

The Choice by Xanthe



Story archived: <http://www.xanthe.org/the-choice/>

Story Notes:

There's no slash pairing in this, just an almighty spanking and I'm not saying *who* gets spanked as that'd give a major plot point away *g*. There is a strong element of Tony/Tim friendship in this fic though – I'll give that much away! It's been ages since I wrote a non-slashy spanking and I had great fun with it.

Thanks to: Aisling K and Sasha for the truly inspiring stories they've posted this week.

Tim didn't like stakeouts - they were always boring, although Gibbs, who was hardly an indulgent boss, did at least give them a little more leeway when they were sitting for eight hours a day looking out of a window through a pair of binoculars. He turned a blind eye to the endless practical jokes as long as they got the job done, understanding that they needed to blow off some steam.

On this occasion though, Tim knew they'd gone too far – which was entirely Tony's fault in his view. Okay, so they'd both been bored out of their brains, and as a result there had been *some* messing around, but it was Tony who didn't know when to stop – as always.

Tim had tried to be the responsible one, he really had, but Tony was just so *annoying*. First there had been the incident with the sandwich, then the whole thing with the toilet, and that had escalated into a play fight that had become an almost-but-not-quite real fight when Tony had trodden on his toe, making him holler in pain, and then...then Gibbs's voice had come over the wire from the building opposite, yelling at them that their suspect was

on the move. Tony was out of there in seconds, leaving Tim trailing in his wake, but even so they lost the guy.

So now Gibbs was mad at them – really mad – and everyone had fled the squad room leaving just Tim and Tony standing in front of his desk.

"If you two had been paying attention to your *jobs* then we'd have him locked up in the interrogation room right now," Gibbs fumed, pacing around them.

Tim thought that was pretty unfair – it had been Tony who had been doing most of the messing around, and he was supposed to be the senior field agent after all. Tim had just responded to the escalation in the practical jokes – and really you'd need the patience of a saint *not* to respond when Tony was being that annoying.

"Sorry boss," Tony muttered, looking genuinely shaken. "Although...he got out of there pretty damn fast. Even if we'd had our noses pressed against that window every second of the day I still don't think we'd have got down there in time."

Tim winced. When Gibbs was in full rant mode it was best not to say anything – but since when had Tony ever mastered the art of keeping his mouth shut? Sure enough, a second later Gibbs slapped the back of Tony's head.

"You screwed up!" Gibbs roared. "And I don't want to hear any damn excuses!"

Tony bit on his lip, casting a vicious sideways glance at Tim as if the headslap had been *his* fault. Tony always hated it when the boss slapped him or yelled at him when Tim was around; it dented his pride and that made him hell to live with after.

"Now get back to your desks and find me a way we can salvage this – while I go and explain to the director why we lost our suspect!"

"Yes, boss," they both said, scrambling away in a hurry.

Gibbs strode off, his fury radiating from every pore in his body as he took the stairs two at a time, with jerky strides.

Tony opened up a filing cabinet, looking angry. Tim sat down at his desk, and stared glumly at his screen.

"Way to go with the not backing me up there, probie," Tony muttered, getting out some files.

"You were just making it worse. You should never interrupt Gibbs when he's chewing you out – you should know that by now," Tim replied hotly. "Besides, he was right. We screwed up."

"I know." Tony shut the filing cabinet with a vicious motion of his hand.

"Why do you do it, Tony?" Tim asked. "Why do you always take things too far?"

Tony threw a bunch of files on his desk and sat down, and then he reached up to massage his neck, making it crack.

"I was just having some fun," he muttered.

"Having fun? Tony, stop behaving like a kid. We're grown men with a serious job to do!" Tim fumed. "Not that you'd understand that."

"Excuse me?" Tony turned to glare at him.

"You don't take your job seriously!" Tim told him. "You just coast by all the time. I knew kids like you at school – you didn't want to work hard but you didn't like the kids who did. It's like you have to bring everyone down to your level."

"I can't be held responsible for your adolescent angst, probie," Tony snapped. "And you're wrong – I take my job very seriously."

"Then why do you goof around so much? You know, me and Kate once had a conversation about how the hell you got this job - and why Gibbs lets you stay."

"Did you now?" Tony's tone was deadly. "And what conclusions did you draw, probie?"

"Kate was smart," Tim flashed back, his anger getting the better of him. "And brave – she was handpicked to protect the *president* for god's sake. And I'm an M.I.T graduate. And you...what's your background again, Tony?"

"I was a cop," Tony told him quietly. "And a good one."

"Is that why you had to move on every couple of years?" Tim flung at him.

He'd been working with Tony for long enough now to know all the right buttons to press, and sure enough, Tony's jaw tightened and he turned back to the files on his desk, making no reply.

Tim sat there for a moment, feeling annoyed with himself and with Tony in equal measure. All the same, he knew he'd gone too far and he regretted it. He was essentially kind-hearted and would never purposefully hurt anyone's feelings.

"Tony, I'm sorry," he said softly. "I didn't mean that."

"Yes you did," Tony replied coldly. "Now get back to work, probie, because if we don't have something good for Gibbs by the time he gets back then we'll both be looking for new jobs."

That had been three days ago and, although he hadn't realised it at the time, somehow it

had changed everything between them. Tim wished he could take it back because he'd been angry at the time and he hadn't really meant it. He knew Tony was a good agent, even if he was very annoying, but on the other hand he *had* screwed up on this occasion.

Since that day the atmosphere in the squad room had turned decidedly chilly; after the stakeout fiasco nobody was goofing around, least of all Tony, and Tim found he missed it.

Instead of practical jokes, something much worse happened. Tony wasn't hazing him any more but he wasn't helping him, either. It was just stupid things, like Tony not bringing him coffee when he did the drinks run, or Tony leaving him to get himself out of the brook he'd fallen into while taking photos of a crime scene. It was Tony not asking if he wanted to go for a beer after work, or including him in the book he'd started on whether Jimmy Palmer had got to first base with the new girl in the HR department, and Tim found he missed it - badly.

In return, and also, if he was honest, in retaliation, he avoided Tony wherever possible, making a point of not getting in the elevator if Tony was in there, and spending as much time with Abby in her lab as possible. He didn't cover for Tony when he was late one morning, which earned Tony a glare from Gibbs and an assignment pulling files from the archives all day - everyone's least favourite job - and the atmosphere in the squad room deteriorated even further. Tony's putdowns of him in front of Gibbs became more pointed, losing their usual good-natured edge and bordering on the vicious. In return, Tim took pleasure in making everyone aware of Tony's complete lack of computer skills whenever he could.

It was stupid, Tim knew that, and he also knew they were both behaving badly, but he was stung by Tony's coldness. He hadn't realised, until it was too late, just how much he liked working with Tony. The other agent did mess around, but he was smarter than he seemed - and smarter than he wanted anyone to know for some reason that Tim could never quite fathom. He was also just plain good fun, and somehow, and Tim wasn't sure how, he was the glue that kept the team together.

It was Tony's stupid jokes, and Tony setting himself up as the fall guy for them to take a hit at, that made them work so well together. Tim wondered how he'd been such an idiot as to have not seen that before. Yes, Tony had gone too far on the stakeout, but he'd been bored and it was just one mistake. Most of the time Tony could mess around and still perform his job brilliantly but he was only human and everyone screwed up occasionally. Tim wished he'd been more forgiving and less of a prig about the whole thing but it was too late for that now. Now, it seemed, he'd lost Tony's friendship forever, and that really hurt.

They'd never spoken about it before but he realised he'd been Tony's closest friend - and he'd never been friends with anyone like Tony before. However annoying Tony was, he was still, well, kind of cool, in a way that Tim had never been, and Tim had never had as much fun with a friend before as he had with Tony, even if Tony's idea of fun did regularly get them both into hot water.

By Thursday they were hardly speaking, and even Ziva had picked up on the atmosphere.

"You two are being silly. I should knock your legs together," she said. Tim stared at her.

"I think you mean heads," he said.

"Yes." She nodded. "And your heads also. I will knock those together until you stop this. Gibbs does not like it, either," she warned.

"Gibbs has noticed?" Tim asked anxiously.

"*Everyone* has noticed, McGee!" she told him. "It is like working in a freezer. Very chilly. Brrr." She ran her hands over her arms.

"I did try and apologise to him," Tim muttered. "It was his fault though – he started it."

"Who cares who started it? Finish it!" She gave him a disapproving look and then strode off.

He sighed, staring after her. If only it was that simple! He wanted things back the way they'd been, but Tony had already rejected his attempt at an apology once; there was no way he'd listen a second time. Tim was angry that Tony was being so stubborn about the whole thing, and he lashed out, and kicked his desk viciously.

"You should pick on an opponent that can actually fight back, probie," Tony said, entering the squad room just in time to witness the kick. "No – wait. You're right! Inanimate objects are the only things you'd beat in a stand up fight."

"And they're also the only things you'd beat in an intelligence test," Tim shot back at him.

Tony's eyes flashed, and then he moved fast and was suddenly right in front of Tim.

"What are you trying to say, McM.I.T.?" he asked. "Huh?"

He reached out a hand to flick at Tim's shoulder, and Tim knocked it away -and then suddenly the tension of the last few days exploded inside him, and Tim found himself charging at Tony. Tony sidestepped him easily and shoved Tim back over his desk and then...then they were both grabbed by the scruffs of their necks, and a very angry Gibbs was glaring at them as he shook each of them by the collars of their shirts.

"That's enough!" he thundered. "I will not have you brawling in here. This has gone on for long enough. Go home and cool off – both of you. I will see you both at my house at 8pm tonight when we WILL resolve this. Do NOT be late."

Then he dropped them both, and stayed, glaring at them, until Tim turned and slunk away to grab his stuff and then headed for the elevator.

Tim sat outside Gibbs's house a few hours later with a sense of dread in the pit of his belly.

He wasn't sure what Gibbs meant by his use of the word "resolve" but knowing Gibbs the evening would not be a pleasant one.

He saw Tony pull up in his car, get out without pausing, and walk up to Gibbs's front door. That, irrationally, just made Tim feel even more annoyed by the whole situation. He was skulking out here, trying to get up the courage to go in, while Tony had just taken the bull by the horns. Tim took a deep breath, got out of his car, and followed Tony up the driveway.

Gibbs let him in, and Tim knew immediately, from the grim set of their boss's jaw, that he was still furious. His heart sank. Gibbs gestured with his head that Tim should follow him into the lounge and he went in there to find Tony already standing there, leaning against the wall, arms crossed over his chest, his body language screaming his defiance. Tim glared at him. Tony glared back.

"Okay. I had hoped that once you had had some time to think about it that you'd have come to your senses, but I can see that you boys are determined to make things as hard on yourselves as possible," Gibbs said. "So we'll do this the painful way."

Tim shifted uneasily, not liking the sound of this. Tony's jaw tightened and he transferred his glare from Tim to Gibbs. Gibbs glared back at him, and even Tony wasn't that stupid – he allowed his gaze to drop to the floor.

"You're good agents – both of you," Gibbs said. "But you've screwed up big time this week."

Tim felt another surge of anger towards Tony. It wasn't fair that he kept getting the blame for Tony's behaviour and he wanted to tell Gibbs that but one look at his boss made him reconsider; it would take a brave man to interrupt his boss when he had that expression on his face.

"The shit you pulled on the stakeout was bad enough, but since then you've made things worse with this juvenile crap. I don't care if you two don't like each other – it's not obligatory. What I care about is that you have each other's six when we're out in the field - and right now I don't know if that's the case," Gibbs growled.

Tony looked up, and Tim caught the startled expression in his eyes. He felt startled himself – however bad things were between him and Tony, he'd **always** have Tony's six out in the field.

"Boss – I'd never..." he began.

"Shut it, McGee," Gibbs interrupted tersely. "You've had your chance and you've blown it. I have given you boys all week to figure this out but today's little stunt proves to me that you're not even trying. So I'm going to do it for you – and I promise you that you won't like what I have planned."

Tim swallowed hard and glanced at Tony, who avoided his gaze, looking at the floor instead.

"Here's how it's going to go down," Gibbs said. "Have either of you ever been spanked?"

Tony's head shot up again. Tim frowned.

"Spanked?" he asked, puzzled.

"Whipped, thrashed, given a hiding – whatever you want to call it, McGee," Gibbs said tersely. "Corporal punishment."

Tim felt his stomach do a flip.

"Uh...no, boss," he replied. "I mean...my mom once smacked the back of my legs because I pulled my sister's hair when I was eight or nine," he floundered. "Uh...why?"

Gibbs ignored him. "Tony?" he asked. Tony looked his boss straight in the eye.

"Yes. I took a few spankings as a kid," he said quietly.

Tim remembered a long story Tony had once told him about his dad giving him a hard spanking for some Hallowe'en prank he'd pulled. He also remembered feeling kind of sorry for Tony for that – Tim had always been a good kid and hated getting into trouble, and besides, his parents didn't really believe in corporal punishment – a fact for which Tim was profoundly grateful.

Gibbs was giving Tony a hard look, and Tim saw Tony's jaw tighten as he realised Gibbs wanted more details.

"My dad used to spank me with his hand or his belt," he muttered. "And when I went to boarding school I seemed to get into trouble every other week." Somehow Tim wasn't surprised by that. "The principal wore out a few paddles on my butt," Tony finished, with just a hint of a wry grin.

"Okay." Gibbs nodded. "Here's what's going to happen. One of you is going to get a hard whipping tonight."

Tim felt his mouth go dry. "Boss, you can't be serious," he said.

"Oh I am," Gibbs told him. "Deadly serious. Now hear me out, McGee. If you don't want to agree to what I propose then that's fine – I'll make sure one of you is transferred to another team first thing tomorrow morning as you clearly can't work together any more."

"Let's hear the man out, McGee," Tony said quickly, and Tim knew that neither of them wanted to be transferred to another team.

"Like I said, one of you is going to get a hard whipping tonight – and I mean a *hard* whipping," Gibbs told them. "One of you will go over the back of that couch," He gestured with his head at the battered looking brown leather couch behind him, " Take down his

pants and I'll blister his ass with my belt until I'm satisfied that he's learned his lesson for the events of the week. I don't want you to be under any illusions about this – this will be a long, hard spanking. Understood?"

"Yes, boss," Tony said quietly.

"Uh – just one of us, boss?" Tim asked, picking up on what Gibbs had said. "Which one?"

"I'm coming to that, McGee!" Gibbs growled irritably. "In a minute, you are both going to stand with your noses against the wall and I'm going to give you fifteen minutes to think things through. I want you to consider who is the most to blame for what's happened this week, and why he should be punished. Then I'm going to take you each into the room along the hallway, and I will give you exactly three minutes to explain to me who you think should take the whipping and why."

Tim frowned. Tony bit on his lip.

"I will expect to hear full and frank reasons," Gibbs continued. "That's why I'm giving you fifteen minutes to think about it first. Now, you can go into that room and tell me why you think it should be you who gets the whipping, or you can tell me why you think it should be the other one who takes it, but whatever choice you make, you'd better be damn sure that your argument good – because that's what I'm going to base my decision on. Whoever makes the best case – he's one who gets his way, and I'll act on his argument as to who should get the whipping. Are we clear?"

"Yes, boss," Tony said quietly.

"Tim?" Gibbs looked at him. Tim swallowed hard. Nothing in his life had prepared him for this moment and he was having a hard time getting his head around it. "Like I said, you can refuse to take part – that's fine. If you do, I'll get one of you transferred to another team first thing tomorrow so you won't ever have to work together again."

"Uh – no!" Tim said quickly, knowing without question that he couldn't bear to be displaced on the team – and also that he'd never get over the guilt if it was Tony who was transferred. The whipping option didn't sound in any way appealing but at least it would be over with this evening and wouldn't impact on the rest of their lives in any way. "No," he added more firmly. "I agree."

"Good." Gibbs strode over to him, took hold of his arm, hauled him over to the corner of the room, and pressed his nose against the wall. Then he strode back over to Tony and did the same to him, depositing him in the opposite corner. "No talking, no conferring. You will make your choice alone, and you will give me your reasons for that choice alone – the other one will not be present when you make your argument to me," Gibbs told them. "So you can say exactly what you really think and make whatever case you want."

Tim heard Gibbs sit down on the couch behind him, and he stood there, facing the wall blankly. He didn't have a clue what he was going to say and suddenly fifteen minutes spent

staring at the pale blue wall in front of him didn't seem nearly long enough. He risked a sideways glance at Tony, to find him resting his forehead against the wall, his eyes closed, his arms wrapped around his body as if he was cold. There were no clues there as to what his decision might be.

"McGee!" Gibbs's voice rang out behind him and he turned his head back front and centre immediately.

Tim tried hard to concentrate, needing to get this right. He thought through his options. Who deserved the whipping? Instinctively he thought it was Tony. He was the one who'd goofed around on the stakeout after all. Okay, so Tim had joined in, and yes, all the practical jokes had made the time go faster and made the stakeout less boring, but Tony had instigated them. Tim hated getting into any trouble – he had always been a well-behaved child and a law-abiding adult. He wasn't *like* Tony who courted trouble the same way other people breathed. He wasn't used to being in this position and he resented Tony for landing him here.

Then he remembered his dig at Tony about why he hadn't lasted long at any of his previous jobs, and he winced as he recalled questioning why Gibbs kept Tony around. If he hadn't said those things then the situation between them would have returned to normal, instead of escalating into the cold war that had existed for most of the week. Tim felt himself flush at the memory. It really wasn't like him to be so mean. He'd just been so angry at Tony. He hadn't even meant it – not really. He knew exactly why Gibbs kept Tony around and he also knew that Tony was a brilliant field agent – he'd learned an enormous amount from him. So what if his computer skills were hardly any better than Gibbs's? He more than made up for that in other ways and his contribution to the team was invaluable.

"Okay," Gibbs said behind him, and Tim couldn't believe the time was up already. "Tony - you first. Follow me."

Tim glanced sideways as Tony pushed himself away from the wall and followed Gibbs expressionlessly out of the door. Tim stayed staring at the wall. What was Tony going to say to Gibbs, he wondered? Would he argue that Tim should take the whipping? Tim realised that it didn't make any difference what Tony said. He had to do the right thing, regardless. He shivered at the thought of talking himself into the hard whipping Gibbs had promised though. Unlike Tony, he'd never been punished in that way before and he felt his stomach clench into a tight knot of fear at the thought of it.

Supposing he couldn't hold position over the back of the couch? Supposing he made an idiot of himself and broke down in tears? Supposing he embarrassed himself horribly? Maybe he should argue for Tony to receive the whipping after all...but then he remembered the expression in Tony's eyes when he talked about being spanked as a kid and he realised he was lucky. His parents had always been generous with their time and attention whereas he knew that Tony had had to fight for every single second of his father's attention. No wonder he'd learned so many inventive ways to invite negative attention if that was all that was on offer. No, he wasn't so much of a coward to offer Tony up for this whipping just because he'd been on the receiving end many times before and would probably handle it better.

Now he'd made his decision, once and for all, Tim knew he'd done the right thing. He just needed the courage to see it through. He took a few deep breaths and felt his stomach flip again as he heard footsteps in the hallway.

"Your turn, McGee. Follow me," Gibbs said from the doorway.

Tim turned away from the wall and glanced at Tony as he walked back into the room. Tony looked as serious as Tim had ever seen him, but as Tim walked towards him he suddenly grinned at him, out of sight of Gibbs, and shot him a sly wink. Tim didn't know why, but somehow that made him feel a hundred times better than he'd felt all week, despite what he was facing. He couldn't return the grin without Gibbs seeing, so he just put his head down and brushed past Tony.

He followed Gibbs along the hallway and into a small room at the end. It turned out to be a den, with a desk and chair and some shelving. Gibbs closed the door behind him and then walked around to face him.

"Okay, McGee." He glanced at his watch. "Your turn. Shoot."

"I should take the punishment," Tim said firmly, immediately, needing to get that out of the way straight off, before his courage failed him. Gibbs leaned back against the desk, and gestured with his head that Tim should continue.

"This was my fault," Tim told him. "Tony goofs around because some of what we have to do is boring, or just plain unpleasant. It's Tony's way of keeping up morale, and making us all get along, and, I don't know, bond I suppose. I didn't like it because sometimes he goes too far, and I blamed him for the suspect getting away during the stakeout but really it wasn't totally his fault. I kind of like his stupid jokes and I hated it when he stopped including me in them these past few days. I got angry with him because I didn't like that we screwed up, and you were so mad at us and I don't like being in trouble. I said some really terrible things to him – things I totally regret, and I honestly didn't mean - and then he wouldn't let me apologise but I don't blame him for that because he was pretty mad too at that point. But if I hadn't said those things to him then it wouldn't have got the way it did. I was stupid and mean and he didn't deserve it."

He took a deep breath. Gibbs took a quick look at his watch. "You've got another minute, McGee," he said. Tim nodded.

"I don't think you should whip Tony because it's not fair. I know he jokes about it, and I can see why he'd be a nightmare of a kid to raise, but I think his dad was pretty tough on him all the same. My parents were great to me and my sister and sometimes I don't think I really understand what it was like for Tony. He tells these stupid stories about it and they're always so dumb that they make me laugh but...then I stop to think about what he's actually said and it's pretty horrible really. So I don't want you to whip him because I think he's probably taken enough whippings in his life to be perfectly honest."

"Okay. You're done," Gibbs said as he finished that sentence.

Tim nodded, hoping it had been enough. He looked at Gibbs for some sign – any sign at all – of what the outcome would be but Gibbs was giving nothing away. He just gestured with his head at the door and Tim turned and walked back out into the hallway. He heard Gibbs behind him, and they returned to the lounge.

Tony wasn't standing facing the corner any more which Tim thought was pretty brave of him. He was leaning against the wall instead, looking casual, as if the whole thing was a giant joke that didn't involve him in the slightest. Tim knew it was all bravado – and he also knew that at least some of it was for his sake and that made him shoot a tiny grin in Tony's direction.

"Thank you, Tim. And you, Tony. Those were very full and frank reasons and I appreciate your honesty," Gibbs said. "Now, I'm going to sit here and think about it for a moment before coming to my decision."

He sat down on the couch, and Tim hovered nearby, anxiously awaiting the verdict. He would never have thought it possible that he would so fervently hope to be on the receiving end of a spanking, but he did. He crossed his fingers behind his back, desperately willing Gibbs to pick him. Tony was still leaning against the wall, gazing into space as if he wasn't part of the whole scenario, but Tim could see how tense his shoulders were, and the tight line of his jaw.

"Right." Gibbs nodded. "I've made my decision. However, before I explain to you my reasons for it, I want you to fully understand my thought process."

He got up and left the room, and then returned a few seconds later holding an ancient, paint splattered cassette player, with a tape inside. Tim's heart did a flip as he figured out what was coming next.

"Oh shit," he heard Tony mutter.

That was a sentiment that Tim shared. It had never occurred to him that Gibbs might have been taping them this entire time. He hadn't seen the cassette player in there but then he'd hardly been looking – he'd been too intent on making his case to Gibbs.

Gibbs placed the cassette player on the table, and pressed rewind. Tim glanced up at Tony with an agonised expression on his face, trying to remember exactly what he'd said, and if any of it was embarrassing.

"Please remain silent while we hear from you both," Gibbs told them.

The tape rewound, and Gibbs snapped a finger on the "Play" button.

"Okay – your three minutes start now, Tony," Tim heard Gibbs say on the tape.

"Sure. First of all – way to go with the evil punishment, boss," Tony's voice said.

Tim grinned – because that sounded so *Tony*. Then he stiffened, wondering whether Tony had chosen to offer him up for the whipping or take it himself. The way things were between them he really wasn't sure which way this would go.

"But you can't whip McGee!" Tony protested immediately, in a tone of outrage. "It'd be like kicking a kitten! You heard him back there – his mom once slapped the back of his legs! Now me – I can handle it, but he's just a probie. Also, he's not any probie – he's *my* probie, and much as I love teasing him I don't want him hurt. Besides, I screwed up the stakeout, not him. Sometimes he's just too tempting, you know, sitting there, being all teacher's pet, and I get some devil in me that just wants to make him walk on the wild side. It's not like I want to get him into trouble but I want to see him crack and unbend just a little, y'know? Okay, you're not giving much back here, boss. Remind me never to play poker with you."

"One minute left, Tony." Gibbs's voice.

"Okay...so, the stakeout screw-up was my fault, and then we got into some stupid argument about it and he said some stuff that I let get to me, and you're the one who is always telling me *not* to let that kind of stuff get to me, but I did and I'll own up to that. I've been pretty cold to the poor probie all week so I deserve the whipping. But...even if none of these arguments sway you, boss, the bottom line is that I'm the senior field agent and he's the probie. Whichever way you look at it this is my fault, and I'll take the rap for it. Don't punish him."

"Time's up, Tony."

Tim glanced up for the first time and met Tony's eye. Tony shrugged, and made a helpless gesture with his hands, as if none of what he'd said had been anything to do with him, but Tim felt warm inside all the same, knowing that Tony would go to the wall for him despite the things he'd said to him this week.

There was silence for a moment, and then footsteps, and then he heard the sound of a door closing on the tape. Gibbs sat back on the couch, his face expressionless. Tim looked straight at Tony to find him staring at a spot over Tim's shoulder, his body twisted into a parody of relaxed casualness that belied the anxiety in his eyes as he waited to hear what Tim had said about him.

"Okay, McGee. Your turn. Shoot," Gibbs said on the tape.

Tim was pleased that he didn't stutter, but he flushed as he heard himself talk. He was in agony as he heard himself admit to liking all Tony's stupid jokes, but even more so as he identified the reason why Tony made them. He saw Tony's shoulders wilt a little as he realised he'd been seen through, as if he was ashamed of the good heart beneath the idiotic persona.

Then Tim went on to talk about Tony's childhood and he saw Tony's shoulders tense up as

he realised that his probie was a hell of a lot more perceptive than he'd even given him credit for. Tim flushed a deeper shade of red and looked away. He had meant every word he'd said, but it was embarrassing to hear it played back in front of Tony all the same. He felt as if he'd laid Tony bare, and he honestly hadn't meant to do that. He hadn't known Gibbs would play their words back to them like this.

His testimony came to an end and Gibbs switched off the tape and stood up. It was at that point that Tim remembered what all this had been about and he stiffened anxiously, wondering what would happen next.

"McGee – go stand over there next to DiNozzo," Gibbs ordered.

Tim scuttled over and the two men stood there, side by side, facing their boss, awaiting the verdict.

"First off – I think that tape shows you two exactly what you think of each other," Gibbs said, with a meaningful stare at them. Tim found himself nodding. "So I don't want any more of the crap we've had this week. Understood?"

Tim and Tony both nodded in unison.

"Good. Okay, moving on..."

"Uh...boss," Tony interrupted. Gibbs glared at him and Tim winced, feeling sure that Tony was about to do something very stupid. He was right. "You've proved your point, boss. You don't have to...uh...well you don't have to follow through with the rest of this," Tony said hopefully. Gibbs gave him a tight, predatory smile.

"When have you ever known me not to follow through, Tony?" he asked.

"Good point, boss," Tony sighed. "I'll shut up now."

"I think that would be wise, DiNozzo," Gibbs replied. Tony grimaced. "Right – I've thought about this and you both make some very compelling arguments. McGee..." Tim stiffened, wondering if he'd soon be ass up over the back of the couch. "You behaved like an arrogant brat."

"Yes boss." Tim nodded.

"Tony..." Tim felt Tony flinch beside him. "Sometimes you take things too far. You should know better."

"Yes, boss," Tony muttered. "I know."

"However, despite the excellent arguments on both sides, one of you swung it for me with his final words. Tony – come here."

He beckoned, and Tony took a deep breath and walked slowly over to his boss, as if going to his execution. He came to a halt in front of Gibbs and stood there, head down, awaiting his fate.

"You win, Tony. You're right - you were the senior field agent, and the buck stops with you. None of the rest of it matters – whose fault it was, why, and who deserves what. None of that is important because you were in charge and this whole fiasco happened on your watch. Now go over there, push your pants and underwear down to your ankles, and get into position for me."

"Yes, boss," Tony said quietly. He went over to the couch, unbuckling his belt as he went. Tim watched, aghast.

"Uh – no, boss. Please!" he said. "Can't we share the punishment? Take half each?"

"That wasn't the deal, McGee," Gibbs said tersely. "This is my decision and it's final. Tony's punishment will be taking the whipping but you're not getting off lightly either. Your punishment will be watching."

Tim felt his stomach do a flip of sheer dismay. "Please boss..." he whispered.

"McGee – you *will* stand there and watch," Gibbs told him firmly.

Tim felt his heart sink. He glanced over at Tony who was making an urgent face at him that he should do as he was told and not protest again. Tim swallowed hard, and then nodded.

Tim watched in a state of paralysed anxiety as Tony lowered his pants and then leaned forward over the couch. There was something about the way he did it that spoke of a familiarity with this position that Tim didn't even want to think about. He was right – Tony had been punished one hell of a lot as a kid.

Then Tim watched, his heart in his mouth, as Gibbs unbuttoned his shirt sleeves and folded them up to his elbows. Tony watched as well, with wary eyes, from his position over the back of the couch. Then Gibbs undid his belt and pulled it through the loops on his pants. It made a rasping sound that made Tim's stomach turn. He couldn't believe that this was really happening. He kept expecting it to end, for Gibbs to say he'd never meant it to go this far, that he'd just been trying to scare them - but at the same time he knew that wouldn't happen. Gibbs was Gibbs – he'd see this through to the end just to make sure this lesson went home, and they really learned something from it.

Tim had to concede that this was a lesson he would never forget, and if this was what it took for them to see what idiots they had been then they should just take what the boss was going to hand out. Although maybe that was easy for him to think because he was just the one watching – it was Tony who would be taking the whipping.

Gibbs crossed over to take up his position behind Tony. He folded his belt in half, and placed a hand on Tony's back. Tony lowered his head so that it was resting against the brown

leather of the couch, and Tim could see him bracing himself for the first swat.

Gibbs swung his arm back, and Tim felt it still wasn't too late...and then it was. There was a whoosh of air, a loud thwacking sound, and he heard Tony give a little grunt of pain. Tim had never felt so terrible in his entire life. He wished there was some way of stopping this, at the same time knowing there wasn't. Tony glanced up at him, and there was just a hint of teasing bravado in his eyes. Even now, in this situation, he was trying to make light of it, to tell his probie that it wasn't so bad after all, and that he could take it.

Tim thought that the least he could do was live every stroke with Tony, and he locked gazes with him, never breaking eye contact as Gibbs's arm rose and fell again. He saw the flash of pain in Tony's eyes, and heard his hoarse grunt. Another stroke, and then another, and Tim felt as if they'd landed on his own ass.

Tony was looking flushed now, and his grunts had turned into little yelps as each blow fell on his unprotected buttocks. The sixth fell lower, on his upper thighs, and he gave an involuntary little growl and half stood up. Gibbs held back the next stroke to give him time to recover. Tony took several deep gulps of air, hanging there, half-standing, half-bending.

"I'm not done yet, Tony," Gibbs told him. Tony nodded.

"I know...I just...give me a moment. That one was bad," he muttered.

Then he bent over again, and his hands curled into helpless fists as he waited for the next blow. It landed in the same place as the previous one and this time he gave a louder yelp and jumped a little, breaking position again. Gibbs took control away from him and pushed him back down. Tony went, and there was something about the way he turned his face downwards, and the resigned look in his eyes, that broke Tim.

"Please...that's enough," he said. Gibbs glanced up at him. "I'm sorry – please don't hit him again," Tim said desperately.

"You both knew the deal, Tim," Gibbs told him. "Now, Tony is taking his part of this punishment without complaining – I suggest you do the same. Unless you'd rather I started again from the beginning?"

"No! He really wouldn't," Tony said, making a frantic face at him. "Would you, Tim?" he asked meaningfully.

Tim shook his head, glumly, although he was slightly heartened by the faint smile Tony shot in his direction as he settled back down to receive the next stroke.

Gibbs placed his hand in the small of Tony's back to hold him in place again and then laid swat after hard swat on Tony's ass, each one hitting its mark with a loud thwacking sound. It was the hard whipping he'd promised, and for the next few minutes all Tim could hear was the sound of Tony's ragged breathing, and his yelps of pain that followed each loud thwap as Gibbs's belt hit its mark.

Tony wasn't able to hold his gaze any more. He was clinging onto the couch for dear life, his skin flushed and his hair dark with sweat, his face downturned, pressed against the faded brown leather. Gibbs laid on several more strokes, until Tony was yelling in earnest as each one hit home.

Then, finally, there was silence. Tim wasn't even aware it was over – all he could hear was Tony's laboured breathing, coming in little hitching gasps, and then the sound of Gibbs threading his belt back through the loops of his pants, and then...then at last, he registered that Gibbs was done.

"Tony – stand up. Your punishment is over," Gibbs told him.

Tony nodded, but he hung there for a moment, trying to get himself together. Then he pushed away from the back of the couch, with a hoarse growl of pain, wincing as the movement clearly sent shockwaves through his punished behind.

He moved slowly, reaching down to pull up his pants over his burning buttocks. Tim felt for him and wished he could help in some way. Tony finished fastening his pants as Gibbs finished fastening his shirt sleeves back into place. Then, much to Tim's surprise, Gibbs went over to Tony, and tousled his hair gently.

"Well done, Tony. You took that well," he said softly, a tone of pride and affection in his voice.

Despite his pain, Tony's eyes glowed with that special happiness he always seemed to feel whenever Gibbs praised him, and Tim had the feeling that however bad it had been, Tony would think it was worth it if he'd managed to impress Gibbs.

His boss turned to him. "And you, Tim. That was a hard lesson to learn but I think you both learned it. I appreciate the honesty and trust you showed here tonight."

He crossed over to the cassette player, flicked it open, pulled out the tape inside, and threw it to Tim, who was so surprised he almost fumbled the catch.

"McGee – bring that into the office tomorrow and make two disks of it. Give one to Tony and keep the other for yourself then return the tape to me. If anything like this happens again I *will* sit you both down and make you listen to it again, and then, if need be, we will repeat this whole thing. Are we clear?"

"Yes, boss," both men murmured.

"Good. Now – McGee, Tony is in no shape to drive. You will drive him home, look after him, and spend the night on his couch in case he needs anything. You'll drive him into work tomorrow and you will, without question, do every single thing he asks of you all day. Understood?"

"Yes, boss," Tim said, with wide eyes.

"Good. Here – take this. You'll need it."

Gibbs pulled a tube of something from his pocket and threw it at Tim, who managed a better catch second time around. He glanced at it – it was some kind of aloe gel. Gibbs had clearly known exactly what he intended to do this evening and had planned ahead for it.

"Okay – then we're done here. I hope we never have to do this again, but if we need to, we will." There was a tone of complete finality in his voice. Tim saw Tony swallow convulsively.

"Uh...we won't need to, boss. I promise," Tony said. "Right, probie?"

Tim nodded weakly. "No, boss. We learned our lesson – we really did."

"Good." Gibbs turned and ushered them through the lounge door. "Then you can go. And remember what I said, Tim – you take good care of him tonight because he just took good care of you."

Tim nodded fervently.

"And Tony – go easy on McGee tomorrow. Tonight was almost as hard on him as it was on you."

"No, boss, it really wasn't," Tony said, rubbing sweat off his forehead with his shirt sleeve. He still looked unnaturally flushed and he was moving slowly, as if every step hurt – which Tim supposed it did. "And if you think so you really under-estimate the power in your right arm," Tony added.

For the first time that evening Gibbs gave a grin. "Understood, Tony." He gave him a nod and opened the front door. "Goodnight, boys. Don't be late for work tomorrow."

"Yeah, like we'd dare after that," Tony muttered under his breath as he shuffled past Gibbs and out onto the driveway.

"Tony, I am SO sorry," Tim said the minute the door closed behind them. "My god – I had no idea he'd do that. Shit – I still can't believe it. Are you okay?"

"Oh I'm just peachy, probie," Tony snapped. "What do you think?"

"Was it as bad as it looked?" Tim asked sympathetically. Tony laughed out loud.

"Oh yeah – every bit as bad," he said, wincing as the laughter set off the pain. Tim winced as well, in sympathy.

"Come on – let me get you home," he said, opening the car door.

“You really don’t have to do this, probie. I can take care of myself,” Tony told him. Tim gave him an agonised look.

“Tony, if you think I’m disobeying him after what he just did back there then you have another think coming. I am taking you home, and I’m staying over on your couch to make sure you’re okay, and I’m driving you to work tomorrow just as he said.”

“On second thoughts – that’s probably a good idea. We don’t want him any more mad at either one of us than he was tonight.” Tony lowered himself gingerly into the car. “Ow, ow, ow,” he said as he came to a halt, an inch or so above the surface of the seat. He turned and settled himself more on his side than on his ass. Tim screwed up his face in sympathy and got in beside him.

Tony rested his head against the car window as Tim drove him home. Tim felt a little pang of sympathy for him as he glanced at him out of the corner of his eye. Tony had taken that with every bit of his usual bravado, but Tim remembered what he’d said about Tony while making his case to Gibbs. He really did think that Tony had probably taken enough whippings in his life and he was determined to make this one up to him, any way he could.

He got Tony back to his apartment and helped him into the bedroom, and Tony flung himself face down on the bed.

“Uh...Gibbs gave me this.” Tim held up the tube of gel. “Did you want me to...or, are you able to...?”

“Just do it, McGee. I can barely move, let alone reach back that far and I can’t see what the hell I’d be doing anyway,” Tony told him.

He unfastened his pants and slowly pushed them down his legs, hissing in pain, and then lay back down on his front in his boxers. Tim sat down on the bed beside him and carefully peeled back his boxers. He bit on his lip when he saw the damage. Gibbs hadn’t broken the skin but Tony’s ass was glowing a bright, angry shade of red, and some of the belt marks were clearly visible on the skin, staining it a dark shade of purple in places.

Tim squeezed some of the gel onto his fingers and then soothed it gently onto Tony’s bottom. His skin was hot to the touch, and it had to be extremely painful. Tony grabbed his pillow, pulled it under his chin, and bit down hard on it while Tim applied the gel as gently as he could. When he was done he pulled Tony’s boxers up carefully, put his head on one side, and gazed at him quizzically.

“Like kicking a kitten?” he queried. “A *kitten*?”

Tony grinned at him. “Yeah. Miaow, probie.”

“You’re an idiot, Tony.” Tim grinned back.

“I know, but you secretly kinda like that about me, don’t you?”

“Yeah.” Tim sighed. “I kind of do. You make things fun, Tony.”

“Yeah, because tonight was great fun,” Tony commented sourly. Then he reached up, with a pained wince, and grabbed Tim’s tie. “Nobody must ever know what happened, probie,” he said urgently.

“They won’t hear it from me, Tony,” Tim promised him.

“Good.” Tony released his tie and patted his shoulder affectionately. “That’s my probie. Now go lie down before you fall down. You look terrible.”

“Not as bad as you, trust me,” Tim grinned. “Good night, Tony.”

“G’night probie,” Tony muttered, closing his eyes.

Tim pulled a blanket over him and then turned off the light and quietly left the room. He went over to the couch and threw himself down upon it, every muscle in his body aching from the tension of the past couple of hours. It had been all kinds of terrible but he couldn’t deny that he felt incredibly relieved that he and Tony were back on good terms again, even if it had take that truly shattering turn of events to bring it about. He was in awe of Gibbs for the evil mastery of his plan to resolve the situation but there was no doubt, evil though it was, that it had worked.

Tim felt a sudden rush of loyalty towards Tony and knew that their friendship had undergone a test and come out the other side with flying colours. They would always be close after this. What was it Tony had said? “He’s not any probie – he’s **my** probie, and much as I love teasing him I don’t want him hurt.” That warmed him inside and with that thought in his mind, and worn out by the day’s events, he fell fast asleep.

Tim woke early the next morning and made sure there was coffee brewing for Tony, and eggs cooking for him when he got up. Tony for his part, although he moved like he was 102 years old, seemed to be in excellent spirits. Tim thought they were both relieved to be back on speaking terms.

Tim drove them to work and Tony high fived some complete stranger in the elevator and breezed into the squad room as if he was having the best day of his life.

“Morning Ziva, morning boss!” he called cheerily.

Gibbs glanced up at him, and Tim thought he saw him looking at Tony more searchingly than usual. Then he gave a little grunt and grinned at him.

“Morning Tony. You’re in a good mood. Good night last night?” he asked, with a glint in his eye.

“Not the best I’ve ever had, no,” Tony replied, with a slight glare in his direction. “But today’s definitely gonna be a good day.” He gave a bright grin at his boss, who shook his head, smiling silently but saying nothing.

“Probie – get me a coffee!” Tony ordered.

Tim rolled his eyes at him, having a sudden suspicion that Tony’s good mood might have something to do with Gibbs’s injunction the previous night that he do anything Tony asked of him today.

He was right. He spent the entire day running ridiculous errands, and while Ziva’s eyebrows climbed ever more steadily into her dark hair, Gibbs just sat at his desk serenely, ignoring the increasingly absurd demands Tony was making on him.

“Probie – my shoelace is undone.” Tony pointed as he stood at his desk. Tim noticed he had barely sat down all day but he didn’t blame him for that. He glared at Tony.

“I can see that, Tony,” he muttered.

“Tie it up for me, probie,” Tony asked, with a wide grin. Tim got up with a sigh, noticing Ziva’s look of total astonishment.

“If I were you, I would tie both his shoelaces together,” she told Tim.

“No, no...I’ll just...help him out here,” Tim replied, kneeling down in front of Tony and tying up his shoelace for him. Tony grinned down at him smugly the entire time.

“Well, I suppose it is good that you are at least talking to each other again,” Ziva commented. “How did this happen?”

She glanced at Tim, who glanced at Tony, who glanced at Gibbs. Gibbs shrugged, and glanced at his work.

“Team building,” Tony said firmly. “The boss has these freakily effective team building techniques, and he showed us just how they work last night – and trust me, they hurt – uh, work. They *work*. Aw – probie – did I spill coffee on my tie? Could you just clean it up for me?”

Tim glared at Tony, but got up and took his handkerchief out of his pocket all the same.

“You’re milking this for all it’s worth, Tony,” he muttered, as he wiped the coffee stain off Tony’s tie.

“Of course I am, probie,” Tony grinned at him. Then his grin faded. “My ass is killing me and you’re complaining about tying my shoelace and wiping some coffee off my tie?” he whispered.

“No...I’m not complaining.” Tim rolled his eyes. “I’m just saying.”

“Noted, understood and ignored, probie,” Tony replied cheerfully.

Tim went back to his chair, sat down and watched as Tony sat down in *his* chair without thinking and then growled and got straight back up again. Ziva looked at him.

“Would you stop doing that?” she said irritably. “You have been doing it all day. You are like a John-in-the-box.”

“A Jack – it’s a Jack-in-the-box,” Tony told her, still wincing. “Probie – I’m all out of coffee here!” he complained, holding up his empty cup.

“Well that’s probably because you spilled it all down your tie,” Tim muttered.

“Refill, probie. Now!” Tony ordered.

Tim gazed at him from narrowed eyes. Gibbs put his pen down and glanced at Tim over his glasses. Tim got to his feet quickly.

“I’m on it, Tony!” he said.

Gibbs gave a satisfied nod. “Nice to see you boys working together again,” he commented dryly, returning to his work. Tony and Tim exchanged a grimace. Ziva just looked monumentally puzzled.

“I’m dying of thirst here, probie!” Tony said, holding up his empty cup again.

Tim took it with a sigh and walked slowly towards the staff area to get him his refill. Ziva joined him a couple of seconds later and they made coffee together and then walked back to the squad room with it.

“Probie – I dropped my pen!” Tony called, the minute Tim came within shouting distance.

“If I were you, McGee, I would hit him,” Ziva told him helpfully. “He is being so annoying today.”

Tim stopped in his tracks, and gazed at Tony, who was leaning against the filing cabinet, grinning at him. He remembered what they’d both said the previous night, and how Tony had taken that whipping without complaint.

“Nah,” he said softly. “You know, Ziva – I wouldn’t have him any other way.”

The End

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