A cross between a bunny farm escapee and an ear worm (Is there such a thing as an idea worm?), this plotline has been haunting my muses for weeks:

Given a startling number of similarities in their backgrounds (troubled mothers, absentee / neglectful fathers, being strung up on flagpoles, disillusionment and inability to fit in with early and middle school schoolmates, a propensity to being kidnapped and life threatening situations, and on the job exposure to weaponized versions of plague and anthrax - to name a few), what if Tony DiNozzo and Spencer Reid were meant for each other, but not in the way that most of their colleagues would expect given their stereotypical jock and genius profiles.

What if Spencer has a hidden wealth of confidence and skill that his colleagues occasionally witness but only in glimpses (like the shot at the end to the LDSK case)? What if the glimpses seen of Tony's vulnerabilities, empathy, and intuition were more inherent and not just peaking out around the edges?

What if Spencer is Tony's bamf sentinel and Tony is Spencer's empathic (and emotionally fluent (?) at some future point) guide?
"Where were you Tuesday night between oh nine hundred and oh three hundred the next morning?" Agent Sacks questioned the suspect that Spencer and Gideon had been asked (as a personal favor to Sacks' team lead) to give a threat assessment on - regardless of whether or not the suspect, also a federal agent, fit the developing profile of the crime he was being investigated for. With the BAU on down time after Elle’s and his own recent involvement in the hostage situation on the train, the local 'informal' consultation seemed like a godsend - giving them a focus for their excess energy (and on Reid’s part an opportunity to distance himself from the event) without the hassles of mandatory paperwork, unwelcoming LEOs, and political infighting.

In the interrogation room, across from Sacks, sat a tall professionally dressed man, with sandy-brown hair, classic features, and what appeared to be a marginally-athletic build only slightly disguised by the lines of his suit. Superficially, his expression appeared open, friendly, and utterly unconcerned, but to Spencer's heightened senses, empathically, even through the interrogation room's partial shielding, he could feel the anxiety, fear, disbelief, and worried-curiosity that poured off of the suspect, only lightly offset with a feathering of uncertain-trust and wistfully-hopeful faith directed towards someone outside of the room. There was another deeper, almost-palpable sense of hopeless-longing layered with a feeling of being resigned-to-its-hopelessness that made Spencer's chest ache as he recognized it: the craving of a guide who'd either met and lost, or given up on finding, his sentinel.

"Well?" Gideon questioned, "What's your read on him? What little I'm picking up through his shields is not enough to say for certain that he hasn't been corrupted, but …"

"While Agent Sacks' emotional overtones are noisome, I’m not having any difficulty picking up the suspect’s empathic print. Actually, it hardly feels like he has any shields up… to me." Spencer commented, cutting his mentor off in surprise, "in fact, most of what I'm picking up is empathic. I realize though that you were interested in my other senses. With regard to those: his heart rate is slightly elevated, but not in the range indicative of panic or deceit. His scent profile is closer to what I've picked up from victims and cleared suspects than unsu--" Spencer reported only to be cut off by Gideon.

"You're picking him up empathically? Not Agent Sacks? You're certain?"

"Oh, I'm picking him up, too, and he shouldn't in there." Spencer snapped, increasingly irritated by the animosity he was picking up from the interrogating agent. "He's being completely unprofessional, and between the two of them, Agent Sacks’ empathic print falls far closer to the profile of someone prone to violence than the man he's questioning."

Spencer wasn't aware of it at the moment, but the expression on his face was contorting to a kind of hardened emotionless mask that Gideon suspected he'd unknowingly learned from Hotch, an expression that Gideon mentally referenced as Hotch's 'sniper mask'.

It was a shock to Gideon, as he began to realize what was happening, and not only from his clearly mistaken belief that Spencer's unique development of guide-like empathic sensitivity (that Gideon theorized had evolved in Spencer to deal with his critically unstable mother) in addition to the moderate level of his sentinel abilities had balanced each other out heavily diminishing if not outright eliminating the need for a partner bond. No, the additional seconds it had taken Gideon to realize what was happening was as much because over his many years of experience inclusive of
his BAU years, consulting with the CIA, NSA, and associated agencies, while Gideon had heard of the occurrences, he had never personally witnessed a potentially-feral response inducing incident so was not prepared for how subtle the initial signs might be... Especially when regular to close working association with the young genius had inured him to seeing the sentinel aspects of his protege when Spencer's intellect and inherent youthfulness stood out in contrast to the other sentinels in the unit.

Sacks losing his temper and stalking out of the room should have been the best thing to happen; instead, the agent came out 'emoting' all over the place so thickly that even with the decades of empathic damage to and the dulling of his guide senses - courtesy of CIA and NSA affiliations (as well as the still too recent loss of his Boston team) - Gideon had no difficulty picking up the malice and repulsion that Sacks felt toward the suspect. While Sacks words were generally professional, his emotional overtones gave the words an extra layer of meanings that Gideon's long experience gave him approximate translations for what he suspected the man would have been saying if he weren't reporting to a superior.

"This \_sick f-c \_ is implicated \_guilty as hell\_ in a homicide, and \_the bastard's\_ making jokes."
"\_Sick f-cs posing as\_ Federal Agents suspected of crimes \_caught red-handed for murder \_ don't get special treatment in my book. \_They get put down!\_"

While they were only mental translations, Gideon had almost immediate proof - by virtue Agent Sacks being practically lifted by his throat and slammed against the wall between the viewing room and interrogation room - that Spencer had picked something up substantially similar to them and viewed the agent as a threat to his, as yet, unbound guide... if Gideon's suspicions were correct, which the evidence was increasingly pointing towards.

"I strongly suggest that you take the seemingly unprecedented step of attempting to actually doing your duty and investigate the 'actual' crime" Spencer warned in an icy tone that would have done Aaron proud while Sacks - seeming stunned by his attackers identity as much as by the actual attack was frozen standing on tiptoe - staring uncomprehendingly at Spencer.

"Instead of accusing the first person, who -all too conveniently- comes to the top of your suspect list by virtue of finding 'perfect evidence' because you are too lazy to question how a trained investigator with in-depth training in evidence retrieval, clumsily, left not one but three pieces of 'perfect' un-contaminated, un-blurred, and un-smeared personally identifying - easily discoverable-physical trace evidence in pristine condition at a dumpsite, which just happens to be on military-controlled grounds- and did not make any attempts to retrieve, mislay, or contaminate them after he and his team went to the effort of collecting them, but was conversely careful enough to leave no trace or erase all traces of his presence in any of the cameras, sign in logs, and scanners at any of the gates." On the way over, they had called Garcia to double check the contradictory fact that had jumped out at them during their first read through of the case.

At the same time that Agent Sacks seemed to get over his shock, Agent Fornell seemed to grasp what was occurring and muttered, "Oh for Christ's sake…" before glancing at Gideon and asking, "sentinel or guide?" which -in Gideon's opinion- should have been quite obvious. After glancing at Sacks, still struggling under Spencer's surprisingly strong grip (given that the other agent hadn't broken free of it yet), Fornell seemed to come to the same conclusion and muttered, “right.”

"Ron, stop squirming and keep your mouth shut. Sentinel Reid, I promise you, I have no intention of railroading your guide, but you must realize how carefully this needs to be investigated? With DiNozzo being a Federal Agent, we don’t want to give any hint of a cover up, and it’s as much for his protection as our agencies. Neither of you will want something like that overshadowing his
Gideon was impressed, considering the circumstances and the fact that Spencer was essentially in the middle of practically assaulting his subordinate, Fornell’s tone was more than reasonable and utterly logical, which would have a far better chance of reaching the young genius than any warning about the consequences of threatening another agent or ramifications for his own career.

Spencer's nod was a weak reassurance - given that he hadn't let go of Sacks' throat - but at least, he was still able to hear them and wasn't sinking any deeper into the instinct to protect his guide. Taking the stalemate as a chance to shoot a text to Aaron, Gideon sent a text requesting his immediate presence at the Navy Yard/NCIS offices, with the SG tag to underline the urgency and issue of his request.

"What the ?!? Are you crazy? That scum isn’t a guide anymore than this geek is a sentinel? Wh--” Apparently, given the way Sacks' words choked off slightly, Gideon wasn’t exactly accurate on the prospect of whether Spencer was succumbing to his protective instincts.

“Get Agent DoNozzo out here, now!” Gideon ordered, recognizing the need to keep his distance from his protege. Sentinels could be particularly ‘prickly’ about dealing with other guides in this state - due to instinctual concerns that their own guide might be offended or put off by the interaction.

“Damn it, Ron. Do what you’re told and keep your mouth shut.” Fornell snapped, even as he hurried over to unlock the door to the interrogation room. Thankfully, he was utterly polite when he asked, “Agent DiNozzo, could you join us?

Startled as much by the sheer courtesy of Fornell’s request as by the fact that the older man had actually pronounced his name right, Tony was completely caught off guard and frankly knocked back into his seat before he could fully stand up by another completely unfamiliar sense - a sentinel… his sentinel. In the other room.


~~~ It was not possible; although, the timing was perfect for it, wasn’t it. To be discovered by a potential sentinel, just in time to ruin the sentinel’s life by having his guide framed - and probably put away for life - for a murder he hadn’t committed, but couldn’t prove otherwise. Yep, that sounded just about right. ~~~

So caught up in his own thoughts that he wasn’t able to even recognize the tension in his body, Tony was already hyperventilating by the time that he’d reached the realization that, once again, fate seemed to have a hate-on for him. The greying out of his vision was hard to even notice due to the too-familiar panic woken by any constriction of his lungs. He didn’t wake up with ‘plague’ nightmares anymore… or at least not recently, but the feeling of any constriction of his breathing was nearly enough to cause flashbacks… ~~~Which Seriously? Did he need anything more to freak out about?!?~~~

The dizziness, though, THAT he noticed. It’s hard not to when he was having a hard enough time staying upright in the chair and dealing with the fact that he was almost certain that he’d FELT the
shift in *HIS* sentinel’s attention from anger towards someone --probably Sacks because as far as Tony was concerned, in his slightly biased opinion, Ronald Sacks was currently the person most likely to get on someone's nerves -- to surprisingly deep concern for him, Anthony DiNozzo, Jr., the universally acknowledged screw-up, which - while it felt … fabulous… to have someone’s undivided, un-conflicted attention and concern - was wrong on so many levels that Tony couldn’t even mentally articulate the surge of panic it caused him.

It looked like someone had been murdered and butchered just to get at Tony, and even if Tony, Gibbs, and the team managed to prove he was innocent, which was a seriously monumental 'IF', what would happen if it got out that there was someone who could be hurt to get back at him, whose welfare would mean more to Tony than his own life?

~~~God, the list of possible suspects who might have wanted to frame him had been so long, before they’d even gone in to the interrogation room, and those were the ones they knew about or at least could guess about, and who knew how many more there might be? ~~~

“Oh, For Christ’s Sake!” Fornell’s voice faded as Tony finally gave up his struggle to sit up in the chair - finally noticing the greying of his vision as it darkened completely. His hearing only lasted a moment longer as he heard Fornell yell for someone to get Gibbs.

Spencer was hard-pressed not to tighten his hold on the agent’s throat as he felt his guide’s confusion immediately transform to disbeliefing panic and from there almost straight into terror with an unhealthily-high dose of guilt… not for the reasons that seemed to be making Sacks smirk smugly as the man no doubt picked up at least a trace amount of his guide’s guilt - and completely misinterpreted it. Without the admittedly low level shielding, Spencer and Gideon - despite his diminished senses - had no difficulty discerning that the entirety of DiNozzo’s guilt was directed at Spencer and was laden with equal amounts of internalized self-loathing and disbelief. He had been entirely correct in his earlier assessment that DiNozzo… Anthony… no… that didn’t ‘feel right’... Tony… yes… it was Tony… Tony had given up on finding his sentinel… and more. From the waves of shocked self-loathing that Spencer was picking up, he didn’t think it was to far out of the range of possibility to speculate that his guide had convinced himself that he was unworthy of a true match, or had from a young age had been indoctrinated in the belief by others, which - given the strength of his guide’s emotions - seemed the more likely probability.

“Spencer, leave him, your guide needs you,” Gideon argued persuasively - his case supported by the fact that Tony’s breathing had sped up and grown shallow in the milliseconds that passed as Spencer had contemplated this shift in his anxiety to panic and fear.

Carefully letting his grip go, Spencer turned toward the interrogation room, even as the SSA Fornell cursed and rushed into the room. Only seconds behind him, Spencer reached the door just in time to watch his guide drop sideways from his chair and lowered to the floor by the senior agent who’d barely made it in time.

“Get Gibbs in here,” Fornell shouted past him, before turning to meet his eyes directly, with apology. “I’m sorry, kid; I know this is probably stepping on your territory in a big way, but if there’s anyone that can get a handle on DiNozzo, it’s his boss, Senior Agent Gibbs.”

As much as Spencer wanted to deny the statement, it radiated with utter honesty, and Spencer forced himself to decide that for -Tony’s sake- he would put up with someone encroaching on his claim to Tony, if it would help his guide come to terms with Spencer’s existence.

In the meantime, though… Spencer fumbled with the phone case on his belt to pull out his phone.
Thankful, once again that Penelope Garcia had programmed several important numbers into his phone, Spencer punched third number on his speed dial and was relieved when Hotch immediately picked up.

“Hotch,” he began before his boss could do more than say his name, “I’ve just discovered my guide, in the suspect we were sent to assess, who’s being framed for murder, and in the middle of an empathic fugue. It’s completely against protocol, I know, but I need to team’s help to prove he’s innocent - as at least one of the lead investigators seems inclined to cooperate with the frame up.” Spencer explained, sparing his attention to shoot a warning-glower at Sacks.

As Hotch was answering that he was already on the way, Spencer looked up to see Gideon smirking at a tall, almost silver-haired agent, who was standing in the doorway, staring at Spencer with an expression of utter shock. Not wanting to waste the man’s time getting to Tony, Spencer waved him to go past and into the interrogation room, while he tapped another number with his thumb.

“Hey, Spence, it’s been ages since you’ve called, I was beginning to feel forgotten…”

“Blair,” Spencer cut his friend and former mentor off, repeating, “I’ve just discovered my guide, who is in the middle of an empathic fugue, being framed for murder, and radiating a nauseating amount of self-loathing and disbelief in the possibility of having - much less being worth - a ‘perfect match’. I know it’s against the standard protocol of going to the nearest S&G center for bonding, with the extenuating circumstances, even once he’s proven innocent, we’re going to need your help: his shields were strong enough to interfere with Gideon’s reading him.”

Closing the phone after getting Blair’s agreement, Spencer looked up and was caught utterly by surprise at Gideon’s amused and impressed expression. “What?” he finally asked feeling self-conscious. Gideon never looked at him like that.

“I can’t decide whether I’m more impressed with your willingness ‘to call out the big guns’ so to speak, or the shock value of your sitreps… No. Let me retract that. While those were sitreps to ‘sit up and pay attention to’, calling in the top sentinel and guide pair in the continental US still trumps them.”

For some reason, Gideon looked unaccountably smug as Agent Sacks’ jaw dropped and he gaped at Spencer. Spencer’s calls were finished though, and he had someone of much greater import to focus on: his guide, Anthony DiNozzo, Jr.
Gibbs watched with a frown as they carted Tony out of the NCIS's interrogation room. The Navy Yard's S&G reps -fearing empathic shock- had decided to keep Tony sedated for the interim and were moving him down to the Navy Base's emergency guild quarters, after consulting with Ducky and the Prime Sentinel & Guide pair that Tony's sentinel had called in… ~~~and wasn't that a hell of a thing?~~~

Oh, he'd known that Tony was a guide, and one who'd adapted to working seamlessly with sentinels; it had been obvious to him the first time they met. That kind of smooth integration didn't come without experience, in Gibbs' mind, and since Tony's file didn't have any record of Tony serving as a temp guide (and Danny Price could never have betrayed Tony by going corrupt if they'd been paired), he'd assumed that Tony had been bonded previously and lost his sentinel in the line of duty (because there had never been any question in Gibbs' mind either that Tony's match would have been in any other field than law enforcement).

Tony's abrupt departure from Peoria directly into a nearly-suicidal undercover operation fit far too easily into the all-too-common pattern of self-destructive depressions that many surviving members of broken Sentinel/Guide bonds (Gibbs included) fell prey to, and Tony's absolute avoidance of anything related to that time of his life was all too similar to Gibbs' own refusal to discuss Shannon and Kelly with anyone. All of those early observations had seemed to reinforce Gibbs' belief of Tony's lost sentinel, to the point he had assumed that, like himself, Tony had proven able to work with pro-tem partners and never requested leave to attend any of the local sentinel/guide meets in the knowledge that having already met his perfect match once - a second could never have replaced the first. Because of the depths of his own pain, regarding the loss of Shannon, Gibbs had never encouraged Tony to discuss bonding…. And he really should have.

If he had, Gibbs might have learned Tony hadn't lost his sentinel; he'd never found one, which poured a whole new can of paint over his early career, and it didn't paint a pretty picture. Something had to have happened early on, to cause Tony to not only jump headfirst into the kind of deep cover role almost guaranteed to cause empathic damage if not outright sensory collapse in unbonded guides, but to also make him shut himself off from the prospect of a possible match so completely that he practically went catatonic at the mere presence of a prospective match. The thought of what could have prompted those outcomes made Gibbs want to requisition another case of 7.62 NATOs.

As much as he'd valued and relied on the balance and support Tony had given him as a pro-tem guide, Tony deserved a hell of a lot more than a broken sentinel who could never have given him more than a shadow of the match that had been out there waiting for him all along… Although looking at Tony's sentinel out in his peripheral, Gibbs wasn't entirely certain that Agent Reid had even been old enough to get a learners permit when he'd been recruiting Tony to NCIS, but that was beside the point. If he'd known Tony had a sentinel out there, he would have booted Tony out of his truck at every monthly meet from the Anacostia to the Atlantic, until they'd run into each other. Working in the same relatively small DC area, odds were it would have happened sooner or later.

"We'll take care of him; I promise." Guide Sandburg commented softly from beside him. Turning to study the man, Gibbs was somehow surprised that Ellison's partner still looked nearly a decade younger, with only a few gray hairs starting to add the salt and pepper quality to his otherwise nearly-black curls despite being only a year or two younger then Gibbs himself. They'd met only a couple of times over the past two decades during investigations involving sentinels and guides, and while

"In the Path of Snow Plows"
Gibbs could respect the alpha-prime guide, he found it a lot easier to relate to Ellison’s no-nonsense special forces-trained approach than Sandburg’s psychic-psychiatry spiels, so made it a habit to give the lead sentinel a heads up whenever possible before investigations ever got to a stage that required the lead guide's intervention. He was willfully ignoring the possibility that they'd intentionally manipulated the response by using their different personalities in a carrot vs. stick manner.

"I know." He answered solemnly, before jerking his chin in Tony's too-young sentinel's direction, and asked, "How's he taking it?"

"Right now? He's pissed. Not at Tony," Sandburg was quick to assure. "At Agent Sacks, at whoever trying to frame Tony, and at whoever's primarily responsible for Tony's current response, which by the way, he's not even considering you as even possibly responsible for. Jim's trying to talk him down from demanding a sanction against Agent Sacks for what he is describing as 'intolerable hostility toward and prejudice against non-normative guides and sentinels', but I'm not certain whether Dr. Reid hasn't halfway convinced Jim to support his position… and preemptively authorizing a hunt against whomever is found to be responsible for framing Tony. I think that he'd make the same request against the ones ultimately responsible for Tony's fugue state if he weren't sufficiently versed in psychology to know that those influences can be diverse and passed along through a variety of unintentional messages shared through social, religious, academic, and work environments."

"Hmph," Gibbs' huffed noncommittally, he happened to think the doctor had the right idea. (~~~ A doctor, as well as an agent? Reid looked too young for that too, but what the hell did he know? Abby looked too young to have the credentials she had too.~~~)

"Oh, not you too." Sandburg sighed, "I think that I better step in before Spencer gets Jim to agree when we don't even know the scope of the issue."

"You do that." Gibbs' agreed almost sarcastically. Sandburg had a bit of a point; though, he was loathe to admit it. You didn't go hunting before you learned the lay of the land and whether an opponent was carrying slingshots or Tomahawk RPGs.

He followed over for a different purpose, though, and held out his hand to Tony's new sentinel. “Leroy Jethro Gibbs, NCIS. Technically, my team isn’t allowed to investigate the case directly due to our association with Tony, but we are running down the whereabouts and activities of all of his known enemies and had first look at all of the evidence against him, if you'd like to join us.”

“Dr. Spencer Reid, BAU. As you heard my team is on the way, and will probably use a different methodology than your team will, but I am sure we can work together. Where are you set up?”

Gibbs smiled and took the methodology warning at face value. There had only been a couple of times that he’d gotten to see Kate do her ‘profiling’ thing, but it had been definitely a different route than the evidence-based approach he’d prefer. Given what the ‘evidence’ was saying about Tony, right now, he was only-too-happy to look at other methods. There was no way in hell that Tony had done anything like this no matter what evidence said.

Watching Jethro get chummy with DiNozzo’s from-out-of-nowhere, BAU sentinel while chatting up the Alpha Prime Sentinel and Guide couple of the US, Tobias Fornell had a distinct sympathy for snowmen standing in front of snow plows. Despite all regulations and technicalities requiring his team to lead an investigation involving other federal agents and agencies, the assumption of his team having any control of the investigation was about to become a fallacy, and he was smart
enough and experienced enough to know that his best move would be to get out of their way - especially when he was already saddled with a subordinate like Ron Sacks.

In and of himself, Ron wasn’t a bad agent per se; he certainly wasn’t corrupt, or really even prejudiced, but once he got an idea into his head, it could take a two-by-four to knock it out. Unfortunately, the combination of evidence that was, at least to Tobias, just too good to be true and the FBI-accessible version of DiNozzo’s file (with notes about his conman father and his 'undercover' ability to smoothly blend in with crime families like the Macalusas), had been too tempting to Ron, who -after a superficial read-through of the files- had taken the bit in his teeth believing that Tony was barely more than a conman planted in minor police stations to work his way up through the ranks to a small federal agency like NCIS and then into one of the major agencies where he could use his position to aid whatever crime boss he had allegiance to, who’d gotten sloppy with his extra curricular activities. If that wasn’t bad enough, he’d let his assumption color his perceptions of the possibility of DiNozzo being a guide - despite the obvious evidence supporting the fact.

Even if Tobias had been taken in by the evidence, which -as Dr. Reid had succinctly pointed out - was just too clean and uncontaminated for having been ‘accidentally’ dropped at a dumpsite, the discovery that DiNozzo was a guide would have put paid to any theory of his guilt. Almost by definition, guides were inherently empathic, and it would have taken a special kind of fruitcake to simultaneously empathize with a victim and cut them up - on top of being a biter. It required the kind of crazy that wouldn’t have lasted three hours in a two person PD on the outskirts of Death Valley, much less any of the metropolitan PDs DiNozzo had worked, FLETC training, and years of service in any federal agency no matter how small… not even to mention Gibb’s radar. Nope, Tony DiNozzo was innocent, and Ron, who was currently fuming in the corner not understanding why no one was seeing things the way he saw them, was about to get a much needed lesson in objectivity.

“I am two microseconds from initiating an S & G guild hearing for a full sanction against Agent Ronald Sacks.” Dr. Reid informed Tobias less than three minutes later, before demanding, “Until this matter is thoroughly investigated and my guide is cleared, I want Sacks where I can see him at all times.”

“What?!” Sacks squacked, professionalism out the window. “Are you nuts, that…”

“Ron, Shut Up! Sentinel Reid, if I vouch for my agent…” before he could finish the offer, Dr. Reid cut him off with a sharp “No. He is to stay in my vicinity or under the supervision of one of the other sentinels on my team, or I will formally request neutral supervision of a guild sentinel to prevent him from tampering with the investigation.”

“That’s not necessary.” Tobias sighed, but Reid’s steely expression was answer enough for him, and if he were in the same position, he’d probably demand nothing less himself.

“That’s not your decision.” Dr. Reid answered icily, and Ron, who just couldn’t keep his mouth shut, had to chime in. “It’s not yours, either…!” with an insult sure to follow, if he hadn’t been cut off as soon as he started.

“No, but it is mine, Spanky, and I’m about to volunteer personally, if Dr. Reid does decide to request it.” Alpha Prime Sentinel Jim Ellison answered with the kind of smile that would probably spook a shark, before asking Reid. “Care to take me up on it?”

“It would be appreciated, and I reserve the right to accept the offer later if he gets in the way, but Agent Sacks clearly needs use a refresher in investigative methods, and I see no reason the two goals cannot be accomplished simultaneously.”
Yep, Tobias was definitely beginning to understand how snowmen felt watching the plows heading their direction.
After flipping through the case files that Supervisory Special Agent Gibbs had handed him as soon as they reached the MCRT's bullpen, Spencer turned to Sacks and snapped, "why weren't we given the full case file when we were asked to do a threat assessment on Agent DiNozzo?"

"You were!" Sacks answered with a glare at Gibbs, "If there's more there, it's because they're holding back."

"No. They gave me what you gave me; I'm asking about your work notes, your contact list, the summary of phone and personal interviews. I am only hazarding a guess that some of this sounds familiar."

Instead of answering, Sacks crossed his arms defensively, muttering imprecations and variations on the theme of jacked up nerds and self-righteous sentinels, which Spencer easily ignored.

"Agent Gibbs, could you please call someone to come up from Human Resources? I understand that it will interfere with the leads you are currently following, however, if you can each independently write a summary of your and the team's actions during the seventy-two hours prior to the discovery and report of the dumpsite, it would assist me in ruling out Tony's involvement.

"Boss?!?" Agent McGee questioned, undoubtedly wondering whether Spencer had the right to give them orders.

Already on the phone, Agent Gibbs' glared at Agent McGee and growled, "you heard the man," before continuing in a far more pleasant voice, "Helen, it's Jethro on the MCRT...Yes, we're doing everything we can do to… yes, exactly. Can you come upstairs? Agent Reid of the FBI is helping us, and I believe there are some things that he'd like to ask for from you to help Tony's case. … Yeah... We can trust him. Yeah, I'm sure. … …"

When Gibbs looked up with a questioning glance, Spencer realized that the woman on the other end of the line was probably asking how or why Gibbs trusted him, and nodded. He certainly had no problem making his claim on Tony known.

"Actually, while you’re at it, you may want to bring an S&G pack and the change of medical and financial powers of attorney forms while you are at it. Dr. Spencer Reid of the Behavioral Analysis Unit, FBI is Tony's Sentinel, with at least three attesting witnesses, who can confirm the match. Well… there was an incident, and … yeah exactly, so he's not currently conscious to make the verification himself, but we have two other FBI agents, myself, Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg as witnesses who can corroborate. Yes, I will be happy to pass the message along to, but you can tell him yoursel… oh gotcha. Then thank you. I will. Bye Helen."

Quirking his eyebrow in question, at Agents McGee and David, who were openly gaping and spluttering, Spencer waited for Gibbs to confirm that someone was coming from Human Resources because the end of the conversation sounded like she might not be.

"Helen sends her congratulations and her best - literally- in the form of her staff assistant, a FLETC intern, and another member of the accounting, payroll, and bookkeeping staff to make copies, run errands, pull and verify whatever files you need, and make coffee and food runs as needed. She said payrolls done and ready to post, so barring a mass resignation event, she can spare them for at least a week - if needed."
That was not quite what Spencer expected, but he wasn't going to turn the additional help away.

"My MannnN!" Derek practically crowed as he stepped off of the elevator and stopped, choking dramatically and rubbing his eyes at the visual blast of orange that almost stole his senses until Penelope caught his arm and helped keep him grounded.

"Wooooow, how that passes S&G standards, I have to know. That's brutal." Derek complained before returning to his previous line of thought, "Here we send you out to analyze some agent and what do you do but pick up a sweet little guide along the way. Where is she? I've gotta meet your perfect match!"

Spencer shook his head, thinking he really should have known, but while it was amusing to be underestimated again, he really didn't have time for it.

"Derek, I'm afraid your neanthral is showing again. My guide is the agent that Gideon and I were sent to assess; HE is innocent by the way, but is currently at the S&G center, sedated and being treated for empathic shock, following an intolerably aggressive and hostile interview conducted by Agent Sacks who has been at best willfully inept in investigating the charge and at worst cooperating with the attempt to frame my guide. I haven't found proof one way or the other, yet."

"You have got to be kidding me, you fu---" Sacks erupted from the seat beside Gibbs desk that the Supervisory Special Agent had ordered him into -only to cut himself when Fornell cleared his throat with a cough that sounded suspiciously like the combination of a curse and an order.

"Reid." Hotch greeted Spencer with a slight grimace, his eyes pinched in response to the discordant color. "Care to introduce us and… see if there is possibly a guild friendly conference room we could set up in?"

"Sorry Hotch, I tried, but the conference rooms are worse. The team sharing the bullpen moved to one so we can use the unoccupied desks. As for introductions, Hotch, this is Supervisory Special Agent Jethro Gibbs, Senior Agent of the Major Case Response Team, Special Agent Tim McGee, and Mossad Liaison Ziva David. I believe you know Agents Fornell and Sacks." From Hotch's expression, Spencer could tell he'd picked up the slur against Sacks, but didn't care.

"Agent Gibbs, this is Supervisory Special Agent Unit Chief Aaron Hotchner of the Behavioral Analysis Unit, Agent Derek Morgan, Agent Elle Greenway, Media Liaison Jennifer Jereau, and Technical Analyst Penelope Garcia. Agents Hotchner and Morgan are two of the three sentinels, outside of myself and Ellison whom I trust to supervise Sacks."

"And the third?" Gibbs asked, but Spencer suspected that he thought he already knew, so only quirked an eyebrow.

"GOTCHA," Gibbs nodded.

Right as Spencer was ready to defer to Hotch to start the team working, the elevator bell dinged again and two women and a man stepped out clearly looking around for someone: presumably the HR staff.

"Excuse me a minute, Hotch? I need to get them started." Spencer explained as he stepped away to introduce himself to the agents on loan and thank them for their assistance.

"Okay, Agent Gibbs, so where are we?" Aaron asked the notorious NCIS agent. How Spencer had
persuaded the man to work together, he was dying to know.

"Well, frankly, I'd suggest following Dr. Reid's lead, unless he stumbles and you need to step in. I don't know the whole picture he's been looking at, but he's asking the right questions, and has something in mind. Anyway my people already know to follow him, he's got Fornell cowed and towing the line, and Primes Ellison and Sandburg ready to jump in and join the fray, so it would be a shame to waste that influence while he has it."

~~~Well, that's unexpected.~~~

"Gideon?" Aaron questioned, in surprise.

"In any other circumstances, I might say no, but it's a good suggestion, and he's right. Besides, Reid's in his version of a 'take no prisoners' mode, and you've seen how effective those can be."

"Don't know if I'd say he's not taking prisoners" Gibbs pointed out with a smirk toward Sacks.

"You may have a point." Gideon agreed wryly, "but I have a feeling that if he doesn't convert Agent Sacks and put him to work, the man can kiss his FBI pension goodbye."

"Sounds about right." Gibbs agreed, and Aaron was pleased and startled at the unexpected respect in Gibbs' tone.

Gideon chuckled, undoubtedly picking up Aaron's bemusement, before suggesting, "just go with it, Aaron."

"Okay,"

"Well, I have my orders," Gibbs commented by way of explanation, as he returned to his desk.

"What were his orders?"

"The MCRT can't investigate the case directly, given their close association to DiNozzo, but were going the route of looking at all past possible enemies. Reid took them off that to write witnesses testimonies of the team's actions and interactions for the last three days prior to the legs being discovered. Apparently, that's the absolute earliest they could have been dropped and still been in the condition that they were found in."

Listening in on Reid's instructions to the new arrivals, Aaron nodded his agreement and approval for the documents Reid was requesting. It was a good move. Waiting for Reid's return, he began flipping through the case folder on the desk, before moving to a second folder and stopping when it was clearly a duplicate. Going back to the first folder, he began to reread the file, making mental notes as he went.

"That's the file of information that Gibbs had when he turned the information over to the FBI.” Spencer explained, before tapping the second file, “This is the file that Agent Sacks gave us to use for the analysis of Tony… According to Agent Sacks, it contains all of their work as well.”

Glancing up sharply, Aaron had to ask, “You're not serious?”

Spencer's too bland, silently infuriated look was the only answer Aaron needed, as he decided to have a rather long talk with Agent Fornell for letting his Agent get away with this kind of slipshod work - if work had been done at all. If it had, the lack of reports or at least work notes was beyond negligent, but Aaron knew almost without question that the work hadn't even been done.
“We’ll deal with that later,” he assured Spencer. “What have you come up with so far, and how would you like to divide up the tasks?”

Spencer’s slightly shocked step-back was amusing, but he recovered quickly and took the lead without any further question or comment.

“SSA Fornell’s team are continuing to run the Jane Doe’s DNA to identify her, but I suspect that my guide was the primary target given the attention paid to planting usable and uncontaminated evidence directing suspicion towards him. Because of this, I don’t believe the Jane Doe should be considered in terms of victimology. Moreover, Dr. Mallard’s report - noting particularly the advance decomposition and lack of exposure to air, soil, insects, or water - suggest that the legs could have been procured from a medical school, morgue, or science donation organization.”

“Based on the evidence planted, after the MCRT finish compiling their testimonies of the period prior to the site’s discovery, they should refine their potential suspect list to individuals with forensic and/or medical knowledge and contact any local organizations that fit one of these descriptions.”

“While the BAU team is building our profile of the unsub, given the recency of the blood, fingerprint, dental, and trace evidence, the person or persons framing Tony will have needed to have fairly regular interaction with Tony and medical or forensic skills, to that end, I believe we should interview NCIS’ evidence and forensic techs as well as medical and morgue staff to determine who if any had the level of contact needed to gather clean samples from Tony, and do so as quickly as possible due to the likelihood of the shift in the investigation being discussed and forewarning a suspect.”

“Good thinking,” Aaron agreed, before turning to study his team, “Who do you want doing what?”

“I have the staff loaned by their HR department pulling up Tony’s reported schedules, appointment logs, and his computer login and out times so that we can verify any periods that someone might accuse him of having the time to commit the acts he’s been accused of. Once they have his timeline, I’d like J.J. and Elle to take Tony’s photo and the photos of the staff we’ll be interviewing to each of the base checkpoints to see if the guards can identify who visited the dumpsite. I would like for Penelope to pull background checks on any of the techs with regular access to Tony, and after that checking the gps data for the same individuals to see who may have driven on or near the base and the dumpsite. I think, we, being Gideon, Derek, you, and myself should do the interviews - to have sentinels available in case the unsub panics and so that Gideon and I have a chance to read for any potential threats or deceptions. When the MRCT have narrowed down their suspect lists, if we haven’t turned up any results, we can shift to interview any likely subjects.”

A quick glance between Fornell and Gibbs confirmed their agreement to plan.

“Okay, let’s get started.”
“Dr. Reid’s supposition that our Jane Doe wasn’t the primary target appears to be correct.” Fornell opened the briefing, explaining, “My team matched Jane Doe’s DNA to the - very much alive with full use of all appendages - Nurse Carla Johnson, who just so happens to be a blood and bone marrow donor who gave her first donation to an accident victim sixteen days ago. The woman she donated to died on the table and was sent to the morgue. The location of the woman’s body is being tracked down as we speak.”

Fornell finished and handed the remote to Gideon who quickly handed the control back to Agent McGee with a gruff order to just pay attention and change the screen when it’s time.

“Agent Jareau and Agent Greenway had moderate success interviewing the gate guards. During one of the mandatory psychiatrists exams required to return to duty after a hostage or shooting, while Agent DiNozzo was perceivably out of the office but his time accounted for and independently corroborated elsewhere, someone signed into the visitor’s log at gate fourteen only three miles away from the dumpsite using Agent DiNozzo’s name. The signature has been compared against Agent DiNozzo’s and judged to be a forgery on nine separate aspects. Unfortunately, the guard who’d been on during that time is off today, but they are going to her barracks to interview her to see if she recognizes any of the possible suspects, now… now… Agent change the screen now.” Gideon ordered, grimacing at Agent McGee. “Thank you.”

The man had no sense of timing and fumbled with the remote almost dropping it before the screen changed.

“Based on Dr. Mallard’s report - regarding the lack of exposure to insects, air, and water, the surgical skill and meticulousness used to remove the skin over the falsified bite, as well as the technical knowledge to make the dental create an accurate bite print, the MCRT refined their potential suspect list to individuals with forensic and/or medical knowledge or contacts. Agent Gibbs.”

”McGee.”

“Yes, Boss.” McGee agreed, standing up to give his report. “Focusing on those characteristics, we were able to exclude most of Tony’s potential enemies and focus on one man: George Stewart, a forensic tech who was fired from the Baltimore PD, in 2002, after Tony discovered that he had been responsible for contaminating blood samples on a case he was working. After he lost his job, he fought the firing in court and ran out his family’s savings in legal fees and lost their house. He and his wife were divorced shortly after; he lost custody of the kids due to drunken and disorderly behavior on and off the job. He eventually won the case, but by that time his reputation had been wrecked and he was near unhirable in the field. He virtually disappeared for two years before he was employed by…”

“How did he win the case?” Fornell and Spencer questioned at the same time interrupting his explanation.

When McGee didn’t answer immediately, Penelope raised her hand waving the troll-puff topped pen as she called “Ooh, ooh, I know. I came across the name in one of the background checks. Yes. Here it is. In the case of Charles Stewart versus the Baltimore Police Department for the City of Baltimore, Maryland and co-defendant Pemberton Medical Analysis, Tony testified for the Baltimore PD, and Pemberton had oh the name was here …”
Penelope was still scrolling through the court records to find the name she’d been looking up only moments before, jerked her head up as Fornell’s phone rang. Answering, Fornell grinned for half a second before passing along the news, ”Jane Doe was transferred to the Virginia County Coroner’s office eight days ago.”

“Boss, that's where Stewart works!”

“Derek… Agent … Agent David, will you please go pick him up for questioning?”

“You got it kid.”

“Of course, Dr. Reid.”

“Spencer? What are you thinking?” Aaron asked, certain that Spencer had a reason for not going out himself with Derek or alternately sending Aaron.

“I don’t think Stewart is the unsub. He might be working with him, and have access to the body and surgical equipment, coolers, and other supplies he’d need, but not access to Tony. Penelope said that he testified for the state against Stewart, so he would probably recognize the man, much less raise red flags if he found out the man was working with evidence as he would have needed to have been to get the blood, fingerprint, dental, and trace evidence, without being noticed. The person or persons framing Tony will have needed to have fairly regular interaction with Tony to do that.”

“Okay, given the nature of the law suit, if we assume that Stewart may not have been the only one found at fault, the profile of a resentful stalker still fits…”

"A resentful stalker?" McGee asked curiously and all eyes turned to Hotch as he explained:

"Resentful stalkers convince themselves that they have been mistreated in some form or other or alternately, believe that they are the victim of some intentional miscarriage of justice or targeted humiliation. Resentful stalkers target strangers and acquaintances, alike, who are seen as having been responsible for the injustice or humiliation. This form of stalker can develop paranoid beliefs about the victim and use stalking as a way of ‘getting back’ at his or target. Motivated by the desire to get revenge, resentful stalkers crave the sense of power and control that frightening their target gives them, but over time, resentful stalkers feel the need to to cause more intense disturbances to feel satisfied that they are 'evening the score'.”

"Oh, okay…” McGee paused on the edge of saying something before he seemed to talk himself out of it.

"Spit it out, McGee.”

"I don't want point someone out if he's innocent, but...Has anyone checked out, Chip? It might be nothing, but I know that he really doesn't like Tony, and when he first came on, he tried to sneak up behind Tony the way Gibbs' can. He wasn't very good at it, but Tony pretended to be spooked as an olive branch for however they got off on the wrong foot and to give Chip an ego boost, but it didn't seem to help, and after that, some of Chip's jokes were a bit cruel, like labelling a petri with some sort of mold, as y-pestes and knocking it over on him… (You know about him being dosed with an altered version of the plague?) He faked a box of evidence that Tony had signed off on but with broken seals and miss-labeled items and switched it out for the real box right when Tony was getting ready to deliver it to the evidence rooms. Another time…”

"Chip?" Spencer demanded, "what's his actual name?"
"Charles Sterling, he's Abby's…"

"That's him;" Penelope gasped "that's the name I was looking for. He's the lab tech that Pemberton had testifying on their side, but Stewart's lawyer got him to admit that he was actually the one who contaminated the tests but hadn't reported the problem to Stewart. The court found in favor of Stewart in regard to Pemberton, but not in regard to the Baltimore PD."

Gibbs was already up and out of his seat running toward the stairs, with Spencer and Aaron on his heels, immediately understanding. They'd barely reached the halfway point of the hall, when they heard a man's voice screaming for help. Rushing forward they reached the room and found Jimmy Palmer knelt beside Abby, trying to pack gauze wadding in to a broad rapidly bleeding wound in her side.

"You've got to call for help. Chip cut the phone line and smashed our phones. Dr. Mallard's at the S&G center still, and I was stopping in to give Abby an update. Her music's so loud, I didn't know they were fighting until I stepped in and … God, I distracted her. I didn't mean to. I swear, but I did and he stabbed her. He wouldn't let me help her till I gave him my phone and he groped her phone off her, and he was telling me how I should blame Tony for everything."

"A bus is on the way," Hotch offered, putting a hand on the shocky man's shoulder as he continued, "Gideon and Penelope are coming down. Sometimes, Guides can use their abilities to help critical patients hang on. You've done a good job."

Gibbs looked almost devastated at the sight, and he could sympathize watching team members suffer was always harder than taking personal injuries.

"Where did he go!!" Spencer growled, rising fury coloring his tone and giving his voice an almost feral edge.

"Oh, God! I'm sorry. He's going there. The S&G center. He's going after Tony."

"I'll call. Go!!" Gibbs barked. There was no telling how much of a head start Sterling had; hopefully, it hadn't been very long for both Abby and Tony's sake.

Neither BAU sentinel hesitated even half a second.

Splitting half of his attention between watching Jimmy working over Abby, and dialing Ellison's personal number, Gibbs silently prayed for a swift response, which he received, but not quite in the way he wanted. Over the phone, when Jim answered, Gibbs heard the Center's emergency alarms blaring. Before he could warn the Alpha Prime, Jim was barking at him. "Get. Reid. Here. Now! Your boy just woke up from enough tranquilizers to keep a bull elephant down, near feral, and Blair says his spirit guide's near feral and hunting. We need Reid here now!"

"Reid's already on his way, so's the unsub, Charles Sterling, a tall, horse-faced man with a shaved head, and probably smells of blood. He attacked Abby and is after Tony. "

"Understood, we'll be waiting for him… By the way, did you have to train Tony, so well? He put two of my sentinels out of commission before the spirit guides started warning everyone off?"

"Sure as hell did. Look, gotta go, guides are here to help stabilize Abby, and you have a psychopath heading straight for you. I know you have to tow the line with congress, but if Sterling isn't an intolerable threat, I don't know what is."

"Sanctions already been given, don't worry. Reid's been keeping us in the loop and warned of the outcome if the unsub's left unchecked and got Blair onside before I'd finished figuring out what he
was saying. You take care of your girl; I'll take care of your boys.”
Gibbs could not believe that Palmer’s talent at being utterly inappropriate at the worst possible time was apparently inborn… but it seemed the powers that be were intent on proving him wrong… as was very aptly proven by the fact that no sooner than Agents Gideon and Garcia had entered the room, Palmer’s head snapped up, eyes glazed, staring at Ms. Garcia as he murmured, “Guide,” in an almost worshipful tone.

“Sentinel!” Ms. Garcia answered, awe and surprise lighting her face.

“Now, is not the time!” Gibbs snapped, practically cursing, and only mildly guilty at the thought of ruining their first meet, but seriously… Abby needed their help.

Thankfully, Palmer hadn’t succumbed to the instinct to disregard everything but his guide on their first meet and was still keeping pressure on Abby’s abdomen, but they really didn’t have time for any distractions at the moment.

Gideon was about to make a comment that looked like it was going to contradict him regardless of the situation, but before the other man could say anything, Ms. Garcia ran around Abby’s feet and dropped to her knees beside Palmer.

“We’ll just sync up and ground each other, for now, Honey-Muffin, then take care of … little sis… and get to the good stuff later, okay? Breathing first, three, two, one, … … … and there … sight … sound… good… good… mind… … oh my, you’re just delish … now … soul …“

“You’re … so … wow … a whole galaxy… of Wow …” Palmer murmured appreciatively, before turning his focus back down to Abby. “Wait, do you hear… there’s something…she’s having trouble breathing… and her heartbeat… Agent Gibbs, Abby’s got stainless steel drinking straws in one of her desk drawers, get one, we need one and a scalpel. Fast.”

With an apologetic tone, he informed Ms. Garcia, “It’s going to hurt her, alot, but I have to … blood’s building up in her abdomen and putting pressure on her lungs and heart. I don’t know how whatever you’ll do to stabilize her works, but she’ll need as much as you can give her.”

“Don’t worry, about me, Peaches, finding you’s like slamming three espresso bombs. Plus, we’ve got Gideon, and grumpy as he is, he’s still got a hell of a lot to give. We’ll give her the juice to hang on; you just focus on getting her fixed up.”

Dragging the first drawer out when he couldn’t find the straws, Gibbs turned it over on the table and huffed at the silvery chimes as five different straws fell on the desktop. He was going to teach her how to organize her damn desk, when she came back. The scalpels were easier, though he still ended up cutting his hand on one. Throwing it aside, he grabbed another and rushed back to them.

It was a tense couple of minutes before he realized that the wheezing sound that he’d barely noticed Abby making as she breathed was easing.

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“We’ll be there in less than a minute,” Aaron urged, pressing the gas as Reid impatiently struck the passenger door’s panel with his balled up fist.
“My guide’s already there. The threat is already there.” Reid uncharacteristically snarled.

“I know.” Aaron agreed, because with whatever headstart he’d had, they were too close for Sterling not to be there. “But, Tony’s not alone, Spencer. It’s a Military S&G base, there have to be dozens of sentinels there, and you can be sure they’ll put themselves between Sterling and any guide, much less Tony. Jim’s there too, and you know he won’t let your guide…”

“He’s mine to protect!” Reid snapped, and even more than the venom of his tone, Spencer’s almost monosyllabic level of speech convinced Aaron that Spencer was slipping into a feral state.

“Yes. He is.” Aaron agreed, which was really the only possible course of action. Disagreeing or trying to mitigate the answer in any way like making any further suggestion that Reid wasn’t the only one who could protect Agent DiNozzo, while Reid was in this state, was decidedly unwise… as was not expecting Spencer to jump out of the car before he’d pulled to a stop.

The provocation was completely understandable, though.

On the front lawn of the S & G center, Charles Sterling, still wearing a bloody lab coat, and waving a knife that was definitely not laboratory standard, was shouting almost incoherently at Tony DiNozzo, who was somehow still managing to look dangerous despite wearing only a barely intact hospital gown, being bare-footed and noticeably unarmed. The air of danger could have come, in part, from the wide berth that the uniformed and armed S & G staff (sentinels and guides alike) were giving the agent, which seemed to have nothing to do with the clearly corporeal presence of his spirit guide, a small but familiar bird of prey, who was successfully harassing Sterling and keeping him off balance.

“Chip, Chip, Chipster… you’ve got some splainin’ to do!” DiNozzo challenged, practically ignoring Spencer, who’d run up to join him. “I mean, I get why you wouldn’t like me. Really, I do. Lot’s of people don’t. I have a talent at getting on people’s nerves. Seriously, if it were a reality show, I’d be like a neutron star at getting on peoples nerves, but messing with Abby. Hurting Abby? Everyone freaking loves Abby, and you go and stab her and leave her to die? Why would you do that?”

“I was fired because of you! You just had to make a big deal about a fiber in a blood sample, how it couldn’t have come from your vehicle, or someone’s apartment. Wah, wah, wah. And I get fired for it.”

“Fired? You’re lucky that all that happened to you was that you were fired. The blood and fiber were from a separate scene, but because you’d thought it was a brilliant idea to get stoned before going to work and got the two samples contaminated, the evidence, warrant, and everything stemming from it were thrown out of court, and we almost let a pedophile go free. Doesn’t that mean anything to you?!?” DiNozzo growled. “And that still doesn’t explain why you hurt Abby.”

“What it means to me? You want to know what it means to me? It means you weren’t doing your job right if the whole case rested on just one piece of evidence. You only had yourself to blame for that and should have accepted responsibility for that, but …. No… Tony DiNozzo… stupid star detective of the whole Baltimore PD can’t stand having his spotless image tarnished with a little thing like incompetence can he, so he just has to find someone to blame, and when Stewart didn’t work, you just had to point the blame at me. But your reputation’s not so spotless now is it? Even if Abby survives and tells them about the tests she ran, tests that would have exonerated you, that evidence is gone now, right into the incinerator, and if anyone believed her - she’s one of your close friends, isn’t she? Everyone will always wonder if there had been evidence or if she’d just made it up to protect you, especially as she won’t be around to convince them, but then again, you won’t be around to see it, either.” Sterling finished, waving his knife invitingly.
Responding to the threat, Spencer growled and lunged forward, only to have his guide catch his shoulder, barely sparing an eye from watching Sterling, as he gruffly ordered, “Down boy, I’ve got this,” and pushing Spencer out of the way as Sterling lunged forward on his own.

“Ah, ah, ah, Chip.” DiNozzo chastised as he grabbed Sterling’s arm and pulled him forward, using the force of his own lunge to drag him past Spencer without giving him the chance to catch Spencer with the blade.

“There are a couple of things you need to learn, and lesson one, is when you’re upset with someone, you don’t take it out on someone else.” From where Aaron stood, he thought he might have heard the bones grinding in Sterling’s wrist as DiNozzo twisted his grip before letting go.

“Bastard. I thought you liked having others take your punishment.” Sterling gasped, pulling his arm close to his chest protectively. “You certainly like spreading the blame around.”

“Lesson two,” DiNozzo continued, not letting the man catch his balance as he caught him with a kick to the back that brought Sterling to his knees. “You especially don’t try to take it out on people I care about.”

Grunting, Sterling recovered more quickly than Aaron liked, and was on his feet again and facing DiNozzo with a wild expression.

“Lesson three, you don’t take a knife to a guide fight.” DiNozzo continued coldly, twisting the quote to suit his purposes.

Unfortunately, Sterling was more intelligent and Spencer less detached than DiNozzo seemed to expect - from either of them - as in the same millisecond that Sterling realized what was about to happen and panicked - throwing the knife with unfortunate accuracy, Spencer realized that DiNozzo would be too focused on inflicting the psionic attack to avoid it and threw himself between DiNozzo and Sterling. Both attacks struck home almost simultaneously: DiNozzo’s dropping Sterling to the ground a nearly-mindless vegetable trapped in his own ego-driven nightmares and Sterling’s dropping Spencer - the blade embedded dangerously low in his upper right thorax, level to where DiNozzo’s heart would have been if he hadn’t intervened.

Chapter End Notes

I’m tempted to apologize to any Breena Slater and Kevin Lynch fans, but really? In an NCIS/CM crossover, how can you not match Penelope with someone as sweet, quirky, and occasionally inappropriate as Jimmy.

Oh, and the influence for her comment about espresso bombs came from running across this post: http://coffegeek.com/forums/members/recipes/336918
Blair gasped at the sudden burst of shock, pain, and guilt echoing through he and the other guides present as Tony DiNozzo became aware of what had just happened.

"FULL SUPPRESSION, NOW!" He shouted ordering his staff guides to follow him in forcing DiNozzo -as gently as possible- back down to an unconscious state. From the black swell of emotions rising in the still unbonded guide, emphatic shock wasn't just a concern, but a certainty.

The veritable puppet on a string, DiNozzo slumped to his knees, only fighting the push long enough to ensure that he didn't risk falling on his sentinel and increasing the damage, before - troublingly- welcoming the darkness.

Not as young as he used to be, Blair gratefully caught and clung to Jim's shoulder as his sentinel joined him. It was ironically more taxing to knock someone, but especially a guide, out while preserving the sanctity of their connection to the spiritual plane than it was to psionically shut down the organs that maintained a person's existence. Doing what DiNozzo had done to Sterling was more exhausting yet - Blair knew from personal experience- so Tony would have collapsed one way or another. The key had been to force the collapse in time to preserve his willingness to come back up. If Spence seized, blocked him, or even seemed to be in 'too much' pain for DiNozzo's inherent conscience to accept, there was no guarantee that he wouldn't do the same thing to himself as he'd done to Sterling; it had happened before where guides had believed themselves responsible for their sentinels' injuries or deaths. In one notable case, where both had died, the guide - believing himself to blame for his sentinel's catastrophic injuries- succumbed first, and was followed days after by the sentinel, whom doctors thought might have survived if it weren't for the shock of that loss.

"Gibbs is not going to be happy." Jim murmured, and Blair couldn't help but snort.

"No, he won't," Blair agreed, watching his staff carefully and quickly move Spencer and DiNozzo on to stretchers. "Is it too late to move back to Cascade?"

"Thirty years too late, Chief. Anyway, our tribe is here now, and Cascade's not like it was back then."

"Always have to be a realist don't you?"

"It's why you love me. It's like a super-power."

"Jim?"

"Yeah, Chief?.

"Shut up, Please."

"Chief?!?" And really, Blair should have expected Jim to catch on immediately. The only times he had ever told his sentinel to shut up was when he had something he needed to talk through but didn't want to even think about.

"Come on, Chief, talk to me."

"He didn't wake up to Sterling's approach or to his sentinel." Blair sighed, "He woke up to his friend being stabbed."
"What?!?" Blair could feel the tension in Jim's arms increase as he reviewed his memory and came to the same conclusion. "Sterling didn't tell him; he already knew."

"Yep." Blair answered dismally.

On the surface, having a sentinel or guide 'tuned in' to the welfare of friends and family sounded like a good thing. The down side was that to put the sentinel or particularly a guide in such a state as to subconsciously create a constant spiritual 'network' of sorts focused on the constant surveillance of the health and well-being of those closest to them, in all of the previous cases they'd experienced, had been prompted a level of trauma that was by definition intolerable and in each case had posed a serious and direct threat to the individual's ability to complete a bond. He and Jim had dealt with several cases over the years, which had all been ugly and disturbing affairs. Thankfully, though, over the years, fewer and fewer cases had presented as the laws and protections that they'd spent decades pushing for stateside and world-wide took effect. They had been too late to prevent whatever … or really whoever ... had hurt DiNozzo - because this kind of damage wasn't ever accidental outside of massive scale natural catastrophes (tsunami-scale events), but at least the chances of others turning up in similar shapes was being significantly reduced.

"Well shit!"

"Sums it up nicely."

"Funny." Jim snarked. "Seriously, how are we going to help him? The others we've dealt with have all been younger… a lot younger." In point of fact, when they had seen this sort of damage before, it had usually been in the context of violent activity from young, usually homeless, sentinels caught up in gang activities.

"He is a special case, but so is Spencer, and I have to believe the powers that be have to have something in mind putting the pair together. If we can help them reconcile a bond, it's going to be something to see."

"Tell me about it. Did you notice how my sentinels reacted to him?" Jim asked sounding a little more vexed this time.

"It was rather hard not to. It reminded me of the first time we went to the firing range after moving out here: all your military-trained sentinels assuming that being the kind-hearted and free-spirited guide that I am, I would never have picked up a gun before then and that you were just indulging me by taking me to the range. It was glorious!"

Jim groaned at the memory, as he always did, but Blair could remember the feeling of his partner's smug pride as his scores fell into the range that would have qualified him as a sniper. Everyone seemed to forget that while guides generally fell into the category of pacifists, it was closer to a pragmatic pacifism. Being paired with sentinels wouldn't be possible otherwise, and in Blair's case, the prospect of a sniper taking out a single individual to prevent violence toward and between tribes that could injure multitudes was perfectly moral, so long as the individual was culpable. Executing someone solely as a means to an end, to threaten or hurt another, or simply to clear the way to a target, would never be acceptable to him. Thankfully, Jim felt the same way.

"Well, this should be a good reminder to them that guides can be physically fit, too."

"Especially if trained by a marine."

"Speaking of Gibbs…"
"You're going to drag Gibbs into the spirit plane aren't you?" Jim sighed, apparently having already figured out Blair's plan, which couldn't have been too hard knowing as well as Blair did that their best outcomes in these cases had been involving guides and sentinels the individual trusted on the spirit plane hunting out the lingering spiritual scars and reinforcing the individual's strength in surviving the instances and sense of self, providing the support the person hadn't received when it had been needed. On the plus side, once on the plane, providing that support occurred almost naturally, so Gibbs wouldn't be put in the position of being required to 'emote'; on the downside, the hunt for the trauma was almost always complicated and exhausting … and usually involved witnessing the individual's impression of the traumatic events in one manner or other.

"So when do you want to do it?"

"Normally, I'd say the sooner the better…" Blair began, thinking over what he'd felt before DiNozzo collapsed.

"But??" Jim prompted.

"I think we'd better wait until both Spence and his friend, Abby, I believe he said, have recovered. He needs to be able to feel their presence."

"There's no guarantee that they will recover. We both know that sentinels are tougher than your average bear, but where that knife hit… and it didn't sound good for Abby, either, from Gibbs call."

"I know, but I think it's the best chance we have."

"Okay, … I suppose you want me to break the news to Gibbs."

"Well, I seem to remember hearing something about you being the realistic one? You know he practically gets migraines when he and I discuss run of the mill matters; if I'm the one to explain this, he'll probably stroke."

"You never discuss things in a run of the mill manner." Jim teased good naturedly, "Even your choice of coffee creamer comes with contradicting theories," reminding Blair - yet again -again of his three week search for the most sustainably-produced coffee creamer varieties and the additional week long taste test of the two final choices. Why it amused Jim so much he couldn't understand.

"Why do I feel like I'm being used as the carrot to your stick?"

"I've no idea, but if Gibbs has any difficulty understanding why his presence is necessary, you can assure him that I'd be happy to explain."

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Tim McGee shifted back and forth in his seat. It was torture being made to stand by doing nothing when he knew that Abby, Palmer, and Ms Garcia were in an ambulance headed to the GW Medical Center according to Gibbs and Agent Gideon, when they'd returned to 'supervise' the wrap up of the case.

"Have you finished your report, McGee?" Gibbs asked in a tone that reminded Tim too much of that horrible couple of days after Kate died.

He had to look down to be sure, but he had finished it, almost without noticing. "Uh, yeah, Boss, just need to print and sign it."
"Do it, get it on my desk, and then you can go to GW, and wait for Abby to get out of surgery. Call me the minute you hear anything."

"Are you sure, Boss? I mean I know that …” Tim asked, as he was putting the signed report on Gibbs desk, but cut himself off, knowing it would be impolitic to suggest that his boss chose one team member over another.

"Wouldn't have said it if I didn't mean it. Now go."

Just as he was grabbing his gun, credentials, and keys, Tim froze unintentionally listening in as Fornell groused, "I can supervise my own man, Jethro."

"From the looks of that evidence folder, you dropped the ball on it this time, Tobias. Anyway, Dr. Reid and Sentinel Ellison agreed that he's to have a sentinel supervising him at all times."

"That's just a technicality: the case is all but over, and you know you're champing at the bit to get to your boy."

"When a sentinel says he trusts you to do something, Tobias, it isn't a technicality, and anyway, in case you haven't noticed it, Agent Slacks doesn't seem to have learned anything, even watching the case investigated right in front of him, with the actual criminal not only confessing his guilt in front of numerous reliable witnesses but also attacking federal agents and employees in the attempt to continue his revenge."

"Ron?!?" Fornell sounded as shocked as Tim felt at his boss's statement.

"I don't know how you all just can't see it. He didn't drop the legs, but it sure as hell wouldn't have happened if he had been kept off the force and out of a federal agency. He's as much of a conman as his father, and the fact he's been hiding that he's a guide just proves it. Nothing good is going to come of letting him anywhere near protected information much less giving him a chance to mess with their minds. It's insane."

"I only heard about ten seconds of that rant, Buddy, but can tell you that not only do you have the wrong end of the stick, but you seem to have been beating yourself over the head with it. I've gotta say, it's time to stop." Agent Morgan commented, derision thick in his tone.

Beside Agent Morgan, Ziva was escorting George Stewart who looked decidedly unhappy to be there.

"Ziver, take Stewart to interview room three; I'll be there in a minute. Agent Morgan, Agents Jareau and Greenway are headed to the S&G center where Dr. Spencer is being treated for an injury he received confronting the unsub. I'm sorry that I have to ask you to stay, but Dr. Reid specified that to forestall a sanction hearing, Slacks is to be supervised by a sentinel at all times until his culpability can be determined. As soon as I finish with Doctor Stewart, I will be able to take over."

"It's Sacks, Dickhead. Agent Ronald Sacks, FBI. You may think you're some sort of big fish in a little pond, but compared to the FBI, NCIS isn't even a pond, it's a puddle of p…"

"If you say one more word, Ron, you won't have to worry about Dr. Reid pressing charges. I'll do it myself. Damn it, I'm wondering if you don't need a psych eval as it is."

"Tim, if you're going, go!"

Tim had to shake himself a second before answering, "Yes, Boss," and rushing to the elevator.
As the elevator doors closed between himself and the bullpen, Tim couldn't help but notice the sheer animosity of Agent Sacks expression. Up until that morning, he would have sworn that he'd had a harder path as a latent guide who'd disappointed his father by having no interest in serving in the Navy, being classified as a guide instead of a sentinel, being an intellectual and a pacifist … almost everything his father disapproved of. But, for all that, he'd never even once considered trying to hide or suppress his nature or knew anyone who had.

Especially not to the extent that Tony clearly had. Tony had always seemed so much the stereotypical sentinel that Tim had been jealous and frequently mocked him for those traits and knew that Kate had too. The Mossad/La Femme Nikita thing that Ziva did with Tony was something like that too, Tim thought, like the head cheerleader taunting the quarterback and making him work for her attention. Only for a guide … an online guide - who could detect the jealousy, disdain, and deceit - it had to have been so frustrating, and all the time having everyone expecting him to be the perfect sentinel because he had been so good at hiding who he was, and apparently treating him with hostility whenever they discovered his true nature if Agent Sacks was any example. The fact that Tony had suppressed himself so much that he practically went catatonic at an event that was usually one of the most celebrated events in sentinels' and guides' lives, it wasn't hard to guess that Sacks' reaction was closer to the standard reaction Tony had received than Gibbs' unquestioning acceptance, not only of Tony but of his entirely unexpected and very much un- stereotypical sentinel.

In retrospect, Tim was fairly certain that he'd had a far easier track by comparison.
In the Spirit of Being Supportive

Chapter Notes

This is a bit shorter than previous chapters have been, but I thought it would be too out of balance, in mood and length, with the next chapters, which focus on the spirit plane and their hunt for Tony's traumas.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I am going to be involved." Dr. Reid repeated in a flat - determined tone.

"Spence, Buddy, you need to understand; there's a very high chance that he won't be able to accept you or your bond yet. It's important for Anthony to be able to feel that you and Ms. Scuito are pulling through and that you don't blame him for your injuries." Blair tried to explain again.

"It's Tony, by the way, and how many times do we have to tell you that we don't blame him? You did that mind scan thing and agreed that there wasn't any 'misplaced negativity' that he could pick up, so why do you keep bringing it up?" Abby grumped. It was bad enough that Blair had decided that she couldn't be pulled into the spirit world to help her Tony-bear because of the high levels of slightly-narcotic pain reliever she had to take to stay sitting up. Apparently, the spirit plane and oxycodone derivatives don't mix.

Timmy had been sweet enough to bring Bert which definitely helped, but it didn't make her any less grumpy, especially when she saw that even Jimmy and his new guide were there (and she was totally closer to Tony than Jimmy was) … and it wasn't at all helped by the fact that she felt the tiniest bit guilty that she was just the tiniest bit, just the teeniest-tiniest bit, like a thousandth of a microgram happy that she wasn't the only one who was told that they couldn't participate. She even felt a little bit sorry for Ziva, who'd paled at the mention of the spiritual plane and only started to breathe more easily when Blair shook his head without explaining and apologized. Agent Gideon’s scan had been much same, but received a slightly sterner response, with the not so subtle order ‘that they needed to talk’.

In fact the only one who had argued his decision was Dr. Reid.

"You are building a flawed generalization from an incomplete data set." Dr. Reid continued, ignoring Abby's comment, "How many of the previous cases that you described involved the guide or sentinel's prospective partner in shoring up the individual's persona?"

"The risk of the partner suffering from the rejection was too great." Blair answered stubbornly, but Abby could already anticipate how the flaw in his argument was going to give Dr. Reid the 'in' he'd been arguing for.

"How many of the partners were adults?" The doctor pressed, his tone making clear that he knew the answer.

Blair didn't respond immediately, his jaw working as if he was chewing on his responses instead of saying them.

“How many of the partners have done intensive studies and have experience in psychology and
working with individuals in ‘extreme mental states’?” The doctor’s question sounded charged somehow, but Abby couldn’t say why or how. The doctor was a profiler who dealt with both victims and violent criminals (who to Abby’s way of thinking were mentally deranged almost by definition).

“Spencer,” and Abby didn’t need to be a guide to know that Blair was getting frustrated with Dr. Reid, just from the use of his full first name instead of the nickname ‘Spence’ that the Alpha Prime Guide had been using during the past … twenty-five minutes of their ‘discussion’ (and wow, did Dr. Reid have chutzpah for going up against the US’s top guide). “This isn’t an argument we should even be having - especially considering that you’re barely recovered from Sterling’s attack.”

“I agree, completely,” Dr. Reid agreed, surprising everyone, except maybe Gibbs. From Gibbs’ smirk, Abby thought that her not direct boss, but boss because if you asked anyone who knew what was going on at NCIS, Gibbs was the de facto boss of the Washington office, regardless of which Director was in charge at the moment… anyway, she was almost certain that he knew what the doctor was up to and, more importantly, agreed with it.

“Jim, completely disregarding the problematic mythos of being the ‘blessed protector’ for Blair, as a sentinel - if someone came to you and informed you that they were going to medically / psychologically / psionically ‘treat’ your guide while he’s unconscious, without his consent, and without you along for the ride (but it would be great if you hung around and watched), even if you agreed with the general methodology and purpose of a course of treatment that would expose the worst and most traumatic experiences of his life… without your support - what would your reaction be?”

“He’s got you there, Chief.” Alpha Prime Sentinel Ellison answered with a bark of amusement, “If anyone even hinted at suggesting that, they would have found themselves enjoying a nice migraine to compliment their black eye - once they woke up.”

“You’re not helping!” Blair protested throwing his hands up in the air. “Look, Spencer, if everything was in optimal condition, I’d still hesitate on bringing you in to try it, but barely a week and a half ago, you had a knife sticking out of your chest, and - “

“And Ms. Scuito had been stabbed and suffered a hemothorax, which she might not have survived without Mr. Palmer’s intervention, and later surgery, so it is rather inexplicable to me that having stated a goal of not fostering my guide’s potential guilt over these events - you intend to delay the proceedings further wasting both my and Ms. Scuito’s energy before the intervention begins, and using up the small amount of time before Ms. Scuito’s pain medications and energy run out.”

Even as he finished his retort, Dr. Reid’s argument was both supported and undermined by the sudden appearance of the strangest amalgam of a reddish-brown cat, dog, mongoose looking creature with a small, cat-like head a muzzle that looked much more dog-like, and large, almost too large for the size of it’s head, round ears. Despite it’s cat-like features, it’s size was more of a medium big cat - almost six foot long if she was estimating correctly - more like the size of a slightly smaller cougar, but thinner almost slender, with clearly muscular limbs, and short, reddish-brown coats, and Abby was absolutely entranced with it even as it stalked over to Blair, stood up on its hind legs pushed small bear-like paws against the guide’s chest, and expressed its displeasure in a cry that was at once a snarl-growl-plea that was just as mixed up as the creature itself.

“Kid,” Ellison snapped, clearly unhappy with the spirit guide’s seeming aggression, “that’s not the way to…”

“It’s alright, Jim.” Blair sighed, “Feroxa and Burton are on fairly good terms; she only tends to
show up when Spence hasn’t had enough coffee, is pushing himself too hard, or is ready to snap at me -- really snap at me in a way he’ll feel guilty about later but it won’t stop him from doing it now. I’m going to assume this is a combination of the former and the latter?” Blair asked, his eyebrow raised.

~~~ Feroxa… ferocious. ~~~ Running Dr. Reid's spirit guide’s possible taxonomy through her mind, Abby barely listened to them for the next few minutes as she tried to pin down what the creature was. ~~~ There were a handful of creatures that had Ferox as a part of their title … … … … but only one, that looks like…~~~

“It’s a fossa?” Abby asked curiously, only aware that she’d interrupted their conversation when she saw that particular look on Gibbs face. It was his ‘where the ‘f’ did that seque come from?’ expression. Abby got to see it a lot, almost as much as his ‘cut the techno-babble, Abby!’ look.

It didn’t seem to bother Dr. Reid at all, though, as he answered, “a Cryptoprocta Ferox, to be precise,” and shrugged at Blair’s snort.

“It’s not particularly hidden today, Spence.” Blair grouse prompting a squeal of giggles from Abby.

“What?” Gibbs groused from beside her, comfortably playing papa bear from his spot between her and Tony’s beds.

“His spirit guide’s genus name ‘Cryptoprocta' comes from the Greek words for hidden (crypto) and anus (procta). Dr. Sandburg was playing on the words to say that Dr. Reid’s … uhmmm… has a tendency to be …” Abby started to explain to Gibbs quietly… or at least she thought it had been quietly… but … sentinels … ~~~ Right, so not quietly at all. ~~~

“An ass,” Dr. Reid supplied good-naturedly and continued the explanation, “I’ve never denied my penchant for being obstreperous (or an ‘ass’, in laymen's terms) but I usually prefer to keep it under wraps; being regularly underestimated can have its benefits.”

“Yep,” Gibbs smiled at the explanation, “My second b’s for bastard, and it’s usually the only warning I give.”

Abby didn't, but she really, really, really wanted to squee at how well Tony’s guide and Gibbs seemed to understand each other. It made her feel all warm and toasty and confident that everything was going to work out for her family.

“You’re just not going to let this go, are you?” Blair asked in frustration.

“What can I say?” Dr. Spencer answered, his smile and his spirit guide’s suddenly becoming catishly mischievous as he continued, “When a male Cryptoprocta Ferox gets hooks into 'someone', he doesn’t let go easily.”

“Oh. My. God !!!!!!!!!!!!!.” Abby couldn’t help it. This time she absolutely had to squeal as Blair and Jimmy choked with surprised laughter and Ducky smiled indulgently. “You. Completely. Rock !!!!!”

“Abby?” Gibbs questioned, sounding as if he suspected that she’d been given too much oxycotin.

“Dr. Reid just told a sex joke.” She tried to explain before noticing that Gibbs wasn’t the only one who appeared confused. “It was a sex joke…” she tried to assure them, her nerves growing as it became apparent that not everyone thought so, before turning to ask Dr. Spencer, “wasn’t it?”
Thankfully, Dr. Mallard was already answering with an aside to Gibbs, “Yes, My Dear; it was a surprisingly lurid remark to hear from the young doctor, but given Tony’s sense of humor, I should have supposed that there might be a shared propensity for such humor. Oh, and Jethro, you very probably won’t want to hear the details of the joke - it's all very biological.”

Gibbs' "I'll take your word for it," answer was such a 'Gibbs' answer' that Abby wanted to roll her eyes, but she restrained herself and turned back toward Dr. Reid, repeating “You totally rock” - though it was with just the tiniest bit of disappointment as she saw that Feroxa was no longer there standing up in Blair’s face, which had been just a little bit awesome to see. Not having an active spirit guide was one of the only things that made her sad about being a latent sentinel, not that she could honestly say that she ever wanted to have the type of experiences that would trigger her coming online.

“Thank you, and please, call me Spencer,” Dr. Reid… Spencer returned. Almost as soon as he finished, Abby noticed a tingling warmth on her hand that wasn’t really entirely there, but was, at the same time, and looked down to see Feroxa kind of ‘snuffling’ her hand.

“And if I may introduce my beautiful spirit-friend, Abby Scuito meet Feroxa, Feroxa my guide's little-sister, Forensic Analyst Abby Scuito.” He continued, his voice filled with a kind of warmth and fondness that really really made her want to squee. He was going to be soooooo good for their family. Now, if she could only find someone for Gibbs.

Chapter End Notes

For a look at Spencer’s Spirit Guide, check out these photos by Milan Kořínek at the biolib site:

Not Quite to the Yellow Brick Road

Chapter Notes

It happened again; when I reached the 22nd page and third pov shift of this chapter and still hadn't gotten to Tony's traumas, common sense prevailed, took my muse by her pony tail, and pulled her back to take a look at what we'd done so far. It took a bit of head shaking (via said ponytail), muse bickering, and a couple of deep breaths before we finally reached the consensus that we had to break the chapter up a bit more and try to tame some of the wild tangents. They're a bit hard to corral, you know, but we managed it, so here's the lead in to what I'm mentally labeling of as 'Tony D and the Spirit Plane' when it's not pretending to be the never-ending-update.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"In normal circumstances, I know you would interact with the spirit plane either through personal visions or by connection with your guide bond; however, due to the recency of Jimmy and Penny's bonds, the in-completeness of Spencer and Tony's bond, and Ducky and Gibbs’ lost bonds, we will have to go about this a different way."

"Each of you will need to call your spirit guide to this plane and ask them - as members of Tony's tribe - to draw you to Tony's spirit guide on that plane for the purpose of healing him and returning his gifts to their full strength. If everything goes as planned, both Jim will be there waiting for you. If you cross over to a location and find that one or both of us aren't there, return here and ask your guide to bring you to my spirit guide, Burton. Intent does have an effect, though so please attempt the first request before falling back on the second. How we proceed from there will be largely dependent on how Tony's frames of reference are interpreted."

"For Jim and I, the settings reflect the Peruvian jungle. That's another reason to make the first request, as doing so should take you into his frame of reference. Otherwise, you might be drawn into the frame of reference shared by Jim and I as the senior guides and sentinels involved. It would still be feasible, but, at some point, you would probably need Jim or I to provide explanations to certain circumstances, and if we don't have a frame of reference that matches Tony's experience we may not be able to translate it at all. Jim'll go first, I'll stay until you've each connected with your guide, then follow. " Blair glanced around, checking for their understanding, then, "Jim."

"Incacha, take me to Guide DiNozzo's side on your plane. As a sentinel of all tribes, I am called to guard the guides and spirits who travel to honor, protect, and heal his connection to the spirit plane." While Jim sometimes enjoyed showing off his black panther guide, they both knew today wasn't the day for it, and more to the point, intimidating or distracting the other guides and sentinels who would be joining would not be productive. Thankfully, Jim didn’t need his guide to materialize to draw him to that plane.

As Jim’s guide took him to the spiritual plane, he slumped into recliner.

Blair was going to suggest Dr. Mallard next, but Spence just seemed to be in a mood to throw him off his game today, and spoke up next, looking into his spirit guide's eyes, "You understand where we're going and why."
It was phrased as a statement, but Feroxa nodded as Spencer immediately slumped in his seat.

Gibbs of course had to add his own little bit of vexation by breaking script, too: "Lobo, let's go find Tony and Kes; they need us, buddy," and slumping before Blair could comment.

Dr. Mallard smiled his understanding and took his turn next. "Bertie, My Dear Fellow, would you please be so kind as to take me to young Kess, I should dearly like to aid in Tony’s healing and returning his gifts to their full strength." The medical examiner's spirit guide caught Blair completely off guard as it momentarily shifted in, caught the tip of the doctor's sleeve in it's bill, and shifted back out. Usually spirit guides were not quite so literal a match as the mallard who briefly appeared in the doctor's lap, feathers and eyes glowing with a healthy luminescence, despite its signs of age.

Turning last to Jimmy and Penny, he was somewhat surprised, with things going so smoothly, to see the younger man looking as distressed as he was.

"Jimmy?"

"Er … maybe you should go on without me." Making a mental note of the new sentinel's shamed expression (and the need to have him talk with Jim later), Blair suspected he knew what was going on, and would address it if Penny wasn’t able to; but honestly, he wanted to get a better gauge of how well their bond had solidified before they were on the other plane.

“Peaches, what’s wrong?"

“I don’t think I have a spirit guide.”

“Oh, Honey, of course you do. When we synced in the lab, I caught a glimpse of him. He’s one of the cutest things I’ve seen outside of my own little Galeno.” As she spoke, a small silver-haired creature barely the length of her thumb, appeared cupped in her palm and looking up at her with wide, intent eyes that Blair could only describe as deeply-warm almost loving, a quality that he didn't often see in spirit guides’ whose natures almost always followed the nature of the animal they resembled.

“Hey there, Little Guy,” Jimmy practically cooed, “Penny's right, you are adorable.”

“Isn’t he, though? Galeno, could you let Jimmy’s guide know that Jimmy…” Before she could even finish the sentence, a small catlike creature emerged from the spirit plane, perched on Jimmy’s shoulder and - leaning slightly forward and around to see his face - gave a bit of a hiccup sound that Blair thought would probably translate into something like a ‘Hi’.

“Wow. I didn’t… this is so cool. I really didn’t think, but you’re here, aren’t you. You really are, and …” Jimmy enthused, which Blair completely understood, easily remembering his own first time meeting with his spirit guide, but still sighed impatiently. He understood, but it really wasn’t the time. Thankfully, Penelope seemed to be on the same page and interrupted.

“Honey buns, we’re holding our ‘Super Guide’ up. Once we’re finished, we can go home and let Galeno and … your cutie get to know each other, but we probably better get down to business.”

“Oh, yeah. Sorry. You're right.” Jimmy apologized sheepishly, before looking back into his spirit guide’s expectant expression. “Well, uh, could you take me to Tony’s spirit guide; I’d like to join our family in healing him and returning his gifts.” Jimmy asked, smiling as his body slipped into an unconscious state.

“Galeno, Sweetie, can you take me to Tony’s guide? Mr. Gibbs said her name is Kess. We’d like
to help Tony get back to his scrumptious self and rock his guide mojo again.”

Blair could only shake his head as she slumped in her seat; between the odd mix of spirit guides and their ‘unique’ approaches to joining DiNozzo on the spirit plane, it was going to be an interesting hunt and an interesting tribe.

Now, though, that they’d left him alone (or nearly so) with DiNozzo, he turned his attention to the one detail he’d intentionally withheld from them: the fact that he was going to essentially force Tony into the spirit plane for their intervention. While Spencer (based on his earlier 'consent' comment) and perhaps Ducky had probably realized what he was going to do, Blair had honestly believed that Gibbs, Palmer, and Jim would outright reject the idea of a guide being forced against his will to face the most significantly traumatizing events of his life, where they wouldn’t have objections for a sentinel doing the same. Defending and protecting guides was as essentially hard-wired into their natures as challenging and fighting other guides to ensure the strength of the tribe’s protectors. A factor that was unfortunately counter-productive at the moment.

“Burton, it’s time.” Blair called his guide, who appeared standing in DiNozzo’s bed, astride the prone man’s chest. The wolf spirit guide had a sad, if determined, expression that told him Burton was no happier with the necessity than Blair was.

“What’s your guide doing?” Abby asked, rather inconveniently.

“For Tony to benefit from our attempts, he needs to connect with the spirit plane, but since he’s unconscious and his connection with his spirit guide is shaky at best, in this state, Burton and I need to help him get there.”

“Oh.”

Moving to stand beside DiNozzo’s bed, Blair put his hands on either side of the man’s face, took a deep breath, and counted down, “3, 2, 1, Push!” He had done this enough times that he no longer needed the synchronized count, but persisted anyway.

DiNozzo, for all that he doubted himself, even completely unconscious was incredibly strong, thankfully, not as strong as Blair himself, or the shaman guide wouldn’t have had a hope of forcing him, but strong enough and with enough of a sentinel’s mentality that if psionic bruises could be made visible, Blair would be waking up to a shiner, bruised ribs, and a split-lip in the morning. Without Burton, it might not have been possible, but thankfully, barely a second after Blair began to psionically ‘push’ DiNozzo’s spirit into the spiritual realm, Burton reared up on his hind legs and dropped his front paws into and through DiNozzo’s chest pushing the man’s spirit out of his body.

Even as he was slumping forward over DiNozzo’s body, Blair could hear Abby asking Tim, “Did that seem hinky to you?”

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Taking each of the others in with a glance as they arrived, Blair turned as he joined Jim to scan the scene, taking in a sallow amber sky that yellowed out what looked to be a white clapboard colonial manor. The melancholy air that permeated their surroundings had the feel of an endless decline to winter, where the leaves of distant trees would be turning if they had not already fallen to bury the browning lawns in dry tinder. From where they stood, a long stone walk with a greenish, mossy patina that spoke of its untred state, stretched out toward the manor. For its size, the manor appeared to have once been meant for a large family with numerous children, but now felt as if it had been gladly abandoned the families numbers driven away by the trials of many harsh summers.
The remaining weak and murky sunshine barely sustained the wilting stems of lavender that lined the walk and offered no promise of returning with spring.

“Somehow, this is not what I was expecting,” Blair murmured.

Chapter End Notes

For an idea of Ducky, Jimmy, and Penelope's spirit guides, here are URLs to their pics and info. Apologies for the need to cut and paste, I couldn’t seem to get them to live link.

Bertie's pic and info (Mallard):
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/assets/photo/60021841-720px.jpg
https://www.allaboutbirds.org/guide/Mallard/lifehistory

Galeno's pic and info (pg. 2 Pygmy Possum):
https://www.livescience.com/33049-smallest-mammals.html

Jimmy's as yet unnamed guide (Genet) pic and info:
https://animaldiversity.org/accounts/Genetta_genetta/
As noted at the beginning of the previous chapter, the seemingly never-ending-update has been broken up a bit. Here's the second clip of it, with the third hopefully soon to come.

Studying the amber-toned sky, Spencer noticed small but distinct elements reminiscent of the Handschlegl-Wyckoff color process used to heighten the dramatic effects of key scenes in Cecil B. DeMille’s 1917 black and white film *Joan the Woman*: including, clear edged borders to the sepia shadows cast over a distant if still imposing Federalist Manor, as if the shadows had been applied by stencils with a separate dye matrix for each depth of shadow. Based on the gradations between the darkest sepia and lightest amber tones, given the pallid amount of sunlight, Spencer estimated that the Manor have been a shade of either an eggshell or crispiian white in their plane. The only building in the scenic foreground, the manor was a tall, three story, symmetrical building that had a small-windowed, spartan, and suffocatingly-formal air that only highlighted the melancholy impression of an eternal fall declining into the isolation, silence, and frigid solitude of inescapable winter. Stretching out ahead of them, the long walkway of interlocking stones also bore the distinct patinas of the processes discernible in the stencil-clean demarcations between the lichen and bryophytic mosses enhancing the solidity of the walkway’s patina, giving it the appearance of being in a neglected and un-visited state which was only highlighted by the open arches of wilting stems of lavender planted to either side of the walkway.

“Is he here?” Spencer asked Blair, as he noticed the shaman approach. Despite their generally comfortable friendship, Spencer had to force down a flare of instinctual dislike toward his friend and sometimes mentor for dragging Tony to this plane.

Intellectually, Spencer had reconciled the shaman’s apparent justifications for forcing his guide to this plane, but instinctively, emotionally, and ethically, he wholeheartedly disapproved of the shaman’s treatment of his guide. Tony was his to protect. *His*. Despite that, he had let the man not only force his guide to essentially jump into a pit where he’d have to face every demon he’d ever known, but do so without consent or warning.

“So, you did know?” Blair question, but Spencer ignored the comment, which wasn’t really worth answering at the moment, especially when there was a very high probability of liberally using several charged epithets to in his response.

“So, you did know?” Blair question, but Spencer ignored the comment, which wasn’t really worth answering at the moment, especially when there was a very high probability of liberally using several charged epithets to in his response.

“Let’s get moving,” Gibbs ordered, stepping around them on the walk.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” Blair started to object, but Spencer shook his head, pointing out, “Agent Gibbs knows Tony better than anyone here, and Tony trusts him.”

Spencer was certain of that. From the very-first moment that he’d been able to pick up his guide’s empathic print, he’d felt a tentative, hopeful if uncertain trust directed toward someone, and Spencer knew it was this sentinel. His guide felt protected by this sentinel, and Spencer would not begrudge Tony of that, especially when it was clear that the older sentinel had been making every attempt to accept Spencer as an inherent part of Tony’s life.

“Tony won’t want any…” Thankfully, Blair trailed off as Spencer stepped forward, finding it
harder and harder to restrain himself from challenging Blair's hypocrisy in even mentioning what Tony would want.

"Feroxa," Spencer murmured, acknowledging her and letting her know that he was following. Without a glance backwards, she loped ahead settling in stride by stride with Agent Gibbs' guide, Lobo.

"Know what to expect?"

Gibbs question wasn't as much of a surprise to Spencer as much as his own feeling of almost certainty that Gibbs expected him to know, which was a new feeling for Spencer. As much as Hotch and Morgan have always seemed to have confidence in profiling skills, they conversely never seemed to have faith that he'd have a clue about others' emotions, which were, somewhat ironically two sides of the same coin, and in part due to his own willingness to let them believe the masks that he wore. Even or especially around the office, Spencer wore masks that they probably wouldn't believe were needed, having never been put in the position of being everyone's favorite target.

Morgan, himself, had been only too willing to believe that Spencer had failed his weapons re-certification due to some form of inherently-nerd-oriented incapacity to defend himself, instead of the true cause a momentary if unfortunately-timed zone-out typical to unbonded sentinels, completely ignoring the fact that to pass FLETC as a field-certified agent, on his first attempt, he'd had to complete required weapons and hand-to-hand testing - without the benefit of the remedial courses in both offered to agents with limited or no field exposure. Admittedly, Jason had fostered the belief by suggesting that he could sign the waivers for re-certification if needed explaining the comment away later as presuming that Spencer wouldn't always want or benefit from the title of being 'the youngest to...,' and similar to Morgan, completely ignoring that for possibly the first time in their experience, Spencer had not anticipated or made adjustments for a fairly common issue, so common in fact that the gun-range administrator had only rolled his eyes and ordered Reid to get more practice at the range instead of shooting clubs that Spencer and most sentinels preferred where the surroundings usually provided enough distractions to prevent zone outs.

It took Spencer what felt like roughly seven seconds -at least in this plane- to realize the slight push forward that had abruptly pulled him away from his contemplations felt as if it had been from a surprisingly tangible contact between Agent Gibbs hand and the back of Spencer's head, which -in and of itself- was fascinating given that they were on a generally intangible plane.

"Get your head in the game, Dr. Reid." Gibbs ordered, softly.

"Oh, yes," Spencer nodded quickly, wondering how long he'd been off in his thoughts to prompt Gibbs' intervention. But the senior agent was absolutely correct it was not the time, and Spencer acknowledged the reminder: "You're right, Thank you."

For some reason, both Lobo and Agent Gibbs seemed amused by Spencer's response, but he didn't pause to ponder why, choosing instead to answer Agent Gibbs' previous question.

"Tony's mental defenses won't be aggressive or violent," Spencer began, certain from the fact that both times he was overwhelmed, Tony shut down instead of lashing out. Studying the faded, unkempt lawn and the long untrod walk, he continued, "If anything, he won't expect us to care enough to go the distance, and won't understand why we have. I suspect he will be curious, however, which may work in our favor." Tony was a detective, so of course he'd be curious. "We will probably see him soon... well before we get anywhere close to his core experiences, but it probably won't be as we'd expect to see him. He's very familiar with wearing masks to hide his thoughts and attitudes, and his traumas will be masked as well or even symbolic."
“Sound’s righ… So, is that what you mean by not the way we'll expect to see him?”

Though still distant, they were just able to see manor's entryway, too narrow and staunchly uninviting to be properly called a porch, and it's inhabitant. Seated in a sun-faded maple, Early Windsor double-rod children's writing desk-chair, his posture stiffly-perfect, a book in his hands properly, if uncomfortably, hovering over the side-arm desk as he pretended to read, sat a small, sallow child in a pallid-blue sailor suit, with dull, sandy-brown hair in a Christopher-Robin cut that let his bangs cover eyes and almost hide the fact that he was very carefully watching their approach.

Spencer's "Yes," was obvious and unnecessary, but lacking any other response was all that he was capable of, while taking in his first true glimpse of his guides' soul. Gibbs seemed equally affected by the sight of his agents' empathic profile.

Lobo and Feroxa had no such hesitations and loped up by the walk, bouncing and hopping in obvious pleasure to see him.

By the visual distance, they shouldn't have been able to hear his greetings to their guides, but as with most circumstances having to do with the spirit plane, one heard what one needed to hear, felt what one needed to feel, and generally, faced what one needed to face. So it wasn't entirely a surprise when they heard Tony's childlike voice saying, "Hey, Lobo, I haven't seen you in a while," as the child reached out to rub the wolf's ears and pate. Lobo seemed only to pleased with the greeting and lifted his head into Tony's hand.

Ferox, who had reached Tony only a pace behind the wolf, seeming to suddenly lose patience with waiting to be acknowledged, slipped her head under the wolf's and lifted it in a way that had the wolf's head sliding down her back while her head slipped right into Tony's still outstretched hand, drawing a tickled giggle.

"Hey there, Funny Girl, I haven't seen you before. You are a beauty, aren't you? What's your name, Beautiful?"

"Heh," Gibbs huffed in amusement, "That's how he asked for Lobo's too. Talks to Lobo just like he would to you or I. "

Feroxa seemed to take the question at face value and scapered back to Spencer, bit into Spencer's sleeve and backed away, pulling Spencer with her much to Tony's amusement, judging by the trill of surprised chuckles the childlike image of his guide let out. While the perceivable distance between their party and his guide appeared to remain the same, Spencer's internal clock noted a distinct discordance between the perceivable distance and the speed at which they reached the porch… in their favor, allowing them to reach Tony and Lobo much more quickly than should have been possible. Feroxa had apparently decided that she was not finished with her antics yet as she drug Spencer forward to stand in front of Tony before turning back to Tony and sitting as placidly as a domesticated house cat waiting on her human servant to obey her whims.

Spencer was too caught up in his fascinated observation of his guides' empathic form, noticing the subtle symbolic glimpses of Tony's adult persona: his sailor suit's velveteen weft stained with a distinct photonegative blue-grey silhouette of a federal law enforcement officer's badge hanging low over his breastbone on a silhouette of an undercover officer's string lanyard; a small silver pendant that he would have mistaken for a cross were it not for the benefits of his enhanced eyesight, which let him recognize it as a Marine-issue Ka-Bar; the professionally-ingrained habit of scanning the area from the extreme edge of one periphery to the extreme edge of the other with soulful, hazel eyes that ached with indecision; visible calluses consistent with holding a gun… Spencer's observations were cut off by a sudden sharp tail 'thwacking' to the side of his leg and
another giggle.

Smiling sheepishly, Spencer tipped his head, somewhat indulgently, both amused and pleased that Feroxa seemed to be evoking positive reactions from his guide… deciding to follow her lead, he offered, "My apologies, Dear Lady. Kind Sir, please allow me to introduce my regal and talented spirit guide, Feroxa."

"Feroxa, what a great name. It means fierce or ferocious, I think. It's nice to meet you, Feroxa." Tony answered shyly, before glancing quickly at Spencer then turning to greet Agent Gibbs and asking in a staged whisper, "Hi, Boss… Did you bring a friend too?"

"Yup. His name Dr. Spencer Reid, and I think he's going to be a good friend; someone we both can trust. Watched him working your case - he cleared you by the way - an think that you two could make a good team."

"You don't want me on your team anymore?" Tony asked sounding almost heartbreakingly - devastated.

"Don't put words in my mouth, DiNozzo? I trust you to have my six, and always will, Tony. Just saying that I think you two could be a good team - and only that.

"Oh." Tony sat a bit straighter, clearly mollified and pleased with the implied compliments, before he realized that he had forgotten his manners and turned his attention back to Spencer, hesitantly extending his hand.

"It's nice to meet you, Doctor Reid." Tony offered, his voice sounded pleasant and welcoming, but what Spencer paid more attention to was the sad, slightly-longing expression that momentarily crossed his face as their hands touched.

"The pleasure is mine Agent DiNozzo." Spencer intoned formally, not wanting to forced familiarity on his guide before Tony was ready to accept his overtures. "May I ask what you're reading?"

"It's … Harrison Bergeron. I've read it before, but my father said it's an important book to read and understand."

"I see. How old were you when you read it? My mother was a professor of Literature and explained a lot of books to me when I first read them. Did he explain it for you?"

"I was eight. Yeah, he said I didn't understand it right, so explained it alot. Over and over til I got it right."

"Did he?" Spencer asked rhetorically, wondering if Anthony DiNozzo Sr. had any inkling of the danger he was in if what Spencer suspected was true.

"Mmmh. He doesn't like it when I don't think the way wants me to."

"My father was like that sometimes," Spencer replied, contemplating what it meant that Tony's traumas were so close to the surface. Behind them, he heard Blair over-explaining the significance of the book in suppressing and frightening gifted children whether latent sentinels and guides or not, and wished his sometimes mentor would employ a bit more subtlety about his disdain.

"The novel sickeningly elevates a character titled the Handicapper General of the United States as a protector of society who does so by disabling those who are above average, and while sentinels and guides aren't specifically mentioned the implications are clear enough. She and her minions are sanctioned by nationally-instituted 'handicap'-ping laws that create and enforce new hindrances for superior beings such as the central character
Harrison Bergeron, who displays characteristics of both guides and sentinels. While it's a dystopian and purgative work, introducing it to very young children, especially gifted young children with limited social contact whose family situation has been challenging enough for them to start demonstrating signs of coming online is beyond neglect and highly suggestive of a troubling…” Blair rambled on behind them.

Regardless of his current appearance, though, Tony was an adult with an adult's mind and had probably come to the same conclusion. Taking that thought into account, the ease at which they'd reached him, and the almost surface level proximity of what was clearly an early trauma, Spencer reconsidered his earlier comment to Gibbs before noticing that Tony was suddenly giving their spirit guides his full and complete attention, intently avoiding the other discussion. The conclusion Spencer came to was only speculation, but he suspected that if he tried to calculate the probability of his answer being correct, it would fall somewhere in the 98th percentile.

Giving Tony his complete attention, Spencer studied the childlike appearing guide looking for some form of confirmation, before he finally just asserted, "you know why we're here, don't you?"

"Yup," the child said, Tony's voice becoming incongruously adult in tone and pitch though the childlike image didn't change. "I didn't want to come back here at first, but figured that maybe it's the best way. I'm not trying to reject you or anything; you are great, I can tell, but getting stuck with me wouldn't be good, and not through any fault on your part. It really is a 'it's not you, it's me' thing."

"Sentinels are stubborn, though," he said with a wry glance toward Gibbs, "so, I thought maybe a bit of show 'n tell might make it clearer, and I don't mind Boss getting a peek or two in my closets and and darker cubbies. I think he's already figured out where most of the skeletons are."

"That said, Folks," Tony raised his voice, which had returned to the childlike tone and intonation to speak to the rest of their party: "The fun house is invitation only, so just Boss and the Doc can go in. Everyone else stays outside, but trust me, you’re not missing anything. I don't even want to go in there.”
In fact…” Tony faced them again, asking, "Do I gotta go back in?"

Cutting Blair off, as the Shaman immediately tried to badger his guide into joining them, Spencer interrupted, "Of course it's alright, Agent DiNozzo if you’d prefer not to go in. Would you like Agent Gibbs and Lobo stay with you?"

The phrase 'those lying eyes' popped into Spencer's thoughts as he watched Tony shake his head, deferring, "No, that's okay … Some translation's probably required." His eyes were almost miserable, though, and Gibbs saw it as well.

"Hey, Champ, how about we have Lobo and Feroxa stay out here while you and Ducky catch up with Jimmy and Ms. Garcia. They have news to share and unless I miss my guess, a new name to pick out."

"How did he know?" Mr. Palmer questioned, startled, clearly not accustomed to fine tuning his senses to match the environment.

"You don't mind?" Tony asked, uncertain, but clearly hoping that they didn’t.

Tony's relief should have been something that Spencer found mollifying, but put into a context that Spencer was all too familiar with - namely being unable to cope with his own thoughts and memories - Tony's need for comfort from their spirit guides particularly when his own was noticeably absent… Well, the implications were clear and troubling - to say the least. As was the evidence that Tony was not quite thinking straight as it was. Given his experience with other sentinels, beyond Gibbs, if Tony truly thought that anything Spencer witnessed would change his mind, he not only didn't understand how emphatic matches occurred, but also completely misread how sentinels in general, and he, in particular, viewed guides.

Certainly, Spencer had difficulties with the 'Sacred Protector' mythos, but not for the responsibility it implicitly assigned to him; instead, he found the assignment of an impaired role to the guide as essentially an innocent and incapable 'Sacred Victim' that the sentinel was sworn to protect insulting to both, illogical, and frankly contradictory to the underlying biological and spiritual imperatives that catalyzed sentinel/guide bonds.

The historical and sociological roles of sentinel 'AND' GUIDE pairs was to protect and guide the tribe; Chief and Shaman, Emperor and Advisor, Godfather and Consigliere - all were manifestations of the sentinel-guide imperatives - imperatives which left no room for either of the pairing to be a liability or a protectee who would distract the other's attention from internal or external threats to the tribe. Social Psychology alone should have informed theorists that the prospective abilities of guides to influence tribes stereotyped warrior-like sentinels would have been infinitesimal if they were the fragile philosophic aesthetes the all-too-commonly-accepted mythos portrayed.

"No, Tony, I don't mind," Gibbs answered for them both, continuing, "and considering the lapful you've got there, I think it's safe to say the doctor doesn't either."

His attention drawn by the odd comment, Spencer looked down to see Feroxa curling up in his guides' lap, her head and neck pressed up his chest so that her nose rested just beneath Tony’s chin.

“Not at all,” Spencer confirmed, before prompting, “Agent Gibbs?” and gesturing toward the door.
“Yeah, let’s go.” Gibbs agreed, reaching out to ruffle Tony’s hair before turning and joining Spencer.

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"He trusts you, as much as he can trust anyone with his instincts suppressed so deeply, but it means he will listen to you and accept what you say at face value, both positive and negative." Spencer offered as he closed the door behind them.

Gibbs’ responding gaze reminded Spencer very much of Hotch’s gaze when he sometimes ‘dumbed’ down his explanations too much and unnecessarily stated something Hotch already knew and felt Spencer should realize he knew. Still the caution was worth making, even if Gibbs already realized how important his opinion was to Tony. The fact that...

As they entered the manor’s vestibule, Spencer’s thoughts trailed off, suddenly no longer certain of what he had been anticipating when confronted with an abundance of symbolic details he undoubtedly should have expected, but hadn’t … at least not in terms of terms of the depth and clarity of their symbolism.

Politely tucked away into the semi-appropriate galosh shelf were plaster leg casts ranging in size from one for a pre-mobile infant and several toddler and young child-sized half and full-length casts to a single adult-sized, full-support fiberglass cast designed to give additional support for orthopedic pinning. Tucked at the end of the boot shelf was a small pyramid of tightly rolled youth ankle and knee wraps. At the end of the upholstered bench, an umbrella stand oddly resembled a vase blooming with a bouquet of various-sized children's crutches and a cane, while the rain-cloak cabinet held at least one sling on each hook and disturbingly, on the cabinet's high shelf, pushed back almost into the sienna-toned shadows was a neck brace that based on it’s visible diameter could not have fit even a prepubescent child.

“Easy there, Reid; he might listen and trust what I say, but I guarantee he’s damn well listening for how you’re reacting to all this and the kind of growling you’re doing isn’t what he needs to hear.” Gibbs coaxed gruffly.

~~~ Growling?!? ~~~

The tightness in his throat, even though he had apparently stopped his subconscious vocalizations, was enough to convince Spencer that ‘yes, he actually had been growling’.

“Noted.” Spencer answered before pausing to reach out empathically to assess whether his reaction had caused his guide distress. The empathic echo that he picked up from Tony, while uncertain, was not particularly distressed though he felt some layer of resignation toward Gibbs’ reaction and thin layer of confusion toward his own. The empathic tinge coloring Tony’s resignation toward Gibbs seeming lack of effect prompted Spencer to bring the topic to the surface - suspecting that, despite his guide’s inherent empathy, Tony was misreading Gibbs seeming lack of effect as disinterest.

“You knew?”

“First time we changed in the lockers for a sparring match, got Ducky to pull all the medical records and check ups he could find after, saw they only accounted for about a third of his scars, and spent the next couple of months going to the range in whatever spare time we had around cases and sticking Senior’s face on a bunch of paper targets. Improved on my clustered headshots by close to 15pts, but spooked the range master a bit.” Gibbs admitted, and Spencer immediately felt Tony’s tone color with surprise as the resignation quickly faded.
Considering Gibbs’ training and experience as a sniper, where the levels of improvement in expertise were often rated in decimals, the improvement was significant and telling, and Spencer suspected that Tony was well aware of the significance. Nodding his acceptance, Spencer gestured deeper into the hall, not wanting to linger amidst the evidence of Tony’s suffering childhood abuse especially as a compartmented segment of his mind began to calculate the probable number of actual injuries that Tony had suffered throughout childhood in relation to known data and resultant statistical inferences.

“While I have never particularly found shooting ranges to be cathartic, I believe that will be a necessary activity to add to my schedule in the foreseeable future.” Spencer commented honestly before asking, “Would you happen to have a copy of the man’s picture available?”

“On my computer.” Gibbs agreed, “Had to keep printing them, and they’ve come in handy a couple of times when Tony’s ended up in the hospital.”

“A digital copy would probably have the most utility, then.” Spencer agreed, monitoring the shift in Tony’s tone toward his reaction from confusion to disbelief.

Leaving the vestibule behind Spencer followed the increase in lighting that lead them from the hall to a formal sitting room that was unaccountably decorated in Baroque period furniture and accessories. Every wall was adorned with gilt-framed portraits of a blond, madonna-like figure seated in various iterations of lushly-upholstered, velvet-tufted, throne-like chairs in a wide range of settings and scenarios from entertaining companions at small dinner parties to reading or playing the piano to seemingly ignoring what looked like a depiction of an effusively ranting man. Although it was difficult to see initially, each of the portraits shared two other common features: the first was a barely discernible image of a small sallow-skinned boy, dressed in the same pallid-blue sailor suit that the childlike image of Tony on the porch wore. In each of the portraits, the boy’s image was standing in shadowed backgrounds and shadowy corners, watching the ‘goings-on’ with barely concealed longing in eyes almost-hidden by Christopher-Robin style bangs. The second common feature was the presence of a brightly glimmering liquor or martini glass in the hand of or in close proximity to the blond Madonna that Spencer needed no translation at all to recognize as Tony’s mother.

The noticeable theme of liquor glasses was carried into the room itself, as well, with abundant arrays of sparkling crystal decanters gilded in ornate floral motifs spreading across the tops more console tables than a well appointed room would have normally had. Aside from the abundance of console tables, the sitting room was nearly spartan, holding only five other furnishings: a single high-back, rosewood queen’s throne-chair with full-velvet tufting on the seat and armrests, enameled in cream with gold crackle overlays; to its side and several feet back, a low, Italianate Renaissance style bench upholstered in velvet the pallid blue that he was quickly recognizing as Tony’s symbolic self-reference; a compact, harpsichord-styled piano with double-layered keyboard and ornamentation in cream and gold enameled tulipwood with it’s almost matching student’s piano bench (discordant from the rest of the display due to the very minimal and undertone cushion of pallid blue velvet); and far into the corner, almost hidden behind another bar-like console table, sat a circa 1962 Magnavox Stereo Television combination console that had been noticeably refinished to match the excessive - at least in Spencer’s opinion - Baroque display.

“Tony’s mother…” Gibbs began to explain, only to trail off when Spencer raised a hand, explaining for both Gibbs and Tony’s benefit, “There is a very, very similar room in my own settings in ‘spirit plane’…” While it was uncomfortable to broach such a profoundly personal matter with Gibbs, when he had only barely and vaguely informed Hotch of his mother’s circumstances - in the course of the hiring interview, it was readily apparent that Gibbs was a critical member of Tony’s pride and would, therefore, become one of Spencer’s own.
“While I cannot speculate on Mrs. DiNozzo’s condition, there were numerous instances in my childhood when my mother relied on alcohol to self-medicate and escape the ... psychosis accompanying ...” despite knowing his understanding of the utter illogic of doing so on the spirit plane, where breathing was not only irrelevant but completely purposeless, Spencer found himself taking a deep breath and holding it a beat as he forced himself to relax.

Despite having mentally committed himself to admit the painful secret, Spencer still found it difficult to continue, but pushed forward as the quiet sense of the ‘room’ listening to him as he spoke washed over him with a feeling of comforting intent.

Still his first word was a bit choked as he picked his explanation up: “Paranoid schizophrenia or … well… while the DSM no longer recognizes any distinct subtypes of schizophrenia including paranoid schizophrenia due to their perceived lack of validity… when my mother's condition was diagnosed in accordance with an earlier edition of the DSM, my mother demonstrated all of the characteristics that had previously differentiated what was then thought to be ‘paranoid' schizophrenia from the state’s other subtypes: hallucinations, rampant feelings of persecution from the government and Sentinel/Guide council, determinedly guide-oriented if grandiose beliefs about the world, irrationality, and depressive fugues.”

Stepping over to a portrait that he found particularly reminiscent of his mother, Spencer studied it in silence, noticing as the subtle lightening of the rooms in the space nearest the portrait edging the sienna tone closer toward sunlit amber. Despite whatever anxieties Tony might have had regarding his mother that placed her second in Tony’s display of traumas, Spencer’s admission seemed to have opened the way for Tony to ‘shed a little light’ on the woman’s eccentricities… if only to get a sense of Spencer’s reaction to them. Just before turning away from the portrait, Spencer noticed a slight oddity on one of mantles in the image (a carefully and artfully drawn plastic-looking novelty aquarium of the type mass produced since the 90's used to hatch the Artemia Nyous hybrid genus of brine shrimp, as a popularized replacement for ant farms; turned over on its side, the aquarium appeared to be almost empty and dripping speckled drops into a martini glass that was balancing unevenly on a candlestick beside the enthroned Madonna) so integrated into the picture that no one-sentinel or otherwise- would have likely noticed without the increase in light if they had been standing more than three or four feet away from the portrait.

After moving between several portraits, Spencer turned to face the corner that he’d noticed Tony’s image had occupied in most of his portraits, and commented, “despite the worst of her extremes and excesses, in her lucid or near lucid moments, my mother offered me the love and caring that she was capable of and shared her interests and time with me in hopes that I could find joy from them also - some with more success than others - and I love her for those moments no matter how many negative ones came with them.”

A surprisingly solid-feeling hand closed over Spencer’s shoulder causing him to jump slightly in surprise, which seemed to evoke the echo of a mild giggle from outside of the room, but Spencer outside of noting it didn’t comment further on it as he was briefly caught in Gibbs’ understanding, if stoic gaze, until the older agent squeezed his shoulder and nodded toward a doorway along a side wall that had been partly obscured by frames and console tables.

“I think he’s ready for us to move forward.”

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The next several rooms passed in a similar manner, with Gibbs mostly leading the way, and Spencer sharing his experiences and Gibbs upset and frustration about the level of mistreatment and neglect that had filled Tony’s childhood (and home) with an abundance of pain, isolation, and
neglect - particularly after his mother died. The scenes they had been walking through had been so alike in pattern that it was quite jarring when they found themselves stepping from a baroque decorated room in a Federalist-style manor -- into the harshly-lit suite of a commercially ‘stylish’ high-rise apartment with an ocean view of the pacific (if Spencer was correctly categorizing the palms he saw in the distance). Almost as jarring as the change in view, though, was the sudden absence of symbolism as a projection of dark haired man dressed in an expensive Caraceni Italian influenced, three-piece suit pushed a no-longer blue-suited though not much older, Tony into the apartment ahead of him and slammed the door behind them.

Nothing could have stopped Spencer from growling as the projection called out, “Branzanelli, I’ve brought the boy, where’s my money?!!?” Gibbs wasn’t likely to call him down for it, though, as the senior agent was growling equally loudly, though.
As the dark haired man pushed past the newer childlike image of Tony, not much older in appearance than the Tony they had viewed on the porch or in the shrine to his mother but looking somehow more worn and more defeated despite the lack of aged sienna tones that had colored the other rooms, the man yelled again, "Damn it, Branzanelli, I don't have all day."

"You don't have the common sense not to make a scene either, " retorted a man who had stepped from a hall or doorway that young Tony hadn't preserved in his memory. The child had, however, remembered - with remarkable detail - even small clip-groove in the smooth polymer handle of the first generation Glock 17 extended in Branzanelli’s (presumably) hand.

“Don’t even think about it. People know I’m here.

“All the more reason to make ensure that no one’s left behind who can say I was here.” The man answered impassively.

“Now, there’s no reason to be so ... confrontational. You’re getting what you want. I've brought the boy and just want the money you promised me.”

“Oh, I’ll follow through on my side of the bargain, I just wanted to make certain that we are ‘clear’ on certain matters.”

“What matters, exactly?”

“First, regardless of the outcome, or the subject’s status, neither you or any of your associates will attempt to renegotiate our agreement?”

“Of course not, quite frankly, he’s ... a liability ... as is. If this works, I might be able to raise him up into something; if not, I’m better off without him.”

“As to that: if it does work, I will be taking him to my employers for additional medical testing; after which, you will be contacted to make arrangements to retrieve him as well as schedule additional ‘check ups’ to track his developmental progress.”

“And I’ll be reimbursed for those?”

“Yes, if they occur, which is by no means guaranteed. If it doesn’t work, the boy…”

“I don’t need to know.” Tony’s father cut Branzanelli off. “Not any of my business. As long as I get the money I was promised, as far as I’m concerned you’ve got tax, tag, and title.”

“It’s in briefcase is by the door. Have you explained matters to your son?”

“What’s to explain? He knows to do what he’s told and keep his mouth shut. What else does he
need to know?”

Branzanelli’s expression was cold and disdainful as Tony’s father left without another word or glance at Tony.

Spencer watched the scene play out in silence - having to use every ounce of the rage he was suppressing to hold him on the spiritual plane to observe the memory. As cowardly and weak-minded as Spencer had always judged his own father to be for walking out on his family - leaving a mentally-ill woman in the care of a nine year-old boy without a backward glance; at least, he had never attempted to sell him physically, the way Tony’s had clearly done, which in Vegas, would not have been as hard as it might have been elsewhere.

Pimping his own son out would have been bad enough, but from Branzanelli’s comments, Spencer suspected that the DiNozzo had committed a far more sinister crime; possibly damning enough to even justify a sanctioned hunt, long after molestation charges would have been dismissed by the statute of limitations. To know for certain, and to support his guide, Spencer had to stay and watch, even if he could already feel the distinctive shape of the Bench-Made Nimravus grips cool and firm in his palms.

Ethan had given the tactical knives to Spencer on his graduation from FLETC and acceptance into the FBI, before making him promise to practice throwing them (until he was as comfortable with them as he was with the throwing-knives turned makeshift darts they’d had back when they shared a dorm) and to always carry the set when he went out into the field. Regardless of the fact that Spencer was in fact a Sentinel and that he had trained and qualified for field duty in hand-to-hand (even if narrowly), Ethan had always been convinced that Spencer would find himself overpowered and disarmed of his side-arm and wanted Spencer to have the set as an unexpected back-up as FBI agents weren’t known to be issued knives. While he usually carried them in his courier bag to keep them on him, as promised, Spencer had never been put in the position to need them before then. (Spencer's knife set)

At the moment, Spencer couldn’t think of any better way to break the knives in than on a sanctioned hunt to bring those responsible for harming his guide to justice. Especially, if what he suspected was true.

Branzanelli’s expression when he turned to study young Tony, was cold and impassive but not as disdainful as it had been toward DiNozzo Senior. Whatever threats, abuse, or motivation his father had used to get the boy into the room and keep him there without a fuss when the man left had been apparently sufficient to keep the boy silent, but not enough to prevent him from stepping back when Branzanelli moved toward him.

“The man who claimed to be your father stated that you know to do as you’re told. Was he wrong?” Tony’s wide-frightened eyes were clear proof that he heard the inherent threat in the icy tone.

“No, Sir.” Tony answered, obediently freezing in place as the man continued to approach him.

“Let’s put that to a test, shall we?” Branzanelli challenged, grabbing Tony’s chin between his thumb and forefinger and using it to pull him forward.

Tony started shaking almost violently as Branzanelli held his chin in an unrelenting grip, almost
lifting him on his toes with the pinched grip as he stared into his eyes.

Thankfully, Gibbs was there to catch Spencer as he started to surge forward to rip Tony out of Branzanelli’s hands - as illogical as the urge was... given that he was watching a memory... one that Tony had already lived through and was willingly sharing with Spencer. There was no telling how Tony would have reacted if Spencer had touched his spiritual persona - filled with as much rage as he currently felt watching the man terrifying the younger Tony.

"Get a hold of yourself. We have a name, two names, and can deal with it later; this is for Tony. He wants you to see it. Needs you to." Gibbs ordered his voice as tense as Spencer was sure his own would have been if he tried to talk. He didn’t, nodding sharply instead.

The atmosphere of the room changed around them as they watched, seeming to become almost jagged, with the edges of objects and furniture around the room seemed to stand out from each other as if another dimension had somehow been inserted between them without their notice adding a depth that wasn’t measurable by length, width, and linear depth giving the edges a sharp and dangerous feel as if the couch’s corner could draw blood or the sheer curtains shatter and fall like broken glass. The longer Branzanelli held Tony’s gaze, the sharper and more dangerous the room felt, until the air seemed to snap as a pastel blue, honey gold, and cream - toned Kestrel materialized barely a two inches from Tony’s chest flying out at Branzanelli directly from the spirit realm, and swooping away when the unsurprised man swung his free hand to shoo it away.

"I’d thought as much. “ Branzanelli murmured smiling as he shooed the creature away, unconcerned. “Considering the kind of crook your father is, I was sure you’d have to had to come online. It's a shame, though," Branzanelli murmured, "your father won't be getting any of the funds he’d so happily sell you off for; you’re quite unfit for my employers' needs."

Branzanelli finally let go of Tony’s chin and stood, sliding his hand and the glock 17 into his jacket pocket as he stepped away from the child, who -despite taking a deep breath of relief - was still visibly on edge as his spirit guide returned to perch on his shoulder.

“See, my employers, like your father, are not interested in allowing their 'emotionally-sensitive' children to become even more so and intend to suppress the guide gene before it has a chance to manifest and have a means to do so. Such a shame, my employers will be so disappointed; any results they might have been able to acquire from testing you are made quite useless by the fact that your little birdy has slipped his cage, and GS318 has already proven quite useless in suppressing online guides. Well, perhaps not completely useless...” Pulling the hand he’d tucked into his pocket back out as he continued to speak, Branzanelli turned his palm to show a labeled prescription vial. His other hand held a syringe that he must have pulled from his other pocket as he explained.

As Tony watched silently, the man pushed the syringe into the vial, breaking the seal with the plastic tip, pulled the plunger to draw a dose that looked to be at least a tablespoon if not more, draining the vial before he tossed it on the couch. Distracted by the throw, the child was unprepared for the man’s free hand to swing back and catch his chin and force his mouth open with a practiced grip as the tip of the syringe was pressed between his lips. When the syringe was finally emptied, the man tossed it aside and used the hand the toss freed up to both hold Tony in place and squeeze Tony’s throat until the child stopped fighting not to swallow and gasped for air, choking as the desperate gasp forced him to swallow.
Covering Tony’s mouth with his hand, Branzanelli turned the child and wrapped an arm around Tony’s waist pulling him back against the man’s chest before lifting him. When the child kicked his legs trying to free himself, Branzanelli squeezed with both grips, pulling Tony tightly against him with the child’s head back so he could speak directly into Tony’s ear: “The serum will still cut the leash between you and your little birdy here, but you poor little dears just don’t seem able to survive it. My employers won’t get any more out of it than your father; and normally, when their interests aren’t served, it results in a bullet between the eyes of whoever disappoints them, but you should consider yourself lucky: if I hadn’t discovered that the serum provides certain physical and empathic reactions that I quite enjoy, you would have already been tossed down the laundry chute.”

Despite the woozy pain that was beginning to swell from his stomach moving outward, Tony froze at the feel of chill fingers slipping under the edge of his shirt and thumbing the line where the waistband of his undershorts rubbed his hipbone... tracing back and forth as it pushed the elastic lower and lower.

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“Spencer!” Blair’s called urgently.

... ... ...

“Spencer, come on, Buddy, don’t make us sedate you! Come on, Spence, you can do this. Can you hear me?”

... ... ...

"Come on, come on, give me some kind of sign you can here me. Damn it, Jim, he’s not answering, I think he’s too far gone.”

... ... ...

... ... ...

... ... ...

"What do you want to do, Chief?"

“I don’t … I don’t know. Incacha never said anything about a sentinel going feral in the spiritual plane, much less one who has guide skills. I don’t know what will happen to his connection if we have to force him back to the physical plane… to his guide or his spirit guide. God, Jim, I don’t know what to do.”

“Move out of the way, that’s what.” Gibbs barked, rejoining them in the bizarrely out of place setting of tropical hotel room that Blair and Jim had been pulled into when they’d felt Spencer simultaneously losing control of his senses and emotions. Gibbs had disappeared almost immediately after Blair started trying to connect with Spencer, and Blair had assumed that he’d returned to the physical plane to alert the medical staff.

That assumption was clearly wrong, given the fact that Gibbs was holding Tony’s hand (Tony still in his childlike manifestation), with Feroxa and Lobo flanking them on either side.
“Agent Gibbs, No! That’s not a good idea. Under normal circumstances, Tony might have been able to help pull him out of a feral state, but his resistance to the bond could further incense Dr. Reid, and …”

Gibbs’ significant glance at Feroxa, who was leaning tightly to Tony’s side, quelled Blair’s argument completely; if the spirit guide had sensed any reluctance on Tony’s part to support his sentinel, the spirit guide would have been rejecting Tony instead of grounding on the child… No Tony was a young man, not a child, despite his spiritual image; although, Blair’s sense of the guide that had been building while they had been waiting for the two sentinels view the traumas marring Tony’s empathic ‘landscape’ suggested that there were in fact quite a number of ways that his spiritual image was more true than his physical image. While Tony was not as ‘immature’ as he liked to project, there were definite aspects of his psyche that had never been given the opportunity to fully develop, without the stability and needed support to foster their growth.

“Boss?!?” Tony’s voice sounded entirely too uncertain and childlike to Blair’s taste, but both guides were pushing Tony toward Spencer, and if nothing else, the entirety of Blair’s experiences since meeting Jim and in the spirit plane was telling him to trust their guides.
In The Surreal World

"What do I do?" Agent DiNozzo asked, and if only to himself, Jim had to admit that DiNozzo's childlike self-image was messing with his head.

"He needs to know you survived it, Tony. He knows it, in his head, but what we saw… if there's anything that could have knocked every damn thought out of even the sanest man's head, that would do it." Gibbs explained, unexpectedly verbose. Jim was impressed, frankly, as the senior agent continued: "The only thing he knows right now is what he's feeling, and that's his gut telling him that you weren't protected and those bastards need to pay. He's not wrong, but too caught up in it to see that you came out the other side."

Like Gibbs' said, glimpsing even the hint of the guide's suffering that Jim had seen coming through the entryway had Jim out of sorts, on edge, and wanting to build a heavily fortified, mobile encampment around Tony's perimeter with a single entrance/exit patrolled 24/7 by guide-sentinel pairs vetted by Blair and the most brutal drill-sergeant-sentinels he knew… and that was without being privy to the event that had only been summarize for Blair and himself, but had been severe enough to set off a feral episode in one of the most self-contained sentinels Jim had ever met. Despite himself and fully certain that even at the level of feral rage that was consuming him, Spencer wouldn’t hurt Tony, Jim still stiffened when Tony - fists buried in Feroxa's and Lobo's fur- moved into the spot Blair had been just a moment earlier… and Blair really needed to clear it with Jim before just walking up to potentially dangerous sentinels he wanted help.

"Dr. Reid? Kes and I beat him." Tony offered nervously before shooting Gibbs a questioning glance and continuing at his boss's nod.

"Kes stayed with me; she wouldn't let go and stopped him when he tried to hurt me more. We made him stop and made it so he couldn’t hurt any other kids after that either."

~~~ Well, Damn!~~~

Turning to Blair, Jim raised an eyebrow, silently asking if Tony was saying what he thought. Blair seemed to study Tony's spirit-plane persona, but shrugged undecided.

Seeming completely unaware of what his admission implied (that, as a 9-10 year old child, he’d somehow managed to incapacitate an experienced adult, who based on Tony’s claim had likely hurt other children), Tony just blithely continued in his attempt to coax the near feral sentinel back to reason. Little wonder so many mistook Tony for a Sentinel.

"We stopped him, Doctor: we walked out. He didn't. So, it's okay. You don’t have to... " Tony trailed off as Spencer growled, but it was a growl that both Jim and Gibbs (judging by the way his stance relaxed) recognized as the growl of a frustrated sentinel dealing with a too-independent guide.

~~~ Yes, I’m thinking about you, Blair.~~~

“‘You’re mine to protect! It’s my job … to protect you… take care of you…” Spencer insisted, coming down from the rage, a bit, and looking down at his guide’s persona.

“‘You’re too important, too special,'” The young lanky doctor continued stiffly, his body reflecting his turmoil even as he knelt to continue after a pause - seeming to gather his rage and push it down into the depths of his soul (though Jim had no doubt it would see the light of day sooner rather than
later) as he forced an almost unnatural mask of calm and composure over his expression and stance, clearly trying to project a non-threatening appearance as he spoke to the not-quite child.

“Too good to push into the shadows, to ignore, or to hurt. You…” the younger man paused, carefully telegraphing his movements as he lifted a hand in a noticeably gentle gesture, not even fully extending his fingers as he swept the child’s bangs out of his eyes before holding Tony’s gaze as he spoke, “are so much more than they raised you to believe... You…”

“Sentinel,” Tony interrupted almost reverentially, raising his own small hand to press small fingers against the doctor’s lips, before he affirmed, “You had me at rule 5.”

“Guide.” The doctor whispered around the child’s fingers - a brief kiss of air against his fingertips.

Abby, having grown bored of watching for some physical trace of what was happening on the 'psychic' plane, jerked from her half doze as a Ducky, Jimmy, and Miss Garcia all sat up straight in a silent explosion of activity.

"Come along, Mr. Palmer, Timothy. We have very little time to move Abigail and certainly do not wish to incite Dr. Reid’s territorial instincts more than necessary.” Ducky ordered pushing himself out of his chair and waving Timmy and Jimmy to her bedside.

“So, it worked then?” Tim questioned, a bit redundantly in Abby’s opinion. Of course, it had worked; they’d sent her silver fox in to deal with whatever issue Tony was having accepting his guide. Abby hadn’t said anything about it, but suspected that Tony’s nose was a bit out of joint at having to be saved and cleared of charges by his guide instead of showing that toerag Slacks up personally or with his team. Tony did have a bit of an ego like that, but Gibbs could - and obviously had - set him straight about that or they wouldn’t be clearing the room before Tony and the doctor came back or worried that they…

~~~ Wait…~~~

“It’s Tony that we need to worry about.” Abby protested. Guides didn’t get territorial; at least, not that she’d ever heard. It’s sentinels, like Tony, that could go feral if they believed someone was too close to or threatening their guide. As much as Tony respected Gibbs and did what he said (even coming back from the edge of death - from the plague... THE Plague... because the Boss told him to), Gibbs only ever pushed Tony so far, and Abby had seen him back down when Tony got in his face… and that was without the potential of going feral.

“Abigail, My Dear, while guides can be sensitive to someone interfering with interactions between them and their sentinels, guides rarely succumb to territorialism.”

“Exactly!” Abby agreed enthusiastically, glad that Ducky had gotten her point.

"My Dear…” Ducky started, but Timmy cut him off with a raised hand.

"We can explain it when we get Abby back to her room."

"Yes, quite right. Quite right. Mr. Palmer, if you would take this "

"Explain what?” Abby asked trying to look over Ducky's shoulder to watch for Tony and his guide to wake up and see her. As much as she knew that her presence might make his guide uneasy, Abby trusted Tony to recognize her as pack, and no threat to his guide… So, she wasn’t exactly cooperating with their attempts to hurry her out of the room because she wanted to see him again
and well, not exactly thank him for doing what he did to Chip, but at least thank him for coming to after they’d knocked him out - to try to protect her.

Duck wasn't having it, though, gently but firmly pushing him ahead as he snarked grumpily: "Abigail, this behavior is entirely inappropriate, and moreover, unkind in the extreme, a trait which I would never have suspected you of being."

"Ducky?!? How can you even say that? I just want to see Tony and his guide, and make sure that they are all right! Tony will know I'm not a threat."

"Abby," Jimmy began only to be interrupted by Timmy. "Her room, Jimmy: now's not the time, and Tony doesn't need…"

"Oh, gotcha," Jimmy answered with a too accepting nod.

"He doesn't need what?!?" Abby snapped, irritated that Timmy was keeping her from getting answers.

Abby loved Timmy; she really did, but it frustrated her, sometimes, how he would speak over her or Tony or Gibbs. He should trust their instincts and follow their leads; they’re the sentinels after all: like now when it was important to her to know that Tony and his guide were alright, really, really alright, not just alright according to what some medtech or ‘trained-guide’ who knew about empathic injuries, but didn’t know Tony or how he would tell everyone he was fine even when he was hurting; and that meant Gibbs or her, because they knew Tony best… but really, it meant her, because as much as she loved her silver fox, he let Tony get away with his uber-sentinel-too-tough-to-take-down act far too often. Timmy should get that, by now; weren’t guides supposed to be empathic?

That had been one of the main reasons that their relationship had been so brief. If Timmy had been a simple mundane, Abby would have tried to stick it out just a little bit longer, just in case, but with Timmy being a latent guide, she’d had higher expectations and had been so disappointed when Timmy hadn’t lived up to them. She hadn’t even expected full-out empathy because he was latent, of course, but had just for him not to try to so hard to suppress his intuition and instincts that she knew he had to have, even if he hadn’t believed in them. When they’d been together, he’d never wanted to let her take the lead, and it had shown in so many ways: him trying to pay for their meals or drinks on a date, trying to step between her and guys at a bar who weren’t quick enough to take the hint, complaining or pretending not to like what she'd ordered when she'd ordered their meals for them, interrupting her at work, but the worst -in her mind- had been that Timmy hadn’t even tried to research how he could somehow move into forensics if a bond or real relationship ever developed between them; she’d kept a discreet ‘watch’ (aka untraceable bot) on his work and home computers just to be sure, and he never did. Compared to that, the fact that he never watched or searched or had ever a saved stash of porn on his computer while a plus in the ‘pros/cons’ column just didn’t measure up.

She was certain that digital and computer forensics would have been viable routes, but he hadn’t wanted to even discuss it, claiming that he was happier as a field agent and wanted to stay on Gibbs team, which she could understand. What guide wouldn’t want to stay on a team with not just one but two strong sentinels to watch over them? Even though Kate had claimed she was a mundane (which Abby doubted because Kate had also been a profiler), she had jumped at the chance to work with Tony and the boss. So, that Abby could understand, but latent or not, as a sentinel, she just couldn’t accept not being first in her guide’s life. Whether they were her final choice or not, Abby had long ago made the decision not to waste time on guides who wouldn’t at least put the effort of considering how they’d fit into her life, and that meant her relationship with Timmy had been
doomed from the start - no matter how intellectually or physically compatible they’d been.

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“Why are you all still here?” Jim barked at the sluggishly moving cluster of NCIS staff. How was it that more than 25 years after international mass-media exposure of sentinels and guides’, there were still pockets of people who didn’t quite get that ‘YOU DON’T MESS WITH BONDING GUIDES AND SENTINELS!?! He would have thought that Gibbs’ people, out of any of the folks they regularly dealt with, would be smarter than that. Ignoring the youngest’s cringe ...

~~~ Damn, he’d forgotten there was a newbie~~~, Jim cursed silently as he turned to the eldest - an experienced, if unbonded, guide, Jim sent a quick thought to Blair, who was still on the spirit plane with Gibbs, Dr. Reid, and Agent DiNozzo (who Jim seriously wanted to schedule some time with to discuss the man’s thoughts upgrading training at sentinel and guide centers).

~~~ Hold up, Chief. The rest of Gibbs’ little pack is having an attack of stupid. I’ll let you know when it’s all clear. ~~~

~~~ You’re kidding, right? Isn’t Dr. Mallard, there? ~~~

~~~ Yep, but has his hands full, gimme a sec.~~~

~~~ Yep~~~ Blair’s response was accompanied with a ‘ghost kiss’ that had Jim giving a brief micro-smile before stalking forward (and of course, scaring the newly online sentinel, who just barely kept himself from retreating as Jim reached their group).

~~~ Damn it.~~~

~~~ Problem?~~~

~~~ Just spooking the newbie.~~~ Jim responded with a grimace.

~~~ You big brute.~~~ Blair teased.~~~ Need me there? I think Gibbs has it in hand.~~~ Blair continued, the surprise coloring his mental tone making Jim want to smirk. As much as it irked Blair when sentinels underestimated him or other guides, he was sometimes guilty of the same crime (in reverse) underestimating sentinel’s ‘comfort and fluency with the spirit plane’. Just because he and Gibbs were old war horses, didn’t mean they couldn’t handle themselves on the spirit plane.

~~~ Nope, I’ve got it in hand.~~~ He answered, knowing that Blair would feel more comfortable ‘monitoring’ Dr. Reid and his guide until they returned to the physical plane.

Having been tracking the cluster’s conversation and movements while he was ‘pathing’ to Blair (and they needed to find a better phrase than that), Jim took the source of the hold up in hand - literally.

“Yeah, Not. Gonna. Happen.” Jim vetoed the latent sentinel’s protest that she wanted to stay out of concern for the newly online guide that she was confusingly identifying as a sentinel instead ~~~ Gibbs can sort that out~~~ ... and picked her up, easily adjusting his grip to avoid putting any additional pressure on her injuries. She tried kicking her legs once, but only once, to get down and noticeably regretted doing so after the fact... before starting to pound her free fist on his shoulder, whining for him to set her down. As he carefully carried her from the room, the rest of the cluster followed in their wake with chagrin and relief.

“Messing with a Guide-Sentinel bonding isn’t just illegal Young Lady,” Jim scolded as she
continued her tantrum down the hall…”

~~~ And what’s with Gibbs collecting a bunch of ADULT latent sentinels and guides who ‘read’ as kids, or nearly so. Ducky was definitely an exception to the kid vibe he was picking up, but all of the others, including the FBI guide paired with the newbie, gave off an early to mid-teens ‘vibe’.~~~~

“It will get you sanctioned, and trust me, as a latent sentinel, you don’t want to get sanctioned for bond interference: plays hell with trying to find your guide when the community’s been warned to stay away from you. “

The squawk and protest that he received in response to that as he reached the woman’s recovery room reminded Jim that as frequently as he and Blair had considered adopting a needy kid, but never did due to the time restraints and responsibilities of their position, maybe they’d missed a bullet by not having to deal with terrible twos and hormonal teens.

The young woman was still protesting as he left the room delivering the parting shot that if she didn’t stay there, he had no problem calling the med staff to use physical restraints. A brief stop at the ‘nursing’ desk had a sentinel assigned to her door with instructions to keep her from leaving the room, and a cleaning and escort team headed to the room they’d just been pulled out of to sanitize the room before the bonding pair came back to consciousness. When the ‘hazmatted’ team finally left the room and Jim could no longer smell the fractious sentinel’s irritation and distress from outside the room, he shot a tight mental ‘note’ to Blair. Even as self contained as Dr. Reid was, Jim didn’t like the thought of Blair sharing space - spiritual or otherwise with a near-feral sentinel, especially not one with an extra back-up of guide skills and who's about to bond.

~~~ Get your but down here, Blair, we’re good.~~~

~~~ Here.~~~ Blair answered, even as he climbed down from the unconscious guide’s torso, which Jim really should have (and would have) noticed - were it not for the bickering cluster hovering in the room when he woke - and removed him from the bed… because having a near feral sentinel waking early to a room filled with the scents and traces of other sentinels and guides wasn’t enough of a recipe for disaster or massacre without having him wake to find someone (even another guide) climbing off of his new guide’s chest.

~~~ Get out of there. You know better than to get your scent on a guide about to start bonding.~~~ Jim chastised before picking up Blair’s quickly suppressed emotional ‘grimace’ as he gladly pushed aside his (prior) grim certainty that DiNozzo and possibly Reid might not survive.

Blair was in his arms within seconds, pressing his face into Jim’s chest as he sought comfort, which Jim really should have expected. It was always hard dealing with cases that stemmed from child abuse and neglect, and this time, DiNozzo’s self-image didn’t help at all… much less that hall of horrors.

“I want Tony’s father sanctioned down to his socks and last cent, Jim. I know Spence and Tony will deal with what the man’s done to Tony, but if he has any other kids, if he’s hurt any other kids, I want them claimed by the closest center, S&G or not, and the scumbag hunted down. This was Intolerable.”

“Don’t worry, Chief. If Dr. Reid leaves anything left to hunt, we will.” As far as Jim was concerned, the man had signed the warrant for his own doom, if he was willing to sell his own son off for potentially lethal testing much less the near rape and murder that his father had clearly been willing to turn a blind eye to, there was no way that he wasn't capable of, if not likely, to do the same to a stranger's child.
“Thank you,” Spencer commented, finally turning to someone other than Tony even while he clung to Tony’s hand and a tenuous semblance of calm, as Blair left to return to the physical plane to see what was taking his sentinel so long in getting their room set up.

“You do what’s needed for family.” Gibbs responded, pausing to smile softly at his second, seeming to notice as Spencer had, the sudden slightly watery gleam in Tony’s eyes, before he continued: “I know I don’t have to tell you to take care of him…” a shift in Gibbs’ smile reminded Spencer of an expression that Hotch sometimes wore (usually before delivering what Derek called ‘a blistering’) that proved to be in keeping as Gibb’s finished: “but I will anyway. Take care of him, watch his six, and don’t ever give me reason to regret trusting you; you won’t like the consequences.”

“Boss!” Tony protested weakly with a slightly embarrassed, mostly nervous laugh, but Spencer could easily see that his guide was more touched than uncomfortable with the statement. Remembering what Tony had said when he finally accepted Spencer as his sentinel, Spencer suspected he knew the source and tested that suspicion with his answer, “I promise to follow rule five to the letter.”

“You do that. Tony, I’ll see ya both in a week: Cowboy steaks and beer. Reid, if you’re not a beer drinker, there’ll be whiskey, coffee, or water. Leftovers of anything you bring to drink will be going home with you, so keep in mind if I get called to pick you up for breaking open container laws, you’ll be sleeping under the boat. I’ll send Lobo back to give you an ‘All Clear’ when we’ve got a room settled.” Before either Spencer or Tony could answer, Gibbs’ and Lobo’s presences both vanished.

“He’s like that on the phone, too.” Tony mused before being visibly struck by something that the departing Sentinel had said, almost paling, which was a feat in the still ochre-toned spirit plane, “Tony?” Spencer questioned, concern growing as Tony’s self-image shimmered, almost trembling. “What’s wrong?”

Miserable eyes looked just past Spencer’s cheekbone as Tony tried to deflect his concern, “I’m fine.”

“Really? Were you aware that the most accepted root of the word ‘fine’ is the Latin word ‘finis’, which -although its source is disputed between the Proto-Indo-European root ‘fignis’ meaning ‘to stick or to set up’ or the Proto-Indo-European root ‘fidnis’ meaning ‘to split’ - is commonly accepted as referring to a ‘minute measure’, a limit, or an end with particular application to distinctions of ‘course’ or ‘fine details such as in the weave of linens or the decoration of furniture - where an item is inferred to be of ‘fine quality’ if the details are visibly acute requiring finesse in the crafting or are exemplary of the qualities that we would like to see all other objects of its sort crafted to.”

“Uhmmm, no, I didn’t, but that’s … really interesting.” Tony offered, seemingly at least momentarily distracted from his distress.
“Oh, well, thank you. I mention the generally acknowledged definition, though, for the reason - if we accept ‘fine’ to refer to states that exemplify the qualities we would like to see all others of a type reflecting, I’m afraid I have to disagree with you.”

Reaching out slowly, to telegraph his movements and give Tony a chance to pull away if he wished to, Spencer carefully cupped a hand around the child-like persona’s cheek, running a thumb under Tony’s lashes to wipe away a glimmer that never actually fell but still spoke of extreme discomfort, “I would truly prefer not to see your eyes or anyone else’s looking this sad and uncertain nor watch you or anyone else trembling like you’re afraid to tell me what’s upsetting you nor see your skin or anyone else’s pale as significantly as I’d noticed a moment ago… and I suspect that if we were on the physical plane I would be hearing heart and breathing rates that I wouldn’t like to see replicated, much less detecting the pheromones and scent traces of hormones with that reflect distress. So, I really can’t reconcile your state with the standard, commonly-accepted definition of being ‘fine’. I’m sorry.” Spencer coaxed, trying not to be overbearing but not wanting to set the precedent of Tony feeling the need to obfuscate his condition or feelings.

“No,” Tony huffed, but with a lighter note in his voice, “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have lied to you about how I feel. … It’s just … a bit of a habit.”

Spencer acknowledged the statement with a nod, understanding easily. “Would it make it easier to tell me if you know that I won’t judge how you feel or judge you based on how you feel?”


“Well, why not try? Start small and see? What’s the smallest aspect of what’s bothering you … the most superficial?”

“Uhmmm… Boss…uh… Gibbs said he’d see us in a week?”

“Oh, would you rather go alone?” Although he’d prefer to be with Tony, Spencer could understand why his guide might need to have a private meeting with his chosen father figure after having his lifelong beliefs and assumptions uprooted.

“No. That’s not it. He said, ‘in a week.’ “

“Would you like to visit him earlier? If we promise to take it easy, I think we can probably persuade the medical center to release us before then.”

“They’ll expect us to bond immediately, won’t they? The boss does.” Tony disagreed.

“Probably,” Spencer acknowledged, not quite seeing the problem. Tony was silent for several minutes after that, clearly waiting for Spencer to realize something that he just wasn’t seeing.

“All the way.” Tony huffed when he seemed to realize that Spencer wasn’t seeming to see the same problem he was…. and the pieces suddenly snapped into place for Spencer. From the so very telling childlike persona Tony presented and what they’d already seen of Branzanelli’s intentions, the fact that Tony had been hiding his guide status, and various extrapolations based on the known effects of the types of traumatic early influences that Tony had shared with him, as well as the details of the background check that Garcia had pulled up, and the all too common tendency of socially-restricted guides to react negatively to the turbulent emotions that can come up during the sexual experimentation stages of late adolescence and early adulthood -- Spencer should have concluded that the frequently ‘sexualized’ rituals customarily practiced during bonding could be problematic for Tony if not actively repulsive. In all honesty, though, Spencer had been too distracted by recent current events to construct a complete profile of his guide and as a result had
unintentionally caused his guide unnecessary stress.

Trusting in his observations of the other sentinel in Tony's life, Spencer decided to 'take the bull by the horns' believing it was probably the quickest and most effective way to reach someone trained under Agent Gibbs’ leadership style:

“Tony, have you ever taken the time to wonder why intercourse has been integrated into the ‘bonding ritual’ when there are numerous example of strong guide-sentinel bonds that were not initiated or generated through sex, but through shared trials? Jim and Blair are excellent examples, but Edgerton and Eppes are another good case, if you've ever met them.”

“Can’t say as I have, but I guess I thought that Jim and Blair had been getting it on from the beginning.” Tony answered with a slight smirk that looked quite out of place on a child’s visage.

“No, from what Blair told me when he was helping me get a handle on my guide skills, he and Jim didn’t start out particularly close when they first met, but over time they got closer and closer until the bond naturally snapped into place.”

“Wait, guide skills? You're a sentinel.”

“Actually, I’m an unusual brand of Sentinel. I came online early, and Gideon believes that due to my youth, when I came online there was more flexibility in the manifestation of my skills and I adapted them self-consciously in a more empathic direction to aid in dealing with my mother’s condition.” Spencer explained finding it marginally easier to discuss now that he’d shared the truth with Tony.

“I’m sorry,” Tony murmured, reaching up to clasp the hand around his cheek.

“Thank you.”

“Uhmmm… okay, so…. I guess it’s back to the sex talk,” Tony offered radiating discomfort and clearly not knowing what else to say with regard to Spencer’s mother.

“Actually, the segue to the ages we came online relates directly to the solution of your concerns, as the age at which we come online has a direct correlation to the circumstances and elements needed to form a stable bond. From what you’ve shared, coming online occurred as young for you as it did for me. For average Sentinels and Guides who come online in their late teens to early twenties, intercourse is typically a primary and necessary component in establishing the intimacy required to form solid bonds. For sentinels who come online slightly later in life, like Jim, trust and shared experiences is far more conducive to forming a strong bond; although, Blair has joked that he was still young enough to want a ‘hot and sweaty’ time, it’s mostly a joke and he will readily admit that it was being able to trust Jim to be there when he needed him that had the greatest effect on their bond.”

“And us?”

“When I said I’m an unusual brand of Sentinel. I probably should have said that we’re unusual examples of sentinels and guides. Jim wasn’t certain if you were aware of it or not, but he and Blair believe that you ‘brandished’ a fair amount of sentinel skills when you - in his words- ‘re-educated’ his guards on making uninformed assumptions about the general threat assessment of guides. He was impressed, which isn’t easy to do.” When Tony only shrugged, Spencer took that to mean he’d been aware of having some unexpected capabilities, and continued. “There haven’t been enough of us to really set a precedent, which - in my mind gives us the leeway to decide how we want to pursue the fulfillment of our bond.”
“In layman’s terms, please?” Tony requested wryly, but Spencer could tell his humor was mostly relief.

“I don’t think we’ll need intercourse to build trust or intimacy, especially considering the aspects we’ve already shared with each other; although, I suspect some reciprocation on my part would be beneficial, so when you’re ready, I’d like to take you to visit my…” Spencer waived his hand around to indicate Tony’s manifestation of the spirit plane, “Mind Palace. That’s not to say, however, that I wouldn’t be amenable if you decide at some later point that a more carnal form of intimacy is in order; in fact, the inverse is true. Aside from that, given that we both exhibit sentinel traits, we should set aside time to imprint on each sense, but I’m open with regard to how we go about doing so.”

“A Sherlock reference? Excellent. I’d love to see your mind palace, whenever you want to take me. What about our guide aspects?”

Spencer smiled softly, not surprised that Tony, whom had probably never received any amount of guide instruction, wouldn’t recognize that his emphatic shock had been partially due to their empathic bond ‘snapping’ into place before he was emotionally prepared for it to happen - much less realize the implications of Spencer’s continued, effortless presence in Tony’s ‘sanctum’. Deciding that showing might be more effective than telling at the moment, Spencer held out his arm slightly, murmuring, “Kess” to bid the small kestrel whom he had noticed surreptitiously following him through the tour after they left the shrine room to Tony’s mother.

He wasn’t surprised at all when Kess, reminiscent of her near assault of Branzanelli, appeared in the space between Tony and Spencer, landing almost delicately on Spencer’s wrist with a soft chitter. Tony, whose jaw dropped at the sight, was another story entirely.

“Well, Okayyyyyyyy, then.” Tony muttered glancing back and forth between Spencer and Kess as Feroxa decided she’d had enough of being on the sidelines and pushed between them to lift herself on her hind legs and bump her chin up under and into his chin rubbing herself on either side of his throat the way a wild fossa would to leave their scent behind on a favorite tree. Spencer was trailing his fingers lightly over Kess’s auricular and gorget plumage, carefully keeping his strokes gentle and visible, when Lobo stepped back into the scene, his tongue lolling in amusement as he came up to the quartet and promptly licked Tony’s forehead.

“Eh, how can it feel wet and drooly?” Tony gasped with a laugh, clearly fighting the urge to rub the intangible drool off of his forehead.

“Well it is their plane of existence, so it’s their rules and perceptions that probably apply.” Spencer answered with a grin, pleased to see the last of Tony's earlier distress fading away. "Lobo, thank you. Shall we, Tony?"

The next few days were probably the best, most relaxing, and most (well, Tony didn’t have the words to describe it but fulfilling probably came the closest) days that Tony could ever remember experiencing - in his life. Spencer was amazing and more than he'd ever believed he could possibly ever deserve in a sentinel in ten lifetimes -- even before he'd convinced himself that he couldn't ever have one in his life.

They spent the first, entire day talking about their favorite foods, movies, books, and activities before they'd started to talk about their histories: absent fathers, troubled mothers, crappy school years, crazy coincidences ~~~Seriously, what is it with being tied to flag poles?~~~ and their struggles with ignorant stereotypes (during which Spencer took the initiative to start discussing
their future by declaring that he didn't agree with the assumption or practice of guides being 'coerced' -his word not Tony's- into the sentinel's job or field without regard for the guide's desires, career plans, or achievements and thought the best course of action might be to see what it would take to get Spencer the credentials and clearance to consult for both NCIS and the FBI, noting that he'd briefly taken classes with someone who'd gone on to consult with the FBI, NSA, and CDC as a civilian consultant, so it should be feasible for him as a vetted and active field agent to be similarly credentialed). And the whole time, Spencer never cut him off, tuned him out, sneered or seemed bored with any of his segues or held back from making his own comments, and as far as Tony could tell, there wasn't a subject that Spencer didn't have something interesting to say about.

The second day was harder for Spencer as the medical staff had decided to start weaning him off of the course of pain medications he had been prescribed, so they had spent most of the morning laying side by side, imprinting on the sounds of each other’s heart beats, breathing, voices, finger snaps, and even digestive tract rumbles before Spencer absolutely cracked Tony up - declaring that he drew the line at imprinting to the sound of flatulence, but would consider a decent Sean Connery or Humphrey Boggart impression (And that comment, alone, was probably responsible for at least half of the infatuation that Tony had started feeling by the end of the second day). The other half of the responsibility for said infatuation undoubtedly came from the game of word association / emphatic 'Uno' that Spencer came up with after Tony shared that he was incredibly touch 'sensitive' another trait they shared. The guessing game - of trying to build runs and streaks of words that provoked a predesignated feeling in their counterpart based on just the cues they picked up from skin to skin contact - had been unbelievably fun, especially when they hit on bawdier topics that weren't immediately obvious to the medical staff, only ending as Tony recognized that Spencer was beginning to tire. After that -as they were already on the topic of powerful emotions shared through touch, Tony - still holding Spencer's hand - shared the story and the lingering emotions surrounding the 'tap on the back of his head that Gibbs' had given him when he was close to giving up his fight with the plague and how the battering-ram strength of Gibbs, often unspoken, care and fondness had crushed the fear, resignation, hopelessness, and groundless feelings of abandonment that had been growing in his boss's absence while Gibbs had been chasing down a cure. Tony went to sleep that night with his head pillowed into Spencer's free uninjured shoulder and the full force of Spencer's profound relief and blatant happiness that Tony had survived the ordeal seeping through every point of skin to skin contact, lulling Tony into a warm and comfortable doze that he almost fought to stay up and enjoy the feeling of being so cherished.

~~~Shhh, I'm not going anywhere.~~~

Tony didn't realize until mid-morning the next day that Spencer's whisper had been entirely empathic without a single whispered utterance, which awed Tony almost as much as the realization that - despite Spencer's seeming perfection in every other manner -- he had finally found someone who rivaled Gibbs in terms of coffee-deprived grumpiness to the point that Spencer nearly traumatized the physical therapist when the man came to schedule future appointments and unthinkingly pushed Tony aside to check Spencer's shoulder wound and range of motion.

With Spencer still grumpy about the 'cretin' and barely holding back from sharing a 'few home truths' about the quality of the respective medical educations of the doctors denying him coffee, Tony decided to take the initiative of suggesting that he would like to try skin to skin imprinting by giving Spencer a massage. He couldn't help but smile at Spencer's immediate attempt to downplay his pleasure at the idea, despite the fact that he had been holding Tony's hand when Tony asked and his frankly intense ~~~ not to mention flattering~~~ interest had flooded through the contact.

One of the many items that they had discussed the previous day was Tony's actual lack of experience - despite his reputation for being an almost misogynistic womanizer that he'd diligently
maintained to throw everyone (but particularly his coworkers and former partners on the police force) ‘off the scent’ of him being an unbonded guide much less Bi, traits not really welcomed in law enforcement, so he wasn’t really surprised when the surge of interest had been almost immediately followed with a way of concern for Tony’s comfort with the idea. Proving almost as stubborn as Gibbs, although it could have still been some of the coffee grumpiness making Spencer difficult to deal with, only slightly difficult though because really how difficult is it to deal with someone who was trying to be certain they refused to push you into something you aren’t ready to deal with. Spencer had to be argued into just laying back and relaxing under Tony’s expertise- if he did say so himself. While Tony largely avoided having sex with any but the bluntest, most insensitive mundanes, he had given many, many, many massages and was quite confident in his skills.

That said, it was still an unexpected thrill to Tony, to feel Spencer melt under his hands, languid with pleasure and -for once- not hold back on letting his empathy play. Tony was soon caught up in an empathic feedback loop that thrummed between them feeding Spencer’s own empathy heightening the feedback. Feeding back onto itself again and again, the sensation finally crest on the edge of too much, and they had to break away from each other - Tony slumping then falling out of his straddle over Spencer’s waist, having already moved from Spencer’s back to his front and Spencer rolling up on his side to stare down at at Tony - wided-eyed, flustered, and for the first time since they’d met - not in full (protective) control of his emotions as risked running two shaky fingers through the hair over Tony’s ear, before murmuring.

“I’d give up coffee for you.”

The absurdity of the comment struck them both at once - provoking a flustered, stammer of explanation from Spencer that Tony silenced with a soft, chaste kiss, and a promise of “I get it!”

The third day ended as it started, with Tony’s head pillowed on Spencer’s good shoulder, his arms wrapped Spencer’s waist, a soft kiss being pressed into his hair, and the promise of moving on to taste-imprinting the next morning.

Over the days that followed, Tony found that while sex might not be necessary to build the empathic side of their bond (that he’d finally realized his sneaky sentinel had known was already there from the start as well as already quite strong), the gentle inexorable progress toward the act was something he was beginning to welcomed instead of worry about: a change in attitude that Spencer had not only seemed to recognize and but was silently smug about, which Tony didn’t begrudge him for - even if he had a few antics in mind for when they got the all clear to take Spencer home and let him drink coffee again … to remind his sentinel that Spencer wasn’t the only one who could be sneaky.

Chapter End Notes

For those who hoped for more slash-iness, I apologise and hope that Spencer's recognition of Tony's reticence will help explain why I didn't just toss them into bed immediately; although, it came a little close. I'd just like give Peter Pan a chance to grow into the potential mature relationship, without the lack of one being a stumbling block for the pair during their upcoming hunts.
The Return from Paradise

The excitement that had been radiating between Tony and Spencer, at the promise of being able to leave the medical center died the instant the isolation room’s doors opened and Tony felt before even seeing Gibbs familiar ‘imprint’ alongside a second that Tony was almost certain was Spencer’s Boss, from the echoing notes of ‘responsible elder brother’ tones that Spencer had shared when discussing the BAU’s SSA. Although Tony had never been lucky enough to have a responsible older brother, over the years, he’d run into enough siblings to recognize the empathic traits without needing much explanation. No, he didn’t need Agent Hotchner’s imprint explained, but the overtones he was picking up from them. Oh yeah. Those needed explaining, and for more than a tenth of a second, Tony wanted to be selfish and back, back into the room they’d been released from, without said explanation to to enjoy whatever time he could before he had to face whatever shitstorm was headed there way - because -from what he was picking up off of the two - it was gonna be an epic example of its kind.

Gibbs was for lack of a better word incandescently pissed, with an underlying feeling of rage that reminded Tony very much of Gibbs fury after Ari had infiltrated NCIS, shot Gerald, and threatened Kate. Well, he'd shot Gibbs, too, but that hadn't been what ignited Gibbs fury. It was the fact that Ari had hurt and threatened others whom Gibbs, though not the appointed Alpha of the agency, which by custom was the director (regardless of said director’s actual status), considered ‘his own’ to protect.

Though Tony was almost certain he would have felt something from the team if anyone had been hurt (the way he had -despite being drugged unconscious- felt the ripping stab of Chip’s knife as it had torn through Abby’s stomach muscles), he immediately felt compelled to reach out psionically and empathically his ‘surrogate’ if slightly dysfunctional work family... not content to trust his senses that something hadn’t happened to one of the members of either man's team.

Thankfully, it wasn't Abby, whom he could tell was just down the hall - bored, impatient, and thoroughly frustrated that the doctors weren't letting her leave, yet, but otherwise mostly fine according to Spencer's definition of fine. Reassured by touching on that connection, Tony reached out to the others - one by one taking a reading of their emotional states. One by one, they registered on his senses with varying degrees of vexation, irritations, upset, and in Ducky’s case extreme disappointment, but as far as he could tell (not knowing Spencer’s team beyond the surprisingly Abby-like Ms. Garcia, whom he could at least sense to be physically well despite fuming irately,) to read any of the other members of the BAU.

“Who is it? Who’s been hurt?” Tony half-demanded as soon as Gibbs came into view, already feeling guilty with the foreknowledge that the plans he and Spencer had been making for the past week were about to be thrown out the window.

“Tony?” Spencer questioned, tense with concern, probably only picking up or registering the fury that Gibbs was projecting.

“He only feels like that when someone under his protection's been hurt,” he would have added ‘or worse’, but Gibbs' stormcloud of barely suppressed emotions lacked the brand of lethal, pyrrhic fury that had risen with the ‘or worse’ of Kate’s death had stamped permanently on Tony’s empathic landscape, burnt into a door that he now realized he would - at some point open to Spencer - if asked, but one which he never willingly opened even to seek closure.

“Is that all you’re picking up?” His Sentinel’s voice was thick with concern now.
Breaking his ingrained habit of dampening his empathy, to cope with Gibbs’ anger and emotions when Gibbs was on a tear, Tony opened his empathy a little more and picked up tinges of other familiar tones: the kind of frustration that always came up when he dealt with bureaucrats, indignation, impatience, a fuzzy sort of something that he got around Mike Franks and the few Marine Corp friends that they’d crossed paths with over the years, and a tinge of the disbelief that always seemed to come up when Tony ran into some ridiculously unexpected difficulty.

“There’s some frustration, impatience, and other stuff, but that’s the main feeling. Why? What am I missing?”

“I could be mistaken, but what I'm reading from Agent Gibbs centers on the threat against you; one of those other feelings he's projecting is concern for you, but based on your question, I suspected you weren’t able to recognize it.”

Tony couldn’t help scanning Gibbs again, before turning a confused expression back to his sentinel, he’d picked the disbelief, sure, but concern…. This … Well, this was Gibbs, and he wasn’t Abby or Ducky or Kate (in the past tense sense of course).

"Boss, this isn't about Chip is it?" Tony didn't see how it could be. Surely, by stabbing Abby, Chip had proven his own guilt. Hadn't he?

"No, its a bigger cluster ... than that," Gibbs grumbled, his tone a mixture of disgust and aggravation even as unnecessarily he censored himself probably for Spencer's benefit.

"While Spencer and Ms. Scuito were recovering enough to meet you on the spirit plane, the remaining BAU members were as called away, " Agent Hotchner picked up the explanation, "...20 hours into the kidnapping of an eleven year old girl. We weren't able to return before it was decided that the intervention needed to occur earlier rather than later, so Sentinel Ellison was left with few other choices outside of releasing Agent Sacks or posting two sentinels to guard Agent Sacks while Sentinel Ellison joined your contingent on the spirit plane. Unfortunately, both men had been stationed with the Quantico S&G station for the entirety of their service, where the presence of trained military guides has a naturally quelling effect on the spread of malicious gossip. As a result, it likely did not occur to them to step in if Agent Sacks attempted to persuade others to his position."

"Probably wouldn't have come to anything if he'd jabbered at anyone else in the bullpen." Gibbs groused, "Don't know why Jen even stopped to listen.

At the mention of the director, Tony felt the start of ensuring sensation in his stomach. Although he had never hinted it, much less mentioned it outright to Gibbs, ever since he had questioned the Director's decision to put Ziva on the team, Tony had been picking up very distinct impressions of intolerance and hostility from the director and later from Ziva after the two had gone to a rather long, out-of-the-blue lunch that had to even had Gibbs watching the elevator for the return that particular afternoon.

"Unfortunatel, your director not only listened but gave credence to Agent Sacks maligning comments and elected to investigate them herself." Agent Hotchner supplied. "In doing so, Director Shepard, somehow, found a sounding board in our Associate Director, who, for reasons I can't fathom, views me as a political rival and has, of late, taken every opportunity offered to undermine and interfere with the team. Whatever Director Shepard’s motivation - once she involved Strauss, the probability of avoiding an administrative hearing (at best) and official reviews of both the BAU and MCRT dropped to zero."
"A hearing?!!" Tony squawked, "a hearing for what? I didn't do anything to Sacks. Fornell was there, and I'm sure they were recording the session. How can they think that I did anything to him?" Tony didn't bother mentioning that Spencer and Agent Gideon had been there as well; as Tony's bonded sentinel, by default, Spencer would be assumed to do anything to protect Tony - including lie. By contrast, while Gideon of might not be automatically presumed to be lying, from Spencer's description of the older man, Gideon carried so much political baggage that an endorsement from the man was only barely better than an indictment from him.

"Sacks is claiming empathic manipulation?" Spencer interrupted, his voice flat.

Even the suggestion of the accusation caused a swell of nausea to rush up Tony's throat, while he had never accepted his father's spurious claim of supposedly worrying that, after coming online at such a young age, Tony would 'inevitably' lose control, manipulate someone, and "wind up facing serious consequences" - seeming almost completely oblivious to the fact that Tony remembered the man's words and, more to the point, had understood the ramifications of both his father's words and his father's willingness to attempt such illegal cruel arrangements to 'temporarily suppress' (which Tony had realized was utter BS even before the plane had landed on his return trip from Maui into his father's supposed care). So while Tony had never accepted his father's patently bull shut excuse, he had heard it enough over the years that the accusation was now almost inextricably linked with that oh so horrible night… coupled with the - almost too-well remembered paralyzing childhood fear of losing Kess -his spirit guide and the only companion, before Spencer, who had ever fully and unconditionally accepted Tony and had, at least to date, never abandoned him - a fear it seemed that he had never grown out of.

"Tony?" Spencer's voice had lost its curious flatness when his sentinel turned toward him, reaching out to take Tony's elbow and guide him to a chair when Tony didn't immediately respond.

"I didn't. I wouldn't… not to anyone who wasn't a direct and immediate threat that I couldn't put down in some other way. Even Chip, if the S&G center decided to give him jail time or some other punishment, someone could reverse it. Not me. I won't do it. He's all kinds of crazy inside and out, but someone could." Despite the past week of near constant bonding and sharing every detail he had never believed to be able to share with someone, Tony still felt an urgent, almost desperate need to convince Spencer that he was innocent of the accusation. He'd been right. No matter how perfect of a Sentinel Spencer was for Tony, it looked like letting Tony into his life was just inviting one problem after another.
My muse apparently decided it was time to include cameos from Bond and Sherlock. I don't anticipate these being regular walk-ons, but did enjoy writing their segments, so anything's possible.

Spencer glanced up from where he knelt looking up into his shaken guide’s tormented gaze, fully-aware that Tony hadn’t realized the most insidious element of Agent (not for long if Spencer had anything to say about it) Sack’s charge. Sack’s wasn’t claiming that Tony had manipulated him personally; Spencer was certain the cretin was claiming that Tony had manipulated Spencer into attacking Sacks… a suspicion that Hotch’s grim nod confirmed without a single word being said, which, given Tony’s reaction to the topic, was something that Spencer was quite grateful for. That was a little detail that Spencer wanted to keep from his still - not fragile, per se - but still hypersensitive guide for as long as possible. He wouldn’t lie to Tony about it, but any opportunity he had to protect Tony and delay provoking Tony’s deepest insecurities, he would gladly take, especially if it gave him the opportunity to annihilate the threat before Tony need worry about it.

To that end, Spencer turned his attention back to Hotch asking a question he was fairly certain that he knew the answer to, “When is the hearing scheduled?”

“2:30,” Hotch answered grimly, his tone matching Gibbs angry expression… Not that Spencer blamed either man, he was beyond livid himself, but was containing it as much as he could for Tony’s sake. The last thing Tony needed was to misinterpret the direction of Spencer’s anger or take the blame for it on himself. It was just short of noon, which would have given the pair very little time to find counsel, if they hadn’t been able to count on Hotch, much less prepare any sort of ‘defense’. As much as they would probably try to pass the hearing off as information gathering, Spencer was well-aware that so-called Information Gathering Hearings could hand down disciplinary actions just like any other kind of hearing; he wasn’t worried, however, incandescently furious? Absolutely! Worried? Not in the slightest.

The greatest weakness that political manipulators usually fell prone to was the tendency to underestimate their target’s intelligence, resources, and power, and Spencer fully intended to teach Director Shepard and Assistant Director Strauss how perilously stupid they had been to misread the situation and Spencer so ineptly.

“Okay, well that will be a bit of a push,” he acknowledged, “but we can manage it. Agent Gibbs, I believe you still hold Tony’s medical proxy and Power of Attorney, and Tuesday morning, I filed the paperwork with the center and the hospital to give you a limited Medical Power of Attorney for myself. Can I ask you to sign Tony and I out, while I make arrangements for the hearing? We’ll meet you at the car?”

Although Gibbs looked a little perplexed at the announcement and request, after a second his expression cleared, and Spencer thought he caught a glimmer of respect or approval in the older man’s eyes as he realized that Spencer had given him the medical POA, trusting him over Aaron or Spencer's other teammates to make any emergency decisions with Tony's best interests in mind.
With that understanding clear between them, Gibbs nodded in agreement and headed off to check them out.

“Aaron, I need to make a couple of phone calls, but after Agent Gibbs is finished, could I ask you to take us to Tony’s apartment? We’ll need to change, and he’ll probably be more comfortable there than at my place.”

“Spence, you don’t need…” whatever self-sacrificing offer Tony was about to make, Spencer wasn’t going to have any of it. Tony needed to go into the hearing in the best state of mind possible, and that meant prepping somewhere he felt comfortable and on home ground. Plus, they were going to need to go through Tony’s wardrobe and pick the right attire for the hearing. Spencer would of course need something to wear as well, but one of his next calls would take care of that, too.

“Shhh… It’s going to be okay. I’m going to have Penelope pick up something from my place, and I suspect that you probably have a better than decent coffee maker and a good stock of whatever brew will satisfy Agent Gibbs’ and Hotch’s coffee cravings.” He intentionally left himself off the list, hoping to provoke a small laugh at the suggestion that Hotch’s caffeine addiction could be any worse than his own. Spencer wasn’t delusional, after all, even if he usually chose not to acknowledge his primary vice.

He got a weak smile in response, but that would have to do. The question Tony asked (and Tony’s response to his answer) were more than enough to satisfy him: “You have a plan?” Tony asked, and visibly relaxed at Spencer’s soft murmur of “I do.” He hadn’t wanted to test or shake Tony’s trust in their bond so soon, but it was gratifying to see the subtle, unconscious indicators that his guide was beginning to trust him so soon—especially considering his background.

“Spencer, what exactly is…” Aaron thankfully aborted his question as Spencer held up his hand, promising, “I’ll explain in the car, but need to make some calls first.”

Putting off Penelope’s call to the last, as he had no doubt she’d be prone to a variety of outbursts the moment she picked up, Spencer held the third button on his down the requisite eight seconds to trigger the speed dial function and breathed a relieved sigh when Quinton immediately picked up.

“Ibitay atiasgray agoyay ibitay, aterfray erasyay. Abeohay ergoyay etitionempay unamnyay eprecorday ayay etay.” Spencer answered, smiling at the warm greeting, thanking his cousin, and asking for his assistance. He wasn’t surprised at all that Q was already aware of the bonding. It would have been a surprise if Q wasn’t. In all honesty, he couldn’t wait to introduce Tony to his distant (in relation and location) cousin and see what they made of each other. He had a distinct feeling that it would be the beginning of a life-long friendship.

The perplexed expression that Gibbs had worn moments ago now graced Hotch’s face, but to Spencer’s surprise and delight, Tony’s eyes sparkled with amusement as he accused, “I can’t believe you are speaking Latin in Pig Latin.”

The exasperated annoyance that suddenly crossed Hotch’s face was well-worth the life and color that returned to Tony’s, so Spencer momentarily ignored his boss, winked at Tony, and returned to his conversation, answering Q’s agreement with a request again in Pig Latin Latin for any information his cousin could send him, electronically, on Shepard, Strauss, Sacks, and any panel members sitting in on the 2:30 hearing. It was hard not to laugh at Hotch’s sigh as Tony translated the conversation in the background, but Spencer managed to stifle his amusement by the time he ended the call and started to dial the second number only to be interrupted by an incoming text.
Salutations, Cousin Mine; I confess that I find it disheartening to note that you would contact my youngest brother in search of information that it must be transparently obvious I would have immediately on hand. I do worry so that the involvement you and my next younger brother insist on continuing with your respectively local law enforcement agencies is having deleterious effects on the both of your intellects, but that concern aside, you will find the information you have requested awaiting your attention in your encrypted dropbox, as well as the family’s cordialialities on the occasion of your bonding and invites from Mother, Aunt Aurealia, myself, and John, to wit Anthea will await your R.S.V.P. and pertinent details for scheduling, transport, and lodging arrangements. Tendering sincerest congratulations, MH

And that text, in and of itself, stood as a superlative example of why Spencer preferred to avoid technology. He wasn't afraid of it or a preferential Luddite, as Penelope inexplicably seemed to believe though she should have easily realized the fact that a Luddite could not have academically survived the rigorous requirements of the universities he'd attended, much less the degrees he'd achieved. No, his avoidance of technology could be laid directly at the feet of his distant cousins, who though Spencer was fond of each of them - in graduated doses - all had a remarkable tendency to ignore customarily-accepted privacy barriers and worse yet, had the means to electronically delve into any matter that caught their interest; particularly the eldest, who had anointed himself the family guardian for close and extended alike and seemed to view that self-authorization as divine permission to examine every detail of each of their lives regardless of the context or propriety.

“Redundancy and efficiency harm none, Cousin My,” Spencer answered in a return text, “Many thanks for your assistance, salutations, and invitations; they will be addressed as time permits. Sincerely, Spencer.”

On it’s heels, came his third cousin’s - expected - acerbic text:

SR, If you are so sex-addled by your recent bonding that you can not concisely and effectively decimate the machinations, intellect, and ambitions of the idiots, who came up with such a flimsy scheme, JW will be waiting your response and alert me immediately. When are you coming, by the way? We haven’t had any interesting cases in AGES, and I. Am. Bored. Moreover, JW has been particularly intransigent lately regarding the testing methods I apply to soundly considered hypotheses. Perhaps, we should come visit you, given how you’ll be ‘tied’ to home for a bit until your bond settles. Have you had any decently interesting cases lately? SH

“I’ll only text if needed. No time to chat; will catch up later.” Spencer assured his cousin, who jockeyed with Q for the title favorite cousin - largely depending on the level of their intrusiveness any given week.

Has the American Educational System stop teaching its students how to compose grammatically complete sentences? SH

To which Spencer replied with an ellipse indicating he would not be answering immediately or further if no further comment was needed. A pleasant shudder ran down Spencer’s spine as his guide, reading over his shoulder, questioned ‘sex-addled?’ inadvertently casting a soft whisper of breath across Spencer's neck.

"My cousins have … interesting senses of humor, but I think you'll enjoy meeting them.... in the near future."

"Yeah, I can see that. It sounds like you've been issued a royal command."
"Actually, that's not too far off, but not quite close enough to be properly acknowledged." Spencer agreed before holding up a hand to forestall any further questions. That didn't stop Tony's stunned "really?", but Spencer didn't have time to answer as Penelope came on line and demanded all of his attention while she ranted about the many minor and not so minor electronic forms of revenge she had in mind for the two she'd clearly nicknamed 'officious bish'es'... Until his internal time sense (He was not going to call it his body clock no matter how many times he'd heard the phrase.) reminded him that they were under time constraints.

"I have something else in mind, actually," he finally interjected, overriding her spate.

"Oh, do tell." Penelope trailed off eagerly.

"Actually, I want you to have a hand in it, but I'll need you to stop by my apartment and pick up a particular suit and coordinating accessories then stop by your apartment for your QESG kit, and bring them to Tony’s place. I'll text you the details of which suit and accessories in a moment.” Spencer paused handing Tony the phone to give her the address, before taking it back and explaining, ‘I’m thinking of a look somewhere between Brosnan in The Tailor of Panama and Kilmer from The Saint though more toward Ogilvy in Return of the Saint for Tony, and somewhere between Hugh Jackman at the Tony Awards for The Boy from Oz with a Tom Hiddleston trim more War Horse than High Rise for myself. Oh, there’s a black shoulder holster in the second drawer of the bureau beside my wardrobe, bring that, too.”

“Oooohhole. So much deliciousness. The ‘OB’s won’t be able to speak for drooling.” Penelope enthused, while apparently abbreviating her nickname for their two troublesome female directors. “I’ll get going, now."

When Spencer finished texting the remaining details of the items he wished her to pick up and looked up from tucking his phone back into the case on his belt, the unexpected look of wonder in Tony’s eyes made a blush rise to his cheeks.

“You’re going to absolutely mess with their minds, aren’t you?”

“Very likely, yes.” Spencer agreed, enjoying Tony’s amused and admiring tone.

“What am I missing?” Gibbs questioned as he reached them handing off the stamped release forms and the dime store gift box center issued ‘bonding bracelets’.

Taking the box and checking inside, Spencer grimaced, before lifting out a functional matte steel guide’s bracelet, promising as he reached for Tony’s hand, “after the hearing, the first thing we can look at the jewelry stores near the Arts Center or Gorman’s for something more fitting,” and slipping the bracelet gently over Tony’s fingers to settle it on his wrist. Then held his hand out for Tony to do the same before intertwining their fingers and turning to Hotch who was explaining what he’d gathered so far.

“I’m not entirely certain, but I suspect that Reid’s going to use the panel’s subconscious and unconscious prejudices against them. One of the reasons that their ‘investigation’ has gotten as far as it has are the misperceptions of Reid as a low level sentinel due to his slight build and stereotypical academic aesthetic and dress compared to Tony’s notably athletic build and appearance and a certain reputation which unfortunately lends itself to the idea that he could easily manipulate the somewhat ‘innocent’ they probably believe Reid to be. While I’m not as familiar with the movie roles as Reid and DiNozzo seem to be, I do remember some discussion about the movies mentioned in regard to Tony’s appearance centering on surprisingly ‘Guide’ish” depictions of spies.”
“Exactly,” Spencer agreed. “Whether Shepard and Strauss are conscious of it or not, the only semi-arguable justification - if you consider the abundance of evidence contradicting the possibility of such manipulation - is a misconceived stereotype. If they are conscious of it, they are failing to consider that if you flip the stereotype, you can undermine the argument completely and secure your position using the same abundance of evidence - leaving them without a defense of their own actions.”

Gibbs considered his answer with a slightly skeptical expression before concluding with an ironically stereotypical ‘sentinel’ answer: “A good a plan as any.”

“I’m glad you approve.” Spencer replied cheekily, drawing an amused aside from the older NCIS agent to Tony.

“Yep, the more I see, the more the resemblance comes through” referring to the somewhat romanticized ideas of compatibility between guides and sentinels, but as Gibbs comment seemed to ease Tony’s anxiety further, Spencer decided not to argue the point.

Chapter End Notes

Next up: ‘The Hearing’ or ‘Why you don't provoke sleeping dragons.’
The Hearing

Chapter Notes

Or ... 'Why you don't provoke sleeping dragons'

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Many people are trying hard to be invincible, and most of the time they fail, invisible, while few find their spotlight.

But the remarkable person is one, who can be both invincible and invisible at the same time.

Anthony Liccione

ブレンキン

Up to the moment that Reid stepped out of Agent DiNozzo’s bedroom, Aaron would have sworn that - out of anyone who knew Spencer Reid - he would have been the last person to underestimate Reid due to build and usual manner.

What Aaron hadn’t realized, however, was how easily Reid could discard the mask projected by the school boy haircut, tentative tone, and unassuming expression. Aaron had never questioned the fact that Reid had passed the requisite training and competency tests to achieve field agent status or that he had done so without the necessity of a waiver, despite Gideon’s attempt to promote that idea; however, studying the man who’d come out of the bedroom, Aaron realized that he had fallen into the same subconscious trap that Morgan had of taking the sometimes awkwardly-worn, oversized-seeming revolver, his patterned vests and cardigans, mismatched socks, and gentle smiles as signs that the young profiler might not be able to adequately protect himself.

The falsehood of that assumption was readily apparent in the transformed appearance of the agent he’d clearly underestimated; because the Spencer Reid, whom he was currently observing, looked not only capable of defending himself but actually, somehow, sleekly dangerous and easily capable of inflicting harm. There was not any single element of his appearance from-

* the midnight-black Cavani Draco three-piece suit, cut to accentuate surprisingly broad shoulders while permitting a glimpse of the black-leather collar-bone strap of his shoulder holster to subtly remind observers that he was trained and licensed to use whatever concealed weapons were on his person;
* the round-collared, brushed-steel grey Brioni dress shirt and charcoal and steel pinstriped tie, which emphasized to the austerity of his appearance and belied the softness of his usual posture with a sense of solidity and impenetrability;
* the French cuffs that allowed just a glint of the wrist sheaths, on each wrist, holding his throwing knives to peek through;
* the tight, almost-military haircut that Penelope had somehow given the appearance of being Spencer’s normally-worn style;
his lace-less monk-strapped Berlutis; his shuttered, impassive expression; or his seemingly relaxed but ‘at attention’ bearing.

... that screamed ‘Sentinel at the ready - beware’, but that was the cumulative effect. Aaron was almost embarrassed to realize, a long-drawn breath later, that he had tensed defensively and straightened his own posture in response to Reid’s entry; he was only marginally relieved to see that Gibbs had a similar reaction, but only marginally, as he had known Spencer two years longer and had never, previously, felt threatened in or by Reid’s presence, nor felt that he should have been aware of the possibility before now.

By contrast, Agent DiNozzo’s entry was almost a relief. Dressed in a similar but lighter smoke-toned wool blazer and matching slacks, softened by a dove-grey Antony Melillo ribbed turtleneck; a thin, woven-leather belt, barely thick enough or wide enough to support the weight of a holster; and matching Bruno Magli woven leather loafers, DiNozzo - though equally tall and carrying an athletic build - exuded a subtly warmer, approachable air that fit quite well with the looser more feathery hairstyle Spencer had referenced with the Tailor of Panama mention. Coming to stand close, if slightly behind Spencer as they glanced through the files that Reid's cousins had sent and Garcia had printed while they were dressing, Agent DiNozzo's relaxed posture and attentive expression - sealed the impression that Aaron knew Reid intended to set.

In simplified terms, the way he might have explained to his own child someday, while the difference in size and build between Reid and DiNozzo might be as distinct as the difference in size and build as a cobra to a lamb, no one would presume to believe that the threat would come from lamb. Playing on decades of internalized and institutionalized stereotypes of sentinels and guides, Reid was quite effectively casting himself as the Cobra and DiNozzo the lamb.

"Tony, would you happen to have some spare manila file folders? I'll need …" Reid paused in his question to consider the information before him.

Looking over the pages, DiNozzo suggested, "seven?"

Reaching up to stroke DiNozzo's cheek, as the guide rested his chin on Reid's shoulder, Reid seemed to consider the suggestion, idly shifting pages into different stacks until he nodded, agreeing to whatever organizational pattern that seven folders implied: "I like it. Good idea. May I have seven folders and prong fasteners?" He finished, lifting DiNozzo's hand to buss a kiss on his knuckles.

"Of course," DiNozzo agreed, quickly turning away, a blush high on his cheeks.

"So, do you need anything else for..." Gibbs questioned waving his index and middle fingers in an up and down motion to indicate Reid's attire, "your outfit?"

Reid’s glanced down over himself, grimaced briefly at the clearly mass produced, impersonal 'center bracelet' that stood out - a cheap dime-store trinket - against the rest of his bespoke attire before continuing his inspection.

"Another four hours to go shopping for the right set," Reid murmured, slightly wistful, before turning to Aaron.

"Do you happen to have your ankle holster?"

“Yes.” Aaron answered, arching his eyebrows.
Admittedly, passing through security would provide an interesting show for any of the panel members arriving at the same time. Even with their Federal credentials, though, Spencer was still going to be required to store his weapons at the security before entering the conference room.

He didn’t know how to interpret Reid’s smirk, but Gibbs sudden snort reinforced Aaron’s certainty that there was more to the abundance of weapons than he realized.

“I’d been wondering why you’d said it so many times,” Gibbs commented enigmatically, but Reid only shrugged in return, not clarifying the matter.

Before Aaron finished unbuckling his ankle holster to hand to Reid, a buzz drew their attention to the door, which Penelope was already answering.


“Really?!!?” Reid’s head popped up dropping his impassive expression for the first time. “This should be interesting.”

“Spence?” DiNozzo questioned, turning with Reid, who answered with a murmur that Aaron barely heard, “sex-addled.”

~~~ Okay, and that’s something I’m not going to ask about.~~~

Aaron shook his head in amusement, before turning his attention back to removing his ankle holster… only looking up when the door closed.

“David Yurman?!!?” DiNozzo’s voice questioned, reading the apparently monogrammed lid of a soft topped jewelry case, in a soft, awed tone that trailed off as Spencer started to read the gift note.

“Cousins, please accept these tokens to commemorate the occasion of your bonding. I will be interested to hear your reaction to the inscriptions I have chosen for each of you. Sincerest Congratulations, SH & JW.”

Opening the jewelry box, DiNozzo gasped as he looked inside, staring at the bracelets with a look of wonder. When he turned the box for them to see, Aaron understood why. Setting on a soft velveteen pad were two stunning cuff-style bonding bracelets of forged carbon links overlaid with intricate scroll work that depicted, on the sentinel’s cuff, a dragon curled protectively around a treasure chest topped with an ornate heraldic crown and, on the guide’s cuff, an equally ornate Knight’s crown encircled a resting dragon with it’s muzzle supported between a fleur de lys and a cross paty.

The already impressive bracelets became even more so as Aaron finally listened in to Reid explaining the materials used in the bracelet to DiNozzo: “David Yurman uses the same composition of forged carbon used in the manufacturing of luxury sports cars and speedboats. The material is three and a half times the strength of tamahagane steel, sixty-five percent lighter per gram, and smelted from carbon nanotubes are compressed under extreme heat and pressure. The overlaid scroll work is a woven filigree of oxidized sterling silver and titanium, and unless I’m mistaken commissioned by Sherlock from a hand drawn sketch. It includes some of the flourishes that he tends to subconsciously add when he’s doodling.”

“They’re beautiful.” DiNozzo’s appraisal was issued in a soft, almost reverent whisper. “What do
“Well, let’s see,” Reid answered, smiling at his guide gently as he took his right hand and removed the pressed metal bonding bracelet from the S&G center, before picking the gifted ‘guide’s’ bracelet from the velveteen pad and turning it to read the inscription.

“I think we dream, so we don’t have to be apart for so long.
If we’re in each other’s dreams, we can be together all the time.”

“Is that … That’s from Winnie the Pooh.” DiNozzo answered his voice amused if happily affected, his expression turning warm and soft as Reid wrapped the cuff and secured it around his wrist. Surprisingly, it seemed to fit perfectly.

“Yes, Sherlock has a surprising affection for the Hundred Acre Woods.” Reid agreed. “In fact, at times, think he has a bit of a ‘tigger’ fascination. I know I’ve seen him jump as though he were.”

“Tigger’s don’t jump,” DiNozzo corrected, “They boing.”

“How silly of me.” Reid responded, “I am certain I’ve seen him ‘boing’ and would not be at all surprised if he has revised a version of ‘The Wonderful Thing about Tiggers’ song to mention ‘consulting detectives’.”

“May I?” DiNozzo asked softly, before handing the box off to Gibbs, who’d joined them to stand at DiNozzo’s side.

“Of course,” Reid agreed, the previous coldness absent entirely as he smiled at DiNozzo indulgently.

Piglet: “How do you spell ‘love’?”
Pooh: “You don’t spell it…you feel it.”

The peal of amused laughter was so typical of the Spencer Reid that Aaron had worked with through the previous two years, that he was immediately set at ease, the last of the lingering discomfort he’d felt since Reid had come out of the bedroom transformed, finally falling away.

“He does have an interesting sense of humor.” DiNozzo agreed, referring back to a comment that Aaron now remembered Reid making back at the S&G center.

“You have no idea.” Reid agreed, before murmuring, “Thank you” as DiNozzo closed the hasp sealing Reid’s cuff around his wrist.

“Hate to break this up folks.” Gibbs finally interrupted, “But, there’s a hearing to get to.”

Jennifer Shepard felt fit to curse as she watched the younger of the two FBI agents - whom she had whom she had originally assumed to be FBI agents who were attending to support and bolster Tony's sentinel - turned and clasped DiNozzo's right hand in his left. Their matched bonding bracelets were elegant, bespoke, and clearly, exorbitantly expensive, making a telling statement in and of themselves of the sentinel's investment in Tony.

Worse yet, this sentinel was nothing like the effete, awkward, socially-clueless, nerd that Erin Strauss had described. Quite the opposite, in fact; the sentinel stalking down the aisle following in
the path of the security guard who was even at that moment protesting to Strauss the sentinel's refusal to relinquish the seven(?) weapons he was currently carrying, in Jennifer's opinion, could not have been mistaken by anyone, as anything other than a sentinel, and if Jennifer hadn't been very certain that Erin would not risk sabotaging her own reputation, it would have been very, very easy to suspect that she'd been set up.

"Seven?" asked Marsh... or Marshall... or whatever the name of the other Associate Director Erin had drafted for the hearing, "Isn't that overkill?"

"If I were only defending myself, Sir; yes, it would be." Sentinel Reid answered the man's astonished whisper, smirking as he demonstrated that his sense of hearing was in line with that expected of sentinels. "But, as it's in protection of my guide... the concept of 'overkill' is a fallacy."

"Agent Reid." Erin interrupted Jennifer's contemplation in a sharp, angry tone, "Protocol requires that all individuals, regardless of field, licensure, or agency status, are required to relinquish service and any other concealed weapons, which he or she may be carrying before they may participate in any convened hearing!"

"As I have reminded security staff at both the building and conference room entrances, Article 746.4602 of the Federal Uniform Code of Justice states that 'no administrative, legislative, or judicial body may require or compel any sentinel who is either a native or natural born citizen licensed to carry concealed weaponry, to relinquish or otherwise abstain from carrying any weapon they have been licensed or certified in the use of a through a state or federally-approved training program, a qualification which FLETC training clearly meets, during any period or in any location where the Sentinel may reasonably expect that he or she may come into contact with any individuals whom the sentinel, or the sentinel's bonded-guide (if applicable), has reported to either local Sentinel and Guide Center administrators or relevant law enforcement agencies as being an intolerable influence. Sections .4603 and .4604 of the same article further state that neither may any of the aforementioned bodies request or require that any guide attend any convened meeting involving any individuals whom have been reported to or by the guide's sentinel (as applicable) as intolerable influence. Nor may any of these bodies pass down a summary judgment or any form of administrative or disciplinary action upon either of the respective Guide or Sentinel for any of the following:

- refusing to relinquish properly licensed weaponry as noted above
- refusal of a guide to attend in the absence of the bonded guide's sentinel under the circumstances noted above
- refusal of a sentinel to attend without licensed weaponry or a bonded-guides presence

Nor may any of the above entities refuse to permit the formal questioning of any individual or the counter presentation of information disputing of claims made by any individual who has been reported as an intolerable influence or alternatively charged directly or adjacent to bond interference."

"That article is not applicable to this hearing!" Erin protested, either in denial, or out of pure stubbornness.

Jennifer, however, fully realized how close both NCIS and the FBI were to being formally sanctioned by both the Sentinel and Guide council and the D.O.J. under the Uniform Code of Justice for even scheduling a hearing that practically equated to bond interference... on the accusation of an individual reported to be intolerable. Worse yet, neither she nor Erin could claim ignorance of the reports as the recordings entered into evidence included at least two clear utterances of the charge being reported to appropriate authorities.
"Actually, Assistant Director Strauss, the article is very much applicable on several salient points, but on three points in particular."

“And those are?” Erin questioned almost blindly irritated by his refusal, and not seeming to realize what was very apparent to Jennifer - that she had given her agent far too wide of an opening. While Jennifer couldn’t say that she particularly liked Erin Strauss, her first impressions of the FBI assistant director had been that she was far more politically savvy than she seemed at the moment… losing her cool simply because one of her agents refused to follow protocol for a justifiable reason. Jennifer wouldn’t have lasted ten minutes as NCIS director if she’d lost her cool every time Gibbs bucked her authority.

"Point 1." Sentinel Reid began, "On the cessation of Agent Ronald Morris Sacks’ interview of Guide Anthony Donatello DiNozzo, whom - at that point - was unknown to me as compatible guide, I informed Senior Agent Tobias Richard Fornell, a duly-appointed active supervisory agent of the FBI and Agent Sacks superior, that Agent Sacks should not have been permitted to interview Guide DiNozzo due to the fact that even with the standard shielding in place, Sacks was projecting a discernibly unprofessional level of malice, revulsion, and a desire to inflict violence on Guide DiNozzo."

"Point 2. On Sacks exit from the interrogation room, the movement of air between the interrogation room and the observation room provided me the aural and olfactory data to identify Guide DiNozzo as not merely a compatible but an instinctual match; while Sacks emergence from the shielded room enabled both myself and Agent Jason Eldritch Gideon of the Behavioral Analysis Unit of the FBI to get a true rating of the violent empathic print that Sacks had subjected Guide DiNozzo to for more than forty-five minutes, the projection of which Sacks did not even attempt to attenuate."

"Point 3." Agent Reid continued interrupting Erin before she could object, "when Sacks projected an emphatically powerful desire for Guide DiNozzo's death ..." and Jennifer wasn't the only to jerk or wince in response to that.

Sacks and Fornell had been very, very lucky that Sentinel Reid had not gone feral on the spot. While few pre-bonding sentinels could tolerate any obstacles being placed between themselves and their compatible partners, sentinel and guides subject to ‘instinctual matches’ (who were usually rated between 97% - 99% compatible) were usually subjected to the bond “snapping into place” on first contact (hence the term instinctual), and sentinels subjected to instinctual bonds were well-known to have severe difficulty even permitting trusted associates in the vicinity of their guides. Projecting the preference for an instinctively bonding guide’s death, on that guide’s Sentinel was a near suicidal act.

"... restrained Sacks." Agent Reid continued calmly, though Jennifer thought she could detect an undertone of a growl in the young man’s voice as he continued to explain. “I did not viciously attack Sacks, though he would like to claim otherwise. I restrained him against the closest wall, without delivering a single blow, then proceeded to clarify for Sacks that he was expected to investigate the incident and listed seven problematic elements related to the evidence planted by Charles Sterling to frame Guide DiNozzo. While Agent Gideon and Agent Fornell's caution was arguably judicious, considering that Sacks elected to both continue to insult Guide DiNozzo and emote blatant malice toward my guide - even after Agent Fornell explained the matter - I did not at any point lose control of my temper or instincts, even after Guide DiNozzo collapsed in a state of empathic fugue when Agent Fornell broke the seal in the interrogation room to invite Guide DiNozzo to join us - not anticipating that the sudden reversal of the intolerable levels of malice and repulsion which Guide DiNozzo had been subjected to for well over forty minutes would trigger an empathic event as the psionic aspects of our bond snapped into place."
"Following this, in full view and hearing of Agents Gibbs and Fornell, I contacted my Superior, Agent Aaron Hendon Hotchner to inform him of the incident and further reported that Sacks was acting in a manner that was intolerable toward my guide. Then contacted Sentinel James Elliot and Guide Blair Rupert Sandberg to make the same report after that. While it would have been within my rights to have Sacks held by the Sentinel and Guide center pursuant to have him sanctioned for his actions toward my guide, I informed his Superior that I required Sacks to be supervised by Sentinels Hotchner, Morgan, or Gibbs while the case he had been assigned to work was investigated, but that he could not be permitted to handle or evidence due to the clear animosity and bias he had demonstrated." Agent Reid paused scanning the panel, seemingly to ensure that the salient points he had listed were understood. By the uncomfortable shifting of papers to either side of her, sounds of the weak attempts to avoid the clearly vexed sentinel’s gaze. To Jennifer’s disappointment, even Erin was looking down at her paperwork… until Agent Reid addressed her directly in an almost disrespectfully hard tone.

"These are the points that speak directly to your objection, Assistant Director Strauss. Sacks acted in a blatantly intolerable manner and continued to do so even after being informed of the activating bond between myself and Guide DiNozzo. He was reported to Agents Fornell, Hotchner, and Gibbs as well as the Sentinel and Guide Primes, Ellison and Sandberg, all of which can be confirmed through an examination of the observation room recordings, or reading it transcript to these recordings, already entered into the evidentiary logs for this hearing as items E and F respectively. As Guide DiNozzo’s bonded Sentinel, I refuse to relinquish any of the weapons I carry in the presence of a man who has not only been reported to be an intolerable influence, but has contributed to the empathic injury suffered by my guide, directly interfering in the development of our bond as healers from the Anacostia Sentinel and Guide centers felt it necessary to keep Guide DiNozzo sedated to avoid empathic shock. Further, I refuse to abstain from attending in lieu of turning over my weapons, as my guide wished to cooperate with this inquiry — even though the hearing was scheduled a mere two hours after our release from the bonding center despite the fact that in both NCIS and FBI employment contracts customarily extend bonding leave to include one work week following the release from any officially-approved bonding center, which again the Anacostia Sentinel and Guide Center, serving Quantico, the Naval Base, and local Federal Offices should suffice, for the bonded couple to address any necessary changes in living arrangements, employment, or other external concerns, which could impact their focus at work.”

Jennifer could almost hear DiNozzo’s characteristic ‘dramatic voice-over’ whisper announcing, “Cue uncomfortable shuffling, and …. Action!” as the other members began to recognize what Jennifer had recognized the minute Agent Reid had finished reciting the Article 746 clauses. Everyone on the panel, but particularly herself and Erin, had stepped into a wasp’s nest and were about to be stung - she suspected, if Agent Reid took his line of argument the direction she thought he might. And the formal hearing hadn’t even officially started yet. Worse yet, the optics were going to be very bad indeed.

Erin seemed to finally regain some measure of professional comportment, as if it weren’t already too late, and conceded, “Very well, I withdraw my request; take your seats,” drawing a barely-covered snicker from another panel member, just to the right, who’d also recognized that both Sentinel Reid, who was -admittedly- currently standing, and Guide DiNozzo, who’d been seated for several minutes taking files out of his sentinel’s quite sleek attache case (a Tumi Maren Delphine, she thought) and setting them out neatly in front of the empty seat that Sentinel Reid was standing behind.

It was only as Jennifer noted their seating arrangements that she realized two things: First, that again Sentinel Reid was not acting as Erin had led her to believe he would — relying on his superior, a former lawyer, to represent himself and his guide, a factor which they had already come up with a strategy to undermine (by declaring Agent Hotchner as both an expert witness and a
reputation-focused character witness to establish agent’s behavior prior to the ‘bonding incident’ as she and Erin had started to call it) intending to leave the supposedly inept unprepared to defend himself or DiNozzo. Based on the brief engagement they had just been party to, that hope couldn’t have been further from the truth. Not only had Sentinel Reid been chapter and verse familiar with the related article of the appropriate code, he had integrated it into his response back to Erin with a confidence that, Jennifer had no doubt, meant he was well-acquainted with the articles and codes relevant to the current hearing and would presumably not need Agent Hotchner further, given that the Senior Agent had not taken a seat near or with them, but was curiously, already sitting in the witness section, even though they had only planned to add him to the witness list after the hearing began to prevent Sentinel Reid from acquiring other counsel.

Second, even as she mused over Sentinel Reid’s lack of reliance on Agent Hotchner, Jennifer suddenly realized that she hadn’t even really paid attention to Tony before that moment. Finally, taking the opportunity to really look at him, Jennifer was frankly infuriated by what she saw. She’d been waiting for months, frankly, for him to screw up so she could isolate him and have a reason to move sideline him or move him to another team where she could dangle the possibility of him earning his way back to the MCRT in exchange for an off-the-books (not that she’d tell him that) honey-pot mission with Jeanne Benoit… Until she’d gotten tired of waiting, and finally found someone with enough of a gripe against Tony that -through Ziva- she’d lured Sterling into NCIS, gotten ‘Chip’ into as close proximity to the MCRT as she could, and watched things play out, hoping that whatever ‘Chip’ (and that really was a ridiculous name) trumped up would be enough to put Tony in the position she’d wanted.

And now, just when it looked like the fruits of her labor looked like they were about to pay off, one glance at Tony, sitting beside his standing BONDED-Sentinel told her that no matter how the hearing turned out, her plans were wrecked. While still dressed as stylishly as usual, Tony’s suit, this time, was clearly not his personal ‘armor’ the way that he usually wore lavishly expensive suits (with an air of being the untouchable bachelor who might indulge but never commit). He was visibly comfortable in his skin, and in his bond, and not at all the kind of bait that she had wanted to throw in front of Jeanne Benoit, not that she had any delusion that he would even accept such a mission now.

The Tony of even two weeks ago? He would have caught Jeanne’s attention: brash, bold, hyperactive, wearing an armor to keep everyone from getting too close, a guide who didn’t act like a guide. (Jennifer couldn’t even deny she’d known he was a guide; Federal background checks looked at everything and had access to records that local PD’s didn’t no matter how big the city.) But, the Tony of two weeks ago was exactly the type of guide that Jeanne liked to ‘break-in’: one of the powerful sentinel-looking guides, who gave the doctor a feeling of power when she could get them to accept the role of a passive partner, even when their empathy was hinting (or screaming) at them that the woman wouldn’t be there in the long run. Of course, Benoit wouldn’t have been there for Tony in the long run, either, but whether it would leave Tony wrecked in an incomplete bond or not at the end of the op, that didn’t really matter to Jennifer. All that she’d been concerned with was using him to get a foot in the door, get what information she could on both Jeanne and her father, and give her a chance to get the leverage she’d wanted on the arms dealer.

She’d planned to follow through on her promise, anyhow, and drop Tony back on the MCRT for Gibbs to put back together, and move on to the next step in getting against Rene Benoit, but that all seemed to be ruined now, and she couldn’t even blame it on Tony or his Sentinel, directly.

Chapter End Notes
Okay, so I have a question for you:
I do have a couple of more shots I can send across the 'OB's and Sacks bows, with more of the hearing, or I could move on to Tony and Spencer getting settled in to their new home and throwing a meet and greet for their new combined family to get to know each other and telling it over the dinner table - with a few flare ups from Abby and Haley, Gibbs starting to get a 'familiar feeling' that he doesn't quite want to recognize, while trying to duck Blair who has news, I could move on to the resulting hunts, with some details from the hearing thrown in as flash backs.

Which would you prefer?

As I was putting together this chapter (via my Rocketbook ***), I came up with what felt like fairly workable outlines for taking it any of those directions. I'd love to hear your thoughts and can take it whichever direction that seems to be the most preferred.

______________Update_______________

Just a small note to everyone who voted today (11/23) on where to take chapter 17.

As of 9:00 pm, the vote's at 13:4 in favor of more notes Hearing (with the two notes that remarked on liking two options being counted as a vote each in the respective two options). If I can finish up the hearing in one chapter, I'll shoot for their settling in and meet and greet for chapter 18, and table the outlines of the pending hunts, Blair's 'chat' with Jason, and Jim dropping a bombshell on Gibbs till a later date. Thank you so much for reading and reaching back.

*** If you haven't heard of Rocketbooks, one check them out on Amazon. Especially if you prefer to write out your stories like I do, and would love to have your handwriting automatically transcribed to text and sent to the drop box or file site of your choice.
I'd Say its Bark is Worse Than its Bite, but Dragons Don't Bark!

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

*The hunger of a dragon is slow to wake,
but hard to sate.*
Ursula K. Le Guin

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"Agent Reid, you have been instructed to sit down so that this hearing may commence," Erin Strauss snapped, utterly infuriated that Agent Hotchner had apparently had enough time to prep the doctor and to, apparently, give him and his guide clothing tips. (Although, she would have liked to have known which tailor the boy had gone to to have his suits return so quickly. She'd never found the tailor you could get her husband suits finished in such a timely manner.)

~~~If Agent Hotchner was so interested in court prep, ~~~ Erin pushed the thought of the the tailor aside, with a snide little aside to get her back on track: ~~~ he should go into it as a career. I'll have to suggest it to him when I deliver the transfer paper work. With luck, getting his pet genius benched will nudge him in the right direction.~~~

Needless to say, in her mind, the only right direction for Agent Hotchner to go was out the door.

"Actually, Ma'am," the annoying upstart interrupted again. She really couldn't understand why Henry had ever signed off bringing the boy into the FBI. A Doctor or not, he was clearly too young and impulsive to be a field agent and had no reasonable respect for the proper hierarchy of the agency, which Agent Hotchner was not at the top of and never would be. That position was going to be hers, once Henry, then John retired.

"What?!?" Jennifer Shepard's shocked tone drug Erin out of her thoughts and forewarned Erin that she may have missed something important.

"I would suggest that you explain that … " Erin paused considering the best phrase to avoid while trying to gloss over the fact that she hadn’t been paying attention, "comment, please"…tacking on the please, solely to give the impression that she was willing to hear him out without bias, regardless of her actual feelings on the matter.

"Of course, as stated earlier, under Article 746 of the Federal Uniform Code of Justice, the convening of this hearing -on a related issue- entitles Guide DiNozzo and myself to question anyone who has been reported as an intolerable influence or alternatively charged directly or adjacent to bond interference pursuant to the filing of any action related to a request for said individuals to be sanctioned in part or in whole. To that end, pursuant to filing requests that Agent Sacks, Director Shepard, and yourself be sanctioned as primary participants forwarding charges which are both demonstrably false based on the evidence that you possessed and submitted into evidence and conducive to or suggestive of bond interference under a reasonable person standard.... n accordance with 46 CFR § 502.62 -The Code of Federal Regulations (that this hearing is held under), all matters related to private party complaints for formal adjudication must be brought forward during any open hearing or formal adjudication related to the matter or be forfeited. Subsequently, I am required to inform you that I intend to call on each of you as respondents and participating witnesses to these actions during this hearing. As such, in light of 10 CFR § 2.1001, neither yourself nor Director Shepard may be permitted to serve as presiding officers to this hearing.
and must step down while replacement individuals are found who are representative of your roles on the panel but not currently subject to or under your command."

"How dare you?!?" Erin almost shrieked. The arrogant little snot was threatening her? With a formal sanction? "Dr. Reid, you are out of order. Now sit down so we can get this hearing started."

"Erin..." A voice she was to-well familiar with interrupted, as she noticed the man's presence at the back of the room: standing as he spoke.

"Deputy Director?" From his chiding expression, Erin swore that as soon as the hearing was over, she was going to go back to her office and figure out how she could transfer Agent Reid to the furthest, East European/East Asian Legat possible. Possibly in Nur Sultan, Kazakhstan or Ankara, Turkey - locations where the locals took a very dim view of Sentinels and Guides to begin with, but same-sex pairings in particular. It wouldn't be bond interference, of course, because she'd happily see to it that the agency paid for DiNozzo to be shipped off with him.

"Sentinel Reid is well within his rights to properly report procedural issues affecting this hearing. His analysis of the issue presented seems very much on point. Please step down. Director Shepard, this applies to you as well. Dr. Reid, in lieu of locating an available assistant director to replace AD Strauss, would a deputy director be an acceptable replacement?"

"Yes, Sir; thank you, Sir." The obnoxious junior agent answered obsequiously. He might think that this was over, but he was just making it worse for himself.

"Erin..." Deputy Director Hammond addressed her again, rolling his fingers in a silent order to pack it up.

"Of course, sir," Erin answered, forcing an insincere smile, infuriated that the Deputy Director had overridden her objections

Barely restraining her urge to slap her portfolio shut, Erin only managed it by reminding herself that alienating the deputy director would be an incredibly foolish move.

"Sentinel Reid, are there any other procedural issues that we should be addressing while we identify a replacement for Director Shepard?"

~~~Why on Earth is he catering to Reid?~~~ Erin grumbled silently, trying to figure out what the deputy director hoped to gain by letting the agent get away with outright insubordination instead of quashing the agent’s insolence and assigning him to a duty or posting that would insure he thought long and hard in the future before even opening his mouth again.

“Of course, Sir. In accordance with Article 746.3207 of the Federal Uniform Code of…”

“Excuse me for interrupting, Sentinel Reid, but for the sake of the young man or young lady who will be tasked with transcribing the records of this hearing, as well as anyone whom will be taking notes, might I suggest using the abbreviate titles for any applicable articles or regulations, after the first introduction.”

“Of course, Sir. if I may start again... “

Erin grimaced as she was forced to cross the well to reach the section set aside for witnesses, fuming at the fact that neither man even paused when she walked directly between them.

“In accordance with Article 746.3207 of the UCJ, all hearings pertaining to the chemical suppression of sentinel or guide abilities, the use or misuse of sentinel or guide abilities, injuries
caused by individuals in feral states, forced bonds, bond interference, the authorized or unauthorized empathic suppression of guide or sentinel abilities, and/or human experimentation as it pertains to the expression, amplification, or suppression of guide or sentinel skills and abilities require both a representative member of the local Sentinel and Guide guild as well as the inclusion of an Upsilon or Rho trained guide to assess each witness and inform the presiding officer whether the witness is hostile with respect to the claimant, defendant, or convening body. “

“I would have assumed that was already in place.” Deputy Director Hammond question, shooting Erin a glance that promised for a distinctly unpleasant discussion after the hearing.

She’d known, of course, having guides available to do a surface read of witnesses before they were questioned was a customary practice, but it was a practice that she wanted to abolish. Everyone put Sentinels and Guides on pedestals and gave them preferential treatment (over so-called ‘mundanes’) in hearings, hiring decisions, promotions, and it was I was well past time for that to end. More to the point, though, with respect to the reason that she’d knowingly chosen not to arrange for a guide, was the fact that she hardly needed a guide to tell her that Agent Sacks was hostile to Reid and DiNozzo, and more than likely was simply trying to cover up his own shoddy work (a fact that Erin intended to pin Fornell on, once she’d gotten what she wanted from using Sack’s claims to enjoin the hearing and discredit one of the agents that Hotchner seemed to rely on for his team’s successes).

“No Sir, while I was waiting for Director Strauss’s response to my first mention of 46 CFR § 502.62 and 10 CFR § 2.1001, respectively I performed a passive, non-intrusive reading of all the attendant panel members; while Assistant Director Marshall Lewis's rating, as a latent guide, marginally satisfies the stricture that no administrative hearings may levy actions or disciplines with regard to registered and or known online sentinels and guides, without at least one member representing the sentinel and guide community on the presiding panel afforded the ability to veto even a unanimous decision by the remaining panel members; due to his latent status, he would not have the capacity to perform the requisite scans.”

“I’m sorry, Deputy Director, but this is getting ridiculous. Agent Reid is clearly a sentinel. To suggest that ...” Erin interrupted, jumping back to her feet, and tottering slightly on her heels as she did. She wanted to say more, but Hammond already had his hand lifted to forestall the rest of her protest, and gestured for her to sit back down with a frown. Finally, he was going to see what she had to put up with from the BAU’s stubbornly self-righteous...

“Sentinel Reid?” Hammond questioned, cutting off her silent rant.

“Sir, while it’s true that 83.26% of current active sentinels do not present with the capacity of accessing skills and abilities commonly categorized as ‘guide abilities’, the remaining 16.7385% percent have presented with the ability to use these skills somewhere along the continuum between mu and sigma ratings. As noted in my service record, my current classification falls into the 83rd percentile of this 16.7385% with formal training and certification through FLETC to the Rho level where I am able to perform non-contact, non-invasive, passive scans within a forty-eight foot radius of my position with 98% accuracy; however, as I am a party to the hearing, it would be inappropriate...”

“Yes, yes. I understand. Thank you for the explanation, Sentinel Reid. Erin, I take it you were not aware of this?” Director Hammond question, forcing Erin to shake her head and publicly admit that she clearly hadn’t read or at least fully read Agent Reid’s personnel file; although, why he could have expected her to look up such a ridiculous detail was beyond her when the man was recorded as a sentinel - even if he had never bothered to properly present himself as one before. Certainly, there had to be something in that she could hold him to task on? Wouldn’t it be arguably safer and
quell the likelihood of suspects challenging field agents if they properly presented themselves as being capable of defending themselves?

~~~ Yes, that’s an argument I can make.~~~ Erin almost grinned at the thought, ~~~ For three years, he’s been endangering the lives of his team members by presenting himself as defenseless and in need of protection.~~~

If she looked back over his past cases, Erin was almost certain she could find a case where one of their suspects had attacked banking on Agent Reid being too weak to defend himself. Pulling out her notepad, Erin rapidly began to sketch out ideas that she could start digging into as soon as the hearing was over. Perhaps it was overkill, but she wanted to knock the stilts out from under Aaron’s precious team and had a distinct feeling - given John’s pandering to Agent Reid- that the hearing wouldn’t achieve her aims.

“Let’s continue, then. Sentinel Reid are there any other procedural matters we need to address?”

“No, aside from formal acknowledgement of the list witnesses whom I intend to call, all of whom have been contacted and informed of the expectation, and the acceptance into evidence of the MCRT’s work notes and evidence inventories released to Agent Fornell and the work briefs submitted to the BAU on making the request to assess Guide DiNozzo with regard to whether he matched the profile of an unsub exhibiting characteristics of both organized and disorganized offenders…”

“Very well, Mr. Wilkersouer, if you’ll work with Sentinel Reid to accomplish that. After that, if there are no objections, I would like to adjourn the meeting for an hour to arrange for Director Shepard’s replacement and permit the named witnesses to arrive.”

Deputy Director John Hammond was, to put it bluntly, impressed with Dr./Sentinel Reid, and increasingly-deeply unimpressed with Erin Strauss. The young man, with clearly little to no advanced notice, had mounted not only a sound defense of his guide - effectively demonstrating in his preamble how the charge was baseless before the hearing had even begun - but redirected the course of the hearing into a valid and objective investigation of whether charges of bond interference against Agent Sacks, Strauss, and Director Shepard should be forwarded to the Sentinel and Guide Council for ratification, by the time the meeting had begun.

The question was already answered with regard to Agent Sacks, whom Guide Alyssa Heart, the Upsilon rated ‘scanner’, had practically recoiled from during the scan to assess whether he could be treated as hostile witness. Dropping the agents hand as quickly as she could after the scan (before excluding him as a witness on the grounds that Sacks apparently lacked the objectivity to testify even on his own behalf), she’d further remarked that Sacks had seemed to fixate on Guide DiNozzo with what seemed to be the entirety of his distrust for both Sentinels and Guides. It came to no surprise, then, when she submitted a formal request to the hearing that Sacks should be sanctioned as an intolerable influence on any guide or sentinel forced to be in his presence and given leave from his position until he received counseling.

The question of whether Director Shepard would be forwarded to the Council to sanctioned or not was in the hands of the Deputy Secretary of the Navy after Sentinel Reid had taken apart, item by item, her reasoning with regard to why she had accepted the now-confirmed intolerable former agent’s record without even performing the requisite investigation, standard under NCIS protocol, before calling in their internal IA offices, much less a two agency joint administrative hearing. By the time the Sentinel had finished questioning the director, she had been practically squirming in her seat and Deputy Secretary Sanchez’s glare at the woman took on an almost physical
manifestation. While it wasn’t particularly common knowledge in Washington ‘power-circles’, Deputy Sanchez held to what many considered outdated values, including the idea that guides regardless of gender were to be cherished and protected, even if they were capable of protecting themselves- as numerous guides in his past commands had discovered. While he would not sideline or diminish their duties or responsibilities in any way, any guide who came into his command could always be assured of being assigned sufficient back up, the best available equipment, and be certain in the knowledge that he (and everyone under his command) would move heaven and earth to get them back if their positions were ever compromised.

As far as John was concerned, Director Shepard had probably sealed her own fate by attempting to railroad a guide who was even tangentially under his command.

The last question remaining was Erin’s fate.

Admittedly, John hadn’t been looking forward to Henry’s retirement when he and Erin would have to finally have the conversation he’d been long putting off - to inform her that she had essentially reached the pinnacle of her career and that while he was, indeed, slated to move into Henry’s position, she would not be moving into his position; however, judging by how Guide Heart had reacted to Erin (while not outright declaring Erin hostile, certainly stating Erin was clearly prejudiced against Sentinel Reid but capable of objectively testifying on her own behalf), it looked like they were going to have to have an entirely different conversation. That is, they would if Sentinel Reid left anything left of Erin’s credibility to ground the remnants of her career on.

As the session break called after Director Shepards’ testimony came to a close, Deputy Director Hammond turned back to face the well. According to the witness docket, Agent Hotchner was up next, then Agent Fornell, and finally Erin.

ブレンキン

“Agent Fornell, please detail the events leading up to Agent Sack’s interview of Guide DiNozzo.”

“Roughly 12:30 that afternoon, SAIC Roberto Cruz called me into his office it inform me that NCIS was being forced to transfer a case that they had just picked up due to discovery of evidence implicating one of the MCRT members. In our department, I’m the unofficial liaison of sorts with the MCRT due to a friendly-rivalry of sorts with the MCRT Team Lead, SSA Gibbs, who’s already testified, and SAIC Cruz wanted to take the case. SAIC Cruz briefed me on the details of the case, and I have to admit, my jaw dropped a bit. If he’d said that Ziva David, their Mossad Liaison was implicated, I’d think it was only to be expected; or that the probie, McGill, had killed someone then panicked and tried to cover it up, it wouldn’t be out of the range of possibility, but DiNozzo? For him to be the primary suspect? There had to be something up.”

“Why would you say that? When your partner was clearly ready to railroad Guide DiNozzo without, without your intervention.”

“Look, this has nothing to do with DiNozzo being a guide. Hell, right up until you put Sacks against the wall, I was pretty certain he was a Sentinel, who’d lost his guide, but one thing I’ve always been certain of, is that Agent Anthony DiNozzo, Guide or Sentinel or what not, is a hell of an agent. I don’t think he knew it, but I was in Baltimore, on the op that he helped Gibbs with, acting the part of the sleazy money launderer go between so it wouldn’t work to have just showed up and shake hands with the police officer who’d down Joey Doughnuts or whatever his cover was that time. But although we didn’t advertise it, Gibbs was wired and I got to listen in to every minute of their dialogue, and when I got back the first thing I did was to pull his records planning to recruit him, only to find out that Gibbs had beaten me to the punch. I still throw job offers at him every time I get called in to a case with any of their teams. I’ve watched DiNozzo over the years, and he’s
never crossed the line. He can kill someone in self-defense, and has, but to kill someone and cut up
the body, then drop it on a marine base? To me, that wasn’t even in the range of possibility. That’s
why I called, Agent Hotchner as soon as I left SAIC Cruz’s office and asked for your team to
profile him. As soon as I’d read the so-called evidence against him, I knew I was going to need
more than just my own certainty to go on.”

“And, what were your instructions to Agent Sacks?”

“I told him to pull a thorough background check, to file a request for his phone records to track
down DiNozzo’s whereabouts during the previous seventy-two hours prior to the discovery of the
legs, and to submit a request for his credit and debit card records for the same period to verify any
gaps that weren’t discernable.”

“At any point, did you become aware that he wasn’t following the instructions you’d given him?”

“Yes.”

“When was that?”

“Roughly ten minutes before your arrival.”

“As I understand it, and the interrogation room’s records confirm, Guide DiNozzo had already
been in the interrogation room for approximately twenty-two minutes before that. Why were you
delayed in reaching this conclusion?” Sentinel Reid’s tone was cutting, clearly the sentinel was
holding Agent Fornell at least partly to blame for his subordinate’s actions.

“Frankly, I misjudged Agent Sacks. In the past, he’s been a relatively good agent, and usually able
to work without supervision in most matters. The tasks I assigned him - while slightly time
consuming - were tasks he’s done routinely, and I wanted to speak with our forensic analyst about
what knowledge would be required to fabricate the evidence and whether there were any elements
of the evidence that would point to it being planted.”

From the way Tony’s head popped up, his eyes wide in surprise at Tobias’s admission, he realized
that Tony probably hadn’t been aware that Tobias hadn’t bought into the evidence even for a
second. With that in mind, even though he was a so-called ‘mundane’, Tobias understood the idea
of ‘emoting’ and for the first time in over two decades (since a very, very brief flirtation with an
incredibly attractive guide in San Francisco), Tobias tried to ‘emote’ - focusing on the respect,
humor, and certainty that felt Tony was a ‘brother at arms’. He’d never, for a second, believed that
Tony was capable of what he’d been accused of, if he had never found a way to prove Tony was
innocent, well, he would have damn sure found a way for him to slip custody until he and Gibbs
could figure the mess out and put it to rights.

“And were there?” Sentinel Reid asked, and this time it was Tobias’s turn to stare because the
sentinel’s tone had gone from icy disdain to almost friendly.

“Yeah…” Tobias answered still a bit flummoxed by the sudden change in attitude. “Yes, there
were.”

”And those were?” Reid questioned, again in the same almost warm tone.

“Well, the dump site to begin with; it just didn't match with what we knew of the rest of the crime -
at that time. Our forensic science analyst, Edmond Parsha told me that everything about the crime
was medically precise from the separation of the legs from the body to the removal of the circular
shape of skin to the image of the blood drop that was found. Not to mention that the tip of the
evidence glove was cut perfectly. So the presumed killer used all this precision and then decided to take the legs out to the woods and supposedly 'dumped' them in a way that was supposed to look like they were accidentally found just under the edge of the bed of leaves?"

"If the presumed killer had a thing for forests and hadn't wanted them to be found, there are a lot better places to do it than on a marine base, in a copse that’s well-known to double as the base's version of look-out point when they aren’t running daily military exercises … and by well-known I mean so well-known that I'd heard about it before all this. So, whoever put them there wanted them to be found. The top three reasons that I know of for criminals to dump bodies out in the open where they'll be easily found are: first, to make an example of someone, which usually means that enough's left of the body for everyone to recognize who and have a good idea why it happened otherwise the example would be useless; second, to send a message, which usually entails something being written somewhere or the person’s identity being well enough known or the details of the death being close enough to other cases - that the message is obvious; as both of those were ruled out by the fact that there wasn't enough of the body dropped for witnesses to easily identify the person and pass along what they’d seen … and no obvious message, I focused on the third reason: namely, to implicate an innocent party for their crimes, and there was a hell of a lot to support that theory."

"Was there?" Sentinel Reid prompted, seeming content to let him continue as he’d started, which Tobias took as a good sign - especially compared to how little latitude Reid had given Director Shepard answering his questions turning her words back on her frequently and making her explain answer after answer in minute detail pushing her to inadvertently admit that she’d wanted Tony compromised and feeling that he had to earn his way back on the team.

"The bit of glove with the fingerprint was suspect, right from the start; gloves just don't tear like that. The edges were too smooth, and leaving a perfect, intact, unsmudged print? That just doesn't happen."

Turning to the panel, half of whom had probably never worn evidence gloves, much less considered the differences between standard issue medical gloves, and the heavier guage evidence gloves, Tobias wasn't surprised to see some skepticism in several of their expressions. Whether they believed that he was backtracking, after the fact, to cover himself or doubted what he was saying about the gloves, but he wanted to make certain they understood that - outside of clearly being framed - there was no motivation for Tony to even consider manipulating Reid, into threatening Sacks, especially as revealing that he was a guide would have given him an inarguable defense following a simple empathic reading.

“Look, I know it’s easy to think that we could overlook a glove being torn in a hurry to get rid of evidence, but that’s not taking into account an important factor. Field investigators, especially field investigators with a background in local law enforcement have accumulated thousands of hours of performing manual searches: digging into boxes, under beds and cushions, reaching into dark spaces, behind panels, under floorboards, and the like… where sharp points and edges could be needles, blades, even booby-traps. As a result, paying attention to the state of your gloves isn’t just a matter of protecting evidence from contamination but protecting yourself from unnecessary injury. There is no way that any investigator, much less Guide DiNozzo, would have ignored anything that caught and pulled the glove enough to tear the tip off completely, the force of which, by the way, would have insured that the fingerprint would have smudged. Parsha felt the same, but agreed to run several tests so that we could exclude the possibility. “

“Then there was the blood, Parsha compared the blood sample to a variety of spatter patterns, and couldn't find any that would leave a single drop of that shape and size without leaving others in a directional pattern. As unlikely as it would have been for a trained and experienced field agent to
ignore the tip of a glove being completely sliced off from the tip of a glove he was wearing, suggesting that it could have done so while cutting DiNozzo, without getting a single molecule of blood on the inside or outside of the glove moves it from the unlikely to the improbable, and doing so while dropping only a single perfectly shaped drop of blood without a directional shaping moves from the improbable to the fictional. And all of it, dropped in the middle of the woods, surrounded with loamy soil, dew, and a thick ground cover of fallen leaves, without even a single trace of contamination? That’s something you’d only see on the big screen, not in real life.”

“So, it was clear to you that Guide DiNozzo was innocent of what he was being accused of with respect to the planted evidence? May I ask what your opinion was of the accusation that he used empathic manipulation to indirectly threaten Agent Sacks?”

“It’s a load of crap. First, that is precisely what the suppressive shielding is designed to prevent. You may have been able to read him from the outside of the room, but if you’d been inside the room trying to read outward, it would have been a different matter entirely. Suppressive shielding works on both Guides and Sentinels a the reverse of white noise, using random clicks at varying sound levels as well as sparks of static electric charge and intermittent shifts of chilled and heated air through the vents to prevent either from concentrating sufficiently to use their abilities. Second, there was no motivation to do so, even if he had been aware of you outside of the locked and shielded room. He knew his team was investigating the case, and regardless of how much of a jackass Sacks was being at the moment, manipulating an assault would only make his case look worse and there was no way he’d get out of the building even if he got past us. But to top it off, I saw the kid’s face the second the door opened; however, that connection happens between guides and sentinels, it hit him like a ton of bricks and practically knocked him out of his chair. There was flat out no way that he could have managed it even if he had known what was going on outside of that room.”

“I see, am I right to presume that you included this in your report?”

“Yeah,” Tobias answered before grimacing as it brought to mind Associate Director Strauss’s repeated rejections of his report.

“And when you filed your reports, were there any addendums requested?”

“Not by SAIC Cruz. He read them, thanked me, signed off on them, after which we discussed potential counseling and retraining options that use to get Sacks back on track.”

“Is it fair to say that SAIC Cruz was satisfied with your report?”

“Yes, he seemed to be?”

“Then, can you explain why seven addendums were filed to your report, that when opened, appear to be revisions instead of addendums?”

“Yeah, Assistant Director Strauss contacted me and ordered me to send her a revised report on the events from the time you arrived until the time that in her words ‘Agent Sacks was taken hostage’... with more detail. When I gave her more detail, she told me to get rid of the speculation; when I gave her dry facts, she didn’t seem to like the picture it painted of Sacks and sent back a snarky note reminding me that Sacks was my partner, which isn’t precisely true as I’m his supervisor. After the fourth round of this, she started sending me copies back with revision notes. Some of the phrases, I could use without problem, but a number of them were … exaggeration the kindest term for it. The last revision she sent was so far off the mark, I included SAIC Cruz in my response and informed that I could not make the revisions she’d requested as they amounted to perjury.”
“Deputy Director, I would like to ask that these emails be retrieved and entered into evidence.”

“You can’t do that!” Assistant Director Strauss protested, jumping to her feet. “Those are private conversations.”

“Actually, Erin, he can and I agree.” The Deputy Director retorted, frowning, “I would like to see these emails, myself.”

“Thank you, Sir. I would also like to reserve the right to recall SSA Fornell with regard to these emails.”

“Granted.”

“Thank you, Sir. SSA Fornell, is there anything else that you feel should be reported to this hearing?”

“Yes,” Tobias sighed before straightening and turning to face DiNozzo. “I feel I owe an apology to Guide DiNozzo for permitting Agent Sacks to continue harassing him. While I am a fairly empathically numb ‘mundane’ and, at the time, I was not aware of the fact that Sacks was emoting at you nor the nature of the empathic print, in retrospect, I realize that I should not have permitted Sacks to continue to question you and should have ordered him back to the tasks that he’d been ordered to do in the first place. The only explanation I can offer is that while I may not have a sentinel’s aural capacity, I did hear Gibbs instruct you to stall and agreed with his tactic as we were going to need time to clear you. When I returned to watch Sack’s ‘interview’, if it could be called such, to me, it appeared that while you were keeping your cool, you had him spinning in his shoes and the situation well in hand to keep him busy until I could find something solid to clear you. Instincts and years of experience just don’t stand up in court the way tangible - even if faked - evidence will. I know and knew then that this wasn’t fair to you, but justified it to myself with the thought that letting you go to jail for crimes you didn’t commit was exponentially worse. For that, the toll it took on you, and the impact it had on your bond. I apologize.”

“Thank you, Agent Fornell. Deputy Director, I have nothing further to ask of SSA Fornell, at this time.”

“Very well, SSA Fornell, I would like to speak with you after this hearing. Please make certain your schedule is open.”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Sentinel Reid, you may continue. I believe that Assistant Director Strauss was next on your witness list.”

“Yes, Sir, however, Guide DiNozzo has requested that he be allowed to lead the questioning, if there is no objection?”

As Tobias was stepping away from the witness table, he noticed the assistant director seeming to relax and wanted to shake his head.

While Sentinel Reid could certainly put someone on the defensive and turn their words against them, he was at least straight forward. You knew when he was on the attack. Tobias still remembered Baltimore, the five or six interrogations that he’d seen DiNozzo run in the years since, and the ‘interrogation’ he’d put Sacks through. Strauss didn’t know what she was up against.

And, in his opinion, it couldn’t happen to a nicer gal.
And yes, another three part-er rears its head. As much as I wanted to give Spencer another 'I am Sentinel, hear me roar!' scene, Guide DiNozzo was sitting at the back of my thoughts whispering, 'you know you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar?' and I decided it was only fair that he got his shot, too.
Justifications

Chapter Notes

Just a small note: I have to give serious kudos to NCIS writers and Michael Weatherly for crafting Tony DiNozzo's panache. I've tried for weeks to imbue a bit of it here, and it's been a struggle. I leave it to you to decide if I was at all successful, but hope you enjoy.

ブレンキン

"I have never heard of a more ridiculous notion, 
than fearing the claws, wings, teeth, tail, and flame of a dragon, 
but trusting in its eyes."

"Whyever would you say that? Dragon’s eyes are beautiful!"

“Indeed, they are, and you should take a lesson in that: 
Death loves and abides with beauty. You may find them most often in the other’s company.”

unnamed

ブレンキン

Q, When will you have the feed actually operational? SH
Patience Brother, I am certain that Q is working as quickly as he can. MH.
Q?
Q?
Q?
Q?
Stop texting me, S, I can either work on getting the feed going or answer your texts, choose. No, I can’t do both! My, can you please see to him and let me focus? Oh, how grown up you are, Q, still running to My!
Q, Mycroft, it’s John. I have the phone and will keep hold of it until... oh,... I see. Good. Thank you, Q.

From a small, almost inconsequential communications office close to a locked fire exit on the lowest floor of White Hall, an East London three-tenant flat, and a small but impressively stocked computer lab, recently relocated to one of London’s National Gallery’s restoration rooms - three brothers and their companions watched a personally important, but politically irrelevant administrative hearing held in the Americans’ FBI - Hoover Building, through the tapped into feed that their youngest brother had ‘navigated’ the Americans’ security protocols to arrange.

On their various devices screens, instead of the cousin, whom they had expected to see leading the questioning, a man somewhere between the oldest and second oldest brother’s ages was crossing the well to address a ‘frumpy’ older woman, with the stamped-sour look of a bureaucrat (a look that each of them were familiar with from many incarnations).

The only thing that held off another spate of bickering texts between the two youngest was the suddenly visible, quite-elegant cuff resting in pride of place on the guide's right wrist.

The forged carbon? Q
Yes. SH.

Very fitting. Q

I know. SH

ブレンキン

"Assistant Director Strauss, er… how do you do? I realize we haven't met formally. My name is Anthony D. DiNozzo. I'm well… I guess it's redundant to say this, but I'm Spencer's guide. It's a pleasure to meet you."

"Guide DiNozzo," the bureaucrat huffed, "Just ask your questions so we can get back to work."

"Yes, Ma'am. Of course, before we start, though, I'd just like to say … well, I'm sorry."

"And what exactly are you sorry for?" the woman asked archly.

"Well, that you were drug into all of this. I mean, like I told Chip, eh… Charles… or well, Mr. Sterling, like I told Mister Sterling, I get why Agent Sacks and Director Shepard don't like me. Lot's of people don't; I have a talent at getting on people’s nerves. So, it's not really a surprise that they would try to jam me up for something I didn't do, but it wasn't right for them to play you. I mean as difficult and as embarrassing as I've found it, at least, outside of my boss, no one's here that I work with or have to sit in meetings with, knowing that they'll be thinking about and remembering… Well, I just wanted to say I'm sorry, and that I know it will be hard for the next few months or weeks… or at least until the next scandal or screw up comes along to distract everyone. With the size of the FBI, it will probably be a big one, but I guess you've had to weather these bouts before?"
“Again, my apologies, but back to my question, Assistant Director, when did you first become aware that Director Shepard manipulated you into calling this hearing?”

“That’s not a question I can answer.”

“Ma’am, are you saying that you can’t answer because despite the evidence presented throughout the hearing you are having difficulty recognizing how you were duped by Director Shepard and Agent Sacks… or because you conspired with Director Shepard to convene this hearing - knowing that it was based on false testimony that in and of itself amounted to bond interference?

“Those are gross oversimplifications that cast negative connotations on our actions.” She protested.

“Erin, you know exactly what he’s asking; answer the question.” Deputy Director Hammond ordered grimly.

Before she could reply, however, Guide DiNozzo held up his hand, and intervened, asking, “Sir, if I may, I’d like to change my question? Perhaps, if we drill down into the events a little deeper, it might help her answer the question.”

“Very well, Guide DiNozzo, rephrase your question.”

The guide nodded his head and turned back to the associate director with a smile that could only be described as condescendingly sympathetic.

“Asso… I mean Assistant Director, looking back over the events we have been discussing, how long did it take you to discover that an incident presumably occurred in the interrogation room involving an agent on one of the major case response teams under your command?”

“The following day.”

“So, you were kept out of the loop for close to eighteen hours, then?”

"I was not kept out of the loop! Agent Hotchner informed me of Sentinel Reid's phone call and request immediately. As it was well within the BAU scope and jurisdiction to investigate allegations as well as false allegations made against active field agents of any Federal Agency, I readily granted authorization to Agent Hotchner to pursue the investigation.” Strauss answered officiously.

“I see, then, may I presume you were already aware that Sentinel Reid and I were subject to a so-called ‘instinctual’ bond and that Sentinel Reid, as my sentinel exercised his right to investigate threats to myself and to our bond.”

“Under Agent Hotchner’s supervision.” The woman’s sneer was visible even over the cctv feed and did absolutely nothing to improve their opinion of the woman.

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She’s walking right into it! Q protested.

I did say. SH

Given her rank in a national agency… Q offered to explain his prior supposition.

She’s par for the course. SH

Surely Not!
In their separate locations, each of the younger brothers were unknowingly mimicking each other’s response to their eldest brother screwing up their expressions and (much to the amusement of their respective companions) sticking their tongues out in the rough general direction of their eldest brother’s last text message. Not that their respective companions didn’t have their own points of irritation with the eldest and most manipulative brother, but knowing the younger brothers as they did, each found it easily amusing to watch such brilliant men indulge in such childlike behavior.

If you’re finished… MH. The eldest answered, clearly having anticipated an ‘unspoken’ response… unless he had his brothers under cctv surveillance as well, which wasn’t entirely out of the range of possibility.

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“What?!?” Assistant Director Strauss almost squawked in protest to a question they had, indeed, been too distracted to hear (not that either would ever admit it to the eldest).

“I’m sorry, if the question was confusing… let me ask it another way?” While it wasn’t immediately noticeable, as the questioning continued, Guide DiNozzo’s speech rate subtly slowed until the second question was delivered in a rate and tone which suggested that he had little belief in her mental capacity to understand or answer the question put to her,

“I realize that you are a mundane so may not be well-acquainted with certain sentinel and guide related terminology, so before we move forward, I’d just like to confirm, do you feel you have a firm understanding of the term ‘intolerable’?”

“Of course, I do. Guide DiNozzo, I am the assistant director of the Critical Incident Response Group, supervising staff in more than 60 field offices, residential agencies, and overseas postings, 800 of whom are sentinels or guides. I am very familiar with sentinel and guide jargon.” Strauss retorted clearly offended.

“Hmmm. Well, I do agree, in your position you should understand the terminology, Ma’am; although, I would note that according to the Sentinel and Guide council’s last survey, performed May 5th of last year and presented in the Annual Status Update to Federal Agencies, the CIRG currently employees 2,377 sentinels and guides, roughly 800 of whom are active or ‘online’ in ‘our’ terminology. Simply not having come online does not ‘reduce’ a sentinel or guide’s status to being mundane, you understand?”

Strauss visibly jerked at the word ‘reduce’ but otherwise only glared at the guide’s correction of her figures.

“But, let me ask again. At the time that you watched the observation room’s recordings, did you understand the meaning and implications of the term ‘intolerable’?” DiNozzo’s voice and rate had maintained the condescendingly gentle tone, which clearly infuriated the woman beyond reason, given her quick unthinking agreement.

“Yes, Guide DiNozzo. I have 37 years experience with the FBI, and understand quite a bit more than you seem to think a ‘mundane’ is capable of understanding. I fully understand what intolerable means.”

“I see… May I ask, have all your 37 years been administrative, for example as a staff assistant or
secretary? Or, have you ever were you ever given the chance - even briefly - to work through an actual investigation? Even as a training activity?"

“I will have you know that I was an active field agent for 25 years - investigating criminal offenses in the CIRG before being promoted to Assistant Director.”

“I see. Then I’m afraid I’m confused. Perhaps you could explain something to me? Given your years of experience and understanding of Guide & Sentinel as well as investigatory procedures?”

“Of course, I can.” Strauss answered smugly.

“As I understand it, one of the underlying tenets of investigatory methodology is that relying on a perceived suspect’s past behavior is insufficient to assign culpability and there is instead a necessity of compiling a thorough and detailed record of documentary support and intelligence gathering to develop a conceptual framework of incidents under investigation. Is that consistent with your experience?”

“Yes.” Strauss answered briefly, perhaps sensing the trap she’d already walked into.

“And it’s a practice you, yourself, have followed?”

“Of course.”

“Okay, so we agree on that. What about the premise that a thorough and detailed record should take into account the activity of suspects not only during the incident, but before and after it as well, and that the ‘goal of all investigations is to find the truth, and that as much intelligence gathering as possible should be completed to accurately identify not only the suspect’, but the subject’s motivations, and methods as well, so that ‘the culmination of information gathered during the surveillance phase of investigations can be integrated with information collected during the forensic analysis of electronic media to create a complete picture of events’?”

“Yes, of course.” Strauss responded, shifting uncomfortably.

“Hmmm.” The guide paused, picking up a folder and thumbing through it, going back and forth through the pages until he found a particular page and his head popped up, his face taking on an ‘Ah Ha!’ expression as he returned to her side. “Could I ask you to look over the comparison of the documentation and evidence turned over by the NCIS team to Agent Sacks and the documentation and evidence turned over by Agent Sacks to the BAU. As you’ll note the second column contains only two additional items a notation of a request to run a background check, and the notation that I was taken into custody for questioning. Based on the two premises we’ve just discussed, how would you describe Agent’s Sacks investigation from the time he received the first inventory to the time he handed the file and it two supplements to Guide Gideon and Sentinel Reid?”

“Lacking.” The woman responded carefully not adding any other information as she finally seemed to catch on to the Guide’s tack.

“In what way?”

“Agent Fornell should have ensured that Agent Sacks done his due diligence, before permitting you to be questioned. They both should have been aware that a simple background check would not provide evidence regarding whether you had the means or opportunity to do the act you had been accused. At the very least, your whereabouts during the potential timeline of the incident should have been verified.

“Yeah, that’s sort of what I thought.” Taking the file back, the Guide paused, cocked his head, and
asked a seemingly out of the blue question, “Assistant Director, have you ever met my father?”

“What? … I don’t know. Why are you even asking that?”

“Oh, I’m just curious; I’m named after him you see, and the handful of times that women have
taken an instant dislike to me without having even met me have all stemmed from well… romantic
entanglements with my father… but it doesn’t matter. Let’s move on. From what you’d seen Agent
Sack’s investigation wasn’t up to standards, which I don’t suppose should be a surprise given both
Agent Hotchner’s and Agent Fornell’s testimonies, but again Agent Sacks is just a Junior Agent,
not even Fornell’s SFA, and probably only has a couple of years experience under his belt.”

Although he wasn’t specifically asking a question, she nodded in response.

“Okay, I hope you don’t mind, but I’d like to be thorough here and just touch on the points that
have already been testified to, okay?”

“If it will keep you from wasting further time, certainly,” Strauss huffed, even as she seemed to be
relaxing at his change in subject.

“Okay, unless I’m missing something…

First, both you and SSA Hotchner testified that he called you immediately on receiving
Sentinel Reid’s report noting that Sentinel Reid and I were in the process of an instinctual
bond, in relation to which Sentinel Reid was exercising his rights with regard to any
perceived threats to the bond.
Second, you gave authorization for this, as you noted, to continue under Agent Hotchner’s
supervision.
Third, within two hours and forty-five minutes, Sentinel Reid’s investigation had identified
the true suspect as Charles Stirling; Charles Stirling assaulted and critically injured
Technical Analyst Abby Scuito, who was only saved due to the intervention of newly
emergent Sentinel Jimmy Palmer, Guide Penelope Garcia, and Guide Jason Gideon… and
fled to the Sentinel and Guide center where he hoped to assault and kill me as well. Sentinel
Reid and Agent Hotchner arrived at the guide center during the confrontation between
myself and Stirling, and even with Stirling armed with a knife and actively trying to kill me,
Sentinel Reid maintained control over his instincts and did not at any point ‘go feral’.

Can we agree on these points, so far?”

“Yes.”

“Thank you, Ma’am.” DiNozzo answered with a slight shift of his speech pattern to a warmer less
condescending rate and tone. Before he continued, “From there, as SSA Hotchner reported, his
team was called away, which forced him to transfer supervision of Agent Sacks to Agent Fornell
with S&G center guards, while Agent Fornell worked with the MCRT to wrap up the related
paperwork. He continued without giving her the chance to comment, “during which time Sentinel.
Ellison and Guide Sandberg were also called upon to address other issues arising from the Stirling
incident, including hiring - as it was readily apparent that he could not have passed standard
employment scans, much less the requisite deep scan required for employment at any level in a
local or federal law enforcement agency. As it turns out, Chipster was directly recruited and given
a handful of waivers to expedite the hiring process. I don't suppose that Director Shepard
mentioned signing off on those?”

"Hmm?" DiNozzo pressed mildly, before continuing, “No, I’d thought she probably hadn’t,” when
Strauss answered in the negative. “But then, she was clearly looking for a patsy, wasn’t she? Let’s
I fail to see the logic of extending her interrogation without pressing for a confession of some sort. Q.

He hardly needs a confession to undermine her aspirations, Dear Brother.

But, he'll get one. SH.

Perhaps. MH.

Care to wager otherwise? SH.

That's almost insulting, S; you might think I'm naive, but certainly I've never been accused of being callow.

Indeed, despite his current manner, it would be inadvisable to discount the implications of his instinctive match; however, any questions of his intention are certain to be resolved should we take the audacious step of redirecting our attention to the feed instead of bromidic prattling. MH.

Much to the amusement of their partners, the two younger brothers ever-so expressive faces screwed up with annoyance at the reminder, only barely restraining themselves from indulging in sticking out tongues or blowing raspberries with the knowledge that they had already given their partners far too much amusement from doing so.

"I only mention the Sentinel and Guide findings with regard to Chipster because as I reviewed their report, when my sentinel was questioning Director Sheppard, I noticed something that confuses me slightly which I'm hoping you can clear up for me, if I may?"

"And what would that be?" Strauss sneered.

"Well, if we could revisit our previous discussion of Agent Sacks' investigation of Stirling's frame job, or perhaps I should say lack of investigation, as you mentioned that it has been your customary practice to thoroughly investigate claims put before you... and I'm sure you have to have... in the past. I mean, I'm sure you weren't just given the position," his tone and overly sympathetic expression practically contradicted the seeming reassurance, but he was already moving on before she could object as the clearly wished to do, "so you see, that's why I'm confused: you agreed that Agent Sacks should have - as a matter of practice - gone further than a first level background check, the components of which include work status and history, S&G class and status, financials, and criminal history - if applicable- just in the course of a regular investigation."

"Guide DiNozzo, stop with your insinuation and your condescending comments. I certainly don't need you to tell me how to run an investigation. ask your question, let me answer it, and stop wasting the panel's time."

"Oh, I'll happy to, Ma'am. My question is this, when you have already testified that you were - kept in the loop regarding the incident in question, fully informed by reports from SAIC Hotchner and SSA Fornell, not misled by Director Shepard,
How do you justify not only disregarding the specific protocols you, yourself, noted were missing from Agent Sacks investigation by failing to ascertain, despite having signed out and -presumably-watched the recordings of both the observation and interrogation rooms (as you demonstrated in the submitted emails from SSA Agent Fornell attempting to suborn perjury), but further demonstrated your in depth awareness of Sentinel and Guide protocols by actively counteracting them at each and every turn?"

“I have not done any of those things.” Strauss veritably shrieked, her shrill protest and panicked outrage doing little to support her claim.

“Yes, Assistant Director Strauss, you have. Although, I have to agree with you about not doing any of the things you should have. I mean you say that Agent Sack’s investigation was lacking, when in fact, you, yourself, did not even pull the first level background check …. or my work status or my IA history from either NCIS or any of the department’s I’d previously worked in, nor my S&G class and status, nor financials, or any of the psych evals that I have had to pass after every shooting or on the job injury, which has happened several times to date. You disregarded reports from both SAIC Hotchner and Fornell… Well, I shouldn’t say that you ignored Fornell's." He paused in front of her to lay several sheets of paper in front of her, before continuing, "according to your emailed responses to SSA Fornell, you actually paid quite a bit of attention to to SSA Fornell's reports: ordering him to leave out details which referenced time-stamped incidents corroborated details that given into evidence should have halted this inquiry… and to include distorting details that by Agent Fornell's account amounted to perjury for the purpose of pushing this hearing forward and casting aspersions on the very nature of our instinctive bond as a forced non-consensual bond - a charge, which - if it had been substantiated - would have insured that I end up plunked on a bed right beside our good buddy Sterling insensate until I got too old to remember my own name. ...

'So I have to ask you again, given your long experience as an assistant director of the Critical Incident Response Group, more than 60 field offices, residential agencies, and 800 active sentinels or guides, how do you justify your willing and -by your own testimony- unmanipulated attempt of bond interference?"

The Assistant Director stared at him in shocked silence.

"Nothing to say Associate Director?"

"It's Assistant Director!" She nearly screeched before she visibly restrained herself.

"Really is that all you have to say? Nothing else?"

"Because I just don't understand: you say Shepard didn't trick you into it; as far as I know, we haven't met before; you apparently didn't even bother to read up on me; and you say you never had anything going on beneath the sheets with my father, so…"

"How dare you?" She shrieked jumping to her feet. "Your disgusting insinuations are out of line, offensive, and totally off-base!"

"Are they? So, why the hate, then? What have you got against me?"

"This isn't even about you!" She retorted, before immediately stiffening and freezing in shock.
Astonishing. His accusations were nearly puerile. Q.

Precisely. He recognized the probability that she could come up with defenses for her lack of proper investigation, so distracted her with challenges to her ego while laying out the proof of her malfeasance. Whether he knew that she would confess on the basis of it, remains to be seen; however, the distraction was clearly effective. MH.

He knew. SH.

"Really. Considering that I'm the one who stood a good chance of being suppressed if I couldn't come up with a defense in the two hours you left me to come up with one, I think it's about me. What did you think it's about?"

Strauss, still standing, glared at him silently.

"C'mon Associate Director, even if you weren't being quite honest and Director Shepard tricked you into it, you must have had some idea what this hearing was about. If it wasn't about me, what was it about?"

"It's Assistant Director." Strauss snarled, before lapsing into stubborn silence.

Deputy Director Hammond, clearly having lost patience with her evasions, interrupted at that point, ordering, "Strauss, you are directed to answer Guide DiNozzo's question."

"John, I…"

"No, Assistant Director, your options are either to answer the question or request legal counsel."

Strauss stared at the Deputy Director for several seconds, before pinching her lips and looking away.

After several moments, Hammond sighed and turned to the remaining members of the panel, "Ladies, Gentlemen, I believe that we have enough to suspend the meeting while Assistant Director Strauss arranges legal counsel."

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