

The OUTNUMB3RED series

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Note: This is a Work in Progress

Review the story so far ... ([or scroll down for Part 1](#))

Cast of Original Characters and History of Events preceding this story:

The Outnumb3red/Rest Stop series of fics include those listed below. Freya has made an effort to include clues in each of the latter stories to help readers understand key events relating to preceding stories. The intent is to avoid forcing readers to read every story, or to minimize the need to read the stories in order.

- **"Flies in an Emerald Web" (The Sentinel)** Blair's student, Jake Connelly has family issues that he needs Blair to help resolve. Since those issues turn out to involve smuggled emeralds with terrorist ties, helping Jake could be a deadly mistake. Timeframe = ca. 1999, i.e. sometime *before* TSbBS.
 - **"Synth Sense" (The Sentinel)**, aka the original "Rest Stop" fic (inspired by the Matchbox 20 song). Abandoned at an obsolete freeway rest stop on the road to nowhere, Blair unwittingly begins a journey no Guide was ever meant to take. Can he guide himself past the sensory spikes caused by an untested drug? Timeframe = immediately following TSbBS.
 - **"Outnumb3red" (The Sentinel & NUMB3RS crossover)**. After six months working undercover, Jim is left for dead and Blair is expected to Guide a small army of sentinels. Now LA has become their training ground. Timeframe = 2007.
- ⇒ **Current Story = "Outnumb3red 2: The Missing Link" (The Sentinel & NUMB3RS crossover)**. You may have first seen this one under one of the initial working titles, i.e. "Rest Stop Revisited" or "Alpha 9." Timeframe = 2 months after Outnumb3red.
Summary: Two months after Shofield's army of sentinels is thwarted by Don Eppes's team in LA -- with the help of our gang from Cascade, of course -- Project Sentinel is getting fully underway. Unfortunately, Blair has some serious issues with the FBI's choice of project coordinators; and two old nemeses, the Dupris' seem to have resurfaced. Have they succeeded in synthesizing sentinels? In this first installment of a multi-part story, a potential link to the Dupris' vanishes --and so does Charlie Eppes.

The **Dupris'**: **Scott** = the younger (a sentinel) & **Jonathon** = the elder. Jonathon was CEO of GXI Biotech in Boston. Quoted from "Synth Sense": "GXI was testing drugs that heightened the animals' senses so much they literally couldn't stand it. FDA shut them down over the sharp objections of one of the lead doctors in the study, a Dr. McGuire. He said their aim was to help

people who've lost certain senses due to illness or injury, and that autistic children who are extra-sensitive to touch could also benefit through some sort of reversal."

George "Bud" McGuire = a fisherman from the northeast. He's also a sentinel; his abilities came online while alone at sea

Dr. Jeffrey McGuire = Bud's son; a chemist formerly employed by GXI Biotech. He initiated research based on his father's capabilities. His belief was that if he could trigger enhanced senses in non-sentinels, it might provide medical benefits such as to people who have lost certain senses due to injury or disease. He might also find ways to dial down extreme sensitivities. Although angry by the FDA's restrictions, he still had to be forced by the Dupris' to continue his research. The key to forcing his hand was his mother, who the Dupris' held captive.

Special Agent Lucille Andrews, in "Synth Sense", assumed the identity of **Julie Stalwart** and sought Blair out after the TSbBS scandal. As Julie, she convinced Blair to leave Cascade with her. She took him to a dying town called Weavers Creek in Colorado, where the Dupris had set up a lab in a defunct paper mill to continue their research in secrecy. Getting Blair involved was Andrews' key to infiltrating the lab, in order to gather sufficient evidence to shut it down and arrest the Dupris'. Although she eventually had a change of heart about involving him, it came too late. Blair and Jim both hold her directly responsible for extremes of torture he endured while in the Dupris' hands, and the months of grueling recovery that followed.

Special Agent John Marconin was originally introduced in the fic "Flies in an Emerald Web." Although the actual events of that fic hold no keys to "Synth Sense" or to this story, Marconin's character has a key role in all the stories. Originally distrustful of Blair, Marconin came to admire him at the conclusion of "Emerald Web." He was integral in helping Simon Banks figure out why Blair Sandburg's identity seemed to be in the process of being "erased" in "Synth Sense". His description from "Emerald Web": "The stranger's dark hair was flecked with gray and his expression was one that reminded Blair of a politician on the losing side in the polls. He looked stiff and official."

Colorado State Trooper Brian Gibson. Gibson, suspicious of activities occurring at the paper mill, was integral in helping Jim and Rafe rescue Blair. His original description in "Synth Sense": "Although Trooper Gibson was not in uniform, clad instead in faded jeans and a green flannel shirt, his police training was evident. Rafe could not help but notice the man's tense posture, so similar to Jim's. The off-duty trooper did seem to relax after seeing the detectives' badges and photo ID's, yet he clearly remained alert as he invited the men into his home."

Mick Shofield was introduced in "Outnumb3red". His initial description: "Blair looked at the other man, stunned yet again by his duplicitous behavior. At one moment the white-haired, former Marine was a cruel and ambitious leader, and then he would become the kind, grandfatherly soul Blair saw now." Shofield was intent on creating "an elite fighting force made up entirely of sentinels, each one carefully and expertly recruited." Blair and Jim had allowed themselves to be recruited in an undercover assignment for the FBI. After Jim was forced out and Blair was forced to continue working as a guide to all of Shofield's sentinels, the gang from

Numb3rs helped to rescue Blair and bring down the entire army. Even Shofield himself was killed.

Alpha 9 is the only name by which anyone knows the last survivor of Shofield's army. This is a sentinel who is on the run; his animal spirit is an anaconda. His first introduction: "... the black mountain moving toward [Blair] took hold of his upper arm. *Alpha 9*, Blair realized. This mountain was the largest, deadliest of all Shofield's sentinels. Could it really be possible he was there to help Blair?" Clues to his character are noted at the conclusion of *Outnumb3red*: "Alpha 9," Blair said. "He influenced all of them. I've been thinking all this time that he was just riding the tide, seeing where it would take him. But he created that tide, man. He was the cause behind the mass psychosis, the action behind the reaction. ... He just planted a seed and then waited to see what would grow from it. It's all a matter of psychology. I'm sure your agent Reeves would explain it much better, but think of it like this. He gave them a mental push to see how they would react."

Jake Connelly was a student of Blair's who was introduced in "Flies in an Emerald Web." He was somewhat unstable, having grown up in a household in which both of his parents were involved in espionage. His first introduction in that fic was as follows: "A tall, bony, redhead with a seemingly permanent slouch, Jake Connelly never appeared to be particularly eager to leave Blair's classroom. It was always as though he had something important on his mind, something he needed to discuss with Blair that would require a certain degree of privacy, hence the need to wait for his classmates to leave the room. Yet whatever those vital words were, they never materialized. Blair could almost imagine them hovering on the edge of Jake's tongue, frequently close to escaping past his soundlessly moving lips, but inevitably giving way to a timidly uttered, "Have a nice weekend, Mr. Sandburg," or something equally inane." By the conclusion of that fic, Jake had grown: "He pulled off his mask to reveal a tangle of red hair and a youthful face spotted with freckles and bruises. He was battered but energized. The shy kid Blair had spoken of must have tapped in to the competent man within."

Aunt Sue was the name of a woman from Jake Connelly's childhood, a woman who disappeared from his life when he was too young to grasp exactly what her relationship was with his family, or even who she was, specifically. His memories of her as described in "Flies in an Emerald Web" were based on thoughts of love and hot chocolate pudding.

Project Sentinel was the label put onto the FBI's research inspired by the events of *Outnumb3red* and the army Mick Shofield had been intent on creating. The teams from *Numb3rs* and the Sentinel will both need to work on the project as needed. The term "Project Sentinel" was introduced at the conclusion of "Outnumb3red," with Blair talking to Charlie Eppes: "'Shouldn't your brother be done with his meeting about now? How about we get Jim and meet Don for dinner? I'm dying to find out how Cascade's FBI branch reacted to the whole idea of Project Sentinel."

Outnumb3red 2: The Missing Link

Sentinel A/U: Only because it's a Future Story, set in current day (2007)

Crossover: Sentinel & Numb3ers

Drama, Angst, H/C, the occasional Smarm (i.e. all the usual suspects <g>)

Summary: Two months after Shofield's army of sentinels is thwarted by Don Eppes's team in LA -- with the help of our gang from Cascade, of course -- Project Sentinel is getting fully underway. Unfortunately, Blair has some serious issues with the FBI's choice of project coordinators; and the Dupris' seem to have resurfaced in their efforts at synthesizing a sentinel's senses. **In this first installment of a multi-part story, a potential link to the Dupris' disappears--and so does Charlie Eppes.**

Outnumb3red 2: The Missing Link

1

Dark settled in around him, enveloped him. It was a blackness more complete than any he had ever experienced, a shadow in space, as absolute as that which claimed dead planets. Like a black hole, it had already swallowed every trace of light, even the faintest glimmer.

It was a blackness not even a sentinel's eyes could penetrate.

And yet the *sounds* They surrounded him, growing sweeter, richer than ever before. He could hear the call of jungle birds, the shriek of an eagle, the gentle trill of a songbird. There was the *clink* of glasses. And there, the persistent *whoosh* of a waterfall.

The giggle of a child wrapped around his ears like a caress. He could feel himself smiling. It might even have been enough to compensate for the darkness, if not for the sudden pounding of a thousand hearts ... a million ... ten million more.

And then a single breath....

*I could swear I heard the universe breathing,*¹ he had told his friend, his partner, all those years ago, right after his world had collapsed ... right before they rebuilt that world together.

He had an instant of supreme wonder, of surreal bliss. But it had been an instant only, and was quickly followed by agony. He felt as though his skin had been ripped open to expose every nerve ending. Every molecule, every cell was on fire. He tried to scream, but his tongue had grown thick from a fire of its own as his taste buds rallied against the stench of rot and decay that assaulted his nose.

His human body simply could not support so much sensory input. Part of him wanted to fall into the blackness, to let the void take him and end the torture. Instead, he fought against its

¹ Quoted from "Synth Sense" (aka the Rest Stop fic), by Freya-Kendra

pull, and reached for the light. He knew it was there, just out of reach. And that light had a name.

"Jim!"

Blair woke before the last echoes of the word had died away. His throat was raw from all the screams sleep had not allowed him to release and the one he had finally produced. His lungs struggled for air. When he knew he was home, he was safe and his senses were no more or less than they were ever meant to be, he kicked himself free from the tangle of wet sheets and headed downstairs to the kitchen, to splash his face with cold water. Then he froze, towel in hand, and stared up towards his bedroom, the mirrored reflection of Jim's.

For the first time in the three years since he had moved to the loft next door, Blair longed for his old roommate. And yet, even as that thought crossed his mind, another, darker one pushed it away. He did not want things to be the way they had been. He could not bear to go back, to remember the torment the Dupris' and Dr. McGuire had put him through². They had tried to turn a guide into a sentinel. Using chemicals injected into his bloodstream, they had thought they could actually synthesize a sentinel's senses. In the process, they had forced him to endure levels of pain no mere human could tolerate.

But that had been seven years ago. After seven years of rebuilding, he had managed to create a life more complete than he had ever dared dream he might achieve. Blair Sandburg had not only earned his doctorate and the respect of the academic community, he had also earned a permanent place at Cascade's Major Crimes Division. True, it was in a consulting capacity that did not have him glued to Jim's side on a daily basis, but that was okay. He was there regularly - frequently, in fact and certainly whenever Jim needed him. Otherwise, he was at the university, where he had gained a full professorship -- although for the past eight months he'd been on an extended sabbatical, one that began when he went undercover with Jim to gather evidence and bring down Mick Shofield, a dangerous man with very dangerous ideas about sentinels³.

After seven years, both the repercussions of Blair's confession to fraud and the lingering effects of Dr. McGuire's drugs had vanished. Nothing remained to remind Blair of his ordeal in those already trying days following the unauthorized release of his old dissertation. So why the nightmare? Why tonight?

Turning back to the sink, Blair grabbed a glass from the draining rack and filled it with cold tap water. He downed it in a single swallow and was filling it again when a noise at his door caused him to jump. The glass slipped from his hand. A tiny, jagged shard bounced upwards, slicing into the thin skin at the corner of his right eye.

"Dammit!"

"Sandburg?" Jim called from the doorway. "What's wrong?"

Both grateful for the intrusion and frustrated by his own carelessness, Blair found himself unable to respond. He shook his head and stared at the water trickling from the faucet to the drain. When he felt something warm slide along his cheek, he raised a shaking hand to wipe it

² See "Synth Sense" (aka the Rest Stop fic), by Freya-Kendra

³ See "Outnumb3red" by Freya-Kendra.

away, and then rinsed the fresh blood from his fingers. There was something mesmerizing about the sight of the red liquid spiraling around with the water at the bottom of the sink.

"Chief?"

Jim's hand landed on his shoulder. Blair jumped again.

"What happened?" His friend asked softly.

While he waited for an answer, Jim grabbed the towel from Blair's hand, ran it under the stream of water and then gently pressed it against Blair's temple. "It doesn't look bad," he said after a quick inspection.

Then, "What happened?" He asked again.

"I dropped a glass," Blair answered finally.

"I got that part."

Flashing a tired smile, Blair took the towel from his friend and held it firmly against the cut. "It was nothing. I had a nightmare."

"I pretty much got that part, too."

Blair met his friend's gaze, and then sighed. "I am so sorry, Jim. And you've got that meeting tomorrow morn--" He looked at the clock on the oven. "*This* morning. Oh, man." He shook his head. "I hope I wasn't screaming loud enough to wake anyone else."

Jim shrugged. "It's almost dawn, anyway. You want to talk about it?"

"I don't even want to *think* about it."

"Maybe not; but you already are."

* * *

Although the companionship and a pot a coffee helped to distance Blair from the dream enough to enable him to discuss it with some degree of objectivity, he could not shake the sense that he was missing some significant, underlying meaning.

"You said yourself you've been revisiting a lot of memories lately," Jim offered. "Maybe that's all this is."

Blair took a deep breath and then another swallow of coffee. "I don't think so. The memories have all been focused on our first days together, and I can tell you exactly what got those started." Sitting back, he finally felt relaxed enough to smile. "Larry."

"Larry?"

"Larry, the Barbary ape. You remember, the one I was using as a subject to test his responses to TV violence?"

The way Jim clenched his jaw made it clear he did, in fact, remember. "The one that trashed the loft." It was not a question.

"That would be the one."

"And what got you thinking about the ape?"

Blair's smile became an almost guilty grin. He shrugged. "Charlie Eppes. When he and his brother were here a few weeks ago, he told me about his friend, Larry⁴. And that just...." He shrugged again.

"Larry the physicist?"

"It's got nothing to do with what he does or who he is. It's just a matter of word association. Hearing about Larry the physicist got me thinking about Larry the Barbary ape; and that got me thinking about how that whole time frame set us on the course to where we are today. I mean, if it wasn't for the bind I was in with Larry after the explosion at my place, you might never have taken me in; and we have no idea what that might have done to our friendship, let alone our partnership."

"That's a pretty big leap," Jim said. "Even for you."

"What leap?"

"You're basing our entire friendship on an ape?"

"No, Jim. Not at all. All I'm saying is we have no way of knowing what might have happened if you didn't let me stay at the loft. Sharing a living space was bound to either bring us closer, or make us want to kill each other. If we hadn't done that, if all we did was work together, who's to say we would have had the chance to build the foundation we did?"

Jim gazed at him for a long moment. "Who's to say we wouldn't have?"

Blair smiled again, this time in warm acceptance. "Fortunately, we'll never know."

It wasn't until later in the day, when Simon Banks called Blair and Jim to join him in Police Chief Warren's office that Blair discovered how intuitive his dream truly had been. Still, intuitive or not, it could never have prepared him to face the visitor already seated there.

* * *

2

Special Agent John Marconin was no stranger to Simon Banks' team in Major Crimes. In fact, he had grown to admire and respect their work since he'd first been introduced to them not quite a decade earlier. Over the years he had even joined them at an occasional ball game or summer picnic. But even if he didn't know them as well as he did, it would have been easy to guess how his message today would be received. He would have preferred to at least give Captain Banks a warning rather than dropping a bomb like this out of the blue.

"Chief Warren." He held out his hand to greet Simon's boss, and then introduced his companion. "This is Special Agent Lucille Andrews."

"Lucy," she said as she extended her own hand. "Please."

⁴ See "Outnumb3red" by Freya-Kendra.

Marconin watched the chief for the expected reaction when Andrews flashed him with that dangerous smile of hers. Fortunately, Warren did not bite.

"What's this about, Marconin?" The chief asked gruffly.

Andrews answered instead. "This involves Project Sentinel. I trust you're aware what that means?"

* * *

If the chief's reaction was gruff, Ellison's was flat out volatile.

"You've got a lot of damn nerve to bring her in here," he said to Marconin the minute he walked in. And then he stood in the doorway, holding his ground like a challenger. He was as rigid as a rock, his eyes a blizzard of arctic ice.

"Sit down, Detective," Chief Warren commanded. "You too, Professor. Simon, come on. Get in here, all of you and take a seat. That is not a request."

Ellison was slow to respond, and then equally slow to join them at the conference table. He never took his eyes off of Andrews as he moved to a chair at the far right side of the table, where he could also keep an eye on the door. Sandburg, moving into the room right behind him, was more hesitant than challenging, his gaze reflecting revulsion rather than hatred. Simon Banks was another story altogether. He burst in behind them both and shut the door with an emphatic *bang*.

"What the hell is going on, here?" He demanded.

Warren glared back at him. "That, *Captain*, is what you were asked in here to find out. Now if you would have a seat, we can get on with this."

"Please," Andrews held up her hand and glanced at the chief. "Gentlemen, if I may." It was a gesture only; she had no intention of giving anyone the chance to prevent her from continuing. "I fully understand your reactions, and I both appreciate and accept your feelings toward me given the circumstances of our introduction seven years ago--"

"Circumstances?" Jim Ellison sat on the edge of his chair, his hands firmly placed on the table before him, clearly ready to push himself to his feet at any moment. "You are directly responsible for subjecting Sandburg to weeks of torture that go way beyond inhumane, not to mention months of recovery."

"Jim," Sandburg said softly.

"Those are what you call *circumstances*?" Ellison continued, giving no indication he'd heard his friend, though certainly he must have. He was a sentinel, after all.

Andrews met Ellison's glare and did not flinch. "I deserve that. I was young, naive, and eager to make my mark as an agent. But I can assure you my work since has improved to a degree that--"

"Oh, your work has improved has it?"

"Jim," Sandburg tried again.

"I am *so* glad we were able to help you--" Jim went on.

"Ellison," Chief Warren interjected. "We are here to--"

"I don't care what you're here to do. Sandburg and I are--"

"Jim!" Blair Sandburg's shout was finally enough to silence his friend. "Just," he took a deep breath, "just relax, okay?" After casting a quick glance around the table, Sandburg locked his soft yet pained gaze on Agent Andrews. He rose to his feet. "I think maybe you and I should talk in private for a few minutes." Rather than wait for a response, he turned and walked from the room, his shoulders set with confident determination.

* * *

"I *am* sorry for what they put you through," Andrews said after joining him in the hallway. "I hope you realize I tried to protect you."

Blair chuckled softly and shook his head. "You're sorry for what *they* put me through?" His humorless smile vanished in an instant. "What about what *you* put me through? You conned me. You played me. You made me believe you honestly understood what I was going through, that you honestly cared. I had just lost everything I'd ever worked for, not to mention every single ounce of self-respect after making the entire world believe I was a fraud. And then there you were, telling me how important truth was. *Truth.*" He chuckled again. "I mean, can you believe the irony in that?"

"For what it's worth, it wasn't *all* a lie." Her gaze was intimate, hopeful.

"No," he said, averting his eyes. "I will not let you go there. I fell for Julie Stalwart, not Lucille Andrews. Lucille Andrews is an actress -- a damned good ... *actress*. Don't even for one minute think I'll ever trust anything you say, ever again."

Her gaze went cold. "I am an agent, trained to work undercover--"

"Yeah, and I was nothing more than a mark."

"I had to expose the Dupris'," she shot back at him. "But," she sighed, "I did realize I was wrong to bring you into the whole thing blindly like that. I'm just sorry I waited until we were almost to Weaver's Creek before I decided I couldn't go through with it. By then it was just too late, and I--"

"Stop it. Just ... stop. I'm not talking about the Dupris' or Weaver's Creek. I'm over that, okay. I'm over all of it." He closed his eyes for a second, trying hard to fight off another replay of the nightmare. "That wasn't the worse thing you did, not even close."

Her brows drew downward in confusion. She shook her head. "I don't know what you're--"

"No, of course you don't. You wouldn't. You couldn't possibly know, because it's about friendship, it's about trust, and you just don't have it in you to understand any of that."

"I don't follow you."

"I know. Look, when you first came to me, I was depressed, dejected ... I was at a crossroads in my life, and not sure where I should turn. Then you jumped in and pulled me away from the one person in this world who could have helped me through it."

"I still don't--"

"You made me turn my back on Jim." His words were cold, dark, and equally accusatory and confessional.

She met his gaze for a long while, and then smiled. "You're still friends. You're still partners. In fact, I'd even go so far as to say your experiences helped you in the long run. Without them, the government may never have gotten involved to help clear your name in both the academic world and with the Cascade PD."

"I feel sorry for you," Blair realized then. "You really have no idea what it means to have that kind of a friend, that kind of a partner. You have no clue how important it is to have someone you can rely on no matter what, someone you can trust explicitly."

"Blind trust can get you killed."

He shook his head slowly. "Blindly trusting someone who truly deserves that trust ..., *that*, Agent Andrews, can save your life."

She sighed, and for once Blair believed she was not acting. No self respecting adult would aim to appear like a teenage brat forced to endure the stupidity of her parents.

"Blair ... Professor Sandburg," she corrected. "Philosophy really isn't my thing. Whatever happened, however I hurt you, I *know* I was wrong, and I apologize, but we *do* need to get past this."

"Why? Why is it so important all of a sudden to 'get past this'?"

"Because we'll be working together on Project Sentinel."

"No. No way."

"I'm afraid it's true. I've been on the project since its inception two months ago. After all, I have the highest degree of experience with sentinels of anyone else at the bureau, and I've spent the past seven years tracking down Jonathon Dupris, a real, living, breathing sentinel who never had to use the drugs he helped to create -- not to mention a dangerous fugitive who could be selling those drugs to terrorists even as we speak."

"No. Do - not - play - me." He pointed a finger at her, emphatically punching at the air with each word. "I cannot work with anyone I can't trust; and god knows I will never be able to trust you."

"Like it or not, Mr. Sandburg, we are both part of the project. Working together, we might be able to find and capture fugitives like Dupris and Alpha 9, as well as to locate and properly guide fledgling sentinels so they can work with us, for the greater good if you will, rather than against us."

"Since when do you care about the greater good? No. You ... you do what you have to, wherever you have to, and I'll do what I can, right here. But we can never work together."

"If we can't be a proper team, this project may never reap the benefits you, yourself have envisioned."

"How do you know what I've envisioned? How can you have any idea what--"

"I know you, Professor Sandburg. You're almost as much a philosopher as an anthropologist. You are always considering the greater good. And you know how important this project could be."

"Enough! Okay? That's enough. Just stop. You see! I can't trust you. You are still playing me." Frustrated, he paced a few steps down the hall and then back again. "Look, you go

back in there," he pointed to the conference room. "You explain your part in the project to Jim and Simon, and if they buy into it, then I'll buy into it. Because I *trust* them. But I've had enough of you for today. Frankly, I don't know that I could stomach anymore." With that, he swiveled around and marched down the hallway toward the elevator.

"How do you expect me to get them to listen," she called after him, "if you don't come back in with me?"

"I thought you were an expert in sentinels," he answered without turning. "Jim heard everything we just said. He'll listen."

* * *

3

Blair would eventually be able to say with complete confidence why he ended up at the waterfront. But he had not consciously decided to go there. He just got into his car and started driving. Before he realized what he was doing, he found himself on a park bench, staring out at the rolling waves and reliving things he would much rather leave buried in some dark place deep within his subconscious.

Seven years ago, while he was recovering from the spiking senses the Dupris' drugs had caused, Blair could not handle spending any time at all at a place like that. The squawk and squeal of seagulls would have seemed to pierce his eardrums. The smell of fish would have emptied his stomach. The sun's reflection on the waves would have awakened a migraine so fierce he would need days to recover. But that was all past. It was ancient history ... water under the bridge. There was nothing he could do about it, nothing he *needed* to do about it. But Julie ... *Lucille* ... her arrival in Cascade was gnawing at him like scar tissue reviving an old wound.

He could not believe Julie Stalwart, aka Lucille Andrews was in Cascade to work on Project Sentinel.

Two months ago -- heck, just yesterday, Blair looked upon Project Sentinel as more than a dream-come-true. The government had actually come to him rather than he to them. They had asked for his guidance in identifying people who might exhibit sentinel capabilities; his direction in contacting such individuals and encouraging them to develop their special skills; and his leadership in establishing a training program. Together, Jim and Blair would ensure awakening sentinels learned to respect the gifts they were born into, and to protect the needs of the tribe.

"That's great," Blair had said when Marconin first approached them with the concept. "But--"

"What about guides?" Jim had interjected, finishing Blair's question.

And so Project Sentinel came to include guides as well as sentinels. A list of potential candidates for guides was already under development. Finding sentinels, however, was a little more complicated. The FBI had yet to identify even one. Still, it had only been a couple of months. A project like this could take years to really get underway, and neither Jim nor Blair had found any reason to feel pessimistic -- until today.

Agent Andrews' appearance had definitely put a damper on Blair's enthusiasm. Logically, he understood her selection. She had experience working undercover with Jonathon Dupris, and had even managed to involve another, lone sentinel, Bud McGuire. She had worked with two sentinels compared with Blair's one -- but not as a guide. No. Lucille Andrews could never be a guide. Instead, she would have tried to manipulate both of them. Her only goal had been to gather enough evidence to land Dupris in jail. Bud had been nothing more than a tool, there to help her understand how sentinels worked. Fortunately for her, he'd had a stake in the whole affair; his wife had been a tool as well, held hostage by Dupris to ensure Bud's son, Jeffrey, completed his work on a series of drugs to synthesize a sentinel's capabilities.

Oh, what a tangled web we weave, Blair mused. And Agent Andrews was an excellent weaver. How could he ever trust her enough to work with her? A team required trust after all, didn't it? If Jim and Simon decided to accept her as part of the Project Sentinel team, then Blair would have to as well. But could he?

He was still pondering that question when Jim sat down on the bench beside him.

"How'd you know where to find me?" Blair asked, less curious than comforted by his friend's unexpected appearance.

"A hunch."

Jim's gaze focused outward, on the waves, but Blair knew his partner's other senses were directed at him. It was a reassuring thing to know.

"Back when you were finally feeling like yourself again," Jim went on, "after the spikes stopped, a case drew us out here. I lost you while I was going over the crime scene. When I caught back up with you, you were sitting right here, grinning like you'd just found religion." Jim turned his gaze toward Blair and smiled.

"In a way I had." Blair sighed, looking out at the waves. "I realized I could finally breathe again, you know? I mean, suddenly the whole place didn't smell like week-old sushi anymore. And the seagulls Man, suddenly they reminded me of summers at the beach again instead of some kind of killer feedback from an over-amped guitar."

A moment passed in silence until Jim said, "Andrews heard from Bud McGuire a week ago."

"Yeah?" The information intrigued Blair as his memories shifted to the strange, old hermit he'd encountered at the rest stop. Bud really had tried to help Blair, unlike Julie -- or Lucille. "How's he doing?"

"He's dead."

Blair shot a bewildered glance at his friend. "What? But you just said she heard from--"

"She did. He told her he knew about someone, a young merchant-marine working freighters in the Great Lakes. He said rumors were flying that this sailor could smell storms coming in long before the most experienced crew, and he could hear messages the radio only picked up as static."

"I'm sorry, Jim, but you still have me wondering how Bud managed to say all this if he's dead."

"Bud was fine a week ago. He told Andrews there were other rumors as well, rumors that suggested this sailor's capabilities were not natural."

"You and I both know sentinel capabilities are beyond natural. It wouldn't be strange for people to think they weren't natural at all. And besides, if we're talking about rumors--"

"Bud had reason to believe the sailor had contact with Dupris."

Blair could not speak, could barely even breathe. He glanced at Jim, then at the water and back at Jim. "You can't ... you don't"

"Bud died within twenty-four hours of making that call," Jim added. "An apparent heart attack. It happened while he was alone in his fishing trawler."

"You think Dupris killed him."

"Initial autopsy results showed traces of something in his bloodstream. More lab work is being done to compare the substance with what's known about Dupris' formula, but--"

"No, Jim." Blair shot back, appalled by the implications. "There's no way. He could never use that stuff on a real sentinel. I mean, come on. Your senses are already at their peak; could you imagine getting shot up with that stuff? You'd be--"

Jim caught his gaze and held it. "I would probably have a heart attack. A very massive, very sudden, very deadly heart attack."

"Oh, god." Blair began to feel nauseous enough to make him imagine he could still smell week-old sushi, and still taste rot ferried in on a misty breeze.

"Agent Andrews believes it's possible Dupris has somehow come into information about Project Sentinel. He's had seven years to recruit other researchers and continue development of the formula. It's possible he's perfected it. It's also possible he's going to try to infiltrate the program by feeding us synthesized sentinels instead of the real thing."

"And if something goes wrong," Blair swallowed, tasting bile. "He's got the perfect weapon to take out the real thing. But why? What would he have to gain from all this?"

"Money. There's a lot to be made through the sale of information to the intelligence community."

Closing his eyes, Blair tried to steel himself for the inevitable. "We have to stop him," he said then, his voice whisper soft.

* * *

4

Charlie Eppes and Amita Ramajuan had been working on and off with the FBI for the past couple of days in an attempt to determine the likely whereabouts of a Great Lakes merchant marine by the name of Christopher Jankowski. The man had walked away from his job when his ship hit port in Detroit a week and a half earlier, and then he disappeared. Although no

transactions had been recorded for credit or debit cards in his name, the FBI had already gathered credible evidence in the form of ATM security recordings to suggest he was stealing wallets and temporarily assuming the identities of his victims.

There was only one problem to tracking the man by following the trail left by these thefts. It was virtually impossible to filter through the thousands of illegal card transactions recorded at any particular time in order to find the handful that might point to Mr. Jankowski. Given that he could have taken a plane, train, bus or car to anywhere, traditional investigative work would simply not be enough if they truly wanted to find him quickly. There were far too many variables to consider. Fortunately, Charlie knew how to turn all those variables into numbers, and given the right algorithm, he was convinced he could reduce volumes of possibilities down to at least a manageable few. With Amita's help and an equally daunting amount of data showing Mr. Jankowski's historical travel and purchasing habits, Charlie was close to achieving his objective. In fact, maybe he already had.

Stepping back from the chalkboard in his garage, Charlie reassessed his work and then turned to review two other boards he had already filled. It made sense. The puzzle was coming together. Smiling, he was ready to call his brother when he realized it was nearly two in the morning. There was no point to waking Don. The call could wait.

* * *

It seemed as though Charlie had barely closed his eyes when something woke him. Had he heard a noise outside? Curious and unwilling to simply go back to sleep, he climbed out of bed and went downstairs to investigate.

The house was quiet except for the soft snoring coming from his father's room. Everything was as it should be in the great room and the dining room. But as he was entering the kitchen, Charlie heard a soft creaking sound coming from the garage. His first thought was that someone was moving one of the chalkboards. Maybe Don was out there.

Charlie opened the garage door. He turned on the light. And he froze.

The chalkboards had been erased. Each and every one of them was blank.

Who would do something like that? Certainly not Don. Don knew only too well what Charlie's work meant to him. But if not Don, then who? And more importantly, why?

This had to be a bad dream. It couldn't possibly be real.

But it was.

Panic began to build. It wasn't so much the loss of the data -- having gone through the variables once would make it a fairly simple exercise to repeat the calculations. He would not have to start from scratch. No, losing the data was the least of Charlie's immediate concerns. He was more worried by the fact that someone had invaded his space. What if it was someone who not only understood the importance of Charlie's work, but who also understood the importance of his current project? Not even Don was aware of the link between the merchant marine and Project Sentinel.

Charlie found himself panting, unable to catch his breath. He felt the need to get out of there, to run, to just get away. With that single goal in mind, he turned around.

He stopped breathing altogether when he found himself face-to-face -- or rather, face-to-neck with a very large, very dark, very dangerous looking black man. Even so, once that first moment of shock passed Charlie would probably have been far less frightened if the man had been a complete stranger. Unfortunately, Charlie knew him, had in fact been held at gunpoint by him in the back of an ambulance outside the FBI building just a couple of months earlier.

Standing before Charlie was the man known only as Alpha 9, the last surviving member of the self-appointed General Shofield's brotherhood, an army of sentinels that had been groomed to follow Shofield's commands to the point of terrorism.

No, Charlie thought. This could not possibly be happening. Besides, the merchant marine he had been tasked to help the FBI locate was linked to a man named Dupris, not to the brotherhood. There was no connection, none at all.

Still, connection or not, the man blocking his way was most certainly real, as Charlie discovered when his thick hand closed around Charlie's shoulder in a vice-like grip.

"Sorry, Professor," Alpha 9 said in a soft baritone. "I'm gonna need for you to come with me for a little while."

* * *

Don Eppes' only involvement in the case associated with the missing merchant marine was as a messenger. He had been asked -- or rather, told -- to recruit his brother and then supply Charlie's findings to an Agent Andrews in Boston. No one had bothered to give him the reason why. And from what Don had been able to ascertain, the case had nothing to do with Los Angeles. He had shoved the whole incident to some obscure section of his brain where he stored non-critical information, and had nearly forgotten about it altogether -- until he walked into his brother's garage and saw the blank chalkboards.

Don could not remember ever seeing a blank chalkboard, memo board or even a blank notebook in the general vicinity of his brother. And these weren't just blank. They were perfectly clean -- shining, in fact. The green surface of each board gleamed as though brand new. There wasn't a single splash of chalk anywhere to be found.

The sight left Don feeling cold.

He turned to his father, hoping he might know something Don didn't; but Alan Eppes was clearly as unnerved by the sight as Don was himself.

"This is not like your brother," Alan said, his eyes scanning the unnaturally clean room.

Don pulled out his cell phone and hit the redial for Amita. "Hey," he started the instant she picked up. "Did you hear anything from Charlie yet?"

"No. Don, I'm getting really worried. He's missed two classes already."

"We'll find him." But the promise left him feeling colder still.

"Something's wrong." Alan's statement as Don clicked off the phone mirrored the younger Eppes' own thoughts. "I told you. Didn't I tell you? Your brother might go off into his own world sometimes, but he's never been the type to just sneak out of the house in the middle of the night."

"Yeah, I know."

"And even if he did, he would not have left his wallet just sitting there on his dresser. And he definitely would not have done ... this." Alan glanced around at the clean chalkboards once more, and then shook his head.

"You're right, dad." Don started to punch a new number into his phone.

"Are you calling for a forensics team?"

"Hello," Don held up his hand to gesture for his father to wait as he introduced himself to whoever had picked up. "I need to speak with Special Agent Lucille Andrews," Don said then. "I don't care if she's out of the office; give me a number where I can reach her. What do you mean you can't? No, I cannot wait for you to relay a message. Okay, look, just patch me through to the Assistant Director."

It took several more inquiries before he got the answer he needed, only to learn it was nowhere near the answer he wanted. Agent Andrews was in Cascade, Washington. Whatever Charlie had been working on, it involved Project Sentinel. That fact alone was enough to send up a host of warning flares. If their last experience with rogue sentinels provided any indication to what they might be facing now, Charlie could be in serious trouble.

By the time Don broke off the connection with the FBI office in Boston, his uneasiness over his brother's disappearance had increased by degrees Charlie himself would never be able to quantify.

* * *

5

Charlie Eppes stared across the old, dry, rotted wooden table at his abductor, the man he only knew as Alpha 9.

"What does it mean?" The large man repeated. His dark eyes were unreadable, his expression blank. His voice was a soft rumble, the sound of a mountain in flux. "Where can I find Christopher Jankowski?"

"You can't." Charlie looked away, sweeping his gaze over the chalkboards that lay scattered about the ancient cabin. It was hard to focus. The prevailing odors of forest pine, lamp oil and mold disturbed him. He found himself wishing for the more familiar aroma of gasoline mingled with scented dryer sheets. For a moment he even tried to imagine the sensation of fresh chalk tickling his nasal passageways. He could almost feel it powdering into the ridges that formed his fingerprints. But the moment passed swiftly as he considered how sensory stimulation could be as dangerous as it could be comforting. What he had heard of the things Blair Sandburg had endured for the sake of synthesizing sentinel capabilities had left Charlie himself feeling numb.

"All these calculations," he said then, forcing his thoughts back to the moment at hand, "all they provide is a starting point. The FBI could take this data and feed it into their computers to reduce the variables associated with--"

"Not the FBI. Me. I need to find him. Tell me where."

"I can't," Charlie countered yet again. "I cannot tell you where to find him."

"You can guess."

"Guess? No." Smiling ironically, he shook his head. "I don't ... I can't guess."

"What does the data mean?"

Exasperated, Charlie sighed heavily. "You can ask that same question a hundred times and the answer will always be the same. This data itself can't tell us anything. All it can do is help us to eliminate variables."

"Then tell me what variables can be eliminated." Alpha 9's tone remained calm, patient. The mountain purred, content for the time being; but Charlie felt certain it could erupt without warning.

"It's not that simple. I--"

"Walk me through the calculations, board by board. Explain the variables you've addressed."

"What?"

"Think of this as your classroom, Professor Eppes. Think of me as your student."

"But--"

"One by one. Board by board. Teach me, Professor. Teach me this particular formula."

"We could find Jankowski a lot faster if you could just let me work with the FBI."

"What's your rush, Professor?" Finally the man showed the briefest instant of emotion. He smiled.

But Charlie did not see humor in that smile. The mountain was testing him, encouraging him to explore new vistas. Charlie loved to teach. He especially loved teaching students who wanted to learn; such moments defined some of the highest peaks of his life. But with this man, with this *student* Charlie could not imagine reaching any peaks at all. His real concern lie in considering the valleys they might find instead--or worse, the gorges.

"Right," Charlie said softly, accepting the challenge--keenly aware that he had no other option.

Home suddenly felt far more distant than the hundred-odd miles Alpha 9 had driven to reach this desolate mountain cabin.

* * *

"She's responsible." Blair glared at Agent Andrews, who was seated across from him at the conference table at the FBI's LA headquarters.

Megan Reeves followed his gaze then quickly returned her attention to him. "Professor Sandburg, I'm sure we can all appreciate your feelings given the nature of your previous experience with Agent Andrews."

Was that a look of disapproval Jim saw in her eyes? A brief revelation of Reeves' own negative feelings for Project Sentinel's lead agent?

"But there is simply no evidence to substantiate your accusations," Agent Reeves continued. "And frankly, Agent Andrews has as much at stake here as any of us."

Jim decided that was his own cue. "Somehow I don't think Charlie's brother would agree with you on that count."

Reeves flashed him a look that was part disapproving scowl and part agreement. "The point is, we all have to work together on this. For Charlie's sake."

"And Dupris?" Andrews added.

Megan Reeves' responding glare almost matched Blair's at that moment. "The link to Jonathon or Scott Dupris is tenuous at best. But if there is a link, then yes, getting Charlie back could very well help you in your pursuit of these men. But, Agent Andrews, you have to acknowledge and accept the fact that there are two, possibly even three distinct cases here, the first and most critical at this moment being the disappearance of Charlie Eppes. If in finding him we help you find your missing sailor or the Dupris', then great. But our priority is with Charlie."

When Don Eppes returned to the room, he was clearly oblivious to both the tension and the resounding silence that had suddenly taken over.

"Welcome back," he said softly to Jim and Blair. "But I'm afraid what we got here is a lot of nothing. No ransom call, no leads, not a damn thing."

In a Jekyll and Hyde-ian sort of moment, Don Eppes suddenly clenched his teeth and slammed the door, clearly putting every bit of his pent up anger into the action.

"The only thing we do have," he continued then, more calmly, "at this moment, for this briefing, is Amita. She has already rewritten the calculations she'd been working on with Charlie last night, and now she's trying to finish the job on her own. So at the very least, she'll help your case, Andrews." Eppes made no attempt to meet the other agent's gaze. "And if we're lucky, that will help lead us to whoever took Charlie."

Jim did not like the smug satisfaction he saw oozing from Andrew's quirky smile.

"That's not all we have," Jim added then. "We know who has your brother."

Eppes focused his attention on Jim. "What? How do we know? Who took him?"

"Alpha 9."

"You're serious? How? How do we know that?"

Reeves answered instead. "Detective Ellison found a message meant specifically for him."

"What message?"

"We stopped at the house," Jim replied, "on the way here from the airport. "Your father was kind enough to show us around. From what my senses could pick up, I can tell you that, yes, Alpha 9 was there. And he left a note."

"What do you mean a note? We didn't find any note."

"More specifically," Megan Reeves added, "Detective Ellison found what might be the remains of a note--actually, nothing more than the fine impression of some previous writing on an old notebook of Charlie's. We have the lab working on it now, but--"

"But I can already tell you what they'll find," Jim said. "Go back to Cascade. I've got this one."

"What?"

"That's what it said."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means," Blair answered, "Alpha 9 is pretending to know what it is to be a true sentinel. He's trying to be one, or at least to act like one, even though he's ignoring some of the most important aspects." Blair closed his eyes briefly, probably to redirect his thoughts before continuing. It was almost as though he could hear Jim's mental prodding to ignore the lecture about what it means to be a sentinel, and proceed instead to the topic at hand.

"He's telling Jim," Blair went on, "not to worry about the Dupris' or Jankowski, or maybe even both of those cases. He might even be trying to prove his value to Project Sentinel by bringing the Dupris' down on his own. The point is he plans to use Charlie to get to them. He doesn't think he needs us to do it. He doesn't think he needs *any* of us." Blair scanned the room to ensure everyone understood his use of the word "us" was meant to include the FBI agents.

Don bobbed his head once, a quick nod of understanding. Then his gaze focused on Blair's. "What does that mean for Charlie?"

Blair gave a half shrug, seeming uncomfortable. He lowered his own gaze, subconsciously protecting himself from the scrutiny. Jim knew Don Eppes would pick up on the signals Blair Sandburg was sending, despite the words that followed.

"He should be safe," Blair said. "I don't believe Alpha 9 would have any reason or even any desire to hurt him."

"But after your experiences with Alpha 9, you said yourself the man appeared unstable, that he was dangerous." Though it was not a question, Don studied Blair until Jim's partner gave a quick nod in acknowledgement.

"So he could hurt Charlie," Don went on, "even if he didn't want to. Right?"

Clearly Blair wanted to counter the argument. But he couldn't. Instead, he held silent. That was all the answer anyone at that table would have needed.

"Then tell me how we find him."

Though Don Eppes' attention remained focused on Blair, it was Jim who answered. "The best thing you can do right now is to continue your work on finding that missing sailor and the Dupris. Meanwhile, Sandburg and I will focus on finding Alpha 9."

"Not a chance. I am not going to leave my--"

"There's nothing you can add to the search." Jim met Don's stony glare. "Not yet."

"Agent Eppes," Blair added. "*Don*, what Jim is trying to say--or maybe what he's trying not to say--is that he needs to use his sentinel abilities to track down Alpha 9. It's going to be hit and miss for a while, and our search pattern will be based more on instinct than anything. There is literally nothing you can do until, well, until he gets a ... a *hit* for lack of a better word."

Eppes was obviously skeptical. "Yeah, well excuse me if I don't want to rely exclusively on that. I will not take anyone off of the search for Charlie." He sighed. "But we won't ignore the Dupris' either. Look, you two do--whatever it is you need to do. We've got enough on our hands already. Just keep us in the loop."

"Count on it," Jim answered.

* * *

6

After a week filled with false leads, dead-ends and sleepless nights, the odds of finding Charlie Eppes alive had already gone from unlikely to improbable. Charlie's brother, Don was taking his frustration out on everyone who had the misfortune of having to come into contact with him. Even the members of his team had begun to make an active effort to keep their distance. Although they were all eager to deliver positive news, there just wasn't any to be found. No one wanted to tell him yet another fruitless search had left them empty-handed.

But when Don's cell phone rang at midnight seven days into the investigation, the caller was not a member of his team.

"What," he shouted tersely, not bothering to look at the caller ID.

"I know where Charlie is," an unfamiliar voice replied.

Don went rigid. He sat bolt upright in the chair in Charlie's living room and carefully placed his bottle of beer, gone warm and flat, on the table beside him. A quick glance at the phone showed him only that the caller's number was unavailable.

"Who is this?" He asked cautiously as he considered possible answers. There was nothing at all remarkable about the voice, no distinguishing tone or accent. It was absolutely average, probably belonging to a white male, around thirty, maybe younger. It definitely was not the voice of Alpha 9.

"You don't know me," that average voice replied. "But Blair Sandburg does. Just tell him my Aunt Sue made another batch of chocolate pudding. It was her best, yet."

"Cut the crap. Who is this?"

"It doesn't matter. All that does matter is you need to get to Charlie before it's too late. I understand he's not much for camping. He's got to be *dying* to get out of that cabin by now."

Despite the sound of playful humor in the caller's tone, his emphasis on the word 'dying' left Don feeling cold. He even found himself shivering as he scrambled for a pen to write down the set of coordinates the caller provided.

"How do I know he's even there?" Don asked after he'd written the last digit onto the corner of yesterday's newspaper.

This time, there was no reply.

* * *

While Don Eppes was waking his team through a series of phone calls, Jim Ellison was waking Blair Sandburg by grabbing a hold of his partner's leg and shaking it.

"Sandburg," he called out softly, his eyes never leaving the trees. The forest was thick, the night dark, but the sentinel's gaze penetrated deep into the foliage.

He had yet to see what he knew was there.

"Blair. Wake up."

Though his movements were made stiff by the hard ground that had served as his bed, Blair was awake in an instant. "Jim? What's wrong?"

"He's out there," Jim said, his attention continuing to focus outward.

"What? Now?"

But Jim did not answer. Something had caught his eye. It was a snake, a massive one, a snake that was far larger than should be natural for this southern California mountain.

It was an anaconda. Alpha 9's animal spirit.

"Stay here," he told Blair before following the snake deeper into the woods. He did not wait to hear his partner's reply.

* * *

Blair Sandburg knew that the relationship between a sentinel and his guide was forged of something far greater than any science book might ever describe. It was a gift more than anything, a gift from all the worlds, not just this world, a gift that transcended the boundaries between the worlds and defied intrusion. It was unbreakable. But it could be damaged. One force that could harm it, perhaps irreparably, was another sentinel.

When Jim's territory had been intruded upon by another sentinel years earlier, the infamous Alex Barnes, Jim had grown moody, edgy. He'd started to act like a cornered animal, and to lash out at his partner and guide. The intrusion of Alex Barnes on their lives nearly destroyed them. In fact, it did destroy them, if only for a brief moment in time. And it almost proved fatal for Blair. Still, they had survived; their relationship had remained intact, was perhaps even strengthened by the experience.

More recently, when Jim and Blair were encouraged by the FBI to infiltrate Mick Shofield's army of sentinels, the proximity of nearly a dozen others just like him had almost proved too much for Jim to bear. Eventually, he let down his guard. In the end he was tortured to the point of a nearly fatal zone out. He was cast out, leaving Blair alone in the midst of all those sentinels and one very dangerous, criminally insane former Marine. Jim had yet to speak

of it, but Blair had seen the suffering in Jim's eyes, the sense that Jim felt he had betrayed his partner, his guide, that he had failed in his duties as blessed protector.

Now, Jim was traipsing alone through an unfamiliar forest, chasing the last surviving member of Shofield's army, a sentinel far more dangerous than Alex Barnes had ever been. The man they knew only as Alpha 9 was massive, almost a mountain himself. He also had a sharp intellect and a knack for playing people. He seemed to enjoy creating scenarios and then watching, curious to see how people would react.

What sort of scenario was he creating now? What game was he playing here in this forest, with Charlie Eppes as the bait? Or, more importantly for Blair at that moment: what role was Jim being forced to play? Did Blair himself even have a role?

Of course I do, he thought. No matter what action he took, Alpha 9 would have considered it, might even have created alternatives to address it. So what should he do? Should he sit there alone warming his chilled hands at the dying campfire and just wait to see who came back for him first: his partner, Jim; or his nightmare, Alpha 9? Should he follow after Jim, despite being told to wait?

"Might as well have told me to wait in the truck," Blair mumbled softly before he slipped into the dark woods behind his partner.

* * *

It was dark. Too dark. Blair could not see a damned thing. When he turned around, thinking he had no choice but to follow the dim glow of the campfire back to where Jim had told him to wait, he found even that option had been lost to him. There was no light at all anywhere to be seen, not even the faint spark of an ember.

"Great," he said aloud.

He stood alone then, frozen in the darkness, trying to open his ears more fully to the sounds around him. That soft rustling of leaves to his left might lead him to his partner--or to a nocturnal animal foraging for food. For an instant, Blair wished for some long-delayed, residual spike like those he had experienced after being forced into service as a guinea pig of the Dupris'.

I could swear I heard the universe breathing.

And then Blair shuddered, remembering his nightmare. Nothing could be worth subjecting himself again to the kinds of torture the Dupris' had forced him to endure. *Not even coming to the aid of his sentinel?* No, he realized. Not even that. There should only be one sentinel in the relationship he had with Jim. Blair's purpose in life was to be his sentinel's guide. That was enough. It had to be.

Instead of listening with his ears, Blair decided to listen instead with his heart and his gut. His instincts might yet lead him to wherever he needed to be. Trusting in that thought, Blair closed his eyes. He gave himself to the night. He let the night surround him, envelope him.

"Jim," he whispered into the expanse opening up before him.

"Hey, Teach!" A voice replied--a voice that was definitely not Jim's.

Blair opened his eyes. They remained as useless as they had been before.

"Who's out there?" He called nervously into the darkness.

"Aunt Sue," the unseen voice replied before drifting off into a soft giggle.

Aunt Sue? It was certainly a strange name for a guy. Still, there was something familiar about both the name and the voice.

Even so, to hear it out here, in the middle of nowhere ... was Blair dreaming?

No, this couldn't be real. He simply could not have heard what he'd heard.

"Jim!" Blair shouted then. He felt his feet shuffling backwards and did not fight the impulse. "Jim? Where are you?"

"It's okay, Mr. Sandburg--*Professor Sandburg.*" The masculine voice of Aunt Sue seemed closer now. "We're here to help you."

"We?"

"Just follow us for a while."

"Follow you? I can't even see you."

"Oh. Right. Sorry. Here."

Hands grabbed a hold of Blair then. They swung him around and thrust something over his head. He tried to struggle, but he couldn't even figure out who he was struggling with.

"Jim!"

And then--sight. Apparently, they had fitted him with night vision goggles.

Blair swiveled, trying to see who he was dealing with; but features were undecipherable. He saw only one figure, despite the figure's use of terms like "we" and "us."

"Who are you?" Blair asked again.

"Sorry. Need to know."

"Well, I do. Need to know, that is."

The figure giggled again. "That old thirst for knowledge. Still insatiable, isn't it? Well, just try to let it go for now. Try to be patient. Aren't shamans supposed to be patient?"

"What would you know about shamans?"

"Everything you taught me."

"Who are you?"

"Okay, if you can't handle a shaman's patience, how about a sentinel's?"

"Where is Jim? What have you done to him?"

"If we had done something to hurt him, why would we be helping you now?"

"You tell me. Where is he?"

"Don't worry. He'll be fine."

"What do you mean, he'll *be* fine? Why isn't he fine right now?"

"Patience, Professor. Just keep following us, and we'll take you to him."

Blair stopped dead in his tracks. He *had* been following, hadn't he? He'd been following the figure without realizing what he'd been doing, simply because he had been so focused on the conversation.

"Where are we going?" He asked then, trying to stubbornly hold his ground.

"Relax, will you? We're taking you to Jim."

"But Jim was right here. I was just seconds behind him."

"It's amazing what a few seconds can do, isn't it? Just come on. Keep walking. We'll get you there."

Reluctantly, suspiciously, Blair followed along on what turned out to be a pretty grueling hike.

"Hold up," he insisted after a while. "This is ridiculous. There is no way Jim could have gotten this far away. I was only behind him by--"

"Seconds. I know. You already said that." The figure sighed. "Look, you've got to trust me. We are here to help you. Both of you--you and Jim. You've just got to follow me for a little while longer."

"What happened to 'us'?"

"What?"

"You've been saying I should follow you in the plural sense, as in 'us'. Is it just you now, or what?"

"That doesn't matter."

"I think it does matter." Blair was gaining confidence. "If it's just you and me out here, then I think I should have a little more say in what's going on. Now I am not taking another step until you tell me who you are, where you think you're taking me, and what the hell happened to Jim."

The figure sighed again. It was a long, slow exhalation. "I guess I really didn't leave much of an impression on you back then, did I? Maybe it shouldn't bother me, seeing as how I wasn't much more than a naive, geeky if not slightly psychotic student. But that adventure we had together, it changed my life. Literally."

"What adventure?"

"You can't tell me you don't remember that. Well, okay, you might not remember too much of the end part--you were pretty banged up by then. And I am sorry about that, by the way. I never wanted you to get hurt. I just needed--I don't know--a coach, a mentor, a bit of friendly, adult support."

"What are you talking about?"

"Emeralds, Blair. You did tell me to call you that, too. You said something to the effect of 'out here, it's just plain Blair.'"

Emeralds? Aunt Sue? Suddenly it all started coming together. "Jake?" Blair asked. "Jake Connelly?"⁵

"In the flesh."

"What the hell? What have you got to do with all of ... *this*, now?"

"I found my calling in life after that adventure. Actually, I was recruited to do what I was born to do."

"What?"

"Remember how important my Aunt Sue was to me?"

Yes, Blair did remember. He had no choice but to remember. Jake had tricked Blair back then much as he was doing right now. Jake had forced Blair to follow him to Aunt Sue's old apartment, where Blair was drugged, blown up and pretty much thrown into the hands of some of the nastiest bad guys he had ever encountered.

"You said her apartment was the most sacred spot you could imagine," Blair answered as he tried to fit the image of that frightened, desperate Jake into this confident, determined one, "even though the whole building was deserted and crumbling down around us."

"Turned out, she wasn't my aunt. She was my mom--my *real* mom."

Okay, that was an interesting bit of news. But Blair forced his thoughts back to the moment. "What does any of that have to do with Jim and this mountain, right now?"

Jake--if it really was Jake--giggled. "Everything and nothing at all. It just explains a little about why I'm on a classified mission on a mountain with night vision goggles."

"A mission? With what agency? CIA?"

"No agency you've ever heard of, or are likely ever *to* hear of. In fact, I don't even exist, and we're not having this conversation right now. I just figured, you know, for old time's sake. I respected the hell out of you back then. I guess I've been wanting to somehow let you know I turned out alright. This was a golden opportunity."

"Look, Jake. I would love to continue this conversation--or this *non*-conversation. I really would. But later. And somewhere other than here. Right now, I need to know where Jim is."

Jake hesitated. "Well, to be honest, right now Jim isn't far from that camp of yours back there."

Blair felt the blood drain from his face. "Then what the hell did you lead me out here for?"

"Diversion. Had to give Jim something to focus on when he wakes up. You see, he'll have a choice: go after the big guy--Alpha 9, that is--or go after you. And believe me, it'll be a lot safer for him to go after you. This is in both of your best interest."

"Our best interest?" Blair scoffed. "Or yours?"

⁵ From Freya's fic "Flies in an Emerald Web."

"I know it's hard for you to see right now, but my only interest in any of this is to your safety. And with that in mind, I must apologize profusely for what I have to do right now."

Blair felt a sharp sting in his neck. He raised a hand to pull out whatever was responsible. But then, oddly, his elbow hit the ground. He was still trying to figure out how that had happened when his night vision goggles went dark--and then the entire world faded into nothingness.

* * *

7

It wasn't until mid-morning that Don and his carefully assembled rescue team finally arrived at the designated coordinates. Unfortunately, there wasn't a cabin in sight.

"Like I said, Agent Eppes," Rick, their forestry service liaison said. "The closest cabin is about five miles east of here."

Don held silent but started pacing like a caged animal taunted by bystanders--or by one particular bystander, a laughing man with a dark sense of humor. The agent was halfway through his fifth turn when Colby Granger shouted out.

"Don! Over here!"

Launching into a sprint, Don covered the thirty meter distance through the trees in less time than it would take to cross a street--any busy street--back in LA. But when he reached the area Colby had called him to, there was still no cabin, and, more importantly, no Charlie.

"What the hell?" Don said.

Jim Ellison sat against the trunk of a tree. His right arm was raised above his head; his wrist, bruised and bloodied--surely from futile attempts at escape--was strapped in a cable tie secured to the nearest branch. His head was turned as far as humanly possible, as though he was desperate to look behind him. His eyes were open but clearly unseeing.

Colby shook Ellison, and then shook his own head. "It's like he's--"

"Zoning," Don supplied.

"Here," he took Colby's place, kneeling beside the sentinel while David Sinclair cut Jim free of the cable tie. "I think I know how..." His voice trailing off, Don tentatively reached a hand toward Jim's shoulder, gave it a cautious, gentle squeeze and then held there.

He cleared his throat. "Jim," he said, his voice soft but firm. He squeezed again. "Jim. Can you hear my voice? Come on, Jim. I need you to focus on my voice. Follow my voice. Dial down everything else, just follow my voice." Another squeeze. "Come on, Jim. Come back."

Jim Ellison blinked and drew a sharp breath. An instant later, before he even allowed himself the chance to see that he was no longer alone, he said one word, "Sandburg." He jumped to his feet, but his legs were unstable. When his knees buckled, Don was quick to support him.

"Whoa, there, buddy," Don said as he led Jim back to the ground. "Let's get you checked out, okay?"

Cascade's sentinel seemed both startled and confused. His gaze swiveled hard and fast toward Don as though seeing him for the first time, as though Don and the others had mysteriously appeared out of nowhere right at that instant.

"Can you tell me what happened here?" Don asked.

He waited while Jim glanced around, taking in the rest of the team. Next, Jim looked at the sky, perhaps gauging the time of day. A few quick blinks followed, and then a shake of his head. Finally, he turned back to Don, recognition dawning.

"Eppes," he said. "How did you...? We didn't contact you."

"No. You didn't. But we'll talk about that later. Right now I need you to tell me what happened."

"Alpha 9. He drugged me." Jim shook his head once more, as though trying to clear thoughts still made hazy by the drugs or the zone-out--or maybe even both. "By the time I came to, Sandburg was gone. I picked them up northeast of here, before I lost them completely." He pointed with his chin. "Alpha 9 went due west."

"Them?" Don asked.

"Two, maybe three others--besides Alpha 9."

David Sinclair moved closer. "One set of prints heads due west, just like he said. But the other prints show three people moving east, not northeast."

"East is the way they started," Jim said. "They cut back at some point. Northeast is the direction we need to go."

"Rick," Don called out. "That cabin, what direction did you say it was, from this point here?"

"Due east," came the reply.

"Cabin?" Jim asked.

"We got a tip that Charlie was being held in a cabin, right here, at these very coordinates in fact. But our forestry guys say the closest cabin we'll find is five miles from here, due east as the man just said."

Jim shook his head. "Then they led you to me, not to Charlie. And I'd guess they didn't take Sandburg to where they're holding Charlie. Or they moved Charlie." He held his eyes closed for a moment. "Look, I don't know what game they're playing, but Sandburg is northeast of here, and that's where I need to go." He rose, using the tree for support. "If I could just trouble you for some water, I'll be on my way."

"Wait, wait, wait. Hold on. You don't expect to go after them on your own, do you? We've got enough people here; we can split up. I'll take a team east, to the cabin. Colby, David and Rick's buddy, Jerry will go with you. Right?"

Jim gave a quick nod in acknowledgement. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me. The way I see it, we've got two hostage situations here. We can't afford to send anyone west right now, which pretty much gives your buddy Alpha 9 a free ticket out of here. That's an efficient diversionary tactic."

"Damned efficient," Jim agreed. "The question is, just whose strategy is behind it?"

* * *

Blair woke to darkness. He blinked--once, again, and one more time; yet he could not dispel the blackness, until.... *Yes*. There. A pinpoint of light, overhead and to the right. He rose, intending to move closer, but his left wrist was stuck somehow. It held him back, allowing him the ability to stand, but nothing more. He reached over with his right hand and discovered that his wrist had been secured to a piece of wood--a railing, of some sort.

Right, he said silently as he began to remember what had caused him to be here--wherever *here* was. Then, "Jake Connelly," he said aloud, shaking his head at the insanity, at the *impossibility* of finding Jake out here, way down in southern California, in connection with Alpha 9, Charlie Eppes, and the two men Blair hated--and feared--more than anyone else on this Earth: Jonathon and Scott Dupris'.

Anger began to build within him. "Jake!" He shouted. "Jake Connelly! Jake!"

Winded, he dropped back to the floor and took several quick, short gasps of breath. He tossed his head backward, banging it against a wooden wall, and then repeated the action two more times for no reason other than to take out his frustrations. So what if he ended up with a headache? Could things really get much worse?

"This is great. Just ... great," Blair said softly.

He closed his eyes and tried to control his breathing, to stop himself from useless panting. And then he listened.

Crickets. Leaves rustling. Something creaking.... Blair focused on the creaking until he realized it was nothing more than trees bending and swaying in a light wind. That realization triggered within him the sensation of floating, as though he, himself had the ability to sway with the wind. *Must be whatever he drugged me with*, Blair decided.

He opened his eyes again, took another look around. Still he saw nothing.

"Jake!" Blair shouted one more time. Only a light breeze answered him. It brushed his skin, lifted a few strands of his hair, and then moved away. Another tree creaked.

Apparently, Jake had left him here, had left him utterly alone.

Once again, Blair wondered where *here* was. *Here* could not be too far from the camp, right?

Blair began to rationalize what might have transpired. If Jake was alone, how far could he actually have gone, weighted down with an unconscious Blair Sandburg? Even if someone else had been moving with them, holding back and keeping quiet until Blair was silenced, their progress would have been slowed dramatically if they had to drag Blair along between them. So it was a logical assumption that *here* was, in fact, not far from the camp Jim and Blair had set up only hours before--which meant it was reasonable to presume *here* was not far from Jim--assuming, of course, Jim had not also been moved.

"Don't go there," Blair told himself. *Jim's out there. He has to be.*

Blair Sandburg drew a deep breath and began shouting once more, but not in anger, and not for Jake Connelly. This time, Blair shouted out of hope and desperation. This time, he shouted for Jim. And he kept shouting until his voice went hoarse and the darkness became too much to bear. And then, lulled by the ongoing feeling that he was floating on air, swaying with the wind, Blair settled into a restless, uncomfortable sleep.

Hours later, the sun rose above the walls of his prison. Its warming rays settled on Blair's sleeping form, which was crumpled into a contorted heap, thanks to the plastic shackle that prevented him from any sort of natural, sitting posture. Rising higher by the minute, those rays moved from his feet, to his knees, to his hip. And then they reached his eyes.

"What the...?"

Awake in an instant, Blair tried but could not blink away the disturbing brightness. He brought up his right arm as a shield, turned away, and waited for the lingering bright flashes to fade. Finally, Blair rose and cast a cautious glance around him. Was he on a porch? There was no roof above him, and the four walls that surrounded him were short. It was as though he was in a small, square box without a lid.

But no, it could not be a porch; a porch meant there would be a building attached. This was just a box surrounded by trees. There was no building, nothing else but trees.

A sour knot began twisting in Blair's stomach as he realized the trees were either pitifully short or he was gazing at them from a high vantage point.

"Oh, shit."

He did not want to look out over the railing. He had no desire to confirm his suspicions.

Swallowing hard, Blair forced himself to look down--and then promptly fell back to his knees.

"Oh, shit," he repeated, dropping his forehead to the railing as he tried to stop himself from hyperventilating. "Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit."

Blair Sandburg, a man who despised heights, had found himself trapped high above the ground, separated from it by nothing more than a series of long, thin--*way too thin*--poles. His 'box' was a tall, wooden tower--probably a fire look-out, he reasoned even as he tried not to vomit.

When he heard another creak, Blair realized it had been the tower creaking all along, as it gently swayed in the light wind.

"Jake Connelly, I am so gonna kill you," he said softly before taking a deep breath and trying another series of lung-bursting shouts.

"Jim!"

* * *

Don Eppes needed more people. This was a potentially volatile--potentially *deadly* situation, and all they had to defuse it were four armed agents. Four. You didn't have to be Charlie Eppes or any other mathematical genius to recognize the flaws associated with that particular number. Back in LA, back where they belonged, no one would even consider approaching a building that might house armed suspects without a full contingent of well equipped agents and armored vehicles. Here, they had nothing but trees for cover--and Don's own brother would be trapped right in the middle of the crossfire. Potentially. *Probably*.

He's in there. Don was sure of it. Charlie was inside that cabin. And despite the intensity of the silence that greeted them, the absolute lack of any sounds whatsoever except for the chirping and cawing and screeching of woodland birds, Don knew Charlie was in danger.

Swallowing back his fears, Don signaled his team. Megan Reeves and Agent Booker, who had been temporarily assigned to Don, would take the cabin's east and west facing windows. Don and his forestry guide, a man who was probably--*hopefully*--an excellent shot, at least where animals were concerned, would take the front.

Yep, these were definitely not the kind of numbers Don preferred. But this is what he had to work with; he had no choice but to make it work.

He held up his fist, raised one finger, then another, and finally a third. It was time to move.

* * *

The agents Don Eppes had sent with him were as persistent as children who did not want to go where they were told. Jim should follow the trail rather than his instincts. Yet when he told them to go ahead and check it out on their own, that he would continue his path regardless, they stayed with him. They even managed to shut up for a while. Jim figured their sense of duty to Eppes was more of a motivator than any sense of respect for Jim. He could live with that. What he couldn't live with--what he refused to accept were any more interruptions. So he ignored the others as he pressed forward silently, eyes forward rather than down.

When he reached the end of his journey, he even managed to forget he wasn't alone.

"You think he's up there?" Colby Granger appeared at Jim's side, causing the sentinel to catch his breath and lose his link.

Turning a sharp eye on the agent, Jim nodded once. He didn't *think* Sandburg was up in that fire tower; he *knew* it--knew it with a certainty as only a sentinel could. What he didn't know was how his guide was faring.

Blair's continuous chatter had drawn Jim to this place. Clearly Blair knew if Jim was nearby he would be listening, so Sandburg used his voice as a tool to guide his partner to him. He talked incessantly. He described the tower. He reminded his friend and sentinel--and blessed protector--of his phobia for heights. Most importantly, he talked about Jake Connelly, a kid Jim owed for saving both his and Blair's lives years earlier--and who Jim also could not help but despise for causing those lives to be put in jeopardy in the first place.

"What's he doing here, man?" Blair had said while leading Jim to the tower. "I can't figure out his connection to Alpha 9. Okay, I can see how he may have been recruited by some secret agency or another. I mean, look at his family: parents who travel all over the world and smuggle artifacts; an uncle who smuggles emeralds and has no qualms about selling them to terrorists; an aunt who vanished when he was young and then, apparently, came back claiming to be his mother. Who were they, really? Who were any of them?"

"I wonder if she's the one who was supposed to have recruited him. By *she* I mean the long-lost aunt who claimed to be his mother. Think about it. He loved that woman and hated the couple who were supposed to have been his parents. He would have jumped at the opportunity not only to have her back in his life, but as his mother, his *real* mother. Whether or not it was true, I don't think he would have questioned it. In fact, I'm sure of it. He would have believed anything she had to say, and he would have done anything she wanted him to do.

"You know, Jim, I don't think he thinks he's done anything wrong. He said what he was doing was in our best interest, yours and mine. So by protecting Alpha 9, by providing a diversion to prevent anyone from following him, Jake thought he was protecting us somehow. He's probably even twisted enough to believe it. Maybe he didn't know about my fear of heights.

"Of course, if he *did* know then he's not just twisted, he's sick."

The last word was shouted, an angry declaration against the rationalized scenario. Blair went silent for several moments afterwards, and then he softly uttered the words, "I'm gonna be sick."

And then he said nothing at all.

Now Jim stood a short distance from the tower listening to Sandburg's harsh breathing and scanning the area for any indication Jake Connelly or anyone else was waiting for them. If it was a trap, Jim would be the first to know.

* * *

The mismatched numbers playing around in Don Eppes' head disintegrated the instant he forced open the cabin door. Despite all of his concerns, no eruption of gunfire greeted him. There were no shouts of surprise, no suspects trying to bolt. The serenity of his mountain surroundings was disrupted by nothing more than Don's own loud entry.

There was also nowhere to hide. It was a simple task to assess the cabin's one main room and single, tiny bedroom directly across from the only door. Aside from Don and his small team, there was only one person present in that cabin. A dark-haired figure was lying prone on the bed, apparently fast asleep.

He'd better just be sleeping. Don's heart seemed to stop cold. *What if--* No. There could be no 'what if's'.

After spending several agonizingly long seconds ensuring no booby-traps were waiting for them, Don hurried to the bed.

"Charlie." He gently shook his brother's shoulder. "Charlie. Wake up. Hey. Look at me. Look at me. You okay?"

Slow to respond, Charlie sluggishly turned his head, squinting toward his brother. "Don?" He seemed confused, perhaps unsure whether or not he was dreaming.

"Yeah, buddy." Don smiled. "It's over. We're here."

"Don?" Charlie's eyes widened in recognition. "What took you so long?" He shook his head. "No, that doesn't matter. Just get me out of this thing." He eyed the strap attaching his wrist to the bedpost.

"Hold on. Stop squirming." Don drew out a knife and snipped off the plastic. "Let me see your--"

But Charlie ignored him. The instant he was free he bolted for the cabin door.

"Charlie?" Don called, running after him. "Hold up. Come on, Charlie, what's--"

"Charlie?" Megan repeated outside.

Don rushed past her, following his brother into the trees. An instant later he stopped short, turned around and waved Megan back.

"He's okay," he shouted. "It's ... okay."

Megan slowed her pace and holstered her gun. By the time she reached his position, Don's own sense of relief had taken on the physical element of a smile.

"He, uh," Don started as Megan looked curiously over his shoulder, "Charlie just needed to, uh...."

Recognizing Megan's sudden change in posture as she dropped her gaze and the traces of a smile warmed her features, Don turned to see Charlie step back into view, making one final check of his zipper.

"Sorry," the younger Eppes said sheepishly. "It's just ... it's been hours. I couldn't--"

"Yeah, I guess you couldn't," Don said, his smile widening. "I just expected a slightly different welcome. But I'm glad you look ... you look okay. A little more rumpled than usual, but ... okay."

Charlie nodded although he winced slightly when Don laid a hand on his shoulder.

Don's smile vanished in an instant. "What'd he do?"

"Nothing." Charlie shook his head. "He didn't do anything. He just wanted me to teach him."

That was definitely not something Don had expected to hear. "To teach him? What are you saying?"

"He wanted me to teach him, to go over my calculations and explain how I could use math to try to locate Christopher Jankowski."

"So what'd you do? You didn't actually go through with it, did you?"

Charlie said nothing.

"What?" Don felt as though his brother had just punched him in the gut. "You taught him? You *helped* him?"

"He has a brilliant mind, Don. It was never my intention to help him. But he rewrote the calculations. He studied the numbers. And as he talked his way through it, I guess I just ... I kind of got sucked in."

"Are you listening to yourself? Two months ago the man almost killed you. He almost *killed* you, Charlie. I'd lay odds you never stopped having nightmares about it."

Charlie shrugged. "From a statistical perspective, you'd be--"

"I'm right, aren't I? You had nightmares."

Another shrug, followed by a small nod.

"Why won't you ever talk to me about things like this? Charlie, why won't you--"

"Because it doesn't matter, Don," Charlie asserted. "It didn't matter a week ago, and it matters even less now."

"Of course, it matters. I'm your brother. I'm supposed to--"

"Protect me? From what? My nightmares? From ... from psychotic sentinel terrorists," despite his apparent indignation, Charlie actually giggled for a moment. "Don," he said after composing himself, "you can't. You do what you can, when you can--like today. But you can't protect me from everything all the time. I cannot go through life expecting you to be my own, personal shield, and neither can you."

"Yeah, well, I sure as hell could stop sucking you into my life, and then maybe you wouldn't need a shield."

"You can't even do that, Don. This case came to me from Washington, not from you. The psychotic sentinels weren't your doing, either."

Don studied his brother for a long while. "When the hell did you ever get to be so brave?"

Charlie's eyebrows shot upward. "Brave? Are you kidding me? After this I'm just going to have nightmares on top of nightmares."

"I thought you said he didn't hurt you? Or was it all the frat house parties you had out here?"

"In a cabin with no running water and an outhouse that caved in on itself decades ago? Yeah, this would make one hell of a frat house." But Charlie's smile was clearly forced.

"Tell me what happened out here, Charlie."

Don's brother glanced away, took in a long, deep breath, and then nodded. "For the first two days, I couldn't stop seeing the back of that ambulance. I couldn't stop seeing him with that gun aimed right at me. But" Charlie took another deep breath and shook his head, seeming confused. "This time, he never threatened me. Not once. Don, he even apologized when he ... he came to the garage, when he said I had to go with him. He just ... just asked a lot of questions, and started studying the calculations."

"He earned your trust by playing nice," Don theorized.

Surprisingly, Charlie shook his head. "No. He never earned my trust. I never even relaxed enough to sleep--that is not until it started to seem pretty clear he wasn't coming back this time. But he *did* earn my respect."

Puzzled, Don studied him, waiting for the answer without bothering to ask the question.

"He understood it, Don," Charlie obliged. "The math. The theories. He took my notes, my work, and he figured it out. All of it. There wasn't a whole lot he actually needed me for."

Don stared at his brother as the empty feeling he'd been carrying with him since Charlie disappeared began to smolder. "Then why'd he kidnap you, Charlie?" He finally shot out. "Why ... why did he have me chasing my tail for the past week, not sure whether you were alive or dead?"

"Sounds to me," Megan interrupted, "like he was buying himself some time."

"Time?" Don shouted. "Time for what?"

Megan and Charlie exchanged glances, and then Megan nodded. "Time to work it out. Time to position himself one step ahead of us in finding Jankowski."

Why? Don stared at her, leaving the unspoken question hanging between them.

* * *

<tbc>