Advanced Principles of Sentinel and Guide Dynamics

by AthenAstrea

Summary

Tony and Gibbs are settling into their new jobs at Homeworld Command, and Tony and
Jack are settling into their new partnership as sentinel and guide. The hours are crazy, the cases are crazier, and some witty soul has nicknamed their new division “The X-Files Unit,” but overall, everything is going well.

Then Colonel Caldwell gets snaked by the Trust, Tony starts to come into a strange new gift, and the Philadelphia problem comes back to haunt them. Now Tony and Gibbs must assemble a team to combat this new threat to Earth, while Tony and Jack must face the ultimate test of their partnership. The stakes are high, the clocks are ticking… and someone out there might just want Jack dead.

Notes

This is a work of fanfiction. All recognizable characters belong to their respective creators.

This is also a work of fantasy. I have taken extensive liberties with existing laws, texts, cultural artifacts, etc. For example, Sun Tzu obviously did not include anything on sentinels and guides in *The Art of War* (although I'm sure he would have if he had lived in a universe that had them). So don't take any of the cultural, legal, or scientific references that you find here to the bank! We live in one of Danny's alternate universes and different rules and customs apply here.

Finally I would like to thank everyone who has read and commented on previous installments of *This Space Opera*. Not only have you kept me writing when I would probably otherwise of stopped, but your comments inspired me to go in new directions with the current story.
Complex Systems

Chapter Notes

Complex System: a system with a large number of interacting parts whose actions and relationships must be understood in order to predict their collective behavior and their interactions with other systems.

Jack was pulled awake by the sound of Tony’s heartbeat outside the door of the apartment and the *snick* of the lock as his guide let himself in. He opened his eyes and squinted at the clock on the bedside table: 12:54 AM. Not the latest night Tony had pulled in the past month, but definitely later than Jack would like. Jack sat up, rubbed the sleep from his eyes, threw back the comforter, and got out of bed. He switched on the light for Tony— he didn’t need it, his night vision had been good even before he awakened as a sentinel— and padded towards the door.

He found Tony in the hallway, trying to get his shoes off at the same time he shucked his coat and suit jacket. His guide looked cold, wet, and thoroughly bedraggled, and his lungs were wheezing slightly. Winter in D.C. was, it turned out, a miserable affair, and tonight was a particularly gruesome specimen, with precipitation that kept teetering back and forth between sleet and freezing rain. Tony looked up in surprise when Jack entered the living room, coat and jacket half off and one foot up so he could get at the damp shoelaces, and almost lost his balance.

“Whoa!” Jack said, half amused, half concerned. “Easy there, Tiger.”

He stepped forward and caught Tony before he could actually topple over, deftly divesting him of his outerwear and steering him towards the couch to finish taking off his shoes.

“Jack,” Tony said with a weary smile. “You didn’t have to get up.”

Despite his words, his scent, tone, and body language all indicated his happiness that his sentinel— or, technically speaking, the sentinel who *would* be his when the finally turned their rich and ever-changing *accord* into a permanent bond— had gotten out of bed to greet him.

“Of course not,” Jack said with a lazy smile, kneeling down to take Tony’s shoes off. “If I’d had to, I wouldn’t have done it.”

Tony slumped back on the couch and let out a breathless laugh.

“Yeah, I’m beginning to get that about you,” he said, his green eyes dancing despite the drooping eyelids and the dark circles.

Jack gently removed Tony’s shoes (soaked) and his socks (also soaked), then stood up and pulled his guide to his feet. Tony moaned and slumped against Jack, dropping his head heavily on the older man’s shoulder.

“You eat?” Jack asked.

“At the office,” Tony mumbled.

“Case wrapped up?” Jack asked, guiding Tony towards the bathroom.
He knew they had been close to breaking it as of this afternoon, but he hadn’t heard from Tony after that beyond a brief text at around 8 telling him that his guide was fine and not to wait up.

“Bomb defused, Pacific Rim Society saved, terrorist cell exposed, sleeper agent safely packed off with the CIA to work out some super-secret deal for turning on her associates while her husband and new baby wait for her to come home,” Tony said.

“Good job,” Jack said, beginning to strip Tony down preparatory to stuffing him in the shower.

Unlike mundane couples, Jack and Tony did not have to worry about confidentiality as pertained to each other’s jobs. Legally, as a sentinel/guide pair, even a pro tem one, they were considered the same person, which meant that each was covered by the other’s security clearance. The legal fiction was actually meant to cover laws concerning terms of employment, but it was also useful for clearance issues, since even a temporarily bonded pair couldn’t guarantee that they would be able to keep secrets from one another. Goodness knows, Jack couldn’t always keep Tony from reading his thoughts, even if he wanted to, and Jack just had to smell Tony to know more or less what he’d been up to that day.

For instance, Tony had to know that, right now, Jack was worried as hell about the whole shitshow that was going down with the Trust trying to blow up Atlantis. Meanwhile, Jack could smell bomb ingredients, expensive cologne that wasn’t Tony’s, and spices specific to Korean cooking on his guide, and while he might not have been able to come up with ‘North Korean sleeper cell in which agents married into the American armed forces as a cover trying to blow up the Pacific Rim Society,’ he could have figured out without being told that Tony was working on something to do with high-level espionage, a high-profile target, and Korea.

Tony moaned.

“I hate it when the CIA gets involved,” he said. “Everything gets creepy and the paperwork takes forever.”

“I can’t wait until this whole transition period is over and you aren’t running around after terrorists and aliens at the same time,” Jack said, finishing with Tony’s clothes and shrugging off his own t-shirt and boxers. “At least then we’ll be working the same crazy hours.”

When Lt. Colonel Paul Davis, Jack’s 2IC at Homeworld Command, had essentially commandeered Tony and Gibbs via executive order to start up his new in-house investigative unit, Tony’s director at NCIS had proved just why she had made it into the big chair at such a young age. She had demanded, and, inexplicably, been given, a four month transition period, during which Gibbs and Tony, although already working for the Pentagon, would also be made available to work priority cases at NCIS while she put together a new MCRT. What this meant in practice was that Tony and Gibbs were essentially trying to work two jobs at the same time.

Jack, for one, was not amused.

“Yeah, then it’ll just be alien terrorists,” Tony mumbled as Jack bundled them both into the shower.

Because time and weirdness waited for no man, Tony and Gibbs had already had to take on a few cases in their new capacity, which had, among other things, involved tracking down patient zero in a plague sent to Earth by the Ori, investigating a murder that had turned out to not really be a murder at Area 51, and plugging a security breach created by an alternate version of the deceased Dr. Janet Frasier from another reality.
It was no wonder that Tony wasn’t fit to untie his own shoes right now.

“You’re working too hard,” Jack sighed, grabbing the soap and beginning to rub Tony down. “You’ve been working almost full-time hours at NCIS and Homeworld this week. You need to start sticking to the letter of your agreement with Shepard and quit pulling this kind of overtime.”

His guide moaned in pleasure, but was far too tired to even think about physically responding.

“New SAC doesn’t come in ‘til next month,” Tony mumbled, “And there’s no way in hell that the kids are ready to run a case on their own. Lee’s so green she could be a Star Trek extra, Ziva still goes all Kill Bill when things get iffy, and McGee will end up pulling an Italian Job by accident if someone isn’t keeping an eye on him.”

Jack felt a familiar spike of guilt when Tony talked about his team.

“I’m sorry I didn’t get the whole team transferred for you,” he said softly. “If you want me to try again— David’s security clearance is a bitch, but—”

“Jack,” Tony interrupted softly, turning his head and looking up at him with a fond smile, “It’s okay. Ziva— she’s a good teammate, but I’ve really only known her for a couple months. Maybe if we’d worked together longer— But honestly, if anyone had asked me before putting all this in motion, I could have told you that the only person I really needed off the MCRT was Gibbs. Who, by the way, would have had a cow if you’d actually managed to bring a foreign operative over to work at the Pentagon. Navy Yard is one thing, but this is the Pentagon, and Gibbs is a Marine. His hair would lawfully refuse.”

It was clear that Tony was loopy from the lack of sleep if he was talking about his boss’s hair like it was independent.

Jack relaxed a little. Bringing a Mossad operative— especially that Mossad operative— into Homeworld Command would have been a task on par with the labors of Hercules. Jack could have done it, if he had to— it wasn’t as though Director David wasn’t already unofficially aware of the program, and he was sure some back door dealing could have been done— but it would have been a gigantic pain in the balls.

“As for McGee—” Tony rambled on, “He wants to be Director of NCIS one day, not a nameless, faceless agent in a super-secret shadow operation that nobody has ever heard of. No, if you’re really worried about me missing people from the Navy Yard, make sure that Paul gets permission to read Abby and Ducky into the program for when we need forensics consults.”

“Paul’s on it,” Jack promised. “He’s even fitting up a sweet new forensics lab at our satellite office with all the newest toys.”

Compared to employing Eli David’s daughter, practicing some good, old fashioned nepotism to in order to get Tony’s friends read in as the new unit’s on-call ME and forensic scientist was child’s play.

“Seems stupid to set up a whole lab for what’s probably only going to be a few cases a month,” Tony slurred, closing his eyes and relaxing against Jack.

“You know how it is,” Jack said. “Operational security.”

“Mmmmnn,” Tony agreed sleepily.

Jack finished washing Tony and turned off the shower. He got them both dried off and, after Tony
had blearily brushed his teeth, tucked his weary guide into bed. Tony murmured happily, snuggling into the 1000 count sentinel-rated sheets, and Jack smiled as he turned out the light and settled down beside him. His vision adjusted quickly and he watched as Tony fell asleep in the space between one breath and the next.

He was drifting back towards sleep himself when his cell phone rang. Cursing, he sat up and grabbed it, silencing the ringer before Tony could do more than stir and murmur “Wha— oo’z ‘z it —?”

“It’s mine, Tony,” Jack murmured, rubbing Tony’s bare back. “Go back to sleep.”

Tony subsided and Jack flipped open the phone, noting Paul’s name on the screen as he did so.

“O’Neill.”

“General,” Paul said, “There’s been… developments in the situation on Atlantis. I think you need to come in right away…”

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Gibbs had been asleep for, at most, four and a half hours when the call came in. He grabbed for the phone and answered it with his eyes still shut.

“Gibbs!” he barked.

“Agent Gibbs,” said Lt. Colonel Davis’s voice.

Gibbs’s eyes snapped open. Davis sounded stressed.

Davis never sounded stressed.

He sat up.

“Yuht,” he said.

“I’m sorry, I understand that you and Agent DiNozzo just closed a case a few hours ago, but… we need you here straight away,” Davis said.

It wasn’t surprising that Davis knew what time he and Tony had crawled into bed, considering that it was Davis’s CO’s bed that Tony had crawled into. What was surprising was how hesitant Davis was about hauling them out again.

“Situation?” Gibbs asked, feeling uneasy.

“New information has been discovered concerning the Trust’s attempt to destroy Atlantis,” Davis said unsteadily. “There was… Agent Gibbs, there was a goa’uld symbiote inside Colonel Caldwell.”

Gibbs froze. Colonel Caldwell? As in, the captain of the USS Daedalus? As in, the guy in control of a spaceship capable of taking out whole cities? That Colonel Caldwell?

“How long?” Gibbs asked.
“We don’t know yet,” Davis said. “Atlantis had only just discovered the symbiote at the time of their last communication, and at the time, they were primarily concerned with getting the information needed to disarm the bomb it had planted on the city. It may be some time before we can establish all the facts. Agent Gibbs… the General is not taking this well, and— he needs his guide, but he won’t ask for him.”

Gibbs blinked. Davis must be really rattled.

“You haven’t called DiNozzo in yet?” he asked, confused.

“The General said not to,” Davis said. “When he came in, he said Agent DiNozzo needed at least 12 hours of downtime before he went back on duty. But that was before…”

Before O’Neill had found out that his buddy and the guy who commanded one of Earth’s intergalactic battlecruisers had a snake in his head.

Gibbs sighed. Things were becoming a little clearer now. Davis was an officer to the core: the chain of command was embedded in his bones. He would never disobey a lawful order from his CO. But, as Gibbs had long ago discovered, it was the officers who never disobeyed orders that were best at getting around ones they didn’t like. Case in point: Davis wasn’t waking DiNozzo up, nor was he ordering Gibbs to do so. He was simply expressing his concerns and leaving it to Gibbs who was not in O’Neill’s chain of command, to use his best judgment.

“So Tony’s on duty when I say he’s on duty,” Gibbs assured O’Neill’s 2IC gruffly. “I’ll get him up and bring him in,”

“Thank you, Agent Gibbs,” Davis said, sounding relieved.

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When Tony stumbled blearily through security behind Gibbs, clutching his large to-go cup of coffee and trying to remember what year it was— it was a new one, he was pretty sure, but which new one? ‘05? ‘07? No, ‘06, it was definitely ‘06— he was unprepared for Jack’s anger to crash into him like Brad Pitt (no relation) in the infamous Michigan/OSU game. He’d been feeling the signs of it across their accord since Gibbs hauled him out of bed and shoved him in his truck, but he hadn’t been able to feel the true scope of his sentinel’s rage until he got into the same building with him. Once they were bonded, their connection wouldn’t be dependent on proximity like that.

Right now, Tony was wondering whether that was a good thing.

They hadn’t even made it to Homeworld HQ when they were intercepted by a frazzled-looking Paul. Tony’s already unsettled nerves took another unpleasant hit, because he was used to Jack’s second in command being utterly unflappable in the face of any disaster, up to and including an offworld plague that required the president to put the nation under quarantine.

“Status report?” Gibbs said shortly.

“Nothing new from Atlantis,” Paul said, falling into step beside them. “Our analysts have compiled a report containing information about Colonel Caldwell’s movements for the past year and we’ve been trying to reach out to the NID for everything they have on the Trust. So far they have been… elusive, which, given their— previous connection, does not make me feel safe or
secure.”

Tony grimaced. That was certainly one way to put the fact that the Trust had, originally, been a rogue element of the NID. Gibbs just nodded.

“And O’Neill?” Gibbs asked quietly.

Paul winced.

“Furious,” he said.

“That going to be a problem?” Gibbs said, voice neutral.

Tony found himself wanting to whimper. For some reason, the idea of his sentinel being one of Gibbs’s problems caused him an almost physical pain.

“Yes and no,” Paul said, his glance flicking to Tony and back again. “He won’t do anything reckless, if that’s what you mean. But he also won’t be polite while he’s hunting down whoever did this. He could make a lot of enemies.”

Gibbs nodded.

“DiNozzo,” he said, “You’re first priority is O’Neill. Get him calm, get him focused. He starts pissing people off, we won’t get answers.”

“You’re one to talk, boss,” Tony said bitingly.

Like getting Jack calmed down wouldn’t have been his first priority no matter what Gibbs said.

“You know how this game goes, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said, unruffled. “We can’t have O’Neill running around as a wild card. He’ll get what he wants, but he has to play by the rules.”

“Which rules, boss?” Tony challenged. “Yours or theirs?”

“Neither,” Gibbs said. “The SGC wrote this rulebook, but O’Neill’s the one calling the shots. He stops doing his job, we can’t do ours. So you get his head on straight. Understood?”

Tony closed his eyes and blew out a breath.

“Yes boss,” he said.

They found Jack in his office snarling at the Director of National Intelligence on the video conference array.

“— don’t care who pulled what strings to create your pathetic little job,” he was saying. “I want full access to all of the NID’s information on the Trust, and I will get it whatever way I have to. You probably don’t care about all the men and women risking their lives to protect this planet, since you built your office on the corpses of the people who died in 9/11, but you sure as shit will care about your drinking buddies whose connections to the Trust will be printed out and sent to the Attorney General, the president, and every single foreign government with a seat on the IOA if I don’t get what I need. Hell, I may do it anyways, just for fun.”

Before the DNI could respond, Jack disconnected the call.

“Sir, was the gratuitous character assassination really necessary?” Paul asked mildly.
Jack just glared at him, then went back to his desk. For the first time since they had met, he was not acknowledging Tony’s arrival right away, and Tony was surprised at how much it hurt.

“Jack?” he said softly, stepping forward.

“I told Davis not to call you,” Jack snapped, not looking up.

His empathic profile hadn’t so much as budged.

“C’mon, Jack,” Tony said, trying to hide the way the callous dismissal cut, “I’m your guide.”

Jack’s head came up.

“Yeah, so?” he snapped. “Right now, I have no use for you. So get out and let me do my job!”

Tony flinched before he could stop himself, but almost immediately got it under control and let his careless, insensitive “every-bro” mask fall into place. After all, this wasn’t the first time he’d been on the wrong end of his sentinel’s tongue.

It was just the first time it had been quite this bad.

“Sure, Jack,” he said with a flash of his teeth. “Whatever. Hey, maybe, if you do your job well enough, you can piss someone off so bad that you get the SGC’s funding cut and leave Sam, Danny, and Teal’c twisting in the wind the next time the Ori attack. But hey, so long as you’re happy—”

He shrugged, turned on his heel, and slammed out of the office.

As the door was swinging shut behind him, he heard Gibbs’s soft voice:

“You have ten seconds to pull your head out of your ass, General, before I do it for you. If you don’t—”

The door banged shut.

Homeworld Command was in absolute disarray, but the chaos parted effortlessly as Tony walked through. Over the past couple of months, the office had become accustomed to the fact that, not only was Tony the boss’s guide, he was also Agent Gibbs’s second. Since the two men could be scarily similar in their scariness, and Tony was the only person besides Paul who could get anything out of either of them when they were in a mood, it seemed to be the general consensus that Tony should be treated like some kind of royalty at Homeworld Command.

After all, the thing about royalty— the thing that everyone always forgot in all the hoopla about getting waited on hand and foot— was that their day-job was basically listening to annoying people who had annoying problems that needed to be fixed.

But it looked like they were all shit out of luck today, because Tony couldn’t do jack (hah!) with his sentinel right now. In fact, right at the moment, the nasty, hateful little voice that lived in some deep, dark, dank corner of his mind was wondering snidely whether he still wanted Jack to be his sentinel.

Tony headed for Intel.

When Paul had officially gotten the go-ahead for their new unit, he had worked some mysterious voodoo to set up an office for them. Tony was cautiously curious who Paul had killed or otherwise
eliminated to clear the rooms he had reconfigured to house his still-nameless new task force, but he hadn’t gotten up the courage to ask. The suite was connected to Homeworld Command through a door in what used to be Surveillance Analysis, but was now Intel (Paul had moved things around when he realized that, for the foreseeable future, Gibbs and Tony were going to be using Homeworld’s analysts to pull data), but, because it occupied rooms on two levels, it also had its own entrance on an entirely different floor of the Pentagon so that they could bring in people who hadn’t been read in without compromising Homeworld’s security. So far, they had only managed to get an interview room and a makeshift bullpen set up, but there was room (and furniture, although it was mostly still in boxes) for a conference room and several private offices once they actually had some more people to have conferences or occupy offices.

Or a name for the unit they were working for.

The formal christening of their little enterprise was still pending, although a few people had made predictably tongue-in-cheek recommendations. Jack’s deadpan suggestion that they should call themselves the Men in Gray had been largely ignored, but Tony had come in one morning to find that some witty soul had put a paper mock-up of a Pentagon nameplate on the door in Intel that read “X-File Unit,” which was still in place. Tony had a funny feeling that, even when they finally came up with some suitably bland acronym, they already had their new nickname.

Trying not to think too hard about what had just happened, Tony swiped his security ID on the door and entered the suite. He headed up the stairs to the interview room— the contractors had put in sentinel-proofing before the paint was even dry— and pulled out his brand new, Homeworld-secured cell phone. Flinging himself into one of the chairs, he dialled the Mountain.

With what was happening on Atlantis, SG-1 would definitely be on-base and, despite the fact that it was two hours earlier there than it was here, one of them was bound to be awake.

After a brief conversation with the on-duty comms officer, he was told that Sam was unavailable, but that he could speak to Danny. He had the comms officer transfer him to Danny’s office and, after a few rings, the archaeologist picked up.

“Dr. Jackson.”

Tony closed his eyes in relief.

“Hey, Danny, it’s Tony,” Tony said.

“Tony!” Danny said. “I’ve been meaning to call you. I hear I have you to thank for the fact that the president has recommended that it be official SGC policy that I have the final say in questions of operational ethics.”

Tony winced. He vaguely remembered the president asking him, after the briefing that had kicked off his career as Jack’s guide and a member of Homeworld Command, what they should do when faced with ethical dilemmas like Khalek. “Hope like hell that Daniel Jackson’s around to make the tough call,” he’d said, and, despite his off-hand manner, he hadn’t been kidding. However, he hadn’t expected the president to take him quite this seriously.

Damnit. Months later and that goddamned briefing was still biting him in the ass.

“Yeah,” he said, “I meant to give you a heads up about that. Sorry. But I’ve— uh— I’ve got another problem.” His gut twisted and his teeth clenched around the bitter taste in his mouth. “You— you know what’s been going down on Atlantis, I assume?”
“Yeah,” Danny said grimly.

“So you know about Caldwell,” Tony said. “Danny, Jack’s— um— Jack’s—”

“Doing his level best to eviscerate the entirety of Washington D.C. with his tongue, starting with you?” Danny suggested.

Tony exhaled and slumped in his chair.

“Yeah,” he said, relieved that Danny knew what was going on, but concerned that this was considered normal Jack behavior. “I don’t— I’m his guide, Danny, but the truth is, I’ve only known him for a couple of months. This is— I don’t know how to deal with this. I don’t know if I can deal with this.”

Tony bit his cheek. He had been trying not to think about how bad the scene in Jack’s office had made him want to run.

On the other end of the phone, Danny made an inarticulate sound that was part frustration, part resignation.

“I’d like to be able to tell you that Jack’s tendency to be a complete asshole when he’s pissed is some kind of psychological reaction to the trauma of his son dying, or to the pressures of his job,” Danny said wearily, “But that would be too easy. No, as far as I’ve been able to figure out, Jack is just a good man with a God-given talent for being an asshole. When he gets mad enough, he forgets why exercising that talent is a bad idea.”

Tony scrubbed his free hand over his face.

“Wonderful,” he said. “So what do I do?”

Danny made an exasperated sound.

“There’s only so much you can do,” he said. “The absolute worst thing is to challenge him directly, because when he’s in this kind of mood, he’s pretty much looking for a fight. All you’ll end up doing is making him louder and meaner. But at the same time, you can’t let him get away with it.”

“So… I have to call him on his shit, but I can’t challenge him?” Tony said, disbelieving. “What is this, Scarborough Fair? Am I supposed to make a shirt without seams and wash it in a dry well too?”

“Like I said, there’s only so much you can do,” Danny said softly. “I’m sorry Tony. I wish I had a better answer.”

“Nah, don’t worry about it,” Tony said, his mind now working furiously on the problem. “I think — I think I have an idea.”

When he hung up the phone, he sat very still for a long moment, staring blindly at the conference table. Part of him wanted to get up, walk out of Homeworld Command, and go find something new to do with his life. That’s what he’d always done before when things fell apart, and it had worked for him so far. But he couldn’t. Realistically, this was a bump in the road, not a roadblock, and besides, the whole saving the world thing was kind of a big incentive to stick it out. Plus, as much as he didn’t like Jack at this very moment, there were two stubborn, grumpy bastards back in Jack’s office who he cared about too much to walk away from.
Back in Jack’s office…

Oh.

Oh shit.

_He’d left Jack and Gibbs in a room together._ With Jack, if Daniel was to be believed, spoiling for a fight. A fight that Gibbs would be only too willing to give him.

_Shit, shit, shit!

Tony reached out with his psionic senses, but he was too exhausted to feel anything past Jack’s anger. Stomach sinking, Tony sprang to his feet and bolted out of the room, practically tumbling down the stairs and through the bullpen before bursting out into Intel.

By the time he hit the main floor, he could hear raised voices from Jack’s office. Tony bounded across the room, dodging gaping Homeworld personnel, and barged through the door without knocking. The scene he was confronted with would have been funny if it hadn’t been so terrifying. The mandatory free-standing flagpole that all military big-wigs were required to have in their office was on the floor (didn’t you have to burn the flag if it touched the ground?) in pieces and Paul was standing in front of Jack’s desk, valiantly defending the computer and the files. Jack, meanwhile, had Gibbs by the front of the jacket and had slammed him up against the wall across from the door. Gibbs was offering no resistance, but was, instead, relaxing into the enraged sentinel’s grip and _smirking_.

“What’s wrong, O’Neill?” Gibbs goaded, his voice calm and steady. “Not used to having someone call you on your bullshit?”

“How I run my office _or_ my life is none of your business, Agent Gibbs,” Jack hissed, pulling Gibbs away from the wall a little only to slam him back again.

“Okay,” Tony said, managing to find his Guide Voice with difficulty, “That’s enough.”

Everybody turned to look at him. Tony’s eyes sought Jack’s and, when he caught his sentinel’s gaze, he held it for all he was worth.

“Paul, Gibbs,” Tony said evenly, “Get out.”

“Tony,” Paul said cautiously.

“Get. Out,” Tony repeated, his eyes still locked on Jack’s.

With a huff, Jack let go of Gibbs and stepped back. Tony didn’t dare look away, even for a second, but he could see Gibbs studying him out of the corner of his eye.


He headed for the door, followed by a very reluctant Paul. When it shut behind them, Tony let out a relieved breath. Step One, accomplished.

Of course, Step One had been the easy step. Step Two… well, he didn’t actually know if he could pull off Step Two. There was only one way that he knew of to win and surrender at the same time, and while a former girlfriend’s spectacular misinterpretation of his sexual preferences might have
given him a decent overview of the practice, he could not claim any kind of mastery.

“What?” Jack snapped irritably. “You’re not going to let Gibbs fight your battles after all?”

Ignoring the biting words, Tony stepped closer to his sentinel, his eyes never leaving Jack’s, until they were standing face to face. He could feel Jack’s anger filling the room, but, now that he could look the sentinel in the eye, he also felt frustration, grief, excitement, and— what was keeping him from continuing his verbal offensive— curiosity.

Tony stood very still for a long minute, heart pounding and breath coming quick and hard. Then, with slow deliberation, he broke eye contact with Jack, bent his head, and slid to his knees.

He felt Jack’s surprise, but did not look up to see the expression on his face. Instead, he did his best to remember the club that Elsa (or was it Elise?) had brought him to during that strange and very unnerving two-and-a-half weeks when she was trying to convince him that he was actually a submissive who had suppressed his natural orientation. It hadn’t been his worst sexual misadventure, but it had definitely something he wouldn’t want to repeat. However, he had been privy some fairly expert instruction in the art of BDSM.

How to kneel properly had been one of the first lessons.

When he sensed that he had Jack’s full attention, he moved on to one of the next lessons: how to unfasten clothing sexily and submissively. Granted, there hadn’t been any Air Force uniform pants around at the time to practice with— maybe he would have changed his mind about the whole thing if there had been— but the principles were still sound. Jack’s sudden spike of arousal was both gratifying and relieving. Up until that moment, Tony hadn’t been sure this would work.

“And now, now Tony was back on surer ground. Because they might not have bonded yet, might not have taken that final sexual and metaphysical step, but they were both healthy, active men with fully functioning sex drives, and blow jobs were awesome.

“Shit!” Jack said, his voice dropping an octave the way it did when he was really turned on. “Tony, what—? God! Yes. Just like that.”

Tony sucked on the head in that certain way he knew that Jack liked, then slid down again until it bumped the back of his throat. He couldn’t swallow Jack in this position— not yet, anyways, although he had gotten pretty good at deepthroating when the angle was easier— but Jack didn’t seem to mind. He reached down and dug his fingers into Tony’s hair, gripping roughly, but not violently. Arousal slammed into Tony and he whined around Jack’s cock.

“Fuck,” Jack ground out, hips thrusting involuntarily in time with Tony’s movements. “That’s it, Tony. So fucking good. So fucking pretty on your knees for me.”

Because, for all he couldn’t handle whips or chains or a near-stranger telling him to call her ‘mistress,’ he loved being on his knees with Jack gripping his head and making him suck him off.

“Fuck,” Jack ground out, hips thrusting involuntarily in time with Tony’s movements. “That’s it, Tony. So fucking good. So fucking pretty on your knees for me.”

His fingers shifted, gripping the back of Tony’s skull, and while he wasn’t forcing him to take more than he could handle, he was definitely making damn sure that he couldn’t stop. Time went slow and syrupy as Tony moved and sucked and swallowed around Jack, and Jack alternated between praise and obscenities as he thrust into Tony’s mouth. When Jack finally came, Tony honestly couldn’t have said whether he’d been on his knees for minutes or hours.
Trust

Chapter Notes

Trust: the expectation that a person or institution means us well.

Jack stared down at his guide through a heady mixture of triumph, satisfaction, and endorphins, and had a vague sense that something was wrong with this picture. Oh, there was absolutely nothing wrong with Tony. Tony at any time was a vision, but Tony on his knees and wearing that particular soft, wide-eyed expression could fuel his fantasies for years. But there was something…

Oh. Tony hadn’t come yet. And, judging by the desperate edge to his scent—Tony Aroused #7—that was a Very Bad Thing.

Jack shook off the haze of the orgasm and, after a brief pause to zip up his pants, reached down and grabbed Tony’s hand, pulling him to his feet. With quick, economical movements, he led Tony to the oversized couch that Paul had ordered for to his office the day after he’d met Tony (“A bonding gift, sir,” Paul had said with a supremely bland expression that was completely ruined by the gleam in his eye) and sat him down. Tony looked up at him with doe-eyed confusion, and Jack couldn’t stop himself from leaning down and kissing him briefly before returning to the task at hand.

Tony was docile and pliant, so it didn’t take much effort to get him how Jack wanted him, sitting against one arm of the couch with Jack kneeling on the cushions between his legs (thank God for sentinel genetics, or his knees would be in even worse shape, but even as it was, kneeling on the floor for extended periods of time was a bad idea). Jack leaned forward and put his mouth by Tony’s ear.


Tony swallowed visibly and nodded.

Satisfied, Jack went to work on his guide’s belt and, when that was undone, on the fastenings of his pants. He pulled down Tony’s slacks and briefs just enough to give himself room to work before wrapping his hand around Tony’s painful-looking erection and giving it a firm, hard stroke. Tony keened desperately in his throat, but didn’t move.

Over the next ten minutes, Jack worked Tony into a babbling mess, giving him just enough stimulation to keep him on edge, but not enough to let him come. Somehow Tony managed to keep still, but he was practically crying by the time Jack finally leaned down and took him in his mouth.

A few of the sentinels Jack had talked to had said that their enhanced sense of taste made oral sex unpleasant. Jack didn’t know what the hell was wrong with them. His sentinel senses made what had, prior to his awakening, been a fairly meh flavor into a carnival of sensory experience. It wasn’t that it was a good taste, necessarily, it was that there was so much information in the complex blend of hormones, fluids, and (with guys) genetic material, it was kind of like living in someone else’s body.

When Tony came in his mouth, it felt like they really were one person.
Tony collapsed back onto the couch, breathing hard, and Jack sat up, grinning with satisfaction. He got Tony’s pants refastened—they were in his office in the middle of a planetary crisis, there was no reason to push their luck—and then rearranged them so that he was sitting on the couch with Tony lying in his arms. For a few minutes, they just sat there, Jack savoring the afterglow and enjoying the temporary reprieve from the overwhelming anger he’d been experiencing since finding out that Caldwell had been snaked and had nearly succeeded and blowing up Atlantis.

When his guide’s heartbeat finally slowed down, Jack said,

“So, that was new.”

“Danny said I had to give you a kick in the pants without giving you a kick in the pants,” Tony mumbled, pulling away from Jack to look up at him blearily. “This was all I could come up with.”

Jack raised an eyebrow.

“You called Danny?” he asked, surprised.

Tony grimaced.

“Yeah,” he said. “I kind of— lost my perspective for a minute there. I needed some help.”

Jack frowned. He knew he’d been acting like a horse’s ass, but Tony had seen him act like a horse’s ass before and had shrugged it off with a smile and a flip comment. He tried to remember what he’d said when Tony was in his office earlier. He’d been operating pretty much purely in ‘eliminate threat’ mode at that point, but there had also been an undercurrent of… yeah, he’d been feeling protective of his guide, his guide who hadn’t slept or eaten enough this week (or, possibly, this month). And there had also been anger there, anger that his guide was so exhausted, anger that Tony couldn’t suit up and go to into battle with him that very minute.

Which, had, he realized, caused him to say…

Ah.

“Shit,” he said. “I crossed a line, didn’t I?”

Tony looked away from him and shrugged, smiling that particular toothpaste-ad smile that always set Jack’s teeth on edge because it never matched up with his scent profile.

“It’s all good,” Tony said carelessly.

“Tony!” Jack scolded, grabbing Tony’s chin and gently forcing him to turn back and meet his eyes. “You can’t bullshit me, Tony, you know that,” he said.

“Really, it’s fine, Jack,” Tony said unhappily, but Jack had been with Tony long enough now to be able to translate Tony-speak: ‘It hurt like holy fuck, but I refuse to admit it.’

“It’s not fine,” Jack said. “I’m a Grade A son-of-a-bitch a lot of the time, and for the most part, it doesn’t bother me. So far, it hasn’t seemed to bother you either, but the minute I really hurt you, it became a problem.”

Tony’s eyes dropped. He looked trapped and miserable.

“Yeah, I admit, it wasn’t awesome when you just—told me to go away like a stray dog,” he admitted painfully. “But it all turned out okay—”
“Stop it, Tony,” Jack interrupted. “It did not ‘turn out okay’ just because I pulled my head out of my ass and we both got off. You’ve gotta call me on it when I pull shit you can’t handle, Tony. I don’t want to hurt you, but I’m, A, not a mindreader, and B, as previously mentioned, a Grade A son-of-a-bitch. I don’t always know where the line is.”

Tony snorted.

“Yeah, like you really cared at that moment,” he said derisively. “Let’s face it Jack, you may not have known exactly how much of a bastard you were being, but you had a pretty good idea.”

“I thought you could handle it,” Jack said. “You take a lot of crap, Tony, from me and from Gibbs, and most days, it just— slides right off you. Today, it didn’t. I need to know that you’ll tell me when that happens.”

“I’m your guide, not your mother Jack!” Tony snapped. “It is not my job to monitor your goddamned behavior!”

Jack relaxed a little, relieved that Tony’s actions were finally matching up with his scent.

“Okay,” Jack said, “Fair enough. But I still need to know that, if things get bad, you’ll speak up. How about this. Right here, right now, we come up with a codeword. If you can’t handle something or you’ve had enough, you say that word so I know that you’ve reached your limit. It doesn’t have to be anything to do with me, it’s just a way for you to let me know that you’re in trouble and we need to stop whatever we’re doing and deal with it.”

Tony went still. He stared at Jack, his expression a hilarious mix of surprise, suspicion, and dawning realization.

“Jack,” he demanded finally. “Are you trying to give me a **safeword**?”

Jack paused, then realized exactly what he had said and laughed.

“I was thinking more ops code, but hey, if it quacks like a duck…” he said.

Tony’s mouth quirked up in a small, delighted smile, but there was a trace of fresh anxiety in his eyes.

“I told you,” he said, “I’m not into the whole BDSM scene. Been there, done that, really, really did not like the decor. Or the role-playing. Or the whips. I do not get how whips are sexy.”

“Tony, you just took control of a situation by getting on your knees and blowing my brains out,” Jack said baldly. “I get you’re not into the role-playing or the paraphernalia, but I think it’s safe to say that dominance and submission have a definite role in our relationship.”

Tony’s eyes widened.

“I— well— huh,” he said. “I guess I never really thought about it that way before. I just— after I figured out that particular scene wasn’t for me, I put a ‘no’ next to that kink and moved on. Plenty more to explore, you know?”

“I’m starting to get really curious where you got the idea there’s only one way to do this kind of kink,” Jack said. “I’m also trying really hard not to let my protective instincts get the better of me, because I can’t imagine any **good way** you could have come to the conclusion you don’t like BDSM when you’re such an enthusiastic submissive, and my inner caveman kinda wants to punch whoever is responsible.”
“Um, that would be Elsa—or maybe Elise—the woman I dated for five weeks during college,” Tony said. “And I doubt you’d actually be able to make yourself hit her—she was only about 110 soaking wet.”

“Okay, maybe you have a point,” Jack said. “But until I know what she did, I still can’t say for sure.”

“Nothing bad,” Tony said. “She just—okay, so she was really into BDSM. And I had a one-night stand with her friend—nothing serious, just some mutual satisfaction. But her friend figured out the same thing you did, that I got off on a little pain, so she introduced me to Elise. I didn’t know that was why, not at the time, Elise—or Elsa—told me later. So we dated a few weeks, and she starts talking about BDSM, showing me some of the porn, and I—really got off on it. So she took me to a club. But it turned out that, while I liked watching people dress up and play with whips and handcuffs, I couldn’t stand doing it myself. The artificiality was really off putting—I hated calling her ‘mistress, and the costume was just weird—and the hardware was scary. Turns out, I’m fine putting cuffs on other people, but I don’t like having them put on me. But things didn’t actually go to hell until she tried to have one of the club’s professionals dom me—he was supposed to be teaching us how to use some of the—toys—she wasn’t proficient with. I— I couldn’t even get on my knees for him. When he tried to make me—I hadn’t safeworded, so he thought we were still, you know, in the scene—I tried to fight back. This was before I went through police academy and did the whole beat cop thing, so I didn’t have the training or the instincts yet, but I played football, and—he called security. Then he told us to leave and not come back.” He shrugged and smiled a humorless little smile. “Turns out, I’m not that good of a submissive after all.”

Tony stopped. Jack took a few deep, calming breaths.

“Okay, no, still want to punch her,” he said. “She had no business doing any of that with you if you weren’t comfortable with it.”

“Um, I may have been…less than honest about how uncomfortable I was?” Tony said. “I was pretty damned confused at the time, and my body was giving me some really mixed signals—the sex was kinda the best I’d had up ‘til that point, which, looking back, is just sad. So when she asked, I usually said I was fine.”

Jack closed his eyes. This was a whole new—and very troubling—dimension of Tony’s ‘I’m fine’ problem and he wasn’t sure how to deal with it.

“Christ, Tony,” he said.

He opened his eyes again.

“Okay, so, first,” he said, “As a proud member of US military, I can tell you that what you experienced was a very specific version of BDSM, one that isn’t to everyone’s tastes. I have had a ton of sex involving orders, restraint, and or pain, and none of it included costumes or handcuffs. Second, the whole point of a safeword is that both people can get what they want without damaging anybody. Third, a good submissive isn’t someone who can’t say no, it’s someone who can, but doesn’t want to, assuming their dom does their job right. I can already tell you you are a very good submissive, and, although thinking about it makes me homicidal, I’ve known a lot of men and women in my time who would have given the last Snickers bar they were likely to see that month to have you on your knees for them, no cuffs or whips needed.”

Tony’s expression in that moment was truly hilarious. It was as though his face had gotten caught between wonder, curiosity, and arousal and didn’t know how to find its way back again. Jack couldn’t help but laugh, and Tony managed to untangle his facial muscles to laugh with him.
“Okay, Jack,” Tony said. “You can give me a safeword if it makes you happy.”

“Ah ah ah,” Jack said. “User picks the safeword— mine’s ‘matches,’ in case you were wondering.”

Tony laughed, then frowned.

“I don’t get it,” he said.

“Long story,” Jack said. “Let’s just say, it involves an op in— a very cold country, a wet field kit, and a personal decision to carry a cigarette lighter from then on. Which contributed to a decade-long smoking habit, but that’s another story.”

Tony grinned.

“Alright,” he said. “‘Gettysburg.’”

“Hmmwhathuh?” Jack said, taken aback by the apparent change of subject.

“My safeword,” Tony said. “‘Gettysburg.’”

“Cool,” Jack said. “Got it.” He frowned. “‘Gettysburg?’”

“Well,” Tony said, looking awkward, “To coin a phrase, long story, but the first time I can remember where I really, really would have liked to be able to say ‘no’ and have someone listen was during a reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg.”

Jack blinked. Then blinked again. Then opened his mouth to ask how the hell Tony had gotten caught up in a reenactment of the Battle of Gettysburg. However, before he could say anything, there was a knock on the door and Paul was sticking his head in cautiously.

“Sorry to interrupt, sir, Tony,” he said, “But the president and SecDef are going to be onscreen in the war room in ten minutes.”

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“Okay, I’m just going to ask,” said President Henry Hayes said over the vid screen. “Our 304s have some of the most advanced tech in the galaxy on board. The SGC has more safeguards against the goa’uld than I have shirts. Atlantis is the City of the Ancients, a race whose technology outrisps even the Asgards’. So how did we not pick up on the fact that there was a goddamned snake inside Steve Caldwell’s head?”

Gibbs ducked his head, concealing a smile from the two men on the split screen and the people assembled around the conference table in Homeworld’s war room. He appreciated President Hayes’s cheerful willingness to charge in where angels feared to tread, but such appreciation was best done discreetly.

“That is the sixty-four thousand dollar question, sir,” O’Neill said blithely, matching the president’s bluntness for bluntness. “Short answer, because we weren’t looking for it. Up until last year, the Trust were a bunch of xenophobes trying to wipe out the goa’uld and all the goa’uld we knew were too full of themselves to pull off a successful infiltration.”

Gibbs had been keeping an eye on O’Neill ever since he and Tony emerged from his office. It
didn’t take a sentinel to figure out how Tony had ended up calming O’Neill down—if O’Neill’s lazy air of satisfaction hadn’t given it away, Tony’s tousled hair and sex-hazed eyes would have done the trick—but Gibbs knew that the general could still lose it at the drop of a hat. He knew this because O’Neill was a lot like him, the proud owner of an infinite supply of hurt and rage that he kept neatly locked away until circumstances broke the locks.

And when that happened, there was Tony, getting caught in the crossfire.

Damnit. Gibbs liked the general, he really did, but if he had to watch him hurt Tony many more times, he might have a body to hide.

“A slightly more nuanced answer, Mr. President, might be that Homeworld Command and the SGC are not counterespionage programs,” Lt. Colonel Davis broke in smoothly. “Our mandate is planetary security, and the SGC’s is offworld exploration and planetary defense. While some of our people have skills that can cross over, they all have other duties and, for the most part, lack actual experience with intelligence operations. Without trained personnel to consistently monitor and interpret the data, all of the security measures you just mentioned are fallible.”

“Okay, fair enough,” President Hayes said. “I thought we were plugging that hole, but I guess that two agents aren’t really in a position to monitor the entire program. Agent DiNozzo, Agent Gibbs, what’s our timeline looking like for getting things up and running in your unit?”

Gibbs blinked.

“Mr. President,” he said, “Just to be clear, are you asking us how soon we can be ready to do what, as I understand it, should be the NID’s job?”

“Yes,” Hayes said without a trace of shame. “I mean, they’re sure not doing it, are they?”

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to ask,” said Michael Bolt, the current SecDef, “Where is the NID? Shouldn’t they have someone here?”

“You would think, wouldn’tcha?” O’Neill said, some of his pre-guide-sex aggression creeping back into his voice. “But nope, they’re not even returning my calls. Which is not giving me a warm, fuzzy feeling about their relationship with their former buddies.”

“I must protest,” said Richard Woolsey, the IOA rep, who, if Gibbs remembered correctly, had actually been an NID agent at one point, “The NID informed us of the threat to Atlantis as soon as they discovered it. The nature of their mandate makes even that a security risk; they certainly cannot allow another department access to their operations.”

“I’m sorry?” President Hayes said, blinking. “The NID’s mandate makes it impossible for them to share their intelligence on threats of offworld origin with the department that protects Earth from offworld threats? Am I missing something here?”

“The nature of the agency’s work would be compromised if the intelligence they gather were accessible to any outside entity,” Woolsey said.

Gibbs’s eyebrows rose. Okay, this was not sounding good. He stared at Woolsey. The man’s face was perfectly bland, but there was something…

“Okay, I feel really stupid having to ask this, but what is the nature of the agency’s work?” President Hayes asked. “I thought that they investigated weird alien stuff, but apparently, I haven’t been told the full story: exactly what is this mandate that would be compromised by sharing intelligence with Homeworld? Because I’m really not sure I like this.”
“I’m afraid that’s classified,” Woolsey replied fussily.

“We can all step out,” Jack said helpfully, gesturing to the Homeworld contingent.

“I’m afraid it’s still classified,” Woolsey said, his expression going absolutely blank.

There was a pause.

“From the president?” SecDef said disbelievingly.

“From the president and the Secretary of Defense?” President Hayes said at the same time.

Tony, most irreverently, began whistling a slightly creepy tune. Gibbs glared at him, but surprisingly, President Hayes nodded.

“Exactly,” he said. “Apparently, I have some housecleaning to do. I do not want to find out at some point down the line that my administration is a bad X-Files rerun.”

Gibbs looked at Woolsey again, expecting embarrassment, but instead there was… satisfaction? Gibbs leaned back in his chair. Well, would you look at that. The fussy little bureaucrat had wanted the president to react this way. He had probably let slip the information about the NID’s mandate on purpose—after all, he hadn’t had to enter the conversation at all. Which meant that, for some reason, he had decided that he wanted the NID gone.

Interesting. Very, very interesting.

“Okay,” said SecDef, looking ill, “I’m suddenly much more interested in the answer to the president’s original question: how close is Homeworld’s investigative division to being fully operational?”

“So—” Tony said, “You actually do want us to take on the NID’s job as well as the job we were originally supposed to be doing?”

“Well, what I thought the NID’s job was,” President Hayes said, sounding grumpy. “Apparently, I’m not allowed to know what their actual job is. So yes, I would very much like to have someone doing the job that I thought they were doing.”

“Okay,” Tony said, “Well, that changes things. We’re about six months out from having a—division? Agency? Service? We don’t actually have a name for it yet—that can investigate incidents related to the Stargate Program. If we’re going to add intelligence and counterespionage to the mix, we’re talking—what?” he looked at Gibbs. “A year?”

“Yuht,” Gibbs said. “At least. I’d say more like eighteen months, considering how hard we’re going to have to vet people before bringing them in. Between the NID and the Trust, our pool of potential agents has probably been tainted pretty extensively. We’re going to have to be real careful if we want to avoid repeating the NID’s mistakes.”

“Well, I think that having a mandate that you can actually read this office in on would be a definite step in the right direction,” President Hayes said peevishly.

Apparently, he was taking the NID’s extreme level of classification very personally.

“Alright,” SecDef said, “So, we’ve got another conversation we need to have at a later time about how to expedite getting the X-Files Unit up and running—”
“Oh no!” O’Neill broke in. “We are not calling it that! How do you even know about that?”

“He works in the same building we do, Jack,” Tony said. “His second shows up here every week for a briefing.”

Gibbs thought privately that the new division would be called the X-Files Unit over his dead body.

“— but right now, we need to do some serious damage control,” SecDef went on, ignoring O’Neill and Tony. “The way I see it, we’ve got two major areas to focus on: ascertain and neutralize the security threat caused by Colonel Caldwell being compromised and take preventative measures to make sure this doesn’t happen again.”

“Oh, believe me, our security protocols will be receiving a thorough overhaul,” O’Neill snarled. “We are going to plug that hole, even if I have to order an army of minions to make little dutch boys do it. This will not happen to any of my people ever again.”

The flow of conversation experienced a momentary interruption as everyone tried to wrap their head around O’Neill’s idiosyncratic way of expressing himself.

“Okay,” the president finally said, “Well, good.”

He was clearly relieved that somebody had a course of action in mind and wasn’t too worried about whether it was the right one.

“It’s not gonna be enough,” Gibbs spoke up.

All eyes turned to him.

“Agent Gibbs?” the president said cautiously. “You have— ah— something to add?”

“Upping security’s not going to be enough,” Gibbs said. “Look, they managed to get a symbiote into the captain of a BC-304. The battlecruisers have the tightest security in the entire program. Even taking everything the general and the colonel said into consideration, compromising Caldwell without being detected had to take a level of resources and planning that even the best security measures may not be able to protect against, at least, not 100% of the time. The only way to know for certain this can’t happen again is to take out the Trust.”

Everyone stared at him for a moment.

“Do you concur, Agent DiNozzo?” SecDef asked at last.

Tony rolled his eyes at Gibbs, although after three years, he should have been used to being put in the hot seat because of his boss’s lack of tact.

“Yeah,” he said. “I mean, apart from the fact that no security is completely foolproof, there’s also the fact that this plan almost succeeded. We may have won this round, but even though they didn’t accomplish their ultimate goal, I don’t think the other side exactly lost. If I were the Trust, I would be looking at how close Caldwell’s symbiote came and getting ready for another try. We need to take them down before that happens.”

There was another, longer silence.

“You know what?” President Hayes said. “I’m perfectly okay with that plan. Just tell me what I need to sign.”
“We’ll let you know within the day, Mr. President,” Davis said, for all the world as though this had been the plan all along.

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“Okay,” Tony said after the conference call ended, “Before we go any further, I have a pretty urgent question that I didn’t want to ask in front of the president and SecDef— I didn’t want to turn it into a ‘blame-the-guides-and-sentinels-for-missing-something’ thing like the WMDs in Iraq: how the hell did none of our people notice that Caldwell had a goa’uld in his head?”

“Lieutenant Sentinel Cadman did notice,” Paul pointed out, sounding way more like his old self now that Jack wasn’t on the verge of alienating the president or SecDef with an ill-considered remark. “That is how it was detected.”

“But in the meantime, it got past the sentinel on the Daedalus, Colonel Sheppard, Dr. McKay, and, if I remember the Atlantis roster, two more sentinels, and eight more guides,” Tony pointed out. “Which, can I just say, eight guides out of less than two hundred expedition members? That’s a little ridiculous. How does that even happen?”

Jack leaned back in his chair, feeling smug.

“I reshuffled the roster a bit when I recruited Sheppard,” he said. “I was damned if I was going to send those people to another galaxy without giving them every advantage I could, so when I found this level six epsilon sentinel with the ATA gene doing fuck-all in Antarctica of all places, I made sure to get him onboard ASAP. I figured if any op could use a multipurpose sentinel, it was the Atlantis Mission. As an epsilon, though, he wasn’t technically required to have a pro tem, and the Air Force wasn’t about to do him any favors after he embarrassed the fuck out of them in Afghanistan, so he didn’t have one. I didn’t want to strand him in Pegasus without any kind of guide, even if he didn’t technically need one, so I went through the roster and stacked the deck so he’d have a decent shot of at least finding someone halfway compatible.” Jack made a face. “Of course, then Rodney McKay gets the artificial ATA gene and gets mauled by an energy monster in the same day, which causes him to awaken, and Shepard decides that nothing will do but that he should bond with the most annoying man in two galaxies.”

“Wow, I’ve never even met Colonel Sheppard, and I already like the guy,” Tony quipped with a quick grin.

“Of course you do,” Jack said, rolling his eyes. “He’s pretty much the sentinel version of you: epsilon class, too pretty for his own good, and gets into trouble the way some people get dressed in the morning. He even has the green eyes.”

“Gentlemen,” Woolsey said chillingly, “If we may.”

Tony turned to smirk at Woolsey. Really, after the whole thing with Khalek, Tony would have been perfectly happy never to see the guy again, but apparently part of his job was to liaise between Homeworld and the IOA. To make matters worse, after Tony’s briefing, Woolsey had been ordered by the president to deliver a very pointed ultimatum to the committee from the US government that basically boiled down to, they needed to abide by the security and ethics guidelines laid down by the SGC’s personnel and Homeworld Command or the US would take its (considerable) resources and go home. Tony hadn’t been there, either for Woolsey’s meeting with President
Hayes or his presentation to the IOA, but scuttlebut had it that Hayes had essentially said, “I am not going down in history as that guy who allowed any old alien with a grudge through the gate to Earth and green-lighted human experimentation just to save a few bucks.” Woolsey might not know the particulars of how Hayes had come to his decision, but it didn’t take a genius to work out the reference to the IOA’s actions during the Khalek episode.

“Right,” Jack said, smirking at Woolsey. “Bottom line, being a goa’uld detector is a lot harder than it looks. If you aren’t concentrating or don’t know what you’re looking for, it’s not obvious that there’s a snake in some poor sucker’s brainstem. They have a natural resistance to psionics— something about the way they control the host generates a kind of shield against guide senses— so guides can’t detect them without doing some serious mojo, and they’re pretty small, so a sentinel isn’t going to hear them if they aren’t listening for them— we have to tune out all the little noises the human body makes so it doesn’t drive us bonkers. It actually used to be pretty easy to sniff them out: if it smelled like naquadah, it was a goa’uld. But then we started using naquadah ourselves, and we met the Tok’ra, and suddenly a lot of people are running around smelling like the stuff. If I remember the specs for the 304s right, the entire crew of the Daedalus probably reeks of it, and the Atlantis expedition can’t be much better— their power is at least partially generated by naquadah-based tech.”

“It should also be noted that Sheppard joined the program mere weeks before it left Earth, and McKay awakened when they were already in Pegasus,” Paul pointed out. “Neither of them would ever have had the opportunity to use their gifts on a goa’uld before. In fact, Lieutenant Cadman was the only sentinel on the city at the time who had any previous experience with the goa’uld, which may be why she was the one who was able to detect the symbiote’s presence.”

“Okay,” Tony said, “That makes me feel better in that we don’t have to figure out if the entire mission has spontaneously gone dormant, or if the Ancient technology is messing with their senses. But it does make securing against this kind of thing that much harder.”

“Well, after this, I don’t think any of the Atlantis sentinels or guides is going to forget what a goa’uld feels like any time soon,” Jack said. “They still won’t be able to pick up on it passively, but when things go wrong like this, they’ll be able to do an active scan and find the problem.”

“I imagine that Colonel Shepard and Dr. McKay may choose to make such scans part of their security regimen after this incident,” Woolsey pointed out in a snotty voice. “In fact, the IOA may even make that a recommendation in its next communique.”

“I think that kind of recommendations would go over better if it came from Tony,” Jack said with vindictive glee. “He is the program’s new Union rep, after all.”

Tony grinned at Woolsey, even though being the Union rep for the Stargate Program was really not all it was cracked up to be. In fact, it was one giant headache. Oh, he was good at it— who else could tiptoe between the Union and all the prides involved in the program without either overstepping his authority or being ineffective at his job?— but it was thankless work, most of the time. However, his new position irked Woolsey no end, which almost made the whole thing worth it in and of itself.

“Now,” Jack said, clapping his hands together, “I think it’s time for Mr. Woolsey to take his leave so that we can discuss super-secret-spy things he really wouldn’t want to hear about, even if he had the right clearance.”

“Yes, I think I should return to my office,” Woolsey said, beginning to gather up his files for all the world like it was his idea. “The IOA should be kept informed.” He paused. “I am, of course, aware that all matters related to the disposition of and countermeasures pertaining to the Trust and the
National Intelligence Department are not under the IOA’s purview.”

Jack blinked, momentarily wrongfooted, and Gibbs, for some utterly obscure reason, was overcome by a wave of smugness.

“Thank you, Mr. Woolsey,” Paul said diplomatically. “We understand how that your position is somewhat… complex, and appreciate your diplomacy.”

Woolsey left, and Tony cocked his head at Gibbs.

“Okay, what’s with the whisker-licking, boss?” he asked.

“He’s a cool customer,” Gibbs said, jerking his thumb after Woolsey, “Handled the president like a pro. But for some reason, you two rile him.”

“Handled the president?” Jack asked, concerned.

“Don’t have to say anything when we were talking about our unit taking over for the NID,” Gibbs said. “He spoke up because he wanted them out of the way and saw the opportunity to make that happen. Don’t know exactly what his problem with them is, but he said exactly what he needed to say at exactly the right time to get the president moving.”

“No way,” Jack said. “He’s not that good.”

“Oh, he is,” Gibbs said.

“But— c’mon, he’s gone head to head with Homeworld and the SGC a couple times now and each time, we came out on top,” Jack said.

“Don’t know him, so I can’t say for sure, but I’m betting that whenever he’s lost an argument to you, it was because you were right,” Gibbs said. “Guy’s a lawyer, he can argue the wrong side all day and not break a sweat. Doesn’t mean he has to win.”


Gibbs shrugged.

“Like I say, I don’t know him,” he said. “Could be wrong.”

“Christ,” Jack muttered.

“I have always found Mr. Woolsey quite reasonable,” Paul said mildly. “However, I think this is a conversation that could safely be put off until another time. Gentlemen, may I remind you that we have agreed to eliminate the Trust?”

“Ah,” Jack said, wincing. “Right. Forgot about that for a moment. How the hell are we going to pull that off?”

He looked expectantly at Paul, Tony, and Gibbs.

“We need high-grade intel on exactly where they are and what they’re doing, and we need a team to go in and neutralize them,” Gibbs said. “President should be able to authorize the team— hell, our current authorization might cover it— but we need the bodies to fill it.”

“And, just to add to the excitement, we can’t go through the normal channels,” Tony said, forcing his exhausted brain to work through the problem. “Like you said, boss, we have no idea how far
the Trust’s influence goes in the intelligence community. We need a short-cut.”

“Well, there’s Carter,” Jack said. “She’s the expert on goa’uld tech, and I know for a fact that she’s not Trust; you’re going to need her. Hell, I’d give you all of SG-1, but they’re kinda busy right now.”

“Tricky, since we’re gonna be operating on US soil and she’s Air Force, but as long as we keep her off the front lines, it should slide under the wire,” Tony said.

“Good luck with that,” Jack muttered.

“Colonel Carter understands the responsibilities and restrictions inherent in wearing the uniform, sir,” Paul said, his words underlaid with pointed subtext along the lines of, At least someone does.

“Fornell’d help out,” Gibbs said. “He can operate in the US, and I’d love to see a terrorist group try and get their claws into him.”

“You actually think Fornell would be willing to jump ship?” Tony asked. “He’s been at the FBI a long time.”

“Maybe not permanently,” Gibbs said, “But he’d definitely work this op for us. Besides, down the road, having someone in the FBI who’s read in may not be a bad thing. I’ve seen Davis’s files.”

Paul didn’t say anything, but managed to appear put upon.

“What about Ian?” Tony asked. “He’s in fugitive retrieval, and I’m, like, 99.9% positive he’s clean — psionically, he feels kinda disgustingly incorruptible. I’d have to do a median scan to be 100% sure, but—”

“Edgerton’s good,” Gibbs said, nodding. “I like it. That something we could use to cut down on time? Empathic scans? Wouldn’t replace background checks, but it might give us a head start.”

Jack looked at Tony and winced, his empathic profile broadcasting distress.

“Fuck, that would be—”

“— exhausting,” Tony finished for him. “Really exhausting. A shaman might be able to do that much spirit walking in a short period of time, but it would knock me on my ass.”

Gibbs shook his head.

“No good,” he said. “We need you on your game.”

“Wait,” Paul said, frowning. “Tony, you said that this Edgerton felt ‘disgustingly incorruptible.’ This is an impression that you picked up simply from spending time with him? Not from spirit walking or deliberately scanning him?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “But— look, it’s not an exact science. A guide can’t just— pick up on whether someone has committed a crime or hit their spouse or cheated at poker night. It’s— okay, just for instance: I know that you lie frequently. I can kind of— sense that, but if I didn’t know you, I wouldn’t know what you were lying about. To find out, I’d have to use my connection to the spirit realm. I still wouldn’t know exactly what you lied about today, but I would know why you lied, and whether you meant harm by it, and if so, why and to whom. Does that make sense?”

Paul nodded thoughtfully.
“So Mr. Edgerton—”

“Agent,” Tony corrected. “He’s FBI.”

“— Agent Edgerton is unusual in that he projects an air of exceptional incorruptibility?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “Most people aren’t that way. Like, me, I don’t have many pressure points, but
the ones I do have, yeah, I’d go off the reservation if someone pushed on them hard enough. I think
most people would.”

“Where you goin’ with this?” Gibbs asked.

“I’m wondering if we could ask the prides for help,” Paul said. “Maybe there are more sentinels
and guides in the law enforcement and intelligence communities who are acquainted with people
similar to Agent Edgerton. Or, alternatively, have long standing relationships with people who they
know through experience are clean, like Agent Fornell. We don’t need to staff a whole agency right
now, we just need— what? Ten people? Twenty?”

“If we’re talking people who need total access, more like ten,” Gibbs said. “We can get Carter for
goa’uld tech, but we’ll also need people who can track money, do geographic profiles, that kind of
thing. And we’ll need a hacker. This is gonna take data, and we aren’t gonna be able to go through
the front door to get it.”

“Like the guy on your team?” Jack asked. “You want me to read him in after all?”

Tony shook his head.

“No,” he said. “McGee’s what hackers call a ‘white hat.’ He dabbles, but he’s always stayed on the
right side of the moral line, if not the law. We’re gonna need a ‘black hat,’ someone who’s actually
walked on the dark side, someone who knows how to get their hands dirty.”

“And you think that we should ask the prides for names of people in the fields we need,” Gibbs
said to Paul, “People that the prides’ sentinels and guides trust.”

“Yes,” Paul said. “As you said, this won’t replace a background check, and if Tony and Jack are up
to it, I would still suggest that they do a— median scan— of the individuals who make the final
list, but it would cut down the time and energy investment exponentially.”

“Hmmm,” Gibbs said. “You know this only works if we trust the sentinel or the guide giving the
recommendation. You guys aren’t infallible, no matter what anybody says.”

“True,” Tony said. “We could start with Ian and Fornell, ask them if they know anybody. After
that, we can put out some feelers to people Jack and I know personally. A.J. and Harm could
probably help— A.J. knows enough about what kind of work we’re doing to make some
recommendations without any specifics.”

Gibbs nodded.

“Should work,” he agreed.

“Okay,” Jack said. “Sounds good. We can ask A.J. and Harm for some names tomorrow when we
have our appointment. Meanwhile, how soon do you think you can read in Fornell and Edgerton?”

Tony blinked. Their appointment with Harm was tomorrow? Really? He was clearly missing a day
somewhere, because he’d thought it was the day after.
It was usual for new sentinel and guide pairs to get regular check-ups for the first six months or so, often paired with classes at the pride’s S&G Center. While all sentinels and guides were taught the basics of using their gifts when they first awakened, there were many skills and pitfalls that only became applicable after someone was bonded. Tony and Jack’s insane schedule meant that they couldn’t make it to the classes the D.C. Center offered, although they had managed to go to a few of the evening workshops. Because this was D.C., and a lot of D.C.’s sentinels and guides had the same kinds of crazy schedules, Harm and A.J. had put them on an independent study course, where they did the exercises and meditations on their own time and then went into the Center when they could manage it to talk to an instructor. Every two weeks—or as near as they could get—they would go in and get a check-up from Harm to make sure everything was going well and nothing strange or unexpected was happening. Harm didn’t usually do new pairs’ check-ups at all—he was the Alpha Guide of D.C. and a JAG lawyer, he really didn’t have the time—but after Jack and Tony’s accord had deepened by accident, not once, but twice, he was keeping a weather eye on them.

“Fornell, by tonight,” Gibbs said. “Edgerton may take longer. He’s out in the field a lot. We can get the FBI to recall him, but depending on what he’s working on, it may take some time to get another agent in place to take over.” Gibbs looked at Tony. “There’s something else we have to talk about,” he said. “DiNozzo, you can’t be out front on this one.”

Tony’s gut twisted and he felt his airway trying to close.

“Why not?” he demanded, ruthlessly silencing the little voice in his head that said, Not good enough, too stupid, too slow.

“Because,” Gibbs said, his voice uncharacteristically kind, “We’re going to be pissing off a lot of very powerful people.”

Protecting me, he’s protecting me, Tony thought, relieved. Does he think I can’t do it? The little voice spoke up again, sneering Incompetent! in his ear.

“We piss off powerful people all the time, boss,” Tony protested. “I’ve always had your six before. Why is this time different?”

“Because you’re O’Neill’s guide, you have the president’s ear, and half the hill listens to you already,” Gibbs said flatly. ‘When this is all over, you’re the one who’s gonna have to go in and tell all those people we pissed off that everything is okay and have them believe it. All those people we questioned, all those people we threatened, all those people whose golf buddies and political allies we made disappear, you’re going to have to smile and tell them that it’s all over, the world is safe, and it’s business as usual. You can’t do that of you were the guy breaking down their doors in the middle of the night.”

“Oh, wow,” Tony said, sitting back in his chair and trying to let this newest bombshell sink in.

“Well, isn’t this just wizard?” Jack commented.
Social Structures

Chapter Notes

Social Structure: the social arrangement of institutions by which the members of a society organize themselves.

“Twice in two months,” Tobias Fornell commented, ambling over to where Gibbs was standing on the frozen sidewalk, to-go coffee in hand. “Be careful, Jethro, I might start thinking you like me.”

“Tobias,” Gibbs said, nodding.

“So, what is it this time?” Tobias asked. “DiNutzo’s evil twin break into the Treasury? Or did Diane show up at your house wearing that dress again?”

At the mention of their shared ex-wife, Gibbs shuddered.

Tobias grinned.

Marrying a mundane woman was not, in and of itself, a doomed enterprise for a guide like Tobias, not if he had already determined that he didn’t want a bond. Marrying that mundane woman… well, he couldn’t regret it, because Em was a gift, but it had been obvious from the start that a relationship between him and Diane was going to go down in flames. What nobody could have predicted was that he would end up getting Diane’s grumpy bastard of an ex in the divorce.

“Naht,” Gibbs said, recovering. “Got a terrorist problem, putting together an op. Wondered if you might be interested.”

Tobias rocked back on his heels. Sure, Gibbs dealt with terrorists on occasion—the US military was a tempting target, after all—but he usually had his pick of operatives. And he never called in the FBI willingly.

“And which office is running this op?” he asked aloud. “NCIS? Or the Pentagon?”

“Pentagon,” Gibbs said. “President greenlighted it this morning. These guys are good, Tobias, and they’re well connected. I need people I know I can trust.”

So, that was it. Gibbs didn’t know who might be compromised, so he was putting together a team of people that he—or, one presumed, DiNozzo or O’Neill—could vouch for personally.

“I’m flattered,” Tobias said dryly.

He was flattered, but he also knew that this was going to be a shit-show of the first order. Whatever Gibbs was getting him into, it was bound to be big and messy. And, since DiNozzo was involved, so wildly unlikely, he would probably end up wondering if he had eaten some bad shellfish and was having the mother of all nightmares.

“So?” Gibbs asked calmly, “You in?”

Tobias sighed.
“What the hell,” he said. “Why not?”

An hour and a half later, sitting in the low blue light of a half-set-up interview room in the Pentagon looking at a picture of a snaky alien critter whose terrorist cousin had apparently wrapped itself around the brainstem of a USAF Colonel, Tobias wondered sadly why he never seemed to learn.

“Next time you ask for my help, remind me of this moment,” he told Gibbs.

The other man merely smirked.

Tobias sighed.

“Now what?” he demanded.

In answer, Gibbs dug a piece of paper out of one of the piles in front of him and slid it across the conference table to Tobias. The FBI agent looked down at it. It was a handwritten list— Tobias recognized DiNozzo’s exuberant writing— and it was incredibly straightforward:

Gibbs

Fornell?

Edgerton?

Agents?

Carter (goa’uld)

Hacker (blk hat)

Analyst/s? Profiler/s?

“We need to fill those holes,” Gibbs said, “And we don’t have time to vet a bunch of candidates to make sure they don’t have ties to the Trust. I need names, Tobias. People you know, people you think are clean. Tony and Jack’ll do their thing, make sure, but Tony says he can only do it so much before it knocks him out, so I want to be pretty damn sure about anybody I have him look at.”

Tobias leaned back, processing. When Gibbs had brought him in, the first thing he’d been confronted with, before the NDAs and the insane briefing packet, had been DiNozzo and his new sentinel. The kid had been running on coffee and whatever energy O’Neill was able to lend him, and O’Neill had been flirting with the edge of the feral zone. After a brief greeting, Tony had bluntly asked his permission to do a median scan, and had then proceeded to casually and forcefully yank them all half-way into the spirit plane, where they had stayed for about forty-five seconds. At that point, O’Neill had laughed and DiNozzo had smirked and said, “Gibbs is so right: if the Trust ever tries to recruit you, I really, really hope I’m there to see it.” Then they had left, and Gibbs had proceeded to turn his world upside down.

At the time, the whole thing had been baffling and odd, but after reading the case file on the Trust
and their attempt to blow up a floating alien city in another galaxy— Christ!— Tobias understood. Gibbs and DiNozzo knew that Tobias wouldn’t knowingly help terrorists, but there had still been a chance that he’d gotten mixed up with the trust without knowing it. A median scan could detect that kind of thing, whether or not the person being scanned was aware of it.

It was also a massive outlay of psionic energy. Tobias couldn’t do it at all— mu guides just didn’t have that kind of power— and even someone like DiNozzo couldn’t afford to just whip it out any old time he wanted to.

Now armed with a deeper understanding of what Gibbs was asking, Tobias read the list again, thinking through all the agents and analysts he knew, as well as the ones from other agencies that he’d worked with. Contrary to popular belief, guides couldn’t read minds. They had the ability to sense emotional truths, but that was not the same as knowing every single thing a person had done or said in their lives. So Tobias couldn’t know for certain who of his acquaintance was free of influence from the Trust. Instead, he had to think about who was most likely to be clean.

Right away, he realized that 90% of the names that came to mind were unsuitable. Either they didn’t have the right skill sets, they were already working on something vital to national security, or their personal lives made taking off on a top-secret op of indeterminate length impossible. So he tried to think of who he knew and trusted in the S&G community who might have access to people with the right qualifications.

“Aaron Hotchner,” he finally said aloud. “He’s a Unit Chief of the Behavioral Analysis Unit over at Quantico. Beta sentinel. Don’t think we could get him— he’s got a lot of responsibilities at the Bureau, and… well, frankly, he’s got personal issues right now that make you and I look like well adjusted citizens. But he’s clean, and he has connections to the right people. In fact, I think he may have the tech you need. Couple years ago, he recruited a hacker the Bureau had arrested— never did hear all the details, but the story is, he went in there and talked with her for ten minutes, and came out with the best damned analyst in the business on his payroll.”

Jethro nodded.

“Think you could give him a call?” he said. “If he’s not going to be working for us, we can’t read him in, but if he’s a Unit Chief, I imagine he’s used to making recommendations based on stripped down mission specs.”

“Sure,” Tobias said. “I’m assuming this needs to be on a line you’re people have secured?” Gibbs nodded. “Just point me to a phone.”

Gibbs brought him out to the half-set-up bullpen and pointed him to a desk phone. Tobias sat down, and dialled Quantico, asking for Hotchner when the operator answered.

“Hotchner.”

“Hotch,” Tobias said. “It’s Fornell. Got a favor to ask.”

“Of course,” Hotch said in his precise, well-modulated voice. “What can I do for you, Agent Fornell?”

“I’m working on an op over at the Pentagon,” Tobias began.

Hotch interrupted.

“Since when? As of this morning, you were listed as lead agent on five open cases, including one that my team is interested in because of your unsub’s MO.”
“Since two hours ago,” Tobias answered.

“I see,” Hotch said after a moment, and Tobias knew that he did see.

When an agent like Tobias got pulled into a black op without warning, it was because something bad was going down.

“How can I help?” Hotchner said.

“We’re trying to put together a team,” Tobias said. “Trouble is, we can’t quite know who to trust. So we’re doing this Mafia style: keeping it in la famiglia.”

“Fornell—” Hotch said slowly, his tone awkward, “— Tobias— I can’t… I can’t take off on a black ops mission right now. With Jack and— everything else, I just can’t.”

Annd there it was, the elephant that Tobias was trying like hell to avoid. Because it wasn’t like he hadn’t done the exact same thing as Hotch. Heck, Hotch had a better excuse than Tobias did: he hadn’t been a sentinel when he married his mundane wife. He’d gone to the altar thinking he was just another normal, mundane guy marrying a normal, mundane girl and they were going to live a normal, mundane life together. Tobias, on the other hand, had married Diane knowing he was a guide.

But there were differences in their situations. When Tobias had married Diane, he had already decided that a sentinel was not something he wanted and, according to all available wisdom, a guide who did not want to sentinel would never find one. Tobias had that luxury because he was a guide.

But Hotch was a sentinel, a high level beta sentinel, no less. He needed at least a pro tem guide to really use his senses, and was all but guaranteed to bond at some point—for metaphysical reasons that Tobias had never really understood, high level sentinels were almost certain to bond, and high level beta sentinels were certain to, at least, from a statistical perspective. From the moment Hotch had awakened, his marriage had been on borrowed time. But Hotch appeared to have ignored the writing on the wall and carried on as though nothing had changed.

Which meant that, when his perfect match had walked into his life in the form of Jason Gideon’s brilliant, sensitive, and oh-so-young pro tem guide, Hotch’s wife had been five months pregnant.

Tobias didn’t know what he would have done in Hotch’s shoes. Would he have left, followed the call of his biology and bonded with his perfect match, leaving his wife to have their baby alone? Or would he have done what Hotch did, deny his other half out of loyalty to his mundane spouse and their child? Either way, it was a nightmare, and Tobias would just as soon stay out of it.

“Yeah, I figured,” he said gruffly, shifting uncomfortably in the badly designed Pentagon-issue office chair. “I was actually hoping you could vouch for your analyst. Op needs someone with her talents and her… history, and word has it, you trust her. Also, if you can name any of the Bureau’s other profilers who you think would be difficult to compromise, that would be appreciated.”

“What kind of compromised are we talking about?” Hotch asked, his voice cool and professional once more.

“Home-grown terrorists, deep pockets, lots of connections,” Tobias said. “From the sound of it, they like to turn people without them necessarily knowing they’ve been turned— lot of their assets seem to think they’re still working for the good guys. The sentinel and guide running this op are scanning everyone, even the people they trust, just to make sure they’re not unwittingly working
for the dark side, but it’s time sensitive, and they can’t afford to burn the guide out. Hence, keeping it in the family.”

“I understand,” Hotch said. “I can vouch for Garcia. Terrorism is not something she is emotionally capable of participating in, and she’s too good at what she does to be fooled into thinking that she’s working for the good guys if she’s not. But I’d have to have your promise that she will not be put in danger before I recommended her. She is not a field operative.”

“Understood,” Tobias said. “She comes on board, she doesn’t leave the Pentagon.”

Technically, Tobias was stretching the limits of his authority in this operation by promising that, but Gibbs would just have to deal. After all, it wasn’t like he’d send his forensic tech into the field if he were in Hotch’s shoes. Hell, he’d nearly killed Tobias after the Sterling thing, even though Sciuto had come out of that encounter the unequivocal victor.

“Very well,” Hotch said. “As for a profiler— I trust my team, but they all have weak points, and as field agents, they don’t have Garcia’s emotional qualms. The only one I can know for certain isn’t compromised without interrogating them is— Reid. For obvious reasons.”

Obvious reasons. Right. As in, Reid was Hotch’s perfect match, so he had an inside track on his state of being, even as he ripped the kid’s heart out of his chest by denying their bond.

Christ on a fucking bike.

“No offense, Hotch,” Tobias said, “But I’m not touching that situation with a thousand foot pole. You’re gonna have to work that clusterfuck out for yourself.”

“I did not mean to suggest—” Hotch began stiffly.

“Save it,” Tobias snapped. “Anyone outside of your team?”

“Ah— maybe,” Hotch said, voice uneven. “He’s technically retired now, but Dave Rossi is one of the best, and he wouldn’t be an easy man to fool or to buy. I could reach out, see if he might be interested.”

“I’d appreciate it,” Tobias said, ruthlessly suppressing the tiny, fan-boy part of himself that wanted to squeal at the idea of working with the David Rossi. “You know I can’t tell you what’s going on, but I can say that this group has a fondness for targets with a large Marine presence. You could mention that, if you think it’d help. If I remember right, Rossi was in the Corps back in the day.”

“I may just do that,” Hotch said.

They hung up after Tobias gave him the number for Homeworld Command that Gibbs had written down for him and a promise that O’Neill’s people would scramble a jet to fly Rossi to Washington if he said yes. Tobias slumped back in his chair, rubbing his eyes.

“Christ,” he muttered.

He took a breath, then turned back to Gibbs.

“So,” he said, ruthlessly dismissing Hotch’s fucked up situation and the way it made his psionic awareness want to curl up and cry in sympathy, “I didn’t see DiNutzo’s name on this list. Care to tell me why not?”

“’Cause officially, he’s not in the field on this one,” Gibbs said flatly.
Fornell raised an eyebrow.

“Is he dying?” he asked bluntly, because that was the only reason he could think of why DiNozzo would be sitting out something this big.

“Naht,” Gibbs said. “But he’s our liaison with the hill, as well as being O’Neill’s guide, and this goes deep, Tobias. He’ll be working with us, but he has to keep his hands clean to smooth down all the feathers we’re gonna ruffle up.”

Tobias leaned back and steepled his hands, frowning.

“Christ, Jethro,” he said. “This is—he’s really not your faithful Saint Bernard anymore, is he?”

“Things change,” Gibbs said, and Tobias felt a faint hint of sadness all but overwhelmed by a rush of fierce pride and a thick layer of satisfaction. “He’s still mine though.”

Tobias snorted.

“Alright, you smug bastard,” he said. “So, where are we on this clusterfuck?”

He waved at the file on the failed attack on the alien city.

Where they are is, apparently, was leaving the empty, half-set-up office, and entering Homeworld Command. They passed through a room that Tobias recognized from years in law enforcement as an analysts’ lair, filled with computer monitors, geeky geegaws, and people with a combined IQ higher than the national debt. They then stepped into a larger, more open space where a lot of people in Air Force uniforms were bustling about in a subdued frenzy. Gibbs led them to a glass-partitioned conference room where Tobias could see DiNozzo standing in front of a video conferencing array, O’Neill lurking off to one side with a laptop.

Even from outside, Tobias could feel the energy surrounding the pair. O’Neill still felt volatile, almost feral, but the anger was counterbalanced by a terrible, anxious tenderness, and all the power from his rage was being gently redirected into shoring up DiNozzo’s exhausted mind and body. DiNozzo, whose empathic profile was ragged with weariness and the remnants of a hurt that had already been healed, was accepting the boost with grace and style, and in return, was helping O’Neill to keep his anger under control, although Tobias was interested to observe that he was making no move to suppress it. He felt a surge of rueful respect for the younger guide: O’Neill was a scary son of a bitch and that kind of acceptance took a special brand of guts.

“… I know, man, I know,” DiNozzo was saying, spreading his hands at the monitor, as Gibbs and Tobias slipped into the conference room. “What can ya do? But we need those files, and the NID isn’t cooperating. So here we all are.”

“You know I can’t authorize access to an agency’s files,” said Director of National Intelligence. “I told your asshole of a boss and now I’m telling you. I do not understand why you people can’t seem to get this through your heads.”

“But you can contact Hilliard,” DiNozzo said with a winsome smile. “And for the record, Jack’s not technically my boss, and while he can be an asshole sometimes—”

“Look, I really don’t care,” the DNI cut in. “He’s an asshole and a loose cannon and I am not feeling like doing him any favors right now. He can deal with his own problems.”

“But, see, that’s the thing,” DiNozzo said affably, “This isn’t Jack’s problem. Jack’s problem was solved an hour ago when the president signed an executive order commanding the NID to give us
access to all their files on the Trust. That makes it Hilliard’s problem. But Hilliard is a spook and we all know that spooks like to disappear when the going gets rough— that’s part of why you’re in charge of the Intelligence Community now instead of the Director of the CIA. Which makes Hilliard your problem. Now, I for one think that your job sucks, but that’s not the point. The point is, with Hilliard making like he’s Al Capone and we’re the IRS, you’re the one left holding the bag.”

“This is ridiculous,” the DNI snarled, sounding exquisitely uncomfortable. “The president can’t just decide, carte blanche, to order one of our agencies to declassify its intel. There is a request process and a review committee—”

“Yeah, see, normally, that’s true,” DiNozzo interrupted, “Although I’ve gotta say, a review committee would have to have a hell of a good reason to ignore an executive order. But here’s a funny thing I found out recently: only agencies whose creation a US president actually signed off on get those kinds of regulations and protections. The FBI, the CIA, the NSA— at some point, an elected president put pen to paper and said ‘why, yes, I think this agency should be authorized to act in the name of the federal government in such and such a capacity, and I’m putting such and such limits on the sitting president’s authority over them.’ It’s part of that whole ‘government by the people, for the people’ thing, ya know? Even our little operation over here at Homeworld got the treatment, and so far, there’s only two of us and we don’t even have a name yet. But the NID doesn’t seem to have gotten a president’s signature on their charter when they hung out their shingle. In fact, they’re so far off the books, they could be a paper clip vendor for all anybody knows. There are no regulations or review committees when it comes to them, because technically, they don’t exist.”

“When did DiNozzo get all patriotic and by-the-book?” Tobias muttered to Gibbs.

“Not sure,” Gibbs said. “Something happened on that first op O’Neill took him on that shook him up pretty bad. DiNozzo’s never had a problem cutting corners before, but when we started hammering out a basic charter for our unit, he was pretty insistent that we needed proper authorization and guidelines. He did a lot of reading, spent a lotta time hanging out with Chegwidden, even took off with O’Neill for a couple days to talk to some people at the SGC. He said he wanted to make sure our asses were covered if the program was ever declassified, but it was pretty damned obvious he was worried we were being given too much leeway.”

“Off-book operations are standard practice in intelligence,” the DNI was protesting on the screen. “You know this.”

“Mmhmm,” DiNozzo said. “Look, I’m gonna level with you here. Yeah, off-book operations are our bread and butter, but here’s the thing everybody forgets: the whole point of doing things off-book is, when it all goes to shit, everyone can back away with their hands up saying, ‘I don’t know nothin’. My man, the president is pissed, the Head of Homeworld is chewing on anyone who comes within biting distance, and I don’t even want to think about what’s gonna happen when the Commandant of the Marine Corps finds out about all this. I think now might be the time for everybody to put their hands in the air and back away.”

The DNI looked a little ill.

“Fine,” he said, sounding defeated, “I’ll tell you the truth: I don’t know how to get ahold of Hilliard any more than you do. I’ve been trying since O’Neill called. He’s gone dark, and every single point of contact I thought I had with the NID is turning up pizza parlors and empty office spaces.”

DiNozzo’s expression turned sympathetic, but his empathic profile took on an air of unholy glee.
“Well shucks, man, why didn’t you just say so?” he said. “We’d a quit bugging you hours ago.”

“I’m sure,” the DNI said dryly. “You and I both know that I’ll probably lose my job over this. I’m the Director of National Intelligence and I lost an intelligence agency. That doesn’t look good.”

“What are you talking about, director?” Tony said, flashing the DNI his million-dollar smile. “You lost what I think might have been a paper clip vendor. Happens all the time.”

The DNI smiled reluctantly, and before anyone even knew it, DiNozzo had his promise to send everything he knew about the NID to Homeworld ASAP. The call ended and DiNozzo whooped and threw up both hands like a rock star.

“Woohoo! Who da man?!”

“You are, Tiger,” O’Neill said fondly. “But did you have to be so nice to him? The man is a slimy little bottom-feeder who wouldn’t know a good deed if it sat on him.”

The sentinel’s anger continued to simmer sullenly beneath the surface, but in that moment, pride was uppermost in his empathic profile.

“Aw, don’t worry Jack” DiNozzo said, grinning. “He was totally right: he’s sooo gonna lose his job over this. Besides,” here he turned his grin on Gibbs, “I got what we needed, didn’t I?

“Yeah, yeah, you did good,” Gibbs said brusquely. “Now, report.”

“Yes boss,” Tony said, preening. “Hey, Fornell. Welcome to the rabbit hole! So, as you probably just gathered, the NID is in the wind. Which means that instead of two main areas of focus, we have three: find the NID and get their files on the Trust, find and eliminate the Trust, and figure out how Caldwell got snaked and how bad that compromised us.”

He waltzed over to one of the computers and hit a few keys.

“As far as the third line of inquiry goes, I still don’t know who, where, or how yet, but I’m narrowing in on when: I’m pretty sure Caldwell picked up his passenger on his last stint planetside,” he said, bringing up an Air Force officer’s file on the screen where he’d just been talking to the DNI. “This is Lt. Colonel Patrick Bishop, bridge officer on the Daedalus. He was removed from active duty two days before the crew was set to beam up to the Daedalus because he and several other SGC personnel were ‘accidentally,’” DiNozzo made abbreviated air quotes, “Exposed to an unidentified alien substance at Cheyenne Mountain. The alien goop turned out to be harmless, but they didn’t figure that out until after the Daedalus left.” DiNozzo looked up at Gibbs. “Remember I was wondering how the symbiote managed to get by the sentinels and guides?” he said. “Lt. Colonel Bishop is a level four rho sentinel. He is also the only sentinel who was scheduled to ship out with the Daedalus this time. I think that the Trust prevented him from being on that ship so that he wouldn’t sense the goa’uld they put in Caldwell. Bishop is Caldwell’s number two; he knows Caldwell and he spends a lot of time on the bridge with him. He would have known something was wrong.”

Gibbs nodded.

“Tell me about the ‘accidental’ exposure,” he said.

DiNozzo tapped keys again, and a different file appeared on screen, this one belonging to a civilian woman.

“Dr. Hannah Bolton, xenobotany,” he said. “She’s been working for the SGC for two years, no red
flags, nothing odd in her file. She was transporting a... weirdly large sample of alien... something that SG-16 brought back from P2X-883— I’m actually kind of confused about what it was and whether it was animal, vegetable, or mineral, and apparently, so is the SGC.” Here, DiNozzo brought up a thoroughly incomprehensible scientific report beside Dr. Bolton and Lt. Colonel Bishop’s files. “Anyways, the cryo cart she had the sample in malfunctioned in the elevator and the sample— exploded, covering Dr. Bolton, Colonel Bishop, and three airmen with alien goo. All five were quarantined. Tests on the substance were... inconclusive, but when none of the victims showed any effects from exposure after seven days, they were released, although Dr. Lam restricted them to base for a further ten days as a precaution. By that time, the Daedalus was long gone.”

“Huh,” Tobias said. “Whaddaya think? Was Bolton the saboteur or the patsy?”

“So far, nothing conclusive, but the whole scenario is much easier to reconstruct with Bolton as the saboteur,” DiNozzo said. “Colonel Bishop was on his way from scheduled PT to a scheduled conference call when the accident occurred, so it wouldn’t have been that hard for someone to arrange for an incident to happen in the right elevator at the right time, but Dr. Bolton’s schedule was much more unpredictable, so it would have been difficult to get her part right without her cooperation. As for the malfunction, we’d need to get someone like Abby to look at the report on the cryo cart to say exactly how it was sabotaged— they weren’t looking for evidence of foul play when they checked it over— to know for sure whether someone could have timed the explosion ahead of time or controlled it remotely. Even if they could, it is a lot less complicated if one assumes that Bolton triggered it. Finally, the alien goop turned out to be harmless, but there was no way to know that at the time of the exposure, so Bishop was all but guaranteed to be in quarantine for the full seven days. Again, someone else could have made an educated guess based on the reports that xenobotany, xenozoology, and xenogeology filed, but Dr. Bolton would already have known that the tests would be inconclusive. The only weak point in the theory is, did she know ahead of time that it was harmless? She was exposed along with everyone else, after all, and while suicide bombers happen, they’re a hell of a lot less common.”

“We need to talk to Dr. Bolton,” Gibbs said quietly.

“She’s in custody, and Hank’ll have her on a jet within the hour,” O’Neill said, looking up from his laptop. “I woulda had the Prometheus beam her here, but they’re out of range right now.”

“Good enough,” Gibbs said. “Now: where the hell is the NID?”

***

Dave Rossi breathed in, held it for the count of five, then breathed out for the count of seven. There was nothing funny about serial killers. There really wasn’t. There was no reason that Dave should be struggling this hard not to laugh during an interview with a spree killer.

Except that this guy was six foot two, weighed 250 easy, and had gone on seven day bender during which he had managed to kill...

Not one single person.

Dave listened to Coote Whittaker (and yes, that was his name; his parents had clearly been aiming for something like this when they filled out his birth certificate) describe the failed attack on his
second-to-last victim and tried manfully to keep a straight face.

Whittaker was part of his research for his next book, which was on the fallibility of the unknown subject. Far too often in his career, he had seen law enforcement stymied, not by the unsub’s successes, but by his mistakes. As a profiler, the temptation was to look at every act as intentional, as another step towards the unsub’s ultimate goal, but sometimes unsubs messed up, or just weren’t competent enough to achieve their vision. A profiler needed to be able to catch the incompetent serial killers as well as the competent ones.

Case in point: Coote Whittaker, who hadn’t actually succeeded in killing anybody, but had still caused his victims extensive trauma and suffering.

It was almost a relief when the guard opened the door and told him that he had an urgent call from the FBI waiting for him on the warden’s private line.

He turned off his recorder, thanked Mr. Whittaker for his time, and followed the guard out of the cell block to the warden’s office. The warden promptly made himself scarce and Dave settled into the chair and picked up the phone.

“Rossi.”

“Dave, it’s Aaron.”

Dave raised an eyebrow. While he kept track of his protege and rightful successor at the BAU, he had been strictly hands-off since his ‘retirement,’ and while everyone, including him, doubted that his departure from the Bureau would actually stick, this was the first time Aaron, or anyone, had put in a priority call to him since he left.

“Aaron,” he said, “It’s good to hear your voice. However, considering I just kicked the warden of FCI Forest City out of his own office, I’m assuming this isn’t a social call.”

Aaron laughed, and Dave smiled wistfully. He knew that the younger man didn’t have a lot of reasons to laugh right now.

“Not exactly,” Aaron said. “I just got a call from Fornell over in Violent Crimes. Apparently, there’s something big going down over at the Pentagon— something need-to-know and eyes-only. All he could say is that it involves terrorism and military targets, particularly Marines. It’s time-sensitive and there’s a high risk of compromise, so they’re trying to put together a task-force based on personal recommendations from members of the sentinel and guide community. I gave Fornell your name.”

Dave let out a slow breath and sat back in the warden’s chair.

“I— don’t know what to say,” he said. “Aaron, I’m— I’m honored that you trust me that much. Especially since we haven’t actually seen each other in months.”

“Yes, well,” Aaron said dryly, “It’s not like they’re going to go solely on my word. There’s a sentinel guide pair in the program that will make sure. But let’s be honest, Dave, they won’t find anything. Except, perhaps, for the shocking number of women you’ve slept with.”

Dave laughed, but underneath the amusement, his mind was racing. There was, of course, a wealth of information packed into everything Aaron was saying— and not saying— but it all came down to one surprisingly simple point: this time, it wasn’t his country that needed him, but the close-knit community of men and women who protected his country. They needed people they could trust not to betray them, and Aaron had chosen him.
It was humbling.

“How long do I have to get to Washington?” he asked, his voice surprisingly thick with emotion.

“Fornell said they would send a plane to get you as soon as you said yes,” Aaron said. “Although to be fair, I don’t think he knew you’d be in Arkansas of all places.”

***

Penelope Garcia spun in her super-ortho-ergo-extra-springy-rolly-spinny office chair and hit the ‘enter’ key on Rebecca’s keyboard with the bright purple parrot eraser on the end of her pencil. The search program queued up on the system leapt into action, digging into the data that Enid had collected off the net, looking for that one little nugget of gold among the gigabytes of dross.

Penelope smiled and spun back to V.I.C.I., her main computer, to start sorting the results. So far, she hadn’t figured out how to give a computer program imagination, so, while her babies could work magic, they still weren’t human. They could only deal with what they’d seen before, or what she’d programmed them to recognize. The weird, the wacky, and the otherwise unexplainable slipped right past them. So even when they were doing their best work, they still needed a human to polish the results up and make them all shiny and pretty.

A light knock on the door to her lair caused her to spin around and look up. Her eyes popped wide open when she saw Hotch standing in the doorway.

“Sir!” she exclaimed. “You’re—you’re—and you’re here—why are you here? You never come here. I always go there. Your office being there, because…is something wrong? Is someone hurt? Oh God, someone’s hurt—”

“Garcia!” Hotch said quickly, his mouth twitching in amusement. “Calm down. No one’s hurt. I just have something that I need to discuss with you, and I don’t want the team asking questions.”

“Oh,” Penelope said, flustered. “Uh—okay.”

She rolled her super-chair over to La Calavera Catrina where her extra—and totally un-super—chair sat covered in files. She swept the files off the seat and gestured awkwardly for Hotch to sit.

Hotch sat.

“I got a call from a friend today,” Hotch said gently, looking Penelope in the eye. “He’s working on something important over at the Pentagon, and he needs help. They’re putting together a—task force to eliminate an American-based terrorist cell with ties to a lot of important people and agencies. They need people they can trust, people who are the best in their field and aren’t likely to be compromised. I recommended you.”

Penelope gasped.

“I—sir, I—”

“You don’t have to,” Hotch went on smoothly. “I promised you that you would have a place here, and that isn’t contingent on you working for anybody else. But I know Fornell, and he wouldn’t have asked me this if it wasn’t important. I may not know the specifics, but I know what kind of
operation he’s putting together and what kind of stakes are likely involved. If I was given the choice, I would want you on this.”

Penelope swallowed hard.

“I— thank you sir,” she whispered, overwhelmed. “I— I want to help, but— sir, would I have to, like, become an actual Bond girl, or can I just… because I can totally sit in my lair and do my thing, but I don’t think I can be a spy.”

Hotch smiled.

“You don’t have to be a spy,” he said. “I already made clear to Fornell that you are not a field agent. He assured me that you wouldn’t have to leave the Pentagon.”

“Okay,” Penelope said, brightening. “Okay, I can do that.”

“Before you say yes, there is one more thing you should know,” Hotch cautioned. “You won’t have to be a spy, but you will have to be a hacker, and from what I gather, not necessarily a white hat. Garcia, if you do this, there is a very real possibility that you are going to have to become the Black Queen again, at least, to some extent.”

Penelope went absolutely still. She had a whole lot of feelings about the Black Queen, about being her, about not being her, but right at the moment, she couldn’t feel a single one of them.

“You don’t have to do this,” Hotch repeated. “And either way, I will make sure that you are 100% safe.”

Penelope opened her mouth.

“Terrorists, sir?” she managed to say.

Hotch nodded.

“Like, 9/11 terrorists?” she persisted. “Or, like, ELF terrorists? Because, and I know I’m not supposed to say this, but the Earth Liberation Front has a point, and, more importantly, a distinct lack of actual human carnage to its name, but al-Qaeda is scary and murderous and just— bad.”

“I don’t know exactly,” Hotch said, his voice calm and neutral, “But from what Fornell said, I think that this group is, in many ways, more dangerous than al-Qaeda. Their influence extends far enough into Washington that Fornell can’t rely on normal vetting procedures. Such a group could, conceivably, get a much higher body count than the 9/11 attack over a longer period without drawing attention to themselves.”

Penelope sat up a little straighter and lifted her chin.

“When do I start, sir?” she asked, her voice wavering only a little.

Hotch smiled at her.

“A car will meet us downstairs in fifteen minutes,” he said.

“Us, sir?” she asked.

“Of course,” Hotch replied. “I have too many— other commitments right now to work with you on this, but I’m not sending you over there alone. I’ll go in with you, introduce you to the people running the op, and we’ll go over a sanitized proposal detailing what your job will be and what you
will and will not be asked to do. If you don’t like it, or if I don’t think it’s above board, that will be the end of it and you’ll come back here with me.”

Penelope felt something in her chest loosen and she gave Hotch a brilliant smile.

“Thank you, sir,” she said.

“Of course,” Hotch said, smiling back.

***

Ian Edgerton stood in a cubicle of the Emergency Department of UF Health Jacksonville, staring narrowly at the trauma bed in front of him.

The trauma bed where his target was being plied with bags of blood and syringes and pressure pads.

His target, who had somehow managed to get himself mauled by a black bear while he was blundering around in the Okefenokee and had needed Ian to rescue him.

A black bear, a species which, despite its impressive size and strength, tended to avoid people whenever possible.

In the Okefenokee, where alligators were the undisputed kings of the wilderness and bears were a laughable minority.

In January, the month when, even in the south, black bears were supposed to be all but inactive.

How did Ian keep finding these people?

“Agent Edgerton?”

Ian turned. A man and a woman who he had never met, but who he could tell, just by their clothes and body language, were Bureau, were approaching him from the direction of the visitors’ entrance.

“Yes,” Ian said. “Agents—?”

“Kalp and Munroe,” the woman—Agent Munroe—said. “We’re from the Jacksonville Office. We’re here to take custody of Mr. Galletti and facilitate your immediate return to D.C.”

Ian frowned.

“Case?” he asked.

He was used to having to pick up and go when a situation was hot, but D.C. was not his normal hunting ground.

“I’m afraid that’s above our clearance level, Agent Edgerton,” Agent Kalp said. “Our job is to get you on the plane that’s going to be landing at Jacksonville International in forty-five minutes.”

Ian looked down at the camo pants and t-shirt he’d had on for the past ten days. Considering that
he had been traipsing through a southern swamp in them, they hadn’t been any too fresh even before Galletti had bled all over them. Ian looked up again.

“I’m going to need a change of clothes,” he said.

“I believe you will find everything you need on the plane,” Agent Munroe said. “Shall we go?”
Aaron accepted his gun and badge from Pentagon security with a bland thank you and watched impassively as Garcia and Morgan went through the check behind him. He had known that the likelihood of getting Garcia out of the building without being intercepted was slim, but Morgan had been even more surgical in his strike than Aaron had anticipated. Rather then feigning a casual encounter, Aaron’s pro tem guide had taken one look at his sentinel escorting Garcia to the elevators and had made a run for the stairs. By the time they got to the Bureau car that was waiting for them in the garage, Morgan was already sitting in the back seat.

“Now, I know you weren’t taking my tech goddess out on company time without me,” he’d said calmly.

Technically, it was fine, since Morgan was Aaron’s pro tem partner and had the same clearance that Aaron did, but Aaron hadn’t really accounted for Morgan’s presence when he planned this excursion. He should have, Morgan was his guide, but he didn’t feel like his guide. Not anymore.

One of the security guards left his post to escort them to wherever they were going, and Garcia fell into step beside him, chattering nervously about it being her first time at the Pentagon and what was it like to work here and was he satisfied with his security tech, because if he wasn’t, she totally had some ideas.

Aaron lagged a little behind with Morgan.

“Why are you here?” he asked, keeping his voice low so that Garcia wouldn’t hear.

“What d’you mean, Hotch?” Morgan asked. “I’m your pro tem, man, and Garcia’s my friend. If you guys are goin’ to the Pentagon, I’m comin’ with you.”

“Do you care about her?” Aaron asked bluntly, voicing for the first time what had, until now, been assumed, but never confirmed.

“Of course I do,” Morgan said, deliberately missing the point. “She’s my friend, Hotch.”

“Yes,” Aaron said calmly, “But do you care about her as more than a friend?”

Morgan stiffened.

“I’m a guide,” he said, jaw flexing, “And she’s not a sentinel.”

“You know as well as I do that that doesn’t always matter,” Aaron said.

“Uh, it kinda does, Hotch,” Morgan said. “No offense, but I don’t want to be in your shoes. Ever. And I don’t want to put Garcia in that position. It wouldn’t be fair to her, and it sure as hell
wouldn’t be fair to my sentinel, assuming I have one.”

It took all of Aaron’s considerable self-control not to flinch. Because Morgan was right, his current… situation wasn’t fair to anyone involved, least of all Hayley and Spencer. But just because Aaron’s world had been ripped apart didn’t mean that Morgan should give up a chance at happiness.

“Sometimes there is no good solution, Morgan,” he said. “Sometimes, no matter what you do, someone gets hurt. Garcia cares about you. When and if you find your sentinel, it will be painful for her. I’m not sure if it will be less painful if you have never been together or more. After all, it might be a comfort to her to know that you cared enough about her to take the chance, even if it wasn’t meant to be.”

Morgan glared.

“You know, sometimes I really, really hate you,” he said flatly.

Aaron didn’t know the Pentagon well enough to really understand where they were, but he did know, from the scent and body language of the people they passed in the halls, that it was one of the more boring sections of the building. Nobody smelled stressed or excited, and everyone they met opened up their posture a little as they looked at the group, implying innocent curiosity rather than wariness.

The security guard stopped outside of an unmarked door that, if they had been on their own, Aaron would have passed by thinking it was a closet, not just because of its awkward positioning between two requisitions offices, but because the carpet in front of it was unworn and whatever was behind it smelled vaguely of cleaning products.

The security guard swiped his card and led them through the door into a little hallway that led back a few dozen feet, then turned to the left. They passed through a second door into a small and utterly bland waiting room that, judging by the smell, had been a storage space not that long ago. The security guard left them there and Morgan started prowling the small perimeter like a big irritated cat.

“This is— normal, right?” Garcia asked nervously. “Because in the movies, this is not good, but—”

The inner door opened and Tobias Fornell strolled in with an amused half-smirk on his face.

“Oh look, a party,” Fornell said. “My favorite.”

“Fornell,” Aaron said, nodding, “Technical Analyst Penelope Garcia,” he indicates Garcia, “and SSA Derek Morgan, my pro tem guide.” Here he nodded to Morgan “Garcia, Morgan, this is SAC Tobias Fornell.”

Morgan nodded. Garcia stammered out a greeting. Fornell grinned.

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“Fornell,” Aaron said, nodding, “Technical Analyst Penelope Garcia,” he indicates Garcia, “and SSA Derek Morgan, my pro tem guide.” Here he nodded to Morgan “Garcia, Morgan, this is SAC Tobias Fornell.”

Morgan nodded. Garcia stammered out a greeting. Fornell grinned.

“Welcome to— actually, it doesn’t have a name yet. Need to get someone on that. Can’t go around arresting terrorists without a name,” the older agent said. “Well, come on in. excuse the mess: apparently, this whole operation’s pretty new.”

He led them through the inner door, down another hallway crowded with boxes and plastic-wrapped office furniture, and into a stark, soundproofed room where three other people were already waiting. Aaron looked them over quickly, filing away details out of habit:

Two-star Air Force general, beta sentinel, in charge, but hands-off.
Federal agent from an indeterminate alphabet agency, former Marine, in charge, and hands-on.

Another federal agent, also from an indeterminate agency, epsilon guide, perfect match with the Air Force general, in accordance, but not yet fully bonded, running the show while ostensibly deferring to the first two.

Aaron had never met the sentinel or the guide before, but then, he hadn’t been very involved in the pride for the past few years, and since meeting Spencer, he had been avoiding other sentinels and guides altogether when he could.

There was another round of introductions. The general’s name turned out to be Jack O’Neill, but what he was in charge of went unsaid. The former Marine was Special Agent Gibbs, but again, Special Agent of what agency was not mentioned. Likewise for Special Agent DiNozzo, who somehow managed to flirt with Aaron, Morgan, and Garcia all at once without making his sentinel jealous before subtly nudging the conversation towards what they need Garcia to do for them.

Mostly, they just needed her to do what she did for the BAU, only more of it and in a more concentrated timeframe. However, Special Agent DiNozzo explained, there was a rather large possibility that she was going to have to hack into some very secure systems at some point, and that if that happened, it was going to have to happen very quickly.

At this point, Morgan spoke up, bristling with aggression.

“And exactly who is taking responsibility for making that call?” he demanded. “I know how you people work: tell an operative to do something illegal and damn the consequences, then hang them out to dry when things go wrong.”

Agent Gibbs got a flat, contemptuous look and General O’Neill glared at Morgan as though the younger agent were a puppy who had made a mess on the rug. Fornell kicked back in his chair with the air of one enjoying a slapstick comedy routine.

Agent DiNozzo grinned and elbowed the general playfully in the ribs.

“See, Jack?” he said, “This is what people believe we do. I blame the CIA.”

“Damn right,” Fornell said. “Fuckers screwed the pooch for all of us.”

Agent DiNozzo turned his sunny smile on Morgan.

“To answer your question, Ms. Garcia won’t be asked to do anything illegal,” he said. “The group that we’re interested in are terrorists, which put most of our operation under the Patriot Act. Now, I’m not the biggest fan of that particular piece of legislation, but it does give us the leeway to do what we need to do in this situation. There’s also some— other factors involved that put a lot of the — major players in this organization beyond the current scope of the law. Those factors also make it impossible for anything that happens during this op to see an open courtroom, which is… uncomfortable, but not our fault.”

Morgan frowned.

“Nobody’s outside the law,” he said.

Agent DiNozzo shrugged.

“Sure they are,” he said easily. “But that gets into why this op is classified, so—”
Morgan looked mutinous, but let it go.

In the end, Aaron had to admit that, while he had reservations about the operation, he was as comfortable with the setup in regards to Garcia as he could possibly be, considering this was a black op running out of the Pentagon.

Garcia was quiet through most of the negotiation, but managed to pluck up her courage towards the end to ask about what tech she had to work with. It quickly became apparent that nobody in the room had the knowledge to adequately answer her questions, which resulted in O’Neill, of all people, promising that someone named Paul would get Garcia whatever she wanted. Agent DiNozzo let out a delighted gurgle of laughter and Agent Gibbs smirked. Fornell, however, didn’t seem to get the joke any more than Aaron did.

Finally, when everyone was on the same page— as much as they could be, with Morgan and Aaron on the do-not-need-to-know list— Agent DiNozzo clapped his hands together and said,

“So, Jack and I are gonna do a median scan, just to make sure our friends haven’t managed to get their grubby little fingers into any part of the lovely lady’s life without her knowing, and I was thinking, if you two wanna stick around, I could include you in it. I know you can’t join our merry little band, but it would give us… options down the road, if the situation changes.”

Aaron glanced at Morgan. The guide stuck his chin out and settled more firmly into his chair.

“I’ve got nothin’ to hide,” he said, the Chicago in his accent thickening.

Aaron turned back to Agent DiNozzo.

“I accept,” he said.

The guide flashed him a brief smile, then held out his hand to the general. O’Neill took it, his body language indicating both pride and worry.

“You sure you’re up to this, Tony?” he asked. “You’ve slept, maybe, four hours out of the last forty.”

Agent DiNozzo shrugged.

“I’m fine, Jack,” he said. “I may have to crash on your couch for a bit at some point, but that’s what it’s there for, right?”

He raised his eyebrows and gave his sentinel a look that bordered on pornographic, leaving little doubt that napping was not the couch’s primary purpose.


The guide took a breath and closed his eyes. When he opened them again, Aaron felt the word twitch and the already blue light around them became deeper and richer. Aaron drew in a sharp breath. He hadn’t expected to be drawn into median along with Agent DiNozzo and General O’Neill. He looked around, quickly, seeing his stag and Morgan’s panther standing at attention behind them, while Fornell’s badger lounged indolently in the middle of the conference table. A gigantic, sleepy lion was sitting between DiNozzo and O’Neill, while an equally outsized but much more high-strung coyote prowled the edge of the room behind them.

As Agent DiNozzo pulled them deeper into median, other differences began to make themselves known. Aaron surveyed the people in the room with interest, seeing the shadows of the
metaphysical reality beginning to overlay the physical. Fornell had a misty hard hat and fluorescent vest on over his suit and there was a shovel leaning against the table beside his hand, prepared for serious grunt work. Morgan had a translucent TAC vest on and the ghost of an assault rifle in front of him, ready to defend unto the death.

Garcia herself… glowed. Aaron had never seen her on the metaphysical level before— he was a sentinel, not a guide, so he didn’t have conscious access to the Spirit Realm on his own, although he had had a few visionary experiences— but he wasn’t at all surprised to see that Garcia was lit up from within by a buttery yellow light, like a small, friendly sun. She also had a big yellow sunflower in her hair, but it took him a moment to register that it was a Spirit Realm sunflower, since Garcia wore flowers in her hair almost daily. Today, however, she had on a midnight blue on white patterned dress with orchid accents, which would not go well at all with sunflower accessories.

O’Neill, DiNozzo, and Gibbs, however, gave him serious pause.

Aaron was not much given to flights of fancy, nor was he well versed in popular culture. He watched movies on long plane rides and in cheap motel rooms, when there were rarely unlimited choices and his attention was usually at least half on something else. His rare encounters with the Spirit Realm had never involved anything even slightly referential. Which was why it was so surprising that Gibbs had a hazy replica of Han Solo’s costume from Star Wars superimposed over his slacks and jacket and O’Neill and DiNozzo were both wearing Jedi robes.

Aaron would very much have liked to pause at this point, but he was forestalled by a most unexpected— and unwelcome— development. DiNozzo was looking at each of them in turn, studying whatever the Spirit Realm was showing him intently, but when he got to Aaron, he took one look, made a ragged, hurt sound, and broke down crying.

The entire room froze.

Aaron was overwhelmed by a strange sensation, as though his body was trying to move slightly to the left without him. For some reason, he found himself wanting to open his mouth and tell DiNozzo everything, about Hayley, about Jack, about— about Spencer. He clenched his teeth against the compulsion and focused on his breathing. It lasted for less than thirty seconds, and then O’Neill was pulling his guide into his arms, glaring at Aaron as he did so, his body language conveying his displeasure while still, somehow, showing the utmost care for the man in his arms. As soon as DiNozzo’s gaze was off him, the sensation faded.

“Aw, hey,” O’Neill murmured to his distraught guide, “What’s wrong? What did that bad sentinel do to you?”

Aaron opened his mouth to protest, but Fornell caught his eye and drew one finger sharply across his neck.

“I’m fine, it’s fine,” DiNozzo protested thickly, sniffling into O’Neill’s uniform. “Just… caught me off guard, that’s all.”

“What’s going on?” Morgan demanded.

Fornell snorted.

“Have you looked your boy there?” he asked, gesturing to Aaron. “I mean, it’s bad enough for me, and I’m a mu. DiNozzo’s a fucking epsilon. He’s getting all the gory details. In technicolor. With his history, it’s probably hitting a little too close to home.”
Morgan frowned and looked at Aaron and his eyes widened.

“Holy fuck,” he said, recoiling slightly.

“Morgan?” Aaron said impatiently.

“Sorry, Hotch,” Morgan said, wincing. “You just… you kinda look like an extra in a horror movie right now.”

For about ten seconds, Aaron was baffled, unable to conceive of a plausible explanation for Morgan’s words. And then he remembered, and his entire body went cold:

He had denied his guide.

In the mundane world, there was no way to tell, but on the Spirit Plane, it must be clearly evident. Aaron didn’t move, didn’t change expression, but inside, he cringed in shame and anguish.

Garcia had been watching the scene in horrified fascination, and at this point, she turned to Gibbs.

“As the only other mundane person here, are you finding this as incredibly creepy as I am?” she asked.

“Any other day, I’d say no,” Gibbs said, his narrow gaze fixed on Aaron. “Right now? Absolutely.”

“Tiger,” O’Neill murmured to DiNozzo, “Can you let go now? Or do you need more time?”

“Yeah, sorry,” DiNozzo said. “They’re clean.”

The extra blue faded from the room and DiNozzo slumped heavily against O’Neill.


“Okay, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said with a gentle, but worried smile.

“Fornell, take Morgan out for coffee,” DiNozzo continued. “Tell ‘im about Em, huh? Show ‘im th’ pictures, I like the pictures.”

Fornell’s eyebrows rose, but he nodded.

“Sure, DiNutzo,” he said. “Whatever you say.”

“Agent Hotchner…” DiNozzo said, voice going ragged, “There’s… I… I don’t know. Fuck! I don’t know…”

DiNozzo swayed a little and O’Neill caught him around the waist, grimacing a little when his guide couldn’t see.

“O-kay,” he said briskly. “Looks like that nap’s happening sooner rather than later. Come on, Tiger, let’s go. Unless you want me to carry you back to the office after you pass out?”

“Can’t carry me,” DiNozzo protested. “’M heavier than you.”

“And? So? Therefore?” O’Neill inquired, already guiding the younger man towards the door. “I coulda carried you a mile over rough terrain before I awakened. Now? Piece a’ cake. Of course,
you wouldn’t exactly be *comfortable*, but—”

The door shut behind them.

There was a moment of silence before Morgan spoke up:

“Who was that?”

“That was Special Agent Tony DiNozzo,” Agent Gibbs said. “Best agent I’ve ever worked with, and the most trouble I’ve come across in one place outside of Desert Storm. You get used to him after a while.”

Aaron leaned back in his chair and tried unsuccessfully to calm his shaking. He could well believe that being around Agent DiNozzo was the equivalent of being in a war zone, but he could not imagine how one could ever get used to it.

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Jack prowled restlessly around the edges of the main floor, tuning briefly in and out of each conversation and phone call being conducted and peeking shamelessly at computer monitors as he went. He didn’t focus too hard or too long on any one thing, just let it wash over him, trusting his sentinel recall to hang onto it if he needed it later.

It was a habit he’d picked up back at the mountain, one that had served him decently well over the years, although he would be the first to admit that it worked a lot better with Tony as his guide. Sam had helped his senses, but their *accord* hadn’t been deep enough for her to do anything more. Which had been ironic, because Jack didn’t actually have much trouble with his senses (aside from the allergy Red Dye #40 and the vulnerability to Sam’s spectrometer). No, his stumbling block had always been turning all the information his senses gave him into useful data. Jack was no dumb cookie, but he wasn’t a genius either. His brain just wasn’t capable of keeping up with all the information his senses gave him. He just took in as much as he could and, occasionally, some random bit of stimuli down the road would shake loose something useful from his sense memory.

Now, however, thanks to his *accord* with Tony, he could usually zero right in on what was important, either at the time or when it became relevant later on. It was something to do with Tony’s psionic power and his connection to the Spirit Plane—Jack wasn’t really all that up on the metaphysical stuff, although he was perfectly happy taking advantage of the perks it offered.

The sound of Gibbs’s distinctive footsteps broke through the passive monitoring into his active consciousness about 25 seconds before the man himself sidled up beside him and leaned on the rail looking down onto the main floor.

“Get your analyst set up?” Jack asked, keeping his tone easy and affable.

They hadn’t spoken directly since they’d wrecked his office, and the atmosphere between them was more than a little strained.

“Yuht,” Gibbs said. “Turns out, she and Paul get on like a house on fire. Left ‘em talking cables and bytes and things like that— don’t really know, always leave that stuff to McGee and Abby.”

“Mhm,” Jack agreed. “Sam was my go-to back in the day. Now— not sure, don’t know the techs
around here that well yet. They sort of appear and do their voodoo, then disappear back into whatever weird dimension they inhabit.”

There was a supremely awkward silence.

“You keep hurting Tony, you and me are going to have a problem,” Gibbs said abruptly.

Jack winced. Okay, looked like they were doing this.

“Yeah,” he said, “I know. Didn’t know he was going to take it that hard.”

Gibbs gave him that flat, fishy stare that Jack presumed he pulled out when suspects were being particularly thick-headed.

“Hey,” Jack protested grumpily, “It’s not like you don’t give him just as hard a time as I do. He’s the master of putting up with absolute bastards.”

Gibbs’s scent profile shifted to, ‘this creature is too stupid to live.’

“DiNozzo can take pretty much anything,” Gibbs said slowly, “Except being assaulted or ignored. ‘S part of why he’s such an annoying little shit: he needs attention or he gets twitchy.”

Jack frowned, trying to work out what Gibbs was telling him. Suddenly, a memory surfaced in his mind, Sam’s voice saying, *He learned to depend solely on himself because he had no other choice.* Then another memory of his own voice saying, *Right now, I have no use for you. So get out and let me do my job!*

Fuck.

“Abuse?” he asked aloud, his mind skipping ahead.

Gibbs sighed.

“Yeah,” he said. “He’s never said so, but it’s not hard to figure out.”

“Just neglect?” Jack asked. “Or was it physical?”

“Hard to say,” Gibbs said. “He sure has some kind of bad associations with violence, but that could just be from working as a cop— his kinda luck, being on the job can get crazy. But even if his old man did knock him around when he wasn’t ignoring him, nobody would know. Senior has connections, and when Tony was growing up, he had money too— guess he’s lost most of it since, but back then, he could afford to make that kind of thing go away.”

Jack nodded, wondering if he could get away with tracking Tony’s father down and shooting him in the kneecaps. A sentinel got a lot of leeway when it came to protecting their guide, but cold-blooded assault for something that had happened years ago (if it had happened at all) might be pushing it.

“At this point, not sure how much it matters,” Gibbs went on. “Tony is Tony, and anything that could change him would probably be worse than what made him this way in the first place. And, as lines in the sand go, not wanting to be hit or ignored seem pretty reasonable to me.”

He gave Jack a narrow, cool look which made him feel about six inches tall. He didn’t know how Gibbs figured out that one of his own lines in the sand was physical violence, especially against his guide, but he sure was capitalizing it, pointing out that, from Tony’s point of view, what he’d done
this morning was just as bad as if he’d hit him.

Way to stick the knife where it hurts.

How long this subtle and excruciating dressing-down would have gone on was unclear, but thankfully, at that point, Gibbs’s phone rang. Gibbs gave Jack one last glare before answering it.

“Gibbs.”

Jack heard the rich, precise voice of the Director of NCIS on the other end of the line:

“Agent Gibbs, where are you?”

She sounded pissed.


“I have three agents here doing nothing and a small mountain of paperwork that needs to be dealt with,” Director Shepard snapped. “I need you and Agent DiNozzo here now.”

“Sorry, Jen,” Gibbs said calmly, “Can’t. Situation we’ve been monitoring went hot this morning. Tell McGee to get David and Lee started on the paperwork—if he’s gonna be Granger’s SFA, he’ll need the practice. DiNozzo and I’ll file our reports when we can. Might be a while though, so you better stand the team down ‘til this is resolved or you can get a new SAC in.”

“Jethro,” Shepard snarled, “I cannot have the MCRT out of action for an unspecified period of time. Until Agent Granger can take over, you have a job to do!”

“Doin’ it, Jen,” Gibbs said implacably. “Pentagon cases take priority, you know that. You don’t like it, bring Granger in early.”

“You agreed—!” Director Shepard spat.

“No, I didn’t,” Gibbs contradicted. “You and Davenport played hardball with SecDef, and he agreed. It’d been up to me, we woulda worked out our notice and been done with it.”

“Yes, we have an agreement with SecDef,” Shepard said. “One which is not being honored!”

“Take it up with him then,” Gibbs said. “But you should know, he got woken up same time we did for the same reason, so he’s a little busy right now.”

And with that, Gibbs hung up.

Jack made a disgruntled face.

“You know, for a while I admired her brass, getting Bolt to back down like she did,” he said, “But now I’m just pissed off. Doesn’t she get that you guys actually work for us now?”

“Yeah, giving up isn’t really Jen’s thing,” Gibbs said. “Sharing either. Far as she’s concerned, we’re still hers.”

“Well, you’re not, and I’m getting real tired of my guide coming home not being able to untie his own shoelaces,” Jack said peevishly.

“Like I said to her, take it up with SecDef,” Gibbs said. “He’s the one that she grabbed by the balls and squeezed ‘til he gave her what she wanted.”
His toned and scent had turned smug, and Jack winced.

“Ugh,” he said. “Why do you sound so pleased by that idea? That’s horrible.”

Gibbs smiled.

“Worked with Jen a long time,” he said. “She’s—a friend. Good to know she can make the hill dance to her tune when she wants to.”

“Even when it means you don’t sleep?” Jack asked.

Gibbs shrugged.

“Don’t sleep much anyways,” he replied.

Another set of familiar footsteps broke into Jack’s awareness and he turned to see Paul making his way towards them.

“General, Agent Gibbs,” Paul said, “Good, I was looking for you both. I have a member of R&D’s creative team on the line with some specs for the unit’s credentials. Agent Fornell has impressed upon me that you are going to need them.”

“Huh,” Jack said.

“Good,” Gibbs said.

“Yes, well,” Paul said. “If you’ll step into my office, Dr. Patel is on my line.”

They made their way to Paul’s office and piled around his video array where a pretty young woman of Indian descent was sitting at a messy desk in one of Homeworld’s brightly lit, ultra-modern satellite offices, fidgeting mightily.

Paul introduced them, and Dr. Patel stammered through a broken greeting—there were, Jack noted, three extra-large to-go cups amongst the clutter on her desk, indicating that she was probably riding the end of a vicious caffeine high.

“If you could show Agent Gibbs and General O’Neill what you’ve come up with, doctor?” Paul said calmly when the introductions were finished.

“Yes—yes—of course,” Dr. Patel said, shuffling through some papers on her desk before turning to her keyboard.

The moment her fingers touched the keys, Jack saw her entire body relax a little. Clearly, she was more comfortable with tech than people.

“So, first, here’s our proposal for the new agency’s seal,” Dr. Patel said, typing a few commands into the keyboard.

Paul’s screen split, and an image of a blue government seal appeared beside the video feed. It had a stylized green globe in the center surrounded by gold laurel leaves with a triangle and a circle on top. There was a banner reading “Pace homini” across the globe and a ring of text around the edge which read, “Homeworld Enforcement and Reconnaissance Agency.”

“We left out the eagle. I mean, I know that technically you guys are an American agency, but this is about Earth, so—”
“Dr. Patel, perhaps we can back up a bit?” Paul inquired mildly. “The general and Agent Gibbs haven’t even been told the name of the agency yet.”

“Oh, right,” Dr. Patel said. “Well, we had to run a lot of possibilities, because there were all these overlap issues with other federal agencies, but based on the new specs Paul— I mean, Colonel Davis— just gave us, what we finally came up with was ‘Homeworld Enforcement and Reconnaissance Agency.’ We kicked around ‘investigation’ and ‘investigative,’ but in the end, we went with ‘enforcement’ because when it comes down to it, you guys are kind of the only thing going in the program as far as law enforcement goes. The ‘reconnaissance’ is new, we went with that when we found out you’re also going to be doing spy stuff as well as arresting bad guys— bad aliens— you know. And—”

While Dr. Patel had been explaining the agency’s new title, Jack had been slowly sounding out the acronym, his lips forming the H, the E, the R, and then the A, then mouthing ‘Hera’ with a growing sense of disbelief. His eyes narrowed and he interrupted the flow of caffeine-fueled chatter:

“Okay, just admit it,” he said. “You came up with the acronym, then had somebody sit there with a thesaurus and find words that fit. Like they did with S.H.I.E.L.D. in the Avengers comics.”

Dr. Patel coughed and covered her mouth, plainly hiding a smirk.

“Absolutely not,” she said unconvincingly. “Like I said, there are overlap issues, which limited our options and… but I do admit, it does fit with the whole Greek theme we’ve got going with the 304s.”

Jack snorted in patent disbelief.

“Doesn’t using ‘Homeworld’ kinda violate operational security?” Gibbs asked, changing the subject.

“Actually, we’re trying to bring the ‘homeworld’ designation into more common usage, both to strengthen the program’s cover and to prepare the way for eventual disclosure,” Paul put in. “You see, back when Agent DiNozzo first spoke at the weekly departmental briefing, he mentioned in passing that the Stargate Program would appear, on paper, to be a new top-secret intel operation utilizing new technology, top analysts from the hard and soft sciences, and elite combat assets. While the point was not discussed at the time, DepSecDef was intrigued by it and proposed to me and SecDef that we should create a second layer to the program’s cover story. Stargate Command, Homeworld Command, and Homeworld Enforcement are now, on paper, parts of a classified operation aimed at identifying and containing security threats with global potential. This has the benefit of being the truth, as far as it goes, just without the alien aspect. The hope is that, when and if the program is ever disclosed, there will be a certain amount of, if not trust, at least awareness of the divisions’ general purposes already in place, which may ease the transition.”

“But you still maintain that choosing a ‘familiar’ word that happens to be the name of a Greek goddess is pure coincidence,” Jack said, refusing to be distracted from his main point.

“The Greek goddess of hearth and home,” Dr. Patel said with a slightly dopey smile. “I know. Funny how that worked out, right?”

Jack sighed and shook his head. This was what happened when you gave too many smart people too much leeway.

“Okay,” he said wearily. “Moving on.”
“Right,” Dr. Patel said. “So, I showed you the seal—we figured you’d need that for official documents and stuff—but this is what we have for agents in the field.”

She tapped a few keys and brought up a black and white digital sketch of a shield shape with ‘HERA’ written across the top, another stylized globe, and ‘Special Agent’ across the bottom. Above the shield, where the American Eagle would be on a normal federal badge, there was the top of a triangle with, again, a circle at the top. This time, Jack recognized the symbol.

“Hey!” he said, “That’s the glyph for Earth off our stargate—the pyramid thingy with the sun directly overhead or whatever.”

Dr. Patel grinned.

“Exactly,” she said. “Like I said, we didn’t want to go with the American eagle. We wanted it to be more—global.”

Gibbs tilted his head.

“Makes it look like we’re Masons,” he drawled.

“I’ll have you know that the gate predates the Masons by a significant margin,” Dr. Patel said sniffily. “Although,” she got a far-away look in her eye, “It’s possible that the symbolism…”

“Dr. Patel,” Paul interrupted smoothly, “Can we go back to the official seal for a moment? I don’t think we got a chance to hear you explain it.”

“Right,” Dr. Patel said, shaking herself. “So, we’ve got the laurel crown. That’s pretty standard, a symbol of triumph and honor—we thought it would be familiar and, well, comforting. And then we have Earth—literally, the homeworld. We made sure all the continents were visible, at least a little, give it that global perspective. And again, we put the stargate symbol in at the top in place of the eagle, and… oh, yeah, this bit’s cool. ‘Pace homini’ is Latin for ‘in peace for humankind.’ It’s—well, literally, it’s a statement about the agency’s purpose, but it’s also a reference to our planet’s first attempts at space exploration—you know, the plaque that Armstrong and Aldrin placed during the first moon landing: ‘We came in peace for all mankind.’ Only it’s in Latin, so it’s more of an in-joke.”

Gibbs stared at the screen, then turned and looked at Jack.

“It always like this around here?” he asked.

Jack nodded sadly.

“Too many IQ points crammed into one place,” he said mournfully. “Why do you think all our battlecruisers have unpronounceable Greek names?”

Gibbs sighed.

“DiNozzo’s gonna love this,” he said.

He sounded less than thrilled by the prospect. Jack, on the other hand, cheered up. Tony might play the dumb jock most of the time, but he was a closet geek, and watching him geek out with the other geeks was kind of delightful.

Jack thought privately that the moon landing reference would be his favorite.
“‘One small step for man, one giant leap for mankind!’” Tony intoned gleefully, gloating over the printouts of the Homeworld Enforcement and Reconnaissance Agency’s new seal and badge that Paul had given him when he’d woken up from his nap. “Do you know that Armstrong was supposed to say, ‘one small step for a man’? He flubbed his line. Which, ya know, first person to set foot on the moon— that he knew of, anyways— he was having a busy day. You can’t really blame him.”

“So, I gather you like it?” Jack said, fond and amused all at once.

Tony grinned at him.

They were in one of Homeworld’s cars on the tarmac of Bolling Air Force Base where the jet that had picked up Ian Edgerton in Florida and David Rossi in Arkansas was due to touch down any minute. In the interest of time, Jack and Tony had elected to meet the two agents at the airport and do the median scan and the debrief in the car. Penelope Garcia had already gotten a hit on a D.C. location for the NID, but Tony wasn’t comfortable with sending Gibbs and Fornell in by themselves. He had insisted that they wait for Edgerton and Rossi, and despite Gibbs’s perfectly valid objection to putting him in the field on this case, he was lobbying to go in himself. In full TAC gear, he could pass as a nameless, faceless grunt, and they had a distressing lack of warm bodies at their disposal who were fully briefed and duly authorized to operate on American soil.

Assembling an agency strike force had, incidentally, moved way up on Tony’s to-do list since this morning. Planning an op of this size was a pain in the ass without backup. Since Tony was unwilling to put military boots on US soil unless the world was in imminent danger of ending— frankly, he was appalled by the number of times the SGC and Homeworld Command had violated Posse Comitatus, albeit, out of necessity— that left them comically understaffed and outgunned.

“When do you think we’ll have the credentials?” Tony asked, examining the badge design avidly.

“R&D said they’d have the first ones to us tonight,” Jack said. “They’re making them in-house— someone got the bright idea of tagging them with naquada. So far, the program controls the naquada supply, and we’ve got ways of detecting it, so it’s kind of like a secret handshake and a tracker all in one.”

“Awsome,” Tony said happily.

Jack continued to smile, but Tony felt a vague thread of worry under his affection and the deep, simmering anger that had yet to dissipate appreciably.

“What?” Tony asked. “What’s wrong, Jack?”

Jack sighed ruefully.

“Forgot for a moment that I can’t get anything past you,” he said. “I’m just— you’re running yourself ragged, kid. I’m worried about you. Worried you’ll wear yourself out.”

“Hey,” Tony said with what he hoped was a reassuring smile, “Hey, hey, it’s okay, I’m okay. I’m a federal agent. I work for Special Agent ‘second B is for Bastard’ Gibbs. I’m used to working my ass off and going without sleep for weeks at a time.”

“Yeah, well, now you’re my guide,” Jack said. “Watching you work yourself to exhaustion kinda
makes me want to beat someone up, only you’re working for me, so the person I should probably be beating up is myself, and that’s just stupid.”

Tony laughed.

“Nah,” he said. “Fight Club, Brad Pitt—not the one who broke my leg—and Edward Norton. You know, I could totally get behind this: they’re both super hot, but in totally different ways.”

Jack blinked.

“… Brad Pitt broke your leg?” he said, baffled.

Before Tony could explain, the intercom connecting the back of the SUV to the front—this particular model had a partition, like a limo, as well as facing seats, so that classified business could be conducted in the car—cracked.

“Sir,” said the driver’s voice, “The plane is landing now. We should be underway in five.”

Jack reached for the button.

“Roger, Mulroney,” he said. “Thanks.”

Precisely four and a half minutes later, Lieutenant Mulroney opened the passenger’s side door of the Escalade to admit a well-dressed, dark-haired man in his late forties or early fifties. At the same time, the driver’s side door opened and Ian Edgerton tossed his duffle bag into the well between the first set of passenger seats before climbing in to settle his rifle case much more carefully on top of it. Mulroney closed the passenger’s side door, and a moment later, the back of the SUV opened to allow him to load two suitcases into the luggage area.


Both men blinked, no doubt because they had never heard of either organization before.

“David Rossi,” the older man said, eying Tony speculatively. “FBI, retired.”

“Nice to meet you!” Tony said, holding out his hand.

Rossi took it and Tony was treated to a series of stills of all of Marcello Mastroianni’s award-winning movie roles. Considering how many Best Actor awards the Italian movie star had picked up over the decades, it was a truly impressive display.

Ian, meanwhile, was staring narrowly at Jack, who was sitting back loosely in his seat and smiling indolently. Tony rolled his eyes.

“Jack,” he said, “This is Special Agent Ian Edgerton, FBI. Ian, this is General Jack O’Neill, US Air Force, my new sentinel. If either one of you pees on the other, you’re both sleeping in the doghouse. For the foreseeable future.”

“Well that’s new,” Rossi remarked. “I don’t think sentinels ever peed on each other in my day. Punched, maybe, but never peed.”

“Punching will also result in the loss of house privileges,” Tony said firmly. “Ian, why are you glaring at Jack like he knocked up your sister and your cousin on the same night?”
Ian finally shifted his flat, reptilian glare from Jack to Tony.

“Because he has an accord with a guide of my pride,” Ian said in his cool, precise voice. “Until he proves himself worthy of bonding with you, there is a very real possibility that I will have to kill him.”

Jack waited a beat, then frowned.

“And…?” he prompted.

Ian turned back to him, raising an inquiring eyebrow.

“I beg your pardon?” he asked. “Would you like me to add something?”

“It’s supposed to be, you’ll kill me and hide my body,” Jack said. “That’s what everyone says. I look forward to that part.”

“I will not need to hide your body, General O’Neill,” Ian said calmly. “If you mistreat Tony in any way, I will simply kill you and report my actions and the reasons for them to Sentinel Ellison and Guide Sandburg. According to Sentinel and Guide Law, I am perfectly within my rights to defend the guides of my pride as I see fit.”

Jack’s eyebrows went up.

“Okay,” he said, “I’m sentinel enough to admit, that was scary.” He cleared his throat and sat up straight in his seat. “I have found in this, thy brother, the other half of mine own soul. We walk as two so that we may be one. I ask thee to bear witness to our courtship,” he said formally.

Ian didn’t so much as twitch for thirty-seven long, long seconds.

Tony counted.

Finally, he relaxed and held out his hand.

“It is a pleasure to meet you, General O’Neill,” he said.

Jack relaxed as well and took the proffered hand.

“You as well,” he said. “And please, call me Jack. If everything goes right, we’re going to be seeing a lot of each other over the next few weeks.”

He turned and smiled genially at Rossi, who shook his outstretched hand with a small smirk playing around his full mouth.


“Dave Rossi,” Rossi said. “And I have a feeling that the— pleasure— will be all mine.”

“Okay,” Jack said, clapping his hands together, “Let’s get this show on the road. Ya ready, Tiger?”

“Yeah, Jack,” Tony said, his own mouth twitching. “So,” he turned to look at the two FBI agents, “We’re gonna do a quick median scan, make sure you guys don’t have any evildoers lurking somewhere in your lives, then Jack is gonna blow your mind with the most crazy classified briefing you ever did see. Sound good?”

Ian and Rossi both nodded, and Jack held out his hand to Tony. Tony took it, and with an ease born
Despite how much he’d been doing this lately, Tony didn’t really know what to expect. Each time he’d gone into *median* over the past twelve hours, he’d gotten a different metaphysical display. With Fornell, he’d gotten a very definite impression of *The Magnificent Seven,* with Jack as Yul Brynner’s character, Gibbs as Steve McQueen’s, and Fornell as James Coburn’s. With Garcia and her entourage, there hadn’t been any overarching theme, just individual impressions: Garcia’s cheerful light, Morgan’s solid protectiveness, and Hotchner’s hideous pain (which Tony was trying not to think about, but how the hell did you ignore the fact that the man had basically carved his own heart out with a rusty spoon, and was that what Tony had felt like after breaking his *precord* with Jake, because yikes!). With Ian and Rossi, Tony found himself immersed in a vision that was familiar to him mostly due to a few select films, although he easily recognized many of the tropes. As usual, *mundane* world and Spirit World were superimposed over one another, so while Tony could still see the interior of the Escalade, he could also see a medieval room, where he, Jack, Ian, and Rossi were seated around a table. The table was distinctly round in shape, and all of them had shadowy impressions of Ye Olden Times plate armor overlaying their suits, uniforms, and, in Ian’s case, jeans and jacket.

“Oh, fer cryin’ out loud,” Jack said. “C’mon, are you serious? This is not my thing. This is *Danny’s* thing. He would *love* this.”

“Considering what he and the gang are doing right now, maybe not,” Tony said, eying the Arthurian cliche before him. “Jesus, I am not qualified for this. What does all this even *mean*?”

Because the vision before him was clearly Arthurian in nature—Round Table anyone?—and was rife with what his college English teacher had referred to as ‘allusions.’ Despite the SGC’s new and urgent interest in Arthurian legends, Tony had only the most cursory (mostly Disney-inspired) knowledge of the mythology, so he didn’t know precisely what those allusions *were,* but he was smart enough to recognize a Very Important Symbol when he saw it.

The table was elaborately painted with designs that even he could recognize as medieval, and around the edge in front of each seat—of which there were thirteen—a name was written in an ornate and difficult-to-read script. The name in front of Tony’s chair, he determined after a little bit of squinting, was ‘Bruenor.’ Jack was sitting in front of ‘Bedivere,’ while Ian was looking down at ‘Bors,’ and Rossi, who obviously couldn’t see the strange scene, was sitting in front of ‘Percival.’ Tony didn’t bother to read all the names in front of the empty seats, but he did manage to determine that there ‘Arthur’ and ‘Lancelot’ were among them, which niggled at something in the back of his brain. He didn’t think this was the first time recently he’d found himself in a situation where the traditional top spot of a well-known hierarchy was conspicuously empty. Suddenly, he remembered a conversation he’d had with Jack when they’d first met, right before they’d gone on that mission: *if you’re the beta of Earth, who the hell is the alpha?*

Tony had no idea whether this was in any way connected, but it sure was weird.

“Would anybody care to explain to the only *mundane* person in this car what’s going on?” Rossi asked mildly.

“We appear to be characters in some sort of Arthurian reenactment,” Ian said dryly. “We are all wearing armor and sitting at the places of specific knights at King Arthur’s Round Table. General O’Neill is Benivere, Tony is Bruenor, I am Bors, and you are Percival. The other seats are empty, although I get the impression that all of them, with the possible exception of King Arthur’s and Sir Lancelot’s, have occupants who are simply not present.”
“Why am I this ‘Bedivere’ character?” Jack asked, put out. “Shouldn’t I be Arthur? I am in charge of this dog and pony show, after all. Besides, I don’t even know who Bedivere is.”

Rossi’s face had taken on a thoughtful expression.

“If I remember the mythology correctly,” he said, frowning, “Sir Bedivere is one of the oldest figures of Arthurian legend. He was in the very first Welsh texts concerning King Arthur, and was Arthur’s most trusted knight. He is said to have been the one who returned Excalibur to the Lady of the Lake after Arthur’s death.”

“Well,” said Tony, “That sounds promising. I don’t remember a lot about King Arthur’s knights, but I do know that, as knights of the round table go, you could do far worse than a trustworthy guy who gets the job done. I mean, you could have been Lancelot and been hopelessly infatuated with some other guy’s wife— which, by the way, if you ever start mooning after married women— or any women— like that, you are so going on the couch for, like, ever.”

“Interestingly, none of the names Agent Edgerton mentioned are central to the main tragedy— or to any tragedy at all. I don’t remember Bruenor, but Bors and Percival are both with Galahad when he finds the Holy Grail, and as I said, Bedivere survives the Battle of Camlynn and returns Arthur’s sword to the Lady of the Lake.”

“Which means… what, exactly?” Ian said.

“I have no idea,” Rossi said. “I don’t understand the Spirit Plane very well. However, if I were building a profile, I would say that the fact that all of the knights you mentioned are relatively minor characters who do not play pivotal roles in the main plotline is significant in some way. All of them were admirable, worthy knights, but neither their lives, nor their deaths were key to the fate of Arthur or of Camelot.”

At this point, Tony realized he’d been holding them in median way longer than he needed to, and since he was already pretty exhausted, that probably hadn’t been the smartest thing to do. He released the Spirit Plane and they were firmly back in the Escalade, staring at each other in confusion.

“I got nothin’,” Jack said.

“We probably won’t understand it until we have the full picture,” Rossi said, shrugging.

“A full picture of what?” Ian wondered mildly.

“Okay, well, good then,” Jack said briskly, reaching down beside his seat and fishing out his briefcase. “Moving on: we’ve got a few papers for you to sign, and then I’ll tell you what this is all about…”
Metaphysical Induction

Chapter Summary

Metaphysical Induction: the process by which events are brought about on the Spirit Plane.

“Back parking lot six, clear,” General O’Neill’s voice said over the coms. “Retail five niner, clear. Retail six aught, clear. Retail six one... clear.”

As O’Neill listed off and cleared surveillance regions surrounding their target in the all but deserted Fairfax Circle Shopping Center, Dave sat back in the passenger’s side seat of the unmarked Pentagon SUV and considered the odd events of the last hours.

The revelation that Earth was not, after all, alone in the universe, and that travel to other planets was not only possible, but had been going on for a decade, was too large and complex to address at this moment. Fortunately, Dave had extensive experience at compartmentalization, otherwise, he could never have gotten it together in time to go on tonight’s op.

The news that a terrorist organization that had originally been aimed at protecting Earth from alien influence (through methods, if Dave understood correctly, which were not exactly surprising for a group of bigoted zealots, but were horrific nonetheless) had been hijacked by aliens and was now pursuing a new, but poorly understood agenda was easier to come to grips with. Dave had not had exhaustive personal experience with hunting terrorists, but he understood the methodology, and it turned out that the addition of aliens to the mix added excitement to the proceedings, but did not alter the basic premise. So too the secret government agency that was obstructing the investigation into the Trust for reasons of its own. Again, Dave did not have much personal experience with corruption cases, but he was well aware of how easily black ops could stray beyond the bounds of both law and human decency, with or without the alien component.

He had seen the results of some of the CIA’s covert operations when he was in Vietnam, and had never been able to forget it.

It was the team that had been assembled to combat these evils which was, at the moment, of deepest interest— and concern— to him. As he understood it, HERA had been formed quite recently and, until this morning, had consisted solely of Special Agents Gibbs and DiNozzo, with General O’Neill as an ad hoc third. Dave was not a man easily unnerved, but any of these men alone would have been enough to give him pause, and together, they caused him no little unease.

Gibbs was, on the surface, a hard-edged ex-Marine who gave new meaning to the word ‘irascible.’ As an ex-Marine himself, Dave was familiar with the breed and would have been quite comfortable with Gibbs, had it not been for the other, less obvious aspects of his personality. First and foremost, while he operated by a very strict code, as most Marines did, this code was not one that could be found in any Corps manual. It seemed to be entirely his own, influenced perhaps a little by Agent DiNozzo, and known only to him and his partner.

As for DiNozzo, Dave had to say, he had never before met a man who made him simultaneously want to tuck him up in bed with an extra blanket and make sure his hands were clearly visible at all times. On the one hand, DiNozzo gave off an air of such painful, puppylike earnestness and
desperation to please, it was almost impossible not to want to coddle him unmercifully. On the other, he had an understated but dangerous competence that made it quite obvious that it was only his own inclinations that kept him from committing any act of espionage or mayhem that took his fancy.

Thank goodness he had gone into law enforcement, or he would almost certainly have become an international kingpin.

Finally, there was General O’Neill. The general was, as Dave understood it, one of the founding members of the original Stargate Program and was currently in charge of planetary defense (broadly speaking—Homeworld Command’s reach seemed to extend to most offworld concerns on the grounds that, considering how little they knew about their galaxy, pretty much anything that happened offworld might have some bearing on Earth’s security). He was, on the surface, an easy-going sort of man, and a less discerning observer than Dave would probably have thought that he was a prime example of Chair Force indolence and complacency. They would have been wrong. Jack O’Neill was a ruthless son-of-a-bitch, and his lackadaisical manner merely served to put everyone around him off their guard while he went in for the kill.

To add to the very real danger that O’Neill represented, the man was bonded to Agent DiNozzo, who, as previously mentioned, had saved international law enforcement an untold amount of anguish by becoming a cop rather than a crime lord. The only saving grace of the situation was that neither of them seemed to have realized the full potential of their partnership yet. In fact, Agent Edgerton had had to point out, during the planning session for tonight’s activities, that, while O’Neill’s commission prevented him from operating on U.S. soil, his bond with DiNozzo nullified that restriction, allowing him to operate, within certain parameters, as a federal agent, just as DiNozzo could, within specific guidelines, operate as an Air Force officer (a thought which had Dave shuddering discreetly).

This, then, was the situation that Dave, along with Agent Edgerton and Agent Fornell, had walked into: a new covert team barely out of infancy run by a maverick ex-Marine, an annoying but loveable confidence man, and an easy-going black ops specialist.

Cazzo, as his nonnino would have said. Fuck.

Dave sighed. None of this was to say this was necessarily a bad situation. It was… Dave hesitated to use any of the adjectives that came to mind—‘complicated,’ crazy,’ ‘dangerous’—but it was… it was like squid ravioli: delicious, but difficult to prepare properly and even more difficult to persuade someone to eat if they weren’t Italian.

“No joy,” O’Neill said over the coms. “Sierra perimeter sweep is clean: no guards. Scanning ground zero.”

“They must be using electronic surveillance,” Edgerton’s voice said. “It is possible that they have tapped into the shopping center’s security system.”

Edgerton was stationed on a rooftop in the neighboring shopping complex, which spoke to either poor planning or, more likely, formidable skill.

“Terra One,” said Gibbs’s voice, “This is Whiskey One. Respond.”

“Copy, Whiskey One,” said the cool, calm voice of O’Neill’s second in command, Lt. Colonel Paul Davis.

“Can we get into Fairfax Circle’s security and see if the target has eyes in the system?” Gibbs
“Rodger, Whiskey One,” Colonel Davis said. “Efforting now.”

“Sierra scan failed. Target is anti-sierra-ed times five,” O’Neill said. “Switching to Golf.”

“Everyone always forgets about the ‘Golf’ in ‘Sierra Golf,’” Agent Fornell remarked smugly from his place in the driver’s seat beside Dave. “You can soundproof against sentinels all you want, a guide’s still gonna know right where you are.”

“The guides I served with in Vietnam had a harder time doing recon than their sentinel counterparts,” Dave remarked. “They said it was more tiring for them to do the same thing, and they couldn’t always get the same kind of detail.”

“Well, sure,” Fornell said. “We’ve gotta get the intel from another plane of existence. That takes effort. And the Spirit Plane isn’t exactly famous for its transparency— ‘three hostiles armed with semi automatics and grenades’ can turn into three turtles in the middle of a stream or a glass of single malt scotch with three ice cubes in it. The point is though, there ain’t no hiding on the Spirit Plane. The intel may be hard to get and clear as mud, but it’s good.”

As though in confirmation, DiNozzo’s voice spoke up over the com:

“Seven hostiles, all armed. Op security holding: they haven’t noticed us yet.”

“On the other hand,” Fornell said, barely missing a beat, “If you’re DiNutzo, the intel is crystal clear, and you don’t even have to work for it— obnoxious little shit.”

His voice was fond.

“I gather that Agent DiNozzo is… a special case?” Dave asked mildly.

Fornell snorted.

“You could say that,” he said. “He’s an epsilon— good at everything, level higher than the Empire State Building, and he doesn’t even need O’Neill to be a rock star.”

Although the words could be construed as envious, Fornell’s tone suggested sympathy rather than jealousy. Rossi picked up on the difference right away.

“Why do I get the feeling that that isn’t always a good thing?” he asked.

Fornell smirked.

“No flies on you,” he said. “Being special usually isn’t a good thing: Too much attention. Too many expectations. Too much hostility when you don’t meet those expectations. The D.C. pride has DiNutzo’s back, but I gather other prides haven’t been so good to him.”

“Whiskey Team, this is Terra One,” said Colonel Davis’s voice. “Stand by for surveillance analysis.”

“Uh, hi there,” said a hesitant female voice. “This is— um—” she cleared her throat, then continued in a firmer voice. “This is your dark goddess of all things technical speaking. It looks like your naughty boys do have eyes in the shopping center’s systems. I’ve managed to get a camera layout, which I can send to you, or I can disrupt their surveillance long enough to get you in.”
“If you disrupt surveillance, will they know their security has been compromised?” Agent Gibbs asked.

“Oh, please, sugar,” the woman purred, all traces of hesitation gone. “I am way better than that. They won’t know a thing until you walk through the front door. Or, in this case, the side and back door, because the schematics indicate that the office space they are currently occupying doesn’t actually have a front door. For a pretty unremarkable bit of architecture, this plaza has some serious weirdnesses.”

“Alright,” Gibbs said. “Whiskey two, maintain visual. Take out the windows on my command.”

“Yes sir,” said Edgerton’s voice.

“Whiskey five, whiskey six, with me on the back door. Your first objective is taking out the anti-sierra: I want you to be able to do your job. Your second is to secure their system: don’t let anyone put so much as a finger on any of the tech in there once we go through that door.”


“Rodger that,” said O’Neill.

“Whiskey three and four, side door. Your primary objective is getting the targets secured— get ’em down and cuffed and neutralize anyone who looks like they’re gonna be a problem.”

“Rodger, whiskey one,” Dave said into his own com, then flicked it off and drew his sidearm.

“Is whiskey three badger boy or Sir Percival?” DiNozzo wondered. “I’m so confused.”

“Whiskey three is me, you wiseassed little coyote,” Fornell growled in the com. “Rodger whiskey one.” He flicked his com off and drew his gun, chambering the first bullet. “Jesus,” he muttered.

“Among my mother’s people, the coyote is known as a great trickster,” Edgerton remarked.

Dave and Fornell climbed out of the SUV.

“Terra one, this is whiskey one,” Gibbs said. “Whiskey team, standing by. Do we have a go?”

“Is— do I— am I supposed to do the thing now?” said the tech’s voice over the com— she had forgotten to turn her receiver off.

Presumably, Colonel Davis responded, but, unlike the tech, he had his receiver off, so they couldn’t hear him.

“Did we even give our dark tech goddess a call sign?” DiNozzo wondered.

“Cut the chatter, whiskey six,” Gibbs said. “Terra one, do we have a go?”

“Whiskey team, you have a go,” Colonel Davis said. “Operation Endless Love, phase one, commencing.”

Dave wasn’t looking at Fornell, but he could feel him rolling his eyes.

“I will never believe that the computer just spat that ridiculous code name out at random,” he said. “It has DiNutzo’s sticky little fingerprints all over it.”

Privately, Dave thought that Colonel Davis was a more likely candidate for giving the op its absurd
name. Not only had he been the one in charge of the paperwork, but Dave had, during their brief meeting, observed a fiendish, but understated sense of humor lurking beneath the Air Force officer’s calm, punctilious exterior.

Of course, since DiNozzo also had a rather mischievous sense of humor, it was entirely possible that the two of them were in cahoots.

“Okay, Dark Goddess,” Gibbs said, his voice wry even over the coms, “Cut surveillance.”

“Oh!” said the tech. “Okay! Cutting surveillance... now.”

“All units, go, go, go,” Gibbs’s voice said.

Dave had done plenty of TAC work during his time at the Bureau, but sneaking across a deserted parking lot in the middle of the night was a lot more secret-agent than he remembered his time with the BAU. They reached the side door to the part of the shopping complex where the NID’s office was located, and Dave was relieved to see that it was a regular door set in a cheap frame. A ballistic breach would be loud, messy, and possibly time-consuming, as neither of them were carrying a weapon powerful enough to guarantee success on the first try. He glanced at Fornell.

“Would you like to do the honors, or should I?” he asked.

Fornell responded by lifting up a foot and kicking the door in. Dave shook his head and keyed his com unit.

“This is whiskey four,” he murmured. “We’re in the building.”

They stepped into bland stairwell lit by a dim security light. Fornell took point and Dave fell in behind him, grateful that this was the kind of training that is not easily lost, even though it had been years since he’d been in the field.

“We’re in too,” DiNozzo’s voice whispered in his ear. “I’m getting... oh, yup, that’s definitely extra security. Lion-toes? What ya got?” There’s a pause, presumably so O’Neill could scan for the security DiNozzo’s sensing, then DiNozzo was back. “Hey, Badger? Percival? Look for a laser security array. We’ve got one beam at chest level over here. Nothing fancy, but definitely enough to ring the doorbell.”

“Yeah, I got it,” Fornell said. “Same here. No imagination, these guys.”

Dave sighed and followed Fornell’s lead, wriggling uncomfortably underneath the laser array that had been set up across the stairs. He was fit, he stayed in shape, but he was also fifty and his knees didn’t bend like they used to.

They reached the top of the stairs and found themselves on a landing with three doors leading off of it. They knew, from the building blueprints, that one door led into an interior hallway, one led into a set of vacant offices, and one led into a set of offices that were vacant on paper, but which were actually occupied by an NID unit.

“This is whiskey three and four,” Dave murmured. “We’re at the door. Standing by.”

“All units, on my mark...” Gibbs whispered. “... Go, go, go!”

They burst into the room just as the tinted windows of the office shattered under a series of precisely placed bullets from Edgerton’s sniper rifle. There was another series of shots as O’Neill and DiNozzo took out the white noise generator.
“Federal Agents!” Gibbs, Fornell, and Dave all shouted. “On the ground, now!”

Of the seven hostiles in the room, only two tried to draw weapons. The other five all dived for the computers. The two who pulled their guns fell instantly, one taken down by a sniper’s bullet, the other by the combined firepower of Gibbs, Fornell, and Dave’s weapons. Dave felt a moment of regret. The protocol in this situation was clear: when agents’ lives were in danger, you shot to kill. But these men had also been federal agents, and there it was unclear whether they knew the agency they worked for was no longer operating with the consent of the American government.

He had no time to dwell on this however.

Of the remaining five, the two who had been at their desks had already been neutralized by a bullet in the arm, courtesy of O’Neill, who, as a covert ops specialist, had trained to disable a target without killing them if necessary, and who, as a sentinel, had very precise aim. The other three, however, were still trying to get to the computers.

“The man said freeze!” O’Neill snapped as one of them reached a keyboard, his irritation coming through even over the electronic mic in his helmet.

O’Neill fired a single shot from his assault rifle and the keyboard exploded. The agent stumbled back with a cry, clawing at his face where shards of plastic had embedded themselves.

“Uh-uh-uh-uh,” DiNozzo scolded, laying out another agent with a firm jab of his rifle butt to the temple.

O’Neill and DiNozzo were suited up in full assault gear, complete with tinted face shields. This served a double purpose: On the one hand, it maintained their anonymity. Nobody in this room outside their own team would know that the Head of Homeworld Command and his guide had participated in this op. On the other, it gave the illusion that the team was larger than it actually was. An anonymous two-man assault team could easily become three- or four-man assault team in an adrenaline-fuelled imagination.

The final agent had gotten to a computer by the wall, but as he reached for the keys, he froze. His eyes bulged and he stared at the desk, transfixed by something that only he could see. O’Neill grabbed him and pulled him away from the computer.

“Nice one, Tiger,” O’Neill remarked as he restrained his strangely unresisting prisoner.

Looking around and seeing no more resistance, Fornell, Gibbs, and Dave pulled out their zip-ties and went to check on the survivors.

“Trust you to pull that trick,” Fornell snarked as he nudged one of the first two agent’s weapons away before reaching down to feel for a pulse. “What was it? Spider? Snake? Scorpion?”

“What can I say,” the slightly taller armored figure said, shrugging. “It’s like Panther-paws said: I’m a trickster at heart. And I don’t know what he saw. I showed him what he’s most scared of, not something I chose, so it could have been anything.”

“Show-off,” Fornell said, abandoning the dead agent and moving on.

“You need to refresh your natural history,” said Edgerton’s precise voice over the com. “Panthers are black; Lyudmila is not. Hence, she is not a panther.”

“Whatever you say, Panther,” DiNozzo said happily, clipping his rifle into its holder and removing his gloves. He pulled a CD case from a pocket in his cargo pants and keyed his com. “Hey, Dark
“Goddess,” he said, “We’re in: tell me how to use this thing again.”

Dave didn’t hear the tech’s reply, but DiNozzo moved towards one of the computers, so Colonel Davis must have put her on a private channel. As DiNozzo slipped the disk into the CD drive of the main computer and began hitting keys as per the tech’s instructions, the others zip-tied the wrists of the living NID agents and Dave, the only person on the team who was qualified in more than basic first aid besides Edgerton, set about applying field dressings to the wounded.

“Nice,” he remarked to O’Neill as he examined the first of the two agents the general had shot. “Through-and-through, didn’t hit anything important.”

Their prisoners, Dave noticed, were being conspicuously silent, which told him that these agents weren’t as innocent as he feared. They were asking no questions, making no protests, expressing no surprise.

They had known this was coming.

“Whiskey six,” Gibbs barked as the last prisoner was secured.

DiNozzo didn’t respond. Gibbs made an impatient sound.

“Trickster!” he snapped.

DiNozzo jumped.

“Yeah!” he said. “Sorry Boss, I was distracted. I’m not a tech, you know, so this is har—”

Gibbs cut him off by striding over and slapping the back of DiNozzo’s helmet.

“You’re distracted because you’ve been doing guide mojo all day on no sleep,” the older agent said. “Keep it together!”

DiNozzo seemed to deflate a little.

“Yeah Boss,” he said. “Sorry. I get a little— turns out, random numbers really don’t stick in my head when I’m messing with the Spirit Plane this hard. Who knew? I’ll work on it…”

Gibbs’s face softened a little.

“Noted,” he said brusquely. “We’ll figure out somethin’ else for next time. How long on the computers? We need to clean this mess up.”

Even in full TAC gear, Dave could see DiNozzo wriggle like a puppy.

“Almost done, Boss,” he said happily, turning back to the computer. “Hey, Dark Goddess, you got it?”

He listened for a moment, then nodded.

“Data retrieval confirmed,” he said. “Hey, sleepy-cat, you’re up. Are you sure those alien thingamabobbers are gonna work?”

“Trust me,” O’Neill said.

“Yeah,” DiNozzo said. “Okay, Boss, our Dark Goddess says she’s done copying their files. We’re ready to go.”
“Whiskey five, clean up,” Gibbs said.

O’Neill drew an awkward and supremely alien object from his belt. He aimed it at the first computer and… did something. The object in his hand fired three bolts of light in rapid succession and the computer… disappeared.

“What the hell was that?” Dave said, pausing in the act of digging enough keyboard out of the third to last agent’s face to bandage him effectively.

“Zat,” O’Neill said, aiming the thing at another computer. “Goa’uld tech. We keep ‘em around for this kind of thing. One shot stuns, two shots kills, three shots—pfft.”

Another computer went pfft.

“Jesus,” Dave said. “Flash Gordon would have been embarrassed to be seen with that thing, but that’s… some firepower.”

“I know,” DiNozzo said. “Tacky, impractical, and ridiculously overpowered. I gather that’s kinda everything you need to know about the goa’uld right there.”

“What have I gotten myself into,” Dave asked his patient as he turned back to his task.

The NID agent did not reply.

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“You’re accord is stable, vibrant, and frankly kind of scary,” Harm said matter-of-factly, leaning back in his chair. “Honestly, I’m pretty sure the only reason it’s still third level is, both of you are keeping it that way. If you weren’t consciously going slow, it would already be fourth level. In other news, Tony, you are in psionic energy debt so deep that your spiritual heir may being paying it off. What the hell, guys?”

Jack was a career Air Force Officer who had spent the better part of his adult life going into pants-wetting situations. He liked to think he’d developed a backbone somewhere along the way. But in the face of his Alpha Guide’s displeasure, he had to confess, he found himself feeling like a green cadet in his first week of OTS.

“Aw, hey, Harm,” Tony said, squirming a little on the sofa beside Jack, “It’s not that bad. It’s just been a crazy couple days— you know how it goes.”

“I know that you’ve been expending a massive amount of psionic energy lately and haven’t been eating or sleeping enough to recoup the debt,” Harm said, fixing Tony with a stern look. “Tony, you are not Superman. You cannot make diamonds out of coal or turn back time by flying around the globe really, really fast or do without food and rest indefinitely. No, you are Batman—a regular human who can do extraordinary things, but needs to eat and sleep and, ideally, take a day off now and again if he wants to be in any shape to save the world.”

Jack found himself nodding, happy that someone was agreeing with him, but before he could feel too pleased, Harm turned to him.

“And you, Jack, need to stop enabling him and start making sure he takes care of himself. Don’t
think I can’t tell that you’ve been sharing energy with him. That’s fine in a crisis, but neither of you can keep it up indefinitely.”

“Um— we’ve kinda been in a crisis, Harm,” Jack said diffidently.

Harm frowned and leaned back in his armchair again. They were in the Alpha Guide’s office at the D.C. Center, a comfortable space with soft furniture and mellow decor where sentinels and guides could meet with the Alpha Guide in peace and safety.

Unless, of course, the Alpha Guide was displeased with them.

“And how long has this crisis been going on?” Harm asked finally.

“Um, let’s see, somewhere in the range of thirty-three hours?” Jack said, doing a quick calculation in his head.

“Well I’m seeing an energy debt that’s been racked up over a period of weeks,” Harm said baldly.

Jack flinched and Tony seemed to shrink in on himself. Harm’s scent softened.

“Look, guys, I’m not trying to go all Muammar Gaddafi on you here,” he said. “I’m not your mother, and God knows, I don’t want to be. But I am your Alpha Guide, and I’m telling you, this is not healthy. Now, what is going on?”

“I, ah, may have been burning the candle at both ends a little,” Tony said. “You know how the Director worked out that deal with SecDef? The transition period? Well, it’s kinda been a scramble, getting the new agency up and running and working cases out of the Navy Yard. But it’s been fine, honest, no big deal. I just— the timing with this new op was crummy. We had just closed a case over at NCIS when it went hot, so I was already pretty tired, and it just happened to turn out that we need some serious mojo on this one. But I’m fine, honest. I mean, c’mon, Harm, are you telling me you’ve never run up a little psionic debt?”

Harm’s mouth twitched and his eyes sparkled a little.

“Yes I have,” he said, “And my Alpha Guide at the time kicked my ass and put me back in baby guide classes for a month when she found out. Which I would be tempted to do for you if I didn’t know that you would take it as punitive rather than therapeutic.” He paused and studied Tony for a moment. “So, here’s what I’m going to do,” he said. “I’m going to put a cap on your hours for the foreseeable future. Nothing drastic!” he held up a hand at Tony’s look of alarm. “Say, sixty hours a week. And you aren’t going to be responsible for enforcing it. No, I think that honor will go directly to Colonel Davis and Director Shepard. Between them, they get to figure out how to share your time between the two agencies without burning you out.” He smirked a little. “To be honest, I look forward to hearing how they come to an agreement. If it involves a cage match, I want an invite.”

“Sixty hours isn’t much of a cap,” Jack remarked.

“Trust me, once you start pulling overnights, sixty hours gets eaten up remarkably quickly,” Harm said. “I’m not trying to enforce banker’s hours here, guys, just to make sure Tony gets to sleep once in a while. No sleep equals poor health, whether we’re talking physically or psionically. A mundane doctor would tell you the exact same thing. The only difference is, I have a hell of a lot more legal pull than an MD and I can make your employers send you home periodically.”

Tony hunched his shoulders.
“Madam Director is going to be pissed,” he said.

“I’m sure she will be,” Harm said comfortably. “Now, enough of that. Let’s move on to more interesting things. Like the fact that I finally heard back from Blair on the whole spontaneously deepening accord question.”

Jack’s attention immediately refocused and Tony sat up straight beside him.

Since their surprising meeting and even more surprising accord, it sometimes seemed like Jack and Tony were living in a constant state of waiting on answers from the Alpha Prime Guide. It was a little awkward, as neither of them had ever even met the man, but he now knew all about them, from the fact that they were a perfect match despite the fact that Tony already had a perfect match to the fact that their accord liked to slip spontaneously from one level to the next when it got bored.

“And?” Jack asked, with a certain amount of trepidation.

The issue with Tony having another perfect match had been cleared up (if you could call it that) several weeks before by means of a draft chapter from the book Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg was working on. Jack hadn’t been able to understand one sentence in seven, but he thought it had boiled down to, ‘we think lots of people have more than one perfect match, but since almost everybody bonds to the first perfect match they meet, and sentinels and guides are notoriously hard to kill, they never meet any of the others.’ However, it was equally possible that it had meant, ‘this is a sign of the apocalypse: get out now!’

All of which was to say that an answer from Blair Sandburg was cause for concern as well as relief.

“Well,” said Harm, “The good news is, it’s a known phenomenon. It’s apparently rare from a per capita perspective, but historically, it’s a pretty regular occurrence. Blair sent me what amounted to a small thesis on it, complete with case studies and a reference list that would do a legislative reform lawyer proud. I’ll pass it on to you.”

Jack groaned and Tony slumped back in his chair.

“Ah, any chance of getting the highlights reel?” Tony asked, doing his best puppy-dog eyes. Harm grinned.

“Well, I gather— and bear in mind, this is me simplifying something that it took Blair almost thirty pages to explain— that it seems to happen between sentinel and guide pairs that are desperately needed,” he said. “Of course, it’s really hard to be sure, because studying cause and effect when the Spirit Plane is involved is a pain in the ass, and also, we’re looking at a really patchy data set. Such a low percentage of perfect matches wait to bond, it’s hard to draw any sort of concrete conclusions about something that only happens to perfect matches who are in an accord. I mean, that isn’t to say that hundreds of pairs all over the world don’t choose the slower route every year, they do, but statistically, it’s a very small fraction of the overall subject pool. But, with that in mind, what Blair’s research suggests is that the… slippage is due to certain conditions being present on the Spirit Plane, conditions caused by a great need, either present or future, that a specific pair fulfills.”

Jack sighed. He hated all that metaphysical stuff. It wasn’t that it wasn’t accurate, it was just so damned convoluted, it hurt his head.

“Present or future need?” Tony asked.

“Yeah, that’s where it gets complicated,” Harm said. “You know the Problem of Metaphysical
Induction, I assume?”

“Yeah,” Tony said. “While the laws of cause and effect still hold true on the Spirit Plane, the laws of time and space do not. Therefore, on the Spirit Plane, an event in the present can be caused by an event in the past or the future.”

“Exactly,” Harm said. “That’s how perfect matches meet in the first place: their future influences their present to ensure that they cross paths. Otherwise, perfect matches would be all but impossible. Statistically, a particular sentinel and a particular guide have a very small chance of meeting if it were left strictly up to chance.”

Jack sighed again. Yup, there was the headache, right on schedule.

“So, similarly, if a particular sentinel and guide pair is desperately needed at some point in their timeline, their accord will be more susceptible to spontaneous amplification— as soon as you reach a new level of trust and understanding, the accord deepens to a new level on its own. Which makes sense, of course: the deeper the accord, the stronger and more resilient the pair and the more able they will be to meet whatever need they are required to fulfil.”

“Then why doesn’t the accord just deepen into a full bond right away?” Jack asked.

“Well, here’s where Blair’s scholarship gets too advanced for me to really understand. I think the gist of it is, your future bonding is influencing the present so that it can come to pass. According to Blair, that means that, future need notwithstanding, you won’t end up bonded any quicker this way than you would if you weren’t experiencing the slippage. Your bonding happens when it happens — no shortcuts. This is just an… alternative route.”

Jack gave Harm a flat stare, then started rubbing his temples.

“Harm,” Tony whined. “You’re giving me Jack’s migraine.”

Harm laughed.

“Look,” he said, “The bottom line is, nothing is going to happen that wouldn’t have happened if you’d had a normal, everyday accord— there’s no metaphysical violation of your free will at play. It’s just a fun little quirk that’s fascinating to people like Blair, but not worth worrying about to the rest of us. Except for the fact that something you’re going to do in the future is so damned necessary that it has provokes a response on the Spirit Plane. That might be worth worrying about.”

Jack looked at Tony. They shared a moment of consideration, thinking about Homeworld Command, HERA, and the kinds of threats Earth had faced in the past and would face in the future. Then, as one, they turned and looked at Harm.

“Nah,” they said in unison.

Harm raised his brows.

“With Jack’s job, we’re kinda playing in the big leagues,” Tony explained. “This doesn’t really tell us anything we didn’t already know.”

Harm nodded.

“Fair enough,” he said. “And now, if I’m not mistaken, it’s time for us to head over to meet A.J. I know you’ve got something you want to talk to both of us about, and I believe he’s got some
A.J.’s office and Harm’s were connected by an interior door, so going from one to the other was a simple matter. Once they pleasantries were completed and they had been reseated in A.J.’s office—which was eerily similar to Harm’s, only with a slightly darker color scheme and a more old-fashioned theme—A.J. leaned back in his chair.

“Okay,” he said, “Before I say anything else, I want you to understand that there is absolutely no threat here. Nothing is going to happen to jeopardize your bond. But this might be upsetting, so I need you to be prepared for that.”

“Okay, I suddenly have a sinking sensation in the mid-section,” Tony said. “Go on.”

“Jake Aronson’s condition is deteriorating, as you know,” A.J. said. “You asked not to be kept updated on the details, so I haven’t, but in broad terms, while the timeline isn’t quite as dire as the Philadelphia representatives painted it when they were here in October, it’s still a matter of weeks to months. I’ve been firm with the Philadelphia Center that you are not to be involved, and they’ve respected that—there’ve been a lot of ugly conversations, but Guide Olsen isn’t stupid, and her sentinel is good people.

“However, Aronson’s parents are… less willing to accept the situation. Guide Olsen called me yesterday to tell me that they have retained independent council and are preparing to sue me for bond interference. They tried to use the Center’s lawyers, but Sentinel Merrick put her foot down. However, because of that they know that the basic premise of the suit is that I have been preventing you from seeing Aronson, thus preventing you and Aronson—who are still a perfect match, as far as anyone can prove, although Harm believes otherwise—from bonding.”

“What?” Tony said, agitated. “But… that makes no sense. I don’t want to bond with Jake. I haven’t wanted to bond with Jake since the day after I met him. I’d already put six years of time and effort into not bonding with Jake before I ever met you.”

“I know,” A.J. said placatingly, holding up his hand. “The suit isn’t going to succeed, Tony. It isn’t even really meant to. It’s purpose is to get you in the same room as Jake. They think that, if they can show I’ve been overzealous in my refusal to let the Philadelphia Center talk to you, they can get a judge to order you to visit Jake just in case my actions did, inadvertently or otherwise, interfere with your theoretical bond. There’s a precedent for that from the Boston cases, so it’s not entirely out of the realm of legal possibility, whether or not they can win the case against me. Which they can’t, as any good lawyer will have told them that from the outset. What their lawyer might not have told them is, there is no way they can get a judge to rule that there was any inadvertent interference either. First and foremost, you refused to talk to the Philly folks. I just made it happen. Two minutes on the stand, and you can clear that up. Second, I happen to have put the lawyer who won the Supreme Court case against the Boston Center on retainer the day I took over the D.C. pride. Shirley and I are—old friends. She set the precedents they’re trying to use here, and she is going to eviscerate them and use this case as an object lesson for future generations.”

“But—why would they think any of this would do any good in the first place?” Tony asked, looking lost. “I have a sentinel now. I have a life. Why—?”

“His parents are desperate, Tony,” A.J. said gently. “And that desperation has created a fantasy in which you see Jake again, change your mind, bond with him, and save his life. It’s not going to happen, we all know that. The Philadelphia alphas wouldn’t let them use the Center’s lawyers because even they knew it. But the Aronsons aren’t ready to give up.”
Jack’s territorial instincts were on overdrive by this time and he shifted a little closer to Tony.

“There’s absolutely no chance that this could… interfere with our accord, or our future bond?” he said, trying to confirm. “Sorry, I know you said— this is just… making me twitchy.”

“I know,” A.J. said. “Like I said, it’s a shit situation. But the worst that could happen— this is if several laws change between now and the court date, the judge is smoking dope, Tony outright lies on the stand, and Shirley suffers a severe brain injury— is that Tony would have to visit Jake, which might be unpleasant, but won’t impact your bond or your well-being beyond a bad mood. But I know, just the fact that someone out there wants to make Tony bond to a different sentinel, even if they can’t do it, is tough to handle with a developing accord. Which is why I wanted to give you a heads up about what they’re trying to do, even though there’s no chance that they can do it.”

Tony leaned against Jack, instinctively seeking comfort in his sentinel, and Jack’s instincts immediately settled a little. Having a guide to take care of had a way of aggressively reordering a person’s priorities. Of course, it didn’t always work out right— case in point, yesterday’s attempt to let Tony sleep and his subsequent temper tantrum when Tony didn’t cooperate— but the impulse was simple enough. Jack wrapped his arms around Tony and buried his face in his guides neck, soothing both of them with the contact.

They breathed together for a few minutes.

“Okay,” Tony said finally, when his scent was settled a little. “Thanks for the warning. That would… not have been a good thing to find out in a subpoena.”


“A.J., you’re the one being sued,” Tony protested.

A.J. waved a hand.

“I’ve been sued more times than you’ve bought new underpants, son,” he said. “It’s nothing new to me. Besides, I’m looking forward to watching Shirley set even more precedents in Sentinel and Guide law on this one. It promises to be quite the show.”

With that, they dropped the subject and moved on to Jack and Tony’s search for qualified and uncompromised HERA agents. Jack explained their need for talented people, the security obstacles they were facing, and their strategy of using recommendations from the sentinel and guide community to help circumvent those obstacles.

“We’re not asking for miracles,” he concluded. “We’re just trying to play the odds a little. Or maybe a lot. So far, we’re oh for four on the people who have been recommended, so clearly, what we’re doing is working.”

A.J. steepled his fingers and leaned back in his chair.

“Ballsy,” he said. “I have to think about it a little. I know a lot of people, and a I trust a fair number of them, but this goes beyond trust, doesn’t it?”

“‘Yes sir,” Tony said. “I mean, Fornell we were pretty sure was clean because we’ve known him so long, but everyone else is— unusual. None of us,” he made an abbreviated circling gesture, “Would have made this particular cut. We’re all normal, everyday, corruptible folks. These people… aren’t.”
Harm went very still.

“I’ve got a name for you,” he said.

Jack was surprised to smell sadness and a healthy measure of anger in the Alpha Guide’s scent pile.

A.J.’s eyebrows rose.

“Harm?” he said.

“Her name is Sydney Bristow and she’s CIA,” Harm said, voice tight.

“CIA?” A.J. said, his eyebrows going up and his eyes bugging out a little. “You’re recommending a spook, Harm? I thought all these years of dealing with Webb had taught you something.”

A.J.’s tone was light, as though he were picking up in the middle of an oft-repeated and somewhat humorous conversation. Harm’s scent pile, however, was incredibly serious.

“It has,” Harm snapped. “It’s taught me that good people have no business working for the Company.”

A.J.’s brows came down again and his body language shifted to match his guide’s.

“Talk to me, Harm,” he said.

“I met her a couple years ago, when I was defending those two intel officers on that espionage charge,” Harm said. “The attempt to blow up the US’s communications satellites, remember?”

“The one the CIA turned out to be right in the middle of,” A.J. said. “Yeah, I remember.”

“Then you also remember how I ended up having to file an unrelated Guide Reprimand on behalf of one of the agents who was involved in the whole mess?” Harm asked.

A.J. pursed his lips.

“I remember that the CIA’s runaround stuck in your craw so bad, you decided to piss in their cornflakes any way you could, including calling down the power of the Union on their sorry asses,” he said.

Harm’s expression finally gave a little and he let out a soft laugh.

“Well, yes, that too,” he said. “But the reprimand was real. The CIA was systematically and deliberately torturing one of their agents psychologically, and had been for a while. She was in one of the more covert parts of the agency,” — Tony snorted— “So it’s impossible to know what they were actually doing or what they hoped the results would be, but they were deliberately putting Bristow in situations that were emotionally compromising and waiting to see when and how she broke.”

“Jesus,” Tony said.

“I’m beginning to understand why all you people are so down on the CIA,” Jack remarked. “The agents I worked with back in the day were decent guys, but this sounds like some kind of bad spy thriller.”

Kinda scarred me for life, actually.”

Harm nodded in agreement.

“What made me think of her— besides the fact I’ve been wanting to get her out of the Company since I found out what they were doing to her— is that when I first met her, I couldn’t believe how innately good she was,” he said. “Very few people are that morally impervious, definitely not CIA agents who do the kind of work she does: I found out in the course of filing the reprimand that she’s already got a star on the wall. That’s how dark some of her ops have been.”

“Oh, now that is just wrong,” Tony said. “Okay, I hesitate to ask, but what exactly was the situation the CIA put her in to run their super freaky, unethical experiment or whatever?”

“Several years ago, the CIA discovered a badly burned body at a crime scene with her DNA— hence, the star,” Harm said. “In the wake of her ‘death,’ her then-fiance, also an agent, left the agency. In due course, he met someone else— who also happened to be an intelligence operative— and got married. Two years later, Bristow shows up alive.

“Now, so far, it’s all fine. Sad, but fine. But then, the ex-fiance decides to go back to work and the CIA put him in the same division as Bristow and makes his new wife their National Security Council liaison. Now, if Vaughn hadn’t quit then come back, or if Reed was something more integral to the division than just a liaison, you’d say, okay, they were cutting corners and being assholes about it. But someone had to pull a lot of strings and waive a lot of protocols to make that happen— even the CIA doesn’t normally put someone in the field with their ex and their ex’s new spouse. They’re stupid, but not that stupid. So, when I go in looking to throw my weight around— because yeah, I was basically looking for an excuse to stick one to the CIA, and these people were really messed up— the whole can of worms gets opened. The CIA’s Guide Council goes in and does an interview, and is so upset, she forces the Deputy Director to launch an investigation into why the agency’s policies are being blatantly ignored. That investigation turned up all this evidence that this situation, along with several others, was deliberately engineered, as well as a whole bunch of reports on how Bristow was handling it.

“I know all this because the CIA’s Guide Counsel let me see a redacted report after it was all over. She said she didn’t care what the CIA wanted, this was not something she condoned, and if I ever felt anything like that again, she wanted me to know exactly what it was.”

“The CIA’s Guide Counsel,” A.J. said blankly. “As in, the guide that the CIA sends in to tell them how to make their super secret spy club more super and secret? She sent you the report?”

“Yes,” Harm said. “I was shocked too, frankly.”

“How do I not know about this?” A.J. asked.

Harm waved a hand.

“Because honestly, it wasn’t germane to anything by that point, and we were, as per usual, insanely busy when she sent it to me,” he said.

His delivery was flawless and his physical cues were damned near perfect, so Jack had no idea how he knew that Harm was lying his ass off. But, clearly, he was not alone in the knowledge, because Tony flinched badly and put a hand to his head.

“Ouch, Harm,” he said. “Don’t do that.”

“Do what?” Harm asked, puzzled.
“Lie your ass off so believably,” Tony blurted out. “It hurts my head. Not to mention, it’s... creating these tiny little cracks that are driving me crazy.”


“Cracks?” Harm said at the same time.

“Harm’s lying really, really well, and it makes— cracks,” Tony repeated. “Tiny cracks in my psionic awareness. It’s— really uncomfortable.”

“Yes, it would be,” A.J. said, looking narrowly at Harm. “However, what’s more urgent right now is, how can you tell he’s lying when his own sentinel can’t?”

Tony shrugged helplessly. Harm scrubbed his hands over his face.

“We were in harmony earlier,” he said slowly, “For the scans. I let it go, but it’s possible...”

“Tony stays in synch really well,” Jack offered. “Back when we first met, we stayed in synch for a couple hours after doing a grounding exercise. Come to think of it, we were still there when our accord deepened the second time.”

“It still shouldn’t be possible, but let’s go with that for now,” A.J. said. “Harm can kick it up to Blair later. In the meantime, I want to know what my guide is lying about.”

He fixed Harm with a gimlet glare.

Harm looked uncomfortable.

“It was nothing,” he said. “We really were busy, and the report really was pretty academic at the time. It’s just— look, on a psionic level, Sydney reminded me of Francesca, okay? I didn’t— it was just after we’d decided not to go the kids route, and I really didn’t want to talk to you about a woman who reminded me of your daughter. And, since there was no reason to, I didn’t.”

A.J. frowned.

“I don’t understand,” he said. “I thought we were both on the same page about not having kids. Was I wrong?”

“No, no, you weren’t wrong,” Harm said, waves of hurt and sadness rolling off of him. “That’s the kind of thing where you definitely need a unanimous vote, and you didn’t want to. It was just— it was hard for a while.”

Jack shifted uncomfortably. This had suddenly become excruciatingly awkward and he wondered if they could sneak out while the alphas were distracted. He glanced over at Tony. His guide was clearly of a similar mind, staring at Harm and A.J. with wide eyes, his body poised for flight.

“Harm,” A.J. said slowly, “Did you want kids?”

Harm shrugged, smelling supremely unhappy.

“Sure,” he said. “Before I awakened, I always assumed I would have kids, and after— I still thought maybe, someday. But it’s fine, A.J. I mean, I also assumed I would stay a fighter pilot, so...”

“Shit, Harm,” A.J. said, and Jack just about curled up and died right there at hearing the open devastation in his alpha’s voice.
“No!” Harm said quickly. “Really! It’s fine! I’m happy, A.J. I don’t—”

He trailed off. Tony pressed himself back into the sofa, trying to blend into the upholstery. Harm’s head came around and he seemed to realize for the first time that he and A.J. had an audience. He flushed.

“No, really, don’t mind us,” Jack said, waving a hand magnanimously. “Carry on.”

A.J. turned as well and his expression locked down abruptly.

“My apologies,” he said.

“I am so sorry,” Harm said. “I can’t believe we…” He frowned. “Tony,” he said slowly, “Are you trying to fix the ‘cracks’?”

“… no?” Tony said unconvincingly.

“Are you sure?” Harm asked.

“… no?” Tony said. “I mean, I’m not doing anything, but… the cracks were really bugging me.”

“Harm?” A.J. asked, expression set like stone.

“It is… out of character for us to forget that we’re not alone,” Harm said, still looking at Tony. “Add in the fact that my— reticence on this subject was causing Tony discomfort, and that’s a little too much of a coincidence for guide work.”

“Whoa!” Jack said. “You think Tony’s doing— this?” he waved weakly at Harm and A.J.

“The community has done a disservice to epsilons by emphasizing their similarities to lambdas,” Harm said, his scent troubled. “While it is true that they can use their gifts at a very high level without a bond, they, unlike lambdas, often have other gifts that can only be accessed after bonding. In our focus on their ability to be independent, I think we sometimes… forget what a bond can give them.”

“So— what? Bonding is turning me into a human truth serum?” Tony asked.

“I have no idea,” Harm said. “A.J.’s right: I’m going to be writing to Blair again.”

“Oh, joy,” Jack grumbled.

Tony whimpered.
Implications of Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems

Chapter Notes

Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems: published by Kurt Gödel in 1931, Gödel's Incompleteness Theorems demonstrate that there are true statements in any formal axiomatic system that cannot be proven within the system, and, further, that no such system can fully demonstrate its own consistency.

“That,” said Tony when they were safely in the car, “Was horrible. Nobody should have to see their alphas having a bond dispute. It’s worse than walking in on your parents having sex! Please tell me that this was just a fluke. I don’t want to be a walking, talking version of sodium amytal.”

“I imagine that, if this is some new guide gift that’s showing up because we’re bonding, you’ll be able to learn to control it,” Jack said. “And look on the bright side: it’ll be damn useful in interrogations.”

“Confessions elicited by means of truth serum are generally considered inadmissible in court,” Tony said glumly.

“Well, you ain’t a truth serum, and the cases you work now don’t go to court,” Jack pointed out. It sounded like he thought this would be a comfort— God knew why. Tony heaved a sigh.

“We’re gonna have to do something about that eventually,” he said wearily. “We can’t just ignore habeas corpus forever. I get that out there in the big bad universe, there’s different rules, but on our own planet, we really need to try and follow our own laws.”

“Whoa, there, Tiger,” Jack said. “Hows about we worry about getting the Trust under control and figure out whatever’s going on with you before we tackle legal reform?”

“It’s really the President who has to do the reforming,” Tony pointed out. “I mean, the way we do it now is the way Hayes’s predecessor set it up, and Hayes is the only one who can undo that.”

“Then we’ll have E-man get you in to see Henry one of these days,” Jack insisted, “After we sort out all the other stuff that’s going on.”

“I guess you’re right,” Tony said. “Seriously though, did you find that as embarrassing as I did? Or was it just me?”

“I kinda wanted to hit myself in the head with something heavy until it went away,” Jack agreed before sobering. “Tony,” he said, “Do you want kids?”

Tony sat up straight as though he had received an electric shock.

“What?!?” he yelped.

“Well, we’ve never talked about it,” Jack said.

“I just assumed— after Charlie—” Tony stammered, although in reality, that was just the top of the
pile of reasons the idea had never crossed his mind.

“I never seriously thought about having more kids after Charlie,” Jack said. “But I also haven’t been in a real relationship since Sara, so—”

“I… Jesus, Jack, I dunno,” Tony said. “I’m really, intensely uncomfortable around kids. Like, epically uncomfortable. My frat brothers all said that the paternal drive would kick in once I hit thirty, but—”

He stopped, unsure how to express the fact that they had been both right and wrong: Right in that, sometimes, the image of a clever, sassy girl or an affectionate, mischievous boy would come into his mind and he would feel a brief second of agonizing loss when he remembered that they weren’t real. Wrong, because he never, ever envisioned children younger than ten or eleven, and was absolutely terrified of such creatures.

“We don’t have to,” Jack said. “Like I said, I haven’t even thought about it for years. But if it’s something you want, I want to know. I don’t want to get blindsided like A.J.”

He shuddered, and Tony hunched his shoulders. Well, when Jack put it that way— yeah, that had been horrible, and he had only been a witness.

“I don’t think I’m cut out for parenthood, Jack,” he admitted. “I mean, sure, I can imagine teaching a kid to play ball or ride a bike, but I don’t— look, even putting aside the crazy hours we work, 2am feedings and dirty diapers and baby playgroups are so not my style. I—”

“Fair enough,” Jack interrupted gently. “I’m not sure I’d be up for going through terrible twos again, and I’d probably get crazy overprotective when they got to be the age Charlie was when he — when he died. But raising a kid from babyhood isn’t the only kind of parenthood to consider here. After all, we’re not talking about doing this the way the birds and the bees do it, we’re talking about doing it the way the sentinels and the guides do it, and for us— well, I gather they come in all sizes when you do it our way.”

Tony went very still.

When he was still a mundane, he had, of course, imagined having children the mundane way (and had immediately shied away from the thought in terror, deciding he’d think about it again in a decade or so). He would marry a mundane girl, have copious amounts of mundane sex, and his wife would get pregnant and have a mundane baby.

Then he had awakened, and his future had changed.

It was common knowledge that most sentinels and guides ended up in idem, or same-sex pairings. Contra pairings, pairings between partners of the opposite sex, weren’t exactly uncommon, but they were in the definite minority. Tony had never read all the studies on why this was so, he just knew that, as soon as he awakened, his expectations had changed completely. Instead of marrying a mundane woman, he would, in all likelihood, bond to a male sentinel. Instead of getting his wife pregnant through vast amounts of sex, he would decide with his bondmate whether they wanted a child and… see what happened.

Because, despite the fact that sentinels and guides tended to bond to mates of their own gender, they had an awful lot of children. Chance or fate or metaphysics or whatever you wanted to call it had always had a way of leading the lost and the unwanted into the arms of the sentinel and guide community. As a child, Tony had grown up on the stories of orphan children getting lost and being found by sentinels, or children living with evil relations being rescued by guides. After his mother
had died and his father had sent him away, he used to dream of it happening to him. Maybe he would get lost on one of those horrible winter training exercises that were so popular at RIMA and find his way to a warm house where a sentinel would usher him inside and a guide would feed him soup. Or maybe one of the military pairs that sometimes ran training exercises would realize that he didn’t belong there and would take him away with them when they left.

As an adult— and a cop and a guide— he had actually seen it happen with his own eyes, had, on one occasion, made it happen himself. His first year on the job in Peoria, he had been on a domestic violence call in one of the poorer neighborhoods. A couple strung out on meth were trying to beat the living shit out of each other, and after he and his partner had subdued and booked them, they’d searched the apartment only to find a bruised, half-starved two-year-old hiding in the bathroom. Tony had been new on the job and hadn’t known what to do, but thankfully, his partner had. She had explained to him that, if they called social services, the little girl would be put into emergency foster care, but would probably be sent back to her mother when the woman got out on bail. However, if Tony, as a guide, took custody of her, she would become a ward of the Union and would eventually find a home with a sentinel and guide pair. The law was very, very clear that children who found their way into Union custody stayed there unless and until a sentinel or a guide said otherwise. After all, sentinels and guides had been looking after abandoned and abused children long before the US or social services existed.

Tony hadn’t hesitated.

The little girl, Conchita, had been taken in by the Peoria pride and, after they had established that she had no suitable guardian available among her relatives, had gone to live with a female pair in Montana. Every Christmas Bella, the sentinel, would send Tony a picture of the three of them in some absurdly picturesque and snowy setting.

So Tony knew that, if he and Jack decided to have kids, they would be children like Conchita, children who had been found by or surrendered to (there was a hilarious story about a pair who had gone to vegas to celebrate their anniversary and had been confronted by a desperate teenaged father just as the sentinel was about to ask his guide what he thought about having kids) sentinels or guides. But, until that moment, he had never thought it through all the way, had never put it together with the fact that children in need came in all ages, and just because they decided to have a child wouldn’t necessarily mean that they would end up with a baby.

“You think we’d get an… older kid,” he said, his voice strangely hoarse. “A— a teenager or something.”

“Maybe,” Jack said. “I think it would be a— good fit. Older kids are more self-sufficient, but they still need clothes and food and help with their homework and somewhere to go home for Christmas after they head off to college.”

Love, was clearly the subtext, although Jack didn’t actually come out and say it.

“And… huh,” Tony said. “I’d never thought about that.” He frowned and looked at Jack. “Is that something you’d want?” he asked.

Jack shrugged.

“I’d be… open to it,” he said. “Probably not now, but maybe some time in the future. I mean, as a sentinel, I’m still going to be pretty lively when I hit retirement age, and I’m definitely not going to take up running a pride as a hobby like A.J. did. It’s not a myth, you know, awakening really does slow down aging. My blood pressure’s been the same for a decade, and my healing factor is better now than it was fifteen years ago. It’s just a shame my knees were already pretty beat up by the
“Well, that’s good, because I’m a lot younger than you are,” Tony joked automatically. “Wouldn’t want you to get old and decrepit while I’m still in my prime.”

“That’s why guides are usually younger than their sentinels,” Jack pointed out. “But, as I understand it, once we bond, you’ll start aging slower too. Shared psionic suchlike creating exponentially more psionic whatsis or whatever.”

“True,” Tony said. “I— I really don’t know, Jack. It’s— after Jake, I never thought I’d bond, so I never bothered to think about having kids— our way. I never even considered that age might— might be negotiable, so to speak.”

“There’s no rush,” Jack said. “Like I said, we’re talking years down the road. But it’s something to be thinking about.”

Tony didn’t know what to say, or even feel. For a long time, he just sat there with a million thoughts and emotions swirling around inside of him. Finally, the chaos began to resolve itself, coalescing into…

“Jack,” Tony said decisively, “Could you find somewhere to pull over?”

“What?” Jack asked.

“I suddenly need to kiss the shit out of you, and I can’t do that while the car is moving,” Tony declared. “So I would very much appreciate it if you could park the car and we could make use of these government-issue tinted windows to make out like teenagers on prom night.”

With sentinel speed and precision, Jack put on the brakes and turned the car sharply down a quiet, residential side street, where he slid it neatly into a parking space between a silver minivan and a boxy maroon Volvo.

Tony had his seatbelt undone before the vehicle stopped and had slid over the central console into Jack’s lap before the engine was turned off. Awkwardly cramming his long limbs into the limited space on either side of Jack’s hips, he leaned down and kissed his sentinel desperately.

“What brought this on?” Jack panted after the long, sloppy kiss.

“Thank you,” Tony said, his throat tight with emotion.

Jack snorted.

“For what?” he said. “You’re kissing me, in case you hadn’t noticed.”

“For— for putting up with me,” Tony said. “You didn’t just— decide we wouldn’t have kids because I’m terrified of them, you figured out how we could get around my hang ups. I know I’m difficult and high maintenance and obnoxious and… you don’t seem to care. You just… come up with ways to deal with it.”

“Aw, Tony,” Jack said, reaching up to kiss Tony’s nose. “You’re not difficult. And you’re only obnoxious when you want to be.”

“I notice you didn’t say anything about high maintenance,” Tony pouted, but inside he felt nothing but relief.
“Nah, I’m not in the habit of lying,” Jack said. “You’re as high maintenance as they come. All the best stuff is. Do you know how much time our engineers put into upkeep on the 304s? Besides, it’s not like I’m perfect: I’m a temperamental bastard with enough stars on my collar to get away with practically anything.”

“You say this like it’s a bad thing,” Tony said, smiling against Jack’s chest.

“It was a bad thing yesterday,” Jack said, his voice growing serious. “I hurt you, and I didn’t even notice right away.”

“But when you did, you apologized, and you gave me a freaking safeword so I could tell you if you did it again,” Tony said. “I’m not looking for perfect, Jack. I couldn’t trust perfect, it’s never real. But you— when things go wrong, you don’t moan or yell or whine about whose fault it is. You just fix it. That’s— for me, that’s way better than being perfect.”

“Shit, Tony,” Jack said, looking like he wanted to cry.

He reached up with one hand and cupped the side of Tony’s face. Tony closed his eyes and turned into the touch, swallowing a pathetic little whimper. Slowly, inexorably, Jack pulled Tony’s head down for another kiss. This one was slower, more thorough, and the whimper Tony had managed to choke back found its way out of his throat anyways. He pressed himself as close to Jack as he could, grinding their hips together. Jack made a low sound in his throat and his hand tightened on Tony’s hair.

As they kissed, Tony felt the now-familiar tug and shift of their accord changing, growing, becoming deeper and stronger. He let out a muffled yelp.

“What?” Jack asked sharply, pulling back, “What is it?”

Tony laughed shakily, pulling back, “What is it?”

“Guess our accord got impatient,” he said. “It deepened again— while we were kissing.”

Jack’s brows rose and his eyes widened.

“Fourth level?” he said.

Tony nodded. Jack cocked his head, thinking, then grinned.

“Sweet,” he said, and pulled Tony down for another kiss.

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“So,” Tony murmured, looking across the table at Dr. Hannah Bolton, late of the SGC, “You sabotage the cryo cart. It explodes. All four of you are covered in the alien substance. Colonel Bishop goes into quarantine and doesn’t get out until after the Daedalus leaves orbit. So far, I’ve got it. But see, here’s what I don’t get: the SGC didn’t know what the alien sample was. So either you knew something that no one else did, or you were willing to die to accomplish your goal. Now, I’m hoping you knew something that no one else did. Because if that’s the case, you weren’t trying to kill anybody, you were just messing with personnel assignments. It’s the difference between— well, between bad and really, really bad as far as what happens to you after this is all over.”
Hannah Bolton stared at Tony with huge, limpid brown eyes as though he was her last hope of salvation.

Which, Jack guessed, he kind of was.

Tony, Jack, and the hapless doctor were in a dark, slightly mildewed interrogation room in Area N, a nondescript little warehouse in Falls Church, Virginia. Located fifteen minutes away from the Pentagon, the warehouse was one of Homeworld’s many discreet offsite locations, and was fitted out as a prisoner holding area, complete with shielding against Asguard beams and goa’uld ring technology. Tony and Dr. Bolton were sitting across from one another at the battered, slightly grubby table while Jack leaned indolently against the wall, watching Tony cajole the woman into revealing every single detail about her part in the plot to keep Sentinel Patrick Bishop off the *Daedalus*.

“I didn’t,” Dr. Bolton said earnestly. “I didn’t try to kill anyone. I didn’t know what the sample was, so I synthesized something that looked and acted like the sample and swapped it out before I took the cryo cart out of the lab. The substance we were exposed to was completely harmless, I swear.”

Jack blinked. *Oh.* Well, they hadn’t thought of that, had they?

Tony was equally surprised, but he didn’t show it.

“Okay,” he said gently. “But the SGC would have known it wasn’t the right substance as soon as they tested it, right? How did you get around that?”

“Because they didn’t actually test the material that was on us,” Dr. Bolton said. “I told them what the sample was and they started running analysis on what was left in the lab while the elevator and everyone in it were still being decontaminated. Since we had another sample in cryo, there was no need to salvage any from the scene.”

Okay, so, policy change at the SGC. Check.

Tony nodded understandingly.

“Okay,” he said. “So, you weren’t trying to hurt anyone. You were just making sure that Colonel Bishop wasn’t on the *Daedalus.* Why, Hannah? Why was it so important?”

“Because he said that Colonel Bishop had been compromised, but he couldn’t prove it,” Dr. Bolton said.

“Who,” Tony said, sitting forward. “Who said?”

Dr. Bolton frowned and blinked at him.

“The NID agent, of course,” she said. “He had the weirdest name…”

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“So, they pulled all this off with the oldest trick in the book,” Jack said when they all assembled in Hera’s offices two hours later. “I thought fake credentials only worked in bad cop shows.”
“Do we have anything on this Agent— Orange?” Gibbs said, trying— and failing— to keep his face and voice blank.

“Besides the fact that he is the victim of a horrific codename accident?” Tony said. “Nada.”

“His name could really be Orange,” Edgerton remarked.

Unlike Gibbs, the lambda sentinel did actually remain expressionless as he pronounced the name.

Fornell snorted.

“All looks, no brains,” he remarked.

“Yeah, no,” Tony said. “I really wish we had a sketch artist on staff. Going through every security tape in Colorado Springs on the off-chance of pulling footage of a guy who accosted a scientist on the running path in the park is going to be an epic downer.”

“I can’t believe that, after everything we went through, the Trust is still getting away with posing as NID,” Sam said.

Sam had accompanied Dr. Bolton on the transport to Washington and had slid almost seamlessly into the team, as if she had always been there. Jack loved having her there, it felt like old times, but it was also weird. In his mind, she was firmly embedded in the part of his life that was the SGC, not the part that was in Washington.

Also, he was still worried about Tony and Sam joining forces and taking over the world, even if Sam had once promised him a cushy job as a concubine in the new world order.

“This is interesting,” Rossi said. “Why that codename? How can this agent, or whoever was in charge of creating his credentials, not realize how memorable it is?”

Tony shrugged.

“Because whoever the brains behind this is is goa’uld,” he said as though it were obvious. “They’re not from here, so don’t understand why it’s so weird, and therefore, so memorable. I mean, it isn’t exactly news that the snakes are controlling the Trust now. We’ve known that for a while.”

“Tony, the goa’uld process and retain information faster and better than we can possibly understand,” Sam said. “Not to mention having access to their hosts’ knowledge. If the goa’uld has been on Earth for any length of time, they know what Agent Orange is.”

“Yeah, yeah, I get that,” Tony said. “It’s not so much about knowing, though, it’s about— look, it’s like trying to get the jokes in another language. Even if you’re fluent, you don’t always quite— know why they’re funny.”

“Hmm,” Sam said, thinking. “Yeah, that makes sense. And, if that’s true, it wouldn’t be one of the young symbiotes, the kind they put in Colonel Caldwell. They don’t have their own memories, at least, not that we can tell. They rely on their hosts’ knowledge. It would have to be an older goa’uld. Probably one we’ve met before.”

“Ba’al,” Jack said with certainty.

“Jack,” Sam disagreed, shaking her head. “Ba’al was in charge of the Trust, sure, but he hasn’t been on Earth for a long time. He’s been trying to take control of the Free Jaffa— Teal’c had an
encounter with him when he was on Dakara a few weeks ago and almost got brainwashed, remember?”

Jack shook his head.

“Yeah, the original Ba’al is off trying to brainwash the Free Jaffa, but he had clones, right?” he said.

Sam looked at him, frowning.

“You think one of his clones is running the Trust?” she said.

“Ba’al wouldn’t have just given up control of the Trust, not if he could help it,” Jack said. “It makes sense.”

“It’s possible,” Sam said. “But we can’t know for certain without more proof.”

“You say you’ve dealt with this ‘Ba’al’ before?” Rossi asked.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Chances are, if it goes by the name of a moldy old Earth deity, we’ve met it.”

“If you give me everything you have on him, I can attempt to build a profile to see if we’re dealing with the same… entity,” Rossi said. “Depending on how well psychological profiling works on some… thing that isn’t human, it might even give us an idea of what to expect next.”

The other law enforcement officers looked at one another, and Jack could tell that there was some kind of undercurrent here he wasn’t aware of. He glanced at Sam, who shrugged, then at Tony, who smirked wryly.

“The law enforcement community is kinda split on the issue of psychological profiling,” Tony said. “Some people swear by it, and some people call it voodoo. Which is ironic, considering that there’s way less supernatural ‘whoooo’ in profiling than there is in guide gifts, and we’ve been using those to solve crimes since the stone age.”

He wiggled his fingers in a spell-casting sort of way, and Jack felt a surge of fondness for his irrepressible guide. Tony, no doubt feeling it through their accord, flashed him a smile.

“That is the point,” Edgerton said. “Guide gifts have been proven to be effective over many millennia. Profiling has not.”

“Oh no,” Fornell said, holding up a hand. “We are not opening that can of worms. Jethro, if Edgerton and Rossi start rehashing the science versus magic debate, I’m telling Diane you have a new redhead.”

Gibbs glared at Fornell, then turned to Edgerton and Rossi.

“Do it,” he said to Rossi. “Edgerton, if you don’t like it, ignore it. I need you looking at the data Garcia’s getting out of the NID’s files. I want to know exactly what we’re gonna need to take the Trust out permanently.”

Edgerton frowned.

“It is going to be difficult,” he said. “The Trust has already been taken apart and reassembled itself once. If we do not take out the correct targets in the correct time frame, what remains of the organization will simply go underground again and reemerge at some point in the future.”
sniper thought about it for a minute. “There is someone I would like to bring in,” he said. “His name is Professor Charles Eppes. He is a mathematician at CalSci, and he occasionally consults on cases out of the FBI’s L.A. office. If he passes Tony’s inspection, I think that Dr. Eppes might be able to come up with a formula that will tell us how best to coordinate and implement our strikes so that the Trust cannot either mount a response or preserve a part of their organization for future use.”

“Eppes, Eppes,” Tony said. “I’ve heard of this guy. He worked on the Spanish Flu outbreak, right? And those train crashes? Both of them came across NCIS’s counterterrorism desk. McGoo—Agent McGee— was fascinated by Dr. Eppes’s stuff.”

“Wasn’t there also a copycat sniper case?” Fornell put in. “If I remember right, a certain Bureau agent is rumored to have called Dr. Eppes’s contributions ‘voodoo’ during that one.”

“That is true,” Edgerton remarked blandly. “However, his numbers did provide an alternative way of evaluating multiple complex variables. Considering that there are no clearly analogous cases on record, we might not have been able to reach a solution to the case any other way.”

His expression was blank— somewhere along the way, Edgerton had picked up a poker face that could have won millions in Vegas— but his scent dared Fornell to keep going. Jack was pretty sure that those two were going to end up killing each other or fucking each other before all this was over.

“Alright,” Gibbs said, his attitude betraying no awareness of the undercurrents in the room, although Jack could tell that he wasn’t missing a single one of them, “Get Dr. Eppes out here so Tony can give him the once over.”

Tony sighed.

“At this rate, my spiritual grandchildren are going to be paying off this psionic debt,” he said ruefully. “I mean, we’ve got Bristow and now Eppes coming in, and we haven’t even started on the strike teams yet.”

“I can help,” Sam said. “I can’t do a full median scan, of course, but I should be able to do a fairly thorough psionic reading. It won’t turn up the kind of nuance your scan does, but it will tell us if you need to look at someone closer.”

“Could you?” Tony asked, his entire being radiating relief. “That would be awesome. I mean, normally this wouldn’t be a problem, but I’ve kinda been running on empty for a couple days now, and all this time in median is kicking my ass.”

“Of course,” Sam said. “It would help if I had a sentinel willing to act as a ground. Jack, I know that until you bond, having another guide ground on you is going to be a no-go, but perhaps you might be willing to help, Agent Edgerton?”

“Of course,” Edgerton said. “I had assumed, since I am the only unattached sentinel currently on this team, that you and I would be registering a pro tem partnership for the duration of the operation.”

Sam gaped at him, and the rest of the table followed suit.

“I’m sorry?” Sam said weakly.

“What now?” Jack spluttered.
Edgerton smelled somewhat taken aback.

“Colonel Carter has extensive field experience and is an expert on offworld threats,” he asked, nonplused. “Were we planning on leaving such a valuable asset sitting behind a desk?”

“Well, since my commission prevents me from operating inside the U.S…” Sam began.

Tony groaned.

“Of course,” he said. “A pro tem partnership with Ian would do the same thing for you as partnership with me does for Jack; you could operate on U.S. soil under his credentials.” He turned to Ian. “I just assumed that, as a lambda, you didn’t do pro tems, so it never even occurred to me.”

“I do not take pro tem partners for the usual reasons, no,” Edgerton said. “However, while I do not personally need a guide, I can still work with one, and guides have access to different resources that can be useful. I have formed pro tem partnerships several times when a mission required a guide’s talents. Based on my observations, Colonel Carter and I would have no problem reaching a first level accord, if that is acceptable to her.”

He nodded at Sam. Her eyes went a little distant, like they did when she was exercising her gifts, and Jack sensed the psionic field in the room give a happy little flicker.

“Yeah,” Sam said, “That… that could work.”

“Jesus Christ,” Fornell muttered. “My condolences, ma’am.”

Edgerton gave him the fish eye, but did not deign to respond.

“Good,” Gibbs said. “Get it done.”

“Okay,” Jack remarked, “Now I’m really, really scared.”

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“It’s good to see you, Jack,” Sam said as the two of them walked towards Jack’s office.

“You too, Carter,” Jack said. “How’s the team? Heard from Danny last week, but T’s not much for e-mail.”

“They’re okay,” Sam said. “Busy. And Teal’c’s still trying to deal with what happened on Dakara. Maz’rai didn’t make it through the Rite of M’al Sharran. He died when his symbiote was removed.”

“I’m sorry to hear that,” Jack said. “God, Teal’c’s people have a raw deal. I don’t know what I’d do if my life depended on a baby symbiote that was just waiting for the day it got big enough to murder everyone I loved or even kinda liked.”

“Yeah,” Sam said, making a face.

“And how are you, Sam?” Jack asked.

“I’m— good, Jack,” Sam said, frowning thoughtfully.
“I’m sensing a lack of conviction there,” Jack said. “What’s up?”

Sam smiled.

“Oh, nothing like that, Jack,” she said. “I really am good. I just— feel like I’m not where I’m supposed to be.”

“Well, you were slated to leave the SGC and start working on getting your own command when Mitchell showed up and the Ori decided to rain on everyone’s parade,” Jack said, pushing open the door to his office. “I know you’re not the most ambitious officer out there, but that does have to be kind of annoying.”

Sam laughed as they settled into the chairs on either side of his desk.

“True,” she said. “But come on, Jack, it’s SG-1. I couldn’t say no. But no, it’s not professional restlessness. It’s a— guide thing. I’ve got a very strong sense that I need to be somewhere else, which I’m fairly sure means that I’m going to be somewhere else pretty soon. It’s the same feeling I had before I was assigned to the SGC.”

“Jesus,” Jack said. “Any clues where or when?”

“Afraid not,” Sam said with a rueful smile.

“Well, what’s the good of that?” Jack complained.

Sam shrugged.

“Well, I’m putting off getting a cat,” she joked.

“You weren’t going to get a cat,” Jack pointed out. “Seriously, no clues? No mystical matchbooks from a specific bar, or visions of Harrison Ford in that movie set in some weird place?”

Sam laughed again.

“No, Jack,” she said. “Most of us aren’t as gifted as your guide. We have to make do with gut feelings and the occasional strong premonition.”

“According to Tony, you’re plenty gifted,” Jack scoffed.

Sam’s mouth quirked up.

“Alright,” she said, “Yes, I am. But not in that way. And frankly, I’m just as happy not to have to deal with the mystical visions. I’m a scientist at heart.”

“You always told me that the Spirit Plane obeyed the laws of science just like the mundane world, they were just different laws,” Jack pointed out.

“That’s true,” Sam said. “The trouble is, the human mind— even a guide’s mind— is constrained by our existence on the mundane plane. At a certain point, the only way for us to interpret psionic perceptions which are, at their core, incompatible with the laws by which our brains operate is to essentially accept our minds’ limitations and rely on— well, faith.” Sam smiled wryly. “Since admitting limits to conscious understanding is antithetical to scientific inquiry, I prefer to stick with vague suspicions.”

Jack felt the familiar throb beginning in his temples.
“Why do you do this to me?” he asked, dropping his head into his hands theatrically. “I have a headache now. Tony never gives me a headache. He uses small words. And short sentences. And he gets my jokes.”

Sam burst into full, rich laughter.

“Well, he is your guide,” she said. “It’s kind of his job to get your jokes.”

“I think you just don’t try hard enough,” Jack pouted.

“Oh, come on Jack,” Sam said, still smiling. “Do you really think that any amount of trying on either of our parts could have made us more than nominally compatible?”

Jack sobered and leaned back in his chair.

“I never really thought about it,” he said. “It worked, so I didn’t mess with it. Until I met Tony, I didn’t really realized that we were… missing anything.”

“Jack,” Sam said gently, “Your range now is three times what it was when I was your pro tem, and your sense recall is five times as good.”

“You were a good guide, Sam,” Jack protested. “The best.”

“I know, Jack,” Sam said calmly, “But I wasn’t your guide, any more than you were my sentinel. We weren’t even a very good match.”

“I was happy with it,” Jack said.

And he had been. At one point, he’d even considered asking Sam to marry him. Not bond, he couldn’t have asked her to bond when they were such an imperfect match, but he’d still been a new sentinel, with a lot of instincts left over from his mundane life, and she was beautiful, and he did love her. He’d never actually done it, and over time, he’d realized what a mistake it would have been. Sam deserved a bond.

“Jack, you were ‘happy’ with the base’s lasagna too,” Sam said. “That doesn’t mean that it was good. And I have never felt you as contented as you are with Tony.”

“Alright, alright,” Jack said, smiling fondly at her. “You’re right, as usual.”

“Besides,” Sam went on, “Even laying aside our psionic compatibility, our careers were never headed in the same direction. I would be miserable here, and you would be bored out of your mind when I eventually end up in charge of a research base somewhere.”

Jack grimaced. Oh, this was… not a conversation he wanted to have.

“Sam, you know that’s not going to happen, right?” he said. “I mean, you totally deserve it, and I’d give it to you if I could, but— well, I’ve got a flying city in Pegasus, the beginnings of a space fleet in the Milky Way, and the SGC on Earth. They all need—or will need— COs who know what the hell they’re doing, and right now, the list of candidates is very short. As in, the SGC goes to either you or Cam when Hank retires, the fleet goes to whoever loses that coin toss, and we hope like hell that Sheppard can hold on in Pegasus.”

Sam blinked.

“Wow,” she said. “I— that’s— are you sure, sir?”
“Of course I’m sure,” Jack said. “You think that officers who actually get what the hell is going on out there are a dime a dozen around here? Hank struggles because he’s never spent any time in the field, Sheppard is tripping over his own feet because he’d never even heard of real aliens before he went through the gate to Atlantis, and Pendergast and Caldwell get by on stoicism and regs, but they don’t know what in God’s name they’re doing most of the time.”

Sam took a deep, careful breath, then let it out again. Jack could sense her gathering and ordering her thoughts before she spoke.

“I see,” she said. “But sir, I don’t have any command experience yet, not even a gate team.”

“You think that really matters?” Jack asked, snorting. “Hammond stuck me in this chair with less than a year of running the SGC under my belt. Meanwhile, Dillon Everett went out to Pegasus with a pristine command record a hundred feet long and ended up as Wraith chow.”

Sam winced.

“I— take your point, sir,” she said. “Still—”

She tactfully didn’t finish the thought that clearly went something like, you would be absolutely insane to put me in charge of the SGC or the fleet without some kind of command on my record. Her scent, however, did it for her: Jack is an Idiot #55. It probably said something that Sam had that many different scents that corresponded with his idiocy, but Jack was absolutely certain he didn’t want to know what.

He sighed.

“Look, once the thing with the Ori is sorted, I am planning on doing some shuffling,” he said. “You’ll have some command experience when the time comes, I promise. I’m not sure where yet, but, you know, details—”

Mercifully, his desk phone rang before he could put his foot in his mouth any further.

“O’Neill,” he said gratefully into the receiver.

“Jack,” said Hank Landry’s voice, “I’ve been trying to reach you. It worked, Jack. The Asgard beam worked. They got the snake out of Steven’s head. He’s gonna be okay.”

Jack felt the ball of anger and sadness and general ‘fuck this’ that had been knotting up his insides for the past forty odd hours abruptly loosen. He sagged back in his chair, closing his eyes, and offered up a brief thanks to the universe for throwing him a bone, just this once.

“That’s— really good news,” he said into the receiver. “Thanks, Hank. I— needed that.”

“I hear you, Jack,” Hank said. “The full report should be coming through in the next couple hours, but I figured you’d want to know.”

They hung up, but before Sam could ask what was happening, the door opened and Tony stuck his head in.

“Everything okay?” Tony asked cautiously. “Only, I just got a really massive wave of… something over the accord. I think it was a good something, but…?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “That was Hank. That hail Mary they were gonna try on Steven, the one with the Asgard beam? It worked. He’s okay.”
Sam took a deep careful breath and Jack smelled the relief sweeping over her as well. Tony slid into the room and moved over behind Jack’s chair where he very gently put his arms around his sentinel’s shoulders. He leaned down and pressed his cheek against Jack’s.

“I’m glad,” he said quietly.

Jack closed his eyes. Every now and again, the universe gave him a break, and this was one of those days.

God, he needed more of these.
The N-body Problem

Chapter Notes

The N-body Problem: the problem of accurately predicting the future motions of a group of gravitationally interacting bodies.

Tony woke up to the delightful sensation of being wrapped up in a cocoon of silky smooth cotton and hard, warm sentinel. Despite the new queen sized bed he and Jack had bought, Jack preferred to sleep pressed right up against Tony, preferably with one or more limbs wrapped around his guide to keep him from going anywhere. Coming from anyone else, that kind of behavior would have freaked Tony out. As it was, he was kind of freaked out anyways by how docilely he’d accepted the situation.

At the moment, Jack had Tony spooned tight up against him. The arm that Tony was lying on was wrapped possessively around his chest and one of Jack’s legs was thrown over his thigh, pressing him back against Jack’s hard-on. Jack’s free hand was running slowly and firmly over the bare skin of Tony’s stomach, the gun calluses on his palm rasping deliciously over the sensitive skin.

Tony let out a sleepy, sinful moan and pressed his ass back against Jack, causing his sentinel to growl into his ear.

What followed was a glorious, torturous, mind-blowing forty-five minutes of being coaxed, teased, and driven into a state of desperate, panting want. By the time they hit the ten minute mark, Jack was kissing the backs of Tony’s knees and Tony was whimpering in abject desperation. At twenty minutes, Tony was curled helplessly into Jack’s chest while Jack made him beg and plead just by caressing his lower back. At half an hour, Jack had Tony on his hands and knees on the bed and was goddamned rimming him, at which point, Tony broke down into silent tears.

It was a mercy when Jack finally turned him on his side again, curled up behind him with his cocked pressed into the crease of Tony’s ass, took Tony’s cock in his hand, and made them both come.

Jack said not a word through the entire thing, but their accord had reached the point where Tony could hear loud and clear what Jack was thinking: MINE.

Tony lay shuddering and gasping in Jack’s arms, tears still pouring down his face.

“Shhh,” Jack murmured, wrapping Tony up in his arms again and kissing the back of his neck. “I gotcha.”

The sentinel’s psionic profile resonated with caring and satisfaction (or smugness, if you wanted to be pedantic), but was untainted by worry. The deepening of their accord seemed to be allowing him to sort out good tears from bad tears— something he hadn’t been able to distinguish when they first met— and he knew that Tony was crying because he was overstimulated and generally fucked out, not because he was in distress.
But, just because Tony was high on endorphins and Jack was riding his afterglow didn’t mean that everything was peaches and cream. There was an undercurrent of dissatisfaction, impatience even, running through their accord. Tony had begun to notice it over the past week or so, but it was much more pronounced this time. Tony couldn’t tell whether it was due to the latest deepening of their accord or the stress they were under, but he could tell that their connection was growing agitated. It wanted to make the final step and it wanted it now.

The tears slowed and Tony took a deep breath, nestling back into Jack’s arms.

“We’re going to need to bond soon,” he whispered.

“I know,” Jack murmured back. “You have no idea how hard it was not to just put my cock in you when I pulled my tongue out.”

Tony shivered and let out a weak moan.

“You can’t just say things like that,” he whined.

“Why?” Jack asked, smiling into his neck. “If I have to suffer, so do you.”

Tony snorted out a hysterical little giggle.

“Asshole,” he complained.

“You betcha,” Jack replied happily, burying his nose in the crook of Tony’s shoulder and inhaling deeply. “Are you okay with it?” he asked after a moment. “That we’re gonna have to bond sooner rather than later?”

“I— think so,” Tony said, his insides suddenly feeling squirmy. “Honestly, with everything that’s been going on, I haven’t really had time to worry about it. Which, come to think of it, is gonna make finding a time to actually do this a real bitch, isn’t it? I mean, how in the hell are we going to carve out three days to bond and nest with this whole Trust thing going down?”

“We’re gonna have to make time,” Jack said. “The op is gonna last probably— what? Six weeks? Two months? And I’m no shaman, but I’m guessing we’re not gonna make it that long. I was already on edge, and A.J.’s news about this Philadelphia thing gave my instincts a hell of a kick in the pants.”

Tony swallowed the apology that wanted to rise up in his throat and instead said,

“I hate that this is still following me. I hate that a— a failed thing I had almost seven years ago is messing with us now. I don’t— I want to be something awesome in your life, not ‘the guy with the ex.’ I hate the guy with the ex! Unless he’s Bruce Willis. I can’t hate anything about Die Hard…”

“Okay, okay, calm down Tiger,” Jack said, rubbing Tony’s arm with a gentle hand. “You are something awesome in my life. Also, I would like to point out that, as far as whose past is causing more drama in our lives, I am so winning that contest.”

Tony frowned, suddenly sidetracked.

“Yeah, speaking of that, why aren’t we at work?” he said. “I don’t know exactly what time it is, but…”

“You’re on a schedule now, remember? Harm’s orders,” Jack said. “Paul told me not to bring you in ‘til 12:00 since there won’t be anything urgent before then. Garcia’s still going through the data,
that guy in Intel is still looking through the security footage from the Springs, Bristow’s plane
doesn’t land ‘til 09:20, and that Eppes guy isn’t set to get in ‘til 10:50.”

“C’mon,” Tony protested. “I could still be working Caldwell’s case. Which, by the way, are they
gonna send him back through the gate like I asked? I need to talk to him as soon as possible.”

“Yes, yes,” Jack said. “As soon as Hermiod is satisfied he didn’t beam out any important neurons
along with the snake and McKay has double-checked that the symbiote didn’t do anything else to
the city that Steve can’t remember, he’s coming through. But figuring out exactly when and how
Steven got snaked can wait. And before you start arguing, remember that Paul will tattle if you
don’t follow Harm’s orders, and Harm has the power to send you back to baby guide school any
old time he wants.”

Tony groaned theatrically, but found that he really didn’t mind. In fact, it was kind of nice to just
surrender and let someone else set the limits for once. There were precious few people in the world
he trusted enough— until four months ago, the list had actually consisted solely of Gibbs, although
it had since expanded to include Harm, A.J., Jack, and, oddly, Paul— but he found that it was kind
of a rush to let someone take care of him.

Just a little.

“Okay,” he acquiesced. “In that case, we need food and a shower, because I want to have at least
one more round of naked sexy times before we have to go in. Maybe two.”

Jack laughed delightedly.

“I am so down with that plan,” he said.

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Tony and Jack strolled into Homeworld Command at 12:01.

Tony was freshly shaved and was wearing one of his more expensive suits. Jack, also freshly
shaved, was wearing his usual uniform and whistling obnoxiously.

They were both wearing identical satisfied expressions.

Paul knew at once what they’d done with the morning he’d forced them to take off. His expression
didn’t change, but his psionic profile was unutterably smug.

Tony was too blissed out to care.

“Sir,” Paul said as he met them at the door, “Agent Bristow and Dr. Eppes, along with Agent
Edgerton and Colonel Carter, are waiting for you and Agent DiNozzo in HERA’s conference
room. However, before you go up, could you speak to SecDef? His office is holding on line 2.”

“Sure,” Jack said easily, redirecting them towards his office.

He sank into his chair with a lazy, boneless grace that he really only ever displayed after he got laid
and picked up the desk phone. Tony sat down on the couch and, rather than fishing his laptop out
of his backpack, settled back to enjoy his own afterglow.
Jack spoke to SecDef’s admin, then waited.

“Michael,” he said when SecDef finally came on the line. “What’s up?”

Tony couldn’t hear the other side of the conversation, but he could almost piece it together through his and Jack’s connection (they were very in synch after a morning of shameless debauchery). He got an impression of NATO and Afghanistan, which suggested it was something to do with NATO taking over the International Security Assistance Force over there, and an incredibly complex tangle involving the UN and the Stargate Program.

Some kind of political maneuvering then.

“Hmm,” Jack said. “I dunno exactly how I can help you. This is a request for the IOA, doncha think?”

He listened again, and Tony got a wave of amusement and a strong awareness that the IOA was trying frantically to put off the day the UN was fully read into the Stargate Program.

“Okay, you’ve got a point,” Jack said. “But, Mike, you’ll have to convince them to do this, and like you said, the IOA is gonna fight it like hell, because the UN could do their job way better than they do. They don’t want them anywhere near the Stargate Program.”

An image of Jack having drinks with the president.

“Yeah, yeah, I get it,” Jack said. “But we’re just one country. And you know China and Russia are cooking up a new scheme to get the stargate out of U.S. control: this totally does not fit in with their plans.”

Bolt’s voice got loud enough that Tony could hear it across the room, although he couldn’t hear what he was saying. Jack felt amused and frustrated in equal measure.

“Alright, alright, keep your shirt on,” he said. “It ain’t happening. But they don’t know it ain’t happening, and I’d like to keep it that way for now.”

More amusement, and a hefty dash of satisfaction.

“Well, let’s just say, we’re not as dependent on the Russians’ gate as they think,” Jack said. “As soon as I heard China and Russia might be teaming up, I got us a backup. Officially, it’s part of the intergalactic gate bridge project that McKay and Carter are working on, but it’s really a replacement for our stargate— I had Carter do the reprogramming herself. If the Russians decline to renew the lease and take their gate, the new one gets installed in Cheyenne Mountain within the hour. The Milky Way network can only sustain one active gate per planet, so the Russians can take their gate back, but they won’t be able to do anything with it.”

Bolt was clearly expressing his displeasure at being kept out of the loop, but Jack just shrugged.

“I’m not actually gonna do it,” he said. “It would totally mess things up with Russia and China. No, my actual plan is to offer Russia one of the 304s, which they will take, because they want one, and frankly the program is insanely expensive to run even with the IOA’s help and they don’t have that kind of cash lying around. Everybody will be happy, and nobody will realize that we’re still pretty much in sole control of the stargate. As Secretary Walker keeps telling me, it’s important that everyone feels like there are other countries involved in Earth’s offworld activities, even though you and I both know that our hold on the program is the only thing preventing this turning into the most screwed up arms race ever.”
After a few more exchanges, Jack hung up and Tony smiled dopyly at him.

“Pretty soon, I’m gonna be able to listen into the other half of your phone conversations as easily as you listen into mine,” he informed his sentinel. “I’m getting clearer impressions from you than I ever have before.”

“Really?” Jack said, standing up from his desk. “I wasn’t consciously telling you what was going on.”

Tony shrugged and stood too, and the two of them headed for the door.

“Our accord deepened yesterday,” he said. “You don’t have to try now, I guess. Although I still can’t actually hear what’s being said. I just get a kind of idea. So I don’t know exactly what SecDef wanted, besides what I could gather from your end of the conversation, but I have an idea it has something to do with NATO taking over the ISAF in Afghanistan.”

They stepped out onto the main floor and made their way leisurely towards Intel.

“Impressive,” Jack said. “Yeah, the UN is talking about making some policy decisions in regards to the ISAF’s mission in Afghanistan that set a crap precedent in terms of future offworld interactions. Right now, of course, the UN hasn’t even been read in, but looking at the future, they’re going to be major players in the galactic sandbox— the IOA is just a stopgap, and they know it. Mike wants to read in the UN Ambassadors whose countries have seats on the IOA so that they can head off the policies that will really fuck us over if and when the UN becomes involved in our offworld relationships.”

“How do you feel about it?” he asked. “I’m pretty sure from reading the reports from your time on SG-1 that you’re not all that interested in cultural sensitivity.”

Jack laughed.

“Not really,” he said. “But, then, we didn’t go out there claiming to be peacekeepers. Explorers, sure, but that was more of a fun bonus. Honestly, our primary goal has always been keeping the supervillain of the year from enslaving Earth. It’s just our bad luck that the rest of the galaxy turns out to like not being enslaved too, so we’ll probably find ourselves playing galactic peacekeepers soon, even though we never applied for the job.”

Tony winced.

“Oh, that’s… ugh,” he said. “The SGC is manned by US troops, and it’s been made pretty clear over the past five years that US troops make crap peacekeepers.”
“Of course we do,” Jack said a little huffily. “We’re soldiers. We make war, not peace.”

“Wow, catchy turn of phrase there,” Tony snarked as they headed up the stairs. “I feel like I should get that printed on a t-shirt or something.”

“Well, I just don’t know why everyone is so surprised,” Jack groused. “Our job is to defend the US Constitution and kick ass— it’s right there in our Oath of Service, fer crying out loud. We don’t make good international hall monitors, and sometimes we literally can’t do the job right because it conflicts with our primary mandate. No, if you want global babysitters, you need a force that is specifically trained for peacekeeping and isn’t obligated on pain of court martial to put one country’s interests ahead of all others. Which is one of the reasons why NATO is taking over in Afghanistan in the first place.”

Tony stopped at the top of the stairs and studied Jack suspiciously.

“You look like Jack,” he said. “You feel like Jack. Our accord says you’re Jack. But I could swear I’m talking to Danny all of a sudden.”

Jack laughed.

“I’ve hung out with the guy for the past decade, off and on,” he said. “Something had to rub off. Besides, I am the Head of Homeworld Command. They didn’t put me in this chair just because of my good looks, you know.”

Jack raised any eyebrow provocatively.

“Really?” Tony purred. “I wouldn’t have blamed them. You are very pretty.”

Then he slid inside Jack’s personal space and pressed their mouths together in a kiss that was surprisingly filthy considering the fact that there wasn’t even any tongue.

“Gah,” Jack said as he pulled back. “No fair.”

Tony grinned.

“I know,” he said, then turned and headed towards the conference room, putting a little extra slink into his step as he went.

The commencement of Operation Endless Love had inspired a bit of an interior decorating frenzy in the HERA offices over the past two days. Now, instead of half a bullpen and an interrogation room, they had a full bullpen, an interrogation room, a conference room, two offices, and a computer lab.

The conference room looked pretty much like the rest of the Homeworld Offices: blue and dim, despite the high-tech lighting. For Tony, who was used to the natural light in the bullpen at the Navy Yard, it was definitely an adjustment. Fortunately, Paul had told him that Homeworld Command’s— and, hence, HERA’s— continued tenure in the Pentagon would be brief. The operation was simply too big and too dangerous to be housed there long term. Within the next five years, there were plans to move Homeworld Command to a larger and more easily fortified facility in Rosaryville, right next to Andrews Air Force Base. Andrews already housed a large segment of Homeworld’s military personnel, as well as a squadron of 302s and one of the smaller prototypes of what had eventually become the 304s, so the new location would be more convenient as well as more secure.

Sam and Ian were sitting at the new (and hideously ugly) conference table with two people who
Tony recognized from their files as Agent Bristow and Dr. Eppes. Sam was engaged in what appeared to be a lively discussion about mathematics that went so far beyond Tony’s college pre-calculus that they might as well not have been speaking English. Agent Bristow and Ian were watching silently, both exuding identical airs of quiet vigilance.

Dear God. Tony wasn’t sure if the world could handle another Ian Edgerton, nevermind HERA.

“Hi!” Tony said brightly. “I’m Special Agent Tony DiNozzo, and this is my sentinel, Major General Jack O’Neill. Welcome to HERA!”

“Uh, hi,” Dr. Eppes said awkwardly. “I’m, ah, Charlie Eppes— Dr. Charles Eppes.” He stood, started to hold out his hand, then stopped. “Wait, you’re a guide?” he said. “I shouldn’t—”

Tony laughed.

“Don’t worry about it,” he said, moving over to Dr. Eppes and holding out his own hand. “I can shake hands with no problems. But yeah, generally, it’s best to wait for a guide to offer. There’s something weird about handshakes; even guides who are normally fine with casual skin-on-skin contact can go hinky over handshakes, especially with a stranger.”

Dr. Eppes took Tony’s hand.

Like Agent Rossi, Dr. Eppes appeared to be one of those people who could not be summed up in one movie character. Tony got a quick series of images that included Adam Hann-Byrd as the child genius in Little Man Tate, Matt Damon as the math savant in Good Will Hunting, Dwight Schultz as Oppenheimer in Fat Man and Little Boy, and Christopher Lloyd as Doc in Back to the Future.

Tony let go, allowing Jack to take his place, and turned to Agent Bristow. She stood smoothly and took his proffered hand with cool professionalism, her perfectly structured face impassive.

Tony nearly swallowed his tongue.

Agent Bristow was Julie Andrews in Mary Poppins.

Which, really, it kind of made sense when you thought about it.

They settled around the table and Sam updated Tony and Jack on her and Ian’s progress— they had formed a first level accord with no problems and had already registered with the D.C. Center—and explained what she’d told the newcomers so far.

“Okie dokie,” Jack said. “Let’s get this show on the road.”

Sam took Ian’s hand and closed her eyes. Tony felt her bright, focused psionic presence swell and expand until it filled the room, and found himself grabbing Jack’s arm for support. Jack shot him a concerned look.

Feels good, Tony thought at him through their bond. Like being on the good drugs, only without the nausea and the word vomit.

He knew Jack couldn’t quite hear words through their connection yet, but they were getting closer to that point, and the deepening of their accord would definitely have helped.

The feeling lasted until Sam pulled her gifts back in and opened her eyes. Tony shook his head to clear it and blinked a couple times.
“Wow,” he said.

“Geez, Sam,” Jack said, “You coulda warned me. I think my guide just got high!”

Sam laughed.

“Sorry, sir,” she said, unrepentant. “That’s never happened to me before. My psionic field and his resonate incredibly easily. It could be something about our psionic fields in particular, or it could just be him.”

“Trust me, it’s him,” Jack said. “He synch with Harm distressingly easily too. Apparently, he’s a psionic hussy.”

Tony put a hand over his heart and reeled back.

“Jack!” he said. “How could you?”

“Gentlemen, ma’am,” Ian said, his voice flat, but still managing to convey his impatience. “If we may?”

“Sorry,” Tony said. “Sam?”

“Dr. Eppes is clean,” Sam said. “Agent Bristow is… sir, it’s weird. She’s definitely got a connection to the Trust, but I’m getting the feeling that it’s… okay?”

Everybody at the table blinked. In near perfect unison.

“Nuts,” Jack said.

Everybody broke off blinking at Sam for a minute in order to blink at Jack. Jack gave them a look that was the equivalent of saying, What? Tony decided not to get into Jack’s odd habit of switching back and forth between G-rated and X-rated expletives right now.

He heaved a sigh.

“Okay,” he said, reaching for Jack’s hand, “Let’s see what’s going on.”

He grasped Jack’s hand and shifted them all into median without preamble. He looked around, trying to get his bearings, then shook his head and looked again.

“What the…?” he said, his voice rising half an octave.

“Holy Hannah,” Sam murmured.

“Okay, did Paul spike the coffee?” Jack asked.

It appeared that Agent Bristow had a very powerful character, because she had caused the whole conference room to turn into one of the animated scenes from Mary Poppins, with Sam, Ian, Jack, and Dr. Eppes as animated characters: Sam was a carousel horse sans carousel, Ian was one of the bloodhounds, Jack was the Master of the Hounds, and Dr. Eppes was the turtle. Tony looked down at himself.

“For fuck’s sake!” he exclaimed.

He was one of the penguin waiters, complete with little bow tie.
He looked up at Agent Bristow, the author of this indignity.

“For fuck’s sake!” he repeated.

She was sitting in her chair, blank-faced, wearing a ghostly replica of Julie Andrews’s gauzy white dress and extravagant matching hat. In front of her, in a tableau that would have given the 1960s Disney animators a collective aneurysm, a cartoon snake was lying in a pool of animated gore, skewered through with the fluffy white parasol that went with Mary Poppins’s costume.

“Well,” said Jack, “There’s something you don’t see every day.”

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“Told you before Jen,” Gibbs snapped into the phone, “Can’t. We’re in the middle of a major op and we’re on the clock.”

“And I have the CIA on my back asking me where our case files on Dawson are, and your team is about to come back on rotation,” said Jen’s irate voice on the other end of the line. “You and DiNozzo are still members of my agency, Agent Gibbs. You need to act like it.”

“You put our team back on rotation, you better be confident McGee can run them, because we can’t come in,” Gibbs said. “Don’t be stupid, Jen.”

He was sitting at his desk in one of the newly furnished offices, glaring at Tony’s empty chair across the room. Paul had set them each up their own office, but Gibbs had had him move Tony’s desk in with his. While they might, at some point, end up as Director and Deputy Director of HERA, as of this moment, HERA consisted of two permanent employees and a handful of TADs. He and Tony were going to be working as a team for at least the next couple of years, and it would be a gigantic pain in the ass to have to go to another office every time they needed to talk.

Besides, Gibbs liked being able to keep any eye on the kid.

“It’s ‘Director,’ Jethro,” Jen said. “You will speak to me with respect, and you will do your job, or I will make your life a living hell.”

“This is my job, Director,” Gibbs said mildly. “You knew this was a possibility, even before we came over to the Pentagon. DiNozzo and I have both on tap for special projects for years. When the president and SecDef call us in for high-priority op, we gear up, whoever happens to be signing our paycheck that week. That’s how it works.”

He heard Jen take a breath to continue her tirade, but he cut her off before she could get going again.

“Gotta go,” he said brusquely, and hung up.

Immediately, he dialled SecDef’s private line, and the minute Bolt answered, he snapped,

“I don’t know what the hell Shepard has on you, but if you want us to take out the Trust and take over the NID’s patch, you need to suck it up and get her off our backs.”

“Agent Gibbs,” Secretary Bolt said mildly. “Nice to talk to you too. I gather Director Shepard is...
“Was a stupid idea to keep us on rotation with the MCRT in the first place,” Gibbs said. “We haven’t been able to train either McGee or Lee effectively, David needs way more supervision than she’s getting, and Rabb’s already reamed us all out for overextending DiNozzo. But this is ridiculous. We’re running a high-priority op on the president’s orders. That should take precedent with any agency in this country. I want you to fix this, Mr. Secretary. Now.”

Bolt sighed.

“It’s... complicated,” he said.

“Well uncomplicate it,” Gibbs said. “Or do you have some kinda plan for how we can go back on rotation at NCIS while running Endless Love and keeping a handle on HERA’s regular caseload? Keeping in mind that, if we wear DiNozzo out any more than we already have, Rabb’s gonna have the Union on all our asses.”

“Look, I’ll see what I can do,” Bolt said. “In the meantime, just... play nice.”

Gibbs hung up. In the doorway to the office, he heard Fornell’s quiet laugh. Gibbs glowered at the other agent with much hope that it would do any good.

“I can’t figure out why you and DiNozzo haven’t taken all that vacation time you’ve accrued over the years and just let the clock run out,” Fornell said, ambling over to the desk and parking his ass unrepentantly on the edge. “I know Shepard was one of your redheads back in the day, but come on, Jethro: if you were gonna move on that, you’d have done it months ago.”

“Favors, Tobias,” Gibbs said. “Jen called in a lot of ‘em to get that transition period, and I woulda lost even more if I’d screwed it up. At the time, seemed like the best idea was to let it all play out. Didn’t know she was gonna start trying to pull us off a presidential op to do paperwork. Doesn’t make any sense.”

“What the hell is her game?” Fornell said.

“Not sure,” Gibbs said. “Before DiNozzo met O’Neill, I was poking around, trying to figure out what she was up to. Her going for the director’s chair in the first place was weird. Back when I knew her, she was on track to take over Global Ops— she always was a hell of a field specialist.”

“I gather you stopped working on it when you came over here?” Fornell said.

“Not quite,” Gibbs said. “Still got people at the Navy Yard, so I’d like to know what’s going on over there. But yeah, I was letting it slide while we got things set up here.”

There was a rapping on the doorframe and both men looked up to see Tony poking his head in.

“Hey Boss,” Tony said, “We scanned and debriefed Bristow and Eppes and we’ve found something... pretty interesting. Garcia and Rossi are ready to make their report, so I figured we should go over all of it at once.”

“Right,” Gibbs said. “Bullpen in five.”

Tony nodded.

“Got it, Boss.”
Gibbs looked at Fornell, eyebrow raised. Fornell mirrored the gesture. After a moment’s silent commiseration, the rose in unison and headed for the bullpen.

They found Garcia standing in front of the flatscreen with a remote in one hand and a tablet in the other. The screen showed a series of thumbnail images, some of people, some of places, and a list of names on a split screen running down the left hand side. Rossi was sitting at the desk he had taken over, twirling a gold pen in his fingers and staring thoughtfully at the screen. Edgerton and Carter were both standing by the wall watching the man and the woman who Gibbs recognized from their files as Eppes and Bristow, who were surveying the bullpen warily. Tony was sprawled in one of the chairs in the middle of the room, and O’Neill was slouched against the partition beside him, observing everything with sharp, half-closed eyes.

“What do we got?” Gibbs asked.

Garcia squeaked and whirled around, almost dropping the remote (although Gibbs noted that the tablet was in absolutely no danger, since she instinctively clutched it against her voluptuous breasts). Eppes jumped as well, but Rossi merely smiled.

The sentinels and guides, of course, had all known he was coming, so none of them reacted at all.

“Agent Gibbs!” Garcia babbled. “I— we— uh— okay.” The technical analyst took a deep breath and turned back to the screen. “This is from the information on the Trust that we pulled from the NID’s servers,” she said, her voice wavering slightly, but gaining confidence as she went on. “The organization has numerous allies and affiliates working for them and even more fronts and shell companies hiding their activities, but the NID managed to trace all of that back to these people, entities, and locations.” She indicated the screen. “Unfortunately, that is the good news.”

Garcia pointed the remote at the screen and a new display came up, this one displaying a series of documents bearing the NID’s logo.

“The bad news,” Garcia continued, “is that the reason the NID has such detailed records is that, until they discovered the goa’uld infiltration, they were working behind the scenes to keep the Trust in place. These are the NID’s orders and reports concerning the Trust from from 2000 to 2004.” She began scrolling through the documents on the screen. “Apparently, they decided to pull a leaf out of the CIA’s book and were trying to use the Trust to keep control of the— the alien underworld, and, oh God, I can’t believe those words just came out of my mouth. Moving on.” She pressed the remote and a new set of documents appeared. She continued more rapidly, but each word that fell from her burgundy-painted lips was clearly enunciated and perfectly understandable. “According to these reports, in 2004, our CIA wannabes found out that the xenophobic terrorists they’ve been secretly supporting had, in fact been taken over by the goa’uld. Unfortunately, as detailed in this brief,” she scrolled to another document, “They didn’t feel they could do anything about it, because if they suddenly decided to eliminate the Trust, the president and the director of Homeworld would begin to wonder why they hadn’t done it before. Which brings us to the present, where the Trust apparently tried to blow up the Lost City of Atlantis, and the NID is doing everything they can to avoid being blamed for it, which may or may not include interfering with our operations.”

“Well isn’t that just wizard?” O’Neill remarked flatly.

“I would like to be surprised, but honestly, this seems on par for the NID,” Carter remarked.

“They know we have their files,” Tony said. “What exactly do they still have to hide?”

“Logic isn’t really a strong suit for most spy organizations,” Fornell said. “They’ll try to do
something to get out of this, even if they know we have them over a barrel.”

“Good point,” Tony said, deflating a little.

“It is foolish to simply assume that the NID has no more moves to make,” Edgerton disagreed, shooting a challenging look at Fornell. “We do not know what other secrets they may have, or what else may be at stake.”

Fornell glared. O’Neill heaved a sigh.

“Looks like I’ve got another conversation with Henry coming up,” he said. “Christ, what a goat-fuck.”

Gibbs filed away the new information (including the continued friction between Edgerton and Fornell), then turned back to Garcia.

“Good work,” he said. “Now, what about Ba’al? Is he in charge, or is it someone else?”

“No, we think it’s him,” Garcia said, raising the remote and going back to the screen with the thumbnail images.

She clicked on the first one and brought up a picture of a white male, mid-forties, brown hair, brown eyes. Gibbs had been observing Bristow and Eppes out of the corner of his eye since the briefing started, so he saw Bristow stiffen a little, while Tony, O’Neill, Carter, and Edgerton all went from passively attentive to actively alert.

Interesting.

“Meet McKenas Cole,” Garcia said, “Former CIA, later an agent of the anti-American intelligence operation SD-6, disappeared from CIA custody in 2000. He turns up in the NID’s files around 2002, and, after SG-1’s encounter with Ba’al here on Earth, the NID reports that Cole seems to have taken over control of the Trust, although their information is— sketchy. Agent Rossi’s analysis,” here she turned to the older agent, “Suggests that at some point between his escape from the CIA and his reappearance on the NID’s radar, Cole was infected by one of Ba’al’s clones.”

Rossi nodded and picked up the thread.

“By comparing the CIA’s files on Cole, both when he worked for them and when they were investigating him as part of their operation to take down SD-6, with the NID’s information, I was able to ascertain that a profound personality shift occurred between 2000 and 2002,” Rossi said. “From what I’ve been able to piece together, McKenas Cole began his career as a discreet, competent, professional agent with skills that tended towards deep cover and wet work. His only weakness as an agent was a lack of strong ideological commitment, which is probably how SD-6 recruited him. When he was captured and tortured in Chechnya while working for SD-6, he lost some of his professionalism, became more erratic, more likely to break the rules. The man who was detained in 2000 would have been an almost perfect spy, except that he could no longer be relied on to follow orders.

“The man who reappears in 2002, in contrast, is ostentatious, authoritarian, and, above all, narcissistic. He draws too much attention to himself to go unnoticed, and lacks the empathy necessary to successfully read and manipulate others. This is consistent with the characteristics most commonly displayed by the goa’uld, especially old goa’uld, but not with McKenas Cole, or, indeed, any successful intelligence agent. Comparisons between Cole post-2002 and the SGC’s records on Ba’al suggest a high likelihood that the symbiote is, indeed, Ba’al’s clone, but,
as Ms. Garcia mentioned, the NID’s records are incomplete, so we can’t know for certain. We also don’t know enough about his recent movements to know exactly what his goals for the Trust are. We need more data in order to get any sort of idea of why precisely he targeted Atlantis or what he is going to do next.”

At this point, Bristow finally spoke up.

“I think I can help,” she said, her low voice controlled and even. “You see, I was one of the agents who arrested him in 2000, and I’ve— encountered him several times since he escaped. The— Trust? Isn’t the only secret organization he’s working with.”

There was a long, kind of deafening silence. Gibbs stared at Bristow, assessing, then jerked his head at her.

“Huh,” Fornell finally said. “So, the agent who originally arrested this guy just happens to get recommended for our operation for totally unrelated reasons. What are the odds?”

“Considering the preponderance of sentinels and guides involved in this operation and the way the Spirit Plane works, rather good,” Edgerton retorted immediately.

“I know that, you supercilious bastard,” Fornell said, exasperated. “I was being facetious.”

“Explain,” Gibbs said curtly to Bristow.

Bristow took over the briefing with calm professionalism, but her hazel eyes were wary.

“After defecting to SD-6 from the CIA, Cole defected again, this time to an organized crime syndicate called the Covenant,” she said. “The Covenant began as a loose affiliation of Russian nationalists dedicated to creating a new world based on the writings of a fifteenth century scholar named Milo Rambaldi. It has since expanded to include multiple cells in various countries, including the United States.

“In 2001, I was captured by the Covenant, and the CIA declared me dead after finding a body in a burned down building with my DNA. Cole and several other members of the organization spent six months using advanced brainwashing techniques in an attempt to make me believe that I was a contract killer in their employ. The procedure failed, but when I managed to contact my superiors at the CIA, it was decided that I should pretend it had succeeded and remain undercover in the organization to gather as much information as I could. I stayed under for almost eighteen months, at which point it came to my knowledge that, due to some unique, but unspecified characteristics of my genetic makeup, I was the focal point of a plot to create a viable human embryo using my ova and a sample of Rimbaldi’s DNA. I was forced to hide the artifact containing the DNA and used the Covenant’s technology to erase its location from my memory, which also erased all my memories of my time with the organization.”

The silence this time was downright oppressive.

Finally, Edgerton spoke.

“Well, that explains a few things,” he said.

“I dunno, Edgerton,” Fornell snarked. “All sounds a little mystical to me.”

“Jesus,” O’Neill said.

Tony groaned, and Carter was frowning hard, obviously thinking.
“DNA,” she said, looking at Jack. “This has to be something to do with the Ancients, right? Ba’al planted one of his clones with the Covenant before we even knew he or they were on Earth. They have to have some sort of alien connection, and the Ancients are the ones who were most interested in DNA.”

“What’s the betting that this Rambaldi guy was like Sheppard and me, a human with the super-gene?” Jack said.

“We should check Agent Bristow’s genes,” Carter said. “If they were trying to combine her DNA with this Rimbaldi’s, she probably has a very strong expression of the gene as well. The child might be… well, closer to a real Ancient than anything we’ve seen outside of Alaya.”

Bristow frowned.

“I… don’t understand,” she said. “What is so important about this gene?”

“The Ancients, or Alterans, are the alien race that built the Stargates,” Carter explained. “They were very advanced in a number of ways, including very sophisticated technology and a number of physical and mental gifts that are comparable to those of sentinels and guides, although not the same. They keyed much of their technology to specific genetic sequences unique to their race so that only their own people could use it. Several millennia ago, most of the ancients chose to leave the physical plane and become pure energy—they call the process ‘ascension.’ Only a few isolated populations were left. Their technology, though, is still everywhere, and certain humans whose ancestors mated with Alterans have enough of the genetic markers to make it work for them. The stronger the genetic expression, the greater their control of the technology. Right now the strongest gene carriers we know of are General O’Neill and…”

Carter frowned, realizing something. O’Neill snapped his fingers.

“And Sheppard and Beckett, who just so happen to be Atlantis’s military commander and Chief Medical Officer,” he finished for her. “Son of a gun. They weren’t trying to keep the Wraith out of the Milky Way. They were trying to take out our strongest gene carriers.”

“Which means that you’re next, sir,” Carter said quietly.

O’Neill made an exasperated sound, but Tony went tense, his green eyes taking on that flat, hard look that Gibbs remembered from right after he’d shot Jeffrey White.

“You know,” Tony said coolly, “It’s a good thing we were already planning to eliminate them, because if we weren’t, I’d have to take personal leave to do it myself. Damnit!”

He reached out and grabbed O’Neill’s hand, twining their fingers together hard.

“Easy, Tiger,” Jack said. “I’m not that easy to kill.”

“This doesn’t make any sense,” Rossi spoke up. “Why would they want to eliminate strong gene carriers?”

“I can think of two reasons,” Carter said. “One, they have or know of a piece of Ancient technology that they don’t want to risk us using, or two, it has something to do with the Covenant’s attempts to breed the perfect Ancient: they want to make a person with a super-gene who can control all the Ancient technology on Earth, and are trying to get rid of anyone who could challenge them. Or maybe three, some combination of the above.”

“Why use the Covenant though?” Jack asked. “Ba’al has cloning technology. Why can’t he do this
himself?"

“The Covenant must have access to some kind of technology that he doesn’t have,” Carter said. “Either they can do something with genetics that Ba’al can’t, or they have whatever technology he wants to use.”

“But, even if the Covenant’s plans had succeeded and they do have some special technology, Ba’al would be years away from having a viable candidate,” Rossi said. “Isn’t this all a little— premature?”

“Not necessarily,” Carter disagreed. “Jack’s right, Ba’al does have very advanced cloning technology. It’s all speculation at this point, but I imagine that, if the Covenant had been successful, Cole would have stolen the embryo and taken it to a Trust facility, where it could have been matured into a human adult.”

“Jesus,” Fornell muttered.

Bristow looked a ill.

“I—” Dr. Eppes said weakly, “I— need to sit down.”

Before he could actually do so, however, his eyes rolled back in his head and his body went limp. He would have crashed to the floor if Edgerton, who had been standing nearby, hadn’t caught him.

“What the hey?” O’Neill demanded.

Carter sighed.

“Dr. Eppes is a mathematician, sir,” she said sadly. “Scientists have… a bit more trouble accepting the advances that have been made in other parts of the galaxy than non-scientists. We know exactly what it involves, you see, and what it means for us as a species. I understand that there’s a very high rate of fainting in the science departments when they read people into the program.”

“I don’t understand,” Bristow spoke up. “I hid the artifact, and I erased my memory so that even I don’t know where it is. How are they hoping to accomplish their goal without access to Rimbaldi’s DNA?”

Rossi eyed Bristow speculatively.

“I don’t know about the Covenant,” he said, “But if I were Ba’al, I would have had a back-up plan. The Covenant, as I understand it, has an ideological investment in this particular DNA, but Ba’al doesn’t necessarily share that investment.”

“Which means that either he is planning to use DNA from General O’Neill, Colonel Sheppard, or Dr. Beckett, or he has access to another strong gene carrier that we don’t know about,” Carter said.

“Most likely the latter,” Rossi said. “After all, he did try to kill Sheppard and Beckett, which implies that he did not believe that their contribution would be necessary.”

“Or that he was absolutely certain he could get access to General O’Neill’s DNA,” Fornell spoke up.

“Or,” Edgerton countered, “He already has DNA from one of them.”

Everyone stopped talking and looked at O’Neill. The general made a very sour face.
“Fuck me,” he said.

“Ah, well, it sounds like their technology is… a little more sophisticated than that,” Rossi remarked.

“Anyways,” Fornell said encouragingly, “Last I checked, babies are made the other way round.”

Tony was beginning to look downright murderous at all this talk of people trying to kill or breed his sentinel.

“Here’s an idea,” Fornell went on quickly, one eye on Tony. “Let’s kill these guys, and then after they’re dead, we can figure out exactly what they were planning to do over a nice whiskey and some cigars.”

“I like that plan,” Tony growled.

“Except for the cigars,” O’Neill said. “I can’t have cigars. Or cigarettes. Ever since I awakened, I can taste the carcinogens— it’s tragic. I want pizza instead. Lots and lots of pizza.”

Carter narrowed her eyes.

“Tony,” she said, “I just realized: you and I need to have a talk about food dyes.”

“Don’t worry, Sam,” O’Neill said mournfully, “Tony’s Italian. He would never let me near a pizzeria that would even think about allowing Red Dye 40 on its pies. It’s a travesty. I’m never going to be able to eat anything from Pizza Hut again.”

Carter turned to Tony and gave him a beatific little smile that had the hair rising on the back of Gibbs’s neck at the same time it was causing a subtle tightening of his slacks.

“Tony,” she said, “You’re… perfect.”

Tony preened a little.

“Of course I am,” he said.


“I think I’m gonna be sick,” Fornell remarked.

“Mmmf-rr,” mumbled Dr. Eppes from the chair where Edgerton had propped him after his episode. “Where am I? What’s happening?”

“It’s time for you to go to work, professor,” Edgerton said.

***

“They’re gonna kill each other,” Tony said matter-of-factly as he and Gibbs peered through their office door into the bullpen, where Ian and Fornell had gotten into yet another squabble over… something or other.

O’Neill was back in his own office doing his own job, and Gibbs and Tony were going over the
personnel files of the strike teams the president had put at their disposal. Gibbs would have liked to keep the whole op in-house— and he was, as far as he was able— but that wasn’t realistic for some of their mission objectives. Even with the recent additions, they needed more warm bodies if they were going to take down the larger bases on Garcia’s list. However, he was damned well going to vet every single man and woman he took in with him to hell and back before he let them near the Trust.

“They’ll work it out,” Gibbs said, shrugging.

“Sure,” Tony agreed. “I mean, if that’s what you call Ian slitting Fornell’s throat and leaving him for the vultures, or Fornell shooting Ian in the head and dropping his body into a landfill…”

“They can both hold their own,” Gibbs said.

“Yeah,” Tony said, “That’s kind of the problem. If one of them would just roll over and say uncle, everything would be fine, but they won’t, so… yeah, they’re going to kill each other. Hey, you know what we need?” Tony turned around and heading for his desk. “Team building! Paul’s putting our out-of-towners up in base housing at Bolling, right? He said he had a couple of those really nice officers’ family units set aside. So, some food, some beer, a few rounds of poker—”

Gibbs’s mouth twitched. Tony was… adorable.

And naive.

“If we get this team together like that, poker isn’t what we’re gonna be doing,” he said.

Tony frowned. Adorably.

Gibbs would never admit that the other reason he didn’t have a dog— beyond the fact that, with the hours he worked, any dog of his would be just this side of neglected— was that Tony was cuter and more loyal than any canine, with the added benefit that he could walk, feed, and toilet himself.

“Okay, I’ll bite,” Tony said. “What would we be doing?”

“DiNozzo, O’Neill and Carter are both Air Force, Edgerton and Fornell were Army, and Rossi and I were Marines,” Gibbs said. “Think about it.”

“Oh.” Tony’s eyes widened. “Oh. Wow. I— uh— wow.” He rubbed the back of his neck, which was suddenly a little red. “Do you think— would that be a good thing?”

Gibbs cocked his head, thinking it over.

“Might be,” he said. “Don’t have a lotta time before we’re gonna be out in the field, and you’re right, they don’t trust each other yet. Kinda depends on you and Bristow though. Neither a’ you served, so you’re not used to this, and if you’re not on board, it’ll screw things up worse.”

“Jesus!” Tony said, blushing harder. “It’s not like I haven’t had— haven’t done— I was in a frat, Boss! I’ve had group sex before! But I can’t— Jack and I— the bonding instincts are riding us pretty hard right now. Anybody else touches either one of us, and there will be blood on the carpet. Actually, I was meaning to talk to you about that, ‘cause we think we’re gonna have to bond really soon, as in, probably while Endless Love is still running. It’s gonna suck balls, but…”

“We’ll work it out,” Gibbs said calmly. “Right now though, we’re talking about whether to let the team fuck it out before we have to go out in the field. Tony, nobody would lay a hand on either one a’ you, not in your situation, they all know better. But having you there— I ain’t gonna say we
wouldn’t get a rush from it. When a guide’s getting lucky, even mundanes can feel it. Are you okay with that?"

Tony relaxed a little.

“As long as it’s just Jack actually—with the—” he said, making vague handsy motions. “But what about Bristow? We don’t really know anything about her, except that on the Spirit Plane, she’s Mary Poppins and takes out goa’uld with a fluffy white parasol.”

Gibbs blinked, trying to get his head around that image. Then blinked again when he utterly failed.

“Huh?” he said.

“I know, right?” Tony said.

Gibbs gave himself a mental shake.

“Bristow’s Company, and she’s done deep cover,” he said, getting back on track. “If she had hangups like that, she wouldn’t a’ been cleared for that kind of field work. She may not join in, but she’s not gonna be upset by watching.”

Tony huffed.

“They never asked me if I was okay with orgies when I went undercover,” he said.

“Clearly you were taking the wrong undercover missions, DiNozzo,” Gibbs shot back.

“Story of my life,” Tony said. “So, food, drinks, condoms, and lube at Bolling tonight. Check. And hey! I get to see Sam naked, and it’s all completely above-board! You know what? I’m totally starting to like this plan!”

At that point, Gibbs’s desk phone rang. Gibbs walked over and picked it up.

“Gibbs.”

“Gibbs, it’s Michael,” said Secretary Bolt’s voice. “Listen, I talked to Director Shepard and she’s agreed to put you and Agent DiNozzo on leave until this situation is resolved.”

“Uuhh,” Gibbs said, punching the button to put the call on speaker and setting the handset back in its cradle. “What’s the catch.”

“She wants to keep you both on her books as agents until the end of the year,” Bolt said, sounding uncomfortable. “You won’t be working regular cases or leading the MCRT, but you will be available for consultation, should she or the MCRT’s new SAC require it.”

“Okay, wow,” Tony said. “Hi Mr. Secretary, Agent DiNozzo here. Look, I’m going to be totally uncool and ask the obvious question: was this her endgame all along? Because honestly, the transition period never made any sense. It was a giant pain in the ass from the very beginning. For us and for her.”

There was a long, uncomfortable silence.

“I can’t speak to that, Agent DiNozzo,” Bolt said. “However, I can say that Director Shepard was… very pleasant when I called her to talk about how to manage the current demands on your time.”
Tony threw himself into Gibbs’s chair and rubbed his face.

“Jesus,” he remarked.

On the speaker, Secretary Bolt cleared his throat.

“She asked me to inquire whether you can make it into the Navy Yard today to sign the paperwork,” he said.

Gibbs glowered at the phone.

“Michael, right now, I’m inclined to have both of us walk in there and quit, like we should’ve in the first place,” he said. “I’m willing to be persuaded not to, but I need a damned good reason.”

Bolt blew out a frustrated breath that caused a burst of static on the line.

“Okay, Gibbs,” he said resignedly. “Director Shepard is poking into things that make several other agencies—unhappy. When she made this deal with the DoD, I suspected that you and Agent DiNozzo played a role in whatever game she’s got going. I want to know what that role is. If I can find out—”

“You can figure out what she’s doing,” Tony finished for him.

“Exactly,” Bolt said.

“Why the hell didn’t you just tell us this?” Gibbs said.

Bolt snorted.

“You know how this works, Agent Gibbs,” he said. “You didn’t need to know.”

“And now we do,” Gibbs said flatly.

“This is the job, Agent Gibbs,” Bolt said.

“No, Mr. Secretary,” Gibbs said, “It’s not. The job is protecting the men and women who are trying to defend Earth. Colonel Steven Caldwell had his body hijacked by an alien parasite and every single person on Atlantis almost died. That is the job. We’ll do this, but the minute Shepard’s game gets in the way of doing right by our people, we stop playing.”

Bolt was quiet for a moment.

“Fair enough,” he said.

Gibbs punched the button to end the call and looked at Tony.

If Tony and O’Neill’s bonding instincts were really riding them that hard, he doubted taking Tony out of the Pentagon without his sentinel was a very good idea right now. Back in basic, he’d seen a perfectly matched pair going through the pre-bond crazies—it had a name, but in the service, they’d just called it ‘bonding heat,’ so he didn’t remember what it was—and it had been hell on anyone who even looked at the guide wrong, never mind tried to separate them. Lance Corporal Blaine had put five guys in the infirmary before she and Private Williams finally bonded. Granted, Blaine had been just a kid, but still, there was no need to make either Tony or O’Neill’s life more difficult than it had to be.

“Get O’Neill,” he said. “We’re heading to the Navy Yard.”
Tony, looking uncharacteristically sober, nodded.

“Yes Boss,” he said.
Tribe: a human social group connected by social, economic, ideological, or familial ties, usually united under a recognized leader. Among sentinels and guides, a group of people upon whom a sentinel or guide depends and whom they are instinctively driven to protect.

The bullpen of NCIS’s Navy Yard office was… *really* orange.

Jack sat in Tony’s office chair, playing idly with his guide’s Mighty Mouse stapler and staring in horrified fascination at the garish walls. Meanwhile, Mossad Officer Ziva David and Special Agent Timothy McGee were staring at him. Loudly.

At least, inasmuch as it was possible for a silent action to be loud.

“So,” Officer David said, leaning back in her chair at her desk against the opposite partition, “You are Tony’s sentinel.”

“Yup,” Jack said, kicking Tony’s chair back and propping his heels on the desk.

“I was surprised that Tony’s sentinel would be military,” David said. “He is— not good at respecting the rules.”

“Funny thing,” Jack said brightly. “Neither am I. Must be why they made me a general.”

Scandalized Disbelief #2. Pretty much the same scent/body language combo expressed by every officer Jack had ever served under, along with a hefty number of those who had served under him. McGee seemed particularly confused, but, then, he was still pretty wet behind the ears, so he probably hadn’t had a chance to get used to people failing to meet his expectations yet.

“Still,” David said, “He can be… childish, at times.”

Despite the content of this statement, David did not smell particularly malicious. She had the air of a predator assessing a potential threat: neither malevolent, nor sympathetic, just dangerous. Jack figured his best bet was to play dumb until he figured out what exactly she was looking for here.

“He likes *The Simpsons*, so in my book, he’s okay,” he said easily.

“He is often— quite insufferable,” David pressed, her dark eyes calculating.

“You aren’t exactly Miss Congeniality yourself, Princess,” Jack said, and this time, his smile wasn’t all that friendly.

David’s eyes widened minutely.

“You are also somewhat insufferable,” she said without any particular emotion.

McGee choked.
“Ziva!” he squawked. “Sorry, General O’Neill, Ziva is…” he trailed off, apparently unable to come up with an adequate explanation for his teammate.

David continued to study Jack, unruffled.

“I think you will suit him,” she said at last, with an air of decided finality.

“I plan to do my best,” he said.

“Good,” David said, “Because if you do not, no one will ever find out what has become of you. Tony may be an obnoxious— prat boy?— but he did save my life. It was unnecessary, but I owe him nonetheless. I do not wish anything bad to happen to him.”

McGee uttered a sound reminiscent of a Marine being taken down by Teal’c: a stifled expression of pain, confusion, and terror.

“Aw, Zee-vah!” Tony’s voice sang out from the other side of the partition beside Jack’s head. “I knew you cared! And it’s ‘frat boy’!”

“Tony!” McGee yelped. “What— how did you— where did you come from?”

Jack smiled secretly. He had sensed Tony coming, of course, but he wanted to observe Tony’s team— former team, now— in situ, as it were, which meant not interfering too much in their normal dynamics.

God, all those years with Danny had finally rubbed off on him. He would never live it down.

“Patience, grasshopper!” Tony said cheerfully, waltzing into the MCRT’s area of the bullpen. “The master still has much to teach you!”

He slid around his desk and leaned down to kiss on Jack deeply on the mouth. Jack accepted the kiss easily, sensing that Tony needed both the physical connection and the visible sign of their mental one.

“Tony, really?” McGee whined.

Tony straightened and shot McGee a shit-eating grin.

“Jealous, Elflord?” he snarked, his entire being radiating a shy sort of happiness that was at odds with his brash behavior.

McGee rolled his eyes, his earlier terror of Jack subsiding in the face of Tony irrepressible teasing.

“Of your exhibitionist streak? Not really,” the younger agent snarked back.

“So, you are really leaving,” David said.

Her tone was neutral, but Jack could hear the displeasure behind it.

“Not totally, my ninja chick,” Tony said. “Our esteemed Director has retained the right to call us in to consult on cases until the end of the year. But we are being taken off regular rotation, which means Shepard is bringing Granger in early.”


Tony wriggled uncomfortably.
“I started mainlining Jack’s psionic energy like it was heroine and I was Kurt Cobain,” he said.
“Alpha Guide Rabb was not amused. He’s threatening to put me, NCIS, and the Pentagon all in 
time-out. Apparently, food and sleep? Not optional, for guides or mundanes.”

“Does Gibbs know that?” McGee asked, sounding doubtful.

Tony waved a careless hand.

“Nah,” he said. “Food and sleep are for us mortals, and everyone knows that Gibbs is a vampire. A 
vampire who lives on coffee instead of blood…” he trailed off, frowning. “And he’s standing right 
behind me, isn’t he? Jack, why didn’t you warn me? What kind of sentinel are you?”

Jack cackled. He had indeed heard Gibbs coming, but he was beginning to get that the whole 
sneaking-up-on-people-talking-about-you thing was a game for the MCRT, so he hadn’t even 
thought about saying anything this time.

“Guess you’ve still got something to learn from the master as well, Tony,” McGee snickered.

“Ya done, DiNozzo?” said Gibbs, who was indeed now standing on the other side of the partition.

“Yeah Boss,” Tony said.

They said goodbye to the MCRT, and Jack could sense that, while the words said were casual and 
perfunctory, there was a profound sense of loss on all sides. Jack and Tony picked up the boxes in 
which Tony and Gibbs’s desks had been packed prior to their meeting with the director, and the 
three of them headed for the elevators.

“So,” Jack said as the doors closed, electing not to bring up their parting with the team, “How did 
your meeting with the director go?”

Gibbs let out a grunt, his entire body suddenly radiating disgruntlement.

“It was like Secretary Bolt said,” Tony said, seizing on the change of topic gratefully. “She was—
incredibly satisfied with the whole thing. Smugness practically oozed from her pores. It was—
creepy.”

He gave a theatrical little shiver.

They got off the elevator, not on the ground floor, but on the floor below it. Gibbs led them 
through a pair of sliding doors into a bright, gleaming, slightly chaotic lab space. Due to the way 
the Navy Yard was built, this level was almost underground, but not quite. Natural light filtered in 
through high windows up near the ceiling and occasionally, Jack could see feet walking by.

Thanks to the shift in both Gibbs and Tony’s physical profile as they entered the lab, Jack had just 
enough time to brace himself for impact before a small Gothic tornado in combat boots flung 
herself bodily at Gibbs, babbling at high speed.

“GibbsGibbsGibbsGibbs!” she said in a voice that was hoarse, but still somehow sweet and 
soothing. “Timmy says you and Tony are leaving the team early and why are you leaving early? 
And I won’t see you anymore and— Gibbs!”

“Abs,” Gibbs said, setting the dark-haired woman gently back on her feet and putting his hands on 
her shoulders. “Breathe.”

Abby took several deep breaths and Jack took a closer look at this singular character. Her black
hair was bound up in high pigtails, she was wearing a shirt with a skull and a plaid mini skirt under her lab coat, and she had a dog collar around her neck. Her makeup was vivid, and Jack could see a tattoo of a spider’s web underneath the studded collar. Jack inhaled discreetly, filtering through the scents of lab chemicals and cosmetics to the woman’s own scent: sadness, anger, and fear.

“But Gibbs!” Abby said. “Who’s gonna bring me CafPow! and show up just when I find something and tell me good job—?”

“Abs,” Gibbs said quietly, “It’s gonna be alright.”

“No, Gibbs,” Abby said, “No it’s not.”

And it really wasn’t. Because Jack could sense the real meaning behind the flood of words:

Who is going to look out for me now?

Jack had been told what had happened to Agent Todd, and he had been there fore the fallout of that bizarre episode with Charles Sterling. He wasn’t at all surprised, after those events, that Abby was scared. The young woman had been targeted by unstable criminals twice in the past nine months, in one of those cases by someone she had worked closely with, and while her performance during the Sterling episode showed that she could take care of herself, it had to have done a number on her head. She was, after all, not an agent. She was not trained in situational awareness, firearms, or hand-to-hand. She did not carry a weapon. She had every right to want people she trusted watching her back right now.

Jack grimaced. His instincts did not like this, not at all. Tony was his guide; Abby was a member of Tony’s tribe; ergo, Abby was a member of his tribe. The idea of leaving her undefended at the Navy Yard was making him twitchy as hell. As Gibbs started trying to reassure the distraught scientist, Jack leaned down and murmured to Tony,

“Hang on. I need to call Paul.”

Tony looked up at Jack, puzzled and unhappy and guilty and a lot of other things that were too mixed up to label right now.

“What?” he said. “What’s going on?”

“I— I need to fix this,” Jack said.

Tony frowned.

“What?” he said. “Fix what?”

“She’s—a member of your tribe,” Jack said. “She’s a member of my tribe. I can’t—I didn’t expect it to be so— insistant.”

Tony’s eyes widened.

“Oh!” he said. “Oh, damn, I didn’t even think about that. What are you gonna do?”

“Have Paul read her in pronto,” Jack said. “Besides putting her in the loop, it’ll put her on the list of people we keep tabs on. If anything happens to her or around her, our people will take care of it. Program security, you know?”

Tony didn’t say anything, but his green eyes brimmed over with relief and gratitude. He nodded,
and Jack kissed him quickly before depositing the cardboard box he was carrying on one of the
counters and stepping back out of the lab into the hall. He pulled out his phone and hit the speed
dial for Paul. The lieutenant colonel picked up after the first ring.

“Davis.”

“Hey, Paul,” Jack said, “I got—a thing.”

“A ‘thing,’ sir?” Paul said cautiously.

“Yeah,” Jack said. “Remember how we decided to read NCIS’s forensic tech and ME into the
program once HERA was up and running?”

“Yes sir,” Paul said.

“I need you to move that up,” Jack said.

“… sir?”

“Look, it’s a—there’s a—I—” Jack frowned, trying to figure out how not to admit that he was
shamelessly exploiting his position at Homeworld Command for his own personal benefit.

Not that Paul wasn’t aware. Or that he would disapprove. After all, Paul had been all set to hire the
Director of Mossad’s daughter and pimp Jack out while he was at it, so long as it got him what he
wanted. Jack privately suspected that all these years working on the Stargate Program had
permanently destroyed Paul’s ability to distinguish personal from professional.

The program kinda did that to a person.

Thankfully, Paul had worked for Jack long enough to be able to interpret his stutterings accurately.

“I will prepare the paperwork at once, sir,” he said. “When would you like to do the briefing?”

“Can you have someone over here in the next twenty minutes?” Jack asked.

“I can have someone there in fifteen,” Paul said.

Jack hung up and sidled back into the lab.

“Hey,” he said, waving a hand to interrupt Abby’s dramatic monologue on the universal order of
things, “Sorry to interrupt. I’m Jack, by the way—we haven’t officially met. So, in about fifteen
minutes, one of Paul’s minions is going to be over here with some NDAs and briefing packets. We
were waiting until we had the agency up and running, but since we’re here—”

He shrugged and smiled urbanely. Tony smiled back happily and Gibbs’s mouth quirked.

“You’re a soft touch, general,” he said.

Abby looked from Gibbs to him and back again.

“Gibbs,” she said, “What’s going on? Oh, hi Tony’s sentinel. Sorry I was kind of totally ignoring
you. Most times, I would be much more interested in making sure you’re worthy of my favoritest
guide jock cop, but I was distracted by the fact that Gibbs and Tony are being kidnapped by the
forces of national defense and really, really impressive firewalls, never to be seen again.”

Jack let out an involuntary snort, and Gibbs rolled his eyes.
“Told you not to look at those firewalls, Abs,” he scolded.

“I didn’t!” Abby said, eyes wide and innocent. “I may— may— have peeked at some message boards where other people talked about looking at them, but I swear that I did not personally at any point try to hack that part of the Pentagon. But I will say that, according to those who have, whatever you are all doing over there has really epic security. Like, it’s on a whole other level. It’s not just ahead of its time, it’s a completely different way of coding, one with no obvious prototypes. Seriously, it wasn’t developed using any of the methods that currently exist. It’s like they stole it from aliens or something.”

Tony choked and had to bang on his chest vigorously, and Jack had to pick up his jaw from his chest. Gibbs actually smiled. Abby, thankfully, was too focused to pay attention to their reactions.

“But Gibbs— and Tony’s sentinel— you haven’t answered my question,” she said. “What’s going on?”

“Well Abs, after you sign a bunch of paperwork promising to never talk about our job with anyone ever, including on secret message boards, the general here is going to read you and Ducky in on what we’re doing over at the Pentagon,” Gibbs said.

Abby squeaked.


“Officially?” Jack said. “The new agency Gibbs and Tony are heading up is going to need forensic capabilities— right now, it’s on a consulting basis, but I give it a year before we’re offering you permanent jobs. Unofficially, my second in command, SecDef, and the president, were willing to give Tony just about anything he asked for short of a first world country to get him to sign on with the program. Turned out what he wanted was Gibbs, Dr. Mallard, and you, so here we are. Like I said, we were gonna wait— we don’t have your lab set up yet, and until a couplea days ago, we didn’t technically have an agency for you to consult with— but—”

Abby’s scent went heart-stoppingly happyshockeddesperatelyrelieved and her expressive eyes welled up with tears. She looked at Tony.

“Oh God, Tony,” she choked. “This is— I can’t—” she broke off. “Can I—?” she asked, pointing at Jack.

Tony laughed, looking at Abby with his own cocktail of complicated, desperate relief.

“Yeah Abs,” he said fondly. “Go for it.”

And with that, Jack found himself with an armful of Goth forensic scientist chanting, “Thankyouthankyouthankyouthankyou,” and crying all over the shoulder of his uniform.

He hugged back by reflex, but whatever expression he had on his face as he did so— surprise, consternation, and perhaps a touch of delight— caused both Tony and Gibbs to laugh.

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“You have done a very good thing, Anthony,” Ducky said, standing quietly beside Tony and
watching Abby examining the pictures from the Stargate Program briefing package with avid fascination.

“I didn’t do anything, Ducky,” Tony said. “This was all Jack. I thought it was going to be months before we read you guys in.”

“Yes, you seem to have found yourself an exceptional sentinel, my dear boy,” Ducky said, smiling. “But, as I understand it, bringing young Abigail—and myself—into your endeavor in the first place was one of your conditions upon joining the program. And that, I think, means the world to her.”

“They were all set to haul Tim and Ziva in with us in the beginning,” Tony said. “I just gave them different names, that’s all.”

“Yes,” Ducky said, fixing Tony with a sharp, inquisitive look, “I must admit, I’m curious as to why we are being read in while Ziva and Timothy are not.”

Tony squirmed a little, mostly internally, although a bit of the mental restlessness overflowed into his hands and left foot.

“McGee doesn’t want to be a spook,” he said. “Gibbs and I asked him, told him a really vague version of what we were doing, and he said no. He may dabble in espionage occasionally, but it’s on his computer. At night. Under an assumed name. Besides, he wants to sit in a director’s chair someday. Going down this rabbit hole with us isn’t the way to make that happen. If me and Gibbs ever have to write up a resume after this, it’s just gonna be our names and a whole lotta lines of redacted text.”

“I see,” Ducky said. “And Ziva?”

“There were… problems with her security clearance,” Tony said. “Jack says he could have figured it out, but I— I said no. She’s awesome as far as I can tell—a little rough around the edges, but also a ninja, which, how cool is that?— but she’s an Israeli spy. That was her job. Five months of working together is not enough to bring a Mossad operative—to bring the Director of Mossad’s daughter—into the Pentagon.”

“One could argue that it is no more risky than bringing her into NCIS,” Ducky pointed out mildly.

It was impossible to tell whether this was his actual opinion, or whether he was playing devil’s advocate. Either way, Tony was relieved to be able to talk about it. He’d had a little— just a little —niggle of guilt over the whole thing ever since he’d told Jack and Paul to stop trying to get Ziva clearance. He knew— how could he not? He was a guide, it was his job to know— how much Ziva needed a place to belong, how much she needed colleagues who would not go on killing sprees and mentors who would not ask her to kill her own kin. Under other circumstances, he thought that the MCRT could have been that for her, eventually, that the four of them, Gibbs, Tim, Ziva, and Tony, could have built something special.

But it hadn’t gone that way, and he hadn’t known her long enough to regret it. He wouldn’t even miss their combative flirting which, if he had met her at any other time, he would have been much more invested in. He had Jack now, he didn’t need a crazy, dangerous, socially awkward ninja assassin to flirt or fuck with.

“Totally different levels of scary, Duck,” he replied to the ME. “NCIS’s real security break is it’s access to Navy property and personnel. That would be a coup for some random terrorist, but for a Mossad liaison, it’s pretty useless— after all, we know she’s here, so anything shady she did could
be traced back to her in a heartbeat. Heck, even something she didn’t do, she could be implicated in, so in a way, the Navy is even safer with her here: it’s in Mossad’s interests to make sure nothing bad happens that could be blamed on her. That leaves information. NCIS has access to a lot of classified material, but it’s mostly material on criminal investigation and counterterrorism, not national defense. We don’t actually have clearance to know about Navy operations except under special circumstances, so someone who was looking for troop movements or ops intel would be out of luck unless it happened to be relevant to an investigation. If Ziva did decide to leak information — I’m not saying she would, but if she did— it would most likely be stuff from Global Ops, and honestly, if Eli David decides to assassinate a few arms dealers based on our intel, I’m not going to cry about it.

“The Pentagon, though, that’s a different story. If Israel ever decided to threaten the US’s interests, that’s where we’d be figuring out how to stop them. Having a foreign operative in there— that’s just stupid. Not to mention, can you imagine the temptation? I mean, c’mon, you’re a spy, and another country hands you the keys to their defenses. Even if that wasn’t why you were there, it would be almost impossible to resist!”

“Espionage by opportunity,” Ducky said thoughtfully, “An interesting phenomenon, and not without precedent. During the second World War, the Allied Forces found an intact code machine and a weather cipher book on a German submarine captured during a diversionary action in the North Sea. Those items would turn out to be key factors in breaking the infamous Enigma code used by the Axis powers to encrypt their communications, a feat that General Eisenhower considered a decisive factor in the Allied victory.”

Tony laughed.

“Ducky, don’t ever change,” he said happily.

At this point, Abby finally looked up from the briefing packet and looked at them all with bright eyes and a luminous smile.

“This,” she said, pointing at the briefing packet. “Is so cool!”

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It was twilight when Tobias pulled off of Mitchell Loop into the driveway of one of Bolling AFB’s officer’s units, a generously sized beige colonial. Colonel Davis, who had given him directions to the house, had explained that Homeword kept a few of Bolling’s housing units on reserve for personnel from out of town, since putting them up in hotels tended to be a security nightmare. Considering why they were all here tonight, Tobias could only be grateful. He’d done a stint in the Army back in the day, but it had been a long-assed time ago. If he was going to do this, he wanted privacy, and even the most secure hotels did not really offer that.

He turned off the engine and got out of the car. As he closed the door, another car pulled up behind him and Agent Edgerton stepped out. Tobias nodded curtly.

“Agent Edgerton,” he drawled.

“Agent Fornell,” Edgerton said, inclining his own head.

The air between them practically crackled with tension.
Tobias wasn’t sure what it was about the lambda sentinel that set his back up. They were, in many ways, very similar: gifted, never going to bond, served in the Army, career FBI, the best in their respective fields, a reputation for playing fast and loose with the rules, a positive allergy to bullshit — the list went on. Yet, ever since Tobias had met the other agent at a Center gala, Edgerton had rubbed him the wrong way.

Maybe it was because they were so similar; nobody liked sharing their personal little niche in the universe with someone else.

The two men fell in beside one another without another word. As they walked up the steps to the porch and Edgerton rang the doorbell, Tobias allowed his psionic senses to brush lightly over the younger man. Edgerton’s psionic profile was calm and self-contained, but there was a frisson of… it wasn’t nervousness, exactly, but— razor-edged anticipation, along with a healthy dose of wariness.

Like Tobias, Edgerton had accepted the necessity of tonight, but was understandably cautious, wary of the untested, possibly volatile mix that was this new team.

Well, Edgerton was smart, Tobias would give him that.

Bastard.

Rossi answered the door wearing gray slacks and a snowy white button down that was open at the collar and had the sleeves rolled up. The profiler’s smile brimmed over with warm Italian charm, but Tobias picked up thoughtful calculation and a fair measure of amusement beneath the relaxed goodwill.

“Welcome,” Rossi said, stepping back and gesturing for them to enter. “Come in, make yourselves at home.”

They stepped into the foyer and Rossi closed the door behind them before herding them subtly and politely down the hall, keeping up an effortless stream of pleasantries the entire way. “The accommodations are— quite luxurious: I gather that this is one of the officers’ blocks. We are in the living room. Homeworld provided a full bar— you can help yourself, or, if you’re so inclined, I make a mean cocktail. We’re still waiting on Agents Gibbs and DiNozzo, as well as General O’Neill, but everyone else is here.”

By this time, they had ended up in the aforementioned living room, a sleek, yet comfortable modern space done in light colors and furnished with a combination of upholstered furniture and natural wood. Tobias couldn’t help but notice that someone had added two extra couches and placed gym mats beneath the dense carpet, making the entire floor into one big soft, yielding surface. The same forethinking person had also provided a number of extra pillows. He was familiar with the practice from Harm and A.J.’s house, where visiting sentinels and guides used the floors as a kind of glorified puppy pit, but he knew that their purpose here was a little different.

Tobias shed his jacket, handing it to Rossi at the other man’s silent prompting, and unobtrusively reached out his guide senses to take the tone of the room.

Colonel Carter, still in her dress uniform slacks and shirt, but without the jacket and tie, was seated elegantly on a pillow on the floor with a martini in her hand, talking earnestly with Dr. Eppes, who was seated awkwardly on one of the couches and sipping nervously on a Sam Adams. Carter was incredibly calm, while Eppes was a bundle of nerves, curiosity, and self-consciousness.

Sydney Bristow, the CIA agent who had been brought in that day, was seated on another couch
with Penelope Garcia. Bristow was drinking gin and tonic and Garcia had something colorful and sparkling in a fancy glass. Both women were vibrating with anxiety, although they manifested it in different ways. Bristow was ostentatiously relaxed, while Garcia was a babbling, nervous ball of energy.

There was a round of greetings, then Tobias ambled towards the bar where, as promised, he found an excellent selection of whiskey. He poured himself a glass of Rittenhouse Rye and listened to the two discussions currently taking place. Edgerton, meanwhile, grabbed a Budweiser and went to sit down beside Eppes. Tobias, realizing that he could understand about one word in three being exchanged between Carter and Eppes, drifted over to lean against the wall near Bristow and Garcia, whose weirdly detailed discussion of Tom Cruise’s bizarre descent into Scientology he could, at least, comprehend.

It took him, perhaps, two minutes to realize that neither woman was actually interested in the celebrity gossip part of celebrity gossip. Garcia seemed to use it as some sort of calibration device for the jungle that was the world wide web, while Bristow— God alone knew why she knew so much about it, but it wasn’t out of any sort of fascination with the lives of famous people. To add to the oddness, both women had to have insider sources, because the information they were exchanging, if accurate, was more on the level of high-priority dossier than a USA Today article.

Rossi returned as Garcia voiced a speculation that perhaps Cruise had a goa’uld symbiote in his brain, since that did seem to be going around lately, and Bristow replied that she knew of three places he had been the year he had had his spiritual awakening where he could have picked up the hypothetical snake. Rossi smirked, retrieved a glass of bourbon from an end table, and moved quietly over to lean against the wall beside Tobias.

“I am strangely convinced that Ms. Garcia and Agent Bristow are going to bring down the country using popular culture,” he said quietly. “The really disturbing part is, I can’t for the life of me figure out how they’re going to do it.”

Tobias hummed in agreement, but his mind was already moving on to other things.

“Been a long time since I was in the service,” he said slowly, “But I don’t remember this kinda thing being so— deliberate. Or so luxurious.”

He nodded to the scotch in his hand.

Rossi eyed him knowingly and smiled.

“I believe that the Stargate Program is accustomed to a certain amount of— expediency in its operations,” he said, “A theory that becomes more likely when one considers that, out of everyone here, Colonel Carter is the only person who is truly at ease.”

He nodded to the beautiful, poised figure on the rug.

Tobias cocked his head. Damn, Rossi really was as good as they said. Tobias had noticed that Carter was at ease and the rest of them… weren’t, but he hadn’t put it together. But Rossi had, and he didn’t even have the advantage of being a guide.

“As for the luxury,” Rossi went on, “I guess there are certain— privileges associated with serving at the president’s personal pleasure.”

Fornell winced.

“Oh, that is an image I did not need,” he said, trying diligently to erase the mental picture of
General O’Neill and President Hayes doing unmentionable things in the Oval Office.

Rossi let out a delighted gurgle of laughter.

The doorbell rang again and Rossi straightened up and headed for the foyer again. Tobias set his glass down and followed. He found Rossi at the door talking to a young airman in what looked like a caterer’s uniform. There seemed to be a complex negotiation going on wherein the young woman was trying to gain access to the house and Rossi was protesting. Tobias’s respect for the other agent grew: with all the sentinels and guides in their group, plus the tenuous dynamics of the new team, having outsiders in the house right now would be a bad idea. Fornell turned and put his fingers to his lips, letting out a piercing whistle.

“Edgerton, Carter,” he said, jerking his head towards the front hall.

The sentinel and the guide both cocked their heads for a moment, then nodded and got to their feet. Rossi was still arguing with the caterer when the three of them brushed past the two of them and moved purposefully down the steps to where a base commissary van was parked on the street. The startled airman waiting in the back was reluctant at first, but, when introduced to Sam by name, rank, and guide status, he saluted and surrendered their dinner with grace and efficiency. Clearly, he had at least a passing familiarity with the quirks exhibited by sentinels and guides in a new territory.

Edgerton prowled around the van and briefly inspected the food before allowing them to begin divvying up the plastic-domed platters and paper boxes. As they were in the middle of this process, a black government SUV pulled up behind Edgerton’s car and Gibbs, O’Neill, and DiNozzo stepped out. DiNozzo immediately bounded over to help, while Gibbs and O’Neill smirked in the background. As they made their way towards the house, Tobias automatically scanned the newcomers. Gibbs, like Rossi, was amused, but watchful. O’Neill was a strange combination of expectant and apprehensive, and after a moment, Tobias was able to track the apprehension down to a particular source: DiNozzo.

DiNozzo, who was bouncing up the steps like a monkey who’d had one too many banana daiquiris, but whose psionic profile was awash with stone cold sober trepidation.

Tobias realized abruptly that DiNozzo, despite working for the Navy, had never served. He eyed the younger agent thoughtfully, wondering how he was going to handle this.

They brought the food straight into the living room, even though there was a perfectly good dining room on the other side of the house. They piled everything onto the two coffee tables and Rossi went into the kitchen to dig out plates and serving utensils. The commissary had provided napkins, and everything they had sent was finger food: platters of neat, paper-wrapped sandwiches, trays of sliced vegetables with various dips, cheese and crackers, cookies and brownies.

After some awkward milling and awkwarder fits and starts of conversation, they finally managed to settle in and seriously address the food. The empathic tone of the room was—unsettled, but not to the point of active distress. Tobias, who had automatically gravitated towards Gibbs and DiNozzo as soon as they appeared, ended up seated on a couch beside the older agent while DiNozzo and his sentinel sprawled at their feet. Tobias looked down at them, amused.

“It’s like having pets,” he remarked.

O’Neill casually flipped him the bird without pausing in his efforts to demolish enough food to keep a marathon runner happy. Tobias grinned, but privately took note of the sentinel’s increased caloric requirements. Both he and DiNozzo felt rested, for a change, but Tobias had sensed how
much psionic energy O’Neill had been channeling towards his guide over the past few days, energy that had to come from somewhere.

No wonder O’Neill was eating like there was no tomorrow.

“Hey!” DiNozzo protested happily.

He was much more relaxed than he had been when he had first arrived. One might have been excused for thinking it was the elaborate cocktail in his hand (courtesy of Rossi, who apparently really did mix a mean drink) that was responsible, but Tobias’s assessment suggested it was actually the food. Apparently, a fed DiNozzo was a happy DiNozzo.

“Good luck house training ‘em,” Gibbs remarked, his psionic profile sparkling with amusement.

O’Neill swallowed and said,

“I’ll have you know, I don’t shed, chew the furniture, or do anything I shouldn’t on the rug.”

DiNozzo choked on a cookie, his expression a comical mix of amusement, disagreement, and embarrassment.

O’Neill looked haughty.

“Anything I shouldn’t,” he emphasized. “I’m a duly accorded sentinel with a powerful and attractive guide; I get to do that anywhere I like. It’s in the Constitution.”

DiNozzo swallowed hurriedly before letting out an uncontrolled gulp of laughter. Gibbs remained stone-faced, but Tobias could feel his smirk.

“I’d say to exercise some freaking self-control, O’Neill, but that would kinda defeat the purpose of this little gathering,” Tobias remarked.

In response, O’Neill leaned over and planted a long, lingering kiss on DiNozzo’s surprised mouth.

As a guide, Tobias felt the shift in the psionic field immediately, as though a whole truckload of warm honey had been dumped into the room. From the sudden change in their empathic profiles, he could tell that Carter and Edgerton were right there with them. The mundanes took a few more seconds, but soon they were reacting too, overcome with a sudden wave of bliss and desire in response to the empathic bleed-off from a very powerful, very aroused guide.

“I think that’s our cue,” Rossi murmured from the other side of the room, where he was sitting with Garcia and Bristow.

He stood up gracefully and began methodically cleaning up the food. Edgerton rose from his place on the floor beside Carter and began to help.

Carter, meanwhile, moved to the cabinet beside the door. From inside of it, she retrieved a white metal box the size of a brief case with a red cross on the cover, which she brought back and set on the coffee table. She opened the box with deft fingers, revealing a comprehensive arsenal of condoms, lubrication, sanitary wipes, antibiotic cream, and Plan B. Carter fixed the room with calm, uncompromising blue eyes, and Tobias felt his inner guide sit up and take notice.

The hierarchy of the new team was shaking out in a somewhat unexpected way. In the absence of an alpha class guide, DiNozzo should have been the Alpha Guide of their ad hoc pride: he was an epsilon, his levels were frankly ridiculous, and he was bonded to the team’s ranking sentinel. But it
turned out that all of them were deferring to Carter rather than DiNozzo, including DiNozzo. There was no one definitive reason for it, just a lot of little things, but what it boiled down to was, Carter *felt* like their Alpha Guide.

Which meant that it was her job to set the tone for tonight.

“Alright,” she said. “Base rules, but we’re operation ready, so wheels up applies. Also, we’ve got four civilians and a new sentinel and guide pair in this room, so R&R is not optional— don’t worry, there are two sentinels and *three* guides here to make sure everyone has a good time. Finally, Tony and the general haven’t finished their bond yet, so don’t touch either of them. They won’t be able to handle it right now.”

DiNozzo raised his hand like he was in grade school, and Carter raised an eyebrow.

“Yes, Tony?” she said dryly.

“Um, could you explain… pretty much everything you just said?” DiNozzo asked. “Except the last part, the last part I’ve definitely got.”

Garcia and Eppes nodded in agreement, and Bristow’s psionic profile registered something similar, although she didn’t show any outward indications.

Carter laughed.

“Sorry,” she said, “Base rules mean we can do pretty much anything we want, because we’ve got everything we need to clean up afterwards. When we’re out in the field, we sometimes have to set a limit on activities because we don’t have access to sterilizing agents or even clean water. Wheels up, though, means we can’t do anything that will leave anybody out of action, since we need to be ready to go wheels up at any time. Basically, if it’s going to leave anyone too sore to go into combat, don’t do it. R&R stands for responsibility and respect. Ideally, we always practice both, but in certain situations— for instance, when we’ve got civilians with us, or when we’re dealing with personnel who have particular sensitivities, like a new pair— it’s particularly important.”

“Got it,” Tony said. “Thanks.”

Eppes had gone dusky pink by this time, and Garcia might or might not have been on the verge of hyperventilating. Carter gave them a reassuring smile.

“You don’t have to do anything you’re uncomfortable with,” she said kindly. “If you just want to sit and watch, that’s fine. If you want to leave the room, there’s a den upstairs that’s fully fitted out with a flatscreen, sound system, gaming console, and desktop. Plus its own bar, I believe.”

“It pays to spoil the guests,” O’Neill put in. “Most of the time, they’re here ‘cause the world is in some fairly significant shit, so a few perks? Well worth it.”

“If you want to leave,” Carter concluded, “All you have to do is call Homeworld and Paul will send a car to take you home or to our other on-base house.”

Garcia squeaked. Eppes went from dusky pink to rusty red. Bristow went so far as to blink a couple of times.

There was a long, strained silence. Tobias could feel the nervous anticipation in the room, as though the air itself had been stretched taut and left vibrating. Finally, Carter stood and, with a serene expression, began unbuttoning her shirt. When she was done, she slid it gracefully off her shoulders, revealing the plain white camisole underneath. The uniform trousers were likewise
unfastened and slipped off (she had somehow lost her shoes and socks earlier in the evening), and Fornell was not the only man—or, indeed, the only person—in the room who gulped discreetly at the sight of her long, smooth legs.

The Army had still had a separate Women’s Corps back in ‘70 when a much younger and sweeter Tobias Fornell had shipped off to Vietnam after his number came up in the draft. Doing this in mixed company was brand new to him, and Tobias was just now realizing what a crying shame that was, because while he liked touching guys just fine, he’d always preferred looking at women (hence, the fact that he pretty much stuck to dating women, even though he was by no stretch of the imagination heterosexual). Judging by his body’s reaction, serving before the WAC disbanded had been a gigantic waste of his time.

Which wasn’t to say that Tobias was unaware that the integration of women into the military had been no picnic, or that the armed forces had a fairly atrocious history when it came to dealing with misconduct against female service members, sexual and otherwise. If Em ever decided to enlist, Tobias was going to throw a shit-fit of epic proportions. So it wasn’t like he wasn’t naive enough to think that Carter had never been called a whore for doing the exact same things the guys did, or that she hadn’t been pressured into doing things the guys would never have been asked to do. But he also wasn’t a sanctimonious enough prick to condemn her for the fact that she was obviously damned good at this, and also enjoyed the hell out of it (albeit in a very understated, kappa-guide kind of way).

Samantha Carter was a goddess among women, officers, and guides, and she knew it.

For a long time, she just stood there, letting the room adjust and revelling (discreetly) in her positive effect on the people around her. Her empathic profile was aroused, with a heady overlay of power and satisfaction that had Tobias blinking dazedly.

Finally, she moved across the room, leaned down to Edgerton, and gave him a long, but rather formal kiss. Considering their new accord, it only made sense for them to kick things off, but it was obvious from their psionic fields that they’d already tried this and it hadn’t done it for either of them. Still, they made a thorough job of it before Carter straightened and moved on. Rossi was next, and this time there was definitely a few sparks in the empathic field. DiNozzo let out a strangled moan.

“I swear to God, Tony, if you synch up with Sam now, I really am going to spank you,” O’Neill muttered, causing muffled laughter from the rest of the room.

Carter moved to stand in front of Garcia. The vibrant, vulnerable woman looked up with huge, scared eyes, clearly not knowing what to do or what to want. Sam smiled and leaned down to kiss her sweetly and gently on her brilliantly painted lips. There was an uncontrolled burst of want/need/fear/yes/no/NOT READY from Garcia and Tobias winced.

Carter, however, remained steady as a rock.

“It’s okay,” the kappa guide murmured, pulling back. “You don’t have to do anything else. Just watch and enjoy.”

Garcia’s relief was overwhelming, and her smile practically lit up the room.

“I can do that, sugar,” she said. “I can definitely do that.”

“I’ll get you another drink,” Rossi said.
Eppes was next, and it was obvious that, despite his sincere appreciation for Carter’s charms— and her legs— he did not want to be there. Carter kissed him on the forehead and told him to go upstairs and finish the something-something equation. He let out a grateful sound and darted out of the room without a word. Rossi returned with Garcia’s drink and Carter moved to Bristow.

The kiss between the two women was erotic, but… artificial. Bristow was competent and engaged, but she was clearly playing a role, not enjoying herself, and Carter was concerned rather than aroused. Tobias wasn’t a strong enough guide to be able to figure out what was beneath the surface layer of Bristow’s psionic profile, so he couldn’t tell what was wrong or what to do about it. Carter, however, was considerably more powerful.

“Rossi,” she said, stepping back and turning to the other FBI agent, “Come here.”

Rossi moved over to Carter and Bristow, his psionic profile calm.

“Colonel?” he said quietly.

Carter reached down, took Bristow’s hand in hers, and guided the CIA agent to her feet so she could place her hand in Rossi’s.

“Sydney is a beautiful, extraordinary woman,” Carter said. “She deserves to be treated accordingly. I think you can do that.”

There was a wealth of subtext in the colonel’s words that amounted to, ‘Someone has hurt this girl badly and she needs to be reminded that she deserves better, so pamper the fuck out of her.’

Rossi obviously understood, because his psionic profile shifted to compassionate understanding.

“Of course,” he said, raising Bristow’s hand to mouth and brushing his lips across her knuckles in a light, but intimate caress. “Io veggio li occhi vostri c’hanno pianto, e veggiavi tornar si sfigurati, che ’l core mi triema di vederne tanto.”

Tobias had no idea what the fuck Rossi had just said, but Bristow did. Her eyes widened and a beautiful flush washed over her cheeks. Where a moment before her empathic field had been all bland, insipid compliance, now it was full of giddy schoolgirl delight.

At Tobias’s feet, DiNozzo whined pitifully.

“Christ, O’Neill, put the man out of his misery,” Gibbs said.

O’Neill gave a put-upon sigh, but he obligingly rolled onto his back and pulled DiNozzo on top of him. Cupping the back of the kid’s head in one hand and the curve of his ass with the other, O’Neill guided DiNozzo into a tender, but thorough kiss.

The sexual tension in the room ratcheted up by a factor of fifty.
Carter smiled gently down at the sentinel and guide pair for a moment, then stepped gracefully around them to stand in front of Tobias. She gave him a look that was part mischief, part smugness, and all sin before grabbing his tie and hauling him onto his feet into a searing kiss. Tobias made a slightly undignified sound deep in his throat. Carter broke the kiss and grinned up at Tobias.

“Alright, Agent Fornell,” she said, “Time to stop pulling Agent Edgerton’s pigtails and move on to something more productive. Go on.”

And she gave him a sharp slap on the ass for emphasis.

Tobias groaned and then laughed. Carter laughed as well, then stepped lightly over to Gibbs and, without further ado, crawled into his lap. Gibbs reached up to cup her cheek with one hand, and then they were kissing like courtesans on vacation. There was a certain inevitability about the whole thing, as though tonight had always been going to shake out like this and Carter had just been going through the motions up until now.

With a shake of his head, Tobias moved over to Edgerton, who had gotten to his feet and was leaning against the wall, arms folded, smirking.

Well, that wouldn’t do. Tobias stepped right up in front of the lambda sentinel and proceeded to kiss the smirk off of Edgerton’s self-satisfied face.

Edgerton growled low in his chest, and Tobias would have laughed if his mouth wasn’t otherwise engaged, because Edgerton sounded exactly like his Spirit Animal. Then Edgerton was pushing away from the wall, sliding his sentinel-strong arms around Tobias, and kissing him back like he was thinking of eating him, and there was really no time for amusement.

They ended up on the floor in what amounted to a wrestling match, but a wrestling match in which both of them were after the same thing: getting their clothes off as quickly as possible. The point of contention was who was in control of the operation.

In the back of his guide mind, Tobias was still aware of the other couples in the room: Rossi had Bristow spread out on one of the couches and was using his hand and his mouth on every inch of her smooth, flawless skin. O’Neill had rolled DiNozzo over on his back and pinned his wrists gently to the carpet while continuing to kiss him. And Carter, Carter was sitting in Gibbs’s lap half naked, rubbing her body against him while they soul-kissed the shit out of one another. Garcia, meanwhile, was watching everything with embarrassed delight that was steadily becoming less
embarrassed and more delighted.

Tobias was down to his undershirt and briefs at this point, while Edgerton was completely naked (he’d had a head start, the cheating motherfucker: he was wearing a long-sleeved black t-shirt with nothing under it and had, apparently chosen gone commando that morning).

It was weird doing this with a lambda, Tobias thought absently as he fought Edgerton for the privilege of removing his own shirt. He could feel that Edgerton was a sentinel, could sense the cosmic complement the other man represented to his own gifts, but there was no “catch” on his psionic awareness, no niche in their psionic landscapes where a bond was supposed to form. It had been unnerving at first, but Tobias was starting to like it now. All the perks of fucking a sentinel with none of the crap. He was a guide who didn’t want a sentinel, Edgerton was a sentinel who didn’t need a guide. It was easy and kind of perfect, if you didn’t mind that the guy was an asshole.

Which Tobias didn’t. Witness the fact that he had married Diane.

Tobias had won the fight for his shirt, but it turned out it had been a diversion tactic all along, because as soon as he had well and truly tangled his arms up in the cotton, he felt Edgerton’s clever sniper’s finger on the waistband of his briefs. He thought for a moment about fighting back, but then he felt Edgerton’s teeth fasten themselves on his left hip, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to break skin. Tobias pulled in a sharp breath, annoyed and aroused in equal measure, and gave in.

Sometimes you had to lose a battle to win the war.

Edgerton hummed in satisfaction and slid Tobias’s briefs down his legs.

Things would probably have continued that way, with the two of them pushing and pulling and biting right to the bitter end, if DiNozzo’s empathic bleed-off hadn’t suddenly reached some critical threshold and his emotional projection hadn’t gone from “pleasant background noise” to “holy fucking shit.” Tobias gasped and clutched blindly at Edgerton’s shoulders in response to the raw, aching waves of desire, fear, need, and love that were suddenly pouring off the younger guide. Edgerton, for his part, went completely still, to the point of ceasing to even breathe.

There were myths about empathic bleed-off, stories about how one guide experiencing a strong emotional reaction could project their emotions across an entire neighborhood or even an entire state, but it didn’t quite work that way.
The Spirit Plane could never be that straightforward.

A guide experiencing grief couldn’t make an entire city sad, and a guide having an orgasm couldn’t make their entire building come. What a guide could do was share their emotions with people who were near them on the Spirit Plane. While this could mean the people who were near them in the mundane world—the people who were aware of them at that moment because, say, they were in the same room and could see or hear them—it could also mean people who were hundreds or thousands of miles away, but were, for whatever reason—close personal connection, future or past association, freaky coincidence—close by on the metaphysical plane.

Hence the misconceptions.

Right now, everyone in the room was fair and square in the hot zone and DiNozzo was pouring empathic bleed-off on them like it was lava and he was Mount St. Helens. Tobias looked over. O’Neill was sitting with his back propped against the couch Gibbs and Carter were on, and DiNozzo was sprawled out beside him, his head in O’Neill’s lap, the sentinel’s cock down his throat. One of O’Neill’s hands was stroking softly through DiNozzo’s hair, while the other was jerking him off with exquisitely gentle strokes. For a moment, Tobias felt as though he, too, were being touched so tenderly, and that this was maybe the first time in his life when someone had cared about him enough to make him feel that way.

Time seemed to slow. Tobias felt Tony’s pleasure, caring, hope, and fear pouring through him in warm, intense waves that seemed to go on forever. And then it wasn’t just Tony anymore, it was everyone. Tobias had a moment of severe disorientation, because for a heartbeat, he was getting a double empathic impression of everyone in the room: one through his own gifts, and one through Tony’s. Then his own empathy quietly dialed down—he didn’t know how, because he sure as hell hadn’t done it on purpose—and it was just Tony’s. Through the other guide, he could sense the entire team: O’Neill, possessive and adoring. Gibbs, aroused and defensive. Carter, luxuriant and caring. Garcia, concerned and titillated. Rossi, ardent and compassionate. Bristow, heartbroken and enchanted. Edgerton, hot-blooded and guilty.

He moaned, and across the room, he heard Carter give a soft gasp. DiNozzo made a muffled sound (Tobias felt his whole body jerk as he thought about just what was muffling DiNozzo’s mouth) and a moment later, he heard the kid’s hoarse voice (God, he was hoarse from fucking deepthroating his sentinel, this was fucking S&G porn, what the hell had Tobias done to deserve this kind of torture?) apologizing:

“Sorry, sorry. Didn’t realize I was broadcasting that strong. I’ll—I’ll rein it in a little.”

“No,” Rossi said, surprising the hell out of Tobias and, judging by the psionic resonations in the room, everyone else with his authoritative refusal. “If I understand my metaphysical theory
This kind of felt like being on ecstasy, only clearer and sharper and with no fear of coming down. He looked down at Edgerton, who was still lying very quiet and still beside him, his entire presence watchful and wary.

“Alright sentinel,” he said, “What do you need? A hard fuck, some gentle petting, something in between? I’m not picky, and right now, I’m so blissed on DiNutzo’s psionic go-juice, a good scotch could get me off.”
with two condoms and one of the bottles of lube. He placed both in Tobias’s hands, feeling resolved, but slightly worried, then lay down on his belly, his lean muscles flowing under his glowing amber skin.

Tobias closed his eyes and moaned. *Fuck,* that was hot.

And fairly clear.

He popped the lid on the lube and poured a generous amount onto his fingers, dredging up his rusty knowledge of male anatomy as he did so.

“Your levels good?” he murmured as he reached down. “Don’t wanna hurt you.”

“I am dialled up far enough to optimize pleasure, but not so far as to cause discomfort,” Edgerton replied stuffily.

Tobias grinned… and thrust one well-oiled finger all the way in in one smooth motion. Edgerton drew his breath in sharply and every muscle in his body tensed, then relaxed. With a slight twist of his hand, Tobias found the right spot inside the sentinel’s body and then he *felt* the other man’s pleasure coursing through him like liquid fire.

Edgerton closed his eyes but, consummate sniper that he was, didn’t make a sound. Tobias wondered if the younger man could go through this whole thing in complete silence and resolved, with a touch of mischief, to find out.

In the periphery of his awareness, Tobias could feel the rest of the team as they fell deeper and deeper under DiNozzo’s spell. Gibbs and Carter were touching each other with a terrifying kind of focus, as though this were the most exacting and high-priority of military operations. Rossi, meanwhile, was practically *worshipping* Bristow, which was causing the young CIA agent to simultaneously gasp and weep, overwhelmed with the pleasure and the feeling of, for once in her life, being treated like she was something precious. O’Neill was doing something similar with DiNozzo, only his actions could be described less as worship and more as *ownership.* DiNozzo was loving every minute of it.

And Garcia was sitting back in her chair, soaking it all in, feeling like she was on the edge of some kind of cosmic epiphany.
Tobias prepared Edgerton swiftly, but thoroughly, making sure that three fingers fit pleasurably inside the sentinel’s body before withdrawing them and tearing open a condom.

“Relax,” he murmured roughly, even though he knew Edgerton was a big boy who had danced this dance enough times to know the steps, “Breathe out.”

Edgerton exhaled obediently, and Tobias pushed into him, biting of a groan at the tight, rippling heat. He leaned down and bit the other agent’s shoulder, half to keep Edgerton still, half to control himself. Edgerton let out a hiss of air between his teeth that didn’t quite count as a sound, but definitely came close.

“Okay?” Tobias asked when he was certain he wasn’t going to come on the spot.

His mouth was by Edgerton’s ear, and the sentinel shivered as Tobias’s breath brushed over his neck. Edgerton nodded tightly, and Tobias began to move. The feelings in the room began to blur and blend until it was unclear to him exactly whose pleasure he was feeling, whose relief, whose anxiety, whose bittersweet sadness. Time went honey-slow again, everything sugary and sluggish. Eventually, the sweetness turned to heat, and the gold became sharper and brighter, and everything exploded into a shower of glittering sparks. Tobias was pretty sure that he’d finally gotten a noise out of Edgerton at the end, but he couldn’t be certain, because there were suddenly a lot of voices making a lot of sounds as everyone slid over the edge into oblivion.

[1] “I see your eyes, I see how they have wept,
And how you have come retreating all undone;
My heart is touched and shaken at the sight.”

Stress Analysis

Chapter Notes

Stress Analysis: a branch of applied physics that determines the distribution of internal forces in an object or structure under a given set of conditions.

“So here is the list of the Trust’s personnel, locations, and assets that Ms. Garcia managed to compile from the NID’s files,” Dr. Eppes said, gesturing at the flatscreen in HERA’s bullpen. “Now, our goal is to remove enough of these resources that the organization cannot recreate itself from the surviving pieces.”

Tony leaned back into Jack’s arms and listened as Dr. Eppes, Professor of Applied Mathematics, broke down what looked like a kind of brutal level of mathematical complexity into friendly, approachable data, and sighed contentedly.

He had been expecting to feel absolutely wiped this morning after last night’s emotionally and psionically intense experience, but he actually felt contented and somewhat energized. The empathic feedback from the team during their… extracurricular activities seemed to have balanced out whatever effort he’d had to expend to structure his own empathic bleed-off, and displaying the physical expression of his connection to Jack in front of them had settled something in his primitive guide brain. He knew he should contact Harm and find out if that was normal, but he was a little afraid to be told that having sexy times in full view of the tribe was actually necessary behavior for sentinel guide pairs.

With a mental shake, he turned his attention back to Dr. Eppes.

“Using modified versions of the equations that measure extinction risks for endangered species,” the CalSci professor continued, bringing up another screen showing a series of equations that Tony just might have been able to understand if he’d had three hours and access to the internet, “I have managed to calculate exactly which of these potential targets we need to eliminate in order to ensure that the Trust is no longer viable.”

He clicked the mouse, and the list reappeared, this time with red lines drawn through specific items.

“Now, you’ll notice that the number of targets that need to be eliminated is relatively small compared to the overall list of resources,” the mathematician said. “That is because a large part of the organization appears to consist of people, companies, accounts, etc. that are unaware of the Trust’s existence. If the Trust is taken out of play, these entities will go on as before, just without the Trust influence.

“However, I calculate that some of those unwitting agents and resources will still have to be eliminated in order to bring down the organization quickly and with minimal casualties.”

Eppes clicked the mouse again and more red lines appeared.

“This brings us to the next point: in what order do we eliminate the targets to get the results we want?”
He turned away from the screen and faced the room, his bright eyes and dynamic hands adding an extra spark to what was already a fairly interesting presentation.

“Think of a game of Jenga. You want to remove the right blocks in the right sequence to make sure that the tower falls at a specific time—in this case, the other person’s turn. If you remove certain blocks each turn, you not only compromise the structural integrity of the tower in specific ways, you dictate what moves your opponent has available to them.

“Similarly, we want to know what parts of the organization to take out in which order so that the Trust will be dismantled before it can fight back. Now, my analysis suggests that we need to begin with these three people.”

Eppes switched to a new screen with three profiles containing pictures, basic biographical info, and vital statistics. There was a collective empathic “huh” from everyone on the team except for Eppes and Garcia.

“Who are these people?” Fornell asked.

Garcia stepped forward and used her remote control to bring up the first profile.

“Maria Cordoba-Sanchez, 31, legislative assistant to Mississippi Senator Graham Weaver,” she said, nodding to the picture of a pretty Latina woman. “Ms. Cordoba-Sanchez is responsible for monitoring and analyzing issues that are either before the Senate or may be about to come before the Senate. Senator Weaver depends on the data she provides to make decisions about which way to vote, what to bring before the committee, and even, occasionally, what to say on the floor.”

Garcia minimized Cordoba-Sanchez’s profile and brought up the next one, this one a balding white man.

“Paul Holloway, 56, Associate Producer for Fox News, New York City. He is responsible for the 5pm national broadcasts out of the New York studio.”

She dismissed Holloway and brought up the last profile, a young man with long hair and several visible piercings and tattoos.

“Hayden Wyjec, 27, a New York-based organizer for United for Peace and Justice. He was, apparently, one of the people behind ‘End the War on Iraq,’ the protest that occurred in D.C. in September of 2005. It is estimated that 300,000 people attended, and there were over 300 people arrested for blocking entrance to the White House.”

“Okay, that’s just wrong,” Tony said, staring at Wyjec’s picture. “Peace activists are supposed to be the good guys. Even if you disagree with them, you can’t really make a case for them being bad people unless they go really radical and start blowing shit up. What the hell is going on here?”

“Well, first of all, any or all of these people may be hosting a goa’uld,” Garcia said. “The NID didn’t have a lot on them, and Agent Rossi hasn’t had a chance to do profiles, so we don’t really know.”

“The Trust could also be blackmailing them, or, alternatively, they could be unaware that they are acting in the Trust’s interests,” Rossi spoke up. “They could also be acting on their own initiative with full knowledge of what they are doing. Until we have them in custody, we simply can’t know for certain.”

“Why these three targets?” Fornell asked. “Wouldn’t it make more sense to start with the big enchilada? Take out Ba’al, then work on his minions?”
“You would think so, but no,” Eppes said. “While Ba’al is the leader of the organization, he is not essential to its survival. Removing him changes their objectives and creates significant delays in their rise to power, but doesn’t weaken their essential structure. Moreover, every scenario I have run that begins with eliminating him has resulted in the Trust disengaging and going underground before our operation even starts.”

“So Ba’al—or Cole—is their canary?” Rossi said. “His death or capture signals an unacceptable level of risk to their continued survival?”

“Not exactly,” Eppes said. “It all depends on who makes the first move. If he is eliminated during a conflict that he initiates, the Trust continues to operate as usual. If his is eliminated on our initiative, they disappear.”

“Of course,” Rossi murmured. “If we attack him specifically, it indicates that we are targeting the organization, but if we are simply reacting to something they initiate, he is just another soldier. Fascinating. And frightening. This level of planning indicates that they have someone like you working for them, Dr. Eppes.”

“We think they do,” Garcia said. “She’s a housewife in Iowa, and she might be smarter than Dr. Eppes or me, which is… frightening.”

“Okay,” Gibbs said. “So, taking Ba’al out first is out. But why these three people specifically?”

He pointed to the screen.

Eppes shrugged.

“Based on the communications data from the NID’s records, my algorithm has identified them as the Trust’s first point of contact when they are threatened,” he said. “If we don’t remove these people first, they will set countermeasures in motion that will delay us long enough for the Trust to regroup.”

“I don’t get it,” Fornell said. “They’re small fish. What’s so important about them?”

“Small fish can cause a large distraction,” Ian said quietly.

The sentinel was standing remarkably close to Fornell this morning, Tony noted, and while he was still contradicting the older agent, the vitriol appeared to have disappeared of their dynamic.

Damn. Apparently, the whole orgy thing had worked.

“They’re all American,” Sam pointed out. “We know the Trust is concentrated here, because it was originally a renegade branch of an American agency, but the NID’s files indicate they’ve got operatives and bases in all of the countries in the IOA at this point. Why do three Americans need to be taken out first?”

“Well, as Senator Walker keeps telling me, the Stargate Program is still pretty much in American hands,” Jack said. “Any move against them is likely to come out of Homeworld or the Mountain. If they have some kind of countermeasures set up, they would have to be here.”

“Graham Weaver,” Bristow said thoughtfully. “He’s the Chairman of the Senate Arms Subcommittee on Personnel, right? I can think of several ways that he could inconvenience the program, either by targeting specific military personnel or by targeting programs or policies within the military, that could significantly reduce the Stargate Program’s ability to act quickly in a given situation.”
“Same with Holloway, albeit, on a different playing field,” Sam rejoined. “He runs the wrong news story the wrong way, and suddenly our hands are full putting out public relations fires instead of focusing on the Trust.”

“And, if all else fails, Wyjec can organize another march that shuts down D.C. for an indeterminate length of time,” Bristow finished.

“The first line of defense,” Sam said. “They slow things down until the real players can get in place.”

“Whoever they are,” Fornell added.

“Uh, well, the Joint Chief with a symbiote in his head might be a start,” Garcia said.

There was a profound, awkward silence.

“I’m sorry,” Tony said when he finally managed to get his voice working again. “What was that? I thought you said one if the Joint Chiefs had a snake in his head.”

“Um… yes?” Garcia said. “The NID confirmed six months ago. And the Deputy Attorney General is totally a Trust agent. And they’re blackmailing a couple of French diplomats, and three of Great Britain’s MPs…”

“Christ on a bike,” Jack said. “And the NID was just sitting on all of this? We really have to put some thought into which deep, dark hole to stick those guys in. Also, the Deputy Attorney General is in the Trust’s pocket?”

“Uh, yeah,” Garcia said. “Um… sorry?”

Jack waved a hand.

“Not your fault,” he said magnanimously. “But, out of curiosity, are there any other highly placed individuals who have been snaked, blackmailed, or what-have-you?”

“Well, um, they indirectly control, like, a third of the most influential lobbyists in the US, Great Britain, France, and Canada with some really well-placed agents and several billion dollars worth of stock in the right companies. If Russia and China weren’t communist countries, they’d probably have done the same thing with them, but instead, they’ve just snaked a few really powerful people who then co-opted other powerful people, who— plus, the NID has several files on the Canadian Prime Minister’s wife…?”

Jack closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Just… make me a list,” he said wearily. “Looks like my day just got a little more interesting.”

The briefing continued, and Tony worked hard to pay attention, but part of him couldn’t help but be preoccupied with what he had just heard. It was not simply the reality of the Trust’s network of control that was bothering him, it was the fact that such a network could exist— did exist. If the Trust had done it, other groups could do it too. Granted, just because they could didn’t mean that they had, but it also didn’t mean they hadn’t.

It was not a cheerful thought.

By the time Eppes and Garcia were done, the team had a list targets which included bases and labs in several countries, discrete cells ranging from two to twenty operatives, a number of individuals
of diverse nationalities, several corporations, and a series of bank accounts and shell companies (these last were the easiest targets: all they had to do, apparently, was give Garcia the word so she could do her hacker magic and make them… disappear). Eppes’s equations had yielded the optimal order in which to take out the first 15 targets, but beyond that, he explained, there were too many variables. The NID’s files were by no means comprehensive, and besides, every op generated consequences once it was set in motion. He would have to keep reworking the numbers as the operation progressed.

Jack took his list and went off to confer with Paul and, no doubt, the president, Tony made more coffee, and Gibbs continued to glower at the screen. Then the team began to plan.

They were, perhaps, an hour and a half in when Gibbs’s phone rang. Tony’s attention was mostly being occupied by the Deputy Attorney General’s schedule for the next week, but he did pay enough attention to figure out that it was security and that Gibbs was surprised by whatever they were calling about. After a moment, Gibbs hung up and turned to Fornell.

“Why is Agent Morgan at the desk askin’ for you, Tobias?” he asked mildly.

“Huh?” Tobias said, looking up from the tablet where he was going through the personnel files for one of the Trust’s shell companies. “Derek’s here?”

“Yuht,” Gibbs said. “Guy at Security says he’s pretty set on seein’ you.”

“Oh!” squeaked Garcia, and Tony realized that the technical analyst’s empathic profile was trembling with embarrassed realization.

“Garcia?” Tony asked gently. “Do you have some idea why Agent Morgan is paying calls this early in the day?”

“N-no!” Garcia stammered. “I mean, I— I may have left him a voicemail after I left Bolling last night, but…”

“Aw, shit,” Fornell said.

Tony dropped his face into his hand. He had a pretty good idea how the other guide would have reacted to that message.

“Problem?” Gibbs asked mildly.

“You could say that,” Fornell said dryly. “Gibbs, I think we’re gonna have to deal with this before Derek decides to mount a one-man offensive against the Department of Defense.”

“Uhuh,” Gibbs said “Why would he do that?”

“We let his Bodacious Goddess of All Things Technical watch us getting down and dirty last night and we didn’t invite him,” Tony answered. “I imagine he’s a little miffed. You want backup, Fornell?”


Tony stood up and followed Fornell up the stairs.

“You know this is insane,” he commented as they passed through the door into the second level.
“A man will do crazy things for love,” Fornell replied.

“I don’t get it,” Tony confessed as they passed through the next security door and entered HERA’s waiting room.

Fornell snorted in disbelief and Tony threw himself into a chair with just a hint of petulance.

“Hell, kid, you of all people should understand this,” he said. “I’ve seen you ready to go to war for Gibbs, and it doesn’t take a guide to know you’d burn the world for O’Neill.”

“I— that— Fornell!” Tony protested incoherently.

“You gonna deny it?” Fornell dared.

“That’s not what I meant!” Tony spluttered. “I was talking about the whole star-crossed lovers thing. I just don’t get how he can just… stay in limbo like that.”

“Ah,” Fornell said, grimacing. “Yeah, I see your point. You gotta understand, Derek awakened young— ugly business, from what I hear— and the pride was real protective of him. He’s been involved in the community since he was a kid, so he’s pretty invested in the whole bonding culture. Imagine it’s hard to give up the idea of finding his sentinel, even if he’d rather have Garcia.”

Tony winced. He didn’t know all the reasons a guide might awaken before reaching adulthood— nobody did— but the ones he did know were not good. The three most common triggers were war, an abusive parent, and exposure to a paedophile.

Not pleasant.

“Course, this mess Aaron’s got himself into probably isn’t helping,” Fornell mused. “Come to think of it, the whole BAU is kinda fucked up right now.”

At that point, the door to the hallway buzzed open and the security guard ushered in 6’1” of pissed off federal guide.

“You son of a bitch!” Morgan roared and, before anybody could react, he stepped forward and punched Fornell square in the jaw.

“Holy shit!” Tony yelped, leaping to his feet and diving forward to help the security guard restrain the out-of-control agent.

“Fuck me,” Fornell groaned. “That hurt!”

“Yeah it hurt, you bastard!” Morgan yelled, straining against Tony and the security guard. “I should kill you for what you did!”

“Whoa, hey!” Tony said, wincing at the force of the other guide’s hurt, anger, and creeping desperation. “Derek, buddy, take it easy.”

“Fuck you!” Morgan screamed. “I trusted him with her! I trusted him to have her back, and he let her— he— you fucking bastard!”

Tony could feel the other guide’s psionic field surging, powered by his hurt and anger, to the point where even the mundane security guard was starting to feel the effects.

“Agent Morgan!” Tony barked, abandoning the nice-guy approach and forcibly surrounding the wounded guide with his own psionic field before he could hurt the guard or Fornell empathically.
“Calm down, now, before I have to calm you down!”

Morgan stopped struggling, and the anger bled abruptly into despair.

“I trusted him,” he repeated, his voice vibrating with hurt. “I trusted him!”

Fornell had regained his feet by this time. With a grimace, he jerked his head at the guard, who looked dubious, but relinquished his hold on Morgan’s other arm and left the room. Tony didn’t think Morgan was going to go for Fornell again, but he kept ahold of him just in case.

Fornell looked up at Morgan ruefully and rubbed his jaw.

“Damn, kid,” he said. “You pack a hell of a punch.”

“Why?” Morgan asked the older guide. “Why did you let her do something like that? She’s a tech, not a soldier. She shouldn’t have been there!”

“Because it was her choice,” Fornell said.

Morgan made a wounded sound, and Tony gasped as the other guide’s psionic field… cracked. It felt like what had happened with Harm and A.J., only worse, because then his psionic field had just been synched with Harm’s, whereas right now, he had Morgan inside his shields. Instinctively, Tony pulled on his connection with the Spirit Plane, trying desperately to heal the damage, or at least slap a goddamned band-aid on it.

The effect was unexpected. Fornell went very still, his eyes sliding out of focus, and Morgan lost his balance, crashing abruptly and unceremoniously to his knees. Tony let go in a hurry, before the bigger man could drag him down with him.

“I’m a guide!” Morgan blurted out. “I love Penelope, and I’m a guide. I can’t— I don’t— what the fuck do I do? Please, tell me what to do.”

“What the fuck?” Tony said, fighting down panic at this unexpected turn of events.

“What the fuck?” Morgan pleaded.

“Fuck!” Tony said. “Fornell, what do I do?”

Fornell blinked and shook himself, refocusing his eyes with difficulty.

“How the fuck should I know?” he growled. “This is serious fucking shit. Like, Sandburg-level mysticism.”

“Well, I can’t lay my hands on the fucking Alpha Prime of North America right now!” Tony snapped.

“Call your Spirit Animal then!” Fornell said, throwing his arms up in exasperation. “Guiding you through the metaphysical shit is supposed to be his job, so tell him to get his furry ass down here and earn his Spirit Kibble!”

“Good point,” Tony said. “Wiley!”

The big coyote appeared beside Tony and immediately ran to Morgan, whining with worry. Morgan made a hurt sound and then, to Tony’s shock and consternation, lurched forward and threw his arms around the coyote, burying his face in Wiley’s brindled fur. Wiley whined again, but began licking the back of Morgan’s neck—the only skin he could reach.
“Jesus,” Tony said weakly. “Okay, Wiley, what the fuck am I supposed to do here?”

Wiley lifted his head and gave Tony the look he used when Tony was asking questions he already knew the answer to.

“What the hell?” Tony demanded. “I don’t know—”

Then he stopped. Because he had enough experience with Spirit Animals at this point to know that they were usually pretty literal, but also maddeningly obscure at the same time.

Okay, he thought, I asked what to do, he told me I already know. I don’t know, so…

I must not be thinking about this the right way.

Tony took a deep breath, got down on his knees, and let himself slip into a light meditative trance. As soon as his brain wasn’t quite so caught up in its own nonsense, the answer became clear: Morgan needed guidance, the Spirit Plane was where sentinels and guides went for guidance, ergo, he needed to connect Morgan to the Spirit Plane.

Tony took a deep breath, and pulled.

He pretty much expected to end up on the Spirit Plane, but that didn’t happen. Instead… Well, the best way to describe it was, the Spirit Plane came to him.

“Choose,” he said, and then frowned, wondering how the fuck that word had come out of his mouth, since he sure as hell hadn’t put it there.

Fornell and Morgan both looked at him, blinking stupidly.

“Choose,” Tony repeated, trying like hell not to freak out at the feeling of being on a ride-along in his own body. “The crossroads is a magical place, but only because you have to pass through it in the present to get to any of your potential futures. If you sit down in the intersection and set up camp, the future can’t happen. Poof! No more potential, no more magic. So choose.”

And, okay, where the hell had that come from? Maybe he shouldn’t have binge-watched all those episodes of Angel when he was on sick leave after the plague. He was starting to sound like a Joss Whedon extra.

“I… can’t,” Morgan said, holding tighter to Wiley.

“You have to,” Tony said, and now he felt more like him again, because this was the kind of argument he was used to: taking run after run at a brick wall until he found a way over, under, around, or through the fucker.

“I can’t— I can’t lose her,” Morgan admitted painfully.

“Then choose her,” Tony said.

“But… my sentinel… when I meet them— I can’t be like Hotch, I can’t,” Morgan said, burying his face in Wiley’s fur again.

“Then let her go,” Tony said, and then, because Morgan still looked lost even though whatever was using his voice seemed to have had its say, he continued on his own initiative: “Look, I don’t think there’s a magical perfect solution here, man. Whichever choice you make, there will be problems, there will be regrets. But you can’t stay like this forever. You punched another guide in the face
for no reason, man. I mean, it was Fornell, so I can totally understand the urge, but c’mon, that’s not healthy.”

Fornell made an exasperated sound and Tony got the distinct impression that the older man didn’t think much of his comforting technique. He flopped down on the floor facing them and fixed his eyes on Morgan.

“Kid. I’m gonna tell you a really brutal fact of life,” he said. “Sentinels need us. We don’t need them. Sure, Mother Nature’s put together a really nice benefits package for bonded guides— the boost DiNuzto got just from an accord with O’Neill is ridiculous— but we can get along just fine all on our lonesome. That’s one of the reasons there’s more guides than sentinels: because some of us come to the conclusion that all the extra psionic power in the world is not worth having to put up with being bonded to one of those needy little bastards. If it weren’t for the Spirit Plane balancing things out, the sentinels would be screwed. So you don’t need to worry about ending up like Hotch. If you choose Garcia, you won’t run into your sentinel some day down the line, because you won’t have a sentinel. Current wisdom is, if you opt out, the Spirit Plane has already made sure there’s another guide to take your place.”

“I’m not— I don’t— I’d be a good guide,” Morgan said.

“You are a good guide, kid,” Fornell said. “Question is, do you want to be a bonded guide?”

“It’s what I’ve always planned on,” Morgan said, “Ever since I was a kid.”

“And Garcia?” Fornell asked. “D’you want the bond more than you want her?”

Morgan closed his eyes and clenched his fingers convulsively around Wiley’s fur.

“I— fuck!” he said raggedly. “No! No, I don’t.”

“Well then,” Fornell said, “If I were you, I’d be thinking about where I wanted take her out to dinner tonight. And maybe heading down to the Center one of these days and getting signed up with their emergency response program. There’s a lot of emergency cases that can only be handled by an unbonded guide, and the SaGERs get sick of training replacements every few years. Take it from me, they’ll give you more guide work than you can handle.”

Tony felt the psionic energy in the room swell, draw taught… and let go, releasing a flood of relief and warmth. The surge was so powerful, that it knocked all three guides onto their metaphorical asses, and might have knocked them on their literal ones if they hadn’t already been sitting down.

“Okay, what the fuck?” Tony said.

“Ya know, I think you should give Harm a call,” Fornell said fuzzily. “That was not normal.”

“No kidding,” Morgan slurred, sounding drunk.

“Great,” Tony muttered.

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“Okay, so, let me see if I’ve got this right,” Jack said, holding up his fork. “This new gift you’re
coming into is basically the Spirit Plane’s version of Dr. Phil?"

They were sitting facing each other in the back of one of Homeworld’s VIP SUVs, which they had parked near the water on Gravelly Point. They had the table unit folded down and takeout from one of Tony’s favorite Italian restaurants spread out on the surface. Outside the tinted windows, the dark water of the Potomac glittered with the lights from D.C. on the one hand and Ronald Reagan Airport on the other.

It was one of the odder ways to have a date, but Jack found it an enjoyable one—certainly better than sitting in a restaurant and talking about the weather in deference to operational security. Also, with the government plates on the SUV, they could park pretty much anywhere, so they never had to worry about the view.

“Oh, now, come on, that was just unnecessary,” Tony protested, taking a bite of his chicken and parmesan thing.

“No, really,” Jack said, waving the fork around for emphasis, “You’re psionic field is the metaphysical equivalent of a life coach. This is—hilarious.”

“Yeah, I was thinking more ‘horrifying’ myself,” Tony complained. “I so do not want to be involved in other people’s drama. No way, show me the ‘off’ switch!”

Jack snickered.

“Doesn’t work like that, Sigmund,” he said with a certain amount of glee. “Gifts from the Spirit Plane are generally permanent—non-refundable, no takesie-backsies.”

“Well, yeah, but that doesn’t mean you gotta use ‘em all the time,” Tony protested. “Like, seventy percent of our training is figuring out how not to use them when you don’t want to. Or are you saying that all those times I’ve told you to dial down over the past couple months were for nothing?”

“Huh,” Jack said, twirling his fork thoughtfully in the pasta and eggplant and other stuff that should have been disgusting but was actually heavenly. “I don’t think of it like that. For me, ‘off’ is off—as in, not functioning. When I dial down, it’s like…standby.”

“That is—what—you are so weird,” Tony said, shaking his head. “Where the hell do you come up with these things?”

“Eight odd years of dealing with alien tech,” Jack said immediately. “Let me tell you, it’s a whole new world.”

Tony groaned at the pun, but Jack didn’t even pretend to be repentant.

“No, really,” he went on, “Apparently, ‘On/Off’ doesn’t mean the same thing to other races that it does to us. Especially the Ancients. They don’t have an ‘off,’ their stuff is pretty much ‘on’ or ‘broken.’ Ancient tech can sit around inactive for thousands of years, then the right gene carrier touches it, and ‘bam!’ City lights up, drone fires, massive database downloads into your brain—”

“Okay, okay, point taken” Tony said, laughing. “The Ancients are weird. However, here on Earth, we can actually turn our tech off when we don’t want to use it. We can even unplug it and shove it in a cupboard if we want to. Like that Keurig monstrosity that I don’t know why you have.”

“Hey,” Jack said, making a show of taking great offense, even though he actually didn’t give a fuck how they made their coffee so long as it was there when he needed it, “My Keurig is awesome! It’s
not my fault you’re some sort of coffee purist…”

Tony made a frustrated sound and unceremoniously shoved a slice of garlic bread into Jack’s mouth, forcing Jack to chew rather than talk.

“Your Keurig is the tool of the Devil and should be exorcised,” Tony said while Jack worked on the garlic bread.

“Mmrmph,” Jack said. “So,” he went on, once he had taken a sip of sparkling water to clear his mouth, “You want to… ‘unplug’ your new gift and stick it in the cupboard?”

“Ideally, yes,” Tony said. “Besides being my own personal version of hell on Earth, this whole involuntary Mr. Emotional Fix-It thing is kind of a logistical nightmare for a federal agent in a top-secret agency. Not to mention being pretty intrusive and maybe unhealthy. I mean, I’m pretty sure that Harm, A.J., and Agent Morgan didn’t want to just spill all their guts in front of whoever happened to be there, and being metaphysically compels to sort out your shit might do more harm than good. I think Morgan is scarred for life, and I know I am.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said, because what A.J. and Harm had gone through had looked pretty painful, and Tony’s description of Agent Morgan’s experience had sounded even worse. “Does Harm have any ideas?”

Tony made an adorable disgruntled face.

“He’s contacting some phi guides to see if they’ve got any insights, but he already told me we’ll probably be calling Sandburg again,” he said.

“Wow,” Jack said. “You’re pretty much single-handedly keeping the Alpha Prime in business this month, aren’t you?”

“Hey!” Tony said indignantly. “The whole slippy accord thing was both of us!”

Their spirited banter was interrupted— entirely predictably— by Jack’s phone.

“Oh, fer cryin’ out loud,” Jack said. “O’Neill!”

“Sir,” said Paul’s voice, “I just got of the phone with the Commandant of the Marine Corps. Apparently, SecDef briefed him on the Atlantis situation. He was… quite put out.”

“DAMNit!” Jack snarled. “Is Mike insane? We were holding off on briefing McMahon for a reason!”

“I know, sir,” Paul said, his voice pointedly neutral. “I already took the liberty of expressing your displeasure to Secretary Bolt. However, the fact remains that General McMahon has been apprised of the situation and is very unhappy. I know that you and Agent DiNozzo are off for the evening, but do you think you could see your way to visiting him briefly on your way home?”

“Oh no,” Jack said. “Absolutely not.”

Forty-five minutes later, he was pulling the SUV into the driveway of General McMahon’s house, getting out, and ringing the doorbell. After about seventy seconds, McMahon yanked open the door and glared at Jack malevolently.

“General,” he growled.
“Commandant,” Jack returned.

“Hi there!” Tony said brightly.

He and McMahon had met three weeks ago at a briefing and Tony had taken an immediate and violent dislike to the guy, which was entirely unsurprising, because most people did. Jack hadn’t cared to wonder how McMahon felt about Tony, but right now, he smelled like he didn’t care for either of them very much either.

“DiNozzo,” McMahon said. “What the fuck are you both doing here?”

“Paul sent us,” Tony said. “Seemed to think you needed company for a nightcap?”

“Jesus,” McMahon growled. “Is everyone Colonel Davis’s bitch these days?”

“If they’re smart?” Tony said, shrugging and offering the man a dazzling smile. “Absolutely.”

“Oh for— get the fuck in here!” McMahon snarled, yanking the door wide.

Despite the lack of actual physical contact, Jack had the distinct sensation of being frogmarched down the hall and into the General’s study. He and Tony took a seat on the leather sofa, McMahon poured them each a whiskey, then flung himself into his massive chair in an obvious fit of temper.

“What the ever-loving fuck are you doing with my men, General?” he demanded, taking a gulp of the amber liquid in his glass and glaring at Jack like the sentinel had personally defaced his Hummer.

“Well,” Jack said cautiously, “I’m trying to defend Earth from known off-world threats, figure out what the hell else is out there that might want a piece of us, and, ideally, find and identify new knowledge and technology that could benefit us. But you know this, General, so I have to assume you’re asking something more specific here.”

“Atlantis, Jack,” McMahon said. “I want to know what my men are doing on Atlantis. Because right now, it seems like you just stuck them out there to bend over and take it from any pansy-assed alien who feels like fucking with them.”

Jack winced, both at McMahon’s crude turn of phrase and at the validity of his observation.

“You know our mission objectives with Atlantis, General,” he said.

“Oh, I do,” McMahon said. “I also know that they should have been tossed on the fucking scrap heap the minute we got the report that Sumner had gotten the life sucked out of him by an alien race that wants to find Earth and eat everyone on it.”

Jack cleared his throat.

“I’m— sorry about Sumner,” he said awkwardly. “He was— a good man.”

“No, he wasn’t, and don’t pretend you didn’t hate his guts,” McMahon said irritably.

Jack laughed ruefully, because it was true. Sumner had been an asshole with a massive stick shoved up it, and Jack had been secretly ecstatic to send him to another galaxy when the opportunity presented itself. But he still hadn’t deserved to die that way.

“Okay, so I admit, he wasn’t my favorite person,” Jack admitted. “What are you trying to say here, General?”
“What I’m trying to say is, my men are out in Pegasus dying for no fucking reason,” McMahon said. “Jack, either this is a scientific expedition, in which case the IOA should be providing its own goddamned security and my guys should be kicking ass in the Middle East, or it’s a war zone and we should be giving them the resources and the command structure to actually fight a war.”

“Okay, so this actually doesn’t have anything to do with the attempt to blow the city up?” Jack asked, just to confirm.

“Hell no,” McMahon said. “That is just the icing on the fucking cake. I want to know why in the hell I should keep sending my men out there.”

“Because if you don’t, we’ll have to let Russian and Chinese military into the program to act as security, and neither of us want that,” Jack answered. “We also have to face the fact that, right now, Atlantis is our only real line of defense against the Wraith.”

“Then you need to get your shit together, General,” McMahon said. “You haven’t staffed or supplied the city to actually go up against the Wraith, and your command structure is a goddamned travesty. For God’s sake, your expedition leader is a woman, and your CO is a flyboy whose jacket would have gotten him court martialed if he wasn’t a sentinel.”

“Wow,” Tony commented, leaning back in his seat and crossing his legs, “We’re just hating on all the demographics here, aren’t we? Anybody else we can disrespect while we’re at it? Asexuals? African-Americans? Disabled people?”

McMahon turned to Tony, his eyes narrowing a little.

“Cocky little shit, aren’t you?” he said.

“You have no idea,” Tony said, crossing his hands behind his head and smirking.

McMahon’s mouth quirked reluctantly to one side before he could stop it, but he didn’t let it distract him for long.

“Look, I don’t care about your PC bullcrap,” he said. “I don’t think a woman has any business in a command position, but that’s not the issue. Weir is a civilian. She should not be making military decisions, but Sheppard has no leverage to stop her. With that shit he pulled in Afghanistan, he shouldn’t even have the rank he does, never mind a command, but Weir got him both, and now she’s got him by the balls. It’s fucked up, Jack, and I don’t like having my men in the middle of it.”

Jack let out a wordless sound of frustration. He didn’t much like the CMC, and the man’s blatant bigotry was grating at the best of times, so it really sucked monkey balls that he actually had a point under all his bluster and prejudice. Oh, not about Sheppard, Sheppard had earned his promotion and his command, and his continuing heroics in Pegasus meant that he had lots and lots of friends in high places these days (although oddly enough, the CMC did not happen to be among them). No, what he was right about was Weir and her complete lack of tactical acumen. Which, she was a diplomat, not a soldier, so it wasn’t a surprise, it was just idiotic that she technically had command over the military on Atlantis. Not to mention maddening, because it gave men like McMahon ammunition for their sexist bullshit, which made life more difficult for female officers like Sam.

Fucking IOA.

“So, just to clarify, what I’m hearing here is, you want me to set up a meeting between you and the IOA so that you can kick their asses?” Jack asked, choosing the high road and channelling all his
ire in a productive direction. “Because frankly, General, nothing would give me more pleasure.”

McMahon blinked and frowned, momentarily wrongfooted in his righteous rant.

“What the fuck does the IOA have to do with it?” he asked.

“Well, the Atlantis Mission is under their command and is operating by their charter,” Jack said. “Since the beginning, they’ve been pretty insistent that this is a civilian expedition, so they’ve been very keen to limit the military’s role— hence, putting the military under Weir’s authority.”

“Which should have been overturned the minute they discovered a galactic-level threat in Pegasus,” McMahon said.

“Well, unfortunately, nobody— including your predecessor, who approved the Charter before agreeing to supply the Marines— thought to put that provision in,” Jack said, “And now, with China and Russia in a snit about American dominance in the program, the IOA would block any amendments just on principle. The last thing they want is for the American military to be given any more authority in Pegasus, even if it means leaving the entire expedition at the mercy of the Wraith.”

McMahon’s eyes bulged a little.

“Why the hell are you putting up with these clowns, O’Neill?” he demanded.

Jack sighed.

“Short answer?” he said. “Because the president ordered me to. Long answer, I’m pretty much biding my time and waiting for the politicians to grind through their process and realize that we need to either cut our losses in Pegasus or commit to establishing an actual colony there. At which point, I can make a case for Pegasus being its own theater of war. Then they can keep their civilian-led expedition and their civilian-governed city while I send in troops— and B-304s and F-302s— under Homeworld’s command and establish a base on Atlantis under the same rules we use for our overseas bases on Earth.”

“But in the meantime, my men get to just sit there playing targets in pin-the-Wraith-on-the-Marine,” McMahon said sourly.

Jack grimaced and took a sip of whiskey.

“Politics is an ugly business,” he said.

“Can you at least pull that insubordinate fuck who got his command by shooting his commanding officer in the head and put a decent CO in his place?” McMahon asked.

Jack bristled, but forced himself not to snap.

“I think you should talk to Dillon Everett before you start shooting your mouth about what Sheppard did for Sumner,” he said coldly. “A Wraith ever gets ahold of me, I’ll be praying for someone to do the same thing. But that aside, Sheppard’s track record in Pegasus is pretty impressive. Considering that, as you say, we’ve given him pretty much nothing to work with, the fact that he’s managed to keep the expedition alive and operational for almost two years is damn near miraculous. Not to mention, contrary to what you seem to think, he has no problem telling Weir to fuck off when he really needs to. Even better, his status as a sentinel protects him from the consequences another officer might face for violating the chain of command, which means the IOA can’t do anything about it. Frankly, I’d be a fool to replace him.”
“Fucking sentinels,” McMahon growled. “They have no business in the chain of command in the first place if they can get off scot free for violating it any old time they like.”

Jack raised his eyebrows in disbelief and Tony choked, but McMahon just glowered, completely unapologetic. Jack had to admire the man’s absolute lack of give-a-fuck, even while he contemplated how fun it would be to punch him in the face.

“Wow, there’s just no pleasing some people,” Tony said, shaking his head. “Personally, I like to think that the liberties afforded sentinels and guides help mitigate imperfections in the chain of command—like the problem with Weir, for instance. I mean, I’ve never served in the military, but as a cop, I’ve seen a lot of bad shit that got stopped because one of the sentinels or guides in the department exercised the leeway they had under the Union charter in order to call out a superior for corruption or bad decisions. It’s gotta be even more important in the military, since your chain of command is so much more rigid. I mean, in a perfect world, soldiers would only obey lawful orders, but in the real world, it doesn’t really work like that, does it?”

He smiled at the CMC, displaying entirely too many teeth to be completely friendly.

McMahon went slightly purple.

“In a perfect world, your sentinel would be tanning your insolent ass for disrespect right now, you jumped up rent boy,” he all but spat.

Jack stiffened, his hand tightening on the glass in his hand and his chest starting to rumble without his conscious permission. Tony, however, laughed and laid a calming hand on the back of Jack’s neck.

“Well, I wouldn’t be opposed to that plan, per se, but I don’t think it would have quite the effect you’re looking for,” he drawled. “If ya know what I mean.”

He gave the CMC an exaggeratedly filthy wink.

McMahon made an inarticulate sound.

“Okay, we’re done,” he said. “Get the fuck out of my house before I forget the oath that goes with the uniform.”

“Too late for that,” Jack snarled.

“With pleasure,” Tony said smoothly.

They left before Jack could earn himself a scolding from the president for breaking the Commandant of the Marine Corps’s jaw, and Jack ended up giving the keys to Tony so he didn’t inadvertently take out his righteous wrath on some unsuspecting D.C motorist.

“Wow,” Tony said once they were about ten minutes out from McMahon’s house, “Just when I thought I couldn’t hate that guy any more.”

“And just think, he’s one of the good guys,” Jack sneered.

He had managed to calm down a little, enough to channel his rage into biting satire rather than wholesale destruction.

“How the hell did he make General with that kind of attitude towards sentinels and guides?” Tony asked. “Never mind becoming Commandant of the Marine Corps. I mean, I could feel his contempt
and— *disgust* from the minute I met him. You can’t tell me the guides under his command couldn’t feel it too?"

“Because there is a small, but pretty vocal faction that doesn’t like having sentinels and guides in the ranks,” Jack said. “They want a factory-issue military where all the pieces are the same and everything does what it’s told and nothing else. They would like to push all of the gifted personnel into special S&G units with little or no contact with the rest of the armed forces and turn the bulk of the military into their own personal collection of lead soldiers.”

“For fuck’s sake,” Tony said. “They’re basically coming out and saying, ‘hey, we’re corrupt, prejudiced assholes who have no business in command, so we want to make a military where no one can question us.’ How is anybody okay with that?”

“That is why they are a *small*, but vocal minority,” Jack said with a sour twist of his mouth. “However, they have enough traction that, with the right amount of luck and favors, a man like McMahon can occasionally slip through spouting the same bullshit that torpedoed the careers of fifty other officers just like him.”

“I think we need to give serious thought to the idea of a new branch of the military dedicated specifically to offworld combat,” Tony said. “It is a fucking *joke* that you have to answer to a bigoted toad would rather fight a war for oil than *save the planet*. I know we can’t get rid of every narrow-minded asshole in the armed services, but the planet’s safety should *not* depend on him in any way, shape, or form.”

“It’s— complicated,” Jack said, grimacing. “Right now, with the program being a secret, we can’t really recruit properly, and the existing branches would be a little miffed if we started just stealing their personnel. They put a lot of money into training their assets, especially the ones we’d be interested in. That said, I think Paul has extensive files on how to structure and administer a dedicated offworld force once we figure out how to do it.”

“I’ll have to talk to him,” Tony said. “There has to be a way to do it without declassifying the program, because this is *unacceptable*.”

Jack laughed, relaxing a little.

“Good luck,” he said.

He gave it a year before Tony and Paul had their very own Space Force up and running. Which, oh, *crap*, would mean he needed yet another experienced officer to head it up, when he already didn’t have enough to go around.

“You know, it’s things like this that make me wonder if the world *deserves* saving,” Tony went on. “Not, I mean, not seriously, but just— fuck, you know? We’re busting our asses so that guys like McMahon can go on being assholes in a Trust-free world that they’re too mean and prejudiced to even appreciate.”

“You can do whatever you like,” Jack said, “But I am *not* saving the world for that piece of shit. I’m saving it for everyone else, but not for him. *Specifically* not for him.”

Tony laughed, the tension bleeding out of his shoulders.

“You’re kinda perfect,” he told Jack, still laughing.

“So’re you,” Jack said.
He was still angry, but he felt better about it now. And there were some interesting things that could be done with anger…

Beside him, Tony sat up sharply and drew in his breath, catching the first wave of pissed-off lust rising up through the bond. Jack didn’t know if it was a sentinel thing, a soldier thing, or a Jack thing, but he’d always had the ability to turn the urge to fight into the urge to fuck with comparative ease— although usually, the two urges did not share a common target.

“Okay, this is interesting,” Tony remarked, and Jack’s sentinel sight caught the flush of blood in his cheeks and the dilation of his pupils, even in the relative darkness of the car.

By the time they got back to Tony’s apartment, both of them were rock hard and impatient as hell. They crashed through the door, pausing only momentarily to lock it behind them, and then lurched towards the bedroom, shedding clothes as they went. Jack’s hands were hard and demanding as they ran over Tony’s smooth, muscular body, and Tony’s were fiendish, finding Jack’s sensitive spots with ruthless efficiency. They tumbled onto the bed, mouths locked in a hard kiss, and Jack rolled them so that his was pinning Tony, his guides wrists gripped in his hands.

Unlike normal, however, Tony did not immediately submit. He fought Jack’s grip and his mouth, nipping at Jack’s lips and twisting his wrists against Jack’s hands. Jack pulled back, alarmed.

“You alright?” he asked, relaxing his hands almost reflexively.

Tony looked up at him, green eyes alight with arousal and mischief.

“Absolutely,” he said. “Just mixing things up. I’m not just gonna kneel down and open my mouth whenever you want me to, ya know: sometimes, you’re gonna have to work for it.”

“Shit,” Jack hissed.

That was… incredibly hot. He let out a wordless snarl and lowered his head to kiss Tony mercilessly, tightening his hands again. Tony gasped and moaned, but didn’t give in. He kissed back just as hard, his strong, lean body struggling under Jack’s in a way that was less about getting away— Tony was a trained federal agent, not to mention having approximately fifteen pounds on Jack, and while he might not be able to match the sentinel’s strength or the special forces training on the mat, he could have gotten away if he wanted to— and more about driving Jack crazy.

It was definitely working.

There followed several long, heated minutes of harsh kisses and grappling limbs, and Jack found the urge to finally give in and fuck his guide growing stronger by the minute. He knew he had to resist, not because of the op, fuck the op, but because it was important to him they when they bonded, it was something they had both agreed to beforehand, not some spur-of-the-moment impulse fueled by adrenaline and hormones. However, he couldn’t fight the urge altogether, so, after slicking up two fingers with his own saliva— not the best lubricant, but better than nothing— he executed a quick roll to get Tony on his stomach and, before his guide had a chance to do anything, slid the spit-slick fingers into him.

Tony screamed and arched under Jack, his body seizing around the fingers that had been so abruptly shoved inside him. Jack would have been worried that he’d hurt Tony, but they’d fooled around enough for him to know what his guide’s body could and could not take. Tony shuddered and moaned, then went limp, yielding to Jack’s demands as sweetly and eagerly as the sentinel could ever have hoped for.
“Ah! God!” Tony whimpered. “Jack! Oh—”

“That feel good, Tony?” Jack growled in his ear. “You like that?”

He twisted his fingers, seeking his guide’s sweet spot, and was rewarded with a high-pitched squeal.

“Yesyesyesyes,” Tony babbled. “Please, Jack, don’t stop, please—!”

“Shhh,” Jack murmured, pulling his fingers back and pushing them in again. “I’ve got you. Not gonna stop, baby.”


“That’s it,” Jack said. “Can you come like this, Tony? Can you come on just my fingers?”

“Oh, oh, oh, oh,” Tony whimpered, thrusting back helplessly against Jack’s hand. “Yes! Aaahhh, fuck! Yes, I can come— I can come like this. Please, Jack! Please make me come.”

Jack growled, and proceeded to do just that. Tony continued to whimper and moan, and it was so fucking hot that Jack almost came just from listening to the noises he was making. Finally, when he could feel Tony getting close, he shifted so that he was sitting up, straddling Tony’s thighs, and used his free hand to jerk himself off while still thrusting into Tony with the other one.

Tony’s cries took on an edge of desperation, and then he was coming all over the bed. Jack let out a hiss and let go, coating his guide’s ass and lower back, which should have been gross, but in the moment, was supremely satisfying.
Ultimate Strength

Chapter Notes

Ultimate Strength: the maximum amount of stress that a given material can be subjected to without breaking.

“Alright, listen up,” Gibbs said, looking around HERA’s conference table. “Wheels up in one hour, so we’re officially startin’ the clock.” Gibbs picked up a stack of folders and passed them to Tony, who took one and handed the pile off to Sam, “This is the info that Garcia and Eppes put together. It’s got the timetable we worked out last night, plus the mission specs and the op intel. It’s also got our new call signs.”

Tony, curiosity aroused, flipped immediately to the page with their call signs. Gibbs had promised him they would get non-generic code names after the takedown of the NID field office, but Tony was excited and touched that he had actually made it happen.

The sheet had HERA’s new logo top center with Endless Love’s specs listed below it. Then, under the heading “Call Signs,” were their names and their new field designations:

“Agent L. J. Gibbs…………… ‘Boss’
Agent A. D. DiNozzo………… ‘Trickster’
Major General J. O’Neill…….. ‘Sleeper’
Agent T. C. Fornell……………. ‘Brock’
Lt. Colonel S. Carter………… ‘Dorothy’
Agent I. Edgerton…………….. ‘Death’
Agent D. S. Rossi…………….. ‘Percival’
Agent S. A. Bristow……….. ‘Phoenix’
Analyst P. G. Garcia………… ‘Goddess’
Dr. C. E. Eppes…………….. ‘Professor’”

Tony couldn’t help it, he burst out laughing.

“Something you wanna add, DiNozzo?” Gibbs asked.

“Nothing,” Tony said, smirking, “Boss.”

Gibbs reached over and delivered a— very gentle and, Tony thought, rather affectionate— headslap.

“Good,” Gibbs grunted. “DiNozzo, you’re coordinating. Everything that happens, it goes through you. Bristow, Rossi, Senator Weaver and his team are in Mississippi this week meetin’ with his
campaign team, so you’re headin’ to Jackson. Carter, Edgerton, you’re goin’ with Fornell and me to New York. You’ll take Holloway, we’ll take Wyjec. Once we’ve got ‘em in lockdown, we move on to the next set of targets. Any questions?”

The briefing was short, more for form’s sake than because anybody at the table didn’t know—in exhaustive detail, after spending almost fourteen hours the day before planning the op—exactly what they were doing. Afterwards, Tony fell into step with Gibbs heading downstairs to their shared office.

“So,” he asked, “Where exactly did you come up with those call signs?”

“Davis,” Gibbs said. “He did some digging, I guess, plus played back the tape of the op out at Fairfax Circle—came up with names he was fairly sure everybody’d answer to. Team’s new, and not all of ‘em have worked covert ops, so he didn’t want anybody to get mixed up out in the field.”

“I’ll have to ask him what he found,” Tony said. “I’d love to know why Sam is ‘Dorothy,’ and Ian as ‘Death’? C’mon, that’s priceless. I’ve got this image in my head of him as Keanu Reeves in _The Matrix_, with the guns and the black trench coat, doing the slow-motion hero walk while Ralph Stanley sings that song from _O Brother Where Art Thou?_ in the background. You know,” Tony cleared his throat and sang slightly off key, “O-oh Death, O-oh Death, O-oh Death, Won’t you spare me over for another year?”

Gibbs looked over at him and raised an eyebrow, but his mouth had quirked to one side.

“Ya done, DiNozzo?” he asked, his voice vibrating with unuttered laughter.

Tony preened a little, grinning madly. His body was loose and relaxed from a night of really great sex, his psionic field was humming with contentment and power from his accord with Jack, and he’d just made Gibbs laugh (or as good as, anyways).

All was right with the world.

He should, he realized two hours later, have realized right then that everything was about to go to hell.

He was sitting on the couch in Jack’s office with his laptop, skimming rapidly through the daily briefs from the SGC and Area 51, looking for anything obviously and glaringly wrong, when Jack’s cell rang. A second later, his own cell started ringing too, and he exchanged a look with his sentinel before pulling the phone out and looking at the window. It read “Incoming Call: Harm.”

“Harm,” he told Jack.

“A.J.,” Jack returned. “This can’t be good.”

Jack flipped open his phone, and Tony did likewise.

“Yeah,” he said.

“Tony,” Harm said, his voice sober, “We need you to come down to A.J.’s office right away.”

Shit, Tony thought. This really can’t be good.

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“This… can’t be happening,” Tony said weakly.

Jack clenched his teeth. His guide’s voice was higher than normal and every part of his body was broadcasting his distress. Jack wanted to hit someone for upsetting his guide, but there was no one to hit.

It was a goddamned nightmare.

“This is legal?” Jack asked, his voice low.

In his hand, the thick sheaf of court documents crinkled a little in his clenching fingers.

“Well, that’s the thing,” A.J. said soberly. “Right at the moment, the Aronsons’ attorney is dancing around in a gray area, so until it gets in front of a judge, it’s neither legal, nor illegal. What I do know is, even if what they’re doing is not technically illegal as of now, it’s going to be illegal by the time this is all over. Blair is pretty unhappy, and Jim is spittin’ nails.”

Jack stared down the paper, his eyes flicking across the words and phrases: “Summons,” “Hearing,” “Preliminary Injunction,” “Motion to compel Guide Anthony D. DiNozzo, Jr. to delay bonding to any sentinel, including, but not limited to, Sentinel Jonathan O’Neill, until the case of Aronson vs. Chegwidden has been settled in a court of law.”

“How the hell did they find a judge who would sign off on this?” Jack growled.

“Theyir lawyer is clever,” Harm said, pointing to the name of the Aronsons’ attorney, one Rita Calhoun of Manhattan (apparently, the Aronsons had gone all out and hired a Big Apple attorney instead of going local). “Like A.J. said, she’s playing around in a gray area. First, she’s worded it as ‘delay,’ not ‘prevent,’ which is definitely against the spirit of the law, but not the letter. Second, this injunction isn’t technically against Tony. She’s contending that, as a member of A.J.’s pride, Tony is legally identified with A.J., so he can be bound by a motion relating to A.J.’s case. It amounts to the same thing, but creates enough of a distinction to at least get the case in front of a judge.”

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“How the hell did they find a judge who would sign off on this?” Jack demanded. “Can they actually get a judge to tell us we can’t bond until this lawsuit is settled?”

A.J. smiled coldly.

“No,” he said.

“They could, theoretically, win the hearing,” Harm amplified. “But, even if they did, they can’t actually enforce the injunction without Blair and Jim’s cooperation. Which they won’t give. Besides, I’m pretty sure that, even though the injunction itself doesn’t fall under bond interference, enforcing it would. The injunction merely asks for a delay, but to prosecute you for bonding while it was in effect would fall under ‘deny’ and ‘disallow.’ It’s actually a fascinating legal problem.”

Jack was not at all interested in fascinating legal problems. He was far too preoccupied with the need to eliminate the threat to his guide and their bond with extreme prejudice.

“If it can’t be enforced, why the hell did they bother?” he asked testily.

“We talked about this last time,” A.J. said. “It’s a million-to-one shot, but the Aronsons are desperate and wealthy and, apparently, willing to go to extreme lengths for an outside chance of
getting Tony to bond with their son. And, while they don’t have a legal leg to stand on, there’s always the chance that just making the motion would be enough. A lot of people give in rather than going to court, even if they’re guaranteed to win, and the Alpha Primes are busy men. Might lose track of this kinda thing.”

Jack let out a wordless growl. Tony’s distress was increasing by the minute, and with it, Jack’s need to do something.

“Right,” he said. “Way I’m hearing this, it sounds like we should just skip over all this crap and get with the bonding so they’ll leave us the hell alone.”

Beside him, Tony’s heart rate increased abruptly, and his scent took on a sour tone.

“It’s your choice, of course,” A.J. said. “I’ll be honest with you, though, it would be better if we took this to court. You two are pretty well protected from this kind of harassment: you’re high-profile, well-connected, have a strong pride, and have secure jobs that pay well. In the end, this is an annoyance for you, albeit a painful one. Other pairs aren’t so lucky. If someone gets the bright idea to try this bullshit on a sentinel and guide who are more vulnerable, it could work. We need to make sure that doesn’t happen, and having a judge’s ruling on this motion would give the Union’s lawyers more ammunition when they bring their case before a congressional committee.”

The sour note in Tony’s scent went abruptly bitter and he bolted to his feet.

“I can’t—!” he said inarticulately, “I— just— I can’t do this!”

“Whoa!” Jack said, standing up. “Tiger, easy now!”

He reached out to pull Tony into his arms, but his guide shook him off.

“No!” Tony cried. “I can’t—! I just… can’t right now. I’m sorry, I— Gettysburg, okay Jack? Fucking Gettysburg!”

And then, to Jack’s surprise and consternation, Tony spun around abruptly and made a dash for the door, detouring slightly so he could scoop up his briefcase before flinging it open and slamming out of the room.

“Shit!” Jack swore.

He stood stupidly in the middle of A.J.’s office, staring after his guide. He had no freaking clue what to do. Every single fiber of his being wanted to chase after Tony, but it seemed like Tony didn’t want company, seeing as he had used his safeword and run out of the room like it was on fire.

“Damn,” A.J. said. “I’m sorry, Jack. I didn’t realize this was gonna be that rough on him.”

“I’m sorry too,” Harm said, running his hands over his face, smelling chagrined. “After last time, I was keeping my psionic field locked down. I— well, I wasn’t all that keen on a repeat of the ‘cracks’ incident, so until we’ve got some answers on Tony’s new gifts, I was— playing it safe. I was being a coward, and I’m sorry. I promise, it won’t happen again.”

“Ah, hell Harm,” Jack said, “I don’t think anybody can blame you. None of us were too wild about that little adventure. Anyways, I’m his sentinel, if anyone should have realized he’d reached his limit, it should have been me. Damnit!”

A.J. blew out a discouraged breath.
“I think I should also take some of the blame here,” he said. “I’m pretty invested in the big picture on this one. I was being a lawyer, not an Alpha. Jack, you and Tony need to do whatever is best for you. If that’s bonding now, go for it. I’m kicking this whole mess up to Blair and Jim anyways, except for the actual lawsuit, which Shirley is handling, so I won’t even have to deal with the fallout. If you decide to go to court, the hearing is in 3 days— Ms. Calhoun very helpfully fast-tracked the whole thing, which saves us the trouble.”

“Thanks A.J.,” Jack sighed. “Now, if I can just figure out what to do with Tony, everything’ll be just peachy.”

***

“Negative Boss,” Tony said into his headset. “Percival and Phoenix have a go, but apparently, Dorothy and Death’s guy decided he wanted to party tonight. We’re on standby until they can get to him without attracting attention.”

That was the key at this stage of the op: no witnesses. Nobody who could alert the Trust, either on purpose or inadvertently, that their starting line-up had been taken out. Nope, the arrests had to be quick and quiet, hence, the delay while Holloway went out for a drink with his coworkers.

Tony leaned back in the crappy rolling chair in Homeworld’s on-base office at Andrews AFB and tapped a few keys on his satellite-enabled laptop, taking a moment to be grateful that Garcia had set him up with what amounted to a secure mobile office. Of course, the point had been to allow him to coordinate Endless Love without being chained to HERA’s version of MTAC, not hide from his sentinel, but hey, whatever worked.

“Roger, Trickster,” Gibbs said over the headset. “Standing by.”

There was a click as Gibbs hung up, and Tony sighed. It just figured that all this shit with the lawsuit and the injunction would happen after the team went wheels up. Even though he and Gibbs didn’t have a warm and cuddly relationship, it was still easier to deal with really fucked up shit with his boss watching his six, and this was really, really fucked up shit.

He’d been managing with the fact that their accord was getting restless, that the Powers that Be (and seriously, that was it, no more Buffy or Angel, he was drawing the line, dammit!) were pushing them towards a full bond whether they were ready or not. It had been tough, but he thought he’d been doing a pretty good job of handling it. But this? This was too much. He had Jake’s parents trying to block him from bonding with Jack on the one hand, Jack wanting to bond right fucking now on the other, and then, as though that weren’t enough, A.J. with yet a third agenda coming in from left field.

How the fuck was this his life?

Tony scowled at his computer, which was displaying the (somewhat shaky) transcript from Colonel Caldwell’s first interview post-desnaking. Nobody on Atlantis had any investigative experience to speak of (and Tony was going to have to rectify that ASAP, because Jesus Christ, how the hell did you have a base as large and as isolated as Atlantis and not realize it needed at least a Agent Afloat, if not a Resident Unit?), but Dr. Weir and Colonel Sheppard had done their best with the notes and had provided a transcript created with a less-than-stellar voice recognition program. Normally, Tony would have been amused to be reading about a snake called Gould who
had tried to blow up Atlas, but tonight, he just wasn’t in the mood. Also not amusing was the fact
that he was going to have to go to the SGC personally to deal with the potential fallout when they
sent Caldwell through the gate. There was a very real possibility that someone would try to
neutralize him the minute he set foot on Earth, because, based on this report, the commander of the
Daedalus had probably been infected inside the SGC, which meant that he potentially had intel on
more compromised personnel the Mountain than their one naive xenobotanist.

Fuck his life, Jack was going to have a cow.

Which, of course, brought him right back to the giant purple elephant in the room, which was, what
the fuck was he going to do about this whole bonding thing?

The hell of it was, before all this, he had thought that he was just about ready. Before the lawsuit,
before the accord getting antsier than an itchy monkey, before this latest disaster with the Trust
and Atlantis, he had been thinking that it was time to take the next step. He’d just been waiting
until he could find a spare hour to sit down and talk to Jack about it.

Now, he didn’t know anymore.

It’s just, Jack had gotten so pushy back in A.J.’s office, unilaterally deciding that they should bond
right away without even asking Tony about it. (Liar! Tony’s rational self whispered quietly in the
back of his mind. That wasn’t pushy, that was defensive. Someone threatened his bond with his
guide, any other beta would have gone feral in that situation. Jack is the most restrained sentinel
on the planet for not losing it completely.) And then A.J. had said they shouldn’t bond before the
hearing, but it had been because it would be better for the Union’s case before Congress if they
went to court, not because Tony didn’t want to. (Do you really not want to? You were ready before.
What changed?) It had reminded Tony of the way he had felt when that counsellor from the
Philadelphia center had come to his apartment and told him that bonding was all about
compromise, but had only been talking about him making compromises: like he didn’t matter in his
own life. (Yeah, but you feel like that all the time, it’s your default setting, for Christ’s sake. You
can’t put that on Jack. Or A.J.) Tony hadn’t been able to handle it, so he’d done what he had to do:
he’d gotten out. (Come on, let’s call it what it is: you ran away. That’s what you do. When the
going gets tough, you disappear.)

Now, he had to decide what the hell he was going to do next.

Did he walk away completely? Quit his job, pack up his DVDs, and hit the road? Or did he give in,
bond with Jack because that was the only way to keep any part of the life he had been building? He
didn’t know. Hell, he didn’t even know where he was going to go tonight. His apartment had
somehow become his and Jack’s apartment, and Jack’s old apartment (which, it turned out, had
been a long-term lease by Homeworld Command) had been given back to Paul to do whatever Paul
did with all the real estate he apparently had control over. He supposed he could crash at Gibbs’s
house— he had a key, and Gibbs wouldn’t mind. But Gibbs’s house held very little appeal without
Gibbs there to drink bourbon with him while not talking. Damn, what good was having a tribe
leader when he wasn’t around when you needed him?

Oh. Well, there was a thought. Gibbs wasn’t here, but it turned out that his tribe was bigger than
just Gibbs. He hadn’t really thought about it before yesterday, but Abby and Ducky were part of
his tribe too (and wasn’t it just an irony that he’d only realized it because of Jack’s thoughtfulness
in reading them in?). Tony took a deep breath and went back to the transcript. When this stage of
the op was over, he’d give Abby a call.
Colonel Yuri Chekov hung up the telephone and leaned back in his chair, staring blindly at the landscape print on the opposite wall of his study. He felt very little guilt for setting the FSB (the KGB in all but name) on the Trust operatives who had managed to remain hidden in his government during the molehunt in 2001. Considering what had happened when he and O’Neill had reluctantly joined forces against the Trust the first time, anyone who was so foolish as to continue to work for the Trust’s interests in Russia deserved exactly what they got.

No, he did not feel guilt, but, rather, weariness. The Trust was beginning to remind him of the mythological beast the hydra: cut off one head and ten more grew in its place. He was also somewhat disgruntled to find himself in the position of fervently hoping for O’Neill’s success in his current endeavors. He did not, after all, like O’Neill, and did not want to have to wish him well. However, he supposed that his pride was a small price to pay if the American general really could rid the world of these pests once and for all.

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Jack paced restlessly back and forth across Tony’s— their?— living room, growling softly to himself. It was almost 10:00 at night, and Tony hadn’t come home. He’d checked with Paul and confirmed that Cordoba-Sanchez, Holloway, and Wyjec were all in HERA custody (the Secret Service, thankfully, had a protocol for containing security breaches that could accommodate HERA’s needs with a minimal amount of tweaking), so he wasn’t still working.

Which meant that he didn’t want to come home.

Which meant that he didn’t want to see Jack.

Which meant that Jack couldn’t see him, which, in their current situation, was driving him insane.

When he had realized that Tony didn’t intend to come back tonight, he had had to make a choice about whether to be angry or terrified. He had chosen anger, because he knew that, if he gave into fear, he would lose his self-control, and he didn’t even want to know what he would do if that happened.

So Jack paced and snarled and focused on how angry he was at Tony, because the alternative was to wonder whether or not Tony was going come back at all, and he couldn’t handle that. He just couldn’t.

So Jack paced.

And snarled.

And didn’t think about what in the world he would do if his guide left him.

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Ducky’s mother’s corgis were going to kill him.

It was embarrassing for a trained federal agent to admit that he was no match for a pack of fawn-and-white canines whose legs barely reached the floor, but there it was: he was going to asphyxiate from a combination of fur and dog saliva, and there was nothing he could do about it.

Tony had never been to Ducky’s house before, so he had never met Ducky’s elderly mother, who had dementia, or Ducky’s elderly mother’s corgis, who barked at everything that moved and then converged on it and tried to lick it to death as soon as it stopped. Tony was pretty sure his suit was never going to be the same, and he was trying really hard not to think about the germs.

When he had called Abby and asked if he could crash at her place for the night, he had expected her to freak out a little— Abby was a romantic, and her respect for the sentinel-guide bond was practically religious. She was never going to take this well. What he hadn’t expected was for his favorite sweet and silly Goth to turn abruptly into General Patton. Somehow, she had mobilized the troops (Ducky and the corgis) and gotten Tony headed to Ducky’s house while he was still wondering what was going on, and now she was in Ducky’s kitchen making tea with the same ferocious energy that she usually devoted to running an analysis on the mass spec. Ducky, meanwhile, was sitting in a frilly armchair across from the couch where Tony was being gently (and wetly) mauled to death, radiating calm and compassion.

Tony was pretty sure that the compassion was not for his current plight, as pitiable as it might be.

“Oh, wow,” Abby said as she came back into the living room carrying a bona fide tea tray. “They really like you, Tony.”

“As I understand it, Anthony’s Spirit Animal is a coyote, which places him with the dogs in the family canidae,” Ducky said. “Studies have shown that animals respond very strongly to sentinels and guides whose Spirit Guides’ species ranks within their taxonomic family or closer. While the response is not necessarily always positive, it is apparently quite pronounced. Fortunately, Mother’s dogs appear to be quite happy to meet the spiritual charge of their metaphysical cousin.”

Tony opened his mouth to say that he could really do without this level of enthusiasm and the most precocious of the corgis— Victoria by name— took the opportunity to lick inside his teeth.

Tony squawked loudly in protest.

Abby laughed delightedly and Ducky hurriedly took a cup of tea so that he could hide his smile behind the rim.

Finally, the dogs decided that they were satisfied and draped themselves on and around Tony, where they promptly fell asleep. Tony accepted the cup of tea that Abby handed him and, despite not particularly liking tea, took a large gulp.

He needed to clear the taste of Victoria’s tongue from his mouth.

“I just got French kissed by a dog whose legs are less than a quarter as long as her overall height,” he said dazedly.

Abby giggled.

“Yeah, and it was really cute,” she said. “Like— so cute I can’t even compute how cute it was.”
Tony let out a little moan and drank more tea.

“Okay,” Abby said, jittering with what Tony suspected was way too much caffeine for this time of night, “What’s going on, Tony? Why are you running away from you super-hot and surprisingly sweet sentinel? Something must be really, really wrong, because I know I only just met him, but he seems, like, the Holy Grail of sentinels. The jackpot. The end of the rainbow. The—”

“Yes, Abigail, I think we understand your point,” Ducky broke in. “Anthony, you are, of course, not obliged to tell us anything, and you are welcome to my guest bed for as long as you may wish with no explanation required, but it is somewhat worrying that you feel unable to return to your own home. I would feel infinitely better if I knew what had prompted this breach in your relationship with your sentinel. As it is, I fear that my imagination is running somewhat wild.”

“Yeah, it must be bad, because like I said, Jack seems, like, perfect, and we need to know if we have to make him disappear,” Abby said earnestly. “It’ll be hard, because Gibbs isn’t here, but I know Ziva would help, and Ducky and I could totally deal with the body.”

Tony’s jaw dropped and he stared at Abby, torn between being horrified that she would so openly plot the murder of his sentinel and touched that she cared enough about his well-being to offer. Then he realized that both Ducky and Abby thought that Jack had done something bad enough to warrant being killed and disappeared.

“No, no, guys,” he fumbled. “It’s— it’s nothing like that! Jesus! Ducky, I might have expected it from you, but Abs, you aren’t supposed to be this bloodthirsty!”

Abby frowned and folded her arms.

“Spill,” she growled.

“Okay, okay,” Tony said. “Jesus! Look, it’s nothing— Jack didn’t do anything bad, okay? He just— okay, fuck, this is harder to explain than I thought. So, a long time ago, when I was still living in Philadelphia, I met another sentinel— Jake. He— at that time, he was a perfect match for me, but I chose not to bond with him because— well, for a lot of reasons, but it kinda boiled down to, I didn’t want anybody telling me what to do with my life, and he tried to tell me what to do with my life. Just— bad luck, or bad timing, or whatever. The point is, we didn’t bond and I moved on. But Jake has Chronic Instability Syndrome, and he hasn’t found any other guide whose compatible— or, fuck, I guess he has, but he wouldn’t consider them… Anyways, he’s… in really bad shape, and his parents, who’re, apparently, wealthier than God or something, have gotten a lawyer and filed a lawsuit against my Alpha Sentinel, saying that him keeping Jake’s pride from harassing me about going to see him counts as bond interference. Which is total bullshit, but they think it’ll get me in a room with Jake… Anyways, today I found out that they’re trying to get an injunction saying that I can’t bond until their lawsuit against A.J. is settled. It’s— with everything else that’s going on, it was just too much.”

“Oh, Tony,” Abby said, her dark eyes going wide and sad. “That’s horrible!”

“I agree with Abigail,” Ducky said, “This is a most trying and unjust situation. However, I fail to see how this connects to your desire to separate yourself from your sentinel. It is my understanding that prospective pairs are predisposed to cling to one another in times of crisis, especially when they feel their bond is under threat.”

“Oh,” Tony said, slumping a little. “Right. Yeah, that…”

He sighed and rubbed his hand disconsolately through the fur on Victoria’s belly, which she had
shamelessly exposed by rolling over on the couch cushion beside him and sticking all four stubby legs into the air.

“He wanted to bond right now,” he admitted. “Harm said we can’t actually be penalized for breaking the injunction, even if it was granted. It’s—one of those weird legal things that make me hate lawyers, even the ones I like. Anyways, when he heard that, Jack just—decided we should bond, didn’t ask or anything. And then A.J. said it would be better if we let the hearing happen, because the Union is going to take this before Congress to make sure it can’t happen again, and… fuck, I don’t know. Either way, it’s not my choice anymore, is it? Bond, don’t bond, wait to bond—any choice I make, someone’s already made it for me.”

He shook his head. Abby made an unhappy little sound and came over to the couch, where she summarily displaced Victoria so she could slide in against Tony’s side and wrap her arms around him. Tony closed his eyes and sank into the warm empathic embrace of her acceptance and love.

Ducky, meanwhile, looked thoughtful.

“In one of Aesop’s lesser-known fables,” he said, causing both Tony and Abby to unconsciously brace themselves for an erudite and possibly baffling digression, “The personified aspects of the Body’s Hands, Mouth, and Teeth take counsel together to air their grievances against the Belly, which, they say, does nothing but consume the food which they do so much work to gather. They resolve to ‘strike off his allowance’ and solemnly swear to give him no more food. Predictably, the Body begins to starve, and the Hands, the Mouth, and the Teeth learn a valuable lesson about the Belly’s humble, but vital contribution to their collective well-being. I am minded of Aesop’s fable here, because I fear that you, Anthony, are in danger of cutting yourself off from something you desperately need because you do not like the particulars of how it happens to function.”

“Aw, Ducky,” Tony whined. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“No, Tony, it does, you know it does,” Abby pleaded.

“A sentinel is not the same as food,” Tony protested. “I’ve lived without a sentinel for over a decade and been absolutely fine.”

Ducky gave him a sad, pitying look.

“Have you, my dear boy?” he asked softly.

“Of course!” Tony replied immediately. “Guides aren’t like sentinels, Duck, we don’t, like, waste away without a bondmate.”

“I do not refer to your gifts, although I am well aware that it is not nearly as simple as you are attempting to convey,” Ducky said calmly. “I am referring to you, Anthony. One does not have to be a guide to sense that, until recently, you were desperately lonely in a way that your friends, as well-meaning as we may be, could not cure. You are not meant for the solitary road, my dear boy. You are meant to share your life with a partner; to, as the rhetoric goes, ‘walk as two so that you may be one.’ it would be a great pity if you allowed your own fears and insecurities to deprive you of that.”

Tony gulped, tears abruptly starting in his eyes, as he remembered Jack saying those very words in the conference room of Stargate Command: “I make thee known to the other half of mine own soul. We walk as two so that we may be one.”

“Don’t you like it, Tony?” Abby cajoled. “Don’t you like your life like this? You’ve been so
happy, and he does all this stuff to keep you that way, and Ziva says he’s got your same sense of humor, and you have the coolest job, and— would you really want to go back to the way things were?"

“Ah, shit,” Tony whimpered, and dropped his head onto Abby’s shoulder. “No, I wouldn’t. I just… shit. I need to go home.”

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Jack sat on the living room couch, his body motionless, his senses on high alert, his anger simmering just beneath the surface. Massoud sat on top of Tony’s piano, mirroring Jack’s pose, the tip of his tail flicking angrily back and forth. The two of them had stopped pacing hours ago and were now simply waiting, although it was unclear what they were waiting for. Jack’s instincts were screaming at him to defend his guide, but he was lacking a target for his anger or a guide to defend, which meant he was reduced to this: standing guard over an empty apartment, waiting for a battle that he knew wasn’t going to come.

As alert and revved up as he was, he heard Tony’s heartbeat when the guide was still almost a kilometer away. In the cold, analytical part of his sentinel brain where his inner beta collated and strategized, he noted that Tony was still driving the SUV they had taken to A.J.’s office. He’d taken the car when he left, but one of Paul’s minions had arrived fifteen minutes later with another without Jack even having to call, indicating that he had had the presence of mind to contact Paul and ask him to pick Jack up. At the time, Jack had clung to the gesture as evidence that Tony was still invested in their partnership, but the subsequent hours of separation had eroded his confidence.

Which was why now, even listening to Tony’s heartbeat come closer and closer, Jack refused to hope.

The SUV pulled into the parking lot and the engine cut out. Jack listened. For a long, long time, nothing happened, then, finally, the door opened and Tony got out. Jack sat absolutely still and tracked Tony’s progress through the parking lot, into the building, up the stairs—no elevator, killing time, didn’t want to get where he’s going—and down the hall. Tony’s key slid into the lock and turned, and the door swung open.

That same cold little bit of Jack’s brain noted that his guide looked terrible. There were dark circles under his eyes, his clothing was rumpled, and Jack could hear the slight hitch in his breathing that indicated his lungs were acting up. The rest of his brain was swamped in equal parts relief and rage.

Tony was back.

How dare he run away from his sentinel?

Jack didn’t move, didn’t react to the instincts that said to grab onto his guide and never let him go. Instead, he opened his mouth and listened to the cold, biting words slip out:

“Don’t know why you bothered to come back when you were in such a hurry to get away.”

Tony flinched. His heartbeat stuttered, and Jack smelled the hurt and anger bloom under the weariness on his skin.
“I’m sorry,” Tony said, the words clearly forced out.

Finally, Jack moved, stood up and prowled slowly towards his guide.

“‘Sorry’?” he sneered. “Save your bullshit for someone who cares, Tony. You ran off, same as you always do when things get a little too personal. Apparently, that’s what you do. Well next time, you can damned well stay gone, because I don’t need this. You are not worth this, do you understand me?”

Jack watched his words hit home, watched the utter devastation crash over Tony’s face and taint his scent with shock and despair. He’d know exactly what to say to get that reaction, exactly what would hurt Tony the most, and part of him revelled in the satisfaction of making the other man feel as wretched as he did, while the other part screamed in horror at how badly had hurt his guide.

Tony stared at him for a long, horrible moment, then he nodded stiffly.

“Yeah,” he said, his voice choked. “Yeah, Jack, I understand.”

He turned away without another word and moved woodenly towards the door. Massoud roared, and Wiley, materializing abruptly by the hallway to the bedroom, threw his head and let out an anguished howl. Tony jerked to a stop, shoulders hunched, and Jack closed his eyes against the crushing wave of anguish and terror that washed over him.

*His guide was leaving again. He had made him leave.*

“Oh, fuck, no!” he gasped. “Don’t!”

Tony turned around again, and now he was angry as well as anguished.

“Don’t what?” he demanded. “Don’t leave? Why not, Jack? You sure as hell don’t need me, you said so yourself. What, do you want me to stick around just so you can kick me in the teeth whenever you get mad? ‘Cause I’m here to tell you, that is not happening. I may not be the best at standing up for myself, but even I have more self-respect than that.”

“Fuck you!” Jack yelled, his voice breaking. “Of course I need you, you goddamned son-of-a-bitch! I need you, and you *left!* You left, and I had not way of knowing whether you were coming back. You’re my fucking *guide*, but you aren’t bonded to me, and you have never even actually said that you are *going* bond with me. At most, you’ve tacitly accepted that it’ll happen at some point. If you left for good, I wouldn’t even have the right to ask you to reconsider, you fucking bastard!”

He turned away, unable to look at his guide anymore, and brought his clenched fists up to his chest to keep them from lashing out and putting a hole in the wall. Massoud made a low, hurt sound, and Wiley whined pitifully.

“Oh, shit,” Tony murmured. “Jack, I’m so sorry. I fucked up, and— Goddamnit, why do you have to be such an asshole?”

Jack closed his eyes.

“Because being an asshole makes it hurt less,” he admitted wearily. “When your humping it out of the jungle with a broken arm, or trying to dig a bullet out of your own gut with a dull knife and lighter, or running another five miles *after* you already collapsed and puked your guts out from running the first five, being an asshole makes it feel better.”
“Okay, wow,” Tony said, surprised enough that the hurt in his scent actually began to fade. “I—that actually works for you?”

Jack let out a mirthless laugh.

“Like a charm,” he said.

“Wow.” Tony repeated. “Okay, so, thousands of self-help books and psychologists have it completely wrong. Good to know. Um— shit. So this was… bad, huh? Bad like, digging-a-bullet-out-of-your-gut-with-a-rusty-spoon or whatever bad. I’m— shit, Jack, I really am sorry. I know it doesn’t mean much, but I didn’t mean to hurt you. I was scared, and I ran, but it wasn’t—I wasn’t trying to hurt you.”

Jack stiffened automatically and shrugged.

“I’m a big boy,” he said, turning around to look at Tony with a stony face. “I can take it.”

Tony let out a small, ruefully laugh and stepped forward into Jack’s space before Jack could stop him.

“Yeah, but not with any kind of grace or dignity, apparently,” he said. “I’m sorry, Jack. C’mere.”

And then he was pulling Jack into his arms, guiding his face into the crook of his neck, and Jack let out a helpless sob and grabbed onto his guide as though he never meant to let go.

“That’s it,” Tony murmured, wrapping one arm around Jack’s waist and the other around his shoulders, cupping the back of his neck in one big, warm hand. “Shhhh. It’s okay. I’m here.”

“Fuck,” Jack said, his voice thick with tears he couldn’t actually seem to shed. “I— fuck, Tony!”

“I know,” Tony said, smelling sad and angry and guilty and elated all at once. “I know, Jack. I am so, so sorry. I’m not gonna leave you. In fact, funny story, I was actually coming home to tell you that I was ready to bond with you. Ironic, right?”

Jack drew his breath in sharply, shuddering as the implication of Tony’s words washed through him.

“D’you mean it?” he asked raggedly, pulling his face out of Tony’s neck so he could look at his guide. “Do you mean it, Tony?”

“Yeah, Jack, I do,” Tony said quietly. “I’m ready. I’ve— been ready for a while. I just hadn’t realized it yet.”

“Then why did you leave?” Jack asked, wincing inwardly at how plaintive he sounded. “If you’re ready, and I’m ready, and Harm says the Aronsons can go screw themselves, why aren’t we bonding right now instead of screaming at each other in the living room?”

It was Tony’s turn to bury his face in Jack’s shirt. He burrowed into his sentinel’s chest, his scent awash with relief and frustration and a whole crapload of Pissed Right the Fuck Off #9.

“Guess you could call it DiNozzo’s Rule 1,” he mumbled into Jack’s chest. “‘When you’re being backed into a corner— any corner, even a nice one— get out. If you can’t get out, blow up the corner.’ I guess I was feeling cornered.”

Jack heaved a sigh and let out a wry laugh. He totally understood that rule. Heck, he’d followed it
himself a time or two: if you got the sense that someone or something was pushing you in a certain direction, you didn’t go that way, even if that’s where you were originally planning on heading.

He took a deep breath.

“I’m sorry I was an asshole,” he said awkwardly.

Tony made an indistinct sound and pressed harder into his chest. Jack winced. The subtext was clearly something along the lines of, ‘That hurt, why did you do that, hold me,’ and it was… a little hard to take. He hugged Tony tighter and turned his head to kiss his hair. On the other side of the room, Massoud—who had, at some point, abandoned his perch on the piano—was curled around Wiley, grooming the coyote’s fur while he purred soothingly.

“You know we can’t— it’ll be a few days before we can actually bond,” Tony said hesitantly, still not lifting his head. “I mean, we’re in the middle of a major op, we can’t just… but there’s a sixty-odd hour window four days from now where Gibbs and Fornell are on recon. So Gibbs could coordinate while we’re nesting, and— you said a while ago that you wanted to bond at your cabin?”

“Well, yeah, ideally,” Jack said. “But honestly, it’s not a deal-breaker. I just want to be bonded to you, Tony.”

Tony swallowed hard.

“I— I want to be bonded to you too,” he whispered, then cleared his throat. “Um, thing is, the Prometheus is detailed to us for the next 21 days, and that sixty-hour window, she’s going to be holding position in the Northwest hemisphere. So we could have Pendergast beam us to the cabin, then beam us back out when we’re done. And somewhere in between if there’s, like, a real emergency, which would really suck, but—”

Jack couldn’t wait anymore, so he grabbed Tony around the back of the head and kissed him. Hard.

Tony kissed him back, his mouth firm and a little desperate, and Jack could taste his guide’s raging emotions on his tongue.

“Four days,” Jack said when they finally stopped for breath. “That means we’ll have to do to the hearing.”

Tony leaned his forehead against Jack’s and sighed.

“Y’know, that may not be such a bad thing,” he said hesitantly. “I mean, A.J. has a point. They aren’t gonna get away with this with us. We have decent jobs, a direct line to the Oval Office, our Alpha Guide is e-mail pals with Blair Sandburg, and I’m pretty sure our Alpha Sentinel has some kinda bro-ey ex-special-forces thing going on with Jim Ellison. But if someone tried this on, say, a couple of kids in Bumfuck, Nebraska who work at a gas station and have never even met the alphas of their pride, because their pride is like ten people who all live four hours away from each other— it might work.”

“I like Bumfuck, Nebraska,” Jack said mildly.

As he had hoped, Tony laughed.

Also as he had hoped, his guide seemed to understand what he hadn’t been able to say: that he did
not have the capacity to care about the big picture right now, but at the same time, bore it no ill
will. If Tony wanted to back A.J. up, then that’s what they would do, but right now, all Jack could
deal with bonding to his guide and, maybe, the fate of the world. Everything else was going to have
to take care of itself until he got one or the other or both squared away.

Tony leaned forward and kissed Jack softly.

“C’mon,” he said. “It’s late, and you— we’ve both had a rough day.”

He tugged on Jack’s hand, leading him towards the bedroom, and Jack followed, noticing absentley
that Tony was still wearing his overcoat.

They undressed, then Tony chivvied them into the bathroom and into the shower. Jack went along
happily, too caught up in the relief of having Tony back to much care what he was doing. When
they were clean, Tony got them dried off and they returned to the bedroom.

Neither of them felt much like sex. Instead, they curled up together under the sentinel-approved
sheets, pressing close. Jack buried his face in Tony’s neck, clinging to his scent, while Tony ran his
fingers through his hair, murmuring stupid nonsense to him.

“I’m sorry,” Tony whispered when they had both finally relaxed. “I’m sorry for leaving.”

“It’s okay,” Jack said. “I’m sorry too. I shouldn’t have said what I did. I was trying to hurt you, and
I kinda hate myself for it, but at the time—”

“I know, Jack,” Tony said. “I get it. We both have some— pretty crappy things we do when we’re
scared. It sucks, but there it is, and we’re gonna have to figure out how to work with it.”

Jack smiled into Tony’s skin. He loved this about Tony, that he could be grimly realistic and
ridiculously optimistic at the same time. Tony wouldn’t pretend that either of them were going to
magically lose their bad habits, but he didn’t let that stop him from forging ahead.

“God, I love you,” he blurted out before he really thought about it.

Tony went very still against him, and Jack realized what he’d just said. He winced. How he felt
about Tony was something he was pretty comfortable with, a natural consequence of a relationship
built on equal parts metaphysical, physical, and mental compatibility, but there was a lot of social
brouhaha about those three words, and he wasn’t sure that Tony was ready to hear them, or to deal
with the pressure they put on him to respond. Jack pulled back to look at Tony.

Tony was staring at him, his skin flushed and his green eyes wide. Jack reached up to cup his
cheek, deliberately trying to project calm and acceptance across their bond. Tony swallowed hard
and cleared his throat.

“‘I know,’” he whispered raggedly. “‘I know.’ ‘Ditto.’ ‘You had me at—’” He broke off with a
helpless sound and surged forward, pressing his mouth against Jack’s.

Jack returned the kiss, luxuriating in his guide’s taste. Tony moaned against his mouth, then gave a
startled cry as something between them— snapped. Jack pulled back, his body automatically
preparing for a fight, but then he realized that the snap had been in their accord and he could feel
Tony in a way he hadn’t been able to before.

“Was that—?” he asked.

“Yeah,” Tony said.
Jack had never been able to actually sense when their accord deepened before, although he sure as hell had noticed the effects. Apparently, his awareness of the metaphysical aspect was increasing as the connection got closer and closer to an actual bond.

“You okay, Tiger?” Jack asked, even though the accord was telling him that Tony was okay, if a little overwhelmed.

“Yeah,” Tony said.

“Need to quote some more movies?” Jack said, smiling.

“Not right now,” Tony said. “Maybe later.”

“Okay,” Jack said. “Now, where were we?”

Tony grinned.

“Right about— here,” he said, leaning forward and locking their lips together again.

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“Does it— bother you?” Tobias asked, leaning back into the upholstery of the Homeworld Learjet and stretching his long legs out in front of him. “That that poor bastard we just dropped off with the Secret Dicks is probably never gonna see the light of day again, and he doesn’t even know why?”

Gibbs leaned back in his own seat, considering the question. It was true, Hayden Wyjec, while not a snake, was not an informed and willing Trust agent. He, like so many in the shadowy network, was a patsy, someone the Trust had manipulated into acting for its cause unawares. In Wyjec’s case, they had used his idealism, capitalizing on the fact that he genuinely believed that the US government and the US military were forces of evil that needed to be removed from the Earth (Gibbs, very privately, agreed with the kid that the War on Terror was a fucked up bid for influence and oil, but he couldn’t figure out how he made the leap from there to removing the government and the military of one of the most powerful countries on Earth without anything ready to stick in their place; what exactly did he envision happening if he succeeded?). Like most true believers, he had been absolutely unshakeable in his conviction that he was doing the right thing and that anyone who said differently was lying. Gibbs had found him annoying in the extreme and had been heartily relieved to hand him off to the Secret Service for transport to the blackout facility that the US and Canada had built and staffed to house people who were a threat to global security.

“Think in this case, Wyjec was right, Tobias,” Gibbs said. “I’m part a’ the problem. Been in this job too long, seen too many victims to care that the system ain’t perfect so long as it gets the bad guys off the streets. Know it’s not right, but until someone comes up with a way to fix it instead a’ just whining about how it’s broke, it’s what we’ve got. End a’ the day, Wyjec can’t help the Trust kill or torture anyone else now, and that’s all I can ask for. One a’ these days, DiNozzo’ll lead a crusade for all those people locked up at Black Site 0, ‘cause he’s almost as much of an idealist as Wyjec, and I’ll back him a hundred percent. But in the meantime, someone’s gotta keep doing the job, or innocent people will die.”

Tobias sighed and scrubbed his hands over his face.
“How the hell did we get here, Jethro?” he wondered, sounding tired.

“Short answer?” Gibbs asked. “We met DiNozzo, and didn’t turn around and run the other way.”

Tobias let out bark of laughter.

“What a mistake,” he said.

“I dunno,” Gibbs said. “I had a choice, not sure I’d change a thing.”
The Art of War

Chapter Notes

_The Art of War_: a Chinese military treatise dated to the 5th Century BCE and traditionally attributed to Chinese military strategist Sun Tzu. It is considered a seminal text, and its influence can still be seen in military tactics, business planning, and legal strategy in both the East and West.

"He who invites war with a sentinel has already been defeated, but he who invites war with a guide does not deserve the dignity of defeat."
Sun Tzu

“What do we know so far?” said Lin Li-liang, senior agent for the Ministry of State Security of the People’s Republic of China.

In front of him, an extremely influential member of the Party was lying on an opulent guest bed in the Beijing mansion of a wealthy Dutch industrialist. He was wearing nothing but his underclothing, and both of his wrists had been cut with a gentleman’s rosewood handled pocket knife.

“He was seen leaving the party last night with a woman,” replied Yuan Desheng, a junior agent for the MSS who, in Lin Li-liang’s humble opinion, was far too open and conscientious to make it far in state security. “She was blond, of indeterminate age and race, and wearing a dress that might have been blue, purple, or gray.”

Lin Li-liang turned to look at Yuan Desheng, blinking slowly. The younger man cringed a little.

“Witnesses— disagreed on the woman’s description,” he said. “One was sure that she was in her mid-forties and of mixed heritage, while another was equally certain that she was in her mid-twenties and wholly Caucasian. One witness said she was wearing blue, another said purple— you understand the point. We have people going through the security footage, but we have already found many women who might match one of the possible descriptions— it was a very international gathering and blond hair is in fashion this year. Since there were no cameras on the door or the hallway they used to get to the guest wing, and the guest wing’s security has— mysteriously developed a fault, we cannot know which of them, if any, is the person in question.”

“I see,” Lin Li-liang said, turning back to the body. “And the cause of death?”

“Self-inflicted, beyond doubt,” Yuan Desheng said.

“So, an important member of the Party is lured into a guest bedroom by a woman of indeterminate description and, some time later, commits suicide,” Lin Li-liang said.

“Yes,” Yuan Desheng said. “And there is more.”

He drew Lin Li-liang’s attention to the 18th Century French writing desk in the corner, where a single sheet of paper was lying under a gold fountain pen. Since the crime scene technicians had
not yet dusted the room for fingerprints, Lin Li-liang put his hands behind his back and bent over the desk to read the characters on the page.

His blood chilled.

“Call headquarters and tell them to recall the technicians and send a cleanup team instead,” he told Yuan Desheng. “And get me the Minister of State Security. We have a very serious problem.”

Yuan Desheng gasped quietly and hurried to obey, while Lin Li-liang stared numbly down at the sheet of paper and the six names the dead man had written there under the heading, ‘Enemies of the State.’ Exactly how and by whose design the man behind him had met his end no longer mattered. What mattered was that, in his final moments, he had identified and written down a significant threat the the People’s Republic of China.

It was Lin Li-liang’s job to neutralize that threat at all costs.

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260 miles above Beijing, Special Agent Sydney Bristow stood beside Special Agent David Rossi in the infirmary of the Prometheus, staring at the remains of a goa’uld symbiote.

“Good work, kid,” Rossi said.

He was still wearing his tuxedo, although he had removed the jacket and bow tie. Sydney, meanwhile, had changed into flats, the better to navigate the grating in the hallways of the ship, but had not bothered to remove her blond wig, subtle Cleopatra eyeliner, or silver mauve silk dress.

“You as well,” Sydney said, then turned to look up at the older agent. “How did you know that he would commit suicide after we removed the symbiote?” she asked.

“He considered himself a faithful servant of the state,” Rossi replied. “His sense of self was completely identified with his role in the government. I knew, based on his personality and his background, that, when he realized that he had inadvertently become the instrument by which a hostile entity had entered into the highest echelons of the Party, he would feel he had no other choice but to take his own life.”

Sydney nodded and turned back to the symbiote.

She had realized, since this operation began, that she trusted Rossi in a way she had not trusted anyone she had worked with since her earliest days with SD-6. It surprised her. She had thought that she was far past the point where she could do something so naive as to trust somebody. But, ever since that night in the living room of Homeworld Command’s luxurious base house, she had had the unshakeable sense that David Rossi was a man to be depended on. It might be cliched, but you could tell a lot by a man by the way he made love, and Rossi made love like someone who knew the exact measure of his own selfishness, and deliberately balanced it with generosity and compassion. He was not a saint, by any means, but he was a man who was aware of and accepted his own sins.

He controlled them. They did not control him.

Sydney had met very few men who could say the same.
“Jack, Agent DiNozzo,” General Landry said as Jack and Tony rematerialized in his office, “Welcome back to the Mountain.”

“Thanks General,” Tony said.

“Good to be here, Hank,” Jack said. “Only wish the circumstances were better.”

Landry grimaced, and Tony could just imagine how bad his week had gotten when Tony had called him up bright and early yesterday morning to tell him he had a security breach and HERA (which, sure, right now HERA meant one lonely agent and his sentinel, who also happened to be the Head of Homeworld Command, but whatever) were coming in to take care of it.

“Just another day at the office around this place,” Landry said. “You sure about this, Jack? Steven’s been through hell. Playing bait for a mole in the SGC on top of that is a lot to ask.”

“I’m sure,” Jack said. “C’mon, Hank. If it was you, what would you do?”

“I’d paint the target on my back myself and hope that I got first crack at whoever tried to take the shot,” Landry admitted.

Jack laughed and clapped Landry on the shoulder.

“Well, there ya go,” he said. “So let’s do this thing.”

They left Landry’s office and headed towards the gate room, making sure to be seen by enough SGC personnel that even people who had been living under a rock and didn’t know about the scheduled dial-in from Atlantis would be alerted to the fact that something was up.

They reached the gate room, and Tony had to suppress a shiver as he looked up at the massive ring of ornate metal. When he had gone through the gate for the first time, he’d had a chance to really sit with the idea of stepping into a wormhole through space and time with nothing between him and the void except his own skin, and he had decided it kind of freaked him out.

The SFs standing guard saluted Jack and Landry and the techs looked up briefly before returning to their consoles. Tony hung back by the door while the two generals crossed the room and took up their positions at the foot of the ramp.

“Incoming wormhole,” said one of the techs. “Reading Atlantis’s IDC.”

“This is Colonel Sheppard on Atlantis calling Stargate Command,” said a man’s voice over the intercom system. “We’ve got some people comin’ your way, SGC.”

“This is General O’Neill,” Jack said. “We’re ready for them, Atlantis.”
“Incoming travellers,” the tech said.

Tony sidled casually along the wall behind the SFs. The blue surface of the wormhole rippled and two Marines stepped out, followed closely by the tall, bald figure of Colonel Caldwell.

Time slowed.

Jack leaned down and yanked out the automatic in his ankle holster.

Tony drew his own weapon from under his jacket.

Jack turned and pointed his gun at the tech, while Tony pressed his to an SF’s temple.


“Well now,” Caldwell said from the top of the ramp, “Isn’t this a nice reception?”

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“How are you doing, Steven?” Jack asked quietly as he and Steve Caldwell stared through the one-way glass at the slightly pathetic figure of Dr. Herbert William Lester, the SGC gate technician who had, apparently, spearheaded Operation Snake-a-Colonel.

Caldwell gave him a look, and Jack laughed ruefully. After all these years, he really should know better. Caldwell was exactly like him in this regard: he would chew his own leg off before admitting to being less than 100%.

“Dreams?” he asked, changing tactics. “After that thing with that Tok’ra, I had nightmares like you wouldn’t believe. Got so’s I started thinking pretty seriously about taking popcorn to bed, since I was spending the night watching horror films anyways.”

“Nah,” Caldwell said. “The— the thing in me didn’t— didn’t have a lot to say. When it wasn’t making me do something it was just… quiet. Real quiet. I’m not sure I’m ever gonna be able to sleep without a white noise generator again, but it could have been worse.”

“Yeah, well, in this business, that ain’t saying a whole heck of a lot,” Jack said. “Anything you need, Steven, you got it. You know that. Leave time, your own shrink, a couple planets to blow up — whatever.”

Caldwell turned and looked at him in surprise.

“Never thought I’d hear you, of all people, offering someone a shrink,” he said. “From what I hear, you hate them almost as much as you hate the goa’uld.”

Jack folded his arms and looked put upon.

“C’mon,” he whined. “Mackenzie was a pompous quack who almost let Danny die because he was so goddamned sure he knew best. I think I have the right to be suspicious of the species.”

Caldwell laughed, his shoulders relaxing a little as he did so.

“Anyways,” Jack said, “We’ve got a new civilian psychiatrist on staff now. Nice lady, very open-
minded. I gather that she talks a lot about acceptance and letting go of expectations, which I think is some sort of touchy-feely Zen thing, but it’s also actually half-way useful for people who deal with unbelievable stuff every day, so, ya know.

“So, you’re saying if it had been you who got snaked, you’d be happy going to see her?” Caldwell pressed, amused.

“Well…” Jack said, floundering a little, “I mean… that is…”

Caldwell laughed again.

“Relax, Jack,” he said. “I’m right there with you. Back when you and I joined the Air Force, shrinks were for crazy people. Then the 90s happened, and suddenly, it seemed like you had to pass a psych eval every time you turned around. Hell, sometimes it felt like the shrinks were the real enemy and the bad guys were just a piddling annoyance.”

“Okay,” Jack said, relieved, “I’ll get someone to make up a list of uninhabited planets for you to blow up then.”

“Thanks,” Caldwell said, grinning.

On the other side of the glass, the door opened and Tony walked into the interrogation room. He made his way over to the other side of the table and sat down, then stared at Dr. Lester for a minute. Dr. Lester stared back, obviously trying for impassive and ending up with something closer to allergic.

“Dr. Lester,” Tony said quietly, “Herbert. Can I call you Herbert?” He did not wait for a reply. “So, Herbert, I’ve got something of a problem. Thanks to the awesomeness that is Alpha Sentinel Harriman and his pride here at the mountain, I have every single person who reacted badly to Colonel Caldwell’s return in custody. Now, I’m sure a few of them just got on the Colonel’s bad side at some point and are scared of him, but the rest of them were part of your little scheme. Which means that I have way too many prisoners on my hands and too few questions to ask them. Meanwhile, I’ve got a goa’uld out in Pegasus who I have a ton of questions for, but no host to put it in so I can understand what it’s saying.”

“What?” Caldwell said. “Jack, the process that Hermiod came up with, the symbiote doesn’t survive. I thought you knew that?”

“Oh, we do,” Jack said. “But Dr. Lester doesn’t.”

In the interrogation room, Dr. Lester had gone pasty white.

“So, you see,” Tony continued, “At this point, it’s all about which of you guys gives me the most useful information before the Daedalus gets back. Because I’m going to get answers, the only question is, who’s gonna to be in control of the mouth that’s coughing them up.”

“Jesus Christ,” Caldwell said, looking a little queasy. “He wouldn’t actually do that, right?”

“Nah,” Jack said. “Tony’s got some pretty specific rules about torture and this doesn’t meet the criteria—I blame Danny, the two of them have been thick as thieves since the day they met. But it turns out, what you and I learned about interrogation in covert ops? Was kindergarten stuff. Tony could make a mute canary sing, and his boss is even worse.”

In the interrogation room, Dr. Lester proved his point by opening his mouth and proceeding to blurt out every single thing he knew about the Trust.
“So, Sam was pretty spot on about what Ba’al’s up to, which is kind of scary, given how little information she had to work with,” Tony said, looking around the conference table where General Landry and the three quarters of SG-1 still in the Mountain had gathered to hear the results of the interrogation. “The clone in McKenas Cole does have a piece of Ancient technology, one he really doesn’t want anyone else able to use— hence, trying to take out Sheppard and Beckett.”

Cam Mitchell snorted, and Danny laughed gently.

“After all these years, Sam’s pretty good at second guessing the goa’uld,” Danny admitted.

“So, what’re we dealin’ with?” Cam asked.

“According to Dr. Lester, our Ba’al clone has gotten his hands on what looks like an Ancient time machine,” Tony said, shaking his head. “It’s non-operational, so Ba’al has spent most of the past six years trying to figure out how to get it working again.”

“A time machine,” Landry said woodenly.

“Oh my God,” Danny said. “I can’t even imagine what Ba’al could do with something like that. Why the heck would the Ancients make something like that in the first place?”

“I find it strange that such an object could exist on Earth without coming to our attention,” Teal’c said, frowning. “How did Ba’al’s clone find this device?”

“Well, it seems that it’s been in the hands of a secret organization called the Covenant for the past six hundred years, so it’s actually not surprising you’ve never heard about it,” Tony said. “The Covenant is dedicated to continuing the work of a fifteenth century philosopher called Milo Rambaldi; guy was, apparently, looking for the secret to immortality, but he was a real Renaissance Man, so he did a bunch of other stuff along the way. From what we’ve managed to piece together so far, one of Rambaldi’s hobbies was collecting Ancient tech— we’ve got reason to suspect he had the gene, but we don’t really have enough information to confirm. This artifact that Lester saw was one of Rambaldi’s finds. Ba’al got his hands on the device because the guy he’s currently possessing is a high-ranking member of the Trust. Unfortunately for Ba’al, it isn’t working, so he’s spent the past several years trying to fix it.”

“Hmm,” Danny murmured. “Ancient tech, the Ancient gene, the search for immortality— it sounds like Rambaldi was looking for Ascension.”

“Huh,” Jack said.

“Oh, wow,” Tony said. “Yeah, that totally makes sense.”

“How in the hell did Lester get this kind of intel?” Cam wondered. “He’s our freakin’ gate tech, for Christ’s sake. Why would Ba’al tell him any of this?”

Jack made a face, and Tony could feel his irritation through their accord.

“Because he’s our freakin’ gate tech, apparently,” he said sourly. “Ba’al couldn’t get to Carter, McKay, Lee, Zelenka— any of the scientists who actually knew diddly-squat about Ancient tech.
They were too well protected and too aware of the risk of infiltration. So he targeted one of our third-string gate techs, someone who would be more... receptive to his offer. Seems that Dr. Lester felt that his non-existent talent was being overlooked here at the mountain. He believed that he was meant for better things than operating our gate, despite the fact that he'd screwed up our dialling program on no less than three separate occasions. So, when Ba’al promised him his own lab, the most interesting research, etcetera and so on, he jumped at it. He went with Ba’al to Russia to look at the artifact, then came back to the SGC to help coordinate the strike against Atlantis.”

“But what could Ba’al have hoped to gain from such a man?” Teal’c asked. “I understand that our experts were unavailable to him, but the goa’uld have extensive experience with the Ancient technology themselves. I do not see what an incompetent technician could have offered him.”

“Intel on what your experts have discovered about Ancient tech over the past nine years,” Tony replied. “Despite his relative lack of clearance, Lester had access to all of the SGC’s data on the gate. That data is updated based on your scientists’ discoveries, so Lester can, at least, say what you’ve been working on and some of what you’ve come up with when it comes to Ancient technology— the gates are kinda the Ancients’ pièce de résistance on a lot of fronts, so most of your Ancient research is relevant to them. Lester doesn’t realize what was going on, of course but the questions Ba’al asked him show that he was pumping him for information about what advancement your scientists had made, particularly fixing Ancient stuff that’s broken. Ultimately, though, you’re right, once Ba’al had questioned him, Lester wasn’t really that useful to him, which is why he sent him back here with the symbiote to snake Caldwell. Lester had served his purpose and was expendable.”

“That plan seems a little short-sighted,” Landry said. “After all, if Lester was caught, he would be able to tell us everything he knew. From what I understand, the man Ba’al’s clone is using as a host used to be CIA. He should know better than to leave those kinds of loose ends.”

Tony frowned.

“I know,” he said. “It’s— so, we’ve got a profiler over at HERA, and he’s been able to use NID surveillance to figure out roughly when Cole was infected based on changes to his behavior. Cole used to be one hell of a covert operative, but being possessed by Ba’al’s clone seems to have pretty much destroyed his espionage skills. It’s kinda weird, especially since Colonel Caldwell’s symbiote seems to have had no problems retaining his training and knowledge.”

“Colonel Caldwell’s symbiote was young and had very few memories of its own,” Teal’c said. “As you know from your interactions with my own symbiote before its death, it takes time for a goa’uld to mature to the point where it ceases to rely on its host for information and behavioral traits. Ba’al has had that time and more. I doubt that he is even capable of sharing his host’s mind with its rightful owner at this point in time.”

“Still, he has access to Cole’s knowledge,” Jack pointed out. “I mean, that’s part of the whole possession deal, right?”

“Yes,” Teal’c agreed. “But it is but one small part of the vast wealth of knowledge and experience he has gathered during his long existence. The goa’uld think very differently from your people, General O’Neill.”

“I do not like the idea of Ba’al getting his hands on a time machine,” Landry said, returning to the crux of the matter.

“Amen to that,” Cam agreed. “Have we told Carter? I bet she’ll have— a lot to say about this situation.”
"Tony’s putting together a brief for his people, including Carter,” Jack said. “Unfortunately, she’s in the middle of something right now. I’m pretty sure when she gets back in contact, it’s going to be epic.”

‘In the middle of something,’ in this case, meant traipsing around in the mountains of Taiwan with Ian and a bunch of Army Rangers to disable a communications hub before trotting off to South America to deal with a Trust lab.

“Well, make sure to tell her that we need a threat assessment,” Landry said.

“Will do,” Jack said, clapping his hands together. “Okay, kids, the General and I have boring General-ly things to do, so if there’s nothing else? Okay, good. Dismissed. You sticking around Tony?”

“Hell no,” Tony said, shuddering. “If I have to hear you guys talk about budgets and requisitions and the IOA’s general bullshit, I’m gonna start jabbing myself with my ballpoint pen. I’ll see you when you’re done.”

Danny fell in beside him as he left the room with the others, his psionic profile earnest.

“How are you doing, Tony?” he asked. “Jack told me what was going on— he said he was worried about you.”

Tony scowled.

“I know,” he said. “Just what this week was lacking—a fretting sentinel. Fair warning: if he starts trying to make me tea, I’m gonna panic.”

Danny laughed as they stepped into the elevator and the archaeologist pressed the button for his floor.

“I think I might too,” he said. “Jack hates tea. And don’t think I can’t see you dodging my question.”

Tony laughed. It was kind of impossible to be truly annoyed with Danny, even when he was being stubbornly nosy.

“When A.J. and Harm first told us what was going on, I was freaked out,” he said. “Now I’m just sort of— numb. No, that’s not quite true. I feel like Mal in the fight with the Operative: ‘Right now, I’m gonna have to go with wrath.’ Like I’ve been stabbed through the gut, but I can’t really feel the pain, just the anger.”

When Tony had visited the Mountain doing the research needed to build HERA’s charter, he had discovered that Danny was, like Tony, a closet sci fi geek, in spite (or perhaps because?) of the fact he worked for what amounted to a sci fi program. Danny was particularly fond of the TV show Firefly and its cinematic incarnation Serenity, because, he said, Joss Whedon really captured the sociological aspects of the ‘verse he had created.

Danny laughed and stepped off the elevator as the doors opened onto Level 18. He set off down the hall towards his office with Tony following him.

The room was in its usual cluttered state, with books and papers strewn across every available surface and odd bits and pieces intermingled in the chaos. Danny shifted a stack of notebooks off a chair for Tony, then began excavating the coffee maker from behind a pile of rocks. Tony accepted the offer of caffeine, despite the fact that it was already evening back in D.C. He was pretty sure
he’d sleep tonight regardless of how much coffee he pumped into himself. Daniel was, of course, immune to the stuff.

“D’you remember a couple months ago, when all those alternate SG-1s came through the stargate?” Danny asked, settling into his chair with his cup.

“How could I forget?” Danny asked. “The alternate version of Janet Frasier used her credentials to sign into JAMA because she wanted to access the articles her counterpart used in formulating her theory on entropic cascade failure, and it worked. I guess they don’t remove people’s access when they die? Anyways, just our luck, it tripped something the AMA had stuck in their system to detect people committing fraud by using the credentials of dead and retired doctors. It was a whole big mess.”

Danny grimaced a little.

“Yeah, seeing Janet was… difficult,” he said. “It was… really hard when she died, and seeing her alive again— sometimes I hate dealing with alternate universes.”

“Only sometimes?” Tony asked.

“Well, it is pretty fascinating, seeing all the different possibilities,” Danny said. “Anyways, I got into a discussion with a few of my counterparts about the differences between our realities after one of the Cams walked in on a couple of Marines having sex and flipped out. Specifically, about the differences surrounding sentinels and guides.”

“Wait,” Tony said, shaking his head and blinking, “Back up. Cam flipped out? As in, our Cam? All-American, apple pie, ‘Save a Jet, Ride a Pilot’ Cam?”

“Well, in this case, despite how similar some of our counterparts were, I’d have to say no, definitely not our Cam,” Danny said. “From what I could piece together, this Cam came from a universe where being ‘all-American’ and ‘apple-pie’ meant— what was it you said about Corporal McLaughlin? Having a violent phobia of any kind of sex that wasn’t one man and one woman under the covers with the lights off?”

“No,” Tony said. “For real? That is so messed up!”

“Oh, I know,” Danny said. “By the way, I owe you— and Sam, but I’ve already apologized to her— an apology, because you were totally right: a military where everyone is as sexually repressed as Corporal McLaughlin is even worse than a military that doesn’t make adequate accommodations for sexual repression.”

Tony choked a little on his coffee.

“Okay, he said, leaning back in his chair, “I suddenly feel that I’m about to hate this other reality even more.”

“So, it turns out that the reality that that Cam came from either didn’t have sentinels and guides, or didn’t know about them anymore,” Danny said, gesturing with his coffee cup. “It’s unclear which, because another team came from a version of reality where most of the world had lost all knowledge of sentinels and guides and was only just rediscovering them. Anyways, in that Cam’s reality, the American military was apparently anti-sex in general and violently homophobic specifically. There were pretty stringent rules about fraternization, and you could actually be sent to Leavenworth for having sex with someone of the same gender. It was horrifying, and, as Sam predicted, really intrusive, but it was also a fascinating and somewhat sobering insight into how
integral sentinels and guides were to the evolution of the Western military model.

“The thing is, in our reality, most of the great military apparatuses in the West have viewed sex as one of the most effective bonding mechanisms available to them. The Greeks, the Romans, even the Vikings, they all incorporate that mentality into their military structure, because sentinels and guides were central to their ideology of war and what makes the perfect warrior, and sex is how sentinels and guides bond. However, according to my counterpart from the reality that didn’t have sentinels and guides, apart from a few isolated instances— the Sacred Band of Thebes for instance — most of the great armies in their history were pretty against sex in general, and sex with fellow soldiers in particular. The Roman army had this absolutely bizarre belief that it was okay for its soldiers to— to ‘pitch,’ so to speak, but not to ‘catch,’ so they could have all the anal sex they liked, but only if they were on top. At some levels, they could face serious repercussions for being on the receiving end.”

Normally, Tony would have teased Danny for going off on one of his tangents, but he was too busy trying to wrap his head around a world where, if he was interpreting this right, either nobody ever had sex, or they had sex, but pretended they didn’t have sex.

“Wow,” he said. “Just— wow. This is a mind-fuck on so many levels. I mean, most of all because that’s just— ugh!, but also, when I was talking about an alternative military where McLaughlin would have felt at home, I was sure that it was purely hypothetical.”

“The wonders of working at the SGC,” Danny said with a smile. “Anyways, to get back to my original point—”

“— there was another reality where the Union— they called it the Guild there— had pretty much unlimited power in the US,” Danny continued. “Nobody could question them, not the government, not the mundane population, not even their own people. Sentinels and guides were untouchable, but they were also trapped: the guild controlled everything about their lives, where they lived, what they did, who they bonded to. It was basically a microcosm of a totalitarian state. The thing was, the Daniel Jackson from that universe told me the premises on which the Guild had been founded, and in the beginning, it wasn’t much different from our Union. It’s core purpose was to protect the rights of sentinels and guides and to make sure that they weren’t abused or forced into untenable situations by mundane society. It just— went wrong somehow along the way.

“I guess what I’m saying is, as much as this situation sucks, checks and balances are necessary in any system. We can’t just sit back and take our freedoms or our rights for granted. We have to— to work on them, to curate them, or there’s a very real possibility that they’ll be taken away, or, worse, turned into something monstrous.”

Tony slumped back and rubbed his eyes.

“I— yeah,” he said. “I see what you’re saying, and you’re absolutely right. But I also— Look, I freely admit that half the reason I chose to go to Police Academy after I graduated college was because I wanted to be Danny Glover in Lethal Weapon, not because I wanted to defend peace, justice, and the American Way. But, shit man, however I got there, I’ve been a public servant for over a decade, and I may goof off, but I always try to do the right thing, and I’ve gotten my ass kicked doing it more than once. Part of me feels like it’s someone else’s turn to keep any eye on our civil rights for a while.”

Danny was silent for a long time, frowning at his coffee mug.
“You’re right,” he said finally. “‘Doing the right thing’ is nice, but it’s too vague to be much of an incentive after the eighth or ninth infirmary stay.”

“Or the second death experience,” Tony agreed. “Anyways, don’t worry about it. Tonight, we’re going to go over to Harm and A.J.’s to meet the lawyer and go over our strategy, then it’s all up to them. I just have to go to the hearing, tell them I’m bonding with Jack and if they don’t like it they can kiss my very fine ass, and then have the Prometheus beam us to the cabin so we can actually get with the bonding.”

Danny nodded and took a wistful sip of his coffee.

“So, it’s about the sex,” he said. “Sex is a good incentive. Do you know how long it’s been since I had sex? I didn’t used to think I’d miss it, but I really do.”

“Oh boy,” Tony said. “We have to get you laid man. Blue balls are not healthy.”

Danny laughed.

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They spent an inordinate amount of time in Homeworld SUVs, Jack thought idly as he guided yet another Escalade (he knew that it was different from the other half dozen he’d driven that week, even though they all looked the same, because of the smell) through the streets Harm and A.J.’s neighborhood. In the passenger’s seat, Tony was bullying the British Prime Minister very politely over his secure headset.

“I understand, Prime Minister, I really do,” he was saying earnestly, “But, as I’m sure Mr. Binder has already explained, this is a global situation red, and it’s on a level we haven’t dealt with before. Pretty much every country in the world that has a seat on the IOA, along with a few that don’t, has been infiltrated, and the Trust has ears everywhere. To be frank, even informing you of our intentions is a security risk, and if I didn’t respect the relationship between our countries so much, I probably wouldn’t be taking it.”

Jack pulled the SUV into Harm and A.J.’s driveway and switched off the engine. He and Tony climbed out, Tony still engaged in the conversation.

“This is a slippery slope, Deputy Director,” the PM said on the other end of the line, his voice stiff and plummy as only an upper class Englishman’s could be. “If I allow you to send agents into my country to arrest British citizens, what’s to stop other American agencies from doing the same? Today it’s—what do you call ZEUS? But tomorrow, it could very well be the CIA.”

Over the past thirty odd hours, Tony had somehow decided that his title was Deputy Director of the Homeworld Enforcement and Reconnaissance Agency, despite the fact that, on paper, he and Gibbs were actually the same pay grade. When Jack had asked Tony why he’d come to that decision, Tony had said that it played to his strengths. ‘If you say you’re the Deputy Director, you’re implying that there’s someone bigger, meaner, and grumpier than you are above you,’ he’d said. ‘So you act all friendly and harmless, and suddenly everybody wants to make you happy, because they would rather deal with you than with your boss.’

Jack had to figure that working for Gibbs all these years had been a defining factor in developing this particular strategy.
“Hey!” Tony said, hamming up his indignation. “I resent that! HERA is nothing like the CIA! I haven’t armed a single warlord or smuggled so much as a gram of cocaine since we got up and running.”

The British PM laughed reluctantly.

Jack rang Harm and A.J.’s doorbell.

“Seriously though,” Tony went on, “We’ve been over this with the IOA. Our mandate allows us limited jurisdiction in the IOA’s signatory countries on a case by case basis. No other law enforcement office or intelligence agency in the world can make use of that loophole— 99% of them don’t even know about it. And I know it sucks that we’re an American agency, but until the program is declassified, this is what we’ve got.”

A.J. opened the door and ushered them into the house, and Jack frowned, because the Alpha Sentinel smelled as smug as fuck about something.

Tony kept talking.

“If it makes you feel any better, I have high hopes that, when I retire, I’ll be passing my job to someone who works for the equivalent of NATO,” he said as they headed for the living room.

“No, Deputy Director DiNozzo,” the PM said wearily, “It really doesn’t. Because that means that, when you retire, the program will have been declassified, and I am not ready for that. My country isn’t ready for it.”

Jack was actually interested in Tony’s reply, but he ended up missing it, because when they stepped into the living room, Blair Sandburg was sitting on the couch chatting with Harm and the lawyer from Boston.

Jack stopped abruptly and Tony, still talking to the Prime Minister, pretty much bumped into him.

“What the— sorry. My sentinel is an idio-oh my God!”

“I beg your pardon?” the Prime Minister said blankly.

“Sorry, Prime Minister” Tony said distractedly. “My sentinel and I have a meeting with the D.C. alphas, and they neglected to tell us that the Alpha Prime Guide of North America was going to be there. Annnnd now everybody is staring at me. Any chance you can excuse me while I deal with this suddenly very awkward situation?”

Harm smirked evilly, the lawyer from Boston raised her perfectly sculpted eyebrows, and Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg choked on his beer and burst out laughing.

“Oh dear,” said the PM, sounding unutterably British. “I wish I could say ‘I can only imagine,’ but, alas, I have intimate knowledge of your current position. Britain’s Alpha Prime Guide has a terrible habit of showing up in my office unannounced. Go deal with your awkward situation, Deputy Director, and thank you so much for doing me the courtesy of calling and telling me that your agency is about to run roughshod over my country’s sovereign nationhood.”

“Thank you, Prime Minister,” Tony said weakly, and reached up to fumble his headset off. “Uh, hi,” he said, smiling brightly at the Alpha Prime Guide and the lawyer. “I’m Tony. It’s— um— really nice to meet you.”
“All rise. Court is now in session, the Honorable Judge Vivian Bright presiding.”

Blair stood as a short, gray-haired woman with a surprisingly angry empathic profile entered the room and settled into her seat.

“You may be seated,” she snapped, sounding irritated. “Bailiff, please read the docket.”

“Your honor, today’s case is Aronson vs. Chegwidden, request for preliminary injunction,” the bailiff answered.

Blair settled back into his seat and tucked his psionic field a little more closely around him. He was seated a little ways back from the defence table where A.J., Harm, their new pair, and Shirley Schmidt (and oh my god, Shirley Schmidt, the lawyer who had, at twenty-seven, abruptly become first chair in the Supreme Court case against the Boston S&G Center when the previous first chair had been in a car accident, and had ended up winning the damned thing) were seated. Everyone involved in the case knew he was there, because his name was on the witness list, but nobody had really noticed him yet. It was a little trick he’d picked up since becoming Alpha Prime of North America, a way to blend in and observe even though his face was pretty well known these days.

“Thank you,” Judge Bright said. “Counsel, please identify yourselves.”

A supremely poised, red-headed woman in a striking green skirt suit rose from the opposite table.

“Rita Calhoun for the plaintiffs, your honor,” she said.

She had that strange, migraine-inducing empathic profile peculiar to many lawyers, honest dishonesty over a slippery sort of conviction. Hers had a particular flavor of amusement and complacency that made Blair want to rub his temples.

He refrained.

The man and the woman seated next to her— older, wealthy, privileged— were broadcasting grief and hostility, and Blair winced a little. Tony, the poor kid— and, okay, Tony DiNozzo was actually exactly the same age as Blair, but he felt like a kid— was feeling this just the same as Blair was, but unlike Blair, it was all directed at him.

Ms. Calhoun sat down and Shirley (she had asked Blair to call her by her first name when they had all met to discuss the hearing, which had made him secretly wriggle like a twelve-year-old boy) stood. She was wearing a sober light gray suit and her empathic profile was sharp and steely. Blair was reminded of a sword.

“Shirley Schmidt for the defense, your honor,” she said coolly before sitting down again.

Judge Bright nodded.

“For the record,” she said brusquely, “This hearing concerns the request for a preliminary injunction filed by the plaintiffs ordering Guide Anthony DiNozzo to delay bonding to a sentinel until it has been determined in a court of law whether his Alpha, Sentinel Albert Chegwidden, has, in fact, interfered with his potential bond to Sentinel Jake Aronson.

“I am, reluctantly, prepared to proceed, but I want to make clear at the outset that I am deeply
unhappy with how closely this request is skirting the line in terms of becoming bond interference in its own right. I would advise the plaintiffs’ counsel to be scrupulously careful not to cross that line. On a similar note, I also see that the defense has hired a legend in sentinel and guide law to argue this case, who has, in turn called the Alpha Prime Guide of North America as a witness. I caution their counsel that my courtroom is neither a Broadway stage, nor a political rally, and I will not tolerate either drama or polemics. Are we all clear?”

“Yes, your honor,” Shirley said calmly.

“Yes, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun echoed, slightly less calmly.

“Very well,” Judge Bright said. “We will proceed with opening statements. Ms. Calhoun, if you would.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said, rising. “Twenty-two years ago, Jake Aronson awakened as a sentinel. Twenty-one years and two months ago, he was diagnosed with CIS, Chronic Instability Syndrome.

“Jake was a second year medical intern when he awakened. He immediately changed his track from emergency medicine to surgery, because he was told that that was where his new senses could do the most good. When he received his diagnosis, he refused to change his mind, despite being told that his condition would make the long hours and high pressures inherent in a career as a surgeon difficult. Instead of changing to an easier specialty, Jake elected to stay the course and to have faith that he would, one day, find his guide.

“It took a long time. Jake finished his internship and his residency and took a job at Penn Presbyterian Medical Center, one of the top hospitals in the country. His chose to specialize in cardiothoracic surgery — in fixing the human heart. He became one of the best heart surgeons in the world.

“He remained one of the best heart surgeons in the world, even when his condition advanced enough that he couldn’t no longer use his senses in the operating room — or, indeed, anywhere else. As with many sufferers from CIS, Jake had difficulty forming a temporary accord with pro tem guides, a difficulty which became more pronounced as time went on. Fourteen years after receiving his diagnoses, Jake had finally reached the point where he could no longer form an accord at all, and he began to face that he might never find a guide.

“And then, one night, at a Center event, he met his perfect match, Guide Anthony DiNozzo.

“Unfortunately, while Guide DiNozzo initially agreed to the bond, he later declined to complete it after a minor disagreement. He broke the precord between himself and Jake and cut off all further contact with his sentinel. He refused all support from the Center, going so far as to leave his own apartment rather than speak with a Center counsellor, and eventually cut off all contact with them as well. Soon after, he moved to a different city. Inquiries by the Philadelphia Center revealed that Guide DiNozzo never sought counselling, either for bond reconciliation or for managing the mental and psionic trauma of breaking a precord. Jake attempted to contact him repeatedly over the years, but was not successful.

“Jake’s condition began to deteriorate rapidly upon losing his guide. Two years after Guide DiNozzo broke their precord, he had a flare up that left him with reduced function in his lungs. Two years after that, he had another that impaired his muscle control; he had to stop performing surgery. Three months ago, he had a third which compromised his kidneys and left him bedridden.

“His Center sent one of its senior pairs to D.C., where Guide DiNozzo had recently relocated, to
ask him for help. Once there, however, they were met with hostility by D.C.’s Alpha Sentinel and were unable to speak to Guide DiNozzo privately, or to properly explain his sentinel’s situation. They were sent away before Guide DiNozzo could give them a response to their request, and a day later, the Philadelphia Center received a call from Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden telling them that Guide DiNozzo would not be coming to Philadelphia and warning them not to attempt to contact him again. Since then, Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden has prevented any and all communication between Guide DiNozzo and the Philadelphia Sentinel and Guide Center.

“Eleven weeks ago, Guide DiNozzo registered a pro tem bond with another sentinel, Sentinel Jonathan O’Neill. Inquiries by the Philadelphia Center revealed that the match between them was close enough that they intended to bond. At the time he registered as Sentinel O’Neill’s pro tem guide, Guide DiNozzo had not seen or spoken to his sentinel in over six years.

“Jake Aronson’s family has brought this suit against Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden because they believe that his interference has prevented Guide DiNozzo from reconciling with his sentinel. Since repeated attempts through the Center and even the Union have been met with indifference, they see no other way to reunite their son with his guide before it is too late. We are seeking this injunction because, if Guide DiNozzo is allowed to bond with his pro tem partner before the case against his Alpha Sentinel is settled, it will be too late to reverse the damage that Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden’s interference has caused, even if he is found guilty.

“Thank you.”

Ms. Calhoun sat down.

The judge eyed her sourly for a moment, radiating anger, frustration, and a hint of sadness, and in that moment, Blair had the feeling that someone or something else was pressuring Judge Bright to handle this case in a certain way, and that she was not happy about it.

Blair frowned, disturbed. As an omega guide and a shaman, his premonitions were rarely if ever wrong, but in the end, they were just premonitions. They were not grounds to interrupt a court hearing.

“Thank you, Ms. Calhoun,” Judge Bright bit out before turning to Shirley. “Ms. Schmidt, your opening statement please.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Shirley said smoothly, rising to her feet. “As your honor alluded to a few minutes ago, I had the privilege of being present when the US Supreme Court ruled on Guides vs. The Sentinel and Guide Center of Greater Boston. I was there because, at the time, I was working for the only firm in Boston that was crazy enough and desperate enough to take on an S&G Center. We had agreed to represent fifty-three Boston guides who had been pressured, coerced, or, in some cases, outright forced into a bond by representatives of the Boston S&G Center, contrary to the laws against bond interference. A year and five trials later, the case ended up before the Supreme Court.

“I ended up arguing the Supreme Court case because my senior counterpart had run his car into a telephone pole the night prior, which, as your honor pointed out, has made me something of a celebrity in the field of sentinel and guide law. However I would like to set the record straight by saying that the Supreme Court’s decision had absolutely nothing to do with me or my skills as a lawyer. I was young and inexperienced, and now, with the benefit of over three decades of hindsight, I can say with absolute confidence that I handled the case terribly. However, the Supreme Court managed to see past my youthful incompetence and, instead, listened to the testimony of my clients and to the United States Constitution. They ruled in favor of Boston’s guides, and the Boston Center was found guilty of fifty-three counts of bond interference.
“Today, I am a much better lawyer than I was thirty-three years, and I am honored to use that experience to uphold the decision that twelve amazing, upstanding judges came to in spite of me: that each and every guide has the right to decide when and with whom to bond, no matter the circumstances.

“That being said, I am not insensitive to the tragic circumstances surrounding today’s hearing. I am deeply moved by Sentinel Aronson’s situation, and my heart goes out to his family in this difficult time. Ms. Calhoun has painted a thorough and comprehensive picture of Sentinel Aronson’s condition and of his history with Guide DiNozzo, and I have no intention of disrespecting him or his loved ones by casting doubt on her story or aspersions on Sentinel Aronson himself. It is not, after all, for this court to determine why the relationship between Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel Aronson fell apart, or apportion blame, or argue justification.

“It is not for us to determine because, from the standpoint of the law, it does not matter whether the disagreement that led to Guide DiNozzo breaking his precord with Sentinel Aronson was minor or major, whether his decision to cut off all contact with Sentinel Aronson was well- or poorly-considered, or whether his repeated refusals to reconsider forming a bond with Sentinel Aronson have been made with or without support or counselling from an S&G Center. What matters is that Guide DiNozzo chose to break his precord with Sentinel Aronson. What matters is that, despite the repeated efforts of the Philadelphia Sentinel and Guide Center to get him to change his mind, efforts that, in my opinion, border on harassment, and which Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden has, as his pride Alpha, elected to shield him from, he chose not to reverse that decision. What matters is that, when he met another sentinel, who, against all odds, was also a perfect match for him, he chose to form an accord with him. What matters is that, after due consideration, he has chosen to turn his accord with Sentinel O’Neill into a bond.

“It is not our responsibility to decide whether Guide DiNozzo’s choices are the right choices. If it were, we would have to do the unthinkable, to weigh one man’s life against another man’s freedom and decide which is worth more. Such a task would be intolerable. Fortunately, that kind of judgement is not within the purview of the law. No, our job today is much simpler: to decide how best to defend Guide DiNozzo’s freedom to make choices, to uphold his rights over his own body and his own mind as granted by US law and defended by the laws of the Sentinel and Guides’ Union and the International Council of Sentinels and Guides.

“Guide DiNozzo has chosen when and with whom he wishes to bond, as is his right under the law. It is our position, as well as the position of the Sentinel and Guides’ Union, that granting this injunction would violate that right and would, despite the careful wording of the request, constitute bond interference. We further hold that granting this injunction might well do substantial harm to Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel O’Neill, while it would in no way better Sentinel Aronson’s situation. Finally, we are confident that, based on Guide DiNozzo’s testimony, there is little chance that the case against Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden will succeed on its merits.

“Thank you.”

“Thank you, Ms. Schmidt,” Judge Bright said. “Ms. Calhoun, your first witness?”

Blair settled more comfortably into his chair. He had gotten a better handle on his weird suspicions regarding Judge Bright during Shirley’s (kickass) opening statement, and it felt more like a case of subtle suggestion than outright threats or blackmail, which didn’t make him feel a whole lot better about the situation, but at least meant that they had a shot at persuading the judge to do the right thing.

Although he would have to significantly change his strategy when Shirley called him to testify. He
had originally intended to downplay the political implications of his position in favor of his professional expertise, but now he thought it would probably be wise to let Judge Bright know that, whoever was leaning on her about this case, he had the power to make them sorry they were ever born.

Judging by how irritated she was, Judge Bright did not like being pressured by anyone, and would be more than happy to see them burn. Blair liked her already.

Ms. Calhoun called one of the two coordinators who had been handling Jake’s case at the Philadelphia Center, Sentinel Helen Parks to the stand, and Blair listened with half an ear as she described in more detail Sentinel Aronson’s background and the information the Philadelphia Center had on record concerning his interactions with Tony.

He perked up a little when Ms. Calhoun asked her to relate the Philadelphia Center’s more recent interactions with A.J., curious to see how she would present it, considering that her pride’s alphas had been vehement in their objections to this case, despite their dogged support of Sentinel Aronson. Felicia in particular had been incensed, and had called Blair personally after the lawsuit was filed and ranted in his ear for the better part of an hour.

Sentinel Parks grimaced.

“We— made a mistake when we came to D.C. to talk to Guide DiNozzo,” she said reluctantly, and it was clear to everyone, mundane and gifted alike, how much it pained her to have to admit that. “Technically speaking, he was no longer under our auspices, despite the fact that he was part of our pride for several years, and we shouldn’t have gone to see him in an official capacity without informing his current Alphas. Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden chose to… make an example of us. I have since been told by my own alphas that they wouldn’t necessarily have done any different in his place, but it did mean that we never got to talk directly to Guide DiNozzo. Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden told us exactly what we were and were not allowed to say and do before he allowed Guide DiNozzo in the room, and when we had finished, he kicked us out pretty much right away. I believe his exact words were, ‘I don’t want to see you in D.C. again for a long, long time. In fact, I think your entire pride should steer clear of this city until I start feeling better about you.’”

Blair had to stifle a snort of laughter. Yup, that sounded like A.J. alright. The man was famous for his put-downs, and if Blair hadn’t already heard Tony’s side of the story, he might actually have been worried that the D.C. Alpha had bulldozed over Parks and Liu a little too effectively and, maybe, influenced Tony’s decision more than he should have.

Parks’s testimony continued, but her description of the Philadelphia Center’s continued efforts to contact Tony held few surprises for Blair, who had actually been cc’d on most the back-and-forth between them, and at length, Ms. Calhoun said she had no more questions and sat down. Shirley stood.

“Your honor, the defense requests that Sentinel Parks’s guide, Guide Liu, take the stand for our cross-examination,” she said.

“Objection, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said, getting immediately to her feet. “While it is true that Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu legally comprise a single entity, they are not the same person, and are not interchangeable. If the defense wishes to question Guide Liu, they should call him as part of their case.”

“Your honor, I wish to elicit testimony on a matter of psionic observation,” Shirley said. “As such, and in keeping with the standard practices surrounding the testimony of bonded pairs, I require the guide half of the legal entity that is Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu.”
“Nice try, counsellor, but the law is clear,” Judge Bright said to Ms. Calhoun. “A sentinel and guide are separate halves of a whole, and their testimonies are considered complementary, but cohesive in a court of law. Sentinel Parks, you may stand down. Bailiff, please swear in Guide Liu.”

Guide Liu was sworn in, and Blair winced at the deep discomfort and resignation in his empathic profile. He sat down, and Shirley approached the witness stand.

“Guide Liu, during the course of your meeting with Guide DiNozzo, Alpha Guide Rabb did an empathic interview with him to determine whether a bond with Sentinel Aronson would be viable, is that right?” she asked.


“What were the results of that interview?” Shirley asked.

“That, based on Guide DiNozzo’s psionic profile, it was unlikely that he would be able to bond with Jake,” Guide Liu answered. “He believed that Guide DiNozzo would need another guide to force the bond between them, which, as we know, is damaging to both the guide and the sentinel.”

“And, based on your own empathic observations during that interview, do you agree with Alpha Guide Rabb’s assessment?” Shirley continued.

Guide Liu closed his eyes. Ms. Calhoun remained impassive, but her empathic profile indicated that she knew she had lost this round.

“Yes,” Guide Liu said.

“Can you elaborate, Guide Liu?” Shirley asked. “Why, according to your empathic impression, would Guide DiNozzo have been unable to bond with Sentinel Aronson of his own accord?”

“Guide DiNozzo is a very dynamic and powerful guide,” Guide Liu said. “His empathic presence is— fluid. Open. However, when Alpha Guide Rabb asked him to think about Jake, his psionic landscape— changed drastically. It closed off and became— hard, impenetrable. Dangerous. His psionic awareness has created an impressive and uncharacteristically ruthless set of defenses in his psionic landscape, defenses with the sole purpose of preventing Jake from ever coming anywhere near him on a psionic level.”

“I see,” Shirley said. “I realize that this seems an obvious question, but can you explain how, exactly, would this make it impossible for Guide DiNozzo to bond with Sentinel Aronson on his own?”

Guide Liu swallowed.

“Bonding is— intimate,” he said, “Both physically and spiritually. In order to bond with a sentinel, a guide has to let down their defenses and allow the sentinel full access to their psionic landscape. Even when both parties are fully committed to the process it is— challenging and often frightening. Considering the lengths Tony’s psionic awareness has gone to to deny Jake such access, it would take a shaman to penetrate his defenses and form a connection between them. The experience would be— painful in the extreme. For both him and Jake.”

“Thank you, Guide Liu,” Shirley said softly. “No further questions, your honor.”

Guide Liu was dismissed and Ms. Calhoun called Dr. Randall Mercer.
Blair hadn’t exactly been surprised to see Randall’s name on the witness list, although he did think that calling him was a shameless bit of showboating, since he had consulted on Jake’s case, but wasn’t Jake’s primary doctor. Randall was one of the foremost experts in S&G medicine in the world, which was wonderful, but he also knew it, which was annoying, especially since he was a guide and kind of projected his smugness everywhere when he wasn’t being careful. Blair had tried very hard over the years to like him, but had mostly failed, while Randall had tried very hard to ignore Blair’s existence, and had also failed. Fortunately, Randall worked out of Duke University Hospital in North Carolina, while Blair lived in Cascade, Washington, so they rarely had to cross paths.

Ms. Calhoun began with a series of questions designed to explain CIS to someone who was not familiar with the condition (which did not, unfortunately, include Blair, who, as Alpha Prime Guide of North America, knew more about it than he had ever wanted to). Randall described the condition, its symptoms, and its treatment in clear precise detail.

“So, Dr. Mercer,” Ms. Calhoun said finally, “If I understand you correctly, Jake Aronson’s only option at this point is a bond with a guide.”

“That is correct,” Randall said, managing to appear both superior and humble at the self-same time (Blair was pretty certain he practiced in a mirror to get that particular effect, but he’d never managed to prove it).

“But, if he did bond with a guide, he could expect a significant, if not a full, recovery, is that right?” Ms. Calhoun asked.

“Yes,” Randall said.

“No more questions, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said.

“Your witness, Ms. Schmidt,” the judge said.

“Thank you, your honor,” Shirley said, standing. “Dr. Mercer, could you, in your capacity as an expert in sentinel and guide medicine, please describe the typical effects of a forced bond on a sentinel and a guide pair?”

“I’m not quite sure what you mean,” Randall said, frowning ponderously, and Blair had to resist the urge to facepalm at his show of sober consideration. “I’m not sure that anything can be described as ‘typical’ when it comes to sentinels and guides. Each of us is unique, and no one of us can be expected to react the same as another.”

Blair wanted to throttle Randall, but Shirley merely smiled graciously.

“Of course,” she said. “However, as I understand it, sentinels and guides in forced bonds tend to react in ways that, while not identical, are similar enough for the International Council to discourage, if not outright condemn, the practice. Can you explain the medical rationale behind the Council’s position?”

Randall nodded agreeably, but his empathic profile was disgruntled. Blair cheered inwardly.

“A typical assisted bond,” he said pompously, emphasizing the euphemism that the USSR’s Guide Service had embraced without a trace of apology, “Is formed when a high level guide uses his or her psionic capabilities to help bring down another guide’s psionic defenses and then manually forges a connection between them and their intended sentinel. While some guides experience little or no discomfort from the resulting bond, many find it irritating or even painful. In certain cases,
the pain is so acute that it has compromised a guide’s psionic abilities or, in extreme instances, their sanity.”

“I see,” Shirley said coolly. “And what of the sentinels in these ‘assisted’ bonds? What types of reactions do they display?”

“Again, it varies widely,” Randall said. “However, it has been observed that, in the cases where the bond is markedly uncomfortable for the guide, the sentinel can either become depressed or, at the opposite end of the spectrum, psychotic. Again in extreme cases, these reactions can lead to suicide or dormancy.”

“I see,” Shirley said again, her voice becoming even cooler. “And why is that?”

Randall looked distinctly uncomfortable, and his psionic profile showed that his humanity had finally managed to break through his hubris.

“Because sentinels are hardwired to protect their guides,” he said quietly. “If their guide is in pain, they have an instinctual need to eliminate the cause. When the cause is the sentinel themselves—well, ultimately, the only options left to them are to remove themselves from the bond by taking their own lives, or to shut down their empathy so that they can no longer feel their guide’s pain. To, in other words, become a psychopath. And, as we know, if a sentinel reaches a point where they are a threat to the tribe on the level that a psychopath is, they go dormant.”

“Thank you, Dr. Mercer,” Shirley said. “And, when you say that guides suffer severe pain from an assisted bond in ‘certain cases,’ how many cases are we talking here? Ten percent of assisted bonds? Fifteen? Twenty?”

Randall paled.

“No,” he said. “More than that, I’m afraid.”

“How much more, Mr. Mercer?” Shirley insisted.

Randall closed his eyes.

“Eighty-nine percent,” he said, swallowing hard.

“I see,” Shirley said, and this time, it was positively glacial. “This being so, would you recommend such a bond for Sentinel Aronson, even considering his condition?”

Randall managed to rally a little.

“I’m afraid I can’t begin to—” he began.

“Yes or no, Dr. Mercer,” Shirley said, her voice suddenly loud in the courtroom.

“Objection, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said. “Badgering the witness.”

“While this hardly constitutes badgering, this is a hearing, not a trial, and I think I can trust myself not to be prejudiced by some extraneous elements in the testimony,” Judge Bright said. “Ms. Schmidt, I can hardly be expected to receive any benefit from Dr. Mercer’s expertise if he isn’t allowed to share it. However, I promise you, I will allow the same leeway during your expert witness’s testimony.”

“Very well, your honor,” Shirley said. “You may continue, Dr. Mercer.”
“I can’t say what I would recommend without being able to assess the actual participants and seeing them interact empathically,” Randall said. “While it is true that many—most—assisted bonds have a detrimental effect on the sentinel and guide pair, that still leaves eleven percent who have no ill effects and, in some cases, actively benefit. After all, for some guides, such as those who have suffered severe empathic trauma and cannot lower their shields by themselves, it is actually necessary.”

“So you would—what—recommend that Sentinel Aronson form an assisted bond on the eleven percent chance it wouldn’t prove catastrophic?” Shirley demanded.

“No, of course not!” Randall said indignantly. “There are factors that a trained guide can identify that, in most cases, can predict whether an assisted bond would be detrimental. However, like I said, without seeing the potential pair interact psionically, I cannot say whether or not those factors are present.”

“Thank you, Dr. Mercer,” Shirley said. “No further questions.

“Very well,” Judge Bright said. “Ms. Calhoun, your next witness?”

“The plaintiffs call Joseph Aronson, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said.

Blair mentally braced himself. Mr. Aronson’s empathic profile could best be described as grief-stricken, and actually hearing him speak about his son was going to be difficult for Blair and agonizing for Tony.

Mr. Aronson was sworn in, and Ms. Calhoun asked him to describe his son’s awakening and diagnosis.

“Jake—Jake was always—driven,” Mr. Aronson said, his voice hoarse. “When he awakened—he hadn’t expected it, of course, I’m not sure if anybody does, but he—well, he was surprised and, I think, a little bit put out. He hadn’t planned on it, you know? But he was determined that, if he was going to be a sentinel as well as a doctor, he was going to make the most of it. So, on the advice of several of his attending physicians, he switched his specialty to from emergency medicine to surgery, where his senses would give him the greatest advantage. As for the diagnosis—he refused to dwell on it, or let it hold him back. I know it was difficult for him, especially later, when it started interfering with his ability to perform even normal surgeries, but he—he rarely spoke of it, even to me.”

“Tell us about your son’s career before his condition forced him to go on permanent sabbatical, Mr. Aronson,” Ms. Calhoun said.

Mr. Aronson offered a watery smile.

“He was ranked the second best heart surgeon in the country,” he said. “He’s never been one to boast, but a colleague of his once told me that he personally had saved more lives that month than the entire hospital had lost.”

“Congratulations, Mr. Aronson,” Ms. Calhoun said softly. “That is—an amazing tribute to your son’s skill and dedication.”

“Thank you,” Mr. Aronson said.

“Can you tell me about the period after your son lost his guide?” Ms. Calhoun asked gently.

Mr. Aronson paled and closed his eyes.
“It was— it was— I have never seen him so angry, or so devastated, not even when he stopped being able to perform sentinel-rated surgeries,” he said. “For two years, he couldn’t even talk about it without yelling or— or crying. Then, when it became clear that his health was deteriorating and the Center told him he needed to start a guide search, he just… he stopped yelling or crying about anything. It was as though he had just— shut down. He tried several guides, but… none of them could offer him a strong enough connection to return to surgery, and he refused to accept anything less. Like I said, he’s… very driven. His mother and I begged him, but…”

Mr. Aronson broke off, unable to continue.

“Thank you, Mr. Aronson,” Ms. Calhoun said softly. “No further questions, your honor.”

“Thank you, Ms. Calhoun,” Judge Bright said, and Blair could see her anger and her sympathy, like a red and blue aurora shimmering in the air around her. “Ms. Schmidt, your witness.

Shirley stood, straightening her blazer, and spoke softly.

“Thank you, your honor. Just one question. What did your son say, Mr. Aronson, when you told him that you were planning to bring this case against Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden and, by extension, Guide DiNozzo?”

Mr. Aronson let out a muffled sob and Blair closed his eyes in empathic sympathy.

“He begged me not to,” Mr. Aronson cried. “He said, ‘Dad, please don’t do this.’ I tried— I tried to reason with him, to explain that we were just trying to— to get him his guide back, but he said that, even if Guide DiNozzo did come back, it wouldn’t do any good. He said— he said it wasn’t his guide’s fault. That he’d been told when he decided to become a surgeon that the job had to come before everything, before his family, before even his guide, and that he’d accepted that, but that his guide had never made that commitment.”

Blair clenched his teeth as anger swept over him. He was going to hunt down every single attending Jake Aronson had ever had to find out who had told him that, and he was going to ruin them. No wonder the man hadn’t been able to bond, either with his guide, or with any other. A sentinel was supposed to put their guide first, like Randall said. One who wouldn’t or couldn’t would feel wrong to any guide who tried to bond with them.

“He said he’d been angry at first, but that now, he could see that his guide had needed to come first in his life, and that as much as it hurt, he couldn’t really blame him for that,” Mr. Aronson continued. “He said— oh God. He said that maybe, if he’d made different choices, or if he hadn’t gotten sick, things would have been different. He had this fantasy of a life where he’d stayed in emergency medicine, and when he met Tony, the two of them went off to work with Doctors Without Borders or the World Health Organization. I— he sounded so happy, when he was describing it: him fixing people up with boiled water and sewing threat, his guide protecting the camp from jaguars and negotiating with warlords. But that wasn’t what happened, and— he said he’d accepted that. That it just wasn’t meant to be.”

There was a long, ringing silence.

“Thank you, Mr. Aronson,” Shirley said softly, her voice cracking a little. “No further questions.”

At the defense table, Tony’s empathic profile was a hair’s breadth away from a complete meltdown.

Judge Bright cleared her throat.
“Ms. Calhoun, do you have any more witnesses?” she asked.

“No, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said, subdued.

“Then we will take a recess before we hear from the defence,” Judge Bright declared. “We will reconvene in an hour. Dismissed.”
The Law of the Land

Chapter Notes

The Law of the Land: the laws and statutes in effect in a country, province, or region. In most, but not all, cases, sentinel and guide law now supersedes the law of the land in all countries that hold a seat on the United Nations.

Blair Sandburg was awesome.

Tony had figured that out almost as soon as he had met him. It hadn’t just been the spit-take he’d done when Tony’s mouth had gotten away from him, it had been the way he embraced every single thing that happened—even the sucky parts—with exuberance and good humor.

For instance, when he’d done a median scan of Tony as part of their preparations for the hearing (and the fact that he could do one without his sentinel even being in the same time zone was so impressive Tony didn’t even know where to start), he’d come across something in Tony’s psionic landscape that was left-over from the whole plague thing. He’d asked about it, and when Tony had explained, Blair had blinked rapidly, shaken his curly head, and said, ‘Really? You play with guns and explosives day in and day out, but the thing that ends up handing you your ass is a bacteria from the Dark Ages? Dude, I can’t even. Your karma is so far out, it might as well be in the Oort cloud, man.”

Still, Tony could have gone all week without hearing the quirky, enthusiastic Alpha Prime Guide tell them over sandwiches and coffee at the generic cafe across the street from the courthouse, that the judge in their case was being influenced by a person or persons unknown.

Seriously, all week.

Fortunately, Shirley had stepped out to deal with a problem back in Boston involving her law firm, a whirlwind engagement, and some guy called Denny, or the ethical conflicts would have been mind blowing.

“And the fun just doesn’t stop,” Jack said, and Tony could feel his anger, which had been simmering all day, heating up towards a slow boil.

“What is it with you guys?” Harm huffed out in exasperation, glaring at Jack and Tony. “You just seem to attract crazy.”

Tony gave him a wounded look, but his heart wasn’t in it.

“Any idea how or why someone’s leaning on our friend the judge?” A.J. asked Blair, his tone mild, his affect calculating.

Blair shrugged.

“ Heck no, man,” he said. “It’s subtle as hell. If I wasn’t—well, who and what I am, I would never have even picked up on it.”

“What can we do about it?” Jack demanded.
Clearly, he was itching for a fight, but there was a dearth of targets in their immediate vicinity.

“Not much,” Blair said ruefully. “It’s not outright corruption, you know? If it were, I could report it to the Attorney General. The US isn’t perfect, no way, but it’s not one of those countries that doesn’t allow guides to speak up when something’s wrong. We learned that lesson during the American Revolution, man. Ten guides over five months said we couldn’t trust Benedict Arnold, and lo and behold—”

“Wait, go back,” Tony said. “You said you could report corruption to— oh, son of a bitch.”

“What?” Jack asked, going from ‘code yellow’ to ‘defcon 5’ in a matter of microseconds.

“Hang on,” Tony said, digging out his headset and hitting the speed-dial for HERA’s computer lab on his phone. “Hello, my Dark Goddess of All Things Technical, it’s Tony. Can you check something for me?”

“Of course, my Italian Stallion,” Garcia purred on the other end. “What can I do ya for?”

“Hey!” Tony protested, blushing. “Save it for Agent Morgan.”

The day after Derek Morgan had had his— messy come-to-Mama moment in HERA’s waiting room, Penelope Garcia had come to work positively incandescent with happiness and sexual satisfaction. Tony had had trouble looking her in the eye since.

“So,” Tony went on, “I need to know if our friend the DAG has had any contact with the judge that’s hearing our case, Judge Bright.”

“Yes, your wish is my command, mon capitaine,” Garcia said. “Checking... bingo. The private cell that the NID had flagged as the DAG’s not-so-up-and-up-business line was used to call Judge Bright the same day she got the injunction request.”

“Shit,” Tony said. “That’s— okay. Can you go deeper? See whether he’s been involved in this lawsuit at any other point?”

“Of course,” Garcia said, and he heard furious typing. “Okay, nothing on his phone records or in his social calendar, but every slimeball has friends, and it takes more than a few degrees of separation defeat me— there. The judge who denied Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden’s demurrer when the case was first filed played golf with the DAG’s good buddy Halifax Malone, III the day before the paperwork hit his desk. It wouldn’t hold up in a court of law, but I think it’s safe to say that our friend the Deputy Attorney General has had his snakey little fingers all over this.”

“Damn!” Tony swore. “Thanks Goddess. Send this to the Professor, see if it changes anything. And while you’re at it, can you check and see if the DAG or his good buddies have been— interested in anyone else on our side, or if it’s just us?”


She hung up, and Tony removed his headset.

“Well, that sucks on toast,” Jack remarked, his anger going from slow boil to fast boil.

A.J. nodded, frowning thunderously.

“Uh, for those of us who don’t have sentinel hearing, what the fuck just happened?” Harm asked.
“Um, well, uh—” Tony began.

“Apparently, the DAG has been— co opted by the terrorist organization Tony and I are in the process of taking down,” Jack interrupted bluntly. “We’re gonna keep pretending that you guys don’t know the details, even though you all do, because operational security keeps Davis happy. The DAG has been in contact, directly or indirectly, with a couple of judges in the lawsuit— Bright and the judge who rejected A.J.’s demurrer— which implies that Calhoun’s legal smarts aren’t the only reason this case has made it this far. The thing that’s bugging the fuck outa me, though, is I can’t figure out why they’re bothering. What the hell do they think they’re gonna accomplish here, besides pissing off every sentinel and guide in the US and half the ones in other countries? It’s not like they can actually keep Tony and me from bonding, so what’s the goal?”

“Sounds like a diversion to me,” A.J. rumbled, his frown growing, if possible, more forbidding.

“Yeah,” Tony agreed. “Something to keep you distracted, keep you off-balance while they get on with whatever their real plan is.”

“Their real plan being?” Jack asked.

“Well, we know they’ve got several plans in the works,” Tony said. “I don’t really have enough pieces of the puzzle to say exactly where this fits into them yet, but I can imagine some likely scenarios. I will say, I don’t think this can be the lynchpin to anything. There’s too many variables, too many different things they would have had to control to make it happen. No, I think this is more of a case of seizing an opportunity: the Aronsons filed the case, and they gave it a helpful little push. Which would mean that they’re watching you—or us—and keeping an eye out for ways to keep us busy and not paying attention to them.”

“If that’s the case, have they already accomplished their objective just by getting us all here?” Harm asked. “I mean, win or lose, just going to court is a— distraction.”

“Well, of course, the ideal scenario for them is that we lose,” Tony said. “Maximum amount of upset, maximum amount of distraction. But, again, it’s a lot harder to guarantee a specific outcome than it is to get a hearing. I mean, right now, all they’ve actually done is say to a few judges, ‘hey, do me a favor, don’t dismiss this case, slash, this injunction out of hand like it deserves because blah.’ It’s ethically shady, but it’s not illegal or even particularly noteworthy. I feel like there’s just not a big enough payout here, even if they won the injunction, for them to actually go any further. After all, worst case scenario, we lose, we bond anyways, and Blair points out politely that the court can fuck off, because a sentinel and a guide can’t legally be penalized for bonding. My instincts say, that’s not enough incentive to actually go the trouble of coercing an unfair ruling.”

“Which instincts?” Blair asked curiously. “Cop instincts or guide instincts? Because Jim says it doesn’t matter, ‘cause the end results are basically the same, but it’s, like, totally different kinds of information, man.”

Tony remembered that Blair and his sentinel were cops as well as the Alpha Primes, and blushed a little.

“Neither, actually,” he admitted. “See, um, when I was working for the mob—”

The reaction to this statement was immediate and dramatic.

“Whoa!”

“Wait!”
“What?”

“Oh man!”

Tony blinked sheepishly.

“…Oops?” he said.

“Tony, you can’t just say things like that!” Jack said sternly.

“I thought I told you guys about it,” he said, waving weakly at Jack and the D.C. Alphas. “It was—right after the whole thing with Jake, didn’t I mention how I went undercover to get away from him and the Center?”

“NO!” all three of them chorused.

“Oh,” Tony said, scratching the back of his neck in embarrassment. “Well… I did. And I ended up—so, have you guys heard of Mikey Macaluso?”

“Philadelphia Mob boss?” Blair said. “Got busted about six years back, took a significant part of Philadelphia’s organized crime with him?”

“Yeah, um, well, I was kinda the one who gathered the evidence that got him convicted,” Tony said. “I went undercover in his organization, and it turned out that he, um, really liked me—kinda thought of me as another son, ya know? Which means he was pretty livid when he found out I was a cop—nobody can hurt you like family, right? Except, funny story, since he’s been in prison, he’s had, like, some sort of epiphany. He realized that life was too short to hold grudges, so he decided to forgive me and bring me back into the family, even if I am a fed, not a mobster, and now he writes to me all the time, gives me advice on dating and food and how to catch criminals…”

“Oh my God,” Blair said. “Wait ‘til I tell Jim that there’s a guide out there that is even more attractive to all the crazy psychos than I am! This is, like, kismet, man.”

Jack dropped his face into his hands.

“Jesus,” he moaned. “It’s Danny all over again. Only on acid, with fifty percent more mystical mojo. What the heck did I do to deserve this?”

A.J. put a hand on his shoulder and squeezed it commiseratingly.

“So, back to how this ties in with your terrorist friends?” Harm said, rubbing his temples.

“Yeah, so Mike used to tell me not to waste effort breaking the law unless I was sure it was worth it,” Tony said, then dropped his voice and let his enunciation fall into Mike’s Philadelphia Italian accent (the guy had never been to Italy in his life, he’d just watched way too many episodes of The Godfather). “‘Crime, it’s a pain in the ass, Tonio. It’s messy, you understand? Draws attention. Requires…clean-up. So much easier to avoid breaking the law until you really need to. A nudge here, a few dollars there, a word to the right person—ecco! Everything is as it should be, and there is no trouble.’”

There was a brief silence while everyone digested this.

“There is, like, so much I wanna say about this,” Blair said finally. “But I’m gonna leave it for now. Just don’t think we’re not gonna revisit this down the road, because man! But right this moment, we’re gonna focus on figuring out what this means for us in terms of the case.”
“If Tony’s— friend is right, they’re not gonna actually lean on the judge to rule against us,” A.J. said. “They probably just asked her to hear the case and are gonna let it play out. I can’t be the only one who gets the sense Judge Bright woulda liked nothing more than to dismiss this injunction with prejudice the minute she saw it.”

“I agree,” Blair said. “It would explain what I’m feeling from here: she’s frustrated and pissed off, but not guilty or conflicted. I’d compare it to, say, having to go to a cocktail party with all the people you don’t like on a night the Jags are in the playoffs.”

“So what now?” Tony asked. “We just— what? Make our case so the judge can do what she wanted to do in the first place?”

“I think so,” Blair said. “I mean, nothing is ever certain, but that feels like the way to go.”

“Jesus Christ,” Jack said, turning to Harm and A.J. with an appalled look on his face. “You realize what that pretty much means, based on Shirley’s witness list? Our plan here is basically to set two of the most trouble-prone guides in the world lose in a courtroom and see what happens.”

“Hey!” Blair protested.

“No fair!” Tony whined.

“We’re all going to regret this, aren’t we?” Harm said ruefully.

Soon after that, Shirley returned from her phone call and the group headed back to the courthouse. Tony, who had been temporarily distracted during lunch when he had some concrete investigating to do, felt his anxiety and anger returning full force as soon as they took their seats. Jack gave him a sharp look, then reached over and took his hand.

“Synch up with me,” he murmured.

Tony’s eyes widened, but he did as he was told, and found that, the moment his breathing and heart rate shifted to match Jack’s, his emotions became much more manageable.

“Think you can hold that until this is all over?” Jack asked.

Tony nodded. Jack had been right when he’d said that, once he’d harmonized his psionic field with someone else’s, it was ridiculously easy for him to stay that way.

The judge called the courtroom to order, and Shirley called Tony as her first witness. Still breathing in synchrony with his sentinel, Tony stood and walked confidently to the witness box, where he went through the familiar process of being sworn in.

“That’s it, he thought, I can do this. It’s no different from testifying on one of the team’s cases.

He sat down, and Shirley had him recite his history with Jake and the Philadelphia S&G Center from his perspective, stopping him now and again to clarify some detail, but mostly letting Tony tell the story. As she’d directed during their preparation session, he kept the story brief and factual, focusing mostly on his interactions with the Center and not dwelling on either the breaking of the precord or the reasons for it. When they reached the point in the story where Parks and Liu had shown up at NCIS, her questions became more frequent and detailed.

“So Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden and Alpha Guide Rabb came to NCIS to sit in on the meeting between you and the representatives from the Philadelphia Center at the request of your team leader?” she said.
“Yes,” Tony said. “I was out in the field when Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu arrived at NCIS. My understanding is that they asked to speak to me on a matter of Union business, and Agent Gibbs became suspicious. He was already aware I was receiving some— unwanted communication from the Philadelphia Center, and he was also aware that, as members of a different pride, Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu shouldn’t have been there in that capacity. He called Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden, then kept me out in the field until he and Alpha Guide Rabb could get there.”

“And at that point, neither Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden or Agent Gibbs were concerned about anything except the breach of pride protocol?” Shirley asked.

“Well, Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden wasn’t,” Tony said. “Agent Gibbs was concerned that Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu— and me, for that matter— were acting in a suspicious manner. He doesn’t like it when people start acting in a suspicious manner, it makes his gut instincts go crazy.”

“Fair enough,” Shirley said with a smile. “But neither of them were aware of your previous association with Sentinel Aronson or the reason the Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu were in D.C. on that particular day?”

“No,” Tony said.

“So Alpha Chegwidden did not go to NCIS in order to prevent you bonding?” Shirley said.

“No,” Tony said again.

Shirley nodded and moved on.

“Can you describe the meeting between yourself, your Alphas, and Guide Parks and Guide Liu?”

Tony did so, ruthlessly suppressing his emotional reactions to the memory and focusing on the bare facts. When he had finished, Shirley said,

“Did Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden at any point express any opinion about whether you should agree to return to Philadelphia or bond with Sentinel Aronson?”

“Obliquely,” Tony said. “After Alpha Guide Rabb did the empathic interview to assess my bond potential with Sentinel Aronson, he advised me that, based on the results of that interview, no guide from the D.C. pride would offer assistance in forming a bond between me and Sentinel Aronson. However, he did make a point of saying that, if I chose to do it anyways, the pride would honor the bonding. I… got the impression he didn’t think much of my chances of pulling it off, considering how upset the empathic interview got me, but that was just my impression.”

“Did he at any point forbid you from bonding with Sentinel Aronson?” Shirley pressed.

“No,” Tony said.


They went through the rest of the story, touching lightly on Tony meeting Jack, until they reached the point where Tony had been served with the notice of the Aronson’s petition for the injunction.

“Why did Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden agree to handle all communication with the Philadelphia Center after Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu’s visit?” Shirley asked when the story was done.

“Objection, your honor,” Calhoun said, standing up. “Calls for speculation.”
“I’ll rephrase,” Shirley said. “Do you know why Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden agreed to handle all communication with the Philadelphia Center?”

“Well, technically, that’s his job,” Tony said. “But in this case— well, it’s not like I could exactly hide from him or Alpha Guide Rabb how upset I was over the whole situation, or how much I hated the idea of even setting foot back to Philadelphia. Mostly, I talked to Alpha Guide Rabb about it, but those conversations were all within Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden’s hearing, so he knew that any kind of contact from them was not going to be good for my empathic well-being. He made it clear, both to me and to the Philadelphia pride, that all further communication was to go through him as my Alpha Sentinel. I admit, I was— pathetically grateful to have him act as the middleman.”

“Why was that?” Shirley asked gently.

Tony swallowed and concentrated on his pulse, which was still beating in time with Jack’s.

“Because I knew, rationally, that I couldn’t bond with Sentinel Aronson— or I could, but that it would almost definitely end with both of us dead or insane— but I also didn’t want to,” Tony said. “I felt guilty for that, even though it didn’t change anything, and talking to Sentinel Aronson’s pride— it would have been hell for me, and probably pretty painful for them as well. I mean, it’s bad enough that a member of their pride is— is in this situation without having to deal with all my issues about it.”

“So you allowed Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden to convey your wishes to the Philadelphia pride to prevent emotional trauma to yourself and to the sentinels and guides of Sentinel Aronson’s pride?” Shirley asked.

“Yes,” Tony said.

“No further questions, your honor,” Shirley said.

She sat down.

“Your witness, Ms. Calhoun,” Judge Bright said.

Now that Blair had pointed it out, Tony could feel her impatience, as though she were performing a pointless and unpleasant task and was counting the minutes until it would be completed. Having testified at many, many trials, Tony knew that judges had to have an amazingly high tolerance for stupid cases in order to do their job, so he had to think that the reason she felt this way was because she knew this petition should have been rejected, but had accepted it at the DAG’s instruction and was now just marking time until it was over.

“Thank you, your honor,” Rita Calhoun said, standing up. “Guide DiNozzo, in the Philadelphia Sentinel and Guide Center’s records, the reason given for the severing of your precord with Sentinel Aronson was ‘professional incompatibility.’ Can you explain to us exactly what that meant in this context?”

Tony drew his breath in sharply. He had been expecting the question, but he hadn’t been prepared for the sudden, desperate need coming from Jake’s father, or the blinding rage from Jake’s mother.

“Objection, your honor,” Shirley said, standing up. “Guide DiNozzo’s reasons for breaking his precord with Sentinel Aronson are not at issue here. Asking a guide to explain why they chose not to bond is akin to asking someone why they chose not to have sexual intercourse. A person’s right to deny any sort of intimacy, physical or mental, is protected in law and is not contingent on their
providing an adequate reason.”

“Your honor, I wish to ascertain whether, without Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden’s interference, Guide DiNozzo might conceivably have been able to reconcile with his sentinel,” Calhoun said. “To do that, I need to establish the circumstances under which they parted.”

Judge Bright pursed her lips.

“I’ll allow it, but tread carefully, counsellor,” she said. “Ms. Schmidt is correct, Guide DiNozzo is under no obligation to justify his choice not to bond, and any attempt to turn the questioning in that direction will not be tolerated.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Calhoun said. “Guide DiNozzo?”

Tony forced himself to concentrate on nothing but the feeling of Jack’s trust and support in his mind, separating himself from the words his mouth was forming.

“I am actually not sure how the Philadelphia Center came to list ‘professional incompatibility’ as the reason that Sentinel Aronson and I didn’t end up bonding,” he said. “I can speculate, but I never said or wrote anything to that effect in any of my communications with the Center.”

“I see,” Calhoun said. “Well then, can you tell me what led you to breaking your accord with your sentinel?”

“Ms. Calhoun, first of all, calling Sentinel Aronson my sentinel is technically incorrect,” Tony said. “He and I never actually reached a point where our connection was stable enough to have qualified as a pair, even a pro tem one. While we were, at the time, a perfect match, that alone does not make us anything more to one another than any other sentinel and guide. But, to answer the rest of your question, Sentinel Aronson and I had a violent disagreement shortly after forming the initial precord. The subject of the disagreement was how we would allocate our time once we were bonded, which may be where the Center got ‘professional incompatibility,’ though, as I said, I never said that. However, my choice not to bond was due to the manner of the disagreement, not the content. The physical aspect of the confrontation was— concerning, not only in terms of how it made me feel, but because I was a cop. My defensive reflexes— escalated the situation quickly, and while no one was hurt, they could have been. Now, I admit that the violence might have been a one-time thing, although a decade dealing with domestic violence calls makes me doubt it, but the empathic component made that… irrelevant. I couldn’t imagine having to face that kind of empathic aggression every time I had a disagreement with my bondmate.”

“How dare you!” Mrs. Aronson burst out, and Tony flinched under the weight of her rage and hatred.

He felt Jack reach out, his presence solid and warm, wrapping his psionic presence around Tony like fuzzy body armor.

It’s okay, Tiger, he said mentally, I’ve gotcha.

Tony turned to look at Jack, focusing on the blue of his eyes and the warmth of his mental presence.

“Mrs. Aronson!” Judge Bright snapped. “You will respect this court, or you will leave!”

At the defense table, Harm was whispering to Shirley. She nodded, then rose.

“Your honor, I am informed by Alpha Guide Rabb that Mrs. Aronson’s feelings towards Guide
DiNozzo have grown— intolerable. Seeing as Guide DiNozzo is not, in fact, the defendant in this case, he is not obligated to accept such conditions. We request that she be removed from the room.”

“So ordered,” Judge Bright said. “Bailiff!”

“Your honor, I protest!” Calhoun said. “Mrs. Aronson has the right to be present during—”

“Ms. Calhoun, I have made my decision,” Judge Bright said icily. “Do not force me to reiterate it.”

The bailiffs removed Mrs. Aronson. Tony concentrated on Jack. Mr. Aronson started crying.

If Tony hadn’t been in synch with Jack, he would have doubted whether this was all worth it. After all, what he wanted didn’t really matter that much in the grand scheme of things, did it? But with Jack’s heart beating in time with his and the memory of Jack pitching the hissiest of all hissy-fits at the very idea that Tony might leave him fresh in his mind, his path was clear: do not let anyone come between him and his sentinel.

“Guide DiNozzo,” Judge Bright said when Mrs. Aronson had been removed from the room, “Are you able to continue, or do you need a recess?”

Tony took a careful breath.

“I’m fine, your honor,” he said. “My sentinel is... buffering the empathic feedback.”

The spike of irritation from Calhoun when he called Jack ‘my sentinel’ was almost worth the last few minutes.

“Very well,” Judge Bright said. “Ms. Calhoun, you may continue. I suggest you move on to your next point. I think I, and Mr. Aronson, have both heard all we need to concerning the personal interactions between Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel Aronson.”

Calhoun’s irritation spiked further, but outwardly, she did not so much as twitch.

“Thank you, your honor,” she said. “Guide DiNozzo, the Philadelphia Center’s records show that you refused to speak to their counsellor after breaking your precord with Sentinel Aronson. Why was that?”

Tony pulled out every scrap of his skill as an undercover operative and forced himself... not to care. He smiled meaninglessly, and pretended he was talking about college ball as he answered.

“That was an unfortunate situation,” he said. “At that point, my shield were in pretty rough shape due to the stress of breaking the precord. The counsellor that the Center sent was incredibly invested in helping Sentinel Aronson— as she should have been, he was a member of her pride and she had been helping him deal with his CIS for years. I have no doubt that she would have done her job without letting her personal feelings influence her,” (here, Tony lied through his teeth, but hey, it was in a good cause, and he was focusing on believing in his own truthfulness so hard, he defied Blair Sandburg himself to catch him at it) “But unfortunately, without me being able to shield her out empathically, she literally couldn’t provide me with unbiased assistance. Just being in her presence was like having her shout her opinion in my ear.”

“I see,” Calhoun said silkily. “None of this is in the Center’s records, Guide DiNozzo. Why is that?”

“Because, quite honestly, after the disaster with the counsellor, I wasn’t feeling all that great about
the Philadelphia Center, or the Philadelphia pride,” Tony said. “You have to remember, I had been in the city for less than two years, and I’d had no real interactions with the Center beyond attending a few events. After they sent me an obviously—to me—biased counsellor, I was concerned that they wouldn’t take me or my wishes seriously in that situation. In hindsight, it was probably unfair to condemn the entire Center for one mistake, but on the other hand, I had no other meaningful interactions with them to base my judgment on, and I was in a very vulnerable place. It was kind of a case of better safe than sorry, so I made the decision to remove myself completely from their influence.”

Wow. Sometimes, Tony amazed even himself with the bullshit that came out of his mouth. Oh, he wasn’t lying, it was all true, he was just leaving out… well, everything that really mattered, basically. The hurt, the terror, the self-loathing, the unacknowledged hope that the undercover job might just take care of the entire problem if Mikey Macaluso happened to feel like putting a bullet in his brain (which had gone away quickly, especially after Mikey had started calling him figlio).

Calhoun was not happy, although she didn’t show it.

“And you never sought counselling for the broken precord, even after you moved to another city?” she asked.

“No,” Tony said.

“You also, as I understand it, refused mediation when Sentinel Aronson reached out to you through the Baltimore Sentinel and Guide Center several years later?” Calhoun went on.

“Yes,” Tony said.

“May I ask why?” Calhoun said mildly.

“I am tempted to say no, you may not, but I’m not sure whether I have that leeway,” Tony said. “Your honor?”

He turned to the judge.

“While it’s unorthodox for the witness to appeal directly to the bench, I have to agree, that is too close to the line I gave you earlier,” Judge Bright said, her voice sugary sweet, her psionic profile poisonous. “Move on, counsellor.”

Tony could feel Calhoun calculating, could almost see her acknowledging that she was losing this case and weighing her options. He sensed when she decided to gamble and surmised, from the genuine curiosity in her empathic profile as she prepared her next question, that she was going to break the first rule of being a trial lawyer: never ask a question unless you already know the answer.

“Guide DiNozzo, you are currently in an accord with Sentinel Jonathan O’Neill,” she said. “Tell me, do the two of you have disagreements?”

Tony blinked. Because he had counted on Calhoun sticking to the rules, he hadn’t anticipated this question at all. For the first time since taking the stand, he had a genuine emotional reaction: he laughed out loud.

“Like cat and dog,” he said, grinning stupidly over at Jack.

Wiley and Massoud took the opportunity to troll the fuck out of him him by appearing briefly on the floor in front of the defense table, engaged in a mock tussle that was made patently ridiculous
by the difference in their sizes. Massoud basically had to use his limbs to make a cage around Wiley so that his greater weight didn’t crush the coyote as they rolled across the floor.

“And when you do, how do you they usually progress?” Calhoun asked.

Tony relaxed into his chair, his anxiety easing a little after the Spirit Animals’ humorous display.

“Um, well, there’s no set formula,” he said with a laugh. “But generally there’s some yelling, some insults, a cooling-off period, and then— well, actually, I’m not going to go there. If Judge Bright wants to know how we make up, I can tell her in private.”

He flashed his most charming smile at the judge, who suppressed a snort of laughter.

“When you say ‘cooling-off’ period, what do you mean?” Calhoun asked, moving closer to the witness stand.

“I mean we slink off to our separate corners like bad dogs to think about what we’ve done,” Tony said. “Or in our case, a bad dog and a bad cat.”

“So you physically separate yourselves,” Calhoun said.

“Yes,” Tony said, wondering where this was going.

“But when you reunite, you somehow reconcile your differences,” Calhoun went on.

“You could say that,” Tony said, grinning.

“And what do you think would have happened if, after your first disagreement, you had not reunited?” Calhoun asked. “If you had both gone your separate ways and had stayed apart for, say, six and a half years?”

Aha! Tony thought. That’s where she’s headed.

“I’m confused,” Tony said aloud, playing dumb. “Are we talking, like, one of us got kidnapped or something?”

“No, Guide DiNozzo,” Calhoun snapped. “I am asking whether if, after your first disagreement with Sentinel O’Neill, you had chosen not to return to him, you might not feel the same about the prospect of reuniting with him as you currently do about reuniting with Sentinel Aronson?”

“Oh,” Tony said. “Well, I have no idea, because after our first disagreement— and our second, and our third— I chose to go back pretty quickly— most of our disagreements are about stupid stuff, you know? Basically blowing off steam. If any of them had been really bad, I might have chosen differently, or at least thought about it more, but, since that didn’t happen, I really can’t know how I would have felt in your hypothetical scenario.”

He looked the lawyer in the eye, daring her to question his choices after the judge had specifically told her not to.

She did not.

Instead she moved on:

“Sentinel O’Neill is a soldier,” she said. “I imagine that he is highly trained for physical combat. Does that ever— worry you?”
“No,” Tony said immediately. “Jack has a real chip on his shoulder about sentinels being physically aggressive with their guides. Which is actually kind of unusual, since a lot of pairs kind of— um— wrestle it out in the beginning, especially idem pairs. But he can’t stand the idea, so our disagreements never get physical. However, I can say, based on the sparring we’ve done together, that if we ever did get into a physical altercation for some reason, Jack’s training, combined with mine, would keep anybody from being seriously hurt.”

“You say that, when you fight, you trade insults,” Calhoun said, changing the subject abruptly. “What types of insults?”

“Whatever fits the occasion,” Tony said. “I believe Jack’s best one was, ‘Really? I’ve seen brain-damaged lemmings with more self-preservation instincts than you. How have managed to stay alive this long? Why don’t you just dive off the cliff and get it over with?’ That was after I pursued a suspect under less-than-ideal conditions,” (meaning, Tony had risked exposure to the Ori plague to chase a person of interest; he had come up dry, but uninfected). “I think I retaliated by telling him that he’d gotten too comfy in his cushy desk chair and had forgotten what real work looked like. See, Jack’s Air Force, and I’m a Navy cop, so Chair Force jokes are kind of a staple in our house.”

That wasn’t nearly the best example of how vicious he or Jack could be, but Tony was hardly going to tell this woman—who he really couldn’t like, even if she was just doing her job—about the really painful stuff, the times when Jack played on Tony’s insecurities and Tony attacked Jack using Jack’s affection for him.

“So Sentinel O’Neill is not always— kind,” Calhoun said.

Tony snorted.

“Are you kidding?” he said. “He’s meaner than a snake and grumpier than a bear on the best of days. But, then, I’m an obnoxious little shit who won’t leave anything alone and plays his cards so close to his vest, he sometimes loses one or two down his shirt, so I’m no picnic to live with either. ‘Kind’ isn’t really a word that describes most generals or cops, ma’am. I mean, neither of us would be very good at our jobs if all the bad guys had to do to get the better of us is say, ‘please don’t shoot me.’”

“Your honor, is there some point to this?” Shirley interrupted, standing up from the defense table. “It seems to me that Ms. Calhoun is simply using this opportunity to pry into Guide DiNozzo’s personal relationship with Sentinel O’Neill and cast aspersions on their characters. It is an invasion of his privacy, not to mention insulting, and, so far, appears to serve no purpose.”

“Agreed,” Judge Bright said. “Ms. Calhoun, get to whatever question you’re working towards or move on.”

“Guide DiNozzo,” Calhoun said coolly, “Isn’t it true that you can’t know whether you could have had a happy, successful bond with Sentinel Aronson, because after leaving in the middle of your first argument, you never even tried to reconcile with him?”

Tony sucked in a sharp breath, then let it out. He forced himself not to feel the doubt that rose up in him, and instead, to analyze the problem.

“I can’t say,” he said, his voice tight and controlled. “My perspective on this is, as you can imagine, not very objective. However, the man that I regard as the leader of my personal tribe—who, by the way, knows more about reading people than most guides can hope to learn—once told me that my potential would have been wasted in a partnership with someone who—reacts that badly to not getting their way. Knowing myself, I’m inclined to agree with him: that would have
been a bad situation for me.”

Calhoun spread her hands and looked bewildered.

“But Sentinel Aronson was your perfect match,” she said. “Isn’t the definition of a ‘perfect match’ the person who is best suited to you?”

And there it was, the thing that had been torturing Tony for six and a half years: Jake had been his perfect match. Jake had been an asshole. Didn’t that mean that Tony didn’t deserve any better?

A tug on his accord with Jack caught his attention, and Tony glanced over to the defense table. Jack caught his eye and held his gaze.

*I love you,* drifted slow and clear over the bond.

Tony turned back to Calhoun.

“You would have to ask Blair Sandburg about that, ma’am,” he said woodenly. “All I know is, I didn’t think I could handle a life bonded to Sentinel Aronson, so I chose not to bond with him. I’m pretty sure I can handle a life bonded with Sentinel O’Neill, so I have chosen to bond with him. The Constitution of the United States gives me the right to make my own choices— and my own mistakes— and this is my choice.”

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Blair held up his right hand and swore to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, without metaphysical influence, so help him God, and thought about how ridiculous it was that a country that had the separation of Church and State built into the foundation of its government still had people swear by one specific deity from one specific faith. After all, as a proud pantheist, Blair did not actually answer specifically to the Christian God (I mean, really man? That dude was, like, way to rigid and patriarchal to be able to encompass a universe as weird, whacky, diverse, and totally motherfucking dependent on maternal benevolence as the one they lived in), and would feel perfectly comfortable breaking any promise made in His name.

Not that he was planning on it, but come on, man, that was just asking for trouble.

Blair sat down, and Shirley moved to stand in the middle of the floor in front of the bench.

“Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg,” she said, her voice calm and controlled, “If this case came before you, as the Alpha Prime Guide of North America, would you grant this injunction?”

“Objection, your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said, standing. “Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg is not trying this case.”

“No, he isn’t,” Shirley said. “However, as the Alpha Prime Guide of an entire continent, he does, routinely, hear and rule on cases concerning the sentinels and guides in his territory. Since his authority over his people is federally recognized as being equal to, and in some cases superseding, that of the United States Government, I think his opinion is— uniquely relevant here.”

It was a bold move on Shirley’s part, reminding Judge Bright that her authority here was largely empty, but, Blair thought, a smart one. Mr. Aronson’s reaction, however, was somewhat
unexpected. He put his face in his hands, shame and despair coursing through him. Blair realized with a sick feeling that, even if he had been told that winning this hearing would be an empty victory, he hadn’t really registered it until now.

Judge Bright sighed wearily.

“Fair point, Ms. Schmidt,” she said. “You may proceed.”

“Thank you, your honor,” Shirley said. “Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg?”

Blair took a breath and let it out, centering himself.

“It actually already has come before me, in a manner of speaking,” he said calmly. “Both Alpha Guide Rabb and Alpha Sentinel Merrick contacted me after Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu met with Guide DiNozzo in D.C. I spoke with both of them at length concerning this situation. While the circumstances are heartbreaking, we all agreed that there were no grounds for me to step in. When Mr. and Mrs. Aronson approached the Philadelphia pride asking for help filing a claim of bond interference against Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden, Alpha Sentinel Merrick called me to make absolutely sure that Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden was within his rights to restrict access to Guide DiNozzo. I contacted Alpha Guide Rabb to confirm that Guide DiNozzo had not changed his mind about attempting to bond with Sentinel Aronson or meeting with representatives from the Philadelphia Center, and when I was told that he had not, I told Alpha Sentinel Merrick that there was no case to be made for bond interference. Neither of us expected the Aronsons to seek other counsel and pursue the case independently. I am actually… concerned, that it was possible. I already have the Union’s lawyers to look at the current laws and drafting changes to make sure that the justice system can’t be misused like this again.”

“Really?” Shirley said. “Misused? What do you mean by that, Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg?”

“The mundane justice system has always been a much-needed check on the Union’s authority,” Blair said. “Every institution needs an authority outside itself to hold it accountable should it act unjustly, or break its own laws, and the Union is no exception—you only need to look at your own case before the Supreme Court to see that. However, the mundane justice system’s position with the prides is—delicate. To put it bluntly, mundane courts only hold authority over our sentinels and guides so long as they allow them to hold authority. The language of the US Sentinel and Guides’ Charter already gives the Alpha Primes the power to either overrule a court’s decision or, barring that, claim sole jurisdiction over sentencing when it comes to our people. Because of that, most judicial matters are handled internally and never make it before a court in the first place—it is, frankly, a waste of taxpayer dollars, and it undermines the system. It would take only the very slightest of pushes—a pattern of ignorance in the mundane courts concerning our needs, a few too many nuisance cases brought against us, one or two miscarriages of justice in cases concerning our people—for the sentinels and guides of the US to decide that they will no longer answer to mundane courts at all. Because of that, it is vitally important to make sure that the cases that do make it to court are legitimate according to both mundane and sentinel and guide law. If they are not, they threaten the balance that both the mundane and the sentinel and guide communities depend on for justice and accountability.”

“And, in your opinion, this case, and the injunction associated with it, are illegitimate?” Shirley asked.

Blair took another calming breath, wishing that his sentinel was here to ground him.

“Unfortunately,” he said.
“Can you be more specific, Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg?” Shirley asked.

“Well, in the case of the lawsuit, both the sentinel and the guide concerned in the case, as well as their Alphas and their Alpha Primes, assert that there has been no bond interference,” Blair said. “Even Sentinel Parks and Guide Liu, who testified for the plaintiffs, did not claim that Alpha Sentinel Chegwidden had committed bond interference, just that he had restricted access to Guide DiNozzo. In other words, no sentinel or guide has at any point endorsed this charge, which, considering that bond interference is an exclusively sentinel and guide matter, is— fairly damning. When one community takes it upon itself to police another community, without regard for that community’s opinions or judgement— well, there’s a lot of words for that, and ‘paternalistic’ is probably the least offensive of them.

“As for the injunction— well, let’s be honest, despite the use of the word ‘delay’ rather than ‘prevent,’ it’s just bond interference with a little window dressing.”

“But, surely, asking for a pair to delay bonding isn’t the same thing as preventing them from bonding?” Shirley said, playing devil’s advocate with evident relish. “After all, many sentinels and guides never bond at all. Others maintain an accord with a partner for years before progressing to a bond— for instance, I understand that you and Alpha Prime Sentinel Ellison were pro tem partners for almost three years.”

“Yes, we were,” Blair said. “And then, our accord progressed to a place where bonding was not only inevitable, but necessary, so we bonded. Sentinels’ and guides’ biology and metaphysical alignment are very much in control when it comes to bonding, Ms. Schmidt. Asking a perfect match to delay bonding is kind of like asking a woman who is pregnant to delay giving birth. A pregnant woman cannot control exactly when she goes into labor, and a sentinel and guide pair cannot control exactly when they will need to bond. It is a natural process, and while we’ve found ways to have a certain amount of influence over it, Mother Nature is still very much in control here. And, in the case of bonding, she has one hell of an endgame if everyone doesn’t get with the program; phrenesis is no joke. If Jim and I had been asked to delay our bonding, we would have both gone into a feral bonding drive. Jim would have been compelled to physically remove any perceived obstacles to our bonding, and I would have been compelled to empathically incapacitate any obstacles he could not reach. If neither of us were too damaged when we were done, we would have bonded as soon as it was possible for us to do so.

“I see,” Shirley said. “Out of curiosity, is there any way to tell how close a pair is to phrenesis?”

“Another guide can usually get a pretty good idea how close a pair is to having to bond,” Blair said. “It’s not exact— we can’t predict in terms of days or hours or anything— but we can certainly tell the difference between ‘soon,’ ‘really soon,’ and ‘right freaking now.’ And once they get to the last stage, they have a short window— hours, maybe a day— to get a move on, or phrenesis sets in.”

“I see, Shirley repeated. “And have you been able to make such an assessment for Guide DiNozzo and General O’Neill?”

“I have,” Blair said. “They’re hovering around ‘really soon,’ but the stress of this case— of, essentially, having their developing bond threatened— could push them over the edge. I have advised them to make arrangements for an emergency bonding just in case that happens, because once they go over, like I said, they won’t have a lot of time, and they are both powerful individuals who could both do some real damage if they went feral.”

“Damage which they could not be prosecuted for under any law in any country with a seat on the United Nations,” Shirley said, just to rub in the point.
“That is correct,” Blair said. “Which doesn’t mean that it wouldn’t be a tragedy for everybody involved, which is why all the countries under the United Nations also have a series of laws designed to prevent situations in which a sentinel or guide would be compelled to go feral in the first place. Sentinels and guides are a society’s greatest defenses, but, like any other strong means defense, they are incredibly dangerous if misused.”

“Thank you, Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg,” Shirley said. “No further questions.”

Blair did a few ki breathing exercises as Shirley sat down and Ms. Calhoun stood. The red-headed lawyer approached the witness stand, head high, spike heels clicking, empathic profile oozing fierce resolve. Blair translated it in his head to something akin to Gimli’s comment in The Lord of the Rings: “Certainty of death, small chance of success. What are we waiting for?”

You had to admire her chutzpah, if nothing else.

“Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg,” Ms. Calhoun said briskly, “We have heard— in passing— that Sentinel O’Neill is a perfect match for Guide DiNozzo. But how can this be, when Guide DiNozzo has already met his perfect match?”

Blair smiled affably at her and settled back in his chair.

“Actually, we think that a lot of people have more than one potential perfect match, and that even more gain new potential perfect matches as their psionic landscapes change over the course of their lives,” he said. “There are a handful of recorded cases where a bond widow has found a second perfect match, and two known instances— well, three now, including Tony and Jack— where a sentinel or guide has, for some reason, declined to bond with their first match and met a second one. It’s not something that’s well known or well-studied, because it happens so rarely. Almost all sentinels and guides bond to the first perfect match they meet, and while bond widows exist, there are far fewer of them than one might think. Because of the way we share energy, bonded sentinels and guides can survive most things, and when they finally pass on, they usually do it together. So, while we’re pretty sure that most of us have other perfect matches out there, the vast majority of us will only ever meet one.”

“But, if this is so rare, how do we know that these are really perfect matches?” Ms. Calhoun asked, frowning. “Could’t this just be a case of— wishful thinking? After all, many sentinels and guides bond with near matches, don’t they?”

Blair sighed. “I can’t speak to the pairs that I have not met personally, but I can say that Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel O’Neill are a perfect match,” Blair said, ignoring the rest of the question.

He was not about to waste time explaining the intimate details of accordance and bonding to a mundane lawyer in a courtroom. Lawyers in courtrooms were, in his experience, not in the correct frame of mind for really understanding new ideas.

“So Guide DiNozzo has two perfect matches,” Ms. Calhoun said.

“Perhaps,” Blair said. “Alpha Guide Rabb has theorized that Sentinel Aronson and Guide DiNozzo may not actually be a perfect match anymore, and after interviewing Guide DiNozzo empathically, I tend to agree with him, but I would have to do a scan of Sentinel Aronson to make sure.”

“But, as of their last meeting, Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel Aronson were also a perfect match,” Ms. Calhoun said, seeming barely phased by Blair’s uncooperative answer.

“According to all available accounts, yes,” Blair said. “Not having been there at the time, I can’t
say from personal observation.”

“So Guide DiNozzo has two perfect matches,” Ms. Calhoun went on doggedly. “One of them appears to be in perfect health, while the other is in critical condition suffering from a disorder which only a bond can cure. In such a situation, shouldn’t we be considering exactly whose need is greater here?”

Blair felt icy fury sweeping through him, but he controlled it with the ruthless efficiency that he had learned from being bonded to Jim. Instead of losing his temper, he directed his anger into the tone and cadence of his words.

“Who exactly is ‘we’ in this scenario, Ms. Calhoun?” he said coldly.

“‘We’ as in, the people of the United States, who are represented in this courtroom,” Ms. Calhoun said with an equally cold smile.

“Then no,” Blair said, “‘We’ should consider nothing, because it is not ‘our’ business. It is, primarily, Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel Aronson’s business, but, if anybody else can be said to have an opinion in the matter, it is their fellow sentinels and guides. To be brutally frank, Ms. Calhoun, mundanes can interfere in bonds, but they cannot form them. They have no say over when, how, or if bonding takes place unless a sentinel or guide specifically requests it.”

“Well then, what about you, Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg?” Ms. Calhoun asked triumphantly, apparently having reached the point she wanted to make. “As Ms. Schmidt was at great pains to point out, your authority over your people as the Alpha Prime Guide of North America is at least equivalent to that of this court, and you say that bonding is the sole business of sentinels and guides. Shouldn’t you be considering the relative needs of the two sentinels in question in deciding your position on this issue?”

Blair took a deep breath and allowed his training to sublimate the instinct to lash out empathically into greater psionic focus and control.

“Are you telling me,” he said with great precision, “That you believe that I should order one of the guides under my care to bond against his wishes to serve the ‘greater good’?”

The courtroom was very silent, as everyone seemed to hold their breath. Ms. Calhoun met his gaze fearlessly.

“Shouldn’t you?” she asked boldly. “Jake Aronson is dying. Sentinel O’Neill is not. Shouldn’t that count for something?”

“Ms. Calhoun,” Blair said, his voice low, “If I were the Secretary for Health and Human Services, would you be telling me that I should compel individuals to donate, say, a kidney or part of their liver because it would save other individuals’ lives?”

“Of course not,” Ms. Calhoun said. “But bonding can’t really be compared to organ donation, can it, Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg?”

“No, you’re right,” Blair hissed. “Donating a kidney or a piece of your liver is, at least, over comparatively quickly. Bonding is for life. The world has been down this road before, Ms. Calhoun, and we have struggled and fought and bled to make sure that we will never go back there again. The path hasn’t been easy, and there have been setbacks, but we are trying damned hard to build a world where guides cannot be simply used like surgical dressings. When even Stalin agrees that utilitarianism has no place in bonding, I think the rest of us can be pretty damned sure it’s a
“Ah, but the matches made by the Guide Service weren’t perfect, were they?” Ms. Calhoun said brazenly. “I understand that forcing imperfect matches might be harmful, but we are talking about choosing between two perfect matches. Is there really the same ethical dilemma in giving the more needed bond greater consideration in this scenario? After all, both of these sentinels are perfect for Guide DiNozzo. Doesn’t that mean that they would both be a perfect bondmate for him? Isn’t that what a perfect match is? The one person—or, in this case, one of two—in all the world who is the most compatible to you?”

Blair smiled bitterly.

“Oh, if only it were that simple,” he said. “There—”

“Yes or no, Alpha Guide Sandburg,” Ms. Calhoun interrupted.

“It doesn’t work that—” Blair hissed out.

“Yes or no,” Ms. Calhoun barked.

“Your honor!” Shirley said loudly, rising from the defense table. “I believe this is the moment to remind Ms. Calhoun that my expert witness is to be granted the same leeway that hers was.”

“Quite right, Ms. Schmidt,” Judge Bright said. “Ms. Calhoun, this is not a trial, and I am not a bored juror. Allow me the courtesy of deciding for myself which parts of the expert’s opinion are relevant.”

“Your honor,” Ms. Calhoun said tightly.

“You may continue, Alpha Prime Guide Sandburg,” Judge Bright said.

Blair, now beyond even anger, looked Ms. Calhoun in the eye and spoke with soft, deadly precision:

“Dieter Schuller and Izaak Friedman, Saito Aki and Go Riku, Fatima Dhanial and Aimee Poitier,” he enunciated clearly. “Guide Dieter Schuller met his perfect match, Sentinel Izaak Friedman, in 1939, when the German Army invaded Poland. Schuller was an SS officer. Friedman was a Polish Jew. As per his mandate, Schuller arrested Friedman and placed him on a train bound for the death camps. He then returned to his barracks and shot himself in the head. Friedman died in Treblinka six months later.

“Guide Saito Aki met her perfect match, Sentinel Go Riku, in Japan in 1974 when her family arranged for her cousin, Guide Saito Reo, to be his pro tem guide. Despite being a perfect match with Saito Aki, Go Riku elected to go through with the arranged accord with Saito Reo, because it was more advantageous socially and politically. When the accord disintegrated under the strain of Go Riku’s denial, the families attempted to arrange for Go Riku to bond with Saito Aki after all. She refused. Go Riku eventually went dormant. Saito Aki never bonded and never left her family’s estate again.

“Sentinel Fatima Dhanial was a French Muslim who met her perfect match, Guide Aimee Poitier, at a centre event in Paris in 2001. Like Guide DiNozzo and Sentinel Aronson, they immediately formed a precord and retreated to complete the bond. However, before they reached the final stage, they had a disagreement concerning Dhanial’s expectation that Poitier would wear a headscarf after they bonded, as required by Dhanial’s religion. This was during the period where France was experiencing extreme controversy over this very issue, and during the course of the
following argument, Poitier apparently expressed contempt and loathing for that aspect of Dhanial’s faith. They broke their precord and Dhanial retreated to a Muslim Sentinel and Guide Sanctuary in Turkey to heal. Poitier, however, regretted their actions and tried repeatedly to contact Dhanial. She was unsuccessful. Dhanial remains in seclusion. Poitier died of a heroin overdose in 2004.

“Metaphysics isn’t a cure for tragedy, Ms. Calhoun. Being a perfect match does not guarantee a healthy bond, or a happy partnership. A single action can poison the relationship between a sentinel and guide at the outset, and fundamental differences in ideology, cultural background, or life experience can doom them before they ever even meet.”

***

Sam sat beside Edgerton in the shelter of the blind they had set up on the slopes above what remained of the Corbeta Uruguay Base, Thule Island, Southern Thule, South Sandwich Islands. Although the garrish red structure appeared empty, their information placed a secret Trust lab on this impossibly remote island in this forgotten corner of the southern Atlantic. Careful observation using Sam’s empathy and Ian’s senses had confirmed that the apparently abandoned base was indeed occupied, containing eleven people, a fully functioning—and carefully concealed—communications array, and a whole lot of alien tech.

“We should be ready to move in three hours,” Edgerton said quietly. “The scientists will be asleep by then, and the guards appear to do solo night-shifts. They think they’re alone out here, so they’re relying heavily on the surveillance equipment, which will be disabled, along with the communications, when we knock out their generator.”

“We can’t be sure that their surveillance and communications are all Earth-based,” Sam cautioned. “Ancient or goa’uld devices won’t be reliant on the generator, and there’s… a lot of alien tech in that base.”

Edgerton frowned.

“I admit, I hadn’t thought of that,” he said.

Sam laughed wryly.

“I imagine that alternate alien power sources aren’t something you had to worry about until a couple of days ago,” she said.

“Can we determine whether we have to worry about it now?” Edgerton asked blandly.

“I’ve got some equipment,” Sam said, reaching for her pack. “I’ll see what I can pick up. But let’s plan on getting our full allotment of Marines off the Prometheus, just to be safe.”

Edgerton frowned.

“I dislike large-scale assaults,” he said. “They are too messy.”

“And I dislike letting someone sneak out the back door because we don’t have enough bodies,” Sam returned mildly. “They always take something important with them, and it usually ends up being the thing that could end the world.”
Edgerton turned to look at her, cocking his head consideringly.

“This has happened to you often?” he said.

Sam grimaced.

“You have no idea,” she said.

He smiled slightly.

“Then I will bow to your greater experience,” he said. “However, if your Marines shoot anything important, I reserve the right to kick their asses.”

“Fair enough,” Sam agreed.
“So, the judge denied the injunction, and Mr. Aronson decided to drop the case despite his wife’s objections,” Jack said wearily to A.J. as they sat at the kitchen island, nibbling on leftovers from the Chinese takeout containers in front of them and watching Harm, Tony, and Blair cuddle on the living room floor. “We won, so why do I feel like we lost?”

A.J. grimaced and took a sip of his beer, a fancy Texas microbrew that Jack didn’t even know they sold in this state.

“Some cases, there ain’t no winning,” the Alpha said heavily. “That poor son-of-a-bitch in Philly is still dying, his parents are still grieving, and all of us just found out that this entire goatfuck was primarily set up to make your life more difficult. Since it did a hell of a job on that, yeah, I’d say we all lost this one.”

Jack nodded and stared moodily at his own beer.

“I hate when I lose a fight I didn’t know I was having,” he said.

A.J. let out a mirthless bark of laughter.

“That happen to you a lot?” he asked.

“More than you might think,” Jack said ruefully.

In the living room, Tony and Rabb were leaning against one of the couches with Blair sprawled across their laps. The Alpha Prime Guide had a beer in one hand and was gesturing wildly with the other.

“… victim of privilege, man. I mean, he was born white, wealthy, male, and American. He went to the best schools, got into the best internship, and then bam! he’s a sentinel too. It all gets handed to him on a silver platter. But, see, there’s always a price. ‘Cause now, he’s gotta live up to all that expectation. So what if he wanted to be a doctor with Médecins Sans Frontières? He’s gotta be a surgeon instead, because that’s what everybody expects from him. And he can’t just be a surgeon, he has to be the best surgeon, because nothing else will goddamn do. Which means that when he meets his guide, he’s so tied up in expectations and ego, he can’t even see you as a person…”

Jack realized that they were talking about Jake Aronson, and it occurred to him, for the first time since this whole mess started, that Tony’s former sentinel, as poor a sentinel as he might be, was one of Sandburg’s people too. He turned up his sense of smell a little and sniffed, immediately picking up grief and helplessness tainting the Alpha Prime Guide’s scent pile.

“We try, y’know?” Blair said, using a clenched fist for emphasis. “We try to educate our people, to tell them not to let anybody’s expectations, including their own, get in the way of their instincts. We try to tell them that they’ve gotta be open to the universe, that if they’re too preoccupied with what they think should be happening, they won’t be able to handle what actually is happening. But
they don’t listen! They don’t fucking listen, man!”

“Christ,” Jack said to A.J., “I think I remember hearing something like that during my orientation. Pretty much went in one ear and out the other though, since I mostly just wanted to stop smelling everyone’s emotions all the time.”

A.J. nodded.

“Smell’s your strongest sense?” he asked.

“Nah,” Jack said, “My strongest sense is sight. But I don’t actually see much that I couldn’t see before, I just see it better. Smell, though, it’s a whole new world. I mean, I already knew that your average guy thinks about sex seven times an hour, but how was I supposed to know that women think about it almost as often, and smell way better doing it?”

A.J. laughed. In the living room, both Tony and Blair were smelling closer and closer to tears.

“… this freaking old boys club mentality, man. ‘I put this job before everything else and now I’m a miserable, maladjusted bastard, so if you want to do this job, you have to be a miserable, maladjusted bastard too.’ Where’s the logic in that, man? If I need surgery, I don’t want some emotionally stunted savant. I want someone who gets eight hours of sleep a night, has strong, healthy relationships with his kids and his husband and his dog and the girl down the street who mows his freaking lawn, and…”

“Okay,” A.J. murmured as it became clear that Blair wasn’t stopping for breath, “I think it’s time to call Jim.”

He stood up and started searching through the pockets of his coat for his phone. Jack frowned, worried. A.J. found the phone and dialled a number and Jack listened to the ringing.

“Ellison,” said the voice on the other end.

“Jim,” A.J. said, “A.J. Think your guide needs to hear your voice. It’s been a hell of a day.”

On the other end of the line, Alpha Prime Sentinel Jim Ellison heaved a sigh.

“Thanks for looking out for him, A.J.,” he said. “Put him on?”

A.J. stood and made his way to the living room, where he crouched down beside the guide puppy pile and offered the phone to Blair.

“Hey, kid,” he said. “Someone wants to talk to you.”

Blair stopped mid-rant and, after blinking at the phone for a few seconds, took it from the sentinel and put it to his ear.

“Hey Chief,” Ellison’s voice said. “How ya doin’?”

“Aw, hey, Jim!” Blair said, brightening. “I miss you man!”

“Miss you too, short stuff,” Ellison said. “I hear it’s been a tough day. You want A.J. to hold you?”

Jack blinked and stuck a finger in his ear, wiggling it around a bit. Clearly he was hearing things, because he thought that the Alpha Prime Sentinel of North America had just asked if his guide wanted another sentinel to hold him.
“I guess,” Blair said, suddenly unhappy. “Jack would work better, but expectations, ya know? I’m not sure I’m up to explaining why it would be okay, even though with any other guide on the planet, it would drive Tony bonkers.”

Jack’s mouth dropped open, and Tony sat up a little straighter. He hadn’t heard the original question, so he didn’t know exactly how surreal this conversation had just gotten, but he’d heard enough to know that things were taking a turn for the screwy.

Jack heard Ellison chuckle.

“Put him on, Chief,” he said.

“Okay Jim. Hey, Jack!” Blair said, sitting up and waving the phone, “Jim wants to talk to you.”

Jack rose obediently, his mouth still slightly agape, and made his way to the living room. Watched by an amused A.J., he took the phone and held it up to his ear.

“Uh— Jack O’Neill,” he said. “Um— pleasure to meet you, sir?”

“None of that, Sentinel,” Ellison said grumpily. “This isn’t the army, and if it was, I retired a captain. Having a general calling me sir makes me jumpy as hell. Just call me Jim.”

“Fair enough,” Jack said. “Uh, what can I do for you, Jim?”

“Go ahead and put the phone on speaker,” Ellison— Jim— said. “No reason for the guides to feel like we’re leaving them out of the conversation.”

Jack did as he was told.

“So,” Jim went on, “It sounds like Blair needs some grounding, and since I’m not around, one of you will have to do. Now, for some reason I’m too big and dumb to understand, Jack would do the job best, but Blair doesn’t feel like explaining why it’s okay for a bonding sentinel to hold him, but not any other guide in the known universe. So I’m just gonna go with, it’s because he’s your Alpha Prime Guide. If any other guide grounded on Jack right now, it would set off Tony’s territorial instincts, but with Blair, it’ll just feel good to both of you. I’ve obviously never experienced it, but other pairs say it feels like being hugged by God.”

“Jiiiim,” Blair groaned.

“Suck it up, Chief,” Jim said cheerfully. “Tony?”

“Um— hi Jim?” Tony said, picking his own jaw up off the floor.

“How do you feel about the idea of Jack grounding Blair?” Jim asked.

“… okay, that’s just weird,” Tony said plaintively. ‘I feel fine about it. Actually, I feel great. Like, marshmallows and puppies kinda great. What the hell?’

Jim laughed.

“Like I said,” he said. “Jack?”

“… I guess so,” Jack said dubiously. “Um… you aren’t gonna kill me later? ‘Cause if some sentinel I never met cuddled my guide when I wasn’t there, I’d be planning a hit.”

“Nah, if Blair says that’s what he wants, I’m fine with it,” Jim said. “Once you’re bonded, you’ll
probably be okay with it too within your own pride. My pride happens to be every sentinel on the continent, and Blair knows which ones are okay and which ones aren’t.”

“Okay, I’ll take your word for it,” Jack said.

Two minutes later, Jack was sitting in the corner of one of the couches with Tony pressed against his side and Blair curled up in his lap, his back against the arm of the couch, his legs stretched out across Tony’s, and A.J.’s phone still clutched in his hand.

“How you doing, Chief?” Blair asked when they were all situated.

“Better, Jim,” Blair said. “I just—I hate losing people, you know? And it’s bad enough when they’re a hundred years old and have lived full lives and have chosen to move on, like Dick and Nix. This—this is just unnecessary and—pointless!”

“You can’t fix everything, baby,” Jim soothed. “I know you want to, but you’re one guy, and North America is a big-ass territory.”

“I have to try, Jim!” Blair protested, pressing harder into Jack.

Jack turned to look pleadingly at Tony, hoping for rescue. He didn’t know exactly why Blair had decided that Jack was the only acceptable stand-in for Jim, but he was finding the responsibility of grounding his Alpha Prime Guide daunting. Tony grinned, and leaned over to kiss him on cheek.

“Hang in there,” he whispered.

“Okay, tough guy,” Jim said, sounding sad and amused in equal measure, “What’s your plan?”

“Pull every single guide from every hospital and medical school in the country until they stop forcing doctors to be selfish, egotistical assholes and ruining our sentinels’ chances of having a respectful, supportive relationship with their guides,” Blair said angrily.

Jack, despite his generally emotional obtuseness, could smell his Alpha Prime Guide’s pain and knew he needed comfort, so he wrapped one arm around the smaller man and awkwardly dropped a chaste kiss on his curly head. Blair relaxed with a soft sigh. Against Jack’s other shoulder, Tony relaxed as well, no doubt reacting to the shift in Blair’s affect.

“Okay,” Jim said agreeably. “Gonna cause a bit of a stink, but I’m game if you are.”

“Oh, hah hah,” Blair said, but he sounded more amused than angry now. “You know I can’t actually do that, Jim. No, we need a more realistic plan.”

“Oh God,” Jim said, sounding as though he had suddenly realized something unpleasant, “We’re about to start another education campaign, aren’t we?”

“It’s all we can do, man,” Blair said.

As Blair began to finish up the phone call, Jack felt Harm and A.J. in the kitchen cleaning up and watching the proceedings with amusement.

“Aw,” Harm was murmuring, “They’re so cute.”

He sounded… paternal, which was a little disturbing, because the kid was younger than Jack by at least a decade.

“Mmm,” A.J. rumbled, his mood oddly wistful.
In Jack’s lap, Blair hung up the phone and popped his head up to look at Harm and A.J.

“You know A.J.,” the Alpha Prime Guide said conversationally, “The whole idea of God—or maybe Santa?—sitting on a cloud somewhere writing down who’s naughty and who’s nice is a weird Christian construct that I’ve never really been able to wrap my head around. In my experience, the universe has better things to do than keep score.”

There was a long, awkward silence.

“Um... care to expand on that, Blair?” A.J. said at length.

“Just food for thought, man. Food for thought,” Blair said. “Felt like I should throw out there that life isn’t really about what we do or don’t deserve. And even if it was, I’m pretty sure making your guide happy would clean the slate in any cosmic scoring system.”

“Damn it, Blair,” A.J. growled, smelling upset and, weirdly, hopeful.

“Holy shit,” Tony said, clearly reacting to something that only the guides could feel. “Was that—what was that?”

“That,” said Harm, sounding amused, but shaken, “Was Blair being Blair. You get—actually, you don’t get used to it. Ever. At all.”

“A.J.?” Harm asked quietly, pressing closer to his sentinel, grounding him on his touch and scent. “You alright?”

“Not so much,” A.J. said, dropping his head to smell Harm’s neck. “I’m an idiot. I’m sorry, kid. I’ve been dwelling on the past instead of focusing on the present, and I hurt you because of it.”

“I’m fine, A.J.,” Harm said.

“You’d make a great dad, Harm,” A.J. said, his voice very soft, and Jack suddenly realized what was happening.

Oh, Christ on a bike. It was Harm and A.J.’s Incredibly Uncomfortable Private Conversation About Having Kids, Part 2.

This was officially a nightmare.

Jack looked over at Tony, hoping for an escape plan, but Tony was looking down at Blair’s legs, which were still draped across his own, with wide eyes. Through their accord, Jack heard what
sounded an awful lot like Tony’s voice saying, ‘It’s a trap!’

“I told you before, this is definitely an area where the low-desire partner wins, A.J.,” Harm said, smelling sad. “You don’t want kids, we don’t have kids. It’s as simple as that.”

“It’s not that I don’t want kids, Harm,” A.J. said. “I just don’t think I particularly deserve to have any more. I wasn’t there for Francesca, and it seems— selfish to ask for a do-over.”

“Oh,” Harm said. “Oh. Well, I guess Blair is right: that is a totally different conversation.”

“’M always right!” Blair piped up sleepily.

Harm jumped, apparently having forgotten that they were there. *Again.*

“Hi,” Jack said, waving. “Yes, we’re here. *Again.* Only I’m pretty sure that this time, it’s all Blair’s fault. And can I just say, this is turning into one of the weirdest evenings I’ve ever had, which, considering what I do for a living, is saying something.”

A.J. turned his head, still holding his guide, and smirked at him tiredly.

“It’s about to get weirder,” he said with what Jack thought was remarkably little sympathy. “Blair hates to sleep alone”

“Wha…”

“… huh?”

Were, respectively, Tony and Jack’s intelligent responses to this new piece of information.

“I’ll go put some sheets on the guest bed,” Harm said. When A.J. looked questioningly at him, he shrugged. “What?” he said. “Before Blair wrapped himself around Jack like he was his favorite teddy bear, I assumed he’d be in with us. I didn’t bother to telling Brandon to make the guest room up.”

***

Tony woke up to the quiet chirping of his secure sat phone on night mode. He was in an unfamiliar bed with an unfamiliar body pressed against him and an unfamiliar curl of hair in his mouth. For a second, he thought about panicking, then he realized that the unfamiliar room was Harm and A.J.’s guest room and the unfamiliar body was Blair Sandburg.

At which point, he almost panicked anyways, because Blair freaking Sandburg was curled up in bed between him and his sentinel, and it felt like the best thing ever.

Tony took a few deep, calming breaths and carefully untangled himself from Blair. He padded over to the dresser and blindly grabbed his sat phone and briefcase. Jack must have filtered out the phone, but he woke up as soon as Tony got out of bed.

“‘Vrything ‘kay?” he mumbled.

“Got a call,” Tony whispered. “I’ll get you up if it’s anything you need to deal with.”
“‘Kay,” Jack said.

Tony left the guest room and headed for the study, the only room in the house that had soundproofing and the place where Harm and A.J. always shooed people when they had to take a private call during a get-together. As he went, he put the headset on and answered the phone.

“This is Trickster, please standby,” he said.

“This is Dorothy,” said Sam’s stressed voice on the other end. “Standing by.”

He reached the study, closed the door, and turned on the white noise generator.

“Okay,” he said, “Go ahead Dorothy.”

“Our mission was a success,” Sam said. “Five scientists, seven guards, all neutralized. Base is secure. But— Trickster, this base isn’t what we thought it was.”

Tony rapidly ran through the mission specs in his head: Corbeta Uruguay, Thule Island, South Sandwich Islands. One of several collections of Ancient, goa’uld, and Asgard tech that the Trust had stashed in various remote labs, all possibly dangerous, all needing to be taken out of play ASAP.

“No weapons?” he asked.

“Unconfirmed, but probably not,” Sam said. “This appears to be Ba’al’s genetics and cloning lab.”

“Oh, holy fuck,” Tony said. “So… we have a lot of baby snakes?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “But that’s not all. We were speculating that Ba’al was trying to create an ubergene carrier? Well, he seems to have succeeded.”

Tony’s gut clenched and his skin went suddenly clammy.

“Are you telling me that you found another Khalek in that lab?” he demanded.

“Worse,” Sam said. “We found a live human fetus. It— she— is being grown in a gestation chamber that appears to be a hybrid of Asgard and a goa’uld technology. From what I’ve been able to gather from the base’s computer files, along with the information Death has gotten from the scientists, we have determined that the fetus is fully human, no goa’uld DNA at all, and that it’s in the final stages of its development. The scientists say that it should be viable in a matter of weeks.”

“She?” Tony said stupidly. “It’s— uh— it’s a girl?”

“Yeah,” Sam said. “Trickster, please advise. We have a— contingency plan for the symbiotes,” the way she said ‘contingency plan’ made it clear that she meant ‘eliminate with extreme prejudice,’ “But we have no protocols in place for a— well, a baby.”

Tony closed his eyes. A baby. A human baby. A human baby grown in a lab by an insane alien symbiote clone as part of a convoluted and, as of yet, unknown plot. A human baby that the IOA, as well as any number of other organizations and agencies in any number of countries, would love to get their hands on.

He remembered what the IOA had wanted to do with Khalek, and he wanted to be sick.
He felt Jack’s worried mental ‘Are you okay?’ through the bond, and sent back a weary, ‘Yeah, Sam and Ian ran into a— really fucked up situation in South America. Tell you about it later.’

Tony leaned forward and pressed his fingers against the headset.

“Listen to me very carefully,” he said. “Do you remember how to take custody of a minor child?”

There was a long silence on the other end.

“To-Trickster, are you saying— Trickster, please confirm,” Sam finally stammered. “You want me to take the— the fetus into Union custody?”

“Yes,” Tony said, his voice low and urgent. “They have a system in place for children in need. HERA and Homeworld don’t. The Union can protect her, do you understand?”

There was a brief silence as Sam read between the lines to what Tony did not want to say on the phone, even over a secure satellite connection.

“I understand,” Sam said. “But the fetus isn’t viable yet. Can we actually take custody of a baby that hasn’t been born?”

“I don’t see why not,” Tony said. “For the purposes of this discussion, we treat her like she’s a— a premie in a NICU: she can’t survive without help, but she’s not actually inside another person, so the— the mom’s personal autonomy and automatic guardianship, etc., doesn’t apply. Now, is the— gestation chamber?— mobile? Can we beam it out of there?”

“Yes,” Sam said. “The unit itself is only about 200 pounds, and it has an independent naquadah-based power unit. But Trickster, the unit is not independent. It needs constant monitoring, and there are some pretty complex input requirements. Someone is going to have to— to babysit it, pretty much, until the fetus is mature enough to survive on its own.”

“And how long is that going to take?” Tony asked.

“The scientists here said they were expecting this ‘project’ to be complete in 15 days,” Sam said.

Thank God. Finally, some good news. They had the Prometheus for 18 days.

“Okay, here’s what we’re gonna do,” Tony said. “We’re gonna beam the unit up to the Prometheus’s infirmary, and we’re going to have the scientists from Corbeta Uruguay tell their infirmary staff and their technicians exactly what they need to do to get this baby ready to be born. The crew of the Prometheus is familiar with hybrid tech, and access to the ship is easy to control. On paper, the baby will be their patient until she’s ready to leave medical. At that point, either you or I will personally remove her from the Prometheus and bring her to a Union safe house.”

It took almost two hours to deal with all the logistics (including waking up a Union rep and getting Sam’s custody claim on record, just in case there was a leak). The entire time, Tony had a weird feeling, like there were a set of dots he just wasn’t quite connecting here, but he couldn’t put his finger on what was bugging him. By the time the incubator had been safely beamed aboard the Prometheus and Sam had set up their decoy measures to make the Trust think that the base was experiencing a weather-related communications failure, it was almost 5 AM. Tony finished up the last electronic form and said goodbye to Sam, then shut everything down and slumped back in the desk chair, rubbing his face.

This was so not how he had envisioned spending the morning of his bonding day.
He sighed, picked up his phone and his briefcase, and headed back to the guest room. It was only when he was settling back into bed beside Blair (who, even deep asleep, seemed to be aware of his return and shifted to accommodate him) that he realized what was bugging him.

Harm and A.J. had been talking about having kids. Four odd hours later, Tony’s team had taken custody of one. There was absolutely no reason that the two would be connected, since, as Jim Ellison said, North America was a big-assed territory and there were a lot of sentinel and guide pairs who might, theoretically, be intended for the unborn infant currently being incubated on the Prometheus. But Tony’s guide instincts were telling him that this particular coincidence was not a coincidence at all. Only time would tell if it was anything more than exhaustion and psionic jitters, but Tony had a groundless, but unshakable feeling that he had just found Harm and A.J.’s daughter.

***

Jack leaned back in his, sipping his coffee and listening to Tony and Blair chattering away. Harm had already left for work, but A.J. was still there, puttering about in the kitchen and generally doing his best to pretend that he wasn’t brooding over Blair like a goose with only one gosling. Jack could sympathize. He’d been freaked out enough over the responsibility of simply grounding the Alpha Prime Guide in Jim’s absence, he couldn’t imagine having sole responsibility for his happiness and well-being while he was away from his sentinel.

By coincidence (hah!) Blair and Jim’s separation also happened to be the topic discussion occupying Tony and Blair.

“I’ll be honest with you, man, it sucks large, and I don’t do it unless I have to,” Blair was saying to Tony between gulps of the frankly revolting-smelling smoothie he had assembled from the contents of Harm and A.J.’s vegetable drawer. “I mean, that whole myth about sentinels and guides not being able to be separated is a bunch of baloney, don’t get me wrong. It would be a pretty major design flaw if pairs couldn’t handle being apart. I mean, what about when one of them gets lost or kidnapped and the other one has to find them? How are they supposed to do that if they can’t function independently?”

Jack snorted into his coffee, and A.J.’s eyebrows levitated up onto his scalp.

“I imagine you’re speaking from personal experience there,” A.J. interjected. “Until Tony came along, you were the only guide I knew who got in as much trouble as mine.”

“Oh, thanks so much,” Blair said, sticking his tongue out at the sentinel. “But seriously, the whole kidnapping thing aside, sentinels and guides have always covered different areas of need within the tribe, and those areas don’t always exactly mesh. I mean, say you want to see the tribe’s holy woman about a really personal problem— you aren’t exactly going to want to open up if the holy woman’s sentinel is sitting in the corner glaring at you the whole time. But that doesn’t mean I’ve gotta like it, you know?”

Jack got up and wandered into the kitchen to refill his coffee cup.

“Personally, I don’t know how Jim stands it,” he murmured to A.J. “I would have heart failure if I had to send that kid out into the world on his own.”

“Hey!” Blair said. “I heard that!”
Tony laughed.

“Come on, bro,” he said. “You’re an omega guide, and you’re an Alpha Prime. You’re like the Golden Child in that Eddie Murphy movie— sure, you’re insanely powerful, but your also little and gentle and adorable and—”

And that was as far as he got, because then Blair was out of his seat and tackling a laughing Tony to the floor, where he started trying to tickle him viciously. Tony attempted to defend himself, but he was laughing so hard at Blair’s angry growls and wild curls that all he could manage was to fend Blairs hands off from his most ticklish spots.

“Holy crap,” Jack said, swallowing and sending a stern warning to his dick to behave itself. “What is with this place? Every time I turn around, there are guides wrestling all over the floor.”

“I’d get used to it if I were you,” A.J. said. “Guides are pretty physical with each other when they feel like they’re in a safe space, and this is Harm’s and my home, so it’s pretty much as safe as it gets. I imagine that, when you and Tony find a more permanent place, you’ll see a lot of this.”

“That’s it,” Jack said firmly, “We’re getting a tent and pitching it in the park. I can’t take this. At least, not without being allowed to pick up my guide and haul him off to a bedroom whenever I need to.”

A.J. laughed and clapped him on the shoulder.

“Welcome to my world,” he said.

Later, as they all began getting ready to leave, the mood grew suddenly serious.

“Listen,” Blair said as A.J. set his suitcase by the door and Tony began putting on his jacket, “I’ve got a couple— well, Alpha-shaman things. First, A.J.: I’m getting some really intense vibes from the Spirit Plane right now, and I think you and Harm need to settle your— ah— family question, like, ASAP, man. I don’t know why, but I am 110 percent sure on this.”

A.J.’s eyes widened, and Tony, for some reason, went a little green.

‘What’s up?’ Jack asked mentally, inwardly gloating that their fifth level accord gave him enough of a connection to Tony to actually hear the answer.

‘You know that— problem Sam and Ian ran into?’ Tony asked, and Jack nodded, having read the highlights in Paul’s daily brief when he’d checked his e-mail that morning. ‘Well, I think that may be Harm and A.J.’s kid cooking in that incubator on the Prometheus. No idea why, it’s just a weird feeling I have, but it is a motherfucking strong feeling.’

‘Jesus,’ Jack said, not even sure what to make of that.

“Tony,” Blair said, and Tony started like a racehorse who’d been stung by a bee, looking terrified, “Harm was absolutely right when he said you’ve got some— ah— new abilities manifesting. We won’t really know anything until you and Jack bond and your connection settles, but when that happens, I think you and I may be seeing quite a lot of each other. But, in the meantime, whenever you feel those ‘cracks’ that Harm talked about? I want you to imagine a nice, soothing balm— you know, something you’d put on chapped skin— and just slather it all over them until they feel better, okay? Don’t freak out and don’t try and fix them, just— put some calendula cream on them and let them be. Think you can handle that?”

Tony gave Blair a slightly sickly smile.
“Sure,” he said, then, perhaps in the interests of full honesty, or maybe just because he wanted to make sure Blair shared his misery, he added, “But just so you know, that was, like, not comforting at all, and if this does end up being your area, I’m going to be the worst student ever.”

Blair laughed.

“Counting on it,” he said, then turned to Jack. “So, Jack,” he said, “There is, like, so much I wanna talk to you about, but this is so not the time, and anyways, I get the feeling you’ve been doing just fine without me. So here’s what I think the universe might actually need you to know: first, trust yourself to take care of your guide. I know it sounds simple, but things get crazy and it’s easy to psych yourself out, especially with all the crap you just heard about that poor schmuck in Philly. Just remember, as long as you’re focused on doing what’s best for your guide and aren’t getting distracted by what everyone else and their brother and their sister and their dog wants, you’ll know what to do. Second, I am getting, like, the overwhelming feeling that you are in the middle of something really huge, but it’s only just started. Like, you’re standing at the crossing of a cathedral, but all that’s actually there so far is some floor slabs and a couple of buttresses.”

Jack felt goosebumps pop up immediately all over his body. He stared at Blair, torn between anger, disgruntlement, and awe, and Blair stared back, eyes filled with wry amusement, as though he got this all the time. Which, obviously, he did if delivering this kind of bombshell was part of his job description.

“So I guess what the universe wants you to remember is, whatever your in the process of building right now, you’re just working on the foundation. And that might not be the most glamorous job, but the foundation is kinda the most important part. So when people ask you to take shortcuts or make compromises, remember that what you’re building is big, and it’s heavy as fuck, and it’s going to be around long after you and them and everybody else alive right now are dead. So you gotta build something that’s gonna hold up to the ages, and fuck everybody who wants to take the easy way. Okay?”

Jack cleared his throat and offered the Alpha Prime Guide of North America his own wan smile.

“Sure, Blair,” he wheezed out. “You got it.”

Jesus Christ.

***

“Welcome back, Agent DiNozzo,” Lionel Pendergast said, standing up from the Prometheus’s captain’s chair and stepping forward. “General. Congratulations.”

Tony beamed at him.

“Thank you Colonel,” he said. “And thank you for letting us use your ship. This is definitely preferable to getting on a military transport right now.”

Colonel Pendergast smiled.

“You’re far too pretty to be on a military transport right before you bond,” he said. “I never believed half of what people say about sentinels and guides, but this part’s true: you’re… glowing.”
At some point between stopping for supplies on the way back to Tony’s apartment and beaming up to the Prometheus, Tony had slipped quietly into preconcordance and had brought Jack along with him. He was shielding the brunt of it, but the joy and anticipation of an imminent bond wasn’t really meant to be shielded. It was meant to be shared.

The entire bridge had gotten very mellow in just the few minutes since Jack and Tony had been beamed up.

“Watch it, Lionel,” Jack said placidly. “I like you, and I’m feeling real good right now, I’d hate to ruin either of those things by having to put you down.”

Pendergast laughed.

“Listen,” he said, “I know it’s a bit presumptuous, but I was wondering if you might give the ship your bonding blessing. Since you’re here. I don’t consider myself a particularly spiritual man, but with what I’ve seen out there, I figure we can use all the mystical help we can get.”

Tony blinked, surprised. While once in a blue moon, he ended up doing the secular part of a priest’s job, like he had for that poor fuck McLaughlin at the SGC, he pretty much never got asked to perform any of the more spiritual functions, even though, as a guide, they were technically within his purview as well.

“Of course,” he said, clearing his throat. “I— it would be an honor, Colonel. Jack?”

“Sure,” Jack said agreeably, then frowned. “Wait, we don’t have to, like, get busy on the bridge, right?”

A surge of jealous protectiveness swept through their bond, making Tony shiver a little. He laughed breathlessly.

“No, Jack,” he said, smiling. “Just a kiss. You do not have to strip me down and take me over a console. We can save that for our five-year anniversary.”


“What am I gonna do with you?” he said.

‘Take me to your romantic hideaway in the wilderness and do filthy things to me for the next two-and-a-half days?’ Tony suggested silently.

Jack’s empathic profile was immediately saturated with possessive lust.

“Get with the blessing, Tony,” he growled. “We’ve got things to do.”

Tony caught his breath and nodded, reaching for Jack’s hand. He closed his eyes and released the tight hold he had on his guide aura. Immediately, everyone on the bridge grew very still, their breath quickening and their eyes growing wide and bright with Tony’s euphoric desire and giddy hope. Tony took a deep breath and let his aura expand, allowing it to spread to the entire ship. For a moment, he could feel the Prometheus as a living thing in his mind, a complex and every-changing organism made up of moving, changing organic and technological pieces that all went together to make up something greater than the sum of its parts.

“Today, I bond with the other half of my soul,” Tony said, his voice hoarse. “I share the blessing of this sacred union with the Prometheus and those aboard her.”
He stepped forward and pressed his lips to Jack’s in a kiss that, while dry and completely close-mouthed, was filled with pent-up desire and expectation. Tony felt the metaphysical ship in his mind shudder a little, although the physical ship stayed rock solid under his feet.

Slowly, Tony pulled back from Jack, pulling back his guida aura as he did so. He looked around, finding Major Marks slumped in his chair, cheeks flushed, and Colonel Pendergast looking at them with a shaken kind of awe.

“Thank you,” Pendergast said softly. “Just— thank you.”

“You’re welcome,” Tony said, voice equally soft.

Pendergast cleared his throat.

“Agent Gibbs is waiting for you in the conference room,” he said. “We’ll beam you down when you’re ready.”

“Thanks, Lionel,” Jack said, his voice low and slightly gravelly.

A young African-American lieutenant escorted them off the bridge and down the corridor to the Prometheus’s conference room, his flushed cheeks proving that yes, chocolate skin could blush just as well as fair skin could, although it was far more flattering and less lobster-y.

Gibbs was waiting for them by the window, his loose-limbed posture and bright eyes showing that he had gotten his full share of Tony and Jack’s bonding blessing. As the door closed behind the blushing lieutenant, Gibbs smirked at them.

“Hoped you were gonna make him calm down, O’Neill,” he said, “Not help him find new ways to flirt with everything that moves.”

“That wasn’t flirting, Gibbs, it was a blessing,” Tony said, putting his nose in the air. Gibbs snorted.

“Don’t remember getting this hard during any of the services I used to go to back home,” he said dryly.

Tony blushed and was suddenly very interested in the— admittedly spectacular— view out the window. While he knew that Gibbs got hard-ons just like anybody else, it was knowledge he worked very hard not to think about too much.

“It— it was a bonding blessing,” he mumbled.

“Speaking of which,” Jack said, “Before Tony officially hands off the super-special-secret briefcase and all that, there’s something I need to do.”

He reached out and took Tony’s hand, then turned to look at Gibbs.

“I have found in one of thine the other half of mine own soul,” he began, and Tony stopped breathing.

They were the same words that Jack had said to Gibbs when Jack and Tony had met, the first words of the petition that a sentinel made to a guide’s chieftain. Only today, Jack was not beginning the courtship, but completing it.

“We have walked as two, and wish to become one. Do we have thy blessing?”
However, unlike that night at Harm and A.J.’s, Gibbs knew what was going on now, and instead of being confused and pissed off, he was cool and focused. He had also clearly done some homework (which probably meant he had asked Fornell), because he met Jack’s eyes and asked the first of the traditional questions in a low, challenging voice:

“How will you guard him?”

“I pledge to guard him as he guards me, and to stand by his side as he stands by mine,” Jack answered calmly.

“How will you keep him?” Gibbs asked.

Tony held his breath. There were a number of possible answers, but only one right one. He had to believe that Jack knew what to say, that he knew Tony well enough to give the response that Gibbs was looking for, but what if he was wrong?

“Like the wild bird that comes willingly to the hand and then flies free again,” Jack replied.

Tony let the trapped air out of his lungs and tried to calm the frantic beating of his heart.

“How will you shelter him?” Gibbs went on.

Tony gulped, because this was something they hadn’t really talked about yet, and he had no idea what Jack would say.

“We will go where we must go, but any roof I put over his head, his tribe must bless,” Jack answered, and Tony smiled joyfully, because it was the best answer he could imagine, but one he would never have thought of.

“How will you serve your people?” Gibbs asked, moving on to the next part.

“I will defend them, and he will keep their laws,” Jack said, as Tony had known he would.

That part had been easy.

“Who may find shelter beneath your roof?” Gibbs said.

“Our tribe and our pride and those they vouch for will always find shelter beneath our roof,” Jack said.

Tony approved his choice. He and Jack were not really in a position to give shelter to anyone who needed it, not with how dangerous and high-clearance their jobs were.

“And who may find a home at your hearth?” Gibbs asked.

Tony felt like he was going to have a heart attack, because while they had talked about this, they hadn’t reached any real conclusions. Jack, however, did not miss a beat.

“Any child in need of succour may come to us for shelter,” he said. “We will bring the babes to the hearths that they are destined for, and the youths may stay at our hearth, or go forward to the hearths that wait for them.”

For the first time, Gibbs looked startled, but he covered it quickly.

Tony couldn’t blame him, because even though that was what that had agreed—insofar as they had agreed anything—it was still shocking to hear it like this.
“You have my blessing,” Gibbs said gruffly. “You have walked as two. Now, walk as one.”

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“Oh my God,” Tony said as they beamed down into the main living area of the cabin, “It’s freezing.”

They had prepared for transportation into the Minnesota winter wilderness by putting on layers of fleece under jeans and parkas, but it was still decidedly nippy.

“Well, duh,” Jack said. “Wood heat, it won’t be warm ’til we light the stove.”

“Are you messing with me?” Tony asked. “Light the stove? Are you telling me you don’t have a furnace in this place? How do you keep from freezing to death in your sleep? And what about the pipes, for Christ’s sake?”

“They’re empty,” Jack said. “I drain ’em when I leave. Once we’ve got the place warm, I’ll turn the pump back on.”

“You know, when you described your cabin in Minnesota to me, I was imagining ‘rustic,’ not ‘subsistence-level,’” Tony said as Jack moved to the squat black stove where kindling and old newspapers were waiting in a basket beside the woodbox.

“What are you talking about?” Jack asked. “Compared to the places I spent most of my career, this is the lap of luxury.”

“At least tell me there’s indoor plumbing,” Tony said plaintively.

“All the hot water you could want,” Jack assured him, laying the last piece of kindling and striking a match. “I stayed here for a while after I awakened, made a lot of upgrades, including the best damn boiler I could find. Turns out showering is important when you’ve got five very jacked up senses and like to stay active.”

“Thank goodness for small mercies,” Tony muttered. “What should I be doing?”

“Go plug the fridge in and unpack the groceries,” Jack said.

“Why is the fridge unplugged?” Tony asked, picking up the cooler they had brought and heading towards the kitchen area. “It’s not as if it’d have to do any work to keep cold in temperatures like this!”

“Nah, it’d have to work to keep warm,” Jack replied. “Fridge keeps stuff above freezing, not below.”

“You are so lucky I love you,” Tony groused, but Jack could tell through their accord that he was amused and a little bit excited.

He realized that he was lucky that Tony was being so good-natured about this. While the cabin was the lap of luxury compared to the long stints he’d done in the wilderness both before and after joining the Stargate Program, for a city boy like Tony, it must feel like being on the wild frontier. It was a subject that had never really come up, since Jack had already moved to the city and taken a
desk job before he met Tony, but it was a major difference in their backgrounds that could have seriously bitten him in the ass. Fortunately, Tony seemed to be taking their circumstances in stride, although Jack did detect a carefully contained thread of worry about how the hell they were going to stay warm.

Jack resolved to keep the cabin absolutely steamy for the next two days. Not only would it alleviate his guide’s fear, he also didn’t want anything bad to happen to Tony’s lungs. They had already taken more than their fair share of abuse this year, and he could still hear the slight strain whenever Tony spent too long outside in the cold, wet D.C. weather.

Once the fire was going and the groceries were unpacked, they put on their gloves, pulled their hoods up over their hats and headed out into the snow. As soon as they stepped out onto the porch, Tony stopped dead.

“Jack,” he breathed.

The sky was a glorious, clear winter blue and the sun was at its highest point in the southern sky. It had snowed the night before, and every branch and needle on the trees was coated in pure, glittering white. The entire clearing where the cabin stood was filled with cold, still silence.

“You okay there, Tiger?” Jack murmured when Tony showed no sign of moving.

“It’s… it’s beautiful, Jack,” Tony whispered, sounding awed and a little overwhelmed.

Jack turned and drew Tony’s down- and fleece-swathed body into his arms. Tony pressed closer, still staring out at the snowy wilderness.

“Thank you for bringing me here,” Tony finally said.

“Thank you for making it happen,” Jack returned. “I was planning on staying in D.C. before you suggested using the Prometheus.”

“I knew this is where you wanted to bond,” Tony murmured. “You said you were fine doing it in D.C., but I— every single psionic nerve I have said it should be here.”

“And what about you?” Jack asked. “There are two of us, after all, and you have no reason to be attached to this place.”

Tony shrugged under his parka.

“It didn’t really matter to me,” he said.

Jack growled, thinking it was one of Tony’s self-effacing evasions, but Tony made an impatient sound.

“No, I mean, it literally didn’t matter,” he said. “I’m a chameleon, Jack. An epsilon guide. I adapt, I blend in, I become what I need to be when I need to be it. I can pretty much belong wherever I want, but at the same time— well, I don’t really feel like I belong anywhere. I don’t have a place that feels like mine. But you do. You have this place, and I can share how you feel about it because you’re— you’re my sentinel.”

“Oh, Tony,” Jack said softly, reaching down into Tony’s parka, putting his gloved fingers under Tony’s chin, and tilting the guide’s head up. “I’m glad I get to share this with you.”

Tony gave him a sweet, open smile that lit up his whole face.
“Me too, Jack,” he said.

Jack leaned forward and pressed a kiss to his guide’s mouth. Tony kissed back, his hot tongue and icy lips providing a delicious sensory contrast, and Jack felt their accord surge with joy and need.

“Come on,” he said. “Let’s shovel out the woodpile and get at least a day’s worth of wood inside. I have plans for the rest of today, and none of them include traipsing out into the snow in the altogether if we run out.”

Tony laughed delightedly and followed Jack down the steps.

“You totally would, wouldn’t you?” Tony said as Jack got the shovels and they began clearing the porch. “Nevermind that you’d probably get frostbite on your dick, you’d do it just to be contrary.”

“I would not get frostbite on my dick,” Jack said indignantly.

Tony giggled.

“Oh, of course not,” he said. “I forgot, you’re superman.”

“Super-sentinel, actually,” Jack said. “George Bernard Shaw never saw it coming.”

“Oh, wow,” Tony said. “Going right for the play, not even bothering with the comics. You really are smarter than you look.”

Jack laughed.

“Right back atcha,” he said, playfully tossing a shovelful of snow at Tony.

Considering how his guide was bundled into his parka, it had virtually no effect. Most of it slid harmlessly off the Gore Tex, except for a few flakes that clung bewitchingly to Tony’s eyelashes.

“Oh, this is war,” Tony said, dropping his shovel and pouncing on Jack.

The sentinel let out a happy shout and let his guide’s tackle carry them both down into the soft snow, which crunched frostily beneath their weight. Jack wrapped his arms around Tony and rolled them so the guide was underneath, but Tony could wriggle like an eel and he managed to squirm out from under Jack, only to grab him from behind. They continued to wrestle gleefully until Tony finally managed to get Jack on his back and straddle his hips, which had the effect of completely immobilizing him, not through mechanical disadvantage, but through basic biology. Even through the layers of denim and fleece they were both wearing, Jack could feel Tony’s hard cock pressing against his own, their bodies eager to complete the unfinished bond that shimmered and vibrated between them.

Jack groaned and thrust his hips up against his guide, and Tony let out a delighted squeak. He rolled his hips, causing them both to gasp, and leaned down for a deep, filthy kiss that left absolutely nothing to the imagination.

“Let’s get that wood,” Tony said raggedly when they finally broke apart.

They went back to their chores, but the incipient bond continued to spark and tremble, pulling them constantly towards each other even as they went about their task.

Finally, they had the woodpile shoveled out and enough wood for the rest of the day and that night inside the cabin, filling the woodbox by the stove and the rack against the wall. By this time, the
stove had warmed the cabin up to the point that wearing their winter clothes indoors was actually somewhat uncomfortable, so they stripped off several layers before Jack headed down into the cellar crawlspace to turn on the water and the hot water heater and Tony went digging through their provisions for lunch.

They had brought ingredients for cooking, but had both suspected that they wouldn’t really be interested in taking time away from—other activities—at least at first, so they had also gotten pre-made sandwiches and several containers of salad—green, pasta, potato, and egg—from the organic deli near Tony’s apartment. When Jack clambered back out of the cellar, Tony had put sandwiches and potato salad on plates and had set out a bottle of water for each of them. Jack heard fizzing, and saw that Tony had put one of the electrolyte tablets that Jack liked (regular sports drinks, it turned out, had truly horrendous things in them, as evidenced by the fact that they made Jack’s taste spike horribly) in each of the bottles. He grinned. Clearly, his guide wanted them both in tip-top shape this afternoon.

They ate in bright, charged silence, and while everything tasted delicious, Jack couldn’t have really told you what he was eating. When they were done, they cleaned up quietly—the water wasn’t hot yet, so this actually meant putting the dishes in the sink for later and throwing the paper sandwich wrappers in the stove—and Jack put more wood on the fire. The bond hummed and glittered.

Finally, there was nothing more to do. Their eyes met across the cabin.
Bonding

Chapter Notes

Bonding: the blending of a sentinel and guide's psionic landscapes to create a permanent and unbreakable mental and spiritual connection between them.

Tony’s cheeks flushed a little. He ducked his head, and Jack felt a totally unexpected wave of shyness across their accord.

“Hey,” he said, crossing the room and pressing himself against his guide’s back, slipping his arms around Tony’s waist. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing!” Tony said quickly. “It’s just— well, I’m used to being the most experienced person in any bedroom I’m in, if you know what I mean. But this— I, uh, haven’t actually done this.”

Jack closed his eyes and bit back a triumphant snarl. It was totally inappropriate how much satisfaction he got from the fact that Tony, despite his extensive sexual experience, had never had anyone else inside him. However, Jack’s sentinel was apparently a possessive bastard and was intensely gratified that, in this particular way, Tony would be his and only his.

Tony drew his breath in sharply, feeling Jack’s lust and sense of ownership pouring through their accord, and pressed instinctively back into Jack’s arms.

“God, Tony,” Jack rasped, turning his head to bite gently at his guide’s ear, “What you do to me.”

“Jack…” Tony whispered, desperate and vulnerable.


He kissed his guide’s neck, just below the lobe of his ear, then moved down to bite gently right above the collar of his shirt. Tony whined low in his throat and squirmed a little, but didn’t try to get away.

“Strip,” Jack rasped in Tony’s ear, “Now.”

Tony let out a sound that could best be described as a yip, and hastened to obey, even as Jack stepped back and followed suit. Very soon, they were both naked, flushed and achingly hard in the close heat of the cabin.

“Oh God,” Tony moaned, running his eyes up and down Jack’s body. “Oh, God.”

“Guide,” Jack growled.

“Sentinel,” Tony breathed back.

They stood very still for a long, endless heartbeat, then Tony turned and moved quickly and gracefully towards the bed. Jack prowled after him, eyes fixed on Tony’s long, lean body, watching
every ripple of every muscle under that smooth, gold skin. Tony crawled smoothly up onto the bed and knelt in the center of the old-fashioned quilt (made by Jack’s Aunt Dot when she was pregnant and bored out of her mind, which was appropriate, since Aunt Dot had been quite a hell-raiser when she wasn’t too swollen to move) and turned to look over his shoulder at his sentinel. His eyes were so dilated, they were mostly black, with just a narrow ring of green around the edges.

Jack had imprinted each of his senses on his guide several times over the past months, spending their rare days off lying lazily in bed or on the couch in the living room feasting his senses on his guide’s body. So now, not only was there was less of a sense of urgency, but there was no need to delay. Tony had even had the foresight to place the lube and the sentinel-safe sterile wipes on the bedside table, so Jack did not have to go rummaging in their luggage for supplies.

Jack slid up onto the bed behind Tony, wrapped one arm around his waist, and used the other hand to pull his face around into a deep, hot kiss. Tony moaned into his mouth and melted against him, muscles going loose and pliant in Jack’s arms.

“Lie down on your back,” Jack growled, loosening his grip and beginning to move Tony towards the position he wanted him in. “I want to see your face while I take you for the first time, Tony. I want to look into those pretty green eyes as I push into you.”

Tony whimpered and hurried to obey, unfolding his long legs and flipping over onto his back, keeping his eyes on Jack as he did so. Jack growled at the sight of Tony spread out on the Celtic square pattern of the quilt, the smooth planes and hollows of his gorgeous body thrown into sharp relief by the winter light.

Jack wanted to touch, to kiss, but he knew that, once he started, it would be very difficult to stop, and he needed to get Tony ready. He reached for the lube— Tony’s favorite brand which was both sentinel-safe and long-lasting, which was apparently a tricky combination to get right— and coated his fingers with swift, economical movements.

“Jack,” Tony whispered, reaching for his sentinel.

“Shh,” Jack said roughly, laying down beside Tony so he could slide one arm under Tony’s shoulders while reaching down between his legs with the other. “I gotcha.”

Tony spread his legs eagerly and, as Jack slid his lubricated fingers down behind his balls, he reached up to pulled him down into a kiss. Jack obligingly opened his mouth to Tony’s tongue as his fingers tested the resistance of his guide’s body. Tony was tight, but not painfully so, and Jack’s first two fingers slid in with just the slightest, most tantalizing of efforts.

Tony’s hips arched up and he moaned into Jack’s mouth.

They’d done this much before, but it was different this time. Jack was acutely aware that this was just the prelude, not the main event. Finally, he was able to relax the ruthless control he’d had to exercise on his instincts and his senses to keep from breaking down and begging Tony to let him inside him before they were both ready for the bond.

Tony was incredibly hot inside, and despite the relative ease of entry, his body had clenched down powerfully on Jack’s fingers as soon as they were in him. Jack pulled his mouth away from Tony’s and moved to murmur in his ear.

“How does it feel, Tony?” he rasped. “Tell me how it feels.”

When he had first met his guide, he had thought, based on Tony’s flirtatious nature and earthy
sense of humor, that he would be a dirty talker in bed. To his surprise, he had discovered that, while Tony was incredibly vocal during sex, his vocabulary during such times was clean as a whistle. It was a delightful discovery, a quirk of Tony’s personality that Jack had not expected and, perhaps because of that, found unbelievably hot.

“Oh, God Jack,” Tony whimpered brokenly. “It— it feels so full, so much. I know it’s just two fingers, but— God, I don’t— I don’t know how— I want you in me so bad, but I don’t know how I’ll be able to take it.”

“Easy, easy,” Jack murmured, caressing inside Tony’s body with gentle, firm fingers. “It’s gonna be fine, sweetheart. We’ve done this part before, remember? You know you’ll ease up, it just takes a minute.”

He laid a gentle, reassuring kiss on Tony’s jaw, then another on his neck, then he shoulder. Meanwhile, his fingers stroked carefully across the place inside Tony that would make his guide feel like a million bucks.

“Aaahh!” Tony cried, jerking in Jack’s arms. “Oh— oh— unh!”

“God, Tony,” Jack said between continuing kisses. “The way you feel, the way you sound— so good, I almost can’t stand it.”

“Jack,” Tony said breathlessly. “Jack, please—”


“You, Jack, I need you, need you inside me,” Tony babbled desperately. “But it’s still so much, and I can’t— oh God.”

He pushed his head back against the pillow as he writhed on Jack’s hand.

“I know, Tony, I know,” Jack said, his voice growing more and more uneven as his own desperation grew. “One more finger, and you’ll be ready. Don’t wanna hurt you too much, just wanna make you feel good.”

“He doesn’t think he was going to have the willpower to pause again when Tony was finally ready.

He pushed back in with three fingers and Tony let out a cry that was almost a wail, his fingers clutching uselessly on the quilt.

“Ohhh,” he whimpered. “Oooohh, oh, it, Jack, it— ahh!”

“Does it hurt, sweetheart?” Jack asked, already knowing, but wanting to hear Tony describe it.

“So good,” Tony moaned. “Like running too hard— burns so sweet. Ah, Jack, please! I need— now, please!”

“If I do it now, it’ll hurt more,” Jack whispered. “Won’t damage you, but you’ll feel it, Tony.”

“I know, I know,” Tony said raggedly. “I need you to… please, Jack, please—”
“Okay,” Jack said, taking a deep breath. It was difficult to walk this line with Tony, to balance his need to protect his guide from any kind of pain against his need to give him whatever he wanted, including pain, but it was worth it. Tony would always be worth it. “Okay, Tony. I’m gonna pull my fingers out, then I’m gonna slide between those gorgeous legs and I’m gonna open you up the rest of the way with my cock. Gonna make you burn so fucking good, baby.”

The sound that came out of Tony’s throat was equal parts pathetic and filthy and Jack had to close his eyes and count to five to keep himself from coming.

He pulled his fingers out of Tony and absentmindedly grabbed for a sterile wipe so he could touch Tony without having to worry about getting his guide all messy. Then, as he had promised, he flipped over and slid his lean hips between Tony’s legs, resting his weight on his forearms beside Tony’s head. Tony’s breathing was fast and uneven and Jack could hear his heart pounding in his chest. Jack’s own heart was pumping like he was making a run for the gate with a whole contingent of angry Jaffa on his heels. He locked his eyes on Tony’s, lined himself up, and began to push.

For a moment, Tony’s body managed to resist the pressure, pushing back against Jack just enough to keep Jack from entering him. Tony whimpered, eyes wide, and Jack groaned. Then the slick, tight muscle yielded and Jack slid inside until the head of his cock was buried in Tony’s taut, quivering body.

“Ah!” Tony said, arching his back reflexively and reaching up to grasp at Jack’s biceps.

“Fuck,” Jack swore. “Oh, fuck Tony, you feel so good. God—”

His senses were growing sharper and clearer by the second now that he was actually inside his guide, even though it was only an inch. Their *accord* trembled, sparkling as brightly as the snow outside the window.

“Jack,” Tony whispered.

Still looking directly into Tony’s eyes, Jack began to push again, slipping slowly deeper and deeper into Tony’s body.

Tony cried out, tossing his head back and forth on the pillow, and Jack leaned forward to lap up the first salty tear that spilled down his cheek. More followed, tasting of ecstasy and joy with just a hint of fear: fear of what was happening and, even more, fear that it would stop. Jack kissed away each one, savoring the taste of his guide’s happiness and vulnerability on his tongue.


Jack bottomed out, and Tony let out a quiet, broken cry, clenching his knees around Jack’s hips turning his head into his sentinel’s forearm as his body shook and spasmed around him. Jack hissed, but held still, allowing his guide to adjust, cradling his head in his hand. After what seemed like a short eon, Tony turned his face back towards Jack. His skin was flushed and his eyes still glistened with tears, but he looked— _radiant._

“Sentinel,” he breathed.

“Are you okay, Tony?” Jack asked, voice tight.

Instead of answering, Tony reached up to cup Jack’s face in his hands and craned his neck to fuse their mouths together. The effort caused all his muscles to tighten, including the ones enveloping Jack. Jack groaned and thrust a little, unable to stop himself. Tony gasped into his mouth and rolled his hips, pushing Jack, impossibly, even further into him, the added depth causing his body to jerk
and begin spasming again. Tony pulled his mouth away from Jack’s and let out a high-pitched mewl, his voice and scent conveying both pleasure and distress at the unfamiliar stretch and pressure.

Jack shifted, wrapping his arms around Tony and blanketing his guide’s body with his own.

“Easy, easy,” he murmured in Tony’s ear. “You’re doing so good, Tony, so good for me, stretching around my cock, taking it so deep. Feels so good, baby, so fucking good.”

Jack rolled his hips slightly, not really moving yet, just thrusting gently, his sentinel sense of touch allowing him to angle himself just right so his cock brushed his guide’s prostate.

“Ahhh!” Tony cried, burying his head in the hollow of Jack’s shoulder.

The pleasure in his scent was growing stronger by the second, so Jack continued to move slowly inside him.

“Ah! Ah! Ah!” Tony whimpered in time with Jack’s thrusts, and then squealed “Oooooh!” as Jack drew out a little and pushed back in.

“Too much?” Jack murmured.


This last was as Jack, responding, not to Tony’s words, but to their accord, which was giving him a steadily mounting sense of ecstasy and desperation, finally drew all the way out and pressed back in again in one achingly long, deep stroke. Tony thrust down with his hips, his body moving automatically to meet Jack’s.

“That’s it,” Jack growled. “Fuck me, sweetheart. Fuck yourself on my cock.”

Tony looked up at him, eyes wide and liquid, and repeated the motion, rolling his hips to push Jack a little deeper, than easing off again. Jack began thrusting steadily in time with Tony’s rhythm, groaning at the physical sensation of his cock sliding in and out of Tony’s body and the metaphysical sensation of their accord opening up and deepening further with each push.


“Guide,” Jack snarled, picking up the pace, and fucking Tony deeper and harder.

Tony screamed and arched desperately under him, his scent awash with nearly unbearable pleasure.

“Come for me,” Jack hissed, sensing his guide’s impending climax, not so much through physical cues as through the taut anticipation as the accord between them tightened.

“Jaaaaaack!” Tony wailed, and came, pulling Jack with him.

There was a loud psionic crack, and everything disappeared in a flash of blue light.

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“Okay, so this is unexpected,” Tony said, looking around.
They were standing on a blue-tinted plain that stretched between two high, jagged mountain ranges. The rolling grassland was interspersed with tall, slender spires of cobalt rock, and there was a river running away to their right.

“Uh, not to be indelicate, but weren’t we just fucking each other’s brains out?” Jack asked, turning in a slow circle to survey their surroundings. “What the hell are we doing here all of a sudden? Also, what the heck is that?”

Tony turned around, and found himself looking at a massive city rising out of the plain. It stood at a point where the two mountain ranges drew together and took up most of the available space between them. The city had a sleek, modern, kind of sci-fi look, but the basic design was very old, round and tiered like a wedding cake, with walls around each of the five successive levels. Tony had seen the same kind of image multiple times in his life: the white city in that Ian McKellan and Billy Boyd rode through in *The Lord of the Rings*, Mount Purgatory on the cover of his mother’s copy of Dante’s *Purgatorio*, those Mesopotamian temple things that he couldn’t remember the name of right now from his undergrad Art History class.

“I have no idea,” Tony said, studying the landscape and the city in blank bewilderment.

At that point, Wiley and Massoud appeared beside them, smug and sleek and positively *dripping* satisfaction from their whiskers. Wiley loped over to Tony and gave him a playful nudge in the direction of the city, while Massoud “grawred” lazily, giving Jack a bored, expectant look.

“I guess we’re supposed to go there,” Tony said.

“Okaaay,” Jack said dubiously. “While I’m sure that makes sense in Spirit Plane logic, I have questions. And concerns. Because we’re supposed to be bonding right now. In fact, I’m pretty sure our bodies actually are still—*bonding* back on the physical plane. We appear to be wearing…clothes? here, but the fact remains, somewhere out there the real us are stuck in a pretty compromising situation.”

Tony looked down at himself for the first time, finding that he was wearing a suit of futuristic bluish armor, complete with a gun on his hip that, while clearly alien, was much sleeker and more practical than a zat. He looked over at Jack, who was similarly dressed and equipped, and frowned.

“Huh,” he said. “Um, we also appear to be armed, which suggests there is something to be armed *against*, which is—cause for concern.” He turned to look at Wiley. “Any time you wanna jump in here, big guy, that would be fine,” he told the coyote.

Wiley gave him a canine grin and nudged him none too gently in the butt.

“Okay, let’s walk this through,” Jack said, giving the coyote a glare. “We were in the process of bonding when we left the physical plane and came here. Our physical bodies are, presumably, back at the cabin, while our psionic awareness is here on the Spirit Plane. There is some kind of fortified—castle? City? in this part of the Spirit Plane that we are supposed to go into for some reason we haven’t figured out yet. So, what does this tell us?”

Tony frowned hard, thinking. There was something right at the edge of his awareness, something he could almost—

“Holy crap!” he said.

“Yes?” Jack said. “Do tell.”

“We’re bonding,” Tony said.
“Yes,” Jack said, “I think we’ve established that. And?”

“No, we’re bonding,” Tony repeated. “As in, present tense. As in, we’re still doing it. We completed the physical part, which means—”

“This is the spiritual part,” Jack finished for him.

“Which means there’s something we need to do on this plane in order to complete the bond,” Tony said. “Any ideas?”

“Well, from a tactical perspective, it looks pretty clear,” Jack said. “We’re supposed to gain access to a fortified structure. The structure has five levels, and each level has its own fortifications and is smaller than the one below it. That means we’re probably heading for the top. It’s the hardest to reach, it’s got the best view, and space is at a premium, ergo, it’s the highest-value target. Once we get there…”

“We’ll hopefully know what to do next,” Tony said. “Okay, let’s go. I don’t know about you, but I’m feeling really cheated out of the truly epic afterglow I’m supposed to be having right now, so I’d like to get back to that ASAP.”

They began walking towards the city, and Wiley and Massoud went with them, although the two Spirit Animals spent most of their time stalking, leaping, and bouncing around one another like they were a lion cub and a coyote pup.

They reached the base of the city much quicker than they should have, considering the distance they had had to travel. There was a massive set of doors made of smooth bluish metal in the wall in front of them, but no visible means of opening them. Wiley and Massoud suddenly became very quiet, taking up a position in front of the doors and staring intently at it with narrowed eyes.

“Interesting,” Tony murmured. “Why am I suddenly getting the feeling that our job here is to get them to the top of the city?”

Jack nodded in agreement. By silent consensus, the two of them began searching for some hidden means of access, but they found nothing.

“Huh,” Jack said. “So, we need to get into the city, but there’s no way to open the doors. Whaddaya think?”

“We haven’t tested these,” Tony replied, pulling the alien gun from the holster on his thigh. “It’s possible they have enough firepower to get through whatever these doors are made of.”

He aimed the weapon at a nearby spire of rock and pressed what he was pretty sure was the trigger. There was a bright, humming beam of light, and a neat, hole about the size of a quarter appeared in the spire. It was impressive, but also disappointing.

“Huh,” he said. “That could take a while.”

“Maybe just as well,” Jack said, looking unhappy. “I’m not wild about blasting our way into this place. I mean, think about it. This is all about us bonding. That’s gotta mean that, on some level, this city represents, well, us. Do we really want to use an alien-laser-beam on ourselves?”

Tony winced.

“Good point,” he said, holstering his weapon hastily. “Options?”
Jack pursed his lips and folded his arms, surveying their surroundings critically. Then his face lit up and he pointed to a something about half-way up one of the mountains on their left.

“Now we’re talkin’!” he said.

Tony sighed.

“I’m not a sentinel, Jack,” he said.

Jack frowned.

“It shouldn’t matter,” he said. “We’re in the Spirit Plane, aren’t we? You should be able to see what I see.”

“Oh,” Tony said, feeling foolish.

After all, he was the guide here, the Spirit Plane was supposed to be his bailiwick.

He squinted in the direction Jack had pointed, and sure enough, he could see a flat, open space carved into the rocky side of the mountain. A little effort allowed his vision to ‘zoom in’ on the spot (and he had to admit, it was kinda cool to be able to see things the way Jack did), revealing three different types of aircraft parked on the smooth, flat plateau. He recognized a Pave Hawk attack helicopter, a goa’uld Death Glider, and an F-302.

“Let me guess,” Tony said. “All things you can fly?”

Jack gave him an innocent look.

“I wasn’t actually a pilot, Tony,” he said. “Just because I’m Air Force doesn’t mean I can fly everything.”

Tony snorted.

“And just because I’m a federal agent doesn’t mean I know fifty different ways to use handcuffs,” he said. “Oh, wait, yes it does.”

“Smart-ass,” Jack said fondly. “Shall we?”

“Oh okay,” Tony said. “Let’s do this. You guys coming?”

He looked at Wiley and Massoud. The Spirit Animals turned their heads and regarded their humans placidly, but didn’t move.

“Of course,” Jack snorted. “God forbid this should be easy.”

They set off across the grassland towards the mountains. Once again, considering the apparent distances involved, it actually took very little time to reach the first obstacle: the river, which, because of the sudden narrowing of the valley at this particular point, ran right along the foot of the mountain they wished to climb.

“Okay,” Tony said, standing and staring at the water, which, up close, was broad, but not terribly swift. “This is so not my area of expertise. What do we do, mountain man?”

Jack frowned at the river, looking for subtle clues that Tony could not begin to guess at.

“I think we walk across,” he said. “The water isn’t deep, and the current doesn’t look that strong.
I’ll go first and you hang on to my belt. If I get into something I can’t see from here, you have the weight advantage, should be able to anchor me.”

“Jack, this is the Spirit Plane,” Tony said as he drew close to Jack and took a firm hold on the supple blue space age belt that went over his blue space age armor. “I’m really not sure the laws of physics apply here.”

“Nope,” Jack said cheerfully, stepping into the water. “But Sam was always telling me that they do apply to our minds, even when our minds are on the Spirit Plane. Things here are so alien to us, we can’t really figure out what we’re seeing, so our brains create something we can understand, something that at least sort of follows the rules we know.”

“That is… very Sam,” Tony said.

They were about two thirds of the way across by now, and the water was up over their knees. Interestingly, whatever the armor was made of, it appeared to be waterproof, because Tony didn’t even feel wet.

“Jack,” Tony said, “Does it strike you as odd that, um, nothing is really happening? No water monsters, no tidal wave, just— wading across a river?”

“… no?” Jack replied.

“Oh,” Tony said. “Okay.”

They reached the opposite side without incident, and stared up at the mountain in front of them. The rock was smooth and nearly vertical, impossible to scale without climbing equipment, but from their new vantage point, they could see what had not been obvious from the city because of the way his particular part of the mountain jutted out: there was a narrow path cut into the mountainside, zig-zagging up towards where they knew the landing pad to be.

They began to climb, and for the first time, Tony began to actually feel the effort of all their walking. He found himself breathing harder, and the muscles in his legs burned gently. A little over half-way up, Jack, who was leading since he was the one who actually had experience in non-urban environments, stopped abruptly.

“Huh,” he said.

Tony peered over his shoulder and saw that section of the path ahead of them was simply— gone. It ended just in front of Jack’s feet and then there was nothing but cliffside until it mysteriously started again twenty feet further on.

“Well,” Jack groused, “Isn’t this convenient?”

“No, wait!” Tony said excitedly. “I know this one! Indiana Jones. ‘Only in the leap from the lion’s head will he prove his worth.’”

Jack turned and raised an eyebrow at him.

“Any time you want to start making sense, that would be fine,” he said, voice flat, but the sparkle in his eyes betrayed his amusement.

“Well, in The Last Crusade, Harrison Ford has to pass three tests to get to the Holy Grail, right?” Tony said. “The last one is the ‘leap of faith.’ There’s a chasm, and it looks like there’s no way across, but actually, there’s this invisible bridge. So if you step out into what looks like thin air,
“Okay,” Jack said, sounding dubious, but game. “Easy enough to test.”

The sentinel stepped forward until the toes of his weird sci-fi armor boots were at the edge of the visible path and crouched down. He reached out in front of him and touched where the path should be. Sure enough, his hand stopped in mid air.

“Huh,” Jack said. “How about that?” He stood up again and turned to flash a grin at Tony. “Shall we?” he said.

The walk across the invisible section of the path was unnerving, to say the least, and Tony was very glad when they had their feet on visible solid ground once again. They continued up the mountain, and eventually they came up over a lip of rock onto the flat, smooth surface of the landing pad.

The helicopter, the Death Glider, and the F-302 were all lined up on the side of the pad looking out over the cliff. Jack and Tony approached the edge, examining the three very different aircraft curiously.

“Which one are we supposed to take?” Tony wondered aloud.

“Well, they’re all armed for bear,” Jack said. “Of course, the weaponry on the Death Glider and the F-302 is much more advanced, and they’re a hell of a lot faster and more maneuverable than the Pave Hawk. Which is kind of a shame.” He went over to the helicopter and ran a hand along the tail. “This is an MH-60G from back in the ‘80s. When they upgraded the Credible Hawks, they only had the funding to do a few of these. They were tapped for special ops, so I got to fly one a couple of times — sweet ride. Way better than HHs.”

“Ah-hah,” Tony said, examining the Pave Hawk thoughtfully. “I think we have our winner.”

Jack turned to look at him, disbelieving.

“Are you kidding?” he said. “The Death Glider could shred this thing, and the F-302 could literally fly circles around it.”

“C’mon, Jack, this is a classic test,” Tony said. “You have a choice between three things, two of which are obviously better than the third. You’re always supposed to choose the third thing. Besides, you like this one. That is so the Spirit Plane’s idea of a Honking Big Clue.”

Jack grinned like a kid who had just been told he could take his new bicycle out for a ride.

“Sweet,” he said. “The Pave Hawk it is.”

They opened the doors and climbed into the helicopter. Jack insisted that they put on the headsets, even though they were on the Spirit Plane and couldn’t actually go deaf, and once Jack started up the rotors, Tony had to admit, the sentinel-grade sound dampening in the ear guards was appreciated. Jack checked gauges and flipped switches gleefully, then finally grabbed the stick.

“Hang on!” he said brightly over the headset, and the chopper lifted up off the pad.

Tony had been in a few helicopters in his time, especially the last couple of years working for the Navy, but for obvious reasons, he’d never been in an attack chopper. The thing was big, and even from the co-pilot’s seat, he could tell that it had way more power and maneuverability than the transport models he’d been on.
Still, it took time to cross back over the river to the city. As they got closer, they took the opportunity to examine the layout from their new vantage point. From up here, Tony could see that the top level of the city was dominated by a single large building with a domed roof and columned portico with a courtyard and a fountain in front. Behind the domed building, there was a garden, then a collection of smaller structures, including a tall, cylindrical piece of architecture set slightly apart from the rest that looked very much like a landing pad.

“Huh,” Jack said after a few minutes. “That’s— odd. How d’ya feel about doing a little recon before we land?”

“Sure,” Tony said, trusting Jack’s instincts. “What’s up?”

Jack swung the helicopter around and set them on a course that would allow them to see the top level of the city from all sides.

“Not sure,” Jack said. “There’s just something… okay, that’s not good.”

“What’s not good?” Tony asked, suddenly on edge.

“See that landing pad?” Jack said. “The buildings around it actually create a wall between it and the rest of that level. If you land there, you can’t access anything else on the top tier. You have to go through the gate to the next level down.”

Tony peered down at the buildings below them curiously, and sure enough, found the landing pad was indeed cut off from the rest of the top tier.

“Okay,” he said. “That seems like a hell of a design flaw.”

“Not a design flaw,” Jack corrected as he used the stick to ease the helicopter lower. “A lobster trap.”

“A lobster trap?” Tony asked, blinking in confusion.

“Yup,” Jack said. “A lobster trap funnels the lobsters into the cage through an opening that they can only reach from the outside, not the inside. Now, I could be wrong, but that gate?” he pointed at the narrow opening in the wall between the first and second tier, an opening that was guarded by a familiar, but jarringly out of place, pattern of interspersing metal bars. “It’s a turnstile. Like on a subway platform. Whaddaya bet it only lets people out, not in?”

“Okay, that is really weird,” Tony said. “So you go through, and you can’t get back to the landing pad. What happens then?”

“Well, let’s take a look,” Jack said, pulling the chopper up and swing out for a broader view of the city.

They examined the architecture below them from their new vantage point, and both saw the same thing: two walls running from the fourth level down to the first, beginning on either side of the turnstile and ending at the outer wall, sectioning off a wedge of the city. Another aerial sweep confirmed that there was not break in the outer wall within that section. Jack was right.

It was totally a trap.

“So, you land and find out there’s only one way out of that area,” Tony said aloud. “You go through the turnstile thinking there will be a way to work around from the fourth level. But there isn’t, so you go to the third, and the second… and finally, you get to the outer wall, and realize
“You’re stuck.”

“You said the Death Glider and the F-302 are faster than the Pave Hawk, right?” Tony asked.

“Oh yeah,” Jack said. “Forget the tortoise and the hare. We’re talking the snail and the cheetah here.”

“So if we’d taken one of them, our approach would have taken a fraction of the time,” Tony said. “What are the chances that we would already have landed and been halfway to the bottom level by the time you figured out what was bugging you?”

“Hah!” Jack crowed, and reached out to pat the console in front of him. “You show ‘em, baby!”

Tony laughed.

“So,” he said, “We land in the courtyard? Assuming we’ll fit. The courtyard’s not that big, not with the fountain, and this thing’s a beast.”

“Yes, I can squeeze her in as long as you don’t mind having her nose in the fountain and part of her tail hanging over the edge.” After they could see through the windshield again—the rotors had briefly whipped the water in the fountain into an impromptu monsoon—they opened the doors and climbed out onto the soaked paving stones.

“It turned out that ‘sure’ was Jack’s way of saying, ‘yes, I can squeeze her in as long as you don’t mind having her nose in the fountain and part of her tail hanging over the edge.’ After they could see through the windshield again—the rotors had briefly whipped the water in the fountain into an impromptu monsoon—they opened the doors and climbed out onto the soaked paving stones.

“Nice,” Tony said.

“Thank you,” Jack said with great aplomb.

“Okay, so we know we have to go get Wiley and Massoud,” Tony said, “But we should probably check things out here first, see if we can figure out what they need to come here for.”

“Call it a hunch,” Jack said, “But I betcha we’re supposed to bring them there.”

He pointed to the domed, columned building.

They approached the steps, and Tony pulled his alien-laser-gun thing automatically, holding it up like he was clearing a building. To his amusement, Jack was doing the exact same thing.
They went up the steps and passed through the columns onto the portico. Tony eyed the huge, blank double doors apprehensively, remembering the city gates and wondering if all of this had been for nothing, but Jack gave them a push and they swung open silently. The two of them stepped cautiously through and, after passing through a strange, shadowy area, found themselves in a massive round room filled with blue light. Tony looked up, and saw that the dome, although it had looked opaque from the air, was actually translucent. In the center of the floor was a round, still pool with four wide aisles of smooth blue stone running out from it. The first one ran directly from the pool to where they were standing. The other ran in the opposite direction, and the remaining two lay at right angles to them. Between these aisles were more pools set in a complex geometrical pattern, separated by narrower paths of blue stone. Around the edge of the room ran a columned arcade with four arched entrances that corresponded with the beginning of the four aisles.

The entire place had an atmosphere of expectant stillness.

“Okay,” Jack said, his voice echoing eerily. “Definitely looks like a place where important things happen, but I have no idea what in tarnation it all means.”

“I guess we have to hope that Wiley and Massoud do,” Tony said.

“Mmmm,” Jack said. “Let’s go get ‘em.”

They went back out through the doors, down the steps, and across the courtyard, which was still damp from their dramatic landing. The gate down to the next level of the city was on the opposite side of the courtyard and, fortunately, was not a turnstile, but another set of double doors, like the ones into the city. On this side, however, there was a clearly visible handle.

“Here goes nothin’,” Jack said.

He turned the handle and pushed.

The door swung outward and they were met by an absolutely deafening roar. Jack promptly yanked the door shut again, and he and Tony exchanged wide-eyed glances. Cautiously, Jack pushed the door open again, but only a little, and the two of them peered out through the crack to see what all the noise was about.

They shared a long moment of stunned silence.

“Ya know, it’s funny,” Jack said conversationally, “But with all our skipping across the galaxy, SG-1 never actually ran into a dragon. It’s kinda disappointing, when you think about it.”

The dragon in question was curled up at the foot of a set of steps leading up to the gate, giving them a perfect vantage point to appreciate how truly large and impressive it was: a long sinuous body roughly the size and length of a jumbo jet, a thick, looping tail that went on forever, wings that could cover football fields, and a massive head positively bristling with teeth. Beyond it, they could see a wide, blue-paved road running straight down towards the second gate, with pristine lawns stretching out on either side of it.

“It seems like a little— much,” Tony said weekly.

“Do we… kill it?” Jack said dubiously. “How do we kill it? You would have to put a hell of a lot of laser holes in that thing before it really would even notice.”

“Aw, no!” Tony protested, staring at the dragon with both awe and alarm. “We can’t! It’s scary as hell, but c’mon, it’s too awesome to kill! Besides, like you said at the beginning, this whole city
has to represent us somehow. We don’t want to kill bits of us, especially if the bits are as big as that!”

“Okay then, Dr. Dolittle,” Jack snarked. “What’s your plan?”

Tony turned and grinned at his sentinel.

“Funny you should say that…” he said.

He stood up and eased the door open again. The dragon’s gargantuan head shot up and it let out another earth shaking roar.

“Well, hello there gorgeous!” Tony shouted, doing his best to sound genial and friendly while bellowing to be heard. “What’s got you all worked up? C’mon, beautiful, smile for me.”

A second later, Tony was wincing, because while his repurposed pick-up line had the desired effect, it turned out that he could have gone his entire life without having a dragon smile at him. Especially that close.

Upon hearing Tony’s words, the dragon had stopped roaring and snaked its long neck around so that its head was level with the door, its colossal eyes bright with interest, which put its head right in front of Tony. It’s tongue was the size of a medium-weight dolphin, and its teeth were like lamp posts.

Tony gulped.

“Hi there,” he said, smiling winningly and forcing himself to step out of the shelter of the door. “Aren’t you just the most magnificent thing?”

The dragon preened.

Tony honestly couldn’t have told anyone what he said after that, it was all a panicky blur of cheesy pick-up lines and heavy-handed flirtation, but he, with Jack behind him, managed to open the doors and sidle down the steps. They then had to pick their way around the dragon’s terrifying forefeet—its claws appeared to have both slicing and stabbing power, with vicious points and a razor-sharp edge—and and thick, serpentine tail. Finally, they were past, and Tony breathed a silent sigh of relief, but it wasn’t over yet.

“Listen,” he told the dragon, which was busy displaying its pinions to their fullest advantage, “We’ve got to go get our Spirit Animals, okay? But we’ll be back soon. Can you, uh, guard the gate until we get back?”

The dragon smiled again, then threw back its head and let out another thunderous roar before settling back in at the foot of the steps with a determined air.

“Thanks, darling,” Tony said, and with one more jaunty smile, he turned and started walking down the road towards the gate, Jack still following him like his shadow.

When they were about halfway down the road, they both breathed out a sigh of relief.

“Holy crap,” Jack said. “What the heck was that? I have never seen anything so crazy or so terrifying in my life, and I’ve seen some really weird shit.”

“Promise you won’t laugh?” Tony said, thinking nervously of how much he’d teased McGee over
his love of fantasy.

“Cross my heart,” Jack said in that certain way that told Tony he was lying through his teeth and would so laugh if he thought the situation warranted it.

“My favorite book when I was a kid was *The Hobbit,*” Tony admitted.

He glanced over at Jack nervously, but Jack’s expression was not amused, but fond, if a little concerned.

“Why would I laugh about that, Tony?” he asked.

“Well, it’s pretty geeky,” Tony said.

“C’mon, *The Hobbit* is a classic, like *The Simpsons,*” Jack protested. “Besides, there is nothing geeky about being well-read.” He paused, then frowned. “And if you tell Danny I said that, I will order him to brief you on the traditions and customs every single obscure culture we’ve ever encountered. In detail. I’ll say it’s in case any of them come to Earth to cause trouble. Or something.”

Tony’s eyes widened in horror, but he kept his head.

“Bring it,” he dared with forced bravado. “I’ll tell Paul that you should join me, since some of those cultures might be important to planetary security at some point.”

They walked in silence for a minute, then Jack laughed.

“Okay, mutually assured destruction,” he said. “I get it. No using Danny’s lectures as revenge. Back to *The Hobbit:* what does that have to do with your dragoncharmer routine back there?”

“Well, when Bilbo meets the dragon, he survives by a combination of flattery and word games,” Tony said. “Our dragon can’t talk, but it did seem to like compliments.”

“You know, one day, I’m really gonna have to read one of those books about how the Spirit Plane works,” Jack remarked. “I kinda skimmed over that part when I was doing my training. I was a sentinel, ya know? Didn’t seem like I’d need to know. Nobody mentioned that, when I bonded, I’d end up on some sort of spirit quest, complete with dragon.”

Tony grimaced.

“Not sure the books will help,” he said. “I had more training in the metaphysical stuff, since I’m an epsilon guide and I have a little bit of Sight, but honestly, pretty much everything I’ve read about the Spirit Plane and how things manifest here boils down to, ‘We don’t know.’”

“Why am I not surprised?” Jack said sardonically.

They had reached the next gate by this point and now they were standing on either side of the lock, ready to push the doors open. This time, however, they were much more circumspect about it, opening the portal just a crack and peering through to see what was on the other side.

Which was nothing.

More specifically, there was a long passage with a bare floor and bare walls that ran for several yards before ending in another equally bare wall. A glance upwards revealed that the passage had no roof, but was open to the sky.
They pushed the doors open and drew their weapons. Jack took point, with Tony behind him, and they made their way cautiously down the passage. At the end, they found a set of steps leading down to a T, with two more passages identical to the first leading off to the left and the right. They looked at one another.

“Okay, I’m gonna go out on a limb here and say, maze,” Tony said, taking in the blank, featureless passageways, the open roof, and the abrupt intersection, and drawing on his significant cinematic knowledge for an acceptable parallel. “It’s got a kinda Labyrinth aesthetic, but I’m getting a vibe that’s more like The Shining. Which isn’t good, and I warn you now, if you go all Jack Nicholson on me, I will knock you out cold and tie you up until you start acting like you again.”

“Yeah, well, if you put on tights and start singing, right back atcha,” Jack said. “What?” he asked when Tony goggled at him. “I saw Labyrinth. It was the second movie in the drive-in’s double feature the summer I after I married Sara. I had just come home on leave, so I have no idea what the first move was, but by the second, we were hungry, so we went and got concessions. We saw pretty much all of the first half, I think, but I don’t remember how it ended.”

“Aww,” Tony said.

They rarely talked about Jack’s marriage, and Tony would have thought that he would have been jealous, hearing about Jack and Sara in their honeymoon phase, but instead, he found that the mental image of a young Jack O’Neill home on leave and making out with his wife at a drive-in was… adorable.

“Shuddup,” Jack said, blushing a little. “So, maze. I know a couple of tricks, but, since we know we’re not starting in the middle, and I really don’t have the patience to do complicated math at every intersection, the one we should probably go with is to pick one of the walls in the first passage and follow it. Since the entrance and the exit are on opposite sides, that solution should work. Eventually.”

Tony frowned, trying to work it out in his head. He almost had it, but then he realized a potential problem.

“Jack, the city is round,” he said. “Each level is a ring, so it has only two sides, not four. What’s to stop us just going around in a circle and ending up right back here instead of at the lower gate?”

“Ah, but it’s not a ring,” Jack said. “The walled-off section, remember? Each level is actually a kind of horseshoe shape.”

Tony whistled, realizing Jack was right.

“Okay, I admit it,” he said. “You can be really smart when you want to be.”

“I told you,” Jack said, puffing his chest up a little, “They don’t give out stars to just anybody.”

They chose the left-hand wall of the original passage, turned left, and started walking.

“How do you know about solving mazes?” Tony asked as they descended another set of steps. “I know you were special ops and everything, but that doesn’t sound like something they taught you in the Air Force.”

“Believe it or not, I spent my first year or so as the commander of SG-1 studying like I was back in college all over again,” Jack said. “Nothing the Air Force had taught me had remotely prepared me to lead SG-1. We had no clear idea what we were up against or what we might run into. Which, I admit, hasn’t changed, we’re just more used to running into weird shit now than we were then.
Anyways, our first encounter with the goa’uld was pretty heavily tied up with Egyptian culture and history, so I read a lot about Egyptian fortification and military tactics during the first year. The Egyptians liked mazes, so I figured I should have some tricks up my sleeve in case we ever needed to get through one. We never actually did, but some of the other things I picked up from studying all that stuff turned out to be damned useful, so it wasn’t a total loss.”

“I’m guessing this is another thing I shouldn’t tell Danny,” Tony said as they ignored a right-hand turn and continued down the passage.

“Oh, no, Danny knows,” Jack said. “A few of the books I read were stolen from his office, but the one time he tried to bring it up, I refused to talk about anything but hockey until he dropped it.”

“Okay, so you’re smart, but you’re also kind of a prick,” Tony said as they reached a left-hand passageway and turned down it, descending two steps and then almost immediately ascending three more. “This is not news, but still, dick move, Jack.”

They reached another T and again went left. They climbed another set of steps, only to find themselves at a dead end. They retraced their steps and set off down the opposite passage.

“Tony, just because I can understand a lot more than I let on about astrophysics and Ancient Egyptian economics doesn’t mean I want to have long involved conversations about them,” Jack retorted. “I chose the career path I did for a reason.”

Before Tony could respond to this, there was a snarling sound from an opening on their right, which they had been ignoring because, in accordance with their plan, they weren’t intending to go that way. They whirled around just in time to catch a glimpse of a large, but painfully emaciated creature with mangy fur and red eyes before it sprang at Tony. He slammed into the opposite wall, the creature’s long, ragged claws raking across his face, and managed to get one armored arm up before it could close its filthy yellow teeth on his throat. The armor proved strong enough to withstand the creature’s teeth, and before it could try anything else, there was a loud hummm, a flash of light, and it fell off of Tony onto the floor of the maze with a neat hole in its head.

Tony stood, shaking with adrenaline and the first edges of pain, staring down at the thing on the ground. It had a vaguely canine appearance, but it was too starved and twisted to tell what kind of canine it might once have been.

Even dead, its eyes were bright red.

“Fuck!” Jack said. “Fuck! What the fuck!”

He stepped over the dead thing and took Tony’s face in his hands, staring in surprised horror at the damage.

“You got hurt,” he said, his voice high with worry and disbelief. “How the hell did you get hurt? We’re on the Spirit Plane, for fuck’s sake, our bodies aren’t really here!”

“It’s a— a psionic projection,” Tony said, wincing as Jack wiped the blood away to inspect the wounds. “My body’s fine, my psionic awareness just took a hit, and this is how it manifests here. It’s not bad. I’ve only heard of four cases ever where something that happened on the Spirit Plane was able to kill someone in real life. I think that’s why we’re wearing the armor— we can be hurt here, but we can’t be hurt bad enough to kill us. It’s okay, Jack.”

“Like hell!” Jack said indignantly, and began summarily poking and prodding his armor until he discovered a compartment in the thigh plate, right where the pocket would be on a pair of regular
trousers, that contained a small tube of antiseptic and butterfly bandages.

Tony blinked at the supplies, taken aback to see such—*normal* things in this alien, sci-fi world. Apparently, Jack wasn’t taking any shit right now. He was making the Spirit Plane give him *exactly* what he wanted, not some weird equivalent that fit the scenario.

“Hold still,” Jack ordered brusquely, and began to patch up Tony’s face with quick, sure movements.

“Ow!” Tony yelped.

The wounds and the antiseptic gel might both be symbolic, but it still stung like hell.

“So,” Jack said when he was satisfied, “What the hell is that, and are there more of them? And if so, what do we do about it? I don’t regret killing that thing, it was trying to eat you, but I know we’ve been trying to avoid doing permanent damage to anything here in case we actually end up damaging ourselves.”

Tony looked down at the tortured body of the creature Jack had killed and swallowed back a wave of nausea.

“Honestly,” he said, “I think we’d both be better off without something like that running around in our psyches. I mean, *look* at it. Killing it was probably the kindest thing you could have done.”

“Right,” Jack said, nodding decisively. “Sounds like a plan. Let’s blow this popsicle stand and get back to that afterglow you mentioned.”

It took a gruesomely long time and a lot of laser-beam bullet things to find their way to the other side of the maze. Their chosen method of navigation might have been effective, but it was slow as fuck, and it turned out that the creature that attacked Tony was not alone, although some of the grotesque predators were more feline than canine, giving Tony the sick feeling that the crazed beasts were, in some way, connected to Wiley and Massoud.

Finally, after what seemed like forever, they were standing in front of the next set of doors. Tony was exhausted and still pretty nauseous, and his face hurt like fuck. Jack was silent and grim, with a muscle twitching in his jaw.

Bracing themselves, they pushed open the doors.

Tony looked out at the second level of the city, expecting more savage creatures or clever puzzles, but instead, all he saw was a set of steps leading down to an expanse of flat gray-blue stone, and beyond that, pearly gray mist.

“I don’t like it,” Jack said decisively, glaring out at the mist.

Tony heaved a sigh.

“Me neither,” he said, feeling utterly done with this whole adventure.

They descended the steps and entered the mist.

At first, nothing happened. They continued walking, weapons out and senses alert, but all they encountered was gray vapor. And then, just when Tony was beginning to think, ‘What the fuck?’, the first figure appeared.
It was small, only about three feet tall, and vague at first, but soon it solidified into the form of a child. Tony had seen photographs of Charlie O’Neill, so he was able to recognize the small shape as Jack’s dead son. He gasped, and his chest tightened.

“Nice try,” Jack murmured, his voice sad, but calm, “But the Unity were way ahead of you. Hello there, Charlie. I miss you, buddy.”

The small boy smiled Jack’s smile.

“Hi Dad,” he said. “I love you.”

“I love you too,” Jack whispered.

The boy smiled again, and his image faded, becoming part of the mist again.

Tony looked at Jack, not sure what to say. What did you say to someone who had just seen an image of their dead child? Jack met his eye and gave him a tired, sad smile.

“Hey,” he said, “Easy, Tiger. This isn’t the first time some weird alien energy has shown up wearing Charlie’s face. The last time— well, it was fucking horrible, but it was good, you know? It was a chance I never thought I’d have. To say goodbye.”

“Jack,” Tony said.

“C’mon,” Jack said. “Let’s get out of here.”

After seeing Charlie, Tony wasn’t all that surprised when another section of mist began to solidify and Kate stood in front of them. She had her arms folded and was giving Tony that unimpressed look that had been an almost permanent feature on her face for the years they had worked together.

Tony stopped dead, staring at her.

“Hi Kate,” he said, voice hoarse.

Like Jack, he found that he was on somewhat familiar ground here. While he hadn’t had any aliens impersonating Kate after Ari had shot her, he had spent a couple days getting really strong mental images of her, to the point where he had actually talked to them a couple times and had them answer back.

“Hello Tony,” Kate said, smirking a little. “I see you’ve finally found someone to put up with you. I’m trying to picture you in a monogamous, adult relationship, but… it’s just not coming.”

Tony winced. Christ, even dead, Kate was still ragging on him.

“And I’m trying to picture why Tony still misses you, but that’s not coming either,” Jack shot back, and, despite the ghoulishness of the situation, Tony let out a pained bark of laughter.

“Jack’s right,” he said to the image. “I miss you like hell, Kate. You are definitely the annoying big sister I never knew I needed.”

“And you were the obnoxious little brother I really didn’t want,” Kate returned with a reluctant smile. “I already had three practically psychotic older brothers, I did not need a younger one to add to the set.”

“I know,” Tony said, grinning in return. “I had to be so annoying just to get your attention. Even I could hardly stand myself sometimes.”
Kate’s expression softened into one he had only seen in the hospital, when he was dying from the plague.

“I know,” she said. “I’m glad you kept trying. Although that does not mean I’ve forgiven you for the wet t-shirt photo.” Her voice became gentler. “Take care of yourself, Tony.”

“Thanks, Kate,” Tony said.

Kate faded away into the mist and Tony rubbed his free hand over his eyes.

“You’re right,” he said to Jack. “Let’s get the fuck out of here.”

They went on. When the mist solidified again into an Air Force officer Tony didn’t recognize, Jack didn’t stop, just kept walking. When Jeffrey White made an appearance, Tony followed suit. Finally, after Tony had walked right past a hazy representation of his mother—who, he realized, he could no longer remember clearly enough to give a definite face to—they reached the next set of doors.

They stood side by side, staring at the doors wearily.

“I am so done with this,” Tony said.

“Likewise,” Jack agreed.

They looked at each other, then reached out and opened the doors.

There was a high-pitched whine and a bright flash of light as an energy beam hit the steps a few feet in front of them. They flung themselves backwards and peered around the doors, assessing the situation.

The area between the outer gate and their position was a wide, open courtyard paved in yet more blue stone with trees arranged around the edge. A quick scan of the area showed nothing moving and no obvious source for the energy blast.

They looked at each other.

“Nothing for it,” Tony said.

He stepped out from behind his half of the doors, than dived back out of the way of a second beam. Jack, who had been watching this time, swore.

“Automated defense system,” he said, pointing to the area above the outer gate. “Damn, I hate these things.”

Tony squinted, and saw an odd thing that might have been a gun mounted on a swivel.

“You’ve seen this before?” Tony asked.

“Couplea times,” Jack said. “You’d think it would be a good idea, a defense system that’s always on and doesn’t need to be manned, but they last forever and they are really, really dumb. I mean, they’re not sentient, so they can’t actually be dumb, but they can’t tell the difference between enemies and their own creators half the time, and they keep going long after whatever conflict they were created for is done and gone.”

“Wonderful,” Tony said sarcastically. “Ideas?”
“Maybe,” Jack said. “Let’s try something. Do the same thing you just did, only I’ll do it too. I wanna see how sophisticated its targeting capabilities are.”

“Yeah, ‘cause that sounds like a great plan,” Tony snarked. “Here goes nothing. One, two, three!”

They both stepped out, then immediately dived back to cover. The left-hand gun above the other gate fired, hitting the step halfway between them.

“Oh!” Jack said. “Like I thought. The targeting system is good enough to pick up movement, but it’s not sensitive enough to be able to distinguish between two objects and one if the two objects are close enough together.”

“What does that mean?” Tony asked.

“Well, if we stay just close enough, but not too close, it should keep aiming for the center of what it thinks is a single target and miss both of us,” Jack said. “Of course, it’s gonna require some fancy footwork. It’s not easy to move in synch and maintain distance.”

Tony grinned.

“Jack,” he said, “Have I mentioned that I was in the starting lineup when OSU’s basketball team made it to the Final Four in ’87?”

Jack threw his head back and laughed.

“No,” he said when he’d recovered. “Final Four, huh? So I guess you can follow your point guard?”

“In my sleep,” Tony agreed.

Jack grinned.

“Alright, Michael Jordan,” he said. “Let’s go.”

After the hell that had been the last two levels, following Jack’s lead across the courtyard while dodging the laser fire from the two pivot guns was actually kind of fun. Jack, of course, had trained to work with a unit, so he knew how to lead, and while Tony had only played the occasional pick-up game since college, covering a partner on the job had kept his skills sharp. By the time they slammed into the last gate, they were both out of breath and grinning maniacally.

“Now that’s more like it!” Jack crowed.

“Not bad, old man,” Tony laughed.

Jack didn’t bother answering, just leaned over and pressed a big, wet kiss on Tony’s mouth.

“Shuddup,” he said when he was done.

Tony sobered a little.

“You realize that once we open this door, we have to go back up again,” he said.

Jack grimaced.

“Let’s hope the kids know how to duck,” he said.
They looked at each other.

“Ready?” Tony said.

Jack nodded, and they pushed the doors open.

Wiley and Massoud were right where they had left them, sitting on the grass outside the gate. As soon as the doors opened, they stood and walked into the city side by side, Massoud shortening his steps so that Wiley could keep pace. They walked right past their sentinel and guide and, without pausing, passed into the courtyard. Jack drew in a sharp breath, and Tony made a wordless sound of warning, but nothing happened. When Jack and Tony stepped cautiously out behind them, there was no laser fire, and a glance up to the area above the gate revealed that the guns were still and silent.

They followed the lion and the coyote across the courtyard and up the steps to the second gate, which still stood open. When the two Spirit Animals passed through onto the second level, the mist parted like the freaking Red Sea, opening a long, clear corridor to the third gate. Wiley and Massoud did not pause, and Jack and Tony had no choice but to follow them.

As they approached the third gate, Tony became nervous, wondering how the Spirit Animals could possibly make the maze any more navigable, but when they reached the third set of doors, they saw that the architecture beyond them had changed. Now, there was a long, narrow flight of steps leading up to the top of the wall straight ahead of them and, when they ascended them, they found themselves on a wide, flat causeway that ran straight ahead towards the fourth gate. On either side of them, the maze stretched away in an elaborate geometric tangle. When they reached the other end, there was another set of steps leading down to the fourth gate.

Wiley and Massoud never paused.

On the fourth level, the dragon was waiting, but it had moved so that it was lying to one side of the steps. As Wiley and Massoud paced up the road, it bowed its head in a gesture of respect.

They followed their Spirit Animals through the fifth gate and into the courtyard of the top level. The stones were still wet from where the rotors of the Pave Hawk had flung the water of the fountain every which way, and for the first time, Massoud’s calm, measured pace was interrupted as he looked reproachfully back over his shoulder at Jack, but Wiley yipped and nudged at him with his nose and he kept walking.

The two Spirit Animals climbed the last set of steps and entered the huge domed building, but once inside, they parted. Wiley turned left down the arcade, while Massoud turned right. Both animals traversed the shadowy passageway, visible through the arched windows, until they reached the left- and right-hand arches. There, they paused, looking at one another. Then, as Tony and Jack watched, both animals crouched, then sprang forward, running full tilt down the aisles towards each other. Somehow, even though Massoud was so much bigger than Wiley, they managed to match their speed so that they both reached the pool at the exact same time. Without pausing, they leaped into the air and collided directly above the still, blue water… and disappeared into one another in a flash of blue light.

Tony gave a startled cry as everything around them disappeared.

***
Jack blinked away the spots in his vision and found himself back on the bed in the cabin, still gasping from his orgasm, his body still buried deep inside Tony’s. Tony’s startled cry turned into a moan and his guide shuddered beneath him, his hands clutching hard at Jack’s shoulders. Their accord was gone. In its place was an awareness so deep and so complex that Jack could not tell where exactly he ended and Tony began.

A bond.

Jack felt a surge of joy, love, and relief, and alongside it, an equally strong surge of love, wonder, and security that did not come from him, but was his nonetheless.

“Tony?” he breathed.


“Guide,” Jack said, leaning down to kiss Tony.

“Sentinel,” Tony replied shakily before leaning up to meet his lips.

Despite having come mere moments ago, Jack felt himself hardening again. Tony whimpered into Jack’s mouth and Jack could sense, deep inside his mind, the mingled pleasure and pain of having Jack’s cock stretching his sore body open once more.

Unlike before, however, Jack did not have to ask Tony what to do. Jack pushed himself up on his forearms and drew his hips back, then plunged his cock back into Tony.

Tony squealed and writhed beneath him, overwhelmed with pain and pleasure, and Jack snarled in satisfaction. He thrust again, and again, and again, his guide squealing louder and louder with each ruthless stroke.

It was unclear who decided that they needed to change position, but Jack was suddenly aware of the overpowering need for Tony to be on his knees, for Jack to mount him and claim him in the most primal way. Jack pulled out and there was a mad scramble as they both worked to get Tony on all fours, and then Jack was shoving his cock into Tony from behind, forcing another desperate cry from his guide’s throat.

The bliss of their newly shared emotions and sensations was blinding. Tony wailed and came after only a few more strokes, the bond between them triggering Jack’s orgasm as well, but neither of them softened in the least. Jack continued to fuck into Tony, whose mental presence in Jack’s mind was a heady mix of ‘Can’t,’ ‘More,’ ‘Too much!’ ‘Don’t stop!’

They came again, and then again, before finally collapsing, utterly spent, onto the bed.

In Jack’s head, he felt his guide’s warm, solid presence, thrumming with contentment and possessiveness. His own mind answered with a similar emotion:

*MINE.*
Nesting

Chapter Notes

Nesting: the period directly after bonding during which a sentinel and guide traditionally remain in seclusion while they adjust to and build defenses for their new shared psionic landscape.

“You know, while we’re here, we should really spare an hour or so to try the seafood,” Dave said as he and Sydney walked into the cleaning supply room of the Idyll Petroleum headquarters and shut the door behind them.

“Let me guess,” Sydney said as she calmly began removing the subtle charcoal suit she was wearing. “You know a small place that has the best seafood in Galveston, as well as a superior wine list?”

Dave laughed as well, removing his own understated slacks and began unbuttoning his shirt.

“Touche, Ms. Bristow,” he said. “I do indeed know an out-of-the-way little restaurant whose chef can do things with crab that would make a grown man weep. They also have an impressive wine selection with very reasonable prices.”

Sydney laughed gently and opened the briefcase she had brought with her, removing a blue jumpsuit with the logo of the building’s cleaning company on the back and a rather squished pair of trainers.

“We aren’t scheduled to beam back to the *Prometheus* until oh-zero-hundred,” she said as she stepped daintily into the jumpsuit. “If we do our job, we will almost certainly have time for dinner.”

“A woman after my own heart,” Dave said, opening his own briefcase and retrieving a similar outfit to the one Sydney had just donned. “If you were a few years younger, I would be wondering if I had been less than careful during one of my youthful indiscretions.”

Sydney paused in the process of zipping her jumpsuit up and raised one perfect, level eyebrow at him.

“That would be awkward, all things considered,” she said dryly, referring obliquely to their liaison in D.C. and the occasional trysts they had shared since going out into the field.

Dave let out a delighted gurgle of laughter as he slid his own jumpsuit on over his boxers and t-shirt.

“I suppose it would,” he said, zipping up the suit and removing the only other item in the briefcase, a CD case with a single disc in it, and slipping it into his pocket.

Sydney finished zipping up her suit and, likewise, pocketed a jewel case before placing her previous outfit neatly into the briefcase and snapping it shut. Dave checked his watch.

“Five minutes,” he said.
Sydney tucked her briefcase behind the mops and moved gracefully over towards the cleaning carts, checking them over with the ease of someone who had done this before. Dave placed his own briefcase under the toilet paper.

When everything was ready and Dave’s watch said it was time to leave the storage room, Sydney finally spoke again.

“Dave,” she said.

Dave paused and looked at her.

“Yes?” he asked.

“I think I would have liked being the result of one of your ‘youthful indiscretions,’” she said softly. “Assuming I’d found out before we had sex, of course.”

Dave swallowed, touched, then smiled.

“I think I’m glad you’re not,” he said. “While I would be lucky to have a daughter as beautiful and intelligent as you, I think I make a much better peer than a father. Besides, do you know how few friends I have who can hold a reasonably intelligent conversation about criminal profiling and have decent taste in wine?”

Sydney relaxed a little and smiled, and as Dave pushed open to door to the storage room, he heard her beginning to laugh quietly to herself.

***

Jack carefully placed another log on the fire and pulled his hand back out just as the hair on the back of his arm started to singe. He closed the door of the stove and listened to the soft crackle as the first splinters on the logs caught, which turned to a roar as the fire got going. Jack shut down the vent again and pulled himself wearily to his feet.

It was a strange feeling, being this tired without any physical pain whatsoever. Jack had seen both Tony and Sam suffer from psionic exhaustion, but he had never experienced it himself until now. He made his way slowly back to the bed where Tony was curled up under the quilt, watching him sleepily in the dim evening light.

Jack had always assumed that the reason sentinels and guides needed a nesting period was a combination of overprotectiveness and extreme horniness in the aftermath of bonding. He had never realized that the bonding itself would be as exhausting as, say, a gate mission, and that the bonded pair would need time to recover their energy. Tony and he had barely managed to clean up before curling up around each other and passing out that afternoon, and had awoken only briefly a few hours later to grab a sandwich and stoke the fire before falling back asleep again.

Jack crawled back under the covers beside his guide, who sighed contentedly and snuggled into his sentinel’s arms. Through the new bond, Jack could feel his relief at being back in physical contact with his bondmate along with a general, sleepy contentment.

Some things, however, he could not pick up through their new connection.
“How are you feeling?” he murmured into his guide’s hair. “Sore?”

“Mmmn,” Tony mumbled. “I was, a little. ‘M not anymore. Think th’ bond’s kicking in. Was already healing a quicker just with the accord— ‘s gonna be even faster now.”

Jack hummed in acknowledgement. He hadn’t really thought all that much about the physical perks of having a full bond which, in retrospect, had been short-sighted of him. For a guy with a desk job, he seemed to end up in the line of fire an awful lot, and Tony, of course, could have found trouble in a monastery. The greater resilience and healing factors that came with a full bond could turn out to be the difference between injured and dead at some point down the road.

“You need anything?” he asked Tony, already feeling sleep tugging at him.

“Mnhnh,” Tony denied, shaking his head and wriggling closer against Jack.

Through the bond, Jack felt the moment when his guide lost consciousness, and smiled a little even as he followed him.

***

When Director Dick Todell arrived at his office in the International Affairs Division of the Federal Trade Commission, he was greeted by the sight of a plain courier’s packet sitting on his desk, squarely in front of his chair. Dick paused, cocking his head and taking a sip of his venti latte, and studied the packet. Then he turned and poked his head out of the office.

“Joe,” he said to his secretary, “What’s that packet on my desk?”

Joe looked up from his computer, his myopic blue eyes blinking behind his thick glasses.

“Not sure, director,” he said. “It arrived by courier early this morning. It was marked ‘Confidential,’ so I didn’t open it.”

“Okay,” Dick said. “I suppose it went through security?”

“Of course, Director,” Joe said. “After that scare the feds had last year, we’re not taking any chances.”

“Alright, good,” Dick said, turning back to his office.

He set his coffee and his briefcase down, hung up his jacket, and, with mild trepidation, sat down at his desk. He broke the seal, opened the packet, removed the papers and the two computer discs it contained, and began to read.

Ten minutes later, set down the papers, stood, walked briskly to his office’s en suite bathroom, and threw up. He then returned to his desk and pressed the intercom.

“Joe,” he said, “Get me legal. Tell them we need to begin proceedings to freeze all assets belonging to Idyll Petroleum now.”

***
Tony was dreaming about cooking eggs when he woke up and smelled… cooking eggs. He closed his eyes again and snuggled down into the unfamiliar bed to think about things a little. The dream had been so clear: the cast iron skillet, the spatula in his hand, the old-fashioned gas range under the tiny window which looked out over the snow…

Oh. Wait. That was…

Tony opened his eyes and sat up, looking across the cabin to where Jack was standing at the old-fashioned gas range with a spatula in his hand, looking out the window while a cast iron skillet sizzled merrily on the burner.

“That was really weird,” he said aloud, his voice hoarse from sleep.

Jack turned and grinned at him.

“Morning sunshine,” he said. “What was weird?”

“I was dreaming that I was you cooking eggs,” Tony said. “I mean, I didn’t know that I was you, I was just dreaming about cooking eggs, but it turns out I was actually dreaming what you were doing.”

“Huh,” Jack said, cocking his head to one side and thinking about that for a minute. “Bond?” he said finally, using the spatula to flip the eggs in the pan.

“Probably,” Tony said, sitting up and yawning. “What time is it?”

“About 1000 hours, local time,” Jack said. “Think we got, maybe, fifteen hours of sleep? Which sounds ridiculous, but apparently, we needed it, ‘cause I still feel kinda mellow.”

“Nobody ever said that bonding would be that exhausting,” Tony agreed. “In fact, nobody ever said that bonding would be… well, any of that. Seriously, couldn’t somebody have mentioned the part where you have to go to the Spirit Plane and fight dragons?”

“You know, I’ve been thinking about that,” Jack said, turning off the stove and scooping the scrambled eggs onto plates already piled with toast and fruit salad. “I’m pretty sure nobody knew.”

He put the pan in the sink and began pouring coffee.

“C’mon,” Tony said. “How could they not know? I mean, maybe not about the dragon, but the fact that you have to go on a spirit quest to complete the bond seems like something the community should be sharing!”

“No, that’s what I mean,” Jack said, somehow managing to put one plate in his hand, another on his forearm, and grab both cups of coffee in a maneuver worthy of truckstop diner waitress. “I think the whole spirit quest thing may have been just us. Or, not just us, but not something everybody has to do. See, I was remembering when I was doing my orientation at the Sanctuary, and most of the stuff on bonding was some version of ‘you’ll figure it out when it happens.’ I thought it was some kind of secret handshake thing, you can’t know until you’re in the club, but now I wonder if it’s because nobody really knows what will happen when a pair tries to bond— like, maybe it’s different for everybody.”

“Huh,” Tony said, taking a plate and cup from Jack and sucking down the coffee greedily. “What makes you think that?” he asked as the prospect of a caffeine jolt began to kickstart the waking-up
“Well, at least two of my instructors at Yellowstone shared their own bonding stories,” Jack said, settling onto the bed beside Tony with his own plate and cup. “There might a’ been more, but I wasn’t always the most attentive student back then, what with the brand new senses to go along with a brand new divorce. Anyways, one sentinel described having to meditate for a really long time—I don’t know if that was before or after the hanky-panky part, and I really didn’t want to ask, because she was, like a thousand years old and I didn’t want to think about it—and there was a guide who had this gruesome story about bonding sex that got way out of control and how the bond snapped into place when the sentinel finally lost it completely and sank his teeth into the guide’s neck. Like a vampire or something. The guide showed us the scar, it was kind of enough to put a person off bonding altogether. Anyways, no spirit quest in either of those stories, and also not much in common between them. It—made me wonder.”

“Huh,” Tony said again, finally awake enough to realize that he was absolutely ravenous and falling on the eggs, toast, and fruit like a starving thing. “Guess that’s one of the perks of going to the Sanctuary for training: instructors who aren’t afraid to share intimate details,” he went on between mouthfuls. “Nobody I ever worked with would say anything about their bonding experiences—too personal, you know? But, even taking differences in experience into account, it still seems like they should give us a heads-up about the crazy shit that might happen.”

“Do I look like Blair Sandburg to you?” Jack said. “If you want to reform S&G pedagogy, I am so not the guy you want to be talking to.”

“No, you don’t look like Blair,” Tony conceded. “There’s a distinct lack of shortness. And curliness. And—guid-y-ness.”

“Guide-y-ness?” Jack asked. “Really?”

“Gimme a break,” Tony said, pouting. “I’m recovering from a major psionic event here.”

“Aww, pudding,” Jack said, leaning over to kiss Tony’s nose. “You still tired, baby?”

Tony’s eyes narrowed.

“You call me ‘pudding’ again and we will be sorting out different sleeping arrangements for you,” he said. “Maybe in the woodshed.”

Jack laughed. It was an empty threat, and they both knew it.

They finished breakfast, and Tony managed to pry himself out of bed to go freshen up in the bathroom, but ended up heading right back when he was done. He was psionically exhausted, and the cabin was pretty small, so the bed was really the most comfortable place to do the only thing he really wanted to do, which was curl up with his sentinel and enjoy the new bond. Jack put more wood on the fire and got back into bed with him, curling around him protectively and reaching around him to twine their fingers together against Tony’s stomach.

For a long time, they just lay quietly together, coming to grips with the extent of their new connection, but, inevitably, their physical and psionic proximity eventually generated a warm, insistent arousal.

“Mmmnnn,” Tony murmured, wriggling against Jack lazily as his sentinel rubbed a gentle thumb over his nipple.

“How’re you doing?” Jack said softly into his hair. “All healed? You said last night that the bond
was speeding that up.”

“Yup,” Tony said. “This whole one-plus-one-equals-way-more-than-two thing is awesome.”

Jack rumbled in agreement, sucking gently on the skin behind Tony’s ear before pausing and saying,

“I realize we’ve… decided that you’re catching again,” he said, referring to their new ability to come to a decision without having to use words, “But I guess I should ask, do you want to switch it up?”

Tony went still, a tendril of anxiety and doubt creeping through the warm haze of lust.

“Oh, clearly that opened a can of worms,” Jack remarked, running his hands comfortingly over Tony’s chest and belly. “Talk to me, Tiger.”

“Well, it’s the— the thing to do, right?” Tony asked. “Switch? I mean, idem pairs recreating mundane gender roles in their relationship is, like, so not cool, right?”

“Ide-re mun-wha-?” Jack said, pausing in his comforting movements. “Tony, what the dickens are you talking about?”

Tony moaned and turned his head to bury his face in the pillow. While his and Jack’s new bond might allow a new and deeper sense of understanding, it apparently still did not allow them to read each other’s minds.

“I’m pretty sure that these days, you’re not supposed to have designated positions in the bedroom,” Tony said, pulling his face out of the pillow again. “‘Guide’ does not equal ‘girl,’ ‘sentinel’ does not equal ‘boy’ and all that. Apparently that is, like, a vicious plot to make sentinels and guides more like mundanes?”

“Plot?” Jack asked, his voice rising. “What plot? There’s a plot? Who’s plotting?”

“Oh…” Tony said, pulling his face out of the pillow and frowning as he thought about it, “I don’t know, actually. The ubiquitous ‘they,’ I guess? But, c’mon, Jack, there’s, like, pamphlets about how your designation does not define you, and the Centers give workshops on healthy sexual dynamics—”

“Dear God,” Jack said. “Forget more information on bonding: Blair needs to fix S&G sex ed now! This is insane!”

“You really didn’t get any of this after you awakened?” Tony asked.

“No!” Jack said. “Granted, I haven’t had a lot of exposure to the Centers: I did my training at the Sanctuary and then went back into the service. After hiding out here for a while, where, as you can see, there’s not a lot of opportunity to, um, ‘interact with the community.’ Anyways, let me see if I’ve got this straight. The people who give these workshops and write these pamphlets and whatever, they’re trying to tell sentinels and guides that they don’t have to do—or not do—specific things in the bedroom just because they are sentinels or guides. And while they’re doing that, they end up telling sentinels and guides what they have to do and not do in the bedroom?”

“Er…” Tony said, blinking and trying to find a hole in Jack’s logic. Finally, he said, “I think it’s sort of implied…?” aware that that the argument was weak, but not sure what else to say.

On reflection, it was possible that he had overreacted. Nobody had ever come out and said that a
guide couldn’t stick with the receiving role, so maybe this was more about Tony taking an implicit cue and turning it into an explicit directive. He had been known to do that, from time to time, and while it made him a great undercover operative, it could be hell on personal relationships. His interactions with Kate had been a perfect case in point: he had kept instinctively following her cues to be the team’s dumb jock frat boy, even though she hated dumb jock frat boys.

Tony felt his sadness and rising self-doubt seep through the new bond to his sentinel. Jack growled and flipped him over, rolling on top of him and trapping him underneath his body, legs tangled in his and forearms bracketing his head.

“Listen to me,” Jack said. “The only opinions I am interested in hearing when it comes to what you and I do in our bed are yours and mine. And maybe the authors of The Gay Kama Sutra, because I freely admit, I do not not know everything about sex with men or women, so some new ideas might be fun on occasion. And I love being inside you— makes my sentinel all growly and happy— so if that’s how we have sex from now on, I’m golden.”

Tony couldn’t help it, he arched under Jack and moaned, because he had his sentinel pressed against him from chest to ankles and damnit, their bond was only, like, fifteen hours old and besides, Jack being— well, Jack was just such a fucking turn-on. And then he started laughing, because the whole situation was kind of absurd, arguing about how they wanted to have sex when they actually were in perfect agreement.

“You toppy bastard,” he said when he stopped giggling, smiling up at Jack. “I love you so much.”

Jack smirked devilishly.

“‘I know,’” he said.

“Oh, you did not—” Tony yelped, and used his greater weight to flip them so he was on top.

“That’s my line!”

They wrestled for a few minutes, using the opportunity to grope and bite and rub against each other, until they were back where they had started, with Tony on his side and Jack pressed hard against his back, cock nestled in the crack of Tony’s ass. They were both past aroused at this point, and the feeling was magnified tenfold by the bond, which allowed the desperation to resonate and expand between them.

“Please, Jack,” Please, Tony babbled, switching involuntarily between verbal and mental pleas.

There was a wave of love, reassurance, and satisfaction through the bond in return.

Tony heard Jack pop the cap on the lube, then felt his cool, slippery fingers. Tony gasped as they pressed against his hole, then slid in, the stretch surprising considering that he’d just had sex the day before.

“Jesus,” Jack hissed. “You said you’d healed up, but you’re also tight as a virgin all over again. If this is a side-effect of the whole bond-healing-factor thing, we’re gonna have to start keeping lube everywhere.”

“Ah!” Tony yelped as Jack’s clever sentinel fingertips went unerringly for his happy spot. “Gonna — oooohhh— gonna have to do that anyways— oh! Oh, oh, ah, ahhh!”

“That’s it,” Jack growled in his ear. “That’s it.” MINE.

Tony squirmed in Jack’s grip, unbearably aroused by the combination of Jack’s fingers in his ass,
Jack’s voice in his ear, and Jack’s emotions in his head.

“Please, please, please,” he chanted aloud, while in his mind, he begged wordlessly and desperately for Jack to slide into him, to fill him, to own him.

Yours.

“Mine,” Jack said aloud, and pulled his fingers out, replacing them abruptly with his cock.

“Ah!” Tony cried as Jack pushed in, catching the flesh between Tony’s shoulder and his neck between his teeth and biting down as he did so.

The exquisite blend of pain and pleasure had Tony almost delirious before Jack had even finished penetrating him.

“Uhhhn! Oh,” Tony panted, while in his head, he was babbling a litany of So full! So full! Hurts! Yes! Too much! MORE!

Beyond that, in the part of his mind that did not rely on words, he was revelling in the feeling of being pushed to his limit, of standing on the edge and just… letting himself go, knowing that Jack would catch him.

“Beautiful,” Jack gasped. “So fucking beautiful, Tony.” So beautiful like this, so open and responsive for me.

Through the bond, Tony felt Jack’s savage need to care for and protect, not because Tony couldn’t do it himself, but because he could, and letting Jack do it for him instead was an act of supreme trust.

Jack didn’t wait for Tony to get used to him this time. The bond provided Tony’s sentinel with a much more exact and nuanced idea of what his guide needed and what he could take, allowing him to push him in a way than he ever had before. He began thrusting hard and deep, making Tony writhe and wail helplessly every time he forced his cock into Tony’s body.

Before, Tony had always associated sex with delivering a good performance, hitting the right cues, saying the right things, making the right moves. It had been fun, but part of him had felt like some kind of dancing bear going through a routine because that’s all it knew how to do.

He didn’t have to worry about any of that now.

It wasn’t up to him how fast or how demanding the pace was, or how far inside of him Jack’s cock went. The only choices he had to make, the only performance he had to give, was deciding how loudly to cry out with each unbearably hard, unbearably deep, unbearably wonderful thrust.

The heat and the pressure began to build, and Tony found himself more and more desperate, needing to come, but at the same time, thinking he might just die if he did. Jack’s need was becoming similarly more urgent, until finally, he snarled and rolled Tony onto his stomach, following him over without even pulling out, and using the new leverage to fuck into him harder and faster.

“Aaah!” Tony cried— more like squealed— as his body responded to the greater depth and force of Jack’s thrusts.

He fisted his hands in the sheets, closed his eyes, and thrust back against Jack. The pleasure was so bright and intense, he was pretty sure that, even if he could open his eyes again, all he would see
was stars.

*Jack, Jack, Jack, sentinel, my sentinel.*

*Guide. My guide.*

*Mine.*

*Mine.*

Tony shrieked and came hard on the sheets. Jack snarled and came seconds after he did, responding to Tony’s pleasure pouring into his mind and to Tony’s muscles clamping down on his cock.

Both of them collapsed on the bed, breathing hard, the bond thrumming with contentment.

*Ours.*

***

Gibbs hung up the sat phone and leaned back in the straight-back chair set by the window in the sunny little room he Fornell were currently occupying in a picturesque cottage in Bujkovtsi, Northern Macedonia. He stared wearily out the window at the sprawling refinery belonging to OKTA, the biggest oil company in the Hellenic Petroleum Group.

He and Fornell were running surveillance on the company’s headquarters preparatory to leading a covert strike on the facility. The NID’s intel indicated that OKTA was being used to coordinate and funnel money to all of the Trust’s operations in the Balkans and Southeastern Europe, but the files had not been terribly detailed. In order to make sure that they weren’t missing anything important, Gibbs and Fornell were using SGC tech to record anything and everything happening at OKTA before shutting it down. It was time-consuming, but not taxing (the analysis was mostly being run by Garcia and Eppes back at the Pentagon), so Gibbs had ample time to contemplate the latest clusterfuck coming out of D.C.

Gibbs sighed and dialled the number for O’Neill’s sat phone, which he and Tony had kept with them when Tony handed his sat phone over to Gibbs.

It rang for a long time before O’Neill picked up.

“O’Neill!” he barked.

Despite the seriousness of the situation, Gibbs smirked. The general was definitely crabby, but Gibbs couldn’t blame him. He was, after all, on his honeymoon.

“O’Neill,” Gibbs said, “Gibbs. DiNozzo there? Need to talk to both of you.”

Since both of them were in secure locations, they weren’t bothering with code names.

“*Hang on,*” O’Neill said after the briefest of pauses.

A moment later, Tony’s sleepy voice came on the line.

“*Gibbs*?”
“DiNozzo,” Gibbs acknowledged, unable to quite keep the fondness out of his voice.

“What’s goin’ on?” DiNozzo yawned.

“Just got a call from Paul,” Gibbs said. “Seems that someone broke into your apartment in D.C. last night”

“Whoa, what?!” Tony yelped.

O’Neill snarled.

“Perps got out clean,” Gibbs went on, “And there’s nothing on surveillance from, but when Eppes and Garcia went through the footage, they did find evidence that your building’s been being watched for at least four days. Someone planned this.”

“What the hell?” O’Neill said. “Why would they break into our apartment? There’s nothing there. The only thing either of us brings home from the Pentagon is our work laptop and our phones, and they go where we go. Was anything taken?”

“TV, stereo, a few paintings,” Gibbs said.

“Paintings?” Tony said. “They took paintings? Boss, I’ve got some really well done oil reproductions, but they’re reproductions. They were, like, a hundred and fifty bucks a piece and they have no retail value. Why would somebody take them?”

“Because this was supposed to look like a robbery, but whoever did this, they weren’t pros,” Gibbs said. “DiNozzo, you and O’Neill beamed up to the Prometheus from your apartment. To anybody watching the place, it would look like you were still there. Pretty sure that whoever broke in was lookin’ t’ find you.”

“Son of a bitch,” O’Neill said. “They’re ballsy, I’ll give them that. Takes a lot of guts to attack a sentinel and guide on their home turf.”

“Unless they’re nesting,” Gibbs said. “How obvious was it the past couple days that you guys were about to bond?”

“Well, Blair said in court that we were close, and we did stock up on supplies on our way back to the apartment,” Tony said. “We also filed for bonding leave with the Pentagon, but getting into the files over there would be a bitch. Still, even without that, I think someone could have made a fairly decent guess. What are you thinking, Boss?”

“Standard wet work playbook,” Gibbs said. “If you have to take out a sentinel and guide pair, that’s the best time. They’re tired and distracted— better shot at getting close, easier to overpower ‘em. It’s still not good odds, but it’s about the best you can get.”

“Oh, holy shit,” Tony said. “That’s what the whole injunction was about. I knew the nuisance theory was weak, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on what their real goal was.”

“Back it up, DiNozzo,” Gibbs said. “What’re ya thinkin’?”

“The Trust pushed the lawsuit through because they needed to speed up our timetable,” Tony said. “Anyone who knows enough about sentinels and guides to target us when we’re nesting also knows that a developing bond responds badly to outside threats. They probably had the hit all set up as soon as we registered a pro tem partnership, but then we didn’t bond. They must have gotten impatient, decided to give things a push.”
“Probably were trying to take me out before they made their run at Atlantis, but it didn’t work out,” Jack remarked. “This whole plan they’ve got going is way too complicated. All those variables in play, no wonder they couldn’t make it work.”

“This part should’ve,” Gibbs said. “Based on the facts they had access to, this was a decent set up. Most sentinels and guides wanna bond where they live, and even I mighta missed the trick with the Prometheus beamin’ you to Minnesota.”

“So, what now boss?” Tony said. “I mean, we know this was the Trust, but right now, we don’t have a lot more than that to go on.”

“Got Garcia goin’ through the records,” Gibbs said. “But we gotta assume they’ll make another move before she finds anything. O’Neill, how easy would it be for them to find the cabin?”

“Easy, but not too easy,” O’Neill answered. “Paul put pretty much everything I own under a legal alias when I transferred to Homeworld, but the NID already knew about the cabin, so the Trust probably has that information somewhere. Whether it’s in a place anybody knows to look— well, I’m not their secretary, so I couldn’t say. But it’d be a bitch to get in here right now, even if they confirmed that we were here. Since we were beaming in, I didn’t have anybody plow the road. We’re totally cut off. They’re only options would be to use snowmobiles or to hike it.”

“Hmm,” Gibbs said. “Gotta figure that they’re gonna give it a try, even if it’s a long shot. DiNozzo, if you guys had to beam up to the Prometheus right now, could you handle it?”

“The Prometheus? Sure,” Tony said. “It’s part of Jack’s own personal little fiefdom, and Pendergast’s cool, so it shouldn’t be a problem. But honestly, boss, wouldn’t it make more sense for us to just hang around and arrest these clowns? They’ve missed their window here. We were tired and distracted, but now we’ve slept, like, twenty hours and had lots of se—”

“What Tony’s trying to say,” O’Neill cut in quickly, “Is that we’re back at 100% and ready to kick some Trust ass.”

“I don’t want you there if they show up,” Gibbs said. “They decide to go in, it’s gonna be a rush job with not a lot of planning. Which means we’ve got no way to know exactly what they’re gonna try. ‘Bout the only thing we do know is, they’re planning for you two on your own. This point, only real strategy we’ve got is to not give ‘em the one thing we know they’re expecting.”

“Okay, I admit, that makes sense,” O’Neill said. “So, what’s the plan, Gunny?”

“Keep to the schedule,” Gibbs said. “Plan on beamin’ outa there tomorrow morning— with any luck, it’ll take them that long just to put something together. If it doesn’t though, you should have plenty of warning: snowmobiles make a lot a’ noise, and it’d be real slow going hiking through all that snow, so either way, you’ll hear ‘em comin’. That happens, you call the Prometheus. They’ll beam you up, and I’ll have our stateside strike team in place to beam down.”

“And if we’re gone before they get here?” Tony asked.

“I think some surveillance equipment’ll do just as well,” Gibbs said. “I’ll have Pendergast beam some down and you can set it up before you leave.”

“Sounds like a plan,” Jack said.

“I can’t wait to be done with these jokers,” Tony said. “They are cutting into the enormous amounts of sex I’m supposed to be—”
“We’ll be in touch,” O’Neill said hastily, and cut the connection.

Gibbs removed the headset and leaned back in his chair, smiling a little. Tony might be bonded, but he was still his same old irrepressible self.

Gibbs wouldn’t have it any other way.

***

Several hours after hanging up with Gibbs, Jack and Tony clomped through the door of the cabin, covered in snow and red-cheeked from the cold.

“God!” Tony said, shedding his parka and scarf, along with a small drift of snow, on the entrance mat. “That was exhausting! I need food! And sleep! And maybe more sex, but I’m so hungry, I can’t tell.”

Jack laughed, shedding his own parka and boots and going to put more wood on the stove.

Setting up the surveillance equipment had been tiring, but it had also been reassuring. Something about walking the perimeter of his current territory, prying into all the knots and hollows and sniffing the cold, clear air for danger had been hugely satisfying to his inner sentinel. Even better news, it hadn’t seemed to have any adverse effect on Tony’s lungs, which, thanks to the bond, Jack could now feel were fine even without listening to them.

Tony was already in the kitchen area scrounging through their provisions by this time, so Jack followed him. He had some of the ingredients they had brought spread out on the counter and was already munching on a carrot as he surveyed them thoughtfully.

“Polenta,” Tony was muttering to himself. “Not that we exactly need to save on calories right now, but we need protein, not carbs. Now, where the hell did I put the thyme…?”

“What am I doing?” Jack asked, ambling up behind Tony and wrapping his arms around him.

Tony turned his head absently for a kiss, still concentrating on the ingredients in front of him.

“You,” he said, as Jack nuzzled into the place where his shoulder met his neck, “Are chopping onions and peppers.”

“I can chop,” Jack said, his voice muffled by Tony’s shoulder. “I’m a really good chopper.”

“I know,” Tony said with a fond laugh. “You led with that, back the first night we met. It sold the whole thing.”

Jack lifted his head and grinned. Until yesterday, if you’d asked him, he would have said that the bond was going to, maybe, fine-tune their ability to talk without words, but that actually wasn’t it at all. They could still do that, sure— although, when it was just the two of them, there wasn’t really a lot of point— but what the bond actually did was make the awareness that they already had of one another’s moods and bodies as instinctive and certain as if those moods and bodies were their own.

Which, Jack supposed, they kind of were.
“I knew it!” Jack said as he let go of Tony and went to get the cutting board. “You’re using me for my sous-chef skills.”

“Hey,” Tony said, turning back to his ingredients, “What can I say? I’m Italian. We never turn down a good sous-chef.”

They made dinner and talked about inane things, like whether Johnny Unitas would have been better than Bobby Orr if he played hockey instead of football.

They ate, then washed the dishes, kissing occasionally and flicking soap at each other. By the time the kitchen area was tidy, they were doing more kissing than cleaning, and they soon ended up with Jack leaning back against the counter and Tony pressed against him.

“Want you,” Jack mumbled into Tony’s mouth, his hands burrowing under Tony’s sweater and his cock throbbing insistently against the zipper of his jeans.

“Want you too,” Tony replied, voice breathy.

Tony pulled back a little, his hands still tangled in Jack’s flannel shirt, and began backing up towards the bed. Jack followed, like a horse after a carrot, and stopped obediently by the bed. Tony began unbuttoning Jack’s shirt, still kissing him, and Jack started working blindly on the button of Tony’s jeans. They undressed clumsily, their movement hampered by their desire to touch and rub and taste, but finally they were both naked and Jack sat down on the bed, pulling Tony into his lap. Tony gasped as his hard cock pressed against Jack’s belly, while Jacks fit up against his balls.

“Don’t wanna wait,” Tony said fretfully, rubbing himself against Jack. “Want you in me.”

“Shhh, shhh,” Jack said. “Don’t have to wait, Tony. Pretty sure you’re still loose from earlier. Just need some lube, okay?”

“Mmmmmn,” Tony said, suddenly much happier, and immediately scrambled off Jack to get to the bedside table.

Jack moved so that he was sitting on the bed, his back braced against the wall by the window. When Tony came back with the bottle of lube, he was able to climb right back into Jack’s lap, after a brief pause to apply the slippery liquid to Jack’s cock.

“Never done it this way before,” Tony murmured coyly. “Show me?”

Jack moaned as the request lit up something primitive and not exactly admirable in his hindbrain, then cursed as he realized that Tony was playing him. His guide might night have personally taken the top spot in the cowgirl— or, in this case, cow boy— position, but he’d sure as hell seen it done, and he was a smart cookie. He could damn well have figured it out. The little shit was just pushing Jack’s buttons. Jack grabbed Tony’s hips and yanked him none too gently into position, then pulled one hand away to line himself up.

“There,” he growled. “Like that.”

Tony gasped and laughed breathlessly, then swallowed and began to lower himself onto Jack. He was, as Jack had predicted, still loose from earlier, and his muscles gave without much struggle. He still squeaked a little though, his body struggling to accommodate the intrusion.

If Tony’s new enhanced healing factor really did keep him tight as a virgin in perpetuity, like Jack was beginning to suspect, Jack wasn’t sure he was going to survive.
“Oooooh,” Tony breathed out as he fought to gain another inch, and then another. “Oh, God! Oh-oh-ooooh!”

When he reached the halfway point, he paused, trembling and biting his lip. He was no longer playing coy, and Jack could feel that he was struggling to handle the sheer amount of sensation he was experiencing.

“I don’t know if I can…” Tony whispered.

“You can,” Jack said lowly, reaching up and burying his fingers in Tony’s short hair, pulling him down for a kiss. “Doin’ so good for me, Tony.”

Tony took a deep breath, then pulled back a little before allowing himself to sink down further.

“Oh!” he gasped, throwing his head back. “Oh, Gaaawd.”

“Good boy,” Jack growled softly. “That’s it. Look at you, taking me so good.”

“Ahhh!” Tony cried as he finally settled fully into Jack’s lap, his body spasming helplessly around the full length of Jack’s cock.

“That’s it, that’s it,” Jack murmured roughly. “Oh, fuck.”

Tony squirmed a little, trying to relieve some of the pressure, then yelped as the squirming caused Jack’s cock to rub against just the right place inside him. His movements became, abruptly, much more deliberate as he figured out how to get exactly the right stimulation in exactly the right place. Jack gritted his teeth and let him do what he wanted, although he was pretty sure he might just die before Tony got it all figured out.

It was clumsy at first, but Tony soon found an angle and a rhythm that had him whimpering and Jack groaning. Jack gripped Tony’s hips and began to thrust in time with Tony’s movements, causing Tony to let out a sharp yip of surprise. He actually sounded a lot like his Spirit Animal, and Jack managed to laugh between moans of pleasure. Tony grinned and laughed too, although it abruptly turned to whining when Jack managed to get one hand on his cock.

“Oooohhh” Tony whimpered. “Oh, God, Jack, are trying to— ah!— kill me?”

“No more— than you are,” Jack panted, drawing his breath in sharply as Tony’s internal muscles gave a particularly fiendish squeeze.

“Uunnnh, fuck, please, oh God,” Tony babbled, his movements becoming faster and harder as Jack began to jerk him off.

“Jesus,” Jack grated out, feeling his whole body tighten as Tony’s movements brought him closer and closer to the edge.

“Jack, I’m— Oh God, I’m— bond! When you come, it’s gonna pull me over,” Tony stammered. “Please Jack…”

Jack groaned and came hard, and Tony, just as he had promised, let out a high-pitched cry and came with him.

***
“Wanna know wha’s worse’n bein’ right alla’ time?” Tony slurred without opening his eyes. “Havin’ Gibbs be right alla’ time.”

Against his ear, Jack’s chest rumbled with a weary groan.

“The couldn’t have waited until morning?” he complained.

“Prob’ly thought we’d be too tired t’ sense ‘em comin’,” Tony muttered, grimacing at the clear sensation of “threat” that he was getting from whoever had just begun the arduous journey to the snowbound cabin. “How?”

Fortunately, the bond clarified Tony’s incredibly vague question sufficiently for Jack to answer.

“On foot,” Jack said. “Idiots. They shoulda gone for the snowmobiles. I mean, it’s not like I can’t hear them either way, and then at least, they would of had the time advantage. As it is, they’re not gonna get here for hours.”

Tony laughed and finally pried his eyes open.

“Y’r range’s pretty long, Jack, even f’r a beta,” he pointed out. “S not that bad a plan for a different sentinel.”

“True,” Jack admitted grudgingly. “Besides, I think most of their intel on me is leftover from the rogue NID era, so they don’t know what my range is now. Mattera fact, I don’t even know what it is now. Think it’s longer with the bond.”

“Well, tha’s th’ idea,” Tony said. He sighed and reluctantly pulled away from the warmth of his sentinel. “Guess we should get going.”

They got dressed and got to work. Tony dealt with clearing out the kitchen while Jack shut down the cabin. It took a little less than 20 minutes, and then they were standing in the middle of the room with their supplies and the communicator linked to the Prometheus.

“I would just like to say, for the record, I hate running away from a fight,” Tony said.

He felt more awake now, but he was cranky and he had a headache from too little sleep.

“I know, Tiger,” Jack said fondly. “But Gibbs is right: they expect us. Ergo, we shouldn’t be here.”

Tony grimaced, but didn’t argue, turning instead to the communicator.

“Prometheus, this is Trickster,” he said. “Initiating Castling Protocol. Repeat, this is Trickster initiating Castling Protocol.”

There was a moment of silence, then the communicator crackled in his hand.

“Rodger, Trickster,” a female voice said. “This is Prometheus. We are initiating Castling Protocol. Stand by to beam up.”

Tony instinctively stepped closer to Jack, suddenly needing to feel his sentinel next to him. This would be their first physical encounter with other people since they had completed the bond, and he was feeling… exposed. Like he had been stripped down naked, and had only just managed to get his briefs back on.
Metaphorically, of course.

“Initializing beam up,” the woman’s voice said, and the cabin disappeared in a flash of light.

They rematerialized on the bridge of the Prometheus. There were fewer people manning it than Tony had ever seen, but each of them seemed determined to make up for it by being in three places at once. There was an unfamiliar face in Pendergast’s chair, a lean Lt. Colonel with graying hair and a scar across his jaw.

“The King is secure,” the major at the con was saying into her coms. “Ready to deploy Castle Team. Standing by.”

“General, Agent,” the Lt. Colonel said with a tight nod. “I’m Lt. Colonel Caffrey, second in command of the Prometheus. Colonel Pendergast will be with us shortly.”

Jack nodded.

“Carry on, Colonel,” he said, casually pulling Tony so that his guide was standing in front of him, back against the sentinel’s chest. “We’ll stay out of your way.”

Tony could feel the thrum of tension coming from Jack, and knew that he, too, was uneasy about being around people so soon after their bonding. Fortunately, the Prometheus was about as safe as it could get, what with it being in space and all, and its crew were part of Jack’s command, so there was no actual threat. Tony wasn’t quite sure what he would have done if there had been. According to everything he knew, things should go back to normal over the next 12 hours or so, but they were still in the process of building defenses for their new shared psionic landscape, and right now, they were vulnerable.

Which meant that it wouldn’t take much to put Jack in a frame of mind to start killing things.

It only took about five minutes for Pendergast to appear, neat as a pin, still sleepy, and generally pissed off with the world. Caffrey saluted and surrendered the chair, giving a terse sit-rep that pretty much boiled down to, ‘These clowns are trying to assassinate our general and his guide at ass-oh-hundred in the morning: let’s bury ‘em.’

In Tony’s head, anyways.

Pendergast nodded, then seemed to notice for the first time that said general and guide were standing on the corner of the bridge, dressed in civilian clothing, with two duffels, and couple of coolers around their feet.

The captain of the Prometheus pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Caffrey,” he said, “Get some airmen up here to clear the deck, and set the general and Agent DiNozzo up in the conference room, on the double. Their still nesting, for Christ’s sake, the last thing I need is a feral guide on my ship. No offense, Agent DiNozzo.”

“None taken,” Tony said, grinning.

“Hey, I could go feral too, ya know,” Jack pouted.

Pendergast gave Jack a withering look.

“General, if you go feral, I can have someone stun you,” he said. “If your guide goes feral, it won’t matter if I can get someone to stun him, he’ll just keep ripping our heads apart while he’s
unconscious.”

Tony winced. He’d never actually seen a feral guide, because, in general, guides left going feral to the sentinels. Probably because a feral guide was, as Pendergast said, almost unstoppable. Rendering them unconscious didn’t work, you actually had to kill them to prevent them from empathically attacking those around them. Which was almost impossible, since anyone trying to kill a feral guide— or knock them out, for that matter— was in the direct line of empathic fire.

“Point,” Jack acknowledged. “Just so you know, though, we’re both fine. A little edgy, maybe, but not about to go all Prehistoric Man or anything.”

“Joy,” Pendergast said without any inflection whatsoever. “Caffrey, get the conference room online ASAP.”

Lt. Colonel Caffrey did as he was told, and almost before they knew it, they had been whisked off the bridge and into the conference room, where the feeds from the strike team and the cabin’s surveillance equipment were already being fed into the monitors.

The chairs were, unfortunately, unsuited for their current situation, but they were still wearing their parkas. Jack put both coats on the floor by the wall and sat, pulling Tony down between his legs with his back against Jack’s chest. When a young lieutenant appeared a few minutes later to check on them, she took one look at their arrangement and disappeared, returning a few minutes later with an airman and a pile of Air Force-issue pillows. Tony thanked her profusely, and Jack set them up a makeshift nest in one corner that, while not luxurious, wouldn’t cause them to lose circulation in their butts.

Meanwhile, on the monitors, the special forces team that HERA had borrowed from the National Guard had beamed down to the cabin and set up a perimeter. Once the team was in place, everyone settled in to wait. Tony felt slightly guilty for being warm and safe up on the Prometheus while those guys were freezing their asses off down there in the dark, cold Minnesota woods, but on the other hand, he’d done his share of supremely uncomfortable stake-outs, so he figured maybe he’d earned a break. He and Jack cuddled together in their pillow nest and Tony managed to doze a little, although he was aware deep in his mind that Jack never so much as closed his eyes.

Almost three hours after they had sensed the initial threat, a sharpening of Jack’s awareness roused him from his nap. Looking at the monitors, he saw that the first hostile appeared on the outermost perimeter of the surveillance Tony and Jack had set up. The coms that Castle Team were using clicked in a familiar pattern, and while Tony’s Morse Code was rusty, he was able to pick up the meaning easily from Jack.

**HST 1, SSW,** which translated to 1 hostile on the south-southwest approach to the cabin.

More hostiles began to appear, and the Morse Code count continued, adding new information as it became available.

“Not sure what their plan is here,” Jack said quietly to Tony. “Final count seems to be 10— not enough to take down even a low level pair, never mind a beta and an epsilon.”

“Whatever it is, it can’t be good,” Tony replied, watching the monitors.

“Fucking hell,” Jack said, narrowing his eyes at one of the monitors. “That asshole is carrying a grenade launcher!”

He pointed to Hostile 6, who Tony was calling Six-pack in his head.
“Oh, fuck me,” Tony said, bolting up and scrambling for the room’s coms. “Bridge, bridge, this is Guide DiNozzo with Sentinel O’Neill. Be advised, my sentinel has identified Hostile 6 as carrying a grenade launcher. Repeat, Hostile 6 is carrying a grenade launcher.”

“Acknowledged, Guide DiNozzo,” said the female major.

She switched channels, and they heard her voice over the feed from the teams coms:

“Castle Team, be advised, Hostile 6 is carrying a grenade launcher.”

The coms clicked with Castle Team Leader’s acknowledgement.

The hostiles approached the cabin, and Castle Team moved in.

Based on Jack’s intel, Hostile 6 was taken out first. The rest followed in quick succession, although the National Guard was careful to leave a few of them alive to answer questions. Expecting a sentinel and a guide, not an entire strike team, the hostile force fell quickly. Once they were down, Castle Team converged, four of them securing the living prisoners while the rest began to search the dead.

“What the hell is this?” said one of the National Guards, pulling something from inside a dead hostile’s jacket.

“I’ve got one too, sir,” said another.

Tony couldn’t see what they had, the picture on the monitors was too dark, but Jack could. Both of them swore.

“Bridge,” Tony said into the coms, which he was still holding, “This is Guide DiNozzo again. The objects that Castle Team just pulled off our dead hostiles are Psionic Dampening Devices.”

“What in tarnation is going on here?” Jack snarled as the major conveyed this information to the team. “Why are these guys carrying PDDs?”

One of the National Guards had reached Six-pack’s grenade launcher, and was carefully unloading it to examine what the hostiles had been planning to shoot at Jack and Tony. The warhead fell out into his gloved hand…

… and everything went to hell.

There was a small pop followed by a hiss. The specialist dropped the cylinder and backed away, shouting that they had a possible airborne threat. The words were barely out of his mouth before he began gasping for breath. The guard stumbled, struggling for air, and one of his teammates cursed and sprinted in to grab him, seizing him by the back of his cold-weather gear and hauling him away from the still-hissing object.

“Prometheus, be advised, we’ve been exposed to an unknown airborne agent!” Castle Team Leader yelled into his coms. “Repeat, we have been exposed to an unknown airborne agent!”

The National Guard gasped one more time… and then stopped breathing.
“The warheads found on the hostiles contained a highly concentrated solution of a powerful antipsychotic called loxapine,” said Major Arif, CMO of the Prometheus, turning the screen of his desktop to face Jack and Tony. “I’m familiar with the drug, but until I saw this, I was unaware that anyone was formulating an aerosol dispersible form of it.”

Jack and Tony were standing shoulder to shoulder in the cramped confines of the CMO’s office, being briefed on exactly what had happened to Castle Team. Castle Team, meanwhile, was in the infirmary proper in various stages of incoherence or catatonia.

“An antipsychotic,” Tony said woodenly, his face and emotions both harder and colder than Jack had ever seen before.

Major Arif winced.

“I’m afraid so,” he said, his scent sympathetic.

“Bastards,” Tony murmured, his icy anger abruptly turning hot.

“Okay,” Jack finally spoke up, “For those of us who don’t know what’s going on, how about somebody explains? Starting with what happened to Sergeant Kirby, because that looked more like the effect of a choking agent than a psych med.”

Jack was still somewhat edgy, but the worst of the post-bonding aggression and defensiveness had faded. Now, being around people was more of an irritant than an all-out threat, although they had had to beam the Trust’s commandos down to Black Site 0 ahead of schedule because he couldn’t tolerate having them on the ship with his guide.

“One of the possible side-effects of loxapine is bronchospasms,” Major Arif said. “In extreme cases, this can lead to respiratory arrest. As I said, this is a highly concentrated form of the drug, and Sergeant Kirby took a direct hit in the face. He didn’t stand a chance.”

“Okay,” Jack said. “Next question, why? I mean, Kirby is dead and the rest of Castle Team is looking pretty rough, so this stuff is effective, but it seems like a weird choice.”

“General, are you aware of the effects that antipsychotics can have on guides?” Major Arif asked gently.

Jack frowned.

“Yeah, they make their controls go all wonky,” he said. “I’m never supposed to let anyone give Tony one— it’s in the information they give you when you register a partnership with the Center.”

“So, extrapolating from that, what would have happened if Agent DiNozzo—or, indeed, any guide—had been on the ground when the warheads containing the loxapine deployed?” Major Arif
“He would have— oh, shit,” Jack said, finally getting it. “He would have lost control.”

He felt a growl building in his chest, and was very glad that they had already beamed the surviving Trust soldiers down to Black Site 0. It would have been pretty inconvenient if he’d had to pause this conversation to go and kill them.

“Yes,” Major Arif said. “He would have been incapacitated, and would have taken you down with him. Now, normally, an antipsychotic is not a viable anti-guide measure, because it essentially sends the guide into an artificial feral state. Whoever administers it, as we’ve discovered through painful experience, is usually the first to be caught in the psionic backlash when the guide loses control, regardless of their intentions. However, in this case, the hostiles were carrying PDDs, so they would have been protected from the fallout.”

“Actually, according to the research Sam did when the Asgard first gave them the PDDs, they wouldn’t have been protected from all of it,” Tony said with savage satisfaction.

“Huh?” Jack said.

“I beg your pardon?” Major Arif asked.

“The PDDs dampen the psionic field, but only on the physical plane” Tony explained. “They don’t effect the Spirit Plane at all. Sam said that, even though she can’t sense anyone’s empathic or psionic landscape when she’s wearing one, she can still call her Spirit Animal, and when she got their Alpha at Cheyenne to try Spirit Walking while it was on, he had no problem. So if they’d made us go feral, the PDDs would have protected them from empathic backlash, but they wouldn’t have protected them from Wiley. And Massoud, ‘cause there’s no way Massoud wouldn’t have let Wiley have all the fun.”

Jack grimaced. He was intimately familiar with what happened when a Spirit Animal felt compelled to step in on the physical plane. They didn’t do it often—they weren’t from here, after all, it took an overwhelming push to allow them to bend the rules enough to act in the physical world—but when they did, it was usually because something massively fucked up was going down. Back when he was the leader of SG-1, the team had been betrayed and taken prisoner by the locals on P3R-118. As was apparently the custom on that stupid iceball, they had had their memories wiped and been sent to work underground with most of the rest of the planet’s population, while the leaders of the planetary elite told the SGC that they had been lost out on a glacier. How long it would have taken for Hammond to find them, they would never know, because Mongwa, Sam’s owl, lost his shit and proceeded to lay down the law like the Native American spirit boss he was named after. Jack had learned some valuable lessons about Spirit Animals from that mission, including the fact that size and species really did not matter in terms of the amount of damage they could inflict when they felt like they needed to. Compared to what that itty bitty owl had done on 118, Massoud’s freak-out when Hathor’s minions tried to implant a symbiote in Jack’s brain a couple years later had been like a toddler’s temper tantrum.

“So let me get this straight,” Jack said, jaw flexing. “Their grand plan was to send us both feral and protect themselves from the fallout with stolen tech that wasn’t going to work?”

“Well, that’s the whole trouble with stolen tech, isn’t it?” Tony said with a sharp, cold smile that Jack had never seen on his face before. “No equipment specifications or performance guarantees, you just gotta guess.”

“I need to end this, Tony,” Jack said, voice low. “These guys—they just keep going and going,
even though it’s clearly not working, and it’s… it’s intolerable. I need them gone.”

“I know, Jack,” Tony said softly, reaching out and putting a gentle hand on the back of Jack’s neck in a reverse image of their usual gesture. “I know.”

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“This is it for you, I think you know that,” Tony murmured softly, his eyes locked on the large and stereotypically mean-looking Trust mercenary sitting across the table from him. “You’ve gotten in too deep, and now you’re never gonna leave this place, except in a box. Just four walls, a bed, a toilet, and three meals a day through the bars until you die from old age.”

The mercenary— Tony didn’t know his name, he wasn’t talking and so far, his face hadn’t popped on any of Garcia’s databases— remained stone-faced and impassive, but Tony could feel the wave of anger and fear coming off him. He smiled slightly.

“Yeah,” he said, “I thought that might get to you. Big, tough guy like you, I know you’re not scared of pain, and since you agreed to take this job, you’re obviously not scared of dying. But, see, most of the mercenaries I know, they’re pretty addicted to the adrenaline rush, ya know? They need to be in the thick of things, not sitting in a cell waiting to die. Now, I can help you, but in return, you have to tell me everything you know about the people who hired you. Every single thing. You can’t leave anything out. I’m a guide. I’ll know if you leave something out.”

The mercenary’s expression still didn’t change, but his eyes were sharp as he looked at Tony.

“What can you do?” he asked, speaking for the first time since Tony had entered the interrogation room.

Tony smiled wider.

“I can give you the adrenaline rush to end all adrenaline rushes,” he said softly. “The craziest, most badass mission you can imagine. You’ll never see the U.S. again, but you’ll never be bored, and I promise you, you will not die of old age.”

It hadn’t been easy, convincing Jack and Paul that this was a good idea, but Tony was pretty sure that this would work. Guys like this, they didn’t do what they did for the money or for their country, they did it because they got off on it. Homeworld needed people out there in the universe, people who could do what needed to be done, and these guys wouldn’t care if they could never come back to Earth.

The mercenary nodded sharply.

“Okay,” he said. “I’ll tell you everything I know.”

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“This changes everything,” Dr. Eppes said over the video conference array in the Prometheus’s
“We need to move up the timeline for D.C. immediately.”

The mathematician was sitting in one of the empty offices back at HERA’s HQ, surrounded by chalkboards. Jack had to wonder what Pentagon requisitions had thought of that request, but there was so much going on right now, he couldn’t really give the image the attention it deserved.

“You mean, we need to arrest agents the Trust has planted there now instead of later?” Jack asked, leaning forward in his chair.

“Yes,” Dr. Eppes said. “The assassination attempt on you and Agent DiNozzo changed the entire timeline, general. If we don’t take out the players in D.C. immediately, the whole operation falls apart.”

“How do we do that?” Rossi asked, leaning back against the familiar faux leather of the cabin seating in Homeworld’s C-21. “None of the teams can be in D.C. for at least four days.”

“Um, hello!” Tony said, waving his hand. “Federal agent, right here.”

“I was under the impression that yours and the general’s involvement in this operation was to be kept unofficial, Agent DiNozzo,” Rossi said smoothly.

“It was,” Gibbs said shortly, looking mean and irritated and totally badass dressed in his TAC gear and absolutely covered in grime—apparently, strikes against Balkan oil companies were messy. “Situation’s changed. These guys tried to assassinate the Head of Homeworld Command and the Deputy Director of Homeworld Reconnaissance and Enforcement. That’s treason. Even their friends on the Hill won’t wanna be involved in that. Hell, they’ll be begging DiNozzo to make these guys disappear before they can bring anybody else down with ‘em. They also tried to assassinate a sentinel and his guide. Sentinel justice is something the entire world understands.”

“Does this move up our timeline as concerns Ba’al?” Sam wanted to know.

For reasons best known to herself, she had chosen to conference in from her current tropical location wearing a bikini and sarong. Jack wasn’t the only person who was suddenly having trouble concentrating. It didn’t help that he had Tony in his head now, and Tony was in the middle of some sort of epiphany about how awesome it was to look at scantily clad women without having to worry about how to get them into bed.

Once again, it was becoming obvious that Tony was a far more complicated person than he appeared to be.

“Maybe,” Eppes replied. “I need to run some more numbers to be sure.”

“Um, guys?” Garcia said, raising her fluffy yellow pencil. “Can I just point out that we don’t actually know where Ba’al—or Cole—is right now?”

“I don’t think we have to worry about that,” Tony said with a grim smile.

Gibbs frowned.

“Whatcha thinkin’, DiNozzo?” he asked.

“His people just screwed up big time, boss,” Tony said. “They were supposed to take me and Jack out, but we’re still very much alive, and the guys they hired to do the job are in custody. What are the odds he’s not headed to D.C. right now to put the fear of God—or, well, Ba’al—into our pals in Washington?”
There was a pause.

“Eppes,” Gibbs said finally, “Need those numbers ASAP.”

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Captain Holly Archer of the United State Marine Corps had had a horrible morning so far. Her girlfriend’s cat had thrown up on the bed, the guy at the coffee shop had put non-fat milk in her coffee against her express instructions, and when she got to work, she had found her CO locked in his office and refusing to take calls. Since her CO happened to be the Vice Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Holly had the dubious honor of being his administrative assistant, having him suddenly go dark sucked hard. How the hell did you explain to SecDef that the VCJS had ghosted him, for fuck’s sake? It was like high school all over again!

Holly was beginning to consider whether she should invest in a large white flag and start waving it at all and sundry when the door to the VCJS’s outer office opened and security stepped in.

“Ma’am,” said the young corporal, saluting nervously, “General O’Neill and Special Agent DiNozzo to see General Camden, Ma’am.”

Holly resisted the urge to do something totally unprofessional.

“The General isn’t taking appointments this morning, Corporal,” she said through gritted teeth.

“Sorry Ma’am,” the corporal said, looking slightly panicked. “They—”

“Are here on the President’s authority,” said a smooth, genial voice. “Hi, I’m Special Agent DiNozzo, HERA, and this is my sentinel, General O’Neill.”

A tall, lean man with a gorgeous smile and a very sharp suit strolled into Holly’s office, with an equally tall and lean, but slightly older Air Force general trailing behind him. Holly knew the General, he’d been in and out of General Camden’s office for the past several months, but she didn’t know exactly what it was he did. She had never seen Agent DiNozzo before, however. She eyed him suspiciously as he flipped open his badge and showed her a shiny gold shield with a totally unfamiliar design and a much more recognizable SGU ID with two photos, one of Agent DiNozzo and the other of General O’Neill.

Holly sighed. This was turning into a goatfuck of a day.

She turned to the intercom on her desk and punched the button with a little more force than was strictly necessary.

“Sir,” she said, “I have a Special Agent DiNozzo here with General O’Neill. They say they’re here on orders from the president.”

She waited, but there was no reply.

“Shit,” General O’Neill said.

“‘Never goes smooth,’” the fed said, reaching beneath his jacket and pulling a glock from his shoulder holster. “‘How come it never goes smooth?’”
“Sir?” Holly said, taking great pride in how calmly she was able to get the words out of her mouth, “Do you mind telling me why you’re drawing a gun in the Vice Chairman’s office?”

“Ma’am, we have reason to believe that the Vice Chairman may be… in trouble,” Agent DiNozzo said, holding his gun ready and approaching the door. “If you and the corporal could step outside —”

“Sir, if the Vice Chairman is in trouble, it’s my job to see to his safety,” Holly said, rising from her desk.

“It would really be better if you waited outside, Captain,” General O’Neill said, bending down and, to Holly’s secret consternation, pulling an M9 from an ankle holster hidden under his uniform pants. “Call it an order if you like.”

Holly did not like, but she was unarmed and outranked, so she nodded sharply and gestured for the corporal to proceed her out the door. She took up a position directly outside and stood at attention, waiting nervously.

She did not have to wait long.

There was the sound of the inner door of the office being kicked in and Agent DiNozzo’s muffled voice saying, “Federal Agents, stand down!” and General O’Neill saying “C’mon Joe, you know what’s going on. You gotta fight this, man.”

Then there was a loud scuffle, a gunshot, some curses, and then the outer door of the office was bursting open and a large figure was barreling out of the room.

Holly had only a split second to make a decision, and she could only hope it was the right one. Taking a deep breath, she used her low center of gravity to tackle whoever had just crashed through the door, taking his legs out from under him. Unfortunately, while this was unquestionably effective, it also meant taking the brunt of the impact as 200 plus pounds of Marine General went down hard.

Oh, shit, Holly thought, realization kicking in. *I just tackled my CO.*

Before she could panic properly, General Camden was being hauled off of her and Agent DiNozzo was jabbing him in the neck with a large syringe. The General snarled and, in the few seconds before whatever was in the syringe took effect, Holly could swear that she saw his eyes go bright yellow. Then he went limp.

“Nice job, Captain,” General O’Neill complimented Holly as he and Agent DiNozzo lowered Holly’s unconscious CO to the floor.

Beyond them, the main office was deadly silent.

“Ah,” said Agent DiNozzo, looking up at the sea of horrified faces. “Right. Um, nothing to worry about fo folks. Special Agent DiNozzo and General O’Neill, HERA.” He flashed the weird badge again. “Everything is going to be okay. The Vice Chairman has been exposed to a, um, dangerous biological agent. We’re, ah, going to get him some help. Jack, where the fuck is the transport team?”

At that moment, the outer door of the main office slammed open.

“What the hell is going on here?” roared the belligerent voice of General McMahon, Commandant of the Marine Corps and perpetual thorn in Holly’s side.
Holly picked herself up quickly, wincing as she felt the results of being squished by her CO, and saluted.

“Attention on deck!” she barked automatically, although really, she’d just taken down a possible hostile who had turned out to be her CO, she so had bigger things to worry about than protocol right now.

“General,” General O’Neill said.

“What the fuck are you doing, O’Neill?” General McMahon bellowed, spittle flying from his lips. General O’Neill grimaced.

“Joe’s been compromised, Bill,” he said, his voice curiously gentle considering that General McMahon was literally spitting mad.

General McMahon went white.

“What?” he ground out.

“The Vice Chairman has been— infected, General,” Agent DiNozzo said, pulling himself up straight and looking the CMC in the eye. “We don’t know when or how yet— we’re working on it.”

If you had asked her before that moment, Holly would have told you that she would have liked nothing more than to see someone make the CMC totally miserable, but when she actually saw his shoulders slump and his face crumple, it turned out to be one of the more horrible things she’d witnessed in her life.

“We can fix it,” Agent DiNozzo went on hurriedly. “We just need to get him to our people.”

The CMC rallied and nodded sharply.

“What do you need, Agent DiNozzo?” he asked.

“An extraction team should be here momentarily,” Agent DiNozzo said. “In the meantime, if you could calm your people down…”

“Right,” General McMahon said, his face going hard again. “Back to your stations! What do you think this is, story time at Tiny Tots?”

While this was going on, General O’Neill was regarding Holly speculatively.

“What’s your name, Captain?” he asked.

Holly took a deep breath and saluted again.

“Captain Holly Archer, sir!” she said.

“You’re very quick on your feet, Captain Archer, and you have more guts than is probably good for you,” General O’Neill said with a private little smile. “How attached are you to your position here?”

“Sir?” Holly said, blinking.

As far as she was aware, after the stunt she had just pulled, she probably didn’t have a position any
longer. She would be lucky if they didn’t court martial her.

“How would you feel about transferring to a— different assignment?” General O’Neill asked.

“Jack,” Agent DiNozzo remonstrated, “You can’t just poach the Vice Chairman’s admin out from under him.”

General O’Neill frowned and cocked his head, thinking about it.

“Nope,” he said after a minute, “I’m pretty sure I can. Besides, Joe’s gonna be on medical leave for a while. By the time he gets back, he won’t even notice.”

“Sir?” Holly said, attempting to insert as much meaning as possible into the word.

“Look, in about fifteen minutes, you’re gonna get a call from Lt. Colonel Paul Davis,” Jack said. “If you’re interested in what he has to say, I can promise you the posting of a lifetime.”

Holly was still gaping at General O’Neill when four special ops personnel in full (unmarked) TAC gear appeared in the doorway and, without exchanging so much as a word with anybody, picked up General Camden and whisked him out of the office. Holly was overwhelmed with a sudden need to either sit down or shoot something.

“Think about it,” General O’Neill said and flashed her a rather charming smile before following his guide and the commandos out the door.

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Deputy Attorney General McFarland Ferris stood in the window of his office, holding his custom Beretta in his hand and looking across the gray, wintery street at the stately bulk of the Smithsonian.

He had always known that the path he had chosen in life came with risks attached. He had accepted that, had made peace with the fact that he might, one day, lose everything. Now that it had happened, though, he found that he was afraid. And angry. He was angry with himself and the choices that had led him here, despite the fact that he had known what he was doing and what the possible outcome was. When his secretary knocked on the door, he didn’t even turn to look at her.

“Mr. Ferris, Agent DiNozzo and General O’Neill are here to see you,” she said. “They’re from the Pentagon.”

McFarland closed his eyes.

“I’d put that gun down if I were you,” said a light, easy voice from the doorway.

The secretary squeaked and fled, and McFarland finally turned away from the window. O’Neill was slouched against the doorway, staring at him with a contemptuous expression, while Agent DiNozzo stood behind his left shoulder with his gun pointed at the Deputy Attorney General.

“And if I don’t?” McFarland asked, his voice slightly ragged.

“Then Tony shoots you,” O’Neill said mildly.
McFarland smiled humorlessly.

“That isn’t quite the incentive it might have been this time last week,” he said lightly.

“Oh, you mean, before me and my guide failed to die in the fucked up assassination attempt you and your goa’uld buddies set up?” O’Neill said, his voice abruptly hardening.

McFarland closed his eyes.

“I don’t expect that it helps, but it was nothing personal,” he said wearily.

“No,” DiNozzo said levelly, his gun still trained on McFarland, “It doesn’t help. You arranged for us to die in unimaginable psionic pain just because it was convenient. That’s worse than if you were holding a grudge. Now put the gun down.”

“And if I don’t?” McFarland asked quietly.

“Then, like Jack said, I shoot you,” DiNozzo said calmly. “I should just mention though, I’ve had a lot of special ops training. I don’t have to shoot to kill like they taught me in the Academy, I can just disable you.”

McFarland met the guide’s implacable green eyes.

“Some might argue shooting to kill would be a mercy,” he said.

“You don’t deserve mercy,” DiNozzo replied, voice flat.

McFarland’s shoulders slumped. He set the Beretta on the windowsill and stepped back from it, feeling tired and utterly defeated.

“Hands up,” DiNozzo said.

He complied silently. The agent holstered his weapon and stepped forward, pulling handcuffs from his belt.

“McFarland Ferris, you are under arrest for global treason, planetary terrorism, treason, terrorism, murder, conspiracy to commit murder, bond interference, multiple counts of corruption, multiple counts of fraud, multiple counts of extortion, and multiple counts of accepting a bribe. As per the Sentinel and Guide Code of Justice and the Homeworld Defense Act, you no longer have the right to remain silent or the right to an attorney.”

McFarland’s hands were put behind his back one at a time and the cuffs were snapped on. DiNozzo then turned him around and shoved him into his own office chair. The agent then leaned down, hands on the arms of the chair, and looked directly into McFarland’s eyes.

McFarland stared up at the guide, feeling an almost uncontrollable urge to confess everything: why he had joined the Trust, why he had agreed to work with the goa’uld, why O’Neill and DiNozzo had had to die. He would tell DiNozzo anything, anything, if he would only just ask.

But DiNozzo did not ask. Instead, he said softly:

“Where can I find McKennas Cole?”

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“You know, it makes me very uncomfortable that a known rogue CIA agent turned goa’uld host is staying literally a stone’s throw away from the White House,” Tony said. “Seriously, how did this not trip anybody’s radar?”

They were sitting outside of the Hay-Adams Hotel in one of HERA’s brand new mobile TAC vans, with TAC gear over their clothes and every member of Castle Team currently fit for duty stashed in the back.

“That,” Jack replied flatly, “Is for Keeley, Fischer, and Suffolk to figure out. Right now, I just want to nail the bastard.”

“Amen to that, sir,” growled the leader of Castle Team from the back of the van.

Castle Team was, understandably, pissed off after losing one of their guys to the Trust’s loxapine warhead— seriously, that warhead shouldn’t have been able to deploy before it was fired, what kind of assholes didn’t have safeguards on their own equipment?— and their hard-on for the Trust’s current leader bordered on the obscene.

“We ready?” Jack asked.

“Hurrah, sir,” Castle Team’s leader said.

Tony let out a gulp of laughter and Jack paused in the act of checking his M16 (Castle Team had brought their own hardware to this rendezvous, so Jack and Tony were making do, even though it wasn’t what either of them were used to) to glare at the National Guard.

“Are you trying to be funny, Major?” he asked.

The major grinned almost boyishly at him.

“Isn’t that what you army types say?” he asked cheekily.

“I wouldn’t know, seeing as I’m Air Force,” Jack said, going back to his assault rifle. “Okay, campers, let’s lock’n’load.”

“Uh, we don’t actually say that, sir,” the major said.

“You do if I say you do,” Jack said tetchily. “I’m a general. Okay people, let’s go.”

They piled out of the van onto the street, causing pedestrians and motorists alike to panic and scatter. As they jogged across the street, Tony could feel Jack listening to what was going on inside the building, and sure enough, as soon as they reached the front entrance, Jack threw up a hand to stop them.

“Target’s on the move,” he said. “Castle Onesie,” Castle Team’s leader scowled at the Spirit Plane friendly adjustment to his call sign, but made no comment, “Have your men cover the entrances. He does not leave this building, got it? Goddess,” here Jack hit his coms to switch them to HERA’s HQ, “Eyes on this building. Anything airborne heads for the roof, you have the Secret Service blow it up. Big Brother,” here he switched to the Prometheus, “Anything higher up that looks like it could beam or ring or otherwise get our guy out, you make it be gone. The rest of you, with me and Trickster. Understood? Okay, let’s do this.”

“You know, you’re really hot when you’re being all Black Hawk Down,” Tony remarked as the
unit fell out and he, Jack, and two members of Castle Team headed up the steps to the main doors. Jack turned to look at him, raising an eyebrow. Somehow, he was totally managing to pull off the commando vibe, despite the fact that he was wearing a TAC vest over an Air Force button down and trousers.

They burst into the main lobby, causing a good bit of panic and general mayhem. Since they were almost certain Cole/Ba’al would have tapped into the hotel’s phones and security the minute he showed up, they hadn’t called to warn anybody they were coming, so the reactions of the staff were fairly epic.

“Everybody stay where you are!” Tony yelled, holding up his badge. “Federal Agents. This building is on lockdown. Do not move unless ordered!”

Fortunately, the upside to Cole/Ba’al having chosen a hotel that was practically on top of the White House was that the staff had better than average training for things like this.

Nobody moved.


Tony suppressed a wave of irrational panic at the thought of separating from his sentinel, knowing it was just the remnants of the nesting hormones. Now that they were fully bonded and their shields were back up, being apart was much less of an issue than it had been before. He took a deep breath and opened up the bond, allowing his awareness to meld with Jack’s as the team split up.

Tony headed for the main stairway, feeling his breathing synching with Jack’s and his heart taking on the same rhythm as Jack ran for the service stairs. He began his ascent, wishing he and Jack had had time to train for this. His new and improved line to his sentinel’s awareness was kind of like having a split screen in his head, with his own experiences playing on one side and Jack’s on the other. It was definitely going to take some getting used to.

The next five minutes were like some kind of next gen video game, a complex and lightning fast series of moves and countermoves as they pursued Ba’al through the building. Jack was on point, with the rest of them cutting off the goa’uld’s escape routes as best they could, driving him further and further up until they had him trapped on the top floor. Tony was still several levels down when Jack finally cornered him on the balcony overlooking the White House.

In his head, the scene played out on his new Jack-feed while in front of his own eyes, he continued to see stairs and carpets and corridors.

“You’ve got nowhere to run,” Jack said, pointing his M16 at Cole/Ba’al as the goa’uld turned away from the railing to look at him. “Give it up.”

The goa’uld’s eyes flashed yellow.

“And why should I do that?” he asked, his voice doing that ultra-creepy echoing thing that Tony had seen on the SGC’s video footage, but never in real life. “This body and this symbiote are expendable. Killing Jack O’Neill would be worth their destruction.”

Jack thought about it for a second.

“Good point,” he said, and fired the M16.
The next seconds were a blur. On the roof, Cole/Ba’al dodged with inhuman speed, although one of the bullets did graze his Armani-clad leg. Tony, meanwhile, had reached the final set of stairs and ran hell-for-leather for the roof, shouting into his coms for the rest of the team to converge on the roof as he went. In his mind, he saw Cole/Ba’al lift his hand, and barely had time to notice the overly gaudy ring on his hand before an energy beam was shooting out towards Jack. Jack too dodged, but his sentinel speed wasn’t quite quick enough either, and the beam clipped his arm.

Tony cried out in shock and anger, and instinctively pulled on his psionic power:

_Ba’al, you bastard!_ he screamed at the top of his mental lungs. _Over here, you slimy motherfucker!_

Cole/Ba’al was momentarily distracted by the deafening psionic shout, and that was all Jack needed. He fired the M16 again, hitting the hand with the ring, and Ba’al went down to his knees, crying out in surprise and pain. Then Tony burst out onto the roof and Jack hit Ba’al in a tackle and the split screen in Tony’s head disappeared.

“This is Sleeper,” Jack said into his coms as Tony took his place kneeling on the goa’uld’s back and snapped the goa’uld-rated restraints over Cole/Ba’al’s mangled hand. “Target is secure. Big Brother, stand by to receive package.”

“You cannot defeat me!” Ba’al spat. “You can kill this body, but I live on!”

Both of them ignored him.

“Jack?” Tony asked, fighting down the irrational storm of anger and panic trying to overwhelm him.

“It’s fine,” Jack soothed, waving his uninjured hand. “Just winged me.”

Jack was kneeling on the ground beside the still-raving goa’uld, peering at his arm with mild interest. His button-down now had a rather large scorch mark on the sleeve, and Tony could smell the burnt flesh underneath. It was actually making him want to gag.

_“This is Big Brother,”_ said Pendergast’s voice over the coms. _“We are ready to receive package.”_

_“Tony?”_ Jack said, adding mentally, _You good to go?_

Tony took a deep breath and gave a tight nod. He couldn’t articulate what he needed, his emotions were too scattered, but fortunately, Jack didn’t need words anymore.

_Hey,_ he murmured in Tony’s mind, _I’m here. I’m not going anywhere._

A warm wave of love and reassurance swept over Tony, soothing the hot, terrifying burn of Jack’s pain in his mind.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s do this.”

_That’s my boy,_ Jack cheered mentally. Aloud, he said, “Big Brother, this is Sleeper. Beam up Trickster, along with what he’s sitting on. That’s our package.”

_“Acknowledged, Sleeper,”_ Pendergast’s voice said. _“Trickster, prepare to beam up.”_

The balcony of the Hay-Adams disappeared and then Tony and Cole/Ba’al were on the bridge of the _Prometheus,_ Tony still kneeling on the goa’uld.

_“I need an escort to the containment room and a medical team, now!”_ Tony barked, his anxiety
making him snappish. “Let’s move, people!”

He wrestled Cole/Ba’al to his feet just as four SFs came through the door. The goa’uld had given up spitting threats and promises of vengeance for the moment, and was now simply glaring malevolently, his eyes still bright yellow.

As the SFs surrounded them and they headed for the containment room, Tony’s com crackled.

“Trickster, this is Terra 1,” Paul’s voice said. “The Secret Service wants to send a team over to help with containment. Do they have a go?”

“Stand by, Terra 1,” Tony said.

He touched the connection in his mind, not quite believing it would work over the staggering distance between the Prometheus and the surface of the planet.

Jack?

Yeah, Jack said immediately, sounding overly chipper—probably from the adrenaline. What’s up?

Secret Service wants to send a team over to deal with containment, Tony said. You want ’em?

Sure, Jack replied. God knows, keeping a lid on this is gonna be a bitch.

Okay, Tony said. Love you.

Love you too, Tiger.

“Terra 1,” Tony said aloud. “Secret Service is a go.”

Fifteen minutes later—fifteen minutes of achingly meaningless, pointless time not being with Jack that Tony will never get back, during which he and the SFs may or may not have secured Cole/Ba’al in the Prometheus’s containment room—Tony was wishing he’d been a little less complacent about letting the Secret Service into this situation.

“I’m sorry, sir,” said the young, fresh-faced agent currently guarding the stairs to the Top of the Hay, where Jack was being examined by Castle Team’s medic. “This area is restricted.”

Tony felt the tenuous control that he had been exerting over his instincts begin to slip away. He had been being so good, holding it together even though Jack was hurt and their bond was brand new and they should still be fucking nesting, for fuck’s sake. When Major Marks had told him that he couldn’t beam him back down to the roof, because there were unauthorized personnel present, he hadn’t even pitched a fit. He had quietly and reasonably agreed to be beamed down to one of the unoccupied rooms on the level below and go up himself. But this? This was too much.

“You are standing between me and my injured sentinel,” he hissed, feeling psionic rage surging inside him. “You have five seconds to move before I lose, do you understand?”

“Sir, I’m sorry—” the hapless agent began.

On Tony’s mental split screen, Jack’s head came up.

“Uh, Agent?” he said to the leader of the Secret Service team. “You might wanna tell your man downstairs to let my guide up before—”

Tony lost it. The young Secret Service agent went down in three moves, squawking loudly, and
Tony took off up the stairs.

“Yup, nope,” Jack said, “Too late.”

Tony reached the top of the stairs and barrelled through the door into the glassed-walled dining room that was the Hay-Adams penthouse. Jack was sitting in one of the swanky pale yellow chairs while Castle Team’s medic—Castle Five-and-dime—examined his arm.

“Aw, Tiger,” Jack said as Tony flung himself across the intervening space and practically dived into his free arm.

“Sorrysorrysorrysorry,” Tony babbled, kneeling on the expensive carpet beside Jack’s chair and pressing himself into his sentinel’s side. “It was—I was—I can’t—”

Behind him, he could hear the young Secret Service agent scrambling up the stairs and into the room, only to be caught by his team leader, who proceeded to insult his intelligence, he pedigree, and his life choices using words of three syllables or more.

“I know, I know,” Jack soothed, wrapping his arm around Tony and kissing his hair. “It’s okay, I get it. You did good Tony, so good. If you’d been the one to take a hit, I wouldn’ta been able to hold it together, never mind complete the mission.”

“Tell me this is going to get better,” Tony whimpered. “We can’t work like this, Jack. We both get hurt, like, all the time.”

“Tony, we haven’t even been bonded for 48 hours yet,” Jack said. “Give it a week. I mean, we’re pretty much designed by the mystical forces of the cosmos to be humanity’s front-line defenders, I’m pretty sure we wouldn’t have gotten this far if we couldn’t handle our partners taking a few dings.”

Tony took a deep breath and finally relaxed into Jack’s hold, allowing the bond to surround and shelter him. As he sank into the comfort it provided, a stray thought crossed his mind.

“Where the hell are we staying tonight?” he asked. “Our apartment is still a crime scene.”

“Son of a gun,” Jack said as Castle Five-and-dime finally finished whatever he was doing and started bandaging his arm. “I guess we need to give Harm and A.J. a call.”

Tony laughed.

“At this rate, we should just move into their guest room,” he said.

“No,” Jack protested vehemently. “No way. If you’re guide-y instincts are right, they’re about to have a small, noisy addition to their household, and I am not going through the 3 AM feedings again unless the squirt in question is my very own grand-kid, niece, or nephew.”

Tony laughed.

“Okay,” he agreed, lifting his head out of Jack’s chest and tilting his chin up with a silent demand.

Jack, being the good and caring sentinel that he was, gave him what he wanted, leaning down and pressing his lips to Tony’s in a warm kiss that tasted of comfort and safety and home.
Supreme Commander Ba’al lay inside his current host in the Taur’i’s dungeon, watching and waiting. He had been here for twelve Terran solar days, which was a wearisome time for a human, but a mere eyelash for a Lord of the Goa’uld. During that time, he had healed his human host of his injuries, but most of his attention had been occupied with the problem of escape. While his progenitor, the original Ba’al, was, indeed, still free and carrying on their work, Ba’al was not actually terribly interested in dying and leaving it all to him.

He was Ba’al. He would prevail.

His attention was brought back to his surroundings when the door to his cell opened and the blond Taur’i scientist, Lieutenant Colonel Samantha Carter, entered the room. She was alone, but Ba’al could sense that she was carrying several devices designed specifically for use against his kind, and she had one of their own ribbon devices on her hand.

Seeing the direction of his gaze, the Taur’i smiled and raised her hand.

“I hosted a Tok’ra symbiote,” she said in explanation. “She left me with the ability to use your technology.”

“I did not think the Taur’i approved of torture,” Ba’al said through his host’s mouth, not bothering to disguise the resonance that his presence created.

She stared at him, her expression considering.

“It’s complicated,” she said. “Suffice it to say that most of us, if pressed, would agree that there comes a point at which torture may become necessary, but we disagree where exactly that point is. You have dealt with a very specific subset of our population which draws the line in a very specific place, but that does not mean that all of the Taur’i feel that way, or that our subset is incapable of adapting to new information or circumstances. But that is not what we’re here to talk about. We’re here to talk about your lab in Siberia. Specifically, about the Ancient time-travel device that we found there.”

Ba’al felt his eyes flash in anger. His old enemies from the SGC finding the Ancient device in the Yakutsk lab was not part of his plans.

“I will tell you nothing,” he said. “You must know this.”

“Oh,” Lt. Colonel Carter said, shaking her head. “No, I don’t need you to tell me anything. I already know all about the device and your plans for getting it working again. No, I want to tell you what we have discovered.”

She folded her arms and leaned against the wall, smiling a little.
“We know that the original Ba’al found out that the Covenant had the device, and that is why he placed you in McKennas Cole,” she said. “We also know that the device is not functional, and that you have spent the time since you infected Cole trying to get it working again. The records from your lab in Yakutsk show that you believed that Rimbaldi had keyed the device to his own specific version of the Ancient gene. The fetus that you were growing at Corbeta Uruguay was your solution to the problem, a human with an Ancient gene that was as close to Rimbaldi’s as you could manage without actually getting your hands on the sample of Rimbaldi’s DNA hidden in the Sphere of Life. You intended to use her gene to unlock the device, so that you could use it to go back in time. We assume, based on your attempts to assassinate our strongest ATA gene carriers, that you had a specific goal in mind and did not want to leave anybody behind you that was capable of using the device to follow you.”

Ba’al felt his host snarling in response to his own surge of anger. The fetus he had been growing in his genetics lab represented years of work. If the Taur’i had indeed found it, that would set his plans back immeasurably.

“Yes, we found— and cleared— the lab on Southern Thule,” she said. “However, your experiment there wouldn’t have succeeded, even if we hadn’t. The fetus you were growing would never have been able to control Rimbaldi’s time-travel device. You see, Rimbaldi didn’t actually key the device to his DNA. What you took to be evidence of a genetic override was actually the device’s way of indicating that it was currently in use by an authorized user. Rimbaldi believed that the time-travel device was too dangerous for anyone to use, even him, so he used his gene to activate it and he gave it an impossible task. Rimbaldi told the device to target a point two hundred Terran solar years in Earth’s future and one Terran solar year before he himself was born. Since that point in time cannot exist, the device will continue trying to work out those coordinates forever.”

Ba’al was overwhelmed with shock and anger. All those years, all that effort, and all for nothing. And now, one puling Taur’i scientist had come along and solved in a few days what he, Ba’al, had been unable to see.

“I just wanted you to know that you had failed,” Lt. Colonel Carter said, “That you were always going to fail. Now that we’ve finished dismantling the Trust, we don’t really have a reason to keep you around, so we’re going to remove you from this host. You won’t survive the process, so I wanted to tell you before we begin the extraction.”

She turned and, without any further words, left the room. Ba’al’s rage grew and grew until he could no longer contain it, and his host threw back its head and howled.

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“Was that really necessary?” Jack asked as Sam exited Ba’al’s cell, Ba’al’s wails echoing behind her.

Sam stopped and thought about it, brow furrowed.

“Yes,” she said finally. “Yes it was.”

Jack laughed.

“I adore you, Carter, I really do,” he said.
Sam smiled.

“I know, sir,” she said smugly.

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A.J. was sitting comfortably in his armchair in the breakfast nook, sipping his coffee and reading the *New York Times*, when his cell phone rang. He lowered the paper and glanced at the screen, raising his eyebrows when he saw the number. He grabbed the phone and picked up the call.

“Jack,” he said, “I wasn’t expecting you to call. Did your apartment get robbed again?”

Jack and Tony had stayed with A.J. and Harm after the dubious-sounding home invasion that A.J. did not believe for a minute had been random, and they had only left ten days ago. It was a little soon for another crisis.

“Ah, no,” Jack said, and even over the phone, he sounded squirrelly. “We’ve got— well, we’re outside your house, and we’ve got something you need to see.”

A.J. felt his blood pressure rising. He closed his eyes and counted to five.

“Is it poisonous, explosive, or otherwise hazardous?” he inquired levelly, because with Jack and Tony, these were questions that had to be asked.

There was a long silence.

“… no?” Jack said in a way that meant *Yes, absolutely.*

A.J. sighed, folded his paper, and got to his feet.

“Don’t do anything stupid until I get there,” he admonished, and headed for the door.

When he stepped out onto the stoop, he saw one of the ubiquitous black government SUVs that Jack and Tony always seemed to be driving. Jack was leaning against the passenger’s side door while Tony had the back door open and was doing something that A.J. couldn’t see.

“So,” Jack said with the air of a ten-year-old who had been caught in the act and was hoping to justify his wrongdoing, “We could totally be wrong about this, and if we are, we’ve already got a Plan B set up, so you don’t have to worry, we’ll just get back in the car and drive to Alexandria. But Tony’s pretty darned sure, and we double-checked with Blair, so…”

A.J.’s mouth tried to twitch, but he ruthlessly suppressed it.

“Just spit it out, Jack,” he growled.

At this point in the proceedings, Tony let out a muffled curse, then a muted cry of triumph. A moment later, he emerged from behind the back door of the SUV with a small, but very suspicious bundle of… something wrapped in a pastel purple blanket.

A.J.’s heart tried to stop, but his sentinel genetics wouldn’t let it. The result was uncomfortable to say the least. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.
“I think she’s yours,” Tony blurted out, his scent and body language both indicating anxiety that bordered on panic. “I don’t know why, but the minute I found out that she existed, I was convinced that she belonged to you and Harm. I might be wrong, but... I need to make sure.”

A.J. moved sluggishly, walking down the steps and approaching the car like a man in a dream. The object in Tony’s arms began to resolve itself into the shape of an infant, newborn judging by the skin, but incredibly pink and healthy.

Some part of him already knew that Tony was right, that this baby was his and Harm’s, but in case he needed confirmation, Ulysses appeared out of the air beside Tony, peering down at the tiny bundle with great interest.

“What!” Tony said, looking up at the massive buffalo. “Hey, big guy. Whaddaya think?”

A.J.’s Spirit Animal, apparently, thought that the new addition to their family was just dandy, because he leaned down and licked her little face. He wasn’t quite corporeal enough to actually leave spit, but she clearly sensed something, because she wrinkled up her tiny nose and made sound reminiscent of an indignant cat.

And then A.J. was standing in front of Tony, looking down at— well, he guessed he was looking down at his daughter. His arms came up without his conscious consent and Tony deposited the baby in them with a sigh of relief. A.J. stood very still, staring at the miniscule creature. She had the amorphous features common to all newborns, although he fancied that hers were particularly symmetrical and shapely, and her skin was a dusky pink that made judging her exact ethnicity impossible. Her hair was no help, an indeterminate golden brown, and her eyes were, of course, newborn blue. On further consideration, he found that he didn’t care about her exact origins: wherever she came from, she was just perfect.

Distantly, he heard the door open behind him, and then his guide’s voice snapped him abruptly back to reality.

“A.J.? What’s going on? Eddie’s going crazy, and—”

A.J. turned around. Harm was standing in the doorway, his hair sticking up on end and his restless gibbon ape chittering on his shoulder. When Harm saw what was in A.J.’s arms, his eyes went impossibly wide and shock rippled through their bond. A.J. managed to regain enough control over his faculties to smile at his guide.

“Hey,” he said roughly, “Look what the stork brought.”

And with that, he walked back towards the house and deposited the infant in his guide’s arms.

Harm gasped, instinctively pulling the baby girl against his chest to keep from dropping her in his stunned amazement. Eddie cooed and reached down with one long arm to steady the little bundle in his guide’s arms, although, since he wasn’t exactly corporeal, A.J. didn’t know if it did any good. When Harm had a grip on himself, he relaxed a little and began examining the baby. He studied her tiny face with rapt attention, then moved the blanket to count her fingers. At that point, he seemed to realize that they were standing on the doorstep in winter and that they should get the baby inside, and the reality of their situation caught up with him. His head jerked up and he looked at A.J. in panicked outrage.

“I meant later!” he yelped. “I meant have a baby later! When we— oh my God. A.J., we don’t have a single thing for a baby in the house!”
The situation was about to devolve into full-blown hysteria, but Jack and Tony saved the day by appearing beside A.J. with a diaper bag and a baby carrier, grinning smugly.

“So, looks like you’re keeping her, huh?” Jack said.

A.J. couldn’t summon up his usual forbidding glare, but he did give Jack an exasperated look. Jack smirked, pulled out his cell phone, and hit a number.

“Sir?” said a calm, correct male voice on the other end.

“Paul,” Jack said, “Pass the word: Operation Cabbage Patch is a go.”

And that was when the day really took a turn for the surreal.

“What the hell, Jack?” A.J. said two hours later as he watched a handsome, middle-aged mundane FBI agent with dark Italian features and clothing that he could almost certainly not afford on a federal salary helping a gorgeous young mundane CIA operative carry a very large cardboard box into his house. “This isn’t just the pride.”

“Nope,” Jack said, ambling up beside A.J. and pushing another cup of coffee into his hands. “Remember how Tony and I were looking for recommendations for our team? Well, that’s Agent Bristow and her new partner Agent Rossi. They weren’t directly involved in recovering you little bundle of joy and stinkiness, but they were on the same op, and when they heard we’d found her a home, they wanted to help.”

“Where would you like this, sir?” Agent Rossi asked as the two agents paused in the foyer.

“I don’t know,” A.J. said. “What is it?”

“It’s a stroller,” Agent Bristow replied. “The most ridiculously fancy stroller you have ever seen from some small, exclusive company that nobody has ever heard of.”

“It’s tasteful,” Rossi protested.

A.J. blinked at the two agents, then shook his head.

“In the living room,” he said firmly. “Angie is directing operations in there and Derek’s girlfriend has brunch set up in the kitchen.”

Operation Cabbage Patch had turned out to be a ferociously coordinated baby shower slash instant home redecorating spree. Until mundanes who were completely unconnected with his pride started showing up on his doorstep, A.J. had thought that it was the sentinel and guide community helping out, as was tradition in this kind of situation, but it was becoming obvious that it was actually being coordinated by the highly classified special ops department that Jack ran over at the Pentagon.

A.J. was trying very hard not to think too hard about that.

“Do I even want to know where this child came from?” A.J. asked Jack as Bristow and Rossi headed for the living room with their burden.

“No,” Jack said. “You probably don’t. We’re gonna have to read you in anyways, though. Later, once you’ve had a chance to settle in.”

A.J. closed his eyes.

“How bad?” he asked.
“Depends on how ya look at it,” Jack said. “Obviously, the people who had her were pretty unsavory individuals since, ya know, we were arresting them and all, but the kid came out of it pretty okay. I mean, she’s alive because somebody very bad wanted her to be, but there’s no mass-murdering sperm donors or enslaved baby-mommas in her history.”

“And this very bad person?” A.J. asked. “Is he or she going to be a problem?”

“No,” Jack said. “He was— injured during capture. He’s— let’s just say, he doesn’t remember that she exists. Or the real reason he’s in prison for, for that matter.”

“And if he does remember?” A.J. insisted.

Jack gave him a wry, slightly bleak look.

“A.J.,” he said quietly, “You know the kind of work we do. He’s too dangerous to ever see the light of day again.”

A.J. nodded his understanding. He’d been the JAG long enough to understand the necessity of the people in the shadows, the people who made sure that the really bad things, the things that were too terrible to even think about, never happened. But he had also been the JAG long enough to know that those people were required to work beyond the law, to act against the very ideals that they sought to defend. It was not something he could condone, but at the same time, it was not something he could condemn.

This rather grim moment was interrupted by another knock on the door. A.J. turned away from Jack to open it, and gaped as he realized who was standing on his doorstep.

“Hi A.J.!” Blair Sandburg chirped, craning his head to smile up at A.J. over a large, ornately carved wooden box that smelled of foriegn climes and spices. “Congratulations!”

“Jim Ellison said, holding out his hand. “It’s been a while. Please promise me, whatever you do, do not let Blair name this baby. He was talking about some Mayan fertility goddess on the plane ride here, and even with my hearing, I couldn’t understand her name.”

A.J. finally managed to close his mouth.

“Jim, Blair,” he said as calmly as he could. “Good to see you. Not to be rude, but what in the hell are you two doing here?”

“It’s not every day one of your beta pairs becomes parents!” Blair said, bouncing a little behind the wooden box. “Besides, I need to check on Tony now that the bond’s had a chance to settle. Hi Jack!”

Jack was suddenly smelling a lot less amused than he had 30 seconds ago.

“I don’t suppose you could just, you know, go away?” he asked plaintively. “Tony doesn’t need any help finding craziness, he does just fine on his own.”

“I hear you, man,” Jim said, turning to Jack and holding out his hand. “Jim Ellison. We haven’t met in person, but you spent a night cuddling my guide, so I figure you’re pretty much family.”

Jack took Jim’s hand and shook it, radiating resigned anticipation.

“Nice to meetcha,” he said. “I don’t suppose you’ve got any kinda plan for keeping our guides out of trouble?”
“Sorry,” Jim said, grinning.

“Rats,” Jack said with feeling.

***

Gibbs pulled the F250 up to the curb behind one of Homeworld’s SUVs and shut the engine off. He sat in the truck for a moment, staring at the clutter of cars parked in and around Rabb and Chegwidden’s driveway and trying not to think about the past.

Considering what was sitting in the bed of the pickup, carefully wrapped in layers of felt, that was pretty difficult.

Finally, he climbed out of the truck, dialling Tony’s number on his phone as he did so. He didn’t really want to explain anything to Rabb and Chegwidden, which meant he was going to need help.

“Tony,” he said when Tony picked up, “Gibbs. I’m out front. Need some help with somethin’.”

He hung up before Tony could do more than splutter. A minute later, Tony was slipping out the front door and sidling down the street to the truck, where Gibbs was carefully unloading the series of flat, felt-wrapped objects.

“Boss!” Tony said as he drew near. “Whaddaya need help with? And what’s that?”

“Crib,” Gibbs said shortly, lifting the last piece down from the truck.

“You bought Harm and A.J. a crib?” Tony said, jaw dropping.

“Nope,” Gibbs said, closing the tailgate.

Tony blinked.

“Okaaaay,” he said. “Are you going to make me guess?”

Gibbs took a careful breath.

“Already had it,” he said gruffly. “Made it—a long time ago. Didn’t have time to make a new one this time, so I figured—”

Tony gasped.

“Boss,” he said softly, eyes suddenly suspiciously bright. “You’re—you’re giving them Kelly’s crib? The one you made for her?”

Gibbs shrugged awkwardly.

“Seemed right,” he said. “You and O’Neill ever decide to have kids, I’ll make you a new one.”

There was a lot that was left unspoken in that sentence, but Gibbs was pretty sure that Tony understood. He wanted someone to make new memories surrounding those pieces of wood that he’d shaped and joined with so much hope all those years ago, memories untainted by what had happened to Kelly. Rabb and Chegwidden wouldn’t know that it had been Kelly’s crib, they would
just know that it was a beautiful piece of handmade furniture.

“Boss,” Tony said, “Don’t freak out.”

And then, before Gibbs could brace himself for whatever was coming, Tony was hugging him tightly. Gibbs started, but eventually, he hugged him back.

“Okay,” Tony said when the hug was over. “Let’s do this. You’re call was kinda suspicious, so I’ve got Jack waiting by the door to let us in. I’m assuming you brought what we need to put it together?”

Gibbs laughed and opened the cab of the truck to get his toolbox.

The operation went off without so much as a hiccup. O’Neill let them into the house, then went off to distract their hosts, who were showing the baby off in the living room, while they snuck up the stairs to the room that had been designated as the nursery. When they got there, they found Fornell stocking the changing station and Carter standing on a stepladder with a drill gun and a stud finder. On the floor beside the ladder was a metal hook and a massive mobile which, upon further inspection, proved to be made up of beautifully detailed replicas of fighter jets. Gibbs frowned and set the toolbox and the crib pieces he was carrying down before going over to the mobile and crouching down to examine it more closely. When his suspicions were confirmed, he let out a bark of laughter.

“You got some kinda death wish, Carter?” he asked.

Carter paused what she was doing to give him a mock-bewildered look.

“Why, whatever do you mean?” she asked, blinking her big blue eyes innocently.

“How long d’you think it’s gonna take the Navy’s golden boy to figure out that you decorated his baby girl’s room with *Air Force* jets?” Gibbs asked, standing up and smirking at the Air Force colonel.

Carter smirked back.

“Since he can’t seem to look anywhere except at the baby, I’m betting at least a week,” she said.

“Two,” Fornell countered as he folded another towel out of the laundry basket at his feet. “You’re forgetting that he’s not gonna be sleeping.”

Tony started giggling and was unable to stop for a good five minutes, long enough that Gibbs already had the crib unwrapped and Carter had the mobile hung before he was done.

“Wow,” Carter said, coming over to look at the disassembled crib. “That’s beautiful.”

Gibbs cleared his throat.

“Thanks,” he said gruffly.

“Wait,” Carter said, “You— that’s handcrafted. You *made* this?”

Gibbs shrugged and nodded.

“Holy Hannah,” Carter said. “I mean, I knew you were good with your hands, but—”

Tony squawked and Fornell made a choking sound.
“Annnd, I’m outa here,” Fornell said, hastily gathering up the laundry basket and exiting the room.

“Sam!” Tony protested.

“What?” Sam asked. “We were all there, it’s not like it’s a secret what Agent Gibbs can do with his fingers.”

Tony looked like he wanted to die.

“Context, Sam, context,” he moaned.

Gibbs smirked at the younger man’s discomfort.

“You know what?” Tony said. “I just realized I have to— there’s a— I gotta go do a thing. Sam, can you help Gibbs put this together?”

Without waiting for an answer, he darted towards the door, but paused before exiting.

“Just out of curiosity,” he said to Carter, “You don’t happen to dye your hair, right? I mean, there’s no chance that you’re actually a redhead, is there?”

Gibbs growled at the irrepressible young agent and Tony let out a mock yelp and dove out the door, leaving Carter and Gibbs alone in the nursery. They turned towards each other and their eyes met for a long minute.

“I can’t promise anything long-term,” Carter said at last. “I’m in the Air Force, and I’m an unbonded guide. My life is not exactly mine to control.”

“S okay,” Gibbs said easily. “Got three ex-wive to show that I can’t do long-term anyways.”

Carter grinned.

“Well then,” she said, “Let’s put this together, and then I think you should take me out for coffee, Agent Gibbs.”

“Jethro,” Gibbs corrected.

“Jethro,” Carter repeated. “And please, call me Sam.”

***

Tobias deposited the laundry basket back beside the washer and dryer in the basement and was heading back towards the stairs when Ian Edgerton appeared on the steps carrying two boxes of diapers that were so large, he couldn’t even see over the top of them.

“What the fuck?” Tobias said, grabbing the top box before Edgerton could run into anything.

“Even sentinels can’t see through a— what is this, a 100-pack?— of diapers. Or are you counting on echolocation?”

“Diapers are something you really do not want to run out of,” Edgerton said coolly. “I have two more boxes in the truck.”
“Jesus Christ,” Tobias muttered, but gamely set the box he was holding down and followed Edgerton back up the stairs again. “Eppes get off okay?” he asked.

Edgerton had been scheduled to bring Dr. Eppes to the airport this morning so that he could get back to CalSci before he missed anymore classes.

“He did,” Edgerton said, opening the front door and standing aside to allow Tobias to go ahead of him. “However, I hear that Rossi is considering making his stay in D.C. permanent.”

“Yeah,” Tobias said, “Him and Bristow. They both decided they liked working for Gibbs and DiNutzo’s little band of merry misfits.”

“That is good,” Edgerton said, leading the way down the block towards where Tobias assumed he must have parked his truck. “I think that HERA will be a good fit for them.”

“What about you?” Tobias asked. “You thinking of staying on?”

“In a consultant capacity,” Edgerton said. “I doubt that HERA will have a consistent need for my particular talents any more than a regular FBI team would, but the Director has agreed to make me available upon request. Yourself?”

“Still considering it,” Tobias admitted. “I like my job, but on the other hand, it’s kinda hard to imagine going back to tracking down regular old run-of-the-mill murderers when I know what else is out there.”

They reached a battered blue Chevy with a dented door and, as promised, two more giant boxes of diapers in the bed. Edgerton lifted out the first one and dumped it unceremoniously into Tobias’s arms before picking up the second.

“I think you would be a valuable addition to the new agency,” he said mildly as he turned and headed back towards the house. “HERA is, after all, still in its formative stages. It needs as many experienced agents as it can get. Also, you and Agent Gibbs provide much-needed moments of comic relief when you attempt to work in concert.”

“Asshole,” Tobias snarked, following the maddening sentinel back up the sidewalk, but privately, he admitted that Edgerton was right.

About both things.

Damnit. Tobias needed a drink.

DiNutzo was going to be his new boss.

***

“They look happy,” said a quiet voice in Tony’s ear.

Tony choked on the coffee he was drinking and turned away from watching Derek Morgan feed Penelope Garcia a strawberry to glare at Blair Sandburg, Alpha Prime Guide of North America and, it turned out, the sneakiest sneaker from sneakersville to ever sneak.

“Not nice,” Tony said when he could talk again.
Blair smiled and shrugged, taking a sip of his own coffee.

“I’m the Alpha Prime,” he said easily. “I’m not supposed to be nice.”

“So why are you sneaking up on me and making me choke on my very nice cup of coffee?” Tony asked.

“Oh, nothing important,” Blair said with a nonchalance that was fooling precisely nobody. “Just curious how your bond with Jack is settling.”

“Just fine, thank you,” Tony said, narrowing his eyes. “Now spit it out. What are you really doing here?”

Blair abruptly sobered and looked at Tony, blue eyes calm and intent.

“How is the ‘cracks’ situation?” he said.

Tony grimaced.

“I’ve been doing what you said,” he told the Alpha Prime Guide, “With the, you know, mental anti-itch cream or whatever. It helps a lot. But since the bond settled, the cracks themselves have become a lot— clearer? More obvious? I mean, like, Aaron Hotchner was here earlier, and I had to hang on to Jack for dear life until he left, his psionic field was so fucked up.”

Blair grimaced.

“Yes,” he said, “That’s a bad situation. I need to have a talk with Aaron. And with Spencer. I mean, there’s not a whole lot that I can do, they have to make their own choices, but their current situation just isn’t healthy, man. I can’t let them keep doing that to themselves. Either Aaron has to stop being an idiot, or one of them has to leave the BAU, because they can’t live this way. Anybody else?”

Tony resolutely pushed Hotchner and Reid’s situation and its uncanny resemblance to his own history with Jake to the back of his mind and focused on Blair’s question.

“Angie,” he said. “It’s not nearly as bad as Hotchner’s, but her psionic field has some definite chips in it.”

“Interesting,” Blair said, bouncing a little. “Let’s go catch up with Ms. Montenegro.”

They found Angie in the front hall with large shopping bag filled with various clips, snaps, ties, plugs, etc. designed to childproof cupboards, outlets, and so-on.

“Tony!” she said happily, standing up and brushing herself off. “And Blair! It’s so good to see you both! Sorry I didn’t really get a chance to say hi earlier.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Blair said, laughing as he held out his arms to hug his fellow omega guide. “You were busy directing the masses.”

“Mmmmmm,” Angie said, closing her eyes. “God, Blair, your aura, it’s so yummy, I just want to live in it.”

“You know you can move in with me and Jim any time, Angie-bear,” Blair said.

Angie let go of Blair and turned to Tony. As he wrapped his arms around her, Tony felt the cracks in her psionic landscape, small and easily fixable, but painful nonetheless, like papercuts. He was
so distracted by them that he didn’t remember that Angie would be getting even more from him
than he was getting from her.

Damn omega guides.

“Oh, wow,” Angie said, releasing Tony and stepping back to look at him. “You are still rocking
this space opera thing you’ve got going. Hello sexy and badass with a laser gun.”

Tony choked and Blair (who, as the Alpha Prime Guide, had been read into the program) snorted
helplessly.

“Angie,” Blair said, pulling himself together, “Tony’s got a— new thing since he bonded, and we
were wondering if you could help us get a handle on it.”

“Sure,” Angie said. “I can leave this for a minute. I mean, the kid is only, what, a few days old? I
don’t think she’s going to be mobile in the next couple hours. Should we grab some coffee?”

“Yeah,” Blair said.

They headed for the kitchen and Angie got a new mug while Blair and Tony both got refills. Then
they headed for the study, which was, at the moment, free of baby preparations, although someone
had set up a playpen by the window.

“So,” Angie said, curling up on the dark green couch, “What’s going on?”

“Well, we were actually wondering what’s going on with you,” Blair said. “See, Tony’s new gifts
are telling him there’s something bothering you, so we kinda need to know what it is he’s sensing
to figure out what’s happening.”

Angie’s face fell and she hunched her shoulders a little.

“Damn,” she said. “It couldn’t be something easy, could it?”

“What’s going on, Angie?” Blair asked gently.

“I think I found my sentinel,” Angie said. “The trouble is, when I touch her, all I see is her with
someone else.”

“Ouch,” Tony murmured.

“You see her with someone else?” Blair said quietly. “Another guide?”

“No,” Angie shook her head. “He’s a mundane. But the image is, like, really strong. They’ve got
kids and a house and—I’m just really, really confused.”

“Is she a lambda or an epsilon?” Blair asked, naming the two classes of sentinel that could most
easily live without a guide.

“No,” Angie said, frowning. “That’s what’s so weird. She’s a zeta, and everyone always says that
zetas need a bond. But she is destined to be with this guy, I swear.”

“Hmmm,” Blair said. “Okay, I think we can figure this out, but do you mind if I walk Tony
through something while we do it?”

“Uh, no?” Angie said, puzzled. “Of course not.”
“Okay,” Blair said. “Tony, I want you to open up your psionic field. Don’t try to do anything with it, just open it up and kinda… let the universe in.”

“Hippy,” Tony accused, but he followed Blair’s instructions.

“Oh,” Angie gasped. “Oh, wow. That feels—that’s almost as good as Blair.”

“I’m not surprised,” Blair said cryptically. “Okay, Tony, I want you to think about Angie and what’s hurting her. Don’t try to do anything, per se, just say whatever comes to mind.”

Again, Tony did as he was told, and, like had happened with Agent Morgan in HERA’s waiting room, he found himself speaking without exactly knowing what he was saying. This time, however, the words were clearly his own, even if he hadn’t exactly meant to utter them.

“This mundane guy,” he said. “Do you find him attractive?”

Angie’s jaw dropped.

“I— he—I would never— God yes,” she blurted out. “He’s hot like hell burning.”

“And the kids,” Tony went on, trying to figure out exactly what the hell was coming out of his mouth, “The ones you see when you touch your sentinel. Do you—do you feel like you could love them?”

“Of course,” Angie said, bewildered. “They’re my sentinel’s kids. Plus, they’re wicked cute. And one of them has these gorgeous dark eyes that just make me wanna melt. Tony, where are you going with this?”

“Honestly?” Tony said. “I have no idea. But I’m getting this really strong feeling from, uh, from the ‘universe,’ I guess that you’re not, uh, thinking about this the right way?”

“Uhuh,” Angie said, sounding skeptical. “And how should I be thinking about it?”

“As a yes-and rather than an either/or,” Tony said in a rush.

Angie blinked.

“I’m sorry, could you run that by me one more time?” she said.

“If she’s your sentinel, but she’s also supposed to be with this mundane guy, it sounds to me like maybe you’re all three supposed to be—you know, together,” Tony said. “You-and-she-and-hot-like-hell-burning-makes-three? A—a—Blair, what the heck is it called when a sentinel and guide have a mundane partner?”

“A triad bond,” Blair said placidly.

“Right,” Tony said. “A triad bond.”

Angie’s entire face went slack and her eyes appeared to be trying to bug right out of her head.

“Eh-ah-uh-wah-huh?” she said breathlessly.

“Well done, Tony,” Blair said.

The Alpha Prime Guide was leaning back in Harm and A.J.’s desk chair, smirking like a cream-and-canary-stuffed cat.
“Okay, are you going to explain now?” Tony asked. “Because this is just getting weirder and weirder the longer it goes on.”

“Oh my God,” Angie muttered.

“Tony,” Blair said, looking at Tony while politely giving Angie a moment to freak out quietly to herself, “What do you know about shamen?”

“Oh, not a lot?” Tony said. “I mean, I know you’re a shaman, and I remember hearing that the path to becoming one is, um, really difficult, but not much more than that.”

“Right,” Blair said. “Well, a shaman is a very powerful guide with a very special kind of connection to the Spirit Plane. Only a few guides have the ability to become shamen, but most of them never do, because, as you said, the path to becoming a shaman is very difficult and very dangerous. To put it really bluntly, you have to die and come back to life— there’s a whole lot of metaphysical reasons for it, but for now, we’ll just go with, a guide’s spirit needs to be set free from their body and return to it before their full powers can be unlocked.”

“Okay,” Tony said. “And this has to do with my weird new talents becaaaauuse?”

Angie abruptly stopped freaking out and stared at Tony, her dark eyes alight with sudden interest. She looked over at Blair.

“You can’t mean—” she said.

“Tony, you said you had the plague last year,” Blair said gently. “At any point while you were in the hospital, did your heart stop?”

“Yeah, once,” Tony said. “But they got it started again, like, almost right away.” He frowned, trying to figure out what Blair was saying, and then abruptly had to put his head between his knees. “No!” he wheezed.

“I think so,” Blair said, sounding amused.

“Holy crap,” Angie said.

Then the door to the study opened and Tony felt the reassuring presence of his sentinel.

“Whoa there, Tiger,” Jack said, moving quickly across the room and kneeling down in front of Tony, pulling the guide’s head onto shoulder. “Easy there. What did that mean old Alpha Prime do?”

“We just confirmed something that I had already started to suspect about Tony’s new gifts,” Blair said.

“Ohuh,” Jack said. “And what’s that?”

“Tony is a budding shaman,” Blair said calmly.

Tony made an inarticulate sound that might have been panic or protest. Jack, meanwhile, considered Blair’s pronouncement. Finally he opened his mouth and said,

“Huh.”
Author’s Notes:

Once again, thank you so much for your comments, kudos, and readership. Also, thanks to all the other writers out there whose stories got me through what turned out to be the very very long process of writing *Advanced Principles of Sentinel and Guide Dynamics*.

I started *Advanced Principles* pretty much the day after I posted *The Stargate Protocols*. I knew it was going to be longer than anything I’d written yet, but I was thinking in terms of, maybe, half again as long, not the sprawling 144,000 word monstrosity it turned into. It was only through the continued readership of the series and copious amounts of time reading other amazing fics that it got written at all, and it is by far the longest work I have ever finished. As may be apparent from *What Makes Us Mighty*, finishing long stories isn’t my strong suit. I tend to develop severe writer’s block around the half-way point, and, since my head is always full of new material, it is way too easy to start fooling around with something else while I’m waiting for it to go away, and before I know it, I’m suffering from writer’s block on that…

You get the idea.

And now, a few answers to questions that have been rattling around in my brain for the past many months:

**Why so long?**

First, because everything kept working.

No, seriously, in the previous stories in this series, most of the stuff I had in mind didn’t make it into the first draft, never mind the final one. Mostly, that manifested as me pushing ideas and plot points out into later stories, but sometimes I just discarded things altogether. But with *Advanced Principles*, everything just kept on tying in like it was meant to be there. Which meant that in December, when I originally thought I was going to publish the story, I was sitting there with something that was almost as long as *The Stargate Protocols*, but was really just getting started.

Second, because nothing in this story was simple.

*Accordance* was easy. I think I mentioned that, except for the first chapter, it was pretty much a Greek drama: one time, one place, no subplots. *The Fourteenth Amendment* and *The Stargate Protocols* were less straightforward, but still moved along fairly quickly. *Advanced Principles* was dense. Every single thing that happened had multiple layers and multiple issues that needed to be, as the scholars say, “unpacked.”

Just for example: it was, obviously, past time for Tony and Jack to actually stop messing around and get with the bonding. That was clear before I even finished *The Stargate Protocols*. Chronologically speaking, it hadn’t been that long a wait, but narratively speaking, if I didn’t have them bond in this story, it was going to stop being anticipatory and start being frustrating. The problem was, several things needed to happen, story arc-wise, before they could bond. First, the Philadelphia problem needed to be addressed. It was, as the old dramatic rule goes, the gun that is introduced in the first act and, perforce, must go off by the fourth. Second, Tony and Jack’s relationship needed to go through some serious setbacks to justify them waiting in the first place. If
there were no problems, there would be no narrative reason for them not to have bonded at the end of *Accordance*. Plotwise, they could just as easily have been bonded in *The Stargate Protocols*. In order to make the wait meaningful, there had to be a moment (as it turned out, it was a very short moment, because I couldn’t deal with the angst) when they could, potentially, decide not to bond. Third— and this did not become obvious until I was actually writing Chapter 14— there needed to be more to bonding than just the sex. I don’t know how other authors in this sandbox make that work— and they do, I’ve read multiple stories by multiple authors who had absolutely no trouble making sex the primary bonding mechanism and having it ring absolutely true— but it just wasn’t happening for me. So I was like, okay, well, maybe they have to take a trip to the Spirit Plane to complete the bond, and…

Well, we’ve all seen how *that* turned out.

Third, every couple chapters, I would kind of remember that Jack had an actual job besides being Tony’s deceptively indolent-looking side-kick.

*Advanced Principles* is, of course, focused mainly on the new agency and their first major operation. However, Jack, presumably, also has a lot of other stuff going on, even though the Trust issue is taking priority. A lot of it, of course, is being handled by Paul, because Jack’s role as the Head of Homeworld, both in my head and in the show, seems to be mostly stepping in and dealing with weird and wacky crises as they occur. Which is part of the reason I gave him Paul in the first place, because clearly someone needs to be handling the day-to-day bureaucracy while Jack handles the inexplicable disaster *du jour*. Dealing with Jack’s other job didn’t take up a *lot* of time, statistically speaking, but it definitely played a role.

**Why so many fandoms?**

This, I blame on you, my dear readers.

You see, after I posted *The Stargate Protocols*, there was a wonderful and quite unexpected interest in Tony and Gibbs move to the Pentagon and what exactly that would look like. Honest, at the time, I hadn’t actually pondered this question extensively. I was still working on the assumption that I was going to use the fandom trope of the MCRT investigating the Stargate Program; basically, take the MCRT out of the NCIS world and put them in the Stargate universe. Other authors— for example, Xanthe in *Hiding in Plain Sight*— have had a great deal of success with this format, and it would save me the headache of having to create a new team and a new dynamic from scratch.

The readers of *This Space Opera* wanted none of it.

They had apparently picked up on my latent ambivalence about the idea (which I mentioned in the Author’s Notes to *The Stargate Protocols*, but honestly wasn’t aware of until it was pointed out to me in those first comments) and combined that with the allusions I’d made to other fandoms in *The Fourteenth Amendment* to demand a brand new team. I was so impressed with their investment in the issue that I decided to do something I had never done before and, basically, take a request. I built them a new team out of characters from other fandoms.

I am all but certain none of the readers who wrote those comments knew exactly what they were asking for.

The trouble was, as any pirate could probably tell you, once I’d started stealing, I couldn’t stop. I really didn’t need all those characters, I could just as easily have used OCs, but it became
something of a game, a game I couldn’t stop playing. I don’t regret it, but I don’t think I’ll go quite that overboard again.

The research is ferocious.

**To bash or not to bash?**

Somehow— I was off hiking that week, so I don’t really remember it happening— this series ended up in a collection called “BAMF without Bashing.” Which is flattering, and fitting, but definitely not a choice I made deliberately or felt particularly bound by. I actually started *Advanced Principles* with the vague idea that Gibbs would go after the Trust and Tony would be left leading the MCRT, recreating some of the angst and drama from “Hiatus.” That turned out to be way more than I could deal with, but, since I didn’t know that when I started the story, I went back and looked at that time period in the show to try and recapture some of the negative dynamics between Tony and the rest of the team.

I was in for a surprise.

You see, I had unwittingly succumbed to the fanon version of Tony’s time leading the MCRT, which, while awesome and riveting and delightful, is fanon, not canon. I hadn’t actually watched “Hiatus” or “Shalom” since they came out way back in 2006. Which, come on, that was years ago, and NCIS has hundreds of episodes, and I have to work and sleep sometimes.

Here’s some of what I had forgotten:

*One: Abby did not give Tony a sticker reading “Trainee” while he was SAC of the MCRT.* The “Trainee” sticker incident was in “Bounce” in Season 6, and it was hilarious. In that episode, Tony is leading a case even though Gibbs is the SAC, and the show writers put in a lot of hysterical little moments where Tony acts like Gibbs (for instance, sneaking up on Tim and Ziva while Tim is complaining about him) and Gibbs is just standing there watching him and smirking. Gibbs even gives Tony helpful little prompts when Tony forgets something, like getting Abby’s CafPow! before going to the lab. Abby gives Tony the “trainee” sticker when he shows up in her lab after she has found relevant evidence rather than just before, and removes it when he finally manages to anticipate her success in true Gibbs fashion. In context, the dynamic of the episode is sweet rather than mean-spirited, a team in-joke which Tony initiates by mimicking Gibbs’s leadership style and the rest of the team, including Gibbs, plays into.

*Two: Tim and Ziva were actually not habitually late when Tony was team lead.* In fact, Ziva being late was the first indication that Tony and Tim have that something was wrong when Ziva is framed for murder in “Shalom.” The real negativity in the team dynamic in the episode surrounded Lee, the new probie. For example, when Tony came back from a conference at the beginning of “Shalom,” he brought gifts for everybody else, but not for Lee, indicating that she was very much not part of the team.

Which leads me to:

*Three: Tony didn’t start out as a very sympathetic character.* Back when this show first started airing, I had a standing *NCIS* date with a couple of friends. We’d make a big, unhealthy meal and watch that week’s episode and talk non-stop during the commercial breaks. And for the first season and a half, we were in unanimous agreement that Tony was an asshole.
Come to find out, doing research for This Space Opera, everybody else watching the show back then thought so too, which is why Michael Weatherly started to tone down the real hardcore misogyny until he ended up with the loveable goofball we all adore. Of course, back then, we didn’t know that, so for us, Tony’s slow transformation into a more likeable, more sympathetic character was an organic shift brought about by him almost dying in “SWAK,” followed by Kate’s death at the end of Season 2.

All of which is to say, Ziva’s attitude towards Tony during her first season on the show was totally understandable and did not make her an unlikeable character. He still had a lot of rough edges at the beginning of Season 3, particularly when it came to treating women with any kind of respect, and desperately needed to have his ass kicked when he backslid into being a misogynist creep. Which is not to say that I don’t love Tony. I do. I actually love him more because he evolved so much as a character. I just can’t blame Ziva for not taking to him right away.

Four: Gibbs was not totally dismissive of the work Tony did as team lead in his absence. Specifically, he asked Ziva what Tony was like as team lead. She replied, “Insufferable,” and he smirked and said “Guess I picked the right guy for the job.” It was unbearably cute.

Gibbs did announce his return as team leader by dumping Tony’s stuff back on his old desk in true asshole fashion. What I had forgotten about the scene though, is that he did the same with Tim’s. And honestly, it was hard to concentrate on either of their implied demotions at the time, because Gibbs was still wearing that horrible mustache. Seriously, the real focus of the scene was Tony, Tim, and Ziva walking into the bullpen, seeing Gibbs, being all surprised and delighted… only to be overcome with horror when he turned around with that monstrosity still on his face.

So, long story short, I gave up on the idea of making Ziva and Tim act like terrible people. By the time I’d finished going through all the canon stuff I thought I knew that was actually fanon, I had rather lost interest in the whole enterprise. Instead, I tried to strike that middle note from Seasons 3-4, the “I-don’t-always-like-you,-but-you’re-mine-and-nobody-else-gets-to-mess-with-you” dynamic. It was, honestly, a decision made out of exhaustion rather than fair-mindedness or a devotion to the original canon, but one I’m happy with.

Besides, as it turned out, I didn’t end up having time to do a lot with the MCRT anyways.

Do I dare disturb the universe?

I think I’ve mentioned a time or two that I am not setting out to teach anyone any big lessons when I sit down to write. Deeper meaning is for readers to discover, not for me to insist on. Nevertheless, I struggled in Advanced Principles with the moral universe problem. While it is not and has never been my goal to either whitewash or to homilize, I don’t really want to create a completely morally bankrupt universe either.

It was pretty clear from the beginning that I couldn’t depend on my source materials for a satisfying moral framework. NCIS ended up going down some really dark roads in later seasons by putting upstanding people in situations where they had to do bad things and presenting them as compromises that had to be made by anyone living in the real world. Stargate SG-1, meanwhile, clung stubbornly to its own moral high ground to the point where truth, justice, and the American way ended up running roughshod over anything the rest of the galaxy might have wanted or thought (which, in retrospect, that kind of captures a lot about the ‘90s). JAG managed to really get the idea of morality as something that should be aspired to and worked towards, but which could
never actually be fully realized, but was heartbreakingly optimistic about the relative goodness of humanity, the United States, the Navy, and the law profession. *The Sentinel...* honestly, I don’t have strong opinions about the original show in terms of its moral underpinnings, and the fandom is, of course, as varied as the authors who write in it.

What made this issue so pressing in *Advanced Principles* was, on the one hand, the clandestine nature of HERA and Operation Endless Love and, on the other, the corner I’d painted myself into with the whole Jake Aronson plotline.

Let’s face it, anyone who watches any amount of TV is aware that covert organizations and operations are morally ambiguous at best. As *Advanced Principles* progressed, I started feeling kind of like I was writing from the point of view of the Alliance in *Firefly*. HERA is, at its core, a secret government agency doing secret things without answering to anybody, and frankly, that never stopped being disturbing. I was fighting with those undertones from first to last. I dealt with the angst in a couple ways. First, by pulling on the dynamics between JAG and the CIA from *JAG* and using the CIA as a sort of whipping boy, a way to comment on the problems without stalling the plotline. Second, by having Tony and Fornell at least think about the implications of the complete lack of legal obligation they’re under and what that looks like. In the end, I don’t actually feel much better about the organization I created, but at least I got my misgivings off my chest.

As for the Jake Aronson thing, that whole plotline highlights something inherently ugly about the bonding premise, an impossible moral dilemma that everyone is kind of conditioned not to think about: you can have free choice, or you can have the preservation of human life, but you can’t have both. Of course, this was the exact problem that inspired me to write *The Fourteenth Amendment*, so it’s my own damned fault that I ended up there again, but this time I had get much more in depth, and it was hard. Thank goodness for Blair and Shirley, who were both able to say, essentially, “No, this is not an ethical dilemma we, as a society, can resolve. Whatever decision we make, it will be wrong. We have to step back and accept the limitations of the law and the cruelty of the universe.” The problem with this is, of course, that this places the responsibility squarely on Tony. In the end, I don’t blame Tony for choosing his own happiness over another person’s life, but I do blame myself for putting him in that situation. It was, quite honestly, a rotten thing to do, and I am ashamed of myself.

So, once again, thank you for going with me on this journey, and I look forward to seeing you next time.

Sincerely, AthenaAstrea.

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