

## Hiding In Plain Sight by Xanthe



Story archived: <http://www.xanthe.org/hiding-in-plain-sight/>

### Story Notes:



## NCIS Awards, 2009



Nominated in the Best Crossover/Fanfiction/Slash category of the **Stargate Fan Awards**

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When a serial killer murders three marines on Atlantis, NCIS are called in to investigate. However, their arrival brings complications for everyone – revealing a lie, a prophecy, a secret and a nemesis.

This story is set in my BDSM universe, and takes place a few months after the events depicted in **General & Dr Sheppard**. You don't have to read the other stories in that universe (**General & Dr Sheppard** and **Coming Home**) to make sense of this although some events from those fics are referenced in this one, particularly **General & Dr Sheppard**. Some of the concepts of the universe are also referenced.

NCIS – this story is set late in S3/early S4 of NCIS, but the events of "Kill Ari" and "Twisted Sister" have happened. The events of "Hiatus" won't happen in this universe. Only Ducky knows the full details about Gibbs's first wife.

SGA – this story is set early/mid-S4 of SGA, only Woolsey replaced Elizabeth on Atlantis instead of Sam Carter, and Carson obviously didn't die.

For the most part, similar things have happened to the characters as happened on the shows but not necessarily in the same order. It'll be clear as you read!

The BDSM Universe: The premise of this universe is that everyone is bisexual and BDSM relationships are the norm – there's a genetic hardwiring for both bisexuality and BDSM. Most people identify as either dominant or submissive and this is their choice and theirs alone. They usually discover their orientation at puberty and might experiment to be sure. There is no value judgement in being either one - dominants aren't superior to submissives. Switches exist but are much rarer. When couples get serious the dominant might ask if they can collar the submissive, and the couple might start eating from the same plate - a significant ritual in this universe called "sharing a plate". Some people don't identify as dominant or submissive at all, and some people aren't bisexual, either. This is mentioned but isn't integral to this story. People talk about sex much more easily in this universe than in our own, and have a different set of sexual standards.

Things to bear in mind about this universe:

- It's a fantasy. I'm not making a case for such a universe being better than our own. I'm not even saying this is what a BDSM/bisexual universe would be like if such a thing existed \*!\*. This is just the way I wanted to write this universe. This story is primarily intended to be romantic and escapist. I can't repeat often enough that the entire universe is, and is intended to be, a fantasy, requiring, as so many fantasy universes do, a willing suspension of disbelief. The story totally has internal logic but the concept is clearly a bit mad.
- In the interests of story flow and accessibility I don't concentrate a great deal on instruction into the finer points of lifestyle BDSM or differentiate between different styles of BDSM particularly. This is not a how-to guide. If you want to understand more about lifestyle BDSM, please go to [www.bondage.com](http://www.bondage.com)
- This story is clearly meant to be "big" in all senses of the word. This universe is all about the big emotions, the claiming, the collaring, and the possessive tops. I'll be the first to admit that some pretty bonkers things happen plot-wise but they are appropriate for this universe, which lends itself to the melodramatic!
- The people in this universe have been shaped by a different kind of society, so while I keep them broadly in character, insofar as I see those characters, they are not the same as the characters we know from the shows. It is definitely an AU. I wouldn't write them this way in the show's canon universe, obviously. See point one about fantasy!
- This fic and this universe aren't everyone's cup of tea – it seems absolutely fine to me that some people won't like it - they should therefore not read it. I'm really just having a lot of fun with this universe and hope people read it in that spirit.

Warnings: This story features lifestyle BDSM, D/S powerplay, and disciplinary and erotic spanking. There is one minor character (SGA) death. There are also scenes of torture.

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**Hiding in Plain Sight - instalments on my LJ**

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## Chapter 1 by Xanthe

“I don’t see why we need some outsider coming in and telling us what to do,” Rodney said, his entire body shifting restlessly, the way it always did when he was agitated.

They were standing in a reception party on the south pier, watching the Daedalus go through her docking procedures.

“Three marines have been murdered, Rodney,” John told him, placing a hand on Rodney’s wrist. The effect was instant; Rodney stilled, and he leaned in towards John, their thighs and upper arms touching. John smiled to himself; he doubted that Rodney had even noticed and that was part of the thrill of having such a complex submissive. After over two years of marriage he thought he had a pretty good idea how to handle Rodney, but his brilliant husband could still surprise him occasionally so he always had to be on his toes.

“Yes, I know, but that’s *\*your\** jurisdiction!” Rodney complained. “I mean, you’ve always handled this kind of thing on Atlantis.”

“This isn’t the Wraith, or life-sucking black shadow entities, or anything else killing our people, Rodney,” John reminded him. “It’s murder – plain, old-fashioned murder, and, despite my best efforts, we still have no idea who did it.”

“Yes, but bringing in these other people, it’s like they’re saying you can’t do your job properly,” Rodney complained. John stiffened.

“Rodney, three of my men have died in as many months, one a month, all killed in the exact same way, and I haven’t been able to find whoever is doing it. I’m not proud – I’ll take all the help I can get,” John hissed. Rodney turned to him, his blue eyes contrite.

“I’m sorry. I know how much this has upset you...I just don’t like the idea of anyone coming in here and criticising you,” Rodney said softly.

“I know.” John tangled his hand affectionately in the long, curly ends of Rodney’s hair.

“And if Elizabeth was still here, she would never have sanctioned this,” Rodney muttered. John sighed – on that, at least, Rodney was right.

“But we’re under new management now, Rodney, and if this is the way Woolsey wants to play it, and if it means I don’t have to go into another marine’s quarters and find him staked out on the floor with his insides gutted and his throat cut then that’s fine by me,” John told him firmly.

John glanced at Woolsey. He felt kind of sorry for the guy; he was a submissive, which wasn’t a problem - some of the best commanding officers John had worked under were subs – but Woolsey was fresh out of what John suspected had been a stifling and unsatisfactory marriage. You could still see the little line around his neck from where his collar had been, and every so often Woolsey lifted his hand to rub the line absently, clearly missing the security the collar had given him. He was a man who liked rules – both in his personal and professional life, and he had a penchant for doing everything by the book. Needless to say, that didn’t always sit well with John’s more free-wheeling style of command.

John was trying not to get into unnecessary confrontations with the man, but, like Rodney, he wasn’t best pleased that Woolsey had called in NCIS to investigate the murders of these marines. He was keeping that to himself though – his wayward sub might pick up on it but John wasn’t going to fuel that particular fire by speaking his mind on the subject. Rodney’s loyalty and volatility were both well known to him – the combination in this instance might be explosive.

“So, Carson, did Steven say what these guys were like?” he called to the doctor, who was standing next to Woolsey in the welcoming committee, a goofy look in his eyes. Carson’s husband had been gone for six weeks doing the scheduled run to Earth and back, and John was pretty sure he wouldn’t be able to survive if Rodney was gone for that long so he had no idea how Carson had got through it – although the usually good-natured doctor had become more and more tetchy as the weeks had passed.

“Hmm?” Carson turned towards him, his eyes still far away.

“The NCIS agents Steven has been ferrying over from Earth – did he say what they were like?” Rodney butted in, clearly eager for some gossip.

“Funnily enough, we had other things to talk about in the very brief conversations we’ve been able to have since the Daedalus came within range,” Carson replied, rolling his eyes. John snorted at that.

Rodney was about to open his mouth to dig a bit further so John poked him in the thigh with

his finger to get him to shut up.

“But...” Rodney began. John shook his head.

“No need to ask – you’re about to find out,” he said, pointing at the Daedalus’s hatch which was just beginning to open.

“Oh shit,” Rodney breathed.

Yeah, oh shit, John thought, as a man emerged from the ship onto the south pier. John was a confident top, who had collared and kept his own sub for the past two and a half years...but, like all the other tops present on the pier, he recognised an uber-top when he saw one, and the hairs on the back of his neck stood on end.

Almost without realising it he felt the adrenaline surge and a sense of protective possessiveness kick in. He turned to Rodney, took his leash from his belt, and fastened it to Rodney’s collar, pulling him in close. Rodney melted against him, body fitting next to his in a way that was both familiar and reassuring, but John didn’t miss the little whimpering sound that Rodney made in the back of his throat.

The top who had emerged from the Daedalus was a decade or so older than John, and had an air of grizzled experience about him that made John feel like a ten year old standing in front of his father, Gil, in trouble for some misdemeanour or other. This top’s eyes were a startling blue, and you just knew they never missed a thing. He was tall and imposing, with a straight back and a toned physique, but that wasn’t what made him intimidating. No, it was those piercing eyes and the brisk, no-nonsense way in which he carried himself that made John’s hackles rise. He was good looking, with features that might once have been boyish but now, in middle age, had weathered into something harder and much edgier. Even so, John doubted there was a sub alive who wouldn’t find him extremely attractive. He didn’t appear to be making any kind of toppy statement in his clothing, which was a combo of plain black pants, black shirt, and a black jacket, but all the same, there wasn’t any chance at all that anyone would mistake him for a sub.

His hand was hanging loosely at his side and in it were five leashes. He didn’t even tug on them – he was so sure of his submissives’ obedience that he made no concessions to them and simply strode forward without glancing back, trusting them to keep pace. John craned his neck, eager to see the submissives that this man had collared.

They were an unusual bunch – there didn’t seem to be any unifying characteristics about them – this top clearly didn’t have a ‘type’. The one that took John’s eye immediately was the tall, handsome sub with brown hair. He had a mischievous look in his green eyes and John recognised immediately that he was trouble – not in the same way that Rodney had been when he’d first met him, but trouble all the same. He was wearing a pair of ass-hugging faded blue denim jeans and a tight black shirt, open just a little too much at the top to reveal an inviting patch of chest hair. There was a small silver and green earring in his left ear, and a studded bracelet on his right wrist. He was possibly slightly taller than his top, but if so only by an inch or two, and powerfully built, but John saw immediately that his wide

grin and laid-back body language hid something. This sub was sharp, those mischievous eyes missing nothing. He was also deceptively strong, and he knew how to game-play with the best of them; it wouldn't be wise to under-estimate him.

Then there was the pretty girl with the spider-web tattoo on her neck and the bright red lipstick. Her black hair was in pigtails, and she was wearing a short plaid skirt with heavy leather boots and a tight black tee shirt with a skeleton on the front. She also wore a number of studded wristbands and rings, and several chains around her neck, below her collar. She was the opposite to the other sub – her clothes screamed 'fear me' but her friendly green eyes and wide, open smile, hinted at a sweet nature. John noticed that of all of them, she stayed closest to Gibbs.

There was another woman, stunningly beautiful, with long, dark hair, deep brown eyes, and a 'don't fuck with me' look on her face. She was dressed in plain chocolate brown jeans and a tight green sweater, and there was something dangerous about the way she moved. There was no subterfuge to her - she wasn't deceptive, like the male sub. She moved like Teyla moved, with all the power and grace of a warrior, and John had a healthy respect for that kind of person. He was puzzled though – he was getting the same vibe off her that he got off Teyla and it wasn't the vibe of a collared submissive - maybe there was something deceptive about her after all.

If he wasn't sure about her, he was very sure about the man next to her, who couldn't have radiated a more submissive vibe if he'd tried. He had a sweet-face and beautiful eyes, but he looked nervous and strangely out of place in the clunky, formal suit and tie that hid his body. His clothing was in stark contrast to the more obviously provocative apparel of the first male sub. This sub looked as if he'd prefer it if tops didn't look at him, although John doubted many did considering whose collar he wore. He was tall, at least as tall as the first sub, maybe even slightly taller, and broad across the shoulders, but his hesitant nature made his height and breadth seem less imposing.

Then, finally, John's gaze fell upon a man older than the top leading him by perhaps a decade. He had a gentle, almost distracted air about him, and kind blue eyes, but John sensed an inner steel beneath the genteel façade. His hair was a faded blond, and his eyes sparkled with an insatiable curiosity. He was wearing a suit, complete with a bow tie, and he had the manner of an affable eccentric.

Colonel Steven Beckett escorted the NCIS agents towards the welcoming committee, and made the formal introductions.

"Mr Woolsey, this is Special Agent Jethro Gibbs and his team. Agents Anthony DiNozzo, Abigail Sciuto, Ziva David, Timothy McGee, and Dr Donald Mallard.

John blanked out the stuttering welcoming sounds Woolsey was making – it would take a submissive of extremely strong stuff to stand his ground on first meeting with a top like Gibbs, although he guessed that Steven Beckett hadn't been affected by the NCIS chief. Carson's husband was steady and strong – the kind of submissive John had met many times in the military, and who he knew he could count on in battle. Gibbs wasn't doing anything to

unsettle Woolsey – just his presence alone was enough to turn the man into a gibbering wreck.

John could feel his hackles rising as Woolsey turned to introduce him to Gibbs. Who the hell did this guy think he was, walking onto Atlantis like he owned the place, and bringing his five collared submissives with him? How many subs did one top need anyway? John couldn't imagine having room in his heart for anyone else - it was so full of Rodney. He didn't want, or need, any other subs. Besides, he had a feeling that Rodney would be really crap at sharing. John always felt that tops who collared more than one sub were just showing off – trying to big themselves up to cover some basic insecurity. This guy though...well, on first impressions he didn't seem remotely insecure.

"Pleased to meet you, General," Gibbs said, holding out his free hand. John took it, and gazed, unflinchingly, into those clear blue eyes.

"And you, Special Agent Gibbs," he replied, squeezing Gibbs's hand firmly, showing he wasn't about to be out-topped by this newcomer, whoever the hell he was. He wrapped his hand so tightly in Rodney's leash that it cut off the blood supply to his fingers.

"This is my husband, Dr Rodney Sheppard," he said. "He's the Head of Science on Atlantis."

Rodney didn't say a word, he just stood there, quiet and obedient by John's side. John wasn't sure if he was over-awed, or whether the pressure he was exerting on Rodney's leash was robbing him of speech. Gibbs nodded at Rodney but made no attempt to shake his hand. John was pleased about that – if Gibbs had asked for permission to touch Rodney he had a feeling he might have refused it, and that would have got this whole thing off to a really bad start. He didn't want this man touching Rodney; he didn't want this man within ten feet of Rodney if he could help it. Rodney was HIS, and he didn't like the idea of this man, with his five submissives, trying to collar a sixth.

John gave a low, almost inaudible growl at that thought, but Gibbs had already moved on and was being introduced to Carson. John was suddenly aware of Rodney's hand stroking his ass, gently but insistently.

"You know...you can tighten the leash if it'll make you feel better but could you just not hold it so close," Rodney whispered to him. "I think I'm gonna trip over your boots in a minute if you don't loosen up."

It was enough to snap John out of it and he gave his sub an apologetic grin and loosened his grip – but just a little. Rodney continued stroking his bottom, and slowly, very slowly, John felt his sudden, extreme sense of his own toppiness start to recede. It would seem that Rodney had also learned a trick or two about dealing with his top, he thought to himself wryly.

"I'll show you to your quarters – you'll no doubt want to get settled in – and then, uh, well, I'm not sure what you want to do next, but you're very welcome to..." Woolsey prattled on, as the newcomers began walking off into the distance.



DiNozzo turned around, and glanced at John with an assessing look as they went. He looked him up and down, and then his face broke into what John could only describe as a leer, and he gave him a wink. There was a sharp tug on his leash and he muttered a, “yes boss, coming boss,” before running slightly to catch up with the others.

Now it was Rodney’s turn to growl, and the gently stroking hand on John’s ass turned into a prod.

“I’m not looking,” John protested.

“You think he’s cute though, right?” Rodney pressed.

“Yeah, but \*trouble\*,” John snorted.

“You \*like\* trouble,” Rodney protested.

“Yes I do – and I have more than enough of it on my hands, thank you very much,” John replied, yanking Rodney’s leash slightly and pulling him in for a quick kiss. “It’s not as if you didn’t go all weak-kneed when you saw Gibbs anyway.”

“If I went weak-kneed it was simply from lack of oxygen because my top was strangling me with my own leash,” Rodney complained.

“So you didn’t happen to notice that we have an uber-top in our midst?” John asked.

Rodney’s eyes widened with feigned surprise. “Who? Gibbs?” he asked innocently. John slapped his ass for that and Rodney laughed and stole another kiss from him. “Seriously, you’re not really jealous are you?” Rodney asked.

John thought about it for a moment. “No,” he said finally. “Just...that guy is unsettling.”

“I think he’s supposed to be,” Rodney said. “But you know me – I’ve never been a fan of that kind of top. All strict rules and leash etiquette – bores me rigid. I much prefer what I’ve got.”

“Which is?” John raised an eyebrow, and they started walking back to their quarters.

“Well, you know, someone laid-back and a bit more casual.”

“You mean lax,” John said.

“No, I mean casual. I’m far too brilliant to be confined by a set of rigid rules,” Rodney said proudly. “You give me room to breathe.”

“And for that – I think a spanking is due,” John told him.

“What?” Rodney’s blue eyes were aghast, but John didn’t miss the little flash of hopeful

anticipation in them either. Rodney would go to hell and back to escape a real punishment but when John talked about this kind of spanking they both knew it was for pleasure.

“Yeah...just to remind you that I could impose some more rules, \*if\* I really wanted to,” John replied.

“And \*if\* you could be bothered to enforce them,” Rodney muttered.

“And for \*that\*, I’m gonna get out my clamps,” John said.

“Oh shit,” Rodney sighed, but the sound was swallowed by John swinging him close and kissing him hard until his body melted against that of his top, utterly submissive and compliant, which was just how John wanted him.

~\*~

“Nice.” Tony dumped his bag on the table and gazed around the suite of rooms. In the centre was a large living space, complete with big dining table. There was a galley kitchen off to one side and a smaller living room to accommodate anyone wanting some quiet time on their own. The bedrooms, all with en-suite bathrooms, opened off from the main living space. “Very nice,” Tony added appreciatively, throwing himself down on the sofa and putting his feet up on the coffee table. “First the ride on a spaceship, which, once you got over how cool it was, was actually pretty boring, and now this! I will be sleeping tonight on a completely different planet. It’s mind-blowing - I feel like I’m starring in my own movie.”

“Would that movie be ‘Zombies from Outer Space’?” Ziva asked. Tony made a face at her.

“Nope. It’d be, ‘Anthony DiNozzo – Intergalactic Hero Cop’,” Tony said, drawing his hand across empty space, imagining the title in his head. “Righter of wrongs, catcher of killers, and the best lay in two galaxies”.

“Even if he does say so himself,” McGee said, rolling his eyes at Ziva. She grinned.

“This, uh, ‘intergalactic hero cop’ – does he solve these crimes all by himself, or does he have any help?” Ziva asked, a dangerous look on her face. Tony shrugged and leaned back on the sofa, arms stretched along its back.

“I expect he has a couple of sidekicks,” he said confidently. “But he’s the hero – the star. They’re just there for show – they do a bit of fetching and carrying for him but he’s the man.”

“Uh huh,” Ziva said, her face a study in straightness. Tony knew that look all too well. He stiffened.

“Gibbs is behind me isn’t he?” he squirmed.

“Yes he is,” a voice said into his ear. “Nice to know your ego has room for a couple of

sidekicks though.”

“I didn’t mean...that is, I mean, you’re not one of them! I’m just...I’m referring to probie here, and Ziva. Not you. I mean obviously, if anyone is the man, you’re the man. I’m just...that wasn’t what I meant at all,” Tony waffled helplessly.

“Glad to hear it,” Gibbs said. Tony braced himself...and just when he relaxed, thinking it wasn’t going to happen, it did – and the smack landed square on the back of his head. “Now, perhaps the intergalactic hero cop would like to do some work,” Gibbs said dryly.

“Yes boss.” Tony got up quickly, grabbed his bag, threw it into the nearest bedroom, and returned to the living room.

“Okay,” Gibbs said to his subs. “I know this is all very new and exciting, and yes, DiNozzo, the idea that we’re in a different galaxy is mind-blowing – but, we have a job to do.”

“Yeah...about that,” Tony said. Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“It’s just that...I spent quite a bit of time talking to Colonel Beckett while we were on the Daedalus, and he was telling me about this stargate thing.”

Gibbs’s eyebrows crawled higher up his forehead.

“Okay...I don’t understand much about this kind of technology but was there a reason why we just spent eighteen days cooped up in a glorified tin-can when we could have stepped through a gate and got here in nano-seconds?”

“Tony has a point,” McGee butted in. “The stargate programme is top secret but seeing as we’re out here, I’m guessing we have clearance – so why not send us through the gate?”

“Three marines have been murdered,” Ducky mused. “You’d think they would want us out here sooner rather than later – is there a reason why we weren’t allowed to travel through this ‘stargate’, Jethro?”

“I was told they had some kind of a glitch with it and it wasn't considered safe to travel between galaxies with it,” Gibbs shrugged. “They weren't sure how long it would take to fix it so they made arrangements for us to travel here on the Daedalus instead.”

“Which was cool for the first three days but then got really dull,” Tony muttered.

“Okay, this isn’t our usual environment and that puts us at a disadvantage,” Gibbs said tersely. “However, I expect the same high standard of you out here as I do back home. We won’t have access to the same information or technical equipment but that’s no excuse for not doing our jobs properly. Ducky...” Dr Mallard looked up, and straightened. “Go and make friends with Dr Carson Beckett – he’s in charge of the medical facilities on the base. He’s also Colonel Beckett’s husband. I want you to set up an examining room and start autopsying the bodies.”

"I believe Dr Beckett has already conducted autopsies," Ducky said, glancing at the file of notes in his hand.

"Do it again. Remember, everyone out here is a suspect at this stage," Gibbs told him. Ducky nodded, and got up to leave.

"The rest of you – get out there and start talking to people. I want to know all about these dead marines – who their friends were, who they were sleeping with, whether they were collared or had collared anyone else...and, most, importantly, who their enemies were."

"Yes, boss," they all said in unison.

"Uh, Gibbs – what about me?" Abby asked. "I mean, I'm not technically a field agent so..."

"You can talk, Abs. And god knows, you know how to ask questions," Gibbs told her, flashing her one of his rare smiles. She smiled back, basking for a moment in the sunshine of his smile. Tony envied her. Gibbs tipped her chin up and planted a soft little kiss on her lips and Tony felt the knife of his envy go even deeper. He shook himself. This was Abby for god's sake – Abby who he adored just as much as everyone else on the team, including Gibbs.

"Just go out there and be yourself – you'll do fine. And be careful," Gibbs added. "All of you. We are out of our environment and it's unclear what the dangers are. If in doubt, speak to me – do not, I repeat, do not take unnecessary risks. Now go."

They all got to their feet and made towards the door.

"Not you, Tony," Gibbs said. Tony hung back, wondering what was coming next. "General Sheppard is married," Gibbs said, not even looking at him as he rummaged through his luggage for something.

"Oh come on, boss. He's a good-looking top. A sub can look, can't he?"

"Not if it causes problems," Gibbs said firmly. "We're here to solve some murders, not cause any."

"You wouldn't let anyone murder me, boss," Tony grinned. "Besides, I noticed he didn't seem too happy to have you here."

"So did I – and you'll remember I didn't exacerbate that situation by shaking his sub's hand. Now, the question is, is he unhappy we're here because we're muscling in on his territory – or is there another reason? Does he have something to hide?"

"Good question, boss. I'll get out there and find the answer." Tony started walking towards the door again.

"Not yet, Tony. First things first." Gibbs found what he was looking for in his luggage and

Tony's heart did a little flip.

"You have already spanked me once today, boss," he said, gazing warily at the hated strap that was dangling from Gibbs's hand.

"I didn't know there was a limit on the amount of times I could spank my sub in one day," Gibbs replied, stone-faced, just a hint of a challenge in those blue eyes. Tony sighed.

"No boss, there isn't," he said.

"Good – into the bedroom, pants down," Gibbs ordered.

Tony did as instructed. For some reason, and he had no idea why, he was the only one of Gibbs's submissives who got a daily spanking. Every day, without fail, the boss turned him ass up and delivered a spanking. Sometimes it was long and arduous, other times just a couple of swats, but Gibbs never forgot. Tony thought he'd be kind of upset if he ever did.

Gibbs's bedroom, was, naturally, the largest in the suite. It held a massive, king-sized bed although Tony doubted Gibbs would be needing that. Still, if the man went around with five leashed subs then people had to suppose he was sleeping with them and make appropriate arrangements.

There was a large armchair in the corner of the room. Gibbs motioned with his head towards it and Tony undid his pants, and lowered them to his ankles. He never wore underwear – it saved time when presenting himself for daily spankings and besides, it was part of his own particular dynamic as a sub that he enjoyed feeling naked and available under his clothes. He bent over the back of the chair, and rested his hands on the padded arms. God he hated the strap! He longed for a spanking that would involve Gibbs's hand on his ass, and Gibbs's knees beneath him - sturdy, intimate and reassuring. He didn't like the impersonal feeling of being draped over a chair, and he sure as hell didn't like the hard feel of firm, unyielding leather on his bare skin. Gibbs had never once taken him over his knee or spanked him with his hand though – he'd spanked both Abby and Tim in that way but not him. Never him. Tony wasn't sure why but it was hard not to feel envious of his fellow subs.

Gibbs tapped his ass with the strap and Tony opened his legs wider, as instructed. This was kind of a game they played. Tony knew well enough what Gibbs required of him and the exact position he was supposed to assume, but he was naughty sub enough to not always want to give it to him that easily. Gibbs only ever spanked on the bare and Tony was used to offering up his ass for his top's attention, but even so, he always felt like this, every single time; exposed, apprehensive, excited. The cool caress of the leather lasted for only a second before being transformed into a sharp sting as the strap thwapped across his buttocks.

"Oh shit," Tony said, gripping the arms of the chair tightly. Another thwap, and then another, and then it was over. Just three strokes – barely more than a caress by Gibbs's standards, and yet, despite his dislike for the strap, Tony couldn't help but feel disappointed. He stayed in position, waiting for permission to rise, and then felt Gibbs's hand tousling his hair.

“Good boy,” Gibbs said, and Tony felt himself glowing at the praise. He stood up, and turned.

“If you wanted to throw me down on the bed, I could show you just how good a boy I can be,” Tony said, in a soft, low tone. He knew the inevitable answer, but hell, they were in a whole different galaxy – maybe the rules had changed here.

Gibbs gave a little grin and shook his head.

“You never give up, do you, Tony?”

“Never will, boss,” Tony replied, pulling up his pants and fastening his belt.

Gibbs looked at him with that unfathomable look in his eyes, the one that made Tony feel he was going to say something – but he never did. They stood there, face to face, for a long time, neither of them speaking, and then Gibbs reached out, and briefly, for just one tiny second, touched the side of Tony’s face with his fingers; gentle, soft and caressing. Then the moment was gone, and the hand was withdrawn.

“Get out there and find this killer, Tony,” Gibbs told him, brisk and business-like again.

“Will do, boss,” Tony sighed, turning to go.

“And don’t forget who you belong to,” Gibbs warned. Tony let out a yelp as Gibbs swatted his sore ass lightly.

“Never could, boss,” Tony replied. “Never could.”

He wasn’t sure what that spanking had been about, just as he wasn’t sure what the usual daily spankings were about, and god knows his inscrutable boss would never tell him, but Tony felt a warm glow spread out from his smarting buttocks and up into his heart.

He belonged to Gibbs. However unsatisfactory and downright frustrating it was to be one of Gibbs’s subs, Gibbs took the time to tell him, with every daily spanking, that he belonged to him. It might not be much, but it was all that was on offer so he’d take it. He set off, determined to do his job to the utmost of his ability and make his top proud of him.

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“I just don’t see why I have to have them in my lab,” Rodney said mutinously as John dropped him off at said lab on his way to his own office.

“Rodney – be nice,” John warned. “I don’t suppose they’ll be here for long.”

“You don’t know what it’s like to have non-lab trained personnel hanging around, getting underfoot, \*touching\* things,” Rodney grumbled. “It’s bad enough having you in there and

at least you're not totally stupid."

"No I'm not and neither are you," John retorted. "These people are here to do a job, and as part of that job they have to ask questions – now be nice and answer up or they'll wonder what you have to hide."

"What? Oh my god! You don't think...they won't suspect ME, will they?" Rodney asked, horrified. He hadn't even thought of that.

"Well I don't know – I suppose it depends on how suspiciously you act," John told him. "And right now you're acting pretty suspiciously. Got anything to hide?"

"Well, there's the experiment you and Elizabeth expressly forbade me to work on - they wouldn't be interested in that, would they? I mean they're here about the murders, not that. Um...oh, shit...did I just tell you about the 'on pain of severe punishment' experiment? Oh god, I think I did."

"Yes you did, Rodney, and we'll talk about that later," John said, rolling his eyes. "And this is another reason why I don't think they'll be hanging around your lab for long. Frankly, five minutes with Gibbs and his team and you'd confess all your sins at once. You're not exactly hard to break, are you?"

"Break? Are they going to interrogate me? Oh shit..." Rodney glanced around his lab, horrified.

"Relax." John put two calming hands on his shoulders, deposited a kiss on his head and then shoved him into his lab. "And don't think I've forgotten about the forbidden experiment."

"I was kidding about that!" Rodney lied to John's retreating back.

"No you weren't," John threw back over his shoulder.

Rodney sighed and then glared at the pretty girl, her dark hair hanging in pigtails, sitting in HIS chair.

"Hi. I'm Abby," she said, as he prowled over.

"Yes I know who you are," he snapped, grabbing the back of her chair and wheeling it out of his way, then drawing up another chair and setting it in the vacant place he'd created in front of his workstation.

"Cool!" Abby said. Rodney ignored her. "You're Rodney Sheppard", she said.

"I can tell you're a trained investigator," he muttered. She grinned.

"Well, to be honest, I'm not. I'm kind of along for the ride. Gibbs knew we'd be gone for a few weeks and didn't want to leave me behind, so he brought me along."

“What, like some kind of trophy sub?” Rodney said maliciously.

“Not really. Anyway, I’m glad he did. This is SO cool.” She reached out a hand and touched the magnetic imaging spectroscope sitting in front of her.

“Don’t touch!” Rodney yelled. “Do NOT touch anything. This is a highly sensitive piece of equipment, calibrated to an exact equation and it must not be touched. God I hate it when non-scientists start playing around in my lab.”

“Me too!” Abby said. “It’s so annoying isn’t it? You just get something set up the way you want it and some idiot who doesn’t know the first thing about it comes in and presses buttons, or stands in the wrong place and just gets in the way.”

“You’re a scientist?” Rodney asked cautiously. “You have a lab?”

“I’m a forensics scientist.” Abby nodded. “And I definitely have a lab. In fact...” She glanced around, a sad look on her face. “I really miss my lab.”

“You don’t look like a scientist,” Rodney said, glancing at her attire which to his mind looked like an odd mix of leather sub and baby doll. Not that he was an expert on fashion.

“Neither do you. They’re usually old and boring, not hot with nice asses,” she said, glancing appreciatively at his posterior.

“Hot?” Rodney said. “Really?” John thought so of course, and it was true that when he dressed up for a night out he could turn heads but even so...it was always nice to hear it from someone else.

“Oh yeah.” Abby grinned at him. “Definitely. Did you calibrate the spectroscope using Vant’s Theorem or the Helsing Tables?”

“Vant. Helsing is an idiot,” Rodney said. “Wait – you know about them?”

“Sure.” Abby laughed and he felt himself relaxing. She really was impossible to hate for long. “And I totally agree. Helsing got all his math back to front.”

“That’s what I always say!” Rodney exclaimed. They grinned at each other happily.

“I haven’t seen this model,” Abby said wistfully, gazing longingly at the spectroscope. “It’s the latest stuff and I never get the latest stuff, not even when I do my best begging for Gibbs. Could you show me the features?”

Rodney felt himself going to a happy place in his head. He demonstrated all the features on the equipment in detail, humming as he did so, pleased to have a chance to show off to someone who actually knew something, rather than the usual dimwits he had to put up with in his lab.



“It must be so weird to live out here, in a totally different galaxy,” Abby said later, over their mid-morning coffee and donut break. “What’s the weirdest, freakiest thing that ever happened to you here?”

“You mean apart from the life-sucking vampire monsters? Well, John nearly got turned into a bug once.”

“Really? No way!”

“Yeah. Or...oh no, I remember the freakiest thing ever – John and me were once sucked into a completely different universe where the people were...well, I grew to like them eventually, but they were a bit weird.”

“Weird how?” Abby asked, licking donut sugar off her fingers.

“Well, they were like us but they only slept with people of the opposite gender – they had some kind of taboo about same-sex relationships - and they didn’t seem to have any concept of dynamic at all. They just wandered around with no idea about whether they were dominants or submissives...now *that* was weird.”

“You’re making that up,” she said, eyes wide as saucers. “How would that even work?”

“I have no idea. They didn’t seem to have a lot of sex though,” Rodney said with a shrug. “It was strange, seeing myself in this other universe...”

“Wait - there was another you?”

“Yes – and another John, and another Carson. It was very like our own universe and yet so completely different.”

“I wonder if there was another me there,” Abby said.

“Probably.” Rodney shrugged.

“I wonder if she’s happy. I wonder what her life is like,” she pondered. “I hope she’s got a Gibbs looking out for her there, like I do.”

“Is he a good top?” Rodney asked. “He seemed kind of scary from where I was standing.”

“Oh everyone says that and I don’t get it,” Abby replied, shaking her head. “Wow, this coffee is nice – it has a real hit to it. I usually prefer soda but I’ll settle for this.”

“Caffeine – the drug of choice for scientists,” Rodney grinned.

“Yeah. But going back to Gibbs – he’s the sweetest guy.”

"How can you share him with all those other subs?" Rodney asked. "I know I couldn't share John."

"Well, it's not really like that," Abby replied.

"Don't any of you get jealous?"

"Not really. At least I don't think so. Maybe Tony does. And maybe we all would if he was sleeping with any of us," she mused.

"He's not sleeping with you?" Rodney asked, shocked. "But he's collared you."

"I know – but that's just the way Gibbs likes to work. He kind of collects subs. Besides, he doesn't really like having anyone on his team that he hasn't collared. He says there can only be one boss, and that boss is him. He doesn't want any of his subordinates answering to anyone else, or having divided loyalties – not in our line of work."

"But...how does that work?" Rodney asked, genuinely curious. "You're his collared subs but..."

"Ziva isn't – a sub I mean," Abby interrupted. "She's a top."

"And she let him collar her?" Rodney was totally confused now.

"Yeah – you'd be surprised how many tops would accept Gibbs's collar for the chance of working with him. The man is a legend," Abby said happily. "It's not forever – Ziva knows that. But for now it suits her."

"So how does it work?" Rodney asked helplessly. He had heard of arrangements like this, where a high-flying top collared colleagues for purely professional reasons, but they weren't very common. Also, he didn't get the feeling that Gibbs's relationship with his subs \*was\* entirely professional.

"Well, he's in charge, and he can discipline us, obviously. He's...somehow he gives each of us what we need. With Tim it's a sense of protection and belonging – he's always wanted that and Gibbs makes sure he gets it. With Ziva, it's maybe kind of a refuge, while she figures some stuff out. Heavy stuff. She never talks about it but he knows – he knows all of us really well. With Ducky – well, those two go way back. Gibbs collared Ducky years ago. I never heard the whole story but there definitely is one – if either of them gets close to talking about the subject they give each other these weird looks and clam up, and afterwards Ducky gets really clingy and Gibbs seems extra protective."

"And DiNozzo?" Rodney asked.

"Ah Tony," she grinned, shaking her head. "Where do I start? Tony needs a strong top. He's looked all over for one but none of them are strong enough to take him on. He might not seem it because he's such a wiseass but he's smart, Rodney, and strong. Gibbs almost gives

him what he needs, but he can't – or won't – give him everything because he can't give him what he wants most – which is himself."

"Why not? If he's not sleeping with any of you surely there's room in his life for someone?" Rodney asked.

"I'd like to see him happy, and I think Tony could make him happy," Abby sighed, "but he won't go there and I have no idea why. He just...won't. Something to do with his past I think. He's been married before, several times, and it never worked out. Maybe he's just been burned too often."

"And you?" Rodney asked, intrigued by this young woman's life.

"Oh well...I have a history of getting into really bad relationships. Gibbs kind of saves me from myself," Abby said, with a little smile. "He insists on meeting any top who wants to date me. If he says I can't see them, then that's it. Kaboosh. No dating." She shrugged.

"But he doesn't claim you for himself?"

"No. With him and me it's more...paternal. He looks out for me and takes care of me. Not that I'd say no – I'm all for the daddy/girl roleplay." Abby gave him a big grin, and Rodney felt himself flushing slightly at her openness. He was used to having some pretty frank conversations with people about their preferences, but this was a bit too much too soon. He was intrigued though, and genuinely interested in the strange setup these NCIS agents had.

"To be honest, I don't think it'd work between us anyway," Abby said. "I don't think we really see each other that way, and it'd ruin what we have if anything happened between us. Don't get me wrong – he's still my top - he just chooses not to exercise some of the rights that come with that. It may seem weird to you but it works – for all of us. For now at least."

"What happens if you meet someone who wants to collar you?" Rodney asked.

"I dunno. It hasn't happened. Well...just once." Abby grimaced.

She was silent for a bit, and Rodney wasn't sure if she was going to say any more, but then she turned to him, took a deep breath, and started.

"There was this guy. His job was cleaning up crime scenes which I thought was totally cool, and we got talking and...well, Gibbs was away for a few days, and I was falling for this guy so I didn't want to wait until Gibbs got home. I thought it was just going to be a fling but then it got more serious...and, you see, I just knew Gibbs wouldn't allow it."

"Why not?" Rodney asked, finishing the last drop of his coffee and scraping his finger around the rim to scoop up the dregs of the foam.

"I dunno – I suppose even though I was crazy about Mikel – that was the guy's name – there

was something about him that was setting off alarm bells. But instead of telling Gibbs about him, I started creeping around behind his back. I got it into my head that it was none of Gibbs's business who I slept with – which was dishonest of me. If I want to wear the man's collar then I have to abide by his rules." Abby gave a little sigh. "I owe him that – and really, he never makes any demands on me. He's only ever wanted my honesty, and I let him down. Badly."

Her clear green eyes looked suspiciously glassy as she said that, and Rodney wasn't sure whether to pat her arm in an attempt to offer clumsy comfort of some sort. Luckily she saved him from that decision by continuing with her story.

"Mikel wanted to take me away from Gibbs. He said all this crap – that Gibbs was using me, that I'd look better in his collar, that Gibbs was an abuser. None of that was true. I woke up to it eventually, and told Mikel I didn't want to see him any more. He went ballistic, took me prisoner, took my collar off me and put his own on me." She shuddered.

"Oh shit," Rodney said, horrified, because a similar thing had happened to him once and he still woke up screaming from the nightmares. "He took your collar? That happened to you too?"

Abby's eyes widened. Rodney waved his hand.

"I'll tell you about mine some other time. I want to hear about yours."

"It was just so horrible. I don't know what would have happened if Gibbs hadn't busted a gut trying to find me. He showed up, just in time, because Mikel was saying that if he couldn't have me then nobody could and I really thought he was going to kill me. Gibbs shot Mikel in the shoulder and took him into custody – he had him up on charges for abduction, removing another top's collar without the sub's permission, and coercing a collared sub."

"Man – this sounds like a movie or something," Rodney said.

"Yeah. It does kinda," she said, but her eyes were sad.

"What did Gibbs do?" Rodney asked.

She took a deep breath. "Oh it was bad, but then I guess you know that."

"Yeah." Rodney gazed at her, one sub to another, both of them sharing an understanding of what she had faced.

"I let Gibbs down. He trusted me and I let him down." She bit on her lip. "Once he'd taken care of Mikel, he just lifted me up in his arms and hugged me and hugged me. Then he took me home and put me straight to bed. I slept for hours and he never once left my bedside. Next day though..." She made a face, and then continued. "He gave me a choice. Said I could have my collar back if I wanted it, but I had to mean it, because he couldn't go through this again. And if I accepted it back then I had to accept whatever punishment he was gonna

hand out too.”

She trembled a bit when she said that, and Rodney watched her, transfixed.

“I wanted that collar back so badly.” She gave a wry little smile. “I went down on my knees, no question, and he put it around my neck and buckled it on and it was such a relief, you know? Then, without saying a thing, he grabbed my wrist, walked me into the bedroom, sat down on the bed, swung me over his knee, lifted up my skirt, pulled down my panties and gave me a spanking I’ll never forget until the day I die. He never said a word the entire time - just spanked my ass to kingdom come.”

“Oh shit,” Rodney breathed, empathising with her for all he was worth.

“You don’t understand,” she murmured. “He’d never spanked me before – never. And he hasn’t spanked me since then, either, other than a stray swat here or there. So it was just the once, but man...it hurt. He didn’t stop until I was sobbing my heart out, and my ass was burning every single shade of crimson you can imagine. He didn’t use a strap or anything, just his hand, but he’s got one hell of a strong spanking hand!”

“I can believe that,” Rodney said, and then he frowned. “But what I can’t believe is that we’re sitting here, and I’m having one of those subby chats – I never do subby chats! Ever!”

Usually the very idea of sitting with a fellow sub and droning on about their latest spanking or the latest way their top had been annoying or demanding was his idea of hell, but with Abby it was different. She just had something that made you like her and want to spend time with her. And her story was different too – he’d never heard of a relationship like the one Gibbs had with his subs, and he was intrigued by it.

“Me either!” Abby said with a wild, bright grin. “I can’t stand them. All they do is go on and on about how terrible their lives are and how boring their tops are. I don’t even usually like to hang out with other subs – well, except Tony and Tim because they’re cool - but that’s only because we don’t usually talk about sub stuff.”

They sat there in silence for a moment, grinning at each other, both of them flushing slightly from the embarrassment of being caught doing something they never usually did.

“So, about the spectroscope,” Abby said eventually. “Got anything else as cool as that to show me?”

“Oh, I have a whole lab full of stuff,” Rodney said, relieved that the subject had been changed and he was back on more familiar territory.

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Ziva watched the small, slender woman swing her batons high, turn, and then deliver a swinging blow to the massive bear of a man who had been pursuing her. She was clad in a long leather skirt, split to the thigh, the golden skin of her bare midriff glistening as she fought. Her breasts were encased in a tight fabric that accentuated every single curve, and

they heaved, plump and appealing, as she moved. He was wearing only a pair of plain hide pants, his feet as bare as hers. He had a broad chest and wide shoulders, his entire body was solidly muscled, and his hair hung from his head in a curtain of wild dreadlocks.

He lost his footing and she turned again, lashing out her baton towards him and catching him just behind the knee. He went down, swivelling, so that he at least landed on his back, batons held aloft, ready to continue the fight, but it was too late. She was too fast for him and within seconds he was immobilised on the floor, her baton held tight beneath his chin.

"You should not have fallen so easily. Is your ankle still sore from the injury you sustained last week?" the woman asked.

"No. I was just slow," the bear-man replied. The woman reached out her hand and pulled him to his feet.

"We will repeat this exercise until I am satisfied," she told him sternly. Then she turned her attention to Ziva.

"Welcome. I am Teyla Emmagan of Athos," she said, walking over to where Ziva was standing, and bowing her head slightly in greeting. "And this is my submissive Ronon Dex of Sateda."

Ziva felt a surge of envy rise in her gut, and tried her hardest to push it away. Teyla moved her hand, a gesture so small as to be almost unnoticeable, and Ronon Dex immediately came over to where they stood and dropped to his knees beside her, shoulders back, hands resting on his meaty thighs, back straight. He was so big that even kneeling he practically reached his top's shoulder. Ziva felt another spike of envy at how beautifully trained he was, and she had no doubt at all that this diminutive woman had been the one to train him.

"I am Officer Ziva David," she replied, giving a formal little head bow in return – it seemed appropriate in the circumstances. "I was wondering if you knew the three marines who were murdered," Ziva said, feeling strangely flummoxed. "I am not asking you this because you are not from Earth. You should understand – I am also an outsider where I come from. I know how hard it is to fit in, and how easy it is for the finger of suspicion to point at what – or who - is unfamiliar and unknown."

Teyla gazed at her steadily. "Thank you," she said. "But I have had many positive experiences of working with your people. I have never been made to feel like an outsider among you." Her eyes were piercing as she gazed, and Ziva had the uncomfortable feeling that this woman was getting the measure of her. "As for the marines – I knew them only by sight but I am saddened by their deaths. I do hope that you are successful in finding this killer, Officer David – I know that General Sheppard is extremely anxious about the safety of his people."

"Sheppard is a good commander then?" Ziva asked.

"The best!" Ronon said vehemently, and Ziva turned to him, surprised. Teyla placed a hand

on his shaggy head and he calmed a little, gazing up at her with an expression that could only be described as devoted.

"Ronon is correct," Teyla affirmed. "Sheppard is a good man and a great leader. He is more worried than anyone about what has happened to his men. Having you here is not easy for him – but he will swallow his pride if it means the killer is caught."

There was an intense pride in the way she spoke and Ziva thought that she looked like a creature from mythology, caramel skin glistening with a fine sheen of sweat, so exotically beautiful that it almost hurt to look at her. Beside her was this magnificent man, clearly as wild as a lion and yet as obedient to his mistress as any of the best trained Shinzoic submissives Ziva had witnessed in the show ring back on Earth.

Ziva snapped out of her reverie to find Teyla's brown eyes fixed on her, a curious expression in their dark depths.

"I have never seen these weapons used in combat," Ziva said, gesturing to the batons Teyla and Ronon had discarded, trying to distract herself. She couldn't help noticing that Ronon's nipples had been pierced, and he was wearing his mistress's jewels in them – gold and red entwined.

Teyla clipped her leash to the chain joining the piercings and then to her belt. Ziva hoped Ronon was good at anticipating his top's every move because otherwise he'd get one hell of a jolt of pain.

"I could show you how they are used if you wish," Teyla said.

"I would like that." Ziva nodded. "How about now?"

Teyla hesitated. "Combat practice will no doubt entail physical contact," she said. "I notice that you are collared. Would your top be happy for this to take place?"

Ziva smiled. "Gibbs will not mind. It is true that I wear his collar, but I am a dominant – not a submissive. We do not have that kind of relationship."

"I see. The ways of your people are often strange to me but this is something I understand," Teyla said, making another of those subtle moves with her hand.

Ronon got to his feet and they walked in unison to where they had left their batons. His nipple leash was still attached to her belt, but he was so in tune with her movements that there was no question of it tugging on them.

"Among my people, it is common for a young top to take the collar of an older one as an apprentice for a fixed period of time. This helps them learn how to be a good top, as well as giving them the opportunity to study the top's trade. Is that how it is with you and Agent Gibbs?" Teyla asked.

"It is...similar, yes." Ziva nodded. Actually, that summed up her arrangement with Gibbs pretty accurately.

"Then I hope you learn well," Teyla said. "He looks like a man who has much to teach a pupil who is prepared to watch, and listen."

Then without warning she unclipped her sub's leash, picked up a pair of batons and threw them at Ziva. Ziva only had a couple of seconds to react, catching the batons out of nowhere, before Teyla was upon her, her own batons slicing through the air with the precision of a dangerous weapon.

Ziva brought her baton up fast, deflecting the first few blows, and then turned and kicked at Teyla's midriff. She just about caught flesh but then the Athosian woman had turned and was after her again, barely giving her time to breathe.

Ziva felt herself click into training mode, easily accessing the instincts that made her such a successful killer. She left thought behind, and tuned in to the sound of her own breathing and the smooth, polished moves of the woman standing in front of her.

Some part of her brain noticed, coolly, how beautiful Teyla looked as she fought. She was so graceful, elevating her fighting to an art form. Ziva didn't waste her energy on grace – she was all sheer physical efficiency, darting and swinging, all her attention focussed on the woman in front of her and on how to outwit her and bring her down.

Ziva kicked out with her foot, catching Teyla a glancing blow that sent her stumbling towards the floor. Scenting weakness Ziva went after her, like a dog after prey. She could feel the darkness rising within her and revelled in it, taking it, twisting it, making it her own. This was who she was, and this was what she did.

She was shocked, a second later, to find herself on her back with Teyla's knee pressed to her windpipe.

"You are good," Teyla told her. "But you mistook my feint for a stumble." She gazed down into Ziva's eyes for a long moment, and Ziva felt as if all the darkness of her soul had been laid bare. It was the way she often felt around Gibbs too and she didn't like how it felt. "You are more than you think you are," Teyla told her mysteriously, and then she moved back, allowing Ziva to get up.

"I want what you have," Ziva blurted.

Teyla gave her a questioning look.

"You are a killer, like me," Ziva said softly. "Do not deny it – it screams from every pore of your body. And him." She pointed at Ronon. "He is a killer too. You understand the darkness - both of you. I want that. I want someone who understands. I want someone I can go there with, someone I will not hurt with what is inside me."



Teyla stared at her for a moment, and Ziva wondered if she'd got it wrong or gone too far; she frequently misread people.

"You and I, Ziva David, must talk properly," Teyla said, and there was a kindness in her eyes that Ziva hadn't expected. "But not now. My people are holding their annual Festival of Deliverance from the Wraith on the mainland tonight and I am to officiate at the ceremony. However - I would very much like to welcome you as my guest."

Ziva blinked, taken aback. "I...I am not sure. I should ask Gibbs. We are here on an investigation so..."

"All from NCIS are welcome at the festival," Teyla said firmly. "It is a good place to get to know people – and to ask the questions which I am sure would aid you in your enquiry. It would give me great joy if you would accompany Ronon and myself to the ceremony."

Ziva felt that she would offend this noble warrior-woman far too much by refusing. This festival was clearly some kind of big deal – and Gibbs had asked them to mingle and get to know the people on Atlantis.

"I would be honoured," she said at last.

Teyla nodded, and then came close. Ziva felt her stomach tighten – she didn't like anyone getting in her personal space. Teyla ignored her body language and took hold of Ziva's face in her hands, and then gently tipped her head towards her so that their brows were touching. Ziva felt oddly comforted by her touch and started to relax. Teyla drew back, smiling.

"Tonight, Ziva David," she said, and then she took hold of her submissive's chain and led him gracefully from the room.

Once alone, Ziva sank to her knees feeling utterly drained. This woman knew her on some level she couldn't begin to articulate. Teyla understood her, the way nobody else had ever understood her.

Except Gibbs.

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"So, will you be joining in the festivities on the mainland tonight, Dr Mallard?" Carson asked, moving a lamp so that it was shining at a more helpful angle in the makeshift morgue.

"I will not, my dear boy, no," Ducky told him, peering through his protective goggles at the innards of the body on the gurney in front of him. "How about you?"

"Me? No." Carson shook his head.

"Not a fan of revelling?" Ducky asked, glancing up.

Carson grinned, and shook his head again. He had only known the Medical Examiner for a few hours but he liked the man. He was Scottish for a start, and they'd swapped endless stories of the old country, chatting non-stop since Ducky's arrival.

Carson had been pleased to assist him in the autopsies of the murdered marines, pointing out what he'd found first time around and generally acting as Ducky's assistant as he'd had to leave his own assistant behind. Carson wasn't used to dealing with the corpses of people who had been murdered and he was fascinated by the process, listening eagerly as Ducky outlined the clues that each body provided.

"Ah, I forgot!" Ducky said, smiling at him. "Your husband is the delightful Colonel Steven Beckett – I got to know him well on our journey here. He keeps an extremely well stocked Captain's table – clearly a man who likes the finer things in life! And as tonight is his first night home in six weeks, I presume that you have plans for him."

"I do, Dr Mallard, yes," Carson grinned. "Extensive plans".

"I'm sure," Ducky chuckled. "And please, dear boy, do call me Ducky. Most people do. Besides, I feel as if I've known you for years – your sub is a man of great discretion but he missed you, and after a glass or two of fine Scottish malt he could be prevailed upon to talk about you. I have to say that it seems to me, having now met you, that every word of it was true."

"Should I blush, Ducky?" Carson asked.

Ducky chuckled again. "Your sub thinks you are the finest doctor to ever graduate from medical school and he clearly admires you very much as a human being, even aside from being his husband and his top," he said. "But don't worry, Dr Beckett – he said nothing to embarrass you."

"Ah now, if I'm calling you Ducky then you must surely call me Carson."

"Thank you, Carson." Ducky looked up from his work again. "I'd like that."

"So why won't you be going to the festival tonight?" Carson asked. "Would Gibbs not allow it?"

He privately thought that Agent Gibbs looked like the kind of top who kept his subs on an extremely short leash so he could imagine him refusing Ducky permission to go over to the mainland for the party.

Ducky looked up, a bemused expression on his face. "I hardly think Jethro would mind one way or the other, Carson," he replied. "No, that's not it at all. I want to mull over my notes, while they're still fresh in my mind. There's something about these bodies – I'm not sure what – but something is ringing a bell with me somewhere. I think I'll retire to our quarters to go through my findings – see if I can piece anything together. I would also - no offence to

you, Carson - but I would like some time alone with the bodies. I've very much enjoyed talking to you but I feel I've very much neglected talking to \*them\* in the process."

"You talk to dead people?" Carson raised an eyebrow.

"Why not? You talk to your patients, don't you?" Ducky replied.

"Aye, but for the most part they can at least talk back!"

"Indeed...but you'd be surprised what a dead body can tell you, Carson, if you're prepared to listen," Ducky told him. "Now run along, man! I can tell you're itching to get your hands on that handsome husband of yours."

"It has been a long six weeks," Carson agreed with a laugh, pulling off his lab overalls. "And I've barely had time to say hello to him today what with all the post-docking checks he's had to do on the Daedalus, and with all of NCIS being here – no offence, Ducky."

"None taken," Ducky chuckled. "Now go – I'll be perfectly fine here. I do understand about love you know, Carson. I might be getting a bit long in the tooth but I remember the heart-stopping joys and agonising ecstasies of it all too well!"

"Remember?" Carson raised an eyebrow.

"Well, it's been awhile since I really indulged myself in that respect," Ducky sighed.

"Is Gibbs neglectful then?" Carson asked. In his opinion, any man who had five subs had to be spreading himself too thin and he thought it was a shame if Ducky missed out just because he was older than the other subs in Gibbs's harem.

"Good lord no!" Ducky replied. "The man is as good-hearted as they come. A little reserved, and, uh, overly focussed at times to be sure, and undoubtedly strict but with that lot on the end of his leashes he has to be! But our arrangement – his and mine - is a little bit more complicated than you might imagine. It's best not to enquire, dear boy. Now go – your husband will be waiting for you!"

Carson couldn't argue with that. He'd had six long weeks in an empty bed and he was itching to start running his hands over his husband's body, reclaiming him as his own again. The mysteries of whatever arrangement these NCIS agents had between them could wait – he had a submissive to attend to.

"Thanks Ducky – my deputy, Dr Keller, is next door in the infirmary – if you need anything, just ask her. I introduced you to her earlier."

"Ah yes! The twelve year old," Ducky grinned. "Is it my imagination or are they letting children take medical degrees these days?"

"She's nearly thirty!" Carson objected. "And quite a high flier. But..." He gave a broad,

conspiratorial grin, "I do know what you mean! Having her around makes me feel like an old man!"

"Well if you feel old that makes me positively ancient," Ducky lamented. "But I'm sure she can take care of me if I need anything so off you go, and don't worry any more about me."

Carson gave Ducky a quick, excited smile, and then left the surgery almost at a run.

There was a mouth-watering smell wafting out of his quarters when he got there. He stood a moment on the threshold, savouring it, and then entered. Steven was standing in the little galley kitchen, stirring something on the hob. He was clearly freshly showered, the little fringe of hair on the back of his neck curling wetly against the clean blue Henley he was wearing. His long legs were encased in tight blue denim, which clung perfectly to his superb ass.

Carson took a moment to gaze at him hungrily. God he had missed those long legs, that beautiful swivel-hipped motion of Steven's body when he moved, the way he prowled more than walked, and his ass - firm and sweet and just aching to be fondled.

Steven was humming to himself and clearly hadn't heard him come in. Carson tiptoed stealthily across the room, and then stole his hands around his husband's body, and rested his chin on his shoulder. Steven gave a little start, and then glanced at him over his shoulder, a grin on his face.

"Something smells good," Carson said, sniffing at Steven's aftershave and noticing how he was freshly shaven. Steven was that kind of sub – he thought about his top, and liked to prepare himself nicely for him. The same service extended to food and the quarters they shared.

Steven's dynamic was that he liked to serve by cooking good food, and keeping a clean living space. He positively enjoyed ironing Carson's shirts, and would happily spend an hour or two on his knees beside the bed, polishing Carson's shoes while Carson sat and read a medical journal in the evening. Every so often, Carson would reach out a hand and trace patterns on his submissive's beautiful scalp, and Steven would press up into his hand, enjoying the caress.

Carson had never dreamed he'd find someone so companionable. He had always been the care-taker before, thinking up treats to surprise and delight his submissives. His romantic streak had often left him feeling exposed, as if he was the only one taking any pains in a relationship, the only one giving while his partners always took. It wasn't like that with Steven.

"You're home," Steven said, his deep voice rumbling in his broad chest. "As for the smell – it's your favourite." He gestured at the pan in front of him, where two chicken breasts were nestled side by side in a creamy sauce.

"Aye, it is," Carson said, "but I wasn't referring to the food. I was referring to you. \*You\*

smell good." He could feel his cock hardening already as he pressed up against Steven's perfectly peachy bottom in its denim prison.

"You want to use me first, or you want to eat?" Steven asked, with a grin in his voice.

"Both!" Carson nibbled on his ear and Steven threw the spoon down, turned around and enveloped his husband in his burly arms.

Carson had never had a submissive who was physically so much bigger than him before. He was no lightweight himself, with sturdy thighs and broad shoulders, but Steven was several inches taller than him and well built – although his long legs had a certain elegance to them that belied the general beefiness of his body.

Steven's sheer, imposing physical presence wasn't a problem between them though – onboard his ship, he was a surly, no-nonsense commander, giving orders with the best of them, and supervising his subordinates with a rod of iron. But in private he was not only happy to submit himself to Carson he positively craved it, and Carson guessed that he had seen a side of Steven that none of his subordinates even knew existed.

He took hold of his husband's face in his hands, and pulled him down for a long, deep, exploratory kiss. Steven opened up obligingly, and Carson's tongue darted hungrily inside his mouth. His hands went to Steven's peachy ass and he held it firmly, reacquainting himself with its fine contours.

"I missed you," Carson sighed when he released his sub.

"Not as much as I missed you. I'd dream about you holding me down while you slid into me, and wake up to find I'd come on the sheets like a schoolboy!" Steven told him. "Sometimes I'd kneel beside the bed in my quarters, close my eyes, and imagine you were there."

"Oh Steven." Carson took hold of his husband's head again and kissed him firmly. He could feel Steven shaking slightly under his fingers – his husband was a man of deep emotions and it had taken some time to coax those emotions to the surface. Steven wasn't a man who gave anything up easily, so those times when he shared what he was feeling were often hard won but with Carson he no longer put up any pretence. He was who he was, and he trusted Carson not to hurt him.

"Here." Steven led him over to the table. It was beautifully laid, decorated with several lit candles, and a bottle of wine stood next to two glasses, ready and waiting. "Your favourite," Steven said, a smug little smile playing on his lips as he opened the wine and poured it. "And I got this." He nodded his head in the direction of the sound system where a plaintive melody was playing. Carson saw the CD case lying on the table and snatched it up.

"Latest recording," Steven informed him, still looking smug. They shared a love of classical music and Steven knew exactly what to buy on his trips back to Earth.

"Oh love, you make me feel bad. I can never buy anything for you except the occasional

bunch of Athosian cherries!" Carson exclaimed.

"Well that's one of the perks of the job – I get to go back to Earth," Steven said. "Besides...I love bringing you back these gifts. You know that."

"Aye, I do."

"Now sit down – let's eat."

Steven served up one enormous plate of dinner, and sat down opposite Carson. Carson took a bite of the food and sighed.

"Exquisite – as usual. I'll have to start running again now you're home or I'll balloon!"

"You could always train with me," Steven said, with a sly grin, as Carson loaded more food onto the fork.

"Not likely! No offence, love – you're a fantastic commander of that ship of yours but you're a complete harridan as a personal trainer. I'm fit enough to run an infirmary and that's good enough for me."

He held out the fork and Steven dipped his head and took a mouthful. Carson smiled at him – it felt so good to have him back. He'd missed their long conversations and the way Steven looked out for him. He'd never felt so sure about someone's love before as he did about this sub's love for him.

"What do you make of this Gibbs?" he asked, as they swapped stories of their time apart, and Carson fed them both their dinner from the shared plate. "Are his subs scared of him?"

"Maybe a little," Steven said. "But then again he's that kind of top. Half the subs on the Daedalus were scared of him – when they weren't falling at his feet that is."

"Were you?" Carson asked, looking up, suddenly feeling a little bit threatened.

"Scared of him or falling at his feet?" Steven queried, with an amused look at him.

"Both – either," Carson said quietly. There was something about Gibbs – even the strongest tops found him unsettling.

Steven frowned. "Neither," he replied. "Carson, are you jealous?"

"No. Well, aye, a wee bit," Carson sighed. "Tops like him always seem to attract the subs. I've fought that losing battle all my life – it's hard to snap out of it."

"Carson, I've been in the military my entire adult life," Steve told him firmly. "I've met tops like him before – well, maybe not *\*quite\** like him but I've met the ones who totally believe in themselves and inhabit their top-space the entire time – like him. If I'd wanted one like

that I could have had one, trust me."

"Aye, I know. I'm sorry, love. I've just missed you so much," Carson said. "Look, I feel like a dirty slob still in my work clothes. Why don't I go and take a shower and get changed and we can talk about what we want to do with the rest of the evening."

Much as he wanted to get his hands on his husband, he also craved simply being with Steven, chatting and catching up – sex could wait.

Steven nodded and Carson took himself off to the shower, berating himself for questioning his husband in that way and doubting him for even a fraction of a second. He got changed into some chinos and a smart shirt and then returned to the other room...and stopped dead in his tracks.

Steven was kneeling, stark naked, in the centre of the room, head down, hands resting on the golden skin of his thighs. He'd oiled himself, and the candles threw soft orange shadows over his solidly muscled body, making his entire body glow in the dim light.

"Oh dear god," Carson breathed, all the blood in his body rushing straight to his cock, making it instantly harden.

Steven glanced up, and traced his hand over the marriage collar Carson had put on him the year before.

"I'm yours, Master," he whispered softly. "I'm here to serve you – and only you. If you'll take me and use me as you see fit?"

Carson's cock went into spasm at the words. All couples had their own dynamic, and this was theirs. Unlike many subs, Steven had little interest in sexual pain however expertly and subtly administered – oh, he'd endure it if Carson wanted to hand it out, but it gave him no particular pleasure.

No, what Steven loved was to offer himself up to serve his master – and right here, right now, in this private space, alone together, that was what Carson was; his master.

"Straighter," Carson said, slipping effortlessly into the role. He ran a hand over Steven's hard, muscled shoulders. His husband's back was already ramrod straight but little details like this enforced his mastery over Steven and his sub's beautiful cock hardened appreciatively in response.

Carson removed his radio earpiece and turned it off, and then reached for Steven's where it was lying neatly on his pile of discarded clothes and turned that off too – there was no way they were going to be interrupted tonight, not after so long apart.

Carson circled Steven a few times, and then paused in front of him and ran a finger over Steven's lips.

"I've missed having this warm mouth to spill myself into," he said. "Will I take you there first?" Steven opened his mouth obligingly, and Carson slipped a finger inside, wetting it and then drawing it back over Steven's lips, wetting them too in the process. Steven moaned, his cock now hard as iron. "You'll not come for a long time yet," Carson told him, knowing how much it turned Steven on to be denied orgasm. "I'll take my pleasure in you twice before I allow you yours – if I decide you've earned it." Steven nuzzled against his hand, and Carson allowed himself the sheer sensory pleasure of caressing his husband's scalp. Then he grabbed Steven's smooth head in his hands and raised it to look at him. "And earn it you must – make no mistake about that. I'll be using you long and hard tonight, Steven Beckett," he said.

Steven's eyes were sex-stupid and the sight was so arousing it was all Carson could do to contain himself. He decided that he'd be no good for anything in this scene if he didn't at least take the edge off his passion a bit first.

"Hands behind your back and open your mouth," he ordered.

He undid his pants, knowing it was killing Steven not to be able to do that for him, and released his hard cock. Steven's eyes lit up in anticipation and Carson gripped his head firmly in his hands and slid his cock between Steven's waiting lips.

"I'll use you hard tonight," he breathed, his fingers caressing that warm scalp. "Keep your hands where they are. You have nothing to serve me with but your lips so work them well."

He knew the words were working for Steven, as he dipped his head back and forth, taking his time, stretching his lips expertly over Carson's hard cock. It felt so good to be here, just the two of them - husbands, lovers, a dominant and his sub, a master and his servant.

Carson gave a groan of pleasure and offered himself up completely to Steven's mouth. Within seconds he was coming, holding Steven's head as he pumped out down his sub's warm throat. Steven drank down his come like a thirsty man, loving that Carson was using his throat in this way. His brown eyes were full of adoration as he gazed up at his top.

"That was beautiful, my love," Carson breathed. He stood there for a long time, his softening penis still in Steven's mouth, his fingers still caressing Steven's head. Finally he withdrew. With that initial urgency over, he could enjoy the scene in more detail – and he liked a slow-burning scene the same way he liked a fine wine. "Now, I need you to hold that erection of yours while I get to know this beautiful body again," he murmured. "But first things first – undress me."

Steven couldn't have been happier to oblige. His throat seemed to convulse with a kind of humming purr as he got to his feet and began unbuttoning Carson's shirt. His long fingers smoothed the fabric sensuously and he took his time, savouring each second, pausing only to press a kiss against Carson's neck, or jaw, or mouth as he worked.

Carson allowed him to take his time – this was an important part of what Steven enjoyed and Carson loved it too. The sense of adoration he got from his sub made him swell up with



pleasure, feeding his own inner top, making him feel powerful and invincible. It still amazed him that he'd managed to keep and collar a sub such as this, a man so handsome and attentive, so good at his job. Yes, on the deck of his ship Steven could bark orders, confident in his abilities as a military commander, but here, alone together, he was Carson's submissive, happy to kneel before him and serve him with his naked body.

Carson shook his head – he'd been an idiot to be jealous of Gibbs for even an instant. Steven was his, his collared sub, and nobody would ever take him away from him.

Steven had finished undressing him, and was now folding his clothes neatly and placing them on the nearby chair. His erection was still almost painfully hard, jutting out in front of him, proud and pulsing.

"Let me inspect you," Carson said, running a hand over Steven's oiled, muscled back. He moved his hands all over his sub's body, claiming him. "You've taken care of yourself – that's good," he said, reminding himself of the sheer joy of having all this hard flesh under his fingers. He stopped at Steven's ass, taking his time to cup the globes of flesh and squeeze them. "You'll serve me with this ass tonight," Carson said. "I'll make good use of it."

"It's yours, Master. Use it however you want," Steven whispered, in a low, hoarse voice.

"I know it's mine – and I'll remind you of that fact too, over and over again," Carson told him. "While I pump into you."

Steven's cock was desperately leaking pre-come but Carson knew he wouldn't take pity on his sub just yet. Steven liked being asked to hold on – and Carson liked making him.

"On the bed, love," he said, taking Steven's hand and leading him over to the bed. He sat down on the bed and pulled Steven between his open thighs. Then he inspected his cock, running his fingers over it, making Steven shudder with need.

"Beautiful – keep holding it, love," he ordered. Steven sighed, and pushed against him, clearly longing for the friction on his cock, making Carson chuckle. Even a well-behaved sub like Steven had his weaknesses.

"On your hands and knees on the bed," Carson ordered. "Serve me with your hole, Steven."

Steven obeyed eagerly, clambering onto the bed and raising his ass in the air, bracing himself on his hands and knees.

Carson climbed up behind him. He reached for the lube standing waiting on the nightstand, and spread it over his fingers. Steven's hole was already open for him, and it didn't take much effort to slip his fingers inside – to find it already lubed.

"I see you prepped for me, love," he said.

"I'm yours, Master," Steven replied. "All of me. It's only right I should keep myself ready and

open for you, so that you can take me whenever you want."

"Good lad." Carson's cock reacted to the sight of Steven's ass, held up in the air, ready and waiting for him, the pink hole stretched enticingly. Within seconds he was hard again. He ran his lubed fingers over his cock and then nudged it into Steven's hole. Steven gave a gasp, and pushed his body back, impaling himself on Carson's cock. This felt so good! Carson knelt there, trying to catch his breath.

"All right, Steven – serve me with this greedy hole of yours," Carson said, and his husband needed no more prompting. He slid forward and then back again, keeping a steady, even pace. His interior muscles squeezed Carson's cock as he went, doing all the work, milking Carson for all he was worth.

Carson rested his hands on Steven's thighs, gripping tightly, as Steven moved back on forth. He loved the way Steven's muscles moved under the skin of his back as he worked, loved watching his engorged cock disappearing into Steven's body, and the way it felt as Steven worked it hard, drawing every last ounce of pleasure from his body.

Carson threw his head back and started moaning as his second climax of the evening drew close.

"Oh god, Steven...that's good...I'm so close...serve me...oh yeah," he groaned, and then he was coming again, deep inside his sub's body. Steven gradually slowed, before coming to a complete stop.

"Good, Steven – that was so good," Carson said. "You served me very well." Steven positively glowed with the praise. "You can move forward now," Carson said, and Steven pulled away from him, allowing Carson's limp cock to slip out of his body with a satisfying little plop.

Steven turned, and knelt on the bed in front of Carson, eyes down, shoulders back, his pulsing cock still standing out proud from his body.

"Good lad," Carson said. "Now – I want to watch while you bring yourself off."

Steven nodded, and rested back on his heels, then took his hard cock in his hand, rubbing it fast.

"Slowly," Carson warned. "I want to enjoy this. I want to watch you pleasure yourself."

Steven gave a strangled little cry in the back of his throat and his frantic hand stilled, the quick strokes becoming slow. He threw his head back, a tiny rivulet of sweat running down his neck. "Good lad," Carson said. "Keep working it."

He sat himself down on the bed, bunching up the pillows, and rested his chin on his hand. He would have gladly taken Steven's cock in his mouth and sucked him to climax, but Steven had done well this evening and he knew that if he kept the sense of service through to the

end, his sub would love him all the more for it.

Steven's hands were big, the fingernails always clean and well kept, and he moaned as his cock slid through his palm, slowly, the purple head emerging and disappearing. Carson sighed, drinking in the sight of his beautiful husband, kneeling naked and submissive on his bed, utterly without any kind of artifice, giving himself completely to his dominant.

"That's it – that's beautiful," Carson said. Steven's hand continued to do its slow work, his entire body shaking with the effort of not speeding up and increasing the friction. "Don't come yet," Carson warned, although he knew Steven would never come without being given express permission.

"No, Master," Steven whispered.

Carson lay back down and gazed contentedly at his husband. He knew he was being a little cruel, keeping Steven on the brink for so long, but he also knew that some part of Steven loved it when he did this, and he was enjoying the show Steven was putting on for him.

The candles had burned down low and the room was in semi- darkness now, but he could still see Steven's sweat-soaked body as he thrust his cock into his palm, over and over again.

"Please, Master," Steven whispered at last.

"Not yet, my love," Carson said. "Serve me some more. I want to see how long you can last."

"Please!" Steven whimpered.

Carson rose up and crawled across the bed; he knelt beside Steven and kissed the side of his sub's face. "Not yet," he said. "You're mine remember, Steven. Your body is here to serve me."

"I know. I serve you. I do serve you, Master," Steven whimpered, and Carson could feel his whole body convulse with the effort of not coming.

"Then keep going, give yourself up to me with no expectation of coming. Just think of my pleasure, in watching you," Carson said.

He almost felt something change as he said that. Steven nodded, swallowing hard, and Carson saw him make that mental adjustment from being the Commander of the Daedalus, with all the responsibilities he bore there, to being Steven Beckett, beloved submissive of his husband. He was here to serve, to lose himself in that service, and by so doing to find his true inner being.

"That's it – let it go," Carson whispered, stroking Steven's trembling body lovingly. "You're mine now, let it go. Serve me, my love. Serve me."

Steven's body started to relax, and his movements became slower as he sank down into his

sub-space – a place where he desperately needed to be. Carson smiled; they had been a long time apart and Steven needed this so badly. He needed the peace of being what he was in his heart – Carson's willing sub, serving him.

Now there was no conflict. Steven didn't beg any more; he was where he needed to be in his head. Carson stroked him gently as he worked his hard cock, now lost somewhere inside his own mind.

Carson honestly thought Steven could have held that erection and pumped himself all night with his own hand if he'd asked him. He didn't intend to ask him – he allowed Steven to keep the rhythm for a long time, until he was sure his lover was deep inside his own sub-space, and then he took over, pushing Steven's hand out of the way and replacing it with his own.

"Serve me with just your cock," he whispered. "Hands behind your back."

Steven obeyed instantly and Carson played with him for some time, revelling in the feel of all that hard flesh in his hand. Then he squeezed more tightly, going faster.

"Not yet, not yet," he said, as he worked Steven's cock hard. Steven was gazing straight ahead, lost, giving himself up entirely to serving Carson, however Carson wanted that service.

"That's it, that's good, you're so good," Carson told him. "Now – you can come. Now. Come." He gave Steven's cock two more hard strokes with his hand and then Steven was coming, so hard he could feel his entire body shuddering, his come spurting out everywhere. He was panting like a workhorse, his body covered in sweat, and he looked so happy.

Carson leaned against his husband, holding him up in the aftermath of his orgasm, and Steven rested against him, his big arms holding onto Carson while his breathing slowly returned to normal.

"That was beautiful, love, thank you," Carson said softly, stroking Steven's back gently. Steven drew back.

"Thank you," he said, his dark eyes loving and sincere. "I'll get a washcloth and clean you, Master," he added, and Carson guessed that by the fact he was still addressing him as 'Master', Steven was in a happy place in his head and didn't want to leave it just yet.

He nodded, and Steven got off the bed, returning seconds later with a warm washcloth. He cleaned Carson lovingly, and then took care of himself. Carson got into the bed and then lifted the covers.

"Come here," he said. "Damn it but I've missed you so much, love."

Steven got into the bed beside him, and wrapped his arms protectively around his top.

Carson had found through being with Steven that he enjoyed this more than he would ever have expected. He leaned back against Steven's shoulder, and felt Steven kissing him reverentially on his neck and the back of his head.

Then, sated, at peace, and totally and utterly content, Carson closed his eyes and drifted slowly off to sleep.

~\*~

"Hi boss."

Gibbs exited his bedroom into the lounge area of the NCIS suite and came to an abrupt halt. Tony was standing there, wearing a pair of tight black leather pants with a lace-up crotch that left absolutely \*nothing\* to the imagination, and a cutaway top that exposed his nipples. He was wearing heavy eyeliner and a hint of lip-gloss; a long silver and emerald earring dangled from his left ear and a silver band was snaking its way up his left arm.

"DiNozzo," Gibbs said abruptly.

"Like my outfit for the festivities?"

"It's fine," Gibbs grunted. "If you want to be groped all night by leering tops."

"Sounds good to me," Tony grinned.

Gibbs gave another grunt and made his way into the smaller living room off to one side. He found Ducky there, surveying pages of notes set out in front of him on the coffee table.

"Ah, Jethro – you're back," Ducky said, glancing up. "Did you see what Anthony is wearing for this party on the mainland this evening? I do hope you're not going to let him go out like that."

Gibbs shrugged. "Nothing to do with me, Ducky. He's a grown man and can wear what he likes."

"Oh dear - he will be disappointed," Ducky lamented. "I'm sure the outfit was chosen merely to provoke a reaction from you and it's failed - so now he's stuck with actually wearing it, in all its ghastliness."

Gibbs shrugged again, and peered at Ducky's notes over his shoulder. Ducky took his glasses off and glanced up at him.

"Seriously, Jethro, are you never going to put that poor boy out of his misery?" he asked.

"He knew what the deal was when I put my collar on him, Ducky," Gibbs said, shifting uncomfortably. "Now, what have you found?"

Ducky's blue eyes surveyed him keenly for a long moment and Gibbs stared back at him stonily. He wasn't in the mood for this right now.

"All right, Jethro," Ducky murmured. "But one of these days you and I are going to have a long chat about this."

"The dead marines, Ducky," Gibbs prompted pointedly. "What have you found?"

"I'm not sure. The bodies were all staked out on the floor in their quarters. The strange thing is...their throats were cut and then their insides were removed and very neatly placed in little piles next to the bodies. It's almost as if the killer was performing his own autopsy. What I don't know is – why?"

"Any drugs in their systems? Rohypnol? Any other kind of date rape drug?" Gibbs asked.

"No." Ducky shook his head. "Admittedly Dr Beckett's tox screening facilities are dissimilar to our own, although sophisticated in quite a different way. You would not believe some of the technology they have here! These 'ancients' whoever they were, were certainly an advanced civilisation. All these rumours we've heard over the years about the lost city of Atlantis and it turns out to be true! I must admit I had my doubts because it all seemed so preposterous and I wasn't terribly supportive when Ra..." He broke off, and glanced at Gibbs with a little wince. Gibbs felt his gut tightening as he guessed what Ducky had been about to say. "Well, that's another matter," Ducky said hurriedly. "You know, if I had the time, I'd like to investigate..."

"Any sign of a struggle?" Gibbs interrupted.

Ducky considered that. "No. Ah, you're wondering why these fit young marines didn't put up more of a fight?"

"I've spent the day talking to the marines on this base and I found out that all the murdered victims were subs," Gibbs told him. "And promiscuous subs at that; the kind of subs who wouldn't turn down a one night stand if it was offered to them by a reasonably attractive top. That could explain it. Maybe they consented to the tying up, not realising what would come next."

"Maybe." Ducky nodded.

"Keep searching." Gibbs rested his hand gently on the nape of Ducky's neck and squeezed affectionately, and his old friend smiled up at him.

"You should be happy, Jethro. You deserve to be happy," he said softly.

Gibbs shifted uncomfortably. "I'm not hurting anyone again, Ducky."

"Yes you are. You're hurting yourself – every single day. Can you deny that you care about Tony?"

"I care about all my subs, Ducky."

"You know what I mean. He'd be good for you, Jethro – lighten you up a bit. You do have a tendency towards melancholy at times, you know. I understand why but the past is in the past – you have to let it go."

"Can't do that, Ducky," Gibbs shrugged. "End of conversation."

"You know I won't let up until we resolve this, don't you?"

"Nothing to resolve," Gibbs replied briskly, irritated by Ducky's continual need to discuss a topic he had no intention of discussing – not now and not ever if he could help it. "Now, I have a party to go to. You're not coming?"

"No, I want to continue looking at these," Ducky replied, waving at his autopsy notes. "Have fun."

"It's not pleasure, Ducky – it's work," Gibbs reminded him. "These people will let their guard down at this party, and we might end up finding something." He gazed absently at Ducky for a moment.

"What is it, Jethro?" Ducky asked gently.

"Just...I have a bad feeling about tonight, Ducky," Gibbs murmured. "Can't place it but it's not good."

"You always listen to your gut, Jethro," Ducky reminded him.

"I know – just can't figure out exactly what it's trying to tell me."

He turned to go but Ducky called him back.

"Jethro – the quarrelsome children next door wearing your collars have just spent eighteen days cooped up onboard a very small ship," Ducky told him. "Do let them have some fun tonight – it doesn't all have to be about work."

Gibbs rolled his eyes. "They can have fun, Ducky, just as long as they remember what we're here for."

His subs were all ready and assembled in the other living room when he returned. Ziva was clad in black leather pants and a silver vest top, hair tied back, a black earring dangling from one ear. She looked – dangerous. Gibbs made a mental note to keep an eye on her. Abby was wearing pretty much her usual garb, which was always a little avant-garde at the best of times – and she'd added some kind of all-over body glitter for special effect. McGee, in a navy polo shirt and stone-coloured chinos looked as unprepared as ever for anything that might involve him loosening up a bit around tops. And Tony, of course, looked the exact

opposite.

"Okay." Gibbs made a circuit of them, fastening on a leash at a time until he had them all in his hand. "Ducky has just reminded me that you're all human, so by all means have some fun tonight. But no drinking, and remember that three marines have been murdered."

"When you say 'fun' - does that include casual, meaningless sex with complete strangers?" Tony asked. Gibbs glared at him. "I'm just asking because, you know, I've just spent eighteen days cooped up with you guys with no hot tops in sight – present company excepted, boss - and, no offence, but I'm raring to get out there. New tops to meet, new positions to be tied up in - that kind of thing. I mean, this is my chance to have sex on a completely different planet!"

"The usual rules apply, Tony – you ask first and you stay safe. Apart from that." Gibbs shrugged. "I don't care who the hell you sleep with."

He watched the flash of frustrated disappointment that spiked in Tony's eyes at the lie he'd just told and wondered how this game could possibly end; Tony goading him, trying to push him into a response, any kind of response, and him riposting, cold and calculated, neither of them giving an inch. Maybe Tony thought he could break him, and that one day he'd just throw him over the nearest surface, rip off his pants and take him out of sheer exasperation - but if he thought that, he didn't know Gibbs very well. His self-control was legendary – which was a good thing, because he was using every ounce of it dealing with Tony DiNozzo.

"Let's go," Gibbs said tersely, turning and walking towards the door. He rarely tugged on their leashes – it was up to them to keep up, and for the most part they walked behind him in unison, like the tightly ordered and well-disciplined little squad he'd taught them to be.

They made their way down to the puddle jumper bay, where a queue of people in brightly coloured party clothes were waiting to be ferried across to the mainland.

John Sheppard was directing people into various jumpers. He came up to them immediately.

"This one over here is for you," he said, waving his arm at an empty jumper. "No need for you to wait in line."

"Thanks." Gibbs glanced at Sheppard's uniform. "You coming to the party later?"

"I don't think so. Rodney will kill me because the food is always really great at Athosian festivals and he won't go if I don't go, but no."

Sheppard shook his head. His dark hair was mussed up in a way that Gibbs didn't expect from such a high ranking military commander – he also didn't like the way Sheppard slouched and loped. On the other hand, he'd heard nothing but good things about the man since he arrived, and his men all seemed to think that the sun shone out of his ass so Gibbs was prepared to cut the other top some slack until he got to know him better.



"Any reason?" Gibbs asked, watching Sheppard's facial expressions closely.

"Nope." Sheppard looked a little uncomfortable and something about his body language rang alarm bells. Gibbs handed his subs' leashes to Tony, and took Sheppard by the arm, leading him off to one side.

"General, if there's anything going on here then I suggest you tell me because if I find out later, well, let's just say you won't like it."

Sheppard's mouth quirked into a little grin. "Oh yeah?" he said. Gibbs held his gaze for a moment, while Sheppard fought a visible internal battle with himself between insolence and helpfulness. Finally, he sighed.

"Look, Gibbs...it's not that I know anything. It's just...look, the reason I didn't want to say anything is because it sounds dumb. But...I just have a bad feeling about tonight. Something feels wrong and don't go asking me what I'm basing that on because it's nothing. Just..."

"A bad feeling in your gut?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah."

They looked at each other for a moment. "I have the same feeling," Gibbs said quietly. "Look – you stay here, Sheppard, keep an eye on the city, and I'll go over to the mainland and keep an eye out over there. We'll check in with each other every hour on the hour. That way we'll cover the most ground."

"Good." Sheppard looked visibly happier.

"You do not have to solve this alone now, Sheppard," Gibbs told him. "That's what we're here for."

"I know. Just...this is my base, Gibbs, and these are my people. You have no idea what we've been through out here, the dangers we've faced..."

"Yes I do," Gibbs told him firmly. "I've read every single report you've filed, General. Didn't understand some of 'em I'll admit, but I read all of them on the journey over here. You're a brave man, and, what's more, you care about your people – and that's a quality I approve of. Now, work with me on this and we'll solve it together."

"Okay." Sheppard nodded. "Okay," he repeated, running a hand through his untidy mop of hair, making it stand up on end even more.

Gibbs fought down an urge to take a comb to it – Sheppard might be a top, but he reminded him a little of his own most exasperating sub, Tony DiNozzo. Both were brave and smart and allowed their external appearance to fool people into thinking they weren't as sharp as they were; dangerous men to know, both of them, but good people to have on your side in a fight.

The mainland was warm, and there was a balmy breeze blowing. Several large fires were dotted around a beautiful bay, and there were already a couple of hundred people walking around, drinking out of earthenware goblets.

A beautiful woman approached him, and handed him a goblet with a little bow.

"Welcome to our feast," she said. "May we be blessed with another year of deliverance from the Wraith."

He took the drink and sniffed it suspiciously.

"It will not cause intoxication," she told him. There was a tall man with dreadlocks by her side, and he recognised them immediately from Ziva's description in their debriefing earlier. Teyla clearly liked to display her sub because he wore only some hide pants and a pair of tough looking boots – he was naked from the waist up, save for the plain, sturdy collar around his neck, and the glittering jewels in his nipples. "Those who wish to partake of something stronger should visit the tent over there." Teyla nodded her head in the appropriate direction. "May I serve your submissives?" she asked.

"Sure." Gibbs nodded. He kept them leashed all the same – he wasn't prepared to let them go off-leash until he was sure about this place. He sipped the drink, which tasted like a particularly tangy kind of fruit juice and was clearly non-alcoholic, as she had promised.

"Deliverance from the Wraith," an Athosian man said, passing them by and raising his goblet in their direction. Gibbs swung his goblet in the air at him in reply. He had never met a wraith but he'd read all about them in Sheppard's reports. He could see why these people would want to celebrate another year of escaping their vampiric clutches.

"Oh my god – these are fantastic," Abby was saying, pointing to the jewelled nipple rings Ronon was wearing. "See, Gibbs – it's completely tasteful. I don't know why you won't let me go and have mine done," she said, with a little pout at him.

"You can have them done if you want, Abby," he told her, with a little shrug.

"Cool!" Abby's eyes glowed.

"All I said was that you might want to wait until you meet the right top and have him or her do it for you," Gibbs reminded her. "It's an intimate thing, and you can only do it once. You don't want to go to some cold, clinical branding and piercing parlour somewhere and then wish you'd waited."

Teyla nodded, her dark eyes glowing in the firelight. "Agent Gibbs is correct, Abby," she said quietly. She was a top of such quiet presence that everyone listened intently to what she had to say. "When I pierced Ronon, it was a special moment for us. I would have been disappointed if another top had already pierced him – or if he had arranged for his own piercing."

"They're just so pretty," Abby pouted, her fingers curling and uncurling eagerly.

"You may touch them," Teyla said, with a bow of her head.

"Cool!" Abby reached out and gently fingered the jewelled decorations. "Did it hurt when you were pierced?" she asked Ronon.

"Compared to being shot in the leg, or having a wraith tracker implanted? No," he told her impassively.

Teyla smiled. "Ronon finds it easy to withstand physical pain. The issue for me was to make him feel something in the moment – not anger at being hurt, because he has been hurt too often in his life, but an understanding that by accepting that hurt at my hands he was offering himself to me, without rancour or reserve, and allowing me the special rights of a dominant over her submissive's body. It was beautiful." She leaned over and kissed each jewelled nipple with a kind of devoted reverence, in memory of the occasion.

Abby's eyes glowed softly, sadly, in the firelight and Gibbs sighed, and ran a hand over her hair, stroking it gently. He wished he could make things right for her, and find her what she needed. She was too lovely to be so alone. Yet this was a choice she had to make for herself – if only she didn't always choose precisely the wrong kinds of tops. He knew why she was attracted to the more abusive tops, and understood that her kind heart always stopped her seeing the bad in people when his own alarms would have gone off at first meeting.

"It is time for me to formally bless the ceremony," Teyla said. "As our guests it would do me great honour if you would partake of the ceremonial ritual."

"What does it involve?" Gibbs asked cautiously. Teyla laughed.

"Nothing more than standing with me," she said.

They moved over to the largest fire and Teyla stood up on a small wooden dais and addressed the crowd.

"Welcome friends and fellow fighters against the Wraith," she said, her normally quiet voice now commanding enough to be heard across the small bay. "We come together to mark another year in our fight against the Wraith, to celebrate the triumphs and mourn the losses. Celebrate your lives, dear friends, and remember those who are gone."

She held up her goblet and then poured the contents into the ground. A buzz went up from the crowd and then everyone poured the contents of their goblets into the ground, murmuring their thanks or whispering the name of a loved one who had died during the year. Gibbs followed suit and gestured to his subs to do the same. Teyla clapped her hands and everyone fell silent again.

"We welcome Mara, sage and prophetess, to pronounce her tidings for the coming year,"

she said, and a wizened old lady shuffled forward. An immediate hush descended and Gibbs glanced questioningly at Teyla, wondering what this was about.

"Mara is a sage – she helps our young people find their true path, and uncover the essence of themselves," Teyla said. "For those who are unsure if they are dominant or submissive, Mara is always able to help. And for those who seek different kinds of answers, she can sometimes see into the mists that hide our future from us."

"Yeah, we have those kinds of people too," Tony muttered. "But we call 'em charlatans." Gibbs reached out and pinched Tony's ass, hard. "Ow," Tony yelped. Gibbs gave him a warning glare.

"Mara – what does the year bring?" Teyla called.

Mara gazed around the crowd, her eyes glassy and unseeing. She waved her arms around and Gibbs could almost hear Tony's eye-rolling.

"It will be a good year," Mara pronounced finally. "The Wraith are in disarray, fighting amongst themselves. There will be losses among our people – but they will be few, and the Wraith will not cause them. And this I foresee! Rejoice people of Athos and our friends – rejoice!"

The crowd broke out into another round of clapping and then began to disperse, laughing and dancing as they went.

Mara turned again, and then stopped, her entire body quivering. She raised a bony finger and pointed it straight at Gibbs.

"Oh god," Tony sighed. "More crap. Don't believe a word of it, boss, unless she tells you you're going to take a tall, dark handsome sub to your bed."

"Quiet, Tony, or all that'll happen is that I'll take a long, dark, whippy crop to your ass," Gibbs hissed.

Mara was walking towards them, that glassy-eyed stare still intent upon Gibbs in a way he was finding really un-nerving.

"You," she said, coming to stand right in front of him. Her body was quivering and she looked quite insane. "I have met only a few like you. A Yedahl is rare – a blocked Yedahl ever rarer. You have known great loss though, I can see that," she mused. "Still, a blocked Yedahl is a danger to himself and everyone around him."

Gibbs stared at her impassively; he had no idea what she was talking about but there was something very compelling about her. It was impossible for him to take his eyes off her while she spoke to him.

"Now hear this, Yedahl. Hear this!" she hissed. "You came with five, but you will leave with

only one."

Gibbs felt a shiver crawl up his spine at her words. Then her wizened face crumpled into a frown.

"But first you must claim what is already yours – and only in the fire of extreme pain will you find the will to act."

"Whatever the hell that means," Tony muttered.

"Remember what I said! A blocked Yedah! will cause only pain wherever he goes, and he denies the world the gift of his true power. And you, who came with five, may leave with only one," she repeated. Then she leaned in close, so close that he could smell the fruit drink on her breath. "Or you will not leave at all," she added, in a low, chilling tone.

Then suddenly she was whirling around again, and her bony finger was pointing at someone else, and she was gone.

"What a sweet old lady!" Abby beamed. "And also kind of scary. What did it all mean, Gibbs?"

"I have no idea," Gibbs said tersely. His gut feeling about this evening was turning out to be correct. He didn't believe in fortune-telling or soothsaying or any of that crap but this woman had seriously un-nerved him.

"Well it doesn't take a genius to figure out that there's five of us, and Gibbs arrived with us," McGee pointed out.

"So it could be a threat," Ziva said. "He leaves with one but arrives with five? Does this mean that four of us will die?"

The NCIS agents all looked at each other, and Gibbs felt a surge of protective anger at the thought of any of his people dying.

"Nobody threatened anyone," he told them all sharply. "She's just a harmless old lady. Now, it's time we got down to some work. Go mingle, people – and find out what you can. And Abby – don't go far. You're not as experienced in these situations as the others."

He released all of them from their leashes and watched them spread out into the crowd.

"I am sorry," Teyla said coming over to him. "Mara meant no harm. She speaks only what she sees."

"Okay." Gibbs shrugged. "What does Yedah! mean? She mentioned that word a few times."

"Ah." Teyla nodded. "There are the Yeda – I am one – we who learn our path and come into our dominance in due course, usually as young adults. We struggle at first, but we learn to

understand our dominant energy and channel it wisely; sometimes this takes great work and meditation, as we must strive first to master ourselves before we can master a submissive. We know that with our sexual dominance comes great responsibility but it takes us time to learn the limits of our own power. When we do, we find great peace within ourselves. We are the Yeda, and we are commonplace – I believe this is how it is for most dominants. However, then there are the Yedahl – Mara recognises that you are one and, from what little I have seen, I believe she is correct."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"Yedahl are simply born, and you are rare," Teyla explained. "Yedahl have an understanding of who they are from a very early age. You do not need to search, meditate or soul-seek. You inhabit your dominant energy from childhood. It is as natural to you as breathing. For you there is no struggle - you are already your own master and have high standards for yourself. There are submissives born the same way – we call them Sedahl. They understand inherently that their nature is strength and look only for a dominant who can help them express themselves to the fullest extent. If they do not find such a dominant then they often self-destruct, spiralling wildly out of control. They need grounding - they are special people and often accomplish great things. When a Yedahl and a Sedahl find one another, it is a thing of great beauty - but very rare."

"She said I was blocked," Gibbs murmured, not believing any of this stuff but intrigued by it all the same.

"I cannot speak to that," Teyla replied. "I do know that a Yedahl must express his or her dominant energy or else it turns in on them, causing great pain. A blocked Yedahl is dangerous indeed – a Yedahl must express their dominant sexual energy in a safe, loving partnership, or else it will destroy them and those around them. Only you know if this is true though."

Gibbs glanced across the crowd, and caught sight of Tony, in his tight pants, flirting with a tall, graceful Athosian top. He was so used to the knife stab in his gut that he barely acknowledged it.

Sometimes though...sometimes, at night, he had dreams where he was covering Tony's body with his own, driving his hard cock into Tony's warm, welcoming ass. He dreamed of kissing Tony's mouth, of making those teasing eyes smoky with need and eager with submission. He dreamed of merging with his beautiful sub, their bodies moving as one as he rode Tony hard until they were both quivering with pleasure.

Gibbs woke from those dreams covered in sweat, and a heartbeat away from driving to Tony's apartment, forcing his way inside, and taking what was his; and Tony \*was\* his damn it.

He felt an age-old need churn in his gut, demanding his attention. It would be satisfied only by him finding a submissive who reciprocated his energy and passion, and with whom he could truly be himself.

The merging, the melding...it called to him, a fierce ache deep inside. If he relaxed his self-control for even a moment it rose up, insisting that he claim Tony as his own and make it damn clear to his wayward sub that he was never, ever again to flirt with any other dominant.

And yet, if he wouldn't bed Tony how could he blame him for seeking pleasure elsewhere? It wasn't fair on Tony to deny him that. He was an attractive sub and a natural flirt – of course other tops would be interested in him and of course Tony needed that.

Gibbs dragged his gaze away and found Teyla staring at him, a sympathetic look in her dark eyes.

"I see how it lies with you, Yedah!, " she told him kindly. "And I hope that one day you find a way to be who you truly are."

~\*~

Abby found herself on the outskirts of the gathering. She sipped her drink, watching the people celebrating. It was a bright, vivacious party and usually she'd have enjoyed it, but she felt oddly disconnected – and kind of sad.

Seeing Ronon with Teyla, and hearing what Gibbs had to say on the subject of piercings had resurrected a sense of loneliness that her sunny personality usually managed to repress. She had a long-held dream of being pierced, and sometimes she had even been tempted to go to the nearby parlour, where she'd had her tattoos done, and ask them to do it. All that held her back was the thought of Gibbs's disapproval.

"Well, they say you never feel more alone than in a crowd," she murmured, leaning against a tree and watching the festivities. She felt aloof and distant, as if she was in a cocoon. "This is so dumb," she told herself. "I mean, you're on a whole different planet for god's sake! This is SO cool." All the same, she didn't *feel* it, so she stayed where she was.

She saw Tony, working his way through the crowd, dipping in and out of conversations. Abby could see that he was doing his job, trying to find out more about this place and the marines who had been murdered, but she guessed that most people wouldn't notice that. His flirtatious manner just made it look like he was trawling for a top and an easy night's pleasure.

She watched him work the crowd for a long time. Sometimes people mistook his manner and the occasional top tried to place a hand around his wrist and lead him off to the tented area at the back, but on each occasion she saw him extricate himself with a cool flair. One top wouldn't take no for an answer and ended up with his arm thrust up behind his back and Tony hissing something into his ear. Abby shook her head; she could see how other people might misread Tony's mixed signals but they were clear as day to her. Despite what he had said to Gibbs earlier, she'd put money on the fact that the one person who wouldn't retire to that tented area tonight was Tony.

She wandered a little further away from the crowd. She knew she was supposed to be mingling and asking questions but she didn't feel like it. Okay, so she also knew Gibbs wouldn't be happy that she'd left the gathering, especially when there was a murderer on the loose, but she felt safe enough. He'd told her not to go too far but she could still \*see\* people after all so that surely wasn't too far?

She wandered up the beach and climbed a path, clambering up a long way until she reached a grassy verge above.

"Are you alright, miss?" a voice called.

She saw a man, in the distance, standing beside one of those cool little ships they'd used to ferry them over here.

"I'm fine!" she waved. "Just, you know, wanted to see the view."

"It is a pretty view," he called. He started walking over to her and she hung there, unsure whether this was such a good idea or not. She was now quite some way from the gathering and she wasn't even sure they'd be able to see or hear her up here if she was in any trouble – it was too dark away from the bonfires and torches below.

"Did you want a ride back to the city?" the man asked, as he drew close. "I'm on ferrying duties." He pointed towards the little ship he'd been standing beside.

"No...at least...not yet. I don't think," Abby frowned. "I mean, I shouldn't go back without telling Gibbs and I don't know where he is."

"He's your top?" the man asked.

"Yeah. Well, kinda...I mean, we're not sleeping together or anything – I'm on his team at work and he just...well, he kind of looks out for me until I find someone."

"Sounds like a nice guy," the stranger commented.

"He is. Really nice." Abby nodded. "Although sometimes I wish he wouldn't give any potential tops such a hard time before he'll agree to let me date them! They always have to ask his permission and he gives them this really formal interview and to be honest most of them are scared off by that point. But that's just Gibbs – he knows what he's doing and he's always been right about them so far."

"Sounds like he's just taking his responsibilities towards you seriously," the stranger said. "Which he should if you're wearing his collar. So, why did you leave the party?"

Abby gazed at the stranger. He had brown hair and blue eyes and there was something about him – but she wasn't sure what; just something that seemed almost familiar. He was a top of course – she'd got that vibe off him straight away. She knew Gibbs wouldn't like her



sitting out here, alone, with this strange top when there was a murderer on the loose but he didn't seem dangerous. Of course, her 'danger' radar was notoriously unreliable – she'd had some pretty abusive tops in the past and while she was nobody's pushover, and always got rid of them eventually, she felt sorry enough for them that she put up with them for longer than she should.

Plus, she really yearned for a strong top – someone she could feel safe with. Sometimes she'd mistaken an abusive top for a strong one, no matter how many times Gibbs and Tony explained the difference to her. The trouble was she had an idea in her head of how it should be but she had never actually experienced it and her heart ached a little about that. She longed to find the right top, someone to love with all the considerable passion in her heart, but so far she'd been completely crap at finding the right person.

"I don't know. I just wanted some alone time I guess," she admitted, finally answering his question. "Everyone down there seems so happy. And they're all in couples and, you know, \*pierced\* and everything."

"What?" The stranger grinned at her, an amused look in his blue eyes.

"Sorry...I'm babbling. It's just Ronon has these really cool nipple piercings that his top did for him and they're so pretty and I want that but Gibbs says I have to wait until I find the right top to do it. I know he's right but I want to go into those cool shops that sell piercing jewels and buy some – I saw these beautiful ones shaped like sunbursts that were just so pretty and...oh...this is too much information, isn't it?" Abby bit on her lip. "I'm sorry – McGee warns me about it all the time."

"Not at all. I think it's fascinating," the stranger laughed.

She cast another glance at him from under her eyelashes.

"So, you're one of Sheppard's men?" she asked.

"Yes I am, ma'am," he nodded.

"Did you know the guys who died?"

He stiffened. "Yes," he answered curtly.

"I'm sorry. I just...I guess I'm not a very good field agent," Abby said with a shrug. "I was supposed to interview Rodney but we just ended up chatting."

"You ended up chatting with Rodney Sheppard?" Her stranger seemed amused. "Wow – way to go. He's not the world's easiest person to get along with."

"I thought he was lovely!" Abby protested. She supposed she really ought to ask the stranger his name but there was something rather delicious about their anonymity. She noticed he hadn't asked her name, either – although as the NCIS agents had made quite a

stir with their arrival it was likely he already knew who she was.

"It really is pretty up here," Abby sighed, gazing down below to where the people scurried, like small, brightly coloured ants. The fires on the beach cast an orange glow over the nearby waves that lapped against the shore.

"It really is, isn't it?" the stranger said. "It's called Collar Bay."

"Collar Bay? Really? That's such a cool name! It isn't really collar-shaped though," she said, turning her head on one side to see if she could see it.

"Nah. I don't think that's why it was named. Sheppard came back and named it on the map the day after he collared Rodney, so I'm guessing it has more to do with that."

"You think he collared Rodney here? Oh! That's so beautiful," Abby said, fingering her own collar. Like all Gibbs's collars it was utilitarian plain black leather – very comfortable and utterly impersonal. She loved it, but longed for one that was meant just for her all the same.

"You're a romantic," the stranger said. "I can tell."

Abby grinned at him. "I know! Tony's always teasing me about it!"

"Tony?"

"One of Gibbs's other subs. He's a great guy – well, he can be kind of irritating sometimes but that's just because Gibbs won't sleep with him. I think he's a romantic too, underneath – he just doesn't want anyone to know. I don't mind people knowing; I guess I'm kind of an open book."

"There's a better view of the bay from over there – do you want to go see?" the man asked.

Abby bit on her lip again. The place where he was pointing was well off the beaten track and she wouldn't be even remotely visible if she went there with him. She knew what Gibbs would say – she could hear it in her head.

"I don't think Gibbs would like that," she murmured.

"Do you always do what Gibbs likes?" the man asked, and he sounded genuinely interested.

"Not always, but where my personal safety is concerned, Gibbs tends to get really fierce."

"As he should," the man said. "I wouldn't want you to do anything your top wouldn't approve of. Why don't we just sit down here for a bit and talk? I'm really enjoying talking to you."

Abby turned to face him, unsure what to reply, but his eyes seemed really close and they looked kind – firm and decisive, but kind. He had that air of being in charge that Gibbs had,

and a relaxed, easy kind of authority – which wasn't so much like Gibbs but which she liked all the same.

"Okay," she found herself saying. They sat down on the grassy verge, side by side, legs hanging over the edge, upper arms touching, and he felt warm, and kind of good sitting next to her.

"You're really pretty you know," he said. Abby felt herself flushing.

"I bet you say that to all the subs," she replied.

"No. I really don't. I'm not that smooth an operator," he laughed. "But you – you're just beautiful. I love the way you dress."

She turned to face him again, and his face seemed even closer now. She swallowed hard and found her eyes wandering down to his lips. They looked soft and firm - and kissable.

"I'd kiss you right now but you're wearing another top's collar and I don't have his permission," the man murmured, his eyes fixed on her mouth.

"Oh. Well. Gibbs wouldn't mind," she said, leaning forward, eyes closed. She felt a finger on her mouth, pushing her back, and she opened her eyes, startled.

"Not without permission," he said regretfully.

"Okay," she pouted.

"Let's talk some more." He put an arm around her shoulders and pulled her against him, and she was aware of the warmth of his body. Was this wrong? It felt so right.

His broad hand circled her wrist gently, the way tops often did with prospective subs, testing them a little, feeling the heat in the mild bondage, searching for the dynamic between them.

Abby felt herself relax. She wondered what it would be like if this kind-eyed stranger fastened cuffs to her wrists and tied her hands above her head. She could imagine those artistic fingers playing with her body, teasing a beautiful, sensuous tune from her, whilst she, bound and helpless, was powerless to resist.

A nagging voice at the back of her head reminded her of something Gibbs had said. Didn't the murderer like to tie up his victims first, and stake them to the ground? The earth up here was really soft – it would be easy to push a stake into it. She shivered, and withdrew her arm from the circle of his hand.

"Sorry," he murmured. "That wasn't appropriate."

"No – it was! It's just...I don't even know your name!" she blurted.

"I thought you were enjoying that," he whispered, his eyes drinking in the outline of her face in the darkness. "An encounter with a stranger on a beach. The mystery. The romance."

She felt known. This was so erotic she could feel the pulsing between her legs but she knew nothing about this guy. She wasn't getting any danger signals from him but then she rarely did. She was a long way from anyone up here, and it would be so easy for this guy to take advantage of that. She gave a little shudder.

"Oh – you're cold."

He took off his jacket and placed it around her shoulders. It felt warm and it smelled of him. It was a good smell; leather and aftershave and something earthy and nice. She snuggled down into it.

"Would you let me do it again?" he asked, his fingers tiptoeing up her wrist. "I won't if you don't want."

"I..." Her throat felt dry, and her body was shaking at his touch. She loved the feel of his fingers on her skin...she wanted this so much. "Okay," she whispered. His fingers moved slowly, taking their time, and then he had circled her wrist again, and was pressing down, just gently.

"You like being tied?" he asked softly. "You like how that feels? Unable to move, or resist?"

"Yes," she moaned. Bondage was one of her favourite things in the entire world. She loved the sensation of it and often tried to recreate it in her clothing, in the little wrist cuffs she wore, the studded rings, necklaces and bracelets, and the tight boots.

"I love it too. I love how it feels to tie a sub down. I love the look of trust in her eyes and the smell of the leather cuffs on her wrists. I love the feel of her, all wriggly and powerless beneath me."

His fingers stroked her wrist gently and she squirmed, imagining it, wondering how it would feel to be at this man's mercy. His fingers seemed so gentle. Surely these fingers wouldn't hurt her?

"I love how it feels to undress her, with her hands tied behind her back so she can't stop me. I love how it feels to unbutton her blouse, undo her bra, and release her beautiful breasts." Abby gazed at him, completely enraptured. He reached out and brushed a stray strand of hair away from her face. "I'll stroke those breasts, gently, and then play with them awhile. I'll take one of her nipples into my mouth and suck it hard while she cries out, arms restrained, completely at my mercy."

Abby made a little moaning sound in the back of her throat.

"I'll strip her slowly, peel off her clothing layer by layer, until she's only wearing her panties."

Then I'll take my knife and cut those off her body." Abby's eyes grew round as saucers.

"Knife?" she whispered, suddenly scared again.

"Yes." He nodded. "I'll cut them off her and then take her to bed and tie her wrist cuffs to the headboard. I'll fasten cuffs on each of her ankles and then open her legs wide and tie the cuffs to the footboard, so far apart that she's staked out, unable to move."

The words 'staked out' rang alarm bells for her, but he was smiling and his eyes were still kind.

"Then I'll lie between her thighs and drink from her until she's screaming with pleasure, but I won't let her come. She'll hold on because she knows I'll only let her come when I'm inside her."

His fingers were now making spidery movements up and down her wrists, beating out the rhythm of her heart on her skin.

"You really are very beautiful you know," he said. "And you're right about the piercings. You'd look beautiful pierced. Your breasts are so round and pretty. I'd love to touch them."

"Gibbs..." she whispered.

"It's okay." His fingers tightened on her wrist. "I wouldn't. I just want you to know I understand about the piercing. I understand completely. I've always thought it would be such a beautiful experience to pierce my own sub, to place such a permanent mark on them, reminding them forever that they are mine. I'd take my time. I'd tie you down first, not because you might struggle but because I want you to be still when I'm doing it so I do it right. And also...because you love being tied."

"Yes," Abby sighed.

"I'd look into your eyes as I do it, and I'd kiss you when you scream and swallow the sound with my lips," he whispered.

"Yes," Abby sighed again.

"Afterwards I'd make love to you, but I'd keep you tied up. I'd cover your body with my own and take you so hard and for so long that you'll know for sure you're mine. And all the time you feel me inside you, you'll feel the cool metal of the jewels in your nipples, and they'll be me too – placed on you to remind you who you belong to."

"Oh god!" Abby breathed. "That's it. That's totally it!"

"We wouldn't have to stop there," he promised. She gazed at him, open-mouth. "There are other areas of your body I'd like to pierce," he said. "If you wanted me to that is."

She swallowed hard.

"Areas even more intimate," he whispered, his fingers hard on her wrist now, as tight as any cuff. She was shaking, her clit pounding with desire at the word picture he was painting. "You want to rub yourself don't you?" he asked, speaking quietly, directly into her ear.

"Yes," she panted.

"You can't," he said, and the hand on her wrist squeezed warningly. "Only I can say when you can come," he whispered, his breath warm on the side of her face.

"Yes," she breathed, putting her head back, exposing her throat, gasping for air.

"And you can't. Not yet. Not until I've tied you. Not until I'm in you."

If he got out some cuffs right now she'd put her hands in them willingly, she thought. If he wanted to stake her to the ground and take her she'd let him. Gibbs, Gibbs, Gibbs... he was at the back of her mind, warning her of the danger, but she didn't want to listen.

"I want you," she told him, and he smiled.

"I know," he said.

~\*~

Ziva did her job with a kind of grim, joyless determination. She was in no mood to party; her head was still full of her encounter with Teyla earlier in the day. She felt drawn to the Athosian woman and she wasn't sure why. Maybe it was because Teyla was so obviously a warrior, and the man at her side was so clearly feral – and yet he knelt for her and allowed her to pet him and she knew that he would give his life to protect his mistress, in the blink of an eye. How had Teyla managed to tame such a magnificent sub, she wondered? And how did she manage to keep him, so obedient by her side?

She had been going around, asking questions and finding out very little, when Teyla found her. The Athosian warrior was accompanied by another woman, shorter than Ziva, with spiky blonde hair. Her body was lean and toned, and her breasts, Ziva couldn't help but notice, were firm and round, nestled invitingly within a plain leather warrior's top. She was wearing hide leggings and knee-length boots, and from her belt there hung a number of weapons. She screamed defiance and challenge from every pore of her body.

"Ziva – I have been searching for you. I wish to introduce you to Kahla. She is one of our people," Teyla said.

"Pleased to meet you," Ziva said, surveying Kahla with a wolfish, predatory look which she took no pains to hide. Kahla gazed back at her distrustfully, but Ziva noticed that the blonde woman was assessing her body openly and insolently in return. It was a challenge, and Ziva felt the heat rise in her body.

"Kahla is a submissive," Teyla said, although Ziva had worked out that much for herself.

"You are an Athosian?" Ziva asked.

"I was born on Athos. I was captured by the Wraith when I was eighteen. They made me into a runner and hunted me. Teyla found me, and her friends removed the tracking device from me," Kahla said, her voice hard, her sentences short and flat, her stance angry.

"I am not familiar with this – a runner?" Ziva asked.

"Ronon was a runner too," Teyla said gravely. "It is a particularly cruel practice. The Wraith hunted him across many worlds. He was never at peace, and, thanks to the tracker implanted in his back, he could never fully escape them. He lived many years like this. Kahla was a runner for only a year but she did well to survive that long – most runners perish within the first few months."

"They could not catch me," Kahla spat. "They tried, but I killed dozens of them. It felt good, slicing into wraith bellies with my knife and hearing them scream as they died."

Ziva stared at her, fascinated. This woman was almost as feral as Ronon. She wondered what it would be like to dive into the darkness of Kahla's soul and subdue her. At least she wouldn't have to take care of her – this creature's heart was as black as her own. They could unite together in the darkness.

Teyla laid a hand on Ziva's shoulder. "I will be here if you need me," she said, and then she moved away, back to where her sub was standing with some Athosians nearby, leaving Ziva alone with this challenging submissive.

"What are you?" Kahla asked, in an aggressive tone. "What do you do?"

"I used to be an assassin. Now...I investigate military crimes," Ziva replied.

"An assassin? You mean a killer?" Kahla wet her lips with her tongue.

"Yes," Ziva replied. Wasn't that the truth of it?

"And you're a top?" Kahla asked.

Ziva nodded. "The collar is..."

"I know. Teyla told me you wear an apprenticeship collar," Kahla shrugged. "I don't care about that. You want to fuck? There are tents over there, beyond the fires. Let's see if you can take me."

Ziva was taken aback by Kahla's directness, but she knew from the heat in her belly that she definitely wanted a chance to subdue and dominate this dark, feral creature.

"I could easily take you," she hissed.

Kahla grinned, her white teeth flashing in the darkness. "We will see," she replied.

"I am supposed to be working. I will speak to Gibbs to see if he will allow it," Ziva said. Kahla looked disdainful.

"I would let nobody tell me who I could fuck," she growled.

"It is his right and my sense of honour to fulfil that right," Ziva snapped at her. "If you do not wish to wait, then leave. It means nothing to me."

Kahla glared at her, a fiery expression in her grey eyes. "Be quick – or I will find another for the night," she said.

Ziva felt the anger rise in her belly. She longed to take hold of this woman and show her who the top was here. She stalked over to where Gibbs was standing with McGee.

"Gibbs – I have been asking questions all evening but have found little of use to us in this investigation," she told him. "I would now like your permission to take a submissive for the night and leave the gathering."

Gibbs gazed at her, those cool blue eyes sharp and assessing. He glanced over Ziva's shoulder and she half turned to see him looking at Kahla. She saw his gaze rake over her defiant stare and the weapons she wore around her belt. Then he turned back to Ziva. She did not like the look of – disgust? Or perhaps just resigned disappointment - that she saw in his eyes. It was as if he always wanted something of her but she didn't know what. She just knew that in this instant she had failed him and she didn't know why.

"I have not taken a sub in months," she said angrily. "I always ask your permission and..."

"It's fine, Ziva. If that's what you want, take it," Gibbs interrupted her. "Come on, McGee – let's get moving."

He undid McGee's leash from his belt and snapped it shut around the sub's collar with a tight flourish. Ziva saw the look in McGee's beautiful green eyes, and she fought down another wave of anger. McGee's stupid crush on her was not her responsibility. She had done nothing to encourage it! He was wrong for her, as wrong as could be. Look at him, standing there, so awkward. He was as gentle and naïve as the day he was born and she would annihilate him if she took him as her sub. He had no idea of the depths of her darkness, and he was an idiot if he thought they had anything to give each other. It was his foolish fantasy, not hers.

Ziva watched Gibbs hurry McGee away, no doubt to save the sensitive flower from witnessing her taking Kahla off to the tents. She felt even angrier now, and stomped back to the submissive who was still standing a little way off, watching. She grabbed Kahla's arm,



swung her around, put a hand behind her neck, and pulled her in for a fierce, biting kiss. Kahla struggled for a moment, and then responded with an angry hunger that made Ziva want more. She released her from the kiss, fastened her hand tightly around Kahla's wrist, and then pulled her away from the gathering, past the fires, towards the tents.

It was cooler out here, a gentle breeze blowing through the trees. Various couples had staggered over here, nearly making it to the tents before getting sidetracked along the way. Ziva almost tripped over one pair who were lying on the grass, kissing, oblivious to everyone around them.

"Get a fucking tent!" Kahla screamed at them, stepping over them.

Ziva heard the sound of leather biting into flesh, and the little whimpers of a sub being whipped. In the distance she saw a woman, her naked body pressed against a tree, hands clenching and unclenching as a top whipped her. It was raw and basic, and Ziva stood there for a moment, gazing at the scene hungrily.

"That's hot," Kahla said, and she put a hand around Ziva's waist and pulled her in for another rough kiss.

It was hot. It also looked kind of brutal from where Ziva was standing, but the submissive was not bound and she was clearly enjoying the whipping. The top was very controlled, taking care where he laid his strokes, so this wasn't some kind of drunken misadventure that could go horribly wrong.

Her appetite aroused, Ziva allowed Kahla to drag her over to the row of tents. They tried a few before finding an empty one and then Kahla pulled her inside, and pushed her against the canvas wall. Ziva pushed her back, closing her fingers around Kahla's wrists so tightly as to leave bruises in the absence of cuff marks. Kahla's grey eyes glowed angrily in the darkness.

"You are mine tonight," Ziva hissed. "I will fuck you the way I want."

"If you can," Kahla challenged.

Ziva made the move without even realising it. She threw Kahla down with a quick flick of her wrist and the blonde landed on her back on the straw mattress on the ground. Ziva jumped on top of her, grabbed her wrists again, and held them above her head. Then she lowered her head and bit Kahla's neck. Kahla screamed and rose up against her, pulling her wrists free. Her nails found Ziva's cheek and gouged a long line down it.

The pain made Ziva angry, and the heat rose again in her belly. She would subdue this submissive and make her sorry. She slapped Kahla hard across the face.

"Submit to me, bitch," she hissed.

Kahla's eyes glowed with arousal, but she just sat back on her heels and spat in Ziva's face.

Furious, Ziva grabbed Kahla's top and ripped it open. She found a breast and squeezed, hard. Kahla cried out, and fell back down on the mattress. Ziva straddled her.

"Submit," she said again, holding Kahla down while she took one of her breasts in her mouth and bit down again. Kahla screamed while Ziva marked her with her teeth, and her body wriggled satisfyingly beneath Ziva's harsh caress.

"Fuck you! FUCK YOU!" Kahla yelled, but Ziva noticed that she had opened her legs and the smell of her arousal was heavy and intoxicating.

"No. I will fuck you," Ziva said, moving her hand down and tearing open Kahla's pants. She overpowered the smaller woman, tearing her clothes off her, wanting her naked. Kahla wriggled, struggling against her, but then Ziva found her clit, warm and pounding, and Kahla stilled, a strangled cry dying in her throat.

"You like this, don't you?" Ziva said, working Kahla's clit with expert fingers. "Beg me, submissive. Beg me."

Kahla's eyes were hazy with want, and she lifted her crotch to meet the harsh strokes from Ziva's fingers. Ziva grinned down at her. "You will beg me or I will not make you come."

Kahla's hands came up, tearing at Ziva's clothes, and Ziva moved her arms to help. Her silver top was thrown onto the ground beside them, and her pants opened enough that Kahla could slip her hand down the back of them. She gripped Ziva's ass hard, sinking in her nails. Ziva cried out, but the pain just made her arousal stronger. She bent forward and took one of those hard round breasts in her mouth again, found the nipple, and sucked down viciously. Kahla convulsed, and her fingers found Ziva's back and scratched a long line of fire down it.

Ziva kept sucking and at the same time moved her fingers rapidly, rubbing Kahla's clit hard. She took her just to the edge of orgasm and then stopped. Kahla gazed up at her, her eyes sex-stupid.

"No," she whimpered. "More...please..."

"Later. First you will serve me," Ziva said. She got up and undressed fully, and then lowered herself down on Kahla's mouth. She held the blonde's head down beneath her while Kahla's tongue moved up eagerly to lick her burning clit. Ziva moved up and down over that hungry, wet mouth for several minutes until she reached her climax, feeling the sticky heat of her own come dripping down her leg. She stayed there for a long time, panting, making Kahla drink her come, and then she released her.

"Now, beg me," she said, returning to her former position, one finger on Kahla's clit, one hand on Kahla's breast, rubbing hard.

"No!" Kahla hissed.

Ziva squeezed her nipple brutally and Kahla thrashed around beneath her.

"I beg you!" she cried out. "Please, please, please..."

Ziva released the nipple, only to take hold of it again in an even more brutal grip. She pinched it even harder and Kahla convulsed, whimpering loudly.

"Who is your top tonight?" Ziva demanded.

"You!" Kahla screamed.

"Good girl." Ziva bent her head and stole another savage kiss from Kahla's bruised lips, rubbing hard on her clit as she did so. Kahla was panting just as hard, and then Ziva felt the warm rush of her come on her fingers.

She sat there for a moment, atop her conquered sub, feeling the heat of the battle leave her. All around her was darkness, and her body ached. She got off Kahla and threw herself down on the mattress beside her. It was always the same – first the intense, dizzying heat of sexual desire, and then the darkness and that numb feeling inside – and then, in the morning...

Ziva turned her back on Kahla and drew her knees up to her chest, closing her eyes.

The morning would have to take care of itself.

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Gibbs pulled McGee away from Ziva without a second glance. He knew the young probie wouldn't say anything, but he also knew he was hurting right now and it was best to remove him from the situation.

"Where's Abby?" he asked, glancing around to get a bearing on where his subs were. They could all take care of themselves except for her. He was acutely aware that she wasn't a trained field agent – and she did have a propensity for getting into trouble.

"I don't know, boss," McGee said, surveying the gathering. "I'm sure she's fine. She's probably with Tony."

"No – Tony's over there," Gibbs said, pointing.

He set off at a fast walk for where Tony was holding court with a group of five Athosian tops, most of whom were looking dazzled by his wayward sub, and all of whom, he suspected, hoped they'd get a chance to tie Tony to their bedposts this evening. Gibbs's stomach tightened at the thought.

"DiNozzo," he rapped out, as soon as they were within hearing distance. Tony didn't hesitate, and was by his side within seconds, alerted by the tone of his voice.

"What is it, boss?"

"We can't find Abby. Have you seen her?"

"Not for some time. She was over there last time I saw her." Tony pointed to the side of the beach, and Gibbs could just about make out a sandy path disappearing up the side of a hill and into darkness.

"When was that?" Gibbs asked.

"An hour or so ago – maybe more," Tony replied.

"Damn it." Gibbs dropped McGee's leash and made for the path at a run.

He should have kept more of an eye out for where she was. He'd specifically told her not to go far. Abby was so special to him, and he loved her so much – they all did. They couldn't lose her. Now that bad feeling in his gut was getting worse, and he stopped for a moment, taking some deep breaths, looking around. McGee and DiNozzo were right behind him, and they all surveyed the gathering from the vantage point of the side of the hill.

"I don't see her," McGee said. The crowd had thinned out considerably, as many people had left to go to the tents; Abby was distinctive - it was quite clear she wasn't there.

"We have to find her," Gibbs said tersely. "There's a serial killer on the loose somewhere out here, and we all know that he or she preys on subs."

"Surely Abby wouldn't just go with someone that easily, would she?" McGee asked.

"Abby's lonely," Tony said. "And that makes her vulnerable right now. I've been getting this weird vibe off her for the past few months."

Gibbs felt a jolt of surprise at that – Tony acted out so often that sometimes he forgot what a skilled investigator he was. Nothing ever passed him by – he noticed everything and filed it away in his brain in case it was ever needed.

"Is there someone up there?" McGee asked, peering up above them.

Gibbs took off at a run. In his mind's eye he could see Abby staked out naked on the ground, her throat cut and her internal organs lying neatly beside her dead body, butchered, the way those marines had been butchered.

He reached the top of the incline and found himself on a grassy verge...and that was when he saw her. She was sitting next to a stranger – a stranger who had his hands around Abby's wrists, his eyes intent upon her face...

Gibbs was there in seconds. He pulled Abby up and away, hauling her to her feet, ignoring

her yelp of surprise, and placed his body between her and the stranger.

"Who the hell are you, and why were you touching my sub?" he growled.

The other man scrambled to his feet and Gibbs could see in the moonlight that he was wearing a military uniform. Gibbs knew immediately that the man was a top. He always knew a person's orientation without needing to ask. He had thought, when he was a child, that everyone could but he had come to realise that in fact it was a rare gift. Sometimes it was clear from the clothes people wore, or from even more obvious clues like the presence of a collar or a marriage belt, but often it was impossible to tell just from looking – unless you were Gibbs, and just \*knew\*.

The strange top stood up straight, and gave Gibbs a firm salute.

"I'm sorry, sir. I was just keeping her company. She seemed a little lost and alone – I wanted to take care of her, keep her safe. There's a killer around at the moment and I was concerned for her. I didn't want to scare her so I thought I'd sit and talk to her. But you're right, sir – it was wrong of me to touch her without your permission. My apologies. She was cold and I wanted to keep her warm and, well, one thing led to another. My fault, not hers. Please don't punish her for it."

Gibbs gazed at the man suspiciously, but now that he had calmed down he could see that the strange top looked normal enough. In fact, he had kind eyes, and he seemed polite and respectful.

"Please, Gibbs...it's okay," Abby said, pulling on his arm to get his attention. "He's really, really nice. He didn't hurt me. He was just being kind."

Gibbs released a long breath and then inhaled again, taking a gulp of air, trying to calm down. Tony and McGee had arrived and were standing behind the stranger, at the ready, awaiting Gibbs's orders.

"Do you have a name, boy?" Gibbs asked.

"Yes, sir." The man nodded. "I'm John Sheppard's deputy on Atlantis, sir. My name is Evan Lorne. Lieutenant-Colonel Evan Lorne."

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Ducky closed his eyes and opened them again, but the words on the page were still blurred. He took off his spectacles and rubbed his eyes but the tiredness remained. He sighed, and glanced at his watch; it was nearly midnight.

"I suppose I've done enough for the night," he murmured. The answer was in here, somewhere, if only he could find it, but he knew from many years' experience that he'd get nowhere by staring at an autopsy report until he fell asleep over it. The others hadn't yet returned and he felt like taking a walk. This city really was remarkable – the architecture

alone was astonishing. He could also do with a nice cup of tea.

Ducky decided to walk down to the cafeteria he had visited earlier in the day. "I hope I can remember the way," he said to himself. "And I wonder if they're open at this time of night? Ah well, I can at least go and find out!"

He found his way easily enough, and the room, with its beautiful view over the sea, was open. There were no staff – just jugs of hot water and percolating coffee, and an array of snacks. He helped himself to some hot water and a tea bag, and then glanced around – and saw, sitting in the corner reading, the somewhat stiff and uncomfortable figure of Woolsey, dressed impeccably in a suit and tie.

"Ah – I see I am not the only one burning the midnight oil," Ducky said, going over to him. "May I join you, Mr Woolsey?"

"By all means." Woolsey waved to the seat in front of him. "Although actually I was just about to retire for a nightcap – would you like to join me for some fine Scottish whisky, Dr Mallard?"

"Ah – those words are music to my ears," Ducky said. "And it sounds infinitely preferable to tea!" Woolsey beamed at him and got up. Ducky left the cup of tea on the table and followed the base commander. "So - why the suit and tie?" Ducky asked as they walked.

"This? Oh...I went to the party on the mainland earlier. I'm quite new in this command position and I felt I should show my face, that kind of thing," Woolsey said.

Ducky couldn't help thinking that Woolsey would have stood out like a sore thumb dressed in the rather formal suit he was wearing. "I didn't stay long," Woolsey said.

"Why ever not?" Ducky asked. "It sounded like enormous fun."

"Yes. Well...to be perfectly honest, I'm not terribly comfortable at social events," Woolsey told him. Ducky could imagine that was the case. The poor man looked as if he had trouble fitting in anywhere – which was a shame, as he was clearly an educated man and a highly competent administrator. He just lacked confidence in his social skills and Ducky suspected there was a reason for that.

They reached the door to his quarters and he waved his hand at the door lock and then gestured Ducky inside when it opened.

Ducky stepped into the most orderly set of quarters he'd ever seen. Nothing was out of place – even Woolsey's slippers were laid out with military precision beside the bed. There were several books on shelves; Ducky read the titles while Woolsey fixed them both a drink.

"That's quite a collection you've got here," Ducky said. "All the classics of course – but these are the ones that interest me most, Mr Woolsey – the entire collection of Ian Fleming's James Bond novels?" He picked up one of the novels and held it up, with a raised eyebrow.

"And somewhat well thumbed too, by the looks of it."

"I love them," Woolsey confessed, looking slightly shame-faced. "I've read them so many times that I practically have them memorised."

"Ah," Ducky said, accepting his glass of whisky and taking the seat he was being offered. "I think, Mr Woolsey, that beneath that very neatly ordered exterior there lurks the heart of an adventurer!"

Woolsey blushed, looking flustered. "Oh, I don't think so...well, I suppose I did end up here, in a completely different galaxy, but no, really..."

Ducky gave a gentle chuckle. This man really was delightful and he had no idea just how delightful he was. "Don't worry. Your secret is safe with me," he said, tapping the side of his nose.

Woolsey gave a bashful smile, sat down opposite him, and leaned back, swirling his drink around in his glass.

"Cheers," Ducky said, raising his glass.

"Bottoms up!" Woolsey said, and then he looked unbearably embarrassed. "Uh, that is..."

"It's fine," Ducky chuckled. "I'm all in favour of upturned bottoms! My, this is fine stuff," he said, taking a sip. Woolsey glowed visibly. "So you haven't been here long?" Ducky queried, making polite conversation.

"No - just a few months - it was all a bit unexpected really. I wouldn't have come if I'd still been with Jane, obviously, but the divorce all happened rather suddenly and then I just thought - there's nothing left for me here, perhaps I should try something new. I mean, if we'd been married Jane wouldn't have come - she wouldn't have liked this at all. But she even got custody of my dog - well, I suppose he was our dog, but I used to look after him, take him for walks, feed him. Still, she wasn't to be argued with on the subject and I suppose I gave in. I always did give in to her." He looked suddenly very sad.

"My dear fellow..." Ducky began, wondering how his innocent attempt to make polite conversation had led to such a startling outpouring. He felt rather sorry for the poor man - clearly he had been very badly hurt, and the wounds were both deep and recent.

"No...I'm sorry. I'm going on far too much. It's just...I couldn't sleep which is why I went to the cafeteria but nobody was there and I haven't really, to be honest, made any friends here. Well, of course it's difficult when you're in a command position, and I don't find it easy anyway, but even so, I replaced a very popular commander and I've locked horns a few times with General Sheppard who is one of those tops I find quite intimidating and...oh dear, I really shouldn't be telling you all this."

"It's okay," Ducky said gently.

Woolsey looked up, blinking, looking for all the world as if nobody had ever been kind to him in his entire life.

"My dear boy, it really is okay," Ducky said firmly. "You can tell me anything you like – it will go no further than this room. As for making friends – I very much hope that you will consider me one."

Woolsey blinked again, and then gave a rather shy little smile.

"Thank you," he said. "I would like that very much."

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Abby sat in the second row of seats in the puddle jumper, gazing at Evan Lorne's hair, where it sat, flat, on the nape of his neck. It was nice hair and she longed to touch it. Evan Lorne. She played the name over and over again in her head. Lieutenant-Colonel Evan Lorne... she felt a surge of pride over his title – clearly her stranger from the beach was very good at his job. She could believe that. She had liked his air of easy but easy-going authority right from the start.

Then her gaze fell on Gibbs, sitting beside Lorne, his mouth set in a grim line. She heard his words to her from earlier in the evening, echoing around in her head.

"Abby – don't go far. You're not as experienced in these situations as the others..."

She'd disobeyed him and caused him anxiety; so much so that he'd had to come looking for her. She didn't think there was any way she'd be going to bed without a sore, well spanked bottom this evening. She hated the thought of Gibbs having to spank her; she was always such a good sub – she wasn't like Tony who got into trouble on an almost daily basis. Besides, Gibbs's spankings really \*hurt\*.

Aware of Gibbs's mood, nobody said anything as they flew back to the city. Abby loved the way Lorne's hands moved across the control panel as they flew. They were such nice hands; firm but artistic.

They reached the city, landed, and got up to leave the jumper, but Lorne placed a hand on Gibbs's arm, stopping him.

"Sir, I realise this might not be the appropriate time to ask, but...I've taken a real shine to Abby, and, if she's in agreement, I'd like to ask your permission to see her again. Perhaps take her on a date?"

Gibbs glowered at him and Abby bit on her lip, but Lorne seemed undaunted. Her heart gave a little zing – he'd taken a shine to her? And he was willing to stand up to Gibbs-in-a-bad-mood in order to see her again? Gibbs glanced at her.



"Well, Abby?" he asked.

"Yes please!" she said, with a big, wide grin at Lorne.

"Very well, Lieutenant-Colonel Lorne. You can present yourself to me tomorrow in my quarters and we'll discuss it. I'm not making any promises at this stage but I'll consider it," Gibbs said tersely. He turned away again but Lorne stopped him.

"Sir," he said.

"Yes?" Gibbs growled, turning back - and looking extremely annoyed at being called back a second time. Lorne stood his ground.

"I meant what I said earlier. Please don't punish Abby. She didn't mean anything," Lorne said, and Abby's heart did a flip of pure joy.

"I told her not to go far and she disobeyed me, putting herself in jeopardy in the process. She was just lucky it was you she met on that hillside tonight and not someone else, Colonel," Gibbs said tersely. Lorne nodded.

"I understand," he said. "I know she did wrong but she does too, don't you, Abby?"

She liked the way he said her name. She nodded, eagerly.

"I'm really sorry, Gibbs," she said contritely, adding, in her head, please don't spank me! and crossing her fingers behind her back. Her top turned to her, a stern look in those usually benign - towards her at least - blue eyes.

"Abby, how am I going to keep you safe if you won't remember stuff like this?" he told her. "If a spanking helps drive the message home then I'll do it. I'd rather you were crying over my knee than dead in a ditch somewhere. Can you imagine how I'd feel - how any of us would feel - if it was your body lying on a slab for Ducky to autopsy? Seriously? Can you?"

Abby had a sudden glimpse of just how worried he'd been, and her throat constricted.

"You're right," she said, with a firm nod. "Thank you, Evan but I think I deserve whatever Gibbs wants to hand out."

"Oh for god's sake." Gibbs rolled his eyes. "You are impossible, young lady," he told her, putting his arms around her and pulling her close, then kissing the top of her head.

She saw him glancing at Evan over her head, and then at Tony, both of whom were giving him hopeful looks. Nobody would interfere with a top's right to discipline his collared submissive, especially not after the stunt she'd pulled earlier this evening, but both Tony and Evan seemed to be willing Gibbs not to spank her. McGee just looked petrified, both by Gibbs's bad mood and by the prospect of Abby being spanked. She thought that if Gibbs did spank her then McGee might just fade away in terror at being in the vicinity.

"Okay," Gibbs said, finally, with a sigh. "You get this one for free, Abby – but if anything like this happens again you'll be over my knees so fast you won't even know about it until you're staring at the carpet. Understood?"

Abby grinned and kissed him. "Yes, Gibbs! And I promise I won't do anything like this again!"

She felt a little starburst of happiness explode inside; she'd met a wonderful top and Gibbs wasn't mad with her any more – all was right in her world.

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John Sheppard paused in the doorway to Rodney's lab and gazed at his husband for a couple of minutes. He always loved watching Rodney work, especially when Rodney didn't know he was being watched. His sub's beautiful hands, always restless, moved at 100mph as he typed, drank coffee, wrote up an equation on his whiteboard, and reset three different machines - all seemingly at the same time.

Rodney was dressed for an evening out in tight black chinos that showed off his fine round ass perfectly, and a bright blue shirt that brought out the colour of his eyes. He even wore a smudge of eyeliner and John loved seeing Rodney in eyeliner.

"Hey," he said at last, having drunk his fill of watching his beloved sub.

Rodney jumped and then swung around, startled at being interrupted in his thoughts. He was completely alone in the lab and had obviously been lost in his own little world.

"Oh, it's you," he huffed, seeing John. He turned his back deliberately on his top and bent over his experiment – which didn't have the desired effect of giving John the cold shoulder, offering, as it did, a fantastic view of Rodney's firm bottom.

"Still annoyed with me?" John said, coming into the room and leaving the big box he'd brought with him on the desk by the door.

"It's the Athosian Festival of Deliverance!" Rodney lamented. "It's the best festival in the Athosian calendar – the one with all the really good food and not the crap one with all the oatmeal where they mourn the dead and sing gloomy songs all night. I can't believe you wouldn't let us go. I got all dressed up especially too."

"You could have gone, Rodney," John pointed out.

"Not without you. You do all the cool socialising and it's no fun eating when I'm not sharing your plate. Besides, it was at Collar Bay and we could have...you know..."

"Re-lived your collaring?" John raised an eyebrow. "We do that every year on its anniversary, Rodney."

"I know! But still! You know how much I love that place and we don't go there that often considering it's only a short jumper ride away and you are a bloody pilot!" Rodney moaned.

John stood behind him and ran his hands over Rodney's lush ass where he was bent over his work.

"And it's no use thinking that fondling me will get you anywhere!" Rodney said.

"Really?" John squeezed Rodney's buttocks gently and Rodney bit back a low moan.

"No!" he said, standing up and depriving John of the easy target.

"You gonna refuse me my rights, Rodney?" John asked, wrapping his arms around his husband's waist and nibbling on Rodney's ear. Rodney sighed and melted back against him.

"Well obviously not, no," he replied. "But I want you to know I'm very, very annoyed with you."

"Did you eat anything tonight?" John asked, his hands sliding up to caress Rodney's nipples into firm points through his shirt.

"When all that was on offer in the cafeteria was cardboard sandwiches because they hadn't bothered to cook knowing that everyone was going to be feasting on the mainland tonight?" Rodney ranted. "No! I didn't! I decided I wasn't hungry and I'm never not hungry so that's all your fault too."

"Okay. So if you're not hungry you won't want this big box of food I had Lorne bring back from the feast on one of his ferrying trips," John said.

"No I'm not...whaaat?!" Rodney turned and looked at him. John grinned, and kissed his sub's surprised mouth.

"You can thank me later. On your knees, with your mouth," he said. "Because this deserves a truly spectacular blow job."

He went and retrieved the box, placed it on a spare desk, and began unpacking the contents.

"Oh my god! Oh my god!" Rodney hopped around the desk like a demented squirrel. "You are the best top in the world."

"Yes I am," John agreed.

Rodney gathered him into a hug and gave him a big sloppy kiss and then went back to hopping around the table, surveying the contents of the box. There were many different kinds of Athosian delicacies, one big plate and a set of cutlery. John piled the food high on the plate and took a bite, savouring it. Rodney stared at him, a look of intense longing on his

face as he surveyed his top eating. John piled up the fork again and then took another mouthful. Rodney's face fell.

"You're not going to feed me?" he asked, so crestfallen that it was all John could do not to laugh.

"I thought you were very, very annoyed with me," John said. "Eating when you're that annoyed will give you indigestion."

"JOHN!" Rodney yelled. John grinned, and then relented.

"Okay – on your knees beside me and worship appropriately at my feet and I'll consider it."

Rodney shot him a dirty look but John thought it had been awhile since he'd really taken Rodney down. They had so much fun together that he often forgot to really ground Rodney, and his brilliant, irascible sub sometimes needed that. Maybe he sometimes needed even \*more\* than that, John thought to himself, uneasily, but he pushed that thought aside.

Rodney got to his knees beside him and settled there, lifting his face up like an innocent cherub, gazing hopefully at the food. John filled a fork full of Rodney's favourite delicacy and held it out to his sub; Rodney took it in his mouth like it was ambrosia.

"Good boy," John murmured approvingly, and Rodney nuzzled his knee affectionately as he chewed.

"Oh god this stuff is good!" Rodney said after he swallowed. John fed him for some time, loving the little humming sounds of pleasure that his sub was making as he enjoyed the meal.

John took a few mouthfuls himself, but he wasn't really that bothered. That bad feeling in his gut was still there; something wasn't right and he wasn't sure what. He'd kept in touch with Gibbs every hour, and he'd kept a strict rota of where all his marines were, which had been hard given that everyone was coming and going all night. He'd drummed into them, in several briefings, that they were not to take any risks, or accept a one night stand from any unfamiliar partners, however good-looking and charismatically toppy he or she might be. He didn't know what more he could have done and he was exhausted by the night's work as he'd been rushing back and forth, here and there, for the past few hours.

"You okay?" Rodney asked, and John realised he'd let out a loud, heartfelt sigh.

"Just...worried," John murmured.

"I knew it! It's those bloody NCIS agents, poking around, asking dumb questions," Rodney fumed. "As if this is THEIR command and not yours."

"Rodney – that's not why I'm worried," John told him, shaking his head. Rodney's loyalty was flattering, if a little over-zealous in this instance. "I'm worried because it's been over a

month since the last murder and we're due another one. Tonight has been chaotic, lots of people coming and going. It would be the perfect opportunity for our killer to strike again. I suppose I could have told the Athosians to cancel the ceremony, or forbidden anyone from the base from attending it, but our people work hard and this is one of those great nights that everyone loves. I didn't want to be heavy-handed about it but I can't help wondering if I've done the right thing."

"I'm sure you have," Rodney said firmly. "You always do."

"Anyway, I thought you liked Abby," John said, changing the subject because worrying wasn't going to be any help. "You raved about her earlier. So they're not ALL bad."

"No, she was nice. Gibbs scares me though and I don't like DiNozzo at all," Rodney said.

"I can't figure out Gibbs. You say Abby told you he's not sleeping with any of them?" John shook his head. "They're a nice-looking bunch of subs. You'd think he could at least have some fun with them."

"The way you had fun with a bunch of different subs before you collared me?" Rodney asked, a glint of mischief in his eye. "Maybe not everyone likes to play the field so vigorously, General Tightpants."

"If you remember I was celibate for a whole year before I met you," John told him reprovingly.

"So maybe Gibbs is celibate too – for whatever reason," Rodney shrugged.

John nodded absently, one hand tangled in Rodney's hair where he was kneeling beside him. He worried away at his bottom lip with his teeth, wishing he could shift that anxious feeling in his gut.

"I think...I'm just going to do the rounds one more time," he murmured. "Check on my marines, make sure everyone is okay."

"What about the truly spectacular blowjob?" Rodney said, leaning forward and nudging at John's crotch with his nose.

"It can wait," John sighed.

He reached down, took hold of Rodney's head, and bestowed a deep kiss on his mouth. Then he got up and walked towards the door. He hesitated in the doorway, and glanced back at Rodney.

"You gonna be okay here on your own?" he asked, that anxious feeling flaring in the pit of his belly at the thought of anything happening to Rodney.

"I'll be fine." Rodney rolled his eyes. "This is my lab, John. Nobody is going to hurt me in

here. Although, if it'll make you feel better I'll lock the door when you leave and I won't let anyone in unless I know them."

"That would make me feel better, yes," John told him.

"Seriously? I thought it was overkill myself," Rodney said, coming over to the door all the same. "John?" He put his arm around John's waist and pulled him close, holding him tight. John felt the kaeira energy flow between them as Rodney sent waves of reassurance his way through the lifebond they shared. "You sure you're okay?" Rodney asked softly. "Just, I've never known you turn down a truly spectacular blowjob before."

John gave his sub a wry grin at that. "I know." He shook his head in amazement. "And yes, I'm fine. But I'll feel better when we've caught whoever is killing my marines."

"Okay." Rodney kissed him and the kaeira fizzed happily between them.

John tore himself away and left the lab – but he stood outside the door and didn't set off down the hallway until Rodney had locked the door behind him. Rodney was his lifebonded partner, and John loved him more than he'd ever loved anyone in his life. Rodney \*was\* his life, and the thought of anyone so much as touching Rodney caused a familiar red mist to rise inside him. His protective instinct, when roused, was always fierce and while it was so strong as to send him almost insane where Rodney was concerned, it was also pretty formidable where any of the other people under his protection were concerned as well.

Three of his marines had died so far; three people under his command whose bodies he'd had to return to Earth to their folks; three people he had failed to protect.

John swung his arm angrily against his thigh and set off at a run back towards the puddle-jumper bay to take a look at the inventories of who had been coming and going all night.

He'd catch this bastard. He had to.

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"So, how did it go?" Ducky asked, as his colleagues returned to their suite of rooms, looking perhaps a little dishevelled and worse for wear.

"You still up, Duck?" Gibbs asked.

"I can never sleep when you lot are off somewhere, potentially doing something dangerous," Ducky replied.

He noticed the hard lines of tension across Gibbs's shoulders and the set of his mouth. Something had happened; he was glad now that he had waited up for them. Gibbs had told him that he had a bad feeling in his gut about tonight – and Ducky had never yet known Gibbs's gut to be wrong.

"Where's Ziva?" he asked, anxiously.

"She pulled a sub," Tony said, a leer playing around his extremely mobile lips. "The boss let her go off and play. It's always one rule for tops and another for subs," he muttered, but the complaint didn't pass Gibbs by.

"You could have played if you wanted, Tony. All you had to do was ask. That's what she did," Gibbs snapped.

"No need, boss. I was out there, doing my job, just like you asked," Tony replied. "No time for anything else – not that there was a shortage of offers."

Gibbs's eyes flashed, and Ducky could feel the tension in the air. Now he really was worried. Tony usually needled at Gibbs for a reaction and this was no different – it was Gibbs who was behaving differently. He looked as if he was close to breaking point, and Ducky had never known Tony succeed in pushing him that far before. Maybe he was just tired, or maybe the evening had taken its toll on him. It couldn't be that easy being a dominant with five collared subs to take care of in this strange place, so far from their usual environment.

Ducky made a mental note to tell Tony to dial it down a bit while they were here, unless he wanted to spend the rest of their time in the Pegasus galaxy standing instead of sitting, and sleeping on his front at night.

"Okay people, go to bed," Gibbs ordered. "It's late and I want a full report tomorrow morning. Set your alarms for 09:00. That'll give you six hours sleep."

"Night Gibbs." Abby threw her arms around her top and kissed him before going to her room.

"Boss. Ducky." Tim waved his hand in the air and retired to his room.

"Sure you don't want any company in there tonight, boss?" Tony asked, nodding in the direction of Gibbs's bedroom. "It's a pretty big bed for one person. You might get lonely."

Gibbs didn't respond with his usual weary good humour to that. He just shook his head, tersely.

"Goodnight, DiNozzo," he said firmly.

Tony stood there for a moment, hands on hips, assessing his boss, and then sighed.

"Well okay then. You know where I am if you need me." He waved his hand nonchalantly in the air and retired to his own room.

"Ducky." Gibbs nodded in Ducky's direction and then walked stiffly into his own bedroom, shutting the door firmly behind him.

Ducky watched him go, noting the tense way he was carrying himself. "Oh no, my dear friend, I don't think you get off that easily," he murmured to himself.

He made some coffee, ensuring that it was as strong as Gibbs liked it, and then went to his top's door and let himself in, without knocking – he had no intention of taking no for an answer and he knew that 'no' was exactly the answer Gibbs would give if he gave him the opportunity.

He found Gibbs standing by the bed, gazing at the contents of the little box in his hands. Gibbs glanced up when he came in, looking as if he was readying himself to be angry, but then the anger faded, and he just looked locked up in himself, tight and vulnerable instead.

"Ah. Shannon's collar," Ducky murmured, recognising the box. Gibbs carried it wherever he went.

Ducky went and looked at the collar over Gibbs's shoulder. He had seen it before but not so close up. It was plain gold, and there was nothing showy about it but there was an elegance to its simplicity.

"Soul meets soul," Ducky read out the inscription on the inside of the collar. "That's Shelley isn't it? 'Soul meets soul on lover's lips'? How beautiful." It was also a little unexpected. He knew that beneath that tough exterior lurked a man who felt things deeply, but he had never known Gibbs to read poetry.

"Yeah, I guess – poetry's not my thing but Shannon loved it," Gibbs murmured, tracing over the inscription with his finger. "She loved this line in particular – always said I was her soulmate."

Ducky noticed the piece of twisted metal on the collar, where one of the bullets that had killed Gibbs's first spouse had hit. "Jethro, how long are you going to do this to yourself?" Ducky asked. "She's been dead for fifteen years. You have to let her go."

"I've tried, Ducky," Gibbs replied. "I've even tried getting married again – three times, as you well know."

"Well, that, my dear boy, is because you're a romantic," Ducky told him. "And you tried to find with them what you had with her which is why it never worked."

"I know, I know," Gibbs growled. "And that's why I have no intention of trying it again. I'm a hard top to be with, Ducky, you know that. I ask a lot – Shannon understood me but my other spouses didn't. I hurt them, Ducky, because I was always looking for her in them."

"Well, it didn't help that you only married red-haired women," Ducky pointed out. "What you had with Shannon was hardly likely to be repeated just by marrying someone who looked like her. What you need is to take a sub for who they are, not who they remind you of."



"No, what I need is never to take a sub in that way again," Gibbs said firmly.

"Oh Jethro," Ducky sighed. Gibbs shut the box with a snap of his fingers and replaced it back in his luggage. Ducky glanced around the room. "You haven't unpacked, I see. You should have asked one of your agents to do it for you. I'm not entirely sure what perks you get out of having them wear your collars, Jethro. You certainly exercise few enough rights."

"They get what they need," Gibbs replied. "Don't they?" he asked, gazing at Ducky searchingly. Ducky traced a finger over his own collar, and smiled.

"Yes, they do," he murmured. "Ah, Jethro, what is this habit you have of picking up waifs and strays and collaring them to keep them safe?"

Gibbs gave a wry smile. "You think I have a rescue complex, Duck?"

"Well, it does sometimes appear that way," Ducky replied with a chuckle. "Oh, I brought you coffee," he gestured.

"At least one of my subs is looking out for me," Gibbs grunted, sitting down on the side of the bed and taking a sip of the coffee.

"What happened tonight, Jethro?" Ducky asked, sitting down on the bed beside Gibbs. "You had a bad feeling in your gut and then you came back all tense like this." He placed both his hands on Gibbs's shoulders and found them as solid as rock when he tried to massage them. He persisted anyway, and Gibbs loosened up a little as he worked on him.

"I still have a bad feeling," Gibbs said. "And nothing happened – not really. I had a strange encounter with some kind of Athosian prophetess. Shook me up a bit. She said something about me being blocked..."

"Well she's not far off there," Ducky murmured, sinking his fingers more firmly into Gibbs's tense muscles.

"Yeah – which makes me worried about the other thing she said. She told me I'd arrived here with five but would go home with only one."

"Ah. Hmmm – and you think she's referring to us, and now you're afraid we'll be killed?" Ducky asked.

"I don't know what to make of it – but you know how I feel about the people under my care and protection, Duck." Gibbs gave a little groan as Ducky's fingers found a particularly sore spot.

"Yes, I do."

"And then Ziva went off into a typical Ziva deep end so she'll be hell to sort out when she comes home. And just to make the evening really memorable, Abby ran off with a stranger

and we spent half the night looking for her. She was okay when we finally caught up with her, but with my gut feeling, and what that Athosian woman said – I was pretty worried, Ducky, I don't mind admitting that."

"Ouch." Ducky grimaced. "That really was very naughty of Abigail. I'll have a word with her myself tomorrow – unless you're going to be spanking her to high heaven, in which case I'll dig out the special ointment, sit beside her and give her a more gentle piece of my mind."

Gibbs grunted. "I allowed myself to be persuaded not to spank her, but she's just lucky she stumbled across the deputy base commander who took care of her and who specifically asked me not to punish her. Plus, Tony was giving me the puppy dog eyes on her behalf."

"Well, nobody likes to think of Abby being in trouble," Ducky said.

"Yeah. And I admit I hate doing it. She's such a big kid and has the kindest heart of anyone I ever met," Gibbs sighed. "Still, she deserved a hard spanking and should have got one."

"I'll remind her of that point when I speak to her then," Ducky said, making some inroads into the tension in Gibbs's shoulders but finding yet more knots underneath.

"So what did you get up to, Ducky?"

"I went for a walk down to the cafeteria and bumped into Mr. Woolsey. We ended up retiring to his quarters for a nightcap. I got back just an hour or so before you did. He really is a very sweet fellow, hopelessly mixed up of course but delightful with it."

"Yeah. He reminds me a bit of you, Ducky," Gibbs said, and his hand came up and covered Ducky's where it was working his shoulder.

"Me?" Ducky frowned.

Gibbs turned and smiled at him. "You – when I first met you," he murmured. Ducky felt the familiar stiffness inside at being reminded of how he had once been. "No confidence, babbling a bit too much, worried about saying the wrong thing," Gibbs said softly.

He reached out, and gently touched the side of Ducky's face. "If I could punch him again for what he did to you I would," he whispered.

Ducky caught Gibbs's hand in his own, and kissed it. "No need," he replied. "You have done more than enough for me, Jethro my love."

Gibbs's blue eyes were shining with an intensity that Ducky knew all too well, and Gibbs's hands were suddenly firm on his shoulders, pulling him close, and then Gibbs's lips were hard on his mouth, demanding entrance.

Ducky sighed, and surrendered to the kiss, his hands sliding around Gibbs's solidly muscled body. Damn, but if only this wasn't always so \*good\*. But then, with a top like Gibbs it was

always going to be good. The man was a virtuoso of a top, both in and out of the bedroom.

The kiss was long and deep, slow and comfortable rather than passionate. Ducky could feel the tension in Gibbs's taut body as he caressed him, and he knew this wasn't going to help and that one of them had to do the right thing.

It took all of his strength to break away from the kiss and put a finger over Gibbs's mouth as he came back in for a second.

"Let's not do this, Jethro," he said softly.

"Do what, Ducky?" Gibbs murmured throatily, his eyes fixed on Ducky's mouth.

"Comfort sex, Jethro. We promised ourselves we wouldn't do it again," Ducky reminded him.

"But it works," Gibbs replied with a wry grin.

"At the time. But we both always feel bad about it in the morning. You feel like you've taken advantage of me and I feel...well, I do feel kind of used, Jethro."

"Used?" That brought Gibbs up short. "I'd never do that to you, Ducky."

"I know." Ducky shook his head. "But, all the same...I know you love me, my dear boy, and god knows I love you too, and I *really* love the feel of your expert hands on my body, but we're not *in* love. We just do this to keep each other company, and alleviate the loneliness, or take the edge off the angst. Whatever it is, it's selling ourselves short and you know it."

"You're my sub, Ducky," Gibbs said, his eyes fixed on the collar Ducky wore around his neck. Ducky laughed.

"Oh Jethro, you know I'd never refuse you sex if you wanted to take it as your right – I do wear your collar after all. I'm just reminding you of the pitfalls, my dear boy."

Gibbs gazed at Ducky hungrily for a few seconds, and Ducky felt a tingle of anticipation run through his body. Wrong though it might be, they were both adults and knew what they were doing and he was always ready and willing to have sex with his beloved top. Then, finally, the gleam faded from Gibbs's eyes and he sat back, with a sigh.

"Ah, hell, you know I'd never take sex as a right, Ducky. I just..."

"Jethro, the person you really want to take to your bed is lying next door," Ducky told him. "Go and claim him and you'll feel so much better."

"No." Gibbs shook his head.

"But why not?" Ducky asked, as infuriated as ever by his pig-headed top.

"Because it would mean something, Ducky, and you know it. It wouldn't just be a night's fun and back to normal in the morning. It would change everything between me and Tony."

"Because you're in love with him?" Ducky asked softly.

"Yes, damn it! Because I'm in love with him!" Gibbs exploded, and he swung out his hand and sent the coffee cup flying from the nightstand onto the floor, where it shattered, spilling dark brown liquid everywhere. Ducky flinched. "There – you've made me say it. You've been trying to for long enough!" Gibbs said, and then he winced, and put his hands on Ducky's shoulders, stroking softly. "You okay?"

"No need to apologise, Jethro," Ducky told him, because that was as close to saying 'sorry' as Gibbs was likely to get. "The flinch was a reflex action - I'm not scared of you, even if most of the world is."

"Thank god for that." Gibbs wrapped his arms around Ducky and held him for a moment.

"He's nothing like Shannon," Ducky told him gently. "He's not like any of those women you married who looked just like her, either. In fact, I'd venture to suggest he's as different from any of them as can be! Why won't you take a chance, Jethro?"

"I don't want to hurt him and I will, Ducky," Gibbs replied. "Sooner or later."

"You've stopped trusting yourself as a top," Ducky murmured. He pushed Gibbs back and gazed at him. "Can that be it? Seriously? I mean – you?" It sounded incredible but it was the only thing he could think.

"I screwed up three marriages, Ducky. They all complained that I was a hard top to please, that I was demanding, strict, unreasonable, stubborn, obsessed with my work, and a whole lot of other things. That's three people saying the same thing. No need to screw up Tony's life too and make him the fourth," Gibbs told him.

"It wouldn't be like that with Tony," Ducky reasoned. "Just as it wasn't like that with Shannon. Tony knows what you're like and as for strict – the boy is begging for strict for god's sake! I think he could handle you – those subs you married were more interested in being with a trophy top and earning the envy of other subs than they were really interested in being with you, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, the person. Tony knows you and likes you for what you are. Besides, be honest, Jethro – you didn't really love any of those subs you married, did you?" Ducky raised an eyebrow.

Gibbs thought about that for a moment, and then shook his head.

"I thought I did," he sighed. "But no – I didn't."

"But you do love Tony and you did love Shannon. I'd venture to suggest that matters more

than anything else and that love is the key to whether your relationships succeed or fail. As for what your exes said about you after your divorce – that's just sour grapes. I suspect that every single one of them married you knowing you didn't really love them, even if you thought you did, and every single one of them thought they could change you and make you love them. They failed and they were annoyed they failed – that's why they were so negative about you."

"I \*am\* a very demanding top, Ducky," Gibbs said. "You know that. I've never given a sub a safe word in my entire life – I know what they can take – I've never understood those tops who can't read their sub's signals. I like pushing my subs to the edge, taking them to that place they think they can't reach, making them taste what that's like. But I demand their absolute trust and absolute submission, Ducky, and there aren't many subs around who can handle that. They think it's what they want, but they're usually too scared to take that final step – and it's the final step that makes it all worthwhile."

"I know how you like to play, Jethro, and I agree it's not for the faint-hearted." Ducky nodded.

Gibbs had only ever given him what he could handle when they had played together, but Ducky knew his top had been holding back, out of respect for his past. What Gibbs needed was someone who was as intense a sub as he was a top, and Tony definitely fit the bill.

"But from what I understand, Tony is into edge play himself," Ducky said. "He's certainly someone who likes to test limits – his own and those of the people around him! The way he pushes you every day proves that if nothing else. There's something very right about the two of you - you're an extreme kind of top and he's an extreme kind of sub. Anyone seeing the two of you sparring the way you do will have seen that – the sparks fly and the chemistry is almost visible. And really, that boy is so desperate for your attention – you should put him out of his misery."

"Oh Tony knows how to pick up willing tops," Gibbs said, with a wave of his hand. "He's fine. He'll find someone else eventually – he's tumbled into enough tops' beds to have tried a few out."

Ducky laughed out loud at that. "Oh my dear boy you really have no idea, have you?" he murmured.

"What?" Gibbs frowned.

"I'll bet my life on the fact that Tony hasn't slept with another top since he accepted your collar," he said.

Gibbs stared at him. "Tony's always asking my permission to sleep with tops he's picked up," he refuted.

Ducky got up, shaking his head. "He asks to make you jealous, and to goad you into taking him to your bed. He doesn't go ahead and do the deed though, and he won't for as long as

he wears your collar."

"That's ridiculous," Gibbs said, getting up too, looking as if he wanted to go and murder Tony in his bed, or else spank the living daylight out of him. "I collared him five years ago. Are you really trying to tell me that Tony DiNozzo could be celibate for five years? I mean Tony? Seriously?"

Ducky gave a little chuckle. "It does seem absurd, doesn't it? But I told you he's an extreme kind of sub, Jethro, and he really is."

"Oh come on!" Gibbs snapped. "Apart from anything else, Tony's a commitment-phobe – everyone knows that. Sure, he wants a few nights in my bed, to try me out, but that's all – and that's not what I want. If I take him to my bed I'll expect him to stay there – for keeps – and that's not Tony's style."

"I wouldn't be so sure about Tony. He's a man of some complexity beneath that smart-mouthed exterior," Ducky told him. "He's undoubtedly been promiscuous in the past but I'll warrant that none of the tops he played with ever satisfied him. He was looking for the real deal and now he's found that he won't play with anyone else."

Gibbs stood there looking completely and utterly shocked. Ducky patted his arm.

"Food for thought, dear boy," he said. "Food for thought."

"It doesn't change anything," Gibbs said stubbornly. Ducky smiled, and kissed his top gently on the mouth before walking towards the door.

"I think it does, Jethro. If you'll let it," he replied.

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Carson stirred in his sleep, and then came to with a start. He lay there for a moment wondering what had woken him. Had he heard a noise or had he been dreaming? He was sure he'd heard something. He sat up and gazed around blearily, and then he saw Steven, lying next to him, his naked, firmly muscled body solid and real in his bed.

"Oh thank god," Carson sighed, feeling a wave of happiness flood through him. He lay down again and took his husband in his arms. Steven stirred.

"Okay, Carson?" he mumbled.

"Fine," Carson replied, kissing his husband's ear. "I just woke up thinking I heard something and then remembered you were here – I've been six weeks on my own and I think my mind's playing tricks on me!"

"What time is it?" Steven asked.

Carson glanced at the clock on the nightstand. "Quarter to four," he replied.

"Too early," Steven slurred, and Carson had to agree with that. He ran his hands appreciatively over Steven's solid flesh.

"You want to use me?" Steven asked, moving his legs obligingly.

"No, love. I just want to hold you," Carson whispered. "It's been so long and I've missed this."

"Wuss," Steven teased. Carson pinched his bottom firmly.

"I'm not a wuss – I'm a romantic, and you, my husband, have been without a top for too long. I'm going to have to take you down good and proper tomorrow and drum some respect back into you!"

"Promises, promises," Steven mumbled into his pillow, a grin in his voice. Carson laughed and kissed the back of his submissive's neck.

"I love you," he murmured.

"Love you too," Steven said, and he wasn't a man for whom the words had ever come easily so Carson relished hearing it.

As he dozed off, he thought he could smell a strange scent in the room, but he was too warm and comfy to move, and, with his arms wrapped tightly around his husband's beautiful body, he soon fell asleep once more.

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"You still up?" the voice in Rodney's earpiece asked.

Rodney straightened up from where he'd been bending over some machinery and gave a groan as his muscles protested, but he smiled at the sound of his top's voice all the same.

"Yeah. I figured you wouldn't be coming to bed tonight so I might as well keep working on this," Rodney replied into his radio. "What time is it anyway?"

"Nearly four," John replied. "Normally I'd come over and order you to bed, but on this occasion...it's nice being able to check in with you every so often."

"Where are you now?" Rodney asked, perching on the side of one of the desks and stretching out his back cautiously.

"My office - but I'll be going out to the jumper bay again in a minute. They aren't coming back as regularly now but one still turns up every so often and I'm trying to keep an accurate inventory of who is where," John replied. "Look, Rodney, you should head to bed soon or

you'll be a wreck tomorrow."

"I like working in the lab on my own," Rodney said, his mind distractedly going over the problem he'd been working on when John had contacted him. "It gives me time to really think without idiots interrupting me."

"Sorry," John said wryly.

"I didn't mean you!" Rodney grinned. "I mean the idiots they send me who \*call\* themselves scientists."

"You do have some say in who you get, Rodney," John reminded him.

"Well, who they are on paper and who they seem to be in person are sometimes two very different things let me assure you! They sent me this guy recently who was so useless I sent him home again the next day and then there was..." Rodney broke off as he heard a sound behind him. "Is that you?" he said, turning to look at the door, fully expecting to see that John had crept up behind him.

"Rodney – what is it? Who's there?" John asked, his voice taut and urgent.

"Nobody," Rodney replied, going over to the door. "I thought I heard someone at the door – maybe someone tried it, realised it was locked and went away again. There's nobody there now." He gazed through the little window in the door, just to be sure, but couldn't see anyone out there.

"Are you sure? I'm on my way," John said, and Rodney could tell by the sound of his voice that he was worried.

"It's fine. Maybe I didn't hear anything," Rodney said. "Seriously, John – there's nobody here. I'm all alone. It's fine."

"I'm coming anyway," John told him, as Rodney had known he would. Maybe that wasn't such a bad thing, he thought to himself. They could both do with a break.

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Ziva opened her eyes and stared sightlessly at a wall of green canvas, wondering where the hell she was. Then she let out a groan as she remembered.

She turned and saw Kahla lying naked on the straw mattress beside her. Her wrists were bruised, the imprints of Ziva's hands livid on her white skin. There were bite marks dotted around her body, scratches on her arms and face, and various bruises everywhere. She looked oddly vulnerable in the faint dawn light.

Ziva felt that familiar rush of self-loathing flood through her. Why did she do these things? What possessed her? She was like a demon, embracing her dark side eagerly with a thirst



that never seemed to be quenched. Now that the urgent heat of sex was over it repulsed her.

She shivered, and realised she was naked too, her own body also covered in scratches and bruises. She could feel the little stings everywhere but she was used to waking up in this kind of state.

She lay there, gazing at Kahla's pale body. The submissive looked smaller than she had last night, and there was something achingly sad about her. What had possessed them both? Why had they wanted to inflict so much pain on each other? She remembered what Teyla had told her about Kahla's past and felt a pang of sympathy; this woman was damaged, and she hadn't made anything better for her last night.

Ziva reached out a hand and gently stroked Kahla's shoulder, then pulled her close to cuddle her and keep her warm.

"Ow! Fuck!" she yelped a second later, as Kahla fastened her sharp teeth in Ziva's hand, making her pull it back. Kahla turned to face her.

"If you want to fuck me again then fine, but I don't do cuddling," she sneered.

"Fine. I do not want to fuck you again," Ziva snapped. "I just wanted to keep you warm."

Kahla gazed at her distrustfully. "Just piss off then if you don't want to fuck me," she snapped. "I have clothes to keep me warm – I do not need you." She pulled her pants and top towards her, and burrowed underneath them.

Ziva's anger was defeated by another wave of sadness. She stood up, quietly got dressed, and then left the tent.

Outside, the sun was a faint rosy glow flickering on the horizon. Ziva hadn't bothered pulling on her boots, and the cool dew made her bare feet wet as she walked across the grass, boots in hand.

She knew she must look a mess, her hair loose and tousled, a large scratch on her cheek, and bruises on her neck and forearms. She hated to think what Gibbs would say – although maybe he wouldn't say anything – the look he gave her would say it all in any case.

She found the dimly glowing embers of one of the fires, and there, crouching beside it on a blanket, poking at it with a stick, was Teyla. Ziva frowned.

"Have you been here all night?" she asked, surprised.

Teyla turned to her, a sad smile on her lips. "It was my choice. I was waiting for you."

"Where is Ronon?" Ziva glanced around.

"I sent him away so I could be alone." Teyla shrugged.

"Oh."

Ziva sat down on the blanket and started to pull on her boots. Her hands were shaking and she couldn't fasten the leather straps around her calf. Smooth fingers took over, and Teyla carefully, gently, fastened them for her. Ziva felt the tears rise hot in her eyes, and she tried to blink them away.

Teyla's hand was warm on her arm, and, finally giving in, Ziva buried her head in the Athosian woman's shoulder and allowed herself to cry. Teyla said nothing – she simply held her until the tears had cried themselves out, stroking Ziva's dark hair the entire time, occasionally pressing her lips to Ziva's head, kissing her gently.

Finally Ziva sat up, and gazed glumly into the dying fire.

"I am lost," she admitted.

"Yes," Teyla replied calmly.

"You knew that. You set me up with Kahla on purpose last night," Ziva accused.

Teyla nodded. "I gave you what you thought you wanted," she said. "What is it that you have done that makes you think you do not deserve happiness, Ziva?"

Ziva shook her head.

"The darkness you seek in others is a mirror of what you feel in yourself," Teyla said gently. "But I feel that you are good – I do not know why you hate yourself so much."

"I killed my brother," Ziva blurted. "Well, he was my half-brother. But I loved him and I killed him."

"I am sure there was a good reason for this," Teyla commented. Ziva nodded.

"There was. He had betrayed us and all we stood for. He was a traitor, and he killed many innocent people."

"So you did what you had to do."

"Yes...but I enjoyed it," Ziva whispered, her throat closing tight on the words. "What kind of person must I be, Teyla? I loved him and I enjoyed killing him. I am a monster."

"So you think that nobody must be allowed to get close or you will enjoy destroying them too?" Teyla asked.

"I am a killer – that is who I am," Ziva told her. "Maybe it is all I can ever be."

"So you seek out others who exist in the dark rather than reach for one who could show you the light?"

Teyla's brown eyes were sympathetic but uncompromising. Ziva was silent, remembering the look in Gibbs's eyes the previous night, and the spike of sadness in McGee's.

"That is what Gibbs thinks," she said. "He knows you see – he knows about Ari, my brother. He was there when I shot him. That is the reason he offered me his collar; he is trying to protect me while I figure it out."

"And have you?" Teyla asked.

"I do not know." Ziva shook her head.

"We must each of us find who we truly are," Teyla told her, "or we can never be happy. You are more than this darkness, Ziva, and I do not believe you would hurt a submissive you loved. Maybe, though, you should try finding a sub who can guide you towards the light, rather than always seeking those who would drag you into the dark."

"Kahla..." Ziva began.

"Kahla has her own issues," Teyla interrupted her. "She and I will talk – her story is not yours. And you and she – you are not good for each other, as I think you know."

"Yes." Ziva sighed. "What happened to her, Teyla?"

"I told you she was a runner?" Teyla said. Ziva nodded. "Well, so was her top. They ran together – Kahla's top was a gentle, artistic woman but no warrior. Kahla kept her safe for three months before they were both captured. Kahla watched as a wraith drained the life from her top, and killed her in front of her eyes. They let Kahla go again because she was so fast and fierce and they enjoyed hunting her but she was changed and no longer cared what happened to her. She killed the wraith with a vengeance that was personal. I can understand this; Ronon feels the same way."

Teyla took hold of her stick again and poked the fire, causing a faint glow of orange to spark within its charcoal depths.

"Kahla evaded them for another nine months, and during that time she slowly descended into darkness inside herself. Eventually they caught her again – they were holding her in the belly of a wraith ship when we found her on a mission and I recognised her as one of our people. I brought her home with me but she was changed beyond all recognition. It will take time, and patience, to bring her back from the dark."

"I am sorry." Ziva wrapped her arms around her knees and rested her chin on them, gazing ahead blankly.

"Do not be – just learn," Teyla said. "Kahla knew what she wanted last night and would have sought it from another if not from you. I am hoping I can speak to her later, as I am speaking to you now."

"What do I do, Teyla?" Ziva asked, in despair. Teyla shook her head.

"I cannot tell you. Only you know the answer to that. However, there is one thing I think you must do before you can leave the dark place where you are now."

"What is that?"

"Forgive yourself," Teyla told her gently. "You have killed – as have I. That does not mean that being a killer is who you are. Both our peoples are fighting a war of kinds – you did what you had to, as have I. But you are more than this, Ziva, so much more. Do not let this one act define you. There are, I believe, many around you who see much else in you. Agent Gibbs for one. And Agent McGee as well, I believe," she added softly.

"Tim is just...he is very trusting. Very kind," Ziva sighed. "He and I – we have nothing in common."

"Sometimes that way works best," Teyla said, with a smile. "You could let him guide you out of the dark and towards the light. Is it not worth a try?"

"I don't know," Ziva shrugged. Teyla nodded, and patted her shoulder.

"Think on it," she said. "You will find the right path, in time, if you pursue it with a true, honest heart. Now – I must go and speak with Kahla. If you climb that pathway to the ridge at the top of the hill there are puddle-jumpers ferrying people back to the city. You may have to wait for the next one to return but it should not be long."

Ziva got up. Teyla got up with her, and reached out, placed her forearms on Ziva's, and pulled her forward. She rested her head, gently, against Ziva's and Ziva felt a sudden warmth rush through her. She could do this. It would be hard, but she could do it. She didn't want to spend another night like last night, ever again.

"Thank you," she whispered. Teyla released her, gave her a flash of that beautiful smile, and then she turned and strode in the direction of the tents.

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The noise at the door was deafening. One minute Carson was dozing, quite happily, his arms around his sleeping husband, and the next the door was being hammered by what sounded like an entire army.

Carson jumped out of bed and reached for his bathrobe, to find Steven doing the same.

"What the hell is going on?" Steven yelled, effortlessly morphing from Carson's meek

submissive into the experienced military commander he was.

"I have no idea." Carson ran for the door and got there at the same time as his husband. He slammed his hand on the lock and the door swished open. Outside was a member of his staff, Ellie Marsh, one of the nurses, her face scrunched up and scared.

"Dr Beckett...please...you have to come," she said, her entire body shaking.

"What is it? What's happened?" Carson demanded, finding his clothes and pulling them on, right there in front of her.

"Please..." She looked so scared that he couldn't think what had happened.

"I'm coming too," Steven said, halfway through pulling on his uniform.

"I tried calling you on the radio but there was no reply," Ellie said, hopping around in the doorway. "And I didn't know what else to do, or who to call."

At that moment a marine ran down the hallway and arrived, completely out of breath.

"Colonel Beckett...you're needed..." he said.

"I'm on my way," Steven growled, now fully dressed.

"...on the Daedalus," the man finished. "There's been a fire onboard – we tried calling you but there was no reply on your radio although to be honest there's nothing you could have done anyway. We got the flames under control and Major McClusky sent me to fetch you in person – they couldn't spare anyone before now."

Steven glanced at Carson who gazed back at him. "Oh shit. I'm sorry, Steven – I turned off our radios last night." Carson turned back to Ellie. "Is that where I'm to go? Are there injured people onboard the Daedalus? Where's Dr Keller? Did she send you?"

Ellie looked as if she was about to faint. "I don't know anything about the Daedalus," she whispered. "I came because I was just about to start my morning shift and I went into the infirmary and...and...you have to come..." She didn't say anything more – she just burst into tears.

"You – take care of her," Steven ordered his marine. "Carson you go to the infirmary and see what's going on there, I'm going to the Daedalus." He picked up his radio and tapped it on. "General Sheppard – there seems to be some kind of emergency. You're needed in the infirmary," he snapped into it, and then he set off at a run.

Carson ran off in the opposite direction, wondering what the hell was going on. He ran full pelt into the infirmary but everything looked fine. It was completely empty but they hadn't had any patients overnight so that wasn't a surprise.

"Dr Keller? Jennifer?" he called, wondering if she was doing triage on the Daedalus and wondering also why he was here. If there had been injuries on his husband's ship shouldn't he be there, with Jennifer?

The door to the next room was open – the room where he had left Ducky the previous evening, performing his autopsies. Carson walked slowly towards it, feeling his stomach flutter nervously. He had a bad feeling about this...

He got to the open door and then frowned; Dr Mallard had left one of the bodies on the table, which didn't seem very professional of him. They didn't have any refrigeration facilities on Atlantis but they did have the stasis chambers. Maybe Ducky hadn't known how they worked and had left the body out for that reason, but Dr Keller had been on hand – he could easily have asked for her help in putting the body back into stasis...

"Oh no." Carson reached the body and had a sickening wrench of recognition. "Oh no. Oh my dear god. Oh no. No, no, no."

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Gibbs woke from a deep sleep and was aware, almost immediately, of a tight sensation in his gut; something was still wrong.

He got up, pulled on his robe and went out into the living area and then stopped. Tony was sitting on the sofa, feet resting on the coffee table, arms stretched out along the sofa's back, gazing out of the window where the sun had just risen above the horizon.

Gibbs was pulled up short – nobody usually got to see Tony in a contemplative mood because Tony wore that smartass mask the whole time, but just occasionally Gibbs had seen a glimpse of a more thoughtful Tony. Right now, he was seeing that Tony and his sub seemed lost in thought. There was something almost defeated about the line of his shoulders and the dull weariness in his eyes – as if he'd been struggling with a problem for a very long time and had almost given up on being able to solve it.

Gibbs cleared his throat, feeling as if he was intruding, and Tony glanced up – and the mask was immediately back in place.

"Morning, boss." He made no pains at all to hide the fact that he was checking out how Gibbs looked in his bathrobe and Gibbs was acutely aware of Tony's hungry gaze stalking him as he walked across the room.

"Couldn't sleep?" Gibbs asked.

"Strange planet, strange galaxy, strange people...and something niggling me, boss," Tony replied.

"Feeling in your gut? Me too – just keeps on getting worse," Gibbs sighed.

"Not sure that's what it is, boss, but...maybe," Tony shrugged.

"Is Ziva back yet?" Gibbs asked, hoping that wasn't the cause of the tight clenching in his stomach.

"About ten minutes ago. You won't be happy when you see her though, boss."

Gibbs raised an eyebrow, wondering what mischief Tony was brewing. He felt relieved all the same – at least he knew where all his people were now, and he had to admit it felt good to have them all under one roof so he could keep an eye on them. They all had their own apartments back on Earth, and that suited him fine, but here, on this, as Tony had pointed out, 'strange planet', he preferred having them all within shouting distance.

At that moment there was a loud knock on the door. Gibbs shot Tony a glance – there was an urgency to the sound that didn't bode well. He ran across the room to open it, Tony at his heels, and found General Sheppard outside, his dark hair standing up on end and his uniform crumpled as if he'd spent the entire night sleeping in it.

"You need to come – all of you, but especially Dr Mallard," he panted. "There's been another murder."

Gibbs turned to go back to his room and get dressed without saying another word. As he went, he passed Ziva, who had come running out of her room at the noise. He took one look at the long, red, angry-looking scratch down one side of her face, and the dark shadows under her eyes, and knew now what Tony had meant. She had a deep streak of self-destruction in her; he had hoped that collaring her would give her the time and safety to work it out – but as time passed, that hope was starting to fade. He shot her a look and watched her flinch as it hit home.

"Later," was all he said to her, and she nodded, her pale face luminous and haunted in the early morning light.

Within minutes, Gibbs and his team were running down the hallway towards the infirmary, chasing after General Sheppard who was tight-lipped, his stride long and his body tense and angry.

They reached the infirmary and went through it to the door at the other end. The first thing Gibbs saw when they went into the other room was Carson, standing by a body laid out on the autopsy table.

"What the hell has gone on here?" Gibbs asked angrily. "Why did someone move the body? We have to examine the crime scene first – who gave authorisation for the body to be moved here?"

"The body wasn't moved here," Sheppard said. "This is where Carson found it."

"Nurse Marsh found it," Carson whispered, and the man looked pale and shocked.

Ducky moved forward, confidently, reaching for his latex gloves and pulling them on...but then he reached the body - and stopped short.

"Oh no." He glanced up at Carson. "Oh Carson. I am so sorry. My dear man... but she was just a child. She was so very young."

"Who is it?" Gibbs asked, moving over to the autopsy table.

On it was the body of a woman. Her throat had been cut and she had been stripped naked and laid out. Beside her, in little medical trays, were all her internal organs, neatly arranged, weighed and labelled.

"It's Dr Keller," Carson whispered. "Dr Jennifer Keller. She's my...she was my deputy. She was on duty last night."

"Okay. This is a crime scene," Gibbs said. "I need the area cleared," he informed Sheppard.

The general nodded, and wrapped an arm around Carson's shoulder and led him towards the door, taking the marines he'd stationed in the room with him as he left.

"Abby – I need you to set up a lab somewhere nearby," Gibbs said. "Go ask General Sheppard for an appropriate room. I know you don't have your normal equipment with you but they have plenty of stuff in this place to stand in for what you normally use so improvise." Abby nodded and ran for the door. "And the same rules apply here as at home," Gibbs called after her. "We don't break the chain of evidence – everything has to be bagged and labelled."

She nodded again and then left. Gibbs turned back to the body to find Tony, Ziva and McGee already going about their usual job, taking photos and examining the crime scene for clues.

"Time of death, Ducky?" he asked impatiently.

"It'll be hard to be exact, Jethro," Ducky chided. "As the killer so thoughtfully removed her liver. But if I were to factor in an approximate cooling time from being outside the body..." He located the liver on one of the trays and got out his thermometer and inserted it. "It's a little rough and until I've done more investigating I can't be certain, but I would have said around two hours ago at most," he murmured.

"What's going on?" Tony asked. "Why has the killer changed their MO?" He took a photo and moved around the body. "The other victims were all killed in their quarters weren't they?"

"Yes they were," McGee said. "And they were tied up and staked out. This one isn't tied." He pointed at the corpse.



"And the others were all marines," Ziva said. "Dr Keller was on the medical staff."

"And I've found something else," Ducky murmured. "Dr Keller did not engage willingly in a scene with her killer." He leaned in close and smelled the area around the corpse's nose. "Chloroform – or something very like it. She was drugged. In fact..." Ducky got up and looked around. "I'd venture to suggest that she was working on her own out there, in the infirmary, and someone came up behind her and took her by surprise. She probably didn't know a thing about it."

"Then he dragged her in here..." Tony said, going over to the door and taking a photo of the doorway entrance.

"...laid her out on the table, slit her throat, and then performed his own autopsy," Ducky finished. "The question is – why?"

"He is a killer, Ducky," Ziva said in a cold tone. "Does he need a reason why? Maybe he just did it for the pleasure it gives him. Some people enjoy killing."

Gibbs shot her a sharp glance. "Maybe," he said. "But this..." He waved his hand at the organs laid out on the neatly labelled trays. "This looks almost like a message."

"You're right, Jethro," Ducky said. "The question is – for whom?"

"And what, exactly, is the message?" Tony added, taking another photo.

"Ducky – you met her," Gibbs said. "Was she a sub, like the other victims?"

"Oh Jethro, I really don't have your talent for knowing a person's orientation on sight," Ducky told him with a shake of his head. "I don't know what she was. I do know that she was very nice. I was having trouble moving one of the bodies into one of their chamber-pod things – what's it called? Stasis – that's it! So I called her in and she showed me how to do it. Bless her. She was very sweet, kind and charming."

"Sounds like a sub to me," Tony said.

"Are you saying that tops are rude and demanding?" Ziva asked, with a raised eyebrow.

"If the shoe fits." Tony grinned at her.

"I have known some extremely rude and unpleasant submissives," Ziva told him.

"Careful – you're talking about the superior half of the dynamic there," Tony winked.

"How do you figure this out?"

"Well, just think about it. Submissives are stronger than dominants," Tony said, snapping a photo of McGee, who made a face at him and pushed him away.

Ziva raised an incredulous eyebrow.

"Sure we are," Tony grinned. "How many doms do you know who could take the level of punishment a sub endures on a daily basis?" He shot a look at Gibbs who ignored him. "All those spankings," Tony murmured, with a cheeky glint in his eye. "Make a top take them and they'd run away screaming. So, I rest my case. Dominants are the weaker half of the dynamic and subs are superior."

"That is nonsense," Ziva said hotly.

"He's just winding you up, Ziva," Gibbs told her. "Don't get sucked in."

"Aw, boss – she's fun when she's riled up," Tony said. He put down the camera and gestured with his head to the door. "Time to do some talking, boss?"

"I think so," Gibbs nodded. "Ziva, McGee – finish with the crime scene and get everything you find to Abby. Tony - I need you to find us an interrogation room."

"On it, boss," Tony said, scampering after him towards the door.

"Agent Gibbs?" Gibbs saw Lorne hovering in the doorway. "I heard the news. I gather Abby is setting up a lab facility? I just saw Rodney and he was talking about lending her some equipment?"

"That's right, yes," Gibbs said.

"Permission to be assigned guard detail on her, sir," Lorne asked promptly, glancing at General Sheppard for permission and then back at Gibbs. "There's a killer out there, sir, and I don't think Abby should be on her own, especially if she's handling evidence."

"I agree," Sheppard said. "In fact, I don't think anyone should be on their own. I'm going to issue a city-wide warning to people to work in pairs and to share rooms at night until we catch whoever did this."

Gibbs gazed at Lorne searchingly, and then glanced at Sheppard. He had a good feeling about Lorne but this was no time to be taking chances with any of his people.

"He's one of my best men, Gibbs," Sheppard told him. "I'd trust him with my life – no, I'd trust him with \*Rodney's\* life and have done on more than one occasion – and I'm sure you know that means a hell of a lot more."

That was reassurance enough for Gibbs. He didn't know Sheppard very well yet but one thing he was certain of was that the man was head over heels in love with his sub.

"Very well – but Lorne." Gibbs called him back. "Take good care of her because I swear that if anything happens to her..."

"I promise, sir," Lorne told him firmly. "If anyone wants to hurt Abby they'll have to get past me first." And with that he strode off.

Gibbs took a deep breath and gathered his thoughts, figuring out the priority of all the many things that had to be done next.

It was going to be a long day.

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## Chapter 2 by Xanthe

Tim McGee was relieved to remove his work clothes and take a long, hot shower. Then he pulled on a pair of sweatpants and a tee shirt and padded out to sit on the balcony overlooking the ocean. He was lucky – only he, Abby and Ziva had balconies leading directly off their bedrooms. He glanced over at Ziva's room but it was in darkness, so he guessed she'd turned in already.

It had been an exhausting day – he didn't think he'd sat down once the entire time. Gibbs had had them running all over the place; the questioning alone had taken several hours and they still weren't done. There were so many people to talk to, and in addition he had been trying to get his head around some of the fantastic technology these people had.

With life-sign detectors and city-wide sensors and god knew what else, Tim couldn't help but think it should have been easy to catch this killer – but it wasn't. He'd followed Rodney Sheppard for a few hours, watching Rodney's hands slide effortlessly over various control panels, and had listened to the scientist explain to him how they all worked, something he did at the speed of light so it was all Tim could do to follow the explanations, but still there were no answers.

The only alternative was good old-fashioned detective work, and once Tony had set up a couple of interrogation rooms the team had taken it in turns to question people, sifting through alibis and at least trying to rule people out. It was unusual to be dealing with such a closed community as this – on Earth there was the possibility of someone outside the Navy being involved in a crime, but here – the population of the base was sizeable but finite, and there weren't many places for a killer to hide. It was hard to escape the conclusion that the murderer was among them, hiding somewhere in plain sight, and he could see that idea didn't sit well with General Sheppard.

Tim gazed out at the rippling ocean below – and then turned his head up to see the two moons shining down overhead. He felt a tingle of excitement run up his spine. No matter how dangerous this situation, he still found it hard to wrap his head around the fact that he was sitting on a completely different planet, in a galaxy as far away from the Milky Way as could be. He gazed up at the stars, and wondered in what direction home lay. This was all so incredibly mind-blowing – and even more so knowing that the government was keeping it all secret. He knew NCIS had only got clearance because Woolsey had insisted that they be

brought in; otherwise he still wouldn't know about all this. He thought maybe Gibbs had known – and possibly even Ducky because the doctor certainly seemed to know a good deal about Atlantis, and not all of it had been included in the briefing pack they'd been given.

Yet somehow, despite the fact this was all so completely crazy he had adjusted relatively quickly. The eighteen day journey getting here on the Daedalus had helped – Colonel Beckett had given them a crash course on all they'd need to know and Tim had read through several of the mission reports Gibbs had given them so they would know what to expect.

Reading those reports had been like reading a sci-fi novel.

“Just my damn luck,” Tim murmured to himself. All those ideas for plots and he'd signed a secrecy agreement so he couldn't use any of them.

He reached for the notepad in his bag, put his feet up on the balcony rail, and started to jot down some notes. He always did this, every evening, and even on an alien planet it was a discipline he wanted to continue. It wasn't much – just some ideas, some thoughts, anything that might help later in constructing a plot for one of his novels. He liked to write these notes long-hand to give his brain time to come up with ideas.

He could guess what Tony would say if he knew this was what he did every night but Tim preferred to stay home writing than go out and try and attract the attention of a top. He'd never been very successful at that but he was good at writing, as his two published novels proved. They didn't bring in a fortune but he had a solid readership and it was a nice supplementary extra to his income.

Tim paused, and chewed on the end of his pen. Sometimes he wished he had Tony's easy way of attracting tops but Tim's experience of tops during his adolescence had been so humiliating that he'd never acquired any confidence in his ability with the opposite half of the dynamic, and now he didn't even try. If he was honest he was scared of dominants, and did his best to keep as far away from them as possible.

That was what made it so ironic, he supposed, that he'd ended up wearing Gibbs's collar, because Leroy Jethro Gibbs was about the scariest dominant out there.

“Maybe that's the point,” Tim murmured to himself. “What better way to keep the other scary tops at bay than taking the collar of the one top nobody would ever challenge?”

He scribbled that down, as possible fodder for his next novel. He was happy enough being one of Gibbs's subs. He liked working in a team, and being part of something. Gibbs was firm but fair - Tim could still recall, with painful accuracy, the only spanking he'd received from his top for deliberately trying to hide evidence that looked incriminating for his sister. Tim didn't count the occasional swats Gibbs delivered in passing; once he'd experienced a real spanking from his top those swats seemed like barely more than love taps.

He'd nearly passed out from sheer fear on that one occasion when Gibbs had punished him. He wished he could say that the punishment itself hadn't been nearly as bad as the thought

of it but it had – in fact it had been worse. Far worse.

He remembered walking back into the squad room after the case involving his sister had been resolved, head down, knowing that the time had come for him to face the music. He was sure that Gibbs would remove his collar and send him on his way – he didn't see that his boss had any other option. He could still see the sympathetic look in Ziva's dark eyes, still hear Tony's muttered, "Chin up, probie, it's gonna be bad but nothing you can't handle."

He sat down, wondering what would happen next, unable to concentrate on his work, just wondering when the axe would fall. Then Gibbs returned from a long meeting in the Director's office, and he stiffened, waiting to hear his fate.

"McGee, you're with me," Gibbs said, without even stopping or looking at his disgraced sub.

Tim got up and followed him to the elevator. He thought maybe that they were going to the punishment room in the basement, on the Director's orders. He'd never been there, and the thought of being punished in such a strict, formal environment with people watching, made him go cold with fear. He'd never even been over a top's knees before, let alone been in such major trouble. He thought he'd faint if he was made to present himself for a formal punishment, with witnesses gloating over his misfortune.

However, the fact that he was collared meant that Gibbs, as his top, was the person who would perform the punishment – although Tim couldn't remember a time when Gibbs had ever punished one of his subs in the punishment room. Everyone knew that he spanked Tony every day, but the couple of times Tony had warranted a formal workplace disciplinary punishment it hadn't happened. Tim was pretty sure that Tony was punished on both those occasions – and pretty severely - just not in the discipline room, in front of witnesses. Maybe that was what Gibbs's long meeting with the Director had been about. Tim had never really thought about it before, but now it suddenly struck him that the collar he wore around his neck protected him in more ways than he had realised.

Gibbs exited the elevator straight into the parking garage and Tim followed on behind, trotting a little to keep up with Gibbs's fast strides. Gibbs didn't say a word to him – just got in his car, waited until Tim got in beside him, and then drove off – fast.

Tim clung onto the side of the car, as much to shrink away from his scary top as out of fear of Gibbs's driving. After fifteen minutes of that terrible, silent car ride, they pulled up at Gibbs's house. Tim hadn't been here very often but he recognised it. Gibbs got out, again without saying a word, and Tim followed on helplessly, his sense of fear growing. This had to be bad if Gibbs was bringing him back here.

By the time he had followed Gibbs down some stairs and into his basement, Tim was on the verge of hyperventilating. He wasn't sure what he expected to find in the basement but a large, half-built boat really wasn't it. Perhaps he'd thought the basement would contain a massive, well-equipped dungeon or playroom but no, just a big wooden boat.

He followed Gibbs over to the far wall and by now he was completely certain that Gibbs was

going to remove his collar and he knew he deserved that. He'd kept evidence from Gibbs, and had interfered in an investigation. Yes, he'd been trying to protect his innocent sister, but even so...

Unable to stand the silence any more, he blurted out.

"I'm sorry! I know what I did was wrong and stupid. I know you're going to take my collar away from me and I deserve that. I'm so sorry I let you down."

"Over here." Gibbs ignored his babbling, putting a hand on his shoulder and pushing him towards a workbench and a grubby old chair. Gibbs sat down on the chair, opened a drawer in the workbench, and pulled out a wooden paddle. It was smooth but completely plain and without any kind of manufacturing mark on it. Tim had no doubt his top had made it himself and his stomach did a flip of fear; a hard paddle like that would really hurt.

"The paddle or my hand?" Gibbs asked.

Tim opened his mouth like a goldfish, and then shut it again. So, he *\*was\** going to be spanked. That wasn't entirely unexpected but it still scared him shitless.

"Tim?" Gibbs queried, and Tim was just barely aware that Gibbs was using his first name, which he rarely did.

"Your hand," he said quickly, because he might be a very inexperienced sub but everyone knew that a hand hurt less than a paddle. He caught just a hint of the wry expression in Gibbs's eyes as he made that choice, and he soon found out why; Gibbs's hand was no less a dangerous weapon than the paddle – there was no way the paddle could have hurt more. He wondered how many other subs had made that particular mistake.

"Pants down," Gibbs ordered, and Tim fumbled with his belt and pants and then pushed them down to his ankles, along with his boxers. Before he even had a chance to adjust to what was happening, Gibbs had taken hold of his wrist and he found himself flying across his top's lap.

Tim had rarely been punished in his life to date – he was always too good, and any punishments he had received as a kid had been short and mild. He had a feeling this wasn't going to be anything like those. He felt like an idiot – he wasn't practised in being over a top's knee, and his body felt cumbersome and awkward. He even felt embarrassed about his top seeing his naked ass. The whole thing was horrible and frightening.

It soon got worse. Gibbs tugged him into the position he wanted him in, and then wrapped an arm around his waist to keep him in place. There was a pause, and then an almighty 'smack' sound that made Tim jump, before he was aware of the warm pain spreading out from the centre of his ass. There had been no warm up, and no lecture; just the choice of implement and then this. Tony had always told him that Gibbs's spankings were master-classes in expertly applied discipline and now he understood why.

He held on for as long as he could but the shame of what he'd done combined with the increasing level of pain in his backside were too much for him, and he started crying far sooner than he felt he should.

Gibbs's hand didn't slow down and the spanking continued, despite his tears. Tim fought down a wave of helplessness. Nothing was going to stop this until Gibbs wanted it to stop – and Tim had a feeling that wouldn't be for some time. This, Tim supposed, was what it was like to be truly submissive to the will of your top – and that wasn't a lesson he'd ever had to learn before. He wondered if it was something Tony was aware of, every single time he was spanked, and then he wondered how Tony could bear to endure \*this\* on a daily basis, and he felt a new respect for the other agent.

He couldn't stop crying, but they were low, steady sobs now, and it actually felt kind of good. He stopped worrying about what he looked like, or just how mad Gibbs was with him, or what could have happened to his sister, or to himself and his career, and he just let it all go.

Then it was over. Gibbs held him in place for a few minutes longer while his body was still shaking, and stroked warm circles on his back to calm him down, and then he flipped him onto his – wobbly – feet.

He turned away, and Tim shakily pulled up his pants and fastened them, glad it was over but dimly aware that his ass hurt like hell, waves of pain radiating out warmly from the epicentre, making his entire butt feel like it was on fire.

When he looked up again Gibbs was back, and he pressed a glass of water into Tim's hand. Tim took it gratefully, his hand shaking a little, drank it all down in one go and then handed the glass back to Gibbs.

"Are you going to take my collar away?" Tim asked, and he was surprised by the raspiness of his own voice.

"After giving you a hiding like that?" Gibbs shook his head. "I don't discipline subs if I'm not going to keep them. Now, I punished you for one reason and one reason only – can you tell me what that is?"

Tim thought about it – just \*one\* reason? He'd held back evidence, lied to protect his sister, and placed his own career in jeopardy in the process. Which of those would Gibbs think was the most serious?

"The evidence," he said, feeling sure that was it. Gibbs was always very emphatic about the proper treatment and bagging of evidence. "Sarah's blood-stained sweater – I should have submitted that straight away. I shouldn't have tested it for human blood myself and held it back."

"No you shouldn't, but that's not it," Gibbs said. He turned the chair around so it was back to front, and sat down on it again, legs on either side, elbows resting on the back, then

gazed at Tim searchingly. "Try again."

"I shouldn't have tried to investigate myself?" Tim ventured. "I should have called the police." His face felt all red and splotchy from where he had been crying but inside he didn't feel anywhere near as bad as he had before the spanking.

"Yes, you should, but again, wrong answer," Gibbs said, and that searching, blue-eyed gaze never let up.

Tim thought about it some more. "I told you I couldn't come to work because I was ill but that wasn't true. I lied."

"Yes you did," Gibbs nodded. "But it's not that either. Tim, what you did wrong was that you didn't trust me. The first thing you should have done was come to me and told me what was going on."

It seemed so obvious now that Tim wondered why he hadn't. He'd been so busy trying to protect his sister that he'd cast everyone as enemies in his head. He hadn't trusted that Gibbs would help him, even though he wore the man's collar, and now he thought about it that seemed like the most appalling betrayal of trust. He gave a choking sob, which he tried to bite back, but it came out anyway.

"I'm sorry," he whispered.

"I know." Gibbs nodded. "Will you trust me in future?"

"Yes." Tim nodded fervently. "I promise."

"Good boy. Right – now I'm going to do some work on my boat. You are going to stay here and help. This matter is now closed."

Tim wasn't sure why Gibbs didn't just send him away – he wasn't sure how his top could bear to have him around when he'd done something so incredibly disrespectful. The more he thought about it, the more ashamed he felt.

He spent the next few hours handing Gibbs various implements. Gibbs showed him how to smooth the wood, his hands covering Tim's as they worked on it together. It was the most physical contact Tim had ever had with a top and it was nice. He wished he could have something like this all the time but he didn't have a clue how to find it.

When they finished, Gibbs handed him a cloth to rub his hands with and Tim couldn't stand it any more.

"Why didn't you take my collar away? I let you down," he said, feeling his face burn with his own unhappiness.

"I decide who wears my collars," Gibbs told him firmly. "And you did let me down, but I've



punished you for that now, and I told you it's over."

Tim just gazed at him miserably.

"You were protecting your little sister," Gibbs said, more gently. "It's not an excuse but it is something I can understand. Now, \*you\* need to understand that for as long as you wear that collar you're mine, and my decisions are always final. And I choose to keep you, so that's it." He reached out and tousled Tim's hair and Tim felt a warm sense of reassurance settle in the pit of his belly.

"Go home, Tim. Get some rest this evening because I expect to see you in the office first thing tomorrow morning, standing at your desk working - because you sure as hell won't be sitting down for a few days." Gibbs pulled him forward, kissed him gently on the forehead, and then turned him around and pointed him in the direction of the door.

Tim could still very definitely remember how sore his ass had been for several days after that spanking, and how much his entire body had ached when he woke up the following morning – but, most of all, what he remembered was those few hours spent with Gibbs working on the boat, and that gentle kiss.

Sometimes Tim wished he could talk to Gibbs and tell him how he felt about himself, about his total uselessness as a sub and his fear of tops, but then he'd catch an expression in Gibbs's eyes when he was looking at him, and realise that Gibbs already knew. He thought, maybe, that was why Gibbs had collared him - to keep him safe from predatory tops, and to give him the time and space to build up his confidence because Tim knew he was a hundred times more confident now than he'd been when he'd first accepted Gibbs's collar.

It had been slow going but he had learned not to be terrified of his top every second of the day, which was how it had been in the first few weeks after his collaring. He was still scared of Gibbs, but then he thought that was normal – most people were. And he'd learned how to take a spanking without humiliating himself completely by bursting into hysterical tears or fainting. Okay, so he \*had\* cried, but he thought maybe that was what Gibbs had intended to happen – after all, he'd kept going until Tim had completely broken down over his knee. Gibbs certainly hadn't seemed phased by his tears – in fact he'd held him gently for a few minutes – he'd even tousled his hair.

Tim didn't think he could cope with a full-on relationship with a top like Gibbs, but he was gradually learning to relax a little, and he was starting to see how much pleasure there could be in giving yourself to a top. If only he could learn how to trust one enough to do that. Always presuming one would be interested, and few enough had been in his life so far. Of course his body language didn't help – he knew it screamed 'don't touch me!' but he didn't seem to be able to do anything about that.

If it wasn't enough having Gibbs as his top, he had also had to learn to cope with having Ziva around. She was so beautiful and so completely and utterly out of his league. He had never had a top as a friend before, and at first it blew his mind that he could talk and laugh with this completely amazing top without embarrassing himself – well, not too much anyway. At

some point he'd let his guard down though, and now he sometimes caught himself fantasising about what it would be like to kneel at her feet, or to be walking on the end of her leash.

Sometimes, as had happened the previous evening, Gibbs would hand his subs' leashes over to Tony for a brief period, when he had to do something or go somewhere, and Tim always resented that a little. He knew that Tony was the senior agent, and that in Gibbs's absence they answered to DiNozzo, but he longed to know what it might feel like to have Ziva's hand on his leash. If Gibbs was scary, so was Ziva, although in a different way.

When she relaxed and they were having fun, teasing each other, then it was so easy...but sometimes she got a dark expression in her eyes and he knew she'd gone someplace inside her own head, somewhere that scared him. He wished then that he could help her, and if his devotion alone could do that then he'd kneel at her feet in an instant...but he knew she didn't want that. He was just a friend, not a prospective partner, and maybe it was easier that way. It was certainly safer.

A knock on his door startled him out of this train of thought, and he got up to open it. Ziva was standing outside. She was pale, the dark red scratch on her cheek standing out livid on her flesh.

"I saw your light. Can I come in?" she asked.

"Well, yes...of course..." He stood to one side, awkwardly. "I'm sorry – was the light disturbing you? I didn't mean to keep you up."

She shook her head. "You are always too nice," she told him. He wasn't sure what that meant.

"I...well...it was the way I was brought up," he mumbled.

"No – I think it is just you," she said. "I met your sister once, remember. I did not think she was very nice and she had the same upbringing."

"Well, those were difficult circumstances," he sighed. "You didn't see her at her best. And...I'd really rather not talk about it." He flushed, remembering how it had felt to lie over Gibbs's knees and take his punishment for not trusting his top. His ass still stung at the thought of it.

"Poor McGee," Ziva said. "Gibbs punished you hard for that one, didn't he? I do not blame him – if you had been mine I would have done the same. You could have ruined your career or faced a judicial bullwhip. I think he understood though – he knew you were just trying to protect your sister. And he likes you – that is why he did not take your collar from you and kick you off the team. I have learned so much from him about being a good top – and yet somehow I cannot be like him, even though I want to." She walked over to the bed, and sat down. "I am tired, but I cannot sleep. How about you?" she said. "I saw you making notes in your little book."

“Me? Well...I was just writing down ideas...I do it every night.”

“For your novels?” She raised a teasing eyebrow.

“Yes,” he said warily. He was always being teased about his writing although he didn’t mind it too much. This wasn’t like the teasing he’d had at high school, where his lack of confidence had manifested in a high degree of clumsiness and a complete inability to get out a sentence without stuttering. A particularly nasty bunch of tops had taken to picking on him on a regular basis, and it wasn’t like in the books or the movies – no nice, strong, decent top had stood up to them, or been prepared to fight for him and then take him under their wing. No, he’d just struggled on, enduring each and every humiliation until at last he’d been able to leave and go to college where things had at least improved a little. The scars were still there though, just under the surface. Maybe that was why he’d never been able to give himself to a top.

“I like your novels. I think they are very good,” Ziva said. “I especially like the way you describe that one agent in them – the one who you keep telling us is not based on me at all!” She grinned at him, and he sighed.

“She’s not \*completely\* you,” he said.

“I don’t mind,” she shrugged. “It is flattering. I wish I was more like her – I like her better than me.”

She looked kind of sad, so he sat down on the bed beside her. “Ziva...tell me where to go if you don’t want me to ask this...but, are you okay?”

She stared at him, her dark eyes full of some deep, heavy emotion that he couldn’t begin to understand.

"No, I do not think so," she replied. "But I would like to be."

He reached out and touched the scratch on her cheek, gently, and she shivered.

“I’m sorry,” he said softly.

“Don’t be,” she said roughly. “I do not deserve your pity – and besides, it was what I wanted at the time.”

He drew back, biting unhappily on his lip. “I...it’s not something I understand,” he told her. Her body stiffened defensively.

“What don’t you understand, McGee? Power-play? Dynamic? Raw domination and submission? Rough sex?”

He flinched, and was about to make all his usual responses but then he shook his head. He

was always pretending and he was tired of it.

"All of those," he told her. "I don't understand any of them. I've had no experience of them."

She sat up, shaken out of her own defensiveness by what he'd said. "McGee...are you...?" she paused and gazed at him, her expression half-teasing, half-surprised.

"A virgin?" He raised an eyebrow at her. "Yes, Ziva, since you ask. I am."

He steeled himself for the inevitable pity and ridicule he'd see in her eyes, but, when he looked at her, she just seemed...intrigued? There was a kind of puzzled, sympathetic curiosity in her eyes. She touched his shoulder and he froze for a moment, and then relaxed, enjoying her touch.

"How come?" she asked. "You're a nice-looking sub...you have such beautiful eyes. And you are kind, and good, and fun to be around. Oh...did a top once hurt you?" Her fingers tightened on his shoulder, digging in a little, and he could sense the anger in her.

"No! It'd be easier if there was some big story, wouldn't it? An abusive top, or parent, or some kind of early experience that scarred me for life. But the truth is nobody has really been interested, and of course I don't go looking for them. I don't...I don't think I'd be very good at it. I long to worship someone, Ziva, to really give myself to them and be theirs, but I know I'd let them down. I wouldn't know what to do or where to start."

"A lot of tops would find that a turn-on," she told him, in a gentle tone of voice. "You know – someone they could train, completely from scratch; someone who needs to be coaxed and gentled." Her fingers relaxed and she stroked his shoulder tenderly.

"You don't understand – I don't know anything about myself – \*anything\*," he hissed. "I hear Abby going on about wanting to be pierced and I think – would I like that? – but I don't know. I don't know if I'm the kind of sub who wants to be tied, or spanked, or even whipped. I don't know what my dynamic is, Ziva. I don't know if I want to serve, or be made to submit, or be taken down - or if I just want to be fondled and indulged and treated like a pet. I just...I just don't know. I do know I couldn't do any of the things you read about in books, or see in magazines, or in movies. I couldn't hold an erection for my top's pleasure, or melt into their caresses. I'm more likely to stub my toe than kneel in the right position and I've never been very comfortable being touched, let alone give my body over to someone else for their pleasure."

Ziva smiled.

"You're laughing at me now," he accused.

"Only a little – and only because you were funny with the toe comment," she told him.

Tim shook his head. It was already too late. He'd already told her too much and he could see

she was thinking he was a total idiot, yet somehow, now he'd brought it out into the open, he couldn't seem to stop himself.

"I see Tony and he's so confident – last night at that Festival he could have had a dozen tops if he'd wanted them, and I know he'd have shown them a good time. You can just see that he's good at sex. He drives me insane but sometimes I want to be him, to have it be so damn effortless."

"It is not so easy being Tony," she told him. He knew she had a good rapport with Tony, even if the other sub did tease her mercilessly. They liked each other – there, see, Tony found it easy talking to Ziva, who was a top, and a damned attractive one at that, whereas Tim got tongue-tied, or else babbled like a complete moron, just like he was doing right now. "He has his problems. Besides, if you were Tony you'd have to take a spanking from Gibbs every day," she teased, and that at least coaxed a smile from him.

"There is that," he murmured. "Why does he do that, Ziva? I've often wondered. He so rarely punishes the rest of us, and I bet he's never punished Ducky."

"He gives each of us what we need, Tim, you know that," she replied. "And I guess he thinks Tony needs a daily spanking."

"Maybe he does," Tim sighed. "But there, see – how does Gibbs know what \*I\* need when I don't even know myself?"

"Well, Gibbs is not like any top I have ever known – he does just seem to understand things about you, even when you do not tell him," Ziva replied, with a tense little shrug.

That brought Tim up short. His gaze flickered over the scratch on her cheek again. "Did he speak to you about last night?" he asked, unsure whether this was something he should mention, in case she didn't want to talk about it. He was surprised she was still here – surely he'd said enough to scare her off by now?

"Yes he did. He called me into his room after he sent the rest of you to bed," she told him. Tim grimaced.

"I bet that wasn't fun."

"No...he made it clear that sometime soon he expects me to choose who I am and what kind of a top I want to be. It was not an easy conversation. He expects so much more of me than I think I can give him."

"Well, I suppose the best tops always want to coax you into being the best you can be," Tim replied. "That's what he does with us when we work cases. I never knew I could be this good at what I do – and, to be honest, I think being half-scared of disappointing him every second of the day is what has made me so good at my job. I think it's the same for all of us, isn't it? Even Ducky?"

“Yeah.” She nodded, a little smile playing on her lips. He liked it when she smiled. She had this whole dark side that scared him, and then she smiled and that was when he could see the top he loved, hopelessly, and without any expectation that his devotion would ever be returned. “You would make someone a very lovely submissive,” she told him softly. “If you would ever trust yourself – and them - enough to try.”

“And you...you always play on the dark side but that’s not really the kind of top you are,” he told her in return. “You should have a sub who loves and worships you, not someone who scratches your face off. You deserve so much more.”

“As do you.” They sat and gazed at each other for a long while. “It is late,” she said at last. “And I am tired but I do not want to sleep alone. Would you let me sleep here, with you? Just sleep – that is all. I...I would like very much to be held.”

It was a huge admission on her part – he could see that, and he felt honoured that she’d chosen him to shelter her right now. Maybe it hadn’t been such a bad thing that he’d bared his soul to her after all. Maybe, on the contrary, it had allowed her to lower her guard and confide in him the way he had confided in her.

“And I’d like to hold you,” he whispered, and something flared inside him as he said it. Maybe this was the kind of sub he was; gently protective of his top, ever-solicitous of them, wanting only to be a willing, devoted friend and servant to them. And what did he want in return? He wasn’t sure. Someone he could trust not to ridicule, hurt, embarrass or humiliate him for sure. And someone he could trust.

He went over to the balcony door and closed it, and when he returned she had undressed to a cotton camisole and panties. He gazed, shocked, at the myriad of bruises and scratches on her body, and felt a surge of protectiveness towards her – which was weird, because she was the kind of top who could take care of herself. Except, right now, she didn’t seem to be managing that so well.

He took off his sweatpants and got into the bed beside her in his shorts, and then slid his arms around her. She felt small and vulnerable like this, and he knew she was usually neither of those things so he was honoured that she had let him see this side of her.

Her long, dark hair was spread out over her shoulders and he loved the smell of it so close by.

“Sleep,” he whispered to her. “I’ll keep you safe. I promise.”

“Thank you, Tim,” she replied, and her body unfurled in his arms, relaxing against him. He relaxed too. This felt so good; him with his arms around her, taking care of her, and her allowing it, allowing him close, allowing him to serve her.

He heard her breathing change, and soon she was fast asleep in his arms while he lay there, wide awake, protecting her from whatever demons haunted her.

"I love you," he whispered into her dark hair.

~\*~

Tony lay in his bed, staring morosely at the ceiling. He'd spent the past three hours tossing and turning, and had no expectation of ever getting to sleep. He'd masturbated twice but that hadn't helped either.

It actually physically *\*hurt\** knowing that Gibbs was lying in bed in the room next to his, so close at hand and yet perpetually out of reach. He had spent the past two nights tormenting himself with fantasies of Gibbs creeping into his room and putting a rough hand over his mouth, then pinning him to the bed and fucking him senseless until morning. In another fantasy, he saw himself tied to Gibbs's massive bed, while his boss teased him with a variety of clamps and floggers. He had fantasies where he was on his knees, arms tied behind his back, taking Gibbs's cock slowly into his mouth; or where he was bent over the balcony railing outside, being slowly fucked by Gibbs from behind as the sea breeze caressed them both. Or there was the one where Gibbs just held him down and kissed him, slowly, sweetly, his hands keeping Tony's wrists held behind his back while he plundered his mouth lovingly with his tongue.

There were other fantasies too – and those were the ones that weren't satisfied by masturbation, and which prevented him sleeping. He could see himself walking at Gibbs's side, his trusted lieutenant and life-partner, and that was never a fantasy he'd had about any top before. He longed for the easy intimacy that went beyond sex and was about companionship and love. He wanted Gibbs to talk to him and confide in him; but mainly, he just wanted to be close to the man.

He had fantasies about sitting on his top's couch in the evening and watching a movie with him; about taking a walk along a beach with him, hand in hand; or living in his house and working on that stupid damn boat with him, sharing a beer and making Gibbs laugh. God how he loved the sound of Gibbs's laugh – and it was such a rare sound that he tried to provoke it out of Gibbs as often as he could. Gibbs was too serious, and had the air of a man who had loved and lost too much in his life. Tony wanted to ease that pain away and make Gibbs see how good it could be to have a sub he loved in his life and in his bed again.

The fantasies were endless, and having the object of them lying in the next door room was too much for Tony. At least back at home they were separated by a ten minute car ride. Here...well, here he got to see Gibbs in his bathrobe first thing in the morning, and he had to sleep in the room next to him, knowing that Gibbs was lying naked just a few feet away - so close and yet still so untouchable - and that was almost more than he could stand.

He had thought, when he first took Gibbs's collar, that he could handle it. He had even thought that maybe this was a test of his abilities as a sub – to wait, to worship from afar, to devote himself to someone who might never even so much as kiss him on the lips - although he lived in hope.

He hadn't been in another top's bed since Gibbs had fastened his collar around his neck, and the truth was that hadn't been such a hardship. Sure, he missed sex, but he'd had one hell

of a lot of sex before he met Gibbs. There was no point even pretending with another top though – Tony knew that nobody would live up to Gibbs.

How long could he endure being so close to the man though, without being more to him than just one amongst his many subs? He honestly wasn't sure he could take much more of this. He got up, body bathed with sweat, and went to take a shower.

When he got out, he rubbed his damp hair with a towel while peering at himself in the mirror. He looked like crap. He hadn't slept a wink last night, and he hadn't managed to get any sleep tonight, either, and in a few hours time they had to get up and work on this case again. There were dark shadows under Tony's eyes and he was aware of a dull ache in the base of his skull. He knew he needed to sleep but it just wasn't happening so there was no point lying in bed waiting for it.

He dried himself slowly, examining his butt in the mirror. Yesterday, for the first time ever, Gibbs had forgotten to give him his daily spanking. Hell, when they were at home Gibbs would even call him over at the weekend to administer it. He'd missed it a couple of times when he was in the hospital, or working a case away from Gibbs, but Gibbs made sure to mention it to him every day even if it wasn't possible for him to deliver it. Yesterday had been so hectic, from beginning to end, that it seemed to have slipped Gibbs's mind completely, and Tony wasn't happy about that. The marks from the brief strapping he'd received a couple of days ago had now gone, and Tony felt depressed as he surveyed his completely white butt – it was the first time in nearly five years that his ass hadn't had Gibbs's mark on it, and he didn't like the way it looked. The daily spankings might not be much but they were all he had and he treasured them for that reason alone.

He knew what everyone thought of him, and to be fair, the image of himself he projected was one that had once been true. He had been a commitment-phobe, hopping from one top's bed to another, barely able to keep them straight in his mind there were so many of them. He was also an inveterate flirt, and being collared hadn't tempered that inclination in the slightest. He had lost count of the number of times he'd propositioned Gibbs, both privately and in public, and been firmly rebuffed. People expected that of him. They all knew he wanted to bed Gibbs, and were probably equally sure that was ALL he wanted – a fuck buddy, someone he could roll in and out of bed with, no strings attached, no emotions involved. They had no idea of the truth beneath that, and he had no intention that any of them should ever find out - least of all Gibbs.

Tony got dressed and opened up the file of notes he'd made during all the questioning they'd done the previous day. There was only one way he could serve Gibbs right now, and that was to solve this case for him - and if that was the only way he could offer Gibbs his service, then that was what he'd do.

He was ready and waiting three hours later when Gibbs emerged from his room, fully dressed, hair still wet from his shower. Tony handed him a coffee, and waved his notes at him.

"Boss, I want to call Kate Heightmeyer, Rodney Sheppard and Carson Beckett back in for



questioning," he said. "I've been going over the notes and I'm still not clear on the timeline. I'm going to pencil in Steven Beckett, and John Sheppard as well – something's niggling me about this and I can't fit it together."

"Okay." Gibbs took the file, and glanced through it as he sipped his coffee. "You sleep okay, DiNozzo?"

"Like a baby, boss," Tony lied. "You?"

"Fine," Gibbs grunted. "Okay – as this is your idea, Tony, and as you're the one with the niggle – you take the questioning. I'll watch."

Tony nodded. He liked it when he and Gibbs worked a case together like this. They bounced off each other, and he loved the way Gibbs's mind worked. The man was a consummate professional and Tony found that exhilarating. Gibbs brought out the best in him, plain and simple.

He decided to call in Kate Heightmeyer first. She was an attractive blonde top, and a respected psychologist.

"Sorry to have to call you in again," he said, smiling his finest boyish smile, with just a hint of subby fawning. Tops always responded to it – well, most tops. Gibbs never had. It had the desired effect on Heightmeyer though; she gave him a fond smile in return.

"That's fine, Agent DiNozzo. I understand that you have a job to do," she told him, looking supremely comfortable.

"And forgive me if I go over some of the ground we covered yesterday – I just want to be clear on some things that I've got kinda muddled about," he said, with another silly smile, as if he was a dopey sub who couldn't get something right unless a top showed him how. That seemed to bring out the dominant in her and she smiled at him like he was a beautiful, much loved, but slightly stupid pet.

"Okay," he said. "You say you didn't see Dr Keller on the night she was murdered?"

"No, I didn't. I was on the mainland and Jenny had to work," she replied.

"But you and Dr Keller were in a relationship weren't you? You were lovers - but Jennifer wanted more commitment from you, didn't she? She was a young sub, quite smitten by a good-looking, older, confident top such as yourself. She even wanted to wear your collar, didn't she?"

"Uh..." Heightmeyer looked as if she'd had the wind completely taken out of her sails by his turn of questioning. Tops were so easy to play. Tony liked the feeling – first lull them into a false sense of security by flirting as subbily as possible, then flip everything on its head and go in for the kill. "Well, it wasn't quite like that. It wasn't a relationship really. We had played together a few times, and I liked her, but I wasn't ready to collar her."

"But she wanted that, didn't she?" Tony asked.

"I don't know." The blonde woman shook her head.

"But you said yesterday that you thought she did," Tony pressed, making a show of checking his notes.

"Well, she had mentioned it, but I didn't take it seriously. Like you said, she was a young sub, a long way from home – I felt she just wanted some security."

"Was that your professional opinion?" Gibbs butted in, from his vantage place by the door. "Or just a personal one?"

"Where does one end and the other begin?" Heightmeyer replied. "Look, she was a nice girl, and I liked playing with her, but there was nothing more to it than that. We weren't in love and I didn't mind her playing with other tops."

"You sure?" Tony asked.

"What are you trying to say? I found her playing with another top and then killed her in a jealous rage?" Heightmeyer asked. "That's absurd. Apart from anything else, Jenny didn't sleep around – and she would have told me if she'd been playing with anyone else."

"Maybe she did tell you," Tony said. "And maybe you didn't like that."

"That's not what happened, Agent DiNozzo," she told him quietly. "And I think you know that. Clutching at straws won't solve your case for you, and Jenny was a lovely woman – she deserves justice."

Gibbs cleared his throat and Tony nodded. "Okay, Dr Heightmeyer. Thank you. We'll call you in again if we need you. You've been a great help. We really appreciate it."

He smiled his best subby smile again but she wasn't about to be fooled a second time, and she gave him a sharp look in return. Tony didn't miss the little chuckle Gibbs gave at that as Heightmeyer left the room.

"She's got you figured out, DiNozzo," he told him. "And she didn't kill Jennifer Keller."

"I know," Tony sighed. "But I just wanted to be sure. Jealous lovers are always the number one suspects."

"As a matter of interest," Gibbs said, a rare grin tugging at the corners of his lips. "Does that little subby trick you just pulled ever work on any of the tops you meet?"

"Oh yeah," Tony grinned. "Every time."

“\*Every\* time?” Gibbs asked, with a raised eyebrow.

“Well, not with you, boss, but with most tops. But then I learned how to play tops at my mom’s knee and you’d be surprised just how predictable you all are.”

“At your mom’s knee?” Gibbs looked startled. “Just how old were you when you discovered your orientation, DiNozzo?”

“I didn’t ever not know, boss. I was born knowing,” Tony shrugged.

Gibbs looked even more surprised by that. Tony wasn’t sure why. He knew it was unusual – most people only figured out their orientation at puberty - but it didn't seem like that big a deal to Tony.

“I could even figure out which of the other kids at school were most likely to end up as dominants or submissives,” Tony said with a shrug. “Got in a lot of early experience playing up to them. I think I peaked too young,” he said with a grin. “Too much, too soon – I had it all figured out while all the other kids were still playing ‘spank-chase’ in the schoolyard. Got into a lot of trouble with my dad, sneaking out to meet much older tops when I was still a kid. I looked older than I was as well which didn’t help.”

“I don’t think any father would be happy with his underage son sneaking out to meet tops he hadn’t been introduced to,” Gibbs commented, and it was reasonable enough but it irritated Tony all the same.

“Oh he wasn’t concerned for my safety,” Tony shrugged. “He just didn’t like me bringing shame on the family name with his business buddies.” His childhood hadn’t been the happiest of times. Gibbs knew that – Tony had never made any secret of it over the years he’d been working with Gibbs.

His parents had been wealthy but self-absorbed; his mother was a beautiful, trophy submissive, who frequently hit the pages of the style magazines, and his father a high-powered businessman. It had been a passionate relationship, full of drunken rows and overblown romantic rapprochements. They had alternately neglected Tony and then showered him with devotion and he’d worshipped and been confused by them in equal measure. Their family life came to a horrible end, overnight, when his mom died in a car accident with her secret lover when he was ten years’ old.

His father’s drinking, always a problem, had spiralled out of control into full-blown alcoholism. He was full of a savage, bitter kind of grief that not only had he lost the beautiful wife he loved, but that she’d been cheating on him when she died. Tony, looking just like her, with the same provocative nature and submissive identification brought out dual emotions of love and anger in him. When he was sober he found it hard to look at his son, and when he was drunk he alternated between clumsy affection and violence.

“I learned a long time ago that dominants are easy to manipulate – it’s the subs who are the smart ones in any dynamic,” Tony said.

"Is that so?" Gibbs's raised eyebrow looked almost like a challenge, and Tony felt that familiar zinging sensation in his belly. This man, right here, was a top he couldn't manipulate, the kind of top who'd be strong enough to take him and who'd see through anything less than his total honesty and submission. Tony longed to have a top who'd take him that far down into his own sub-space. He wanted to find out just what his limits were, in the hands of a truly skilful top - the kind who would know if he was bullshitting or feigning charm for his own manipulative purposes.

"Yeah," Tony said, raising his chin, meeting Gibbs's challenge with one of his own.

They stared at each other, and the atmosphere in the room seemed suddenly highly charged, almost electric. Tony had the sensation that Gibbs was teetering on the brink, and that in a blink of an eye he might find himself flat on his back on the table, with Gibbs's hands on his body, claiming him. Then the moment passed; Gibbs looked away, and Tony felt as if he'd been punched in the gut. He turned back to his notes as if nothing had happened and willed himself to get his weary brain working again but he was so tired, and his head was pounding.

Next up, he called in Steven Beckett. The man was a tall and physically imposing submissive and Tony already knew him well from the eighteen days they'd spent on his ship on their way to Atlantis.

"Take a seat, Colonel," he said, brisk and businesslike – no point wasting the subby tricks on another sub. "The fire onboard the Daedalus – do you know what caused that yet?"

"No, we're still figuring it out," Steven replied. "Why? You think it's related to Dr Keller's murder?"

"I don't know. It just seems like a big coincidence for it to happen on the night she was killed, and, well, I don't believe in co-incidences." He shot a look in Gibbs's direction. "What time did it start?"

"It was found at around 3.30 a.m."

"But you didn't find out about it until 6 a.m. when a marine came to your quarters?" Tony furrowed up his brow.

Steven looked annoyed. "Yes," he replied tersely.

"Why did it take them so long to inform you?"

"My radio was switched off." He looked uncomfortable about that but didn't elaborate.

"Why didn't they send someone to wake you earlier?"

"They could have but Major McClusky was in charge - she's my second-in-command – and

she took a view that she could take care of it. They sent someone for me as soon as they got the situation under control."

"What's the security like onboard the Daedalus, Colonel?" Tony asked, sitting back in his chair and surveying the other man intently. Steven shifted, looking annoyed.

"To be honest with you, Agent DiNozzo, I don't think security was all it should have been the night before last," he admitted. "It was our first night back on Atlantis, everyone was excited, and there was only a skeleton detail onboard as so many people were on the mainland attending the festival. I shouldn't have authorised it but my people have been working hard for weeks and..." He spread his hands and sighed.

"You had no reason to believe the Daedalus would be targeted – if, indeed, that's what happened," Gibbs commented, from his vantage point behind Tony's shoulder.

"I know." Steven made a little ticking sound of annoyance in the back of his throat. "But...my preliminary findings suggest that the skeleton staff weren't following protocol as closely as they should have been. Security was lax – no doubt about it."

"So, it's entirely possible that someone could have got onboard and started the fire?" Tony asked.

"Yes. It is." Steven nodded. "Rodney's looking into it but the damage is extensive so it might take awhile to be sure. It might not have been deliberate – it *could* have been an accident – Daedalus is overdue a full maintenance check and she's been on continuous runs for the past few months. Flying between galaxies can place serious strain on a ship – it's possible she had a problem we hadn't detected."

"Okay. Well - let us know when you have some answers," Tony said.

Steven nodded, and unfurled his tall body to leave. "I'm sorry," he said, and the comment was directed more at Gibbs than him, Tony thought. "I screwed up on this one."

Tony supposed that there wasn't a sub in the world who wouldn't look to Gibbs for some kind of reassurance in a situation like this but Colonel Beckett got the same kind of cold Gibbsian comfort all the rest of them got.

"Yes you did," Gibbs said firmly. "I don't have a problem with you giving your people the night off, but security protocols should have been followed to the letter."

The colonel gave a little grimace, but Tony guessed that Gibbs hadn't said anything to him that he didn't already know.

General John Sheppard was up next. Tony had liked the general since the moment he first laid eyes on him. He reminded him a bit of Gibbs, only a hell of a lot more laid back. Tony gave him the patented Tony DiNozzo subby smile of supreme flirt as he came in but Sheppard didn't respond. Tony thought he heard Gibbs give a little grunt of amusement at

that.

"We estimate the murder took place at around 4.15 a.m., General," he said, launching straight in. "Where were you at that time?"

"I'd just gone to check on Rodney in the lab," Sheppard replied. "He'd heard something and I was worried."

"It's kind of late to be up isn't it?" Tony asked. "Shouldn't both you and your sub have been tucked up in bed at that time?"

His tone was just faintly suggestive – it was intended to be. He had the feeling that this top hid a fierce, dark streak behind that cool exterior and he wanted to needle him out of his comfort zone. Sure enough, Sheppard's eyes flashed at that comment.

"Rodney often works through the night if he's preoccupied with a project – sometimes it's easier to give him his head and let him get it out of his system then take him down later when he needs to rest," Sheppard replied.

Tony felt a jolt of envy that Rodney had a top who understood him so well and knew how to take such good care of him. Then he realised he had that too – but what he didn't have was a top who was in love with him, and John Sheppard was clearly as head over heels in love with his husband as it was possible to be.

"As for me...I just had a bad feeling all through that night," Sheppard said. "Can't explain it but I was sure something bad was going to happen. Felt it in my gut, as Special Agent Gibbs knows." Sheppard glanced over Tony's shoulder at Gibbs.

"So you didn't go to bed at all?" Gibbs asked.

"No." Sheppard shook his head. "And I still didn't catch the bastard doing this. I just wasn't expecting there to be trouble in the infirmary. I was patrolling the marine quarters and keeping an eye on the people coming back and forth from the mainland. All the previous murders took place in marine quarters." Sheppard ran his hand through his unruly dark hair. "I should have gone around the entire base. Poor Jenny – she was just a silly kid. I liked her – once I put her straight on the crush she had on me when she first arrived we got on well. She was like my kid sister or something. Damn it – if only I'd stopped by the infirmary after checking on Rodney!"

"Easy, General," Gibbs murmured. "You couldn't have known."

"What time did you call Rodney?" Tony asked.

"Around 4 a.m. I'd told him to lock the door in his lab when I was there earlier and he had – I saw him do it. When I called him he said he'd heard a noise. I was spooked, so I ran down there...but he was fine."

"How long did you stay?"

"About five minutes – then I went back to the jumper bay."

"Okay – thank you, General."

Tony tried the subby grin again, glancing sideways at the general through his eyelashes, and this time Sheppard's eyes glimmered in recognition. He looked amused for a moment, and then shook his head.

"Don't let Rodney catch you doing that, DiNozzo," he warned. "He has the power of granting you hot or cold water for your shower in the morning and you really don't want to get on the wrong side of him. I did once and ended up running through the hallways in my towel."

"A fine mental image to leave me with, General – thank you for that," Tony said, with an appreciative wink. Gibbs snorted, and Sheppard gave a wry grin and glanced at Gibbs over Tony's shoulder.

"Looks like you have your hands full with that one, Agent Gibbs," he commented. "He must give your strap a few workouts."

"You have no idea," Tony muttered ruefully, as Gibbs gave another amused snort.

Sheppard left, and Tony was about to call in the next person when Gibbs clapped a hand on his shoulder.

"Time to eat," he said.

Was it? Tony didn't feel very hungry but he saw from a glance at his watch that it was already early afternoon and he hadn't had any breakfast.

They walked down to the canteen and Tony felt his headache recede a little as he enjoyed the alone time with Gibbs, just the two of them, with him on the end of Gibbs's leash. He imagined what it would be like to do this all the time – to walk into the cafeteria and pile up just one plate, bring it back to the table and have Gibbs feed him with his own fork. Then he shook himself. Sharing-a-plate fantasies were the lowest of the low – only really dumb subs or the subs in the worst kind of romantic movies ever spent their time dreaming of sharing a plate with a top. It wasn't something he'd ever wanted for himself, either, before he met Gibbs.

They saw Abby, sitting at one of the tables, talking excitedly to Rodney Sheppard, while Colonel Lorne sat opposite, gazing at them with a bemused if goofy smile on his face. Carson was sitting next to Lorne, trying, unsuccessfully, to engage him in conversation and John Sheppard was sitting opposite Rodney, not saying a great deal but feeding his sub from their shared plate whenever Rodney shut up for long enough to eat. Tony felt another of those stabs of envy at seeing Rodney and John Sheppard sharing a plate. He wondered what the hell a powerful top like Sheppard saw in Rodney. The scientist was attractive in his own way,

sure, and he certainly had very wide, very blue eyes, but he also had an irascible edge to him that Sheppard seemed to allow to go unchecked.

Tony wondered how Gibbs would handle a sub as obviously volatile, frenetic and brilliant as Rodney Sheppard and decided that Rodney would wilt within seconds – very few subs were brave enough to withstand Gibbs's sharp eyed gaze for long. On the other hand...General Sheppard didn't look like the kind of top who put up with much bullshit either, so maybe Rodney was made of stronger stuff than he seemed.

Abby saw them and waved them over so they took their trays and went to sit with her and her new friends.

"Gibbs – I found out that Carson can sign too!" she said, signing with her hands as she spoke. "Isn't that cool?"

Carson grinned, and signed something at Abby, who signed back.

"My little brother was deaf," Carson explained. "Nobody was sure why – we made lots of trips to the hospital when I was a kid – I think that's when I first became interested in medicine. Anyway, the whole family learned to sign – and there were seven of us kids plus mum and dad so sometimes we'd have these great big silent conversations around the dinner table."

"You know...I've always wondered how you know how to sign, Gibbs," Tony said. "I mean, Abby has a deaf mom and Carson has a deaf brother. How about you?"

Gibbs glanced at him sideways, his expression as inscrutable as ever, and then he signed something at Abby and Carson who both laughed. Tony rolled his eyes - there were many things about Gibbs that he found fascinating and this was one of them, but his boss never gave away anything personal. It was frustrating.

Tony switched off while Abby chattered away excitedly. His head felt as if it was full of lead, and he was sure he was missing something obvious about the case. He rubbed the base of his skull, absently, wishing he could shift the knots he felt there, wanting to get his fingers right in and rub the sore spots away.

He vaguely heard Abby and Rodney talking – most of it made no sense so he could see why Lorne was looking so bemused. Sheppard just sat there with a fond smile on his face as if he was used to this.

"You know...sometimes I get all excited about this stuff Rodney is showing me and then I remember that that poor girl was killed and I feel bad about it," Abby said.

"Jenny Keller was a nice woman," General Sheppard said softly. Rodney glanced up sharply.

"She had a thing for John," he said. "Like half the subs on the base." He didn't seem happy about that but General Sheppard just rolled his eyes and placed another forkful of food in



Rodney's mouth.

"Aren't you upset she's dead?" Abby asked him.

"Mmm, the thing is..." Rodney said, with his mouth full of food, "I've found a way of handling it when people die – and they seem to die a lot out here, what with the Wraith and the dangerous missions and everything. So...you remember I told you about that other universe John and I were sucked into a few months ago? The one where nobody knew their dynamic and they had all those weird taboo issues about same gender relationships?"

Abby nodded, and Tony wondered what the hell they were talking about.

"Well...when I first arrived out here a few years ago there was a scientist on my team called Zelenka. He was good – not as brilliant as me of course but then who is? Anyway, he and I...well, I suppose we'd kind of been friends but then he went and got himself killed at the end of our first year out here and I was pretty cut up about it." Rodney glanced at his husband, who nodded in agreement.

"But the thing is, Abby – when we got sucked over to that other universe Zelenka wasn't dead over there. He was still alive! And I got to see him again, and talk to him and work with him." Rodney's face looked animated as he spoke about this Zelenka person, and Tony found himself interested, despite himself. "So now, when something happens like it did with Jenny Keller – I just think that in that other universe, with the other John and Rodney and Carson and so on – well, Jenny's probably still alive in that universe, living her life, being happy." He shrugged and accepted another forkful of food from his husband.

"Oh that is so cool!" Abby exclaimed. "It's like nobody ever really dies!"

"xactly!" Rodney said, around his mouthful of food.

Tony couldn't even begin to process that. His head hurt too much. He pushed his food around his plate, until he noticed Abby watching him, a worried look in her green eyes.

He pulled himself together and sat up – the last thing he wanted was for Gibbs to notice he wasn't eating.

"They should make a movie about that universe," he said with a grin. "Although from the sound of it nobody'd believe it. I can just see the casting – Tom Cruise could play the general here, and Nic Cage could play Dr Sheppard."

"Ooh – could I be in it?" Abby said, clapping her hands. "Who could play me? And who could play you, Tony?"

Tony grinned at her. "Nobody's cute and crazy enough to play you, Abs. And of course nobody's cool enough to play me - or scary enough to play the boss."

A second later felt a familiar smack on the back of his head. "Hey – do you suppose in that

universe Dr Sheppard's talking about the boss here doesn't slap his team around the head whenever he's pissed with them?" he asked, gazing warily at Gibbs in case another one was coming his way.

"He wouldn't – not in that universe," Rodney said, with a firm shake of his head. "Trust me. I met those people and they definitely didn't do anything like that."

"Hear that, boss," Tony said. "They sound quite enlightened over in this other universe of Dr Sheppard's."

Gibbs shook his head. "Tony, I bet there isn't a universe out there where a Gibbs doesn't feel the need to slap a DiNozzo upside the head," he said and there was something kind of fond about the way he said it that made Tony glow a bit inside.

He grinned, and made a series of jokes about movies that got people laughing and, hopefully, distracted everybody from the fact that he hadn't eaten anything.

He was relieved when they could return to the interrogation room and resume their questioning. He felt as if he was looking at a jigsaw puzzle and one very obvious piece was missing; if they could just find it, it would make sense of the whole picture.

He called in the nurse, Ellie Marsh, next but it was clear the poor woman wasn't going to be much help. She'd found Keller's body at around 6 a.m. when she'd reported for duty at the infirmary and she'd tried to call Dr Beckett on his radio. When there was no response she had fled to Beckett's room to get him.

Next he called in Rodney Sheppard. He was aware that he was developing something of a dislike for the other sub but he wasn't sure why. He was too tired to know whether it was a genuine gut instinct, or just sheer envy for the obvious love that John Sheppard had for his husband. Rodney didn't have to hide his love for his top the way Tony did – it was reciprocated, fully and without reservation.

"What I don't understand is why we didn't manage to get visuals on any of the murders," Tony said to Rodney. "I mean, this place is full of equipment – you'd think one of the cameras you have around the place would have picked something up."

"They're not cameras, they're sensory devices," Rodney told him snappily. "And it's not that simple. I admit, I'm surprised that we didn't find anything on the infirmary sensors. Although of course the Daedalus sensors were partially destroyed in the fire so they've told us nothing."

"It is possible the cameras – oh, I'm sorry – sensory devices," Tony stressed the two words with a slightly unnecessary sneer, and watched Rodney start to coil up like a tightly wound spring, "were tampered with?"

"Possible but unlikely. I mean, you'd need a level of knowledge of the base to start with," Rodney frowned.

"And who exactly has that knowledge?" Gibbs asked.

"Apart from you," Tony added, pointedly. Rodney clearly didn't catch the inference.

"Well, anyone working in my department I suppose," he said. "But none of them...I mean, I don't think any of them is a killer. In fact I'm sure of it!"

"Name them," Tony said. Rodney's blue eyes widened.

"What? Why?"

"Just name the people in your department – it can't be hard," Tony said, leaning back in his chair and folding his arms, watching Rodney closely.

"Well...there's me, and uh, well, there was Zelenka but he's gone and Miko – yes, there's Miko – short, Japanese, seems very meek and mild but has three subs and rules them with a rod of iron. And Hargreaves – small sub, always getting in the way. And Mortimer...or is it Morton? Well, there's him – tall, dark-haired, always flirting with any sub who'll give him the time of day which isn't many because he's kind of slimy. And um, the short lady with the grey hair and that switch...what's his name? Um..." He stopped, visibly floundering.

"How many people work in your department, Dr Sheppard?" Tony asked quietly.

"Twelve," Rodney replied promptly.

"And you can only name three of them?" Tony raised an eyebrow. "I thought you were supposed to be a brilliant scientist."

"I am!" Rodney protested. "I'm just not great with names."

"So, how do you know nobody in your department was involved when you don't even know their names?" Tony pressed. Rodney shook his head desperately.

"You don't understand – I know them, of course I know them but as people - not as names!"

"Okay." Tony nodded, and gave Rodney a look made of pure steel, one sub to another, because Rodney might get away with that kind of shit with some idiot top but it didn't wash with him. Rodney's blue eyes widened even further and, for just a second, Tony thought he understood what a man like General Sheppard might see in this sub. There was something vulnerable about Rodney, although you had to dig deep to find it. "That's all we have for now, Dr Sheppard," he said, with a dismissive nod towards the door.

Rodney left, looking slightly dazed.

Tony felt something bugging him and just wished his head was clear enough to identify it. He needed this – he needed it to show Gibbs just how good he was at his job, to prove it to

him, over and over again, so that maybe one day Gibbs would finally see he was worthy of him. If only he could concentrate, and shake off this headache.

He called in Carson Beckett, and the doctor came in, looking nervous.

"Dr Beckett..." He gave the doctor his best subby smile and Carson relaxed, visibly. Tony had an instinctive feel, honed from many sexual encounters over many years, for what kind of a top a person was, and he knew immediately that Carson was one of those kind-hearted tops who took pity on subs and wanted to take care of them. He also sensed that the good doctor was made of a certain kind of steel beneath that, and might not be as easily manipulated as he seemed at first sight. "Can you think of any reason why anyone would want to murder Jenny Keller?"

"No." Carson shook his head emphatically. "She was a dear, sweet girl. We all loved her. She was excellent at her job as well."

"Okay. Now...I want to go over something in the statement you made yesterday. You say that you woke up around 3.45 on the night Jenny was murdered, and you thought you heard and smelled something?"

"Well...I'm not sure," Carson replied, looking troubled. "I did wake up, yes, but maybe I was imagining things. I don't know."

"What kind of smell, Dr Beckett?" Gibbs asked.

"I don't know...look, I'm not even sure I smelled anything!" Carson protested loudly.

Tony winced, the raised tones aggravating his pounding headache. He rubbed his eyes to try and clear them; they felt like they were filled with grit.

"Are you okay, son?" Carson asked softly, and Tony looked up, surprised. "You look terrible if you don't mind me saying. Maybe you should take a wee trip along to my infirmary when you're done here."

"We *are* done here," Gibbs said, suddenly and unexpectedly. "Thank you for your help, Dr Beckett."

He nodded and Carson left, looking relieved to be allowed to go so soon.

"Gibbs!" Tony protested. "We only just called him in! I had more questions to ask him. He was one of the first on the scene when the body was found and..."

"It can wait," Gibbs said tersely, his sharp blue eyes gazing at Tony like two intense lasers, so bright they almost hurt. Tony shut his eyes to relieve the pressure and when he opened them again Gibbs had snapped his leash on his collar and was leading him towards the door.

"Where are we going?" Tony asked.

"Back to our quarters," Gibbs replied. "We're done for the day."

"But it's only the middle of the afternoon!" Tony protested. Gibbs gave him one of those silent glares that shut him up immediately and he followed on behind, wondering what the hell was going to happen.

Their quarters were empty when they got there which wasn't surprising. Tony knew Ziva and McGee were helping to investigate the Daedalus fire, Abby was busy in her lab with Rodney, and Ducky was taking another look at the corpses.

"My room. Now." Gibbs gestured with his head in the direction of his bedroom, unleashing Tony as he did so.

Tony sighed, and tried to crack his neck from side to side to release the tension. "I thought we were onto something before you pulled me out of there, boss. Do you think I went too far? Is that why you called me out? If I could just clear my head I'm sure I could figure out what's bugging me," he said, making no effort to walk towards the bedroom. Gibbs put a hand on his shoulder and propelled him there, shutting the door behind them.

Tony took one look at the bed and suppressed a yawn. God he felt tired. In other circumstances, he and Gibbs alone in a room with a big bed would have been a cue for him to make a suggestive comment but he was too tired to bother.

"When did you last get any sleep, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked.

"Last night," Tony said, warily.

Gibbs's hand was so fast that Tony didn't even have an inkling it was coming his way until it connected resoundingly with the back of his head.

"Ow!" he complained.

"I'll ask again. Don't lie to me twice," Gibbs said. "When did you last get any sleep? You were up when I got up this morning, and you were up when I got up yesterday morning. Did you sleep either of those nights?"

Tony did actually consider lying again because this didn't look good whichever way you looked at it, and he had no intention of telling Gibbs he'd spent two nights – and plenty more before that, on the Daedalus - struggling with the strength of his feelings for his boss.

"No," he admitted finally.

"Why?" Gibbs came to stand in front of him, and there was just no getting away from that steely gaze.

"I don't know, boss – I'm just finding it hard to switch off," Tony muttered, hoping that the

half-lie at least would pass muster with his top. He wasn't sure he had totally convinced Gibbs, but he seemed prepared to let that pass.

"I know a way to switch you off, Tony," Gibbs said, and Tony glanced up.

"Me too, but it's never on offer, boss," he replied. That earned him another light slap on the back of the head although he didn't miss the amused glint in Gibbs's eyes either.

"I was too busy to spank you yesterday," Gibbs told him and Tony groaned out loud. "My mistake. Events ran away from us. I should have taken care of it this morning but you seemed to be on a roll with the case and I didn't want to interrupt you. Again – my mistake – and not one I'll make again. Strip. You know the drill."

Tony sighed. "You really don't have to do this for me, boss," he said as he unzipped his pants and toed off his shoes.

"Yes, I do, Tony. I really do," Gibbs said, sounding amused.

Tony shucked off his pants, leaving them in an untidy heap and then stood there, awaiting further orders.

"I said strip, Tony," Gibbs ordered, and in the dull recesses of his aching brain Tony finally registered that. Gibbs did occasionally order him to strip completely, but only when he was due one hell of a spanking.

"Oh boss," he groaned. "Does it have to be that bad?"

"Depends on your definition of 'bad', Tony," Gibbs said. He went over to his night stand, opened the top drawer, and pulled out the strap that Tony loathed so much. "But if you miss a spanking you know you're due a big one next time. That's just the way it works."

"Well, it's the way you say it works," Tony muttered. "It doesn't \*have\* to work that way. You could change the rules."

"Can't do that, Tony," Gibbs said, with a wry shake of his head. "You depend on 'em."

Tony really didn't think that was the case but he finished undressing and walked stiffly over to the armchair to take his position.

"Not so fast. I'm going to give you a choice," Gibbs said. Tony stood up, intrigued. This was new; Gibbs never usually gave him a choice. "Ten with the strap, or you take your chances with my hand – no promises for how many you'll get there though," Gibbs said.

Tony swallowed. He hated the strap and he'd longed to take a spanking from Gibbs's hand since he'd first been collared. He wasn't sure why that was on offer now when it hadn't been before but he wasn't going to pass on the opportunity. Besides – Gibbs's hand, even if he took dozens of swats from it, couldn't hurt anywhere near as much as the damn strap.

“Your hand. Please, boss,” he said, giving Gibbs his patented DiNozzo subby look through his eyelashes.

“Doesn’t work with me remember, Tony,” Gibbs snorted. “Okay, my hand.” He put the strap down on the nightstand and Tony thought he caught a strange glimmer of amusement in Gibbs’s eye at his choice of implement. What the hell was \*that\* about? Gibbs sat down on the bed and pulled a pillow over his knees. “Come here.”

Despite his tiredness, his pounding headache, and the knowledge that he was about to be soundly spanked, Tony went over to his top eagerly. He’d fantasised often enough about being over Gibbs’s knees and now he was going to experience it first hand.

He threw himself over Gibbs’s lap with the practised air of a sub who had been in this position many, many times. He knew he looked good, body stretched out, ass positioned right in the centre of the pillow, legs and arms comfortably positioned and supported by the mattress on either side. He relaxed; this was one of his favourite positions and he had no objection to spending a lot of time this way.

He felt Gibbs’s arm go around his waist, and he knew immediately there wasn’t going to be a slow warm-up. He didn’t know why he had expected anything different – when Gibbs spanked he spanked. He didn’t screw around with warm-ups and stroking and all that shit – which happened to be shit that Tony was pretty fond of as it usually presaged a nice, expert play spanking which ended with him getting sexual release. This was NOT going to be one of those spankings.

He didn’t even have time for that realisation to sink in before there was a whistle of air and a sharp smacking sound – and then a blaze of pain ripped across his right buttock.

“Ow! You said you weren’t going to use the strap!” Tony protested, turning his head to glower at his top.

“I’m not,” Gibbs said, nodding in the direction of the nightstand, where, sure enough, the strap was still lying where Gibbs had left it.

“That is never your hand...oh shit...that IS your hand,” Tony said as Gibbs landed another sharp smack to his ass. “Man, you’re evil. When you gave me that choice you \*knew\*...oh shit...” he didn’t have time to finish his train of thought before Gibbs was spanking him in earnest.

Gibbs’s hand felt like it was made of warm, living iron as it rained down hard blows on Tony’s upturned ass. It hurt more than Tony thought a top’s hand could \*ever\* hurt but there was something intimate about it all the same. He loved the feel of Gibbs’s warm body so close against his own, and the tight hug of Gibbs’s arm around his waist, keeping him close and keeping him in place. He liked being able to hear Gibbs breathe as he spanked him, and the scent of the man.

The ache in his bottom grew more intense as Gibbs continued spanking him, sparing him nothing as he spanked with his usual degree of deep concentration, and now Tony knew that the ten with the strap would have been a breeze compared to this. His backside felt aglow, and he knew it had to be shining brightly. It throbbed, and that throb spread out into the rest of his body, warming him.

He closed his eyes, feeling the pounding in his head recede a little with every spank. He didn't resist the pain, but instead welcomed it in, slowing his breathing down to meet each wave of burning sensation as they radiated out from his ass.

He couldn't do anything but submit – he was Gibbs's submissive, he wore Gibbs's collar, and if Gibbs wanted to hold him here and spank him until his ass was burning hot and too sore to sit on for days then he'd just have to accept that – he didn't have a choice in the matter. He gave himself up to it, utterly and completely, and really, with a top like Gibbs that was easy.

Something deep inside him felt settled by the spanking, hard and intense though it was. This was where he was meant to be, lying over this man's knees and taking whatever he wanted to hand out. He trusted Gibbs to know when he'd had enough, and not to take him further than he could go – all that was left was to simply surrender to it.

The pace slowed, and then stopped, and Tony shifted and gazed up at his top blearily.

"You done, boss?" he whispered, feeling shattered, as if someone had reached into his soul and pulled him apart.

"Yeah," Gibbs said softly. He gave Tony the strangest look, and then reached out and smoothed his hair away from his face. "You need to get some sleep now, Tony," he said quietly.

"Mmm...I'll just roll over this way and go next door to my room..." Tony muttered, sliding sideways to get off the bed, his body a mass of fiery sensation as he moved. He felt as if his limbs were made of jello and seriously considered crawling into the next door room as he wasn't at all sure he could walk there.

"Not next door. Here. Where I can keep an eye on you," Gibbs said, getting off the bed and holding up the covers for Tony to crawl under. Tony was too tired to say anything – he just did as he was told, sliding beneath the covers and settling himself there on his front.

Gibbs pulled the blanket up to Tony's neck, and then got up and went over to the desk in the corner, found a file, and returned to the bed. Tony watched dozily as Gibbs toed off his shoes and sat down next to him on the bed, then opened the file and started reading.

"Close your eyes, Tony – I've got you and I'm not going anywhere," Gibbs said, and Tony had no idea how his boss knew that his eyes were open because Gibbs wasn't even looking at him. Still reading the file, Gibbs reached down and gently stroked Tony's head with his hand. Tony sighed, loving the feel of Gibbs's fingers smoothing his hair, and, within seconds, he



was fast asleep.

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Gibbs sat on the bed for a long time, reading Evan Lorne's service record file, which John Sheppard had provided for him. Every now and then he stroked Tony's hair idly with his free hand, revelling in the post-spanking protectiveness he was feeling. It had been a long time since he'd been able to give full reign to his more top-py instincts and they had taken him by surprise today. No – that wasn't right - \*Tony\* had taken him by surprise today. Gibbs had spanked a good many submissives in his life, and it was something he often enjoyed, in the right circumstances, but even so, today had been a revelation.

He'd long ago made it a rule to spank Tony every day, because he instinctively knew it was what Tony needed, to ground him, help him perform well at his job, and, in some freaky DiNozzo way, to keep him happy. Tony was a sub through to his bones, and he responded best to consistent caring discipline and a firm hand on his leash.

It was different with his other subs – he had rarely ever needed to spank them, and when he did he always went with what felt right, trusting his own innate instincts as a top. Gibbs felt that his gut feelings as a top had rarely ever let him down, any more than his gut feelings in his working life had let him down. He made his rare spankings of the rest of his team memorable enough to leave a lasting impression – in his view, discipline was useless unless it served a purpose and made the point – his subs might not like it, but he knew the discipline he handed out \*always\* made a point.

Tony was different. The occasional hard spanking was wasted on him – he'd been there, done that too often, and it had had little effect on him in the past. No, he needed something much more regular in his life. Tony needed Gibbs's attention – and Gibbs knew if he didn't give it to him by spanking him daily, even if it was just a couple of swats, Tony would find some other way to get it – and Tony's ways of getting attention had always got him into a whole heap of trouble in the past.

Gibbs mostly kept the spankings light, occasionally delivering a big one when he felt Tony needed it most, and always keeping Tony on his toes so he never knew when it was coming, or how hard it would be. Mostly Gibbs only left marks that would fade within a day – but sometimes, when he felt Tony needed it, he made sure to leave a couple of harder strap marks that would last a bit longer – Tony had a real need for that kind of grounding.

When Gibbs had first looked at Tony's resume, he'd almost not bothered interviewing him for the job, but something about the pattern of misdemeanours and eventual expulsions from various law enforcement agencies and police departments had caught his eye. He'd agreed to interview Tony as much out of curiosity as anything else, but as soon as he met him he knew, instantly, that this was a sub he had to have on his team. Tony had turned up looking ruffled, with couldn't-care-less body language but hungry-to-impress eyes, and something very old in Gibbs's blood had responded to this sub's obvious need for a firm hand. Tony, in return, had responded to Gibbs's discipline, smartened himself up almost overnight, and turned out to be the best damn agent Gibbs had ever had. Playing Tony right, to get the best out of him and stop him messing up, was like playing a finely tuned musical

instrument. Gibbs wasn't a man of much patience but he did like a challenge – and Tony was definitely that. He'd ended up collaring his new agent within three weeks of putting him on his team which was a record for him – but an un-collared Tony was too dangerous to have around and Gibbs knew he couldn't protect the young agent's ass unless he owned it. Damn it, Ducky was right – he DID have a rescue complex.

Today, seeing Tony tired and clearly troubled about something, although he wasn't saying what, Gibbs had felt strongly that his most difficult and exasperating sub needed more than an impersonal strapping over the back of a chair. He'd never seen Tony like this – he seemed distracted and was clearly running on empty. Gibbs had let that pass for most of the day because Tony was a like a cat with a mouse when he got on the trail of something, and Gibbs assumed that whatever was bothering Tony was related to the case. Now he wasn't so sure. It was only when Dr Beckett had expressed his concern about Tony's health that Gibbs had finally decided to step in – Tony wasn't likely to get any breakthroughs in the case if he wasn't well.

So he had offered Tony a choice of spanking – which wasn't his usual style with Tony – and he hadn't been surprised when Tony went for the over-the-knee option with his hand. Most subs assumed that was the easier option – they were wrong.

But he had been wrong too, in not realising how profound an experience it would be. He knew Tony was an experienced sub, and while it was always a pleasure to have a good-looking, naked, collared submissive over his knee, Gibbs was skilled enough to put that to one side in order to get the job done and bring Tony down to where he needed to be.

That was all it should have been about but then Tony had done that \*thing\*. Not one of those subby tricks he'd been putting out there all day – the smiles, and the eyelashes, and the 'I'm not worthy to kneel at your feet, oh strong top' shit that Gibbs had found so amusing. No - this had been the real deal. Tony had given himself up to Gibbs, completely and totally. He'd submitted on a deep level – and that wasn't a place many subs could go to without a lot of help and direction on his part. For Tony it had seemed almost effortless, and Gibbs had responded to the sense of absolute trust Tony placed in him.

Tony's body had been relaxed over his knees – and Gibbs hadn't held back on the spanking, as Tony's glowing bottom showed. Most subs in that situation would hold themselves tight and tense and sob their hearts out while resisting all the way, until finally they had no choice but to let go. It took a skilled top to get them to where they needed to be, and Gibbs \*was\* a skilled top, a master of his subject, instinctively able to judge the dips and peaks in a sub's responses, and alter his approach accordingly.

But he hadn't needed that level of skill today because Tony had just stretched out and offered himself up, giving himself to Gibbs without holding back. It had been beautiful – like a choreographed dance between top and sub, each of them knowing the precise moves to make without saying a word to each other - and Gibbs hadn't experienced anything like that in a very long time. Not since...Shannon.

Gibbs got up, quietly, so as not to wake his sleeping sub. He went over to his luggage, still

largely unpacked, and found the box he'd been looking at the previous night. He opened it, and touched the gold links of Shannon's collar. He'd had it made especially for her, wanting the moment of her collaring to be one they both remembered for the rest of their lives, and it had been a beautiful moment too. She had had that same sense of trust in him that Tony had just displayed, and that none of his other wives ever had – but then perhaps that had been his fault. Perhaps Ducky was right, and he'd always held back with them, never loving them for who they were but only for the ways in which they reminded him of Shannon. Tony though - Tony was nothing at all like Shannon.

Gibbs glanced at Tony, lying naked and dishevelled in his bed, his collar just visible above the sheets. It had been a long time since Gibbs had had a sub in his bed, and, even though they weren't sleeping together, somehow it felt easy and natural that Tony was there – as if it was where he belonged.

Tony was trouble though – Gibbs had known that when he collared him. He was bright, street-smart and brave; but he was also promiscuous, immature, and mischievous. He really was nothing like Shannon at all, and yet...they shared some quality that was hard to define – something about how they, as subs, responded to Gibbs, as a top.

Gibbs shut the box and replaced the collar in his bag. He wasn't ready to let go of Shannon just yet; in fact, he didn't think he'd \*ever\* be ready to let Shannon go.

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Tony smiled, and muttered something as he slowly dozed towards wakefulness. He was in bed, and he was warm and endorphins were whizzing through his body, making him feel so good. There was a burning ache in his bottom which implied he'd been spanked, and spanked well, and Tony loved the post-spanking haze. He felt completely relaxed and safe, enveloped in the reassuring scent of his top, whose bed he was in... Tony woke up fully with a start. He was lying naked in Gibbs's bed – something he'd wanted for the past five years, and, okay, so no actual \*sex\* had taken place, but that spanking had been almost as intimate. He and Gibbs had shared something during that spanking – he wasn't sure what, but it had felt damn good.

He opened his eyes and saw Gibbs gazing at him from where he was sitting at his desk in the corner of the room.

"Hey, sleepyhead. About time too," Gibbs said, with a grin. He looked softer and more relaxed than usual, although those blue eyes were still sharp.

"How long have I been asleep?" Tony asked, yawning.

"About five hours. The others just got back so I was about to wake you," Gibbs told him.

"Five hours?" Tony sat up fast, surprised, and then yelped as his sore butt protested. "I slept for five hours?" he said, in disbelief. Gibbs rolled his eyes.

"Get up and get over here, Tony," he said. "I'm not done with you yet."

Tony groaned as he had to leave behind the warmth of the bed, with its intoxicating scent of Gibbs. His body felt loose and relaxed as he walked, naked and unself-conscious, over to Gibbs. Gibbs might be his boss but he was also his top, and as such Tony's body belonged to him. Gibbs had made it perfectly clear when he first collared him that there were certain rights he wouldn't be claiming, but he still had them, even if chose not to exercise them. Seeing Tony naked was certainly one of them – and besides, Tony enjoyed it. He knew he looked good and if all Gibbs wanted to do was look, well, that was something.

"Turn around," Gibbs said, when he got close, and Tony did so, presenting his ass to his top for inspection. Gibbs ran his hands gently over the still sore flesh and Tony bit down on his lip and tried to think of really un-erotic things so that his cock wouldn't immediately spring into life. Gibbs had seen him with an erection before but it was always embarrassing. "Okay – looks fine," Gibbs said.

"Might look fine but it feels like it's on fire, boss," Tony told him with a grimace.

Gibbs just gave a wry shake of his head. "Regardless, like I said, I'm not done with you yet, Tony. Kneel down next to me, facing the desk, hands behind your back."

Tony sighed – Gibbs clearly hadn't been kidding earlier when he said he was going to make him switch off. He knew Gibbs liked to spend time with his subs after a serious punishment but he'd never spent *\*this\** long with him following a spanking before.

Tony hoped that Gibbs wasn't going to follow up his half-lie from earlier because he was feeling vulnerable right now, glowing ass exposed as he knelt beside Gibbs's knee, facing his desk. He wasn't sure how long he could hold out if Gibbs seriously went after the truth, but it also wasn't a truth he thought he could bear telling.

The last thing he wanted to see was the look of pity in Gibbs's eyes when he admitted he was in love with him – lust was one thing; they could all laugh and ignore that, but love? Tony had always been the untouchable one in relationships, the commitment-phobe, the one with all the power to break hearts. Now he was in love and he wasn't going to dump those unwanted feelings on this man. They were his problem and his alone – no reason why Gibbs should be troubled by them. Gibbs had made it perfectly clear he wasn't interested, and Tony would cope. He always had. He'd felt alone inside for his entire life and he had grown accustomed to it. He'd be fine...but only if Gibbs didn't find out the truth.

"When did you last eat anything, Tony?" Gibbs asked, unexpectedly.

Tony shrugged. He'd messed up with the not-sleeping thing but he was sure he could get this over with as soon as possible and get Gibbs off his back so he wouldn't get near the truth.

"Lunch-time, boss. At the cafeteria. You saw me – we were there together."

"Uh-huh." Gibbs got up, went over to the night-stand, and picked up his strap.

Tony turned his head, following his top's every move. His stomach did a little flip of fear; his butt was in no shape to take more right now. Gibbs returned to the desk and put the strap on it, right in front of Tony's nose. "What I saw at lunchtime was you pushing your food around your plate, while making a lot of noise to cover up the fact you weren't eating," he said quietly. "Now, let me ask you again; when did you last eat anything? And \*think\* before you reply, Tony." He let his hand rest on the strap. Tony glared at it, but he wasn't about to give in. He wasn't going to let Gibbs get to the truth.

"This morning – before you guys got up. I ate some of those cakes Ducky left in the kitchen," he said. Gibbs picked up the strap and Tony bit on his lip. How the hell did Gibbs always \*know\* when he was lying? It was uncanny.

"You sure about that, Tony?" Gibbs asked dangerously, slapping the strap against the hard, flat palm of his hand.

Tony sighed. "No. Look – I haven't eaten anything in awhile. I don't know when – maybe sometime yesterday, or even the day before. I honestly don't remember. Things are different out here – kind of exciting. We're in a whole different galaxy in case you hadn't noticed. Maybe I let it get to me a bit too much and forgot to eat, which yes, I know is not like me, but go figure. I'm sorry – I know it's unprofessional and you've had to take time out to deal with it but it won't happen again. I promise."

"Last time you stopped eating you were sick, Tony," Gibbs said, still holding the strap.

"I know, but that was extreme, boss. I had the plague," Tony replied, remembering how \*that\* had felt all too well, but most of all remembering that Gibbs had come to his hospital room and told him he didn't have permission to die – so, like the good little sub he was, he hadn't.

"Do I need to get Ducky to take a look at you?" Gibbs asked. "No telling what diseases they might have out here."

"No," Tony said firmly, because Ducky had a knack of seeing right through him that was second only to Gibbs's talent in that area. "I'm fine and I'm sorry. I screwed up but I won't let it happen again."

He had to stop thinking about Gibbs and get more control. It was just so hard managing it 24/7. He'd had eighteen days at close quarters on the Daedalus and now he was sleeping in the room next to Gibbs – no wonder he was struggling. At least at home he got some time out from the situation.

"Okay," Gibbs sighed. He put the strap down, much to Tony's relief, and then turned in his chair, took hold of Tony's face between his hands, and gazed at him searchingly. "If you say it's not a problem I'll believe you. If it turns out you've lied to me, I won't be so kind – understand?" Gibbs said. "This is your last chance to tell me if anything is going on with you,

Tony."

Tony swallowed, gazing into those sharp eyes. It would be so easy to confess his feelings, right here, right now, and let Gibbs handle the situation, but he had too much pride for that. He wanted this man's love, not his pity.

"Nothing is going on," he said firmly, crossing his fingers behind his back as he spoke. Gibbs nodded, looking disappointed that Tony was holding out on him but accepting his answer all the same.

"Okay then," he said, and then he dropped an unexpected kiss on Tony's forehead. "You allowed this situation to get out of control, DiNozzo," he said when he released Tony, and his tone was brisk and businesslike now. "So you can just kneel there and think about your sore ass until I'm ready to let you go."

Tony nodded, and relaxed into the submissive posture. There were worse ways to spend time. At least Gibbs was with him, and he could pretend this was more than it was. He felt himself go down into his own sub-space, and it was so easy when he was with Gibbs. He wished he could rest his chin on Gibbs's knee like a puppy but he hadn't been given permission for that and he knew it would be denied in any case. So he closed his eyes and leaned slightly against Gibbs's thigh where he was sitting at the desk – that much at least he might get away with.

They were silent for awhile, as Gibbs went through his notes and Tony zoned out beside him. The silence was so intimate, and he was so far inside his own sub-space, that Tony jumped when there was a knock on the door.

"Easy." Gibbs ruffled a hand through his hair, soothing him, but still didn't give him permission to get up so he stayed where he was. The door opened, and Evan Lorne stepped into the room.

"Sorry to disturb you, sir," he said, standing to attention in front of Gibbs. Tony made a small sound in the back of his throat. He really didn't like being naked and red-assed in front of another top but he was Gibbs's sub, and Gibbs didn't seem to have a problem with it. Lorne wasn't phased by it, either – it was common enough for a top to have a sub-in-discipline beside him. Gibbs rested his hand on Tony's shoulder and let it stay there, where it fulfilled the dual role of being both reassuring and making it clear to Lorne who Tony belonged to – if he'd been in any doubt on that score.

"I know the timing isn't ideal, sir," Lorne said, "but yesterday was so crazy I didn't dare approach you then. I know you're in the middle of a case but I don't know how long you and the rest of your team will be out here and I really wanted to ask you again about Abby. You said to present myself to you?"

Gibbs leaned back in his chair, his hand still resting on Tony's naked shoulder. Tony risked looking up and saw that Lorne looked as if he was due on the parade ground. He was wearing Air Force dress blues, and his shoes were sparkling, as were the buttons on his

uniform which was crisp and freshly pressed. There wasn't a hair out of place on him. Tony was intrigued by the process whereby Gibbs interviewed prospective tops for Abby, and he shifted slightly, wondering what would happen next.

What happened was that Gibbs put his hand on his head and directed it downward.

"Head down, Tony. You're in deep submission," Gibbs told him firmly, and Tony swallowed down a sigh and did as he was told, gazing at the floor. Then Gibbs turned his attention back to Lorne. "I've been reading through your personnel file, Colonel," he said.

"Yes sir. General Sheppard told me you'd requested it, sir," Lorne replied.

"You have an excellent service record," Gibbs commented. "Everyone speaks very highly of you. You're also a painter, I see?" Tony saw him, out of his peripheral vision, flicking through the file on his desk.

"Yes, sir! It's a hobby of mine," Lorne said.

"That's an unusual hobby for a military top," Gibbs commented. Lorne's shiny boots shifted a fraction.

"I'm not a usual kind of military top, sir," he said, softly. "That's why I like Abby – she's different, and she's fun. She's not like the subs I've met in the military. I would treat her with the utmost respect, sir, if you gave me permission to date her."

"Okay." Gibbs sat back in his chair. "You can date her, Colonel, but there are some rules."

"Of course, sir," Lorne replied, his eyes flashing happily.

"First – I need to know where she is. If she's with you, that's fine. But if she's with you she's with you – you don't leave her anywhere, or drop her off somewhere thinking she'll be safe. When she's with you, she's your responsibility and if anything happens to her on your watch I promise you that I will hold you accountable. Understood?"

Lorne took a deep breath. "Yes, sir."

"Okay." Gibbs nodded. "Secondly – you let me know when she's back with me – you bring her back in person and you see me – even if just to say goodnight and that Abby is safe."

"No problem, sir." Lorne nodded.

"And thirdly – if you decide to play you play safe and you play the way Abby wants to play. You ignore her safe word, or coerce her into doing something she doesn't want to do, and you'll wish you'd never been born."

"Yes, sir," Lorne said, and Tony detected just a little hint of a quaver in his voice. Gibbs sure as hell could be scary.

"Finally – you don't hurt her," Gibbs said. "It might not work out between you and that's fine, I won't blame you for that. But if you're the kind of top who likes to pick up subs and deliberately break their hearts then think again; because I will come after you."

"Me too," Tony said, in a deadly serious tone, looking up, unaware he'd even spoken until it was too late. He bit his lip, waiting for Gibbs to smack his head because he was supposed to be in deep submission but Gibbs just gave a little grunt and his hand came up to rest on Tony's naked shoulder again, stroking softly.

"I promise you – both of you," Lorne said, glancing from Tony to Gibbs. "Abby won't come to any harm with me."

"Very well – then you have my permission to date her," Gibbs said.

"Thank you." Lorne pulled himself up and gave Gibbs a crisp salute. "And if you don't mind me saying so, I haven't felt like this since I was at high school and had to ask permission to date a sub from their parents," he said, with a little grin. "Only this was much, much worse. Abby sure as hell must be special if she has you two looking out for her."

"She is," Tony said, and Gibbs said it too, at the same time. Gibbs grinned at him, and stroked the back of Tony's neck with his finger. Lorne gave a little snort and then turned smartly on his heel and left the room.

They were only alone for a second or two when there was another knock on the door and Ducky entered. Tony gave a resigned sigh – as a sub, he was used to being naked at his top's discretion, no matter who else was around, and it was only Ducky after all. The fact that he was a doctor and had seen Tony naked on many previous occasions made it feel a bit better at least.

"I was just wondering if you intended to join us for dinner," Ducky began. "Ah...I see Anthony has been in trouble again," he said, shooting an affable grin in Tony's direction. "Nothing serious I hope?"

"Nope – he just needed settling," Gibbs replied. "He's not been eating or sleeping for a couple of days and needed taking down."

"My dear boy, not eating, not sleeping – anyone would think you're in love," Ducky said, with a little laugh. Tony stiffened, and Gibbs's hand tightened on his neck.

"Is that it, Tony?" Gibbs asked. "Has some top out here taken your interest?"

"No, boss," Tony answered, firmly and honestly. He glanced over Gibbs's shoulder and saw that Ducky had seen right through him, even if Gibbs hadn't.

"Here, let me see the damage," Ducky said, and Tony could see he was trying hard to cover up his mistake in drawing attention to Tony's emotional state.



Ducky stepped forward, and Gibbs nodded and allowed Tony to get up and have his ass examined.

"I see it's your usual exemplary handiwork, Jethro," Ducky murmured as he surveyed Tony's buttocks. "No bruising or wrap marks – if indeed an implement was used. I'll get the special ointment to take the sting away, Tony, if Jethro is in agreement."

Gibbs nodded. "And while you're doing that I'm going to go and get us some food," he said. "I don't want us eating in the cafeteria tonight – I want to go through the results of everyone's day and see where we're at with this case. I also want to make sure you eat, Tony. Let Ducky do his thing and then get dressed and meet us in the living room."

Both of them left the room and Tony got up, feeling relieved. That had been close. Ducky returned a moment later and came towards him, brandishing his tube of ointment. He never told any of them what was in it but he'd rubbed it into Tony's ass enough times for Tony to know it really did work.

Right now though, he had other things on his mind than relieving the sting in his ass. He caught Ducky's wrist, and gazed at him intently. Ducky's eyes widened in surprise behind his spectacles; Tony rarely let the mask slip for long enough for anyone to see the real him, but right now it was imperative.

"You must never tell him," Tony said, in a low, urgent tone, completely different to his usual joking demeanour. Ducky's eyes widened even further at that.

"Of course not – you have my word," Ducky replied. "Although - you might want to tell him yourself, my dear boy."

"No," Tony said firmly, squeezing tight. Ducky winced and Tony released his wrist with an apologetic smile.

"It might not be as bad as you think," Ducky said.

"No," Tony repeated. "I knew the deal when he put his collar on me. He told me this was all I was getting and I told him I could handle that. I'm not pressuring him for more. I have my pride, Ducky – and he's made it abundantly clear he isn't even interested in taking me to his bed, let alone into that damn cold heart of his."

"It's not as cold in there as you think," Ducky murmured. "How long?" he asked, unscrewing the cap on the tube of ointment.

"Five years," Tony replied.

Ducky sighed. "Since he collared you? You've been in love with him for \*that\* long?"

Tony nodded, and turned to allow Ducky to spread the ointment on his ass. It was always

freezing when it was applied but Ducky was gentle and it didn't hurt. His ass would be sore for a few hours, especially when he sat down, and it might glow for a day or so, but that was the extent of the damage. Even when Gibbs left marks, as he sometimes did, Tony suspected it was more for his benefit than anything else. It was as if Gibbs \*knew\* how much Tony liked looking at those marks in the mirror after. Ducky finished, and then he turned Tony around to face him.

"We all knew you wanted him of course, you've made no secret of that. In fact you've turned it into quite the joke, haven't you, Tony?" Ducky shook his head sadly. "I should have known all along that you were too smart to be acting so much the fool without good reason. It's a good disguise, Tony - pretending to just be interested in jumping the man's bones to hide the fact that you're in love with him."

"Hiding in plain sight, Ducky," Tony answered quietly. "That's always the best disguise."

"And none of us knew it went this deep – not even him. Everyone just wrote off the lingering looks as pure lust on your part – which, given your history, is hardly surprising. You're really in love with him, Tony? You're sure?"

"Yes, Ducky." Tony dropped all pretence now. There was no point to it with Ducky any more. "I'm in love with Gibbs and have been since the day I met him and it just gets worse. Being with him constantly these past few weeks is driving me insane. I need to get a handle on myself or I'm going to screw things up badly."

"I wish I could bang your heads together, the pair of you," Ducky said. "But this is for you two to sort out between you. I just hope you DO sort it out."

"Nothing to sort out, Ducky," Tony said, with a curt shake of his head. "I just need to find a way to shove it back down again so I can get it under control and it doesn't screw with my work."

"Oh Tony," Ducky sighed. "I'm so sorry, my dear boy. I remember the agonies and ecstasies of the affairs of the heart all too well."

"But you have him," Tony pointed out. "You've had him for a long time – and he's different with you. I mean, I get the feeling that you and he..."

Ducky cleared his throat. "Don't enquire, Anthony. It's private," he said.

Tony nodded, flushing slightly, but feeling envious all the same. Ducky and Gibbs went way back, and they had an easy closeness. Ducky was also the only person that Gibbs ever confided in. Tony often wondered exactly what was between them and how they'd got together but neither of them was ever forthcoming on that subject. He knew Gibbs had married three times since taking Ducky as his sub, but he'd never married Ducky, and while the two men clearly loved each other, Tony didn't get the impression that they were \*in\* love. So what they had was something else – something almost as important, to both of them, but not the same. It was certainly a deep friendship, and Gibbs was as protective

towards Ducky as he was towards his other subs, but Tony had never known Ducky to have any other relationships and sometimes he wondered why.

“Are you even a sub, Ducky?” he asked suddenly, and he realised that this was something that had been bugging him for some time. Sometimes he got a very subby vibe off Ducky, but others...not so much. He was certainly the only one of Gibbs’s collared team who could get away with occasionally giving the boss orders – and, more surprisingly perhaps, Gibbs would usually follow them.

“What an extraordinary question, Anthony!” Ducky said, with a surprised smile. “I wear Gibbs’s collar, don’t I?”

“So does Ziva,” Tony pointed out. “And she’s definitely a top.”

“Ah well...we all have our own stories, Tony, don’t we, those of us who wear Gibbs’s collars?”

“Hmm, that’s enigmatic. He ever spanked you, Ducky?” Tony was intrigued now – Gibbs’s relationship with Ducky was a mystery to him and he often wondered what had brought these two together and kept them so close for all these years.

Ducky grinned. “You’re fishing, Anthony,” he said.

“Yeah.” Tony grinned back at him. “So – has he?”

“Once or twice,” Ducky conceded. Tony laughed out loud, taking a perverse pleasure in learning that Ducky had to submit to Gibbs’s discipline the same as the rest of them. Ducky leaned towards him, conspiratorially. “But only when I asked him nicely,” he added. Tony stopped laughing and pulled a face.

“You suppose he’d \*stop\* spanking me if I asked him nicely?” he said, easing his pants on over his ass and wincing as he did so because while Ducky’s special ointment was good, Gibbs’s hand was even better.

“You could always try,” Ducky mused. “But you might want to wait a day or two until the sting in your nether regions has died down a little, Anthony, before embarking on such an inherently risky strategy.”

“Yeah. Ha, ha,” Tony said sourly. Ducky patted him on the arm and then left the room, chuckling away to himself as he went.

Tony pulled on the rest of his clothes and then followed the doctor out into the living room, to find that Gibbs, Ziva and McGee had returned from the cafeteria with several trays of food. He was surprised to find that it smelled good and that for the first time in days he was hungry; Gibbs’s method of taking him down had clearly worked.

He perched uneasily on the side of the couch, wincing slightly as he eased himself down. He

caught the jolt of realisation in McGee's eyes as the probie realised he'd just had a tough spanking, and then McGee glanced at Gibbs, with that rabbit-caught-in-the-headlights gaze of his. Tony bit back a laugh, wondering whether McGee would always be scared of tops. Then, to his surprise, McGee's gaze flickered uncertainly towards Ziva, and it wasn't that usual look of love-cum-terror that McGee had whenever he looked at her. It was tender, and almost speculative. Tony filed that away for future reference.

"So...what did you find out today?" Gibbs asked, pushing a tray of food Tony's way with a look that told him if he didn't eat he'd spend the night hanging by his ankles from the ceiling in Gibbs's bedroom. Which wasn't \*such\* a bad thought but it was bad enough to make Tony pick up his tray in a hurry. Not that he needed urging – he really was starving. He began shovelling food down, while listening to the team each say their piece.

Ducky didn't have a whole lot to add, although he spent about fifteen minutes adding it all the same, with all kinds of Ducky-like embellishments. Tony loved the way the doctor talked so he sat back cautiously on his sore ass and let the sound wash over him.

Then Abby gave her report and Tony was thoroughly zoned out in a post-spanking haze now but he allowed the words to drift into his subconscious because sometimes he got great flashes of insight this way. There was certainly something out there that tied all the puzzling aspects of this case together – he just wasn't sure what.

Next up was Ziva, giving her report in her usual clipped tones, with McGee butting in occasionally.

"The fire on the Daedalus was definitely started deliberately," Ziva said. "We found evidence of a small incendiary device. The device itself was not all that powerful – but it was placed where it would cause the maximum amount of damage. It was located near an oxygen tank which was why it took them so long to get it under control."

"So we're talking about someone who had access not only to explosive materials but who also knew the schematics of the Daedalus inside out?" Gibbs asked.

"That's right." McGee nodded.

"How does that tie in with Dr Keller's murder though?" Abby asked.

"Diversion," Tony said, without even thinking about it. "Someone wanted someone else out of the way. Question is - who and why?"

"Carson Beckett is the obvious choice," Gibbs mused. "Jenny Keller was killed in the infirmary – maybe Carson was supposed to be out of the way helping casualties on the Daedalus."

"But Carson Beckett \*was\* out of the way," Tony pointed out. "He wasn't on duty and his radio was switched off all night."

“But the killer couldn’t have known that. It was a failsafe,” Gibbs replied.

“There’s something else we found out...” McGee said, glancing anxiously at Gibbs. “Or, at least...I found out...I’m not sure if it’s important. I mean, it’s not directly related to the case but...”

“Just spit it out, probie,” Tony said, rolling his eyes. Gibbs was too far away to slap the back of his head but he gave him a glare anyway, before turning his attention to McGee, raising an eyebrow to get him to continue.

“Well...it’s we were told we couldn’t gate through from Earth a few weeks ago because the Atlantis gate was experiencing some kind of a temporary problem with intergalactic transfers,” McGee said, stuttering slightly, as he always did when he had the full force of Gibbs’s stern gaze on him.

Gibbs cleared his throat to hurry the explanation on a bit and McGee stumbled to get the rest of his words out.

“Well, I found that isn’t the case, boss. I’m not an expert on this tech, but the gate seems to be working just fine. I checked back on the logs, and there was some routine maintenance run on it back when before we set off from Earth on the Daedalus, but it was working okay.”

“Who would benefit from lying about that?” Gibbs asked. “Who wouldn’t want us here?”

Tony felt everything slot into place. “Dr Rodney Sheppard,” he said firmly. “Think about it – he had access to explosives, he knows the Daedalus schematics backwards, and he would have been the person who lied to Woolsey about the gate glitch.”

“But why? You think he’s our murderer, DiNozzo?” Gibbs asked, frowning. “What’s the motive?”

“Well, I always say you should look for a jealous lover first,” Tony replied, on a roll now. “Look at the facts, boss! We KNOW that Jenny Keller had a crush on John Sheppard – Sheppard told us so himself. He also told us that Rodney is a jealous kind of sub – remember what he said about the hot water in the showers? Rodney confirmed his jealousy himself, over lunch – remember what he said about half of Atlantis having a crush on General Sheppard and how he didn’t look too happy about that?”

“No way!” Abby said vehemently. “Tony, you’re wrong. There is no way Rodney did this! I’ve spent more time with him than anyone these past few days and he’s just...he couldn’t do this. He couldn’t hurt anyone. He’s not like that.”

“Hold on, Abs,” Gibbs said, holding up his hand. “Go on, DiNozzo.”

“Think about it, though,” Tony continued, warming to his theme. “The first three victims were all marines – and subs of pretty easy virtue, or so we’ve been told. And there’s General Sheppard – a good looking, charismatic top and their superior officer – what’s the betting

they all made a move on him? And Rodney's jealous – so he starts picking them off, one by one. The message is clear – lay off my husband or else.”

“But John is totally in love with Rodney!” Abby protested. “He wouldn't have slept with them, even if they did make a move on him!”

“How many tops do you know who can turn down a willing sub when they throw themselves at them?” Tony asked. “Tops are easily manipulated - all it takes is a few compliments and some subby eyelash fluttering.”

“You have a very low opinion of tops, Tony,” Ziva said, her dark eyebrows furrowed.

“Yeah...well...I've known a lot of tops,” Tony replied, with a shrug. “I don't care how much General Sheppard seems to be in love with his husband – he could have taken the bait.”

“No, I don't think so,” Gibbs murmured. “Leaving aside your jaundiced view of - what was it you called us yesterday? ‘The weaker half of the dynamic’?” He shot a glare in Tony's direction. “I don't think General Sheppard is the type to play around. But it doesn't matter whether he did or not – all that matters is whether Rodney thought he did – or even whether Rodney was so jealous that he couldn't stand to have people flirting with his husband. He certainly has the motive and opportunity to have committed the murders.”

“Exactly!” Tony grinned. “He set the fire on the Daedalus to make sure Carson wouldn't be in the infirmary, and to cause a general diversion, and he went and took care of Dr Keller – one less person to try and charm their way into his top's pants.”

“We know that Rodney was in his lab at 4 a.m.,” Gibbs said, flicking through the notes. “Because the general was there with him.”

“Yeah – but he only stayed five minutes. And Rodney had plenty of time to set the fire on the Daedalus beforehand, and to go murder Jenny Keller after. In fact, he might even have called the general to his lab on a false alarm to provide an alibi for himself.”

“Is it enough?” Ziva asked Gibbs.

“It's enough for me to want to question Rodney again,” Gibbs said, throwing his plate down and getting to his feet.

“No – please – Gibbs, you're wrong!” Abby wailed. “Rodney didn't do this. You don't know him.”

“We know he's anti-social and rude,” Tony told her, getting up to follow Gibbs. Abby grabbed his arm.

“Yes...but...not underneath - underneath he's just a bit insecure, and he's really kind. He hates it when anyone gets hurt, let alone dies.”

“He didn’t seem that cut up about Jenny Keller,” Tony pointed out. “He told us that ludicrous story over lunch about how he thought she might be alive in another universe to hide the fact that he doesn’t give a damn about the fact she’s dead – and why would he if he’d killed her himself?”

“No, you’re wrong – he meant that!” Abby said. “That really is how he deals with things.”

Gibbs reached out, and put an arm around Abby, then pulled her in and kissed her cheek. “Abby, this is what we have to do,” he said firmly. “If Rodney is innocent then we’ll find out – but right now, he’s our main suspect and that means we have to question him some more. DiNozzo, McGee, David – you’re with me.”

He strode towards the door, and Tony was right behind him. They walked fast down to Rodney’s lab and Tony felt exhilarated. This all made sense! Well – almost; there was something that didn’t but he couldn’t put his finger on what it was. He just \*knew\* that he hadn’t liked Rodney Sheppard from the moment he first met the guy, and it seemed his gut was right after all.

Gibbs threw open the lab door, and Tony was first inside. Rodney Sheppard was working in there on his own, and he stood up, startled, his mouth opening and closing in surprise at the sudden intrusion.

“Dr Rodney Sheppard,” Tony said, walking forward. “We’d like to question you again, about the murders of Dr Keller, Sergeant Maloney, Corporal Evenden, and Lieutenant Sarkovsky.”

Rodney’s eyes widened in shock. “What? Why? Oh my god – you don’t think I killed them, do you?”

“Did you?” Gibbs asked.

Rodney looked as if he was about to keel over. “Of course not! You can’t be serious. Me? I mean...me? Why would I want to kill them? Oh my god...you can’t mean me...”

“Will you accompany us to the interrogation room?” Tony asked.

“No!” Rodney looked panicked. “I didn’t do anything!”

“Then you won’t mind being questioned.” Tony stepped forward, and put a hand out to gesture him out of the room. Rodney squirmed away from him.

“No, no, no!” he protested. “You can’t do this. Don’t \*touch\* me. John won’t like it.”

Tony was sure he wouldn’t but a top’s sensibilities didn’t over-ride the necessities of a federal investigation.

“And you don’t like anyone touching him, either, do you?” Tony asked.

“What do you mean?” Rodney looked very confused, and Tony wondered, for the briefest moment, whether they had this all wrong.

He reached out to push Rodney towards the door, and then hesitated, because it was never good form to touch a top’s collared sub without permission. However, Gibbs had drummed into him often enough over the years that he didn’t give a damn about such niceties where law enforcement was concerned, so he over-rode that automatic instinct and reached for Rodney’s arm again. Rodney shoved him away. Tony stepped forward and there was a minor skirmish as he tried to get Rodney under control. The scientist tripped and went down, banging his head against the desk as he went. Tony cursed.

Gibbs stepped in and hauled Rodney to his feet. There was a small cut on Rodney’s forehead, oozing blood. Tony sighed – it never looked good when a suspect got hurt in custody. Gibbs didn’t look happy about it either – he took a second to peer at it and make sure it wasn’t serious, but it was just a small cut.

“Dr Sheppard,” Gibbs said, briskly, in the kind of tone subs always took notice of. Rodney went still at the sound of his voice, and stopped struggling. “We’re going to take you to the interrogation room for questioning – that’s all. It’s in your best interests to come with us and co-operate fully. If you *are* innocent, then I’m sure you’ll be able to prove it. For your own safety we’re going to handcuff you.”

“You don’t know what you’re doing,” Rodney whispered. “Seriously – you have no idea. This is all totally wrong.”

“Okay...we’ll see,” Gibbs said, nodding at Tony.

Tony cuffed Rodney's hands behind his back, took hold of Rodney’s shoulder, and pushed him towards the door. At first he’d been exhilarated by the thought that he might have solved these murders – anything that would make Gibbs think highly of him. But now...an uneasy feeling was settling in the pit of his stomach. Had his dislike for Rodney and his jealousy over his relationship with the general influenced him too much? Sure, the evidence did kind of point to Rodney’s guilt...but was this man really capable of murder?

### Chapter 3 by Xanthe

Gibbs wasn’t happy – he didn’t like that Rodney Sheppard had been hurt, even though it was just a minor injury. Gibbs had an old-fashioned attitude towards submissives – part chauvinist, part chivalrous - and he didn't like to see them harmed; tops could take care of themselves, but subs were to be protected and cherished, just like the line in the wedding vows went. He also couldn’t shake the feeling they had the wrong man. Was Tony’s jaundiced view of human relationships influencing them too much?

All the same, he needed to get to the bottom of exactly why Rodney had lied about the gate glitch – that was the one tangible piece of evidence they had, and he was all too well aware of that. The rest was just conjecture.



He stationed McGee and David outside the door and went into the room with Tony and Rodney. Tony shoved Rodney down on a chair, still in cuffs, and Gibbs pulled up his own chair in front of the table, and gazed at Rodney Sheppard. He seemed dazed and confused – and *\*really\** anxious.

“You got something you want to confess, Dr Sheppard?” he asked. “You seem pretty nervous.”

“I am - when John finds out he's going to go ballistic,” Rodney replied.

“Well...we'll deal with that later,” Gibbs said. He thought he had an hour or two before Sheppard found out and if Rodney *\*was\** guilty then he might be able to get a confession out of Rodney in that time.

“No...you don't understand. John will be here soon,” Rodney said. “And I don't know how out of control he's going to be when he gets here.”

“Why do you say he'll be here soon?” Gibbs asked, frowning.

At that moment there was a noise outside that sounded suspiciously like someone roaring in rage; Gibbs could hear Ziva trying to calm the situation down. He nodded at Tony to keep an eye on Rodney, and went outside.

John Sheppard was standing there, struggling with Ziva and McGee. He looked angry, upset and extremely dangerous.

“General Sheppard,” Gibbs said smoothly, gesturing that Ziva and McGee should release their grip on him.

“What the hell are you doing?” John yelled. “You have Rodney in there. Oh my god, what have you done to him? He's hurt...oh shit...” He lunged for the door and Gibbs grabbed his arm and pulled him away. There was a brief impasse – the general was so angry that Gibbs had no doubt at all that he could take them all on and win.

“Yes, we have him in there, but he's fine,” Gibbs said, in a low, reassuring tone. He remembered what *\*this\** felt like – having a sub you loved beyond all reason. He remembered when they'd come to tell him about Shannon being murdered...and he sure as hell remembered tracking down the bastard who'd killed her and their daughter and putting several bullets into him – far more than were necessary to actually kill him. “We have good reason to believe that Rodney might be responsible for the recent murders and we want to question him again.”

“You what?” John looked outraged. “You think Rodney murdered someone? My god, are you insane?”

“How did you know we had him here?” Gibbs asked, curious. He hadn't been aware that anyone had seen them go down to the lab and Rodney certainly hadn't had the time or

opportunity to radio anyone.

“We’re lifebonded,” John told him, through gritted teeth. “I FELT what you did to him. You’ve hurt him...he’s hurt, and he’s really upset, and someone has \*touched\* him. You can just be grateful that you’re protected by your badge of office, Gibbs because if you weren’t you’d be dead by now.”

Gibbs sighed. God he hated lifebonded couples. For one thing, the law said you had to treat them as one entity, so he couldn’t question Rodney without John being present and that wasn’t what he wanted at all. He gazed at John searchingly. The general’s hazel eyes were intense and he looked as if he was about to explode. Gibbs could empathise with John; Tony had once been framed for murder and taken away for questioning and that had tested Gibbs’s patience and self-control to their limits. However, regardless of how much he empathised with John Sheppard right now, Gibbs knew he had a job to do.

“You’re lifebonded?” He raised an eyebrow. “Okay – if you can prove it, then you can sit in the interrogation room when we question him.”

John gave him a look of total disgust. “Of course I can damn well prove it,” he growled. “Now, are you going to let me in there, or do I have to shoot one of your people?”

“I wouldn’t do that, General,” Gibbs warned, in an icy tone. He didn’t take kindly to threats to his submissives, no matter what the circumstances. “You harm an NCIS officer doing their job and you’ll end up on the receiving end of a bullwhip – and one I’ll be quite happy to wield myself.”

“Just let me in there,” John said, in a tight voice. “Because if I don’t see him soon I can’t swear to what I’ll do.”

Gibbs nodded, clearly seeing a man on the edge. He opened the door and John ran in. He rushed over to Rodney and knelt down beside him, reaching out shaking hands to touch him.

“Oh shit...Rodney...” His fingers found the wound on Rodney’s forehead and probed it gently.

“It’s okay. I’m okay. It wasn’t their fault,” Rodney was saying, in fast, urgent tones.

Gibbs felt uneasy – Rodney seemed more worried about what his top was going to do than about being under suspicion of murder. “It was my fault – I was so surprised I kind of fell over,” Rodney said.

John’s hands went down Rodney’s arms, his expression darkening. Gibbs braced himself.

“You cuffed him?” he hissed. “Who did this? Who put cuffs on my sub?”

“I did,” Tony said, sounding completely unafraid, and John got up, a low, growling sound

emanating from the back of his throat.

"Nobody - \*nobody\* - but me ever puts cuffs on my sub," John said, in a strangled tone, walking towards Tony, his body stiff with rage. Gibbs stepped between John and Tony, seriously concerned about the situation now.

"Easy, General. Rodney's okay. We were just about to remove the cuffs when you showed up," he said, in calming tones. "We'll do that now."

Tony got up, and Gibbs clicked his fingers and gestured him back down. Tony went, immediately, for which Gibbs was grateful because he had no doubt at all that anyone who touched Rodney right now, even just to undo his cuffs, would die a very quick death. He clicked his fingers again and Tony handed him the key to the cuffs; Gibbs handed it over to John.

John undid Rodney's cuffs and threw them to the ground, then took Rodney in his arms and held him. Rodney's arms went around John's back, and Gibbs knew he'd done the right thing – the only person who stood any chance of calming General Sheppard right now was his husband, and Rodney sure as hell seemed to know how to do it. He was stroking his top's back and murmuring something in his ear, and the general's body was pressed so close against his husband's that it was almost as if he wanted to merge with him there and then.

Finally, John's body stopped shaking and he released his husband and turned back to Gibbs.

"You wanted proof?" he spat. "Here's your proof." He touched his fingers to Rodney's cut head, and then moved his face towards the cut and sniffed at it. Then he licked it.

Tony glanced at Gibbs, an alarmed look on his face, but Gibbs just watched, fascinated by their dynamic. Despite their situation he almost envied the general and his husband the bond between them.

As he watched, something seemed to happen between them. John made a low humming sound in the back of his throat, and his fingers smoothed the cut on Rodney's face...and then, before their eyes, the wound faded. It didn't completely disappear, but it scabbed over, and the redness died down to a healing pink. When John turned back, he bore a similar scabbed scar on his own forehead.

"Wow," Tony muttered, clearly impressed.

"You never seen lifebonding in action before, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, not taking his eyes off the volatile General Sheppard, unsure what he might do next.

"They're lifebonded?" The envy in Tony's voice was so palpable that Gibbs felt a jolt of surprise. "Okay, that makes sense. And no...I haven't. Never even met a lifebonded couple before," Tony said. "Seen the movies though – always thought it was crazy. I mean – if the general dies, Rodney goes with him, right? And vice versa."

“That’s right,” Gibbs said. “I’m surprised that as a military man you’d risk it, General. You’re not exactly in a safe line of work.”

“His sub insisted,” Rodney said, in a shaky voice. “We were half-way there anyway and it was pissing me off that he wouldn’t take it to the next level.”

Gibbs nodded. He had once felt the stirrings of something similar with Shannon but had pushed it away – they had a child, and he wasn’t going to risk Kelly losing both her parents just because they had selfishly wanted to lifebond. Shannon had never mentioned it to him so he guessed she’d felt the same. Lifebonding was hard in any case, and few people ever achieved it. He had never felt it was something he had the mindset for.

“Okay – well, this changes things a little,” Gibbs said. “Obviously, legally you’re entitled to sit in on Rodney’s questioning, General.”

“I can’t believe you’re doing this,” Sheppard growled. “Nobody could believe Rodney capable of murder.”

“Not even if his beloved husband – his beloved, \*lifebonded\* husband, was cheating on him?” Tony asked.

Rodney made a little sound in the back of his throat, and Sheppard turned, fists clenching.

“What the hell are you talking about?” he demanded.

“Sit down – all of you,” Gibbs ordered, gesturing to the chairs. John took his seat, but he grabbed Rodney’s hand and squeezed, hard.

“Rodney knows that isn’t true,” he hissed. “I’ve never cheated on him – never could.”

Tony rolled his eyes. “That’s what all the tops say,” he muttered. “My dad used to take his strap to me all the time for sleeping around but at least I was young, free and single.”

“And underage,” Gibbs pointed out. Tony shrugged, and Gibbs felt a pang of pity for his agent. It was no wonder Tony had such a jaundiced view of tops, considering his childhood experiences. Somehow he doubted that Tony’s childhood punishments had been delivered in a loving environment, and he knew there had been no affection or respect there – and both were prerequisites for effective discipline to Gibbs’s mind.

“John hasn’t cheated on me,” Rodney said defiantly. “You don’t understand what we have – I’d KNOW if he cheated on me.”

“Yeah, that’s what all the subs say,” Tony replied. “Face it, Rodney. John’s a good looking top, with one hell of a lot of charisma, and those marines weren’t shy about asking for what they wanted. You found out and...”

“No,” Rodney said quietly. “Is this it? Is this what you think?” He shook his head, chuckling

slightly. "You have no idea how laughable it is. John and I...it's not like that. It \*couldn't\* be like that. I don't know what kind of relationships you've had, Agent DiNozzo, or what kind of slimeball tops you've been with, but it's not like you say. Just because you've never been with a good top doesn't mean the rest of us haven't."

Gibbs didn't miss the wince that crossed DiNozzo's face – Rodney was winning this round on points even if neither of the two subs in the room had landed a knockout blow.

He had to admit that the more he questioned Rodney Sheppard the more his gut feeling told him that he had nothing to do with the murders. There was one thing that he was guilty of though, and Gibbs needed to get to the bottom of that.

"Rodney...why did you lie about that stargate glitch that prevented us from using the stargate to travel here?" he asked directly. Rodney's blue eyes widened, and he glanced, guiltily, at his husband and then back to Gibbs.

"Rodney?" Sheppard turned, a puzzled frown on his face. "You said the gate was having problems with intergalactic transfers," he murmured. "You said local travel was fine but that you couldn't guarantee the safety of incoming traffic from Earth and you weren't sure how long it would take to fix it."

Rodney bit on his lip.

"That wasn't true, was it, Rodney?" Gibbs prompted gently. "Why didn't you want us here?"

"Because we don't need you!" Rodney burst out. "John can solve this! He doesn't need you coming in here, undermining him, giving HIM orders. Elizabeth would never have allowed it!"

"So you lied, Rodney?" Sheppard asked, and Gibbs noticed him squeeze Rodney's hand with his own. He looked upset, but not surprised. "I thought you got it working again pretty quickly - but now I see that was \*after\* the NCIS agents had set off on the Daedalus."

"Yes, John. I lied," Rodney said quietly. "I thought I could buy you more time – that by the time they got here you'd have figured out who the killer was."

"And in the meantime, another person died," Sheppard said softly. "Jenny Keller died, Rodney. If NCIS had got here earlier she might still be alive."

Rodney's eyes widened in horror at that. "I didn't mean...I just thought..." he began.

"He was trying to protect you, General," Gibbs said flatly. "Question is why?"

Sheppard shifted uncomfortably in his seat.

"I'm sorry, John. I honestly am," Rodney said desperately. "It didn't seem like such a big deal at the time. I just..."

"It's bad, Rodney. For both of us," Sheppard said quietly.

"It sure is," Gibbs commented. "Look – when we brought Rodney in I thought he might have killed those people but I don't think that now."

Tony's head snapped up at that.

"But this is big; he's lied to the commander of this expedition – Mr Woolsey - and he's interfered with an NCIS investigation, and that'll have to go in my report."

"I understand," Sheppard said, nodding. Rodney paled.

"Please..." he began, but Sheppard reached out and put an arm around his shoulder.

"It's okay, Rodney. I'll handle this," he said firmly. "Agent Gibbs, if you're done could you let Rodney go? He'll go straight to our quarters and I promise he won't leave in case you want to speak to him again."

Gibbs nodded, ignoring Tony's grunt of protest.

"That's fine. DiNozzo – get Ziva to escort Rodney back to his quarters. You go and stand outside this door. I want to talk to the general alone."

Tony got up, and Rodney did the same. Rodney wrapped his arms around his top and kissed his dark hair.

"I'm sorry, John. I really am," he whispered. Sheppard sighed, and then kissed his sub firmly on the mouth.

"I know," he replied. "Now go. We'll deal with this later."

Gibbs watched Rodney go, noticing how he eyed Tony warily as they walked towards the door – there was no love lost between those two but he wasn't sure why Tony was so antagonistic towards the scientist.

The door closed behind them and Gibbs leaned back in his chair, one hand still on the table. He drummed his fingers on it for a long while, gazing at General Sheppard the entire time. Sheppard gazed back at him, and Gibbs could see by the look in his eyes that he knew how this would go.

"You've done this before, haven't you?" he said. "Taken the rap for him?"

"He's my sub," Sheppard replied, as if there was no choice in the matter. Gibbs admired him – he'd met some tops who'd take a public punishment for their subs, but not many.

"Woolsey doesn't like you," he said, dispassionately.

"I know." Sheppard nodded.

"So it'll likely be bad," Gibbs continued. Sheppard shrugged.

"Nobody is going to discipline Rodney except me, and I refuse to do it with an audience, and as I'm guessing Woolsey is going to demand an audience then he'll have to make do with my ass and not Rodney's," he said. "It's my right – and I won't put Rodney through that again."

Gibbs wondered what he was referring to when he said 'again' but didn't press. He thought maybe he'd misjudged this man. The studied air of laziness, and the laid-back manner were deceiving. This man had a dark streak – no wonder Rodney had been so freaked out about them touching him earlier. This was a dominant who played at the top of his game – he loved and protected his sub with a rare passion, but it was a passion that could occasionally spill over into something terrifying. Gibbs understood that – but whereas he could see Sheppard's rage was red hot when roused, his own tended to be ice cold.

"You're as good as DiNozzo at hiding who you are," he murmured, wishing he could sometimes see more of a glimpse of the Tony behind the mask. The Tony who was serious, committed and take charge, and not the Tony who played the fool to throw them all off the scent. Just what was Tony hiding anyway?

"Rodney's the only one who can handle who I am," Sheppard replied.

"I can believe that." Gibbs nodded.

There was silence for a long time. Then Gibbs stopped drumming his fingers on the table and leaned forward.

"What the hell happened to him?" he asked softly. Sheppard's face tightened, and that dark look returned to his eyes. "Something happened to him," Gibbs prompted. "Something that's left you wounded – something you can't get over. That's why he tried to protect you, John. That's why he lied about the stargate glitch. He knows you're vulnerable right now – and you've let him feel that way. You deserve to take the punishment for his screw-up, John Sheppard, because you're the top here but you haven't been a proper top to him for awhile, have you? How long has it been?"

Sheppard glared at him.

"A few months I'm guessing. How long since you last took him down? How long since you made the hard decisions – for his sake?"

Sheppard shook his head, mutely.

"You should talk to someone about it, John," Gibbs said, "And I think I'm the closest thing you've got to someone who understands you right now."

He got up, allowing those words to sink in. He walked around the room, musing out loud.

“Having a sub is a huge responsibility and sometimes you have to do things you don’t want to,” he said. “See DiNozzo – he’s a whole heap of trouble, as you accurately identified yourself earlier. I don’t always want to take him down, and sometimes I’m tired or busy or not in the mood – but it always backfires if I don’t. And you...you’d rather indulge your sub than punish him and that’s not like you – it’s not the top you are in your heart. You wouldn’t normally shirk your responsibilities but you have recently and you know you have.”

He leaned against the wall and watched John Sheppard run long fingers through his untidy dark hair. There was another silence and then Sheppard started talking, and his voice was hoarse, low and defeated.

“I lost him,” he whispered. “We were in this other place...and he fell through a gap, into another universe. He was shot...and I wasn’t there. I wasn’t there.” He looked up, and his eyes were dark with the memory.

Gibbs had a flash of empathy, remembering his commanding officer coming to him, his expression stricken, and giving him Shannon’s blood-stained collar. He hadn’t been there to protect her and she was dead, and so was Kelly, and it had been his responsibility to take care of them. He’d failed them, damn it. He’d failed them and he had to live with that for the rest of his life.

“He was lying there, in a strange world, with nobody who cared about him and I couldn’t do one damn thing to help him,” John murmured. “I couldn’t even go after him because he was dying, and it was draining the lifebond down to nothing and I couldn’t walk, couldn’t \*do\* anything except lie there and try to keep him alive through the lifebond. I could feel his pain, could feel his life ebbing away and I couldn’t even hold him in my arms. He was so far away. I had to send someone else in my place – someone good, someone I trusted, but not me. I failed him,” he whispered. Gibbs nodded.

“Yes. I understand,” he said, because he did. He understood exactly.

“He could have died – and I would have died too, but we’d have been apart, unable to touch each other one last time. And now...it’s like I’m blocked,” John said. “I can’t tell him that but he feels it. He knows I’m anxious but he doesn’t know why, and I don’t want to lay that on him; he’ll just feel guilty about it. You’re right – I can’t take him down, even when he needs it. Sometimes, when I know he needs it, I try to do it - but all I see is him, lying on the floor with that great big wound in his chest, lying there in a pool of his own blood, all alone, and I can feel him slipping away from me – and I can’t do it. I just can’t do it, any more than I could protect him from being shot.”

“All he knows is that you’re vulnerable right now and he has to protect you,” Gibbs said softly. “So he lied about the stargate glitch, to keep his top from being challenged when he was at his weakest.”

“Yeah.” John nodded, and looked up to meet Gibbs’s gaze, his hazel eyes dark. “Yeah, that’s



about it. I totally screwed this one up.”

“Yes you did,” Gibbs agreed, briskly, because he didn’t like wallowing in self-pity himself and he wasn’t about to let anyone else do it either – not that John Sheppard looked like the self-pitying type. “But you know what you have to do now.”

“Yes I do. It’ll kill Rodney though – it almost did last time, after Doranda, and this is even worse. He won’t want me to take a punishment for him – he’d rather take it himself but he knows I can’t – I \*won’t\* - let that happen.”

“I’ll speak to Woolsey,” Gibbs said. “I don’t see there’s anything to be gained from you taking a public punishment for this. Whatever needs to happen should take place between you and Rodney – nobody else.”

“Yeah, well, good luck with that.” John gave a wry grin. “Woolsey hates me and has been looking for a way to assert some authority over me since he arrived. He’ll leap at this and won’t let it go.”

“We’ll see,” Gibbs said, having an idea. “You – wait here. I’m going to brief my team and then I’m going to escort you to Woolsey’s office.”

“Okay. I’ll uh...consider myself out-topped,” John muttered, rubbing his chin ruefully. “But then I guess you’re used to that, aren’t you, Agent Gibbs?”

Gibbs shook his head. “You lost your way there for awhile and I can’t say I blame you,” he said, remembering the aftermath of Shannon’s death and the ice cold feeling inside that had made him feel numb and which had never quite faded away. He also remembered how, in that cold, grey year after her death he’d found friendship with a medical examiner. Ducky had brought him lunch when he forgot to eat and had been his friend when everyone else gave him a wide berth, terrified of the dark look in his eyes and the almost tangible streak of self-destruction in his soul. He had lost his way back then, done some things he wasn’t proud of, and been out of control a lot of the time. It had helped to have a friend in his time of need - and Ducky had been a true friend when nobody else was interested. He hoped he could be a friend now, to this man in front of him. Even the best tops got it wrong occasionally and he had a gut instinct that John Sheppard was one of the best tops there was.

Gibbs retrieved his subs and returned to their quarters to find Abby and Ducky waiting for them.

“Well, you were right, Abs,” he told her.

She got up and flung her arms around his neck. “Oh Gibbs! I’m so happy! I knew Rodney didn’t do it!” she squealed.

“Well he didn’t murder anyone but he’s sure as hell in a whole heap of other trouble,” Tony said, and Gibbs got the impression his sub was pleased about that. He wished he had more

time to get to the bottom of Tony's issues with Rodney but right now he had more pressing matters to deal with.

"Ducky – I need your help," he said. Tony had already filled the team in on what was going on, and he re-capped the salient points for Ducky.

"I don't see what the problem is," he overheard McGee muttering to Tony. "So Rodney screwed up – someone has to take the rap for it. Why is Gibbs getting involved? Does it matter if the general has to take a public punishment? What's it got to do with us?"

"Well I don't know, probie – what does it have to do with us?" Tony asked, a withering look on his face. "How do you suppose you'd feel if it was - I don't know - say a probie covering up for his sister during a murder investigation, and HIS top went to the wall for him? Supposing that top told the director, that there was no way – NO WAY - that he was going to allow his wussy little sub to go through a hard public punishment for his – let's be honest – massive screw-up. And this meeting between the probie's top and the director went on, and on, and on - because you see this top was so damn stubborn, and so damn committed to his sub that he wouldn't give up. So the director either had to allow this probie's top to take the public punishment in place of the poor little probie, something he was very prepared to do, or she had to let the top take care of the probie's punishment himself – privately, with discretion, and a huge dollop of comfort after I expect. I wonder how you'd feel then, hmm? Would that make you feel just a little bit more empathy for the situation?"

McGee's face paled, visibly, and Gibbs winced – clearly McGee had never worked that one out fully before now, and Tony hadn't exactly sugared it any. Tony was right though – that was exactly what had happened, and that was another reason why he was going to pull out all the stops to get the same result for General Sheppard. Gibbs recognised a kindred top when he saw one, and Sheppard's determination to take a public and humiliating punishment for his sub reminded him of himself.

"You with me on this one, Ducky?" he asked, and Ducky nodded, eyes blinking behind the spectacles. "You've made friends with Woolsey and he trusts you."

"I'll do what I can, Jethro but I think you over-estimate our little chat the other night. We got on very well but whether Mr Woolsey listens to me or not is another matter," Ducky sighed.

"Just give it a try," Gibbs said. "This is a complex situation and I don't see any good comes from dealing with it straight by the book."

"Unfortunately, straight by the book is Woolsey's style," Ducky replied.

"A matter like this should be taken care of between a dominant and his sub," Gibbs said firmly, with a brief glance in McGee's direction. McGee looked as if he was about to faint at the very memory of the punishment he'd taken that day, and what Gibbs had been prepared to do to keep him out of the public disciplinary room.

“Okay – the rest of you – go over the evidence again. We clearly haven’t caught our killer which means that he – or she – is still out there,” Gibbs told his collared agents. “Get on it and see if you can come up with anything else while Ducky and I take care of this.”

~\*~

Ducky walked alongside Gibbs and General Sheppard with a feeling of trepidation in his stomach. He'd do his best, of course, but he hoped Gibbs's faith in him in this instance wasn't misplaced. One late night drink was hardly the stuff of which a solid friendship could be claimed...although, he suspected that that one friendly chat made him the closest thing to a friend that Richard Woolsey had on Atlantis.

John Sheppard had the grim but weary look on his face of a man going to the executioner. Gibbs, meanwhile, one hand on Ducky's shoulder, had that same look of utter determination on his face that he had whenever he was defending one of his own submissives. Ducky found that interesting, and could only assume that Gibbs was identifying more strongly with Sheppard's predicament than he probably should – perhaps as a result of Tim McGee's recent spot of bother over his sister.

Ducky was well aware of Gibbs's feelings on the subject of public punishments – unless they were judicial, and part of the due legal process, Gibbs disliked them intensely. Ducky knew that Gibbs would never allow a sub of his to go through a public punishment, and, as their top, he did of course have the right to submit himself for the punishment on their behalf, as John Sheppard was intending to do here.

Ducky admired both men their stance on the matter. The better option was for the top in question to administer punishment himself, privately, as Gibbs had done with McGee, but that was, technically speaking, wangling one's way around the subject somewhat, and frowned upon by most authorities. It also relied on an element of trust – one had to trust that the sub had been suitably punished without it being witnessed, and most authorities didn't have that kind of trust and didn't want to condone anyone breaking the rules and getting off scot-free either.

It was, all in all, a tricky matter. Woolsey was quite within his rights to order Rodney to be punished and John was within \*his\* rights, as Rodney's top, to take that punishment in his sub's stead. What John didn't have was any kind of right, whatsoever, to demand that he be allowed to take care of the matter privately - and Ducky wasn't sure on what grounds Woolsey could be prevailed upon to agree to it.

Of course, Gibbs, with five collared subs to his name, took a great risk with his stance – which was one of the reasons he demanded so much of them, Ducky suspected. If Gibbs's five submissives had been unruly and constantly getting themselves into hot water, Gibbs would be presenting himself to the punishment room on a regular basis to take their discipline for them, and Ducky shuddered at the thought of that. The idea of a man like Gibbs having to take swats over a judicial punishment bench was too much to bear – it was wrong on every single level.

Ducky always conducted himself with the utmost decorum to ensure he brought no such shame on his top, and he knew that Gibbs's other submissives tried to do the same – even the predictably naughty Tony tried to keep his behaviour in check for that reason. In fact, Ducky sometimes wondered if Gibbs didn't spank Tony so regularly just to ensure he stayed grounded and didn't go off and do something stupid just to get Gibbs's attention; Tony was an undeniably brilliant agent but he hadn't stayed anywhere for very long before Gibbs had recruited him for NCIS. His service record was littered with black marks and public disciplinary punishments. Perhaps that sixth sense Gibbs had for lost and wayward subs had made him step in and rescue Tony before he killed himself in pursuit of whatever it was he was hellbent on finding.

Ducky had a similar dislike for the idea of the tall, dark-haired man beside him being publicly punished as well – anyone could see that General Sheppard was a good top who loved his submissive dearly and did his job to the utmost of his capability. If he also had a certain kind of dangerous, wayward charm, that just added to his charisma – although Ducky was willing to bet it had got him into hot water with the authorities in the past. But John Sheppard was his own man and would take the rap for his own mistakes – and those of his sub. Nobody could ever accuse him of being a coward.

It was late but Woolsey was still working in his office – Ducky suspected there was little else to drag the man away from his job. They stepped inside and Gibbs shut the door quietly behind them. Woolsey looked up from his desk, a surprised expression upon his face.

"Trouble, gentlemen?" he asked, his gaze flickering towards Sheppard, and then over to Gibbs's taut-shouldered stance and finally coming to rest on Ducky, to whom he directed the question.

"Well, that depends on how you look at it," Ducky began, intending to start the matter with some finessing. Gibbs had no patience for such an approach though and ploughed straight in with his usual terse directness.

"Yes – trouble," he answered. "Before you ask, we have not found our killer. However, this is by way of a heads up about something I have no choice but to put in my report. Dr Rodney Sheppard lied to you about the status of that stargate glitch that temporarily prevented transport between galaxies. Rodney wanted NCIS to make the trip here on the Daedalus – a journey of around eighteen days, rather than step through the stargate – a journey of a few minutes – in order to give General Sheppard more time to investigate, and hopefully solve, the crimes himself. He acted out of the best – if misguided - motives but it still amounts to interfering with a federal investigation. He is not, and I repeat, not, implicated in the murders in any way. He was just trying to protect his top."

Woolsey looked flabbergasted. He gazed at Gibbs, and then looked at Sheppard.

"Is this true, General?" he asked quietly.

"Yes, sir," Sheppard replied. "I only just found out but it's true. I'm sorry – I had no idea Rodney lied about the stargate."

"This is very serious," Woolsey said. "I can't have the IOA thinking we make our own rules out here, just because we're so far away. One of the reasons they sent me here was because there was a good deal of concern about the way things were being run on Atlantis. Lady Elizabeth was an excellent commander but sometimes her reports caused considerable alarm at the IOA. We are still subject to the same rules and regulations as back home, General, and I think \*some\* of the base personnel have a tendency to forget that at times."

Ducky winced – Woolsey had clearly wanted to address this issue for some time, and now Rodney had handed him General Sheppard's scalp on a plate. Poor Sheppard. Ducky had read some of his mission reports and the man was clearly brave and liked to think on his feet – and he clearly also knew, instinctively, that there were some situations where the rules were no good, and you had to throw them out and go with your gut instead. Ducky suspected that was another reason why Gibbs was so keen to defend Sheppard – that was Gibbs's way of doing things too.

Woolsey though – Woolsey loved rules, and hung onto them like a dying man clinging to a life raft. Ducky could understand that, all too well. He could also see how a man like Sheppard, who had the confidence to make up the rules as he went along, would clash with a man like Woolsey. They were like chalk and cheese, and the fact that Woolsey was an insecure submissive who'd just come out of a long, and, from what Ducky could tell, fairly abusive relationship, and that Sheppard was a charismatic, endlessly self-confident top, didn't help matters.

"I understand all that, Mr Woolsey," Sheppard said. "And I don't intend for Atlantis to be immune from Earth's laws, either. However...back on Earth they don't have to get out of near death situations every other day – there are no Wraith feeding on them, and they aren't strangers in a faraway galaxy. That imposes some different obligations on us, sir."

"Yes, but this is a \*murder\* investigation, General. We simply can't be seen to be interfering with it. NCIS could make things very difficult for the IOA if they choose."

"We don't choose," Gibbs interrupted. "I can't cover this up, but I'm not making a big deal out of it, either. It was a mistake, and I'm sure John can deal with it without any interference from anyone else."

"Oh no." Woolsey shook his head, realisation glimmering in his eyes. "Oh dear no. That won't do at all. This is a legal matter, Agent Gibbs, and must be dealt with as such. I am happy to hear any mitigation, but if the matter is as it has been presented to me here, then I must order Rodney to the punishment room to accept discipline. I think, from what you've said, that thirty swats with the paddle is the likely sentence."

Ducky winced. Thirty swats with the judicial paddle was a considerable sentence, but it was in line with the nature of the offence and not unduly harsh. It would test the limits of even the most penitent wrongdoer though and leave them in pain for days – if not weeks.

Ducky saw John's mouth set in a hard line and his body shake slightly at the thought of

anyone going anywhere near his submissive with a judicial paddle.

"No," he said, in a hoarse, strangled kind of tone. Woolsey looked shocked.

"General, this isn't a matter for negotiation. The rules clearly state that in a matter of this kind..."

"I said, no," John interrupted angrily. Gibbs put a hand on the general's shoulder to calm him down, and Ducky grimaced, wondering if John would be able to keep himself under control. "Nobody touches Rodney but me, and I won't punish him publicly. I know why he did this and it's as much my fault as his. I'll take his swats for him."

"Well, that is your right," Woolsey said, and Ducky couldn't help but think he looked quite pleased at the thought of Sheppard being taken down a peg or two in public.

"See, the thing is," Gibbs interceded, "I don't think it's ever a good idea for a popular commanding officer, who is good at his job, to be disciplined in public for something his sub has done. It's bad for morale – and morale is already very low on Atlantis following the loss of Lady Elizabeth Weir and everyone having to adjust to a new commanding officer, and now, on top of all that, these murders. I think it would be a bad move for the base to see General Sheppard stretched out on the punishment bench – it'd cause a lot of resentment."

Woolsey looked surprised. "I would have thought, Agent Gibbs, that as a law enforcement officer you would want me to do just that – enforce the law," he snapped.

"The law can be a pretty blunt instrument," Gibbs shrugged. "I'm just saying – let John take care of this, on his own, with Rodney. I think you'll have his assurance that he'll deal with it properly and won't shirk his responsibilities – yes, General?"

John's face looked weary and defeated, but he nodded. "I'll do what it takes," he muttered.

"So we have to just rely on his word for it?" Woolsey asked. "When we know that he dotes on his husband and Rodney Sheppard gets away with anything he wants?"

"That's not true!" John protested.

"That's what I've seen since I've been here," Woolsey retorted. John opened his mouth to say something but then visibly slumped. Ducky felt a great sense of pity for the man.

"I've made some mistakes," John admitted. "And, you know, if I have to take thirty swats for that then I will. It's my screw-up. I didn't do something I should have done, a few months ago, and that's come back to bite me."

"Well I'm glad you admit it because personally I think your conduct and that of your sub since I arrived here has been disrespectful and arrogant," Woolsey snapped.

"You haven't given us a damn chance!" Sheppard snapped back. "We lost Elizabeth and it

seemed like the IOA was glad about that because you'd been looking for an excuse to replace her for the past couple of years. And then you just swept in here, when we were \*grieving\*, and started handing out your orders, making it pretty damn clear with each one that you disapproved of her and everything she did here. And the IOA doesn't understand because they're not \*here\* and they don't live under constant threat of Wraith attack or the million and one other things that happen out here that make it impossible to live by the stupid damn rules you're so keen on."

"That's enough!" Gibbs thundered, looking pretty angry himself, and Ducky decided that he needed to step in before everyone got entrenched in their various positions and nobody was prepared to back down.

"You know...I don't think anything needs to be decided right now," Ducky murmured. "Mr Woolsey – would you be so kind as to share with me some of that excellent whisky you gave me the other evening? I think we could all do with a break from the current situation and a decision can be taken later."

Woolsey looked surprised, but he clearly didn't object to having some time out either, and he nodded to Ducky.

"Of course, Dr Mallard. If you'd care to accompany me to my quarters." He got up, and, without looking at Sheppard, he walked over to the door.

"You two – stay here," Ducky hissed. "And Jethro – do try and calm the general down before he does something we really won't be able to fix."

Gibbs nodded. "Will do, Ducky." He turned back to General Sheppard, who looked as if he was about to implode. At least Ducky was leaving him in safe hands – if anyone could calm down an irate top it was Gibbs.

Ducky followed on behind Woolsey back to the other man's quarters; he wasn't entirely sure what he was going to do but he hoped inspiration would strike.

They got inside, and Woolsey turned to him.

"Thank you, Dr Mallard. That was a heated situation and it was the right thing to break it up at that point. I should have thought of it myself. General Sheppard can be a very intimidating man and..."

"Do you think so? I've always found him quite charming," Ducky said, with a gentle smile. "Now, Richard, why don't you sit down and I'll fetch the drinks." He put a firm hand on Woolsey's shoulder and stroked a couple of times. Woolsey took a deep breath and Ducky felt the tension in his shoulders start to release a little. He went and poured them both a drink and then returned to where Woolsey was still standing, ramrod straight, looking as if he was waiting for someone to tell him what to do.

"I said sit," Ducky said, gentle but commanding all the same. Woolsey sat down

immediately. Ducky felt a wave of pity for the man - all he wanted was a good, firm sense of direction, but without it he was just hanging in the wind.

He handed Woolsey the drink, and then sat down opposite him.

"You know...I totally understand your stance on this, Richard," he said. "I know how comforting the rules can be. Without them - well, it's chaos isn't it? Who knows \*where\* to draw the line?"

"That's exactly it!" Woolsey told him, taking a sip of his drink. Ducky wondered if he'd even noticed he was using his first name.

"I want to tell you a story," Ducky said, sitting back in his chair. "It isn't a story I've ever told to anyone before, Richard, so I want you to treat it with the utmost confidence – can you do that?"

Woolsey blinked, but Ducky noticed that he seemed flattered that he was sharing confidences with him.

"Of course, Dr Mallard."

"Call me Donald," Ducky told him, and Richard nodded, gratefully. "Very well. Once upon a time, quite a long time ago now, there was a young medical student. He fell in love – madly, blindly, deeply - with another medical student, a rich young man from a very good family. The feeling was mutual – both students adored each other and maybe that blinded them to the problems. You see, one of the students, the one from the rich family, was a top, and a controlling top at that. He was prone to jealous rages, and he needed to be in charge all the time. Which might not have been so much of a problem if he'd been with the right sub - but the man he'd chosen, the man he was very much in love with, was a switch."

"Ah." Woolsey sat back in his chair.

This was familiar territory and the stuff of some serious literature over the years. Switches, people who identified as both dominant and submissive, weren't very common, and could be resented by subs and tops alike for not fulfilling the role the other wanted of them.

"You know, I've always thought it isn't an easy life, being a switch," Woolsey murmured. "Do you remember that book that caused all that fuss a few years' ago? 'The Third Wheel: How Society Discriminates Against the Minority Third Part of the Dynamic.' I must admit that until I read that book I'd never given a great deal of thought to how hard being a switch must often be in our society."

"Indeed," Ducky replied, with a little nod of his head, and a wry, sad smile.

"Sorry, Donald. Please continue," Richard said, with a wave of his hand. "Tell me more about your two medical students."



"Well, at first they were so much in love that it didn't matter that they were so mismatched, but, in time, the switch needed more space and less restrictions than the top was prepared to give him. Eventually, their love turned into something else – something very ugly. The switch lost confidence, as the top insisted that he adhere to a rigid set of rules that were at odds with his very nature. And the top's demands became more and more extreme as he grew into his family's wealth and position – and he wanted a trophy sub to go with it, not a rather vague switch who didn't fit his family's expectations for him."

"It sounds as if this story isn't heading for a happy ending," Woolsey murmured.

"I'm afraid it isn't," Ducky agreed. "This state of affairs went on for a long time – for far too long in fact – many, many years. The top became more abusive, but nobody liked to interfere because of his great wealth and position, and the switch became more and more unhappy. He'd lost his way. He wasn't being himself, and he didn't know how to get out of the situation."

"What happened?" Woolsey leaned forward.

"Well, the switch was lucky. He made friends with a man several years younger than himself, who was just as lost as he was. He was a top who was mourning the loss of his family, who had been the victims of murder. He was grieving, and he couldn't get over what had happened. He felt he'd let his family down by not being able to protect them when they had needed it and he was nursing a self-destructive streak a mile wide as a result. He'd given up his job in the military and taken a new job, where the switch worked, and that's how the switch came to know him.

The switch felt sorry for this unhappy young man, and took him under his wing a little. It helped him to have someone to look after I think. It helped him to express his caring instincts. Maybe it even helped him remember his original inclinations towards being a switch, which he'd had to bury for so long in order to sub for a man who had become his tormentor.

For a very long time this younger man was too full of his own grief to see his friend's plight, but one day he DID see it, and then he became very angry at how badly his friend's top treated him. He saw how it made his friend nervous and anxious, prone to stuttering and always wary and afraid. When he was alone with his friend he saw someone very different, someone much calmer and full of curiosity, with a lively interest in the world around him, and it made him furious to see what his friend's top had done to him."

"What did this young top do?" Woolsey asked.

"Well, I'm rather afraid he took matters into his own hands," Ducky said with a little smile. "That's his nature you see. He *could* have played by the rules, maybe he could have reported what he'd seen to the police, although I doubt that would have worked. Or maybe he could have prevailed upon his friend to eventually leave his abusive top – although his friend was so confused and browbeaten by this point that it's unlikely he would have succeeded. In any case, our headstrong young top was too impassioned to do either of

those things; he saw something was wrong and he tried to right it. They were at a party, and he saw his friend's top scolding him about something, belittling him in public, and he stepped in, and challenged the abusive top to a fight."

In fact, it had been a good deal less civilised than that, Ducky thought. Gibbs had gone roaring in, all guns blazing, and punched Randolph Jordan on the jaw, felling him to the ground. Then he'd grabbed Ducky's arm.

"Do you want to stay with him, Ducky? If so, say so now, otherwise I'm taking his collar off you."

"Jethro...I..." Ducky gazed down at the tall, imposing man at his feet, a man he'd lived with for twenty-five years but long ago stopped loving. Randolph Jordan was thickset, with slick black hair, going silver at the temples, and dark, brooding brown eyes. He was lying on the floor, wiping blood off his jaw, a dazed look in those eyes as he stared up at Gibbs, wondering who the hell had had the audacity to challenge him in public.

"Do you still love him?" Gibbs demanded. "I've seen what he does to you, Ducky. I've seen the bruises on you – don't deny them. I've seen how he turns you into a stuttering idiot whenever he's around and you're not like that when you're with me. Let me set you free."

His hands undid the collar around Ducky's neck then paused, before removing it completely, looking for Ducky's permission. Ducky looked into Gibbs's blue eyes, and nodded.

"Do it. Please," he whispered. Gibbs needed no further urging. He pulled the collar off and threw it on Randolph Jordan, in front of everyone.

"He's free now. Don't bother him again," he snapped.

"I'll have you up on charges," Jordan growled, getting to his feet. "Removing a sub's collar without his permission..."

"He gave me permission – I have witnesses, and he'll stand up in court and say it himself," Gibbs replied.

"He doesn't know his own mind! He never has!" Jordan yelled. "He thought he was a switch when I met him but he's clearly a sub. He can't make a decision to save his life, let alone about something as important as removing his collar!"

"You mean you've beat any kind of opinions and instincts out of him," Gibbs growled. "The man you describe is the man you've made him – not the man I've seen when I've been alone with him. You don't even know him - I bet you never even take the time to talk to him."

"It's none of your business what takes place between a dominant and his submissive," Jordan said, moving towards Ducky. Gibbs put his body between them.

"He's not yours any more," he said.

"He'll always be mine!" Jordan hissed.

"Want to fight me for him?" Gibbs asked dangerously. Ducky flinched. When two tops fought over a sub in the movies it was usually a lot more romantic than this. This just felt raw and ugly. He didn't want anyone fighting for him or getting hurt for him, least of all Gibbs – but then again, he didn't think Randolph would accept the challenge. He was a big man but he was also a bully and a coward, his belly soft from too many big power lunches. Gibbs, by contrast, was lean and tough, his combat instincts recently honed from fighting in Iraq - Ducky had no doubt that Gibbs would win hands down in a fight.

"I wouldn't lower myself," Jordan said loftily, and Ducky noticed the tight grin that played briefly over Gibbs's lips at that. He knew a coward when he saw one. "You hit me!" Jordan fumed, running a disbelieving hand over his bruised, cut jaw. "I'll have you for that. I'll take you to court. I'll pursue you to the ends of the earth, Jethro Gibbs. You're a nobody - and I'll crush you."

"You were abusing him. There isn't a court in the land that'll uphold it. Look."

Ducky was taken by surprise as Gibbs grabbed his shirt and ripped it off his back, and then turned him so that he had his back to the room. A gasp of surprise rippled around as everyone saw his bruised and heavily welted shoulders, the flesh raw and still oozing blood in places.

"You don't whip a sub into oblivion like this for no reason – and damn it, this is Ducky we're talking about – what kind of reason could there be? No, hell, you don't whip a sub like this at all – it's abuse, plain and simple," Gibbs roared, and Ducky wondered how he'd known about the welts, and whether he could have been more careful about not wincing when Jethro was around. The man had eyes like a hawk.

"He's mine," Jordan said, standing up tall, towering over Gibbs, who was sturdy and strong but nowhere near as heavily built as Jordan. "Come with me, Donald." He turned those cold, possessive eyes on Ducky.

"I don't think so," Ducky whispered, finally finding the strength from his friend's actions to stand up to a man he had once loved so passionately and now found he hated with an equal passion. "Randolph, you don't love me. I'm just another possession to you – one you want to control and abuse at will. Our love died a very long time ago."

"You are mine," Randolph fumed, and Ducky could only imagine how humiliating it must be for him to lose his sub in this way, in front of all these people.

"No." Gibbs reached out and ripped a strip out of Ducky's ruined shirt. "He's mine," he said, tying the piece of shirt around Ducky's neck in a makeshift collar. "Agreed, Ducky?" he asked. Ducky nodded, because it felt more right having Gibbs's ragged collar around his neck than all the expensive trinkets Randolph had placed upon him. "Now you can't touch him – he's wearing another top's collar and he wants to be wearing it – that protects him by law,"

Gibbs said.

"You won't get away with this, Gibbs," Jordan yelled, as Gibbs took hold of Ducky's arm and led him away from the party. "He's mine! I'll take him back and you'll pay for this. I'll destroy you! I promise you that, Gibbs. I'll make you know how it feels to lose a sub you love."

"Already happened," Gibbs said tersely, and Ducky saw in his eyes the darkness of one who had already suffered the worst and had nothing else left to lose and therefore nothing at all to fear – not even Randolph Jordan with all his power and money. "Already happened," he repeated softly, as he ushered Ducky away.

They reached Gibbs's car and got in, and Gibbs rested his arms on the steering wheel and blew out a long breath, shaking his head ruefully.

"Shit. Look – you can wear my collar as long as you want, Ducky. I'll get you a proper one tomorrow. I know we're just friends and you know what I've lost and that I'm not looking to take another sub but the collar will protect you from him for as long as you want to wear it."

"Thank you, my dear boy," Ducky said, his voice croaking with emotion.

Gibbs turned in his seat, took hold of his face, and rested his forehead against his. Ducky wrapped his arms around Gibbs's shoulders and felt himself shaking with a whole gamut of emotions. He had been locked up in Randolph's abusive prison for so long that he had no idea what freedom tasted like until this young man had rescued him. He wouldn't let him down. Not now. Not ever.

"It's okay...I've got you now," Gibbs murmured, stroking Ducky softly, taking care of his bruised body. "Christ, Ducky. I couldn't stand by a moment longer and watch him hurt you like that. I can't stand abusive tops and he was the worst kind; thinking that all his money and power meant he could just beat up on you day and night...putting you down all the time. Damn it I want to go back in there and punch him again!"

Ducky made a little sound in the back of his throat at that, and Gibbs squeezed him tight to make it clear he wasn't going anywhere.

"Thank you, thank you, thank you..." Ducky whispered, over and over again, holding on tight to the man who had become his lifeline.

Ducky finished his story and blinked, a little surprised that after all these years he had chosen this man to tell it to. It felt like a release, as if something inside was falling away after a very long time.

"Thank you, Donald," Richard said quietly. "Now, forgive me if I'm being presumptive, but I assume that the top you're talking about, the one who went to the rescue, is Agent Gibbs?"

"That's correct, yes," Ducky said, with a little nod of his head. He took a gulp of his whisky.

"And the switch?" Richard asked, gazing at Ducky earnestly from behind his spectacles.

"The switch was myself," Ducky replied.

"Ah." Richard nodded thoughtfully. "And your purpose in telling me this story?" he asked. Ducky gave a wry smile.

"Well, for some reason I just felt you were the person I wanted to tell. I haven't told it to anyone else in all these years. Gibbs is the only other person who knows it and he won't tell anyone."

Ducky paused and swirled the remainder of his drink around in the glass.

"All the same," he continued. "There was, clearly, a method in my madness, Richard. You see...you remind me a little of myself, back then. You've told me something of what happened with your wife, and I know how I used to feel, when Randolph – my ex – was trying to control me. It can be very confusing emerging from a relationship like that – you don't miss the person but it's hard to be suddenly without the certainties they imposed upon you – and you try and look for those certainties elsewhere. I know I did." He gave a rueful smile.

"I even tried to get Gibbs to provide those certainties for me but he was always straight with me about the fact that I might wear his collar but I was my own man. Gradually, in time, I began to see that this was a kindness on his part – he was giving me room to grow again, to blossom and flourish, and he supported me while I did that, but he would not be another Randolph in my life. I appreciate that now but it was harder at the time. Adjusting is hard."

"Yes," Richard murmured. "It is."

"And it helps to have a friend along the way," Ducky said softly. "And you see, I'd like to be such a friend to you, Richard."

"I'd like that too," the other man said, a little shyly. "Although to be fair, Donald, my relationship with my wife wasn't as bad as the one you describe with this Randolph person. She didn't physically abuse me..."

"But she put you down all the time – publicly as well as privately, didn't she?" Ducky said. "She made you adhere to restrictive rules and punished you relentlessly when you couldn't stick to them. She made you doubt yourself and who you are. You wanted to offer her your devotion and affection but all she wanted was someone to bully," Ducky said softly.

Richard's eyes looked a little glassy behind the spectacles, and he didn't say anything, just dipped his head and gazed at his drink.

Ducky got up and went over to where Richard was sitting. He stood behind him, put his hands on Richard's shoulders, and caressed them gently.

"You're excellent at your job, my dear boy," he said firmly, stroking the entire time. "And you need to have some faith and courage in that. Don't do everything by the book – use your instinct occasionally – it'll be much more reliable."

"I'm not sure what my instincts are any more," Richard admitted, in a broken kind of voice.

"That's because she took them all away from you. If you like...I could help you get back in touch with them?" Ducky suggested gently.

Richard looked up, a hopeful light in his eyes, and Ducky couldn't resist. He leaned down and pressed a gentle kiss on the sub's lips. He hadn't felt this way about someone in a long time but this man's obvious vulnerability and his similarity to Ducky's own situation of many years ago touched him. Richard's lips were soft and open beneath his, and it was just a small kiss but he could feel Richard relax.

The kiss finished and Ducky drew back. "I don't want you to make a decision now, dear boy, but, if you're in agreement, I'd very much like to spend my free evenings with you from now on," he requested. Richard gazed at him, looking more than a little dazed.

"I'd like that too," he admitted at last. "In fact, that would be very nice."

"We could talk...or play," Ducky suggested, never taking his eyes off Richard's face. The other man looked a little panicked.

"It's been awhile for me," he confessed, "Uh, playing I mean. And to be honest, I'm not terribly good..."

Ducky put a finger over his mouth. "It's not a performance contest," he said firmly. "All I'll ask for is your honesty – and we'll take it slowly. I really would enjoy it very much I think and I'd like to think you would enjoy it too."

"I think I would," Richard replied, that shy look back on his face.

"Very well." Ducky nodded. "But for now – we have a situation to resolve. Do you feel as if any of what I've said has helped you in your decision?"

Richard gazed at him for a moment, and then sighed. "I do understand your point, Donald," he said. "I'm not sure if it's the right thing, but I understand it. And...maybe I was being a little vindictive. I hadn't fully appreciated the depth of feeling these people had for Lady Elizabeth and how much they were grieving. I suppose I took it all rather personally – after what happened with my wife and so on. I was feeling a little bruised before I arrived and didn't view the situation as objectively as I could have done."

"Hardly surprising," Ducky commented sympathetically. "Shall we return to your office and see if we can't come to an amicable resolution? It's your command – I have no wish to interfere. I'm sure you'll make the best decision for all concerned."

"Yes." Richard got up, and pulled his shoulders straight as he followed Ducky towards the door. "Yes. We'll do that. And Donald? Thank you."

Ducky turned, and pressed a gentle kiss on Richard's cheek. "You're welcome, my dear boy," he said softly. "Very welcome. I have a feeling that you and I are going to be good for each other."

They returned to Woolsey's office, and Ducky was impressed by the firm set of his friend's shoulders and the look of resolve on his face. They swept into the room to find John Sheppard sitting on a chair, his elbows on his knees, his face set in a grimly fatalistic mask. Gibbs was sitting opposite him, gazing at him. Neither man was talking. They both looked up as Ducky and Woolsey strode in.

"Very well – I've given the matter some thought," Woolsey said, and Ducky felt proud of the way he was conducting himself – he looked more confident than he had seen him since they had arrived. "Agent Gibbs – you're right. It would be bad for morale to discipline General Sheppard publicly. General Sheppard...John." He turned and addressed himself to the other man. "You and I didn't get off to the best start but I'm determined to change that. I know your mission reports inside out – they read better than a James Bond novel," and he flashed a grin in Ducky's direction as he said that. Ducky sent him a delighted grin back in return.

"You're a brave man and a simply outstanding commanding officer. Atlantis is lucky to have you – and I trust you to do the right thing, even if not always in strict accordance with the rules." He gave a wry smile at that. Sheppard looked stunned – he clearly hadn't been expecting this.

"However, Rodney did do something very wrong – and I trust you to deal with it, in the best way you know how. I'll leave the decision as to what that should be up to you, but I have every faith that you'll do what needs to be done. You and Rodney are both suspended for the next four days, and I'm confining you to your quarters during that time. Food will be brought to you. However, this won't go down as a black mark on your service record. Confining you to quarters is as much a punishment as it is a means to help you resolve whatever it is that needs resolving between yourself and your husband – because something clearly does."

Sheppard nodded, looking intensely relieved, then he got to his feet and gave Woolsey a smart salute.

"Thank you," he said, in a heartfelt tone. "And if you don't mind me saying it...that's exactly what Elizabeth would have done."

Woolsey gave a little chuckle. "Then I take it I'm in good company."

"The best," John replied. "I won't forget this, Mr Woolsey."

"Go." Woolsey nodded his head towards the door. Sheppard gave a nod towards Gibbs, and mouthed a 'thank you' at Ducky and then he left, at a run, clearly eager to return to his sub.

Gibbs and Ducky said their own goodbyes to Woolsey, and then Gibbs put his arm around Ducky's shoulder and led him out into the hallway.

"You know, I don't think I tell you often enough how much I love you," Gibbs murmured to Ducky as they walked. Ducky laughed out loud. "Seriously, Duck," Gibbs said, stopping and drawing Ducky towards him so he could look him in the eye. "How the hell did you accomplish that? Woolsey was like a different man when you brought him back."

"Ah well. I told him a story I've never told anyone before," Ducky said softly. "About a young, grieving widower, and the somewhat eccentric medical examiner who befriended him. About how the rules can't cover every situation, and how hard it can be to be who you truly are and not what someone else wants you to be. And I told him about a wealthy, powerful, abusive top, and his terrified submissive; and about how there was a knight in shining armour, and a fight, and a rescue."

Gibbs stared at him, his eyes a particularly luminous shade of blue. "Don't..." he began, in a hoarse voice. Ducky took hold of his face, drew him down, and kissed him gently on the lips.

"And I can never say thank you often enough, so thank you," he whispered.

Gibbs didn't say a thing. He just wrapped his arm around Ducky again, pulling him in close, and they walked back together to their quarters together, side by side, old friends lost in old memories.

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John Sheppard half ran, half walked back to the quarters he shared with his husband. He was anxious to get back to Rodney because he knew what kind of a state his sub would be in by now, but, at the same time, he had some things to work out in his head. Usually his instincts as a top were so sure he'd \*know\* what to do, but those instincts hadn't been working so well for the past few months and he needed to get back in touch with them.

He slowed down, and thought it through, and then took a deep breath and squared his shoulders. He could do this; he had to do this. He had to get beyond what had happened when Rodney had nearly died or he'd be letting Rodney down. Rodney might not like what he had planned – in fact John was sure he wouldn't, to start with at least – but it was necessary. He tapped his radio, made a call to Lorne, and then set off again, walking slowly this time.

Their quarters were in darkness when he stepped inside, and he frowned, puzzled. He was damn sure Rodney wouldn't have gone to bed.

He glanced around the room and saw Rodney sitting at the table, shoulders slumped, staring into space.

"Rodney?" he said, softly.



"I'm sorry, John," Rodney replied, not looking at him. "I've been thinking about it, and I know you won't like it but I can't let you take the punishment for what I did. I'm going to go to Woolsey and insist it's me who gets punished and not you."

"All thirty swats with the paddle?" John asked. "In front of the entire base?"

Rodney looked up, and John could see, in the dim light, that his eyes glittering with fear, but his chin was resolute, pushed out and stubborn.

"Thirty? Is that what he said? Well...okay then. I can take that. I've only taken twelve in the punishment room before but thirty...well...it'll be hard...you might have to use the restraints but I'll take them."

"No you won't," John said, turning on the light and going over to the table.

Rodney blinked. "I won't let you take them for me," he said firmly.

"Not your choice." John shook his head. This was another example of how out of hand he'd allowed this to get. Rodney should be obeying him on this, not arguing about it. For the most part they had an easy give and take in their relationship, but when it concerned their dynamic Rodney knew John was in charge - and this was all about their dynamic.

"John – it was my mistake. You didn't know anything about it!" Rodney protested. "I screwed up, and I'll pay for it. Shit, when I think of poor Jenny Keller..."

"That wasn't your fault," John told him. Rodney shook his head.

"Like you said earlier – if I hadn't lied NCIS would have been here sooner and she wouldn't have died."

"Conjecture," John said, with a terse wave of his hand. "NCIS *were* here and she died anyway. All it means is that she might have died a few weeks ago and not a couple of days ago. Look, Rodney, it happened. We can't undo it. We don't know what would have happened if NCIS had got here earlier but they haven't solved this yet, so it's not as if they've delivered. You feeling guilty about Jenny won't bring her back."

"She was a sweet girl," Rodney murmured. "I liked her."

"I know. So did I. But *we* didn't kill her, Rodney. Someone else did – and they're to blame for this, not us."

Rodney thought about that for a moment, and then nodded, but John knew it wasn't going to be that easy.

"I lied to you though," Rodney murmured, looking away, unable to meet John's eye. John reached out and touched the side of Rodney's face, making him look up.

"Yes, you did, and we have to deal with that," he said.

"Is it going to be bad?" Rodney asked, a slight hitch in his voice. "I mean...I assume it is, but..."

"Yes, it is," John replied grimly. For both of us, he thought to himself.

"I'll take the thirty swats in the punishment room as well as anything else you want to hand out," Rodney said.

John sighed. This was Rodney all over; he was always ready to admit a mistake and abject in wanting to make amends for it. He wished people could see beyond his irascible demeanour to the kind-hearted, loyal man underneath. He could see it so clearly – and maybe that was another reason why he let Rodney get away with more than he should.

"It's okay – Woolsey said I could take care of it myself. There won't be any thirty swats in the punishment room," John said gently.

"But you..." Rodney looked confused. "Woolsey really said that? But he hates us!"

"No, I don't think he does, not really. But we have given him kind of a hard time since he got here," John pointed out.

"He's not Elizabeth," Rodney said stubbornly.

"No, and that's not his fault. He just arrived at a bad time. You and I had just got back from that other universe, and then Elizabeth was killed and Peter...well, we lost Peter. Then they sent us Woolsey and these murders started to happen - so I'm thinking we didn't give him much of a chance," John said.

"He didn't give us one, either," Rodney pointed out. "He's never had a good word to say about Elizabeth and he's changed half her protocols and made everyone unhappy into the bargain."

"Yeah, well, we all make mistakes; those were his," John sighed. He sat down on the edge of the bed and began unlacing his boots. Rodney came over, knelt down in front of him, and started to help him. John smiled, and placed a hand on Rodney's head, stroking softly. Personal service wasn't really Rodney's thing in their dynamic, but just occasionally his sub surprised him.

Rodney finished removing his boots and John patted the bed beside him. Rodney sat down, his blue eyes wide and a little scared.

"You gonna cane me?" he asked.

John knew how much Rodney hated the cane, and it wasn't his own favourite implement to

wield either. Maybe it would work for precisely that reason but he didn't want to get ahead of himself. He reached up and massaged his own neck, feeling the tightness. He rolled his shoulders and felt a satisfying crack, and a sense of release.

"I don't know. I'll see what feels right as we go along," he replied. Rodney's eyes widened even further at that.

"As we go along?" he repeated.

"Yeah. We have some work to do," John told him. "In fact, we've had some work to do for some time, but I've been shirking it."

"I don't know what you mean," Rodney said, defensively.

"I think you kind of do," John sighed. He reached out and put a hand on Rodney's shirt, allowing it to hover over the area where Rodney's scar was. He had the exact same scar on his own chest. "Unfinished business," he whispered. Rodney reached out and grabbed hold of John's wrist, and then he pushed his hand away.

"No," he said, his eyes glittering.

"Yes," John said firmly. "Rodney, you might not want to do this but you have absolutely no choice in the matter. Understand that?"

Rodney gazed at him, and John could see the emotions flit through his eyes – Rodney had the most expressive eyes of anyone he'd ever met. He saw the defiance, the fear, the pain, and then, finally, the acceptance.

"Go into the bathroom and strip," John said. "Then come back out here. You won't be wearing any clothes for the next few days. You won't be leaving our quarters for the next few days, either."

"But what about my work?" Rodney asked, aghast. "I was in the middle of a series of delicate experiments. And what about Abby? She doesn't know how our tech works. She'll need..."

"Rodney, I don't give a damn," John interrupted, his tiredness making him angry. "I don't give a damn about your work, or NCIS, or any other damn thing right now. All I give a damn about is why my sub lied to me, and why he lied to his boss, and to NCIS, and why he thinks it's okay, even after lying his ass off, to stand here and argue with me over a direct order. Now get in the bathroom and strip."

Rodney's expression was mute with dismay. He swallowed, hard, and then got up and walked slowly into the bathroom, like a man with the weight of the world on his shoulders. And that, John thought, was part of the problem.

He went to the door of their quarters and opened it. Two marines were standing outside.

They gave him apologetic smiles and he sighed – it wasn't their fault and he didn't blame Woolsey for posting a guard on the door to make sure he and Rodney stayed confined to quarters for the duration of their sentence.

Outside the door were also the supplies he'd asked Lorne to provide. He pulled them into the room, placed the small single mattress beside his side of the bed and put the box on the table. Then he went and retrieved a box of his own from the closet. He opened both boxes, and took out what he needed.

The bathroom door opened, and Rodney tiptoed out. He was naked except for his collar and although he'd learned to walk with pride in his own skin after being with John for a couple of years, on this occasion he looked uncomfortable. John couldn't remember the last time he'd ordered him to strip and be naked around him. They had been so preoccupied of late – first Elizabeth, then Peter, and then the murders. In the early days he'd told Rodney he wanted him naked around him when they were alone together but it had been a long time since he'd enforced that. More fool him.

Rodney saw the mattress on the floor and he looked up at John, and shook his head.

"Please, not that," he said. "Don't tell me I can't sleep in your bed."

"You'll have to earn that right back," John told him. "The way you have to earn back the trust you lost when you lied to me. You don't sleep in my bed again until I'm satisfied you've done that."

Rodney looked small, and lost, and kind of angry too. John knew about Rodney's anger – knew they had to reach into it and get it out before it poisoned them both. Maybe it already had, a little.

"Are you rejecting me?" Rodney asked. John laughed out loud.

"No, Rodney. I'd never do that. I'm just reminding you who the top is because I think you've forgotten that. Now, you're sleeping on the floor beside me until I say you can come back to bed. And do you know why?" Rodney shook his head. "Because I'm in charge, Rodney, and you're my submissive. Now come here."

Rodney came, looking poised between total defiance and abject submission. It was the kind of complex emotional tightrope that only Rodney could walk, John thought wryly to himself.

When he got close, John reached out and pulled him closer, running his hands over Rodney's body. He stroked the naked flesh gently, loving how it felt under his fingertips. Rodney's arms went around his body, instinctively, and John smiled, and kissed his sub's hair. Then he released him, and touched the scab on Rodney's forehead.

"I'm angry this happened, Rodney," he said, feeling the red heat rise inside him all over again. "I'm angry someone touched you without my permission. I'm angry someone cuffed you."

"I know." Rodney nodded, his eyes searching John's face anxiously.

"I'm angry you placed yourself in a position where they \*could\* because of the lie you told," John said, more sternly. Rodney nodded.

"Yes, I know."

"Hands out," John ordered.

Rodney held out his arms, and John picked up a set of padded black cuffs from the table. He fastened them onto Rodney's wrists and made them secure. Then he took a second set of cuffs, knelt down, and fastened them around Rodney's ankles. Finally, he took a long length of chain. Rodney bit back a startled little sound and John shook his head.

"It's going to be tough, Rodney. Accept it," he ordered. Rodney nodded, his face strained.

John led him over to the mattress and ordered him to lie down. Then he fastened Rodney's hands together behind him; in front would have been kinder, but he needed to make this hard, or Rodney wouldn't give it up for him. He fastened Rodney's ankles together as well, and then linked a chain between the two. Finally, he took another chain and looped it through the first, then fastened the ends of it into the slave rings on the bedposts and secured them there, one at the head and one at the foot of the bed. Rodney was now tied fast – his hands and feet were tied together, and he was tied to the bed at both ends. He couldn't move more than a couple of inches either way. John tested the bonds to be satisfied, and then nodded.

"You have to ask me for everything from now on," he said in a low tone. "You ask me if you want to use the bathroom, or you need anything to eat or drink. Understood?"

"Yes, John," Rodney replied, but John could see the expression in his eyes. Rodney \*hated\* being restrained and it wasn't usually part of their dynamic at all – not for very long periods anyway. Being tied for a light flogging was one thing – this was something else, and would require Rodney to submit himself completely to John's will.

"The sooner you stop fighting it and submit, the sooner I'll let you go, but everything has to be earned, Rodney," John told him. Rodney nodded, stiffly, and John had a feeling this might take some time.

He went back to his box and got out a black leather blindfold. He returned to the mattress with it and Rodney tried to slither away from him, only managing a couple of inches before the chain restrained him.

"Please, John, not that. You know I hate being blindfolded," Rodney whimpered. John did know that. He knew that Rodney was so prone to over-thinking any given situation that he hated anything that took away his visual clues as to what might be going on. That was precisely another reason for doing it; he didn't want Rodney to think about anything for the

next few days. He wanted to take him to a place beyond thought, and give him back the gift of his own submission. He had no doubt it wouldn't be easy, but it *\*was\** necessary.

"Ssh," he said, stroking Rodney's hair gently. "I'm going to blindfold you, Rodney, but you trust me don't you?"

He felt as if he'd been punched in the gut by the tiny seed of doubt he saw flicker in Rodney's eyes. Ah, so that was what this was about.

"Rodney – you have to learn to trust me again," he said. "I'm going to make you learn to do that. You have no choice but to accept the blindfold. You're my collared sub, and I'm your husband and your top. I *\*will\** make you take this. Now close your eyes."

Rodney gazed at him for a moment, struggling with it, and then did as he was told and closed his eyes, a little sigh leaving his lips as he did so. John was grateful for that much at least. He was chipping away at Rodney's resistance, piece by piece, but he had a feeling it would take awhile. Damn it, why hadn't he seen this coming on? Why had it taken him so long? A few short months ago Rodney would have submitted to all this without question, trusting John without even thinking about it. It hurt that that wasn't the case any more.

John fastened the blindfold around Rodney's face and then kissed him gently on the lips, reassuring him. Rodney was now naked, blindfolded and trussed on the mattress. He could barely move, and he couldn't see anything.

"You'll rely on me for everything from now on," John told him. "You have so much as an itch, you let me know. You're forbidden to touch yourself or do anything for yourself."

"Yes, John," Rodney whispered, and John could see how tense and unhappy he was. Usually he wouldn't push Rodney this far outside his comfort zone but this time he had no choice.

He got a blanket and put it over Rodney's body, patting him gently when he was done.

"I'm going to be right here, on the bed," he said. "You're safe – but you have to trust me on that. If you call me, I'll be here."

Rodney shuddered, and John knew why. Rodney had called for him before, when he'd been lying on the floor in a strange universe, blood pouring from his chest. John hadn't been able to get there then and they were both paying the price for that now.

John removed his own clothes and got into the bed. He turned off the light and lay there, staring at the ceiling. This was as much a punishment for him as for Rodney. The lifebond between them pulsed when they were touching, flesh against flesh, and they both felt more comfortable when they were in close physical contact. Having Rodney lying on the floor beside the bed was its own special kind of torture, when he longed to be holding him and making love to him. Barely a night passed when John didn't slide his hard cock between Rodney's ass cheeks, and thrust into his sub's willing body. Sometimes they were too tired to complete the act, and just fell asleep, John softening inside Rodney's body. Sometimes

they had quick sex, just to get in touch with each other again, and sometimes John took his time, and spent hours exploring his sub's body until they both collapsed in a haze of pleasure.

This was how it had to be though, until they had worked through what had gone wrong between them.

"John," Rodney whispered from the floor beside him. "Is it going to be okay?"

John rolled over and stroked Rodney's hair. "Yes," he said firmly, because his sub needed reassurance. "But it's not going to be easy." He lay there, his hand resting on Rodney's hair, wondering if either of them was going to get any sleep tonight.

It took a long time but John finally got to sleep. He wasn't sure if Rodney managed any though. When he woke, the sun was up outside and he could see by Rodney's body language that his sub was awake. He didn't look comfortable but then that had been the point. His arms had to be aching, tied behind him like that, although John had done his best to ensure he was supported by his pillow and could breathe easily. Still, such tight bondage was always going to be uncomfortable.

John shifted in the bed and Rodney raised his head, unable to see because of the blindfold.

"Thank god for that," he breathed. "I have to use the bathroom."

"Then you should have woken me," John chided. "This isn't an endurance test, Rodney. This is about you learning to trust me again."

"I do," Rodney muttered sullenly. John got up, whisked his blanket off him, and landed a firm slap on his naked ass. Rodney jerked in surprise, unable to see the slap coming his way.

"Don't give me attitude, Rodney," John snapped. He undid the chain fastening Rodney to the bed and unfastened the ankle cuffs so Rodney could walk but didn't undo his wrist cuffs. He helped Rodney to stand and Rodney stretched his back, moaning as he did so.

"I ache all over," he said accusingly. "I have a bad back – you know I have a bad back, but you tied me like that and left me there all night."

"Yeah – I know you've got a bad back and that's why I got you the mattress. Count yourself lucky – you could have been sleeping on the hard floor," John said tersely. "Now, if you're good then you can sleep with your hands tied in front of you tonight. If you're not, then you can sleep tied over the spanking bench and I'll get up every hour on the hour and give you five hard swats with the paddle."

Rodney paled. "You wouldn't," he said, but he didn't sound too sure.

"Want to try me?" John asked, dangerously. He could see Rodney adjusting mentally to where they were going with this. Usually they had so much fun together that their dynamic

just bubbled along happily underneath. John rarely exerted himself as Rodney's top more than he felt necessary, preferring a lighter touch. That, clearly, had been a mistake.

"No," Rodney muttered. "You're in charge."

"Glad to hear you think so," John retorted.

He escorted Rodney into the bathroom and over to the toilet. Rodney's hands were still tied behind his back and he knew what was coming next. John stood behind him and held his cock, pointing it at the toilet.

"I hate this," Rodney told him, his body convulsing mutinously.

"Yeah, I know," John replied, pressing a kiss against Rodney's neck. This wasn't about bludgeoning Rodney into submission – it was about leading him there, both of them feeling their way until he got Rodney into a place where he trusted him again. The first few steps were always the hardest.

Rodney eventually relaxed enough to be able to pee. Afterwards John put him in the shower and then got in with him and started soaping Rodney down. Rodney's cock responded to this as it always did when John touched him, and reared up hopefully.

"Do you really think there's any chance you'll be coming any time soon?" John said, biting back a chuckle.

"No, I don't," Rodney sighed. "But try telling my cock that. It's ever-hopeful."

"Well it has no reason to be," John said firmly. "You're forbidden to come until I give you express permission. If you disobey me then I promise you that night-time spanking regime I outlined earlier will become a reality, and if you think things are bad right now they could get so much worse."

Rodney made a little sound in the back of his throat and John stroked him reassuringly.

"Turn," he said, and he pulled Rodney around so that his back was facing him. John ran soapy fingers over Rodney's back, massaging away any knots caused by his uncomfortable sleeping position, and Rodney sighed, and opened up, his body slowly relaxing. "Here's how it'll be," John said. "I'm going to use you whenever I want, and you are going to open up and let me. This is just about you pleasing me. There won't be anything in it for you. Understood?"

Rodney quivered under his touch, and John knew that on some level this was turning him on – which was good, because Rodney being turned on but unable to come was a level of control he needed to exert over his sub right now.

"You won't know when," John added. "The blindfold will stay on – you'll just open your mouth or your legs whenever I want you. Understood?"



"Yes." Rodney nodded.

"The cuffs will stay on as well," John warned. "I want you to please me with those talented lips of yours and with your hole – you don't get to touch or to see – you just get to serve."

"Okay," Rodney sighed, and John knew how much that was going to chafe – Rodney loved using his hands and adored being able to run them over John's naked body. He was an extremely sensuous man, and this was depriving him of so many of his pleasures.

John unfastened Rodney's cuffs from behind his back but only to immediately refasten them in front of him. Then he reached for the shower brush and swung the flat of it hard against Rodney's exposed buttocks. Rodney gave a yowl of surprise but John just surveyed the red mark he'd made dispassionately. He loved marking Rodney's body, and it had been awhile since he'd done so – another sign of his own lack of attention to detail of late.

He swung the brush again, landing another fine swat. Rodney gave a gasp and fell forward, his bound hands clutching for the side of the shower. John waited until he'd got himself into position, and then swung again. He got into a rhythm, liking the splotchy red colour he was bringing to the surface of Rodney's ass. Rodney took the spanking well, not moving or complaining beyond the odd muffled "ow". They both knew this wasn't for pleasure – but it wasn't too severe yet, either. John knew he had to work his way up to that one. Rodney often got angry during the course of a proper punishment spanking, and John knew that anger was buried so deep that it would take some time to bubble to the surface. It was time they had. His job was to skilfully work it out, giving Rodney the right guidance to express it and get it out of his system. This was a good start.

He finished spanking Rodney and then reached for the lube they kept in the shower. He spread Rodney's glowing buttocks, lubed him quickly, and then slid his hard cock into his sub's warm ass. It felt good, the way it always felt so damn good with Rodney. No matter the difficulty of this current situation, being inside Rodney was never anything other than a pleasure – and he knew that Rodney felt the same way about having him inside him. Apart from anything else this was necessary – Rodney needed to feel connected, and he also needed to get back in touch with that sense of John as his top, as someone strong who could take what he wanted from his sub at will. Rodney had been taking too much responsibility for too long – he needed to give it back to John.

John kept firm hands on Rodney's hips as he thrust into him, using him hard and fast. He knew Rodney's cock was hard and leaking but he also knew Rodney wouldn't come without his permission, either, and he wasn't going to get that permission until John was satisfied he'd managed to bring his sub right down, and that Rodney had submitted to him utterly and completely, without reservation.

John came with a sigh of satisfaction, shooting deep inside Rodney. He stood there for a moment, leaning over his sub, panting, and then decided to move things up a notch.

"Pull your butt cheeks together and stay there," he ordered, and he pulled out of Rodney

and left the shower to return to the other room and retrieve a nice, solid butt plug. He went back to the shower and stepped inside, to find Rodney exactly where he had left him, his taut buttocks showing he had obeyed John's order.

"Okay." John tapped his butt. "Relax." Rodney did as ordered, and John lubed up the buttplug and then slid it firmly into Rodney's hole. "That'll keep my come inside you until I'm ready to shoot into you again," he said, and Rodney's entire body quivered at that. John smiled to himself. Oh yes, this might take awhile, but he knew his husband, and he knew the best way to reach him. "You're my sub, Rodney," he whispered, pressing on the buttplug with his fingers to make sure Rodney was feeling it. "You'll submit to me. I'll take what I want from you, and mark you with my scent, with my come, with my strap, with my hand, with my teeth – any way I like. And you'll take it and submit, won't you?"

Rodney moaned softly. "Yes, John," he whispered. "I will."

John smiled, and drew back. He could feel his body start to loosen as he got himself into his top-space. The strain of the past few months began to drain away and he felt his doubts going with them.

He knew who he was, and he knew who Rodney was – and it felt good to remind themselves of a few basic truths that they'd lost touch with of late. No wonder Rodney had stopped trusting in him as a top when he'd stopped trusting in himself. This was as much about him regaining trust as Rodney, and now that he was listening to his instincts, and being the firm, uncompromising top Rodney occasionally needed, he hoped they could resolve their issues and be strong again.

~\*~

Rodney hated this. He hated being tied, his ankles connected by a short chain so he could only take small steps, his arms tied behind his back, his eyes blindfolded. He hated having to trust John to lead him around, unable to see where he was going, or even put out a hand to catch himself if he felt he was falling. True, John was beside him, and when he had stumbled, walking from the bathroom to the living room, John's hand had immediately clasped his elbow, keeping him safe, but he hated it all the same.

Much as he loved his top, he didn't like feeling this dependent. Being naked didn't help. He felt as if all his everyday defences had been stripped away: his clothes, his sight, his sense of touch, his ability to walk where he wanted or to lie beside his husband at night. Even his work had been taken from him.

He was aware of the buttplug pressed deep inside his body as he walked. It was uncomfortable, but he didn't mind it. He liked the idea of it keeping John's come inside his body, and of keeping him open in case John wanted to use him again. The touch of John's hands on his body and the feel of his cock inside him would never be unwelcome.

He was led over to the table and John told him to kneel. He went down, slowly, John's hands on his body to keep him steady. Then he felt the chain being tied to the table and he sighed.

"I'm not exactly going to run anywhere," he muttered. "Aren't the blindfold and cuffs enough? You don't need to tie me to every inanimate object in the room!"

He didn't see or hear it, but he certainly felt it as John's hand connected with the side of his exposed ass.

"I don't recall asking you for guidance on where and how I should tie my submissive," John told him. "All I'm asking for is your submission and I'm not seeing much of that at the moment."

Rodney thought about making a smart reply but then decided against it. He hung his head, a dozen mutinous thoughts rolling around in it. He felt angry – furious even - and he wasn't sure why. This was John's right; he could do this to him every day if he wanted, and for as long as Rodney wore his collar he had no choice but to submit. Why was it making him so angry? Why couldn't he just give it up to John, as his top was asking?

He leaned his head against the table leg, fighting himself. Maybe if he thought about work that would be better. He went through some equations in his head, calming himself with the math. It usually worked but John wasn't having any of it. Rodney had no idea how he knew but suddenly there was a hand on his head, and John spoke straight into his ear.

"No. You don't go there, Rodney," he said. "You don't go off someplace in your head. You stay here, with me."

Rodney shook with silent, unfulfilled rage. He felt wave after wave of frustration roll through his body, chafing at the restrictions, at the discomfort, at the exposure...and John kept a hand on his body all the time, stroking him as he struggled, silently, with his situation. Finally, the wave broke, and he leaned, exhausted, against John's solid thigh.

"That's good. Now, let's have something to eat," John said. He moved away, and Rodney could hear him preparing some food. Then he returned to the table with it, and Rodney heard him sit down. "I'm going to eat first – then I'll feed you," John told him, and Rodney gave a big sigh and rested his chin on John's lap. John gave a little snort but his hand came to rest on Rodney's head and he resumed stroking him as he ate.

Rodney smelled toast, fruit and coffee and all kinds of things he loved, and his mouth started to water. He wondered whether John would feed him something disgusting, something he hated, and then got gripped by a moment of panic as he wondered whether John would feed him at all. Maybe he'd change his mind and keep Rodney hungry. Rodney sat up straight at that thought, and John laughed.

"Man, you are so predictable," he said. "Rodney, it's okay. You should trust me. I told you I'll feed you and I will."

Rodney nodded, uncertainly. A second later he felt a fork press against his lips and he opened his mouth to taste the deliciousness of chocolate-filled croissant; his favourite food in the whole world. It melted in his mouth, and he devoured it with a happy sigh.

"Thank you," he whispered. "And I'm sorry I didn't trust you."

"Yeah, well, it kind of hurts, Rodney," John told him. He fed Rodney the entire croissant and then pressed the coffee cup to his lips. Rodney swallowed it down – it was warm, strong and sugary, just the way he liked it.

John finished feeding him and then left him kneeling at the table while he took care of the dishes. Then he unfastened him and took him over to the couch. He fastened him again and sat down, and Rodney heard the whir of a disk being put into a laptop on the coffee table, and then the sound of a movie starting.

His knees were hurting from all the kneeling and he shifted uncomfortably, feeling a sense of resentment growing in his stomach. They were confined to quarters, and yet John was the one who got to sit with his feet up, watching a movie, while Rodney knelt by his side like a puppy. He knew this was part of his punishment for his lie but all the same he felt that anger start to rise again.

"Do your knees hurt, Rodney?" John asked.

"Yes. Like you care," Rodney retorted.

"I do though," John said, in a reasonable tone of voice. His hand came down on Rodney's tense shoulders and he stroked gently. "If you'd asked me to be allowed up onto the couch I'd have let you. But as you didn't, you can stay there. If you're good then I'll let you up here in an hour."

"How was I supposed to know I had to ask?" Rodney snapped. A second later John's hand connected again with his naked flank. "OW!" he protested.

"I've been telling you often enough – you just haven't been listening," John told him.

"I hate you," Rodney said, leaning his head against John's thigh just the same. John sighed, his hand coming to rest on Rodney's hair.

"I know, buddy," he replied. "I know."

Rodney zoned out a little, trying to ignore the growing pain in his knees as he knelt there, leaning against John while the movie played. This was so boring! And such a waste of time when there was so much work he could be doing. John stroked his hair the entire time which helped, but not much.

After an hour, John was as good as his word and he unfastened Rodney and allowed him up on the couch. Rodney sat down beside him but John wasn't having any of that.

"No, Rodney. Wrong position," he said. He hauled Rodney over so that he was lying on his front, arms still tied behind his back, his face resting sideways on John's lap, his body

sprawled out on the couch. "That's better. I want to fondle you while I watch the rest of the movie."

Rodney relaxed as John's hands played with his body, just idly, stroking and caressing him absently as the movie continued. He gave a contented little sigh. He might be naked, blindfolded and tied but being this close to John was never a bad thing.

The movie finished, and John's fingers started to tangle more purposefully in Rodney's hair as he pushed Rodney down into his crotch. His cock was starting to harden and Rodney nosed at it hopefully through John's jeans. He loved giving John blow jobs as much as John liked receiving them.

"That's it, good boy," John sighed happily, opening his fly. His cock sprang up, hard and ready, against Rodney's face. John shifted Rodney, guiding him down in front of him onto the floor and putting him in a kneeling position again, and then Rodney felt John's hands on the side of his face, directing his head down. He took John's hard cock in his mouth and sucked on it. It felt strange to be doing this in a position of such abject bondage but good all the same. It gave a whole new perspective to giving a blow job; his hands were tied behind him and he couldn't see, so he had only his mouth with which to service his top and he felt suddenly very aware of how naked he was. John's hands were firm on his head and he fucked Rodney's mouth expertly, never once letting Rodney take charge.

"Relax your throat...that's it," John murmured. "Open it up for me...no...don't move, just let me use your mouth." He held Rodney fast and thrust back and forth, harder and harder. The angle was deep, and Rodney couldn't move. He couldn't lick, or blow warm air over the crown, or perform one of his usual truly spectacular blowjobs; all he could do was kneel there, and let John use his mouth the way he'd used his ass earlier.

John held Rodney fast as he grew closer to his climax, and then he came and Rodney felt warm semen in the back of his mouth. John's cock was still between his lips, softening, and John stroked Rodney's cheek encouragingly.

"Clean me, Rodney," he ordered, and Rodney obliged, sucking the last drops of moisture from his top's spent cock.

John didn't move away when he was done – he just sat there, his cock still in Rodney's mouth. Rodney wasn't sure what he was supposed to do but he couldn't move or speak so he just knelt there, breathing around John's soft cock. After awhile he shifted on his knees and John caressed his jaw warningly. He settled back down again between John's legs and zoned out. If John wanted to sit there with his cock in Rodney's mouth then he supposed that was fine with him.

They sat there for what felt like ages and Rodney started to wonder if his top had fallen asleep. This felt kind of weird...although, he did like the feel of John inside him. John would often fall asleep with his cock in Rodney's ass, and this was a bit different but it gave him the same sense of warm connection. Finally, he stopped wondering about it and just gave in to it. Just when he did that, he felt John's cock start to harden again and he sat up straight,

wondering if John wanted to pound into his mouth a second time...but John drew back and pulled Rodney up onto the couch instead.

"Ride me, Rodney," he instructed, removing Rodney's butt plug and positioning Rodney on his lap. Rodney felt his buttocks being pulled apart, and he moved his hips down, cautiously, to impale himself on John's hard cock. It was wet from where he'd been holding it in his mouth and there was still some lube in his anus but entry was dry enough to make his eyes sting all the same. John held his hips steady and pulled him down, right down, until his cock was filling Rodney's hole, stretching him as far as he'd go. He gave a little muttered sigh, and then felt John's fingers on his nipples, pinching and playing.

"Hold still...hold it right there, with me deep inside you," John said, and Rodney did as he was told, surrendering himself utterly to the sensation of John's rock hard cock filling him. He heard John reach for something, and then, completely without warning, he felt a blaze of atrocious pain rip through his left nipple.

"OH SHIT!" he screamed. Normally he liked wearing nipple clamps but only when he could see them coming, and ease himself into the sensation. This had taken him totally by surprise.

"Easy," John said, stroking him. Rodney tensed, waiting for the right nipple to be similarly assaulted, but nothing happened. The pain in his left nipple began to subside into a steady, persistent throb, and John wasn't saying anything.

"John?" he whispered. "Oh shit...John...that hurt."

"Mmmm...looks good though," John replied. And at that moment Rodney felt the other clamp go on. He convulsed, the action making his anal muscles clamp even tighter around John's cock, embedded deep within him, and the dual sensations caused fireworks to spark inside his mind. He swayed, moaning softly, and was grateful for John's hands on his thighs, holding him in place.

Now both nipples ached – and Rodney knew from the way they felt that John had used the particularly nasty clamps on them; the ones that pinched right in and got worse the longer you wore them rather than better. He could feel the sweat on his body, running down his chest in little rivulets, and still John's hands were on him, calming him.

"Take it, Rodney," John whispered, and in truth Rodney had no choice. He was bound, blindfolded and completely at John's mercy. All he could do was trust that John wouldn't take him too far, or to a place where he would drown. "That's good," John crooned affectionately. "You're doing so well. Hold on now..."

Rodney put his head back and howled as John took hold of both his clamped nipples and twisted, hard. He could take a lot of nipple play but it had been a long time since John had been so uncompromising in making him endure it. There were times, in the middle of it, when Rodney longed for it to be over and for John to leave the poor, abused nubs of flesh alone, but then, when it was over, Rodney took a secret pleasure in remembering how it

had felt. His nipples were sensitive, and the pain/pleasure line often became totally blurred when John played with them.

John held the twist for a long moment and then released his nipples, and Rodney slumped down, held in place only by John's hard cock inside him and John's hands on his thighs.

"Please..." he croaked.

"What, Rodney?" John asked. Rodney wasn't sure what he was pleading for. He wanted this to stop but at the same time he felt a familiar warm sensation creeping through him at the thought of being so completely in his top's control. "Your body is mine, Rodney," John reminded him, and this - \*this\* - was their dynamic. "And I can play with it any way I like, can't I?"

"Yes, John," he whimpered, that warmth spreading out inside him. There was a brief respite and then his nipples were twisted again and he put his head back and yelled out loud now - yelled and screamed and shouted - and it felt so good to be letting it out.

He forgot work, and NCIS, and the lie he'd told. He was just John's collared sub, his body a plaything for his top to use. He was aware of nothing but the ache in his nipples from the clamps and the ache in his anus from where it was stretched around John's hard cock, His hands were fastened behind his back and he couldn't see or do anything – he could only submit.

Then John was pushing him back on the couch, going slowly, taking care to keep his hard cock sheathed deep inside his sub's body. Now Rodney was lying on his back, his bound hands beneath him, and John was on top of him and inside him. He tensed, and then relaxed and waited for what was coming next. A moment later he felt John's warm, wet mouth on his nipples, playing with them around the edges of the clamps, roving from one to the other. It was soothing and painful at the same time, and Rodney wriggled and struggled but there was no getting away from his top. John's body was keeping him pinned, and he was bound and helpless.

John used his tongue and teeth to pull on the clamps, and twist them, and each time it sent a wave of pain through the abused flesh. Rodney gasped and whimpered and yelled but nothing stopped John. He held Rodney in place beneath him and tormented his nipples for what felt like hours. Rodney lost track of time. There was nothing he could do but accept, and the longer it went on the easier it seemed to become. He was John's, and John could do what he wanted to him. He was John's, and John wanted to play with him. He was John's, and could expect nothing back – no pleasure, no chance of coming. His body existed to please his top right now and all he could do was offer it up and submit.

Something clicked inside his brain and he felt waves of endorphins flood through him. It had been a long time since he'd been this far inside his own sub-space and he hadn't realised how much he'd missed it. The problem was he hated the getting here, but when he was here it felt so good. He felt as if he was floating, and the only thing keeping him anchored was John's brutal mouth on his chest, and John's heavy weight on and in his body.

His cock was hard but he wasn't allowed to come. This wasn't about him. This was about his top taking whatever he wanted from him. He felt John's fingers on his left nipple and then a sense of freedom and release as the clamp was removed, followed by a blaze of atrocious pain as the blood rushed back into the tortured piece of flesh, and then, just when that blaze of pain was hitting, John's mouth descended again, taking the nipple whole, and he bit down – hard.

Rodney felt as if he'd died, and his consciousness was above him somewhere, hovering around the ceiling. If he looked down he could see their bodies on the couch below; himself bound, John's long, agile body on top of him, John's mouth fastened around his nipple, a feral look in John's eyes. Oh god it hurt; he was sure he was going to pass out from the sensory overload.

Then it was over, and the pain subsided, and there was just John sucking gently on his nipple and he was back in his body again.

"You've got a beautiful mark there now," John told him. "Nice and red." And Rodney felt him lapping at the mark with his tongue.

Next thing he knew, the clamp had been removed from his right nipple and he was too far gone to even convulse this time as the waves of pain came, too zoned out to tense in expectation as John's mouth came down on the newly released nipple and bit it, just as hard as he had the other. He was John's to mark, John's to bite, John's to play with.

Then the bite was over, and now John was moving inside him, his hard cock claiming him with a series of brutal thrusts. John didn't usually thrust into him like this, raw and hard and hungry, and Rodney couldn't brace himself because of his bound hands so all he could do was lie there and take each powerful inward thrust, whimpering softly as John used him without mercy. John had been recently sated by the blowjob, so he had considerable stamina and he didn't let up, his hips pistoning into Rodney for what felt like hours.

Rodney was aware of a crimp in his arms from where they were pressed into the couch, and a vivid ache in both his nipples. He was aware of sweat running down the side of his body, of his legs resting on John's shoulders, and the weight of John's body on top of his own. But most of all he was aware of John's large cock inside him, filling and claiming him with each savage thrust.

It was as if they were caught in some kind of time anomaly that stretched on for all eternity. Rodney felt as if he'd been here forever and would be here forever, and this was all there was in the whole universe; him, John, and John moving inside him like this, claiming him so totally and completely, without any room for doubt.

Then, as if from afar, he was aware that John had stopped moving. There was a rushing sound in his ears and he couldn't hear anything but he felt warmth trickling down his leg, and then the solid, plastic weight of the butt plug pressing into him again as John shoved it home. He whimpered as it went in, longing to feel John's warm hardness and not the cold



plastic but John pushed it into place and he felt his body settle around it. John had put it there, so that was where it had to be, whether he liked it or not. It was pressing up inside him, keeping what John had left there in place. He was a receptacle for John's come, and if John wanted to mark him in that way, scenting him and filling him, then that was fine.

He felt himself being pulled onto his side on the couch, and his chained hands were fastened again to something on the floor – probably the coffee table. And then a blanket was thrown over him, and he felt John's lips on his forehead.

"Sleep," John told him, and it was what his top wanted, so he did.

He was awoken some time later – he had no idea how long it had been – by something warm being wrapped around his cock. The blanket had been flung aside and he was on his back again. He came to with a start, realising that John was sucking him. He gave a gurgle of pleasure as John deep-throated him, and thrust up between his lips. John sucked him expertly until he was right on the brink of coming...and then stopped. Rodney moaned out loud, still teetering, longing for his climax.

"Don't come, Rodney," John warned, and Rodney gave a whimper of disappointment. He was so close, and he wanted to so much! But John had told him he couldn't, so he fought it, and finally won, battling the sensation into submission. He felt his cock starting to droop, and then cried out as it was slapped. "Keep it hard for me, Rodney. Keep your erection – but don't come."

Rodney wondered how the hell he could do that.

"I want you on the brink, Rodney," John warned, teasing the underside of his cock with what felt like a fingernail. "But there is no question of you coming today. You'll stay hard because you're mine and I'm telling you to."

Rodney gave a frustrated groan. He remembered the feeling of John's warm, wet mouth sucking him, and his cock hardened again. Then he tried to stay in that place.

"I have my cock whip, Rodney," John told him warningly, and Rodney felt the cool tendrils of leather gently waft over his hard cock. "The second your erection flags, I'll use the whip on it."

It was torture! Rodney felt everything inside him rebel at such a cruel demand.

"I can't," he whispered, hoarsely.

"You have no choice," John told him resolutely. Rodney struggled with it for a moment, going around his options in his head until he realised there were none. John would make him do this if it took days. He had to find a way to stay hard, to stay excited and eager and ready to come, and yet not go over the brink.

He tried to run through every sexy scenario he could think of. He remembered earlier, his

hole stretched tight around John's demanding cock and his own cock spasmed with need.

"That's good," John whispered, and he sounded dangerously close, sitting right there, watching, waiting, whip at the ready. Rodney did his best to hold onto that thought but, without any further stimulation, his cock gradually began to droop. Before he knew it, John's whip flashed a line of pain through his groin.

"Oh shit! Please...I'm trying – I'm trying!" he whimpered.

"Not hard enough," John said, and there was the sound of an evil smile in his voice. "Literally," he chuckled. The whip assaulted his cock again and Rodney wrestled with his bonds, trying to get away from it, but it was no use – he was tied fast. He howled as John's whip set about in earnest, sending a biting line of fire through his groin and deep into his balls.

The stimulation at least had the effect of causing his erection to return and the whipping stopped. Rodney slumped back on the couch, panting heavily.

"I'm still watching, Rodney," John hissed, and he sounded dangerous and predatory. Rodney remembered how he'd often thought of John as being like a big, black panther, and he shivered – he liked that image but it had been a long time since he'd thought it. Of late, John had been more vulnerable and preoccupied and Rodney had been worried about him. This man here, though, the one standing over him and demanding he stay erect or face his whip – he didn't seem vulnerable at all, and if he was preoccupied with anything it was only with whether Rodney's body was obeying him the way he wanted.

Rodney shifted, feeling the butt plug press uncomfortably inside him. His nipples were sore and his entire body ached but he had to stay erect because John had demanded it. He tried to relax and switch off, while at the same time concentrating for all his life on keeping his cock bobbing hopefully in the air, without hope of release.

Time passed again – blindfolded, he had no idea how long it was. There were intervals when he failed, and the whip stung his cock, and then time when he succeeded, and trembled on the brink of orgasm, knowing it was denied him, and he lurched between the two. It was agony but a delicious kind of agony. And then it was over, and John was unfastening him and taking him over to the table to feed him again. Was he hungry? He couldn't tell – but if John told him to eat then he would.

After they had eaten, the butt plug was removed again, briefly, but only so that John could bend him over the back of the couch and take him again. He shot another load into him and replaced the plug. Rodney could feel his top's come inside him, becoming cold and heavy, seeping out around the plug. John took him over to the mattress, and released his hands from behind his back.

"You've been good today, Rodney," he said, and Rodney felt a glow of pleasure at the praise. "So you can sleep with your hands tied in front of you."

Rodney lay on the mattress on his side and John began fastening him to the bedposts again. Rodney could hear the chain tightening and rattling until he was held fast, barely able to move. At least his hands were in a more comfortable position than they had been the previous night, and that was good.

But now he found he missed John's hands on his body, and the way John had been touching him and filling him all day.

"Can't I sleep with you?" he whispered. "Please."

"No," John told him, firmly. "You must earn that."

"I know. I'm sorry," he whispered. "I'll try."

"I know," John told him, and a gentle hand smoothed his hair and he felt John's lips on his forehead. He longed to feel them on his mouth and moved his face accordingly, but John pulled away. "That has to be earned too," he said, and Rodney gave a whimper and buried his face in the pillow.

He slept better that night than he had the previous night, and woke to find John unfastening him. He was sat up, and, before he was even fully awake, John took hold of his face, and pushed his cock in his mouth. He sucked on it without thinking about it, loving the smooth feel of it on his tongue, and the way John was stroking his hair as he worked.

It was his second day blindfolded, and he found he lost all track of time. There was just John, and him, and John's hands on his body, and John's cock in his mouth, or in his ass, and John's butt plug filling him and John's come inside him.

John tied him when he wasn't being used, and Rodney forgot even to complain about his aching knees or back. He just slumped against John, trusting that he'd look after him, because he always did. He always \*had\*. There had been just that one time...he pushed that thought aside angrily because that hadn't been John's fault, but it niggled away at the back of his mind. He could rely on John. John was strong and solid and always there for him.

He wasn't sure what time it was but he felt tired, so maybe it was late, when John suddenly pulled him to his feet.

"It's time for me to punish you now, Rodney," he said. "I'm going to punish you for the lie you told. You're ready to take that now."

Rodney frowned behind the blindfold. What lie? Oh, yes...with a great effort of will he dragged his mind back from where it had gone. He'd told a bad lie, and John was right – he did deserve to be punished.

"Yes, John," he whispered obediently. "I'm ready for my punishment now."

"Good boy."

He felt John's hands on his shoulders, pushing him over to the wall. They had a nice, padded spanking bench but Rodney knew John preferred him braced against the wall when he was going to whip him hard.

He felt his hands being untied, and then he was being turned. He placed his hands on the wall, and he felt John moving his legs apart. He instinctively got into the right position, hands braced, ass out and exposed, ready for the sting of his top's strap, or his paddle, or his cane or anything else he wanted to use on him.

He stood there, waiting to be told what to do next, and then he felt hard wood being held up to his lips.

"Kiss the cane, Rodney," John told him and Rodney did so, without question. It wasn't something John had ever asked of him before but it was fine – if that was what John wanted. He dimly registered that it was the cane he was kissing and he hated the cane, but that didn't matter. If John wanted to cane him then he would submit to being caned.

He heard John behind him, moving away a little, and then the whistle and hiss of the cane moving through the air, and, finally, a terrible, fiery sting as it landed on his bottom. He stifled his yelp but John wasn't satisfied with that.

"I want to hear you scream, Rodney. Don't hold back," he warned. Rodney nodded, and next time the cane landed on his naked, exposed ass he cried out. It hurt but it felt good to be crying and yelling. Something deep and dark was unravelling in the pit of his stomach and it wanted to get out, to be screamed out. John's cane was relentless, driving into his skin, marking him with its savage caress.

The blindfold kept him in the dark, and he remembered another place and time and a different kind of darkness. He was lying on the floor in a pool of his own blood and his chest hurt...He pushed it back down. He wasn't going there. No matter what happened, he wasn't going back to that time and place.

He came to with a jolt as the caning stopped, and he felt hands on his nipples; they were still very sore from the previous day and he cried out loud.

"Ssh, easy, Rodney," John soothed behind him. "I think we need to step this up a bit don't you?"

He shook his head, blindly, not liking where this was heading, and then they were back, the evil, vicious, biting clamps from the day before. John took no notice of his cries and fastened them tight around his nipples. Now his chest hurt, throbbing painfully, reminding him...

John put him back in position and then stepped away and the cane rose and fell once more on his exposed buttocks; then again, and again, in a steady, painful rhythm. It was hard to push away the memory when he could feel the ache in his chest, reminding him, and when

that cane was burning him from behind, making it impossible to concentrate on keeping the memory at bay.

The darkness flickered, and then suddenly he was falling in a flash of light, falling through a window into another universe. He had barely a moment to adjust before he saw the man in the Genii uniform raising his gun. He lifted his hands, offering to surrender, but it was too late and the gun spat fire at him. He felt the pain in his chest, ripping through him, and then he was on the floor, blood soaking through his shirt, and then onto the floor around him, in a vivid crimson tide.

"John!" he cried. "John? Where are you?"

But he was alone. Nobody was there. There was just him, lying on the floor, lost and alone.

"I'm here," John said, and he felt gentle hands circling him, and someone clasping him, holding him close.

"No, you're not. You weren't there. You weren't there! I called for you and you weren't there!" Rodney cried, his fists rising and falling angrily on John's chest.

"I was," John said, and his voice was breaking as he spoke. "I was, Rodney, remember."

Rodney felt the lifebond pulse between them, and the healing kaeira energy travel along it. He was alone...but there, far away, he could feel John's presence, sending him vitality, keeping him alive, trying to reassure him.

"I was there – not in the room but I was there, with you, the whole time," John told him. "I was there, Rodney, I promise you."

Rodney slumped against his husband, reaching for him blindly, and he felt John's fingers on his nipples and arched against him as the clamps were gently removed. There was a familiar wave of pain, but somehow that just brought clarity.

"You were there?" he whispered, feeling John's beloved face in the darkness with his fingertips.

"Yes, Rodney, and I'm here now," John replied, his fingers linking through Rodney's. "You can trust me. I'm strong...I've got you. You can fall now – fall all the way for me because I've got you. You can trust me. I'll never, ever let you down."

"I know," Rodney whispered. "I know."

John's hands helped him up, and John half carried him over to the bed, and gently guided him down onto it, and then John got on the bed beside him and was holding him tight. He settled down against John's chest, snuggling in close, and John raised his face and then he felt – thank god! – John's lips on his mouth, and John's tongue gently seeking entry, and that felt so good. He was being kissed and it calmed him, making him drowsy.

"Elizabeth died," he whispered into John's neck when John was done kissing him. "We were only back a few weeks and then she died."

"I know," John said hoarsely.

"And Peter..." Peter Weir had stayed to bury his wife after she had been killed fighting the replicators. She had fought bravely, winning them time to regroup and save the city from catastrophe but had paid the ultimate price. Then, a few days after the funeral, Peter hadn't showed up for his shift in the lab. It had been Rodney who had gone to his room, and Rodney who had found Peter's body, the hand resting on a note that said only one word: "Sorry".

"I know," John said again, stroking Rodney.

"Then people started being murdered," Rodney continued.

"Yes." John's arms tightened around Rodney. "But I'm still here, Rodney." And his hands were warm and comforting on Rodney's body. "I'm still here and I'm not going anywhere. Not now, not ever."

"No," Rodney said simply, and he rested his chin on John's shoulder. "No. You're not going anywhere," he repeated softly. "I know that now."

John's hands were everywhere on his body, soothing and gentling him, removing the cuffs and the buttplug, wiping him clean with a washcloth and rubbing cooling ointment into his sore flesh, wherever it hurt. Then John's fingers went to his blindfold, and Rodney stopped them with his own.

"Not yet," he said. "Can I stay here a little bit longer, John? Please?" He didn't want to leave just yet. The darkness was warm and comforting, and he knew he could trust John to keep him safe and take care of him while he stayed there.

"Okay." John didn't remove the blindfold. He just settled down beside his husband, took him in his arms again, and pulled the blankets up around them both. "Okay," he whispered. "I've got you, love. I've got you."

~\*~

Tim McGee lay on the bed staring at the ceiling. He felt tired, not least because Gibbs was only allowing them eight hours downtime to themselves at night, most of which was taken up with sleeping, while the other sixteen hours of the day were spent going over and over the evidence; the tapes, the files, the interviews – everything they had. The problem was they weren't finding anything and that was making Gibbs bad tempered, and, as a result, all his subs were on edge too.

It had been four days since their abortive questioning of Rodney Sheppard. Tony clearly felt

responsible for how badly wrong that had gone, and Gibbs had been making his views on that screw-up abundantly clear. Tim even felt a little bit sorry for Tony as Gibbs sent him on various tedious or downright unpleasant errands around the city, and he got the feeling those daily spankings Tony took from their top had been especially tough of late.

He wished he could switch off but he was so worn out by the grinding pace that he was almost beyond sleep. He hadn't even had the energy to make his usual notes for story ideas – he had just thrown himself on the bed the minute Gibbs had allowed them to retire to their rooms.

There was a little noise at the door, and Tim sat up.

“Who is it?” he whispered.

“It is me,” Ziva told him, hesitating in the doorway. “Is it okay to come in?”

“Of course.” Tim sat up. Ziva had come to his room every night since that first night a few days ago, and he still wasn't sure why. Sometimes they talked, and he loved that, and sometimes they just sat in silence, and that felt good too. He didn't like to ask her what was going on in case she stopped visiting him at night and he really, really didn't want that to happen.

“Do you mind me doing this?” she asked him, crossing over to the bed, removing her outer clothes with the same lack of embarrassment she always had, and slipping under the covers.

“No.” Tim shook his head.

“You are still dressed,” she pointed out.

“I can't sleep. You?” he said.

She gave him a strange look. “Tim, I have not been able to sleep for the past few nights. I try and then I give up. Why else do you think I end up coming into your room?”

“Oh. Uh. I don't know really,” Tim whispered. “I thought...well, I really don't know.”

“No. You really don't, do you,” she said, with a little grin.

“Well, I suppose it is weird,” he said. “Being on a strange planet and so far from home and with all that's going on here.”

“Yes.” She nodded. “But that is not why I cannot sleep.”

“Oh.” He wasn't sure if she wanted him to ask her about that, or wanted to confide in him, so he just sat there, wishing it was easier to talk to tops. Damn it, even when he had one sitting in his bed he *\*still\** didn't know what to say.

“Are you worried about the case?” he asked at last.

“It is proving hard to solve,” she replied. “Being away from our usual facilities does not help. It takes hours getting information back from Earth.”

“Yeah. Gibbs is getting frustrated I think.”

“You think?” She raised an eyebrow. “Good detective work, probie!”

Tim shook his head, chuckling. “I wish he’d let up on Tony though – and that’s not something I say very often! But it wasn’t his fault he was wrong about Rodney.”

Ziva stared at him, and then laughed. “You really do not understand tops at all, do you?” she said.

“Uh...well, no, to be honest. Why? What am I missing?” he frowned. Ziva leaned in close, so close he could smell her hair, and he longed to bury his nose in it and inhale deeply.

“Gibbs cannot let up on Tony right now or Tony will do something stupid,” she said. “Something more stupid than usual,” she clarified.

“What makes you say that?” Tim asked, still frowning. Ziva sighed.

“Because he is Tony. He tries so hard to impress Gibbs and this time he was wrong – spectacularly wrong. If Gibbs does not punish him for it Tony will punish himself, and Tony is extremely inventive so that will not be pretty.”

“And you can tell all this because you’re a top?” Tim asked. Ziva laughed.

“Yes, Tim. And because I know Tony – and Gibbs,” she added.

“I haven’t seen Tony sit down comfortably since that night we questioned Rodney,” Tim said. “So I’m guessing Gibbs must be spanking him pretty hard. I sometimes wonder how tough a hide Tony must have to take that, every day.”

He remembered earlier in the evening how Tony had leaned against the wall when they went through their case notes, and how he’d found Tony sprawled face down on the couch when he’d returned to their quarters the previous evening.

“Gibbs will only give him what he can handle,” Ziva replied. “He has some kind of strange sixth sense for that. Most tops would love to have the instincts he has for handling a sub. I find it...puzzling a lot of the time.”

“Really?” Tim smiled at her. He was glad there was something she wasn’t good at because most of the time she seemed so effortlessly cool, zipping around zapping the bad guys and being the consummate agent she was.



“Really.” She leaned in again and nudged his shoulder with her own. “Gibbs says...” she paused, and then continued. “Gibbs says I must learn to trust my own instincts more around subs but...I am scared.”

“Why?” Tim blinked. What did she have to be scared about?

“I am scared my own instincts might be...harmful,” she said softly. “And that I might hurt any submissive I cared for.”

“You wouldn’t do that,” Tim said, without any doubt at all. She stared at him thoughtfully.

“You have such confidence in me,” she said.

“Well...no...but...I’ve met some dangerous tops in my time and you...you’re scary in other ways but not like that,” he told her, with a laugh. She gazed at him for a long moment, from those deep, dark brown eyes, and then her face softened.

“Thank you, Tim,” she said. She snuggled down under the bed clothes. “Now, we only have a few hours left if we want to get any sleep,” she said with a grimace. “So I think we must both try harder, yes?”

Tim grinned and nodded. He got up and stripped down to his boxers and a tee shirt and then slipped into the bed beside her. He reached for her, the way he had each night these past few nights, and was as astonished as always that she allowed him to hold her like this. He pulled her close and she came to him, willingly, and he wished she didn’t always have to be asleep when he told her he loved her.

He held her body carefully, like the precious creature she was. If he had a top such as this he would sacrifice his body to her every command, kneel by her side for eternity and die for her if she asked. But she would be gone in the morning. She always was. He’d wake to an empty bed and when he went out into the living area she’d be there, hair tied back, beautiful face emotionless. Nobody knew that she crept into his bed like a scared child at night, and asked to be held.

He buried his face in her dark hair and kissed it. “I love you,” he whispered, and then he stiffened, wondering if she was asleep, because her hand seemed to stroke his, where it was resting on her belly. She said nothing though, and her breathing didn’t change, so he relaxed – she must have been asleep after all.

Tim fell asleep too, easily this time, now that he had her in his bed, and, in the morning, she was gone as he had known she would be. He went out into the living area to find Gibbs sitting at the dining table, making notes on files with impatient flourishes of his hand, his body language radiating his ill humour.

Tony was lying on the couch, face down, reading through a file that was on the floor beneath him. Gibbs had him reading through the personnel files of every single person who had been on Atlantis for the past three and a half years – both military and expeditionary –

even the ones who had left. It was a huge task but one that Tony was doing without complaint. Everyone was walking on eggshells around Gibbs at the moment.

Tony glanced up as he came into the room. "Hey probie," he said, rolling sideways off the couch and getting up with a wince. "You seen Ziva?"

"Me? No...uh...why? Why would you think...uh..." Tim glanced at his bedroom door, wondering, ridiculously, if he'd somehow not noticed that Ziva was still in his room. Not that it would matter if she was, would it? He wondered if Gibbs would mind – his top had firm ideas about his subs taking strangers to their beds, but he'd never said anything about them asking his permission to sleep with each other.

"Relax, probie – it's not an interrogation...although, methinks that maybe the probie has a guilty conscience...hmm? So what's going on, McGee," he said, coming up close, his green eyes surveying Tim with a sharpness that was at odds with his mocking tone of voice. "You been hiding any tops in your room, huh?" Tony asked. "Has the McVirgin finally got laid?"

"DiNozzo – here." Gibbs clicked his fingers and Tony made a face at Tim, and then, with a quick, "I hear you, boss", went over to the table and knelt down beside his top where he was greeted with a firm slap to the back of his head. Tony put his head down obediently, but not before he shot a wicked grin and a lascivious wink in Tim's direction.

Tim felt his face flush – he was sure Tony was just being his usual annoying self and didn't actually \*know\* about his virginal status, but all the same that comment hit too close to home. Gibbs glanced up at him, and Tim felt those steely blue eyes reading him like a book. Gibbs shot him a little smile and Tim realised, with a jolt, that even if Tony had just been guessing, Gibbs definitely knew he was still a virgin.

Ziva, Ducky and Abby joined them a few minutes later, and they set off down to the cafeteria for breakfast. Gibbs released them from their leashes when they got there and sent Tim, Ziva and Ducky to get food for the rest of them. Abby then ran off with a squeal as she saw the tall figure of General Sheppard enter the room, with his leashed husband. They'd been confined to quarters for the past few days and this was their first time out – and Tim knew Abby had missed the irascible scientist. He wasn't sure why the two of them had struck up such a rapport but Abby clearly adored Rodney and the feeling seemed to be entirely mutual.

"Rodney! I missed you," Abby said, wrapping her arms around him after a quick glance at the general to make sure that was okay. Tim stopped on his way back to the table with trays of food for them all and gazed at John Sheppard and his husband, struck by how different they looked.

The general had a prowling, almost predatory quality to him that Tim hadn't noticed before – he also seemed to have had a hair cut. Rodney, on the other hand, was radiating a kind of blissed-out happiness, and looked as if he was walking along on some kind of happy cloud all of his own. His normally coiled-like-a-spring body language had changed and his shoulders were now loose and lacking any kind of tension. He looked more in love with his husband

than ever; their bodies were pressed close against each other, and when they moved they seemed to do so completely in unison.

Tim was about to turn to Tony and say something, when he stopped. Tony and Gibbs were also watching the general and his husband and seeing the same things he was seeing, but Tony's shoulders had tightened into an unhappy knot, while Gibbs looked more intense than usual, his blue eyes cold as ice. Tim noticed that Gibbs was still holding Tony's leash, and the knuckles on the hand he had wrapped around it were white. The tension between Gibbs and Tony was so thick it was almost tangible, and Tim stepped quietly towards them with the tray, wondering what it meant.

They all converged on the same set of tables to eat, and Tim sat down, watching the whole time, fascinated by the strange undercurrents around the table. Rodney's eyes were shining, and the general literally couldn't keep his eyes – or his hands - off him as they shared their breakfast. Tony was leaning against the wall beside Gibbs, standing up as he ate with an air of studied nonchalance that seemed to imply that he was \*choosing\* to eat standing up because he liked the view rather than it being a necessity because his ass was too sore to sit on it. Tim also noticed that Rodney shot Tony a glance or two, and there was clearly no love lost between the two men. The general and Gibbs, on the other hand, seemed to be on good terms.

"I see you fixed that problem you had," Gibbs commented to the general with a grunt.

John gave a smile. "I did – with a little help from you. Thank you again, Agent Gibbs," he murmured. Rodney looked up, wide-eyed, from where he was eating and John's hazel eyes went back to him immediately; the look of intense love he gave his husband almost took Tim's breath away.

"And the hair is a big improvement," Gibbs said. John laughed out loud.

"This is just the way it usually is," he said. "Things have been so hectic lately that I forgot to get it cut before. I got Carson to fix that this morning."

"Yeah, about that," Rodney said, his mouth full, "Carson really isn't a barber you know. I dunno why you asked him to do it."

"Aw, you're just antsy because he's pissed with you for lying to us all," John said, with a grin. Rodney flushed and John laughed at him. "It's okay, Rodney. I'll make sure he doesn't get too terrible a revenge on you next time you visit the infirmary."

"He said he was keeping some medical instruments especially for use on me," Rodney said, gazing at Abby mournfully.

"That doesn't sound so bad," she said.

"He's keeping them in the \*refrigerator\*," Rodney added, a tragic look on his face.

Gibbs laughed out loud at that, and Tim glanced at him in surprise. His normally taciturn boss didn't usually laugh much – and if anyone made him laugh it was Tony. Tim didn't miss the sour look Tony shot in Rodney's direction but it went entirely over Rodney's head. He was just gazing goofily at his husband. Then Tim noticed that Gibbs seemed transfixed by the way the general was petting Rodney, and that was when he noticed that Gibbs \*still\* had his hand wrapped tightly in Tony's leash – although he'd unleashed the rest of them some time ago. He wondered if Ziva knew what was going on because there was definitely \*something\* going on here that he couldn't figure out.

After breakfast Gibbs took them all down to the south pier, the way he did every morning. Atlantis was a beautiful city, and, the way the boss was working them, they mostly only got to see the inside of it. Gibbs didn't leash them for their morning walk – and it wasn't really recreational, as far as Tim could tell – more an opportunity for brainstorming, if anyone's brain could storm anything while trying to keep up with Gibbs because he walked so fast. Gibbs liked to go over all the salient points from the day before and then assign them all their day's new work by the time their walk finished.

They didn't usually start talking about the case until they reached the end of the pier, so the pace wasn't as fast to start with. Tim walked beside Ziva, wishing he could slip his hand into hers and they could stroll along, hand in hand, like lovers. It was an exceptionally lovely day, and Ducky was regaling Abby with a very long, convoluted story about his childhood in Scotland.

Tim let the sound of Ducky's voice wash over him as he gazed out at the ocean. The large yellow Atlantean sun was already high in the sky, while the smaller, more intense white sun was lower on the horizon, but both of them were sending fizzing glints of light over the surface of the blue water.

"Bet you wish you could sail that boat of yours out on a surface like this, huh boss?" Tim overheard Tony say to Gibbs. Gibbs looked, for a moment, almost benign, as he gazed out at the ocean, a soft smile playing on his lips.

"Yeah, Tony. Looks like a great ocean to sail," Gibbs murmured, and then they both leaned forward at the exact same time, in the exact same way, to lean on the balustrade together.

Tim had a sudden flash of insight into a jigsaw puzzle he hadn't even realised he'd been trying to piece together – but then it was gone. He saw a colourful alien bird swooping overhead and pointed up at it. Tony turned to look, taking a step towards him and Ziva, and Tim was about to say something when a loud noise ripped overhead and into him at what felt like one and the same time. He heard someone screaming, and, as he stood there, the entire world seemed to slow down, and everyone started moving as if they were going at half-speed.

He saw Tony, acting without thought or hesitation, throw himself at Gibbs and push the boss to the floor, then roll him over towards the cover of an awning. He saw Ducky seizing Abby and watched them both duck instinctively, then run towards the side of the building and take shelter there. And in the middle of it all was him, standing there while everyone

around him was moving, and there was a pain in his arm and he could feel something warm and wet soaking through his shirt. Then Ziva was shouting something, and she shoved him – hard – and he fell, and in one continuous motion she turned, gun drawn, and was firing up at something.

It was almost comical, lying there, a loud buzzing sound in his ears, watching as DiNozzo rolled off Gibbs, and turned, and then saw him. Tim could see everything so clearly now. Tony's eyes, usually always laughing and teasing, were deadly serious – and kind of worried as he gazed at him. He was shouting something at Tim – something Tim couldn't hear - and seemed to have morphed effortlessly into the fast, deadly agent he became whenever things got serious.

He saw Tony wriggle forward, coming towards him on his stomach, and he wanted to laugh because Tony was a big guy and it looked kind of dumb like that, but then Tony stopped and covered his head with his hands, and there was another loud noise.

Ziva was yelling something and shooting her gun again, and now Tony was wriggling towards him even faster, and had reached him. Behind Tony, Tim saw Gibbs roll onto his feet and get up, in one smooth motion, his gun drawn. He started shooting too, up at the same spot Ziva was shooting at, far above them into one of the gleaming silver towers.

Then Tony was looming over him, blocking out the sun, and his hands were pressing down hard on Tim's upper arm, and that's when Tim realised it really, \*really\* hurt.

"Oh shit...I've got you, Tim. Hold on," Tony said. "Seriously, probie, if you wanted Ziva to notice you I'm sure there are better ways you could have gone about it than getting yourself shot."

And he gave Tim a grin that didn't disguise the worry in his eyes. And before the clarity faded, and everything speeded back up again, Tim wondered why he had never seen before that Tony - annoying, teasing, tormenting Tony - cared about everything and everyone more than anyone was ever supposed to know.

"You like me," he muttered, as his eyes closed.

"Yeah, probie," Tony replied, and his hands closed over Tim's shoulders and Tim felt him pulling him over to the safety of the side of the building, where Ducky and Abby were sheltering out of range of whoever was shooting at them. "Keep it quiet, but I kind of do."

#### Chapter 4 by Xanthe

"Well, Abby confirms it," Tony said, ending his radio conversation with the forensics expert from where she was working in her makeshift lab. "Tim was shot by a P-90."

"General Sheppard said there were no P-90s missing from his armoury," Gibbs snapped, prowling their quarters like a caged tiger, all controlled, angry energy.

Ziva watched him, feeling detached. She would find out what she needed to know, and then she would act.

“There aren’t,” Tony confirmed. “But the fire onboard the Daedalus a few days ago? Funnily enough, it took place right next to the armoury. Door was blown right off by the force of the explosion.”

“The weaponry?” Gibbs asked.

“Things were so badly burned up in there that it’s taken them awhile to go through the inventory. It seems all the weapons are accounted for - except one...”

“P-90,” Gibbs finished, shaking his head grimly. “Looks like that bomb on the Daedalus was more than just a diversion.”

“It’s looking that way, boss,” Tony mused, scratching the side of his face with his pen.

“Tony – get General Sheppard to give me a list of all the men under his command who can shoot moving targets from that kind of range with this kind of weapon,” Gibbs ordered.

“On it, boss,” Tony said, turning away and tapping his radio again.

Ziva closed her eyes momentarily and re-lived the flash of gunfire, seeing the livid red spot that appeared from nowhere on Tim’s shirt. She had turned, locating the shooter by instinct, and fired off some shots before shoving Tim out of the way so he wouldn’t be hit again. Then she had covered Tony while he crawled over to aid Tim. Gibbs had joined her, and they had fired for several minutes until they realised they weren’t getting any returning fire.

Then she, Tony and Gibbs had pursued the shooter while Ducky and Abby had radioed for help and taken care of Tim. General Sheppard had arrived within seconds, and they’d run up to the tower where the shots had emanated from, only to find it empty when they got there.

Ziva wasn’t sure she’d ever seen Gibbs so angry. He’d thumped his hand angrily against the window the shots had been fired from and then had them working it as a crime scene for the next few hours, looking for some clue as to who the shooter had been. So far, they’d drawn a complete blank. This man, whoever he was, seemed to walk around the city leaving no trace of anything. He’d policed his brass and left no fingerprints, or anything else they could use to track him.

“What the hell was the shooter trying to achieve by firing on us?” Tony asked. “He wasn’t a very good shot, either – McGee sustained a minor gunshot wound but none of the rest of us got hit.”

“Maybe he wasn’t intending to hit anyone,” Ducky murmured, from the corner of the room.

Ziva looked up, sharply, to see Gibbs turn and march towards Ducky.

“What are you saying, Ducky?” he demanded.

“I don’t know...just, there was a lot of noise and gunfire and we were in a tight knit group but despite that he only managed to hit one of us – and not a very good hit at that,” Ducky mused. “Why go to all the bother of stealing a weapon if you’re not that good a shot?”

“Maybe he just got lucky,” Tony said.

“Maybe.” Ducky shrugged. “Or unlucky,” he mused, frowning. “Perhaps it was just designed to frighten us off?”

“He thought he’d frighten off NCIS with some random gunfire?” Gibbs said, his tone a combination of disdain and disbelief.

“And how is this linked to the murders?” Tony asked. “Is this our killer, or is this someone else? And if it’s someone else, why the hell does he want us dead?”

“So far, we’ve got a killer who preys on subs, who likes to perform his own autopsies and who can shoot,” Gibbs growled, pacing again. “That makes him what? A soldier with some medical training?”

“You mean like a field medic?” Ducky asked. “It’s possible – Jennifer Keller’s body wasn’t opened up the way a trained medical examiner would open a body, but it was carved into by someone who knew their way around the major organs in the body. As, indeed, were all the other bodies.”

“Tony – find out how many field medics on Atlantis can also shoot and would have known where to find the armoury on the Daedalus and have access to explosives,” Gibbs said. Tony nodded and tapped his radio again, turning away as he did so.

Ziva blinked, and saw a flash of light and Tim standing there, a surprised look on his face, as if he didn’t know he’d been shot. She blinked again, fast, trying to clear the image but it wouldn’t go away. Someone had shot him. Someone had tried to kill him - and she would have to kill someone for that. It was her right. She felt a surge of darkness deep inside, and smiled to herself. This was one thing she understood, one thing she was good at. She would go out there, find this person, and slide her knife between his ribs. She would carve into him until he was begging her for death but his death would be slow and painful. She would make sure of that.

She got up and began walking to the door...then stopped, as someone stepped out in front of her, blocking her way. Gibbs.

“Where the hell do you think you’re going?” he asked sharply.

“To visit McGee in the infirmary,” she replied coolly.

“No you’re not.”

“You cannot stop me,” she said, her mouth twisting into a dark little smile.

“The hell I can’t. Tim McGee is my sub, Ziva, in case you’ve forgotten, and it’s my collar he wears around his neck,” Gibbs told her, and she almost missed the note of danger in his tone. “Nobody goes to see my sub when he’s injured without my permission – got that?”

“Dr Beckett says he’ll be fine, my dear,” Ducky told her, from where he was sitting at the table. “It was a clean wound – he lost some blood but he’s been stitched up now. Carson says he can return to quarters tomorrow, Ziva.” His tone was placatory. She glanced at him over Gibbs’s shoulder, her gaze cool and dispassionate.

“All the same, I will see him,” she said in a cold, hard tone.

“Not like this you won’t,” Gibbs growled, and he took hold of her arm and physically thrust her into his bedroom, shutting the door angrily behind him. “Snap out of it!” he told her, clicking his fingers hard in front of her face. She didn’t even flinch at the sound. She was a long way away, somewhere dark, cold and familiar. She liked it here – it felt good.

“I will see Tim, and then I will kill whoever did this to him,” she said, as if it was that simple.

“And then what? You go back to McGee full of bloodlust and rip him open with your teeth?” Gibbs asked. “Listen to me, Ziva David, you’re not going anywhere near McGee when you’re like this. You’ll terrify him half to death, and he’ll never come near you again. You want that? Huh? You want to scare him so much he flinches whenever you go near him?”

She gazed at him steadily, trying to process what he was telling her.

“You have a choice – right here, right now,” Gibbs told her, in a low, urgent tone. “I know you like Tim, and I know he sure as hell likes you. I know you’ve been sneaking into his room at night, and I know he lets you.”

That registered. She moved her head to look at him more closely. “How do you know this?”

“I know everything,” he told her, with a wave of her hand, as if that explained it. “Listen, Ziva – this is the moment, right here, when you decide what kind of a top you want to be. You can still have Tim, if you want him, but if you do, if you really do, then you have to learn to control what’s inside of you, and I don’t see you doing that right now.”

“Tim is mine,” she said, robotically. “And someone tried to kill him. I will have my revenge and I will...”

“No, he’s not,” Gibbs interrupted her. “Tim McGee is mine, right up until the time he takes off that collar around his neck, or I take it off for him. Understood?”

Her brain took a moment to process that. She was surprised to realise that what Gibbs was



saying was correct. Tim wasn't hers. She hadn't claimed him. She hadn't even slept with him. She closed her eyes, and saw red blood staining his shirt, and his eyes, those beautiful green eyes, wide with pain and surprise as he looked at her. When she opened her eyes again, Gibbs was standing in her space, his face too close, his gaze scorching her with its intensity.

"Now you want him, you can win him – I've no doubt about that," Gibbs told her. "But first you have to win that battle with yourself. Can you do that, Ziva? Can you be what he needs you to be, and not what you've been in the past?"

"I...I do not know," she said, feeling the darkness subside into a dull ache in the pit of her belly. "I want blood for this," she whispered. "I want to make someone pay."

"Yeah, well, we don't have anyone who fits the bill right now," Gibbs snapped. "But we do have an injured sub lying in an infirmary bed who could use a friendly word from the top he's crazy about."

"I..." She hesitated. "I want to hurt someone," she murmured. "Supposing it is him I hurt?"

She did want to hurt him. She wanted to hurt him for scaring her, for making her care about him, and then for nearly dying. She wanted to hurt him as she had hurt Ari – she had loved her half-brother and he had betrayed her. That was what love did – it made you weak. You had to destroy the other person before they destroyed you. She dug her fingernails into her palms. Would she really do that? Would she go to Tim's bedside and deliberately hurt him because she was too scared to love him?

Gibbs gave her a cold, hard look. "Right here, right now – you make that decision, Ziva, because I'm not letting you leave this room until you do."

She swallowed hard, and felt little droplets of blood run down her palms from where she was digging her fingernails into the skin.

"I used to have a dog, when I was child," she whispered. "I loved that dog so much but...I used to hit him, just so I could kiss him after and make him love me again. And he did. He loved me so much that he just took it, and every time I hurt him, I would see that look in his eyes. Betrayal, pain...maybe I just like seeing that look," she murmured.

"Maybe you do." Gibbs took a step forward, crushing her into a little space between him and the wall behind her. "Tim McGee is a gentle soul, Ziva. He's not like you, or me, or Tony. He's not as tough, or as sure of himself. And he's not one of those subs you can take to your bed and hurt because they like it because he doesn't want that. He's not one of those vicious lost souls you seem to have an instinct for picking up, either. You don't slap him around, and tear into him, and fight him into submission. He's not like that. He's inexperienced and he's scared. You need to figure out whether you can gently take him to a place where he'll eat out of your hand, and you have to decide if you're worthy of him, because if you get him eating out of your hand and then you turn on him, I promise you, I *will* track you down and I *will* make you suffer for that. Understood?"

She felt suddenly frightened – not of Gibbs but of herself. Was she really that dark inside? Was she so far gone that she'd hurt someone as kind and trusting as Tim McGee? She remembered his big, innocent green eyes and she wanted, suddenly, to take him in her arms and kiss him, and tell him it was going to be okay. She didn't want to hurt him - she wanted to take care of him. She wanted to love him.

"Okay...you're back with us," Gibbs said, taking a step back. "Now, you make this decision once and for all, Ziva – who are you? Are you someone I can trust, or are you always going to be fighting your dark side? Because I think you can beat it, but you need to step up to the plate and do it. Make your choice, Ziva, and make it now. Who are you? Who are you in here?" He tapped her chest, over her heart, with one hard, pointed finger.

"I am Ziva David. I am a Mossad agent and an NCIS agent. And I would like to be...I would like to be Tim McGee's top," she told him, liking the way that sounded.

"You think you can go down there and be the kind of top he needs right now?" he demanded. "Because that's what a good top does – they put the needs of their sub before their own."

She lowered her head and gazed at the ground, then took a deep breath and looked up again. This man, he was always getting into her head and into her space and forcing her to make the hard decisions. He was so demanding and uncompromising and he saw something in her that she did not even see in herself. He had put his collar on her, and brought her into his team and helped her belong just when she had lost her old family and all her old certainties.

He was always needling her, to bring out the best in her, and with him she felt known. He was a top, like her, and a top who had seen and suffered so much. He had gone through the tough times and come out the other side like this – wounded, for sure - but battle hardened and tempered by his experiences. He understood her - she could see that when she looked in his eyes. There wasn't any part of being a top he didn't understand, and maybe this was a battle he'd had to fight with himself too, a long time ago.

"Yes," she said firmly, seeing the one thing she needed in his eyes – his faith in her and his determination that she would \*not\* fail. "Yes, I can be that top," she said. The darkness in her belly dissipated a little. She knew it would always be there, and she would always struggle to control it, but she also knew now that she \*could\* fight that battle and win - and she had never been sure about that before.

"Okay...then you can see him." Gibbs stepped back, and gestured with his head at the door. "But you see this through, Ziva. Don't make him want you and then decide you can't be bothered with this kind of sub. He'll never be a warrior, like you. He's a different kind of soul – but he'll give you his devotion for the rest of his life if you let him. Don't ever throw that back at him."

"I would not," she whispered, suddenly awe-struck by how she felt. Tim McGee had been

under her nose the whole time, wanting to give her what she needed – love, loyalty and every ounce of devotion in his steadfast soul. And all this time she'd turned her nose up at such a gift. She was an idiot. They weren't mismatched at all; he was \*exactly\* the kind of sub she needed to take her out of herself and make her laugh, to bring a lightness into her life, and to make her feel loved.

She walked slowly out of the door and down to the infirmary. This was important – she had to do it right. This was about Tim as much as it was about herself and she knew how scared he was of tops, and how much he feared his own sexuality.

Tim was sitting up in bed, his arm in a sling, his face so pale that it made his eyes – those beautiful eyes – look lovelier than ever. Those same eyes lit up when she came into the room and she felt her heart break a little. How could she ever have dismissed his devotion so casually? He was beautiful, and he could be hers if she went gently with him. Being gentle was a new thing for her – she who threw her subs to the ground and took what she wanted from them. It felt...surprisingly good.

“Hey,” she said softly, and she leaned over and kissed him on the lips, just a little affectionate kiss, and it felt good to be able to touch him.

“Hey.” He looked up at her, a dazed expression on his face. “I was wondering if you'd come and see me. All the others have been.”

“I know. I...wanted to wait until I was feeling less upset.”

“You were upset? About me?” he asked, those large, expressive eyes full of hope. She sat down beside the bed and took his hand in her own.

“I was. I was angry that someone had hurt you, and I was worried that you were in pain.”

“You were?” He looked surprised, and she squeezed his fingers gently with her own.

“Yes. I was,” she told him softly. “Tim...I have Gibbs's permission to stay here and to watch over you. Is that okay with you?”

“Um...well, yes – that's fine,” he said, looking tired but happy. “Tony likes me,” he told her, conversationally. “He's trying to deny it now – he says I was delirious at the time and misheard, but he definitely said he likes me.”

“Of course he likes you,” Ziva chuckled. “He always has. You did not know that?”

Tim frowned. “Do I miss everything?”

“Well...maybe you are not quite as observant as Tony or myself, but you are getting there,” she said smoothing her hand through his short hair. He grinned at her, and then suppressed a yawn. “You must be exhausted – Carson says you lost quite a bit of blood. Why don't you sleep,” she said to him. “I will stay here with you.”

He nodded and closed his eyes, then opened them again. "You won't go while I'm sleeping will you?"

"No," she promised.

"Not even if they find out who shot me?" he asked.

She thought about that for a moment, and how it would feel to allow Gibbs and Tony to take her revenge for her and for that particular bloodlust to be forever unsatisfied, and found that she didn't care. Tim needed her right now and the others could take care of their murderer if they found him.

"No. Not even then," she said. "Here - let me show you." She climbed onto the bed and lay down next to him, then put her arms around him and held him close, going gently, taking care of his injured arm.

He gave a little sigh and relaxed against her, and she thought of all the recent nights when he had held her, and kept her demons at bay. Now she would do the same for him.

His breathing slowed and deepened as he fell asleep. She moved one finger, stroking his hand with it tenderly, and as she did so she pressed her nose against his short hair and breathed in the scent of him. She thought of the many times he had done this to her over the past few days, thinking she was asleep, and that made her think of something else he also did when he thought she was asleep. She smiled, and snuggled in even closer, watching over him and keeping him safe.

"I love you," she whispered.

~\*~

Abby sat on the floor of her room, knees under her chin, gazing out at the moonlit ocean beneath her. She usually liked to sit on her balcony, enjoying the warm, soft sea breeze before she went to bed, but Gibbs had forbidden them to sit out now that pot shots were being taken at them. Their balconies were only partially overlooked from other areas of the city and any such shot would be almost impossible, but Gibbs wasn't taking any chances.

The ocean, which she'd loved so much since arriving here, now looked dark and unfriendly. This whole city, so beautiful, rising out of the sea with its silver turrets, full of technological wonders, had now turned into something more sinister. Someone was stalking through its hallways, murdering people in their rooms and workplaces, and taking shots at her and her friends. She didn't feel safe here any more.

She remembered when she'd received a death threat before testifying in court once, and had stayed in the elevator for hours, going up and down endlessly, sitting at the back on the carpeted floor, too afraid to leave. Gibbs had come to sit with her for some of the time; he'd put his arm around her shoulder and she'd snuggled in close because Gibbs was the only

person who could ever make her feel safe. With Gibbs beside her she knew she'd never come to any harm; he just wouldn't allow it.

She ran her fingers over his collar, gratefully. She was lucky he let her wear it. She remembered how he'd put it on her, several years' ago. She'd been at NCIS for a few months and had a sneaking envy for the fact that Ducky and the field agent Stan Burley both got to wear Gibbs's collars. She'd done some good work and Gibbs seemed pleased with her, and she had been going through a tough time after breaking up with yet another totally unsuitable top.

"You do seem to attract 'em, Abs," Gibbs had told her in her lab one day, giving her that unnerving look – the one that seemed to reach into her soul and lay it bare, so she felt she had no secrets. "What the hell was there about this top that you thought she was worth taking all this crap for?"

"I like to give people a chance," Abby replied. "And she was nice to me. Well, at first. And she's a Goth, like me, so I thought we had a lot in common."

"And she owns her own funeral home," Gibbs commented mildly, with just a hint of a grin on his lips. Abby rolled her eyes.

"Okay, so the thought of us sharing a coffin at night was pretty hot – at first," she said, grinning back at him because this one had hurt, and it was easier to laugh about it than cry. "I thought I'd met a kindred spirit, Gibbs!"

"A kindred spirit who cleaned out your bank account to keep her funeral home in business when the bank called in her loan," Gibbs said, with a shrug.

"Yeah. That's the bit where I figured out that she and I were doomed."

"No it's not, Abs. If it were, you and I wouldn't be having this conversation," Gibbs told her, an uncompromising look in his eyes.

What conversation? Abby wondered. They just seemed to be chatting – it didn't seem to be a special kind of conversation.

"But you were still seeing her and still making excuses for her when she kidnapped you and drove you to your mom's house at gunpoint to try and scam \*her\* out of her life savings as well."

"Well, Gloria wasn't suckered in," Abby said, as if that made everything all right. Gloria had known something was up because Abby had signed her and Cicely hadn't figured out what she was signing. Gloria had gone into the bathroom and texted Gibbs on her cellphone.

"Gloria is a smart lady." Gibbs shook his head. "Smarter than her daughter," he added.

"Gibbs! I was blinded by love!" Abby declared. "I didn't know Cecily was going to turn out to

be some crazy psycho grifter!”

“I could have told you,” Gibbs said. “I DID tell you as I recall.”

“Not that she was a crazy psycho grifter!” Abby protested.

“Nope – that she was trouble and you should stay away from her,” Gibbs reminded her.

“Abby, I know you’re attracted to the crazy ones. I know you’re a sucker for a sob story – the sobbier the better.”

“I don’t think there’s such a word as ‘sobbier’,” Abby retorted, turning away from him to work in a different area of her lab because she really didn’t want to hear this. Whenever she turned he was in her face again, the little smile on his lips softening the hardness in his eyes.

“I don’t think crazy is what you really want, underneath,” Gibbs said. “You just feel sorry for these tops because they’re outsiders and you think nobody ever gave them a chance. I don’t think you even consider that maybe they’ve had dozens of chances and nobody’ll give ‘em any more because they are beyond help; nobody except you that is.”

“Well, that’s just the way I am,” Abby declared. “I don’t DO boring, Gibbs. I want something different, something cool and unusual. I want...”

“To be safe,” he finished for her. “Because that’s what I keep reading from you, Abby, and yet you keep on choosing the kind of tops who put you in danger.”

“I don’t mean to,” she said, feeling a little contrite because he had had to rescue her from her mom’s house and then he’d nearly been mown down by Cecily’s hearse as the psycho top from hell had made her getaway.

“I know.” He shrugged. She liked the way he said that – it was never a flat statement with Gibbs – he always put a little inflection in it that made it seem like he DID know, that he always knew everything. “So I was thinking about a way we could keep you safe – which you want and god knows I want – while still giving you the opportunity to at least flirt with crazy and exciting – the way you want but I’m less keen on.” He gave a wry grin at that.

“What did you have in mind?” She put down the evidence bag she was holding and gazed at him, puzzled.

“My collar.” He took a plain, black, leather collar out of his jacket pocket.

“How romantic!” she laughed.

“Nothing romantic about it – just practical,” he told her. “Like with Ducky and with Stan. I’m not taking any subs to my bed but...”

“Which is a pity, Gibbs – you must get lonely,” she said, eyes wide and sympathetic. “And you’re nice – you deserve someone really special.”

“Been there, done that, got the alimony payments to prove it,” he told her with a wry grin.

“So how would this collar work then?” she asked, frowning. People did have all kinds of arrangements but mostly tops collared subs they were sleeping with. She wasn’t sure about Ducky but she knew Gibbs definitely wasn’t sleeping with Stan because the field agent had told her so.

“If you wear it, then you’re my sub – like Ducky and Stan. No sex, no sharing a plate or any of that stuff. But the collar might scare off some of the more insane tops you seem to attract – all I’ll ask is that if you want to date someone, you introduce me first. I say they’re crazy, you don’t date ‘em.” Gibbs shrugged.

“That’s all?” Abby picked up the collar and held it in her fingers. There was something appealing about the idea. She’d envied Ducky his collar for ages, and she knew the love between him and Gibbs, though deep and abiding, wasn’t essentially sexual in nature.

“Well, that and discipline,” he grinned at her. She felt her stomach do a flip. “Easy,” he laughed. “The rules will be simple – I’ll only spank you if you lie to me or disobey my direct order. That’s it. Oh, and if you get in any trouble with the Director, he’ll have to come through me to deal with you because nobody else is laying a finger on you. But you’re a good girl, Abs – you don’t get into trouble. And I promise you that if you do I’ll always be on your side.”

He would as well. She could sense that. He was the kind of top who didn’t let a sub get away with any kind of shit, but he’d also stick with you, no matter how badly you screwed up.

She was shocked by how much she wanted this. Okay, so it wasn’t \*ideal\*, and it certainly wasn’t what she’d imagined it would be like to be collared, but it was...kind of nice.

“You intend to collar all your team?” she asked. “First Ducky, then Stan, and now me?”

Gibbs grinned. “It helps knowing you all answer only to me – that there are no other tops on the scene. Means I can keep you all safe and focussed on the job.”

“Heh – slavedriver!” she said. He laughed at that. She wasn’t sure why he’d collared Ducky, but she knew that Stan had struggled with alcoholism and Gibbs had put his collar on him to help keep him clean. It was working as well; Stan hadn’t touched a drink in two years and was proving to be an excellent agent. She also knew that Stan had been offered a new job and she wondered what would happen then. “If Stan takes this job he’s been offered, will you take his collar away from him?” she asked.

“Yeah. Can’t keep him collared if he’s working hundreds of miles away.” Gibbs shrugged. “But it’s done its job – time for Stan to move on.”

Abby knew that while Stan really appreciated what Gibbs had done for him, he needed to find someone whose collar would be more than platonic; both he and Gibbs were in

agreement on that.

"I'll miss Stan," she sighed.

"I know."

"Will you get a new field agent?" She didn't like new people; it took ages to get used to them.

"I guess." He shrugged. "I'm up to my eyeballs in resumes at the moment – boring as hell."

"Poor Gibbs." Abby fingered the collar thoughtfully. She wondered if he'd given his spouses plain black leather collars as well, or something more personally meaningful to them. Then she wondered why he HAD so many ex-spouses. He was a nice guy – why did his marriages always fail? Ducky had worn his collar for years and clearly loved him, and Stan had always worn his collar with pride as well. Maybe Gibbs was better at collaring subs than marrying them.

"Think about it, Abby," Gibbs told her. "No need to rush into it. And if it doesn't work out – there's no pressure. You can just repudiate the collar. Maybe you'll find the right kind of top and want to take their collar in time."

"With your help?" She raised a cheeky eyebrow. He grinned at her and kissed her forehead.

"I just want to keep you safe, Abs," he replied, walking towards the door. She knew he did, and she couldn't help wondering what it would be like to be the collared sub of a man like Gibbs, to walk on the end of his leash beside Ducky and Stan. "Like I said, you think about it and..."

She reached the door before him, running at full pelt, so fast that he almost tripped over her as she knelt down in front of him and held up the collar.

"I've thought about it," she said. "Yes please!"

He laughed out loud at that. "You sure, Abs?" He stroked her dark hair.

"Positive! It all sounds really cool – uh, except for the discipline part so if you ever have to spank me please go easy on me."

"Well..." he paused in opening the buckle on the collar. "I can't promise that, Abs. Never disciplined a sub yet and went easy on 'em. Can't see the point of it. It's confusing to the sub and doesn't get the job done. If they don't deserve a spanking don't give them one, and if they do, then do it properly. Still want to wear the collar?" He held it up, a question in his eyes.

She thought about it for a moment. She wasn't the kind of naughty sub who was always getting into trouble – she wondered how Gibbs would handle that kind of sub and thought



it'd be fun to watch. But she wasn't like that, so she thought she was safe.

"Yes," she said thoughtfully. "I'll just have to trust you."

"That's all I ask." He fastened the cool leather of the collar around her neck and buckled it into place. She placed her hands over his where they were working.

"Your hands are strange," she said. He raised an amused eyebrow, clearly wondering if this was going off into some crazy Abby place.

"In what way?" he asked. "Or am I going to regret that question?"

"No...it's just, I'd have thought a man like you – you know, ex-military, law enforcement, big bad top and all that...that you'd have these big, blunt hands but you don't. You have quite creative hands."

She took hold of one and examined it. They were quite square and neat, the palms flat and smooth, the nails clean and trimmed.

Then she realised something; these were hands that sanded down boats, lovingly crafting shape from raw wood. And these were hands that were used to holding a sniper's rifle, taking their time, being patient, waiting for the right moment to strike before quietly and efficiently squeezing around a trigger.

They were subtle hands, expert hands, not blunt instruments. She wondered what these hands would feel like making love to a submissive, running over a bound, naked body, full of intent and purpose, and she gave an involuntary shiver. These hands were beautiful but frightening. She didn't think they were hands she wanted spanking her or claiming her, but they *were* hands she wanted keeping her safe. She raised the hand she was holding to her lips and kissed it, then glanced up at him.

"Thank you, Gibbs," she said.

"You're welcome, Abby," he replied, and then he lifted her chin and kissed her gently on the lips for the first time.

Abby smiled at the memory, and then got up from where she was sitting. It was late, but not time for bed yet. She'd heard Gibbs and Tony return about half an hour ago but hadn't wanted to move from the quiet spot in the corner by the window where she'd been sitting. Gibbs had poked his head around the door anyway, to check she was alright, and she'd seen the spark of concern in his eyes that she was sitting in the dark with her knees pressed up against her chin, but she'd waved him away.

Now she felt lonely – and a little afraid. Ducky was spending the evening with his new friend, Richard Woolsey – she wasn't sure what was going on between them but she had noticed that Ducky walked around humming a lot these days. Ziva was spending the night in the infirmary with Tim. That had taken her by surprise; Tim's hopeless infatuation with Ziva

was pretty obvious but she'd never seen any evidence that Ziva returned his feelings.

Tony and Gibbs had been working late, questioning all the marines on the base about their medical expertise and their ability with a P-90, and she'd been alone in their quarters for a few hours now.

Rodney had asked her if she wanted to spend the evening with him and John but she'd declined. Whatever had happened between them during their four days confined to quarters seemed to have affected them profoundly, and right now she was pretty sure they wanted to be alone together.

She went out into the living area and paused in the doorway. Gibbs was sitting in the armchair, reading through his notes. He was at least wearing his reading glasses, which always made her chuckle because he did like to pretend he didn't need them. He had one leg crossed over the other knee, and his elbow was resting on the arm of the chair, one finger tapping the side of his jaw as he read.

Tony was lying on the floor at Gibbs's feet. He was on his stomach, which was pretty much his main position these days when he wasn't standing, and she wanted to feel sorry for him but he seemed fine with it and never complained so she thought that maybe it was what he wanted – or needed – or something like that anyway. He was wearing a pair of faded jeans and a black shirt, and he was reading another one of the stacks of personnel files Gibbs was making him go through. There was a huge pile of unread ones beside him to his right, a smaller pile of ones he'd finished to his left, and an even smaller pile of ones he'd read but thought might be hinky in the middle. When he was done with one, he took it and put it on one of the other piles.

What struck her though, was that he was resting his chin on Gibbs's boot, the file lying open in front of him, and they both looked so comfortable, utterly at ease with each other. If Abby hadn't known better she'd have assumed they were sleeping together, and that Tony was Gibbs's sub in every sense of the word. They just looked like a dominant and a submissive should look – the sub resting on the floor at the dom's feet, chin on his boot, and the dom comfortable with that, unmoving, neither of them speaking.

She stood there for a long moment, just watching them, and she felt another pang of loneliness.

Gibbs became aware of her, and he looked up and gave her a smile.

"Hey," he said softly. "You okay, Abs?"

"I...I'm kind of feeling creeped out," she admitted. "People getting carved up in their quarters, and then someone taking a shot at Tim...it doesn't feel very safe around here any more."

She hugged her arms around her body. She knew she could take care of herself if push came to shove – she had done it before when some bad guys had captured her - but that didn't

stop her being scared anyway. She remembered those gunshots and the way Tony, Ziva and Gibbs had immediately leapt into action, and how Tim had looked lying on the ground with blood soaking through his shirt.

“You want to sleep in my room tonight?” Gibbs asked her, and it was tempting. She knew he’d just hold her all night and she’d be safe because nobody would get past Gibbs to get to her. She was about to say ‘yes’ when she saw the look in Tony’s eyes. He wouldn’t say anything, and she knew he wouldn’t begrudge her, but it would hurt him all the same.

“No.” She shook her head. “I’ll be fine. Really.” She turned to go back to her room.

“You want to spend the night in Colonel Lorne’s room, Abs?” Gibbs asked, and she felt her stomach do a flip. She turned back.

“You think he’d mind?” she asked.

She saw Lorne every day as he had taken it upon himself to be her bodyguard, with Gibbs’s permission, and she loved their easy banter and the way his eyes followed her around the room. She hadn’t had a whole lot of free time but she’d spent a couple of evenings with him when Gibbs wasn’t working them all to the bone. She liked him more and more but somehow that made it harder to take the next step. She couldn’t believe this was for real; she’d never met anyone who made her feel like this and she kept waiting for the crazy shit to start and for it all to fall apart. He’d been patient, never going further than she wanted to go, which had only been a few kisses and the feel of his fingers tightening on her wrists so far. He never asked for more though, just sat back and let her dictate the pace.

Tony laughed out loud, rolling over to look at her properly. “Mind? I think he’d be ecstatic,” he said.

“Cool!” she grinned, walking towards the main door to their quarters.

“Not so fast, Abs – Tony will take you there,” Gibbs said, gesturing with his head. Tony got to his feet and sauntered over to her. “After this morning we can’t take any chances.”

“But then Tony will have to come back alone,” she said, terrified of losing any of them. “And you remember what that strange old lady said the first night we got here, Gibbs? She said something about you arriving with five and leaving with one. Supposing that’s what’s happening? Supposing we’re going to be picked off, one by one, and Tim was just the first?”

“Well, first off...” Gibbs said, standing up. “McGee isn’t dead – he’ll be fine. And secondly, Tony is a trained field agent who knows how to use a gun and you aren’t. Thirdly, Tony has twenty minutes to take you there and come back and if he isn’t back by then I’ll call General Sheppard and get a consignment of marines to go looking for him. Does that make you feel better?”

Abby thought about it for a moment and then nodded. Gibbs laughed out loud. He came over to where she was standing and gave her a little kiss on the lips, the way he always did

when he wanted to reassure her. She had no idea why people found him so scary – he was always so loving and protective of her.

She left their quarters with Tony at her side.

“So...looks like you’ll have the place to yourselves tonight,” she told him, with a mischievous sideways glance at him. “Just you and Gibbs – alone together. Don’t do anything I wouldn’t, Tony!”

“Yeah, right. No chance of that,” he sighed. “It’s just such a waste, you know. Nice looking top like him, in his prime, five subs and none of us get to warm his bed. The man’s self-control must be...”

“Legendary. I know.” Abby nodded. “But he’s been burned in the past, Tony, you know that. All those ex-spouses...”

“Yeah.” Tony nodded. “But what happened before then, Abby? That’s what I want to know.”

Abby stopped and looked up at him. “What do you mean?”

“I’ve done some digging but I can’t get anyone to talk. Ducky clearly knows but won’t say anything, obviously, and sometimes I think Ziva knows – but if she does, she also knows that Gibbs will kill her if she says anything. Gibbs says he’s been married three times but I’ve found four marriage certificates...”

“Tony!” Abby was shocked. “Gibbs really won’t like it if he knows you’ve done this kind of checking up on him.”

“I know,” Tony sighed. “That’s why I stopped there. But all the same, it’s driving me crazy. Why is he lying about that? What’s he hiding?”

“I don’t know, but if he doesn’t want to tell us then we have to accept that,” Abby replied. She saw the look in his eyes and reached out a hand to touch his cheek. “You really like him, don’t you, Tony?”

“Just the challenge of trying to get into the pants of a top I’ve never had before,” he told her, with a wink. “Never yet had one who turned me down.”

Abby gazed at him, feeling kind of sorry for him. “Well, you do keep on trying. Maybe he’s the kind of top who needs to chase a sub – did you ever think of that?”

“You mean I should stop flirting with him?” Tony asked.

“Well...if you can. I mean, flirting with Gibbs does seem to be like eating and breathing for you so you might not be able to do it,” she grinned.

He thought about it for a moment. “I could try,” he said at last. “Maybe if I play hard to get

he'll come around, huh?"

"Maybe," Abby said, although privately she thought it unlikely. Gibbs had been very clear on this topic when he'd collared her, and she was pretty sure he'd given Tony the same talk. "You know, Tony, first thing you did when those gunshots rang out this morning was push him to safety and throw yourself on top of him to shield him," she said. Tony gave her a blank stare.

"Just a reflex," he said, with a shrug.

"Okay," she said, unconvinced. "If that's the way you want to play it."

"Don't do love, Abby – never have," Tony told her. "Tops always let you down in the end anyway."

"How would you know?" She raised an eyebrow at him. "Seriously, Tony – you've never been in a relationship long enough to have one cheat on you."

"And that's exactly the way I want to keep it," he told her with a grin.

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They reached Lorne's door and she knocked on it nervously, wondering if he'd really be pleased to see her. He opened it and her heart skipped a beat. He was wearing a pair of faded denim jeans and nothing else – nothing on his chest, which was broad, smooth and well muscled, and nothing on his feet either.

"Oh...uh..." she stared at him blankly.

"Don't know what you see in him, Abs," Tony whispered wickedly in her ear, and she saw his eyes flicker appreciatively over Lorne's attractive body as well.

"Is everything okay, Abby?" Lorne said, reaching for a shirt and starting to pull it on.

"NO! Uh...I mean, you don't have to get dressed on my account – just stay half-naked...oh, shit, that sounded SO wrong," she muttered. Lorne laughed but he held off putting the shirt on, which pleased her.

"What's going on?" Lorne glanced from Abby to Tony, and back again.

"I was just...with what happened to Tim, I didn't want to be alone tonight," she murmured, feeling like a total idiot now. What kind of a needy sub turned up like this on the doorstep of the top she'd only dated a few times, and gibbered at him like an imbecile?

"Is Gibbs okay with this?" Lorne asked. Tony nodded.

"She's just a bit freaked out – we all are. I think she could use the company – Gibbs and I

aren't much fun at the moment."

"Would it be okay to spend the night here?" Abby asked shyly. "I think I'd feel safe here. Nothing hinky! Just to sleep – if that's okay?"

"Sure." Lorne stepped to one side and she tiptoed into the room, looking around her, then gave Tony a wave. He winked at her, a sexy twinkle in his eyes, and then he was gone. Lorne closed the door behind him, and then turned to her.

"You sure about this, Abs?" he asked, and she liked the way he called her 'Abs'.

"Yes...no...just..." She was surprised to find herself crying. "Tim is one of my best friends," she choked. His strong arms were around her in seconds and she burrowed her face into his bare chest, feeling like an idiot. "There was a lot of blood...I thought he was dead..."

"Hey, it's okay. He's okay. Doc said he'd be okay didn't he?" Lorne stroked her hair softly.

"Yeah, but it all happened so fast...someone \*shot\* at us, Evan, at all of us. Supposing I'd lost them? They're my family. And there was that crazy old lady on the mainland last week telling Gibbs he'd lose us all and I'm so freaked out. I don't feel safe, Evan."

He pulled back so that he could look into her eyes.

"I have an idea for something that would make you feel safe," he said softly. "If you trust me? I think it'd work."

"What is it?" she frowned.

"Do you trust me?" he asked. She gazed into his clear blue eyes and knew she did.

"Okay," she whispered.

"Will you let me undress you?" he asked. "I won't do anything you don't want me to – promise."

"Okay," she said again. She knew she wanted to sleep with him – she longed to feel his hands on her body, exploring and teasing her, but it still seemed like too big a step to take. Lorne wasn't like the crazy people she'd dated – he was nice, and normal, and fun, and if she started subbing to him she thought maybe she'd fall in love with him, and that thought scared the hell out of her. "Maybe I'm more like Tony than I think," she murmured, with a jolt of surprise.

"What?" Lorne was grinning down at her.

"Nothing. It's fine. You can undress me," she said, nodding firmly.

"Good...now...I want you to stand here, and close your eyes," he whispered, and she felt his

fingers brush some of her hair away from her face. It was the first little order he'd given her and she felt a thrill of anticipation, wondering what would come next.

She closed her eyes and stood there, swaying slightly. She heard him move around the room, and get something out of a drawer. Then he was back.

"Okay – open them," he said, and she gave a little gasp when she obeyed. He'd turned the lights down low, and lit some candles. The room looked smaller, more intimate. She gazed at the bed, which was now covered with a crimson fleecy throw.

"I'm going to undress you," he whispered, and she felt her body loosening in anticipation. "Keep your eyes open for this part. I'll tell you when to close them again."

He smoothed his long, artistic fingers over her blouse, and she shivered. He undid a button, and then another, and his fingers strayed beneath the fabric, stroking her gently. She started to relax; this was going to be good.

He finished unbuttoning her blouse, and then pulled it open and slowly stripped it from her shoulders. She was wearing a lacy black bra underneath, and he stroked the lace with his fingertips, gently smoothing over her breasts, pausing just for a second on the nipples. She gave a gasp and looked into his eyes, to find them gazing at her body. She liked the way he was looking at her – like she was special, but with the intent look of a top who really knew how to take care of a sub.

He traced the bra around her back and then opened it, expertly, and pulled it forward, liberating her breasts. Then he dropped the bra on the floor and stood back, gazing at her newly released breasts.

"I always knew they were pretty," he said, in a throaty tone. She swallowed hard, unable to take her eyes off him. He reached out and gently touched his fingertips to her nipples, stroking just a little, and she moaned. "This okay, Abby? Tell me if you want me to stop."

"No...it's good," she whispered.

He took her breasts in his hands and caressed them gently, rolling them with firm, strong strokes of his fingers. She relaxed even more.

"Okay...now..." His fingers dipped lower and undid her belt and soon that was on the floor too. Her short plaid skirt followed suit, and then she was standing there, in her panties, her knee high leather boots, and her collar.

He knelt down and unzipped her boots and then helped her step out of them. Next, he hooked his thumbs into her panties, and she shivered.

"Want me to stop?" he asked, pausing.

"No...s'good," she said, wondering where this was going. He slid her panties down her legs,

and she stepped out of them, now completely naked apart from her collar which she knew he wouldn't touch.

He moved over to a box on the table and pulled out a length of rope.

"Stand still," he told her. He placed the rope on her body, wrapped it up, under one breast, and then down the other side, circling her as he worked. Then he fastened it, pulling it tight enough that she could feel it firmly encasing her, but not so tight as to be uncomfortable.

"What's this stuff?" she asked, caressing the strands with her fingers.

"Special jute rope for tying up subs in beautiful poses," he told her. "I'm a devotee of Shinzoic rope bondage, Abby."

"Really?" She felt surprised. "You don't strike me as being a Shinzoic Grand Master or whatever they're called."

"I'm not," he grinned. "I'm not into all the other disciplines – all the leash etiquette and total submission and domination, and subs and doms moving as one being and all that shit. I just like bondage – and they do have some really cool ideas on bondage. You okay with this?"

She nodded, intrigued. She loved bondage as much as he clearly did, and she was intrigued as to where this was going. She had been tied before, many times, but usually with cuffs and chains – this was different.

"Okay then - let me show you what I can do."

"You are full of surprises," she said.

He grinned and continued circling her, pulling the ropes into patterns.

"I like the way it makes a sub look, Abby...I like the pretty patterns and how the flesh is visible between the sections of rope, squeezed here and there. All I'm doing now is tying you into position – another time, I could tie you a different way...a way that would make you feel vulnerable and exposed...but today, I want to make you feel safe. You like being tied, and this is a beautiful way to be tied."

He continued criss-crossing her with rope, pulling and tightening in places, and she loved the little brush of his fingers on her body. He tied her arms down the side of her torso, and crossed the rope over and under her breasts, squeezing them a little in a way that felt really good, making the nipples bulge out and feel ultra-sensitive.

Soon she couldn't move at all – she was like a mummy, bound and helpless.

"Okay – now I'm going to lift you and put you on the bed," he told her.

He took her in his arms, and she couldn't move so much as a muscle. He laid her on bed,



encased in his rope, utterly at his mercy. He got on the bed beside her, and undid her hair from its usual pigtails.

“This should be free,” he murmured. “I want to see it sweeping your shoulders...like this.” He smoothed the hair down, allowing his fingers to tangle in the dark strands. Then he started stroking her.

It was the most amazing feeling to be lying here, in this candlelit room, completely immobile. She liked the way the ropes felt on her flesh but most of all she liked that he had put them there. The ropes gave her certainty, and made her feel coddled, like a child in swaddling. She liked the comfort and security it gave her.

Out of her peripheral vision she saw the knife on the nightstand and stiffened, feeling vulnerable again.

“Hey – it’s okay. That’s just in case there’s an emergency and I have to free you in a hurry,” he told her, stroking reassuringly. “I can have you out of this in about five seconds so there’s no need to worry - and you trust me, remember?”

“I do,” she said, gazing up into his blue eyes. He grinned at her, then lowered his head and took her lips in his own, kissing and sucking gently. She sighed, and relaxed into the bondage even more.

“Feeling a bit better now?” he asked, and she smiled.

“Yeah.”

“Good. Now close your eyes again. Don’t worry – I’m not going to do anything. But I need you to promise you’ll keep them closed – okay?”

She whispered her agreement and did as he asked, and she heard him get off the bed. He bustled around the room again, but she didn’t speak. She began to relax even more. The ropes were strong, encasing her in their firm embrace; she could let go and be safe here. She heard Lorne somewhere over the other side of the room, and a sort of scratching noise, and she wondered what he was doing but she kept her eyes closed. She felt herself drifting off, into a haze, lulled by the feel of the ropes on her skin, keeping her wrapped up tight. She was safe, she was safe, she was safe.

At some point she must have fallen asleep because she awoke to the sound of his laugh, and his fingers were on her skin again.

“Whaaa?” she muttered.

“You can open your eyes now,” he told her. She did so, gazing up into his smiling face, and he kissed her and then held up a large sheet of white paper. “This is you – how I see you,” he told her.

She gave a delighted giggle – he'd painted her as she lay there, fast asleep, bound from head to foot. Her pale flesh was rendered in pink swirls, and the crimson of the comforter was contrasted against the darkness of her hair. She looked so peaceful, her breasts squeezed in their prison, nipples poking through the rope.

"You're \*good\*," she exclaimed. "I mean, you can really paint!"

"It helps to have such a beautiful muse," he replied. She laughed.

"You are a charmer, Evan Lorne."

"Not really." He grinned. "You really do bring out the best in me."

"That is the most beautiful thing I've ever seen – can I keep it?" she asked.

"Sure – I did it for you. Now, are you feeling better?"

"Much." She gazed at him for a long moment. "Evan...I...would you make love to me?" she asked. "I'd really like that now."

"You sure?" He stroked the back of his hand along her arm. "I'm happy to just sleep next to you and hold you all night."

"Yes...I know, you've been very sweet but this bondage is making me really horny!" she said and they both laughed at that. "And I remember you said some pretty sexy things about what you'd like to do to me that night we first met on the hillside on the mainland."

"I remember," he said, a wolfish look in his eyes. "Okay, Abby. Your wish is my command."

He leaned over her, and she was suddenly aware of how vulnerable she was, lying here, completely at his mercy. He kissed her neck and then his mouth went lower, hot and warm on her flesh. He hovered over the tip of one pointed nipple, where it poked out between the ropes, and then he took the piece of flesh in his mouth and sucked on it. Abby moaned, her entire body trying to convulse around the ropes but she was stuck fast, and all she could do was enjoy the delicious torment. He moved his mouth to the other nipple, teasing that with his tongue, and she whimpered, wishing she could put her arms around him and pull him close, but she couldn't. All she could do was lie there, encased in her rope, unable to move an inch.

"You can't come until I'm in you," he told her and she gave a sigh, promising herself that she'd do her best to obey him.

He moved down, mouth covering little areas of her body, sucking and kissing the flesh as he went. Her legs were closed, fastened tight, but he slid his finger between the ropes and found her clit. She gave a started shout, her body shining with sweat as he rubbed it slowly, never taking his eyes off her the entire time. She was wet now, full of need, but he hadn't stopped tormenting her yet. His mouth roved over her entire body while his finger kept up

that insistent rhythm between her legs.

“I’m going to die soon if you don’t get inside me,” she whimpered. “I need to...I need you...”

“Ssh...” He pushed her hair away from her face. “You look so beautiful like this.” He rubbed harder on her clit and she thought she might implode with having to hold it all in. She couldn’t move, she couldn’t come...it was a delicious kind of agony, and she loved it.

He looked down on her with those loving blue eyes, and then kissed her. She opened up her mouth as his tongue gently pushed in and then he started to kiss her more passionately while still rubbing her clit.

She could feel his skin against her own, his half-naked body pressed against her own fully naked body. The ropes seemed to have sensitised every inch of her flesh and she was whimpering in earnest now as the rough fabric of his jeans brushed her naked, bound legs.

He drew back, and smiled at her.

“Okay – you’ve been good,” he said, sitting up and unbuttoning his jeans.

She gazed, rapt, as his erect cock sprang out. It was hard, urgent and curving, but he didn’t hurry himself, despite his obvious need. He pushed off his jeans so that he was naked, and then slowly untied the bottom half of her bondage, so that her legs were free. Then he pushed them apart. She felt the release as a kind of agony and ecstasy. She’d loved being tied, but she wanted to feel him inside her so much. She was desperate to take him into her body and worship him the only way she could while she was tied and defenceless.

“Ssh.” He pushed her legs open and positioned himself between them and then she felt his cock nudging at her entrance. She tried to move her thighs to hurry him in but he shook his head and pulled back. “Uh-huh – you don’t move,” he warned her.

She bit back a moan of frustration and then gave a little squeal as he pushed inside her. God he felt good! His cock was warm and hard, and he pushed himself in slowly, inch by inch, filling her completely. When he was fully lodged inside her he lowered his head and flicked his tongue over her nipples again. The bondage had made them swell and they were unbearably sensitive so it was all she could do to stay still, but she knew that was what he wanted of her. She screamed, teetering on the brink, and he took pity on her and began thrusting.

“Can you hold on until after I come?” he asked.

“I don’t know...” she moaned.

“Try,” he ordered and she knew she’d do anything he asked of her. He kept up his steady, rhythmic strokes, deep inside her, his body pressing against hers with each inward thrust, stroking over her sensitised nipples.

“Oh god...oh god...” she whimpered. She felt him stiffen and saw from the look on his face that he was coming, and that was enough for her. She gave herself up now to the dizzying waves of pleasure that were assaulting her body and rolled with them, screaming out loud as she came, and came, and came.

She wasn't sure how long she lay there, blissed out, but eventually she felt him clean her with a washcloth, and then he lay down beside her and pulled her close, still in her bonds.

“Want me to untie you, or do you want to stay like this a bit longer?” he asked.

“Mmmmm,” she replied.

“I'm sure there was an answer in there somewhere – just not sure what it was,” he chuckled.

“Mmmmm,” she told him, and he grinned, and kissed her.

“Okay. Got it. Let me know when you want out.”

“You, are definitely not boring,” she commented and he laughed.

“Neither are you.”

He held her tight, tight as the bondage she was wrapped in, and she closed her eyes. He was crazy, she thought to herself; crazy, exciting and creative – but also stable, protective, and kind of dependable. And he was in the military. And he knew how to do these amazing things with ropes and he loved doing it as much as she liked having it done to her. He could even \*paint\* for god's sake! And he thought she was beautiful...It was like he was Gibbs's perfect top for her, almost as if he had been designed from some special blueprint Gibbs had drawn up. Lorne kissed the back of her neck and she gave a deep, happy sigh.

“I feel really safe,” she told him.

“You'll always be safe with me, Abby,” he replied, and she knew that was true.

Nobody but Gibbs had ever made her feel this way.

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Tony leaned against the living room wall, reading his way through yet one more personnel file. The pile was going down but it was hard to concentrate on every single word in them. Sometimes he found he'd read a whole file but not taken any of it in. That's when he sat down to read – his sore ass kept his mind firmly on the task. Gibbs's daily spankings had been pretty severe since the whole Rodney Sheppard almost-arrest fiasco but Tony didn't mind that. He deserved it for that screw-up, and at least it showed the boss hadn't given up on him and still cared enough to make it count.

He glanced around the room to find everyone silently reading or working on something. Ducky was leaning back in the armchair, looking through his pages of notes, blinking owlishly through his specs. Abby was sitting cross-legged on the floor by the large balcony window, tapping away on one of those pads Rodney had provided for her, remotely accessing the data in her lab. McGee was sitting on the couch, legs up, arm in a sling, helping Tony go through the personnel reports. Ziva was sitting on the floor beside him, the back of her head resting easily on his good arm as she went through the interrogation data.

Tony gazed at them for a few moments, feeling a stab of envy. Ziva hadn't left McGee alone since his return to their quarters. She was hardly the type to cluck over a sub like a mother hen, but she handed him his meds and brought him his meals and helped him around if he needed it, in a quiet, unobtrusive kind of way. Personally, Tony thought the probie was milking it all a bit too much – it hadn't been as bad a wound as they'd first thought, and, apart from the sling, McGee was able to get around just fine.

Gibbs was sitting at the dining room table, files spread out around him, his poker face giving little away, as usual. Tony was a seasoned Gibbs-watcher though – in fact it was pretty much his favourite study, so he'd picked up on a few clues. He noticed the way the muscles tightened in Gibbs's jaw occasionally and the sharp, jabbing movements of his hands when he finished with a file. All of them were frustrated by the lack of progress in this case, and the lack of access to their normal facilities back on Earth wasn't helping, but the boss was feeling it worse than the rest of them. Gibbs didn't like to fail and he *\*really\** didn't like people shooting at his subs.

Gibbs had already given them a long lecture about returning to 'good old-fashioned detective work', with a glare in McGee's direction to make it clear that technology wasn't going to help them much with this one. That was why they'd had to do so much lengthy questioning - and why Gibbs had them going through their notes and files for hours on end every single evening for the past five nights until he'd allow them some sleep.

Tony didn't actually mind good old-fashioned detective work. His approach to his work wasn't that much different to Gibbs's – he listened to his gut and he'd happily work through the night on case files in the hope of making a breakthrough.

He turned back to the file he was reading and tried to pick up the thread of it again. He glanced at the dates, and then at the photo at the top of the file, and was about to fling it onto the 'done' pile on the floor when something made him look again.

"McGee...isn't Colonel Beckett supposed to submit a sign-off when he takes anyone back to Earth on the Daedalus?" he asked.

McGee looked up. "Yes, Tony – there are dozens of sign-offs in these files. Some people don't stay long – particularly the people in Rodney Sheppard's department. I've been reading their exit interviews and they don't usually have anything good to say about Rodney." He picked one up from a pile beside him. "'Rude, petty, obnoxious and utterly impossible to work with,'" he quoted.

"Yeah, sounds about right," Tony said. "It's okay, Abby," he grinned as she glanced up, mouth open, ready to defend her beloved Rodney. "I know he's misunderstood, has a heart of gold and all that crap you keep telling us but you gotta admit he's hell to work for."

"I found him pretty easy actually," Abby said.

"That's because you're smart," Tony replied. "Rodney likes smart. I'm guessing some of the people they sent him weren't smart enough. Like this guy. He was only here a day, which is a record even by Rodney's standards, and then Rodney threw him out of the lab saying he'd destroy the city if he had access to anything more than the sewage system, and even then Rodney wasn't taking any chances." He grinned, reading the notes in Rodney's terse, irascible handwriting. "Man, Rodney really hates this guy. Which is strange, because according to his file he's a top scientist who's written a series of papers on exactly the kind of stuff Rodney wanted him to work on."

"Your point, DiNozzo?" Gibbs asked, tersely. Tony made a face – Gibbs had been in a really bad mood ever since McGee had been shot and it wasn't a good idea to keep him waiting, or irritate him more than was unavoidable.

"My point is, Rodney threw him out of the lab - but there's no chit from Steven Beckett saying he was delivered back to Earth safely on the Daedalus."

"Could have gone back through the stargate," McGee commented.

"Uh-huh. Nothing signed by Chuck in the control room either – I checked the stargate rosters and he didn't go back that way. Also, they don't tend to waste ZPM power on routine transport."

"Probably just an admin error," McGee said. "I've found a few of those. What's the date on it?"

"It's..." Tony paused. "Ah. Okay. This guy arrived a couple of days after Elizabeth Weir died. Hardly surprising the paperwork is screwed up. She usually processed the returning personnel and arranged for them to be flown out on the Daedalus's regularly scheduled trips. Admin was a bit crap for a few weeks until Richard Woolsey took over – and then it got really picky, with triplicate copies required for everything, and a whole new layer of bureaucratic shit to pick through. Uh, no offence, Ducky," he said, with an apologetic grin in Ducky's direction. He knew the ME had been spending quite a bit of what little free time he had with Woolsey of late. He assumed they were just friends because Woolsey was a sub but Ducky sure as hell did seem happy these days.

"None taken, my dear boy. I'm sure Richard is just doing his job the best way he knows how. Better to have everything well documented than poorly so," Ducky said.

"Easy for you to say, you don't have to wade through all the paperwork in the files," Tony muttered under his breath. The admin error explained the lack of a chit, and he was about to throw the file down again when he paused, something holding him back.

"DiNozzo?" Gibbs queried, and Tony realised his boss was watching him like a hawk.

"I was just thinking though...supposing this guy didn't go home? Supposing he was still here? Rodney wouldn't notice – I think we've already established that Rodney is not very good at remembering who anyone is, especially if he only met them once, for less than a day. So this guy – uh, Robert Hancock - is supposed to get shipped back out on the Daedalus, but Elizabeth's funeral takes place, and then Peter Weir commits suicide, and nobody is really picking up on that kind of thing, or checking the paperwork. So Hancock just stays here, wandering around the city at will, answering to nobody."

He had Gibbs's attention now – in fact he had everyone's attention now.

"Hiding in plain sight," Ducky murmured, gazing at him earnestly from behind his spectacles.

Tony gave a wry grin. "Works every time, Ducky - best disguise there is." He glanced at Gibbs as he said that.

"Are you saying this guy is our murderer?" Gibbs asked.

"No." Tony shut the case file with a flourish. "I'm just saying it's possible. I mean...he's filed in the 'inactive' section of their paperwork, so we haven't even called him in for questioning because he's not supposed to be here and that makes him the only person on this damn base that we \*haven't\* spoken to. I'm only going through his file because you're really picky...uh, I mean thorough, boss, and you insisted I even check the files of personnel who'd left the city."

"Why would a respected scientist come all the way out here, get fired by Rodney Sheppard, and then start murdering people?" Ziva asked. "It does not make any sense. I mean – it would make more sense if this person had murdered Rodney, who had said all these bad things about him and sent him packing, but not random subs. I think your theory is flawed, Tony."

"Yeah." Tony was about to throw the file down on the pile again, when he stopped.

"Unless..."

Everyone sighed, and looked up again.

"DiNozzo, I swear, if you don't make your point soon I'll gag you," Gibbs said, exasperated.

"Sorry boss – but I was just thinking...why was this guy so useless? He was supposed to be a respected scientist, and I know Rodney is a scary genius who sets high standards for his staff but he's never fired one in less than a day before. Maybe...maybe this guy wasn't who he said he was? Who he was \*supposed\* to be. Maybe he was an impostor. Abby – can you pull up any pictures of Dr Robert Hancock – from, I don't know, scientific journals or something?" Tony asked, going over to her.

"Sure!" She cheerfully typed away for a few seconds and then drew something up. Tony glanced at it over her shoulder, and then back at the file he was holding.

"Uh-oh," he murmured. "Unless he's had some really bad work done this is not the same guy. Robert Hancock looks like Frankenstein's much less attractive older brother, while the guy in this picture looks..." He turned his head on one side, and grinned, "Kind of hot - in an older guy, Ricardo Montalban sort of way. Man, I had such a crush on Ricardo Montalban when I was a kid. Used to re-watch that Star Trek movie, The Wrath of Khan - the one where he's the top gone bad - over and over again. Montalban's got all these muscles and you can tell Kirk kind of has the hots for him but Spock isn't going to have any of it, and..."

"DiNozzo!" Gibbs interrupted sharply.

"Sorry, boss. Here...see what you think."

Tony handed the personnel file to Gibbs, and he wasn't sure what reaction he was expecting but it sure as hell wasn't the one he got. That muscle in Gibbs's jaw twitched violently, and he got up, stalked over to Ducky, and handed him the file with a taut, jerky flick of his wrist.

"Remind you of anyone?" he asked.

Ducky peered at the photograph for a second, frowning, and then Tony swore he turned a shade of green, and looked as if he was about to throw up.

"It can't be," he whispered. "Surely not, after all these years!"

"It adds up," Gibbs growled. "The medical experience, the fact he can fire a weapon with reasonable accuracy. Christ - even the way he left the bodies, Ducky! We said it looked like a message but we assumed it was a message for someone on Atlantis - not for us."

"Us?" Tony asked, with a raised eyebrow.

Gibbs made an impatient movement with his hand. "For Ducky...I mean, damn it, now it seems so obvious. The bodies were already practically autopsied - how clear a message could that be that it was aimed at Ducky?"

"You said 'us'," Tony said quietly. Gibbs's jaw did another violent twitch.

"The message was for Ducky - but the murders were aimed at me," Gibbs snapped. "Or, more precisely, on getting me out here - to Atlantis. He had to kill three times, but finally they called in NCIS to deal with it. And now we're out of our normal environment, sitting ducks for him to do whatever it is he's planning."

"Hang on - we don't know he's planning anything. We've been here a couple of weeks," Ducky pointed out. "He could have struck at us by now."

"He did!" Gibbs roared. "He shot Tim!"



"But why did he kill Jennifer Keller?" Ducky asked. "We were already here when she was murdered. Surely if the sole purpose of the murders was to draw us out here, then..."

"It was a welcome gift, Ducky. For you," Gibbs snapped. "And I don't think she was the person he actually intended to kill."

"Then who was?" Ducky asked.

Tony wished they'd both stop talking at each other and start explaining things to the rest of them.

"Carson Beckett," Gibbs replied. "Think about it; you'd spent a few hours with Carson the day we arrived, and you'd struck up a rapport with him. Carson is a Scottish doctor – just like you. Carson was supposed to be a warning to you, a statement of intent if you like. Now, he knew that Carson's husband was going to be in his quarters that night, so he set the fire on the Daedalus – that fulfilled two purposes – it enabled him to steal a gun, just in case, and it was supposed to get Steven out of the way, leaving Carson alone and vulnerable. He didn't count on the fact that they'd both have their radios turned off so Steven didn't hear about the fire until much later. He broke into their quarters, found Steven was still there, and knew it wasn't worth the risk going through with it so he left again."

"My god..." Ducky whispered.

Gibbs got up and began to pace furiously around the room. "Remember Carson woke up?" Gibbs grabbed a file from a pile on the table and found the notes he was looking for. "Carson woke up because he heard something – someone breaking into their quarters - and he smelled something..."

"Chloroform," Ducky murmured. "That's what he used on Jennifer Keller – it has a highly distinctive and really quite strong smell. Are you saying that he intended to use it to knock out Carson?"

"Yes - then to butcher him and leave him for you to autopsy. His plans were thwarted, but he's determined, so he went down the hallway looking for another victim."

"He stopped by Rodney Sheppard's lab..." Tony said, glancing at the file over Gibbs's shoulder. Tony wasn't sure where this was going but he could guess this bit. "Tried the door but it was locked – and Rodney alerted John. Not worth the effort killing Rodney, either, especially not with the possibility of General Sheppard on his way there – not enough time."

"So he went to the infirmary – and found Keller – not the victim he'd intended but she'd do. She had at least had contact with Ducky so he knew her and her death would mean something to you, Ducky. That was the point – it had to mean something to you – to feel personal to you. He didn't even have to move her body; he could do the autopsy right there. He must have been pretty pleased with himself for how that turned out," Gibbs said tersely.

"But why would he do something like this?" Ducky whispered. "I mean...I know he was an overbearing bully, but a murderer?"

Gibbs stared into space for a moment, thinking about it. "I'm not sure. I know what my gut is telling me but I can't be sure."

"Does this guy have a name?" Abby asked.

"And are you two going to explain what the hell is going on?" Tony demanded.

Gibbs looked as if he was about to drive his fist through the nearest wall. He glanced at Ducky, who glanced back at him. Then Ducky gave a little nod.

"It's all right, Jethro. You can tell them," he said softly.

"Randolph Jordan," Gibbs said tersely. "Our killer's name is Randolph Jordan."

"And he used to be my husband," Ducky added softly.

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"So you used to be married, Ducky?" Tony asked, as they all followed Gibbs down the hallway towards the conference room, to meet with Woolsey, General Sheppard and the command team on Atlantis. "And to a murdering psycho top?"

"Well, to be fair, Anthony," Ducky replied, "He certainly wasn't a murdering psycho top when I married him."

"Psycho bit fits if you ask me though, Duck," Gibbs threw back over his shoulder. Ducky winced.

"You didn't know him when he was nineteen, Jethro!" he protested. "No...he really wasn't like that at all. Jealous perhaps, very possessive, and a little bit overbearing but a murderer? No."

He remembered sitting next to the tall, broad, incredibly handsome young top at the dissecting table for the first time during an anatomy class, and how Randolph's big hands had wielded a small scalpel. He'd laughed out loud at how incongruous that looked, and Randolph had looked up at him and fixed him to the ground with those dark, brooding eyes of his. Ducky had felt a wave of sheer, physical lust that hit his gut with a force that almost knocked him off balance.

"Are you laughing at me?" Randolph asked, in a quiet voice. Ducky shook his head.

"Good lord no! Just at your hands! They need to make the scalpels in a larger size," he said.

Randolph's brown eyes remained fixed on him, and then his face broke into a slow grin.

"You're interesting," he said. "I like interesting. Randolph Jordan." He held out his hand and Ducky took it, feeling a surge of excitement.

"Donald Mallard," he said. "Although my friends call me Ducky."

"I won't," Randolph promised, in a low, intense tone. "I'll call you boy, maybe, or pet. If you're good I'll call you Donald - but I'll never call you Ducky."

And that was how it had started – lord knows, if he'd had any idea of how it would end he'd have run out of that room there and then and never gone back, medical studies be damned.

They reached the conference room to find John, Rodney, Teyla, Ronon and Richard Woolsey already there. Carson and Steven Beckett joined them a second later, and then Evan Lorne.

Gibbs filled them in as briefly as possible. Ducky sat there, wondering how it was possible for his whole world to have fallen apart in such a short space of time.

"I am so sorry," he said, when Gibbs had finished. "I feel we've brought this upon you all somehow."

"Not your fault, Ducky," Gibbs said firmly.

"Why Atlantis?" Richard asked. "Why did he bring you out here? Why not kill people back on Earth if he wanted Gibbs's attention?"

"Well, he always did have a remarkable fascination for the legends of the lost city of Atlantis, even back when I first met him," Ducky mused. "I thought it was all a bit silly to be honest, but I humoured him when he spent a fortune on books and ancient artefacts and the like. Then when his older sister died in a sudden, tragic accident, he abandoned his medical studies and took over the running of the family company."

"Jordan Tech," Gibbs said tersely.

"Oh shit," John sighed. "They're one of the few tech companies that have stargate clearance. He'd have been in regular contact with some top level scientists and some of them would definitely have been working on the stargate programme."

"Uh...it says on his personnel notes that Robert Hancock worked at Jordan Tech prior to getting the job on Atlantis," McGee noted, holding up the file.

"And Randolph had more than enough money and influence to ensure Robert Hancock quietly disappeared, while he took his place on the expedition," Ducky said with a sigh. "I rather think he was killing two birds with one stone – he got to see the lost city of Atlantis, a place he's been obsessed with all his life, and he also got to lure Jethro here, away from the relative safety of NCIS. I fear it must be his plan for him to have revenge on Jethro for taking me away from him all those years ago."

He felt Gibbs's hand come to rest on his shoulder, and his top squeezed, gently. He placed his own hand over Gibbs's, thankful for the reassurance.

"Randolph was very embarrassed when I took another top's collar and asked him for a divorce," Ducky continued. "I didn't take a penny of his money although god knows I was entitled, but I didn't want anything more to do with the man."

"He still wanted something to do with you though," Gibbs said. "He followed you, he sent you those letters...he used to wait for you to finish work and he'd try and browbeat you into going back to him. In the end I had to take out a restraining order on him. It's still in force," he added.

"I've been looking over my shoulder every day since then," Ducky murmured. "And it's made me extremely grateful for Jethro's collar which at least affords me some protection. He's never stopped trying to contact me, even after all these years, and even despite the restraining order. Jethro is all that keeps him at bay I suspect - he's a coward at heart and is afraid of Jethro. I thought he had been quiet for the past few months. I suppose I hoped he'd finally forgotten about me."

"Question is – what exactly is his revenge?" John asked. "I mean...he took a shot at McGee, but apart from that he's left you well alone since you arrived."

"I know. That *is* puzzling," Ducky mused.

"I knew he was a crap scientist," Rodney said.

"He wasn't a scientist at all, I'm afraid," Ducky said. "He didn't finish his medical degree, either, although he did learn enough during those years he was studying to be able to accurately dissect the bodies of those marines, and poor Dr Keller."

"Don't under-estimate him though," Gibbs said tersely. "He's a smart man - he's made Jordan Tech into the biggest and most sophisticated tech company in the US. He's dedicated, pays great attention to detail, and is extremely ruthless."

"So what's his next move?" Tony asked.

"Arrest, hopefully," Gibbs growled.

"I've sent his picture all around the base – he won't be able to hide for long. He'll need to come out to eat if nothing else," John said. "And I already checked his quarters – no sign of him there, although it's clear he was there until fairly recently. We did find this though." He slammed down a piece of tech the size of a pea on the table. "His subcutaneous transmitter – everyone on Atlantis is fitted with one on arrival. He must have cut it out so he couldn't be tracked."

"What about your life-signs detectors?" McGee asked. "I know they won't be able to pinpoint which life-sign is his but they could show if there's a life-sign away from the main

area of the city, hiding somewhere?"

"I did a sweep already," Rodney said. "There are dozens of life-signs on their own – as you'd expect in a city this size – but none of them is anywhere I wouldn't expect them to be."

"I've sent a team of marines to track down every single lone life-sign on the grid and see who it is but that's going to take some time," John added.

"And I've sent a message to Earth asking for every detail they have on him," Rodney said. "Should have the information back in the next databurst."

"We'll find him," Woolsey said.

"I hope so," Ducky sighed. "But Jethro is right - don't under-estimate the man; I was married to him for twenty-odd years, and he's a force to be reckoned with. What Randolph Jordan wants, Randolph Jordan gets...that's why he was so upset when I left him. He's not a man who can bear to lose."

"Neither am I," Gibbs said, in a low, dangerous tone.

Ducky shook his head, smiling wryly, and that was the last thing he remembered before everything went black, and his head hit the table.

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"Wake up, Rodney."

He felt a sharp slap across the face, and moaned. Something was fastened over his face and he coughed, trying to get rid of a foul taste in his mouth. He breathed, and his lungs became flooded with clean air and that woke him. He blinked, and as his vision cleared he saw a man in a hazmat suit, kneeling in front of him. The man slapped him again.

"I said, wake up. We don't have much time," the man told him. Rodney blinked again, trying to make out the man's features. Then he realised who it was and he tried to scream, but didn't get the sound out before he was slapped again, and this time the slap sent him flying sideways.

"I see you recognise me," Jordan said.

"What are you doing here?" Rodney said, pulling the mask away from his mouth a fraction so that he could talk, and then pressing it back again in order to take another gulp of clean air. He looked around the room to see that everyone else was out cold. Gibbs was on the floor, Dr Mallard sitting at the table, face down, DiNozzo sprawled out beside McGee, and John... John was lying slumped over the table, his eyes closed, unconscious.

"John!" He got up, but Jordan grabbed him and slapped him again.

"He's fine – and he'll continue to be fine for as long as you co-operate with me," he said. "If you don't – I'll kill him." He pointed at the small incendiary device strapped around John's throat.

"What have you done?" Rodney asked, aghast.

"Just ensuring your co-operation, Rodney," Jordan said, with a macabre grin. He was a big man, really tall, broad-shouldered and imposing. "I've released a drug into the Atlantis ventilation system. It's recycling so it'll keep them all unconscious until I'm done. As for that bomb strapped around your husband's throat – that's for your benefit. It's only small – it'll probably only deliver minor burns to the people sitting near him, but if I set it off it'll decapitate him – immediately."

Rodney gazed at the man, horrified. "You can't do this," he hissed.

"I already have, Rodney."

"There's a lock-down system on Atlantis - the city will have detected any airborne..." Rodney began. Jordan slapped him again.

"I over-rode the system," he said. "And you have got to learn to stop talking and start listening. God knows how your top puts up with you. I'd keep you gagged if you were mine."

"You over-rode the system?" Rodney asked, and then he flinched, waiting for the slap. It didn't come.

"Yes, Rodney. I know you had a low opinion of my work as a scientist, but I know a lot more about Atlantis than you might think. Besides, I've had three months to study all her schematics. I know how this place works." And then he slapped Rodney again, so hard he fell over. "You'll learn," Jordan said. "Subs always do eventually if you hit them hard enough."

"What do you want from me?" Rodney asked, panicked. His jaw hurt from all the slaps, and he was trying his hardest not to send his distress to his husband through the lifebond. He wasn't sure if it would reach John anyway, as his top was unconscious, but he didn't want his husband coming to and Jordan carrying out his threat to blow his head off.

Jordan grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him to his feet.

"I want an accomplice," he said. "I have plans, Rodney – and you're going to help me make them happen."

"And if I don't?" Rodney thrust out his jaw obstinately. Jordan laughed and gestured with his head in John's direction.

"Then I guess your top will be losing his head," he said.

"If he dies, so do I," Rodney muttered. "We're lifebonded."

"Doesn't matter. I'll just wake up one of the other scientists if that happens," Jordan replied, with a careless shrug. "I chose you because you're the best, but one of the others will do. Nobody is coming to rescue you, Rodney. Everyone in the city is fast asleep – and nobody is going to wake up until I want them to."

He threw Rodney a hazmat suit and nodded to him to put it on. Rodney did as he was told. Maybe he'd find a way to thwart this man's plans later but for now he didn't see he had any option but to co-operate. He watched as Jordan went over to where Ducky was sitting. Jordan paused beside the doctor, then crouched down beside him and gently stroked his blond hair.

"Don't hurt him!" Rodney found himself saying and then he winced, wondering what the retribution would be for that but Jordan just shook his head.

"Donald is mine, Rodney. I'll hurt him if I want but that's not what I'm here for. Besides, he isn't really the one I want to hurt."

He got up, and went over to where Gibbs was lying on the floor. Rodney finished getting into the hazmat suit, and watched as Jordan crouched over the unconscious agent.

"He's the one I want to hurt," Jordan murmured, with a kind of twisted, gloating satisfaction.

"Are you going to kill him?" Rodney asked. Gibbs was out cold and vulnerable; Jordan could do what he liked to the man.

"Oh no." Jordan smiled icily. "I don't want to kill him. I want to hurt him, Rodney, and there are much better ways to hurt a man than by killing him. Ah...Leroy Jethro Gibbs...at last I have you at my mercy. It's been a long time coming but they do say that revenge is a dish best served cold."

He got up, and then delivered a savage kick to Gibbs's midriff. Rodney winced.

"Let's hope the pain keeps you focussed," Jordan murmured to Gibbs's prone body. "Because it's only going to get worse from here on in."

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Gibbs moved his arm, and grunted. There was a foul taste in his mouth – he tried to spit it out, and then felt something being pushed over his face. He came to with a start and grabbed his ribs as he felt a sharp stab of pain. His battle instincts kicked in and he tried to push the mask off his face.

"Easy, Gibbs," a Scottish voice said, close to his ear. "It's just oxygen. It'll help clear your head."

Gibbs looked around, his vision swimming. "Ducky?" he whispered.

"No, it's Carson. But Ducky's here – he's fine," Carson told him.

"My ribs..." Gibbs winced. Carson pulled up his shirt and they both looked down at the dark bruise on his torso. "Where the hell did that come from?" Gibbs frowned.

Carson tested it gingerly with his fingers and Gibbs bit back another wince. It hurt, but it was minor compared to what he'd had in the past.

"Nothing broken – just a nasty bruise. Looks like you were the only one to be physically assaulted though," Carson said.

"What happened?" Gibbs took Carson's proffered hand and the doctor helped him to his feet. Gibbs looked around the room, taking in the troubled faces around him. He saw Ducky, sitting at the table, looking completely broken. "Ducky?" he demanded, "What the hell happened? DiNozzo?" He looked around. "Where's Tony?" he asked, an icy sensation settling in the pit of his stomach.

Ducky shook his head, unable to meet his eye. Gibbs looked around frantically, searching for his agent, but there was no sign of him – and he wasn't the only one missing.

"McGee?" he asked, and Ducky lifted his head to him this time and shook it again, almost imperceptibly. "And..." Gibbs made one last sweep of the room and then swayed. Carson caught him and helped him into a nearby chair. "Abby?" Gibbs whispered, feeling like he'd been punched in the gut. "Not Abby?"

Ducky nodded, mutely, his eyes glassy. At that moment Ziva came into his line of sight, and he grabbed her and held her for a moment. At least she was here. At least he had two of his collared agents still here – Ducky and Ziva. But why them? And where were Tony, Tim and Abby? Ziva held onto him, tightly, her body shaking, and he knew she was fighting to stay with them and not descend into the darkness that so often claimed her when she was upset.

"Defeat it," he told her brusquely. "We need you operating with a clear head." She nodded and pulled away from him, her brown eyes bleak.

General Sheppard strode towards him and there was something almost explosive about the man, like a red hot fire was burning inside him. Gibbs knew immediately.

"Rodney too?" he asked. John nodded, grimly.

"How long?" Gibbs choked, looking around at the dazed faces in the room. "How long were we out cold?"

"Twelve hours," Ziva replied.



"Twelve? Twelve hours? Christ, anything could have happened in that amount of time!" Gibbs felt that icy sensation in his stomach freeze into a cold, hard fist.

"I know," Sheppard growled. "I woke up to find a small bomb strapped to my throat – I was the only one targeted that way so I can only assume that was to ensure Rodney's co-operation."

"Co-operation for what?" Gibbs asked desperately.

"We don't know," John replied. "But there's no sign of Rodney, DiNozzo, McGee or Sciuto anywhere on the base. They're gone, Gibbs."

Gibbs got to his feet. "Then we find them," he growled angrily. His subs were in danger and it was his job to protect them. He stared right into John Sheppard's soul, and saw the man was even more like him than he'd thought.

"We will," Sheppard replied grimly. "And when we do..."

Yeah, Gibbs thought, when we do we'll exact our revenge and it won't be pretty - but supposing it was already too late? Supposing Jordan had already killed them? Tony, Tim and Abby - supposing they were already dead? Could he bear that? He remembered his CO bringing him Shannon's bloodstained collar and the room swayed again. He held on tight to the table; his subs needed him right now and they needed him thinking straight.

"Any chance we can track them using those subcutaneous transmitter gizmos you implanted in us when we arrived?" Gibbs asked. Sheppard shook his head and pointed in the direction of the table, where four little transmitters were winking away happily.

"He cut them out," he said. "The same way he did with his own." They were only implanted just beneath the skin so that wasn't hard.

"I think we can assume Jordan took Rodney for some technical reason," Gibbs ground out. "He needed his expertise for something. Question is - what? If we can find the answer to that then we might find out what he's done with Tony, Abby and Tim."

At that moment a loud burst of static sounded in the room, followed by a high-pitched squeak.

"What the hell was that?" Gibbs demanded, but Sheppard just shook his head and ran over to the plasma screen at the far end of the room. It flickered, briefly, and then came to life, and Gibbs came face to face with a man he hadn't seen in many years.

Those years had been kind to Randolph Jordan. His black hair was still thick, although Gibbs suspected it was now dyed. His brown eyes were still dark, brooding and intense and he looked fit, his broad shoulders and toned biceps testament to a man who worked out regularly. Gibbs walked slowly over to the plasma, transfixed.

"Is this working?" Jordan asked someone over his shoulder.

"Of course," Rodney's voice replied irritably, and then the scientist came into view. He was dangling on the end of a chain that Jordan had attached to his collar, his hands tied behind his back, a number of bruises on his jaw and face. "Yes, it's a complicated comms feed and I had to do something quite brilliant to set it up the way you wanted it although it helped that you had..."

Jordan reached out and delivered a casual backhander that threw Rodney off his feet and onto the floor, a dazed expression on his face. Beside him, John Sheppard gave a low, angry growl, like a furious panther faced with someone harming her cubs. Gibbs grabbed his wrist warningly and John's growl faded but his body remained tense.

"Ah...that's better," Jordan said. "I can see you now, Gibbs – and I gather by the expression on your face that you can see me."

Gibbs nodded. "Where are my people, Jordan?" he asked.

"Safe. For now," Jordan said, with a nasty little smile. "Possibly not for much longer but that's up to you."

"I don't take kindly to people threatening my agents," Gibbs said icily.

"Ah, but they aren't just your agents, are they?" Jordan replied. "They're your subs, Gibbs. Now, I want you to sit down and listen to me – their lives depend on it. Sit." He waved his hand. Gibbs glanced at John and they both pulled up a chair and sat, arms crossed identically over their chests.

"Good. Now...Rodney has told me you've figured out my plan to lure you here, so let me fill in the gaps so we're all the same page." He gave another of those nasty little smiles. "A long time ago, Gibbs, you stole something of mine," he said.

"Ducky didn't want to be with you any more," Gibbs said, but before he'd even got the sentence out of his mouth Jordan's hand shot out and whacked Rodney on the jaw again. John Sheppard's body twitched beside Gibbs, every muscle in his body hard and tense, and his mouth settled into an angry line.

"Please don't interrupt," Jordan said. "This is my story, and I'll tell it my way, thank you, Gibbs." Gibbs swallowed down his frustration and gave a curt little nod at the screen.

"Very well...where was I? Ah, yes, you stole something of mine, in the most humiliating way," Jordan said. "And you kept him from me, poisoned his mind against me, and refused to return him to me." Gibbs heard Ducky give a little whimper behind him, but he managed to refrain from saying anything, for Rodney's sake.

"Now, I'm not sure what you recall of that night," Jordan continued. "I know I recall every single detail. The way you came towards me, without warning, and punched me, with no

provocation whatsoever. The way you removed Donald's collar and replaced it with your own." Jordan spat that part, and Gibbs knew that was what rankled with him most. "The way you ran off with him. Now – this is your turn. Can you remember what I said to you before you left?"

Gibbs closed his eyes, the years falling away. He remembered that he'd only gone to the party because the Director of the time had insisted. He hated parties; all that standing around, making small talk – not his thing. Randolph Jordan had been hosting the party at his mansion – he had just landed a big Navy contract and he'd invited all his husband's work colleagues along to celebrate – the man did like to show off- and he and the Director were good friends.

Gibbs stood in a corner, brooding, watching as Jordan bossed Ducky around, ordering him here and there and pulling him up if he set a foot wrong. He watched Ducky go from the educated, interesting man he was to a gibbering wreck, stuttering to get his words out, fearful of his abusive husband.

Gibbs hated Jordan's hectoring tone as he belittled Ducky, calling him an idiot. He hadn't intended to interfere but there was something about watching an abusive top in action that made him go ice cold with anger. Being a top was instinctive to him - he knew down to his bones how to treat a sub, and what a sub needed – so to see someone mistake it for ego, bullying and abuse, and getting it so fundamentally \*wrong\*, hurt him. It was like someone scraping their nails along a blackboard – it set his teeth on edge and made him feel physically sick.

He endured it for as long as he could but Ducky was his \*friend\*, one of the few people to befriend him after his wife's death. He'd made him feel welcome during his first few months at NIS, as it had then been called, and he was a good man. He didn't deserve this.

"Oh for god's sake, boy," Jordan raged, as Ducky stumbled and spilt some of his drink on the floor. "Mop it up before someone slips on it. No - not with your handkerchief." He pushed Ducky down towards the shiny wooden floor. "With your tongue. Maybe that'll teach you to be more careful in future."

He kicked Ducky on the ass as he went down and Gibbs really hadn't acted consciously as he walked over there, body coiled like a spring, and swung his fist at Jordan's jaw, liking the crunching sound it made as it connected, and the satisfaction of seeing a big man like Jordan go down. Then he hauled Ducky to his feet and placed his own body between Ducky and Jordan.

"I remember the night," Gibbs said, snapping back into the present. "I remember you were a coward and a bully then, Jordan, and you're a coward and a bully now. You killed three innocent people just to get us out here. And then you killed Dr Keller just as an object lesson for Ducky, didn't you? To punish him for leaving you and get his attention."

Jordan reached out and slapped Rodney, hard, and John gave another of those low, involuntary growls, watching the screen like a wolf, desperate to pounce.

"That wasn't the question I asked, Gibbs," Jordan snapped. "I asked if you remembered what I said to you that night."

Gibbs nodded. "I remember. You told me that one day you'd destroy me, and take someone I love away from me," he said.

Jordan smiled. "That's right – and you replied that it had already happened. So I did some digging and found that was true. You didn't have anyone left to lose because there was nobody out there you loved. Not then anyway." There was something utterly evil in his eyes as he said that, and Gibbs felt that cold fist tightening in the pit of his belly. Now he knew where this was going.

"All I had to do was wait though, Gibbs," Jordan continued. "It's been a long wait. I watched you take various spouses, but you didn't love any of them, did you? Just when I thought that this one might be different, that you might be in love with this one - you divorced and were onto the next one. Things went quiet for awhile - I checked up on you regularly and when I found out you'd been collaring some new subs...well, I figured there was a possibility you might love at least one of them. You see, I want to take someone you love away from you, Gibbs, the way you took someone \*I\* love away from me."

Gibbs felt that cold fist in his belly unclench, and send ice cold blood surging through his veins, flooding his body.

"But which one to take?" Jordan asked, with a speculative look. "I thought it would be easy to tell but it isn't. You don't give much away, Gibbs."

Gibbs felt the icy coldness seep into his bones, and settle there.

"So...I thought I'd try Plan A to find out. I had a Plan B, obviously, and you'll learn a little bit more about that in a minute. But Plan A – that was the simple plan. You remember that shot I took at you a few days ago? The one that winged poor McGee? You'll be pleased to know I wasn't aiming at the boy – as you probably know, I'm a very good shot and if I'd wanted to hit him I could. I was aiming over his head but he moved his arm at a most inopportune time and got hit by accident. You see, Gibbs, I thought I'd be able to tell, in that split second of your reaction, which of your subs you love the most. I thought your reactions under duress would give away what you normally keep so close to your chest, and that you'd throw yourself towards one of them and that would be my answer. Unfortunately for me, I got the answer to another question entirely."

He gave another little grin, and Gibbs knew he was enjoying himself immensely.

"I didn't find out which of them you love the most because you didn't have time to react before one of them rushed to protect \*you\*, instead of the other way around. So instead I found out which one of your subs loves you the most – dear, charming, impossible Anthony DiNozzo – but that wasn't what I needed to know."

"Tony was just closest to me that day on the pier – doesn't prove anything," Gibbs commented tersely.

"Ah, poor DiNozzo – he loves you so much he'd die for you and you can't even see it," Jordan said. "I took some footage of the entire incident, to study later, and he was closer to both David and McGee at the time I started shooting so you're wrong there, Gibbs. You're wrong more often than you think, I suspect." He turned and slapped Rodney, who gave a yelp of surprise. "And please don't interrupt again, Gibbs."

Gibbs bit back the growl of frustration, aware of just how rigid John Sheppard had gone beside him. He hoped the man wasn't so far gone that he'd be unable to help them in what was coming next – because he had the feeling that something was coming next, and he also had the feeling that he wasn't going to like it.

"So I had no choice but to put Plan B into operation. It took a few days to arrange, but it's all turned out very well. Now, listen carefully, Gibbs, because I'm going to give you a choice. Your subs are all well – for now. Here...see."

He pressed a button and a picture flashed up in the corner of the screen. Gibbs got to his feet, and felt Ziva suddenly arrive at his side, her eyes fixed on the screen.

"This is McGee," Jordan said, and Gibbs could just about make out the probie, lying on a stone slab somewhere, arms and legs tightly bound. He could see a splash of red on his arm and knew that his gunshot wound had opened up again. He couldn't make out many details but McGee was clearly conscious and frightened. Then he saw the small device attached to McGee's collar and he frowned. Beside him, John gestured at the incendiary device that he'd found tied around his own neck when he woke up and which was now lying on the table; the one attached to Tim's neck looked exactly the same.

"I think you'll recognise this planet, General Sheppard," Jordan said. "You visited it some time ago - I heard about it from one of your marines. You'd be amazed at how much people are prepared to tell the crazy old scientist sitting in the corner of the cafeteria, drinking his coffee!"

"It's PBX-250," John said. He took a sharp intake of breath, and glanced sideways at Gibbs. Gibbs knew this wasn't going to be good.

"That's right, General. It's the planet where your husband was nearly sacrificed by the somewhat savage locals – an offering to appease the Wraith. I've given them McGee – they were very pleased and plan to sacrifice him at sundown. So that gives you..." Jordan glanced at his watch. "About six hours, Gibbs."

Sheppard nodded at Lorne, who put a call out on his radio.

"Not so fast, General. I wouldn't want you to make any hasty decisions," Jordan chuckled. "Not before I've had Gibbs make his choice."

Gibbs took a deep breath, and nodded. Jordan clicked another button and a different image came up.

"Abby," Lorne breathed.

Abby was sitting by herself on what looked like an island, hands and legs both chained behind her to the tree she was sitting propped up against, and, like McGee, there was a small incendiary device attached to her collar. She looked pale and scared, and Gibbs wanted to reach out, pull Jordan through the screen, and smash his face to smithereens.

"This planet is PMB-090," Jordan said. "It's a nice planet. She won't be in any danger until sunrise..."

"I remember that planet," Lorne said. "It's the one with the deadly solar radiation."

"That's right!" Jordan beamed. "Sunrise on that planet isn't for another...oh, six hours though, so if someone were to rescue her before then, she'd be fine. Of course rescue won't be easy – she's on an island some way from the nearest gate, and there's some rather unpleasant wildlife. It's fine during the day when they all hide from the radiation – but at night, well...it can get a little unpleasant. You might not find it an easy rescue but she should be fine as long as you get to her before sunrise."

Gibbs wished he could talk to Abby and tell her she was going to be okay, that he'd never let anyone hurt her, but he was powerless. All he could do was watch while this man, this old enemy, taunted him with images of how he'd failed to protect his own submissives. He felt the failure on every level – as a leader, as a field agent, and, most particularly, as a top. Protecting his subs was his responsibility damn it! There was also a certain irony in this – he'd collared them in order to keep them safe, and it seemed that by that very act he'd placed them in danger.

"And finally..." Jordan flicked a switch and the image of Abby faded. "It's DiNozzo. You know, Gibbs, I really don't know why you keep such a badly behaved sub. I'm afraid I had to slap him around considerably just to get him to co-operate. He didn't seem to like me hitting Rodney, either, and although he was very tightly bound, he tried to assault me. It was necessary to tie him quite brutally I'm afraid."

The screen flickered and a new scene came up. Gibbs felt himself screaming silently inside as he saw Tony, lying in a room in a building somewhere. Like the other two, Tony also had a small bomb attached to his collar. Gibbs's eyes were drawn to the bruises around Tony's jawline and he felt his own jaw tighten. Tony was tied down to a steel hospital bed, thick cuffs fastened – too tight - around his hands, legs, neck, chest and midriff - and a sinister looking tube sticking out of his arm.

"I wonder how often DiNozzo gives blood?" Jordan asked. "Well, today he'll be giving a lot of blood. He's wired up to a machine that will automatically take some every hour, on the hour. Not much each time but enough that after, say, six hours, he'll be dead."

Gibbs felt his jaw twitch as he saw Tony pull, pointlessly, on the cuffs holding him down. "But don't worry, Gibbs," Jordan said. "I'm sending you the co-ordinates to his location. Of course, he's at the bottom of an abandoned Genii complex, and there are some booby traps on some of the doors...but I'm sure you'll be able to rescue him in time if you really try."

Jordan flicked a switch again, and all three images came up on the screen, alongside Jordan himself. Gibbs surveyed his three subs blankly, giving nothing away in his facial expression.

"Ah – always the poker face. That's what I like about you, Gibbs," Jordan said, shaking his head. "But I think I'll find the answer to my question. Now, I'm sure you're wondering why I chose these three, and left Ziva and dear Donald. Well, firstly, I know that much as you love my dear Donald he's not the love of your life – I note you didn't marry him but you did marry elsewhere, so that gives me that answer. As for Ziva – she's a top, clearly, and unless you've changed your orientation, that means you're not interested in her in that way. So, that left me with your other three subs. Time to find out which one of them you love the most. Choose one, Gibbs. You can't rescue all of them yourself, in the time allotted. You must choose one to save. And don't think you can duck the question by sending others in your stead – you'll have already noted the small incendiary devices I've placed around their necks – similar to the one I put on General Sheppard to ensure Rodney's co-operation. Unless you set foot on one of the three planets where your subs are, within the next hour, then I will detonate them and kill all three of them."

"I can't make that choice," Gibbs hissed, gazing at the three images on the screen. "It's impossible."

"Not impossible, no. Hard, I'll grant you – but not impossible," Jordan said. "Now – time for me to leave. You have an hour, Gibbs."

And with that he cut the feed – but only to himself. The other three images stayed on the screen.

"Sir – we have audio," Lorne said to Sheppard.

"They can hear us?" Gibbs asked. Lorne shook his head.

"No, sir – but we can hear them," he said. Sheppard nodded and the audio came up.

"Songs," Abby was saying. "I can sing songs until Gibbs gets here. What song though?" She licked her dry lips, and then gave a little squeak and looked around. "What was that? Oh shit...this place is so creepy."

The sound from McGee's feed was the sound of wild celebrating, as the villagers holding him captive whooped and jumped around the fire, anticipating their impending sacrifice.

Lorne switched to Tony's feed. There was a sound of muffled cursing as Tony struggled with his cuffs, pointlessly, tugging and tearing at them. "Damn it, being tied up should be more fun than this," Tony lamented, thumping his head back on the steel bed he was tied on.

Gibbs shook his head, chuckling slightly despite himself.

"Looks like we can keep the audio and the visual," Lorne said. "Should be a help in locating them, sir."

"Oh he didn't leave us with the feeds in order to help us," Gibbs muttered dryly. "He left it to torture us. If one of them dies we'll see it, hear it, and be powerless to help. He knew what he was doing when he left us with the feeds."

It was all supposed to twist the knife in his gut a little bit more – and it was working. Gibbs made a vow to himself, there and then, that if he ever got the chance to twist a knife in Jordan's gut he'd take it, and he'd be sure to twist damn hard.

"How the hell are we getting live feed from three different planets?" Sheppard demanded, turning to Lorne.

Lorne beckoned over a tall, bespectacled man. "We're not entirely sure how he's doing it, but Dr Conway's got a theory, sir," he said, nodding to Conway to explain.

"Well, first off, he has Dr Sheppard," Conway said, and his face had a pinched look about it as he spoke, as if he really didn't like giving Rodney that much credit. "And, as he tells us every five minutes, the man is a genius. Also, I've taken a look at the schematics of that Genii complex – we visited it last year but couldn't stay more than a few days to study it properly because of the usual amounts of Genii radiation."

"Figures," Sheppard sighed. It all sounded like so much gibberish to Gibbs – he had no idea what they were talking about and he didn't particularly care what the explanation was for them being able to receive the live audio and visual feeds. Jordan was a resourceful man and had clearly planned this meticulously.

"We think the Genii were using the outpost as a communications relay station," Conway continued. "They were experimenting with Ancient tech to try and get comms through without having to dial a main gate, bouncing off signals from various different planets and handling them all through one central array. Maybe Rodney got that working."

"Or maybe Jordan did," Gibbs said. Sheppard looked at him, with a raised eyebrow. "I'm just saying, the guy did run one of the biggest tech companies on Earth," Gibbs said impatiently. "He had to have access to all the latest stuff. Whatever – I really don't care how he's done it. Just give the man credit for being an evil, twisted genius – all I care about is my subs and all this talking is wasting time."

John Sheppard nodded. He took Gibbs by the arm, and led him away into a corner.

"You gonna make this decision?" he asked, his intent gaze fixed on Gibbs. Gibbs was glad the man could put aside his own anguish at this moment in time in order to help them resolve the situation. He had a feeling John Sheppard was a good man to have on your side in a crisis.



"Looks like I have to," he murmured. "But there's a trap in all this. Whoever I choose – that's the one he's going to kill."

"Maybe." John shrugged. "But if you don't choose one of them he's going to kill them all. You could bluff him..."

"What – choose the one I care about the least and go after them so that'll be the one he kills? I don't think so, General," he snapped, his entire body going cold at the thought of it. "I wouldn't do that to any of 'em!"

"No. Damn thing's impossible – I agree. So which one *are* you going to choose?"

"Sir..." He looked up into Lorne's anxious blue eyes and Ziva's dark, angry brown ones as they came over. "With all due respect, this isn't a choice you have to make. I'd like to take my team and go after Abby, sir," Lorne told him.

"And Tim is mine," Ziva said firmly. "Teyla and Ronon say they will come with me." Gibbs looked at them both, noting the strength of their feelings in their eyes. He sighed, rubbing his face wearily, and then nodded.

"Looks like DiNozzo is yours then," Sheppard said.

Gibbs dropped his head and gazed bleakly at the floor.

"Oh yeah - DiNozzo is mine," he muttered. Always had been, always would be. Just because he'd kept him at arm's length didn't mean he got to spare himself the pain of loving Tony DiNozzo. He had thought that keeping Shannon's collar close and keeping Tony at a distance meant he'd protected himself, but now he realised he'd just been lying to himself and Jordan had caught him out in that lie.

General Sheppard moved briskly around the room, giving orders, and within minutes various teams had assembled and were kitting up, quietly and efficiently. Gibbs was impressed – he doubted he could have done better himself.

Carson came over, carrying a medical kit. "I'm with you, Gibbs," he said. "Got supplies of DiNozzo's blood type so the minute we get to him I can give him a transfusion."

"Here." Sheppard handed Gibbs a kit – vest, supplies, P-90, knife.

"I already have a knife," Gibbs said. "Never go anywhere without it."

"Then take two," Sheppard replied, buckling on his thigh holster. "Can't do any harm."

"Which team are you going with?" Gibbs asked.

"Yours," Sheppard replied tersely. "Way I see it, Jordan needs a base of operations and that

Genii complex has to be it. So that's where Rodney is."

"You think Jordan's still there?" Gibbs asked, pulling on his vest and fastening it with terse jerks of his fingers.

Sheppard shrugged. "Not necessarily. He's got access to a stargate and can come and go at will. He could be somewhere else by now. Here." He stuck something in Gibbs's ear.

"What is it?"

"Audio – so we can hear what's going on where DiNozzo's being held. We'll keep it as background in case the situation changes. Radio contact takes priority though."

"Sure." Gibbs nodded. He could hear Tony fighting with his cuffs again, and a few muffled curses. "Wish he'd stop struggling," he muttered.

"Not gonna happen." Sheppard shook his head. "My guess is the only top's cuffs he'd willingly wear are yours – he'd always fight anyone else who tried to tie him down."

Gibbs gave a wry shake of his head. "Yeah - that sounds like DiNozzo." He glanced over at where Lorne was talking to his team.

"Don't worry." Sheppard patted his shoulder. "He's one of the best. If anyone can get to Abby it's him."

"It should be me," Gibbs muttered.

"It's not. Suck it up," Sheppard growled. Gibbs sighed, remembering that conversation he'd had with this man in the interrogation room a few days ago, where he'd been the one giving the tough advice.

"Looks like I've been out-topped," he murmured.

Sheppard shook his head, a wry smile playing on his lips. "I have a feeling that day will never come, Gibbs."

Ducky came running up to him. "Jethro...that databurst from Earth has come through with information on Randolph," he said. Then he stopped, an anxious expression in his eyes.

"Bad news, Duck?" Gibbs asked, reaching for the knife Sheppard had provided and sticking it into his vest.

"I'm afraid so, Jethro," Ducky sighed. "You know I told you that I didn't think Randolph was capable of murder?"

"Yeah – but you've been proved wrong about that one, Ducky," Gibbs told him.

"I know...but I kept thinking – why now? I mean, I know what he said about waiting until you cared about someone enough that it would hurt you to lose them but I felt that couldn't be the whole story."

"Okay. What is?" Gibbs asked, picking up the P-90 and checking the weapon to become familiar with it.

"Randolph is a wealthy man, a highly respected businessman with a lot to lose. He could have struck at you before now but I don't think he wanted to take the risk. However, I took a look at the medical records they sent us..."

Gibbs looked up sharply.

"He's dying, Jethro," Ducky sighed. "That's why he doesn't care. He's dying and he wants his revenge before he goes. No wonder he thought it was worth the risk – coming out here, impersonating Hancock, killing people to draw you out here. He's got nothing to lose..."

"And that makes him very dangerous. I know," Gibbs said, with a wave of his hand.

"It's a brain tumour," Ducky explained. "He's always been a bad-tempered man but the tumour is pressing on the part of the brain associated with personality – and that's making him worse."

"So he's insane as well as murderous," Gibbs said, finishing with his uniform and snapping his radio on.

"Something like that, yes," Ducky sighed. "Jethro..." He put a hand on Gibbs's arm. "Be careful," he warned. Gibbs gave a terse motion with his head.

"Can't promise that, Duck," he said.

"Then please bring Tony back," Ducky said, beseechingly.

Gibbs felt that muscle in his jaw twitch again. "If I don't...I won't be coming back either," he said, in a soft, low undertone. Ducky's eyes widened. "Won't lose two subs I love in one lifetime," Gibbs told him. "Can't. Tony dies...I die."

"Jethro, no...please," Ducky said, but Gibbs pulled his arm away and strode over to the plasma.

He surveyed the images on the screen impassively. He took in Tim's pale face, and wide, frightened eyes, and noted the blood staining his bandaged arm.

Then his eyes flickered over to Abby, sitting in the semi-darkness, lit by a couple of low moons. Her arms were wrapped around her legs and she was resting her chin on her knees. Her eyes seemed huge and they were luminous with fear; every so often she'd twitch and glance around nervously as if she'd heard something that scared her.

Then, finally, he looked at Tony. His gaze, without expression, at the six or seven bruises forming along Tony's jawline, the cut on his head, and the way his brown hair was sticking up messily. His gaze travelled along Tony's arms to the cuffs holding him down; cuffs that were tied too tight. Cuffs that \*he\* hadn't put there. He heard John Sheppard come alongside him; the general glanced sideways at him.

"I'm going crazy just about Rodney," Sheppard murmured. "No idea how you feel having three of 'em out there."

Gibbs turned to him. "We'll find Jordan," he said confidently. "And when we do – he's mine, Sheppard. I know you want him for what he's done to Rodney, but he's mine. Got that?"

Sheppard stared him out. "I get a chance at him – I'll take it," he said grimly. "But if there's a choice – you can have him first."

"Fair enough." Gibbs nodded.

"Look sir," Lorne said, pointing at the screen. Jordan came into view on Tony's feed, his hand wrapped around the chain dangling from Rodney's collar.

"Knew he was there," Sheppard snarled, gazing at the screen intently, and Gibbs knew he was cataloguing all the bruises on Rodney's face, silently stowing the information away to feed the anger and hone his fighting instincts without allowing it take him over completely.

Jordan grinned up at the camera, and then turned back and fastened Rodney's chain securely to the wall, before turning away.

"Any chance of letting me go, big guy?" Tony asked as he passed him, giving Jordan his most charming subby smile. Gibbs winced – that smile didn't work on him and he sure as hell knew it wouldn't work on Jordan – but then again he didn't think for a moment that Tony expected it to. It was just bravado on his part.

"Oh, DiNozzo," Gibbs sighed, as Jordan struck his agent across the mouth, hard, making his head clang back on the metal bed with a resounding thwang.

"I take it that's a 'no' then," Tony said, spitting out blood, his lip split open from the force of the blow. Gibbs had to chuckle – trust DiNozzo to always have the last word. He felt that icy fist in his belly clench again - his sub might have an indomitable spirit but everyone had their breaking point; what was Tony's?

Jordan ignored Tony and glanced up at the camera. "I'll be taking my leave now, Gibbs," he said. "You have...thirty minutes to make your choice. I'll be waiting." And then he strode from the room, leaving Rodney and Tony behind.

"I'll be there," Gibbs said, in a low undertone.

He made his way over to Lorne, whose team was standing assembled behind him, ready to go.

"Bring her home, Colonel," he said. Lorne stood to attention and gave him a salute.

"I will, sir," he promised. Gibbs gazed at him, feeling a twinge of regret that it wouldn't be his hands that freed Abby and brought her home. He glanced at Lorne's hands, and remembered something Abby had once said to him on the subject. "They look capable," he said, nodding at them. "And safe. Make sure they are."

Lorne looked a little startled, but he gave another salute and then called his team and they left together. They were the first team due through the gate.

Gibbs went over to Ziva who was standing beside Teyla and Ronon, all of them now kitted up and ready. He took her head in his hands and gazed at her intently. "Bring Tim back safe, Ziva, and, if it's what he wants too, you can put your collar on him," he told her.

She gazed at him, wide-eyed, and he could see the gleam of hope in their dark depths. He didn't think she needed the additional incentive but he wanted to give it anyway – anything to help keep her focussed. If she wasn't focussed he had no doubt at all that she'd lay waste to that entire planet – and who knew if either she or Tim would survive that.

"Yes, boss," she said, firmly.

He squeezed her head between his hands.

"Keep control of yourself," he told her, glaring at her as hard as he could. She could do this – he knew she could. She just needed to stay in control of her dark side.

"I will," she said, in a low, hoarse tone. "I promise."

"Okay." He kissed her forehead then released her, and started to walk away.

"Boss?" she said. He stopped. "Tony..." she began.

"Tony will be fine," he told her, his back stiff, his resolve as cold and hard as the butt of the P-90 under his fingers.

He turned back to see the fear in her eyes – Tony, out of all of them, was the one who was in the most danger. The minute Gibbs walked through the gate onto the planet where Tony was being held Jordan would have his answer - and that made Tony the main target. Gibbs remembered that Ziva was Tony's partner, and that the two of them had an easy rapport and a good working relationship. Of course she was worried about him.

"He'll be fine," Gibbs insisted.

"How do you know...?" she began. He turned on her, eyes blazing.

"Tony will be fine, Ziva! He won't die because I haven't damn well given him permission to die," he said grimly, and then he turned on his heel, and, with General Sheppard by his side, he strode out of the room.

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Tony twisted his head as much as he could so he could see Rodney. The other sub was crouching, slumped against the wall, his hands chained behind him, another chain attached to the collar around his neck and then to the wall. There might not be any love lost between them but they were in this together, and he kind of felt sorry for Rodney. None of this was his fault and Jordan had been using him like a punching bag. Tony had tried to intervene when he'd gained consciousness, but, groggy and unsteady, he'd just brought Jordan's wrath down on himself. The top had backhanded him several times before he'd passed out again. When he woke up he was lying on a steel bed with a tube in his arm. And he was tied down tight; so tight it hurt.

He knew Rodney was awake even though the other sub's eyes were shut, and he wondered if they really had anything to talk about. Rodney loathed him and he couldn't say he blamed the guy. Maybe it would be smarter to stay silent. He thought about that for awhile and then opened his mouth – he'd never made a habit of being smart, no need to start now.

"You okay?" he asked.

Rodney opened his eyes and Tony realised that he hadn't been keeping quiet because he hated him but because he was too ashamed to look at him.

"Yeah...I mean, no, but yeah," Rodney replied.

"I can see the chain on your neck – are your hands tied behind you or to the wall?" Tony asked.

"To the wall – that bastard wasn't going to take any chances."

"Nope. Guess not." Tony surveyed the cuts and bruises along Rodney's jaw. "He sure does like his backhanders, doesn't he?"

Rodney nodded, wearily. "I just keep thinking about what John will do when he catches up with him; it won't be pretty."

Tony snorted. "John won't get a look-in if Gibbs gets there first. Rodney – can you fill me in on what's going on? I know we aren't on Atlantis any more and I can see there's a tube in my arm, and a second ago I noticed it filled up with my blood. What's that about?"

Rodney hesitated.

"Tell me. I can take it. I'm a big boy," Tony grinned. His split lip opened up even more with

the movement and he tasted the salty tang of his own blood again.

Rodney looked away from him, as if he was too ashamed to meet his eye.

"Sorry, DiNozzo – he's taking blood from you - every hour on the hour. He gives you six hours unless someone shows up to rescue you."

"Sick bastard. Gibbs knows about this?" Tony asked, frowning.

"Yeah." Rodney nodded.

"Then he'll be here," Tony said confidently. Rodney stared at the ground, still unable to look at him. "Okay, Rodney, what aren't you telling me?"

"Jordan has Abby and McGee as well," Rodney replied. "He's put all of you on different planets but they're both in danger of their lives, just like you. Gibbs has to choose which one of you to save himself, and which of you gets someone else to rescue them."

"Why the hell did Jordan do that?" Tony asked.

"He wants to find out which one of you Gibbs loves best," Rodney muttered.

"Oh man. I see. Okay. Yeah, wow – that's taking 'sick bastard' to a whole new level!" Tony chuckled.

"Still think Gibbs will be coming for you?" Rodney asked. Tony snapped his head around to look at the scientist, but there was no malice behind the question, just curiosity.

"Nope," he replied, shaking his head as much as his bonds would allow – which wasn't much. Rodney's blue eyes widened.

"Who will he rescue then?"

"Abby," Tony said confidently. "She's his favourite – always has been, always will be. Besides...he's been kind of pissed at me lately. And even when he's not pissed at me I really wind him up. So definitely not me."

Rodney gazed at him, and Tony found it kind of fascinating seeing just how wide and blue his eyes could get.

"Why was he pissed at you?" Rodney asked.

Tony laughed. "You were there!" he said. "You know...that whole nearly arresting you fiasco."

Rodney coloured. "Oh. That," he muttered. "You were such a jerk to me, DiNozzo."

"Yeah, well...it's kind of my thing, you know." Tony told him. "Being a jerk. People expect it of me. If it's any consolation I haven't been able to sit down comfortably ever since."

"Gibbs punished you for it?" Rodney asked, leaning his head back against the wall with a weary sigh.

"Hell yeah. Big time. Although to be fair I deserved it. How about you and John? Did he take you down for that lie you told?" Tony asked.

"Yeah. Well, kind of," Rodney replied. Tony craned his head to look at him again.

"Bad?" he asked.

"Yes. Well...no...bad but kind of a good bad," Rodney said, with a slight grin.

"Ah, that's the \*best\* kind of bad, Rodney!" Tony exclaimed. "I LIKE that kind of bad!"

Rodney shot him an amused smile at that, and Tony could feel the scientist's distrust of him fading a little.

"It felt personal," Rodney said, quietly. "The way you treated me that day."

Tony thumped his head back on the steel bed, and gazed up at the ceiling, blankly. He wasn't sure where they were but the run down room with the paint peeling down the walls was starting to feel a little claustrophobic.

"Yeah, well, Rodney...maybe it was," he sighed. "Maybe it was."

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Gibbs had never been through a stargate before and the effect was momentarily disorienting. One moment he was in the control room on Atlantis, then he was walking through what felt like thick, gooey water, and he couldn't hear anything except for a buzzing in his ears, and then he seemed to be walking down a green-blue tunnel, before emerging, suddenly and unexpectedly, into a lush forest.

He took a moment to get his bearings and then saw Sheppard, Carson and the blonde marine Sheppard had brought along, waiting for him.

Sheppard checked the audio and then nodded. "Still got it," he said, and Gibbs heaved a sigh of relief as he heard Tony's voice in his ear and Rodney's muted reply. At least they were both still alive – but for how much longer? He glanced around, looking for some kind of surveillance device that would tell Jordan they were here. Sheppard was already on it, and gestured with his head to a tiny hidden camera aimed at the gate.

"Looks like Rodney's work," he said. "Doubt Jordan did much more than order him around and tell him what to do."



And slap him around, Gibbs thought to himself but it was wiser not to voice that thought. Rodney Sheppard had looked pretty beat up – as had Tony. Gibbs felt his world narrowing to a little point. He'd seen Tony beat up before, and while he was always aware of his own ice cold anger when it happened, he had never allowed himself to give in to that anger – in fact he'd barely ever acknowledged it. This was different – he felt pushed to the edge here. He was outside his normal environment, reliant on the help of strangers, using a stargate to travel from planet to planet and something he'd done a very long time ago had come back to bite him – spectacularly – on the ass.

"Well, he knows which one you've chosen," Sheppard said. "So I guess the ball's in his court now."

"Yeah – and that means we don't have much time," Gibbs replied shortly. He kept one ear on the audio feed from his headset, waiting to hear it change, to hear Jordan re-enter that room and take his revenge on Gibbs by killing Tony, but there was nothing except for the sound of Tony's occasionally ragged breathing and Rodney's chains clanking against the wall.

"This way." Sheppard read his hand-held device and began walking – fast – through the trees. Gibbs jogged along easily behind him. This was like being back in the Marines, and the memory of being part of a platoon working ops came back to him as if it was yesterday.

After about fifteen minutes they reached a clearing, and in it found the rundown Genii complex which consisted of three ramshackle old buildings.

"Problem?" Gibbs asked, as Sheppard circled around, looking at his handheld device the entire time.

"Yeah. There are three towers, sunk into the ground beneath each building...need to figure out which one to raid," John replied.

"Underground?" Gibbs queried. John made a face.

"It's a Genii thing. They just love being underground."

"Any life-signs?" Carson asked, looking at the device over John's shoulder.

"Yeah... " John twirled, his face scrunched up. "Two life-signs – right at the bottom – long way down. That tower there." He pointed at the rundown building furthest away. Gibbs started walking towards it. "But..." John began. Gibbs turned back. "Isn't it a bit obvious?" John frowned. "Three buildings, two life-signs at the bottom of one of them, just sitting there waiting to be rescued. Supposing it's the wrong building – but we don't find out until we get down there?"

"You think it's a trap?" Carson asked.

"He knows it's a trap," Gibbs snapped. "What he's worried about is whether it's also a bluff."

No life-signs anywhere else?" Gibbs asked, looking around.

"Nope...but this building..." John pointed to the one closest to them. "It's got more radiation than the rest – I can't get anything reliable off it."

"Bastard knew that – that's why he brought them here," Gibbs growled. "He wasn't going to make it easy for us."

"I say we go for the one with the life-signs," Carson said. John and Gibbs gazed at each other. "It's at least \*something\* to go on!" Carson said. Gibbs sighed, and rubbed his jaw.

"It's your call, General," he said. "You're mission leader."

"Okay then." John walked towards the building with the life-signs. "Maybe I'm over-complicating things, and Carson's right – at least it's something."

Sheppard pulled the ramshackle door off at the hinges. On the outside, the building looked like a rundown agricultural barn, but inside it was overgrown with weeds.

"Looks like someone's been here recently." Gibbs pointed at the disturbed vegetation around a large trap door.

"Yeah. Could still be a bluff though," John said. He reached the trap door and waved the blonde marine over. "Cadman – this one booby trapped?" he asked. She knelt down beside it, reaching for a bag of equipment.

"Major Cadman is an explosives expert," Carson told Gibbs. "The best I've met. She's also one of the mouthiest and most annoying subs I've ever met," he added with a grin. "Hard as nails and bossy as hell – I thought she was a top for almost a year after we arrived until she tried to seduce me one time – well it was kind of her. I mean it \*was\* her but she was in someone else's body at the time – uh, long story."

Gibbs grunted. He'd known the blonde marine was a sub the minute he'd been introduced to her but he knew not everyone had his knack for instinctively picking up orientation on sight. Then the last part of Carson's sentence penetrated his brain and he turned, frowning.

"She was in someone else's body?" he queried. Carson made a face at him and pointed at John.

"We don't talk about it," he signed with his hands.

John turned. "Are you talking about that thing we don't talk about?" he asked.

Carson grimaced. "No. Definitely not," he said firmly.

"Glad to hear it." John turned back to Cadman.

"It was Rodney," Carson whispered to Gibbs. "She was in Rodney's body and she kissed me. John didn't, uh, react very well..."

Gibbs had no doubt that was a massive understatement. He wondered how the hell he'd ended up here, in a galaxy so far from home, with people who routinely battled vampire-like aliens and swapped bodies, for god's sake. And now his subs were scattered over three planets, each of them in three different kinds of deadly peril - you couldn't make it up. It was all so insane that he'd have laughed his head off if it wasn't all so close to home.

How were the others doing, he wondered? How were his other subs, and the people he'd sent to rescue them? Would they make it back alive? He remembered the words of the Athosian prophetess, Mara. Was she right? Would he lose them all - all except one? And if so - who would survive? Ducky was the only one of his subs who was safe on Atlantis right now - maybe he'd lose all the others. His gut clenched at the thought - he had already told Ducky he didn't intend to go back if Tony died and he meant it. There was no way he'd be leaving at all if he lost four of his subs, prophecy be damned.

He jerked slightly as he heard voices in his ear - Rodney and Tony were talking. It was good to hear Tony's voice again. He could tell by the expression in Sheppard's eyes that he was listening too - and they glanced at each other for a moment, sharing the same sense of relief at hearing their subs speak.

Cadman found some wires, traced them back to some C4 explosive, and effortlessly disarmed the small bomb attached to the trapdoor.

"Well Jordan said there were booby traps," Sheppard murmured. "Question is - would he bother trapping the building they're not in as a bluff?"

"Question also is - how many are there?" Gibbs asked. "Looking at these schematics you dug out of your database there are seventeen levels to this place, all of them accessible only by one door at the end of each staircase. If he's booby-trapped all seventeen of them then it'll take us longer than six hours to get there."

"We'll get there. Cadman does her best work under pressure, don't you, Major?" Sheppard told her with a grim smile. "She'll be faster next time."

She'd been pretty fast this time, Gibbs thought, but Sheppard clearly knew his people and she looked like she relished the challenge.

"Yes, sir!" she said sharply.

Sheppard pulled open the trap door and they went down a narrow metal staircase and then walked along a featureless dark corridor.

They reached the door at the end and Cadman set to work again.

Gibbs leaned back against the wall, caressing the butt of his P-90. It wasn't a familiar gun for

him, but he liked the way it felt in his hands. There was another bomb attached to the next door; Cadman located it quickly and efficiently but he could see the sweat beading her brow as she worked, hands moving fast over the wiring.

"Don't worry," Sheppard told him in an undertone. "We'll get there in time. Your boy won't bleed out on my watch."

Gibbs took a sharp intake of breath. He'd been deliberately not thinking about Tony, lying on that steel bed with the blood draining out of his veins, because he needed to stay focussed. They all watched as Cadman worked. Gibbs listened to Tony and Rodney talk in his earpiece, glad of the sound of Tony's voice, reassuring him that his sub was still alive. He hated it when there was a silence and wished he could order Tony to keep talking, but he didn't know Gibbs was listening so there was little Gibbs could do except ride out the silences.

"Still think Gibbs will be coming for you?" Rodney's voice.

"Nope." Tony.

"Who will he rescue then?"

"Abby. She's his favourite – always has been, always will be. Besides...he's been kind of pissed at me lately. And even when he's not pissed at me I really wind him up. So definitely not me."

John gazed at Gibbs dispassionately. Gibbs gazed back at him just as blank-faced but he felt as if he'd been on the receiving end of one of Jordan's backhanders by the tone of utter certainty in Tony's voice. Was Tony right, he thought to himself? Would he have chosen Abby? If he'd had a real choice, is that what he'd have done? If it was down to his feelings alone, would it have been Abby? He felt the most protective towards her – she was the only one of the three of them who wasn't a trained field agent, and besides...she was like a daughter to him. She was a lot older than Kelly would have been, if she hadn't been killed, but there was something about her that brought out all his paternal instincts. He loved her - but then he loved all his subs.

He thought of Tim, who was so smart it was scary, and so totally not smart when it came to tops; who lived out his entire life in fear that someone would guess that he'd never yet gone to a top's bed. It wasn't such a dark secret, Gibbs thought wryly, when he remembered the many dark secrets he'd kept over the years. He hadn't told any of his agents about his first wife, his daughter, or how they'd died. Ducky knew, obviously, and Ziva knew, but only because she'd done a dossier on him before she joined NCIS. Nobody else knew. Just like nobody knew he'd tracked down the man who'd killed them and emptied his gun into him. Yet poor Tim tortured himself about his much more innocent secret all the same. He had always had a soft spot for the probie; would he have gone for Tim?

Then there was Tony. Tony who never let anyone get really close, who used misdirection like his own secret superpower. Tony who had told him dozens of stories about the same

events in his life, all of them with a slightly different emphasis, so it wasn't easy figuring out what was true and what was just Tony's sleight of hand. Tony who he knew he loved, who he'd loved for years without doing a damn thing about it. And Tony who, right now, was absolutely certain that Gibbs didn't love him at all. Gibbs thumped his head back against the wall. This hurt. This hurt as much as Jordan must have hoped it would hurt.

"Why was he pissed at you?"

"You were there! You know...that whole nearly arresting you fiasco."

"Oh. That. You were such a jerk to me, DiNozzo."

"Yeah, well...it's kind of my thing, you know. Being a jerk. People expect it of me. If it's any consolation I haven't been able to sit down easily ever since."

"How's it coming along, Cadman?" Sheppard asked. It felt claustrophobic in that small corridor, the three men lined along the side, Cadman working away at the door. Gibbs clamped down hard on his raging impatience; this one was taking a lot longer than the first.

"Nearly there, sir – this one's a doozy," she replied. Gibbs fought, with all his self-control, to stay focussed. They were just standing here while down below them, a very long way down, Tony was bleeding to death.

"Gibbs punished you for it?"

"Hell yeah. Big time. Although to be fair I deserved it. How about you and John? Did he take you down for that lie you told?"

"Yeah. Well, kind of."

"Bad?"

"Yes. Well...no...bad but kind of a good bad."

Gibbs watched as John gave a wry grin at that. He wondered, idly, what he'd have done if it had been Tony telling the lie, and he who had to punish it. He was sure he could be suitably creative but finding the right way to handle a sub wasn't always easy. Was that the kind of lie Tony would tell, he wondered? A lie to protect his top? He didn't think so – he knew that what Gibbs hated more than anything else was his subs lying to him. Then he remembered what Jordan had said about Tony's first instinct being to protect him when they'd been shot at. Maybe Tony *would* lie to him...maybe Tony *had* been lying to him, for a very long time, about something very important.

"Ah, that's the *best* kind of bad, Rodney. I LIKE that kind of bad!"

John gave a little snort of amusement. "Your boy is funny, Gibbs. I'll give him that," he murmured.

"Yeah. DiNozzo is a regular comedian," Gibbs commented dryly.

"It felt personal. The way you treated me that day."

"Yeah, well, Rodney...maybe it was. Maybe it was."

Gibbs tightened his hands around his gun. Jordan had to know they were here – so what was his plan? Why was he waiting? Why didn't he just go straight in there and do whatever it was he intended to do to Tony? He had a feeling he was being played, and he didn't like it. He didn't like it one bit.

"Why? What did I ever do to you?"

"Nothing. Just...watching you with John...I guess I was kind of jealous."

Gibbs frowned.

"He loves you, Rodney. No, he's *\*crazy\** about you. All that lifebonding, sharing a plate stuff. You've latiqued your entwined initials on your arms! Then there's the matching pendants, and that handmade wedding collar he crafted for you and the way he looks at you..."

"Oh."

"Figured it out now?"

"But Gibbs loves you, right? I mean, he collared you?"

"Rodney, in case you haven't noticed Gibbs has collared a lot of subs. I'm nothing more to him than one more sub to rescue, and he never promised me anything more than that, to be fair. I'm the one who screwed up the deal by falling in love with him."

Gibbs lowered his head and stared at the floor, unblinking. There, now it had been said, and he couldn't keep pretending he didn't know the truth of it any more.

"You told him any of this?"

"No, Rodney – like I said, I knew the deal when he collared me. He's not in love with me, and he's never gonna be in love me and that's fine. It's my problem – not his."

"Wow," John said, raising a wry eyebrow at Gibbs. "When that boy of yours gets something wrong, he really gets it wrong, doesn't he?"

"All part of the DiNozzo charm," Gibbs sighed, shaking his head. "How did you know?" he asked, because he thought this was one particular secret he'd hidden pretty well.

Sheppard's handsome face broke into a grin. "'Cause he's trouble," he said. "And you're like

me – you \*like\* trouble."

Gibbs gave an amused grunt. "Rodney's a handful, huh?"

"Yeah – and that's what makes him so much fun," Sheppard said, with a wink. "Just like DiNozzo. Besides – you're here, aren't you? You telling me you'd have let anyone else – and I mean \*anyone\* else come rescue him? I don't care what you said about it not being a choice – it was. Lorne and David made it easy for you, but it was still a choice, Gibbs. You made it, even though you didn't know you were making it. He's the one you're in love with – and I don't even think that's a surprise to you, is it?"

"Hell no." Gibbs shook his head. Sheppard gave him a strange look.

"So, question is – why's it gonna be such a surprise to him?" he asked.

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Ziva made her way down to the jumper bay with Ronon and Teyla walking beside her, and a handful of Sheppard's marines at their heels. She might not have known Teyla and Ronon for very long but she trusted them, implicitly. They felt like good companions to have in such a battle – both of them warriors, like herself.

She tried not to think about Tim. Gibbs had told her to stay focussed and if she thought about him she felt the darkness inside threatening to rise up and overwhelm her. She'd gone slowly with him these past few days, as Gibbs had advised, gentling him, taking care of him, making no claims on him. She knew now that she wanted to take him as her sub one day but only when he was ready, and that might take some time.

It made a change not to bed a sub and take what she wanted from them, hard and savage, without getting to know them first. She found that she liked the gentle pace, the slow build-up, and the sense of pride she felt that he was learning to trust her. She would take him places he had only dreamed of, she promised herself. She would show him how good it could be to surrender his body, heart and soul to the will of a top who loved him. She would coax and tease the best from him, until he was eating out of her hand. It would be so much more satisfying than all those nights of angry, empty sex. But first...first she had to bring him home safely.

They reached the bay and the marine Sheppard had assigned to pilot them went to the controls. Ziva followed him.

"Wait!" a voice called out, and she turned to see a young woman running up behind them, armed to the teeth.

"Kahla?" she frowned. "What are you doing here?"

"I was in the city awaiting combat training with Teyla and got knocked out with the gas, same as everyone else," Kahla said. "Someone told me what was happening and I..." She

stopped, looking a little nervous, and then glanced at Teyla, who nodded to her that she should continue. "I wanted to help," she said firmly. "I am a good fighter, Ziva, and you need all the good fighters you can get."

"I have good fighters and you owe me nothing," Ziva told her, turning. Kahla placed a hand on her arm.

"Then I would like to help as a friend," she said softly. Ziva turned back to see something in Kahla's eyes that hadn't been there before. She glanced at Teyla, who smiled.

"Kahla and I have had many talks these past few days," she said. "Kahla has chosen who she wishes to be, Ziva – as have you I believe," she murmured.

"We are going to rescue someone I love," Ziva told Kahla. "His name is Tim McGee, and, if - \*when\* - I bring him home, if he is willing, I will collar him. Do you still wish to come with us, Kahla?"

Kahla gazed at her from fierce, proud eyes. "It would be my honour," she said, bowing her head in that Athosian way. "Will you accept my help, Ziva?"

Ziva felt surprised that anyone would risk their life to help her. She had only known these people a couple of weeks but they had chosen to come with her and help her fight for her submissive. She liked their company, the simplicity of their friendship, and the knowledge that they were warriors in their souls, just like her, and had done battle with their own demons to be at ease with who they were – just as she had.

"I will, Kahla," she said, touched. "And – thank you."

## Chapter 5 by Xanthe

Lieutenant-Colonel Lorne sighed as the puddle jumper died a second time. It took all his skill to keep it from crash-landing in the marshlands – instead he did a neat nose dive and managed to bring it down relatively safely on dry land. Then he turned and glared at Dr Conway who was busy frantically trying to get the jumper started again.

"What's the problem?" Lorne snapped at his scientist. Conway shook his head.

"It's the solar radiation, Colonel," he said. "It's created a kind of ionic cloaking field around the planet – keeps jamming the jumper controls."

"Jason - Abby is sitting on an island 23 miles in that direction." Lorne waved his arm due south. "And there's no way Jordan carried her there so he and Rodney had to have used the jumper Jordan stole. How come \*they\* managed to get their jumper working out here?"

Conway gave a resigned sigh, and looked up from his work. "Much as I hate to say it, Colonel, I'm not Rodney Sheppard. He might be the most difficult, temperamental and downright obnoxious boss I've ever worked for, but he is right when he tells people he's a



genius. He can do things on the fly that the rest of us have to sit down and work on. Now, I can get the jumper flying again but I need some time to figure out how."

"Okay." Lorne nodded – Conway hated Rodney so if he was paying him compliments then it had to be bad. "How long do you think it will take?"

"Several hours." Conway bit on his lip. Too long, Lorne thought. The sun would come up in four, and soon after that Abby would be fried out there, with no protection.

"Then here's what we'll do," Lorne said, getting up and grabbing two hazmat suits from the back of the jumper and stuffing them into his backpack. "I'm going to go out there and run to Abby's position. You stay here and figure out how to get this thing flying again. When you've figured it out, fly it over to where we are and rescue us. Hazmat suits will keep us safe until you get there. Stay in radio contact at all times. Lieutenant Rice you're with me. Sergeant Hansen – you stay with Conway. Okay, let's get moving."

Lorne didn't wait to hear Conway's protests – and he was sure there were plenty. He just ran out of the back of the jumper and started jogging across the wet ground. A few seconds later he heard Rice catch up with him.

"You do know we have to jog 23 miles and then swim for two carrying hazmat suits to reach her, don't you?" Rice asked him. Lorne glanced sideways at him.

"No, \*I\* have to jog 23 miles and swim for two with the hazmat suits," Lorne told him. "You're going to run with me and then cover me while I swim. Those dinosaur birds patrol the open water like tops at an orgy, and I remember from last time I was here how they like to dive-bomb anything that's moving. Your job is to shoot them down when they go for me while I'm in the water."

"Right," Rice said. "Sir...I like Abby...and I really hope she's going to be okay but even if we could see where we're going, and even if those dino-bird things weren't out there, this is one hell of a task."

"I can do it, Jamie," Lorne said firmly. "And if I can, so can you. You're not long out of basic training and your legs are fifteen years younger than mine. Now – let's get moving."

"Yes, sir!" Rice said, shooting him a grin.

Lorne was a serial monogamist – he'd had many subs in his life, but none of them for longer than a few months. He'd never met anyone he wanted to collar and couldn't imagine sharing a plate with anyone, but Abby was different. Abby was special. He loved everything about her from her big heart to her big green eyes. She was fun to be around, in and out of the bedroom. He also loved that she enjoyed being tied as much as he enjoyed tying her. He loved the pretty patterns his rope made on her body, and the way she'd wriggled and sighed when he had her captive and tied beneath him. He'd never had a sub who responded as perfectly as Abby – she'd looked so beautiful naked, her skin criss-crossed with his rope.

The only possible obstacle to their relationship, as far as Lorne could see, was Gibbs. He thought the other top trusted him to take care of Abby but he needed to prove to the man that he was worthy of her – and if he had to risk his life running and swimming half way across this planet then he would. No question.

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Rodney tried to shift himself into a more comfortable sitting position but it wasn't easy when he was chained to the wall by his neck and arms. His head hurt from where he'd been thwacked every few minutes by Jordan, and he was exhausted from being on the go for so long with no rest while he'd helped Jordan set up his revenge. Rodney wasn't sure he'd done the right thing helping Jordan; not that he thought he'd had any choice, but, even so, he was horrified by the results of his actions.

He glanced over at Tony, lying on the steel bed. That tube in his arm had turned red three times now, and he could see the colour draining visibly from the agent's face. This served to make the bruises on his jaw stand out even more against his now deathly white skin. They'd been silent for awhile, and Rodney had a sudden, horrible thought that he might end up sharing this room with a corpse.

"Should I keep you talking?" he blurted. Tony moved his head, slowly, and gazed at him, a question in his eyes. "Uh, I know with a head injury you're supposed to keep the person talking – aren't you? Is this the same? I just...I don't want you falling unconscious."

"Worried I'm going to croak on you, probie?" Tony asked, with a grin. "Don't worry – I wouldn't do that to you."

"Probie?" Rodney frowned.

"That what I said?" Tony laughed. "Must be thinking of someone else. Do you know where he took them? Tim and Abby? Are they going to be okay?"

"Honestly?" Rodney shook his head. "I really don't know if they're going to be okay. And yes I do know where he took them."

"He made you help him?" Tony asked. Rodney shifted again, hating himself.

"Yeah. You blame me?" he asked softly.

"You said earlier that he had a bomb tied around John's throat?" Tony raised an eyebrow.

"No, Rodney. I don't blame you. If it had been Gibbs I'd have done the exact same thing. Not that the cold-hearted bastard would have deserved it."

"You really think he's that? Cold-hearted?" Rodney asked.

He watched Tony sigh, and stare at the ceiling for a long time.

"I don't know," he said at last. "Sometimes I do...other times, he looks at me and I see \*something\* there, but then it's gone and I think that maybe I imagined it."

"You don't like tops much, do you?" Rodney murmured.

"Never met one I couldn't outplay," Tony replied with a grin. "Well, except Gibbs. And I never stayed with one long enough to let them screw with my head. Commitment issues, probie."

"Rodney."

"Whatever."

"I never believed in relationships, collaring, sharing a plate - all that stuff, until I met John," Rodney confided. "My parents were switches – insane switches. It was like living in a war zone growing up, or a real-life chess game with me and my sister as pawns."

"Oh yeah. I know that feeling," Tony chuckled, and then his head flopped back and he took a deep breath. "Is it me or is the room underwater now?" he asked.

"It's you," Rodney said quietly.

"Hey – your parents drink?" Tony asked.

"My dad did. My mum became teetotal as a reaction against him. They were both switches so they defined themselves in any other way they could in opposition to each other."

"My father was an alcoholic," Tony told him. "You sure the room isn't underwater?"

"Really sure."

"Okay, probie. Take your word for it. Where was I? Oh yeah – parents. Mine used to drink like other people breathe. That was before mom died. Afterwards me and dad stayed in a succession of swanky hotel suites so dad could drink himself stupid without having to clear up after. He used to go out and pick up these subs, bring them back to our suite, tie them up in his bedroom, fuck them senseless, and then pass out. I could pretty much hear everything – he was too drunk to be quiet and they didn't even know I was sleeping in the room next door."

"Sounds crappy," Rodney commented.

"Ah, good times, probie, good times. 'Course I'd have to go in there in the mornings and untie them or they'd have been there until lunchtime before he woke up. I used to give them this little lecture on safe sex – I mean, what the hell kind of a dumb sub goes to a hotel room with a tanked up top and lets him tie them up? Idiots."

"So who looked after you if he was drunk all the time?" Rodney asked.

"Maids, bellboys – met some really cool concierges. They always know the best places to hang out. Then, when I hit puberty, I decided there was no way he should have all the fun so I started sneaking out at night wearing tight pants to get myself laid. Tops are so easy. Dad caught me a few times...didn't like it when I wouldn't stop – probably only doing it to get his attention anyway. That backfired – he ended up sending me away to boarding school."

"Shit – Tony, that sounds horrible."

"Best days of my life," Tony sighed. "Loved boarding school. Of course they tried to separate the doms and subs but we were young and not everyone was sure of their orientation, and those that were unsure...well, I was happy to help 'em find out! Once I'd gone through all the 'undecideds' in my dormitory I used to climb out at night, shin down the drainpipe, and break into the dom dormitory in the next building for some fun. Got found out eventually, of course."

"What happened?" Rodney hadn't thought he'd ever meet anyone with as fucked up a childhood as he'd had, but Tony's was coming pretty close.

"House-mistress disciplined me every night for a week," Tony said, with a happy sigh. "But by the end of that week the DiNozzo charm had worked on her and I spent the rest of the term tied up in her bed at nights."

"And you were underage?" Rodney asked, horrified.

"Yeah. Wasn't her fault though – I seduced her. She didn't stand a chance."

"I'm not surprised you have a low opinion of tops," Rodney commented. "They've kind of been letting you down your entire life."

"Oh, I never let them get close enough to let me down, probie," Tony told him. "Just use 'em and move on."

"Until Gibbs," Rodney said quietly. Tony went very still, and then gave a big sigh.

"Yeah. Until Gibbs. He won't let me use him and he sure as hell won't use me." He laughed at the double entendre. "He's right not to want me, Rodney," he said softly. "I'm bad news."

"I think if anyone can handle you Gibbs can," Rodney said. He wondered if it was a good or bad sign that Tony seemed to have remembered his name again.

"Yeah. Well, we'll never know will we, Rodney?" Tony replied. "Time's running out."

"Why do you stay with him?" Rodney asked. "Why not move on, find a top who wants you as much as you want them?"

Tony was silent for a moment, and Rodney hoped he was still conscious. Then he moved his

head. "Never thought I'd let anyone collar me," he said. "But when Gibbs asked...well, it was five years ago now and..." He trailed off and then sighed. "How did you feel when John collared you, Rodney?"

Rodney thought of a meal on a beach, with the sun setting around them, and the sheer \*rightness\* of accepting John's collar around his neck.

"It meant everything," he murmured.

"Same here," Tony said. "He told me that sleeping together wasn't part of the deal but the minute he buckled that collar around my neck I found I was old-fashioned. If I was going to wear his collar then I wasn't going to sleep with any other top."

"You've been celibate for five years?" Rodney asked, disbelieving. "You?"

Tony chuckled softly. "People just see what they want to see, probie," he said softly.

"It's an act?"

"Not all the time." Tony's voice faded, and then strengthened. "Collar meant something y'see...and I wanted to prove to myself that I was worthy of someone like him. It was kind of a test for myself and you know, I think I did pretty well." He glanced at the tube in his arm as it filled again with his own blood. "Feeling kinda tired," he murmured. "Too tired to swim any more. You lied, Rodney; this room is underwater."

Rodney pulled against the chains binding him, even knowing he was tied fast. If he could just get free he could go over there, and stop this. Tony's head rolled sideways and he closed his eyes.

"Tony!" Rodney pulled on his chains frantically. "DiNozzo! Wake up!"

But this time there was no reply.

~\*~

Tim wasn't sure where he was. One minute he'd been in a meeting on Atlantis and the next he'd woken up on a slab of rock, with people gazing at him. Scary people with skulls attached to their belts and teeth hanging in necklaces around their throats. His brain couldn't even begin to make sense of it. He passed out, and when he awoke again he was aware of his arm throbbing and, looking down, he saw that his gunshot wound had re-opened. Blood had soaked through his bandage and was now dripping down his arm.

"Hello?" he called out. The scary villagers ignored him. "Am I dead?" Tim asked, with a frown. "Only, if I'm alive this is a really freaky thing to have happened."

One of the villagers glanced up, laughed at him, and then drew her hand across her throat and laughed again.

"Okay. There's no planet in the universe where that can possibly be good," Tim muttered. He wondered where his team were and if there was any possibility of a rescue. He thought Gibbs would probably be kind of pissed – and Ziva...he grimaced. Ziva was likely to go ballistic and he'd seen her go ballistic before and it wasn't pretty. He didn't like that dark, intense look she got in her eyes and hoped she'd never direct it at him.

"Sunset," one of the villagers said, pointing up at the sky. Tim could see the sun was sinking inexorably towards the horizon.

"What happens at sunset?" he asked, and she turned and pointed at an open fire a few feet away. Several dozen crudely made knives were resting beside it. She smiled at him, and he got full view of her rotting teeth and smelled her foul breath.

"Sunset," she said again, with another cackle. "That is when we will make our sacrifice to appease the Wraith."

"Uh...sacrifice?" Tim asked, nervously.

She smiled at him, her eyes glowing in the firelight. "You," she told him.

Tim banged his head back on the stone slab he was tied to. "Oh shit," he muttered.

~\*~

Running 23 miles across open land – some of it dangerously marshy – reminded Lorne of his time in basic training. This time though, the incentive to cover the distance was much greater, and he pushed himself to the limit. Rice struggled to keep up with him, and Lorne knew they were both risking sprained ankles or worse running this fast over this kind of terrain but he didn't have a choice. They didn't have long before the sun rose, and anyone caught in the open without the protection of a hazmat suit would die within minutes.

One of the planet's moons had already set and the other four were slowly sinking towards the horizon. Every now and again Lorne heard Abby talking to herself, and sometimes she sang, which made a little smile curve at the corners of his lips. Hearing her on his radio helped keep him focussed and the adrenaline pumping.

He was tired, but he didn't have time to rest when he reached the water's edge. He quickly dumped his pack on the ground, grabbed his canteen and took several large gulps of water, and then emptied his pack of everything except the hazmat suits, the canteen of water and his knife. He took off all his clothes except his boxers, wrapped his gun in one of the hazmat suits to keep it dry, and then fastened his pack over his shoulders again. It wouldn't be easy swimming with it on his back but he didn't have a choice; without the hazmat suits they'd die as soon as the rays from the sun hit their skin.

Rice came running up, panting heavily, and bent over, putting his hands on his knees. He retched a couple of times, looking completely exhausted. Lorne tapped his radio.

"Conway – I'm going into the water now. Any news on the jumper before I risk my life taking on those dinosaur birds?" he asked. If the jumper was fixed he didn't need to make the swim – they could fly to Abby within minutes.

"Sorry, Colonel – I'm close but I'm not there yet," Conway replied. "Half the crystals were fried when we went down the second time. I'm replacing them with fresh ones and I've recalibrated to..."

"I don't need to know," Lorne told him briskly. "Just get it done and come rescue us. I'm going into the water now so all radio contact from now on should be with Rice."

"Yes, Colonel. And Evan? Good luck," Conway said. Lorne grinned. He and his team worked well together, and he had a sneaking affection for his scientist. Okay, so he might not be a Rodney Sheppard but he was a good man, even if Lorne did have a sneaking suspicion that he might be non-dynamic. The way Lorne saw it that was Jason Conway's business and nobody else's, and Lorne had already taken down one marine on Atlantis when he'd overheard the man making snide comments about Conway's sexual orientation.

Lorne threw his radio on the pile with his pack, and then took a deep breath and looked into the depths of the inky black water. It was a long swim over to the island where Abby was being held captive – about two miles, which, after having just run 23, was one hell of a distance. Rice made a face.

"You sure you want to do this, sir?" he asked. "We could just wait for Conway to fix the jumper and..."

"And supposing he doesn't get it done until after sun-up, Rice?" Lorne said. "You think I could sit here on the shore safely wrapped up in my hazmat suit and listen to her screams as the sun fries her? Have you ever seen someone die of this kind of solar radiation? It literally burns the flesh off the body, leaving a pile of jellied remains behind. It takes about five minutes to die – five minutes of total agony."

Rice swallowed hard. "It's just...that's a long swim and those flying reptiles are vicious, sir," he murmured. "And, uh, we...I don't want to lose you."

Lorne felt a little pang at that. Rice was a sub, and one he'd played with a few times back when they'd first arrived on Atlantis. They hadn't really been compatible – Rice's aversion to being tied hadn't exactly helped – and their relationship, such as it was, had soon burnt itself out, but it had left a residue of affection behind. The young marine had a knack of always looking untidy and appearing clumsy but he was a good kid – his big brown eyes were kind of endearing, and Lorne had enjoyed running his hands through his messy dark hair.

"Rice – Jamie – you're just a kid so I wouldn't expect you to understand, but I have to do this," Lorne told him, placing his hands on Rice's shoulders. Rice bit his lip, looked at the ground, and then looked up at him and nodded.

"You're in love with her, aren't you, sir?" Rice asked. Lorne grinned.

"Yeah, I am – and you know how crazy tops are when they're in love, Lieutenant! Now – you're a good shot and you need to be if you're going to keep those reptiles from killing me in the water. I need you to cover my back for me while I swim, Jamie."

"I won't be able to cover you all the way to the other side, sir."

"I know." Lorne nodded, strapping his thigh holster around his half-naked body and then sliding his knife into the holster. "I'll have to take care of it myself when I get that far out. Now, you need to remember to put on your hazmat suit the minute the moons set – okay? Right when this world is at its darkest because sunrise happens quickly here and once it does it's too late. Understood?"

Rice nodded. Lorne patted his arm and then drew away, and, without hesitating, threw himself head first into the dark water.

It was icy cold, and the first shock of it took his breath away. He took a moment to steady himself – he had a long swim ahead of him. He was a strong swimmer and made good progress for the first half mile or so, fuelled by his own adrenaline and something else, something old in his blood that made him need to rescue and protect the sub he was in love with. There was something, maybe in their most basic genetic coding though nobody had actually found the gene for it yet, that made most dominants protective of their submissives. That was why he, Sheppard, Gibbs, Carson and most other dominants Lorne knew hated it when they met an abusive top. He thought of Sergeant Bates, who had once tormented Rodney so unpleasantly, and how something about the sergeant had always felt 'off' to him. He'd subsequently found out just *\*why\** Bates made him feel that way, and between them he and Sheppard had managed to pull the sergeant around - but that hadn't been without its challenges.

He was startled out of this train of thought by a shot ringing out and then something large, with a grey, leathery skin, splashed into the water beside him, causing him to sink momentarily. He came up, gasping for air, and pushed the corpse of the flying reptile out of the way. It was like a massive iguana with wings and it had a sharp beak in which resided equally sharp teeth. Lorne waved his arm back at the shore, where he could dimly see Rice standing with his gun. It was getting quite dark now as all the moons gradually disappeared; this made visibility poor, and also reminded him of how little time they had before the sun rose.

He tried to swim faster but his exhaustion, combined with the coldness of the water and the weight of his pack, were taking their toll. He could see land ahead but it was still a long way off. He hoped Abby was okay; the reptiles usually only attacked over open water and she was tied a little way inland. If she'd been on the shoreline he'd have been more worried as a stray reptile might have taken its chances with her there.

He wished she knew he was coming for her. Then it occurred to him that she was expecting



Gibbs and he felt his breath tighten in his chest at that. He hoped she wouldn't make her disappointment too obvious.

Something loomed overhead, then fluttered and swooped at him, and he felt something sharp tearing into his shoulder.

"Fuck!" he screamed, beating off the reptile with his bare hands. The creature paused, and then came back at him again. Lorne heard gunfire from the shore but he was out of range now – he was on his own with this one. He went underwater to escape the reptile's next attack, and when he rose up he had his knife in his hand. The creature bombed towards him, beak open, sharp teeth gleaming.

Lorne struck its flank hard with his knife as it came in for the kill. The creature screamed loudly, and then dropped into the water like a lead weight, still screaming. It flapped around in the water and Lorne got caught in the undertow. He went under once, dragged down by the weight of his pack, surfaced, gasping for air, and then went under again. The creature was still screaming and writhing, thrashing about in the water making it hard for Lorne to keep above the surface. Lorne reached for it, got hold of the leathery wings and rammed his knife into its body again, hard. It didn't scream this time – it just went limp. Lorne thrust his bloodied knife back into his holster and swam on, as fast as his weary body would allow, not looking back.

Three reptiles circled overhead, calling to each other. He could see they were uncertain about striking after what had happened to the other two, but every so often one of them came close, and he was forced to stop and yell at them in the hope of keeping them at bay. He couldn't afford another confrontation; his shoulder was aching from where it had been ripped by the creature's beak – he couldn't tell what the damage was but it sure as hell hurt. He wasn't sure how much blood he'd lost in the water but he felt so tired now that it was all he could do to keep swimming. His arms and legs felt like lead, and each stroke was an effort.

Now the island was closer – tantalisingly close – but the moons had set, and he could see a faint glimmer of light on the horizon. He didn't have long...if he didn't get there soon then he and Abby would both die a particularly painful kind of death. He wondered how the others were getting on with their rescues – Ziva, Gibbs and Sheppard. There had been some radio traffic before he'd got into the water but mostly it had been sporadic and uninformative – everyone was too focussed on what they were doing.

He felt something under his feet and gave a startled yelp, before realising it was land. A glance at the sky told him he might just be in time if he ran. He half-swam, half-crawled his way out of the water. Long swim over, he wanted to stop and rest; his legs felt like they were made of solid concrete and he didn't think he could run anywhere. His chest quickly became streaked with blood from his shoulder wound now there was no water to wash it away. He ignored it, forcing himself up the beach towards where their readings told him Abby was chained. He hadn't brought his life-signs detector with him – he wasn't sure it would withstand the long swim – but he'd memorised the details of where she was. He paused only to open his pack and retrieve his gun from where it was wrapped inside one of

the suits.

His legs gave way as something dive-bombed him, and he only managed to raise his gun at the last moment, and fire off a round into the reptile that had taken its chances with him before he got too far inland for it to feel confident about success. The creature screamed defiance at him, and rose up into the air once more, lurching, one wing hanging loose. Lorne battled on, through bush and scrub. He had to be close...he had to be...

He saw the trail, flattened by the jumper Jordan had used to bring her here, and now his legs were responding more quickly to the commands from his tired brain.

Then he saw her. She was wearing black combat pants and a black tee shirt with a skeleton motif on the front. Her arms and legs were tightly chained together and the chain had then been wrapped around the tree behind her, binding her tight. She looked up as she heard him crashing into the clearing.

"Gibbs!" she said, and even tired as he was he braced himself for seeing the light in her eyes fade when she realised it was him who had rescued her and not the top whose collar she wore, and who she worshipped.

"Sorry, Abs," he gasped, reaching her side, and pulling out his gun. "It's me." He unfastened the small bomb from her collar and threw it into the bushes. "Now cover your head," he ordered.

"Evan?" she said, surprise and disbelief evident in her tone. She obeyed him all the same, pulling her body forward as far as the chains would allow and putting her arms over her head, chains clanking as she did so.

He fired at the chains, over and over again until he had freed her, and then he pulled off the pack strapped to his back.

"No time to explain," he panted. "Just get this on – quickly!" He threw her the hazmat suit, and got his own out.

"You're hurt!" she exclaimed, coming over to examine his wounded, bloody shoulder.

"Get the suit on! Now!" he yelled, seeing the first rays of the sun start to hit the ground just yards from them, and coming closer with every second as the sun rose in the sky.

Her eyes widened but she did as she was told without question. Lorne was grateful she'd belonged to a top like Gibbs these past few years and was therefore trained to obey urgent orders without arguing. He pulled on his own suit with just seconds to spare as the sun finally hit their position. Then he just fell to the ground, completely and utterly exhausted.

He'd done it. She was safe. He'd saved her. She was his...or at least she would be if he could persuade her over-protective top that he was worthy of her - and if she wanted him. Did she want him? Or had she just been playing? Maybe he'd taken it a lot more seriously than she'd

ever meant it. And maybe there had never been a chance for him – maybe her heart would always belong to Leroy Jethro Gibbs and never to him.

"Evan? Are you okay?" Abby crawled towards him and lay down beside him. She raised her hands and took hold of his helmeted head, gazing through the clear visor at him.

"Sorry I'm not Gibbs," he told her wearily.

"You came for me? You came to rescue me? You risked your life for me?" she said, sounding astonished. "Is it possible to kiss someone through these visors?"

"Nope." Evan grinned at her. "But you can kiss me later."

"I'll hold you to that," she said, curling up happily beside him. He put his arms around her, loving the feel of her body and the weight of her against him. The remains of the chains that had bound her clanked beneath her suit. "Promise me that nobody but you will ever tie me up anywhere, ever again," she said. He laughed out loud.

"That's a promise I'm happy to make."

"Is Gibbs okay?" she asked anxiously.

"He's fine. I'll explain it all to you when I get my breath back," he replied, squeezing her against him.

"Look how pretty the sunrise is," she said, raising her head to look around the glade. "It's been so dark and I was so scared...but in the daylight this place is beautiful."

It was – the sun glowed a shade of deep pink, bathing everything around them in a violet glow.

"Pretty but deadly," he told her. "The radiation burns the skin off the body – that's why we had to get these suits on."

"Wow – you literally did get here in the nick of time," she said, cuddling into him more closely. "How \*did\* you get here?" she asked. "You were kind of wet when you arrived...and sort of half-naked."

"I ran 23 miles then swam two to get here," he told her.

"23 miles? God, Evan - that's almost a marathon," she said. "And then you still had the energy to swim all that way – and all for me?" Her eyes were shining behind the visor.

"Yes," he replied. "All for you, Abby."

He longed to kiss her, and roll her beneath him and make love to her, but had to content himself with stroking the outside of her hazmat suit with his fingers.

"What's that?" Abby sat up, and Lorne propped himself up on his elbows and looked around, startled.

Somewhere, a long way off, something was screaming. The sound rose and fell in a long staccato wail.

"Might be one of those reptiles I shot – maybe one of them got caught on the surface of the water when the sun came up," he murmured uneasily.

Abby pressed back against him, holding him tight. "I thought this place was creepy during the night but I'm starting to think it's even worse during the day," she whispered.

She was leaning on his wounded shoulder but he didn't say anything – he just pulled her even closer, wrapping his arms firmly around her.

"It's okay," he told her. "It's over. I'm here now and you'll always be safe with me."

"Safe. Yes." She smiled at him. "But not boring, right?" she queried anxiously, a moment later. He laughed out loud.

"No...not boring. I promise you I'll always make it exciting as long as you promise you'll always let me keep you safe."

"I promise," she grinned.

They lay there for a long time, not speaking, just holding each other, and then, a little while later, Lorne heard the low hum of the jumper coming towards him. It took all his strength to get to his feet and walk slowly over to it, holding Abby's gloved hand tightly in his.

"About time," he muttered to Conway, as they took their seats on the bunks inside. Conway grinned at him, and then at Abby.

"Well done, Colonel," he said. "Nice to see you safe and sound, Abby!"

"Go pick up Rice and then let's head for home," Lorne said wearily, putting his arm around Abby and closing his eyes. "And then I'm going to sleep for a week."

Conway's grin broadened. "You got it," he said.

Hansen piloted them over to where he'd left Rice, and they opened the hatch but there was no sign of the lieutenant.

"You sure this was where you left him?" Conway asked.

"Yeah...I'll go take a look," Lorne said, with a sigh. He felt too tired to move but there was no point in any of the others getting suited up. He stepped outside and walked along the shore.

It looked so different in the daytime – Abby was right; it was pretty. The water, which had been an inky black in the night, was now shimmering in various shades of violet and purple as the sun warmed it, and the sandy beach shone a pretty shade of pinky yellow.

He saw a pile of what he recognised as his own possessions and went over to them. His clothes and radio were piled up where he'd left them but there was no sign of Rice. He stepped over some rocks, and then slipped in a pile of red goo. Something crunched underfoot.

"Oh shit." Lorne crouched down and examined the goo in more detail.

"Evan?" Abby came up behind him. "Is everything okay? Is Jamie here? Oh." She stared down at what he was standing in.

Lorne saw Rice's pack, untouched, a few yards away and picked it up. His heart sank as he opened it and pulled out the unworn hazmat suit. He saw the body of a reptile nearby, the leathery skin better able to withstand the sun's radiation than human flesh. There was a long gash in its side which looked as if it might have been caused by gunfire.

"Oh no. Jamie." Lorne shook his head. "The damn bird must have injured him during a dive-bomb and he didn't make it to his pack in time to get his suit on," he whispered.

"That sound we heard..." Abby's eyes were wide with horror.

"That was him burning to death in the sun," Lorne said. "Oh shit. I'm sorry, Jamie. I'm so sorry." He crouched down beside what remained of Rice's body, found the dog tags, and pocketed them. Then he and Abby scooped up the gloopy remains and shoved them into the spare hazmat suit to transport what was left of Jamie back to Atlantis.

"I'm so sorry, Evan," Abby said softly. "He was a nice kid, and he died helping you rescue me."

Lorne picked up Rice's pack and Abby picked up his own, and they walked slowly back to the jumper. All his earlier elation was gone; he'd succeeded - he'd saved Abby and he could never regret that - but he'd paid a high price.

He felt Abby's gloved hand slip inside his own, and she squeezed her fingers gently against his hand.

"I know what it's like," she told him. "We lost a member of our team once. Kate. She was my friend - I still miss her."

He nodded, squeezing her hand a little in return, and they got into the jumper together.

"Take us home, Hansen," he said softly, as the hatch closed behind them.

"But Rice...?" Conway began and then he saw the expression on Lorne's face. "Oh shit," he

sighed.

Lorne sat back down as the jumper took off. Abby pulled his helmet off, and then began unfastening his suit.

"Your shoulder was injured," she said. "I want to take a look at it."

"Don't," he told her. "Just...come here. Please."

She took off her own suit, and then curled up in his lap like a cat, and he held her close and buried his face in her pigtails.

"It's okay," Abby whispered, and her fingers gently combed through his hair, stroking and soothing. "I've got you, Evan, and I'm never going to let you go."

He had thought it was all about him keeping her safe but it turned out it was the other way around. Her arms were strong, and she held him while he cried silently into her hair; hot, bitter tears of exhaustion and grief. "I've got you," she repeated. "I've got you. Ssh. It's okay. I'm here. That's it. Let it go, let it go, let it go."

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Ziva gazed dispassionately at the villagers feasting around their huge open fire. Over to one side, Tim lay on the stone slab, awaiting his part in their grisly ritual.

It was an entire village but Ziva had no doubt she could take them all on, alone if need be. When the shutters came down she was a cold, ruthless killing machine – and she could already feel the shutters coming down. If she could find a way of channelling the darkness inside her, so she could use it to give her the edge she needed without allowing it to destroy her completely – surely that would be okay? Then she remembered the look in Gibbs's eyes after Tim had been shot. He'd \*been\* there, in this place where she was now. He'd killed for revenge after his first wife had been murdered and he knew what that felt like. She didn't think he regretted it for one moment, and she knew he'd do it again in a heartbeat, but she could also guess what he'd tell her if he was here now; the darkness inside her wasn't so easily used and then tossed aside. She had to own it, or it would always own her.

"I suggest that we create a diversion," Teyla said. "Ronon, Ziva and myself will start a fight, and draw them over in that direction while Kahla frees Tim and helps him to safety. The marines will cover us from behind. We will meet back at the jumper."

"That is your plan?" Ziva frowned. There was a whole village and only ten of them - herself, her three friends and the six marines Sheppard had sent with them. They were all superb fighters but even so, they were out-numbered. "It is kind of a crappy plan."

Teyla smiled. "We have done this rescue before," she murmured, "When Rodney Sheppard was once their captive."

“And Sheppard’s done it twice,” Ronon grunted. “Said they did it the same way second time around when he was in that other universe too.”

“And it always works?” Ziva raised an incredulous eyebrow.

“It works,” Ronon said firmly.

“Very well. Then we will follow your plan.” Ziva inclined her head. Teyla was the mission leader and she knew these savages who were holding Tim captive much better than she did. Even so, kind though these strangers were, she wished she had her own team here – she was used to the way Gibbs and Tony worked, and she could predict the way they would move and what they would do. Tony might be a smartass in the squad room, but in a combat situation there was nobody she’d rather have by her side – except Gibbs. “However – I will be the one to free Tim, not Kahla,” she said firmly.

“I do not think that is a good idea,” Teyla said smoothly.

“Why not?” Ziva demanded.

Teyla gazed at her steadily, and Ziva saw the answer in her eyes. She wasn’t sure Ziva could be trusted, and, like Gibbs, she was worried for Tim’s safety if Ziva got to him first. Ziva bit down her anger. She could be trusted! She was able to control herself. She wouldn’t hurt Tim – she wanted to rescue him. All the same, there seemed little to be gained by arguing the point, so she waved her hand, giving in.

The villagers were celebrating their impending sacrifice by feasting and drinking so the element of surprise would work in their favour. On the down side, these people really didn’t look very nice. There wasn’t one of them, not even among the children, who wasn’t wearing ornaments made of some part of the human anatomy – teeth, bone fragments, hair. One man even had a complete human skull hanging from his belt. Clearly these were people who worshipped death.

“That is a good thing,” Ziva muttered to herself, as she got into position. “Soon they will meet death in person.”

Teyla gave the word and all hell broke loose as they began firing on the villagers. They completely outclassed them in terms of weaponry but there were hundreds of villagers and they soon descended on their position. When they ran out of ammo there was no time to reload; Ziva just threw her gun down and drew her knives instead. By her side, Teyla was fighting with her batons, while Ronon was wielding two hefty axes, making massive inroads into their attackers, his huge arms slicing through the air with a strange kind of grace for such a big man, almost as if he was dancing rather than fighting. The marines all fought with knives, working in formation, as well trained as she would have expected from men under General Sheppard’s command. Between them they drew the fight away from Tim, so that Kahla could free him and get him to safety.

Ziva kept one eye on the Athosian sub as she fought. Kahla had reached Tim and was trying,

frantically, to slice through his bonds with her knife, but he was tightly tied so it wasn't easy. A cry went up as the villagers realised they were about to lose their human sacrifice and a group of them descended on Kahla's position. Ziva let out a growl of anger, and fought her way over to them.

Now she was in the thick of it, and the villagers were all around her. She could see Tim, blinking blearily, trying to pull himself loose from what remained of his bonds, blood now pouring from the re-opened wound on his arm. Ziva felt something click inside her, and now she wasn't even conscious as she fought the people standing between her and the sub she wanted to make her own. Something else had taken over, and she felt like an observer as she sliced and hacked her way through bodies to get to her sub.

The darkness inside her was overwhelming, bloodlust filling every one of her senses. She *\*was\** the darkness and it felt thrilling, intoxicating, and exhilarating! Gibbs was wrong – Teyla was wrong – this was who she was. She felt like an invincible, icy-hearted goddess as she fought, utterly without mercy for any who got underfoot; man or woman, adult or child. She was just the cold steel blade of her knife as it dispensed her justice.

She reached the stone slab, and whirled as a body came towards her. She raised her arm, knife ready to plunge, carve, and dismember...

"Ziva! No! It's me!" a voice called, and somehow it penetrated her consciousness. She felt her vision clear a little, and saw that she had Tim pinned down on the slab beneath her, her knife pressed against his neck. His eyes were wide, and a vein was pulsing under his skin. She wondered what it would be like to sever that vein, and watch him bleed. Would she enjoy it, the way she had enjoyed killing Ari?

"Ari?" she whispered, pressing the knife a little harder, watching as a red droplet of blood rose on the side of his neck.

"I know...Ari hurt you didn't he?" Tim whispered. "You had to kill him because he betrayed you, but I haven't, Ziva. It's me, Tim. I haven't hurt you."

Ari had hurt her - it was Ari who had first shown her what she was inside; Ari with his lies and manipulations and his way of ruthlessly disposing of anyone who got between him and his goal – including her. She'd loved him and he had betrayed her. She had killed him because she had to – but she didn't have to enjoy it. That had been all her; it was who she was.

"I'm not him," Tim whispered. "Ziva - I'm not him."

She stared at him for a long time, and then, somehow, teetered back from the brink.

"We must go," she said abruptly. The crowd was pressing back in around them and Kahla was struggling to hold them off. Ziva removed the bomb from Tim's neck, an idea occurring to her. She primed the device and then threw it into the thick of the mob. There was a loud explosion and a big plume of smoke went up, obscuring them.



Ziva grabbed Tim's arm and dragged him towards the cover of the trees and the waiting puddle jumper. He came, but he was so slow. She had to yank him along, at breakneck speed, and he stumbled behind her, finding it hard to keep up with her unrelenting pace. She paused when they reached the safety of the forest and turned back to see how her comrades were faring. Teyla had seen her make her escape and had given the order to retreat, fighting as they went.

Satisfied they would make it, Ziva took Tim's arm and pulled him away again, dragging him relentlessly back to the jumper.

It was cloaked, so he almost walked into it, but she managed to shove him inside. The pilot was waiting to take off as soon as they all returned; he turned to talk to her but Ziva ignored him. She had fought for a sub, fought for \*this\* sub and something old in her blood was demanding that she take him and make him hers, as was her right.

"Ziva - you're scaring me," he said. "Ziva...hey, slow down."

She pushed him onto the bunk, her attention rivetted by the blood on his arm. She put her fingertips in the red, sticky fluid, and then brought them to her nose and sniffed. He smelled of death - she liked that smell.

She pushed him down, roughly, so that he was lying on his back on the bunk and then she straddled him.

"Ziva," he whispered. "Please...don't do this..."

He was hers. She'd fought for him and won him and now she was going to claim him. She ripped his shirt off his chest, swiping through the buttons with her bloody knife, exposing the pale pink skin beneath. Then she lowered her face to his neck, wanting to sink her teeth into the tender flesh, and tear it. She would mark him; she would cover him all over with her marks so that he would know who he belonged to. She knew he was an innocent, untouched by any other top, but that would make it all the sweeter. She would show him what it was like to be her sub. She would scratch, tear, bite, hurt and...

"Ziva," he whispered again. His hands came up, and gently stroked her hair. "Hey...Ziva...it's me. Tim."

She felt as if someone was calling to her from far away but she couldn't hear what they were saying. She gazed down at Tim's neck again, the flesh so soft and inviting...but someone was talking to her in soft, low tones, and the sound was buzzing in her head, annoying her, and she couldn't seem to bat it away. She looked at him again, seeing him a little more clearly now. She growled as she saw the plain black collar around his neck...it was the same as the one around her own neck, but it was wrong; he should be wearing \*her\* collar but he wasn't. He didn't belong to her but he should - she'd fought for him...

"Ziva," he said again, and his face swam into focus. He was frightened but calm, and the look

of love in his eyes was unfaltering as he gazed up at her from the bunk. "Take me if you want," he said softly, relaxing beneath her and offering himself up to her. "I'm ready. I'm yours. Do whatever you want to me. I trust you, Ziva."

He trusted her. He had no cause to but he trusted her all the same. Reality smashed back in so hard it almost took her breath away and she sank down on top of him, resting her head on his chest. His arms came up and gently cradled her and she lay there, numb. The darkness receded, ebbing away. Tim was fine – he was alive and well, and she had rescued him.

"I wouldn't have hurt you," she whispered. "I could never hurt you, Tim."

"I know," he said softly, stroking her back gently. "I trusted you, remember."

She did – and it was his trust in her that had saved her. She could hear his heart beating fast under her ear and she loved how his body felt beneath hers, so big and steadfast. Thank god she wouldn't wake in the morning to find him marked by her vicious sexual frenzy. She never, ever wanted to wake again to that empty sensation in her belly and a hostile sub beside her.

Within minutes the rest of their rescue team had returned and then they were flying back towards the gate. Ziva didn't say a word. She just lay where she was, on top of her sub, his arms around her, his breathing steady beneath her, grounding her.

He continued to stroke her back and nuzzle at her hair and she felt herself responding to the peace of his embrace. His total faith in her had given her the strength she needed to fight the darkness and win - and she knew that with him by her side it would never come close to defeating her again. It was over.

~\*~

Gibbs glanced at his watch, and then at Carson. They had got through sixteen doors, seven of which had been booby trapped with bombs of various degrees of difficulty. But over five hours had passed and it had been almost 40 minutes since Tony had last said anything. They were running out of time.

"Quickly," Gibbs muttered under his breath. "Hurry!"

"I'm going as fast as I can, sir," Cadman replied, sweat dripping freely down the side of her face and into her blonde hair. He knew she was – she was as good at her job as Carson had said, but there were no prizes for coming in late. If they didn't get through this door within the next ten minutes, Tony wouldn't be able to survive losing any more blood. He had no doubt that Jordan, as an ex-medical student, knew the exact amount of blood Tony could lose before his body shut down and major organ failure occurred.

"Done it!" she said, cutting through the last of the wires. Gibbs pushed both her and Sheppard aside, and slammed through the last door, then ran down the long, dimly lit

hallway to the door off to one side at the end. This was it. Tony was behind that door. Unless... was it the trap, or the bluff, or both? Why had Jordan allowed him to get this far? Why not set off that bomb around Tony's neck the minute Gibbs stepped through the stargate onto this planet, thereby showing Jordan his preference?

He examined the final door for a bomb but didn't find one, and he couldn't wait a second longer in any case.

He crashed the door open with his boot, and slammed headlong into the room - then looked around in disbelief.

It was empty.

Someone had been here though. A large plasma screen was fixed to the far wall, and on it...on it was a visual of the room where Tony was being held, presumably in one of the other towers judging by the similarity of the decor. It was the first time Gibbs had seen his agent in several hours and Tony's condition had deteriorated visibly in that time. He was deathly pale and no longer moving, and the bruises on his face stood out as livid purple stains on his white skin. Rodney was still hanging where he was chained, looking utterly exhausted.

"Damn it!" Gibbs slammed his hand into the nearest wall.

Sheppard stared up at the screen, and Gibbs could see him drinking in the sight of his sub. He walked over to a control console and examined it, then turned, shaking his head.

"Jordan got Rodney to create some artificial life-signs to lure us to this room," he said.

"So we chose the wrong tower?" Carson looked as if he was about to cry. "I'm sorry - that's my fault. I suggested..."

"It's nobody's fault," Gibbs snapped. "Nobody except Jordan; he wanted us to come to this tower, and that's why he left the trail of breadcrumbs straight here. Now I'm guessing he wants to finish with a floorshow."

There was no time for them to retrace their steps and then navigate their way down to the bottom of the other tower; Tony didn't have that long. John glanced at his watch, and then over at Gibbs, and shook his head.

"Not yet," he said. Gibbs nodded.

"Better be soon," he said. "We're almost out of time."

At that moment there was a noise on the screen and the door to the room Rodney and Tony were in opened. Gibbs watched as Jordan entered. He went to the camera, and stared straight at them. John glanced around the room and pointed at a camera positioned over the plasma, making it clear that Jordan could see them as clearly as they could see him.

“Ah. Gibbs. I’m so sorry – you’ve made another bad choice. Story of your life isn’t it?” Jordan said. “First, all those years ago you made the bad choice of stealing my sub from me. Now you’ve made another mistake and will have to suffer the consequences. This is my moment, Gibbs – I’ve waited a very long time for this and I want you to watch very carefully.”

He went over to where Tony was lying and removed the tube from his arm. Tony stirred and muttered something, at least reassuring Gibbs that he was still alive. Jordan unfastened the little bomb from Tony's collar and placed it on the ground, out of reach. Then he returned to Tony's side.

“He’s very pretty,” Jordan said, running a finger down the side of Tony’s face. Gibbs felt his gut tighten. “I can see why you collared him. I wouldn’t have thought he was your type but he is, isn’t he? All that mouthy charm, combined with just a hint of DiNozzo vulnerability. He’s a handful, a challenge, and you like that don’t you, Gibbs?”

Gibbs grunted. Jordan’s hand whipped out and struck Tony on the jaw and Tony’s eyes flew open and he let out a startled yelp.

“I asked you a question,” Jordan said. “Please reply.”

“Yes,” Gibbs ground out. “I like that Tony is a challenge.”

“I thought so.” Jordan smiled straight at the camera. “What first attracted you to him?”

John made a motion with his hand to play for time and keep Jordan talking, and Gibbs blinked at him that he understood.

“Well...he looked like something the cat dragged in when he first showed up for an interview at NCIS, but there was something about his eyes. His body language said he couldn’t care less but his eyes said he wanted to please.”

“And you liked that?” Jordan asked, running his finger slowly down Tony’s chest. Gibbs swallowed hard.

“Yeah, I liked that,” he agreed.

“And you’ve liked it ever since, haven’t you?” Jordan laughed. “You like keeping him on edge, you like making him work hard for your approval. When you give it to him it’s in these grudging little morsels that always leave him wanting more because it’s never quite enough, is it?”

Gibbs felt his hands clench into fists. Was that true? Maybe it was, a little.

“It helps him stay good at his job,” he said gruffly. “I get the best out of him that way.”

“And is it always about the job? Or is it sometimes more personal?” Jordan asked.

Gibbs thought about that for a moment but he was too slow, and Jordan's hand whipped out again. The sound of Tony's cry sliced through him, making him flinch.

"Yes, it's sometimes more personal," he said quietly.

"Good. That's what I wanted to hear," Jordan said. "Because I'm about to do something to dear Tony. Something *\*very\** personal. And I want you to watch. If you look away, I'll make him very sorry."

Gibbs could do nothing *\*but\** watch, his gut roiling, as Jordan began undoing the buttons on Tony's shirt.

"Oh dear god no," he whispered.

"I didn't want him quite dead you see," Jordan said. "He's weak, but conscious. I want him to feel it when I take him."

"Jordan...no...please...you don't have to do this," Gibbs said hoarsely. "It's not too late. There's still time for you to stop this."

"Oh I know." Jordan smiled at the camera. "But I don't want to stop, Gibbs. I've been looking forward to this. Tony isn't my usual type either but he's a fine looking boy. I'll enjoy using him as he should be used – as you've neglected to use him."

"How do you know that?" Gibbs flung at him, trying to do something – anything – to delay the inevitable.

"I've been listening to him and Rodney talk, Gibbs, the same way you have these past few hours. He's besotted with you and you've been cruel to this boy, Gibbs, keeping him on edge when you could have taken him to your bed and given him what he wants. Instead you made him work for it, didn't you? You made him work for everything – every word of praise, every fond look, and every smile. I almost feel sorry for him."

He finished undoing Tony's shirt and slid it open, revealing his sub's chest beneath with its smattering of fine dark hair. Gibbs fought hard to keep his face blank, but failed. He turned away to hide his emotions but Tony's hoarse cry when Jordan backhanded him brought him back to the plasma.

"Please keep your eyes on the screen, Gibbs. I don't want you to miss any of this," Jordan told him, looking straight at him through the camera. "If you turn away again I'll make him scream even harder."

Jordan undid Tony's belt, pulling it through the loops, and then undid his fly. Gibbs just stood there, helplessly, standing by, unable to do a thing as Jordan undressed his sub. Every muscle in Gibbs's body was coiled and tense. He could feel Sheppard, Carson and Cadman watching him watching Jordan and was aware of their silent sympathy but it was no damn

use to him.

Jordan paused for a moment to undo the various cuffs that bound Tony to the table. He unbuckled them all, clearly thinking Tony was too out of it to put up any kind of a struggle. Now Gibbs was seriously impressed by Jordan's planning; this had all been meticulously worked out, down to the last detail.

He pulled Tony up, and Tony lolled against him.

"You wanna make out?" Tony slurred, nuzzling at Jordan's throat. Gibbs frowned. He knew DiNozzo too well... "Hey handsome," Tony said, his hands clumsily stroking Jordan's body, patting and fondling. "You want me?" he breathed in Jordan's ear. "I think you do."

Jordan laughed. "Your boy is like a cat in heat, Gibbs. He'd go with anyone."

"I'm easy," Tony said. "Always have been." He lolled forward again, as if he'd lost his balance, but Gibbs wasn't fooled. He noticed that Tony had a bunch of keys in his hand stolen from Jordan's pocket, and as he fell forward, making Jordan catch him, he threw them at Rodney's feet, clanging his hand against the steel bed to hide the sound of them landing.

Rodney's eyes widened, and he reached out with one of his feet to drag the keys towards him, and then managed to contort enough to pick them up with his bound hands. He didn't have much leeway, and he almost dropped the keys but then caught them again and began frantically trying to find the right key to unlock the chains. Gibbs tried not to watch in case he gave the ploy away to Jordan, but he was willing Rodney to succeed and grab the chance Tony had given them both.

Jordan moved suddenly, and threw Tony face down over the steel bed. Tony gave a yelp as Jordan yanked his shirt from his back and then held him down, his groin pressed against Tony's ass, his hands holding Tony's wrists tightly to keep him still. He leaned over Tony's half-naked body and then licked the back of Tony's neck. Gibbs felt something break inside him – something old and cold that had been keeping him imprisoned for a long time, but he couldn't give into it yet. He had to stay focussed, for Tony's sake, because when the moment came he had to be ready. He saw Carson making a sign with his hands, and nodded imperceptibly and signed back, his hands hidden behind the console.

Gibbs watched out of his peripheral vision as Rodney freed himself from the cuffs and then got to his feet, behind Jordan, out of the other man's sight. He'd been chained for hours and he was a little unsteady, but he was silent as he stood.

"You like me this way, big fella?" Tony was saying to Jordan, desperately continuing with the distraction. "All helpless underneath you. That feel good, huh? Always liked sexy older guys – you ever heard of Ricardo Montalban?"

Gibbs rolled his eyes; it really was astonishing that Tony's seduction technique was ever successful.

“How about you let me up so I can look at you when you take me, huh?” Tony asked, and Gibbs understood the point of that request. Face down, Tony had little room to manoeuvre, but if Jordan let him up then there would be a split second when Tony had a chance to overpower his assailant – if he wasn’t too weak, and looking at him Gibbs was by no means sure that he wasn’t.

“That’s good...if you let me up the other way I could show you how good a DiNozzo kiss can be,” Tony was saying. Jordan bit on his shoulder blade and Tony gave a strangled yelp.

“I like you fine just the way you are,” Jordan told him. “You’re in just the right position for me to fuck you.”

For the first time, Gibbs saw a flicker of real panic on Tony’s face and it was all he could do to keep his eyes on the screen.

Rodney was now creeping stealthily towards them. He had one of the chains in his hand – it was solid and would pack a good blow, Gibbs thought, if wielded correctly. He knew Rodney Sheppard was a scientist, not a fighter, but he hoped that the general had drummed some kind of fighting skills into his sub, even if only to keep him alive during those dangerous missions they frequently went on.

Tony was face down and couldn’t see how close Rodney was, but then Rodney let out a scream of defiance and brought the chain down hard on Jordan’s back. Jordan roared and Tony pushed up from beneath, then swayed, before launching himself at Jordan who was now grappling with Rodney for possession of the chain.

“I’ve got him, Rodney. RUN!” Tony yelled, landing what looked like a pretty good punch to Jordan’s kidneys considering his weakened condition. “Get out of here, Rodney – go!” Tony shouted hoarsely.

Rodney didn’t run though, and Gibbs hadn’t thought for a moment that he would. Rodney Sheppard was one of those people you only got to know when the chips were down. He had a prickly, sarcastic manner and gave the appearance of being a coward, but in a crisis he was one of those people whose innate bravery shone through. Now he grappled with Jordan for possession of the chain, while Tony thumped the man from behind with the last bit of strength he had left. Gibbs watched, his heart in his mouth, willing the two subs to defeat his nemesis.

Then suddenly Jordan pulled the chain free, and, in one smooth motion, thwapped it hard against Rodney’s head. There was a loud cracking sound, and then a stain of blood streaked Rodney’s forehead and he crashed to the floor.

Gibbs heard someone screaming but Rodney was out cold...then he realised the screaming was coming from General Sheppard, who was clutching his own head, and Gibbs suddenly remembered the lifebond.

“Is he okay? Is he still alive?” he asked the general. John nodded, his eyes dark with pain.

“He’s unconscious but I can feel he’s still there,” he hissed. Carson crouched down beside him, checking on him, and used the movement to sign to Gibbs again. Gibbs signed back, with a sharp, impatient flick of his fingers.

Back on the screen Jordan turned, triumphant, and Tony swayed again, and then sagged down onto his knees, shaking his head to try and clear his vision.

Jordan grinned at the camera. “Where was I?” he said. “Oh yes. You know, Gibbs, I think Tony deserves a whipping for that, don’t you? I wonder what damage the buckle end of my belt will do to all this fine young skin?”

He wrapped the chain brutally around Tony’s wrists, securing them behind him, and then he pushed Tony over the bed again. He yanked off Tony’s pants leaving Tony naked. Jordan grinned, and ran his fingers over the faint strap marks on Tony’s ass.

“I see you keep him well-disciplined, Gibbs,” he commented. “I can understand why. A sub like this – if you’re not going to keep him well-fucked then you have to keep him well-spanked or he’ll leave you, won’t he?”

“He needs a firm hand,” Gibbs choked. He hadn’t wanted to answer the question at all but feared Jordan’s reprisal against Tony if he didn’t; Jordan liked his questions to be answered.

“Yes he does. And he’ll have it,” Jordan said, unbuckling his belt and pulling it free from the loops in his pants. He wrapped the leather end around his hand and then drew back his arm and unleashed a hard blow on Tony’s shoulders. Tony jerked, convulsing, a low animal cry keening from his lips.

“No more,” Gibbs whispered hoarsely. “Please, Jordan. I’m begging you. You want me to say I’m sorry about Ducky – I will. Anything you want, I’ll say it. You’re the big dom here, Jordan, not me. You’ve won. I’m sorry. Just don’t hurt him again. Please.” His throat hurt with the sincerity of what he was saying. Jordan glanced at the camera again.

“But I like hurting him, Gibbs,” he murmured. “I like it when a sub is scared and trembling beneath me. Don’t you like the way that feels?”

“No,” Gibbs replied honestly. “That’s always been the difference between us, Jordan. I like my subs happy and safe. You just like bullying them.”

Jordan’s hand came down again and Tony gave a low grunt of pain. Gibbs winced when he saw the blood staining Tony’s back where the metal belt buckle had lacerated the skin. He’d disciplined many subs in his time, sometimes very hard, but he’d never once broken skin; there was never any need for it and it sure as hell wouldn’t have given him any pleasure. He’d never used the buckle end of a belt either – or any object harder than a strap, cane or paddle - or his own hand, which he was pretty sure was as hard, if not harder, than most implements. The subs he’d spanked certainly seemed to think so.



Jordan delivered blow after hard blow while Tony writhed beneath his belt. After the first blow Tony hadn't screamed again and Gibbs knew why. He'd seen Tony in pain before, and when it wasn't serious Tony milked it for all it was worth – but when it *\*was\** serious, something inside him seemed to shut down and he went quiet. His breathing was ragged, and he gasped as each hard blow from Jordan's belt ripped into his skin, but Gibbs knew he didn't want to give Jordan the satisfaction of hearing him scream or beg for mercy.

Gibbs could only stand there and watch, in a cold, angry silence as Jordan flogged Tony repeatedly with his belt, until his back and shoulders were covered in blood, the flesh torn, welted and bruised. Then, finally, much to his relief, Jordan was done and he threw the belt onto the floor.

"Now we come to the good bit," he said, smiling at the camera. "It's been awhile for you hasn't it, Tony?" he said, sliding his hands possessively over Tony's ass cheeks. "You're probably tighter than you used to be...it'll be like popping your cherry," he said, his hands kneading Tony's buttocks.

"Been a long time since anyone likened me to a virgin, Jordan," Tony muttered, with just enough wryness in his voice to hearten Gibbs. The whipping had been tough, but it seemed Tony was tougher.

"Unfortunately, despite my meticulous planning, I 'forgot' to bring any lube," Jordan chuckled. "So you might find this a little rougher than you're used to, Tony. But that's okay; the discomfort shouldn't last for long because when I'm done with you I'm going to slit your throat with my knife."

"You sure as hell know how to turn a sub on," Tony replied. "I'm getting hard just thinking about it."

Jordan squeezed his buttocks brutally, making Tony gasp. "You won't be so smart by the time I'm through," he said. "Will you beg for your life? I hope so. I'd like Gibbs to see you do that."

"Why are you doing this, Jordan?" Tony asked, and this time there was no bravado in his voice. "You want to punish Gibbs – I get that. And he'll be pretty pissed – I get that too, but this isn't going to hurt him the way you want it to. He's lost agents before and he's bounced back. It's not like I'm special. If you were doing this to Abby or even Tim then you might hurt him more, but not me. It's not like it was with you and Ducky. You're not hurting him the way he hurt you. Trust me."

Tony craned his neck upwards and looked straight at the camera. "Gibbs," he said hoarsely, getting a good look at the screen for the first time, eyes trying to focus through his exhaustion. "I don't know why you came for me in person and not the others, but I'm guessing it was a bluff to throw him off the scent. So tell him the truth. Tell him it doesn't matter to you, tell him *\*I\** don't matter to you."

“Can’t do that, Tony,” Gibbs replied, gazing directly into his sub’s eyes. “He already knows it’s not true.”

Those green eyes looked momentarily confused. “But it is...” he whispered.

“No,” Gibbs said softly, moving closer to the camera. If these were going to be Tony’s last few minutes then he wanted him to know the truth. “No, it isn’t. I love you, Tony. I’ve loved you since the minute you walked into that interview room in that crumpled shirt, and shot me that stupid DiNozzo smile - the one you think charms all the tops. Didn’t work on me, but the eyes did. That expression in your eyes – the one you can’t fake, the one that made me want to slam you down on the table and make you understand who you belong to. You’ve been pushing me for a long time, Tony, but you didn’t need to. You had me all along.”

“Then why...?” Tony gasped, his gaze swimming in and out of focus.

“I wasn’t ready,” Gibbs replied tersely. “Sorry, Tony.”

“Never say you’re sorry – sign of weakness,” Tony muttered.

“Not with you,” Gibbs said softly.

“Ah...finally the mighty Agent Gibbs admits to having feelings,” Jordan said. “And just when it’s too late. Stay with me, Tony – it’s time we ended this. But first things first...once, a long time ago, you did something to me, Gibbs, something that really hurt me; and you did it in public, in a roomful of witnesses. Now I’m going to return the favour. I just want you to know how it feels.”

He reached for Tony’s collar and Gibbs felt a wrenching ache inside his gut.

“I know how much being collared means to you, Tony,” Jordan said. “But you’ve worn this for long enough. It’s time you were a free, isn’t it? Besides, didn’t you say you wouldn’t go to another top’s bed while you were wearing Gibbs’s collar? I never had you down as the old-fashioned type but it does you credit; all the more reason to take it off you before I fuck you.”

Tony made a choking sound as Jordan unbuckled the collar and then pulled it away from his throat. Gibbs felt his fists clenching and unclenching by his side. Removing a sub’s collar without the sub’s permission - unless the top who put it there was the one removing it - was actually a legal offence, and there was a reason for that. Jordan held up the collar and examined it critically.

“It’s just what I’d expect from you, Gibbs. How much did it cost? Two dollars? At least I gave Donald a collar that was worth something – several thousand dollars in fact.”

“That was just for the sake of your ego,” Gibbs muttered, and then regretted it as Jordan slammed his hand hard against Tony’s lacerated back, forcing an agonised gasp from Tony.

"This is what I think of your cheap collar, Gibbs," Jordan said, throwing it down disdainfully. It landed a few feet away from where Rodney was lying on the floor, still out cold. "Now, I hope you understand how it feels to have your collared sub taken from you, and his collar removed without your permission. I'm pleased that your friends have witnessed your impotence and humiliation at being unable to keep the sub you collared."

Gibbs glanced at Sheppard and Carson but saw only a kind of transfixed anger in Sheppard's eyes, and utter sympathy and horror in Carson's.

"Now, Tony," Jordan said, turning his attention back to the prone agent. Tony looked out of it now; the loss of his collar and his own inability to prevent it, combined with the blood loss and the beating he'd received had drained him. His green eyes were open but blank, and Gibbs had a sudden fear that if Tony wasn't broken now he might be by the time Jordan had finished raping him. "Watch, Gibbs," Jordan gloated. "Watch me take your boy."

Jordan undid his pants and Gibbs stood there, utterly powerless to do anything. It wasn't a position he was used to being in, and he felt a wave of cold sweat break out on his body. Was he really going to have to stand by as this happened right in front of him? Was he going to have to watch as Tony was raped and then murdered? His anger was now a hard, frozen ball of solid ice in his gut and it took all of his self-control to keep it there, and not give into it and allow it to destroy him. There was still a chance they could save Tony, and he had to be ready for it.

He saw John move towards Carson and raised an eyebrow.

"Ten seconds," Carson said, gazing intently at the device in his hands.

Ten seconds...it felt like ten years. Gibbs held his gun in one hand and his knife in the other, and watched as Jordan kicked Tony's legs apart. Tony struggled, pushing back against him, and Jordan grabbed a handful of his thick hair and thumped his head down on the table, smashing his forehead against the steel surface. Gibbs winced – Tony looked dazed, and Gibbs wondered if he'd even make it through to the throat-slitting part. He already looked close to death; they were going to be too late.

"Three, two, one..." Carson's voice whispered, and then the room disappeared. Gibbs had been transported only once before, when they'd first joined Daedalus from Earth several weeks ago, and he'd found the experience disorienting. This time he was too alert and focussed to be disoriented. Tony needed him and they didn't have much time.

A second later he found himself standing on the Daedalus.

"Thank god – just in time," Sheppard snapped. "Get us down there – now."

A second later the room on the Daedalus disappeared and then he was in the room he'd seen on the plasma screen. Jordan was busy trying to wrestle a struggling, clenched Tony into submission so he could rape him, and hadn't noticed them disappear from the other

room. They had only been gone seconds in any case.

Gibbs heard Sheppard let out a blood-curdling growl as he ran towards Jordan. Gibbs didn't run, and yet somehow he crossed the room in a couple of strides. Jordan looked up, a shocked expression on his face, and then Sheppard was behind him, pulling him off Tony, holding his arms behind his back. Jordan didn't say a word - his eyes said it all as they glittered in defeat. Gibbs barely spared him a glance.

Gibbs's knife was in his hand and for a split second he and Sheppard locked gazes. Jordan might not resist arrest but they all knew there wasn't going to be any arrest. Gibbs didn't let anyone hurt his sub this badly and live, and he sure as hell knew that John Sheppard didn't either. Sheppard held Jordan up, arms twisted behind him, and Gibbs waited. He and Sheppard had a wordless conversation, each understanding the other perfectly, and then Sheppard thrust Jordan forward and held him there - held him up, and held him still, offering him to Gibbs.

Gibbs arm went forward, and he felt the cold blade of the knife slide straight into Jordan's belly, as deep as it would go. He leaned in close, so close that he could feel the warm blood on his shirt, and feel Jordan's agonised breathing against his cheek.

"Nobody hurts what's mine and lives," he told Jordan, in a low, intense voice. "And Tony DiNozzo is mine."

Then, slowly and deliberately, Gibbs twisted the knife. Jordan choked, and Gibbs slowly twisted it back the other way. Then he was done. He dropped his hand and locked wordless gazes with Sheppard again. Sheppard nodded, took hold of Jordan's head in his hands, and twisted, just once, hard. There was a loud crack and then Sheppard dropped the man's dead body to the ground, where it landed with a crashing thump.

Gibbs turned without looking back and was by Tony's side in an instant. Carson was crouching beside him, getting a line into his vein, and blood into his body. Sheppard was cradling Rodney's head in his lap, while Cadman called the Daedalus to get them transported out. Sheppard glanced up at him and Gibbs saw something in the other man's eyes that made him go cold, and he knew this wasn't over for John Sheppard yet - and it might be some time before it was.

"How is he?" Gibbs asked Carson. Tony was lying pale and silent on the floor, unmoving. "Is he dead?" Carson was working fast, his hands moving over Tony's body with thorough efficiency.

"Not while I'm his damn physician he isn't," Carson growled, and, for the first time, Gibbs saw the true top in the usually affable Carson.

Seconds later they were transported back to the Daedalus, and then there were medical personnel everywhere, and people pushing and shoving past him with gurneys and medical supplies.

“Agent Gibbs.” Colonel Beckett was striding towards him. “I’ve got Mr Woolsey waiting for you on an open channel back to Atlantis.”

Gibbs watched as an unconscious Tony was placed on a gurney.

“My people?” he asked, glancing at Steven Beckett. “Did they all make it? Abby? Tim? Ziva? Are they okay?” He dreaded hearing the news because he didn’t think he could stand losing any of them.

Beckett’s face creased into a wide smile. “They all came back alive,” he confirmed.

Gibbs felt as if he’d left his body and was looking down on himself, standing alone in the centre of that room while everyone hustled and bustled around him. They were alive. They were all alive. It was hard to take in. He had been worried about every single one of them but they had all come through – and, for the most part, they’d come through without him.

“Colonel Lorne lost a man out there,” Beckett added, in a more sombre tone. “But Lieutenant Rice was the only casualty.”

Gibbs came to, brought back down to himself by that unwelcome news.

“Please relay my condolences to Colonel Lorne. I’ll write to the marine’s family myself when we get back.”

They had Tony strapped to the gurney now. Gibbs fell into step beside it, and reached out and took hold of Tony’s hand as they walked. Tony was still unconscious, and his hand felt cold. He was a mess, his face covered in bruises and his hair and body streaked with blood. He was almost unrecognisable.

“Sir? Agent Gibbs?” Beckett called after him. “Mr Woolsey wants to speak to you, and there’s a mission debrief and...”

Gibbs glanced back at him over his shoulder. “I’m not leaving my sub,” he snapped.

Beckett turned to Sheppard. “General? What about the debrief? What shall I tell Woolsey?” he asked, as Sheppard ran past him beside Rodney’s gurney.

“You heard Agent Gibbs,” Sheppard growled. “Same goes for me.”

They glanced at each other. At some point they’d have to decide what their reports would say, and how they would describe Jordan’s demise, but right now neither of them gave a damn about anything except their two subs. Gibbs saw in John now the kindred spirit he hadn’t seen when he first met the man. John Sheppard might hide behind a casual exterior but the man had a dark, passionate streak, and would go to hell and back for the sub he loved. Gibbs understood that all too well; Sheppard was a top after his own heart.

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Tony opened his eyes, then closed them again, then opened them once more as consciousness slowly seeped back in.

“Hey.” Blue eyes were gazing at him. Tony tried to sit up but the room circled around, dizzily. Gibbs leaned in and steadied him on his way back down again. “Might be a bit too soon for that,” Gibbs said. Tony felt boneless as his head hit the pillow again. “How do you feel?” Gibbs asked.

“Great,” Tony replied. “Nothing hurts. Hell...what’s Carson given me? These are some serious happy pills.” He couldn’t move without toppling over but the sensation of flying was terrific. He gazed around the room; it didn’t seem familiar. “Where are we?” he asked, blankly.

“Daedalus sick bay – on our way back to Atlantis,” Gibbs replied. Tony wasn’t sure without looking down but he thought that maybe Gibbs was loosely holding his hand. He dismissed that as a side effect of the pain meds – Gibbs didn’t do hand-holding.

“What happened?” Tony asked, and then he flinched as the memories came flooding back. He could vaguely feel a myriad of different aches in his body, masked by the medication, and suspected that when the drugs wore off he’d hurt like hell. He remembered being held down, remembered his head crashing onto metal, remembered Jordan working his legs open... “Jordan,” he murmured. “Is he...?”

“Yeah.” The expression on Gibbs’s face wasn’t pretty.

“Right.” Tony nodded. “You did that?”

“Yeah.” Gibbs’s blue eyes shone icily. Tony noticed there was a big red stain on his shirt and decided, wisely, not to mention it.

“And before that, did he...?” Tony remembered rough hands on his ass, pulling his buttocks apart, and he’d been clenching and wriggling for all he was worth but he knew he had been too beat up to prevent the inevitable for long and at some point he’d blacked out so he wasn’t sure what had happened next.

“No,” Gibbs said firmly. “We got there in time. The Daedalus set off the same time we stepped through the gate but it was a six hour flight and we knew it’d be tight and we couldn’t necessarily rely on them for rescue. Colonel Beckett busted a gut to get this ship to our location as fast as he could. Soon as they were within range they transported us out of where we were and over to where you were. Daedalus has more powerful scanning technology and was able to pinpoint your life-signs. We couldn’t risk transporting you straight out because of your physical condition – Carson wanted to stabilise you first. We also couldn’t risk transporting Jordan up with you – we didn’t know which life-sign was which - so Colonel Beckett transported us over to your position – that’s how we got there.”

“And the others?” Tony asked. “Abby and Tim? Are they okay? Is Ziva okay?”

“Yes – they’re all okay. All of them got back to Atlantis safely,” Gibbs told him. “The planets they were being held on were out of Daedalus’s range so we sent teams in puddle jumpers instead. Colonel Lorne rescued Abby, and Ziva brought Tim back.”

Tony felt suddenly exhausted all over again. He sank back into the bed, eyelids fluttering, then, by great force of will, opened them again.

“Rodney?” he whispered. “Is he okay?” He had a vague recollection of Rodney lying on the floor, a big red mark on his head. “Oh shit...he’s not...? Did he make it? I really grew to like the guy.”

“He’s fine,” Gibbs said. “Carson is taking some X-rays of his head but he’s regained consciousness – he asked after you.”

“Should have run and left me,” Tony muttered.

“Not his style.” Gibbs shook his head. Tony tried to say something but he was sure it just came out as gibberish. “I think you need to sleep now,” Gibbs told him, and then Tony felt a hand stroking his hair, and a kiss being pressed to his forehead. He was asleep before he could even think about how good that felt.

He dreamed that he was flying through the air and Randolph Jordan was flying behind him with a big silver knife, coming closer and closer until the knife was pressed against his throat and... He woke with a start, to find himself staring into a different set of blue eyes – these ones were wide and had a kind of innocence to them – they weren’t sharp and all-knowing like Gibbs’s eyes. The room came into focus and Tony saw that there was a bed next to his and Rodney Sheppard was lying in it, a big bandage wrapped around his head.

“Hey...you’re awake. Good. Because I would not want to be around Gibbs if you, you know, died or anything.”

“Where is he?” Tony glanced around blearily. There was nobody in the sick bay save for Rodney and himself – and John Sheppard who was leaning against the wall. Tony was not remotely fooled by the casual pose Rodney’s top was adopting; every muscle in his body was tense and there was a dark, almost predatory look in his eyes.

“He went to the bathroom. He and John take it in turns so there’s always one of them in here with us at any one time.” Rodney leaned a little closer. “I think it’s a top thing,” he said conspiratorially. “If one of them has to leave for any reason the only one they trust to stand guard is each other. I don’t know what they think’s gonna happen onboard the Daedalus. I mean, the bad guy’s gone – who do they think is going to come after us now?”

“I don’t think it’s about that, Rodney,” Tony said. “I think it’s more of a sort of PTSD thing. Until they come down from whatever topky headspace they’re in right now we just need to expect them to be a bit over-protective.”

“Yeah - you could be right.” Rodney nodded.

“Are you okay?” Tony’s eyes flickered over Rodney’s bandaged head, and down to the bruises all over his face, and then the red marks on his wrists.

“Yeah. Carson said I don’t have a fractured skull – which is a good thing. This skull houses a brain of considerable genius.”

Tony laughed out loud at that. “Ah, Rodney, I really *\*like\** you,” he said. Rodney looked surprised.

“Really?” He seemed quite pleased by that and Tony could suddenly see, with total ease, what Abby and John Sheppard and even, he suspected, Gibbs saw in the man. The bluster was all a disguise – Rodney Sheppard was a whole lot more insecure than he seemed, and he had a big heart beneath it all. He was also damn brave.

“I told you to run,” Tony said to him. Rodney’s eyes widened.

“He was going to rape you and slit your throat!” he protested. “Besides, I thought Gibbs would kill me if I didn’t stay and help.”

Tony laughed and Rodney gave a little laugh too. Tony glanced up at John who, despite hearing their entire conversation, hadn’t said a word. He was just standing there, leaning against that wall, never once taking his eyes off his sub.

“Is he okay?” Tony asked. Rodney’s expression changed, becoming more serious and thoughtful.

“Not yet, but he will be,” he said. “Right now he’s hanging on until I’m better. Then I’ll need to take him down.”

“You take him down?” Tony asked, surprised. “Isn’t he the top?”

“Yeah, he’s the top – but sometimes I’m the one in control,” Rodney said. “This is him. It’s how he is. It’s how *\*we\** are.”

Everyone had their own dynamic, and this one intrigued Tony. He wondered what it would be like to take Gibbs down but his brain wouldn’t even go there. He didn’t think Gibbs *\*did\** being taken down.

At that moment Gibbs returned to the room. Tony was surprised by the way his boss's eyes lit up, visibly and openly, when he saw he was awake.

“Hey – how you doing?” Gibbs said, in a soft voice that Tony didn’t think he’d ever heard before. His boss came over to him, put a hand on his head and smoothed his hair back, and then dropped another of those little kisses on his forehead. Tony lay there, too surprised to react. He vaguely recalled a conversation that he suspected might have been important and



even relevant to the way Gibbs was behaving now but the details were hazy.

“Uh...fine?” he said. He tried sitting up again and this time managed it without toppling back down, but the movements made everything hurt. He winced. His back and shoulders felt like they were on fire, and he was suddenly aware of how much his jaw and the side of his face ached. He could feel the pain meds wearing off and his head was pounding.

“Got some lacerations back there,” Gibbs told him, nodding in the direction of his shoulders. “Should heal okay but might be sore for awhile.” He leaned forward and ran a finger over Tony’s face. “You’re not looking so pretty right now, DiNozzo,” he said. “But the bruises should fade soon.”

Tony ran a tongue over his dry lips, remembering spitting blood. He found the large gash on his lower lip and winced as his warm tongue made contact.

“So...Ricardo Montalban?” Gibbs asked, with a raised eyebrow. Tony groaned.

“Didn’t you see that movie, boss? Don’t tell me you never had a thing for Captain Kirk, either. Running riot across the entire galaxy while he waited for Spock to make his move, trying to provoke him into it...but you know, Spock was being all Vulcan and denying he had feelings but we all knew he did, and then Khan shows up looking all ripped and...uh...” Tony paused. “You usually tell me to shut up by now, boss.”

Gibbs grinned, and settled back in his chair. “Tony, I don’t have a clue what you’re saying but I’m glad you’re still alive to say it, so just go ahead. I’ve not got anywhere else to be.”

Tony gazed at him suspiciously. This really wasn’t Gibbs-like behaviour at all. On the plus side, his current physical state did at least preclude Gibbs slapping the back of his head. Or maybe not. He remembered being deathly ill with the plague once and Gibbs had given him a head tap then, so it might not be wise to test that theory by pushing his boss too much at the moment, especially when Gibbs kept looking at him that way, as if he couldn’t take his eyes off him. Gibbs’s gaze seemed to be mapping his entire face, travelling steadily over every inch of him as if he was recording him for posterity or something. It was un-nerving, and Tony wasn’t entirely sure what to make of it.

At that moment a man in a white coat entered with a little tray of meds and came over to Tony’s bedside.

“How are you doing, Mr DiNozzo?” he said cheerfully. “I’m here to give you your meds and...”

He broke off with a strangled squawk as Gibbs’s hand fastened around his wrist, holding him tight.

“I don’t know you,” Gibbs growled.

“I’m Nurse Bryant. Just taken over on shift,” the man squeaked.

“Well go get Carson. Nobody else touches Tony, or comes close to Tony, or gives Tony any damn thing except him – understood?”

Bryant nodded, eyes wide, and backed out of the room.

“See, I told you,” Rodney whispered loudly to Tony.

Tony leaned back in his pillows, frowning. He’d never seen Gibbs behave like this and a part of him liked it - while another part of him was really wishing he could have had the pain meds before Gibbs had scared the nurse away.

Carson entered a few minutes later and gave Gibbs a severe look, which Tony could see was pretty much for show.

“God help me, it’s bad enough with just him usually,” he said, nodding in General Sheppard’s direction. Sheppard hadn’t moved; he was still standing there, gazing wolfishly at Rodney. “Now there are two of you scaring the life out of all my staff.”

He paused, and surveyed Tony. “Nice to see you awake, son,” he said, in a firm but gentle voice that Tony had never heard from him before. He remembered his initial impressions of Carson as being the kind of top he could charm and manipulate, and realised that while that might be true outside of an infirmary, in here, as one of Carson’s patients, he didn’t stand a chance. This was where Carson was at his toppest. Carson sat down on the bed beside him. “How are you feeling?”

“Great. Fine. Ready to go back to quarters as soon as we get back to Atlantis, Doc,” Tony said, his mask fitting effortlessly back into place as he gave Carson his best subby smile - which hurt his cut lip so much he couldn’t hold it.

Carson shook his head, smiling wryly. “Son, you won’t be going back to quarters for a few days yet. You’ll be staying in my infirmary on Atlantis until I say you’re well enough to return and even then, you won’t be back on active duty for a few weeks.”

Tony hated being ill or injured. He hated the time away from work, and especially the time away from Gibbs - but most of all he hated the endless bed rest, and how that gave him far too much thinking time. He didn’t do well if he had too much time to think.

“Hey, Doc, even when I had the plague I was back at work within a couple of weeks,” he said. “And Ducky can look out for me back at our quarters. I’ll be fine.”

“You’ll stay under Carson’s care until he releases you,” Gibbs cut in firmly, and Tony’s heart sank because he could argue with Carson all he liked but there was never any arguing with Gibbs.

He lay back down on his pillow, feeling a wave of impotent rage. The last thing he wanted right now, after all that had happened, was thinking time. The pain meds had well and truly

worn off now and with them had gone his good mood and sense of optimism.

"I want you and Rodney to both see Kate Heightmeyer when we get home as well," Carson said.

"The shrink? No way," Tony said. "I don't do shrinks."

"If this had happened back on Earth the Director would send you for a psych evaluation before letting you return to duty so we'll follow that protocol out here as well," Gibbs said. "And...it might do you good, Tony," he added, leaning forward. His eyes were kind but uncompromising, and Tony saw how his gaze flicked briefly over his neck...and he didn't want to think about what was – or wasn't – there. For a sub to have a collar forcibly removed was always traumatic – that's why they had a law against it, and Tony had been through that and a lot more besides in the past 24 hours.

"There's no way \*you'd\* see a shrink – don't see why I have to," Tony muttered, closing his eyes. He opened them again, in surprise, as Gibbs gave him a firm tap on the head; it wasn't a slap, but Tony knew that was only because of his condition. "Yes boss, sorry boss," Tony sighed.

It was stupid, but somehow that small tap made him feel better than even the pain meds had managed to do. He closed his eyes again, and was soon fast asleep.

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Gibbs had learned in the Marines how to snatch a cat nap whenever you could, however cold, wet, hot or downright uncomfortable you were. He could even sleep standing up if need be. Now, exhausted though he was, sleep wouldn't come. All he could do was stare at Tony, lying in his sick bay bed, and wonder how the hell he'd managed to be such an idiot for so long.

Five years was a long time to pretend you didn't love someone; for Tony, as well as for him. They were both damn idiots, he decided. Hearing Tony talk all those long hours during that rescue had been a kind of hell – an illuminating kind of hell. Seeing his own behaviour from Tony's perspective had been painful; and then hearing Jordan's spin on it – well, that had been almost as bad.

When Shannon and Kelly had been killed Gibbs hadn't been there to protect them. He hadn't known anything about it until it was too late. Watching Tony being tortured and damn nearly killed in front of him and being unable to help him had been worse in a way. Even knowing the Daedalus was on its way hadn't helped when he didn't know if it would get there in time.

Gibbs sat in the chair beside Tony and held his sub's hand between his fingers, stroking the skin gently the whole time. Shannon hadn't made it but Tony had, and Gibbs had learned that it didn't matter whether you took a sub to your bed or not, because the thought of losing one you were in love with hurt just the same, either way.

Gibbs watched as Carson entered the room and went over to where Rodney was lying. John stiffened, a low growl sounding in his throat. Gibbs was fascinated by their dynamic. Although Rodney was safe now, John seemed unable to come down from the top of his headspace he was in, and viewed everyone as a threat, even Carson, who was treading very carefully around him. Gibbs knew what it was like to almost lose a sub, and he knew that he was being over-protective towards Tony right now, but even so he wasn't in the kind of headspace John was. Their earlier easy camaraderie during battle was long gone; John didn't even reply when he spoke to him now.

Carson stood by Rodney's bed and John came over, still growling softly. It was like having a rabid dog in the room – no wonder Carson was being so cautious.

"I've run all the tests I need to run and it's all fine. No hidden injuries or fractures. So if you want to do that lifebondy, healing thing you do, then that's fine. It'll speed up Rodney's recovery time at least," Carson said. "I can't pretend I'm ever really comfortable with the idea of someone else sustaining injuries in the process of healing, but I know I'm wasting my breath even mentioning that to you right now," he said to John.

Sheppard didn't even acknowledge him; his eyes were fixed on Rodney's face.

"It's okay, Carson. I'll take it from here," Rodney said, looking at his top.

John didn't wait for an invitation; he jumped onto the bed with a kind of lupine grace and got on all fours, hands and knees on either side of Rodney's body. Then he lowered his head and did that weird thing Gibbs had witnessed before – he sniffed at Rodney's injuries, particularly where there was a cut or any kind of an open wound. His mouth travelled over the bruises on Rodney's jaw and then up to his forehead, licking as he went. It was animalistic, and oddly compelling. Gibbs found his fingers tightening around Tony's hand protectively.

Rodney reached up to unwind the bandage from around his head but John snarled and batted his hands away.

"It's okay...stay with me," Rodney said, lying back again and allowing John to unwrap the bandage. Gibbs glanced at Carson, alarmed, but the doctor shook his head and signed to him that it was okay, and not to speak. Then Carson took a step back and leaned against the wall.

Gibbs watched as John ripped the bandage from Rodney's head. His movements were strangely graceful but very determined. Rodney had a nasty gash on his forehead which Carson had neatly stitched. The entire area was bruised, and the severity of the injury had caused both Rodney's eyes to blacken. He looked just as bad as DiNozzo.

John gazed at the wound, transfixed, and then he moved his hands and took Rodney's head between them. He sniffed the newly revealed injury and then his tongue darted out towards it. It was a strangely intimate act, and Gibbs felt almost as if he shouldn't be watching.

Rodney held still, moaning softly, and John growled in response. Something was happening, but Gibbs didn't know what. Both men seemed to be entering a trance-like state. John was kneeling, straddled over Rodney's chest, his hands on either side of Rodney's head, and Rodney's hands were resting on John's hips. The two of them, for just a second, looked as if they were one being. It was an odd sensation, and then it passed, and John sank down onto the bed beside Rodney. Rodney sighed, and wrapped his arms around his husband, holding him close.

Gibbs peered at them, intrigued; the wound on Rodney's forehead now looked much less severe. The swelling had gone down considerably, and the scar was now pink and puckered, much further along in the healing process than it had been a few seconds earlier. He frowned, and glanced up at Carson who shrugged.

"Lifebond," Carson sighed.

When Gibbs leaned over further, he could see there was a newly formed scar on John's forehead, about as far along in healing as Rodney's. He also seemed to have acquired some faded bruising around his jaw and eyes.

At that moment John raised his head, reacting, visibly, to the fact that Gibbs had leaned towards them, and Gibbs froze. He felt, instinctively, that John was responding to him as a top and a potential threat, and not as Gibbs any more.

"Easy," he murmured, settling back in his chair again. "I'm not going anywhere near him."

He decided right then and there that he would give Rodney a wide berth from now on. He remembered the day he'd first met these two, and how he'd instinctively known not to shake Rodney's hand. Gibbs trusted those toppy instincts innately.

"The rest will have to wait until we get home," Carson told him softly, coming over to him.

"The rest?" Gibbs whispered, incredulously. "What more is there?"

"John won't come down from this without Rodney's help," Carson replied. Gibbs remembered something John had once told him; 'Rodney's the only one who can handle me,' and now Gibbs was starting to understand what he meant. He could see that Sheppard was a top in a great deal of pain right now and he suspected he knew just how Rodney was going to handle him when they both recovered from the healing they'd just done.

If it had been bad for him, watching Jordan assault Tony, he wondered how it had been for John, going through the same thing with his lifebonded partner. Gibbs didn't pretend to understand lifebonding but he knew it was a powerful force. The fact that if one part of a lifebonded couple died then the other did too was testament to that, and yet people felt the urge to lifebond so it had to bring with it great advantages – like the accelerated healing via the sharing of injuries that he had just witnessed.

The Daedalus arrived back at Atlantis half an hour later. Tony was so out of it he slept

through the entire thing which was a relief. Gibbs knew his sub well, and he suspected there would be difficult times ahead – for both of them.

He walked alongside Tony's gurney to the infirmary and watched as Carson got Tony and Rodney settled in a small side room.

"My people?" Gibbs asked, as Carson's team worked. "Any idea where they are?"

"As a matter of fact, yes," Carson replied. "They're all next door." He gestured in the direction of the main infirmary. "None of them are long-term patients but there were a few minor injuries that needed taking care of. I trust my staff but I asked that they keep your people here so that I can check the care they've been given and agree to discharge if it's appropriate. This room here is for longer term care – we'll keep Tony in here for awhile. John and Rodney should only need a day or so before they can be discharged but your boy will need longer."

Gibbs glanced at Tony, and then at the infirmary door.

"He'll be fine in here," Carson told him firmly. "Go see your people."

It was hard, but Gibbs managed to wrench himself away. He really needed to see for himself that all his subs were alive and well, and he knew Tony was in good hands.

He had barely walked through the door to the main infirmary when someone threw themselves at him and he found himself with an armful of Abby. Her arms and legs were wrapped tightly around his body, and he almost toppled over backwards from the force of her hug.

"Easy, Abs," he said, throwing his arms around her and inhaling the scent of her hair.

"Gibbs!" she squealed, kissing him enthusiastically. "Thank god you're okay. I mean, they told us you were okay but that's not the same as seeing that you're okay. You are okay, aren't you?" she asked anxiously, finally jumping down from him and surveying him anxiously. "You don't \*look\* okay," she said, her eyes travelling down his face and fixing on the bloodstain on his shirt. "Oh my god – you're not okay! Is that your blood?" she asked, her fingers going towards his shirt. He caught them before they got there.

"No. It isn't."

Her eyes widened and she looked even more upset. "It's not Tony's blood, is it?" she asked. "Because they said he'd been really badly hurt. Is it Tony's blood?"

"No, Abby – it isn't Tony's blood either," he told her gently, putting an arm around her shoulders and kissing her cheek.

"Is it the bad guy's blood?" she asked, in a horrified whisper.

"Were you hurt?" he asked, ignoring the question and gazing at her searchingly. She \*looked\* okay – she had dark shadows under her eyes and her skin was pale, but he guessed that was the same for all of them.

"I'm fine. Evan ran almost a marathon and then swam for miles to reach me," she said, and he noticed the little glow in her eyes as she spoke about the colonel. He felt a little jolt of pain at that, knowing she'd found another top who could take care of her just as well as he had, but he was pleased for her all the same.

"He's a good man."

"Yes he is," she agreed happily. "He was injured by one of those dino-bird things that live on that planet. He's been stitched up but they won't let him go until Carson says they can. All Carson's staff are terrified of him – it turns out that Carson is \*really\* toppy in the infirmary – who knew?"

Gibbs grinned. "Is Tim okay?" he asked. Abby took hold of his hand and pulled him towards the back of the room.

"See for yourself," she said, leading him in the direction of some beds where several familiar faces were sitting. Ducky got up, came over to him, and enveloped him in an embrace.

"Jethro," he said softly, holding Gibbs tight for one long, heartfelt moment, and then releasing him.

"Hey Duck. All's well," Gibbs told him, although the expression in Ducky's eyes informed him that his lie hadn't been remotely successful.

"Anthony?" Ducky asked.

"Doing okay. Considering," Gibbs muttered. He knew Ducky had been watching the whole thing on the plasma back on Atlantis, so he knew what Tony had been through.

"I told them that Tony was in a bad way but I didn't tell them the details," Ducky said in an undertone, gesturing towards the beds.

"Thanks." Gibbs nodded, tiredly, wondering how much they needed to know.

He walked the final few strides to where the others were and was relieved to see Tim sitting up in bed, his arm freshly bandaged. Ziva was beside him, hovering close, and he could see from the expression in her eyes that she'd undergone some kind of transformation. She looked happier and more at ease with herself than she had in all the time he'd known her.

"Tim...you okay?" Gibbs asked, leaning over to ruffle Tim's hair affectionately. Tim looked startled, the way he always did whenever Gibbs was kind towards him.

"I'm fine. I got off easy compared to Tony, I think," Tim replied. "Is he okay, boss?"

"Not right now, but he will be."

"Can we see him?" Ziva asked.

"Can we?" Abby repeated eagerly.

He shook his head. "Not yet. When he's ready."

"Nobody will tell us what happened to him," Ziva said, her dark eyes never leaving Gibbs's face. "Just that he has been hurt and is very ill."

"He is. And, well, it's a long story." Gibbs deflected the enquiry easily.

"It was bad, wasn't it?" Tim asked. "I mean, I know Abby and I both went through hell, but something even worse happened to Tony, didn't it?"

Gibbs took a deep breath. "It was pretty bad. But you know, DiNozzo," he said, with a wry grin, trying to keep his tone light. "He bounces back. He'll be annoying the hell out of you all within a few days I'm sure."

That seemed to satisfy them, and they all relaxed, visibly.

"And Rodney?" Abby asked. "They said he'd been hurt too." Gibbs smiled at her, knowing how much she loved the irascible scientist. She'd seen in Rodney, all along, what it had taken him and Tony a lot longer to see.

"He's going to be okay," he replied. "He and General Sheppard are...healing each other. Somehow I don't think they'll be accepting any visitors for a few days, either."

Gibbs turned to the second bed, where Colonel Lorne was perched, his arm heavily bandaged and supported in a sling.

"Colonel, thank you for doing such a fine job," he said. "I understand that you lost a man out there and I want to offer you my condolences."

"Thank you, sir," Lorne said. Abby said he'd run and swam for miles to reach her and Gibbs could believe that, looking at the man; he was dead on his feet. "We're holding a memorial service for Lieutenant Rice in a few days, sir."

"I'll be there," Gibbs promised. "Now, I gotta get back to Tony in case he wakes up."

He knew they were all still worried but hopefully less so now that he'd had a chance to talk to them. He shook Lorne's good hand, bestowed a kiss on Abby's forehead, tousled Tim's hair again and cupped Ziva's cheek in his hand, and then turned and left. Ducky followed him, as he had known he would.



"Jethro – no offence, but you look terrible," Ducky said, catching up with him and grabbing his arm. "Have you eaten anything? Or slept at all? And you really could do with a shower, a shave, and a change of clothes." His eyes lingered pointedly on the bloodstain on Gibbs's shirt.

"Not now, Ducky," Gibbs said, pushing him away. Ducky caught up with him again, and this time he wouldn't be brushed aside.

"While you've been worrying about all of them, I've been worrying about you," Ducky told him. "I know you, Jethro, and you don't have to play the big, strong top for me." Gibbs stood there for a moment, body taut and tense, and then he sighed, and sagged against his friend.

"He's in a really bad way," Gibbs confided in him. "And I'm finding it hard to handle what I heard, what I saw...what he went through. I don't want to be apart from him for a minute. I can't stalk the poor guy his entire life so I hope this feeling fades."

"You both went through a lot," Ducky told him soothingly. "It's natural you feel like this. Give it a couple of days and you'll feel more like your old self. In the meantime, you aren't superhuman, Jethro, and you need sleep like everyone else. Why don't you take a shower – there's one in the infirmary so you won't be far away from Tony. I'll get you a change of clothes and then you can bunk down in here. I'm sure Carson won't have any objection to that."

They reached Tony's room, and Ducky pointed at John and Rodney, who were curled up in each other's arms, fast asleep.

"See – partners are clearly allowed to stay," he said, with a little grin.

"I'm not Tony's partner, Ducky," Gibbs replied tersely.

"He's your collared sub, Jethro," Ducky pointed out.

"No – he's not even that any more," Gibbs reminded him, and he saw the look in Ducky's eyes as they both recoiled from that memory.

"Jethro, in his heart that's all he'll ever be," Ducky sighed.

They stopped beside Tony's bed, and Gibbs saw the wince that crossed Ducky's face as he caught sight of Tony for the first time. There was no getting away from how bad Tony looked; his pallor and the nature of his injuries also made him seem younger and more vulnerable than either of them was used to seeing him.

"Oh Anthony," Ducky whispered, running a gentle hand through Tony's hair. He looked up at Gibbs. "Jethro, I'm so sorry. If I'd known, all those years ago, that this would happen - and all because of me..."

"Not your fault, Ducky," Gibbs told him firmly. "Jordan was responsible for his own actions,

brain tumour or not. Besides, he was always a violent, sadistic bastard, even back when you were married to him, well before he fell ill. All that illness did was make him feel like he had nothing to lose by coming after me. He wanted to hurt you but most of all he wanted to hurt me, and he sure as hell succeeded there."

"But he didn't win," Ducky said. "You got there in time, Jethro, and all your subs survived."

"Guess that Athosian prophethess was wrong then, huh?" Gibbs said with a wry grunt.

Ducky shook his head. "I thought you didn't believe in fortune tellers?" he said, with a tight smile. "Of course she was wrong, Jethro! I never for a moment thought you'd lose them. You've trained them all far too well for that. If you could have seen Ziva in action - and Abby and Tim held it together admirably under extreme duress. I have to say, also, that Colonel Lorne is quite the hero from what I can gather."

"You think he's going to steal Abby away from me?" Gibbs asked. Ducky smiled.

"You only rescue us, Jethro – you never say you'll keep us forever. You let Stan go, remember?"

"Yeah." Gibbs nodded. He felt so tired he wasn't sure he could stand up for much longer.

"Shower," Ducky said, turning him around and pointing him in the direction of the bathroom.

"Only if you stay with him – I don't want him to be alone if he wakes up," Gibbs said. "Send someone else to get me a change of clothes – but don't leave him."

"Very well, Jethro." Ducky pulled him down and kissed him on the lips. "Now go, because otherwise you'll be no use to him at all when he \*does\* wake up."

Gibbs went; Ducky always had been the only one of his subs he'd take orders from.

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When Tony awoke he was back on Atlantis and had somehow slept through the transport from the Daedalus's sick bay to Carson's infirmary in the city.

This room was bigger and brighter but he felt unaccountably depressed. Now that the immediate euphoria of being rescued was over, he found there were snatches of memory that he kept replaying over and over again. Being tied so tight for so long, helpless, with his blood draining from his body; Jordan undressing him; Jordan hitting Rodney with that chain and Rodney going down; being held down while Jordan whipped him with the buckle end of his belt; rough hands on his ass, seeking entry...

He gazed, unblinking, at the bed next to his, the flashbacks replaying endlessly in his mind. After a few minutes he realised that there were two people in that next bed, one of them

fully clothed, the other in an infirmary gown. He focussed on them, trying to distract himself from the snatches of memory that kept flashing in and out of his mind. John Sheppard was wrapped around Rodney like a man clinging to a rock in a storm. He looked spent, his body tense and suffused with raw emotions he couldn't process. Rodney was just holding him, one hand gently soothing John's back as they lay there.

Tony envied them their closeness. They were clearly going through something pretty big right now but they had each other, and he had no doubt they'd get through this.

He was suddenly achingly aware of a sense of aloneness, and the nakedness of his own throat. He put his hand up to his neck and felt bare skin where there hadn't been bare skin for five years. He remembered how he'd felt when Jordan had ripped his collar off him; the collar that he'd worshipped for all these years, giving it a power over him that maybe it didn't deserve. Now it was gone. He wondered why Gibbs hadn't just fastened it back on him while he was unconscious, and the fact he hadn't made him wonder if Gibbs even wanted him back as his sub. That thought made his stomach ache, but, at the same time, he was aware of a little voice inside asking if he'd accept Gibbs's collar this time around in any case. A lot had happened in the past few weeks and it was time he faced up to some questions he'd been avoiding for a very long time; which was another reason why all this enforced bed rest was going to kill him.

He turned to get away from the overwhelming sense of togetherness in the next bed, and found Ducky sitting beside him, reading a book.

"Casino Royale?" Tony muttered, reading the title on the spine. Ducky glanced up and smiled.

"Ah. Anthony. How very good to see you awake again," he said, his eyes awash with happiness and relief.

"Where's Gibbs?" Tony asked.

"He's asleep." Ducky gestured with his head at the bed behind him, and, over Ducky's shoulder, Tony saw Gibbs lying there, flat out, eyes closed. "Carson tried to send him back to quarters but he wasn't ready so the good doctor allowed him to sleep here. I don't think that's an uncommon occurrence around here," Ducky murmured, glancing at the entwined bodies of John and Rodney Sheppard on the next bed. "Although, somewhat unorthodox. It wouldn't work in autopsy, but I suppose one must cut the living more slack. As for Jethro – he was dead on his feet. I'm not sure how many hours he's been keeping going but if Carson hadn't given him a bed here he'd probably have had to admit him anyway, from pure exhaustion. As it was he'd only agree to take a nap if I promised I'd sit with you and not leave."

"Don't you think he's taking the protective top thing too far?" Tony asked. "I mean, it's over, I'm fine. It wasn't such a big deal."

Ducky gave him a look of combined pity and disbelief. "Tony, it *was* a big deal," he said

softly. "It was a huge deal."

"Nah, it wasn't. It wasn't any worse than that case where I..."

"Tony, we saw it," Ducky interrupted.

Tony froze. "What?"

"We saw it. All of it," Ducky told him, his earnest blue eyes full of compassion behind his spectacles. "And I'm so sorry you had to go through all that at Randolph's hands. I feel so very responsible. I had no idea he was capable of something like this and it all stems from my..."

"Who's we?" Tony asked quietly.

"Oh. Uh..." Ducky blinked, looking as if he wished he'd kept his mouth firmly shut. "Well, myself, Richard Woolsey, and a couple of other base personnel back here on Atlantis. Steven Beckett had the feed patched through onboard the Daedalus so he could keep track of what was happening. And the audio..." Ducky paused.

"Oh go on, Ducky. Make my day," Tony muttered, gesturing with his head that Ducky should continue.

"Well, Gibbs, John Sheppard, Carson and Cadman all had audio during the entire rescue."

"Audio?" Tony closed his eyes, trying to remember exactly what he'd said.

"They heard everything that went on in that room," Ducky said, in an apologetic tone. "From the beginning."

"Right."

Everything exploded in his head and Tony had to get away from it. He shoved aside the sheets covering him and sat up, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. Ducky got up in alarm.

"Tony, what do you think you're doing?"

"I need to use the head," Tony said, in a determined tone.

"My dear boy, just hold on and..." Ducky began. Tony tried to rip the IV line out of his arm and, in his haste, fumbled it.

"Help me get this damn tube out!" he growled, unable to bear it for another second.

"I should get Carson," Ducky said, looking around frantically for help.

Tony's fingers picked at the IV in his arm while another wave of impotent rage flooded through him and he flashed back to being tied down to that steel bed with a different tube in his arm, just lying there, helpless, for hours on end as his blood drained out of his body. It had been like a living death and he couldn't get it out of his head.

"Get it off me! Get this damn tube off me!" he said hoarsely, scrabbling frantically with his fingers.

Ducky swooped in and took care of the IV, quietly and gently, and when he was done Tony got off the bed, and looked around, swaying, for the way to the bathroom. The room swam around him but he was determined. He couldn't stay here. He couldn't just stay here after what Ducky had just told him. All these years of preserving himself behind a carefully constructed mask and Randolph Jordan had blown it apart in the space of less than a day. He felt physically ill.

"Here...I'll take you," Ducky said, grabbing Tony's arm before he fell. Tony leaned on him and allowed him to walk him over to the bathroom. Then Tony fumbled for the door, pushed it open, got inside, and closed it behind him, locking Ducky out.

"Tony! You can't stand properly!" Ducky remonstrated, trying the door from the outside. "Tony – open the door, please," Ducky begged.

"Fuck it, Ducky, I'm not totally useless - I can damn well piss on my own," Tony yelled at him through the door.

Then he turned towards the sink...and stopped, as he caught sight of himself in the mirror.

"Well Gibbs sure as hell was right about that – you don't look pretty, DiNozzo," he said to his reflection.

He tottered closer to the mirror, and rested his hands on the sink to hold himself up. He was as white as a sheet, his hair sticking up in a dozen different directions, and the bruises on his face were spectacular. They were a variety of colours ranging from dark purple to light yellow, via green and violet in between, and they covered his entire jaw. His cut lip looked as swollen and painful as it felt, and there was an ugly bruise on his forehead. His surgical gown was half-open at the back, revealing the dressings on his shoulders and he had all kinds of interesting bruises on his thighs but, most of all, his eye was drawn to his neck, and the complete absence of the collar that was usually there.

He ran his fingers over the pale line where the collar had been, and gazed at himself. What had he said during those six hours he'd been tied up alone in that room with Rodney? Snatches of jumbled conversation came back to him and he flinched. What had he been thinking to give all that away, even if he had thought he was only talking to Rodney and not the entire damn universe and everyone in it? And Gibbs. Particularly Gibbs.

He had spilt his guts to Rodney like some love-sick young sub. Had he admitted to not sleeping with anyone in five years? His stomach clenched; all those years of flirting, and

asking Gibbs's permission to bed a variety of good-looking tops, and now he was caught out in what suddenly seemed like a really bad lie because he'd never gone through with it with anyone. It had all been just to try and make Gibbs jealous, to provoke a reaction, to try and see if he could get Gibbs to \*care\*.

"Failed there, DiNozzo," he muttered, and then he remembered something else. He remembered Gibbs looking into that camera and telling him he loved him. "Poor bastard," he said to his reflection. "After hearing you whine on like an idiot for hours on end the least he could do was tell you what you wanted to hear right before you got raped and murdered."

His stomach churned, and he half-turned, half-fell in the direction of the toilet and just managed to get to it before throwing up. He vomited strenuously for a few minutes, his ribs aching as he heaved. Then he sat back against the wall, body trembling from the exertion.

Shit. Years and years of hiding, of being so careful never to let anyone see the truth, and now he'd just let it hang out to the entire world. He felt so...known. People had seen him naked, ass up, witnessed some psycho knocking him around and trying to rape him, and, worst of all, they'd heard every damn fool thing he'd told Rodney Sheppard. He was such an idiot.

"Tony." Gibbs's voice, outside the door. "You okay in there?"

"I'm fine. Just leave me the fuck alone," he snapped. The last thing he wanted was to go out there and face all those people. Why couldn't they just leave him be so he could wallow in his embarrassment by himself?

"DiNozzo, open the damn door," Gibbs said. Tony made a face at it. That was one order he wasn't going to obey any time soon.

"Son, you really shouldn't be out of bed." Carson's voice – firm but gentle. "It's not just the cuts and bruises – you lost a lot of blood and your body is still in shock. We nearly lost you back there. You can't just expect to get up and start walking around like nothing happened, lad."

Tony gazed at his wrists; they were covered in lacerations and deep, dark bruises where he'd tried to escape from Jordan's cuffs. Did Ziva, Abby and Tim know, he wondered? He didn't mind Abby so much, but Tim? He shuddered at the thought of how the probie would look at him if he knew about his hopeless, one-sided love affair with their top. He was the flippant one, the one who played around and played the field and never let anyone get close. Except he had. He'd let all of them get close; Gibbs, Ziva, Abby, Tim, Ducky.

"That's why you're not supposed to stay anywhere longer than eighteen months, DiNozzo," he chided himself. "Well, that and the fact you always end up in a workplace discipline room too many times and that's no fun at all," he added with a grimace. Wasn't that why Gibbs had collared him? So he could keep him out of the NCIS discipline room and take care of any punishments himself, and, in the process try and save Tony from himself? "Whatever it was,

it had fuck all to do with him being in love with you,” he reminded himself. “Just Gibbs’s rescue complex kicking in.”

“Tony, son, you need that IV,” Carson said through the door. “Why don’t you just open the door and we can get you back to bed, give you some more meds, and make you more comfortable.”

“This is my fault I’m afraid,” Tony heard Ducky murmur. “I should never have told him that he’d been observed and overheard. I had no idea he’d react so negatively.”

Observed and overheard. Tony felt his guts heaving all over again, and he pulled himself over to the toilet and threw up into it a second time. His entire body ached, his head was pounding, and he felt like he was going to die. He’d never felt this terrible before, not even when he’d had the plague.

He heard something hard pounding against the door, and then a second time. The third time Gibbs’s boot slammed into it, it flew open, and Gibbs strode into the bathroom. He took one look at Tony, cradling the toilet in his hands, and sighed.

“Don’t make me go back out there, boss,” Tony whimpered, gazing up at Gibbs pathetically, and then he turned back to the toilet and heaved up again.

“Okay, Tony. Hold on.” Gibbs pushed Carson and Ducky back out, although not before a terse argument with Dr Beckett, and then Tony heard a whispered discussion and something that sounded like an angry admonition from Carson. Whatever the altercation was about Gibbs clearly won it because he reappeared a few seconds later with a blanket, which he threw over Tony’s shoulders, before shutting the broken door to give them some privacy.

He went over to the sink and filled a cup with water and then handed it silently to Tony, who took it, gratefully.

“Gonna heave again?” Gibbs asked.

“Not right now,” Tony said, sipping the water gingerly. He hurt in so many places he wasn’t sure which was the worst. He realised he was shivering and pulled the blanket more closely around himself.

Gibbs sat down on the floor opposite him, back against the sink, and gazed at him. Tony noticed that he’d had a shower, shaved and changed into some different clothes, and he wondered when he’d done that.

“I seem to remember saying some stuff – stupid stuff,” Tony said, aiming for his usual flippant self and failing spectacularly. “I was out of it at the time so it was probably crap.”

“It wasn’t,” Gibbs stated firmly, and there wasn’t any possibility of an argument with the finality of his tone. Tony stared into those blue eyes opposite him for a long time, wondering where this went next. No wonder Gibbs hadn’t wanted to collar him again; the man must

think he was a total basket case.

"I spilled my guts in that room. How many people heard that? How many saw me being held down and nearly raped by that bastard? And how many have they told about it?" Tony rasped out.

"Not many saw it – and I guarantee you that none of those that did will say a thing about it," Gibbs told him. "Not to you or to anyone else unless it's what you want; and if you don't want to talk about it you don't have to."

"Except to the shrink." Tony made a face.

"That's what she's there for," Gibbs replied. "Tony, none of this is your fault. And I'm proud of you. You hung on in there like a damn fine agent and did your job even despite what that bastard did to you. You kept your wits about you and got those keys off Jordan; you managed to get them to Rodney even when you'd had half the blood drained from your body."

"Didn't work though," Tony said. "Had to wait for the big bad tops to come charging in and do all the rescuing. Still, you must have enjoyed that. You like rescuing people."

"Tony..." Gibbs began.

"Fuck it, Gibbs. You weren't the one hanging there with your ass out and some psycho's hands groping you all over!"

"Is that what's bothering you most?" Gibbs asked, blue eyes searching.

"No – just one thing among many," Tony muttered. He gazed at the floor for a long time, and then looked up. "He took my collar from me, boss," he said quietly.

"Yeah, I know." Gibbs nodded wearily.

"You gonna put it back?"

"You want me to?"

"I don't know." Tony gazed at the floor some more.

"Then let's talk about it later – when Carson says you're better," Gibbs said, reasonably enough.

Tony wanted to smash his fist into something, preferably Gibbs's face, but he was too tired to move. His body was shaking more violently now; he just couldn't seem to get warm.

Gibbs got up, came over to him, and sat down beside him. He put an arm around him and pulled him against his body. Tony wanted to resist but he didn't have the strength, and



besides, it felt good. And it was warm. He wasn't used to being this vulnerable around anyone, and couldn't imagine any other scenario in which he'd let Gibbs do this – or in which Gibbs would want to. Damn it, that whole thing with Jordan must have looked really bad from where Gibbs was standing to make him behave like this.

"I was married once, a long time ago," Gibbs said, suddenly and unexpectedly. Tony glanced up at him.

"Uh, you've been married three times, boss," he pointed out.

"Four," Gibbs told him.

That got Tony's attention. He glanced up again. "They all red-haired women?" he asked.

Gibbs gave a wry smile and nodded. "Yeah. They were."

"You're not...this isn't some big confession that you're a monosexual is it?" Tony asked, because it wasn't like he hadn't wondered this before. "Not that there's anything wrong with being monosexual," Tony added hurriedly, as Gibbs glanced down at him, a perplexed look in his eyes. "And it's not as weird...uh, unnatural...or whatever, as being non-dynamic. That's really kinky and you're \*clearly\* dynamic. Overly so, some might say, judging by the amount of subs you've collared. But if you've only married women, maybe you're monosexual. Which is okay of course...uh...if you are. Which you might not be."

Gibbs waited until he'd finished and then screwed up his forehead. "Interesting," he commented. "I've always wondered just how long you could continue one of your 'thinking out loud' speeches if I didn't interrupt. Now I'm kind of glad I always stopped you. No, Tony, I'm not monosexual. Or, as you have so correctly identified, non-dynamic." He moved his hand a little and slapped Tony lightly on the back of his head, then kept his hand there, stroking Tony's hair gently.

"Yes boss." Tony nodded, feeling himself start to warm up again. "So what happened to your first wife, boss?" he asked softly.

"Shannon was witness to a drug-related killing while I was out fighting in Iraq," Gibbs told him. "She was NIS's star witness...and she was murdered, along with our daughter, by the man she had been going to testify against."

"You had a daughter?" Tony looked up, startled.

"Yeah. She was eight years old when she died. Her name was Kelly."

"Like your boat," Tony murmured.

"Named it after her," Gibbs told him. "After they were killed, I tracked down the man who murdered them and emptied the contents of my gun into him. I wish I could say that it helped, and I suppose it did, a bit, but it didn't heal anything. I joined NCIS, met Ducky...and

married three more times, always looking for what I had with Shannon, and always making the same mistake, as Ducky has pointed out to me, several times." He rubbed his chin ruefully with his free hand.

"Marrying redheads?" Tony asked.

"Marrying period," Gibbs winced. "But yeah, marrying people who looked like Shannon, because I couldn't let Shannon go. After the third failed marriage, I called quits on it. Clearly the problem was with me, so I decided not to take another sub to my bed again, and definitely never to get married."

"Why are you telling me this, boss?" Tony asked softly. Gibbs's arm was warm and strong around his body and he liked the way it felt. He rested his head wearily on Gibbs's shoulder.

"Because, like you said, you spilled your guts back there, and I thought you might appreciate it if I returned the favour," Gibbs told him.

"Who knows?" Tony asked. "About Shannon and Kelly? Who knows?"

"Ducky. He's known since he first met me. And Ziva..." Tony looked up sharply. "I didn't tell her, Tony. I never would have told anyone else about this ahead of you," Gibbs said firmly. "She did a dossier on me when she was with Mossad. When she joined NCIS I swore her to secrecy. They're the only people who know. And now you."

"I'm sorry," Tony said, sincerely. "That's a terrible thing to carry around all these years. I had no idea. You are one secretive bastard."

"As are you, Tony," Gibbs murmured. Tony winced, and glanced at him. "Five years, Tony – and all those times you asked me if you could sleep with all those many and varied tops?" Gibbs raised an amused eyebrow.

"Just trying to make you jealous," Tony muttered.

"It worked, Tony. It worked."

"If it did, I never saw any sign of it."

"Can't blame me for being as good at keeping secrets as you," Gibbs replied with a wry grin.

Tony felt that ache in his gut subside, and some of the tension leave his body. Okay, so the whole experience had still been a living nightmare, but Gibbs was giving him back something he'd lost by sharing something of himself. Now, at least, it wasn't all one-sided.

"I am sorry," Tony muttered. "Losing your wife and little girl like that...I can't imagine how that must have felt. And I don't blame you for wanting to keep something like that to yourself. Boss, I have something to confess – awhile ago I got curious and I have to admit I did some digging on you. Felt bad – and I know it was a lousy thing to do – that's why I

stopped – but I found four marriage certificates. Figured you had your reasons for lying and saying you'd only been married three times so I let it drop but...I just want you to know I'm sorry I went looking."

Gibbs shrugged. "It's okay - I knew about that, Tony," he said.

"You did? How?" Tony asked, alarmed.

"I know everything," Gibbs told him and Tony had to grin at that.

"Yeah...sometimes I think you actually do, boss," he muttered.

Tony felt his eyes closing. God he was tired. Gibbs turned, put both his arms around him, pulled him in close, and kissed his forehead gently.

"C'mon. Time to get you back to bed," he said. Tony gave a whimper of protest as Gibbs pulled away and he was no longer encircled by those warm, strong arms. Gibbs opened the door, and Carson was beside him in seconds, checking him over.

"You, are a terrible patient," he admonished Tony, his eyes anxious. "You're worse than Rodney Sheppard. No, you're worse even than John Sheppard and he's the worst I've ever known." He shone a light into Tony's eyes, making Tony bat his hand away in annoyance. Carson glanced at the contents of the toilet, and sighed. "See – that's why you weren't supposed to get out of bed," he scolded. "Gibbs – can you help me get him back there?"

Gibbs took one of Tony's arms and Carson the other, and he was glad of the support because now he had no strength left in his body whatsoever. The two of them carried him back to the bed, and then Carson fussed around him inserting tubes and injecting him with something that made him feel warm and fuzzy almost immediately. He struggled against his own weariness for awhile, but Gibbs sat down on the chair beside the bed and held Tony's hand loosely in his fingers, and Tony registered, hazily, that it seemed Gibbs \*did\* do hand-holding after all.

"Go to sleep, Tony. I've got you," he said, and Tony was asleep within seconds.

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The world seemed to be lit by a red mist. It made everything glow around the edges, and cast everything he saw in its strange light. It was like a crimson blanket of snow, muffling out sounds on his periphery but making those close by seem sharper, and yet slightly out of focus.

He felt as if his senses were heightened – he was stronger and faster than he remembered himself being; he could feel his body coiled, ready to spring at the slightest hint of a threat to his submissive.

He wasn't sure when it had started, but he knew that for a long time he'd remained in control of it. He could do this – keep going until the danger passed, feeding the dark red

mist inside with every ounce of his anger, pain and distress, keeping it at bay until it was safe to let it all out. He had that level of control – he needed to because it had been necessary to stay calm and collected while they performed the rescue, channelling little pieces of his inner rage to keep him sharp and his responses honed, but now...now that it was over, he could no longer keep it at bay.

It enveloped him like a cloak, and it would stay with him until he could release those pent-up emotions and safely allow the red mist to dissipate.

His submissive moved beneath him and he growled, sensing danger.

"It's okay. Carson says we can go back to our quarters now," his submissive told him, and he felt a wave of relief wash through him. Thank god. It was fraying his nerves having these people around Rodney; having them touch him, and stand near him. Danger - it was all around them, and he had to keep Rodney safe.

A couple of days ago he'd been aware of the other wounded sub as well, the one lying in the bed next to Rodney's, and had been able to stand guard over them both but he couldn't do that now. The red mist was too strong. Now all his senses were focussed on Rodney, on keeping him safe. He didn't have anything left for anyone else.

He could feel other tops nearby. He could \*scent\* them, and it made him uneasy. They weren't people to him any more – they were vague, fuzzy outlines, more real to him for the dynamic they radiated than their actual physical bodies.

That one there – he smelled of cologne and medicine. It was a clean smell, with an earthy undertone. He was strong but hid that strength behind his warmth and innate gentleness. John only let him close to his submissive because he was a healer, but he was wary of him all the same. Other tops were dangerous, and if he had to fight for his submissive he would. He growled as the healer's hand briefly touched Rodney's arm, and then Rodney was stroking him again and the gesture calmed him in some way that he didn't understand.

Then there was the other – John was aware of him sitting in the chair in the far corner, watching. He smelled of soap and sweat and something else – something hard, uncompromising and raw. There was also a hint of coffee, sawdust and the potent tang of leather. He was powerful, and made no attempt to hide it. His aura pulsed more strongly than anyone else around; it was an unsettling combination of great dominance and great stillness. He was like a spider in a web, silent but commanding, and he made John uneasy.

He was keeping his distance from Rodney though – in fact, he stayed well away from him so John was prepared to let him stay in the room. He sensed this top had his own concerns in any case, and he thought the wounded sub in the other bed might be his. John had no interest in the other sub, and he thought this powerful top knew that and was making it equally clear he had no interest in Rodney. That was good, because John would rip apart anyone who touched his sub and tear them limb from limb with his bare teeth if he had to.

He knew he was far gone. He wasn't sure why the red mist affected him differently at

different times, but this time it had been bad. Maybe it was the length of time he'd been parted from Rodney, knowing his sub was in danger and having to stand by, listening and watching, unable to act.

Little flashes of it played over and over in his mind. Another top had chained Rodney, had cuffed his hands behind his back and attached a chain to his collar – to the collar \*John\* had put around his neck. He had hit Rodney, repeatedly, had laid hands on him...had nearly killed him. John had watched, watched it all, powerless to stop it. He had been unable to protect his submissive and that cut deep into his soul, causing a chasm inside from where this red mist rose.

"Come on, John," Rodney whispered, clutching his hand and leading him towards the door. John felt relieved. He didn't want to be around any other tops in case someone touched Rodney because he didn't know what he'd do if that happened.

Someone entered the room as they got to the door and John stopped, snarling. He recognised the man...neither top nor sub but both, or something in between. Not dangerous but not harmless either. The man backed away, muttering something. Rodney squeezed his hand.

"You have no idea how crazy you're being," he whispered. "Ducky is a really nice old guy. He wasn't going to touch me."

John turned his head and his gaze fell upon beloved features. His submissive; the only person he trusted. He wanted to crawl inside Rodney and never let him go. He whimpered as he saw flashes of a chain flying through the air, and re-lived the harsh jolt of pain travelling through the lifebond. Shuddering, he reached for Rodney and held him tight until the moment passed. Rodney's hands soothed him gently, bringing him back to himself, but it was only momentary. He needed more. He needed much more. His lips sought Rodney's roughly, and he claimed a kiss, but then Rodney pulled away and John found himself growling softly; Rodney was his, and he wanted to take him, to get inside him, to claim him again...

"Yeah, I know, buddy," Rodney told him, grabbing his hand and pulling him swiftly away. "But not here. It would be really embarrassing, trust me. You might not care now but you would when it was over. And I'd \*really\* care."

They passed a woman...her hazy aura smelled of sub so John ignored her; she wasn't a threat. She got out of their way, flattening herself against the wall as they passed.

Rodney's hand in his, guiding him, was the only thing keeping him sane right now. He didn't know where they were going but he trusted Rodney to get them there safely. Rodney was his; Rodney understood him the way nobody else did.

He felt as if he was blind – the red mist obscured everything, making him aware of the strangest things. He could hear every beat of Rodney's heart, but any other background noise was fuzzy. He could hear every word Rodney said, with a clarity so sharp it hurt his

ears, but he couldn't make sense of anything anyone else said. He was aware when people spoke but their words were just gibberish, rising and falling in pitch, and he couldn't catch their meaning. He could feel the heat of Rodney's body but had no idea where his own began or ended. He could walk and run and move but only by instinct, not by design.

His body had a much greater degree of grace and athleticism than usual, and he knew he could pounce and swoop and dive with much greater speed and skill – but he couldn't see where he was going clearly. It was a strange sensation, like he was a bird flying blindfolded in the sky, connected to the world only by a thin, pulsing thread...like the lifebond that connected him to Rodney.

His blood was pounding inside him now, making the lifebond vibrate, and his head ached with need. He was so close...Rodney was here, and John had to claim him, possess him totally, and make him his own again.

"Nearly there," Rodney told him, running now, guiding him along endless red-lit hallways. A top passed them, and John turned and snarled at her. "It's just Miko and she's \*got\* three subs already and really doesn't want any more - and now you've completely freaked her out."

John didn't care. He just knew that another top had passed by, close to Rodney, and he had to protect his sub and make sure he wasn't hurt or claimed by anyone else. It had happened before, when a top had forcibly removed Rodney's collar, put his own on him, and defiled him, and John had killed that top with his bare hands. Now something similar had happened, and he'd had to \*watch\*.

John growled as he heard that sound reverberating in his mind – the sound of a chain connecting with Rodney's forehead. The sound kept repeating, over and over again; harsh, metallic, slicing through skin and hitting bone...

"I know, I know," Rodney soothed, his hands bringing comfort as they touched John's arms. "But we're okay, aren't we? We're okay. \*I'm\* okay. Ssh, ssh."

Rodney's hands were a lifeline, taking him to safety, and he followed his submissive blindly on their nightmarish journey. Then, finally, he heard the sound of a door opening, he was pulled inside, and it was closed again behind them.

"Okay. We're home now," Rodney told him. "We're alone - so let's get started, huh, big guy?"

He felt Rodney's hands on his face, and saw Rodney's blue eyes close to his, and the scent of Rodney's body sent him wild. He loved that scent. It was intoxicating, and it drove him crazy with need. It was coffee and toothpaste and all the dusty, bustling smells of the city. It was machinery and ideas and the strong tang of marker pens. It was blue eyes and a wide, mobile mouth, and soft pale skin. It was love and friendship, sex and companionship. It was HIS.

He grabbed Rodney up and kissed him hard on the mouth, and the ache in his belly subsided a little as the lifebond flared between them. He pulled at Rodney's clothes, needing to feel skin, desperate to feel skin. Rodney was helping him, tearing off his own clothes quickly so that John had access to every inch of his body.

Finally the clothes were gone, and John gave a low, guttural roar, stepped back for one brief second, and then launched himself forward. He gathered Rodney up, threw him bodily onto the bed, and then lowered himself on top of him. His hips felt agile, like those of a panther or wolf, and they ground down onto Rodney's naked body, pinning him beneath him.

This felt good. This felt so good. He grabbed Rodney's arms and held them over his head, and then lowered his head and inhaled Rodney's scent. It was overwhelming, and he needed more of it. He licked his way along Rodney's jaw and down to the soft, inviting skin of his neck. He sank his teeth in there, feeling Rodney arch up beneath him, and he growled.

"Don't move," he said, the words sounding alien and guttural to him.

"Hey...it's okay...I won't. Mark me, John," Rodney told him soothingly. "Make me yours again."

This was what he needed to do. Another top had put marks on Rodney's body and John had used the healing lifebond energy, the kaeira, to share those wounds, taking them onto his own body. Now he had to wipe out any trace that anyone else had even touched Rodney; Rodney was his and his alone.

His mouth was everywhere, sucking and licking and biting. It was a strange feeling – very in control and yet so very nearly out of control. And through it all Rodney was there, keeping him anchored, whispering to him and slowly bringing him back to himself.

The taste of Rodney was like nectar – he couldn't get enough of it. He sank his tongue into Rodney's mouth, licked Rodney's skin, bit on Rodney's nipples and the soft flesh of his inner thigh, and then pushed Rodney's legs apart and pushed his tongue inside him, tasting him where he was at his earthiest.

The pounding in his head was receding a little now, and the red mist lifting, but still he needed more. He needed flesh on flesh, skin on skin. He needed to be IN Rodney, merging with him completely – only then would this aching inside be relieved.

Rodney seemed to sense his need and he fumbled with John's pants and pulled at his tee shirt. John was aware that he smelled of sweat and battle, and that it had been a long time since he'd bathed, but none of that mattered.

Soon he was naked too, and that felt so much better. Now he was able to lie on top of Rodney and feel the bliss of having skin touch skin – all the way from fingertips to toes. He loved the warm softness of Rodney's belly against his, and the way Rodney was kissing the side of his face. Rodney was being careful not to move beneath him – he knew how much that upset him when he was like this. Rodney was his; he didn't want him wriggling or

squirming – he needed his acceptance, needed him to stay still and offer himself up for John to claim.

John moved his hips up and felt the movement release their two hard cocks, where they had been trapped between their bodies.

"Buddy...I need to lube. If you won't let me move you have to do it," Rodney told him, and he felt Rodney's arm move in the direction of the nightstand. He growled, and Rodney paused, and took hold of his head. "John, listen – you're going to pick up the lube and rub it inside me," Rodney told him, in very clear tones. "Understand? You'll hate yourself afterwards if you don't."

He'd do anything Rodney told him. If Rodney told him, right here, right now, to get off him, then he would but he knew Rodney wouldn't tell him that because Rodney knew how much he needed this. Rodney was in control right now – John was helpless, in the grip of emotions too powerful to resist, but Rodney was his rock and would guide him safely through the storm.

He moved his hand and found the tube on the nightstand. He tore the lid off it with his teeth and then squeezed a massive dollop onto his fingers. He remembered how to do this, as if in a dream.

"Okay...I don't think we need that much but go ahead," Rodney said. John slid his fingers into Rodney's body. He should probably go more slowly but he was impatient and Rodney wasn't telling him to stop. He held Rodney down, one arm across Rodney's belly while he worked the lubricant into him. He didn't like the cold, clinical smell of the lube, or the way it partially obscured Rodney's scent, so he leaned down and sniffed at Rodney's balls and cock, inhaling deeply. He didn't trust himself to suck Rodney, not when his every urge to was to bite right now, so he contented himself with just licking, tasting that scent of Rodney and feeling it flood through him, intoxicating him all over again.

Now he couldn't wait another second; he had to be inside Rodney or he'd explode.

"I'm ready, John," Rodney told him, opening his legs wide so that John could settle between them.

He thrust into Rodney hard, with one big, almighty surge of his hips and heard Rodney gasp, but now he was completely sheathed in Rodney's warm body and he paused, feeling the pain in his gut recede another notch. He didn't want to move yet. He just wanted to savour this feeling. He was lying on top of Rodney, as far inside him as it was possible to be, and he grasped Rodney's hands in his and lay there for awhile, resting on him, feeling Rodney's heartbeat beneath his ear. Now it felt like warm honey was flowing between them through the lifebond, gentling and soothing him.

He moved his hips once, back, and then forward, hard, and felt Rodney give another of those beautiful little gasps. The images in his mind began to fade, one by one. He thrust, and the sound of that chain hitting Rodney's head grew faint. Another thrust, and the memory



of another top chaining Rodney to a wall faded away. He was moving rhythmically now, and Rodney's body was so welcoming, Rodney's blue eyes gazing up at him, lovingly, keeping him connected and bringing him safely back down to earth.

He became only the thrusting motions of his hips, back and forth, and the sensations in his cock as it slid into and out of Rodney's body. Every nerve ending was tingling with need – his need to be inside Rodney, to claim Rodney and make him his own again. Rodney was his again – he was here, beneath him. John didn't have to stand by and watch, helpless, as Rodney was hurt. Rodney was fine. He was here. He was safe. John remembered holding a man's head in his hands and turning it so hard and so fast that it snapped the man's neck and that had felt so intensely good but not as good as this. Not as good as Rodney panting beneath him, all pink, living skin and warm, eager flesh. He was so beautiful, his body open and wanton, allowing John to bury himself deep inside him.

He was coming. White lights flashed in his mind, illuminating everything, and suddenly the red mist cleared and he was lying on top of Rodney, still lodged deep inside him, panting hard. Rodney's hands came up and rested on his back, stroking him gently.

"You're okay now, John. Ssh," Rodney told him.

John felt at peace. He was lying on Rodney's naked body and that was the best place in the world for him to be. He wasn't sure how long he lay there but eventually Rodney shifted beneath him. John moaned and pulled back, hating the sensation of leaving Rodney's body, but then Rodney was drawing him close and they were lying facing each other, on their sides, and Rodney was kissing his lips gently.

He closed his eyes and let Rodney kiss him, feeling the kaeira fizzing happily between them. After awhile he opened his eyes again to see Rodney gazing at him searchingly.

"You back?" Rodney asked.

"Yeah," he whispered. "You okay?" He ran a gentle finger over Rodney's swollen mouth.

"Fine." Rodney smiled. "That was a bad one for you though," he said. "You were getting worse by the hour. I had to practically bribe Carson to let us out of the infirmary so I could take care of it."

"I'm sorry." John buried his face in the crook of Rodney's neck. Rodney stroked him.

"I'm not complaining," he said, kissing John's hair. "It's always exciting, and I always know what to expect. Also...I know I can stop you any time. It's like you're this wild dog who snaps at everyone else but I've got you tamed and you just follow me wherever I lead you. I kind of like it."

"Did you get off?" John asked, glancing down. Rodney shook his head. John moved his hand down and took Rodney's semi-erect cock in his hand, firmly caressing it back to full erection. Rodney moaned and leaned into him, panting, and John picked up the pace and rubbed fast

until Rodney came over his hand. Then John lifted his semen-covered fingers to his mouth, and licked.

"Animal," Rodney grinned.

"Can't get enough of you," John replied. He could still feel the after-effects of the red mist. His senses were more sensitive than usual, and the scent and taste of Rodney stronger and still so \*necessary\*. "I love you, Rodney," he whispered. "I'm sorry I couldn't protect you from that bastard. We did everything we could..."

"I know." Rodney put a finger over his mouth. "I knew you were coming, and I knew you'd find us and rescue us. I didn't doubt you for a moment." He took hold of John's face in his hands. "John – I \*knew\*," he said fiercely. "It wasn't like that other time, when I was shot and you couldn't get to me. This time I knew you would get to me. I trusted you. You helped me do that; you made me believe."

John smiled. Those few days they'd spent together confined in their quarters hadn't been easy for either of them but he was glad he'd followed his instincts because by doing so he'd given Rodney the faith to sustain him through this latest crisis, even when things had looked bleak.

He pulled up the blanket to cover them both and wrapped himself around Rodney, wallowing in the feel of his beloved sub's naked body against his own, grateful to be home again.

Because wherever Rodney was - that was home.

## Chapter 6 by Xanthe

Gibbs glanced at himself in the mirror; black suit, white shirt, black tie. He looked appropriate for the occasion – he just wished the occasion wasn't necessary. Maybe they'd got off lucky, losing only one person in their final battle against Randolph Jordan, but try telling that to Lieutenant Rice's parents.

Gibbs supposed he should be thankful that he hadn't lose any of his own subs – and he was – but they'd all been through so much that it was hard to feel any gratitude.

He walked out into the living area of their quarters to find his subs standing waiting – all except Tony who was still in the infirmary.

"Okay." Gibbs surveyed them all. Like him, they were all dressed in formal clothes, polished and starched up to the eyeballs because they knew that was what he expected of them. "I know I haven't been around much lately..."

"That's okay, Gibbs - we know you've been with Tony," Abby interrupted. "Are we going to be able to see him any time soon?"

“As a matter of fact, yes,” he told her with a faint smile. “He said he’d like to see you, Abby – this afternoon, after the service.”

“What about us?” Ziva asked, and Gibbs noticed that her hand had slipped silently into Tim’s.

“Just Abby to begin with,” Gibbs told her softly. He saw the flash of hurt in her eyes and shook his head at her. “Ziva it’s nothing personal. Tony’s been through hell – he’s just taking it one step at a time.”

She looked a little mollified. “Why will nobody tell us what happened to him?” she asked.

“Because it’s his story to tell,” Gibbs said sharply. “If he wants to tell you about it then fine, but I’m not going to and nobody else will, either. Now, I know it’s been a tough few weeks for you all, but I want your full written reports by the end of tomorrow.”

None of them reacted, and then they glanced at each other uneasily, and Gibbs knew they were missing Tony’s smart-assed aside on the subject of writing up a long report to meet the deadline, or at least his vocal groan. Gibbs missed it too. Tony was so integral to their team; he could be a royal pain in the ass, but he brought with him an energy and humour that lifted them all, and that was all the more noticeable now that he wasn’t here.

“After that...” Gibbs gave a little smile. “Well, you’re due some R&R so make the most of being out here. The surf’s good apparently – well, according to General Sheppard anyway – and he’s putting some puddle jumpers at your disposal if you want to visit the mainland. Apparently the Athosians are having a market day on the mainland at the end of the week if you want to go check that out. Whatever you want – you’re on your own time after the end of tomorrow – no need to check in.”

“How long for?” Abby asked.

“Well...trip home on the Daedalus usually takes eighteen days as you know,” Gibbs said, “But I had a word with Rodney Sheppard and he thinks it'd be okay for us to use the stargate this time around.” He grinned at that because, perhaps unsurprisingly, Rodney had been more than happy to bend over backwards to accommodate that request. “However...no need to tell the Director that – she thinks it’s going to take eighteen days for us to get home so let’s leave it at that.”

“We have eighteen days leave to spend on Atlantis?” Tim asked incredulously, his face creasing into a big grin. Gibbs could just imagine his geeky young sub making the most of it to devour the technology in the city.

“Yup.” Gibbs nodded.

“I love you, Gibbs!” Abby swung her arms around him and kissed him and both Ducky and Ziva looked quietly delighted. He was glad about that; they’d all been through a lot and deserved some fun.

“But first...” Gibbs disengaged himself from Abby and straightened his tie from where she’d dislodged it. “We have a memorial service to attend.”

He clipped their leashes onto their collars, feeling a pang as he did so; judging by the way Ziva and Tim were looking at each other this was the last time he’d be doing this. He brushed that thought aside – like Ducky said, he’d never promised to keep them forever and he was happy for them.

They walked down to the main hall together and then he unleashed Abby, who had asked if she could sit with Lorne and his team. He knew that she’d become close to all Lorne’s team – firstly when they’d guarded her after Keller’s murder, and latterly after they’d rescued her. He watched her go to the front of the hall, and slip her hand into the crook of Lorne’s arm. Lorne turned, and his eyes lit up. Gibbs could see that he was upset at losing a man in the field – and Gibbs knew all too well how that felt – but he could also see the look in Lorne’s eyes when Abby was around, and he knew what it was like to feel that way about a sub too.

The Atlanteans seemed to be familiar with holding these services judging by how smoothly it went. The remains, such as they were, had already been sent through the stargate; Lorne intended to visit Rice’s parents and return his effects in person when he next visited Earth. Gibbs stood there with his subs and remembered another memorial service, a year or so ago, when they’d buried Caitlin Todd. It never got any easier.

Afterwards they flung open the balcony doors and went and stood in the sun to eat the sandwiches that had been laid out there on tables. Gibbs unleashed his subs to allow them to mingle and stood leaning against the balustrade, just watching. He saw General Sheppard feeding his husband something from his plate. Rodney was talking animatedly while John fed him, and John was nodding, lazily, his eyes alight with fond amusement as he looked at his sub. At least John was back down from that strange, topky headspace he’d been in immediately after they rescued Rodney. Gibbs saw the bite mark on Rodney’s neck, and he knew that whatever had happened between them had been intense but ultimately healthy for them both.

He watched Ducky talking softly to Richard Woolsey. He never saw Woolsey look as relaxed as he did when he was with Ducky; he lost the slight stammer he habitually had around tops, and his body seemed softer and less rigid. Gibbs was happy for his friend - Ducky hadn’t felt free to have a normal relationship in years and it was good to see him feeling his way like this. Gibbs didn’t know how it felt to be a switch – he couldn’t conceive of being anything other than sexually dominant - but it clearly suited Ducky to be able to express a side of his personality he’d kept repressed for so long.

Then there was Ziva – he’d never seen her look like this. Her hair was flowing loose over her shoulders, and she always had one hand on Tim McGee, either tucked into his hand, or his arm, or just loosely resting on his ass or shoulder. She’d lost that dark, intense look and seemed genuinely happy for the first time since he’d met her. He saw in her the top she had always had the potential to be, if she hadn’t lost her way. He wondered if she’d taken Tim to her bed yet, but a searching glance at McGee told him that she hadn’t.

Tim followed where she led, and there was the beginning of a beautiful synergy between them, of the kind that existed between tops and subs in good relationships. John and Rodney were the best example of it he'd ever seen, always walking in step, hips and upper arms touching, each seeming to know exactly what the other was thinking. It was good to see Ziva and Tim taking their first tentative steps along that path. Tim was still a little jumpy and nervous, and his eyes, although eager to please, still held the fears of a sub who hadn't yet been taken by his first top. Gibbs had no doubt Ziva was the right top to take him on that journey, and he almost envied her the experience. He could imagine how beautifully eager to please Tim would be, and how gentle a hand he'd need. He was good at judging subs and thought it would be rewarding beyond belief to be Tim's first.

He could have done it himself, he thought. It would have saved a lot of time and trouble and he had no doubt he could have cured Tim of his many self-doubts and concerns, but that had felt like a journey Tim needed to take himself. Gibbs had contented himself with just guiding him along the way, getting him used to a firm hand on his leash and giving him at least a glimmer of understanding of how it would feel to eventually submit, heart and soul, and offer himself up to the will and demands of a top. Tim was nothing like the scared boy Gibbs had first collared; Gibbs had found the young agent so petrified of tops that he'd collared him out of pure necessity. Without the protection of a collar, McGee had been useless when questioning tops or dealing with them in any meaningful capacity in the course of his job. Tony, of course, was the complete opposite, and could play tops with consummate ease.

Gibbs found he missed Tony's presence. Five years was a long time and he was so used to having Tony's tall, solid body beside him, at the end of his leash. He missed him. He missed Tony's energy and constant stream of chatter, and, most of all, he missed the way Tony could always make him laugh.

Today was the first day he'd spent any appreciable time away from Tony. He'd been sleeping in the infirmary and sitting by his agent's bed these past few days, making sure Tony didn't do anything stupid, the way he had the day they'd brought him back to Atlantis. He made sure Tony took his meds, and wheeled him along the hallway to his visits with Kate Heightmeyer. He was pretty sure Tony was leading the shrink a merry dance, alternately charming her then playing her like she was still in the interrogation room, but she was trained in her job so Gibbs left that up to her to figure out. If all Tony got from it was the sense of having charmed and outplayed an attractive top then that might make it worthwhile of and by itself. Gibbs suspected that it would at least go some way towards Tony regaining a sense of pride and dignity in himself as a sub that he'd lost during his nightmarish time as Jordan's prisoner.

One thing they hadn't done was talk, in any meaningful way, about what happened next between them. Gibbs didn't want anything to interfere with Tony's recovery – they could talk later, when Carson finally discharged Tony from the infirmary.

"Gibbs." He was jolted out of his thoughts of Tony by Ziva. "Uh...I wondered if I could talk to you later," she said in a soft tone. "About Tim? About what we talked about? Uh...about his

collar?"

He was amused by her reticence. He supposed it was a delicate subject – asking a top to give up his collared sub - but he'd given his word and besides, it was the right thing to do. First though, he needed to be sure that they were both ready for it. He also had to make them aware of what would – and would not – change in their working lives if she collared Tim.

"That's fine, Ziva. Come and see me at 6 p.m. in our quarters – I'll make sure we have privacy. And bring Tim too."

"Thank you!" she said, looking relieved beyond belief.

At that moment, the small, blonde sub Ziva had spent the night with at the Festival of Deliverance came up to her. Gibbs looked at her more closely – she didn't look the same as she had that night, when she'd been full of anger and hate. Now she looked smaller and softer, less spiky and antagonistic. Her eyes were full of a weary kind of grief but they were also more hopeful now than they'd been before.

"Kahla." Ziva enveloped her in a warm hug, which surprised Gibbs; Ziva wasn't known for her touchy-feely qualities. "I wanted to thank you again for risking your life to help me free Tim."

"No need, Ziva," Kahla told her, with a firm shake of her head. "Look...I..." She glanced across the room and Gibbs saw that Teyla was watching her. The Athosian leader nodded, and Kahla took a deep breath. "I wanted to give you something," she said shyly. "You might not like it – you do not have to use it if it is not right...but...you see, before the Wraith took me I used to be a leather crafter by trade. Ahna – that is my top - she was the creative one. She used to come up with all the designs – but I was good at making them work. She always said I had a great feel for the material."

"It sounds as if you made a great pair," Ziva said softly.

"We did...we were going to travel the galaxy through the stargates and sell our work in markets all over Pegasus," Kahla said, her eyes glowing. "Turns out we did travel - just not the way we thought we would."

Gibbs had heard something of this sub's story, and the top in him responded to her. He hated it when a sub was hurting, and it was clear that Kahla had been badly hurt. In another time and place he knew that he'd want to put his collar on her and see if he couldn't help that way, but, looking across the room at Teyla, he saw that she already had it in hand.

"I have not worked any leather since Ahna died, and when Teyla first put some in my hands I was sure I would not remember how to do it now, after so long. But I did. In fact...I found my hands working, and hours later I looked up and the sun had gone down and Teyla was laughing at me," Kahla said, with a shy smile. "It came back to me so easily – the smell and feel of it. I love it as much now as I used to when Ahna was with me, only now I have to

design the work myself - but I think I can do that. We used to specialise in collars," Kahla said, taking a small velvet bag out of her pocket, and pressing it into Ziva's hand. "You said that you hoped one day to collar Tim. I thought...well, like I said, it has been a long time and maybe it is not very good, but if you wanted to use it..."

Ziva looked overcome. Her eyes were shining as she opened the velvet bag and took out a collar made of the highest quality, soft leather. It was a rich dark brown in colour, with overlays of a softer, tan colour in different shapes around the edge. Gibbs could make out a stargate, a puddlejumper, a knife, and the moons of Lantea circling the planet. The stitching and crafting on it was superlative. A collar like this, back on Earth, would cost a serious sum of money.

"I wanted to include symbols of your time here," Kahla said. "So that you do not forget us."

"I will never forget you, Kahla," Ziva said softly, fingering the collar with the utmost care. "This is so beautiful. Thank you. I hope that you one day find someone who will put such a collar on you."

Kahla smiled, and nodded, a little too fast. Then she pressed a hurried kiss to Ziva's cheek and ran away, back into the crowd.

Gibbs put a hand on Ziva's shoulder, and squeezed. He knew she wasn't someone who expressed her emotions easily, but she had clearly been deeply affected by Kahla's gesture. She had made some good friends out here and that pleased him; in the entire time he'd known her she'd avoided getting close to people, too scared of her own nature to allow anyone in, afraid of hurting them. That had been one of the reasons why he'd collared her in the first place.

He was glad that she had started to let her guard down enough to let people get close – and that made his other decision easier. He knew Tim was ready to have his collar removed but he hadn't been so sure that \*she\* was ready to be released just yet.

Now he thought that maybe she was.

~\*~

Tony gazed blankly at the laptop Gibbs had given him just before he'd left to get ready for Rice's memorial service.

"What's this for, boss?" he'd asked.

"Your report. Thought you could start typing it up," Gibbs told him.

"But I'm \*ill\*," Tony protested. Gibbs grinned at him.

"Carson said a little light work wouldn't do you any harm, and I thought you might be bored without me," he said.

"Without you hovering over me to make sure I take my meds and keep my appointments with Dr Shrinkmeyer? I don't know why you'd think that." Tony made a face.

"Anything to keep you out of mischief," Gibbs told him, eyes narrowing warningly.

"What mischief would be possible in Carson's prison - oh, I'm sorry, I mean infirmary?" Tony replied.

"Tony, you used to shimmy down drainpipes to go and meet tops when you were fourteen," Gibbs told him. "So I'm not taking any chances on you shimmying your way out of here when my back is turned. Make sure you've done half a dozen pages of your report by the time I get back."

"I don't shimmy!" Tony yelled after his boss's retreating back. "I grew out of shimmying when I was sixteen," he told his laptop. "And, frankly, it hurts me to think he doesn't trust me to stay in bed like a good little agent while he's gone," he added in a wounded tone.

One of the nurses stuck his head around the door. "Coast is clear – want to join us for that card game you were asking about?"

Tony made a face. "Can't. I have a report to write apparently," he said. Damn it, Gibbs knew him far too well.

He gazed at the laptop with a considerable degree of loathing. Where did he start? And just how much was Gibbs expecting him to include? Usually Gibbs insisted on every single detail being reported, down to what everyone was wearing and what they'd had for breakfast. This made report writing long and tedious beyond belief, and Tony had a real aversion to tedious.

He made a few preliminary notes and then decided that it might help his thought process if he walked around. Between them, by use of a technique Tony could only describe as 'toppy bullying', Carson and Gibbs had pretty much ensured he remained in bed for the past few days and he thought it was time he regained use of his legs.

"While the tops are away, the subs will play," he muttered to himself, swinging his legs over the side of the bed. He was light-headed for a moment but soon recovered. He pulled on his bathrobe and walked around the room.

He was feeling so much better than he had – his body still ached but the lacerations on his back were healing well and had scabbed over – although they were now driving him crazy by itching all the time.

Tony wasn't an idiot; he knew decision time was fast approaching, and while he could avoid the rest of the team for now he'd have to see them again soon. A part of him really wanted to see them, but he still wasn't comfortable with what had happened and he didn't want to see that discomfort reflected back at him in their eyes. He'd agreed to see Abby later – that



was a good first step. He'd see how that went and then go from there.

For now though...Tony glanced at the laptop lying beside the bed, and then at the door.

"Fuck it," he muttered under his breath, moving slowly towards the door. He opened it, cautiously, looked outside to make sure it was safe, and then tip-toed out into the main infirmary. He found his old instincts kicking in – not only was he a damn fine agent, he'd been sneaking around since he was a kid and he was good at it.

He moved stealthily through the infirmary to the nurse's station, where he found four of the infirmary staff kicking back with the card game. He crept up behind them.

"Och, aren't you lads supposed to be on duty?" he asked, in a fair imitation of Carson's Scottish brogue, even if it did come out sounding more like Sean Connery's James Bond. They all jumped, guiltily, and he laughed his head off. "Changed my mind," he told them, coming to sit down with them. "Deal me in!"

He felt normality settle around him again as he played. At least it was a distraction from all the big questions going around in his head – well, some of them at least. He was aware of feeling almost naked without a collar around his throat. He had worn it with pride for so many years and now it was gone, and he was pretty sure, from the way Gibbs was behaving, that he wouldn't be getting it back. He wasn't sure why – he could guess at many reasons but he wasn't sure what Gibbs's thinking was on it. Maybe Gibbs thought he didn't need rescuing any more. Or maybe he just didn't want the complications of collaring a sub who refused to sleep with anyone else while wearing his collar. Gibbs had been pretty clear about the reasons his marriages had failed and why he wasn't taking any more subs to his bed and Tony could at least understand where his boss was coming from on that. Whatever the reason, Gibbs was adamant that they weren't going to talk about it until Tony was better and Carson had discharged him, and frankly the waiting was killing him.

As he listened to the nurses' gossip he realised he was missing his team. It was fun kicking back and unwinding, and Tony loved gossip so he was soon getting the low down on all the people on Atlantis.

"Last hand," one of the nurses said, dealing out the cards with an anxious glance at the clock.

"Oh come on! I'm just starting to win!" Tony said, picking up his cards with a flourish.

"Dr Beckett will be back soon," the nurse replied, with a grimace. "And he'll have us scrubbing out the bedpans with toothbrushes if we're not working."

"Ah, he sounds just like Gibbs in a good mood," Tony grinned. "But we'll see him coming and you can scatter."

"We didn't see you coming," one of the other nurses pointed out.

"Ah well...you see I learned from a Jedi Master," Tony said, leaning forward and tapping his nose. "A freakishly sinister Jedi Master from the dark side of the force who uses his powers to appear from nowhere right when you're in the middle of doing something you shouldn't."

"Like right now?" a voice asked dryly in his ear. He jumped and threw the cards down with a wince.

"Damn it, Gibbs," he sighed. "You have to teach me that trick one day."

He turned to see Gibbs standing behind his chair, one eyebrow raised.

"Busted, Tony," Gibbs said. "Only way you even begin to save this is if you finished that report before leaving your room and going walkabout."

"And if I said no?" Tony asked cautiously.

"Then it looks bad." Gibbs spread his arms. "Which is it?"

"It's a no," Tony sighed. He got up, and swayed slightly as the light-headedness kicked in again. Gibbs's hand immediately found his elbow, and held him up.

"C'mon, let's get you back to bed," Gibbs said.

Tony was about to make one of his usual suggestive comments when he paused – hiding in plain sight wasn't an option any more, so any invitation for Gibbs to join him in bed would be hopelessly charged. He felt stifled, and kind of angry that this simple pleasure had been taken away from him. He walked back to his room in silence feeling suddenly tired; this whole excursion had taken more out of him than he'd expected, and he was glad now of Gibbs's strong arm around him, holding him up.

"So, you gonna spank me for this?" Tony asked, as Gibbs helped him back into bed. A part of him wanted to be spanked – it would be a sign that things were back to normal between them at least - but he was all too well aware of the fact that as he no longer wore Gibbs's collar, Gibbs didn't have an absolute right to discipline him when he needed it. In the old days he'd have earned a swat or two for this, he thought, but the old days seemed long gone now.

"Maybe – when you're better," Gibbs replied, and Tony felt his bad mood worsen at the vagueness of the answer.

He slumped down against the pillows, and turned his head away angrily when Gibbs smoothed his hair with one of those hard, flat palms of his, the way he had been doing since he'd brought Tony back.

"One step at a time, Tony," Gibbs told him softly, and then he stepped away and left the room.

Tony gazed at the wall, wondering if it was normal to have these mood swings. In all honesty, although he bitched and complained about Gibbs's micro-management of his stay in the infirmary, he actually found it reassuring that Gibbs had been beside him these past few days. When he'd been hurting, or angry, or unable to get Jordan out of his mind - or all three - Gibbs's presence had been a solid source of comfort. His top never said much but his hand had never been far from Tony's hair, or his fingers, or - when he was really wallowing in self-pity - the back of Tony's head. And hadn't his mild disobedience this morning been about getting Gibbs's attention back firmly on him because this was the first time Gibbs had left his bedside for any length of time?

He was jolted out of this train of thought as the door opened again, and Abby crept into the room. She stood there, gazing at him from the protection of the doorway, and he knew she was taking in the fading bruises on his jaw and searching for some clue as to how he was from his eyes. Something broke inside him at the expression on her face and he opened his arms wide. She crossed the room within seconds, threw herself onto the bed, and wrapped herself around him.

"Yikes...easy, Abby," he said, as her knees dug into various sore spots on his body.

"I'm sorry," she said, sitting back and gazing at him with big eyes. "But I've been so worried about you, Tony!"

"Well, I'm fine," he told her, flicking at her pigtails.

"You got beat up pretty bad though, huh?" she asked, her fingers gently tiptoeing over the bruises on his face.

"Yeah," he admitted softly. "Yeah...I kind of did."

"Gibbs won't tell us what happened. In fact, nobody will - not even Rodney."

"Well that's because I asked them not to," Tony told her.

He saw her eyes go to the empty space on his neck where his collar should have been, and she brought up her hands to her mouth and made a silent "oh".

"Did Jordan do that?" she asked, her eyes flashing angrily.

"Well it wasn't Gibbs and it sure as hell wasn't me," Tony told her tightly. "Yeah, it was Jordan. He wanted to get back at Gibbs for stealing Ducky away from him. Apparently Gibbs took Jordan's collar off Ducky all those years ago, so Jordan wanted to return the favour with one of Gibbs's subs."

"I'm so sorry."

She stroked his neck gently, and he was surprised to find that actually helped. Tony thought it was ironic - he'd seen dozens of movies where a sub had their collar forcibly removed,

and sat through the many and various legal and emotional ramifications that resulted, and he'd always thought the subject overly melodramatic. That was before it actually happened to him – he hadn't realised what a profound psychological effect it could have. Kate Heightmeyer had been banging on about it these past few days and he'd pretty much ignored her but maybe she was right. Maybe this \*was\* really bugging him.

"What I can't figure out," Tony told her, "is why Gibbs didn't just put it back on me while I was unconscious."

Abby looked aghast. "Gibbs would never do that, Tony!" she exclaimed. "He's a gentleman. He'd never put a collar on a sub without getting their permission first."

"Well he kind of already had my permission, Abby," Tony pointed out. "I mean, I've been wearing the damn thing for the past five years."

"Yes, but...putting a collar on an unconscious sub is like using a date rape drug or something," Abby pointed out. "It's really hinky; kind of coercive and creepy. He'd never do that," she repeated firmly.

"Well, okay then, let's assume Gibbs was being 'gentlemanly'." Tony made air quotes with his fingers because that sure as hell wasn't a description he'd ever use about their tough boss. "Why hasn't he put it back since?"

"Because you're ill," Abby said, in a 'duh' tone of voice. "He's just waiting until you're ready to make that decision again, Tony."

"I wonder why he thinks I'm not ready yet?" Tony mused out loud.

"Maybe because you're not?" Abby threw back, softly. "Tony...do you want to wear Gibbs's collar again?"

Tony gazed at her uneasily – wasn't that the very question he'd been trying to avoid ever since he woke up and realised the collar was missing?

"The honest truth, Abby? I haven't figured that one out yet," he replied.

"Then he's waiting until you do," she said. "Tony – do you remember when that Mikel guy took my collar from me?"

"Yeah. I do remember that." Tony winced. "Gibbs was really not happy about that as I recall – didn't he shoot that guy?"

"No, he wasn't and yes he did – but the point is, I know how it feels, Tony."

"Oh look, I am not turning into one of those sappy subs from the movies who go all mopey over losing their collar!" Tony protested. "There's no need to do the big tragic eye thing with me. I was just wondering why Gibbs hadn't collared me again, that's all."

"Well, Gibbs didn't put my collar back on me until he'd asked for my permission – that's my point, Tony," Abby said. "It's the same with you. I was really out of it so he waited until after I'd caught up on some sleep and was feeling up to making that kind of decision and that's what he's doing with you – he's giving you time to figure it out."

"Hey - didn't Gibbs give you the mother of all spankings for that whole Mikel thing?" Tony teased, pulling on one of her pigtails.

"Yes he did, Tony," she replied cheerfully. "But he's only ever had to spank me once; unlike some other subs we could mention who have to be spanked daily."

"Ouch." Tony grinned at her. "Touché, Ms Sciuto."

Her fingers crept over the bruises on his wrists – the cuffs Jordan had put on him had been tied far too tight, cutting his skin in places, and the wounds had gone deep when he'd struggled against them so they were taking their time to heal. He knew she wanted desperately to find out what Jordan had done to him but he also knew that she would never ask – she'd wait until he was ready to tell her, and if he never was then she'd accept that.

"On the subject of collars," Abby said, clearing her throat a little nervously. "I was thinking – how off-putting do you think it is to a top to be with a sub who is wearing another top's collar?"

"Never met a top who let it put them off having a good time if it was on offer, if that's what you mean," he said. "I wore Gibbs's collar for years but I never had any shortage of offers from other tops. I think some of them actually view it as a challenge – see if they can seduce another top's collared sub. Of course, the ones who actually \*met\* Gibbs usually backed off pretty quickly, which was, frankly, disappointing. You'd think they'd have hung on in there for the chance of some hot sex with me but no – the minute he went all steely-eyed on them they just melted away and I never saw them again."

"I'm not talking just about sex, Tony," she chided. He rolled his eyes.

"Okay, well then, you've come to the wrong person," he replied. "Because I don't do love, remember, Abs."

"Really?" Abby saw right through him. "Because I always thought you were crazy in love with Gibbs, and, to be honest, although you talk a lot – a \*real\* lot – about all the tops you've ever slept with, I never actually saw you go home with any in all the time I've known you."

He gazed at her for a moment, appalled by his own idiocy. It seems it didn't need Randolph Jordan to drag the truth out of him for everyone to hear; some people had already figured it out for themselves.

"Abby – you're right. I am in love with Gibbs," he told her, quietly and seriously. "But we're

not talking about me, we're talking about you and Loverboy Lorne, aren't we?"

She coloured, and nodded.

"Well, if you want my opinion, if there's someone out there for you, and I mean someone really right for you who you just \*feel\* you should be with right down to your bones, then you should go for it. You have to really lay yourself on the line for it, regardless of how scary that is or how unknown the outcome. I never did because I'm a great big coward, but you should, Abby. Lorne's a good man – did you know he showed up for his 'please let me date Abby' interview with Gibbs wearing his dress blues?"

She shook her head, her eyes shining. Then her face fell.

"But I'm worried about Gibbs, Tony," she said. "He's been so good to me and I don't want him to think I'm abandoning him or anything."

"Gibbs is a big boy, Abby – he can take care of himself," Tony assured her. "I don't think he ever meant to keep any of us for this long anyway. Not even Ducky. It just turned out that way. There's never been much in it for him except a whole lot of trouble."

"Why do you think he didn't collar Kate?" Abby asked curiously. "I've always wondered. I mean, he said some stuff about his team answering only to him and how he wanted to collar us so he could keep an eye on us, protect us, and keep us in line - but he never collared Kate."

"Well, that's an easy one, Abby. Kate kind of had it all figured out – or she liked to think so anyway. Gibbs only collars the ones who need saving; like you and me."

"And what happens when we don't need saving any more?" Abby asked.

"I think we're finding that out right now," Tony said softly. "Aren't we?"

She gazed at him, green eyes apprehensive, and then nodded. "I guess we are," she murmured.

"It isn't easy, is it? Imagining what life will be like without Gibbs's collar," Tony said. "But you can't go on wearing it forever when it's not really giving you what you need any more, can you?"

"You talking about me or you, Tony?" she asked.

He smiled. "Both of us, Abby. Gibbs told me why he doesn't take subs to his bed any more and I understand his reasons but if there's never going to be a chance for me with him do I just continue wearing his collar forever, knowing that? Maybe it's time for me to move on. And as for you – he collared you to protect you from your truly abysmal taste in tops. Ow!" He grinned at her as she punched his arm. "But now you've found one worth keeping, isn't his collar kind of redundant?"

She lay down beside him and rested her head on his shoulder, fingers gently tracing over his bruised wrists. He put his arm around her, and kissed her pigtails. He'd never had a sister; Abby was the closest he'd ever come to it, and he felt like he was her big brother. They were silent for a long while and it felt comfortable just holding her like this. He realised she was family, and he could tell her anything.

"Jordan strapped me down in a bunker and put a tube in my arm," he told her softly. "He drained away a lot of my blood over a period of several hours. Then he stripped me naked, and flogged me with his belt buckle. I was too weak and out of it by then to fight back much."

She stiffened but she didn't move; she just continued stroking his wrists with gentle fingers.

"He had Gibbs watch the whole thing, to punish him," he continued. "The highlight was going to be raping me and then slitting my throat. I know he was kind of looking forward to that part because he kept telling me about it." Her fingers tightened on his wrists and he kissed her hair again. "It's okay, Abs. He never got that far because Gibbs got to him just in time and stuck a knife in his belly," he finished.

She made a little animal sound in the back of her throat and he rested his chin on her head. That hadn't been nearly as bad as he'd thought and he felt better that she knew, even though it had upset her. Her imagination might only have supplied worse images if he hadn't, and he didn't want there to be any secrets between them.

"Lorne told me that Gibbs had to choose which of us to rescue," she said. "He had to choose the one he loved the most. He chose you, Tony."

He knew what she was trying to do and he loved her for it but there was no way he was buying it. "Oh, I'm sure Lorne and Ziva volunteered for you and Tim, so it was just a question of him going after the one everyone else loved the least," he grinned.

"No." She looked up at him. "You're wrong, Tony. You are completely, totally and utterly wrong."

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"Why does Gibbs want to see us?" Tim asked nervously, pacing around the lounge in their quarters. Ziva looked just as nervous – she was leaning against the wall, chewing on her fingernails. "And why just us?" Tim muttered. "Have we done something wrong? Or is it about Tony? Or maybe he wants the details from that data burst we received from Earth...but we can put all that in our reports and he hasn't asked for them until tomorrow evening...although mine's pretty much done. So why..."

"Tim! Ssh!" Ziva cut in.

"Right. Sorry," he said. "I know I can be irritating. When I get nervous I talk too much and when you get nervous you go really, really quiet, which I find just as unnerving frankly

and..."

"Tim!"

"Oh. Right. Okay. Doing it again."

At that moment the door opened and Gibbs entered. Tim felt his stomach do a flip. It had been awhile since he'd spent any time with Gibbs and he always felt nervous of their top, especially when he wasn't sure what kind of a mood Gibbs was in.

Today, though, Gibbs seemed to be in a good mood – or at least in as good a mood as Tim had ever seen him. He was carrying three cups of coffee on a tray, and he put the tray on the table and gestured to them to take one.

"You got us coffee?" Tim asked, frowning, because this was unheard of. Gibbs never got anyone coffee. "Are we in trouble?"

Gibbs gave him a look that was half exasperation and half fond amusement. "McGee, have you ever known me get you coffee when you're in trouble?" he asked.

"No...but...uh..."

"McGee?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"You've never actually got us coffee at all, boss. Ever," Tim pointed out. Gibbs looked thoughtful for a moment.

"Hmmm, I guess you're right, McGee," he said, grinning. He sat down on the sofa and gestured to them to take their seats on the sofa opposite him.

Tim sat down, and Ziva came over and sat beside him. She was being very quiet and very still and that made Tim feel anxious. He was aware that he was sitting all alone in a room with two of the most dangerous tops he'd ever met and that was enough to make him feel even more anxious. He wished Tony was here. No matter how annoying Tony could be, Tim always felt kind of safe around him. Tony knew how to handle tops and that made Tim relax around them too.

Gibbs leaned forward and gazed at them both, a searching kind of gaze that made Tim want to sink into the floor. He'd spent his entire life hoping tops wouldn't notice him and Gibbs was about the scariest top in the world to have notice you.

"So...I saw the footage of what happened on PBX-250," Gibbs said. Tim swallowed, hard.

"And I've spoken to Teyla, and to the jumper pilot who took you through the gate. I thought you did a fine job out there – both of you," he added. Tim looked up, surprised.

"You did, boss?"



“Yes. I'm proud of you.”

“Proud? Of us?” Tim asked, amazed. He had wanted Gibbs to be proud of him since the man had first collared him but he wasn't sure he'd ever done anything impressive enough to warrant it.

“Yes, McGee. Proud. Are you going to question every statement I make?”

“Uh...no, boss,” Tim shook his head hurriedly, and risked a glance at Ziva. She looked even more nervous than he was, and Tim wasn't sure that was physically possible.

“You've both come a long way since I collared you,” Gibbs continued. “Ziva...” he leaned forward and looked her straight in the eye. “You held it together in one of the toughest tests you could have faced. You're the top I always knew you could be.”

“You knew better than I did then,” she replied. “I wasn't sure.”

“You doubted yourself but I always knew that you'd step up to the plate if you had to. And you did.”

Gibbs took a sip of his coffee. “And you, McGee – that was one hell of an ordeal but you kept your wits about you and handled the situation with a cool head. How's the arm?” Gibbs nodded at Tim's bandaged arm.

“It's fine. Much better.” Tim nodded vigorously.

“Good. So...” Gibbs gazed at them both for a long time and Tim wondered if he'd forgotten what he was going to say. Then Gibbs sighed, and shook his head, grinning wryly. “So...I knew this day would come, one day, but it's tough all the same.” He got up and went over to Tim. “Stand up, McGee,” he said.

Tim did as he was told, wondering what the hell was about to happen. Gibbs reached out, and Tim froze as Gibbs's fingers touched his collar.

“You don't need this any more, Tim,” Gibbs told him softly.

“Uh...what?” Tim felt his stomach do several somersaults. “Uh...no, I mean...I'm not ready to...did I do something wrong? Is that why you're going to remove my collar?”

“No, son, you didn't do anything wrong,” Gibbs said quietly, and he patted Tim's cheek affectionately. “But you've grown up a lot since I put this collar on you and I think it's time you took your next step, whatever you decide it should be – and that's up to you.”

He took hold of Tim's head in his hands, and kissed him gently on the forehead.

“Bye, Tim,” he said. “It's been an honour having you wear my collar.” And then he plucked the collar open and removed it. Tim traced his fingertips over the empty space where it had

been, feeling bereft. Then he felt someone's hand slip into his, and he glanced down, to find Ziva looking up at him from where she was sitting on the sofa, her brown eyes warm, and he knew then that he could do this, and that Gibbs was right. It *\*was\** time for him to take the next step.

Gibbs slung the collar onto the table and then turned to Ziva.

"Now you - you were a hard one," he said to her. "I knew Tim was ready to have his collar removed but I wasn't so sure about you until this morning."

"I am ready," she said firmly.

"Yes...I think you are," Gibbs told her, with a smile. "Stand up." She did as ordered, and he put his hands on her shoulders and looked deep into her eyes. Tim wasn't sure what was going on but whatever it was it was something profound. "Ziva, never, ever stop trusting yourself again," he told her. "The darkness - it's always going to be there but you're in charge of it, and if you didn't give into it back on PBX-250 then I don't think you ever will."

"Neither do I," she said softly.

"However..." Tim saw Gibbs's hands tighten on her shoulders. "Remember what I told you that time. You hurt him and I will come after you. Understand?"

"Yes - but it'll never happen," she said. Tim frowned, wondering what this was all about.

"I hope not." Gibbs loosened his grip, and then stroked her dark hair affectionately. "Bye, Ziva," he said. "Thank you for trusting me enough to wear my collar - I know that wasn't an easy decision for a top to make."

"I have learned so much from you," she said. "I will never forget it."

"Hell, I won't let you," Gibbs snorted. He unbuckled the collar around her neck and then slung it onto the table next to the one Tim had worn. "Now...here's the deal. You might not wear my collars but I still own you - as agents. Nothing changes at work - you do your jobs and when I tell you to jump you don't even ask 'how high?' - you just jump. Ziva - I own Tim's ass at work and he'll answer to me, just like in any other chain of command situation. Understood?"

"Yes boss," Ziva sighed.

"Good." Gibbs nodded. Then he reached into his pocket and took out a large, wedge-shaped Atlantean key. "This is for some quarters along the hallway," he said. "They're a bit cosier than these." He glanced around the suite of rooms they'd been occupying for the past few weeks. "But I think that'll suit you." He gave Ziva a knowing grin and Tim wondered what that was about.

"Uh...we're not staying here, boss?" he asked, surprised.

“Nope.” Gibbs shook his head. “We only shared quarters because you were my collared subs and I wanted to keep an eye out for you in this place, so far from home. Now you’re not wearing my collars and the danger has passed. Besides...I think you guys might want some alone time,” he added.

Tim glanced at Ziva and found her glancing back at him, a smile on her lips. He wasn’t sure what to make of that. He and Ziva had been inseparable since she had rescued him but she never did more than touch him gently, and slip into his bed at night so they could hold each other, and he wasn’t sure what she wanted from him, if anything. He knew what he wanted to give to her, but he didn’t know if it was a gift she had any interest in accepting. Gibbs seemed to know though, judging by the amused glance he was throwing Tim’s way.

“Grab your stuff and ship out,” Gibbs said, gesturing to the door. “And make sure I have those reports by the end of tomorrow!” he added, as Tim scrambled for his room to collect his belongings.

“Yes boss!”

Tim gathered up his stuff and then met Ziva out in the living area again. Gibbs was nowhere to be seen. Tim glanced around, and Ziva nodded her head in the direction of the balcony. Gibbs had gone out there and closed the door behind him. He was standing, his elbows resting on the rail, gazing out to sea.

“Should we...uh...” Tim hesitated. Gibbs looked kind of sad and alone.

“No,” Ziva said. “He has said his goodbyes, Tim. I think he just wants us to leave now.”

“Yes...but...” Tim stood there, feeling unsure. His head was saying one thing but his gut was saying something else, and if he’d learned one thing from Gibbs it was to trust his gut. He put his bags down, plucked up all his courage, and walked purposefully over to the balcony. He opened the door, strode out there, and pulled his surprised boss into a clumsy hug.

“Thank you,” he whispered into Gibbs’s ear. “For all of it. For seeing something in me when nobody else did; for protecting me with your collar while I figured it out for myself; for standing up to the Director for me when I screwed up over that thing with my sister. “

He pulled back, wincing inside – he knew Gibbs wasn’t really big on displays of emotion - so he was surprised to find that Gibbs didn’t look uncomfortable or angry. Instead he was smiling, and shaking his head.

“Looks like you finally figured out that you don’t need to be scared of tops,” Gibbs said softly. “But then I’m guessing that any sub with the strength and skill to bring Ziva David down from extreme top-space doesn’t need to be scared any more, do they, McGee?” He ran one thumb along the side of Tim’s face. “Go on – she’s waiting for you. And Tim? Take good care of her.”

“I will,” Tim promised. Then he turned and left – not with an apologetic stumble, but with the firm, purposeful stride of a sub who knew who he was now, and what he wanted.

And what he wanted was standing over by the door, waiting for him.

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“Hey.”

Tony looked up from his two-fingered typing of his report to see Rodney Sheppard standing in the doorway – looking kind of sheepish.

“Hey, Rodney!” he grinned, beckoning the scientist into the room. “Thank god – a distraction from the tedium of report writing.”

Rodney shuffled into the room, came over to the bed, and dumped a bag of some kind of unfamiliar fruit on it.

“Athosian cherries,” he said. “It’s an infirmary thing. Everyone gets Athosian cherries. They’re good.” He proved that point by taking a handful of them and stuffing them into his mouth.

“How’s it going, my friend?” Tony asked, his sharp eyes noticing the bite mark on Rodney’s neck. “Now that – that there – that looks like things have been going well,” he said, with a knowing grin, clicking his fingers and pointing at Rodney’s neck.

Rodney put his hand up to brush the bite mark and laughed. “Yeah. It was that good kind of bad thing that we talked about.”

“Ah yes, I remember those days of the good kind of bad. I think.” Tony sighed. “It’s been a long time.”

Rodney eyed him sympathetically as they both remembered the conversation they’d had when they’d been tied up in that room together. Tony gazed back at Rodney. There was silence. Rodney took another handful of cherries and wouldn’t meet Tony’s eye but Tony had sat through enough of Gibbs’s interrogations to know they all cracked eventually, if you stayed silent for long enough. So Tony waited.

“Um...” Rodney said. “Uh...It’s just...”

Tony narrowed his eyes. “Abby sent you, didn’t she?”

“Yes.” Rodney sat down beside the bed and slumped back in his chair, looking like he’d rather be anywhere else in the universe.

“It’s the collar thing, isn’t it?” Tony sighed.

“Yeah. I told her that someone once took my collar from me, and she told me it happened to her, and now it’s happened to you and she wanted me to...I dunno...do some subby solidarity thing with you to help you get over it.”

Tony made a face.

“I know,” Rodney sighed. “Can I just tell her I talked to you about it, without us having to, you know, actually talk about it?”

“Sounds good to me, my friend,” Tony said, with a nod. “Wow – look at this.” He pulled up a picture on the laptop. “This is from the files we got sent from Earth. Gibbs is making us write up our reports – although how I can be well enough to write a complicated mission report and not be well enough to leave this damn room is beyond me. I swear he even has guards posted on the door.”

“No – he’s got Carson,” Rodney said, making a face. “And that’s even worse. So what have you got there?”

“It’s a picture of Ducky with Randolph Jordan when they were much younger. Some kind of society newspaper report on their wedding and wow – you have to see this.”

Tony turned the laptop around and Rodney gave a little whistle.

“That’s Ducky?”

“I know!” Tony glanced at the picture. “He was *\*hot\** back then, wasn’t he?”

They both stared at the photo. Ducky was in his twenties, with light blond hair, wide blue eyes and an almost ethereally beautiful face. He was a handsome man now, in his mature years, but back then he’d been stunning.

“And as for Jordan...” Tony sighed. “I hate to say it but he was pretty damn hot too.”

“Yeah.” Rodney winced as they both stared at their tormentor. “Bastard.”

Jordan had been tall and imposing but without the muscled bulk he’d acquired later in life. His thick dark hair was swept, mane-like, off his face, and his brown eyes were gazing broodingly at Ducky.

“You know, I think Ducky really was the love of his life,” Tony said. “It was just a really warped kind of love. Seeing this photo kind of makes sense of them as a couple somehow. I was having trouble envisaging Ducky with this guy but now I can see that he and Jordan really did have something going on.”

“They *\*were\** married for twenty or so years,” Rodney pointed out.

“Yeah - and Ducky was clearly a catch,” Tony murmured, gazing at the photo. “He came

from a wealthy family, went to Eton, was beautiful, intelligent...I mean, you can see why Randolph viewed him as a trophy sub, to be shown off to everyone. It must have dented his pride beyond endurance when Gibbs took his collar off him so publically, and put his own on him." He winced. "I'm starting to see why he wanted his revenge - although I could have done without being the medium by which it was enacted."

"Hey - I was just an innocent bystander and I got dragged into it," Rodney muttered. Tony grinned at him.

"Good times, Rodney – good times," he said. Rodney looked outraged for a minute, and then he figured out the DiNozzo humour and grinned back at him. Tony laughed out loud. "Ah, I knew I liked you, Rodney," he said. "You remind me of this guy I was chained to once during an undercover op. His name was Jeffrey, and it was a similar thing – we were thrown together by fate, and we shouldn't have got along but somehow we just clicked. I really liked that guy."

"What happened to him?" Rodney asked.

"I had to kill him," Tony replied, with a regretful sigh. He glanced up to see Rodney's look of horror. "Oh, I like you \*much\* more than I liked him. I mean, he was a criminal murderer type and you...well, you're not, Rodney. You and I can just be friends and I won't have to worry about having to kill you at some point."

"I've never been friends with a sub like you," Rodney said, shaking his head. "Well, to be fair, I don't have many friends at all. But you – you were one of the popular subs in high school, weren't you? I used to watch the subs like you – always the centre of attention, everyone always wanting to be your friend. I bet all the tops chased after you with their tongues hanging out."

"I took whatever was on offer," Tony said, feeling old and tired. "And yes, Rodney – I was popular. I was good at sports, I played the fool in class, got into a lot of trouble, and I slept with any top I wanted. I'm guessing your high school experiences were a little different?"

"Yeah. I never hung out with the cool kids until John started showing an interest in me. Even now, I still wake up sometimes and wonder how it's possible he's with me."

"He is kind of the ultimate cool kid," Tony grinned.

"And you should be the kind of sub he ended up with – not me," Rodney said, shaking his head.

"Nah. I'd drive him insane."

"You ever been with any top you couldn't run rings around?" Rodney asked, in a curious tone. Tony looked up, sharply.

"That's a leading question, Rodney," he said.

"They aren't all like you think, Tony," Rodney told him. "I know you don't have a very high opinion of tops but I've met some amazing tops out here. Elizabeth was...well, you'd have liked her. She was so calm and dignified – she really tried to get things right. And Carson – he's nice too – well, he's okay outside of the infirmary anyway. And John, of course - he's a great top." He smiled, and Tony felt an old, familiar pang of jealousy at the expression in Rodney's eyes.

"It's okay, Rodney – you don't need to convince me. I met Gibbs, remember. I know they're out there. I just want...I want to \*feel\* it, Rodney. The way you feel it with John. I don't want it to be fake any more – I'm tired of having to pretend. With Gibbs it always felt real but I never felt that way with any other top. But...I guess I'll just have to go looking again."

"You won't go back to Gibbs?" Rodney's eyes were wide, and a little scared.

Tony bit on his lip, and then winced as he re-opened the cut Jordan had given him, tasting blood on his tongue.

"I don't think so, Rodney. Five years is long enough to wait, isn't it?" he asked. "I might play the fool but I'm not a complete idiot. I think it's time to move on. Now, let's change the subject because I'm thinking that if someone took your collar off you that John would have gone ballistic."

"Oh, he did." Rodney nodded. "This guy – Kolya – he put his own collar on me so you can imagine how John reacted to that. He went after Kolya and from what I understand he pretty much tore him apart, limb from limb. When he came back to me he was a mess; it took me ages to bring him down and he still has nightmares about it, even now." He was quiet for a moment, and then shook his head ruefully. "Good times, Tony - good times," he said.

They gazed at each other for a moment, and then burst out laughing.

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Ziva opened the door to their new quarters and stepped inside.

"You just need to use the key once," Tim told her. "Then when you've set it like this, it sort of imprints your DNA and opens for you automatically after."

She went over to the sofa and dumped her large bag there, keeping the smaller one over her shoulder, and he followed on behind her, still marvelling at the wonders of Atlantean technology. She turned and watched him talk, wondering how she could ever have not felt like this about him. She loved how tall and broad he was; she loved his expressive hands and his beautiful eyes; she loved his sweetness and essential innocence. He wasn't like the subs she usually took to her bed – in fact he was the polar opposite. He was big and clumsy and endearing, endlessly worried about doing or saying the wrong thing. She was longing to touch him, taste him and be his first but she didn't want to get this wrong. She had to find a

lightness of touch to coax and lead him through his first experience of being topped.

She was also a little nervous. He'd just given up one collar – she had no idea whether he'd want another one so soon.

Tim picked up her bag, still chatting, and glanced around.

"Huh..." he said, taking both their bags over to the bedroom. "There's uh...there's only one bedroom. Is that okay?" He looked at her anxiously.

"Tim, we have barely spent a night apart since we got here," she reminded him.

"I know." He nodded. "But...well..." He coloured. "All we did was sleep," he said.

"Well, we will be sleeping here too," she pointed out.

"Right. Yes." He nodded, and she had to stifle a laugh. Even after all that had gone on, he was still a little unsure of exactly what was happening between them. "Well, I'll unpack the bags then," he said. "Could I...would I have your permission to, uh, unpack your things?"

"I'd like that very much, Tim. Thank you," she said. He looked enormously pleased and she smiled. He might not know what his dynamic was yet but she was pretty sure that she knew.

She got out her laptop and inserted a disk of his favourite music and then turned the lights down low. She opened her smaller bag, took out the candles that Teyla had given her, placed them around the room and then lit them. Outside, the Atlantean sun had just started to drop below the horizon and it was getting dark.

Then, satisfied the room was as she wanted it, Ziva went into the bathroom and changed into the long, cream-coloured satin dress that Teyla had lent her. She didn't possess a single dress of her own but Teyla had told her that she might enjoy getting in touch with the more sensual side of her nature so she was prepared to try it. She chose not to wear any underwear and she liked how sheer the fabric felt as it settled, cool and seductive, against her bare skin. She loosened her hair so that it spread out over her shoulders like a dark cloak, making a fine contrast with the pale satin dress. Then she gazed at her reflection in the mirror, stroking the empty space where her collar had been. She was the top now and she didn't need to wear another top's collar. It felt good to know who she was.

She gave herself one final look and then she picked up the small velvet bag and returned to the living room.

Tim was standing in the centre of the room, looking around at all the candles, a bemused expression on his face.

"Wow, this looks great, Ziva – I didn't exp..." He turned, saw her standing in the bathroom doorway, and his mouth opened - and didn't close again for a good few seconds as he drank in the sight of her. "I didn't..." he whispered. "Uh...I..." He closed his mouth, and then, to her



total surprise, he dropped to his knees and bowed his head.

She walked over, feeling her top-space swelling inside her as she walked. She was powerful and beautiful, serene and in charge. There was no need for sex to be a battleground as it had been for her in the past – it could be slow, gentle and sensuous. She reached him and put her finger under his chin and he looked up at her, an expression of total worship in his eyes.

"Tim...will you be mine?" she asked him softly. "I know you just gave up one collar and it might be too soon for you take another but...would you do me the honour? You see...I want to take you but I would very much like you to be wearing my collar when I do. Is that what you want too?"

He looked as if he could drown in her eyes, and he nodded, his own eyes shining.

"Ziva – I'm yours," he said. "And that's all I ever want to be. If you want me?"

"I do." She leaned down, took his face in hers, and touched her lips to his. He brought his hands up to gently hold onto her hips. His mouth was surprisingly soft and mobile beneath hers, and she worked his lips open and kissed him. He opened up even more, so she could slip her tongue into his mouth and taste him properly, exploring him. He tasted firm, ripe and willing and she found that arousing. She wanted to drive forward, hungrily, and take him hard, but she controlled herself, bringing herself back from that place. That wasn't how this should be done.

She drew back, and gazed down at him. His eyes were still closed, his lips partly open, still wet from their kiss, and his fingers were gently entwined in the fabric of her dress. She opened the velvet bag and took out the collar Kahla had made for her. She loved how soft it was, and how beautifully crafted.

"Tim, look at me when I collar you," she told him. He opened his eyes and gazed at her, blindly, as if he couldn't really believe this was happening to him. "This collar is not just for now," she told him. "It is not just for a few days or a few weeks – it is forever. Are you sure about this?"

"Yes," he whispered, his fingers stroking her hips gently through the satin fabric of her dress. "Please," he added, with a little smile.

She smiled back at him as she opened the collar, and then she wrapped it around his neck and fastened the buckle with shaking fingers. She hadn't realised that she'd feel like this. She had always hoped that she'd one day collar her own submissive but she hadn't known it would fill her with all these emotions. She finished buckling the soft leather collar around his neck, and he knelt there, trembling, never taking his eyes off her.

"I've never done this before," he told her.

"I know," she smiled. "You told me."

"Yes...but...I might be really bad at it," he said, anxiously.

She frowned. "You are mine now, Tim. I only ask for your submission – and how could that be anything other than beautiful to me?"

"I'm scared of screwing up," he admitted.

"That is not possible," she assured him. "Here." She gave him her hand and pulled him to his feet. He always dressed so formally, in shirts and ties and suits, and she longed to get him out of those clothes and see the flesh and blood submissive beneath, but she would take her time. They had time – lots of it.

She ran her hands over his shoulders and eased his jacket from him, then threw it on the sofa. Then she undid his tie, and that followed suit. She opened the top buttons of his shirt while he just stood there, a dazed expression on his face, allowing her to undress him.

"Good...that is good, Tim," she reassured him. As his top, she now had full body rights over him but those were rights she thought she'd assert slowly and gently, so he had time to get used to it. He wasn't a sub like Tony, who had been engaging in play scenes since he was old enough to get an erection and who knew every trick in the book. There was no artifice to Tim. He would need time to get used to the idea that his body now belonged to his top, to use as she wanted, and she didn't want to spook him by grabbing him and claiming her rights too forcefully.

"Let's dance," she said, taking his hand and pulling him close. He came towards her, breathless, his face flushed. She pressed her body against his, enjoying the feel of his hardness straining against his pants. "Learn to hold it for me," she said, teasing him slightly by pushing her hips against his. He gasped, and she smiled and pressed another little kiss to his lips.

"I'll try," he whispered.

"It would please me," she said, and she saw the light in his eyes as he responded to that. "Do you see what your dynamic might be now?" she murmured, moving one hand down to cup his right buttock as they swayed in time to the music.

"I think so," he whispered.

As the top she led the dance, one hand in his, the other firm on his right butt cheek, guiding him as they danced. She moved him around the room and he went where she guided, their bodies slowly attuning to each other as they danced.

"You are a good dancer," she said. Somehow she had expected him to be clumsy, the way he so often was with anything other than computers, but he wasn't. He didn't have much natural rhythm but he could move well.

"I...uh...well my mom made me take dance classes as a teenager," he said.

"She was the top?" Ziva asked, suddenly realising how little she knew about him.

"No, actually – I had two moms but the one who made me take dance classes was the sub. She said a good sub should know how to dance to please their top. I hated it – I felt like I had two left feet and none of the tops in the class ever wanted to dance with me."

"So how did you get to be this good?" she asked, stroking his buttock with her hand.

"It's you," he said, shyly. "I know all the steps – I practised them often enough as a kid – but I was always too nervous to perform them properly when I was dancing with an actual, real-life top back then. With you it's so easy."

She pushed him effortlessly away from her and then brought him back in close and he came towards her easily. She moved faster now, manoeuvring him across the room in time to the music, and she was amazed by how sweetly they moved together. She liked the way their bodies were already adjusting to each other – he was tall and she was slight, but somehow they fitted together. He started to relax, and the more he surrendered to her lead the easier it became. He grinned at her, looking genuinely surprised, and she smiled back, longing to surprise him even more.

The slow music came on and she pulled him close and held him against her body. He was still hard, which pleased her. She wondered how long he could last, especially as he was so inexperienced.

She ran her hands over his body as they danced, and he rested his hands on her hips, and his chin on her shoulder, and she drifted her fingers down his back, over his butt, and back up again.

"In a minute," she whispered. "I am going to ask you to undress. Before I do...do you want to choose a safe word?"

He stiffened in her arms and she held him tight and stroked him some more to calm him.

"Goddess," he said softly. She pushed him away and looked into his eyes. "That's my safe word," he told her.

She smiled up at him and ran her fingers through his short hair. "Yes. Of course it is," she replied.

He went down on his knees again, and then, to her surprise, he kissed her bare feet.

"There's something I'd like to do...if you'll let me," he said, gazing up at her.

"Go ahead. I like being surprised," she said, delighted that he felt relaxed enough to suggest something.

"Would you let me draw you a bath, and bathe you?" He looked embarrassed and hopeful at one and the same time.

"Is this a fantasy of yours?" she asked, loving the way his skin flushed pink in response.

"Yes. I...well, obviously, you don't have to let me...but I'd like to?"

"I would like that too," she said, intrigued. He kissed her feet again, reverently, and then got up eagerly and began walking towards the bathroom. "Not so fast," she said, taking back a degree of control. He turned, looking flustered. She smiled. "First...remove your clothes so I have something good to look at."

He took a deep breath, looking agonised, and she knew how very much he hated tops looking at him.

"You are mine now, Tim," she told him firmly. "Your body is mine. I want to see it."

He nodded, although his eyes were anxious, and then he unbuttoned his shirt, his fingers fumbling the buttons. She hid her smile – she would teach him to do this slowly, so she could enjoy it, but for this first time she'd let him get through it as best he could. He took off his shirt, then his undershirt, and kicked off his shoes and then hopped around the room in an effort to get his socks off. Her jaw tightened as she saw the bandage on his arm but his wound was well on its way to healing and wasn't causing him any trouble.

She relaxed, and enjoyed the sight of him. She liked his body – he wasn't solidly muscled like Tony but she loved the soft little belly and the tiny tuft of hair on his chest. He took another deep breath and then undid his pants, pushed them down his legs, and kicked them off. Then he stood there, naked. His erection was almost flush against his belly, pulsing, and he was sucking his stomach in.

"Stop that," she told him, waving her finger. "Just hold yourself naturally. I like what I see so there is no need to be ashamed, Tim."

He looked shyly pleased about that.

"Turn around – slowly - so I can see all of you," she commanded, and he did as he was told.

She let her gaze wander over his sweet, peachy buttocks and then made him turn again. She liked the smooth curve of his cock, and the length of his legs. He was a fine looking sub, and he was hers. Her gaze was drawn to the collar around his neck which was now all he wore and she felt a surge of pride. She had collared a sub for the first time, and now she was about to take him for the first time, and that aroused her more than she would have thought possible. She could feel her clit pulsing between her legs, and could easily have pushed him down on the sofa and taken him inside her there and then but he had suggested a fantasy and she wanted to give him that.

She gave him permission to draw the bath and he disappeared, eagerly, into the bathroom. She followed, slowly, and when she got there he knelt again at her feet. The water was filling the tub and she could smell the oils he'd put in it. He glanced up at her eagerly.

"Could I...permission to undress you?" he asked, eagerly, and she gave a little laugh at his desire to see her naked. She couldn't blame him – she'd wanted to see him after all.

She nodded, and he touched the hem of her satin dress with shaking fingers, then slowly, gently, began smoothing it up over her body. He remained on his knees, gathering the fabric in his fingers and sliding it upwards. He reached her groin, exposing her pussy, and sighed, sweetly, when he got there. His nose was level with her clit, and she longed to push his face against her and have him serve her with his tongue but it was too soon.

He got to his feet, still clutching the hem of her dress, and she noticed that all his usual clumsiness had disappeared now that he was serving her. Now he seemed relaxed and graceful, as if this was him at his most comfortable. He pulled the dress slowly up over her body, and she reached up her arms so that he could remove it completely. Then she stood there, naked before him for the first time. He got down on his knees and kissed her feet again and then stayed there, abject at her feet.

She loved how powerful this made her feel. She didn't need to overpower him, or bully him into submission, the way she had with so many other subs before him. He offered himself up to her, sweetly and without reservation, and that felt better than anything else. She nudged him with her foot and he looked up at her, his eyes alight with adoration.

"See to the bath," she said, and he did as he was told, turning off the faucets and then returning to her with a ribbon he'd found in the cabinet. She was struck by the care and thought he put into everything as he tied her hair off her face and then took her hand and helped her into the bath. She noticed he was still hard and although she longed to touch him she didn't think it would be fair – he was too inexperienced to hold his erection if she did that, and she wanted him to hold it.

He knelt beside the tub, took a washcloth and immersed it in the warm water, and then squeezed it over her breasts. It felt delicious, and she leaned back and allowed him to do it again. She loved watching him work, his entire being centred on her, on pleasing her, his brow creased in an expression of total concentration.

He trailed his fingers through the warm water, caressing her skin with them, and she shivered, her arousal so strong now that she didn't think she could hold on for much longer. She reached out and pulled him close for a warm, scented kiss, and he moaned softly as she explored his mouth with her tongue.

"Dry me," she ordered when she released him. He helped her out of the bath, and then brought over a warm towel and began patting every inch of her skin with it. She liked how absorbed he was in his work, and how much of himself he put into it. She found his devotion unbelievably erotic, and could hardly believe that this was clumsy, gauche Tim McGee, the virginal probie who was terrified of tops.

When he was done he came to rest at her feet and kissed them again, before curling down, face against the floor, back exposed to her, completely and abjectly submissive before her.

"Follow me," she ordered, turning and leaving the bathroom.

She went into the bedroom, knowing he had obeyed her order and was walking close behind. She considered tying his wrists and ankles to the bed and making him serve her with his hard cock alone but decided that was a game for another day. Today, she wanted to feel his hands on her body, making love to her and worshipping her. She found a tube of lubricant in her toiletry bag, and placed it on the nightstand. His eyes followed her every move and she could feel him tensing again.

"Lie on the bed," she ordered. "I want to explore my collared sub." He shivered at that, as she had hoped he would, but got eagerly onto the bed all the same. "On your front," she said, sitting down beside him.

He turned and lay there, face down. She ran her fingertips over his naked body, enjoying the little red marks they made on his pale skin. She came to the swell of his buttocks and then squeezed out a dollop of lube onto her fingertip and inserted it gently in his body. He clenched and she soothed him, stroking his buttocks with her other hand until he relaxed.

"I would like to plug you," she told him. "Will you take a plug for me, Tim?"

"Yes," he whispered.

"What is your safe word?" she asked.

"Goddess," he told her firmly.

"Remember it. I will go slowly, and I will make you take it, but if you need time to adjust, or you need me to go more slowly, you may ask."

"Thank you," he whispered, knowing as well as she did that it was a kindness on her part. She could just bend him to her will but she had no intention of doing that; she didn't want to frighten him – she wanted to coax and reward him. She played with his opening for a long time, teasing her lubed fingers into the hole and out again, and he gradually opened up, slowly, sweetly, becoming looser and more relaxed beneath her.

"I will fuck you here, another time, with my strap-on," she promised, as she worked. "You will learn to be open for me here, whenever I wish to use you."

"Yes, Ziva," he said obediently, and she smiled; he was so sweetly submissive.

She got the butt plug out of her bag and lubed it thoroughly, and then pressed it against his opening. He trembled, but she could see he was trying to stay open for her. She teased it in and out, just pressing a little, and he relaxed again. Only when he was fully relaxed did she

push it firmly inside him. He gave a startled cry, his fingers scrabbling on the bedclothes, but he didn't use his safe word.

"Good boy." She stroke her fingers over his bottom, calming him. "Does it feel sore?" she asked.

"No...it burned a little as it went in but...I think I'm getting used to it," he replied.

"You will learn to love it," she promised. He didn't seem so sure about that but she was – in fact she suspected he'd have learned to love it before the evening was out.

She straddled his back and trailed kisses down his spine. When she reached his buttocks she played with the plug, pressing on it and moving it, and he whimpered beneath her. He was so beautiful and unreserved in his reactions; everything was new to him, and he shook, trembled and sighed at her every caress.

"Turn over," she ordered, getting off him, and he obeyed, wincing slightly as the new position forced the plug more deeply into his body. "You have permission to touch me," she said, straddling his chest. His hands came up immediately, and gently, sweetly, touched her breasts, tracing soft, tender patterns over them, lingering on the hard points of her nipples, his eyes transfixed. She let him play there for awhile, grinding her clit against his body as it pulsed strongly. His fingers were so careful and worshipful on her breasts and she loved the feel of his solid body beneath her thighs.

Eventually she shifted, moving up and lowering herself over his mouth. His hands came up to trace more of those loving patterns on her ass cheeks, and his tongue darted eagerly upwards to embrace her clit.

Aware of his inexperience she guided him gently, showing him how best to lap inside her to make her clit throb and tingle with pleasure. She didn't hold him down, and she gave him time to adjust and catch his breath as he worked. He was eager to please and a quick learner so before long she was close to orgasm.

"I cannot wait any longer," she told him, wrenching herself away from his warm tongue. "I must have you – now."

He gazed up at her with sex-stupid eyes, and she smiled and kissed his swollen lips, tasting herself on them. Then she drew back and ran her hands and mouth over his body as she worked her way back down to his still hard cock.

"Who do you belong to, Tim McGee?" she asked, as she took it in her hand. He gasped, his body convulsing at her touch.

"You...Ziva...Ziva David," he whimpered, eyes closing. "Oh...please...I don't think I can hold it..."

"You will," she ordered, firmly.

He shuddered, his entire body shaking from the effort but then he opened his eyes and she saw that they were firm with resolve. She straddled him again, and then guided his hard cock into her body, slowly, so very slowly, sinking down onto him until he was fully sheathed inside her. God he felt good! She sat there for a moment, gazing down at her collared sub beneath her. He was blinking, looking dazed, but there was no mistaking the adoration in his eyes as he looked up at her.

She ground her hips down on him and he gasped, clutching at the air with his hands, and she knew that the butt plug she had placed inside him had just triggered every nerve ending in his body. She clenched her muscles tight around his cock and moved her hips up and then down again, in one fluid movement, and he cried out.

"Oh my god...oh please...oh my god..." he yelled, sweat beading his face. There was an expression of total, stunned surprise in his eyes as he gazed up at her, and she knew he had never dreamed it could be this good.

"You're mine...serve me, Tim. Hold on while I ride you," she ordered, rising and sinking, then again, and again. He was a nice size – not too big but hard and thick, and she loved how eagerly he was trying to serve her. "Do not come before I am done with you," she ordered and he whimpered again. "Tim!" she cracked out and his eyes focussed once more, and he nodded.

"Not...before...you...got it," he said, concentrating hard. "I'm yours, Ziva – use me."

She began riding him in earnest, her body pounding with arousal. She ran her fingers over her own breasts, squeezing her nipples gently as she rocked up and down on him. He was gasping, holding on for dear life, and he felt so incredibly good inside her. His hands were resting on her hips and she could see he was concentrating with all his might on not coming so that she could take her pleasure from him. She was turned on by his devotion, by his obvious desire to please, and by the sensation of total power she felt as she rode him.

He was her collared sub and she could do this to him – she could make him quiver with need, and offer himself up to her, without reservation. She relished his submission and rode him harder, feeling that giddy orgasmic sensation start to pulse deep inside her, building slowly towards a crescendo. She locked gazes with him as she rode him, and now they were moving together as one, their bodies keeping rhythm as easily as they had when they had danced earlier.

"Come for me," she cried, as her body exploded in a mass of sensation. She felt her orgasm tingle along every nerve ending in her body and then she was coming, her body pulsing sweetly as he came inside her, crying out as he experienced his first orgasm at the hands of a top.

She stayed where she was, riding out wave after wave of pleasure. She hung there, limp and covered in a fine sheen of sweat, her entire body glowing. He looked dazed but intensely happy as he gazed back up at her, still stroking her hips with gentle sweeps of his fingers.



When she had got her breath back she climbed off his softening cock and lay down on top of him; he wrapped his arms around her and held her tight.

"I love you, Ziva," he whispered fiercely into her hair. "I love you so much."

She kissed his lips, slowly, gently, affectionately, loving the sensation of his naked body beneath her own.

"I love you too, Tim," she told him, glowing at the spike of happiness she saw in his eyes as she said the words.

She curled up beside him, facing him, nestling into him, and he pulled the sheets up around them as the sweat cooled on their bodies. She got a thrill from the scent of his leather collar – the collar \*she\* had placed around his neck - and she liked how he was holding her, the way he always held her at night, as if she was the most precious thing in the world.

"How do you feel about the plug now?" she asked, teasingly. He grinned.

"Amazing," he told her. "I had no idea!"

"I thought you would enjoy it." She ran her hand over his face, and down over his collar. "There are so many more things I want to do to you, Tim; so many more things that I think you will enjoy."

"You've got a lot to teach me," he murmured, kissing her hair.

"And you have a lot to teach me," she replied, remembering the sheer eroticism of that bath. "I want to hear all your fantasies, Tim."

"Mmmm." He nuzzled against her hair, his hands pressed against her skin, and she closed her eyes as they dozed.

She felt a moment's anxiety as she waited for that hollow, empty feeling to take hold of her, the one that she always had after sex – but it didn't come. Tim felt her tension and held her tight, soothing her. She relaxed and snuggled in even closer against his warm, solid body, knowing that now she had him she would never feel that way again.

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"All being well, this is the last time we'll have to do this, Tony," Carson said, unlacing the back of Tony's gown and carefully removing one of the dressings on his shoulder.

Tony glanced sideways at Gibbs, who was leaning against the wall, sipping a cup of coffee. Technically speaking, Gibbs didn't have a right to be here during Tony's medical exam because Tony wasn't wearing his collar any more, but Tony knew that neither he nor Carson was brave enough to point that out to him.

"Looking good," Carson said, moving onto the next dressing. "No more dressings required, Tony – it's all healing up nicely."

"Does that mean I can go home now?" Tony asked. "Because everyone else is getting R&R on Atlantis and all I'm seeing is the inside of your infirmary."

"And what is wrong with the inside of my infirmary, laddie?" Carson asked dangerously.

"Well, for starters, it's boring," Tony replied, and then he gave a high pitched squeak as Carson ripped off the next dressing a bit too enthusiastically. Gibbs grinned and took another sip of his coffee. Tony made a face at him. "And also, I'm fine now. I'm really fine. I'm well. I can be allowed to get up, and move around, and do stuff."

"I agree," Carson said.

"I can be allowed to actually walk places instead of being pushed in a chair and...what did you say?" Tony turned his head and glanced over his shoulder. Carson smiled at him.

"I said yes," Carson replied. "I already agreed with Gibbs that you can go for a walk around the city after I'm done here. But for no longer than an hour, no further than the south pier, and you don't go alone – Gibbs goes with you," Carson added firmly.

Tony didn't care about any of those restrictions – he was finally being allowed out.

"Ah yes," Carson said, having removed all the dressings. "You're going to be fine, son – which, I might add, is testament to the excellent care you've received." He beamed around the room happily, obviously pleased with himself. "Don't roll your eyes like that at me, Tony – there was a time or two back there when we might have lost you."

"Nah. Never would've happened." Tony shook his head. "Tell him, boss." He glanced at Gibbs over Carson's shoulder. Gibbs shrugged.

"I didn't give him permission to die, Doc," he said.

"So I didn't," Tony added. "Like a good little sub." He sat up and Carson helped him into a bathrobe, and then he slipped off the bed and over to the door, and waited for Gibbs, impatiently.

Gibbs took his time, sipping his coffee, and Tony stood there, glowering at him, aware of the conditions of his walk. Trust Gibbs to be all toppy about it and make him wait. He found himself hopping from one foot to the other, impatient to get going, and he could tell Gibbs was toying with him, sipping slowly on purpose.

"Gibbs!" he said at last, unable to bear it.

"Tony?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. Tony glowered at him.

Finally, Gibbs finished his coffee, set the cup down on the table, and joined him by the door, an amused little smile curving at his lips.

It felt great to be out walking around again; they walked down to the south pier and Tony leaned against the railing, looking up and relishing the feel of the sun on his face.

He saw Abby, a long way off on the east pier with Colonel Lorne and a bunch of his marines, and she waved at them excitedly, and then signed something with extravagantly large hand movements.

"She says 'hi' and she hopes you're not driving Carson completely insane," Gibbs translated, signing back at her.

"Hah, the other way around more like," Tony muttered. "So, how did you learn how to sign, boss?"

He'd asked before, several times, and Gibbs had either ignored or sidestepped the question, so he wasn't actually expecting a reply this time around; he was therefore surprised when one was forthcoming.

"I was deaf once," Gibbs said.

"What? When?" Tony turned, startled.

"When I was a kid, DiNozzo," Gibbs said, with a hint of exasperation in his voice, like it wasn't any big deal. "I was ten, and I used to sneak onto military land nearby and go watch the Marines blow things up on training exercises. Once I got too close and busted my eardrums. They didn't think I'd ever get my hearing back so I learned how to sign."

"But then you got your hearing back?"

"Obviously. I can see why we made you an agent, DiNozzo."

"Oh...wait a minute. Wait just a damn minute..." Tony held up his hand, the penny dropping. "You can't just sign – you can lip-read too! That explains everything – like, how you always know what we're talking about when you're nowhere near. I thought that was just some creepy toppy power you had, but no, you can lip-read, can't you?"

"Yes, DiNozzo, I can lip-read," Gibbs grinned. "Which came in damn useful when I was a sniper in the Marines. It's also pretty helpful dealing with smart-mouthed agents who think I'm out of earshot."

"How long were you deaf for, boss?" Tony asked, intrigued.

"Just over a year." Gibbs shrugged. "My dads were great about it – we all learned to sign, and I learned to lip-read pretty well. Then I just recovered my hearing almost overnight. That year of silence made me really aware of body language – it taught me how to see

things, to really observe things, in a way I never would have done otherwise. I learned to really concentrate, and be aware of what I could see, touch and smell, in a way I never would have done otherwise. It completely changed the way I view the world."

"And it explains why you never miss a thing,"

"When you can't hear someone creeping up behind you, you have to really develop your peripheral vision," Gibbs said. "I never lost that awareness of where people are standing in relation to me."

"Nobody ever sneaks up on you by surprise," Tony grinned.

"Nope." Gibbs rested his arms on the rail, and gazed out at the ocean.

"So you had two dads?" Tony decided to risk a personal question while they were on a roll. He'd learned more about Gibbs in the past few days than he had in all of the last five years.

"Yeah." Gibbs nodded.

"I'm guessing one or both of them were in the military," Tony hazarded. Gibbs grinned at him sideways.

"You guess right, Tony. One was a Marine and the other was Air Force – both of 'em fought in WW2. Later on, after they had me, they bought a store and ran it together."

"Which one was the biological?" Tony asked.

"The one who taught me carpentry," Gibbs replied, side-stepping the question with a chuckle. "He wasn't a great storekeeper but he used the garage to make some fantastic pieces of furniture – they sold pretty well in the town."

"They proud you joined the Marines?"

"Hell no! I ran off to join up as soon as I was old enough. When dad found out he slapped the back of my head so hard I thought I'd go deaf again. Working wood gave him these really hard, flat palms – used to hurt like hell when he spanked me."

"Yeah, well, I know how that feels," Tony muttered under his breath. "So why didn't they want you to be a Marine?"

"Too young – and they knew how hard the military life could be - but it was all I ever wanted to be," Gibbs shrugged.

"I bet you were a tough little kid to raise," Tony commented.

"How do you draw that conclusion, DiNozzo?" Gibbs said, sounding half amused and half outraged.

"You snuck out to go watch the Marines blow things up on their weapons test site when you were ten, and then you snuck off to go join the Marines and that's just the two things you've told me about," Tony grinned. "I rest my case. You were a stubborn little brat weren't you?"

"Maybe I was a little headstrong," Gibbs conceded. Tony rolled his eyes because calling Gibbs a little headstrong was like calling a Shinzoic Grand Master a control freak.

Gibbs seemed to be in a good mood, so Tony decided to risk asking him for something.

"Boss, I'm feeling better – couldn't you ask Carson to sign me out of the infirmary now?"

It felt so good to be out here, in the fresh air; he wanted to feel that he was over this and could put the entire thing behind him, instead of feeling like some feeble invalid who needed babysitting the whole time.

"Nope." Gibbs shook his head.

"Oh come on, boss. You could out-top him," Tony grinned, deciding that flattery was the best way of getting what he wanted. Besides, Gibbs could out-top anyone.

"You want me to out-top Dr Beckett in his own infirmary?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"You could do it," Tony said encouragingly. Gibbs gave one of those dry grins.

"Yes, I could, but I'm not going to," he replied.

"Boss...you said that after Carson signed me out then we'd talk about my collar," Tony said quietly, dropping the act now because this was what he really wanted to discuss.

"I did, yes." Gibbs nodded.

"Well I'm fine, so we could talk about it now," Tony said. This had been eating away at him, and he needed to find out where Gibbs stood on the subject. Did his boss intend to collar him again? Until Tony knew, he wasn't sure what his response would be, and he felt like he was in limbo while it was still undecided. If Gibbs DID intend to collar him again would he even have the strength to turn him down?

"You miss it that much?" Gibbs asked.

"Honestly? Yes," Tony said. "I didn't think I would but I do." Which didn't mean he'd accept it back again but it was the truth; he DID miss it. "I'm not saying I miss everything that went with it," Tony added. "Like having my ass spanked every day – I'm just saying I miss the damn thing being around my neck and what that meant. Like earlier, when you were in the room when my dressings were being changed – you still act like you're my top, but I don't know if you are any more."

"Tony – stop fretting about it," Gibbs told him firmly. "I told you I'd talk to you about it when you're better and I promise you that I will but that's not now. A few days ago you were nearly dead, and there's time enough to deal with your collar when Carson discharges you."

"Gibbs..." Tony began.

"DiNozzo!" Gibbs snapped. Tony glared at him, feeling all his pent-up frustrations rising to the surface. Gibbs took a deep breath. "Tony," he said, in a softer tone. "Did you ever wonder why I spanked you every day?"

"Yes. All the damn time," Tony answered emphatically.

"How did it make you feel?" Gibbs asked. "Did it make you angry?"

Tony paused, considering that. He wanted to say 'yes' but he knew that wasn't true. "No," he admitted at last. "It...kind of made me feel warm inside – as if I belonged somewhere, or to someone; as if someone was looking out for me, keeping me grounded - which isn't to say that I liked it."

"But you didn't like it when I missed a day, either, did you?" Gibbs said.

"No." Tony shook his head. "Although I really hated it when you'd call me over to your place on the weekends just to deliver one swat; seemed to me like you did that just because you could - just to remind me who owned me."

Gibbs turned to look him straight in the eye. "Tony, did your father ever spank you when he was drunk?" he asked.

"Gibbs, he never spanked me when he was sober," Tony replied.

Gibbs made a little movement of his head, the way he always did when he was angry, which he was right now but not with him, Tony thought.

"Yeah. That's what I figured," Gibbs said softly.

"Thing is, he was often so drunk I could have stood up and walked out of there and he'd never have known the next day," Tony said, gazing out at the ocean. "But I didn't. I stayed and let him whack me with his strap."

"So why did you stay?" Gibbs asked.

"Because I wanted it to mean something," Tony sighed. "It never did but even as a kid I was a sub to my bones, Gibbs, and I wanted to believe in him. I wanted him to be more than he was. I wanted to trust him and I wanted him to care about what I did and why I did it. I wanted the connection. Whacking me while drunk was the closest he ever came to that. When he was sober he just ignored me, like I wasn't worth the effort. He used to

communicate with me via these little notes he left around our hotel suite.”

“And when he was sober he sent you away to boarding school,” Gibbs murmured.

“Yeah. To be fair, I was kind of a pain to have around,” Tony said.

“Well, I’ve stood having you around for five years.”

“Which is strange because I never took you for a patient man, Gibbs,” Tony commented. Gibbs delivered a highly predictable slap to the back of his head.

“I can be, Tony,” he said. “Now do you see why I spanked you every day?”

Tony frowned. “Uh...no,” he said.

Gibbs grinned. “I think you do, Tony. Now come on – let’s get you back to Carson.”

"Hey, did you know that Ducky was hot when he was younger?" Tony asked, as they walked back. He was surprised by how tired he felt. Maybe Carson was right – he wasn't all better yet.

"I think he's still pretty hot," Gibbs replied. Tony glanced at him sideways.

"Did you and he ever...?" he began, with a suggestive waggle of his eyebrows, and then he ducked, instinctively, as Gibbs's hand connected again with the back of his head.

"Don't go there, Tony," Gibbs warned.

Tony grinned. Now *\*this\** was starting to feel more like old times.

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Gibbs wandered around the Athosian marketplace aimlessly. He wasn’t someone who enjoyed shopping but this wasn’t exactly like a trip to the local mall and he had thought it might be a damn sight more interesting.

Athosians usually bartered their goods but they liked Earth gold so Gibbs had bought some from the Atlantean quartermaster in case he saw anything he liked. It would be nice to take home a souvenir of some kind from the Pegasus galaxy.

General Sheppard had ferried him over to the mainland personally – as it was market day, a few offworlders had come through the gate so there was a lot of ferrying going on.

“That’s life in Pegasus,” Sheppard grinned at him as they landed at the Athosian settlement. “Part taxi-driving, part risking life and limb on a daily basis.”

The Athosians mainly sold hand crafted goods – Gibbs picked his way around some stalls

piled high with Athosian-style clothing, mostly made of animal hides. Then he moved on to a stall of weaponry.

“Athosian knives are pretty damn good,” Sheppard told him, coming up behind him. He pointed at one with a plain wooden handle and a gleaming, serrated edge. “Nothing fancy – their knives are for killing, not for show. I’m heading off to meet Rodney – see you at the food tent in about an hour?”

Gibbs nodded, and continued browsing. He liked the knives he had, so he wasn’t tempted. He moved on, and saw Colonel Lorne coming out of a tent nearby. Abby wasn’t with him – Gibbs looked around to see if she was close by.

“She’s visiting Tony,” Lorne told him, before he could say anything. “She was here earlier – she left with Lieutenant Hansen so she’s fine. And she just radioed to say she’s reached the infirmary.”

“Just as long as she’s safe,” Gibbs murmured, grinning slightly because it was clear that Lorne remembered each and every single one of the conditions for dating Abby that he’d imposed on the man.

Lorne was holding a little parcel in his hands and he slipped it quietly into his pocket. Gibbs raised an eyebrow but Lorne didn’t offer an explanation; Gibbs decided that he wasn’t owed one.

“What’s this tent?” he asked.

“Jewellery – they’ve got some nice stuff,” Lorne said, gesturing with his head. “Go take a look.”

Gibbs decided to do just that. He slipped inside the tent and was surprised to see some extremely intricate work on display. The clothing and weaponry had been so rough and ready that he’d expected more of the same. There was body jewellery, piercing jewels, bracelets, collars, cock rings, harnesses, necklaces – all beautifully crafted. His eye was drawn to a necklace, made of an unusual red gold, and he pointed at it. The Athosian stallholder came over.

“That is Athosian gold,” he said. “We used to mine it on our homeworld, before we were forced to flee. Now it is very rare, and thus expensive.”

“And this?” Gibbs pointed to a shiny, more silvery looking chain.

“That is Atlantean gold,” the man told him. “We mine it here – neither form of gold will tarnish, and both are beautiful and strong, but Atlantean gold is hard to mine – and therefore just as expensive as the Athosian gold, I fear.” He gave an apologetic smile.

Gibbs looked at the man sharply, trying to decide if he was being hustled, but years of experience interrogating people, combined with his own gut, told him the man was telling



the truth. He fingered the gold chains speculatively, allowing himself to fantasise for a moment, and then pulled himself together, shaking his head.

“I will be here, if you change your mind,” the Athosian told him.

Gibbs joined Rodney and John at the food tent half an hour later. They were already there, seated with an enormous plate of food in front of them.

“What is it with perpetually hungry subs?” Gibbs asked, sitting down with them. “DiNozzo eats enough for three people too.”

Rodney paused in mid-chew. “We get so much exercise seeing to the needs of our perpetually demanding tops that we need lots of food?” he hazarded around his mouthful of food. Gibbs snorted.

“You ate like this before I collared you,” John pointed out, holding out a heaped fork of food for Rodney to take another mouthful. “How’s Tony doing?” John asked, looking up at Gibbs.

“Good. Carson says he can return to quarters the day after tomorrow,” Gibbs replied.

“Thank god!” Rodney sighed. Gibbs raised an eyebrow. “Uh...it’s just, he’s driving everyone insane being cooped up in there. He called me on my radio seven times last night when I was working in the lab.”

“He reminds me of you. I’m surprised Carson doesn’t keep you both permanently sedated while you’re recuperating,” John told him, holding out another forkful of food which Rodney gobbled up happily.

“Oh, please! Last time you were in the infirmary Carson practically had a nervous breakdown,” Rodney told him.

John grinned at him fondly, and Rodney grinned back. There was something so easy and joyful about their banter that even Gibbs couldn’t help but be affected by it. It was rare to see a top and sub so completely and perfectly in tune. Gibbs had a feel for dynamic, in himself and everyone around him, and he didn’t think he’d ever met a pair better suited to each other. Sure they had hiccups along the way, like everyone, but they were solid to the core.

“Tony radioed you seven times?” Gibbs frowned. “What the hell did he want?”

“Uh...” Rodney flushed wildly and gazed helplessly at John.

“Answer the man, Rodney,” John urged, with a look that said he was enjoying watching his sub squirm.

Rodney looked as if he’d prefer the ground to open up and swallow him whole. Gibbs gazed at him steadily and expressionlessly – it was his favourite interrogation technique and

Rodney Sheppard was hardly a difficult person to break. The silence only lasted about ten seconds before Rodney caved.

“Well...uh...he wanted me to go and spring him out of the infirmary,” Rodney muttered.

Gibbs laughed out loud. “And what did you say?” he asked.

“That I wanted to live, and pissing off the three toppest tops on Atlantis – you, John and Carson - was not a good way to go about it,” Rodney said with a grimace.

“And he called back six times?” Gibbs grinned. “DiNozzo is nothing if not persistent!”

Rodney took another bite of food from the fork John was offering, and gazed at Gibbs speculatively.

“You know,” he began, still chewing. “You’re not what I thought you’d be when you arrived.”

Gibbs raised an eyebrow. “And how’s that?”

“Well...I thought you’d be into leash etiquette and Shinzoic obedience rituals and all that stuff but you’re not.”

“You thought I was into all that Shinzoic shit?” Gibbs frowned. “Why the hell would you think that?”

“I dunno. Just because you had five leashed subs and they all walked to heel like they were in tune with you.” Rodney wrinkled up his face. “Usually that’s something you only see in the show ring.”

“They walk to heel because they learned the hard way that I don’t stop for ‘em,” Gibbs replied with a gruff laugh. “I don’t have a lot of time for the Shinzoic principles. If a sub and top have something good going on then they just move the way they should – no need to make it into some kind of hard study.”

“Exactly,” John agreed. “Rodney and I spent part of our honeymoon in a Shinzoic retreat,” he confided.

“It was terrible,” Rodney said mournfully.

“Well you wanted to go,” John reminded him.

“I know. I thought it’d be hot but it was the most boring thing I’ve ever done,” Rodney confided. “Those people study for years just to become two halves of the same apple or something like that - two sides of the same coin, the two sides of the moon – whatever. ‘Sub and top moving in perfect harmony, each a working part of the same well-oiled machine’,” he quoted. “Terrible,” he added again, shaking his head.

Gibbs laughed out loud. "I could have told you that. Being a top is instinctive – and I presume being a sub is the same for you, Rodney. Nobody has to teach you – if there's anything to learn it's to listen to your gut and be who you are, and never, ever let anyone tell you to be anything else."

"Agreed." John nodded, a grin tugging at the corners of his lips. "I knew there was a reason you and I get along, Gibbs." Gibbs grinned back at him.

"Likewise, General," he said, meaning it. John Sheppard was one of the finest men and best tops he'd ever come across – and he owed him for helping him rescue Tony.

It was dark by the time Gibbs returned to his quarters. He didn't expect anyone to be there as Ducky and Abby were both spending their free time with Woolsey and Lorne respectively so he was surprised, when he turned on the light, to find Abby curled up in the corner of the lounge, staring out of the window.

"Everything okay, Abs?" he asked, cautiously, feeling his gut tighten. If Lorne had done anything to upset Abby he'd go and rip the man's throat out.

"No," she said, the sound muffled because she had buried her face in her knees as she spoke. "Gibbs...I'm sorry." She glanced up, and he saw immediately what she was sorry about. There was an empty space around her neck where her collar had been, and she was holding it loosely in her hand.

"Oh," he said, feeling a little winded. "Well...it had to happen one day," he told her, going over to sit down beside her on the floor. He put his arm around her and waited.

"I know," she said at last. "But I didn't realise it would be this painful."

"You sure about this?" he said. "Because this time, if you give it back to me, you can never have it back again."

She glanced up at him, her eyes steady if a little anxious. "I am sure," she said. "Although it kind of scares me that I'm so sure."

He kissed the top of her head, and held her close.

"Lorne?" he asked.

"He's special, Gibbs," she replied. "And it's not fair on him to wear another top's collar any longer. He's been patient, and he hasn't asked me to do this but...the thing is, I want to do it."

"Fair enough." He kissed her again.

"I want you to know that I am so, so grateful to you for letting me wear your collar all this

time.”

“It’s been my pleasure,” he told her, sincerely.

“Are you sure you’re not upset?” she asked. “Only, I know Tim and Ziva have their own thing going on now, and Jordan took Tony’s collar off him and I’m not sure you intend to put it back, so that just leaves Ducky and...are you going to be lonely, Gibbs?”

He laughed again. “Oh, I’m a big boy, Abby – I’ll cope.”

“That’s what Tony said you’d say!” she exclaimed.

“You talked to Tony about this?”

“Yeah. Tony can be really cool when he’s not, you know, pretending to be an idiot,” she said.

“Yeah. I know.” Gibbs nodded. “And he’s right. I’ll be fine.”

“He said you never intended to keep any of us forever, and I remember you let Stan go, and then Ziva and Tim. You even let Tony go, which, I’m sorry, is just wrong on so many levels...but anyway...I just figured it was my time.”

“Lorne works about as far from NCIS as it’s possible to get,” Gibbs pointed out to her. “And I will not lose my forensics expert as well as my sub.”

“I don’t want to leave NCIS – you’re my family...but I can’t promise anything right now. I have to give this a chance, don’t I?”

“Yes, yes you do,” Gibbs agreed. “And Lorne’s a good top, Abby. I like him. If I have to lose you to anyone he’s about as good as it gets.”

“Thank you, Gibbs.” She turned towards him, and he caught hold of her chin and kissed her on the lips one last time. She threw her arms around him and held him tight, and then pulled back, pressing the collar into his hand. He got to his feet and pulled her up.

“Your ass still belongs to me at work,” he reminded her.

She grinned. “I wouldn’t have it any other way, bossman!”

“Bye Abby,” he said softly.

“Bye Gibbs,” she replied, her eyes gleaming as she blinked back the tears.

He watched her as she walked over to the door. She was almost there when she turned and ran back, almost knocking him over with the force of her hug.

“Promise me that you’ll collar Tony again,” she whispered fiercely in his ear.

“Can’t make that promise, Abby. You see, he doesn’t need my collar any more either.”

She slapped the back of his head, startling him, and he put up his hand to rub the sore spot.

“What was that for?” he asked.

“That, is because you are wrong, Gibbs!” she said. “First time for everything,” she added slyly.

“Go!” he ordered, laughing softly. “And Abby – thank \*you\*. It was an honour to have you wear my collar.”

She smiled, raised her hand in a little wave, and then she was gone.

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Abby went to Lorne’s quarters, feeling scared but excited. It was like starting a new life – she had no idea where it would lead her but it felt exhilarating all the same.

Lorne had keyed his door pad to allow her to enter, so she did just that. Now that she was here she felt apprehensive. Supposing he didn’t like her as much as she thought he did? Supposing he actually liked the safety of knowing she was another top’s collared sub? Maybe she hadn’t thought this through enough...

She had worked herself up into a frenzy of over-thinking by the time she heard him at the door.

“Hey!” he grinned as he entered. He was dressed casually, in a stripy navy blue shirt and a pair of jeans. She liked the way he dressed; he wasn’t one of those tops who had to parade around in some heavy leather outfit to make him feel big. “You okay?” he asked, seeing her face.

She got up, slowly, and stood there.

“So...I did something, and I’m not sure how you’ll feel about it...and maybe I should have talked to you about it first but it felt like something I had to decide for myself...and I know I’ve only known you for a few weeks but it feels like longer, and, see, I don’t feel like this is one of those short-term flings but on the other hand, maybe that’s what you feel, and I guess I should have thought about that before I...”

She stopped as she realised he was staring at her neck, his eyes shining. Then he crossed the room at a run and swung her up in his arms.

“So I didn’t do a bad thing?” she said, as he kissed her bare throat over and over again.

“Not a bad thing, Abs,” he said huskily, between kisses. “Not a bad thing at all. Uh...was

Gibbs okay about it? He's not going to come down here and kill me with his bare hands or anything, is he?"

"You see, I have no idea why everyone is so scared of Gibbs!" Abby said. "He's a really sweet man."

Lorne laughed. "Abby – if you had been there when he was interviewing me to see if I was good enough to date you then you'd have some idea of why I have a healthy respect for the guy. Also, I'm guessing you are the only person – ever – who has described him as 'sweet'."

"Well, he's always been sweet to me," Abby said. "Okay, sometimes I can see that he can be a little scary but mainly he's just misunderstood."

"Okaaay," Lorne said, in a tone that suggested he didn't believe that for an instant. He ran his fingers over the empty space on her neck, smiling at her. "Abby, what did you have in mind?" he asked. "I mean, I know how \*I\* feel, but how about you?"

"I don't want to leave NCIS because I love my job and I love those guys but I will - for you," she said. "I've been thinking about it – Rodney could probably use another scientist – I have no idea why so many of them leave but he really needs more help in there. I could apply for a job here – that way we could be together."

"First Gibbs, now Rodney – you really do have a unique view of people, Abs," Lorne grinned. "And I love you for it. Although I think even you might find Rodney a hard boss to work for."

"I would not!" Abby protested.

"Perhaps not – you clearly have the ability to work for difficult bosses," Lorne grinned. "But...no, I don't think that's the right solution, Abby."

"You don't?" Abby grimaced. "You think I'm moving too fast, don't you? I didn't mean to imply I'd move in with you, or make you feel you have to collar me or anything. I just thought..."

"Ssh." He put a finger over her mouth. "How about this instead?" he suggested. "I'm owed about three months' leave. I've been out in Pegasus for years and I've barely had any time back on Earth. Why don't I take those three months? I'll need to ask Sheppard but I'm pretty sure he'll agree. Then...if it's worked out between us and you still want me after that time then I'll request a permanent transfer to Earth, so you can still work at NCIS."

"You'd give up the Pegasus galaxy for me?" Abby asked. "Really? But it's so cool out here!"

"Yeah, but I've been thinking about Earth a lot lately. My mom is getting older and I know she worries about not seeing me very often. Don't get me wrong – I love it out here – but I figure there's plenty of excitement to be had back home, especially if I have a reason to go back there."

“I love you,” she told him. “Is it too soon to say that?”

“No.” He wrapped his arms around her and held her hands behind her back, the way she loved, making her feel restrained and safe at one and the same time. “It’s not too soon at all.” He kissed her, and she sighed and pressed herself up against him. Then he released her, and stepped back.

“Hey,” she pouted. “I thought we could...” she glanced at the bed.

“Oh no.” Lorne shook his head. “I have plans for tonight. Come here.” He held out his hand and she took it, and then he led her out of the room.

“Where are we going?” she asked, intrigued.

“Well...you told me, specifically, that it should never be boring,” he told her, a gleam in his eyes. “So I’m doing my best to make sure it never is.” Something about the way he was smiling told her that he loved arranging surprises, and that suited her just fine.

He led her down to the jumper bay and they got into a jumper; he closed the hatch, and pulled her in for another kiss.

“Undress,” he told her throatily when he released her.

“Ooh, kinky,” she said, unbuttoning her blouse. He grinned at her over his shoulder as he took control of the jumper. “Sex on a spaceship – I’ve never done \*that\* before.”

“You won’t be doing it tonight either,” he said. “I have something else in mind.”

She finished undressing and stood there, completely naked, as he piloted the jumper out over the ocean. He threw her something black.

“Put it on,” he ordered as she caught it.

“A blindfold? Hmmm...I like the way this is going.” She slipped the blindfold over her eyes and then stood beside him. “So...this feels weird,” she said. It did – standing stark naked save for a blindfold, while he flew the ship. There was something exciting about it and she could feel herself getting turned on.

He landed the ship smoothly a few seconds later and she wondered where they were and what he had planned. She heard him move around the jumper, gathering up things, and then she felt his warm hand in hers.

“Come with me,” he whispered in her ear, and he sounded more than a little dangerous. She shivered, remembering the night she’d first met him, and how he had turned her on with just some flirting, wordplay and the touch of his hand on her wrist. He seemed to understand her instinctively.

He led her towards the ramp and she felt the warm night air on her naked skin.

“I’m not...you’re not taking me anywhere public are you?” she asked, uncertainly. He squeezed her hand.

“Trust me,” he said, and she did – implicitly. He led her slowly out of the jumper, and she felt grass under her bare feet. The night was warm, and a balmy breeze caressed her skin. She liked how it felt – her naked and vulnerable behind the blindfold, while he was fully clothed and in charge. All she had to do was give herself up to whatever he had planned and she was happy to do that.

They walked a short distance and then he stopped, and she heard him moving around again. Finally he returned, and placed a hand on her shoulder.

“Okay...I’m going to remove the blindfold now,” he told her. “Keep your eyes closed.” She did as she was told, and felt him remove the blindfold. “Open them,” he whispered in her ear.

She did so, and gazed around. They were on the cliff-top above Collar Bay, and she was standing by a blanket. Over to one side was a little fire, and all around the blanket were dotted dozens of candles in little jars. She noticed the stakes that had been hammered into the ground around the blanket and her stomach did a little flip in anticipation, wondering what he had planned for her.

“Evan...this is so beautiful!” she said.

“It’s the exact spot where we first met,” he told her.

He stood behind her, and ran his hands down her bare arms. She shivered and melted back against him, loving the feel of his denim jeans against her naked buttocks. He slid his hands over her breasts, cupping them, and teased her nipples into little points with his fingers. She gasped at the sensation flooding through her breasts, and he kissed her neck.

“It’s also the place where I’d like, with your permission, to pierce these,” he said, tweaking her nipples gently as he spoke. She felt a thrill of excitement run through her.

“You want to pierce me?” she asked, excitedly.

“If you’ll let me have that honour,” he said, rubbing her nipples insistently with his fingertips. If she had been his collared sub he wouldn’t have had to ask permission – he could have just gone ahead and done it - but she wasn’t collared – yet. She liked how nicely he was asking, full of respect.

She turned in his arms and kissed him, hard, on the mouth.

“I’ll take that as a yes then,” he said, when she was done. She looked at him, feeling a little dazed.



“Gibbs always said to wait for someone who’d make it special,” she whispered.

“Am I special enough?” he asked, one eyebrow arched.

“Oh hell yes!”

“It’ll hurt but I’ll make it good if you trust me.”

“I do trust you – and I like a little bit of pain,” she told him mischievously.

He laughed, and then that dangerous look was back in his eyes. She remembered the stranger she’d met out here a few weeks ago, and how he had painted a delicious little scenario in her mind. Lorne was an imaginative top but he was also responsible and very skilled. She had no hesitation at all about surrendering herself to him, totally and completely.

“Come here then.” He took hold of her hand and led her onto the blanket, then sat her down. She liked the way the fire felt, warming her skin. It was a warm night so she wasn’t cold but it was nice to feel the heat of the flames on her naked body. “I don’t want you to look – I want you to feel,” he whispered, placing the blindfold over her eyes again.

Now there was just her naked body, exposed on the cliff-top, the breeze tickling her, and his voice, deep and dangerous, anchoring her. He took her hands and bound her wrists with rope. She loved that he used rope – she had no objection to cuffs, and they were certainly more comfortable, but she loved that he knew how to tie a sub so expertly.

Then he took her bound wrists and pulled them over her head, making her lie flat on the blanket. She felt them loop the rope into one of the stakes, securing her there.

“I’m going to tie you tightly,” he told her, his breath teasing her skin as he spoke. He sounded so calm, and so utterly implacable and in control that her clit began to pound with excitement. “I don’t want you moving when I pierce you. I want you still - so I’m going to tie you tighter than usual.”

She moaned, softly; she loved the combined promise and threat in his words. She adored being tied and loved the idea of being completely immobile when he pierced her.

She felt his rope on her body, criss-crossing her skin, and she knew it would leave those beautiful little red marks that she loved seeing after he released her. She wished they wouldn’t fade so soon.

“You’re mine now, Abby,” he murmured as he worked. “And I’m going to place my permanent marks on your body. I’m going to pierce you, and that will show you – and everyone else - who you belong to.” He kissed her throat as he said that, on the exact spot where her collar had once been, and she knew how much this meant to him. She was his now – she didn’t belong to Gibbs any more, and Lorne was going to make his mark on her,

printing it indelibly in her skin where it could never be removed.

She wriggled in anticipation, and then squealed as he slapped her thigh.

“Be still, submissive,” he hissed, dangerously, in her ear. She thought she might come there and then but he hadn’t given her permission so she tried her best to relax and do as he had ordered. She imagined that if she could see them his eyes would be laughing at her but she liked that she was blindfolded – it made the scene more intense.

He tied her as tightly as he’d promised, ropes digging into her bare flesh, each of them making her aware of their presence. He pulled her legs wide apart and attached them to the stakes he had placed in the ground until she was completely immobile, unable to move a muscle.

She heard him open something. She wished that she could see what he was going to pierce her with, and then it occurred to her that he must have bought some body jewellery and she wondered what her new decorations would look like.

“You’re so beautiful...and you’re mine,” he whispered, undoing her pigtails so that her hair flowed loosely. He kissed her mouth, and she moaned and opened up to him, but he didn’t linger. He trailed wet kisses down her neck, and then, without warning, she felt his warm mouth on her right nipple, sucking hard. She cried out but she couldn’t move, and it felt so delicious to be bound this tight while he toyed with her.

He moved onto the other nipple, sucking that too, and then slid his hand between her open legs and rubbed her clit. It was already pounding like it was going to explode but it was too soon, and she knew she had to hold on for him.

“Later,” he warned, and she moaned by way of reply.

She felt something cool on her nipples and smelled something medicinal, so she guessed he was using some kind of antiseptic. She shivered. She was about to be pierced. She knew it would hurt, but she loved the idea of experiencing that kind of pain at his hands. It would be intense but so delicious. Besides, she was tied tightly, and couldn’t resist. She was his, and he could mark her any way he liked.

She heard him move over towards the fire, and then he returned. She was glad she couldn’t see him - even though she longed to know what was going on. Being blindfolded made her so much more aware of her body; she could feel the softness of the blanket beneath her, the tight criss-crossing of the ropes digging into her, the warmth of the fire on her skin, and the coolness of the breeze wafting over her bound, naked body.

She thought she’d explode from a combination of nerves, apprehension, excitement and arousal as she felt his body straddle hers. She wished for a brief moment that she could lock gazes with him, and see the intent look in his eyes when he pierced her, but then she squawked as she felt her left nipple being held steady by what felt like a cool metallic clamp. She struggled to draw breath, fearing what would happen next while welcoming it eagerly.

Then there was a sharp blaze of pain in her nipple and she wanted to twist away but the ropes held her firmly in place, and she was screaming and screaming and all the time there was that sharpness in her breast that wouldn't go away. She felt a tugging sensation and then the pain receded into a dull, pounding throb.

"Oh god!" she cried, her body drenched with sweat. His mouth closed over hers and she offered herself up to his searching kiss. She was his, she told herself, over and over again, like a mantra. If he wanted to pierce her she was happy to offer up her body to be pierced. She loved the idea of wearing his jewels in her breasts, even though it hurt so much right now.

"That was good. It looks so beautiful," he whispered to her when he finished kissing her. "If you could only see what I see - you look amazing, Abby. All bound up beneath me – and the piercing looks so pretty. I love your breasts...so round and white and soft...and all mine now. All mine."

She felt him plant a kiss on the breast that was hurting, and then he pulled back. She tensed as she felt that clamp take hold of her other nipple in its cold, metallic embrace.

"Please no...please yes...please no..." she whispered, wanting it to happen but afraid of the intensity of the pain all the same.

"Ssh," he said, soothing her. "Take this for me, Abby. You can take it, can't you?"

She knew that she could, and she nodded, trembling. Then she felt another blaze of that same sharp pain and she screamed again. He was marking her, and it felt so bad and so good at one and the same time. The tugging began and she screamed again, loving the intensity of the moment. He let her scream – she was glad he hadn't gagged her – she loved that they were all the way out here, where nobody could see or hear them, and she could be as loud as she wanted, screaming out her joy and agony at one and the same time. Then, as she screamed, his mouth closed over hers, swallowing the sound, and he claimed her for his own with a deep, powerful kiss.

Then it was over, and now both breasts ached, sore but deliciously so.

He kissed her again, softly this time, and she moaned, utterly helpless beneath him. Then she felt his mouth on her body, covering its terrain, mapping it and claiming it for himself.

She felt him untie the ropes as he went, loosening them by degrees between kisses and caresses, until she was free.

"Stay there," he told her and she obeyed, not moving a muscle. She heard the sounds of him undressing, and then he was back. He sat down beside her and then he pulled her over. She found herself sitting in his lap, and felt his hard cock. He manoeuvred her up, and she allowed herself to be guided down, her wet pussy swallowing his cock easily, her knees bent on either side of his body.

“Hold it there,” he told her, and she sighed, loving the way he felt inside her – hard, strong and pulsing.

She felt his fingers on her face, and then he whisked her blindfold away. She blinked down at him, smiling insanely, and she saw that he was smiling too, his eyes shining.

“You can look now,” he said, and she glanced down and saw the beautiful jewels glowing in her nipples, dappled by the firelight. The piercings were plain steel barbells, but beneath each one swung a cobweb, with seven red jewels glinting along its delicate tendrils. “I thought these suited you. I bought others, though,” he said, nodding his head in the direction of the box by the fire. “We can try them on you another time.”

“They’re perfect,” she whispered. She loved that he didn’t want to change her, and that he’d chosen something so intrinsically her. She reached down to touch them but he grabbed her hands and held them behind her back.

“Uh-uh. These are mine for tonight – no touching,” he said. “Now, ride me. I want to be at eye level with these when I come inside you.”

She loved how he was holding her hands behind her back as she rose up and slid back down on his hard cock. His mouth brushed her breasts as she rode him, taking care not to catch the new piercings, and it felt so amazingly intense that she wanted to explode.

She was bobbing up and down in the dark summer’s air, her breasts bouncing as she rode him, each move of her hips sending a wave of sensation through her body, making her sore nipples ache even more, with a sweet, erotic throb.

She looked down on him, meeting his gaze as he stared back up at her. She could see that he was in his top-space, intent and focussed, his brown hair mussed up, his handsome face and hard, toned body dappled in the firelight. He was so beautiful, and the moment was so perfect, that she lost herself in her own sub-space. She was nothing save the dangling cobwebs hanging from her breasts, and the feel of his hardness inside her body. She was his submissive, and he had marked her as his own, with his own hands.

Her body was a tumult of sensation – pain, pleasure and something darkly beautiful all merging as one. She rode on, her hair streaming out over her shoulders, her body joining his in the age-old dance between dominant and submissive. She was his - his, his, his and she had never felt happier. The crescendo playing inside her built to a climax and then she was blinded by a series of starbursts, white flashes like fireworks exploding in her mind and body, sending ripple after ripple of pleasure through her. Those waves of pleasure kept on coming, over and over again, until she was spent and could do nothing but hang there, looking down on him, completely out of it.

He released her wrists and stroked her thighs while she hung there, gazing at him, lost in the moment. His hands moved up her body and cupped her breasts, and she looked down at the beautiful cobwebs dangling from the steel bars he had placed there.

"You're not his any more," he said softly, his eyes dark with emotion. "You're mine now, Abby. I made you mine tonight."

"Yes," she replied. "I'm yours. All yours."

She fell down on top of him, a jolt of sensation from her sore nipples sending another wave of intense pleasure through her, and he caught her and held her against him, keeping her safe, just the way he'd promised.

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Gibbs wasn't used to R&R. At least back home he could work on his boat but out here, on Atlantis, he had a lot of time on his hands and not much to occupy it. So he spent the day doing what he did best – working.

He read through all his agents' reports and filed them in a box in the smaller of the two lounges which he was now using as an evidence room. There were other boxes there too – all neatly labelled and filled with various bags of evidence. Gibbs wouldn't be entirely happy until he got them signed in back at NCIS and they ceased to be his responsibility. They had taken a lot of stuff from Jordan's quarters, including the P-90 he'd used to shoot Tim. Gibbs went through it all to make sure it had been properly tagged and catalogued.

He broke off to go and visit Tony at lunchtime. He took Tony some clothes, in preparation for his release from the infirmary the following day, and took him on their regular stroll down to the south pier. Then Gibbs dropped him back into Carson's capable hands - although not before Tony had tried to talk him into getting him released a day early - and returned to his quarters to continue his inventory.

He was still working when Ducky dropped by late in the afternoon.

"You know what they say about all work and no play, Jethro," Ducky commented, standing in the doorway.

"It makes Jethro a bastard?" he asked, looking up. "Because that's what I usually get called."

"Well, I'm fairly sure nobody ever called you dull," Ducky chuckled. "That's the way the saying usually goes."

"I just wanted to make sure this was all exactly the way I like it," Gibbs said, gesturing with his head at the boxes.

"Jethro, we've been working with you for many years – we know the way you like it done," Ducky told him gently. "Was any of it done incorrectly?"

"Nope." Gibbs shook his head. "But I wouldn't be me if I didn't check," he added.

Ducky laughed, and then his expression changed. "Can we talk?" he asked softly. "It's not

about work – it’s personal.”

Gibbs gazed at him for a long moment, and then sighed. “Et tu, Ducky?” he said, spreading his arms in a gesture of despair.

Ducky gave him a sad little smile in return, then turned and led the way back to the main living room. Gibbs followed him, his gut tightening. This never got any easier – and this one, this was the one he had always known would hurt the most.

Ducky sat down at the dining table and pushed a warm cup of coffee in his direction, claiming a cup of tea for himself.

“Jethro, we both know that I’ve hidden behind your collar for far too long,” Ducky said. Gibbs took a sip of coffee, and gazed at his old friend.

“Yeah, I know,” he muttered.

“Fourteen years to be precise,” Ducky added. “I don’t suppose that any of us thought it would be this long when you fastened that strip of shirt around my neck all those years ago.”

“I guess not.” Gibbs shook his head. “Has it really been that long? Damn that makes me feel old. But he was always out there, Ducky, sending you those threatening letters, calling you, even until fairly recently. It never felt safe for you to take the collar off while he was alive, did it?”

“No. It didn’t.” Ducky shook his head. “And to be honest, I loved wearing it. I was always very proud to be your collared sub, Jethro.”

“But you aren’t a sub at all, Ducky. You’re a switch,” Gibbs pointed out. “And I’ve always respected that. Didn’t really understand it, but respected it.”

“I know,” Ducky chuckled. “I can’t say I’ve done a very good job of understanding it myself. Maybe I’m more of a sub than I like to admit – after all, I wore Randolph’s collar for twenty-five years and yours for fourteen.”

“And now you get a chance to explore who you really are,” Gibbs said. “How are things going with Woolsey?”

“He’s a charming man,” Ducky replied, and he looked younger and more animated than Gibbs could remember seeing him in a long time. “We’re neither of us at an age or of an inclination where we think of sharing plates and buckling on marriage belts and all that kind of thing, but it’s been good for both of us I think.”

“If anyone can help someone like him then it’s you,” Gibbs said. He didn’t know Woolsey that well but he knew a sub who had escaped a bullying top when he saw one.

“Yes, I have rather been there, done that,” Ducky replied, with a wry shake of his head.

“And when we go back home? What happens then?”

“Well we've only known each other a short time so we decided we wouldn't expect too much of each other at this stage. If he wants to see other tops then that's fine by me, and the same goes for me too, if a sub or top takes my fancy. However... he is intending to make a trip back to Earth regularly – this IOA committee want him to report in person on a monthly basis from now on. We can meet up then. He's also said I'm welcome to spend vacation time on Atlantis so we can stay in touch and see how it goes. I'll be thinking of retiring in a few years so who knows what I'll decide to do then. There are worse places to retire to than the Pegasus galaxy!”

“It's a long way to come for a visit, Ducky,” Gibbs pointed out.

“Well, I'm sure you'll find a way, Jethro,” Ducky replied. “You always do, you know.”

“Yeah.” Gibbs took another sip of his coffee. He wasn't great at dealing with his own emotions, he knew that, and this was tough.

“But my dear boy, I wouldn't leave you in the lurch,” Ducky said. “You have been the best and truest friend a man could ask for. If you want me to keep the collar then I will.”

“No, Duck.” Gibbs shook his head. “Jordan's dead, and he was always the main reason for you wearing it. It's done its job. Like you said, I never intended to keep any of you for good when I first collared you.”

“No, indeed!” Ducky chuckled. “But you did a good job, Jethro. You saved us in various ways – all of us – and now you're setting us free. You're a man of honour, my friend.”

He got up, went over to where Gibbs was sitting, and knelt in front of him. “You put it there, Jethro,” he said softly. “I would very much like you to be the one to remove it.”

Gibbs reached out, and touched the plain black collar. Jordan had been right when he said they were cheap – Gibbs had bought them for a few dollars at Walmart. However, the sentiment behind them had never been cheap, and he knew his subs had understood that.

He pulled blindly on the buckle, wondering whether his eyesight had deteriorated overnight because he was having trouble seeing. He felt Ducky's fingers gently cover his own and they opened the buckle together. Gibbs pulled the collar and it fell into his hand. He threw it onto the table and blinked, and his vision cleared. He wiped his hand across his eyes and was surprised when it came away wet. Ducky stood up.

“Thank you, my friend,” he said.

“Bye Ducky,” Gibbs whispered hoarsely.

"Goodbye, Jethro." Ducky put a hand on Gibbs's shoulder and squeezed.

"This place must be jinxed or something," Gibbs said, with a rueful shake of his head. "I had a whole fistful of collared subs when I arrived but now not one of 'em is wearing my collar."

"Well, technically speaking, that's not entirely true," Ducky pointed out. "Neither Tony nor you removed his collar, so legally and, I dare say, emotionally, his status remains rather undecided, doesn't it?"

"Ah, hell. Tony doesn't need saving any more than the rest of you now," Gibbs said. "He's grown up a lot lately."

"You're quite right; he doesn't need saving any more," Ducky agreed.

"So I guess I'm all out of people to save now," Gibbs sighed.

"Ah, that's where you're wrong, Jethro," Ducky said quietly. "There's still one more person."

"Who?" Gibbs looked up at him, surprised.

"You, my dear boy," Ducky murmured. "You." He bent his head and kissed Gibbs's hair before straightening up. "You deserve to be happy. Be as kind to yourself as you've been to all of us, Jethro - you're worth it."

"Am I?" Gibbs looked up, straight into Ducky's eyes. "I couldn't save them, Ducky," he said hoarsely. "Shannon and Kelly. Protecting them was my job and I didn't do it. So why the hell do I deserve to be happy?"

Ducky took his face in his hands and held it firmly. "Oh Jethro. Is that what all this has been about? All these years? Oh my dear boy. No wonder you've been saving people ever since. Jethro - listen to me. Of \*course\* you deserve some happiness. You're a good man. You've always been a good man. What happened to Shannon and Kelly wasn't your fault. What happened to Tony, Tim and Abby wasn't your fault either. Now let it go, my dear boy. You must let it go - and that's not a suggestion, Jethro. It's an order." He bestowed a gentle kiss on Gibbs's forehead, and then released him. Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

"You giving me orders now, Ducky?"

"Yes, my dear boy - I am." Ducky gave a little smile. "And as for Tony's collar - there is another reason for collaring a sub apart from saving him, you know, Jethro."

"There is?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. "Like what, Ducky?"

"Love, Jethro," Ducky told him softly. "Love."

He stroked Gibbs's arm one last time, and then he turned and left.



Gibbs sat there for a moment, staring at where his last collared sub had been, feeling numb. He felt wetness on his cheeks and raised his arm angrily to wipe it away. He wasn't used to this kind of emotion and had no idea what to do with it.

He found himself getting up and going back to the evidence room. He searched through the boxes until he found what he was looking for, and then he slammed the data stick into his laptop and watched.

The camera was fixed into position, so there were no fancy angles. He saw himself, standing on the south pier, looking out at the ocean. Tony was beside him. That much was what he remembered. Then Tony turned and walked away from him, towards Tim and Ziva, saying something. He was a good few feet away from him now. Tim pointed upwards, at a bird flying overhead, and at the same time gunshots rang out. Tony turned, so fast he was a blur, and flung himself on Gibbs. Gibbs remembered feeling all his breath leave his body as he went down; Tony was no lightweight. It had taken him a few seconds to get his breath back and by then Tony had turned, shielding Gibbs's body with his own, and was reaching for his gun to start firing back, while gazing anxiously over at where Tim was lying on the ground, blood streaming from the wound on his arm.

Gibbs paused there, and then rewound and watched it again. Then again. Then, finally, he paused on it. Jordan had been right - Tony's love for him had been right under his nose the whole time and on some level he'd even been aware of that - he'd just chosen not to acknowledge it. Then Jordan had hit him in the face with it and now - now what? He loved all the time he'd been spending with Tony recently, sharing little bits of himself, letting Tony in, just a little way. His heart knew what it wanted even if he was stubborn bastard enough to still try and resist. Maybe he'd been locked up inside this prison of grief and recrimination for so long that he had become comfortable inside it - and maybe Ducky was right; maybe it was time to give himself a break.

He got up, went into the bedroom, picked up his backpack and took out the little box he found in there. He walked out to the balcony and stood there, watching as the sun went down over the ocean, painting the sky in various shades of reds and golds as it sank down towards the horizon.

"Save myself?" he muttered, shaking his head. "If it was that easy I'd have done it years ago."

He opened up the box and let Shannon's collar ripple through his fingers. Tony was right too - he always had been a stubborn bastard, even as a little kid, and he still was. Maybe it wasn't always a virtue though. Fifteen years was a long time to grieve. She wasn't ever coming back; maybe it was finally time to let her go.

He picked up the collar and kissed it, one last time.

"Goodbye, Shannon," he whispered, and then he raised his arm and threw the collar out, far out into the distance. He watched as it cleared the city's gleaming turrets and landed in the ocean, where it sank immediately.

He wasn't sure what he felt. Relief? Sadness? Maybe a bit of both. He did know what he had to do next though.

He strode down to General Sheppard's quarters, and knocked on the door. The general opened it, a surprised look on his face.

"I need a favour," Gibbs said.

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Tony stood by the open door, glaring at Carson.

"If you're releasing me then I don't see why I can't just go," he said, through gritted teeth.

"And as I've told you a dozen times, son, I'm only releasing you when Gibbs arrives and signs you out," Carson told him.

Tony narrowed his eyes, and pointed at his throat. "Do you \*see\* a collar around this neck, Carson? Huh? No. That's because there isn't one. So I don't need any damn top to sign me out."

Carson's blue eyes, which he'd once thought avuncular and genial but had since come to realise were steely and no-nonsense, just gazed at him steadily.

"Son, don't play semantics with me," he said firmly. "I was there – I saw how that collar was removed."

Tony bit on his lip; he hated being reminded of that.

"Now, you and Agent Gibbs might have some unfinished business to sort out but you have to respect the man for not just snapping a collar back on you while you were recuperating from being tortured and damn near raped and murdered!" Carson said, his eyes flashing. "You never, ever collar a sub without their consent, and he's waited until you're well enough to give full, informed consent, without the influence of pain meds or anything else. He's acted like your top, and done everything a good top would do. He barely left your bedside those first few days, and he's visited you every single damn day since. He's been with you every step of the way through all the hard times - when you were screaming, when you had nightmares, when you were throwing up and when you were in pain, so don't give me any bullshit about him not being your top."

"Fine." Tony threw himself down on the chair by the door and gazed up at the ceiling. He knew Carson was right but he'd been waiting longingly for this day and he was disappointed Gibbs hadn't come by straight after breakfast to pick him up.

The last time he'd seen his boss had been yesterday lunchtime when Gibbs had stopped by to take him for their regular walk to the south pier and to bring him some clothes, but then

he'd gone back to work. Although what the hell work there was to do when the case had been wrapped up days ago was beyond Tony.

"Guy needs to get out more," he muttered to himself as he sat there, long legs draped over the arms of the chair. Gibbs had brought him his favourite pair of faded denim jeans and his black shirt. He'd even brought him his tan coloured Timberlands. How Gibbs knew these clothes were his favourites Tony didn't know, but they were.

It had felt so good to actually get dressed this morning. The bruising on his face had completely gone, and his shoulders and back no longer gave him any pain – the marks there would soon fade, hopefully without any permanent scarring.

He suspected that Carson had kept him in the infirmary for longer than was strictly necessary but he also knew the reason why. At times during his stay there Tony had seen, reflected in the doctor's eyes, the memory of what Carson had witnessed that day Jordan had tortured him. It was a forcible reminder that he wasn't the only one who'd been traumatised by what had happened in that room. Tony knew that was why Carson wanted to make sure he had done everything in his power to restore Tony to full health before he would release him.

He also knew that they were all worried about his psychological state; he'd run rings around Dr Heightmeyer until Gibbs had stepped in and mercifully put the poor woman out of her misery by removing him from her patient list. As therapy had failed, Tony suspected that another reason Carson had kept him so long was to make sure he had come to terms with what had happened to him, and wasn't a suicide risk.

"Damn overprotective tops," Tony muttered under his breath, although he knew he wouldn't have it any other way. He glanced at his watch to find that it was nearly noon. Gibbs was doing this to torture him, he was sure of it; just another of the little toppy tricks in Gibbs's extensive arsenal.

Tony knew he was using petulance to hide his own anxiety. The whole collar thing would have to be resolved soon, one way or the other, and while he dreaded the conversation he knew it had to happen and he longed to get it out of the way.

"Worse than waiting for a hard punishment spanking," he murmured, moving his head from side to side to loosen the tension in his neck. "Hate being kept waiting for the big ones."

Carson, who was sitting on the side of one of the now empty beds, writing up notes on his chart, chuckled at that one.

"Relax son. I'm sure Gibbs will be here soon."

"You don't know Gibbs," Tony said sourly. "This is his idea of fun. Trust me. And Carson – you can't be more than three or four years older than me so what's with the 'son' thing?"

"Son, this is my infirmary and I view every single one of my patients as my subs while they're

here, to be cared for to the utmost of my ability,” Carson told him.

“Really? That explains a lot,” Tony muttered.

“Aye – so my patients are ‘son’, or ‘lad’, or ‘lass’ to me, regardless of age, status or orientation,” Carson grinned.

“I’d love to see Gibbs in here as your patient then.” Tony fantasised about that idly for a few seconds.

“Please – don’t wish that on me,” Carson replied, in mock terror. “You’ve turned my hair grey all by yourself – he’d make me go white overnight.”

“Oh your hair isn’t grey, Doc,” Tony grinned, gazing at Carson’s sleek black hair. “It’s kind of a weird style, all pointy on top like that, but it’s not grey.”

Carson glared at him.

“Uh...did I say ‘weird’? That wasn’t the word I meant to use,” Tony said hurriedly.

“Did you open your mouth without engaging your brain again, DiNozzo?” a dry voice asked by the door. Gibbs had appeared, as usual, from nowhere, without making a sound.

“Yes boss, sorry boss,” Tony said. “Thank god you’re here, boss! And what the hell took you so long?” he added.

Gibbs grinned at him. “Impatient to be let out, DiNozzo?”

Tony made a face at him. Gibbs turned to Carson.

“Doc, you deserve a medal for putting up with him for so long,” he said.

“I can’t pretend it’s been easy,” Carson replied with a heartfelt sigh. “And I can’t say that I’m not a very happy man to have him signed out of my custody. Thank god he’s not going to be my responsibility any more. It’ll take me weeks to whip those nurses back into shape – he’s a terrible influence with that smart mouth of his and all his sneaking around, leading impressionable staff astray.”

“Tell me about it. I’ve had to put up with it for years,” Gibbs grinned.

“I’m standing right here,” Tony pointed out.

Carson handed Gibbs a sheet of paper, grinning broadly as he did so. Gibbs glanced at it, and then signed it with a terse flourish of his hand and gave the paper back to Carson.

“So now you are officially free, Tony,” Carson said. “And don’t think you’re the only one celebrating that news.”

“Thanks doc,” Tony said, moving his hips in a little freedom dance. He grabbed Carson and kissed his cheek. “You’ve been great – kinda scary, but great.”

Gibbs rolled his eyes, shook Carson’s hand, and then led the way out of the room and into the main infirmary. Tony high-fived his favourite nurses on the way out. His body felt loose, healthy and relaxed and he was suddenly full of good spirits. He was free!

“DiNozzo!” Gibbs snapped, from over by the door. Tony finished doing a little celebratory lap around the infirmary and chased after his boss – Gibbs hated to be kept waiting.

He followed Gibbs along the hallways, back towards their quarters.

“So...if we asked nicely would Sheppard fly us around in one of those cool little spaceships?” he said, as they walked. “Abby says Lorne takes her all over the place - of course he’s a pilot which helps. I want to get out there and see things before we have to go home, boss. I mean, this is a completely different planet! Okay, so there seems to be a distinct lack of nightlife but I’m sure we can jazz things up, hold a few parties – right, boss?”

Gibbs glanced at him over his shoulder, one eyebrow raised.

“Or not,” Tony said, running to catch up.

They got back to their quarters and Tony felt a rush of *déjà vu* as they walked inside. He paused, and gazed around.

“Feels kind of strange to be back here, boss,” he murmured. “Last time I was here we were having that discussion about Jordan, and then we set off for that meeting...and man, that feels like a long time ago, boss. The room’s different.”

The investigator in him noticed that the place was tidier than it had been when he was last here – and emptier. Six people living together in a suite of rooms meant that there was always lots of stuff lying around – cups, shoes, files, PDAs, laptops, books...but there was little of that now.

What there was, lying on the dining table, was a plain black collar. Tony stiffened.

Gibbs turned, and saw where he was looking.

“Problem Tony?” he asked.

Tony took a deep breath. Now that the moment had come he knew what he had to do. He hadn’t been sure before but now they were here, and the collar was in front of him, it all seemed clear.

He went over to the table and picked up the collar, caressing the soft leather gently with his thumb.

“I liked how this felt around my throat,” he said quietly, gazing at Gibbs. “It’s all warm, and snug, and comfortable. I liked the way other subs looked at me when they knew I was wearing your collar – I liked that a lot. I liked how tops would chat me up, then back off when they met you and realised it was your collar I was wearing. I liked that it protected me, that you protected me from self-destructing by putting it on me. I liked all those things.”

He raised the collar to his nose, and inhaled the smell of the leather.

“But I can’t wear it again,” he said, looking straight at his boss.

Gibbs gave a little nod. “I understand,” he said.

“Not because I don’t want to – because you have no idea how tempting it is,” Tony said. Now he wasn’t hiding any more, because his cover had been blown several days ago, in a dank room at the bottom of a derelict tower on an alien world. Now he was the Tony DiNozzo he didn’t let anyone see very often because growing up he’d learned it was better to let people think he was a shallow rich kid who played the fool than to allow them to get close enough to hurt him.

“But, tempting though it is, the conditions that come with wearing your collar are too hard,” Tony said. “Last time around I thought I could handle it, and for a long time I could. I can’t do it any more though. It’d be selling myself short and I’ve been doing that my entire life. It’s time to find something real, instead of hanging on hoping for something that’s never gonna happen.”

Gibbs gave a little shake of his head. “I told Ducky you didn’t need saving any more,” he said. “I was right. You’ve come a long way, Tony.”

“Thanks boss.” Tony gave a little nod of his head, meaning it. Gibbs’s praise had always been important to him and he didn’t think that would ever change. “I still love the job – I still want to work with you, if you’ll have me,” he said.

“Think you can handle that? Working with me and not wearing my collar?” Gibbs asked.

“Maybe not. We’ll see,” Tony said thoughtfully. “So...” He glanced around the room. “I suppose this is goodbye. I’ll just grab my stuff – I’ll go ask Woolsey if I can be reassigned to some different quarters – I’m sure you won’t want me around, getting underfoot, now I’m not collared.”

He put the collar down, regretfully, on the table and then walked over to where his boss was standing.

“Should say thank you, boss – for everything,” he said. “I think we both know I wouldn’t still be alive today if you hadn’t put that collar on me back then. I’d have done something stupid, pissed off the wrong people, and been found lying in an alley with a bullet in my brain one dark night.”

“Yeah – I think you would,” Gibbs agreed, with a wry smile.

“Bye boss.” Tony put out a hand and patted Gibbs’s arm. He didn’t want to think about how good it felt to touch the man – that part of his life was over. He had to move on.

“Bye Tony,” Gibbs said, those sharp blue eyes of his betraying nothing.

Tony sighed, and walked over to his bedroom to collect his things. He had hoped for something more – a tear might be too much to ask for but perhaps some sign that Gibbs actually cared about losing him.

“Tony.” He paused as Gibbs said his name. “The collar on the table wasn’t yours,” Gibbs said. “It was Ducky’s.”

Tony turned, frowning. “You took Ducky’s collar off him?” he asked, bemused.

“We took it off together,” Gibbs said. “It was time, and it was what he wanted – what he needed.”

“Wow. Never thought that would happen.”

“He didn’t need saving any more than you do now,” Gibbs said softly. “I wasn’t going to offer you your old collar back, Tony.”

“Oh.” Tony felt a bit deflated by that.

“I was going to offer you a new one,” Gibbs said.

Tony frowned. Gibbs reached into his jacket pocket and pulled out a little bag. He opened it, carefully fished out what was in it, and held it up. Tony gave a startled whistle. Gibbs was holding a beautiful collar made of two different kinds of gold, entwined together in strong, chunky links, one a warm red colour and the other shinier and almost silver in hue. At intervals there were smooth, solid, golden rectangles, shaped a little like abstract padlocks. It was sharp and classy – understated but an object of beauty.

“That looks expensive,” he murmured.

“It was,” Gibbs said. “I bought it from an Athosian craftsman on the mainland. That’s why I was late picking you up from the infirmary this morning. I had a very definite idea of what I wanted, you see. John Sheppard flew me over there last night and I told the Athosian guy how I wanted it to look and he said he’d work on it overnight and have it ready for me today. The different colours are new gold and old gold, linked together. I liked that.”

Tony moved closer, his heart beating a little too fast. He held out his hand and Gibbs dropped the collar into it. Up close, it was even more beautiful. He had never seen a collar like this – it was completely and utterly unique. He ran his fingers over the smooth metal

and then glanced up at Gibbs.

“This collar – does it come with any conditions?” he asked. “Last one did.”

Gibbs shook his head. “No. This one is a little more traditional. This one isn’t about rescuing you, or saving you from yourself. This one...this one’s just about loving you,” he said softly.

Tony stared at him. He’d never thought he’d hear anything like that from Gibbs’s lips. Gibbs leaned in close, and whispered into his ear.

“You wear this, I’ll want full body rights from you, DiNozzo,” he said, in a tone that went straight to Tony’s cock. “You’ll be mine – in the bedroom, at work, everywhere. Not for a year, or five years, but until the day you die. So think about it, Tony...think about it very carefully.”

Tony could feel the gold warming up between his fingers. He gazed at the collar for a long time, and then shook his head, and handed it back.

“See, thing is, I don’t think I can share,” he said. “I’ll happily belong to you but I’ll need you to belong to me too and that’s not going to happen while you have a bunch of other subs hanging from your leash.”

“No sharing,” Gibbs told him. “There are no other subs.”

“Abby?” Tony asked. Gibbs shook his head. “Ziva and Tim?” Tony said, bemused. Gibbs shook his head again. “What the hell happened while I was in the infirmary?” Tony grumbled. “I come back here and everything’s changed.”

“Everything *has* changed, Tony,” Gibbs told him. “Everything. You accept this collar and I promise you that I won’t collar any other sub. To be honest, I think I’ll have my hands too full to even think about it,” he added with a wry grin.

“What about your first spouse?” Tony asked. “I respect her place in your life but I won’t compete with a ghost – and I’m guessing that’s why all your other relationships failed.”

“You guess right,” Gibbs agreed. “But this time it won’t be a problem, Tony.”

“How do I know that?”

“Because I haven’t been in love with anyone since Shannon – but I’m in love you.”

Gibbs wasn’t a hearts and flowers kind of man but he had always been direct and to the point. Tony doubted he’d ever get any big speeches but he would get simple statements of truth, and that was enough for him.

“Think about it, Tony,” Gibbs said, placing the collar back in his hand and closing his fingers around it. “No need to rush into anything. Take your time.”



He turned and went out onto the balcony, leaving Tony alone in the room. Tony sat down at the table and gazed at the collar in his hand, hardly able to believe that this was happening to him. What would it be like to be Gibbs's properly collared sub, he wondered? Different to the past five years, that was for sure. He wondered what it would feel like to give full body rights to the man standing out there. He'd never given body rights to any top in his life before, and the thought of it both thrilled and scared him.

All the same, he was a sub to his bones, as he had said many times before, and he had always wanted to find a top to match him. If anyone was that top it was Gibbs. He rolled the collar over in his hand, and that was when he saw the engraving, in copperplate letters, on one of the gold padlocks: Leroy Jethro Gibbs.

If he accepted this collar he'd belong to this man and wear his name around his neck so everyone could see who had collared him. He turned over the chain and saw the engraving on the other side – just one word, but it made his heart skip a beat: Beloved.

He got up and went out onto the balcony. Gibbs didn't turn around – he just kept gazing out at the ocean.

"The answer's no," Tony said. Gibbs turned, his eyes flashing, and Tony laughed. "Don't be an idiot," he said. "Like the answer was ever going to be anything other than yes."

Gibbs's hand connected, resoundingly, with the back of his head and Tony grinned and winced at the same time. He handed the collar back to Gibbs.

"You sure about this, Tony?" Gibbs asked. "Because before I put this on you there's some stuff you should know."

Tony frowned. "What kind of stuff?"

"I'm a demanding top," Gibbs began. Tony laughed out loud.

"You don't say? And five years working with you would have given me the idea you're a pussycat how?" he asked.

"Ex-spouses all said the same thing," Gibbs shrugged. "They all said I'm unreasonable, stubborn, obsessed with my work, and a whole lot of other things."

"Oh they just didn't know how to handle you," Tony said confidently.

"And you think you do?" Gibbs raised a challenging eyebrow. Tony grinned at him.

"Oh yeah," he said. "But, while we're on the subject – are you sure about this too? I'm not an easy sub to top. I have issues."

It was Gibbs's turn to laugh. "I've handled your issues for five years, Tony. I think I have

them all figured out.”

“I have trust issues,” Tony said, counting that one off on his fingers. Gibbs gazed at him speculatively.

“You trust me?” he asked.

“With my life,” Tony answered, with a firm nod.

“Then that’s not a problem. Next?”

“I have commitment issues,” Tony pointed out.

“Tony, you haven’t slept with a top in five years and all because I put my collar on you. I don’t think we need to worry about the commitment issues, do you?” Gibbs asked.

“I guess not,” Tony said, with a little grin. “I have daddy issues,” he continued, counting that one off on his fingers. Gibbs laughed again.

“You think, DiNozzo?” He rolled his eyes expressively. “Do I look like your father, Tony?”

“Hell no!”

“Do I act like your father, Tony?”

“Never,” Tony said, shaking his head.

“Then I don’t think that’ll be a problem, do you?” Gibbs raised an eyebrow.

“Depends,” Tony said, in a more thoughtful tone. “I know you like your JD but do you ever get drunk?”

Gibbs shifted a little, gazing at him searchingly. “Sometimes,” he said.

“That’s fine – I get drunk too, sometimes. Thing is...when you get drunk, I’ll be sleeping on the couch. And those full body rights? They won’t apply when you’re drunk. Just so we’re clear.”

Gibbs nodded thoughtfully. “We’re clear, Tony, and that sounds fine and reasonable to me.”

“And if you ever hit me while you’re drunk then I’ll hit you right back, then take off the collar and you won’t ever see me again,” Tony continued, in a deadly serious tone.

Gibbs’s expression darkened. “Hey - I don’t \*ever\* abuse subs – drunk or sober,” he said. “Got that?”

“Yeah. I got it.” Tony nodded. “Sorry. Just had to be clear.”

Gibbs nodded. "You were, Tony. I get it – and I understand."

Tony looked at him for a long time and Gibbs looked back as they got the measure of each other, not as boss and subordinate any more but as potential lovers and life partners. They both had their demons but Tony thought they were demons they could slay if they tried.

"So, if we're agreed that we're both a nightmare to take on..." Tony sank down on his knees, and gazed up at Gibbs. "Would you please collar me, boss?" he asked.

"Jethro," Gibbs corrected him. "I'm not collaring you as your boss. I'm collaring you as your top."

Tony nodded. "Please collar me, Jethro," he said. He had thought that it would feel strange, using Gibbs's first name for the first time, but it didn't. It felt totally natural.

Gibbs looked down at him for a moment, the sun glinting off the golden collar in his hand. Then he moved around, so he was standing behind Tony, the back of Tony's head pressing against his groin. Tony put his head right back, and gazed up at him. Trust Gibbs to manoeuvre him into a position of such abject surrender, neck exposed as he looked up and behind him.

Gibbs stroked his throat, fingertips sending spikes of electricity through Tony's body. He knelt there, facing out to sea, arms behind his back, head back, throat naked...waiting. Gibbs undid the collar, and Tony closed his eyes and offered up his neck to his top.

Tony felt the gold links of the collar slide around his neck as easily as if he'd been wearing it for years. He heard a little click and then the collar was in place. He took a deep breath, and opened his eyes again. He was a collared sub. Gibbs's collared sub. Gibbs's \*only\* collared sub...and he had a sudden realisation of all that might entail.

On collaring, a sub gave themselves to their top, totally and completely. By accepting a top's collar they agreed to all the demands a top might make on their body, and consented to submit and surrender to whatever their top wanted to do to them. His body now belonged, in the most basic way, to Leroy Jethro Gibbs – and that was a good thought and a scary thought at one and the same time.

Gibbs seemed to read those thoughts.

"I've never given a sub a safe word in my life and I'm not about to start now," Gibbs told him.

"I didn't think for a second you would," Tony replied. "I'm guessing that's the way you've always liked to play."

"Oh, I don't play, Tony," Gibbs said, a feral smile on his lips. "I don't play, I don't do scenes, and I don't use toys."

“What’s wrong with toys?” Tony asked, surprised. Most tops used toys and most subs liked it; he certainly did.

“I don’t need ‘em,” Gibbs said. “If there’s something you particularly like I’m happy to do it for you occasionally, but it’s not my thing. I’m sexually dominant, Tony, and trust me, I’ll be able to dominate you just fine without using any toys.”

Tony had no doubt at all that that was true. “So...no cock rings?” he risked asking.

Gibbs circled him, one hand on his shoulder. “If I ask you to hold it, I expect you to hold it without help,” he whispered into Tony’s ear. Tony’s cock gave a little lurch for freedom at the tone of his voice.

“Nipple clamps?” Tony asked, his mouth going dry. Gibbs’s fingers slid across the front of his shirt, found his nipples, and pinched, hard. Tony swallowed back a yelp.

“That’s what my fingers are for,” Gibbs told him.

“Cuffs? Everyone needs cuffs, surely?” Tony croaked.

Gibbs slid his hands down Tony’s shoulders, gathered his wrists in a vice-like grip, and held his hands behind his back. “Feel like you can escape?” he asked.

“No,” Tony whispered, his cock now hard as iron, pressing painfully against the front of his jeans. “What about butt plugs, or dildos?” he dared to ask, his voice sounding more like a squeak to his own ears.

Gibbs leaned forward, and spoke straight into his ear. “And what’s wrong with my hard cock up your ass?” he asked.

“Oh, nothing,” Tony said, wondering if he’d died and gone to heaven. “Nothing at all.”

“Good.” Gibbs’s warm breath ghosted over his ear, making him shiver.

“You’ve got a strap though – and a paddle,” Tony pointed out. “I’ve been on the receiving end of those more times than I can count. And there’s that damn cane you keep in your basement - you’ve used that on me a few times, although admittedly only when I really screwed up – and, hey, what about that switch you had me cut for you that time when we working that case in Shenandoah National Park?”

“Oh they’re not toys – they’re tools of the trade, and with you they’re a necessity,” Gibbs said, a dangerous kind of smile in his voice. “I’m also an expert with a flogger, the bullwhip and, my personal favourite, the single-tailed whip. Even so, most of the time all you’ll feel is the flat of my hand on your bare ass, Tony.”

“And given how hard your hand is I’m guessing it’s pretty much all you need,” Tony sighed.

“Usually works,” Gibbs agreed.

He put a hand under Tony’s elbow and drew him up to his feet, then pulled Tony’s arm, turning him around so he was facing him. Then he stepped in close – too close - so close that Tony could feel his shirt brushing against him, and the warmth of his body. Gibbs was looking at Tony like he was prey and it felt strange, after all these years of being the one doing the hunting, to suddenly have the tables turned and be hunted instead.

“So,” Tony said, trying to get some control back. “It’s, what, about just after one? I’m thinking you were planning on some lunch, maybe followed by a walk – it’s a nice day out there.”

Gibbs grinned at him, his blue eyes so close and so intense that Tony wanted to back away – only to find he was rooted to the spot by that mesmerising stare.

“Oh no.” Gibbs shook his head. “Oh no, Tony. You’ve been propositioning me just about every day for five years and today’s the day you get to deliver. I’ve been waiting a long time for this and I don’t care what time of the damn day it is. You’re mine and I’m going to take you. Right now.”

“Okay.” Tony swallowed hard. “See, you think that’s scaring me but really it’s just turning me on.”

“Actually, it’s doing both,” Gibbs said confidently.

He took hold of Tony’s hand and led him to the bedroom and Tony went, feeling as if his legs were made of jello. This had been such a long time coming that it seemed hard to believe the moment was finally here.

“Five years is kind of a long time,” Tony said, as Gibbs pulled him into the bedroom. “Be gentle with me, boss.”

Gibbs laughed out loud. “Oh, I don’t think so, Tony,” he said. “And Tony – if you ever call me ‘boss’ in the bedroom again, I’ll spank your ass until they can see it glowing from outer space.”

“Right. Jethro. Okay.” Tony nodded nervously.

Gibbs took off his jacket and Tony watched him, transfixed. Gibbs was wearing a plain black shirt and black pants beneath the black jacket – his sexiest ensemble and one Tony had always found pretty hot - not least the big, shiny gleaming buckle of his belt. Gibbs threw the jacket over the armchair and then turned towards him, undoing his shirt sleeves as he walked. Tony took a step back, and then another – that predatory look in Gibbs’s eyes was unnerving.

“So it’s been five years for me but how long for you?” Tony asked, trying to coax some

normality back into Gibbs's hungry eyes, freaked out by just how single-minded Gibbs looked right now.

"Awhile – but not as long as that."

"I knew it!" Tony said. "It's Ducky isn't it? I knew you and he...ummf"

He shut up as Gibbs pushed him against the wall and placed a hand over his mouth.

"And this is why I don't need a gag, either," Gibbs told him with a grin. "And also - this." He removed his hand but only to replace it with his mouth. Tony sighed and was glad of the wall now, holding him up, as Gibbs kissed him on the lips for the first time.

It wasn't anything like what he had fantasised about – it was so much better. Gibbs's mouth was determined and expert, Gibbs's body was pressed up close against his, pinning him in place, and Gibbs's tongue was ruthlessly efficient at opening him up and gaining an entrance he was all too happy to allow.

As he kissed him, Gibbs ran his hands down Tony's arms, reached his wrists, grasped them firmly in his own, and pushed them up over Tony's head. Now he leaned in even closer, his body firm and solid against Tony's, his leg pressed between Tony's legs, their groins touching. He held Tony's hands in his own, keeping them pressed against the wall, and Tony had just the briefest flash of realisation that Gibbs hadn't been kidding when he said he would dominate Tony without the need for toys. Gibbs could wield his personality, his hard body, and the sheer force of his iron determination like deadly weapons in the battle for his sub's total surrender.

Tony was happy to give him that surrender. He relaxed beneath the kiss, allowing Gibbs to take control, giving it all up to him. His body started to unwind as he trusted Gibbs to hold him there, against the wall. Gibbs would keep him up. Gibbs owned his body now – all he had to do was give in.

This wasn't like any kind of foreplay he'd experienced before and Tony had another realisation that he was in the presence of a master top here. Teasing and playing were out of the question; Gibbs would demand nothing less than everything he had, and he hoped he wouldn't disappoint the man. This wasn't a scene, and Tony wouldn't be able to flirt and wheedle his way through it to get what he wanted. He would have to take whatever Gibbs wanted to do to him and that thought was more arousing than he'd have imagined possible.

Gibbs finished kissing him and drew back, and Tony was about to say something glib to diffuse the sheer intensity of the situation when next thing he knew he'd been flipped around, as easy as anything, and he was now facing the wall, head angled to one side. Gibbs pushed his hands up the wall, his own hands covering Tony's, and leaned in close.

"Stop fighting me," he whispered in Tony's ear.

"I'm not!" Tony protested.

“Stop thinking, stop second guessing me, and stop trying to have control. Just give in.” He kissed the back of Tony’s neck, making him shiver, and all the time he kept Tony pinned there, against the wall, his hands flat on Tony’s hands, utterly unmovable even if Tony had wanted to struggle – which he didn’t. Gibbs’s body was heavy on his own and he could feel his top’s hard cock pressed against his buttocks.

Gibbs continued kissing the sensitive spot between his new collar and his hairline, and Tony sighed, loving the way it felt to have such a dominant partner pinning him against the wall. Gibbs moved his head and nibbled the tip of Tony’s earlobe affectionately, then bit a little harder. Tony gave a little yowl and Gibbs sucked the abused tip of flesh, warming and soothing it.

Then he pulled Tony around again, and, wrapping one hand in Tony’s hair to keep him in place he used his other hand to rip down the front of Tony’s shirt, sending buttons flying.

“Hey...favourite shirt!” Tony protested.

“I know,” Gibbs said. “But it was in the wrong place at the wrong time.” He flashed Tony another one of those feral grins and flipped him again, pulling him free of the shirt at the exact same time. He flung the shirt on the chair without missing a beat.

Tony had never been undressed so expertly in his entire life. He wondered where Gibbs had learned this particular skill but before he had time to think about it Gibbs was back on him, one hand planted square in the centre of his back, pushing him against the wall again, face first, and the other tangled up in his hair, making it impossible to move.

He felt Gibbs’s mouth on his shoulders, and then gently teasing the healing wounds on his back.

“This hurt?” Gibbs asked softly.

“No,” Tony replied honestly.

“Good. You tell me if it does. I never want to hurt you by accident – only by design.”

Tony shivered because that sounded both good and bad and he liked that particular combination all too well.

Gibbs was like an octopus, Tony thought, because he was sure the man had more than two hands. It certainly felt that way; he seemed to have one hand on his fly and another tangled in his hair, and he was sure he could feel more hands all over his body but maybe that was just his imagination. Gibbs undid his belt and fly, and next thing he knew his jeans were pooled around his ankles.

Gibbs pulled him away from the wall and then flipped him around and pushed him so that he landed expertly on the bed, jeans tangled up in his Timberlands. Tony reached down to

try and untangle them and found his hand seized in a firm grip, and then thrust firmly back over his head.

“See, thing is,” Gibbs told him, leaning over him, that feral look still in his eyes, “I don’t like seeing anyone else’s hands on my sub except my own – and that includes yours.”

Tony gazed at him, wide-eyed. “You don’t want me to touch myself, Jethro?” he asked. “What - ever?”

“Not when I’m touching you,” Gibbs replied. “When I’m not you can do what you like, but when you’re in bed with me your body is mine and I’m the only one who gets to touch it. I’m a little possessive that way.”

“A little?” Tony rolled his eyes. Gibbs grinned.

“You’ll get used to it.”

Tony sank back down on the bed, thumping his head on the pillow. He felt Gibbs’s fingers make short work of the laces on his boots and then they were gone, and so were his socks. His jeans followed suit, leaving him completely naked save for the collar around his neck. He was aware of his hard cock standing almost flat against his belly, seriously turned on by what was happening to him.

“Now that is a good look for you,” Gibbs said, standing over him, looking down.

“One of us is overdressed for this particular party,” Tony said, reaching up and getting as far as Gibbs’s shiny silver belt buckle before his questing fingers were pushed away.

“And another thing you’ll have to learn about me,” Gibbs told him, sitting down on the bed beside him, still holding his hand firmly between his fingers, pressing it back into the mattress. “I really like to be in control.”

“I kind of knew that one already,” Tony said, making a face.

“Then stop trying to take it back,” Gibbs said tersely. “Because this is the first and most important lesson that you’re going to learn, and you’re going to learn it today, even if it takes us all day and all night to get the message home. You’re mine now, boy. You belong to me, body and soul, and submission isn’t optional – it’s mandatory.”

Tony barely had time to process what that might really mean before Gibbs’s mouth was on top of his again, claiming another deep kiss. He loved being naked and exposed, bare skin pressed up against the cool cotton of Gibbs’s shirt, and he loved the taste of Gibbs on his lips. Gibbs’s scent was one of coffee and leather and sawdust – even after weeks away from his beloved boat he still had the faint scent of the woodshed about him. All of those were mingled with good, honest sweat, and it turned Tony on. He lay there and just accepted the kiss, welcoming Gibbs’s deep, probing tongue and the weight of the man as he leaned on him, pinning him into the mattress.



Gibbs was a tall, solid man, but Tony probably had an inch on him in height and several more pounds in weight. Even so, Tony didn't doubt for a moment that Gibbs could keep him pinned down without any problem at all, by sheer force of will if nothing else. He had finally found a top who could really \*top\* him, without him having to pretend. He had no safe word, and he knew the only way Gibbs would stop was if Tony removed his collar – and if he did that, he was pretty sure Gibbs would never allow him to have it back.

He didn't want to remove his collar though – he liked the thrill it gave him to be this naked and vulnerable under his top's expert caresses. It was the kind of thrill he'd been looking for all his life and never experienced before. He had no doubt that Gibbs would keep his word and that by the end of this day he would have learned how to find the true submission he'd always longed for; he also suspected it might not be an easy lesson to learn.

“Close your eyes, Tony,” Gibbs said, and Tony obeyed him instantly. He felt the mattress shift and Gibbs get up, and then heard some jerky sounds which he suspected might be Gibbs getting undressed. Finally, he heard the nightstand drawer being opened and he shivered, suspecting his top was getting out lube. He was startled by a sharp tap on his head, and his eyes flew open.

“See, you're still not getting it,” Gibbs told him. “You don't want to be thinking about what I'm doing – you don't need to be thinking at all. All that you should be doing is submitting. Never mind – I'll get you there, one way or another.”

That sounded kind of ominous but Tony couldn't focus on analysing it because Gibbs was standing next to him...and - oh shit - he was completely naked. Gibbs had seen him naked before, several times, but Tony had never had that pleasure where Gibbs was concerned. Now he took his time, almost inhaling the sight of his top.

Gibbs might be fifteen years older than him but years in the Marines and NCIS had kept him fit and toned. There wasn't an ounce of spare flesh on him and his stomach was washboard trim. He had a smattering of silver curls on his broad chest, firm shoulders, and biceps that were toned but not overly muscled. He had long, lean legs which led up to...Tony gave a satisfied sigh. He wasn't obsessed with size but he was pleased that Gibbs was bigger than average. His cock was hard, as hard as Tony's, and almost as vertical right now, curving up pleasingly from a thatch of wiry dark hair.

“Like what you see, Tony?” Gibbs asked, in an amused tone.

“Uh...yes, boss...sorry, Jethro...” Tony stammered, unable to take his eyes off his top's naked body. He wondered what Gibbs's ass looked like – it always seemed nice and peachy when he'd followed it into the elevator numerous times back at NCIS, and he hoped he'd get a good look at it if Gibbs would only turn around.

“Good...because from where I'm standing you look pretty fine too,” Gibbs said, and that predatory look was back in his eyes again. “Now, this is where we find out who you are, Tony.”

“We do?” Tony asked, frowning. “Because I thought we were having sex.”

“Yeah, we are,” Gibbs chuckled. “But I’ve waited a long time for a sub like you, Tony – one with something to really give up, and I’ll make you give it up – I’ll make you give everything up to me. You ready for that?”

“Uh...I'm not sure,” Tony squeaked.

“It’ll be sweet, taking you to that place,” Gibbs said, sitting down on the bed beside him. “I won’t stop until you’re there, Tony. Might be a long hard ride but we’ll get there. It’ll be nice not to have to hold back, nice knowing you can take everything I throw at you.”

“You know this how?” Tony asked, feeling seriously scared by whatever was about to happen next. Gibbs smiled, and stroked a dangerous fingertip down his chest, pausing to squeeze his fingers around Tony’s right nipple, eliciting a hoarse shout from his sub.

“Because I know you, Tony,” Gibbs whispered, moving his head close so his mouth was right by Tony’s ear. “And I’m about to get to know you a whole lot better.”

He was on the move again, covering Tony’s body with sweeping movements of his hands, seemingly in every place at once. Tony put his head back, feeling his new collar clink satisfyingly around his throat and the sweat start to trickle down his body.

He heard the pop of the lube cap being removed, and then his legs were pushed apart, and cool, slick lubricant was being slid into his body on the tip of Gibbs’s index finger.

“Relax...we have a long way to go yet,” Gibbs told him, finger working in deeper.

“Like I said...been a long time,” Tony sighed, trying to loosen up. He guessed it was like riding a bike and you never forgot but five years was one hell of a wait. “Maybe Jordan was right – maybe I am virginal again,” he joked, and the next minute he wished he hadn’t, as Gibbs’s hand slammed down beside his head and Gibbs’s blue eyes came into view, looking really pissed off.

“Don’t say his name to me,” Gibbs growled. “You’re mine...I don’t want to think of his filthy hands groping you, his thieving fingers taking your collar from you, his damn tongue on your body – on *\*my\** sub’s body.”

Tony gazed up at him, realising, perhaps for the first time, that while Gibbs might not show his emotions often, they were as strong as you might expect from a top as powerful as him.

“Hey...easy,” Tony said softly. “I didn’t mean anything by it. He’s gone, Jethro – he’s dead now. He paid for what he did to me – you made him pay, remember?”

The intensity flared in Gibbs’s eyes for a moment and then faded, and he stroked his hand gently through Tony’s hair.

“Nearly lost you, Tony...and it damn near killed me,” he said, by way, Tony suspected, of apology. He felt oddly affected by Gibbs’s obvious distress – Gibbs had told him he loved him but this was the first time he’d really seen the depth of his top's feelings and it was strangely comforting. “Having to stand there and watch,” Gibbs whispered, his voice choking. “Watching him touch you, hurt you, and half kill you.”

“But I’m fine now,” Tony soothed. Gibbs continued stroking his hair, and then dipped his head and claimed a sweet, tender kiss from Tony’s mouth. This was unlike his previous kisses, which had been raw and commanding – this was a kiss of comfort; for himself as much as for his sub, Tony suspected.

Then that side of Gibbs disappeared, almost instantly, to be replaced by the dangerous, feral top again. He slid another finger into Tony’s ass and Tony sighed and relaxed, opening up his body easily. This was easy – Tony loved being fucked, and knew he was going to love it even more if Gibbs was the one doing the fucking.

“What did you say about trusting me?” Gibbs whispered, fingers exploring deep into Tony’s body.

“Trust you with my life, Jethro,” Tony replied, feeling hazy as another finger slipped in. Oh god this was good.

Gibbs finger-fucked him for a few minutes until Tony was boneless and relaxed on the bed. His cock was still hard against his belly but he had a feeling he wouldn’t be coming any time soon so he just enjoyed the sensation without trying to push towards orgasm. He thought Gibbs would probably deny him his climax as a punishment if he tried to do that in any case.

Then Gibbs removed his fingers, and Tony gave a soft moan of protest.

“Ssh...I’ve been patient for long enough, Tony DiNozzo. Time I claimed you now,” Gibbs told him, in a low, throaty growl of a voice.

He pushed Tony’s legs open, rested them on his shoulders, and then settled down comfortably between them.

Tony gazed up at the ceiling, clenching the sheets in his fingers in anticipation of what was coming.

“Look at me, Tony,” Gibbs ordered, and Tony looked down to see Gibbs gazing at him. “I want you to keep looking at me while I take you,” Gibbs told him. “Don’t take your eyes off me.”

He spread Tony’s buttocks with his hands, and then pressed his hard, lubed cock into Tony’s entrance. He went slowly, and Tony hissed as he breached the ring of muscle and then slid in, deeper, inching his way in. There was a momentary familiar burn, and then Gibbs was inside him, pushing further.

Gibbs adjusted his position, and then, without warning, he thrust in deep, with one big shove of his hips, and at the same time propelled his body forward so that his hands were on either side of Tony's head, and his body was completely covering Tony's body, chest against chest, Tony's cock trapped between their bellies. Gibbs's eyes were now only a few inches away from Tony's, and that searching gaze seemed unbearably close.

Gibbs shifted a little, manoeuvring himself into a more comfortable position, and then he thrust in again, right up to the hilt.

Tony had expected to be fucked into the mattress, to be taken fast and hard until he was screaming out his top's name – but that didn't happen. All that happened was that Gibbs rested a considerable amount of his body weight on Tony, pushing his hard cock as deep inside him as it was possible to go, and then he stayed there, totally covering Tony with his body, arms resting on either side of Tony's head.

It felt too close, too intense, and Tony shifted, trying to ease the many different aches in his body, and move away from Gibbs's searching gaze.

"No, Tony - take it," Gibbs told him.

Tony stared up at him. Was this some kind of test? How long could Gibbs hold it, he wondered? The man was good but he was only human – how long could he stay this hard without thrusting?

"In case you're wondering, and I think you are...I can hold it for as long as it takes," Gibbs told him.

"As long as what takes?" Tony panted, wriggling slightly. Gibbs took hold of Tony's head between his hands, and held him still.

"I said take it," he repeated. "I'll know when we're done."

Tony felt as if time had stopped still as he lay there, on his back on the bed, his long legs resting, bent, on Gibbs's shoulders, his top's hard cock lodged deep inside him, and Gibbs's weight on his chest, holding him down. He couldn't move – he was totally trapped there.

He felt the sweat begin to pour off him. His ass felt as if it had been stretched wide open by the force and weight of his top, and the angle of penetration was so deep that all he could feel was Gibbs's hard cock inside him, pulsing deep within his body. He longed for the release of Gibbs moving his hips back, even if only for a second and even if he thrust straight back in again, but that didn't happen.

Instead, Gibbs began to rock gently, which served only to make it feel like his cock was penetrating even deeper into Tony's body.

"Oh shit," Tony said, trying to wriggle sideways again – anything to escape the intensity of

what was happening.

“Give it up to me, Tony,” Gibbs said. He was holding Tony’s head in his hands, and his thumbs gently stroked over Tony’s cheeks.

“I can’t do this...please...you have to let me up,” Tony begged. Gibbs shook his head.

“Not going to happen,” he said.

Tony had never safe-worded out of a scene in his life but this wasn’t a scene and he was suddenly very aware that he didn’t have a safe-word. Gibbs was going to make him take this and he had no choice but to surrender.

His body ached from being held down, his hole felt stretched as wide as it would go, and he was having a hard time adjusting to the depth of this penetration. He’d been fucked in this position before, but never \*pinned\*, and held down, and nobody had ever found this particular angle before. He guessed that it was partly because Gibbs’s cock was a good length and breadth, but it was also the precision of the entry. Gibbs had known exactly what he was aiming for when he’d pushed into Tony, and Tony couldn’t help but feel a healthy respect for any top this skilled. Now he really understood why Gibbs felt he didn’t need toys – why would he, when he could work a sub this expertly with just his own body?

Tony tried to concentrate on relaxing, surrendering, allowing his body to accommodate the demands Gibbs was placing on it.

“That’s good,” Gibbs told him, but all that loosening up did was give Gibbs a chance to sink even more deeply into him. Tony knew he’d never been fucked so deep before.

“Please,” he whispered again, desperately, gazing up at Gibbs. His top pressed a gentle kiss to his lips and he opened up blindly, needing the reassurance.

“You’re safe. I’ve got you,” Gibbs said, when he finished kissing him. “Now give it up. Give it all up.”

“I have,” Tony said frantically. Gibbs gave a wry smile and moved his hips, just a little, making Tony gasp.

“No. You’re nowhere near,” Gibbs told him.

“I can’t...it’s too deep...you’re everywhere,” Tony panted, trying to struggle, desperate now to push Gibbs off him. Gibbs grabbed his hands and pushed them up so that they were on either side of Tony’s head, using his weight to keep Tony in place, body pressed firmly on top of him.

“It’s easier if you give in to it,” Gibbs advised him.

Tony tried to remember to breathe, taking several big, gasping lungfuls of air.

“Who are you, Tony?” Gibbs asked him. His forearms covered Tony’s forearms, and his fingers were curled around Tony’s fingers, holding his hands in his own, keeping them pressed against the mattress.

“I’m Tony DiNozzo. I’m your agent, your sub...hell I’m whoever you damn well want me to be!” Tony screamed.

Gibbs smiled at him and kissed him again. “Calm down,” he whispered.

He shifted his hips again; it was just a tiny movement but it sent shockwaves through Tony’s body. How long had Gibbs been buried inside him like this, so deep? How long had he been lying on top of him, holding him here, claiming him like this? It felt like forever.

Gibbs kissed him again and again, and the sweetness of those tender kisses made Tony relax. The ache in his ass wasn’t so bad now – his body was starting to relax around Gibbs’s cock, learning to accommodate its presence, even as deep as it was.

“Who are you, Tony?” he heard Gibbs ask again, and his voice seemed to come from far away.

Tony closed his eyes, and saw Randolph Jordan looming over him, his belt in his hand. He flinched.

“Who are you, Tony?” Gibbs asked.

“I’m yours...honestly,” Tony said.

Gibbs shook his head. “Not yet you’re not,” he told him.

“Then what can I say to prove it?” Tony shouted. He wasn’t sure he could take much more of this, lying here, completely and utterly powerless in this man’s grasp.

“Just tell me who you are,” Gibbs whispered in his ear. “Not the fake you, not the mask you’ve hidden behind all these years. Who are you really?”

It was a year ago, and he was lying in a hospital bed, close to death, his lungs aching, his skin covered in sweat. He could hear Kate crying, and the low murmur of Ducky’s voice as he comforted her.

“He’s dying,” she was saying, and he wondered who she was talking about.

“The hell he is,” a familiar voice said, and then he saw Gibbs, standing by his bed. “Tony – you will not die. Understand?” Gibbs said. He wanted to. He felt so ill and it would be so easy just to slip away, and give into it. He felt a sharp tap on his head and opened his eyes, startled. “You will not die,” Gibbs commanded. “You do not have my permission to die, boy.”

“No, boss,” he replied, and he took a deep, ragged breath. Following that easy path to death was no longer an option – Gibbs had taken it away from him. He had no choice now - he had to live.

“Who are you, Tony?” Gibbs asked. He moved his hips again and Tony gasped and convulsed, whimpering beneath him.

It was five years ago, and he was sitting behind a table in an interview room at NCIS. A tall man with steel grey hair, piercing blue eyes, and an aura of total control strode into the room. Tony sat back in his chair lazily; no top with a power complex was going to scare him. He flashed the man his best subby smile – it never failed to work. If he threw in a blowjob as well then he'd as good as have the job. Gibbs raised an eyebrow at him, as if he'd read his mind, and Tony flushed, feeling suddenly small and stupid.

“So, you’ve been fired from or had to leave five different jobs in the past eight years,” Gibbs said. “Tell me why I should take a chance on you, DiNozzo.”

Blue eyes seemed to scour his soul and he shifted, uneasily, in his chair. He knew of Special Agent Gibbs by reputation but he hadn’t thought he’d ever meet a top who could actually make him feel anything other than contempt.

“Well, I don’t know, Agent Gibbs,” he drawled. “But I hear your last agent just shipped out, so maybe you should hire me because you’re as desperate as I am.”

“Oh son.” Gibbs shook his head, laughing. “Trust me, nobody is as desperate as you are right now.”

“I don’t know what you want from me,” Tony told Gibbs wearily. “I didn’t back then and I don’t now. I just want to belong to you. That’s all I’ve ever wanted from the day I met you.”

“I know,” Gibbs told him, and his body felt warm and comforting pressed against him. “There’s more. Keep going.”

It was a little over five years ago, and he was standing in a room in Baltimore PD, with his boss, and his partner.

“Sorry, Tony,” his boss told him, shaking her head. “You’re going to have to take one for the team.”

“But you said...” he began, and then he figured it out. She smiled, and glanced at his partner and Tony knew he was right. “Okay. I get it. You used me. Thanks, Dana – and thanks to you too, buddy,” he said bitterly to his partner, a man he'd trusted with his life out there on the streets.

“That’s the way it goes, Tony,” Dana told him. “View it as a learning experience.”

“What was I supposed to learn? Not to trust the tops I sleep with? I don’t, Dana. I never have. Which is why I taped you and why you’re going to let me resign, instead of being fired,” Tony snapped, watching the smile fade from her face to be replaced by something a good deal less pleasant.

“Fuck you, Tony,” she hissed.

“Oh you already did – royally,” he replied.

He gazed up, blankly, to find Gibbs staring down at him. “Don’t ever betray me, Jethro,” he whispered.

“I won’t, Tony,” Gibbs replied, and he kissed him again, very gently. “Keep going,” he said. “Give it all up to me. Where are you now?”

“I’m getting married again,” his father told him. Tony laughed out loud, and then his smile faded.

“Seriously?” he asked. “You? You think you can stay faithful to any sub for more than five minutes?”

His father’s expression darkened. “Your mom was the one who cheated on me, remember,” he snapped. “And as for promiscuous – you take after your mother there too, just like in everything else. Sneaking out, whoring around”

“If you weren’t always drunk and didn’t abandon me in hotel suites all the time then maybe I wouldn’t need to go out and find my own entertainment!”

“Damn it, Tony, I can’t control you any more. You always do what the hell you like, no matter what I say. Frankly, you’re an embarrassment, and I think you and I just need to accept that we’re never going to get along.”

Tony felt as if he’d been punched in the gut. “If that’s what you think,” he said quietly.

“It is. And I don’t want you hanging around here screwing up my new marriage. I’m sending you away to boarding school.”

“Fine by me. Last thing I want is to have to stay here and watch you play happy families anyway.”

His view of Gibbs seemed suddenly hazy, and he felt his top’s thumbs sweep over his eyes, gently wiping away the tears.

“Yeah...like I said, daddy issues,” Tony whispered.

“Uh-huh,” Gibbs murmured, his thumbs sweeping broad strokes across his face, taking the moisture away. “What’s left, Tony?”



Gibbs's body didn't feel suffocating any more, and his cock didn't feel intrusive either, lodged deep inside him. It felt good, and he thought that maybe he could stay in this position forever. He wanted Gibbs here, inside him, on top of him, everywhere around him, for as long as he lived.

He was ten, standing by his mother's grave, watching his father take a gulp from the flask of whisky he carried in the pocket of his big, black coat. He had a sudden dawning realisation that things would never be the same again. His mother, his beautiful, exotic, playful, teasing, enchanting mother had gone, and his father had changed overnight from a handsome, vigorous young man, into this bitter, angry person.

"Come on, time to go, Tony," his father said, placing a hand on his shoulder.

"Time to go," Tony whispered. Gibbs kissed him again, and Tony gazed up at him blearily.

"Time to let it go," Gibbs told him firmly. "Who are you, Tony?"

He was nine years old, before his mom had died and his dad had changed before his eyes. He remembered watching her work a room full of tops at a party. She was so beautiful, so well dressed and elegant, so fantastically good at flirting. No wonder none of the tops in the room could take their eyes off her.

"Watch and learn, Tony," she told him, with a wink. "Tops are easy but they can be dangerous. You need to learn how to use them before they use you. Always stay one step ahead and then they can't hurt you. And never surrender – just let them think you have. If you give them everything they'll lose interest and move on to the next sub."

He convulsed up under Gibbs, trying to throw him off one last time but Gibbs held steady, and kept him pinned down beneath him.

"If I tell you, then you'll leave," Tony hissed. "I can't do it."

"Yes you can, Tony. Who are you?" Gibbs said, insistently.

Tony felt lost, all his certainties gone. Who was he? Who was he really? He'd been hiding for so long that he'd almost forgotten.

"I'm a sub," he said. "I've known that since the day I was old enough to know anything, and all I ever wanted was to find a top to trust in. I want to be that sub I always felt I was, in my bones. I want to be him but everything else got in the way. Can I be him again, Jethro?"

"You already are, Tony," Gibbs told him. "You always were. Other people just screwed you up along the way."

Gibbs's body seemed so comforting now. Tony didn't know why he'd found it so hard to accept his weight before. Now it seemed like the most natural thing in the world. His whole

body felt loose and relaxed, open and content. Their bodies were meant to be together like this, joined as one – it felt so right.

“I can’t feel where I end and you begin now,” he murmured.

“Good,” Gibbs said, and then he kissed him again, and as he did so he moved his hips back a little, and then thrust forward - just a tiny movement. Tony gasped as his body protested the change. Gibbs thrust again, harder this time, and he hit Tony’s sweet spot, making fireworks spark. “That feel good?” Gibbs asked.

“Oh yeah,” he sighed, gazing up at Gibbs with shining eyes. “So good.”

Gibbs smiled and moved his hips again, getting into a rhythmic motion of long, slow strokes that hit Tony’s prostate with each inward thrust. Tony arched up like a cat, abandoning himself totally to Gibbs, submitting completely to whatever his top wanted to do to him.

“That’s good, Tony...that’s beautiful...” Gibbs murmured. He moved his body like a precision weapon, expertly ramming home with every thrust. Tony was lost in the sensation, lost in the moment, and lost in Gibbs as his top claimed him completely. He offered himself up without reservation, letting Gibbs take whatever he wanted from him. Their bodies were moving together in perfect synchronised time and he knew that he'd follow this man to the end of the universe and do whatever he asked of him.

“Now come for me...come with me,” Gibbs ordered, and Tony felt a hand wrap around his cock, and rub with firm, hard strokes.

The combination of Gibbs’s cock hitting his prostate, and Gibbs’s hand on his own cock sent him over the edge and within seconds he was coming, white lights exploding in his head. He couldn’t see or hear anything, but he could feel Gibbs still inside him, and that was all that was connecting him to the world right now.

Time passed. He wasn’t sure how long but now he was on his side and there was a blanket over him, and Gibbs wasn’t inside him any more. His hole felt stretched and sore and his body ached all over but he felt utterly content, in a way he’d never felt before.

Gibbs was lying beside him, facing him, one hand resting on Tony’s hip, possessive and reassuring at the same time. Tony moved forward, and buried his face in the crook of Gibbs’s neck, then wrapped his arm around Gibbs’s back, needing to feel that solid weight of comfort again.

“I’ve got you, Tony. Now and always,” Gibbs told him, kissing his hair and stroking his hip gently. “You belong to me now, Tony. You're all mine.”

~\*~

Gibbs was too exhilarated to sleep. His arms were full of his newly collared sub and he couldn't remember when he'd last felt this content. Tony was exhausted, slumbering

peacefully, body nestled against Gibbs as if he wanted to burrow into him.

Gibbs wasn't surprised Tony was so tired – he was straight out of the infirmary after all, and he'd just surrendered his whole being up to Gibbs – no wonder he was shattered. They had shared something intense today; Gibbs had never taken a sub down further, or had one offer themselves up to him so completely.

It had been such a moving experience, and he felt an old, familiar sense of his own dominance coursing through his veins, in a warm, surging flow. Tony was his now, in every single way. He would protect the sub in his bed with his life if need be, and fight any top who went near him. It had been years since he had felt this way but in taking Tony for the first time he'd somehow reconnected with a part of himself that he'd buried a long time ago.

He had been so in tune with his sub, had felt Tony's struggle and stayed with him as he went down into himself. Then he had been there for him, firm, dependable and unyielding, when Tony reached the core of himself and found who he really was, deep inside.

Gibbs allowed his fingers to drift, lazily, over the golden skin of Tony's shoulder; his sub was so beautiful. He kissed Tony's neck, and nuzzled at his hair, and Tony moved even closer, muttering in his sleep.

Gibbs almost felt like laughing – this sub, this amazingly responsive boy, had been under his nose for years and he hadn't taken him seriously. He hadn't lifted his head out of his own ass for long enough to see the soul-mate sitting just across the room from him at work. Now he had this boy here, naked and well fucked in his bed, Gibbs couldn't believe he'd been such a blind idiot.

All those years of watching Tony prance and perform for him and he'd never seen the perfect sub beneath the entertaining act.

He allowed Tony to sleep for a couple of hours, and then kissed him awake.

"Wha...?" Tony sat up, his hair sticking up, dishevelled. He was disoriented for a moment, and blinked, blearily, and then he remembered where he was and his eyes lit up as he responded eagerly to Gibbs's passionate kisses.

Gibbs moved the sheets aside, revealing his sub's naked body; Tony whimpered and tried to pull them back and snuggle under them again, still half asleep. Gibbs stopped his hand with his own.

"You won't sleep tonight if you don't get up now," he said. "Besides...I want to examine you."

"Hmmm. Sounds promising," Tony murmured with a wide yawn, before closing his eyes again.

Gibbs smacked him – hard – on the ass, and Tony yelped, and sat up, fully awake now.

"When I tell you I want to examine you, you'll get into position to be examined," Gibbs told him. Tony gazed at him, green eyes wide. "Hands and knees," Gibbs ordered. Tony scrambled quickly into position and Gibbs had to smother a grin – this boy was eating out of his hand right now.

He ran his fingers over Tony's back, checking that their vigorous activity earlier hadn't caused any damage to his healing scars but they were fine. Then he moved lower, and pulled Tony's ass cheeks apart with his hands to check he hadn't torn him earlier. He'd been careful, and prepped Tony thoroughly, but even so, he'd stretched him wide open for a long period of time and he wanted to be sure there wasn't any damage. Tony's hole was a little pink around the edges but it looked fine. Gibbs grabbed the lube and slid his finger into Tony's ass. He was looser now than he had been a few hours ago and his finger slipped in easily. Tony bit on his lip.

"Hurt?" Gibbs asked.

"A bit sore, yeah," Tony told him. Gibbs slapped his ass again with his free hand, making Tony jump.

"Then you tell me without waiting to be asked – you're mine now, and if anything's hurting I need to know about it."

"Yes, Jethro." Tony grinned at him over his shoulder. "It's kind of a good hurt," he said, with a wink.

Gibbs ran his hands over the rest of Tony's body, checking him all over, and then, satisfied his sub was fine, he drew back.

"Hungry?"

"Starving." Tony nodded.

"Then let's eat."

Gibbs got out of bed and pulled on some sweatpants and a tee shirt. Tony followed him, naked save for his collar.

"Where are you going?" Gibbs asked, as Tony headed for his old bedroom.

"Bathrobe." Tony pointed. "All my stuff's still in there."

"You look fine just the way you are," Gibbs said, beckoning him over. He didn't want Tony covered up right now; he wanted to look at his newly collared sub and drink in the sight of him. Tony looked a little startled by that but he came towards him. Gibbs grabbed him, enjoying the sensation of having a sub to fondle again after so long. He kissed Tony again,

moving his hands possessively over Tony's back and buttocks as he did so, and then released him and went into the kitchen. Tony followed him, stark naked.

Gibbs filled the kettle with water and placed it on the hob and then leaned against the wall and watched Tony get some cups out of the cupboard. He liked how big Tony's body was – solid and well muscled - and he liked the way Tony's cock swung as he moved. Tony turned, giving Gibbs a good view of his firm round ass. Unable to resist he went over and ran a hand over the tight globes of flesh.

"Made for fucking and spanking," he said. He took another look. "And biting," he added. He'd been spanking Tony on his bare ass for years and he couldn't believe he'd been able to resist it for all this time. If he'd been alone he'd have slapped the back of his own head for being so blind for so long.

"Well it's yours, so any time, Jethro," Tony told him.

"Too right it's mine." Gibbs took a handful of firm, plump flesh and squeezed, and Tony leaned back against him. Gibbs pressed a kiss to the back of his sub's neck, just above his collar. Then he slapped Tony's ass and shoved him out of the kitchen so he could make them some toast.

Tony didn't go far – he just hovered in the doorway, hair still sticking up on end. After a couple of minutes he sidled back in, and then he followed Gibbs around the kitchen.

Gibbs knew what was going on here – he'd taken Tony right down, and that left a sub feeling vulnerable. He had expected Tony might need some physical reassurance after an experience that intense.

It was strange seeing Tony like this, without his usual teasing mask. He wasn't saying much – in fact he seemed uncharacteristically subdued and Gibbs would have been worried about him if it wasn't for the way those green eyes were glowing.

Gibbs made a pile of toast and put it on a plate, then added it to the tray with their coffee. They went and sat down at the table and Gibbs took a bite of his toast and then held it out to Tony, without a second thought. Tony gazed at him for a second, a tiny hint of a question in his eyes. Gibbs waved the toast at him impatiently and Tony grinned, and took a bite, and then they ate it companionably.

Gibbs didn't give a damn about any sharing-a-plate rituals – all that crap about getting down on one knee and asking a sub to share your plate, or buying some fancypants big plate and presenting it to the object of your affection in a romantic setting. Tony shared his bed so of course he'd share his plate as well. No need to dress it up and have everyone send them those dumbass Hallmark cards about it. Tony was his, so he'd feed him; simple as that.

"We don't have to go anywhere today, do we?" Tony asked as they ate.

"Thought you were eager to do some sightseeing?" Gibbs raised an eyebrow. It was late

afternoon – still time to do something if they wanted.

"Not today. I can't talk to anyone today, if that's okay. I just want to be here, alone, with you," Tony said.

Gibbs nodded. Tony looked as if he'd undergone some kind of transformation. His eyes were still glowing, and there was a stillness to him that Gibbs had never seen before. He knew Tony was still deep in his sub-space and taking him anywhere today would be an act of cruelty.

"Sure," Gibbs said. "Rodney said something about some movies he's uploaded onto the Atlantis mainframe. Haven't a clue how to work that but I could call him and find out."

"Okay." Tony didn't look remotely interested in the prospect of watching a movie, which really wasn't like him. He took another bite of the toast Gibbs was holding out.

"I'll go down to the cafeteria later and bring back some proper food," Gibbs said. Tony's eyes flashed with anxiety and Gibbs could have kicked himself – it'd been so long since he'd taken a sub this far down that he'd forgotten how it could be. Tony wouldn't want him to be out of his sight for awhile yet. "Correction – I'll call someone and ask them to deliver room service," he said.

"They do that?" Tony frowned. "It's not a hotel."

"They'll do it if I ask," Gibbs replied firmly.

"So...what happens when we go home?" Tony asked, that spike of anxiety still there, in his eyes.

"You move into my place. Consider yourself chained to my bed from now on – figuratively speaking," Gibbs said, with a little grin. "After I've claimed a sub, I don't like sleeping in an empty bed - ever. Besides, I want you naked and available whenever I'm in the mood to take you."

Tony moved his head down at that, and rubbed it against Gibbs's free hand, looking for a stroke. Gibbs felt winded – this boy was so beautifully submissive he'd be the death of him. He ran his hand obligingly through Tony's short hair, smoothing out all the bedhead spikes. Tony leaned into his hand like a cat, and Gibbs thought he could never get enough of stroking him.

He got up and Tony followed him immediately, as he'd known he would. Gibbs cleared the table and then ordered Tony to kneel beside him in the kitchen to keep him in one place and avoid tripping over him while he did the dishes. Tony was so zoned out that he leaned his head against Gibbs's thigh while he worked, and Gibbs couldn't resist reaching down and stroking his soft hair every so often. He could imagine that when Tony wasn't this far down he would protest at being ordered to kneel in one place for any length of time but right now Tony was eating out of his hand.

He clicked his fingers and Tony got up and followed hard on his heels out into the living area. Gibbs sat down on the couch and pulled Tony down beside him. Tony saw the laptop on the coffee table, the data-stick still sticking out of it, and frowned.

"Evidence?" he asked.

"Yeah. I was checking up on something yesterday," Gibbs replied.

"What kind of something?" Tony asked.

"Just some footage Jordan took that I wanted to check."

Tony stiffened. "Footage from in the room?" he asked. Gibbs could have kicked himself for laying himself wide open to that one.

"No," he said carefully. "Footage from when he shot Tim."

"Right." Tony nodded. "You have footage from inside the room though, don't you?"

Gibbs sighed. "Yes, we do," he said. "It was all captured on the Atlantis servers and transferred to data sticks for us to take home and file as evidence on this case."

"Who did the transfer? McGee?" Tony's shoulders were tight and tense. Gibbs put a hand on them and felt them relax, immediately, beneath his caress.

"No – Rodney Sheppard did it. The only people who have seen that evidence are the people who were there, or the people who already saw it as it was happening. Nobody else," Gibbs reassured him. "Tony – it might help if you told them about it - Ziva and Tim? They're on the team after all."

"Not yet." Tony shook his head. "Have you watched it?"

"No." Gibbs felt his gut tighten. "I already saw it once – that was enough."

"I haven't seen it," Tony said.

"No, and I don't think it's a good idea you do see it, either," Gibbs told him.

"Okay," Tony said, and Gibbs wondered if he'd said that too fast and too easily.

Gibbs called Rodney, and between them he and Tony figured out how to pull up a list of movies from the Atlantis mainframe movie library on the laptop.

"I always knew I'd miss the McGeek one of these fine days," Tony said, after Rodney talked them through it the third time, in tones of growing impatience. "Where is he anyhow? And, more importantly, who is he with?" He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

"I guess you'll find out – in time," Gibbs told him, with a grin. He put his feet up on the couch and pulled Tony between his open legs. Tony's large frame settled effortlessly against Gibbs's body. Gibbs loved the lack of awkwardness, and the way Tony responded so readily to his non-verbal commands. Their bodies were in tune with each other, fitting seamlessly together. Tony's naked back rested against his chest, and Tony's head fitted easily in the space between his shoulder and his neck. He put an arm around Tony's body and stroked his bare chest idly with his fingers.

"Better than working on the boat?" Tony asked, glancing up at him.

"Oh yeah. Working on you is definitely better than working on the boat!" Gibbs chuckled.

He clicked the mouse and pulled up the list of available movies, then scrolled down.

"Oh, I think it has to be that one, don't you?" he said, pointing.

"The Wrath of Khan?" Tony wriggled happily between his legs. "You sure, Jethro? Doesn't sound like your kind of thing."

"You kidding? I have to check out the competition," Gibbs snorted. "Ricardo Montalban?" he whispered in Tony's ear. His fingers found Tony's nipple and he squeezed, a bit too hard. Tony convulsed against him, laughing.

"Oh he's nowhere near as hot as you, Jethro," Tony said. "Trust me."

"That's what I like to hear, boy," he said, with another squeeze.

Gibbs wasn't all that interested in the movie, although he could see why a teenage Tony had had the hots for the eponymous Khan, all blazing muscles and dark, tippy looks, with a kind of cultured arrogance that a young sub might find attractive.

Gibbs had never been all that into movies, although he guessed he was going to have to start sitting through a damn sight more of them now he had taken this particular sub into his bed. The movie wasn't important though – what made the experience so pleasurable was lying on the couch with a naked, compliant, utterly submissive Tony DiNozzo in his arms.

They watched the movie, ate the dinner Gibbs managed to talk one of the kitchen staff into delivering, and then watched another movie. Tony followed him around whenever he moved – even into the bathroom.

Gibbs loved these first few hours after taking a sub deep into their own sub-space. There was so much gentle bonding – it was like taming a wild animal, making them yours forever, and he realised his touch was as sure with Tony as it had been when he'd first collared Shannon. The subsequent three spouses, when he'd got it spectacularly wrong because he didn't really love them, were now just bad memories.



He made sure to kiss Tony deeply and often, and touched him intimately, without asking, just as frequently. He stroked Tony's ass, pinched his nipples, fingered his cock, cupped his balls, ran his hands over Tony's bare skin, and touched his lips to his body incessantly for the rest of the day. Submission wasn't always easy, and Tony needed to know that his body was no longer his own – it belonged to Gibbs now, to touch as often as he liked, in any way he liked. Tony didn't seem to struggle with that concept at all. Gibbs had known subs who found the transition from autonomous, private person, to collared submissive pretty damn hard; it wasn't easy to suddenly belong to another person, and to surrender your body to them. Accepting that your own body was now the sexual plaything of another person and out of your control was a hard mental shift to make, even for a born submissive. That was why Gibbs liked to take his subs right down the first time he bedded them, and give them a taste of how good it could be if they surrendered, unconditionally, from the outset. He knew some tops liked to go slow and sometimes that was appropriate, depending on the sub, but he'd always thought that it often wasn't the kindness it was intended to be. Far better to overwhelm a sub in the first few hours, and then bring them slowly up to the surface, supporting them all the way, than prolong the taking down over several weeks, giving them a false expectation of what life as his collared sub was going to be like.

By the time they went to bed a few hours later, Tony was so relaxed, and so sensitised to his touch, that it was an easy matter for Gibbs to pull him close, slide his hard cock into Tony's open, willing body, and make love to him sweetly and tenderly before they both fell fast asleep.

~\*~

Tony woke with a start. He was lying on his side, his head resting on Gibbs's shoulder, his arm slung across Gibbs's stomach. Both Gibbs's arms were loosely cradled around him, and it felt good. He moved his head and glanced at Gibbs's watch. The illuminated dial told him it was twelve minutes past three. He lay there for a moment, contemplating what he intended to do.

Something in his gut told him that Gibbs was right, and he shouldn't do this, but something else was insistent. He *\*had\** to do this. He wished he was back in that place he'd been in a few short hours ago, when the only thing he *\*had\** to do was stay in constant physical contact with his top. He had never experienced his own sub-space so deeply before and he wished it was a place he could stay in permanently. Things had been much simpler when all that mattered was being as close to Gibbs as possible, leaning into each caress, and wanting only to be petted and held.

It was a wrench to leave the circle of Gibbs's arms, and slide out from under the sheets. Gibbs shifted, and moaned.

"Tony?" he muttered, half-asleep.

"Just going to the bathroom, Jethro," Tony lied.

He got up, and tiptoed towards the door. He passed the armchair on the way and snagged his jeans, soundlessly. He was good at sneaking around – he'd been doing it his whole life and knew how to move almost as soundlessly as Gibbs when he really put his mind to it.

He went into the living room and shut the door quietly behind him. Then he pulled on his jeans and glanced around. Gibbs had to be storing the evidence from the case somewhere – question was, where? He could have stowed it in one of the now empty bedrooms that the other team members had occupied but Tony suspected the most obvious place was the little sitting room off to one side that Ducky had made his own when they first arrived.

He moved quietly over to the room, and silently opened the door and then closed it behind him. He turned the dimmer on the light down low before switching it on, and then glanced around. He'd been right; the room was full of boxes, all neatly labelled, just the way Gibbs liked them. He found some of their gear over to one side and located a flashlight, and then turned off the main light – it was a risk to have turned it on in the first place. Then he used the flashlight to go through the boxes. It didn't take him long to find what he was looking for. There was a box full of neatly labelled data sticks. He found the one he was looking for and then left the room, as silently as he had entered it.

He went over to the coffee table and placed the data stick in the laptop, then sat down on the couch in front of it. He turned the sound down low, paused for a moment, took a deep breath, and then pointed the mouse at the screen.

"Okay, let's do this, Tony," he whispered.

~\*~

Gibbs rolled over and reached for his sub, only to find the bed empty. Judging by how cold that side of the bed was it had been empty for some time. Gibbs glanced at the bathroom door but there was no light shining beneath it. His gut tightened and he knew, immediately, that something was wrong.

He got up, pulled on his sweatpants and tee shirt, reached for his gun, and then edged cautiously over to the door. He could hear faint noises in the lounge – noises he didn't like the sound of. Gibbs raised his gun, opened the door silently, looked outside, and then sighed, and lowered his gun again.

Tony was sitting on the couch, bare feet resting on the coffee table, knees bent, his arms around his legs, staring at the laptop in front of him. He was wearing a pair of jeans and nothing else. It was just starting to get light outside, and Gibbs could see that Tony was no longer in that sweet headspace he'd been in the previous evening. Now his face was drawn and pale, his eyes transfixed by what he was viewing – and Gibbs had no doubt at all what that was.

"Oh Tony," Gibbs said, shaking his head.

Tony glanced up. "Sorry," he said quietly. "But I had to see it for myself. Memory of that day

is kind of hazy...and I wanted to see what everyone else saw – know how bad it was.”

Gibbs walked over to the couch and dropped down on it beside his sub. He removed the cartridge from his gun and placed them both on the table.

“Scared I’ll do something stupid?” Tony asked.

“No.” Gibbs shook his head. “You don’t have my permission to do anything \*that\* stupid,” he growled. “Ever. Got me?”

“Yeah. Not my style anyway. I fast-forwarded through some of it but I’m just getting to the good bit,” Tony said, nodding at the laptop. “Jordan just came into the room.”

Gibbs glanced at the screen – it was as he remembered it, the stuff of nightmares, and he’d give good money not to have to watch it again but he damn well wasn’t going to let Tony watch it alone. Tony paused the picture and turned to glance at him.

“You going to make me turn it off?” he asked.

“No.” Gibbs shook his head.

“You angry I snuck out here to watch it?”

“No. You and I are going to have a little chat about you lying to me though,” Gibbs said. Tony looked confused. “You said you were going to the head,” Gibbs reminded him.

“Oh. Yeah. Sorry. You gonna spank me for that?” he asked.

‘Never lie to the boss’ was rule number one in Gibbs’s long list of rules for his subs and he’d been drumming it into Tony for five years – but in fact it was the rule Tony had the least problem with. Gibbs didn’t think his sub had lied to him very often in all that time – not to get out of trouble anyway. Tony didn’t have a problem with taking the consequences of his actions – he might be disobedient on occasion but he usually owned up to it and took what was coming without complaint.

“No, I’m not going to spank you for that,” Gibbs told him, wondering if he was going soft in his old age. But he’d had to terminate the sessions with Dr Heightmeyer out of respect for the poor woman’s sanity, and Tony clearly had unfinished business here. He trusted Tony’s instincts – if he thought he needed to see this then he did, and maybe it would help both of them finally put this behind them. “I might spank you for doing this alone though. You should have woken me up, Tony.”

“Sorry. Thought you might not let me watch it if I asked.” Tony shrugged.

“For the record – that’s never a good reason for not keeping me in the loop,” Gibbs told him tersely. “But this is your call.” Gibbs gazed at Tony thoughtfully. “If you need to do it then we’ll do it. Together.”

"I get these flashes," Tony explained. "And sometimes I'm not sure what's real and what I'm hallucinating. I thought the room was under water at one point but it looks like that bit wasn't real." He gave a haunted little grin.

"It wasn't," Gibbs confirmed.

"And you heard all this stuff? Me raving on about my childhood and how I felt about you and all that shit to Rodney?"

"Yeah."

"I called you a cold-hearted bastard," Tony said.

"I know. I deserved it," Gibbs replied.

Tony gazed at him thoughtfully, and then nodded. He glanced back at the screen, and pointed the mouse at it again.

Gibbs hoped he'd be able to handle this, but at the same time he knew he didn't have any choice. Tony needed to do this and Gibbs wasn't going to let him do it alone. What had he once said to Ziva? That a good top put the needs of their sub before their own? He had always tried to live by that rule and he wasn't going to stop now. This was a sub worth going through hell for – and besides, he owed Tony.

Jordan was pacing the room, talking at the camera. Gibbs could hear his own replies, out of shot. Tony watched, his half naked body stiff and still. Gibbs put a hand on his sub's neck, and gently stroked the soft, bare skin as they watched.

"You like keeping him on edge, you like making him work hard for your approval," Jordan was saying. "When you give it to him it's in these grudging little morsels that always leave him wanting more because it's never quite enough, is it?"

"It helps him stay good at his job," he heard himself reply. "I get the best out of him that way."

Gibbs felt his hand tighten, involuntarily, on Tony's neck.

"You've been playing me a long time, Jethro," Tony said quietly.

"Yeah, I know," Gibbs replied. He deserved that.

"And is it always about the job? Or is it sometimes more personal?"

There was an agonisingly long pause, and then, without warning, Jordan reached out and landed a smacking backhand on Tony's jaw.

Beside him Tony jumped, startled. "Should have answered up sooner there, Jethro," he muttered.

"I was thinking about it," Gibbs growled. He could feel the stiffness in Tony's bare shoulders, beneath his hand. He wondered if either of them would be able to survive watching this through to the end but he also knew they had to get it out of the way, or it would stay with them forever.

"He's besotted with you and you've been cruel to this boy, Gibbs, keeping him on edge when you could have taken him to your bed and given him what he wants. Instead you made him work for it, didn't you? You made him work for everything - every word of praise, every fond look, and every smile. I almost feel sorry for him."

Gibbs felt as if he'd been hit in the face with his own shortcomings, and it hurt. It especially hurt now, after having taken Tony to his bed and making him surrender to him so completely and so sweetly. He felt like a total bastard.

Tony was chewing on his lip, thoughtfully, not saying a word. Gibbs winced, and wondered what was going on in his sub's mind. Maybe this would be the shortest-lived collaring in his life, and Tony would fling that brand new collar back in his face by the time they'd finished watching.

On the screen, Jordan delivered another backhander to Tony in retaliation for Gibbs looking away.

"In my defence, that was damn hard to watch," Gibbs muttered.

Tony didn't say a word. They watched as Jordan untied Tony and Tony made a clumsy pass at him, stealing the keys to Rodney's chains in the process.

"There - see," Tony pointed. "I did good there, boss."

"Tony, you're the best agent I have," Gibbs told him. "I knew you'd pull something out of that situation, however bad it looked." He got the feeling this point was important. Jordan had stolen something from Tony that day, and Tony hadn't yet been able to get it back, whatever it was. That was what this was about.

Jordan was throwing Tony down now, and licking the back of his neck.

"Eew." Tony wriggled his shoulders, dislodging Gibbs's hand in the process.

They watched as Rodney tried to knock Jordan out with the chain, and Jordan slammed it into the scientist's forehead. Now it was Tony's turn to wince.

"Poor Rodney. He should've just run," he said.

"I knew he wouldn't." Gibbs shook his head.

“Wish I’d been nicer to him, you know, back when we first got here. Accusing him of murdering Keller was a really dumb move on my part,” Tony sighed.

“We all have our blind spots,” Gibbs replied. Then he tensed. “I really don’t like this next bit,” he said.

Tony scrunched up his shoulders and gripped his knees more tightly as onscreen Jordan undid his belt and drew it out of his pants. The blow landed, and the sound of Tony’s scream sliced through the air. Tony jumped, visibly, re-living the moment when that first blow had hit his shoulders. Gibbs wanted to slam his hand down on the laptop and put an end to this, and it took every ounce of his self-control to stop himself doing just that.

“Please, Jordan. I’m begging you. You want me to say I’m sorry about Ducky – I will. Anything you want, I’ll say it. You’re the big dom here, Jordan, not me. You’ve won. I’m sorry. Just don’t hurt him again. Please.”

Tony glanced at Gibbs. “You apologised?” he said, one eyebrow raised. “Sign of weakness you know,” he added, and Gibbs was relieved to hear the hint of mischief in his voice.

“I’d have done anything at that point to make it stop. I’d do anything, right now, to make it stop as well,” Gibbs growled.

“Not yet.” Tony turned back to the screen.

Gibbs didn’t remember the beating going on this long before but now it seemed to stretch on for hours. Tony looked like something that had been chewed up and spat out; naked, half-dead, his shoulders covered in welts as Jordan whipped him mercilessly with the buckle end of his belt.

Gibbs felt his hands tightening into fists. He wanted to go out there, find Jordan, and slam his knife into him all over again.

“Easy,” Tony murmured, glancing at him again. They stared at each other for a moment, and Gibbs knew, with a sudden flash of insight, that he’d met his match in this sub. Tony was making him take something, the way he’d made Tony take something yesterday – and he was getting a glimpse of that inner steel that Tony usually kept so well hidden.

“Back then – I thought he’d broken you at this point,” Gibbs said, pointing at the screen, where Jordan had dispensed with his belt and was now groping Tony’s ass. He felt like he was going to be physically sick at the sight of it.

“Only person who could ever break me would be you, Jethro,” Tony told him, and they stared at each other again. Gibbs exhaled slowly, and nodded.

“I know,” he said softly. “Won’t ever happen,” he added.

Tony nodded back at him. "I believe you," he said.

Tony's face now filled the screen as he gazed desperately into the camera and he seemed to be talking straight at them.

"I don't know why you came for me in person and not the others, but I'm guessing it was a bluff to throw him off the scent. So tell him the truth. Tell him it doesn't matter to you, tell him \*I\* don't matter to you."

"Can't do that, Tony," came back Gibbs's reply. "He already knows it's not true."

"But it is..."

"No. No, it isn't. I love you, Tony. I've loved you since the minute you walked into that interview room in that crumpled shirt, and shot me that stupid DiNozzo smile - the one you think charms all the tops. Didn't work on me, but the eyes did. That expression in your eyes - the one you can't fake, the one that made me want to slam you down on the table and make you understand who you belong to. You've been pushing me for a long time, Tony, but you didn't need to. You had me all along."

"Then why...?"

"I wasn't ready. Sorry, Tony."

"Never say you're sorry - sign of weakness."

"Not with you."

Tony turned to face him.

"That was the bit I wanted to see," he said. "I couldn't remember it properly and I wanted to make sure I had it right."

"You had it right, Tony," Gibbs said softly, looking down at his hands. He understood now why they were doing this, and why it was necessary that they did this. Tony reached out, put a finger under his chin, and raised his face so that he was looking at him.

"You said sorry," Tony said. "And you said it to me."

Gibbs managed a faint grin. "First time for everything," he muttered.

"We could have done this five years' ago, you know," Tony said, fingering his collar. "You made me wait a long time, Jethro."

"You already know what a stubborn bastard I am," Gibbs reminded him. "Besides - you hid the truth from me all that time, Tony. I was just thinking about how little you've lied to me but all the time you were hiding one great big lie."

“And did you believe that lie?” Tony asked.

Gibbs hesitated, and then shook his head. “No,” he replied.

“You’re right about one thing – you are a bastard,” Tony told him.

“I never said I wasn’t,” Gibbs sighed. “Got three ex-spouses say the exact same thing. You gonna make it four?”

“We’re not married and you don’t get rid of me that easily,” Tony told him tersely.

Gibbs felt out of his depth. He never had been good at dealing with these kind of complicated emotions and Tony...Tony was surprisingly adept at it; more adept than Gibbs would have suspected.

Tony turned back to the screen, where Jordan had his pants open and his hands were pulling at Tony’s ass, seeking entry. It was too much for him. Gibbs fought down a wave of nausea and shot up, strode over to the wall, and slammed his hand against it, unable to watch.

Tony watched though. Gibbs could hear the sounds playing out behind him, could hear Tony’s rasping breathing and Jordan’s sickening panting as he tried to rape him.

“This is the bit I don’t remember,” Tony said. “Wow – you guys just appeared from nowhere...and...oh. Right.” He fell silent. Gibbs heard his own voice, low and chilling.

“Nobody hurts what’s mine and lives. And Tony DiNozzo is mine.”

He heard the knife go in, and Jordan’s agonised scream as he twisted it, slowly, once, then twice. Then a crack and a thud as Sheppard broke the man’s neck and dumped him on the floor like the trash he was. Then silence.

He heard Tony get up, and come over to him, and then he was being turned around and a pair of green eyes was too close.

“So, you say you’ve been in love with me since you first met me?” Tony said.

“Yeah.” Gibbs gazed at his bare feet, knowing exactly what was coming next.

“And how long have you known I was in love with you?” Tony asked quietly. Gibbs didn’t reply. “How long, Jethro?” Tony insisted, banging the wall beside Gibbs’s head with a hard slap of his hand, an interrogation technique he’d learned from his top – all too well it seemed.

“About the same amount of time,” Gibbs admitted. He raised his chin, offering it up, waiting for Tony to hit him. He deserved it, and he’d take it if Tony wanted to dish it out. Tony just



gazed at him, and Gibbs realised he'd never seen Tony lose his temper. He wasn't seeing it now, either. Tony didn't let off steam the same way Gibbs did – he just went quiet and intense when he was feeling angry.

“Maybe not consciously,” Gibbs continued, in a hoarse tone. “But I knew in my gut. I made excuses the whole time, but I knew, and yes, Tony, I used it to motivate you, and get the best out of you on the job, and I knew I was doing that, even if I never admitted it to myself.”

Tony stood back, but that intense gaze didn't let up. “So why didn't you say anything before now, Jethro?”

“Because I didn't want to hurt you,” Gibbs admitted, the honesty searing his voice. “And because I didn't want to get hurt by you. Losing Shannon damn near killed me, Tony. I didn't think I was ever going to be ready to risk feeling that way again.”

“And what changed your mind?”

“That.” Gibbs pointed at the screen. “When I realised it didn't make any difference whether I slept with you or not – losing you hurt just as much all the same. Even then...” He hesitated, and then ploughed on. “Even then...afterwards, I thought it might be kinder to let you go. You didn't need my collar any more, and I thought about setting you free so you could find someone else.”

“That's why you didn't collar me again immediately afterwards?” Tony asked.

“Partly – I wouldn't have done it until you were well in any case, but yeah. I didn't know if I *should* collar you again.” Gibbs rubbed his jaw. “Like you so accurately pointed out, Tony – I can be a stubborn bastard. I wanted you so bad it hurt, and the more time we spent together while you were getting well again, and the more times we went out on that damn pier and talked – well, I was just falling in even deeper.”

Tony gazed at him speculatively, as if figuring something out in his head. “You know, ever since I've known you you've been the big, bad top, Jethro. Right from the beginning, you've held all the cards. I was just the little puppy yapping at your heels, desperate for attention, and that's how you played me, for a long time.”

“I know.” Gibbs wrapped his arms around his body – this was hard to take, but he deserved it – all of it.

“I need to see the man beneath the top,” Tony said, in a low, determined voice.

Gibbs looked down again, his own eyes glassy. Tony took hold of his head, and forced him to look up.

“That's what I saw in that video,” Tony whispered. “The real man. The real Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and that's who I'm seeing right now. It's nice to know that you fuck up just like the

rest of us – and god knows I fuck up often enough. I need to know you \*feel\* something in here,” he said, moving one hand and placing it over Gibbs’s heart. “I wasn’t sure. Even after yesterday, which was fantastic on so many levels, I still wasn’t sure. It still seemed like I was the one doing all the giving, and you were like you always are – in charge and in control, just taking everything out of me and never letting me know what’s going on inside you. I wasn’t sure if you weren’t just playing me still, because you’re so damn good at what you do. I had to see that footage for myself, see how you really feel – those feelings you keep locked away and out of sight.”

“Well, you sure as hell saw,” Gibbs growled. “You’re seeing now, Tony.”

“I need to know,” Tony said insistently, his voice breaking slightly. “I need to \*know\* that you came to get me because you really do love me, and not because I was the only one nobody else wanted to rescue.”

That was when Gibbs saw it – the vulnerability that Tony kept so well hidden, and which he'd only seen in glimpses these past five years, before yesterday, when Tony had finally opened up to him and shown him who he really was, deep inside. This was a sub who hated being vulnerable around tops – who had spent his entire life avoiding being vulnerable around tops. Then Jordan had come along and made him weak, causing Tony to confess emotions he'd kept to himself for so long, making him feel exposed.

What Jordan had started, Gibbs had finished. Gibbs had taken Tony right down into his sub-space and forced him to give it all up to him, and now Tony had just seen on that tape that Gibbs had been playing him for years. No wonder he was scared right now, and more vulnerable than ever. If there was ever a time for honesty, it was now. He had to \*make\* Tony understand, somehow, that whatever Jordan had stolen from him, Gibbs would give back – all of it, and more. He'd give this sub standing in front of him everything he had.

“I couldn’t have stood losing any of you,” Gibbs said, and his voice sounded rough and husky to his own ears. “Not Tim and not Abby...but you least of all, Tony. If I’d lost you, I knew I couldn’t come back from that. I didn’t intend to. I already told Ducky that if you died, I wasn’t coming back.”

Tony's eyes were intense as they gazed at him, and even then Gibbs wasn't sure he'd done enough to convince him. Tony put his hands on Gibbs's shoulders and pushed him back against the wall, and Gibbs allowed him to do it, his heart pounding almost painfully in his chest.

"Who are you, Jethro?" Tony asked, his fingers digging into Gibbs's arms. "Who are \*you\* really? If we're going to have a future together, I need to know the answer to that question."

"I'm yours, Tony. I'll live for you, I'll kill for you and I'll die for you. That's who I am," Gibbs said hoarsely.

Tony gazed at him for a long time, trying to read the truth of that in Gibbs's eyes. Then, he

pulled back. Abruptly. Gibbs felt as if he'd been torn apart, and he wasn't sure what it would take to put him back together again.

"You leaving, Tony?" he asked. Plenty of subs had walked out on him before – one of his three ex-spouses had taken a baseball bat to him on her way out. He wasn't sure what he did to them to piss them off so much but he did know they had all found him utterly exasperating.

"Don't be an idiot," Tony replied. "But here's the thing – I won't be one of those subs who rolls over whenever you bark. I'll get in your face, Jethro, just like this, whenever I think you need it. I told you yesterday that I can handle you, and I can, but you might not like it. You're my top, yes, but if this is going to work between us then we have to be equals. And just because you've got a few years on me and you're my boss – don't make the mistake of thinking I'll let you get away with any of that with-holding crap you do so well."

Gibbs wrapped his arms even tighter around his body. He remembered having a stand-up, blazing row with Shannon because she got in his face and called him on something, and she'd won that row, hands down. Now Tony was winning this one, and somewhere, deep inside, Gibbs was glad he'd found a sub who'd fight him for possession of his own soul. Nobody had done that since Shannon.

"You've been locked up inside yourself for years," Tony said. "Now you have to learn to share, Jethro. Think you can do that?"

Gibbs gazed at him. "Don't think you'll give me a choice," he muttered, with a tired smile.

Tony smiled back at him, and then came over, unwrapped Gibbs's arms from around his body, and replaced them with his own. His sub's body felt hard and warm and so damn comforting. Gibbs buried his face in Tony's neck and inhaled his scent like a drowning man breathing in oxygen.

"That bit where you told Jordan I was yours?" Tony whispered in Gibbs's ear. "That was totally hot. And the bit where you slid your knife into that bastard's gut? Thank you for that, Jethro."

Gibbs held on tight, relishing the feel of his sub's naked back beneath his fingers. "I love you, Tony," he whispered. "Not as a pet, or a plaything, or a pretty trophy sub. I love \*you\*."

"I know," Tony said. "And I love you too, Jethro. Not as a fantasy top, or a daddy substitute, or someone to take me into sub-space and make me fly. I love \*you\*."

Tony pulled back, took hold of his hand, and led him towards the bedroom. Gibbs felt like he was in some kind of weird movie, and he shook his head, laughing softly.

"What?" Tony asked.

"Just thinking – Ducky said I needed saving and I thought I'd be the one doing that," Gibbs

told him. "Never thought it would be you."

"You just don't like having the tables turned on you," Tony grinned, pushing him down on the bed. Gibbs grabbed his wrist, and gently kissed the deep scars still on it from Jordan's cuffs.

"Careful, boy - I'm still your top," he said, and then he pulled, hard, and Tony fell down on top of him, with a startled squawk. Gibbs stole the sound from his mouth with a deep, lingering kiss.

Tony pushed him back onto the bed, and Gibbs looked up into those teasing green eyes.

"You ever think of marrying again?" Tony asked, almost conversationally.

"Why? You asking?" Gibbs moved his shoulder, knocking Tony's arm out from under him. Gibbs flipped himself out and was on top of Tony in an instant. "You can get in my face all you like, but never try and out-top me, boy," he said, grinning down on his sub.

"Oh come on! Nobody's ever out-topped you, Jethro and nobody ever could," Tony replied, rolling his eyes. "And no, I'm not asking. I've got your collar and that's enough for me. I was never a great fan of marriage. My dad married four times and it never worked out for him."

Gibbs gazed at him steadily, and Tony gave a little grimace. "So, his first spouse died, and his three subsequent marriages ended in divorce...but he's really, \*really\* nothing like you, Jethro."

"I know." Gibbs lowered his head and bit Tony's ear, gently, just the way his sub liked. "He didn't have the good sense to keep you around - I did," he said.

He liked the way Tony's eyes glowed at that.

"No need to make it official unless you want to," Gibbs whispered, his mouth roving over Tony's naked chest, licking, sucking and nibbling as he went. "We can keep it just between ourselves."

He worked his way upwards, and traced a line of kisses along Tony's jaw, remembering where every single bruise had been, and kissing each spot.

"I, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, take you, Anthony Daniel DiNozzo to be my wedded husband," he said, never taking his eyes off Tony's face. Tony went very still beneath him, gazing up at him, transfixed.

"To protect and to cherish," Gibbs whispered, knowing the traditional vows backwards. He propped himself up on one elbow, and stroked his fingers through Tony's dark hair.

"To respect and to discipline..." Gibbs moved his fingers over Tony's naked chest, spidering over his nipples, gently caressing them.

“To love and to care for...” He kissed Tony’s collarbone, and Tony moaned and arched up into him.

“For better for worse...” He kissed Tony’s throat, and then sucked on his neck.

“For richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, ‘til death do us part,” he whispered, finishing up at Tony’s mouth, and kissing his sub deeply and tenderly. Tony was like a cat beneath him, his body relaxed and compliant.

He kissed him for a long time, savouring the delicious taste of his sub’s mouth, and the eagerness with which Tony welcomed him in. Then, without warning, Tony moved and suddenly Gibbs found himself on his back, and Tony was now on top of him.

Tony pinned his hands to the bed, above his head, just as Gibbs had pinned him the previous day, and straddled him, knees on either side of his body. Gibbs grinned up at him. Tony was big and heavy but even so he knew he could easily flip him off if he wanted. He also knew that Tony knew that but they were both enjoying the moment so Gibbs stayed where he was.

“I, Anthony Daniel DiNozzo, take you, Leroy Jethro Gibbs, to be my wedded husband,” Tony told him, holding him there, never taking his eyes off him. Those green eyes, usually so teasing, were now deadly serious, and it was clear he really wanted Gibbs to hear this. “To trust and submit, to respect and to serve, to love and to obey, for better for worse, for richer for poorer, in sickness and in health, til death do us part.”

Gibbs moved his hands and grabbed Tony, wrapped his arms around his sub’s body and pulled him down on top of him for another deep kiss. Tony came, as willing and compliant as any top could wish for, submissive to his bones as he’d always said.

Gibbs ripped at his jeans, needing to get them off him.

“Hey, favourite jeans,” Tony protested feebly.

“Don’t care,” Gibbs said, pulling the button free and releasing the zip. He managed to tear the jeans bodily from Tony’s legs and then Tony launched himself at him and made short work of his own tee shirt and sweatpants.

The lube appeared in Tony’s hands, and Gibbs just as quickly managed to slick it into Tony’s hole.

They were both too impatient to go slow; Gibbs flipped Tony onto his front, rammed a pillow beneath him, grabbed his hips, and entered him in one smooth, quick motion. Tony gasped, and Gibbs moved his hips back and slammed into him again, loving the little animal noises Tony was making as he thrust into him. He got into a rhythm, and Tony moved his hips back in time to Gibbs’s inward thrusts, joyfully meeting each stroke of his hard cock.

Then they were moving as one, bodies synchronised in perfect time as they made love. Gibbs loved looking down on Tony's smooth, golden skin, loved running his hands along Tony's haunches as he rode him, loved the way Tony was panting, his head half-turned to look at Gibbs over his shoulder, his dark hair spiky and wayward, his eyes heavy-lidded and full of pleasure, his wide, mobile mouth half-open, his tongue wetting the lips.

It was a beautiful sight, and Gibbs savoured it as he thrust into Tony's warm, willing body. He kept going for as long as possible, holding on until the last moment so he could enjoy this. He had never thought he would find a sub to merge with, so perfectly, the way he was merging with Tony right now, bodies rising and falling in perfect harmony. He reached down under Tony's body and found his hard cock, took it in his hand, and stroked in time to his inward thrusts. Tony was out of it now, and Gibbs knew it was only his hands on Tony's body and his hard cock inside him that was keeping Tony upright. He gave one last, hard thrust, and then he was coming, shooting deep inside his sub's body. He was blinded by white light, and was aware, hazily, of moisture on his hand and knew Tony had come too, and then he wasn't sure of anything for several minutes.

When he came to, he found he was lying on Tony, still lodged deep inside him. He pulled out, ignoring Tony's moan of protest, and took hold of his sub in his arms. Then he pulled the sheets up around them.

"Did we just get married?" Tony asked him, a bemused expression on his face.

"Yeah. We kind of did," Gibbs replied. Not for real, because there had been no witnesses, but it had been real enough for the two of them. Gibbs had a feeling that it wouldn't be long before he made those vows in front of a whole roomful of people, and made it official.

"Cool." Tony kissed him lazily on the mouth, and then fell fast asleep in his arms.

~\*~When Tony woke it was nearly noon, and the bed was empty. He stretched out, cataloguing all the new aches and pains in his body. He felt like a well-used sub \*should\* feel, the various sore spots reminding him of all the recent sexual activity. He felt good. Damn good. The last couple of days had been intense on so many levels but he thought that had maybe been inevitable; both he and Gibbs had rough edges that needed smoothing while they adjusted to each other and the roles they would play in each other's lives from now.

He heard noises in the bathroom and got up and walked over there. He didn't think Gibbs was the kind of person who gave a damn about having privacy in the head so he opened the door and went right in. Gibbs was standing in front of the mirror, a towel wrapped around his waist, lathering shaving foam onto his jaw. Tony grinned – he would have guessed Gibbs wasn't an electric razor kind of guy.

"Hey." Gibbs saw him in the mirror and flashed him a smile. Tony thought that maybe he'd never get used to seeing his top smile like this, so often and so freely. He'd spent the past few years trying to wring those grudging little grins from Gibbs, playing the fool just to get a reaction from his taciturn top. Now Gibbs smiled at him as easily as breathing – and his eyes

lit up whenever he saw his sub. It was all Tony had ever wanted, and the one thing he definitely could get used to was the feeling of happiness that had settled in his gut; he hoped that would never leave.

"Hey," Tony said softly. Gibbs reached for the cut-throat razor in his shaving kit, but Tony got there first. He stepped in close behind his top, his bare chest against Gibbs's back, put his arms around Gibbs and batted Gibbs's hand away. "Allow me," he said, watching his own eyes sparkle in the mirror over Gibbs's shoulder. He took the razor with a flourish and tested the edge – it was as sharp as he'd have expected from Gibbs – still a marine through and through.

"Trust me?" Tony said, raising it to Gibbs's throat. Gibbs grinned at him and leaned back against him, putting his arms behind Tony and linking his hands over his sub's naked buttocks.

"With my life," Gibbs replied, offering up his throat.

Tony held Gibbs's head with one hand, and with the other, with perfect, expert sweeps of his fingers, he began shaving his top. Gibbs stroked his buttocks as he worked, and he loved how his cock was nestled right between Gibbs's towel-clad ass cheeks. It felt close, intimate, and loving.

Tony finished, and then patted Gibbs's chin and neck with a towel.

"Voila Monsieur," he said, putting down the towel, wrapping his arms around Gibbs's midriff and resting his chin on Gibbs's shoulder. They looked at themselves in the mirror, and Tony was struck by how good they looked together. They looked right, as if they belonged, a sub and top in perfect tune with each other. He pressed a kiss against Gibbs's newly shaved cheek, inhaling the fresh scent.

"You're full of surprises," Gibbs commented. "Where did you learn how to do that so expertly?"

"One of the hotels we used to stay in – there was an in-house barber. I used to hang out in the hair salon when I was bored – he used to let me eat his donuts," Tony grinned. "I'd go anywhere for donuts. I liked watching him shave people and asked him to show me how to do it properly. I always thought..." He broke off, and gazed at himself in the mirror. He usually lied, casually and without thinking, about various aspects of his childhood, but that was a habit he was going to have to try and break now that he was with Gibbs. "I always thought that one day I might be able to offer it as a service to a top," he said quietly. "I wanted to be the perfect sub."

"There's no such thing," Gibbs replied, looking at him via his reflection in the mirror.

"I know. I guess what I'm trying to say is...I wanted to find a way to express that side of myself, in everything I do. You asked me the other night who I am, and this is who I am. It's who I've always been inside. It might not be the person people think I am, but it is the sub I

am in my heart. I just never found anyone I could be myself with before now."

"This sub? I like him," Gibbs said, taking hold of Tony's hand and kissing it.

Tony grinned, and bestowed a kiss of his own on Gibbs's shoulder.

"I guess we're both full of surprises, huh?" he said.

"You sure as hell were a few hours ago," Gibbs commented.

"Did I scare you?" Tony grinned.

Gibbs rolled his eyes. "No – but I'm glad you got in my face. And Tony? You have my permission to do it again, if it's ever necessary."

"You can count on it, Jethro." Tony rested both his hands on Gibbs's shoulders and then frowned. "Uh...is this human flesh here or solid rock? Your shoulders are tight as anything, Jethro."

"It's been a tough few weeks," Gibbs said, which, Tony thought, was a typical Gibbs understatement. He remembered how tense Gibbs had been watching that video footage a few hours ago and then winced as he thought what it must have been like for him going through it the first time around, when the outcome had been uncertain. No wonder the man's shoulders were locked.

"Then allow me to introduce you to another of the weapons in my subby arsenal," Tony told him. "Massage."

Gibbs raised a questioning eyebrow.

"I dated a top who played pro football once," Tony grinned. "He had muscles of iron and they knotted up like rope. I learned how to unknot them as a survival technique – if his shoulders were hurting him his swing was off, and his spankings were really uncomfortable. Of course I only dated him for about three weeks, but I never forgot how to give a good massage."

He winked at Gibbs, and then ushered his top into the bedroom and pushed him face down on the bed. He whisked Gibbs's towel away, ignoring Gibbs's low growl of protest about that, knowing it was all for show. He returned to the bathroom and found some oil and then went back into the bedroom – and stopped. Gibbs was lying face down on the bed, and for the first time since he'd been collared a couple of days ago, Tony got a proper look at his lover's naked ass.

"And a damn fine ass it is too," he murmured, leaning against the door and just enjoying it for awhile. Gibbs's ass was round and peachy, just as Tony had suspected, and it made for good viewing.



"Are you going to stand there staring at my ass all day?" Gibbs asked, over his shoulder. Tony grinned.

"A sub can look at his top's ass can't he?" he said, going over to the bed and climbing onto it, straddling Gibbs's body so that his cock and balls rested on the ass in question. Gibbs gave one of those amused little grunts that Tony loved hearing so much.

Tony poured some oil into his hands and then placed them on Gibbs's shoulders, and dug his fingers in deep. Gibbs made a groaning sound.

"Hurts huh?" Tony asked. "That's because you're a control freak with a rescue complex and an irresistible compulsion to run down the bad guys and save all the submissives-in-distress before the end of the movie. Only your movie never ends. That's why you need a deep, hard massage."

He dug his fingers in even harder to make the point.

"You're calling me a control freak?" Gibbs asked, dangerously, over his shoulder.

"I am," Tony said happily, working his fingers in as hard as he could, trying to loosen the tension in his top's shoulders.

"Figures," Gibbs grunted, resting his head on his hands.

"What does?" Tony frowned. He liked the way his fingers disappeared into Gibbs's solid flesh, making little red lines as they worked.

"You always get a smart mouth on you when I haven't spanked you in awhile," Gibbs said. Tony's fingers came to an abrupt halt.

"Oh come on! I was just teasing!" he said, nervously.

"I know." Gibbs looked back over his shoulder. "I'm not," he purred dangerously. Tony swallowed hard, and began moving his fingers again.

"You gonna start up that whole daily spanking thing again?" he asked, tentatively. He knew he didn't have any say in whether his top spanked him or not – that was Gibbs's decision.

"Don't need to," Gibbs replied. "Now I'll be fucking your ass daily you won't need as much spanking."

"And will the fucking definitely be daily?" Tony asked hopefully, moving his hands up Gibbs's back in long, sweeping strokes, ending up at Gibbs's neck. He paused to kiss Gibbs's cheek while he was there.

"Oh yeah," Gibbs chuckled. "More than once a day probably."

"I admire your stamina," Tony commented. He stopped digging in so hard and just soothed the sore flesh instead. "So the spankings...?"

"At my discretion." Gibbs smiled at him over his shoulder, that dangerous smile that both turned Tony on and scared him in equal measure. "But, knowing you, I think we'll keep them pretty regular."

Tony's cock twitched at that. Gibbs's spankings always hurt like hell but he loved the way they made him feel and you couldn't have one without the other.

Tony finished the massage in silence, losing himself in serving his top in this way. He thought he'd made a good job of it too, as Gibbs seemed to zone out beneath him and by the time Tony was done his top's shoulders were a good deal looser and more relaxed than they'd been when he started.

"Thank you, Tony," Gibbs sighed, rotating his shoulders to test them out. He sat up, and pulled Tony in for a deep kiss. "Time to return the favour, I think."

Gibbs was as quick and efficient as ever, taking Tony by surprise with his speed and strength, and within seconds Tony found himself face down over Gibbs's lap, his ass right in the centre, upturned and vulnerable. He gave a squawk of alarm at being so easily out-manoeuvred – although it was something he thought he'd have to get used to. Gibbs was as silent, stealthy and deadly in the bedroom as he was in the field.

"Okay...here we go..." Tony said, stretching his body out, and trying to relax. He loved being over his top's knees, and even knowing how hard Gibbs's hand was he knew the best thing was just to surrender, and take the spanking his top wanted to hand out.

Much to his surprise, Gibbs didn't start spanking him. Instead he stroked his ass cheeks with his fingers, caressing him gently. Tony glanced over his shoulder, surprised – spankings never usually started this way.

"Everything's different now, Tony," Gibbs murmured, in answer to his unspoken question. "Which isn't to say that I won't still spank your ass hard when you need it...but I just want you to know that I can do the fun stuff too."

He tapped Tony's ass gently, warming it, and Tony sighed, and relaxed even more. This was going to be \*good\*. The taps were tender, although delivered with typical Gibbsian efficiency to be sure, each one unerringly hitting the mark. Gibbs built the heat expertly in his ass, concentrating on little spots at a time, moving on just before it became unbearable, and soon Tony's ass was a mass of sensation. It felt hot but not sore, and the sting was just enough to get the endorphins going but not enough to really hurt. It was the most deliciously expert pleasure spanking he'd ever received - and he was dimly aware, not for the first time, that he was in the presence of a master top here.

Gibbs alternated his spansks with little caresses, running his hard palm over Tony's warm, round butt cheeks, squeezing and fondling. Then he leaned forward and blew on the

sensitised flesh and Tony moaned, his legs scissoring open, his cock hardening.

"Oh shit...that's just..."

Another little blast of air on his ass made him tingle, and he opened his legs wider, exposing his hole hopefully in Gibbs's direction. Gibbs slid a finger obligingly inside him, teasing the opening, stimulating it, and Tony rubbed himself on Gibbs's lap, back and forth, his cock now rock hard and desperate for release.

"Permission to come," he gasped.

"Denied," Gibbs told him, in a wicked tone of voice. Tony sighed, loving how implacable Gibbs sounded. A second later he found himself flat on his back, as Gibbs expertly performed another of those flips on him. Then, a second after that, he screamed as Gibbs's warm, wet mouth swallowed his cock whole.

"Oh SHIT!" He writhed on the bed as Gibbs deep-throated him expertly, one arm across Tony's chest, holding him down. His warm bottom was throbbing, his cock was aching with need, and Gibbs – the bastard – was just sucking and sucking. It was fantastic and totally unbearable at the same time - how could he be expected to hold on? It was past the point when any flesh and blood sub could hold it when Gibbs was doing \*that\* with his tongue, and if he wasn't allowed to climax soon then he'd just die from sheer...

"You can come now if you want," Gibbs said, drawing back and gazing down at Tony with amused and somewhat evil blue eyes.

Tony did.

Several minutes later, when he'd recovered, he sat up to see that Gibbs was now fully dressed in black pants and shirt.

"Aw – you got dressed," he pouted. "I was thinking I could return the favour." He nodded his head in the direction of Gibbs's groin.

"Nope." Gibbs shook his head. "I'll take you later, when you're not expecting it – I have a fetish for taking my sub by surprise that you might as well get used to now because it's going to happen - a lot," he grinned. "But now – now I want to eat."

Breakfast, lunch, or whatever it was, was much like it had been the previous day – Gibbs held up the toast and Tony ate. He'd never shared a plate with anyone before – he'd never wanted to - and therefore he was surprised by how much he enjoyed it. Gibbs never withheld food or teased with it – it was just shared, companionably, without comment, and it felt like the most natural thing in the world.

After breakfast, Tony got up and went towards his old bedroom.

"Where're you going?" Gibbs asked.

"To find something to wear – seeing as you've ruined all my favourite clothes," Tony said. Gibbs grinned, wolfishly, at him.

"They were in the way," he said with a shrug. Tony rolled his eyes – he already knew how determined Gibbs was at work and how he never allowed anything to get in his way there. He suspected his clothes were going to pay a hefty price for that particular personality trait – maybe he should buy two of everything from now on, just in case.

Tony opened his closet and looked at the clothes inside, deciding what to wear. A few seconds later he heard Gibbs enter the room and then his top was gazing into the closet over his shoulder.

"That outfit there." Gibbs pointed at the tight leather pants with the lace-up crotch and the tiny mesh tee shirt Tony had worn on their first evening on Atlantis, when they'd attended the Athosian Festival of Deliverance. "They won't be coming home with us when we leave."

Tony grinned at his top over his shoulder. "Jealous, Jethro?" he asked.

"Yeah. Hated you wearing them the first time around – all those tops looking at your ass, and trying to grope you. I'm not going through that again. Ever. You belong to me now, boy."

"Not even for a private viewing?" Tony asked. "Just you?"

"I prefer you naked," Gibbs replied, slapping Tony's bare bottom.

Tony laughed. He had a feeling he was going to be naked a lot from now on.

He took a shower, got dressed, and then went out onto the balcony, wondering what Gibbs had planned for the rest of the day. He overheard Gibbs in the kitchen, talking to someone on the radio, and rested his elbows on the balustrade, bending forward, lost in thought. It was a lovely day, and much as he enjoyed being holed up here with his top he thought it might be nice to get out there and live a little before they had to leave this beautiful planet.

He was enjoying the feel of the sun on his hair, and, as usual, didn't hear Gibbs come up behind him. He let out a startled yelp, taken by surprise as fingers slipped around the front of his pants, undoing them; next thing he knew they had been stripped down to his ankles. His legs were kicked apart, and then he felt Gibbs's lubed fingers press against his entrance. He pushed back, opening up so his top had better access, grinning to himself at the pleasure of the surprise attack. He'd once fantasised about being taken out here, bent over the balustrade, and it looked as if that fantasy was about to become a reality.

Gibbs stretched him briefly, and then he felt the tip of his top's lubed cock demanding entry and he concentrated on keeping himself open, so Gibbs could take him. God this felt good! Standing bent over the balustrade, his top thrusting into him without saying a word, just using him as sub should be used, taking his pleasure in Tony.

Gibbs didn't waste time on foreplay. He grabbed hold of Tony's hips to keep him steady and then pistoned into him. Tony liked the weight of him, and the feel of his hands on his body, keeping him in place as he fucked him mercilessly. It felt raw and possessive, and he liked how Gibbs wasn't asking – just taking.

He felt exposed and vulnerable, being fucked like this, the beautiful landscape of Atlantis spread out in front of them, the sun warm on his head. Gibbs kept one hand on his hip, and then grabbed Tony's hair, pulling his head back as he continued thrusting into him. Tony gasped, loving how primal it felt to be held in position in this basic way while his top made full use of him. He'd experienced Gibbs's lovemaking in many different ways already, and while he knew Gibbs could play his body as gently and sensitively as any maestro, this wasn't about that. This was about Gibbs reminding him who he belonged to - and he loved being made to feel it, to really feel it, deep to his core.

He had been stroked, caressed, loved, sucked and expertly spanked over the past couple of days but during all their sexual encounters one thing remained constant – Gibbs was never anything other than sexually dominant to an extreme extent. Tony doubted it was in the man's make up to be anything else. His dominance was hard-wired, and however slow and gentle he might go during love-making he would always be in charge in the bedroom.

He wasn't going slow and gentle right now. His hand was tangled tight in Tony's hair, pulling his head right back for leverage as he slid his hard cock back and forth into Tony's ass. Tony liked feeling this helpless, unable to move as his top made good use of him, barely a participant at all save for the fact it was his body Gibbs was thrusting into so vigorously. His own cock was ramrod hard but Gibbs made no move to take it in his hand or bring him off – after that fantastic spanking and blowjob earlier Tony doubted that his own pleasure was on Gibbs's mind at all. This was about Gibbs asserting his rights as Tony's top, and they were rights that Tony was all too happy to have him assert.

Gibbs came with a little grunt of pleasure. He released his grasp on Tony's hair and stroked it gently, smoothing it back into place. Still lodged deep inside Tony, he leaned forward and rested his chin on Tony's shoulder, then deposited a kiss on his sub's cheek.

"That was good," he said. "God, I'd forgotten what it's like to have a sub like you. Someone who responds so beautifully and gives it all up to me; someone I don't have to hold back with. It's been a long time."

He withdrew, and Tony heard him tucking himself away. Then he pulled Tony's pants back up and fastened them again and it was as if the whole thing hadn't happened, save for the come he could feel dribbling out of him. He even liked that sensation – he liked that Gibbs had left something of himself behind when he'd used him.

"In future...it'll save time if you keep yourself lubed and prepped," Gibbs murmured in his ear. "I don't like to be kept waiting – when I want to use you, I'll use you."

Tony's cock hardened even more at the thought of that. The idea of being Gibbs's sex toy,

available for his pleasure whenever his top was in the mood, was a total turn on for him.

"And if I forget?" he asked.

"Do you like dry fucks?"

"Not really."

"Then don't forget," Gibbs told him, patting his ass affectionately.

"You gonna get me off?" Tony asked, glancing down at the tenting in the front of his pants caused by his hard cock.

"Nope," Gibbs said, patting his ass again.

"Can I get myself off?" Tony asked.

"Nope," Gibbs repeated, with a little chuckle. "I told you, Tony – you're mine; your cock, your ass – every part of you. I'm in charge of when you come now – and you'll only come when I say you can."

"No jerking off?" Tony asked, crestfallen. His hand and his cock had become intimately acquainted over the past few years and he couldn't quite envisage life without daily masturbation.

"Not unless I've asked you to put on a show for me. You jerk yourself off in private and I'll make your ass pay."

"How will you know?" Tony asked.

"I'll know." Gibbs's voice was rough and throaty, close to his ear, and Tony didn't doubt for a moment that he would. "But don't worry – I'll give you more than enough sex to keep you happy, Tony. Trust me."

It was one of the tough parts of being a sub, Tony thought to himself, but with the loss of control came so many great things that he couldn't complain, and he had no doubt at all that Gibbs would keep him sexually satisfied. If anything, Tony would be the one running to keep up with his very dominant, highly skilled lover.

He turned his head to find Gibbs right beside him, and his top grabbed him and pulled him in for a long, deep kiss.

When he released him, Tony stared at him, feeling giddy.

"Jethro...yesterday...that place you took me to – in my head," he whispered.

"Mmm?" Gibbs put his hand on Tony's shoulder and stroked, never taking his eyes off his

sub.

"Will you be taking me there again?" Tony asked quietly.

Gibbs smiled at him. "Did you like it?"

"Yeah. Oh hell yeah," Tony nodded. "I'm not saying I'd like to go there all the time or even most of the time but I would like to go there again – and often."

"Not always easy getting a sub there," Gibbs said.

"But you can do it?"

"Sure," Gibbs grinned, running his fingers lightly over Tony's shoulder. "Every time. I'm just saying – you might not always like the way I get you there, but you will like it when you're there."

"I know." Tony nodded. "Nobody's ever taken me so far down before. Nobody's even come close."

"I know." Gibbs shrugged. "Most tops – they play at it. They don't feel it. And most subs – they just put on a show; they don't see that it has to be hard – if it's easy then you aren't doing it right and it doesn't mean a damn thing. Taking you there, Tony – it's beautiful. I'd be honoured to do it again – frequently. Subs like you – they're rare. You just gave it all up - you trusted me, and you went with me, even when you were scared of it. I'll never forget how good that was. It's what a top needs to feel – that sense of total surrender from his sub - and you didn't hold back; you gave me everything."

He squeezed Tony's shoulder, and pulled him in close for another kiss. Tony put his arms around him and held him tight, loving the closeness.

"How come you know all this stuff?" he asked, nuzzling Gibbs's neck. "How did you know how to get me to that place?"

"I don't know. I just go by instinct," Gibbs replied. "Just like you respond by instinct – never had a more instinctive sub than you in my bed."

"Were you always this good at topping? Or did you have to learn the hard way?" Tony asked, drawing back a little so he could look at his top. Gibbs frowned, thoughtfully.

"To be honest, I never understood why some tops get it so wrong. Take Randolph Jordan for example. When a top is that screwed up it sets my teeth on edge. It's taking something so right and making it into something so totally wrong. Tops like him just don't have any understanding of what it means to be a top at all. With me...I just always knew how it should be, easy as breathing."

"Since when?" Tony asked, intrigued.

"Since I was a little kid. There was never a time when I was anything other than a top – I just felt it."

"Could you figure out what all the other little kids in the schoolyard were going to be before they knew themselves?" Tony asked him, with a grin. "I always could. Way before they hit puberty I knew – even when they didn't know themselves."

"Yeah." Gibbs nodded thoughtfully. "I had them all divided into tops and subs in my head. I used to get into a hell of a lot of trouble with my dads because I'd fight all the little tops, and try and protect all the little subs. I walked Tom Sampson and Ginny Blair home from school every day because they were so beautifully subby and I wanted to take care of them. Took me over an hour to get home because they didn't live nearby but it was worth it just to make sure they were safe."

"Chauvinist," Tony grinned.

"Never denied it!" Gibbs grinned back. "It's just instinct, you know? I have a soft spot for subs who need me. Tops can take care of themselves but subs are my responsibility."

"Not all subs – not any more," Tony pointed out. "Just this one. Your days of saving subs left, right and centre are over, Jethro. You're mine now – someone else will have to do the saving from now on."

"Yeah, just this one," Gibbs said, kissing his cheek. "I think I've met my match with this one," he added, tousling Tony's hair affectionately.

"So – who were you talking to on the radio earlier?" Tony asked.

"Abby. Apparently Teyla and Ronon have invited a bunch of people over to the mainland for a meal this afternoon and we're welcome to join them – Abby is already there and says she can send Lorne back to ferry us over. Are you up to that?"

"Sounds like fun," Tony nodded. "So...how about I wear those leather pants you like so much...?"

He grinned happily as Gibbs's hand connected, resoundingly, not with the back of his head but with the back of his pants, delivering a nice, hard spank to his ass.

~\*~

Tim felt nervous; it was the first time he'd gone out anywhere with his new top, save for occasional trips to the cafeteria – they'd both been too preoccupied with exploring each other to do much exploring of their surroundings. However, the time had come to face the world, and he hoped he was ready.

Ziva emerged from the bedroom wearing a pair of tight black pants and a fitted purple shirt.



She looked beautiful, as always, and his throat went dry as he looked at her. He could hardly believe that he belonged to a top this amazing.

“Oh, that is good,” she purred, circling him, one hand on his shoulder, looking him up and down.

“I feel stupid,” he replied, flushing. “People will look at me.”

“I want them to look at you,” she said. “I want them to look at you and know they cannot touch you because you belong to me. You have been hiding behind your geek clothes for too long – people should know what a fine ass you have.”

He flushed even more at that, and she laughed and kissed his cheek.

“Seriously, Tim – you look very sexy. And just think – I could be one of those tops who likes to display their subs naked in public – or wearing those cutaway trousers that reveal the ass. You should count yourself lucky.”

He smiled at her, and stole a kiss. “I do,” he said fervently. “It’s all I think about, every day. I have no idea how a sub like me ends up with a top like you.”

She frowned. “Tim...you should see yourself as I see you,” she said, guiding him over to the mirror.

She stood behind him, and ran her fingers possessively over the green silk shirt he was wearing. It clung to his body and was a deep, vivid colour, matching his eyes. He was wearing a pair of tailored chocolate-coloured pants that fitted far more snugly than the pants he was used to wearing. On his feet were a pair of brown Athosian boots, just as comfortable but more sexy than the brogues he usually favoured. Ziva had bought the entire outfit for him at the Athosian market a few days earlier, and today was the first day he’d put it on. His eyes were drawn, as always, to the soft brown collar around his neck. It fit there so perfectly, and felt so light. It suited him, and looked perfect peeking out from the green silk collar of his shirt.

Tim looked at himself in the mirror and was surprised by what he saw. He looked like himself only softer, more submissive, his body no longer awkward. His limbs were relaxed, and his eyes shone with happiness. He was a well-loved, well-fucked sub – and it showed, somehow.

“You are a beautiful sub, Tim,” Ziva told him softly, brushing her fingers gently over his nipples, making him gasp and them stand to attention immediately. “People will envy me.”

He wasn’t so sure about that but he had to admit, looking in the mirror, that he wasn’t as far out of her league as he’d always supposed.

“Now – one last thing.” She turned him around, and held up a long silver chain. “Will you walk on my leash, Tim?”

“Gladly,” he whispered, his heart doing a little flip. He’d always found it comforting to walk to heel on the leash – something in his submissive heart yearned for that kind of connection with a top, to walk in tune with them, and have it demonstrated so visibly who he belonged to.

He’d always enjoyed walking on Gibbs’s leash but this was better because he would be Ziva’s only sub – and her devoted servant. He wanted to be close by to wait on her if she needed anything and protect her if she was in danger – although he doubted he’d be much use in that capacity, given that she was a trained assassin who could kill people with her bare hands - but there was something in his submissive heart that \*wanted\* to do that for her, if it was ever necessary.

He was slowly coming to understand the kind of sub he was, under her loving tutelage. He wanted to serve – he would kneel by her side for hours if she asked it of him. He wasn’t cheeky or naughty like Tony. He didn’t need to be spanked, although he’d endure if she wanted to spank him – which, so far, she hadn’t. She had been endlessly patient, gentle and kind with him and he had responded, opening up to her and giving her everything. It was all he’d ever wanted – a top to worship and adore.

Ziva locked the clip of the leash around the ring at the front of his collar and then took the long, silver chain in her hand.

“Now, we are ready,” she told him.

The party was in full swing when they arrived. Abby and Lorne were already there, as were a number of other recognisable faces, including Rodney, John, Ducky and Richard Woolsey. Ziva went off to find them both a drink, and Abby ran over to him, shrieking wildly, and grabbed him, gazing at him as if she’d explode.

“Tim! Oh my god! Tim? Is it really you?” She looked him up and down and instead of flushing under her shocked gaze he stood taller, enjoying it.

“Yeah, it’s me, Abs,” he told her, grinning.

“Oh...she must be \*good\*,” Abby laughed. “If the way you look is anything to go by!” She reached up and touched the collar around his neck. “It’s lovely,” she said softly.

His eyes went to the missing space around her neck, where Gibbs’s collar had once been, and his smile faded.

“Abby – is everything okay?” he asked.

“Everything is fine,” she replied, firmly. “Evan says he’ll collar me when we get back to Earth if it works out between us. He’s making the collar himself. I’m dying to see what it’ll be like but he keeps hiding it so I have no idea – not that I’ve been trying to sneak a peek or anything,” she winked. “I’m not worried about not having a collar right now though –

because I have something else! Something I want to show you - not here though – if Evan sees he'll kill me. He said I wasn't to go around showing them off but I can't resist."

"Showing what off?" Tim asked nervously.

She pointed to her chest, surreptitiously, and this time he *did* flush, seeing the faint outline of the piercing jewels through her tee shirt.

"I'll show you later – when Tony's here. He'll want to see them," she grinned. "But nobody else – not Ziva, or Gibbs, or even Ducky. Only subs – it wouldn't be fair on Evan otherwise."

"Tony's coming? Is he okay?" Tim asked. He hadn't seen Tony since the other sub had returned from his ordeal. Everyone assured him Tony was fine but he couldn't help wondering what Tony must have gone through that everyone was being so secretive about it.

"I think so." Abby frowned. "He and Gibbs have been holed up alone for awhile so I guess we'll find out if everything is fine or not when they arrive."

"I'd kind of been hoping he wouldn't be here," Tim admitted. "He's going to tease me, Abby," he explained, flushing again. "I mean - looking like this - wearing Ziva's collar? He's going to go into tease overdrive. I'll be the butt of his annoying jokes for weeks."

"I'd like to say that's not going to happen but we both know it will," Abby said cheerfully. "Or...maybe not," she murmured, gazing over his shoulder. "Oh shit. Oh my god."

"What is it? Is Ziva okay?" Tim asked, turning anxiously.

"Oh yeah...it's just – look who just showed up," Abby said, pointing. Tim squinted through the crowd in the direction she was pointing, and then whistled out loud.

"Oh my god," he repeated, echoing her.

"Yeah – so if he teases you, I think you can tease him right back."

Tim grinned – she had a point. Tony was walking through the little gathering of people wearing a bright, shiny new metallic collar. Next to him, Gibbs was holding Tony's leash in one hand, and had his other hand firmly attached to one of Tony's butt cheeks. They were walking the way John and Rodney always walked – completely in tune with each other, both stopping and starting at the same time, their bodies moving as one. Tim knew that this was a top and sub whose bodies knew each other intimately, and who fitted together perfectly. They had also, quite clearly, had sex recently. Lots of it, he surmised, judging by the relaxed set of Gibbs's shoulders, which were usually so tense, and the wild grin on Tony's face.

He watched as Gibbs took the plate of food Teyla offered to him. She gave him a ceremonial bow, her eyes gleaming as she looked at Tony, and then back at Gibbs.

"I take it only one plate is required," he overheard her say.

"Yeah." Gibbs grinned at her, and then glanced at Tony – and Tim didn't think he'd ever seen that particular expression on Gibbs's face. It was soft and tender – and neither of those were words he would ever have associated with Gibbs before. There was something else about his expression as well – protectiveness, love and a fierce kind of pride.

"Wow – Gibbs has it bad for Tony," Abby muttered. "I knew it! About time too."

Gibbs took a forkful of food and ate, then piled up another and held it out to Tony. Tony was busy talking but he paused to take a bite of the food, and then Gibbs replied to him, eyes glowing fondly as he gazed at his sub.

"They're sharing a plate already," Tim observed. "Wow - that's fast." Even he and Ziva hadn't gone that far yet, despite her collaring him. There was no hard and fast rule that said when a top and sub would start sharing a plate – but he knew, instinctively, that Ziva was going slowly with him, taking care not to spook him, so he wasn't surprised she hadn't suggested it yet.

"They look as if they've been sharing a plate for \*years\*," Abby commented. "Look at them!"

She was right – often when couples started sharing a plate they were self-conscious about it, and their body language made it clear how big a deal it was for them, but Tony and Gibbs looked totally natural and relaxed, as if this wasn't a new thing for them at all.

"When did all this happen?" Tim asked Abby. "I mean – last thing I knew, Gibbs was having to spank Tony every five minutes for that screw-up over Rodney Sheppard...how did they get from that to this?"

"I have no idea," Abby said, shaking her head. "Although...I think, maybe, in their heads this is the way it's always been for them, for a very long time. Maybe that explains it."

"Tony and Gibbs?" Tim asked, a little surprised. "I mean...I thought maybe I saw something between them, but...you really think this has been going on for a long time?"

"Oh not the sex," Abby said confidently. "I just think, in their hearts, that they were top and sub in this way for years – they just never admitted it to each other. Now – they clearly have!"

"Gibbs looks...well, happy," Tim said, staring at his boss who was laughing, his eyes glowing. "I've never seen him like this before."

"I knew Tony would be good for him!" Abby grinned. "Thank god they finally got it on together because that has to be the longest foreplay in the history of the universe."

"What the hell happened to Tony when he was abducted?" Tim asked her. "You know, don't

you, Abby?" Abby's face changed, and she chewed on her lip thoughtfully.

"Yes I do, but I can't tell you, Tim. I do know it was bad but it's up to Tony to tell you what it was. I think nearly losing Tony is what made Gibbs admit to his feelings for him. Finally!" She rolled her eyes.

"I always knew Tony wanted Gibbs's attention but I assumed he was being, well, Tony," Tim said. "Always flirting with the strongest top in the room – and, let's face it, Gibbs is always the strongest top in the room. I had no idea it was serious."

"Oh yeah." Abby grinned. "It always was I think – for both of them - but being idiots they could never admit it to each other. Tony hated being vulnerable around tops so he played that stupid game of pretending he was only flirting with Gibbs the way he'd flirt with any strong top. And Gibbs was so badly burned from all his previous relationships that he just pretended he didn't give a damn who Tony flirted with. I guess neither of them was being honest."

"Until Jordan came along and blew their cover," Ziva said, coming up behind them. She gave Tim a tankard of some kind of unidentifiable brew. He sniffed at it cautiously.

"Are you trying to get me drunk, Ziva?" he asked.

She laughed, and pinched his ass affectionately. "I do not have to," she told him. "This already belongs to me," she whispered, patting the spot where she'd just pinched. He flushed and she laughed again, and kissed him.

"You are adorable you know," she told him.

"Hey – there's that sweet little old lady who told Gibbs we'd all die," Abby said, pointing at Mara who Teyla had beckoned over to speak to Gibbs. "Guess she was wrong about that."

"That wasn't exactly what she said, Abby," Tim pointed out. "She told him he'd arrived with five but would leave with one...and, as none of us except Tony are wearing his collars any more, maybe she was right."

"What about Ducky?" Ziva frowned.

"Oh, I saw him earlier – he's not wearing a collar either," Abby said.

"So she was right," Tim mused softly, still gazing at Gibbs and Tony. Tony saw him, and his eyes sparkled, mischievously. He waved, interrupting Gibbs at the same time, speaking fast. "Oh god," Tim sighed. "Here it comes."

Gibbs unclipped Tony's leash but not before kissing him possessively on the mouth, and then patting his ass as he ran off in their direction.

"Thank god!" Tony said as he arrived at where they were standing. "That old lady freaks me

out.”

“Is she still telling Gibbs the future?” Ziva asked.

“Nope – just a lot of stuff about how a Yedahl and a Sedahl joined are a rare gift from the universe, and together they can unlock the true secrets of yada yada yada,” Tony said. “But hey, I don’t want to talk about her when the probie is standing here, all collared up and, if I’m not mistaken – and let’s face it I never am – no longer a McVirgin.”

Tim was surprised to find that he didn’t flush. Instead he just surveyed Tony’s new collar, an assessing look in his eyes.

“Is Gibbs still spanking you every day, Tony – or does the new collar mean he’s found other things to do with your ass?” he asked, one eyebrow raised. Much to his delight, Tony actually flushed – it was the first time he’d ever managed to get the better of Tony and he was elated.

“Hmm, I see that sex isn’t the only thing you’ve learned while I’ve been away, McGee,” Tony muttered. “Aw, our little probie is all grown up. It brings a tear to my eye.”

He wiped away a mock tear, and Tim rolled his eyes. Then he noticed the bruises around Tony’s wrists – they were fading, but the scars went pretty deep. Tony noticed him looking and his expression changed, his eyes darkening. He pulled his shirt sleeves down, trying to cover the marks, but they’d all noticed them. Tony glanced down at the ground for a moment, and then glanced up at them.

“I guess I missed a lot while I was refusing visitors,” he said quietly. “Ziva – congratulations; hurt Tim and I’ll break you in two. Tim – congratulations; hurt Ziva and I’ll be very, very surprised.” He gave a little grin.

“Congratulations to you too, Tony,” Ziva said, her gaze fixed on the shiny new collar around his throat. “Whatever happened to you out there, at least it made you and Gibbs figure out the important stuff – yes?”

“Yeah. I guess.” Tony shrugged. “And about that – Jordan tied me down and drained half my blood from my body. Then he whipped me pretty bad, and was going to rape me and slit my throat when Gibbs and Sheppard showed up, just in time. None of that stuff hurt as much as the fact he took my collar off me. I was ashamed about that and I didn’t want anyone knowing that I was too weak to stop him.”

“My god, Tony – that wasn’t your fault,” Tim said, shocked by what he’d heard. No wonder Tony hadn’t been up to receiving visitors. Whatever Tony said about himself, and god knows he said a lot, Tim knew that was all a smokescreen - the private stuff, the really private stuff, always remained that way. Tony hated admitting being vulnerable with anyone, but especially with a top, and he had clearly had a tough time coming to terms with being unable to prevent Jordan removing his collar.

“Rationally I know that, probie,” Tony sighed. “Emotionally – it was tough back there for awhile. Gibbs wouldn’t collar me again until I was well, and I couldn’t help thinking he blamed me for losing it to Jordan in the first place.”

Tim reached up and touched his own collar, feeling his gut tighten at the thought of someone removing it. Ziva had put it there – he was hers. If someone were to forcibly take it...it would be like a betrayal of her and what they had together. No wonder Tony had been so badly affected by it – especially if, as Abby said, he and Gibbs had been in love with each other for years.

Ziva wrapped an arm around his waist and leaned against him, sensing his distress, and he was glad of her soothing presence.

“You could have told us about it,” Ziva said. “I was angry you would not see us.”

Tony nodded. “Yeah. I deserve that. I just didn’t want the probie here going all big-eyed and sympathetic on me, and you’d have just slammed your fist into the wall and yelled a lot, Ziva.”

“That is true,” Abby told them, in an apologetic tone.

At that moment Gibbs and Ducky came over to join the group.

“Hey – this is the first time we’ve all been together since that night we were all sitting around, solving the case,” Abby pointed out.

“Well, actually, Abs, \*I\* solved the case,” Tony said. “I don’t like to brag or anything but it was my fine detective work sifting through all those files that cracked it.”

“Only after you nearly arrested poor Rodney,” Abby said. “I still can’t believe you did that.”

“Okay, so that wasn’t my finest hour, but I still solved the case!” Tony said. “Didn’t I, boss?” He turned to Gibbs for confirmation. Gibbs grinned at him, and rolled his eyes.

“Yeah,” he said, and then he slapped the back of Tony’s head. “But nobody likes a smartass, Tony.”

Tim found himself grinning as the old, familiar banter washed over him. It looked as if, despite all that had happened, and despite the fact that only Tony now wore Gibbs’s collar, they were still a team.

As he watched Gibbs, noting the way his former top’s gaze rarely left Tony’s face, he wondered why he’d ever been scared of tops. Sure, Gibbs could be occasionally terrifying but tops were only human, and not the frightening untouchables he’d always assumed them to be. Tony didn’t look cowed by Gibbs any more than Tim felt cowed by Ziva – in fact, Tony looked like a submissive insanely in love with his top, both of them equals.

He looked down as he felt Ziva's hand slip into his own, and watched as she picked up the leash that was hanging free from his collar in her other hand. She wrapped it around her fingers possessively. He smiled down at her. The relationship between subs and tops, which had always been such a mystery to him, now seemed utterly and completely clear. He had no idea why he had ever been confused when it was this simple.

Gibbs and Tony, Abby and Lorne, John and Rodney, Teyla and Ronon, Carson and Steven, Ducky and Woolsey – and himself and Ziva.

It was all so very right.

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"You know I hate goodbyes," Rodney muttered, as they walked along to the control room.

"Yeah, I know." John rested his hand on his sub's shoulder and caressed some of the misery out of his tense muscles.

"It's like when we left that other universe," Rodney muttered.

"Yeah. What's weird though is that you hate people when you first meet them, and then end up going through some crazy bonding ritual with them so that by the time you have to say goodbye you're best buddies with them," John pointed out.

"Why is that weird?" Rodney said, glancing at him.

"Well, you could just be nicer to people when you first meet them, on the off-chance that they might actually turn out to be okay. I mean, take you and Tony."

It was an odd friendship, John thought to himself. The two of them shouldn't have had anything in common and yet they seemed to have a strange rapport. Tony loved leading Rodney astray, and Rodney basked in the friendship of a sub who was so at ease with people, and so obviously not suffering from Rodney's own social dysfunction.

Tony seemed fascinated by Rodney, and the two traded banter like old friends, insulting each other endlessly with stupid grins on their faces the entire time. Tony had even talked Rodney into a disastrous trip out on a puddle jumper when John and Gibbs had been busy looking at threat assessments a few days ago. It wasn't that Rodney's flying was all \*that\* bad, but Tony had goaded him into going faster and further than his comfort zone allowed, and two worried and angry tops had been forced to mount an impromptu rescue mission. Neither Rodney nor Tony had sat comfortably at breakfast the following day.

"And Abby – Abby's great too," Rodney said softly, and his shoulders hunched again. "I hate goodbyes," he repeated.

They reached the control room, and found Woolsey waiting there. Spending time with Ducky had been good for him; he was much more relaxed these days, and a lot less



obsessed with rules and regulations than he had been. As a result, he and John were getting along pretty well. In front of the gate, the personal bags of the NCIS team and their boxes of evidence were all piled up waiting, ready to go. Rodney ran up the stairs to check the status of the stargate, leaving John at the foot of the stairs, waiting to say goodbye.

There was a noise in the hallway and Lorne entered the control room, hand in hand with Abby.

“It won’t be long,” he was saying to her – she looked as if she’d been crying and he was clearly trying to comfort her. “Just a few weeks and then I’ll be with you for months, getting underfoot and bugging the hell out of you.”

She didn’t say anything – her luminous green eyes said it all. He swept her up into a big hug and held her tight.

“I really do think someone needs to write a book on the architecture of the Ancients,” a voice said, and Ducky, Ziva and McGee walked into the control room. “Of course, architecture isn’t really my thing, but who could not have an appreciation for these gleaming spires?”

“Uh, well...the existence of these gleaming spires is top secret, Ducky,” McGee pointed out. “So I don’t think you’d be able to actually publish that book, if you did write it.”

“Oh I wouldn’t write it, my dear boy,” Ducky said. “You’re the writer!”

McGee glanced at Ziva, who smiled at him. “I keep him too busy to write, Ducky,” she told the doctor.

Ducky smiled. “I have no doubt at all that that is so, my dear,” he said, chuckling to himself. He moved away to say his goodbyes to Carson and Steven, who were standing to one side, waiting to take their leave.

Ziva led Tim over to where Teyla was standing with Ronon kneeling by her side, head down, unmoving. John gave a wry smile – Ronon didn’t like goodbyes either, so Teyla had put him in deep submission to spare him from having to actually interact. It would be enough for the big man that he was here – he’d hate for anyone to see him visibly affected by the NCIS agents leaving.

Ziva and Teyla shared a long, heartfelt hug; John didn’t know what had happened between those two but it was clear something had.

Gibbs and Tony were last to enter the control room.

“I’m not saying it was the *\*best\** movie in the franchise,” Tony was saying. “I’m just saying it was better than the first one. Although not as good as the fourth.”

“Tony – do I look like I care?” Gibbs asked, one hand wrapped in Tony’s leash, the other

resting on his bottom – John had a feeling that was pretty much the way they were going to walk anywhere for the rest of their lives.

“Your problem, Jethro, is that you have no appreciation for popular culture. When we get home I’m going to tie you to the couch and make you sit through all ten movies in the franchise,” Tony told him.

“When we get home, if there’s any tying up to be done I’ll be the one doing it,” Gibbs retorted.

Tony grinned, and leaned in to claim a kiss from his top. “You say that like it’s a bad thing, Jethro,” he whispered wickedly.

John felt the familiar sensation in his stomach that he always got when Rodney was nearby – it was as if something inside him relaxed when he was in physical proximity to his sub and, sure enough, a second later he felt Rodney’s body against his, arms and thighs touching the way they always did when they were together.

Gibbs came over to speak to them, Tony by his side.

“Rodney – I take it the gate isn't having any problem with transports between galaxies this time around?” he asked, one eyebrow raised, a teasing glint in his eye. Rodney had the grace to blush.

“It's working just fine,” he muttered, gazing at his boots. Tony grinned at him and nudged his toe with his foot.

“Remember what I told you, Rodney – only ever tell lies you know you can get away with. First rule of Lying 101,” Tony told him.

“I’m glad you’re taking him home,” John told Gibbs. “He’s a terrible influence.”

“People say that wherever I take him,” Gibbs sighed. “And Tony, if you ever lie to me you’ll be sleeping on your front for a week.”

“Yes Jethro,” Tony grinned.

Gibbs slapped the back of his head anyway for good measure. John thought that if anyone could keep the incorrigible Tony under control it was Gibbs – and he also thought that Tony, in return, would be good for Gibbs, amusing him and keeping him on his toes in equal measure. A top like Gibbs needed that constant sense of challenge, just as Tony needed a top who would both love him fiercely and control his wilder impulses at one and the same time.

“I want to thank you for your hospitality, General Sheppard. I’m sorry that you and your people were dragged into Jordan's sick feud with me,” Gibbs said.

“And he never apologises,” Tony butted in. “So he really means that.”

“Well, despite the circumstances, it was good meeting you guys,” John replied, meaning it too. He wondered what would have happened between him and Rodney if Gibbs and his team hadn’t shown up, and if Gibbs hadn’t had that top to top chat with him about what was going on between him and his sub. He didn’t think it would have turned out well. John was a strong, confident top but he would be the first person to concede that he’d learned something from Gibbs. He didn’t think it was all one way either – he’d noticed how much Gibbs had watched him and Rodney together, and he hoped that had had something to do with Gibbs deciding to finally face up to his feelings for Tony and put that fancy collar around his sub’s neck.

“Bye Rodney,” Tony said, patting Rodney’s arm. “And don’t ever let the tops think they’ve won,” he whispered loudly in Rodney’s ear.

Gibbs rolled his eyes, and held out his hand to John. “Been good meeting you, General,” he said.

John shook his hand firmly. “Likewise,” he replied.

Gibbs turned to Rodney. He glanced at John, who made a show of thinking about it for a couple of seconds, then grinned and nodded. Gibbs held out his hand and Rodney shook it. John didn’t feel threatened any more – Gibbs had more than enough on his plate with Tony at the end of his leash – and besides, since when had Rodney ever had eyes for anyone but John?

Then Gibbs turned, and Tony turned with him, both of them moving as one.

Out of the corner of his eye, John saw Ducky bestowing an affectionate kiss on Richard Woolsey’s lips.

“I look forward to your visits, dear boy!” he said. Woolsey looked a little subdued, and John guessed he’d miss the genial doctor. He made a mental note to try and include Woolsey in more of the base social activities.

Abby ran over and threw herself at Rodney, nearly knocking him off his feet, and they hugged for ages. Then she threw herself at John, hugging him tight too, before running back to claim one final kiss from Lorne.

The NCIS agents lined up in front of the gate, and watched as their possessions were sent through on big, wheeled crates. Finally, all that was left was the six of them.

They stood there for a moment, and John took one last look at them. Ziva was standing with her back against her sub’s body, leaning into him – Tim McGee was a big man and she clearly loved the solidity of him. He just as clearly adored his beautiful top. He had one arm loosely wrapped around her as they waited. Ducky was standing next to them, Abby’s hand tucked firmly in his arm. He was talking to her in quiet, gentle tones, and she was nodding

furiously, holding back the tears.

Gibbs and Tony joined them, one of Gibbs's hands wrapped firmly in Tony's leash, and his other hand resting on Tony's bottom. They paused for a moment.

John remembered when they'd first arrived, disembarking from the Daedalus, Gibbs holding all five of their leashes in his hand. Now he had only one. Yet, despite that, John thought Gibbs looked like a different man. He might have lost a fistful of subs but he'd gained the one thing he truly wanted, and as a result he looked as relaxed and happy as a man like Gibbs would ever look.

There was a flurry of waves, and then they walked toward the gate and in the next instant they were gone, and the place seemed suddenly empty without them. Rodney pressed against John, seeking his top's reassurance. John wrapped his arm around Rodney's waist, and held him close.

"Everything's changed," Rodney said quietly, his eyes downcast.

"Yeah, everything's changed," John said. "And everything's remained the same."

He put a finger under Rodney's chin and kissed him deeply on the lips and Rodney melted against him, as compliant a sub as any top could ever wish for.

Everything had changed – a lot had happened and the past few weeks had been a rollercoaster of highs and lows - but some things never changed, and never would.

"Let's go back to our quarters," he whispered to Rodney. "There's something I really want to do to you..."

The End

If you're in the mood, why not visit the **HiPs Shrine**

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