No Man Is An Island

by lantalia [archived by mtac_archivist]
Curled up on his couch, Tony took another inventory of himself, just in case anything had changed that he hadn’t spotted in the last five minutes.

His head hurt. Hell, everything hurt, inside and out, but his head had a more assertive, kick ass kind of pain – a Ziva of a headache. Probably designed to make sure it could be heard over the rest of the complaining his body was doing.

So many reasons to feel miserable. His mouth was dry, because he couldn’t breathe through his nose properly. Cracked lips. Sore skin. Hearing like he was back underwater.

Throat felt like it had been pulled out, dragged ten miles across loose gravel, and then stuffed back in the wrong way round.

Anything that could be congested was – especially his lungs, much to the morbid fascination of everyone who came to see to him. The way people spoke about his lungs reminded him of the way they used to speak about his mother when she was having one of her ‘episodes’.

“We need to keep an eye on your lungs, Tony. Wouldn’t do to let them take a turn for the worse.”

“Okay Doc.”

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“And how are your lungs feeling today Anthony, hmmn? Still a little delicate?”

“About the same, Ducky”

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“Tony! Oh Tony! I mean – Tony!”

“S’me, Abs.”
“You know, just as soon as I’m done here, I’m gonna go tell the bossman he’s gotta take more care of your lungs, Tony. You need them, and... well... you need them. And he should be more careful. So there.”

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In fact, when it came down to it, he wasn’t entirely sure, if he had been in one bed and his lungs in another, that they wouldn’t have had all the visitors.

To be honest, as long as it meant that he was rid of that goddamn constant tickle, and the cough that was doing its very best Alien impression every few minutes – without even a hint of a Sigourney Weaver shaped benefit – he’d take that deal.

Course, it didn’t help in the slightest that he’d done a real number on his arms and shoulders at the same time. Forcing your way into a car wreck would do that for you. His hands were bruised and grazed, and a significant number of the muscles in the top half of him were either wrenched, pulled, strained or otherwise damaged. The rest were operating a one out, all out policy, and striking in protest at cruel and unusual working practices.

As a result – well, it wasn’t that he couldn’t do anything for himself, it was just that it hurt like hell to try. And that was only after finding the energy from somewhere in the first place.

Much easier to lie here and feel bored.

He hated ‘recovering’. Said as much to Kate once – that if he had to make a choice, he’d rather fight off the plague again than go through the recovery a second time. With hindsight, he maybe should have realised that she wouldn’t take it well, but at the time he’d just said it.

He was a guy. Just saying things was how he worked. Wasn’t going to waste valuable brain waves thinking about it.

So Kate had been horrified. She’d given him the kind of look only a woman could manage, and then launched into a lecture about how worried everyone had been, and how he shouldn’t say things like that, and how it had been crass and insensitive and...
Actually, she’d run out of steam at crass and insensitive. He thought that might have been the point where she’d remembered who she was talking to. To be fair, she’d rallied well, fixing him with a repeat look and informing him that if she ever heard him say anything like that again, she’d tell Abby.

He’d grinned, deciding that it was easier to let her have the score than to try and explain that all he meant was that he, personally, preferred ‘too ill to think’ to ‘not well enough to be allowed to do anything interesting’.

Which brought him back to this couch. Magazines, dvds, games – they only entertained him for so long. He was bored.

Normally, he’d do some dwelling, a little wallowing, take some time to beat himself up over managing to land himself in a mess again. But he didn’t even have that option. For once, everyone was in agreement. This time he hadn’t stuffed up.

Of course, he could dwell on seeing the car go over, on trapped bodies and lifeless eyes and desperate, desperate attempts to grab a hold and haul the pair of them back to the land of the living. But to be honest, it was all a little too heavy. He was aiming for occupied, not basket case.

Plus, even the thought of all that made his lungs hurt and brought on yet another coughing fit.

He rode the latest one out, until he was breathing almost easily again, ignoring the ever present tickle. Stupid cough should be a teaching aid. Never knew how many muscles it took to cough until now. He could feel every last damn one of them begging for mercy. Basic anatomy the hard way. Damn lungs.

Still bored.

There would be visitors, later. Someone would come by to entertain him. And okay, it sounded a little bad, put like that, but it was what it was.

He was lucky. There were a bunch of good people looking out for him. And for his lungs.

It just felt – surreal. Nobody trying to take him down a peg, or to slap him upside the head, or to take him to task for inappropriate behaviour and goofing off. He was living in his very own Being John
Malkovich moment.

Tried watching that again earlier too, but it made his head hurt even more. Didn’t have the spare mental capacity to cope at the moment, so he slept through three quarters of it instead. Dreamed of Cameron Diaz – and that was much, much better than any movie he’d seen.

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For once, then, nobody was blaming him for this one. Everybody was being incredibly nice, because this was someone else’s fallout. He really appreciated it, even if it did mean he couldn’t complain as much as he wanted to.

He knew Dr Pitt didn’t blame him for landing his lungs back in hospital again, because instead of the ‘you really should be more careful’ speech, he’d got a long-suffering grin, and Nurse Valerie on duty.

He only ever got Nurse Valerie when he was on his best behaviour. She was everything you could want in a nurse.

At least, she was everything he could want in a nurse. Plus she knew it, and didn’t mind a bit. He always slept better with Nurse Valerie on duty, if only to get in some quality dreaming time.

Come to that, he also knew Brad was cutting him some slack when after the initial exam he’d said. “I’ll keep you in for forty eight hours. Don’t get worse, and I’ll let you go home then, as long as Dr Mallard is willing to keep an eye on you.”

That was his ‘you did good’. Brad never let him out early.

Ducky had been there when the suggestion was made, and Brad hadn’t even had to ask him directly.

“Of course, of course. I’d be delighted to keep an eye on young Anthony. Well, not delighted that you’re ill of course, dear boy, but more than happy that I can help out. It will be no trouble. No trouble at all. It wouldn’t do to have you out of action for any longer than need be, hmmn?”
That had been polite British for ‘Sure’.

And he’d been as good as his word, coming by twice a day, just to check all was ok. To catch any changes in those pesky lungs early enough that there would be no chance of an ambush by any complications.

“So, young man, we can keep you out of hospital, and get you back to work before you go stark raving mad.”

He hadn’t been able to bring himself to do more than minimum standard grumbling when Ducky was being so damn good about giving up so much of his time just to keep an eye on him.

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For once, he’d even ended up on the right side of the Director. Not only had she come to see him in the hospital, she’d taken his verbal statement herself, and told him that the rest of the paperwork could wait until he was cleared for return to work. And that she would personally make sure that everything was in line to get him back on duty as soon as possible once he was fit again.

That was Jenny for ‘thank you for saving his life’.

On top of all that, the morning after his swimming expedition, Nurse Valerie had arrived, and checked his pulse, and his temperature – apparently both were a little elevated, she said with a wink and a smile. Not all that was a little elevated, he’d thought to himself. Hadn’t said it though, because that was a sure way to get Brad to take her off his roster again.

Anyway. She had then happily filled him in about this ‘petite, formidable looking redhead’ that had been seen stalking into Agent Gibbs’ room.

Apparently Jenny had gone on to tear several very painful sounding strips off his boss, covering ‘wilful endangering of lives’, ‘abdication of responsibility’, ‘catastrophic lack of thought’, and his personal favourite, ‘arrogance and ego above and beyond, Jethro. As per usual.’

Not that he wished Gibbs ill, of course. But sometimes it was – well, it was refreshing to hear that his boss was on the wrong side of the argument. Nice to know it wasn’t just him who thought the man had had an utter brainmelt this time round.
Another coughing fit raced through, leaving him curled up around his ribcage, mentally cursing in three different languages. Once it passed, he shuffled upright, painfully located another juice in the small fridge by his side, and blessed McGee yet again.

When he’d got back from the hospital with the girls, it was to find that McGee had already swept through and rearranged his apartment – with help from Jimmy Palmer, of all the unexpected people. *Man* arranged it, at that. Less little cushion things, more creature comforts. Couch in prime viewing position, with the best view whichever way he laid. Big screen positioned to just the right angle. Surround sound set up perfectly.

A small fridge he’d never seen before set up within arm’s reach, stocked with water, juice, ice and ice cream. Just the right height for the top of it to double as a table, with all the remotes, his cell, a couple of magazines and a box of tissues.

He’d dropped onto the couch, found himself in the middle of a Tony entertainment centre, and noted that McGee was a true friend.

In a moment of weakness, he’d admitted as much.

“*Probie! Always knew you were useful for something. Turn the blinds would you? It’s way too bright in here.*”

Having to stop for breath part way through hadn’t helped his cause, but it was the intention of normal that counted, right?

And two days later, the younger man had managed to surpass himself when he turned up with a fresh supply of DVDs, including a couple that must have made the geek blush right to the ends of his hair when he bought them.

He didn’t know McGee even knew where to get porn. Tony had been so impressed that he thought about cutting him some slack and skipping the teasing.
That had lasted precisely as long as it took him to notice the uncertain look that McGee was trying – badly – to hide, and then he was off and running. He’d not gotten much further than ‘Didn’t know you had it in you’ before the look disappeared under an affronted glare.

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To be fair, he hadn’t needed to infer approval or anything else from Abby’s reactions. She’d thanked him and well doned him a dozen times in the first fifteen minutes, only holding back on the hugging out of respect for the lungs.

But she’d gone over and above, too. Insisted on picking him up from the hospital – in a borrowed car, because she’d known without asking that he wouldn’t be too comfortable with her usual mode of transport just yet.

Taken him home, and told him she was staying over for the first couple of nights, just in case.

He’d told her she didn’t need to. That he’d be fine. That there was no danger – it was just a - very unpleasant - infection. That while he was ill, was suffering, he would recover. Eventually.

She said she did need to, and he would be fine, because she was going to be making sure of it.

He hadn’t been about to argue. If misery loved company, then Abby was going to blow its mind. She could always cheer him up.

He’d huddled down on the couch while she made herself and three large bags at home. She’d rummaged around in one, then walked over to him.

“Hold out your hand.”

“Abs…”

“C’mon Tony! I’m not gonna be mean. Just a little way – hold out your hand.”
He’d followed orders, and she placed a small object on his palm. He’d looked at it in amazement, and then back at her. “Really?”

“Really. Dr Pitt said you needed to keep the talking to a minimum, and those coughs sound, like really painful, so I thought – a bell.”

A bell. That he could ring. To summon someone to wait on him. He looked at her again, and she grinned, and he knew she knew exactly what he was thinking.

“Try it!”

He gave it a shake, pleased that it was more of a clang than a light tinkle. His whole fantasy could have been damaged by the wrong sound.

“Yes Tony?”

Someone up there really did love him.

“You’re the best, Abs.”

“I know.” She took a step or two closer, and gently folded his hand over the bell. “And Tony?” He looked back, and the grin didn’t waver but the look turned severe. “Abuse this bell, and the next one you hear will be attached to your Prince Albert. Got it?”

He resisted the impulse to cross his legs – just barely.

“Got it.”

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He shuffled for the hundredth time, blew his nose, looked doubtfully at the tissue box, and then grabbed the phone, texting ‘tissues please’ through to Ziva.
Ziva. Even she thought he’d done a good job. He was surprised he wasn’t more unsettled by it. That smile, and that nod, and that comment –

“Very brave, Tony. You did goods.”

“Good.”

“That is what I said.”

He hadn’t had the breath to explain.

Ziva had an extra gold star for being the only one of them not to mention the word lungs in his hearing. Not that she had said that much of anything. When it came to things like this she preferred to do rather than to say.

So she’d turned up last night with several bags of shopping, and disappeared into the kitchen with them. She’d restocked his fridge, and then set about making what he presumed where cooking type noises in the kitchen.

He’d heard Ziva and a knife. He hoped they were cooking noises.

He hadn’t been able to resist ringing the bell, just once, and she’d appeared in the doorway, pretending not to smile. He’d offered his most pathetic look, and coughed gently, and waved an empty tablet box at her.

She’d gone back into the kitchen, and come back out with a replacement. Walked over to him, and he wasn’t so ill that he couldn’t appreciate the view – she very rarely wore tops that clung, or that scooped, quite like this one did. And when she got to him, she gave him the tablets, and a drink, and then she leant over to feel his forehead, leaving him with a view that did more to make him feel better than any mere medicine had a hope of. He was so grateful he kept his hands to himself, not wanting to put her to the trouble of breaking any of his fingers.

And when she was done, she smirked at him, and went back to the kitchen with a sway, and he knew the top was deliberate, and Ziva really thought he’d done a good job.
To be fair, the chicken stew had been excellent as well. It just didn’t have a hope in hell of being the high spot of the evening.

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There were days when he questioned his place in the team – in the world. He wasn’t immune to black moods, and self doubt was written in his bones.

And he found himself here, with everything hurting, and he was bored, and sick, and trying to feel sorry for himself. And he couldn’t, because there were a group of people who figured it was worth some of their time and effort just to help him. His friends.

No man is an island, went the famous saying. He wondered if Gibbs had heard it.

Maddie had come to see him in the hospital, once they’d given her the all clear. Yet another pretty girl, but Gibbs could see a daughter in her, which meant she was firmly off limits and he’d leave well alone.

“I… thank you. You saved my life. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome.”

She’d looked at him with big, damp eyes, and he’d prayed hard that she wasn’t going to cry.

“I should do something to thank you properly.”

“No need, really.”

“Is there anything I can get you? Do for you?”

“I’m fine. You don’t need to…”
He’d stopped, reading the slight disappointment on her face, and he’d thought some more.

“There is one thing.”

“What?”

“Gibbs. Maybe I don’t have to ask but…would you keep in touch with him? He likes you. You’re good for him.”

She’d understood. No more was said.

And it was true. She was good for him. Gibbs definitely needed more people in his orbit, if only to keep in practice with what to do with them. Walling off from the world never helped anybody. He knew. He’d tried it, a long time ago. Isolation was never a good place to be, whoever you were.

Gibbs wasn’t completely out of touch though. Despite all appearances, the man had his moments. He’d come to see Tony his first night in the hospital, sometime in the middle of the wee small hours. Tony had woken by he didn’t know what, only to become aware of the other man in the doorway, and he’d closed his eye again, and pretended.

After a few minutes, his boss had come over to the bed, just standing there, long enough that he’d felt himself dozing off. The slightest touch to his hair had woken him again, then another. A few more minutes, and there’d been a whisper of sound.

“Regret this one, Tony. Should have taken you in the first place.”

Tony kept his breathing even, and waited.

“Thank you. Her life and mine. Hell of a job.”

The hand had moved then, but Gibbs only went as far as to pull up a chair. He’d waited a while, but the pull of sleep was too strong, and before long he was drifting again. Almost gone when he heard
another whisper.

“Job now is to get fit again, DiNozzo.”

By the next time he’d woken, the man was gone.

There had been no mention of it since, from either of them. He still didn’t know if Gibbs knew he’d been awake.

Didn’t really matter. He knew what he’d heard. Gibbs knew what he’d said. Business could carry on as usual. His boss had come to see him every day, filling him in on what was happening at work.

“Thought I’d keep you in the loop, DiNozzo. Quicker to get you back in the field when Pitt clears you.”

That was Gibbs for ‘I made a mistake.”

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A lot of people thought that Gibbs’ team was a bunch of dysfunctional misfits with some interesting luck.

They just didn’t know how to speak the lingo.

His cell rang, and he picked up. The caller paused until the coughing jag had passed.

“There in thirty, DiNozzo. Abs says prepare for the full crew. We’re celebrating.”

“Celebrating what?”

“Seven years since you joined us.”
Seven years? Well, hell. That was Tony for ‘family’.

“Boss? She say if she found a nurse’s uniform?”

The line went dead, and he grinned at the phone in his hand.

Being ill didn’t suck so much.

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