



# Everything They Said

by Jilly James

**Title:** Everything They Said

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**Fandom:** Hawaii Five-0

**Relationship(s):** Tony DiNozzo/Steve McGarrett, Other/Other

**Content Rating:** NC-17

**Warnings:** Violence, human trafficking, abduction, implied threat of rape.

**Spoilers:** Hawaii Five-0 Season 1, NCIS up to Season 4.

**Beta Thanks:** Naelany

**Author's Note:** One of my projects for Rough Trade, July 2015 "Little Black Dress" Sentinel Fusion Challenge.

**Summary:** Steve is finally feeling settled back in Hawaii and his task force is solid. Everything is going the way he wants, until guide traffickers manage to abduct seven guides, and Steve finds out the guide he didn't know he had is among the missing.

**Word Count:** ~17.3k

**Note:** Fudged Date on Captain America release by a few months.

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## Acronyms:

**SEAL** – Sea Air Land (special operations force of the US Navy)

**BUD/S** – Basic Underwater Demolition/SEAL training

**SUV** – Sport Utility Vehicle

**PD** – Police Department

Made-up terms:

**OSG** – Olfactory Shock Grenade

**S&G** or **SnG** – Sentinel and Guide

**SGC** – Sentinel and Guide Council

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## Part One

October 2010

“You should get a guide.”

Steve nearly dropped his fork he was so surprised by the non-sequitur. “Where’d that come from?” he asked, stabbing at his omelet once again.

“I’m just saying; maybe it’d be a calming influence in your life. Then you wouldn’t be so tempted to feed people to sharks,” Danny remarked dryly.

“He was perfectly safe. There was never any danger.” Steve shoveled in the last two bites of eggs. “Are you ever going to let that go?”

“No. Never.” But Danny’s lips were twitching.

With an eye roll, Steve pointed to Danny’s glass. “Come on, Danny... drink your juice and let’s get out of here.” Steve was getting impatient to get the day started.

“Pass,” Danny muttered sounding mulish.

Now it was Steve’s turn to be amused. “Do not tell me you don’t like pineapple juice.” When Danny just stared stubbornly, Steve laughed. “Come on, Danno, all sentinels like pineapple juice.”

“It can’t possibly be *all* sentinels,” his partner grouched.

“Oh, yeah it can,” Steve retorted with a big grin. “You know there’s actual science about it; extensive studies. It’s the only thing that crosses all cultures and geographies; all sentinels like pineapple juice. It’s a fact. Plus, it has a positive effect on the senses.”

“Shut up, Steven.” But Danny quickly downed the juice, because even he couldn’t argue with something *that* well known. They paid the check and headed out to the car. They’d had to park several blocks from the diner due to rush hour madness.

Steve decided to rev Danny up a bit more. “Now that we know that you do in fact like pineapples, I assume you won’t be giving me grief about the pizza.”

Danny ground to a halt, hands held up in front of him. “Whoa, whoa, whoa.” Making emphatic hand motions, he said, “Juice is juice, but the fruit is something else. And I swear to you Steven, if you put fruit on my pizza...”

“It’s the same thing. And it’s good for sensory acuity.”

“It is not the same thing. Take Gracie... loves banana popsicles, hates actual bananas. And it’s a certainty that there will be consequences if you put that damn tropical fruit on my pizza!”

Steve knew he shouldn’t be so amused by getting his partner riled up, but the other sentinel was just too easy. Still... the thing about Grace. “She latent?” As true as it was that all sentinels enjoyed pineapple juice, it was almost as much of a truism that they hated bananas. Anecdotal evidence had long pointed to children who hated bananas as likely being latent sentinels.

“Nah. After I came online, we had her tested. She’s got the gene, but it’s not strong enough for her to be latent. My girl just doesn’t like bananas. Not that I fault her for that.” Danny’s expression was utterly disgusted, and Steve couldn’t help but agree. Bananas were repulsive.

They resumed walking and Danny immediately began talking again. “You thought about getting a guide now that you’re in the reserves?”

Honestly, he hadn’t put any thought to it. The only sentinels allowed in the SEALs were those who were stable while unbonded; guides rarely made it through BUD/S. If he bonded to a guide, it would affect his ability to *be* a SEAL, and *that* needed a lot thought. “Eh. No rush, Danny. I’ve only been out a few weeks, our task force is still new; hell, we just barely named it.” He gave Danny a quick look. “You thinking about it?”

Danny did this weird nod-shrug combo, which basically meant yes.

“You been to the Center already to have them start looking?”

“No.” When he didn’t say anything else, Steve figured it was a touchy subject for some reason. “You met the Alpha Prime yet?” Danny finally asked.

They were apparently going to have a whole sentinel bonding moment. Kaimana Iona was the Alpha Prime for Hawaii and Steve definitely knew him. “I’ve known Kai since I was a kid.”

Danny shot him a look. “So you have or have not checked in with him since you got off the boat?”

“It’s a ship, Danny.”

“I don’t care if it’s a life raft; misdirection will get you nowhere, Steven. You’re a level six... did you check in with the Alpha Prime or not?”

“He knows I’m here,” Steve prevaricated.

“Meaning, ‘No, Danny, I didn’t ask the Alpha Prime if I could settle in his territory, but because he knows me, he’s not smacking me on the nose with a rolled up newspaper’.”

Steve refused to react, but it was the truth that Kai was probably letting things slide because he knew Steve from grade school. Technically, any level four and above wanting to move to the islands was supposed to clear it with the Prime. And level six shouldn’t even visit without advance notice unless it was an emergency. Sentinels were territorial, and the higher the level, the more territorial they became.

“I can’t believe you, Steven. I assumed you had taken care of this. Though I don’t know why. It’s like assuming you do all your paperwork; look what a bad assumption that turned into. I swear to you, I don’t care if the governor herself is being held hostage by a whack job in a diaper, when we get back, you are calling Sentinel Iona and making sure he’s not going to kick you off the damn island!”

“Danny, you’re over reacting.”

“I am not over—”

Steve’s world was suddenly a horrible cacophony of sound and overwhelming smells. He dropped to his knees fighting the sensory assault, trying to hold onto his dials and turn them down, but they kept slipping out of his grasp. And then everything seemed to go white.

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“Steve...” a familiar voice called over the horrible ringing in his ears. “Dammit, McGarrett, snap out of it!” There was a slap to his face. “I swear to Christ, Steven, if you don’t come out if now, you’re going to the hospital and getting one of those attractive assless gowns. Now wake up!”

That was Danny. His partner. Fellow sentinel.

He blinked, the world swimming into focus and he immediately regretted the clarity. Everything stunk. He couldn’t even separate the smells they were so sharp and mixed together. It was completely overwhelming and he just wanted it to stop.

“Dammit, Steve, you’ve got to dial it off. Do *not* zone again.” He could now pick up the tremors of stress in Danny’s voice and he managed to focus on his partner who was kneeling by Steve. He was pale and shaky.

“What happened?” he croaked, trying to sit up, aware that there was a crowd of people standing around them, but keeping back at Danny’s continued glares.

"I don't have the whole story yet. HPD officer is getting my car. Took me ten minutes to get you out of it."

"You didn't zone?"

"I did, but as soon as someone touched me, I started coming back. You zoned hard when those damn noise devices went off at the same time as the olfactory-shock grenades detonated."

"What?" Steve asked with alarm, trying to get to his feet, but finding he was still a little wobbly.

"Dammit, Steve, get your dials down before you try haring off to figure out what's going on."

Steve glared, but leaned against the building façade for a moment. "Tell me what you know."

"At exactly 8:15, all over Honolulu, devices were rigged to emit high frequency sound at the same time as those damn OSGs detonated. And, god, do they stink."

Steve agreed with that wholeheartedly. It wasn't uncommon to try to get to sentinels through their senses, but an attack on a single sense had a low probability of success with a stable sentinel. But hitting two senses, particularly if one was scent, was successful with virtually all unbonded sentinels; and at this level of attack, the bonded ones as well.

"We don't know anything else?" he asked, nearly having wrestled his dials into position.

"Obviously someone was trying to pull off something major, because they crippled every sentinel in the city for several minutes. And even if we knew what and where, we have no way to track them with this stench over the island. The OSGs were as much a countermeasure as they were an attack. Chin and Kono are already at the office. They're going to call when they know something."

It was a couple more minutes before Steve heard the distinct rumble of Danny's Camaro. Those couple minutes were incredibly frustrating because Steve needed to be doing something. Immediately.

Traffic was typical for Honolulu in the morning; meaning it sucked. They'd barely been in the car two minutes when the phone rang. Danny put it on speaker.

*"We got something,"* Chin's voice came out tinny sounding and sharper than normal to Steve's now-sensitive ears. *"They knew immediately, but were keeping it under wraps. The governor is giving us the case in conjunction with the Center."*

"*They'* who? What exactly are we talking about?" Steve asked impatiently.

*“The Sentinel and Guide Center. Seven guides were abducted from Diamond Head Beach this morning. HPD are on the scene, though they don’t know the victims were guides. The Center has sent their best sentinels. You’re closer than they are, but they got a head start. You should get there close to the same time.”*

Steve flipped a very illegal U-turn, ignoring Danny’s griping, and directed the car toward Diamond Head.

*“Steve, Danny, technically the Center has jurisdiction on this one,”* Chin warned.

*“Like hell they do!”* Steve barked. *“Seven guides can only mean there are guide traffickers on the island, and that’s our jurisdiction.”*

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He couldn’t quite process the actual words, but the sentinel in him recognized the order of the alpha guide. Her voice was strong, insistent and compelling, and it pulled him back from the edge.

The red haze that had fallen over Steve the minute they’d arrived at the beach started to lift and he realized he was ringed by sentinels, though they were keeping a careful distance and trying to be non-threatening. Steve had his Ka-Bar in hand, though he wasn’t sure why.

He took a breath to steady himself, and amongst the chaotic array of scents, was the scent of his *guide*. Who was missing. Taken before Steve even knew he existed. He felt the red haze start to descend again.

*“Sentinel!”* that commanding guide voice called out to him again, the order implicit in the tone.

At the same time, another, more familiar, voice hollered, *“I swear to you, McGarrett, if you lose it again, I’ll have you tranq’d and locked up until we sort this mess out!”* Steve locked eyes with Kaimana Iona, Alpha Prime of Hawaii, who was looking more than a little pissed. Behind him and to the right was a beautiful woman with Asian influences in her features, and Steve had no doubt she was the guide who talked him out of his haze. She stood nearly a foot shorter than her 6’4 sentinel, who was presently glaring with his arms crossed over his chest.

*“I have to find my guide,”* Steve managed to say. It was hard to believe an hour ago he was on the fence about a guide, but once he’d caught that scent, which had called to everything in him, there had been no doubt.

*“We figured that out,”* Kai said dryly. *“You can’t do a damn thing for your guide if you’re feral, so keep it together!”*

He locked eyes with Danny, who was standing right next to Kai. "Did I hurt anyone?"

"No. You just lost your mind and tried to take off. Like I was gonna let a feral sentinel drive my car," Danny griped.

Several of the sentinels, including Kai, gave Danny a funny look, but Steve just snorted, unwillingly amused. He sheathed his knife, trying to shake off the last of the feral sentinel tugging at his mind, and moved closer to the alpha pair, keenly aware that the other ten sentinels were watching him closely. "What do we know?"

"I've got it handled, McGarrett," Kai quickly replied. "Despite what the governor thinks, she has no authority to put her taskforce on this."

"Bullshit! Guide trafficking is well within our scope, but even if it wasn't, that's my guide out there!"

"You're a liability right now," the alpha sentinel said firmly.

Before Steve could reply, the alpha guide curled her hand around her sentinel's upper arm. "Perhaps the two of you should talk privately, and I'll discuss the situation with Sentinel Williams." She phrased it like a suggestion, but there was no doubt in Steve's mind that they'd just been given an order.

Kaimana huffed a little, but gestured for Steve to follow him. They walked a bit, and the privacy was an illusion with all the sentinels about, but it still helped. "Not exactly the way I anticipated this first meeting going, Steve."

He fought back his wince. "Look, I know I should have contacted you when I came back."

"Damn right you should have!" Kai growled, then gave a frustrated grunt and rubbed his hand over his face. "We don't have time for this right now. I've got seven guides to find before they disappear forever. Frankly, with your ability to smell your guide past all the crap in the air, you could be a real asset, but if you can't keep it under control, you're useless."

Steve found himself growling and his spirit animal appeared, a black jaguar, growling at the same time. "You're not gonna stop me from finding my guide."

Kai just glared at him, his own lion spirit guide making an appearance. "Then keep it under control! Now tell me if your guide is male or female."

"Male, I think. The scents are all so muddled, but I'm pretty sure."



“Damn.”

“Why? What’s wrong?”

“There’s only one person it could be. We should be able to get strong scent exemplars from the Center, plus I can send someone to his condo to pick up more if we need them. Let’s head back to the Center. First we’ll see if you can get a scent trail.” He gave Steve a serious look. “And after we get the guides back, you and I have stuff to *discuss*.”

Steve just nodded. He’d known this conversation would come eventually. “Why would we get strong scent samples at the Center?”

“He works for me. Spends more time at the Center than he does at home.”

“What’s his name?” Steve asked as they turned back to join the others.

“Tony.” At Steve’s little growl of annoyance, Kai just shook his head with exasperation.

“Anthony Dominic DiNozzo Junior.”

The sentinel in Steve settled a little more at knowing his guide’s name.

There was a quick coordination of effort, and Steve formally met the Alpha Guide Prime, Isabelle Iona. Then he and Danny were headed back to the car to follow the others back to the Center.

“Tell me what you found out,” Steve demanded as soon as they were on the road.

“Six fairly newly online guides, plus their instructor out for a morning at the beach. Guess they needed some downtime. Semi-regular thing, but not at any consistent day or time. It wasn’t planned for today until last night.

“There were four sentinels with them, all level-five, so they were quickly brought down by the sensory attack. Witness statements seem to point to the perps *knowing* this outing was happening, even if the guides themselves only planned it yesterday.”

“So someone on the inside,” Steve mused.

“Likely. Isabelle indicated her part of the investigation would be questioning anyone who had access to the guide trainer’s schedule. Although it’s possible someone just overheard the guides talking about it. In any case, as soon as the sentinels dropped, three vans pulled up, somewhere between six and ten men piled out — witnesses vary on that — armed with various weapons. The sentinels were all shot.

“We now know those were tranquilizers. All of them were transported back to the Center to be monitored. Witnesses say two of the guides were drugged as well, but the rest left under threat of being shot or drugged. HPD is securing video from a couple cameras in the vicinity. And that’s all we know so far.”

Steve nodded, thinking through the issues. “Call Chin and Kono. I want them on the devices and the vans, and then pulling up any reports that might hint at where these guys might be holed up.”

“They’re not going to be in Honolulu,” Danny retorted.

“No. Those scent grenades aren’t going to cloud things for long, and there’s no way we wouldn’t find seven distressed guides if they were within even ten miles. But we need to figure out where these guys were working from; they had to have a base of operations in the city, even if they abandoned it. They got enough of those devices up around the city to send everyone into sensory shock and there’s got to be a trail we can follow.”

Danny made the call, briefing Chin and Kono on everything. When he hung up, he gave Steve an assessing look. “So, your guide...”

“Tony,” Steve supplied stiffly.

“The guide trainer?”

“I know he works for the Center, so... yes.”

“You still on the fence about having a guide?”

“No,” Steve replied with certainty.

“We’re gonna find him, Steven,” Danny offered.

“Damn right we will.”

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As soon as Steve was out of the car, he was tracking the scent of his guide. The Center actually had less of the smell from the OSGs. No doubt it was because it would have been harder to plant the devices too close to a building full of sentinels.

He followed that perfect, soothing guide-scent to an office on the second floor; there was a sign on the door that read, *Tony DiNozzo, Senior Guide Instructor*.

Kai appeared next to him, passing him keys. “We want to keep the scent in there as strong as possible. Bag the best scent exemplars you can, and let’s get out there.”

Steve nodded, then entered the office by himself. The scent of his guide was nearly staggering. He closed the door behind him and took a few deep breaths, letting the incredible guide scent chase away the overwhelming smell of the shock grenades. Where stepping onto that beach with his guide’s scent laced with stress and fear had tipped him over the edge, this calmed him and helped him feel in control again.

He briefly took note of the office... it was orderly but filled with personal touches. A stack of DVDs here, a pile of fantasy novels there, jazz on the iPod playlist. Steve wanted to linger in his guide’s space, but he began gathering up the items that smelled the most strongly of *Tony*.

The strongest scent was actually the office chair, but that obviously wouldn’t work. Next was a reddish-brown leather jacket slung over the plush armchair; Steve took that for himself and bagged several additional items for the other sentinels. It was time for them to hunt.

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## Part Two

Six hours Steve’s guide had been missing, and for nearly five he’d been trying to catch a scent trail with no luck. Staying dialed up was difficult and exhausting because of the fading smell of the shock grenades — which was a horrible combination of human and animal pheromones, chemicals, skunk, old fish, male musk ox urine, and sulfur. They had eventually found the vans, but then nothing. The trail had gone cold.

Finally, Kai had called off the search and ordered everyone back to the Center to reconnoiter. Steve was pissed. He knew they couldn’t keep searching like that, it was obvious that the sentinels were all suffering from the lingering effects of the sensory shock, yet trying to search around it. But he couldn’t help being upset at giving up on the ground search already.

Conventional investigation had turned up almost nothing useful throughout the day. Chin and Kono had determined who had put up the devices throughout the city. They were hired labor, paid in cash, who had no idea what they were mounting on traffic lights and utility poles throughout Honolulu for the last few weeks. They’d been dressed as city workers with forged paperwork and no one had thought twice about them. So that was a dead end.

Trying to track the OSGs was useless. They were illegal, expensive and hard to come by. And these folks had used a *lot* of them. That kind of purchase would have been huge, so it would

have already been on law enforcement radar if anyone knew about it. They'd still asked all the right questions of the appropriate agencies, but nothing had come of it.

The surveillance tapes had also yielded nothing. Steve and Danny had watched them from a laptop during a break in the manhunt, but other than Steve getting some grainy pictures of his guide, there hadn't been much there. The traffickers all wore masks and oddly enough were mostly of similar build.

Two of the guides had been drugged quickly, Tony being one of them. He had wounded two of the men before they'd tranquilized him. The other guide drugged was the female level five. The remaining five guides had been either levels three or four. It was unclear if Tony was drugged because he was high-level and it was part of the plan all along, or if it was because he fought back.

The vans were a dead end as well; lots of fibers and trace, but no prints outside of the seven guides. Kai was able to determine nineteen separate recent scents in the van. Seven guides, three people to drive the vans, and nine to do the actual abduction. There were people out trying to get scent samples of all the guides so they could possibly try to pick up some scent besides Tony's, but it was a long shot. Not many sentinels could differentiate that many scents and manage to search for some subset of them, especially with the scent countermeasures the kidnapers had taken. It would take a bonded sentinel for certain, and at least a level five with outstanding olfactory control who had mastered the second set of dials, which Steve had barely ever touched before today.

"What'd Chin and Kono find out about Tony?" Steve asked as they made their way through midafternoon traffic headed back to the S&G Center.

"You sure you want to do this now?" Danny asked cautiously.

"Yeah, Danny, I'm sure. I need something to focus on besides my desire to kill whoever has my guide."

Danny watched him for several seconds before he pulled out his phone and pulled up whatever Chin had sent him earlier. "Green eyes, light brown hair, six-foot-two, one hundred eighty pounds. He was thirty-seven this past June ninth. Born in Bridgehampton, New York — which is on Long Island, and is ridiculously expensive, by the way. Father is Anthony DiNozzo Senior, alive, and still in New York. Mother Claire DiNozzo nee Paddintgon, British ex-pat who died in a car accident when Tony was eight.

"Military Academy followed by athletic scholarship to Ohio State University where he played Football and Basketball. Majored in Sports Science. Eventually also earned a masters in

Criminology. Police Academy at twenty-two, six years with the police, six years as a Senior Agent with NCIS; he finished that masters in criminology his first year as a Fed. Left law enforcement when he came online in 2007. Went to work for the S&G Center here in Hawaii a year later. He's been here for two years now."

Danny finished the recitation of facts and put the cell down. "Most guides who were in law enforcement before they came online choose to stay in law enforcement," he said, obviously going for casual but not really succeeding.

"Except for the ones who can't," Steve said as he put the pieces together and started to fume. "If it's true that he's a wolf guide, Kai should have said something."

"Mm hm," Danny murmured noncommittally. "Well, I will say you landed a pretty bastard, so you'll have lots of opportunities to use the shark cage to torment all the people who flirt with your guide."

"Jesus, Danny," Steve said, exasperated, but also unwillingly amused. He had seen a picture of Tony earlier and there was no doubt his guide was attractive.

"What? Knowing you, you'll start carrying around anti-tank weaponry in the trunk."

"I would not."

They argued the rest of the way back to the Center.

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Steve could only blame sensory fatigue for the fact that it took him so *long* to notice the presence of an insanely powerful Alpha; one who hadn't been here earlier. Kaimana had a significant Alpha presence, but whoever was here now was on a whole other level.

Inside they found Kai and Isabelle talking to Jim Ellison and Blair Sandburg. Steve wasn't inclined to be anything other than grateful that the strongest guide and sentinel in world were here to help find Tony and the other missing guides.

There were quick introductions and then Steve cut right to the chase with Kai. "Was there something you forgot to tell me about Tony?"

"In what respect?" Kai asked, arms crossed over his chest.

"About his spirit guide?" Steve demanded.

“And we’ll be having this conversation in private,” Sandburg interjected sternly, leading them all off to a soundproofed room and flipping on the white noise generators.

“Those are pretty useless,” Steve remarked. Even he could hear around them, and he could barely use the high-level sentinel dials.

Isabelle took a seat and gestured for everyone to sit. “Those who have the aptitude to hear around the generators plus the soundproofing are all still in the field.”

“Tony being a wolf guide is something we needed to know. This whole thing could have been targeting him specifically,” Steve began.

“Tony’s not a wolf guide,” Sandburg said immediately.

“*He’s not?*” Kai and Isabelle asked simultaneously.

Now Steve was confused.

Sandburg braced his elbows on the table. “On paper, until he bonds, Tony is a level six fox guide, who left law enforcement because of personal issues. Many who know him assume he’s actually a wolf guide because of his aura and his empathic skills. I knew Kaimana and Isabelle had inferred he was a wolf guide. I let that misapprehension stand.”

“What is he?” Steve asked urgently, suddenly feeling a lead weight in his stomach. Unbonded lion guides were valuable, almost as much as wolf guides.

Sandburg and Ellison exchanged a look. “He’s a crow guide,” Sandburg finally admitted.

“I needed to *know* that,” Kaimana growled.

Steve pressed the heels of his hands to his eyes. “They’ll kill him if they find out.”

“They won’t find out,” Sandburg assured. “Tony is still training but he hides his skills well, and his spirit guide never makes unexpected appearances.”

“How good is he?” Steve finally managed to ask.

“His empathic skills are excellent, he’s still working on the shamanic skills, but he wields psionic energy like no one I’ve ever seen or heard of. It takes intense focus, which is why he was abducted at all. Once you two bond, his true spirit guide will have to be registered, or he won’t even be able to consult with you legally, but he’ll downplay his gifts for the rest of his life. He’s incredibly dangerous.”

“Of course he is,” Danny said. “What other kind of guide would McGarrett have?”

Sandburg’s lips twitched in amusement. “He’s still drugged or he’d have reached out to me by now. We need to be ready, because Tony will contact us.”

Steve braced his elbows on the table and dropped his head into his hands. Wolf and crow guides were treated similarly in the judicial system. Both could compel the truth, so neither were allowed to question suspects. Using sentinel or guide gifts to determine if someone was lying was not the same as *compelling* them to incriminate themselves. So while technically they could participate in investigations, careful documentation had to be kept, including video, to prove they hadn’t been involved in questioning. If you even wanted one to be in the room to monitor an interrogation, you had to have a court officer present to ensure they didn’t ask any questions. Well, that or your suspect had to give explicit consent to the questioning, but that almost never happened.

But crow guides were well known to be vicious when provoked and were damn dangerous. Unlike the other types of guides, there was no black market for crows, and they were incredibly rare. They were killed outright if it came to it; which had happened when traffickers accidentally stumbled on a crow guide ten years ago. There wasn’t even an attempt at abduction, they just shot him.

The last crow guide to be successfully kidnapped was over a hundred years ago and had left a trail of bodies in a vegetative state before she was killed, and no one had ever determined what she had done.

Everything Steve thought he knew and wanted had been turned on its head in the last seven hours, and he was reeling. The only thing he was absolutely certain of was that he needed his guide.

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Tony pried his eyes open, continuing to fight the drugs they had used to sedate him. They hadn’t given him any more since the abduction, which was a damn good thing. He needed his head clear if he was going to attempt to reach out for help, and he definitely needed it clear if he was going to try to get himself out of this cluster fuck.

He was handcuffed to a bed, and he was able to utilize his empathy with enough precision to feel the other six guides throughout the dilapidated building they were being held in.

Suddenly, he could feel two of the captors moving toward him. He let his body go lax and feigned unconsciousness.

He heard the door open. *"This one's a little older than the others, but he's a fox guide. Supposed to have nice auras and shit. Sexy."*

*"Doesn't matter how old. He's pretty enough. Feisty, too. Didn't know guides could fight like that. Though maybe he's really a lion. That'd be a nice payday."*

*"We need him awake soon. I don't wanna be carrying his heavy ass to the boat tomorrow. When's that bitch gonna wake up?"*

*"She's moving around. Be up soon. We gave him a lot. Let's get the pictures of the rest and we'll do those two later. Dammit, I'm fucking hungry. Matt better get his ass back here soon."*

*"He's got to tie up that loose end in Honolulu."*

*"Well he should fucking be back by now."*

*"I think you forgot just how hard it is to get the smell of guide off you. Their fucking odor sticks to you like skunk. If he went into the city smelling like those seven, we'd all be fucked."*

Their voices faded and Tony opened his eyes. He was running out of time to get his head clear, and then get uncuffed from this bed. He also desperately needed a plan.

He figured about half an hour had passed before he felt focused enough to try to reach out to Blair. Conceivably he could try Isabelle, but he'd never told her he could pull her to the spirit plane, so that could be startling, and she might fight him.

Letting himself relax, he mediated enough to connect to the psionic energy he needed, then tugged gently at Blair.

He blinked and was surrounded by blue. His crow announced itself as it flew overhead, then settled on his shoulder. "Hey there, Hitch," he said stroking the breast feathers of his spirit guide.

"Tony?"

He looked up into Blair's worried face and got to his feet. "Hey, Blair."

Blair pulled him into a hug, and Hitch squawked and flew off. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine. We're all okay from what I can tell, though we're not being kept in the same room. I'm still a little unfocused because of the sedation, but it's getting better."



“Any idea where you are?”

“None. Smells like forest though, and that doesn’t tell us much in Hawaii. They’re moving us tomorrow morning by boat, so we’re running out of time here. The only name I have so far is ‘Matt’ and he’s in Honolulu *‘tying up a loose end.’* I think that loose end might be a guide who works at the Center named Les Parks.”

“Why him?” Blair asked intently.

“Just a gut feeling; twelve years as a cop, I suppose. His emotional tone has been peculiar for the last week or so; just pinging at me sometimes, and that’s not typical for him. When I left for home last night, he just seemed... odd. I was getting some guilt from him, but you know how often people radiate guilt for the stupidest of things. But now... when I consider everything, well, I think it’s worth looking into.”

He felt his energy already waning; trying to maintain this connection with the drugs still affecting him was just going to make things harder in the long run. “I can’t stay any longer. I need the drugs to metabolize more.”

Blair nodded, looking concerned. “Just contact me whenever you can.”

“Are you in Hawaii?”

“Of course I am,” Blair said with a half smile. “Where else would I be?”

Tony just nodded. “Thank you for coming.”

“Look, Tony... there’s something you might need to know.”

Raising a brow in inquiry, Tony waited.

“Never mind. It’ll keep,” Blair said, shaking his head.

“You sure?”

“Yep. Get back before you wear yourself out. And don’t do anything stupid, okay?”

“No promises!” Tony replied with a smile.

“Dammit, Tony!” Blair managed just before Tony ended his connection to the spirit plane.

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Steve tried to contain his impatience as Sandburg talked to Tony “*on the spirit plane.*” He didn’t know what to make of *that* — Sandburg was just sitting there with his eyes closed — but if the alpha guide was able to help find Tony, Steve didn’t care what it took.

Suddenly Sandburg’s eyes popped open. “Les Parks,” he said immediately.

Isabelle leaned forward. “He’s one of the administrative coordinators. Today is his day off... we’ve been trying to reach him to have him come in for an interview.”

“Tony thinks he knows something.”

“And he’s been ignoring your request to come in?” Steve asked. “Why hasn’t this come up before?”

Kai started to say something but Isabelle held up a hand. “We’ve been tracking down a lot of people who aren’t in the building today. Les is just one of them. He usually surfs or snorkels on his off days, so it’s not unexpected that we wouldn’t be able to reach him.”

Before Steve could say anything else, Sandburg interjected, “Look, everyone who we haven’t been able to reach, or who hasn’t called in voluntarily — because, let’s be real, the sensory attack on sentinels this morning was not a secret — is under suspicion, but let’s just focus on finding Parks.”

“What’d Tony say, Chief?” Ellison asked.

“He said they’re all fine. Likely somewhere in the forest based on smell, though he hasn’t seen anything. He’s still trying to shake off the drugs, so his concentration wasn’t the best. He said one of the kidnapers’ name is Matt, it’s the only name he got, and the guy is in Honolulu ‘*tying up a loose end*’ right now. Tony thinks that loose end might be Les Parks. And, if that’s who leaked information, that’s *definitely* a loose end.”

Steve was incredibly relieved to hear Tony was okay, but he had to quickly set that aside. “Give me Parks’ cell number and we’ll track it.”

Isabelle read off the number, and Danny made the call to Chin.

“Did he say anything else?” Steve prompted.

“He said they are being moved by boat in the morning. It won’t be easy to get nineteen people on a boat at once without attracting attention,” Blair offered thoughtfully.

Steve could think of several strategies, with varying probabilities of success. “If this thing with Parks doesn’t turn up a lead, we can post sentinels at harbors, marinas and boat clubs, but there are too many places to possibly put a boat in the water. The best method to move them is a couple at a time on a speed boat out to a bigger ship.”

“Why do you suppose they didn’t move them immediately?” Isabelle asked.

“This has been in the works for a while,” Steve offered. “They’ve been waiting for a moment to strike, and had to know we’d lock down private flights off the islands, so that leaves the water. If they didn’t know until last night that they had their opportunity, it could easily take a while to get their transport vessel in the right position for a rendezvous.”

He noticed Danny making furious notes, and then he hung up his phone. “Parks is at some hole in the wall fish taco place on Nuuanu. Chin and Kono are closer.”

Everyone was already on their feet. “Not on this,” Ellison answered. “They’re limited in ways we aren’t considering there are guides missing.”

Steve chafed at that, but he also got it. Technically his team had *full authority and means*, but even that had practical limits. Sentinels searching for a kidnapped guide had a lot more leeway in the eyes of the legal system. “How about they get eyes on him and only move in if he’s in danger?”

Ellison considered, exchanged a look with Sandburg, then nodded.

Danny made the call as they headed to the car. Oddly enough, Sandburg followed them, and Steve got a warning glare from Ellison that clearly said, “*Nothing had better happen to my guide.*”

“What’s going on?” Steve asked.

“I figured you’d have questions, so I’m riding with the two of you,” Sandburg replied, climbing into the backseat.

Steve peeled out after Kaimana’s SUV, anxious to get Parks and get some answers from him. But in the ten minutes it would take to get there, yeah, he wouldn’t mind hearing about Tony.

“Why’d he move to Hawaii?” Steve asked immediately.

“He said it was a fascination with Magnum PI, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he sensed this is where he’d find you. Crow guides are a bit of a mystery, even to someone like me.”

“In what way?”

“The original shamans were all crow guides, not because others *couldn't* walk the path, but because it was almost *instinctual* for crow guides. Then they seemed to die out. Wolf guides were next most connected to the psionic plane, or what is referred to as the spirit plane, and they stepped into the breach. Sometimes a fox guide can walk the shamanic path, which is why Tony chose that as his fake spirit guide.”

At Steve's apparent confusion, Sandburg offered. “Tony spent a year training with me. It was already an unusual length of time. Making him a fox guide would seem like I was checking his aptitude and found he was a viable candidate, which justified his time with me. Even though he had more training to do, we agreed that he needed to wait until he'd bonded.”

“I don't understand that... why?”

“Because then he can reach out to one of the other two crow guides and find out the things I can't teach him.”

Danny asked, “Why did he have to keep it secret at all?”

In the rearview mirror, Steve could see Sandburg make a face. “A few things. I don't think he wanted the expectation hanging over his head. Also people have the misunderstanding that crow guides can speak to the dead, which is not true. Any shaman can sometimes meet those on the psionic plane who are transitioning through to the next phase of existence. But just talk to the dead? No one can do that. Still, the urban legend means that crow guides sometimes attract... weirdos. Tony didn't want sentinels looking over his shoulder all the time to keep him 'safe,' so he decided to keep it secret until he bonded.”

Steve mulled that over. It seemed as if his life was going to be a lot more complicated very soon. Yesterday he would have cared, today it didn't matter; only finding his guide was important. “How'd he wind up a guide instructor?”

He caught Sandburg's smile in the mirror. “He came to Hawaii with no real plan, so I suggested he help out at the Center for a while just to keep busy. After he was able to help a couple guides who were struggling with some basic skills, Isabelle gave him a trial run as a guide trainer, and now he's been at it for two years. Hawaii is becoming one of the best training centers for guides because of Tony, and we can't exactly replicate his methods.”

“Why's that?” Danny asked.

“Because it's as much driven on Tony's personality as what he's teaching them. For instance, if I were to tell another instructor to take their guides to a mall and tell them that the first person

who can find a narcissist gets a prize... well, I'd get some peculiar stares. Tony just seems to know how to explain things in the way that people will *get*, and his training exercises are quite unconventional."

Steve's lips twitched in amusement.

Danny groaned. "He's the kind of guy who'd drop someone in a shark cage, isn't he?"

"Shark cage?" Sandburg asked, sounded bemused.

----

It was over by the time they got there. Two people were in cuffs and seated on the sidewalk. Chin immediately briefed them. "Matthew Whitley and Lester Parks. They were getting into a car together and Parks didn't seem happy about it."

Steve was too busy glaring at Matt Whitley to respond. He was keenly aware that Danny had ahold of one of his arms and Sandburg had the other. Even if he were inclined to fight Danny, he wouldn't do anything to the alpha guide, though he desperately wanted to beat the answers out of Matt Whitley immediately.

Kai and Ellison were already grilling Whitley, who was professing no knowledge of the kidnapping. Isabelle had moved Parks further away and was questioning him gently, but so far he wasn't saying much either.

"What do we know about Parks?" Steve asked Chin, trying to get some information.

"Serious financial issues up until about a month ago. Bills were mysteriously paid off, though no increase in his income that I could find. The accounts that paid the bills, including paying off his mortgage, was dead end at a shell company registered in the Caymans."

Steve nearly growled in frustration.

When they were clearly making no progress with either man, the decision was to move everything off the street. "Our offices are closer," Steve insisted. He was only a couple feet from Whitley and desperately wanted to get his hands around the bastard's throat.

Ellison stepped close to him and spoke in a voice much louder than was necessary considering Steve was right in front of him, "We aren't constrained by the manner of our interrogation techniques. If you take him to your offices or the local PD... there will be cameras, and eventually questions."

“We’re not constrained as far as I’m concerned. Cameras can be turned off and the only questions will be the ones Whitley answers,” Steve gritted out.

“As much as I hate to say it, that sounds like Steve. Our last case, he threw a guy who wouldn’t answer questions in with a bunch of sharks,” Danny offered rocking back on his heels.

“Ewa!” Matt Whitley blurted out. “They’re in the Ewa Reserve in an old ranger’s cabin.”

*Nicely played, Ellison,* Steve thought, as he hauled Whitley to his feet.

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Tony finally felt clear headed, though he was incredibly thirsty. He just needed someone to let him out of these cuffs and he could see about getting out of this mess. In the meantime, he spent the moments opening up his empathy to get a feel for everyone in or near the building. He easily filtered out the minds of the other six guides, who were all in various stages of distress. That left eleven other people in the vicinity.

He carefully mapped each of those minds, visualizing the receptors he planned to target. It would take all his concentration to keep that map ready for the right opportunity. What was probably a half hour or so later, the two men from earlier returned along with an additional man sporting a swollen nose and carrying a tranquilizer gun.

The older one with a scruffy beard and brown hair said, “Good, you’re awake. You’re the last one. I’m only telling you once, you cooperate, you’ll be fine. You fight and you’ll get tranq’d again, then when you wake up, I’ll beat the shit out of you.” He nudged Tony with his foot. “You got all that?”

Tony just nodded, maintaining his concentration.

The younger one with pale gingery hair, leaned into scruffy beard’s space and whispered, “We can’t damage the merchandise.”

Scruffy just snorted. “There’s ways to hurt ‘em where the cameras won’t see. You got that, *guide?*” he asked with another nudge.

Tony nodded again, continuing to focus and not let himself react to the way “guide” was said so disparagingly.

“Good. We don’t need any of that bullshit you pulled on the beach. ‘Sides. Hank’s already pissed at you about his broken nose,” he gestured to the guy with the tranq gun, who gave Tony an evil smile. “He’d be happy to shoot you again.”

Tony almost rolled his eyes at the cliché bad guy routine.

Ginger was fussing around with the settings on his cell phone while Scruffy uncuffed Tony and pulled him up from the bed. Tony's concentration wavered when his shirt was pulled off and he was pushed against a wall. He realized they were filming him and his attention was almost shot entirely, but he pushed aside the annoyance and closed his eyes, focusing on the mind map.

"It's nice how they take care of the hair on all of 'em. Nice and smooth, every single one," ginger said.

"Shut up... Doesn't matter what you think of the damn guides. *Hey you!*" Scruffy yelled. "Open your eyes, pretty boy. Need to get a shot that shows 'em those green eyes."

Tony ignored it, sensing the annoyance rising in the men in the room when he failed to comply.

"*Hey!* I said open your eyes!"

He could sense Scruffy moving closer and at that moment, he struck out at all eleven minds at once. It was unsubtle the way he rammed a psionic spike into the minds of the eleven men. He heard three thumps nearby, followed by the muted sounds of shocked exclamations from the other room.

Tony opened his eyes to find three bodies on the ground, staring vacantly. He knew they were alive, but there was nothing else there anymore. At least for now. Tony was pretty confident he could undo it, but he sure wasn't planning to find out if that were true right now.

It wasn't until he took a step that he realized how tired he was. Exhausted, really. He staggered out of the room and found the other six guides on their feet and staring at the fallen bodies. There were four bodies in here, all armed, which meant the other four must be outside. His empathy said they were similarly affected, but he needed to be sure.

"Alex," Tony called, leaning heavily against the doorframe, "take one of their handguns and make sure the rest are down, too. Collect their weapons. I don't think I could walk five more feet or I'd go with you, so be careful."

Alex was the only one with military training, and he quickly nodded and carefully slipped outside. Erin was suddenly there, propping him up and helping him into the room to get seated. "What happened, Tony?"

"Had to wait until they uncuffed me to do anything. Didn't know if you guys were cuffed as well and couldn't risk that we'd all be tied up with this," he gestured to the downed men, "mess out of commission."

“But what did you *do*?” she persisted.

“Let’s just... another time, okay? I’ve had some advanced training and I can’t get into it. And everyone needs to keep quiet until Alex gets back.” These were his baby guides and he considered them his responsibility but there wasn’t a lot he could do for them at the moment.

Alex returned with an armful of weapons. “Four down out there. I couldn’t see anyone else and I didn’t feel any empathic presences near by. But that means there’s one missing.

“Yeah,” Tony replied, “one went to Honolulu for some reason. So we need to be on the alert for them coming back. Anyone know where we are?”

A bunch of headshakes, and then Alex answered, “We’re somewhere on the north side of the island. They brought us by helicopters to a clearing, then a couple of them, plus you and Erin who were drugged, came by Jeep up to here; it looked like a rough ride. The rest of us were walked in. I could get us back to the clearing, but I have no idea where to go from there.”

Tony’s mind spun on the best way to handle the situation. He might have enough energy to contact Blair, but he had no way to tell him where to go, so that was useless. If they just waited it out, someone else connected to this plot could come looking for them, so he wasn’t fond of the idea of staying put and hoping for rescue. Besides, hoping for rescue had never been Tony’s style.

Finally he decided he’d have to chance waking one of these guys up. “I’m going to have to risk using one of our captors to get us out. Which one was the most nervous or subservient?”

Three of the guides, including Erin and Alex, identified one fairly young brunette. The other three seemed rattled out of their minds. “Hey!” Tony said sternly. He’d like nothing better than to baby them, but they needed to get out of this, and falling apart wasn’t an option. “You guys need to keep it together. I know this has been the shittiest day, but we’re getting ourselves out of it and we can’t afford emotional meltdowns right now.”

At a bunch of wide-eyed nods, Tony murmured to Erin, “Shore them up the best you can.”

She nodded and moved to round up the three nervous guides. That left Alex and Jen. “As much as I’d like to leave the bodies out for scavengers, we need to bring them inside. You guys get started on that, and the others will be out shortly to help.”

It took time Tony wasn’t happy with before they were ready to wake up their designated idiot. The bodies were all piled in the room they’d been holding Tony in, and they’d put the moron in a chair across from Tony. Tony’s energy had returned some in the interim, but he was still damn



tired. Fortunately the kidnapppers had been giving water to everyone except Tony, so, though hungry, everyone was okay. A bit of water helped Tony feel tremendously better.

“This could wipe me out entirely, so if I decide to take an involuntary nap, Alex is in charge of tactical decisions. He’ll determine the best way out.” He fixed Alex with a stern look. “If I pass out from waking this yahoo up, you do whatever you have to in order to figure out how to get out of here. If you have to shoot him to get information, you do it. Am I clear?”

“Yes, sir,” Alex responded sharply. He and Erin were a little older than the others. Erin was a level five and Alex a level four, but Alex had nine years in the Navy under his belt, and could hopefully bear up under the pressure of the situation. Erin was also rock solid so far. He looked to her. “I need you to work with Alex to get everyone off the mountain. I’m putting him in charge because of his military training, but you’re the senior guide and have the most guide experience. You also do what you have to in order to get out of this. And if that means leaving me here for someone else to come rescue, you do that, am I clear?”

“Tony,” she whispered sounding appalled.

“Am I clear?” he barked at her.

“Yes,” she responded, looking a combination of sad and frustrated.

“All right, I need everyone to be quiet and let me concentrate.”

Tony spent a lot longer than he’d like visualizing the receptors he was trying to mend. It took every bit of energy he had to piece together what he’d empathically damaged. It was pretty clear to him that his initial attack had been overkill, but considering the circumstances, the overkill was preferable to possibly having missed one of them.

The idiot woke abruptly, clutching his head in pain. Tony was able to stay conscious, but his reserves were gone. There was no way he could interrogate the idiot so Alex had to do it.

And it was bad news. They could take the Jeep to the clearing, but then they’d have to hike out. They couldn’t do that in the dark, which would be coming in a couple hours, and Tony couldn’t do it at all. He’d have to rest overnight first.

Alex eventually cuffed the idiot in the room with the human vegetables, which was probably cruel but Tony really didn’t care. Now Tony needed to contact Blair, but that wasn’t really possible right at the moment; his grasp on the psionic energy was weak and slippery at best.

He, Alex, and Erin discussed it for several minutes while the rest of guides foraged in the kidnapppers’ supplies for food. They found some snacks and stuff in a bag, and there was enough

water for a day. Either the mysterious Matt was bringing the food back, or they hadn't been planning to feed the guides at all.

Ultimately, they decided to let Tony sleep for an hour to see if he had the energy to reach out to Blair. Alex and Erin would keep watch in case the Matt came back. There was just the one bed and it was in a room with the vegetables, so Tony just curled up on the floor. He registered that two of his baby guides settled by him, one of them positioning Tony's head on his lap.

When they woke him up, he didn't exactly feel better, in fact he was exhausted, but he needed to try to reach Blair now. It was already evening and they were losing light. His body was stiff from lying on the floor, but he just stayed in position, with his head in Jen's lap, and tried to focus.

He did his best to concentrate on the flow of psionic energy. It seemed to take forever, but eventually he felt the shift to the spirit plane. Tony collapsed to the blue-hued ground, trying to stabilize his connection. Hitch immediately appeared squawking and picking at Tony's hair. Tony petted his guide, the contact helping shore him up temporarily. Mentally, he reached for Blair.

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The preparations went much slower than Steve would have liked. The only way to that part of the Reserve was on foot. There was a clearing about two miles from the cabin where helicopters could land, and there was a rough road between the two, but they didn't want to tip off the kidnapers, so twenty sentinels were going in on foot. They'd cut a couple hours off their time if they could land in that clearing, but it was too risky.

Once they had the guides, they could evac them by chopper, but until then, this was the best option. They were taking choppers from Honolulu to a landing area in Ahupua'a O Kahana State Park, which was as close as they could get without risk.

Everyone was finally geared up and they were headed for the SUVs when Sandburg stumbled and yelped, "Tony!"

"What happened?" Steve asked urgently, moving close only to be held back by Kai. He could only watch as Sandburg folded himself into a half lotus and closed his eyes. Tony was obviously contacting them again. Sandburg had tried to reach Tony earlier, repeatedly, to let him know they were coming, but hadn't been able to make the connection. He had theorized Tony might have been drugged again, or just couldn't respond for some reason.

All the heavily armed sentinels hovered around the shaman seated in the parking lot in front of 'Iolani Palace, anticipation thrumming in the air.

When Sandburg's eyes popped open again, he looked worried, but only said, "Tony says the kidnapers have been neutralized. They can meet us at the clearing near the cabin as soon as we can get there."

Steve wanted to ask questions, but the urge to keep moving won out. "Let's go. You can fill us in on the way."

It had already been determined that Chin and Isabelle were staying back to coordinate, but Kono was coming with them; there was no time for changes to their logistics.

Steve, Danny, Kaimana, Ellison and Sandburg packed into one SUV.

"What do you know?" Steve asked as soon as they were moving.

"Tony did something to incapacitate the eleven kidnapers. He was barely maintaining his connection on the spirit plane, which I've never seen him struggle with, so I just got the essentials. They know how to get to the clearing and have the transportation to do it. They'll meet us there."

What the hell could Tony have done to incapacitate eleven people?

They rehashed their plans on the way to the helicopters. The choppers and the pilots were being supplied by the Navy, after Steve called in a favor, so now they were all going straight to the clearing, although only one chopper could land at a time. They were using two search and rescue equipped HH-60s, so they'd be able to complete the entire mission with only two helicopters.

Once the guides were flown out, the sentinels would go in for clean up. Steve should care about the tactical plan for the rest of the operation, but the idea was for Steve to fly out with Tony. Beyond that, he really didn't care. Kai had military experience, Danny was a cop, and Ellison had been both, so he'd let them figure it out.

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Alex hadn't been kidding about the ride being rough, Tony thought as he held on with all his remaining strength. He'd have happily slept on the ride down, but no one could sleep through this spine-jarring hell; unless they were drugged, of course.

Everyone was crammed into the Jeep with Alex driving, and they were probably lucky no one had bounced out of the vehicle. They reached the clearing as the sun was starting to dip below the tree line. They had a little bit of twilight left, and Tony hoped their pickup would be here soon. He really didn't want to be out here in the dark in an open vehicle.

The Jeep was decrepit, and Tony wondered how the original owner ever even got it out here. For certain gas had to be flown in, and it all seemed like a giant pain in the ass when its sole purpose appeared to be transport from that cabin to this clearing.

“Tony?”

He jerked awake, realizing he must have fallen asleep practically the minute the bouncing stopped.

“Tony,” Alex said again, “I can hear the choppers inbound.”

Now that he was alert, he could hear them, too. “There’s two,” he remarked once he could see clearly. From the size of the clearing, it was pretty obvious that only one could land at a time.

The first set down and it was barely on the ground before people were pouring out of it. Even in the twilight and decked out in tactical gear, he recognized Kai, Jim, and Blair. Tony wasn’t moving from his spot until it was time to leave, but the other guides piled out of the other side and the back of the Jeep.

Something was tugging at Tony’s awareness, but he was too tired to figure it out. Then the new arrivals were at the vehicle, and Blair was giving him a rueful grin.

“What, no balloons?” Tony asked tiredly.

“I told you not to do anything stupid,” Blair said, surprising Tony by staying back so far.

“Wasn’t stupid,” Tony said feeling fatigue pulling at him. “Was brilliant.”

Tony blinked at the only sentinel who was coming close to the Jeep. He was about Tony’s height with dark hair and rather obnoxiously attractive, plus Tony had a weakness for hot men in thigh holsters.

The tug at Tony got stronger.

The sentinel reached out to Tony slowly, and he registered that the man’s hand was trembling. Blinking in confusion, Tony found himself reaching out as well. Their hands touched and suddenly Tony *got it*.

“Oh,” he breathed.

He was carefully pulled from the Jeep and then the sentinel was on him like an octopus, face buried in Tony’s neck.

“Okay.” Lifting his arms felt like it would take more energy than he could spare, but he did it anyway. “So this is happening,” Tony mumbled as he held on.

“Guide,” the sentinel murmured, lips near Tony’s ear.

He closed his eyes and let this new reality wash over him. Tony was so tired, but this felt so right. He’d been in a lot of bad situations in his life, but he’d never come to the end of one to find himself greeted by something so perfect and so *safe*.

“Sentinel,” he whispered.

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## Part Three

Steve still didn’t know what Tony had done to the kidnappers, but he didn’t really care, so long as it didn’t harm his guide. All that mattered was that Tony was safe. The problem was that he wasn’t certain if it had harmed his guide or not.

He’d helped Tony to the helicopter and his guide had fallen asleep the minute Steve had climbed in next to him; he just slumped against Steve and seemed to pass out. At first, Steve had been alarmed, but the steady heartbeat and even breathing had reassured him. So he’d maneuvered Tony into position where his head was in Steve’s lap, so he could rest more comfortably for the short flight back to Honolulu.

The first group out was primarily the guides, excluding Blair, who was staying behind with most of the sentinels to determine what had happened to the kidnappers. There would be sentinels to meet them when they landed and escort the guides back to the Center for medical and empathic evaluations.

Steve kept running his fingers through his guide’s hair, surprised at how much his senses had eased just from having his guide close. Despite the scent of the kidnappers and the lingering smell of the OSGs clinging to Tony, the underlying scent of *guide* made everything else bearable.

Prior to today, Steve had had very little success with using his secondary sense dials, but he’d been able to dial up smell in order to try to find his guide. It had been almost instinctive. Now, with his guide present, he was able to lay out all the sounds in his mind and turn everything down except his guide’s heartbeat and the sound of his breath.

When the chopper landed, Steve managed to rouse Tony enough to stagger toward the SUV, but he didn't want any of the sentinels waiting to drive them back to the Center anywhere near his guide. He started growling. Tony leaned against him, blinking blearily.

"I'll drive," the guide who'd only been introduced as "Alex" offered. "Just the three of us in the middle vehicle, okay?" At Steve's look of concern, Alex added, "I'm just a little tired and a lot hungry, dude. I wasn't one of the ones drugged and I certainly didn't take on eleven kidnappers, so just climb in the back with your guide and let me get us back to the Center."

Once they got situated, he expected Tony to fall right back to sleep, but instead, his guide leaned on him and mumbled, "What's your name?"

"Steve."

"Steve. Okay." Tony's breath got more even, but then he muttered, "I'll be Iron Man, you be Captain America."

Steve was surprised into a laugh, and Alex was clearly amused as well.

"Not funny," Tony mumbled, situating himself more comfortably with his head again in Steve's lap. "I'll have great toys, and Steve will have tight pants. You'll look great in tight pants."

Feeling himself actually blush a little, Steve couldn't help but laugh again, ignoring Alex's shaking shoulders. "Are you sleepy or drunk?"

Tony didn't respond for several seconds. "I'm awesome when I'm tired."

"You're awesome all the time, Tony," Alex called back.

"I am." Rubbing his cheek subtly on Steve's thigh, Tony whispered, "You have to remember that. People... forget."

Steve frowned, wondering what that meant. He started to run his fingers through Tony's hair again and realized his guide was truly asleep once more.

When they got to the Center, Tony insisted on getting in with just Steve's assistance. Steve couldn't help but growl at everyone who came near, even though he knew Tony needed to be checked out by the medical staff. His spirit animal, an overly large black jaguar, reinforced his stance, prowling along with them and rumbling menacingly at everyone.

Finally they cleared out a small section of the medical wing and a doctor who was a bonded guide and strong empath gave Tony an exam and an empathic scan. He was careful not to

touch Tony more than necessary, because that always made Steve bare his teeth and growl, but Tony just slept through it.

The doctor finally stepped back. "I've never seen a case of empathic exhaustion quite so severe. What did he do, exactly?"

"I can't tell you that," Steve retorted. Even if he knew, he wouldn't be able to say.

"As his physician, I need all the information," the doctor responded with a frown.

"Take it up with United States Alpha Primes, because I think they might outrank you."

The doctor looked frustrated, but just said, "Rest is the best treatment for this level of empathic drain. I advise you that he will be unable to complete an empathic imprint right now, so will be unable to support a bond until he's rested."

Steve started to growl again, and his spirit guide leapt up right on cue with hackles raised, growling as well. "Are you kidding me? You really think I'd jump him in this condition?"

The doctor took a couple steps back and held up his hands in a surrender gesture. "I'm just stating the facts. He needs to rest. We won't try to separate you, of course, but it's important to bear in mind his physical and emotional limitations."

"Anything else?" Steve said barely holding on to his temper.

"If you can't get him to drink at least two full bottles of water in the next two hours, he'll need an IV. He's already dehydrated."

Steve didn't want his guide's scent altered, so he would do his best to get Tony to drink. He growled at the doctor again, who left, promising to send someone to show them to a room.

Alex appeared after a couple minutes, smelling and looking freshly showered, and Steve relaxed a little bit. "Come on. Everyone figures you're on edge so I volunteered to show you to the bonding suite. And, yes, I know you don't need one yet, but they're more comfortable than the iso rooms."

As they walked through recently vacated hallways, with Steve encouraging Tony to stay awake and keep going, Alex offered, "Tony keeps a bag here. It has a couple changes of clothes and I think you two are about the same size, I dropped it in your room. Hopefully since it's been closed up in his office, and under the protection of the Center's awesome air scrubbers, you won't get too much smell of today lingering after you shower."

Alex stopped at a door with Steve and Tony's name already marked on a login board. "Phone if you need anything. There's water and food already in there. I won't be around though. Kai has asked me to come back to the site to help them with some issues. I know the Doc is kind of a dick, but everyone else around here is pretty great, so don't hesitate to call, okay?"

Steve nodded. "Thank you."

"Just take good care of Tony and we're square, man." Alex gave him a short wave, then took off.

Steve planned to just put Tony to bed, smell be damned, but his guide had other ideas, and staggered away from Steve and towards the bathroom. "Tony, you need to rest."

"Need to shower," Tony insisted, sleepily. "Smell of those OSGs, and you can smell all those kidnappers... need shower."

"Tony, you don't need to take care of me right now," Steve argued as he tried to keep Tony in his shirt even as Tony was trying to divest himself of it.

His guide fixed him with a pretty good glare considering the dark shadows and lines of fatigue in every part of his body. "Shut up. I'll always take care of you. So help me and it goes fast, or go away and it goes very slow."

Steve gave in and helped Tony out of his clothes, getting him to pause to drink some water in the process. When Tony started to tug at Steve's clothes with poor coordination, Steve got that Tony meant for them both to get clean at the same time. And, yes, it would be much easier to help Tony if he wasn't trying to do it from outside the shower.

After shoving all their clothes in a plastic bag and tying it off, he got them both under the spray. Tony slumped against the wall, looking exhausted and frustrated. Grabbing the washcloth and sentinel-friendly shower gel, Steve murmured, "Just relax. I'll take care of you."

He started and the top and worked his way down, not missing an inch. The worry and stress of the day kept the whole event from feeling even remotely sexual, but it definitely felt intimate, and he couldn't help but begin imprinting his guide's body. He tried to rein in the impulse, but after nearly losing Tony, he couldn't not imprint everything about his guide indelibly onto the very fiber of Steve's being.

"I like that," Tony murmured, still sounding sleepy but also more relaxed.

"What's that?"



“You imprinting.”

Steve winced a bit. “I tried not to yet.”

“No. It’s good.” Tony blinked a few times as if trying to get his thoughts together. “They say that some high level guides can feel the sentinel change during the imprint... can feel themselves becoming part of their sentinel. And I did... I feel myself becoming a part of you.” Tony’s fingers trailed along Steve’s jaw. “Don’t do taste... it’ll trigger both our need to bond, and we’re too tired. But finish the rest tonight. It’ll settle the sentinel in you.”

“Tony, we don’t have to do—”

“You need to trust me about this. I can feel that your senses are stretched thin. You nearly lost your guide today. A full four-sense imprint will bring you off high alert. Get us out of the shower and finish it.” At Steve’s hesitation, Tony whispered. “You think I don’t need it, too? Even if I’m so tired I can barely think? Someone took me with the intention of *selling* me today. I could have lost any chance of finding out if all those things they said about bonding were true. My empathic gifts are almost useless right now. So the only connection we can really forge at the moment, other than base recognition of each other, is through imprinting.”

“Okay, Tony. Let me wash really quick.” He was keenly aware that Tony watched him closely as he got clean.

“Yeah, someone likes me a whole lot,” Tony said on a sigh.

“What?” Steve asked, startled.

“You’re incredible,” Tony replied with stark honesty.

Unable to help himself, Steve pressed full body against his guide. They were both too overtired or overstressed, but it still felt good. He framed Tony’s face with his hands, and fought the urge to kiss him. “Someone must like me a whole lot, too, then. You are utterly perfect.”

Tony leaned forward a bit, breaking Steve’s hold and pressed their cheeks together.

They stayed like that for a few precious seconds, then Steve got them out of the shower and quickly dried off, bullying Tony into finishing the first bottle of water. He’d let Tony sleep for a bit and then wake up him up later to drink more.

He figured Tony would drop right to sleep, but his guide was sprawled out on the bed, looking like temptation made flesh and he was just watching Steve. “Do your imprint, Sentinel,” he ordered, and the *guide* voice made Steve shudder.

Getting on the bed, he crawled up his guide until he could nuzzle at his ear. "It's going to be so hard not to taste you," he whispered.

"I have faith in you," Tony responded.

And so Steve began mapping his guide's body, learning every freckle, every scar, every subtle change in texture or scent. He actually dialed off taste so he wouldn't crave it so much, and hoped it wouldn't distract him from the rest.

The further he went, the more he felt he felt like he was changed at a fundamental level; as if he was making Tony a part of him down to his cells. Tony was loose and pliant and amazingly staying awake. It was like the imprint was giving him the energy to keep going.

He turned his guide onto his stomach, starting from the feet this time and working his way up. The beautifully firm, lush ass and the low back elicited tremors as Steve explored thoroughly.

When he reached Tony's head, he nosed against the soft strands of hair and relaxed, weight half on his guide, feeling four of his senses humming with *Tony*. And the sentinel in him was calm again.

Tony turned so they were lying face-to-face and traced along Steve's jawline. It pained Steve to see how fatigued his guide was, but he also seemed markedly more relaxed. "That's the best thing ever," Tony murmured. "I can feel me in you. Like you're all mine."

"I *am* all yours," Steve whispered.

"Mmm." Tony wiggled close. "Perfect," he whispered and immediately fell asleep.

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Tony fought waking as long as possible, and in that half asleep state, he let the memories of the day and night before filter back in. He'd think he had dreamt the whole finding his sentinel thing if it wasn't for the solid body pressed against his back and the muscular arm around his waist.

Yeah, last night had really happened. He vaguely recalled Steve — and he was still amused about Tony and Steve — waking him up frequently for water. He was grumpy about it at the time, but grateful now because waking up dehydrated wasn't the way he wanted his day to start.

He did a quick empathic check on himself. He'd say he was at about fifty percent. Meaning he could function empathically, but couldn't do anything with psionic energy or spirit walk for probably another day; at least, not without serious exhaustion.

The imprint last night... Wow. That was the only word he could think of. He'd heard that some high-level guides could feel their sentinel's imprint at a profound level, and he was glad that turned out to be true. With Tony's empathy on the fritz last night that imprint probably allowed them both to sleep soundly.

But the sensory imprint was only half the story. Tony needed an empathic imprint on Steve for them to feel balanced. They were doing things strangely out of order, but as long as it worked for them, it didn't matter.

Reluctantly, he began the careful process of wiggling away from his sentinel so he could use the facilities and brush his teeth. The firm squeeze around his waist followed by being released told him his sentinel was already awake. He squeezed Steve's hand as he slid out of bed.

Tony had never been body-shy, so he didn't bother flailing about for clothes. Not sure exactly where his sentinel was at, he softly asked from the bathroom, "You okay with the door closed?"

"I'd..." there was a long pause followed by a strained, "that's fine."

"Open it is," Tony replied smoothly. He quickly took care of things, except he took the time to nearly brush the enamel off his teeth. Returning to the bed, he slid in next to Steve and propped himself up on his elbow. "You should always tell me what you need."

Steve looked frustrated. "I should be okay with you closing the bathroom door."

"And you will be eventually." Tony ran his fingers along Steve's face, from his temple to his jaw. "This isn't going to be subtle," Tony murmured.

"What?" Steve asked with a frown.

"Feeling me," Tony murmured. Much like a sentinel who dialed down a sense that was overworked and needed rest, Tony had his empathy near dialed off since before he'd first met Steve, attempting to protect himself. Most of the empathic connection they'd managed so far was through touch, and so the bond they had was strained and uneven. Tony needed to connect with Steve, so he dialed back up, and his empathy immediately reached for his sentinel.

Steve gasped and shuddered, body folding into Tony's and holding on. Normally senses and empathic receptors reached out simultaneously at the moment of meeting, but Tony and Steve

were apparently going to do things in stages. Their empathic connection the night before had been very minimal because of Tony's extreme fatigue.

"Fuck, that feels good," Steve muttered, his forehead resting on Tony's sternum and fingers clutching at Tony's back.

"You ready?" That was just connecting and recognizing one another. Steve had already imprinted; now it was Tony's turn.

"That wasn't it?!?" Steve asked, pulling back and staring at Tony.

"Nope. So you ready?" Tony asked challengingly.

Steve's lips twitched with amusement. "Bring it, *brah*."

So Tony reached out to imprint on his sentinel. He wrapped his sentinel in an empathic web, and imprinted the *feel* of sentinel into his mind. Now there was near-balance in their connection. Steve would have to imprint taste before things truly settled evenly.

Steve was holding on to Tony and gasping.

Finally, it was done and Steve flopped onto his back, throwing his arm over his eyes. "Damn. That's what happens when every sentinel and guide meet? No one ever said anything about *that*."

"No, it's part of what happens when sentinels and guides bond." Tony rested his head on his pillow, watching his sentinel.

"I don't follow," Steve admitted.

"When a sentinel and guide meet who are a match, they reach out for each other; one with empathic receptors, the other with their senses. It's an acknowledgment, or an awareness if you will. Or at least, that's what they say. That's what you experienced when you smelled me the first time even though I wasn't there. It's what I experienced in a very small degree when we first touched, and to a greater degree when I turned on my empathic receptors just now; which was the first part of what I did.

"If the couple weren't ready to bond, they'd leave it there until they were. And then, at the time of bonding, a sensory and empathic imprint are done."

Steve was now watching him closely. "But we imprinted most of the senses last night."

“You had a feral edge about you, and neither of us would have been able to rest, but bonding was out of the question. So you imprinted what you could. But that’s only half the work. I can’t just leave my empathic receptors dialed off; it’s actually unhealthy for guides after more than a day or so. And with the sensory imprint partially complete...”

“The empathic imprint had to follow.” Steve reached out and settled a hand on Tony’s hip, thumb grazing gently over the hipbone.

“Yes. I could feel the imbalance,” Tony replied, subtly moving into the touch.

“So what’s left?”

“When we bond, you’ll imprint taste, and because of the type of guide I am, I’ll likely feel compelled to blend our psionic energies. At least, that’s what I’ve been told,” Tony shrugged because there wasn’t exactly reference material for crow guides. A lot of what Blair had been able to tell him was anecdotal at best. “As for bonding...” Tony trailed off, wondering how to phrase his need.

“Just tell me,” Steve prompted.

“I want to wait a day or two,” he replied, deciding to go for blunt. “We’re part way down the process and we can’t put it off too long, I just...” he blew out a frustrated breath.

Steve’s thumb continued to rub soothingly along his hipbone. “You have whatever time you need, Tony.”

Tony wasn’t sure how to articulate it, but he needed to feel settled in his skin again. Yesterday someone had wanted to sell him into a life as a plaything; as a sexual object to exist for someone else’s amusement. And while Tony felt better, and safer, for having Steve saturating his empathic web, he wasn’t quite ready to have anyone, not even his sentinel, inside his body.

A chaste kiss was pressed to his temple and Tony smiled. He knew it was all going to work out.

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Dressed, well fed, and overly watered by his pushy sentinel, Tony was reading an old Sci Fi favorite while leaning back against a firm, solid body. He and Steve had talked all throughout the morning and then through lunch, until finally they were both talked out. He was pleasantly pleased with how well they got along, and how much he enjoyed Steve’s irreverent humor.

The room phone rang and Steve reached behind him to answer. Tony felt the sentinel tense, then argue about someone coming to see them. Finally, he nudged Tony. "Sandburg and Ellison need to talk to you."

"They coming here?"

"If you're okay with it," Steve replied.

"I think it's more a matter of are *you* okay with it?" Tony prompted.

"And if I'm not?" Steve asked cautiously.

"Then they'll have to wait or they can tell me over the phone," he replied immediately.

That seemed to relax Steve in some way, and he spoke into the receiver, "Give us five minutes."

They tidied up the room and, oddly, Steve wanted Tony to wear socks while they had visitors. If keeping Tony's naked and unbonded feet out of view kept his sentinel calm about having their space invaded, Tony wasn't even going to grumble.

Steve arranged the room so Jim and Blair had to sit near the door, and had Tony seated on the far side of the made bed.

As soon as everyone was seated, Blair gave Tony a quizzical look. "I half expected you two to be nesting already."

"We sort of are," Tony replied. "We're just not finishing the bond for a couple days, so our nesting period is going to be longer."

Steve shifted impatiently.

Blair hid a smile. "Steve, aside from what we discuss, before we leave, I'd like to give Tony an empathic scan. I'll need to just touch his hand. I want to be sure he's recovering." It was possible to do some level of scan without contact, but deep scans were clearer and faster when touch was involved.

Tony could tell Steve was torn, but the sentinel finally nodded and then looked to Tony for his agreement, which he gave, even though he already knew he'd be completely fine by tomorrow.

Jim quickly got them up to speed on everything that had happened since Tony had been airlifted out of the forest. They'd eventually been able to transfer the ten vegetables to a

Honolulu hospital. The two conscious kidnappers were in custody at HPD with an order that they were not to be questioned except by order of the Sentinel and Guide Council.

With information from the two kidnappers, and Alex and Erin helping as decoys, they'd set a trap at the Marina which eventually led to a freighter where they found eighteen other guides bound for various locations in Europe, Africa, and Asia; with two even headed for South America. All the guides were being treated at the hospital and would be transferred into the custody of the Center when they were well enough.

"The issue, Tony," Blair began, bracing his elbows on his knees, "is the men who are in a vegetative state. I can sort of feel what you did, and in time I think I can begin to undo it, but I'd like to hear what you think we should do."

Steve started growling. "They should stay like that." Tony could feel the hot anger pouring through his sentinel and the feral edge Steve hadn't ever quite lost was more pronounced and pressing at Tony's mind.

"Hitch," Tony called, and his spirit guide flashed into the room, gliding to settle on the bed. Tony thrust his crow carefully at Steve, who blinked at the handful of black feathers. "This is Hitchcock. He's a crow, though I know he's bigger than most ravens. Don't call him a raven. Ever. He'll peck you."

Steve just looked at him blankly, even though he did just what Tony expected and began stroking the soft feathers. Next to Tony himself, Tony's spirit guide would be the most soothing thing to the sentinel.

He turned back to Blair. "I basically used psionic energy to sort of perform an empathic lobotomy. I don't know how else to explain it."

"Yeah, that's what it felt like, man. We're just trying to figure out the best way to protect you in this. All of the guides are prepared to say they don't know what happened to them, because they don't. The only people who know are here in this room, though I'm sure Kaimana and Isabelle can easily infer since they know the type of guide you are."

Blair and Jim spent the next half hour laying out the pros and cons of waking the human veggies versus leaving them to die in a hospital bed. In point of fact, Tony didn't know that what he had done might not one day wear off. They couldn't keep them under guard forever on the off chance that they might wake up on their own eventually.

When there were no immediate or easy answers, Blair said, "We're going to leave the decision to you, but it may be worth talking to one of the other crow guides to see if they can offer any insight. We don't need a decision immediately, but we do need one in a few days."

Tony knew they at least wanted to wake the leader up. While they had already arrested people further up the food chain, it wasn't the whole picture by any means, so he nodded his agreement. "I'll discuss it with Steve, and we'll figure it out. I'm not gonna short change our bond to wake those idiots up, so if we decide to, it'll take me a couple weeks to wake all ten without leaving myself empathically compromised in the process."

Steve growled again at the notion, but Hitch squawked reprovably and demanded more petting.

Because of the investigation, Blair and Jim were staying in Hawaii for about ten days as representatives of the SGC. As soon as they finished discussing the guide-trafficking case, Blair did the empathic scan, agreeing with Tony that he'd be fine in another day. Afterward, they left, promising to see them both after their nesting period was up.

Steve was giving him a look. "Did you *handle* me?"

"Yep," Tony affirmed readily enough. "And any time I feel that feral edge creep in on you, I'll do it again. Though I doubt that will be much of an issue after we bond."

His sentinel continued to pet Hitch, and Tony got the distinct impression he was pouting. Trying not to laugh, Tony headed for the bathroom for a quick shower. He knew Steve would be unhappy with just the small change to his scent pile from Blair touching him. Sentinels were very tetchy about their guides until the bond was complete and settled.

The rest of the day went smoothly, if even more mellow, and seemed to involve a lot more cuddling. In the dark that night, Tony learned about the recent loss of Steve's father, which explained some raw edges Tony felt in his empathic landscape. He held onto his sentinel, letting his empathy smooth over those sharp jagged places, giving comfort where he could.

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Tony woke feeling almost back to normal. His empathy was humming under his skin the way it should and his sense of the psionic energy was just about at normal.

After eating and dressing, he and Steve lay on the bed and watched movies. They were about half way through *Serpico*, when Steve paused it and asked, "Do you miss being a cop?"

Tony blinked in surprise before he sat up into a cross-legged position so he could look at Steve head-on. "Yes and no. When I came online it was..." he paused to consider the word, "*easier* to cut those ties and leave than I was expecting; especially after so many years. To this day people think... well, I don't know what they think, actually. NCIS would have kept me on as an analyst,



and I could have worked in the field with sentinels provided I didn't question anyone about anything without consent forms signed, which meant pretty much ever."

He blew out a frustrated breath over how crow and wolf guides were regarded by the judicial system. It had been years, but sometimes it just bothered him. "Of course, that's provided I disclosed my spirit guide so they could make accommodation, but I decided not to." He rubbed his hands through his hair, thinking back on how bleak he'd felt during that time. How being online had shown him the *real* emotional landscape of where Tony was working, and it had been a sucking black hole of misery. He just hadn't been able to deal with it.

Gibbs had been back from Mexico for nearly seven months when Tony came online. And his Boss' emotions were a cesspool of grief and anger that never seemed to end. It wasn't Gibbs' fault, but Tony couldn't sit with that much pain every day and not want to help. Which, of course, Gibbs would refuse out of hand.

Madam Director had been so far off the reservation it hadn't been tolerable to be in the same building with her; she radiated deceit, rage and hate from every fiber of her being.

Tim and Ziva had disdained Tony so completely that it nearly made him sick to be around them. And it wasn't just disdain; resentment fairly oozed from both of them. He had felt like such an idiot for how thoroughly he'd misjudged their working relationship.

And then there was Abby...

She had tried to be supportive about Tony coming online. At first. But when he'd wanted to leave NCIS, she'd fired every emotionally abusive thing at him she could.

That had been the hardest for him, because Abby had deliberately caused him pain. She was a sensitive with remarkable control of her emotional tone and emotional projection, and had used it to inflict deliberate harm on him. At first, she'd claimed she was just trying to make him see how much pain he would cause by leaving, but they both knew it was bullshit.

She'd later tried to apologize to him for it, saying she had been reacting out of grief and fear over losing the sense of family, and the inevitable changes to the team, but Tony hadn't backed down on filing the report against her with the SGC. To this day he wasn't sure why he went through with the report, though it likely was the incredible stress he'd been under since coming online, and Abby's abuse had been one step too far.

Because Abby had used her nominal gifts as a mundane-sensitive to hurt Tony through his own guide gifts, it had been the SGC's purview to investigate. They almost filed charges against her, which could have resulted in probation and loss of her security clearance. But in the end, she was simply issued a formal citation for empathic abuse, which would be disclosed to any

sentinels or guides she worked around in the future. That black mark would follow Abby forever, but Tony had been beyond caring. Her tears and apologies hadn't moved him. Eventually, she'd had an utter freak out over the black mark that she'd never be able to shake.

That had been the last straw for Gibbs who had gotten furious at Tony for not letting it go. Despite the anger, Tony had felt the inner conflict in Gibbs when he'd chosen Abby's side. Tony wondered if Abby represented what Gibbs had lost, and with the death of his family being renewed because of the amnesia, if he'd been unable to make any other choice. While Tony could be sympathetic to Gibbs' pain, he wasn't sympathetic, at all, to Gibbs' choice.

Ducky hadn't known what to make of the situation, even though he agreed that she behaved badly. But like everyone else, ultimately felt that, *"Abigail should be forgiven for her impulsive behavior."*

In the end, only Jimmy had been on Tony's side, and they stayed in touch to this day. For a couple years, Tony had kept track of what was going on with the others, but for his own peace of mind, he'd had to let that go.

"Hey," Steve said, strong hands framing Tony's face. "Where'd you go?"

"Three years in the past. It's okay. I'll tell you about it some other time." He took a steadying breath. "Um... I miss it, yes. I can still do some police work if I want. I can investigate, I just can't question without a fuckton of red tape. We'll need to work out how I can consult with your department when you need me. Once we disclose my spirit guide, there are certain things that will be required in terms of paperwork and various other things any time I'm on a case."

"Forget the paperwork... that doesn't matter." Steve was frowning. "Whenever you want to talk, I'm here. Okay?"

"Yeah." Tony nodded. "Someday. Just... not now."

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Steve lay staring up at the ceiling, Tony's warm naked body pressed up against him and deeply asleep. They hadn't showered together since their first night, and they'd stayed dressed during the last two days, but they never hesitated about being naked in bed together. Which was both a delight and a torment as the urge to complete their bond grew stronger, and the growing attraction between them simmered under the surface.

Idly, he traced the ridges of Tony's spine, thinking back on Tony's space out earlier in the day. Something had gone very wrong somewhere in Tony's past, because the feelings Steve had

gotten through their nascent connection had been overwhelming and distressing. He hoped Tony would trust him some day with whatever that painful *thing* was.

The last couple days had been good. Really good. Considering how horribly everything started, it was an absurdly happy ending. Steve felt Tony would mesh with his team when they were able to take cases together. Plus, they got along obscenely well. He couldn't stop the smirk at Danny's reactions in the months and years to come.

Tony moved a bit, breath pattern changing as he arched into Steve's touch. His guide's hand slide up from Steve's waist, over his chest and cupped his jaw, turning his head. Vision already adjusted to perfectly see his guide's green eyes in the dark room, he was waiting for whatever Tony had to say. Then his guide's scent pile started to change and Steve took in the heady scent of rising desire.

The silence stretched between them before Tony leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Steve's mouth. "Bond with me," he whispered against Steve's lips.

"Yes." Steve pressed forward, kissing more firmly, then deepening the kiss. Tony opened up to him immediately, and Steve tasted his guide for the first time. He shuddered as the last sense started to imprint.

Pulling back, he tasted along Tony's jaw, and down the side of his neck. "God, your taste... it's..." he kissed down to one pebbled nipple, drawing it into his mouth, "amazing," he breathed over the wet nub, getting a shudder and a gasp from his guide.

He continued to explore Tony's body, tasting the smooth, hairless skin, and adding to his imprint for his other senses, adjusting them to allow for his guide in a state of sexual desire. He chased subtle changes in flavor; a hipbone tasting different from a navel or the crease of an elbow.

Steve had always heard that guides surrendered utterly to the imprint and the bonding, and he suddenly realized how strong that made Tony, because there was no hiding from a sentinel just how amped up his guide was, how much pleasure he was receiving. Yet he yielded utterly to Steve so the sentinel could find his ground, the very baseline of his new existence in the sensory feast that was this beautiful man who was willing to be with Steve forever.

When he took his guide's heavy cock deep into his throat, Tony just trembled, but didn't move or attempt to speed things along. The bare and stark offering of Tony to Steve almost overwhelmed him. He pulled off, tasting at his guide's balls, getting his emotions under control before moving on to complete his taste exploration.

He moved his guide onto his stomach, trailing fingers over smooth, tan skin, then chasing it with his tongue. As he explored the taste of his guide's shoulders, he grappled for the lube on the bedside table. Nudging Tony's legs apart, Steve explored his guide's buttocks and then licked over his asshole, delighting in the full body shudder that elicited. He'd explore that reaction more some other day, but for now, he nipped at Tony's buttock before sliding a slick finger inside his guide's hole, waiting as long as he could before increasing to two, and quickly to three. He stayed with three, scissoring and watching the fine tremors in his guide's back.

He continued finger fucking Tony open as he mouthed at the sweat-slick lower back. Abruptly, he knew his sensory imprint was complete. *Tony* was etched into Steve now and that would never change. He withdrew his hand and urged his guide to turn over. He needed to see Tony's eyes.

Tony's legs immediately parted, open and waiting as Steve applied more lube to his cock. He moved into position, pressing the head of his cock against Tony's asshole. Staring into his guide's eyes, he whispered, "Tony..."

Long, strong legs came around Steve's hips and he was pulled close at the same moment he felt Tony's empathy flare wide open. "Steve," he breathed just before pulling the sentinel down into a deep, open-mouthed kiss.

All at once, Steve felt his cock encased in tight and hot and smooth, his tongue was sucked into Tony's mouth, and Tony's empathy pulled everything that Steve *was* deep into his guide. It was overwhelming and like nothing he could have prepared for, but everything he'd ever needed.

Tony was holding him close and Steve rocked as much as he was able, getting small thrusts into that deliciously tight heat. Tony pulled away with a gasp, staring up at Steve, eyes wide and breathing erratic. He loosened his legs enough that Steve could pull back and plunge in. Hard.

Head arched back, Tony stopped breathing for a couple seconds, then pushed up to meet Steve's next deep thrust. They settled into a hard, driving rhythm and he could feel the bond between them forming and shifting and settling.

"You ready?" Tony gasped between thrusts.

Steve's movement faltered briefly. "There's more?"

"God, don't stop!" Tony arched up, clenching his asshole around Steve's cock. "One more thing, but don't stop!"

Resuming his rhythm, Steve began mouthing at his guide's exposed throat. "Do it... whatever it is."

Suddenly it felt like Steve was pulled out of himself. Like the thing he'd connected with the day he became a sentinel was pulled away, stretched tight. It almost seemed reflexive to fuck harder, to chase it with his body. He was torn between the pleasure coursing through his physical form and the odd distress of having that part of him tugged at.

Then it crashed back into him, but blended with *guide* and *Tony* and *perfect* and Steve couldn't find his breath. The orgasm slammed into them at the same time there was a blinding flash in the room as their spirit guides merged, signifying the completion of the bond.

He continued fucking into his guide, riding out the pleasure, but not even sure if it was his pleasure he was feeling or Tony's. Their connection was laid open, and they were completely bare to one another.

It took a long time before anything that wasn't a physical sensation penetrated the fog around Steve's mind. He was breathing hard, face pressed to his guide's neck, and aware of *Tony* in every fiber of his being. It felt like home and safety and love.

It was perfect, and Steve wasn't sure he deserved it, but he sure as hell wasn't giving it up.

He was aware of his senses operating in a way they never had before, and he began reflexively adjusting them, realizing belatedly he was responding to Tony's whispered instructions. From what he was hearing outside their room, everyone in the Center had felt their bond, but it seemed really unimportant at the moment.

Finally managing to get on an even keel again, he pulled out of Tony's delectable ass, and collapsed on the bed. "You are so... incredible," he whispered.

Tony pressed a soft kiss to his mouth. "My sentinel."

Steve traced his thumb along Tony's cheekbone. "My beautiful guide."

Steve had always heard that a sentinel's guide would be exactly what the sentinel needed, even if they didn't know it themselves. And it turned out that everything they said had been absolutely true.

The End