

# Growing Pains

by  
Emerald



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### One

Blair rolled onto his side, instinctively scooting over to the warm spot on the other side of the bed. When he realized that he was alone on the king-sized bed, he opened his eyes to see Jim standing at the window, apparently lost in thought. He took a moment to admire the view of the strong back and wide shoulders. It had been many years since the Department of Sentinel Affairs had paired the energetic student with the former soldier, but they'd developed into one of the strongest pairs in recorded history. The downside was being dragged to Washington, DC twice a year to testify to the Senate Oversight Committee.

"You okay?"

Jim Ellison turned away from the view of the sun rising over the Washington Monument, shaking of his head. "The panther was restless last night. Something's coming."

"Something dangerous?"

"Not exactly dangerous, but whatever it is, it makes me want to grab you up and bond like there's no tomorrow." There was no mistaking the lust in the blue eyes as they raked up and down the smaller man.

That look turned him on now as much as it had the week of their first bonding and Blair tossed the bedding back. The thickening shaft immediately caught the Sentinel's attention even as his nose caught the pheromones. Blair smiled as he saw Jim's nose flare. "Come here, lover. Make me yours while we wait for whatever is going to happen."

Jim didn't have to be told twice as he strode across the hotel room, dropping his boxers on the thick carpeting.

On the other side of Washington, DC a group of NCIS agents prepared to storm a warehouse. The Major Crime Response Team had a reliable tip that PadshadShuhab would personally oversee a weapons deal that morning. Two agents at the back entrance, two at the front, the three younger agents waiting for the team leader to make the call.

Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs winced as the sounds of the pier echoed through his ears and the smells rolled his stomach. Next to him was the team's least experienced agent, Timothy McGee, their computer and technology expert. McGee moved closer to him, waiting for the signal. His aftershave was much too strong, but it was a soothing scent to the older man. Gibbs spoke into his wrist mic. "Hold your positions, all the players aren't here yet." Leaning towards McGee, he sniffed again, letting the rich, spicy scent fill his sinuses and calm his stomach. "New aftershave, Tim? Sure smells better than whatever it is that DiNozzo was wearing this morning."

"Boss?" He wasn't sure what surprised him more, the question or the use of his first name. "I'm not wearing any aftershave."

"Yeah, babe, that's it. Feels so good." Panting, Jim lay flat on his back, watching as Blair rode him. A few lines on his face, a few streaks of gray in the curls, did not diminish the beauty of the younger man. As they drew closer to climax, the bond flared strong, strengthening them both. He reached up and grabbed Blair's cock, pumping it in time with their motions. Blair threw his head back with a cry, echoing Jim's yell, as his fluid landed on the older man's chest.

The signal had been given and the team moved in. In the back, Tony DiNozzo and Ziva David caught their first target unaware and were able to subdue him without raising the alarm. A second gunman opened a door before they were back in position. He yelled and all hell broke loose. Both Tony and Ziva started shooting as they moved across the empty bay to the relative safety behind the crates on the other side.

Gibbs eased forward, McGee behind and to his left. He glanced over his shoulder at his partner, who nodded as he drew down on Shuhab's bodyguard. Gibbs turned back, but a strange, thumping noise caught his attention, distracting him and drawing his focus into a narrowing circle as the sound became louder and consumed him.

Timothy McGee hated these kinds of Ops. There were too many unknowns and too many things could go wrong. That seemed to be the case here as a yell from the back of the warehouse caught the attention of the players. Any hesitation was lost when shooting could be heard. The bodyguard and several others turned towards them, guns drawn. McGee raised his SIG as he yelled.

"Federal Agents, freeze." He fired off two quick rounds before realizing that Gibbs was standing, frozen, in the open. Laying down as much cover fire as he could, McGee charged his boss, knocking him to the ground as a bullet ripped through Tim's shoulder. The impact spun McGee around before he fell. Tim bit back a curse as he was forced to continue shooting with his off hand, protecting Gibbs with his own body between Gibbs and the shooters.

Growing weak from the blood loss, Tim continued to fire, grateful when he heard the approaching sirens and the squeal of tires as Shuhab and his people blew through the side of the building with their armored limo. "Boss? Boss, can you hear me?" McGee crawled closer and struggled to get a response from the older man, but he was unresponsive and barely breathing. It wasn't until he heard DiNozzo yelling for an ambulance that he let the darkness pull him under.

Jim lay sprawled on the bed, Blair draped over him. After such an intense joining their bond was literally buzzing and he reveled in the feeling. It was tempting, so very tempting, to ignore the phone when it began to ring. Grumbling, he finally reached out and snagged it as Blair pinched him to get him moving.

"Yeah, Ellison."

~Jim, it's Simon.~

It was barely six in the morning on the West coast and for the Director of the Department of Sentinel Affairs to be calling this early, something was obviously wrong. Blair sensed it too, sitting up to allow Jim to raise up. "Simon, what's wrong? What's happened?"

~Looks like we've got a possible new sentinel that's just come online. He's been taken to Bethesda Naval Hospital. I need for you and Blair to get over there and assess the situation.~

The hospital caught Jim's attention. "Is he military?"

~No, he's a federal agent, NCIS. Something's weird about this, Jim. If this is legitimate, he'll be the oldest sentinel we've ever had come online.~

"You think he's been flying under the radar?"

~I think that's much more likely than a fifty-two year old man suddenly gaining sentinel abilities in the middle of a gun fight. Figure it out, Jim, and keep me posted. If you think he's the real deal, I can be in the air within the hour.~

Disconnecting the call, Jim turned to Blair who had been leaning close enough to listen in. "What do you think?"

"I think we just figured out why the panther was so restless last night."

Jim was pulling the rental car into the parking lot when he felt it – a primal, untamed wave stronger than he'd ever felt from another sentinel. "Call Simon, tell him it's confirmed."

"Already? You can sense him from out here?" Sandburg was already fumbling for his phone. "My God, Jim, if he's that strong without any training and without a guide..."

"We'd better find him a guide quick, or he's not going to make it for very long." Jim found a parking space and quickly parked the car. "Any suggestions?"

Blair was biting his lower lip as he thought. "I can call Professor Stoddard at the Guide University, but we'd be better off with someone local, maybe somebody from his own agency." The two men climbed out of the car and hurried towards the emergency entrance.

"Does NCIS even have any trained guides on staff? Because I'm telling you, Chief, I don't think this guy can hold out for the months to train a new guide."

Hurrying to keep up, Sandburg was adamant. "If he's as strong as you say he is, and as old as Simon thinks he is, his abilities must have been at least partially active. I bet there's a latent guide close to him that's been keeping him in check."

"I hope you're right, Chief." They walked up to the desk and Jim pulled out his ID. "Ma'am, Senior Sentinel Ellison and Senior Guide Sandburg from the Department of Sentinel Affairs."

The petite woman jumped to her feet. "Oh, thank goodness. Come right this way."

Jim noticed a group of people watching them intently, but his focus was on the new sentinel beyond the double doors whose vital signs were becoming increasingly unstable. "Was he injured?"

"We don't know. Nothing showed up in the x-rays they took and none of the doctors have found anything physically wrong with him. They tried to take him upstairs for a MRI, but every time we start to move him out of the ER, he crashes."

That gave them their first clue. "Was anyone else brought in with him?" Blair reached out with his mind, hoping that a guide, even an untrained one, would react. "Perhaps someone who is still unconscious?"

She nodded. "Another agent was shot during the raid. He's being prepped for surgery right now."

Blair was instantly concerned. "Tell them not to move the other agent yet. Not until we've had time to check him."

"Why?"

"If the sentinel has partially bonded with him as a guide, separating them right now could kill the sentinel."

The nurse's eyes widened in alarm and she grabbed another nurse to pass on the message.

With the wounded agent being cared for as best they could in the emergency room, Ellison and Sandburg went in to examine the possible new sentinel. Blair was still convinced that the man had somehow managed to hide his abilities rather than having subconsciously suppressed them all his life.

"Hey, Doc, what have we got?" Ellison moved closer to the bed, Blair tucked in behind him. Jim recognized a fellow soldier from the haircut to the body that had been kept in shape, despite his age. "Jarhead?"

"Yep, Marine Corps." The doctor rattled off what he knew without even looking up. "Former Gunnery Sergeant Leroy Jethro Gibbs, now a lead agent with NCIS. I've seen sentinels come on line before, but never one this old."

Elbowing Jim just a bit, Blair stepped out from in back of him and examined Gibbs. There was no doubt that the man was deeply zoned. "Up until today, the oldest recorded sentinel coming online happened at the age of thirty-two. This is going to be fascinating."

Jim had to smile at his Guide's enthusiasm. "First thing's first, Darwin."

"Yep." Sandburg looked up at the doctor. "We need to move him next to the possible guide. If they're meant for each other, the Sentinel will stabilize pretty quick."

"What in the hell is going on?" They turned to see another man standing in the doorway, bloody sleeves rolled up to his elbows. "What are you doing with the Boss?"

Ellison crossed his arms over his chest and gave the new arrival a questioning look. "Agent..?"

"DiNozzo, Anthony DiNozzo. Now I don't know who you are, but you have no right to come in here and start making decisions for Gibbs. I'm his second in command – if any decisions have to be made, I'll be the one to make them."

Jim pulled out his badge. "Ellison, Senior Sentinel, Department of Sentinel Affairs. Looks like your boss was a latent sentinel that just came online. That means any decisions from this point on will be made by the Senior Guide until Sentinel Gibbs' Guide is recovered enough to take over."

"No way." DiNozzo shook his head, not willing to budge. "If Gibbs is a sentinel, then I'm his guide because I'm his senior agent."

Sandburg quietly moved to the side and made a call, which told his Sentinel that he was picking up a lot of hostility from the new arrival, so Jim tried to nip it in the bud. "Listen, Skippy, it doesn't work that way."

"Whatever it is, I can learn."

"Nobody learns how to be a guide, it's genetic, the same as sentinels. Now, move." Senior agent or not, Jim was rapidly losing patience with the stubborn man.

"Oh, come on. You can't just barge in here and start taking over."

Jim nodded to the three MP's that came up behind DiNozzo. "Interfering with the bond between Sentinel and Guide is a class three felony. I'm not going to ask you again – back off."

Swearing under his breath, DiNozzo pushed past the MP's and stormed back out to the waiting area. Ellison returned his attention to Gibbs. "Okay, let's get him moved."

Gibbs had been hooked up to a great deal of equipment in the exam room, but now he was transferred to a portable oxygen tank and a Wi-Fi capable heart monitor. Once that was done, the bed was wheeled down the hall to another room.

The smell of blood was strong to sentinel senses and Jim had to dial it down. He knew immediately that the injured man was a guide and even though he wasn't Jim's guide, Jim immediately felt protective of him and wanted to offer comfort.

Sandburg watched Gibbs closely as they moved into the room. Gibbs was becoming more stressed as it was the damage to his Guide and not his comfort that the new Sentinel was sensing.

With the help of an orderly, Ellison tenderly shifted McGee towards the edge of the bed, being ever vigilant to not jostle the damaged shoulder. At the other gurney, Sandburg and the doctor mirrored their actions until the two men were touching.

"Damn." Doctor Wilkes shook his head as he watched the EKG settle into a normal, steady rhythm and Gibbs' oxygen levels rose with each breath.

Blair bounced on his toes. "No matter how many times I see a new Sentinel and Guide start off, it's always cool. We'll give him a few minutes to come out of the zone a little bit more then it will be okay to give him a sentinel safe sedative to keep him under while Agent McGee is in surgery."

Once that was done and Agent McGee was wheeled into surgery, Gibbs' doctor turned back to the remaining sentinel and guide pair. "Walter Reed has a top tier dedicated sentinel and guide unit. Should they be transferred there?"

Jim turned to Blair, leaving the decision to the Senior Guide. "We didn't get a chance to talk to McGee's doctor, how badly is he injured?"

Wilkes checked the chart and x-rays. "One gunshot wound to the upper left chest. It missed everything vital, but was pretty messy with heavy blood loss. Apparently it just caught the edge of his vest so the bullet was tumbling, left a pretty torn up wound track. His recovery will probably be slow, but unless they find something unexpected in the OR, I'd expect him to be able to go home in a few days, as long as he has help. With him being a new guide, I don't expect that to be a problem, right?"

"Shouldn't be. Senior Sentinel Ellison and I will stay here until they're ready to be on their own. All right, we'll plan on them staying here unless we run into complications. I assume that you have enough staff on hand trained in sentinel and guide protocols?"

"Of course. Leaves have already been canceled and the entire team will be here within the hour."

Jim looked over at Blair, making sure to have his support before cutting in. "To be safe, we want Sentinel Gibbs kept under sedation and isolated until Guide McGee is stable enough to handle the first stages of the bond, probably tomorrow morning. Also no visitors for either of them until they've passed the first stages of the bonding. Make sure there's plenty of security, we can bring in more if you need it."

Doctor Wilkes was taking notes. "In the past we've used one of the rarely used isolation units as a temporary sentinel and guide units. It has a card lock system – do you want us to reactivate that?"

"Yeah, let's do that just to be safe." Jim looked over at Sandburg. "Okay, Chief, let's inform NCIS that they officially have a Sentinel Guide pair."

Leaving the Emergency Department, they headed towards the waiting area. Agent DiNozzo was there, standing over two seated women, glowering at them as they walked down the hall. A well-dressed black man that reminded Ellison of a shorter Simon Banks was coming towards the group from the opposite direction, an even shorter, gray-haired man at his side. Judging from the armed agents flanking them, it appeared the Director of NCIS had arrived. Jim waited and addressed him directly.

"Director Vance?"

"Senior Sentinel Ellison? So, it's true."

"Yes, Sir. NCIS now has a Sentinel Pair. Congratulations."

No one in the waiting room seemed overly thrilled by his announcement.

## Two

"You wanted to see me, Sir?"

Simon looked up from the stack of folders he was sorting. "Yes, Rhonda, I'll be flying to DC on the midnight shuttle. I need you to reschedule everything on my calendar for the next few days."

"So it's true? A new Sentinel came online today?"

"Oldest one ever, too, this should be interesting."

Rhonda laughed, lighting up her whole face. "Blair must be ecstatic over that, a new case study to research. Do you want me to line up prospective Guides for him?"

"Nope." Simon carefully set aside the folders that could wait until he got back and laid the rest in his briefcase. "Looks like our new Sentinel has been working with a latent Guide for years."

"Fascinating, this will be one for the record books."

Finished, Simon picked up his briefcase and his carry-on bag, leaving the suit bag for Rhonda. "Hold the fort down for me. This might take a few days."

Lips brushing his shoulder were a lovely way to wake up and Blair smiled as he rolled over. "Morning, lover."

Jim smiled and pulled him even closer for a lingering kiss. Morning sex was his favorite, when Blair was warm, relaxed and usually loose from the night before. They'd fallen into bed too exhausted to do much more than kiss after the long day at the hospital, but when he probed, Blair was lubed and ready for him.

Wagging his eyebrows, Blair turned and rubbed his backside against Jim and the hint was taken. Not quite fully hard, it took a little more work to bury his cock in Blair's ass, but soon he was there and they slowly fucked, spooned together as the sun came up over the horizon.

"Best alarm clock ever." Blair lifted one of Jim's hands and reverently kissed each of his fingers, while Jim's lips returned to his favorite morning spot on Blair's shoulder.

"I remember when you used to hate mornings." Jim worked his way up to Blair's neck before nipping at his ear.

"Well, yeah, back in the days when your idea of a wake-up call was a glass of water poured down my back."

Jim tried to muffle his laugh in Blair's hair. "It worked, though."

"True, but this is much more fun."

Now fully hard, the lovemaking got more serious and Jim wrapped his hand around Blair and started working him to the same rhythm.



Blair came with a shout, clamping down on Jim, and pulling him along. A few more thrusts and Jim gave his own shout as he emptied himself into Blair.

Twenty minutes later as they were getting in the shower, Jim shook his head when Blair picked up the supplies to wash inside himself. "No, I want you to smell like me today."

"Feeling territorial, still?"

"Maybe, a little. You mind?"

"As long as tomorrow, you smell like me."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah."

Gibbs woke, confused, dreaming of Shannon, convinced she was calling out to him. He knew he was in a hospital, the sounds and smells were unmistakable, but he wasn't feeling any kind of injury nor the floaty feeling of heavy duty drugs that would be blocking the pain. He opened his eyes and found a stranger sitting next to his bed. Gibbs frowned at the long, curly hair, even as he pushed the memories back into their safe spot. "Who the hell are you?"

Before Blair could say a word, Gibbs looked around more and spotted Ellison sitting next to McGee's bed and immediately bristled. "Better yet, who in the hell are you and what are you doing with McGee?"

Both Sentinel and Guide smiled at the protectiveness they heard in Gibbs' voice. It was the first step towards a successful bond. Blair rarely used his professional title instead of his Guide title, but he suspected it might give him more respect until Agent Gibbs understood what was happening. "Agent Gibbs, I'm Dr. Sandburg from the Department of Sentinel Affairs."

Gibbs looked him up and down. "What's a civilian doing here?"

Blair ignored the question. "Agent Gibbs, how much do you remember about what happened during the raid yesterday?"

The first flicker of worry crossed Gibbs' face as he realized how much time he'd lost. "Yesterday? Not much. Shooting started, there was a loud drumming sound and... and that's it. Why? What happened, exactly? What happened to McGee? Where's the rest of my team?"

"I'm afraid that you and Agent McGee will be in isolation for a while and we can't allow any visitors, especially considering Agent McGee's weakened condition."

Gibbs was losing patience and it felt like his skin was crawling. "What, exactly, happened to him? What's wrong with me?"

Jim stepped in, having read the details of the crime scene analysis done by the FBI. "You zoned, Agent Gibbs. The only reason you're not on a slab in your morgue is because McGee shoved you out of the way and took the bullet himself."

"Zoned?" Gibbs was so intent on the first comment that the rest wasn't sinking in yet. "You think I zoned? Only sentinels zone and I'm no sentinel."

"Actually, you are. We confirmed it last night."

The increasingly loud conversation woke McGee and the three other men turned to him as he groaned. Gibbs was convinced his agent could straighten it out quickly. "McGee, what happened?"

Jim and Blair exchanged annoyed looks and Jim helped Tim take a few sips of water from a straw. "Easy kid, take your time. How are your pain levels?"

"I'm okay." McGee tried to shift around and Jim took pity on him, raising the bed a few inches.

"There, no higher until your doctor comes in to check on you. If you're up to it, can you tell us how you were injured?"

Slightly dizzy, Tim closed his eyes as he explained what he could. "Something was wrong with Gibbs. He just froze, didn't react to anything. It was like he couldn't see anything going on around him. One of the suspects aimed at him, and then they all were. I remember shooting and running towards Gibbs, slamming into him to knock him down. After that I just kept shooting, trying to keep them off us."

Both Jim and Blair looked over at Gibbs, seeing the troubled look on his face. Blair decided they were ready for the full story. "Have you ever heard of Sentinels, Tim?"

"Well, yeah." Tim's eyes opened suddenly as he remembered. "Gibbs was complaining about Tony's after-shave and told me he liked mine, but I wasn't wearing any."

Jim could practically watch the pieces fall into place in the younger man's mind, reminding him so much of a younger Blair. He nodded encouragingly for Tim to keep talking.

"Gibbs was zoned? He's a Sentinel?"

"Yes."

"No." Gibbs shook his head as he threw the covers back. "I'm no damn Sentinel, you heard them talking about it before you woke up, McGee. Stay here while I go find a real doctor and get this damn quack thrown out of here."

Gibbs made it about three steps before someone out in the hallway dropped a metal tray. It was barely heard in the room, except for the two Sentinels. Jim winced, while Gibbs dropped to his knees, clutching his head.

McGee's immediate reaction was to try and get out of the bed. Ellison pointed at him to stay put before helping in his place. Pulling Gibbs up off the floor, he glared at the stubborn man. "Do you believe us now?"

Gibbs returned the glare, shaking off the helping hand. "What did you do to me?" He froze as another sound grew louder.

"What in the hell is that noise? That's the same thing I heard at the docks yesterday." Turning, he tried to locate the thumping sound.

Jim knew exactly what Gibbs was hearing, even if he had to reach out a bit to hear it. "It's getting faster, isn't it?" He tilted his head towards McGee's bed. "That's your Guide's heartbeat. Get used to it. It's what will ground you. Right now he's stressed, in pain and worried about you."

Gibbs finally looked over at McGee, noting his pallor and the sheen of sweat across his face. "Just take it easy, McGee, and don't pay any attention to these lunatics. I'm too damn old to be a Sentinel and you're sure as hell aren't a Guide. That's something you're born with."

"I know, Boss, because my mother's uncle was a Guide, so was his son."

"And you never mentioned this, because...?"

Blair could feel the heavy strain on the new Guide and stepped in. "Tim, why were you never tested for the gene?"

Tim wouldn't look any of them in the eye. "Because my father is an Admiral as was his father before him."

Immediately, Blair understood. It had only been in the last fifty years or so that Sentinels and Guides were officially recognized and protected, but there were still pockets of resistance to the changes and others who felt that Guides were lesser because they were hard-wired to follow the path chosen by their Sentinel.

That meant that a Guide would never rise to such a high office. The military was the final hold-out, going as far as barring Guides from such places as Annapolis and West Point, considering it a waste of training. "He expected you to follow in his footsteps and since you were born in a military hospital, he could make sure you weren't tested."

Gibbs still wasn't buying it. "You've never mentioned this uncle and he's not in your records."

Tim looked at Blair as he explained. "He and his Sentinel were killed in the Phoenix riots."

Blair gasped and Jim closed his eyes for a moment while Gibbs' expression demanded to know what that meant. The Senior Guide laid a comforting hand on Tim's uninjured shoulder as he explained to Gibbs. "When Guides and Sentinels were first recognized and given protection, there were some who felt it was some sort of government conspiracy."

Gibbs vaguely remembered hearing about it when he was a child. "There were protests?"

"Some of the radicals used one protest as cover to kidnap and execute over a dozen Sentinels and Guides from the regional center. The youngest one was only seven."

"Damn." Gibbs might not be accepting any of what was happening, but he hated murder, especially the killing of a child. The arrival of a doctor to look over McGee stalled the conversation.

"Status report?" Padshad Shuhab might have lost a number of men when the warehouse was raided, but he was far from defeated. "Tell me we at least managed to kill Gibbs."

"No, but something interesting has happened." Javeed Amiri smiled at his cousin. "It appears that the Americans believe Gibbs is a Sentinel."

"Really?" Shuhab returned the smile. "Interesting, indeed."

### Three

At a well-built 6'4" with ebony skin and strong features, Simon Banks was used to attracting attention whenever he walked into someplace new, but the interest he was subjected to as he walked into NCIS was unusual, even for him. An older man in a uniform watched as he signed in before calling for an escort. "Director Banks, Charles will take you upstairs. Director Vance and Ducky are waiting for you."

"Ducky?" Simon adjusted his glasses as the young MP arrived to escort him upstairs. "Is there a reason I am consulting with the local water fowl?"

"What?" For a second the older man looked confused, then grinned. "Sorry, Ducky is Dr. Mallard. He's the Medical Examiner here and takes care of the agents."

"I see." As he stepped into the elevator, Simon made a mental note to find out more about this agency that he'd heard so little about.

A beautiful woman with Asian features and long dark hair was waiting when the elevator arrived at the top floor. It was a mezzanine level, overlooking the floor below where the agents worked. As he followed her across the catwalk, Simon looked down at the group staring up at him. Simon wasn't a full Guide, but he had enough Guide blood to sense extreme emotions and that group was not happy about his, or the Department of Sentinel Affairs, involvement with their lives.

"I assume that's Gibbs' team? They certainly don't look happy."

"Agent DiNozzo doesn't do change well." It was a vague answer, but she told Banks a great deal.

"DiNozzo has been with Gibbs a long time?"

She smiled and paused before opening the door to the Director's outer office. "As I understand it, Agent Gibbs recruited Agent DiNozzo personally. Tony has been with Agent Gibbs longer than anyone, ever."

"Understood."

Passing through the outer office, she tapped on the door before opening it. "Director Vance, Director Banks is here to see you."

"Thank you, Pamela. Would you hold my calls, please?" The man behind the desk stood and offered his hand.

Simon shook it, taking a moment to appraise the other man, noting the similarities Blair had mentioned. Vance could easily pass as Simon's younger, and shorter, brother. "Thank you for taking the time to see me, Director Vance."

"Of course, and this is Dr. Mallard."

"Your reputation precedes you, Director Banks. Welcome to DC."

"Thank you." Simon bit back a smile at the dapper gentleman in the bow tie, the Scottish accent adding to his charm. "I understand that you handle the medical needs of Agents Gibbs and McGee, Dr. Mallard."

The elderly man gave a slight bow of his head. "Yes, well, when they allow it. I'm afraid that Jethro is rather stubborn when it comes to taking care of himself and his agents tend to follow suit. That being said, I do believe we will have our work cut out for us, so – please – call me Ducky."

Simon took the offered chair and sat back, stretching his legs out in front of him, his steepled fingers under his chin. "How much do either of you know about Sentinels and their Guides?"

After an exchange of glances, Ducky became the spokesman, at least for the moment. "We've heard a great deal, but separating out the truth from the stories is rather difficult, as we've never had the chance to work with a Sentinel before. Why don't you assume we know nothing and go from there?"

"All right." Simon smiled for a second as he settled in. "Dr. Sandburg is the world's expert on the history of the subject, but I'll give you the short version. Sentinels have been with us since ancient times but were officially identified by the explorer, Richard Burton in the early 1880's. Guides were identified a few years later. For many years they were a rarity, more of a side show attraction than anything. The military experimented with using Sentinels as scouts during World War I, but with extremely limited success."

"Why was that?" Ducky seemed quite fascinated and Simon made a mental note to make sure he and Sandburg met up at some point.

"Back then no one understood the importance of the Guide in the equation. Even away from combat, the death rate of Sentinels without Guides was quite high. Add in the high risks of war and it was a recipe for disaster."

"Because of the zoning?"

"For a large part." Simon leaned forward, a serious expression on his face. "Guides are vital to a Sentinel's very survival, they provide the stability, both mental and physical, to keep a Sentinel functioning. It wasn't until the early days of the Vietnam War that the true abilities of a Sentinel/Guide pair were fully understood, at least in modern civilization. It took a few years after that for the government to start offering protection and guidelines to help Sentinels function easier."

"And Guides? Is the same protection offered to the Guide half of the equation?"

Simon realized that the Medical Examiner was very astute. "Unfortunately, the prejudices and stereotypes towards Guides have been slower to fade, especially for our male Guides. If needed, we have people that can come in and conduct a sensitivity training seminar for the rest of your agency."

Vance knew how popular those kinds of seminars were amongst his staff. "We'll keep that in mind. Now, what do we need to do to prepare for Gibbs and McGee's return?"

"I don't have time for this crap." Gibbs marched to the closet for his clothes, but they weren't there. He turned and glared at Ellison. "You think stealing my pants is going to keep me here? I've got a terrorist to catch."

Jim was rapidly losing patience. "Your clothes are sitting in an evidence bag. In case you don't remember, because you were zoned at the time, your Guide used his own body to shield you after he was shot. But, hey, you're not a prisoner. Go ahead and ask one of the nurses for a pair of scrubs. I'll even loan you cash for a cab."

The battle of wills lasted for a few more seconds before Gibbs turned to try the door. A key card was required to open it from the outside, but not from the inside. When the door opened for him, Gibbs gave a triumphant grin and stormed out.

Inside the room Tim seemed to curl in on himself as the emotions of his Sentinel battered him. Blair wrapped a comforting arm around him and gave Jim a look. Jim rolled his eyes. "What? It's not like he's going to get very far."

Blair still didn't say anything, but Jim recognized the look. "Fine, I'll go pick him up, drag his sorry ass back in here."

Sure enough, when Jim went out into the hall, Gibbs was heavily leaning against the wall, sliding down. Jim waved away the nurses and went to him. Standing there, arms crossed, as Gibbs' knees hit the floor, Jim waited. "You done?"

"What the hell..."

As if speaking to a child, Jim explained it in simple terms. "You're a Sentinel with an incomplete bond. Until the bond is completed and has time to settle, you physically can't be away from your Guide." He reached down to help Gibbs up, but the other man shook off his assistance and struggled to his feet on his own.

"Great, just great. So what do we have to do? Hold hands and sing Kum-by-Yah?"

Jim was annoyed enough to be more blunt than usual. "Sexual intercourse."

"Sex?With McGee?" Got a news flash for you – I'm straight, so is McGee."

The two Sentinels were nose to nose, Jim using his extra inch in height to his advantage. "No, you used to be straight. Now, you're a Sentinel with an incomplete bond. You can fight it all you want, eventually it will happen."

"Like hell it will." Despite his refusal to even think about what bonding entailed, Gibbs followed Ellison back to the room and laid back down, his back to the rest of them. Jim wanted to give him a swift kick in the ass, but at least he knew the other man couldn't help but hear what the rest of them were discussing.

Sensing the strain the new Guide was under, Jim sat at the foot of his bed and kept his voice calm. "Tim, do you understand what's involved between Sentinel and Guide in regards to the bond?"

"Not totally." Tim ducked his head down and didn't look any of them in the eye. Jim didn't know if it was due to his natural shyness or if he was reacting to Gibbs' hostility. Watching the young man closely, Jim listened to his explanation. "I know my uncle and his Sentinel were lovers, but I don't know if that was the cause of their bond or the result of it."

Blair had stationed himself between the two beds. "Both, actually, if you think about it. The formation of the bond requires sexual intercourse with the complete exchange of bodily fluids and the stronger the bond becomes the..."

"What?" Tim finally looked up, startled. "Bodily fluids? You mean bare?"

"Yes, so that means you'll both have to be screened for STD's, which may take a while depending on when your last unprotected sex was." Blair looked closely at Tim, suspecting he knew the answer already. "How long ago?"

Tim's ears were bright red as he ducked his head down again. "I've never had sex without a condom."

That got Gibbs' attention and he rolled over with a look that was a mix of shock and 'cat that got the canary', despite his cutting words. "But you have had sex, right?"

Jim didn't let McGee answer, instead turning the question back at Gibbs. "And you?"

"Couple of weeks."

The Marine Corps bravado was evident, but Jim saw the pain on McGee's face as if it had been a physical blow. "How many partners in the last six months?"

For a moment they thought Gibbs wouldn't respond, but eventually he ground out an answer. "Just the one."

"Fine, we'll get her checked out too. That will speed things up." Jim knew he'd scored when Gibbs took a deep breath and fell silent.

The afternoon was mostly quiet while Gibbs sulked and McGee dozed, until Dr. Wilkes and McGee's surgeon came in with a third doctor. Their arrival woke McGee, who rubbed his face before struggling with the bed controls to sit up further. "This is Dr. Hamel, he's the head of the Sentinel unit at Walter Reed."

There was something about Hamel that set Blair's teeth on edge and he watched the newcomer carefully. The first strike was when he didn't acknowledge Gibbs as McGee's Sentinel before he started examining the injured man.

"Well, let's see how this incision is healing up, shall we?"

Blair winced when the heavy gauze was removed. Tim wasn't looking down at his wound and wasn't prepared when Hamel started poking around at it.

Hamel was watching Gibbs' reaction and was pleased when Gibbs reacted to McGee's cry of pain.

"Hey, was that necessary?"

"My apologies, Sentinel Gibbs."

Gibbs just glared at him, annoyed that the man was not giving his agent proper care. "Apologize to him, not me."

The apology, if one could call it that, came in the form of a nod at McGee as Hamel continued the examination, which left Tim drenched in sweat and trembling as his damaged shoulder was flexed and twisted. "He's making satisfactory progress, but I would prefer that they be transferred to my unit at Reed."

"That won't be necessary." Blair spoke up before anyone else had a chance to react. "I'm sure Dr. Wilkes can handle anything that comes up medically and Sentinel Ellison and I will be here to handle anything else."

"Suit yourself." Dr. Hamel directed his attention to Gibbs, smiling as he did. "How about you, Sentinel Gibbs? Is there anything I can do to make you more comfortable while you're stuck here with the Guide?"

Gibbs eyes narrowed at the difference between how this man treated Sentinels and Guides. "No, thank you."

A business card was laid on Gibbs bed table. "Very well, call if you have any questions. Otherwise I will expect to see you when you're ready to be cleared for duty." After another warm smile at Gibbs and the barest of glances at McGee, he was out the door.

Blair didn't acknowledge any of them as he followed Hamel, but Jim didn't need enhanced senses to know how angry his Guide was. Instinctively he listened into the conversation, even as he gave Gibbs a suggestion and tilted his head towards the door. "Focus on your hearing."

Dr. Hamel ignored the Guide following him, but Sandburg was not about to be deterred. "Excuse me? You want to tell me what the hell that was all about?"

"I examined the new pair, as requested by the Secretary of the Navy, Guide."



The put-down had Blair bristling. "It's Senior Guide, and I saw more torturing than examining. Is your specialty surgery? Because that was some pretty rough handling of a serious wound."

Hamel stepped close, but Blair didn't blink. "Fine, two can play that game. As an Army Colonel and the Chief of Sentinel Medicine at Walter Reed, it is my job to assess the worth of any guide my Sentinels are saddled with. After reading his file, I must say I'm not impressed with this one. Sentinel Gibbs obviously isn't, either. Otherwise, he would have ripped my head off when I hurt his Guide."

"So, that was a test?" Blair crossed his arms as he glared back. "A latent Guide steps in front of a bullet to protect a Sentinel as he comes online for the first time and you're questioning the Guide's worth? Even before they've fully bonded? Tell me, Colonel Hamel, when was the last time you cared for a pre-bond pair? Yeah, I didn't think so. I've heard of you, your background is all theory and research. You've never worked directly with bonded pairs outside of a lab. Oh, and don't worry, Secretary Jarvis will be getting my report, too."

Furious, Blair slammed back into the room, dropping his voice down to a whisper and wincing as both Sentinels reacted in pain. "Oops, sorry, guys."

Wilkes joined them as McGee's doctor left, a sour expression on his face. Wilkes didn't look any happier about the visit from Hamel. "As Guide McGee's physician, Dr. Adams will be filing a complaint against Dr. Hamel, but I don't expect it to do much good. The guy is pretty well connected."

"A well connected ass, you mean."

Jim smiled; his Guide all fired up was quite a turn-on. Blair returned the heated look, remembering their plans for tomorrow morning and wondering if they could push that up a few hours. Gibbs was too distracted by what he was sensing from the pair to ask about his own Guide, but Wilkes filled them in anyway.

"Guide McGee's wound is healing as expected, but it will take time. After that examination, Dr. Adams and I felt it was in his best interest to have his pain medication increased for the night. He's also been given a strong muscle relaxant, so between the two, he should sleep until morning." Dr. Wilkes looked at Gibbs. "Your Guide's recovery will be affected by your physical state also, so I'd suggest a good night's rest for you, too. If you'd like, I can have one of the nurses bring you a mild sedative. It's one that's been approved of for Sentinels"

"Even if I believed all this crap, what does my being a Sentinel have to do with that?"

Blair held a hand up so that Wilkes would let him explain. "You're a bourbon man, right?"

"Yeah..."

"What about wine?"

"Not really."

"Because as strange as it seems, you can hold your bourbon better than you can wine, right?"

Gibbs didn't answer, but his expression told Blair that he'd hit it on the head.

"A Sentinel's body reacts to everything differently. Even if you weren't on-line yet, some of that was already affecting you. One cold medicine doesn't touch your symptoms while another one makes you loopy for hours, days even. An individual Sentinel's reactions might be different, but we've identified entire families of drugs that are and aren't safe for Sentinel use. With the help of your Guide, your doctor will sort things out in detail, but for now, we want you to stick to what's already been tested and approved. After you and your Guide are released from the hospital, you both will be flying out West with us for extensive training, but in the meantime we need to be conservative. Now, would you like a sedative?"

"No, I'm fine." To prove his point, Gibbs turned on the television in the room, using the remote to turn the sound down low.

They weren't alone until they were in the car and even then they could be seen in the busy parking lot. Blair appeared to be looking straight ahead, but he was watching Jim out of the corner of his eye. "I'm not waiting for tomorrow, I'm going to claim you the minute we get back to our hotel. Rip that shirt right off of you and leave my mark on your neck where you're going to feel it tomorrow. Then I'm going to bury myself in your sweet ass and make you come so hard that even Gibbs will get a hard-on."

"Fuck." Jim came within inches of backing into another car. "You're going to kill us before we even get back to the hotel."

Tires squealed as the car fishtailed pulling out of the parking lot and Blair reached over and squeezed Jim's cock. "But what a way to go."

Jim considered finding a closer motel, but decided it would take longer to check in than it would to drive the short distance to the hotel they were already registered at. Parking in the first spot available, he pulled Blair out his side to make it quicker.

Blair laughed and deliberately slowed his steps. "Sure you don't want dinner first, big guy? I hear they have a killer prime rib here."

Pulling his Guide into the elevator, Jim glared at the others wanting to ride. The door closed and he pressed Blair up against the door as he pushed the button for their floor. "Only if you want to explain to Simon why there was a detailed bonding demonstration on one of the tables in the restaurant."

By now they were at the room and it took both of them to get the key card the right direction and slid through the reader. When the light turned green and the door unlocked, they tumbled inside. True to his word, Blair yanked Jim's shirt apart, laughing when the Sentinel automatically tracked where the buttons went. "By morning you'll have forgotten where they landed and if you stop and look for them tonight, I'll handcuff you to the bed and make you watch as I take care of myself."

Steel blue eyes widened. "You wouldn't." Even as he protested, he remembered the night when he'd taken what his Guide considered an unnecessary risk. As punishment he'd spent hours handcuffed to a chair while Blair masturbated and fucked himself with a variety of dildos and butt plugs. "You would."

Blair smiled as he walked Ellison backwards to the bed and pushed him down. Next, the rest of his clothes came off before Blair stripped for him. "Like what you see, Sentinel?"

"You're just as beautiful as the day we first bonded, Guide."

"And here I thought you had amazing vision."

"The years haven't made you any less beautiful, Chief."

Blair gave him a wicked grin and started shuffling up the bed. "No, but they have made me more experienced." His cock was hard and leaking, so Blair bent over far enough that the head of his cock dragged, leaving a trail, up Jim's body.

Jim shuddered at the sensation as the silky head rubbed along his body, leaving a streak of moisture that tickled his nose and quickly brought him to full hardness. "Want you in me, babe, let me roll over."

"Not yet." Straddling Jim's chest, he leaned forward and rubbed his cock against Jim's lips, not letting him suck just yet.

"You're teasing me."

"Sure am." Blair let his cock bounce off Jim's face before reversing, scooting back until he could stand up, looking Jim up and down.

Hard and leaking, Jim spread his legs, grabbing his knees and pulling them up to expose himself fully. "Now, Blair."

Blair loved seeing Jim like this, wild with desire, thrusting in the air and begging to be taken. Digging around in the clothes on the floor, he found the lube and coated his fingers. It wasn't like in the beginning when they needed a lot of prep, but he was still careful and loving as he slid several fingers deep inside Jim. Finally satisfied, he removed his fingers and very slowly pushed his cock past the tight ring of muscles.

He paused as always, taking deep breaths to give Jim a minute to adjust. Luckily this always gave him time to regain his own control – otherwise they would be done before they even started.

Once Blair set up his rhythm, he leaned far enough to limit the pressure he was putting on Jim's prostate, eliciting howls from the other man.

"Blair."

"Not yet." Blair kept up the slow pace until he couldn't stand it any longer and then he pulled out. "Okay, roll over."

Jim didn't have to be told twice and was on his hands and knees in a matter of seconds, pushing back to get Blair back inside him quicker. Finally, he felt the coarse hair against his ass. "Yes, now fuck me, damn it."

Just to tease him, Blair slowed down a bit more. "You sweet-talker, you. This what you want?" He leaned forward and pressed hard, rubbing the head of his cock against Jim's prostate.

"Yes, oh God, yes." Jim was slamming back as much as he could, one hand furiously working at his own shaft. He came with a yell, pulling Blair along with him.

They ended up on their sides, Blair still buried in him, as Jim held his hand up to Blair. The younger man licked his hand clean before snuggling down against Jim's back. Most nights their lovemaking was limited to once now, but they kept their bodies joined as long as they could while they enjoyed the afterglow and the hum of a successful bonding. Turning up his sense of touch, Jim could feel Blair's sperm inside him. Too small for even Sentinel touch to feel individually, the cumulative effect added a nice buzz to what he was already feeling.

## Four

Jim woke, feeling content, the heavy weight across his back warm and soothing. "Morning." In answer, a soft kiss was placed between his shoulder blades.

"Hey. Don't suppose we can hide in bed for another hour or two?" Even as he asked, Blair was rolling off of Jim and preparing for the day.

"I wish." Once the weight was off his back, Jim moved to his side, facing Blair, his head propped up on his arm as he watched Blair chew on his lip. "You're worried."

"Yeah, I am. It's easier when a Sentinel comes online at an early age, when their sexuality is something they're still exploring. This pair is really going to struggle with that."

Jim shrugged his shoulder as he ran his fingertips down Blair's arm. He was worried somewhat, too, but he had the advantage to physically know how strong the drive to bond was in a Sentinel. "No matter what's going on in Gibbs' head, eventually the drive to bond will take over."

"I hope you're right."

"I am." Jim leaned closer and gave Blair a lingering kiss. "Sentinels and Guides have been bonding since the beginning of time. It might take them a bit, but they'll get there."

Blair wasn't convinced yet, but a call from Simon requesting their presence at a breakfast meeting stopped the conversation, at least for now.

Director Vance stood in the chaos that was once the bullpen, overseeing a group of workers. Strange shadows danced across the floor as another group of workers outside added a new layer of glaze to the skylight that dominated the building. Tony DiNozzo and the fourth member of their team, Ziva David arrived, looking around.

"What's all this?" Tony looked at their corner of the bullpen. Instead of the four desks in a square formation, his and Ziva's desks now sat opposite one large, two-person desk. New, Sentinel friendly monitors replaced the old, flickering ones that buzzed, even if the annoyances were too low for normal eyes and ears. Even the cubicle walls were new, made of a natural fiber that wouldn't irritate Sentinel senses.

"This is our official Sentinel upgrade, DiNozzo, courtesy of the Department of Sentinel Affairs."

Tony knew that Gibbs wouldn't want a fuss or even an acknowledgment of what had happened. "Boss won't like this."

"Gibbs doesn't have a choice." Another group of workers passed them with the table from one of the conference rooms, which caught Ziva's attention and Vance nodded. "Conference room four is being converted into a bonding room for them. Once it's done, it will be off-limits to anyone else who's not on the approved list."

"Approved list? What does...? I mean, we're on the list, right?"

Vance sighed, knowing how badly Tony was going to take what he felt was a displacement. "No, only Ducky will be authorized among NCIS. Even the janitorial service will be brought in by the DSA."

"So, what are we, chopped liver?"

The second woman that had been at the hospital came running into the room, her heavy boots clomping on the floor. "They still won't let me see them, Tony. Gibbs wasn't even hurt, why won't they let him leave McGee's room? It's like they're holding him prisoner."

Several expectant faces turned to look at him and Vance was glad he'd spent most of the night reading the paperwork Director Banks had left him. "They can't fully bond until McGee is stronger, Abby. Unfortunately, the incomplete bond means that Gibbs can't be more than a few feet away from him."

"Why not, what will happen?"

Vance forced himself not to roll his eyes. With his arms crossed in front of him and the expression on his face, DiNozzo looked more like a petulant five year old than a senior agent. "I believe the words 'collapse to the ground in sheer agony' were used. Do you want to drag him out and test it for yourself? See how far he can go before he's screaming in pain?"

Abby teared up and Vance knew he had to step away from them before he said something to make the situation even worse.

Once Vance had moved away to check on the bonding suite progress, Tony let his anger show through. "So, Gibbs is stuck there until McWimp is strong enough? What the hell does that even mean? If I were Gibbs' Guide, we'd already be back on the case. Why can't he finish the bond?"

Ziva wasn't happy about the situation either, but she felt obligated to remind her partner. "McGee was shot, remember?"

"Yeah, a day and a half ago, what's so hard about the bonding that he can't manage yet?"

Abby didn't answer, but she did blush, which caught Tony's attention. "Why, Miss Sciuto, I didn't think anything made you blush."

"You know how they bond." Ziva waited for an answer. Unless directly ordered not to, Abby was notorious for letting details spill, especially when it involved someone she cared about.

"It's, umm..." Not looking at either of them, Abby twisted her pigtails nervously.

"Abby..." DiNozzo stepped closer and lifted her chin to force her to look at them, knowing that if forced, she'd spit it out.

"Sex. They have to have sex to complete the bond."

Simon was already missing his Northwest coffee. "Okay, what do we know about them so far?" He looked to the Guide, knowing that Sandburg would be the one to actually gather the details. Dr. Mallard would be meeting them in a few minutes. "They appear to have a fairly good working relationship, but McGee seems to be intimidated by Gibbs. That could be a problem, but I'm actually more worried about the rest of their team. I was picking up some real hostility from Gibbs' senior agent. He seems to think becoming a Guide is some sort of seniority thing."

"I don't suppose he could also be a latent guide? That might explain the antagonism between he and McGee." Taking notes, Simon wrote himself a reminder to check into DiNozzo's family background and whether he'd ever been tested. "What about Gibbs?"

Blair thought for a moment. "It's not that he means to be hostile towards his Guide, but he's not happy at all with what's happened and his new Guide is the most convenient target. Jim's convinced that eventually nature will over-ride his cultural upbringing, but I'm worried that the bond might be damaged in the meantime. Especially with the anger from DiNozzo. Until the bond is fully and evenly formed, Tim is going to be affected by that anger. Like most Guides, he's not naturally aggressive in dealing with hostility. Hopefully, getting them back to Cascade will give them the support they need while the bond is forming."

"Jim, your take on the situation?"

"Overall, I agree with Blair, Simon. However, Gibbs was military. He'll grumble, but he knows what the government expects of him. He might drag his feet, but he'll bond and despite his anger about the situation, he's already somewhat protective of McGee. Maybe not as much as he should be, but it's a start."

The hostess arrived with Ducky and Simon made the introductions. "Dr. Mallard, I'd like you to meet Senior Sentinel James Joseph Ellison and his guide, Senior Guide Blair Sandburg. Jim, Blair, this is Donald Mallard. He is the Medical Examiner at NCIS and usually fills in as the doctor for the team."

"Please, call me Ducky." Quickly shaking their hands, Ducky launched into questions. "Please don't think I am being bold, but I'm afraid that I'm not familiar with the different levels. What makes you a Senior Sentinel and Guide pair?"

Blair wasn't offended at all; he loved to have an opportunity to brag just a little about his Sentinel. "Jim is the naturally strongest Sentinel in the history of modern record keeping. The strongest pair is in a position to lead and support the other pairs in their region, which for us, is all of North America."

"I see, and how are Sentinels and Guides normally paired up? I understand that the joining of Jethro and Timothy is quite unusual."

"Gibbs is one for the record books, that's for sure." Blair paused, giving Jim a chance to tell it in his own words.

Even after all these years, big, bad Ellison still got a dreamy look on his face when he thought back to that day. "When you first come online, all your senses are going crazy. An eagle flies overhead and you can see the mites on its feathers. A cup of coffee tastes more like the detergent the cup was washed in, no matter how many times it was rinsed. Your clothes feel like they were dipped in acid and you're convinced the skin is literally melting off your body."

Jim looked over to see Ducky's reaction before continuing. "You smell everything within a mile of you, good and bad, and the worst is the sound. It's like the pressure from all these noises are going to blow your head apart. If you know anything about Sentinels and zoning, you pray that that happens to you, you're so desperate for even a moment's relief. And then there's this bubble of peace that you sense and you just start moving closer, you don't even have to think about it. You need it more than you need your next breath of oxygen.

"As you get closer, you can tell that there's a person in the middle of that bubble of peace and you just know you have to be with them. There could be a dozen Guides in the room, but for that one Sentinel, only one Guide draws them in."

Ducky seemed enthralled. "Oh, my."

Jim reached over and took Blair's hand. "After the bond is fully in place, it's like nothing else you can imagine. It's like you'd gone through life missing half of your soul and didn't even realize it until suddenly you were whole."

"Amazing, simply amazing." Ducky turned to Blair next. "What is it like for the Guide in the partnership?"

Blair squeezed Jim's hand and smiled. "For Guides, it's a little different, at least for Guides that are identified early on and trained. You have all this theoretical knowledge, and you're just waiting to be chosen. The first stage of the bonding is hard, I won't lie to you. Guides are empathic, but our abilities don't come online until the bonding starts. Then suddenly your mind is torn wide open and you sense everything and everyone that's ever touched what you're touching, every person close to you. It can be brutal if you're not someplace secluded. Then as the bond finishes forming, your Sentinel becomes your protection from the outside world. It's a very symbiotic relationship, but I'll admit the process, once it starts, is much harder on the Guide than it is the Sentinel, unless they've got a lot of stamina."

"Stamina?" Ducky's eyebrow went up as Jim turned red and Blair chuckled. It was Simon that took pity on the doctor.

"Bonding requires sex, several rounds, to be blunt."

"Ah, of course. The transfer must be completed both directions for the bond to be balanced, am I correct?"

"That's right. Sentinel to Guide and then Guide to Sentinel. Some Sentinels need a bit more recovery time than others, or struggle a bit with the idea of submitting to their Guide, but it always happens." Simon thought back. "The longest a bonding has taken was forty-eight hours before the second stage was completed."

Blair started laughing. "Jack and Daniel are never going to live that down, are they?"

"Jack's the only Sentinel in modern history to have ever come online when he was drunk and Daniel is the only Guide to fall off the bed and give himself a concussion half way through the bond." Simon shook his head, even though he was smiling. "You would not believe the paperwork that caused me."

## Five

After dropping her bombshell on them, Abby quickly retreated to her lab, leaving Ziva to deal with the fallout. She quietly approached him as he stared out the window. "Tony?"

He looked like he was ready to hit something. "It should have been me, Ziva. I'm Gibbs' senior agent; I earned the right to be his Guide, not McGee."

"It does not work that way, Tony. You know that. McGee was born to be a Guide just as much as Gibbs was born to be a Sentinel. You cannot change genetics." Movement in the hallway caught their attention and they both turned and watched as a large mattress was carried around the corner and toward the former conference room. Tony followed the workmen and Ziva cursed under her breath as she followed him.

At the doorway, they were blocked by a man wearing a clean room suit. Behind him the workers actually in the room were each in a full face mask and an air tank in addition to the bunny suit. "I'm sorry, sir, but the bonding room shouldn't be exposed to anyone other than the intended pair."

Tony stared at the king size mattress and the high quality sheets that would soon cover it. For a minute it looked like he would challenge the foreman, but after a few moments his shoulders slumped and he walked away. With Ziva still following him, he ended up back at the desks, touching the items that had been on Gibbs' old desk.

"Are you all right, Tony?"

He didn't turn around. "Are there Sentinels in Mossad?"

It wasn't a question she was expecting and stumbled over her answer. Before she could say anything, he spun around. "It was a simple question, Agent David. What is the Mossad's position on Sentinels?"

Knowing that he'd find out one way or another, Ziva told him. "If Sentinels could work without a Guide, Mossad would find them useful. Unfortunately, they believe that Guides are a threat because they have so much control over their Sentinels."



"Oh, that's great, just great." Needing to get out of there, Tony pushed past her and grabbed his keys and gun. "If the Director asks where I am, tell him I went out to follow a lead or something, all right? I just want to be alone for a while."

"Tony?" He didn't turn, but he did stop. She figured that would be as good as she'd get. "I am sorry."

"Yeah, me too."

The conversation stopped as the food was delivered, but Blair had questions as soon as the waitress left.

"What can you tell me about Gibbs? He seems unusually resistant to the idea that he's a Sentinel."

"No." Jim cut in before Ducky could say anything. "It's not the fact that he's a Sentinel, it's the idea of bonding to a Guide. Any history of homophobia?"

"In Jethro? Heavens, no, he's probably the most accepting person I've ever known. His problem isn't that Timothy is male, his problem is that he isn't Shannon."

"Shannon?" They'd gotten Gibbs military records, but not much on the personal side, so Ducky explained.

"Jethro's first wife and one true love. She and their daughter were murdered while Jethro was serving overseas. That's the reason he left the Corps and joined NCIS."

Blair was already working on a theory. "How was his mental state after their deaths? Did he go after their killer?"

Ducky didn't answer, but his expression told them everything they needed to know. Jim was already figuring out what Blair was thinking. "When you called her his first wife..."

"Jethro has tried to find what he's lost, but no woman could ever measure up, I'm afraid. Three additional marriages, none of which lasted very long." Ducky gave them a careful look. "You believe that has something to do with his newly discovered Sentinel abilities."

"Not newly discovered, try reawakened." Winding up for a lecture, Blair pushed his plate out of the way and rested his elbows on the edge of the table. "Let me guess, Gibbs met Shannon in the summer of 1976."

Ducky was surprised. "July, to be exact. How did you..."

Blair had his tablet out and was running a quick search on Shannon Gibbs. "His DI at Basic Training called him a late bloomer, but, actually, I think Gibbs was already coming online and then he met his Guide."

"Shannon was a Guide?"

"Yes." Now that he knew what to look for, finding the first Mrs. Gibbs and her family history had been easy. "She was never tested, probably because less than twenty percent of Guides are women, but she had several uncles and cousins that were Guides."

"So, when she was killed and the bond broken..." Ducky shook his head. So much was starting to make sense. "Just moments after he learned of the deaths of his wife and daughter, Jethro was injured in a bomb blast. He was in a coma for weeks that the doctors never understood. He was actually zoned, wasn't he?"

Exchanging a look with his own Sentinel, Blair nodded. "I think so. The traumatic severing of a bond usually kills the surviving half of the pair. Probably the only reason he survived was because of the intensive medical care his injuries required. But, the overload most likely burned out his senses for a while, for the lack of a better term, so his abilities went dormant."

"Why would his senses come back online now, after all these years?"

Blair had been trying to determine why a fifty-two year old man would suddenly come online and his research made much more sense now that he knew more about Gibbs' past. He pulled up a chart he'd put together of the success rate of Gibbs and his team, turning the tablet so Dr. Mallard could see it. "It actually wasn't all that sudden. Look at the increase the team has had in their solve rate. It's been steadily increasing for years. Gibbs calls it his gut that helps him solve all these cases, but I think he's been relying on his senses more than he realized. He and Tim have been subconsciously working as a low level pairing since Agent McGee joined the team, but since Tim is considered more of the tech guy and stays in the background, nobody made the connection. The real question is, what caused the crisis at the warehouse the other day."

The last piece fell into place for Ducky. "There's been no official announcement made, but Timothy was offered the position of leading the Cybercrime unit based in Tokyo. As I understand it, he turned down the offer..."

"Why?" Simon knew enough about the agency to know what a big promotion that would have been.

Ducky smiled as he looked at McGee's decision in a whole new light. "He felt he had more to learn from Jethro. That is a good sign, is it not?"

"Yeah, it shows that the beginnings of a rudimentary bond is already in place, but the death of Gibbs' first Guide will make it harder for him to accept a new bond, especially if he's never really came to terms with losing her and is still holding onto the remaining thread of his first bond. Until he's psychologically ready to move on, this new bond is in danger." Blair looked over at his own Sentinel, seeing the same worry on his face.

Refusing to listen or even think about the changes happening, DiNozzo found himself sitting at a bar, staring down at a Bloody Mary as he slowly dunked his celery stick in the drink. He didn't pay much attention to the man that took the next seat until he started talking.

"Damn stubborn untrained Sentinel – gonna get himself killed stuck with that Guide."

Tony turned to look at him, noting the uniform of an Army Colonel. "What Sentinel are you talking about?"

"Sorry, I shouldn't have said that out loud."

"Listen, Colonel..." Tony looked down at the other man's name tag. "Hamel, somebody very important to me just came online as a Sentinel. Important enough to me that I should have been his Guide instead of McGeek. If the Sentinel you're worried about is my friend, I want to know about it."

"Unfortunately, privacy laws prohibit me from..."

"Gibbs, his name is Gibbs." Tony waited, hoping for help from this unexpected source.

Hamel had hoped that this new Sentinel would be the answer to his research and knew he had to tread carefully. "The patient is planning on bonding with a Guide that has questionable abilities, but my hands are tied. If he were my friend, I'd be very worried about him.

Every fear of Tony's was being realized. "Then you've got to do something. Why are your hands tied?"

"Unfortunately, the civilian agency has control and they're more interested in Guide rights than what's best for the Sentinels under their control. I may be in charge of the dedicated Sentinel unit at Walter Reed, but I can't even read his chart without permission while he's at Bethesda." Hamel finished his drink and turned to leave. "I wish your friend luck; he's going to need it."

Ducky insisted that they stop for coffee on their way to the hospital. Simon was ready for a decent cup and readily agreed, but he had a strange look when he saw the near tar that Gibbs drinks. "You might want to reconsider that now that his senses are online."

"Quite possibly." Ducky smiled as he ordered a more normal coffee for McGee and a cup of tea for himself. "However, Jethro will insist on his preferred swill until he proves it to himself."

"Typical, stubborn Sentinel." Blair looked at Jim and grinned. "Oops, did I say that out-loud?"

Jim rolled his eyes as he ordered his own coffee. "Keep it up, short-stuff. It's a long walk home."

Gibbs glared at the tray the nurse set in front of him. "Cream of Wheat, again?"

"I'm sorry, Sentinel Gibbs, this is the default breakfast when the Guide isn't able to confirm your dietary restrictions." She gave an apologetic smile and left the room as Gibbs turned to McGee.

"I need your permission to have a decent breakfast? So, why haven't you done it?"

Still tired and in pain, Tim fumbled around to find the controls for the bed, raising it up enough that he could reach his own breakfast tray. Pulling off the lid, he found the same breakfast awaiting him. "First I've heard about it, Boss. If it's any consolation, I've got the wallpaper paste, too."

"At least they gave you coffee."

McGee checked the small pot. "Umm, no, it's the same decaf tea they gave us with dinner last night."

Gibbs was unconvinced. "Well, I smell coffee."

"From where?" When Gibbs gave him a strange look, McGee pushed him. "You smell it, right? I think you're supposed to be able to follow a scent back to its source."

At first, Gibbs thought he was nuts, but after considering it for a moment, he followed his Guide's instructions. Climbing out of bed, he followed the scent over to the door. He looked back at Tim, who gave him an encouraging nod, before opening the door. Ducky was leading the men from the Department of Sentinel Affairs, two cups with familiar logos in his hands. "Is that my coffee?"

"Of course, Jethro." When he reached the door, Ducky handed it over with a smile. "Now remember, your senses are more acute, you should probably just sip at it and..."

"Boss, wait."

Ignoring the advice from Ducky and the warning that McGee called out, Gibbs took a large swallow and started choking before spitting it back into the cup. "What the hell?"

"Boss, if you could smell it before they even got off the elevator..."

Blair tried not to smirk as he interrupted McGee, but he was a little annoyed at the new Sentinel. "Guess we're ready for the lesson on dials, aren't we?" Gibbs' only response was to glare, but McGee was listening carefully, so Blair continued. "Even that battery acid you call coffee can't be smelled from that far away unless you focus on it, which means you've dialed up your sense of smell. Smell and taste are connected unless you concentrate on separating them."

He next turned to McGee. "Is your Sentinel an old-fashioned kind of guy?"

McGee froze for a second; the deer in the headlights expression would have been comical under any other circumstance. "I'd call him traditional."

"Lucky you." Jim grinned at Gibbs, hoping to lighten the mood. "You have a tactful Guide."

Gibbs flashed a rare smile. "Can't argue there." Sighing, he remembered that both McGee and Ducky had tried to warn him, and decided to accept this lesson, whatever it was, in good grace. "Okay, what's the dials?"

Just as Blair was getting started, a special bulletin started on the television and both Sentinels turned to watch and listen. Blair elbowed Jim. "Not all of us can hear that, you know."

"Sorry, Chief." Jim picked up the controller and increased the volume from one to eighteen, where normal ears could hear the sound and they all listened to the report of another mystery attack, this time a pipe bomb had exploded outside a recruiter's office near Gibbs' home.

Gibbs was already on his feet. "Damn it to hell. That was Shuhab, I know it was, sending me a message." Ignoring the others and completely forgetting the lesson on dials that was about to start, he made a terse call to Vance, slamming the phone down as soon as he got his answer. "Damn it, they're on the move again."

Simon tried to keep him on track. "I'm sure your team can monitor the situation while you're with us in Cascade and we'll try to condense it down as much as possible."

"No, I don't have time for any of this Sentinel crap right now. I need to get out of here now." He started to move towards the door, but Jim blocked his way as Blair barked out a reminder.

"You're not going to be able to do anything until your Guide recovers."

"He'll be fine. I just need him sitting at his desk, doing his job. Find me that bastard, McGee, I'm getting us out of here." Sidestepping Ellison, Gibbs stormed out the door, a worried Ducky right behind him.

"I'm sorry. This case has been really rough on him." Obviously in pain, Tim struggled to swing his legs off the bed.

Out in the hallway, Gibbs slowed as he tried to move further from his Guide, but Jim's focus was on McGee. "What is it about this case?"

"Shuhab has been taunting Gibbs for months. He's been building a stockpile of weapons, but in the meantime he's been targeting the Corps and anything connected with Gibbs. He even vandalized the playground his daughter used to play at when he was overseas. It was just dumb luck that no kid was hurt."

Blair and Jim exchanged a look. "Guess that explains a lot. The child of his Guide..."

Jim nodded, but more of his attention was on what was happening out in the hall and he headed for the door. "Explain, not excuse, Chief. Come on, we're going to let Tim rest for a while."

Before he left, Blair pulled a thick notebook out of his backpack and handed it over to Tim. "Here, this will get you started on what you need to know as a Guide. It won't replace going through training, but it will get you started until you're ready to travel."

Becoming quickly engrossed in the book, he barely noticed when Simon turned off the TV and they left the room.

Gibbs only made it a few feet past the room before he had to lean on the wall, a few more feet before his knees buckled. He slammed his hand against the wall as he slid down. "Damn it, damn it, I hate this."

"Yes, Jethro, I know." Ducky tried to reason with his old friend. "However, this is quite a gift and will be very beneficial in the long run if you just give yourself and Timothy enough time to adjust and learn what you need to know."

"I don't have time, Ducky. Shuhab is playing with me and eventually he's going to get tired of it and people are going to get hurt."

Dr. Mallard crossed his arms and glared, refusing to help Gibbs to his feet. "People already have been hurt. Have you forgotten that young man in there that took a bullet to protect you? That young man is determined

to leave this hospital before he's anywhere near ready just because you want him to? For better or worse, he is your Guide, Jethro, and you need him."

"No." Gibbs tried to get to his feet again before sliding back to the floor. Shaking his head, he closed his eyes as the image of Tim's injury overlaid the pictures in his mind of Shannon's death. Not understanding why he was connecting the two events, Gibbs relied on anger to maintain control. "I don't need him, Ducky. I can't need him. Not like that."

Ducky saw Ellison leaving the room, Sandburg and Banks behind him, and shook his head as he stepped back. "Unfortunately, Jethro, you don't have a choice."

Behind them, Jim was furious and fed up. He jerked his head toward the elevator as he looked at Blair and Simon. Nodding, they continued on, letting the Sentinel handle the situation. Once they were out in the main hallway, Ellison hauled Gibbs up onto his feet. "You know, I'm getting pretty damn sick of picking your sorry ass up off the floor."

Gibbs glared at him, jaw twitching, but Jim didn't back down. Not saying another word, Gibbs jerked away from him and marched back into the hospital room. Once they were alone in the hall, Jim gave Ducky a hard look before following his team downstairs.

"Really, Jethro, was that necessary?" Ducky closed the door with a little more force than necessary as he watched Gibbs pace back and forth in the room.

"Is McGee healed enough for you to handle it?"

"And if I say no?" Ducky looked over at McGee, who was sitting up, trying to prove that he was fine. "One more night, Jethro, and it's not open to discussion. Now, get some rest, both of you. In case you've forgotten, Jethro, your heart stopped several times while you were zoned. It's not just Timothy that needs the time to rest and recover. Eat your breakfasts, both of you, and I will be back later to check on you."

## Six

Tom Morrow, Deputy Director of Homeland Security was in a unique position, having a large team of Sentinels and Guides under his command and scattered all over the country and also having been the one time Director of NCIS. Ellison hated to deal with Feds more than he had to, and had never gone out of his way to see Morrow, but felt this time was necessary. Blair wasn't so sure. "Okay, tell me again why we're seeing him? Isn't having him sit in when we testify at the Congressional Committee enough?"

"He was Gibbs' boss at one time. Let's see what he has to say about the situation."

Simon had met Morrow on several occasions when the man would visit Cascade to recruit new Sentinels for the war on terror. "He oversees almost every Sentinel team in the federal government. At some point, Gibbs will be answering to him. Jim's right, it'll be interesting to see what he has to say."

Morrow looked like most men of power that they saw in DC – past middle age, balding and with a slight paunch, you had to look closer to see the keen mind that juggled politics and Sentinels on a daily basis. Leaning back in his chair, he waved his assistant away. "I was wondering when you'd come see me about Gibbs. You've got yourself a handful there."

Nodding in agreement, Simon took the lead, speaking Director to Director. "We certainly do, what's your take on the man?"

"Stubborn, tenacious, hates politics in all forms, loyal to the few people he trusts and receives that level of trust from those working for him. He's a real hard-ass, but when the chips are down, he's one that I'd want in my corner."

"And McGee? You're the one that hired him, is that correct?"

That brought a grin. "Yes, I did. Stole him right out from under the FBI. Brilliant mind. I thought he'd spend a few years at Norfolk and then shoot right up the administrative side, but Gibbs latched onto him the first time they met. Harped on me for months before I finally gave in and transferred the boy to Gibbs' team."

"Really?" Simon looked over at Blair before turning his attention back to Morrow. "Do we know just what Agent McGee did that impressed Gibbs so much?"

Morrow thought for a moment and then shook his head. "Nothing in the report stands out. He called and requested a field team when a body was found, maintained the chain of evidence until Gibbs and his team arrived. Whatever happened, Gibbs brought the kid up from Norfolk every chance he got until he got my okay."

Blair was hanging onto every word. "Even back then, some part of the Sentinel in Gibbs was aware that Tim was his Guide. This is amazing. I can't wait to see how strong of a pairing they become after they're bonded."

"Yeah, well, we've got to get them bonded first." Jim was sure that eventually nature would take its course, but he still wanted to hurry it along if he could. "Director Morrow, what do you know about Gibbs' first wife?"

"I was Assistant Director at NIS when Shannon and Kelly Gibbs were killed while under our protection."

Blair looked at him blankly. "NIS?"

"Earlier designation of NCIS." When Sandburg nodded in understanding, Morrow continued. "Shannon had witnessed the murder of a young Marine by a rather major Mexican drug dealer. Several agencies were after him and hoped that her testimony would have put him away for life. Unfortunately, a sniper shot the agent that was driving them to the safe house and everyone in the car was killed in the wreck."

"Do you know how she came to witness the murder?"

Morrow had to think before he could answer Blair's question. "I'd have to have someone at NCIS pull the original report to be sure, but I believe she said that she felt that something was wrong and walked around to look

in an alley." At his own words, Morrow realized what Blair had already determined. "She was a Guide, Jethro's Guide to be exact."

"Yes, Sir."

"Back then, we had so few Pairs at any agency, and no women. I never made the connection, but it makes perfect sense – pardon the pun."

Blair gave him a strained smile. He'd heard the same pun more times than he could count. "Of course."

Morrow leaned forward and rested his arms on the edge of his desk. "You want some advice on how to handle Gibbs?"

"Of course."

"You may want him to do things in a certain way, but just back off and give him some time. When he's ready, he'll do not only what you asked of him, but a lot more and leave you wondering why you didn't think of it that was to begin with."

Blair looked around at the three other men, not totally convinced. "I hope you're right."

Garrett Kincaid glared at the metal box that was the back of the truck he was being transported in. The state of Washington insisted on moving him to a different prison approximately every six months, so just as he was getting a new network set up, he'd have to start over. The convicted white supremacist just hoped that his followers would discover his transportation route one of these times and affect a rescue.

Gibbs looked over at his new Guide, studiously going through a book of some sorts, but it didn't seem to have a standard binding. "What are you reading?"

"Guide Sandburg gave it to me. It's kind of Guide book for dummies. Thought I'd get a jump start while we're stuck here. The quicker I can learn all of this, the quicker you can be back out in the field."

"Okay." Gibbs took a careful look at the younger man. McGee was holding himself very carefully, the bulky bandages visible through the hospital gown. He frowned at the sight. "I was wearing a vest, McGee. You shouldn't have risked yourself."

Tim looked up, surprised at the worry he saw on the older man's face. "Yeah, well, I was wearing a vest, too. Besides, they were aiming at your head." He gave a one-shouldered shrug and went back to reading.

Restless, but not wanting to disturb McGee, Gibbs turned the television and cranked the sound down as far as he could and still hear it clearly. McGee didn't seem to react to it, but Gibbs was concerned that he was tolerating the noise for his sake. "This isn't too loud is it?"



McGee looked up, not understanding the question until he saw the images flickering on the screen. "Boss, I can't hear it."

"Really?"

"Really." Tim had just read the section on dials that Blair had mentioned. "You've dialed up your hearing to compensate for turning the volume down on the TV. The same way you had your sense of smell dialed up when you smelled the coffee." Taking a deep breath, Tim started explaining what he'd learned about the dials and how they worked.

Outside the Homeland Security Building, Jim, Blair and Simon discussed what they'd learned from Morrow. "Well, Jim, I'm more encouraged than I was about this pairing. What about you, Blair?"

When there was no answer, Jim turned to look at his Guide that had fallen behind as they walked back to the car. "Blair?"

Turning so that they could see he was on the phone, Blair held up his hand and Jim tuned into the conversation, listening as the nurse at Bethesda reported that the new Sentinel and Guide pair was working on controlling the Sentinel's hearing and that the Guide had ordered a range of foods for the Sentinel's lunch. He waited until Blair ended the call. "Maybe the truth is finally getting through Gibbs' hard head."

"I hope so." Blair wasn't totally convinced, but he agreed that they should be left alone for a while.

Simon rubbed his hands together. "All right, let's go get some lunch. How about we go to the Capitol and have some..."

"No." Jim shook his head. "I don't care if you have enough influence to get us in there. I am not sitting with a bunch of politicians while they eat bean soup. The dial does not go down that far. You go schmooze, we're going to find someplace peaceful for a few hours."

"You said peaceful, so we're going to have peaceful. Now, change your clothes." Blair was already tugging off his tie as he walked across the hotel room floor.

Jim had been planning peaceful as in a few hours of soaking in the Jacuzzi tub with his Guide on his lap. "Why do we need clothes at all?" Blair's voice was muffled from inside the closet as he pulled out clothes for the both of them.

"Because I'm not explaining to Simon or Director Vance or Director Morrow how we managed to get busted for indecent exposure." He turned around and handed Jim his hiking boots, jeans and a t-shirt, while holding two dressier shirts. "Now, hurry up and get dressed. We're picking up our food on the way."

"On our way where?" Jim grumbled when he didn't get an answer, but he obediently dressed and followed his Guide out the door. He was curious about where they were going and why they'd need to change once they got there, but Ellison knew when not to ask too many questions.

Blair sent Jim for the car and was just ending a phone call when Jim pulled the rental to the curb. Blair jumped in, smiling. "Get on the I-95 and head south."

"That's all you're going to tell me?"

"For now."

Jim shifted it into gear and moved away from the curb. "You know your sense of direction is sorely lacking at times, Shecky."

"Laugh it up, I Googled it."

"Oh, yeah, that makes me feel a whole lot better."

The advantage of printed directions over a map is that they couldn't be accidentally read upside down and a little less than forty-five minutes later, Jim was parking at the requested restaurant. Blair wouldn't let him get out of the car, so he still had no idea where their final destination was. Blair returned a few minutes later, a large bag in hand.

Back on the road, it was only a few minutes before they passed a sign for Prince William Forest Park and Jim glanced over at Blair, who was smiling. "Fifteen thousand acres, thirty-seven miles of hiking trails, how's that for a way to unwind?"

Jim returned the smile. "Nice, Chief, very nice."

"Maybe we should try it again?"

Gibbs was tired and had a headache. "What makes you think it's going to be any different than the first eight times we tried this?"

It had only been seven times, but McGee wasn't going to force the issue as he struggled to get out of bed. "Since we haven't bonded yet, it might help if we're closer. The book suggests physical contact when the Sentinel needs more support."

"Stay put, I'll come to you. Last thing we need is for you to take a header and get us stuck here for another week." Gibbs was seriously considering tossing that book out the window, but to keep McGee stationary, he walked over and sat on the edge of his bed.

Tim reached out and laid his hand on Gibbs' arm. "Okay, Boss, let the dial creep up a little bit and reach out with your hearing. Go beyond the wall, into the hall..."

The background noise faded away as soon as his Guide's warm hand touched his arm. Easily as swimming through water, Gibbs moved his hearing out and down the hall, following a soft, feminine giggle.

...Have you seen the new Guide? He's so adorable. I wouldn't mind him using all his empathy on me...

...He's the first Guide I've ever met. Is it true what they say about them? That they can sense your every desire...

Gibbs hissed as he pulled his hearing back, a wave of hot anger and possibly jealousy turning his stomach as he pushed away from the bed. "Damn it to hell, I've had enough of this damn mumbo-jumbo for the day. If we're going to be stuck here, I'm going to take a nap." Ignoring his Guide's hurt and confused expression, he laid down with his back to the other man. "Wake me when dinner gets here."

"Oh yeah, Chief, this is exactly what I needed." Jim took a deep breath and looked around. They'd just finished the almost ten mile hike on one of the trails and were watching the antics of a group of beavers that had built a dam along one of the creeks. They'd picnicked first near the visitor's center before picking up maps and heading out.

Blair smiled at the peaceful look on his Sentinel's face. Spending time in DC with all the crowds and traffic was something the other man hated and the more well-known parks in the area were still too busy for them to truly relax. "What do you say? How about the next time we have to testify to Congress, we get a cabin here instead of the fancy hotel Rhonda always reserves for us?"

"Yeah, I'd like that." Jim sat on a bench and pulled Blair down onto his lap. "They got some that are private enough that we can have some fun while we're at it?"

They looked over the park map and Blair grinned. "Guess it depends on how noisy we want to get."

"For the amount the DSA is paying for that hotel, we could rent a half dozen of the cabins and not worry about the neighbors."

Blair leaned back, enjoying the strong arms wrapped around his waist. "Do you think Simon would go for it?"

"He would if he got to use one of the cabins for himself."

The explosion rocked the truck and knocked Garrett Kincaid to the floor. Convinced that his incarceration was finally coming to an end, he struggled to his feet as he heard thumping and gunfire. When the door swung open, he was face to face not with one of his lieutenants, but dark skin and a foreign accent.

"What the hell..."

"I have a message for you."

Kincaid looked down the barrel of the gun pointed at him. "Yeah?"

"The enemy of my enemy is my friend. I believe you know the quote. In exchange for your freedom, all my leader requests is that you continue with your plans."

"And what's in it for your leader?" A set of keys were tossed to him.

"Nothing that will interfere with your goals."

Kincaid watched as the armed man left with several others in two trucks, leaving a car parked near the side of the road. Suspicious, but not ready to be caught with several dead guards, he jogged to the car and quickly drove away.

## Seven

By the time they finished a more leisurely walk down one of the other trails, it was starting to get late. Jim turned them toward the parking lot. "You got someplace in mind for dinner, Chief?"

"Sure do." Other than directions, Blair was tight-lipped about their next destination until they were pulling into the parking lot a few minutes later.

A slow grin spread across Jim's face. "Really?"

"Yep, Brazilian barbeque. The waiters are dressed up as cowboys and walk around to the tables with the meat on big skewers. It's going to be great."

Button-down shirts added over their t-shirts allowed them to fit right in. The restaurant was busy, but the atmosphere was laid back as customers made as many trips to the counter for the salad bar and side dishes as they wanted, while a large colored disk on the table announced when the diners were ready for meat to be served. Lamb, sausage, bacon wrapped turkey and every cut of beef you could imagine, all seasoned and grilled to perfection were a treat to Sentinel senses.

Blair had to subtly adjust himself after a particular cut of rib eye steak had Jim moaning. "So, a cabin – or five – at the park from now on and dinner here?"

Letting his eye zoom in on a receipt as a waiter walked by, Jim was pleasantly surprised at the cost. "And maybe a few lunches, too."

Back in DC, the dinner wasn't quite as elaborate, but it was a step up from the bland food they'd been getting. Gibbs sat up, intrigued, as his stomach rumbled at the smells. "What's all this?"

"Guide McGee requested a variety of foods for your dinner this evening." Setting his tray down on the bed table, she lifted the lid and snuck a quick glance at McGee as she smiled. "If there's something you want more of, just buzz the nurse's station."

"Thank you." Fork already in hand, Gibbs was checking out the offering. Multiple small plates filled the tray, each covered with glass and holding a small, sampler sized portion. He glanced over at McGee and saw that he was eating the unseasoned, baked chicken breast with white rice they'd had for dinner since they'd been admitted. "What about you?"

After the earlier anger, Tim smiled at the flicker of concern. "Smells and taste can get tangled up pretty easy. I didn't want my dinner to distract you. Besides, the antibiotics are kinda rough on my stomach." He shrugged and started picking at his roll. "I'll survive another day of bland."

Gibbs knew that he'd messed up earlier and offered an olive branch of sorts. "Okay, so how do you suggest I tackle this?"

A slight smile crossed Tim's lips as his Sentinel showed his willingness to listen. "Keep your sense of smell down at first and just have one lid off at a time. Your sense of taste is probably going to creep up, just pay attention and don't let it get away from you. Maybe drink some water in between to give your taste buds a break."

There was nothing spicy or overly seasoned, but Gibbs was happy to be eating a few slices of beef, even if the smell of the salmon had him rapidly slamming the lid back down on that plate.

Sitting at a red light just blocks from the hotel, Jim looked down the side street and smiled. "You thinking what I'm thinking?"

"Oh, yeah."

Detour agreed on, Jim turned and drove the ten blocks. There was no parking available, so he let Blair off and circled around. There were more than a half dozen cars making the trek around the block and as he made the third pass, Blair dashed out of the shop with their treat. Once they were moving again, Jim let his senses explore what was hidden in the Styrofoam cup.

"Is that what I think it is?" Jim had sulked for days when they'd been out of his favorite gelato during their last trip.

"Sure is. Their famous OPM. After that huge dinner I just got one large, figured we could split it." Grinning, Blair knew that splitting it meant that Jim would eat every drop of the passion fruit part of the blend and maybe leave him half of the mango. Light and fresh, they'd always leave the orange for last.

"You're spoiling me. Do we need to stop at the hospital and check on them tonight?"

Blair already had the cup open and was sneaking what would probably be one of the few spoonfuls of the mango he'd get. "Nah, I called while I was in line. McGee had him working on his dials this afternoon and Gibbs finally got some real food."

"Good, maybe he'll be in a better mood tomorrow."

"We can only hope. Now he's watching TV and Tim is sleeping." As Jim stopped for another red light, Blair waggled his eyebrows and suggestively licked the spoon. "A whole evening without the kids underfoot. What-  
ever will we do?"

Jim smiled as the light turned green and he accelerated. "I'm sure we'll think of something."

"Captain Taggart?"

"Yeah, Henry?" Joel looked around at the carnage and the dead bodies of the guards. It had been hours since the escape, the official chain of command delaying their response time tremendously.

"Sentinel Ellison captured Kincaid the last two times, shouldn't he be here for this?"

The Captain flipped the sheet back over the body of the youngest guard as he stood. "Yes, he should, but he's in Washington DC for the annual dog and pony show and with the storms in the Midwest, they'll never get a flight tonight. I'll call him in the morning, somebody might as well get a decent night's sleep, cause it sure as hell won't be us."

"I hear you, Captain."

With nothing to do but paperwork as the hunt for Shuhab dragged on, Tony was the last one left in the bullpen when the foreman in charge of building the bonding suite left the card keys in an envelope on the pair's new desk. "Everything's set for when they return to work."

"Yeah, okay. Thanks." When the elevator door closed behind the man, Tony walked over to the new desk and picked up the envelope. The flap was folded inside instead of sealed and without thinking about it, Tony pulled one of the cards out and studied it. The familiar black strip was on the back side, but the logo on the front was for the Department of Sentinel Affairs. Tony stared at it a long time, hating what it stood for and what it was taking away from him.

Arriving back at the hotel room, Jim was torn between wanting to wash off the day's activities and eating the gelato before Blair managed to kill it off. In honesty, he wanted both, right now so it was time to break in the suite's Jacuzzi tub. "Come on."

Blair squawked when Jim took his arm and led him into the bathroom, but caught on quick when the faucet was opened for the tub to fill. "Quick rinse in the shower to get the sweat off first?"

With a sigh, the cup was set on the counter while they stripped and quickly rinsed off in the shower. By then the tub was filled enough that Jim was able to climb in. Blair ordered him all the way back in the tub, so his legs could be stretched out. Once the tub had finished filling and the jets were started, Blair climbed in and sat on Jim's lap, facing him, cup in hand. He spoon fed the passion fruit gelato to Jim, swooping in to lick his lips clean between bites. Blair had already eaten most of the mango, but he split what was left with Jim, before starting on the orange.

By now the orange was half thawed, but still very cold when Blair dripped some on Jim's chest. Smiling, he enjoyed Jim's reaction to both the cold and the feel of Blair's tongue on his chest. With just a little bit left in the cup, Blair took a spoonful and let it fall on one of Jim's nipples. That got even more of a reaction, especially when he took his sweet time licking and sucking it clean. The last of the melted gelato made it to Jim's other nipple where the cleaning process was repeated, slowly and carefully, until Jim was squirming and ready for more.

"Ride me, baby."

Blair didn't need to be asked twice and after a short amount of prep he raised up on his knees and guided Jim inside him. Settling into position, he started to move, his cock bouncing against Jim's abs in the water.

Deciding a little payback was in order, Jim reached up and tugged on Blair's nipple ring, grinning as the ring of muscles tightened around his cock. "Yeah, you like that, don't you?" Leaning forward, he sucked it into his mouth and started working the nub with his lips as he shifted them enough that one of the jets was pounding against where their bodies joined.

"Oh, yeah." Feeling how good that was, Blair raised up just enough that there was still a small gap between their bodies even as Jim thrust upwards, letting the stream from the powerful jet tease not only his ass, but the base of Jim's cock. Jim gave an appreciative moan and sped up, coming dangerously close to sloshing the water out of the tub before Blair threw his head back with a yell.

Blair's climax pushed Jim over the edge with a matching yell before they both slumped against the side of the tub. Curling his body around Jim's, Blair kissed the side of his neck. "Can we just sleep here?"

It was tempting, but Jim started moving them. "Only if we want to look like prunes in the morning. Besides, the water will be getting cold soon."

Hating to be cold and wet, Blair let Jim tug him to his feet and out of the tub. They tenderly dried each other before walking out hand in hand and crawling under the covers.

## Eight

"Good morning, are the two of you ready to leave here?" Ducky came in smiling as McGee was suffering through one last exam.

"Finally." Gibbs swung his feet off the bed, reaching for the bag Ducky was carrying. He was in the bathroom, getting dressed, when Ellison, Sandburg and Director Banks arrived.

Blair smiled at Tim as he winced and bit back a groan. "I bet you'll be glad to get out of here and let your Sentinel take care of you properly.

Giving a slight nod, Tim didn't admit that he couldn't see his stoic, driven boss in the stories of Sentinels caring for their injured Guides. "If nothing else, it will be nice to sleep in my own bed."

Jim's phone rang and he stepped out to answer it as Blair looked over at Ducky. "He hasn't been told?"

"Told what?" The question came in stereo as Gibbs came out of the bathroom, tucking his shirt in. "Ducky?"

Dr. Mallard looked at both Sentinel and Guide before taking a deep breath and plunging in. "The lease on your apartment has already been broken, Timothy. The Agency has picked up the cost and your belongings have been divided between a storage facility and Jethro's home."

"What?"

Blair could sense the underlying panic in the new Guide. When the new Sentinel didn't pick up on it, Blair moved closer and rested his hand on Tim's leg. "All Guides live with their Sentinels, Tim, and since you and Gibbs are already attached to a federal agency, the Agency is responsible for any costs a new pair incurs. They'll even have to pay for a new bed."

"Yes, speaking of which," Ducky cleared his throat, ignoring the glare he was getting from Gibbs. "Both of your blood tests were clear of any STD's so you can begin bonding as soon as Timothy is physically recovered enough."

"Great, just great." Before anything could be said about Gibbs' less than enthusiastic response, both Guides and the new Sentinel were turning towards the door even before Ellison stormed back in.

"Jim, what's wrong?"

"Kincaid escaped yesterday while being transported to a new prison. Four guards were killed."

"And we're just hearing about it now?"

Jim gave a worried look at his Guide. Kincaid was dangerous and had an unhealthy interest in all Guides, but especially Sandburg. "Major Crimes wasn't notified until last night and thunderstorms over the Midwest had most of the flights grounded until this morning. I've called a contact and he's getting the three of us seating on a military shuttle."

"Only three?" Blair looked over at his fellow Guide and realized Jim's concern. "You think Kincaid is going to target the DSA?"

"Wouldn't be the first time."

Simon was already reading texts from Rhonda. "Rumors are already starting to fly, I'm ordering an immediate lock down of the facility and the students at the university are being assigned round the clock security."



Gibbs understood what they weren't saying. "Until we're ready to be out in the field, we'd be more of a hindrance than a help."

"Nothing personal, but, yeah. He'd love to get his hands on an unbonded Guide, and an unbonded Sentinel would just be the icing on the cake." Jim fought back the urge to growl, his protectiveness of the new Guide growing by the day. "Until Tim has fully recovered, he's even more of a target. As soon as the threat is neutralized, we'll send for you and start training so you can bond."

"That means that I can't go after Shuhab until you have this Kincaid captured." Gibbs eyes narrowed and Blair could tell he was ready to fight them, so he stepped in.

"No, but you can't do much of anything until your Guide is recovered and the two of you are ready to bond. In the meantime, study the book and settle into your new lives." Blair could tell that Gibbs was annoyed by the delay and moved to stand in front of him. "Be patient, Gibbs. What you'll be able to accomplish when this is all over will be well worth the wait."

To be safe, Jim made sure both the Sentinel and the Guide had their complete contact information before they headed out the door. Less than an hour, the three were on a plane, headed back to Cascade. Blair nuzzled up against Jim. "I'm really worried about them."

"Yeah, me too." Jim brushed his lips against the curly hair before kissing Blair's forehead. "Me too."

McGee had been in Gibbs' house before, but only when Gibbs needed something from him and never longer than what the job required. This time he paid more attention, trying to figure out the layout of the rest of the house as he was ushered into the living room. He'd walked through the living room and dining room, into the kitchen to get to the basement stairs, but had never been inside long enough to even need to track down the bathroom. Gibbs didn't seem inclined to give him a tour and Ducky immediately went to check for food in the kitchen.

Ducky sighed as he looked at the three bottles of beer and the one bottle of mayonnaise before letting the door swing shut. "Honestly, Jethro, I don't even know why you bother to own a refrigerator."

"None of the ex-wives took it." Gibbs was restless as he wandered through the house, noticing just how much dust had settled over the last few days.

"Very well, I shall fetch some basics at the store for the two of you. Other than a chunk of beef for you to scorch in the fireplace, is there anything else you would care for?"

"Something with some damn flavor, Duck." Gibbs was already making a pot of coffee. "McGee, sit down before you fall down."

Doing as he was told, Tim sat down as Ducky continued to rummage through the kitchen cabinets, checking expiration dates and tossing various boxes and bottles in the garbage. "Timothy, I do hope you can cook, otherwise the two of you might starve before the bonding is complete."

"Basics, nothing fancy."

"Do you actually cook with your stove, Timothy?"

"Umm, yeah."

Ducky patted Tim's hand as he stood and gathered his hat and coat. "Then you're miles ahead of your Sentinel, young man. I will procure the basics for tonight and you can give me a more detailed list tomorrow. Now, go lay down. You've just been released from the hospital and you need to rest."

Gibbs followed Ducky to the door, closing it behind him, before disappearing upstairs for a moment. He returned with a pillow and blanket and tossed them on the sofa. "Here."

Tim wasn't surprised to be relegated to the couch and slowly stood, adjusting his sling. "Thanks, Boss. Umm, where's the head?"

A small half-bath was pointed out at the back of the house, past the mud room, and Gibbs turned as a knock sounded at the front door. Recognizing the car in the driveway as belonging to his most recent relationship, he met the woman on the porch.

"Karen, what are you..." He didn't get any further before an open hand made contact with his face. She went to hit him again and he caught her hand. "What the hell?"

"Dumping me wasn't enough, Jethro? You had to humiliate me as well? To have government agents come to my work and demand a blood sample? How dare you accuse me of exposing you to a STD?"

Before he could say anything, she burst into tears and ran back to her car. Cursing to himself, Gibbs watched as she peeled out of the driveway, flinging gravel across the yard as she did.

It wasn't exactly luxury, but it wasn't the worst flight they'd ever had. Simon looked uncomfortable, but Jim and Blair were settled in and discussing the situation while Simon listened. "Are you sure there were no hints that something was being planned?"

"Not an inkling, Chief. The Marshals always watch Kincaid's people before a move and they didn't pick up on anything. Looks like they've gotten good at covering their tracks."

"Or Kincaid has gotten one of his people inside the Marshals." When both Jim and Blair looked up, Simon shifted around, trying to find a comfortable spot. "It wouldn't be the first time he's had help from friends in high places."

They both remembered that all too well. Even though they were more than an hour from landing and having cell service, Jim pulled out his phone and started scrolling through his contacts. "If that's the case, any help we get through official channels could be compromised."

Blair leaned his head back, letting it thump against the side wall of the aircraft. "Great. So, not only does Kincaid have the worst timing possible, he's probably got help from somebody who's supposed to be one of the good guys."

"Yep."

Tim wasn't sure what had happened while he was in the head, but he could practically see the thunderclouds over Gibbs' head when he came out. Knowing better than to ask, he started looking through the various boxes that were stacked along the wall in the dining room. Only able to open the top row, he found assorted clothes, books and some kitchen supplies. None of the boxes were labeled and he couldn't lift any of them to look in the next row down, so he settled for a book he'd read several times already and retreated back to his assigned couch to wait for Ducky's return.

Twenty minutes later, engrossed in his book, he assumed it was Ducky when he heard Gibbs walk to the front door and open it.

Gibbs really hadn't thought about Karen since he'd broken it off with her. She'd been fun and easy on the eyes, but he'd felt nothing for her. Her accusations, however, had hurt and he'd retreated back upstairs the moment he'd returned inside.

Acting on instinct, he went straight to the bedroom he'd shared with Shannon and stopped just inside the door. "What the hell?"

In preparation for the new pair, the local DSA team had cleansed the room of prior influences. The quilt Shannon had made during one of his deployments was gone, as was all the bedding. In their place was a brand new, all natural, mattress and a stack of organic cotton bedding.

The room was almost bare, even the boxes that had held Shannon's personal belongs were gone, as were her clothes from the closet. On the nightstand was a new bottle of lube and a pamphlet on creating a successful bond. Feeling his chest tighten, Gibbs turned to leave. The sound of tires on gravel gave him hope that Karen had returned. He'd take even more of her yelling at him than face the idea of moving on without Shannon.

Without looking or reaching out with his senses, Gibbs threw the door open and a small package on the porch exploded into a cloud of strong smells that immediately overwhelmed his senses. He dropped to his knees as it became too much. Vaguely, Gibbs was aware of someone yelling his name, but he ignored it as he let the zone take him away.

Looking through the small window, Jim smiled at the sight of Joel Taggart standing under the awning and surrounded by soldiers and airmen. Joint Base Lewis-McChord was a busy facility and as their plane taxied to a stop the last thing Jim wanted was to have to waste time arranging transportation to Cascade. Not when he really wanted to go to the site of the ambush.

As soon as the steps were in place, Jim loped down to the tarmac. Simon made the climb almost as easily, while Blair struggled a bit. "You know, not all of us are built like a lumberjack."

Jim turned back and took Blair's bag so he could move a little easier. "Come on, Short Stuff, time's a-wasting."

"Funny, real funny. Just remember, I know where you sleep every night and payback's a bitch."

They turned serious when Captain Taggart joined them, addressing them formally as he always did in public. "Sentinel Ellison, I appreciate your quick arrival."

"It's Kincaid, how could we not? Any leads on his location or plans?"

Taggart led them to his car. "Nothing so far. We've got surveillance teams in place near his known lieutenants, but so far it's still pretty quiet. Either he's still hiding or he's..."

"Gotten help from further up the food chain." Jim finished for him and Taggart sighed.

"Yeah, that crossed our minds, too." They were finally in the car and moving and Taggart loosened his tie. "Blair, can you check with your retired spook buddy? I'm not sure I trust the feds right now."

"Sure, Joel, I'll give Jack Kelso a call." He looked over at Jim. "You think Gibbs could find out anything?"

"This is a long way from his home territory, Chief. If we have a name he might be able to do some checking, but I doubt he'd know anything direct."

"Tim could..."

"Tim's got enough on his plate right now. Let's see what we can find out here first, okay?"

Blair could see his own worry about the new Guide reflected in Jim's eyes. "Yeah, you're probably right."

The smell of chili powder even burned Tim's nose as he struggled to his feet. "Gibbs? GIBBS?" He kicked the door shut to block out as much as possible, and bit back a scream as he pulled the unresponsive Sentinel further away from the door.

"Boss, really could use you awake right now." He didn't get a response and Tim just kept pulling until he'd dragged Gibbs into the kitchen. Tim found Gibbs' phone and made a terse call to Ducky before wetting a dishtowel and starting to gently wash the fine spice dust off Gibbs' face. As he worked, he started talking in a gentle tone, trying to get Gibbs to return to him. The Sentinel was just coming around when Ducky and the team arrived.

"What the hell happened, McQuack? It's your job to prevent stuff like this."

Ducky saw Gibbs' eyes open just a bit before slamming shut in an expression of pain. "Anthony, keep your voice down and remember this is new to Timothy, too."

With Ducky's help, Tim got Gibbs sitting upright and leaning back against a bank of cabinets. Gibbs was fully aware again, but his voice was raspy. "Not McGee's fault. I'm the one that opened the door without checking." The number of people in his house was making his skin crawl and Gibbs now understood why the team had been restricted from seeing him and McGee. Truthfully, he just wanted them gone as quickly as possible as he leaned against McGee.

"Your Guide should know what he's doing, Boss."

Ziva tried to diffuse the situation and keep them on track. "We have a bigger problem."

Sighing, Gibbs straightened back up. "Yeah, Shuhab knows where I live."

She shook her head. "Actually, Gibbs, he knows you're a Sentinel."

## Nine

Impressed, Jim turned and looked at Taggart as they were waved past the barricade that closed off the section of the road where the ambush had happened. "You've still got it closed to traffic? How'd you manage that?"

"Officially, it's closed because of a sink hole. Since it's a secondary road and easy to detour around, the Chief of Police signed off on it when I told him that it would increase the chances of you finding something." Joel looked nervous as he glanced over. "It will, won't it?"

"If we're lucky."

Not wanting more distraction than absolutely necessary, Blair tapped Taggart's shoulder. "Stop here, man. The less people that are traipsing through the crime scene the better."

Joel agreed and they found themselves on foot almost a half of a mile from the ambush site.

They'd barely gotten out of the car before Jim found his first clue. Faint tire tracks on the road from a rapidly accelerating vehicle were easily spotted by Sentinel eyes. They weren't parallel and following the road, they were angled. Jim determined the angle and backtracked past a grouping of scrub brush. Tire impressions in the soft dirt were even visible to normal vision and the rest of them followed the Sentinel as he found where the attackers had waited.

Joel stared at the deep impressions where a truck had waited, before photographing it. "They knew the route of the transport."

"Means that they had inside information." Jim scratched the side of his face as he looked around. Underneath the residual odor of car exhaust was something he couldn't quite latch onto. "Come on, let's keep going."

It took an hour, but the original locations of all three vehicles used in the attack were located. Jim was still picking up on the strange smell and Blair saw his frustration. When Taggart and Banks moved back down to the road, he touched Jim's arm. "What is it? What else are you getting?"

"It's a smell, but I can't get past the exhaust to get a good grasp on it."

"Okay." Blair thought for a moment. "Did you sense it at all three sites we found?"

"Yeah, but it was strongest at the second one, the one closest to the road."

"Let's go back and try again." Blair let Jim lead, the Sentinel watched the ground carefully for any signs of who'd been there when the attack went down. "Anything?"

"Maybe." Jim looked at the faint footprints in the dirt, circling around in a widening circle where the car had been parked. "This one had the most activity, but that doesn't make sense."

"What do you mean?"

Jim pointed out the other sets of tracks. "Two big trucks designed for off-road and one compact car."

"At least the economy car doesn't spit out the fumes as much. Filter the exhaust out of the way and describe what's left."

In theory, it sounded easy, but it was only the grounding presence of the Guide that made it possible. Jim closed his eyes and braced himself with the bond before letting the smells of exhaust, burned oil and gasoline fall away. Next was the smell of the forest and when that was dismissed, Jim could smell an assortment of what reminded him of cooking spices.

Blair recognized the expression on Jim's face. "You've got it?"

"Yeah..."

The long drawled out answer had Blair rolling his eyes. "And?"

"Kinda reminds me of curry."

"Curry?"

"Yeah, it's like a mix of spices that I can't really place."

Blair thought for a moment. "So, Kincaid's men had tandoori for lunch before they sprung him? I'm not sure how much that helps us."

"I know. Hell, they could have stolen the trucks from an import shop for all we know."

Simon and Joel were waiting for them at the shot up remains of the prison transport van and Blair turned their direction. "Well, file it away for now. Maybe we'll run across it again."

Cordite and blood were the most predominant smells along with the typical odor of death. Anything else had been destroyed by the dozens of emergency personnel that had combed the scene before Cascade PD had gotten the courtesy call from prison officials. Nevertheless, Sentinel and Guide spent hours going over every inch of the scene and the surrounding hillside, finding a half dozen shell casings that had been missed, but not much else.

Joel bagged the shells, hoping to find at least a partial print on one of them. "Feds took every scrap of evidence they found and aren't sharing. At least we've got this."

It wasn't much, but at least they now knew the caliber and manufacturer of the bullet, which they didn't know previously. Simon hated when his agency was caught between other warring agencies. "You going to let the feds know what you found?"

The city of Cascade had always been Kincaid's target and every time it had been the Cascade Police Department, led by Major Crimes and their official Sentinel/Guide pair that had captured the madman and stopped his reign of terror. He was furious that the feds had waited for hours before notifying him of Kincaid's escape and even then it had been only a courtesy call, not an offer of a joint task force. Only the fact that an old Army buddy was in charge of the State Transportation Department had gotten them access before the FBI's Sentinel pair arrived, and to Captain Taggart, that was the last straw. "Nope, they'll be chasing their tails looking for a leak when they realize what we know."

"Works for me." Blair bounced on his toes, almost challenging anyone to disagree with him. One of the FBI agents in the region had once suggested that their Sentinel should be the Senior Sentinel based on the fact that he was attached to a federal agency rather than a local one and to the Senior Guide that had been an unforgivable sin. The FBI's Sentinel hadn't scored himself any points by not refuting the comment, either. "Besides, I bet George won't pick up on half of what Jim just found."

Jim just grinned as he steered his Guide back to their car. George Perry certainly wasn't the strongest Sentinel in the country, but he had some serious family ties and sometimes he forgot which was more important. "Probably not, but let's concentrate on finding Kincaid before any more lives are lost, okay?"

"Yeah, I know."

As they walked, Jim was still looking around and suddenly bent down to look closer at the pavement.

"Jim?"

He bent even lower, his cheek almost flush with the asphalt and Blair touched the back of his neck to help him focus. "Got some faint rubber that matches the tires of the small car. It left in the opposite direction."

"They split up?"

"Looks that way." Jim straightened up, brushing the dirt off his knees. "Bet George won't pick up on that, either." They grinned at each other and Joel was pleased, too.

"Out here most folks drive trucks. That little car will be easier to track."

Simon was trying to subtly wipe the dirt off his shoes. "It will be dark soon, how much more can we do tonight? Just because Jim can see in the dark, doesn't help the rest of us."

Taggart had been trying to photograph everything Sentinel eyes had picked up, but he wasn't sure how much of the detail would be visible. "It would help if Jim could go over these photographs and mark the details he sees. If we're lucky, maybe we can track down the make and model of the vehicles they used in the getaway."

Jim nodded his agreement. "Let's do that tonight. I want to start interviewing every member of the Sunrise Patriots we can find, first thing in the morning."

It was almost midnight before they had the house to themselves and Gibbs could finally relax. After samples were collected, Tim had called for a DSA cleaning team to remove every remaining speck of the spices. Guards were stationed outside while Tony and Ziva had left to take all the evidence collected from the spice bomb Shuhab or his people had set off on the front porch. Ducky had been the last one to leave, having waited to change the dressing on McGee's shoulder after he'd showered off the remnants of the spice particles.

Gibbs watched as Tim struggled to his feet and turned toward the bedroom door. "It wasn't your fault. Tony's just... he's having a hard time adjusting to the changes."

He wasn't the only one, but Tim didn't mention that. "Yeah, I know." He made it about halfway to the door before stopping to turn around. "I asked the DSA guys while they were here. Everything they took from in here is in a box in the attic."

Nodding his appreciation, Gibbs watched McGee as he moved unsteadily across the room. It had taken both he and Ducky to get the injured man up the stairs to take a shower. "Do you want to sleep up here tonight?"

It was tempting, but Tim didn't need any Guide abilities to see how uncomfortable the offer made Gibbs. "Thanks, but I'll wait until you're really ready to have me up here." Under Gibbs' watchful eye, he carefully lumbered down the stairs, not relaxing until he heard the bedroom door shut. Then he slumped onto the sofa and buried his face in his hands.

"Sentinel Ellison, I was told you would be here this morning. Welcome to Coyote Creek Corrections Center."

Behind Jim, his Guide snorted and whispered Sentinel soft. "Try saying that five times fast."

It was enough to get him to relax. "Thank you, Warden Jeffries. Does McBride know we're coming?"

"No. He's not exactly what one would call a model prisoner, so he's been in lockdown for the last three months. I made sure to inform the staff that no mention of Kincaid would be made anywhere near him. The only way he could know anything is if he had prior knowledge and I think that's highly unlikely."



"Does he get a lot of visitors? What about mail?"

Jeffries barked out a laugh. "You're his first visitor since he arrived here from Dayton Grove Correctional Facility and we read every piece of mail that comes or goes from here." The Warden checked the file he was holding and nodded as he filled them in. "Normal groupies sending him love letters, a letter from his uncle informing him of his mother's death, that's about it. Nothing in the last six weeks. For someone who thought he was going to be the second in command of a new world order, he's certainly fallen a long ways."

"All right. Well, we probably won't get anything out of him, but let's give it a try." Jim rested a hand on Blair's shoulder, then let it slide down, as they followed the Warden to a small visitor's room. The two detectives Captain Taggart sent with them stayed out in the observation room, watching the monitor. Just outside the door Jim paused and listened. McBride's heart rate was slightly elevated, but his breathing was slow and steady. Turning, he looked for his Guide's opinion.

Empathy among Guides varied, but Blair's was quite high. Leaning back against the hand on his back, he let his shields thin enough to get a feel for what was waiting for them on the other side of the door. "Nervous, he's nervous and curious. I get the feeling he doesn't get many visitors and he's much more comfortable in his cell."

So the big, bad white supremacist was scared to be out in the general population. Filing that away, Jim swung the door open and strode into the small room. McBride jumped when the door slammed against the wall, but tried to cover it up. "Ellison, long time, no see. Still have the hippie freak with you, I see."

"And you're still in prison, I see." Jim sat in the chair across from McBride, turning it enough that he could stretch out his legs and slouch down, giving the impression that this was a casual visit.

Taking his cues from that, Blair leaned one shoulder against the wall and smiled at the imprisoned man. "Guess we know now how he ranks in the new world order." McBride didn't say anything, but his eyes narrowed as they flickered back at the Sentinel.

Jim smiled as McBride's heart rate increased and his breathing wasn't quite so steady. "Looks like I was right, Chief, and you owe me lunch."

Bait swallowed, McBride jumped to his feet, then immediately sat back down when the guard cleared his throat. "What the hell is that supposed to mean."

"Kincaid didn't bother to bring you along in his little escape plan."

McBride grinned, but both Sentinel and Guide could read the real response as he absorbed the discovery that he'd been abandoned by the man he'd gone to prison for. "He'll be back for me. Just you wait and see."

"Why don't we make it easier for him? See about getting you moved back to the general population? I bet your friends in the BGF would love to have you in their block." This time McBride couldn't hide the fear. The Black Guerrilla Family's hatred of the Sunrise Patriots was legendary. "Go to hell, Ellison."

"You first." Laughing, Jim climbed to his feet. "If you want to stay in your cozy private accommodations, I suggest you think of something useful in the next thirty seconds."

McBride stared over Jim's shoulder. "Check on Southern. He was always a brown-noser."

"Enjoy your peace and quiet." Smirking on the look of relief on McBride's face, Jim left, with Blair at his side. Detectives Brown and Rafe were waiting for them, Rafe already tapping away at his smartphone.

"He might be onto something. Southern already managed to make parole. Apparently he squealed against the right person."

"Against Kincaid?"

Rafe shook his head even as he was digging for the answer to Ellison's question. "Nah, if he'd testified against Kincaid, he'd have been put in witness protection. Looks like he testified against another prisoner. We've got him under surveillance, so we know where he is."

"Okay, let's go see what he knows."

Not bothering to go home, Tony slept on the futon in Abby's office and thus was the first person in the bullpen that morning. Unable to resist the temptation, he again found the envelope left on the pair's desk, but this time he used one of the cards to open the door before stuffing the card in his pocket.

Stepping inside, he looked around. Everything was a soft white, even the furniture. Two chairs were covered with soft velour while the bed was piled deep with pillows and the thickest comforter Tony had ever seen. Knowing it wasn't allowed, he ran his fingers across one of the pillows, feeling the smoothness of the Egyptian cotton.

"It's not fair, it's just not fair."

## Ten

"What the hell do you want, Ellison?" Southern stood in his doorway, defiantly refusing to open it further despite the fact that he was out on parole and really didn't have a choice in the matter. Jim looked at him closely, noting the trembling hands that he tried to hide and the dots of perspiration on his forehead, even as Sentinel senses scanned the room for any threats.

"Now, is that any way to greet an old friend, Southern?"

"You're no friend of mine." He had to step back as Jim pushed the door open further and let himself inside. As he'd suspected, a pile of cigarette butts marked the spot where Southern had stood and watched the unmarked police car that sat outside his run-down rental.

"I'm hurt, Ronny. What about Kincaid, is he still a friend of yours?" Jim saw the flinch as Southern turned away.

Brown and Rafe were casually wandering through the house, poking and prodding as they went. Southern was trying to watch all of their movements as he kept up the conversation with the Sentinel and Guide.

"Garrett Kincaid is a great man. Someday he will lead us to a greatness this country has forgotten all about."

"Yeah?" Blair moved closer to Jim as he lowered his mental shields. "So, what's the timetable on that? You wouldn't happen to know anything about it, would you?"

There was a flash of anger and fear before Southern started pacing and Blair whispered his findings to Jim, who nodded. "What's the matter? You and Kincaid have a falling out? I bet he wasn't real happy when you found a way out of prison and left all your white brothers behind."

Southern stood ramrod straight and wouldn't look at any of them. Behind him, Brown and Rafe came out of the hallway, a bulging duffel bag in Rafe's hands. Knowing how Southern would react to a black man touching his stuff, he handed it to Brown and let his partner take the lead.

Grinning, Henry Brown walked into the living room, swinging the bag around before he dropped it on a table. "Well, look at what we found. Looks like our boy has himself a bug out bag all packed and ready to go."

Jim stepped closer to Southern, forcing him to divide his attention between the Sentinel and the black man unzipping his bag and pulling out his belongings. "So, are you planning on slipping past your guards and meeting up with Kincaid, or are you running from him?"

"You got no right to be touching my property." Southern tried to grab his boxers from Brown, but Rafe stepped in his way.

"Why, what's the matter, Mr. Southern? You wouldn't happen to have a problem with a gentleman of the Negro persuasion rubbing his sweaty hands all over your clothes, would you?"

Picking up on the theme of Rafe's comment, Henry shook out a carefully folded t-shirt and wiped his face with it. "Yeah, with all this searching and seizing, I've really worked up a sweat. Maybe Southern would like to offer us a nice cold drink. I'd go for a big glass of ice cold Southern Sweet Tea about now."

The two cops laughed at their joke, but Southern wasn't amused as he grabbed some of his clothes and shoved them back in the bag. "Get your filthy hands off that."

"So, are you going to meet up with Kincaid like this? Black germs all over your clothes?"

Jim picked up on the spike in Southern's heart rate and breathing, while Blair got the emotions. Between the two of them, they knew the answer. "You ready to turn state's evidence against Kincaid?"

"Go to hell, Ellison."

"Did you hear that, Chief? You'd think someone that's made such a powerful enemy would be a little more interested in self-preservation."

"Kincaid still trusts me."

"Really? You're not the one that broke him out of prison. You just got yourself out, yeah, there's that self-preservation again."

Brown tossed a handful of clothes to Southern. "You know, Kincaid might find out we were here. Wonder if he'll think you were true to the mission or if you sold him out?"

Southern looked at Brown, then back at Ellison, his eyes widening almost comically. "How would he... You can't do that."

"Says who?"

"You're cops."

"Yeah, well..." Jim tilted his head toward Blair, who wagged his fingers at Southern. "He's just a consultant."

After reviewing his options, Southern held his wrists out. "Will you at least cuff me?"

"Good morning."

Tim gave a shy smile before returning his attention to the food he was cooking. "Good morning, fried eggs all right?"

"Sure, I'm not fussy." Gibbs headed for the coffee pot, but stopped short when he saw the fresh squeezed orange juice that McGee was pouring. "Damn, that smells good."

Knowing that Gibbs wouldn't want him harping on about his senses making everything more acute, Tim just silently handed over a glass. It was all he could do not to laugh at the look of bliss on Gibbs' face at the first swallow.

Getting Ronald Southern to talk wasn't the problem. Getting him to shut up however, was an entirely different matter. If it weren't for the steadying hand on the small of his back, Jim would have throttled the man and he wasn't even in the interrogation room, Henry Brown was.

Turning to look at the detective sharing the observation room with them, Jim felt compelled to ask. "They've been in there for hours, Rafe. Has Southern said anything useful?"

Rafe straightened his designer tie as he leaned back in his chair, glad his partner had drawn the short straw this time. "I guess it depends on what you consider useful. He's told us more about the financial backers of the Sunrise Patriots than we've ever known and ratted out every politician that has privately supported them, but he doesn't know anything about Kincaid's escape or what his plans are now. Sorry."

"Maybe he knows, but doesn't know that he knows."

Both Rafe and Jim turned to look at Blair, but it was Jim that asked. "Yawanna run that by us again, Chief."

"Locations. Have him start pointing out every fox hole they've ever dug, every safe house they've ever used. Kincaid had to go somewhere until he could meet up with whoever helped him escape. Maybe we'll get lucky and find a clue as to his next step."

"You're brilliant." Jim pulled him close for a kiss while Rafe went out for a map.

Garrett Kincaid had been on foot for several hours after the head gasket had blown on the junker car he'd been given. "Damn towel heads can't even steal a decent car." Even more than a fresh car to steal, he wanted money and food. Sliding down an embankment toward a small business, he saw a chance. Spotting the owner of the establishment made it all the sweeter.

If Gibbs were honest with himself, he'd spent a miserable night so far away from his Guide. He had more flexibility in his own home, but he had woken several times that night on the verge of falling out of bed, subconsciously drawn to the figure sleeping one floor below him. The dreams about Shannon didn't help either. Just before daybreak he'd given up and laid on the floor, directly above the living room sofa, for a few hours of almost restful sleep.

Now Ducky was here, fussing over McGee's shoulder, and Gibbs just wanted him to finish and leave them alone. Since that wasn't going to happen anytime soon, Gibbs busied himself looking through the groceries Ducky had brought with him. Tim had spent almost two hours painstakingly tapping out the order on his phone, one handed, and had it paid for and ready when Ducky had arrived at the store. Everything was fresh, organic and looked expensive, which reminded Gibbs that at some point he and McGee would need to discuss how to split the finances involved in living together.

"Well?" Gibbs turned as Ducky was packing up his medical bag.

Ducky didn't pull any punches. "Dragging you back inside yesterday certainly didn't do his shoulder any good, Jethro. It's quite inflamed and I've warned Timothy that if he doesn't take it easy, he could end up back in the hospital. Now, since I've given him a heavy dose of pain killers, an anti-inflammatory and a strong boost of his antibiotics, he will probably sleep most of the day. Let him."

"Yes, Dr. Mallard."

Almost rolling his eyes, Ducky settled for a glare. "This is for your own good, too, Jethro. You need him back on his feet if you ever plan on being back out in the field."

In truth, Gibbs was still struggling with the idea that his own recovery and movements were dependent on someone else. "Yeah, I got it."

Jim and Blair were at their desks at Cascade PD when Taggart waved them into his office. "We might have something." Sentinel and Guide were on their feet immediately, the detectives they were working with right behind them.

Taggart waited until they were all in his office and closed the door. "There was a pretty violent robbery near the I-5 interchange. Might be our boy, but the video is really grainy. This is all we've got. He ripped the camera out of the wall about halfway through the attack. Forensics is working to clean it up, but it's going to take a while."

Rafe frowned at the image as Jim leaned closer to study it. "Other than violent, what ties it into Kincaid?"

"Vietnamese store and deli, owners are immigrants, TrangHuuLanh and TrangHien Lien. They didn't put up a fight, but he beat the hell out of them anyway. Wife's in a coma, husband's on life support until the family can gather to say their goodbyes."

"Damn it." As an immigrant himself, this hit close to home for Rafe. He turned to the pair, watching as Blair's hand rested on Jim's back, grounding him.

Eventually, Jim leaned back, rubbing his eyes. "Yeah, it was him, all right. How long ago did this happen?"

"Earlier this morning. State Patrol has it secured for us, though." At the captain's words, the four climbed to their feet as Henry looked at the address they'd been given.

"I think I've stopped there before. They were nice people."

Since Tim was asleep on the sofa, Gibbs sat at the table, staring into his coffee cup as Ducky brewed himself some tea. Eventually, Ducky joined him at the table. "You don't seem all that happy to be home, my friend."

"Yeah, I'm home, but basically under house arrest, Ducky. I didn't ask for any of this."

"You're telling me that you never once suspected that you might be a Sentinel? That when you were in boot camp and everything became much sharper and clearer, that it never crossed your mind?"

"It was different then, I had..."

Ducky shook his head sadly when Gibbs wouldn't even say Shannon's name. "Timothy is your Guide now, Jeth-ro." When Gibbs just shook his head, Ducky reminded him of something that Gibbs hadn't admitted to himself. "Subconsciously, you chose Timothy years ago, long before your heightened senses started to return."

"No, it had nothing to do with my senses. It was because..."

"You were drawn to him in a way you didn't understand." Ducky finished for Gibbs before giving him a pointed look. "You stopped raiding my office for aspirin when Timothy joined the team."

Gibbs stilled, having never made the connection before, and Ducky patted his arm before standing up. "It will only be a few more days, I'm sure. Court the lad a bit. Lord knows you've had enough practice with all the ex-wives you've got floating around."

"Damn it, Ducky." Gibbs stood, knocking his chair over in the process. "I'm straight, how in the hell am I supposed to manage this?"

"He's your Guide, Jethro. When the time comes, you'll know."

"I guess I don't have a choice, do I?"

Neither man noticed that the Guide in question was awake on the sofa in the next room.

## Eleven

It was normally a two hour drive, but they made it in an hour, forty-five. Henry parked the police sedan next to the state cruiser and Jim pulled his truck up behind it.

Climbing out of the truck, Jim took a moment to look around. The off-ramp from the interstate was a long one, actually made up of two different off-ramps. One led to the small convenience store with an attached deli, along with a gas station across the street and a few lesser used roads. The second off-ramp, the primary one, led onto a state highway that headed east into the National Forest and beyond, to the eastern half of the state. Along the back side of the crime scene, the main highway was visible. I-5 continued on up to Cascade and on to the Canadian border while the southbound side went down to Portland. Three entirely different possible targets for the maniac they were after. Hopefully, they would find some clues inside.

The smell of blood was apparent to even non-Sentinel senses, but to the Sentinel it was but one of many layers hanging over the crime scene. Fear, terror, pain, anger and excitement, they each had their own signature and Jim found all of them in the devastation.

Shelves emptied, displays overturned, everything splattered with blood. They would have kept to the edges of the scene, but the destruction started right at the door.

"Somebody must have seen something." Brown shook his head and looked out the large front window. From that angle, the side of the gas station was in view, a solid brick wall. Pulling out his notebook to check the time stamp on the video, he turned to the Trooper guarding the scene. "When were they found?"

Comparing notes, they determined that the attack lasted no longer than twenty-seven minutes, but Rafe was shaking his head. "That still doesn't give him time to get away."

Blair had a question of his own. "They were found by a customer, right? So, did the customer stay here while they called it in, or did they leave?"

The Trooper checked his notes again. "Jumped back in her car, backed it all the way across the street to the gas station and called from there."

Jim was familiar with Kincaid, and the thrill he found in hunting any of what he considered the 'lesser' races, and was tracking his movements through the store. An enclosed building lent itself to retaining scent much better than the outdoors, even with the air being stirred up by emergency personnel.

Tracking Kincaid, the man he'd never forget, Jim opened the door to a small storage closet. The smell of blood and satisfaction was so strong it almost knocked him off his feet. "Over here, Kincaid hid in here before he left. Probably when the witness pulled up."

The Trooper wasn't convinced. He also didn't know that a Sentinel was on the scene. "No blood on the floor."

"No, but there's newsprint." Jim saw the smudged ink on the floor and pointed out a partially painted wall. A stack of newspapers that were being used to protect the floor were in the back hallway. Snapping on a pair of gloves, Rafe started turning over the wrinkled pages one by one until he found bloody footprints on one.

"How in the hell did we miss that?"

Jim didn't answer the Trooper's question as he carefully examined the narrow hall leading to the back door. Most of the blood had been stomped off onto the paper, but he could see the faint trace of a bloody boot print on several places. Continuing to track, he went out the back door and crossed to an old building in the back of the property. Dilapidated, with a rusty metal roof, many years ago it had been an automotive repair shop. Now it held a half dozen cars, all at least ten years old. Attached was a partially fenced area holding another seven cars, with an empty spot and recent tire tracks in the dirt.

Blair looked around. "If he stole a getaway car, where's the one he came in?"

"Good question." Jim looked around, but the front lot was paved, leaving no clues behind. "Guess we'll have to figure that one out later. Right now, we need to know what car he took from here." Jim pointed to the Trooper as he and Blair started walking to the gas station across the street. "We need a listing of all the vehicles the victim owned."

Another Trooper was with the witnesses at the gas station. The tire tracks from the crime scene were easy to follow, leading right to the little sports car that had slammed into the barricade surrounding the large propane tank. Inside, two people waited – the station manager and a young woman. The Trooper leaned over and whispered in Ellison's ear. "We haven't gotten a lot of details out of her yet. Every time we start asking questions, she gets hysterical again."

Knowing that this needed a Guide's touch, Jim stepped back and let Blair take over. Trying to look as harmless as possible, Blair crouched down before introducing himself. "Hi, I'm Blair, what's your name?"

Even that got the tears flowing again, but eventually Blair was able to piece together that her name was Kristi, Mrs. Trang made the best Pho and Kristi stopped every week on her commute as a sales rep. This week, she'd opened the door and found Mr. and Mrs. Trang beaten and bloodied. Terrified, she'd jumped back into her car,



throwing it into reverse and flooring the accelerator, not stopping until she hit the pole in the parking lot. After a frantic call to the police, she and the station manager hid in a storage room until help arrived.

"I'm sorry I didn't do more, but I was so afraid somebody was still there."

"What made you think that, Kristi?" Blair had been using his empathy to calm her down and she was remembering details now.

"I heard a noise in the back of the store." She frowned as she tried to grasp the stray memory. "It sounded like paper rustling."

Guide and Sentinel exchanged a look, knowing what Kincaid would have done with the pretty, blonde-haired woman. Blair squeezed her hand. "You did the right thing, Kristi. You made it to safety and got help; that's all you could have done."

Gibbs snorted at the detailed instructions Ducky left with their dinner that started with the location of the kitchen stove. It was preheated and the pan of chicken slid inside just as there was a knock at the door. Seated at the table, Tim stopped him before he could leave the kitchen. "Can you tell who it is?"

"Even I can't see around corners, McGee."

Tim let it roll off his back. "Use your other senses. Try to catalog everything you sense about them as you walk to the door. Check on the guards – are their heart rates steady?"

He tried hearing first, but their visitor wasn't saying anything. The guards outside weren't stressed, so it wasn't an enemy. The smell was familiar and Gibbs realized that he needed to memorize the scents associated with everyone he worked with. It obviously wasn't McGee and he was able to eliminate DiNozzo as well. He heard a sound then, a wet grinding on wood, and grinned at his success. "It's Vance. I can hear him chewing on that damn toothpick."

Moving out of the kitchen and away from McGee, Gibbs lost his grasp on his senses. He didn't zone, but a sudden headache was the result, fouling his mood before he even opened the door. "Director Vance."

"And a good evening to you, Gibbs." The Director was aware that the next few weeks were going to be difficult and he was prepared to give the new Sentinel a great deal of slack, but he wanted to prevent any public insubordination. "Let's talk inside."

Gibbs walked back into the living room, leaving Vance to close the door behind him. Falling into a chair, Gibbs watched as Vance sat on the sofa, obviously preparing for bad news, if his expression was any indication. Silently, McGee joined them, leaning on the doorway instead of coming into the room.

There was no way this was going to end up well, so Vance just jumped right in. "The FBI will be taking over the Shuhab investigation in the morning."

"Like hell they will." Gibbs was back up on his feet and pacing as he raked his hands through his hair. "The FBI wasn't even taking the case seriously until we got involved."

"And now they are taking it seriously. The attempted murder of a federal agent tends to do that. Fornell will be the lead agent so I'm sure he'll call you for your input on the case. This way you can focus on your new role as Sentinel, work on your bond and learn to control your senses. NCIS will continue to provide security for the two of you until Shuhab and his people are captured or until you leave for Cascade, whichever comes first. Director Banks tells me that they have people that can handle it on their end."

"I'm not some damn helpless civilian, Leon. I need to be tracking that animal down, not hiding like some frightened woman."

Vance stood and blocked his path. "No, but you are an unbonded Sentinel with an injured, unbonded Guide and absolutely no training. So concentrate on what you need to be doing and let someone else deal with Shuhab and if you're good, I won't tell Ziva what you said."

It took Gibbs a few moments to figure out what Vance meant, his eyes narrowing. "Funny, real funny."

"Hey, I run an underfunded, understaffed, armed federal agency that tries to keep up with the big boys. Now I've got the two of you to deal with. I take my humor where I can get it." He turned serious and stood toe to toe with Gibbs. "It's time to look at the big picture, Gibbs, and that is what you and McGee will be able to do eventually. That's what you concentrate on. That's what you work towards."

"Is an investigator at the hospital with the victims' family?"

"I'm not sure." Jim already had a headache from the crime scene and was letting Blair drive the truck to the hospital. "The victims won't be able to make a statement for quite a while, if ever."

Blair looked especially sad. "They came to this country to get away from the fighting and this is what happened to them. Do you know the meaning of his given name?"

"No, I don't."

"HuuLanh means 'very much peaceful'. It's just so tragic, you know?"

"Yeah, Chief, I know. All we can do for them now is to catch Kincaid before he hurts anyone else."

Lieutenant Carter with the State Patrol was at the hospital, waiting for them as they got off the elevator. "The family is with Mr. Trang. The doctors are disconnecting his life support."

Blair closed his eyes for a moment as Jim thanked him and Carter left to report in. Once it was the two of them, Jim wrapped his arm around Blair's shoulders and they found the waiting room.

Jim and Blair waited respectfully as the family and friends of the late TrangHuuLanh filed out of the room. An elderly gentleman escorting a young woman nodded to them before coming over as Lieutenant Carter made the introductions.

"This is Senior Sentinel Ellison and his Guide, Senior Guide Sandburg. They are here to investigate what happened to your parents, Miss Trang."

Red-eyed, but composed, she took Jim's hand. "Thank you for your help, Senior Sentinel. The state must be taking what happened to my parents very seriously."

"Yes, ma'am, we are. We've identified the man that attacked your parents and I give you my word, I won't rest until I've found him."

Blair took over, nodding to the daughter and her escort. "I noticed that your mother has taken your father's surname. Do you prefer Miss Trang or..." He paused, allowing her to fill in as necessary.

She smiled softly and shook her head. "My parents loved this country very much and took to most of the traditions, including names. Miss Trang is fine and this is Mr. Nguyen, my father's oldest friend. Thank you for asking, very few Americans even think about the differences."

"We know this is a terrible time, but do you think you could possibly answer a few questions for us?"

"Questions?" Her voice broke and she struggled for control. "My mother is still in a coma, I'm not sure how I can help you."

Blair waved his hand over at a sofa and the group moved, Blair and Miss Trang sitting on the sofa while Jim sat on the arm and her escort stood just off to her side. "There was a garage and fenced area near the store that had a bunch of cars. Did those belong to your father? They weren't registered in his name, but we believe their attacker might have stolen one."

When she started to cry, the elderly gentleman spoke for the first time. "HuuLanh was always fixing up cars to pass on to new immigrants to this country or anyone else struggling to get ahead. He told me that it was his way of passing on the good fortune of becoming a citizen. The only payment he would accept was the promise to help someone else when the time came."

Any loss of life was hard on a Guide, but this almost took Blair's breath away. Jim laid a hand on his shoulder and took over the questioning. "Do you know where he kept the titles? If we knew which car was stolen..."

"Of course. I believe he kept them in his desk at home. HuuLanh and I planned our families' escape from Vietnam together, but he was always the organized one."

"You've known each other a long time, then?"

Nguyen looked up at Jim, but they could tell he was seeing the past. "We grew up in the same village in Vietnam, married sisters the same week, became fathers the same month. My wife and their first child died during the escape."

"I am very sorry for your loss."

Gibbs paced in his bare bedroom before sinking down on the bed. Even if it was all in his head, the lack of Shannon's presence in the room left it achingly cold and empty. He froze when he looked at the bottle of lube on the nightstand before slowly reaching out and picking it up.

The label proclaimed it 'Sentinel safe' and 'all natural' which Gibbs didn't pay too much attention to, but he knew what the bottle represented – freedom and control on one side, betraying his bond with Shannon on the other. No matter what he might want, he knew he couldn't spend the rest of his life trapped in his house. Decision made, he tossed the bottle onto the bed.

The pamphlet caught his eye and he brushed it into the trash. All he needed was the one time to be able to return to the field and he had no intention of having further sexual relations with McGee.

## Twelve

"You okay, Babe?" Finally back at the loft instead of a hotel or crashing overnight at the DSA, Jim was tired, but Blair was starting to stumble.

Blair let himself be pulled into strong arms, the grief and pain he'd absorbed that day had left his shields in tatters. "They were such good people, Jim. After everything they went through to come to this country, it's just not fair."

"I know." Jim nuzzled Blair's neck, letting his teeth scrape against the skin before repeating the same path with his tongue. "We're going to get Kincaid. I don't care if I have to climb the tallest mountain to do it. We're going to get justice for the Trang's."

Jim could tell how fragile Blair's shields were and the need caused the bond to flare. Leaving their bags on the floor, Jim took Blair's hand and led him upstairs to the bedroom, leaving a trail of clothes as they went.

"Can you make it up the stairs?"

McGee jerked awake and tried to figure out what Gibbs was talking about. "What?"

"Upstairs, now. Let's just get it over with. I am not turning the Shuhab case over to the damn FBI."

Still not fully understanding what Gibbs wanted, McGee rubbed his eyes and levered himself off the sofa. Once upstairs, Gibbs led him to the bedroom and pointed at the bed.

"Drop your shorts and lay on your good side in the middle of the bed." Gibbs turned away as Tim slowly complied, refusing to even look at him.

Jim tenderly eased Blair onto the bed, peppering his skin with kisses. He pressed Blair's hands onto the bed, a silent command to let him run the show tonight, before turning his attention to Blair's chest. Circling his tongue around one nipple, then the other, he had Blair panting and begging before even touching the nubs themselves. It wasn't until Blair's back was arched off the bed and he was keening, that Jim sucked one nipple into his mouth, pouring all his love into the bond.

Smiling as he finally released it, Jim trailed his mouth down Blair's body, whispering words of love. Too soft to be heard, Blair could feel them against his skin and against his soul. Returning the smile, he felt the emotions he'd absorbed that day finally float away.

The bedroom light wasn't on and the lights from the hallway and the bathroom cast the bedroom in strange shadows as Tim tried to make himself comfortable on the bed and forced himself to relax. Behind him he could hear the rustling of clothes being removed before the bed dipped behind him as Gibbs joined him. Even knowing that, he still jumped when a hand touched his bare hip.

Gibbs had never appreciated having other lovers in the bed he'd shared with Shannon, deep down never having wanted them to replace her in his heart. Now, he was expected to replace Shannon, not only in his heart, but in his very soul, and with a man. The old anger and hurt from losing her bubbled up inside him, killing any arousal Gibbs might have had. Determined to do it, he closed his eyes and fantasized about Shannon being back in his bed, Shannon waiting for him to finally make love to her again.

Holding onto that image, he stroked himself until he was mostly hard and then used lubed fingers to quickly prepare McGee. One finger, pushing from side to side, then two, scissoring to stretch the muscles as much as possible. Without hearing Shannon's passionate cries, his erection was starting to soften, so he quickly pulled his fingers out and pushed his penis inside. The heat and the tightness did their job, bringing Gibbs back to full hardness as he rocked back and forth.

The touch to his backside was almost clinical, slick fingers probing and stretching him. Tim forced himself to relax, shifting his leg to give Gibbs more room. The fingers left and then a blunt object was at his entrance. Knowing what was about to happen, Tim took a deep breath and pushed, flexing the muscles and easing Gibbs' passage. He'd been stretched enough that there wasn't a great deal of pain, but there was no pleasure as the cock slid back and forth inside him. Gibbs didn't speak, didn't touch him, and as Tim's body absorbed the earliest fluids of their joining, he began to sense the other man's anger and hurt.

"Mmm, love you, babe." Jim nuzzled the side of Blair's face as he slid a hand down his body. "Love you so much. Gonna take such good care of you tonight."

Blair turned his face enough to kiss Jim. "Need you, need you so much."

"I know, I know." Jim's hand detoured for some lube before sliding between his legs.

"Yes." When Blair hissed in delight, Jim moved enough to take his cock into his mouth and suck it to hardness.

Jim pulled back enough for the hard shaft to pop out of his mouth before he kissed each of Blair's balls. "Tell me what you need, Blair."

"I need you in me. I need you around me."

"I can do that." Shifting enough to kneel between Blair's legs, Jim lifted his hips enough to slide all the way in before leaning forward to wrap his arms around Blair. There wasn't much leverage at this angle, but he rocked back and forth slowly as they kissed.

The physical pain was minor, but the emotional battering took Tim's breath away. He felt the old hurt of Ann's suicide, leaving her son way too soon, the raw tearing as Shannon's death shattered bond between Sentinel and Guide, husband and wife. Then there was the deep yawning ache of the loss of a father's little girl. As the natural shields protecting Tim's mind were peeled back, he could sense Gibbs' thoughts. His Sentinel was fantasizing about it being Shannon beneath him instead of his new Guide and that rejection hurt most of all.

Rather than get up, a couple of baby wipes had sufficed for the clean-up and now they were lying together, Blair draped over Jim, their legs tangled together. Jim picked up their intertwined hands and kissed each of Blair's fingers. "It's going to be okay."

"I know, but I keep thinking about the Trang's. Everything they went through to come to this country and all the good they did once they were here and someone like Kincaid crosses their path. It's just not fair."

Jim pulled him even closer and kissed his forehead. "No, it's not, but we're going to get him."

"Promise?"

"Oh, yeah, I promise. Whatever it takes, he'll answer for what he's done"

A single grunt signaled Gibbs' climax before Tim felt it. As Guides for millennium have experienced, accepting his Sentinel's seed inside him opened every part of his mind and soul to the one that should be his soulmate. Instead, all he experienced was the icy cold of an unwanted, unwelcome bond as Gibbs pulled out quickly. Tim wasn't the slightest bit hard, the emotions had taken care of that, and the gratitude from Gibbs about that was the final blow.

Grateful that he wouldn't have to deal with any further sexual contact with his new Guide and relieved that he could get on with his life, Gibbs climbed out of the bed, not looking back. All he wanted to do was to get rid of the evidence of his unfaithfulness to Shannon.

"Close the door on your way out, McGee and be ready to leave for the Yard at 0700."

Hearing the bathroom door slam, Tim flinched before slowly climbing out of the bed to retreat to the downstairs bathroom and then to the sofa.

After driving two hours out of his way, Garrett Kincaid pulled into a rest stop. There was little activity here and no one to notice him as he parked next to a pay phone. He dropped some change into the slot and punched in the numbers. A sleepy voice answered after a few rings and Kincaid grinned to himself. "Hey, baby girl, I need you to get a message through to your uncle."

## Thirteen

Tim wearily watched the sun break on the horizon before stiffly rolling off the couch, making a quick assessment of how he was feeling at the same time. His shoulder was throbbing, which was to be expected. There was a more intimate ache, but even that wasn't much of a surprise. It was the pain in his chest and head from a half formed bond that he hadn't been expecting. Under normal circumstances, the discomfort would only last a few hours. Once the bond was completed, the Guide's empathy was tied to, and grounded by, the Sentinel, but Tim suspected he might have a long wait.

Hoping to please his Sentinel in some way, Tim lumbered into the kitchen and started the coffee before looking through the refrigerator for something he could fix one-handed. Fried eggs were fine, but not two days in a row.

Upstairs, Gibbs smiled in his sleep and reached for the beautiful redhead just out of reach on the other side of the bed. She sadly shook her head and vanished just as his eyes popped open.

"No, don't leave me."

He sat up, nostrils flaring. The smell of McGee, not Shannon, was on the bed and he instantly felt sick with guilt. Desperate to rid the room of the smell, he yanked the sheets off the bed and threw them out into the hallway. Remembering what McGee had said, he went up to the attic to find the quilted bedspread Shannon had made them.

The box was easy to locate, but it was taped tightly shut. Unable to open it without his knife, Gibbs brought the box downstairs, setting it on the dresser and carefully cutting it open. Still wearing the sweats he'd put on after his shower the night before, Gibbs wrapped up in the quilt and laid back down, wallowing in his feelings of guilt. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Shannon crying in early morning light, refusing to look at him. He was still like that when McGee came up to tell him breakfast was ready.

"Food's ready, Boss." Feeling like an intruder under the onslaught of the other man's guilt, Tim stumbled down the stairs, barely making it to the bathroom before the dry heaves hit him.

"Morning."

All Jim could see was the hair, but he smiled at the mumbled greeting. "And a good morning to you. Ready to get up and face the day?"

Blair shifted enough that he could see Jim. "Would the world stop for a few more hours if I said no?"

The calm peace from their bonding was still surrounding them, so Jim knew exactly what he meant. Kissing the side of his face, Jim started to slide out from under him. "Tell you what – I'll go down and start the coffee and call the station, see if there's anything new. Then we'll see about officially starting the day."

Blair nodded, but pulled him closer for a proper kiss before letting him out of the bed. He listened as Jim went down to the bathroom to take care of his morning routine and a few minutes later the Sentinel was on the phone. When he heard Jim's quiet, 'yeah, we'll be there soon', Blair quietly rolled out of bed.

"What's up?"

Jim hung up the phone to see Blair standing in front of him. "State Patrol found a stolen car abandoned with a blown engine a few miles south of the Trang's store."

"Kincaid?"

"Maybe. It was stolen close to where he escaped. It's been impounded and is being towed to the evidence yard at the station."

"Okay." Blair looked longingly at the coffee maker that Jim hadn't started yet. "But you owe me coffee."



Tired and convinced that his mind was playing tricks on him, Gibbs went downstairs, pleased to find scrambled eggs and fried ham waiting on his plate. The coffee was already poured and he watched McGee struggling to butter the toast one-handed. Apparently satisfied, McGee brought the plate stacked with toast to the table and sat down.

Nothing was said as Gibbs ate his food and Tim picked at the small amount he'd given himself. Once Gibbs was done, he took his dishes to the sink, bringing back the coffee pot to refill their cups, along with McGee's pills. "Here, make sure you take your meds before we leave."

Jim hated to be out early after such an intense bonding, but it was necessary. The detectives were used to it and didn't raise an eyebrow at how closely he kept Blair tucked up against him. Henry just grinned at the younger of the pair as he signed for the car as the tow truck unloaded it. "Man, I hope Kincaid was in this car. Otherwise, we just paid for a tow for nothing."

"He was in it all right." Jim had barely stuck his head in the door before he reported back. "Same spice scent, too. So what direction was he heading before he blew the engine?"

Rafe was on a tablet, flipping through the pictures. "Afraid I can't tell. The car was found on a secondary road that you could reach from either north or south bound I-5."

They all looked to the Guide for options. Blair thought about it and calculated the approximate time Kincaid would have abandoned the vehicle. Knowing what Jim was hoping for, he shook his head. "It's been too long and too many cars have been on those roads to backtrack any leaks from the engine. We're better off getting any traffic camera footage."

"Even if we can get a warrant, it'll take hours to get that footage and bring it here." The two detectives exchanged a look and Rafe nodded. "Okay, I'll get it started."

Gibbs' car was still aboard the Yard, so they drove his truck to work. Gibbs was convinced something was wrong with the suspension because of the way it bounced and vibrated, but McGee disagreed. "It's always rode like this, Boss."

The older man started to disagree, but remembered to dial touch down a bit first. When he did that, it felt like it always had. "Oh." Out of the corner of his eye he could see how much discomfort the ride was causing McGee. "We'll leave the truck at the Yard and drive the car home tonight."

Tim latched onto that slight flicker of concern. "Thanks, Boss."

By the time they arrived in the bullpen, and a half dozen people had asked Gibbs if he was supposed to be there, the Sentinel was in a foul mood, too foul to notice the effect their arrival was having on his Guide.

All the way to the Yard, McGee had reviewed what he knew about bonding and bonded pairs. The theory was quite simple. Guide and Sentinel were a symbiotic pair. The Guide provides support and strength to the Sentinel, while the Sentinel shields the Guide from empathetic overload. It was something his mother taught him from a very young age, but he never realized its importance until that morning when he walked through the bullpen and felt every thought and emotion in the room. Few people knew the full meaning of the bond between Sentinel and Guide, but enough crude porn had been made over the years that many people knew that if they were there, he'd 'submitted' to Gibbs. Tim hated the rude thoughts about him from people he thought were his friends. Even Ziva's distrust of Guides in general hurt, but the worst were the feelings of betrayal from Tony.

Not looking any of them in the eye, Tim slid into his chair and tried to disappear behind his monitor.

Up in Major Crimes, Jim studied a map of the area. So far, Kincaid had done nothing to give away his plans. A call from Mr. Nguyen gave them hope.

~Sentinel Ellison, I have found the titles to the vehicles HuuLanh was working on. There is one title that does not match any of the vehicles listed by the State Troopers. I hope this is the vehicle you are looking for.~

"I hope so, too, Mr. Nguyen. If you can give me the information, we'll start searching for it." As it was read off, Jim wrote down the license plate number for the missing, dark green 1992 Ford Ranger pick-up truck and Henry immediately put a BOLO out on the truck.

The rest of Kincaid's lieutenants were under the watch of the FBI, but Jim wanted to talk to each of them personally, nevertheless. First up was Nolan, out on parole and securely tucked away at his house with a round the clock FBI team watching every move.

Gibbs just had time to find and pocket the key card for the bonding suite before he was summoned up to the Director's office. Standing, he glanced at his Guide and saw a pained expression. "McGee, go down and check in with Ducky, let him check you over." He didn't wait to see if his order was being followed before he left for upstairs.

Tim adjusted his sling before carefully standing. He felt another wave of hurt from Tony as he passed, not surprised at the angry outburst. Tony never did handle hurt very well.

"Walking pretty stiff there, McLove. What's the matter? Did Gibbs ride you pretty hard last night? You not enough man for him?"

He gave the expected come-back, but his heart wasn't in it. "Go to hell, DiNozzo."

For the first time ever, it was a relief to walk into Autopsy. The lack of living beings combined with Ducky's calm demeanor kept the room peaceful for the fragile Guide. Ducky took one look at him and sent his assistant out of the room, locking the door behind him and leading Tim into Ducky's private office.

"If you and Jethro are here, can I assume you have completed the bond?"

Tim gratefully dropped in the chair. "Not exactly completed, Ducky."

Dr. Mallard had spent every free moment since Gibbs had come online researching the relationship of Sentinels and their Guides and knew exactly what Tim meant. "This is a very difficult stage in the bonding process, Timothy. How long does Jethro expect you to wait before you complete the bond?"

"We're not completing the bond, Ducky." He'd known from the moment his natural shields had been ripped away, but saying the words made it even more real. "He can't, and I won't ask him to."

"You're not serious? Surely you realize what you will be facing."

Staring at his hands, Tim slowly nodded. "I've spent most of the night thinking about it, about why our bond is so damaged."

Ducky pulled a chair close and sat down facing Tim, their knees almost touching. "You have a theory?"

He nodded again, chewing on his lip before he spoke. "Shannon was his first Guide and when she died, the bond shattered, but I think Gibbs held onto it at his end. Those few fragments helped keep him sane until he subconsciously buried his senses."

"That makes a certain kind of sense."

"And now, his senses are back, bringing those fragments back on-line, but it's the wrong Guide at the other end of the bond."

As he'd said, Tim's theory did make a certain amount of sense to Ducky and explained the wives that Gibbs could never fully connect with. "Be that as it may, Jethro would not want to hurt you, Timothy."

"No, but my very existence is hurting him. He sees me as the one that forced him to break his marriage vows to Shannon, just by being a guide."

"Not just a guide, Timothy, you are his Guide, lad. You are Jethro's Guide, no matter how much he may fight it right now. He was drawn to you, wanted you, from the moment he saw you."

Tim shook his head, remembering how rarely he'd felt like part of the family Abby claimed they were.

Ducky leaned forward and tapped his knee to get his attention. "You think he didn't really want you because he's never treated you as one of his children, but I propose that on some level, a level that Jethro himself is not fully aware of, he always knew you would eventually take this place in his life."

"Maybe he knew, Ducky, but he doesn't want it. The emotions I felt from him..." Tim looked up at his Sentinel's oldest living friend at the Agency.

Ducky could feel that he was being tested and projected all the support he could, hoping that the new Guide could feel safe in confiding in him. Finally, Tim gave a slight nod and began to speak, one tear spilling over and trailing down his cheek.

"He didn't want me to move or to touch him or to say anything. He didn't touch me any more than what was necessary to get inside me and when the connection started to form, I could tell that he was fantasizing about Shannon. It was the only way he could stay hard enough to get the job done, but when enough of the bond formed that he couldn't hide from the fact that it was me on that bed and not Shannon, I could feel his guilt, his revulsion."

"Oh, Timothy, I'm sure that, given some time, Jethro will come to accept your place in his life."

"No, I don't think so. He couldn't get away from me fast enough last night, couldn't get in the shower fast enough to scrub every reminder off of him, couldn't get me out of that room fast enough. And this morning, the sheets were out on the hallway floor and he was wrapped up in Shannon's quilt like he was desperate for any reminder of her touch. I... I felt like a damned rapist, Ducky, and I never laid a hand on him."

Ducky wanted to offer platitudes, something to give the young Guide hope, but he could tell the situation was beyond that. "What can I do to help you, Timothy?"

"You've been researching all of this, haven't you? As a doctor to a Sentinel, you have access to information that would be – difficult – for me to get, right?"

"Yes." Ducky was wary, not knowing what McGee hoped to learn.

"Can you find me a way to get back my mental shields without affecting Gibbs? I'm not sure how long I can handle this."

It was a reasonable request, Ducky thought, and would give them time for Gibbs to come to terms with the changes in his life. "All right, I will see what I can uncover. In the meantime, feel free to come down here if you need the break, or spend some time in the bonding suite. That's been designed to block out emotion from outside the room. Did Jethro give you your key?"

"No, there was only one, and he has it."

"Odd, I could have sworn there were two. Well, ask Jethro, then. You can tell him that your shoulder is bothering you, if you don't want to tell him the real reason."

McGee gave a weary nod and levered himself to his feet as Ducky hurried to tell him the rest. "Take care of yourself, Timothy, and I will do my best to find the solution you seek."

"Thank you, Ducky. I just wish..." Tim had a wistful look on his face as he stopped in front of the door and turned to look at Ducky. "I just wish I could be what he wants."

"Give it time, lad, don't give up hope just yet."

Ducky kept the encouraging smile on his face until he heard McGee leave Autopsy, before he realized that Tim could feel Ducky's discouragement as well as the Medical Examiner, himself, could. He dropped back into his chair and pulled his glasses off to rub at his eyes. "Oh, Timothy, I am so, so sorry."

## Fourteen

There had never been any love lost between the Cascade PD and the local branch of the FBI, but it had definitely gotten chillier since Sentinel Perry had been assigned to the Northwest Division of the FBI. He insisted on being based at the Seattle office instead of the usual Spokane one, which was just close enough to Jim's territory to be a near constant irritant. As they arrived at the house where the FBI was set up to watch Nolan, Jim expected to find Perry. There was no sign of him, but his senses told them the other man had been there at some point. They also told Jim that the FBI was watching an empty house.

"When was the last time you saw Nolan?"

The blonde agent with the crew cut and wanna-be soldier attitude just shrugged as he turned to his partner. "Local yokel wants to know when we saw Nolan, Murphy."

Murphy, bald and too heavy to pass his next physical, but too close to retirement to care, sat up and rolled his eyes. "I'm old, not deaf you idiot." He turned to Ellison. "Last visual was yesterday when he walked out for his mail. He's been laying pretty low since we put him under surveillance."

"Yeah, real low. There's nobody alive in that house."

"What?" It took Murphy a minute to get out of his chair and by then Ellison and Sandburg were out the door and half way across the yard. "Fuck. Come on, Chambers, let's go."

"But Sentinel Perry said..."

"Forget Perry, don't you know who that was? That was the Senior Sentinel, and if he says there's nobody alive in there, then we're screwed." Murphy was panting by the time he caught up with the Senior Pair and realized the irony of dropping dead of a heart attack his last month on the job.

Ellison was standing on Nolan's walkway, not stepping up onto the front porch and waved the two FBI agents to stay back with Sandburg. Murphy froze, but Chambers kept going. Ellison grabbed his arm and swung him around. "Do you have a death wish or are you just stupid?"

"You said there was nobody in there."

"I smell C4. He left us a surprise."

"Well, crap."

The advantage of getting in the elevator in the basement is that you're usually riding alone. Unfortunately, one of the Foreign Intelligence Specialists was in Cybercrimes and called for the elevator to stop at the sub-basement. Tim immediately got some nasty vibes from the man as he moved closer to Tim, but one of the geeks from Cybercrimes joined them and Tim breathed a sigh of relief as the doors closed with the three of them inside.

"Well?"

The bomb tech looked up. "It's clear, Senior Sentinel. Glad you were here to sense it, otherwise it could have taken out a couple of the neighbors, too."

"Just doing my job." Jim looked over at a now very contrite FBI agent. "Did he have any calls or visitors, Chambers?"

"His, umm, his niece was here last night, left about nine or so."

"And you didn't think that was unusual?"

"She's been bringing him food every couple of days." Chambers shrugged and scratched at the side of his face. "Yesterday wasn't her normal day."

"Why the change in schedule?"

"I... I don't know."

Jim resisted the urge to roll his eyes. "Well, find out, will you?"

Blair felt sorry for the guy – just a little bit. "Anything else go on in the neighborhood last night or today?"

Chambers had to think about it for a moment. "No, just the next door neighbor getting something picked up a couple of hours before you got here."

Jim did a silent scan of the neighbor's home. It was not only empty, there was no residual heat patterns that indicated anyone had been in the house for a while and no one had answered the door when the bomb squad evacuated the neighborhood. "You mean the empty house that nobody lives in? That neighbor?"

"Well, crap."

It had taken a lot of persuasion, but instead of the FBI taking over the Shuhabcase, it was now a joint investigation. Invigorated from the win, Gibbs arrived back in the bullpen the same time McGee did, not noticing how shaken his Guide was from his near miss in the elevator. He slowed down, barking orders.

"McGee, find me a fresh trail. David, go find out what the Harbormaster has for us. DiNozzo, go over the earlier files. Find me an associate that we've missed. There has to be someone. I need coffee."

Tony and Ziva immediately got to work while Tim watched him leave, a feeling of dread growing. His Sentinel was supposed to notice when something was wrong. His Sentinel was supposed to care.

Still on alert, Ellison and Sandburg searched Nolan's house. The safe was open and empty, the shape of multiple weapons still visible in the foam while indentations in the carpet showed where several bags had sat for a while.

Even fewer clues were found in the neighbor's house. The refrigerator was empty and on the lowest setting, giving credence to Jim's claim that no one had been there for a while. Bushes in the narrow space between the two garages blocked the FBI's view of the plain door opposite Nolan's utility room door.

"This is how he got out without anyone seeing him."

Murphy knew they'd screwed up. "We need to find the connection between Nolan and the delivery company."

"Already found it." Rafe arrived, handing a stack of papers to Blair. "Richie Berman."

Sandburg was flipping through the pages. "We didn't even know he was out on parole."

"Convinced the Parole Board about six months ago, had a maintenance job at his uncle's delivery company all lined up. This morning, Richie took a truck out for a road test and nobody's seen him or the truck since."

"How convenient." Blair shook his head as he looked up at Jim. "He's dating Kincaid's niece."

The central contact was becoming apparent and Jim pulled out his phone, preparing to call for a search warrant. "We need to take a look at her phone records."

FBI Agent Tobias Fornell left for the Navy Yard expecting to have the Shuhab case handed over to him. By the time he arrived at the Yard, the case was a joint one. Still, when he walked into the building, he was surprised to find Gibbs and McGee at their desk.

"So, I hear congratulations are in order."

Gibbs climbed to his feet. "I wouldn't go quite that far, Tobias."

"Well," tapping the side of his nose, Fornell sat on the edge of the desk. "Does it mean that you'll be able to sniff him out now?"

"Funny."

Fornell grinned at DiNozzo. "Too bad it didn't improve his sense of humor."

Tony was still laughing when Fornell followed Gibbs up to MTAC.

After the discovery of Nolan's escape, every suspect under surveillance was physically checked. Jim was on the phone with Captain Taggart as Blair drove them back to the station. When Jim bit back a curse as he closed his phone, Blair knew someone else had slipped through their fingers.

"Who?"

Jim hesitated, knowing this would be hard on his Guide. "Van Dyke's son."

They were stopped at an intersection and Blair closed his eyes for a second, remembering the siege at the police station early in their bond. Van Dyke had survived the vending machine that had fallen on him, but he'd never been the same. Sent to prison in a wheelchair, Van Dyke had spent several years in solitary confinement to protect him from the other prisoners before getting a medically required sentence reduction to house arrest. His son had been young and impressionable and blamed the government for 'persecuting' his father.

"When?"

"Last night. Van Dyke's not talking, but his wife admitted that the kid got a text and took off, claiming to be meeting a friend."

"Friend like Kincaid, who needs enemies, right?" The light changed and Blair pulled out, hoping to end this particular conversation.

Jim remembered the hours that Blair had devoted to the kid, trying to help him see that what his father was doing was wrong. He'd been making progress, until Van Dyke came home. "You did everything you could, Chief."

"Yeah, just wish it had been enough."

Gibbs and Fornell were up in MTAC for an international briefing when Abby came up to the bullpen. Not seeing her new favorite silver-haired Sentinel, she made a beeline to her new favorite Guide. "McGee, I've missed you so much."

He stood just as she plowed into him. The emotions were joyful, but a bit much and staggered him. She didn't seem to notice as she peppered him with questions. "Are you really going to live with Gibbs? Has he fixed you a cowboy steak yet? Do you want me to come over and help you unpack? Why are you back already? I thought you couldn't be around anyone until... McGee, you bonded!"



Abby squealed and hugged him again before she got a sly look on her face. "So, was it as good as they say it is?"

"Abs." McGee blushed and stammered, not knowing what to tell her. Behind them, DiNozzo stood, kicking his chair out of the way, and Tim winced at the sudden burst of hostility

"I'm going for coffee." He glared at McGee, feeling both pleasure and guilt at the pained look on the Guide's face. Abby watched the exchange wide-eyed, but filed it away for later when McGee just shook his head.

"Phone logs." Rafe dropped the stack on the table in front of his partner and Brown looked at him in surprise as Taggart set down his phone.

"How'd you manage to get them that quick?"

"Ask them." He pointed to Jim and Blair as they came in with trays of food for a late dinner.

Jim just grinned as he helped himself to the food before Blair started handing out the rest. "I had Simon pull some strings. Kincaid's interest in Sentinels makes him a terrorist with special circumstances. At least that's what the official request from the DSA stated."

"Nice. Okay, let's see what we've got." Blair was better at sorting through papers than Jim, so the Sentinel sat back and let his Guide work his magic with them. It didn't take long. "Yep, she called and sent texts to Joshua Van Dyke's cell phone almost every night. Let me guess, the FBI were watching his father's cell phone and the family's land line, but not the kid's cell?"

"Got it in one, Chief. Now, how did she get the information? What do we have for incoming calls?"

Blair skimmed down the list and one caught his eye. "Got a call from a pay phone about ninety minutes before she showed up at her uncle's house."

"Really?" Henry was sitting nearest the computer and turned, resting his fingers on the keyboard. "Give me the number and I'll find the location."

"Excellent." They all looked up as a group from the FBI walked in. Sentinel Perry was leading the group and seemed pleased to have arrived at the right time. "Give us the location and we'll have the lot of them back in custody before this time tomorrow."

They really didn't have a choice, the location finished loading and showed up on the computer monitor just as Perry made his announcement. Pleased, he leaned over Henry's shoulder. "Just as I suspected, he's heading north, towards Seattle and probably trying to get across the border. Are you coming with us, Ellison?"

Jim made a split second decision and shook his head. "I wouldn't want to interfere with a FBI operation. My Guide and I will clean up the loose ends here."

George Perry was pleased; he'd been expecting a fight. Being the one who captured Kincaid would garner a lot of attention. "I'll be sure to mention your support at the press conference."

Jim gave him a nod. "Appreciate that, George."

Sentinel Perry turned and left, his Guide and the FBI agents scurrying to keep up. Jim listened as they got on the elevator and followed their conversation until they left the building. When he pulled his hearing back, he was surrounded by expectant faces. Jim grinned and shook his head at Blair. "He thinks he's going to find Kincaid and then be given the title of Senior Sentinel."

"As if."

The snort made the detectives smile, but Captain Taggert was worried. "Is there any chance that he could stumble across Kincaid?"

"You really think that Kincaid is going to run to Canada and hide?"

"Good point. Okay, so he's finally making contact with his people. Where is all this going to happen?"

"I might have something." Brown walked over to the printer and waited as the machine started spitting out pages. He skimmed over them, and then handed the pages over to Jim. It appeared to be a list. "We had half of the Police Academy's graduating class at the Trang crime scene sorting out the merchandise and Miss Trang compared the list to the store's sales records for us."

"That must have been hard on her."

Rafe wasn't a Guide, but hearing about it had made him uncomfortable, too. "It was her idea. She, umm, she said she needed to do something to help catch the man that did this to her family."

Henry nodded in agreement. "I think she's onto something."

Both Jim and Blair looked over the list and realized what he meant. The store's entire stock of energy bars was gone along with every item that could possibly be considered survival gear.

"He's going to ground."

"Where?"

Blair pointed to a map and Captain Taggert brought it over and spread it out on the table. Once that was done, Blair placed his hand on Jim's back, grounding him, as the Sentinel studied it. Jim traced his finger along the lines that indicated the various freeways where they knew Kincaid had traveled. It was a few minutes before he tapped at the center of the Rainier National Forest.

"Here. If you ignore the phone call, this is his most likely destination."

"He knew we'd eventually find out about the phone call. What better way to throw us off his trail?"

"It worked on Perry." Brown thought about the hours he'd spent trying to get useful information from Southern. "Kincaid had a secret base camp someplace there, but Southern wasn't high enough on the food chain to know where it was."

Rafe was dreading the answer he knew was coming since Jim was grinning. "So, how do we track him?"

"We hunt him the old-fashioned way. Pack up and get a good night's sleep. We leave at first light."

Except for lifting the hot pan out of the oven, Tim had been able to fix their dinner with no help from his Sentinel. He'd fixed the meal that his mother would cook when she needed to butter up her husband. Gibbs had eaten two helpings and seemed pleased, so Tim was hoping that he'd have similar luck.

"Boss?" Gibbs looked up at the questioning voice, which Tim hoped was a good sign. "We need to talk about completing the bond."

"Nope." Gibbs tossed his napkin aside and carried his plate to the sink. "All we needed was the ability to get back to work without being joined at the hip. We don't need any of the rest of that crap." Ignoring anything else from his Guide, Gibbs retreated to the basement to work on his boat, getting distracted by the far corner where Shannon kept appearing and disappearing, a look of sadness on her face.

## Fifteen

"Rafe went shopping."

Jim looked up at Blair's subvocal comment and snicker, only to smother his own grin. The GQ member of the Cascade PD looked rather uncomfortable in brand new jeans, flannel shirt and hiking boots. Not only that, but the backpack and all his gear were painfully new.

"Didn't have a pair of boots already broken in, Rafe?"

"I've never owned a pair of hiking boots in my life, Jim."

The side of Jim's face twitched. "Make sure you wear two pairs of socks to protect your feet, then. We've probably got a lot of walking to do before this is over."

"Wonderful." But the expression on his face, told the opposite story.

Captain Taggart came out of his office, grinning. "Well, Jim, looks like we've got proof you were right. Too bad Sentinel Perry and his FBI lackeys are prowling around the Canadian border pissing off the Mounties."

Jim had to grin at that comment; his late night phone call to his contact with the Royal Canadian Mounted Police appeared to have paid off already. "Something come in on the BOLO's last night, Sir?"

"Sure did. That missing pick-up from the Trang's store was found in one of the parking lots near the northern entrance of the Rainier National Forest."

Blair had the map out and Taggert marked the location as Jim studied it. "We'll go about a mile past the last picnic area and then do a sweep, see if we can pick up some sort of trail. He'll be heading in deep, toward the mountains, and with any luck we'll be able to find him before a group of hikers stumbles onto him."

"Good luck, Jim. A couple of Forest Rangers will meet you at the truck. We'll be monitoring the radio from here."

"Since we know approximately where he's going, can we use a chopper with heat detection to narrow it down for us?"

The city boy's question had Jim shaking his head. "Sorry, Rafe, he'd hear it before he was in range of the sensors, plus there's bound to be hikers in the area. Like I said, we're going to do this the old-fashioned way."

McGee had a follow up appointment at Bethesda that morning. Gibbs was annoyed at the delay to the work day, but he realized that he didn't have any choice. He knew that McGee was hurrying to get ready, but he was only wearing a lightweight jacket, not appropriate for the morning chill. "Where's your coat?"

"Have no idea." Tim shrugged his good shoulder and pulled the jacket tighter. "None of the boxes are labeled and I can only get into the ones on top."

There wasn't time to look, but Gibbs did turn the heat up more than usual in the car for the drive into Maryland.

Dr. Adams wasn't pleased with the progress of McGee's injury. "You're running a low-grade fever and you look like hell, Guide McGee. I'm seriously considering readmitting you into the hospital for a few more days."

Tim almost panicked and quickly glanced at Gibbs. They weren't joined at the hip any more, but being that far away from each other would definitely be uncomfortable, at least for him, and he certainly didn't want to tell an almost total stranger about the problems with the bond. "That's not necessary. I really rest better at home than I did here."

"I'd believe that if you looked like you've actually gotten some decent rest." Adams didn't deal with a lot of Sentinels and Guides, but he dealt with enough military to recognize the stubborn look that signaled a losing battle. "All right, we'll try it your way for a few more days. I'm going to change your antibiotics though and I expect your Sentinel to make sure you don't exert yourself more than necessary."

Dr. Adams looked over at Gibbs, who nodded. "Except to use the head, I'll make sure he stays put today."

"Good. Report in daily with Dr. Mallard. He'll make the final decision, but otherwise, I'll see you at your next scheduled appointment."

Rafe and Henry's supplies were added to what Jim and Blair already had in the bed of Jim's truck. Taking pity on Brown, Blair climbed into the jump seats with Rafe, leaving the front passenger seat for the slightly stockier man.

Middle of the week, they made good time and the rangers were waiting for them as they pulled in next to the stolen Ford. The shorter and older one of the pair joined them as soon as they climbed out of Jim's truck. "Senior Sentinel Ellison? I'm Paul Miller and that's Eric Rice."

A tall, gangly red-head with two backpacks grinned and gave them a short wave before jogging over and handing one of the backpack to his partner. "I'm really looking forward to working with you, Senior Sentinel Ellison. I've always wanted to watch a Sentinel track someone."

Jim wondered if he was ever that young and impressionable as he pointed to Blair. "He's my Guide, and you do whatever he says. Got it?"

"Yes, Sir."

With a look that promised payback, Blair's first job was to keep Eric back out of the way and downwind as Jim moved to examine the abandoned vehicle.

Tony DiNozzo didn't feel comfortable doing it, but he couldn't seem to stop either, as he sat in the parking lot at Walter Reed Hospital waiting for the sleek Mercedes that Dr. Hamel drove. He'd spent a sleepless night calling in almost every favor he was owed, but he'd found out about the research Hamel had been doing before he took over the Sentinel Unit at Reed. Watching the car arrive, Tony climbed out of his car and walked across the parking lot, carefully timing his arrival.

"Colonel Hamel, we weren't formally introduced before. I'm Tony DiNozzo with NCIS."

Hamel bit back a smile and he took the offered hand. "Oh, of course, from the bar the other day. Tell me, how is your friend doing? The bond progressing the way it should be?"

"No. No, I don't think it is."

Never one to look a gift horse in the mouth, Dr. Hamel waved his hand towards the medical office building. "Let's go up to my office and talk about it."

It had only taken a few seconds for Jim to confirm that Kincaid had been in the car, but a little longer to determine that no other clues were to be found. Now they were preparing to move out. Henry had gone fishing with them a few times and just shook his head at Blair's fishing spear, but Jim's cross-bow got a second glance. "Gonna go medieval on his ass, Jim-Boy?"

"Whatever it takes, H. Whatever it takes." Anything else Ellison might have added was interrupted as he saw Rafe struggling into his overloaded backpack. Jim shook his head and took the backpack off the other man. "We're traveling light and fast, Rafe. Time to lighten the load."

While Rafe spluttered, Jim pulled out a week's worth of clothes, only leaving one change of clothing and three pairs of socks. The shaving supplies, the hair gel, the camp toaster, all but one of his pots and pans and another dozen unnecessary items were all tossed into Jim's truck before the pack was closed back up.

"There, now maybe you can keep up with us."

Rafe started to complain, but when the pack was back on his shoulders, it felt a lot better than it had before. "Thanks. Guess the sales guy saw me coming."

"Hiking for fun and hiking to chase a fugitive are two different things. You'll catch on, don't worry." Jim looked around. The two rangers had rejoined them, packs over their shoulder, both of them armed. Jim pulled out a bagged rifle from under the seat and locked the truck. The rifle would stay in the bag until they were past the day use area. No need to attract attention of any kind.

"Okay, let's go."

Tony didn't waste any time. "I did some checking on your research, Sir. You've been working on a way to develop a stronger Guide. One better suited to support a strong Sentinel."

"A strong Sentinel like your friend?"

Jumping to his feet, Tony started pacing the office. "I'm Gibbs' Senior Agent. I was his partner when it was just the two of us and no other team. McGee's a nice guy, but he's a computer geek. He's going to get them both killed; he's not cut out for this."

Hamel leaned back in his chair, fingers pressed together under his chin. "Natural Guides have their place, but they're often not cut out for the demands of a Sentinel. It may not be politically correct, but the military knows this. There's never been a Guide that would make it through the training and become a Green Beret or a Seal on their own, but we give them that position anyways because the Sentinel needs them there. Most teams that have a Sentinel and a Guide end up having to assign an extra member just to make sure the Guide can keep up, carry them if need be.

"You're right. My research is designed to change all of that. To take someone who already has the skills to be on an elite team and then give them the ability to become a Guide." Hamel shifted and opened a drawer in his desk, pulling out a bottle of pills.

"I've spent years developing this. Take two of these pills and within thirty minutes, probably less, a man's body is chemically the same as a natural born Guide. In theory, at least. The civilians have put a stop to my research, I'm afraid. It appears that Director Banks has friends in high places and Ellison's pet manages to put on a pretty good show for the politicians every year."

Tony stared at the bottle as Hamel set it on the corner of his desk. "What if you had a volunteer?"

The longing in the green eyes was apparent and Hamel had done his homework, too. Standing, he stepped over to the window, turning his back on DiNozzo. "I would willingly take a volunteer. Someone dedicated and loyal to a newly awakened Sentinel would be the perfect candidate. Unfortunately, as I said the other day, my hands are tied. I can't ask, even if the perfect volunteer was sitting in my office right now. Good day, Agent DiNozzo. I do hope our paths cross again at some point."

Hamel didn't turn away from the window until he heard his office door close. When he finally did move, he smiled, not at all surprised to find the bottle missing from his desk.

With the FBI focusing their attention elsewhere in the hunt for Kincaid, Simon Banks was scrambling to pull together enough security for the Guide University, not to mention the boarding school for underage Sentinels that had yet to come online. It took Rhonda several attempts to get his attention.

"Director Banks, Dr. Mallard is on the phone for you."

Slamming the phone down on the Army officer that was demanding he go through proper channels, Simon rubbed his face as he picked up the phone. "Rhonda, call Jack and Daniel out in Colorado, see if they can help us."

Once she nodded and returned to her desk to make the call, Simon punched the flashing light on his phone. "Ducky, how's it going back there?"

~Not well, I'm afraid.~

Simon listened, rubbing his face again, as the situation was explained. "Damn stubborn ex-Marine."

~Once a Marine, always a Marine, I'm afraid.~

The day was definitely going from bad to worse. "With the bond this unsettled, anything we give McGee is going to affect Gibbs. At least anything currently available. I'll get our researchers onto the problem, see if they can alter one of the drugs we already have, but I wouldn't get my hopes up."

~I was afraid of that, Director Banks, but it was worth a try.~

"Understood. Keep me posted, Dr. Mallard."

Tony saw Gibbs and McGee waiting for the elevator, so he ran for the stairs, making sure to be casually sitting at his desk when they arrived. It wasn't until Gibbs smirked at him that he realized Gibbs probably sensed him downstairs and certainly sensed how winded he was now.

Gibbs had no idea why DiNozzo had been so late this morning but his punishment would take care of another problem. He looked at McGee as he settled into his desk before realizing that he couldn't reach the stack of print-outs that had been left on the other side of his monitor.

"McGee, you heard what I told the doctor. You don't move from that chair except to use the head. DiNozzo is your designated gopher for the day. Understood?" Gibbs looked at McGee first for understanding, then turned to stare at Tony until he, too, nodded. "Good. DiNozzo, you can start by helping him with those papers. I'll be up in MTAC."

By noon, they were well past the day use area. There were some faint signs of a trail, but it was Sentinel instinct more than anything that led them deeper into the woods. It was another hour and one of the Park Rangers was about to say something when they spotted a broken branch and some footprints in the soft dirt.

Jim held his hand up and they all stopped while he examined the find. "Four men, five or six hours ahead of us, and traveling fast."

"That's got to be them. Kincaid, Berman, Nolan and Van Dyke, junior." Blair was using his fishing spear as a walking stick and leaned against it as they huddled around the map the rangers were holding. "Any idea where they're headed? Just because Jim can see to walk all night doesn't mean the rest of us can."

Rafe gave a slight squeak at the comment about hiking all night, but everyone's attention was on Jim and the senior ranger looking at the various hiking paths on the map while the younger ranger was staring at the faint footprints, trying to tell the difference between them.

Paul nodded in approval as Jim explained the plan, pointing out the trails on the map. "They're following this ridge. In about five miles, they'll have to either turn left or right. Once we know that, we can probably start to narrow down on their ultimate goal."

"Can we cut them off?"

"Depends on which way they go at the fork. If they take the left hand fork, the terrain is pretty rough and we'll more than likely have to stick to the trail. If they go right, we might be able to gain a little on them."

Sentinel and Guide exchanged a look, knowing where luck would lead them. Blair swung his pack up onto his shoulders. "How ya' doing, Rafe?"

"Don't ask."

Gibbs and Fornell spent the day back and forth between MTAC and the interrogation room as different suspects were brought in. That meant large amounts of time where Sentinel and Guide were separated and the still angry senior agent used every opportunity to snark and throw insults, falling into the pattern of how he'd



treated the younger man many years ago. In truth, he was spoiling for a fight, not understanding why Tim wasn't fighting back.

"Go right, go right."

Jim had to smile at the whispered pleading he heard from their city boy, but it didn't look like he was going to get his wish. He'd checked both ways carefully and there was no doubt which way the group had gone. If anything, it was too apparent and Jim took out his rifle as a precaution.

"Jim?"

His Guide was worried, that was obvious. "They're not even trying to cover their tracks. Either Kincaid has gotten sloppy or..."

"He wants us to follow him."

Now on high alert, they slowly moved forward, Jim watching both for trouble and a place to camp for the night. They had about one hundred feet of open, rocky path before they would be back in heavy woods.

They'd almost made it when a reflection up on a high hill caught Jim's attention. Sight zooming in, he brought his rifle up quickly, but another shot echoed through the valley along with his. Jim saw the sniper fall back, before turned to check on his Guide, then the rest of the group. Blair was crouched down next to Henry, putting pressure on a bleeding wound. Rafe had his gun out, looking around, while Miller already had his rifle in position.

A handgun wouldn't have the range and the younger ranger seemed shocked, so Jim yelled at the two of them to help Blair get Henry to safety. Once they had him past the bushes, Jim covered Miller, then made his own run to safety.

"How bad?" Jim leaned over Blair's shoulder, checking out the wound. Henry's face was dotted with sweat and he was cursing under his breath as Blair wrapped a pressure bandage around his leg.

"Through and through, but it might have nicked the bone. You'll have to check to tell for sure."

Once the bleeding was under control, Blair moved back to let Jim take his place. Dialing up touch as much as he dared, Jim carefully examined the wound, feeling all around the leg and sensing the slightest movement in the bone. "Yeah, Chief, I think you're right. Let's get a splint on it just to make sure."

Hearing that, Rice pulled out his chain blade and went to a nearby tree. Finding two straight branches, he sawed them off and went to work stripping away the smaller branches and the loose bark before bringing them back to Ellison. Jim was prepared and quickly tied them to each side of Brown's leg to keep it rigid.

Once that was done, he traded places with Blair again, leaving his life partner to care for the injured man. When Jim moved to the side, Rafe and Ranger Miller joined him.

"What do we do now, Jim? Do we carry him back down or get a helicopter up here?"

Jim knew Rafe was worried about his partner, but nightfall was rapidly approaching. "Neither for tonight. The shooter went down, but I couldn't tell any more than that. No matter what, we're going to have to hunker down here until morning. I'll leave a couple of hours before daylight and make my way up to the top of that cliff. If it's clear, we can bring a chopper in."

Rafe nodded at what wasn't being said. A helicopter carefully lowering into that small clearing would be a perfect target. "Okay, so we camp here?"

"Yep. And we can't risk a fire, so it's going to be a cold night."

They moved Henry next to a large boulder that had been in the sun earlier. It wasn't much, but the radiant heat helped some. Rafe was on his other side while the rest took a watch. Jim and Blair took the first watch and the rangers took the second, giving the Sentinel and Guide a few hours rest before they had to leave in the morning.

Gibbs sat at the table, noting the lack of food anywhere but in front of him. "Aren't you eating?"

Shaking his head, Tim swallowed his pills and finished the water in his glass. "No, I'm just going to go to bed."

"You need to eat something." Gibbs noticed the hand pressing against Tim's stomach and the sallow complexion.

Tim's stomach rolled at the very thought of trying to force some food down. "Maybe later." He looked like he was going to say something else, but instead, turned and left the room. Gibbs ate automatically, noting that his Guide had probably spent a lot of effort on the meal.

After he was finished, Gibbs quickly cleaned up in the kitchen before stepping into the living room. Tim was asleep on the sofa, but he didn't look comfortable. Gibbs quietly adjusted the strap on his sling before pulling the blankets further up. He watched him sleep for a few more minutes before retreating to his bedroom.

Upstairs, Gibbs stripped down and wrapped up in Shannon's quilt. He knew he wasn't being fair to his new Guide, but he just couldn't let go of the past.

## Sixteen

His phone rang at 0400. Tim knew it wasn't Gibbs telling him they'd been called out, so that left only one other real option and the Admiral was the last person he wanted to talk to. Duty had him picking up his phone even as he wanted to bury it under the blankets. A voice was barking at him the second he let the call connect.

Timothy, tell me this is some stupid rumor and that you're going to put a stop to it right now.

He really needed coffee before dealing with his father, but the coffeemaker wouldn't kick on for another half hour. "Which rumor would that be, Sir?"

Don't play stupid, Timothy. It's an embarrassment to the family name. Have you or have you not bought into all that Guide crap? I thought I trained you better than that.

"I'm a Guide, Dad. I've had a latent bond with a dormant Sentinel for years. He came online, the bond formed. I don't think either one of us had a choice. By the time we were conscious, it was a done deal. It's kind of like breathing, you don't really have a choice in the matter."

If that bullet had hit you in the head, at least you could have died a hero.

Tim wasn't aware of Gibbs' arrival until he plucked the phone out of Tim's hand. Gibbs' voice was pure steel as he laid down the law to Admiral John McGee. "Any further contact with my Guide will be through me."

The possessiveness he heard and felt gave McGee hope, but Gibbs just disconnected the phone and tossed it over to him before going back upstairs without a word.

As promised, Jim and Blair left the group before daybreak and carefully moved up the trail. It was too dark to see much of anything, so Blair held onto the back of Jim's jacket. "You hear anything yet?"

"There's some raccoons over there."

Blair could tell Jim's left arm went up, but that was about it. "What about human?"

"Not yet."

Daylight was just starting to break when they were ready to make the climb. Jim stood, Blair grounding him, and stretched his senses as far as he could. Other than the native wildlife, nothing could be seen or heard. When he dialed up smell, Jim got a good idea of how effective his shot had been.

"Anything?"

"Blood, death."

Blair just nodded as Jim used the satellite phone to call for the chopper, arranging for them to not make a final approach until he gave them the all-clear.

It wasn't a sheer cliff face, but the final climb still took almost an hour, enough time for the chopper to arrive and land next to the parking lot to wait for them. Just before they reached the top, Jim paused again, checking to see if they were still alone. Nothing human was in range so they made the final part of the climb, Jim immediately tucking Blair between some rocks as he continued to scan.

Blair knew Jim was checking further out and rested his hand on Jim's leg as an anchor. Eventually, Jim pulled his senses back and nodded. "I think we're clear. Kincaid's more worried about getting to his bolt-hole than sticking around to jump us again."

Determination made, Jim called for the chopper to come on in before they went to examine the body.

Death had not been quick for Nolan, they soon discovered, as he'd dragged himself about forty feet judging from the blood trail and scuff marks. Footprints around the final resting place of the body showed that he hadn't been alone when he died, but there had been no attempt to stop his bleeding.

Blair stared at the body, one arm stretched out toward the grouping of footprints, suggesting a last cry for help. "They stood there and just watched him die, didn't they? That's really cold."

Another smell had caught Jim's attention and he followed a set of footprints a little ways to find a hastily covered spot. "Well, one of them puked. Pretty sure it wasn't Kincaid, though."

"Probably Van Dyke's kid. Rhetoric is one thing. Actually watching someone die is another."

Jim had to agree with Sandburg's assessment. "If the kid's not liking his new reality, it might work in our favor."

They could hear the helicopter on approach and Jim turned his attention back to the surrounding hills, looking for a second sniper. Under the Sentinel's watchful eye, the chopper landed and Henry was carefully loaded. Neither of them relaxed until the helicopter was airborne again and had gained enough altitude to be safe. Once the rescue had been successful, Jim waved the rest of the group toward the trail they'd marked and then he and Blair settled in to wait for them.

Tim had looked even worse that morning, so Gibbs took the carton of eggs out of his hands. "Sit down before you fall down – just don't tell Ducky I know how to do this."

"Umm, okay." Tim watched as Gibbs mixed up the eggs and poured them into the skillet, soaking up that little bit of concern from his Sentinel. He still wasn't hungry, but he forced down a few bites in appreciation. Satisfied, Gibbs herded him out the door as soon as Gibbs ate his last bite.

Ellison was chomping at the bit to start after Kincaid the moment the others caught up with them, but Rafe and Rice dropped to the ground the second they arrived. Miller gave Jim a crooked grin. "Kids today, no stamina."

Jim gave them ten minutes, then urged them onto their feet. Miller decided to dangle a carrot to get them moving. "Come on, there should be a stream up ahead. We can top off the canteens."

Rafe perked up at that. "How far?"

"At your speed, thirty-five minutes."

Bouncing on his heels, Blair grinned at Jim. "And at your speed?"

"We'll be there in twenty, Chief."

At ten minutes, Jim held up his hand.

"What's wrong?"

"A smell..."

Blair knew that Jim knew, but sometimes the reminder helped him focus. "Piggyback sight onto scent. Find where it is."

Nodding, Jim was already tracking the odd scent. It just took a moment for him to find it. "Damn it. They've poisoned the creek."

Miller bit back a curse and they all picked up the pace. Sure enough, when they arrived at the creek, several dead fish were floating along the bank. Hoping to minimize the damage, Miller and Rice worked up the creek, finding a box of pesticide wedged between several rocks about fifty yards upstream. Jim joined them and checked carefully for any sort of booby trap. Finding none, he gave the nod to Rice before he waded out. Gloves on, the box was retrieved and quickly bagged up while Miller used the satellite phone to notify his superiors.

"Well?"

Miller answered Blair's question, knowing that the Sentinel had already heard both sides of the conversation. "They're closing all the public access areas of the park to limit the risk, but they can't do any more until you've located Kincaid and his people."

Blair understood, even if he didn't like it. "Kincaid could have more followers coming and a cleanup crew would make some great hostages."

"Go see Ducky."

Tim just nodded and stayed on the elevator as Gibbs stepped off. His last view of the bullpen was of DiNozzo jumping up to tell Gibbs everything he'd accomplished, his pride and desire to re-establish himself as Gibbs' number one a physical presence in the room.

As the elevator doors closed, Tim leaned back against the steel wall, already exhausted. Every day Gibbs seemed more and more energetic and Tim just wanted to crawl back onto the sofa that was now his bed and pull the covers over his head.

This early in the morning no one else called for the elevator, so his trip to the basement was uninterrupted. Relieved, Tim went straight for Autopsy, giving a wan smile to Ducky's assistant as he passed him.

"Hi, Jimmy."

Palmer was a naturally happy person and turned with a smile that fell as soon as he saw McGee. "Hey, McGee, you look... actually, you look horrible."

"Thanks, Jimmy."

"Oh, man, I'm sorry. It's just that you look like someone who..."

Feeling how embarrassed Jimmy was, Tim tried to make light of the situation. "Got shot a few days ago?"

"More like someone who should still be in the hospital." Worry overcoming embarrassment, Jimmy hovered as McGee walked over to Ducky's office door. While Ducky was steering him inside, Jimmy rushed over to start a pot of tea for them.

Once it was the two of them and the door was closed, Ducky gave him a careful look. "Mr. Palmer might be right, but I suspect that another trip to Bethesda would not help the situation. Am I correct?"

Tim hesitated, and then gave a slight nod. "It's the bond. It's like the spot where the other end of the connection should be is just a big gaping hole and all my energy is just leaking out."

"Actually, that is a rather apt description, I'm afraid. You need to tell Jethro what is happening. As your Sentinel, it's his right to know and his responsibility to fix."

"His feelings haven't changed, Ducky."

"If he knew how much damage he was doing to you..."

"Guilt him into it? That's not going to help the bond at all. Might make it even worse."

"Honestly, lad, how much worse could it get?"

"We could both be suffering like this, Ducky." Tim looked up and the ME was stunned at the crushing exhaustion he saw in the green eyes. "I don't know, Ducky, maybe Tony's right and he should have been Gibbs' guide."

"Not possible." Dr. Mallard leaned forward and tapped McGee's knee to get his full attention. "Because of Tony's strong reaction, we did question whether he might have some latent guide abilities also. Director Banks and I did an extensive search into his background. Both sides of his family, as far back as the records have been kept and not one single Guide in his family tree. Not only that, but he had the standard testing as a child. Anthony DiNozzo may be many things, but he is not a Guide."

Tim shook his head. "I'm not sure if that makes it easier or harder. Gibbs needs a Guide he can open up to and trust and apparently it's not me."

"Somehow, we need to get through that thick skull of his."

There was a slightly hysterical tinge to McGee's laugh. "Unfortunately, the only person who could get through to him was Shannon, but if we could bring her back we wouldn't be in this mess."

Palmer discreetly knocked on the door and offered cups of tea, which were a welcome break. Ducky continued to watch McGee and made a suggestion as they were finishing. "On your way back upstairs, why don't you stop as have a visit with Abigail? I'm sure she's been missing you these last few days."

Dealing with the poisoned creek put them back an hour, but it couldn't be helped. Needing to be conservative with their water until they could find a safe source didn't help either, but the group pressed on. Every sign showed that Kincaid was pushing his two remaining men hard, but it made it easier to track them.

They pressed on, hoping that the second creek a few miles away would be safe. If it wasn't, they'd have to make a serious detour for additional water and that would put them even further behind.

"Hey." Tim wasn't sure of what kind of welcome he'd get as he eased in the door, but Abby spun around and squealed out his name before running up to him and delivering a bone crunching hug. "Ow, Abs, watch the shoulder."

"I'm sorry." She started to pull back, but Tim hung on so she just shifted her grip to make it more comfortable for him. "Is that better?"

"Yeah, thanks."

She'd had her suspicions in the bullpen a few days earlier, but the way he seemed to soak up the comfort confirmed it. "The bond's not even, is it?"

"Not even close."

"I'm sorry."

"Me too."

"Well?"

Jim just shook his head. They were close enough to the second creek for him to know that it had been poisoned, too.

"Now what?" Not used to hiking, Rafe was already out of water and had been taking sips from the canteen Blair offered.

"We're going to have to find the poison, deal with it, and then go upstream far enough to be safe before we get any water." As he spoke, Jim was focusing further up the stream, looking for the source of the poison. There were dead fish as far as he could see which told him they had quite a hike ahead of them. He had the answer even before Rafe asked the question.

"How far are you talking about?"

"You probably don't want to know."

The worry and concern from Abby had been like a balm, even if she'd been upset about what was happening to him. Already missing the comfort, Tim got on the elevator, almost missing it when a second person joined him.

Tim looked up to see the Foreign Intelligence Specialist he'd nearly had an encounter with earlier and cursed his momentary distraction. Squaring his shoulders, he managed to reach past him to push the button for the squad room. As the elevator started to move, Tim found himself being pushed into the corner.

"You know, when I worked the Middle East Office, I heard a lot about Guides. Heard that they were the best lay out there, knew exactly what you wanted and were oh, so eager to give it to you."

The lustful image of being bound and bent over in front of a group of strangers almost made Tim gag, but he knew not to show fear. "You'll have to get my Sentinel's permission first." A ding announced the arrival of the elevator on the correct floor and Tim shoved his way out, locking the door open and calling out to Gibbs as soon as he could see him.

"Sentinel, Agent Hayes thinks it would be exciting to tie up and gang rape a Guide with a bunch of his buddies. I told him he'd need your permission before he could attack me."

Another agent was walking past the elevator and grabbed Hayes out before he could figure out how McGee had shut down the power. "I'm sure Agent Gibbs will want to talk to you, Hayes."

Gibbs was instantly on his feet. He didn't need Sentinel vision to see McGee's hands shaking from both fear and anger. Just because he wasn't willing to accept McGee as his Guide didn't change the fact that McGee was already his, claimed years ago.

Hayes was delivered to him as Gibbs circled around the desk. He grabbed Hayes by the throat and squeezed while bringing his SIG up to rest on the weak chin. There was only one of the laws regarding Sentinel/Guide pairs that he remembered, but it covered a great deal. "You do know that a Sentinel is never punished for killing to protect his Guide, right?"

"I... I didn't touch him."

Gibbs nose twitched at the smell that the rest of them noticed a few seconds later as the front of Hayes' pants darkened. "You wanted to, though. Thought about it, fantasized about it. According to the law, that's enough. I'll let you live, but I want you out of this Agency."



"Only the Director can fire me."

Smirking, Gibbs let his eyes flicker down for the briefest of moments. "Director requires his agents to be at least housebroken."

On his way to a luncheon, Vance had silently come down the stairs, but nobody had noticed him until Gibbs spoke to the Director. "Isn't that right, Vance?"

"Housebroken and law-abiding is a good start. What do you have to say in your defense, Agent Hayes?"

"I didn't touch him, Director."

"Agent McGee?"

"He pushed me into the corner and blocked me from leaving the elevator, Sir. Then, when he had me trapped in there, he said that he'd heard a lot about Guides while he was in the Middle East, that we were the best lay out there. He claimed that Guides knew exactly what he wanted and that we were very eager to give it to him. He was projecting his thoughts quite loudly and I could see exactly what he wanted to do to me."

"Which was?"

Tim looked around at the number of people that had been drawn to the commotion. "Sir..."

"I'm sorry, Tim, but I need to know. Just the basics for now, you can write up a full report later."

Humiliated, McGee closed his eyes. "He was projecting a violent scene where I was not a willing participant. I was tied up and there were witnesses waiting for their turn." Opening his eyes, he stared at Vance. "After blocking my escape, he may not have physically touched me again, but his thoughts were loud enough that I could feel what he wanted, anyway."

"I see." There had been rumors about Hayes, that had been the reason he'd been recalled to DC, and now Vance wanted to get to the bottom of it. "Are you able to tell if he has more than theoretical knowledge about sexually assaulting a Guide, or anyone else for that matter?"

Tim could feel the shock waves through the crowd as they realized that as a guide, Tim had empathic abilities. "I can't probe his mind, Sir. Only feel what is projected toward me."

"Understood." What Vance couldn't understand was why Gibbs was still holding the man by this throat instead of throwing him aside to check on his obviously shaken Guide. Unfortunately, as Director of the Agency, his job was to focus on the possibility of a crime committed by one of his agents. "Agent Dorneget, take Hayes to interrogation for me."

"You can't arrest me for thinking."

"No, I can't. But since your little projected fantasy matches the rumors that got you kicked out of the Middle East, it's enough for a full investigation. You'll be allowed legal representation, I suggest you use it." Done with the man for now, Vance nodded at Dorneget and watched as Hayes was led away before patting McGee's shoulder and rushing out to make his lunch meeting with the SecNav on time.

Feeling raw and exposed, Tim turned to Gibbs. "Could... could I have the key to the bonding suite? I'd like a few minutes to just..."

Even with his end of the bond firmly closed off, Gibbs couldn't miss McGee's condition. "Do we need to leave?"

"No, the case is important. I just need a few minutes without..." He looked around at the many watchers the scene had attracted. While Gibbs dug in his wallet for the key card, Ziva stood up and took care of the problem. "The show is over, go back to work everyone."

Tim was only vaguely aware of Ziva ordering the rest of them around, his entire focus was on getting inside the bonding room and to the peace he was supposed to find in there. What he found, instead, was a room that literally oozed with Tony's aura, every bit of his hurt and anger, his fears of being displaced echoed throughout the room. Tim escaped to the small attached bathroom, which was a little better, and slid down onto the floor burying his face in his hands as he tried to get his emotions under control.

Gibbs didn't analyze what he was feeling, but he was determined to make sure Hayes never came near McGee again. The investigation into Shuhab had stalled, so Gibbs decided to pull Hayes' personnel file and start there. He glanced down the hallway toward the bonding suite, but instead walked over to the elevator, pressing the button to call it. Once inside, he could smell Hayes' excitement along with McGee's fear and he angrily punched the button for the top floor.

Downstairs, being in the bonding suite wasn't really helping Tim so he painfully climbed to his feet and left. Gibbs wasn't at his desk and Tim hoped to be ignored, but Tony smirked at him as he eased himself back into his seat.

"What's the matter? Didn't get fucked like you wanted?"

If McGee hadn't been at the end of his endurance he'd have noticed more of the hurt and less of the anger in Tony's words, but he'd had enough. "Go to hell, DiNozzo."

Tony was instantly on his feet just as Gibbs came around the corner, the headslap he received the first indication of the older man's arrival.

Tim couldn't help but smile at his Sentinel's defense of him, even if it made Tony's ire even more apparent and he wilted back into his chair at the new onslaught of emotions.

## Seventeen

Late afternoon found them close enough to the lake to see it, at least if they were all Sentinels. If Jim had been by himself, he would have pushed on, but there was too great of a risk for the rest of them. A quick scouting found the trail Kincaid had followed, looping around the western side of the lake, so Jim went a little way around the eastern side of the lake to find a defensible spot for them to camp for the night.

Once a spot was secured, Miller and Rafe started to set up camp while Rice filled canteens from the safe stream that Jim pointed out. While the rest of them smirked, Blair rolled up his pant legs and shucked his footwear before wading out to the middle of the water. After two days of using his spear as a walking stick, he was more than ready to turn it right side up and do some fishing.

Jim walked over to Miller, pointing out a spot where a small fire could be built that wouldn't be visible from a distance. "Better get a cooking fire going. Something small enough that there's not a lot of smoke visible."

"You're not actually expecting him to catch anything that way, are you?" Before Jim could answer, Blair raised the spear to show his first catch of the evening and Miller shook his head. "Okay, one cooking fire coming up."

Citing McGee's still weakened state, Gibbs left early with his Guide, leaving DiNozzo and David to continue with the hunt for Shuhab. The elevator had barely closed behind them before Tony threw a wad of paper across the room, hitting McGee's empty chair. Ziva stared at him for a moment before crossing to sit on the corner of his desk.

"Why are you so angry?"

"Aren't you? You were the one that said Guides can't be trusted." Tony wadded up another sheet of paper, but this one he just bounced in his hand.

"That is not what I said. I said that they could be a threat because of the control they have over their Sentinel, but McGee seems to be struggling, not gaining control over Gibbs."

"Because he's not a strong enough Guide for a Sentinel like Gibbs. Just because he was in the right spot, they decided he should be Gibbs' Guide, not because he was the best one for the job. I mean, look at him, Ziva. He had to go running to Gibbs because somebody thought bad things? So, what happens now? We only go after bad guys that think happy thought?" Frustrated, Tony threw the second paper wad and shoved his hands in his pockets, wrapping one hand around the bottle he was still carrying. "Gibbs needs a stronger Guide before McGee gets them both killed."

A little more than an hour after he started, Blair returned with enough fish for everyone, the fire was ready to cook them and Rafe was carefully reading the instructions on some of the freeze dried vegetables he'd brought. Blair left him to his reading as he left again to gather wild herbs and onions to complete the meal. By the time everything was ready, Jim and Miller had studied the map and narrowed down the possibilities somewhat.

It was late in Cascade, which meant it was even later in DC and Simon couldn't put it off any longer. The call was picked up at the other end before he even heard it ring.

"Dr. Mallard, it's Simon Banks."

Thank heavens. Have your people found a solution for Timothy?

"Not really. The bond is, or at least it should be such a symbiotic relationship that I'm afraid there hasn't been much research done on chemical solutions when it goes wrong. Have things improved at all on your end?"

If anything, they've gotten worse.

Simon listened with dread as Ducky explained McGee's deteriorating condition and his theory of how Gibbs was using the partially developed bond to hold onto the fragments of his lost connection with Shannon. Next, he heard about the incident in the elevator, even though Ducky didn't have all the details. Simon wasn't nearly as encouraged by Gibbs' reaction to the man that had threatened his Guide as Duck had been. At this point in the stalled bonding process, Gibbs should have been tearing the man apart limb by limb.

"Damn it, are they at least spending time in the bonding suite? Reconnecting on a non-sexual level? Even that would help Agent McGee at this point."

No, Timothy was in the suite for a few minutes today as I understand it, but Jethro was not with him. That reminds me, Director Banks, why is there only one key card to the suite? I realize that ideally, they should both be using it and at the same time, but why does the Guide need to ask permission to have a few moments peace?

"What?" Frowning, Simon tried to figure out how the contractors had only given out one key. One more thing on a long list he'd have to deal with. "No, there should have been two keys. I'll call our DC contractors and get it taken care of."

After speaking for a few more minutes, Simon ended the call and leaned heavily against his desk. There hadn't been a recorded death of a Guide from a failed bond in modern time but he was afraid that record was about to be broken during his watch.

Bonding in front of strangers was never high on Ellison's list, but their relationship was strong enough that some serious cuddling did the trick as Rafe and the two rangers split up the watch duties to give the Sentinel a chance to recharge. Jim smiled as he felt Blair's lips on the hollow of his throat.

"Mmm, how you holding up, babe?"

Blair snuggled closer, tugging Jim's shirt open to press a kiss a little further down. "Better than poor Rafe. His idea of roughing it is going without room service." Blair's voice had been Sentinel soft, but the fact that Jim was shaking with silent laughter told him that it had been heard loud and clear.

Gibbs woke early, even before the coffee turned on downstairs. He was aware of McGee moving around, so he climbed out of bed to start the pot. As he circled around into the living room, Gibbs froze at the view. McGee was obviously fresh out of the shower, skin still damp, boxers hanging low as he worked through the stretches and exercises the doctor had given him.

Eyesight zooming in, Gibbs watched the moisture collecting on Tim's back as he moved and flexed. Eventually it formed a water drop and slid down his back to be absorbed in the waistband of his boxers. Gibbs realized that he could sense the different temperatures on the various parts of McGee's body. His arms and legs were rapidly cooling from the shower, while the injury site was still quite warm. However, the warmest parts of his body were the more intimate ones. Opening his mouth, Gibbs took a deep breath, tasting as well as smelling McGee's natural scent while his vision started picking up details of McGee's body as the weak morning sun gave him a glow to Sentinel eyes.

He was well on his way to zoning when a grunt of pain from his Guide pulled him back and Gibbs realized that he was half hard. Biting back a curse, he retreated upstairs until McGee was safely dressed.

Well-fed and well rested, Jim was ready to capture Kincaid and get back into Cascade. It was still dark out but he pushed the group to be ready to move out quickly and to be able to move even quicker. Blair cornered him after he had Rafe reducing his load once again.

"What's going on? What are you sensing?"

Jim opened his mouth and closed it twice before he said anything. "We're running out of time, but the problem's not here, it's back East."

That was not what Blair was expected. "Back East? You mean?"

"Yeah, the new Guide is in trouble."

"How bad?"

The image of his panther, frantically pacing in front of a sick fox cub was still fresh in Jim's mind. "Bad."

In the car, Gibbs finally risked taking another look at McGee. Despite the long rest he still looked tired and drained, an unhealthy pallor to his skin. "You look like hell, McGee."

Tim didn't turn back from the side window as he reviewed his options. "Sorry, I'll try to do better, Boss."

Thrown by the answer, Gibbs' mouth opened and closed several times before he stopped trying as he didn't have a clue what to say. He settled for stopping at McGee's favorite coffee shop, getting him a large cup and the doughnut with the fewest sprinkles in the bunch.

The shadows were still heavy when Jim had them move out. Blair was tucked in behind him while the other three stayed close, trying to not trip over the rocks and roots they could barely see. Jim knew they were pushing their luck, but he couldn't shake the feeling that time was running out. As the light filtered through, the group naturally started to spread out a bit.

Rafe brushed a branch out of his way, revealing a thin wire just before Eric Rice stepped across the wire, pulling it. There was a subtle click and then Jim clutched at his head, falling to his knees. He was in too much pain to even cry out, his senses spiraling down onto that one sensation.

Rice saw the wire just as his foot hit it. He froze, convinced he was about to be blown to bits. When that didn't happen right away, he was too scared to move, least he finish triggering the device he was sure would kill him. It was Sandburg's yelling that made him open his eyes, if not yet move.

"It's a sound bomb. Find it before it kills him."

Still scared to move, Rice stared at the wire where it was tangled around his ankle. Rafe was already down on the ground, brushing leaves away, tracing the wire into the heavy brush. Miller untangled the wire from Rice's boot laces and shoved him backwards. When they didn't blow up, Rice and Miller joined the search.

None of them were sure exactly what they were looking for. Whatever it was, it was producing sounds much too high for them to hear. Rice and Miller looked back once at Jim curled up in a ball as Blair held him, pressing the side of Jim's head against his chest, both hands against his other ear. They couldn't hear the sound the trap was producing, but they could feel an uncomfortable pressure in their own ears. Cursing softly, Miller picked up speed, Rice right behind him.

FBI Agent Tobias Fornell hung up his phone with a shout. "Shuhab has been spotted."

It didn't take long for them to be moving and Tim watched with a worried expression. "Boss, I don't think this is a good idea. You're not cleared for the field, not alone."

"He's not alone, McGeek. I've been watching his back since before you even knew what NCIS even stood for." Part of Tony's mind was screaming at him to stop, but he couldn't. "Believe me, there's nothing you can do for

Gibbs out there that I can't do." Following Gibbs and the rest of them to the elevator, Tony slips a hand into his jacket pocket to check, making sure he still has the bottle of pills.

"Damn it." Tim kicked the leg of his desk before falling back into his seat. "I'm not taking your place, Tony. Why can't you understand that?"

## Eighteen

A glint on a near-by tree caught Rafe's attention and when he moved closer, he could see a wire running up the trunk. As he moved close enough to look up, he could see a large speaker hidden in the branches. Taking a deep breath, he yanked at the wire, pulling it free. Nothing exploded, so he looked back, hoping to see a reaction. Jim was still folded up and in pain. Looking closer at the device, it looked like the wire was only the trip, batteries appeared to power the unit. Rice and Miller arrived to help and Rafe pointed up.

"We need to reach it."

Rice was the lightest, so Rafe and Miller braced themselves and Rice climbed up them, straining to reach. He shook his head.

"I can't. Need another ten feet."

"Can you climb? Even as he asked, Rafe knew the answer. The tree was too big to reach around, not like the thin trees he'd climbed back home as a child. Rice scrambled back down and just as Rafe was pulling his handgun out to shoot the device, Miller pulled a rope off of his pack.

"There's more than one way to climb a tree."

Miller quickly folded and tied the rope into a long band that would go most of the way around the tree with loops his legs and smaller loops for handles on each end. With that accomplished, he hung onto one end and tossed the other before stepping into the larger loops. When he was done, he used it to literally walk up the side of the tree, using split second timing to move it and himself up far enough to reach the box attached to the speaker.

The bands holding everything in place were heavy, so Miller grabbed the wires he could see instead. Praying that there wasn't an explosive hidden inside the metal box, he closed his eyes and pulled hard. A second later, when he hadn't been blown to bits, he opened his eyes.

Over the years Jim had been exposed to ultrasonic attacks and even the occasional infrasonic weapon, but never for more than a few moments and Blair had never seen such a painful reaction in his Sentinel. Feeling helpless, all he could do was try and block the sound out as best he could for Jim and provide an anchor.

Blair watched as one of the rangers climbed the tree and yanked the wires loose. He obviously expected it to be booby-trapped, and Blair's impression of the rangers went up a few notches. What Miller did obviously worked because as the wires came loose Jim collapsed unconscious into Blair's arms.

Aware of the perimeter they were setting up around them, Blair concentrated on his Sentinel, shifting them around until he was on his back with Jim draped across him. Then Blair set to work, slowly bringing Jim out of his zone.

"I've got you, babe. It's over, you're safe now." The words were just a whisper, but Blair knew it would sound like a shout to Jim for a while. Dropping his voice even lower, Blair tugged his shirt open so Jim's cheek would rest on his bare skin.

The warehouse was a good hour outside of DC, and when Gibbs and company arrived, the metal building appeared to be empty. They spread out to clear the building hoping to find some clue as to Shuhab's plans or where he might go next. Gibbs heard a strange sound and turned to investigate it, a headache already forming.

"Do you have something, Gibbs?"

Gibbs shuddered and held his hand up. Ziva's voice was grating and the smell of her hand lotion and shampoo combined into something that turned his stomach. She froze at the expression on his face, then took a few steps back, giving DiNozzo a questioning look.

Whatever the sound was, it was coming from behind a stack of pallets and Gibbs pulled his gun out as he moved closer to investigate. The other two members of his team fell into place behind him while the FBI maintained the perimeter.

Easing carefully around the edge of the stack, Gibbs bit back a curse before shoving his SIG back into his holster. A small table held several monitors, with the live feed from a total of eight cameras still playing on the screens.

"They knew we were coming."

"Ya' think, DiNozzo?" Gibbs reached out and touched a tea cup on the table. "Damn it, this is still warm." Looking at the various shots on the monitors, Gibbs caught a figure disappearing into some heavy brush. Still cursing, Gibbs ran out the back door. Past a marshy area he saw similar bushes. Stretching out his hearing, he could hear movement. Knowing that a Sentinel should be able to track them easily, he took off that direction the team and the FBI agents following behind.

Finished with the last of his paperwork, McGee locked his workstation and went downstairs. The echoes of the earlier threats against him still echoed in the elevator so he took the stairs, trembling with the strain by the time he reached the basement. Abby was leaning over Ducky as they studied something on the computer. He just hoped it was something that could help him.



"Any luck?"

Ducky turned and slowly removed his glasses before carefully folding them and setting them on the desk. Even without his empathic abilities, McGee recognized a stalling move when he saw it. If not that, Abby's tears would have been a dead giveaway. Still, he waited, not willing to give up on his last hope.

"I'm afraid not, Timothy. I'm very sorry."

Abby threw her arms around him. "You have to tell Gibbs what's happening. If he knew..." Tim's fingers against her lips stopped anything else she would have said.

"No. He has to want it on his own. If he's guilted into it or forced in any way, he'll become just as damaged as I am."

"But..."

"Ask any Guide, Abby. They'll tell you that there's no higher calling than to sacrifice themselves to save their Sentinel, no matter the reason." He saw the thunderous look on her face and shook his head. "Don't blame Gibbs, Abby. His end of the bond is tangled up with Shannon's memory. He's been trying to let go for over twenty years, it was wrong of any of us to expect him to just turn his back on her now."

Abby let herself be pulled into a hug and she sniffled as she hung on. "Maybe if you gave him a little more time."

He shook his head again, choking on his answer. "I can't, I'm sorry. You have no idea what it's like to be on the wrong end of a damaged bond. I can't save myself, Abby. All I can do is to make sure I don't end up taking him with me."

Ducky couldn't stop thinking of how he could have prevented this. "What will you do? What can I do to help you?"

"I'm going to call Director Banks. There's a protocol for this, even though it hasn't been used in almost a hundred years. Take care of him, Ducky. No matter how much I'm shielded, I'm sure he'll feel it at the end." Tim turned and left, not giving them a chance to argue any further.

He still had the card key for the bonding room so he went back upstairs and slipped into bond room. Alone with only the shadows of Tony's fears of abandonment, he called Simon Banks. His call was put through almost immediately. Tim didn't hesitate, fearing he'd lose his nerve. "Our bond is incomplete and hopelessly damaged. How do I end this without hurting my Sentinel?"

Blair was becoming hoarse, but Jim was finally relaxing and breathing deeper, the first signs of his return. He kissed down the side of Jim's face. "That's it, Jim, come back to me. I need you, man."

A few minutes later there was a groan and Jim slowly opened his eyes before slamming them shut. Blair wrapped himself even tighter around his Sentinel, peppering his eyes with kisses before tenderly kissing each

ear lobe. He pressed his lips against Jim's skin, lowering his voice even more so that Jim would feel the words as much as hear them. "It's okay, I've got you. It's safe now."

Trying to remember the few things he'd learned from his Guide, Gibbs stretched his senses as far as he could as he ran. The scent from a dead animal made his gag, the sounds echoing and bouncing between the trees in front of them and the buildings behind them gave him an instant migraine and having his vision zoom in and out as his control wavered made him stumble more than once.

His control was becoming erratic, that was obvious to the rest of the team. Ziva reached out to touch Gibbs' arm, pulling back as he flinched. "Perhaps we should call for McGee? You need your Guide, Gibbs."

Bouncing off a tree, Gibbs stopped as his knees buckled. "No, he's not strong enough. I'm fine, Ziva."

"Like hell you are, Boss."

Tony's words were ignored as Gibbs struggled to his feet, a new sound catching his attention. When Gibbs took off again in a different direction, Tony lagged far enough behind that no one saw him pop several pills into his mouth and swallow them dry.

The pounding of feet Gibbs heard turned out to be several squirrels climbing a tree. They stopped again to regroup before he took them in yet another direction.

When Jim started to shift around, Blair carefully loosened his grip on him and leaned back. "Hey, you back with me?"

"Yeah." Jim's voice was rough as he rubbed his hands over his face before accepting the canteen Blair held out to him. "Yeah, I'm okay now, but it's time to end this."

"What do you have in mind?"

"I'm going to scout ahead. I want the rest of the group to stay here so I can move faster. We know the general area, there's only a few places he can go. I find him, and then we can make our move."

"Time to stop playing defense and start playing offense?" Blair strapped on one of the canteens and a knife before Jim shook his head. Blair didn't give him a chance to argue. "I know you're not going to tell me to stay here because you know this is when you need me the most."

"I always need you, Chief, but..." Jim sighed and shook his head. "I'm not going to win this one, am I?"

"You never do. We're a pair, we go together."

Jim fussed while he chose his own gear, as was expected, but then he agreed as Blair knew he would. All their years together and that had never changed. Leaving the other three there, they scouted ahead. Abandoning the trail, they cut through the heavy brush, Jim's destination just a little over a mile ahead. They had to be close before Blair could see the large rock cliff face about fifty feet tall with almost straight sides.

"You're kidding, right?"

Jim just grinned as he pulled out the climbing gear. "You're the one that wanted to come."

Climbing onto such a tall rock was not quick or easy. Two hours later Jim was helping Blair up onto the top. Lying down as to not be seen, Jim sent his senses out. It took time and concentration, but anchoring to his Guide allowed Jim to survey miles of landscape. Filtering out the native animals, he eventually picked up on another group of humans.

"Got them. Kincaid's at the old mine."

"You mean where..." Blair shuddered as he remembered a few years back when an anti-Sentinel lunatic named Quinn kidnapped Simon in an insane plot to destroy the DSA.

Jim remembered it all too clearly as well. Remembering the frantic jump off a cliff to save their lives, remembering when things had gone wrong and Blair had been shot. Determined to keep the upper hand this time, Jim watched Blair rappel down to solid ground before making the trek himself. Quickly they returned to rest of group to put his plan into action.

They were probably less than a mile away from the warehouse, but Tobias Fornell was hopelessly turned around. Grateful when Gibbs slowed down and stopped, he dropped to his knees, trying to catch his breath. Next to him, Tony was frantically looking around, muttering under his breath.

Unable to maintain control any longer, Gibbs was almost relieved when he felt himself starting to zone. An overpowering whooshing sound was crushing his ears. He stumbled to a stop, convinced that a helicopter was about to fall on them, but all he could do was to cover his ears. The last thing he was aware of was Fornell crawling toward him before Ziva and Fornell both tried to pull him out of the zone, but they weren't guides and they certainly weren't his Guide.

The voices started about twenty minutes after Tony swallowed the pills. He ignored them at first, but they kept getting louder. He couldn't shut them out and it started to get overwhelming. It was when Gibbs started yelling without moving his lips that Tony started to freak. Remembering back many years ago when he'd been a cop on the street and dealt with addicts on a bad trip, Tony wondered just what was in the pills he'd taken and why in the hell he'd thought it had been a good idea. He heard screaming, only vaguely aware that it was coming from him.

Ziva wasn't quite sure how things had gotten out of control so quickly. About the time that she realized that Gibbs was leading them in circles, he stared, transfixed, as a large moth flapping around him before ducking and covering his head. His eyes became unfocused and he became unresponsive. Moments later he fell to the

ground and she discovered that he'd almost completely stopped breathing. Tony was only a few feet behind her, but instead of helping, he clutched at his head as he went down. Ziva rushed for Gibbs, yelling for help, just as Tony started screaming hysterically. Fornell tried to help her with Gibbs, but then Tony began tearing at his skin and slamming his head into the ground. Just when Ziva thought it couldn't get any worse, he started to convulse.

## Nineteen

Jim and Blair jogged back to where the rest of the group was waiting for them. Jim already had a plan in mind and laid out the map to show Rafe and the rangers what he intended to do.

"Okay, we're going to split up and surround them. That mine had an escape route out the back, so you and the rangers are going to circle around and block them. Blair and I will take them from the front. Watch for traps. Knowing Kincaid, there's bound to be more, the closer we get to them."

Rafe studied the map and the diagram Jim had drawn. "What if we can get in from the back side?"

"No, it's too risky." Jim glanced over at the two rangers. They might not officially be civilians, but they weren't trained enough for Jim to feel comfortable about sending into a probable shoot-out. "You three are just there to contain them if they try to sneak out the back. Either capture them or shoot them, whatever the situation requires."

Jim pointed out their path, well out of the normal route to the mine, one that should keep them away from most of the traps. "We'll travel together until this point. Blair and I will wait until you're in position here and then we'll circle back around to the front. Settle in while we get in position, it might take a while. We'll wait for the right moment, so you'll need to wait for my signal."

Miller nodded, it appeared to be a good plan. "What's the signal?"

"You'll know it when you hear it." Jim grinned as Rafe rolled his eyes. The detective had been around Ellison long enough to know what that meant.

"Great, just great."

For all they knew, Shuhab and his men were watching them, but Ziva knew they had bigger problems at the moment. Trying to bring Gibbs out of his zone, she slapped him hard across the face as Fornell radioed in for an emergency evacuation. When that didn't bring Gibbs out of the zone, she slapped him again and was preparing to strike him a third time when he caught her hand.

"No wonder Mossad doesn't have any Sentinels." Gibbs' voice was hoarse and he looked rough but for now she was convinced that one crisis had been averted.

"Welcome back, Gibbs. McGee was right, you were not ready for this."

Gibbs didn't deny her claim, but he shook off her help as he rolled up onto his knees. "I'll dial it down, do it the old fashioned way."

"We have a bigger problem." She pointed over Gibbs' shoulder and he turned, almost falling again. The seizure had stopped, but Tony was already struggling with Fornell. He was silent, but that didn't last long as he started screaming and tried to slam his head against the ground.

"DiNozzo? What happened to him?"

"I do not know. Perhaps he was exposed to a toxin at the warehouse."

Alarmed, Gibbs crawled closer to help and Tony snarled at him.

"Get away from me. I know what you want. It's not fair."

"Tony? Tony, it's me, it's Gibbs. Whatever you're seeing, it's not real."

Fornell lost his grip for a second and Tony got one hand free. He pointed toward a clump of bushes. "It's all his fault. He's taking everything away from me." Tony started screaming again and it took all three of them to hold him down until another round of convulsions started and this time they didn't stop until he lost consciousness. When the medics arrived they quickly strapped him to a backboard and loaded him onto the medevac chopper.

It took a while, but Rafe and the rangers were in position. Safely out of view from any watcher inside the cave, they'd still be able to block anyone from escaping. Ready to have this done, Jim led Blair back around to where they would settle in to wait for the right moment.

Jim listened carefully as Kincaid ordered his two remaining men around, smiling as Van Dyke's kid muttered under his breath, clearly not happy with the turn of events. Sitting on his ass, Kincaid yelled at the kid to gather more firewood.

Blair couldn't really see him, but Jim watched as Joshua Van Dyke stomped around, picking up dead branches off the ground. Jim would have loved to get him away from Kincaid and let Blair reason with him, but the young man was still in distant view of Kincaid.

Jim turned his attention to Kincaid, himself. It wasn't a surprise to find Kincaid in full Kevlar, but it was a disappointment. One shot to take him out was a temptation, but his rifle didn't have the stopping power to go through the Kevlar at this distance. Wanting to take Joshua out of the equation without killing him or identifying their location, Jim drew down on him with the crossbow and waited.

Blair watched as Van Dyke moved closer to their position. He whispered words of encouragement to wish the kid to take off, to run from Kincaid and all he represented, even as he knew that wasn't going to happen. Off to the side, Blair saw Jim bring up the crossbow, waiting for the right moment.

Letting his sight zoom in, Jim picked the right moment before letting the arrow fly. Smiling in satisfaction, he watched as it went through the fleshy part of his arm, before the point buried into the tree next to him, successfully pinning him into place. The kid yelled in surprise, but back at the cave Kincaid and Berman chose to protect themselves and ran for the safety of the cave, firing wildly as they did.

Jim was on top of Joshua just as Berman made it inside the cave, clamping his hand down over the young white supremacist's mouth before he could give them away. "Ya see that, kid? Kincaid didn't even look back to see what kind of trouble you were in. He just cut and run on you."

The look of defiance lasted just a few moments before Joshua's face crumpled. "God, I'm such an idiot."

"No arguments there, kid."

As soon as the chopper cleared the ground with Gibbs and DiNozzo, the rest of them headed back to the warehouse. Having no idea what direction to go, Fornell let Ziva take the lead. She had them back in less than thirty minutes, even though the pace made him feel like he was back in boot camp.

With Sacks now in charge of them, a team was left in place to secure and fully search the warehouse while Fornell and Ziva went to the hospital. Having had enough excitement for the day, Fornell drove while Ziva called Ducky. Word had already traveled fast.

Ziva, what has happened? We've had a report of a medical helicopter being dispatched to your location.

"Gibbs zoned very badly and I believe that Tony was exposed to something in the warehouse. He was hallucinating, and then he went into convulsions."

Heavens, Timothy and I will meet them at Bethesda.

"Bring Abby, we need to know what Tony was exposed to. She will be quicker than the regular lab at Bethesda."

Rice looked at the two older men and nervously wiped his hands on his pant legs. "What did Sentinel Ellison mean about us knowing what the signal was?"

Before Rafe could answer him, a flurry of shots could be heard.

"What's that?"

"The signal." Guns drawn, Rafe and Miller braced themselves, Rice following behind a few seconds later. Kincaid and Berman started out of the back entrance. Rafe yelled at them to drop their weapons and surrender. It was no surprise that Kincaid started shooting. They returned fire before Kincaid and Berman retreated back inside.

Blair clambered over several fallen trees to join Jim before he started to question Van Dyke. "Josh, you don't owe Kincaid anything. He abandoned you just like he did your dad. Don't let him take you down with him, talk to us and we'll talk to the DA."

Jim nodded, hoping they could get through to the obviously troubled young man. "Listen to him. Just tell us what surprises Kincaid's still got with him."

Almost in tears, Joshua started talking as Blair cut away the shaft of the arrow and freed him from the tree before bandaging the wound. "He's got grenades and more poison, and..."

"Bombs?"

"No, sir, I haven't seen any bombs, but he... he's got this box that he won't let anyone else touch. He said it was a box of plutonium."

Eyes wide, Blair looked over at Jim to see the alarm echoed on his face. With plutonium and grenades Kincaid could easily make a bomb that had the potential to do a lot of damage.

After handcuffing Van Dyke to the tree, Jim and Blair moved back to discuss their options.

"We need to take him out before he can put something together."

Blair knew they had limited time if Kincaid had been telling his men the truth. "Do you think he could be bluffing?"

Shaking his head, Jim thought about it, reviewing Kincaid's resources. If he'd had access to such a potentially lethal weapon, why was he out here with stolen camping gear and none of his lieutenants? "Maybe, probably, but we can't take the risk. I need to take Kincaid out before he can rig something together."

Leaving Van Dyke where he was, Jim moved even closer before pointing at the front opening of the mine. "Yell, get them to yell back."

"What?"

Jim had his handgun out and was braced against a tree. "Gonna piggyback sight onto sound, see if I can get Kincaid with a ricochet shot."

"That's crazy."

"You got a better idea, Chief?"

"Shit, no, but if we all get vaporized, I'm haunting you. Just remember that."

"Love you too, Chief."

Blair made sure he had cover and began to yell. "Hey, Kincaid, you going to hide in there all day? Is that what a General does?"

"Well, well, Mr. Natural, is that you? Long time, no see."

"Yeah, well, you come on out here and you can see for yourself."

"Nah, I don't think so. You come in here and we can have a real party, give that Sentinel of yours something good to listen to."

"Don't think so, asshole." The words were whispered, but emphatic. Jim had mapped out the majority of the large opening just past the entrance, where Kincaid and Berman were holed up. Squeezing the trigger, he followed the trajectory of the bullet as it skimmed along, bouncing off the side wall and hitting Kincaid directly in the center of the vest. Jim knew it wouldn't penetrate, but he wanted a reaction.

Richie Berman thought they were pretty safe until a bullet hit in Kincaid dead center in the vest, a shot that would have been instantly fatal if it hadn't been for the Kevlar. When Kincaid went down, Berman panicked and turned to run. A shot from the back side of the mine stopped him short and he tossed a grenade out the back escape route to clear it. His toss was short and instead of killing the men blocking their path, it rolled back in, coming to rest just inside the back entrance.

In the corner of his mind, Berman remembered all the stories about the brave soldiers that threw themselves on a grenade to save their fellow soldiers. As with most cowards, self-preservation took over and he ran for the front entrance. Kincaid was right on his heels, his own self-preservation skills also highly developed.

Both men were armed and firing as they came out of the mine shaft. Jim returned fire, shooting Berman in the chest just as the grenade exploded. Rocks flew and Jim hoped that Kincaid would drop his weapon. Instead, Kincaid pointed his pistol at Sandburg and Jim instantly shot him in hand to make him drop his weapon. Kincaid cursed and screamed as both of his hands were roughly handcuffed behind his back. Berman's body was checked, but he'd died where he'd fallen.

There was a frantic few moments after Kincaid's capture, making sure the group at the back were all right before Ellison pulled out a small Geiger counter. The dust settling around them didn't set off an alarm.

"I'm going to check inside."

Blair gave him a worried look. "Be careful, man."

Senses on high alert, Ellison carefully searched the dusty mine shaft. The grenade had kicked up a lot of loose debris, but the beams and the rock ceiling appeared to be stable. The box Joshua had described was on the ground, lid ajar, and Jim eased closer, Geiger counter out as far as he could reach. The counter remained silent, so a quick peek was warranted. Inside was a stack of hundred dollar bills, some baggies of a familiar white powder and several porn magazines. Jim couldn't help but laugh.

"Kind of over-kill to keep the boys out of your stash, Kincaid."



Radioed to stay put, Rafe and the two rangers had assumed that there was a booby trap somewhere in the mine. When Jim came out the back entrance with a Geiger counter, they all sighed in relief before Rafe realized what Ellison was carrying.

"Is that a..."

Jim grinned at the stunned face. "False alarm, it's safe. Kincaid was bluffing about having anything radioactive."

Rafe just stared at him, shocked that he'd even have such a device with him. "And you wouldn't let me carry an extra pair of pants?"

"Priorities, Rafe, priorities."

Dr. Wilkes met the helicopter, expecting to find an injured Sentinel and Guide. He saw Gibbs, who looked rough, but awake and aware. "Sentinel Gibbs, where is your Guide and why were you out in the field already?"

"We bonded, I'm fine."

One of the medics looked up from transferring DiNozzo onto a hospital gurney. "According to one of his team, Sentinel Gibbs zoned deep enough to interfere with his breathing."

"Without your Guide? What brought you out of the zone?"

Gibbs rubbed at his jaw that was getting sore. "A right hook."

Wilkes rolled his eyes. "Terrific." Instead of arguing further, he latched onto Gibbs' arm and when they all arrived down in the emergency department, started leading him to another room. "Your man will be taken care of, you're coming with me. Is your Guide on his way?"

"I'm here."

Looking up, Dr. Wilkes bit back a curse. In his medical opinion the Guide looked like hell, which told him something was seriously wrong with the bond. He escorted them both into an exam room, ready to lay into Gibbs, but a sharp shake of the head from the Guide stopped him. "Okay, Gibbs, tell me what happened."

Gibbs pinched the bridge of his nose. "We just missed Shuhab at his warehouse. They had cameras set up and saw our approach, but I spotted them on one of their monitors. We went after them and then..." Gibbs sighed and shrugged his shoulders. "I guess it was too much. I couldn't keep it under control. Sounds, smell, it all got to be..."

Wilkes shook his head. "Let me guess, it all got to be too much. Without your Guide to help you sort out the input, you couldn't handle it."

"Before all this Sentinel crap, I would have been able to handle it and Shuhab would be in custody by now. You done with me? I want to check on DiNozzo."

"Yeah, sure. I'll sort it out with your Guide since you won't listen to any medical advice." Wilkes waited until Gibbs had left the room and was around the corner, pretty sure he wasn't going to bother listen in before he turned his attention to McGee. "You're dying, aren't you?"

"Director Banks is making the arrangements. I'll be transported back to Cascade for the... for the last stages."

"And your Sentinel is just willing to let you die so he won't be – what? Inconvenienced?"

Tim leaned against the empty bed as he tried to explain. "When the bond started to form, instead of bonding to me, it resurrected the remaining threads of his bond with his late wife, his first Guide. It's so damaged now, either we both die, or I die. Don't see a reason to kill him in the process."

"Does he even know?"

"No, and I don't want him to know. It won't help either of us and it'll just make it harder on him."

Wilkes didn't agree with the Guide's decision, but his hands were tied. "I'm sorry. Is there anything I can do to make it easier for you?"

"Just... just take care of him."

## Twenty

Abby watched as Gibbs arrived back in the waiting room without McGee. "Where's McGee?"

"Apparently he's discussing me with my doctor. Now that I'm a Sentinel," the sarcasm was dripping as he formed quotation marks in the air, "apparently I can't make my own decisions."

She started to object but a nurse came out, looking for them. "We found this is Agent DiNozzo's pocket and he became quite agitated when we took it." She held up a plastic sample bag that held a small, unlabeled plastic pill bottle.

"What the hell?" Gibbs took the bagged bottle. Several pills were rattling around inside it.

The nurse was happy to let him have it. "We've taken one of the pills to try and identify it, but..."

"But we can do it faster." Abby took the bag from Gibbs and announced that she was going back to the Yard. "I'll have answers for you soon, Bossman, but," hesitating, she hugged him tight. "Remember, there's a reason you have a Guide, Gibbs. Don't ignore him, okay?" Giving him a long look, she finally turned and headed out the door. Gibbs turned back to the nurse.

"What are you doing for DiNozzo?"

"Unfortunately, for now all we can do is to treat his symptoms and keep him stable, at least until we know what he's taken. We'll let you know if anything changes."

After she left, Gibbs stomped around the waiting room like an angry bear, tearing into McGee the moment he walked into the waiting room. "What good is all this? You tell me. This damned bond has destroyed everything."

Tim didn't say anything, just turned and left again. Before Gibbs could go after him, Ducky grabbed his arm. "If you're looking for someone to blame, Jethro, might I suggest you start by looking in the mirror? After all, it was your choice to not have a complete bond. Your choice to go out in the field before you were medically cleared, before your Guide recovered from the bullet wound he received saving your life." Ducky turned and left without saying another word, before he broke the confidence McGee had placed in him. Gibbs just stared, looking around, wondering what had just happened.

Berman's body was covered with a tarp, still where he had fallen. Van Dyke and Kincaid were bandaged and now they were cuffed and waiting for transportation back to Cascade. While they all waited for the chopper to arrive, Blair snuggled close to Jim.

"You okay?"

Blair smiled and kissed the tiny spot of skin that was exposed. "Yeah. Just need to get my bearings for a minute."

Jim still wasn't sure what that meant, but he enjoyed the cuddle and used the time to bring Rafe and the other ranger up to speed after talking to Miller and Captain Taggart. "Rafe, you'll go with us to handle the prisoner transport. The rangers will remain behind and wait for a second team to deal with bodies and the crime scene. After that is done they will bring the rest of the gear back down the mountain and meet up with the Park Service team that will be repairing the damage to the creeks that Kincaid poisoned."

"Does that mean sleeping in a real bed tonight?"

Listening to his Sentinel tease the other man, Blair finally figured out what was bothering him. He took a few steps closer to Kincaid, Jim automatically moving to keep between them. Blair mentally reached out, using all of his empathic skills as he asked his question. "So, Kincaid, who helped you escape?"

"I have no idea." Kincaid was so happy in his ignorance which the Guide immediately picked up on, a crazy idea forming in his mind.

Somewhat stable, Tony had been moved to a room in the intensive care unit and McGee watched through the window as Gibbs and Ziva sat at Tony's bedside. Sadly he turned to Ducky. "Please call Director Banks, I'm ready."

Ducky turned to argue, the words dying in his throat as he took a closer look. "Oh, Timothy, I am so very sorry."

Tim pressed his lips together as he took a deep breath. "Yeah, me too. Take care of them for me, okay?" Without waiting for an answer, he turned and walked away.

The minute the chopper landed in Cascade, Blair was on the phone and within an hour a package was delivered to him in the squad room. Bandaged and doped up, Brown watched as he carefully unwrapped it.

"What you got there, Hairboy?"

"If I'm right, the answer to a whole lot of problems." Blair didn't wait; he jumped to his feet and barreled into Captain Taggart's office with the briefest of knocks.

Jim had heard him coming, but the Captain was surprised. "Blair?"

"Hey, Cap, I need Jim to smell these."

Even without opening the individual packages, the scent had already caught Jim's attention. "That smells like..." He took the packages, smelling them individually before shuffling them around several times until he was satisfied. "That's it. These five combined are what I kept smelling at the scene where Kincaid escaped."

Blair tuned all eight packages over. The five Jim had picked had small stars on the bottom. "Bingo."

Taggart was still lost. "And the significance is?"

"PadshadShuhab."

"Excuse me?"

Taking pity on Joel, Jim took over the conversation. "When we were in DC, our testimony was interrupted when a local sentinel came online. He's a federal agent, came online in the middle of a gun fight with a known terrorist, PadshadShuhab. Shuhab and his people escaped and the case was put on hold because the two agents with the most knowledge were a brand new Sentinel and his equally brand new Guide. Their training was put on hold when Kincaid escaped and we had to come back."

"Because Kincaid had a history of going after both Sentinels and Guides and every pair except the two of you were pretty much under guard." Taggart thought about it for a minute. "It makes sense, but what exactly ties them together? What's the deal with the spices?"

"His cousin owns a restaurant that he used as a front for his operation for years. The restaurant's signature dish is lamb slowly stewed in..."

"Those five spices."

Blair beamed at the Captain. "Exactly."

Taggart thought about it and it made a sick sort of sense. "Okay, how do you want to play it?"

Exchanging a look with Blair, Jim grinned as he cut in. "Oh, I know exactly how we're going to play this."

Megan Conner was a beautiful woman, but she'd much rather be known for her excellent skills in the field. However, after the plan was explained to her, the exchange officer from Australia was willing to play along.

Jim was in an interrogation room with Kincaid, going nowhere, when Megan walked in, clutching a stack of files against her chest.

"Oh, I'm sorry, I thought this room was empty." Appearing flustered when Kincaid leered at her, she let the files slide out of her hands. They landed on the table and the photos inside one of the folders spread out across the table. Jim watched Kincaid closely, noting when his pupils flared, while he scolded Megan and helped her gather the files before escorting her out of the room.

As soon as they were clear of the door, Blair pounced. "Well?"

"It was the picture of the cousin, Javeed Amiri, that he recognized. Better call Simon, let him know what's going on."

Between Kincaid recognizing someone in Shuhab's group and Jim's premonition that something was wrong back east, Blair was worried when he called Simon to warn him that the real target was the new pair in DC.

"Hey, Rhonda, it's Blair Sandburg. I need to talk to Simon right now. It's an emergency and it's about Gibbs and McGee."

I'm sorry, Blair, he's already on his way to DC.

"What happened?"

It's never happened before, but the bond failed. The Guide bonded to the Sentinel, but the Sentinel's original bond to his first Guide was too strong.

Blair rubbed his mouth as he struggled to breathe. "My God, that poor kid. All right, I'll call his cell, tell him what we've learned. He'll get the message when he lands. Thanks, Rhonda."

His hands were shaking, but he called Simon's cell. "Hey, Simon, it's Blair. Kincaid was involved with Shuhab, trying to undermine Gibbs and McGee. Hell, I guess it really doesn't matter right now. Just bring Tim home to us, we'll take care of him until... until it's over."

For the first time since his darkest days in Afghanistan, Ducky didn't have a story to tell as he drove. He and Tim arrived at a private airport and were waved in. Simon met them at the plane with several DSA medics, trained to help transport injured or ill Sentinels or Guides.

Tim couldn't stop the tear that was threatening to spill over onto his cheek. "Well, I guess this is it, Ducky."

"Lad, are you sure you want to leave without saying goodbye to Abby? She will be heartbroken."

"Can't, she'd try to stop me." Tim shook his head. "Gibbs doesn't need the guilt. That... that's my last gift to the team."

"Oh, Timothy." Voice breaking, Ducky pulled him into a hug before they boarded the plane together.

Once on the plane, Tim laid down on the bed and the medics started an IV to sedate him for the trip. As they worked, Simon explained the procedure to Ducky. "The sedation won't last long, just enough to get him to Cascade, and his symptoms will be worse when he awakens, but once in Cascade he'll be shielded as much as possible."

Ducky nodded, and then moved closer as the medics stepped back. Bending down, he kissed Tim's forehead. "Goodbye, lad. I am so, so sorry it turned out this way." He watched as the sedative pulled Tim under, then Simon led Ducky off the plane.

Ducky and Simon watched the plane take off. "I'm afraid we have another problem."

It was all Simon could do, not to groan as he turned to face him. "What else could go wrong at this point?"

"When Jethro went out into the field after Shuhab, his senior agent went with him, of course."

"Of course." Knowing how strongly DiNozzo felt about McGee becoming Gibbs' Guide, Simon already suspected trouble. "What went wrong?"

"Jethro zoned, of course, but Anthony had a severe reaction to something. At first we thought it was a toxin from the warehouse – something that Shuhab had cooked up for his next attack."

Simon shook his head. "Gibbs is a Sentinel. He would have reacted first. Something else would have had to have been the cause."

"Yes, and apparently that 'something' was a bottle of pills that was found in Agent DiNozzo's coat pocket."

"Okay." Simon wasn't seeing the connection, but Ducky wasn't through.

"We're still running tests on the make-up of the pills, but several fingerprints were found on the bottle. Agent DiNozzo's, of course."

"Of course."

"And Colonel Hamel's fingerprints. He's the Sentinel specialist from Walter Reed."

Simon nodded. He'd heard of the man and none of it was good. "Well, shit. When will DiNozzo be able to answer questions?"

Ducky had already checked. "Tomorrow morning at the earliest."

Simon glanced down at his watch before shaking his head. "It's late, I'll deal with Gibbs and DiNozzo both in the morning."

Nothing was said as Jim and Blair arrived at the loft. Locking the door behind them, Jim opened his arms and Blair burrowed against him. Jim knew his lover and Guide was hurting over the impending loss of the new Guide. He didn't say anything, but Jim wanted to go knock some sense into Gibbs.

"I know." Blair took his hand and led him upstairs, dropping their coats as they went. "Part of me wants to, too, but our first priority has to be Tim. He's going to need us more than anyone ever has."

"Yeah. It's going to be bad, isn't it?"

"Already is."

Jim didn't know what to say to that so he just laid Blair on the center of the bed and made slow love to him until it was time to go to the airport.

Tim was just waking up when the plane landed. By the time his eyes were open, Blair was bending over him, trying to smile.

"I tried, I wanted so much for him to want me, but I guess it just wasn't meant to be." Tim took a deep, shuddering breath, letting Blair wrap his arms around him. Jim watched the two Guides for a moment and then pulled them both close.

"I'm so sorry, kid, we can't make it better, but we'll do everything in our power to make it easier. I give you my word."

The drive back to the loft was a quiet one, Tim leaning heavily on Blair by the time they arrived. Between them, they got him upstairs and stripped down to his boxers. Tenderly Blair tucked Tim into bed before he and Jim climbed in also. With McGee in the middle, they held on close, using their bond to shield and comfort him.

## Twenty One

First thing in the morning, Abby reported to Gibbs with a heavy heart. "The tests confirmed it, Gibbs. The pills were some sort of hallucinogenic. There were some elements that I couldn't identify, but over 75% was a mix of LSD and PCP with a binder." She had her suspicions as to why Tony took them, so she had to know. "Did you feel anything odd when he took them?"

Gibbs had heard details from Ziva. "You mean other than think a damn moth was a helicopter that was going to land on my head?"

"That was because you were out there without your Guide, Gibbs. Did you have any..." Abby knew she had to tread lightly, but she needed answers. "Any desires to bond with Tony?"

"With DiNozzo?" Gibbs shook his head and closed his eyes. "No, if anything, when my senses act up I can barely stand to be around him. Something about his scent really set my teeth on edge. Why?"

He'd opened his eyes and given her an intense look as he'd asked, but she still hated to tell him. "I found a second set of fingerprints on the bottle. They belong to Dr. Hamel."

"Dr. Hamel?" It took Gibbs a minute to place the name. "The Sentinel doctor from Walter Reed? How did he get involved with what happened to Tony?"

Abby had been researching everything she could get her hands on about Sentinels and Guides since Gibbs had come on line, but after finding the fingerprints, she'd spent the rest of the night focused on Hamel and his research. "He's been trying to create Guides. At least until he lost his research position. He got moved to a figurehead position at Walter Reed because he's got friends in high places."

Gibbs hadn't said anything, but he'd been more than aware of Tony's jealousy. "You think he used Tony to try and continue his research, even though I have a Guide already?"

"Hamel thinks Guides created with drugs are better than natural Guides and with the way you've been treating McGee..."

"What's wrong with the way I treat McGee? I treat him like I always do."

"Exactly! That's the problem, Gibbs. He's not just one of your agents anymore. He's your Guide, he's supposed to be the other half of your soul."

Gibbs could tell she was about to start in on that subject, so he cut her off before she could. "We'll talk about McGee later. For now, let's figure out what the hell DiNozzo was thinking."

Through the window they saw Ziva sit up straight, a good indication that DiNozzo was waking up. Gibbs walked in, Abby at his heels. Gibbs waited while Tony slowly blinked, looking around. It didn't take long for embarrassment to color the younger man's face.

"I'm an idiot."

"Ya think, DiNozzo? Where'd you get the pills?"

For a moment, Gibbs thought he wasn't going to speak. The words started coming slowly, then tumbled out faster and faster as he confessed his fears of being replaced and how he'd reacted to Tim every time Gibbs was away from the pair. Next came the visits to the bonding suite and how he'd come to have the pills. Finally, he looked up at Gibbs. "I really messed up, didn't I, Boss?"



Ducky and Simon had arrived at the beginning of Tony's confession and chose to listen through the open door. Not knowing if Gibbs was aware of their arrival or not, they continued to listen from out in the hallway until Tony asked his question. At that point, Simon Banks stormed in.

"Yes, you did, big time. You do realize that interfering with a bond is a class 3 felony?"

"No, I wasn't interfering, I was just giving McGee a hard time because..."

"You were jealous."

"NO, well... yeah, but anyone could see that things weren't right. Colonel Hamel was right; McGee isn't cut out to be Gibbs' Guide."

"And you decided that you were."

"Yeah, well..." All bravado gone, Tony dropped his head in shame. "I wanted to be, but I can't, can I?"

Abby cut in, hoping to get through to both Gibbs and Tony. "Gibbs, when you're starting to zone, what does Timmy smell like?"

"Warm spices, like nutmeg and cinnamon, mixed with a perfectly prepared cup of coffee." Gibbs was slightly surprised by his own answer. He'd never really analyzed the smell, just enjoyed it.

"What about Ziva?"

Gibbs seemed almost embarrassed to answer Abby's second question, but Ziva refused to be upset. "It is all right, Gibbs, I will not be offended. As I understand it, only a Guide will smell pleasant to a Sentinel in distress."

Recognizing the truth, Gibbs had to admit it to himself and the others. "Everyone other than McGee, unless he's right there with me... it's like a mix between rancid meat and a week old corpse."

"Even me?" Abby stepped back and tucked her arms tightly against her side and Gibbs shrugged.

"Sorry, Abs."

"Then why..." Tony faltered a bit and then decided he already was in so much trouble with Gibbs, that it really didn't matter at this point. "If not having him around made us all smell like that to you, then why in the hell don't you want him surgically attached to your side? I thought that was the way it was supposed to be."

"It is, once the bond is completed."

Tony looked between Gibbs and Ducky, not really understanding. "Their bond is complete. I mean that's why Gibbs was able to return to work, right?"

Simon decided not to pull any punches. Their theory hadn't been proven, but he knew it was close. "Gibbs bonded McGee to him, but instead of bonding himself to McGee, it looks like he used McGee as a conduit to resurrect the bond he had with his first Guide – Shannon."

Once Gibbs and the other had a moment to digest that, Simon opted to tell them the rest. "The bond, what little there is, will soon be broken. I've brought some pretty heavy duty drugs with me that will suppress your senses, Agent Gibbs, until you can have surgery to destroy them permanently."

Gibbs didn't react, while Ducky and Abby had sad expressions, so Ziva decided it was her responsibility to be his advocate in McGee's place. "Just because this bond did not work, why would he not be allowed to try again?"

"He won't be allowed a third Guide, especially after he killed his second one."

Tony stared at him in horror. "What? McGee is dead?"

"He will be, soon. Since the bond is so uneven and damaged, it will be a slow, painful death for him, but Gibbs should survive relatively unscathed. Too bad you realized so late that you can't be his replacement." Annoyed, Simon stared at the group. "What? You thought there was some sort of return policy on Guides? 'Til death do you part' is a real part of the bond."

"I'm the one that screwed up, why is McGee the one that's being punished?" Gibbs paced back and forth, instinct warring with his commitment to his first wife. "You can take me to him. We can finish the bond, right?"

Ducky shook his head. "I'm afraid it's not that simple, Jethro. You have to let go of Shannon first."

Gibbs stared over Ducky's shoulder as he admitted the truth. "I don't know how to do that. All these years, all the ex-wives, and I still don't have a clue, Duck."

Abby had been listening quietly, everything she'd learned about Sentinels, Guides and the bond they share running through her mind. She'd been hurt and angry when Gibbs had first come on-line and wanted to prove the restrictions weren't necessary. She'd found the exact opposite and learned even more as she'd tried to find a way to help her friend.

"I might know of a way."

She turned to Simon. "He needs to accept the spiritual side of being a Sentinel, doesn't he? He needs to join with his spirit animal."

Simon hesitated, and then spoke slowly. "The churches put a lot of pressure on the government to not include the spiritual side in the official documents, but the majority of successful pairs grow stronger when the Sentinel goes on a spirit walk and accepts that side of his abilities."

"A spirit walk?"

Gibbs sounded doubtful instead of revolted, so Simon continued to explain. "Most meditate, open themselves to the possibilities. The result is something very private; few Sentinels ever discuss it and those that do only refer to it in the most general of terms. If you and Tim had come to Cascade, this is something that you would have been taught by the Senior Pair. Oh, and you should probably know, they've identified Shuhab's cousin as the mystery man that broke Kincaid out of prison."

"If Kincaid hadn't escaped..."

"Ellison and Sandburg would have stayed right next to you and McGee until the two of you were successfully bonded and fully trained."

Gibbs resumed pacing, obviously at war with himself. Decision reached, he stopped in front of Banks. "If I do this spirit walk thing, if I'm able to find a way to let go of Shannon, will you take me to McGee?"

Simon had his doubts, but eventually agreed with a warning. "You better be sure before you get there because if you screw it up again, I won't protect him from Jim."

Knowing what was at stake, Gibbs gave a silent nod of agreement while the rest of the remaining DC team looked worried.

Exhausted, but wide awake, Jim looked at his Guide, seeing the same on the other man's face. In between them, the new Guide from DC was pale and trembling, drenched in sweat. Jim knew Tim's shields were failing and that he was terrified of hurting his Sentinel. Jim drew as much energy around them as he could, feeling Blair do the same.

When that was done, Blair tightened his grip on the younger man and leaned close. "Shh, it's all right. Let it go, we've got you."

Tim struggled for a few more minutes before he gave in and let what was left of his personal shields go. The agony battered at the Senior Pair, but they held on to him and to each other and rode it out.

Returning to the Yard, Abby quickly prepared her office for a spirit walk. She wasn't fully aware of everything involved, but she had a pretty good idea. What she'd learned was that it was similar to a deep meditation and that she knew how to do. She remembered the first time she'd done this, it had been to help McGee. Now, in a way, it was again.

Lightly scented candles that reminded her of McGee perfumed the air. She swapped out her heavy metal music for something that Gibbs would probably call "jungle music". She'd brought the CD back from a holistic healing seminar years ago and tucked it away, never dreaming it would become important. The desk had been shoved aside as much as possible, giving room for a large pillow on the floor. The only thing missing from duplicating the spiritual awakening demo she'd witnessed at the seminar was the peyote, but she was pretty sure Gibbs would draw the line at that. Right on time the lab door opened, admitting Gibbs.

Gibbs grumbled and rolled his eyes, but when she pointed, he settled cross-legged on the pillow. "So, what do I do?"

"Clear your mind and reach out."

"That's it?"

"It's harder than it sounds, Gibbs."

He gave her an unbelieving look, but closed his eyes. Several ex-wives had complained that he mentally checked out when working on one of his boats and that's what he tried to duplicate. It took a few minutes, but the familiar sounds of the building faded away and then he heard a childish giggle.

Gibbs opened his eyes and found himself outside his familiar world, in a beautiful meadow surrounded by massive trees. He heard Kelly's voice again and started searching. Running toward the edge of the forest, Gibbs worried that he wouldn't be able to find her, but as he continued to run the trees spread out, allowing sunlight to filter in. Something told Gibbs to stay silent as he slowed down to a walk. Eventually he found Kelly kneeling next to Shannon. Cradled in Shannon's lap was a very sick fox, exhausted from the simple act of breathing. Tears running down her face, Kelly looked up at him.

"Please, Daddy, you have to make him better."

Instinctively, Gibbs realized that he was looking at Tim's spirit animal. Dropping to his knees in front of his girls, he stroked the small creature's head. "I don't know if I can, sweetheart."

"You have to, Daddy. He's my friend. I don't know what I'd do if I lost him."

Shannon finally looked up at him. Like Kelly, there were tears running down her face. "I've helped him all I can, Jethro. It's up to you now." Giving a soft whine, the fox rubbed its head in Gibbs' hand, desperate for any sign of affection. Gibbs was torn.

"I don't know what to do."

"You have to let me go, Jethro. Tim is your Guide now, as he was always destined to be."

"Shannon... We were supposed to have a lifetime together."

"We did. My lifetime. Now, it's time for your lifetime with Tim."

"But..."

She reached out and pressed her fingers against his lips. "No buts, Jethro. I've been waiting for years to see you have the life I want you to have. The life you're destined to have with Tim. If you wait much longer, you'll lose your last chance. It's time to become the man, the Sentinel, I know you are destined to be. Accept it, Jethro. Embrace it."

"I don't want to lose you."

"You won't. Tim is your Guide in the physical world and I'm your Guide in the spirit world. All you have to do is accept us both."

He touched the side of her face as he stood. "What do I do?"

Shannon pointed. "Face North, it's time to take your spirit animal and make him part of you."

Standing, he had to ask one last time. "Are you sure?"

She picked up the limp animal and held him against her chest. "I am. He's the one I want you to have."

Kelly nodded beside her. "You'll be happy with him, Daddy, I know you will. Please, Daddy, for us?"

Doing what he was told, Gibbs saw the lumbering animal in the distance. It was limping and refused to look at him while a panther looked on from the distance. Gibbs couldn't help but laugh and shake his head. "A bear? A bear with a sore paw? I should have known."

Laughing along with him, Shannon had a piece of advice. "Ask your mentor about Incacha and his sense of humor."

Not sure what that meant, Gibbs turned and faced the beast. There was a moment of fear as it charged at him, and then he closed his eyes as the light became unbearably bright.

## Twenty two

Jim gasped as his eyes shot opened. On the other side of McGee, Blair looked at him worriedly. "What's wrong?" Jim just shook his head, giving a short laugh.

"That stubborn SOB finally took his first spirit walk. We might get them through this yet."

"Yeah?" Looking down, Blair nuzzled the semi-conscious man between them. "Do you hear that, Tim? Your Sentinel is finally ready for you. You just need to hold on a little longer." Blair pulled Jim close and kissed him, letting their lips brush against Tim's face, sharing the strength of their bond to keep him alive a little bit longer.

Gibbs was unnaturally still and just as Abby leaned close to see if he was still breathing, he opened his eyes with a yell, frightening her and almost sending her sprawling.

She barely took a breath before the questions started. "Did it work? What happened? Were you able to reach out to McGee? Did you find your spirit animal? Gibbs, what..."

Ignoring her questions, he was already struggling to his feet, trying to get his knees to loosen up. "I have to get to my Guide now, Abby. He needs me right now."

She grinned as he rushed past her without further comment or even his usual kiss to the cheek. "Wow. Whatever happened, it must have been good."

Simon had been busy and a driver was waiting for Gibbs as he stepped out of the lab. Gibbs was quickly taken to the nearby Air Station where the SecNav's jet was sitting on the tarmac. Simon Banks stood next to the aircraft's stairs and blocked Gibbs from getting on board as he laid down the law.

"This is your last chance. Right now Tim is physically and mentally surrounded by a bonded pair that care about him a great deal. They will comfort him and limit his suffering as he passes. If you go there, you'll interrupt that and if you back out, his suffering will be unbearable. Final decision – are you going or staying?"

Gibbs pushed past his arm and up the steps. "I'm going and you're wasting time."

Satisfied, Banks followed him into the plane and tossed a book at him. "Here, I'd suggest you start with chapter seven." A quick check of the table of contents showed that chapter seven was titled 'Sexual Relations and the Bonding Process.' Ears turning red, Gibbs started reading.

"They're here." In truth, Ellison had been tracking the approach of the other Sentinel for quite some time, but now they were walking up to the building. Carefully easing off the bed, Jim adjusted the waistband of his boxers, but made no attempt to dress as he went downstairs. He opened the door just as Simon was reaching up to knock.

"Damn, I hate it when you Sentinels do that."

"Half the fun, Simon." Jim turned serious as he faced Gibbs. "Last chance."

"I know."

"You screw this up, he dies."

It was a bare whisper. "I know."

"If he dies..."

"I'll go with him – willingly."

Jim gave him a long, hard look before finally nodding and turning to Simon.

Knowing what was coming for the next few days at least, Simon just grinned. "I'll bring food by once a day and leave it just inside the door."

Once Simon had left, Gibbs didn't need to be told where to go. Now that he was no longer actively fighting it, the call of his Guide was like a siren song. He took the stairs two at a time up to an open loft bedroom. He gave the room the briefest of glances, his attention on his Guide in the center of the big bed. Tim was still and pale, his skin almost translucent. Gibbs had to zoom in to even see any signs of life. It hurt to see anyone else in bed with him, but Gibbs understood that it was only the sharing of Jim and Blair's bond that had allowed him the chance to fix his own.

Jim had followed him back up the stairs and crawled into the bed behind Blair, leaving the other side for Gibbs, but he didn't pull any punches and he wasn't subtle at all. "Strip down and get in. You'll have to bond with him several times before he's strong enough for Blair and I to leave the bed for more than a few minutes."

Gibbs had done his required reading on the flight. "If I take him, won't it make the bond even more uneven?"

"It can't get any more uneven than it already is. He needs your strength before he can complete the second stage of the bond." To prove his point, Blair pulled the sheet down before stroking his fingers across Tim's chest. "He's waiting for you, Sentinel."

Feeling something very primal as he watched another Guide touch his Guide, Gibbs tugged off his clothes, only vaguely aware of the audience. He wasn't a bashful man, years in the military and the locker room had taken care of that, but this was the first time he'd undressed with multiple men waiting in bed. Dismissing Jim and Blair from his mind, Gibbs crawled into the bed and pressed up close to McGee.

"Tim? I'm here, Tim." Understanding now that Tim was feeling every projected emotion and thought, he focused on his newly admitted desires to fully join with his Guide. He leaned close, brushing his nose against Tim's cheek. "Come back to me, Tim. Don't let me discover the truth too late."

Green eyes slowly opened and Gibbs' breath caught at the sadness he saw in them. Tim didn't say anything, but Gibbs could tell he was being studied, the damaged Guide having no real reason to trust his Sentinel just yet. There were many things he wanted to say, that he needed to say, but the two words that came out were ones he never said and they covered everything.

"I'm sorry."

Tim's breath caught as he stared at Gibbs. "I can't do half way anymore."

"I know."

"Do you?"

"Yes." Gibbs tenderly kissed Tim's lips. "You're mine." Another kiss, this time to Tim's throat. "And more importantly, I'm yours." Tim's eyes widened at that, but Gibbs wasn't done. "I have been for a long time, I just couldn't let go of the past."

Part of Tim just wanted to spread his legs and join with his Sentinel, but he had to know. "What changed?"

"I got to finally say goodbye to Shannon."

"I don't understand."

"You will." Smiling, Gibbs kissed Tim's lips again, putting everything he was feeling into it and slowly deepening it as Tim began to respond. He slid one hand down to start working Tim's boxers off of him, startled when a second pair of hands joined in. He'd almost forgotten about the other couple on the bed, but he didn't argue as Blair helped remove Tim's underwear or when Ellison coated his fingers with lube.

This time Gibbs was wanting to take his time, to explore Tim's body more, but Tim was too weak for an extended session. Murmuring words of love and encouragement, about how each time would be better, Gibbs worked his fingers inside Tim. He made sure his Guide was stretched and prepared, not wanting to cause a moment's more pain. Convinced he was ready, Gibbs slid his fingers out and pressed the head of his cock against Tim's opening. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been that hard. Looking into Tim's eyes, he slowly pushed in.

Tim let out a small gasp, but he hung on tightly to Gibbs as they found their rhythm. Tim's weakness was evident, but Gibbs continued to rock slowly, snaking one hand in between them to work Tim's cock.

Another hand covered his as Jim pressed closer, whispering in Gibbs' ear. "He needs to come in your mouth to start stabilizing the bond." Gibbs nodded as he lightened the pressure and slowed down, using just his fingertips to tease his Guide and build his arousal. The book he'd been given on the plane was quite clear on how a complete exchange of bodily fluids was necessary, one of the main reasons Sentinels and Guides of opposite genders rarely bonded. Oral sex was the primary way for a man to take in the sexual fluids of a woman, but it was almost always a fraction of what the woman absorbed in intercourse, leaving the bond naturally uneven. Eventually, Tim would need more than to just come in his mouth, but Gibbs would deal with that when the time came.

Questioning his flexibility, but wanting to try, Gibbs eased backwards, pulling Tim with him. Jim and Blair gave him a curious look but they helped with the move, even grabbing the pillows when Gibbs pointed at them.

When he was done, Gibbs was standing next to the bed, still buried inside Tim, who was now lying on his back with his ass elevated on several pillows. It gave enough height that Gibbs was able to curl his body forward as he bent over and suck the head of Tim's cock into his mouth.

It felt like warm velvet and the taste satisfied a craving Gibbs suddenly realized he'd always had. Working up and down on his new favorite Popsicle, Gibbs vowed to get more flexible. The more he tasted, the more he wanted and the idea of swallowing his Guide down until coarse hairs tickled his chin sounded pretty good.

That would take a little more practice, but Gibbs always liked having a goal. For tonight he concentrated on what he could reach, circling his tongue around the sensitive head.

With the dual sensations, it didn't take long for Tim to reach a climax. "Gonna... gonna..."

Blair reached out, rubbing his hand on Tim's belly. "That's it, Tim, come for Jethro. That's it, Guide. come for your Sentinel." He groaned and stuttered as Jim's cock started rubbing against his own hole.

Tim cried out, arching his back. Gibbs didn't lose a drop as he followed in his own climax.

The new pair rested for a moment, the full circle of the bond beginning to form, allowing Gibbs to feel the remnants of what Tim had gone through. "Oh, Tim." Shifting them enough that he could lay next to him, Gibbs wrapped his arms around Tim and pulled him close. "I didn't know, I wasn't ready to understand, but it will never be like that again. I swear."

Determined not to cry, Tim bit his lip as he nodded, but when Gibbs tightened his arms around the younger man he broke down. Gibbs wasn't at all put off by the apparent show of weakness, just held on as they rode out the emotional storm. "That's it, I've got you."

The bed was still moving and Gibbs glanced over at Blair and Jim. They were spooned together, Jim slowly sliding in and out of Blair's ass. Gibbs was still deep inside Tim and started rocking, matching their rhythm.

Blair reached out and touched Tim's hand, smiling as Tim's fingers tangled with his. "That's it, Jethro. The two of you are so beautiful together. See how perfectly the two of you fit together. His body was made for you."



"Mine, you're all mine, Tim." Gibbs rubbed his belly against Tim's while they kissed, his body hair adding another layer of sensation to Tim's body and he felt his Guide's cock harden again. "That's it, Tim. That's it."

"Play with his nipples."

Gibbs rubbed his thumbs over them, but soon that wasn't enough and he bent enough to suck one into his mouth.

"Yes." Tim's body arched up against his almost instantly and Gibbs heard a groan next to them. Turning his head slightly as he worried the nub in his lips he watched as Jim rolled one of Blair's nipples between his fingers.

Looking at them over Blair's shoulder, Jim gave Gibbs a lazy smile. "He's your Guide. His body was born for your touch and as your bond fully forms, yours will be the same for him. You think it's good now, just wait. You won't believe how much better it gets."

To prove his point, Jim let the sheet slip off of them as he lifted Blair's top leg and draped it over his hip, exposing their joining to the other couple. "The first time he takes you and you fully complete the bond, you'll feel both sides, you'll be so fully bonded. When that happens, you'll understand everything."

Gibbs couldn't help but look. Blair had a heavy pelt of chest hair, much like himself, trailing down his body to surround a thick cock that was hard and leaking. Past the shaft were balls up tight against his body which gave Gibbs a perfect view of Jim's cock sliding in and out of Blair's body.

"Damn." It might have been his imagination, but Gibbs could swear that he could feel the nearby bond growing stronger. He certainly could feel his own connection to Tim becoming deeper, more intense. The view had been arousing and Gibbs turned serious about his own lovemaking. Up on his knees, he pulled Tim further onto his lap and increased their speed. Out of the corner of his eye he could see Jim and Blair also picking up speed still matching them stroke for stroke.

It had been years since either of them had seen active duty, but the natural competitiveness between Army and Marine started coming to the forefront and as Gibbs neared another climax, he wrapped his arms around Tim and lifted him up, burying himself hard in Tim on the downward thrust.

Tim let out a scream as he came, pulling Gibbs with him. Not wanting to lose a single drop of the precious fluid, Gibbs laid him back down and licked him clean. What had landed on Gibbs' belly and chest, he rubbed into his skin with a deep moan.

Wanting more, Gibbs sucked Tim's cock back into his mouth, sliding two fingers into Tim's ass at the same time. The passage was loose and slick and Gibbs easily found his target. He couldn't get enough, coaxing a third climax out of Tim. That small amount of fluid tasted the best of all. Knowing they were done for at least a few hours, Gibbs crawled up next to Tim and the two men instinctively wrapped around each other as they fell into a deep sleep.

Wanting to make their lovemaking last, Jim had slowed down when Gibbs impaled McGee. Now they were enjoying the aftermath of the show as Jim continued to slowly rock back and forth. Blair turned his head just enough that they could kiss.

"They're going to make it, aren't they?"

Jim watched for a moment as Gibbs instinctively nuzzled McGee's neck without ever waking up. "I think so, Chief. As long as Gibbs doesn't freak out when it's time to really turn the tables. Either way, we'll know tomorrow. In the meantime..." Without changing his speed, Jim moved just enough that the head of his cock scraped across Blair's prostate. "You ready to get serious?"

Blair ground back against him. "Damn straight I am. Give me all you've got."

Jim was the first one awake. He'd have happily snuggled down for a few more hours, but he knew the other Sentinel would be waking soon. Biting back a groan, he gave Blair a kiss before climbing out of the bed. Downstairs he took care of business and cleaned up before soaking two washcloths with hot water.

Giving the coffee pot a longing look, Jim ignored the desire for a strong cup, not wanting anything to interrupt day two of the re-bonding. Blair was now awake and Jim returned upstairs, tossing one of the washcloths to him before sitting on the other side of the bed.

Synchronizing their movements carefully, the senior pair washed their counterparts. Gibbs opened his eyes briefly, before pulling Tim up against him as soon as Blair finished washing his Guide.

Jim leaned close before the other Sentinel could go back to sleep. "We'll bring some food up and then leave you guys alone for a while. We'll be downstairs if you need anything." Gibbs nodded, but didn't open his eyes.

Sure enough, Simon had been by, leaving a bag of groceries just inside the door. Blair pounced on the bag, pulling out fruit, various high protein snacks and a few bottles of Gatorade. "What time did Simon drop this off, did you hear him"

"Heard him, smelled his cigars, felt the vibrations from him stomping up the stairs. Apparently the elevator is out again." Blair snorted at that, and then crept up the stairs with the assorted treats while Jim got the shower ready for them.

A strongly bonded pair could form temporary secondary bonds with an individual Guide or Sentinel that was in distress or a newly bonded pair that was struggling, by bonding near them. That was how they'd kept Tim alive before Gibbs arrived and how they were now giving strength to the developing bond. As tempting as it was, their joint shower now involved nothing more than tender caresses and slow kisses.

Secondary bonds tended to be stronger and give more awareness from Sentinel to Sentinel and from Guide to Guide. Using the water as white noise, Jim bent to whisper in Blair's ear. "Is Tim ready to take control for the next stage of the bonding?"

Blair thought for a moment, smiling at what he had been picking up from the other Guide. "Physically, he's still weak, but he's got a plan. A very good plan."

Jim caught the flush of arousal in his Guide. "Yeah? Care to share?"

Blair planned on matching the second round, stroke for stroke, but he didn't tell Jim that. "You'll figure it out soon enough."

## Twenty three

His years of training too strong to ignore, Gibbs was wide awake. He might have dozed a bit longer, but the smell of the food Blair had brought up was impossible to ignore. Lonely with his Guide still sleeping, but not actually wanting to wake the still recovering man, Gibbs ran his fingers across the cut up fruit and coated Tim's lips with the juice. Not surprisingly, Tim licked his lips, enjoying the sweet flavor before sucking Gibbs' fingers into his mouth.

At Gibbs' deep moan, Tim opened his eyes and smiled. "Hey."

"Hey, yourself." Gibbs touched the side of Tim's face, watching him closely. "How are you?"

Tim thought about it for a moment. The loop wasn't fully healed and closed between them, but the gaping wound in his mind was smaller and already partially sheltered by Gibbs. "Better."

Gibbs looked at him carefully as he continued to touch Tim's cheek. "Good. I'm ready to finish the bond if you're strong enough."

"Yeah? Are you sure, because I know this is a big jump and I don't want you to feel like you're being pushed into something you aren't ready for."

"That's why you left, isn't it? You were afraid Abby or Ducky was going to tell me what I was doing to you."

Knowing this wasn't going to be an easy conversation, Tim shifted enough to rest his head on his hand, his elbow on the mattress. "Ducky understood, but Abby just wanted to wave her hands and have everything be okay. To her, you're Superman and I didn't want to take that away from either of you, not when forcing the bond wasn't going to do any of us any good."

Gibbs cringed as he thought back. "You felt all of that, didn't you? It wasn't about you being a man, it was..."

Details weren't that important, after all, Tim had felt it firsthand, but he let Gibbs know that he really understood. "The bond formed along the same pathways where your bond with Shannon had been. At that stage, it felt like it should have been Shannon at the other end. It's really not your fault, Jethro. No one anticipated that starting our bond would have resurrected your bond with Shannon."

"I like that." Gibbs shrugged as he realized that needed more explanation. "When you call me Jethro, I really like that."

"Yeah?" Tim wrapped his arms around Gibbs' neck and pulled him closer. "I'm glad. I like it when you call me Tim. Especially when you come."

Gibbs didn't think he'd made any intelligible sound when he'd come, then he realized that he'd been shouting out 'Tim' in his mind. Testing his theory, he pulled Tim closer and thought hard. 'You're the best thing that's happened to me in a very long time.' When his Guide's face lit up, Gibbs kissed him hard.

It had been a while since the futon in the downstairs's office had been folded out, but Jim and Blair made do, even if Jim's feet hung over the edge. Jim's connection to the new pair wasn't as strong as Blair's but he had a pretty good idea what was happening above them and the joy on Blair's face was a good indicator that he was right. "Their bond is really getting stronger, isn't it?"

"Oh... yeah." Blair's voice jumped an octave when Jim latched onto his nipple and started worrying it between his teeth. Concentrating on what was going on right there, Blair arched his back. Just because they needed to pace themselves didn't mean they couldn't have some fun.

Gibbs was expecting to be rolled onto his stomach, but instead, he was nudged off the bed.

"Shower first." Tim was still pretty wobbly so Gibbs stayed close as he was led down the stairs. At the bathroom door, Tim smiled and kissed him. "First order of business is a nice, relaxing shower."

Carefully, Gibbs steadied Tim as he climbed over the edge of the tub. Once McGee was safely in the tub, Gibbs quickly joined him before McGee got the water going and adjusted the taps. The water was just warm enough to not be frigid or uncomfortable in any way. It was refreshing and meant that the water heater could keep up with them.

Barely whispering as to not break the mood, Tim directed Jethro to lean against the tile wall, resting on his crossed arms. The water was coming from the side as he leaned there, but the shower head was high enough that it cascaded down instead of across his back.

Senses up, Gibbs smelled the vanilla of the shampoo before the fingers touched his head, but he wasn't anticipating a full scalp massage. Not expecting it to be so sensual, Gibbs was melting by the time Tim's hands finished with his head massage and moved onto his ears.

If you'd asked him, Gibbs would have said there was nothing he found erotic about his head or ears, but he was already hard, almost painfully so. When he groaned, Tim laughed.

"I thought snipers were all about patience." Giving in just a bit, Tim dropped his hands down to stroke Gibbs' inner thighs before carefully washing his most intimate places.

A few minutes of that had Gibbs panting. "Damn it, I'm ready."

Tim straightened up so that Gibbs could feel his words on the back of his neck. "I'm just getting started."

"Oh, fuck."

"That's the plan. Come on, let's go upstairs."

Not bothering to completely dry off, Tim opened the door and led Gibbs out of the bathroom.

The chill was enough to take the edge off and allow Gibbs to walk in reasonable comfort. Still hard though, his cock bounced with each step. Walking past the downstairs bedroom, he couldn't help but glance in. Jim was spread out on the bed, Blair kneeling between his legs, licking and sucking his way across Jim's chest.

Gibbs stumbled to a stop, but Tim latched onto his shaft as a handle. "Upstairs if you want to play."

That was too good of an offer to pass up and Gibbs obediently went up the stairs, definitely ignoring the quiet snickers from downstairs.

Crisp, fresh bedding covered the king sized bed as obviously either Ellison or Sandburg had slipped back upstairs while they'd showered. Tim made a pile of the pillows and without being asked, Gibbs laid face down over the pillows. That left his ass elevated and ready for McGee. However, instead of fingers slick with lube, something else, something warm and wet touched his backside.

"Oh."

Tim hummed, the vibration echoing through Gibbs' ass cheeks. Then he went to work, licking and exploring until Gibbs was ready to explode.

For his part, Gibbs hadn't known the human body could feel like this. He wanted it to go on forever; he wanted Tim to fuck him right now. There was a strange sound filling the bedroom and then he realized that it was him, moaning and keening, begging for more.

Guides that were close often developed an empathic link with each other. Because of that, Blair could sense what Tim was doing, and he, too, now had his Sentinel ass up on the bed while he rimmed him. Jim had his senses wide open, listening to Gibbs as he begged and gasped. Combined with the wet sounds of sucking and licking, he had a good picture of what was happening, even without being able to actually see them. It wasn't the first time he'd overheard another couple, but this was the first time they'd played along with them while in separate rooms. Just as Jim didn't think he could take anymore without either dialing down or climaxing, he heard the soft snap of the lube lid and knew that upstairs, Gibbs was about to be taken and from the sounds, he was more than ready.

"Fuck..." Gibbs let out a low groan as a very talented tongue circled his hole before nailing it dead center. "Too good. Need you. Need you now."

Teeth scraped lightly across skin, making him shiver before Tim lightly sucked on the sensitive stretch of skin between his hole and the back of his balls. "You've got me, Jethro. Now, what do you want with me?"

Gibbs could feel the smile against the back of his balls before Tim sucked one into his mouth, the last of his guilt and anxiety over living his life without Shannon melting away. "I want you to take me and make me yours."

Immediately, Gibbs felt a wave of pleasure from Tim that was not entirely sexual before Tim shifted enough to gently kiss the small of his back. "Mine." The word sent a ripple of similar pleasure, this time through Gibbs, accented by the feel of slick fingers sliding inside him. First one, then two. There was no pain; he was too aroused and too relaxed for that. Even three only had the slightest burn and that faded quickly.

"I'm ready, damn it. Fuck me." Gibbs tried thrusting back against the fingers inside him, but Tim pulled out.

"Wanna roll you over."

Gibbs almost objected. After all, he was spread out and in position, all Tim had to do was to mount him, but Tim started rearranging him before he could get any words out. Several pillows were removed and tossed aside before Tim helped him move onto his back. Now diagonally on the big bed and face to face, Tim moved closer, pressing the tip of his cock against Gibbs' hole.

With a smile, he pushed in slowly, lifting Gibbs' thighs and moving even closer until his cock was buried as deep as it could be and Gibbs' ass was on his lap. Face to face, the look on Tim's face took Gibbs' breath away and he was so glad Tim had moved them.

Tim had been careful in preparing Gibbs, not only because he didn't want his Sentinel to experience any discomfort in his first time bottoming, but because he didn't want to spoil the surprise. Knowing about the pleasure spot deep within a man's body and experiencing it firsthand were two different things, as Gibbs was about to find out. After a long session of stimulating every nerve surrounding Jethro's prostate, Tim started rubbing across it with his cock. Positioning them at first to provide only minimal pressure, he slowly changed their angle until eventually he was slamming into it with every thrust. Pressing Jethro's thighs against his chest, Tim felt joy as their bond continued to heal and his lover was almost incoherent with pleasure.

"Oh, fuck... gonna... gonna..."

"That's it, Jethro, come on my cock." Still holding onto Gibbs' legs, Tim rolled backwards, pulling Gibbs with him until Tim was flat on his back, Gibbs sitting on his cock, riding it. The interruption was enough to stall his own climax, while triggering Gibbs'.

Between the cock in his ass and the sounds and smells from upstairs, Jim thought he was going to go mad. He'd started to dial down, but a pinch to his ass told him that his Guide didn't approve.

"No cheating, Jim. You get the whole package today."

"Blair, you're killing me."

"Nah, you love it." Just to prove his point, Blair slowed down and Jim immediately started thrusting back against him. "See?"

Upstairs, Gibbs' voice got louder and sharper and Jim dropped his head down to rest on his folded arms.

"What the hell is Tim doing to him?"

Both Guides were too aroused to get much detail about the other by that point. "Don't know." Blair was straining, determined to not come before Tim. "But I'm going to find out."

"Damn straight."

"Don't think straight is the right term for this."

Jim snorted in laughter, and then howled as Blair nailed him just right. "Fuck, yeah."

Gibbs was so aroused that he barely softened as he came. Hardly believing it, within seconds his shaft was starting to harden and thicken again as they found their new rhythm with him riding Tim's cock.

Tim lifted his hands, allowing Jethro to lace their fingers together. Tim then supported him on their joined hands letting Jethro focus on the sensations.

His breath coming in short pants, Gibbs tilted his head back and just let himself feel. "Yeah, oh, yeah." When Tim gave a shout and arched his body, Gibbs let his sense of touch spiral up even more and the feel of Tim's fluids splashing against his insides tipped him over the edge. He left a few more stripes of come across Tim's chest as he sagged down against him.

"Did you like that?" There was just a touch of timidness in the question and Gibbs pulled him close.

"That was amazing." Gibbs was still trying to catch his breath, but he wanted to make sure that Tim understood the moment of sadness he'd felt. "I'm just so sorry that your first time was so miserable."

"You didn't hurt me, not really."

"I also didn't try to give you even an ounce of pleasure. You're my Guide. You're the one that's going to be by my side for the rest of our lives and I never even touched your dick that first time. Then I kicked you out of our bed."

Knowing that Tim needed to hear this, Gibbs shifted them so that Tim was draped across him, enjoying the feel of his semen squishing between their chests as Tim settled. "I saw Shannon that night. She looked so sad – I thought it was because I'd cheated on her, but it was because I was throwing away everything she'd wanted for me all these years."

Tim didn't look convinced, so Gibbs kept talking. "You're a fox, you know." He got a funny look from his Guide and laughed before he continued. "Your spirit animal, it's a fox. All these years, he's been with them in the spirit world, just waiting for me to get my act together. She picked you for me and your fox is Kelly's best friend."

Remembering how weak and sick the fox pup had looked, Gibbs pulled Tim even tighter. "I was being so damn stubborn that I almost lost everything."

"But you didn't." Tim kissed the skin under his lips. "We're okay now, right?"

Gibbs tilted his face up for a proper kiss, putting everything he was feeling into it. "We're better than okay."

"Jim, you okay?" Blair watched as his Sentinel seemed almost overcome by emotions for a moment. Knowing that Jim had been quietly monitoring the other Sentinel upstairs, he became worried. "Are they all right?"

He listened for a moment more before pulling his hearing back downstairs to give them a bit more privacy as they started moving against each other again. "They're going to be just fine, Chief, just fine. Come on, let's get some sleep. Their training starts first thing in the morning."

"Good morning." Blair beamed at the couple as they descended the stairs rather late the next morning. If he'd been expecting any embarrassment from Gibbs, he'd have been disappointed. The fully bonded Sentinel was practically crowing that morning.

"And a good morning to you. Got the coffee on, I see." There was a bounce to his step as he headed off to the kitchen where Jim was staring at the pot, watching each drop as it fell.

Once it was just the two Guides in the living room, Blair grinned and shook his head, knowing the Sentinels could hear anything that was said. "Man, I'm not sure exactly what you did to him yesterday, but it was good."

Tim laughed even as he turned bright red. "Hope we didn't bother you guys too much."

Jim and Blair had managed to keep up with them for only the first few hours, but had still enjoyed the rest very much. "Are you kidding? We're older, not dead." He waggled his eyebrows, laughing even harder when Tim reddened even more.

In the kitchen the two Sentinels were chuckling over their coffee and Gibbs shook his head. "Never had a honeymoon like this, not even when I was in my twenties."

"First couple weeks are pretty wild, and then things will settle a bit. At least you'll be able to get through a meal without taking each other." He waited until Gibbs was taking a sip of coffee. "Just what in the hell were you guys doing with those kiwi fruit?"

Gibbs sputtered and choked on his coffee. "Let's just say it'll be a while before I can walk into the produce department without getting a hard-on." He got a dreamy look on his face. "Or the peanut butter aisle."

"You wanted to see me, Sir?" Tony DiNozzo stood in the doorway to Director Vance's office, expecting the worst.



Vance studied him for a moment before nodding. "Come in DiNozzo, close the door behind you."

Tony stood in front of the desk until Vance nodded at the chair, then he quickly sat down, trying to be subtle as he wiped his sweaty palms on his pant legs.

"You've been out of the hospital for a few days. How are you feeling?"

"Stupid." The answer popped out of Tony's mouth before he could censor himself, but the honesty was appreciated.

"Good, because that was one of the dumbest things I've ever seen an agent do in all my years at the Agency and I'm not just talking about the pills. You reacted badly right from the get-go when Gibbs first came on-line."

Tony stared at the floor in front of him. "I know."

"Are you in love with Gibbs?"

"What?" That got Tony's eyes front and center. "No, I just..."

Vance waited and eventually Tony spit out the rest. "I guess I was afraid of being replaced. Director Banks was right, I was jealous."

"You do realize that every chance at promotion for McGee went right out the window the moment Gibbs latched onto him? That he'll never have a chance to lead his own team. That his career here will end the moment Gibbs retires?"

"Now I do. Abby and Ducky have been educating me since Gibbs left for Cascade."

"And how do you feel about it now?"

DiNozzo sighed and shook his head. He hated baring his soul, but Abby had laid down the law. "Like I said, it was stupid and I let Hamel lead me around by the nose. All I could see was Gibbs not needing me anymore and McGee was an easy target."

"You made a bad situation worse and put both their lives in danger."

"And that's the one thing I never meant to happen. If I could take it back, I would – in a heartbeat."

Vance knew he was honestly contrite and decided to go straight to the requirements. "Luckily for you, both Gibbs and McGee think your ass is worth saving."

That caught Tony's attention. "You've talked to them? How is McGee, is he all right? Is their bond...?"

"They've got a full, solid bond and have apparently already learned a great deal about using the bond and Gibbs' senses. In fact, they'll be home soon."

"Already? Wow, that's great." Tony's face fell. "If they want me to leave the team or even the Agency, I'll understand, Sir."

"Well, they don't, but I do have some requirements."

Tony took a deep breath and visibly squared his shoulders. "Okay, lay it on me."

"All right, first – you will not interfere with their bond in any way. The next time it happens, you'll be terminated and you will face charges."

"You don't have to worry about that, Director Vance."

"Good. Next, you will cooperate with the investigation against Dr. Hamel."

"I thought he'd resigned his commission."

"He did, but the man has some sort of secret agenda regarding Guides. If there's anything you can contribute to the investigation, you do so. No matter how embarrassing it is, understood?"

"Yes, Sir."

"Excellent. Now," Vance leaned forward, resting his chin on his folded hands. "You're a good agent, Tony. I understand the potential Gibbs sees in you." He watched DiNozzo's eyes light up at that. "However, you're your own worst enemy. I suspect that you already know that."

Tony gave a slight shrug, but didn't say anything. Abby had accused him of sabotaging himself to continue to need Gibbs. Part of him objected to that, but a larger part was afraid that she was right.

Vance had seen the look of guilt flash across his face, but he didn't make DiNozzo say the words. The point had been made. "I don't care how you do it, but you need to fix that. Hash things out with your father, learn yoga, spend some time building a stronger personal life, whatever it takes. I'm not going to require you to see one of the Agency shrinks, but I do want you to talk to Ducky. Keep him apprised of your plans and progress."

"I can do that."

"Good." Vance picked up a file in an obvious dismissal and Tony stood, but he wasn't quite done.

"If you talk to them again before they get back, tell them... tell them I'm really happy for them and that I'm especially glad McGee's okay."

Vance gave a nod and Tony quickly left.

"Hey."

Blair smiled as strong arms wrapped around him and Jim kissed the top of his head. They were standing near the top of the stairs, Jim behind and one step above Blair as they watched the other pair. "They're ready to go home, aren't they?"

Jim watched them closely. After a day of standard training and tests, Tim had come up with his own test. He'd made a quiet request to Simon and now Jethro was sipping various bourbons and comparing them to their ad-

vertisements and to each other. "Yeah, they're ready. They passed everything we could throw at them today, and then some. With some time and experience, they could give us a run for our money."

"Yeah." There was a hesitation in Blair's voice that caught Jim's attention.

"You're worried?"

Blair shook his head. "No, not worried. Just hate to see them leave."

Jim understood. After the first forty-eight hours the new bond had settled enough for the four men to go out and do some sightseeing. It let Gibbs become acclimated to his senses before they started serious training and they'd had an enjoyable few days at the same time. The evenings had been filled with good food, great conversation and amazing sex. The loft was infused with a lust it hadn't seen since Jim and Blair's first weeks as a pair. The two couples hadn't shared a bed since the first two days, but with two Sentinels and two very empathic Guides, very little had been left to the imagination.

"You want to form a secondary bond with them."

Blair smiled as he watched the two men. Gibbs had apparently decided to compare how the various drinks tasted on his Guide's skin and was dripping bourbon on McGee's neck before licking it off. "Yeah, I do, and I know you do, too."

Jim wasn't surprised that Blair had picked up on that, even though they hadn't talked about it. "It'll be Spring, maybe Summer before that's possible."

"Something to look forward to, then." Blair tilted his head up for a brief kiss before turning around to do it right. Jim smiled and tugged him the rest of the way upstairs.

Gibbs and McGee had insisted on moving into the downstairs bedroom after the first few days, but Jim and Blair were still enjoying the echoes of the sexual energy left up there in the loft. Stopping next to the bed, Jim pulled Blair's shirt off and tossed it to the side before kissing and sucking his neck as he rolled Blair's nipples between his fingers. It didn't take long before Blair was panting and grinding his ass back against Jim's groin.

"Come on, man, fuck me."

Jim undid the snap on Blair's jeans before working the zipper down. Once he had Blair's boxers and jeans down far enough for him to step out, he gave a few tugs on Blair's rising shaft. "Get me hard, babe."

Blair smiled and turned before dropping to his knees. Jim was going commando and as soon as he had Jim's pants down to his knees, Blair swallowed down the half-hard cock.

"Oh, yeah." Jim's head went back as he groaned in pleasure. As much as he enjoyed Blair's mouth, it wasn't long before he wanted more. "Get on the bed."

While the rest of Jim's clothes hit the floor, Blair scrambled up onto the bed. Knees spread wide and hands braced on the wire of the railing he watched the action downstairs as Jim prepped him. It didn't take long before Jim's cock was buried deep inside him and Jim was pressed against his back, nipping at his ear.

"Enjoying the view?" Jim saw a smile cross Gibbs' face even though he didn't look up at them.

Blair couldn't see everything, but he saw enough. "Hell, yeah."

Sometime after midnight Jim went downstairs for a drink of water, running to Gibbs who apparently had the same idea. By unspoken agreement, they sat across from each other at the kitchen table and Jim gave him a careful look. "Been a hell of a week."

"No arguments there." Gibbs had a half smile on his face as he set the glass down. "I wish things hadn't been so hard for Tim, but maybe he's right. Maybe we needed the whole journey to get where we are."

"Don't let Sandburg hear you being that philosophical. We'll never hear the end of it." They both chuckled and then Jim got serious. "You feel ready to go home tomorrow?"

"Yeah. Yeah, I do. Be nice to put all this into practice. Show folks there what a real, bonded pair can do."

Jim was pretty sure the 'folks' was mostly DiNozzo. The four of them had had some serious discussions, but McGee was adamant about letting it go. Gibbs had agreed, but confessed to Ellison later that he'd be watching the other man closely as the team settled into their new dynamic.

Smiling, Jim traced a water drop down the side of his glass. "Haven't said anything to Blair yet, until it's confirmed, but Simon is getting my testimony rescheduled so we can go back East again in the next few days so we'll be around if you need us."

"Good to know. I certainly wouldn't mind another set of eyes tracking Shuhab and his people, especially after they killed those guards and helped Kincaid to escape."

Jim nodded and waited, suspecting that Gibbs had something else on his mind. He didn't have long to wait.

"What's a secondary bond and will it help me keep Tim safe?"

"You know how we are able to sense each other's bond right now?"

Gibbs gave his own nod. He hadn't minded, but it had sent any aspect of privacy right out the window. "It's starting to fade a bit."

"Yep, and in another week it'll be gone. A temporary secondary bond is from bonding next to each other."

The pieces started fitting together. "That means that a full secondary bond is a bit more hands on? Not sure I like the idea of anybody, even you, having Tim that way."

"No, his ass is yours. Imagine bonding next to each other like we did before, but one of us leaning over to suck on him. Then you guys return the favor. An oral bonding will always be secondary to a full intercourse bonding."

Parts of Gibbs liked that idea a whole lot and Jim smirked. "You've got plenty of time to talk about it and make your decision. A new bond needs five or six months to fully settle before we can even start to discuss it."

"You guys ever do it before?"

"There's a pair based in Colorado that we've got a secondary bond with. They're good friends, which is why we have the bond, but their work with the government keeps them pretty isolated."

Gibbs understood what wasn't being said and just let Ellison continue to explain.

"Jack's Guide is even more of a trouble magnet than Blair is, believe it or not, so we did use the added bond to help rescue them a while back. I think you've seen both the good and the bad about being a Sentinel, so you understand the danger. The thing is that it won't work if the two pairs aren't close, unusually close, so it doesn't happen very often." Jim stood and clapped Jethro on the back as he left him to think about future options.

"We could have flown back commercial. Or military."

"Enjoy it. You've gotten more miles in the SecNav's jet than he has lately." Jim turned and gave a fond smile to the Guides as they said their goodbyes. He'd almost pulled it off to go with them, but another session of paperwork awaited them before they could close the Kincaid case. As he watched another round of hugs, Jim gave Gibbs a brief hug, thumping him on the back before pulling away. If he didn't get them moving, he and Blair would miss their own flight.

"Come on, Chief. Time's a-wasting."

"Yeah, yeah." Blair gave Tim one last squeeze before walking over to stand in front of Gibbs. "The DSA cleaning crew has prepared your house – again, and the bonding suite – again. Don't screw it up this time, okay?"

There was a smile and the words sounded light-hearted, but Gibbs could feel the threat behind them. He wouldn't get another chance. "Don't worry. I get it now. All of it."

## Twenty four

"You ready to do this?" Smiling, Gibbs looked over at McGee, thrilled to see him looking so healthy and strong, so different than the last time they'd been here.

Tim stepped closer and returned the smile. "Sure am, Jethro. Let's show them what we can do." With Gibbs' hand resting on the small of his back, Tim stood tall as they walked into the building and signed in. They were sure a call went up even before the elevator started moving and the audience waiting for them proved that theory right. Abby was vibrating with excitement, while the others were a bit more cautious.

Not surprisingly, Abby was the first of the group to break away to greet them, running up and hugging them both at the same time. "Oh, my God, Oh, my God, I am so happy you're home and that everything is all right." She pulled back to look at them, the first hint of worry on her face. "It is, right? I mean, things are okay between you now and the bond?"

To answer that and any other question the others might have on the status of their relationship, Gibbs pulled Tim's face against his and kissed him hard, stopping just short of grinding against him. Finally, when they pulled back, Gibbs turned back to her and the others. "My Guide and I have a very strong and well balanced bond and are ready to return to work."

For a group that was expecting a smirk or a one-word answer, Gibbs' full answer was a surprise. Vance recovered first, not knowing how his response would be taken. "We're glad to hear that, but we need you to re-certify first."

"Planning on it. Paper targets first, then the Gauntlet?"

Vance had not been expecting such easy compliance and certainly hadn't expected them to offer to undergo the more advanced testing and stumbled over his words for a moment. "Yes, sure, that's... that's perfect."

As Vance made the call to set up the Gauntlet, Gibbs and McGee stepped over to their desk to drop their coats and gear, aware that they were being closely scrutinized. Gibbs knew that he looked more relaxed, more comfortable in his own skin, but the big change was in McGee. Gone were the shy geek and the emotionally battered, partially bonded Guide. In his place was a man confident and strong, ready to face the future.

"You okay, Chief?"

Blair shrugged and accepted the hug. "Yeah."

"That was convincing." Jim brushed his lips across Blair's forehead as they stood outside the loft, paperwork finally finished. "We've trained other pairs before and sent them on their way."

"This time was different."

Jim smiled, remembering the plane tickets in his pocket. "Yeah, it was. Which is why we're going back to DC this afternoon. Well, that and the testifying that we never got around to doing."

"Really?" Smiling now, Blair leaned back enough to look Jim in the eye.

"Really. And after the dog and pony show is over we can stick around and help them go after Shuhab. Figured it was the least we could do after Shuhab and Kincaid teamed up to cause them all that trouble. So let's go pack, we have to be at the airport in an hour."

If there was any doubt about the rumors on a new Sentinel and Guide pair, the fact that even the Director of NCIS was going to observe two agents' re-certifications seemed to confirm them. The Quartermaster himself set up the targets and handed out the ear protection.

McGee was first up. As they watched, Gibbs snuggled up behind him and whispered something in his ear before backing up. Tony looked at Ziva, who shrugged, and they both settled in to watch. Tony had seen some pretty good shooting from McGee over the years and he hoped that the changes hadn't hurt him too much in that regard.

The traditional target they used was the outline of a body with two bulls-eyes, one small one on the head and a larger one the covered the core of the body. On the body target the 10x was about the size of a human heart, the regular 10 was several inches larger. A score of 9 was still a kill shot and 8 was the minimum that Gibbs considered acceptable for his team at this distance.

Gibbs' promise of what he would do for every 10x he scored had Tim smiling as he loaded his weapon. Tim centered himself, feeling the bond supporting and strengthening him as he sighted down the barrel to the target 25 meters away. Certification required ten shots fired for a total of 85 points at 25 meters or 95 points at 10 meters. When Tim set his pistol down and the target was brought back, even Vance gave a whistle. Every shot was either in or touching the 10 ring and three shots were within the 10x.

Usually several rounds needed to be done to satisfy the Quartermaster, but he laughed and shook his head. "Boy, you can come shoot on my team anytime."

McGee and Gibbs switched places, Tim giving his own advice. "Use my scent as your anchor, Jethro and show them what a trained Sentinel is capable of."

Dismissing the body target, Gibbs let his sight zoom in on the head target. The 10 ring was the size of a quarter, the 10x the size of a dime. Tony noticed how high his gun was and started to ask. "Umm, Boss?"

Ziva hushed him as Gibbs started firing. Ten rounds later and they were staring at the target, the 10 ring completely demolished and the rest of the target untouched. Gibbs and McGee just smiled at each other and started walking to the interactive range while the rest continued to stare at the target.

"Wow."

"Yeah."

"I am impressed."

"Impressed? I've been running ranges for twenty-five years and I've never seen anything even close. Not with a pistol and not at that range."

As they walked, Tim looked at the smile on his Sentinel's face. "They surprised?"

"Oh, yeah."

The interactive range, or the Gauntlet as it was called, was designed to test personnel in the most realistic circumstances possible with different targets popping up under varying conditions every time it was run. Civilians, hostiles, hostiles with hostages, undercover operatives, every possible combination could be found as one

carefully made their way through the buildings waiting to be cleared. Smoke bombs and sirens made it even more realistic and several human shooters added an element of surprise. Scoring with the laser guns was based on both accuracy and time and the best score for a two person team had been held for the last five years by two members of the FBI's Hostage Rescue Team based at Quantico.

After they were suited up with the vests that would record if they were hit, Gibbs turned to McGee. "Suggestions?"

"Sight will be your most useful sense, but use sound to get a location on the humans before we start. Anchor on me and be ready to dial down quickly if you need to. Remember what Ellison said about the sirens?"

"The click."

"Yep. You hear that and crank hearing down in a hurry. Then you can bring it back up slowly as you filter out the siren."

"Okay, stay close to me. If we're doing good, they'll try to separate us." Gibbs looked over at the Quartermaster and raised his voice. "You're recording this, right?"

"Cameras are all over the range."

Ten minutes later, they were staring at the screens, wondering just how an over-the-hill former Marine and a Geek managed to shatter the time record and pull a perfect score at the same time.

"Pull in there."

Jim made the turn automatically, and then realized what parking lot he was in. "A sex shop? I know you packed lube."

"I did."

"Then what did you forget?"

Blair didn't roll his eyes, but it was a near thing. "Nothing was forgotten."

"You're up to something." The only answer was a grin and Blair bounced out of the rental car.

"Stay here, I'll be back in a minute."

Jim thought about using his senses to track his Guide, but decided to play along instead.



Vance secured a copy of the video before mentioning that he would see the rest of them back aboard the Yard after lunch. Plans were made, but Gibbs could tell that DiNozzo wanted to speak to McGee without an audience. He sent Ziva ahead to get them a table at a nearby pizza joint.

Tony gave a nervous laugh and rubbed his sweaty hands on his pants. "I guess you can hear it too, Boss."

Gibbs just gave him the look. "Tony, I'd be able to hear you from on the other side of the parking lot, but if Tim doesn't want me to listen, I won't."

"Really?" Tony had to squint to see that far and just shook his head. "That's going to take some getting used to. I understand that you probably don't trust me yet."

Tim looked at Gibbs and a silent conversation seemed to take place. Tony didn't quite understand it as there were no gestures or lip reading taking place. Eventually, Gibbs nodded at McGee and stepped away, pulling his phone out as he did.

"Wow, you can read each other's minds?"

"Not that, exactly. He can feel my emotions and my reactions. Even if he's not consciously listening, he's aware of my heartbeat. He'll know if something is wrong." Tim took a closer look at Tony. The image of DiNozzo in the ICU was still very clear in his mind. "How are you?"

Tony knew exactly what Tim was referring to. "Fine. Embarrassed as hell, but I'm fine. Doctors said there's no permanent damage." He shuffled his feet and shrugged. "I'm sorry I made things even harder for you."

Aware that this was going to be a difficult conversation for Tony, Tim pointed out a nearby bench. Nothing else was said until they sat down. "Relationships aren't one or the other, Tony. My being his Guide was never a threat to you. You're his senior agent. You're the son he never had. The only way that is going to change is if you push him away."

"I almost did, didn't I?"

"Yeah, you did. It was stupid and could have killed all three of us."

"I know." Tony leaned forward to rest his elbows on his knees. "A couple of hours of that and I just about lost my sanity. I can't imagine living through it for days. Were you really ready to..."

McGee understood the question even if Tony couldn't verbalize it. "I went to Cascade to die, Tony. Jim and Blair helped shield me so that Jethro wouldn't suffer too as I..."

"Killed yourself?"

"No, it wouldn't have been a suicide, not exactly." Tim hesitated, not sure the best way to explain how a damaged bond could suck the life out of a person.

Gibbs rejoined them, sitting on McGee's other side. "It would have been murder, Tony. I was literally killing him. Me and my stubborn refusal to face our new reality."

Tony frowned as he tried to make sense of what he was being told. "Because you hadn't fully completed the bond? I don't understand how that would have killed him."

"The connection was one way." Gibbs snaked an arm around Tim and pulled him close, needing to feel that his Guide was alive and well. "I was basically sucking the life right out of him and he was getting nothing back from me."

Thinking back, Tony remembered how Gibbs had seemed to be getting stronger, but McGee appeared to be weaker every day. The pamphlets Abby had made him read about symbiosis suddenly made sense. "Damn. But you guys are okay now, right?"

"Better than okay." Gibbs nuzzled the side of Tim's face. "Let's go have lunch then get our medical clearance out of the way, all right?"

"Sounds good. Have you heard from them?"

"Landed a little while ago. We're going to meet them for dinner."

Jim watched as Blair hung up their suits and got out their favorite 'date' outfits. "I know we talked about getting a cabin the next time we were here, but I don't think we're going to have time to play."

Blair understood that neither Sentinel would fully relax until Shuhab and his men were either captured or dead. "Maybe after everything is done, we can rent one before we go back to Cascade."

"That sounds good. Maybe even ask Jethro and Tim to join us for a few days." Jim waited until Blair was slightly distracted. "So, when do I get to see the new plug?"

"Who says that's what I bought?"

"Please. I can smell the silicone from here."

In truth, Blair was excited about his plan. "Actually, there's two. One for me and one for Tim, so don't be surprised when we slip off together during dinner."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." With that answer, Jim started looking for a restaurant that had not only good food, but fast service.

## Twenty five

"Hey, so how did it go?"

Tim bragged because he knew Gibbs never would. "Shattered the record on the Gauntlet and the Quartermaster is framing his paper target."

"Nice." Jim was as happy about the success as he was about seeing this happy, comfortable version of McGee, especially when Gibbs nudged his Guide and gave his own brag.

"You posted your highest score ever today, too, you know, and that was a joint score on the Gauntlet." Grinning, Gibbs turned to the other Sentinel in the group. "They even tried to trip us up by adding an extra live-action terrorist to the mix."

In all honesty, Tim had been suspicious when he'd picked up on the excited vibes as they'd met the two soldiers playing the official terrorists, but he let Gibbs continue to tell the story.

"Guess they thought they'd prove that the Guide is a weak link. Tim had me scan for heartbeats before we even started, so we knew there was someone standing in the back, just off the range. We were separated when he entered, but Tim picked him off before he could ever get a shot off and without touching the hostage doll he was carrying." Gibbs laughed again and shook his head. "The look on his face when he was standing there, the sensor lit up on his face-shield..."

McGee joined in the laughter, as well as Jim and Blair, who, of course, could hardly contain himself. "They always underestimate us Guides. Get used to it, Tim."

A waitress arrived to take their orders and when that was done, Blair picked up his backpack from under the table. "Speaking of us Guides, we'll be back in a minute."

Gibbs watched as they left the table, before turning to Ellison. "They're up to something, aren't they?"

"Oh, yeah."

He picked up on the flush of arousal. "Something good?"

This time the words were accompanied by throaty laughter. "Oh, yeah."

Blair held his finger to his lips before pulling out a small portable radio. Once the soft music was making it hard for the two Sentinels to hear them in the restroom he handed Tim the smaller of the two plugs and a bottle of lube.

"What?"

"Tonight will be the first night you've spent in that house as fully bonded Sentinel and Guide. I know he's come to terms with losing Shannon, but you need to claim now as your time. You don't just want to just have sex; you want him to claim you and claim you hard."

McGee blushed, but was smiling as he took the toy and the lube. "So we drive them up the wall all through dinner?"

"Yep." Blair waited while Tim went into the stall, and then took his own turn. "If we do this right, they won't make it to dessert."

Jim watched Gibbs closely as the Guides returned. Blair had deliberately picked a lube that was different than the one given to all new pairs. It was their favorite, but in a different scent than they'd had at the loft when Gibbs had come for McGee. Silently laughing at his own pun, he waited for Gibbs to put the clues together.

He wasn't sure if Gibbs finally identified the smell of silicone or if it was watching Blair and Tim sensuously lick their spoons, but his eyes widened as they were finishing the first course. The steaks arrived before Gibbs could say anything, but Jim enjoyed watching him watch McGee.

A well-established bond and more knowledge meant that Jim was able to enjoy the slow burn of anticipation as they ate dinner, trading smiles with Blair while they watched their table mates.

It wasn't until McGee asked for the dessert menu that Gibbs finally broke and pinned him with an almost feral look. "We don't need any dessert." The senior pair nearly laughed at the innocent look Gibbs got in response.

"But I want dessert, Jethro. Something rich and creamy that I can run my tongue through." Gibbs wasn't the only Sentinel at the table that growled at that, so the two Guides put their heads together as they looked at the dessert menu together.

Gibbs looked to Ellison for help, but Jim just grinned and shook his head. "When they get like this, just sit back and enjoy the ride."

In deference to their Sentinels' needs and a real desire to actually make it to their respective beds for the planned fun, the desserts were ordered to go. Jim wasn't actually sure exactly how much money he and Gibbs tossed on the table, but the waitress had a big smile on her face as they left.

In their rental car Jim raised a finger the first time Blair opened his mouth. "If you expect us to make it back to the hotel, you won't say a word. Otherwise, you're going to find yourself taken right on the hood of the car here in the parking lot."

Blair actually thought about it for a moment, which showed Jim just how worked up he was, before nodding and sitting back in the seat.

In the yellow Dodge across the parking lot, Gibbs burst out laughing as he put the car in gear.

"What?"

Gibbs just shook his head and concentrated on getting them home before he followed through on Ellison's threat himself.

Blair had managed to keep up a sub-vocalized monologue all the way back to the hotel about various positions he wanted to try that night and by the time they were parked, Jim was so hard he needed to carry his coat in front of him so that he didn't get arrested for lewd behavior. Blair gleefully bounced down the hall in front of him, the take out bag in his hand.

"I don't know why you got ice cream. It'll be melted before we get around to eating it." Jim remembered what they did with the gelato the last time they were in DC. "Or, is that what you have in mind?"

Thinking for a moment, Blair gave him a sultry smile. "You really want to wait for the tub to fill?"

Arriving at the house, Gibbs turned serious as they stood on the porch. "Welcome home, Tim." He watched a slow smile spread over Tim's face and knew he'd made the right decision. "Tonight you drive. Whatever you want. However you need it."

Tim was glad he'd opted for a dessert that would keep a little longer than the ice cream if needed. Stepping closer, he pulled Gibbs' face to his. "This house is filled with twenty years of loneliness. We're going to wipe that away and fill it with love and happiness again."

"Yeah?" Gibbs had to admit that sounded pretty good. "How do you propose we do that?"

"We're going to start in the bedroom for tonight, but we're going to make love on every possible square inch of our home until there are no more shadows left."

The corner of Gibbs' mouth twitched. "Every possible place? Even the basement?"

McGee pushed Gibbs inside the moment the door opened, not stopping until they were against the wall with his thigh pressing against Gibbs' groin. "Especially the basement. You're going to lean against that workbench and I'm going to eat your ass until you come."

Gibbs groaned out something that might have been a yes as he kissed Tim's throat, but Tim wasn't done.

"Then, even when you're alone down there, you'll smell it and feel our energy there and know I'm always with you."

"How did I get so lucky?"

Tim could feel the guilt creeping back into Gibbs' thoughts and decided to lighten the mood, not letting him dwell on how wrong it had almost gone for them. He smiled and started tugging Gibbs up the stairs. "Lucky? Come on, Jethro. Let's go upstairs and I'll show you lucky."

"Fuck, Chief, you killing me here." Jim was spread eagle on the bed, his cock standing at attention as Blair dribbled some of the half-melted ice cream over the hard shaft. The cold stopped his climax in its tracks, then Blair would lick and suck him clean, bringing him back to the edge. Blair just smiled and dove back down onto his treat, swallowing him deep before slowly working his way back off.

"Don't think anyone's ever been aroused to death, Jim, and your heart is healthy. I think you're going to survive it." Blair shifted around as he repeated the process on Jim's chest and belly before using the last of the ice cream on the head of his cock.

This time Jim was able to reach around and grab onto the end of the butt plug, giving it a slight twist. Blair let out a shout and Jim tugged at it again. A couple more licks at the leaking shaft and Blair let Jim take control.

Snagging the lube from the bedside table, Jim flipped their positions so that Blair was on the bed. Jim squirted lube onto his own cock as he pulled the plug out of Blair. Tossing it in the direction of the clothes on the floor, he rolled Blair's hips up and entered him in one stroke.

Blair let out a howl and clamped down, which pushed Jim over the edge. Senses turned up, he was so aroused that he didn't soften and barely lost his rhythm. Slick with sweat, their bodies slid together, Blair's fingers finding Jim's nipples, working them as he wrapped his legs around Jim's waist.

Jim knew he was leaving bruises where he was hanging onto Blair's ass, but he couldn't let go as they rode each other to another climax. Any semblance of control he thought he might have was shattered when Blair came with a shout, pulling him over the edge a second time.

"I want you naked."

Mouth dry, Gibbs did what he was told, using sight to enjoy Tim as he stood a few feet away. When his jeans and boxers hit the floor, he tugged on his dick a few times. "Do I get to see it?"

With a slow smile Tim stripped off his own clothes, then turned and bent at the waist. Spreading his legs and pulling his cheeks apart showed the bright blue base of the plug.

"Damn."

"You like it?" Tim was learning to be more assertive and found that it was quite a turn on.

Gibbs really had to remind himself to think with his big head, not the little one. "Oh, yeah. It's not hurting you, is it?"

"No." Tim straightened and turned before walking closer to Gibbs. "No pain, but it has been rubbing against my prostate all evening."

"Yeah?"

"Uh huh." Tim started walking him backwards toward the bed. "But I'm ready for something else in there now." He smirked at the look of surprise on Gibbs' face when he found himself lying on the bed.

The quilt was gone from the bed. Only a fitted sheet covered the mattress and a single blanket was folded at the foot as Gibbs allowed himself to be arranged on the bed. "Whatever you want, however you want it."

Tim set the restaurant bag on the nightstand next to the lube before climbing onto the bed. Gibbs waited, wanting tonight to be for Tim's wants and desires. He smiled as Tim knelt next to him, legs wide. Without saying a word, Tim took Jethro's hand and slid it up between his legs. When he felt one finger trace around the base, Tim smiled. "Feel that, Jethro? I'm stretched and loose and ready for you." He paused for a moment and picked up the bottle of lube, dripping it on the hard cock as he continued to explain. "I want you to pull it out of me and then I'm going to take my time riding you slowly until you're almost out of your mind with desire."

Gibbs shuddered as the cold lube hit his skin. "Then are you going to let me come?"

"Yeah, with you buried deep in my ass. Then as my muscles milk you and you get hard again, we're going to do it a second time, even slower."

A week ago, Gibbs would have said no way, not at his age, but while in Cascade he'd discovered that a Guide's body was the most powerful aphrodisiac a Sentinel could ever experience. "Oh, yeah."

Concentrating, Gibbs moved the butt plug slightly, making sure the lube hadn't dried out enough to make things difficult. "Raise up a bit more, I want to see it."

Tim did one better and turned, bending down so that Gibbs had a direct line of sight. Gibbs' fingers traced over the globes of his ass as he watched, enjoying the twitch of the muscles as fingers grazed sensitive flesh. Gibbs tapped at the plug, enjoying the sounds Tim made as the vibration went through his ass, before grasping the end and pulling it out just an inch or so.

"Is this one of those that have a curve at the end?"

"No. It's got small ridges, but it's symmetrical." Tim wasn't quite sure why Gibbs was asking but he laid his forehead on his crossed arms and waited, butt up in the air. If he'd turned his head he'd have seen a wicked grin on Gibbs' face.

"So, I can do this?" With a firm grip on the end of the plug Gibbs gave it a good twist. Tim howled and bucked back against him.

"Oh, fuck."

A few more teasing twists and Gibbs pulled it the rest of the way out. Tim turned around and climbed onto him, grasping his cock. The plug dropped out of Gibbs' hand and rolled out of sight, unnoticed as Tim eased down onto him.

Gibbs gave him a slow smile. "I don't think I'll ever get tired of this."

"Better not." Tim returned the smile and raised up before easing down even slower than before. Fingers interlaced together, Sentinel and Guide reaffirmed their bond as they slowly made love.

"I'm buying you an ice cream maker for your birthday."

Blair kissed the broad chest under his lips, tasting the remnants of sweetness there. "Yeah? You liked that?"

"Oh, yeah."

"It wasn't too – vanilla – for you, was it?"

Jim froze, and then started laughing. "Why, you... I'll show you vanilla." He grabbed Blair tight and rolled them, blowing a raspberry against his neck.

It was still dark out when Gibbs woke up. He was warm and comfortable, feeling Tim's breath across his chest. His eyes were just starting to drift shut when he noticed a soft glow in the room. Now wide awake, Gibbs watched as Shannon stepped close to the bed. She was smiling, a joy in her eyes he hadn't seen since the day Kelly was born. She reached out and touched his face before bending down to kiss Tim's cheek.

I am so happy for you both, my love.

The light faded and Shannon disappeared. Gibbs was glad to have had the moment, and this time there wasn't the terrible pain as she vanished. Tim shifted, drawing his attention. The younger man smiled in his sleep, touching his cheek before stilling. Content, Gibbs pulled him closer and closed his eyes. They had a few hours before they had to be up and he planned to enjoy them.

## Twenty six

The automated wake-up call that morning seemed especially cheery, but Jim wasn't complaining. He'd set it a half hour early for a reason. Nudging Blair, he waited for a grunt. "Come on, Chief. We need to shower off the last of that ice cream."

Blair shoved his hair back enough to glare at the clock. "We don't have to leave for like an hour and a half. What are you planning on doing in the shower for that long?"

Smiling, Jim bent closer to whisper in Blair's ear. "If you really have to ask..." He knew the second Blair really woke up.



"Oh."

Gibbs and McGee were at their desk when Fornell and Sacks arrived with all the evidence they'd gathered on Shuhab's activities. "Glad to see you back, Jethro. You and McGee look a whole lot better than the last time I saw you."

"Appreciate it, Tobias." Gibbs looked at the stack of boxes Sacks was struggling with. "That everything?"

"Yep, other than what you've already got on file."

"Okay, let's get set up in one of the conference rooms." Gibbs looked over at McGee, who held up three fingers. "Conference room three, upstairs, is ready for us."

Gibbs went up the stairs with McGee next to him and Fornell right on his heels, curious about how the finished bond had changed his old friend. Ziva and Tony were behind them, while Sacks tried to balance the evidence boxes on his way up.

"Why, no, I don't need any help at all. Thank you for asking."

At the sarcastic words, Tony grinned at Ziva before turning to Agent Sacks. "You're so welcome, Ronny." Then, to be nice to the man that had annoyed him for years, he lifted one sheet of paper off the top stack and continued up the stairs.

"Easy, man, don't let him get to you." Blair rubbed Jim's back as their least favorite Senator droned on about how impossible it was to verify a Sentinel's accuracy, how the entire Sentinel program was a waste of money and government resources. He topped off his rant, smiling at the photographers in the room, by stating his opinion that perhaps Kincaid was a patriot by fighting against such waste.

There was a splattering of sparse applause and Jim glanced down at his watch. He'd hoped to be done by now so that they could help with the hunt for Shuhab. Looking at his own watch, then Senator Reed's knock-off Rolex, gave him an idea.

"You're right, Senator Reed, it's hard to convince someone of the worth of our work when so much of what we do is classified. Perhaps a more practical demonstration is in order? I hope you didn't pay too much for that watch, Senator. It's a fake. The way the light reflects off the metal is a dead give-away."

The laughter in the gallery was more widespread than the applause had been. Jim climbed to his feet and started walking in front of the committee members. "I believe you had salmon with dill sauce at the brunch this morning, Senator Compton. You might want to try a stronger breath mint. Senator Jackson, you have a cataract forming in your left eye. I'd suggest an appointment with your ophthalmologist soon."

Jim stopped in front of the committee chairman, standing at parade rest. "Senator Russell, you might want to make sure your secretary gets that yeast infection taken care of. Would you like me to explain exactly how I know that?"

"No." There was no mistaking the look of panic. "Thank you, but no. I believe you have made your point, Senior Sentinel Ellison."

"My point is that sentinels have unique gifts. They also have the biological imperative to protect their tribe, the people of their community, our country, and all we ask is to be allowed to do our job. Stopping men like Kincaid is our job. Not because he doesn't like sentinels, but because he is willing to kill innocent citizens to create his version of an Aryan utopia. Now, the reason he was able to escape custody and kill again is because another terrorist killed four prison guards to get him out."

The committee chairman looked around; the mood in the room had changed remarkably. "Are you planning on assisting the hunt for the second terrorist?"

Jim carefully looked up and down the row of desks and at the men and women of the committee. "The only thing between us and that hunt – is you."

Senator Russell briefly looked over at Senator Reed before picking up his gavel. "Then this meeting is adjourned. Good luck, Senior Sentinel, and good hunting."

"Thank you, sir."

Blair was already on his feet and Jim followed him out the door.

There was a lot of evidence, but McGee concentrated on the missed evidence that a Sentinel might pick up on. That meant the video surveillance that showed some sort of meeting. The FBI's cyberteam had reviewed the footage and considered it a total waste of time, but Tim wanted to see if Sentinel eyes could pick up on anything new.

The footage was grainy, from before the FBI considered Shuhab a serious threat. It was taken from a distance and there was no sound. Gibbs' first viewing was to get a general feel of what to look for. The second time, he concentrated on Shuhab and his lieutenants, trying to read their lips. He wasn't as expert at that as Abby, and they never looked in the direction of the camera, but he got a few words.

"Well?"

His Guide's utter belief in him felt good in ways he couldn't quite describe. "They're definitely planning something, but I couldn't get enough to piece it together."

Tim immediately went to the white board. "What words did you get? We'll start with that."

Gibbs thought for a moment. "Target. I saw that word at least three different times. Success, triumph and future. They were staring at something on the table, didn't look up very often."

Fornell had had his suspicions, and this seemed to confirm it. "So, he's finally planning his move. Would really help if we knew what it was."

"Were you only using one camera to film them?"

"There was a second camera, but it got even less, McGee. All you see are their backs."

Undeterred, McGee started going through the boxes, looking for the disc. Sacks found it and handed it over. "Just because he's a Sentinel doesn't mean he can see everything. Some things just aren't there, man."

"True, but why are you assuming that just because you can't see something, it isn't there?"

Sacks didn't have an answer to that and just stepped out of the way. In the corner, Tony and Ziva watched Tim carefully guide Gibbs, his hand lightly resting on his back. The third time Gibbs watched the video, Tim grinned at him.

"Something is drawing your eye to the window, Jethro. Figure out what it is."

It took a minute, but finally Gibbs grinned back. "You're right, Tim, there is something there. It's a damn reflection. They're looking at a map."

"That's great." Fornell was finally grinning, too. "Now, can you tell us what the map shows?"

"Nothing I recognize."

Fornell was disappointed, but McGee was resolute. He sent Ziva for paper, pencils, tape and crayons. There were a few raised eyebrows, but Tim didn't back down. "You'll see."

When Ziva returned with a curious Director in tow, Tim had taped six sheets of copy paper together and turned them over so that the tape was on the back side. He positioned the paper on a table in front of Gibbs and slipped a pencil into his hand.

"Don't look down at the paper, just let your hand follow what your eyes are seeing. When you need a color, we'll use the crayons."

While the rest just watched, they fell into a routine. McGee alternated between pushing Gibbs to see more and pulling him back as he began to zone. Blue and green crayons were used while a few pencil lines became thicker and darker.

Eventually Gibbs dropped the pencil. "That's it, that's all I can see."

"That's great, Jethro." Tim pressed up against him, nuzzling the back of his neck as he pressed a red crayon into his hand. "We're going to watch the first video one more time. Remember how Shuhab is always gesturing, always moving his hands? This time follow the movement of his dominate hand. Let's see what he's interested in here."

While Tony switched the recording around and loaded the first disc back into the player, McGee taped another six sheets of paper together and set them in front of Gibbs, moving the crude map off to the side. Gibbs went

through the video twice and by the time he was done, it was obvious that certain areas held the terrorists attention.

Tony reached out to turn the video off, but Gibbs stopped him. "Back it up. I think I saw something else." The senior agent did as he was told and they watched Gibbs shake his head in frustration.

Tim ran his hands up and down Gibbs' arms. "Don't fight it, let it come to you. What are you seeing?"

"Through the doorway, on the far wall."

For everyone else, it was a deep shadow, but Tim trusted him. "Okay, let me tighten up the image for you. He brought up that area as much as the technology would allow, then started to slowly lighten it up.

Gibbs was leaning closer, nodding. "Better, better. Wait, go back one step." Tim darkened it one percent and waited. Eventually Gibbs straightened back up. "It's a countdown chart. Twenty-six days from when this was filmed."

As one they turned to Fornell, who was checking log dates while Sacks pulled up a calendar on his phone. Fornell wasn't quite convinced, but he was worried. "That video was shot early in the morning, so we don't know if they'd marked that day or not. It could be as early as..."

"When, Tobias?"

"Today."

"Well, crap."

Dealing with DC traffic, Jim didn't pay too much attention to the call at first as Blair checked in with Director Vance at NCIS. It appeared that their new counterparts at the small agency had found new information and were preparing to move out. When Blair disconnected the call, Jim quickly changed lanes and started to speed up. "What did they find?"

"A reflection of a partial map. Gibbs sketched out as much of it as he could see and now Tim is trying to find the actual location. Whatever it is and wherever it's happening, apparently it might be going down today."

Hearing that, Jim mashed down on the accelerator.

Tim was on his feet with both maps. "I need to use my computer downstairs."

"What's wrong with this one?"

Knowing his teammate, Tony grinned at the Director. "He probably needs a program he wrote himself."

Sure enough, by the time the rest of them had followed McGee and Gibbs down to the bullpen, Tim had the images scanned and was loading up a program Vance had never seen. Tony looked down, cocking his head. "You got that turned around, Probie."

"Well, yeah. Jethro was looking at the reflection." The correctly flipped version of the sketch was up on one of his monitors and Tim started a modified version of a facial recognition program to match it up with any known map that was close.

Jim and Blair were just being escorted upstairs when Tim's computer chimed. "We've got a possible match."

"Put it up on the plasma." With the two images side by side up on the large screen everyone turned to Gibbs to see his reaction. He studied it carefully before nodding. The blue wavy lines and big circle matched up with the river and the large water reservoir while the large green area he'd scribbled matched with the National Forest. The line he'd drawn repeatedly was a close approximation to the state highway. He didn't show it, but he was excited that it had worked. "That's it, that's what they were looking at."

"Ziva, start checking on the area. See if anything big is happening there today or during the next forty-eight hours. Tony, local LEO's. See if there's been any rumors or threats. Anything unusual going on. Something that they might have been treating as a local problem." Tony and Ziva had both been so surprised that it had worked that they didn't even complain about being given orders by McGee.

While Fornell checked in with his Director, Tim continued to work, turning the second image Gibbs had created into a transparency and laying it over the map. In following the movements of Shuhab's hand, Gibbs had repeatedly drawn circles in several spots and a long arc roughly connecting the two primary circles. A slight rotation of the image brought the arc over the primary highway in the area with one circle over the water reservoir and the second over Hamilton Falls, West Virginia, the nearest town.

"Shit."

## Twenty seven

When a source of water for thousands of people is identified as a possible terrorist target, things quickly move into high gear. With more resources at their disposal, the FBI and their tactical unit took point on that while NCIS planned to check the town.

Jim and Blair were assigned to the FBI team, which made Jim glad. While Gibbs had gained a great deal of control and McGee was quickly developing into one of the DSA's best Guides, working such a large area with so many strangers was difficult and exhausting. A more experienced pair was better suited this time out. The fact that the new pair would be showing their abilities to some that had been less than supportive was just icing on the cake.

Local LEO's insisted that nothing was going on in the area and weren't overly impressed with the feds moving in with such little hard evidence. Rather than take the time to argue, Fornell agreed to call the sweep part of a training exercise and to try to not cause a ruckus in town.

Blair couldn't help but laugh at the irony as he climbed out of the truck. Not wanting to spook Shuhab and his crew, they'd been dropped off on the outer edge of the reservoir after circling the fence and finding a breach. Now he was tucked in behind Jim while the Sentinel tracked and the FBI followed. To be honest, heightened senses weren't entirely necessary this time as there was no attempt to hide the trail. However, after days of following Kincaid and dealing with his traps, the obvious trail made Ellison even more cautious.

Homeland Security had thought the evidence was too thin, the FBI believed it only suggested a plot to poison the reservoir, but Gibbs had insisted the town was still at risk. It was payday at a small Army base nearby, so Vance believed the bank most soldiers used was the most likely target. On paper it looked right, but Gibbs was shaking his head as they walked up to the sleepy branch.

Tim saw the subtle head movement and rested his hand on Gibbs' back. "What's your gut telling you?"

Gibbs hesitated, then shook his head. "We're here. No matter what, protocol is we have to check it out."

Tony started to ask when did they ever follow protocol over the gut, then he realized that the first few ops by a new Sentinel would be scrutinized in great detail. "Okay, so we officially eliminate this bank as a target, then we can get serious about finding the right target?"

"Exactly." Tim was glad they had the support, both for following the needs of the mission and for going off-script to follow Gibbs. "If we're lucky, there will be a couple of soldiers in there getting their pay that can help us with security there so we can move out quicker."

Several uniforms were evident and they quickly scanned them, finding the highest ranked soldier in the building. Gibbs spotted a Major and introduced himself, briefly explaining the possible threat. By the time DiNozzo had brought the branch manager up to speed, three teams of MP's were on their way in to 'pick up their paychecks' and would stay at the bank until given the all clear.

Fornell had never worked with a Sentinel until the last ill-fated attempt to capture Shuhab. So far the trail was fairly easy to spot in places, enough that he knew they were on the right track. Clark from the Hostage Rescue Team seemed comfortable with their direction, too. Just as they were getting comfortable with the pace, Ellison's head raised up and Fornell knew he'd found something.

Before the agent could ask, Ellison took off running and they all scrambled to keep up. Nothing looked different and Fornell had no idea what they were chasing. Starting to pant, he looked over at Sacks, who was to his left as the tactical guys passed them up. "You see anything?"

"No."

"Me neither. Kinda reminds me of chasing after my Grand-pappy's bird dogs." Fornell could have complained more, but decided breathing was more important.

Leaving the sleepy bank branch in the capable hands of the MP's, the team retreated back to the parking lot to regroup. Not wasting any time, McGee laid his hand on Gibbs' back again. "Follow your gut, Jethro. Anchor on me and reach out. Find what's wrong. Follow it to its source."

As Tony and Ziva watched, Gibbs seemed to melt back against McGee, eyes half closed. Never one for silence, Tony started to open his mouth, but a quick shake of the head from McGee silenced him.

Gibbs' eyes snapped open, then narrowed, as he tensed. Nothing was said, but Sentinel and Guide started running in unison, leaving the other two playing catch-up.

Ziva loped along easily, but Tony had to report in to Vance, which threw off his gait.

Wrist up to his mouth, Tony tried to keep his breathing steady as he spoke. "Think Gibbs has found something."

What?

"Don't know."

Where?

"Don't know. Heading north on," Tony looked around for a street sign. "Main, just passing Juniper."

Does he have a visual on Shuhab?

"God, I hope so." Tony stumbled to a stop as he watched the Bonded Pair silently picking up speed as they changed direction, easily jumping a barricade, still in unison. "You have got to be kidding me."

What?

Vance's shout shook him from his stupor. "They just took a left, going through the park." No longer needing to worry about traffic, they seemed to pick up speed again. "Crap." Tony dropped his wrist and concentrated on running.

Back in DC, Ducky smiled as he leaned over the map with Director Vance, remembering some of the earlier comments they'd been told about being amazed by what a fully bonded pair could do. It appeared that they were right, indeed.

Vance glanced up and returned his smile before he prepared to radio Fornell with some possible new targets as soon as they'd cleared the reservoir.

Jim held up a closed fist, signaling the group to close rank and stop. Once he had everyone close enough to talk quietly, he brought them up to speed. "Lots of bodies up ahead, ten, maybe fifteen. They've got a couple of radios going so between that and all of you guys panting, I can't hear what they're talking about. Stay put and I'll scout ahead."

Sacks really wanted their agents to be the first ones on the scene, not an out of state Sentinel that worked with a bunch of local LEO's. "It's the only group out here in the restricted area."

"So, it's got to be them." Fornell did a quick head count, making sure all of their people were accounted for. "Do we need more back-up?"

The commander of the FBI's HRT team shook his head. "It'll take too long. Let us get between them and the water, and then everybody move in. They'll have no place to go."

This was a large part of why Jim hated working with the FBI. "You're going in blind. Just give me five minutes to make a confirmation." Apparently the answer was no, because the tactical teams were already moving out, going both directions to surround the group of possible suspects.

When the call came over the radios to move in, Jim took his position with the rest, despite his misgivings.

"You've got to be kidding me." Fornell frantically waved everyone's guns down as they surrounded seven members of the West Columbia High School football team and their girlfriends. One of the boys stood, raising his arms as the pretty cheerleader he was with tried to pull her blouse down and hide the beer.

"Umm, don't tell Coach, okay?"

Fornell snapped his finger and pointed at several of the other young ladies in various stages of undress. "Get your clothes back on. Do you kids know how much trouble you're in? This is a restricted area for a reason, and who brought the alcohol?"

"But are you going to tell the coach?"

The fact that his daughter was only slightly younger than the girls here upset Fornell almost more than the disruption to the search. "I don't know, kid. That will be up to the Chief of Police."

While Fornell was yelling at the students, Clark circled around to Ellison and Sandburg. "Okay, maybe I should have listened to you, but if Shuhab isn't here, where in the hell is he?"



Jim seemed distracted, so Blair answered for them. "Good question. NCIS always believed the target was someplace in town."

"Okay." Clark looked around for a second, making his decision. "We still have to search the reservoir to make sure nothing's been left here. I'll assign four men to that and babysitting the ball team until the LEO's arrive and the rest of us will continue to search with you."

"Sounds good." Blair looked at Jim again, who was still staring off into the distance. "Jim, you got something?"

Jim nodded as he started to walk, then began to pick up speed. "The panther."

"The panther? Oh, shit." Knowing how rare it was for Jim's spirit animal to make an appearance in the physical world, Blair immediately started to run after the other man, leaving Clark baffled.

"Panther? Is that a code?" Not waiting for an answer, Clark barked orders to the four men that would be staying behind before running to catch up. Fornell, Sacks and the rest of them also found themselves playing catch-up.

The FBI and NCIS were on different radio frequencies, which meant that Vance had to change over before he could make contact with Fornell and his team. It took a bit before Fornell responded and he sounded winded.

"Fornell, status report. Where are you?"

Leaving the reservoir.

"To where?"

Don't know.

"What did they find?"

Don't know.

Vance raised an eyebrow as he looked over at Ducky. This was starting to sound familiar. "Well, what do you know?"

That I'm getting too old for this shit.

Over the years Blair Sandburg had learned to jog along next to his long-legged Sentinel without getting too out of breath. Luckily that gave him the ability to ask questions as they ran. "Did they find Shuhab?"

"I think so. They're really booking it."

"You know, we could go back and get a car." Jim just gave him a look and kept going. "Damn stubborn Sentinels."

They could just see the large mall on the edge of town when Jim's nostrils flared. "I smell those damn spices. It's got to be Shuhab and his people."

There was keeping up with his Sentinel and there was keeping up with his Sentinel for more than a mile and Blair couldn't help his muttering. "If we're running to a curry joint, I'm gonna strangle a couple of Sentinels."

Jim smiled and shook his head. Then he heard screaming.

## Twenty eight

Gibbs and McGee had just reached the local mall when the screaming started. Seconds later Gibbs heard several bursts of automatic weapon fire and people began pouring out of every exit. Sensing the panic, Tim had already grabbed Gibbs' jacket and tugged him into a small alcove, half hidden by the landscape. Tony and Ziva weren't so lucky and were swarmed by frightened civilians who saw their badges and bulletproof vests. Spotting a break, Sentinel and Guide dashed in. The security gates were coming down from the ceiling and they both ran, dropping and sliding across the floor just under the leading edge of the steel mesh barrier.

Looking at the number of shoppers now trapped inside with them, McGee knew something was very wrong. "That can't be mall policy. They've got control of the security room."

"Yeah." Gibbs saw an access to the maintenance corridor and tugged McGee that direction as they turned off their radios. "Come on, we need to make sure we don't get caught before we have a plan."

They'd already gotten the call from DiNozzo and while Ducky went through the list of tenants at the Hamilton Falls Mall, looking for something that would attract the attention of the terrorists, Vance was making calls. When the phone was slammed down with a curse, Ducky looked up in concern. "Director?"

"When we sounded the alarm about possible terrorist activity in such a little town, you'd have thought the Federal Reserve would have mentioned that they're moving over twenty million dollars through one of bank branches through there today."

"That would finance a great number of terrorist activities. What happens now?"

"Good question."

PadshadShuhab was furious. Their plan to sabotage the water system as a diversion had been derailed by too many witnesses that morning and now an over eager guard had spotted one of their guns, throwing off the timetable of the raid. The only good thing was that they'd managed to hack into the system and drop down the security gates and lock the exterior doors before the feds from the reservoir managed to arrive.

Looking carefully at the screens, Shuhab looked for familiar faces among the personnel gathering outside. He spotted DiNozzo and David, along with the fed that Gibbs worked with, but no sign of the man himself. Unfortunately, he saw the other Sentinel with the feds so he knew they weren't in the clear quite yet. Just to be safe, he sat one of his men down to check the internal cameras for Gibbs and his new boy toy. Twenty million dollars was great, but taking out the ex-Marine would be even more satisfying.

It was absolute chaos when Jim and Blair arrived, the assorted members of the FBI following behind. Jim saw the two members of NCIS and yelled as soon as he got close enough for them to hear him. "DiNozzo, Sit Rep."

Even though Ellison was close now, Tony was still having trouble hearing him over the hysterical screams of those that had been separated from their loved ones during the escape. Needing to get these people away from the building, Tony gave a shrill whistle to get their attention. "Folks, we need to get statements from each of you and the FBI will take your statements while we assess the situation."

He got a dirty look from Sacks, but it worked, leaving DiNozzo and David able to bring Ellison and Sandburg up to speed. Fornell managed to join them, as did several members of the local police.

"Okay, this is what we know so far. Sentinel Gibbs and his Guide picked up on something here and we arrived just as an uncontrolled evacuation started. Something or someone triggered the security gates and they dropped into position, trapping an unknown number of potential hostages inside. Sentinel Gibbs and Guide McGee were able to slide under one of the gates and are inside.

"They've gone radio silent, which probably means they are not in a secure position yet. If we haven't heard from them within the next hour, then we'll assume... we'll suspect that they may have been captured."

Tall and wiry, the Chief of Police was a quiet man that commanded respect and his men let him speak. "Agent DiNozzo, I'm Chief Abbot. We spoke earlier when you first started looking into the rumors. If this is the terrorist threat you were anticipating, what do you believe will be their next move, and how do you plan on countering it? Should we be evacuating the rest of the town?"

Unless he wanted to turn the scene over to the FBI, Tony knew he had to keep a cool head and run it like Gibbs would expect. He glanced behind him to see that Ziva was on the phone, probably with Vance. "Got a map? We need both a map of the town and one of the mall."

The town map was easy. The mall map took a bit more, but finally one of the local LEO's pulled up the mall website on his cruiser's on-board computer. That was when Ziva joined them.

"Where is the mall branch of the First National Trust?"

Her question threw them for a moment. "This is all about a bank robbery? Not really Shuhab's style."

"Not a regular bank robbery, Tony. The Federal Reserve just admitted to Director Vance that they are using the bank here to hold an unusually large amount of cash overnight."

"How large?"

"Twenty million. It is old cash earmarked for disposal."

Fornell let out a low curse. "That means it's unmarked and untraceable if they get their hands on it."

Together, they bent over the screen as Tony pointed out where Gibbs and McGee had accessed the building and where they were in relationship to the bank in question.

While NCIS was setting up a command station, Jim and Blair did a sweep of the outside of the building, checking for cameras along with any sign of the terrorists. They crept along the edge of the cement, keeping flat against it whenever they were in range of a camera. Jim was pretty sure they'd been picked up when they'd first arrived, but if they could keep their movements hidden from this point on, it would help.

They arrived at a corner and Jim risked a quick look around the corner. There was no camera there, so he dropped to his knees and crawled. This was the side where the underground parking was, which was probably where Shuhab and his men entered the mall. "Stay put for a minute, Chief."

Blair waited impatiently until Jim reversed and backed around to join him. "Well?"

"Trucks – they're predictable, I'll give them that. Gates are down over the driveways, but there's men with the trucks."

Blair, too, was remembering their first run in with Kincaid. Apparently, he was an example to terrorists everywhere. "How many?"

"Six. Three per truck. We can't go any further without being seen, so let's go back and see what they've found out so far."

Gibbs listened closely, and then shook his head. "Nobody's in here." Still, they were cautious as they crept down the dimly lit hall, pausing at each door.

"Edge scent down a bit, Jethro. There's probably the janitor's closet down here someplace."

The warning came just in time and Gibbs grimaced as they passed a door with a strong smell of bleach and various chemicals. "Got it." They traveled a bit further and Gibbs stopped, carefully laying a hand on a heavy metal door.

"What have you got?"

"Electronics, and a lot of it."

"Server room. Be careful of alarms."

Gibbs nodded, his lock picks already out. Apparently mall management thought the steel door and deadbolt were enough and seconds later they were inside, Gibbs' heightened sense of touch making the lock child's play.

"After we get out of this, you should challenge Ziva to a lock picking contest. Loser buys lunch."

Grinning at that, Gibbs whistled at the long bank of towers. "Is this anything you can use?"

McGee was already sitting at the one broken down chair. "I'll let you know in a minute. Assuming they've got someone in the security office, I don't want to catch anyone's attention. Don't want to use the radio until I can get some heavy duty encryption set up either."

"Do what you can." Gibbs took a second to squeeze Tim's shoulder. "I'll use the cell to call DiNozzo. Maybe he's found out what they're after."

Knowing where the cameras were, Jim and Blair made much better time getting back to the rest of the group. Tony looked relieved when he saw them. "Tell me you've got something."

"He's got two big trucks waiting for him in the underground parking. Six men total."

"That you could see?"

Jim tapped his ear. "That I could hear. Six heartbeats, all calm, so not hostages. Driver in each cab, two in the back of each truck."

"So we use cruisers to block them in. Then they've got no place to go and we turn the tables in our favor before they ask to negotiate."

Jim and Blair both turned to look. The speaker was from the Sheriff's department, having arrived while they were doing their reconnaissance. Behind him, the city's police chief didn't look happy about their arrival.

"Negotiate? Are you out of your mind? These terrorists went all the way to the West Coast to kill four guards and break another terrorist out of prison just to mess with the agents chasing them. Do you really think they're going to just give up if we block their escape route?" Blair shook his head. "Man, am I glad the feds are in charge here and not you guys."

"Now, just wait a minute..."

As the argument over jurisdiction heated up, Tony almost didn't hear his phone ring. In fact, if Ellison hadn't pointed to his pocket, he wouldn't have answered it in time.

"Yeah. Gibbs? Man, are you guys all right?"

We're secure for the moment. Found the mall's computer back-up servers, McGee's hacking into them now. Any idea what his target is?

"Well, just found out that the bank in there is sitting on twenty million cash that's supposed to be going to the burn bin."

Are you kidding me?

Tony didn't need any special senses to tell that his boss was pissed. "Yeah, apparently the Federal Reserve thought that was on a need to know and we didn't need to know, even after Vance put out the alarm this morning."

Damn it. All right, give us a few more minutes to see what we can control from this end.

"Boss, they've got trucks in the parking garage, but we can't get to them."

All right, I'll see what we can do. I'll call back in ten.

DiNozzo heard the dial tone as he disconnected from his end. Ellison had been a good fifteen feet away but had apparently heard the call easily.

"Can McGee get into the server without being detected?"

"He's the best there is. If anyone can get in, it'll be him." Tony looked around. Federal had trumped county, but there were two federal agencies at the scene. Fornell gave him a nod.

"It's your people in there, DiNozzo. You've got point on this one."

Tony gave him a grateful nod before bending back over the mall map as he checked the time. It was going to be a long ten minutes.

Eighteen years ago, PadshadShuhab's elder sister had come home from a European trip with a permanent gift from a college boy she'd fallen for. He'd been furious at his father for taking her and her bastard child in, but eventually Shuhab had discovered his pale skinned nephew had advantages that he could use.

He wrapped his arm around the boy's shoulder. "Come, Adar, I have a special job for you."

Just as he'd been taught by Ellison, Gibbs split his hearing. Using McGee as an anchor, and the map on the wall as a reference, he reached out and found several pockets of frightened civilians trapped and hiding throughout the mall. Some groups they couldn't reach, but he noted the ones they could. He felt a flush of satisfaction from his Guide and drew back from his search to see what he'd managed. Two screens were lit up and McGee's fingers were flying across the one keyboard.

"What have you got?"

"I'm in." Tim tapped one screen, then the other. "This one shows me what they're doing up there and this one shows what's under my control. There's a lot of redundancies here, but I can bypass the alarms for up to ten seconds at a time without it showing up on their monitors."

Gibbs thought about it for a moment, looking back at the map. "Not a lot of time, but if we work it right, we can get some of the hostages out and some of our people in."

"Exactly." Tim messed with his radio for a moment, before reaching for Gibbs'. Once the adjustments were made, Tim wrote down a series of numbers. "Tell DiNozzo to change their radio frequency to this and we should be able to communicate without Shuhab's people listening in."

One last phone call was made and radios were quickly changed over before the planning began.

## Twenty nine

Chief Abbot gave DiNozzo and Sandburg a questioning look. "You want my guys to be standing in front of the main mall entrance, arguing with the Sheriff and his people?"

"Yep." Tony nodded emphatically. "And a couple of State Troopers for good measure. Since they think they've got the other access points under their control, they're paying a lot more attention to that bank of glass doors. I want you to give them a show while we slip inside and get some of the hostages out."

Abbot's eyes had just about bugged out of his head when he'd heard that they were going to use windows of less than ten seconds to accomplish their plans. "I heard you Fed's were crazy, but..."

"Just make it look good. Argue. Look like somebody won. Break out the riot gear. Make it look like you're getting ready to storm the building."

"The Sheriff's got himself an armor plated truck with a battering ram."

That got Blair bouncing on his heels. "Cool. Get him to bring it here. Guys like Shuhab thrive on causing chaos. Let him see that while our people slip right past his watch."

"Okay, but I still think you all are crazy."

DiNozzo thought about the two Sentinels and their Guides that had put the plan together. "Crazy like a fox."

As they jogged back to the command post, DiNozzo looked over at Sandburg, who was chuckling. "Okay, I could use a good laugh about now."

"What you said about a fox."

"Yeah?"

"I hear Miss Sciuto educated you about spirit animals."

"Yeah?" Tony thought for a moment, realizing where this was going. "Who?"

"McGee."

Tony had to smile just a bit at that. "Sounds like him, actually. What's Gibbs'?"

"Big old brown bear."

That got a snort. "Yeah, I can see that."

Fifteen minutes later, an argument of epic proportion between local agencies was brewing in front of the main entrance of the mall while two teams got into position. As the Sheriff's tactical truck rolled into view, the plan went live.

Deep inside the mall, McGee entered the final code and triggered the bypass. Gibbs started the count. "One, two, three..."

About a dozen fire doors were on the outer walls of the mall. Locked from the outside always, they were designed for emergency exits only, which was why Shuhab had dropped the gates. Each door was painted the same color as the building and surrounded by shrubbery, thus they were hardly noticeable.

At the one that led to the parking garage stairs, Ellison was leaning against the door, feeling the subtle vibration of the live alarm. Bent down next to him, Ziva already had her pick in the lock, tumblers caught and ready to turn. Ellison reacted the second the alarm went dead. "Go."

Lined up and ready, Ziva had the door open almost instantly and they dashed inside. DiNozzo first, then Sandburg, followed by Ziva and Ellison, the Sentinel and DiNozzo pulling hard on the door, fighting the hydraulics' that made it close soft and slowly.



Gibbs knew he was squeezing McGee's shoulder as the count went higher and they listened to the struggles with the door over the radio. Maintaining his calm, at least on the surface, he continued the count.

"Seven, eight, nine."

We're in, door's closed.

Tim hit the bypass, reactivating the lock just a fraction of a second before the alarm would have sounded.

"Damn, that was close."

"Too close." Gibbs took a deep breath and gave Tim a careful look. The next one was on them, which meant that McGee was going to have to run his hack through his smartphone. He'd already warned Gibbs how many things could go wrong, but they really didn't have a choice. "You ready?"

Tim was still fighting with the interface and his phone was getting hot. "As ready as I'm ever going to be." When he got a raised eyebrow, Tim explained further. "As long as it doesn't fry my phone, we should be fine."

While McGee was making final adjustments, Gibbs took the chair and moved it under the access to the air duct. Climbing up, he quickly undid the panel and climbed down to move it out of the way. Tim glanced over and saw the layer of dust coating the inside and immediately knew they were going to have a problem.

"What are you doing?" By the time Gibbs was stepping off the chair, Tim was ripping the sleeves off his shirt.

"Dust masks." When Gibbs looked like he was going to claim he didn't need one, Tim pushed. "You're going to have your senses cranked up, Jethro. That means the dust is going to affect you more than usual and I'm allergic. The last thing we need is either one of us sneezing up there and having it echo through half the ducts."

He couldn't argue with that. "Good point." When Gibbs tied the fabric around his face he discovered another, even better point – the fine cotton smelled of his Guide. "Guess I owe you a shirt. Where'd you get it?" Small talk was comforting as they prepared to move out.

"Actually, an ex-girlfriend bought it for me."

Gibbs looked back just before he hoisted himself up. "Then when we get home, I'm going to rip it the rest of the way off of you."

"Promises, promises." Taking a deep breath, Tim followed his Sentinel into the narrow ducts.

The best thing about cement steps was that you didn't have to worry about them squeaking as you made your way down them. Ellison was in the lead, his Guide tucked in behind him, while DiNozzo watched his back and Ziva brought up the rear. Tony was just realizing how much it was like working with Gibbs and McGee even before all the Sentinel stuff had happened, when Jim froze.

"What..." DiNozzo didn't have a chance to say anything else before Ellison had them all against the wall and hunkered down.

"I smell C-4. A lot of it."

"Crap." Tony's eyes widened as the words finally registered. "Wait, you can smell it? From here?"

Blair was already working with him and they ignored the question. "Okay, you know the drill, man. Filter everything else out, piggyback sight onto smell and follow the C-4 back to the source. Which truck, and please don't let it be both."

As they watched, Ellison cocked his head slightly as his pupils opened fully. Tony could almost imagine his attention being drawn across to the far end of the parking garage. It was fascinating to watch, especially how Sandburg knew exactly when to push and when to pull him back, much like McGee and Gibbs when Gibbs had been studying the video.

Finally Ellison was satisfied and drew back his focus to address the group. "There's some traces in the green truck, but it's older. The white truck has the fresh load and it's probably enough to bring down half the building."

The words might have sounded flip, but DiNozzo's expression was dead serious. "Okay, nobody shoot the really big bomb please. Thank you very much."

Ziva had not taken her eyes off the truck since Jim announced its cargo. "I see movement."

Jim took a careful look as two men walked around the truck and then returned to the back. There was a faint sound of metal against metal and when he looked closer he could see the ramp being pulled out. The back of the truck was facing away from them, but by looking at their movement and the shadows under the edge of the truck, he knew what they were doing.

"They're getting ready to unload."

That was not what Tony wanted to hear. "It's too early to move in on them. Suggestions on how to do it quietly?"

Without answering, Blair crawled part way under a car and came out with an empty plastic soda bottle.

"Thanks, Chief." After a quick bit of planning, Jim took the bottle and moved away from the group. If he were made, it would offer the rest of them a bit of protection. Sticking the barrel of his pistol into the neck of the bottle, he waited for the right moment.

Once Ellison was in position, the other three moved closer, staying close to the cars that were still in the garage, but not too close. Setting off an alarm right now would not be to their advantage. They had moved as close as they dared to the trucks when Ellison raised up slightly. He was hidden from the drivers by a tall SUV as he drew down on one of the two terrorists moving the large bomb.

The bomb was heavy and they'd developed a rhythm of moving it, but it made quite a racket as it scraped along the concrete floor. Ellison used the noise to his advantage, getting off two quick shots. Between the soda bottle silencer and the noise in the garage, no one heard the gun.

Tony grinned as the truck drivers didn't notice the sound and didn't see the bodies fall directly behind one of the trucks. He had to admit that Ellison had timed it perfectly while they'd been in the blind spot of both trucks.

It would probably only take a few seconds for the other terrorists to realize that the bomb had stopped moving, but they would react with curiosity or suspicion, not immediately start shooting up the garage.

Using the time Ellison had bought them, Tony led Ziva and Blair closer, almost saying something when Blair stopped to lean into the open window of a car. Before Tony could object, Blair came up with a baseball he'd seen on the back seat.

"If we need a diversion."

Grinning, DiNozzo gave a nod. Like McGee, Sandburg was very good at thinking outside the box. He wondered if it was a Guide thing.

Gibbs had memorized the map in relationship to the overhead ducts and could get them close enough to the hostages in the food court easily enough. After that, it was a matter of following the soft sobs and fearful chatter as he looked for brightness in the gloom, indicating an access vent.

Once they were in position, Gibbs spoke quietly, wanting to get someone's attention without getting the wrong attention at the same time. "Federal Agents, don't look around, but can you hear me?"

It took a moment, but a middle-aged woman with two children spoke without moving her head, her only visible movement a tightening of the arm she had around her youngest boy. "Yes, we can hear you."

"Good. Now, there's a security camera in the corner to your left. Can you see it without attracting attention to yourself?" Gibbs watched as the family appeared to be adjusting themselves, ending up directly facing the camera.

"Yes, now what?"

"Do you see a red light?" It took a moment before she answered.

"Yes. That means they're watching us, right?"

Gibbs bit back a curse. "Yeah, maybe. Probably not all the time, they've got a lot to keep track of."

Next to the family were a teen and his girlfriend, who'd been carefully listening in. The boy adjusted himself slightly, ready to bounce up. "Would it help if we could knock the camera out of commission?"

"Have you seen any of the terrorists? Anybody physically walking around outside the gate?"

"Nah, man, the gates just came down and we ain't seen nobody. We heard some shots, though."

Gibbs hated asking a civilian to do anything risky, but if one of Shuhab's men saw them either in person or on the camera, the situation could turn deadly very quickly. "Okay, take out the camera, but watch for company. If you see anyone, hit the deck. We don't want you caught in the crossfire."

As he watched, the teen casually stood and wandered over to the other side of the food court without looking up at the camera. After a quick glance out into the empty corridor, he climbed up onto a table under the camera and jumped, knocking it up so that the only view it was showing was a close-up of the ceiling.

The moment that was done, several of the folks moved another table under the vent, and Gibbs easily dropped down before turning to steady McGee as he came down. Tim stayed on the table to address the group, while Gibbs jumped down to check the scene, tucking his impromptu face mask into his collar.

"Okay, folks, there's a lot about the situation that we don't know yet, but our first priority is to get as many people to safety before they know we're here. That means we need all of you to work with us."

"How can you get us out without being seen? There's alarms on all the doors and they're locked. We've already tried that."

Tim kept his voice steady, projecting all the Guide calming techniques he'd learned as he held up his phone. "I've got control of one of the back-up computers. We can't do everything, but I can over-ride the system for ten seconds at a time without setting off any of the back-up alarms. That means you've got to work with us to get everyone out. It also means that if any of you have the same phone, I'll need your batteries so we can keep going."

Gibbs picked a few of the men, putting them each in charge of a group. McGee ended up with four extra batteries for his phone, plus two external back-up batteries.

After the near miss in the garage, Gibbs went to work unscrewing the hydraulics at the top of the door. By the time he was done and McGee was ready to cut the alarm, Fornell and several members of the HRT were waiting on the other side. The alarm was cut, the door yanked open with one heavily armed agent coming in and a half dozen civilians rushing out before the door was slammed shut and the alarm reset. The agent went to one of the gates to watch for unfriendly company and the process was repeated as McGee changed batteries and started fresh.

Ellison rejoined them as they moved closer to the trucks. One of the drivers was yelling at the men he thought were still moving the bomb. Knowing that they would soon be out of time, Blair shifted his grip on the ball as the other driver climbed out of his truck. "Jim, which car?"

Ideally, they wanted to trigger a car alarm as far away as possible. Sentinel sight cutting through the gloom, he looked for the tell-tale signs. He concentrated on the newer, more expensive cars, finding a late model Honda with a soft, flickering glow that seemed to be coming from under the dashboard. He pointed it out and Blair nodded.

A few seconds later the ball flew fast and true, hitting the Honda and setting off the alarm. As a bonus, it bounced into a second car, setting off that alarm.

What Jim suspected was a curse in Urdu could be heard as attention was diverted and most of the terrorists moved toward the noise. Using the distraction, Ellison, Sandburg and the two agents were able to get closer.

The one driver still in his truck finally noticed their movement, but a well thrown knife left him slumped against the steering wheel.

"Nice throw."

Ziva smiled at the Sentinel's complement as they continued to creep closer. Half the terrorists in the garage were now down and the remaining three were still trying to find what had set off the car alarms.

Wanting to take at least some of them alive, DiNozzo watched and when the rest of the team was somewhat protected, he called out. "Federal agents, drop your weapons."

To no one's surprise, the men opened fire as they turned, but one ran toward the bomb as he fired. He managed to keep a row of cars between him and the team as he ran. There was a second where he was in the open, but instead of firing at him, Ellison spun and fired off to the side. Ziva and Tony both tried to fill in the gap, hitting him twice, but the terrorist managed to fall against the bomb when they finally took him down.

Ready to yell at the Sentinel, DiNozzo looked over his shoulder to see what had distracted him, only to find the truck driver now slumped out the side window, a hole between his eyes a nice match to the knife sticking out of his chest, a Glock slipping out of now lifeless fingers.

"Thanks."

Ellison shrugged as they moved toward the bomb. "McGee would be pissed at me if I let you get killed. Gibbs, too, but remember rule number one."

"Rule number one?"

"Never piss off the Guide."

That stopped Tony in his tracks. His life motto had been to never piss off Gibbs. Worrying about pissing off McGee was going to take some getting used to.

Ziva had stopped to check on the other bodies, which meant Ellison was the first to arrive at the bomb. Sitting on a wooden pallet, it had a pile of C-4 blocks that was several cubic feet and, most importantly to Jim, a timer that was showing an active count-down. "Crap, this thing's live."

## Thirty

By the time the last civilian was out of the food court and all the available members of the FBI's hostage rescue team was inside the mall with Gibbs and McGee, they'd finally caught the attention of somebody as two armed men approached the gate. Gibbs drew down on the one with the radio, dropping him with a head shot before he could sound the alarm. The second one turned to run, but only made it a few feet. The FBI shooter standing next to him had been part of the team from the Gauntlet and just shook his head.

"Guess you're not a fluke."

"Nope." Gibbs was ready to move out. The remaining pockets of hostages were inside the bank and his gut was telling him that they were running out of time. "This gate going to set off an alarm?"

As suspected, the gate was wired, but McGee and one of the FBI agents managed to jury-rig a bypass with a length of wire from one restaurant's sound system and something he'd pulled out of an electronic cash register at another. It wasn't pretty, but when they rolled the gate up, the light stayed green.

Nobody from the FBI complained when Gibbs took point.

"Everybody shut-up."

The screaming and shouting stopped when the order was punctuated with a burst of gunfire that splattered across the ceiling. Several groups of frightened shoppers had been gathered up and brought into the bank. Ordered to keep their heads down as they shuffled into the bank, no one noticed the shaggy-haired teen with the dark eyes and the bulky coat that was now in the center of the group.

His back-up plan in place, Shuhab supervised as bags of money were loaded into shopping carts.

DiNozzo looked over at Ziva, the closest he had to an expert on bombs. "Can you disarm that thing?"

The amount of wires crisscrossed over the stacks of plastic explosives was amazing, no obvious plan to the design and Ziva bit her lip. "Maybe, I have never seen anything quite like this."

Cursing, Tony brought his wrist up to his mouth. "Fornell, if you've got an explosives expert out there, we could really use him in here right now."

I've got two. One's already in the building with Gibbs and the other one is still on the sweep at the reservoir. What have you got?

Tony watched as Ziva started poking around the wires. "Trouble."

A large department store was across from the bank, and Shuhab had sent several of his men to grab shopping carts before they'd made a move on the bank. Now those carts were filled with bags of assorted bills. Twenty million dollars ended up weighing more than he'd expected when it came in smaller denominations and they were going to need the help to get it back to the trucks.

The bomb should be in place by now, so Shuhab radioed for all but the drivers to come help. There was no answer, so he repeated the call. When there was still no response, he turned his attention to the short, quiet man behind him. "Umar, check the garage."

"Kaleem and Wazir have not returned." Suspicious now about the malfunctioning camera, Umar hefted a rifle as he moved toward a small service corridor.

Once they'd gained control of the mall, using the advanced security system against it and electronically locking all the exterior doors, the security room had been all but abandoned. The physical presence of multiple armed assailants deemed more important in controlling the people still trapped inside.

Looking over the bank of monitors, Umar let out a curse in his native tongue as he keyed his radio. "We have lost the garage. We will need another way out. Do you want me to remotely detonate the bomb?"

Back in the bank Shuhab punched the wall before moving away from the hostages to answer. "Not yet, not until we are ready to make our escape."

The mall was a large, winding layout that had been remodeled several times since it had first opened. Luckily, that allowed them to get close enough for Gibbs to use his senses without being seen by Shuhab's men in the bank. McGee had taken a deep breath when one armed man came out of the bank and went down one of the narrow service halls, but he never turned back or looked to his side. When he went back to the bank, he was running, not looking around.

"Do you think he made us?"

McGee answered the rookie from the FBI before Gibbs could say anything. "No, not us. He was angry about something, but his attention wasn't close." At the shocked expression, he shrugged; not wanting to explain how he could now 'feel' what was going on around him.

Gibbs understood and backed him up. "The garage or one of the outside cameras picked up on something." He already had his mike active. "DiNozzo, Sit-Rep."

All the unfriendlies dead, Boss. But there's a bomb, a really big bomb. Ziva's trying to disarm it now.

They could hear the strain in Tony's voice. "If she can't, you guys get out of there. You hear me?"

Size of this thing, it won't do any good. It's close enough to the supports that it'll take down half the building. Fornell's getting us a bomb tech now, but we might need help getting him inside the garage.

"Don't worry about the alarms, just get that bomb disarmed. They know we're onto them, so watch your back."

Crap.

Even though he was mad, Shuhab wasn't as worried as his men. "We will leave another way, Umar. Tell me, Javeed, is there a truck still at the loading dock?"

"Yes, cousin." To make sure, Javeed had shot the driver dead as the gates started to close. A stolen truck wasn't ideal as it would attract attention, but he hoped the chaos of the explosion would give them enough time.

Shuhab smiled as he looked at his nephew sitting in the crowd of hostages. "Good. Between Adar and our gift in the garage, following us will be the least of their worries."

It had taken a while, but Ziva had traced one wire completely around the massive bomb. Convinced that she'd found the right one, she prepared to cut it but Ellison reached out to stop her.

"No, it's a trap." He touched the wire in her hand and shook his head. "There's no current in that one, it's the ground."

"But..."

Jim shook his head as he touched a different section of what appeared to be the same wire. "This section is live." Trying to not look at the flashing numbers as they counted down, Jim started checking each wire, telling her the difference as Ziva quickly dug and scooped at the plastics to find the hidden connections. Behind them, Blair and Tony nervously watched the action, neither one experienced enough to help.

"Do you want me to go back and help with the bomb in the garage?" He'd been through the classes, but Eric Arlow had never faced a live bomb out in the field alone.

"We've got explosives here, too." Gibbs had left his radio connection open, knowing that the team in the garage and the agents outside could hear him.

All of the members of the Hostage Rescue Team turned at Gibbs' words. "And you're just now telling us this?"

They had been steadily creeping toward their objective. "Just now close enough to smell it."

"Maybe it's just transfer from them being in the truck?"

Gibbs wasn't swayed. "If it is, they were rolling in it, it's pretty strong."

"Got a location for me? Sure like to get some of the hostages away from here before we move in."



It was a valid question and Tim rested his hand on Jethro's back as he studied the situation. A group of frightened people were in the center of the lobby and Gibbs could see them easily in the security mirror tucked discreetly near the ceiling. Piggybacking smell onto sight, he followed the scent to the center of the group.  
"Damn it."

"What?"

Gibbs turned to the commander of the HRT. "The explosives are in the middle of the hostages."

"They're sitting on a bomb? Do they know it?"

The Sentinel could hear the fast heartbeats, but he wasn't able to gauge their level of fear. That was more of a job for a Guide, so he turned to McGee. Tim knew the question without it being voiced.

"They're scared, but not terrified, so I'd say not – but..."

It was hard not to say anything, but Gibbs only raised his eyebrow. Tim looked worried when he finally answered. "One of the hostages is not what he appears. He's peaceful, almost happy."

"Happy?" Arlow wasn't convinced about Sentinels, let alone Guides. "The only ones in there that are happy are the terrorists."

"Exactly."

Gibbs knew exactly what McGee meant. "We need to get closer."

"They'll see us."

"No matter what, they'll see us eventually." Gibbs brought his handgun up and sighted down the barrel as he moved out, McGee behind and to his left.

Most of the hostages immediately covered down, realizing that they were in between two armed groups, but Gibbs noticed the one that only bent down slightly, still watching the terrorist group while the rest of the hostages were intently watching their rescuers. Dialing in his sight, and letting it pull scent along, he saw the bulky coat and could smell the explosives. The young man shifted again and Gibbs could see the dead man's switch in his hand.

Javeer pulled up one of the hostages, a pregnant woman with red hair. "You will let us walk out of here, Agent Gibbs."

"I don't think so."

In the garage, everyone could hear Gibbs, but only Jim could hear everything that was going on in the bank, thanks to the open mike.

There were chunks of plastic explosive clay scattered all over the underground garage, but they'd uncovered the necessary wires. Jim had touch dialed up as far as he dared, feeling the various currents that ran through the different wires as he split his focus between touch and hearing.

"Cut here, and then here."

Ziva did exactly what she was told and the display went blank. She relaxed, but Ellison didn't. "There's a secondary power source. We need to find it."

With Blair and Tony helping, they continued to dig through the clay-like explosives, finding several thin wires when Ziva was able to lift the control device. The wires weren't coated and Jim cautiously held his fingers over each of them, the hair on the back of his hand raising up. Knowing how sensitive it was, he held his other hand out. "Give me the pliers."

Ziva was holding the device about three inches above the remaining plastic, all the slack they had, so Tony handed over the pliers. "Here you go."

Jim took it and shook his head. It was going to be a tight fit and things were heating up in the bank. "You and Blair get out of here."

"No." Blair looked around, then back at the large pile of C-4 still active. "There's no place to go that's safe. We stay together."

Giving him silent support, Tony laid a hand on Blair's shoulder. "No matter what happens, I want to thank the two of you for what you did for Gibbs and McGee."

Behind Javeer, Shuhab stepped into the shadows. He smiled as he held close what looked like a phone. "Oh, I think you will be too busy to stop us." Still smiling, he fingered the remote for the bomb in the garage.

Taking control of the situation in the bank, Gibbs gave a shout. "Shuhab, you've got no way out." Out of the corner of his eye he watched their suspected suicide bomber and the hand holding the dead man switch. When the shot presented itself, Gibbs fired, the bullet shattering not only bone, but the device itself. The hostages screamed, trying to scatter and unfortunately giving cover to the terrorists as they made their escape.

At the same moment Gibbs shot Adar, McGee fired, hitting Javeer in the head. His hostage was splattered with blood, but unharmed as she stumbled to the ground and some of the other hostages reached out to catch her.

When Gibbs swung back around while the FBI charged the downed suicide bomber, Shuhab was gone.

"Shit."

Jim took a deep breath and cut the wires, half expecting that to be his last action. They were all still alive, but Ziva took a sharp breath as the device in her hand suddenly clicked.

There were a half-dozen suspected terrorist heading in multiple directions, not to mention the panicked and newly freed hostages trying to escape, but Gibbs had his hearing locked onto Shuhab. McGee was right behind his Sentinel, leaving the rest of the clean up to the HRT agents.

## Thirty one

"That was close." Wide-eyed, Tony stared at the trigger mechanism as it continued to click in Ziva's hand before she dropped it and they both started stomping on it.

When the broken pieces were scattered and finally silent, Blair grinned at them. "I think it's dead." Jim was also grinning, but most of his attention was on what he could hear through the earpiece. Everyone heard Gibbs' shout at Shuhab, but the rest of the exchange was muffled to them until they heard the gunshots.

Instantly all business, Jim jogged to the door into the mall. It was still locked, but Ziva followed and started to work her picks into the lock as she warned the others. "This will set off the alarms, you know."

Jim could hear the pounding feet and the rapid breathing. "Least of our problems, David. They're on the move."

The door swung open and they rushed through, ignoring the alarm. Jim and the two NCIS agents were ready to charge in, but Blair snagged Jim's vest, forcing him to slow down. "What, Chief?"

"We going to play catch-up or cut them off at the pass?" Blair pointed to the large mall map on the wall. Knowing that his Guide was right, Jim stared at the map as he listened carefully to determine a plan of attack.

PadshadShuhab cursed as he ran, repeatedly punching the switch on the bomb's remote before giving up and tossing it over his shoulder. Instead of happily walking out of here with twenty million dollars in unmarked, untraceable bills and followers that believed he could do anything, he was running with only a few handfuls of cash stuffed into a bag. His followers were scattering, but Gibbs and McGee were locked in on him and closing in. As a last resort, he pulled a dog whistle out of his pocket and blew hard, hoping to stop the Sentinel in his tracks.

Gibbs felt like his senses were singing to him, everything crisp and clear, his Guide anchoring him as they ran. Watching Shuhab, he saw his target reach into his pocket. It took a second to recognize what Shuhab pulled out. Wrenching down his hearing as fast as he could, he still wasn't prepared when the pain hit.

Just behind Gibbs and slightly to his left, McGee saw what was happening. Gibbs stumbled and tried to keep going. Before he lost momentum, Tim managed to grab his arm. The physical contact was enough for Gibbs to regain control. Picking up speed again, he remembered the sleeve that was still around his throat. As he ran, Gibbs pulled it up a little closer to better smell his Guide's unique scent and keep his senses under control.

Shuhab looked over his shoulder, expecting to find Gibbs incapacitated, only to see McGee pull him out of what should have been a painful zone. His plan had only gained him a few seconds and the Sentinel and Guide pair was rapidly making it up. Glancing around, he spotted one of his men off to the side and a large glass art piece overhead, halfway between them.

Hoping to catch the attention of the Guide, Shuhab yelled at Umar, demanding a diversion, as he took cover behind a large display that showed the layout of the mall. Umar nodded and pointed his gun at a group of shoppers trapped in one of the smaller stores.

Tim was finding it almost overwhelming as the various emotions battered him from every direction, but the sudden spike of terror down one of the secondary corridors turned him around before it fully registered. One of the terrorists was aiming his weapon at some previously hidden hostages. Too scared to scream, the fear of the women and children locked behind the gate was like a siren call to the new Guide. He was halfway across the open area before Gibbs even realized he wasn't behind him.

Yelling at him to drop his weapon, Tim moved closer as he tried to get a bead on the other man. From that angle, only the arm of the gunman was visible as McGee fired.

Jim had the mall layout fresh in his mind as he ran. He could tell that the suspects were scattering, but he knew that Gibbs would stay on Shuhab. Finding Gibbs in the chaos, he and Blair picked up their pace. Tony and Ziva were right behind them and a minute later they were close enough for all of them to hear the gunfire and the muffled boom.

"That wasn't another bomb, was it?"

Hearing what was happening further ahead, Jim just ran faster instead of answering DiNozzo's question.

Gibbs realized that McGee was moving away from him just as Shuhab raised up to fire. Instead of shooting at either Gibbs or McGee, he pointed up, firing three shots even as he ducked back down. Before Gibbs could react, hundreds of pounds of shattered glass was raining down on McGee.

"No."

McGee heard the shout just as he realized what had happened. He dropped to his knees and threw his arms up over his head as the first pieces came down.

"Tim!"

The others were close enough to hear the gunfire and the loud crash, but only Jim heard Gibbs' fearful cry. Two terrorists were running toward them and Jim didn't even attempt to capture them. If the rest were surprised when he dropped the two men with two well-placed shots, the expression on his face told them there were bigger troubles up ahead.

Since they had to turn the corner, Sentinel sight didn't give Jim much advanced warning. Only the new scent of blood told him they'd be a second too late.

Glass continued to fall on McGee and Shuhab raised his arms in triumph, gun still in his hand as he turned toward the Sentinel. Gibbs saw the movement and the gun and instinctively fired as he ran toward his Guide.

"Tim? Tim, don't move." Tugging the sleeve off of his neck, Gibbs took a deep breath of his Guide's natural scent, forcing the scent of his blood into the background. Next, he used the fabric to carefully brush away the glass from Tim as best he could. Luckily, the thick art glass had broken into large chunks instead of tiny splinters, making it safer to remove.

"I'm okay, get Shuhab." The words were shaky, but Gibbs didn't scold him.

"Got him and you got the other one. Help's on the way, so let me take care of you." Knees protected by heavy denim, Gibbs ignored the crunch of glass as he dropped down and tenderly lifted Tim's chin. "Let me see, okay?"

When Ellison and Sandburg came to a sudden stop, Tony almost ran into them. Off to his side, Ziva softly spoke in Hebrew, either a prayer or a curse, he wasn't sure. Looking over Jim's shoulder, he let out a curse of his own.

Shuhab was on the ground, a growing pool of blood surrounding his head. Another body was lying just past the intersection with a smaller hallway. A group of hostages apparently trapped just past the second body were screaming and crying while Gibbs and McGee knelt in the center of what looked to be wreckage of a Chihuly glass display, Gibbs carefully picking glass off McGee's head and shoulders.

The Sentinel with them also paid no attention to the bodies as he made his way to the injured Guide, his own Guide tucked up against him, but Tony followed protocol and checked the two downed suspects.

DiNozzo didn't have to get close to tell Shuhab was dead. Three bullet holes in his face meant that most of the back of his head was gone. Beside him, Ziva was nodding. "I am impressed."

"Yeah." They moved next to the second body and this time Tony let out a low whistle. The kill shot had gone through two blacked out windows before hitting the suspect. "How did he even tell where the suspect was? Body heat?"

"Perhaps." Ziva raised up from where she'd been checking for a pulse. "The shot came from where McGee was injured."

Tony could tell where she was going. "Probie did this? No way."

"Remember, he was able to locate everyone when he and Gibbs ran the Gauntlet. As a Guide, he can pick up on strong emotions." Ziva looked around as they listened to the radio while the last of the terrorists were rounded up. "They have become quite the formidable pair."

Tony glanced back over and watched Gibbs fuss over McGee. "Yeah, yeah, they have."

Jim carefully approached the other pair and let Blair do the talking.

"Hey, Tim." Keeping back a few feet, Blair squatted down, trying to make eye contact with Gibbs, but Gibbs wouldn't look away from the cuts he was examining on Tim's body. Blair blanched slightly at the amount of blood, but it looked like the worst were two gashes on Tim's head and one along the back of his ear. Those would definitely need stitching, but the rest would probably be fine with some ointment and a few butterfly bandages.

"We got them."

"You sure did." Blair started to move closer, but a low growl from Gibbs stopped him. "Okay, Jethro, I know it's very stressful when your Guide is injured, but we're going to get him some help, all right?" He didn't get an answer, not that he was expecting to, so he just kept talking. "The bad guys are all either dead or captured, so the danger is gone. Nobody is going to hurt your Guide."

That got a slight nod from Gibbs, but he still didn't look away from McGee. Under the circumstances, Sandburg considered that progress. Being sure to not make any sudden moves, Blair stood and backed away to join Jim, Tony and Ziva joining them a few seconds later.

"Okay, we need to make sure any medics that come in have been trained to deal with Sentinels. Between the stress of all this and the residual guilt of how he treated his Guide the last time he was injured..."

Tony started to argue, but the arrival of more back-up had Gibbs visibly bristling and for a second, Tony thought he was going to go for his gun. Instead, Gibbs pulled Tim even closer to him and glared at anyone that even looked at them.

Jim watched the reaction and waved back the FBI agent heading toward the pair, first aid kit in hand. "We'll get a DSA medevac chopper here to transport them both to Bethesda."

Blair was about to suggest Walter Reed before he remembered that they would probably still associate the place with Hamel and his view on Guides. "Good idea. I'll give Gibbs the first aid supplies and then we'll just keep everyone back for a while."

When he'd heard Ellison tell David to forget about the alarms, Fornell knew it was time to move in. The Sheriff was finally allowed to use his battering ram and the majority of the agents, troopers, deputies and officers swarmed the mall. Completely outnumbered and without Shuhab to lead them, the remaining terrorists were quickly rounded up. Fornell heard the call for the medevac chopper and headed further into the mall.

Just inside the northern courtyard that served as the focal point of the mall he found the NCIS agents along with Ellison and Sandburg. McGee was down, bloodied and obviously injured, while Gibbs was taking care of him. Picking a path carefully through the broken glass, he made his way to his old friend.

"Hey, Gibbs, looks like you took them all down." Fornell stopped and took a quick step back as he looked at Ellison. "Did he just growl at me?"

It wasn't Jim, but Blair, that answered him. "Rule number one in dealing with a Sentinel – stay back when the Guide is injured."

"Umm, okay." Just to be safe, Fornell took another step back, then another, before squatting down to be eye level with them before trying to talk to Gibbs again. "He going to be all right?"

This time he got a slight nod in response, which Fornell considered progress. When he hesitated, Jim filled him in more.

"We're air-lifting him to Bethesda where the doctors are used to dealing with Sentinels and Guides."

Fornell was still wide-eyed. "Yeah, that's probably a good idea." Behind him, he heard the quiet report that the chopper was landing.

As Tim suspected, the slightest tug on their joined hands brought Gibbs immediately down to McGee's level on the stretcher. "Dial your hearing down, Jethro. No reason for you suffer through all this noise."

Gibbs hesitated, wanting to keep all of his senses dialed up and focused on his Guide for the flight home. Understanding the problem, Tim reached up and tugged Gibbs even closer. "It's okay. If I need anything, you'll know. I promise."

A few weeks ago, Gibbs would have scoffed and rolled his eyes, but he shifted and settled into place as he obediently dialed down his hearing just as the chopper's jet engine roared to life. Outside the small window, he could see Jim and Blair watching, Jim giving him a thumbs-up as the helicopter gained altitude.

"Well?"

Vance bit back a smile. Ducky had almost grabbed Vance's phone when it rang and had been leaning closer and closer as Vance had gotten an update from the scene. Even Abby looked ready to take the phone away from him. "Final sweep of the mall has just taken place and all of the suspects are either dead or in custody. Other than the few that were shot when Shuhab and his people took over, none of the hostages were killed and all of the injured have been taken to local hospitals. Minor injuries and shock for the most part."

"And our people?"

"McGee was cut by some flying glass, but other than that, everyone's fine. McGee and Gibbs are being airlifted to Bethesda right now. The rest of the team, along with Ellison and Sandburg, will be driving back after they officially turn the scene over to the ATF and Homeland Security."

"Airlifted?" Abby's eyes widened at that. "Both of them? But I thought you said that only McGee... and that it wasn't that bad..."

Ducky was laughing, which surprised them both. Trying to muffle his amusement, he shook his head. "Welcome to the world of Sentinels and Guides, my friends. Timothy was cut; that means blood, and no Sentinel worth his salt deals well with a bleeding Guide. The doctors at the Sentinel Unit are the best prepared to handle that situation."

Understanding now, Abby relaxed and smiled. "Does this mean that Gibbs is really bonded to McGee the way he should be?"

"I believe so, my dear. Shall we take a drive to Bethesda and await their arrival?" Ducky reached his hand out for Abby and smiled as she took it and bounced up.

"I'm so happy for them, Ducky, even if McGee did get hurt."

"Indeed. Now let's gather some fresh clothes for our intrepid pair and be on our way. Will you be joining us, Director Vance?"



Leon just shook his head. "I need to stay here until the crime scene is officially turned over. Tell Gibbs I'll see him later." Once he was alone, Vance leaned back in his chair with a sigh of relief. Their first case with a Sentinel on the team had been a success.

"Wow, just wow." Staring at the pages of notes he'd taken, the ATF Special Agent in Charge from the local field office walked away, circling around the dismantled bomb still in the garage. The reminder of all that they'd done that day was even more vivid after repeating it a half dozen times and Tony had to shake his head as he finally broke down and asked the question he'd been thinking for hours.

"This wasn't a typical day for Sentinels, was it?"

Blair froze for a second, remembering his first full day with Jim. He'd asked a similar question at the end of his first day, too. Blair looked over at Jim and they both started laughing as they walked away.

"Umm, guys?" Tony looked over at Jim and Blair and then at Fornell, who had a similar, horrified, expression on his face. "Guys? You're joking, right? Guys?"

## ~Epilogue~

Dr. Wilkes smiled as he felt someone breathing down his neck. He'd take that over a failing bond any day. "Your Guide will be fine, Sentinel Gibbs. A few more stitches and then you'll be able to take him home and fuss all you want."

"He lost a lot of blood. Are you sure he doesn't need a transfusion?"

Under Wilkes' steady hands Tim rolled his eyes, but the doctor kept an impassive expression. "His blood counts are still in the safe zone. It would be better to just support his body's natural ability to produce more blood than to put him through the stress of a transfusion." After years of dealing with Sentinels, Wilkes knew that the threat of stressing the Guide would work.

"All right, what do we do?"

"Make sure he gets plenty of rest, drinks plenty of fluids and eats lots of iron rich foods." Dr. Wilkes almost laughed at the determined look on Gibbs' face. McGee was going to be experiencing his Sentinel in full nesting mode until he was healed up.

Once the last stitch was in place, Wilkes made his escape before he burst out laughing. He was hiding in the break room, still chuckling over his coffee when Senior Sentinel Ellison called in for a report.

How is he?

"Total of eighty-seven stitches and a Sentinel in a full nest. I'll be sending them home as soon as their ride arrives and then I don't expect them to move for a few days. Certainly not until the skin's healed up enough that Gibbs can't sense any blood and he's convinced nothing is going to pop open."

That bad?

"Damn near poked him with the needle while I was stitching, he was that close." Wilkes could hear both Ellison and Sandburg laughing. "After the rough start they had, I'm not complaining."

Amen to that. All right, I'll make sure they're given some privacy for the next few days. After the way Gibbs was growling at anyone that came near Tim, that shouldn't be too hard.

Laughing, Wilkes shook his head. He'd heard about that from the medics aboard the chopper. "Appreciate it. I'll be doing a wound check in two days, that should be long enough." Still smiling, Wilkes ended the call and headed back to his patient, happy to send him and his Sentinel on their way.

"Admiral McGee?"

"Yes? Can I help you?" John McGee looked up at the figure that was standing over him, holding two cups.

The now civilian Vincent Hamel sat in the booth across from the Admiral. "Actually, sir, it's how I can help you."

Despite his blank expression, Admiral McGee had recognized his visitor. Accepting the coffee and pushing his own work to the far side of the table, he leaned back. "All right, I'm listening."



**The End?**