High and Low

by xenascully

Summary

An unexpected disaster takes place. An agent is missing, presumed dead. The remaining team won't rest until they have the answer.

Notes

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Chapter 1

Special Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs looked down from the helicopter window, at the forest of trees consumed with rolling black smoke and flames. Small planes swooped around the area, dumping fire-retardant as they passed. The senior agent had yet to spot any debris they'd come in search for, and more importantly, no sign of survivors. But from what he could see, he had little hope that anyone could have survived it, anyway.

Gibbs swiped a weary hand down his face. Losing a team member this way, was never in the list of possibilities, in his mind. This was unexpected. They'd been unprepared. And now, he feared that coming out here to try and hang on to some false hope, would only end up being the downfall for the remaining members of the team...

6 hours earlier...

"I cannot believe Tony gets to go to Vegas for the weekend, with his frat buddies, while we are stuck here going through cold cases," Ziva said as she slapped down the file in the pile on her desk.

"He put in for the time, almost six months ago," McGee defended, flipping a page in his folder as he glanced over at her from his desk. "Since we didn't get an emergency case, he finally lucked out and got to go."

"Had to skip out on the last three trips," Gibbs said, as he rounded into the bullpen.

"That's right," McGee agreed. "He was pretty sure he'd not get to go this time either. I'm glad, actually. He needed some time off."

"Alright, fine," Ziva resigned. "I suppose I should not complain. At least it will be a quiet work day, yes?"

Gibbs didn't try to hide the grin, as he took a seat at his desk and flipped open a file.

Moments later, a tearful Abby Sciuto scurried into the bullpen, light whimpering her only form of communication.

"Abs?" Gibbs stood, attempting to approach her panicked stature. "What's wrong?" The others stood now, as well, realizing something was very wrong.

Abby couldn't bring herself to speak, as she grabbed the TV remote from McGee's desk and turned on the big screen. She typed in the station for ZNN, and the screen filled with helicopter footage of trees, smoke and fire, and flashes of words on the screen. Abby pointed at them, looking from Gibbs to McGee to Ziva, begging them to understand what she was trying to tell them.

McGee was the first to put the pieces together, eyes widening as he read the words on the screen. "Flight 112...That's not Tony's flight, is it? Kaibab National Forest...that's in Arizona. His flight left almost five hours ago. That'd...that'd put him..."

Gibbs yanked the remote from Abby and turned the volume up on the TV, his body flaring with an intense level of apprehension.

*. . .authorities say the crash occurred just twenty minutes ago, heading from Washington, D.C toward Las Vegas. It's unknown at this time, whether there are any survivors. Though experts say the severity of the explosion on impact makes it highly unlikely they'll find anyone that was on board.*
The reporter's voice suddenly muted in Gibbs' ears, as a sense of dread overwhelmed him.

"No..." McGee shook his head, unable to accept what she'd said. He glanced from a hypnotized Abby, to his shocked and stunned Israeli partner, as tears began to form in her eyes, unable to move from their place on the screen. "No," he shook his head again, trying to clear his thoughts. "Maybe h-he wasn't on it. Maybe he took a different flight," he hurried to his computer, hunching over it as he began typing at a furious pace.

"What's goin' on?" Director Vance made his way into the bullpen, having come down the staircase after hearing the commotion. Gibbs could only glance blankly at him, unable to articulate the words to explain. Or rather, unable to accept them enough to say anything, just yet. Instead, he looked to McGee, who stared bleakly at his screen as he began to straighten back up.

"McGee..." Gibbs called to him, wanting an answer.

Tim slowly looked up to meet his eyes. "Tony made his flight," he replied, voice cracking as he gave the news.

"No no no!" Abby broke down, Ziva catching and holding onto her, before she could collapse. Tim sank down into his chair. Gibbs turned, blankly, back to Vance, who was putting the pieces together in his own head, glancing from the screen, back to the senior agent.

"DiNozzo was on that?" he asked, his stance stiffening. Gibbs felt himself nod, then turned his gaze back to the screen.

*...so far, there's no report as to why the plane came down. But authorities and airline experts predict that an investigation might find mechanical systems failure. We'll be sure to keep you updated, as this news is uncovered. Before releasing names of the victims, police want to contact families of the passengers...*

"What do you need, Gibbs," Vance asked, after pulling himself from his trance.

Gibbs swallowed down any feeling that quenched his hope, and straightened himself. "Time," he told him. "I need a flight to Arizona. Gonna do a search of my own."

"We are going with you, Gibbs," Ziva said.

"No," he shook his head.

"The hell we're not!" McGee shouted, then slightly ducked his head. "Sorry, Boss... But, we're going with you. We'll be no good to you anywhere else, until we can figure this out. And we can't do that from here."

Gibbs couldn't fault McGee for his outburst. He was terrified. He was in denial. He was everything Gibbs was, right now. The senior agent turned back to Vance. "Looks like the rest of my team will be going with me," he told the director.

"I'll get your flight taken care of, and let the LEOs know you're coming, and that they need to give you their full cooperation," he replied, with a nod. "I trust you'll keep Ms. Sciuto and me informed."

Gibbs nodded, then turned to Abby, who was looking at him with sad but hopeful eyes. He put a hand on the back of her neck and kissed her temple. "You do whatever voodoo magic or prayers it is that you do, Abs. I'm not coming back without him..."
Minutes before the crash...

"I can't believe you actually got to come, this time," Max said, for the thousandth time, playfully punching Tony in the shoulder, where he sat beside him.

"Yeah, I know, I know," Tony said. "And you should be thrilled, because without me, it's not quite a party, is it?" he gave the infamous DiNozzo grin.

"Damn straight, DiNozzo!" Max laughed. A couple behind them shushed.

"Sorry," Tony apologized to them, then smacked Max's arm. "Save it for the club."


"Classy," Tony replied, standing from his aisle seat to let him out. "If only my boss knew I'm the mature one in this group."

"Funny," Max replied, moving past him and toward the lavatory. "Tony DiNozzo...mature. Right!"

Suddenly, there was a loud sound, like an explosion or something hitting the side of the plane, and it jolted to the left, knocking Max up the aisle. Tony had gripped onto a seat in time not to topple over. "Max!" he yelled, seeing his friend hadn't moved to get back up. Max lay still on the floor. The plane continued to rock, but Tony made his way toward his friend. "Max?" The plane jolted again. Whether or not there was another noise, he couldn't tell over the frightened screams of the other passengers.

Oxygen masks fell from the ceiling of the plane, and people were scrambling to put them on. The lights flickered several times, as Tony reached Max. "Max, buddy, come on. Time to wake up!" he checked his friend for injury. He was unconscious, but otherwise seemed unharmed. Probably a concussion from hitting his head as he went down. There were voices on the intercom, urging passengers to buckle up and put up their trays. Tony knew he needed to get Max into a seat. It just so happened there was an empty one beside where they were.

He hoisted Max up, under his arms, and got him into the seat, just as another jolt and bang shook the plane. Struggling to remain upright, he pulled Max's belt on, securing him to the chair, before he began to plan his own route to a vacant seat. Another jolt, they seemed to be coming more frequently, now, and the lights went completely dark. All mechanical sound had ceased, and Tony could hear the undeniable and terrifying sound of a quick descent, if the falling feeling wasn't already an indication.

Gripping the seats as he went, Tony tried to get back to his seat. Fear and adrenaline were ripping through his entire being. He was nearly there. Then another jolt; different, this time. And in front of him, which was actually the rear of the plane, was suddenly just...gone. Screams filled the room, and left all at once, as part of the plane and its passengers separated from the rest. And just like that, everything went white, for Tony. He couldn't hold on any longer. Everything stopped...

Present time...

The chopper touched ground, and Gibbs was already pulling off his seat-belt and making his way out of it and toward his agents, who were standing nearby, looking ready to give some kind of news. There was a look of urgency on their faces, that gave Gibbs way too much hope than he probably
should've allowed himself to feel. "What've ya got?" he yelled over the sound of the helicopter, as he approached them.

"Fire is cleared at the site," Ziva replied, just as loudly.

"They're gonna take us there, Boss," McGee added. "You ready? Or do you need a minute?"

"Let's go," Gibbs headed toward the SUV that was there to take them in. Ziva and Tim shared a glance, before following him.

In all, it only took a few minutes to drive through the patch of woods that lead to the crash site. It was smokey, but the driver clearly seemed to have his bearings pretty well handled. McGee was eternally grateful that neither his boss, nor Ziva was driving. It was so foggy, they wouldn't have known they'd arrived at their destination, had the vehicle not stopped, and the driver looked back at them.

Gibbs and Ziva had their doors opened at the same time, and piled out of the back, with McGee right behind them. And as they stood straight and looked up, the smoke began to clear out of the path of their sight, and reveal the devastation they'd come to see.

It wasn't too long ago, that the team had been called to investigate a military plane crash that had been transporting caskets of deceased Marines. That scene had been difficult to take in. But this... this was different. Not because the plane was so much bigger, or that it wasn't military. But the loss involved. And as selfish as it might be, it wasn't even about the number of lost civilian lives. It was about Tony. Their Tony. He was somewhere...here. Here in this gigantic, twisted metal monster, still smoking in the cool air.

As they stood there, taking in the sight before them, Gibbs couldn't help but wonder why it wasn't raining. It seemed like it should be raining; thundering and stormy, like it felt this scene called for. Instead, it was sunny. There were birds singing, somewhere in the distance. Maybe just coming out of the shock of their home being so violently disturbed, but singing, nonetheless. And that greatly disturbed Gibbs, for some reason. There shouldn't be birds singing and sun shining. It should be dark and streaked with frightening lightning, deafening thunder, and freezing cold, biting rain, just like his insides felt, right now...

"Gibbs?" Ziva's voice sounded beside him, and he suddenly felt her hand on his arm, and looked over at her. "You do not have to go in there."

Was Ziva trying to comfort him? Baby him through this devastation, as if somehow it wasn't affecting her, as well? Gibbs narrowed his eyes, and realized, as he appraised the two agents at his side, that they were as afraid as he was. And maybe the only way to get past it and do what they'd come here to do, was to worry about their friends, a little bit more than themselves.

"Yeah, I do," Gibbs answered, softly. "We all do. Let's go," he told them, and they hesitantly stepped forward. Hesitant to find the body of their beloved friend and partner. But pushing forward because they respected him too much to walk away and let someone else do it.

Hazard workers stopped them, handing them air-filter masks, before letting them continue on into the front of the plane. It was difficult to stomach, that first step up through the mangled opening that used to be the boarding door, and into the blackened pit that was a harsh glimpse into Hell for at least a hundred and forty-seven people, that day. Gibbs tried to shove his personal feelings to the back of his mind, for a moment, stepping far enough into the destroyed room, that his team could get in as well.

McGee swallowed down the bile that rose in his throat, at the sight and inevitable smell that couldn't be completely cut out by their masks, of the burnt bodies still secured in their seats. He had to fight
even harder, when it reoccurred to him that Tony could be any one of these corpses. And though it took Ziva considerably more effort than normal for her, to place her apprehension into the near-impervious bubble in her gut, so that she could do her job, she didn't miss the way the color had left Tim's face.

"McGee," she turned to him, noticing it took a moment for him to show indication that he'd heard her speak. "Are you alright?"

He didn't answer the question, as he looked back up the aisle. "Let's...get this started, shall we?" he asked, softly, before pushing himself forward. But then he stopped short.

Ziva glanced over at Gibbs, who had been watching their interaction, silently, until now. "Tim?" Gibbs narrowed his eyes at the agent. McGee was facing away from them, looking at one of the passengers, who happened to be closest; the row of seats that were front most, toward the cockpit, closest to the door where they'd entered. Tim shook his head, mutely, though they couldn't see his face to determine what was happening. "McGee, what is it?" Gibbs asked again.

McGee drew in a shaky breath, "It's Max," he told them.

"Max?" Ziva questioned, before Gibbs had the chance.

"I dropped Tony at the airport, and he introduced me to his frat buddy, Max," Tim replied. "This is him," he barely motioned with his hand, to the burned figure in front of him.

"How do you know?" Gibbs asked, taking a step forward, until he could see Tim's face.

"His fingers were too fat," he replied, almost absentmindedly; his eyes seemed to focus elsewhere, somewhere in the air in front of him...

Early that morning, at the airport...

"This is my partner in the MCRT; my probie, Special Agent Tim McGee," Tony introduced him to Max.

"The probie thing is more an endearment thing, than anything," Tim told Max as he shook his hand.

"Tis true," Tony smirked, in agreement. "McGee's a hell of an agent, now. And a genius at that. It's why I'm not too wary about leaving, this time; I know he'll have our boss's six."

"Oh yeah," Max seemed to recall something. "You're the one that pulled Tony up from that ledge in the parking garage a while back, right? Saved his life."

At first, McGee wasn't sure what to say to that. Tony talked about him to his friends? Good things, at that? "Uh...yeah. Yeah, I guess I did."

"Pretty cool," Max nodded. "Nice to meet you, man."

"You too, Max," Tim smiled. "You'll make sure Tony doesn't get in too much trouble in Vegas, right?"

"I resent the implication that I can't take care of myself!" Tony halfheartedly objected.

"I'll...how'd you say it?" Max tilted his head a moment, "Have his six, I promise," he told him.

"Besides, we've got these," he pulled a chain from under the collar of his shirt. "Has our class ring on it. We all have 'em, so if any of us gets separated and passes out drunk, they'll know who to return us
to, eh?” he let out a small laugh.

"That's not gonna happen," Tony shook his head, though his smile was genuine.

"Why wear it around your neck, instead of on your finger?" McGee queried.

"Because his fingers got too damn fat," Tony laughed.

"Hey, shut up, DiNozzo!" Max punched him in the shoulder. Tim shook his head, watching the two of them, just a little jealous at the friendship, and wishing he could come along...

Present...

"His class ring is around his neck on a chain," Tim told them. "He showed it to me, before their flight, this morning..." The other agents leaned in a bit closer to the charred body, to see the chain, and the ring it bore on the end of it. "Tony was wearing his on his finger," Tim recalled. "He should be beside him, right?"

"This body is female," Gibbs said, examining, as best he could, the figure beside Max.

"Perhaps Tony gave up his seat?" Ziva suggested.

"I want the itinerary and seating chart for this flight," Gibbs said, going into agent-mode, as he should've been before they'd even entered the plane. "And I want Ducky here."

"You think Vance will allow anyone else here?" McGee asked.

"This is an NCIS matter," Gibbs retorted, daring any of them to argue the point. He looked to Tim, "Get me that itinerary, Tim."

"Yes, Boss," he managed to squeak out. Gibbs' voice had taken on that soft tone that Tony had always warned them meant something was terribly wrong.

"Let's get out of here, until we have it," Gibbs told them. And as a couple of uniformed men came from the cockpit area, carrying the black box that could give them the information they needed to determine the reason for the crash, Gibbs turned to them. "I don't want anyone removed from this plane, until I get back. You hear me?"

"Yes, sir, Agent Gibbs," one of them said. Gibbs narrowed his eyes, realizing he'd likely spoken to this specific officer at some point beforehand. He nodded to him, and turned to exit with his team.

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"Now, Abigail," Ducky petted the distraught woman, who had broken down once again, when the M.E came up to check on her. Her face was buried in Ducky's shoulder, and Jimmy Palmer stood off to the side, unsure of what to do, but wanting to help. "I know this is a terrible thing. But we mustn't ever give up hope."

"But you saw that fire, Ducky," she muffled, through tears. "And they've not found any survivors, yet. If he'd survived the crash, he'd have been burned alive. Or so badly...that..." her tears renewed.

"Hush, my dear girl. You can't think like that."

"Is it selfish of me?" she pulled away, revealing her mascara-stained cheeks. "To hope he's still alive, even if it means he's in so much pain? I mean, what if he...what if his limbs had to be amputated? Because the burns were so severe...but he still survived. I would be so happy... I mean, not that his
legs were gone, but that he was still alive and could get better. He might be upset or pissed for a while, but I know Tony. And Tony wouldn't let that slow him down, one bit! He'd be the best wheel-chair basketball playing, special agent..."

"Abby!" Ducky stopped her rambling.

"I'm sorry... Oh god, I'm sorry...I just... I... I can't, Ducky!" she broke down again. "I can't accept it!"

"Well, there's nothing to accept, right now. There are no definitive answers, just yet. The only fact we can rely on, right this moment, is that Anthony does not like it when you are upset, young lady. He didn't like to see you cry. So you best buck up, in his honor, for the time being. Tears won't help the investigation into the matter, move along at all, now, will it?"

Abby straightened, taking in what the older man had told her. "You're right," she replied. "It won't. And I know...Tony wouldn't like that I was so upset." She grabbed a couple of tissues from the box Jimmy held toward her, and she gave him a small, sad smile before wiping the wetness from her face.

"That a girl," the doctor gave her shoulder a squeeze. Then his phone went off in his pocket. "Excuse me a moment," he said, taking a few steps away as he pulled the phone out to answer, seeing it was Gibbs. "Yes?" he answered, leaving out his friend's name, in hopes that it wouldn't reignite Abby's tears.

"Duck, I just cleared it with Vance, to have you flown out here," the tired voice on the other line told him.

Ducky glanced at Abby, who was now engaged in a quiet conversation with Palmer, and he walked out into the hall for some privacy. "What's going on, Jethro? Have you found anything out yet?"

"Nothin' yet," he replied. "So many bodies, Ducky. Can't be sure who's who. Need you to...to bring Tony's dental records," he said, then cleared his voice. "Not sure why the plane went down, but it went down hard. Tryin' to make sense of it all..."

"I'll get the next possible flight," he told him. "And I'll let you know when I'm to arrive. How are Ziva and Timothy handling this?"

"They're okay, I think. They're doing their jobs. Though, I suppose this really shouldn't be part of it..."

"Abigail is struggling to make sense of it all, as well," the M.E told him. "I believe Mr. Palmer will be able to take over my roles here, while I'm out. I'll call you, Jethro."

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McGee hurried into the plane with Gibbs and Ziva, once they had the seating chart, and knew what they were looking for. They each had a copy of the chart, and went up the aisles, swiping at the overhead compartments, where the aisle numbers were layered under soot.

"Here it is!" McGee yelled out, once uncovering the correct row. "But his seat is empty," he told them. "There's someone in the next seat, but it's not him. Too short," he said, voice shaking, unsure of what this could mean. He turned to his colleagues, who were almost on top of him where they stood.

"Then he could be any one of these," Ziva replied, looking over the charred passengers. No one responded to the suggestion. Instead, they were helplessly silent for a moment. Until Ziva spoke
again, "They all died on impact. This...at least, should provide some comfort for the families, yes?"

she asked no one in particular. And since she was facing away, no one saw the tears forming in her
eyes. "No one...tried to escape the cabin," she elaborated. "They are all still fastened in their seats."

Gibbs looked around the graveyard...or perhaps ghost ship would be a more appropriate term, and
realized what Ziva had revealed. But as he looked, he noticed something else, and glanced down at
the chart in his hand, and back up again.

"Boss?" Tim asked, curious about what Gibbs might've noticed.

"Something's missing," he said aloud.

McGee furrowed his brows for a moment, before glancing at his own chart, and in the direction
Gibbs had been. It only took him a moment. Though, they should have been able to tell sooner. Of
course, they had been there for one reason, and they'd been suddenly thrust into a full stop, with that.
"Yeah...about six rows!" Tim said.

"Back of the plane is gone," Gibbs elaborated.

"The strength of the crash pinched the rear of it closed," Ziva added. "Perhaps the rear of the plan
disintegrated..."

"No. Couldn't have done that," Gibbs turned and headed toward the open exit, and they followed
close behind him. "Nothin' to accelerate the fire, back there," he told them. "The engines are here, in
the middle," he pointed out as they exited the plane. "Fuel isn't that far back."

"And look at the structure," Tim added, taking a few quick steps toward the hull. "It looks like it's
been ripped apart."

"Or perhaps blown apart?" Ziva queried.

Gibbs shook his head, "Would be a particular burn pattern, and the hull would be bent outward. This
is pulled; torn..."

"Like Titanic," Tim chimed in. The two agents turned their heads to look at him in question. But
McGee looked directly at Ziva, "Remember? Tony made you watch the special about the real one...
The exploration of the ship on the bottom of the ocean."

"Only because I told him I somewhat enjoyed the film..."

"That's not my point-

"Ah! I see!" she put it together. "Yes, you are correct. That is exactly how this seems, though the
materials are clearly different. I understand your reference, now."

"Question is," Gibbs interjected, "Where the hell is the rest of the plane?" They glanced at him,
before their gazes fell in the open expanse behind the ruined vessel. A path of cleared, broken trees
and scorched land, fell behind it for perhaps the better part of a mile. But aside from pieces of the
plane's exterior, including the wings, there was nothing else...
Chapter 3

Tony slowly became aware. The last thing he remembered, was getting up out of his seat to let Max past to get to the restroom. But now, his ears were ringing, and there was a strange smell; something not at all like how the plane smelled when they'd boarded. It wasn't even strange in a sense that he didn't know what it was. Just that it didn't smell like it theoretically should. It smelled more like...pine.

Another strange sensation, was that it was awfully quiet. And bright, and he hadn't even opened his eyes yet. Of course, the ringing in his ears made him think it was quiet, anyway. That 'so quiet, your ears start straining to hear something, and suddenly they're ringing' kind of quiet. That's what he thought it was, anyway. Aside from the fact that it seemed too bright to open his eyes, Tony couldn't seem to do much of anything, at the moment. There's a strange feeling you get when you wake up to the sun right in your face; a moment of panicky pain behind your eyes, that forced you to put your hand over them before making the attempt. Only, Tony couldn't seem to get his hand to move.

Only...why would the sun be in his face?

And though the moment called for action, Tony found himself frozen still, like his brain requests weren't quite reaching any other part of his body.

"M-Max..." he tried to call out, in hopes that if something was really medically wrong with him, his friend would notice, and find someone who could help. Lord knew Max wasn't much of a first-aid kinda guy. But no answer came. He felt himself sway, as if the plane were making a turn. "Max?" he called a little louder. But instead of a voice, he heard a sudden flapping around him, and...was that chirping? He swayed again, this time feeling almost like he'd fall, and his body suddenly jerked into action.

His eyes snapped open, and all he saw was sky, and green...green...tree? "Holy shit!" he yelled out, feeling himself sway again as he quickly scrambled to turn and grab onto something...anything. He wasn't even sure what it was that he'd grabbed onto, in the commotion and fear that was running a ridiculous amount of adrenaline through his entire body, now. It was only after whatever he was holding onto, made the swaying seem less threatening, that he dared open his eyes again.

Tony's arms were clung around a tree trunk, he deduced. After several long moments of trying to accept this fact, and un成功的ly attempting to wake himself up from what had to be a really weird dream, he decided to look down.

Really bad idea.

"Ohgodohgodohgod..." he squeezed his eyes closed, again, pressing his forehead into the bark of the tree trunk. Tony wasn't certain the exact number of feet between him and the ground. But it wasn't a number that would have him living, had he plummeted to it. He looked back up, noticing the sun again, that was only peeking through the hole created by a disturbed area of treetops. And from that open spot at the top, in a direct shot to where he was now, was a series of broken or missing branches. A lot of them, in fact. As if he'd fallen from up there...

And suddenly, like a two-by-four to the back of the skull, the memories came rushing back into his mind. The jolting of the plane. Getting Max into a seat. Trying to get back to his. The back of the plane simply falling away from the rest of it...the looks on those people's faces as they drifted away with it... And losing his grip on the chairs he so desperately clung onto, being flung out into the terrifying, yet silent blue sky, until he began a fast descent... and everything went black, just
moments later.

He'd lost consciousness before he'd ever reached the trees.

Tony lost the battle with his nerves, and clung to the tree branches for dear life, as his stomach involuntarily emptied of whatever little was in his system. In any other circumstance, the delayed distant splash of vomit hitting the ground below, would've been amusing. But this...this wasn't exactly the time. And it wasn't like he could stay up in this tree forever.

"Get it together, man," he gruffly told himself. "What would Gibbs do?" he looked around. "Well, clearly he would get himself out of this tree. Only, I seem to be having a difficult time with heights, today..." Somewhere in the back of his mind, he wondered if talking to himself like this, meant that he'd finally lost it. "Okay, DiNozzo... Let's do this."

There were enough branches jutting every which way out of the tree trunk, that climbing down didn't seem like it would be too impossible a task. But as he reached his foot to the next branch down, his body seemed to catch on to its injuries, where his mind must have been clouding those facts until now.

Tony wasn't just sore. Sore, he knew. He worked for Gibbs, after all. "Wait...that...didn't sound right at all," he voiced his thoughts on...his thoughts. "There's a lot of physical stuff we have to...wait. Wait that doesn't sound right, either... As agents, there is a lot of running, tackling, that sort of thing. I know sore... Ah, forget it," he gave up on the thought. Point was, he was injured. Must have sprained a few things in his arms and legs, and the back of his head hurt. His chest was sore. But he wasn't going to sit there and access his list of ailments. He needed to get out of that tree and find help.

"Couldn't have waited until..." he grunted as he made his way down the branch, "...after I was down...to start hurting, could you?" he told his...self. He pushed through the pain, willing himself with the promise of being on stable ground. It took about ten minutes, before he reached the last branch before earth. What he hadn't realized, was that the last branch was about ten feet from the debris-covered ground. Those branches that had inevitably slowed his descent enough to keep him from fully crashing into oblivion, were in a scattered pile where he would need to jump down.

After a few long moments of calculating, Tony decided to let himself get as close to the ground as possible, by hanging down from his hands. It left about three feet from his shoes to the ground, and he let himself go, rather quickly, as hanging onto the branch was ungodly painful.

By some stroke of luck, he managed to land in the two clear patches of land; one foot in each, and remain upright. He let out a victorious bit of laughter, before stepping over the debris and over into a grassy patch a few feet away. "Take that, Batman," he said, a bit amused, and possibly a bit delirious.

And then he collapsed...

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"I want that black box information, now!" Gibbs barked at the officers who had tried defending their analysts.

"Agent Gibbs, the footage is difficult to make out," one of the analysts told him. "It just hit so hard, things are really messed up. It's gonna take a while to get this going."

"We don't have a while!" the senior agent retorted.
"Let me try," McGee stepped forward, not only to sate his boss and save the analysts from premature death, but because he needed to know, too.

"What?"

"I might be able to get this going a bit faster. You've gotta let me give it a shot."

"It's not just something you can hit with a stick and get better reception on, Sir," the man said.

"I know what I'm doing. Trust me," McGee replied.

The man looked from McGee to Gibbs, and back again. "Okay, fine. But if you end up messing anything up-"

"I'll take the fall. Don't worry. Just...get us some coffee, will you?" Tim ordered, and the younger man scampered off, torn between feeling ashamed and relieved. Gibbs watched the man hurry out of the room, and felt a bit of pride in his agent, mixed with a smidgen of amusement, and he couldn't hold back the half smirk, as he watched McGee get right to work...

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When Tony wakes up a second time, he hasn't forgotten the preceding events. He decides this is a good thing. Saves time. Though, now he feels the ache even stronger, throughout his body. And now that he's on the ground, it seems silly to talk out loud to himself.

He cracked open his eyes, realizing he was on his side, now. He rolled onto his back, groaning with the effort, and looked up at the sky, noticing through the trees that the sun had changed its position in the sky. He'd likely been out for a while. Hours. He needed to move, now, before it got late, and dark.

Tony turned onto his side, then pushed himself up, with more effort than he could ever remember needing to use to get up before, in his life. His stomach hurt, among other things. But the stomach hurting was new, and he focused on that. Once standing, he was still for a moment, waiting for the wave of dizziness and nausea to dissipate, before he started heading in the direction the sun was descending. Theoretically, that should bring him to wherever the plane had finally touched down. Hopefully, that wasn't so far off.

It hurt to walk. It hurt to gently set his foot down on the earth. It hurt to swing his arm for balance. "Basically, it hurts to breathe," he said to himself. "Why can't there be segway rentals in places like this? Or a payphone, so I can call a cab..." Wait. He paused in his steps, and reached hopefully into his pockets, in search for his cell. When his fingers hit the smooth, cool edge of plastic casing, he let out a victorious bout of laughter, and pulled the object out. Upon inspection, however, his smile faded, along with his hope, and his relieved laughter turned bitter and hopeless. "Damn you, iPhone! We both fall at the exact same speed, from the exact same height, and I survive, but you...you, the one thing that might've gotten me out of this mess a lot quicker, if I can at all, are destroyed!" He screamed at the shattered screen, and wanted nothing more than to throw it or stomp on it or something. But he hurt too much to do either.

He closed his eyes, forcing himself to regain composure. The only time there's no hope, is when you stop having it. "Can't let that happen," he whispered to himself, and opened his eyes. "Gibbs would have my head." Gibbs... What Tony wouldn't give to have the man out here with him. He'd know what to do. "Not that I don't know what to do," Tony said, pocketing the broken device, and draping his hand over his stomach again. "But I have no idea where I am, and no clue if anyone's looking for me." If he died out there, would anyone ever find him?
A flash of light hit his eye, somewhere in the distance, and he looked over in the general direction, squinting through the blurriness of unwelcome moisture. He couldn't see anything. But his instinct told him to move back a step, where the flash had hit him. And sure enough, the light reached him again. Now that he knew where to look, he took a step forward. It was something white. Something metallic. Something that doesn't belong in the woods, that was for certain. So he headed toward it. And when he spotted the airline symbol, once he got closer, his heart began pounding in his chest, and the adrenaline re-surged through him. He quickened his pace, as painful as it was.

"Hello?" he yelled out, as he progressed. "Is anyone there? Hello?" Though he received no response, he kept going. He looked up, noticing the same type of disturbed spot of treetops above, and once he reached the clearing, he realized, on top of all the debris, sat the rear section of plane that had been torn away, right before he had.

It was surreal, seeing this massive chunk of destroyed equipment, that had once been part of something that flew hundreds of people all over the country. Maybe the strangest part, was that it was just...there. It wasn't on fire, or even smoking. Just there. In the middle of the woods.

Tony slowed as he approached. The open end wasn't facing him. He made his way around the structure, bracing himself for what he might find there. As he rounded the section of plane, he saw them. The passengers who had met and held his eyes as they were torn away. But he didn't see their eyes, now. Though still fastened in their seats, each of them were deathly still, and clearly broken. Mangled and bloodied, where they sat, Tony had to look away.

They were all dead. Was everyone on that plane dead? Max?

A quiet cry pulled Tony's attention back to the structure. Movement in the very back, caught his eye. "Hey!" he called out, and made his way into the hunk of metal. The bloody woman in the back seat opened her eyes and looked at him. He noticed her uniform. She was one of the flight attendants. "Hey there, sweetheart," he said, kneeling down in front of her. "Are you okay?"

"I...I...d-don't know," she stuttered. She looked around her, at the other passengers who were too silent for her liking. The look of realization and devastation, was picked up immediately when Tony saw it. "Oh god... Oh god, where...where's the rest of the plane? What happened?"

"Hey now," he put a gentle hand on one of hers, "What's your name?"

"Ch-Cheryl," she replied, sniffling.

"Ch-Cheryl," she replied, sniffling.

"Cheryl, I'm Tony. I think you served my buddy Max and I a breakfast bloody mary," he gave her a small smile.

She blinked a few times, eyes darting around in front of her, in thought. "Oh...oh yeah, I remember you," she had a hint of a smile.

"You were a bit reluctant to serve those so early in the day," he supplied.

"Yeah," she nodded, wincing at the pain it caused. "But you flirted your way into convincing me..."

"That's right," he smiled at her. "Look, Cheryl, we need to get outta here, and try and find our way to the rest of the plane. I'm sure there are people there that can help us. You think you can walk?"

"I'm n-not sure," she answered. "I can try."

"Okay. I'll help you, alright?" he grimaced as he pushed up to stand again, helping her out of her buckle. "On three." Carefully, he assisted Cheryl out of the seat. She'd doubled over, once standing,
grasping her hands over her stomach, and crying out in pain. Tony caught her, and though it caused him an immense amount of pain, he lifted her small body into his arms and carried her out. Once he stepped down off the edge of the plane remnants, the pain in his limbs became too much. But he was careful to gently set her down on the ground.

"You're hurt," she pointed out the obvious. Tony grunted in response. "Where I was sitting, the seat comes up. There's an emergency...first aid kid." She coughed a bit, looking back up at Tony, who seemed concerned for her.

"Doesn't happen to be water in there, too, does there?" he asked.

"No," she replied, sadly. "Everything was just ahead of economy class."

"Hey, maybe there's something wedged in one of the seats, from the passengers," he told her, with some hint of hope. "I'll look, while I'm in there, alright?" She nodded, a spark of hope blooming in her eyes as well. And suddenly Tony was on a mission. This, he could do. Taking care of someone, he wasn't too clueless about. As he made his way back into the structure, he was able to ignore some of his pain, to accomplish the tasks at hand.

First, he made his way back to Cheryl's seat, lifting it to retrieve the kit she'd told him about. From there, he began searching the debris in the leftover cabin, being sure to get down on the floor and look under the seats as well. And though the movement caused him more pain, it hadn't been in vain. The first container he'd found, was empty. It was scattered among other trash, and his hopes had taken a dive into thinking that there was a garbage bin somewhere that had toppled into this section of the plane. He almost passed over the juice box that was hiding just behind one of the seat bolts. But it was full, and unopened.

Tony felt victorious, once again, and kept on looking through the cabin, in hopes of finding something else. But that was it. In all of everything, there was just one little juice box. Though, he supposed he should be grateful for that much.

He made his way back to Cheryl, poking the little plastic straw that had successfully stayed stuck to it's side, through the little foil hole on the top of the box. "We're in luck," he told her, as he crouched down and handed it to her. "Apple juice."

Cheryl let out a small laugh, "You have some."

"Nah, there's not much here. You're more hurt than I am. Go ahead."

"You need something to drink, Tony," she chided. "You might be a big tough man, but you still need water to survive."

"Alright, fine," he said with a raised brow. "I'll take a sip. But the rest is yours." She was satisfied to get him to agree to at least that much, and gratefully took the box once he'd finished.

"Anything of use in the kit?" she asked.

Tony had almost forgotten about it, tucked under his arm. He placed it on the ground in front of him and opened it up. "Few bandages, antibiotic ointment, gauze, medical tape, space blankets... Oh, matches; those will be handy," he told her. "Maybe it'd be a good idea to build a fire. You're not going anywhere, in the shape you're in. And no offense, because it's not that you're heavy or anything, but I'm in no shape to carry you outta here. I'm not even sure how far 'here' is."

"Probably a good idea, then," she told him. "If someone's looking for us, they might see the smoke, and head this way." Tony nodded in agreement. He wouldn't need to go far, even, to get the wood,
seeing as it was scattered about all around them, from where the plane had broken the trees.

Standing back up again, however, proved to be a poor decision, as he was suddenly reminded of the pain in his head. "Oh god," he winced, hand shooting to the back of his head as he hunched over.

"Are you okay?" Cheryl asked, looking worriedly up at her rescuer.

"Yeah," he squeaked out, as his hand met the cool dampness matted in his hair. Some was caked and dry, so he knew it'd been there a while. As his hand came instinctively forward for him to examine it, Cheryl gasped at the sight of blood on his fingers. "S'okay," he assured her. "Head wounds just bleed a lot." He realized he was out of breath. "Everything's gonna be okay, Cheryl. Alright? I promise," he told her, seeing little silver star-specks dance just out of his view. "I just...need...to rest for a minute..." he got out, before collapsing once again.

The last thing he was aware of, before being pulled from consciousness, was Cheryl's fearful calling out of his name...

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Tony was pulled from consciousness, an unknown amount of time to him later. But this time, it was by the sound of a woman's voice. Cheryl, he remembered. She sounded happy about something. He smelled smoke.

Cracking open his eyes, he realized he'd been covered up with one of the space blankets. But the color of everything had changed. Everything had an odd glow, and it took him a moment to realize that the sun had mostly gone down, and he could only see because Cheryl had just gotten the fire going. When he found her face, she was smiling to herself, clearly proud she'd accomplished a successful building of the fire.

"You did good," Tony called, quietly to her.

Her eyes shot to him, "You're awake!" She seemed relieved. "I was afraid you might not wake up, for a while there."

"I'm okay," he grunted, pushing himself up.

"You should stay lying down," she suggested. "I'm not doctor, but you were burning up, when you first went down. I gave you a little more of the juice, since you weren't conscious to argue with me."

"Damnit, Cheryl," he retorted, once he got a bit upright.

"Don't argue with me, Tony," she shot back. "It's not like we'll be stuck out here for days."

"You don't know that," he shook his head, grimacing again as he continually forgot his injuries.

"They'll find us. Soon. I know it," she told him. She seemed so hopeful in that statement, as she looked back down into the fire, that Tony couldn't argue with her anymore. Suddenly, her hope-filled eyes turned anguished, as she cried out in pain, and grabbed onto her stomach, dropping the stick she'd been poking at the fire with.

"Cheryl?" Tony shot up from where he sat, and crossed the small space between them, to help ease her to the ground. She let him, and ended up laying back against his shoulder as he held onto her shaking form.

"Hurts..." she told him.
"I know," he acknowledged. But there was nothing he could do for her. Except maybe... "Hey, Cheryl? You got anyone back home? A husband, maybe?" he asked.

"Are you...seriously still...flirting?"

"No," he let out a small laugh, hearing the amused annoyance in her voice. "Just...tell me something. Anything." He wanted to help pass the time. "Till they find us..."

Cheryl swallowed. "My parents," she told him. "And a sister. I don't...have a husband. Or a boyfriend. That's...not an invitation, Tony..." He laughed again, squeezing her arm, where his hand ended it's hold on her. "What about you?"

"No husband," Tony replied.

"Funny guy," Cheryl retorted through her teeth, but let out a small laugh, regardless.

"No wife or girlfriend, either. But my team... I'm an NCIS agent. My team is my family. I wonder...if my boss knows what happened. Wonder if they're worried."

"What're their names?" she asked, glad for the distraction. The next half hour was filled with talk about Gibbs, Tim, Ziva, Abby, Ducky and Palmer. And the next, about Cheryl's sister, who seemed to have a lot in common with Abby.

It was in the middle of a story about when they were still in high school, that Cheryl sudden stopped speaking. Tony thought she'd simply paused, reminiscing in memories of her past. But when she didn't continue, he looked down, and saw she wasn't moving.

"Cheryl?" he lightly shook her. There was no reply. "Cheryl!" he said, louder, fingers desperately seeking her jugular, in search for a pulse. But he found none. "No... Nonono no no..." he hugged her lifeless body to him, unable to hold back the tears he'd been so successful at holding in this entire day. He'd promised her they'd be rescued... "I'm sorry..." his voice cracked. "I'm so sorry...god..." his breath hitched. And he wondered if they really would find them. If they ever would.

He was quickly losing his hope; abandoning the idea that Cheryl might have been right. And now...now, he was alone...
Chapter 4

A huge, white medical tent had been set up, mere feet from the downed aircraft. Within it, bodies were categorized and being examined by more local medical examiners. By the time Ducky arrived, it was night, and the dental record copies he’d sent over email, had been put to use in comparing to the remains already retrieved.

Ziva had gone to fetch the doctor from the airport, filling him in on the case thus far. McGee was still hard at work on the black box video footage. So when Ducky arrived with Ziva, he greeted Gibbs, just outside the medical tent. A hand to the senior agent's arm, drew his attention.

"Hey, Duck," Gibbs greeted him with a weary smile.

"Jethro. How are you holding up?" the older man asked.

"As expected," he replied.

"I assume he's not yet been...discovered among these bodies," he surmised.

Gibbs shook his head. "So far, everyone's matching up with their assigned seats, except for Max," he told him.

"Quite strange," Ducky commented, and turned to look at the large expanse of workers among the dead. "Anthony's fraternity brother, being in a seat not his own, while Tony, himself, is missing altogether. You don't suspect something...foul at work here, do you, Jethro?"

"Nothing that makes a damn bit of sense. We won't know anything, until McGee's got that footage up and running."

And as if on cue, Tim came rushing toward them, from the smaller tent to the right of them. "Boss," he grabbed his attention. "I've got it."

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"Well, that explains Max's change of seats," Ziva said, as they watched the silent video. They watched with mutually held breath, as Tony tried to make his way back to his seat.

McGee saw what was going to happen. In a rush of breath, he said, "There it goes..." and they watched as the hull split, with one of the rough jolts, and the back of the plane ripped away so quickly, it was as if it hadn't even really happened. The video feed went white, as the sudden light confused its sensors, until it adjusted.

They all watched in horror as Tony struggled to hold on. McGee seemed to know, before it happened. His hands came up to either side of his head, and they watched as Tony was sucked out of the open back of the plane, into the bright sky behind it.

"Dear god..." Ducky exclaimed. "The altitude of the aircraft at this point?" he asked. "Timothy?" he had to ask again, and McGee seemed to be shaken from his thoughts, back into reality.

"Uh..." McGee backed the footage up a bit, zooming in to the bottom corner of the screen. "About twenty-six thousand feet," his voice cracked. Ducky's eyes slowly darted before him, a grim look upon his face, as he slowly looked up at his friend.
But Gibbs dismissed the thought, turning back to McGee. "And how much farther was that, than the main crash site? We need the speed of the plane from this point until it stops. We need to narrow down the search area."

"Just give me a minute, Boss," Tim requested as he began calculating.

"Jethro," Ducky pulled him aside, as the agent worked. "Are you certain...that you want to be the one to find him, in the likely state he is in?" Gibbs narrowed his eyes at the doctor. "After such a fall, as broken as his body will be, you may not even recognize him. He'd need to be identified by an examiner, to verify."

"I told Abby we weren't coming back without him," Gibbs replied, just as quietly as his friend had been speaking to him. His breath sped up a bit, without his permission; all of this becoming a little too real, now. "Of course I don't wanna find him that way, Duck," he added, brows hinting at the pain he refused to let loose. "I can't... I don't think we will. I still...have some kinda..." his sentence tapered off.

"Hope?" his friend supplied for him, brows raised. Gibbs could only nod. Ducky put a hand on Gibbs' arm, and squeezed, reassuringly. "Then perhaps there's reason to, yet."

"Gibbs," McGee turned to face him, "I've got several possible coordinates. If we send out six teams, we can have all the areas searched within an hour..."

Within minutes, Gibbs had arranged for the local LEOs to assemble search parties and have them meet at their start location, just past the white tent, where he'd brief them.

"I know we're short handed," Gibbs started out, "But we're not sitting around waiting on backups, while there are missing people who might, at best, be in immediate need of medical attention. There are twenty-three unaccounted for passengers, somewhere in these woods. One of my agents is among them."

He looked to McGee, who nodded and took over. "I've mapped out six locations, which, mathematically speaking, might be where the second piece of the plane ended up. I have maps drawn up for each team. Each map includes the quickest way to get from each location from here, and from each other spot we're searching. This way, if one of us is successful, the rest of the teams can relocate to where we need you the most." He began handing out the maps, glancing back to Gibbs.

"Each team will be given a two-way radio," Gibbs told them. "If at any time, you find something, anything, that looks like it might've come from the plane, you call it in to me. Do not separate from your teams. We don't need to be sending out more search parties for missing search parties. Are we clear?"

"Yes, sir!" the crowd replied.

"Each team will have three people. It'd be preferable to have someone with at least some medical background to be in each team," Gibbs told them. "Team up. Report back, once you've reached your destinations, then wait for orders. Good luck," he told them with a nod, then turned to his team. "I want each of us on separate teams; ensures one of us have a higher chance at being the ones to find 'em."

"If we take routes A, B and C, we will have less distance to reach each other, should you be correct," Ziva suggested.

"I'll take Duck with me," Gibbs told them.
"I have some medical training," McGee reported. "I'll see who needs someone."

Gibbs nodded to both of them. "Be careful. Watch your six," he told them.

"You too, Boss," McGee said.

Tony secured the blanket over Cheryl's lifeless body, after checking to confirm what he'd assumed been causing her so much pain. Sure enough, her stomach was a sickly purple and swollen. She'd been bleeding internally, probably since the crash. Definitely at least long before he'd discovered her. There was nothing he could've done to save her. If only he hadn't been in so much pain. If only he could've sucked it up and carried her out of there...

He sniffled, straightening himself as he stood. Feeling sorry for himself wasn't going to help him. He needed to get more wood for the fire. "If you're lost, it's best to wait somewhere, for someone to find you," he told himself. "You've got a fire going. Someone will see it, eventually. Right? It's dark out. But maybe someone will smell the smoke...or something." He limped over to the plane, where there were plenty of branches still strewn about on the ground, and slowly, painfully began to gather them.

The agent tried to be conscious of his actions, cautious how he was moving, so he wouldn't cause himself to black out again. "So much for DiNozzos not passing out," he told himself. The pain had done it to him a couple of times, now. He didn't want it to happen before he could put more wood on the fire, at least. But unconsciousness sounded pretty okay to him, right now.

He'd been worried that maybe he was suffering similar injury to Cheryl's. But at the rate it had taken her, he doubted that's what his pain was caused by. Plus, he didn't have any swelling that he could see. There was no feeling of pressure. Just a lot of pain when he moved. Sure there was bruising. But he did, after all, just fall out of a freaking airplane. One is bound to have a mark. Tony was convinced, though, that he didn't have any life threatening injuries. Unless the bump on his head was more serious than he thought. And that could be translated in either direction; physiologically or psychologically, speaking. He might just be thinking he's okay. Or he's okay, and there could be a small bleed in his brain somewhere. You can't really tell if something like that is happening. "Hell, I watch way too many movies," he mumbled to himself, when the list of medical scenes played through his mind.

Tony wasn't sure if he could accept that he was perfectly fine. "You don't just...fall from a plane without a parachute, and end up without much more than a scratch," he let out a small laugh. "The way my body must've careened through the tree... It'd... I mean... I was like...a human pinata. A very relaxed human pinata. And I was whacked at least fifty times, I imagine. How do you get hit fifty times and not have any candy spill out?" He grunted against his body's decision to begin throbbing. He couldn't be certain if it was because he was letting himself think about what had happened, or if something just decided to burst inside of him, that very moment. Something like what happened with Cheryl...

"No no," Tony shook his head, carefully, so as not to reignite the pain there. "Nah you're fine! You're just getting yourself worked up, DiNozzo. Most serious thing is this head wound, which stopped bleeding a while ago. Pretty sure Gibbs has toughened that very spot, over the years. Hell, I might even have him to thank for it not breaking completely!" he let out a small laugh, which unexpectedly to him, became a sob. And he tried to understand why it had, coming to the conclusion that he was afraid he might never actually see the man again. That maybe...just maybe Gibbs would miss him.

Or worse, maybe Gibbs would end up blaming all of this on himself. Letting Tony take this vacation,
of course. Not that Tony hadn't deserved some time off, and asked for it himself. But Gibbs had a funny way of turning things full circle into being his own fault. Tony could totally understand it; he had a bad habit of doing that, as well. Probably even more so than his boss. But that didn't mean he'd be right. He didn't want Gibbs to even think that for a second. And if there was one thing worth fighting to stay alive for, it would be so he could tell him that much.

Tony narrowed his eyes as he walked back to the fire, wood in hand. "Maybe I'm thinkin' a bit too highly of myself, and not giving Gibbs enough credit," he said aloud. "There's no reason for him to blame any of this on himself. Not unless the plane going down was somehow..." his voice tapered off, and carried on in thought form, "Some terrorist attack, aimed at NCIS... Aimed at Gibbs, and because his SFA was on this flight, they could get his attention..." Tony dropped the wood into the fire, unable to do it with any level of finesse, as his breath came a bit more rapidly at the thoughts that had bloomed in his mind.

After several long moments of panic, he started to laugh, "Geez, DiNozzo... You're thinkin' crazy, now! That's not what happened, at all. You're reaching. There's no way..." And though the odds were slim that he was correct, he couldn't help but accept the possibility. Gibbs had taught him never to believe in coincidences. Of course, sometimes you're wrong. But if that's what happened, then yes...Gibbs would blame himself.

"Can't let that happen," Tony shook his head. "I'm not supposed to die like this, Boss... If I'm gonna die, I want it to mean something. Like saving you. Or McGee...or Ziva or something... I want it to be a way that makes you proud, more than anything," his voice cracked, and tears blurred his vision. "I don't wanna die, Boss... Not here. Not like this..."

Tony blinked hard and brought his hands up to wipe his face, wincing at the pain in his arms and shoulders, as he let out a humorless laugh. "God...now I'm not even just talkin' to myself. I'm talkin' to someone who's not even here. Must've...hit my head harder than I thought..."

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"You smell smoke, Duck?" Gibbs asked, as they approached their destination, which was void of what they were looking for.

"Now that you mention it, yes," Ducky replied, slowing to a stop as Gibbs and their third party member did.

"Coming from West of us," the deputy told him. "Which team is that way?"

Gibbs pulled out the walkie-talkie and pressed the button on the side, holding it to his face, "McGee, you smell smoke?"

A few moments later, the crackling on the radio announced his reply, "Yeah, Boss. I...I think I can see fire in the distance. I... Boss, maybe you should start heading this way."

"Copy that, McGee," he told him, handing off the radio to the deputy. "Get the rest of the teams heading for destination A, on the map, now." And he glanced to Ducky before they both hurried off toward McGee...  

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Tim had quickened his pace, his less-than-in-shape team members falling behind quite a ways. His heart was hammering in his chest. Fire meant, most likely, that they'd found the other part of the plane. There were no screams; no voices. Surely what they were going to find, would be similar to
that of the larger section they'd seen earlier.

But it smelled different. There was a distinct smell to the larger plane. This, though, just smelled like fire, and the blaze he'd spotted while on the radio with Gibbs, seemed far off, because it wasn't very big looking. But as he neared it, he realized it wasn't as far off as he'd thought. It...was actually a...small fire. And it wasn't on the plane.

But then he saw its glow on the craft. They'd found it.

"Boss!" he got back on the radio. "Boss, I see the plane!" he hurried closer. "Boss, can you hear me?"

"Got it, McGee, we're almost to you," Gibbs replied, finally. "Do you see anyone?"

"Not yet, Boss. Not close enough. Hang on," McGee hurried closer, pointing his flashlight out in front of him, shining it into the craft. In his mind, he assumed the fire was just remnant of the crash, until he caught a glimpse of silver when his flashlight beam hit it. He changed direction, then, heading toward the man-made fire.

He crouched down, setting his flashlight on the ground beside him, before lifting the blanket a bit. "Boss, I found a body that's outside of the plane. She's dead. But it seems like someone pulled her out..."

"McGee?" Gibbs wanted him to elaborate.

"Not sure yet," he replied. Then he heard a cough, somewhere ahead of him, beside the plane. He dropped the blanket and pocketed the radio, before grabbing his flashlight and quickly standing to point it toward the noise.

"McGee?" the voice sounded before the light even hit his face.

Tim nearly jumped out of his skin. The battered figure that stood, bracing himself against the hull, clothes torn and bloody, and face smudged with dirt and dried blood, was familiar. He knew him. "Tony?" he squeaked out, and his body seemed to be more with the program than his brain, as he found himself rushing toward his friend, before he began to slip from his position against the hull. Tim half-caught Tony, Tony half-catching himself, gripping onto McGee's jacket before he could hit the ground. And he grunted against the pain that twinged through his arms and chest. "Tony, I gotcha," Tim told him, half-sobbing in relief as he held his alive partner, friend, mentor, and reached to dig out his radio once more. "Boss! Boss, I've got him! I've got Tony! Boss, hurry!"
"What're you doin' here?" Tony asked, eyes narrowed and face a mixture of relief and anguish. This was almost too good to be true; being rescued, and by his friend, at that. He thought he might be imagining it; that there really was something seriously wrong with his head.

"Looking for you," Tim told him, voice thick with emotion. His knees were pressed into the dirt of the forest floor, as he held Tony's upper half in his lap; arm cradling his head, as if any rough movement might break him. "W-we thought you were dead. God, Tony, we thought we came out here to find your body..."

"How did you even know?" Tony asked, voice lowering to a whisper.

"It was on the news," Tim answered. "Gibbs demanded Vance let us come here."

"Gibbs? He's here, too?"

"Yeah," McGee gave a small smile to his friend, when he saw the revelation seemed to bring him some joy. "He'll be here any second." Tony squeezed his eyes shut for a long moment, willing the painful spasms to end. McGee became worried. "Are you okay?" he asked, moving his hand to grab onto Tony's, which was holding onto Tim's jacket still.

Tony let out a small laugh, "I am now." He opened his eyes, again, putting on a brave face to hide any indications of pain from his friend.

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"What's his condition, McGee?" Gibbs shouted into the radio as he broke out into a full run. "Tim! His condition!" he repeated when he heard nothing back. A crackling sounded from the speaker, but no clear voice came through. "Damn this piece of-"

"There, ahead!" Ducky shouted. "I can see the fire!" Gibbs spotted it as well. "Go on, Jethro. I'll catch up."

Gibbs sent a brief, grateful glance to his friend, before he broke out into a full-speed run. It didn't take him long to get to the fire, and only a few moments after that to spot where McGee was holding onto Tony. He froze where he stood, heart gripped in fear for a moment as he glanced around him. The rear section of the plane was filled with lifeless bodies. Another by the fire. The way McGee held Tony, from what he could see of the expression on the younger man's face, didn't exactly reveal happy news.

"Tim?" Gibbs approached, cautiously.

McGee's head shot toward the voice. "Boss!" then back to look at Tony. "Hear that, Tony? Gibbs is here. Just stay awake, okay?"

The grip of fear released Gibbs, at that, and he quickly maneuvered to crouch down at Tony's unoccupied side. "Hey, DiNozzo," he said, swallowing the lump that had threatened to crack his voice. The relief at finding his agent alive, was a lot more overwhelming than he'd imagined. It was surreal, like it had been since the start of all this.

"Boss," Tony's head barely turned, but his eyes found him, and it was hard for Gibbs to stop the moisture from forming in his eyes, at the sight of it in Tony's. "You're here."
"I am," he smiled, giving a short nod.

"You...look like hell," he told him. Gibbs barked a laugh at that, glancing at McGee, who had a hint of a smile on his still-shocked face. "Boss?" Tony got his attention again. "I want you to know..." he coughed a bit, "I think...your head-slaps might've actually...saved me," he smiled at him, as much as he could.

Gibbs narrowed his eyes, confused by what that meant, but his concern for Tony's condition took precedence. "Tony, can you tell me where you're hurt?"

Tony let out a small laugh, " Everywhere."

"Ducky's almost here," he told him. "You bleeding from anywhere?"

"Was. My head. But it stopped a while back," he told him. "Think I'm okay, Boss. But 'm tired. Jus' wanna go to sleep." His eyes started to drift closed.

"No, no!" Gibbs grabbed his arm, and Tony yelled out in pain, eyes widening. "God...sorry, Tony, I didn't-"

"It's okay, Boss," he managed to squeak out.

"My word, Anthony!" Ducky's voice sounded as he rounded the plane and squatted down beside Gibbs. "It is absolutely...unbelivable to see you!"

"Thought I was dead, huh?" Tony quirked a smile. "Takes more than...fallin' out a plane, to...take down a DiNozzo," he told them.

"However it was that you happened to survive, you'll have to divulge the tale once we get you in safer conditions," Ducky said as he pulled a bottle of water from his bag and cracked it open. "I'm sure you're thirsty. How about you take a drink, and let me check you over, while we wait for transport?"

"Okay, Ducky," he replied. "Sounds good."

"I'll need you to lie him flat, Timothy," Ducky told the younger agent. "Jethro, if you would make a bit of a pillow for him, with your jacket..." Gibbs nodded and shrugged off his jacket, then helped McGee gently set Tony down, and stuck the balled up jacket under his head. "I'll need the both of you to give me some light, if you would," the doctor told them, then looked to Tony. "Anthony, is there anywhere in particular, that you're experiencing a high level of pain?"

"Jus' my head, Ducky," he told him. "Think I...whacked the back of it pretty hard. Woke up...in a tree."

"A tree," Ducky repeated. "That would explain your survival, a bit. It must have broken your fall, to some extent," he felt around with his fingers, through the agent's hair, in search of any open wounds. "Ah," he reached the damp, caked mess on the back of his head. "This will have to be looked at in better lighting. Let me look at the rest of you, then."

"Back hurts a bit. My arms an' legs have been killing me, but there's nothing broken, far as I can tell."

"Allow me to open your shirt, young man. Let's be sure you get the urgent things taken care of, if need be, first," he pulled at the buttons of the soiled dress shirt, until they were all undone, and opened the shirt. "I hope you don't mind, but I'll need to cut this one open, my boy."
"S' long as it's just my shirt, an' not me," Tony let out a small laugh.

Ducky gave a hint of a smile and turned to the senior agent, "Your knife, Jethro, if you please?"

Gibbs fished out his knife, and did the honors of carefully slicing the shirt up the middle, as Ducky and McGee held it up and away from Tony's abdomen. The three of them sucked in a surprised breath at the level and pattern of bruising that lined Tony's entire torso, and Gibbs looked worriedly to the doctor.

"My word..." the doctor grimaced. "Let me know if this causes you any pain," he warned, before he began pressing his fingers flat over the expanse of bruising. Tony held his breath as he did the examination, his face skewed in a grimace of pain.

"Tony?" McGee grabbed back onto his partner's hand.

"M' okay," he assured, through pinched breath. "Doesn't feel...nice...but it's not unbearable."

"There's no swelling," Ducky said, "Which would've indicated internal bleeding. And by some miracle, no broken ribs, that I can tell. But let me take a look on the other side. Help me to turn him," he requested of the other agents, "Unless you're able to sit up?" he asked Tony.

"I can do that," Tony replied. "Little help, maybe?"

They repositioned themselves to assist and give room for the agent to sit up. He grunted through the pain the actions caused, as he moved. It seemed the pain was getting worse, now that the repeated adrenaline had worn off, and he didn't have the worry of never being found, distracting him from it. He felt as they stripped his shirts, carefully, from him. And he heard the hiss of breath from McGee, as they got sight of his back.

"Look bad?" Tony squeaked out, using Tim's arm to lean forward on, trusting him to hold his weight.

"No better than the front of you, that's for sure," Gibbs told him. "Jesus, DiNozzo...how are you not broken?"

"Think I...might not have been...conscious, before I hit the trees, Boss..." he was finding it increasingly difficult to get his breath, now.

"He'll need x-rays to confirm," Ducky said, "I can't see anything obvious, though."

"S-stomach...hurts..." Tony told them. "Think I'm gon...gonna be..." he couldn't finish the sentence, before he leaned to the side, away from his rescuers, and vomited the water he'd just drank, along with whatever stomach acid was in his system.

"You okay?" McGee asked, concern washing his face as he looked to Tony.

Tony merely grunted in response. Gibbs glanced to Ducky. "Let's lay him back down," the doctor said. "We'll wait until more help arrives, before anything else." They lowered him back down, using Tim's lap as a cushion for his upper half, again. "I do believe it's safe to say that you have a concussion, my boy," Ducky told him, as he took out a small flashlight. "Have you vomited before now?"

"Couple times...at least," he replied, drowsily.

"Open your eyes, Tony," Ducky told him. "Let me take a look, alright?"
"Tired," he replied, trying to open his eyes, but finding it impossible, much like when he was up in that tree, just waking up.

"DiNozzo," Gibbs' voice warned.

"Tryin'... tryin', B'ss... So tired..."

Gibbs looked to Ducky, who leaned over, opening the lids of Tony's eyes one by one, shining the light in them. Gibbs turned his head toward the remaining group of team members, who were waiting by the clearing, for transport. "How long on that bus?" he shouted to them.

"Agent Gibbs, sir, I don't think they can bring it in through here," one shouted back. "They're saying they may walk a stretcher in."

"To hell with all this," Gibbs grunted, pushing himself up to stand. "Duck, is he okay for me to carry him?"

"From what I'm able to see, I'd say yes. But there are-"

Before the doctor could finish, Gibbs was carefully scooping his senior field agent into his arms, with McGee's assistance. "We wait for them to walk in here, it'll be another hour. We can save time, if we meet 'em halfway, at least," he told him.

After a few steps, Tony groaned out in pain. "B'ss... I can walk. P...put me down... 'm too heavy."

"You can't keep your eyes open, Tony. You can't walk," he replied.

"Been...walkin' all day," he retorted.

"Think you've done yourself in, then," Gibbs told him. "You need to rest, now. I'm gonna get you to some help."

"Too heavy," he said in a choked sob, that came in barely a whisper.

Gibbs slowed for a moment, looking down at the anguish on the agent's face, tears now leaking from the corners of his eyes and trailing down the sides of his temples. It made Gibbs' heart ache in his chest to see him this way. And he couldn't tell if it was the pain, or something else. But he secured his hold on him and cleared his throat before speaking. "Tony, listen to me," he told him. "You listening?" he asked, mostly concerned that the agent might lose consciousness at any point.

"Listening, Boss," he quietly replied.

"You're not too heavy for us," he told him. "Never too heavy." And after a few moments, Tony used every ounce of strength he could bear, to crack open his eyes and look at Gibbs' face, just for a moment. Just to see the meaning behind the words. And though Gibbs was mainly looking ahead on the trail as he walked, he glanced down and met the younger man's eyes before they could close again.

"Thanks, B'ss..." Tony whispered.

"Thanks for not getting dead," Gibbs replied, a quirk of a smile on his face. "You're gonna have one hell of a story to tell." He glanced down again, to a completely relaxed face. "Tony?" There was no response. "Hey! DiNozzo!" he yelled.

"Boss, hang on," McGee, who'd been jogging alongside them, got the senior agent to stop for a
moment, and Tim checked Tony's pulse, then met Gibbs' eyes. "He's okay. Just unconscious."

Allowing his jaw to unclench, Gibbs nodded in acknowledgment, then continued the brisk walk, carrying his agent, with McGee at his side...
They had met the EMTs halfway, and jogged the rest of the way out of the woods, to the clearing point where they could load Tony into the ambulance. Since they were set up to be able to examine him more fully, there, they did. Ducky assisted, and they did as much of an examination as they could, without CT equipment.

The exam took around twenty minutes, Gibbs and McGee standing apprehensively by, as they weren't able to wake him up, still. And they turned to them, informing them they were going to take him to the hospital. A deputy from their team offered to get his car, and bring it around to take them over, as well.

So they stood there, waiting, as the deputy jogged off. Ziva was talking over the two-way radio to Gibbs, demanding more information about Tony. McGee heard her as she explained how she ended up at destination A and got news that Tony was found alive, but that he'd made his way there from somewhere else. Ziva had tracked his movement and found where he'd started; found the tree where he'd been. Vomit and blood, not together, but both there.

Her voice slowly dimmed from Tim's hearing. The day began replaying itself in his head. Abby tearfully coming into the bullpen, the news on the big screen, seeing the blazing flames and smoke in person, as they flew overhead... Walking into that first section of plane, into the devastation they assumed they'd find Tony's body in. Finding Max... The black box footage, imagining what Tony had felt in those moments, as he was sucked out into the open air and violently flung toward the earth... Heading out into the dark of night with strangers, to look for the second part of the plane...then finding Tony, suddenly...alive. Holding him in his arms, and seeing him in all of that pain... Being helpless as he stood by, wishing more than anything that Tony would wake up, in that ambulance...

And then everything all over again, and it played backwards, all the way to where Abby came bounding into the bullpen with mascara-lines down her cheeks...

"I- I gotta call Abby," he said aloud, suddenly patting down his jacket pockets. "Haven't c-called her yet-"

Gibbs turned toward the agent, just in time to see his knees begin to buckle. And the senior agent was dropping the radio and reaching out to catch McGee, before he collapsed. "Whoa now, McGee!" Gibbs caught him under his shoulders.

"I'm okay- I'm okay.." Tim insisted, trying to right himself, but failing.

"Let's just sit, alright?" Gibbs convinced him to allow him to lower them to the ground. He took advantage of the moment of silence, to observe the younger man's symptoms. As he got them sitting, he was sure to stay close to his side, an arm still around his back, in support. He could feel the agent's heart racing, and his breath coming faster than it should be.

"I need to call Abby, Boss," he told him, not meeting his eyes, but simply looking a bit frantically somewhere in the air ahead of him.

"I'll call her, Tim," he told him, reassuringly. "Now talk to me. What's goin' on?"

"N-nothing," he answered, maybe too quickly. "Nothing's going on, Boss." He felt Gibbs' glare, rather than seeing it. "I...I just... I dunno," he shook his head. "A l-lot's happened, today. An' we find
Tony... He's alive. Tony's alive, Boss," he looked at him, then, eyes wet and red and he looks away too quickly for Gibbs to get a complete read on them. "And now...now he's not waking up. What if he doesn't wake up? What if something happens on the w-way to the h-hospital?" Gibbs didn't have any answers for him. So he simply listened. "I...I prepared myself that h-he was dead, Boss," he admitted. "I really did. On the trip here, I prepared myself...to accept it. I d-didn't want to. But I knew I...I had to k-keep it t-together for...for everyone. For all of this...finding him. But...but finding him alive, Boss, I hadn't prepared for. And it just l-let in all of this...this s-stuff I wouldn't let myself f-feel or think about before...because there was nothing I could do..." and it was at this point, that Gibbs realized there were tears making course down the younger man's cheeks. "It's just... Tony...he's...he's my best friend, Gibbs. He's...like a brother to me," he breath hitched. "And I've never told him that," he shook his head. "I regret that. I regretted it on the way here. And I had another chance to say something, and I blew it. What if I never have another chance?" he looked to Gibbs again.

The look he saw on the older man's face, was one of forced stoicism; hardened, yet sympathetic eyes. And McGee realized, at that moment, that he'd been crying in front of his boss, and he was suddenly scrambling away, wide-eyed and embarrassed, as he wiped the wetness from his face. "I'm sorry, Boss!" his voice cracked, and he pushed himself up from the ground, almost immediately losing his balance again, which Gibbs was quick to help correct, once again.

"Just slow down, Tim," he told him. "Got nothin' to be sorry about, first off. Secondly, you'll have plenty of chances to tell him whatever you need to tell him. He made it this far. I don't think he's gonna bow out just yet."

"You think?" McGee asked, with hopeful eyes.

"Let's get to that hospital, alright? And let's get you something to eat. When's the last time you had anything to eat, McGee?"

"I uh... I dunno. Last night, maybe? Didn't have time for breakfast, or I'd have been late to work, after dropping Tony at the..."

"Alright then. Probably why you're lightheaded. Don't have much reserves on ya, anymore," he smirked. "Can't skip meals so much."

"Sorry, Boss..."

"What do I say-"

"Right, never apologize...I know. Sor- I mean...won't happen again, Boss..."

*~.~*

Abby was sitting curled in the chair-space beneath the metal cabinets in the lab. Her futon spread beneath her, she hadn't been able to get to sleep. A picture of Tony from the Christmas party last year, fixed to the wall of the cabinet, Abby's head settled on her bent knees as she looked, sadly, at his happy green eyes.

Her mouth pulled into a frown, though her eyes remained dry. She was convinced she'd shed every tear in her reserves, that day. There was nothing left to come out. Her head ached and her heart was broken. She could hear Tony's voice in her mind, as clear as day. "Don't be so sad, Abs. I hate to see you cry."

"I'm not crying," her voice cracked, thought it was just a whisper.

"Just because there aren't tears, doesn't mean it's not crying."
She let out a half-laugh, half-sob, smiling at the photo and running her knuckle along his image. "I'm trying," she said aloud. "But I miss you so much, already. I don't think I can do this..."

"Abby?" a much louder voice sounded from somewhere else in the room. "Abby, you in here?"

"Director?" Abby slid out of the cubby-hole, and pushed up to stand, straightening the loose-fitting dark sweat-suit she'd changed into. "I...I'm not leaving until-

"I've got news," he told her. "From Agent Gibbs." Abby's brows rose. "It's good news. They found Tony. He's been taken to the hospital-"

"Tony's alive?" she interrupted, though quietly.

"Somehow, miraculously enough," he answered. "Still trying to figure out how he managed to-oomf!" Vance was cut off, when he found himself with an armful of forensic scientist, squeezing him in an embrace he hadn't expected the strength from. "Abby he squeaked out.

"Sorry," she pulled away, sheepishly. "I just- this is such...unbelievable news!"

"It's okay. I understand," he smiled at her. "Besides, Gibbs told me to expect that. I underestimated him, though."

"Why didn't he call me, himself?"

"Said he wanted you to hear it in person. He also wanted me to order you to get some sleep, now, and that he'd call you in the morning, if he's heard any more news on Tony's progress." Abby nodded in acknowledgment. "Do you need a ride home?" he dipped his head forward, a bit, "Or do you really intend to sleep in here?"

She smiled at him.

*~.~*

Gibbs stood in the doorway to Tony's ICU room. The room was dark, aside from the few rays of light that peeked through the blinds, casting an orange glow on the wall across from his bed. McGee was curled up in, what looked like an uncomfortable position, on a chair in the corner of the room, sleeping. Finally.

It had taken much coaxing. Tim had fought it, unwilling to let himself close his eyes until they received some word about Tony's condition. But the senior field agent still hadn't regained consciousness, and the doctors could tell them nothing, until the CT's could be done.

They'd forced a small meal into McGee, and made sure he was hydrated. Only then, had Gibbs realized that he'd been in a similar boat; not having eaten that day. His body might be used to running on coffee alone, but there was only so much it could take in present circumstances, before he'd end up in a similar state as Tim. So they'd eaten their meal together, Ducky watching over them like a mother-hen, since his skills couldn't be honed for Tony at the time.

It wasn't until they'd brought Tony back to his room after the scans, and told them it'd be a bit before their neurologist was able to go over the results thoroughly, that Tim had agreed to try and get some sleep. But only if he was allowed to stay in the room with Tony, in the event he woke up at some point. Gibbs understood his reasons, and convinced the staff, along with Ducky's assistance, to allow it.

"Now, if only I could convince you to do the same," Ducky's hushed voice sounded beside him, and
Gibbs turned to look at him, noticing he wasn't alone. "Jethro, this is Dr. Walters," he introduced the middle-aged woman, and they shook hands. "She's the trauma specialist and radiologist whose gone over Anthony's x-rays."

"Agent Gibbs," she greeted. "I have to say, I'm quite amazed at the lack of damage Agent DiNozzo sustained, given the circumstances. I don't believe I've ever had a patient who'd been in a similar incident. But I'm sure you know that this is an unusual case..."

"DiNozzo is an unusual case," Gibbs said with a raised brow.

Walters gave a small smile, "I heard. Dr. Mallard informed me of some of his medical history. I'm quite amazed. But my thoughts aside, his x-rays came back clear. He somehow managed not to break a single bone. I was informed that he'd lost consciousness before impact, which explains how that's possible. The relaxed state of the muscles in the body helps avoid breaking bones. My concern lies in the level of tissue damage in his muscles. More specifically his arms and legs. Without him being conscious, I can't be completely confident to diagnose it, as it won't show in x-rays. But I'm fairly certain that, with the level of pain I was informed he was in before losing consciousness, he's likely to have sprains, and even more likely, bruising in his bones."

"Which can cause an intense level of pain," Ducky explained. "Especially given the extensive area it likely covers."

"Right," Walters continued. "We did check for any ruptured tendons, and the CT and MRI that checked extensively for internal bleeding in his body, came back negative. So far, Tony seems to be in the clear, in that respect. The results of the head scans are still being discussed by our head trauma specialists; two came in this morning, even though they weren't on call, once hearing about the incident. I can tell you, they're quite good at their jobs, Agent Gibbs. I'm confident that if there's anything to find in those scans, they'll see and treat it to the best possible degree."

"And if it's not treatable?" Gibbs wasn't even sure why he'd thought it, let alone said it out loud.

Walters seemed to understand, and gave him a calm look. "If that turns out to be the case, then we'd do everything in our power to make him comfortable, and allow him to live out his life to it's fullest possible extent."

"Where is he?" Ziva's voice sounded a bit in the distance behind Gibbs. He and Ducky turned to see as she approached them. Her face was smudged with soot and dirt, and her clothes were dirty and rumpled.

"Where have you been, Ziva?" Ducky asked. "All this time, I was too distracted by what was going on here."

"She was investigating," Gibbs said, without looking away from her. "What'd you find?"

"I needed to wait until dawn to go back to the site where Tony...landed," she began, keeping her voice low as she explained. "So, I assisted in bringing the bodies from the rear section of the plane, to the tent. The woman that was found beside the fire, her name was Cheryl Atkinson. She was a flight attendant. Tony must have found her still alive, and placed her by the fire to keep warm. The medical examiner says it looks like she died not long before we found her; maybe an hour or two, of internal bleeding."

"Nothing Tony could have done to prevent it," Ducky said, in a low voice.

"By the time we got them all out," Ziva continued, "The sun was up. I went back to the tree. It is
approximately two-hundred feet high. Had I been judging by the amount of debris on the ground, I'd have estimated that he'd broken through half of that. I climbed up to where the broken branch height began. My estimation would have been suffice," she spouted off the information in a stoic manner, the doctors listening intently for details that might assist with their diagnosis. "Upon my descent, I noticed a trail of bloody prints and marks. For him to have climbed down that hundred feet, injured, I find it difficult to understand...how he was able..."

"He's DiNozzo," Gibbs supplied.

Ziva met his eyes, then, nodding after a moment. "I need to see him, Gibbs," she said, though her eyes pleaded more than her voice did.

"He's not conscious, my dear," Ducky told her, sadly.

"It does not matter," she replied, flatly, yet quietly. Gibbs nodded, leading her into the room, and stood there as she approached Tony's bedside. Her eyes darted over the body of her friend; bandages scattered about his arms and chest and neck, leaving the marred, purple skin exposed, wherever the blanket covering a better part of his body didn't touch. His face, though not much damaged, was pale and a bit ashen. Circles under his eyes made him look a frailer state than she'd ever seen him before. There were bandages wrapped around his head, which explained, to some extent, why he was unconscious.

"Concussion," Gibbs told her, whispering. He saw her nod, though she didn't turn. "Not sure the extent of damage, yet." She acknowledged him once more, and her head bowed a bit. It might have been the exhaustion, but she was finding it difficult to maintain her composure any longer. Her normally lively and energetic, yet at times childish, but charming, caring, and loyal friend, was lying battered in a hospital bed, unconscious; no knowing whether he would be alright or not. And even though they'd come in search of a dead body, and were given this miracle of his survival, it was still overwhelming and scary and confusing. Ziva wasn't quite sure how to emotionally process it. But her body seemed compelled and insistent to shed tears.

Only, she hadn't really been aware of them, until she felt Gibbs' arm around her shoulders, as he now stood beside her, and pulled her to his side. This action seemed to cause another reaction within her; break down a final wall that had her shoulders quaking, partly with her efforts to hold back the silent tears, and partly in uncertain fear. And she felt his hand move to her head, gently pulling it to rest on his shoulder, and felt him place a kiss on the top of her head. "You did good, Ziver," he whispered to her, holding her, still, in attempt to comfort.

It was in that moment that something clicked in her head. Gibbs was comforting her, yes. But who was comforting him? Tony meant something to Gibbs. This team was a family, and Tony had been part of it longer than she or McGee. They were closer to each other, than probably anyone else they knew. Ziva knew that this was difficult for Gibbs. She remembered the devastated look of anguish she'd seen on the man's face, when he thought no one was looking, on the flight in.

They were all feeling this. All of them. And because she wasn't even sure how to deal with her own mental state, at the moment, the only thing she could think to do, was twist in Gibbs' arm, wrapping both of hers around his middle, and hug him tightly; her face burying into his chest as she felt him return it...
Chapter 7

Tony slowly became aware, starting with a horrid ache throughout his entire body. It made him panic a bit, due to the fact that he wasn't sure why he'd be feeling that way. Had he fallen asleep on the plane in an awkward position? Why is it so hard to open my eyes?

"M-Max..." his voice cracked, and was dry, as he called out to his friend for some assistance. He realized, then, that they were stationary; not feeling like they were still on the plane, nor did it smell the same. It smelled familiar, but...not like the plane. Did we land and go get so drunk that I can't remember a damn thing? That'd explain why I feel like hell... "Max?" he called out again. He heard a rustling somewhere beside him. "W-what happened, Max? Feel like...hell..." he finally was able to crack his eyes open, as he felt someone take his hand.

"Tony, you're in the hospital," that wasn't Max's voice.

Tony blinked several times, until the man hovering a bit over him came into view. "McGee?" he felt a fog begin to lift, from his confused state, "Wh-what..." and then it hit him. The memories came flooding back, as they had the first time he'd woken in unfamiliar surroundings.

"Tony! It's okay!" McGee panicked as his friend had so clearly begun to. Tony's breathing had become fast and heavy, and the heart rate indicator on the machine beside the bed was setting off an alarm. "Tony, you gotta calm down, or you'll hurt yourself!" Tim urged, placing his other hand on Tony's shoulder. "It's okay, I promise. Everything's gonna be okay..."

Tony's widened, frightened eyes met Tim's, and he tried to force himself to calm. McGee was right, after all. He was no longer lost in those woods. Clearly, he was getting help, and his friends were there with him. His friends... "Where's Max?" he asked. McGee got a sad look on his face and looked away, some. "McGee? Where is he?" he asked, more sternly.

Tim met his eyes again, "I'm sorry, Tony...but Max...he didn't make it."

"Didn't..." his eyes darted back and forth in front of him, as he processed that. "Max is...?"

"I'm so sorry, Tony," Tim repeated, squeezing a little harder on Tony's hand, but not so hard as to cause him any pain.

Tony pressed back into the pillow and tried to will himself not to shed the tears that brimmed on the surface. Not in front of McGee. He didn't want him to think him weak. He tried to swallow, and realized how dry his throat was, and he couldn't help the cough he broke into. Tony's hand squeezed harshly onto his friend's, at the pain it caused, to cough. "Guh..." he grunted as he tried to hold back from coughing further.

"I'm gonna get a nurse-"

"Water," Tony squeaked out. "Please-"

"Okay," Tim replied, eyes frantically scanning the room, until a figure appeared in the doorway. "Boss! I...I need to get Tony some water..."

It only took Gibbs a moment to process the fact that Tony was awake, and McGee had actually made a request, in some form. And he was crossing the room to take over the younger man's spot beside the bed, while Tim fled to look for water and a nurse. Without hesitation, he grabbed Tony's hand, when he watched him let go of McGee's and begin to grip the sheets. Tony seemed grateful for the...
"Hey, DiNozzo," Gibbs gave his hand a squeeze, and attempted to talk him into some sort of
distraction. "Damn good to see you awake again."

"B'ss-" his breaths came short, purposefully, as he tried desperately not to cough. "H'rts..." he
released a breath, unable not to, and breathed in just as quickly, reigniting the pain that radiated
through his chest. His eyes clamped shut, knocking loose the tears he'd been holding back with
everything in him until now, and with them came a pained groan.

"I know," Gibbs replied, bending down over him, placing his other hand at the crook of Tony's
neck, where it met his shoulder; a spot Gibbs had noted didn't have bruising. "I know it hurts, Tony,"
he said, softly, knowing the younger man's head probably hurt like hell as well. "They wanted to get
you to wake up. Couldn't really gauge your pain relief needs, when you weren't up to tell 'em how
you were feeling," he spoke, as his thumb stroked comfortingly along that unmarred patch of skin.
"Someone will be in here, soon, to give you something. Okay?"

"Mhm," Tony managed, absorbing the comfort Gibbs was giving. He felt himself begin to calm,
concentrating on his boss's hands, where they touched him. And though his brain was screaming
shame that he needed this comfort, he couldn't refuse it.

Gibbs began to relax a bit, as he felt Tony's shaking begin to subside a bit. Within moments, McGee
returned with a nurse, who had a pitcher of ice water and a cup already filled, with a straw.

"Agent DiNozzo!" she beamed. "You're awake! Let's get you comfortable, shall we?" she handed
the cup to Gibbs, and moved to raised the head of the bed a bit. Gibbs narrowed his eyes at the
cheery nurse, before putting the straw to Tony's mouth, and letting him drink. "Not too much at
once," the nurse told him. "Don't want you getting sick on us!"

"He's in pain," Gibbs told her. "Can he get something for that?" it wasn't so much a question, but a
polite demand.

"The doctor has been paged," she told him. "I've not been given permission to restart his pain
medication, until she can speak with him."

"How long will it take her to get up here?" McGee asked, more than slightly annoyed at her answer.

"I assure you she's on her way up, right now," some of the cheeriness left her, at the slightly
frightening insistence of the agents.

McGee looked to Tony, whose eyes were still closed, and saw the tears tracking down to the sides of
his face. It fueled his anger at the woman, and he turned back to her, "Do you even know what
happened to him?" he asked.

"I- I just arrived..."

"He fell from a plane at twenty-six thousand feet! By some miracle, he managed to not only survive,
but attempt to save another victim of that crash, all in his current state. And now he's here where he
can finally get some relief from his pain, and you want him to wait until the doctor moseys on up
here, to give it to him?" he asked, incredulously.

The nurse had been slowly backing toward the door, wide-eyed and feeling ashamed, stuttering
something unintelligible, when the doctor finally came through the door. "She was doing as she was
told," the older woman said, as she came in, having heard the conversation as she'd come up the hall.
"You can go, Amanda," she told her, and the nurse gratefully nodded and scurried out of the room.
"And I can assure you," she told McGee, "That I was not, in fact, moseying in any fashion." She said this as she walked to Tony's bedside and opened the front of a machine that was hooked to the agent's IV. She pressed a button a couple of times, then closed it, and looked to the agents.

"I...I didn't mean to get so angry," Tim told her. "I'm sorry..."

"I understand your reaction," she told him. "I just wanted to clear up any misinterpretations you might have, as to my intentions. I merely wish to help Tony, and giving the nurse permission to administer too much pain medication, before I can speak with him, would be counterproductive." She turned her attention to Tony, who was slowly blinking open his eyes again. "Are you feeling a bit better?" she asked him.

"Little, yeah, thanks," he told her, then looked over at Tim, gratefully.

"I'd like to speak with Tony privately, please," the doctor told the agents. "If you could wait outside for just a moment..."

Gibbs looked to Tony, who looked back at him, and released his hold on his hand, then turned to walk out with McGee. Once they were in the hall, and the door closed, he turned to face the younger agent. At first, he was silent, and Tim felt ashamed.

"I'm sorry, Boss..."

"No," he shook his head.

"Right...no apologizing.-"


McGee released an emotionally charged breath, momentarily meeting his boss's eyes. "I just...couldn't stand to see him in so much pain, anymore. He'd have done the same for me."

Gibbs nodded, "Yeah. You're right."

And Tim was reminded, again, that he still hadn't talked to Tony about what he'd needed to...

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"As far as we're able to see, Dr. Mallard," the neurologist told him, "There's no bleeding in his brain. There's some minor swelling. But what we're most concerned about is a small basilar fracture."

"That would explain those raccoon eyes," Ducky said. "How serious?"

"Not as bad as we thought we'd find," she admitted. "It's likely that his head was one of the last things to hit surface, once he landed in the tree. The CSF has already stopped leaking, however long it might've been before he came here. And since he'd only been missing a better part of a day, I'd say that's not very long. His loss of consciousness may have had more to do with physical and emotional shock, than anything. I'm sure the pain didn't help matters."

"Your suggestions for treatment and recovery?" Ducky asked.

"What you'd expect," she told him. "Plenty of rest. Pain management. After he's had some time to recover, I'd suggest some physical therapy, especially given his line of work. But I don't believe there's been any damage that would prohibit him from working, once he does recover. Although..."
she looked to the side, a bit.

"Psychologically speaking," Ducky said for her. "I understand, doctor. We'll be sure to cross that bridge, when we come to it. He's a bit of a stubborn one, in that respect."

"I'm glad you understand, Dr. Mallard."

"Please, call me Ducky."

"Alright, Ducky," she smiled. "Then I suppose you ought to call me Diane. Especially when you phone me about Tony's progress."

He returned the smile, "I thank you, again, for disclosing the information to me privately, so that I may be the one to tell Anthony. We both appreciate that, as he can become quite agitated when faced with trying to interpret medical jargon," he let out a small laugh.

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"My skull is broken?" Tony asked, after Ducky explained to him, with Gibbs and McGee in the room.

"A small fracture," he elaborated. "One that's no longer affecting you by loss of fluid. The doctor even says you should be fine to take the flight home."

"And that's it? Did anyone else get so lucky?" he asked. Ducky glanced to Gibbs, and Tony didn't miss the look exchanged between them. Even with the aching in his head, he could figure out what that meant. "No one else made it..."

"You...were the sole survivor, Anthony," Ducky told him.

"Being separated from the plane, was the only chance you'd had," McGee added, quietly.

Tony nodded, not making eye contact with anyone. But Gibbs could see that he was trying very hard to conceal whatever he might be feeling, in that moment. "When..." Tony cleared his throat, against the lump that sat in it, and began again, "Ducky, when did they say I can go home?"

"They want to be sure you get another day's rest, as they keep you for observation, before you leave," Ducky replied.

"Okay," Tony replied, flatly, nodding once more. "Think I'm gonna go ahead and sleep now," he told them. "Maybe...maybe you all can go do the same."

Ducky and Gibbs shared another knowing glance. "Alright," Ducky said. "I do believe there's a hotel just a few minutes down the road. I'll try and get us all rooms, if that's what you'd like," he glanced between the two standing agents.

"Sure, Duck. McGee, call us a cab," Gibbs said. "I'll meet you both outside, in a minute." He watched as Tim hesitated, but followed the direction and went out after the M.E. He waited until the door was shut, before turning back to his senior field agent.

"I really am tired, Boss," Tony told him.

"I know you are," Gibbs said.

"It's been a long couple of days."
"Yeah, it has. For you, even more than any of us."

Tony let out a breath, fixing his gaze on the far wall. "Why?" his voice was quieter, now, and smaller. "Why did I survive, Boss? Why did...everyone else die, but I came out of it...whole?"

"McGee told you-"

"I mean why?" he asked, more sternly, looking at him with reddened eyes. "What's so damn special about me, that I get to live, and the rest of those people died, huh?" Gibbs watched the frustration and guilt on the younger man's face, and could only shake his head, not having an answer. And suddenly, Tony was pushing himself up. "I wanna see it. I want you to take me there," he said, grunting as he forced his legs over the side of the bed.

"Tony, no!" Gibbs grabbed onto his arms, cautious of how hard he gripped them, knowing it would cause him pain.

"I need to see it, Gibbs!" he shouted, meeting his eyes with his own, now glassy.

"No, you don't!" he countered. "It won't change anything, Tony, and you know that! It's not gonna bring them back, and it sure as hell won't make you feel any better!"

"Max was my friend, Boss," he argued, the fight leaving his body, as well as the struggle to hold back his tears. "Almost twenty years... We were just going to go have fun," he blinked, sending the flood over the dam and down his cheeks. "We were just...going to have fun..."

Gibbs couldn't stand it anymore, the look of guilt and anguish carved so deeply into Tony's face. He scooped his arms around him, pulling him into an embrace that he hoped would bring more comfort than it would cause pain. And he both felt and heard him as he broke down against his chest.

"I know, Tony," Gibbs whispered, unsure if he would hear him or not. "I know." He did know. He knew what it felt like to not understand why; to not see what insane notion whatever higher power had for him to survive, when no one else did. He'd felt it twice. It'd taken him down a vertical drop of a path, straight to the bottom, each time. And like Tony, he'd somehow, miraculously survived it. "It's gonna be okay. I promise you, it won't always feel this way. I'm here for you, Tony; we all are. We're gonna help you through this."

Tony must have heard at least some of what he'd said, because after a few moments, he felt the man's hands come up around his back and grab hold of his shirt in his fists, as if is was some form of acceptance of the statement. Gibbs had to fight every bone in his body, not to squeeze him all the tighter to him, and possibly actually break something, this time...
"You're certain you wish to stay behind, Ziva?" Ducky asked the youngest agent.

"My wish is to assist in figuring out why the plane went down, Ducky," she told him. "Director Vance has given me permission. I shall return, once I have answers. For us, and for Tony."

"I admire your determination," the doctor told her. "But please take care of yourself, while you're here. We'll be quite far away, with no one to...have your six, as Gibbs would say."

Ziva gave him a small smile, "I can take care of myself. I will be alright. Just...be sure to take care of my team, while I am not there, will you?"

"A request that need not be made, my dear," he told her, giving her arm a squeeze.

"Got everything, Duck?" Gibbs asked as he came out of his hotel room, locking the door behind him.

"I didn't bring much," the doctor replied, "But yes, I'm ready to go."

Gibbs approached the young agent, as Ducky headed toward the rental car. "You be careful, Ziva," he told her.

"And you, take care of Tony, Gibbs," she replied. He gave her a short nod, and watched her as she got into her rental and pulled out.

"Gibbs?" an unfamiliar voice sounded from somewhere beside him, and he turned to see a man in a suit, preparing to enter his own car, but paused and looking at them. "As in Agent Gibbs of NCIS?"

"Who's asking?" Gibbs queried.

"My name is Aaron Hotchner," he replied, stepping forward, and extending a hand. Gibbs instinctively shook it. "I'm an agent with the FBI's Behavioral Analysis Unit. We've been here for over a week, working a case, and heard about you agent who was on flight 112 when it went down."

"How did you hear that?" Gibbs asked, narrowing his eyes.

"You're friends with Tobias Fornell?" he confirmed. "When he saw the newscast, he called your director, verifying what he'd already known, about your agent being on the flight. He called me, knowing we were here, and that you were as well, and might appreciate a lift back home."

Gibbs raised a brow.

"We have a jet, Gibbs," he told him, with a small smile. "One we can get clearance to fly at a lower altitude than the beast you'd be flying home on. How is your agent, by the way?"

"His name is Tony," Gibbs told him. "And he's doing damn well, considering."

"That's...amazing," Hotchner replied. "Fornell told me he was being released, today, and I wasn't sure if that meant Tony would need any special medical equipment for the trip..."

"No, he won't," Gibbs shook his head. "I appreciate this, Agent Hotchner. I'm sure this will be a lot more comfortable than the commercial plane we'd planned on booking."
"Not to mention, it would've been the same type of plane he'd gone down in," Aaron added. "I can't imagine that would've been easy. It's surprising enough that he's willing to fly at all, again, so soon."

Gibbs smirked at that, "He said he'd rather suffer the five hours of terror, than the thirty-six hours of pain cooped up in a car."

"Can't say I blame him," Aaron returned a small smile. A hotel door behind them opened up, and a fairly young looking man with a curly mop of hair came out, glancing at them both, and forming a shy smile. "Reid," Hotchner motioned for him to come over. "This is Agent Gibbs. Agent Gibbs, this is one of my agents, Dr. Spencer Reid."

"Nice to meet you," Reid told Gibbs. "Actually, I assumed you'd be at the hospital with Agent DiNozzo. We were about to head over there and offer a lift home, to you and your team."

"I just mentioned that," Hotchner told him.

"Well, I think we might want to hurry over there, anyway," the young man told them. "I just had the news on, on the television in the room, and there's a large group of reporters formed outside of the hospital. Apparently, they got wind that the sole survivor of flight 112 is checking out, today."

An electric pang filled Gibbs' chest, at his revelation. "I need to get back over there," he told them, and turned to hurry to his car. He heard Agent Hotchner yell for Agent Reid to get someone named Prentiss, and hurry so they could leave, too. And Gibbs pulled out his phone to dial McGee, as he started the car...

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"Mr. DiNozzo!" reporters were shouting from all angles, as Tony was pushed through the doors to the outside of the hospital by McGee; Gibbs, Hotchner and Reid surrounding him and attempting to fend off the reporters and make a path to the SUV waiting at the curb. "Mr. DiNozzo, can you tell us how you did it?" someone shouted.

"Mr. DiNozzo, how is it that you managed to survive?" another reporter shouted.

"What do you have to say about the rumors that there was a bomb on board?"

"Was there anyone suspicious on the flight with you? Anyone that could've been a terrorist?"

"Mr. DiNozzo!"

Gibbs managed to get Tony into the front seat and shut the door, before pushing past the swarm of reporters and getting into the driver's seat. McGee, Reid and Hotchner were inside by the time he got in; Ducky and Prentiss in the very back. None of them said a word, as Gibbs sped out of the parking lot. For that much, Tony was grateful. It'd stung, to hear those questions. The last thing he wanted, was the pitying looks and attempts to make him feel better.

"This rental is pretty huge," Tony said, trying to break the deafening silence.

"Usually, we have a few more people with us," Prentiss told him.

"Yeah. Agent Rossi decided to stay and help with the investigation behind the crash," Reid pointed out. "The other two members of our team chose to stay with him."

"They need FBI for that?" Tony asked.
"Actually, what they're having our agents do, is go over the flight manifest, and look through profiles for each passenger that was aboard, to look for red flags," Reid explained. "Even though it's in our opinion that there wasn't any reason to suspect malicious intent to sabotage the plane."

"We went to the site," Aaron told them. "The hull didn't seem like there'd been any type of explosion, pre-crash."

"My guess is that they'll eventually find that the integrity of the outer hull had been compromised; not necessarily purposefully," Reid added.

"We have an agent staying behind to help, as well," Ducky chimed in.

"Special Agent Ziva David," Reid supplied, "Yeah, we heard. Though we hadn't had the chance to meet with her."

"She can take care of herself, for the most part," Tony told them. "But...it'd be...really nice, if you could, maybe, ask your agents to...maybe keep a bit of an eye on her, for us. Ya know, since none of us will be here." Gibbs glanced to Tony, from the corner of his eye. "You don't have to be her bodyguards, but, now and then, if they could just make sure she's eaten something... Stuff like that."

"I will let J.J know to look for her," Prentiss spoke.

"Jennifer Jareau," Hotch elaborated. "Our liaison, and resident mother-hen," he smirked. "She'll take good care of Agent David without her even knowing she's doing it."

"Sounds perfect," Tony replied, smiling.
With the pain killers in his system, it wasn't too horrendous, getting up the steps into the plane. Tony had had Gibbs' arm to hold onto, for balance, if needed. But he'd done a pretty good job, by himself, only needing to use Gibbs' arm a couple of times, when he'd lost his footing.

They were all a bit amused and surprised at Tony's enthusiasm about the jet. He thought it was very "James Bond", which made Prentiss laugh, before taking a seat in one of the cream-colored seats.

"You know, for everything you've been through, you're in surprisingly good spirits," Prentiss told him, as he took a seat across from her.

"Being in bad spirits won't do me any good," he smirked. "Besides, how many people can tell a story like this one?"

"Actually," Reid began, as he took a seat beside Prentiss, and buckled in, "On March 24, 1944, 21 year old Flight Sergeant Nicholas Stephen Alkemade was a member of No. 115 Squadron RAF and was flying to the east of Schmallenberg, Germany, when his plane was attacked by enemies, caught fire, and began to spiral out of control. Because his parachute was destroyed by the fire, he opted to jump from the plane without one, preferring his death to be quick, rather than being burned to death. He fell 18,000 feet to the ground below. His fall was broken by pine trees snow cover on the ground. He was able to move his arms and legs and suffered only a sprained leg."

"I stand corrected," Tony raised his brows.

"You do have 8,000 feet on him, though," Reid gave a small smile.

"How do you even know about that stuff?" McGee asked the younger man.

"I didn't, until a few days ago," the young doctor told him. "I read an article about fall survivors, after seeing the crash site."

"And you remembered all of that, word for word?" Gibbs asked.

"I have an eidetic memory," Reid confessed.

"He can also read 20,000 words per minute," Prentiss chimed in. "So it took him all of thirty seconds to read the article." She slightly rolled her eyes, but had a grin on her face, nonetheless.

"Well, we were in the middle of a case, at the time," Reid defended.

"So, you could get through Pride and Prejudice in one trip to the john?" Tony queried, fascinated by the kid.

"I suppose that would depend on how long a trip I would need," Reid told him. "But in theory, if it were a little more than six minutes, then yes."

"That's amazing," Tony let out an astonished laugh. And then the jet started moving. Everyone did there best not to make it obvious, but kept a close observational eye on Tony's reactions. He seemed to be doing okay. Seemed to be, if anyone who didn't know him, was looking at him. And the observational skills of the BAU team had an advantage, as well.

Tony did his best to play it cool. He was doing a pretty good job of it, in fact. As his fellow
passengers tried to distract him with discussion, he followed along, brilliantly. It was like he was on an undercover mission, and his role was playing a middle-aged man who wasn't afraid to fly.

Only, inside, Tony's gut was twisting in circles, fighting not to upchuck his lunch from earlier, as he desperately clung to whatever topic was on the table. He was grateful for the painkillers that still worked through his system. He didn't think he could handle this and the pain.

"Once we're level," Hotchner told Tony, "You can stretch out on the couch, if you'd like. You're probably tired."

Without looking away from the area in which he and his team and new acquaintances occupied, Tony nodded, "Sure. Thanks." As the craft leveled out, Tony became aware of his death-grip on the armrests. He loosened his hands, casually, and rested his hands, now clammy, on his thighs, instead.

Seeing Tony relax some, Reid glanced around the table, "Would anyone like some coffee? I'm about to make some, for myself." Gibbs accepted the offer, as well as Hotchner and McGee.

"I'll come help," McGee told him, as they all removed their seat-belts, and the youngest agents got up and made their way toward the coffee station.

Tony felt something tighten in his gut, again. Gibbs was observing him, and noticed the clenching in his jaw, and stiffness in his posture. "You need more meds, DiNozzo?" he asked.

Tony glanced, nervously, to his boss, pasting on the infamous DiNozzo-smile, "Nah, Boss, I'm fine. I think I'll take up that couch offer, though," he said, shakily moving to push himself out of the chair. Gibbs stood, ready to help him, if he needed it. But he knew the younger man wouldn't ask, nor appreciate if Gibbs were to assume.

Upon standing, Tony couldn't help but to glance out the window. He felt himself waver a bit, in his stance, and grabbed onto the back of the seat he'd been previously sitting in. "Whoa..."

Prentiss glanced out the window, before looking back at the agent. "Not that this will make a difference," she told him, "But chances of being in a plane crash are like one in eleven-million."

"Actually," Reid said, as he returned to the table with two cups of coffee, "The way they come up with that number is slightly ridiculous." Hotchner and Prentiss shared a worried glance as the young agent continued. "They divide the number of crashes per year, to the entire population. I actually did the math, and after crunching some numbers, just the average number of US commercial flights per year divided by the average US commercial crashes per year. So 9,748,551 divided by a rounded 36. So the odds are more like one in 270,417. Still fairly slim, though. Especially since you were already in one. The odds of one specific person being in more than one plane accident are next to nonexistent. Although, that's probably more likely true because most victims never board a plane again, in their lifetime."

"Reid..." Hotchner stopped him, before he could continue, but possibly later than he'd meant to.

Reid looked at his boss with a furrowed brow, and then realized how insensitive he might've just been. He looked back at Tony, "Sorry..."

"No, it's..." he let out a small laugh, "Oddly enough, it's not so much that I'm afraid of the plane crashing..." Tony turned away from them, making it his mission to get to the couch. Halfway there, however, he looked up to see McGee at the coffee station, fixing a cup for himself, the way he liked it. The younger man turned to look at Tony, and smiled at him.

Something flashed in front of Tony's vision. His heart began to race in his chest, and his breaths
became quick and almost painful. He remembered standing in the aisle, watching Max head toward the lavatory as they joked back and forth. He remembered the jolting of the plane; Max falling and losing consciousness; struggling to get to his friend and get him into the seat...

McGee's smile slowly faded from his face, as he appraised his friend. He watched the color drain from Tony's face, and watched his eyes glaze over as his breath sped up. Tim abandoned the mugs of coffee, and hurried to his now hyperventilating friend, catching him before he could fall to his knees. "Tony!" Tim tried to pull him from whatever mind-state he'd entered, and with the shout, gained the attentions of the rest of the passengers.

But Tony wasn't among the people who'd heard the younger agent. He was trapped in whatever was playing over in his mind, now. And all Tim could do was try and get him to the couch. Gibbs was there, suddenly, helping him move Tony. "I think he's having a flashback," Tim said, to no one in particular. "You think that's it?" he looked to Gibbs, before looking back at Tony's face.

"And what looks like a strong brewing of panic attack," Ducky added, coming to the couch. "Luckily, I've been given some anti-anxiety medication for him, in case of such an event. I'd rather not have to administer it forcefully, though."

"H-how do we stop the flashback?" McGee asked.

"Unfortunately, there's not a medication for that," Ducky told him. "However..."

"Here," Reid dug into his pocket, "We got these in our delivery bags, from lunch, earlier," he told them, as he pulled out a peppermint, still in its wrapper, headed quickly to the coffee station and grabbed a paper bag that would normally be used in case of vomiting, threw the mint into the bag, and handed it to Tim. Tim looked at him with confusion. "Have him breathe into the bag," the young agent told him.

"I see, yes," Ducky agreed, insisting that Tim follow the instruction. "Hold the bag over his nose and mouth, Timothy. Brilliant idea, Dr. Reid."

"It's less than brilliant, but thank you," Reid replied.

"The peppermint smell should act like a grounding technique, and pull Anthony from whatever he's re-living in his mind," Ducky explained to Gibbs and McGee, as Tim nervously held the bag over Tony's face. They all remained silent, aside from Gibbs, who was murmuring something quietly into Tony's ear, as if trying to talk him through and out of whatever he was seeing.

Tony knew where he was. He really did. But the image of McGee standing in that doorway just made this reality into a green-screen for what replayed in front of his eyes, now. He didn't want to see it; didn't want to let it continue, because he knew what happened next. And it hurt to breathe, knowing. His chest burned, and he could feel the harsh knocking of his heart against its wall. He was ice-cold with fear. But he felt a sudden warmth on either side of him.

He could hear a voice, soft and quiet, yet close. He knew it was Gibbs; would know that voice anywhere. He strained to hear what he was saying, but it was too difficult, over all of the commotion replaying in his mind. But then...then he smelled something. It was familiar and strong and...even though it was difficult to breathe, he could smell it; taste it, even. And then the voice started becoming clearer...

"Tony, you're safe. Come on back, now. It's gonna be okay. Promise ya that. You're safe, Tony..." The playback started to fade away, and, though it was out of focus, reality started to fade in.
The members of the BAU, though concerned for Tony's well-being, also knew that if he came back to reality and saw a bunch of near-strangers hovering over him, it would only further agitate his state of mind. So, once they saw him start to pull out of his flashback, they dispersed, heading back to the table, to give the NCIS crew some space. Reid, unbeknownst to his teammates, had already headed to the other end of the jet, curling up in the furthest corner from the group. And once Aaron realized this, he approached the younger man.

"Spencer? Is everything okay?" he asked, pulling Reid's gaze from the window.

Reid took a breath. "I didn't mean to...didn't mean for that to happen. I didn't realize..."

"This isn't your fault," Aaron said, as he sank into the seat across from him. "He said he wasn't afraid of crashing again. The trigger is more likely the fact that he's chosen to fly again so soon."

"I'm sure what I said, didn't help."

"It's not your fault, Spencer," he repeated. "And sitting here, sulking, isn't going to help anything."

"I'm not sulking," he retorted. "I'm just making sure I'm not given the opportunity to say something I shouldn't, again." With that, he turned back to look out the window. Hotchner let out a long, silent breath, unable to come up with anything more to say to him, and decided to go back to the other table, and leave Reid by himself.

As Tony became fully aware again, he realized that the burning in his chest, and the difficulty breathing, didn't fade with the flashback. Even after the paper bag was pulled away from his mouth.

"You back with us, DiNozzo?" Gibbs' voice sounded, with crystal-clarity now.

Tony nodded, merely glancing between each of his friends. "Can't catch...my breath," he told him.

"I can give you some lorazepam," Ducky suggested.

"No more...drugs...Ducky," he shook his head.

"If you don't think it'll hurt you," Gibbs told Tony, "You can bend down, put your head between your knees for a few minutes."

Tony nodded, acknowledging what he'd been told, and letting him know that he was willing to give it a try. He tested by going slowly, at first, as he began to lean forward. Within moments, his head was between his knees, and he was gripping the edge of the couch on either side of him as he looked at the floor.

"Can you get him some water, McGee?" Gibbs asked, quietly.

"Yeah, sure, Boss," Tim replied, and Tony saw him from the corner of his eye as he got up to find it. On his other side, he could see Gibbs moving from the couch, to sit down on the floor, bringing his head level with Tony's. And mere moments after he settled down beside him, Tony felt a hand high on his back, between his shoulder blades.

"Any better?" Gibbs asked.

"I'll be okay," Tony told him. "It's helping, a bit."

Gibbs looked to Ducky, giving him the go-ahead to go back to the table, and let them be alone for a moment. "Wanna talk about what triggered that?" Gibbs asked, quietly. "Is it what Dr. Reid said?"
"Are you feeling any better?" he asked, taking a seat on the couch, beside him.

"Yeah, McGee. Thanks," he took a long drink from the bottle. "I'm actually really tired," he told them.

"I am, too," Gibbs told him. "But I need to stay up, and so I'm gonna go get my coffee," he pushed up to stand. "You should go ahead and attempt to get some sleep," he told his senior field agent.

"Okay, Boss," Tony replied. "Thanks," he told him, before Gibbs headed to the coffee station. Then he looked to the agent that sat by his side, looking troubled. "What's wrong, McGoo?" Tony asked. A ghost of a smile came to Tim's face, at the nickname, and he looked up at Tony. The smile left, as soon as it had come. "You were looking at me, when it happened," Tim said. "Was it me? Did I...do something to cause that?"

Tony looked at him for a long moment, before shaking his head. "No. Before the plane pulled apart," he told him, "Max...he'd gotten up to use the bathroom. And I was standing there; we were talking. He had this grin on his face," his eyes drifted somewhere beside Tim, as he remembered. And McGee knew what he was talking about, because of the video footage. But he listened anyway. "And that's when the first big jolt happened," he continued. "Max fell hard; knocked him out. And I... Man, I..." tears started to form in Tony's eyes, surprisingly to McGee, as he couldn't remember Tony ever showing such emotion to him before. "I realize, now, that...as hard as it was...as much effort as it took to get him into a chair, and buckled down, thinking I was...saving him, I was actually sealing his fate, instead."

"What?" Tim's brows furrowed, and Tony's wet eyes met his.

"If I'd let him stay on the floor, he'd have had the same chances I did," Tony told him. "Instead, I destroyed any chance that he might have survived. I...I killed him."

"No, Tony," Tim shook his head. "You were trying to save him. If the plane had stayed in one piece, that's exactly what would have happened. That would've saved his life. But you couldn't have know what was gonna happen."

"He didn't even need to be on that flight," Tony continued. "He flew in from New Haven, just to fly with me on the way..." a blink sent the buildup of wetness in his eyes, cascading down his cheeks. "If it wasn't for me..."

"Tony, stop," Tim demanded, turning to more fully face him. "Max did what he wanted to do. You didn't ask him to do any of it. And damn it, had he not gone with you...had he not been there and gotten up to use the bathroom, you'd probably be dead, like everyone else on that plane."

"I should be!" Tony retorted.

"No! No you shouldn't be! Don't say that, Tony..." and McGee found himself a bit shocked, but unable to stop himself from diving into his friend and pulling him into a hug, still conscious enough not to do anything that might hurt him in the process. And he held onto him, not thinking about anything else around them, as he continued. "I'm sorry that you lost your friend. But...I'm not sorry
that I didn't lose mine. Right now, I don't care what that means, or how selfish it sounds. You're my
best friend, Tony," the words were nearly whispered, but Tony heard them, loud and clear. "You're
my family. My...my brother." Tony's heart clenched. "And I'm not sorry that you came out of that
alive." He held him, just a bit tighter. "Now, I just...need you to stop...regretting it."

He felt Tony's body shiver in his arms, and he nearly pulled away, thinking he might've hurt him.
But then he felt Tony's arms come up around his back to return the hug. Relief flooded his body.

They stayed like that for a few long moments, until McGee felt those shivers, which he realized were
silent sobs, stop. And he gently pulled away. "You should get some sleep," he told him, moving to
stand. Tony nodded, quickly drying his eyes, and moved to lay down.

"Hey, Tim?" he said, before he could walk away.

"Yeah?"

"Thank you..."
Exhausted from the panic attack, Tony slept for a majority of the rest of the flight. It wasn't long or deep enough to dream. When he woke, it was to the quiet sound of laughter. He laid there for a minute, the fact of where he was, drifting slowly back into his mind. Tony willed himself to remain calm. Freaking out wasn't going to help or change the situation. And if he allowed it to even start to brew in his head, it would get out of control, fast, like it did last time. No need for Gibbs and McGee...or even his newest acquaintances, to see him like that again.

He decided he'd stay lying down, and distract his thoughts by listening to the conversation taking place at the table.

"How old is Jack?" he heard Gibbs ask.

"He's six," Hotchner replied. "Just turned, actually." He could hear the smile in his voice.

"I'm guessing your work takes you far out like this, often," Gibbs said. "Jack enjoy the alone-time with him mom?"

There was a long pause. Really an awkward silence, that Tony could feel without even looking over.

"Uh," Hotchner was a bit hesitant to reply.

"I'm sorry," Gibbs' voice was a bit quieter, indicating he'd understood something he hadn't realized before. "I didn't know..."

"You couldn't have," Hotchner replied.

"How long ago?" he asked, after a long moment.

"Almost three years," Aaron replied. There was another long pause. "Yours?"

Tony's eyes snapped open at the question, his heart seizing a bit in his chest for Gibbs. Across from him, Ducky was sleeping in one of the chairs, and McGee in the one beside him. The others were out of his line of vision.

"How..." Gibbs started to ask.

"I'm sorry," Aaron told him. "It's uh...it's my job to analyze certain reactions and expressions. I just...I saw it in your eyes. It was insensitive of me, and I apologize."

"No, don't. Only fair after all, I suppose. It's been...a lifetime. Twenty-one years." Another long pause from both men, let Tony know what was going to be said next. And it seemed Agent Hotchner knew he had something else to say, too. "She and my daughter," he told him.

"I'm so sorry, Gibbs," he said, sincerely.

"I'm glad your boy is doing okay, Hotch," Gibbs told him. Tony wondered when, during his name, the nickname was discovered.

"He is. He's...a really great kid. He's stronger than I imagined, in the beginning; when it first happened. I wasn't sure how I was gonna be able to explain... Wasn't sure how I'd ever be enough. Lucky for me, Jack is an amazing kid."
"He sounds like it," Gibbs said. "Must have a pretty amazing dad."

"Hotch is an excellent father," Reid's voice chimed in.

"You don't have to say that," Hotchner sounded shied away.

"No, it's true," Prentiss said. "He's really done a great job."

Tony thought about it, for a moment. Gibbs had probably been a really great dad, too. He wished he could say something to that effect, without making it awkward. But the subject change had made it a bit better of a time for him to officially 'wake up'. So, he moved to push himself up from where he was laying. The slight weight put down on his arms caused such pain to hit him suddenly, then his entire body tensed. And that just caused a chain reaction of intense pain to ignite every part of him, like a spreading fire. It was enough, that he couldn't hold back the voiced cry of pain.

Everything was a white blur, for a moment. But suddenly, Gibbs was crouched in front of his face, hand secured on that small spot at the crook of his shoulder and neck, where there was no bruising. He was saying something to him, but he couldn't quite make it out; his ears felt plugged, like he was under water. Something like, "...getting your meds...shoulda known...start workin' soon, DiNozzo...just breathe..."

Breathe...right. He'd forgotten about doing that. Easy enough, he supposed. But releasing that breath he'd been holding, and breathing in again, reminded him why he'd stopped in the first place. The pain was unbelievable. Maybe the worst out of everything else...

McGee had been pulled from sleep in the sudden commotion of Ducky being woken up beside him. It didn't take long for him to become fully aware, as he heard Tony's painful cry. It made him shoot up from his semi-uncomfortable position in the chair. He watched as Gibbs was knelt down beside the couch, one hand holding only Tony's, and the other near his shoulder, as he tried to talk him through the pain, while waiting on Ducky to prepare a syringe full of pain medication.

"Just breathe, Tony. Come on," Gibbs told him. And he did. But at the sudden panicked whimpering that followed, McGee's heart clenched in his chest. He knew it must be painful; the bruising in his ribs, and god knows what else. Tim had had a bruised rib, before. It sucked. Of all the things he'd experienced as far as pain went, when it came to ribs, it sucked, pretty bad, above the rest. Maybe next to being hit in the jewels. Although, that pain went away after a while, and while you had it, you could curl up in a ball and rock your way through it. Pain in your ribs was paralyzing. There was no position that made it any better, and there was no rocking it out.

Tony's whimperings became more desperate as his breath refused to be stifled any longer. That's when Tim saw, for the second time in the past couple of days, tears running down the sides of his friend's face. It hurt just as badly to see it now...

"I know it hurts, Tony, but Duck's got your meds. It'll stop soon, I promise," Gibbs assured him, as Ducky positioned himself in such a way that McGee could no longer see Tony, while he made the injection.

Tim was forced to look away, as opposed to looking at the M.E's back. What his eyes met, were Prentiss, biting nervously at her nail, and Hotchner observing the men comforting their teammate. But then he looked over at McGee. "Are you okay?" he asked Tim.

Tim furrowed his brow, "Yeah, I'm fine."

Prentiss looked to him, pulling her hand from her face before she spoke. "It's just, we can tell how
concerned you are about him," she told him, quietly. "And we, sorta, overheard you when you were talking to him, earlier. You must care very much about him."

McGee heard her, and glanced back over at Tony, as Ducky moved out of the way to his bag again. He watched as Tony's Adam's apple bobbed and his jaw clenched, fighting his way through this session of suffering. "Yeah, I do," Tim told her.

"We're landing in ten," Reid said, a bit hushed, to his team, as he came from the front of the plane. "I hope those meds work quickly, for more than the obvious reasons."

"They should start working almost immediately," Ducky said, without looking away from his bag. "We really should have gotten some of those gel ice packs for the trip," he told no one in particular. "I already have Abigail gathering up as large a quantity as she can manage. Now, let me just take a quick listen to your heart, my boy," he said to Tony, as he walked back to the place he'd been to give him the meds.

"It may be a little late in the trip," Spencer said, "But we have a few ice packs in the first aid kit. They're the endothermic ones. I can get them, if you think it'll help."

"Probably a good idea," Ducky told him, without looking away from his task. "It might help reduce the severity of the next time the medication wears off..."

Ten minutes went by a lot faster than any of them realized, and soon the seat-belt light came on in the cabin.

"Are you alright to move now, Anthony?" Ducky asked a now more aware Tony.

"Think so," he replied. " Might need a little help."

McGee was up and by his side, the instant Gibbs had Tony helped to sit up. The two of them wordlessly helped Tony to stand, and stayed beside him in the case he might overbalance. They made it to the chairs, and were all buckled in, in a matter of minutes.

The lightheaded feeling from the pain killers, had distracted Tony from the subject of landing. Right up until they were all buckled, that is, and began the descent. The sinking feeling of falling, rushed through Tony with a flame of fear that lit up his insides like wildfire. He closed his eyes, swallowing against the bile that rose in the back of his throat, and pressing his head firmly back into the headrest of the chair, as he tried to make his breathing not as noticeable.

Then he felt a hand take his, on the armrest, and he looked beside him, seeing that it was Gibbs. There was no judgment in the older man's face. Just an offer of something to hold on to. Tony's gratefully accepted it. Then he looked to his other side, where McGee sat. "Tell anyone we were holding hands," he whispered, "And I will kick your ass all the way back to the Navy Yard."

Tim let out a small, breathy laugh, then took Tony's free hand in his, "I won't tell anyone, Tony."

Tony swallowed at the gesture, unsure of how to process all of the affection shown by his friends. It wasn't something any of them did, really. They were more of a head-slap-and-suck-it-up kinda crew. Not that this was unwelcome, in any fashion. But he wasn't sure how to react to it, other than to just take it. So he did.

With a deep breath, he closed his eyes and faced forward again, as the view out the window started to show land, and the speed they were going became more obvious. He had to stifle a yelp, when he felt the jet touch down on the runway. The jolt was similar to what he'd felt on that plane, in the air, before all hell had broken loose.
He decided to shut it all off. "Lemme know when it's over," he squeaked out.

"We're already landed, Tony," Prentiss told him.

"Lemme know when it stops..."

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"What the hell's wrong with you, Junior?" Tony's father asked, where he sat across from him in one of the cream-colored chairs.

"Dad?" Tony was confused. "What are you doing here?"

"Never mind what I'm doing here. What're you doing crying and needing people to hold you hand? What kind of DiNozzo are you?"

Tony swallowed down a ball of shame that rose in his throat. "You don't understand-

"I understand just fine!" he countered. "I thought I'd raised a man, but I guess I was wrong."

"That's not fair, Dad..."

"What's not fair, is having such a sissy excuse for a son!"

"I'm not...I'm not a sissy, Dad. I survived a plane-crash-

"You're gonna end up getting your whole team killed, the way your luck works out," Senior harshly spat. "You got your friend killed, and you'll do the same to everyone you care about."

"No..." he shook his head.

"Why do you think I sent you away?" he narrowed his eyes. "You got your mother killed. I wasn't gonna let it happen to me, too!"

"What...what does this have to do with-"

"Look! Look, now, the plane is going down, with all your team in it!" he told him.

Tony looked out the window, seeing the ground rapidly approaching them. "No...No, this isn't real!"

"Tony! Hey!" Gibbs voice was suddenly and loudly right in front of him, and the image of his father was gone. "Snap out of it!"

A dream...It was all a dream. "What?" Tony met his boss's eyes. "What's goin' on, Boss?"

"You with me?"

"Yeah, I...what happened? Did I fall asleep?"

Gibbs narrowed his eyes, a worried look on his face. "I've been trying to get your attention for five minutes, since the jet stopped," he told him. Tony looked around the cabin, realizing that he and Gibbs were the only people left on board. "Ducky's called Bethesda," Gibbs told him. "He and McGee are getting us a car, so we can take you there."

"I don't wanna go back to the hospital, Boss," Tony said, in a small voice.

"Ya scared us all, makin' us think you'd gone catatonic. That wasn't normal, DiNozzo. You need to
be checked out; make sure they didn't miss anything over there."

"Just take me to my place, Gibbs," Tony pleaded. "I'm fine. I can take care of myself. I don't wanna go to the hospital. It...I was just...having a dream. I had to have been sleeping. Maybe it was the painkillers."

"Tony..."

"Boss, come on..." his eyes stung, "We just got back. I don't think I can take being in another hospital. I just...I want my own bed; my own apartment. I just wanna go back to normal."

"I wasn't even planning on taking you to your place, hospital aside," Gibbs told him. "You need someone with you. You're in too much pain to be alone."

"I can do it, myself!" he countered. "I just need to take meds now and then, is all! There's nothing broken, Boss! I can take care of myself and my damned bruises...guh!" he hunched over and grabbed at the pain his shouting had flared in his chest.

"Yeah," Gibbs replied, flatly. "I know you can, Tony. But I'd feel better, and I know McGee would, as well as Abs and Duck and Ziva, if you'd let us help you."

"I'm bad luck, Boss," he shook his head. "I...I'm just gonna..." he let out a short, bit-back sob, "You're gonna end up getting hurt...or killed. You should stay as far away from me as you can..."

"You're not makin' any sense," Gibbs told him. "Listen to me," he grabbed the sides of Tony's face, forcing him to look at him. "You are not bad luck. I've worked with you for almost a decade. If anything, you're good luck. You've saved each of our asses, on the job. Now, I dunno what's gotten this thought in your head, or if it's got something to do with you losing Max the way you did. But damn it, DiNozzo, I need you to trust me on this. And I need you to trust us to help you. Can you do that for me, Tony? Can you trust me?"

"I trust you, Boss," Tony told him in a quiet voice. "I trust you with my life. Always will."

Gibbs nodded, setting aside the warm feeling that gave him. "Good. Because the same goes for me; I trust you with my life, Tony. Keeping you around, isn't putting me in any danger." Tony's eyes darted around, a bit confused, and a bit drowsy. "Do you believe that? You believe me?"

Tony met his eyes, again. "Yeah, Boss. I do. I believe you...But..."

"But what?"

"But I'm...I'm scared. I'm afraid I...I won't be able to keep any of you safe. And that scares the hell outta me, 'cause I don't think I could handle it..."

"Nothin's gonna happen to us. Not today. And you're not in any shape to be playin' bodyguard," he raised a brow. "But we can get you back to that, if you'll let us help you."

Tony took a moment, absorbing Gibbs' words. Finally, he felt himself relax, resignedly. He'd let Gibbs do whatever it was he wanted to do...
Tony was lying on Gibbs' couch, headphones in his ears as he listened to his...well McGee's mp3 player. McGee just happened to know most of the songs he'd had on his own, and got them for him, when he'd asked if he could borrow it. Tony's had been in his suitcase. Along with an expensive suit, shoes and some less important items. Tim had also been kind enough to requisition a replacement cell phone for him. He felt naked without the ability to use his phone. And to be honest, it made him nervous, now, not to have a working one. McGee had put in the request while they were still in Arizona. So the phone, technically, should be ready today. Or so that's what the younger agent had told him, and that as soon as it got in, he'd bring it right over.

Being sick, or recovering from injury, really sucked for Tony. He was restless. Always. And this predicament with the everything-sprain, wasn't working too well for that. With Gibbs at the office, he was alone, at the house. It wasn't so much that he couldn't handle being by himself. It was more along the lines of not having anyone there to help distract him. Listening to music, he could only attempt to convince himself that that would work, for just so long.

Tony felt the sound of the front door closing, like a small jolt underneath him, and his eyes shot open. In the doorway to the living room, stood Abby. Gibbs' shadow was on the wall, indicating he was still by the door, doing something, as the afternoon sun beamed orange through the window. But Abby was looking at Tony, like she'd been making sure he was awake, before making her move. Tony pulled the ear buds from his ears, and moved to sit up without showing her any sign of his pain.

"Abs," he smiled at her, trying to comfort the woman he knew had been freaking out for a few days, now, as she stood there giving him a look as though she were trying to calculate the possibility of it being real.

"Oh, Tony!" she forced herself to slowly approach. And by slowly, of course, it was a normal speed for anyone that was not her. Gibbs had warned her that Abby-hugs were off limits; that any amount of pressure on his body would cause him extreme pain, right now. She sank down to sit beside him, without even once tearing her eyes from his. "I can't believe you're okay... I was so worried, when I saw the news," her voice cracked. "I thought you were dead. I thought I'd never see you again..."

"I'm okay, baby doll," he gave her a suave grin, and wrapped shaky arms around her back, pulling her in for a hug.

"God, Tony, don't!" her voice squeaked, as she froze in his arms. "Don't hurt yourself, just because you know how much I wanna hold you."

"It's worth it," he told her, kissing her cheek.

"Tony..." she broke, moving her hands to grasp his face; the one place she was certain wasn't hurt. "I missed you...I love you, Tony, you know that, right?" she peppered kisses on his cheeks and nose.

"Love you, too, Abs," he replied, meeting her wet eyes, as the tears drained down her cheeks. "I wasn't gone all that long, though," he let out a small laugh.

"When you think one of your best friends in the whole wide world is dead, over two-thousand miles away from home, and there's nothing you can do but wait, it's a long long time," she retorted, almost in a whisper.
"You should know better," he told her, pulling away a bit. "I'm a DiNozzo."

"Promise me that you're Superman, and that you won't ever die, and then I'll stop worrying," she told him, with a teary smile.

"Even Superman dies, at some point," he replied. "But...it'll take a lot more than that."

"I guess askin' ya what it feels like to fly, wouldn't be appropriate," Gibbs said with a smirk, as he walked into the living room.

"Gibbs!" Abby turned to him, wide-eyed.

But Tony laughed, "That wasn't flying, Boss. It was falling, with style," he looked back to Abby.

"I dunno how a Toy Story reference made it into this conversation," Abby said. "But I'll take it as a cue to change the topic. What do you, Very Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, want for dinner?"

"Eh...I'm not too hungry," Tony replied. "But if you're staying for dinner, I'll eat whatever you get. Or are you making something?"

"I doubt Gibbs has anything to make, in that kitchen," she raised a brow.

"I do, actually," Gibbs told her. "Go see if there's enough for all of us," he motioned with his head. Abby nodded and stood, making her way toward the kitchen, as Gibbs took a seat in the chair across from the couch.

"All of us?" Tony queried.

"You up for a little company, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, cocking his head a bit...
Gibbs was sure to give Tony his dose of pain killers, in enough time that they'd be working in his system before their company arrived. The senior field agent was relieved to have pills, now. Not that he much cared about the needles in the midst of really needing the medication. But part of him felt like his subconscious was making him wait until it got bad, before actually asking for it, because it was in shot form.

It was at the last minute, when the pain killers really started to work, that Tony suddenly and desperately wanted to take a shower. "I've had nothing but sponge baths for days, Boss," he'd argued. It just so happened that McGee showed up, right then, and Gibbs volunteered him to stay in the bathroom while Tony took a shower, just in case. "I think I can handle a shower, without a babysitter!" Tony argued.

"And if you suddenly find it too difficult to get outta the tub, you really wanna be calling across the house from the bathroom, for help?" Gibbs had countered. Tony gave in, sulkily.

Tim sat on the closed lid of the toilet, playing a game on his phone, while Tony showered, both of them trying not to feel awkward. "You get my phone yet, McGee?" Tony asked, from behind the curtain.

"Yes, I did, Tony. It's in my pocket."

"Awesome," the smile could be heard in his voice. "Hey, thanks again for letting me use your mp3 player."

"Not a problem," Tim answered. "Hey, do you know who else is coming to dinner?"

"No," Tony poked his head around the curtain. "Gibbs just told me we're having company. Do you?"

"No idea. Though, Fornell came by the office, today. He asked about you."

"Did he, now?" he replied, disappearing back behind the curtain. "But he seems to be in the loop, already."

"He actually seemed genuinely concerned, believe it or not."

"I wonder why that is," he pondered.

"He seemed pretty concerned about Gibbs, Dorneget told me, while we were still in Arizona. He kept coming by the office to talk to Vance and see what was going on."

"What's with that guy, all of a sudden, huh?" Tony asked.

Any reply was cut off, when there was a knock at the door, and Gibbs' voice coming through. "Company's here, if you wanna hurry it up in there, DiNozzo!"

"Got it, Boss!" Tony replied. "Alright, McGee. I think I can manage on my own. Stand outside the door, if you're really all that concerned. But I think I'll be fine..."

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"You sure he's ready for visitors?" Director Vance asked, as he helped bring in the corn on the cob...
and beans Gibbs had prepared on the grill.

"He said he was," Gibbs told him. "Just takes him a while to do things, right now. Like getting dressed, or going up and down stairs."

"Good of you to be keeping him, Jethro," he told him. "Don't the pain killers help with that? With doing those things?"

"They do, for the most part. But it's not like it's healing anything, Leon. He knows if he overdoes it, it's gonna hurt like hell, once the meds wear off. And most likely prolong recovery."

"You should know that, baby," Jackie raised a brow, having turned from her quiet conversation with Abby at the table, upon hearing the two talking. "Don't you remember the last time you were hurt?"

"Yeah, I do. I just figured you were naggin' me, and wanted to baby me, like every other time I've been hurt," he gave her a knowing smile. She playfully shook her head at him, and Gibbs half-smiled as he grabbed plates down from the cupboard.

"Director Vance!" Tony said, as he entered the kitchen, surprised at his presence, even though he'd heard them talking as he'd made his way down the stairs with McGee's help. "And Mrs. Vance. Good to see you, again," he smiled at her.

"You best call us by our first names, when we're making a social visit, Tony," Jackie told him, standing to greet him.

Tony made a nervous glance to the director, at that statement. "Best do as she says," Leon told him. "I find it's usually the right decision, anyway." He gave a rare smile to the younger man, and held out his hand. "It's damn good to see you okay, Tony," he told him, allowing Tony to be the one to take his hand and lead the shake.

"Bet you never thought you'd say that, Leon," Tony grinned at him. "Wow," he glanced at him, up and down, noticing the jeans and tee shirt the man was wearing. "It's...different to see you...casual." And then his face made this strange, shocked expression. "Sorry!" he held up his hands. "I can't be held liable for anything I say or do, under the influence of this pain medication. Right, Boss?" he looked to Gibbs. "Tell him... Tell him how they make me!"

Gibbs just laughed and shook his head as he brought the main course to the table. "Hope everyone likes pasta."

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Ducky showed up late, but expectantly so. He'd needed to finish an autopsy, and so passed the word to Gibbs a while before dinner had even started. When he entered the house, Abby and Gibbs were at the sink, washing dishes, and Jackie and Leon were at the table talking to Tony and Tim. He wasn't sure what they were talking about, but it seemed to be amusing to the people at the table. Leon was doing a majority of the talking at this point.

"Heya, Duck," Gibbs called out, when he saw his friend walk into the kitchen.

"Good evening, all," he greeted. "So sorry I've missed dinner."

"Saved you a plate," Gibbs told him. "It's sitting in the oven. Take a seat and I'll grab it for you."

"Tony, you okay?" Tim's question pulled their attention back to the table. Tony had his elbows on the tabletop, his fingers massaging his temples; his eyes closed.
"Just...getting a headache, all of a sudden," he replied, in a bit of a hushed voice.

"How bad?" Gibbs asked.

"Getting bad," he replied.

"When did he last take his medication?" Ducky asked.

"Couple hours ago, at most," Gibbs replied, coming around beside the SFA, with a look of concern on his face.

"Maybe we should cut our visit a bit short," Leon said.

"No, you don't have to go," Tony told him. "I'm okay."

"Let me take a look at you, before you make that judgment," Ducky told the agent, as he pulled out his small flashlight. "I need you to open your eyes for me; just for a moment," he told him.

Tony slowly lowered his hands, holding onto the edge of the table, as he cracked open his eyes for the doctor. Ducky looked, carefully, at both eyes, testing pupil reaction in each. "I don't see anything that would indicate an emergency," he told him. "It's to be expected, getting headaches after what you've been through. You've likely just been up for longer than your body can handle, so soon. You need your rest, Anthony."

"Yeah, okay," he replied, quietly, replacing his hands on his head. "But no one has to leave. Don't let me ruin the party."

"We do need to get back," Jackie told him. "Our babysitter is only paid up for another half an hour, and it's a school night. But it's been so good seeing you, Tony. I hope you feel better."

"You need anything, you let us know," Leon added. "Or let Jethro know to let us know."

"Thanks for coming by, Leon, Jackie," Gibbs told them.

"I'm sorry, guys," Tony told them.

"Nothin' to be apologizing for, DiNozzo," Leon retorted. "We're honestly surprised how good you're doin' after all you went through. In every sense of the meaning."

"Thanks..."

"Thanks for dinner, Gibbs," Leon said.

"Yes, it was lovely. We'll have to get together again, soon," Jackie told him. "But let's not wait until someone gets hurt, next time?"

"Sure thing, Jackie," Gibbs replied. "I'll walk you out." They left the kitchen and headed toward the door.

"McGee?" Tony asked, eyes closed again.

"Yeah?" he could hear the worry in the younger agent's voice.

"Help me? To the couch...please," he requested.

"Sure, yeah, of course," Tim stood and walked around the chair, helping Tony up, and guided him to
the couch. "Can I get you something? An ice pack?"

"Ice pack sounds great, Tim. Thanks," Tony replied, where he now lay on his back, with his arms draped over his face, blocking out the light. He listened as the front door was closed quietly, and heard Gibbs' cross the room and sit down on the coffee table beside the couch. "I'm okay, Boss, really," he assured him.

"I shouldn't have turned the visit into a dinner," Gibbs told him. "Shoulda just let 'em stop in and see ya, and then go. I shoulda known better, Tony. You need rest, obviously. It was stupid of me..."

"Holy crap," Tony said, pulling his arms away, just to peer up at his boss. "Don't guilt trip yourself so hard, Boss. You might hurt yourself. Hell, I thought I was the one that hit my head, here. You're not a doctor, and sitting down eating food doesn't seem like not resting. I agreed to the company, Gibbs. This isn't your fault. It's not anyone's..." he groaned and pulled his arms back in front of him. "Ask Ducky how much rest equals no more headache."

"I can't possibly determine that, young man," Ducky's voice sounded in the room. "But I'm betting if you allow yourself a short nap, it should be better by the time you wake up."

"Here's the ice pack," Tim said, waiting for Tony to hold out his hand, before setting it in it.

"Thanks," he replied. "Where's Abby?"

"I'm here..." she said, quietly.

"Why are you so quiet?"

"I didn't wanna hurt your head any more than it already is," she told him.

"It's not natural for you to be so quiet, Abs. But thank you..."

"Anything for my Tony," she said, then he felt her gently kiss his cheek.

"Guess I'm takin' a nap, then," he said.

"We'll stop by tomorrow," Tim told him. "I'll leave your phone here on the coffee table, for you. If you need me for anything, just text me. Or call me; whichever..."

"Same goes for me, too," Abby added. "G'night, Tony."

"Night, Abs. See you tomorrow..."
Chapter 13

Tony slowly drifted back into full consciousness, from a seemingly short, uneventful nap. But his head wasn't pounding anymore, so he was glad. He kept his eyes closed for a bit, anyway, just to not tempt fate. He heard voices in the kitchen.

"I just need to run over to Ducky's and pick up the prescriptions he forgot to leave here for Tony," Gibbs said, quietly.

"It's fine, Jethro. It's not like he needs a sitter, for god's sake. But I'll stay here, in case he gets up and needs help with something." That was Fornell's voice. Tony decided he'd just pretend to still be asleep.

"I'll only be ten minutes," Gibbs told him.

"I've got the rest of the evening off," Fornell told him, in a bit of an argumentative tone. "I came here to see the both of ya. It's not like you're keepin' me from something important. Geez, Gibbs, just go! It'll be fine."

After a few moments of silence, Gibbs spoke again. "Don't touch anything."

Fornell let out a light snicker. "I'm gonna touch everything, now. I'm gonna unzip my pants, whip out my-"

"So help me, Tobias!"

"Go on, and get the damn meds," a smile was evident in his voice. Tony listened as the front door opened and closed again. He listened until Gibbs' car started up and drove out of earshot.

"Nice Stepbrothers reference," Tony said, not opening his eyes yet. "Didn't think you'd have seen that one.

"How long have you been awake?" Fornell asked as he entered the living room.

Tony opened his eyes and looked over at him with a grin, "Not too long. How's it goin', Fornell?"

"I should be askin' you," he replied, taking a seat in the chair across from the couch.

"But you already know," Tony said, knowingly. "Heard through the grapevine that you've been keeping tabs on the situation from the get-go; checking in with Vance, and even getting us a fancy ride home from Arizona." Fornell stayed silent. "What had you so worried about Gibbs?" Tony finally asked.

One side of Fornell's mouth curled up into a half smile, and he let out a puff of air through his nose, shaking his head. "Don't you get it?"

"Get what?" he narrowed his eyes.

"Gibbs thought you were dead," he replied. "Your whole team did. Hell, everyone did, after seeing that news footage."

"Well, I wasn't; I'm not. Yet here you are, checking in again."

"You really have no idea what you mean to that man, do you," Tobias said with a raised brow. Tony
looked at him in confusion. "Some investigative skills you have," he scoffed.

"Hey! That's not fair. You know how Gibbs is. He doesn't make anything obvious. This has nothing to do with skill!"

"The man thinks of you as a son, DiNozzo," he told him, in a manner that implied he should have known this.

"He's not old enough to be my dad," Tony argued.

"That's beside the damn point."

"How do you know this? He tell you?" the younger agent asked.

"No, he didn't. You think Gibbs reveals much of anything?"

"Exactly," Tony retorted. "Not many people can read half of what he says or does. What makes you so sure how he thinks of me?" he asked, skeptically.

"What makes you think I'd be makin' this up?" the older man shot back, incredulously. Tony raised a brow. "When we talk, Gibbs and I, guess who he talks about the most; brags about when he does somethin' good; freaks out or goes on a rampage when somethin' happens to him? And lemme give ya a hint: it ain't Abby."

"I'm sure he talks about the whole team," Tony countered.

"Yeah, sure he does," he said, then sat forward, "But you he talks about the most."

"Maybe I just do a lot more screwing up, and trying to make up for it, than anyone else."

"You're a damned idiot," Tobias shook his head. "I know Jethro loves his team like they're family. Everyone there; you, McGee, David, Abby an' Dr. Mallard. But there's somethin' different, when it comes to you; somethin' I can't even explain, save for a sparkle in his eye, and a level of respect I don't think he's given a single other soul still alive on this planet." Tony's eyes darted around the air between them, trying to process this information, yet couldn't quite let himself believe it to be true. "I was worried about him, because I wasn't sure what he'd do, if he went there and found you without a doubt dead," he continued. Tony's eyes met his again. "He's lost...a lot in his lifetime. I wasn't sure if he'd be able to handle this. Somethin' woulda drastically changed, and I'm not even sure what that might've been. But I was worried. And now you know why."

Tobias studied Tony, as the younger man seemed to be calculating and processing what he'd been told. He remembered how Gibbs had told him about the kid's father; DiNozzo Sr's personality, even in his older age. It didn't take a renowned psychologist to see that Tony was having trouble accepting that anyone genuinely cared this much about him. It was like he'd been programmed to think himself unworthy. It's no wonder he was always trying to prove himself, even despite the numerous occasions it seemed his personality drew him to be a clown.

But, Fornell had had enough experience with personality types like this, in the past, to know that there was no amount of talking that would convince those people that they had been wired wrong, in that aspect; no way to get them to accept something of this magnitude, at least not on their own. Resignedly, Tobias leaned back in the chair, with a sigh, and awaited Gibbs' return...

*~.~*

Gibbs laid awake in his bed, staring at the darkness above him. Tony had been awfully quiet, since
he got back home a couple of hours ago...

"How's your head feelin'?” he'd asked, as he came in.

"Better," Tony responded.

"Good. Glad to hear it. Need anything?"

"Nah, I'm good, Boss. Think I'll head upstairs. I'm still tired."

He'd helped him upstairs, and left his pain meds and a bottle of water beside the bed. There was something in the younger man's demeanor, though, that had Gibbs on edge. Something felt off, but he couldn't put his finger on what it was. Whatever it was, though, it was keeping him from being able to sleep. It was another hour, before he'd finally dozed off, only to be jerked right back into consciousness again, from what, he didn't know right away.

Then he'd heard it again, though. Tony...

"Nnnuuuuhhh!” it was a strangled, muffled scream coming from the guest room up the hall, and Gibbs was up out of his bed and tearing toward it, before the next one started up. "Nnoohoo pleeeeesnnooo..."

Tony was still sleeping, but his body twitched, showing he was mid-night terror; tear tracks evident on his face. Gibbs knew it wasn't always a good idea to try and wake someone in the middle of a nightmare, like this, but he wasn't about to let Tony keep suffering, and possibly injure himself further. He flipped on the side-table lamp and sank onto the side of the bed.

"Tony," he called, softly, placing his hands just hovering over Tony's arms, in case he needed to restrain him momentarily.

"Guh...nooo," Tony groaned. "Can't... You can't...please... Can't..."

"Tony, come on, now. You're asleep. Time to wake up, now," his voice remained gentle but firm. But then, suddenly, Tony was full-out screaming. Screaming at the top of his lungs, back arched off of the bed, with a strength he shouldn't even possess right now, and Gibbs felt his own chest tighten so rapidly, he thought maybe the younger man had given him a heart attack, in that moment. "Tony! Wake up!” he gripped his shoulders and shook him, then placed a hand on his face, instead. "DiNozzo!"

Tony's eyes shot open, wide, and he sucked in a deep breath, then letting out a pained cry as he clutched his chest.

"Hey, hey, easy!” Gibbs tried to calm him. "I've gotcha."

"G-Gibbs...?” Tony tried to focus his eyes on his boss.

"Yeah. It's just me," he replied.

He watched as Tony nodded, closing his eyes tightly as he tried to breathe. But his breaths came fast, as though he'd been running and was trying to catch his breath. He moved to push himself up, panicking against the inability to breathe properly; it was one of his biggest fears for a long time now. Gibbs realized that he was having another spell like he'd had on the plane. So he helped him to sit up, like he'd been trying to, and let him swing his legs over the side of the bed, intending to guide his head down between his knees like he had on the plane. But Tony had other plans, and he was quickly speeding toward the bathroom.
Gibbs went after him, just in time to see him empty the contents of his stomach into the toilet. He grimaced, watching the younger man struggle against the pain of heaving, coupled with the pain of breathing the way he was. He wasn't sure how to help him, right then. And that kinda scared him. He didn't like feeling helpless.

Gibbs decided to approach Tony, as he watched the struggle continue, and he decided he needed to do whatever he could to calm the agent down. "You're alright, now, Tony. You were asleep. Just dreaming. You're okay. Gotta calm down, alright?" he told him, as he stroked a comforting hand along Tony's shoulder blades.

Tony tried to process Gibbs' words, and felt his knees begin to shake with the effort of standing. Then, still heaving, though nothing else was coming up, he was being gently led to kneel down on the floor. His hand caught the counter-top for balance, as the other held the back of the toilet, so he wouldn't face-plant the bowl. He heard Gibbs say something about meds, and felt his hand leave his back. Gibbs leaving, filled Tony with a sudden sense of added dread.

When Gibbs returned, Tony was shaking. The heaving had stopped, but he was still mid-panic attack. Gibbs led him backward, and Tony felt himself being seated on the edge of the bathtub, and Gibbs led his head down between his knees. He barely felt the prick of the needle in his arm. He'd been given some water to swish and spit with. He didn't remember being led back to the bedroom. But there, he suddenly was; back against the headboard, when things started to seem real again.

Gibbs was still there, he realized. He was right beside him, an arm around his shoulders, the hand of it gently massaging the crook of his shoulder where there was no bruised skin. And he was talking, he realized now.

Tony turned his face to look at him, and Gibbs paused in whatever it was he'd been saying. "You with me?" the older man asked, hand freezing in its motion. After a moment, Tony nodded. "You okay? Feel any better?"

"I...can breathe," he replied, throat scratchy and sore.

"That's a good thing," Gibbs agreed. "How about the rest? Your stomach okay? You hurting anywhere?"

"Chest hurts," he whispered.

"Figured it might. I wanna wait a bit, before havin' you take your pain meds, though. Don't want you to get sick again."

"I'm okay," Tony told him, facing forward again. "I'm...I didn't mean to wake you."

"I'm glad you did," he replied, simply. There was a long moment of silence between them, before he spoke again. "You wanna talk about what you dreamt?"

He felt a shiver run its course through Tony's body, at the mention of the dream. "No," his voice cracked.

"Okay," he told him, calmly, without pushing, "You know I'm here, when you do." He felt Tony's breathing pattern change again, though it was different from panic. He was holding something in, Gibbs knew from experience. He was trying not to cry.

"Y-you can go back to bed, Boss," he told him.

"I know I can. Wanna stay here; make sure you're okay."
"You don't...need to do that," Tony's breath hitched.

"I know I don't. I want to, Tony," his hand moved from Tony's shoulder, up to his head, and pulled him gently toward him a bit. That seemed to dissolve whatever ability the younger man had, to hold back. Gibbs felt the soft sobs, before he heard them.

"I c-can't..." Tony shook his head.

"Can't what?" he asked, quietly.

"I...I dunno what I'd do, Boss...if anything ever..." Tony couldn't continue the sentence, as it seemed that holding everything in all this time, seemed to give it control over the moment, and all he could do was give in to the quaking of tears.

"It's okay, Tony," Gibbs told him, his hand rubbing up and down the younger agent's arm, not too hard to hurt him.

"Anything ever...happened to you," he finished, after getting a breath in. "I couldn't... I c-can't..."

Tony's words touched Gibbs' heart, pulling at its strings. It'd been a long time since anyone had ever said anything like that to him. And like then, he had no other response for it, except, "Nothing's gonna happen to me."

"You don't know that."

"No, I don't. Just like I don't know that nothin' will happen to you. That's why I need ya here; so I can have your six. And so you can have mine. No one I trust more with it."

And in that statement, Tony felt a little bit of truth in Fornell's earlier words, shine through like sun rays. He didn't dare try and speak, after that. He simply let himself relax into his boss's hold, and allowed whatever tears his body and mind decided they needed to shed, get themselves out of his system. The fact that Gibbs stayed through it all, even until they ended, and he drifted back to sleep with the aid of the anti-anxiety shot his boss had earlier given him, made it a little more believable that he really did care about him...
Chapter 14

Gibbs was fixing breakfast, when Tony's cell rang. The younger agent answered it where he was on the couch, and Gibbs couldn't help but to overhear.

"This is Tony DiNozzo," he answered warily.

"Mr. DiNozzo! Hello! How are you?" an unfamiliar voice sounded on the other line.

"I'm...uh...who is this?"

"My name is Marcia Livingston, and I'm with BMZ magazine. I was wondering if you might be up to answer a few questions?"

"What kinda questions?"

"Well, first of all, how is your recovery going?"

"Um...I'm not exactly sure I'm comfortable answering these-"

"That's okay. We'll skip to the next one. Do you plan to sue the airline?"

"I have to go," he told her, abruptly. "Please don't call me back." He ended the call and tossed the phone onto the coffee table.

Gibbs peeked around the doorway from the kitchen, "Reporters again?"

"Yeah," Tony took a breath. "Will it ever stop?"

"People are curious," Gibbs cocked his head a bit to the side. "You're a hero, in their eyes."

Tony scoffed, "Hero...right."

"You survived a plane crash; the only one on board who did."

"No, I survived a twenty-six thousand foot fall," he countered. "Cheryl. She survived the crash. But she died from her injuries, hours afterward." His gaze drifted for a moment, in thought. "She died, because she was on the job. She died in the line of duty. Cheryl's the hero. Not me."

"They don't know about Cheryl," Gibbs told him, though proud of his conclusion about the flight attendant. "They hear the story, and they think of you like that...Bruce Willis guy, in that movie with the train..." he circled his finger in the air as he tried to recall the movie.

"Unbreakable."

"Yeah, that's it."

"Bruce was a super-hero, in that movie. He walked away without a scratch. I've got injuries. I don't think it's the same. Maybe more like...Tom Hanks in Cast Away. Except without the island and all the cool packages and Wilson..."

"And the beard."

"You've seen Cast Away, Boss?" he asked with a surprised look on his face.
"Who hasn't seen Cast Away?" he retorted. "Was on two straight weeks in a row, over the summer."

"I dunno. It's just, you've made two perfectly logical movie references in a row. It's makin' me wonder if I got hit in the head harder than I thought..." he gave a small smile, then watched as conflict flashed over Gibbs face. It stayed there long enough, that Tony began to really worry, and the smile faded from his own face. "Boss? What's wrong?"

Gibbs shook his head, then met the younger man's eyes, "I dunno what to do to replace the head-slaps, until your head heals..." After a long moment, simply staring open-mouthed at his boss, Tony burst out laughing. Seeing Tony's laughter gave Gibbs a feeling of warmth. He couldn't help but to join him.

It took a few minutes for it to die down, and Tony's hand over his chest, had Gibbs on alert. Tony noticed the concern, and held up a hand, "I'm okay, Boss. Just a little soreness breakin' through. I'm not due to take anything for a couple hours." Gibbs nodded, after a moment, acknowledging the information. "Know what's weird?"

"What's that?"

"That reporter asked if I was gonna sue the airline. Why would she ask something like that?"

Gibbs didn't really have an answer to that, and before he could think too deeply about it, there was a knock at the door. "Expecting more company?" Tony asked. Gibbs simply shook his head, before making his way to the door.

He peeked out the side window, surprised by who he saw, but only because he figured he'd have heard something before them showing up. He opened the door, allowing his agent in. "Ziva. Wasn't expecting you..."

"I am sorry I didn't call," she told him.

"You should've let us know you were even heading home. Are you okay?" he asked, pulling her into a protective hug, after appraising her, and coming to the conclusion that she probably hadn't slept much in the past few days.

"I am fine," she told him. "Tony is here, yes? With you..."

"Yeah, he is. Come in," he pulled her inside and shut the door behind them. "In the living room."

Tony had heard her, before he saw her enter. He hadn't expected her to look exhausted. "Hey, Ziva," he half-smiled at her.

"Hi," she smiled at him, and he could've sworn he saw her start to tear up, before she ducked her head and took a seat beside him on the couch. "I came straight here from the airport," she told him. "I wanted to tell you what we found out about the plane." Tony straightened, preparing himself to listen to the news. "Apparently, the plane had encountered large amounts of turbulence, several flights ago, damaging a small part of the hull. It had been repaired, but obviously they were not thorough enough to realize that it had significantly weakened. The jolts that you felt, before the aircraft began to lose altitude, were small pieces of the outer hull separating and compromising the fuel supply hold. The captain was actually attempting to bring the plane down closer to land, knowing the the fuel was depleted. What he did not take into consideration, was the compromised hull. Several of the families of the victims are planning a lawsuit against the airline..."

Tony's eyes drifted down a bit in the air between them, as he allowed the information to settle in his mind. "Must be why that reporter asked if I was suing," he said, meaning for it to seem amusing, but
missing the emotion behind it.

"You okay, Tony?" Gibbs asked.

"Yeah...ah...I guess I didn't really think it'd make a difference why the plane went down," he admitted. "But knowing it was...someone's...negligence? I...I just..." he shook his head. "All those people... My friend... They're all dead because someone couldn't be bothered to do their damn job properly." He huffed out a breath, "Sorry...I...I guess I'm kinda pissed."

"You have a right to be," Gibbs told him.

"The airline is being investigated, as we speak," Ziva told them. "Any aircraft that passed through the engineers' hands, has been grounded until further inspection can be done. The FBI is involved in the investigation. In fact, I met a few very nice agents, while I was in Arizona. They were particularly kind to me, even when I was not so, to them."

"Was one of them named J.J?" Tony asked.

"How did you know that?" Ziva's eyes widened.

"We caught a ride with the rest of that team," Gibbs told her. "We were wondering if you'd run into them."

"They're really nice," Tony added. "Maybe you can meet the rest of them..." A ringing started in his ears. Not really a ringing, but a sudden muting of everything else, and a sound he couldn't quite place, covering it. His vision began to blur, for a moment, and he blinked a few times, hard, trying to clear it up.

Around him, he could see his teammates were trying to talk to him, concern written clearly on their faces now. But he couldn't hear what they were saying. And suddenly he was slamming his eyes shut, as pain shot through his skull. They must've understood, since he'd grabbed his head in turn. He didn't know what to do; didn't know why this was happening, or how to stop it. But he was hit with a wave of nausea that had him opening his eyes in a panic. Then, though he couldn't hear himself say it, he told them, "Bathroom..." and somehow summoned the strength to get up and run for it, the other agents clearing the way for him, reaching out to help, but only able to follow behind him.

The last few moments he could remember, was vomiting stomach acid into the toilet, and then watching as the room tilted in his vision, ending with his head on the floor, and the stand-base for the sink in his vision. Then there was darkness...
Chapter 15

"Ziva, call an ambulance!" Gibbs shouted, hovering over Tony's unconscious form. Watching Tony's sudden rapid decline had been frightening enough, as it was. But watching him drop like dead weight, to the side like that, was downright terrifying. Something could be horribly wrong. He could have a clot, or a bleed... He could die, right here on Gibbs' bathroom floor.

A shaky hand reached down to take a pulse. The urge to vomit ebbed when he found a steady pulse, though it didn't seem quite as strong as it should be. He found himself lifting the younger man, once again carrying him. But this time, instead of through forest, it was into his living room, down onto the couch, to wait for the paramedics to arrive.

With Ziva being kept on the line with dispatch, Gibbs could only think to call Ducky. He could only think to dial his number, anyway. It wasn't until he heard the man's voice, that he realized he'd even done so.

"Hello? Jethro, are you there?"

"Duck, it's Tony," he told him.

"What's happened?"

"Not sure. He seemed okay, but then he was in pain. Ran to the bathroom and threw up, then he just...dropped. He's unconscious."

"Have you phoned for an ambulance?"

"Ziva's got one comin'."

"Ziva has returned? Never mind, we'll get to that later. I need you to check Anthony's eyes, Jethro."

"What am I looking for?" he asked, balancing the phone between his shoulder and ear.

"Uneven pupils, to start."

Gibbs pulled open each of Tony's eyes. "They look normal."

"Do you have a flashlight?"

"Yeah. Hang on," he replied, reaching under the couch for one of his emergency flashlights.

"Alright."

"I need you to check his pupil reaction. Shine the light in his eye for a couple of seconds, then move it away."

Gibbs did as he'd been instructed. Twice, just to be certain. "They seem to be reacting normally, Ducky."

"Good. That's good news, Jethro. Allow the paramedics to take him in. He should be given an MRI at Bethesda, just to be certain he's alright. Go with him. I'll meet you there."

Gibbs ended the call right as the medics came through the door. They asked questions as they took Tony's vitals. All of it seemed to go by rather quickly, and then they were loading him into the ambulance. Gibbs climbed in the back with him, only partially hearing Ziva as she told him she'd
inform the others.

The lead agent sat back and watched the medic as he hooked Tony to monitors and continued checking his vitals. It was about halfway to the hospital, that Tony started to wake, with a groan. Gibbs seemed to be the first to notice, as the medic was talking to the driver at the time. Gibbs leaned forward, taking hold of the agent's hand.

"Tony?"

Tony's eyes slowly cracked open and found Gibbs. "Boss? Wh...what the...where am I? What happened?" the heart monitor indicated a slight picking up in heart rate.

"In an ambulance, on the way to the hospital," Gibbs told him. "You collapsed. Scared the hell out of us."

"I'm fine," Tony shook his head. "I don't need the hospital, Boss. Please tell them to turn around."

"Gotta make sure," Gibbs told him.

"Mr. DiNozzo," the medic said, "Are you experiencing any pain?"

"Yeah, I am," Tony replied, with an annoyed tone. "I fell out of a godamn plane a few days ago, and all."

"Oh yeah! You're that guy!" the medic looked surprised. "Hey, Gary! This is the DiNozzo that survived that plane crash over the weekend!"

"No kidding?" the driver's voice sounded.

"I figured you'd already be in the hospital still. You really don't have any broken bones? That's luck, man..."

"Yeah, real lucky!" Tony retorted. "Over a hundred people lost their lives in that crash. My friend, being one of them. I found out the front part of that plane burned," he said, looking to Gibbs, then. "I should've realized it before, seeing and smelling all the smoke. But I saw the paper. There was a picture of it still burning. All the passengers on that part of the plane were burned beyond recognition," his voice cracked. "Max's parents won't even be able to have an open casket for his funeral. They never wanted to cremate him, but they had no choice. They couldn't see him that way." He swallowed against a lump in his throat, then looked back to the medic, "So yeah...real damned lucky." His breaths came quick, with his frustration, and he felt lightheaded.

The medic had, up until now, simply stared and listened, feeling a bit ashamed to have been excited before. But then noticed the monitors. "BP is 70/40," he said.

"Is that bad?" Gibbs asked, not looking away from his agent, whose eyes were growing heavy and not really focusing on anything in particular.

"It's low," the medic replied. "We're almost to Bethesda."

Tony seemed to not be catching his breath, and Gibbs watched to rapid rise and fall of his chest. "Is there something wrong with his breathing?"

"His lungs sound clear. Heart rate is low, but doesn't sound like any abnormalities. They're gonna have to do a scan; make sure there's no blockages anywhere," he said as he secured an oxygen mask over Tony's face.
"Gibbs..." Tony stirred, trying to focus on him. "I wanna go home. Please..."

"We will," he told him. "Soon as they tell us you're okay," he furrowed his brow, as he wondered when that would be...

*_~_*

"Where is he?" McGee asked, slightly frantic as he entered the waiting room, seeing Ziva there. "Is he okay? Have you heard anything?" he looked around. "Where's Gibbs?"

"McGee, calm down," she told him, standing from her seat and leading him to one. "I have heard nothing except that he is stable."

That at least relieved him enough that he was able to sit. "What happened, exactly? You just said he'd collapsed and was being brought to the hospital."

"We were simply talking," she told him. "I told him that the airline engineering staff was responsible for the plan going down. He seemed okay. But then he acted as though his head was hurting, and took off to the bathroom to throw up. Then...he just...fell over, unconscious."

"That...could be anything," Tim shook his head, trying not to think of the life-threatening things that could be.

"Gibbs said he regained consciousness in the ambulance. This is a good sign, yes?"

"Maybe... Where is Gibbs?"

"Pacing, no doubt," she told him, with a sigh.

*_~_*

Ziva had been correct. Gibbs was pacing right outside radiology. Ducky was sitting in with the radiologist, as Tony was run through the MRI machine. The only reason he knew the lead agent was out there, was because he'd seen him on the way in, and failed at getting him to go wait with Ziva.

As the machine started up, Ducky watched as Tony's body slowly entered the tube.

Tony was frustrated, having to be there. Everyone knew it. But this scan was what they'd brought him here for, and if that'd ease their minds so he could go back home, then he'd do it, and get it over with. He closed his eyes, after several long minutes into the scan. The sound hadn't bothered him, really. Not until he'd closed his eyes. And then suddenly he could feel his heart pounding. He felt his breath start to speed up. He was panicking; he knew the signs by now. All he could think to do was open his eyes. He knew the scan wouldn't take too long, and that if he moved, they'd have to start over again. Tony tried to focus on staying perfectly still, despite the discomfort that now coursed through his body.

Ducky kept a close eye on the screen that showed Tony's face on camera, in case he needed to talk or get their attention for something. He noticed when Tony had suddenly seemed to become uncomfortable. But he waited, seeing the younger man's familiar schooling of his emotions. He knew what Tony was trying to do, and he tried to respect it.

Ducky looked to the monitor, where the radiologist and neurologist studied the image as they turned it from side to side, and discussed what they were looking at. He only partially absorbed what they were saying, more anxious for it to be over, than anything, as he looked back and forth between that and Tony's face cam screen.
"I don't see any swelling or bleeds," one of them said.

"No abnormalities. The fracture seems to be healing nicely. I don't see anything neurological that would warrant what happened today," the other said.

"Something's wrong," Ducky finally spoke up.

"What?" the doctor turned to him.

"With Anthony," he told her. "He's panicking. Are you almost through?"

"Just another minute, to be thorough. Unless you feel he can't handle it?"

"I'm sure he can tough it out just fine," Ducky told them. "But I wouldn't leave him in there much longer."

"Talk to him, Dr. Mallard. Maybe you can calm him down."

Ducky sighed, but complied, pressing the red button beside the monitor. "Anthony, are you alright?" he asked, watching him on the screen.

"I'm fine, Ducky," he replied, quietly. "How much longer?"

"Not much longer at all, my boy. Are you in pain?"

"I'm okay. Just...finish this."

Ducky released the button before turning to the doctors beside him, observing the image on the screen. Suddenly it became unclear. "What's happened?"

"He must have moved," the radiologist said.

When he looked at Tony again, he seemed to be shaking. He pressed the button, "Tony?"

"Really cold in here," he said.

"Stop the scan," the neurologist said. "We're done, anyway. I'll get the nurse."

"Do send in the man that's pacing in front of the door, as well, please," Ducky told her. "His name is Agent Gibbs."

She nodded to him and got up, as the radiologist shut down the machine. They remaining doctors went into the room to pull Tony from the machine. When Ducky felt his skin, he flinched. "My word, he's burning up!" he exclaimed. "Was he like this when he was brought in?"

"Not to my knowledge," she replied, looking concerned. "Mr. DiNozzo, are you in pain?"

"It's n-nothing knew," he told her.

"How long has it been since your last pain killer dose," Ducky asked him. Tony's eyes shifted, Ducky assumed, in thought. Then Gibbs was there, beside him.

"Dose time would've been this morning," Gibbs answered for him. "You took your pills, right, Tony?" he asked.

"Uhm..." Tony's eyes shifted again, and Gibbs narrowed his eyes. But he didn't press it, as he
noticed Tony's renewed panicked state, and flushed skin.

"Duck, what's goin' on with him right now?"

"I believe he's running a fever," Ducky told him, right as a nurse came in, with an orderly, to help get Tony to a gurney for taking back to the room. The older men moved out of the way as Ducky continued to explain. "It's likely Anthony didn't take the medication, for whatever reason that might be. The fever could be from the pain. In all actuality, it could also be the reason for his sudden loss of consciousness at the house."

"How's that?" Gibbs asked.

"You said he showed signs of pain in his head, before vomiting. I'm guessing he was in enough pain that the migraine cause nausea, and the combination and suddenness of the onset of pain caused him to start panicking, whether he was aware at first, or not. And the information Ziva brought, I'm sure didn't help that situation. The low blood pressure might be dehydration. Nausea tends to lead to that. Of course, I could be wrong about this. He may just be confused with the fever, and did take his pain killers. This could very well be drug toxicity."

"You think the pills could've caused all this?" Gibbs narrowed his eyes as he watched the agent wheeled out of the room.

"One of a couple of possibilities, Jethro, as the MRI showed no abnormalities in his brain. That, at least, is some good news..."
Ducky had been correct in his assumption that Tony had stopped taking his pain killers. This is what caused the pain-induced fever. It's what cause him to have such intense pain that he couldn't keep from vomiting. And the fact that he'd been in secret pain, keeping him from wanting to eat, and consequently making him incapable of remembering to drink enough fluids, had caused him to become dehydrated. That's why he'd suddenly lost consciousness, and was so sluggish in the ambulance. His blood pressure had been so low because of the dehydration, that there wasn't a fast enough supply to allow him a clear mind.

Gibbs thought about all of this as he sat beside Tony's hospital bed, arms crossed in frustration, as he watched the younger man sleep. Tony was hooked to an IV that was feeding him, both fluids and pain killers. After Ziva and Tim had come in to see him, with Abby, who had shown up shortly after Tim, Gibbs sent them all back to the office, assuring them that Tony was okay, and that he'd keep them posted. They were all just relieved that there wasn't anything serious wrong with the senior field agent, in terms of brain injury that the hospital in Arizona might have overlooked.

Gibbs was relieved, as well. But he was also angry. Tony had scared the hell out of them all, collapsing like that. And the fact that it was caused by something as stupid as him not taking his medication, confused and frustrated the lead agent.

Nurse Pennyapple came in to change the IV fluids, and check the rate of flow, wordlessly smiling upon her brief glances at Gibbs, who monitored her actions. He was grateful she wasn't chatty. He really wasn't in the mood for talk. Not that he ever was.

The nurse had come and gone, before Tony made a whispered groan, indicating his ascent to consciousness. Gibbs stood from the chair and approached the bed, refolding his arms in front of his chest as he waited for the younger man to open his eyes.

Tony could feel the tension in the room, before he even opened his eyes and found Gibbs standing there. "Boss?"

"What the hell were you thinkin', DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, with less bite than he'd wanted to give.

"W-what?"

"Why haven't you been takin' your damn pills?" he narrowed his eyes. "Do you have any idea how terrified I was that we were gonna lose you, after all that's happened? After everything you've been through, seemingly fine one minute, and then collapsing from the pain in your head that shouldn't even have been felt? But you decided to stop taking the meds, and this is what happens? Do you have any damn idea how scared I was?"

Tony somehow temporarily dismissed the anger in his boss's voice, in favor of the actual words. "You...you were scared?" he asked in a small voice.

Gibbs' face fell for a moment, previously unaware he'd let such an admission out. Twice, for that matter. But then he straightened and put the stubborn look back on his face, "Don't change the subject."

"I..." Tony's eyes shifted and he looked down at the blanket that covered the lower half of him. "I'm sorry, Boss," he whispered. "I didn't know... Didn't think it'd do anything like this."

"You've been sitting around hiding your pain, for how long? Long enough to dehydrate from
throwing up anything you'd eaten or drank. Why? Why would you just...stop taking the pain killers, Tony?" his voice suddenly softened, his arms slipping from their angry stance in front of his chest, and falling down to his sides.

"Because..." Tony began, hesitant to continue, but knowing Gibbs wouldn't drop it, if he stopped now. And Gibbs deserved to know why. Especially after what he'd put him through, today. "Because I...I survived," he told him, not taking his eyes away from the blanket, even as his vision became cloudy with the wet stinging of fluid building in his eyes. "I lived. They all died, and I lived, and I'm whole and not broken and I shouldn't be so lucky as to walk around without feeling something."

"You think I don't see you in pain every day?" Gibbs interjected. "And not just physical..."

"It's not enough. Not with the pain killers," he looked up and met his eyes. "Think of all those people, Boss. All those families mourning over what happened to their kids, husbands, wives, brothers, sisters, grandparents... everyone. Everyone on that plane, Boss, has families that are devastated over their loss. Everyone except me. And had I been the one to die, you think my father would give a crap? Only long enough to collect his compensation from the airline, I'm betting... Point is, had I been the one to die, there wouldn't be so much devastation-"

"We would've been devastated," Gibbs nearly shouted, incredulously, looking at Tony as if he'd been speaking another language. "You idiot! We would've been...we were. We didn't know we still had you, and during those long hours, we were...completely..." he couldn't even find the words to describe the way they'd felt on that journey to Arizona. The whole lot of them were like mindless zombies on the outside. Going through the motions necessary to survive. But on the inside, they had been a complete disaster; a wreck they'd not allow to be seen by any of the others, in fear that they'd be admitting to having lost all hope.

"Boss..." Gibbs' eyes were drawn back to his agent's, who was looking ashamed and sorry.

"You scared the hell out of us, today, Tony," Gibbs repeated.

"I'm sorry... It won't happen again. I promise," Tony told him. "I'm sorry..." his voice cracked, and tears threatened to breach the brim where they were filled and glistening. Tony felt as though he'd betrayed his team; his true family. And it showed heavily on his face, that he felt that way. Gibbs stood at the threshold of wanting to remain pissed, and wanting to scoop Tony up and take away the look of arrant sadness that played across the younger man's features. "I didn't mean to...downgrade you- you're right; you are my family. I'm...I'm such an idiot," he ducked his head, tears now spilling. "I didn't mean to hurt you... God I would never..." his hands came up to cover his face, right after Gibbs caught a glimpse of it morphing into an anguished expression, and the sobs wracked the younger man's body.

"Ah hell, DiNozzo," Gibbs sighed, giving in to the urge to comfort him. He sat down on the side of the bed and laid a hand on the crook of Tony's shoulder. "I know ya didn't mean for it to happen. And I trust you when you say you won't let it happen again." He pulled at Tony's arm, trying to get him to stop hiding his face.

"W-whatever they're g-giving me, s'makin' it...really h-hard not to be em-motional," Tony told him, fighting against the pull on his arm.

"Ya mean it's makin' it impossible to hide what you feel," Gibbs corrected. Tony looked at him, a bit horrified, as he scrambled to swipe the wetness from his face. "Not the best time to try and deny that," Gibbs told him. "Tryin' to hide all that misplaced guilt, by skippin' the pain killers? That's a new one. Well, maybe it's one I've overlooked in the past, anyway. This time, I caught you red-
handed. But you and hiding what you feel? That's not new at all."

"Boss, I-"

"I get it, Tony," he interrupted. "I do. And I respect it, to a degree. I'd have to," he raised a brow, "Seeing as I do the same damn thing. It's necessary for the job. Bottling things up, I know is necessary sometimes. And I know you do it a lot, and you don't let it interfere with the job, and I respect that. But at the end of the day, if it's not something that's gonna just go away on its own, then you gotta talk to someone. If it can hurt you... Tony, I gotta know you'll talk to someone, even if it's not me. Ya can't let things like this kill you."

"C'mon," Tony let a small smile appear on his face. "I wouldn't have died."

"Oh yeah?" Gibbs raised both brows, feeling a bit of frustration start to boil in him again. "What if you'd hit your head on the way down, huh? What if it'd further fractured your skull, and no one was home to have known to call an ambulance? What if you'd bled out on my floor...or hemorrhaged, and I'd come home and found you...already gone cold? You ever think of that?"

"Jesus, Boss," Tony grimaced. "You keep thinking the worst scenarios..."

"But they're not impossible!" he retorted. "Hell, they're not even rare! I know accidents happen, DiNozzo, but for god's sake, I'm not gonna just sit by and watch it happen because you're..." he stopped himself, swiping a hand down his face, and forcing all of the anger aside. "I'm sorry," he told him, softer now. "I know you apologized; that you didn't mean for it to happen. I just...I don't want you to think it was no big deal; that we had no reason to get so worked up."

When he finally looked back at his agent, Tony looked as though he'd seen something miraculous. Gibbs narrowed his eyes, in question, until Tony opened his mouth to explain. "You...you apologized. I apologized and then you apologized and no one reminded anyone about the rules. And are you sure they didn't find anything wrong in the scan? 'Cause I'm pretty sure you admitted to having emotions... Admitted to me, at that, and..."

"Damnit, kid, I swear," Gibbs shook his head. "You've got head-slaps buildin' up. Might end up right back here, in fact."

"Shutting up..."

*~.~*

McGee was sitting alone in his apartment. Not so unusual. Except that instead of being in front of his computer, he found himself flipping through channels on the television. That was slightly unusual. He rarely used the TV, himself, for anything other than catching the news, or maybe a marathon of something. And occasionally when Tony would come over, they'd watch a movie. That was actually what he'd intended on doing, actually; watching a movie, maybe in honor of his friend. But upon going through the DVDs in his shelf, most of which belonged to Tony, he got a sick feeling in his gut. It was as if he was somehow betraying him, watching something without him. So he opted to flip channels and hope for something to come on.

After leaving the hospital, he'd felt a bit numb. Not numb, like he couldn't feel anything. Numb like how your hands felt after a glove-less snowball war was over, and you were back inside, trying to thaw your fingers in front of the fireplace. Tingly and a bit painful. Except, his whole body felt that way, and he couldn't really figure out why, except for the adrenaline that had once again been coursing through him, and suddenly had no use anymore.
Part of it, he knew was frustration. He felt like there was a possibility that the neurologist had missed something important. Again. And that something could actually be a lot more seriously wrong with Tony, than they were figuring. What if he didn't wake up? What if there was a bleed somewhere, and they just didn't see it, because they'd done a quicker scan than normal, and it wasn't picked up? Or what if it wasn't his brain? What if the low blood pressure was from a clot somewhere in his body, and not enough oxygen was getting to his brain, and that's why he'd lost consciousness? What if he ended up with brain damage, because of the negligence of the stupid doctors? After everything Tony had survived, what if he was taken out by yet another human act of stupidity?

The thoughts were driving him crazy, hence the flipping channels, trying to find something to distract himself. He knew they were extreme thoughts; probably not true. Bethesda was a good hospital, and they wouldn't miss something like that, would they?

A medical reality show flashed onto the screen, capturing his attention. It wasn't his usual favored form of entertainment, but considering the circumstances, it seemed interesting. He set the remote down and sank a bit more into the couch. He noted how the hospital in the current case, looked a lot more like the one in Arizona, than Bethesda.

"Jennalynn Smith, 37," the narrator's voice announced. "Brought to the morgue at 8:30am, January 16th, 2003. Cause of death: unknown. Jenna was found in her apartment by her co-worker, who had come to pick her up, as part of their normal routine of carpooling in. After repeated phone-calls, texts, and knocking on the door, knowing the woman was home, since her car was still there, and they'd spoken just the night before, Amy, the co-worker called 9-1-1.

Amy had been worried, since Jenna's car accident two months before, had the woman hooked on pain killers. She was afraid that maybe she'd taken too much, and wasn't waking up to answer the door. But was the paramedics found, when they broke into the home, was a cold, dead body."

"Probably overdosed," McGee said to himself.

"While waiting for toxicology reports, the medical examiner began the rest of the autopsy. The normal signs of overdose, or even misuse of any kind of drug, was absent. Jennalynn seemed to be completely healthy."

"Ms. Smith was, in every sense of the meaning, a perfectly healthy 37 year old woman," the medical examiner said, as he was interviewed. "She wasn't too thin. She had clear skin, no marks or bruises or really any signs of being as old as she was. She was clean; fingernails and hair well kept. No sign of biting her nails, I mean. And her mouth and nasal passages were clear, with no wear or indication she'd been using."

The screen switched from the M.E to a new face, that hadn't shown before. The screen showed his title at the bottom, 'James Carter, psychiatrist'. "Prescription drug use can swing in different ways, so easily," he began. "It's often that you do see script-addicts that started out with a bad injury that required the use of pain killers. But just the same, two months after a wreck that messed up Smith's back, specifically the discs in her spine, there would still be a significant enough amount of pain, to warrant continued use. Certainly, as they discovered after investigating further, she hadn't been taking more than the recommended dose."

"Hm," Tim raised a brow, curious, now, about what happened to the woman, that she died overnight.

The narrator's voice returned, "When toxicology reports came back negative, the medical examiner put Jennalynn through an MRI. What he found, was shocking to the family."
"Had I known to watch for it," a tearful young lady said on the screen, "I would've been there, every
day, checking on her." The caption on the bottom, said Terra Smith, sister. "But after Jenna was well
enough to go back to work, we'd all figured she was okay; that she didn't need us around babying
her. It's not fair that this happened... It's not fair that I couldn't have done anything to help her..." she
broke down.

The M.E returned to the screen, "Upon further investigation into the medical reports from Ms.
Smith's car accident, we saw that she'd had a concussion. It wasn't severe, which is why there was
no follow-up made by her. In fact, doctor visits were more focused on her back, than anything. Had
she been seen as often as she should have, they would have seen some of the symptoms, earlier on,
and had her go through a CT."

The narrator's voice returned, "What the examiner found in the scan, was a brain hemorrhage.
Jennalynn's concussion had caused a clot to form," the voice explained, as a 3D image appeared on
the screen, showing the clot, and how it was jostled loose and caused the bleed. "Because she was
alone, she wasn't able to receive the medical attention that could have saved her life."

The volume faded, in McGee's ears. How cruel and coincidental that this should be what he ended
up watching. The very thing he was afraid could happen to Tony, had killed this woman. This very
thing is what he'd feared had happened to him, today.

A wave of uncontrollable nausea hit him like a brick wall, and he couldn't even make it to the
bathroom, but ended up at the kitchen sink, throwing up the half a bottle of beer he'd just drank. The
medical show had only verified his own feelings about Tony's case. Yet all he could do was sit here
and worry about him.

Or could he?
"Now, you heard what the doctor told you," Gibbs told Tony, as he brought him a bottle of water to his room. "I'm not gonna treat you like an invalid or a child, but so help me, if I find out you can't handle this on your own, I won't hesitate to change that."

"I know, Boss," Tony replied, taking the water and sitting up a bit more against the headboard as he twisted the small pills in his hand.

"You've got a regimen to stick to. Meds with you meals. Except your anxiety ones, which are just before bed, and as needed. You throw up, you tell me about it. No hiding anything from me."

"And here I thought you'd just said you weren't gonna treat me like a kid," he replied, sarcastically, before downing the pills.

"I'm not treating you like anything," Gibbs retorted. "I'm giving you the house rules. Don't like it, then you can go right back to the damn hospital that wanted to keep you overnight."

"Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss...I like the rules. I love the rules," he plastered on his infamous smile. Gibbs simply shook his head.

"I'm going to the store. Need something to make for tomorrow. Want anything specific?" he asked as he stood from the bed.

"Can't think of anything," Tony replied. "It's kinda late. Can't you go tomorrow?"

"Need breakfast stuff, Tony. Besides, if I get called it early, there won't be anything here for you."

"Well, why don't I go with you to the store, then? Maybe I'll think of something I want, if I'm there."

"You just got home from a day at the hospital. I know you're tired; can see it written all over your face. It's goin' on midnight, Tony. Just get some sleep." He watched Tony's face, as some flashes of different emotions flitted over it. The younger man seemed anxious, maybe even afraid. Gibbs narrowed his eyes. "Store's only a few minutes away. It's not a big shopping trip; I'll be back in probably twenty."

"Okay," Tony complied, a bit too quickly. "Just uh...be careful, Boss, okay?"

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Gibbs was true to his word, rushing through the shopping trip to get back in less time than he'd even told his agent. It wasn't until his drive toward the store, when a car swerved into his lane and nearly hit him, that he realized what Tony had been afraid of. The younger man was worried that something would happen to Gibbs, and possibly the rest of the team as well.

He made the trip through the store quick, getting everything they needed, but at a pace that would get him out of there in no time. Being late, there wasn't a line at the front of the store, either. So he'd been checked out fairly quickly. After practically hurling the bags into the back seat and throwing the cart into the receptacle, he got into the car and pulled safely out of the parking lot, and into the road, making sure to keep his word there, too, and be careful. The last thing he needed was to actually get into a wreck on the way home. That wouldn't help Tony's fears at all.

Twice, Gibbs had the urge to call and tell the younger agent that he was on the way home. But both
time, he talked himself out of it, in case he'd actually gone to sleep. He sighed, swiping a hand down his face. "Better calm yourself down, before you get home," he told himself. He knew that if he kept this up and showed up at the house thinking that Tony was just sitting around freaking out that Gibbs would never make it back alive, he'd end up treating the younger man, unintentionally exactly the way he didn't want to be treated, which was like a child...

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10 minutes earlier...

McGee had forced himself into an online game to get his mind off of the day. Before he knew it, hours had flown by, and it was fairly late. It's one thing he both liked and hated about gaming; it could either make a day go by really fast, or kill an entire day really fast. Hating it depending on whether or not there was something else that really had to be done. Today, however, had not been one of those days.

In the middle of a battle, his phone rang. His instinct was to ignore it, and just call back when the battle was over. But glancing down at the caller ID and seeing that it was Tony, suddenly the battle wasn't so important anymore. "Uhh sorry, guys," he said into his mic on his headset. "Emergency. I gotta go."

He heard a series of, "Aw, c'mon, man, we needed you!" before shutting down the game and quickly picking up his cell to answer.

"Hello?"

"McGee?"

"Yeah, Tony," he replied, noting the sort of small voice on the other end. "It's pretty late. Shouldn't you be asleep?"

"I- I'm sorry. Did I wake you? I thought you'd maybe be up playing one of those games-"

"I was," Tim answered in a bit of a shameful voice for being so predictable.

"I didn't get you killed or anything, did I?"

"Nah, I was shutting down anyway. What's going on? I'd have thought you'd be exhausted and passed out by now."

"I'm supposed to be asleep," Tony told him. "But Gibbs went to the store, and I swear to God if you tell anyone I told you this, I'll hate you forever... but anyway... I... I couldn't sleep. Can't sleep till I know he's back and okay. So I just... I need you to talk to me, just for a little bit, until he gets back here. Then I won't bug ya anymore."

Ignoring the part of his brain that was screaming with anger at the fact that Tony had been left alone after what happened today, he replied, "How long has he been gone?"

"Not long. He shouldn't be gone long, either. I just... ya know. I worry. Doesn't take long for someone to t-bone your car, or to walk into a robbery in progress at the store, or for some drunkard to hit you while you're walking back to your car, or-"

"That stuff is a lot less likely to happen, than you seem to think," McGee cut him off before he could continue. "Especially with Gibbs. He's more likely to notice something before it happens."
"You're probably right. Can't shake the feeling, though. So uh...distract me. What have you been up to, today?"

"Distracting myself, actually," he replied. "Doesn't feel like it, but I've been playing that game all day."

"Did you rape and pillage?"

"I...I pillaged. I didn't do any raping. I don't know that that's even an option in the game, and if it is, well...that's just disturbing."

"How do you not know something about a game, McGamer? Isn't this your elf lord thing?"

"Actually, no. It's something new I'm beta testing. But I'll be sure to keep an eye out for rape ability," he rolled his eyes.

"I'm kidding, probie. Don't get snippy, now."

"I'm not getting snippy. Just trying to distract you," he smirked. "How are you feeling, by the way?"

"Better. Tired and anxious, but better. Sorry...about what happened today."

"I'm just glad you're okay. I didn't really have anyone I felt okay to call, when I was freaking out about you, earlier."

"You were freaking out?"

"Well I...I was... I mean..."

"Aw, you really do care..."

"Of course I care, you jerk!"

"Hey, no need for name-calling."

"I'm sorry, I just... I told you that you're like a brother to me, Tony. I hope you don't think I said it lightly."

"You idiot," Tim shook his head.

"Well, I wasn't sure I was ready to believe it, McGee! I mean, I try not to get my hopes up that someone actually gives a crap about me as much as I do them... It hurts when it turns out not to be true, ya know?"

Tim was quiet for a moment, considering what Tony had just said. It made his heart ache a bit, to know that this all stemmed back to his childhood and god knows what else. "Well, you don't have to worry if it's true or not, with me, Tony," Tim said, his voice slightly quieter as he tried to avoid it cracking. "I wouldn't just say something like that. And I've never said that to anyone else, before."

Tony was quiet on the other line for a long moment, as well. "Then..." he finally began, unsuccessful at keeping his own voice from cracking, "Then I wish I'd told you I feel the same about you, Tim... I mean, I wish I'd told you right then, instead of over the phone. Because I do. I think of you like a brother. But I didn't say anything on the plane, because...well, I thought maybe if you had just said it.
in the moment, then it'd be weird to know that I...that I cared about you...Ya know, weird for you to be around me."

"You mean that?" Tim asked, choked. "You...you..." at the last minute, he changed the direction of the conversation, before it got too serious for him to contain himself, "You were afraid I'd feel weird around you?"

Tony chuckled on the other end, "I know, right? It's stupid... Resident geek, elf lord supreme, getting the jeebies around Very Special Agent Anthony DiNozzo."

"Hey, watch it with the nicknames, Tony," McGee sarcastically replied. "I could start calling you Very Special Agent Lightyear to the rescue."

Tony fully laughed now, and that put a smile on Tim's face. "That'd make you Woody, ya know."

"I dunno about that... I feel like maybe Gibbs would be Woody. I'd be...the speak and say thing," he let out a snicker.

"Nah. You'd definitely be Woody. Gibbs would be Andy."

"That'd make...um...that'd make us Gibbs' toys," McGee laughed.

"Alright. Maybe you've got a point. We're gonna have to stop using Disney-Pixar characters to compare to the team relationships..."

"Oh I dunno. I think Ziva would be Bo Peep," McGee retorted. After a moment of consideration, they both laughed...

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Gibbs entered the house carrying all of the bags, and gently kicked the door closed before quickly setting the bags down in the kitchen, and turning to head up the stairs to check on Tony. As he went, he heard him talking, and feared someone else was in the house. So he approached the room, silently, as he listened.

"Yeah, okay. I think I heard him pull up outside. Thanks again, for talking to me, McGee. I appreciate it. And I meant what I said, man. I'll see you tomorrow?" there was a slight pause, and Gibbs knew he was actually just on the phone. "Okay, cool. G'night, Tim." The call must have ended, and the lead agent heard the phone set down on the end table, and heard the creak of the bed, indicating the younger man was getting up. Gibbs let himself into the room.

"Hey," he told him, and Tony was slightly startled that he was standing there.

"Gibbs!"

"You're still up."

"Yeah," he nervously reached back to scratch his head, wincing when he hit the bandage there, absentmindedly. "Couldn't sleep. You need help with putting anything away?" he yawned.

"Not tired, huh?"

"Well, I'm tired. I just...couldn't sleep till you were back. Called McGee, to see what he was up to."

"I'm back, now. So get some sleep, DiNozzo."
"Yeah, okay, Boss..." he sank back down onto the bed. "Hey, Boss?"

"Yeah?" Gibbs turned back around, after having headed back out to the hall.

"I kinda invited McGee over, tomorrow, if that's okay?"

"Sure."

"He's gonna put a game on my laptop. Something to keep me occupied when everyone's gone to work."

"Sounds good."

"I'm sorry..."

"Sorry for what?" he narrowed his eyes, taking a step further into the bedroom, when Tony wouldn't meet his eyes.

"For uh...for getting nervous when you're out," he almost scratched at the back of his head again, but opted for the side of his neck, this time. "I can't really explain it, but...I can't help it, either."

"Don't have to apologize for things you don't have any control over," Gibbs told him. "Unless you're a compulsive killer. Then I suppose we'd need to find something to do with you."

"Funny, Boss," Tony cracked a smile, then yawned again.

Gibbs smirked. "Goodnight, DiNozzo."
"Okay, I don't get how I'm supposed to do anything, without any armor or weapons," Tony whined, where he sat propped back on the headboard, McGee beside him, both adorned with laptops on their thighs, as Tim tried to explain the game to him.

"Well, you've gotta earn them, Tony."

"How am I supposed to earn them?"

"By fighting, and gaining gold, or taking items left behind and reselling them at the market."

"How am I supposed to win a fight, without any weapons or armor?"

"You...you've got a weapon, Tony. They start you out with one," McGee told him.

"Yeah. It's a hammer."

"It's a mallet."

"What am I supposed to fight, to win with a freaking hammer, McGee?"

"You find other lower level players, and fight them. Work your way up."

"That doesn't sound fun. I wanna be able to go out on group fights with you. I can't do that with a hammer."

"Well, we can restart you as a girl," Tim suggested.

"How's that gonna make a difference?" he glanced at him, incredulously.

"Because high-level guy players are all about helping the sweet, innocent newbie chick players," he smirked at the older agent. "You'll get a handful of them trying to win your heart by giving you stuff or helping you through battles. Pretty much, it's up to the girl to pick which player she wants to consider her game-mate. But in all reality, it's more to do with how much they can do for her character."

"But...I don't wanna be a chick," Tony pouted. "Can't you just give me the stuff I need? You've got like a billion things."

"I dunno. I think it'd do you good to earn it like everyone else-"

"Everyone else that isn't a girl, you mean?"

"Well, no...they don't all do that-"

"C'mon, man. I don't care about earning it. I just wanna start out at a worthy enough level that I can play along side your character. Come on... I'll... I'll be your in-game girlfriend," he offered.

"But you said you didn't wanna be a chick."

"I know. I mean...I'll be your, ya know..."

"Oh for God's sake, Tony, I'll just give you the stuff you need."
"Yes!" Tony pumped a fist in the air.

"You really shouldn't be so eager to sell your ass for supplies, ya know," Tim told him.

"I'm willing to sell my virtual ass for pretty much anything, McAdvice-giver."

"Well if you're willing to be my in-game bitch, I'll get you whatever supplies you need," Tim replied, unable to keep in the laughter he'd been trying to hold in.

"You always have a potty mouth when you're playing these online role-playing things?" Tony raised a brow at him.

"It's a different world, Tony," he told him. "And I couldn't really think of a better way to put that. Unless...Tony?" he turned to him with a serious look on his face, "Will you be my big gay viking in-game lover?"

Tony's left eye twitched just a fraction of a centimeter, trying to hold back a smile. "Yes. A thousand times, yes!" he told him, turning back to the game, with excitement. "We get some kind of house, right? I get to pick out the curtains."

"I don't think there are curtains," Tim casually replied. "But you can change the layout a bit, if you want. I was thinking about redecorating anyway."

"You've already got a... well, of course you've already got a house. It's big enough for me to move into?"

"It's big enough for us to start adopting like Angelina Jolie."

"I wanna see!"

"What in the hell is going on in here?" Gibbs asked as he entered the room, looking a bit taken back. Both men looked up and over at the lead agent, just a few beats before realizing what Gibbs must have heard and how it must have sounded. McGee paled, and Tony's jaw dropped for a moment, before he burst out laughing, "It's a game, boss. McGee and I are newlyweds."

"I thought this was a warrior type of game," Gibbs narrowed his eyes.

"It is," Tony told him. "What, you can't be a warrior if you're gay?"

"Are you gay, Tony?"

"In the game, I'm gay for Lord Garadon," he told him, with a straight face. "That's McGee's charac-"

"Yeah, I get it," Gibbs shook his head and turned to leave.

"I'm gonna get a lot of cool stuff out of this, Boss!" Tony shouted after him.

"I don't even wanna know," Gibbs could be heard as he descended the staircase.

"I'll be an excellent warrior!" he shouted anyway. "Sheesh," he said a bit quieter, as he looked to a still slightly stunned McGee. "You think he actually thought we were talking about reality?" he nearly giggled.

"I'm not sure," Tim said, "But that was one of the most awkward moments with Gibbs, I've ever experienced. Probably in the top five."
"Ah c'mon, Timmy," Tony gave him a smile. "It's not like Gibbs would really be upset about if we were actually gay for each other, ya know. He'd just be pissed because he hadn't already seen the signs, beforehand, and put it together himself."

McGee thought about that for a moment. "You're probably right, actually," Tim replied, finally. "And I know the whole DADT is gone, now, and it's not like Dorneget has had a problem at NCIS, being gay or whatever. But I just...I guess I can't help getting slightly...freaked out when I think I might lose my job."

Tony looked over at his teammate with a serious expression, "Are you...McGee, are you coming out to me, right now?"

"W-what? No!" Tim shook his head. "That's not what I'm saying, at all! Not that it would matter if I was... It wouldn't, right? I mean, you'd still... Would you still like me as much, if I were gay?"

Tony narrowed his eyes at him for a moment, then brought a hand up to slap him in the back of the head, "Of course I would, you idiot."

Tim half-smiled, as he rubbed the spot on the back of his head, where he'd been smacked. "Are you?" he asked.

"Am I an idiot? Of course not," Tony replied, not looking away from his screen.

"That's not what I meant."

"You've seen how many women I get with, Tim," Tony answered, passively.

"Doesn't mean you're never with guys," McGee retorted.

"We are done with this conversation."

"You made me answer!"

"And you didn't, really, so let's drop it. It's not even important. We're gay lovers in a game. That's all we really and truly need to know," Tony winked at him, and turned back to the screen. He heard Tim let out a small laugh, beside him, and knew the younger agent had figured out he was trying to mess with his head, and let it go. But he also saw, out the corner of his eye, Tim rub a hand over his stomach, letting out the smallest indication of a pained breath, that he was likely trying not to show.

"You okay, man?" Tony asked, looking over for a moment.

Tim looked at him, surprised he'd noticed, "Yeah." He sighed, dropping his hand away. "Okay so, let's warp over to the house, and I'll drop all the items you'll need. Then you've just gotta pick them up and equip them," he told him, pressing a few keys on his laptop.

"Wait, how do I warp? And how will I even have the option to go to your house?"

"You're linked to me, right now. When I warp, a box will pop up and tell you, and give you the option to follow me. Ready?"

"Yeah." He waited for the box to pop up, that McGee had mentioned, and followed the instructions given, ending up in a castle-sized house, filled with relics that McGee's character had, no doubt, collected over a long period of time. "Not bad, Garadon."

"Thanks. I'll need to go purchase a bigger bed, I'm pretty sure."
"Is that really necessary?"

"You put your character to sleep when you're not playing, or if you've been wounded in battle and can't afford the doctor for faster healing," McGee explained. "We won't have that problem. But, sleeping when not playing, is a good idea. Leaving your character out in the open, leaves you vulnerable to being attacked and looted. We're safe in my house. I've made the appropriate security measures to ensure that." He rubbed a hand over his stomach again. "Now here, let me get you the armor, first. You'll need it in order to allow your character the ability to carry certain things."

Tony watched as Garadon dropped something on the ground, and didn't need much instruction on picking it up and equipping it. "Hey, I look pretty good!" Tony smirked, looking his character over.

"Yeah, yeah," Tim shook his head, amused. "Now for your weapons," he dropped a few other things. "There are certain things you have to use both hands to carry. Some things you only need one hand for, so you can carry two of those as a time, equipped. And you'll need some health elixirs, and..." he made a sound, almost a grunt, and Tony tore his eyes from the screen for a moment, to look over at him. McGee's hand was over his stomach, and his eyes were closed a bit tightly.

"You don't look so okay, McGee," Tony said, worriedly.

"No, I... It's not a big deal. Just...indigestion or something."

"Well, can I get you something? Some antacids or...you want one of my pain killers?" he asked, moving and setting the laptop down on the mattress.

"I um..." Tim compulsively swallowed.

"You gonna puke?" Tony asked, almost fearfully. "There's a little trash can next to you by the bed..." he took the laptop from McGee's legs as the younger man moved to get up.

"I...I dunno what...what this is-" Tim was overwhelmed with the strange feeling, but grabbed for the trash can, right as he stood, knowing the familiar feeling of something moving up his esophagus. He barely needed to force the heave, as the warm, slightly thick liquid came up and was expelled into the bin. The short amount of time it had spent in the younger agent's mouth, however, was long enough to detect what he'd vomited.

McGee had been facing away from Tony, out of pure embarrassment at the situation, to begin with. But after he put his fingers to his lips, where traces of what he'd brought up, was still there, and looked down at the bright red liquid that coated his fingertips, he turned, scared, toward his friend. "Tony..." he managed to say, before another unexpected heaving overtook him.

Tony watched, horrified, as blood poured from Tim's mouth and into the trash bin he was barely holding onto anymore. "Oh god..." Tony sprang across the bed and caught the agent right as his knees began to buckle. "Tim!"

"Tony...w-what...what's happening to me?" the room started to become fuzzy.

"I dunno...I dunno! McGee, don't you pass out on me!" he shouted, lowering him to the floor as he tried not to drop the bin, before setting it down beside them. "Gibbs!" Tony shouted. "GIBBS!" But he spotted his phone on the nightstand, and could just reach it still, without letting go of his friend, who was now completely limp against Tony's chest. He quickly dialed 9-1-1, then wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear, so he had a free hand to maneuver Tim's face so that he could see it. He looked white as a sheet, making the blood that was trailing down his chin and neck, seem even more gruesomely red. "I need an ambulance!" he shouted into the phone, when they picked up
on the other end. "I have a Federal Agent down! Unknown medical issue. He's...he was...throwing up blood and now he's passed out. I dunno...what to do..." his breaths came quick and harsh.

"Jesus! What happened?" Gibbs came tearing into the room, out of breath, possibly having come all the way up from the basement.

"I dunno, Boss," Tony replied. "His stomach was hurting, and then suddenly he was puking blood-like a lot of it! And then he collapsed and... What?" he said into the phone. Then he gave them an address. They must have been asking something else, because Tony's eyes were darting all over the place as he listened. "Yes...yes, he's breathing... No, he didn't fall. Not that I know of," he met Gibbs' eyes, who was kneeling in front of them now, and Gibbs shook his head at the silent question. "He was fine, and then he just wasn't... What? ...Okay...hang on," he set the phone down and looked to Gibbs. "They want me to lay him down on the floor. Can you help me?" he asked.

Gibbs nodded and moved to help gently lay McGee's unmoving body to lie flat. "What do they want you to do?"

Tony shook his head, not having and answer, then grabbed his phone again. "What...what now?" he waited, listening to the voice on the other end. Then, with slightly shaky hands, he lifted Tim's shirt, slowly, holding his breath as he searched the man's abdomen. "No," he let out a breath. "There's no bruising." He listened again, and Gibbs watched as Tony's hands carefully moved to Tim's belly, feeling and pressing, surely following orders from the other line. Once he reached higher up, near the ribcage, McGee groaned, and it shocked Tony to the point that the phone dropped to the floor. "McGee?" Tony's hand went to the younger man's face. "Tim, can you hear me?" he asked, fumbling for the phone with his other hand.

"McGee, you with us?" Gibbs repeated, narrowing his eyes as he bent a bit closer.

"He's...I dunno," Tony said into the phone. "Not really waking up, but he made a sound." And suddenly that sound became a choking cough, splashing tiny dots of blood over his own cheeks. "Oh god!" Tony didn't need instructions to save his friend from choking on his own bloody vomit. He and Gibbs moved fast to roll him onto his side as the coughing continued, and whatever he'd aspirated came back up, with a few rough pats to the back. There was only a short moment where Tony realized the muscles in Tim's back were flexing to indicate that he was still heaving.

Before anything else could happen, there was a loud banging at the door, and Gibbs was up quickly, to go let the EMTs in. They were fast to prepare Tim for transport, loading him onto a gurney and into the bus in less than five minutes, not wanting to waste another moment. The statement, "We don't want him to bleed out," had scared Tony stiff. Whatever happened between that moment, and the moment they were half-way to the hospital, following behind the ambulance, in Gibbs' car, he didn't really recall...
"Breathe, Tony!" Gibbs shouted from the driver's seat, as he watched Tony start to fall apart beside him. "Ya gotta calm yourself down!"

"What's wrong with him?" Tony replied, brokenly, voice cracking as he spoke, pulling at his shirt that had absorbed some of McGee's blood. "What's gonna happen to Tim, Boss? Why is this happening? I don't...I don't understand..."

"I'm not sure what's wrong with him," Gibbs told him, in a tone of voice meant to calm the younger man, before he started to hyperventilate. "But he's in good hands. They'll figure it out, and he'll be okay."

"We were just...we were just playing a game... We were just having fun, Boss," his voice was pinched, near the end. "Why is this happening? Why..." And Gibbs' attempt had failed, though it wasn't likely there would've been much he could have done to stop it from happening; Tony was going into full-blown panic mode.

Gibbs pulled the car over and threw it into park, before getting out and going around to the passenger side and opening the door. "Come on," he unbuckled the younger agent and swiveled him so that his legs hung out of the car and his feet planted on the curb they'd parked beside. His intention had been to put Tony into position to help him get his breathing back under control; head between knees. But Tony seemed to have other ideas.

Before he knew what was happening, Gibbs had arms-full of Tony, wrapping himself around his boss in a hug he could only describe as one a frightened child would give their parent. It was absorbing, yet also hiding, burrowing into the comfort that could only be provided by a loving, protective mother or father. And Tony was taking that provision from Gibbs.

The older agent was torn between fear for his agent's mental health, and honor at the younger man's feelings toward him. He could think of nothing aside from wrapping his arms around Tony's back, and holding him all the tighter against him.

How it was possible to fold around someone and melt into them at the same time, Gibbs wasn't certain. But Tony was doing it. "Is it me?" Tony asked, so quietly that Gibbs had almost missed it.

"Is what you?" Gibbs asked, holding him a bit tighter as he felt Tony's body shaking.

"Am I cursed?" he asked. "Why does this keep happening?"

"Nothing keeps happening, DiNozzo," Gibbs sighed. "What happened to Max was a freak accident. Wasn't your fault, or his, or anyone's on that plane. It was just fate...and a negligent engineer. McGee...well, whatever's goin' on with him, isn't your fault, either."

"Do you think he's gonna die?" his voice was so small, Gibbs forgot, for a moment, that he wasn't holding a small child.

"He's not gonna die, Tony. And it's not your fault. You understand me?" When Tony didn't answer, he moved his hands to the younger man's shoulders and pried apart from him, so he could look at his face. "Hey! You understand me, DiNozzo?" he asked, more sternly, again.

Tony's eyes were red, but he hadn't allowed tears, and Gibbs watched as his childlike expression of fear, suddenly morphed into something more himself; stomping the fear back somewhere else, and
putting on as brave a face as he could manage. "Yeah, I understand, Boss," he replied.

"Good," Gibbs replied, looking him over, and then, just instinctively bringing his hand up to ruffle the younger agent's hair. "Now, let's get to the hospital, and see what's up with McGee," he moved to stand from his awkward crouched position, and guided Tony back into his seat, before shutting the door and getting back into his side.

Once the car was on the road again, Tony looked sheepishly over at Gibbs. "Sorry, Boss...for what just happened, and all."

Gibbs cocked his head for a moment, not looking away from the road. "Not a reason to apologize," he told him.

"I completely freaked out on you," Tony retorted. "We don't even know what's wrong, and here I am, completely freaking out like Tim's gonna die."

"It was a bit scary to see him like that."

"I see blood all the time," Tony countered. "I see people shot."

"This isn't shot. This is unknown. Can't get scarier than that, sometimes," Gibbs glanced at him for a moment. "Vomiting blood can be a lot of things, Ducky told me." That was one of the pieces of time Tony's mind seemed to have skipped over, until Gibbs mentioned it, and then he recalled that the lead agent had been on the phone for the first half of the ride. "Just depends how much Tim's been hiding from us, about how he's been doing physically. Or if this really was sudden."

"Can't shake it, Boss," Tony told him, compulsively swallowing. "Can't make this go away- this panic. And I didn't bring my meds. Not sure what to do, right now. I'm trying, but it's like...it's like trying to put out a grease-fire with water..." he tried to breathe.

"There's a lever on the side of your seat," Gibbs told him. "Push your seat all the way back, and stick your head between your knees. You know how to do it, and I don't have any paper bags."

"I'll be okay," Tony told him. "Just need to open my window," he pressed the button until the glass disappeared into the door, and he leaned his head so that the wind hit his face.

Gibbs kept glancing over at the younger man, as he drove. Tony's struggle to get through this attack, was being done silently as possible. Gibbs couldn't help but feel bad about that. He wanted to help him, but he also needed to know what was going on with McGee. Stopping to help Tony, would possibly only make him worse, seeing as Tim's incident was the trigger. It seemed the only thing aside from drugs that could help him, was hearing some good news about their friend. If there was good news to be had. If not...well, Gibbs wasn't sure what would happen with Tony, if that were the case...

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"Please! Please let me just...call him and...tell him I'll be okay!" McGee begged the doctor that stood alongside the nurses, who were preparing him for a procedure.

"We'll be sure and tell him, as soon as they get here, Mr. McGee," the doctor assured him.

"You don't understand..." Tim was groggy from the medication they'd administered so they could begin the procedure. It was getting difficult to focus on the task he'd felt so strongly about, before. "You didn't see his...face...before..."
"Let us help you, before it gets worse, and he really does need to start worrying," the doctor told him.

The fight left Tim, and he felt himself drifting into unconsciousness. But before his hearing joined it, he could have sworn he heard Ducky's voice in the room...

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"What'd they say, Duck?" Gibbs asked, before Tony even got the chance, as Ducky came out of the E.R doors and into the waiting area.

"Timothy will be just fine," he said, looking to Tony, who had managed to mostly get himself under control. "There's an ulcer in his esophagus, that's apparently been building for a while now. But only more recently, has it escalated. It began bleeding slowly at some point, without him even realizing it, I'm sure. It was draining directly into his stomach, for I'm guessing a greater part of the day, unless he's been withholding symptom information from us."

"So the blood he'd thrown up..."

"Was a collection of what drained from his esophagus, yes," Ducky finished for Gibbs.

"It was a lot of blood," Tony told him. "What are they doing to fix him? Do they need blood? Can I give him my blood?"

"Anthony," Ducky put a hand on the younger man's arm, and gave him a small smile, "As noble an offer, you're in the midst of healing, yourself. They have what they need, here. As far as fixing him, they're preparing to do an endoscopy. They'll cauterize and then inject an adrenaline and fibrin glue, which will assist in minimizing chances of it bleeding again."

"What could've caused this?" Gibbs asked the M.E., noticing another doctor come up beside him to join in on the conversation.

"A number of things, really. None of which I'd pin Timothy on, but I'd guess that his...weak stomach during certain circumstances, couldn't played a part, or been an indication of some form of acid reflux problem. Eventually, it leads to things like this."

"Stress can also be a cause for ulcers," the other doctor chimed in. "Or so it's highly believed. It might be what aggravated it more recently, anyway. Stress at home or on the job. I've been told he's an NCIS agent?"

"Yeah," Gibbs replied, trying not to show his annoyance at the man's intrusion.

"Guys, uh..." Tony interjected, "I'm gonna...go outside and get some air, okay?" he didn't wait for an answer, before turning and heading out the automatic doors.

"Did I...say something wrong?" the doctor asked, looking back and forth between Gibbs and Ducky.

Gibbs sighed and turned to find the agent, as Ducky talked with the doctor for a moment. "Damn doctor and his damn big mouth..." Gibbs mumbled as he made his way out. Once outside, he looked to the left and right, not seeing his agent anywhere. After scanning a bit better both ways, he turned to the older woman smoking a cigarette in the designated area. "You see a guy come out here, about six-two?" he held his hand a little over his own head, giving a better example of Tony's height.

"Green shirt?" the woman asked, in a rougher voice than he'd been expecting. Gibbs nodded. "Yeah, he went that way," she pointed behind her. "Started runnin' once he got past people walkin' toward
"Thanks," he told her, and took off in the direction she'd pointed out. It didn't take long, but he'd almost passed right by him. Tony had run into the recovery ward garden area, which meant he'd needed to take a left at the middle of the structure. Gibbs had spotted him before he could run right past it, and took the left into the garden, slowing down, as Tony was now just standing there at the center of it, looking up at the stone fountain.

"You said it wasn't my fault," Tony said, knowing Gibbs had approached him.

"It's not," Gibbs replied, without hesitation.

"You heard what the doctor said. All this crap that's happened with the plane— with me— that stress is what aggravated his condition."

"Something he already had, DiNozzo."

"Something that wouldn't have gotten so out of control like this, if he hadn't been having to deal with me," he shot back, finally glancing over at his boss for a moment. "I know you're trying to make me feel better, Boss, but this is just fact. And I just...I just..." he looked back at the fountain. "I need to figure out what I did... I need to know why."

"Tony, you're not cursed."

"You say that like you mean it. But you don't believe in coincidences, either," Tony retorted. "You explain this to me. Explain what's been happening to me."

"You and your friend were in a plane wreck," Gibbs started. "You survived, against all odds. McGee... he worries. He worries about a lot of things. It's something you rip on him about. He's been stressed his whole life. School, then the job. It happens. Some of us get headaches. Some of us get ulcers. Some get gray hair. McGee got an ulcer." Tony shook his head, looking down into the water in the pool below the fountain. "Hey!" Gibbs sternly said. "Since when would I blow smoke up your ass, Tony? Yeah, he's had some added stress over all of this. But he's gonna be fine! Nothing that's happened, has anything to do with anything you've done!"

"I know it's not what I'm doing. It's just me; it's being around me that's dangerous. I don't want anything to happen to you, Gibbs. Or anyone else. I dunno how to make you safe, unless I go away."

"You're not goin' anywhere."

"Gibbs—"

"Tony, this is ridiculous. You're not cursed. Nothing is going to happen to any of us, by you staying here."

"I know it sounds ridiculous. I feel how ridiculous it sounds."

"Then maybe you should see someone," Gibbs suggested.

"Like a therapist? I see a therapist already."

"Since the accident?"

"Haven't really had time."
"Well," Gibbs turned to face the fountain, "Guess it's time to make time." They were both quiet for a long few moments. "You shouldn't have run."

"What?" Tony looked at him.

"You've got sprains and bruised bones, if you've forgotten. And I know the pain killers numb that a bit, but you shouldn't push yourself."

"I ran for ten seconds. I think I'll live," he argued.

"Regardless, I'm going to the house to get your meds. You can come with me, or stay here with Ducky. But I'd feel better if you weren't alone, right now."

"I'm not gonna run away."

"Not my point."

Another long moment of silence.

"Fine. I'll stay with Ducky. I don't wanna leave here till I can see McGee," Tony told him...
Tony stood beside Tim's hospital bed, trying to remember if he'd ever seen the younger man so pale before. The doctors said that he'd be fine; that the procedure was successful and that the transfusion went smoothly, but that it would be a few days before McGee's system was back to normal. And they'd said it would probably be a few hours before the agent would be ready to even wake up.

Tony had been thinking about what Gibbs had said; how he didn't think it was possible that these incidents had anything to do with Tony. He knew it made sense, what his boss had said. But his head just didn't want to shake the thought that he might actually be right; that he really was a curse to those around him.

Then again, Tony's mind had always had it out for him. Like right now, he thought all the way to when his mother had died. She'd been with Tony, the first time she'd collapsed and been brought to the hospital. She'd never come home, after that. He didn't remember much after that, but that his father must have known something about him being cursed, since he'd sent him away.

Then he thought of Kate. How close she was standing to him, when Ari took that shot; her blood barely needing to travel far to spray over Tony's face...

Flashes of faces, including Paula and Jenny, passed him over, only just reminding him of how he'd been with them, too. And then it led to the plane; to Max.

Tony looked down at Tim, again. Or rather, he refocused on him, where his eyes had drifted in thought. Only, now he was seeing the blood again. It was dripping slowly from the corner of the younger man's mouth. "McGee..." his heart began to speed up, unsure of what to do. And then the blood came more quickly, and covered his chin. "Oh god...oh no no no...Somebody help!" he shouted, grabbing for a towel or something, anything to try and stop it. But suddenly Tim's body was engulfed in flames...and suddenly it wasn't even Tim anymore. It was Max. He was burning...

"Tony!" a familiar voice shouted, beside him, and his entire body jolted as he looked over. It was Ziva, looking at him worriedly. His eyes shot back to the bed, finding McGee perfectly fine; no blood. It had all been in his head. Part of him was relieved. The other part was worried about his own sanity. "Tony, are you alright?" Ziva asked.

"I'm fine," his voice cracked, and he took a moment to clear his throat, before continuing. "What are you doin' here? Where's Gibbs?"

"He was called in for an emergency meeting with SecNav," she told him. "He called and told me what happened with McGee, and asked if I would stop by the house and pick these up for you, and bring them here as I was coming to see McGee." She handed him a small paper bag that he knew contained his meds, and looked to their ailing partner. "How is he?" she asked.

Tony took the bag, and held it at his side. "The docs say he'll be okay. He had an ulcer that was bleeding. Not sure if anyone elaborated when they told you." She shook her head. "Anyway, the blood filled his stomach, basically, and he started throwing it up. The doctors are guessing he lost consciousness at seeing all the blood. I'm not so sure, but I guess I wouldn't write it off, completely."

"But he will be okay," she repeated back.

"Yeah."

"And you?" she asked, looking up at him.
"I'm fine," he replied. "In fact, I'm gonna go take my meds. Actually...actually, I'm gonna catch a cab back to the house, if you can stay here with McGee. Can you do that? I don't want him to be alone..."

"Of course," she replied. "I will let Gibbs know."

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"Come on, Leon," Gibbs argued, after the MTAC meeting with SecNav. "Half of my team is down. I can't take this on, right now."

"You heard Jarvis, Jethro," Vance replied. "I'm just as annoyed by this as you are. But he's right; you are the best for the job."

"Not when I don't have my team!"

"You've got Ziva, and I can get Dorneget."

"Dorneget isn't ready for something like this, Leon, and you know it."

"He's a good agent. Just a little wet behind the ears."

"You want me to take him into this mission? Put his life in danger?"

"His life won't be in danger," Leon countered. "He's got you and Ziva."

"We're supposed to focus on the task, not be the kid's bodyguard."

"Then you and Ziva can go alone," Vance said. "Or I can go with you."

"Jarvis won't have that," Gibbs shook his head and looked off to the side.

"I don't know what to tell you, Gibbs," Vance replied. "You could always quit," he said, then smirked when Gibbs looked at him with narrowed eyes. "But I wouldn't advise it."

Gibbs paced to the other side of the room and back again, "You don't understand what's goin' on with DiNozzo, right now. I can't just up and leave him alone for two days."

"So have Ms. Sciuto be with him," Vance suggested. Gibbs squinted at him for a moment. "I'll give her the time off. Your team won't be here, so I can get a replacement for her."

Gibbs seemed to mull that over for a few moments, then ran a hand down his face. "I wanna take a week of my leave, when I get back, Leon," he demanded. "Those are my demands."

"You've got a lot more than that saved up," Vance agreed. "You fly out in two hours. Best you and David be at the jet in one."

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Tony felt a hand on his shoulder, shaking him from his sleep. He cracked open his eyes, looking to the culprit. "Boss?"

"Hey, Tony," Gibbs greeted.

"Everything okay?" he asked, then suddenly remembered about McGee, and wondered why Gibbs would wake him up, unless... "Did something happen?" he shot up into a sitting position.
Gibbs' hand went to his shoulder, "Everything is fine. I just have to go," he explained.

"Go?"

"SecNav is sending Ziva and I out on a top secret mission," he rolled his eyes. "We'll be gone a couple days. But Abby will be staying here with you. Ducky will stay with McGee, until he's checked out, and then he'll bring him here."

"What kind of mission?" Tony backed up to lean on the headboard and listen.

"Can't really tell ya."

"Is it dangerous?" he asked. Gibbs didn't answer, but kept eye contact with him. "I can't believe he's sending you out with half your team gone," Tony shook his head. "It's not safe. Do you have any back-up?"

"Ziva and I can take care of ourselves."

"I know. I know that. But I'd feel better if I could have your six... I mean, I trust Ziva to have it. But I..."

"Don't worry about the mission, Tony," he interjected. "We'll be in and out, and back here before you know it. I just wanted to let you know that I'm going. They're sending us out soon. Gotta be at the jet in half an hour."

Tony nodded in acknowledgment, swallowing as his eyes darted about the air between them. "You packed?" Gibbs held up his go-bag. Tony nodded again. Gibbs could see the nerves playing on the younger man's face. "Um," he cleared his throat, "If this uh...doesn't sound too weird, or whatever... If you could...just give me a call when you land? Just...just to let me know you got there okay..." he finally met Gibbs' eyes again.

Gibbs realized what Tony thought might happen; even before the mission ever would begin. "I think I can manage that," he told him. "Think you can manage Abs for a couple days?" he smirked.

"Oh yeah, Boss," he smirked. "We'll be fine. We'll have a movie marathon. And when McGee gets here, we'll force him to join us. It'll be great," he plastered on the infamous DiNozzo smile. "Too bad you'll be missing out."

"Maybe when I get back, we can do a...small one," Gibbs suggested, with a smile, and stood from the side of the bed.

"I'm gonna hold you to that, Boss," he pointed to him. Gibbs smirked and cocked his head a bit, before turning toward the door. "Please be careful, Gibbs," Tony told him, in a smaller voice.

Gibbs looked to him, "Can't promise I'll be careful. But I can promise we won't do anything too stupid," he smiled.

"Guess I'll have to settle," Tony said, mixed emotion on his face; humor laced with worry. "Have a good flight, Boss."

"Call you, when we land..."

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"Alright, Tony-boy," Abby said, excitedly, as she entered Tony's room. "Popcorn is here, the movie
is in, and your pain killers are sufficiently kicked in enough for this to be a super interesting evening,” she smiled as she hopped into the bed beside him, setting the bowl of popcorn down in between them.

"Nah, these don't make me as loopy, anymore, now that I've been taking them for a while," Tony told her. "Thanks for making popcorn. Hey, what time is it?"

"Uhh...I'm not sure. Why?"

"Gibbs is supposed to call when he lands. He wasn't leaving the country, was he?"

"I doubt it," Abby replied.

"He should've landed by now."

"Not if he was going to California," Abby countered. "Or if he had layovers." She pressed play on the remote, as Tony considered that.

"I guess you're right."

"If he said he'd call, he'll call," she told him.

"Yeah, I know that," he replied. That's why he was a little afraid...

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"They were ambushed, right as the got out of the jet!" Vance nearly shouted at Jarvis over MTAC feed. "You did this on purpose, didn't you?"

"I resent that implication," Jarvis replied.

"No one knew about this but you and me," Vance shot back. "You knew he was two men down on his team, and you forced him to go anyway, and now he and Agent David have been captured!"

"I had nothing to do with that," Jarvis retorted. "What would be the point?"

"I'm not sure on that. But this doesn't make any damn sense. My agents are in danger. You're gonna make sure they get the hell out of this unharmed!"

"Who are you to be making demands of me?" Jarvis narrowed his eyes.

"I'm the only thing standing between you, and this whole agency catching wind of what happened today," Leon shot back. "If anything happens to them, so help me, I won't be the only one leaving." He made a motion to the agent controlling the feed, to terminate it, and soon the screen went blank. Leon sank into one of the chairs in the front row of seats, and dropped his head into his hands. If he was wrong, he might have just cost himself his job. But right now, the fear that he might just have sent two of his best agents to their deaths, made none of that matter.

He folded his hands, closed his eyes, and rested his hands against his bowed head, and he prayed...
Tony jolted awake, at the sound of the credits rolling on the TV. Glancing over beside him, he saw that Abby had fallen asleep as well. After a moment of collecting his thoughts, he scrambled for his phone, checking to see if he'd missed any calls from Gibbs. But there was none.

"It's been another two and a half hours," he said aloud, worriedly. "Gibbs hasn't called, and it's been way too long. He'd have called, if he'd been laid over like this. He'd have let me know."

"Tony?" Abby sleepily questioned.

"Something's wrong," he told her. "Gibbs still hasn't called," he stood from the bed, pacing as he looked at his phone.

"Well, maybe he really is going overseas," she suggested, pushing to sit up.

Tony shook his head, "He would've told me to expect the call late. Abs, something's wrong; I can feel it. I need to know... I need to call Vance," he started out the bedroom door, and began dialing the director's number.

"Tony, don't you think you might be freaking out a little soon?" Abby followed him out.

"Agent DiNozzo? That you?" Vance's voice sounded on the other line.

"You're still in the office, this late," Tony stated. "What's going on, Director?"

"What do you mean?"

"Where was the mission? Where were they being flown to? Has he contacted you?"

"Slow down, Tony," Vance said. "I can't...divulge this information over the phone."

"Has something happened, Vance? I need to know...I need you to tell me..."

"I can't," he replied. "It's not something I can talk like this about, you understand?" it was like he was talking to Tony in purposeful code; as if someone might be listening in. "Is Abby still there?"

"Yes..."

"Maybe she should come into the office for a while."

"She's...supposed to stay..." he seemed to catch on, after a moment.

"I hope you're feeling well, Agent DiNozzo. I'd like to have you back at work, soon."

Tony didn't respond, before the call ended from Vance's end.

"Tony?"

He turned toward Abby's voice, and looked at her. "I need you to take me to the office..."

*~.*

When Abby and Tony entered Vance's office, demanding information, he held up a hand, ushering for them to close the door, then pressed a button under his desk, securing the room from any devices
that might be listening in.

"What the hell is going on, Director?" Tony asked, anger mostly veiled by the fear he felt in his chest.

"Gibbs and Ziva were sent to intercept a Marine officer who had, until recently, been off the grid for nearly three months," Vance told them. "This Marine is suspected of partnering with a drug cartel running out of Mexico, which ended up getting four of his fellow officers killed."

"You sent them to Mexico?" Tony yelled, incredulously. "What the hell were you thinking? Two agents up against that?"

"No," Vance held up a hand. "First off, this wasn't my idea. In fact, I voted against it. I was suspicious of SecNav, of Jarvis' plan. It looks like I was right to be. Second, we wouldn't send them to Mexico. We had intel report that the Marine, Briggs, was spotted in Canada. He'd booked a flight under an alias, but apparently SecNav got lucky, and had an officer on leave spot the guy, and overhear where he was flying out to. His flight left Ontario at 1800 hours, our time. Non-stop flight to Austin, Texas. Gibbs and Ziva arrived an hour before he was supposed to land. It was supposed to be a simple spot-and-grab. We had sent airport security a list of known cartel member images, making sure to keep a sharp eye out, in case Briggs was meant to meet any of them there. Security checked in with me, personally, through MTAC, every thirty minutes. There was no suspicious activity, and the jet Gibbs and Ziva were on, was to land in a separate area as the commercial flights, which we had heavily guarded."

"What happened?" Abby spoke up.

"They were ambushed," Leon didn't beat around the bush.

"How? What?" Tony panicked.

"Someone tipped them off," Vance surmised. "No other way I can see it possible. The last report in, was twenty minutes before the jet landed; I hadn't expected another call until they were on the ground. But when the call came, there was one guard left," he picked up the remote from his desk and pointed it to the screen on the wall, playing the MTAC footage from the last call in from Austin.

The screen lit up, blurry at first, as the signal had taken a moment to fully connect. They could see the small jet, and the ambulances, police cars and airport security vehicles parked all around the area, lights spinning wildly, as EMT's and officers roamed the area. There were bodies; the guards, lying in blood, surround the walls. One of the guards, however, strapped to a gurney, had the video camera pointed at him, with the help of an officer. He was bloody, as well; a gunshot wound to his clavicle, was all they could see on from that angle.

"Director Vance," the man's pinched voice sounded. "They came...outta no where. Like it was planned...Like they knew about call-times, landing time...everything. They ambushed us, right after our last call ended. Took us out, quickly. They had silencers. Most of us never heard it coming. All of my men...Sir, my men are all dead..." his face showed his anguish at this fact. "And they took your agents," he told him. "I don't know where. But...but they thought I was dead. They talked...said something about a warehouse. I'm thinking it can't be far from Austin... I'm sorry, Sir... I'm sorry..."

"No," Vance's voice replied. "I'm sorry, Agent. You lost a lot of good men. This shouldn't have happened. I'm smellin' somethin' bad all over this. You rest up; get yourself better, and you call me, directly, if you remember anything else. Anything, you understand?"

"Yes, Sir. I'll do that. I hope you find your agents, Sir..."
Vance ended the video, but Tony still stared at the screen in disbelief. "What's being done?" he asked. When there was no immediate reply, Tony turned and looked at the director. "What's the plan, to get them outta there?" he asked, louder.

"We have no idea where they are, right now," Vance replied. "SecNav has denied sending anyone else out, until we receive some sort of communication; demands."

"That's bullshit!" Tony shouted, slamming a hand down on the table, causing Abby to jump. "You're just gonna let them sit there, in the hands of that damn cartel, until Jarvis pulls his thumb out of his ass? They could be dead, before then! They could already...They could..." Tony was furious, fuming, and terrified, all at once. But he felt Abby's hand take gently hold of his arm, and he looked at her frightened, tear-stained face, and drew her into a comforting hug.

"It's why I called you in, DiNozzo," Vance replied. Tony and Abby looked at him. "The guard called; told me there were four cartel members. The only reason they got the jump on them, was the element of surprise, and the silencers. He said they discussed having been sent there as a task force, and to hold the agents until further instructions."

"So there's only four," Tony repeated.

"Yep," he replied. "But there'll be a lot more of you," he told him with raised brows, and glanced over to the couch, which had been in the shadows and ignored.

Agent Tobias Fornell stood and walked into the light. "You're lookin' good, DiNutso," the older agent smirked.

"Fornell..." Tony was surprised to see him. Then he looked back at Vance, "But how does he know about this?"

"I read him in," Leon told him, "As soon as he came to me, askin' why he hadn't heard from Gibbs. Apparently, there was more than one call he was supposed to make, once he landed."

"Call me nervous," the older agent shrugged, "But after what happened to you, I worry."

"But how did you even know he was going anywhere?" Abby asked.

"He called me; let me know he was going outta town for a couple of days, and to take your call, in case there was an emergency. What, with McGee being in the hospital, and Ducky with him..."

"Fornell has a team in mind to assist you with this rescue mission," Vance interjected. "Briggs killed four people, so technically it's a serial killer we're after, along with getting our agents back."

"Hotch?" Tony asked.

"And the rest of the team, yeah," Fornell told him. "Are you up for flying, though, is the question?"

"Gibbs and Ziva are in trouble, and they need my help," Tony replied, without hesitation. "I don't care what I have to do."

"How are you gonna do this, without Jarvis finding out?" Abby asked.

"That's why working with the FBI is gonna come in handy," Fornell replied. "I don't have to report to that jackass. We don't have to charter a flight through NCIS expenses. You'll take the BAU's jet. You're technically on medical leave," he said, looking at Tony. "Jarvis isn't keeping tabs on you."
Tony looked to the floor, in thought. After a moment, he looked up at Vance, "I want McGee read in."

"He's still in the hospital," Vance narrowed his eyes.

"He deserves to know what's going on," Tony told him.

"And he's okay." Abby chimed in. "He's weak from losing blood, but he's fine. He could even go on the flight, with Tony..." she looked to Tony.

"He doesn't have to do that," Tony told her.

"But he could help. I mean, with tracking and anything computer-related," she offered. "He would be local, so he'd have a little more advantage than, say, me working from here."

"Or Garcia working from here," Fornell agreed. "You're both good, but I agree; McGee would be an asset, if he can manage it."

"Sending two wounded, into battle," Tony smirked, a bit sarcastically. "They'll never suspect us coming."

"We've already got Garcia working on finding the location of where the cartel is holed up," Fornell told them. "Vance read the entire team in, not an hour ago."

"I'd planned on coming by the house, if you hadn't called when you did," Vance told Tony. "I suggest you go home and get a couple hours of sleep. I'll go see Agent McGee, and we'll see what he wants to do. Though I'm sure he'll want to go with you. It's up to Dr. Mallard, if he deems him healthy enough to fly..."

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Sleep had only come for Tony, thanks to the pain killers and anti-anxiety meds Abby insisted he take. It was before dawn, when Fornell picked him up to take him to the BAU jet, where he greeted the agents he'd met in Arizona, and was introduced to the rest of the team as they all settled into their seats.

"It's real good to finally meet you," Agent Derrick Morgan told him, shaking his hand. "I think it's amazing, what you did to try and save that woman, despite your own pain."

"Thanks," Tony replied, not really knowing what to say to that. He'd only ever been told that it was amazing he'd survived. Not that what he'd done otherwise, had meant anything.

"I agree," a blond woman said as she buckled in. "I'm JJ," she told him. "I'm glad that we can help out with this. I'm sorry about what's happened to your teammates. I would be out of my head, right now."

"JJ?" Tony asked. "Thank you for looking out for Ziva, all of you," he told them.

"Wasn't much we had to do," a man with a goatee told him. "I'm Agent Rossi, by the way. I'm amazed you've managed to dodge the media."

"They've tried," Tony told them. "They've probably been camping outside my apartment. But I haven't been there," he smirked.

"People just wanna hear your story, more than anything," Reid piped in. "Even though it's a
fortunate series of near-impossibly placed events that lead to your survival, people like to hear things like that. It gives them hope that they have that same chance."

"Maybe so," Rossi replied to the young agent's statement. "But that doesn't mean Agent DiNozzo is ready to talk about it to the world, just yet."

"Maybe sometime down the road," Tony said. "I'm sure I'll get to a point where thinking about it doesn't make my skin crawl."

"Is there room for a couple more passengers?" Ducky's voice sounded from the entranceway.

Tony looked over, as did the rest of the team, to see the older man walk in, followed by Tim. "McGee!" Tony practically tore off his buckle and stood to greet them. "Ducky, are you sure this is okay?"

"Timothy insisted," Ducky told him. "And I told him that the only way I'd advise or allow it, is if I were allowed to come along, just in case. Not to mention, I would like to assist in finding Ziva and Jethro, if I can."

"You okay?" Tony asked Tim, as he stood in front of him.

"I'm fine, Tony," he replied. "I'm sorry... I didn't mean..."

"It's okay," Tony let out a relieved laugh, and found himself drawing the younger man into an embrace. "I'm just glad you're okay." He pulled away, looking sheepishly to the floor for a moment. "You'll be okay, with this stress?"

"If I wasn't, I couldn't keep my job, now could I?" he cocked his head.

"Let's get ready to take off," Hotch chimed in. "We can do introductions as we fly..."
Chapter 22

The sun was just making its existence known, as the jet landed in a private landing strip just outside of Austin. Garcia had narrowed down the warehouse location to a thirty mile radius, and had been talking to McGee via video chat, on the plane. She would coordinate with him, and he'd use his laptop, and local PD would have a surveillance van ready for him to use, in order to do so.

Until they could find it that way, the rest of the team had divided off at the outer corners of that radius, doing unsuspecting manual searches of each area. Though dressed in civilian clothing, each agent had on bulletproof vests, and were armed with handguns both at their waist and ankle. They wouldn't be caught unprepared or unaware...

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Gibbs was freezing. He didn't like the fact that he was in Texas and was freezing. But it was still early, and he was in a cell made of cement walls. Ziva was in another, across from him. It was like an old storage building, he'd surmised. But he hadn't remembered much about being brought there.

They had landed, that afternoon, and got off of the jet, not even noticing the bodies, until it was too late. The massacre had been so shocking a sight, that they'd been blindsided, and the cartel members worked fast to knock both of them out. They'd been prepared for their arrival. A little too prepared. For them to have taken him and Ziva both by surprise, was no coincidence. Someone had compromised them. And with all this time to do nothing but think, Gibbs couldn't help but to have his mind wander back to Jarvis, and the fact that he'd sent them on this mission shorthanded, even after having argued the fact that it was a stupid idea.

Sure, they hadn't exactly expected this, or anything like it. But there was always a chance for it, and the fact that he'd agreed to this stupid mission, angered Gibbs more than anything. He'd put Ziva in danger. And if they died there, would anyone ever figure out why?

That got him thinking about Tony. Surely, the younger agent was worried, by now, since he hadn't called to tell him he'd landed. There was no way to get a message out. Not that that would change anything for either party.

Gibbs was confused as to why they hadn't simply been executed. Surely, if they'd just wanted NCIS out of the way until Briggs could cross the border safely, they'd have either killed them, or let them go by now. But it'd been too long, and there had been no communication between the kidnappers and the agents. He wasn't sure if they'd called NCIS and made demands, but regardless, they seemed unconcerned with informing the captured agents of their intentions. Part of him felt he should probably be relieved, as the less they talked to them, the less need they had to kill them, if they weren't already planning on it...

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"Agent McGee, are you there?" Penelope Garcia asked, in front of her webcam, looking at the screen which showed an empty chair inside the surveillance van. After a moment, a figure appeared and sat.

"I'm here," McGee replied.

"I found something interesting," she told him, pulling up information that would also show up on his monitors in the van. "There was a call placed, just moments after the shooting at the airport. It came
from a cell phone registered under the name Alejandro Martinez, and it's a Veracruz number."

"Mexico..."

"Right. I've managed to pick up the signal being used again, significantly shortening the search parameters. Assuming this is one of our culprits..."

"Gibbs doesn't believe in coincidences," the agent smirked.

"I find that to be an excellent belief," she replied.

"Okay, I see the parameter update. Thanks. I'll run the signal through on my end; might hit here faster, if they use the line again. That was a really great catch, Garcia."

Penelope smiled, "Well thank you, honey bun!"

McGee raised an amused brow, "Honey bun?"

"Pet name."

"You've given me a pet name?"

"I just did."

"Okay. Cool...I guess. Thank you?"

"You're welcome, honey bun. Watchin' over you from here. Good luck! Over and out."

.:.*:.

The screen showing Garcia's face, went blank, and McGee shook off his amusement of the woman that reminded him a bit of Abby, so he could get back to work. Picking up his headphones, he pressed a button that allowed him to speak to Tony via headset.

"Tony?"

After a moment, he replied, "What's happenin', McGee?"

"We've got updated parameters," he told him. "Sending it to everyone's phones. How's it looking out there? More importantly, are you feeling okay?"

"Well, it's starting to heat up," Tony told him. "These vests are gonna suck, come noon. No one's reported anything out of the ordinary, yet. And aside from the fact that Gibbs and Ziva could be in need of medical attention, or worse, I'm feeling just fine. How about you?"

"Wishing I could be out there with you guys," he confessed. "But I'm good. If you don't believe me, you can ask Ducky. But he's sleeping right now."

Tony could hear the smile in the younger man's voice, and felt a bit of relief amidst all the chaos. "I'm glad JJ decided to stay back with you guys. I don't like you sitting there like ducks, without any back up."

"I think we'll be fine, Tony," he retorted. "This thing even has a bathroom. We don't even have to leave it, until we're done here."

"That thing has a bathroom? Didn't look that big from the outside."
"It's designed not to," he told him. "And it's not like you can actually take a shower in it or anything. So I guess technically not a bathroom. Rest room."

"Hopefully no one's had burritos for breakfast."

"Charming."

"Hey...Just sayin'."

"I'll let you know if we get anymore updates, Tony. You've got another two hours before you need to take your meds. Don't forget."

"Oh trust me, those are the only things letting me be out here. I won't forget them."

"Just...be careful, Tony. I told Abby we were coming back with all of us."

"Of course we're coming back with all of us, McProbie! Now, you're tying up my line. Get back to work, slacker."

McGee shook his head, but smiled, nonetheless, as he ended the call.

*

"Your boy doin' okay?" Morgan asked Tony, from where he and Agent Reid walked beside him.

"Yeah, I think he's fine," Tony replied. "Did the update get to your phone?"

"Yeah. I was just checking it out. We're actually inside of the parameter, but Rossi, Hotch and Prentiss are gonna have to catch a cab," he said with slight amusement.

"This narrowed down search parameter is significantly less ground to cover," Reid chimed in, as he looked at his screen. "This cuts out several hours. We should be able to get through all of this, assuming they do catch a cab in a timely fashion, in under three hours."

"Too bad it's gonna get a hell of a lot hotter out here, before then," Morgan commented.

"At least it's not Mexico," Tony replied, with a smirk.

"Actually," Reid retorted, "It's hotter here, than it is in places like Mexico City. But I'd have to agree that I'd rather be here, than there."

"No argument from me," Tony said, looking a bit off in the distance. "Hey," he stopped, holding a hand out to stop them in their tracks. "Hey," he motioned with his head, and the agents looked ahead of them, across the street, about two blocks up, and saw a man with a ponytail, lighting a cigarette where he stood in an alleyway. "He look familiar to you, too?"

"That's one of the men in the video footage," Reid assured him. "And his hair isn't messy. His

"That's one of the men in the video footage," Reid assured him. "And his hair isn't messy. His
clothes are neat, and there are no signs of perspiration, which indicates he's not been outside long 
enough to be effected by the heat, yet. There's no vehicle anywhere near him to indicate he's just 
arrived, so he must have come from inside the building; stepping out to have a cigarette. It's a vacant, 
currently closed down, equipment storage facility with sub-levels. If they had the time to ascertain 
where they'd hide two federal agents from being seen or heard by passersby, this would definitely be 
a good choice."

Tony looked at him for a long moment, trying to absorb everything the young man had just told him. 
"How the hell do you know all of that about the building, just by looking at it from this far away?"
he asked.

Reid shrugged, "Just observations, and estimations based on those, in order to fill in the missing 
information. If you've ever had dealings with this state and its building structures, it's fairly easy to 
conclude that most structures follow the same guidelines and regulations." 

"They're on their way," Morgan interjected, after ending his call to Hotch. "I'm having them go 
around and come in from the other direction, so we have both sides covered, in case we get runners. 
Plus, we can surround them a lot easier."

"How long until they get here?" Tony asked.

"Five minutes, if Rossi convinces the cabby to drive fast."

"Should we split up? Come in at different angles, so we don't look suspicious walking up in a group 
like this?" Tony asked.

"I could probably make it around the block and back to this street in under five minutes," Morgan 
said. "You and Reid head across the street to that little book store. Wait until you see a signal from 
me. Hotch will call me once they're here, and we'll all head over together." Tony nodded in 
acknowledgment, and Morgan headed up the alleyway to the next street, while Tony and Reid 
headed across the street to the book store.

Once inside the small shop, Tony picked a shelf near the side window to pretend to browse through, 
as he kept the corner of his eye on the man smoking beside the building. "Think we can do this?" 
Tony asked, quietly, to the younger man beside him.

Reid's eyes shifted slightly, narrowing for a moment in thought. "There are six of us, and four of 
them. Assuming the only weapons they have, are the ones we saw in the video footage, we do have 
the advantage. However, seeing as they had a predetermined post, it is possible that they have better 
weapons stored there. For that matter, I suppose it's also possible that there are more cartel members 
inside..."

"They would've had the best with them during the airport raid," Tony interjected. "They wouldn't 
have gone in with just four guys, if they had more."

"You're most likely right," Reid replied. "But I was just responding to your question in whatever 
scenario might be possible."

"Well thanks. I guess..." he turned with a book in hand, facing the window as he held the book open 
in front of him, allowing him to peek over top, inconspicuously. The man outside, flicked away his 
cigarette and glanced around before turning to go back in the door. Before it closed behind him, 
Tony caught a glimpse of a tied figure being shoved to their knees, and a gun pointed a their head. 
"Ziva..." Tony said almost too quietly for Reid to hear. He threw the book back on the shelf and 
headed toward the door.
"Tony, wait!" Reid called after him...
"They're gonna kill her," he told him, without turning back. "I'm not gonna stand here and let that happen."

Panicked, Reid hit the button on his earpiece, leading back to the surveillance van. "Agent McGee, Tony's gonna go in before the rest of us are ready," he informed. "What do I do? We'll be outnumbered, even if I go with him."

"Where's Morgan? Hotch's team is still en route..."

"He won't be at our position for a couple of minutes!"

"Alright, hold on! JJ and I are coming..."

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"This isn't like him," McGee told JJ as they quickly approached the building. "He wouldn't do this unless he'd seen immediate danger."

"Well, let's hope that whatever he saw, he can stall until we can all get in there to help," JJ replied.

"What the hell is goin' on?" Morgan asked, as he caught up with the rest of them outside of the building, Reid coming up at the same time from across the road.

"Tony saw one of the agent's at gunpoint," Spencer told them all. "He wouldn't wait."

"Can't say that I blame him, but..." Morgan started.

"There's been no gunfire," Reid continued. "So whatever he's done, it was likely the right call."

"Stupid and suicidal," Morgan added. "But right."

"Should we wait?" JJ asked. "He may be negotiating with them."

"If we charge in, they might open fire, and reverse whatever has them halted for the moment," Reid agreed.

"Or they've got Tony at gunpoint, too," Morgan interjected. "And they're just playin'eenie meenie..."

"We should go in at all entrance points," McGee chimed in. "Reid, JJ, you should go up top. Morgan, you could take the back."

"And you're just gonna go in there alone?" he questioned.

"What choice do I have? If they capture me, I'm coming in the same way Tony did. They might not expect any of you to come in any other way." McGee spotted the other team approached quickly and quietly up the alleyway. "There's our back up," he nodded in their direction.

"I think Agent McGee's idea is the most ideal," Reid spoke. "I think he should go in this way, alone. The rest of us split up accordingly and ambush them. But at least from inside, we'll have a better idea of the situation. And if Tony hasn't been captured yet, then he's already got an idea of how to best attack, and knows we're coming."
"You're sure?" Hotch looked at McGee, having heard Reid's words. Tim nodded. "Alright. Let's do this."

They scrambled off to either sides of the building, and some up to the rooftop, quietly. Tim stood, a bit anxiously, at the alley door, counting off in his head. He took a deep breath, then slowly turned the knob and let himself into the building. There in the entrance way, was an unconscious man. His weapon was removed. Tim surmised Tony had done that.

He continued on up the hallway, until he heard voices. To his left, a doorway was open, leading into the larger part of the warehouse. In the center, he saw Tony standing, gun held out to the side in surrender, where he stood in front of one of the cartel members, who had Ziva still at gunpoint. She was on her knees, looking at Tony with sympathetic eyes.

Up along the balcony of the second level, another member stood with his rifle aimed at Tony. Tim was sure to scan for the fourth member, before heading any closer. He spotted him off to the right, aiming yet another rifle at Tony.

Tim waited. He knew that if the others had a chance to move in, they could cover them. But if he were to try anything right now, they'd all end up killed, and likely only take one or two of the cartel with them, leaving Hotch's team vulnerable.

Tony hadn't dropped his weapon, which was a good thing. Though Tim couldn't tell what was being said back and forth between the man holding Ziva, and Tony, he could hear a slightly sarcastic tone in his partner's voice. It was liable to either get him killed, or stall them just long enough to get through this. Tim was hoping for the latter.

McGee noticed the slight extra movement from the second level, from the corner of his eye, and saw Morgan and Hotch silently approaching the armed member, giving Tim a slight nod. That's when the young agent made his way toward the ground-level agent that was aimed at Tony, keeping out of sight until he heard the grunt from the second level.

This sprang everyone into action.

The three cartel members on ground level, looked up at the balcony, giving the NCIS agents the split seconds they needed to take control. Tony's gun was back at aim within a moment, firing at the man holding Ziva. McGee had swiftly taken out the man closest to him, and the man on the balcony had fallen with a yelp, to the ground floor.

Surprisingly, no one was killed. The swarm of agents from the BAU around them, securing the cartel members, was simple background noise as McGee rushed to Tony and Ziva. Tony was crouched down, attempting to untie the younger agent's hands. But his were shaking so badly, that Tim took over, appraising his mentor as he did so. "You okay, Tony?" he asked.

"Where's Gibbs?" Tony asked Ziva, ignoring the question about himself.

"The lower level," Ziva told him. "There is a key around the neck of the Ben Kelev that had me at gunpoint," she spat. "It will get you into the cell."

"There's no one else?" he confirmed. She shook her head. "Are you alright? Did they hurt you?"

"I have...been separated from Gibbs, since they brought us here," she told him. "I am unharmed, aside from the initial attack. But I cannot speak for Gibbs."

Wordlessly, Tony sprang up and tore the key from around the man's neck, ignoring his yelp of pain, and stormed toward the staircase that would lead him down to the next level. Tim and Ziva watched
with worried eyes, until he disappeared, then met equally concerned eyes of the other team members.

Tony quickly made his way down the stairs, noting the considerable drop in temperature as he descended. "Gibbs?" he called out, as he reached the floor and moved down the long, dark hallway. "Gibbs!" he yelled again. He heard nothing, for long, frightening moments. And then there was the faint sound of movement.

"DiNozzo? That you?" he heard Gibbs' voice, followed by some coughing.

"Boss!" Tony wasn't even sure how his body knew which direction to go even before his mind registered it, but he was at the cell door within moments, shakily shoving the key into the lock. Once it clicked, and the door began to open, he dropped the keys to the floor and pulled at the door to quicken the process.

There, in the center of the small square of space, Gibbs was getting up off of the floor with some effort. Tony was in front of him, the next second, hands roaming over him as he appraised for damage. "You okay? Are you hurt?"

"I'm fine," he replied. "How are you even here?"

"You're sure you're okay?"

"I said I'm fine, DiNozzo," he retorted. Then he remembered... The men had come and taken Ziva upstairs. The gunshots... He'd thought for sure that they'd executed her. "Ziva..."

"She's okay, Boss," he told him.

He let out a relieved breath, then suddenly, found himself pulled into a tight embrace, forcing him to feel the younger man's shaking body. He was stunned for a moment, but then returned the hug just as tightly. "You saved us, Tony," he told him.

"I told you... I needed to have your six."

Then, in a whisper, Gibbs said, "I told you ya weren't cursed."

Tony let out a sound that was either a laugh or a sob, Gibbs wasn't entirely sure. But he held tighter, grateful to have found them alive and well...
Chapter 24

Vance was at the airport to congratulate the agents on a job well done, and took them straight over to the hospital to be seen, even at their refusal. Something about liability and whatnot, they had no choice but to agree to Vance's terms. They were just happy to be back in the vicinity of home.

The emergency intake at Bethesda was surprisingly busy for this time of night. Vance was at the intake desk, trying to pull some strings, as the BAU team piled in the doors to check in on the agents. Tony and McGee were just returning from the cafeteria with coffee for Gibbs and Ziva.

"Here ya go, Boss," Tony handed the large cup over, and Gibbs didn't miss how it shook in the younger man's grasp. Gibbs took the cup, then found himself catching Tony mid-near-collapsing.

"Whoa whoa whoa," Gibbs said, nearly under his breath, silently thanking McGee for having seen what was happening and grabbed the coffee from Gibbs so that he could use both hands. "Y' alright there, DiNozzo?" he asked, as he steadied him and led him to a chair.

"'M okay, Boss," Tony replied. "Just...been a little longer than usual between meds. Really starting to feel like I fell out of a plane, again," he grunted as he was lowered into the seat.

"A little?" Gibbs raised a brow, then looked to Tim, when Tony didn't answer right away.

"He was due to take more..." he glanced at his watch, "Well, over six hours ago. We kinda got distracted. Then the flight... I'll grab his meds; got 'em here in my bag," he told him as he swung his backpack off of his shoulder, handing Gibbs his coffee back.

"Seriously, it's not a big deal," Tony told them, clearly trying to mask his level of pain as well as he had been for several hours now. "We're here to get you and Ziva looked at. I'm fine."

"Should've let Ducky take you back to the house," Gibbs said.

"Not without knowing you're both okay," Tony replied. "Besides, I don't wanna miss the giant hugs Abby will attack you both with, once Ducky gets her back here," he grinned.

"I dunno," Gibbs replied. "You're lookin' worse than the rest of us. She may end up coddling you."

"Everything okay?" Agent Hotch asked, as they finally approached the group.

"Will be," Gibbs said as he turned to greet them. "You didn't have to come down here. I appreciate what you did to help us. Thank you."

"We're not done with this case, until you're all home safe and sound," Agent Morgan replied.

"Ziva David, Jethro Gibbs?" a nurse approached with two clipboards containing files, and they turned to her. "Right this way."

Gibbs looked to Tony, seeing McGee hand him his pills.

"You should eat something with these," Tim told Tony.

"Come on," Agent Prentiss put a hand on Tony's arm, "We'll go see if there's anything edible in the cafeteria. None of us have eaten."

Gibbs looked gratefully to the agents, then back to Tony, who was now looking at him as he stood.
"Go eat. I won't leave without ya."

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"Just sit," Morgan told Tony and McGee. "We'll bring your stuff to the table."

The agents resigned without an argument, and gave a thank you, before Morgan walked back to the line to join his teammates. McGee watched as Tony's face morphed with a spasm of pain that seemed to shake through his body, before he schooled it, and eased back into his chair.

"Pain killers should start to kick in soon," Tim said.

Tony looked over at him, flinching almost imperceptibly at the fact that the younger man had seen through his mask. "Yeah," he let out a breath. "Ten more minutes, and I should be fine. Sorry I forgot..."

"We were all kinda distracted," Tim defended the both of them. "I should've remembered to remind you. It's just...with finding them, and then being so relieved that they were okay..."

"Yeah..."

"You know you saved Ziva's life, going in there like that," he said. Tony looked at him. "It was stupid, and you could've gotten yourself killed. But they were gonna kill her. And the only reason she doesn't have a bullet in her brain, is because you risked your life to go in there like that." Tony shook his head, as if to dismiss the thought that he'd done anything out of the ordinary. "I wish I were as brave as you, Tony."

Tony looked back at him, at that. "You're pretty brave, McGoo," he countered, raising his brows. "Coming out there with me, straight out of the hospital, after what happened..." he shuddered involuntarily at the memory. "And then coming to the warehouse to back me up. You did good."

"I dunno...It's not the same."

"Look... If it'd been you that saw Ziva there with a gun to her head, there's not a single doubt in my mind that you wouldn't have done the same exact thing as I did."

"Maybe... I definitely don't think I'd have been able to stall them like you did, though."

"Oh trust me," Tony said, with a laugh, "You come up with the best ideas, when your life, and the life of your friends, are on the line. You'd have done as well, if not better, than I did."

"Ham sandwich okay?" Morgan asked, as he set two trays down on the table.

"Was there any other choice?" Tony raised a brow, knowingly.

"Nope," he replied. "Guess you've been here before, at this hour," he smirked as he took a seat, and the rest of the BAU team took seats around the table.

"Maybe once or twice," Tony replied. "Thanks for grabbing these for us."

"Are you feeling any better, yet?" Prentiss asked Tony.

"A little," Tony said in order to ease their minds.

"Ya know," Agent Rossi said, taking a seat across from Tony, "You don't have to hide the fact that you're in pain, from us. It's not as if we don't admire you for the things you've accomplished since we
met you.” Tony flinched, slightly, not sure how to feel about how easily he'd been read.

"Absolutely," Agent Reid chimed in. "The fact that you've gotten back onto a plane, not just once, but on three separate occasions, since the crash, is amazing. It's almost unheard of. I admire your bravery and perseverance. Although, to be honest, your level of selflessness leads me to question your judgment, as it pertains to your own personal safety."

Tony suddenly felt the need to throw up his defensive walls.

"Now, in the case of what we just went to do," Prentiss interjected, "It was absolutely the right decision; no one is saying any differently."

"Of course," Rossi agreed. "Had you not gone with us, things would have turned out very differently. You just strike me as the kinda of, however, that will go to that extent for whatever the reason may be. Without regard for whether or not you're in pain."

"He tries," Tim chimed in, "But we don't let him. He's not stupid, or self-destructive. He knows his limits, and when it's necessary. Sometimes, it doesn't matter what happens to you...as long as the people you care about are safe, in the end." Tony was grateful that McGee had jumped to his defense. He wasn't sure he was in the right mindset to do it, himself. But it also made him realize that Tim wasn't just talking about him. He was talking about himself, too.

Tony felt oddly compelled to hug the younger man, but refocused that energy into something more useful. "Eat your dinner, McGoo. You lost a lot of blood, not 36 hours ago." And he went back to his own sandwich and silently began to eat. Tim smirked, before digging in to his own meal.

Though the NCIS agents didn't see it, the BAU agents glanced at each other with a bit of amusement on their faces. Amused, but relieved and admiring of the men across the table from them. It didn't take a behavioral analyst to see that these people really cared about each other and their team...
"Told you I was fine," Gibbs told Tony, as they entered the house.

"A concussion and dehydration isn't 'fine'," Tony countered.

"Mild dehydration," Gibbs retorted, "And we're home, aren't we?"

"Only because you threatened the doctors, and their children's children's children."

"That's not true," Gibbs said, though he smirked at the comment. "We're home because I'm fine."

"Well, I'm glad you're okay," Tony told him. "But you need to keep drinking those sports drinks Ducky dropped off on his way back from taking McGee home with Abby."

"They're in the fridge, right?"

"That's what he said. Are you gonna go to bed?" Tony asked.

"I'm wiped," he replied. "So probably. You?"

"Yeah, the painkillers are hittin' me pretty hard."

"You okay?" his brows furrowed.

"Yeah. Just tired."

"Was a long day."

"Was a couple of long days," Tony corrected. "Scary as hell, couple of days." His gaze drifted a bit as he thought back on how highly-strung he'd been, and he wondered how he had managed to keep it together. A hand on his shoulder pulled him from his reverie.

"Thank you...for what you did, Tony," Gibbs told him, in an uncharacteristically soft voice.

"You already thanked me, Boss," Tony shook his head.

"Well, I'm thanking you again."

"I thought you'd have been angry with me."

"Oh I am," he raised his brows, and Tony swallowed. "It was stupid. You could've been killed. But...if you hadn't done what you did, we'd be dead. And that's a fact."

Tony flinched, slightly, at the statement. It wasn't a revelation, by any means. But hearing Gibbs say it out loud to him really made it all the more powerful. "You know I'll always have your six. No matter what."

Gibbs' mouth curled up at the corners, proudly, and he nodded, "Yeah, I know ya do." He appraised the younger man, fondly, before scruffing a hand through the slightly messy brown mop of hair. "No one better for the job."

Tony's heart filled at the words, so much that he could feel the bloating in his chest.

"Now let's get both our sixes some sleep?" Gibbs raised a brow.
Tony smiled, gave him a quick nod, and headed up to the guest room feeling like everything was finally okay with the world...

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Gibbs woke up at 0500 on the dot, as if his sleep schedule had never been interrupted that week. He was a little sore, but that didn't slow him down as he made his way down the stairs and to the kitchen to brew a pot of coffee. Once the grounds were in the filter, and he pressed the button to start the water going, a crash sounded from upstairs, followed by a pained cry that sounded so strange, it sparked a level of fear in his body so strongly, that his heart was racing immediately.

He took off for the stairs, and tore up them, skipping two at a time, until he reached the guest room and swung open the door. There on the floor, beside the bed, Tony lay tangled in the flat sheet and still asleep, yet thrashing and making a horrid sound. Gibbs couldn't see his face, but he heard the frantic sob, a rushing out of air from his lungs that was immediately sucked back in and held, until he couldn't help but to let it out again in the same fashion, repeating this over and over.

Gibbs was on his knees beside him, once he was able to process what he was seeing. He pulled at the sheets, trying to free the younger man from them, as he tried to gently coax him out of his dream. "Hey now, Tony, come on," he told him, gently gripping Tony's shoulders and trying to turn him onto his back. Gibbs figured that falling down off of the bed likely triggered memories of falling from the plane, and that Tony was having a bit of a panic attack. But the tear-soaked face he was greeted with, made him question what the nightmare might really be about.

"Wake up, DiNozzo!" he shouted, suddenly unwilling to hold off any longer. "Come on, you're just dreaming. Come on back... Open your eyes," he patted Tony's cheek, leaning in a bit, as if he could will him out of the dream with a glare. "That's it... Come on," Gibbs shook him, gently, as Tony's eyelids began to flutter.

"N...no...can't..." he slurred; consciousness not yet returning to him.

"Yeah, ya can, Tony..."

"Can't b...be," Tony's breath hitched. Gibbs narrowed his eyes, confused at Tony's words. "W-was too l-late..." his features crumbled, and Gibbs couldn't help but to gather the younger man in his arms...

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The Dream...

"Tony, wait!" Agent Reid called from behind him.

"They're gonna kill her," Tony replied. "I can't stand here and let that happen." He made way toward the building, and suddenly the structure was completely transparent; the walls see-through and he could see everyone inside.

His path to the door suddenly stretched out long...and he took off at a faster pace toward it; eyes locked on the man holding the gun to Ziva's head. But the road lengthened as quickly as his pace grew. Tony was running full-speed, now. But he watched in horror as the gun went off, and Ziva's body fell to the ground, lifeless.

"No!" Tony shouted, pausing in his steps for a moment as he breathed through the terror he'd just witnessed. And given the moment to think, he realized what would happen next. "Gibbs..." he took of running, again, toward the building, as he watched them drag Gibbs into the room and throw him
down onto his knees. "Gibbs!" he ran as fast as he could.

Somehow, he made it to the door and swung it open. One of the cartel members quickly approached him from the left, and Tony turned his gun and fired, sending the man to the ground. Trying to force his way to Gibbs, he fended himself by firing at the other two members on each side. But as he reached his goal, the last remaining member fired his weapon, and Gibbs' body flopped to the concrete floor; dead eyes fixed on Tony's...

Tony lifted his gun at the now-surrendering murderer, and didn't hesitate to pull the trigger, shooting him between the eyes, and watching him drop to the floor as well.

Then Tony dropped his arm down, letting his gun hit the floor, as his gaze fixed on his Boss. He dropped to his knees, as the anguish overwhelmed his entire body. Ziva lay not three feet away, surrounded by a puddle of her own blood.

He didn't know what to do. He was alone. He'd failed. He was too late...

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"Tony, it's okay. You're just dreaming. Everything's okay; just open your eyes and you'll see that."

"I'm...too late..." Tony's face scrunched with pain. "I'm so...s-sorry..." sobs wracked his body as it curled into Gibbs' chest. "So sorry, Boss..."

"You've got nothin' to be sorry for," Gibbs' heart sank in his chest at the realization of what the agent had been dreaming about. "You weren't late, Tony. You saved us. Remember? C'mon, now...wake up." He grabbed Tony's face with the hand that wasn't holding onto him, and forced it away from where it hid in his chest. "Wake up, DiNozzo!" he said, more firmly.

Tony's lids fluttered, right before shooting completely open. It took him a moment to see past the burning ache in his chest, and into the reality of where he was. But Gibbs was patient, and waited for the younger man to meet his eyes. "Boss?" Through the still-heavy breath, littered with course, scratchy undertones from the sobbing, his voice cracked.

"You had a nightmare," he told him, as if to remind him why he was confused. "You okay?"

Tony glanced around them. "I'm on the floor."

"Yeah."

"How did I get on the floor?"

"Fell outta bed," Gibbs raised a brow.

"Guess that'd explain it," Tony seemed embarrassed, and started to twist away from his boss. "Sorry... What time is it?"

"Little after five."

"Damn... Sorry I woke you."

"Was already up." He moved, so that Tony could get himself up, and pushed up off of the floor to extend a helping hand.

Tony reached up to grab onto Gibbs' hand, after realizing how stiff his legs felt, and that he'd likely be better off accepting the assistance. But upon pulling up, intense pain shot through both limbs, so
severe that he actually cried out and tried to release Gibbs' hand to stop the motion. But Gibbs was quickly beside him, hoisting his arm over his shoulder and wrapping an arm around Tony's waist to support him from falling back down, and he quickly maneuvered the younger man to sit down on the bed.

"Guess it's time for meds," Gibbs said, as Tony let out the breath he'd been holding.

"G'uh..." he grunted, still in pain, "This-this is worse...than before." His breath came in huffs, as he ran a hand roughly over one leg, then the other, hoping to alleviate some of the pain. But the motion only seemed to make it worse, and his hand went to the mattress instead, gripping onto the sheets.

"I'm gonna call Ducky," Gibbs told him, concern written clearly on his face.

"Okay," Tony told him in an outburst of breath. He watched the older agent leave the room to grab his phone, and once out of sight, let himself release some of the panic he'd been holding back from Gibbs' view. The amount of pain he'd experienced when he'd stood with Gibbs' help, was worse than when he'd been in the woods after the crash. Back then, he'd been able to suck it up and trudge himself through the forest, even though the pain was pretty bad. But now... Well, he couldn't even stand up. He couldn't stop himself from shouting out in pain, even with Gibbs right there. And that terrified him.

"Yeah, Duck," Gibbs voice started up the hall. "He didn't even protest when I told him I was calling you. It must be pretty painful." He appeared in the doorway, as he continued the conversation. "You want me to do what?" he paused in front of Tony, listening to the voice on the other line. "Okay. Hang on," he placed the phone on the bed. "Ducky wants me to do a quick check on something," he told Tony. "You ready?"

"Doesn't involve...taking my temperature rectally, does it?" Tony tried to smile.

Gibbs shook his head, with a slight smile curling the corner of his mouth. "Can you pull your pant-legs up a bit?" he motioned to the shorts Tony was wearing. Tony slid each pant-leg up a few inches as Gibbs took a closer look and picked the phone back up to his ear. "Yeah, I think they do look a little swollen, Duck." He listened as the doctor spoke. "Okay," he wedged the phone between his shoulder and ear, so he could use both hands to start palpating Tony's quadriceps.

"G'ah!" Tony yelled out, almost immediately after Gibbs' started, halting him from further exploration.

"Yeah, I'd say it's aggravated by my touching it," he told Ducky. He took the phone in his hand and straightened his head, and Tony had no problem hearing Ducky's reply.

"You should get him to Bethesda, straight away, Jethro..."
Chapter 26

Gibbs paced the waiting room, after Tony was taken back for an MRI. The amount of fear he'd seen in his agent's eyes, while they'd been waiting in the small emergency intake room, hit the older agent's nerves to the core. Tony wasn't one to show when he was scared. Not normally, anyway. There was the occasional moment, when it was something silly; much in the same fashion of how the senior field agent conveyed pain, in fact. If it was something small or silly, there was a display; almost as if it was Tony's way of even picking on himself. But if it was something huge, he would hide it with every ounce of strength he could manage.

But there was the occasional moments when it was too much; when the strength of the pain or the fear far outweighed the strength to bury it and hide. And this was one of those times. The past several weeks, in fact, had been riddled with those occasions. Gibbs knew the younger agent was already running on fumes. But his ability to recharge that strength to bury things, was immediate. This incident wasn't really a case of Tony not being strong enough to hide. That's what scared Gibbs.

Sure, there had been a horrific nightmare preceding the pain. Not to mention the stressful days beforehand. But that previous day, with Tony running around, literally, preexisting injuries masked, barely, by painkillers, couldn't done something to him. In fact, Gibbs was pretty sure that's exactly what was going on. As far as what it did to him, exactly, he didn't have a clue. He was hoping that it wasn't something that would be permanent or life-threatening. But the manner in which Ducky had told him to get him straight to the hospital, had him on edge.

Gibbs paused in his steps, when Ducky came up the hall toward him. He turned his body to face the older man, expecting news.

"They've given Anthony some stronger painkillers, and a mild sedative," he started. "Though I suspect that the painkillers are what have his nightmares so intense, lately. Nonetheless, he's finished with the MRI, and is sleeping soundly."

"Any news on the results?"

"It may take a little while, Jethro," he told him. "Perhaps we can grab a bit of lunch in the cafeteria. The doctor has both our numbers, and has promised to call as soon as they have news for us."

Gibbs nodded, acknowledging him, and blindly followed the doctor to the elevators. "What do you think this is?" Gibbs asked, as they waited for the elevator to reach their level.

"It could be a number of things," Ducky sighed. "Though his level of pain is worrisome. I fear he may have further damaged himself. The lack of mobility in his knees, coupled with the pain upon attempting any sort of movement to even try and stand...I'm afraid this isn't simply a worsened sprain."

They boarded the elevator, once the doors opened. Ducky could hear the gears spinning in Gibbs' head, and the younger of the two stood there in the shaft, blankly and worriedly staring at the wall.

"This isn't your fault, Jethro," Ducky said, knowing exactly what Gibbs was thinking. Gibbs looked over at him. "Anthony chose to come after you, and for damned good reason. You know as well as any of us, that he would do it again, in a heartbeat."

"At what cost to him, Duck?"

"Certainly at any cost," he replied, without hesitation. "Whatever this is, it's not life-threatening. At
least, if it could have been, it's been caught in time."

"What if he doesn't get better from this?"

"If you think for even a moment, that that boy wouldn't trade his ability to walk, to spare your life, and Ziva's at that, then you've sorely underestimated how much he cares for you."

"You really think he'll be happy, if he can't do his job anymore?" Gibbs asked, laced with anger and frustration.

"Do you really think," Ducky returned with as much ferocity, "That he'd have been able to continue doing his job, had he stayed home and let you die?"

Gibbs flinched, almost imperceptibly, not taking his eyes away from the older man. Ducky was right, though Gibbs wasn't ready to verbally admit it. Still, it didn't make him feel any less guilty.

"This is still because of me," he said, turning back toward the front of the shaft.

"No. It's the bloody fool that sent you on what was obviously a suicide mission."

Gibbs' frustration grew in his chest again, remembering who was responsible for all of this in the first place...

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"There was no evidence of fracture or patella displacement," the doctor explained to Ducky and Gibbs. "The MRI revealed haematoma formation in both of the rectus femoris muscles. The diameters of the left and right haematomas within the muscles were six and five centimeters, respectively."

"What's that, in English?" Gibbs interrupted.

"A swelling containing blood," Ducky explained, "They found in both his legs, Jethro. Likely what's causing the pain and mobility issues."

"Right," the doctor nodded. "We'd like to keep him here for forty-eight hours. He needs rest and elevation of both legs. We'll be treating with compression bandages, ice application; have him on some muscle relaxants, which we'll send some home with him as well, once he's discharged."

"He'll recover?" Gibbs asked.

"He should regain full mobility," the doctor replied. "But it'll take some time. It might be a couple of weeks before he can walk again. And that would be if he sticks to the isometric exercise routine we'll have worked up for him. I can't stress how important this is. Most of it will be stretching. We can send a PT out, if need be."

"We'll keep on him," Gibbs said, relief clear in his voice, as far as Ducky could interpret. "Can I see him?"

"Certainly," the doctor told him. "He's being admitted now. He'll be brought to room three-eighteen, on the third floor, straight down the hall to your left," he told them.

"Thank you, doctor," Ducky told him, then turned to catch up to Gibbs, who was already making his way toward the elevator. "Jethro, why the rush?" he asked, as he approached. "Anthony is alright."

"Wanna see that he's okay, before I go talk to Vance," he replied, straight-faced, just as the elevator
doors opened. He boarded, as did Ducky. A distant voice shouting, stopped Ducky from replying right away.

"Hold the elevator!" it was McGee. "Boss!" he said, out of breath, as he ducked into the shaft. "I came as soon as I heard." Gibbs glanced at Ducky, before looking back to the out-of-breath agent. "Is he okay? What happened?"

"He'll be okay, McGee," Gibbs told him. "Just got the news."

"Yes, Timothy, you didn't have to rush over. I did say it wasn't life-threatening, after all."

"That doesn't matter," Tim shook his head. "I- I should've kept better track of him. I should've been out there on the street with him."

"And what, McGee?" Gibbs narrowed his eyes, "Carried him through the search?"

"Well...no..."

Gibbs fit himself in front of the younger agent, Ducky automatically backing away a bit, to give them what privacy he could. The lead agent put a hand on Tim's shoulder, and looked him square in the eye, "What happened is no one's fault but the people who sent Ziva and I on that mission. And I intend to go and figure out just what the hell it was they actually sent us there to accomplish, and then give them hell for nearly killing my team. But you, McGee... You did nothing wrong. You checked out of a hospital and boarded a plane to help him; to help us. You did a good job, and I haven't gotten the chance yet, to thank you."

"Boss, I-"

"No, Tim. You were doing more than just your job. You were being a good friend and an excellent agent, and had you not been there with Tony, things might not have turned out so smoothly. So yeah... Thank you for that. And thank you for having Tony's six."

Tim was speechless, for a moment, until the dig of the elevator doors opening behind him, jogged him out of the trance. "There was never any other consideration in my mind, Boss," he finally said. "You both would do the same for me."

Gibbs was proud of the agent, and gave him a nod and a slight smile, before heading out of the elevator and toward Tony's room...

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Tony felt woozy and heavy, like he'd been drinking, as he pulled himself into consciousness. Blinking, he realized the room was quite dim. The hospital room, he remembered suddenly. The pain he'd been in, was a mere throbbing. Though the cloudiness in his head told him he was drugged to the brim, for him to be this pain free.

The last thing he remembered, was being in the MRI machine. Everything after that was fuzzy. He pushed up and bit to check himself over for any indications that he'd been taken to surgery during his lapse of memory. Upon doing so, he realized his legs were elevated, and that, in all reality, that should've been the first thing he'd noticed upon waking up. Both legs were in some kind of bandages. But he wasn't sure if they were post-surgical, or otherwise. All he knew for sure, was that the pain was no where near what it was earlier. And for that much, right now, he was grateful.

"Tony?" McGee's voice sleepily sounded beside him, and he looked over. "You're awake."
"Yeah, so are you," Tony repeated the obvious statement. "What're you doing here? What time is it? How...how long have I been sleeping? Did I have surgery?"

"Hey, calm down, first of all," McGee was up and at the bedside within mere moments. Tony gave him a funny look, until he realized that he was a bit winded and sounding panicked.

"I'm calm..."

"Right. Well, I'm here because I was worried about you. It's..." he glanced down at his watch, "A little after ten PM. You've been sleeping since they gave you some sedatives after the MRI, and no, you did not have surgery."

Tony nodded, absorbing what had been said to him. "And my legs? Did they say what's wrong with them?"

Tim nodded, "Haematomas. Basically, your quadriceps are swollen with blood, in places that started to affect your mobility. It's not permanent. But it might be a couple of weeks before you can walk on them again."

"But not permanent," Tony repeated.

"Not permanent," McGee smiled a bit at him. He watched Tony relax to some extent, and then saw as his gaze started to wander around the room, as if he were looking for someone else. "Gibbs is at the office. He'll be back around."

Tony looked at him, only shocked for a moment, that Tim knew what he'd been thinking. "It's kinda late to be at the office."

"He's talking to Vance," Tim told him. "About...the whole botched mission thing."

"How long has he been there?"

"Since this morning," McGee replied, and whilst replying, got a strange look of realization on his face, right about the same time Tony did.

"Has anyone checked in on him?" Tony seemed concerned.

"Ducky left around lunchtime to go over there. I haven't heard from either of them, though. But I...I didn't think calling would be a good idea. You know...in case he's hiding a body or something..."

"Not hiding a body," Gibbs' voice sounded from the doorway, and the two younger agents looked over, both showing sudden signs of relief upon seeing him. "How're ya feeling, Tony?" he asked as he walked further into the room.

"Fine," he replied, trying to shove aside the topic. "Plenty of painkillers in my system right now. What happened, Boss?"

Gibbs looked between the agents for a long moment, decisively, and turned to shut the door to the room. Once he got back to the bed, he started to explain. "SecNav is currently under investigation," he began. "Someone intercepted the order we were given. Jarvis didn't have anything to do with it, though I'd hoped to have the excuse to knock him out."

"Jarvis didn't care, when you'd been intercepted," Tony spat.

"He'd been compromised at that point," Gibbs told him. "He was given the order not to proceed."
Someone higher up."

"But why?" McGee asked, a bit angrily.

"Someone wants Gibbs outta the picture," Tony said, grimly, not looking away from his boss. Gibbs met his eyes, not countering what Tony had just suggested.

McGee looked back and forth between them, fear racing through his veins. "What? Why...who...I don't understand..."

"Someone in SecNav just messed up, royally," Tony continued. "They were planning something big; something illegal. And they needed the one guy who could figure it out, gone." Gibbs didn't contest Tony's speech, so he continued. "But they just exposed themselves, in doing so."

"The entire board is under investigation," Gibbs took over. "In the meantime, we all lay low. We've all got medical leave, and could damn well use it. Vance will let us know when we have the okay to come back."

"Shouldn't we be doing something?" McGee asked. "Shouldn't we be part of the investigation?"

"That could compromise us, McGee," Gibbs told him. "We were targets; all of us."

"You were the target, I thought."

"When you all came to rescue us, you put yourself in the line of the same fire. We're too involved, and it would be detrimental to the case."

"Abby can help, right?" Tony asked. "At least there's that."

"And Vance," Gibbs added. "I trust them both to get to the bottom of it, and not leave any loose ends. But can I trust the two of you to stay away from this?" he looked to both of them.

"Well, I'm not goin' anywhere," Tony replied, with a slight smirk. McGee looked nervously around at nothing, in thought. "And I'll keep Timmy here busy teaching me that game thing we were gonna start, before all of this. Right, McGoo? You'll stay with us, and lay low?"

Tim met his eyes, then looked to Gibbs, then back at Tony. "Yeah, okay," he resigned, with a sigh.

"Great!" Tony smiled. "Now...I dunno about you guys, but I'm starving..."
Tony had been on muscle relaxants for five days, though he was back home with Gibbs, now. Today, Ducky had come over to administer some non-steroidal anti-inflammatory medication, and assist the agent in some stretching exercises, which he'd have to keep up at least fifteen times a day.

Tony wasn’t fighting the routine. He wasn't complaining. He wanted to work hard to get himself better. But he was getting frustrated at the fact that he still couldn't walk. Gibbs kept telling him, "You'll get there." And Tony knew he was right. But the progress seemed so slow.

Perhaps it was the fact that he'd gotten himself a bit better, before he'd worsened the problem during the rescue mission. He'd made so much progress, and pretty much reversed it all, and then some.

His friends understood his frustration, though there was little they could do to help speed up the process. Nothing they weren't already doing, anyway. McGee had been over every day, distracting Tony by getting him involved in the video game he’d set up. Tony actually looked forward to it, though he wouldn't admit it to Tim. It was nice to get sucked into an alternate reality for several hours. It was only when the need arose that he had to leave the game and get to the bathroom, that he was sorely reminded of his physical situation.

Two days after the stretching routine, found Tony able to use crutches to get himself around. It brought a new light to the agent's eyes; renewed hope that this was working, and that he was getting somewhere with his recovery. He was even able to help Gibbs make dinner, that evening.

It was as they were just finishing up with putting dishes away, that there was a knock at the door. Gibbs, not expecting anyone, glanced at Tony, and then McGee, who both shrugged. Then he set out to answer the door. Vance stood outside of it, sticking his chin up a bit once the door opened for him. "Leon?"

"Jethro," he greeted. "I've got some news."

Gibbs narrowed his eyes for a moment, looking the man over, and noting the confident posture. He backed away a bit, inviting him inside with a gesture. It wasn't very surprising that Vance would hand-deliver the news, as they were all pretty much on edge with the possibility of being watched somehow.

"What is it, Leon?" Gibbs asked, once they reached the living room.

Vance turned to face the lead agent. "How's DiNozzo doing?" he asked, not seeing the SFA come through the kitchen door with McGee.

"He's doing great. Should be ready to come back within a couple of weeks. Now what's the news?" Gibbs asked, losing his patience.

"There was a moron working within SecNav's office, is what the news is," Vance began. "Had no clue what he was getting himself into, when he agreed to accept an outside bribe."

"Outside bribe?" Gibbs narrowed his eyes.

"Someone wanted you taken out."

"I thought you had news."
"We still don't know who."

"Still waiting on the news, Leon."

"They wanted it to look like you were killed on the job; wanted no personal involvement in your demise. That much, we know."

"So it wasn't the cartel," McGee spoke up.

"And it wasn't the guy you'd sent him after in the first place," Tony chimed in.

"That's right," Vance glanced at them, then back to Gibbs. "Edward Lee Barker," he told them. "That's the man in SecNav's office, who's on his way to Gitmo as we speak. He'll be interrogated until we get a name."

"Barker doesn't sound familiar," Gibbs said.

"Only been workin' there for a few months, is why," Leon told him. "He's the nephew of Eric Lemming." He looked at Gibbs with raised brow.

"Jarvis's uncle..."

"It's why he was so reluctant to accept there was somethin' goin' on."

"How does little Eddy have the power to make a call like sending Gibbs on that mission?" Tony asked, making his way to the couch on his crutches; McGee following behind him, watching in case the older agent needed assistance.

"He made it look like Lemming signed the order. Brought it to Jarvis to carry out."

"And that worked how?" Tony asked.

"It's how things were being handled before all of this; Lemming would hand off assignments and have Barker deliver them out. He wanted to give the kid some responsibilities. He had no idea Barker was capable of somethin' like this," Vance explained.

"Nepotism rarely ever has a good outcome," Tim said, as he helped Tony by taking the crutches from him, and helping him sink down onto the couch.

"Well, it works for those family-owned Chinese buffets," Tony countered.

"I said 'rarely', not 'never'."

"There are a lot of Chinese buffets, McGee."

"Tony..."

"Point is," Vance interjected, "You're free to come back to work. No need to lay low anymore. We don't think you're in any danger. Well...no more than usual, anyway."

"What do you mean, he's not in danger?" Tony retorted, angry now. "There's someone out there still at large, that wants Gibbs out of the picture. You don't even know who it is!"

"DiNozzo," Gibbs warned.

"You're right," Leon told him. "We don't know who it is. But whatever their reason behind wanting
him gone, the longer we keep you all in hiding, the more opportunity they have to do whatever it is they're planning. Without Gibbs as a threat, they might carry through before we ever get the information outta Barker."

"How do you even know Barker knows who it is?" Tony asked.

"We don't. But...it's all we have to go on."

"Wait," McGee said, and they all looked over at him. The youngest agent had wild eyes, darting back and forth in the air in front of him, as he seemed to be calculating something in his brain. "What if..."

"What if what, McGee?" Gibbs asked.

Tim's eyes settled on his boss's. "What if...Barker wasn't the only one that accepted a bribe?"

"I'm not following," Vance looked between the two men. But Gibbs' gears seemed to be turning, now.

McGee continued, "What if the airport mechanic didn't just mess up the inspection?" Tony looked up at McGee, who was still looking at Gibbs. "What if he accepted a bribe, to turn the other way, and if anything were to happen, to claim ignorance, take the money, and go retire somewhere warm and sunny, once all the dust settled?"

"Would take an awful big bribe, to make a man not care about risking that many lives," Vance commented. "But that'd mean Gibbs isn't the only target."

"Or that whomever did this," Tim interjected, "Knew it'd be difficult to get rid of Gibbs, if Tony was still around."

"Either way, we've got another witness to interrogate," Vance said. "I'll get on bringing him in. And I'll see you in the morning, Gibbs?"

Gibbs gave him a slight nod, though his attention was mostly on the seated agent, now. Vance let himself out, as Gibbs appraised Tony. The senior field agent's mind seemed to be going a mile a minute. McGee was aware of it as well, and had a concerned look on his face, surmising what the agent likely had going through his mind, but only because it had been on the table before. Before thinking they'd found the true reason for the crash. But his worst assumptions were turning out to likely be true...

"I could be wrong," Tim said, suddenly regretting having brought it up in front of his friend, before knowing for sure.

"You could be right," Tony countered. "God..." his head dropped into his hands. "All of those people are dead...because this monster was after me."

"If McGee is right," Gibbs said, sitting down beside the agent, "Then all of those people are dead because someone was greedy. And because someone is a monster."

"But if I'd decided to road-trip it, all of those people would be alive, today," Tony retorted. "Max would..."

"You can't do that, Tony," Tim sank down on the other side of his friend. "You can't blame any of this on you. It's not as if you did something to deserve being a target. And you'd have sacrificed yourself to save those people, if you could have. Even if none of them would've done the same."
Tony's eyes closed and he shook his head, "It doesn't matter. None of that matters. It doesn't change anything."

"You don't get to do that," Gibbs shook his head, and Tony looked at him in question. "You don't get to sit there and blame yourself, Tony. Because this was about getting to me. They tried to kill you, so they could get to me. Those people died because of that. So if anyone should feel the weight of all the senseless loss, it's me."

"Boss..."

"But I don't," he stopped him, before he could continue. "Because there was no warning; nothing I could've done to stop it. And as far as I know, I didn't do anything to warrant these attacks on us. So no, I won't take the blame. I won't let myself feel guilty. And I sure as hell won't let you."

For long minutes, there was silence blanketing the room; all three men deep in thought. Then Tony broke that silence. "I'm really tired," he said, his voice laced with indications that the statement was a hundred percent truth. "I think I'm just...gonna go to bed."

Gibbs stood, as did Tim, but the older man motioned for him to go on ahead; that he'd help Tony to his room. McGee nodded, slightly disappointed that he couldn't help, and left to go upstairs. Tony was staying in the downstairs guest room, until his legs were up to par again.

Gibbs helped Tony up, and handed him his crutches. He walked behind the younger man, being a sort of spotter, in the case that Tony ran out of strength and needed some help. Once he got to his bed and sat down, Gibbs took the crutches and set them against the wall beside the bed.

"Thanks, Boss," Tony said, quietly, as he situated himself on the mattress, and expected the older man to leave.

"I would've felt guilty," Gibbs said, almost under his breath, not completely certain he should even speak.

"Huh?" Tony turned his head to look at him.

"If you'd died in that crash," Gibbs elaborated, meeting his eyes. "If I'd have ever found out that this was why, I'd have blamed myself." Tony wasn't certain what to say to that. He wasn't even sure that, if he did know what to say, he'd be able to, because he was a bit frozen. "Even though I'd have known in my heart that you wouldn't blame me; that you wouldn't want me to blame myself, I still would have. So I get how you might feel that way...about Max." Tony flinched. "But I can't imagine that he'd want you to blame yourself, either. You tried to save him," he continued. "You put him before yourself, and had the situation been any different, he would've lived, and you'd be the one he was feeling guilty over."

Tony's head dropped with his gaze; eyes wandering over the covers on the bed.

"At the end of the day, there was only one person who stood in the path of life or death, and chose death for those people. And it was the man that accepted that bribe. Doesn't even matter what kinda monster offered it. It all boiled down to that guy's decision, and he chose to only care about himself. He's the one to blame. He's the one you should be pissed at. Not yourself. He's the reason those people are dead; why Max is dead. He's the reason you're in pain. Not you."

There was a long moment where neither man spoke. Thoughts ran through their heads, knowing that what Gibbs said was right. But knowing that regardless of how they needed to accept the facts, that blame was something neither truly had complete control over feeling. They'd just have to settle for
what they could manage.

"Boss?" Tony looked up at Gibbs.

"Yeah?"

"What if we don't figure out who it is?" he asked. "What if these bribe-takers don't even know who to point to? It's possible... I mean, there are ways to make a bribe without showing your face or using names. What if we don't find who did this?"

"Then we keep going," Gibbs replied, after thinking about it for a moment. "We didn't know there was someone out there, before. But now we do. Now we've got a heads up. We can't let them stop our lives. But we're aware now; we know to keep our eyes peeled and our guard up. But we don't let it stop us from doing our jobs and living our lives."

"It's like we have our own personal terrorists..."

"In a way, yeah. But we can't let them win, Tony. You can't let them make you afraid."

"I'm not afraid..."

"Good."

"Are you afraid, Boss?"

Gibbs looked at him and narrowed his eyes. "Not as long as you've got my six."

Slowly, Tony's mouth curled into a smile, which Gibbs returned. Gibbs then moved to head toward the door.

"G'night, Boss," Tony called after him.

"Night, DiNozzo."

"Oh, hey, Boss?"

"Yeah?" Gibbs poked his head back in the doorway.

"Make sure McGee isn't upstairs worrying. Remind him he's not supposed to do that..." Gibbs quirked a brow. "Don't look at me like that! If you can get me to stop, you can get him to. Read him a bedtime story or something. Check under the bed for monsters... Just...just do what you do best, Gibbs."

"What do I do best?" he raised both brows.

"Knock some sense into us," he smirked.

Gibbs couldn't help the smile, as he shook his head. "Goodnight, Tony."

"Night, Boss!"

Tony curled onto his side and switched off the light. Snuggling down into the pillow, he allowed himself to relax, and soon drifted off to sleep, peaceful in knowing that no matter what lay ahead for him and his team, they'd be able to get through it...together.

~Fin
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