid once full dark came on, areas of particular vulnerability…. Kas struggled with how to explain, then finally said, “No, not really.”

Angel frowned up at him. “Are you sure?”

Lying to his Sentinel, right. Signorelli, who was plodding after them like a faithful hound, would love that, almost as much as he’d love Kas taking it upon himself to give his Sentinel an impromptu tactics lesson. “You just want to get the lay of the land, sort of. See how we’re up against the hill on that side?”

Angel nodded.

“If you remember from when we came in, it’s sheer on the other side, so chances are nobody’s going to be coming at us from that direction.”

He nodded again. “That makes sense.”

“And over there the undergrowth is very thick, and this time of year it’s mostly dried, so anybody coming on us that way would make a hell of a lot of noise. Most likely, somebody trying to come up on us under cover of darkness would just use the path….”

#

Feeling like a third wheel, Signorelli stood out of the way while Kas explained the technical details of standing watch to Sentinel Temas. He had a feeling that Captain Bedell wouldn’t like it, and probably not Captain Nagley, either, but it probably wasn’t something they had to hear about. The Sentinel had, after all, asked his Guide for advice; it would hardly be correct for Kas to refuse him. Tony had no way of knowing if what Kas was saying was accurate—he’d been a Sentinel School Guide all his life, and there was no reason for him to learn anything about military life in general—but Kas had been in the field for several years, and probably knew best.

Kas tied his lecture up neatly by saying, “So with this much cover, and that damn fire backlighting you, anyone coming is going to see you before you can see them. What I would recommend is taking up a concealed position and listening, instead.” He stopped just short of telling his Sentinel what to do, so that was all right.

Temas stationed himself and Kas behind one rock, and Tony behind another, which Tony was glad enough of—after being in the way all day, he didn’t begrudge them a little privacy.

Kas walked Temas through extending out his hearing and cataloguing the natural sounds of the area, much the way that Captain Ketner might have done in a lab exercise. The rest of the camp was still settling down for the night—talking quietly, stomping through the underbrush to the latrine trench, getting into their sleeping bags. Temas seemed to be handling the high level of distraction well, and if Kas was still being entirely too familiar with his Sentinel, it didn’t seem to have hampered Temas’s
effectiveness at all.

The reckoning that Tony had predicted since seeing the affectionately condescending way Kas was encouraged to treat his Sentinel had not come; the two appeared as close as ever. And Kas was as solicitous of his Sentinel’s comfort as anyone could have wished—far from taking advantage of his Sentinel’s ignorance to slack off, he did more than it would have occurred to Temas to require of him.

In an unguarded moment, Ketner had revealed to Tony that his real fear was not that Kas would shirk his duty to the extent of endangering his Sentinel, but that he would stifle Temas’s development as an officer so that the Guide could remain in the dominant role that he clearly preferred. If anything, though, the day’s observations suggested the opposite. Several times he’d seen Kas hang back in order to prompt Temas into asserting himself.

Tony had cringed inwardly when, at the beginning of the day, Kas had publicly scolded his Sentinel for attempting to look at Lieutenant Hsu’s sealed orders—it seemed exactly the sort of thing Ketner was dreading from him. But the breach of military courtesy was so severe that Tony was forced to concede that it would have been worse for Kas to let Temas keep digging himself in deeper. Apart from that incident, he had advised Temas only when requested, and had carefully given Temas the benefit of his greater experience, while still making clear that Temas, as the Sentinel, was expected to make decisions.

Looked at another way, of course, it was a presumptuous as hell for Kas to be deciding what was in his Sentinel’s best interests, rather than simply doing what he was told. Tony couldn’t imagine how he dared to do it. Unless, maybe, Temas had asked him to do exactly that. He couldn’t quite picture any of the other Sentinel students he’d encountered over the years relying on a Guide’s judgment enough to give such vague instructions as, “Stop me if I’m making a terrible mistake, otherwise just let me know of anything I might need to know to make a decision,” but it seemed somehow plausible for Temas. Tony couldn’t say that that wasn’t what had happened, and if it had, Temas’s trust was clearly not misplaced.

After some time, Temas said, “There’s somebody coming. That way.” He pointed back the way they had come.

“Okay. Let Lieutenant Hsu know.” He seemed to have forgotten that he was supposed to be addressing his Sentinel with respect; Tony wasn’t surprised, since he had already seen that they only did so when one of the School staff was watching.

“They’re on one of those four-wheel, dirt-bike things.”


That was too much like giving his Sentinel a direct order for Tony’s comfort, but Temas only nodded and did so.

The trainee officer got the rest of the camp up and on guard, putting Temas and the Guides behind the defensive line, as was correct. Most of the Sentinels Tony had accompanied on exercises put up a fight about that, wanting to be in on any action that occurred, but it wasn’t much of a surprise that Temas didn’t.

Several long minutes passed. “Are you sure there’s someone coming, Temas?”

“Yes,” Temas said, sounding insulted.
“You sure it wasn’t a squirrel or something?”

“If the squirrels around here have motor-bikes, maybe,” Temas allowed with a shrug.

Tony hid a smile. Temas wasn’t nearly as passive as he sometimes appeared. And his hearing was a bit better than average—he’d probably heard the approach from quite a distance.

Finally, the sound of the engine became audible to the rest of them.

“Oh,” Angel said, slumping against Kas. “It’s just Captain Ketner.”

Now it was surprise that Tony had to hide. Scent discrimination, at this distance, with a smoky campfire among the myriad distractions, really? The wind was in his favor, but still, impressive.

“Who?” Lieutenant Hsu asked.

“From my school.”

Hsu kept the rest of the team on alert, though, which Temas seemed to find mildly insulting until Kas quietly explained that Ketner could be playing a hostile in the scenario.

He never did; what he did sometimes do was stop by on the first night out to check on a trainee that he had reason to think might be struggling with the exercise, but Tony didn’t volunteer that information. When he appeared and was passed into camp, he spoke briefly with Lieutenant Hsu, giving him the new orders packet. Hsu told the rest of the team they could stand down, adding, “Temas, the Captain wants to see your Guide.”

He didn’t specify which one, and Temas correctly sent both of them.

“Ah,” Ketner said. “I wanted to see Guide Signorelli, but stay a minute.”

“Sir,” Kas said.

“How’s the exercise going so far?”

“Fine,” Kas said. “He’s fine, sir. Doing well.”

Ketner likely hadn’t expected a critical report from him, anyway. “Good, good. So you have no concerns?”

“No, sir.”

“All right. As you were, then.”

Ketner took him off to the other side of camp. Tony knew as well as Captain Ketner did that that wouldn’t be enough to stop Temas from hearing every word of their exchange if he wanted to, but presumably Temas would know he wasn’t supposed to listen in.

“How’s he handling himself, then?”

“Well enough, sir. Makes no secret of the fact that he doesn’t enjoy field conditions, but he’s managing. He was on watch when you arrived; he heard you coming from at least a mile away, and identified you by scent from about a quarter-mile.”

“Really.” Ketner looked impressed. “Still, it’s not his senses I’m worried about. Any difficulties with the rest of the soldiers?”
“No, sir. He’s keeping to himself.” That wasn’t unusual with their young Sentinels. “I gather the others find him a bit fussy, Lieutenant Hsu in particular, but he’s pulling his own weight.”

“Fussy how?”

“Well, he predicted rain for tonight, and had Kas put up that little tent there to keep him out of it, for instance.”

Ketner frowned. “I thought they left behind the tents from the supply cache. Did he insist on one?”

“No, Kas threw that together out of things he had with him. He’s had survival training, sir.”

“Right, Ranger School…well, that’s all right, then. If Kas can keep him comfortable without slowing down the rest of the squad, so much the better. What else?”

“He moaned a bit when he thought they were going to have to ford the creek, at the beginning. Turned up his nose at the lunch that was provided for them, and he didn’t like the evening meal much, either, sir.”

“Did he eat at all?”

“Yes, sir. Probably half a ration, at dinner.” Tony wondered whether to mention the problem with the rations supply. It did sometimes happen that the instructors engineered a shortage on purpose, to test the Sentinels’ reactions. But Temas seemed the last one they’d be likely to worry would neglect his Guide, and it was highly unusual for a Sentinel to be sent out with two, so it could be a genuine oversight. On the other hand, if he mentioned it now, it might seem as if he were complaining on his own behalf. He’d mention it in his final report after the exercise, he decided, but not before unless Captain Ketner brought it up.

“Good. Apparently he nearly starved himself to death at Basic training before anyone noticed. What about Kas, is he behaving himself?”

“Yes, sir. Well, as much as he does, which is to say he’s over-familiar, but Temas prefers it that way, so one could hardly say he’s not being obedient. Sir.”

Ketner raised an eyebrow. “I’m aware of that particular difficulty, yes, Guide.”

“Sorry, sir, didn’t mean to imply you weren’t.”

Captain Ketner decided to let that pass. “Well, the young Lieutenant gave them a fair report, so I suppose he didn’t too anything too egregious?”

“No, sir.”

“All right, then, the details can wait. If there’s nothing else, you’re dismissed.”

He reported back to Sentinel Temas, who asked, “Does he want to talk to me?”

“He didn’t say so, sir.” Captain Ketner usually didn’t, when he made this mid-exercise checks, unless there was something badly wrong.

“D’you think I should tell him about the thing with the food?” he asked Kas.

Kas considered. “Do you think you should?”

“Well, yes. Unless you think it’s going to look bad. The whole—” He waggled his fingers in a vague
gesture. “—leadership thing.”

“Yeah. I really have no idea what answer he’s looking for, if it’s even part of the test.” He gave Tony a sidelong glance, as if hoping for a hint. Tony carefully kept his face blank. He didn’t know either, but wouldn’t interfere even if he did.

Temas sighed. “All right, I’m going to say something, then. You guys, um, stay on watch while I do that.”


“Everything all right?” Kas asked him.

“Hm? Yes.”

“Ketner was just checking up on us, I guess?”

Tony could hardly fault Kas for wanting to help his Sentinel game the system, but he wasn’t about to help, so he said, “Captain Ketner isn’t the habit of taking me into his confidence.”

“Right,” Kas said, more gently than the asperity of Tony’s reply really warranted. “Of course.” He hesitated. “You are all right, then? Because if you weren’t, Angel—Sentinel Temas, that is—would....” He trailed off.

Coming on field exercise after nearly a week of short rations and little sleep wasn’t exactly ideal, but there wasn’t a damn thing Sentinel Temas could do about it, even if he did want to. “I’m fine.”

“Good. Okay. Good.” Kas put himself at parade-rest, alertly scanning the path ahead of them. When Temas returned, he kept one eye on the path as he gave Temas a quick hug. “All right?”

“Hmph,” Temas said. “He says it must have been an oversight, and he’ll see what he can do. But he would say that, wouldn’t he?”

“Yeah, probably,” Kas agreed.

“Right.” He looked around, distractedly. “Back to work, I guess.” He held out his hand for a link.

#

“God-damn motherfucker.”

Angel startled awake. Rain was pattering on the roof of their shelter, and from the sound of things, the poor bastard on guard duty wasn’t enjoying it much. There was a lot of rustling and more swearing as he dug through his pack for his own poncho.

He hadn’t thought he would sleep at all, but he must have, since a quick glance at his watch showed it was after one AM, and he definitely didn’t remember the whole three hours since they’d gone to bed at ten.

The tent was working perfectly—they were nice and dry in there. He wondered if they should have made it big enough for Signorelli to sleep inside, too. Angel didn’t exactly want him in there, but it wasn’t fair that he had to be out in the rain. Squirming to loosen Kas’s grip on him, he stuck his head out of the tent and had a look. Signorelli was already wrapped up in his poncho, and seemed fast asleep, so maybe he wasn’t too uncomfortable. From what he could make out, most of the rest were sopping wet, but they weren’t his problem.
Still, maybe he could have asked Kas to make Signorelli a tent, too. He had learned enough at Sentinel School to know that Signorelli couldn’t have asked on his own. It was all well and good to say that he should have been able to look after himself, but since he wasn’t allowed to, there was nobody to look out for him if Angel didn’t. The Sentinel School instructors might have wanted him to make his Guide sleep outside and get wet, but he wouldn’t have even considered it for Kas. Not doing the same for Signorelli would be like saying he only treated Kas the way he did because he liked him more, when really that was only part of it.

If it rained again tomorrow night, he decided, he’d make sure that Signorelli had a dry place to sleep, too.

As he tucked himself back into Kas’s arms, Kas mumbled something and patted him.

“I’m all right; go back to sleep.”

With Puckett and Warren out there crashing around like elephants, he didn’t think he’d be able to get to sleep again, but he settled down and focused on Kas’s heartbeat, and eventually managed to doze a little.

Lieutenant Hsu made them all get up just as the sky was beginning to go gray around the edges, and everybody was cold, wet, and cross. Breakfast was oatmeal, and pretty much all you could say about it was at least there was enough of it. Angel was prepared to content himself with coffee—instant was all they could manage, but Kas had thought to bring along a can of condensed milk—until Kas found a handful of almonds in his pack and pressed them on him. “Well, if you insist.”

Kas also insisted that he stay inside the little tent while he and Signorelli helped with heating water and clearing up the campsite. Angel protested, reluctantly, that he was willing to do his share, but Kas just said, “I’m not being selfless here; everyone will be happier not hearing about how wet you’ve gotten.”

Angel had to admit he had a point. Suffering in silence was not one of his talents.

When the time came to leave, Kas somehow managed to take down the tent in such a way that Angel was only left standing out in the rain for a moment, between being sheltered in the tent and wearing it as a poncho. It was decidedly less cozy as a garment than it was as a shelter, but at least he wasn’t thoroughly soaked.

Once they started walking, he had worse things to worry about. He was sure Kas was right that there would be some tracking for him to do soon, and the rain was going to make it difficult.

Maybe more than difficult. The guy at the pretend village had said that the militia had left a couple of days ago. That would make the trail three days old now, and would have rained twice since it was left. There might be enough of a trail left for him to follow, but he didn’t think much of his chances.

When he mentioned the problem to Kas, though, Kas shook his head. “I’m sure we’re tracking Orange Team, and they left yesterday, the same as we did. The thing about them coming through a couple of days ago is just part of the plot of the game.”

“I don’t know why they’d put that in if it wasn’t important, though,” Angel reasoned.

“Sometimes the guys who come up with these games get a little carried away, like they’re directing a play or something.”

Angel thought about that. It could be fun, he supposed, coming up with a story for everyone to act out. It almost had to be better than being one of the people acting it out, anyway, when you had to
get wet and eat nasty food and nobody told you anything about what was going on.

Before long they had to stop talking, because they were going into “enemy territory.” Angel tried to point out that there wasn’t anybody for miles, and he’d know if there was, but Lieutenant Hsu didn’t want to hear it. He sighed. You couldn’t tell some people anything. After a while they got to a spot where the trail they were on crossed with another one, making a sort of x-shape. Lieutenant Hsu took out his map and spent a long time looking over it with Sergeant Ward.

After linking up with Kas, Angel started a little way down the left-hand path. The scent had all been washed off to the southwest part of the trail by the rain, so there was just enough left to pick up, and not enough to tell which way the people leaving the trail had been moving, but there were loads of footprints in the spots that had been mucky even before last night’s rain, and after comparing them to his own boot soles and making a few measurements, he soon figured out which way they had been going. He guessed it was possible that they had thought of walking backwards just to confuse anybody trying to follow them, but it wasn’t all that likely. Probably. Maybe.

He tried the idea on Kas, who said, “Hm…probably not, no. Is there something that makes you think that’s what they did?”

“No,” he admitted. “It was just an idea I had.”

“We might want to try it if later on we’re the ones being followed,” Kas said. “But the village is back that way, so it makes sense that they’d be going this way.”

“Oh, right,” he said, deflated. He’d done all that work for nothing, then.

“It’s good practice,” Kas assured him. “And in a real situation you’d be less sure of where the enemy had started out.”

They went back to the X, where Hsu was folding up the map. “What are you doing wandering off, Temas?”

The nerve! He’d been doing important tracking things, not wandering at all. “Didn’t you want to know which way we should go to find where the Orange guys went? They came from that way,” he explained, pointing.

Hsu stared at him for a moment. “Well, which way did they go?”

“Either straight or right,” Angel said. “Obviously.” With everybody standing around in the intersection getting in the way, he couldn’t pick up the trail again, even in the scent wasn’t all dispersed from the rain, which it was.

“Oh, right, I guess we’ll just flip a coin, then?”

“We could if you want to,” Angel said doubtfully. “Or I could check them both out and tell you when I know. I guess it’s up to you.” The choice seemed fairly obvious to him, but maybe he was missing something.

Suddenly everybody started getting interested in their feet or the treetops, while Lieutenant Hsu stood there and huffed like a steam engine. It was very strange. “Are you all right? If you’re having trouble breathing, maybe you should sit down,” he suggested.

“Go—check the trails,” Hsu finally said.

“Okay,” Angel said agreeably. He had been going to do that anyway; Hsu didn’t need to bother
stopping him if that was all he was going to say.

It stood to reason that if the Orange team had been coming from the left trail, they probably had gone straight through the intersection to the right trail, but he decided to be systematic about it and check out the straight-ahead one first.

“You remember that Lieutenant Hsu is your commanding officer in this exercise, don’t you?” Kas asked, as they started.

“Yes,” Angel said uncertainly. “Why?”

Kas sighed, the way he did when Angel wasn’t getting something he thought ought to be obvious. “You might want to be a little less mouthy.”

“I wasn’t!” On reflection, though, he could see how Lieutenant Hsu had thought he was. Still, he’d been rude first, unfairly accusing Angel of wandering off when he didn’t know the whole situation. He should have asked, instead of assuming Angel didn’t know what he was doing.

“The scenario is pretend, but he really is in charge,” Kas added.

“I don’t see why,” he groused. “He’s my age. Anyway, I was just trying to help.”

Kas just looked at him for a minute, then shook his head. “All right. Did they come this way?”

“I don’t know yet.” After a few minutes of concentrating on his work, though, it was clear they hadn’t. The few wisps of human scent that he caught were days old, and crossed over with raccoon and fox and lots of other stuff. That meant they had gone down the right-hand trail, but he decided to make a thorough check of it, as much to avoid reporting back to Lieutenant Hsu again as anything. Even being thorough, though, it didn’t take long. There was a lot of underbrush and stuff along the south side of the trail, which had caught the scent and kept it from washing away too much, and he even spotted a few more footprints. “Definitely this way,” he said to Kas. “What do I say to Lieutenant Hsu about it?”

“Just tell him you tracked the enemy going this way,” Kas advised. “And throw in a ‘sir.’”

“I don’t like to,” Angel said.

“I’d recommend it. But only one, or he’ll think you’re being sarcastic.”

“I guess.” Kas did usually know what he was talking about, with stuff like that.

He trudged back to Lieutenant Hsu, who said, “Well?”

“That way.” He pointed. “Sir.”

“Right,” he said, but not in a nice way. “Move out.”

Things were very boring for the next few hours. After they passed by the spot where Orange team had camped for the night, there were some booby traps for the others to spot and lead them around. Lang found one of them, and Ward got to find two. He wished they’d give him a turn being in front; he was sure he’d be as good as anyone at spotting traps, once Kas told him what to look for. For that matter, Kas would probably have liked a turn, too. But they were stuck at the back where they couldn’t see anything interesting. At least the rain had stopped, so he supposed it could have been worse.
When they found a “coded dispatch” for Warren to translate, Lieutenant Hsu said they might as well stop for lunch while she was working on it. But he posted a guard and said, “We have to stay ready to move—no cooking,” looking straight at him and Kas.

Once again, they only got two meals for the three of them. Angel took a moment to admire the boxes. The food wasn’t any good, but it was sort of satisfying how they had everything tucked into a little box, so it fit neatly with no wasted space. If only they could put nice things in there, it would be perfect. This time, one was meat loaf, and the other was tuna. “I don’t want any,” he said, before Kas could open them. “You can each have one, or we could save one for dinner.”

“All right,” Kas said. “Why don’t Signorelli and I split the tuna; I know you hate it.”

Angel nodded. “Okay,” he agreed, moving upwind of them so he wouldn’t have to smell it.

Kas opened both boxes, though, and sorted through the contents. “Here, this one has cake. You’ll eat that, won’t you?”

“I guess.” He sighed. The cake wasn’t too bad. It would have been better with some hot cocoa or something, on such a chilly day. There was also a can of pears and two packs of crackers, one with cheese and one with the flammable peanut butter. So they could have burned that and had hot cocoa, if Lieutenant Hsu hadn’t said they couldn’t.

Although he bet burning peanut butter smelled pretty bad, and the Orange team had a Sentinel with them—Savard, he thought. So Hsu was probably right not to let them. Even though Hsu didn’t seem to know much about Sentinels and had probably said they couldn’t just to be mean, and not because he knew there was a good reason.

“What about the pears, will you try those?” Kas asked, opening the second small can.

“I already had the cake; are you never happy?”

“No, never. Eat up.”

The little cans were the dessert cans, so if he ate the cake and the pears, he’d be having well more than his share. But Kas and Signorelli did have crackers with their tuna, so that was two things each. Maybe it wasn’t too unfair. “I’ll have half,” he decided, carefully fishing out one pear slice for Kas and one for Signorelli. That left him with two slices and the juice, which he was sure had to be very nourishing.

By the time they were done eating, Specialist Warren had the dispatch figured out. Kas had only said about not looking at orders that weren’t yours, so Angel listened in while she explained to Lieutenant Hsu what it had said.

“It looks like the militia group’s orders, sir,” she said. “It’s telling them that enemy forces have been identified in pursuit of them—that’s us, I guess—so they’re supposed to identify a concealed, defensible location, and secure it with…something. Mortars?”

The rest of it was a lot of stuff about what kinds of weapons they had, that Angel didn’t care about. Kas might be interested, but on the other hand, he’d probably say he shouldn’t be eavesdropping, so maybe he had better not say anything about it. It seemed very stupid that their orders would have all that information in it—Orange team already knew what they had, and anyway, they weren’t Russian—so he guessed it was put there on purpose for them to find, and so Warren would have something to do. Maybe that meant it would be his turn to do something soon. He hoped so.
Sure enough, it was! After they had been walking for another half-hour or so, the clear path they were walking along just stopped. Boom. He bet it would be a challenging bit of tracking: it was definitely Savard on the other team, and he at least knew what a Sentinel could do, so he’d make it hard.

He was shocked, though, when Lieutenant Hsu offered it to Ward, first. He knew Hsu didn’t like him very much, but if he was supposed to be in charge, he ought to at least be fair. It was clearly Angel’s turn; he hadn’t had a thing to do all day, except for that really easy bit of tracking before.

But Ward said, “I can try, sir, but it might be a Sentinel job.”

Hsu said something that sounded like, “Yeah, if we had a Sentinel,” which didn’t make any sense since they had him. And he clearly hadn’t forgotten, because the next thing he did was raise his voice and say, “Temas!”

Angel went over. “Yeah? Um, sir?”

“The enemy has gone to ground somewhere out there. We’ll need to track them down. Do you think you can handle that?”

“Of course I can. Tracking’s my best thing.”

“God help us,” Hsu said.

“Hm?”

“Never mind. Get started.”

But Ward had pulled Kas aside while they were talking, and was asking him, “—sure he can manage it? Because I might be able to find something now, but not after he’s been crashing around in the woods getting lost for an hour.”

Maybe Ward wasn’t nice after all, if he was trying to take away Angel’s turn. But Kas said, “No, he’ll be fine. If there’s any precision shooting to do, that’ll be for you, but he’s good at tracking.”

“Really?”

“Yeah. I mean, not spectacular for a Sentinel, but that’s still a lot better than anyone who isn’t a Sentinel.”

Mildly cheered that Kas had stuck up for him, Angel focused on the task at hand. “Can you get everybody to stand back a little?” he asked Hsu. “Thanks.”

He cast back and forth. The scent was all spread out, like maybe they had stood around for a while trying to pick out a path, or maybe…

Yes, that was it! They’d split up and each entered the woods at a different spot. Very tricky. For a moment he thought he would have to follow each one individually, which would take a long time, and maybe worse, would look to the others like he was just wandering around being confused. But, he realized, they would all meet up somewhere, so all he had to do was pick one and follow it. Savard’s seemed the strongest—maybe just because his scent was more familiar, or maybe the scent of a rival Sentinel was more salient…well, either way, that was the one to follow.

“This way,” he said, taking Kas’s hand.
Once he got into the woods, he saw that there were a lot of little paths going everywhere. Animal trails, he decided—a lot of them had reasonably fresh scent of deer, when as far as he could tell, there was no scent evidence whatsoever that a human had ever been on them. Every now and then he caught the scent of one of the other Orange team guys, but he stuck to Savard’s trail, even when it looped around and backtracked a little, since he didn’t want to get distracted. Savard had done a lot of messing around, but nothing really hard, and if he stuck to it, eventually he’d find where the team had met up.

When he did find the spot, he had to dial down his scent quickly. A lot of the guys had taken the opportunity to have a pee while they were waiting for the meet-up. If he had known, he could have just homed in on that scent—it wasn’t exactly a tricky one to follow, especially as fresh as it was.

“Hey, where is everybody?” Now that he wasn’t concentrating so hard on scent, he realized that it was just Kas and Signorelli with him. He listened, and realized they were a good hundred yards behind him. “Oh, I see.”

“We were keeping them back so you could concentrate.” Kas said. “What’s up?”

Oh, right—he couldn’t know about the enormous pool of scent they were standing in the middle of. “This is where they all met up again,” he explained.

“What?”

So he had to back up and explain, “They split up when they left the main trail—I guess so they’d be harder to follow. That was pretty smart of them, I thought. But they went on as a group from here. The trail should be easier from here out.”

“There’s also a bigger chance they’ll have stopped to lay some more booby traps,” Kas warned him. “Make sure you’re watching for those.”

Oops. He had sort of forgotten about that; he guessed he’d gotten lucky. Or maybe it was just that Savard wasn’t the booby trap guy; he had noticed that each of the others they passed had the concentrated scent of one of the other members of the team; maybe they had somebody who was a specialist with booby traps, like Lang was for mines and Warren for pretend Russian dispatches. “Okay,” he said. “No problem.”

“Be careful,” Kas added. “It’s not a race; you can take your time.”

“I know.” The others were just about caught up to them, though, so he took a drink of water and said, “I’m ready to keep going. Are you guys ready?”

They were, so Angel picked up the trail and started off again.

#

“Uh-oh.” Angel stopped short on the bank of a stream, shaking his head. He dropped Kas’s hand, breaking the link.

Kas could guess at the problem: if Savard’s team had gone into the water, the trail effectively dead-ended here. If they were at all smart, they would have gone up or downstream some distance before coming out of the water—which they could have done on this side or the opposite. It was a predictable trick, but Sentinels could still be stymied by it, even if they saw it coming a mile away.

“Are you all right, sir?” Signorelli asked.
Angel nodded. “They went in the water,” he said glumly.

“Ah.”

“Can you ask everybody else to stay back a little bit, when they catch up? I’m going to--” He gestured. “Catch my breath for a minute.”

“Of course, sir.”

Signorelli went back to the group, and Angel sat down on a log, sighing heavily.

“Do you know what to do from here?” Kas asked, sitting next to him.

“Yeah. I’ll have to go up and down the bank looking for where they came out. I can scent them if they came out on that side; if it’s the other side, I’ll have to look for visual signs, and go over and check out the scent. I’m just not looking forward to it.” He stared down at his toes, through which Kas gathered he was thinking about getting his feet wet.

“We packed plenty of extra socks, so you can put on dry ones when you’re done,” Kas said.

“That helps,” Angel agreed. “It could take a long time, though.”

Kas thought he was probably bored. He’d been pretty enthusiastic about starting the tracking exercise, but he’d been at it for almost two hours now, and a long attention span was not one of his most noticeable qualities. “You might want to ask Sergeant Ward to have a look at one direction while you do the other.” Angel looked affronted at the suggestion, so he explained, “They learn visual tracking in sniper school. If they split up again, he probably won’t find them, but if they didn’t, having both of you work on it could speed things up.” They learned visual tracking in Ranger school, too, so Kas could have done it, but Angel was likely to need him.

“Am I allowed to do that?”

He was a little surprised that Angel asked; he didn’t seem to care much one way or the other about what was allowed. “Yes, you are. This is your show, but you’re entitled to the full resources of the team.”

Angel called Ward over and explained the situation. “Which direction do you want to go?” he asked. “I don’t really care.”

Ward chose downstream, so Angel set off upstream, trudging along looking thoroughly dispirited. Kas hated to see him unhappy, but realized with some surprise that the Angel of a few months ago would have thought nothing of sitting down on the ground and declaring that he hated this and wanted to go home, if he had even made it this far. Apparently it hadn’t even occurred to him to just give up—which, indeed, it shouldn’t have, but he had made an amazing amount of progress in a relatively short time. Kas took his hand and gave it a squeeze.

“Hm?” Angel asked.

“Nothing. You’re good. I know you’re not having any fun, but you’re doing really well.”

Angel smiled up at him and continued on in slightly better spirits.

After only ten minutes more of careful searching, though, he stopped short. “Oh, I’m an idiot. I can’t believe how stupid I am.”
“What?” Kas asked.

Angel shook his head and held out his hand for a link. Kas took it, and felt Angel edging his hearing upward. Abruptly, he dropped Kas’s hand, flinching a little the way he did when he was shying away from a sound that was too loud for him. “Signorelli, could you go back and tell the others to be quiet for five minutes while I do this? Absolutely silent if they can manage it; don’t even move. Okay?”

“Yes, sir,” Signorelli said, sounding a little confused.

“And get Hsu to give you the map,” he added. As the other Guide left, Angel added to Kas, “It’s only been a couple of hours since they crossed, here, and they aren’t making very good time, looking for their stupid concealed location…oh, if this works I’m going to kick myself.”

Now Kas was starting to get an idea of what Angel was trying to do. He could have kicked himself, too. He had been thinking of this as a tracking exercise all along, just as Angel had, but it wasn’t. The point wasn’t to go over every inch of ground Orange Team had covered, not at all.

Signorelli had apparently made it back to the rest of the group and passed along the message, because Angel took up Kas’s hand again and opened the link. This time he extended his hearing as far as it would go.

Kas matched his breathing to Angel’s, so the sound wouldn’t be an added distraction.

The moment stretched, until at last Angel dropped his hearing back to a normal level. He kept the link up, though, and slumped against Kas, breathing hard. “I got it,” he said, flapping his arm vaguely across the creek and downstream. “That way, about a mile and a half.”

It was an impressive piece of work at that distance, but it might not be enough. “Can you be more specific about the direction?”


Kas got out his compass and took down the exact heading. Briefly, he considered the possibility that Angel might be wrong. Pinpointing the direction of a sound at that kind of distance was possible—the Sentinel he’d worked with in the Rangers could have done it—but it was beyond anything Angel had practiced in lab. But he seemed completely confident, and over-confidence wasn’t one of Angel’s faults—quite the reverse. “Let’s let the others know.”

They met up with Signorelli on his way back with the map, and after a few moments, Ward joined them too. With a little input from Ward, Kas pinpointed their location on the map and drew a line along the heading Angel had indicated.

“Caves,” Angel said, after checking the map legend. “Of course.”

“If we can go more or less as the crow flies, we can probably get there before they’ll be expecting us,” Ward noted with approval. “It’s all orienteering from here out. Do you want to do it, or should I?”

It wasn’t entirely clear which of them he was asking, but Angel said, “Orient-what?”

“Navigating with a map and compass,” Kas explained. “I know how to do it, but I’m sure Ward does, too.”

The rest of the team caught up to them, and Angel made his report.
“You can hear them, all this way?” Hsu asked, with unflattering skepticism.

“Yes,” Angel answered.

“Will their Sentinel be able to hear us from here?” Ward wondered aloud. “Maybe we should back up, sir, to discuss our approach.”

“Oh, he won’t be able to tell what you’re saying, if he can even hear us at all,” Angel said. “I can’t make out more than a word or two, and I’m way better at sound discrimination than Ethan. Plus we have the creek here.”

Hsu looked confused as to what that had to do with anything, so Kas explained, “The sound of the creek will help block him from hearing us, sort of like a white noise generator. It’s a little easier for Angel—Sentinel Temas—to filter out because he’s right next to it.” And because he was, as he said, better at it, but Kas didn’t think having Angel’s Guide repeat the boast would make Hsu any more likely to believe it.

“What were the words?” Hsu asked.

“What?”

“That you could make out.”

“Oh. ‘Fucker’ and ‘Grish.’ I think that’s someone’s name,” he added.

“Grissolm is one of the OCS trainees participating in the exercise,” Hsu allowed. There was no way Angel could have known that, and Kas could see Hsu having to admit to himself that Angel really had done what he said he had.

Studying the map, Ward suggested, “Maybe we should proceed along the bank to here.” He pointed. “Then we can cross and cut west to their position. Preserve the advantage of the creek for as long as possible.”

Kas liked that idea. “We’d be able to make good time, too,” he added. “It’s a little more open, so we won’t have to whack trail as we walk. If we get there earlier than they were expecting us, it’s possible they won’t even have their Sentinel on watch yet.”

Ward nodded. “There’s a chance, yeah, and we’d be fools not to take it.”

Hsu cleared his throat, and both sergeants realized at once that he didn’t appreciate their stepping on his toes. With a little more experience, he’d come to appreciate the advice of seasoned NCOs, but it was his first time out. Except that Kas shouldn’t have been talking tactics at all; his only job here was to help Angel.

Ward covered for them both by saying, “That’s my assessment of the situation, sir. What do you think?”

It was a good plan, and Hsu had enough sense not to reject it simply because he hadn’t been the one to think of it. They made their way along the bank of the creek, stopping every half-klick or so for Angel to have another listen.

Unsurprisingly, when it was time to ford the creek, Angel balked. As the rest of the team splashed across, in water up over their boot-tops, he said, “I don’t want to.”

“That won’t help much when my boots are wet.”

“True,” Kas allowed.

“Maybe I should take my boots off. But it’s going to be cold. And slimy.” He crossed his arms over his chest and looked mulish.

“Are you coming, Temas?” Hsu demanded from the other side.

“Do I have a choice?” Angel muttered.

“No,” Kas said.

“I didn’t think so.”

“I could carry you.” It was the only alternative Kas could think of. “But you’d look absolutely ridiculous in front of the rest of the guys.” As would he, but he wasn’t supposed to care about that.

“I’m not sure I care,” Angel answered. But, with a martyred sigh, he scrambled down the bank and into the water.

He had sloshed about halfway across, complaining under his breath at every step, when he slipped, arms wind-milling, an almost comical expression of surprise on his face. Kas tried to steady him, but he was just a bit too far away, and barely missed being pulled down into the creek himself.

Kas could see that Angel was more pissed off than hurt; he scrambled to his feet almost immediately, cursing a blue streak. “Oh, fuck. God-damn fucking creek—rocks—fuck.”

“Ssh. It’s all right. Come on.” Kas steadied him as they made their way to the opposite bank.

Once there, Angel collapsed onto the ground, shaking and fighting back tears.

“It’s okay,” Kas said, starting to untangle him from his pack and jacket. “Are you hurt anywhere?”

“I guess not,” Angel said, sniffling. “It’s cold, though.”

“Yeah, I bet.” He’d fallen over backwards, so not only was everything he had been wearing soaked through, but his pack had gotten dunked, too. Kas emptied it out to see what could be salvaged.

Lieutenant Hsu loomed over them. “What’s going on here?”

“I fell in,” Angel answered pitifully.

“I saw. We’re moving out.”

Angel whimpered. So much for not looking ridiculous. “Give us about ten minutes,” Kas said, shrugging out of his own pack. All of Angel’s spare clothes were soaked, but he might be able to wear something of Kas’s.

“We don’t have that kind of time.”


“I’m in command of this operation,” Lieutenant Hsu began. “And I told you--”
“Do you really want to explain to your superiors—and his—who you let a Sentinel get hypothermia to save ten minutes on a training exercise?” Kas interrupted. He wasn’t glad that Angel had fallen, of course, but some small part of him was relieved to have a legitimate opportunity to step out of his passive Guide role and do something.

He wasn’t at all sure what he was going to say next if Hsu answered that yes, he did, but fortunately, he stomped back to the rest of the group and announced that they were taking a ten-minute rest.

“Is it really cold enough that I could get hypothermia?” Angel asked, pausing with his shirt half-off.

“Maybe. If the wind picks up. I’m not sure. I know you can get it in above-freezing temperatures if you have wet clothes on. So get those off, and we’ll see what we can do.”

Kas hadn’t packed extra pants—the ones he was wearing ought to have been fine for three days, and he’d had other things he wanted to use the space for. Clearly, that had been a mistake. “Here, dry off, and put these on,” he said, giving Angel a towel and a pair of his shorts and a t-shirt. He had some safety pins somewhere, if he could just find them…

“Kas! There’s a girl here,” Angel protested.

“Signorelli, could you go ask Specialist Warren to turn her back, please?”

Signorelli went, and Warren did so, although she did stage-whisper over her shoulder, “It’s nothing I haven’t seen before!”

Angel got changed. “Here, you can wear this for a while,” Kas said, taking off his own jacket. “But I think you’re stuck with your own pants.” He wrung them out a little bit, at least, before Angel put them back on.

“Ugh,” Angel said, shuddering. “I hate wet clothes.”

“I know,” Kas said. “Dry socks, then your boots.” Fortunately, he had some of Angel’s special prescription socks in his own pack. While Angel put them on, he re-packed Angel’s pack, and arranged the poncho over it so that Angel would have a layer of plastic between the wet pack and his dry, borrowed jacket. “Ready?”

“I guess.”

What little enthusiasm Angel’d had left for the day was clearly spent, though, and he plodded along tiredly at the back of the group. He did rouse himself enough to relay some information about Orange Team’s numbers and position to Lieutenant Hsu, through Kas, when got close. Kas thought there might be some difficulty when Hsu started planning the assault on the cave—it would be natural for Hsu to expect Angel to take part in that, possibly helping pick off the guards from a distance before the rest went in. But he just said, “Specialist Warren, you stay back with Temas and his babysitters.”

Angel didn’t even protest, as he usually would have, that he wasn’t a baby. Kas, though, was offended for him—although perhaps more at being lumped in with the “babysitters” as with the idea that Angel needed one. He probably could use one, but if he wasn’t doing any sensory work, he didn’t need his own Bonded Guide. Signorelli and Warren could more than handle keeping him company while Kas assisted with the attack. While Angel wouldn’t be of any use, he certainly would—possibly helping Ward pick off the guards.

It was probably the last chance he’d have to do anything like it—Angel’s medical school field exercises would probably not involve assaults on enemy positions. He wanted to do it. Ward, who
had just glanced at him and raised an eyebrow, would back him up if he offered his services.

But he knew he wasn’t supposed to do that; it was exactly the sort of thing that always got him negative appraisals from G-TAC liaison officers. He didn’t much care about that, but if he did it now, Angel would get in trouble for letting him.

He shook his head slightly at Ward, and shepherded their little band behind some cover, reminding them, “Orange team might come back this way, if they decide to retreat, so stay alert,” and propped Angel up with a rifle in his hands.

They were far enough back that Kas couldn’t hear much. Rifle fire, the occasional bit of yelling, and Puckett did get a chance to fire off his shoulder-mounted mortar launcher; he must have enjoyed that. Nice to know someone was having fun.

Eventually, it got quiet, and Kas started looking for the rest of the team to return.

“We’re supposed to go up there now,” Angel said suddenly. “They’re done.”

Kas certainly hoped they really were; Angel made no effort whatsoever to be quiet as he crashed along the path broken by their teammates. If Hsu, or whoever, had actually been calling for backup, they’d be picked off before they even got close.

But, as Kas discovered when they got to the cave, at some point the team’s objective had become to take Orange Team prisoner, rather than just grabbing the Object and retreating. Angel didn’t seem surprised, so maybe he’d heard about the change in orders and simply hadn’t bothered to mention it. On the other hand, he might simply not have cared. He walked past where their teammates had Orange Team tied up, and sat up against the cave wall, hugging his knees to his chest. “You guys can sit down,” he mumbled when he noticed Kas and Signorelli standing over him.

While Signorelli found a spot a short distance away from them, Kas sat down next to Angel. “Hey, are you okay?”

Angel nodded. “Can you find out if you’re allowed to make me something hot to drink yet?” he asked, sounding very sorry for himself.

“Sure.” He gave Angel a pat and went off to look for Lieutenant Hsu. He was talking on a radio, but gave Kas a distinctly unpleasant look when saw him, so Kas decided to try Sergeant Ward instead.

Ward winced when he heard his request. “There’s probably plenty of time. Somebody’s being sent to pick up the prisoners, so we won’t be going anywhere until they get here. But I wouldn’t—the lieutenant’s on a tear about how he’s had just about enough bullshit from your Sentinel.”

“I really don’t care what he has or hasn’t had enough of,” Kas answered. “Thanks.”

There really hadn’t been that much bullshit, he thought. Certainly not compared to how Angel had been at Basic, and really not even by ordinary Sentinel standards. Sentinels didn’t generally settle into a team without some aggression: they’d be very fussy about new teammates entering their personal space, or touching their stuff, or looking at their Guides funny, and often resisted the authority of a new CO. Angel’s was a different kind of bullshit, but there wasn’t more of it. Inexperienced as he was, Hsu probably didn’t know that.

But it wasn’t, when you got down to it, his problem. “Okay,” he told Angel, returning to his side. “Coffee, or hot chocolate?”

“Coffee, I guess, if we have milk left.”
When Kas had the drink made, Angel cuddled into his side to drink it. “Better?” Kas asked.

“Oh-huh. This is nice.” He sipped. “So do we get to leave, since we’re done?” he wondered.

“I don’t know,” Kas said. “Sometimes they call these things off early, but usually they come up with something else for you to do.” He didn’t see how the exercise they’d just done could have taken another night and day, unless they’d made some serious mistakes, so likely there was more to it.

“Oh.” Angel dropped his head to Kas’s shoulder, disappointed.

As it turned out, they’d had more than enough time for Angel’s coffee break. He had finished it, and Kas had cleaned the cup and repacked the stove, by the time one of the Officer Candidate School instructors showed up to collect Orange Team and give them new orders.

Kas couldn’t hear the new orders—they were being given verbally to Lieutenant Hsu—but Angel said, “Oh, that’s not too bad.”

“What?”

“We’re supposed to stay here and defend this position until morning, then make our way to a rendezvous point.”

“Where?”

“I don’t know,” Angel said. “They’re giving Hsu a new map. And Ethan’s team is going to have to march somewhere and then get their new orders. I wonder if they’ll let them go so they can have a turn coming back and attacking us?”

“Probably,” Kas agreed. “Or else one of the other teams.”

When the captain finished with Hsu, he came over to Angel. “Don’t get up,” he said, not sounding sarcastic, even though Angel hadn’t moved. The captain—Englebright, on his name tag—took a knee in front of them. “How’s it going, Sentinel?”

“I fell in the creek,” Angel said sadly.

Englebright nodded. “I see. Are you injured?”

“No. Just wet.”

“I see. You’re managing all right otherwise?”

Angel nodded. “I guess.”

“All right. Carry on, then.”

He went over and talked to Ward, then Hsu again.

“Ooh, that’s not gonna help,” Angel said.

“What?”

“That captain just told Hsu he had better learn how to command Sentinels if he ever wants one again. Apparently he was complaining about me,” Angel explained.

“Yeah, he shouldn’t have done that,” Kas said. “Not in the middle of the exercise, anyway.”
“He’s going to be mad, though,” Angel predicted. “He looks mad.”

A few minutes after Englebright left, Hsu got everyone’s attention and explained their new objective, and assigned Lang and Puckett to setting up perimeter defenses and the rest to camp chores. It was no surprise that he didn’t assign Angel to do anything—Angel had no expertise in perimeter defenses, and it was usual for Sentinels to have their Guides set up a separate camp—but when he announced the watch schedule and Angel wasn’t on it, Kas was sure it was a calculated snub. “What is this, seventh grade?” Kas muttered.

“It’s not like I want to be on watch,” Angel pointed out.

“Yeah, but if this were a real situation, that kind of playground crap could get the rest of the team killed.”

“It’s not real, though.”

“Yeah, but you’re supposed to be acting like it is.” That wasn’t something Kas could just let go, for all that he wasn’t supposed to be acting as a sergeant anymore.

“Oh,” Angel said glumly. “Does that mean I have to argue with him about it?”

Actually, when Kas had said, “you,” he’d been thinking about Hsu, but Angel was right. “You already know the answer to that. But I’d wait a little while, see if he settles down. Why don’t I get our bedrolls set up?” he suggested. Angel might feel better with a territory established, and he needed something to do that was not introducing Hsu to the error of his ways. It would be much more appropriate for Angel to do it, anyway.

“Yeah, okay.”

Signorelli came over to help him, not that setting up bedrolls was exactly a two-person job. Kas chose a spot near the back of the cave, in a corner—once everybody else got set up, space was going to be at a premium, and he thought Angel would be happier if he wasn’t in the middle of things. He spread out their bags so their heads would be at the cave wall, and zipped them together. “Why don’t you put yours down there,” he told Signorelli, indicating the foot of their bedroll. “Perpendicular to ours.” He arranged their packs in a row along the remaining side of their spot, so they had a clear boundary on all four sides.

Angel soon came over, carrying two more C-rat boxes. “Thanks, Kas, it looks nice,” he said wanly. “They gave us our food. Turkey loaf and something called ‘pork cooked in juices.’”

In contrast to the previous night, Angel showed no enthusiasm for fixing up their food. “The meat loaf and the turkey loaf are both good if you fry them up in a pan and top them with cracker crumbs and the cheese spread,” Kas said, looking over what they had to work with. “And then we can heat up the pork in applesauce for a second course. How does that sound?”

“Oh, I guess,” Angel said unenthusiastically. “I’m not very hungry.”

“You’ll feel better if you eat.”

Angel sighed heavily. “You always say that.”

“Am I ever wrong?” Signorelli was fussing over his sleeping bag, pointedly not paying attention to them, so he could get away with it.

“Well,” Angel said. “That one time when I threw up.”
“Do you think you’re going to throw up now?”

Another sigh. “No, I guess not.”

Kas set up the stove and poured a little oil into a small frying pan, then started opening cans while it heated. “Why don’t you crush those crackers,” he suggested. He hoped Angel would do it—he did seem to eat better when he had a hand in the meal preparation—but it was Signorelli who took him up on it.

He was chopping up the two kinds of “loaf” with the edge of a spoon when Specialist Warren came their way. “Hi. Do you mind if I put my bag here?” she asked, indicating the open spot next to Angel’s territory.

“Yeah, okay,” Angel said.

“You were smart to bring that little stove along,” she said, spreading out her sleeping bag. “Lieutenant Hsu doesn’t want us to have a fire, for some reason. Where did you get it?”

“It’s Kas’,” Angel said. “Where did you get it? Do they issue you that somewhere?”

“No, you make it out of the cans that the crackers come in,” Kas explained. “It’s easy; you just poke holes around the base of the can, drop your fuel tab in, and light it. You can get the fuel tabs at the PX.” The hot oil popped as he added the meat.

Warren came over to look at the stove. Fortunately, Angel didn’t seem to mind the incursion into his territory. “Why do you poke the holes in it? Doesn’t that let the heat escape?”

“Fire needs oxygen to burn,” Angel answered. Kas shouldn’t have been surprised that he knew that; if he was going to be a doctor, he must have passed physics. Or chemistry, whichever one it was.

“Oh, right,” Warren said. “What about the screen part, where do you get that?”

The “screen part” was a little grill he’d placed over the can stove to keep the frying pan steady. “At a hardware store, or wherever. Or you can make it out of whatever wire is lying around. But you only need it if you’re using a pan or if you’re heating water in your canteen cup. If you’re just heating C-rats in the can, you can sit it right on there.” The pan itself was a luxury most soldiers in the field didn’t bother with—if you were carrying a full pack all day, every day, even a flimsy aluminum pan was weight you didn’t need to carry. If you had a Sentinel to feed and keep happy, however, it was usually worth it. If you had Angel to take care of, it definitely was.

The meat loaf hash was crisping up nicely. “Where are those cracker crumbs? Thanks,” he said, as Signorelli handed them over. He mixed them slightly into the meat, and then dabbed the cheese spread on top.

“That smells almost like real food,” Warren said, inhaling appreciatively.


“It’s ready,” Kas agreed. He sat back and let Angel portion it out.

Kas could see Warren getting her hopes up as he carefully dished out three equal portions, but Angel, of course, handed them around to his little team. He did say, “How many of those fuel tabs do we have left? If we aren’t going to run out, maybe you could show Warren how to heat up her own stuff.”
“We have plenty,” Kas agreed. He’d estimated the maximum amount they were likely to need, then doubled it. He glanced over at Signorelli. The G-TAC Guide would probably interpret what Angel had said to mean, “Drop what you’re doing and make Warren a boonie stove, right now,” while Kas knew Angel didn’t mean anything of the kind.

He was a little surprised when Angel, apparently picking up on that, said, “But eat yours while it’s hot, first.” He leaned up against Kas to eat. “This really isn’t bad. I mean, I don’t think I’d make it at home, but it’s okay. I like the cheese. What are the red things?”

“Pimentos,” Kas answered.

“It would be better with real peppers. Jalapenos or something.” Still, he ate it all, and Kas didn’t even have to resort to any undignified coaxing.

He also volunteered to heat up the pork while Kas helped Warren turn her own cracker can into a stove. Kas always liked showing new soldiers things, but when he saw that Warren had been given the chopped ham and eggs meal, he was especially glad to help—that one was bad enough even heated up, much less cold, and he was glad he didn’t have to try to find a way to get Angel to eat it. Angel, seeing the mess she was trying to force down, generously shared his hot sauce.

Warren doused her eggs liberally. “Thanks, Temas. At least now I don’t have to taste this.” She took a bite. “Doesn’t do anything about the texture, though.”

“If they ever give us that one,” Angel said, “shoot me.” Their pork steak braised in applesauce, on the other hand, was fairly pleasant. “Not quite as good as the meat loaf,” was Angel’s appraisal, “but it’s bearable.”

“We still have dessert,” Kas said. “And bread and jam. But maybe we should save the bread for you to have for breakfast.”

“Okay,” Angel said. “Unless you guys want it.”

They didn’t, of course. Signorelli, Kas thought, wouldn’t have admitted to wanting it if he was ten minutes away from starving to death, and Kas figured saving it was the best chance he had of getting Angel to eat anything before they got back to Sentinel School tomorrow night.

They finished the meal with cookies and hot cocoa. One packet of the cocoa had actually come with the C-rations, in the same can as the cookies, which amused Angel to no end. “That’s what they ought to do differently about boot camp,” he said. “Cocoa and cookies at bedtime. It would change the whole atmosphere of the place.”

“That probably has something to do with why they don’t do it,” Kas pointed out.

“It’s not like they can say cocoa and cookies are un-military if they give them out in C-rations,” Angel said.

Now that Angel was restored to his usual chipper self, Kas decided it was time to try to get the watch situation sorted out. Sending Angel into a confrontation with Hsu cold wouldn’t help anyone, though. He gathered up all the empty cans and wrappers, to serve as a pretext, and headed for the front of the cave. Bypassing Lieutenant Hsu, he went straight to Ward. “Are we burying trash?”

“You can just dump it over there,” Ward said, indicating a spot where several others had already tossed theirs. “We’ll throw it in the latrine before we leave.”

Kas did so and hesitated, trying to decide how to bring up the subject of either Angel or the night’s
watch schedule.

Ward, however, did it for him. “Is your guy all right?”

“Yeah, he’s perked up now that he ate something.” He continued, “Do you know anything about why the Lieutenant didn’t put Sentinel Temas on the watch? Does he have something else in mind for him?”

Ward looked surprised. “He said Temas wouldn’t do it.”

It took a lot to make Kas angry, but that was more than enough. “That’s a lie.” A lie that could get Angel in a hell of a lot of trouble. “Hsu never said a word to him about it.”

“Little pissant,” Ward said. Before Kas could take further offense, he added, “Hsu, I mean. That’s over the line, even if your guy is a high maintenance pain in the ass.”

Kas couldn’t exactly deny that Angel was precisely that.

“I wouldn’t want to be anywhere near him in combat, but he should be able to manage guard duty on a training exercise.”

The idea of Angel leading men in combat was enough to give any good soldier conniptions. “He’s not going to be in combat,” Kas assured him. “The SRB liaison officers already know what he’s like. He’s going into training for the medical corps next.”

Ward nodded at that. “That’s a relief. I guess I better not ask what you’re doing with a non-combat Sentinel,” he said, with a meaningful look at Kas’s Ranger tabs.

“Probably not,” Kas agreed. “Kind of a long story.” He wished, almost, that he had more time to talk to Ward. Ward had looked past the Guide tabs and seen that Kas was a soldier; this could be the last time that ever happened. When they left Sentinel School, he’d be going into Angel’s world, and while Kas had chosen it, with his eyes open, there would be no opportunities there for him to be Sergeant Dillinger, and not Angel’s Guide.

“Makes almost as much sense as sending him out on a combat exercise, I guess,” Ward said doubtfully.

Right, even with field experience, Ward wouldn’t necessarily know how Sentinels and Guides ended up Bonded; he might well think it was one of the incomprehensible decisions the brass sometimes made. As opposed to, say, an incomprehensible decision Kas had made.

He was on firmer footing talking about Angel’s participation in the exercise, so he answered, “It’s part of Sentinel School, and I guess didn’t want to come up with something special for him to do. The medical school runs their own field exercises, so they’ll make sure he learns what he really needs to know. I’m halfway sure the Sentinel School captain rigged the teams to cover his weak spots—none of the other teams got a sniper, did they?”

Ward shook his head. “I’m the only one from my class that they sent out on this trip, anyway.”

Kas nodded, his suspicions confirmed. “Shooting’s his worst thing. He could probably hit the broad side of a barn at point-blank range, but it might take him two tries. He did all right with the tracking—” Ward nodded acknowledgement of that “—so as long as he keeps up with the squad and nobody makes waves, they should be able to pass him through.”

Ward seemed to follow his drift, that if the Sentinel School brass had gone to that much trouble to get
Temas off their hands without a problem, there would be plenty of shit to go around if somebody fuckup the plan—or allowed a pissant cherry lieutenant to fuck up the plan. “I’d better talk to the lieutenant,” he decided. “You’re about the last person he’s going to want to hear from. Keep an eye on this here for a minute, will ya?” he asked, indicating the area in front of the cave.

Kas agreed, gladly. Managing ignorant young officers was a sergeant’s natural duty, but having one of his own to deal with, Kas was more than happy to let Ward deal with Hsu. And Ward proved himself to be a master of the art. Without Sentinel hearing, Kas couldn’t manage to overhear everything, but he made out something about “misunderstanding” and “deploy our unit’s Sentinel most effectively.”

Hsu’s reply included the words, “Thinks he’s too good to follow orders” and “sit there painting his nails while the enemy walks up on us.”

“…not that bad, sir…know how to manage Sentinels…all the resources at hand…advise against…squad at risk.”

“I don’t need you to tell me how to do my job, Sergeant!”

“Of course not, sir. But you might want to think about….”

At that point Hsu moved further away, evidently not wanting the rest of the team to overhear any more of this conversation than they already had. After a few minutes, Lieutenant Hsu stomped over to him, Ward following at a discreet distance. “Temas goes on watch at 0400. Make sure he shows up.”

“Yes, sir,” Kas said. Ward took up his post again, and Kas made his way back to Angel to give him the news.

“Oh, great,” was Angel’s response. “Just what I wanted.”

“You can thank Sergeant Ward; he decided not to let both you and Hsu go down in flames.”

“Oh. Is he the nice kind of sergeant? I didn’t know that.”

Kas had no idea what Angel had in mind when he said “the nice kind of sergeant,” except for, possibly, him. “He’s a normal sergeant. Drill Sergeants are kind of a special case.”

As the evening wore on, it became clear that Angel was considering simply staying awake until his 0400 watch shift. Reminders that they were probably going to move out shortly after his watch shift ended had no effect. Finally, Kas took advantage of Signorelli going to the latrine to say, “You know, Signorelli probably wants to go to sleep.”

“So? He can.”

“Not until you do.”

“That’s not fair.”

“No, it isn’t,” Kas agreed, and waited for Angel to think about that.

By the time Signorelli returned, Angel was lying down, pretending to be asleep. Eventually, pretending gave way to the real thing, although Kas was dimly aware of Angel waking up and squirming around every time the watch changed, or somebody got up to visit the latrine.
Shortly after Angel had subsided back into sleep for the fourth or fifth time, the realistic *boom* of a dummy claymore rattled the air. Sitting up, Kas saw the fading light of a trip-flare in the sky outside the cave.

“Whassgoingone?” Angel asked, sitting up and rubbing at his eyes.

“What?”

“What’s going on?” Angel repeated more clearly. “Are they attacking us already?”

“Maybe,” Kas said. Everybody else was scrambling for their boots and weapons. “I’ll go find out. Get your boots on.” He grabbed Angel’s fake rifle and went to the front.

A flustered Specialist Warren was saying, “Sorry, um, false alarm. A deer set off the flares.”

Grumbling, everyone returned to their places. Kas picked his way among the sleeping bags and gear back to Angel’s spot.

“Deer, huh?” Angel asked, with a yawn.

“Apparently. You want to do a hearing sweep, make sure that’s all it was?”

“Might as well, since I’m up.” He yawned again and settled into Kas’s side. “We have watch in half an hour anyway.” He made the sweep with an expression of studious concentration, then broke the link. “Deer…raccoon…owl…that’s about it. Can I have some coffee?”

“Sure. You’ll have to use the powdered creamer, though. We’re out of milk.”

“I guess I can live with that.”

Making the coffee took up most of the rest of the time they had before their shift started. Angel took it along with him when the three of them trooped forward to relieve Warren.

Shortly after she went back to her sleeping bag, they were joined by Sergeant Ward. Kas was surprised—putting their most experienced man and their Sentinel on the same shift was pretty stupid—but didn’t comment. Ward shrugged, and positioned himself to the other side of the cave opening.

Angel, as was his habit, did his watching sitting down, and mostly with his hearing. To keep him from complaining too much about boredom, Kas had him link up and make an extended sweep every fifteen minutes.

On the third of these, Angel sat up straight. “Oh!”

“You hear something?” Kas asked.

“Yeah. There’s people coming.”

Ward came over. “How many and how far?”

“I’m not sure,” Angel said. “Pretty far.”

Ward opened his mouth to say something else, but Angel had resumed the link, so Kas motioned for him to be quiet.

“There’s only two of them talking,” Angel said. “But there’s more than that walking. It’s hard to tell exactly. They’re at the edge of my range—maybe a mile and a half.”
“In the dark, over rough ground, that puts them close to an hour away,” Kas noted.

“Plenty of time to organize a defense,” Ward said. “Nice job, Temas.”

“Thanks,” Angel said. “I don’t know why we need a defense, though.”

“Because they’re coming to attack us,” Kas said patiently.

“I know. But if what we really wanted to do was get the Thingy to the rendezvous spot without the Orange people having a chance to get it back, we could just leave now and be a mile ahead of them all day,” Angel reasoned.

Ward and Kas exchanged a look. Both of them were probably more surprised than was flattering, and Kas definitely should have known better: Angel had the least soldierly mindset of anyone he’d ever met, but he was smart. Coming up with a plan to exploit the ambiguity of their orders and avoid combat was exactly like him.

Angel sighed. “What am I missing?”

“Nothing,” said Ward. “I’m going to go talk to the Lieutenant.”

Kas didn’t think there was any way Hsu would go for it, but after a brief consultation with him, Ward was going around shaking everyone awake and saying, “Grab your gear, we’re moving out in ten—and be quiet!”

With Kas and Signorelli working together, stowing their own gear took only a few minutes. When they regrouped at the front of the cave, Puckett and Lang were discussing what to do with the claymores—pack them up and take them along, which would cost time, or leave them where they were, where they might slow Orange Team down.

“If we’re really lucky, they might not realize we’re gone until they make it the whole way to the cave,” Puckett said.

“Won’t they hear us leaving?” Lang asked. “Sentinel?”

Angel looked surprised to be consulted. “Maybe. Ethan’s not very good at long-range sound discrimination, though, and his scent discrimination is shit. He might know something’s up, but he won’t be sure if it’s us or animals.”

“You know what we could do,” Kas said, an idea forming. Signorelli was busy with their gear; he could do this one last bit of sergeanting before he was through. “We could set off one of the claymores just as we’re leaving. If he has his hearing extended, it’ll disable him for a few minutes. If not, anything he hears right after, he’ll probably write off as us responding to another false alarm.”

The earlier false alarm had been loud enough that even Sentinel Savard had probably managed to hear it, from wherever they had been at the time. If they got really lucky, Orange Team might even decide to stop for a while, to make sure Red Team wasn’t still on alert from the “false alarm” when the real attack started.

Lang and Puckett liked the plan. “Tell Lieutenant Hsu it was your idea,” Angel suggested. “He doesn’t like our ideas.”

When they were finally ready to move out, Hsu realized he had to put Angel on point, since he was the only one who could see where they were going. “If you think you can recognize a land mine before you trip over it,” he added.
“Of course I can,” Angel said.

Kas doubted that, and once Hsu was out of earshot, started giving him a quick lesson. Before he got too far, however, Angel stopped him. “I can just find them by scent.”

“You can?” Land mines weren’t something they’d done in scent discrimination lab.

“Sure. Anything that smells like a person, a person put there. Easy enough.”

That wouldn’t apply to a situation where the mines might have been set days or even months ago, but for this situation, it would work, Kas realized. “Right. Easy,” he said with a smile that he was sure only Angel could see. He remembered again why he’d thought giving up his life’s work in exchange for his sweet, clever Sentinel had been a fair trade.

The claymore rocked the air, and Angel started off, leading the group down a path that would have been almost invisible even in daylight. When he encountered any significant obstacle—a protruding tree root, or a woodchuck hole—Angel whispered a warning to Kas, who dropped a lit glow stick next to it. The last man in line picked them up as he came to them, and passed them back up to the front.

They made good time. The eastern sky was just beginning to go gray, and Kas estimated they had covered nearly two miles, when they heard claymore and rifle fire in the distance. “Okay?” he whispered to Angel.

Angel nodded. “Sounds like they made it to the cave.”

“You’ll have to start listening for them on our tail,” Kas warned him. “If they came up this way before, they’ll have the advantage of knowing the territory.”

“Okay,” Angel whispered back.

Kas remembered to warn him, “And check for anyone else in the area, too—there might be another team around somewhere, and we don’t know if they’re friendly or hostile.”

“Okay.”

After that, they paused every fifteen minutes for Angel to extend his hearing. For most of the next hour, their lead widened, to almost two miles ahead, before Angel began to report that Orange Team was slowly closing the gap.

By then, it was fully light, and Hsu took point, setting a faster pace than Angel had. Angel was predictably unhappy about that, but kept up—until Hsu started bitching about the every-fifteen-minute stops for Angel to check Orange Team’s position.

“Can’t you listen and walk at the same time?” he demanded.

“No,” Angel said. “If you can listen to people two miles away and walk at the same time, you’re welcome to take over.”

Kas thought he had gotten through to Angel on the issue of behaving in a vaguely subordinate manner to Hsu, but apparently he hadn’t. “Of course it’s up to you, sir,” he added, before Angel could dig himself in any deeper, “if you’d rather stop less often.”

The lieutenant couldn’t really argue with that. They made their next stop twenty minutes later, which Kas supposed was just enough of a difference to make him feel like he was in charge, without
actually endangering the rest of them. It could have been worse.

They kept moving steadily, and Orange Team kept following them, but they encountered no other obstacles, and no other teams. A mile out from the rendezvous point, Angel alerted them that there were two people there. When they arrived, they proved to be Englebright, the OCS Captain, and Captain Ketner, sitting in a Jeep drinking coffee.

As Hsu went to report in to his captain, Angel started to slump onto the ground. Kas caught him by the collar before he could quite manage it—Captain Ketner was heading their way. “Temas,” he said, not sounding entirely disapproving. “You’re…early.”

“Our orders said we could leave in the morning,” Angel answered.

“So you left at….”

“About 4:30. As soon as I heard Ethan’s people coming.”

Ketner looked thoughtful. “Interesting. Whose idea was that?”

“Mine,” Angel said. “Only Sergeant Ward pretended it was his because Hsu doesn’t like me.”

“I see. The vans won’t be here to pick you up until sometime this afternoon.”

“That’s okay,” Angel said. “But are we done now?” he asked plaintively. “I’m tired.”

“Yes, Temas, you’re done.”

“Good. Only somebody better tell Ethan; his guys are still planning to attack us when they get here,” Angel said, and started to wander off.

“Thank you, Temas. You’re dismissed.” Kas was impressed at how he managed to get that in before Angel had completely turned away. “Signorelli, you’re with me.”

Kas went off with Angel, and found him a comfortable spot to sit down, spreading out his poncho and arranging the packs as a backrest. “Want some more coffee?” he asked, getting out the bread they’d saved last night and opening the can.

“No.”

“Hot chocolate, then?”

“No. Thanks.”

Kas pried the cylinder of bread out of its can, sliced it into rounds, and applied jam. “Here, eat this.”

Angel took a slice, looked at it, and let his hand fall limply into his lap. “I don’t want it.”

“We’re going to be here a while.”

“I’m not hungry. My throat hurts.”

“It might feel better if you drank something.”

“I don’t want to.”

What Angel did want to do, it turned out, was lie down with his head in Kas’s lap. When the sun
was high overhead, and it was warmer than it had been for the entire exercise, he announced that he
was cold. Putting Kas’s jacket on top of his own didn’t help; not even unpacking a sleeping bag and
tucking him in helped. Not long after, he started sniffing, and Kas had to face the truth: his Sentinel
was sick.

He should have realized sooner—it wasn’t like Angel to be this whiny and clingy if there wasn’t
something really wrong. As soon as Angel consented to be left alone for a few minutes, he reported
in to Captain Ketner, thinking he ought to know the reason behind Angel’s increasingly conspicuous
behavior.

Ketner’s reaction surprised him. “Sick?” he said, sounding alarmed.

“Yes, sir. He slipped and fell into a creek yesterday, and I think he caught a chill—”

“Signorelli!” The other Guide trotted over. “I have to stay here,” Ketner said to Kas. “Both of you,
get Sentinel Temas back to base, to the infirmary. Take the Jeep.”

Within moments, they had bundled Angel into the back of the Jeep. Kas had no idea why they were
in such a screaming hurry. A lot of Sentinels were big babies when they were sick—sometimes with
good reason, because nasal congestion and fluid in the ear could play havoc with their senses. But a
simple cold wasn’t any more dangerous for them than for anyone else, even if it was more
uncomfortable.

Maybe, Kas thought, one of the other Sentinels, or even a classmate of one of their teammates, had
come down with something serious. “How are you feeling?” he asked Angel. “Just cold and tired
and congested?”

“Oh-huh.”

“Nothing else? No…” He tried to think of other serious symptoms. “Stiff neck or anything? Tingling
in your left arm?”

“No,” Angel said. “You don’t normally get a stuffy nose with a heart attack,” he added peevishly.

“Right.” Angel didn’t seem at all concerned. Possibly he thought that everyone treating his mild
discomfort like an emergency was the natural order of things.

Angel dozed for most of the rest of the trip back to base, cuddled up against Kas’s side for warmth
and comfort. When they arrived at the infirmary, he slumped into a plastic waiting-room chair while
Signorelli spoke with the admitting nurse, then had to get up again almost immediately when another
nurse appeared to escort them upstairs to the Sentinel ward. They paused on the way in for the nurse
to take Angel’s temperature and weigh him, then were shown to the same room Angel had been in
before. “Make yourself comfortable; the doctor will be in shortly,” she said.

Kas got Angel to sit on the edge of the bed, sitting next to him so Angel could lean up against him.
“How are you feeling? Any worse?”

Angel shook his head limply. “I just want to go to bed.”

“Soon, I hope,” Kas said. Since they were already in a room with a bed in it, if they didn’t send
Angel back to the Sentinel School soon, Kas would just tuck him in where he was.

A middle-aged man in a white coat and captain’s bars came into the room. “Sentinel Temas?”

“Hi, Doctor Taylor,” Angel said, his voice small and pathetic.
“I understand you’re not feeling well?”

“No,” Angel agreed.

“You’re a bit feverish. Any other symptoms?”

“I’m really tired. And--” He paused to apply a Kleenex to his dripping nose. “Stuffed up.”

“I see. Well, is it all right if I examine you?”

“If you want to.”

The doctor looked in Angel’s ears, nose, and throat, and palpated his neck. “Your symptoms started when you were out on a field exercise?”

“Yes. Um. We were pretty much done.”

“I’m glad your superiors had the sense to have you seen promptly. After the other incidents, I wouldn’t have expected it,” Taylor said. “Well, it appears you have a cold.”

“That’s what I thought,” Angel said.

“I’m going to take a culture, just to be sure. Open your mouth, please.” He applied a swab to Angel’s throat. “I’ll have the nurse bring you something to change into, so you can be comfortable while we wait for the results.”

“Oh, I have to stay?”

“Yes, I’m not releasing you until I know your captain’s not going to have you out running around in the woods in the rain, falling into creeks, before you’re fully recovered.”

That explanation seemed to satisfy Angel. “Well, okay, as long as Kas can stay with me.”

“That’s,” Angel said.

“Of course. Do you still need the other Guide, or can we send him back to the Sentinel School?”

“He’s still here?” Angel looked around, as if expecting to see Signorelli in the room with them. As far as Kas knew, they had left him behind in the lobby. “No, I don’t need him for anything.”

After the doctor left, Kas suggested, “Here, why don’t you take a shower?” The attached bathroom was fully stocked, and the steam might help Angel feel better.

“Hmm, well…okay. If you’ll come with me.”

#

Between getting all of the Sentinels back to the School, receiving reports from all of the other instructors who had supervised parts of the exercise, and making sure Ethan Savard and his team leader didn’t murder each other, it was late evening by the time Captain Bryan Ketner could make it to the infirmary to check on his other problem child. He thought Doctor Taylor would have called his office if Temas’s condition was serious, but if it wasn’t, he’d have thought Temas would be back at the School by now.

“So nice of you to make time to stop by, Captain,” Taylor said when Ketner tracked him down, in his office.

“It’s been a busy day. What’s Temas’s status?”
“He has acute viral rhinopharyngitis, no doubt exacerbated by excessive stress, poor nutrition, and lack of sleep over the last few days. Not to mention taking a nasty fall into near-freezing water.”

Translation: Temas had a cold from falling in the creek and being too fussy to eat and sleep on field exercise, and Captain Ketner was a very bad man to have let it happen. He should have realized that sending Temas to the infirmary the second he found out about his illness wouldn’t be enough to satisfy Taylor; he also seemed to hold Ketner responsible for Temas’s breakdown in Basic, even though neither of them had so much as laid eyes on the kid at the time. “I see.”

“I’m keeping him overnight, and he’ll need complete rest and supportive care while the condition runs its course.”

Of course he would. Well, one good thing to be said for Kas, he didn’t seem to object to waiting on Temas hand and foot. “I’ll just check in on him, then.”

“Don’t bother him if he’s resting,” Taylor said. “And you had better not even be thinking of depriving that boy of his Guide this time.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Ketner said, leaving. That would be going too far, when Temas was sick, and anyway, Signorelli had reported nothing too egregious about his behavior on the exercise.

As he neared Temas’s room, he heard the Guide saying, “—eat something, if you want to get better, Ang.”

Not resting, then, at least. Ketner paused to see where this was going.

“I don’t like it,” the Sentinel whined.

“I’m sure I could get you something else. What do you want?”

“Well…maybe I could eat some ice cream. Mint chocolate chip. It would feel cool on my throat.”

“I’ll see what I can do.” Kas came out of the room, and pulled up short. “Sir.”

“Guide Temas,” Ketner said with a nod. “Carry on.”

Reluctantly, the Guide went about his errand. Ketner went into Temas’s room, where the Sentinel was propped up in bed, poking at a dinner tray. Another dinner tray, this one clean, sat on the windowsill. The infirmary staff was still delivering meals to Guides along with their Sentinels, no matter how many times the liaison officers told them it was bad for unit discipline.

“Hi,” Temas said grudgingly, glancing up at him.

Of course, the idea of military discipline was entirely lost on Sentinel Temas anyway. He was in for a rude surprise when he arrived at the military medical school, but there was only so much he could do in six weeks. And he’d go completely out of his mind if he was stuck with Temas for another session. “Temas,” he answered. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired,” Temas answered. Without his Guide there to remind him, naturally it didn’t occur to him to add a “sir” or anything like that.

“The doctor says you’re going to be just fine. Rest up, and you’ll come back to School tomorrow.”

“Okay.”

That was about enough. “‘Yes, sir,’” he corrected.
“Huh?”

“That’s what you say when your commanding officer gives you an order. Not ‘okay.’”

“Oh. Right. I forgot. I am sick, you know.”

Ketner glared at him.

“What?” Temas seemed genuinely baffled. “Oh. You want me to say it now?”

“Yes.”

“Okay. Oops. I mean, yes sir.”

“Thank you, Temas.” Not that the lesson would stick for more than ten minutes. Ketner decided to leave, before Temas had a chance to do anything more outrageous.

#

Kas located the nursing station, down the hall from their room. Nurse Fairchild, the same one who had taken Angel’s temperature and brought his clothes, was there, noting something in a chart. She glanced up at him and smiled briefly. “Temas’s Guide, right? Is there something else he needs?”

“Ice cream,” Kas said. “He’s barely eaten a thing all day, but he says he might be able to handle ice cream.”

“He’d better have some, then. Unfortunately, dietary only does Jello and pudding. You’ll have to go to the cafeteria.”

“Thanks. Where is it?”

“It’s a little hard to find—I’ll be going on my break in a minute; I can show you.” She smiled again, more genuinely this time, showing a dimple.

There was attraction there, he could tell. She knew better than to think anything could happen—working in the Sentinel ward, she knew what a Bonded Guide was—but it was nice, for a moment. He allowed himself to smile back. “I’d appreciate it.”

When they set off to the cafeteria, though, he resolved to put things back on a businesslike footing. A few seconds of nonverbal flirtation was one thing; a few minutes was something else. “So, uh, is it difficult, learning to be a nurse?” He and Angel had kicked around the plan of him getting a nursing degree; he wasn’t sure how well it would suit him, but it had to be better than nothing.

“Harder than a lot of people think,” she said, a little tartly.

He could see how it could come across as a condescending question, out of context. “Sentinel Temas has a guaranteed slot in the uniformed services medical school,” Kas explained. “He thought—we both thought—it might be a good idea for me to get some kind of degree. Nursing, or…something.”

“Oh! Well, it’s challenging,” she said. “If you go into it thinking, ‘it’s just nursing, how hard can it be?’, you won’t do well.” She pressed the call button for the elevator.

Kas carefully didn’t admit that he had been thinking just that.
“There’s a lot more to it than holding people’s hands and emptying bedpans. Before you can even start really learning nursing—in clinicals—you have to learn all about anatomy, chemistry so you can understand drug reactions and test results—oh, and calculus so you can understand the chemistry. Then you have to learn all about diseases, and the symptoms and treatments.”

The list of subjects was intimidating—Kas had taken Calculus in high school, but all he remembered about it was that he’d gotten a D in it—but he hadn’t gotten to be a sergeant, or gotten through Ranger School, by being afraid to try things that were hard. Maybe it would be better than he thought.

The elevator arrived, and they boarded. “Sometimes people have the idea that you’re just doing what the doctor tells you, so you don’t really have to know that much. It’s true that most of the time you can’t run tests or start a treatment until the doctor writes the orders. But if you’re a good nurse, most of the time you’ll know what the doctor is going to order before they order it. Or even before they’ve seen the patient. That way you can be ready to do the test or the treatment as soon as the doctor confirms it.”

“Now it’s starting to sound a little bit like sergeanting. If you’re good at that, you know what the officers are going to order before they order it. Or what they ought to be ordering, anyway.”

“Sometimes it’s like that, too.” Fairchild agreed. “Especially if you’re in a teaching hospital, and you have new doctors who don’t really know what they’re doing yet. They’ll be doing procedures that, as a nurse, you’re not allowed to do, but you have to know how it’s supposed to be done, and everything that can go wrong, so you can fix it if they make a mistake. Or stop them from making a mistake, but you can’t make them look stupid in front of the patient.” She paused. “Even if they are.”

“Now it sounds exactly like sergeanting;” Kas said. The thought cheered him.

As they got out of the elevator on the basement floor, Fairchild continued, “But it is a great job. Every day you learn something new, and—I know it sounds corny—but you really do make a difference to people.”

She was right, it did sound corny. But not bad. G-TAC might agree to let Angel send him to nursing school if they thought it was easy and unimportant—but if it really was, he wouldn’t want to go.

Arriving at the cafeteria—which was not, really, particularly hard to find—Kas spotted where the dessert line was. “Hey—thanks,” he said to Fairchild.

“No problem. I’m sure I’ll see you again up on the floor.”

When he returned to the room with Angel’s ice cream, Angel sat up and took it with both hands. “What are you looking so happy about?”

“I’m just thinking about…stuff.” He couldn’t exactly say, “I’m not worried anymore that even though I love you and everything, being your Guide is going to end up making me miserable, which I didn’t realize I was worried about until I wasn’t anymore.” That would be a thorny subject to tackle even if Angel wasn’t sick.

“Stuff?”

“And things.” Realizing that Angel might want a little more detail, he said, “One of the nurses showed me where to get your ice cream, and on the way we talked about nursing school.”

“Oh yeah?”
“Yeah. I think maybe I’ll like it.”

Angel spent most of his last week at Sentinel School in bed. After the initial exhaustion passed, he was a cranky patient, frequently complaining that he was bored, but refusing to read, play cards, write letters, or do anything else that Kas was able to suggest. When Kas wasn’t trying to entertain him, or trying to sleep with a sweaty bundle of Sentinel clinging to him, he was in the kitchen fixing increasingly elaborate treats for Angel to eat two bites of and turn up his nose at. He finally turned a corner on Wednesday, agreeing to take a short walk outside and eating his lunch—the dining room’s planned menu, no less, with only the usual modifications—with good appetite. Doctor Taylor came to the School to give him another checkup, and pronounced him fit to return to duty the next day.

They were due to leave on Saturday, and Kas wondered if his absence from the last few days of training would delay their departure. Fortunately, Captain Ketner arranged for Angel to do all of the required graduation tests in the remaining two days. Most of these were simple exercises designed to test the range of his senses, which would be recorded in his official file. They measured the range of his hearing, in both decibel level and frequency, the concentration at which he could detect scents, and his ability to read an eye chart at distance. Some of them were performed while Angel was hooked up to an EEG, which he found very interesting and cooperated with happily. The written tests were also not a problem.

Angel balked, however, when Captain Ketner took him out to the long-distance firing range. The other trainee Sentinels had had their range test while Angel was still sick in bed, and Captain Nagley was, according to Ketner, unavailable to give him the test, so the conditions were about as favorable as Angel could have asked for. Still, he stood in the firing box, holding his rifle awkwardly and looking mutinous, until Ketner said, “For Christ’s sake, Temas, just fire the weapon so I can record a score!”

Wisely, he didn’t comment when Angel missed all of the targets, just shook his head and dismissed them back to the School.

That evening, Captain Ketner assembled them all in the entry hall after dinner and made a short graduation speech. Angel drooped noticeably during it, and even more as Ketner one by one called the Sentinels up to the front of the group, exchanged salutes, and gave them their travel orders. No amount of poking or kicking his ankles—or at least, no amount that Kas could do without making a spectacle of himself—induced him to stand up straight. By the time Angel’s name was called, he looked like a daffodil somebody had forgotten to water.

“Temas!” Ketner said again.

Angel dragged himself to the front, saluted with the wrong hand, and looked miserable.

Ketner saluted back and said, “Congratulations, Sentinel,” with perhaps just a little less conviction than he had said it to the others.

Angel accepted his written orders and looked at them, frowning. “Wait, I’m actually leaving?”

“Yes, Temas, you’re leaving.” Someone in the rank of other instructors standing behind Ketner added, under his breath, “Thank God.”

That explained the drooping. Somehow, Angel must have gotten the idea that he wasn’t being passed like the others. When Kas thought about it, it wasn’t that surprising a conclusion for him to come to: he’d failed Basic twice, after all, and nobody had actually said what a passing score on the tests was. God.
“Dismissed,” Ketner said. “Temas, see me.”

Angel looked back at Kas, with an expression of pure panic. Kas joined him quickly, and gave his shoulder what he hoped was a reassuring squeeze.

“Temas, your transport to Bethesda isn’t until Tuesday.”

“Okay,” Angel said. “Um, yes, sir.”

“You’re welcome to stay here until then. The next class won’t be arriving for a few more days.”

“O—yes, sir. Um, do we have to stay here?”

“No, as long as you report to the airport by 0800 Tuesday morning.”

Angel remembered his line on the first try this time. “Yes, sir.”

He bounced up the stairs to their room, with Kas following. “I think we should go somewhere,” Angel said, once they were in their room. “Where do you think we should go?”

“I don’t know,” Kas said.

“There must be somewhere we can go. Didn’t you say you were from around here? Hey, wait a minute!”

Kas had a sinking feeling that he knew where this was going. “Yeah?”

“We should go see your family. We already saw mine. It’s only for a couple of days, but it’ll still be nice, right? I really want to meet them.”

After that, what could Kas say but, “Uh, I’ll have to call and make sure they’re home”?

“Okay, so, um, how are we going to get there?”

“We’ll have to rent a car,” Kas said.

“Oh!” Angel said. “Is that why you said we ought to get a credit card? So we could go see your family if we had time?”

Kas had not been thinking anything of the kind, and probably would have suggested they wait and get one in Bethesda if he had considered the possibility. “Not really, I just thought we might want to drive somewhere.”

Angel accepted that. “So where do we rent a car? Do they have a place on base?”

“Not usually,” Kas said. He hadn’t seen one, anyway. “We should probably get it at the airport—they always have car rental at airports, and that way we can just drop it off before we get our flight. Since everyone else is flying out tomorrow, why don’t you ask Captain Ketner if we can ride along to the airport with them?”

Angel agreed to do that, and Kas set out on a final errand of his own. He didn’t want to do it, and in some ways he felt that everyone else would be happier if he didn’t, but there were some things you just had to do, regardless of whether anyone wanted you to or not.

He found the School Guides in their ready-room, exactly as he’d found them on his and Angel’s first night at the School. This time, Signorelli glanced up at him, but once again, no one spoke.
“So…” Kas said. “We’ll be leaving tomorrow.”

“We know,” said Vosberg dryly.

“Right. Anyway, thanks for…” What? Living in this horrible place? He really shouldn’t have come down here. “Helping us,” he concluded.

Doolan muttered something that sounded like, “Yeah, right.”

Signorelli looked over at him. “Do I need to find something for you to do?” Doolan subsided into silence again, and Signorelli released him from his glare, evidently satisfied. Looking back at Kas, he said, “Good luck.”

“Thanks,” Kas said again. “Uh…you too.” He wasn’t exactly sure what would constitute “good luck” in the life of a School Guide. Being assigned somewhere else, anywhere else, might qualify, but as far as he knew, that never happened. “I guess I should—go.”

“Yes,” Signorelli said. “You probably should.”

Epilogue

“Your suite, gentlemen,” the bellhop said, managing to almost conceal an expression of fastidious distaste as he deposited their Army duffle bags on a luggage rack. Kas was not terribly surprised to see that they were in an ornate suite dominated by a gigantic bed, and also boasting a fireplace, balcony, and Jacuzzi tub. When Angel had insisted on talking to the desk clerk by himself while Kas sat on one of the lobby’s several overstuffed leather sofas, he had known something was up.

He had managed to convince Angel that they should stay in Seattle for the night, allowing them to break the long drive and confront—er, meet—his parents well-rested and un-rumpled. Angel had agreed to this plan but rejected several serviceable chain establishments, eventually selecting the most opulent hotel he could spot from the car. And then booked them into, apparently, the honeymoon suite.

“The amenities you requested will be delivered shortly,” the bellhop continued. “Is there anything else I can do for you?”

“Not right now, thanks,” Angel said.

“Enjoy your stay,” Kas had to give him credit for managing to say it without smirking.

Once the bellhop had left, it became clear that Angel had been working hard to appear cool and worldly while he was there, since as soon as they were alone he started gaping in open admiration of their surroundings. “This is really nice, Kas, isn’t it nice? You sink right into the carpet when you walk on it. And a fireplace, won’t that be nice? Do you think they start the fire for us, or do we have to do it? I bet you know how, anyway.” He opened the French doors to the balcony and bounced out. “I can smell the ocean from here.”

Kas couldn’t, but he took Angel’s word for it. The view was nice, looking down on the hotel’s landscaped gardens and out over the mountains.

“We can have breakfast out here in the morning, they said, if we want to. I’m going to check out the tub,” he added, bounding back inside.
On a small table by the door, Kas found the room service menu, which also listed “romantic extras” available in the suite: champagne, roses, chocolate truffles, chocolate-covered strawberries, in-room massages, something called a “deluxe spa gift basket….”

When a team of room service waitstaff arrived, he discovered that Angel had requested pretty much everything, except for the massages. After deploying flowers in several strategic locations, the waiters arranged the champagne bucket, strawberries, truffles, cheese plate, and a gift basket that rivaled the one Kas’s parents had sent, on the low table in front of the sofa. That wasn’t the “deluxe spa gift basket”—that one went in the bathroom, along with two plush robes. After that, they still weren’t done; they went around the room lighting candles.

Kas shuddered to think what this was costing—although since Angel had been collecting paychecks without spending them for over six months, he supposed they could afford it. His hopes for the evening had extended as far as a bed legitimately big enough for two, a steak, and perhaps a beer. Angel had, apparently, set his sights a little higher.

It was, Kas told himself firmly, a very sweet and lovely gesture. His parents would have laughed out loud—had they been the sort of people who laughed out loud—at the crass excess of it all, but that didn’t matter. It looked like a seduction scene staged by a teenager whose only knowledge of seduction came from movies and, Kas thought, TV commercials, and had consequently tried a bit too hard, because that was exactly what it was.

And Kas had better take it absolutely seriously, because Angel would be crushed if he didn’t.

After the flock of attendants left—extracting from Angel a promise to call the front desk if there was anything else they needed, anything at all—Kas found it surprisingly easy to enter into the spirit of things. They changed out of their uniforms and into the plush white robes. They fed each other strawberries while snuggling in front of the fire. They soaked in neck-deep lilac-scented water in the Jacuzzi. They drank the champagne, Angel clearly not caring for the taste, but growing progressively more sloshed on a single glass.

Kas did get his steak, when they ordered room service for dinner. He decided not to ask for a beer, since Angel clearly wasn’t going to manage more than the one glass of champagne, and he couldn’t stomach the idea of leaving half a bottle behind when they checked out, not at the markup the hotel was probably putting on it. Angel had lobster and a dessert chosen after a hasty consultation with Kas about what, exactly, en flambé meant. Once he found out, he decided they had better move out to the balcony, to better appreciate the novelty of a dessert that was on fire.

As soon as he had consumed the last mouthful of crêpes Suzette, Angel observed that it had grown very chilly outside, and they were finally moving toward the obvious end-point of the whole elaborate set-piece.

“I’m sure I can warm you up,” Kas said.

Angel burrowed into his arms, and Kas carefully steered them back inside and toward the bed. Once there, Angel began kissing his way down his body. So far, they had explored several variations on the theme of mutual masturbation and frottage. It appeared that tonight, Angel was ready to try something new.

He indicated this by sloppily kissing the head of Kas’s cock, giggling drunkenly, and looking adorably confused. “I want to, uh, can I…?” He tried the kissing maneuver again.

“Sure, you can,” Kas said agreeably.
“I don’t really know how,” Angel admitted.

“Why don’t I go first, and show you how,” Kas suggested.

“Oh, good idea,” Angel said, sounding very impressed with Kas’s cleverness.

Kas flopped Angel over on his back. Better not do anything too elaborate, he decided, since Angel would be trying to copy him. A couple of licks along the length of the shaft, swirl his tongue around the head, and he started sliding up and down the shaft. Soon, Angel was whimpering his approval, and then, coming.

“Like that,” Kas said, sitting up and wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “More or less.”

“Oh, I can do that,” Angel said, once he’d caught his breath.

He could. He slurped on Kas’s cock with more enthusiasm than technique, but that wasn’t a problem, not at all. He had been on the receiving end of more than one perfunctory blowjob, and they had nothing on the well-intentioned eagerness of his own beloved little Sentinel.

Angel lapped up his come with evident enjoyment. “That’s nice,” he said, looking over Kas’s cock, apparently to make sure he hadn’t missed any. “Better than the champagne,” he added, with another tipsy giggle.

“Glad you liked,” Kas said, pulling Angel down into a boneless sprawl on top of him. There was a lot to be said for not having to zip up and endeavor to look not-obviously-well-fucked immediately after, too. Kas kissed him, tasting his own come in Angel’s mouth.

“Love you,” Angel said, snuggling sleepily into his shoulder.

“You too, sweetheart,” Kas answered, tugging the blankets up over them.

Their real “honeymoon”—the night of their Bonding—they had spent crammed into one bunk in a barracks bay with 50 other men.

Yes, this was definitely better.
“Hey,” Kas said, ducking his head as he walked into the Guides’ room. He had been surprised, when he, Angel, Blair, and Jim arrived to inspect the Sentinel School as part of their work for the Presidential Task Force, to see three familiar faces. All of the instructors who had been there when Angel was a student were long gone, of course, but the Guides Vosburg, Doolan, and Collins were still there, along with two newer ones. “I don’t know if you remember--”

“Of course we remember you,” Collins said.

Kas felt an instant of déjà vu. The first time he’d walked into this room, on the night that he and Angel had arrived for Sentinel School, Collins had said, Yes, we know who you are, in a way that suggested the reputation that had preceded him was not at all a good one. Later, he’d come to realize that the Sentinel School Guides had good reason to be unfriendly to him, but at the time he’d been confused.

“You really do know him,” one of the new Guides said.

“Yes,” said Vosburg, repressively. “Go walk around upstairs, and take Wilkes with you.”

The two newer Guides left quickly.

“So,” said Vosburg, once they had gone. “You’re going to change everything.”

“We’re going to try,” Kas agreed.

“Hmph.” After a moment Vosburg said, “Leave Wilkes and Harris alone. They don’t need you getting their hopes up.”

Harris and Wilkes looked like they might be about twenty-five and twenty—they hadn’t been here long. Vosburg had been about thirty when Kas and Angel had been here before; that he was still here, more than twenty years later, proved that being a Sentinel School Guide was still a rabbit hole that one disappeared down, never to emerge. Kas could understand why Vosburg would want to shield the younger two from false hope.

“When you were here before, you know, the officers warned us off talking to you. Thought you’d give us ideas, the way you swanned around doing things that would get the rest of us rated in a heartbeat. And when they weren’t around Tony—Signorelli, that is—wouldn’t let us say a word more to you than we had to, and he was right not to. You were so. Dangerous.”

“I know that now,” Kas agreed.

“Tony was always strict with us, the younger Guides, but it was to keep us out of trouble. Anything
he caught us doing and gave us hell for, was something the officers didn’t catch. I didn’t come to appreciate how much he protected us until he was gone and I had to try to fill his shoes. He taught us what we had to do, how we had to behave, to survive this place. And knowing how different it was for other Guides... didn’t help.”

“And here I thought you just hated me,” Kas said, hoping to lighten the mood.

“Oh, we did. The way you behaved was bad enough, but coming in here with a Sentinel of your own, when none of us would ever have one— Vosburg shook his head. “We absolutely loathed you. And it wasn’t like you deserved him any more than the rest of us did, the way you acted. Bonding with him when you knew damn well you weren’t supposed to. None of us could stand the sight of you.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It wasn’t your fault—we knew that then, but... well. You can’t imagine what it’s like, having a different Sentinel every day, and a different batch of them every six weeks. Even if you’d been Bonded to—that was his name, that little prick that was always giving your Sentinel such a hard time?”

“Savard,” Kas said.

“Right. Even if it had been him you were Bonded with, any of us would have cheerfully murdered you to have him.”

“So that’s what you would want,” Kas said. “If we can change things for you—Sentinels of your own?”

(Of course,” Vosburg said. “But it won’t happen, and I’ll thank you not to give Wilkes and Harris any idea that it might. You know why we’re here?”

Kas shook his head. Even with the access being on the Task Force got them, how Guides ended up assigned to Sentinel School was still a mystery.

“Your friend Sandburg, if he hadn’t been a conscientious objector, could have been one of us,” Vosburg said. “They don’t trust Sentinels to keep the real hard cases in line—the Blessed Protector instinct, you know. Makes them go soft on us. Liaison officers, fortunately, aren’t troubled with any protective impulses toward Guides, so they won’t hesitate to take us down hard as many times as it takes. After seeing the way Sandburg has that Sentinel of his wrapped around his little finger, they’d shoot us all in our sleep before they’d give us the opportunity to corrupt perfectly good Sentinels.”

“I’m sorry,” Kas said again.

“That doesn’t change anything.”

“I know.”

“There is one thing you can do,” Vosburg said.

“What?”

“I’d like to know what happened to Tony.”

What? “He’s alive?” Kas asked stupidly.
“Last I heard, Lamotte, he passed away. Heart attack in his sleep. Threw the whole place into an uproar, only having four Guides, until they found Harris. At about the same time they realized how old Tony was getting and shipped him off somewhere. That was about two years ago, and I have no idea where he is or if he’s still alive.”

“I’ll find out,” Kas promised.

“I’m looking for a Guide named Anthony Signorelli,” Kas said to the front desk nurse, after showing his credentials. With Blair’s help, he had tracked Signorelli to a military nursing home for Sentinels and Guides, just outside DC. He had been admitted there after leaving the Sentinel School, but his records stopped abruptly about six months ago, with no notice of his death or anything else. Phone calls had produced nothing but references to medical privacy laws, but since they were in DC for a Task Force meeting, he decided to stop by in person and see what he could dig up.

“Try the sun room,” the nurse said. “Down the left hallway, last door on the right.”

Was it really going to be that easy? Kas found the sun room, which was occupied by about a dozen very elderly Sentinels and Guides, some dozing in chairs by the windows, others playing checkers or assembling jigsaw puzzles.

Kas looked carefully at each Guide’s face. Finally, by the windows, he spotted a man who could have been the grandfather of the Signorelli he had known twenty years before. Approaching, he asked tentatively, “Signorelli?”

The Guide looked up. “It’s Miller, now,” he said, with a fond smile at the Sentinel sitting next to him in wheelchair.

One side of the Sentinel’s face and body drooped in the characteristic sign of a stroke, but he returned a lopsided smile and patted Signorelli’s arm with his good hand.

“Congratulations,” Kas said. That explained Signorelli’s disappearance from the hospital records. If he was Bonded, even this late in life, his identification number would have changed along with his surname.

“Thank you,” Tony said. “And you’re…Temas, right?”

“Yes,” Kas said. “Kas Temas. I ran into some old friends of yours not too long ago, so I thought I’d look you up.”

Tony nodded. “Harry, do you mind if I--?”

“Go on,” said the old Sentinel. “I know how Guides are.”

“Have one of the nurses page me if you need anything, sir,” Tony said, standing up.

Sentinel Miller fumbled in the pocket of the bathrobe he was wearing and produced a pack of cigarettes and a lighter, which he passed to Tony.

“Thank you.” Tony bent and kissed his Sentinel on the cheek. When he straightened up, his expression was half sheepish, half defiant.
Kas followed Tony down the hall and out a back door, where there was a picnic table with a coffee can full of cigarette butts. An orderly took a last drag on a cigarette and dropped it in the can, saying, “You have a visitor, Tony?”

“Yes.”

“Don’t stay out here too long; you know how the cold gets to your joints.”

“I know.”

As the orderly went back inside, Tony sat down on the picnic bench and shook a cigarette out of the pack. “Do you--?” he asked, offering it to Kas.

“No, thanks.”

“I know I shouldn’t,” Tony said, lighting up. “When I first got to the Sentinel School, I must have been rated for smoking thirty times—they didn’t allow it around the Sentinels, you know. But Harry doesn’t mind, even though he quit years ago.”

Kas wondered, then, why Harry kept Tony’s cigarettes in his pockets. It could have been a move to control him—a reminder that even the relative freedom of being, at long last, a Bonded Guide with no one’s whims to cater to but his own Sentinel’s, came with limitations. Or it could have been a way to give Tony the gift of his permission every day, a necessary reminder that he was free of the prison he’d lived in for almost sixty years.

“What brings you here?” Tony asked.

Kas explained about his visit to the Sentinel School, and Vosburg’s request. “I’m sure he’ll be thrilled to hear how well things have turned out for you.”

“I’ve been very lucky,” Tony said. “I know it’s ridiculous, Bonding at my age, but—I never thought I’d have the chance. And Harry is so good to me.”

Kas knew that elderly Sentinels and Guides often didn’t survive a Bondmate’s passing—the strain of the Bond breaking often caused stroke or heart attack. Tony was doubtless shortening his own life expectancy by Bonding with a man who was older and sicker than he was, but he must have thought it was worth it. “I’m sure he is. How—if you don’t mind my asking—how did it happen?”

“They retired me here, when they didn’t want me dropping dead in harness the way poor William did. I suppose you heard about that?”

“Yes,” Kas agreed. William was Lamotte, he assumed.

“Harry had been here about a year by then. He had a stroke when his first Bonded Guide died. Pancreatic cancer—it was horrible, Harry says. A long illness. Of course he couldn’t manage by himself after that, so he came here. The staff here, they have the Guides help with the Sentinels if we’re able, and Harry was in terrible shape when I got here—he could barely get out of bed. So I started looking after him. It was like having a Sentinel of my own, and it would have been enough just to…pretend. But then he asked me, and it was the happiest day of my life. Harry’s doing a lot better now—we might have a few years together.”

“I’m really happy for you,” Kas said. “And I’m sure Vosburg and the others will be, too.”

Tony focused on the glowing end of his cigarette for a moment. “I suppose I should have written to them. If they’d be allowed to see my letters. I don’t know. I’d rather not think about the place.”
“I understand,” Kas said.

“No you don’t.” Tony said. “You were there, what, six weeks?”

Tony had to have been there almost fifty years. He was right; Kas had no idea. “I’m sorry,” he said. A useless thing to say, but there wasn’t anything else.

Taking a last drag and then stabbing out his cigarette, Tony pushed himself to his feet. “Thanks for stopping by,” he said, and went back to his Sentinel.

The meeting left Kas unsettled, even though he knew that the outcome for the former School Guide had been the best anyone could reasonably expect. A Sentinel of your own, who was good to you—a narrow definition of happiness, but all that most Guides could hope for. At least, he told himself, if the Task Force succeeded, the way Guides and Sentinels were trained would be changing. The position of Sentinel School Guide would be changed radically, if not eliminated entirely. Maybe the other School Guides wouldn’t have to wait as long as Signorelli had for their escape.

Chapter End Notes

With that, all of the complete stories in the Dreaded Bonding AU have been re-posted on AO3. However, there are still some other extras and fragments on my LJ, which may be accessed through my master post: http://alex51324.livejournal.com/238549.html

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