

In Your Eyes



Art by LaPetite Kiki

Story by Brumier

“Drop it!” Rachins demanded. Jaw clenched painfully, Jim put his gun on the floor and kicked it away. Maybe he could talk this guy down.

“Even with your wife on the elevator?”

“There’s more than one way to get a divorce,” Rachins sneered.

Oh, shit. Jim’s skin flushed hot with fear. This asshole never intended to get Caitlin off the elevator.

Before he could come up with a plan that he didn’t immediately discard as unworkable, the injured man on the floor raised Jim’s own gun and fired, hitting Rachins in the leg. Jim was already on the move, trying to grab for the detonator as Rachins stumbled. They struggled for a moment, Jim almost getting the upper hand, his hearing wide open as he listened for the backup he knew Simon would be sending, listened to see if the injured man on the floor would fire again. Listened for everything but Sandburg because he couldn’t...couldn’t...

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Jim jerked awake, tearing his eye mask off and panting into the semi-darkness of his bedroom.

Blair almost died today. That thought was on an endless loop in Jim's head, interspersed with the feeling of his fists on Rachins' flesh. It wasn't the first time the kid had been in that position since he'd partnered up with Jim, which was something he chose not to think about most days. But for several long minutes today, Jim had believed Sandburg to be dead.

Jim rolled onto his stomach and pressed his face into his pillow, willing the images away. He hadn't killed Rachins – Simon had intervened before he could – but the man would be eating through a tube for a while. It was going to be a problem for the department, and Jim was on paid suspension pending an IA investigation, but he didn't care. Taggart'd had the foresight to send Sandburg up to the control room as soon as they fished him out of the damned elevator, which had kept Jim from doing anything else ill-advised. Just seeing his friend whole and undamaged had nearly undone him.

Without conscious thought Jim sought out Sandburg's heartbeat in his tiny room under the stairs. He'd been doing it all night, needing the reassurance of that steady ka-thump, ka-thump. It would've been better to have Sandburg in the same room, though he tried very hard not to think about the kid lying next to him on the bed. That was just the Sentinel's attraction to the Guide, nothing more. And Jim was skilled at burying things he'd rather not examine too closely.

In an effort to get his mind off his slumbering roommate – and how was it that Sandburg wasn't plagued with nightmares himself? – Jim tried to think about how to fill the time while he was suspended.

There was plenty he could do around the loft, projects he'd been putting off for a while now, but the thought of staying in was almost suffocating. No, what he needed was some time away. He couldn't remember the last time he'd had a real vacation. The aborted kayak trip with Sandburg when they got lost and then had to save Simon's ass? That had been months ago. He and Sandburg had been working pretty hard. Maybe they both needed to get away.

Jim decided he'd call his buddy Brock in the morning, see if his cabin was available for a few days. And then he'd just need to convince Sandburg to come along. The fresh mountain air would do the kid some good.

Feeling a bit more settled now that he had a plan, and with Sandburg's heartbeat still thumping reassuringly in his ears, Jim pulled his eye mask on and tried to get back to sleep.

"You want to go where?" Sandburg stared at Jim across the table, a forkful of scrambled eggs halfway to his mouth. Despite the fact that Jim hadn't heard the kid wake in the night, or even toss restlessly, he looked a bit haggard around the edges.

"Mystic Lake," Jim repeated patiently. "I know a guy that has a cabin up there. I just thought that after everything we've been through lately, we could use some time away."

There was no reason he should feel so nervous. It wasn't like he couldn't go alone and have a perfectly good time. Fishing on the lake, kayaking, hiking through the forest; the Sentinel part of him yearned for the vast, unpopulated mountains with a strength that was a little surprising. Sandburg would probably be completely on board if Jim revealed that feeling to him, but Jim didn't want this to be about Sentinels or Guides. Just two buddies communing with nature.

Sandburg set his fork down, eggs uneaten. "Is this about the suspension?"

"Partly. But it's also about us not having a proper vacation in a really long time." Jim thought Sandburg should've been a little more interested; he usually loved their fishing and camping trips, and this time he could actually offer all the modern conveniences. "It's a really nice place. Flush toilet, the whole nine yards."

"There's a lot to be said for indoor plumbing, man," Sandburg said. He grinned, but it was hollow somehow.

Concerned, Jim did a comprehensive Sentinel scan on his partner. Nothing seemed out of the ordinary, despite the edge of exhaustion and an almost imperceptible tension along Sandburg's back and shoulders. Physiology aside, the kid was projecting something that Jim didn't like. A sense of defeat, maybe? Sadness? It didn't sit well, not on someone who was normally upbeat and positive to a fault.

"Can you get the time off from school?" Jim wasn't going to accept a no, not in any form. Sandburg needed a break as much as he did, that was clear.

"How much time we talking about here?"

"A week?"

Sandburg shrugged, all his attention on the eggs he was pushing around his plate. "I could maybe swing something."

Jim knew it wasn't easy. Between the work Sandburg was doing with him, and his responsibilities at the university, he didn't have much free time. The Dean had given him some flack already about missing classes, but Jim was prepared to talk to her if he had to, and express the importance of Sandburg's work with the PD. He didn't want the kid to have to be in a position where he had to choose.

"I'll let you know when I get home," Sandburg said. He took his plate to the kitchen and scraped the remains of his breakfast into the trash.

"Are you sure you're okay to teach today?"

“Don’t worry about me. I’m good. Later.” Sandburg slung his backpack over his shoulder and was gone, leaving Jim ill at ease.

The two hour drive to Mystic Lake had been mostly silent, Sandburg not being his usual chatty self, and so Jim was relieved to see a little of the spark back in his friend’s eyes when he saw the cabin.

“Look at this place! Wow. Not at all what I was expecting.”

Jim couldn’t help but agree. The outside was all natural wood and fieldstone, with wide porches and banks of windows that looked out on both the lake and the Wenatchee National Forest. The leaves hadn’t started turning yet but Jim could feel the crispness in the air that spoke of the approaching autumn and the change of the season. With the breeze coming in off the lake it was a good thing he’d packed some warmer clothes.

He showed Sandburg around inside. The floors were gleaming hardwood, interspersed with area rugs in authentic Snoqualmie tribal designs, and all of the appliances were new. It was a great place and Jim had been thinking about maybe looking into a little vacation house for himself.

The master bedroom took up half the downstairs, but as Jim explained to Sandburg he never felt right sleeping in there. “You can have your choice of the two upstairs rooms, Chief.”

“Whichever you don’t want is fine with me.”

Jim sighed. He normally took the larger room, which had a lakeside view, but he decided to let Sandburg have that one this time around. He wanted the kid to have a good time while they were here, wanted him to feel comfortable and at ease. Despite his best intentions, though, Sandburg seemed determined to do anything but relax.

The kid threw his duffle on the bed without giving the room more than a cursory once-over, and then he was herding Jim back down the stairs. “Okay, big guy. Why don’t you take a walk or something, while I make sure this place is Sentinel friendly.”

“Sandburg...”

“Hey, it’s my job, right? Just let me do it. I brought everything we need.” Which explained the extra bags in the back of the truck.

“You don’t have to do that,” Jim insisted, holding his ground at the bottom of the stairs. “I’ve stayed here plenty of times before without any trouble.”

“Since your senses came online?” Sandburg challenged, arms crossed. He was exuding an air of desperation that made no sense to Jim.

“Once.”

“I want to do this, Jim. Please?”

As if Jim could say no, not with Sandburg’s heartfelt plea shining out of his eyes. It was Sentinel manipulation, he was sure of it, but that didn’t mean he had the strength to shoot

the kid down. So what if he hadn't needed to Sentinelize anything in longer than Jim could remember? It wouldn't hurt anyone.

"I think I'll take a walk along the shore. Let me know when you're done?"

Sandburg let out a breath, and the smile he gave Jim this time was completely sincere.

"Sure thing, big guy."

*

They took a canoe out after dinner, a leisurely sunset paddle along the north side of the lake. The water's surface was still and smooth as glass, reflecting the oranges and pinks from the sky above. There wasn't anyone else out, and when Jim extended his hearing most of the neighboring houses were empty. They'd picked a good time to visit.

They weren't completely alone, though. One of the rental cabins was occupied; Jim could smell meat cooking on a grill and hear the faint strains of classic rock playing on a radio. He could only hope it wasn't someone hiding out from the law, though that would be just their luck.

"Open up your senses, Jim," Sandburg said quietly from his seat in the rear of the canoe.

"What do you hear?"

Jim complied without even giving it a second thought. He pulled his oar across his lap, closed his eyes, and opened up hearing much more than he usually did. It was overwhelming at first, so many sounds clashing together, but then Sandburg put a hand on his shoulder and murmured in his ear.

"Filter them out, sound by sound. Identify, catalogue, diminish."

It was an exercise they'd worked on in the past, but in Cascade Jim could never let his hearing go the way he was doing now. He put his trust in his Guide and started the process, talking it out for Sandburg's benefit.

"Waves rolling up on the shore. Birds further down on the lake. Loons, ducks. You. Heartbeat, breathing. The scrape of the oars on the canoe." As he worked through each sound it became softer, more background noise. "Birds in the trees. Feathers rustling. Something chewing. Wood sounds. Beaver?"

He could hear bugs trundling along the ground, and burrowing through the trees, and buzzing through the air. Leaves rustling in the gentle breeze, tree limbs creaking. He heard the man in the rental cabin singing off-key: ...just one look I was a bad mess, 'cause that long cool woman had it all.

"Okay, big guy. Pull back. Nice and easy."

Jim slid back to a normal hearing range effortlessly, a testament to the work they had put into the Sentinel thing. Sandburg especially, who buried himself in research and devised all the tests that Jim hated so much because they were reminders that their relationship was strictly academic.

"That never fails to amaze me, man." Sandburg's hand dropped away from Jim's shoulder. "You've come a long way."

"It's nice to have control," Jim agreed. The sun was dipping down behind the mountains, casting long shadows on the lake. "We should head back before it gets dark."

"Yeah." Again, Sandburg sounded off somehow. Or maybe it was just that he was thinking of some of the trials they'd gone through while Jim worked on using his senses instead of being used by them. It hadn't been an easy road.

As they paddled back to the cabin, oars slicing almost soundlessly through the water, there was no conversation between them. Just the companionable silence of two men who were accustomed to spending time together.

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"Jim! Jim, that's enough!"

Strong arms pulled him off Rachins, dragged him away even though he fought to get back and finish the job. The voice was muffled, but Jim's hearing was coming back and he strained to hear that one heartbeat that meant the most to him, the one that would let him know everything was okay.

Simon squatted down in front of him, put a hand on his shoulder. The grief on his face told Jim everything, but he couldn't believe it. Couldn't bear it.

"No." He shook his head, tried to clear the static from his ears. His hearing dial was up as high as it could go but he still couldn't hear the one thing he desperately needed to hear.

"No!"

Jim woke with a gasp, heart pounding. His hearing dial was up too far, his head a cacophony of noise: chirping bugs, leaves rustling in the breeze, water lapping on the shore, the lonely cry of a loon somewhere out on the lake, and above all Sandburg's heart pounding like a kettle drum.

It took longer than it should have to set the dial to rights and regain control. The emotions from the dream buzzed beneath Jim's skin like angry bees, leaving him agitated. That wasn't how things had gone down, and he didn't appreciate his subconscious embellishing events.

Sandburg would no doubt have something to say about it, tossing around his two dollar psychology terms like he was some kind of expert, but Jim had no intention of telling him about the dreams. Maybe it was a Sentinel thing like the visions he'd had in Peru, or maybe

it was just a normal human response to a traumatic event and once his subconscious worked through things the dreams would stop.

He kept one ear on Sandburg's regular heartbeat, a small part of him annoyed that the kid was sleeping so well. Not that he wished nightmares on him again, not after the ones that had plagued him following the whole David Lash fiasco; neither of them had gotten much sleep then.

Jim tried to get comfortable. The mattress was softer than what he was used to, though he had to admire Sandburg's foresight in packing his bedding from home. The kid took his role as Guide pretty seriously, always on a quest for organic cleaning products and fabrics that wouldn't irritate Jim's sensitive skin. Jim wasn't accustomed to that kind of care and attention, and he'd be lying if he didn't admit that it made him vaguely uneasy.

He kept waiting for Sandburg to ask for something in return, but he never did.

*

Sandburg was up and out unusually early the next morning, even before Jim had gotten up himself. He'd left a hastily scrawled note on the kitchen table, anchored in place by a salt shaker. *Gone for a walk. Don't wait breakfast on me.*

Jim stared at the note for a long moment, feeling uneasy though he couldn't put his finger on why. After a brief internal debate he opened up hearing and cast around for his Guide's heartbeat. He'd learned a few months ago that he could zero in on Sandburg with intent really quickly, all other sounds filtered out so they weren't a distraction.

Sandburg's heart was beating a nice, normal rhythm, which meant there was no reason to eavesdrop on the kid any further. But that's exactly what he did, coming in at the tail end of what sounded like a punchline.

"...mackerel, dig the ass on that woman!"

That was followed by laughter, Sandburg's and another man's; Jim thought maybe it was the same voice as the one he'd heard singing the night before. Their only neighbor. Jealousy, bright and unexpected, sliced through him and left him momentarily breathless. When was the last time he'd heard Sandburg laugh like that? When was the last time Jim had given him a reason?

Jim pulled his hearing back, irritated, when he heard the clatter and scrape of silverware. If Sandburg wanted to have breakfast with a stranger that was entirely his business; it wasn't like they had to spend every minute of the day together.

He went about his morning ablutions, firmly telling himself that he wasn't upset even though he had to unclench his jaw in order to brush his teeth properly. It was just Sentinel territorial tendencies, nothing more.

By the time Sandburg returned from his breakfast date Jim thought he had himself under control, at least until his sensitive nose picked up the scent of that other man clinging to the kid's flannel shirt. He kept his head down, focused on the few dishes he had to wash, and made sure his voice sounded as neutral as possible.

"Nice breakfast, Chief?"

"Oh, yeah!" Sandburg pulled out a chair and sat at the table. "Our neighbor is pretty nice. Makes some excellent huevos rancheros."

"Only you could make friends so fast, this far from civilization." It was meant to be light-hearted but came out sounding just a little bitchy.

"Sorry I didn't stick around for breakfast here," Sandburg said apologetically. "I just felt like taking a walk, and then I ran into Matt."

Matt. Jim fought to keep from grimacing. His roommate had never brought another man home, but Sentinel senses told him that Sandburg was just as interested in same sex relations. The last thing Jim wanted to do on his vacation was watch the kid perform his hound dog act.

"He's writing a book about haunted locations in Washington, and how the stories reflect societal views in a historical context. It's really interesting."

"He some kind of ghost hunter?" Jim was skeptical. As a cop he tended to believe in hard facts, evidence, tangible things that he could build a case on. Ghosts, vampires, aliens...as far as he was concerned they were all just bedtime stories that some people put way too much stock in. "You know that's pretty far-fetched, right?"

Sandburg's eyebrows went up. "People could say the same things about me and Sentinels."

"That's hardly the same thing," Jim said. Blair laughed.

"No, you're right. Sentinels are more in line with bigfoot."

"You might want to take a look in the mirror, Hairboy."

They grinned at each other and for a moment it was like old times, the two of them teasing each other and sharing a laugh. And then something changed in Sandburg's expression, something maybe no-one but his Sentinel would see. That inexplicable sadness was back and Jim wasn't sure he should ask about it; was almost afraid to.

"So what's on the schedule for today?" Sandburg asked, changing the subject.

"I was thinking we could do some fishing," Jim replied. He couldn't quite work up a smile, but Sandburg didn't seem to notice.

"Yeah? Cool." Sandburg stood up and looked down at himself. "Give me five minutes to change and I'll help you get out the fishing equipment."

Jim watched him go, feeling unsettled.

They took the canoe out again, going the opposite way around the lake this time until they found a good fishing spot Jim remembered from one of his past visits. Sandburg had never been fly fishing before, and Jim enjoyed acting as the instructor for a change. He showed the

kid the different types of flies that he liked to use – today they'd be using the caddis flies - and proper casting technique.

"You can't just throw the line like you would for rod and reel," he explained when Sandburg tried to do just that. "Watch me. You want a smooth back cast. Start low, pull it back. You want to keep it straight so the fly goes right where you want it."

Jim demonstrated his technique a couple of times while Sandburg watched intently, taking it all in. The kid was a fast learner in this as in everything else. It wasn't long before he was doing a perfect side arm cast, though it took him a little longer to get the hang of shooting the line without getting it wrapped around his arm.

"This isn't as easy as it looks," Sandburg said. He was wearing borrowed gear from Brock's supply – green hip waders and a grey fishing vest – and to that ensemble had added his own floppy green sun hat, his curly hair pulled back into a ponytail. He should've looked ridiculous, but to Jim's eyes he looked...perfect.

"You're doing great. You're a natural, Chief."

Sandburg looked pleased at the compliment. They fished in companionable silence for a while, casting and playing the lines to make their flies skitter across the top of the lake. This was all Jim had wanted: some quality time together away from the noise and distraction of Cascade.

"What do you see?" Sandburg asked softly.

Jim looked over at him, but the kid was looking out at the lake, and his caddis fly bobbing on the water. "This a test?"

"Just curious, man. That's all."

The lie was there, easy enough for a Sentinel to pick up on, but he didn't call Sandburg on it. Instead he opened up vision, the opposite side of the lake telescoping until it was clear enough to have been merely a foot away instead of almost five miles.

"Shore line. It's pretty rocky. Mayflies hovering just over the water. There's a red canoe, pretty weathered, looks like it's been there a long time. There's a hole in one side, like it ran into some rocks." Cop instincts wanted to flare up, but Jim suppressed them; he couldn't see any evidence of a crime, and the hole in the boat was old, he could tell from the silvering of the wood at the breaks. "There are squirrels in the trees, running up and down the trunks. I see...huckleberry bushes. Bugs moving around on the ground. Tracks, something big passed through recently. Bear, maybe?"

Sandburg put a hand on Jim's shoulder. "That's really good, big guy. Pull it back now, okay?"

Jim did, the view expanding back to its normal size. It was almost effortless, though he imagined a lot of that had to do with his ability to ground himself on his Guide's presence, and knowing that Sandburg had his back in case he slipped into a zone.

"Oh! Hey! I've got a bite!"

“Okay. Slow down, now. Ease up, Sandburg!” Jim pulled his own line in and set aside his rod so he could help the kid pull in his fish. “Feel the energy of the fish. Easy now. Take up the slack with your left hand.”

“What?”

Jim moved behind the kid and helped him, showing him how to work the line. He was hyper conscious of the heat that filled the narrow space between them, and the movement of Sandburg’s muscles even under the layers he wore. “Okay, like this. Now reel it in.”

“I got him! I got him!”

“You sure do.” Jim grabbed the net and scooped up the fish as soon as it got close enough. “Wow, look at this beauty!”

He passed it over to Sandburg, who eased the hook out of its mouth and held it in both hands, grinning. “He’s big! What do you think? Five pounds?”

“At least. Cutthroat trout. That’ll make good eating.” Jim took possession of the wriggling fish and dumped it in the bucket they’d brought along, which was full of lake water. They’d keep their catch alive until they were ready to head back, and then he’d bleed them out and pop them in the cooler for transport.

He supervised Sandburg switching out his fly and then they both cast out their lines. Jim figured two more trout would do the trick, especially if they were close in size to Sandburg’s catch. They’d be good eating tonight.

Jim watched Sandburg, saw the smile still lighting up his face. It made him want things he didn’t think he could rightfully ask for. Maybe it was fate, Sandburg meeting this writer guy. He was probably closer to the kid’s age, someone he’d have more in common with.

“You ever think about settling down?” Sandburg asked, his question oddly mirroring Jim’s thoughts.

“What? Like getting married again? No.” His marriage to Carolyn had been a disaster in almost every way.

“I don’t necessarily mean married. That’s becoming an outdated convention, if you ask me. Women today have much more freedom and independence, and marriage no longer means the same thing it did in the past when they needed the financial security and protection offered by a husband.”

Jim would never admit it, but he loved the way Sandburg sounded when he got into lecture mode. It was almost as good as his Guide voice. “So what do you mean then, professor?”

“Just...finding the right person. The one you want to come home to every day. Someone you can really talk to, have fun with, share your life with. A person you can see yourself growing old with.” Sandburg gave a lopsided shrug. “I just think it would be nice to have someone to hold my hand when I’m old, you know? Someone that shared all those years with me.”

Jim had to bite back his first response: that’s why I have you. It wasn’t fair for either of them. Sandburg didn’t owe him a lifelong commitment, regardless of what the Sentinel-Guide lore

might say. And he couldn't delude himself into thinking that there was anything between them but friendship. Once the diss was done everything would change. Sandburg would get back to his life and Jim would carry on with his. They might get together for lunch every now and then, maybe, catch up for a little while. But Sandburg deserved a family of his own.

"Jim?"

"Sorry, just thinking. I —" He was saved from having to answer Sandburg's question when he felt a tug on his line. "Here we go!"

Sandburg didn't bring the subject up again.

Jim had been relieved of his gun and his badge, but they couldn't make him leave. He stood out on the sidewalk, arms wrapped around himself, as the Medical Examiner's office rolled the bodies out of the building, each one tucked away in a black body bag. There were four of them, their lives snuffed out by Rachins. Jim could've stretched out his senses, figured out which one was Sandburg, but he knew he'd be overwhelmed by the scent of charred flesh.

He'd wanted to be there when they pulled the bodies out of the mangled elevator but Simon had flatly refused to allow it.

"You don't want to remember the kid that way," he'd said.

Taggart had sorrowfully assured him that the end had been quick, and Sandburg hadn't had time to feel any pain. Jim had used that same line too many times to believe it. The kid had been terrified, had been waiting for Jim to save the day like always. Had he had time, there at the end, to feel betrayed?

The vans drove away with their lifeless cargo and Jim watched until he couldn't see them anymore. He barely felt Simon's hand on his shoulder, pushing him gently in the direction of his car. The whole world was muffled, distant. His Guide was gone. His friend, his housemate, his partner. Jim could sense the void, knew it wouldn't be long until he fell into it.

Jim woke with a curse on his lips and a hollow feeling in his chest. The fucking dreams were getting real old real fast, and he wished he knew how to purge them. He'd never experienced anything like this before, which meant it was probably Sentinel-related. But it wasn't like he could ask the expert because there was no way he was talking about how it felt to lose Sandburg, not even in a dream. And especially not to Sandburg himself, who might misconstrue that hypothetical level of dependency.

The bed was definitely too soft. Jim tossed and turned until he found a comfortable position, and tried to get back to sleep without needing to tune into his Guide's heartbeat like some kid with a security blanket. He cursed himself when he couldn't do it.

Jim and Sandburg shared a quiet breakfast in the morning, and then they went for a hike along one of the trails that skirted the edge of the property. It was maintained by the Parks Department, so there was plenty of signage and the trail itself was clear of major obstacles like fallen branches or washouts.

It was nice, being out under the trees and breathing in all that piney air, but Jim wasn't feeling quite right. It was like he was living two different lives, one where Sandburg kept from getting blown up in that elevator and one where he didn't. He knew the second scenario wasn't real, but he couldn't shake the most recent dream no matter how hard he tried.

"I never get tired of this, man." Sandburg gestured expansively. "Nature in all her glory. It doesn't matter what's happening in Cascade, the forest just keeps doing its own thing. You know what I mean? It was here long before I was born and it'll still be here long after I'm gone."

Jim made a noncommittal noise, to show he was listening even if he had nothing to contribute.

"There's something comforting about that, I guess. The circle of life and all that."

"Can we please talk about something else?" Jim snapped. Sandburg was being morbid, talking about dying so soon after he nearly had. The kid processed things differently than most people, Jim knew that, but it wasn't like he needed to be reminded how close he'd come to losing his best friend.

"Are you okay? You've been acting weird all morning."

"I'm fine." Jim lengthened his stride, forcing the kid to walk faster to keep up.

Sandburg snorted. "Well, that's a lie. If something's bothering you —"

"Nothing's bothering me, I'm just not sleeping very well." And shit, he hadn't meant to let that slip.

"Hey." Sandburg put a hand on Jim's arm, stopping him in a patch of sunshine filtering down on the trail. "What's going on? If it's a Sentinel thing maybe I can help."

The kid looked so earnest that Jim was tempted to spill his guts about the dream, but he reminded himself that they were supposed to be taking a vacation, a real break from everything. It wouldn't be fair to dump a death dream on Sandburg, who would likely go into research mode. There was also the diss to consider. Jim didn't relish adding another new chapter to it, not when there was already too much of himself on those pages.

"Bed's too soft," he said. Which was a partial truth at best, and he could see that Sandburg wasn't buying it. "It's nothing I can't handle, okay?"

Sandburg's face was too expressive, too easy to read. He looked disappointed and somehow resigned, and when he dropped his hand from Jim's arm there was a numbness that reminded Jim painfully of his dream.

"You know what? I'm gonna head back. Matt invited me for lunch and there are some things I need to do before I go."

"Chief..." Jim didn't know what to say and Sandburg clearly didn't want to hear it because he just waved Jim off with one hand while he walked away. "Dammit!"

He kicked at a hapless pinecone and sent it spinning off the trail. He wished he knew what to do, or what he was supposed to say to keep from screwing things up, but clearly he didn't. Maybe the whole trip had been a bad idea.

Jim resolutely kept moving up the path. Just because Sandburg wasn't with him didn't mean he couldn't enjoy himself. And at least he didn't have to submit to another sensory test. Sometimes he wished that Sandburg could see him as a man, and not just as a Sentinel.

Jim ate his lunch alone on the deck, looking out over the lake and feeling lonelier than he'd ever admit to anyone. Truth was he liked having Sandburg around, as much as he sometimes griped about the incessant chatter. Which is why he stretched out hearing to check in with Sandburg and the ghost hunter, even though he knew it was wrong.

"...dances. It's a pretty common type of story." A masculine voice with a decidedly twangy accent.

"Wish fulfillment for grieving families," Sandburg said. "That's what a lot of those stories are, a way for their children to live on, to have their deaths mean something. It's something I've come across regularly, particularly in sheltered tribes and communities."

"Your work must be fascinating."

"It can be. There are so many common threads even between completely disparate social groups. It's easy to believe that at one point we were all one tribe."

"Maybe I should write my next book about you. I bet you could make anthropology exciting."

Sandburg laughed. *"Not as exciting as chasing down ghost stories. Do you spend a lot of time away from home?"*

"It depends. Some of these stories I can chase from the comfort of my computer chair, but it can help to visit the sites and soak in the ambiance."

"I imagine there are plenty of hauntings you can investigate at home. Lots of history there." A pause and the sound of someone drinking. "It's a place I've always wanted to go."

"You'd love it! Any time you want to come visit, I'd be happy to show you around."

"That would be great, man!"

Jim stopped listening, face set into a scowl. Sandburg sounded awfully chummy with their neighbor, and he didn't like it. He couldn't help feeling guilty, though. Not just for listening in like some kind of jealous boyfriend, but for keeping Sandburg from going all the places he wanted to go. The kid had turned down Borneo for him, and who knows how many other academic opportunities.

Jim was being selfish, and he knew it. If Sandburg was interested in Matt – and that had certainly been the vibe yesterday – maybe he should encourage it.

With a sigh, Jim took the remains of his lunch and scraped it into the trash. He wasn't hungry anymore.

"I think we should talk," Sandburg said.

Jim managed not to cringe at the words but it was a close thing. They were sitting out on the dock in lawn chairs watching the sun go down, after an evening of strained silences. The water lapped against the wooden pilings, the canoe that was tied up there thumping against the side every few seconds.

"I guess we should," Jim agreed. He resolutely kept his gaze forward so he wouldn't see Sandburg's face bathed in the warm glow of sunset.

"Look, I'm sorry for losing my patience earlier. I was frustrated." Sandburg shifted a little, chair squeaking under him as he did so. "I think...no, I know. It's time to get my own place."

Jim's hands clenched into fists and he hid them by crossing his arms over his chest. There was no reason he should feel so panicky. Hadn't he been thinking earlier that Sandburg needed something different in his life? But this wasn't supposition. Jim could hear the resolution in the kid's voice.

"Yeah. I, uh. I guess your room is kinda small."

"I want you to know that I appreciate everything you've done for me. You saved my life, Jim. In more ways than one."

He didn't want to be having this conversation; he knew where it was leading. No Sandburg at the loft would become no Sandburg at the PD. Eventually the kid would be out of his life for good.

"If that's what you want." Jim swallowed the pleas that were on the tip of his tongue, and reminded himself that he needed to do what was right for Sandburg.

"It's what I need," Sandburg replied. That sadness was back, and thicker than ever. Jim could hear it in his words, practically smell it on his skin. "You'll be okay. Right?"

"Sure." Jim took a deep breath and looked over at his friend. "Be nice to have the hot water all to myself again."

The joke fell flat. Sandburg looked disappointed, Jim could see it in his eyes. The kid nodded.

"All right. I'm gonna head in." He folded up his chair and walked off with it. Jim watched him go, saw the slumped shoulders and bowed head and wondered what Sandburg had expected him to say.

The grave was marked with freshly turned earth and a small placard – Blair Jacob Sandburg. There would be a headstone eventually, his life reduced to a birth date, a death date, and 'Beloved Son and Friend'. Nothing about his bravery, his keen mind, his beautiful smile, his big heart.

Jim stood there, still wearing his funeral suit, unable to make himself turn away. There was so much he'd never said, a painful ball of regret that had lodged in his throat and was slowly choking him.

You were my best friend, he wanted to say. You were everything to me. But the words wouldn't come now, just as they never came before. Blair had saved his life, saved him from himself, so many times, and had he ever properly said thank you? Had he ever told him how much he appreciated having him around?

A firm hand gripped Jim's shoulder. Before Rachins, before the elevator, Jim would've heard him coming. Smelled the cigars in his coat pocket. Without Blair he was just a man, the heightened senses had faded away. Without Blair he would never be extraordinary again.

"We should go," Simon said.

"I never told him, Simon."

"He was a smart kid. He knew. You have to believe he knew."

But Jim didn't believe. Blair had died not knowing everything that mattered, because Jim had always been too afraid to say it. I loved you.

"He's a great guy."

Jim looked up, startled. The voice belonged to Matt, but the body looked suspiciously like that of the Marlboro Man. He was standing on the opposite end of the grave, by the placard. "You shouldn't be here."

"Neither should you. Don't let him go."

"It's too late," Jim said. He looked back at the dirt that covered the coffin and the tattered remains of Blair's body. "I waited too long."

"Jim," Simon implored. "Let's go."

"I can't," Jim choked out. He dropped to his knees, not caring that he was getting grave dirt on his suit. There was silence where Blair's heartbeat should be, a numbness that spread through Jim's chest and threatened to stop his own heart as well. Tears burned at his eyes and he swallowed them, ate his own sorrow, wondered how the hell he was supposed to go on all alone.

Jim struggled awake, his face wet and his breath hitching. The feeling of loss from the dream moved through him like an echo and he frantically opened up hearing; he needed the reassurance of Sandburg's heartbeat. When he found it, it wasn't where he was expecting it to be.

He didn't have to think twice before sliding out of bed and padding down the stairs. He found Sandburg sitting on the couch that faced the wide expanse of lakeside windows, legs drawn up and his chin resting on his knees. The moon was high, casting a silver glow on everything it touched. The kid looked ethereal, untouchable, and the truth of it hit Jim like a physical blow.

"Everything okay, big guy?"

"No. I don't want you to go." The words came out in a rush. Jim dropped down on the opposite end of the couch, fingers drumming nervously on his bare knees. He wished he'd thought to put on a robe.

"Face the facts, man. You don't need me anymore. You haven't for a while." Sandburg ran a hand through his hair, tugging at a knot in the curls. "Not since that business with the Golden, not since the fires. You handled all that really well, and I don't want you to think I'm not glad for that. It's what you wanted. Control."

Jim could hear the resignation in Sandburg's voice, and it cut at him. "I only have control because of you."

"There's nothing in the research to suggest that the Sentinel-Guide relationship —"

"I don't care about the research!" Jim snapped. Sandburg was going to slip away, detach with love, and it would be wrong. So very wrong.

"Do you know the story of Mystic Lake, Jim?" The change in topic left Jim struggling to change gears.

"What?"

"Matt told me about it today. It's about two doomed lovers from disparate Native tribes. They fell in love but their families forbade them from being together."

"Sounds a lot like Romeo and Juliet, Chief," Jim pointed out.

"Some stories are universal, man. Anyway, these two kids decided to run away together. They lived on opposite sides of the lake and planned to meet in the middle, where one of them would have a canoe waiting. Only a storm blew up, and the lake grew choppy."

Jim didn't care for this story. He knew where it was going, but wasn't sure he wanted to know how it tied into his and Sandburg's current situation.

"They drowned trying to get to each other. Their families found their bodies the next day, washed up on shore, and immediately regretted having driven their children to their deaths. They built a pyre and set the bodies ablaze, so that their souls might be joined in the afterlife." Sandburg hugged his legs tighter. "A myth grew out of that. That when two soulmates are present at the lakeshore, the mists on the water will dance in celebration. The mists representing the souls of the young lovers."

"Sad story," Jim remarked, not knowing what else to say.

"Those families were filled with regret, Jim. They had the chance to do the right thing when their kids were still alive and they didn't. I don't want that to be me. I'm tired of living with regrets and what-ifs. I can't do it anymore."

Jim remembered all too well how regret felt, how it had choked him in his dream. Maybe he didn't deserve Sandburg, maybe the kid would leave no matter what he did, but Jim wouldn't let him go without having all the facts first. He owed him that much.

"I keep having this dream. You don't make it out of the elevator. You and the others...die in there."

Sandburg reached out and put his hand over Jim's, squeezing, but he didn't say anything.

"In the dream I'm full of regret, for all the things I didn't say. You're gone and it's too late and you'll never know." Those emotions were still too close to the surface, and Jim could feel his throat constricting as he tried to swallow them all down.

"So tell me now," the kid said softly. "I bet the dreams will stop if you do."

Jim stared at their joined hands, then forced himself to look up. If he was going to do this, he'd face it head-on. There was nothing but warmth and acceptance shining out at him from Sandburg's face, and it gave him the courage to say what he had to say.

"You're my best friend, Blair. All this control I have? You made it possible. You anchor me, and I know I don't have to worry because you have my back. That's how I made it through that fire. Knowing you were on the other side."

Sandburg's eyes gleamed in the moonlight. He didn't say anything, just clutched at Jim's hand more tightly.

"I want you to be happy. If that means leaving, I'll deal with it. If you want to be with Matt –"

"Wait. Matt? What does Matt have to do with any of this?"

Jim shrugged like it was no big deal. "I can tell you're attracted to him. Truth is, there's a part of me that wishes...well, that's probably just the Sentinel anyway."

"Jim? Part of you that wishes what?" Sandburg had an urgency in his voice that Jim didn't quite understand.

"Look, Chief. I'm all about baring our souls and everything, but can you spare me at least some humiliation?"

Sandburg bit his bottom lip, and then nodded. "Open up your senses, big guy. Tell me what I'm feeling right now."

"Sandburg –"

"Please."

Jim sighed, but he couldn't say no. He opened up hearing first, zeroing in on the sound of Sandburg's heartbeat. "Steady beat. Maybe a little fast. Your lungs are nice and healthy."

"What else?"

"You smell like the wind on the lake, and a little musky. Sad. I can smell the tears in your eyes." Jim unclasped their hands and used his to feel up the length of Sandburg's arm. "I can feel all the hair, surprisingly soft, and tiny blemishes in your skin."

"What do you see?" Sandburg prompted a bit breathlessly.

"Your face is flushed. If I wanted I could see each individual eyelash. And your eyes..." Here Jim faltered. There was a look in Sandburg's eyes he'd seen before. With Maya. But he couldn't possibly be looking at Jim that way. Could he?

Sandburg licked his lips. "When we talked about pheromones, I was sure you'd figure it out. How could you not? But you're blocking it somehow. Blocking me. And I don't know why."

Pheromones? He'd checked Sandburg, after that whole embarrassing ordeal. Tried to read him. But he hadn't been able to. Or maybe he'd been too afraid of what he'd find.

"One more, Jim."

Taste. Jim looked at Sandburg's lips, but he was still so unsure. Instead he reached for the kid's hand and turned it gently so it was palm up. With his heart hammering in his chest, Jim pressed his lips the center of Sandburg's palm, tongue darting out just enough to get a little sample of the taste of his skin.

All at once he was overcome, a completely different picture of Sandburg forming with his senses. Racing heartbeat, blown pupils, and the overwhelming pheromones that spoke of want and desire. How had he not seen it till now? How had he been so blind?

Jim brought Sandburg's hand up to his face and held it there while he leaned in and captured those full lips in a kiss. Dear God, he had almost let this slip away! Sandburg licked his way into Jim's mouth, all while making little needy noises in the back of his throat. It was the hottest thing Jim had ever heard.

"Whoa," Sandburg said, pulling back a little and panting.

"I don't want you to move out," Jim said, more confident now. "If you want to travel, we'll do that. We'll do anything you want. But I don't want to lose you."

"I don't want to be lost." Sandburg straddled Jim, hands running over his bare chest while he kissed and sucked and nibbled at Jim's neck and ears and mouth.

Jim left his senses wide open, knowing he was in safe hands. He wanted to feel everything, take in all that Sandburg had to give him and give it back in return. He sent up silent thanks that he'd been given the chance.

Unseen by either of them, under the cool light of the full moon, the mist on the lake began to swirl.