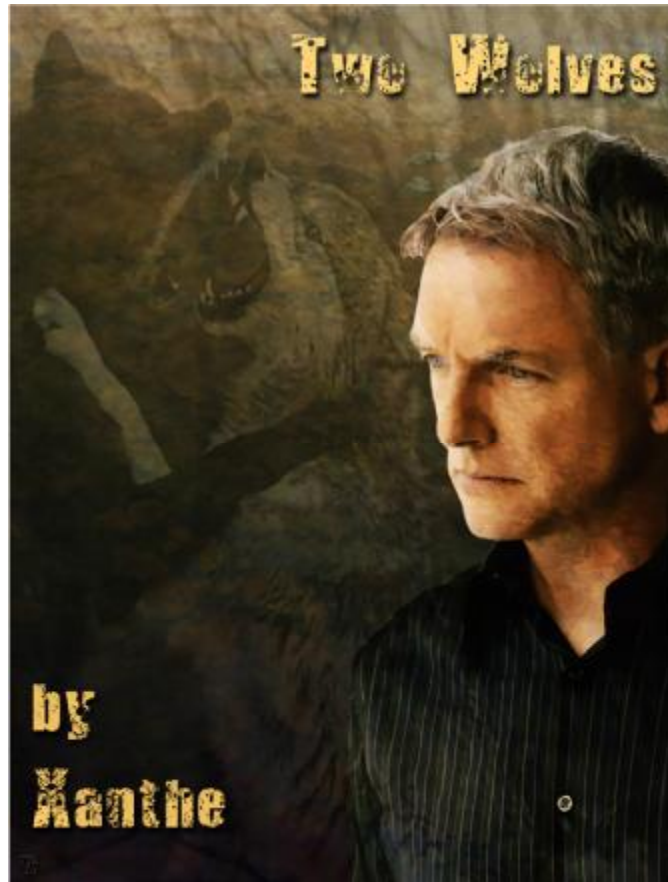


## Two Wolves by Xanthe





### Story Notes:


Author's notes: This is really a giant hurt/comfort, action/thriller/suspense epic. Despite the warnings, it's not really a rape or rape recovery fic as such, and I should stress it does not feature partner betrayal - it isn't about Tony or Gibbs hurting each other, it's more about how they bond as a result of a horrific situation going on around them. It **is** very dark in places, but I do love a happy ending, and I think the payoffs make it worthwhile :-).

This story was inspired by this **NSFW** picture from [meret](#) which I received on the same day that my neighbour's son knocked on the door to warn me to keep my cats in as a local dogfight was looking for bait – an idea that horrified me. The two sort of morphed into this story – which then took on a life of its own. While researching this story, I also found **this site**

(definitely NSFW!). Who knew?

It's been thirteen years since I wrote *Subterfuge* in *The X Files* fandom. That had a very similar premise to this story, but *Two Wolves* is a very different kind of story and goes into much darker territory. However, there is one scene in this story that is a deliberate homage to *Subterfuge*, *Star Trek: TOS*, *Being Human*, *Torchwood*, *Birds of Prey* and many other shows, including *NCIS* have dealt with a similar central premise in their own way, but this is obviously my particular dark take on it.

Thank yous: To my trusty audiencers:  **taylorgibbs**, Sue and  **nikitariddick**, who kept me going during the writing process. I think I'd have given up at a very early stage if you hadn't been so encouraging a86;.

To  **bluespirit\_star** for the beautiful title graphic.

To my fantastic betas:  **taylorgibbs** and to  **annieb1955** for the great medical beta.

They all did a wonderful job. This is a very long story, and I appreciate them giving up their time to help me with it. Any mistakes are all mine.

Special thanks to  **taylorgibbs** and Sue for handholding and support. You have been my rocks! Thank you so much a86;.

Two Wolves Artwork can be found **here**

- 1. Chapter One - Lone Wolf** by Xanthe
- 2. Chapter Two - Thrown to the Wolves** by Xanthe
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## Chapter One - Lone Wolf by Xanthe

*To love a person is to learn the song  
That is in their heart,  
And to sing it to them  
When they have forgotten.  
~ By Anonymous ~*

The scent of the sawdust is the first thing he smells when he's shoved into the holding pen. His bout is the next but one, and his gut clenches in anticipation, the heat rising in his blood. He can't wait to get out there and start fighting.

The drugs they force into him before every fight are coursing through his body, making him angry, horny, and desperate to slam his fists into an opponent he hasn't even seen.

There's someone else in the pen with him – the kid who is going to fight before him. He's naked apart from the black hood around his head, fastened in place with a chain. Gibbs sighs. A newbie; newbies are always hooded before their first fight.

The gate to the holding pen is opened, and the kid's guard leans down and jabs him on the shoulder with a cattle prod. The kid makes a startled, gasping sound and runs forward into the pit.

The referee removes the kid's hood, and the crowd roars their approval as the fight commentator introduces the newcomer. He has brown hair, a soft body and pale skin, and he looks like what he is – a lamb to the slaughter.

The gate to the holding pen slams shut, and Gibbs watches through the bars as the kid stumbles around in the pit, looking bemused. The poor guy has no idea what's in store for him.

Over on the opposite side of the pit, another fighter is released from his holding pen and goes careening out, roaring at the top of his voice to psych himself up. Gibbs recognizes this one as the veteran of several fights. He's a tall, lean, scarred man, covered in tattoos, who likes playing up to the crowd to get them on his side. Gibbs grunts; this won't be much of a fight. It won't be long before it's his turn.

The smell of the sawdust they use to line the pit always puts him in fight mode, ramping up his adrenaline, and making him eager to get out there and get on with it. As he waits his turn the other, familiar scents of Fight Night filter in too; he can smell hot meat, as the sick bastards watching from the bleachers munch on burgers and hotdogs. Then there's the sweet, sickly scent of the oil he rubs into his skin in his pre-fight prep, to make it harder for his opponents to get a grip on him. He can also smell blood; there's plenty of it, mingled with the sawdust in the pit.

A huge roar goes up from the watching crowd as the newbie goes down. He won't be getting up again. The tattooed guy runs around the edge of the pit, stoking up their frenzy, doing a victory lap, yelling and screaming his head off at them. They yell back at him, enjoying the show he's putting on.

Gibbs watches as the crowd starts collecting bets. A hell of a lot of money rides on these fights – the gambling is an integral part of the night's entertainment. As is what comes next...

The victor finishes doing his victory dance around the pit and then turns back to the newbie, who is scrabbling frantically to get away, his fingers opening and closing feebly in the sawdust, looking for purchase. Gibbs watches impassively. The kid would be better to just give in and take it; it's going to happen anyway, and the alternative is so much worse.

A hum of anticipation rises from the crowd, and they start screaming as the victor returns to claim his prize for winning. A loud chant of "Fuck him! Fuck him! Fuck him!" arises from the audience, and the victor grins – and obliges.

The kid's mouth opens in a howl of pain mingled with disbelief. As a newbie, this is his first experience of what losing means. Tattoo guy is as much a showman with the fucking as he is with the fighting, and he spears the kid on his cock and takes his time, enjoying his reward. The crowd's chanting fades, and Gibbs can see them watching with a kind of sick intensity as the kid is fucked into the sawdust. There's no lube. No stretching. No condoms. It's as raw and basic as the fighting was. It's no more than rutting. A few short months ago it sickened him, but now he's seen it so often that he has no reaction.

Then it's over. Tattoo guy comes with a roar that the crowd echoes back at him, and then the blond kid is being pulled through the sawdust and thrown back into a holding pen over the other side of the pit. He's now the property of the victor's owner, who already has an impressive stable of fighters. The kid was badly beaten, and his nose looked broken at the end, but Gibbs is sure he'll live to fight another day. Maybe next time he'll fight harder now he knows what losing feels like.

Behind him, Gibbs hears the next fighter being shoved into the holding pen. He glances at him and sees that it's someone from his owner's stable – a skinny man in his early twenties called Steve – an average fighter with no killer instinct. Gibbs barely spares him a glance before turning back to the pit.

Fresh sawdust is being strewn on the ground, and Gibbs concentrates on getting ready for his own fight. He takes a final handful of oil from the trough in the holding pen and rubs it over himself. He can see his opponent in the holding pen on the other side of the pit. He's a big guy – bigger than him – but that has never made Gibbs afraid of an opponent yet. Gibbs watches him oiling himself up, applying one last coat before stepping into the ring, just as Gibbs has done. Gibbs studies him carefully – and smiles when he sees what he's looking for.

"Why are you smiling?" Steve asks. Gibbs glares at him. He doesn't like anyone talking to him just before a fight; he needs to focus.

"Because he just lost the fight, right there," Gibbs snaps, picking up a handful of sawdust and rubbing it over his hands to dry off any remaining oil from his palms.

"How?" Steve is looking at him with an expression of combined awe and fear. They all look at him that way. He's the veteran of more fights than he can remember, and he's won every single one of them. His victories have swelled his owner's stable with new fighters and made the bastard a small fortune in the process.

"He oiled his asshole. That means, in his head, there's the possibility he might lose." Gibbs shrugs.

"It's true then. You don't ever oil your asshole?" Steve asks in barely more than a shocked whisper.

"Never." Gibbs looks straight ahead.

"But if you lose..."

"Then I'd better make sure I don't lose," Gibbs growls angrily, turning on the other man.

Steve shrinks back against the bars of the holding pen, and Gibbs controls his urge to slam his fist into his face. He turns back to the pit instead, forcing himself to concentrate.

The pit is ready, and the crowd settles back into their seats. It's time.

A hush descends on the pit, and the gate to his holding pen opens. One of his owner's men sticks a cattle prod through the bars to force him out, but he jumps away from it and strides out into the pit. He goes there on his own terms. They might make him play this sick game, but he won't give them any more control than he has to.

A roar from the crowd greets him. He's become notorious in the past few months, and they love watching him fight. He never pays them any attention. He doesn't work the crowd like some do. He doesn't play up to them, or roar back at them. He doesn't try to get them onside, or win their support. He ignores them. They seem to love him for it, enjoying his complete contempt for them.

He knows they love watching him win, but he also knows they'd love to see him lose even more. They want to see him go down, brought to his knees and humbled. They long for him to be beaten to a pulp and then fucked into the sawdust by his opponent. They want to see him punished for his disdain even as they love him for it.

It won't happen. He made himself a promise when this started, and he'll keep it. He'd rather die than be fucked for their enjoyment.

There are no weapons. There's just him and his opponent. They are both naked, both oiled, and both hopped up to their eyeballs on the drugs their owners have forced into them.

Gibbs measures up his opponent the way he always does before a fight. He doesn't look at the man's features. He can't afford to see him as a person; he's just someone to be vanquished.

His opponent is about six one or two. He has broad shoulders, muscled forearms, and big, strong legs. He looks like one of the tougher opponents Gibbs has faced. He's probably military or ex-military; most of the best fighters in this vile tournament are. He's clearly an experienced combatant – his skin is laced with scars and bruises, and the majority of them are recent, probably gained in the pit. Gibbs's skin is the same – among all the old scars is now a network of new ones that he's acquired over the past few months.

There are no rules. You fight until someone goes down and stays down. Nobody gives a damn about fairness or a clean fight. Hell, this audience loves some dirty moves. That's another reason they love him; he's never afraid to land a low punch, or use his nails and teeth to win a fight. He knows he's hurt and maimed during fights. He doesn't think he's ever killed; he never lets himself go that far. But it's possible some of the men he fought died of their injuries later. He doesn't allow himself to think about that.

Gibbs forgets the audience. He forgets everything but the opponent in front of him. He can hear the sound of his own breathing, feel the blood thrumming through his veins, and the surge of fighting energy that rises up inside.

He circles his opponent warily, mentally mapping the guy's likely weaknesses and strengths. The other man is listing slightly to the left, probably the result of a sprained ankle or a pulled calf muscle. He's compensating well, but it might make him unsteady if he's hit from the right angle.

When they first threw Gibbs into the pit, they thought he'd get wiped out in his debut bout. He's a hell of a lot older than most of the fighters he's encountered, but it's his age and experience that have given him the edge. It's not just that though – it's also his raw determination. Unlike Steve back there, he does have killer instinct. He always has. It's what enabled him to be such a good sniper when he was in the Corps. He can kill, he has killed, and he's prepared to kill again. It's that simple.

He breathes deeply and evenly, oblivious to everything but his opponent now. He is cool and calm, but under the surface he nurses every old wound he's ever had, needing to feel them again now, to use them to fuel him to victory.

He only killed Pedro Hernandez once, but since then he's killed him countless times again in his head. This time is no exception. Gibbs remembers his dead wife and child and how they were torn from him in an act of cowardly violence, leaving his life in ruins and his future shattered. He remembers the hate and anger he felt towards Hernandez, and he gathers it in, channels it, and when his opponent moves towards him he explodes.

He lands several fast, hard punches to his opponent's jaw and then dances back out of reach, taking just a glancing blow to his ribs in the process. His opponent is growling loudly, trying to psych himself into the fight, but Gibbs remains silent. His right shoulder is still sore from last week's fight, but he never lets it show. He can't afford to give anything away – no glimmer of weakness, or anything to give his opponent hope.

They move forward again and exchange a few more blows. Gibbs continuously probes the man's weaknesses, landing several punches that confirm his suspicion that his opponent's left leg is his weak spot.

They draw back, and Gibbs controls his breathing so it doesn't look as if he's winded by that last punch to his gut. He doesn't acknowledge the blood he can feel dripping down the side of his face from a cut above his eye. *No weakness. No weakness. No weakness.* He remembers a long line of fresh-faced boys he trained back in the Corps; he is putting into practice all the lessons he taught them. He remembers the boxing ring back at NCIS too, and another young man he trained how to fight...and he pushes that thought away. He can't afford a moment's lapse in concentration.

He stares his opponent out, looking him straight in the eyes, and he sees a glimmer of fear there. Then he knows that he has won. His reputation has gone before him. His run of victories has given him an aura of invincibility and that gives him the edge. Half the battle always takes place in the mind; Gibbs knows he can win, but his opponent has doubts, and it's the doubts that will take him down.

His opponent is still gazing at him, trying to find some chink in his armour. He won't. Gibbs goes in fast, feints sideways, and then shoves his knee into the man's balls – hard. His opponent goes backwards with a groan, but Gibbs gives him no time to recover and goes after him. He throws a punch, shoves a foot against that weak left ankle, and wipes the man's legs out from under him. His opponent lands on the sawdust with a thud, and Gibbs is on him immediately, landing one good punch after another.

It feels satisfying to crunch his fist into flesh, and he goes fast and hard, wanting to end this with the minimum amount of damage to them both. He can feel his opponent's erection poking into his thigh, but that's not unusual during a fight. God knows what all these drugs have done to their body chemistry, but Gibbs spends half his time wanting to fight and the other half wanting to fuck, and often both at once. It's no different for any of the other fighters.

He senses it when the resistance leaves his opponent but he stays alert; playing dead is a common tactic, and he is not going to be toppled when he's this close to victory.

The fight referee steps in for the first time – he's really only there to declare if a fight is over or not – and to use his cattle prod if the fighters refuse to engage or are slowing down too much.

Looking down into his opponent's green eyes, Gibbs sees that he's definitely gone down. There is something about him that is familiar, something that Gibbs thinks he should recognize, but in his drugged, fight-heightened state he can't place it. Gibbs steps back warily, never taking his eyes off his opponent. The referee waves a hand in his direction, confirming his victory, and the crowd erupts.

"Wolfman! Wolfman! Wolfman!" the chant goes up. All the contestants in this surreal version of WWE have stupid names: Bone Crusher, Caveman, Fat Prick...and his is Wolfman. Maybe it's the wolfish way he pursues his prey around the pit and silently dispenses each and every one of them, or maybe it's because his shorn grey hair gives him a grizzled appearance. He has no idea why, and he really doesn't give a damn.

He looks back down at his defeated opponent. What comes next is, like the fighting, something he has no choice about. It's an integral part of this nightmare world he was plunged into all those months ago, and something he has to do to survive.

He tried to refuse the first time, only to be told that refusal isn't an option. Either he fucks his defeated opponent, or the baying mob decides whether the winner or the loser pays the ultimate price for his refusal.

Gibbs believes the stewards of this nightmare game from hell whenever they threaten him; he knows the cost of refusal. He once watched from behind the holding pen bars as the winner of the bout before his was unable to get it up. He saw the mob screaming out their verdict, and a

well-dressed man in the stands making the final decision. He witnessed the referee delivering a swift shot to the losing contestant's head, like a horse being put out of its misery, and the sudden, shocked silence after. He remembers the long river of blood flowing into the sawdust and the way they dragged the poor, dead bastard from the pit, leaving an angry, red stain where he'd died.

Gibbs has always been able to get it up. He has the drugs to thank for that because he sure as hell finds nothing attractive about the bloody, sweaty bodies of the poor bastards he defeats in the pit. He knows they have as little choice about fighting in this obscene arena as he does, and once the fight is over he can't hate them. He always does his best to make it as fast and painless as he can.

His opponent's glassy eyes are fixed on him, filled with hopeless resignation. Gibbs doesn't say a word. He just rolls him over, pulls him onto his knees, and enters him with one quick, hard thrust.

He is both glad that his body responds and hates that it responds at the same time. He knows he has no choice, but his body feels the pleasure anyway, and he needs to feel it in order to finish the job.

Agent Leroy Jethro Gibbs of NCIS is appalled by what he's doing, but his dark side seizes the moment, taking pleasure in the fruits of his victory, and relishes being able to claim the prize he has won. He knows he doesn't have the luxury of all these conflicting emotions, so he shuts them down as ruthlessly as he just fought.

He puts an arm around the man's midriff and pulls him up and back against his own body, fucking him quickly but forcefully. It feels good to ease some of his sexual frustration in this guy's body. The drugs make him think about sex all the time – when he's not thinking about fighting.

Then he's done. He comes with a growl, allowing himself to savour the moment for just a second, and then he pulls out, releasing his tight grip on the defeated fighter's body. The man drops to the ground and sprawls face down in the sawdust, panting heavily.

Gibbs gets up and strides back to his holding pen. Steve is waiting there, smiling and clapping as Gibbs returns.

"Wow, you really took him down! He was a big fucker too! Shit, you've got some good moves."

"What the hell are you doing?" Gibbs roars at him, and Steve falls back against the bars of the cage. "Get ready for your own damn fight. Focus on that!"

Steve's eyes widen, and he nods and turns away. Gibbs remembers him now that the red mist of the fight is over. He fought him – and beat him – a few weeks ago; that's how Steve came to be in his owner's stable.

"You can't afford to lose concentration for a second," Gibbs growls, and then he's prodded out of the holding pen by McGuire – one of his owner's men – and escorted back to the truck



at gunpoint. McGuire starts wrapping the familiar chains around his wrists and legs while Ellis holds a gun to his head, and within seconds he's weighted down again.

His owner comes over, smiling broadly. He's in his mid-fifties, bald with a big, soft paunch. His name is James Scott, and he's some kind of businessman. He's the kind of guy you could imagine going to the opera or the ballet. Somehow he seems incongruous in this setting, but this sport seems to attract all kinds, judging by the audiences Gibbs has been performing to.

"Good fight, Leroy," Scott says. "Well done! He was a tough opponent too – been on the circuit the entire season and won most of his fights. This was another great victory!"

"Some victory. I still get to go back in chains – as usual." Gibbs jerks his head at the chains.

Scott ignores the complaint. "I had no idea you'd prove to be such a good investment when I bought you! The way this season is going, I'll have enough to take on the big boys by the end. You're my passport to the big time, Leroy!"

"Great," Gibbs says, flat and sour.

"I'll see you get a glass of the finest bourbon for your victory, Leroy," Scott tells him, patting his arm as if he's a prize racehorse. Maybe he is.

McGuire chains him into the truck to await transportation back to the stable. There are no windows in the truck, and his chains are fastened to the wall to keep him secure. It's always the same – a very smoothly run operation with never even the smallest chance of escape. Whoever runs this sick tournament has money and connections. Gibbs has seen gleaming limos coming and going, and the stable and holding pens he's moved between are all expensive.

He's caught sight of what he suspects were a couple of Saudi princes and some wealthy Texas oilmen. You have to be rich to afford the fighters. His own price was just a few thousand on first sale, but now he knows he's worth about \$250,000 to Scott. He's a winner, and winners go up in value with every single successful fight. Not that Scott would sell him. He's grooming him to win the entire season and give Scott the kind of clout and influence within the cartel that he craves so much that Gibbs can almost smell it.

Gibbs is in the truck for what feels like an hour or two, while the night's entertainment continues outside. He can hear the occasional roar from the crowd. He's still naked, but he's become used to that. They don't let them have clothes, maybe because it makes it harder for them to run away, or because they don't want them to have access to anything that might aid them in a suicide attempt; no belts, or shoelaces, or anything they could tie together to make a noose. Or maybe it's because they want to make it clear to the fighters that they are nothing, that their old lives are over, and they have no identity outside the pit. Their sole purpose is to fight and fuck on cue to entertain the audience and bring glory to their owners. Nothing else exists for them.

He's tired – the drugs are starting to wear off and that, combined with the adrenaline high fading, makes him feel suddenly drained. He's so weary of this, and if he has too much time to think the dark moods take over. He can't think about what he just did back there, or who he has become. He can't allow himself to do anything except survive.

The truck door opens, and a man is thrown inside. Gibbs recognizes him as his defeated opponent of the evening. He is Scott's prize – his winnings – and the new addition to his stable, won for him by Gibbs's skill and ruthlessness in the pit.

The newcomer is chained too, and his head lolls back against the wall. His skin looks almost grey in colour, and Gibbs hopes he isn't too badly hurt. Scott's doctor will check him out when they get back to the stable in the usual post-fight examination.

As he studies the man's face, that niggling of recognition he had earlier suddenly hits him.

"Hurrell? Lieutenant Sam Hurrell?"

One of the man's eyelids flickers open. The other is swollen shut. "Yeah," he mutters. "How did you...?"

Gibbs gives a tight, ironic smile. "You're the reason I'm here. Your wife told me you weren't a deserter, and I believed her."

Hurrell's good eye glows in the dark truck and then the glow fades sadly, and shame floods in instead. Gibbs almost wishes he hadn't mentioned the man's wife.

"Jan's okay?" Hurrell asks huskily.

"She was fine when I last saw her, but she's worried about you. She convinced me that you'd never go AWOL, so I came looking for you."

"You...?"

"Agent Gibbs. NCIS." Or at least that's who he was once. Now he's not so sure.

"Oh fuck." Hurrell's grey skin is tinged with a flush of pink. "Sorry I got you dragged into this, Gibbs. They took me...was out drinking with my friends..."

"I know. They gave statements."

"On my way home...walking...the bastards must have been following me. Just took me."

"Seemed like you'd vanished into thin air. We investigated – found nothing. But I must have asked the right questions in the wrong place because..." He shrugs.

One minute he'd been drinking while working in his basement, and the next he'd blacked out. Whatever they'd laced his bourbon with was so strong he went down fast and was out of it for hours. He had been mercifully groggy throughout the whole humiliating ordeal of being purchased by Scott – a middle-ranking member of the cartel that runs these human dogfights, or 'modern-day gladiatorial contests' as Scott grandly likes to call them.

"Sorry," Hurrell says again, looking down.

"Don't apologise. Sign of weakness," Gibbs snaps back automatically.

Hurrell still has an erection. He flushes again and glances up at Gibbs. "Damn it, what the hell is in that shit they inject into us before the fights?"

"Viagra. Testosterone." Gibbs shrugs. "And fuck knows what else." He wonders what Abby would find if she looked at his blood through her microscope right now.

"Fucking bastards."

"Yeah."

Then there is suddenly nothing else to say. Gibbs thinks he's should feel something, some kind of connection to the man who is the reason he's here, but he doesn't. He doesn't feel anything. It's as if that Gibbs was someone else. He felt the same way after Shannon and Kelly died; the life he had when he was a husband and father died with them. Now the life he once lived as an NCIS agent has gone too. He's not that man anymore.

Since he was taken, he's been forced to fight once a week in various venues. After each fight he is returned to Scott's stable and made to perform a physical exercise regimen and daily training fights in preparation for the next contest. It's relentless, and it's been his life for so long now that he finds it hard to remember who he once was. Not that it matters; he doesn't have the luxury of dwelling on the past if he's to stand any chance of surviving the present.

Hurrell clears his throat, and Gibbs knows what he is going to say before he says it.

"So, if you're here...is there...any chance...?" Hurrell looks almost afraid to be asking the question, and Gibbs understands his dilemma. He wants to know if there's any chance of rescue, but at the same time he doesn't want whatever small nugget of hope he's been nursing to be taken away.

"No," Gibbs replies shortly, removing that hope as swiftly and cleanly as he fought and fucked back in the pit.

Gibbs shuts his eyes and leans his head back against the wall of the truck. It's been five months since he was taken, and in his darker moments he can't help wondering if his team is even still looking for him.

~\*~

"Director Vance." Tony nods his head at the director as he takes his place at the conference table in his office, for their usual weekly briefing meeting.

"Agent DiNozzo." Vance nods back curtly.

Tony places the bulging case file on the table in front of him and opens it. Vance sits back in his chair, and Tony notices the toothpick between his fingers. That isn't good. He's become proficient at reading Vance over the past few months, and the appearance of the toothpick is never a good sign.

Tony launches into an update, talking fast, aware that he doesn't have his audience's full attention. Vance has crossed one leg over the other and is tapping the toothpick impatiently on the table.

"So, what you're saying, Agent DiNozzo, is that you're no further forward this week than last week?" Vance interrupts him.

"That's not entirely true..."

"And I have my best team working a case that's rapidly turning cold."

Tony looks up sharply. "It's not a cold case, Director. We still have leads. We will find Agent Gibbs."

"And in the meantime, this agency's solve rate is going down the pan because you and your team are occupied elsewhere."

Tony shuts the file with a terse flick of his wrist. "It would help if we got some co-operation but every warrant I file gets refused, and every avenue of investigation I open up leads to a dead end. My calls don't get returned, and the local LEOs obstruct me wherever I go. How the hell am I supposed to find Gibbs when there's a wall of silence around this case that not even my badge and this agency's name can penetrate?"

Vance sticks the toothpick in his mouth and gazes at him mutely.

"Is there something going on that I don't know about, sir?" Tony emphasizes the last word sarcastically.

"I don't know what the hell you mean," Vance says, but Tony can see a flicker of something in his almost inscrutable brown eyes. "SecNav is concerned about our solve rate. I can't keep one team working one case indefinitely. You've had five months. At some point we have to call it a day, DiNozzo."

Tony sits back in his chair. "And have we reached that point, Director? Is that what you're telling me?"

Vance has the grace to at least look uncomfortable. "Yes, I am."

"You're really telling us to give up on one of our own people? To give up on Gibbs?" Tony doesn't raise his voice, but he thinks his white hot anger is clearly conveyed all the same.

Vance gives a heavy sigh. "It pains me, Agent DiNozzo, but you've tried hard enough for long enough – and it does you credit that you haven't given up long before now. But you can't go on forever. It's time to move on. You've been running the MCRT for the past five months, so I'm going to make that official, and give you the job title and pay raise to match." He gives a big smile. "You're the special agent in charge as of now, DiNozzo. Congratulations on your promotion."

Tony gives a disbelieving laugh. "Oh my God, I must have a problem with my ears!" He slaps both his ears dramatically with the palms of his hands. "Because I could have sworn I heard you trying to buy me off! Is that what I heard, Director?"

Vance grits his teeth. "Of course not. I'm just saying – it's time you were paid your due. You've led that team and led it well for the past few months. Take the promotion and the pay rise, DiNozzo. You've earned it."

Tony shakes his head. "Have you no shame, Director Owens?"

Vance stiffens and sits up at Tony's use of that particular name. "What the hell...?"

"I thought it was time to stop pretending," Tony interrupts. "Your real name is Tyler Keith Owens, and unlike the real Leon Vance, you were never a Marine. Want to know how I know this?"

Vance's eyes flicker angrily. "You're on very dangerous ground here, DiNozzo."

"I know this because if you were, you'd never leave a man behind. 'Semper fi', remember? If you were missing, if you'd been taken, I can tell you without a shadow of a doubt that Gibbs would never give up on you, Director. He's a Marine. You never were."

"How did you...?"

"I've been through everything Gibbs ever touched with a fine toothcomb these past few months. It's surprising what he had stashed away." Tony shrugs.

"Damn it, DiNozzo – I'm not the one shutting this down!" There is a hint of guilt in Vance's eyes, and Tony knows his barbs have hit home. "We all have our orders, Tony," Vance adds softly.

So that's it. SecNav is behind this; he's the one shutting down the investigation. Tony isn't surprised; it's become very clear to him over the past five months that his investigation is being hampered at the highest level.

"You need to understand..." Vance begins.

"Oh, I understand, sir." Tony gives a tight smile. "You're just following orders. I understand that very well." His voice drips sarcasm.

Vance slams his fist on the table. "I don't give a damn what you think you understand, DiNozzo. Just understand *this*. Your investigation into the disappearance of Lieutenant Hurrell and Agent Gibbs is over as of now. You're done here."

Tony nods slowly. Then he stands up. He's planned for this; hell, he was expecting it. "I believe I have six weeks leave accrued, sir. I'll be taking it with immediate effect."

Vance sighs. "Fine. Do this the hard way, DiNozzo. You can have your six weeks, but when they're up I expect you back at your desk, working the cases *I* give you."

Tony gathers up the bulging file and walks stiffly towards the door.

"And DiNozzo? Don't use the badge during your leave. If I hear you've used this agency's name in your own private investigation..."

Tony turns, and for a second his usual controlled mask isn't in place, and he sees Vance visibly recoil from what he sees on his face. Then he gets himself under control and forces his mask back on.

"That's fine. Here – I'll leave it with you for safe-keeping. I'm not feeling too proud about wearing it these days anyway."

He walks back over to the table, removes the badge from his belt, and puts it down with deliberate disdain in front of Vance.

Vance reaches out and grabs his wrist. "Don't be an idiot, DiNozzo. Read between the lines; this is way out of your league."

Tony laughs, and Vance looks up at him, a surprised expression on his face.

"Sorry..." Tony says between chuckles. "See, I can live with being thought an idiot, Director. Hell, I'm used to it! That won't keep me up at night!" He snaps off the laugh and leans in close. "What I can't live with is the thought of abandoning a friend. Now that, Director, really would keep me up at night. Maybe you've found a way to live with yourself, but I know I never could if I did that."

Vance shakes his head. "Look, DiNozzo, I know how you feel about Gibbs..."

Tony stiffens and pulls his arm out of Vance's grasp. "No. Really. You don't. If you did, we wouldn't be having this conversation." Then he turns and walks out of Vance's office without looking back.

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It's probably mid-morning by the time they get back, but inside the stable they work to a different timetable. When it's daytime outside, it's nighttime within, keeping the fighters' body clocks tuned so they're alert to fight at night.

The venues for the fights change regularly; sometimes they're close to the stable and other times they're a long drive away. This one was several hours' drive, but Gibbs has no idea where the stable or the venue are because the truck has no windows.

The truck drives straight into the stable, and the fighters are removed one by one, with a heavy escort. It's a long, slow operation, and Gibbs snoozes through most of it. Finally it's his turn.

He knows the routine. He's taken to the showers first and that's where his chains are removed. Armed guards watch him shower, and then he's escorted along the hallway to the doctor's office.

Dr Tanner is a young, skinny guy with red hair, and freckled skin. He's on Scott's payroll, and Gibbs long since stopped trying to appeal to the man's better nature. When Gibbs first arrived, he spent some time trying to win the doctor over, but Tanner's weak and likes his regular large pay check too much. He's also got a gambling problem, and he loves the high he gets off the fights.

Gibbs hopes Tanner won his bets tonight. When the doc wins, he floats his way through the post-fight medical exams, and they go much easier. When he loses...then the bastard can be brutal with his patients.

He clearly won tonight. He grins as he checks Gibbs over, examining his knuckles and ribs, assessing the damage.

"Saw you take a punch here," he says, pressing down hard on Gibbs's ribs. Gibbs sucks in a low growl. "Not broken – just bruised. You'll be fine to fight again next week."

He removes his latex gloves, reaches for his clipboard, and fills in some details on Gibbs's chart.

"I'm increasing your meds. The fights only get tougher from here on in, Leroy. Gotta make sure you're at your best." He gives a little giggle. The good doctor also has a coke habit, and Gibbs can see he's been indulging tonight; he usually does on Fight Nights.

"By increasing the amount of that shit you inject into me and shove down my throat?" Gibbs growls.

Tanner shrugs and looks up, meeting his eyes, suddenly serious. "You wanna win, don't you?"

Gibbs stares at him for a long moment and then gives a taut nod. He does. That's a promise he made to himself during his first fight, and he intends to keep it.

"Then trust me." Tanner giggles again. "I've been getting the dose right so far. I'll keep you good and angry and horny when you step into the pit. I've got everything riding on you to win, Leroy! It's in my best interest to keep you fighting fit."

"Glad to hear it," Gibbs says sarcastically, but it's lost on Tanner. "These drugs even licensed, Tanner?"

Tanner shrugs. "Some of 'em."

Gibbs doesn't even want to think about what the long term side effects might be – if he lives long enough for that to ever be an issue.

The doctor mixes a concoction of drugs into a plastic cup of water and then hands it to Gibbs. When given orally, the drugs are always dissolved in liquid; there's never any chance you can pretend to swallow but keep them in your mouth. "Drink."

Gibbs takes the cup and gazes at it distastefully. His personal guard shifts, his hand going to the whip tucked into his belt, his meaning all too clear. Gibbs tried to get out of taking the

drugs once and took a whipping for his defiance, so he knows there's no point refusing. He downs the liquid in two gulps, refusing to gag on the vile taste. The doctor hands him a clean cup of water, and he drinks that quickly too, to wash the unpleasant taste of the drugs out of his mouth.

He's signed off, and the guards escort him back to his stall at gunpoint. The stall is a narrow metal cell, with a toilet in one corner and a mattress on the floor. There's one pillow and one blanket. But today, something is different. There's another mattress on the floor and another occupant: Lieutenant Hurrell.

"Get out," Gibbs snaps.

Hurrell sits up, looking confused. "But they said I was to sleep in here..."

"We're running out of space because of all the fighters you keep winning for us," McGuire tells Gibbs with a grin.

"I said, get the fuck out. I don't share with anyone," Gibbs growls.

"Don't be so hasty. You might want the company," McGuire murmurs into his ear. "Your dose just went up. You'll be horny all the time...you'll want someone to fuck to take the edge off it, or it'll drive you nuts. If this one's not your type, then how about that kid Steve?"

Gibbs makes no reply. He just turns, slowly, to glare at McGuire. They can make him fight, and they can make him fuck his defeated opponent in the pit, but they can't make him fuck anyone just for his own pleasure, to "take the edge off it".

McGuire shrugs. "Your choice. I just thought you'd like a fuck buddy. You'll change your mind when your cock is hard all night long, and you wanna bury it balls deep in some piece of ass just to stop it aching like a motherfucker. I've seen it before."

The guard jerks his head, and Hurrell grabs his thin mattress and bedding and scuttles out of the stall.

McGuire pushes Gibbs inside and shuts and locks the door behind him. Gibbs lies down on the mattress and gazes up at the ceiling, relieved to finally be alone.

It might have been nice to have the company though. It might have helped stop the dark thoughts he sometimes gets in the middle of the night.

"Better to be alone," he growls, clamping down on the desire for company, conversation, and human connection. It's a weakness he can't afford right now.

"Is it really better to be alone?" a little voice whispers inside his head. "Or were you just afraid of the temptation? Maybe you were afraid you might wake up and find yourself holding that poor bastard down while you pump into his tight hole..."

His cock is hard and aching at the thought, the new drugs causing waves of sexual energy to sweep through his body. He ruts helplessly into his hand and even when he comes his cock remains half hard afterwards.



He closes his eyes. Sleep is the one respite he gets from this nightmare; he hopes he won't have to wait too long for it to claim him.

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Tony sits in his car for a few minutes before finally getting out and forcing himself into Starbucks. He isn't looking forward to this.

Jan Hurrell is a neat little woman with a sleek, dark brown bob. She looks up and sees him, and her face breaks into a pathetically hopeful smile. He manages a smile in return – one of his big, bright ones that never reach his eyes – and goes over to the table. She gestures to the cup of coffee waiting for him.

"I hope that's the way you like it. I think it is," she says. "I've watched you order it often enough!"

He takes a sip and finds it's just how he likes it. He nods and smiles his thanks, another of those big, bright smiles.

"You have bad news," she says, and either his smile wasn't big or bright enough, or this brave, patient woman has learned to read him too well over the past five months.

"Yes." He's always been honest with her; he's not about to stop now. "I'm sorry, Jan, but the case has been shut down as of this afternoon. I've been forbidden to work on it."

"Sam...?"

"Classified as officially AWOL. A deserter. The case has been closed."

"And Gibbs?"

"A missing person." Tony shrugs. "No link has ever been found between their disappearances. Apart from the big, fat coincidence that they both disappeared without a trace within a month of each other and nobody heard from them again," he says bitterly. "And the fact that Gibbs disappeared while investigating your husband's own disappearance."

"So that's it? I mean, there's no recourse? Nobody we can go to? No way we can change their minds?"

"No." Tony shakes his head. "To be honest, I'm not surprised it's come to this, Jan. I've told you several times recently how hard it's been. Everything I do, every way I turn, I come up empty. At first I thought I wasn't trying hard enough. Now I realize it's deliberate. Someone has something to hide; something big."

Jan's face is a picture of pinched misery. "Who?"

"I wish I knew."

"I don't understand. Do they think we can just wash our hands of them? That we can just move on and forget about Sam and Gibbs?" she asks in a tone of disbelief.

“We’re the little people. We don’t matter to them. Sam and Gibbs don’t matter to them,” Tony replies bitterly.

“Sam’s my husband! We’ve been married for nine years! I love him. It kills me every single hour of the day, knowing he’s out there, being held somewhere against his will. How can I forget him?”

“You can’t, and neither can I.” Tony shakes his head. “I’m taking the six weeks leave I’m due, so I can continue the investigation.”

“Alone?” She raises an eyebrow. “What about your team?”

“They support me, but they’re more use to me at NCIS so I told them to stay put.” He gives a rueful smile as he remembers how hard it was convincing Abby to do that. She wanted them all to resign and go looking for Gibbs, but he couldn’t see what use that would be. Haven’t they already spent virtually every waking hour for the past five months looking for Gibbs with all the facilities of NCIS at their disposal?

“And what happens when your six weeks are up?” Jan asks. “What then, Tony?”

“Then we’ll see where we’re at when we reach that point.”

Maybe then it’ll be time for the entire team to resign and go renegade in their search for Gibbs. He has to see what he can turn up during the next six weeks before he can make that decision.

She looks suddenly afraid. “Be careful, Tony. Remember what happened to Agent Gibbs when he first started poking into Sam’s disappearance – they took him too. I don’t want that to happen to you. Promise me that won’t happen to you too!”

“I can’t promise that, but I can promise that I will never, ever give up on Sam or on Gibbs. You have my word.”

“I know.” She puts her hand over his, where it’s resting on the table. “I know that, Tony.”

“Someone is shutting this down – someone at the very top,” Tony tells her. “They took away my badge, Jan.”

“As if that would stop you,” she says scornfully. “If they thought that would stop you then they don’t know Tony DiNozzo very well!”

He glances at her, a little surprised by her certainty, and she smiles at the question in his eyes.

“They can try their best to try to make us go away, but we won’t. I’m not the kind of person who would ever give up on someone I love, and neither are you, Tony.”

He blinks, startled. “How did you...?”

"I see it in your eyes every time we meet. You feel the same way about Gibbs that I feel about Sam. I saw through the big smile a long time ago. I know you're hurting as much as I am right now. How long have you been in love with him, Tony?"

It's the first time anyone has ever called him on it, and now that it's happened, he finds it's the most natural thing in the world to talk about it.

"Since the day I first met him." He stirs his coffee aimlessly and then looks at her again. "He was undercover, but I didn't know that at the time." He smiles at the memory. "I had to arrest him – took him down with a full body slam, and I think the minute he looked up at me I was gone. I didn't know it then, of course, but looking back..." He shrugs. "That was ten years ago. I was a cop at Baltimore PD, and he...kind of recruited me."

She gives a little smile. "Ten years – that's about the same time as I've been with Sam." She squeezes his hand firmly. "He doesn't know, does he?"

"I have no idea." Tony shrugs. "I never told him, because he never showed any interest. Me, I've been sleeping with guys as well as girls since I was old enough to have sex...but he's never shown any signs of being bisexual. It's annoying," he gives her a little grin, "because I was always so good at never falling for the straight boys. I used to look down on the idiots who did. And I guess I always hoped that when I did fall in love, it'd be with a girl...just because that's easier."

"I don't think we can choose who we fall in love with, Tony," she says softly.

"You think?" he laughs out loud. "'Cause if we could, I promise you I wouldn't have fallen for an ornery Marine with a bad taste in haircuts and an even worse taste in clothes!"

She laughs too. "Sounds like Sam. I swear, when we first married I used to throw away one item of clothing per week and smuggle in new things when he wasn't looking. No taste whatsoever!"

"Oh, if I could ever get my hands on Gibbs's closet, I would make a bonfire of his terrible Sears collection. Then I'd take him out and buy him some silk shirts in just the right shade to show off those beautiful baby blues of his."

They smile, faded, tight little smiles, and then they fall silent, each of them lost in their own memories.

After awhile she picks up her purse and gets up. He gets up too, and she folds him into a fierce hug, and they cling on to each other for the brief moment of comfort it affords.

"Same time next week?" she murmurs into his shoulder.

"Well...maybe..." He hesitates and then draws away from her. "If I'm not here, it's because I'm out following a lead. Don't worry about me if that happens. Just...wait it out."

She knows what he has planned; he can see it in her eyes. And she's worried for him, but she wants her husband back, so she doesn't try to talk him out of it.

“I’ll be here,” she says firmly. “I will be here, Tony, same place, same time, every week, until you come here and tell me what happened to my husband.”

She gives him another firm hug, and then she leaves. Tony sits back down at the table after she’s gone and stares into his coffee. It feels strange, after all these years, to have been called on the one thing he has tried so hard to hide. He’s surprised to find that he feels relieved that someone finally knows. Someone knows, and understands, and isn’t shocked, or horrified, or judging him for it. It’s a small relief, in the grand scheme of things, but it unlocks something inside him.

He’s on his own now, a free agent, and it’s time to start acting like one. He’s no longer bound by the rules and regulations that came with wearing that badge, or the restrictions that came with always hiding his true feelings. He’s not going to do that again. He is who he damn well is, and he’ll be damned if he pretends to be someone else.

He isn’t an NCIS agent right now. He’s just a guy named Tony, who has been crazy in love with a guy named Gibbs for nearly ten years.

Tony downs the coffee and then gets up, a decisive new energy thrumming through his veins. What he knows, and what the people who stole Gibbs don’t know, is just how dangerous a Tony DiNozzo in love can be.

But they’re about to find out.

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He’s woken by the blare of the klaxon, as he has been for the past five months and the lights are turned up to full blast in the hallway outside, flooding into the stall through the inset window in the door. There are no lights in the individual stalls; there’s no need for them as the fighters only go there to sleep – and to fuck. Gibbs often hears the unmistakable sound of them fucking each other in the adjacent stalls.

His stall door is opened, and he blinks as he steps out into the bright, artificial light in the hallway. The building is made of a lightweight metal material, clearly intended to be a temporary structure, easy to take down and reassemble somewhere else.

It’s hard to tell in here, under the constantly bright lights, but he judges that it’s probably evening outside.

There’s a subdued feeling in the air, the way there always is the day after a fight. All that adrenaline and the extra drugs they’re given on Fight Nights have left them drained. Several of them are nursing bruises, and some of them have more serious injuries.

Gibbs glances around to assess the situation; he was too out of it in the truck last night to pay much attention to who was coming back with them and who wasn’t. Steve must have won his fight because he’s there, although he’s limping badly. Gibbs glances down to see that his ankle is covered with bite marks.

“Think they’ll let me off next Fight Night?” Steve asks him, as they’re herded towards the showers.

“For just a few bites? Not a chance,” Gibbs snorts.

Several broken fingers might win you a few weeks respite – no owner wants to risk losing a fighter by fielding one too injured to stand a chance of winning. But other than that, if it’s just a pulled muscle, cuts and bruises, or a minor sprain, they’ll throw you out into the pit to fight again the following week.

Gibbs knows that any fighters requiring serious medical help for internal injuries or complex fractures are taken out back and shot. Tanner can deal with bruises, strains, and minor sutures, but Gibbs is sure that any kind of internal surgical procedure is beyond him.

They shower together as usual, and Gibbs is aware of some of the men staring hungrily at others. He meets any such impertinent gaze directed his way with a dark glare. He knows they’re all hopped up on drugs, and they’re all feeling the same strains and pressures as he is, but he wants them to be clear that he’s not an option. They’re all scared of him in any case. His reputation has been growing with each successful fight, and the way he carries himself and his frequent glares make them wary of him.

“Hey, Gibbs, how long have you been here?” Sam Hurrell asks as he soaps himself.

“Five months,” Gibbs replies tersely.

“No, I mean, how long in Scott’s stable?”

“Five months,” Gibbs repeats. “Never been anywhere else. Never lost a fight.”

“Never? Not even in the early days?” Hurrell looks surprised.

“Never.”

“I lost my first three. To be honest...” Hurrell glances down and then up again, looking ashamed. “I thought it’d be better to lose than to win and have to...” He chews on his lower lip.

Gibbs shrugs. “If I win, nobody dies, but I only have control over that if I win. If I lose, and the other guy refuses...one of us is dead.”

“So it’s pure survival?” Hurrell asks.

“Yes.” Maybe. He doesn’t like losing, and the thought of being raped out there for the pleasure of the bastards running this sick tournament doesn’t appeal, either. Maybe it’s not just survival, and maybe he’s not that altruistic.

“Took me a long time to get my head around it. Wasn’t sure if I could do it the first time...” Gibbs sees that same ashamed, almost guilty look in his eyes that he saw last night in the truck when he mentioned Hurrell’s wife. “The drugs help,” Hurrell finishes with a shrug.

“Yeah, the drugs make me so horny I’d fuck my own grandmother,” Steve butts in with a ribald laugh.

Gibbs gives Hurrell a thoughtful glance. He's surprised the man hasn't asked him about his wife. Jan Hurrell insisted her husband was devoted to her, so it's only natural that he'd want whatever news he could get of home. Maybe Hurrell is biding his time, waiting to get Gibbs alone.

Gibbs glances down at his body as he soaps himself. He's always been lean but now there's no spare flesh on him. His muscles are tautly defined and much bigger and bulkier than they used to be, partly because of the drugs and partly because of the relentless daily exercise regime.

"You're such a winner, Wolfman," Steve says, daring to make conversation with him, which is unusual. Hurrell has broken the ice; usually the other fighters are too scared of him to initiate conversation – and he hasn't exactly encouraged them. "What's the secret? I've lost more times than I've won; been in about eight different stables."

"Are they all like this one?" Gibbs asks.

"Pretty much." Steve shrugs. "Some are worse. One of them had a Jacuzzi! I liked that one. I heard that in one of the stables, if you win your fight they give you a woman for the night," Steve adds, soaping his cock obscenely. "I always wanted to end up in that stable!"

"Myth." Gibbs shrugs. "They wouldn't risk it. Any woman they brought in might talk to the cops, and they've got this whole operation nailed down tight."

"Damn it." Steve looks disappointed. "What is it with the whole gay thing anyway?" he asks furtively. "I mean...in the ring...what they make us do at the end of each fight?"

"It's not about sex; it's about domination and humiliation," Hurrell says quietly, and Gibbs gets a sense of the man as intelligent and thoughtful, just as his wife said. "I've been thinking about this, and I think maybe it started out as a side effect of the drugs. They made the fighters horny, so this got to be part of the whole performance – a sort of literal climax for the audience. And it gives the fighters more incentive to put up a good fight, knowing there's a price for losing."

"You think it started out as just a fight club type deal?" Steve asks. "You know, like the movie?"

Gibbs gazes blankly into the distance, his stomach clenching as he remembers Tony telling him about that movie once.

Tony.

What the hell is Tony doing right now? Is he out there, looking for him, or has he given up on him and forgotten all about him? Is he even now working some other case, standing at a crime scene, handing out orders and head-slaps? No. He has to clamp down on that dark thought before it runs away with him. He doesn't believe that. Tony is either working his ass off to find him, or he's dead. There are no other options.

Tony wouldn't forget about him.

Would he?

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Tony opens the fridge door and fishes out the remains of a pizza. He tears off a slice and bites away a big chunk, and the cold, congealed cheese sticks to the back of his throat as he swallows. He grimaces – it's some weird combo of olives and anchovies – not exactly his favourite choice of toppings, but hey, it's pizza, and he's starving. He devours the slice, then takes the box containing the rest of the pizza and a cold beer out of the fridge and goes over to the sofa to sit and wait.

It's nearly 11 p.m. when he hears a key turning in the front door. There's a slamming sound as the door is shut, and a few seconds later a man walks into the living room. He turns on the light, humming softly to himself, and then he sees Tony sitting on his sofa and draws his gun quickly.

"Hey, it's only me!" Tony puts up his hands.

"DiNozzo? What the hell are you doing here?" Tony hates the way Fornell always pronounces it 'DiNotzo'. It might be the correct Italian pronunciation, but it's not one they use in his family, and Fornell knows that. Tony is sure he only does it to piss him off.

"What? A guy can't visit the old friend of a friend?" Tony asks with a raised eyebrow.

"Visitors knock on the door and wait to be invited in. They don't let themselves in and steal all my pizza and beer," Fornell grumbles, eyeing the empty pizza box and beer bottle on the coffee table.

"I was hungry. And bored."

"You couldn't have called and arranged to come over some time I was home?"

"I didn't want anyone to know I was here. And trust me, you don't want anyone knowing I'm here, either."

Fornell's expression changes, and he takes off his jacket and sits down cautiously in the armchair opposite Tony.

"What's going on, DiNozzo?"

"Gibbs is missing," Tony says bluntly.

"I thought the bastard had been quiet. How long?"

"Five months."

"Five months?" Fornell gets to his feet. "And you're only just telling me now?"

"I tried before, but you were unavailable."

Fornell runs a hand through his straggly hair. "I was working an undercover case; been out of circulation for the past eight months. Only wrapped it up this week. Haven't even damn well had a chance to get a trim."

"I can see that. It's a really bad look on you." Tony makes a face.

Fornell ignores him. "Why are you here, DiNozzo? Does NCIS need the FBI's help on this one?"

"No." Tony shakes his head curtly. "Tony DiNozzo needs Tobias Fornell's help. The FBI won't help, and I'm on leave from NCIS."

"The FBI..."

"I already asked. I got stonewalled, just like everywhere I go. Even NCIS. Vance shut me down earlier today."

"Vance shut you down when you're looking for Gibbs? The son of a bitch!"

Fornell goes into the kitchen, and Tony can hear him opening the fridge door. Then he returns to the living room with a beer in his hand.

"Tell me everything," he says, sitting down.

Tony gets Gibbs's case file out of his bag and puts it down in front of Fornell.

"He just disappeared – no sign of a struggle in his house...although...there was no bourbon in the place, and I've never known Gibbs not to have a bottle of bourbon in the basement."

"You think they kidnapped Gibbs \*and\* his bourbon?" Fornell raises an amused eyebrow.

"No. I think they drugged his bourbon and then took it when they took him, to hide the evidence," Tony says curtly. "He was investigating the disappearance of a Marine lieutenant called Sam Hurrell. Since then, I've found a number of men who went missing in the exact same way – some military, some not. A few weeks ago, we got a lead and went to this place."

Tony opens up the file and removes a set of photographs. He points to a hollowed out pit in the ground, covered in sawdust.

"We found blood there. Did a DNA test and found it belonged to a missing army corporal called Peter Hendricks."

"And since then?"

Tony sits back with a sigh and takes another sip of his beer. "Since then nothing. The land where we found the pit belongs to a property company waiting for permission to build. They said they didn't have a clue about the existence of the pit. I asked around, but I keep coming up blank."

"Well you would," Fornell says slowly.



Tony's head jerks up. "What makes you say that? What do you know, Fornell?"

"Nothing much. Just...a couple of years ago there were these rumours... DiNozzo, have you ever been to a dog fight?"

"Busted a few when I was a cop," Tony replies. "Why? What the hell have dog fights got to do with this?"

"Think dog fights – but with men instead," Fornell tells him quietly. Tony stares at him, trying to make sense of that. "I didn't even believe them at the time," Fornell continues, "but there were these rumours of illegal prize fights – no holds barred, that kind of thing. I heard it was highly organized and very lucrative."

"So why the hell isn't the FBI all over this?" Tony demands angrily.

Fornell shakes his head. "Because, from what I heard, the cartel running the fights is made up of some of the wealthiest men on the planet. There is...political pressure...from high up. Threats that investment will be withdrawn and careers destroyed if certain investigations aren't dropped."

"Horse-racing and gambling aren't enough for these rich bastards then?" Tony asks sarcastically. "They want the thrill of bare knuckle fighting too?"

Fornell shrugs. "It's kind of the rich man's version of a dog fight. A lot of money changes hands at these fights – and there's some kind of on-going contest, leading to one big fight at the end of the season – some kind of winner takes it all deal."

"Christ, there's a season for it?"

"Yeah – spring through until late fall, while the weather holds good."

"Damn it, Fornell, you're sitting there just telling me about this? You never did anything about it?" Tony growls.

Fornell leans forward. "I didn't know they were kidnapping men to do the fighting. I thought the fighters chose to do it – that they got paid. And I was warned off, like everyone else."

Tony stares at him, dumbfounded. "Five months? Gibbs has been fighting in these pits for the past five months?"

"I don't know. I'm just saying...it sounds like the thing I heard about a couple of years ago."

"Fuck." Tony sits back in the couch, feeling winded.

"Yeah." Fornell stares at him for a moment. "So what's the plan, DiNozzo?"

"What plan?"

"Oh, you didn't come here without a plan. I take it Vance has warned you off, so now you're exploring other avenues."

“Yeah, I am. That’s where you come in. And McGee. But mostly you.” Tony reaches into his pocket and then hands Fornell a cell phone.

“You’re going to do something stupid, aren’t you?” Fornell sighs.

Tony grins. “Probably. See, we need to be a hydra.”

“A what?” Fornell looks at him as if he’s gone insane.

Tony laughs. “Did you never watch those great movies as a kid? Man, I loved ‘*Jason and the Argonauts*’. Ray Harryhausen did these fantastic special effects – okay, so compared to today’s CGI it’s primitive – but he was a genius with what he did at the time...”

Fornell clears his throat, and Tony winces and delivers a slap to the back of his own head. “Thank you, Boss,” he mutters, knowing Gibbs would have given him the slap in person if he’d been here.

“A hydra is a monster – if you cut off one head it just grows two more. Gibbs was the head of this investigation. He was asking too many awkward questions, so they got rid of him the best way they know how – and if what you’re saying is true then they got themselves a new fighter into the bargain.”

“And you’re the second head,” Fornell says. “I have a feeling I won’t like where this is going.”

“Yup, I’m the second head,” Tony confirms. “No point in them cutting me off because I wasn’t a threat – until Vance shut me down, and I decided to investigate alone. Now I’m vulnerable – there’s no telling what I might do now I’m off the grid and outside their control, and if I keep on pushing away at this, then I figure they’ll come for me too.”

“And I’m guessing I’m the third head. This is your plan? We all get kidnapped, one by one, until there’s nobody left? Your plan sucks, DiNozzo!” Fornell glares at him.

“Keep your hair on!” Tony looks at Fornell’s haystack mess of a hairstyle and grins. “That’s not the plan. Well, it’s not the whole plan.”

“You can forget about wearing any kind of transmitter under the skin,” Fornell tells him with a snort. “I can tell you straight away, these guys will sweep you for bugs the minute they’ve got you.”

“Well duh.” Tony rolls his eyes. “That’s not the plan, either. Not that it’s a great plan...just it’s all I’ve got. I need you to be my backup, Fornell. I need to know that if McGee calls, you will come roaring in with twenty trucks full of FBI agents. I need to know that I can trust you to do that; day or night, no matter what else you’ve got going on, you have to swear you’ll do that for me – for Gibbs.”

Fornell shakes his head. “Gibbs is one of my closest friends. Don’t tell him I said that,” he adds quickly. “Of course you can damn well count on me, DiNozzo! Christ, man, do you think I’d turn my back on Gibbs if he’s really been kidnapped by these people?”

“No. I wouldn’t be here if I thought that.”

Fornell gives a slow nod. There’s silence for a moment, and then Fornell leans forward. “How do you know he’s even still alive?”

Tony feels his gut clench. “I know,” he says firmly. Fornell raises a quizzical eyebrow. “I would know if he was dead. Gibbs might be a bastard, but he’s my damn bastard. So I know he’s still alive, Fornell. I just know.”

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After showering, they’re escorted at gunpoint into the dining room for breakfast. The food is healthy – wholegrain bread, low-fat milk, cereal, fruit, eggs – it’s all deliberately calculated to keep them in the best physical condition possible. Not for their own sake, but so they’re the best fighting machines they can be.

There’s a kind of irony in how healthy the food is in juxtaposition to the injuries they all bear and the drugs they are made to take on a daily basis. Looking around the table, Gibbs can see black eyes, missing teeth, bruises, scratches and even some sutured wounds. He’s got off relatively lightly himself. He always does; he knows that the longer a fight lasts, the more injuries he’ll sustain and the harder it will be for him to recover. He has to take his opponents down quickly and ruthlessly; it’s what’s kept him alive all this time.

The choice of food irritates him. He longs for coffee, but that’s never been on the menu. There’s only fruit juice. He wants to taste pancakes and chocolate sauce and cookies – anything but the dour, worthy food that’s placed in front of him. And it’s not even as if he wants to taste them for their own sake – that ornery part of himself that has always hated being constricted and told what to do by people he doesn’t respect wants to taste them precisely because they are being denied.

He squashes down the anger, as he has to do a thousand times a day, and eats the food. He’s seen the results of a hunger strike, and it wasn’t pretty. Watching a man being held down and force-fed through a tube is enough to turn anyone’s stomach.

After breakfast, Tanner examines them and determines what they’re capable of in their training regime for the day.

Gibbs is cleared for his usual heavy workout. He’s aware of the other fighters watching him as he enters the gym and heads for the weights. He tries to keep himself separate from them. The more they know about him, the more they’ll see his weaknesses. He has to stay in control of himself at all times, so he doesn’t give too much away.

It’s hard to keep up that level of control, to never let them see that he has a weak knee and his eyesight isn’t as good as it used to be. Today, these fighters are in Scott’s stable – but next Fight Night they could lose and go to another stable, and the week after that he could be facing them in the pit. They are all potential opponents.

Steve jogs over to him, limping slightly on his injured ankle. “Hey, Wolfman!” The way he calls him by his fight name irritates Gibbs, just like the choice of food at breakfast irritated him, and the constant presence of the guards irritates him. He takes those small irritations and

nurses them, so he can use them during the next Fight Night to give his anger edge and improve his performance.

“I was thinking; that advice you gave me before I went into the pit last night, you know, about keeping focused – well that really helped. So I was wondering if you could coach me. I know I’m scrappy – I’m not a good fighter like you – but I could learn. You could teach me.”

Steve puts up his fists and does a little dance, and Gibbs has a moment of déjà vu so strong it almost overwhelms him. He remembers Tony dancing around in front of him in the boxing ring in the NCIS gym a few years back, and how he took him down. He remembers the look of surprise on Tony’s face as he landed on his back, and the feeling of pride he’d taken in training his second in command. He enjoyed training Tony the way he always enjoyed training his men in the Marines, making them into strong soldiers to give them a fighting chance on the battlefield. Isn’t this exactly the same thing?

“No,” he snaps, glaring at Steve. He isn’t doing that again. He isn’t going to open himself up to how it feels to train these young men and then watch them fight in the pit. He doesn’t want to watch them lose and suffer the indignity of the rape that inevitably follows – or worse. He doesn’t want any of that to be his fault for not teaching them well enough and not making them strong enough. “Do your own damn training. I’m not here to nursemaid you.”

He sees the flash of hurt in Steve’s eyes but ignores it. Maybe the kid thought their conversation in the showers this morning and their brief rapport in the holding pen last night made them friends, but Gibbs doesn’t make friends that easily. He can count his real friends on the fingers of one hand, and none of them are in this building.

“I’ll help you,” Hurrell says quietly to Steve. “Go get into the ring. I’ll just go tape my hands, and then I’ll come show you some moves I learned in the Marines.”

Gibbs turns away and goes over to the weight stack to begin his prescribed workout, and Sam Hurrell follows him.

“Why did you talk to the kid like that?” Hurrell asks softly as Gibbs sits down and begins lifting. “You were in the Corps once, just like me, weren’t you, Gibbs? I know you were. I can tell. I can always tell another Marine when I see one.”

Gibbs raises an eyebrow but makes no reply.

“What I mean is ‘Semper fi’, Gibbs. We’re all in this together. We have to help each other.”

Gibbs snorts. “No, we’re all in this alone, Hurrell.”

“Are you scared you’ll teach him too well and if you ever have to face him in the pit he might beat you?” Hurrell pushes, his nostrils flaring angrily.

Gibbs drops his weights with a loud crash and turns to glare at the lieutenant.

“No...I’m more worried that if I ever meet him in the pit again I might have started to care about him too much and not be able to do what I have to damn well do,” Gibbs hisses. “Same for all of you.”

“You think that’s keeping us safe – and you too – but it’s not. It’s just another way they’re dehumanizing us,” Hurrell tells him in a low, angry voice. “They want us to forget our humanity, Gibbs. They want to turn us into these efficient fighting machines. The rapes are part of that – a way of making us ashamed of ourselves, a way to turn us from ourselves. We have to be better than them. We have to remember who we are, who we really are inside. We can’t let them strip that away from us.”

“Who **you** are,” Gibbs snaps. “That’s who you are, Hurrell. You need to justify everything in your own head, to somehow make it okay. You have this little system of checks and balances, don’t you? It’s okay to fuck this guy today as long as I help him tomorrow. It’s okay to beat this guy to a pulp if I teach that guy a few moves. It’s a constant stream of justifications and excuses and if that’s what gets you through, then fine. But don’t kid yourself that it’s nobler, or more human, or just plain better than my way of handling it.”

He stalks over to the treadmill, feeling angrier than he has all morning. The minor irritations were bad enough, but Hurrell just pressed all his buttons, and he’s not even sure why.

If only he could think straight. If only the damn drugs didn’t make him feel so angry and horny the whole time, and if only he could have some goddamn coffee!

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There’s a giant bowl of popcorn, two big pizzas, and a case of beer on his coffee table. It could almost be movie night with a group of friends, but it isn’t. More like the last supper, Tony thinks as he takes his seat on the couch between Abby and McGee. Ducky is sitting opposite, on the armchair, bow tie slightly askew, an anxious frown on his face. Jimmy is sitting on the floor at Ducky’s feet, and Ziva is perched on the edge of his armchair.

Tony throws the bulging case file onto the table and extracts the latest updates from it, which he passes around. He’s already emailed them the information he received from Fornell a few nights ago.

“I took these photos yesterday. I couldn’t get access – I had no warrant and it was private land, heavily guarded by armed men.”

He gestures to the pictures of a large metal structure, as big as an aircraft hangar.

“It remained locked nearly all day – I watched,” he explains. “But at one point they opened it up to let in a truck of what might have been food and other supplies. The truck was unmarked so there’s no way of telling for sure.”

“And you think this is where they keep the fighters?” Ziva asks, studying the photograph.

“I think it’s one possible stable of fighters. There are clearly many, at many different locations.” Tony shrugs. “No telling where they’re holding Gibbs.”

“Why don’t we just go out there and storm the place?” Abby demands.

“No warrant for a start – and no judge apparently willing to sign off on one – and they’re armed, Abby. That’d just end in a gunfight that I’m not sure we could win. Also…” Tony

sighs. “They saw me snooping around and chased me off, and when I went back this morning...” He puts another photo down on the table. “Gone. Not a trace of them. That structure is clearly portable.”

“These people are slippery like...like...slippery things!” Ziva exclaims, making frustrated gestures with her hands.

“I agree. Which is why we have to be just as slippery, Ziva,” Tony tells her. “So, here’s the plan.” He leans forward and begins explaining it to them, watching their faces become progressively more troubled with every word he says.

“I don’t like this, Tony,” Abby says when he’s finished.

“It’s not a great plan, Tony,” McGee agrees, his pale face more anxious than usual.

“Look, I’m not exactly thrilled about it, either, but we’ve spent the past five months drawing blanks, and I have no expectation that’s going to change,” Tony says firmly. “We’re running out of options, guys.”

“But this...this is so reckless, Tony,” Jimmy says, shaking his head.

“Your entire plan does rather rest on a cell phone, Anthony,” Ducky murmurs. “And on your own ingenuity of course. Not that I’m impugning that; I think we all agree that you have the best improvisational skills on the team. But still, I fear it leaves much to chance.”

“And to Tim,” Tony says, flashing McGee a quick smile. McGee doesn’t return it. “Look, like I said, it’s not great, but it’s all I’ve got. If anyone else has got anything better then I’m happy to hear it.”

There is silence. The entire team is gazing at him with doubtful looks on their faces, and Tony realizes just how scared they are right now.

“Hey! You’re forgetting one important part of the plan!” he tells them.

“We are?” Jimmy asks, looking confused.

“Yes – in fact you’re forgetting the most important part of the plan.” Tony pauses for dramatic effect and milks it for so long that in the end Abby elbows him in the ribs to make him get on with it. He grins. “It’s Gibbs, people! Gibbs is the most important part of the plan! He’s my secret weapon. I mean, c’mon, this is Leroy Jethro himself we’re talking about! If anyone can outwit these bastards, it’s him!”

“I don’t know, Tony,” McGee says, manfully ignoring Abby’s glare at him for doubting Gibbs’s superhero status. “Uh...it’s just...Gibbs has been missing for five months. You’d think if he could have gotten out of there then he would have done it by now.”

He doesn’t say what Tony knows they’re all thinking, what Fornell was thinking too, and what Tony refuses to acknowledge.

“Gibbs is NOT dead,” Abby says helpfully, saving him from having to say it. Of them all, it’s the two of them who are most convinced of that fact. “We would know if he was dead, wouldn’t we, Tony?”

“Yes,” Tony replies in such a firm and final voice that nobody argues again.

“I think it is a viable plan,” Ziva says unexpectedly. The others all look at her, and she shrugs and flicks her long dark hair impatiently. “Tony is right – we have run out of other options and it is time for a bold move. This is certainly that. It will move things along, change things, if nothing else. It is simply what we must do.”

“I agree. Thank you, Ziva.” Tony flashes her a smile. “So, it’s settled.”

They don’t look too happy about it, but then he didn’t expect them to be. He goes through the plan with them again, talking them through some of the details he’s uncovered over the past few days since he took his leave from NCIS.

Then he gets up and goes into the kitchen to get more beer, leaving them to talk about it amongst themselves. When he turns around he finds Ducky standing right behind him.

“You do realize the possible cost of this, don’t you, Anthony?” Ducky asks, gazing at him quizzically.

“C’mon, Ducky – you know I have to do this!”

“Yes, I do.” Ducky’s eyes are serious and concerned behind his spectacles. “I just wanted to be sure you know precisely what it is you are risking.”

“My life?” Tony raises an eyebrow. “Don’t we all risk that, every day on the job?”

“Yes, we do, but I fear in this instance you might be risking something a good deal more, in a way,” Ducky says quietly.

“I know I’ll probably have to fight...”

“And risk serious injury. This won’t be anything like the brawls you might have encountered in your job, my dear boy. I once witnessed this kind of pugilism as a young man on a trip to the Gorbals area of Glasgow, and it’s brutal. I know you have faith in your own prowess, and with good reason, but do not be under any false illusions about what you’ll face if your plan works. You could end up maimed for life, or brain damaged, if you are not killed.”

“Gibbs has been doing this for five months, Ducky. He’s had to handle it – why the hell shouldn’t I?”

He knows the answer. He can see it in Ducky’s eyes. Because Gibbs is Gibbs; he’s larger than life, invincible, and Tony has never yet seen him lose a fight.

“Hero-worship is all very well, my boy,” Ducky says quietly, “and maybe in this case even well justified. But at the end of the day Gibbs is still just a man, like the rest of us, and he possesses the same frailties that we do too.”

“Gibbs is a man?” Tony feigns shock. “You’re kidding me right, Duck? I always thought he was a god!”

They stare at each other for a moment, and Tony begins to regret his facetious comment as Ducky’s searching look penetrates all his defences. Tony looks down, unsettled, and Ducky touches his arm gently.

“I’m sorry. I didn’t realize,” Ducky says, in barely more than a whisper. “And I should have, of course, long before now.”

Tony keeps his gaze fixed on the floor. First Jan, and now Ducky; when did he become so damn transparent? Or maybe it’s this situation making him that way. He promised himself that he wasn’t going to hide anymore; he’s not even sure it’s possible anyway. Jan was right – losing someone you’ve loved so steadfastly for so long hurts – and it’s far easier to hide love than pain.

He jerks his head up to look at Ducky defiantly...only to find a sadly benign expression in the other man’s eyes that completely takes the wind out of his sails.

“So you can see why it has to be this way?” Tony says seriously, dropping all trace of his usual deflecting mask.

“Yes. We are all fools where love is concerned.” Ducky gives a little smile and pats his arm. “But you...all these years to love where you saw no hope of it being returned, and now, to make what might be the ultimate sacrifice for a man who has shown no sign...”

“I know,” Tony says abruptly. “It doesn’t matter. I couldn’t live with myself if I didn’t do this. I’m not doing it to win his love, or any shit like that. I won’t lay this on him, or make him feel guilty, even if we do make it out of this alive. It just is what it is.” He shrugs.

“Yes. It is.” Ducky surprises him by putting his hands on either side of Tony’s face and drawing his head down. Then he bestows a gentle kiss on Tony’s forehead. “You’re a brave man, Anthony DiNozzo.”

Tony doesn’t feel brave. He feels stupid and full of doubts, the way he’s always been, his entire life. But he does know there is no other choice. If he loved Gibbs less then maybe he could choose a different path, but he won’t lie to himself about that, the way he’s lied to everyone else all these years. He loves the man, and he’ll throw himself straight into this lion’s den if it’s the only way to save him.

Ducky releases Tony and then he takes a couple of the bottles of beer from Tony’s hands and carries them out to the living room, talking aimlessly as he goes, giving away nothing of the conversation they just had.

Tony follows him. He hands out the beer, and then he beckons McGee over to one side and gives him the file.

“You’ll need this. Fornell has another copy with everything I know in it.”

“Don’t do this, Tony,” McGee says, and Tony can see just how frightened he is.



“I have to, Tim.” He gives what he hopes is a reassuring smile.

“At least let us follow you when they come for you. We can find out who they are and...”

“No.” Tony shakes his head firmly. “For a start, I think they’re too good to allow themselves to be followed judging by how smooth Hurrell’s and Gibbs’s abductions were – and I can’t risk you and Ziva getting hurt in the process because I need you both out here. But also, we’ve seen how quickly they can move their operations. If they think you’re onto them, they’ll shut things down before we get anywhere near Gibbs, and then we’ll never find him.”

“You don’t know you’ll get anywhere near Gibbs as it is,” McGee points out.

“But I have to try. I’m viewing this as being deep undercover, Tim. I’m not going to make a move to get out of there until I find Gibbs.”

“You’re really serious about this, aren’t you?” McGee has a look of respect in his eyes. “I mean, I know you’ve done brave things before, Tony, but this...”

“Has to be done.” Tony pats his arm firmly. “Now look, you and Fornell are the next two heads on the hydra.”

“On the what?”

“Never mind. Just...if this doesn’t work, if you don’t hear from me within the agreed timescale, or if you or any of the rest of the team is threatened, then you go to the press.”

“The press?”

“Yeah. If these guys have taken out both me and Gibbs, then there’s no point risking the rest of you in the same way. You’ll find it hard to get the press on board – for the same reason that investigating this case has been so damn hard. There are too many backhanders involved and too much corruption at the highest level. Talking of which...” He takes a much slimmer file out of his jacket and hands it to McGee. “This is important. I did some digging on SecNav...”

“You did WHAT?” McGee asks, a horrified look on his face.

Tony puts a finger under his chin and pushes his jaw shut. “Come on, Tim. Think! Vance shut me down and his orders clearly came from higher up. These guys pretty much own the planet, Tim. They have enough money to buy anyone – and SecNav clearly has a secret they’ve uncovered that he doesn’t want to get out.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because everyone has secrets, Tim.” Tony grins.

“Do you?” McGee asks, a challenge in his eyes.

Tony laughs. “Ooh boy, yes! Question is – how much are you prepared to corrupt yourself to protect your secret? In my case...I’m not. If my secret comes out, then I’ll handle it and be

damned with the consequences. I have a feeling that SecNav's secret is much bigger and more damaging than mine though." Tony gestures to the file he's stuffed into McGee's hands. "I haven't figured it all out, but there's something there – something to do with money and defence contracts – that's my gut feeling. I want you to continue digging – discreetly. Do not put yourself in danger. Do not ask questions in the wrong places. Just do that computer geek thing you do so well. Do your digging electronically."

"I will, Tony." McGee folds the slim file and tucks it in his jacket pocket. "Look, Tony, in case I don't have the chance..."

"Don't say it, Tim." Tony slaps McGee's arm cheerfully. "I'll be back. Just make sure that gizmo you created works."

"It will. It does."

"Good. I'll be relying on it."

Tony goes and sits back down on the couch. He puts his arm around Abby and draws her close, knowing that she's as afraid as he is right now, and all they can do is comfort each other.

She snuggles in close, and he kisses her hair, wondering when he'll see her again. It might not be for some time. He refuses to believe it's never. He can't go into this with that kind of negative attitude. He has to be strong for the rest of them – and for Gibbs.

He's spent the past few days asking all the right questions in all the right places. He's irritated the exact same people Gibbs irritated. And he's off the grid. He doesn't have the protection of NCIS. He's a loose cannon with no backup, no support, and no friends in high places – or at least that's what they think.

So very soon they will be coming for him, to silence him the same way they silenced Gibbs.

But unlike Gibbs, he'll be ready for them. And if he gets cut down then he's got two others to put in his place – Fornell and McGee.

"Like a many-headed hydra," he mutters to himself.

Abby glances up at him, a questioning look in her eyes, but he just smiles one of his big, bright smiles to try and reassure her.

It won't be long now. He's sure about that.

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Scott turns up at the stable the day before the next fight. Gibbs is called out of training and escorted into the dining room at gunpoint by one of the guards. He sees Hurrell, Steve, and a couple of the other fighters at one set of tables, on one of their routine breaks, and he can feel Hurrell's eyes on him as he's escorted over to where Scott is sitting. He wishes Hurrell would stop looking at him like that, as if he wants something from him or is expecting something of him.

Scott gives that big, amiable smile of his and waves his hand at the bench across the table from him. The guard begins to push Gibbs into the seat, and Gibbs turns, a growl on his lips. The guard draws back slightly, and Scott laughs.

“It’s good to see you’re in a fighting mood, Leroy,” he says. He’s always called him Leroy; Gibbs has never told him his preference is to be called by his second name. He doesn’t want that degree of intimacy with this bastard.

Gibbs takes his seat on the bench opposite Scott as if by his own choice, which it clearly isn’t.

Scott smiles at him benignly. He reaches into his pocket and draws out a whisky flask.

“I believe I promised you this!” he says, twisting off the lid. He gestures with his hand and one of the guards brings over a couple of plastic cups and puts them down on the table. There are no glasses in this place, and the knives and forks are plastic too – there is nothing that could be used as a weapon.

Scott pours a small amount of the bourbon into each of the cups and then hands one to Gibbs.

Gibbs raises it to his face and takes a cautious sniff. It’s good stuff – Gibbs can tell that just by smelling it – and it’s been so long since he last tasted bourbon. He wants to throw the amber liquid in Scott’s smug face, but he craves the liquor too much. He takes a sip, feeling like he’s supping with the devil, and Scott grins at him, clearly delighted by this small victory.

“See – you and me can be friends, Leroy,” he says.

Gibbs says nothing. He just concentrates on the way the fiery liquid feels on his tongue and how good it feels warming his body as it goes down.

“We should be friends. Our partnership has been very beneficial to me,” Scott tells him.

Partnership? Gibbs raises an eyebrow at that, but still he says nothing. He takes another sip, running it around his mouth, savouring it. It’s a taste of normality, a reminder of what seems like a different lifetime, and in that sense it hurts, but he can’t stop wanting to taste it all the same.

“See, you’ve brought me a certain amount of kudos, my friend,” Scott continues. “I’ll be honest with you, I only bought you because you were cheap. I wasn’t able to compete with the big boys in this game, but I wanted to be part of it all the same. And you...you were this washed up old wolf of a man. Nobody thought you’d turn into the great Wolfman!” He laughs out loud at his play on words.

Gibbs looks back at him without moving a muscle, still relishing the warm tang of the bourbon on his tongue. It’s the smoothest, most expensive bourbon he’s ever tasted.

“Good huh?” Scott takes a sip from his own cup. “Only the finest for my best fighter, Leroy!”

Gibbs takes another sip, still ignoring him.

Scott leans forward. "I've had offers to buy you," he says. Gibbs raises an unimpressed eyebrow. "Big offers too, but I turned them all down. I don't want the money – I want the triumph of owning the best fighter in the pit!" Scott crows. Then his smile fades. "Of course, it's risky...if you lose a fight, then I lose you. But you won't lose, will you, Leroy? You want to win too much."

Scott sits back, looking pleased with himself. "I recognize that in you, Leroy. I can see it, burning inside you, like a hunger. I find you intriguing, my friend, so I had one of my people do some digging on you."

Gibbs can feel the growl rising in his throat and it's out before he can stop it.

Scott laughs. "Oh, I've made you angry now. You're such a private person, and you hate anyone knowing you, really knowing you, don't you, Leroy?"

Gibbs bites back another growl and downs the rest of his drink in one gulp.

"But I know you very well," Scott says, a twisted little smile on his fat face. "I know about your lovely wife Shannon, and your beautiful daughter, Kelly, and how they were murdered."

Gibbs crushes the plastic cup in his hand with vicious force, squashing it into oblivion. Scott glances down at his tightly clenched fist, nodding to himself.

"You killed the bastard drug dealer who murdered your family, didn't you?" Scott says silkily. "That's what you think about when you're in the pit, isn't it, Leroy? You're an angry man, and I think that anger is the source of your strength."

Gibbs throws the plastic cup onto the floor and then speaks for the first time since he was brought in here, forcing himself to keep his voice steady.

"You think you know me, but you don't. You can't know me from reading a dossier, Scott."

"That's where you're wrong." Scott has that smug look on his face again. "I read your school reports. You were always getting into fights even when you were a kid. Your mom was killed by a drunk driver when you were eight, and you were angry about that. You wanted vengeance, and you hit out at everyone around you."

Gibbs finds his hands curling into fists and longs to smash them into Scott's smirking, self-satisfied face.

"Your folks were separated, and you'd been living with your mom when she died. So you had to go live with your dad, and you were angry about that too, because you blamed him for not making it work with your mom, who you adored. You've been angry your entire life, Leroy. It's what you are. It defines you."

Scott has a point. Maybe that's why his words are making Gibbs so angry, or maybe it's the drugs; Gibbs isn't sure he can tell the difference these days.

"So?"

“Oh, it’s not a bad thing!” Scott laughs. “It’s a good thing. A very good thing. You’re mad right now, Leroy. You’re mad at me for keeping you here and making you fight because you don’t like not being in control of your own destiny. But, see, here’s the thing…”

Scott leans forward again and beckons Gibbs forward too. Gibbs stays sitting stiffly in his seat. Behind him, the guard shoves the gun into the back of his neck and forces him forward, so that his nose is almost touching Scott’s.

“See, I think there’s a part of you that likes what I make you do every Fight Night, out there in the pit,” Scott says silkily into his ear. “I think it gives you a chance to really enjoy all that anger inside you. You’ve always had to rein it in and control it before, but I give you permission to enjoy it.”

Scott sits back, a triumphant gleam in his eyes. “I make it possible for you to become that anger, to feel it running through your veins, as fiery as the bourbon inside you right now. It warms you, Leroy. You’re hungry – hungry like the wolf you were named for. When you walk into that pit we all see that, and that’s why you’ve gained such a reputation on the circuit. And you will always be that way. It’s who you are. So you should be thanking me really.”

Gibbs raises a questioning eyebrow, and Scott shrugs.

“Because I’m giving you the chance to be who you are – who you really are inside, Leroy.”

“You’re a sick bastard, Scott,” Gibbs replies stonily, but there is no passion in his words. Maybe Scott has a point. Maybe he’s right.

“And so, my friend, are you.” Scott beams. He raises his cup in a mock toast and downs the contents in one go. Then he glances around the room, his gaze lingering on Hurrell and Steve.

“McGuire tells me you never fuck any of the other fighters,” he says abruptly.

Gibbs frowns. “So what?”

“You should.” Scott shrugs. “You’re the alpha around here, Leroy, and it’s a way of reminding them of that and keeping them in line. They should know you have the right to fuck them, whenever you want. That’s what you get for being a winner.”

“I don’t want to fuck any of them.” Gibbs knows what the man is doing. He’s trying to make him complicit in this world, to make him believe he’s part of it, that he accepts its warped morality, and that he even enjoys it.

“Yeah, you do. I know you’d probably prefer a woman, but Tanner has been feeding you enough drugs to make you want to fuck anything with a pulse.”

“Your point?”

Scott smiles. “Fuck any of them you want. Just ask for them to be put in your stall and fuck them all night long. You deserve it.”

“No thanks.”

Scott lets out a long sigh. “Stubborn bastard. Look, Leroy, you have some big fights coming up.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes – and you can win them too, but you need to stoke yourself up. I want you pumped, Leroy. I want you to feel like the big banana around here. I want you to enjoy that status so much that you never want to let it go. See, I think you can win the whole season for me.”

“And what’s in it for me? You gonna set me free if I do that, Scott?” Gibbs gives an ironic grunt.

Scott waves his hand expansively in the air. “You know I can’t do that, Leroy. You know too much about us. But I can promise this – during the off-season, I’ll let you live a life of luxury. You’ll still have to train, but it’ll be a much looser regime than this. I’ll set you up in one of the houses I own – you’ll have a pool, and you’ll be allowed out into the yard.”

Gibbs thinks, briefly, of how good it’d be to feel the sun on his skin again.

“You’ll still be under lock and key and guarded 24/7, of course,” Scott says. “But it’ll be much nicer than it is here. You win the season for me, and I’ll give you that, Leroy.”

Gibbs gazes at him impassively. He’ll win because he’s made a vow to himself that he won’t let any of the other fighters defeat and rape him; Scott’s incentives are irrelevant.

Scott stands up and grabs his hat. He’s wearing a cream-coloured suit and the hat matches it. He looks like a standard dapper businessman, and Gibbs wonders how the hell he got caught up in this obscene game in the first place.

“You’re a winner, Leroy. That’s what you are in your heart,” Scott tells him firmly. “You’re an angry man who can’t bear to lose and who refuses to bow his head to anyone. Not to me, and not to any of those other fighters in the pit. That is what will make you the greatest winner this tournament has ever seen.”

He tips his hat to Gibbs and then leaves, taking his whisky flask with him.

Gibbs gets up, and as he does so he catches Hurrell’s eye. He wonders how much of that conversation the lieutenant heard and feels an odd sense of shame. Does Hurrell think of him the same way Scott does? An angry man who can’t bear to lose?

He sees something in Hurrell’s eyes that rouses the fury always simmering inside him these days, and he turns away, growling to himself as he’s escorted back to the gym.

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It’s nearly midnight when Tony gets home the following evening, and he’s tired after another fruitless day trying to find the stable where they might be holding Gibbs. All he wants to do

is take a hot shower and sink into bed...but he knows immediately that won't be happening tonight.

His apartment is just as he left it. There is nothing suspicious about it. But Tony hasn't worked with Gibbs all these years and not developed a gut instinct, and right now that instinct is making all the hairs on the back on his neck stand on end and his spine tingle.

So it's going to be tonight. He can't pretend he isn't scared, but he's relieved too, in a way. The game of cat and mouse was becoming tiring. He's good at being annoying, and God knows he's tried his best to annoy the hell out of whoever is running this game, but he's glad that particular phase of his plan is coming to an end.

He goes into the kitchen and turns on the light. His gaze flickers briefly around the room and comes to rest on the fridge. This morning, using one of his favourite James Bond movies as inspiration, he took a single strand of his own hair, wet it, and placed it across the fridge door. Nobody would have noticed it. And now it's not there; someone has been here and opened his fridge, dislodging the hair.

He goes over to the fridge and opens the door. There are two pieces of leftover pizza from last night sitting on a plate and his guess is that's the most obvious item of food to have been drugged.

He gets out the plate and puts it on the small kitchen table. Then he gives an extravagant yawn and glances around the room. His gaze finds the tiny black dot above the door; a camera. That means they're waiting outside, watching him.

He gets out his cell phone. He could scrap the plan. He could call McGee and Ziva right now, and they could go out there and find whoever is spying on him...but that wouldn't get them close to Gibbs, and he's pretty damn sure there is nothing he could threaten these bastards with that would make them reveal whoever is behind this.

Even if they did, he knows no judge will give him a warrant to go in there and search. He's equally sure that if he did go in, with or without a warrant, Gibbs would be long gone before he got there. Gibbs would be gone the minute he arrested whoever is sitting outside his apartment right now. No, he'll have to find Gibbs the hard way, by catching an actual fight in progress. That's the only way to nail these bastards.

He texts McGee the coded word that will let him know that the plan has worked. It'll be torture for his probie to sit on his hands and wait for the next phase of the plan to kick in, but he'll do it because Tony has ordered him, and McGee won't let him down. For all their bickering, McGee has never let him down when it mattered most.

Tony sits down at the table, picks up a slice of pizza, and takes a bite. Then he glances up at the tiny camera above the door...and smiles.

~\*~

Gibbs feels restless, the way he always does the night before a fight. It's probably the middle of the day out there, but in here it's night and his windowless stall is in semi-darkness as

usual, lit only by the glow cast by the muted light in the hallway filtering through the small window on the door.

Tonight's guard, Ellis, likes listening to music during his night shifts, and that means they all have to listen to the medley of mellow, cheerful songs that blare out all night long from the radio in the hallway. Gibbs feels an almost overwhelming urge to go out there and slam his fist into the damn thing, then throw it repeatedly against the wall until it's crushed to a pulp.

He turns onto his side and stares at the wall in front of him, trying to control his growing sense of frustration. There's no point to it; he knows that from experience. He just has to find a way to shove the anger down and then bring it back out when it'll be the most use – in the pit.

There are hooks in the wall; in the beginning, before he learned there was no point to resistance, he used to cause the guards trouble all the time. They frequently chained him to the wall in his own stall, often for nights on end. He felt like a stallion they were breaking in, flanks heaving, head down, fighting them with every ounce of his will.

Does that mean he's broken now? It's been weeks since they last chained him to the wall, or tazered him, or beat him with the whips they carry tucked into their pants.

The music is almost unbearably cheerful, and it's such an incongruous counterpoint to his misery that he can't stand it. He turns back the other way on his thin mattress...and now he can hear a different sound coming from the next stall. The walls are thin – just hollow metal – and he finds himself listening to the sounds of two people having sex. Someone moans and another murmurs something in reply. Gibbs hears little whimpers of pleasure, accompanied by the slick sound of balls slapping on skin. It's not a rape; God knows, those are common enough around here, but this is clearly consensual.

"Oh shit...yeah...that's good...you're good," a voice moans, and he recognizes it as belonging to Steve.

"Fuck me harder," another voice rasps. "Please...Christ...fuck me, Steve...fuck me..."

"You got it, Sam. Hold still...gonna fuck you good..."

Gibbs gazes blankly at the wall. He isn't surprised that Steve is fucking Sam Hurrell. Nothing about this nightmare surprises him anymore. Hurrell is bigger, stronger, and a much better fighter than Steve, so there's no way Steve has overpowered him and forced him into this. They're both willing.

Gibbs almost envies them. Maybe sex would take the edge off the combined horniness and anger that he feels all the time. Maybe Scott is right, and he should take one of these men and fuck him into the mattress. It wouldn't have to be rape, judging by those ecstatic little noises Hurrell is making right now. There are probably plenty of fighters in Scott's stable who'd suck his cock or let him take them up the ass...and it's so tempting.

His cock is hard just thinking about it, but it's just one more way they're manipulating him, and he refuses to let them beat him, just as he refuses to let anyone beat him in the pit. He has to hang on to some shred of who and what he is. He has so little control over anything these



days, least of all his own body, but this, here, is one way he can get a little control back, by fighting the drugs coursing through his body, and struggling, in this small way, to be his own man.

Besides, fucking might create caring. He could have some kid's soft lips around his dick one day and be smashing his fist into his face in the pit the next. He can't do that. He doesn't know how Hurrell can do that, either. He has to wall off those parts of himself that he can't afford to acknowledge right now, those parts that are weak and scared and could bring him down. He has to stay strong.

His cock is still hard and aching, but he refuses to jerk off tonight. In a few hours he'll be fighting in the pit, and he wants to channel all that anger and sexual frustration into the men he fights...and to the fucking that comes after each victory.

He hates the little part of him that is looking forward to the fucking. He's always tried so hard not to take pleasure in it, but he can't help himself. He wants to fuck so badly it's all he can do not to grab his dick and masturbate fast and furiously to the sound of Steve fucking Sam Hurrell in the adjacent stall.

The sweat is running down his body, every muscle strained and aching with the struggle not to jerk off. He grabs the thin pillow and bites down hard, and then roars out his rage, helplessness and frustration into it, in a long, silent scream that nobody hears.

## Chapter Two - Thrown to the Wolves by Xanthe

Tony blinks and moves his head, and a jolt of pain pierces him behind the eyeballs.

“You’re awake,” a voice says, and he squints up into a bright fluorescent light, wincing as the glare makes the pain in his head worse. Whatever drugs they put in his pizza were strong enough to bring down a horse, let alone a man. His throat is so dry it aches almost as bad as his head, and his lips are parched and chapped.

He sits up, slowly, and as he moves he can hear the jangle of chains. There are cuffs on his wrists and ankles, attached to the wall. He can move his arms and legs, but not far. He also realizes that he’s naked. His balls are resting on a cool metal floor, and he shifts his hips, trying to find a more comfortable position.

“Where am I?” he asks. His vision clears a little, and he can see that he’s in a small room with walls constructed out of the same lightweight sheet metal that he took photos of a few days ago.

“In a stall in my stable.” A man swims into sight. He’s handsome, with sleek dark hair and a little goatee beard, of indeterminate Middle Eastern origin, and expensively dressed. He exudes an air of exquisite elegance, and Tony can identify half a dozen different labels in what he’s wearing: Tanino Crisci shoes, an Armani suit, and a Gucci shirt buttoned at the wrists with a pair of exquisite Longmire cufflinks. There is a Rolex *Submariner* watch on his arm and a pair of aptly named Louis Vuitton *Evasion* sunglasses obscuring his eyes.

The man crouches down beside him and hands him a bottle of water. “You must be thirsty – the drugs do that – and I’m sure you have a bad headache. Drink. You’ll feel better.”

It crosses Tony’s mind that the water might be drugged too, but he doesn’t care; his throat is so dry it’s aching, and he longs to feel the water on his parched tongue. He tips back his head and drinks the entire bottle, and the man laughs.

Tony feels better now that he’s had something to drink, and he takes in his surroundings with more attention to detail. The room he is in is completely empty except for a toilet in the corner with a basin beside it, made from the same metal as the walls. There is one solitary chair in front of him. A guard is standing by the door, dressed in plain black pants and a black shirt; there’s a whip sticking out of his belt and a gun in his hand.

The expensively dressed man sits down on the chair. “Let me introduce myself; my name is Prince Walid.”

Tony gives his brightest smile. “Good to meet you, Walid. I’m sure you already know my name.”

“Of course, and you proved to be much more persistent than we expected, Mr DiNozzo. Or maybe the word is loyal. Most people aren’t so loyal to their bosses. I very much doubt my own men are.” The man glances over to the guard by the door. “Or at least not without being paid a very considerable sum to ensure that loyalty.”

Walid has an accent, but Tony can't quite place it. He is also clearly very cultured, and Tony thinks he can hear the overtones of an expensive English education in his voice, combined with whatever his native accent is.

"We thought you would search for your boss for a while – a few months maybe – but that if we could show you how fruitless such a search to be, then you would give up. That is what most people would do."

"I guess I'm not most people," Tony replies.

"Indeed not." Walid inclines his head. "Your devotion does you credit, although it mystifies me. **You** mystify me – and I'll admit you also fascinate me. Why, Mr DiNozzo? Why didn't you give up?"

"Well, I've never been a quitter." Tony shrugs. There is no way he is letting this bastard know how he feels about Gibbs; that would be a huge tactical mistake. "Also..." he gives a little laugh. "I'm kinda stupid. If you know anything about me, you'll know that."

"Yes. I believe you really are stupid." Walid sits back in his chair, looking at Tony thoughtfully from behind his sunglasses. Tony wishes he'd take them off – he can't get a steer on what the man is thinking because he can't see into his eyes. "We did some discreet investigations, and many of those who have encountered you say that you are an idiot. I wasn't so sure...but now I've met you..." He leans forward again, a little smile on his lips. "Yes, I believe you are an idiot, Mr DiNozzo. A loyal idiot, I grant you, but an idiot all the same."

"My dad always told me I was." Tony grins again. "Maybe you know how it feels? I see you as...maybe the younger son of a large royal family?"

"Hmmm...not always an idiot then," Walid murmurs thoughtfully.

"You have a lot of money, but they just see you as their kid brother. They don't take you seriously, and they don't give you anything important to do, so you have to make your own entertainment," Tony hazards.

Walid shifts irritably. "You should not expect rescue," he barks, changing the subject, and Tony is sure he's hit a nerve there. "We took your passport, we bought you an airplane ticket, and we sent an email to your colleague, Agent McGee. It was all too much for you, you see, DiNozzo. You ran out on them."

"Did I now?" Tony gives an amused grunt. At least Walid hasn't figured out that he wanted to be captured. Then again, he's fairly sure this man sitting in front of him would never understand why anyone would risk their life to save another person, so the idea probably never crossed his mind.

"They would expect that of the idiot. You are someone who engenders low expectations, DiNozzo, as I'm sure your father told you."

Ouch. That barb hit home, as it was supposed to. Walid clearly wanted to land a hit of his own after Tony's crack about his family not letting him do anything important.

“It’s a shame it came to this though.” Walid gives a theatrical sigh. “It’s unnecessary. Your superiors at NCIS gave you orders, and you were supposed to follow them. You were supposed to give up the investigation, go back to your job, forget all about Agent Gibbs, and accept the promotion we arranged for you – regretfully, of course. But you chose not to do that.”

“He’s a hard man to forget.” Tony shrugs.

“Now, that I believe.” A knowing smile plays around Walid’s lips.

“So, if you’d just give him back, then I’ll happily be out of here and on my way,” Tony says glibly.

“Oh, he is not mine to give back, and even if he was, I wouldn’t do it. He is one of our best fighters you see, Mr DiNozzo.”

Tony feels his heart give an almost painful jolt; it’s the first indication he’s had that Gibbs is still alive, outside the certainty in his own gut.

“I had no idea he would prove to be such a winner – it has turned him into quite a favourite with the crowds on Fight Nights. If I’d known, I might have kept him for my own stable instead of selling him on. But who would have thought a man his age would be so successful at our little game?”

“I coulda told you.”

“We took him initially to stop him asking so many awkward questions – he was clearly not a man who would give up in the face of obstruction, and we thought it the best way of silencing him. We had no idea he’d become a genuine contender. Scott is a lucky man.”

“Scott?”

“The player I sold him to. He got a bargain. Now, the question is what to do with you.” Walid sits back, a musing look on his face. “I could simply kill you, but it seems a waste. It’s too late in the season for you to be contender, but I expect you would put up a decent fight in the pit. And the crowd does so love to see a newbie floored by one of our seasoned pros.” He gives a malicious smile. “It is always so enjoyable to witness a newbie’s first lost fight: the shock, the distress, the tears and the struggles when they realize what losing *\*really\** means.” Walid looks like he’s getting turned on, which makes Tony’s gut churn uneasily. “Oh, now that gives me a very pleasing idea.” Walid gives a little chuckle. “Let us talk more about Agent Gibbs. You risked your life to keep looking for him; you must think very highly of him.”

“Yeah, well, the old bastard grows on you after ten years of taking his head-slaps and putting up with his bad moods.” Tony watches Walid carefully, wondering where this is going.

“It’s more than that, or you would have given up on him a long time ago. He is your mentor, yes? Your teacher? Maybe a surrogate father, as your own father is so dismissive of you. Is that it? Hmm?”

Tony makes no reply. He knows his feelings for Gibbs are definitely not filial, but he can't deny there's something complicated about his fucked up relationship with his own father mixed up in what he feels for Gibbs, even if that's something he's never wanted to examine too closely.

"Or maybe he is simply your friend. Someone you can confide in. Maybe you go to him in times of trouble, and he helps. Yes?"

Tony thinks of the various times he's stayed over at Gibbs's place when there was some problem with his apartment, or just when he wanted the company and to be near the man. It's always Gibbs he goes to whenever a case gets to him. There was that time after Dana Hutton died, and the time after his father left town; Gibbs has always been there for him when he needs him. He might not be a very touchy-feely kind of guy, but he's always been rock solid for Tony – and Tony wants to be the same for him.

"Ah, there is no need to reply. I see it all in your eyes, Mr DiNozzo. Hmm, I think I will call you Tony. We know each other well enough now, yes?"

Walid suddenly leans forwards and removes his sunglasses with a languid flick of his fingers, and Tony finds himself looking into a pair of dark eyes that remind him vividly of a cobra. His gut registers a sudden chill; this man has a streak of cruelty that goes far beyond whatever pleasure he takes in watching kidnapped men fighting in his pits. There is something else going on here, something much darker.

"You know, I do get so very bored, Tony. Sometimes even Fight Nights don't do it for me anymore," Walid murmurs, plucking a piece of lint off his immaculately tailored pants. "I want something new...something more intense." Those cruel eyes are looking at Tony curiously, a hint of amusement in their dark depths. "And I do find the idea of crushing a man's loyalty and destroying his hero worship so very exhilarating."

"If you're talking about me and Gibbs, then I think you'll be disappointed," Tony replies, but his gut is churning again, and he's suddenly very afraid of what Walid might be planning.

Walid gives an amused bark of laughter and gets to his feet. "Do you? I rather think I won't." He turns to the guard. "We'll take him with us this evening. No drugs. I want Mr DiNozzo to experience the real Gibbs, without anything to take the edge off that very considerable thrill." He turns back to glance at Tony, a malicious gleam in his eyes. "I want him to see his hero for who he really is."

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Gibbs always wakes up with the same jittery feeling in his gut on fight day, but today it's worse than ever. He hates the sense of anticipation, and he hopes they don't have to drive too far to get to the fight; he just wants to get out there and start crushing his fist into an opponent's face.

The other fighters give him a wide berth as they go into the communal showers. He's getting into his pre-fight headspace and starting to exude the dangerous energy that has made him a winner in the pit for the past five months.

Steve slips on the wet floor and almost falls into him, and Gibbs gives a low growl. An anxious silence descends, and Steve makes his apologies and runs back to the safety of Sam Hurrell's side. Gibbs glares at him.

After breakfast, they are placed in chains and herded onto the truck. Gibbs clenches his fists as they chain him in place. He is constricted, confined and restrained. It makes him angry, and he forces the anger into a tightly controlled ball of fire in his belly, where he will need it later.

He closes his eyes as the other fighters are chained into place around him. He can already smell the sawdust and the scent of the oil they use to make their skin slippery. He can hear the sound of the crowd roaring around him and feel the heat in his own body. Soon he will have the release he needs.

Soon he will fight and have the satisfaction of destroying the man who killed his family all over again. He'll be able to punch his fist into James Scott's face and sink his teeth into Ellis for playing his damn radio all night long. He will be able to unleash all his anger at his imprisonment and print it into the flesh of a nameless, faceless opponent. And afterwards he can sate his other need too – the need to fuck and release his sexual frustration.

The truck starts to move, and he hears the man next to him turning his head and feels his warm breath ghosting over his ear.

"So, what's the plan, Agent Gibbs?" Sam Hurrell asks.

Gibbs opens his eyes. "What plan?" he growls, irritated that his pre-fight ritual has been interrupted.

"Your plan," Hurrell replies intently. "I've been watching you all week, Gibbs, but I haven't been able to get close enough to talk to you without the guards over-hearing, until now. You have a plan to end this. There's no way a man like you submits to all this humiliating shit without putting up a fight."

"I fight every damn week in the pits."

"That's not what I mean, and you know it. Look, if there's a plan I want in on it," Hurrell tells him forcefully. "You can trust me. I can fight – you know that. I put up a good fight against you in the pit last week, didn't I? You saw I could fight. So, I figure that whatever plan you have, it happens on Fight Night, yes?"

"There is no plan," Gibbs says, in a low, dull tone. "There's no fucking plan, Hurrell."

"I don't believe you. Like I said, I've been watching you all week, and I've never seen a more natural leader than you, Gibbs. If you wanted to organize these men..." he nods his head at the fighters in the back of the truck, "then you could have them eating out of your hand in seconds. I admire you for that."

He leans back against the wall of the truck, a rueful smile on his face. "See, me...I'm not a natural leader, Gibbs. I've tried hard, and I do my best – I even went to a class once to learn how to be a good leader. I made lieutenant because the Corps saw something in me, but I've

had to work at it. You don't have to work at it. It's who you are, right down to your bones; you're a natural born leader."

Gibbs closes his eyes again. He owes this man no explanations, and he sure as hell won't give him excuses. He owes Hurrell nothing.

"See, you're a legend not just at NCIS but in the Corps too," Hurrell whispers urgently into his ear. "The Agent Gibbs I heard about was a real hard-ass. He wouldn't just sit here and say there's no fucking plan. He wouldn't just sit back and be happy to let these bastards own him, without making any attempt to escape. So, who the hell are you, Gibbs? Because you're not the man I thought you were."

"And who the hell are you?" Gibbs snaps back, opening his eyes again.

Hurrell looks confused by the sudden change of tack. "What do you mean?"

"I knew your wife, Hurrell. I knew Jan. I was in your house. I patted your dogs and saw your wedding photos. Your wife made me a damn fine cup of coffee – she knows how a Marine likes to drink his coffee."

Hurrell's eyes are anguished, but Gibbs has no intention of letting him off the hook.

"I liked her. Your wife is a good woman. She's devoted to you. She knew you hadn't deserted, and she convinced me of that too. And yet you haven't come to me and asked me one damn thing about her and how she's doing."

Hurrell's hands clench into fists, and Gibbs knows that if he wasn't chained to the wall of the truck that he'd take a swing at him.

"Jan made me believe you loved her too much to ever run out on her, but last night I heard the sounds you made when Steve was fucking you," Gibbs continues relentlessly. "It's one thing to have to fuck in the pit but nobody is holding a gun to your head at night in the stalls, Hurrell. So who are you? The loving, faithful husband Jan told me about and believed in? 'Cause I'm not seeing him right now."

All the fight goes out of Hurrell's body, and that shame and guilt that Gibbs saw in his eyes the night he first met him floods back in. Gibbs almost wishes he hadn't said that. He doesn't judge Hurrell for what he does in his stall at night. Hell, he wouldn't judge anyone for the ways they find to try and survive this ordeal. That's why he's so angry with Hurrell for judging him.

There is a long, shocked silence, and Gibbs is aware, not for the first time, that his embargo on apologies can be as hard on him as it is on the people around him.

Finally, Hurrell turns to him again. "You're right. I'm sorry."

"Never apologise. It's a sign of weakness," Gibbs snaps back automatically. "Now shut up."

He needs his pre-fight preparations. He needs the silence in order to get into his headspace.

He can't even look at Hurrell as he forces himself to focus on getting ready for the night ahead. The pit is waiting for him, and he has to make sure he is in the right frame of mind to do whatever it takes to win.

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Some time later the guard returns to the room, unlocks Tony's chains, and takes him, at gunpoint, out of his stall. He's escorted down a hallway and into what looks like Ducky's autopsy suite but is clearly an infirmary. An elderly guy in a white coat with a stethoscope around his neck glances up. He's got nicotine stains in his white beard, and he stinks of liquor.

"A newbie?" he frowns. "Kinda late in the season for Prince Walid to field a newbie, ain't it?"

"He isn't a serious contender," the guard replies. "Just someone the boss wants out of the way."

"Hey, how do you know I'm not a serious contender? I can fight!" Tony tries a disarming grin, but the doctor just grunts. Tony uses the moment to take a good look around, trying to figure out the weaknesses in this setup. So far he hasn't seen any, but there has to be something. He'll know it when he sees it.

The doctor leans over to place the stethoscope on his chest, and Tony leans back, waving a hand in front of his nose as he gets a whiff of the man's stinking breath.

"You drink on duty?"

"Yeah. That's why I don't have a medical license anymore and have to work in this shithole with you fuckers."

"That's reassuring," Tony mutters.

The guard is leaning against the wall, clearly bored, and the doctor is drunk on his ass, so Tony seizes the opportunity.

"Did you ever see that movie about the doctor with the drinking problem who..." he waves his arms around enthusiastically and knocks the doctor's stethoscope to the floor on purpose. "Shit, I'm sorry..." He bends to pick it up and hangs it around the man's neck again, patting his coat down apologetically and using the distraction to slip his fingers into the doctor's pockets. He comes up empty. No cell phone. Not even a wallet. The guy has nothing on him except a screwed up handkerchief.

The doctor pushes him away irritably and turns to the guard.

"What dose does our lord and master want him on?"

"No drugs," the guard replies.



The doctor shakes his head sadly, making a 'tsking' sound with his tongue. "None?" The doctor glances at Tony. "You poor bastard. What the hell did you do to piss off Walid so badly?"

"I asked him about his childhood. That seemed to upset him. I have no idea why," Tony responds facetiously.

"Whatever the hell you said, I don't envy you in the pit. Is he fighting tonight?" The doctor looks at the guard again.

"No idea." The guard shrugs.

"Well, if you are..." the doctor turns back to Tony. "Then I pity you."

"Why? I don't need drugs to be able to fight."

The doctor laughs. "Well, maybe not, but your opponents will be hopped up on 'em all the same. That makes them stronger, faster, angrier, and hornier than you. You'll be lucky to get out of there alive."

"Hornier?" Tony raises an eyebrow. "What's the advantage in that?"

The doctor snorts through his yellow moustache and pats his arm. "Oh, you'll see, son. You'll see. Better hope for your own sake that your opponent *\*is\** horny."

Tony doesn't like the sound of that, but he doesn't have time to give it any further thought because at that moment the door opens, and a giant of a man steps into the room.

Like Tony, he's completely naked, but unlike Tony, he looks completely at ease with that fact. He inhabits his skin like it's clothing, walking confidently, his big cock swinging in front of him. There's a bite mark on his cheek and one of his earlobes is missing. He puts Tony in mind of a feral tomcat, all bulging balls, thick neck, and cocky arrogance.

A guard steps into the room behind him, but the big man doesn't look like he's being forced to go anywhere against his will; the guard looks more like a bodyguard than a jailer.

The big man glances at Tony and his face breaks into a grin, revealing a couple of missing teeth.

"New blood?" he chuckles, in a deep, throaty voice. Tony wonders just how much testosterone you have to feed someone to get a timbre of voice that low and gravelly. "He's pretty. Nice of the boss to get me a new piece of ass to celebrate my victory tonight."

Tony doesn't like the predatory way this guy is looking at him, like he's a piece of meat. He wonders if this is how women feel when a guy is hitting on them and won't take no for an answer. This guy definitely looks like he won't take no for an answer, and Tony has to force himself not to shrink back against the exam table. Now is not a good time to show any weakness.

“You haven’t won yet, Mac,” the doctor replies, but there’s a look of frank admiration on his face.

“You gonna bet against me, Doc?” Mac asks.

“Hell no! You’re the fireman. Ain’t nobody gonna bet against you!”

“Too fucking right. I’m fucking unbeatable out there.” Mac’s eyes light up. “Maybe this is a pre-fight treat for me?” he asks, leering at Tony again. “I’m tired of the ass in this place. I’ve fucked ‘em all, and they’re a bunch of fucking whiners. I want a new toy to play with.” He grabs his cock and it swells in his big fist, becoming dark and erect almost instantly.

Tony wants to back out of this room and get as far away from this bastard and his ugly erection as he can, but there’s no place to go. He doubts whether the doctor or the guard would stop Mac if the big man decided to throw him over the exam table and fuck him in front of them.

Mac moves towards him, his cock jutting out from his body, pointing straight at Tony.

“Not this one,” Tony’s guard says, stepping between them, much to Tony’s relief. “He’s not for you, Mac.”

“Sez who?”

“Boss’s orders. He wants this one kept fresh for later.”

There’s something about the way the guard says that, and the way he glances at him, that makes Tony more uneasy than all Mac’s leering.

“Well, if the newbie ain’t being given drugs, there’s nothing more I can do with him,” the doctor says. “I don’t know why you even brought him here.”

“Just following procedure.” The guard shrugs.

“Aren’t you going to listen to my heart some more? See if I’m fit enough to fight?” Tony asks.

The doctor laughs. “Oh, I don’t think it matters much if you are or not. You’re just pit fodder, nothin’ more. I ain’t gonna waste any more of my time on ya. You can put him in the truck.”

He jerks his head, and the guard grabs Tony’s arm and propels him towards the door.

“Later, pretty!” Mac calls after him. “If you win, I’ll ask for you to be put in my stall tonight, so I can fuck that sweet ass of yours!”

Tony makes a face. “If that’s the prize for winning, then I think I’ll lose thanks.”

Mac laughs. “Either way, that slick little hole of yours is gonna get fucked good and hard before dawn!”

Tony is grateful to be propelled out of the door, back into the hallway, and out of the firing line of Mac's ugly, erect penis.

He's escorted along the hallway and into a big, hangar-sized space where a truck is waiting. He's herded at gunpoint into the truck where several other naked men are already sitting, chained to the truck's walls.

"Wow, Walid's a real cheapskate. Can't even buy us some pants, huh?" Tony jokes, grinning at the other men. Nobody so much as smiles at him in return; they all look grim and anxious, and Tony can feel the tension in the air.

"Shut up and sit down," one of the men growls at him.

Tony does as he's told, and the guard comes over and chains him to the wall of the truck, just like all the others. The chains are cold and heavy on his stomach, tying him in place, and his ankles are thrust into a pair of manacles and fastened to hooks in the floor. These are heavy-duty chains; there are no weakness here and absolutely no chance of escape.

A few minutes later Mac leaps into the back of the truck.

"Hey bitches!" he announces. "Tonight's winner is here, so I guess we're good to go! Man, I'm on fire tonight." He gives a deep, crowing laugh. "You losers will all eat sawdust, but I'm gonna fight good and dirty and claim me some prime ass."

Tony notices that nobody in the truck meets Mac's eye, and he understands why. This is not a man you want noticing you. He can believe Mac's earlier boast that he's fucked all of these men. They look like they all hate him but are too scared to stand up to him.

Mac sits down, but unlike the rest of them, he isn't chained into place. Tony wonders why, but doesn't give that a lot more thought because at that moment Mac opens his legs wide to reveal his thick, semi-erect cock again. He grins at Tony and nods at his growing erection, wetting his lips with his tongue.

"If you're lucky, you'll get to suck on this monster tonight, sweetheart!"

Maybe it's all just talk, but judging by how the other men in the truck are behaving, he suspects that Mac means it. Tony is starting to understand the environment he's thrown himself so recklessly into. There are no women here, just men, and men who are being fed a cocktail of drugs. Clearly the law of the jungle reigns supreme, and if Mac is strong enough to hold him down and fuck him then nobody here will stop him – not the guards or the other fighters. Prince Walid is fostering a dog-eat-dog atmosphere on purpose, presumably because he thinks it makes better fighters. Perhaps it does.

"Got a good pair of cock-sucking lips on you, pretty boy, just made to suck dick," Mac continues, still leering at him. "I'll get you to suck it first, make it nice and wet, then ram it up your tight asshole."

"Oh, you're a regular Mac-the-mouth, aren't you?" Tony replies, rolling his eyes.

“I told you to shut the fuck up!” someone further along the line of chained men roars at Tony. Tony cranes his head to see a stocky guy glaring at him.

“Cool it, Spencer,” someone else says softly.

“No, I won’t cool it! Christ, it’s fucking Fight Night! Some of us want to get our heads in the zone, and this idiot doesn’t have a goddamn clue!”

Tony clamps down on another smartass reply. Ten years of working with Gibbs has given him an instinct for when not to open his mouth and earn a head-slap, and the same principle applies here. He can feel the tension in the truck, but he’s not sure why they are so hyped up about the upcoming fight. Haven’t they all been doing this for some time? It might not be nice to be thrown into a pit naked and made to fight but the sheer level of tension in the truck makes him realize he’s missing something. Just what doesn’t he know about these fights?

Across the truck Mac winks at him, and Tony is suddenly even more acutely aware of being completely naked, vulnerable, and on display. He wonders if that’s something you get used to, in time. Has Gibbs got used to it? He can’t imagine Gibbs tolerating this kind of treatment for one second...but if they beat him enough, then even Gibbs would have had to learn to endure it. Tony has seen the whips in the guards’ belts, and he’s sure they’re not just for show.

He doesn’t like to think of Gibbs taking beatings, but he knows there’s no way Gibbs just rolled over and showed them his belly. That’s never been Gibbs’s style.

What damage would stubborn resistance have done to him though? If they’ve beaten him into submission, can he still be the man Tony once knew?

Will he even recognize Gibbs when he sees him? After five months in this brutal environment, will Tony find him broken beyond repair?

~\*~

*They’re walking along the road, talking. He doesn’t find it easy talking with anyone except his mom, but when it’s just the two of them, alone together, he finds he can open up. She has a gift for drawing him out, teasing him, and making him laugh. She glances down at him, encouraging him to tell her what happened at school that day.*

*It wasn’t much – just a little fight – his knuckles barely got scraped. He finds it hard to make friends, but she says it’s just a phase, and he’ll learn to fit in eventually. It hasn’t been easy though, since his mom and dad separated. None of the other kids have parents who don’t live together, and he gets angry when they tease him.*

*The car comes out of nowhere. One minute he’s talking to his mom, and the next there’s a screech of tires, and he feels himself being lifted up and slammed down on the road. A sharp stabbing pain in his knee makes him cry out. He calls for his mother, but when he turns his head he sees her lying against a nearby tree, her body folded in such a way that she can’t be alive. Nobody can be alive and look like that.*

*The car that hit them doesn't stop. It weaves drunkenly into the distance and is gone. It's dusk, and he didn't even see what colour it was, let alone get a licence plate number. His leg hurts so much, but not as much as seeing his mom lying over there, and the bastard that killed her driving away. His entire life has changed in the space of a couple of minutes, and a wave of helpless rage sweeps through his body. He throws back his head and screams...*

Gibbs wakes with a start. He's still in the back of the truck; without a watch it's hard to tell how much time has passed, but it seems to be a long drive to this particular venue. He shakes his head, trying to clear the fuzziness. He's dreamed that dream before, too many times to count, but not for a long time. When he was a teenager he often woke up with that scream dying in his throat, but after he met Shannon it stopped. Since Shannon and Kelly died, he's had a different nightmare to haunt his sleep, but this one sometimes returns, usually when he's least expecting it.

It's more of a memory than a dream, his brain endlessly reliving the trauma of his mother's death when he was eight years old. They never did catch the bastard who killed her, and he spent weeks in the hospital recovering before going to live with his father. The rage at her senseless death has remained with him his entire life, along with the weakness in his knee that he tries so hard to hide. When Shannon and Kelly were murdered, he refused to accept another injustice. He couldn't get any justice for his mom, because he was just a kid back then, but he sure as hell could get it for his wife and child – and he did.

The dream has reopened an old wound that never completely healed, and the timing is good. He can use that sense of rage and injustice from his childhood in tonight's fight. His mom was never avenged, but he can have that vengeance now, taking it out on whomever they throw into the pit against him. He won't be defeated tonight; he has too much fire in his belly. They'll have to kill him before he surrenders.

He glances around the truck at the other fighters and sees that Steve is asleep. He's lurching sideways, his head resting on Hurrell's shoulder, but Hurrell is awake, a grim look in his eyes. Gibbs is sure he has a similar look in his own eyes, as they both think about what will happen in the pit later.

Nothing is a foregone conclusion. Some will lose and be taken to a different stable, owned by a different bastard. Others will win and come back in this truck. All of them will nurse various new injuries. If they're lucky, none of them will die tonight. How long can his body keep taking this kind of punishment? He still has yellowing bruises on his skin from last week's fight, and he's not getting any younger.

Steve mumbles something in his sleep, and Hurrell rests his head against Steve's, murmuring something to him. It's not just about sex then, Gibbs realizes, in surprise. Hurrell seems to feel a genuine affection for Steve. Maybe that's how he keeps some sense of himself in this nightmare world; making bonds with weaker fighters, looking out for them and having sex with them. Maybe that's his way of keeping hold of his own humanity.

Gibbs isn't convinced that keeping hold of your humanity will help keep you alive though. In order to survive, he has tried to shut down every frail, human weakness and keep his mind fixed on going out into the pit every Fight Night and winning.

The truck rumbles to a halt, and the fighters sit up. The level of tension ratchets up a notch, the way it always does when they arrive at the venue.

The back of the truck is opened, and the guards unlock their chains from the walls and herd them at gunpoint into the open air. The handcuffs on his wrists are attached to the chains around his midriff and those in turn are attached to the manacles around his ankles. They're as heavy-duty as the restraints on a prisoner being escorted to a high security prison, and there's absolutely no chance of escape.

Gibbs pauses to take a big gulp of fresh air. Fight Nights are the only chance he gets to see the outside world, and it's so good to feel the breeze on his skin and to gaze up at the crescent moon overhead. It's a warm night, the air heavy, sticky and oppressive, but at least he's out in the open, even if it's only for a short time.

Scott's fighters are usually herded into a holding pen to wait for their fighting slot in the pit, but Gibbs finds himself prodded at gunpoint away from the group. Maybe he's got first fight – that would be good, as he'll get the hard part of the evening out of the way early. It's always nerve-racking to sit in the holding pen, hearing the sounds from the pit and knowing it'll be your turn soon.

However, instead of being taken to the pit-side holding pen, he's shoved towards the stands surrounding the pit instead. These are makeshift bleachers, clearly temporary structures, and a little rickety.

The guard prods him up some stairs and then he finds himself in a position he's never been in before. He's standing up above, looking down on the pit, instead of being in the pit looking out. The pit looks smaller from up here, and he can barely even smell the sawdust. The stench of hamburgers, popcorn and beer is much stronger up here though, in this twisted parody of a spectator sport.

The crowd is already starting to assemble, and he finds it strange to be amongst so many clothed bodies. They stare at him as he is prodded up the stairs, naked and moving slowly in his chains. His presence amongst them draws attention, and a little hush descends over this section of the stands as he shuffles his way up the bleachers.

"Wolfman! Hey – it's the wolfman!" someone yells, and even more people turn to stare at him.

A bearded young man comes running up, and Gibbs's guard raises his gun warningly to keep him at arm's length. The man comes to a halt a few yards away and gazes at Gibbs with a look of adoration.

"Wolfman! Oh my God, it's the freaking wolfman! You're my favourite! You're such a mean son of a bitch out in the pit!" he calls admiringly before the guard pushes him away.

"Yeah, you're a mean SOB, but would it kill you to smile just once, Wolfman?" someone else yells, and the crowd dissolves into a fit of laughter.

"It just might," Gibbs growls, and the crowd thinks he's joking with them and laugh some more.

Gibbs wonders how the hell they can reconcile their obvious hero-worship of him with the fact that he's standing here, stark naked and chained.

He realizes that he is, in some sick way, a celebrity. He might be a prisoner, but he is also a well-known face to these people. They've watched him fighting and fucking in the pit for months. They feel that, on some level, they even know him. Nothing could be further from the truth. They don't even know his name. All they know is Wolfman, the name they've given to him, and the persona that they've projected onto him from the comfort of their cosy, pit-side seats.

These people have no idea what it's like to fight down there in the pit. To know that one fight stands between you and possible death, and that your life depends solely on your own skill, courage and strength. You have no clothes and no weapons. You just have yourself. You are as alone out there as it's possible to be.

Up here, you get a different perspective entirely. You can believe the men fighting for their lives down there are nothing more or less than the make-believe people in movies or on TV. It isn't real to the people up here the way it is when you're standing in the pit.

A part of him even pities them for not knowing how it feels to stand in the pit just before a fight, with the adrenaline pumping through your veins. He might hate being forced to fight for their entertainment, but he's never felt more alive than when standing down there in the sawdust just before a fight.

He glances around at the people gathered to watch this sick, obscene sport. He's struck by how ordinary they look. There are several cliques of very obviously wealthy folk, sitting side by side with much rougher-looking individuals, and while the majority of the audience is made up of men, there are plenty of women around too.

He's shoved along a row of seats to where his owner is sitting, surrounded by a little entourage of people that Gibbs knows all too well. There's Frank, the wizened little old guy who oversees his gruelling daily training sessions; Dr Tanner, who looks as coked off his head as usual; and some of the guards who aren't on duty tonight. Gibbs is pushed into the vacant seat next to Scott, and his owner turns and gives him a beaming smile.

"Ah, Leroy. I thought you might appreciate the view from up here!" He makes no reply, and Scott laughs. "Never very talkative, our Leroy! Strictly speaking, the fighters aren't allowed on the bleachers, but I pulled a few strings. I'm quite a player now, you know, thanks to you."

Gibbs turns to give the man a hard stare, but Scott ignores it.

"It also helped that Prince Walid wanted a favour from me tonight. Prince Walid himself! He owns this entire setup, you know. This – the fights, the pits – the whole thing was his idea in the beginning. It's grown so much over the past few years – it's big business now."

"His mom must be so proud," Gibbs says sarcastically.

"He's a very important man – and I was able to do him a favour – so he did one for me!" Scott beams, clearly getting off on being considered a major player.

The place is filling up, and there's an air of palpable excitement pervading the arena. A hush falls as the commentator announces the first fight of the evening, and a second later one of the pit-side holding pens is opened, and a big man struts into the pit like he belongs there.

"Fire-man, Fire-man, Fire-man!" the crowd chants, and Gibbs feels the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. This is what it's like experiencing these fights as a member of the audience, and he can tell that they know this fighter well. He's a crowd-pleaser, and Gibbs can see why. He charges around the pit, urging them on to louder cat-calls and more thunderous levels of applause, and the audience, loving it, duly obliges.

"He's a showman," Scott says. "You know, you could learn something from him, Leroy. The crowd adores him. He's brutal, of course, but a great fighter, and he plays up to the crowd. He gets them on his side. You could do that, Leroy."

"I could if I gave a damn."

"I get it. Not your style. You like to shut out everything but your opponent when you're fighting. But maybe afterwards?" Scott glances at him. "You could engage with the crowd more, give them some entertainment value, and put on more of a show."

Gibbs turns to give him an incredulous stare. He's fighting for his life every time he steps out into the pit, and Scott wants him to be entertaining? The anger that's never far beneath the surface courses through his veins again, and if he wasn't chained he'd slam his fist into the man's stupid fat face right here and now.

"Who's the best fucking fighter in the pit?" the fireman yells, and the crowd goes into a frenzy.

"You are! Fire-man! Fire-man! Fire-man!"

"That's not his real name, of course," Scott tells Gibbs.

"You don't say."

"His real name is Liam McIntyre, and he's one of the two biggest stars in the entire tournament."

"Really." Gibbs couldn't put less interest in his tone of voice if he tried.

"Don't you want to know who the other one is?" Scott nudges him conspiratorially.

"No."

"You are!" Scott laughs. "You are, Leroy. One of MY fighters is the other biggest star of the tournament! If you keep on winning, then you'll face Mac in the final. He's your main competition, Leroy, so watch him closely."

Gibbs is interested in this piece of news, despite himself. Often, he only sees an opponent for the first time when he steps into the pit with him. He might have caught a glimpse of him on a previous Fight Night, while waiting in the pit-side holding pen to go on next, but that's not



much to go on. Being allowed to watch the fight from up here is actually a huge tactical advantage, and he wonders what Scott had to give Walid in return to make it happen.

The gate to the holding pen on the opposite side of the pit is opened, and a guy he recognizes from the previous week runs out. He's lithe and sleek, covered in tattoos, and he likes to play the audience too. Gibbs remembers how he brutally dispatched the newbie kid last Fight Night. Tattoo Guy runs around the pit, trying to get the audience going, but it's clear their affections are with Mac.

Mac gives Tattoo Guy a few seconds to play the crowd, and then he lumbers forward. He's a huge mountain of a man; some of his bulk is fat, but Gibbs can see that a lot of it is muscle. The combination is extremely effective, and Tattoo Guy, although tall, looks dwarfed by him.

Mac is clearly a hard opponent to beat; he has a massive weight advantage for a start. But Gibbs has found that when all you have to fight with are your wits, experience and killer instinct, then weight and height are less of an advantage than sheer bloody-minded determination – and Tattoo Guy's got plenty of that. He's also not afraid to fight dirty – but it soon becomes clear that Mac isn't, either.

Tattoo Guy puts up a good fight, and Gibbs rates him as one of the better fighters on the circuit, but Mac is too big, too relentless, and too mean a bastard to bring down. After some brutish fighting that draws blood on both sides, Mac manages to kick his opponent in the balls and then throws his entire weight on top of him to bring him down. He then sits on top of his felled opponent and lands punch after brutal punch on Tattoo Guy's face.

Gibbs isn't even sure Tattoo Guy is conscious when the referee finally stops the fight and pulls Mac off. Whether the man is conscious or not, he'll get fucked – that's the way this game works. Mac has a leer on his face as he circles his fallen victim

“Fire-man! Fire-man! Fire-man!” the crowd chants again, and Mac milks it for all he's worth, massaging his big dick and thrusting his groin out as the audience cheers him on.

“Bet you're wondering how he got that pit name,” Scott says to Gibbs.

“Nope.”

“Sure you are.”

Mac turns back to Tattoo Guy, who is moaning softly, barely moving. He grabs the man, slings him effortlessly over his shoulder, and runs around the pit with him.

“Cause of that?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

Scott grins at him. “Nope. You'll see.”

Gibbs can feel his gut tightening as he watches the drama unfold in the pit. He wonders what it feels like to be slung over Mac's shoulder and carried around like a piece of meat and promises himself that he'll never let it happen to him. Mac is a formidable opponent though, no doubt about it, and he'll be hard to beat. Gibbs clamps down on that thought – he can't

afford any doubts. He mustn't let this bastard get into his head, or he'll have no chance against him when they finally meet in the pit.

He watches as Mac finishes his victory march around the pit and then slings his prize down on the ground. Gibbs has done this himself, too many times to count, but it's different viewing it as a spectator. He can feel a certain amount of pity for Tattoo Guy now, although he's sure the man showed none for his victims in the past, any more than Gibbs ever has in the pit.

Gibbs fazes out as McIntyre skewers Tattoo Guy with his big dick, making obscene gestures at the audience as he fucks his victim into the sawdust. Gibbs glances around the audience instead, trying to get the measure of this event from his unique vantage point. He can see various clusters of what must be owners – wealthy men, with armed guards around them. His gaze stops on one man who is clearly the emperor of this event, seated on a big, padded chair over on the other side of the arena. He's middle-eastern in appearance, darkly handsome and exquisitely dressed. That has to be Walid.

Walid seems to feel Gibbs's gaze on him because he looks up, straight at him. He stares at Gibbs for a moment, and then he nods his head gravely in his direction. Gibbs makes absolutely no response, and a second later Walid's handsome face breaks into a broad grin, and he laughs softly to himself, never taking his eyes off Gibbs the entire time.

Chanting breaks out in the crowd again, drawing Gibbs's gaze back to the pit, and he sees Mac finishing up with Tattoo Guy. The big man comes with a mighty bellow and then withdraws and stands up...but judging by the sense of eager anticipation among the crowd, he isn't done yet.

Gibbs watches as McIntyre stands over his victim, grabs his flaccid dick, and pisses all over the fallen man.

Scott turns to him. "That's how he got his pit name."

"Oh shit," Gibbs mutters in disgust.

"See, that's what happens when you lose to Big Mac." Scott's eyes are dark and serious. "So you have to make sure you don't lose, Leroy, when the time comes."

Gibbs makes no reply. He doesn't need any extra incentives; he'll die out there rather than surrender.

"Oh, he's good – I didn't want you to underestimate him – that's why I brought you up here today," Scott says. "But you're good too, Leroy. Look, I want to show you something." Scott gets out his cell phone and flicks his fingers across the screen a few times. Then he holds it up, and Gibbs finds himself looking at a piece of video footage.

"It's you," Scott tells him. "At your last fight."

It's fascinating watching himself prowling around the pit – he looks focused, deadly, and completely in the moment. His concentration doesn't lapse for even a second – that's always been one of his strengths.

“You can beat Mac,” Scott says. “The wolfman can beat the fireman.”

“Mac is about twenty years younger than me and 30 pounds heavier,” Gibbs points out.

“You can beat him if you’re angry enough,” Scott says. “Your anger is your greatest weapon, Leroy. Be angry out there. I don’t care who the hell you’re angry with, but I’ve never seen a man feel anger like you do without losing focus. That’s why you’re so good.”

Gibbs gives another grunt. He has a grudging respect for what Scott’s doing. He’s playing him to get the best out of him, the way he’s been playing him for months now, and it’s working.

Scott’s attitude changes from serious to laid-back in an instant, and he gives another of those lazy, deceptive grins and leans forward. “It’s time for your fight now, Leroy,” he says.

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Tony sits with his back pressed against the bars of the holding pen, watching the other fighters. Some of them are pacing around anxiously, chewing on their fingers. Others are sitting on the floor of the pen like him, their relaxed poses seriously undermined by the lines of tension he can see in their taut muscles.

It’s a beautiful warm night, and there’s a crescent moon overhead. He can see the back of the bleachers in the distance and hear the distant shouts and jeers coming from the direction of the pit, but out here it’s almost peaceful.

There are several holding pens dotted around the barren patch of land, each of them located near a truck, and each with its own set of armed guards. It seems as if each owner gets his own pen. Although they’re clearly temporary structures, the pens were already there when the truck pulled up a little while ago. The fighters were all shoved into the wooden pens still wearing their chains – all of them except Mac, who was separated out and ushered in the direction of the pit.

There’s a big roar from the direction of the pit, and then the sounds of people moving around, and some of the crowd emerge to use the temporary toilets and buy food from a couple of vendors. How the hell did the vendors get this gig? Tony presumes Walid has laid on the amenities like everything else; this is a business for him as much as a pleasure.

There’s a sense of exhilaration in the air, and a little while later Mac is escorted back across the field. There’s blood running down his face and bite marks along one brawny forearm, but he looks exuberant.

“Hey, fuckers! I told you I’d have a good night!” he jeers through the bars of the holding pen.

Nobody responds, but Tony can see them all deflate slightly at this news.

“Hoping he’d lose, huh?” he asks the guy sitting next to him as Mac is led away.

“What do you think? If he’d lost, he’d have gone to a different stable, and we wouldn’t have to put up with the bastard anymore,” the man replies.

So that's how it works. Tony is gradually piecing this jigsaw together. "You could lose – to get away from him?" Tony suggests.

The man gives him an incredulous look. "Lose on purpose? No way. Too risky."

Tony watches as Mac is escorted back to the truck. "Do you only have to fight once?" he asks.

The man nods. "Yeah, once each Fight Night. If you win, you stay with your current owner. If you lose, you go to the stable of the fighter who beat you. You really are a newbie, aren't you?"

At that moment the gate of the holding pen is opened, and a guard enters. He glances around and then jerks his head in Tony's direction. Tony's stomach does a sudden queasy lurch.

"You. Get your ass over here."

Tony gets up slowly, and the man he was just talking to touches his arm briefly. "Good luck. You should go all out to win. It's better that way – trust me."

Tony doesn't have much time to think about that because the guard grabs his shoulder and propels him out of the holding pen and towards the arena.

It smells like a dog racing track, or a music gig, or any of those places where people get together and eat and watch a show. He looks around, trying to keep his agent head on and scope out any chance to put his plan into action. First he needs to find Gibbs though; he can't put any escape plan into action until then. His stomach does another anxious flip. Gibbs is probably here somewhere, close by. If so, it's the nearest Tony's been to him in five months, and the sense of anticipation is acute.

He's taken up onto the bleachers, which wasn't where he saw Mac being taken earlier, so that confuses him. He doesn't like being naked amongst all these clothed people, but they barely spare him a glance. He's walked up to what is clearly the best seat in the house – a boxed off area containing a big, padded seat, where Walid is sitting like a king on his throne. Tony is shoved onto the bench immediately to the left of Walid.

"Hey, Walid. Nice to see you again. So, this is cool. Like Christians versus lions with you as the Roman emperor," Tony says with a grin. "You must love having all this power."

Walid doesn't look remotely riled by that comment. He just inclines his head towards Tony. "I do. And you're most welcome, Tony. I'm delighted to see that you haven't lost your...unique sense of humour. Although, I do wonder if that might change before the evening is over."

Walid isn't wearing his sunglasses and his eyes have a gleam of anticipation. Tony has an excellent view of the pit down below, lit by massive floodlights. He gives a little whistle.

"Wow, this whole thing must cost you a hell of a lot of money to stage, Walid."

“I have money.” Walid shrugs. Then he grins. “It also makes me money. It’s become quite successful, Tony. I get a cut from all the gambling, and the owners have to pay me in order to put their fighters in the pit. Good fighters are also often bought and sold for high sums, and I get a cut of that too. It’s big business.”

“Aw! And your family thought you wouldn’t amount to anything. How wrong they were!” Tony glances sideways to see if that barb hit home, and he sees Walid stiffening so he counts it as a success.

Walid turns towards him, a macabre little smile on his face. “You are in fine form this evening, Tony. I’m glad. That will make the events I have planned all the more pleasing.”

That sounds ominous. Tony watches as fresh sawdust is strewn in the pit. The crowd begin to return to their seats, clutching drinks and hotdogs, and the air of anticipation starts to build.

“Next up, we have the only other unbeaten fighter in the tournament this season!” the commentator announces excitably, and a little murmur goes around the crowd. “He’s mean, he’s hungry, and he never, ever smiles...he’s the wolfman!”

The crowd erupts in a fit of wild cheering, and Tony watches as the guards open the gate to a holding pen, and a man prowls out into the pit. He’s tall and well built, with a sleekly muscled body, and like Tony and all the other fighters he’s encountered, he’s naked. His hair has been shorn to no more than a half an inch in length all over, and his body is glistening under the glare of the lights.

“Is he covered in oil?” Tony turns to Walid to find the man watching him intently.

“Yes. They are all oiled – it makes them slippery. Harder to catch.”

“What are the rules?” Tony asks, leaning forward, catching the sense of excitement in the crowd and feeling it too, despite himself.

“There are no rules.” Walid smiles. “They fight until one of them has clearly won. Sometimes that is very quick – other times, it takes much longer. Wolfman usually doesn’t need very long. He is one of the best fighters we have.”

He smiles at Tony again and nods back at the pit where another fighter has been released from his pen.

Tony decides he wouldn’t like to fight the wolfman. He suits his name. There’s a predatory kind of grace about the way he moves and a look of total concentration on his face. It reminds him of Gibbs when he’s chasing a lead on a case...Gibbs. The realization kicks in, and he looks up to find Walid still smiling at him.

“Yes, Tony?”

“That’s Gibbs. Wolfman is Gibbs!” Tony looks back down on the pit in shock. He hadn’t recognized him. He’s worked with the man for ten years, lusted after him and loved him for pretty much the same amount of time, and he didn’t recognize him.

Maybe it's the extremely short hair, or the muscles that are much more evident now than they were five months ago, and it's not as if Gibbs was lacking in that department even back then. But no, it's not either of those things. It's Gibbs himself. He looks like a different person. There is no sense of the man Tony once knew in that predator below in the pit.

Relief floods in all the same, combined with a nagging sense of anxiety. At least he was right, and Gibbs is alive...but how much of \*his\* Gibbs is still left in that stranger down there?

"Problem, Tony?" Walid asks silkily.

"Yes. What the hell have you done to him?"

"We have done nothing to him. We have simply teased out his potential and given him a way of best expressing the hungry wolf he is inside. He is aptly named, yes?"

Tony watches as Gibbs behaves just like a hungry wolf. There's an expression of cold, calculating anger in his eyes as he moves towards his prey. The other man is clearly terrified and makes a sudden rash move, throwing himself at Gibbs, fists flailing. It's a tactical error, and Gibbs punishes it ruthlessly and efficiently, getting in several low punches that make Tony wince before skipping out of reach of his opponent's fists.

"He really is very good," Walid whispers in Tony's ear. "You see, we cannot make a fighter, Tony; fighters are born. We simply liberated him from his civilized trappings and showed him what he really is. And Gibbs is an excellent fighter, as you can see. Only my own fighter, Mac, is better. I'm annoyed with myself that I didn't keep Gibbs when I first had him captured. I was misled by his age and his weak knee; I should have looked into his eyes and seen the wolf within."

Tony feels a shiver running up his spine, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. He fears Walid might be right because the Gibbs he's looking at right now is coolly ruthless as he throws punch after punch, exposing his opponent's weaknesses with brutal precision before bringing the man to his knees with a sneaky swipe at his ankles, sweeping his feet out from under him.

Gibbs's movements are smooth and controlled, but Tony can see a tidal wave of rage surging just beneath the surface as he leaps on his prey and punches away at his jaw repeatedly and with deadly accuracy.

The crowd scent blood and rise to their feet, cheering as Gibbs's opponent goes limp and stops fighting. Gibbs, however, doesn't stop punching. Tony winces and wants to look away as Gibbs carries on, his fists breaking the man's nose and causing blood to flow freely into the sawdust.

Finally – after what feels like hours – the referee steps in and stops the fight, and Gibbs moves back, away from his prey. Tony is initially relieved it's all over, but then he realizes, from the reaction of the crowd and the hush that descends, that it isn't.

Walid is watching him again, an indulgent smile playing on his cruel mouth. "Watch," he instructs. "You'll enjoy this next bit, Tony."

Tony is transfixed as Gibbs returns to his victim, that predatory look still on his face. This isn't over for Gibbs yet; there's something more he wants to do.

"Wolf-man! Wolf-man! Wolf-man!" the crowd chants, and the atmosphere in the arena has turned electric.

A breeze rustles though Tony's hair, chilling his naked body to the bone as Gibbs grabs the man, pulls him onto his haunches...and then begins fucking him with cruel efficiency.

"Shit...that's...that's just...horrific." Tony turns away, unable to watch. It's not so much the act, as watching Gibbs perform it. To be fair, he can't see any actual relish on Gibbs's part, but he can see a certain angry satisfaction. He might not like it, but he doesn't hate it, either. Just what have these bastards done to him?

"I know Gibbs," Tony says urgently to Walid. "And he might be a bastard – hell, he'll admit to that himself – but he's no rapist."

"Really?" Walid raises a polite eyebrow.

"So what have you done to him? What have you threatened him with, Walid? What's the penalty for refusal?"

Walid shrugs. "It's a good question, Tony. But did it ever occur to you that he might not need any incentive to do this? Look at him – does he look like a man being coerced?"

Tony can't look though. The sounds from the pit are sickening enough. He doesn't want to see what Gibbs is doing right now.

"I said, look at him!" Walid roars, and, reluctantly, Tony turns his head back to look at the arena.

Tony can see a catalogue of marks on Gibbs's sleek, lean body. There is clear evidence of scarring on his back, so he's obviously been whipped at some point, but is it possible to whip a man into committing rape?

Tony closes his eyes and listens as the crowd's cheering comes to a triumphant conclusion, and then they're stamping their feet and applauding. When he opens his eyes again, he sees Gibbs stalking out of the pit without sparing the audience a second glance. The crowd appears to love him for his disdain. They chant his name over and over again, laughing at his refusal to engage with them, enjoying the fact that he's just as ruthless with them as he was with his victim.

"That is your mentor, Tony," Walid murmurs to him, in that same silky tone of voice. "That is the man you worshipped, admired, and risked your life to save. Behold your idol, Tony. Or should that be 'fallen idol', hmm?"

~\*~

Gibbs checks himself over as the adrenaline high of his fight gradually fades. Sometimes he sustains injuries he wasn't even aware of at the time, in the heat of the fight. This one was

tough; his opponents have been getting progressively tougher for the past couple of months, as the competition intensifies in the build up to this grand finale that Scott is so excited about.

He's got a bruised jaw and one of his ribs is tender, but apart from that he's fine. A guard chains him up again, but instead of being taken back to the truck as usual after a fight, he's returned to Scott's holding pen instead.

"What's going on?" Hurrell asks he sits down, his chest still heaving from the fight. "Why did they bring you back here?"

"No idea." Gibbs shrugs. He notices blood running down his shin that he didn't see before, but it's just a graze.

"I don't like it," Steve says anxiously. "Is something different happening tonight?" He begins gnawing on his fingernails. They're bitten down to the quick as it is; the skin around them is hanging off in angry red strips, but compared to the kind of injuries sustained in the pit it's nothing.

"Like I said, I have no idea," Gibbs growls. He's unsettled by the change himself, but he can't allow it to get to him.

"Why did Scott take you out of the pen earlier?" Hurrell asks, gazing at Gibbs curiously.

"He wanted to show me a fighter he thinks I'll meet in the last fight of the season – if I keep winning."

"You got to watch the fights from the bleachers?" Steve asks excitedly. He's so on edge that he's practically bouncing off the holding pen walls, and Gibbs wonders if Tanner has got his dosage right.

He watches as Hurrell puts a calming hand on Steve's shoulder, and Steve relaxes into the touch, visibly reassured.

"What's it like?" Steve asks. "What's it like to watch the fighting?"

"Different." Gibbs shrugs.

"What did Scott say to you?" Hurrell is giving him another one of those thoughtful looks.

Gibbs shrugs again. "The usual shit."

"He's trying to psych you up, so you'll win for him. He's playing you," Hurrell says.

"I know."

"I heard him talking to you back at the stable. I heard what he was offering you during the down season."

Somehow, everything Hurrell says to him sounds like an accusation, and Gibbs turns to glare at him



“Do you ever wonder what they’ll do with the rest of us? The ones who don’t win all the time?” Hurrell asks quietly. “Will they want to waste the money on feeding and guarding us all through the down season?”

“They’ll still need fighters for the new season,” Gibbs replies.

“They can steal fighters!”

“But it’s risky.”

Hurrell nods, but Gibbs can understand the fear. He has no idea whether Scott is trying to play him with all his promises about the down season, and he has no idea what will happen to the less able fighters, either. Would Scott kill them? Does the man have the stones for that? He doubts that’s what happens – even the cheapest fighters cost a few thousand dollars, and that makes them a commodity. You don’t kill your commodity.

Hurrell is still giving him a needling little look. “Do you buy into what Scott’s telling you?” he asks bluntly. “Do you like the idea of being the ultimate winner, Gibbs? ‘Cause sometimes I look at you, and I think you’re loving all this, and that’s why you’re not trying to escape.”

Gibbs is about to growl back an angry retort when a huge roar goes up from the pit, and Steve jumps nervously. He’s like the proverbial cat on a hot tin roof, wound up at the prospect of his fight.

“Ssh,” Hurrell says. “You need a distraction. Let me tell you a story.”

“A story?” Steve looks pathetically desperate to take any distraction going. Gibbs sighs and leans back against the bars of the holding pen. He has a feeling that Hurrell often tells Steve stories during the long nights alone in their stall, when they’re not fucking. Steve’s a young, weak man, and Hurrell seems to have appointed himself as his protector.

“Yeah – hearing all the cries for ‘Wolfman’ reminded me of this story someone once told me.”

Gibbs opens his eyes a fraction and fixes Hurrell with a hard look.

“This story is called ‘The Two Wolves’,” Hurrell says, totally ignoring him.

“Wolves...cool! Wolves. I like wolves,” Steve says eagerly. He chews down hard on his thumb and the blood seeps out from around the fingernail.

Hurrell strokes the back of his head gently with his hand, and Gibbs fights down a memory of giving Tony an ‘attaboy’ many years ago. Tony’s hair was soft under his hand, and the memory is so vivid it hurts.

“So, a Cherokee elder was teaching his grandchildren about life,” Hurrell begins. “He said to them, ‘A fight is going on inside me, and it’s a terrible fight between two wolves. One wolf is dark, and it represents fear, envy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, hatefulness, lies – and anger.’” Hurrell glances at Gibbs who gives him a stony look in return.

“‘The other wolf is full of light, and it stands for joy, peace, truth, hope, humbleness, kindness, friendship, generosity, faith – and love.’”

Gibbs leans his head back on the bars of the pen. He knows this story. His father told it to him once, many years ago, after he got into a fight at school.

“‘This same fight is going on inside of you, and inside every other person too,’” Hurrell continues. “‘Those same two wolves are fighting inside each of us, all the time.’ The children thought about it for a little while. Then one child asked his grandfather, ‘Which wolf will win?’ And the Cherokee elder replied...”

“The one you feed,” Gibbs finishes for him with a growl.

He and Hurrell stare at each other for a long moment, and Steve clearly senses the tension within the pen because he starts chattering away.

“Wow, that’s cool! Two wolves...I love that story. I have to remember it so when I get out of here I can tell my little girl...she’s three years old, and she loves stories...” He pauses, looking suddenly broken.

Hurrell wraps his hand around Steve’s neck and pulls his head down, gently caressing his back with his other hand. Gibbs closes his eyes, shutting out thoughts of Kelly. The anger rises in his belly again, and he almost wishes he was back in the pit so he could pound out his fury on someone – anyone.

They are silent for a long time, listening as the fight in the pit comes to an end. Then one of Scott’s men comes to the holding pen.

“You.” He points at Steve. “Your turn.”

“Can’t I go first?” Hurrell asks, but they all know the answer to that. They are matched against a specific opponent, depending on the number of fights they’ve fought, and how many they’ve won.

“It’s okay. My turn. Better to get it over with, huh? See you in the truck later!” Steve says brightly, getting to his feet.

He hops out of the pen, his entire body shaking with nerves and anticipation.

Gibbs rubs a hand over the stubble on his head. Why has he been brought back to the holding pen instead of being put back in the truck? And what did Scott offer to Walid in order to get him that pit-side seat earlier?

Something bad is going to happen tonight. He can feel it in his gut.

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“So the raping thing – whose idea was that?” Tony asks, as the third bout he’s witnessed comes to an end, and the victor rampages around the pit, screaming in glee at the audience.

“Raping? I prefer to view it as the just prize for a victory hard won. This is a gladiatorial contest, Tony,” Walid replies. “There should be some penalty for losing, shouldn’t there?”

“You mean beyond a broken nose, concussion, and possible brain damage?” Tony raises an eyebrow.

“See, to do this properly, the loser should really forfeit his life.” Walid gives a regretful sigh. “But fighters are expensive, and that’s wasteful. All the same, my audience wants some kind of climax to the event, and for the loser to experience some kind of forfeiture. Also, the winner should get the chance to exert his dominance over the loser, don’t you agree? It makes sense.”

“It only makes sense if you’re kind of nuts,” Tony replies with a shrug.

Walid smiles. “My sport of choice simply happens to be more honest than most,” he says. “Don’t tell me that when you watch a boxing match you don’t long for someone to get hurt – really hurt. We enjoy it because it is primal. I am simply removing all the modern day frippery that has made the boxing world so safe and sterile. I am giving the audience what it really craves; no gloves, no safety mechanisms, no pampered little prima donna performers with their big pay checks.”

“You’re kidnapping people and forcing them to fight at gunpoint,” Tony points out.

Walid laughs. “You say that as if mankind does not have a history of such contests. I prefer to think of it as simply returning us to an earlier, more honest age.”

“You’re talking about ancient Rome? Gladiators?”

“Of course. They were mostly slaves; men defeated in battle, taken from their homelands, and made to fight in front of crowds. This is the same thing.” Walid shrugs. “It is brutal, yes, but there is a beauty to its brutality and a sense of nobility.”

“I guess I’m not seeing either the beauty or the nobility then.”

“Then look harder.” Walid sits back in his throne, a dark, intense look in his eyes. “I mean it.” He glances at Tony. “You should enjoy this next one, Tony.”

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They hear the fight in the pit coming to an end, and Gibbs sits up. Steve will have been in the pit-side holding pen waiting his turn while that fight finished, so his will be next. Gibbs hopes the skinny young man can hold it together to at least avoid being injured too badly. Maybe he can even win. He won his fight the previous week, so it’s possible. Gibbs suspects it’ll make Hurrell happy if Steve wins; he seems to have built up a rapport with the kid and will no doubt be upset if Steve ends up going to another stable later this evening, instead of back to Scott’s with them.

The guard returns to the holding pen with both Scott and Tanner, and Gibbs gets to his feet, that bad feeling in his gut intensifying.

“Leroy – I’m sorry, we must prevail upon your unique skills again,” Scott says.

“I already fought this evening.”

“I know, and usually I wouldn’t agree to a second fight. It’s not fair on you. But, like I said, Walid asked for a favour, and this is it.” Scott gives him a benign smile. “For what it’s worth, I don’t believe you’ll have much trouble with this particular opponent.”

Gibbs stands his ground, staring at the man.

“Ah, maybe you’re worried about...” Scott points down at his groin with a conspiratorial wink. “A man your age...is twice going to be difficult for you? I did ask for a little rest period for you, to give you time to recover. And Tanner has more drugs for you.”

He nods, and Tanner comes towards him, carrying a needle.

Gibbs knows from experience that refusing the drugs isn’t a good idea. They’ll just hold him down and inject him anyway. No matter how much he glares and protests, he has no bargaining chips here.

His muscles are taut with anger at the lack of control he has over what they’re doing to his body, but he submits to Tanner’s injection and is then prodded out of the holding pen by the guard. Scott puts a hand on his shoulder and walks him back towards the pit.

“This one’s a newbie, so he won’t be a challenge for you. You’ll probably have him down the minute his hood is removed.” He squeezes Gibbs’s shoulder firmly. “Just remember what’s at stake, Leroy, and how much you love winning.”

It’s been a long time since Gibbs last faced a newbie in the pit, and he feels a sense of revulsion. It’s always worse somehow because they don’t know what to do, or what to expect. He can still remember his own sense of disorientation that first time. He’d been hooded, as all newbies are, and he had no idea what awaited him.

His first glimpse of the pit had been when the hood was removed, and then an opponent was bearing down on him and before he knew it he was fighting for his life in front of a baying crowd. His old Marine instincts had kicked in and seen him through, but he can still remember how terrifying the entire event had been.

“Why the hell do you hood the newbies anyway?” he asks Scott.

Scott shrugs and spreads his arms wide. “For the drama, my dear Leroy. To see them blinking and blundering around down there, like helpless little new-borns, and for the joy of watching them either sink or swim.”

“I always thought I was a bastard, but you’re in a whole different league.”

“Oh, you **are** a bastard, Leroy. Now go out there and show us all just how much of a bastard you can be!”

The back gate of the pit-side holding pen is opened, and Gibbs is shoved into it by one of the guards. Scott waves at him and then disappears, presumably to return to his seat.

Steve is standing at the front of the pen, waiting for his fight to begin. His fingers are bitten down to bloody stubs, and he's clearly trying to psych himself up and get into the right headspace for what lies ahead.

"Just focus. Don't let your opponent get into your head," Gibbs advises him. "Stay calm – and Steve?"

"Yeah?" Steve looks at him, his eyes dark, his pupils dilated from the drugs.

"Remember to breathe."

Steve grins at him and holds up both thumbs. Then the front gate of the pen is opened, and the guard prods Steve out into the arena.

Gibbs watches him go, taking up position at the front of the pen to oil up again and watch the fight. This is the first time he's ever been made to fight twice in one night, and he feels angry at the change to his routine. He got himself all psyched up to fight earlier and thought that was behind him for another week, only to find that he has to go out there and do it all over again.

He can't spare any sympathy for Steve, or for the newbie he's going out to fight shortly, or for anyone else. If he's to go out there and win then he has to block out everything and everyone and concentrate. He's at a disadvantage; he's already fought one tough bout tonight, and he's bruised and tired, but he'll be damned if he's going to lose to a newbie.

He has to find that anger from earlier and reconnect with the hunger to win. Hurrell and all his moralizing can go to hell; he's going to need the dark wolf tonight, so that's the one he's damn well going to feed.

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Tony isn't sure why Walid is so interested in him watching this fight. It seems like a hopeless mismatch to him. There's a skinny, lanky kid, probably in his early twenties, whose moves are all over the place, pitched against one of Walid's men who he remembers from the drive over here in the truck. It's the guy who told him to shut up repeatedly; Spencer, someone called him.

Spencer is a thickset guy with jet black hair. He moves with a kind of feline grace, and it's clear from the outset that the skinny kid doesn't stand a chance against him.

"At least the other fights were more equal – height, weight, skill," Tony points out to Walid. "This one's a no-brainer."

"Is that so?" Walid's long, elegant fingers stroke a ring on his right hand. "Three fights in, and you're already an expert, are you, Tony?"

Tony rolls his eyes and settles back to watch as Spencer makes short work of the skinny kid. It doesn't take long before the kid is lying on his back in the sawdust, screaming his head off, blood pouring from his nose.

"Like I said," Tony mutters, looking away. He hates the next part, the fucking part. It makes him feel sick.

Walid leans forward in his chair, an intense look in his eyes, and Tony looks back, curious.

The crowd is standing up and jeering and down in the pit something unexpected seems to be happening. Tony cranes his neck to get a better view.

Spencer is standing back, away from the man he just defeated, his arms crossed over his chest.

"Do we have a refusal to fuck?" the commentator yells excitedly. "It looks like we do!"

The crowd goes wild, yelling out something Tony can't decipher.

"It looks as if our esteemed patron, Prince Walid, will have the deciding voice in this round!" the commentator declares.

The crowd erupts into a long bout of yelling and caterwauling that seems to go on for ages. Walid sits on his throne, craning his head and cupping his ear theatrically as if he's trying to hear what they're saying.

Then Walid stands up, and the crowd goes silent. Down in the pit, Spencer is looking up at Walid with an expression of stubborn desperation in his eyes. The skinny kid starts to shake and sob, looking terrified.

Walid moves forward, where everyone can see him, and Tony can see that he's soaking this up. Walid is loving every second of it, and Tony is reminded again of the gladiatorial contests of Ancient Rome, where someone's life rested on whether the emperor turned his thumb up or down. In this particular arena, Walid is the emperor; this is his game, and it's played by his rules.

Down in the pit, the referee has a gun in his hand and waits for the decision.

"So, Prince Walid – what's it to be? Which of these fighters pays with his life?" the commentator asks gleefully.

You could hear a pin drop as Walid ponders his decision.

Tony gets to his feet, his throat dry. "Walid...you can't be serious," he says urgently, moving forward. A guard intercepts him, grabs him, and throws him back down on the bench. "Walid!" Tony yells.

Walid looks down on the pit, a smile on his face. He flings out his arm dramatically in the direction of the skinny kid, and the referee strides towards him, gun drawn.

“No!” the kid screams. “Please, no...no, no!”

There is no pause, no hesitation, and no mercy. The referee puts his gun to the kid’s head, pulls the trigger, and there is an explosion of blood all over the sawdust.

Tony gazes down on the pit in horrified silence.

“Well, you did ask what happens if the victor refuses to complete the fight in the appropriate way.” Walid smirks at him.

“Shit...did you...I can’t believe this...you just killed him,” Tony whispers in disbelief.

Walid shrugs. “That’s the game, Tony. That’s how it’s played.”

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Gibbs stands in the holding pen, watching angrily as Steve’s lifeless body drops to the floor a few feet away, blood pouring out of the wound in his head.

He hears a strangled sob behind him and turns to see that Hurrell has just been shoved into the pen to wait for his fight.

“Steve?” Hurrell yells, all the blood draining from his face as he sees the tail end of what just happened. “Steve?” He presses himself against the bars at the front of the pen as a net is thrown over the corpse and it’s dragged through the sawdust, out of the pit. It’ll be thrown in an incinerator, and the ashes and bones buried somewhere nobody will find them; Gibbs has heard the guards talking about what happens to the bodies.

Hurrell looks broken, and Gibbs grabs his arm and squeezes tight to keep the man upright.

“He had a girlfriend...and a little kid...shit...he was just a kid himself,” Hurrell tells him. “He was a person...he was real... and they just snuffed him out like he was nothing. The fucking bastards.”

There is nothing Gibbs can say to make this any better. All he can do is try and prevent there being two tragedies tonight instead of one. His own fight is next, and then Hurrell will be forced out there into the pit after him. The man has to get his head on straight if he’s to stand any chance of winning after this.

“Find your own dark wolf, Hurrell,” he says urgently, shaking him hard. “Find it, use it, and win, because that’s the only way to survive.”

Hurrell stares at him from blank eyes. “I can’t fight...I can’t fight after that...”

“Yes, you damn well can!” Gibbs roars. “It’s a war, Hurrell, and you’re a Marine. You’ll do what I do – you’ll go out there and fight, and win, and fuck, and that way we both get to stay alive tonight.”

He's so angry that he wants to get out there and fight right now. He wants to take out all his anger, rage, and pain on his next opponent in the pit, to slam his fist into an anonymous face and take his revenge for Steve's senseless death.

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Tony stares down at the pit as the dead body is pulled through the sawdust, trailing blood in its wake. The mood in the arena is ugly, shock and bloodlust warring with each other, making the crowd jittery. They loved what just happened though; Tony is sure about that. It might have been shocking, but they loved the thrill and excitement of watching someone being executed in front of them.

He looks up to find Walid staring at him thoughtfully. "So, Tony, I think you understand us a little better now, no?" Walid asks.

Tony has a sudden, bleak flash of understanding as to why Gibbs is the way he is, and how the man he once knew has turned into the hungry predator he saw in the pit this evening. It's only a flash though. He can't truly comprehend just how fucked up Gibbs must be after enduring five months of this.

"I saw the look Spencer gave you," Tony says slowly. "He was very hyped up in the truck earlier; they all were, but he was particularly on edge. I think..." The truth dawns on him with sickening clarity. "I think you arranged this, Walid, as an object lesson for me. Spencer was supposed to refuse, wasn't he? That's why he was looking at you like that. You promised him you'd choose the other fighter, not him, to take the fall for his refusal."

Walid gives a broad smile. "Ah, Tony, so you are not quite the idiot you like to appear!" He claps Tony on the arm. "Now, my dear Tony, you have watched for long enough. You must be longing to take part, no?"

Tony's throat goes dry. "No." He shakes his head. "No, Walid. Don't do this."

"But I want to." Walid shrugs. "This is the most fun I've had at a Fight Night in quite some time, Tony. I enjoy games you see, and this is turning out to be the best game of all. I want to see it reach its conclusion. I am still unclear as to what that might turn out to be."

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a square of silk fabric, in a deep red colour.

"I got this especially for you, Tony," he says, in a pleased tone of voice, as if giving Tony a gift. "Usually with new fighters we use a black hood, but for you, I thought red was more fitting."

Walid gestures to his guards, and they grab Tony's arms and hold him still while Walid shakes out the red square of silk to reveal that it's a hood. Tony tries to twist away, but the hood is thrown over his head and something is pulled tight around his neck, keeping it in place.

"Ah, that's good," he hears Walid say with a chuckle. "What better treat to throw to a wolf than his own Little Red Riding Hood?"



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The crowd is in a restive mood after the killing. It's energized them, tapped into their bloodlust, and made them crave some new excitement to slake their thirst.

Gibbs knows he has to focus. He has to forget about Steve and just concentrate on winning this next fight.

He closes his eyes, listens to his own breathing, and shuts down every part of himself except what he needs to survive.

When he hears the gate opening his eyes snap open, and he's in the zone, ready to go.

He prowls rather than walks into the pit. He can smell Steve's blood and feels the electric mood in the crowd. They're excited, and the killing wasn't enough; they want more.

Gibbs ignores the crowd, the way he always does. He despises them. They're weak people who get their thrills from violence, rape and murder. If it weren't for people like them, then people like Scott and Walid wouldn't exist.

He pauses to dip his hands in the sawdust. He's oiled his body, identifying any weak spots from his previous fight. He knows he has to protect his ribs, and he knows he has to make this quick because he's got less stamina than usual from fighting once already. But he has no doubts. He's the dark, ruthless, hungry wolf he has to be in the pit, in order for both himself and his opponent to survive. This newbie won't stand a chance against him.

The gate over on the opposite side of the pit is opened, and the newbie is pushed out. He stumbles, and one of the guards grabs him and hauls him upright. He's hooded, like all newbies, although the hood is red instead of black this time, for some reason.

"And what do we have here?" the commentator crows excitedly. "It seems our favourite Wolfman is back in the pit again in an unusual move by his owner, James Scott. And Prince Walid wants to field a newbie against him, which means we are literally throwing our newcomer to the wolf! Place your bets now! Does the newbie stand any chance against one of the strongest fighters ever to grace the pit? Or does Prince Walid have something special to show us? Let's find out!"

Gibbs hardly listens to the words; he's too busy concentrating. The newbie's hood is removed, and Gibbs makes his usual fast assessment. His opponent is about six feet – possibly more as he looks to have an inch or so on himself. Broad shoulders, toned body, but not fighting fit. This guy doesn't spend a lot of time in the gym, but he's solid and can handle himself. The idiot still has a full head of hair – being a newbie he hasn't figured out you have to keep it shaved or an opponent can take a handful of it during a fight and bring you down. He also hasn't oiled himself, so he'll be easy enough to grab and throw into the sawdust.

Gibbs starts circling, making mental adjustments as he prowls around his prey, who is just standing there, trying to talk to him. Gibbs doesn't listen; newbies often think they can reason their way out of the pit, but the pit is about the least reasonable place on Earth. Reason, sanity, humanity...none of them belong here. This place is about raw survival, as Steve just found out all too brutally.

Steve...Gibbs feels a surge of anger at the loss of his stable-mate, and he runs forward and lands a couple of good punches. It feels good. The idiot newbie puts up his arms in defence, but makes no attack in reply. Good. The newbie is too shocked to stage much of a fight, so he should go down easy.

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“Gibbs!” Tony says urgently, ducking away from a blow aimed at his midriff. “For God’s sake – it’s me, Gibbs!”

He can see by his boss’s dark, dilated pupils that he’s drugged up to the eyeballs, but something else is going on here too. Gibbs is so focused on him as an opponent that he can’t recognize him for who he is. Tony has seen Gibbs like this before, when he was pursuing Ari after Kate died, but back then Gibbs wasn’t lost to himself like he is now. He was intent on his revenge, but he was still reachable, still himself.

Now, it’s like he’s someone else. Tony can imagine this was how Gibbs was after Shannon and Kelly were killed. He always turns in on himself when he’s hurting and finds some dark place inside where he nurses the anger close until he can find a way to let it out. Usually that’s in a case, or by himself with a punching bag. Tony has seen him after a bad case, just punching away in the NCIS gym. There is a similar look of intense concentration on his face now, and Tony can’t see a single trace of the Gibbs he once knew in the predatory figure standing in front of him.

Gibbs moves in again, all prowling grace, and Tony knows he doesn’t stand a chance against him. He’s never bested him in any of their sparring sessions in the past. Gibbs is just...Gibbs, and Tony doesn’t remember anyone ever beating him in a fight.

His intention here isn’t to win in any case; it’s to stop Gibbs hurting him too badly. He’s seen the people they’ve dragged from the pit after a fight. He doesn’t want Gibbs to beat him to a pulp and live with the guilt afterwards. If he’s capable of feeling guilt these days because it looks like he isn’t capable of feeling anything right now.

There’s nothing in those icy blue eyes except a desire to win.

“Gibbs...it’s me, Tony. Listen to me, will you?” he hisses urgently.

Gibbs gives no sign of having heard him. There is no recognition in his eyes as he feints one way and then lands two vicious punches to Tony’s gut. Tony lurches out of range, holding his side, panting heavily.

“Look, I know they’ve fed you drugs, and I know they’ve kept you locked up for five months and done God knows what to you, but you have to listen to me,” Tony says urgently.

“Because you’ll really regret this later if you don’t. Well, I think you will. Maybe it’s always been your dream to fight naked with me in a pit while a bunch of people watch, but can I just say that it’s the kind of thing that’s much sexier as a fantasy than it is in reality...”

He reaches up and slaps the back of his own head for the inanity of what he’s saying. Gibbs is still prowling around him, circling, looking for weaknesses – Tony can see his cold

assessment of Tony's skill as a fighter in his eyes. There is nothing in them to suggest that the Gibbs of old is even still alive in there. He might as well be a completely different person.

How the hell is Tony going to reach him?

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His opponent talks and skips out of reach and then talks some more. It's getting boring, and Gibbs decides it's time to bring him down.

He moves in to deliver a knockdown, but his opponent surprises him with a feint to the left that disguises an agile move to the right. It's a move Gibbs is familiar with because it's one of his own, and one he taught to many young Marines when he was a gunny. Something about it niggles at him, and his gut tells him that he's missing something important. He's just not sure what.

He ignores it. The pit isn't a place to have doubts. He goes back in for another attack, and finally his opponent decides to fight back instead of just defending himself. He lands a glancing blow to Gibbs's jaw; it wouldn't normally be enough to bring Gibbs down, but his foot slips on something in the sawdust, and he goes down, briefly, breaking his fall with his hand and getting up again before his opponent can take advantage of his moment of weakness. He glances down to see what made him slip and sees a patch of Steve's blood that they must have missed when throwing down the new sawdust.

The memory of what they did to Steve ignites the anger he needs to win. He feels it rise up inside, and he channels it, the way he always does out here. Steve, Shannon, Kelly, his mom...all the unnecessary deaths coalesce in one angry ball of hate, and he throws himself on his opponent. He's so furious right now that he just wants to kill, and he forgets everything else. He can't see the pit, or hear the crowd. He's just a killing machine; there is nothing else in his heart as he brings his opponent down.

He straddles his victim, pinning the man's shoulders into the sawdust with his knees, and grabs a handful of the man's thick brown hair. Then, holding him in place, he delivers a savage punch to his jaw, and then another.

It feels good to let it out, to release all the pent-up anger and hate and take it out on the flesh and blood beneath him. He wants to bury his fist in this man's face, to have his revenge by proxy on Walid, and Scott, and Hernandez, and the drunk driver who killed his mom. He's not sure there is any limit to his anger. It's like a bottomless pit and every time he goes back down he finds more and more of it, a black hole of rage and fury.

He's hitting his stride, raising his arm for another blow...but then his fist is caught in mid-air. Somehow his prey has got an arm free and is blocking his punch. He can feel a vice-like grip around his wrist...but instead of pushing him away, the man beneath him is pulling him forward.

"Boss? Boss! Snap out of it!"

He's so close. A few more punches, and he'll claim his victory...if he can just pull his arm free...

"Jethro!" It's the first time anyone has called him by his preferred name in months. "Jethro – it's me – Tony!"

He feels a sharp slap on the back of his head and, at the same time, the words penetrate his consciousness. His opponent uses his moment of disorientation to take hold of his face between his hands, forcing him to look at him, and Gibbs finds himself staring into a pair of familiar green eyes. They're so familiar, and so incredibly out of place in this nightmare, that the jolt of recognition feels like a stab in his gut. He draws back his fist to punch again, wanting his victory, craving his victory, and then pauses...

"Tony?" Sweat falls into his eyes, and he blinks it away. His chest is rising and falling heavily, and he feels like he's on the brink of falling. He can't force all the anger and hate back inside. He wants to fight, and hurt, and win. He wants to land blow after blow on his opponent's face. He wants... "Tony?" he says again, in disbelief.

"Yes. It's me, Gibbs."

It's as if he can see clearly for the first time in months, and yet it doesn't feel real. How can Tony have been transported from that other reality, so long ago, into this one? Tony doesn't belong here; this isn't his world.

"You..." Gibbs glances up to see Walid standing high up in the stands above, watching them intently. He remembers the little smile the man gave him earlier. Gibbs has spent the past five months wondering if Tony had forgotten all about him, and now he wishes he had. "Oh, Tony," he says brokenly. "You stupid, fucking idiot."

"Good to see you too, Boss." Tony grins, and then, unexpectedly, he throws a punch that hits Gibbs a glancing blow on the chin, throwing him backwards.

Tony gets to his feet and circles him. "Sorry about that. Wanted to buy us some time."

"Tell me there's a plan," Gibbs asks as they mock parry. "Tell me you have backup, Tony. Tell me we're going to be rescued." He wants to feel relief. He wants to believe that this is the end, and he'll soon be rescued, but the fact Tony is fighting in the pit makes him doubt that's the case.

"Sorry, Boss. No backup. Finding you **was** the plan."

"That's the plan? Christ, Tony. What a stupid plan!"

"Yeah, that's what everyone else said too. Well, everyone except Ziva. She thought it was 'bold'." Tony feints to one side and then gets in close and lands a blow lacking any real weight to Gibbs's midriff.

"Then why the hell...?"

"It's been five months! I ran out of options!"

Now it all makes sense. The second fight, the smile Walid gave him, hell, even the stupid red hood Tony was wearing...they're just puppets being made to dance to Walid's tune.

And now he has a decision to make – and fast. “So if there's no rescue...”

“Yeah,” Tony says grimly. “I saw a few fights earlier, Gibbs. I saw you fight earlier. I know what happens next.”

Does he? Does he really have any idea? Gibbs doesn't see how he can. You can't understand the reality until you've experienced it.

He throws a punch to Tony's jaw that glances to one side, skimming the surface. He's weighing up the options as he goes through the motions of the fight.

He could throw the fight, let Tony win...but is Tony capable of doing what he has to do? Because if he isn't, then Steve's corpse won't be the only one dragged from the pit tonight.

“Did they give you any drugs?” he asks, closing in on Tony with a flurry of punches that look more powerful than they are. He knows the answer to that already; Tony's eyes are clear. He's clean.

“No.”

If he throws the fight, and if Tony can somehow manage to fuck him, which Gibbs doubts, then he'll be Walid's property. Was that part of the plan? Did the sneaky bastard think he'd neutralize his biggest competition by throwing this curveball into the contest? Gibbs is all that stands between Walid's best fighter, McIntyre, and victory.

If he loses, then he and Tony both go into Walid's setup as newcomers, with all the risks that entails. Gibbs has spent five months in Scott's stable. He knows the guards, the routine, and the people. He stands a better chance of protecting Tony as Scott's prize fighter than as just another loser in Walid's stable.

But can he do what he has to – to Tony? He's fucked fighters before, countless times, but he didn't know any of them. He didn't allow himself to know any of them, in case he couldn't do it when the time came. That's what Hurrell, with all his little kindnesses and his need to get close to people, never understood. Gibbs doesn't know if he can fuck Tony like he's just another one of those strangers. He isn't sure he can do that.

Gibbs once vowed never to be defeated in this pit, but now, for the first time, he doesn't want to keep that vow.

Tony is watching him closely. Gibbs goes in and grabs his neck, pulling him forward.

“I'll throw the fight. Let you win,” he growls into Tony's ear.

Tony shoves him away, twists around, and puts him in a neck lock. “No.” Tony's arms are strong around his neck, and he squeezes firmly. “I can't do it. You've done it before, Gibbs. You can do it again.”

Tony is right, and he knows it. He has no choice. He's never damn well had a choice; if he's learned anything over the past five months, he's learned that.

Gibbs escapes the neck lock, throws himself on Tony, and brings him down to the ground.

"Stay down," he orders. "Take the punches. Make it look good."

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Tony finds himself on his back, looking up at Gibbs who is straddling him. A blow connects with the side of his jaw, but there isn't much force behind it, unlike the blows he took earlier. He gives a loud holler of pain anyway. A blow from Gibbs's other fist makes his head snap back the other way, and he groans and tries to push up. Gibbs silences him with a third blow, and then a fourth. None of them are as bad as they were when Gibbs meant it for real, but they feel bad enough.

The referee is in the pit, coming over to them, and Gibbs keeps up the frenzied attack on his face. It looks much worse than it is, the frenetic activity hiding the fact that none of the blows is connecting with real force.

Then the referee is pulling Gibbs off him, and he feigns the dazed look he saw on the other fighters' faces when he was watching earlier. There's blood running down his jaw from a cut caused by one of Gibbs's earlier punches and that helps. He shakes his head and the blood splatters over the referee's shirt.

That seems to decide it – the referee declares for Gibbs, and the crowd goes into their usual frenzy, yelling out obscene comments, most of which seem to relate to Gibbs fucking him.

*Gibbs fucking him.* The reality of what is going to happen next hits home. It was all very well being noble about it just now, but being fucked in the sawdust in front of a baying mob didn't feature in any of Tony's fantasies of what sex with Gibbs might be like. The alternative, him fucking Gibbs, was always out of the question; his cock is resolutely flaccid, and he doesn't see that changing any time soon, given the situation. At least Gibbs has the benefit of whatever drugs they've fed him.

Gibbs is coming back towards him, a grimly determined look in his eyes.

"You oiled?"

"What?" Tony sits up.

"Your skin isn't oiled – you oiled anywhere else?" Gibbs asks impatiently. "To make it easier?"

"No." He can feel himself blushing, but now is no time to play the coy virgin.

The crowd is getting restless, wanting their big finale. "Fuck him, Wolfman!" they chant, over and over again.

Gibbs kneels down in the sawdust beside him. Tony saw him fuck a man earlier without even breaking into a sweat, but now...now he looks lost and confused, as if he's not sure what to do, and his cock is barely semi-erect. Tony decides he can't leave it all to Gibbs – he has to play his part too.

“I won't be raped,” he says fiercely.

Gibbs looks even more confused. “If I don't, then they'll probably kill you,” he mutters hoarsely. He drops his gaze to the ground, looking desperately ashamed.

“No...” Tony grabs his head and pulls it up so that Gibbs is looking at him. “I won't be raped,” he repeats urgently. “Understand?”

He leans forward and kisses Gibbs on the mouth, just gently. It isn't exactly how he imagined them sharing a first kiss, but it's the best he can do in the circumstances. Gibbs's mouth is hard and unresponsive beneath his; he seems shocked.

“What the hell, DiNozzo?” Gibbs asks when Tony releases him.

“Don't make this rape, Gibbs,” Tony replies fiercely. “Not between us. Give me something back here.”

Understanding dawns in Gibbs's eyes, and he nods and reaches out to stroke gentle fingers through Tony's hair.

“Okay, Tony. Show me how.”

Tony grabs his hand and kisses his fingers, smiling at Gibbs. Then he draws Gibbs down on top of him in the sawdust, holding him close. He's surprised to find that Gibbs is shaking – he's trembling like a wet puppy, and there's no trace of the formidable ‘Wolfman’ that Tony saw in action earlier.

Tony wonders when anyone last showed Gibbs anything other than brutality. The man has been kidnapped, forced to fight and fuck at gunpoint, whipped, beaten, and abused for five long months. No wonder he's shaking right now. Kindness is hard to bear when you've become accustomed to being kicked constantly.

“Ssh...it's okay...I've got you.”

He gently caresses Gibbs's back with his fingers and gradually Gibbs's shaking subsides, and he gets himself under control. Tony can feel that his cock isn't anywhere near hard yet though. He knows Gibbs can fuck a stranger in the pit because he's seen him do it – but put him with a friend, someone he's worked with for ten years, and he's floundering badly. Tony knows he has to do something - fast.

“Do you trust me?” He looks up into Gibbs's eyes and sees a complete lack of comprehension there. Gibbs is out of it right now; he doesn't know what the hell is going on.

Tony grabs Gibbs's head and makes him focus. “Do you trust me, Gibbs?” he demands roughly. “I need you to trust me.”

Gibbs nods, his eyes clearing. "Yeah, I trust you, Tony."

"Good – then let's do this."

Tony wraps his arms around Gibbs's back, pulls him close, and kisses him again. This time Gibbs's lips come alive beneath his, and his tongue explores Tony's mouth eagerly. Tony caresses his buttocks, moving his body rhythmically against Gibbs's body, hoping to arouse him that way, and he feels Gibbs's cock slowly starting to harden. Tony guesses the drugs are making him respond to any sexual stimulus.

The gentle kissing and rocking motion is working, and after a while Tony pushes Gibbs back and reaches down between their bodies to caress his cock. Gibbs gives a startled grunt, and Tony can see that he's visibly torn between the sheer torture of this situation and the drug-induced demands of his own libido. He's disoriented, thrown by the fact he can't just fuck a faceless stranger.

Tony knows that he has to take charge here, or this whole thing will end in a swift gunshot to the head for one of them. He wonders whether Gibbs has any experience with men – has it only ever been this brutal rutting in the pits, or has he ever known what it's like to make love to a willing guy? Tony's thankful for his own extensive experience with men over the years, or he doubts he'd be able to handle what he has to do next.

"Come on, lover boy, let's move this along..."

Tony rubs his fingers in the oil on Gibbs's skin and then dips them into his own ass, oiling and stretching it. It isn't ideal, and he knows this is going to hurt like hell, but it's better than nothing, and the oil will ease the way a little.

The crowd has gone completely still, shocked into silence by what they're doing. Tony bites back a desire to laugh. It serves the bastards right; they want their fucking to be about degradation, force and humiliation, but he's giving them something very different. He hopes it damn well chokes them.

Tony returns his hand to Gibbs's cock. He slides his fingers over it, rubbing it to full hardness, and then he guides it between his open legs. Gibbs's pupils are dilated, and Tony can see that the desire to fuck is so strong it's almost overwhelming him. Yet Gibbs is holding back because of who is beneath him; Tony can see it in his eyes.

"Do it," he urges, opening his legs wide to give Gibbs more access. "Give in to it, Gibbs. It's fine."

Under normal circumstances, Tony thinks he'd probably be pleased that Gibbs is so well endowed, but right now it's not exactly a blessing. He bites back the hiss of pain as Gibbs sinks into him. He wasn't properly prepared for such a large intrusion, but he doesn't want Gibbs to feel bad about that so he pulls him into his body, welcoming him in, trying to relax as best he can around his large cock. It feels like he's being stretched beyond endurance, and it's sore as all hell, but he breathes deep and reaches up to pull Gibbs's head down and kiss him again.



Gibbs is moaning softly, his body bucking into him helplessly, driven by the drugs they've pumped into him. Tony can feel his shame and pities him for it. He's done all he can to lessen the horror of what they're being made to do, but for a proud man like Gibbs, being forced to commit this act with a friend in this brutal way has to hurt.

Tony keeps kissing Gibbs fiercely, trying to remind him that although they're both being made to do this against their will, he is an active participant. This isn't something Gibbs is doing to him; it's an ordeal they're sharing.

Finally Gibbs comes, with an agonized gasp, and Tony lies back in the sawdust, panting, keeping his gaze locked on Gibbs's face. They did it. Somehow they've managed to stave off death for at least a little while longer.

Tony smiles up at Gibbs, and Gibbs manages a tight little smile in return, but there is something dark and ominous in his eyes.

Gibbs withdraws from Tony's body and glances up at the watching crowd.

They stare back at him, still deathly silent, in total shock. Gibbs gives them a slow, murderous glare, sweeping the entire arena with a look of utter contempt, and you could hear a pin drop.

Gibbs looks back down at Tony, the contempt fading from his eyes.

"Do you trust me too, Tony?" he asks.

Tony isn't sure what's about to happen next, but he knows his answer. "I trust you, Gibbs," he says, without any hesitation.

Gibbs runs a gentle hand through Tony's hair. "Atta boy, Tony," he whispers in Tony's ear.

Then he takes hold of Tony's left hand, grabs the index finger, and, with a sudden unexpected jerk, breaks it. It makes a loud cracking sound, and Tony yowls in pain. He tries to draw his hand away, but Gibbs has it in an iron grip and won't let go. Instead of releasing him, he breaks Tony's second finger instead.

The crowd goes wild. They didn't understand the kissing, or the gentle, face-to-face love-making that was so different from the primal rutting they expected. But this savage climax, after so much disorienting tenderness, is something they do understand.

Gibbs is still fixing him with that steadfast gaze, never once breaking eye contact. Tony nods and clings onto him, one arm wrapped around Gibbs's body for support as he breaks Tony's third finger. Tony screams and buries his head in Gibbs's shoulder.

"Trust me, Tony," Gibbs says softly – and then he breaks his pinkie.

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Gibbs doesn't spare the crowd a second glance as they burst into cheers of approval at his brutality.

Tony is lying crumpled in the sawdust beside him, and he's clearly in no shape to go anywhere.

One of the guards gets into the pit and throws a net over Tony, preparing to drag him out, but Gibbs has no intention of allowing Tony to endure that indignity. He shoves the guard aside and squeezes Tony's arm to get his attention.

"Gonna carry you, Tony. Hold still."

Tony nods, that indefatigable gleam of pure **Tony** shining in his eyes, even though he's shattered right now.

Gibbs pulls Tony to his feet, net and all, and slings him over his shoulder. Tony's heavy, but Gibbs can handle the weight. He shifts to a more comfortable position, then walks back towards the holding pen with his head held high.

"Didn't want the bastards to see you couldn't walk out of there," he tells Tony as he puts him down. He swipes the net aside, and Tony slumps against the bars of the pen; he's clearly in shock, but he'll live.

"Thanks, Boss." Tony gives him a faded smile, and Gibbs wants to find out every single damn thing about what is going on. How did Tony find him, why is he here, and what's his plan – because Gibbs is sure there's some kind of plan. He wants to know what the hell has been happening out in the real world, but now isn't the time or place.

He crouches down beside Tony and gently wipes a streak of blood from his face. It isn't much comfort, but after what they were just forced to do together, Gibbs is wary of getting too close. He has no idea how Tony feels about him right now.

Their respite is only brief, as one of Scott's guards arrives to prod them out of the holding pen. Tony is out of it and can't even stand. Gibbs isn't surprised; between being brutally fucked and having his fingers broken, he wouldn't expect Tony to be able to walk right now. The poor bastard is new to this. Without saying a word, Gibbs hauls Tony up, swings his arm over his shoulder, and helps him walk to the truck.

He can see Scott hurrying towards them as they reach it. He puts Tony down against the wheel and stands in front of him, guarding him. It feels strange having someone to care about after all these months of not allowing himself to care about anyone.

Scott looks furious as he charges up to them. "Damn it, Leroy, what the hell was that?" he explodes when he reaches them.

Gibbs shrugs. "Well, you said I should put on more of a show after a fight."

Scott gazes at him for a moment and then all his puffed up anger seems to dissipate. He gives a loud belly laugh and slaps Gibbs heartily on the arm. "I did, didn't I? I didn't mean anything like **that**, but it definitely shook up the crowd! What an evening! First the refusal and then that; people are calling it the best Fight Night ever!"

He glances down at Tony. “So, this is the new fighter you’ve won for me, huh? He showed some promise before you pulverized him.” He kneels down beside Tony and takes a good look at him, his gaze raking over Tony’s naked body, and Gibbs has to bite back the protective growl that rises unexpectedly in his throat. “Did you have to break his goddamn fingers, Leroy?” Scott says plaintively, glancing up at Gibbs. “I won’t be able to put him in the pit until they heal!”

“Yeah. Shame.”

Gibbs looks down at Tony who looks straight back up at him, a spark of gratitude flashing in his weary eyes. Now he understands why Gibbs broke his fingers. It wasn’t easy, but it was the only way Gibbs could think of, on the spur of the moment, of keeping Tony out of the pit. It’s a short-term solution but it’s bought them a little time.

“What’s your name, son?” Scott asks, and Gibbs realizes that Scott doesn’t have a clue who Tony is and what he means to him. That means Walid kept him in the dark – and with good reason. Scott thought he was sending Gibbs to fight a newbie – a fight he’d easily win. If Scott had known he was actually going to face someone he knew, a close friend and co-worker...well, then the outcome would have been more unpredictable.

Gibbs decides that keeping Scott ignorant of Tony’s identity is the best way forward, and Tony’s no fool; he’s figured the same thing out for himself.

“Tony,” he replies. “Tony DiNardo.” He glances up at Gibbs, who gives a tiny nod of approval. If Scott knew the truth he might keep them apart, and Gibbs desperately wants news from home.

“Well, Tony, you’re new around here, so I’ll let Leroy here show you how it works. My name is James Scott, and you belong to me now. I think you’ll be an asset to my stable, in time. It’s annoying that this had to happen so close to season end though.”

Scott puts a finger on Tony’s jaw and turns his face sideways, examining his bruises, and Gibbs clenches his fists tightly by his sides.

“Tony didn’t show the same killer instinct you showed even in your very first fight, Leroy, but he gave you a few rocky moments in the pit, and I haven’t seen another fighter do that up until now,” Scott says as he examines Tony’s injuries. “I was watching him closely, and he has something all the best fighters have.”

“Yeah? What’s that?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

“He has heart, and that’s an important quality in a fighter. You had him down, but he got up again, and he taunted you, found a few weak spots. We’ll have to work on those, Leroy. But Tony DiNardo definitely has potential.”

Scott gives Tony an assessing look, his eyes raking up and down Tony’s body. “He’s too fat of course – we’ll get him trimmed down, and we’ll work on his strength, get him lifting weights...”

Gibbs isn't hearing any of it. His temper is on a knife-edge, and he's putting everything into not hauling Scott's sorry ass away from Tony and sinking his fist into the bastard's fat face. He knows the drugs are partly responsible for his anger, but the depth of his sudden protectiveness surprises him all the same.

Tony, meanwhile, is looking at Scott with an outraged expression on his face.

"Hey, did you just call me fat?" he asks, and Gibbs finds himself laughing at the very pointed look Tony is giving to Scott's fat gut. He's forgotten when he last laughed, or even what it feels like. There hasn't been anything remotely funny about the past five months. Only Tony could make him laugh at a time like this.

"Don't worry, Tony – we'll soon have you slimmed down for the pit," Scott says, wrapping a hand around Tony's bicep. "And we'll get these pumped up nice and firm too."

Gibbs can see Tony's look of disgust at being viewed as a piece of meat – and so can Scott, who gives one of his hearty laughs and pats Tony's arm. "Better get used to it, son. Your old life is over. I own you now, and if you fuck with me I'll get one of these nice men to take you out back and flay the skin from your bones. Got it?"

He jerks his head in the direction of the guards, and Gibbs takes a protective step forward. Tony glances up at him and the startled look in his eyes forces Gibbs to calm down.

"Got it," Tony says quietly. "I won't give you any trouble, Mr Scott."

"Good. Then you and I will get along just fine. Now, about those fingers – Dr Tanner will take care of them."

Scott levers himself up from where he's crouching in front of Tony and nods at the young doctor, who is hopping around nearby, high as a kite as usual. Gibbs wouldn't leave him in charge of a dog, let alone trust him to set Tony's broken fingers, but he knows from experience that Tanner is as good as it gets.

"When he's done, get them chained up ready for the journey home," Scott orders the guards, and then he walks back in the direction of the pit.

"Oh man, when he cracked your fingers, and they went snap, snap, snap, snap...and the crowd went nuts...so good... such a great night..." Tanner giggles happily as he disappears into the truck to get his medical kit.

"Shit. Is that guy for real?" Tony glances up at Gibbs.

"Oh yeah."

"Great. Walid's doctor is a drunk, and this one's a cokehead," Tony says in a disgusted tone.

"What d'you expect? They only hire the kind of doctor who can't get a job anyplace else," Gibbs replies, crouching down beside him. "Tanner does seem to know something about medicine at least, and he's all you've got, Tony."

“Not all,” Tony says firmly, and Gibbs gives a nod in return, understanding.

Tanner returns to Tony’s side, opens up his kit to get out what he needs, and then turns back to take hold of Tony’s hand.

“This is gonna hurt like a mother!” he announces cheerfully.

Gibbs puts an arm around Tony’s shoulders and pulls Tony’s face against his neck. “Brace yourself, Tony.”

He nods at Tanner over Tony’s head, and Tanner giggles gleefully and pulls the first finger back into place. Tony gives a hoarse scream into Gibbs’s neck, and Gibbs holds him tight, stroking his hair gently. It’s all he can do – nothing is going to make this less painful.

It seems to take forever for Tanner to set each finger, but finally he’s done, and Tony has a white bandage covering his hand – his face is almost the same colour.

Gibbs isn’t sure why it hurts so much to see them wrap their chains around Tony and tie him up in the back of the truck. It never hurt him to see the other fighters in chains, but with Tony it does. Gibbs takes the seat beside Tony. He might be chained, but he’ll protect Tony any way he can.

A little while later, the truck door opens, and Hurrell is prodded inside. Gibbs was worried he might not be able to do what it took to win his fight after what happened to Steve, but his knuckles are torn and bloody, and there’s a dark expression in his eyes. Gibbs can see immediately that he’s just taken out all his grief and anger over Steve’s murder on his opponent in the pit. It’s a method that’s always worked for Gibbs, but he can only imagine how much it cost Hurrell to embrace his dark side.

“You okay?” he asks, but Hurrell ignores him. After he’s chained into place, he rests his head back on the truck wall and closes his eyes. He looks like a man utterly defeated, even in victory.

Gibbs is aware of Tony studying Hurrell and sees the look of dawning realization on Tony’s face.

Tony turns to him. “That’s…”

“Yeah. I know.”

“Sam? Sam Hurrell?” Tony leans forward as much as his chains allow.

Hurrell’s eyes open wearily. “Yeah.” His voice is dull and disinterested.

“My name’s Tony. You don’t know me, but I know all about you. Jan’s told me everything about you these past five months. She’s an amazing woman, and she loves you very much. I know she’d want me to tell you that.”

Hurrell stares at him. An expression of savage anger flares in his eyes and fades just as quickly. “Shut the fuck up,” he snaps, and then he closes his eyes again.

“People keep saying that to me today,” Tony mutters, sitting back again.

“Leave him. It’s been a hard day,” Gibbs says.

“Tell me about it!” Tony gives a little laugh. “First I got drugged, then I got kidnapped, and then I had a weird conversation with the mad hatter in charge of this whole Alice in Fight Club Land. After that some big bastard threatened to rape me, I saw some poor kid get killed in front of me, I had to fight you in the pit, I had the least enjoyable first time sex ever, and my fingers were broken and then mended by Doctor Giggles. Tell me it doesn’t get any worse than this, Gibbs.”

“Wish I could.” Gibbs gives a wry shrug, and Tony sighs. He looks pale and exhausted. There are dark bruises on his jaw from their earlier fight and caked blood on the side of his face. “Damn it, I wish you weren’t here, Tony,” Gibbs says quietly.

“Me too, Gibbs. Me too.”

They’re quiet for the next hour or so as the truck fills up with fighters. Then they’re on the road again, back to Scott’s stable. It’s a long drive, and Tony falls asleep, his head lolling against Gibbs’s shoulder.

Gibbs would do anything for Tony not to be here, but some small, greedy part of him is glad that he’s got Tony back by his side. He’s been deprived of so much for the past five months, but he realizes that the one thing he’s missed the most is the man who has had his six for the past ten years.

Across the truck, Gibbs can see Hurrell watching them. On the journey out here, Steve was resting against Hurrell, like Tony is resting against him now, but Hurrell is going back alone. Gibbs has almost despised Hurrell for his need to take care of his fellow fighters, but now he thinks he understands the man a little better, just as he suspects Hurrell understands him a little better too. Somewhere during the course of the night they swapped roles and each of them walked in the other’s shoes.

Gibbs closes his eyes and allows his head to drop sideways, so that he can feel Tony’s thick, soft hair under his cheek.

He thought that Tony had forgotten about him, but he was an idiot. Tony is and always has been his loyal St Bernard; he would never forget. Now he’s back by his side, where he belongs, and Gibbs thinks he can survive anything with Tony here.

### Chapter Three - Wolf in Sheep's Clothing by Xanthe

Tony is jolted awake when the truck comes to a stop. The back doors are opened, and the fighters are taken out, one by one. There's a long wait, and then Gibbs is removed too, leaving Tony alone with Hurrell in the back of the truck.

"Are you an NCIS agent too?" Hurrell asks.

"Yeah, but they don't know, so let's keep it that way, huh?"

"Whatever." Hurrell looks completely defeated.

"That guy they killed earlier – Steve? You and he were friends?" Tony asks gently.

Hurrell gives a little bark of laughter. "Yeah, Agent whoever the hell you are, we were friends. No, screw that, we were more than friends; we were fucking."

Tony can't hide his surprise. Over the past five months, Jan Hurrell has told him all about her love story with this guy, and he never expected to hear that.

Hurrell looks angry and shamed by his reaction. "Yeah, Jan's faithful husband was fucking some guy in the stalls at night. Not just that guy, either – there were others, before this, when I was in other stables."

"Hey, look, it's none of my business," Tony says quickly.

"You don't know what it's like here. It's been months and the drugs...you have no idea what the drugs do to you. I'm horny all the time – 24/7. I try to remember who I am, but it's so hard, Tony."

"I'm not judging you, Sam, and I don't think Jan would judge you, either."

"She should. She deserves better than me." Hurrell hunches his shoulders moodily.

"Like you said, the drugs are making you..."

"Gibbs doesn't do it!" Hurrell snaps unexpectedly.

"Gibbs doesn't do what?"

"Gibbs doesn't fuck any of us, and he has his pick if he wanted – Scott's made that damn clear. The drugs make it hard to think about anything except fighting and fucking, and that's the way they want us. We're like animals to them. But Gibbs never fucks anyone outside the pit. I have no idea what kind of self-control that takes, but I know that I don't have it."

That sounds like Gibbs. He'd view it as an act of rebellion, and a way to retain some control over his own body in a situation where that's been ripped away from him. Tony can't help but wonder what that bloody-minded rebellion must be costing Gibbs, if even Sam Hurrell, a faithful, loving husband, can't hold out against the drugs.

At that moment the truck door is opened, and Tony is unchained from the wall and pushed out into a huge room, still wearing his manacles. It looks exactly like Walid's stable, and he has a moment of disorientation, wondering if they've brought him back to the same place.

He's so tired that he can barely walk, and he stumbles repeatedly as they shove him down a few hallways and into a communal shower area. His legs don't seem to be working properly, and he aches all over. His face hurts, his hand is throbbing, and his ass is sore too, but he doesn't want to think about that particular ache too much.

The guard removes his manacles and then nods at the shower.

"Talkative, aren't you?" Tony mutters. He looks down on his bandaged hand, wondering how he's going to do this without getting it wet. At that moment the door opens, and he feels a surge of relief as Gibbs walks into the shower room, accompanied by his guard.

"I told Tanner you'd need help," he says, holding up a plastic bag and a rubber band. "I don't think he really gave a damn, but they like keeping me sweet if it doesn't cost them anything."

As Gibbs is their big shining hope in the pits, Tony can believe that. Besides, most sane people are scared of the Gibbs death glare, and he's sure even the cokehead doctor and the armed guards aren't immune to its power.

Gibbs fastens the bag over his wrist, covering the bandage completely, and then he guides Tony under the hot water.

"So, tell me, do you ever get used to the being naked thing?" Tony asks with a grimace. In other circumstances, he'd be embarrassed about hanging out naked with his boss, but right now it's the least of his problems.

"No," Gibbs growls in reply. He puts a finger on Tony's face and turns it, examining the damage. Tony's glad there are no mirrors around, because he has a feeling he doesn't look so pretty right now. "Christ, you look a mess."

"Well, you were hitting me pretty hard for a while back there, before..." *Before you knew who I was.* He doesn't say that out loud, because the guards are there, but it's been bothering him. How could Gibbs NOT have known who he was? Just what is going on inside Gibbs's head right now? He's still there, he's still Gibbs – Tony can see that much – but he's not exactly the Gibbs he knew five months ago. Maybe that's hardly surprising, but is that Gibbs still there, buried somewhere deep inside? And if he is, can Tony reach him?

Gibbs grunts but doesn't reply. He grabs the soap, lathers some in his hands, and then gently wipes away the caked blood on Tony's jaw. Tony mutters a feeble protest when Gibbs begins soaping his back, but he's so tired it's not exactly convincing.

"You're about to fall over. Just shut up and let me get you clean," Gibbs replies, but the flash of guilt in his eyes tells Tony that isn't the only reason he's doing this. "Trust me, if the guards have to do it you'll like that even less."

Tony closes his eyes and rests his head against the shower wall as Gibbs goes about the task. Gibbs is right – he's so tired he can barely stand, and Gibbs is just being his usual efficient



self. He can sense Gibbs's guilt in the gentle, careful way he's washing him – Gibbs punched him repeatedly, fucked him, and then broke his fingers, and now he feels responsible for taking care of him because of that.

The warm water is soothing on his sore muscles, and it feels good to be clean. When he's done, Gibbs guides him out of the shower, throws a towel over him, and gently rubs him dry, and then they're both escorted along yet more narrow hallways and into what's clearly an infirmary.

Dr Tanner is sitting at a desk, a bright, inane grin on his face.

"Ah, good! I wondered if sending Leroy to help was a bad idea; I thought he might break the fingers on your other hand," he announces cheerfully. "And that would have been more work for me!"

Tony has nothing to say to the idiot, so he just sits on the side of an exam table where directed. One of the guards puts a hand on Gibbs's shoulder to push him out of the door, but Gibbs shakes it off.

"I'm staying," he says, stony-faced.

"Now, Leroy, you know these consultations are one on one," Tanner replies.

"I'm staying," Gibbs repeats.

The guard's hand goes to the whip sticking out of his belt, but Gibbs just turns towards him and gives him the death glare. The guard hesitates, and Tony bites back a grin. He was right; all the weapons and whips in the world can't give you the confidence to stare down Leroy Jethro Gibbs when he's in full badass mode.

"Oh, let him stay!" Tanner says with a wave of his hand, and the guard shrugs and leans back against the wall. Anything for an easy life it would seem.

Tony has no choice but to submit as he's poked, prodded, weighed and measured, and a vial of his blood is taken.

"Standard new fighter procedure, Tony," Tanner tells him. "I need to decide what dose of drugs to start you on."

Tony doesn't like the sound of that, but he's too tired to really care right now.

"Not that there's any hurry. I'll discuss it with your owner, but with those fingers you won't be going into the pit for a while," Tanner adds.

Finally the exam is over, and Tanner pushes him towards his guard. "Off you go – time for bed, sleepyhead!" In a different time and place, Tony thinks he'd cheerfully smack the idiot in the mouth. "Is there a spare empty stall?" Tanner glances at a chart on his desk. "We lost a

few fighters this evening, so there should be. Put him in one of those on his own; he needs rest."

"He's sleeping in my stall," Gibbs growls. It's the first thing he's said in the past twenty minutes.

"Really, Leroy? You never share your stall with anyone. Did you take a liking to this pretty boy?" Tanner asks, with another one of his inane giggles. "Did you enjoy the kisses he gave you in the pit? It looked totally gay to me, but maybe that's how you like it, Leroy."

Gibbs gives him the same death glare he gave the guard. "My stall," he repeats stubbornly. "Scott told me I could have any of them I want, and I want him."

In other circumstances, Tony thinks that might sound hot, but right now, with Gibbs like this, it's closer to scary.

Tanner gazes at him for a moment, but he's no match for Gibbs's death glare, either.

"Very well." He shrugs. "I don't care. Just don't break him anymore than you already did, or Scott will be annoyed. It's already doubtful whether we'll be able to put him back in the pit before the end of the season, so Scott will have to feed him through the down season without him having earned his keep."

Gibbs doesn't reply. He just turns and strides out into the hallway. Tony follows him, and the guards fall into place behind them. Gibbs leads them along a few narrow hallways and stops beside a doorway. He goes inside and grabs some bedding from the floor and then moves on again, further down the hallway. They stop outside another stall, and Gibbs jerks his head at the door, gesturing that Tony should go in.

"Knew you'd change your mind, Leroy," one of the guards says with a leering grin, and Tony wonders how Gibbs feels about all these idiots calling him by a name he doesn't like and never uses. "I had a bet with McGuire that you would. Knew you couldn't hold out forever. They're all at it; fucking like rabbits in their stalls at night."

"That why you play your damn radio so loud, Ellis?" Gibbs asks. "Drown out the sound?"

"Nah – I do that to fuck you off. " Ellis gives a big grin and shoves Gibbs into the stall.

Then the door is slammed shut behind them, and Tony hears the jangle of keys as they're locked in.

He looks at Gibbs, and Gibbs looks back at him. It's the first time they've been alone together since Tony arrived, and he has no idea what happens next.

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Gibbs slings the thin mattress, pillow and blanket down on the floor next to his own bedding. The stall is tiny, and the only space for Tony's mattress is pressed up close against his own.

Tony looks terrible, and Gibbs knows he should let him get some sleep, but he has too many questions he needs answered first.

"The stall isn't bugged so we can talk," he says.

"Right." Tony glances around and gives a little whistle. "It really is a 'stall' isn't it? Like in a toilet or a horse's stable. Not much privacy."

"Tony, they don't let us wear any damn clothes; that should have clued you in on how they view our 'privacy'."

"Sorry...I'm just tired...and oh shit...apologies are a sign of weakness, I know!" Tony adds hurriedly. He slaps the back of his own head and then winces and falls down in a heap on the mattresses. "Ow. That hurt much more than usual," he says in such a mournful tone that Gibbs can't help but grin. It's just so very Tony, and it makes him acutely aware of how much he's missed the big goofball. He suppresses an unexpected urge to hug him; he's never been the hugging type, and it'd probably just freak Tony out.

"What's happening, Tony? Fill me in," Gibbs says urgently, leaning against the wall and gazing down on Tony.

"We never gave up looking for you, Gibbs – you need to understand that," Tony says first, and the big goofball is instantly gone. Gibbs can see he's looking at the brave, relentlessly loyal man he knows Tony also is instead. "But we were shut down every which way we turned. Oh, they let us poke around a bit – but in this soul-destroying way, always turning up blank leads, never finding anything useful. I think we got close a few times, but they were onto us and always one step ahead."

"By 'they' – you mean Walid?"

"Yeah – although I didn't know that at the time. I couldn't figure out why we could never get warrants in time, and why the local LEOs were so damn unhelpful wherever we went. One day we'd see a sheriff, and he'd be nice as pie. Next day we'd go back, and he'd be all closed up like a clam. I think it was a combination of bribery and threats – whichever worked. Walid is seriously well-connected, and I mean \*seriously\*," Tony says meaningfully.

"Are you saying he's got Vance in his pocket?" Gibbs demands, frowning.

"Worse – SecNav. Not sure what he's got on him, but I think SecNav's been a naughty boy, accepting bribes over various defence contracts – Walid found out and is blackmailing him. I left McGee digging into that."

McGee...he hasn't heard that name in months and thinking about all the people back at NCIS makes him feel suddenly homesick. Gibbs tries to shove the feeling away, but it's been a long, shocking day, and he can't control his emotions as well as he'd like. The feeling persists, all the stronger for Tony being here. He's having trouble coming to terms with the reality of Tony's presence in what has been, up until now, his own personal nightmare. It feels so strange.

"How are they all?" Gibbs asks quietly. "Abby...Ducky...all of them?"

"They're fine. But worried about you. All of them," Tony repeats firmly. "Nobody gave up on you, Gibbs. Nobody forgot about you."

Gibbs looks down, struggling as unexpected emotions surface, making a lump rise in his throat.

"Gibbs, you didn't think we'd forgotten about you, did you?" Tony asks. "You didn't think we'd walk away and leave you here to rot? That we'd ever just give up on you?"

Gibbs swallows hard. He can't look up for a long time, but when he does he finds Tony's eyes gleaming brightly in the semi-darkness.

"No," he says hoarsely. "No. I knew that you would never give up, Tony." But he can't talk about all the long, lonely nights when it felt that way. They're seared into his soul, and it hurts to even think about them. "So what happened, Tony? How did you end up here?"

"Vance tried to shut me down – on orders from SecNav," Tony says briskly, clearly trying to move them both on from Gibbs's uncharacteristic emotional lapse. "From talking to Walid, I think I was supposed to try and fail, and then, when I was at a low point, they offered me the bribe of a promotion and a hike in pay, on condition that I give up looking for you."

"Boy, they really misjudged you."

"Well, that's the way I like it," Tony says seriously, and Gibbs nods. He's never misjudged Tony or been taken in by the mask Tony presents to the world. He knows Tony likes his opponents to underestimate him, and he's seen the tactic work time and again on a variety of people from murder suspects to the director of Mossad. He's seen Vance being fooled by it too, and he suspects Walid made the same mistake; and that could turn out be the most serious tactical error he'll ever make.

"So, what's the plan?" Gibbs asks, leaning back against the wall. "It can't just be finding me – that gets us nowhere except us both being in captivity."

"Yeah – it's not the plan – well, it's only part of the plan," Tony replies. "See, everything these guys do is transportable. I even found the site of one stable a few days ago, but when I showed up again the next day it was gone. They're wealthy men, with resources. Moving their fighters around the country for fights and to hide them is easy for them."

"So, we need to tell someone where to find us," Gibbs says.

"Yup. That's where the plan comes in." Tony pauses and takes a deep breath. "It, uh, well it involves technology, Gibbs."

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "Tell me."

"Okay – McGee has set up this gizmo. I won't go into details; it was boring enough when he explained it to me. All I have to do is steal a cell phone and call a number I've memorized. He has this automatic trace set up – the minute that number gets called, any time, day or night, it starts locating the source automatically. Ideally he needs the line to stay open for about 28 seconds..."

"A cell phone?" Gibbs interrupts, frowning. "Christ, DiNozzo – how the hell are we going to get our hands on a cell phone? None of the guards is allowed to bring a cell phone into the building. Nobody is – not even Tanner."

"Yeah right." It's Tony's turn to roll his eyes now. "And I'm not supposed to play Tetris at work, Gibbs, but that's never stopped me!"

"Worse you ever got for playing Tetris at work was a slap on the back of the head," Gibbs retorts. "What these guys would get for bringing a cell phone to work is a bullet through the back of the head. Big difference."

Tony makes a face. "You do make a good point there, Gibbs, but it's the only plan I've got. We just need to be vigilant. At some point one of them will screw up – and we have to take advantage of that."

"No," Gibbs snaps.

Tony's head jerks up. "No?"

"No. It's too dangerous."

"What?" Tony looks confused. "Come on, Gibbs..." then he pauses. "You have a different plan? Is that it?"

Gibbs shrugs. "When the season is over, and when I win, Scott says he'll give me privileges – move me to a house somewhere. I figure the security will be a hell of a lot looser there, so there will be far more opportunity for escape."

"And between now and then you have to fight that bastard Mac in the pit – and not only survive but win," Tony points out.

"You think I can't?" Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

Tony sighs. "I'd never bet against you, but that guy is a man mountain, and he's a serious head case as well. I met him at Walid's place." He shudders theatrically. "Nice guy; told me that if I won, he'd ask for me to be put in his stall so he could fuck me."

"I saw him fight tonight. I know he'll be hard to beat."

"So..."

"So, I'll just have to beat him," Gibbs says firmly. Tony opens his mouth to argue, but Gibbs cuts him off. "I said no, Tony, and I mean it. Do not try and steal anyone's cell phone. That's an order."

"But..."

"You've been here for five goddamn minutes, and I've been here five months. You don't know anything about this place. I do!"

Tony stares at him for a moment and then gives a reluctant nod.

"Good." Gibbs exhales loudly. "Okay – now, is the Tony DiNardo cover watertight, or do we need to worry about Scott finding out who you really are?"

"Jenny set up a full paper trail for the cover which is still in place," Tony replies. "There hasn't been anything new on DiNardo for a few years since that assignment ended, but hopefully Scott won't notice that. Man, I never thought I'd have to use that name again. What a clusterfuck of a mission that was."

He gives an elaborate shudder, and the movement makes him sway; he looks like he's about to pass out.

"You need to get some sleep. Now," Gibbs orders.

Tony doesn't argue this time. He just slides under the blanket, closes his eyes, and is asleep within seconds.

Gibbs sighs. He had hoped for more promising news. Now he has all the complications of protecting Tony without any real hope of rescue. It's not good.

He goes over to the mattress next to Tony and lies down on it, pulling the blanket over his body. He's spent every single night in this stall for the past five months on his own, and it feels strange having someone sleeping beside him. He can hear the soft snuffle of Tony's breathing and can smell the scent of him – soap mingled with some smell that's all Tony, and that reminds him vividly of their days working together at NCIS, a lifetime ago.

He closes his eyes...but all he can see is Tony lying beneath him in the pit whispering, "I won't be raped" fiercely in his ear. He clenches his hands into fists, willing the image away. They've both been avoiding that subject since they've been alone together, but is it something that can be avoided forever?

What the hell kind of relationship can he and Tony have after this, even if they do escape? How can they ever work together again after he screwed Tony in the sawdust in front of all those people? Yes, the alternative was so much worse, but he and Tony both know one horrible truth – that a part of him enjoyed the sex. It was such a blessed relief to sink into Tony's body and feel the tight heat of his hole milking his cock. He hates that he was forced to do it, but he hates the fact that his body took pleasure in it more. How can they ever get beyond that?

He opens his eyes and lies there, looking up at the ceiling. Christ, this is such a mess!

There's another problem with having Tony in his stall; one that he hadn't considered. He's used to jerking off, often more than once a night. It only relieves the aching pressure in his balls for a short while, but it's some respite from the constant urge to fuck. Now, with Tony here, that activity will have to be curtailed. It was bad enough being forced to fuck him in the pit, but Gibbs has his pride; he's not going to jerk off in front of him like a randy teenager unable to control himself.

Tony mumbles something in his sleep and turns over, and one of his arms comes to rest on Gibbs's hip. Gibbs can feel his warm breath tickling the back of his neck, and it's more than he can stand.

He gets hold of the hand on his hip and slings it away, shoving Tony as far from him as he can in the process. Tony mumbles something again, but he doesn't wake up.

Somewhere down the hallway, Gibbs hears a couple of fighters in their stall, fucking noisily. It's a familiar sound, but this time it gets to him more than ever before. Presumably Ellis isn't on hallway guard duty or the radio would be blaring out too, but tonight he'd welcome that if it shut out the noisy pants and moans and the wet, slapping sounds from down the hall.

Gibbs closes his eyes again, but this time he finds himself fantasising about turning over, grabbing Tony and sinking his hard cock into that warm, tight hole again. He knows it's the drugs, but that doesn't make it any easier. There is no way he'd do that to Tony, who worked so hard to make it seem like the sex they had in the pit was consensual, but the images taunt him all the same.

Gibbs takes hold of his pillow and buries his teeth in it, stifling the scream of helpless, frustrated rage.

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Tony wakes up a little while later and immediately remembers where he is. It's like waking from a nightmare to find you're still in one. His body aches all over, and he moans as he stretches out on the thin mattress on the floor.

He can hear noises down the hallway – sex noises. He closes his eyes again and then is aware of another sound. Gibbs is breathing hard and there's a rhythmic rustling sound emerging from under his blanket. Tony realizes that the poor bastard is trying to jerk off – quietly, so as not to wake him. He can only guess how humiliating this must be for Gibbs. He's such a proud, private man; this must be its own special kind of torture for him.

Tony thinks about it for a minute. They're going to be trapped here, at close quarters, for God knows how long. Hurrell told him about Gibbs's phenomenal self-control in not fucking any of the other fighters, but the poor guy needs some release. He shouldn't have to feel ashamed for trying to meet the needs caused by the drugs they're pumping into him.

It's a risk...but Tony decides it's one worth taking. He turns over and slides his good hand under Gibbs's blanket.

There's a momentary startled hiss. "DiNozzo!" Gibbs growls, grabbing hold of his wrist as his hand goes lower.

"It's okay, let me," Tony says softly into Gibbs's ear. "Boarding school," he adds by way of explanation.

Gibbs releases his grip on his wrist with a sharp exhalation of breath. Tony moves his hand and finds Gibbs's hard cock. He's pretty good at this, knowing just the right pressure to apply in all the right places, and he rubs a firm rhythm along the hard shaft. Gibbs's breathing gets

faster and faster, and Tony can feel he's close, but also that he's holding on, unable to completely give into the pleasure and have his release.

"Let it go," he whispers. "Trust me," he adds, remembering the pit.

Gibbs gasps, his body shuddering, and then he relaxes, moaning softly and rocking into Tony's skilful hand. A few seconds later, Tony feels his warm come spilling out over his fingers. There's a momentary almost shocked silence, and then Gibbs gives a strangled sob and turns towards him. He buries his face in Tony's neck, all the muscles in his back taut and quivering, and Tony wonders how much it cost him to have such a human moment.

For one horrible moment he's afraid Gibbs is crying. Then he realizes there are no tears, but Gibbs is breathing fast, making these little gasping sounds into his neck. Tony wonders if he did the right thing, but then he suddenly understands that Gibbs isn't upset – he's overwhelmed. The man has suffered months of loneliness and abuse, so for someone to touch him with gentle affection and give him that kind of unselfish release...it's all too much for him.

Tony puts his bandaged hand on the back of Gibbs's shorn head and strokes him gently. "S'okay. Ssh, ssh..."

Gibbs slowly calms down, his breathing deepening, and at some point in the night they both fall asleep again.

Tony is woken up a few hours later by a loud klaxon blaring and the lights in the hallway outside being turned up to full brightness. He sits up blearily, to find Gibbs is already up and pissing in the toilet in the corner.

"Get up." Gibbs finishes up and jerks his head at the door. "Time to get moving. They don't like it if you're slow."

Tony gets up, every muscle protesting the movement. The door is opened by one of the guards, and Gibbs stalks out of it without a second glance at him.

"I get it," Tony mutters under his breath as he follows on behind. "We don't talk about what happens in the night. I get the message – loud and clear."

He's actually relieved; the idea of having a chat with his taciturn boss about anything involving sex would probably just about kill him on top of everything else. It's not as if his own avoidance techniques aren't just as finely honed as Gibbs's, if not quite as direct. Besides, there was something so intimate and humbling about what they shared last night that he doesn't want to drag it out into the open and ruin it by talking about it.

They're herded back to the showers, where Gibbs helps him wash again, which feels, to Tony, just as intimate as the hand job. This whole situation is so confusing. He might have been in love with Gibbs for years, but he's under no illusion that the man returns his feelings. Right now, Gibbs is being driven by a combination of loneliness and the drugs in his system, and Tony knows he's treading a fine line between alleviating the effects of both those things while at the same time not taking advantage of Gibbs.



After showering, they're prodded into another room to eat. Tony's so hungry he doesn't really care what's put in front of him, but he notices there's no coffee, which is yet another thing his caffeine addicted boss is having to manage without right now.

Breakfast over, they're taken to a huge training room, complete with punching bags, boxing ring, treadmills, rowing machines, and every variety of gym equipment, all of it state of the art.

Tony stands and watches as the trainers set the fighters to work on various machines. Now he understands why Gibbs has that lean, muscled look; he's been doing a fitness boot camp for the past five months. "World's worst way to diet," he mutters to himself.

Nobody seems interested in him, so he sits down in the corner to watch. He supposes they'll devise a training regime for him at some point, but for now he's being ignored. In fact, both the trainers seem far more interested in Gibbs – and he's aware just how important Gibbs is around here. He's Scott's ticket to the big time, and they're putting everything into him.

"Hey," a voice says, and he looks around to see Hurrell coming over. "Thought I should..." Hurrell shuffles his feet. "Look, I want to apologise for last night. I was in a bad place after what happened to Steve, but I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

"No problem." Tony gestures to the floor, and Hurrell crouches down beside him, his back to the wall. "Are they always all over him like this?" Tony nods at where the trainers are taping Gibbs's fingers, talking to him intently.

"Yeah. The guards are always close by too. He's their star asset – they guard him well, and they train him well. Can't say I care; takes the heat off the rest of us." Hurrell shrugs. "Look, Tony," he glances around, lowering his voice. "Have you talked to Gibbs about getting us out of here?"

Tony chews on his lip thoughtfully. "Yeah. We talked." He's still having trouble making sense of Gibbs's vehemence about not trying to escape; maybe Hurrell can shed some light on it.

"And? See, if there's anything going down I want in on it, only he says there isn't. Practically bit my head off when I asked him about it."

Tony leans forward. "I had the same problem, and it threw me. Trust me, it didn't sound like the guy I knew back at NCIS."

Hurrell nods eagerly. "I know what you mean! I felt the same way! Look, Tony – Gibbs is a legend around here. All the fighters are in awe of him. He's a natural born leader, and we'd do just about anything he asks."

Tony nods thoughtfully. "Yeah – now that sounds like the Gibbs I know."

"So, if he's that strong, mentally as well as physically, why the hell isn't he trying to escape?"

"I don't know. I mean, they've beaten him – you can see the marks on his back – but..." Tony trails off, gazing over to where Gibbs is striding towards a punching bag, a hungry, intense look in his eyes.

"They haven't broken him, Tony," Hurrell tells him. "Trust me – I've seen men they've broken, and they're useless. Gibbs isn't like that. There's something kind of feral and untamed about him – there's no way these bastards have broken him."

"Any idea what's going on with him then?"

Hurrell gives a little sigh. "Maybe – it's just a hunch – I don't know the guy as well as you. But sometimes I worry that he's got sucked into this whole thing, that he's forgotten that it's not about winning the fights – it's about finding a way out of here. I wonder if, as much as he hates it, maybe he also enjoys it too. He seems to come alive in the pit, like it's where he feels most at home and can express some truth about himself that he has to keep locked up the rest of the time."

Tony sits back. In all his concerns over Gibbs's mental state, that's something he hadn't considered. Gibbs going native – is that possible? If you'd asked him that about the man he knew a few months ago, he'd have said not only "no", but a resounding "hell no!" But this man – the one with the prowling, wolfish intensity in his every move – the man who took several minutes to even recognize him in the pit last night? Tony is not so sure.

"Have you spoken to him about any of this?" he asks quietly.

"Yeah...but he just gets that dark, angry look, and shoots me those glares of his; the ones that are supposed to make me shut up."

"But you don't?"

"No. I've been getting in his face, calling him on it whenever I can, getting angry with him, trying to force him into facing up to it."

"Ah." Tony winces.

"What?"

"That's not how you handle Gibbs, Sam. Trust me, I should know. I've worked with the guy for ten years."

Hurrell gives a little grin. "Ten years – and you're still alive? Hell, Tony, are you some kind of masochist?"

Tony laughs. "Maybe, Sam, maybe I am – where Gibbs is concerned, anyway. I think in all that time I got angry with him about...three times?" He counts in his head. "Yeah...three. It doesn't work very well."

"Then what does?"

"He's an intense guy – and he's got one hell of a temper on him. You can't meet that anger with more anger, because trust me, no matter how angry you get he can get ten times angrier. He can do angry like nobody else I've ever known."

"Yeah, I had noticed."

"And he's always more angry with himself than he is with anyone else. It's no use telling him when he's fucked up – he always knows that, and he'll be beating himself up far worse than you ever could. So you douse the flames, you don't fan them. You bring him out of it."

"How?"

Tony grins. "You make him laugh. You joke around, you goof off, and you tease him, and that way you remind him that he's human and that he needs people, no matter how much he hates that fact. He's lost more in his life than most of us could lose and stay halfway sane or sober. Sometimes that gets to him, and he becomes lost in a dark kind of headspace – and that's when you have to pull him out of it with a stupid joke, or a prank, or anything to distract him and make him smile."

"He smiles? I've never seen it," Hurrell says with a wry shake of his head.

"Oh yeah, he smiles! Not often, but when he does, you know you've done something right. You can get in his face and call him on his shit – he needs that sometimes – but don't do it with anger. Stay calm and give him something to laugh at too."

Tony watches as Gibbs buries a fist deep in the punching bag. "Yeah, he can be a bastard, but he's also a guy who'll risk his life for you, without question. He's a guy who looks out for all kids like they're all his own flesh and blood, who needs to see justice done like he needs to breathe, and who would never, ever leave a man behind. So you just have to remind him of that occasionally."

Tony shrugs, never taking his eyes off Gibbs. "You help him remember that he's not just a guy who can kill with his bare hands, but also a guy who can build these beautiful boats that actually sail on water."

"He builds boats?" Hurrell raises a disbelieving eyebrow.

"Beautiful boats – and with his own hands. He won't use power tools."

"Sounds like you know him really well."

"Yeah." Tony looks thoughtfully across the room, to where Gibbs is pounding away at the punching bag like it's his worst enemy. "Yeah, I do, Sam. And one thing I know is that you don't reach Leroy Jethro Gibbs by getting angry with him and telling him what he's not. You do it by sticking with him and reminding him what he is."

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Gibbs isn't a runner; running bores the hell out of him, and there's something so soulless about just pounding away on a treadmill without getting anywhere. He prefers sparring in the

ring, or punching, or lifting weights, but it isn't his choice. Frank, the chief trainer, has punched his workout into the treadmill, and Gibbs knows he won't be allowed to eat, rest, or piss until he's completed it.

He watches out of the corner of his eye as Tony does what Tony does best: nosing out information. Tony is busy making friends, charming everyone in the room – guards, trainers and fighters alike. Tony has various strategies at his disposal, and Gibbs is familiar with every single one of them.

There is stupid Tony – he's deliberately idiotic, mangling movie quotes, tripping over his own toes and generally acting the idiot. That Tony is the one he starts off being, lulling his audience into a false sense of security by presenting himself as a harmless idiot.

Then there is the empathetic Tony. Gibbs watches as Tony identifies a target – one of the guards standing by the door, looking bored – and goes over to him. He makes a joke, and the guard grunts. Tony leans in, talking softly, and the guard starts to engage, nodding, talking back, holding a conversation, then smiling, and looking at Tony with genuine interest. Tony is making them see him as a real person, not just another fighter. Gibbs tried the same tactic when he first arrived too, for all the good it did him.

Finally, there is smart Tony. Gibbs speeds up on the treadmill as Tony misdirects the guard with some extravagant hand gestures, maybe doing one of his Jack Nicholson impressions. Gibbs is vaguely aware that the fighter on the treadmill next to him is breathing heavily, his face bright red, sweat flying off him, but nothing can distract him from watching what Tony is doing. He sees Tony knocking the guard's arm and then apologising extravagantly, patting him down as he does so... and Gibbs sees one of Tony's hands slip into the man's pocket.

Damn it! He told Tony not to go looking for a cell phone! Gibbs runs as fast as he can, keeping one eye on Tony the entire time in case his attempt at pickpocketing has been noticed. Tony is still talking manically, still waving his arms around. Gibbs can feel the sweat pouring off his body – if he can just get to the end of the session the trainer will let him take a break, and then he can go and speak to Tony

The treadmill slows and comes to a stop, and Frank comes over. He takes one look at the time and distance covered and gives a low whistle.

"That's your best time ever, Leroy. Well done. Take ten."

Gibbs grabs a towel and wipes the sweat off his forehead and is about to stride over to Tony when a sound behind him grabs his attention. The fighter who was on the next treadmill is standing there, head down, his chest heaving, and Frank is yelling at him.

"You're too fucking slow, Stuart! I've warned you before – if you don't cover the distance in thirty minutes, you pay for it."

Frank waves his hand, and the guard who was talking to Tony comes striding over. Tony jogs along behind him, stopping when he reaches Gibbs's side.

"What's happening?" he whispers.

Gibbs gives him a hard sideways glare. "You'll see."

"Please...no...I'm just tired. I fought in the pit last night, and I won! Please, please...don't..." Stuart begs pathetically. Gibbs puts a hand on Tony's shoulder, feeling the muscles tense under his fingers.

The guard shoves Stuart to the floor and pulls the whip out of his belt. It all happens so quickly – the rise and fall of the whip, the welts rising, red and angry, on Stuart's back, and the crescendo of Stuart's sobs and screams as he places his arms over his head to protect himself, grovelling on the floor at the guard's feet.

It's not a hard whipping – Gibbs has had far worse – but it is shocking in its swift brutality. He can feel Tony pulling forward, his instinct to help the poor bastard taking the beating, and Gibbs tightens his grip and forces him to stay still. He had the same instinct himself once, back when he was new, but he learned the hard way that it helps nobody and costs you dearly.

Then it's over. Stuart is a quivering wreck on the floor, sobbing and shaking, the red whip marks standing out in livid intensity on his white skin.

Gibbs digs his fingers into Tony's shoulder and propels him towards the table in the corner of the room where the drinks are lined up. He shoves Tony against the wall.

"See, you stupid, dumb idiot. It's not a game, Tony. It's real. Do not fuck with these people.

Tony is staring at him from wide, shocked eyes. "I know...shit...that poor bastard...but I know, Gibbs...I..."

"I saw you!" Gibbs hisses. "I saw you searching the guard for a cell phone, Tony. I ordered you not to go looking for trouble, because if you do, trust me, you'll find it."

"I just spoke to that guy...the guard who just...he was nice...we talked about football..."

"Yeah, and if you screw up he'll throw you down and whip you like he whipped Stuart, without hesitating. He's not your friend, Tony, and he's never going to be your damn friend, no matter how many of your stupid Jack Nicholson impressions you do!"

Gibbs finally releases Tony's shoulder and grabs a bottle of water from the table. He drinks it all down, swallowing furiously, glancing around the gym. Everyone has gone back to their training regimes as if the ugly interlude with Stuart never happened. Stuart is still lying on the floor shaking. Gibbs watches as Frank goes over to him.

"Get back on the treadmill and do it again, and this time do it faster," Frank orders, nudging Stuart with his boot. Stuart is still sobbing as he slowly gets up and walks back to the treadmill, his head down.

Gibbs hears Tony coming up behind him.

"My Jack Nicholson impressions aren't that bad, are they?" Tony whispers in his ear.

Gibbs can't stop the grunt of laughter that escapes from his lips; only Tony could make him laugh at a time like this.

"Worse than bad," he growls, getting himself under control.

"Damn it. I'll have to work on them some more," Tony says. He puts one hand on Gibbs's shoulder and squeezes, and then he moves away.

Gibbs stands there, breathing heavily, and not from the exertion on the treadmill. Somehow Tony just turned everything around, pulled the rug out from under him, and reminded Gibbs that now he's here and everything has changed. He made him laugh, for God's sake!

Gibbs watches as Tony walks over to where Sam Hurrell is standing, and he finds himself fixating on Tony's ass as he walks. He's been living with hairy, sweaty, naked men for months now and has never found any of them remotely attractive, but now he finds himself appreciating the sweet curve of Tony's ass where it meets the top of his long legs. He closes his eyes, remembering the feel of Tony's skilful fingers stroking his hard cock in the middle of the night, and the heat of his breath on the back of his neck.

Why did Tony do that, especially after he fucked him in the pit? How can Tony not hate him, at least on some level, right now? Gibbs knows how he'd feel if their roles were reversed. The pain and humiliation would rankle, even if his logical mind knew that the alternative was so much worse. Tony seems to have taken being fucked up the ass in his stride, and Gibbs can't comprehend that. He didn't deserve Tony's gentle touch in the night, or the compassionate words whispered in his ear. They both know he took some pleasure in that fucking in the pit. Tony saw it in his eyes, and it shames him. It makes him feel exposed, weak and guilty, and he hates those emotions.

He watches as Tony shares a joke with Sam Hurrell and another emotion rears its ugly head, one he's completely unprepared for: jealousy.

It's just one more thing to feed to the dark wolf. Gibbs strides over to where Frank is waiting and channels his anger into a vigorous session with the punching bag.

"You are on fire today, Leroy," Frank says approvingly some time later, as Gibbs wipes the sweat from his body with a towel. "Best workout I've ever seen from you. What's the reason?"

Gibbs glances over to where Tony is still talking to Hurrell. "No reason," he lies.

He puts in his best day ever in training – which is unusual after Fight Night as he's usually too tired to do any personal bests.

He's relieved when the day is over, and it's time for dinner. He gets his tray of food as usual, sits down, and glances up as Tony sits down opposite him, a look of disgust on his face.

"This is food?" Tony asks dubiously, pushing a piece of carrot around the plate with his plastic knife like it's some kind of alien life form. They're eating the usual healthy dinner of chicken, brown rice, and a multitude of grilled vegetables. It's fairly tasteless, but Gibbs is so hungry he doesn't care.

"Yeah, Tony. It's food."

"Even this?" Tony holds up a piece of broccoli on his fork, gazing at it quizzically, and Gibbs bites back another grunt of laughter.

"It's broccoli, Tony. Just eat it. It's okay."

Tony takes a mouthful and then makes an extravagantly repulsed face. "You and I have different definitions of 'okay', clearly," he mutters reaching for his cup of water and gulping it down. "So tell, me, Gibbs – when's pizza night?"

"No pizza. No popcorn, chocolate, or Chinese. No noodles, no hamburgers, and no coffee." Gibbs sighs as he says that last item.

"Apart from all the other reasons this place sucks, this place really **sucks**," Tony says mournfully.

Gibbs glances around. Usually he eats alone, his demeanour making it very clear that he doesn't appreciate anyone sitting at his table, let alone talking to him. But tonight, a whole clutch of the other fighters have sat down around him – no, not around him – around **Tony**, and Tony just happens to be sitting with him.

Normally, his body language tells them to stay away, but Tony's body language is clearly inviting them to join them. Gibbs remembers the many conversations Tony had with the other fighters during the course of the day, all the clowning around, the jokes, and the movie impressions. Back in the office, when they're trying to get work done, Tony's more idiotic characteristics were irritating to his co-workers, but here, where there is no entertainment, Tony is like TV.

Gibbs has a sudden impression of what Tony must have been like in the closed, confined quarters of boarding school. Tony is used to communal living, bad food, and the exclusive company of the male gender, and he knows how to handle it. Being in the Marines has equipped Gibbs to handle it too – and Hurrell – but some fighters, without that kind of background, struggle more here. Tony's innate charisma shines very brightly in this environment, and Gibbs can see why the other fighters are drawn to him.

"So...pizza! It has to be pepperoni, sausage, and extra cheese for me – you?" Tony glances sideways at Hurrell, who is sitting next to him.

"Ham and mushroom – no question." Hurrell grins, shovelling a forkful of rice in his mouth.

Around the table the fighters start shouting out their favourite pizza toppings, and soon Tony has got everyone talking to everyone else, instead of the usual muted dinner conversations Gibbs is more familiar with.

"Gibbs?" Tony asks, and Gibbs can sense the entire table tensing. They aren't aware that Tony already knows him, and newbies don't usually dare to initiate casual conversations with him. They aren't sure how he'll respond.

Tony leans back, a grin on his face. "Let me guess..." he murmurs thoughtfully. Gibbs glares at him some more, and Tony's grin widens. "Pepperoni, ham, beef, pork sausage, Italian sausage, and bacon. Some would say they don't go together, but I bet you like your pizzas as carnivorous as possible."

Gibbs rolls his eyes. Tony knows his pizza order all too well from various late nights at the office working cases over the years. "Lucky guess," he says, deadpan, and Tony bursts out laughing.

The rest of the table seems to view it as a good omen that Gibbs hasn't sunk his fist into Tony's face for his audacity, and everyone relaxes and the conversation starts flowing again. Now that Tony has shown them that he's not the ogre of pit legend, people even include him in their conversations, and he finds himself being drawn in, despite himself.

It feels strange to be talking to people he's seen around for weeks but never had more than a cursory exchange of words with before. He finds himself relaxing, and he's aware of Hurrell's surprised gaze falling upon him several times during the course of the meal. Then Hurrell looks at Tony and gives him an impressed little nod, and Gibbs wonders what the hell that was all about.

After dinner, they're herded back to their stalls to sleep.

"They're nice guys," Tony says, as he shakes out his blanket.

"Yeah, and next time you meet them they could be slamming their fists into your face in the pit and then after that..." Gibbs stops, fighting down the anger. "There are ways of getting by in here, Tony."

"I know." Tony nods. "And yours are different to mine."

Gibbs thinks back to how he was when he first arrived and wonders whether Tony will still view it the same way in five months' time. That thought makes him angry again; he doesn't want Tony to be here in five months' time. He doesn't damn well want Tony to be here now – and yet he doesn't want to be here without him, either.

He bends down to grab his own blanket and can feel Tony watching him. Heat rises to his face as he remembers what happened between them the previous night.

"How did you get the scars on your back?" Tony asks unexpectedly.

"I was whipped," Gibbs replies, turning to give him the death glare.

"Well, duh – I figured that out, Boss. Why were you whipped?"

"You know why, Tony." Gibbs lies down on his mattress, pulls the blanket over himself, and turns his back on Tony.

There's silence for a bit.

"That's cryptic, Boss, even by your standards," Tony says eventually.



"Tony, you know me, and you've seen how this place works. You're a bright boy, no matter how hard you work at trying to make people think you're not, so you figure it out."

There's another silence. Then he hears Tony turning too, and a hand comes to rest casually on his hip. He thinks about it for a moment, but the truth is it's been a tiring day, he's exhausted, and Tony's hand isn't doing any harm, so he doesn't shove it off.

The truth is also that it's warm and comforting, and he likes it – and inside the light wolf gets thrown a little scrap of food.

He wakes up in the middle of the night and is immediately aware he has an erection. He often does – day or night. He long ago stopped being embarrassed by it, or even taking much notice of it. It's the same for most of the fighters – it's impossible to stop the body's physical reactions to the drugs they keep pumping into them.

Having Tony here made it humiliating all over again at first, just like it was in the early days, but Tony's surprising gesture last night somehow removed his shame. Tony understands. He gets it. He might not be being fed any drugs himself – yet – but he made it seem like something normal that Gibbs didn't have to worry about or hide.

All the same, Gibbs hesitates. Beside him, he hears Tony move his head on his pillow.

"You awake?" Tony asks softly.

"Yeah. I...I'm gonna jerk off."

"Need a hand?"

He hesitates again. It felt so much better to have Tony's hand on his hard cock after the long nights taking care of it alone, but he doesn't want to give in to that kind of weakness.

"No," he says firmly.

It helps not to have to hide the tell-tale grunts and thrusts as he wraps his hand around his cock and begins to rub it. He finds his mind wandering back to earlier in the day, watching the sweet curve of Tony's ass as he walked across the gym. He knows how it feels to be deep inside that ass, and it makes him moan softly. It feels somehow wrong to be jerking off, thinking about Tony, while Tony is lying right beside him, and he takes the pressure off, his erection wilting slightly in response.

Tony turns over and puts his hand on his hip again. Gibbs closes his eyes, fighting it, but the light wolf inside him seems determined to be fed. It wants the sense of intimacy from last night that he has been trying to deny it.

He can't deny it anymore. He grabs Tony's hand where it's lying on his hip and slowly guides it down towards his cock. Tony doesn't say a word. He just moves in close, rests his chin on Gibbs's shoulder, and takes his cock firmly in his hand.

Gibbs arches his back. It feels so damn good. He's hungry for human touch and companionship, and he trusts Tony. He couldn't let his guard down in this way with anyone

else. He'd punch Hurrell, or McGee, or anyone else who tried to touch him like this, but somehow with Tony it's okay. It's more than okay.

Tony's hand is skilled and expert on his cock, but that isn't what makes it so pleasurable. It's the way Tony murmurs little words of encouragement into his ear and the warmth of his breath on the back of his neck. It's knowing that he can relax, and that Tony will take care of it. It's the feeling that he can let go, for just a little while; he doesn't have to hold it in or handle it alone.

He comes with a low growl of pleasure and is immediately overwhelmed by a sensation of wellbeing. He feels warm, relaxed, and sated. There is so little kindness to be found in this place, and now he understands why Sam Hurrell has always gone looking for this kind of comfort. They are all trapped in this big, terrifying nightmare. They endure privations and ordeals on a daily basis. It feels good to take some respite wherever you can find it.

He turns over and looks at Tony's familiar features in the dark. He won't say thanks – not in so many words at least – that isn't his style.

"When I first got here, I pissed them off," he says. Not over stupid things, because he's a pragmatist and always has been, but he asked questions and intervened when he was supposed to look the other way. "I knew how you would react to Stuart being punished earlier because that was my reaction too. That's why I held you back."

Tony places his good hand on Gibbs's back, and Gibbs can feel his fingers locating one of the long scars that stretches from his shoulder to his hip. Tony traces the scar all the way down with slow, gentle sweeps of his fingertips.

"There was this kid – Brian – reminded me of Jimmy Palmer. You know the type. He didn't belong here – nobody does, but he didn't have a fighting bone in his body. Failed every single workout, got beaten all the time."

"And you got these scars trying to protect him," Tony says quietly.

"They kept beating up on him. He was going under."

In the first couple of weeks he'd irritated the hell out of the guards. He asked awkward questions, challenged them, and made them feel uneasy. They didn't know he was going to amount to anything in the pit, but somehow they sensed that he was a threat. Maybe because back then he didn't know how to keep the dark wolf down and only bring it out in the pit, and it snarled at them once too often.

He took several beatings during the early days, but it was the beating over Brian that caused the scars. The guards, especially Ellis, enjoyed bullying Brian – he had victim written all over him, and they made his life a misery. When Brian failed yet another workout, Gibbs stepped in to take the heat off him, and Ellis decided he'd pissed them off once too often. They strung him up like an animal and whipped him long and hard until his back was red raw, the blood flowing freely. It was supposed to teach him a lesson. He thinks maybe it did; just not the one they expected him to learn.

There's nothing else to say. Gibbs rests his head on Tony's shoulder, and Tony continues tracing those languid fingers up and down his scarred back until they both fall asleep again.

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Tony is slowly learning that any intimacy he shares with Gibbs in the night is gone by the morning. The next day everything is back to normal, with Gibbs growling and glaring, and Tony goofing off to try and provoke even the slightest hint that Gibbs is human and not the fighting automaton this place wants him to be.

Even two days into this ordeal, Tony is wondering if the only way to cope is to shut down and turn in on yourself, the way Gibbs has done. The unrelenting routine of every single day must get to you after a while. First the showers, then the dining room, and the food that's healthy but always the same, day in, day out; then into the gym all day, with brief rest periods for water and lunch, and finally dinner, another shower, and then bed. There is nothing to look forward to, no change to the routine, and no end ever in sight. It's soul-destroying.

Occasionally, a fighter gets called to the infirmary for a check-up, or someone gets punished for not completing his training regime fast enough. The combination of drugs and bored, helpless, frustrated men doesn't make for a peaceful environment and fights break out regularly. Tony is never sure what sets them off, but suddenly raised voices will turn into snarling, the men sounding like dogs, followed by the brutal crunching sound of fists slamming into flesh and bone, before the guards break it up.

Fight Night looms for all of them at the end of the week, an ordeal they all hate and fear. The fighters are worked hard in the gym all week, herded and confined into stalls and denied any entertainment during their down time, and then at the end of the week they're forced out into the pit, where they might die or be raped. It's hardly surprising they fight among themselves.

Tony has an appreciation for Gibbs's self-control. The man strides through it all like the colossus of pit legend that he is. He never initiates a fight, gets involved, or breaks them up. If the guards yell at him, he treats them to his death glare and slowly does as he's told as if it's by his own choice. He gives them no excuse to punish him, but he doesn't talk or laugh with them, or try to make friends with them, either. Tony is sure that some of them are scared of Gibbs; only their whips, guns and tazers keep them brave around him.

How much does it cost him though, Tony wonders, as he watches Gibbs put in another good time on the treadmill. The trainers still haven't taken any notice of Tony. His arrival this late in the season, and his broken fingers, make him completely useless to them. There is nothing for him to do but hang around and observe, the way Gibbs taught him to observe. It's what he does best. It's his job.

Tony notices which guards are on duty and how often they're rotated. He talks to each of them, trying to get a sense of their strengths and weaknesses. Some chat to him quite easily, talking about their families, sports, movies, sex...and others just grunt and look away. Maybe they're ashamed of what they're doing, or maybe they know he's trying to get them to see him as a real person, not just another prisoner to be herded and hit.

The other fighters like to talk to him too, during their breaks. He's someone new, someone to break up the tedium, and he tries to keep them entertained. He's always loved playing the

clown, and this audience is more appreciative than his usual duo of a disdainful Ziva and an eye-rolling McGee.

There's something incredibly un-erotic about being surrounded by so many naked men. Tony has enjoyed plenty of gay porn in his time, but a gym full of fit, naked guys is a hell of a lot more alluring on celluloid than it is when you're living it and your life is at stake.

Being around a permanently naked Gibbs is definitely distracting though. Tony tries not to ogle him, but he can't help but notice how long Gibbs's legs are and the tight curve of his ass when he walks. His body is hard all over, toned to perfection by the gruelling fitness regime.

After lunch, Frank nods Gibbs over to a rowing machine, and Tony leans against the wall, turning over the problems in his mind. Hurrell is right; Gibbs is the key to escaping. He commands the respect of all the other fighters and is the only one who would be able to get them to work together in order to make a bid for freedom. Tony needs to get him onside to make any escape attempt work. But Gibbs won't even talk to him about it. He shuts down every conversation on the subject and goes ballistic every time Tony mentions getting his hands on a cell phone.

Tony is so lost in thought as he mulls this over that he doesn't notice the two fighters coming up to him.

"Hey, Tony," Greg says, leaning against the wall in front of him. Greg's a good-looking guy, tall, with dark curly hair and big brown eyes. He's one of the better fighters in Scott's stable, just behind Hurrell and Gibbs himself. Matt is Greg's stall-mate; he's slighter in build, with short blond hair, and he takes up position behind Tony, standing close. Too close. They're both in his space, and it's clearly deliberate. "So...is the wolfman fucking you?" Greg asks, jerking his head in Gibbs's direction.

Glancing down, Tony notices that Greg has an erection. He's becoming used to the sheer amount of erections he's seen since he arrived here. His own cock has remained resolutely soft; this environment is freaking him out too much, and although he could allow himself to get turned on at night, when he's alone with Gibbs, that's a complication they could both do without. Gibbs at least can blame his sexual arousal on the drugs; Tony has no such excuse.

"Aw, c'mon, guys." Tony shoots one of his disarming grins over his shoulder at Matt.

"Matt and I share the big stall at the end of the hallway. If you're bored with the old man, you could bunk with us," Greg suggests. He moves his hand down to caress his hard cock, grinning at Tony.

"I don't think the 'old man' would like that," Tony replies, glancing over at Gibbs. Gibbs seems to sense his gaze on him and looks up...and his expression darkens.

"So he is fucking you? I knew it! I always wondered when he'd break and start fucking one of us!" Matt exclaims.

Tony is still looking at Gibbs, who is going so fast on the rowing machine it looks like he'll break it.

"What's it like?" Greg asks softly, and Tony almost laughs out loud at the wistful look in Greg's eyes. "He fucked me in the pit a few weeks ago, but I wondered how it'd be if he, well, if he actually liked you?" Greg's cheeks are flushing.

"Ah, the legend that is Leroy Jethro Gibbs." Tony gives one of his infuriating grins and taps the side of his nose. "Sorry, Greg – I'm just not a kiss and tell kind of guy."

Greg laughs. "Okay, but if he's not doing it for you, you're welcome to bunk with us."

"Yeah – it's not so boring with you around," Matt adds.

Gibbs finishes his assigned workout and jumps off the rowing machine. He has that look he gets when he finds someone screwing with his crime scene, or he's in a pissing match with Metro over jurisdiction. Tony is familiar with it from long experience.

Gibbs prowls rather than walks over to them, every muscle in his body taut and angry. Matt makes a speedy exit, sprinting towards the drinks table, but Greg is trapped; he can't go anywhere without running straight into Gibbs. He backs up against the wall as Gibbs closes in on them.

Gibbs doesn't say a word. He just moves in close, getting into Greg's space. His hands are bunched into fists by his side, and the death glare is set at full blast.

"Hey, it's okay, I didn't mean anything," Greg mutters. "I was just talking to Tony."

"Talking to Tony with your dick?" Gibbs growls, glancing down at Greg's now rapidly wilting erection.

"No harm in talking," Greg says faintly. "Hey, c'mon, Wolfman! That's all it was. Just talk!"

Gibbs's glare doesn't fade even a fraction. "You talk to him that way again, and I'll make it so you can't ever 'talk' again." He glances contemptuously at Greg's cock, making his meaning clear. "Got that?"

"Got it, Wolfman," Greg replies faintly, his erection completely disappearing; Tony doesn't blame it.

Greg finally dares to creep away to the drinks table after Matt; Gibbs all but snarls at his retreating heels.

Tony folds his arms over his chest, unsure if he's amused, freaked out, or turned on by that none too subtle display of dominance; maybe all three.

"Did you want to piss on me too?" he asks, as Gibbs turns back towards him. "You know, mark your territory more clearly?"

Something dark and savage flares in Gibbs's eyes and his fist comes flying towards Tony – and lands on the wall just a fraction of an inch beside his head. Tony doesn't react. He doesn't flinch or move. He just stands there, holding his ground, gazing steadily at Gibbs, staring into

those dark eyes. Slowly, the savage expression fades, Gibbs's eyes clear, and someone Tony recognizes is back again.

"I wasn't going to hit you," Gibbs says, which is as close to an apology as Tony knows he's going to get.

"I know. I'm used to you cock-blocking me," he replies in a hard tone of voice.

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"You figure it out. You've been doing it for ten years now, only usually with more subtlety."

Gibbs looks completely mystified.

"EJ, Paula...any pretty girl I meet working on a case." Tony shrugs.

Gibbs blinks, an expression of confused surprise on his face. He doesn't have a chance to respond though, because at that moment Frank interrupts them.

"Leroy – that was another PB. You're really stepping it up. Good work!"

Frank places a hand on Gibbs's shoulder and guides him away. Tony watches him go; he can almost see the cogs turning in Gibbs's mind, and he wishes he hadn't just said that.

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Gibbs spends the rest of the training session beating a punching bag into submission. He's too angry to focus on anything beyond how good it feels to pound his fist into something as hard as he can.

"You're in the best shape you've ever been in, Leroy," Frank says, holding the punching bag in place. "I gotta tell you, when you first arrived I never pegged you for the winner you've turned out to be."

The anger is coursing through his veins, and Gibbs likes the way it feels. He unleashes it on the punching bag, landing punch after punch.

"We're so close. Just a few more fights, and we'll win the entire season," Frank adds.

"**I**ll win the entire season," Gibbs corrects him, throwing his fist into the punching bag again. "I'll win it for you, Frank."

Frank shrugs. "Means we got your training right, your meds right...it's a team effort, Leroy."

"Is that so?" Gibbs raises an eyebrow. "Does that mean that you, or Scott, or Tanner are going to walk out into that pit next Fight Night instead of me then?"

Frank laughs. "Always love your fighting spirit, Leroy. It's what sets you apart 'cause it ain't that you're younger, fitter, or stronger than the other fighters I've trained. What makes you a

winner is what's inside. I've never met a fighter stronger than you are mentally, and that's where it counts. You're brutal, Leroy; a real killer."

Gibbs buries his fist in the punching bag, but he can't keep his gaze from wandering over to where Tony is standing. At least he's alone, but what the hell did Tony mean by throwing that cock-blocking comment at him like that? It's hard enough being in this place without having Tony to protect, and the idiot has no idea what the other fighters would like to do to him, given a chance. Tony hasn't been here long enough to know. He doesn't understand what the drugs and desperation do to you and how sex is on your mind all the time.

An image flashes into his head of Greg pounding his cock into Tony's ass. Suddenly, he finds that he's taken Greg's place, and is looking down as he fucks Tony into the mattress. Tony looks back over his shoulder, wetting his lips with his tongue as Gibbs thrusts into him, burying himself balls deep in all that tight heat.

A wave of sexual frustration so strong it hurts makes him go at the punching bag in a frenzy. He hits it so fast and hard that Frank has to step back out of the way. It feels satisfying; the dark wolf likes to be fed.

Later that night, when they're alone in their stall again, there is an awkward, strained silence between them. Gibbs watches as Tony moves around the stall, rearranging his mattress and blanket. Gibbs's mood is resentful and brooding. He wants something; he's not sure what, but he can feel the dark wolf rising inside.

He could have Tony. Scott has told him that he can have any of the fighters he wants – he's just never wanted any of them before. But he wants Tony. And nobody would stop him, not even Tony. He knows that. He could give in to the dark thoughts inside his head, take what he wants by force, hold Tony down and...

He remembers Tony's face looking up at him in the pit a few days ago. *"Don't make this rape..."*

And he wouldn't. He *couldn't*. His dark mood breaks like a wave crashing against a rock. He comes to and finds his body shining with sweat. Tony has got under his blanket and is looking at him thoughtfully. Neither of them has spoken a word to each other since their altercation in the gym earlier.

"I don't know how to keep you safe," Gibbs says quietly, breaking the silence. He leans against the wall, crossing his arms over his body, hugging himself.

"I'm 39 years old. I've been in law enforcement most of my adult life. You taught me how to fight, and you've seen me fight – and win – against some really bad-assed guys. Why do you think I need protecting?" Tony asks.

*Because...*

Gibbs can't find the answer amid the confusion of his own emotions. He knows Tony can handle himself, even here. He knows that if Tony can disarm a bad situation with an easy smile and a joke then he will, but if that doesn't work he can handle himself in a fight better

than most. Gibbs never had any qualms about allowing Tony to handle plenty of tense situations back at NCIS, so why here?

*Because...*

Because these guys are naked and hopped up on drugs that make them so horny they would literally fuck anything. Because those tense situations back at NCIS weren't usually about sex, and when they were...Damn it, Tony's right. When they were, Gibbs hated it. He hated Paula, and he hated EJ, and he hated them because they were pert and pretty, and Tony was sleeping with them. He did everything he could to step between them and Tony. He stepped in front of anyone who might take Tony away from him. Cock-blocked, just like Tony said. But why? What the hell is wrong with him? Why did he behave that way all those years?

*Because Tony belongs to me.*

The realization is new, but somehow it isn't a surprise. He's been fighting to keep Tony by his side, loyal only to him, since the minute he first met him. It's taken this nightmare situation to force his tactics out into the open and make Tony finally call him on it.

He goes quietly over to his bedding and lies down beside Tony.

"You figure it out?" Tony asks softly.

"Yeah."

"Wanna talk about it?"

"No."

What he wants is to hold Tony down and explore his body with his fingers, his mouth, and his hard cock, but he won't do that. It's bad enough that he's screwed up Tony's life all these years without realizing it. It's even worse that he enjoyed fucking his very heterosexual senior field agent in the pit a few days ago. And worse still is the fact that he wants to do it again. He wants to do it so much that the desire is burning him up inside.

It's just another thing he has to control. He can do that. He just has to feed it to the dark wolf and then, when he gets out in the pit on Fight Night, let it all out there. It's the only way he knows how to handle it.

When Tony puts his hand on his hard cock in the night, Gibbs thrusts into those skilful fingers, keeping his eyes tightly closed, and tries not to think about how much more he wants.

~\*~

Their usual routine of Gibbs putting in personal bests in his workouts, while Tony watches or spots him on the weights, is disrupted a couple of days later when Ellis comes over to Tony in the gym.



"You – DiNardo!" He shoves the butt of his gun against Tony's shoulder and forces him towards the door. Tony glances back and sees Gibbs watching, his expression tense, but there's nothing either of them can do about it.

Tony is pushed out of the gym and back to the hallway where their sleeping quarters are located. Ellis takes him to a small washroom at the end of the hallway.

"Clean up," Ellis orders, pointing his gun at a bucket and mop. "You've got a few broken fingers – doesn't damn well stop you working," he adds, in answer to Tony's questioning look.

Tony fills the bucket and takes it along to the first stall. The place smells as stale as the stall he shares with Gibbs, but it doesn't take long to mop down the floors. Cleaning the toilet isn't exactly a job he relishes, but he makes the best of it, trying to engage a monosyllabic Ellis in conversation as he works.

He knows from the little Gibbs has said that Ellis is the guard he is the most wary of, so he keeps his approach light. He told Gibbs he can handle himself, and he can, but that's with the other fighters – not the guards. He's acutely aware that Ellis has a gun. If the man wanted to hurt him, or rape him, there's not much Tony can do about it. He has prepared himself mentally for the possibility of being raped at some point in this place – he won't like it, but he thinks he can endure it.

He's more worried about what Gibbs's reaction would be if he was raped. Gibbs is teetering on a knife-edge right now, and Tony isn't sure which way he'll go. There's something feral and ferocious always lurking just beneath the surface. Tony thinks maybe that's always been the case; the difference is that Gibbs always used to be able to control it, but now the drugs, imprisonment and abuse have worn that control down.

Tony is afraid of losing Gibbs altogether to the dark stranger within. Right now, it seems that Gibbs only allows that dark stranger out in the pit, but supposing something tipped him over the edge? If Gibbs lost control with the guards then they might shoot him, and Tony would lose him forever. Tony's not going to let that happen. If Ellis or anyone else rapes him, he won't tell Gibbs about it. He'll just handle it.

Some of the stalls are disgusting, the blankets covered in shit, urine, semen, or a combination of the three. He throws them out into the hallway as instructed; presumably they'll be washed and new bedding supplied.

When he gets to one of the stalls he's surprised to find it has an occupant. A young man, probably no more than twenty years old, is lying on his back, his face badly bruised. His skin is sallow and his breathing laboured. Tony vaguely remembers him being thrown into the truck after Fight Night, although he didn't look so bad then. The young man moves his head feebly when Tony walks in.

"Uh...sorry...I didn't know anyone was here," Tony says uncertainly.

He isn't even sure the man has heard him because he just closes his eyes and turns his face away, and Tony works around him.

"Who is that guy?" Tony asks Ellis when he leaves the stall.

"New fighter. Hurrell won him in the pit last Fight Night."

"He looks in a bad way," Tony glances back at the stall. "Shouldn't he be in the infirmary?"

"Tanner's examined him. If he lives, he lives. Otherwise." Ellis shrugs. "He's no use if he can't fight. We'll give him a week or two."

"Then what?"

"Then, if he's no better, we'll shoot him," Ellis says, as if it's the most normal thing in the world.

Tony feels a cold shiver run down his spine. Gibbs has told him repeatedly how brutal these people are, and he's seen it with his own eyes too, but all the same, each new piece of evidence shocks him. Do you ever get used to it? Has Gibbs got used to it? The Gibbs he knows is a justice hound; he hunts down bad guys not just because it's his job, but because on some level it's who he is. For Tony, it's about fighting crime and upholding the law, but for Gibbs it's always been personal. Living here must be soul-destroying for him in so many ways.

After he's finished clearing out the stalls, he's given new bedding to distribute. Then he's shoved down a different hallway, back towards the massive room he hasn't been in since he arrived.

There's a truck waiting there. The back doors are open, and a man is carrying a crate out of it.

"Supplies. You can help unload," Ellis grunts, pushing him towards it.

Tony doesn't recognize the man unloading the truck. He isn't dressed like the guards, and he isn't carrying a whip or a gun. He looks at Tony nervously, as if he's unsure how to behave around him.

"Hey, I'm Tony." Tony holds out his hand as if they're being introduced at a party, not in this weird setup, with him naked, and the other guy fully clothed.

"Uh...Pete," the truck driver says nervously, giving his hand a quick shake and then dropping it.

"Pete huh? My cousin's called Pete. Well, we call him Petey, but only because it annoys the shit out of him." Tony grins.

Pete casts an anxious glance at Ellis, but the guard is sitting with his feet up by the door, listening to the bashed up little radio he carries around with him. Tony blocks Ellis out with his body, forcing Pete to look at him.

"So, do you bring all this stuff in, Pete?"

"Yeah...uh, I'm not sure if I'm allowed to talk to you."

"Sure you are. If Ellis doesn't like it, he'll let us know," Tony says with an easy, reassuring grin.

It takes them a long time to unload all the crates, and Tony does his best to draw Pete out as they work. He finds the guy is married, has seven kids, and is badly in debt. Scott is clearly paying him well to bring supplies into the stable, and he's not about to jeopardise that by telling anyone what's going on here.

Tony accidentally drops one of the crates, causing some mild confusion that enables him to slip his hands into Pete's pockets...to find that he isn't carrying a cell phone. Damn it, maybe Gibbs is right, and nobody ever brings a phone into this place.

He isn't about to give up though. He glances over to see that Ellis has his eyes closed and is humming along to a song, and he takes advantage of the moment to go around the front of the truck and climb up into the open driver's door.

He quickly goes through the glove compartment but there's nothing there except the usual crap people carry around. Then he sees a little box under the passenger seat. He pulls it out, and there he finds a wallet, some keys, a smart card, and...a cell phone.

"Gotcha!" He scoops it out of the box; if he goes fast, he can punch in that number and then put it back where he found it and leave McGee to do the rest.

"Hey!" Pete appears at the door. Tony glances over to see Ellis opening his eyes at the sound. Damn it! There's no time to dial the number. "What are you doing?" Pete asks angrily, reaching for the phone.

"S'okay, Pete." Tony shoves the cell phone back into the box and pushes it under the seat. "Just looking for some chocolate, buddy! They don't give us any here, and I miss it!"

Pete looks uncertain, but Ellis is coming over so Tony slides out of the truck and grabs the nearest crate of supplies. He winks at Pete, giving him a pleading look, hoping that the past couple of hours spent bonding with the guy and listening to all his whining about how his wife won't give him enough sex means Pete won't say anything to Ellis.

"What's happening?" Ellis demands as Tony hoists the crate away, pretending to work.

"I was just saying to Pete that I wish there was chocolate in these crates!" Tony announces cheerfully.

Pete still looks uncertain, and Tony has an anxious moment waiting to see what he'll do. If he tells Ellis where he found him and what he found him with, then he's not sure what will happen. A beating? Worse? He remembers that guy back in the stalls that Ellis had no compunction about killing. With his broken fingers, he doesn't have much stock around here, either. How much would Ellis care about putting a bullet through his head?

"There's no chocolate," Pete says finally, going along with his lie, much to Tony's relief.

Ellis grunts, seemingly accepting the situation. "You done here?" he asks. Pete nods. "Good. Then fuck off."

Ellis pokes his gun warningly into Tony's back, and Tony watches as Pete retrieves the smart card from the box in the truck and then goes over to the hangar-sized doors and slips the card into the lock. The doors open slowly, and Pete returns to the truck, gets in, and backs out of the stable.

Tony catches a brief glimpse of the outside world before the doors swing shut again. It might be mid-afternoon in here but it's night out there, and all he can see in the darkness is the outline of some trees in the distance.

Tony turns back towards Ellis just in time to see the butt of his gun coming his way. It slams into his jaw and sends him falling to the floor.

"Don't fucking ask for chocolate again," Ellis growls.

It's not anywhere near as bad as it could have been, so Tony just rubs the ache out of his jaw. It was worth it. He's disappointed that he didn't get the chance to make the call – but at least now he knows where to find a cell phone.

~\*~

Gibbs glances anxiously towards the door. He hasn't seen Tony for most of the day, and he's getting more and more worried.

At first, he assumed they were taking Tony to the infirmary for a check-up, but then, when he didn't come back, he started getting anxious.

He doesn't like that it was Ellis who took Tony out. Of all the guards, Ellis is the one Gibbs dislikes the most. He has a mean, sadistic streak, and if he's got it into his head to make Tony his newest victim, then Tony's life won't be worth living.

Gibbs slows down on the treadmill. He can't stay focused on his time; he's too worried about Tony. Frank set him a long run, and usually he'd stay in the moment, forcing himself to concentrate so he completes on time and avoids punishment. Now his focus is shot to pieces; his concern about Tony is overriding everything else.

The worry gnaws away at him. He looks up every time the door opens and closes. There aren't any clocks in the room, but he can see from the various timers on the gym equipment that several hours have now passed.

Where the hell is Tony? And what are they doing to him? He feels his powerful protective streak rearing up. Maybe he should just get the hell off the treadmill and go looking for him...but his survival instinct wars with the protective instinct, telling him what a bad idea that is. He wouldn't get to the door before the guards tazed him, and then what the hell use would he be to Tony? He's no use to him here, either though. Just running on the spot while God knows what is happening to Tony.

Supposing Tony needs him? Should he at least try to get out there and help him, even if it does mean taking on several armed guards? Supposing Tony's in trouble? Supposing....

The treadmill comes to a stop, making a loud pinging sound, and Frank strides over.

"What the hell, Leroy?" He glances at the display showing the details of the workout. "This is the slowest time you've ever done. What the hell is the matter with you?" His expression changes, becoming anxious. "Are you ill?"

Gibbs knows just how much Scott's entire operation has riding on him; he can see it in Frank's eyes. The wizened little trainer looks genuinely concerned that he might be ill. If Gibbs goes down, then Scott is out of contention to win the tournament, and the money dries up. It's possible that Frank, Tanner, and all the rest are out of jobs if that happens. Maybe Scott would sell his stable of fighters rather than keep them all over the down season. Maybe he can't afford to keep them over the down season unless Gibbs wins.

"Leroy?" Frank's tone has become belligerent. "Christ, even Stuart ran faster than you today. You're nowhere near the time I set for you. What the hell is wrong with you?"

The door opens, and Gibbs's heart skips a beat as Tony walks into the room. There's a dark new bruise on his jaw amid all the fading yellow ones, and he seems more subdued than usual, but apart from that he looks fine.

"Leroy!" Frank snaps, slapping his cheek to get his attention. "You've never failed a workout before. Do I need to call Ellis over?"

Gibbs knows that means a beating for sure, but Frank has never yet had him beaten, and he thinks the old man has a certain amount of respect for him. Frank also won't want to weaken him before the next fight; they used to beat him all the time when he was new, and they didn't think he'd win, but now he's their champion they won't want to handicap him this close to the next Fight Night.

"Leroy – you'd better fucking answer me, or I will call Ellis over. What the hell is going on? The past few days you've put in your best ever workouts, and now you just did your worst? What's happening? What's causing it?"

"Tony," Gibbs answers honestly. He forces himself to tear his gaze way from Tony and look at Frank instead. "You want me to do well, Frank? Then you make sure Tony is in the room where I can see him at all times."

"What the fuck?" Frank looks at him, and then over at Tony, and then back at him again. "You gotta be kidding me, Leroy."

"You ever known me kid you, Frank? You can have Ellis beat me if you like, but it won't make a damn bit of difference. You asked me why I scored so high before and why I just scored so low, and that's your answer. When Tony's in the room, I score high. When he's not, I score low. You want me to do well, then just make sure Tony's here, and I will."

Frank looks like he's not sure whether to laugh or punch Gibbs in the face. In the end, he goes for the former, giving a growling laugh of disbelief, accompanied by a shake of his head.

"Well, I'll be damned. Never took you for a sentimental man, Leroy. You in love with that kid or something?"

"Call it what the hell you like. Just do it," Gibbs says stonily.

Frank gives him an assessing look and then shrugs. "Look, I don't give a fuck about your love-life. Scott's paying me to make sure you deliver in the pit. If having the kid in the room helps you do that, then it's no skin off my nose."

"Then tell Ellis and all the other guards. Make sure they know."

He can see Tony walking towards him, and he wants to go over there, examine that bruise, and find out what's been done to Tony in the time he's been missing. That protective instinct rises up again, so strongly that he wants to growl and lash out at someone.

"Go and tell them now," he tells Frank insistently. "When you're done, I'll be ready to beat the crap out of the punching bag."

Frank looks startled by his tone, and he glances over at Tony and clearly sees his bruised jaw for the first time. He looks back at Gibbs and his eyes widen as he sees something in his expression that Gibbs knows he won't ever have seen there before. "I'll go tell them," he says quietly.

He strides over to Ellis, giving Tony a quizzical look as he passes him. Gibbs stands there, forcing himself to wait and let Tony come to him. The last thing he wants is for Tony to freak out at him for being overbearing the way he did the other day.

"You okay?" he asks softly when Tony reaches him.

Tony gives him one of his big, shiny smiles. "Me? I'm fine."

"No, you're damn well not." Gibbs puts a gentle finger on Tony's bruised jaw, and Tony winces. "Who did it and why?" Gibbs works hard at keeping the white hot rage down, channelling the anger away until he can release it safely in the pit on Fight Night.

"Ellis. Because I asked for some chocolate." Tony gives an evasive shrug, and Gibbs knows that's not the whole story.

The dark wolf inside of him rises, and he turns to glare at Ellis, wanting to go over there and tear off his head with his bare hands.

"Gibbs." Tony's fingers fasten around his wrist, gripping tightly.

The dark wolf is hungry, wanting Ellis's blood. He can almost taste how good it would feel to rip into Ellis's flesh with his fists and teeth. The growl rises in his throat, low and guttural. He starts to move, feeling his body shift into a predatory prowl, the way it always does in the pit.

Tony yanks on his wrist, forcing him to stop. Gibbs stands there, his body quivering, wanting to be let loose to have his vengeance.

Tony leans in close. "Jethro," he says, directly into Gibbs's ear. Nobody calls him that here, but that's not what brings him back; it's the way Tony says his name that does that. There's an intimacy in his voice that reminds Gibbs immediately of the warmth of Tony's breath on the back of his neck in the night, and the little whispered words of encouragement he croons in his ear as he's jerking him off.

The dark wolf disappears, and he finds himself smiling at Tony. It's a tight, strained kind of smile, especially when he sees that bruise again, but it's a smile all the same. Tony returns it, a look of relief flooding into those green eyes.

"Yeah, I'm here," Gibbs says quietly.

"Good – and you're not going to go over there and do anything stupid to Ellis, are you?" Tony grins, making a joke of it, but Gibbs can see a shadow of doubt in his eyes all the same.

"Not today," he grunts. "See that punching bag?" Gibbs jerks his head at it, and Tony nods. "For the next half an hour, that's Ellis," Gibbs tells him.

He strides over to meet Frank by the punching bag, leaving Tony behind.

"Is it done?" he demands.

Frank nods. "It's done. Tony will be in the room whenever you train from now on."

"Good."

Frank takes off his jacket and slings it over a nearby chair. "Come on then, Leroy. I wanna see the difference it makes when Tony's in the room!"

Gibbs doesn't say a word. He just goes over to the punching bag, imagines Ellis's face, and then smashes punch after punch into it. It hurts his knuckles, and it hurts his wrists, and soon the sweat is pouring off him, but he needs to release the anger.

The thoughts from the other night repeat over and over again in his mind as he punches:  
*"Because Tony belongs to me...because Tony belongs to me..."*

And Ellis touched him. Gibbs will make him pay for that, one day, just as he'll make them all pay. Just as he made Hernandez pay for what he did to Shannon and Kelly, and how he's made countless scumbags pay over the years, during the course of his job. Justice, Gibbs-style, demands nothing less. But for now, the punching bag will have to do.

It's a long time before he's anywhere near spent, but when he looks up some time later, he sees Tony standing by the chair where Frank slung his jacket. He watches as Tony glances around to check that nobody is looking and then slips his fingers into the jacket pockets.

Gibbs fights down a wave of fury and forces himself to strike up a conversation with Frank in order to cover for Tony, his temper at boiling point again. Damn it! It's hard enough trying to keep Tony safe as it is, and Tony sure as hell isn't helping.

The day's training session is soon over and after wolfing down his dinner he prowls angrily back to their stall, still fuming.

As soon as the door is slammed shut behind them, he turns on Tony.

"What the hell did you think you were playing at, you damn idiot?" he roars. "I saw you back there, fishing around in Frank's pockets! I've told you, you won't find a cell phone. None of

them brings a cell phone in here – not Frank, not the guards, and not Tanner. When the hell are you going to start listening to me?

"I listen." Tony shrugs.

"But you don't believe me – is that it? You've been here a few days, and you think you know better than me how it works around here?"

"No. What I think is that you've given up, and I don't blame you for that, but I'm not going to give up. I still want to be rescued."

"And you think I don't?"

Tony gazes at him thoughtfully. "I've watched you training, Gibbs, and I've seen you in the pit. It's like you've found your spiritual home here."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

"How much do you really want to escape, Gibbs?" Tony asks, one eyebrow raised. "Oh, sure, you don't like it here. You don't like them telling you what to do, ordering you around, deciding what you eat and when you can piss..."

"Damn straight I..."

"But you like the fighting."

Gibbs rocks back on his heels. "That so, Tony?"

Tony nods, slowly. "Yes, I think it is. When Hurrell told me you'd gone native, I didn't believe him, but now I'm not so sure. See, there's a hunger inside you, Gibbs. It was there at NCIS too, only you didn't have the opportunity feed it so much."

"You're saying I'd choose this life?" Gibbs asks incredulously.

"No, I don't think you'd choose this life," Tony says musingly. "I think you'd accept your freedom if it was offered to you, but maybe you won't go after it very hard because there's some part of you that gets fed out there in the pit every week. Some part of you enjoys it, is consumed by it, and wants to taste what the pit has to offer."

"Which is?"

"A place to lose control and give in to all that anger you've got inside," Tony replies, his eyes hard and serious. "You're an angry man, Gibbs. You've been angry since the day I first met you, and in the pit you get a chance to let that anger out, to really let rip, and to do it in a way nobody can blame you for because you have no choice."

Gibbs crosses his arms across his chest and gazes at Tony stonily. "You done, DiNozzo?"

"No." Tony gives a swift, apologetic smile. Only Tony could hammer away at him this hard while still smiling; it's classic DiNozzo. "You want to win, Gibbs. You want to win every



fight, and you want to win this entire tournament and be crowned their champion. You want to go up against Mac in the final – you're itching for that. You want to crush the hardest opponent they can throw at you. You want to feel invincible, to experience the rush and the adrenaline surge of being out there, pounding your fist into someone's flesh. It makes you feel alive, Gibbs."

Gibbs fights down the rising tide of his own temper. "Oh, you're definitely done now, DiNozzo."

"No, I'm not. See, I understand – the drugs, the relentless routine of this place, the whippings, the training, the constant supervision – they've worn you out, and you've had to shut down parts of yourself to survive. I get it." Tony leans forward, his eyes shining with intensity. "But the Gibbs I knew wouldn't sit back and wait the season out on the off-chance that he'll get moved somewhere nice afterwards! Were you hoping for a pool and some servants maybe, Gibbs? Do you think that's what Scott's gonna give you if you win?"

"You don't know shit, Tony," Gibbs says stiffly.

"Maybe not, but how do you see this ending? Because after this season, assuming you win, there'll be another one, and another one, until one day you lose – and then they'll they take you out back and put you down, like a dog that's served its master well but is no longer fit for purpose."

Gibbs leans back against the wall, the anger fading into something cold and hard inside. "That really what you think of me, Tony?"

"No! That's the whole damn point! The Gibbs I know is still in there somewhere – I'm sure of it. I just want find him and bring him back."

"Well, the DiNozzo I know is sure as hell the one standing in front of me right now; the one with the half-assed plan to get in here and no damn plan for getting out again. You thought you'd just come in here and wing it as usual, didn't ya, Tony? Flash the smile around, steal a cell phone, and hey presto! We're free!"

A flush rises to Tony's face and a guilty look creeps into his eyes, and Gibbs knows he's hit a nerve.

"Then when all this is over, and you've played the hero and milked it for all it's worth, then you can go back out to your nice, easy life, screwing whatever piece of skirt catches your eye because you can't commit to anyone or anything," he adds savagely.

"I committed to you," Tony says quietly.

"What?"

"I've been working for you at NCIS for ten years now. Never worked any place longer than two before you came along. And let me tell you, you're a damn difficult bastard to work for, but I stuck it out all this time. I even turned down the chance to lead my own team because I thought, idiot that I am, that you might actually need me."

"Then why the hell did you stay?" Gibbs growls. "If it was so damn tough, and you could have done so damn well without me, sunning yourself in Rota, looking at all the pretty girls in bikinis on the beach; why the hell stay in DC with this 'damn difficult bastard'?"

"Why the hell do you think?"

"I don't know!" Gibbs yells, exasperated. "You seem to feel I've fucked up your life and ruined your career, but you could have left whenever you wanted. I never damn well made you stay!"

They're silent for a moment, glaring at each other resentfully across the stall, chests heaving.

"Look," Tony says eventually, spreading his arms wide in a gesture of peace-making. "If we can just find a cell phone..."

"A cell phone, DiNozzo? Really? That's your answer to this? You had five damn months and a cell phone is the best you could come up with? Couldn't Abby inject you with a GPS tracking device, or McGee cook up some gizmo, or couldn't you at least have come up with some plan better than a cell phone?" His voice drips sarcasm.

Tony's face is pinched and miserable. "We tried," he says wearily. "We tried, Gibbs. We experimented with everything we could lay our hands on; every piece of high-tech equipment I could beg, borrow, requisition or just plain steal from the military. But it's all detectable. If Abby put a tracker under my skin, they'd easily be able to pick it up. You can't make something that McGee can trace hundreds of miles away, but is invisible to the guys with guns standing next to you. It just doesn't exist yet. Not that I could find anyway."

Gibbs shakes his head in disbelief. "Even if you got your hands on a cell phone, then what, Tony? You have to dial the number, put the phone back, and hope nobody saw you. If whoever you stole it from figures out what you've done, then Scott just picks this place up and moves us all somewhere else. He's done it before. He can have the fighters out of here in five minutes flat, and the rest packs up and follows on later. You don't know where we are, or how long it would take McGee to get here. It's a lousy fucking plan, DiNozzo!"

"I know that! I knew that when I came in here, damn it!"

"Then why the hell...?"

"Because I had to find you! Even if I couldn't get you out, I needed you to know that we hadn't forgotten you. That I hadn't forgotten you! I needed you to know that we were on it, Boss; that we were looking for you and had been all these months, and that nobody had given up on you."

Gibbs bites back the cutting retort that's on his lips. There's something desperate about the way Tony is looking at him right now, and, as his words sink in, Gibbs feels himself calming down.

"Okay, Tony. I get it," he says wearily. And he's glad Tony's here; he hopes Tony knows that because he's sure as hell not going to tell him.

"And I have to find a cell phone because I came here to get you out," Tony adds fiercely.  
"And I intend to do that, Gibbs. I came here to rescue you, not rot in here with you. I will find a cell phone, and I will get you out of here."

"I already told you, none of the guards..."

"And I believe you, but that doesn't mean there isn't another cell phone in this place! Listen, Gibbs, they made me unload supplies from the truck this afternoon, and I got talking to the guy who drives it, and..."

"His name's Peter Papadakis, but his friends call him Pete," Gibbs interrupts. "He's Greek; his dad's called Jimmy; he's got seven kids, and he's always whining that his wife won't give him enough sex, although maybe with all those kids they should have less."

Tony is looking at him, an astonished expression on his face.

"What? You think I haven't scoped this place out? You think I don't know it inside out, DiNozzo?"

"But you don't know the best bit!" Tony says excitedly. "See, he's got this little tin he keeps under the passenger seat of his truck and inside..."

"He keeps his wallet, a set of keys, the smart card that opens the main doors, and his cell phone. Yes, Tony, I know," Gibbs says wearily.

Tony looks like a puppy that's had its favourite toy taken away. "You know?"

"Yeah. I know." Gibbs shrugs. "Like I said, you've been here a few days, but I've been here five months. You seriously think I haven't found out every single thing about this place?"

"Then why won't you try to escape?"

"Because there IS no escape. That's what you need to understand, Tony. There is no way out. Believe me, I know – I've been looking for it for long enough."

Tony sighs and slumps back against the opposite wall. "Of course you have. I should have known that. And I should have known you knew all this already. I've been an idiot."

"Wouldn't want you any other way." Gibbs flashes him a grin. "So, no more fishing around for cell phones in people's pockets – yes?"

"Oh, I wasn't looking for a cell phone in Frank's jacket!" It's Tony's turn to grin now.

"Then what...?"

"I was looking for **this**!" Tony turns his hand palm up to reveal a small bottle of the oil Frank carries around to rub into his fighters' muscles when they get tight.

"Why the hell did you want that?"

"Because I only ever see Frank pounding away at you, digging in, or doing that weird Swedish choppy stuff." Tony makes sawing motions with his hands. "And I wanted to do something different." He opens the top of the bottle and takes a cautious smell, wrinkling up his nose. "Okay, so it's not exactly the nicest scent in the world, but it's oily, and that's the main thing."

Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

"They treat you like a piece of meat," Tony explains. "Prime steak admittedly in your case, but still like something to hammer into shape for the pit. To them you're just the wolfman, their prize pit asset, but never Leroy Jethro Gibbs, a real person. They view you as someone who lines their pockets – an object to be shaped, and trained, and kicked around to do what they want. They don't see **you**."

Gibbs stares at him, speechless. Tony bites on his lip anxiously.

"Okay, so maybe I **am** an idiot, but I wanted to give you a massage, Gibbs!"

"A massage?" Gibbs repeats blankly.

"Yes!" Tony says defiantly. "Not like the ones Frank gives you. Not a sports massage – something nicer. Nobody's ever nice to you in here, Gibbs! I look at you and think about what you've been through, and I figure that after five months of being kicked repeatedly it'd feel good to be stroked for a change instead."

Gibbs stands there, staring at him, completely astonished. His throat hurts a little, and he isn't sure why. He turns away, so Tony won't see him blinking the wetness out of his eyes.

"Gibbs?" Tony says softly behind him.

"Yeah, Tony." Gibbs clears his throat, getting himself under control, and then turns back again.

"Is it okay? Will you let me?"

"You've only got one hand," Gibbs points out.

Tony grins. "So? There's a lot I can do with one hand." He waggles his eyebrows. "Trust me! My one hand is very talented!"

Gibbs gives a little grunt of laughter. "Okay, Tony. Let's see what you and your very talented hand can do."

He lies face down on his mattress and watches warily as Tony pours a small amount of the oil into his good hand and then rubs it against the palm of his other hand, just beneath the bandage.

"Where the hell were you hiding that stuff anyway?" Gibbs asks. Tony might be a pretty good pick-pocket, but without clothes there's no place to conceal his ill-gotten gains.

Tony waggles his eyebrows again. "You don't wanna know! Now be quiet and let the maestro work!"

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Tony kneels astride Gibbs's back and gently places his oiled hands on Gibbs's shoulders. The fingers of his broken hand are covered in a now grubby bandage, but he can use the palm of the hand well enough.

The oil smells of something herbal – and not a particularly nice herb, either – but it's all he's got to work with, so he's going to make the best of it.

Gibbs's shoulders are as hard as iron. The muscles have been over-worked for months, and that, combined with the stress of the place, has created a solid knot across Gibbs's back.

Tony gently soothes his fingers across the surface of the skin, gliding back and forth.

At first, Gibbs is stiff and resistant, but Tony expected that. He knows it will take him some time to just give in and go with it. Tony suspects that Gibbs isn't the kind of man who has ever received a massage for the simple pleasure of it, and he wants to give him that. He wants to take Gibbs out of this nightmare world, even if only for a short time, and make him float.

Tony loves trailing his fingers over Gibbs's skin, sinking in more firmly wherever he finds a knot, and gently easing it out. There's something incredibly satisfying about making a man as intense and focused as Gibbs zone out.

It takes a little while, but Gibbs slowly starts to relax. Tony notices that if he presses too hard then Gibbs's muscles remain rigid, but if he's patient, persistent, and gentle, they gradually start to soften.

Tony finds one persistent knot and rubs away at it gently for a long time until Gibbs gives a little grunt, and Tony feels something pop and release.

"You got any qualifications for this, DiNozzo?" Gibbs demands lazily.

Tony laughs. "Only dozens of satisfied customers in the bedroom, Boss," he replies flippantly. Gibbs's shoulders tense immediately, and Tony can actually feel the rage boiling up inside him. What the hell is that about?

It takes him several minutes to soothe Gibbs's muscles back to the relaxed state they were in before, but Tony wasn't lying about his lovers. One of the things he's always enjoyed most about sex is the sensuality of the act.

He learned how to give good massages in college, with a fuck buddy who was team quarterback and always had muscles that felt like solid brick. Then there was the girlfriend in Peoria, who just loved having gently heated oil trailed over her back and buttocks and rubbed in. Tony learned to massage out of the sheer sensual joy of touch, and he's damn good at it, one handed or not.

Tony moves up to Gibbs's scalp and concentrates his attention on that, easing away the tension with firm sweeps of his fingertips. Gibbs's hair has been cropped close to his head, only silver-grey stubble covering the smooth, bare skin, and Tony loves the sensation of that closely cropped hair under his hands. He massages Gibbs's scalp for several long minutes, before moving further down.

Gibbs's body is marked with a network of scars, old and new, telling the story of a long life, lived hard. Tony finds the top of a recent long whip scar and gently maps it from shoulder to hip. When he finishes with that one, he finds another and traces it back up again, with a feather light touch.

Beneath him, Gibbs relaxes even more, his body sinking into the mattress. Tony circles a dark, crescent-shaped scar on Gibbs's shoulder. It's recent; maybe an injury he got in the pit.

"Bite. Third Fight Night," Gibbs mumbles into his pillow, as if reading his mind. "Bastard sank his teeth right in."

Tony gently soothes his fingers into the scar, acknowledging it, and then moves on.

He finds an old, white, scar on Gibbs's side, just beneath his ribs. He lingers there for a few seconds, examining the jagged edges.

"Stabbed. On a case. Russia," Gibbs mutters. "Stupid. Shoulda seen it coming."

Tony glides his fingers up a little way and dips them into an old bullet wound on Gibbs's shoulder. He knows how this one happened.

"Ari," Gibbs growls, stiffening.

"Yeah, I know. I was there."

Tony trails his fingers over it, soothing it, and Gibbs slowly relaxes again. Tony isn't sure if Gibbs will be comfortable with his ass being caressed, so he skips that and goes lower. He finds a tiny, puckered scar on Gibbs's thigh and recognizes it as another bullet wound.

"Colombia. Black ops," Gibbs says quietly. "Got a fever with that one. Nearly died."

Tony slides down Gibbs's legs and finds a twisted scar on the back of his knee that twines all the way around to the front. This one is old. Very old. He kneads it gently with his fingers, and this time Gibbs says nothing, but his muscles tighten. This scar still clearly hurts; not physically – it's too old for that – but it marks a wound that goes far deeper than flesh.

Tony spends awhile easing away at it, knowing that Gibbs still gets stiffness in the knee. Gibbs has always walked with a slight limp, and now he's up close Tony can see why. It's a nasty scar; this must have been a terrible injury once, a long time ago.

He doesn't ask for an explanation; he just works at it with careful swirls of his fingertips, taking his time, soothing the slightly twisted muscle under the skin.

He's so lost in the task that he's almost taken by surprise when Gibbs suddenly gives a deep, exhausted sigh, and his body relaxes almost visibly beneath him. It's as if something inside him has surrendered, making his body completely loose and pliant.

Tony feels as if he's been given permission, and now, as his fingers trail upwards again, he's more daring. He places his hands gently on Gibbs's taut buttocks and leaves them there for a second, motionless, to see if Gibbs objects. When no objection is forthcoming, he moves his hands across the globes of flesh, circling gently. Gibbs's ass is perfectly round, the skin pale and firm beneath his fingertips. Tony works it for several minutes, allowing his fingers to soothe and caress, but nothing more.

Gibbs now looks as relaxed as Tony's ever seen him. His face is angled to one side, his mouth is slightly open, and his breathing is deep and even.

Tony has a sudden vivid mental image of Gibbs as an old grey wolf, strong, wily, and powerful, muscles rippling under the surface of his fur. Right now, Tony has the wolf eating out of his hand, dozing lazily under his fingertips, but he doesn't think for a second that the wolf has been tamed. It's still there, just beneath the surface, biding its time.

Tony smiles and continues trailing his fingers over Gibbs's now thoroughly oiled skin, pouring a decade's unspoken devotion into the task. Years of unrequited love are in his fingertips as he gives himself up to it completely.

Gibbs might be a difficult, ornery bastard, but he's always been the only man Tony ever loved, and he wants to offer all that love to him now, without asking for anything in return. He imbues every caress with a loving tenderness, but there is nothing sexual about his devotions. He wants only to give, not take. He works hard for a very long time, smoothing, gentling and swirling, losing himself completely in his task.

He isn't sure how much time has passed when his aching fingers finally come to a halt of their own accord. Gibbs looks boneless and completely at rest beneath him. Relaxation has softened his features, making him look more like a cub than a grizzled old wolf.

Tony lies down beside him and pulls Gibbs into his arms. Gibbs comes without a murmur, and Tony holds him close, enjoying the warmth of his oiled skin seeping into him.

"There's something I've been meaning to tell you," he whispers in the dark.

Gibbs moves his head. "Mmm, whassat?" he mutters, clearly half asleep.

Tony smiles and holds him tight. "Never mind. I think I just did."

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Gibbs wakes up the following morning feeling well-rested for the first time in five months. He's never slept through the entire night before. This place is too noisy, with the sounds of the fighters in other stalls fucking or arguing, and the sound of the guard in the hallway patrolling up and down, or, sometimes, the sound of Ellis's radio blaring out all night long.

None of that seemed to matter last night, and he slept the night through without waking once.

"You missed your calling, DiNozzo," he says, rolling his shoulders experimentally and finding them loose and relaxed. "Should have been a massage therapist instead of an NCIS agent."

Tony gazes at him for a long moment from narrowed eyes – and then he grins. "You're welcome, Boss. And next time a simple 'thank you' will do."

Gibbs gives a grunt of laughter, but mainly he's just pleased that there's going to be a next time.

It's the day before the fight, and, as usual, tensions are running high. Gibbs puts in his best performance of the week in training, and Frank is happy with him.

"You're the best you've ever been," Frank says approvingly as he tapes his knuckles for a practice fight in the ring. "Like a sleek fighting machine. My pit bull terrier. I'm proud of ya, Leroy. You're the best fighter I've ever trained, and I'll retire a happy man when you bring home the title."

"There's a title?" Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

"Figure of speech." Frank shrugs. "But you've made me a hell of a lot of money, Leroy. I did good with you."

"You ever feel bad about that?" Gibbs asks. "I'm not here by choice, Frank."

Frank laughs. "Oh, Leroy, nobody could fight like you do in the pit and not want to be there. It's your home, lad." He pats Gibbs's arm, still chuckling away to himself, and Gibbs remembers how Tony said something very similar to him last night.

"The competition only gets tougher from here on in," Frank tells him. "But I think you'll relish that, Leroy. You won't lose. It's not in you to lose. I've trained a few fighters in my time, but you're the only one I've met who really gets it. You understand what it means to let go in the pit, to fight with your head, and your heart, and your entire soul, and to give it everything you have."

Gibbs thinks about how it feels when he's standing in the holding pen on the edge of the pit just before a fight, the scent of sawdust in his nostrils and the anger rising up inside, ready to be unleashed. He can feel the sense of exhilaration and anticipation, and he knows that Tony and Frank are both right; a part of him does love it out there.

"What will happen to Tony?" he asks. "He's not fighting tomorrow."

"Then he'll stay behind." Frank shrugs. "That's what usually happens with the injured lads. You've been here long enough to know that, Leroy."

Gibbs doesn't like the idea of Tony being out of his sight. Who knows what might happen when he's not here? It's not as if he can protect Tony even when they are together, but at least he doesn't have to fret about what's happening to him. Frank doesn't have the power to bring Tony along with them to the fight. That's down to Scott, and Gibbs doubts he'll even see his owner before the fight, let alone get a chance to ask him for a favour.



"Someone stole something from me yesterday, Leroy," Frank says, giving him a searching look.

"That so?"

"Yeah, someone stole that little bottle of my special oil, right out of my pocket. Who d'you think did that?"

"No idea." Gibbs gazes at him blankly.

Frank leans in close and sniffs his skin. "I think that boy of yours is looking out for you, Leroy, same as you're looking out for him."

Gibbs shrugs, keeping his face deliberately expressionless.

Frank gives a little grunt. "I could call Ellis over, have your stall searched – stealing earns an automatic whipping, Leroy."

"I know. But like you said, Frank, I'm in the best shape I've ever been, and you get to take all the credit for that." Gibbs gives him a conspiratorial little grin.

Frank's beady dark eyes gleam with amusement. "Just as long as the cold-hearted killer in you doesn't go all soft and mushy over that boy, because we need our wolfman hard and hungry in the pit."

"Soft and mushy? Me?" Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

Frank laughs out loud. "Oh – and tell Tony he doesn't have to steal oil to make things go nice and easy when you fuck him. Tanner will hand out lube if you ask nicely."

Gibbs doesn't get a chance to correct Frank's misunderstanding of why Tony's stole the oil because at that moment a scuffle breaks out on the other side of the room. Greg and Matt, usually the best of friends, are snarling at each other and trading blows.

Ellis strides over there, pulling his whip out of his belt as he walks. His usual tactic for breaking up a brawl is to whip all the fighters involved until they stop. It's brutal but effective. Then suddenly, out of nowhere, Tony jumps between the fighting men. Gibbs pulls away from where Frank is taping his knuckles and runs over there, Frank hard on his heels.

Tony is trying to get between the two men and break up the fight, but Gibbs can see he's just going to get caught in the crossfire when Ellis starts throwing that whip around. He grabs Frank's arm.

"If Tony gets whipped, I won't be happy," he growls.

Frank makes a sucking sound through his teeth, giving Gibbs an angry look, but he steps up all the same. He goes over to Ellis and grabs his wrist just as he's about to bring the whip down on the fighting men.

It buys them a little time. Gibbs manages to haul Matt off Greg, while Tony wrestles Greg away to one side, and the scuffle is over. Looking back over his shoulder, Gibbs sees Ellis shooting Tony a vicious glare, and he's suddenly aware that in his efforts to keep Tony safe he might just have painted a very big target on his back.

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Tony wraps an arm around Greg's shoulder and forces him away into one corner.

"What the hell was that about, buddy?" he asks, crouching in front of the angrily trembling man. "You and Matt are friends – you share a stall." And they're fuck-buddies too – everyone knows that. Tony's heard them, night after night – Greg isn't exactly quiet during sex.

"He's a fucking bastard! I want to fucking kill him!" Greg growls, wrapping his arms around his body and rocking to and fro.

"No you don't, buddy," Tony says quietly.

Greg begins to calm down, taking several deep breaths. He looks up and meets Tony's eye, still rocking slightly. "It's Fight Night tomorrow, and everyone knows Matt is one of the weaker fighters. I was just trying to get him to train harder, so he'll be stronger, but he's a lazy shit, and the trainers don't care because he's never gonna win them any money."

"Well, that's Matt's look out," Tony tells him. "You can't make him train harder if he doesn't want to."

"But I want him to." Greg's mood breaks, and he slumps down pathetically. "Supposing he loses, Tony? Supposing he doesn't come back? What the hell will I do then?"

Tony understands that in this hothouse environment these men come to rely on the friendships they've made with each other. They might have been pushed together by circumstances, but they'll cling to anyone who can help them get through this nightmare. Only Gibbs seems immune and has chosen to navigate these dark waters alone. But then only Gibbs is strong enough mentally to do that. Everyone else is more...human.

"You can't think like that, Greg," Tony tells him. "It's out of your hands. If it happens it happens. You've got to concentrate on winning your own fight. That's the only thing that IS in your hands."

He talks to Greg for a long time, telling him jokes, discussing movies, and gradually Greg's dark mood subsides. Eventually he gets up. "Thanks, Tony. I'm...gonna just..." He walks off in Matt's direction, and a few minutes later Tony sees them hugging each other, foreheads pressed together. He has no idea how these men handle the stress of the sudden, enforced separations that losing a fight inflicts on them, but he hopes these two don't have to, and that they both win their fights.

Sam Hurrell comes over to him. "Shit, this place messes with your head," Tony says to him with a sigh, still watching Matt and Greg.

"It's Fight Night tomorrow. It always gets tense the day before." Hurrell sits down beside him. "How's it going with Gibbs? You getting anywhere?"

Tony shrugs. "One step forward, two steps back, but I'm getting there. I think."

"Is he going to help with an escape?" Hurrell wraps his arms around his knees.

"No." Tony shakes his head. "I don't think so, Sam. It's like he's given up."

"Or he enjoys the pit too much to try."

Tony looks over at where Gibbs is sparring with Frank. "Maybe. I don't know. I think maybe there's something else going on too."

"But he won't tell you?"

"Not yet, no. It's been five months, Sam. He trusts me, but he's always been close-mouthed at the best of times, and these are definitely not the best of times. He's struggling with something – I know that much."

"I feel that too," Hurrell says. "It's like there's something big going on inside him, and he doesn't know which way it'll end up going. I call it his two wolves."

"Two wolves?" Tony raises an eyebrow.

"There's a good one and a bad one, a light one and a dark one, both fighting inside him. Question is, which one'll win?"

"The light wolf," Tony says, without hesitation.

"You have that much faith in him?"

"I've known him a long time, and I know that dark wolf well. I've seen it, and in all honesty it gives him his edge and it's what makes him so good at his job. He's always been able to control it though – the light wolf always makes sure of that."

"Even here? With all the drugs, and the training, and the beatings, and the pit? Seems to me this place just feeds the dark wolf constantly, and the light one doesn't even get scraps."

"That's where you're wrong." Tony smiles at him, remembering the previous night. "The light wolf is the underdog in this fight, yes, but it's getting fed. I'm seeing to that."

Hasn't that always been his job where Gibbs is concerned? Back at NCIS, he always saw his job role as relieving the tension and teasing a smile out of Gibbs to keep the team's mood from getting too intense. This particular battle has been playing out for a very long time, and Tony thinks Gibbs needs both wolves in equal measure. He's seen the light wolf too, as well as the dark. He's seen Gibbs rescue those in need, look after small children with infinite care and patience, and get justice even when it costs him dear. The light wolf is equally as strong as the dark one; Tony just needs to remind him of that.

"Look, Tony, I wanted to talk to you...about Jan," Hurrell says, a flush rising to his cheeks. "See, if I lose tomorrow then I won't be coming back here, and I won't have a chance to ask you again."

"You won't lose tomorrow, Sam," Tony says firmly.

"I might. I did a terrible thing last week, Tony. I...I lost it. After Steve was killed, I went a bit crazy, and I beat up on that guy in the pit so bad that I don't think he survived. He came back in the truck with us, but I never saw him again after that. I think he was too badly hurt, and they shot him."

"They didn't shoot him, Sam. I saw him yesterday; he's in one of the stalls." Tony hesitates, but he figures Hurrell would rather know the truth than be lied to, however kind the lie. "He's not doing too good, but he's still alive."

"Shit." Hurrell buries his face in his hands. "I've never lost it like that in the pit before. I can't channel it and control it like Gibbs. I've never given into it like that. That poor bastard; none of this was his fault. He just got caught in the fallout."

"It's not your fault either, Sam."

"Yes, it is." Hurrell looks him full on, squaring his shoulders. "It is, Tony. I let myself down out there. And...I guess...this is my own struggle and my own two wolves." He gives a wry little smile. "I love Jan, Tony, but I've always known I'm weaker than her. She's one hell of a strong woman – to be honest, I've always wondered what she saw in me."

"She loves you, Sam," Tony says gently.

"I know. But even back when we were first married, I wondered what this amazing woman was doing with me. I know myself, Tony. I know my own weaknesses. Jan's like Gibbs – I recognized that in him the minute I first met him, and that's why he pisses me off so much, I think. They both have this sense of themselves, this certainty. Whatever happens to them, no matter how much they go through, they never lose that. And I'm not like that."

He rests his chin on his hands and looks across the gym sadly.

"Most of us aren't, Sam." Tony sighs. "Jan and Gibbs – they're the special ones. There aren't many like that out there. I saw it in her too. She never gave up on you; she's been fighting tooth and nail to find you."

"And meanwhile, I'm sleeping with random guys because I can't face being alone at night. I want to be held, Tony, even if it's only for a short time, and by some guy I barely know, because it makes me feel a bit less lonely."

"Look, I'm hardly anyone's idea of a relationship counsellor with my fucked up track record, but Jan loves you for who you are, Sam. She knows you're doing whatever you can just to get by, so you can go home to her. She'd be glad you're doing that because it means that one day she'll get you back."

"Maybe." Hurrell sounds unconvinced.

"No maybe about it." Tony gives Hurrell's shoulder a firm pat. "Jan's a pragmatist – like Gibbs. If sleeping with the guys in here keeps you sane and helps you survive, then she won't judge you for it."

Hurrell gives a slow, thoughtful nod. "We tried for kids for years," he says quietly, staring off into space. "She miscarried so many times, but it never broke her. I think it broke me a little, but it never broke her, despite all she went through. We gave up a couple of years ago – it was just too painful – but Jan being Jan, she made the best of it and went out and bought some puppies. Those dogs are like her kids now."

He turns to look at Tony. "Tell me about her, Tony. Tell me everything. How she looked, what she was wearing. How is she holding up? What did she say about me? And how are the dogs? I want to hear it all, even if it hurts. I don't want to go out into that pit tomorrow knowing I didn't ask you because I was too much of a coward."

Tony puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, and then he tells Hurrell every single thing he can remember about his wife.

Later that night he leans in close, rests his chin on Gibbs's shoulder, and reaches down towards his cock without asking, for the first time. Gibbs isn't even hard, but his cock springs to life under Tony's fingers. He takes his time with it, giving the best damn hand job he can, and soon Gibbs is panting, his skin damp with sweat as he thrusts into Tony's hand.

"What the hell was that about?" Gibbs asks when he's done.

"Fight Night," Tony replies. "You're going into the pit tomorrow, Gibbs. Who knows what'll happen?"

"I do." Gibbs turns over to look at him, his eyes gleaming fiercely. "I'll fight someone, win, and come back again. That's what'll happen, Tony. That's what always happens."

"Are you sure you'll win?"

"Yes." It's said in a firm, flat tone. "I'll win."

"Because you refuse to lose?"

"Yes."

"Is it really that simple?"

"No, it's damn well hard, but it is what will happen."

Tony's known Gibbs for ten years now, and he has no reason to doubt that Gibbs is right. He'd definitely never bet against him.

All the same, the tension in the air around them is electric. Along the hallway he can hear Greg and Matt fucking like there's no tomorrow. And someone else is sobbing into his pillow in another stall; he thinks it might be Sam, but maybe it's Stuart. It's hard to tell. How does

anyone stand this kind of tension, week in, week out? It's a living hell, and only the strongest survive.

Tony puts his hand on Gibbs's hip and nestles in, wanting to be as close to the man as possible, because who knows what tomorrow will bring?

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Fight Night. They call it that because it's always dark when they're made to fight out there in the pit, even though in the artificial environment of the stable, it's day to them.

Gibbs wakes up with the usual pre-fight jitters in his belly. He can handle them. He's fought in wars and taken down suspects in his job. He's used to handling his own adrenaline. Most of the other fighters don't have that kind of experience and it affects them much more.

It's the usual jittery atmosphere as they are herded along to the showers. Tony is talking to him, cracking jokes, and Gibbs tries to tune him out. He needs to get into his fighting headspace, but it's harder than usual. He feels more relaxed, his shoulders loose and open, and, thanks to Tony, he's got to know these guys in the showers with him. He knows their names and the jobs they used to do. He's seen a glimpse of their hopes and fears, and Christ, he even knows their favourite pizza toppings. It's hard not to care about their fate in the pit today. It's hard to block out their anxiety and their nerves and get into the headspace he needs to be in for fighting.

He's also worried about Tony. Which guard will stay behind to keep an eye on Tony and the other fighter – the injured one Tony saw yesterday? If it's McGuire, it'll be okay. But if it's Ellis...Gibbs doesn't trust Ellis. The man has a vicious, bullying streak, and there's no love lost between him and Gibbs.

Gibbs can still remember how it felt to be chained up while Ellis whipped him until he bled – and enjoyed it. Ellis doesn't like him because of his slow, insolent responses to every order they give him, and he's frustrated because he doesn't get to whip him anymore, either, now that he's so successful in the pit. Ellis wouldn't last five minutes in the pit with him, and he knows it. That's why he wants to assert his superiority over Gibbs all the time, to prove that he's the better, stronger, harder man, even though they both know it isn't true.

After breakfast, they're herded into the big, hangar-sized room where the truck is waiting for them.

"Good luck," Tony whispers in his ear as McGuire attaches the travelling chains to his wrists and ankles. Then he's shoved into the truck and chained in place. He can see Tony standing out there, through the open back door of the truck, while the other fighters are chained up around him.

Then only Tony is left. The guards who are accompanying them to Fight Night jump into the back of the truck...and Ellis isn't among them. Gibbs cranes his head, and his heart sinks as he sees Ellis standing beside Tony with a scowl on his face, clearly annoyed to be missing the excitement of Fight Night.

The door is swung shut, and the last Gibbs sees of Tony is him winking and making a thumbs up sign at him with his good hand while Ellis shoves him away with the butt of his gun.

Gibbs closes his eyes and tries to block out his anxiety. He will come back. There is absolutely no question about that. He just hopes that while he's gone Ellis doesn't do anything to hurt Tony because he doesn't know what he'll do if that happens.

The drive to the venue isn't as long this week. They get there early, in time to see some of Walid's workmen as they finish setting up the bleachers, temporary toilets, vending areas, and all the other paraphernalia that goes with Fight Night.

It's raining, but that's not important; Fight Night has never been cancelled, no matter what the weather.

They're herded into the usual holding pen, and Gibbs puts his head back and catches the rainwater in his mouth like a child. It's the only time he gets to be outside, to breathe fresh air and feel the wind on his face, and he relishes it, even if it is pouring with rain.

The crowd starts to arrive. Some come in chauffeured limousines while others show up on the backs of Harleys. Gibbs wonders how Walid found these people and what kind of an underground communication network must exist to spread the word of where the fights will be held each week. They are often at different venues, but always on a big patch of open ground. He suspects the grounds are private – belonging to Walid and some of the other wealthy players who own stables and field fighters. Maybe they take it in turns to be the host for the night's entertainment.

One thing Gibbs does know is that the fights are popular; the bleachers are always packed. These people love this cruel sport and show up week after week to enjoy the obscene spectacle of kidnapped men fighting for their lives out in the pit.

Gibbs tries to get into his pre-fight headspace, but every time he closes his eyes he finds himself wondering what's happening to Tony back at the stable. He's never known Ellis to show any interest in the fighters sexually, but the man does love his whip, and he has Tony's life in his hands right now.

"Damn it!" Gibbs opens his eyes, unable to concentrate.

"Problem?" Hurrell asks, coming over to sit beside him.

"Tony. You think he's okay?"

Hurrell looks surprised by the question. "He's an NCIS agent. I'm a Marine. You're a Marine \*and\* an NCIS agent. He's as okay as you or me."

"So not very," Gibbs grunts.

"None of us is safe. You know that. We all live on a knife's edge. This time last week Steve was alive, and I never saw his death coming."

"Not helping," Gibbs grinds out.

"Sorry. Tony will be fine. He looks like the kind of man who has nine lives."

"Yeah." Gibbs nods, remembering dozens of dangerous situations that Tony somehow emerged from unscathed. "Hell, he once had the plague, and there was just a fifteen per cent chance of survival, but he made it."

"There you go then. And if anyone can talk his way out of a difficult situation, it's him." Hurrell grins. "Bet it's been fun having him around at NCIS all these years."

Gibbs has a sudden flash of a dozen different memories at once, all jumbled up and out of sequence; Tony laughing, pouting, and dancing around in the squad room; Tony lying on a hospital bed, covered in sweat, coughing up his guts; Tony making that little squeaking sound he likes to make when Gibbs slaps the back of his head; Tony standing on his desk, addressing the entire room, being an idiot; Tony with a beaten up face, still making jokes despite that; Tony slapping a pair of handcuffs on him when they first met; Tony behind bars; Tony bringing him his favourite USMC sweatshirt after Mike died; Tony hugging him after his return from Mexico; Tony doing movie star impressions at various crime scenes; Tony eating steak off a combat knife in front of the fire in his living room....

"Yeah," he says, smiling softly. "I guess it has."

His belly tightens again. He doesn't like this. He's never gone through a Fight Night with anyone but himself to worry about before.

A massive limousine draws up nearby, and a man in an expensively tailored suit gets out. He's wearing sunglasses, even though it's the middle of the night, and Gibbs realises that it's Prince Walid.

Walid walks over to the holding pens, a lackey accompanying him to hold an umbrella over his head. He stops by their pen and peers inside; his gaze falls on Gibbs, and he smiles.

"Get him out. I want to talk to him," he says to McGuire.

McGuire hesitates because he's one of Scott's guards, and these are Scott's fighters, but everyone knows Walid runs this whole operation, so he's clearly not sure what to do.

Walid gives him a politely threatening smile, and McGuire gives in and opens the holding pen. Gibbs is hauled out and shoved over to stand in front of Walid. It's the closest they've ever been to each other, and Walid gives Gibbs a slow, searching look, up and down. Gibbs copies him insolently, studying Walid as openly as he's being studied.

Walid is every inch the bastard that Tony described to him. Every single thing about him is expensive, from his exquisitely tailored suit, to his watch, and his white shoes with black laces. He's got some black and white theme going on, with a black shirt and a white tie, and his hair looks freshly blow-dried, not one single strand out of place.

"Wolfman – we meet at last," Walid says smoothly. "I must congratulate your trainer. You're looking in excellent condition."

"So are you. Who do I need to congratulate for that?" Gibbs flips back.



Walid gives a little laugh that doesn't sound in the least amused. "Ah, I heard you were a man of few words, but it appears that you have a sense of humour. How interesting."

Walid reaches into his jacket pocket, pulls out a gold-plated whisky flask, and hands it to him. "Would you like a drink, Wolfman?"

McGuire shifts nervously, and Walid waves a hand in the air. "Oh, please! As if I'd stoop to drugging the fighter of a rival competitor – even if this particular fighter **is** the main threat to my own champion winning the tournament."

He smiles at Gibbs, and Gibbs's gut rings out all kinds of warning bells. This man is as dangerous as a deadly snake, but Gibbs is sure that he hasn't put poison in the flask. Walid takes this competition extremely seriously, and he would never be caught cheating in such an obvious way. The flask is safe.

Gibbs takes it and swills back a mouthful of the finest, smoothest bourbon. He glances at the flask in surprise.

"Ah, yes, I know your tastes. I have taken the trouble to find out everything there is to know about you, Jethro."

Gibbs stiffens; Scott has never called him that. Like everyone else, he assumed Gibbs went by his first name, not his second. It would appear that Walid *\*has\** done his research.

"I should thank you. Last Fight Night was our most exciting to date. People have been talking about it all week." Walid inclines his head. "I am expecting a particularly big turnout this evening as a result. You've become the star attraction, Wolfman!"

Out of the corner of his eye, Gibbs can see Scott's gleaming white limo pulling up some distance away.

"And that's good for business," Walid continues. "It doesn't matter whose stable you belong to, as long as you entertain us in the pit – and you do, Wolfman."

"Yeah, it's my main aim, every time I step out there. Entertaining you." Gibbs injects as much withering sarcasm as he can into every single word.

Walid laughs. "Ah, now I understand what Tony sees in you! I did wonder. Such a stern-faced, angry-looking man...I asked myself – why would Tony DiNozzo risk everything for his boss the way he did?"

"And I asked myself – why would you let Tony DiNozzo end up in Scott's stable with me, knowing that we're both federal agents? Surely having us together and outside your control makes us dangerous?"

Walid shrugs. "That's the game. It's how it's played. The loser goes to the winner's stable. I made those rules, so I cannot be seen to break them."

"You made me fight twice last week – that isn't in the rules, either," Gibbs points out.

Walid shakes his head. "Actually, there is nothing in the rules about that. Sometimes fighters have been required to fight more than once – in our early years, when we did not have as many fighters as we do now, it was common for a fighter to go into the pit two or three times a night. As long as the fighter's owner is in agreement, then it is acceptable. There are little areas where we may be flexible – such as allowing you to watch Mac fighting last week – but in the fundamentals of how the game is played, then no. We must all stick to the rules. You beat Tony in the pit, so he became Scott's property."

"Hell of a risk."

Walid shrugs. "I like taking risks. It was a gamble, yes, but one I relished!"

That doesn't surprise Gibbs; most of the people involved in this tournament seem to have a gambling problem.

"I didn't know what would happen when I put Tony in the pit with you; that's what made it so exciting." Walid smiles. "It could have thrown you – or you could have decided to lose the fight, rather than subject him to rape. But you didn't. You're a tougher opponent than I expected, Jethro, and that pleases me. I get easily bored. It made the game more interesting to me."

Gibbs glances over to see Scott getting out of his car, wearing his usual crumpled cream suit and black lariat tie. He straightens up, looks over, and frowns when he sees Walid talking to Gibbs. He starts striding towards them.

"Having established that you are a worthy opponent, I have been wondering what your next move will be," Walid says.

"My move?" Gibbs glares at him. What the hell kind of move can he make when these people control his entire life?

"Oh yes. I'm sure you have one. Maybe Tony has inspired you. As you said, you are both federal agents. You've been his boss at NCIS for ten years; maybe you've cooked up some plan together."

Gibbs gives a quick, furtive look to see if Scott is close enough to have heard that, but he's still some distance away.

Walid laughs. "My, you are looking anxious, Jethro! Is that because you've deceived your owner? Is it possible that poor Mr Scott doesn't know who Tony really is? Does he believe that his name is Tony DiNardo and not DiNozzo, and that you never met him before last Fight Night?" Walid asks, a cruel smile playing on his lips. "I have my spies everywhere, you see, Jethro."

He removes his sunglasses, and Gibbs finds himself looking into a pair of cold, dark eyes. Walid leans in close and speaks directly into his ear.

"I expect you thought that if he knew the truth, Mr Scott might keep you and Tony apart, or keep a special eye on you both," Walid murmurs accurately. "You're probably right. I always

make sure I know every single thing about the fighters in my stable, but Mr Scott's research is not nearly as thorough as my own. He has no idea who Tony really is, does he?"

Walid draws back, his cold eyes gleaming with amusement.

"You should consider your next move, Jethro, because I know what mine will be," he says softly. Then, in a louder voice: "Enjoy yourself in the pit, Wolfman; I look forward to watching you entertain us all again tonight!" He turns, replacing his sunglasses as he goes, and greets Scott. "James! My dear friend! I was looking for you."

"Looks like you found Leroy instead," Scott says, looking confused.

"I was just wishing him well in the pit. He's such a fantastic competitor, a great ambassador for our little tournament. Now, I've been thinking, James." He puts an arm around Scott's shoulders. "Why don't you come and sit with me tonight, hmm? Now you're a major player, and the owner of one of the main contenders, I think you should have the recognition you deserve."

Scott beams, his entire body quivering with pride.

"I would be delighted, your Highness. Oh, really, this is wonderful, such an honour...goodness me...!"

"Not at all, not at all." Walid glances back over his shoulder at Gibbs. "It will give us time for a little chat, my dear James. You see, there is something very particular that I want to tell you."

Gibbs watches them go, his stomach twisting into knots. He has no doubt that Walid will tell Scott that they lied to him. What he doesn't know is how Scott will respond to that knowledge.

Tony is on his own and vulnerable back at the stable. Ellis might not have a cell phone, but Gibbs is sure Scott has a way of getting a message to the stable. All it would take is for Scott to give the order, and when Gibbs gets back he could find Tony lying in his stall with a bullet hole in his head.

### **Chapter End Notes:**

Your kind words are the only payment I receive for writing fan fiction. I love hearing from you – please leave a review below.

## Chapter Four - Cry, Wolf by Xanthe

The place seems eerie and empty without the fighters. Usually Tony spends the day in the gym, helping Gibbs, talking to the other fighters, and, when the equipment is free, doing a workout himself, just to get some exercise and alleviate the boredom.

Today, instead of that, Ellis escorts him back towards the hallway where the stalls are located. He nods his head at Tony's stall, and Tony walks inside, wondering if he's going to be locked up here all day and all night, and if he can stand the boredom of that.

Ellis leaves the door open, which is different at least, and Tony hears him walking off down the hallway to the chair at the end where the guards spend the night shift. A few seconds later, the radio blares out.

Tony figures it's at least as dull for Ellis as it is for him. Ellis might have a gun and the opportunity to wear clothes, but he's still just got to sit there, bored brainless, doing nothing all day. Maybe there's a chance he can get the man talking and try and build some kind of bond with him. He knows Gibbs dislikes Ellis more than all the other guards, but it's worth a try.

"Hey." Tony stands in the doorway to his stall, leaning against the thin, metal partitioning. Ellis looks up and glares at him. "So, did you ever see the movie *The Great Escape*?" Tony asks, ignoring the less than welcoming reception. "See, Steve McQueen is the cooler king – they keep locking him up in the cooler, and he just sits there and throws a ball against the wall and catches it, over and over again. I wish I had a ball right now."

Ellis just continues giving him that dark glare, clearly discouraging his attempts at conversation.

"I get it. You wish you were at the fight. Me too." Tony shrugs. "But I guess someone has to stay behind to mind the ranch."

"You wouldn't last five minutes in the pit, pussy boy," Ellis tells him. "I saw you last week, fluttering your eyelashes at Leroy and slobbering all over him out there. Made me sick. You're a fucking fag, Tony."

Tony fights down the cold, steely anger. "Watching two guys having sex makes you sick but watching one guy raping another is okay?"

"Getting fucked is the price for losing, but you turned it into a fucking fag-fest."

"Oh, I get it. It's okay as long as it's rape. You want it nice and brutal. What we did out there last Fight Night looked too much like we might have been enjoying it, is that it?"

Ellis gives a nasty grin, and Tony immediately wishes Gibbs was here to head-slap him for letting this guy get to him.

"I was right – you are a fucking fag. You don't have a clue about fighting, pussy boy. You're lucky Leroy broke your fingers; you're too soft for the pit."

Tony nods pleasantly. “You’re probably right, Ellis.” No point giving this asshole any excuse to shove the butt of his gun into his face again. That pissed off Gibbs enough last time, and he doesn’t want to make their lives any harder than they already are.

He hears a low, soft moan from the stall with the injured fighter – the one Hurrell took down last Fight Night.

“How’s he doing?” he asks, changing the subject.

“How the hell should I know?”

“Would it be okay if I looked in on him?”

“Knock yourself out.” Ellis shrugs.

Tony walks along the hallway and goes into the stall where the injured man is lying on a mattress on the floor. The poor bastard looks even worse than before; his brown skin is a strange greeny-white colour, and his breathing is laboured.

Tony kneels down beside him, and the man opens his eyes and blinks at him a few times.

“Hey, how you doing?” There’s a plastic cup of water by the man’s head but his lips are chapped and parched. By the smell in the room, Tony is guessing that he’s soiled himself. “Are you thirsty?” Tony presses the cup to the man’s lips, and he takes a few sips. “You got a name, buddy?” Tony asks.

The man’s lips move but if he makes any sound, Tony can’t hear it. He leans in close.

“Rajul...Patel,” the man whispers.

“Hey, Rajul. I’m Tony.”

Rajul gives him a faded smile. He reaches up and beckons Tony close so he can whisper into his ear again.

“Tell my mom...so she knows what happened to me.”

“You can tell her yourself, when you get out of here,” Tony says firmly.

Rajul’s eyes are hazy, but he manages to shake his head. “No. Tell her I love her. Love her so much.”

Tony fights down another surge of anger. So many lives are being so pointlessly ruined and for what? So that a baying mob can be entertained every Fight Night? He supposes it’s the same mentality that people have at dogfights and cockfights. The people who attend aren’t indifferent to suffering – they attend because it’s what they want. They actively crave it and seek it out.

“I’m sorry, Rajul. I have no idea what these sick bastards get from watching people tear each other apart in the pit, but I’m sorry you got caught up in their twisted little game.”

“It has a long history.” Rajul smiles at him. “Bear baiting...gladiators...public hangings. I have thought about it often. Our world is modern...but our hungers are ancient. People like to watch cruelty in action...”

“Some people,” Tony says firmly. “\*Some\* people, Rajul.”

“There is darkness in us all. Have you never slowed down to look at a car wreck by the side of the road, Tony?”

Tony sighs. “I hear you, Rajul, but this is a whole different level of dark.”

“The human heart is both dark and light.” Rajul smiles. “It is for each of us to decide which weaknesses and temptations he gives in to, I think.”

“The wolf you feed,” Tony says softly. Rajul gives him a puzzled look. “Just a story Sam...a friend told me.” He winces slightly, remembering it was Hurrell who did this to Rajul, in retaliation for what Walid did to Steve. Actions and consequences, like so many dominos knocking into each other. Where will it end?

Rajul is clearly an educated, intelligent man who has given the nature of their situation a lot of thought.

“How did you come to be here, Rajul?” Tony asks quietly.

“History major...college...boxing...” Rajul is clearly fading.

“You’re still at college? You made a name for yourself on the varsity boxing team – that’s how they heard about you?” Tony guesses.

“Yes. I chased after vain glories and look at where it has got me.” Rajul gives a wistful little smile. “Tony...please.” Rajul grabs his hand. “My mother...she lives in Washington DC. She will be so worried about me. Please tell her my last thoughts were for her. I love her so much. Promise me you will tell her this.”

“I promise, Rajul,” Tony says quietly, squeezing his hand gently.

Rajul nods but seems unable to speak anymore. Tony pulls Rajul’s blanket back a little way and sees a large, dark bruise on his abdomen; he’s clearly bleeding internally.

Tony gets up and goes to the door. “This man is very ill,” he tells Ellis. “He needs urgent medical treatment.”

“Yeah?” Ellis grins at him. “Well, he isn’t gonna get it.”

“Are you really that callous, Ellis? There’s a man dying in there, and you’re just going to stand by and let that happen?”

“If he hadn’t been such a pussy in the pit, he’d be fine.” Ellis shrugs.

“It’s that simple? Survival of the fittest?”

“Oh, you don’t have any idea, pussy boy!”

“Do you even know his name? He’s called Rajul Patel. He’s studying history at college. He’s a real person, Ellis.”

“That so?” Ellis stands up, and Tony holds his breath. “Is Leroy fucking you?” Ellis asks unexpectedly.

“What?”

“I think he is. What makes you so special, Tony? He never fucked any of the others.”

“What the hell does it matter if he’s fucking me or not?”

“It matters because you’re turning him into a pussy like you,” Ellis snaps. “Frank says you’ve gotta be in the gym when he’s training so he can keep an eye on you, and he says I’m not allowed to lay a fucking finger on you in case it upsets Leroy.” He spits on the floor in disgust. “You’re a fag, and you’re turning him into a fucking fag too.”

“Seriously? There’s a man dying in there and this is the conversation you want to have right now?”

Ellis glances into the stall at Rajul and then a big smile creases up his face. He turns back, and the expression in his eyes is so ugly that Tony feels a cold shiver creeping up his spine.

“I think we should give you a taste of what it feels like to win in the pit,” Ellis says.

“What do you mean?”

“I think you’re a big pussy who likes to take it up the ass. Bet your dick doesn’t even work. Bet you can’t get even get it up. Let’s see if I’m right.”

He pushes the barrel of his gun against the side of Tony’s head and forces him back into the stall, shutting the door behind them.

“Let’s see you get it up, Tony.”

“What?”

Ellis grins. “Jerk off, spank the monkey, have a wank; let’s see if ya have the balls for it.”

“Why?”

“‘Cause I’m bored, and you’re here, and you think you’re so fucking better than me...and because I wanna have some fun.” He gives a big grin.

“This is stupid. Rajul needs help, and you want me to sit here jerking off?”

“You calling me stupid?”

“No, I’m just saying...” Tony pauses, trying to figure a way out of this situation. “Look, Ellis, I don’t want to do this.”

“Aw, you don’t wanna do it! Poor little Tony! Let’s see what you do without big, bad Leroy here to protect you.”

“I don’t need Leroy to protect me!”

“Dontcha?” Ellis gives another of those leering grins. “I think you do. I think you’re his bitch. So let’s see if that dick of yours actually works, pussy boy. Let’s see you get hard.”

Tony feels an angry heat rising to his face. “No. I’m not a performing monkey, and I’m not going to jerk off just because you tell me to.”

“Yeah, you are.” Ellis strides over to Rajul and places his gun against the sick man’s head. “This is what it feels like to be a winner in the pit on Fight Night, when you have to get it up or someone dies,” he says, an ugly gleam in his eyes. “Now, I wanna see you cream all over your fingers. So jerk yourself off, or I pull the trigger.”

~\*~

The scent of the sawdust and the roar of the crowd seem more vivid than ever tonight. Gibbs watches through the bars of the holding pen as the fight before his ends. Usually, Gibbs is in his pre-fight headspace and only notices them peripherally, but tonight he’s not in that headspace; he has too many other concerns.

Tony once likened Walid to a cobra, and he's right. If Walid had a pit-name, then 'Cobra' would be it. Gibbs knows the game Walid is playing. He wouldn't put poison in his drink, but playing mind games with his main competitor to throw him off his stride is much more his style. Walid is fighting as dirty as Gibbs fights in the pit, and, for the first time, Gibbs realizes who his real adversary is.

It isn't the poor bastards he fights out there in the pit every week. It isn't Ellis, back at the stable, doing God knows what to Tony right now, and it isn't Scott, with his stupid fat face and his delusions of grandeur. It isn't even Liam McIntyre – the fireman – the fighter everyone expects Gibbs to do battle with in the final. It's none of them.

No, his true opponent is Walid, and he's been an idiot not to realize it before. Ultimately, this contest is between the wolf and the cobra, and the cobra just made his next move. Last week, his move was to throw Tony into the pit against him. This week, it's calling Gibbs out just before his fight in order to get into his head and destroy his focus.

Walid set up this entire tournament. He has all his pride and money invested in winning, and McIntyre is his chosen instrument for that triumph. Walid has been watching Gibbs in the pit for months now, and with each passing week it has become clear to him that the one man standing between him and his ultimate victory is Gibbs.

Walid knows that Scott isn't his main adversary. He despises Scott's greed and stupidity and no doubt rejected him as a serious opponent a long time ago. Walid wants a more worthy adversary, and that's what he sees in Gibbs.



Gibbs could kick himself for taking so long to figure this out. Walid is playing a cold, calculated game of chess, moving his players into place, piece by piece.

The real fight doesn't take place in the pit every Fight Night. The real fight takes place on a completely different battlefield, but that fight is every bit as dirty and the competition much more formidable than he ever imagined.

A wild cheer goes up from the crowd as the man he's going to fight in the pit tonight is released from his pen. Gibbs can tell by the loudness of the cheers that he's facing a popular fighter.

"Go-ri-lla, Go-ri-lla..." goes the chant.

"Tonight, ladies and gentleman, we have a unique fight in store for you," the commentator announces in his usual tones of over-the-top excitement. "A gorilla versus a wolf!"

The crowd goes absolutely insane at that and a new chant goes up: "WOLFMAN! WOLFMAN! WOLFMAN!"

The doors to his holding pen are opened, and Gibbs charges out into the pit to be met by a wall of sound. It's so deafening it almost overwhelms him for a moment. His popularity with the crowd has been growing week on week, but after his fight against Tony last week it seems to have reached epic proportions.

Last Fight Night, Tony turned the brutal post-fight rutting into an act of tenderness. He kissed and caressed Gibbs, shocking the crowd into silence. Afterwards, Gibbs broke his fingers, and he's pretty sure that the crowd interpreted that as an act of retaliation towards Tony for not playing by the rules. The crowd now loves the wolfman both for his brutality and for putting the newbie in his place. They have no idea that he broke Tony's fingers to keep him out of the pit and spare him this ordeal.

Now, it would appear, he has become a legend, and the crowd's chants turn into an awed silence as he prowls around the edge of the pit, sizing up his opponent.

He can see why they've given him the name 'Gorilla'. He's not particularly tall, but he's squat, with brawny shoulders and arms, and extremely hairy. Gibbs finds himself looking at the man's face, straight into his dark brown eyes...and he catches himself. Usually, he focuses on assessing his opponent's fighting prowess but tonight he's distracted, and he can't afford to let himself get distracted in the pit.

He tries to concentrate, and to figure out what his opponent's strengths and weaknesses might be. The crowd is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. He can feel their eyes on him, watching his every move, and that's wrong too. He shouldn't be this aware of them. He shouldn't be aware of anything but his opponent right now.

Tanner gave him a shot of something half an hour ago, and he can feel his heart racing and a familiar sense of anger rising up inside. This is his place, his moment, and his chance to right so many old wrongs. He has killed Hernandez and the drunk driver who took his mother from him countless times in this pit. Tonight, he thinks of Steve and of Prince Freak up there who killed him and who lords it over this sick tournament like some dark and twisted emperor.

Gibbs can't help himself. He glances up at the stands and sees Walid sitting on his throne, stroking his neat little goatee beard with his fingers. Walid sees him looking and inclines his head towards him, acknowledging him as his opponent with a vicious little smile.

The gorilla takes advantage of his lapse in concentration and throws himself at Gibbs, succeeding in bringing him down to the ground. Gibbs kicks out savagely, slamming his opponent in the balls until he howls with pain and lets him go.

*Damn it.* Gibbs gets to his feet and skips out of reach, kicking himself mentally. He can't afford to be distracted. He must focus.

The gorilla lumbers to his feet and pursues him around the pit. He isn't fast – Gibbs is much faster and more agile – but he has a certain brute strength, and Gibbs senses a wily cunning.

Gibbs feints a left, then ducks around the gorilla, jamming his elbow into the man's kidneys. He can do cunning too.

The gorilla is angry, and he lets out a roar of intent. The crowd, as one, seems to lean forward in their seats, spellbound by the contest.

The gorilla is the hardest opponent he's ever fought – but they're reaching the closing stages of the tournament so that's hardly surprising. The summer is over and there is a definite chill in the air now. In a few weeks' time the fighting season will finish – and what happens then? Tony's broken fingers should keep him out for the rest of the season if...if Tony survives that long.

The thought of Tony being alone with Ellis preys on his mind. It reminds him of when Ellis took Tony out to clean the stalls and unload the supply truck. He wasn't able to focus all day because of that and put in his worst training time ever. Supposing he allows the same thing to happen now?

The unthinkable hits him. All this time he's been worrying about what might happen to Tony. Now, for the first time, he realizes he should be worrying about what will happen to him.

Maybe this is the night he loses and has to succumb to the ultimate degradation of being raped out here by this hairy-assed gorilla of a man.

Maybe this is the night the wolfman goes down.

~\*~

Tony looks at Rajul, who looks back at him from wide, dark eyes.

Ellis digs the gun into the injured man's temple. "What's it to be, pussy boy? Are you gonna wank for me, or do I paint the wall with the Paki's brains?"

Tony grabs his cock and desperately tries to think of his favourite jerk-off fantasies. They usually involve either Jennifer Lopez, because fundamentally he's an ass man, or Leroy Jethro Gibbs, because when he's going gay it has to be with a real man and not a twink. He's never been attracted to twinks.

He closes his eyes, leans back against the wall, and thinks about Gibbs's ass. He's been looking at it enough this past week, and it's a damn fine ass. It's hard and tight, and he wonders what it'd be like to slide his cock into it and make Gibbs scream with pleasure.

The idea of reducing Gibbs to helpless moans during love-making is a definite turn on, and he feels his cock start to harden.

"Whoa! Pussy boy has a man's dick after all!" Ellis says, breaking into the fantasy. His cock wilts as he loses focus. He needs to concentrate; Rajul's life depends on it.

"Shut up," he snaps, opening his eyes.

Ellis winks at him. "Aw, look at it. Does it only work under certain conditions? How do you think it'll be in the pit, Tony? You think your dick will work out there, with everyone screaming at ya?"

"If I get the same drugs as everyone else..."

Ellis roars with laughter. "Aw! Pussy boy's dick only works when he's on drugs! You're not a man, Tony; you're a useless fucking fag who can't get it up."

He reaches out and, with casual brutality, backhands Rajul across the jaw. The injured man makes no sound. His head snaps sideways and then slowly rolls back again, and he gazes at Tony with pity and resignation in his eyes.

"Do not blame yourself, Tony," Rajul wheezes. "You are a good man."

Tony grabs his cock again, determined to obey Ellis's insane demands and save Rajul's life. This place makes them all complicit in its evil: Hurrell, Gibbs, and now himself. They all sacrifice little pieces of themselves to protect their essential core, but how much do they lose in the process? Is it worth protecting, or is it valueless by the time everything around it is dark and rotten, corrupted by the evil that pervades every single aspect of this place?

He remembers night times with Gibbs, alone in their stall. It's the only time he experiences real intimacy with the man – not during the hand jobs but in their aftermath, when Gibbs allows himself to be held. That's the only time Gibbs will open up even a little and actually talk to him. He's not surprised; Gibbs never was exactly great at talking.

He remembers the feel of Gibbs's hard, pulsing cock in his hand. Tony has often wondered what it would be like to take it in his mouth and explore it properly. He's already felt it in his ass, but that situation was just about hurt and humiliation, no matter how much they both tried to alleviate the worst of it.

If he was alone with Gibbs, somewhere fancy – a hotel maybe – he'd take him to bed, take his time, and make love to him slowly...

His cock is hard, and he rubs it purposefully. He can do this! He thrusts into his hand, thinking about Gibbs and what it would be like to feel Gibbs gently pushing inside his body, making love, not fucking. No pit, no sawdust in his hair, no crowd of gawking spectators. Just the two of them...

“You thinkin’ dirty thoughts about Leroy?” Ellis whispers in his ear.

Tony jumps, startled. He was so engrossed he hadn’t heard Ellis moving towards him. Ellis stands in front of him, looking down on his erection, and it immediately starts to wilt again.

“That the best you can do?” Ellis sneers.

Tony tries to get back into the mood, imagining rolling over on top of Gibbs, and now it’s his turn to slide into Gibbs’s open body, and Gibbs is so relaxed, so responsive, and it feels so good to thrust into all that tight heat...

“Shoot, or he dies, Tony,” Ellis whispers ominously into his ear. Tony whacks his hand frantically up and down his semi-erect cock. “You’ve got thirty seconds. You don’t cream by then, this sucker takes a bullet for you. Thirty, twenty-nine, twenty-eight...”

Tony looks at Rajul who looks back at him with that same weary, resigned look in his eyes.

“Tony, I am dying anyway. Do not have this on your conscience – it is not your fault,” Rajul tells him.

“Eighteen, seventeen, sixteen...”

“You’re not going to die,” Tony says stubbornly, working away at his cock, trying desperately to reach climax.

“Ten, nine, eight...”

Tony bucks up into his hand, feeling his climax close...so close... He imagines Gibbs growling into his ear while he thrusts his hard cock into him, over and over again...

“Four...three...”

He comes. His come spurts out over his fingers in little bursts, and Tony leans back against the wall in relief.

“Well done, pussy boy. Well done.”

Ellis grins at him, and then he turns, points the gun at Rajul’s head, and pulls the trigger. Rajul’s head explodes in a flash of red, his blood spurting out over Tony, mingling with the come on his hands.

“You fucking bastard...why did you do that? I did what you said! I did what you fucking well said!” Tony sobs, shaking uncontrollably with shock and outrage.

“Like he said, he was dying. I’d have shot him later anyway. Might as well do it now.” Ellis shrugs. He glances at the blood-stained stall, and at Tony’s come-covered fingers. “Now clear up this fucking mess, pussy boy.”

Something bad is happening to Tony; Gibbs can feel it in his gut. He wishes he could block Tony out of his thoughts, but he can't. Whenever he tries to stop thinking about him, the anxiety just comes back ten times stronger.

The crowd is cheering, screaming out obscenities and urging him to fight harder.

Gibbs makes a mistake. He feints left but doesn't follow through fast enough. The gorilla grabs him around the waist, sinking his fist into Gibbs's ribs over and over again. Gibbs elbows back, getting the man in his ample belly. The gorilla growls and lets go.

That was a stupid, rookie mistake. If Tony had made it, he'd have slapped him stupid. Damn it, what will Scott do when he finds out about the lie? Does he already know?

Some of the crowd, fickle as ever, have gone over to the gorilla's side.

"Wolfman's going down, down, down! Gonna take a beating, Wolfman! Gonna take a fucking, Wolfman!"

Gibbs glances up towards Walid again. Scott is sitting with Walid's entourage, leaning forward, his elbows resting on his knees, gazing down at him intently.

The gorilla leaps on him and throws him into the sawdust. With his weight advantage, if he gets on top of him and lands a few punches then this will be over, and who will be left to protect Tony from Scott's vengeance then?

He rolls sideways just in time, and the crowd gasps as the gorilla throws himself down onto empty sawdust.

The crowd lapses into a shocked silence. They aren't used to seeing him this vulnerable. Usually his opponents never get close, and the gorilla is good, but he's not that good. Under normal circumstances, Gibbs would be beating him easily.

"Come on, Wolfman! You can beat the fucking gorilla!" someone in the crowd yells, but he can hear the uncertainty in the voice.

He has to find a way to do this. He has to stop thinking ahead and focus just on now. That's always been one of his strengths.

He takes a few seconds to regroup, watching the gorilla carefully. He's got brute strength and low cunning but not much else. He's not that smart, and he's definitely not fast. He's much younger than Gibbs though – aren't they all? Gibbs has always relied on wrapping up his fights relatively fast, knowing he loses the advantage the longer they go on. He simply can't compete with someone two decades his junior in terms of stamina if he lets the fights drag on too long. He has to have swift, decisive victories or he's lost. He's already tired, and he's got bruised ribs and a cut on his forehead that's dribbling blood into his eye. He has to win soon, or he'll go down.

He can find the anger, but he can't keep hold of it; the worry about Tony just gets in his way. He tries to remember Shannon and Kelly, and his mother, but images of Tony alone with Ellis keep haunting him.

A different emotion rises up inside, one that is even more powerful than anger: Protectiveness. If he doesn't win, then he can't keep Tony safe. It's as simple as that. He's not fighting to avenge the dead anymore; he's fighting to save the living.

He takes a run at the gorilla, jabs him hard on the jaw and lands a kick to the man's balls. Then he runs around him as the gorilla blunders to regain his balance. He jumps the man from behind, rams his knee into his ass, kicks the back of his knees away, and forces him to the ground. Now he has him; he can't afford to lose this advantage.

He goes down with him, jumping on him before he can get up, and lands two hard blows to his jaw. The gorilla roars out his anger and distress, but Gibbs is ruthless and takes no notice. He has Tony to think about; he has to win this for Tony.

The gorilla is pushing up, trying to shove Gibbs off him, and he's strong...but Gibbs has someone to protect and that makes him stronger.

He fights with all his might, wrestling with the gorilla in the sawdust, ignoring the punches he's taking and landing his own with clinical precision, knowing how hard to hit and where to make the gorilla stay down. The man's eyes are already losing focus, and soon he stops flailing and lies back in the sawdust, surrendering to the inevitable.

The referee is coming over, but Gibbs keeps punching until he's told he's won. Then he stops immediately and steps back.

He doesn't acknowledge the crowd's loud cheers, or their hollering, whistling and celebrating.

Gibbs only cares about one man in the crowd. He glances up at Walid, who smiles down at him, inclining his head in acknowledgement of his victory.

Then Walid turns to Scott and says something to him. Scott leans forward, frowning, and Gibbs realizes Walid only intended to tell him about Tony's lie if he won. That's his penalty for winning, for staying in the competition.

He can't think about it right now; he has one more thing he has to do.

Usually he gets down on his knees and performs this part of the fight without thinking about it, getting the job done as quickly as possible.

This time though, it's as hard for him to access that part of himself as it was for him to focus on his anger. When he kneels down behind the gorilla, all he can think about is the quiet, gentle intimacy of Tony's chin resting on his shoulder as he lovingly rubbed his cock with his fingers. All those nights alone together in the stall, with Tony whispering those words of encouragement in his ear. It wasn't the lonely, angry masturbation he had become accustomed to. It wasn't the brute force of rutting in the pit with some man whose name he doesn't even know. Tony gave him something else; something sweet, loving and...human.

Damn it. Tony has somehow humanized him this past week. Gibbs had shut himself down in order to survive, but Tony coaxed him back with his strength, his wit, his loyalty, and his

sheer charisma. It's like waking from a dream to find he's still living a nightmare; what the hell does he do next?

In the end, he does what he has to do. If he doesn't, then someone will die, either himself or the man lying in the sawdust in front of him. He finds the strength from somewhere, and for once he thanks Tanner for his damn drugs. He thinks of the sweet curve of Tony's ass, and the soft warmth of his body pressing into his during the nights they spend alone in the stall, and his cock hardens.

He completes the deed and then withdraws, leaving the gorilla lying in a dazed heap in the sawdust. He gets up, shoots a baleful look up in Walid's direction, and then stalks back to his holding pen.

As he leaves, he can sense the crowd's disappointment that he didn't break anyone's fingers tonight.

~\*~

Tony is still shaking as he mops up the blood and brain matter from the stall. It takes a long time before the stall is clean, but he's glad about that as it gives him time to calm down.

He works for hours, until the stall is sparkling. Then he washes Rajul's body and wraps it carefully in the blanket; it's the least he can do for the man.

"I will find your mother, Rajul," he tells the corpse. "I will let her know that your last thoughts were of her, and I will tell her how much you loved her."

When he's finished, he goes cautiously to the door of the stall. Ellis is sitting out there, rocking his chair back on two legs, his feet up on the wall, his radio still blaring out.

"I'd like to go back to my stall now," Tony says quietly.

Ellis grins at him. "Go ahead, pussy boy."

Tony walks quickly back to his stall and closes the door. He grabs his blanket, drags his mattress over to the wall, and sits down, his back against the wall, wrapping the blanket around himself.

He wants Gibbs back. He wants to know he's safe, and that he survived out there. He wants to put his arms around him and hold him for as long as Gibbs will let him. He needs the sheer human comfort of another person's gentle touch. How has Gibbs kept people at arm's length all this time? Tony suddenly has all the more sympathy for Sam and all the more admiration for Gibbs. He can see why Matt and Greg turned to each other and clung on so desperately. This place is brutal.

Tony has been here for one week. Gibbs has endured five months of this, fighting week after week in the pit, fucking week after week in the pit. Is he doing that now? Is he out there, fucking some hapless loser right now?

Tony could barely make himself come with an audience of two...how the hell does Gibbs do it? The drugs must help, but what must it do to your soul to go through that every week?

Tony never, ever wants to know what it's like. He nurses his broken fingers to his chest, thankful beyond belief for what Gibbs did for him last week, back in the pit.

~\*~

Gibbs is chained up as usual and escorted back to the truck. He can see Scott walking across the grass towards him, his fat belly straining at the edges of his white shirt, jiggling as he walks. He's angry; Gibbs can see that. He's furious.

Scott strides towards him, reaches him, and smacks an angry fist across his jaw without pausing. Gibbs's hands are chained to his waist, so he has no way of breaking his fall, and he falls down onto the grass on his side. He can feel the cut from where Scott's ring caught on his face, and the warm flow of blood on his skin.

"You lied to me, Leroy." Scott crouches down beside him, and his little piggy eyes are mean and dark. "Tony DiNardo is Tony DiNozzo. You pretended you didn't know him, but you've been working with him for the past ten years. He's your right hand man, your second in command. He's one of your closest friends. And you lied to me!" He sounds genuinely hurt.

Gibbs lies on his side, saying nothing. There's nothing to say.

"Damn it, Leroy!" Scott rocks back on his heels. "I liked you! I liked you, and you lied to me."

"So? You throw me into that pit every week. Why the hell do I owe you any kind of truth, Scott?"

"I'm angry." Scott heaves himself to his feet and looks down on Gibbs with a petulant expression in his eyes. "I'm really very angry and disappointed about this, Leroy. There will be repercussions."

Gibbs is unsurprised to hear it. Out of the corner of his eye, he can see Walid lurking nearby with his entourage, a cool little smile on his smug, handsome features.

"I think," Scott muses, "That it's time for your precious Tony to experience what it's like in the pit, don't you, Leroy?"

Gibbs's stomach does a sick flip. "His fingers are broken..."

Scott kicks him hard on the leg, and he shuts up. Scott looks down on him, a spiteful expression on his face, like a child getting his hands on someone else's candy.

"Oh yes, his fingers. I see now that you broke them to keep him out of the pit. No doubt that'll be a big disadvantage to him when I put him back out there next week."

"You can't do that, Scott!"



“Yes I can, Leroy. I own you, and I own him, and I say that he’ll fight in the pit next week. Prince Walid suggested it, and he’s right; it’s a fitting punishment for your deception.”

With that, he puffs out his chest and turns and stalks back towards the pit.

Walid wanders over, still smiling that cool, cruel smile. He takes off his sunglasses and looks down on Gibbs, a pitying expression on his face.

“Ah, Jethro, how sad. It looks like you are going to lose your dear, loyal boy. You know, as a special treat for him, I think I’ll arrange for him to face Mac in the pit next week. It seems fitting – the fireman versus the wolfman’s boy. It’ll mean Mac fighting twice, as he already has a fight scheduled, but I doubt Tony will cause him to break into a sweat. In fact, he’ll be a nice little warm-up for Mac.” He gives a little chuckle.

“I think, also, that I will arrange for you to watch from a special vantage point next to me, so you can see every single piece of the action. Maybe we’ll even see the wolf cry, hmm? I think I’d like that.” Walid puts his sunglasses back on with another smug smile. “Enjoy your week with Tony, Jethro, for I very much fear it will be your last.”

~\*~

It feels like such a long wait for the fighters to return. Even though Gibbs was certain he’d win, Tony is worried all the same. Anything could have happened to him out there, and Gibbs’s certainty is no guarantee that he’ll come back safely.

At some point Ellis turns off his radio. Maybe he’s gone off duty and another guard has started his shift out there. Tony doesn’t want to look into the hallway for fear of starting a new altercation, and after the way the last one ended that’s a risk he doesn’t want to take.

So he just sits there, with his back against the wall and his arms around his knees, hugging himself, and waiting.

It seems like hours. It probably is hours. Finally, he hears a noise in the hallway, and the sounds of the fighters returning to their stalls, one by one.

He squeezes his arms more tightly around his knees, waiting for Gibbs, hoping for Gibbs, worried beyond belief that Gibbs might not return. He has no idea what he’ll do if that happens.

At long last, the door opens, and he looks up, heart in his mouth, to see Gibbs standing there.

He looks like shit. He’s got butterfly stitches in a cut over his eye, there’s a laceration on his jaw, and there are several dark red bruises on his ribs. Worse than that is the look of utter defeat in his eyes. He clearly won, or he wouldn’t be here, so why does he look so defeated?

Tony gets up, slowly. Gibbs just stands there, unmoving, gazing at Tony. Behind him, the door is slammed shut and locked.

“Boss...are you okay?” There’s no reply. Tony moves towards him. “Boss, you’re freaking me out. Are you hurt?”

Tony remembers the dark bruising on Rajul's body; if Gibbs is bleeding internally then there won't be any medical treatment for him. They'll just dispose of him the way they disposed of Rajul.

Tony stands in front of Gibbs, mapping every new bruise on his skin, his gaze raking over every single injury to assess its severity and find out what's wrong. Still Gibbs makes no reply; he looks all locked up in himself, as if he can't speak.

"Jethro?" Tony reaches gentle fingers to touch the side of Gibbs's face. He can smell the soap from the post-fight shower Gibbs just took, and he's relieved he doesn't have to smell some other guy's scent on him. Gibbs clears his throat and seems to come to. He looks tired and old.

"I failed you, Tony," he says wearily. "I got this all wrong. I've been fighting the wrong damn fight all this time."

"I don't understand."

Gibbs looks battered and worn. His skin is pale, making the bruises stand out in stark contrast. Tony traces his fingers from one bruise to another. "Was the fight harder than usual?"

"Yeah. I was distracted."

"By what?"

"Worrying. About you."

Tony nods, understanding. "You think I make you weak." That's what Ellis as good as said earlier, and maybe it's true.

"No!" Gibbs jerks away from his gently questing fingers. "I mean...it was harder to get into the right headspace to fight. I kept wondering what Ellis was doing to you."

"I'm fine."

"You don't look fine." Gibbs looks straight at him, those sharp blue eyes missing nothing, as usual. "You look like someone walked across your grave."

"Ellis didn't touch me."

"He doesn't need to touch you to hurt you." Gibbs shrugs. "I know that."

"How?"

"Doesn't matter."

Tony has a suspicion that it probably does, but now isn't the right time to push. He changes the subject. "Did Matt win his fight?" he asks, remembering how desperately afraid Greg was that his lover would lose.

Gibbs frowns, looking confused, as if he doesn't even remember who Matt is. Then the memory seems to kick in, and he nods. "Yeah, he did."

"That's good. Greg was worried because..." A thought occurs to him. "Did Greg win too?" he asks, thinking it'd be ironic if Matt won and Greg didn't after all the worrying Greg was doing.

"Yeah. They both won. Scott had a good night tonight." There's something about the way Gibbs says it that makes Tony shiver.

Gibbs goes over to the basin and runs some water into it. He scoops out a handful and drinks it. Then he straightens, squares his shoulders, and turns to look at Tony again. Tony can see the bad news in his eyes before he even says a word.

"Scott knows we lied to him about who you are. Walid told him, as punishment for me winning my fight tonight. Scott's going to put you in the pit next week. Walid says you'll be fighting McIntyre."

He says it all in a flat monotone, delivering the bad news in typical Gibbs style, as quickly and efficiently as possible.

Tony rocks back on his heels. "Okay."

"Okay?" Gibbs looks furious. "O-fucking-kay?" He turns and slams his fist against the wall, the first display of emotion Tony has seen from him since his return. "You have no idea what it's like out there, Tony. Facing me in the pit is nothing like how it'll be against McIntyre."

Tony shrugs. "What do you want me to say, Gibbs? It's not in my control. If it happens, it happens, unless I can find a way to steal a cell phone in the meantime..."

"Christ, you and the goddamn cell phone! Won't you ever give up about that?"

"No! And I don't know why you've given up, either!"

"I haven't! It's just a lousy plan!"

"Then come up with a better one!"

They stare at each other for a long moment, an atmosphere of tense fury in the air, both of them irritated by the other's failure to understand. Then suddenly, in the middle of it all, Ellis's radio starts blaring out again.

"No! Fuck it! NO!" Gibbs howls, putting his head back and screaming in frustrated rage. "Not now. Not fucking now!" He storms over to the door and bangs on it over and over again with his fists. "SHUT THE FUCK UP!"

Tony can see a vein bulging in Gibbs's temple, and he's not surprised the man has finally reached breaking point. He's just surprised it took this long.

“You shut up, asshole!” Ellis roars back from the hallway. Then the sound is turned up, blaring out so loudly it’s impossible to ignore. Gibbs begins beating on the door with his fists in a frenzied rage. Tony gets it; the frustration, the helpless impotence of their situation, and the fact that none of it is in Gibbs’s control...it’s all boiled over into this display of raw fury.

“Hey...you’re looking at this the wrong way,” Tony tells him quietly.

Gibbs just stands there, pounding his fists pointlessly against the door.

“It’s boring as hell in here – but good old Ellis is providing us with some entertainment. Listen...” Tony holds up a hand. “This is good stuff. Sam Cooke – ‘*Wonderful World*’. I love this song, Gibbs.”

Every single muscle in Gibbs’s body is screaming out his tension, and Tony isn’t sure he’s even listening.

“This song reminds me of one of the best scenes ever, in the history of movies. Did you ever see the movie ‘*Witness*’, Gibbs?”

Gibbs stops pounding and stands with his forehead pressed against the closed door, his body shaking, sweat pouring off him.

“There’s this great scene in the barn, where Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis dance to this song, and the sexual tension between them is electric! They come from two different worlds, and there are so many reasons why they can’t be together, but you just want them to kiss.”

*“Don’t know much about a science book, don’t know much about the French I took, but I do know that I love you, and I know that if you loved me too, what a wonderful world this would be...”* Tony sings along to the song blaring out from the radio.

Gibbs turns to look at him, an incredulous expression on his face. “A movie? You’re talking about a movie at a time like this?”

“It was a great movie, Gibbs!” Tony grins. “One of the classics. And this is a great song. It always reminds me of that scene.” He hesitates and then decides to go for it. What is there left to lose anyway? “I had such a crush on Harrison Ford back then.”

“Harrison Ford?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow. “You mean Kelly McGillis.”

“Her too.” Tony grins. “Beautiful woman. But Harrison Ford was more my type.”

Gibbs frowns. “There something you’re not telling me, DiNozzo?”

Tony laughs out loud. “Oh, plenty, trust me, Gibbs, but I think maybe you’ve always known about this, on some level. Harrison Ford is one of the greats. He has that cool, macho thing going on, like Steve McQueen. I always loved his movies.”

“You’re trying to tell me you’re gay? You?” Gibbs looks incredulous.

“Bi,” Tony corrects. “I love the pretty girls too. Not the pretty boys though...I like my guys older – tough and hard-assed – like Harrison Ford. And like you.”

He holds his breath, watching as Gibbs processes that. There’s no reply. Gibbs is just looking at him, his chest heaving up and down.

“If you’ve been beating yourself up about what happened in the pit last week, then don’t.” Tony shrugs. “I’m a long way from being a shy little virgin with guys, Gibbs. I’ve done that before. Lots of times.”

Gibbs still makes no reply, but there’s a dark, brooding look on his face.

“Not that I’m saying that was good sex, because it wasn’t. It was crap sex. The crappiest sex I’ve ever had, and I never thought I’d say that about sex with you.” Tony grins. “‘Cause in my head, sex with you was always going to be wild and intense and blow my mind – but in a good way. I never figured it’d happen in a pit full of sawdust, at gunpoint, with people watching, and some weird ‘fuck or die’ scenario going on.”

Tony knows he’s babbling because he’s so nervous and because Gibbs isn’t saying a word. Maybe now wasn’t the best moment to come out to him, but they’re running out of time, and he doesn’t want to waste what little they’ve got left.

Gibbs is still standing there, just staring at him, that same dark look on his face. Maybe it’s time to try a different tactic.

“So...do you want to dance?” Tony asks, holding out his hand.

That at least elicits a response, even if it’s one of incredulity. “Dance? In here? Are you insane?” Gibbs looks like he’d rather go back out into the pit and fight again.

“Sure. Why not? Ellis has gone to all that trouble to provide the entertainment, I’m going to hell in the pit next week, and you’re all beat up on the outside and fucked up on the inside. Seriously, Gibbs, in the circumstances, all things considered – what else is there to do but dance?”

Tony doesn’t miss the tiny hint of a smile that quirks on the outer corners of Gibbs’s mouth.

“You’re an idiot, DiNozzo.”

“I know. *‘I don’t claim to be an A student, but I’m trying to be...’*” Tony sings. “*‘For maybe by being an A student baby, I can win your love for me.’*”

He moves closer, still holding out his hand, watching Gibbs closely. Gibbs looks as if he’s torn between his two wolves, various different expressions warring on his face, and Tony knows it’s down to him to make sure the right wolf wins.

Tony moves his hand and snaps his fingers, dancing in time to the tune. “C’mon, Gibbs – dance with me...”

He grabs Gibbs's hand and pulls him into the centre of the stall, swinging him gently, to and fro. At first Gibbs is stiff and resistant, and Tony waits for the explosion of anger...but it doesn't come. Instead, something inside Gibbs seems to break, and he suddenly throws back his head, gives a loud, howling laugh, and starts moving in time to the music.

It's just a moment, one brief moment in time. It doesn't last long, and yet somehow it also seems to go on forever. Tony can almost feel Gibbs's light wolf rising to the surface, fur ruffled, teeth bared, but alive and kicking all the same, still there after months of being shut out, pushed down, and denied.

Gibbs is laughing, his feet are moving, and he looks almost happy. They both know that nothing awaits them but a whole world of hurt, but they have now, right now, and they're going to seize the moment.

The song comes to an end. Their feet slow down and then stop, and they both stand there, looking at each other, still holding hands. The atmosphere in the tiny room is suddenly electric, and Tony can feel all the individual hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. Screw Harrison Ford and Kelly McGillis – their sexual tension has nothing on him and Gibbs right now.

"Hey! We've gone from *'Witness'* to *'Dances with Wolves'*," Tony says to diffuse the tension. "Get it? That would be you – the wolf – and me doing the dancing. Now that was another great movie...Kevin Costner...never felt the same about him as I did about Harrison, but..."

Tony trails off. Gibbs isn't listening. He's just looking at him, an expression of hungry intensity on his face, his eyes fixed wolfishly on Tony's lips. Tony has that feeling you get when the rollercoaster reaches the top and pauses, hanging on a precipice, and you want to get off the ride so badly...but at the same time you also want to experience the terrifying thrill of plunging over the edge.

Then it's too late, and he's in free-fall as Gibbs moves in close, grabs his shoulders, and kisses him hard on the mouth. Gibbs is a force of nature, wild and unrestrained as he wraps a fist in Tony's hair to keep him still, pulls him in, and works his lips open.

Tony wraps his arms around Gibbs's body and returns the kiss, opening up his mouth to Gibbs's tongue, his own questing just as furiously in Gibbs's mouth.

Gibbs pushes him against the wall, devouring him with his kiss. Tony slides his hands down and cups Gibbs's buttocks, kneading them rhythmically. He can feel the hardness of Gibbs's erection against his thigh, and his own cock rising up to meet it.

There is nothing else but Gibbs's lips on his, and Gibbs's hard, fighter's body pressed against him. This is nothing like it was back in the pit. This is real desire, both of them wanting the other, and each of them lost in the moment, blocking everything else out.

Tony pushes Gibbs back, but only so he can throw himself onto the mattress and pull Gibbs down on top of him. Neither of them can bear to be out of physical contact for even a second, needing the skin-on-skin contact like they need to breathe.

Tony rolls over on top of Gibbs, and Gibbs winces, reminding Tony of his sore ribs.

“Sorry...just looking for this.” Tony fumbles around in the blankets and finds the oil he stole from Frank. “You want to catch or pitch?” he asks, between kisses. He draws back to find Gibbs staring up at him. “Gibbs? Jethro?”

Gibbs just pulls him back down and devours him with another hungry kiss, his hands exploring Tony’s ass, his cock rock hard between their bellies. Then, mid-kiss, he rolls Tony over, so now Tony is on his back, and somehow Gibbs has maneuvered himself between his legs, opening them with his hands. He presses a finger against Tony’s hole, circling it without pushing in.

“Okay...got it. I’ll catch,” Tony says with a grin.

Gibbs moves his hand to Tony’s cock, and Tony mewls with pleasure at the sudden firm touch. He looks up to find Gibbs grinning down on him, a feral expression on his face. Gibbs then proceeds to give to Tony the kind of exquisite hand job that Tony has been giving to him these past few days, returning the favour with interest. He takes Tony right to the brink of orgasm and then moves his hand away, leaving Tony whimpering in disappointment.

“Not yet.” Gibbs takes the bottle of oil from Tony’s hand and pours some on his fingers. Then he pushes Tony’s legs open again and slides a finger into his hole.

“Okay...that’s good for me,” Tony pants, opening up wider to let another finger in. He’s so aroused that he’s impatient, pulling Gibbs down on top of him, trying to get him to hurry it along.

Gibbs stops and pulls back. “No...this time we do it properly,” he says firmly, and he slides his fingers back inside Tony’s body and opens him up, stretching him until he’s wide and ready.

Tony wants him inside him so much he can hardly stand any more delay, and eventually he knocks Gibbs’s hand away, grabs his hips, and then guides his hard cock towards his waiting hole.

It’s tight, and his hole feels stretched impossibly wide around Gibbs’s big cock as it goes in, but it doesn’t hurt the way it did back in the pit last week. It feels so good he instantly wants more, and he pulls Gibbs into him so he’s fully immersed in his body and holds him there, never wanting to let him go.

Gibbs puts his hands on either side of Tony’s head and gently kisses his mouth again, kiss after kiss, soft, loving, warm, gentle and so intense. Tony knows what Gibbs is like when he’s focused, but he’s never been the object of that focus before, and it’s thrilling and scary at the same time.

Gibbs kisses his eyelids, his cheeks, and his forehead and then dives back into his mouth again, opening his lips with a sweet thrust of his tongue. Tony can feel Gibbs’s hard cock fully lodged inside his body, joining them together. His own cock is pressed between their bellies, pulsing urgently.

Gibbs takes his time. He kisses Tony repeatedly, not moving, his cock rigid inside Tony's hole. Then he slowly moves his hips back and glides back in again. It's smooth and controlled, and he never takes his eyes off Tony's face as he moves inside him. He pauses on every inward thrust to kiss Tony again and then draws back. In and kiss...back...in and kiss...back. Tony reaches down and grasps his own cock, sliding his hand along it and rubbing hard in time to Gibbs's thrusts. He lifts his head eagerly to meet Gibbs's kisses, his body quivering with pleasure as Gibbs speeds up, his cock snagging Tony's prostate with each deep thrust, making white sparks flash behind his eyes.

Tony comes, the moment lost in a sweeping haze of pleasure. Gibbs thrusts a couple more times and comes too, blinking almost in surprise as he shudders out an orgasm. He hangs there for a moment, looking down on Tony, and then he sighs and collapses on top of him, claiming another kiss. Tony wraps his arms around him, and they stay there for a long time, Gibbs lying on top of him, kissing his mouth gently. No tongues this time, just light, butterfly caresses of lips on lips.

Gibbs is shivering, and Tony isn't sure if that's from the sweat drying on him or the overwhelming emotion of the moment. It felt so intense and passionate, and he's all too aware of how long Gibbs has been locked up in here, refusing to take comfort in sex or human companionship. He holds Gibbs tight against his own body, warming him until the shivering subsides.

Eventually, Gibbs withdraws and slides over onto the mattress beside him. Tony turns, tugging the blankets over them both, and they lie there in the dark, just gazing at each other. Tony's hand is on Gibbs's hip, and Gibbs's leg is slung over Tony's legs, skin pressed against skin. Their situation is just as hopeless now as it was when Gibbs returned from the fight, and yet somehow everything has changed and anything is possible.

Gibbs smiles tiredly and moves a hand to gently stroke Tony's hair.

"How long...?" Gibbs's voice is hoarse, and he coughs to clear his throat, but Tony knows what he's asking.

"Ten years. Why else do you think I stayed and put up with such a bad-tempered bastard of a boss?"

Gibbs gives him a lazy grin and taps his hand half-heartedly on Tony's head. As head-slaps go, it's a pale imitation of the ones he's used to, and yet it's the first one Gibbs has given him in over five months and for that reason alone it makes Tony break into a wide, insane smile of happiness.

Gibbs wraps an arm around him and pulls him close and a little while later Tony falls asleep, his head resting on Gibbs's shoulder.

It must be hours later when he wakes up and finds Gibbs still gazing at him in the dark. He wonders if Gibbs has slept at all, or if he's just been lying there, looking at him all this time, watching over him as he sleeps.

"Whassup?" Tony whispers.



Gibbs levers himself up on his elbow and rests a hand on Tony's chest. "I was the same as you...when I first got here. It's been so long, I'd almost forgotten."

Tony runs his fingers over the short grey stubble covering Gibbs's head. He likes the feel of it, but he likes the way Gibbs bows his head and lets him do it even more. It's like the wolf is almost tame.

"We stole the supplies truck, Tony," Gibbs says quietly. He sits up, and Tony sits up too, gathering the blanket around them. "There was this Marine – Gunnery Sergeant Benjamin Harris." He glances sideways at Tony, a tiny smile on his lips. "He was about your age. Brave. Smart. Talked a lot. Liked movies."

"I like the sound of him." Tony grins.

"He could be a pain in the ass, but you got used to him after a while." Gibbs quirks a grin back at him. "I knew he was someone I could rely on, so I told him my plan. I'd got talking to Pete, and I knew about the cell phone and the smart card. One day, Ben and me pulled supply truck duty on purpose, and we managed to steal that truck right out from under their noses. Had it all planned – went like clockwork. I got the fighters organized so some of them created a diversion in the gym. The guards ran off to handle it, leaving only one of them guarding us. Ben stole the smart card and got the doors open, and I knocked the guard out and stole his gun. Then Ben got into the truck beside me, and we drove straight out of there."

Gibbs leans forward and wraps his arms around his knees, and Tony watches him, waiting.

"It was dark out there, and we didn't have a damn clue where we were, but we were out. I drove us across the open land at about 100 miles an hour, looking for a road somewhere. We were free. I could smell the freedom, Tony. We were so damn close." Gibbs drops his head and looks down at the floor. "Ben got the cell phone out of the box, and I asked him to dial your number."

"Mine?"

"Yeah. Knew you'd get McGee to figure out where we were and send help."

"So what happened? I never got the call."

"No, you didn't get the call." Gibbs is silent for a while, staring into space. "There was no service on the damn cell phone. I'm not sure where the hell we are, but it must be wilderness, out in the middle of nowhere. I kept on driving, but it's private land, and there were no roads – not that I found anyway. It just goes on and on...miles of dirt track. Never even saw a road."

He turns to look at Tony. "They found us. They shot out the truck's tyres and surrounded us. Had us at gunpoint, so we surrendered. They brought us back to the stable, herded all the fighters out into the main room, and..."

"They killed Ben," Tony says quietly.

“Yeah. I was winning too many fights by that stage for them to kill me, but Ben was expendable. They made him kneel down, and put a bullet in the back of his head. Then...” His hands form into tight fists, his body tensing. “Then they got Brian – the kid who couldn’t fight – the one they were always bullying. He wasn’t even involved in the escape, but they knew I liked him, so they made him kneel down in front of me...”

He pauses for a long time. Then he looks at Tony again, his face expressionless. “They lined up three of the other fighters on one side. Said I had to kill Brian, or they’d kill all the others. Three lives against one – my choice. I pull the trigger and kill Brian, or they kill the other three men.”

“Don’t tell me – that was Ellis’s idea,” Tony says quietly.

“Yeah. Like I said, he doesn’t need to lay a finger on you to make it hurt.”

“So you did it. You killed Brian.”

Gibbs nods. “Object lesson. I didn’t try to escape again.”

Now it all makes sense. Tony puts a hand on Gibbs’s shoulder and squeezes. No wonder Gibbs shut everyone out after that. It was too dangerous for him to get close to any of them and make them a possible target. Gibbs shut down not because he wanted to, but because he had to.

“See, way I am isn’t because I love the fighting so much – although you’re right – a part of me does love it,” Gibbs says, with the weary, brutal honesty of a man who knows his own weaknesses all too well. Gibbs glances at him sideways. “The way I am is because I’m just trying to keep everyone safe, only way I know how, Tony.”

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Gibbs sits there, looking at Tony in the dimly lit stall. He feels like a tin can that Tony has been opening up, bit by bit, ever since he arrived here, and now the contents are spilling out all over the place, and he has no idea how to put them back. He doesn’t even want to try.

In opening up those parts of himself that he shut down, it’s like he’s lost control of the process. Now it’s all coming out, not just going back five months, but going back ten years. He’s spent an entire decade trying to deny what he felt for Tony, to keep it out and push it away, but he doesn’t have it in him to do that anymore. He can’t keep shovelling his feelings down and locking them up.

Tony is watching him, but then Tony has been watching him for the past ten years, waiting for him to make a move. Why the hell did it take him so long?

“What did Ellis do to you today?” Gibbs asks quietly.

There’s a haunted look in Tony’s eyes. Gibbs recognizes it because he’s seen it in Sam’s eyes, and Matt’s, and Greg’s, and reflected back at him in the mirrors in the showers all too often. It’s what this place does to you.

“Tony?” He squeezes Tony’s leg.

“That guy I told you about – the one Sam beat up in the pit last week...”

“After they shot Steve?” Gibbs can still remember the look in Hurrell’s eyes when he returned to the truck. He’d found a dark wolf of his own and fed it that night.

“Yeah. I got talking to him. He was pretty sick...dying. He said his name is Rajul. I asked Ellis to get him medical treatment.”

“That was never going to happen.” Gibbs wraps his arms around his legs, feeling very old and very tired. He’s been here too long.

“I know. I suppose I just had trouble getting my head around the fact that it is that brutal here, no matter how many times you told me. Anyway...Ellis shot him. Then he had me clean up the stall and the body. Took me a while.” Tony gazes at him almost defiantly in the dimly lit stall.

“That’s not all that happened.” Gibbs has been in enough interrogations to know when he’s not hearing the whole truth.

Tony sighs. “No. Ellis wanted to give me a taste of what it was like in the pit. I had to jerk off...he gave me thirty seconds, or he shot Rajul.”

“That sounds like Ellis.” Gibbs can feel his jaw tightening. He looks at Tony searchingly and sees shame there, but no guilt. “You did it, didn’t you? You managed it?”

“Yes. Just about did it in time – by thinking of you.” Tony gives him a ghost of a smile. “But he shot Rajul anyway. The bastard just turned around and shot him, in cold blood. Gibbs, how do you do it in the pit? How the hell can anyone do it?”

“Because you have to.” Gibbs shrugs. “You found that out, Tony. If you don’t someone dies; might be you, might be the other guy, but it’ll be one of you. So you have to do it.”

He doesn’t want to think about the pit and what he’s done there, and he really doesn’t want to think about what will happen out there next Fight Night, but he knows they’re both thinking about that anyway.

“What are we going to do?” Tony asks.

“I’ll think of something.” He turns his head to look at Tony, a little grin on his face. “Do not try and steal a damn cell phone.”

Tony laughs. “I won’t. But I’d rather die than be a puppet in this freak show, so if that’s what it comes to, that’s what I’ll do, Gibbs.”

“I hear you, Tony. Just give me some time to think before you do anything stupid.”

He feels like he’s waking up after a long sleep; not just a five month sleep, but twenty years, going all the way back to losing Shannon and Kelly. He thought he felt alive out there in the

pit, but Tony just showed him a different definition of feeling alive, and he likes this one a hell of a lot better.

He gazes at Tony's tousled hair and familiar features. He's been looking at them a long time and trying not to see them for what they meant to him. Now he knows, but right at the point when it's too late. They probably only have this one week left together and then it all gets blown to hell.

He moves the blankets aside, lies down, and places his head on Tony's chest. Then he pulls the blanket up over them both and wraps his arms around Tony's body. He holds him tight and listens to the steady beat of his heart under his ear.

Now he has him, he never wants to let him go.

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Tony rests his fingers on Gibbs's shorn head; the silver stubble is smooth under his fingertips. "Why do they shave your head?"

"Hair gives an opponent something to grab and bring you down. It's a weakness you can't afford in the pit. Frank shaves all the fighters the day before a fight."

"I didn't recognize you when I first saw you."

"Didn't recognize you, either."

"No, but for different reasons." Gibbs glances up at him. "You were too far gone, Gibbs. I wasn't even sure you were in there."

"You sure now?" Gibbs's eyes are gleaming wolfishly in the dark stall.

"Getting there," Tony says quietly.

"What's missing?"

"Apart from your hair?" Tony grins, and Gibbs reaches up and slaps his head lazily again. It feels good to have some genuine intimacy with the man, an intimacy that isn't about sex. God knows, he never exactly expected Gibbs to be playful, but drawing out the white wolf is proving to be a revelation. "Did you ever read the Narnia books, Gibbs?" Tony asks.

Gibbs has always been used to the way his mind skips around, so Tony isn't surprised that he takes this particular change of subject in his stride.

"Yeah. Used to read them to Ke..." He stops short. "Used to read 'em," he amends, but they both know what he was going to say. Tony runs his thumb soothingly over the silver stubble on his head.

"My mom used to read them to me when I was a kid. There was this one bit that always got to me. It was when they had Aslan tied up on the table of stone. Mom used to laugh at me because they had him tied up, the rope cutting into his paws, and they were taunting him and

mocking him and about to slaughter him...but the one thing that really upset me was that they shaved off his mane. He didn't seem like Aslan without his mane. It showed how much they'd changed him, brought him down to their piss poor level, and made him weak." He pauses for a moment, still stroking Gibbs's shorn hair. "Nobody likes seeing their heroes that way."

"I don't have any magic from before the dawn of time, Tony," Gibbs says tiredly.

"Sure you do. You're Gibbs." Tony grins down at him. He's never yet lost faith in Gibbs, and he doesn't intend to start now. He figures the white wolf inside Gibbs just needs more feeding to get up to full strength and when it does, Walid and the other bastards running this sick freak show had better watch out.

Gibbs glances up at him, a puzzled, almost bemused expression on his face. Maybe he'd forgotten just how much faith Tony has always had in him. Tony is glad he reminded him because Gibbs suddenly moves up, takes Tony's head between his hands, and kisses him on the mouth. It's long, deep, and slow, and so incredibly focused and intense that it makes Tony shiver.

After all these years of nothing, now it seems that Gibbs can't keep his hands off him. Then again, that's not surprising; Gibbs never does anything by halves. While he was keeping Tony out he was doing it with all his might, and now he's letting him in, he's giving that his all too. That's classic Gibbs.

How long it'll last is another matter, but not one Tony wants to think about right now. He is under no illusions about this. Gibbs is lonely and desperate; Tony isn't expecting him to still want to be this close when that isn't the case anymore...if that ever happens.

Gibbs finishes kissing him and looks down on him, his hands still cupping Tony's face. Tony gazes back up at him, completely in thrall to the intensity of that dark-eyed gaze. It's almost as if Gibbs's white wolf is visibly drawing strength from him, drinking it in thirstily, and it's so compelling Tony can't look away. Then the moment passes, and Gibbs drops a more casual kiss on his mouth and releases him.

Gibbs moves over to lie down next to him, one arm slung possessively over Tony's naked body, keeping him close. Tony moves in even closer; if they don't have long, he wants to make the most of it.

They're holding each other so tight that Tony can feel every rib and hard muscle in Gibbs's body. Tony rests his chin on Gibbs's shoulder, Gibbs rests his hand on Tony's ass, and they fall asleep that way.

When the klaxon wakes them the next day, Tony knows immediately it'll be different now. For a start, Gibbs leans across and presses a brief kiss to his hair before getting to his feet. Up until now, whatever intimacy they've shared at night has been forgotten during the day.

What's also different is the way he's treated by the people running this place. Nobody gave a damn about his training regime last week, but now, the minute he steps foot in the gym Frank comes over to him.

“Scott tells me you’re going up against McIntyre in the pit next week,” he says, looking Tony up and down with an assessing gaze. “You won’t win.”

“So people seem to think,” Tony replies stonily.

Frank gives a little bark of a laugh. “Even Leroy will struggle against Mac, and you’re no Leroy.”

“Don’t under-estimate Tony,” Gibbs cuts in from where he’s busy taping his fingers nearby. “He’s killed a trained Mossad Kidon, and he once took out an armed man while beat up and tied to a chair.”

“Thanks, Boss.” Praise from Gibbs is rare, so Tony laps that up.

“Besides, I taught him everything he knows,” Gibbs adds, patting Tony’s face lightly as he passes him by on his way to the boxing ring.

“He’s got a broken hand, he’s carrying too much fat and not enough muscle, and he has virtually zero experience in the pit. He won’t win,” Frank says again, shaking his head.

“Again with the weight jibes. I’m not fat, am I, Boss?” Tony asks mournfully, although in truth, standing beside Gibbs who has been in training for months, he can see the difference.

“Nah. Just cuddly.” Gibbs winks at him.

Tony looks at Frank, and Frank looks back at him, and Tony can see his own incredulous expression mirrored on Frank’s face. Did Gibbs just \*wink\* at him? Gibbs, who hasn’t cracked a smile for weeks, and who spends every day in the gym pounding a punching bag into submission with a grim expression on his face? Maybe that white wolf is closer to the surface than he thought.

“C’mon, Tony. Get that bubble butt in here,” Gibbs says with an impatient jerk of his head towards the ring. “I’ll go through some moves with you.”

Somehow, Tony doesn’t think these moves will be as much fun as the moves Gibbs showed him last night, but he strides over there and gets into the ring anyway. Frank follows.

Gibbs isn’t messing about. This is nothing like the tutorials Tony got back at NCIS, and he thought those were bad enough. But when he lands on his back with Gibbs straddling his chest for the fourth time in as many minutes he puts up his hands in surrender.

“Damn it – go easy, Boss.”

“McIntyre won’t,” Gibbs snaps.

Tony is about to growl a retort when McGuire calls him out to visit the doctor.

For once, Tanner doesn’t appear to be coked off his head. In fact, he seems irritable and depressed. He undoes the bandage around Tony’s fingers to check on them with jerky movements of his hands, making Tony wince.

“Fingers take about five or six weeks to heal. These are nowhere near healed. I’ll re-bandage them but it’s kinda pointless because Mac will probably just break them again the minute you step into the pit.” Tanner gives a shrug.

He puts a fresh bandage on Tony’s fingers, glances at his notes, and then back at Tony. “Look, let’s be honest, after Fight Night you won’t be in this stable, so there’s no point to all this, but Scott wants you to at least put up a fight to entertain the crowd, so I’m going to give you the maximum dose.”

He pulls a syringe from a box and fills it with liquid from a vial.

“Maximum dose?” Tony asks, gazing at the syringe anxiously.

“Yeah – we’ll get you nice and pumped up for the pit. I wouldn’t normally start a new fighter on a dose this high, but we don’t have time to finesse you, and it’s not as if Scott plans on keeping you anyway. This is just for the fun of it.”

“Fun for who?” Tony raises a sceptical eyebrow.

Tanner gives a nasty grin. “Well, not for you, Tony, that’s for sure.”

“Are there any side effects?”

“Plenty.” Tanner shrugs. “Look, we’re not asking your permission here, Tony. This isn’t some nice, safe clinical trial. Scott wants you doped up to the eyeballs, so that’s what’s gonna happen.”

“I don’t respond well to drugs,” Tony says nervously. “Even painkillers make me go loopy, so I really don’t think this is a good idea.”

“Aw – really?” Tanner says, in a tone of false sympathy. “Sorry, Tony, I think you’re mistaking me for someone who gives a damn.”

He nods his head at McGuire, and Tony finds his arm grabbed. He’s pulled off his chair and forced over the steel table. He can’t do anything. He can’t get away or refuse the drugs. He can only stand there, helpless, as Tanner jabs the needle into his ass and injects all that junk into his bloodstream. He hates that he has no control over what is being done to him, and he gets a taste of the frustrated anger Gibbs must feel about being forced to take this medication week after week.

His skin feels red and itchy even before he’s left the infirmary. McGuire escorts him back to the gym where Gibbs takes one look at him then grabs his shoulder and hauls him back into the ring and tells him to get fighting.

Tony doesn’t need any encouragement. He can feel the blood thumping in his veins, making him hungry for something, although he’s not sure what. He goes after Gibbs, fists flailing, but Gibbs is too fast and too good for him as usual.

Gibbs is talking to him, but he can't hear anything except the sound of his own blood rushing through his body. He feels a huge surge of energy, and he bounces, feints, and swings as he pursues Gibbs around the ring, fists flailing.

Suddenly the floor disappears from under him, and he finds himself lying on his back looking up at Gibbs, and – damn it – his cock is ramrod hard.

“Shit.” He turns his face away, feeling his face redden. He's used to being naked in front of the other fighters, but he's never been hard before, and it's embarrassing. His mind is full of images of shoving Gibbs up against a wall and burying himself balls deep in his ass; of holding Ellis down while he punches him, over and over again; of grabbing a fistful of Scott's hair and crashing his head into the wall; of getting hold of that bastard Walid and....

“Tony!” Gibbs slaps him hard across the face. “Focus,” Gibbs growls in his ear.

“Can't...oh shit...shit, Gibbs. How the hell do you survive this? I'm...I want to...” He gazes up at Gibbs helplessly.

“I know.” Gibbs pats his face gently where he slapped him. “I know, DiNozzo. You want to fight, and you want to fuck, and that's all you want to do right now.”

Tony feels another surge of rage. He wants to shove Gibbs off, to push him down, to pummel him into the ground and then to fuck him through the floor. He heaves upwards and succeeds in dislodging Gibbs from his chest, but Gibbs just flips him over onto his front and sits on his back, holding him down with a vice-like grip on his shoulders.

“You have two choices, DiNozzo,” Gibbs hisses in his ear. “You control it, or you give in to it. What's it to be?”

“Fuck you!”

Tony feels Gibbs grabbing a handful of his hair, and then his face is shoved down onto the floor.

“Find something to be angry about. Channel the anger. But never let the anger control you or it'll destroy you,” Gibbs hisses in his ear. “Now, what are you angry about, Tony?”

“You sitting on my goddamn back!” Tony says immediately.

“Good. What else?”

“Being here! Being locked up. I hate being locked up. I want to...” A surge of helpless fury floods through his body, and he pushes up against Gibbs, only to find his face being slammed effortlessly back onto the floor.

“I told you – control the anger or it will destroy you.”

Tony doesn't care if it does. He just wants to give into it, to fight, and fuck, and lose himself in the rage that's coursing through his veins.



“What else?” Gibbs demands, forcing him to think.

“Vance and his refusal to damn well listen; Jenny and her stupid fucking vendetta against the frog and how she screwed me over because of it; the way McGee eats those Nutter Butters...crunch, crunch, crunch.”

“Good. Keep going.”

“Ziva, accusing me of jealousy all the time – what the hell is that about? What am I damn well supposed to be jealous of? The fact that she has a love life with CIRay, and I don’t after I split with EJ? Damn it – maybe I am.”

“More.”

Gibbs’s fist is still tight in his hair, keeping him immobilized, forcing him to think when all he wants to do is fight.

“You! You and the way you’d go all lone wolf on us every single time Mike Franks came to town or something personal came up. I hate the way you always cut me out of anything personal, like I’m not the loyal schmuck who stuck around all these years, who always has your six, who covers for your sorry ass, and who pulled you out of a car when you were drowning.”

He feels another surge of anger and tries to push back and shove Gibbs off him again. Gibbs thumps his head forwards one more time.

“You’re not done yet,” Gibbs growls in his ear.

“Fornell...now I **am** jealous of him, and the way you talk to him, and hang out with him, while loyal schmuck over here doesn’t get a look in.” He pauses for breath.

“Don’t stop now. You’re on a roll.” Tony thinks he can hear a note of amusement in Gibbs’s voice.

“My dad – for all the lies, and the spin, and for making me believe all his stupid stories. For always telling me what to do, and how to do it, and for the eternal disappointment he feels about his only son not being the chip off the old block he wanted. And for never being there. For never damn well being there when I wanted him...for every single, lonely second of my fucked up childhood...”

He’s so angry he’s practically choking with rage.

“And my mom...my mom for dying and leaving me alone with him...”

He gives an angry sob, his body shaking with rage.

“That’s it. Get it all out, DiNozzo.” Gibbs’s voice is an anchor, keeping him grounded, bringing him back to himself. “And find a way to master it, or it’ll drive you insane. Trust me. I \*know\*. Now what else?”

“Pizza! I am so sick of all this healthy food. I want a goddamn pizza!”

That seems to break something inside, and Tony takes a few deep breaths, blinking as rivulets of sweat fall into his eyes. Gibbs is right; he needs to focus. Slowly, gradually, he calms down and gets himself under control. And slowly, gradually, Gibbs releases his hold on him, although he stays on top of him, keeping him down. Only when Tony is breathing normally again does Gibbs let him up and haul him to his feet.

Tony feels like a wreck. He rubs an arm over his eyes to wipe away the combination of sweat and angry tears. Throughout this entire humiliating experience, his cock has remained rock hard and vivid images of sex continue to flash through his mind.

“With me...now,” Gibbs orders, and he strides out of the ring and takes Tony to the restroom next door. A guard follows – one of the guards always follows Gibbs wherever he goes – he’s their prize asset. They do at least let him use the toilet unsupervised though.

Gibbs pushes him through the restroom door, one hand on his shoulder, slams him back against the wall, and then goes down on his knees and takes Tony’s hard cock in his mouth. It’s such a blessed relief to feel that warm pressure around his cock that Tony shouts out. He grabs hold of Gibbs’s head, but Gibbs shakes him off with a look of annoyance. Then he goes back to swallowing Tony’s cock clumsily again.

It’s not exactly the best blowjob Tony has ever had, but it’s one of the most welcome. It doesn’t take much before he can feel himself coming. Gibbs draws back, getting to his feet again as Tony shoots out onto the restroom floor. Tony breathes heavily and thumps his head back against the wall with a bang. It’s taken the edge off; now he can at least think straight.

“Better?” Gibbs slaps his cheek lightly, bringing him around, and Tony gives a tight, grim nod.

“Yeah. Thanks. And, you know, sorry.” He makes a little face.

Gibbs grabs his head, pulls it forward, and rests his forehead against Tony’s. “Never apologise,” he hisses fiercely, and Tony can feel his thumb rubbing up and down his neck soothingly.

“I know. Sign of weakness,” Tony mutters feebly, managing a little grin all the same.

“Good boy.” Gibbs pulls back, plants a little kiss on his mouth, and then turns and leaves. Tony takes another deep breath and then follows.

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Gibbs watches Tony like a hawk for the rest of the day. Tony’s just about holding it together, but barely. He doesn’t blame him. He knows what it’s like to have the drugs make you think and feel things that confuse and enrage you, and Tony got a massive dose without any build-up. That has to driving him nuts.

Frank wears Tony out with a tough exercise regime designed to test his limits and that seems to help; the constant activity is an outlet for the aggression and sexual frustration.

Tony looks exhausted and subdued by the time they return to their stall later that night. He's hard again, despite several more trips to the rest room during the course of the day when Gibbs knows he jacked off.

"That stuff I said earlier." Tony runs a shaky hand through his hair, making it stick up even more than it is already. "I didn't mean it."

"Yeah, you did, and you're right. I've been a shit to you." Gibbs shrugs. "You have always had my six, Tony, and I have always shut you out."

"That an apology?" Tony gives him a faded smile.

"No." Gibbs glares at him. "But you deserved better."

"Then why did you do it?"

"Anger: thought I couldn't have you. Thought I shouldn't want you. Fear: only been in love once before, Tony, and that nearly killed me; didn't want to do it again."

Tony looks startled, and Gibbs wants to smack his stupid head. "You didn't figure it out? I thought you damn well knew! After last night..."

"I assumed you were just lonely. And, you know, horny." Tony grins.

"It's been five months, and I never touched any of the other fighters outside the pit or let them touch me. You were the only one, Tony, despite all the damn drugs. I'd never have let anyone else get close the way I let you. You think if it was McGee in here with me, I'd have let him touch me like that?" Gibbs feels irrationally irritated by the fact Tony hasn't figured it out. "Christ, Tony, I've been in love with you for just as long as you have with me!"

"Love? Leroy Jethro Gibbs actually uses the 'I' word?" Tony gives him a smug, shit-eating grin.

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "Shut up and get your ass over here."

Tony comes easily into his arms, and it feels so good to have him there, where he belongs. Gibbs kisses him, loving the softness of his mouth, and the way his lips open up to let him in.

He pushes him down onto the mattress, finds the oil, and spreads it on his fingers. Tony lies there with his legs open, looking up at him, his lips swollen from kissing and his hair sticking up in points. Gibbs gets hard immediately, just looking at him.

There's always been something so sexual about Tony. It's something about his mouth, and the way he moves; something about how he loves to tease, and how he's always stood too close on purpose, getting into his space to demand his attention; something about the way he's always danced around him, taunting him to get a rise out of him and invite a head-slap; something about the gleam in those mischievous green eyes and his constant need for Gibbs to notice him.

Tony exudes a sensuality that has been driving Gibbs nuts for years. He's always wanted to tame that teasing mouth and to sink his cock into Tony's ass and make him scream with pleasure.

Gibbs strokes Tony's soft, golden skin with oily fingers. He trails them over his chest, circles a nipple, and squeezes gently, loving the way Tony arches up into him, responding so eagerly to every touch.

Gibbs moves his fingers down and stretches Tony's hole, eliciting little panting moans from him. When he's done stretching him, Gibbs slicks oil onto his own cock and positions himself between Tony's legs. He slides into Tony's waiting hole, and at the same time grasps Tony's cock in his oily hand.

"Oh shit...oil feels good...was rubbing it raw..." Tony hisses.

Gibbs grins down on him and begins to thrust with long, slow, powerful strokes, loving the feel of Tony's warm heat milking his cock. He pauses to kiss Tony regularly as he thrusts, and Tony opens up even more, helping him sink balls deep into his body. It feels so damn good and before long they both come.

Afterwards, he drags Tony into his arms and lies there, his nose buried in Tony's hair, inhaling the scent of him. It feels so good. He feels strong and powerful, as if nothing can defeat him, and yet he knows that isn't the reality of their situation.

Tony turns in his arms and looks at him. "When you sucked me off in the restroom earlier, I got the feeling you hadn't done that in a long time."

"Yeah." Gibbs strokes his hand along Tony's thigh, unwilling to volunteer any more information than that.

"Look, I get it, neither of us likes talking about this kind of shit – that's why it took ten years to get us here in the first place. But, see, the thing is, we don't have another ten years to figure this out. We probably only have a few more days, and I'd like to fill in some of the gaps before the world comes crashing down around us."

Gibbs shifts uncomfortably. "Liked guys when I was a teenager," he says. "Jerked a few off. Sucked a few off. Then Shannon came along, and I never looked at another guy again. Never wanted to. Assumed it was just a phase."

He's quiet for a long time, until Tony nudges him. He swallows down hard. Talking about himself has never come easy to him, but Tony's right; they don't have much time, and he owes him this.

"After she died..." His voice comes out in a croak, and he clears his throat and tries that again. "After Shannon died, I didn't think about it too much. I just chased after every redhead I could find in the hope it'd feel like it did with her all over again. Thought I could find her in those women, but she was long gone, and I ended up chasing shadows. Then you came along."

Tony is quiet for once, gazing at him with rapt attention.

“And it blind-sided me.” Gibbs shrugs. “Thought I’d never feel that way about anyone again, least of all a guy. Wasn’t expecting it. Couldn’t accept it. And buried it down deep so it couldn’t fuck up both our lives.”

“Rule twelve,” Tony says quietly.

“There for a reason. Getting involved with Jenny nearly got us both killed. And besides, you never shut up about all the women you were dating. You sure as hell never gave any indication that you like Harrison Ford as much as you like Kelly McGillis.” Gibbs gives a little grin.

“Self-protection. I found out I liked guys at boarding school and then discovered girls at summer camp.” Tony gives a lascivious grin, clearly relishing that memory. Then the grin fades. “But my father always disapproved of every single thing I ever did, and I didn’t want to give him any more ammunition. So I kept it quiet – it’s easier that way. I thought it wouldn’t be a problem until I met you. Then I knew nobody else would ever do, so I was stuck following you around like a puppy for the rest of my life. But being near you was better than nothing at all, so I learned to live with it. Although sometimes I wanted to slap \*you\* upside the head to make you notice me.”

“Oh, I noticed you plenty, Tony,” Gibbs says in a rueful tone. “Just tried to pretend I didn’t.”

Tony starts to laugh, and Gibbs bites his shoulder gently. “What’s so funny, DiNozzo?”

“Just thinking...ten years, Gibbs! Ten long years we’ve had this between us, and we never once said a word about it. It took shutting us up together in a steel box and breaking us down with drugs to get us to admit we felt a damn thing for each other. There has to be an easier way of getting laid.”

Gibbs chuckles into Tony’s neck. “We’re both stubborn bastards.”

“So, you like pitching, but have you ever wanted to try it the other way around?” Tony asks, gazing at him curiously. “It’s good. I like it both ways.”

Gibbs tenses up. “No. Until they put me in the pit for the first time I’d never fucked any guy up the ass, and I’m sure as hell not letting any guy do that to me. I made a vow they’d have to kill me first.”

“Is that part of what motivates you to win?” Tony asks curiously.

“Yes,” Gibbs says firmly. He doesn’t like the quizzical look in Tony’s eyes. He knows Tony all too well; he’ll take that as a challenge. “Not gonna happen, Tony.”

Tony grins and wraps his arms around him, nuzzling sleepily into the crook of his neck. “Whatever you say, Jethro. Whatever you say.”

~\*~

Tanner calls Tony into the infirmary twice a day to receive a cocktail of drugs. In the morning he gets injected, and in the evening he's forced to drink a bottle of vile-tasting water that makes him choke with every mouthful.

Tony doesn't have a clue what's in the drugs being forced into his body, but he is all too well aware of the effect they're having on him. Even within a couple of days of the regime of training and drug use, he can feel that his body is starting to become leaner and more sculpted. Despite all the jibes, he wasn't fat before, but in comparison with Gibbs and Hurrell his body was much softer. Now he can feel it start to harden up – in every respect.

His constant desire for sex wars with his need to fight, and mastering it is becoming increasingly difficult. He's lucky that Gibbs is here to help; Gibbs not only knows how it feels to be fed the same drugs, but he's also exactly the kind of hard taskmaster Tony needs right now. Nobody else but Gibbs could get him to focus and learn how to control the extreme sensations flooding through his body.

Gibbs takes him into the ring every day and makes him fight, hard and dirty. He doesn't ever let Tony get away with giving less than his all; he knows Tony too well for that. He also makes sure Tony knows there are repercussions for letting his anger affect his fighting. Every single time he loses it in the ring, Gibbs outmanoeuvres him, throws him face first onto the floor, and shoves his arm up his back. Tony is held there, Gibbs growling into his ear, until he gets himself under control again.

Gibbs might be a hard taskmaster in the ring, but he takes damn good care of Tony outside of it. He pulls Tony into the restroom twice a day or more to suck him off and is just as diligent at night, giving Tony exquisitely pleasurable hand jobs that help take the edge off his overactive libido. He also sinks his hard cock into Tony's ass at least once a night, making love to him with an attentive thoroughness that sends Tony spiralling into an ecstasy that has nothing at all to do with the drugs.

But their days are numbered. Tony is aware that every passing day brings them closer to the end. It's like having a gun pointed perpetually at his head, and that, combined with the massive intake of drugs, makes him increasingly jittery.

He goes ballistic in the ring one afternoon, throwing himself around and raving at the top of his voice. Gibbs circles him warily, avoiding his windmill-flailing fists, and then brings him down with a swift jab of his hand and a sweep of his foot. Once again, Tony finds himself chewing the mat while Gibbs holds him there, and once again Gibbs insists he go through a litany of all the things making him angry.

"Put the anger into the fight; shove it down and bring it out when you need it," Gibbs tells him for what feels like the hundredth time. "Find every single damn thing you're angry about, channel that anger, focus it, and use it against your opponent."

Tony's heard it all too often before, and he snaps. "I'm not like you, Gibbs!" he yells. "Anger's your thing, not mine! You've practically made a career out of keeping it locked up and letting it out when you need it. That's not me though, and I don't damn well want it to be! I don't want to end up an angry, miserable old bastard like you!"

He can feel Gibbs relaxing his hold on him, and he knows he just went too far but he's too angry to care. Gibbs hauls him up by the hair and propels him out of the ring and into the restroom, Gibbs's personal guard tagging along behind as usual.

"What's going on?" Gibbs asks the minute they're alone inside the restroom.

"I feel like a naughty puppy, or a toddler having a tantrum," Tony snaps mulishly. "And I'm not either. I don't want to be pinned down and slapped around by you."

"I'm trying to teach you how to fight!"

"What's the point?" Tony asks in despair. "We all know I won't win against Mac. I'll be beaten to a pulp, raped, pissed on, and then dragged back to his lair to be his regular nightly fuck toy. Shit, Gibbs – what's the point of any of this? You, me, us – the little world we've created in here to get us through this nightmare – it's all going to end in a few days' time."

"No!" Gibbs slams his hand onto the wall beside Tony's head.

"Yes! And you not talking about it and pretending it's not going to happen doesn't help! We need a plan! We have to find a way to escape – we need to find a cell phone – we need to get the hell out of here, not just sit around and wait for the worst to happen."

"No," Gibbs says again.

"Look, I understand what happened before, with Ben and Brian. I get that it's a huge risk. I'm just saying it's a risk worth taking because I'm looking at something worse than death here."

"No." Gibbs shoves him back against the wall. "You can beat McIntyre, Tony. You beat Rivkin, and I've seen you take down plenty of bad guys. Mac is overconfident and over-rated. I'm working you so hard because I know you can beat that lumbering, puffed-up idiot."

"No, Gibbs." Tony rests his head back against the wall wearily. "They're not even sure \*you\* can beat, Mac, so I don't stand a chance in hell."

"Half the battle is mental. If you believe you can beat him then you can. You need to find that killer instinct, Tony."

"I don't have it." Tony shrugs. "I can be a bad ass, Gibbs, you know that, and I can take out the bad guys when I have to. I can even kill when necessary. But killer **instinct**? No. Killer instinct is what you've got – not me."

"You've got something better, Tony! You've got the heart and courage of a lion. You rise to every single damn challenge. I've seen it!"

"That's it? That's all we've got to rely on? Me rising to meet the challenge?" Tony quirks a disbelieving eyebrow. "I thought you'd been spending these past few days thinking up a plan – some plan you didn't want to tell me about for whatever goddamn secretive Gibbs reason. But you're telling me THIS is your plan? Training me in one week – one damn week – to defeat a man who is built like a truck and who has pummelled every single opponent he ever met into the ground? Christ, Gibbs." He shakes his head.

“No, Tony. No.” Gibbs takes hold of his shoulders and pulls him forward, looking into his eyes. “You can do this. I know you can. You said you had faith in me, and I’ve got it in you. I believe in you. You just need to believe in yourself.”

Tony stares at him uncertainly. If anyone could make him believe in himself it’s Gibbs, with those intense blue eyes and that “this is the way it WILL be” attitude. Gibbs has the kind of mental strength that means he could probably go out into the pit and defeat Mike Tyson if he really put his mind to it. That’s \*his\* skill.

Tony has his own skills; he knows he’s a fantastic investigator, a loyal friend, and that he’s a master of the arts of distraction and misdirection. But he doesn’t have Gibbs’s quality of sheer bloody-mindedness. He admires that quality in Gibbs because what he loves most are those aspects of the man’s character that he doesn’t possess himself; that’s part of the attraction.

“I once told you not to die, and you didn’t,” Gibbs tells him in a low, fierce voice. His face is right up close to Tony’s, his strength of will radiating from every pore in his body. “You had a fifteen per cent chance, Tony, but you lived because I told you to live. You beat those odds, and you can beat these.”

“So I can beat McIntyre just because you tell me I can?” Tony asks doubtfully.

“Yes. Yes!” Gibbs grasps Tony’s face between his hands, and his certainty is compelling. He leans in and kisses Tony on the mouth, and Tony can feel him transmitting his energy and faith into him. He responds to the kiss eagerly. He can do this! Gibbs is right! He DID survive the plague because Gibbs demanded it. This is no different. He can defeat Mac because Gibbs tells him he can. That’s enough.

Gibbs draws back, still gazing at him intently. “Yes, Tony? Yes?”

“Yes.” Tony nods. “Yes!”

“Good boy.” Gibbs strokes the side of his cheek with his thumb. “Now let’s get back to the gym. I want to work on your agility. You’re still too slow, and Mac is a big guy. He doesn’t move fast. Speed will be one of your greatest assets in the pit.”

“I have to piss. I’ll follow you,” Tony says, going over to the urinal.

Gibbs nods and leaves the restroom. As soon as he’s gone, Tony’s resolve starts to falter. It’s all very well believing he can defeat Mac when Gibbs is standing right in front of him, urging him on, but on Fight Night he’ll be alone out there in the pit, fighting for his life. He doesn’t have the months of experience that Gibbs has. He’s fought out in the pit once – and that was against Gibbs.

He understands. He understands that Gibbs has seen what happens to fighters who try to escape, and that he’s trying to keep him safe, but he meant what he said a few nights ago. He’d rather die than be Walid’s puppet in the ring, dancing to his tune. Gibbs might think the best way out of this is to fight and beat Mac, but Tony doesn’t agree.



He finishes peeing, washes his hands and then leaves the restroom...and stops. The guard who accompanied them has returned to the gym with Gibbs, leaving him alone. He could go to the infirmary; maybe he could overpower Tanner and use him as a hostage to make the guards surrender a gun...

He hears a noise from the big room at the end of the hallway and makes a quick decision. He creeps silently along the hallway towards the sound, and, as he gets closer, he realizes the supply truck has arrived and is being unloaded. He hides behind the door, watching as Pete finishes unpacking the crates and then goes over and accepts a cigarette from McGuire. The two of them sit there, smoking and chatting for a couple of minutes.

Then McGuire says something and jerks his head at Pete who nods, and the two of them walk off in the direction of the guards' room, leaving the truck completely unguarded.

It's a chance, and it might be the only chance he'll get. One of Tony's strengths has always been to see an opportunity and act on it, and he's not about to pass on this one. He runs over to the truck, gets into the driver's side, and fumbles for the box under the passenger seat. He hears voices and ducks down beneath the steering wheel, holding his breath. The voices fade, and he starts breathing again.

He takes the cell phone out of the box and jabs his fingers at it. "*No service*" – the message taunts him, and his gut clenches in frustration. He needs to go somewhere else...somewhere further away.

He grabs the smart card and runs over to the big doors. He slips the card in, and the doors slowly open. It's not ideal. There's no way to close them again behind him – that has to be done on the inside – but he doesn't care. It's a risk, but a calculated one. Right now, anything seems more appealing than what lies in store for him on Fight Night.

The darkness outside takes him by surprise for a moment; he always forgets they're on a different daylight cycle, trapped away inside this big, steel structure. He takes a few seconds to get his bearings, and then he runs out into the night.

He hides for a moment, pressed against the outside of the building, looking around. Gibbs was right; it's all wasteland. Clearly, this is some big plot of private, undeveloped land that Scott owns, right out in the middle of nowhere. Fine, then he'll run. He'll be much less conspicuous than the truck was when Gibbs drove that out; he's one man on his own.

He leaves the comparative safety of the wall and speeds swiftly away from the building. His pale skin will be the biggest giveaway in the dark, and he needs to get as much of a head start as possible before they come looking for him.

He bends double and runs as fast as he can across the open ground. At least the drugs and training have given him speed, and the adrenaline helps. He finds some brush, hunkers down in the bushes, and tries the phone again. "*No service*".

"Just have to keep running, DiNozzo," he mutters. He hears a commotion in the distance, and he knows they've found the open doors, which means they're probably aware of the missing cell phone too.

He remembers what Gibbs said about them being able to pack up the fighters and get them to a different location in a matter of minutes. If they do that, then it's pointless him escaping. But if he can stay out of their reach for long enough to make the phone call, McGee will at least know where he is and come looking for him. It's a start, if nothing else.

He runs again, even faster than before, but it's dark, and he loses his footing. He rolls over sideways and falls down an incline. He comes to rest at the bottom of the slope and stays there, listening out for his pursuers.

Silence. He's about to get up when he hears the sound of barking dogs, and his heart sinks. He might outrun or evade humans, but he doesn't stand a chance against dogs. He's never seen any dogs in the stable, but the fighters' lives are so tightly corralled that's not surprising. He's never seen where the food they eat is made, either, but there must be a kitchen on the premises.

He has no intention of giving himself up, dogs be damned. He gets up and runs as fast as he can through the bushes, his chest heaving. He can hear the sounds of his pursuers behind him, much closer now, the dogs howling excitedly as they chase his scent.

A pain in his side makes him pause beneath a tree. He glances at the cell phone again, to find it still says, "*No service.*"

"Damn it!" He wants to slam it into the side of the tree in frustration, but that would defeat the purpose.

He heaves in several deep breaths and then sets off again. What will they do when they catch him? He remembers how they made Gibbs kill Brian. Would they do that again? Give Gibbs a choice – the other fighters or him? Who would Gibbs choose? He knows the answer without having to think about it; Gibbs would sacrifice the other fighters to save Tony's life but the choice would break him, so either way they'd lose each other for good.

He runs as fast as he can, an image replaying in his mind over and over again of him kneeling, with a gun shoved into the back of his head. If he can just get far enough away, then surely at some point the damn cell phone will work. He glances down at it and almost falls over when he sees that there are two tiny connection bars; the service is faint, but it might work.

He crashes into some nearby bushes and shakily dials the number McGee gave him. It's like one of those dreams where it's so important to push the right buttons that he can't do it. He makes a mistake the first time, his hands shaking from a combination of drugs, adrenaline and fear, but the second time he gets it right. He jams his finger onto the "Call" button on the screen and it starts dialling.

He looks up as he hears the barking of the dogs nearby and then down again – and his heart flips when he sees that the call is in progress. He only needs twenty-eight seconds. That's all. Twenty-eight seconds for McGee to do the automatic trace.

He lifts his head and looks at the stars shining overhead in the dark night's sky, counting softly under his breath. "Seven, eight, nine...c'mon. C'mon!"

The sound of the dogs is getting closer and closer. He doesn't have twenty-eight seconds. Not even close. To buy time, he hides the phone on the ground under the bushes, puts his hands in the air, and walks out to meet his pursuers.

Suddenly they're all around him, swarming all over him, surrounding him. He's thrown face down, forced onto his stomach in the mud, and his arms are pulled behind his back and fastened there with rope. They pull it so tight that it cuts into his wrists, and he clamps down hard on the cry of pain. There's a lot of shouting and confusion, and he struggles to breathe as someone big plants a knee in the small of his back.

"Found it!" one of the guards yells, emerging triumphantly from the bushes, cell phone held aloft.

Twenty-eight seconds...has it been that long? Tony cranes his head, looking up, and sees the display on the phone. "*Call failed.*"

At some point the phone lost connection. McGuire grabs the phone from the other guard, puts it on the ground and shoots it, in a pointlessly dramatic gesture, killing it completely.

The guard behind him shoves his face down into the mud, and Tony closes his eyes, his mouth full of dirt.

**He's failed.**

~\*~

Gibbs runs on the treadmill, one eye on the door. Tony never came back from the restroom, and he could kick himself for not waiting there for him and escorting him back. He just assumed he'd follow. *Never assume!* Never assume, damn it! It's one of his rules. He went back to the restroom but Tony wasn't there, and he didn't like to draw attention to his absence in case it got him into trouble – but where the hell is he?

It's been over an hour now – he can see that by the display on the gym equipment.

What's happened? Why hasn't Tony returned? Did Tanner catch him in the hallway and call him in for a medical? It's a bit late in the afternoon for that; it's nearly dinnertime.

A little while ago two of the guards were called out at a run, leaving only one remaining in the gym. They've never left so few guarding them before.

The anxiety is churning in the pit of his stomach. Something is wrong. His gut is setting off so many alarm bells that he can't concentrate, and he jumps off the treadmill.

"Hey – Leroy! You have another fifteen minutes!" Frank yells at him.

"Stick it!" Gibbs stalks towards the door, but the one remaining guard steps in front of him, gun raised. He lifts the butt of the gun threateningly, aiming it towards Gibbs's jaw, and Gibbs only just manages to jump back in time.

That's unusual. They don't normally dare touch him in case they injure him, and he can't fight in the pit, but the guard looks anxious, scared...just like Gibbs is feeling right now.

"What's going on?" Gibbs asks urgently. "What's happening?"

"Shut up and get back to your training," the guard replies, hefting the gun warningly.

There's only one guard and there are several trained fighters in the room. Frank might join in and help the guard, but he never carries a gun, so he should be relatively easy to overpower. Gibbs glances around and sees Sam Hurrell walking towards him. Then Greg.

Maybe this is their chance. It's an opportunity at least. He doesn't want to think about Ben, or Brian, or his previous failed escape attempt. He moves forward stealthily, aware of Sam and Greg coming up behind him, and Matt over on his flank.

"Keep away, or I'll blow your brains out," the guard warns, edging back.

"You do that, and Scott will blow your brains out. I'm his champion remember?" Gibbs growls, moving in, feeling like he always does on Fight Night, in the pit. This is an opponent, an adversary, and not a very impressive one. Gibbs can take him out, no trouble.

He prowls closer, feeling himself going into his fight zone:  
Power...control...focus...strength...killer instinct...self-belief...

Even if the guard shoots him, the others will still be able to overpower him and get the gun so it won't be wasted. It's worth the risk. He glances over his shoulder to see the other fighters coming up behind, and he can tell that they're all up for it. If he leads, they'll follow.

He doesn't hesitate. He throws himself forward...and at that moment the door flies open and a warning shot is fired into the air.

All the fighters scatter, running backwards as several guards charge into the room, all of them armed. The moment has gone, the opportunity lost, but Gibbs doesn't have time to think about that because he sees someone being dragged into the room, covered in mud, his hands tied behind his back.

"Tony!" He runs forward but is sent flying backwards by a sharp crack to his jaw from the butt of a gun. Hurrell catches him and then wraps a solidly muscled arm around him, holding him tight to stop him running back again.

Tony's head is down, and Gibbs can't see if he's alive or if they've dragged his corpse into the room.

"Tony!" he yells again, and this time that gets a response. Tony's head moves, and he glances up, straight at him.

The relief at Tony being alive is soon outweighed by his fear about what they're going to do to him. Ellis is unwinding some rope, menacingly, from a coil in his hands.

“Tony decided he didn’t like it here. He tried to run,” Ellis announces to the room. There’s a dark glow in his eyes that Gibbs is all too familiar with, and he feels a knot of anxiety form in his belly. “And I’m sure you all know how I feel about fighters who try to run.”

He looks at Gibbs and gives him a malicious smile.

“You over-played your hand, Leroy. We all had to go soft on this one because he’s your pussy boy. Well, not any more. Scott said to treat him like all the others after last Fight Night, so that’s what I’m going to do. No special treatment. He tried to escape, so he gets punished.”

He strides back over to Tony, grabs him by the hair, and pulls him up. Tony doesn’t make a sound. Ellis shoves Tony onto his knees, and Tony looks straight at Gibbs, an expression of mute appeal in his eyes. Gibbs knows what that appeal is about. He’s asking Gibbs not to lose it and go ballistic because he knows that’s the one thing Gibbs wants to do right now.

He can feel his fury rising up like a tidal wave, and he struggles to get out of Hurrell’s arms. Hurrell isn’t having any of it; he’s seen that look in Tony’s eyes too, and he knows what it’s about. He just holds on more tightly, and he’s a big guy.

Ellis unties the rope around Tony’s wrists, only to tie them again almost immediately, this time in front of his body. Then he throws the loose rope from the other coil upwards so that it catches over a hook in the ceiling. He ties that rope through the rope around Tony’s wrists, and then hauls him up so that his arms are stretched overhead, his whole body helpless and exposed.

“No,” Gibbs says quietly.

Ellis just grins at him and then slowly and deliberately removes the whip from his belt.

“I said no!” Gibbs storms forward, breaking out of Hurrell’s grip just as Ellis brings the first hard whip stroke down on Tony’s exposed back, leaving a long, red welt in its wake.

It takes three of the guards to catch Gibbs as he lunges at Ellis. They throw him down on the ground and sit on him, keeping him down.

Ellis jerks his head at the guard sitting on his back. “Make him watch. I want him to see this.”

The guard grabs the sides of Gibbs’s head and forces it up, so he’s looking straight at Tony. Tony looks back at him.

Ellis lifts his arm again and begins whipping Tony in earnest, putting all his might into each savage stroke. The sound of leather cracking onto skin is deafening, reverberating around the gym. The fighters are all standing in a subdued huddle over to one side and most of them are looking away. Some of them have their hands over their ears to block out the sickening sound.

Gibbs keeps his gaze fixed on Tony, and Tony holds that gaze. He doesn’t make a sound as the whip slams into his body, making him jerk like a fish on a line. He doesn’t move, and he doesn’t scream. He doesn’t do anything except look at Gibbs like he’s the only person in the room.

Tony needs him to be here, like he was that day, years ago, when Tony was dying of the plague in a hospital room at Bethesda. Tony can take any kind of punishment if Gibbs sees him through it. So he keeps his gaze locked on Tony. He blocks out Ellis, and the other fighters, and the guards, and Frank – who is standing by to one side, chewing anxiously on his thumb.

Gibbs doesn't care about anything but keeping faith with Tony right now. He can't stop this, but he can give Tony the strength to survive it. It'll be bad – Ellis has been itching to do this for a long time – but Tony is strong. He's always been strong enough to take Gibbs, even at his worst, so he's sure as hell strong enough to take Ellis at his worst too.

The sound of that whip cracking down on Tony's back is sickening. Gibbs can see flecks of blood spraying out with each stroke, and he struggles again, pointlessly, against the men holding him on the ground.

Tony's head has started to hang down, but he's still managing to maintain sporadic eye contact with Gibbs. He hasn't uttered a single cry, and Gibbs feels a surge of pride, knowing that Tony won't give Ellis that particular satisfaction. Then again, Gibbs has always known that Tony is brave; it was the first thing Gibbs noticed about him when their paths crossed in Baltimore a decade ago.

Tony is fading now. Gibbs has never known them whip a man so long before, and he has a sudden real fear that Ellis means to whip Tony to death. He wriggles and shoves and manages to dislodge the man sitting on his back, and then he tries to lunge over there to stop it, but he doesn't get that far and is thrown back again. He gives a hoarse shout and reaches out, but Tony's head is down now, and Gibbs can see that he's lost consciousness.

Gibbs howls, over and over again, the anger and anxiety combining with his own helplessness to make him struggle pointlessly in the guards' arms. And then it's over. The sound of whip on flesh stops, and Ellis tucks the bloody whip back into his belt.

"That is what you get if you try and escape," he tells the assembled fighters, in a tone of gloating. Nobody says anything. They just stand there, shell-shocked, gazing at him with barely concealed hatred.

Ellis takes out his knife and cuts through the rope holding Tony up, and Tony falls immediately to the floor and lies there in a heap. Gibbs can see that his back is covered in blood, the beautiful golden skin he caressed last night now ravaged by the whip. He looks like a dead bird, feathers broken, his hair lifting slightly as the breeze from a nearby fan rustles through it.

"Take him away – him too." Ellis jerks his head, and the guards drag Gibbs out of the gym. He's hauled along the hallway back to their stall and thrown inside. Ellis strides in after him. He's stopped to pick up some chains somewhere along the way – the same chains they wrap them in when they take them to the fights.

He comes over to Gibbs, a vicious smile on his face, and wraps the chains around his wrists and ankles and then fastens them to the hooks in the wall. He draws back with a darkly satisfied look, and Gibbs can only stand there, chained and immobilised against the wall.

They bring Tony in, two of them hauling him between them, their hands under his armpits. They throw Tony face down onto one of the mattresses and then leave. Ellis turns back to Gibbs.

“The only reason I didn’t put a bullet through his head is because I want to watch Mac pissing all over him in the pit on Fight Night,” he says with a grin. “Aw, did you think this would get your little pussy boy out of fighting Mac? No fucking chance! Scott will throw him into the pit half dead – he won’t care. Tony’s a troublemaker, and Scott just wants to be rid of him. After Mac’s through with him, he’ll be Walid’s problem, not ours.”

Gibbs makes no reply. He just gazes back at Ellis stonily. He’s not going to give him the satisfaction of a response any more than Tony did when he was taking that whipping so silently.

“Night night, sleep tight, Leroy,” Ellis says smugly, patting Gibbs’s cheek with his hand. Then he leaves the stall, shutting the door and locking it behind him.

The bastard has chained him here so that he can’t go over to Tony to help him, to wash his back, or even just to hold him. He can only stand here, tied to the wall, helpless.

“Tony?” he calls across the stall.

Tony doesn’t stir. Gibbs can see from the rise and fall of his chest that he’s still alive, but he’s out of it.

“Tony, I’m tied up, so I can’t get to you, but I’m here,” Gibbs tells him. He isn’t sure if Tony can hear or not, but he wants him to know that he’s not alone.

Tony gives a low sob of pain, and it’s too much for Gibbs; he pulls furiously on the hooks attaching him to the wall. The chains might be unyielding, but the hooks could be less secure.

He pulls with all his might, yanking his hands backwards, tugging on the hook his wrists are attached to. It moves, so he can tell it’s loose, and he keeps on heaving and tugging away at it with all his might. His rage lends him even more strength; he remembers what it feels like to stand in the pit, with the anger flowing through his body, and he finds that anger now.

He is furious that they touched Tony; that they dared to hurt someone he loves. He connects with that rage, feeling it surge through him, and then with one massive yank he pulls his wrists free. They’re still attached to each other, and his ankles are still attached to the wall, but his arms are at least free. He leans down; there’s some slack in the chain around his ankles, but a few tugs on that hook show that it’s attached far more solidly to the wall than the other one was, and he can’t get it to budge.

He gets down on his knees and inches slowly along the floor towards Tony. The chains tethering his ankles to the wall prevent him getting all the way there, but he gets close enough to grab the hem of a blanket and pull it towards him. He shakes it out and throws it over Tony’s body to keep him warm. Then he lies flat out on his stomach and reaches out his bound hands towards Tony. The stall is small, but even so, it’s still a stretch.

Tony's arm is slung out, a little way from his body. Gibbs reaches out as far as he can and manages to get the tips of his fingers onto the side of Tony's hand.

Tony whimpers, and Gibbs strokes the side of his hand gently with his finger. That's all he can reach. "You with me, Tony? I'm right here. Close as I can get."

Tony doesn't reply. He just lies there, completely still, his face turned away. Then slowly, painfully slowly, he manages to move his hand just a fraction closer, and then a fraction more, until it's close enough for Gibbs to take it between his hands. His wrists are bound but he can open the palms enough to gently capture Tony's hand between them. Tony doesn't move again for a long time, but then he slides his thumb sideways, stroking one of Gibbs's fingers. It's a tiny, shaky movement, but enough for Gibbs to know that he's okay. He clasps Tony's hand firmly in his own and holds it there.

The floor is hard on his belly, and he's cold, and before long he gets cramp in his arms from holding them outstretched, but he has no intention of ever letting go.

~\*~

It hurts. His shoulders and back are throbbing, aching and sore. He can feel a searing pain every time he moves, so he tries not to move. He closes his eyes and dozes, longing for the sweet oblivion of sleep.

In his sleep he sees a pair of wolves fighting, one light and one dark. They're circling each other, teeth bared, snarling, and Gibbs is there, in the middle, caught between them. Then both wolves suddenly leap up at the same time, making straight for Gibbs's throat. They tear away at his skin, ripping into it, and blood pours from the angry wound.

Tony comes to with a gasp, twitching as he wakes from the nightmare, and the pain immediately comes flooding back in, making him sob.

"Tony?"

"Yeah." He waits until the waves of pain subside a little and then moves his head, cautiously, to look down.

Gibbs is over to his right, stretched out on the floor, chained to the wall at the ankles. He's holding Tony's hand between his own bound hands.

"Sorry. Fucked up," Tony mutters.

"What happened?" Gibbs's blue eyes are gleaming vividly in the darkness of the stall.

"Guard was gone when I left the restroom. Heard the supply truck being unloaded. Pete and McGuire left it unguarded. Stole the cell phone. Used the card to get out. Ran like hell until I got a connection. Almost made the call...almost." The sense of failure hits him again, made all the more intense by the pain. "Saw an opportunity. Took it. Sorry. You warned me."

"Screw that," Gibbs growls. Tony blinks, confused. "You did what I trained you to do."



“And what you ordered me not to do.”

“Yeah...well...Rule 51.”

Tony blinks again. “I don’t know that one.”

“Never mind.”

They’re silent for a moment. Tony runs his thumb back and forth over Gibbs’s hand.

“They’re still gonna make me fight Mac, aren’t they?”

Gibbs’s hand squeezes hard. “Yeah.”

“Definitely not gonna win now. Not that I was ever really going to win, Gibbs.”

Gibbs is silent.

“They whip you this bad when you got those scars?” Tony asks quietly.

“Not as bad.”

“So I’m gonna be scarred? Like you?” Not that it matters. He’s unlikely to survive much longer in view of what’s in store for him.

“Yeah. Worse than me.”

Gibbs sounds angry, and Tony isn’t surprised. Gibbs has always been protective of anyone he allows into his family, and Tony is a hell of a lot more than just family to him now.

Tony tries to bite back a moan as a wave of pain sweeps through him. “Shit...” He can feel Gibbs squeezing his hand again as he rides it out. “Shit...that hurts so bad.”

Tony closes his eyes, longing for sleep, but it doesn’t come. Everything hurts too much, and he can’t switch off. He needs a distraction.

“You still with me, Tony?”

“Yeah. Just hurts so much. Talk to me, Jethro.”

“About what?”

“I don’t know. Anything. Need to think about something else ‘cept how much it hurts.”

He hears Gibbs taking a deep breath. Then: “Used to take Kelly sailing; blue water, sun shining in the sky, taste of the salty air on your tongue, feeling the wind in your hair. Nothing’s better than that.”

Tony smiles, liking the word picture Gibbs just painted. He knows Gibbs is trying to take him out of himself, so he can think of himself someplace else.

“Better than sex?” he asks.

Gibbs taps his hand with his finger, and Tony laughs, knowing that’s the closest Gibbs can get to a head-slap right now. The laugh makes him hurt all over again and it tails off into a sob as the pain kicks in, rolling through him in agonising waves.

Gibbs squeezes his hand again, seeing him through it.

“Sailing’s good,” Gibbs says softly. “I’ll take you some day. You ever sail, Tony?”

“No,” Tony says through gritted teeth, trying to block out the pain. “Not really. I mean...I’ve been out on a boat a few times...been fishing...but never just been out sailing.”

“We’ll do it. One day. Take a boat out on the open water. Together. Alone.”

“Could we have sex out there?”

Gibbs gives a snort of laughter. “Anythin’ you want, Tony. I’ll take you out sailing and make love to you out in the open, under the sun.”

“Promise?”

“Promise,” Gibbs says firmly.

“What was she like?” Tony asks softly, changing the subject.

Gibbs is silent for a long time. Tony can feel him running a finger in little circular patterns over the palm of his hand. Then, finally, he speaks.

“Kelly lived in the moment. When she was happy, you knew about it. When she was sad, you knew about it. And when she was angry...boy, did you know about it!”

“Sounds like her dad.”

“Yeah. Smart though, like her mom.”

“Tell me about Shannon.”

There’s another long silence. Tony knows how much Gibbs hates this, but all the same, he saddles up and gets on with it.

“Shannon was funny. She made me laugh. When I got angry, she knew how to diffuse me. And she could talk! God, she could talk. Never shut up sometimes.”

“Hah.” Tony smiles to himself. It seems that he’s not the only one attracted to the opposite in a lover.

“Yeah. She wasn’t anywhere near as annoying as you though.”

Tony pinches Gibbs’s finger hard, eliciting a half-laugh, half-growl in response.

They're silent again. Tony manages to shift onto his side a little, ignoring the pain that sweeps through his body at the movement. He glances down on Gibbs.

"Tell me how you got the scar on your knee," he says quietly.

Gibbs traces his fingers over Tony's hand again, drawing little circles. The silence is even longer this time, and then, finally, Gibbs clears his throat.

"Got knocked down by a drunk driver when I was eight. Walking home from school with my mom."

"Christ, Gibbs...that's...I'm sorry. I shouldn't have asked."

Gibbs's fingers continue their gentle caress over his hand, and Tony knows he's saying that it's okay.

"Were you badly hurt?"

"In the hospital a while."

"Must have been bad to have left that kind of scar."

"Yeah." Gibbs's voice is tight. "Couldn't speak for weeks. Jack used to visit, try and coax me out of myself. Took a long time."

"You were in shock. Probably too shook up to speak."

"No. I was too angry to speak."

Slowly, very slowly, Tony comes to a realization. "You were walking home with your mom?"

"Yeah."

Another silence.

"Bastard drunk driver killed her, didn't he?"

"Yes."

It's Tony's turn to squeeze now.

"My mom died when I was eight too. Cancer," Tony says into the darkness of the stall, not looking at Gibbs. "She just faded away. Nobody even told me she was ill. I thought everyone's moms lost their hair and looked that pale and thin. Like it was normal. Then Dad sent me away to stay with my uncle for a few weeks. When I came back, he dressed me up in a black suit and took me to her funeral. It took me a long time to understand she wasn't coming home. I thought she was just staying at the cemetery, like she was on vacation or something."

“Yeah, well, I’ve always thought your dad is a total shit.”

“He is. Still love him, but he is.” Tony gives a little laugh and then wishes he hadn’t. He closes his eyes and waits for the pain to dull down to a more manageable level. He ponders for a moment about Gibbs losing his mom at the age of eight and being brought up by his dad. Maybe it isn’t just the differences in Gibbs that he finds attractive; they have a lot in common too.

“D’you think there’s any way we could have this kind of conversation except after me being beat half to death and delirious with pain, and you chained to the wall, so you can’t run away?” Tony muses.

“Nah. You’d have to tie me down to make me.” Tony can hear the grin in Gibbs’s voice.

“Don’t think I wouldn’t. There’s no way I’m going through a whipping like that again just to get you to damn well talk.”

“Well, if anyone could ever get in my face and make me do something I don’t want to, it’s you.”

Tony is pleased with that compliment. His back might hurt like hell, but at least something has come out of it.

“They ever find him?” Tony asks quietly. “The drunk driver who killed your mom?”

“No.”

“So you never got justice.” One last piece of the jigsaw puzzle that is Leroy Jethro Gibbs falls into place; Tony has never met anyone more obsessed with pursuing justice than Gibbs.

“No.”

“But you’ve had revenge,” Tony says slowly. “Out in the pit, every Fight Night: *‘Find every single damn thing you’re angry about, channel that anger, focus it, and use it against your opponent...’*” He quotes Gibbs’s words back at him.

“Yes.” Gibbs’s voice is steady and firm. “I’ve beaten that bastard over and over again, and Hernandez, and Walid, and Scott, and Ellis, and everyone who ever hurt me or the people I love.”

Where does it all end, Tony wonders? When someone has as much anger inside them as Gibbs – and as much to be angry about. He lost his mom, his wife, and his daughter – no wonder there’s so much pent-up fury in the man. But where does that end?

He’s feeling sleepy again. The pain is wearing him out, and his eyelids droop and open, droop and open drowsily. He glances down at Gibbs again, lying almost out of reach. Gibbs’s shorn head is angled to one side, and Tony can see the chains wrapped around his wrists and feet, tying him to the wall. It reminds him of a book his mom used to read to him when he was a child, a book that always used to make him cry.

His eyelids droop again, and this time they stay shut.

~\*~

He's been trying to keep everyone safe, but he can't. It isn't in his power. He wasn't able to keep Tony safe, or Rajul, or Steve, or any of the others that this place has destroyed.

Gibbs stretches out, still keeping his fingers wrapped around Tony's hand. Tony has been badly hurt, and he doesn't stand a chance of beating Mac in the pit in a few days' time.

"That was always a stupid-assed plan anyway, Jethro," he mutters to himself. "You were playing by their rules. It's time they start learning yours."

He remembers what Tony said to him earlier. *"Killer instinct is what you've got – not me."*

That's what gives him his edge in the pit; the fact that he'll die rather than submit, and he'll kill if necessary. He's a warrior. He's fought in war zones, and he knows what any leader knows; you have to be prepared to lose your own life and your own people on the battlefield. Any victory entails risk.

He thinks back to that moment in the gym when he advanced on the guard, fully intending to attack him. He remembers how good it felt to look over his shoulder and see that Hurrell, Greg, and the others had his six. They're desperate to escape. They're just looking for a leader who'll show them how.

He needs to start thinking like Walid. You don't outsmart your enemy by playing the game by their rules. He's given Walid an easy ride. He hasn't shown him exactly what Leroy Jethro Gibbs is capable of.

Tony twitches in his sleep, and Gibbs strokes his hand gently until he settles down again.

Sam Hurrell is wrong. It isn't a fight between the light wolf and the dark wolf. The real battle is to take those wolves and make them work together. Only by taming them, controlling them, and using the force and power of them both can he win this particular fight.

The white wolf is his love for Tony, for his family, and for the people on his team. It's his acute sense of justice, and his urge to protect those who need him. The dark wolf is his anger, his killer instinct, his lust for revenge, and his desire to fight.

He needs both those wolves. It's time to wrestle them into submission and harness their unique individual qualities to create one Big Bad Wolf – and then he'll go and blow Walid's house of freaks down.

Maybe Tony was right, and he **does** have some magic from before the dawn of time; or at least from before he was captured. At some point along the way he forgot who he was; it took Tony to come along and awaken a sleeping wolf to remind him.

Gibbs squeezes Tony's hand, feeling whole again. Walid wanted him to cry; he should know that when you back a wolf into a corner it doesn't cry – it comes out fighting, more dangerous than ever.

Gibbs smiles, baring his teeth. “Watch out, Walid. I’m coming to get you.”

**Chapter End Notes:**

Your kind words are the only payment I receive for writing fan fiction. I love hearing from you – please leave a review below.

## Chapter Five - Big, Bad Wolf by Xanthe

He dreams about the same two wolves from before, but this time they are lying in a forest on a table of stone. It's night-time, but there is a full moon overhead, illuminating them. One has fur as white as snow, while the other's fur is as black as the night sky. Tony steps back behind a tree and watches them.

Their paws are bound together with chains, and they are growling at each other furiously, unable to attack because of their bonds. All they can do is snap and growl, trying to bite each other.

A movement from the trees catches Tony's eye, and he watches as Gibbs emerges and walks slowly towards the stone table.

The snarling of the wolves doesn't seem to bother him. He stands over them and places a hand over each of their muzzles, squeezing hard. The wolves shake their heads, trying to dislodge him, snarling and yelping, but Gibbs just stands there, immovable. He looks powerful and commanding and exerts total control over the wolves, forcing them into submission by sheer strength of will.

Eventually they are subdued, becoming quiet under his stern touch, and only then does he release his grasp on their muzzles. The wolves are now silent and obedient, looking up at him adoringly, like tame dogs. Gibbs waves a hand and their chains fall away. They jump off the table and take their place next to him, one on each side, looking completely at home there, as if it is where they have always belonged.

Suddenly, Gibbs looks up, straight at him, and Tony takes a startled intake of breath. Gibbs looks completely different now. His hair is no longer shorn; it reaches down almost as far as his shoulders, shining silver grey in the moonlight. His eyes are a lupine shade of yellow, and his body is sleek and powerful. He looks as if he is at the height of his powers; dark and light combined, strong and compelling. He throws back his head and howls at the full moon overhead, revealing his sharp, white fangs.

Tony wakes up, the gasp of surprise dying in his throat, to find the pain is just as bad as it was when he fell asleep. He also needs to piss, so he has to find a way to brave the pain and get up. He slowly draws his hand away from Gibbs's embrace, missing the comforting contact immediately. Then, just as slowly, he manages to lever himself up onto his hands and knees, growling as the movement sends shock waves of pain through his body. He glances down to see if he's woken Gibbs and finds him gazing back at him, eyes wide open, looking completely alert and awake.

"Did you sleep at all?" Tony asks.

"No." Gibbs sits up and rolls his shoulders back, stretching, and Tony senses immediately that there is something different about him. Something has changed during the night, while he was sleeping.

Gibbs gets up off the floor with the lethal, prowling grace that Tony remembers from the pit.

"Gibbs...what's going on?"

Gibbs turns his head suddenly, and it must be the pain making him hallucinate, or the lingering after-effects of his dream, because Tony has a vivid mental image of a wild grey wolf, yellow eyes blazing, teeth bared. He takes a startled intake of breath.

“Tony, come here.” Gibbs beckons him over, and Tony slowly crawls towards him, his body protesting every single movement, and comes to rest at Gibbs’s feet. Gibbs crouches down in front of him and cups his head between his chained hands.

“I need you to trust me,” Gibbs tells him.

“I will. I mean...I do. I always have.”

“Good...because it might get worse before it gets any better. They might hurt you some more. They probably **will** hurt you some more. Can you handle that?”

“Yes.” Tony says it quickly and without hesitation. “You’ve got a plan, Boss?” He feels himself falling almost immediately into second in command mode in response to the strong sense of leadership he’s getting off Gibbs.

Gibbs stands up again. “Yes. We’re not just playing to survive, or escape anymore, Tony. That’s what we were both doing before, and it didn’t work for either of us. We’re playing to win now.”

“Okay,” Tony says slowly, wondering what the hell Gibbs has in mind.

“I don’t just want to survive. I don’t even just want to escape. I want *\*justice\**, Tony. I want to bring these bastards down – all of them.”

Tony feels the shiver start at the base of his spine and creep all the way up to his head, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand on end. “Oh yeah. You’re back. Now *\*that\** sounds like the Leroy Jethro Gibbs I used to know.”

“He was always here. I just forgot who he was until you reminded me.”

Tony can feel his grin stretching from ear to ear. It’s the smuggest, most irritating grin in his entire repertoire of smug, irritating grins.

Gibbs taps the back of his head lightly, in place of a head-slap. “This isn’t going to be easy, Tony.”

“I don’t care. Just tell me what you want me to do.”

~\*~

Tony’s eyes are too bright and even in the darkness of the stall Gibbs can tell he’s feverish. He’s been drifting in and out of delirium all night long judging by the mutterings in his sleep, and Gibbs knows he can’t tell him the whole plan in case he blurts it out by mistake. So he decides to tell him just a little piece of it.



“I need you to take whatever Ellis does to you next. It won’t be nice, but trust me, it won’t last long.”

“Okay.” Tony smiles up at him like a happy puppy, and Gibbs wonders if there is anything he can do that will make Tony lose faith in him.

“Then I’ll be leaving for awhile, but I’ll be back. You have to trust me on that too.”

“Sure.”

“I’ll tell you more later. Can you trust that I’ll do that?”

“You’re the boss, Boss.”

At that moment the klaxon sounds and the lights are brightened in the hallway outside, flooding the room with light through the window in the door. Gibbs crouches down beside Tony again to take a good look at him. Tony’s face and the front of his torso are covered in mud and there are still a few leaves and twigs in his hair from his brief escape attempt. Gibbs scrapes a bit of caked mud from Tony’s cheek with his fingernail.

“I’m fine, Boss,” Tony tells him, trying to push him away.

“Yeah. Right. Now shut up and hold still.” Gibbs takes a firm hold of his head and turns him around so he can get a better look.

Tony’s shoulders and back are streaked with lacerations and covered in blood, and it’s clear he needs urgent medical treatment. The dirt must have got into the open wounds, causing an infection. There are beads of sweat on his forehead, and Gibbs can see all too clearly that he’s running a high fever.

“It’s not so bad. I’ve had worse,” Tony tells him. He’s shivering, even though Gibbs can feel the heat radiating from his torn skin.

“When?” Gibbs asks incredulously.

“Okay, not worse maybe, but nearly dying from the plague sucked big time, and this is about the same as that.”

Gibbs is sure Tony is digging in deep right now just to stay in the moment, and he wishes he could spare him what comes next. “You’ll do fine, Tony. I’m gonna make sure of that.” Gibbs presses a kiss to Tony’s forehead. It’s burning up, and he knows the fever is a bad one.

Tony crawls over to the toilet to piss, hanging onto the wall, barely able to stand long enough to finish. Gibbs wishes he could at least help hold him up, but he’s chained too far away to be any use. He can only watch as Tony staggers back to the mattress and falls down on it.

A few seconds later, Ellis comes into the stall with the same ugly grin on his face that he had the night before. Ellis picks up the hook Gibbs pulled away from the wall the previous night and holds it up angrily.

“It was getting in the way.” Gibbs shrugs.

Ellis delivers an entirely predictable backhander across his jaw, making him fall sideways.

Gibbs grunts and pulls himself upright again. “I want to see Scott,” he says firmly, spitting out some blood from his split lip.

“Aw, does poor little Leroy wanna go running to the big boss and complain about how we were mean to his pussy boy yesterday?” Ellis makes a face at him. “Not gonna happen, Leroy. You have zero stock with Scott right now. He’s not gonna care that we whipped Tony. He knows Tony will be leaving soon; you’re lucky he even bothers feeding him.”

He glances down at Tony, where he’s lying on the mattress on the floor.

“How you feeling, DiNardo? Oh, wait, it isn’t DiNardo – it’s DiNozzo, isn’t it? Lying little shit.” He prods his foot contemptuously into Tony’s side, making Tony grunt.

Gibbs gets between them immediately. “Bring Scott here. Tell him I won’t fight in the pit again unless I see him today.”

Ellis actually laughs in his face. Gibbs holds his ground, fixing him with the kind of hard glare that’s shut up better men than Ellis in the past. The smile finally fades from Ellis’s face. “Aw, you mean it! You actually think you have some bargaining chips around here!”

“I do.” Gibbs holds the glare.

“Nah, you don’t. All we have to do is rough up this pussy boy here, and you’ll agree to anything we say.”

Ellis takes hold of Tony’s hair and pulls his head back. Tony gazes at him from those bright, feverish eyes, a grin on his face. “Go on...do it,” he urges.

Ellis slaps him hard across the face, holding him in place by his hair, first one way and then the next. Tony just giggles in response, and Ellis hesitates, confused. Then his face darkens, and he draws his fist back to strike...and that’s when Gibbs leans in to growl into his ear.

“Touch him one more time, and I won’t fight again. Kill him, and you have no hold over me at all. I’ll throw the fight on Fight Night. There’s a lot of money riding on me, Ellis. You wanna have to explain to Scott why his champion threw the fight?”

Ellis hesitates, his fist still raised.

“Think about it,” Gibbs says darkly.

He can see the cogs working in Ellis’s mind. Much as he loves beating up on Tony, he doesn’t want to risk Gibbs making good on his threat.

“You can take a wolf to water, but you can’t make him drink,” Gibbs adds. “You can throw me into that pit, but you can’t make me fight.”

Ellis releases Tony's hair, and Tony drops to the floor with a thud. Ellis glares at Gibbs and then turns and stalks out of the room.

"So far, so good." Tony smiles up at him. "Like the way you played that, Boss."

Gibbs crouches down beside him and gently smooths down his hair where Ellis yanked on it. "We have a long way to go yet, Tony."

He gets up again and a few minutes later Frank enters the stall. "What the hell is this about, Leroy?" he asks, planting all five feet nothing of himself in front of Gibbs and glaring up at him. "You know this won't get you anywhere!"

"You know my terms." Gibbs shrugs. "Get Scott down here, or I don't fight."

Frank laughs at him. "You'll fight, Leroy. You're a natural born fighter. You can't help yourself. We put you in that pit, you'll fight."

It's Gibbs's turn to laugh now. He shakes his head, chuckling softly to himself. "Oh Frank, you know fighting, but you don't know much else, and you sure as hell don't know me. Get Scott down here, or I'm not going to train, and I'm sure as hell not going to fight again."

"Don't be an idiot!" Frank hisses, glancing at Tony. "They'll kill Tony if they have to, Leroy, to make you fight."

"If they kill Tony, I definitely won't fight," Gibbs replies firmly. "Because I won't have anything to fight **for**, Frank."

Frank rocks back on his heels, a thoughtful look on his face.

"I know you've got a lot riding on me to win," Gibbs tells him. "Not just next Fight Night, but in the grand finale of this shitty tournament, and we both know that's close now. You've staked pretty much your entire life savings on me winning, haven't you, Frank? You're all a bunch of gamblers – that's how you ended up in this freak-fest."

Frank looks angry, but Gibbs can see that comment hit home.

"Go get Scott, Frank. That's all I'm asking. It won't do anyone any harm, and that way nobody has to get hurt."

"We could shoot some of the other fighters – the weaker ones. He'll cave soon enough," Ellis says from the doorway.

"You think I care about any of them?" Gibbs asks. "You ever see me talk to them, or take an interest in any of 'em?" He has been talking to them since Tony arrived, but he doubts Ellis has noticed that. His reputation for aloofness is well established.

"You liked that kid Brian..."

"And you made me shoot him. So now I don't get close, which means I won't give a damn if you kill the whole damn stable. But I'm betting Scott won't be happy if you do that. He's

proud of how big his stable is now because I've been winning fighters for him all season. All those fighters are worth money, even those who can't fight for crap. The pit always needs fodder, doesn't it? And people will gamble on anything, even if it's just who's the weakest fighter on the circuit. I bet Scott plans to sell some of his weaker fighters during the off-season – there will always be some idiot out there who wants in on this game who'll buy them. But Scott can't do that if you kill them."

Frank glances at Ellis, and Gibbs can see that's another point that's hit home. Frank sighs. "Let's just get Scott down here. Let him talk some sense into Leroy."

"Unchain me first," Gibbs orders as Frank starts walking to the door.

Frank nods at Ellis who gives him an angry look but comes over to him and unchains him anyway. Then they both disappear, locking the door behind them, and the waiting game begins.

Gibbs goes and pisses first, desperate to relieve his aching bladder. Then he drinks several scoops of water from the basin to refresh himself. He's hungry – they both missed dinner last night and now they've missed breakfast too – but he feels alert and alive, the same way he does before going into the pit every Fight Night. This is going to be the fight of his life, and he has to play it every bit as well as he always does in the pit.

He wets one of the blankets in the basin and then goes over to Tony. First he wipes some of the mud from Tony's face, while Tony just sits there, looking up at him, letting him do it. Then Gibbs turns him around. "Lie face down," he orders.

Tony does as he's told, and Gibbs straddles his back and begins gently washing it. Tony is shivering in earnest now, and Gibbs knows that fever has a real hold on him.

When the blood is washed away, he finally gets a good look at the damage. It isn't pretty; if Tony survives he'll be scarred for life, but if he gets antibiotics to treat the fever he'll bounce back quickly enough. Gibbs has learned never to underestimate Tony's indomitable spirit and sheer zest for life.

"How is it?" Tony asks, glancing up at him.

"Looks worse than it is. You'll be fine." Gibbs flashes him a grin.

Tony gazes at him hazily, and Gibbs knows he's fading again. "Like it when you smile, Boss. Always did."

"That's good, Tony. I'll give us both something to smile about real soon. Now go to sleep."

He throws the dry blanket over Tony's shoulders, sits down beside him, and gently pulls Tony's head onto his lap. He strokes Tony's hair soothingly, combing out some dried mud with his fingers. Tony gives a little sigh and closes his eyes, relaxing against him. Gibbs doesn't like the sheen of sweat building up on his forehead, but he can't do anything about it. He can only sit there, gently stroking him, while Tony falls asleep.

What feels like a few hours pass, and Tony sleeps through it, his rest punctuated by fever-dreams judging by the way he murmurs and cries out, thrashing about under the blanket. Gibbs holds him and whispers to him, calming him when he gets particularly agitated. He's rambling on, muttering something about wolves and snakes and stone tables, and he frequently cries out some kind of warning to him.

"Gibbs – over there! Gun! Jethro!"

"Hey, it's okay. I'm here. I'm fine." Gibbs hopes Scott will hurry the hell up, because Tony's condition is deteriorating, and he needs that medical treatment soon.

If his plan doesn't work, then Tony will very likely die... No. He won't let himself think that way. He has to be like he is in the pit, never oiling his asshole because he won't allow for even the possibility that he'll lose. He won't lose against Scott. He's known the man for months now; he's studied his strengths and weaknesses and knows exactly what makes him tick.

He hears footsteps in the hallway outside, and he carefully lifts Tony's head and places it on the pillow, then gets up. Tony moans softly and mutters something in his sleep.

"Ssh...sleep. It's okay, Tony. I'll be back soon." Gibbs soothes his hand through his hair one last time. Then he remembers something. He leans down and speaks into Tony's ear. "You will not die. Hear me, Tony?" He pats Tony's head gently, and Tony opens his eyes and looks straight at him.

"Hear...you...Boss."

"Good. You will not die," Gibbs repeats firmly. Then he presses a gentle kiss to Tony's forehead and stands up to face the coming fight.

He's taken to a room he's never been in before. It seems to be some kind of office. Scott is waiting for him, standing beside a desk, looking sweaty and flustered.

"What the hell is this all about, Leroy?" he demands as Gibbs enters the room. "I thought you and I had an understanding!"

"What kind of understanding would that be?" Gibbs quirks an eyebrow. "I win for you in the pit, and in return you beat up on the people I care about?"

"I told you; you win for me, and I'll see you spend the off season in luxury!" Scott takes a handkerchief out of his pocket and presses it against his forehead. "I'm not happy about you making demands, Leroy. I've treated you well."

Gibbs snorts. "Get real, Scott. You haven't treated me well. You've just been along for the ride. Walid's men kidnapped me, and you bought me because I was cheap, and you wanted in on this game. You had no idea I'd turn out to be so damn good at fighting out there in the pit. You got lucky, that's all, and you can get unlucky again whenever I choose."

"That most certainly isn't the case!" Scott says indignantly. "I've been playing a very smart game; Prince Walid said so himself!"

Gibbs gives a derisive laugh. "Walid is playing you, Scott. You're an idiot if you can't see that."

Scott goes red in the face. "How dare you! Prince Walid and I are friends! He said I'm worthy to join the elite, to be welcomed into his inner circle, reserved only for those he trusts completely."

Gibbs snorts. "Well, he would. You own the one fighter who stands between him and the kudos of winning this entire thing."

Scott stares at him, open-mouthed.

"Come on, Scott! Use your brain! Walid wants to win, and you're the one person who can stop that happening. Why else do you think he suggested that you put Tony in the pit against Mac and make me watch? He's hoping it'll screw with me so much that I'll lose my fight."

"Walid is an honourable man. He wouldn't..." Scott hesitates.

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "Of course he would, man! Wake up! This is more than just a game to him – you've seen that. He wants to win!"

"The winner does take home a sizeable purse and a percentage of the takings. Then there is the gambling take," Scott says uncertainly.

"I don't think Walid gives a damn about that; he has money coming out of his ears. For him, it's about the winning."

Scott dabs his handkerchief against his forehead again, wiping away the sweat dripping down his face. "Even assuming you're right, Leroy – what should I do about it?"

"Don't let him play you! Because you're a winner too, Scott! You want to win, don't you?"

Scott gives a slow nod. "Unlike Prince Walid, I must admit the purse on offer would make a difference to me. I have sold some of the fighters you won for me, Leroy, and they made a very nice sum, but do you have any idea how expensive it is running a stable?"

It's all Gibbs can do not to roll his eyes again. "Yeah. I bet. And I bet also that you've staked a lot of money on me winning. I know Frank has. You've gambled a hell of a lot on me taking Mac down in the final, haven't you? More money than you can afford to lose."

Scott purses his lips but doesn't answer that.

"Thing is, Scott, do you want me to win or not?" Gibbs demands. "It's that simple."

Scott turns to him, and there's a greedy look in his eyes. One thing Gibbs has always known about the man is his greed. He saw it the first time he met him.

"Of course I want you to win! I've invested a lot in this stable. I've become a major player. I deserve to win." He puffs out his large chest.

“Yeah, you do,” Gibbs says softly. “And I can win for you, but I have some terms.”

“You have terms?” Scott looks indignant again. “You’re mine, Leroy. You’ll do what I tell you.”

“You’d think, huh? But no.” Gibbs prowls forward, and Scott takes a step back, and then another, until he’s flush against the desk.

The guard by the door moves forward, but Scott waves him away. “Look, Leroy, I know you; you want to win as much as I do,” he says, a cunning look creeping into his piggy brown eyes. “I don’t believe you’re even capable of throwing a fight. Do you really want to get fucked, and jeered at, and pissed on, and dragged off to some other stable where nobody gives a damn who you are? Trust me, you would be treated far worse than you are here. You’d have to start at the bottom and work your way up again, and you wouldn’t like that.”

“No. I wouldn’t.” Gibbs gives a soft little smile – and then wipes it instantly from his face. “But I’ll damn well do it if you don’t give me what I want!” he roars into Scott’s face.

Scott edges away from him and plops himself down onto a chair. “And what is it that you want, Leroy?” he asks quietly. “Not your freedom – I won’t give you that – or Tony’s freedom, either. It’s against the rules of the game to set a player free, and, well, not exactly in our best interests.”

“Oh, I know that.” Gibbs gives an impatient jerk of his head. “Here’s what I want, Scott. I want you to order your men to leave Tony alone. He suffers so much as a scratch, and I’ll throw the next fight.”

“Ah... Tony DiNozzo...he’s your Achilles heel,” Scott says knowingly. “He’ll be your downfall one day, Leroy. You see, you care about him. Maybe you even love him?” He raises an eyebrow, looking at Gibbs searchingly. Gibbs just gazes back at him stonily. “And that makes you weak,” Scott says.

“No – that makes me strong,” Gibbs replies. “Took me a while to see it, but it’s Tony who makes me strong, and bastards like you who try to make me weak. You got me all wrong, Scott. Remember how you whispered all that crap in my ear – about how my anger over my mom, and my wife and daughter were what made me such a good fighter? You were half right – I **am** angry, but I’m only that angry because I loved them so much. Now think about Tony – they’re dead, but he’s still alive. If I get that angry about dead people, think what I’m like about the living.”

“Hmmm...interesting.” Scott considers this for a moment. “But then surely, by your own admission, all I have to do is threaten Tony’s life, and you’ll do whatever I say.”

Gibbs laughs. “And if you kill him, you have no hold over me at all.”

“But if we hurt him, we can ensure your continued co-operation.”

“You’ve already hurt him. Am I co-operating?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

“I see. So we have something of an impasse. What are the rest of your terms, Leroy? I’m sure that isn’t all.”

“You’re right. You won’t put Tony into the pit. Not next Fight Night, not ever.”

“Then he becomes useless to me. Why would I keep him?” Scott spreads his arms.

“To keep your star fighter happy,” Gibbs snaps. “And you want me happy, Scott, because only by keeping me happy will I win for you.”

“Go on.” Scott leans forward and places both hands on his knees. Gibbs isn’t fooled by the man. Scott is no Walid, but he has a kind of low cunning; he’ll have some terms of his own.

“I want a visual on Tony at all times, including in the pit. So he sits up in the bleachers with you.”

“Really?” Scott nods his head musingly. “And?”

“He wears clothes on Fight Nights.” Gibbs shrugs. “I don’t want anyone gawping at him.”

“My, my, you **are** a possessive lover – for I assume you are fucking him?” Scott raises an eyebrow. “I understand you better now. You’re trying to protect a lover. That makes sense to me. Tell me, Leroy. Were you fucking him before, back at NCIS, when you both worked together as federal agents? Isn’t it frowned upon for a boss to be fucking a subordinate?”

He gives a nasty little smile, and Gibbs feels his hands closing into fists. *Channel the anger, focus it, and use it against your opponent.*

“Or did it start in here?” Scott asks with a leering smile. “If it did, then it’s likely the drugs are the reason behind your current little infatuation, nothing more. Without them, you’d feel nothing for this boy, although he is pretty, I’ll grant you that. But can you honestly say that if you weren’t locked up in here you’d give him a second thought? That you’d pass on the chance of a woman with firm tits and a nice, juicy cunt?”

He makes an obscene motion with his finger, but Gibbs refuses to rise to the bait.

“Wouldn’t it be stupid to throw all that away, to allow yourself to be beaten to a pulp in the ring and fucked up the ass just because you mistook a passing infatuation for love?” Scott demands.

“Tony also needs urgent medical treatment,” Gibbs continues, his face like granite. “He gets it immediately our conversation is over. He gets whatever medical treatment he needs going forward, and you stop drugging him.”

“Anything else?” Scott raises a facetious eyebrow.

“Yeah. Pizza. He wants pizza – pepperoni, sausage, extra cheese.” Gibbs leans back against the wall, crossing his arms over his chest.



“Oh, it must be love.” Scott smirks. “These are very interesting demands, Leroy.” He steeples his fingertips together thoughtfully. “To be honest, it’s no skin off my nose to agree to them if it will keep you happy. As you have pointed out, you are my star fighter.”

Gibbs grunts, waiting for Scott’s conditions.

“And I have no objection to giving you a carrot, to ensure that you keep winning in the pit. However...” He leans forward again, a sly look on his face. “I am also a great believer in the stick as well as the carrot, Leroy. You have told me what motivates you, and I think I can ensure that you will be as motivated as possible when you enter the pit.”

He glances up, a smile creasing his plump cheeks.

“You’re a soldier, aren’t you, Leroy? A Marine? See, I read somewhere that soldiers fighting for their homeland and loved ones fight much harder than those who are simply paid to do battle, because it’s more personal to them. They have more to lose.”

Gibbs nods. He knows the truth of that, and he’s seen it first-hand. He can guess what’s coming next.

“So, here are my terms, Leroy. You can have your medical treatment for Tony, and your clothes for him, and your pizza.” He gives a little snort at that, waving his hand dismissively in the air. “And I’ll happily have him beside me when you fight in the pit, so you can see that he is safe and well. But I think it is important that you fight **for** something out there. So, to ensure you are properly incentivized, understand this: if you lose, I will drag Tony down into the pit and invite anyone who wants him to rape him while you watch. When they’re done, I will take great pleasure in putting a bullet in the back of his head myself. That is what will happen if you lose, Leroy; that is the solemn promise I make to you.” He puts his hand on his heart and raises his eyes up to the heavens.

Gibbs grunts. It’s obscene but nothing less than he expected.

“So, do we have a deal?” Scott asks.

“We have a deal.” Gibbs nods. “How many fights do I have to win?” he asks. “How many more fights until the end of season finale?”

“Just two more, my boy. Next Fight Night is our penultimate one, and then we have the finale, where, if you and he both win your next fight, you will face the fireman.”

“I’ll win,” Gibbs says grimly.

Scott’s eyes narrow. “Oh, for Tony’s sake, I do hope so.”

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Tony stirs blearily as the door opens. He has a hazy impression of Gibbs standing over him and then he’s lifted up. He thinks it can’t be possible that Gibbs is lifting him up in his arms like a child and carrying him out of the door and along the hallway, because he knows he’s

pretty heavy. Then he remembers all the training Gibbs has been doing, and he thinks maybe it is possible, but he's too tired to open his eyes and look.

He still hurts but it's a hazy kind of hurt now, like he's not really inside his body anymore. He rests his head against a neck, which has to be Gibbs's neck because it smells like Gibbs and the hard body he's pressed against feels like Gibbs.

He's placed gently on a soft bed and a glass of water is pressed to his lips. He drinks it down, and he thinks an IV is shoved into his arm, but he's not sure because he falls asleep before he can find out.

He dreams he's in the forest again, but it's the middle of the day this time, and the sun is overhead, beating down on him. He's lying on the stone table, under the full force of the sun. He's naked, and it's so hot he feels like he's burning up. He tries to get off the table but it hurts when he moves, so he gives up and just lies there, feeling the sweat dripping down his face.

Something blocks out the sun, giving him some blessed relief from its scorching rays. He looks up and sees a big, grey wolf standing over him, and he thinks he should probably be scared but somehow he isn't. He just smiles and reaches up to pet the wolf's fur. The wolf growls at him and nudges the back of his head with its snout, but he still isn't scared; he just keeps running his fingers through all that soft grey fur.

The wolf leans in close and opens his mouth, his white fangs gleaming. Unafraid, Tony bares his neck, happily surrendering to the wolf's bite. But instead of biting him, the wolf gently fastens his jaws around Tony's neck and drags him from the table. The movement hurts, and he whimpers like a cub and clings on tight. The wolf lopes away from the table, carrying him gently in his mouth, dangling from his jaws. He takes Tony away from the sunlight and deposits him under a bush. Then he sets about cleaning him with firm, wet licks of his tongue.

When Tony wakes up, his head is clear. He still hurts like hell, but he no longer feels like he's burning up. He blinks and looks around. He's in a room somewhere; it's small but not as small as their stall, and he's lying on an actual bed, not a mattress on the floor.

He looks down to see that his entire torso has been bandaged, and then he looks up to see Gibbs standing beside the bed, looking down on him.

"You back with us?" Gibbs asks.

"Yeah. Think so." Tony reaches out a hand, and Gibbs hauls him upright. "Where are we?"

"Room off the infirmary." Gibbs jerks his head at the door. "Tanner's been pumping antibiotics into you via the IV for the past couple of days. He said the fever had gone and took out the IV a couple of hours ago, while you were sleeping. How are you feeling?"

"Much better," Tony says firmly. "So...how did it go?"

He takes the plastic cup of water Gibbs gives to him and drinks it down thirstily, loving the sensation of the cool wetness on his parched throat.

“Good.” Gibbs nods. He takes the empty cup from Tony’s hand and puts it back on the basin. Then he gazes at Tony searchingly. “Look, Tony, Tanner gave me a couple of painkillers to give you, if you want them.” He holds up the white pills. “But, thing is, we both know you go loopy on painkillers, and I can’t risk telling you the plan if you take them.”

“I don’t need the painkillers,” Tony says firmly. “I want to hear the plan, Boss.”

Gibbs flashes him a smile, like he never doubted his reply for a second.

“Is the room safe?” Tony asks anxiously, glancing around.

“It’s safe. I checked. There’s the usual guard outside the door, but there are no bugs or cameras in here.”

It’s pretty much an empty room save for the bed, basin and toilet, so there aren’t exactly many places to hide any recording devices. Tony nods at Gibbs to continue.

“I got Scott to agree to medical treatment for you. That’s why you’re here. He also agreed that nobody will lay a finger on you going forward. And you don’t have to fight in the pit next Fight Night. You don’t have to fight in the pit ever again.”

“Really? Wow.” Tony gives a low whistle. “Can you walk on water too, Boss?”

Gibbs rolls his eyes at him. “You are never to be out of my sight at any time, so I can see you’re okay, and when I fight in the pit you’ll sit next to Scott, watching, so I can see you then too. You also get to wear clothes on Fight Nights.”

“Clothes?” Tony can feel his eyes lighting up. “Damn it, Boss, what did you have to promise Scott in return for all this?”

Gibbs shrugs. “I have to win. That’s all.”

Tony knows Gibbs too well. “Or?” he asks quietly.

Gibbs folds his arms across his chest. “Or they rape you, and when they’re done raping you Scott shoots you in the head,” he says bluntly.

Tony frowns. “You know, Boss, your definition of ‘good’ and mine must be entirely different.”

Gibbs leans in close. “Scott takes a cell phone to Fight Nights, Tony. I saw it,” he murmurs into Tony’s ear. “He’ll also be distracted by what’s going on in the pit. And I didn’t just ask for you to wear clothes because I can’t stand the thought of all those people staring at ya – although that was part of it.” He gives a wry grin, and Tony rolls his eyes. “Clothes will also give you a chance to hide the cell phone.”

“You want me to steal a cell phone? After all this time telling me not to do just that?” Tony glares at him.

“This is part of a wider plan. You steal the phone, go to the restroom, and make the call. Those temporary toilets are too small for a guard to go in with you, so they’ll stay outside. After you’ve made the call, you delete it from the phone’s memory so Scott doesn’t find out. Then you go back up to the bleachers and return it to Scott’s jacket, so he never knows it’s gone.”

“You have enormous faith in my talents as a thief,” Tony says musingly.

“I do, Tony, yes.” Gibbs gazes at him steadily.

Tony gives him a big grin. “So you should! I’m an excellent thief. Did I ever tell you about the time I stole my housemaster’s stash of porn from the locked filing cabinet in his study? That stuff was good! I sold half of it and made enough to keep me in Oreos and Hershey bars for the rest of the term. Although I kept the best half, obviously. Of course they did find out it was me eventually, possibly because I bragged about it so much.” He grimaces. “Man, the housemaster had a mean right arm. I didn’t sit down for weeks after that, and...” He comes to a halt as Gibbs taps him lightly on the back of the head.

“Yes, Boss. Sorry, Boss. Your own right arm is pretty mean too,” he adds, smoothing down the hair on the back of his head ruefully. “So, what happens next?”

“Next we have to keep them all there for as long as possible to give McGee a chance to get to us. So you need to steal the phone as early in the evening as you can. But we can’t just rely on that. Regardless of whether we get rescued or not, we’re going to screw up Walid’s evening. That’s where Sam Hurrell comes in.”

“Sam?”

“Yeah. You have to be my go-between, Tony. I can’t train the fighters myself because they watch me too closely, but Sam can. He’s a Marine, and he knows how to organize men. He’s also going to be out in the truck after his fight, while I’m in the pit.”

“Hang on...how do you know that? How do you know which of you will fight first?”

“Because we’re going to do this on finale night, and any finale I’ve ever been to they save the headline act until last. So, I’ll be in the pit, fighting Mac, and Sam will be in the truck. My guess is there won’t be many guards out there – everyone is going to want to watch the big fight. So Sam is going to have to find a way to overpower the guard, get the key off him, and release all the fighters.”

“If anyone can do it, it’s Sam,” Tony says firmly.

Gibbs nods. “That’s what I figured. I’ll draw out the fight with Mac as long as possible, but while everyone is watching us fight, Sam has got to free and arm as many of the fighters as he can.”

“Then what?” Tony asks.

Gibbs shrugs. “Then we hope the cavalry shows up in time to stop the whole thing becoming a bloodbath. But I’m not coming back here after that fight, Tony, and I’m not going to any

other stable, either. I either die out there, or I go home. Those are the only choices I'm giving myself."

Tony shivers, and Gibbs puts a hand on his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Fine...just...those poor suckers think they know the wolfman, but they don't, not really. They've never really seen him in action before, but I have. They won't know what's hit them."

Gibbs gives a little grunt at that, but Tony thinks he looks pretty pleased all the same.

"It's dangerous. I'm asking everyone to put their lives on the line," Gibbs says quietly. "Do you think they'll do that for me?"

Tony gives an incredulous laugh. "Shit, Gibbs, they're just waiting for you to ask!" He hears footsteps outside the door and stiffens anxiously. "There anything else I need to know?" he asks quickly, as the handle on the door turns and the door opens.

"Yeah...are you hungry?" Gibbs goes over to the door, grabs a box from the guard's hands, and closes the door again. He turns, and Tony gets a whiff of baked cheese so strong his salivary glands go into overdrive.

"Oh man...please tell me that's pizza! I've been jonesing for pizza for weeks!"

"Oh yeah! It's pizza." Gibbs has a shit-eating grin on his face. "Pepperoni, sausage, extra cheese do for ya?"

He opens the box and slings it on the bed, and Tony shoves his nose into it and inhales the scent dreamily.

"I love you, Boss," he murmurs as he tears away a slice of the hot pizza and crams it into his mouth. "Oh God, this is good...oh shit..." He's aware that he's making positively orgasmic noises as he eats. He glances up to see Gibbs smiling at him. "Christ, Jethro, you got me medical treatment, clothes, a free pass out of the pit, and pizza," he says between mouthfuls. "Didn't you ask for anything for yourself?"

"Don't be an idiot, DiNozzo," Gibbs growls, still smiling at him. "Everything I asked for **was** for me."

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"Don't you want some?" Tony waves a slice of the pizza in the air. It actually makes Gibbs's stomach roil; maybe all these months of eating plain, healthy food has changed his taste buds.

"Nah. Tanner already brought me some food while you were asleep. Besides, I'm in training." Gibbs shrugs. "Can't afford to lose now, Tony. Not with what's at stake."

Tony flashes him a look that tells him he's well aware of what's at stake, and then, in typical Tony fashion, ignores that particularly unpleasant subject and stuffs another slice of pizza

into his mouth, chewing greedily. “Man, I’m starving. One more thing,” he says between mouthfuls. “When is finale night? When is all this going down?”

“Fight Night after next. So we have just over a week to plan this thing.”

“Had much less for missions before.” Tony shrugs.

“We’ll use the coming Fight Night to do recon and figure out how it’ll work on finale night.”

“Me and Sam will have to get the other fighters on board. That means telling them at least some of the plan. It’s a risk,” Tony points out.

“A calculated one. You know them better than me – any of them you think we can’t trust?”

Tony thinks about it for a moment and then shakes his head. “No. They’re all good men, and they all want to get out of here as much as we do. What does your gut say?”

Gibbs grunts. “My gut says we have no choice. We have to trust ‘em.”

He leans back, watching as Tony finishes the pizza and then begins sucking the grease off his fingers in a way that’s positively obscene. He feels his cock harden and winces. It’s embarrassing being naked and unable to hide any sign of arousal, and the drugs don’t help.

Tony finishes sucking and then looks at his erection and grins.

“No,” Gibbs says firmly. “We have no lube for a start, and you’re too badly hurt.”

“My mouth isn’t hurt, and my mouth would very much like to say thank you both for what it just received and what it’s about to receive!” Tony gives a lascivious grin. He slowly levers himself off the bed and then staggers as his feet touch the ground, wincing in pain as the movement clearly jostles his injuries. Gibbs reaches out a hand to steady him.

“Tony, don’t be an idiot...” he begins, but Tony just grabs his arms to give him support, sinks slowly down to his knees, and then swallows his cock with one smooth glide of his lips.

Gibbs shouts out loud, shocked by how good that feels on his erect cock. Tony looks up at him, his lips stretched taut around Gibbs’s cock, and gives a cheery wink. Gibbs puts a hand in Tony’s hair and strokes as Tony sets about giving him the best blowjob he’s ever had in his entire life. He thought Tony’s hand jobs were good, but this is even better.

Tony has clearly had plenty of practice, and his lips slide up and down Gibbs’s cock with expert precision. He draws back a little way and teases the slit with his tongue, while at the same time cupping Gibbs’s balls with his hand, juggling them skilfully, and Gibbs leans back against the wall, gasping with pleasure.

Then, without warning, Tony deep throats him with one swift movement of his head, and Gibbs feels himself coming. He tries to draw back, but Tony isn’t having it. He holds Gibbs in place and swallows down his come until Gibbs is completely spent. Then he draws back, smacking his lips together happily.

“Aw, you even provided me with dessert.” Tony winks. “You are truly a God among men, Gibbs.”

All Gibbs can do is snort. “You’ll be the death of me, DiNozzo.”

“Yup – they’ll put it on your tombstone: *‘Leroy Jethro Gibbs – sucked to death by Tony DiNozzo, aged 102. He died a happy death!’*” Tony’s face becomes suddenly serious. “That’s how it’s going to be, Jethro. You and me, out there, living a life together until we grow old and die. It doesn’t end here.”

Gibbs gives a little grunt. He can’t think beyond getting out of here; he has no idea what their lives will be after that. He can’t afford to be distracted.

He helps Tony to his feet, and Tony glances at the bed and back at him.

“There’s only one bed, Jethro. Wanna share?”

Tanner told him they only had the room for the rest of the night, as it’s clear Tony is well on the road to recovery; tomorrow night they’ll be back in their stall as usual. Gibbs thinks it’ll be nice to sleep in a real bed again, even if only for a few hours.

The bed isn’t big, but it’s bigger than the thin mattress he’s been sleeping on for the past few months. He helps Tony crawl back onto it and then slides in beside him. It’s so small that they’re jammed up close to each other, but Gibbs doesn’t mind; he likes the closeness.

They’re face to face, and Tony kisses him softly on the lips. Gibbs rests his hand on Tony’s hip and kisses him back, and they fall asleep like that, both of them aware that they’re facing the fight of their lives.

The next day Gibbs is put back into training. He works out with a vengeance, knowing that more is at stake than ever before. Tony sits in the corner of the gym watching him, looking tired but on the mend. Scott has been true to his word, and Tanner has changed Tony’s bandages and checked his injuries, giving him proper medical care.

Sam Hurrell finishes on the treadmill and grabs a drink from the table, then walks over to where Tony is sitting. He crouches down beside him, clearly asking him how he is.

Tony begins talking, softly, dipping his head to whisper into Hurrell’s ear. At one point Hurrell stiffens, and then he looks up, straight at Gibbs. Gibbs gives him a barely perceptible nod, and Hurrell’s face breaks into a big grin.

Later, in the showers, Hurrell clearly engineers it so he gets to stand next to Gibbs. The guard is leaning against the wall by the door, looking bored, clearly not listening, and the noise of the showers means the sound of their voices doesn’t carry that far in any case.

“Tony told me your plan,” Hurrell murmurs.

“You in?” Gibbs asks.

“Of course I’m in. I just hope I can do what you ask.”

“Of course you damn well can, Sam. You’re a Marine.”

Hurrell straightens at that, but Gibbs understands the lack of confidence; Hurrell has been here for over six months, and a man can forget a lot about himself and who he is in that time. Hurrell hasn’t been lucky enough to have a Tony come along and remind him, so Gibbs must do it for him.

“Once the off-season starts, some of the fighters will be sold off. I don’t know what they’ll do with the rest, but we might be split up, or transported someplace else. We have to act before that happens.”

“Yeah, but finale night?” Hurrell raises an eyebrow. “Never took you for the dramatic type, Gibbs.”

Gibbs shrugs. “Think about it, Sam. Finale night is when they’ll all be there. Not just Walid and Scott, but all the owners and all the sick bastards who come and watch. I don’t just want to escape. I don’t want to go running back to my old life, leaving this whole operation still going strong. Sure, I could spend the rest of my life tracking them down, but there’s no guarantee I’d get them all. No. I want to bring them all down, catch them in the act, and make them all pay.”

Hurrell is staring at him.

“What?” Gibbs asks impatiently.

“Never seen you this way before, that’s all. Feels like I’m seeing the man Tony told me about. I wasn’t sure he was even in there.”

“He’s here,” Gibbs growls. “Question is, will these men follow me? Matt, Greg...all the others. Will they risk their lives for my plan?”

“I’ve already spoken to them, and the answer is yes,” Hurrell tells him. “They look up to you, Gibbs. You’re a legend around here. But they’re scared; they’re only agreeing to it because it’s your plan, and they think you’re invincible. Don’t let them down.”

“I won’t,” Gibbs says firmly. “But this is no time for weakness. This plan only works if I play my part, Tony plays his, you play yours, and they all play theirs. We have to work together.”

“*For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf, and the strength of the Wolf is the Pack*” Hurrell quotes at him.

Gibbs quirks an eyebrow. “What’s with all the wolf quotes? Did you swallow some kind of wolf reference book or something?”

Hurrell laughs out loud. “That was Rudyard Kipling, and, uh, I guess things like that tend to stick in my brain.”

“Yeah, you’re a regular inspirational quotes factory.”



Hurrell has gone a shade of bright red that has nothing to do with the hot shower water. He dips his head, looking supremely embarrassed. "I told you I attended leadership classes, Gibbs. That was one of the things they suggested. Learn inspirational quotes to inspire your men. I also know the entire St Crispen's Day battle speech from '*Henry V*' off by heart."

"Well, don't damn well quote that at me too," Gibbs says, rolling his eyes. Then he looks at Hurrell's earnest face and sighs. "Look, Sam, you're trying too hard. Here." He throws the bar of soap he's holding onto the shower floor. "Try to pick that up."

Hurrell looks at him, a confused expression in his eyes. He bends down, picks up the soap, and hands it back to Gibbs uncertainly.

"I told you to *\*try\** to pick it up." Gibbs throws the soap back at him. "The point is, you don't 'try' and do something, Sam. You just do it."

"Oh, I know this one." Hurrell grins. "'*Do or do not. There is no try.*' That's Yoda...uh, '*Star Wars*'?" he finishes with a squeak as Gibbs gives him a glare.

Gibbs puts a hand on his shoulder and looks into his eyes. "You're already a leader, Sam. I never met a more honourable man. You've been telling me a whole lot of things I should have listened to a hell of a lot sooner, and you never gave up. You don't need to try to be a leader; you already **are** one. There's no room for doubt. Just go out there on finale night and lead these men to victory."

Hurrell's face relaxes and something inside him seems to give. He jumps to attention and snaps off a smart salute to Gibbs. "Yes, Gunny!"

~\*~

Tony wakes with a stomach full of butterflies on the morning of the penultimate Fight Night. Everyone knows they're doing recon, and the men all know they have to win their fights to be guaranteed a place in the escape attempt the following week.

It's still early, and the klaxon hasn't sounded yet. His back is healing, but it's itchy now that it's scabbing over. He rolls his shoulders and rubs a particularly itchy part of his shoulder blade against the mattress. It only relieves the irritation a little, so he reaches back and tries to scratch at the scab. He's done this before and it makes them bleed, but he prefers the soreness to the perpetual itching.

He's just found the sore spot and started to dig in when his hand is grabbed and his wrist held in a vice-like grip.

"Do I have to borrow a set of chains from McGuire and tie you up to stop you doing that?" Gibbs hisses in his ear.

"Ooh...kinky." Tony glances over his shoulder with a grin.

Gibbs rolls his eyes. "You're jittery this morning."

"How do you...? Oh, never mind." Tony sighs. Gibbs always knows everything.

“You’ve been awake a long time, and it’s early.”

“Well, today might be the last day of my life so…” Tony shrugs.

Gibbs tightens his grasp on Tony’s wrist, and Tony can feel him pressing his entire body weight against him. “I will not lose out there, Tony.”

“Supposing you finally come up against someone who is better than you? I mean, this is their semi-final; this guy is probably good.”

“You’re not listening. I will not lose out there, Tony,” Gibbs repeats into his ear.

Tony can feel Gibbs’s erection digging into his buttocks, and he opens his legs and goes up on all fours. “Fuck me, Jethro. Fuck me like it’s the last time you’ll ever fuck me. Make me feel it,” he urges.

Gibbs needs no further invitation. He grabs the oil from under the pillow, and then Tony feels him sinking his fingers inside him. Before long, they’re replaced by the familiar burning press of his big, hard cock. Tony loves the sensation of being stretched, and he particularly loves the tingling fizz he feels every time Gibbs’s cock brushes his prostate.

Gibbs does exactly what Tony asked him to do and fucks him hard. It’s the first time he’s taken him from behind – before Tony’s always been on his back, but it’s too sore for them to have sex that way right now.

Tony likes how vulnerable it feels, kneeling there with his ass in the air as Gibbs pounds into him from behind. He likes being able to see Gibbs when they’re fucking, but there’s something raw and thrilling about doing it this way too.

Gibbs is like a piston, thrusting into him good and hard for a very long time. Choosing to have sex with Gibbs is one of the few things Tony has any control over in this place, and it makes him feel alive, as if he has at least some say in his own destiny. Gibbs’s cock hammering in and out of his hole makes him feel filled and complete.

Gibbs comes with a deep, pleasure-filled moan, and Tony grins, delighted that he can wring that kind of sound from his usually taciturn lover. He finishes jerking himself off, Gibbs’s cock still lodged inside him, and comes with a happy moan of his own.

Then he pulls forward and turns around, an unpleasant thought occurring to him. “What will you think about when you’re fucking that other guy in the pit later? Will you be thinking about me?”

Gibbs raises an eyebrow. “Jealous, Tony?”

“No!” Tony laughs and then makes a face. “Yeah. A little. I’m going to be watching, remember. I’m going to have sit up there and watch you stick it to some other guy.”

“I won’t enjoy it, Tony. It’s not something I do by choice.”

“I know. Still doesn’t mean I have to like it. You’re mine, and I’ve never been good at sharing.”

“So, you’re the possessive type, huh?”

“Aren’t you?” Tony shoots back. “Imagine if it was me out there; how would you feel?”

“I’d want to tear the world apart to make it stop,” Gibbs replies, his eyes darkening. He grabs Tony’s head and looks intently into his eyes. “It’s nothing at all like what we do together, Tony. It’s nothing like this.” He pulls Tony’s head towards him and gives him a fierce kiss.

Tony wonders whether they could ever have got this intimate under any other circumstances. Now the real Gibbs has been unleashed, he’s a passionate, focused lover, and he knows what he wants, treating Tony’s body like he has dominion over it. He’s a generous lover, never failing to give Tony pleasure, but he’s also extremely forceful and demanding – which doesn’t surprise Tony at all.

Tony is glad he’s no shy virgin, because being locked up with this particular wolf is a challenge, no matter how attractive he finds the man. Gibbs isn’t holding anything back; he’s giving Tony everything he’s got, and Tony loves it. He doubts many people would be able to handle it though, and he wonders how Shannon managed it. No wonder there are so many ex Mrs Gibbsses out there.

The klaxon sounds, and they’re herded through their morning routine and then taken to the truck. Despite the entirely welcome fucking, Tony is still jittery. He believes in Gibbs, and he believes Gibbs will win, but they all have a lot riding on the man right now. Can he deliver – or will he buckle under all the pressure? It’s a lot for one man to handle.

Ellis comes over to him, a sour look on his face, carrying a pile of clothes in his arms. “These are for you,” he says, holding up the clothes, but when Tony reaches out to take them he drops them deliberately on the floor and walks away.

Tony bends down and picks them up. “Aw...they shop at Sears, Boss, just like you,” he says, holding up a pair of black jeans and a red and black plaid shirt. Gibbs slaps the back of his head without missing a beat, and Tony squeaks in response, grinning wildly at the same time. “No underwear, no socks, no boots. I guess this is it,” Tony says with a sigh as he examines the clothes. “Kind of minimalist.”

“But not as minimalist as your current outfit,” Gibbs points out, glancing at his naked body.

“True.” Tony pulls the jeans on and zips them up. It feels strange to be clothed after so long naked, and the fabric feels rough against his skin. He pulls the shirt on and buttons it up and then smooths it down with energetic sweeps of his fingers. “How do I look?” He turns to Gibbs with a beaming smile.

“Like a lumberjack,” Gibbs grunts. Tony makes a face at him. “Rule number one or three – never date a lumberjack,” Gibbs adds.

“Uh, that’s not rule number one, Boss,” Tony says, confused. “Or three actually.”

“Someone else’s rules.” Gibbs gives a rueful little smile. He puts his hands on Tony’s shoulders and looks him up and down, and then he leans in and whispers in his ear. “You look great. I won’t lose. And I’ll definitely be thinking about you.”

He puts a hand on Tony’s jeans-clad ass, cups one buttock, and squeezes. Tony grins, suddenly feeling a lot less anxious.

They’re herded into the truck, chained as usual, driven for a couple of hours to their destination, and then hauled out the other end and shoved into the holding pen – except for Tony.

Scott appears, all beaming smiles and devious, piggy little eyes. He slaps a hand on Tony’s shoulder, making him wince as it lands on his whipped flesh.

“You’re with me, Tony!” he announces loudly. “Fight well, Leroy,” he says, with a glance at Gibbs. “I’ll keep this boy nice and safe beside me. You can have him back when you win.” That comment sends shivers up Tony’s spine, knowing the bargain Gibbs and Scott have struck between them.

He’s taken in chains up to Scott’s little camp on the bleachers. Several familiar faces are there; Frank, Tanner, McGuire, Ellis, and many of the other guards. Even Pete the truck driver is there, but he refuses to meet Tony’s eyes. Tony wonders if he’s angry that he stole his cell phone or guilty about what happened to him as a result.

He’s seated next to Scott, which is good. Although his hands are attached to his ankles by a chain, it’s a loose chain, and he has plenty of freedom of movement. He decides he can use the chains to his advantage when the time comes, if Gibbs is right, and Scott does have a cell phone.

Mac comes on to fight first. Tony had forgotten what a big bastard he is. He looks more like a man mountain than ever as he lumbers into the pit. The crowd goes wild for him, chanting his name, and he waves and makes obscene gestures with his arms – which just sends them into even more of a frenzy.

“He’s quite the showman, isn’t he, Tony?” Scott murmurs, leaning forward and watching intently.

“You could call it that. I’d call him a great, big ham actor personally, but whatever.” Tony shrugs.

Tony sees Frank leaning forward too, and he knows the trainer will be assessing every single aspect of Mac’s performance to see if there are any weaknesses.

Mac’s opponent is also a big guy, and the commentator obligingly refers to it as a fight between two giants. They lumber around the pit for a while, bodies gleaming, yelling insults at each other. Then Mac strikes, and he’s faster than Tony expected for such a massive guy; maybe Walid’s trainer has been working with him on that, knowing that speed and agility are Gibbs’s strengths.

Before long, Mac is pummelling his victim into the ground, after which he does a victory lap around the pit, before returning to piss on the losing fighter.

“Aw, that’s gross.” Tony turns his head away. He knew it was Mac’s signature move, but knowing it and seeing it are two different things. He’s all the more grateful that Gibbs struck that bargain with Scott and spared him fighting Mac in the pit, or he would be experiencing a very different kind of evening right now.

Tony pulls on his lower lip glumly. Quite frankly, Mac is streets ahead of all the other fighters he’s seen. He’s bigger, stronger, and meaner. He also goes into that pit like he loves it and wouldn’t want to be anywhere else in the world. The other fighters, even the good ones, look like what they are; men who have been kidnapped and thrown into this nightmare against their will, doing their best to survive. Some of them try and play to the crowd to psych themselves up, but none of them look as at ease out there as Mac does.

Gibbs is good, and he’s bulked up a lot since his capture, but Mac is still a hell of a lot bigger than him. Does Gibbs seriously stand any chance against this guy next week? Supposing their plan doesn’t work, and the cavalry doesn’t turn up in time? Supposing Mac beats Gibbs to a pulp, and then rapes and pisses on him? Tony doesn’t think he could bear that.

Beside him, he can see Scott and Frank exchanging worried glances. They can see how invincible Mac is too, and they are clearly shitting themselves wondering if Gibbs can possibly beat him.

There’s a brief interlude while more sawdust is thrown down, and then Hurrell comes into the pit. Tony finds his hands curling into fists. They need Hurrell to win; if he loses he’ll go to another stable, and they need him for the escape attempt next week.

Hurrell is good, but so is his opponent. They fight a long, hard fight, before Hurrell takes him down. Scott, Ellis, Frank and all the members of Scott’s camp rise to their feet as one, and Tony finds himself rising with them, clapping his hands together and yelling in relief. He exchanges a happy glance with Frank and then feels complicit in this whole thing.

He can suddenly see how easy it is to get sucked in and how addictive it is. After awhile you barely care about the brutality, or the raping. It’s just part of the game. You get swept up in the emotions and forget these are real people who have been kidnapped and forced to fight and rape at gunpoint. He sits down quietly.

Scott is delighted. He shakes hands with Frank, and Tony guesses that Gibbs isn’t the only fighter they have money on. Then Scott reaches into his pocket...and pulls out a cell phone. Tony heaves a sigh of relief, noting which pocket Scott kept it in and what kind of a phone it is.

Scott punches in a number. “Did you see that?” he crows down the phone. “Now can you see Hurrell is worth more than the measly 50k you offered me for him? He’s a potential winner – next year, with the right training, he could win the entire season.”

Tony realises that he and Gibbs and the other fighters only see a tiny glimpse of this whole operation. They only see the inside of the stable, and the truck, and the holding pens and the pit. Sitting up here on the bleachers, you get a different perspective. There is clearly a whole

other world going on up here, with stable owners doing deals with each other to buy and sell the best fighters, and money changing hands in the betting. It's a big business – the sums being thrown around prove that – and Scott doesn't just have his eye on winning this season. He's already thinking about the next.

"We'll see, my friend. We'll see!" Scott says gloatingly into the phone. He waves his hand at someone sitting over the far side of the bleachers, presumably another stable owner. Then he finishes the call and replaces the cell phone in his pocket.

Tony lets his gaze wander a little further along the crowd...and it comes to rest on Walid.

Walid is sitting on his throne, dressed as immaculately as ever. He's wearing his sunglasses, and one of his legs is tilted neatly over the other. He looks as cold, withdrawn, and detached as always. There's an aura of power around him. This is his domain. Here he is emperor and everyone else is a minion.

There's a sneer on his polite mask of a face as he looks down on the crowd, and Tony sees that Walid despises his people even as he provides for their entertainment. Watching him, Tony gets a sense of the man's huge ego. This is Walid's tournament. It's his baby. He created this entire world; he funds it, and he organizes all the fights.

The idea that a puffed up idiot like Scott could walk into **his** world, get lucky, and steal victory from him is obscene to him. He would lose, gracefully, if he thought his opponent was a worthy one who had outplayed him, but lose to an idiot like Scott? That prospect must be eating him up inside. No wonder he's tried so hard to get into Gibbs's head and cause him to lose.

Walid suddenly inclines his head in Tony's direction, and Tony realizes he's been seen. Damn – it's always so hard knowing where Walid is looking behind the sunglasses. Tony decides, possibly unwisely, to screw with him, so he gives him a big grin and puts both his thumbs in the air.

"Take that, fucker," he mutters under his breath, knowing just how angry Walid must be right now that he's evaded that fight against Mac that Walid had scheduled for him.

Walid runs his hand over his goatee, looking supremely unconcerned, and Tony shifts uncomfortably. Unlike Scott, Walid is a formidable opponent and should not be underestimated.

Tony asks to use the restroom, and is escorted there by McGuire. Gibbs is right; the toilets are too small for a guard to enter, and McGuire stays outside, guarding the door. Afterwards, as they leave the restrooms, Tony glances over to the holding pens. They're visible from the toilets, and Gibbs sees him and jerks his head in his direction. That's good too; next week, Tony will give them a signal to let them know if he made the call or not. The men will make their move either way, but their game plan will be different depending on whether rescue is potentially on its way, or if they're on their own.

Tony returns to the bleachers and sits through the rest of the fights. It's a fantastic evening for Scott, with most of his fighters winning. Tony knows why – they've all got the added incentive of knowing that they'll get a chance to escape next week. Their numbers will be

swelled by the new fighters they'll take home, but Tony doubts Gibbs will trust the new men enough to tell them his plan. However, when Hurrell makes his move next week, Tony bets most, if not all, will decide to join in.

Gibbs is on last. It makes sense; Mac opened the evening's 'entertainment', and Gibbs, his main rival, will close it. Mac won his fight, and the winner of Gibbs's fight will face him in the finale.

Tony watches intently as Gibbs prowls into the pit. He moves so differently from Mac, with slow, controlled movements and a deadly kind of grace.

Gibbs glances up, looking directly at him, and Tony stands and waves both his hands in the air. He knows Gibbs doesn't need any reminding what's at stake here, but he wants him to know he's fine and that Gibbs should concentrate on the fight and not on him.

Ellis yanks him back down to his seat, and then Gibbs's opponent is released into the pit.

Tony watches, open-mouthed, as Gibbs delivers a master-class in fighting. Even the crowd gasps as Gibbs powers through, outwitting, outsmarting, and outfighting his opponent at every turn. Gibbs's opponent is a semi-finalist, a man who, according to the commentator, has only lost one fight all season, but it's like watching a master against a complete beginner. Gibbs has never looked more like a hungry wolf as he paces around the pit, stalking his prey and then bringing him down with his sharp teeth.

It's all over in a matter of minutes, the fastest fight of the night, and the crowd is stunned.

Scott's camp are all on their feet, cheering wildly. Tony sees Scott and Frank exchange a different look this time. They are hopeful; they think if anyone can beat Mac, it's Gibbs, and having seen him in action this evening, Tony can see why.

The crowd hushes, and Tony wants to look away, not wanting to see what comes next. Then he steels himself. Gibbs has to actually do this; the least he can do is be there with him, every step of the way, just like Gibbs was there for him during that whipping.

So he stands there, unmoving, looking down on the pit as Gibbs approaches the man he just beat. And, as he watches, Gibbs looks up, straight at him, and nods. Tony nods back, remembering their conversation that morning. Neither of them smiles. Neither of them wants this. It just has to be done. Tony feels sorry for the poor bastard Gibbs will fuck and feels sorry for Gibbs having no choice but to fuck him, but none of them have any choice in the matter, and the alternative is much worse.

Tony holds Gibbs's gaze as he fucks his opponent, sharing the unpleasantness of the moment with him. Gibbs is at least merciful with his victims. He doesn't draw it out, or, as one of the fighters did earlier, withdraw when he's on the brink and come on his opponent's body. He just does what he has to, and then draws back and, with one last look at Tony, he stalks out of the pit.

"It would seem," Scott says, leaning towards Tony. "That Leroy was right. Our little agreement does seem to have properly incentivized him. I've never seen him more on fire. I think Mac had better watch out next week."

He claps a happy hand on Tony's shoulder, making him wince again, and then shoves him towards the stairs. They go back down to the truck, where Gibbs is already being chained up, ready for transport. Scott is all beaming smiles, congratulations, and pumping handshakes, as if he really believes Gibbs is his friend, and not a man he is coercing and blackmailing to victory. "Well done, Leroy! Excellent fight! The best of the evening!"

"I must concur," a silky voice says from behind them. Tony turns to see Walid standing there with his entourage of bodyguards. "That really was a most impressive victory, Jethro."

Gibbs stiffens at the use of his real name, and Scott just looks confused. Walid ignores Scott completely, clearly considering him to be a complete nonentity, and leans in close to Gibbs. He removes his sunglasses, and Tony gets a flash of those cold, dark eyes.

"I must congratulate you, Jethro. I expected to see Tony fight Mac in the pit tonight but it would appear you outplayed me." He pauses for a moment, considering that. "A most novel experience." He inclines his head graciously. "Enjoy your moment while you can, Jethro, because this is your last week in Scott's stable. After next Fight Night, you will belong to me."

He replaces his sunglasses and then, with a dismissive look at Tony, he moves silently away, his entourage following.

"Oh no, you sick freak. After next Fight Night, **you** will belong to **me**," Gibbs growls under his breath, so quietly that only Tony hears him.

Tony glances at Walid's retreating back, and is reminded of a cobra, sleek, silent, cold, and deadly. Then he glances at Gibbs and sees the snarling wolf, hackles raised, teeth bared, ready to do battle with the snake. One thing is certain; they are heading for a showdown far more epic than anything that will take place in the pit. It is Walid and Gibbs who will do battle next Fight Night, and only one of them can win.

But which one will it be: the cobra or the wolf?

~\*~

Gibbs spends the next week surreptitiously training his men. He watches their training fights when he can, offering them little bits and pieces of encouragement and advice, and is gratified when they visibly blossom. It seems Hurrell was right about their high regard for him. He doesn't approach the new men; like Tony, he's of the opinion they'll all join in on the night, but he doesn't trust them with the plan beforehand in case they tell one of the guards. Only he, Tony, and Hurrell know the entire plan. Greg, Matt and the others know there will be an escape attempt but not what form it will take. Hurrell has just told them to be ready when the time comes. He's a good Marine, and Gibbs can see the men responding to his leadership.

The last Fight Night of the season is upon them all too quickly. After months of gruelling days and boring nights, suddenly the time flashes by, and all too soon it's the night before the big fight. The door is locked behind them in their stall for the final time, and Gibbs finds himself looking at Tony, and Tony looking back.



“So this is it,” Tony says quietly.

“Yeah.”

“Look, Jethro, whatever happens tomorrow...”

“Don’t, Tony. Just...don’t.” Gibbs shakes his head.

There are so many ways tomorrow could go. His plan could work, and all this could end. Or his plan could fail, Tony could be raped and murdered, and he could end up in a truck on his way back to Walid’s stable for the off-season. Or they could both die out there. Mac might kill him in the pit, or Walid might decide to kill him, just because he can. Or Hurrell might get the men free and arm them, and there could be a shoot-out where they all die.

“Come here,” Tony says quietly, holding out his hand.

Gibbs takes it, and Tony pulls him in close. It’s such a comfort to feel all that warm, solid flesh against his body. Tony wraps his arms around him and moves him in a silent dance around the stall.

*“But I do know one and one is two,” Tony sings into his ear. “And if this one could be with you, what a wonderful world this could be.”*

Gibbs thinks of Rajul, Steve, Ben, Brian and all the others. He thinks of what he’s been made to do every time he stepped out into the pit. He thinks of the way they whipped Tony until the blood ran down his back. And he thinks of the long nights alone, facing himself and his own weaknesses in this tiny stall before Tony arrived.

“Doesn’t seem like such a wonderful world to me,” he mutters into Tony’s shoulder.

Tony laughs. “Sure it is. You’re just looking at this the wrong way.”

Gibbs thinks about the dark days before Tony got here. Then Tony arrived, turning night into day with his smile, and charisma, and sheer zest for life. He thinks about how Tony brought with him a towering, unshakeable belief in Leroy Jethro Gibbs that made him believe in himself again, when he’d nearly forgotten who he was.

He thinks of the slow, inching progress they made towards admitting a truth they’d been denying for ten, long years. He thinks of Tony’s hands on his body in the night, giving him company and comfort and asking for nothing in return.

He thinks of Tony stealing oil to massage into his skin and pressing little kisses onto his scars. He thinks of long conversations in the night, talking about his life in a way he’s never done with anyone else. He thinks about how that wasn’t easy, and yet somehow it was easier than it should have been, because it was Tony he was confiding in. He thinks of Tony’s lips on his, and the feel of Tony’s body under his fingers, and his mouth, and around his cock.

*“But I do know that I love you, and I know that if you loved me too, what a wonderful world this could be,” Tony half-whispers, half-sings into his ear.*

Maybe he's right. Gibbs takes hold of Tony's head and kisses him on the lips, gently pushing his tongue into Tony's mouth, and they dance to the sound of music only they can hear, kissing as they go.

Later, they sink down onto the mattresses on the floor, and Gibbs finds the oil and buries himself deep inside Tony's body. They might not have tomorrow but they have tonight, and if it's their last night together Gibbs wants to savour every second of it.

He isn't sure how many times they make love. He doesn't know how many times they kiss, or how many times he comes deep inside Tony's body. He doesn't know how many times Tony arches up against him and comes in his mouth, or on his fingers.

All he is aware of is the smoothness of Tony's skin under his lips, the softness of his hair under his fingers, the warmth of his lips against his own, and the soft mewling sound of his cries of pleasure. They don't speak, they just make love, their bodies rising and falling against each other in a rhythmic dance that neither of them wants to end.

They perform what might be their final dance together until finally they can dance no more. Then they just lie there, looking at each other, tired fingers tracing gentle circles on each other's bodies. When they finally fall asleep, it's with their arms wrapped around each other, and their bodies entwined.

In the morning, after he's showered, Gibbs gazes at himself in the mirror, looking at his shorn head where Frank shaved him the previous day. He is the wolf, the hunter, but he doesn't need anger to help him fight anymore; he has something much better to fight for now.

There is a different atmosphere in the truck as they drive to the venue. Hurrell, Greg, Matt and the others are all hyped up; he can see it in their eyes and the way their legs bob nervously up and down. Their eyes are on him for the entire journey, and he can feel the burden of their expectation upon him, weighing him down. Then Tony puts a hand on his shoulder and squeezes, and he remembers that he isn't alone.

Hurrell leans forward. "For the strength of the Pack is the Wolf," he says softly, gazing at Gibbs.

Gibbs nods and straightens. "And the strength of the Wolf is the Pack," he replies, glancing around the entire truck as he speaks. He sees the fighters straighten too, nodding at him, understanding.

Hurrell grins, and Gibbs grins back at him, thinking that maybe the inspirational quote school of leadership doesn't suck as much as he thought it did.

The truck comes to a halt, and the doors are opened. Gibbs feels a cool wind on his face, and he looks up to see a bright, full moon in the sky.

"It's a good omen," Tony whispers in his ear. "Wolves like a full moon."

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Tony is taken up onto the bleachers, just the same as last time. Scott is so nervous there's a sheen of sweat on his forehead that he keeps dabbing away, despite the coolness of the night air. There's a wind rustling around them, the clouds scurrying fast overhead, and Tony can sense an impending storm.

He hopes that won't interfere with the cell phone reception. There's no way of knowing if this is the same venue as last week; the venues change fairly frequently, but from up in the bleachers, with the floodlights beaming down onto the pit, it always looks the same.

There is a carnival atmosphere here tonight. People have clearly started drinking early, and there is an abundance of costumes. Tony counts dozens of wolves and just as many firemen costumes. It would be ludicrous if the situation were less horrific. As it is, it just lends the occasion a sense of the macabre. There is singing, and chanting, and people banging on drums, and Tony feels like he's in the middle of some ghoulish festival of evil.

The commentator starts cranking the crowd up even more, telling them what they have in store for them, and the crowd cheers and catcalls in response. There is a feeling of menace about the place, a certain kind of tension, and a thought occurs to Tony.

He leans across to speak to Scott, who is sipping on his flask of whisky, the nerves clearly getting to him. "Is this going to be the same as the other Fight Nights?" Tony asks.

"Not exactly, no." Scott wipes some more sweat from his forehead. "You see, during the week Prince Walid decided that our normal finale isn't exciting enough."

Tony feels his stomach doing a nervous flip.

"He decided we need more of a climax. Now, after the losing fighter has...uh...well..."

"Been raped?" Tony suggests.

Scott shrugs that off. "After the usual end of fight climax..." He says that without any hint of irony at all about the play on words, and Tony almost admires him for that. "Then Prince Walid intends to dispatch the losing fighter himself."

"And by 'dispatch' you mean 'kill'?"

Scott shrugs. "His Royal Highness felt the audience deserved something more on finale night. He felt they should have the promise of knowing that blood will be spilled, not just the possibility of it. He also wanted to feel more personally involved in the proceedings. He's tired of just watching."

"He could always go out there and fight himself if he really wanted to feel it," Tony offers facetiously.

"Well, in any case, he felt this was the kind of grand climax the audience deserves. After all, they've been loyal followers of our little tournament for several months now, and he wants them to leave the pit talking about what a wonderful night it's been so that they come back next year."

“Hang on, these fighters are worth a lot of money. It’s all very well him killing his own property – but supposing he has to kill yours? If Gibbs wins, Mac belongs to you,” Tony points out.

“Well, yes.” Scott looks pained. “He did promise me appropriate recompense though, and he’s a man of his word.”

“Oh yeah. Whatever else you might say about Walid, he’s definitely that.” Tony glances over at where Walid is making his grand entrance. The crowd goes wild, chanting his name over and over again. “Looks like Walid knows his audience well,” Tony mutters. The promise of an actual death at the end of the contest seems to have electrified them.

“I should remind you,” Scott says peevishly. “That my bargain with Leroy still stands. If he loses, then before Walid shoots him, I will take you down to the pit, invite anyone who wants you to fuck you, and then shoot you myself.”

“Sounds like a real party.” Tony gives his brightest, shiniest grin because he’s not letting this bastard think he’s scared. “Can’t wait.”

So that’s it. If Gibbs loses then both he and Tony will die out here tonight. So if the plan doesn’t work, if Sam doesn’t manage to overcome the guard and free the fighters, and if McGee and the cavalry don’t show up in time, then this is it.

Scott dabs his forehead with his handkerchief again and then raises his flask of whisky to his mouth.

“So, I was wondering…” Tony raises his hands into the air and one of his chains catches on Scott’s arm, jolting it and causing him to spill the whisky. In the ensuing confusion and spluttering, Tony slips his hand into Scott’s nearest jacket pocket, hoping against hope that the cell phone isn’t in the other one. He’s in luck and his hand closes around the hard edge of the phone.

He removes it stealthily and slips it up his sleeve, while simultaneously mopping Scott’s trademark cream-coloured suit with his other hand, making a big fuss over the large brown stain on the lapel.

“Get off me, you idiot!” Scott roars, pushing him away.

“Sorry…so sorry…” Tony makes a face. “Damn it, all that talk of being raped and murdered later has made me want to piss.”

“Now?” Scott asks irritably. “The fighting is just about to start!”

“Sorry.” Tony bites on his lip and shrugs helplessly. “Should I do it in my pants maybe?”

“You really are the most infuriating man I’ve ever met! I have no idea what Leroy sees in you!”

“Really? But you’ve seen how cute my ass is, right?” Tony grins. “That’s what Leroy sees in me.”

“Oh, just go!”

This time it's Ellis who escorts him down to the toilets. He keeps one hand on Tony's shoulder as they walk down the stairs, and he shoves him irritably into a toilet when they get there. Tony starts to close the door, but Ellis puts his foot in it, keeping it open.

“I want to keep an eye on you.”

“Ah, that might be a problem. See...I can never pee when anyone's watching,” Tony says apologetically, thinking on his feet.

“Get the fuck on with it.” Ellis remains there, foot jammed in the door.

Tony makes a big show of standing over the toilet, whistling to himself. “Nope...it's not working. We could stay here all night looking at my dick hoping it'll spring a leak, but you'll miss the fighting. Why don't you just let me shut the door and get on with it?” he suggests. “It's not as if I can go anywhere.”

Ellis glares at him but finally he removes his foot, and Tony closes the door. He rests his back against it, heaving a sigh of relief. Then, with shaking fingers, he removes the cell phone from his sleeve.

“Please let there be service...please,” he whispers under his breath. There was last week, but that could have been at a different venue, or a different part of the grounds.

The phone lights up as he presses a button and...yes! Service! Five strong, healthy bars, indicating there shouldn't be any problems connecting.

He looks at his still shaking fingers, takes a deep breath, and calms himself down.

“You are not going to fuck it up this time, like you did last time,” he tells himself sternly. His fingers stop shaking, and he begins pressing in the number. He finishes, jams his finger on the green telephone on the display screen, and the phone starts to ring.

It's answered immediately although there's nobody there – Tony knows it's automated. He watches the seconds counting up on the phone's display.

“Eighteen, nineteen...come on...come on...twenty...twenty-one...”

“Hurry the fuck up! The fighting's about to start!” Ellis bangs impatiently on the toilet door, making Tony jump, and he drops the phone.

“No!” He scrambles after it and picks it up, hoping the connection hasn't been lost. “Twenty-six...twenty-seven...twenty-eight...Yes!”

He gives it another few seconds, just to be safe, and then he disconnects. He takes a quick moment to delete all trace of the call, and then, taking a risk, he goes to the text function and sends a quick text to McGee's cell. Just one word: “*Hurry.*”

He deletes that too and slides the phone back up his sleeve again, just as Ellis bangs on the door a second time.

Tony opens it, smiling. “Sorry...nerves,” he says apologetically.

Ellis grabs him by the collar of his shirt and begins hauling him back to the stands. Over in the distance, Tony can see Gibbs and Hurrell and the others in the holding pen, watching him. He shoots off a quick salute – that’s the signal that all is going to plan. He sees Gibbs straighten up, and then he gives him a salute back in return. Message received and understood.

Ellis drags him back up the stairs. He can hear from the sounds in the pit behind him that they’ve missed the beginning of the first fight.

He shuffles apologetically along the row of seats back to where Scott is sitting and, upon reaching the man, opens his arms and envelops him in a big bear hug. “Scott! I missed you!”

Scott shoves him off irritably, but not before Tony has slipped the phone back into his pocket.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” Scott demands.

“Nothing...being nervous always makes me a bit loopy.” Tony grins. “Ask Leroy. Oh, well, you can’t, because he’s down there, and I’m up here, but he’d tell you...”

Ellis delivers such a forceful backhander across his mouth that he falls sideways. “Shut the fuck up and watch the fighting, pussy boy. You might learn something,” Ellis growls.

Tony nurses his split lip, a satisfied smile on his face. Phase one of the mission accomplished. Now it’s down to Hurrell and the other fighters.

And Gibbs.

And McGee.

And Fornell.

There are so many pieces to fall into place; Tony wonders if this plan stands a hope in hell of working. He has no idea where the venue is, or how far McGee will have to travel. He also has no idea if Fornell will make good on his promise to get the FBI involved. Otherwise McGee is likely to turn up with just Ziva, Abby, Ducky, and Jimmy in his NCIS truck, and frankly, Tony doesn’t think that’s going to do them much good against all the people here, however welcome it would be to see their faces.

Tony licks away at his bloody lip, feeling more anxious than ever. He hasn’t even told Gibbs that the cavalry McGee will be bringing with him is the FBI and not NCIS. He knows Gibbs doesn’t like or trust the FBI, even if he does have some kind of weird, odd couple friendship going on with Fornell.

They’re probably all going to hell tonight, but maybe there’s just a glimmer of hope that somehow it’ll all work out.

Tony crosses his fingers behind his back and waits.

~\*~

The wind is blowing harder now and there are spots of rain in the air. Some nearby trees are thrashing around as the storm starts to pick up pace.

Gibbs hunkers down beside Hurrell in the holding pen, out of earshot of the guard. “Go through it with me one more time,” he says.

“After my fight, when the guard takes me back to the truck, I overpower him and steal the keys to the chains and his gun.”

“Make sure you kill him or knock him out,” Gibbs says grimly. “So he can’t sound the alarm. Chain him in the back of the truck and gag him if need be. Killing’s a last resort, but do it if you have to.”

Hurrell nods. “I take his clothes, pretend to be him, and free the rest of our fighters. Then we take out the guards around the other holding pens and trucks, but quietly, so nobody hears. We free all the fighters we can.”

“Don’t fire the guns, just use them to knock the guards out; we can’t afford for the guards in the pit to hear them being fired and come out and investigate,” Gibbs instructs.

“I’ll do my best, but if all goes well then by this time I’ll have freed a hell of a lot of fighters from different stables, and they might not want to take orders from me.”

“Make them.”

Hurrell gazes at him uncertainly and then his eyes clear, and he nods again. “Yes, Gunny.”

“Then what?” Gibbs asks.

“Then we surround the outside of the pit, overpowering any guards we find there.”

Gibbs nods. “I’ll do my bit. I’ll hold out against Mac for as long as I can to give you time to overpower the guard and get the fighters free.”

That’s important. Hurrell can’t start his escape attempt until Gibbs goes into the pit to fight Mac because that’s when there will be the fewest guards around out back. Gibbs is counting on them all wanting to watch the big fight, leaving a skeleton guard detail on the pens and the trucks. This plan wouldn’t work on a normal Fight Night, when the holding pens are heavily guarded.

“And Tony did his bit – he got the phone call taken care of early, so we have a few hours,” Gibbs adds.

It might not be enough. He knows that. McGee has to track them down, organize a rescue mission, and get out here – and all before the grand finale comes to a close. It’s a tall order. If NCIS doesn’t turn up, then Sam, Gibbs, Tony and the other men will just have to fight it out

with the rest of the guards, the crowd, and all Walid's bodyguards themselves - and Gibbs has a feeling that'll turn into a bloodbath.

“Organise your men. Lead them with confidence. Make them obey you,” Gibbs tells Hurrell.

“They’re not exactly my men...”

“A good leader can lead anyone,” Gibbs says firmly. He’s not entirely sure that’s true, but he wants Hurrell to believe it. The man’s biggest obstacle is his own lack of confidence.

“Yes.” Hurrell gazes at him with the same look of total belief Tony always gives him. “We really are going to do this, aren’t we, Gibbs?”

“Yeah, Sam.” Gibbs squeezes his shoulder. “We really are.”

~\*~

The night wears on, and the audience becomes more and more excited leading up to the big finish. Tony’s legs jog up and down anxiously as he wonders where the hell McGee is.

“C’mon...c’mon...c’mon...” he mutters under his breath. The wind is cold, and he’s glad he’s at least wearing a shirt. The fighters in the holdings pens out back will be feeling it.

The penultimate fight arrives – and it’s Hurrell. That works out well for their plan. All the fighters will now be chained back in the truck. Hurrell will make his move when they take him back out there, before they put the chains on him. It gives him more of a chance. But first he has to win...

Hurrell enters the pit confidently and fights the best Tony has ever seen him fight. He easily beats his opponent and before long he’s striding out of the pit.

“And now, ladies and gentlemen, the moment we’ve all been waiting for! The big one, the finale, the clash of the Titans!” The commentator pauses for dramatic effect. “It’s the showdown between the wolfman and the fireman!”

The crowd goes berserk and it takes several minutes for them to calm down again. There’s whistling, and screaming, and someone’s banging on those damn drums again. A loud chanting starts up as fans of the wolfman scream at fans of the fireman, and the tension on the bleachers mounts.

Tony takes a deep breath and offers up a prayer to the heavens.

~\*~

Gibbs stands in the holding pen on the edge of the pit, waiting his turn. He can see Mac, over at the opposite end of the pit, glaring through the bars of his pen, looking straight at him.

Mac makes an ‘L’ sign with his hands. “Loser!” he screams. “I’m coming for you, Wolfman!”



His pen is opened, and Mac bounds out into the pit. “Who’s afraid of the big, bad wolf?” he screams to the crowd. “Not me! I’m gonna yank on his tail so hard he cries like a baby!” He makes an obscene gesture with his hand on his cock as he says that.

The crowd goes wild, standing up and chanting “Fire-man, Fire-man, Fire-man!” over and over again.

Gibbs thinks about what he’s going to do out there. This isn’t like a normal fight in the pit. He’s not going out there to win, but to buy time for Hurrell to free the fighters. Unfortunately for him, he knows that the longer the fight continues the more disadvantaged he is, because of his age. Mac is a good twenty years younger than him and both taller and heavier. Everything is stacked against Gibbs.

For the first time, Gibbs knows there is a real possibility of defeat. With defeat comes Tony’s death, and that’s not something he can contemplate. But if he wins time for Hurrell to free the fighters, then maybe they’ll storm the pit before it comes to that. Or maybe McGee will show up.

Maybe, maybe, maybe...there are too many maybes in this plan. He doesn’t like it.

Mac is still screaming at the crowd, working them up into a frenzy, and then Gibbs’s pen is opened, and he prowls out into the pit.

He doesn’t work the crowd. He never has. He’s always ignored them. He glances up at where Tony is sitting, his gaze going immediately to him. Tony stands up and looks down on him, and Gibbs feels himself almost tangibly drawing strength from him.

“So, it’s the wolfman versus the fireman. Neither of them has lost a fight all season, and they’d both make worthy champions. But which one will it be? The fireman’s bigger and stronger, but the wolfman is harder and meaner – I know he scares the bejesus out of me! Who will win this epic fight?” the commentator screams, whipping up the crowd into an even bigger frenzy.

Mac comes lumbering towards him, arms outstretched. He’s a massive man, and Gibbs can see why other opponents would be intimidated, but he isn’t. Gibbs easily side-steps him, and manages to kick Mac on the ass on his way past.

Mac hollers and turns, an angry look in his eyes. “Fuck you, loser,” Mac growls as he starts stalking back towards Gibbs. “I’m gonna beat you so bad that you won’t wake up again until I stick my fat dick up your ass and screw you ‘til you scream like a little girl.”

Gibbs does a sudden, unexpected jump, kicks Mac in the balls, and lands a punch on his jaw at the same time. “You talk too much.”

Mac screams in angry pain. He lumbers back towards Gibbs, lashing out wildly with his meaty fists. Gibbs hops out of reach and goes back to jam his elbow into Mac’s kidneys. Then he manages to jump on his back, scratching at his eyes, and Mac scrabbles around blindly, trying to dislodge him.

Gibbs jumps off and in the same quick move throws himself at Mac's ankles, bringing him down. He has a real chance now. He has a split second to launch himself onto Mac and punch him into submission...but it's too soon. If he wins this early, Hurrell won't have enough time to free the fighters.

If he wins then it's over, and within fifteen minutes the trucks will be driving home. If McGee is on his way, then he'll show up to find the place deserted.

Yet if he doesn't defeat Mac, then Scott will kill Tony. What is most important? The needs of the one, or the needs of the many? The needs of justice, or the needs of his own heart? In the end, he hesitates for too long and the decision is taken out of his hands as Mac twists away and gets to his feet with surprising agility for such a big man.

Hesitation is not part of Gibbs's fighting repertoire. He's always taken any opportunity that presented itself before and gone in for the win. That has always been the killer instinct that gave him his edge. Without it, he doesn't stand a chance.

Damn it. He's fighting on two levels here. He's fighting Mac in the pit, and he's fighting Walid outside it. It might not be possible for him to win both fights; he might have to make a choice. But which one should he choose?

Mac charges at him, faster than Gibbs was expecting, and lands a cracking punch to his jaw that sends him flying. He manages to get up before Mac can throw himself on top of him, but it's close.

Gibbs dances out of reach, and somewhere in the distance he can hear the crowd chanting: "Wolf-man, Wolf-man, Wolf-man..."

Gibbs makes his choice. He will keep this fight going as long as possible, to give Hurrell time to storm the pit, and McGee time to show up, and if he loses then he loses. He remembers that mental vow he made, never to be raped out here in the pit, and he tears it up inside his own mind.

This isn't about him or Tony anymore. It's about freedom and justice for all the fighters. God knows, nobody has been on their side throughout all this, but they are his people, and he will be their champion.

He will fight for them even if it costs him his life. He will die for them if need be. That is the man Tony fell in love with, and that is the man Tony came here to save.

It's who he is.

~\*~

Tony watches helplessly as Gibbs goes down – and then gets up again, just in time. He knows what Gibbs is doing. He knows he's trying to draw this out for as long as he can. He also knows that Gibbs could win this if he wasn't trying to save them all.

He's often wondered if Gibbs could defeat Mac in a straight fight, but watching them in the pit the answer to that question is clear, beyond any shadow of a doubt. Gibbs looks like a

sleek, dangerous predator, whereas Mac looks like a lumbering rhino by comparison. He bellows and roars as he storms around the pit, but he doesn't have a good fighting brain. He's all brute force and no finesse. Gibbs is a fighter down to his bones. He's been fighting all his life, and nobody has ever defeated him yet.

The crowd is on its feet, screaming and whistling as Mac takes Gibbs down again. Tony stands up, his heart in his mouth, but Gibbs scrambles free, and the crowd goes wild. It's the longest, most exciting fight they've ever seen, with everything hanging on the victory, and they're loving it.

~\*~

He's tired. He's taken several punishing punches, and he's been thrown a few times. Gibbs shakes his head, trying to clear it, feeling the blood running down the side of his face.

It's raining hard now, washing the oil from his body. If Mac catches hold of him, he might not be oily enough to wriggle free another time.

Where is Hurrell? Maybe he failed. Maybe he couldn't free the fighters. Maybe he's lying dead out back by the trucks at this very moment.

Where is McGee? Maybe Tony's call failed, and he's not even on his way here.

Or maybe the failure is his own. Maybe Leroy Jethro Gibbs has failed, and Tony will pay the ultimate price for that failure.

Lightning flashes across the sky, blinding him for a moment, and Mac makes another lunge. Gibbs manages to twist away, but his feet are slowing down. This is the longest fight the pit has seen, but even so, it might not be long enough to save them.

He turns...and Mac is upon him. Gibbs throws punch after punch but nothing seems to dent the man's huge bulk. Mac grins at him, and the rainwater mingles with the blood streaking down his face and runs into his teeth, giving him a macabre look.

"Night, night, Wolfman. Time you went down and stayed down." Mac swings a massive fist, and Gibbs's feet are too heavy, and he can't quite get out of the way in time. He hears a sharp cracking sound, feels his head snap back as a blow connects with his jaw...and then he's falling.

~\*~

"Shit!" Tony jumps to his feet as Gibbs lands on his back in the sawdust, and Mac throws himself on top of him. "Get up...get up!" he urges, but Mac is too big, and anyone can see that's not going to happen. Damn it, where's Hurrell?

"He's going to lose! The stupid bastard's gonna lose!" Ellis screams.

Scott has gone pale, gripping the sides of his seat so hard that his knuckles are white. Frank is nibbling ferociously on his nails, a look of anxiety on his wizened old face.

Tony looks away as Gibbs takes punch after punch. He's lost now, for sure. Nobody can take that kind of beating and get up again.

The referee runs up to Mac and drags him off, and the crowd erupts into raucous cheering. The entire arena seems to explode as they are presented with their winner.

"I don't understand!" Frank is yelling. "He had him. He had him...right at the beginning. Why didn't he finish him off then?"

Tony knows why, but he's not saying. Scott looks like a broken man sitting there, head down, muttering to himself.

"Ladies and gentlemen, behold your winner! He's big, he's mean, he's a fighting machine! He's...the fireman!" the commentator yells.

Mac does his usual victory lap around the pit, screaming at the crowd, and they scream back at him, loving it.

The commentator lets him have his moment, before hushing the crowd again. "Before the fireman finishes the fight in his usual entertaining way, our generous host, Prince Walid, would like to say a few words to you all," he announces.

~\*~

He can't see. One of his eyes is swollen shut, and there's blood and rain in the other one, blinding him. He's lying on his back, looking up, barely conscious. His ears are ringing, and he feels like he's been hit by a truck.

He blinks his good eye and his vision clears. He sees Walid walking out into the pit, and in his confused state he notices stupid things, like the way the sawdust clings to the hem of Walid's expensive pants. One of Walid's lackeys is holding a black umbrella over his head, and to Gibbs's barely conscious mind it gives Walid the look of a cobra poised to strike.

Walid takes the microphone from the commentator.

"Thank you, everyone, for making this season the most entertaining to date," he says, inclining his head at the crowd. "Now, I promised you blood, and I always deliver on my promises." Walid gives a tight, deadly smile. "First, we will allow Mac the pleasure of his victory; he's earned it, as I'm sure you will agree." The crowd laughs, and Walid gives a knowing little smirk. "Later, I will put this sorry specimen out of his misery in the way he deserves." He nudges Gibbs with his toe. "I'm sure you'll also agree that the loser deserves to pay the ultimate price for his loss."

The crowd erupts in a fit of excited cheers, and Gibbs realizes that the same fate awaits him as awaits Tony: rape, followed by a bullet to the brain.

They've lost.

~\*~

Scott gets up and grabs hold of Tony's shirt.

"He'll pay, and you'll pay – both of you will pay with your lives!" he screams. "I'm ruined because of him...because of you both."

Tony snorts. "If you're ruined, it's because of your own damn greed."

Scott slaps him hard across the face. "I'm going to take you down there, so you can watch Leroy being fucked and pissed on by Mac, and then I'm going to take you out into the pit, so Leroy can watch you being fucked by anyone who wants you. If you're still breathing after the audience is done with you, I'll take great pleasure in putting a bullet through your head just before Prince Walid does the same to Leroy."

"Is that so?" Tony raises an eyebrow, grinning as he looks over Scott's shoulder.

"Yes, it is. You're dead, DiNozzo."

"Oh, I don't think so," Tony says, and at that moment Sam Hurrell pokes the barrel of a gun into the back of Scott's neck.

~\*~

Gibbs looks up blearily as a large, black umbrella blocks out the harsh glare of the floodlights.

"Poor Jethro. He lost," Walid says, removing his sunglasses and gazing down on Gibbs. "I must say, you've been a worthy adversary, Wolfman. You've made this season the most exciting one I can remember. I was becoming so bored with it all, but then you came along and made it all so much more interesting."

"Fuck you."

"No, my dear Wolfman, **you** are going to be fucked by Mac here, and then I'm going to take great pleasure in shooting you." Walid holds out a gloved hand, and his henchman places a sleek black gun in it.

"Really?" Gibbs gazes up into the night sky.

"Oh yes. You see, the big bad wolf turned out not to be quite so big or so bad after all." Walid gives a slow, vicious smile.

"But he still managed to blow your house down, Walid," Gibbs tells him, looking up at the helicopters flying in towards them, with FBI emblazoned all over them in big, white lettering.

"What?" Walid whirls around as he hears the helicopters, and at that moment chaos breaks out all around them.

Suddenly there are fighters swarming through the bleachers with guns, and overhead the helicopters are flying in low, and on the ground Gibbs can see, through the bars of the pit-side holding pens, that there are trucks pulling up with NCIS and FBI written all over the

side. He watches as agents scramble out of them by the dozen and run across the ground towards the pit, and, in the middle of it all, Walid is just standing there, as the whole damn freak show falls down around his ears.

Gibbs scrambles to his feet. He's naked, he's covered in blood mingled with oil and rainwater, and he's barely able to stand, but still he manages to stagger over to where Walid is standing and yank the gun out of his hand. Walid doesn't even put up a fight; he just stands there, looking shocked.

Gibbs staggers away from him and then stops in the middle of the pit, unable to take another step. The gun slips from his nerveless fingers, and he throws up his arms to the skies, to the whirling helicopters swooping in like angry birds, and to the scurrying storm clouds above. At that moment the clouds part, revealing the bright full moon hanging in the dark night sky.

This is his moment. He's beaten the most formidable opponent he's ever faced and been triumphant here tonight. He's won.

Gibbs sinks to his knees, flings back his head, and howls out his victory to the moon.

~\*~

Hurrell's freed fighters are storming through the pit, targeting all the stable owners, each group making for the one who owned them.

The FBI helicopters are overhead, the noise of their whirring blades combining with the wind and the rain to create a confusing chaos of sound.

And there are agents running into the bleachers in Kevlar jackets with NCIS and FBI emblazoned on them.

Tony doesn't care about any of that. He only cares about Gibbs, alone down there in the pit with Walid. He's taken too many blows to the head this evening; who knows if he's still conscious, or even alive. It's impossible to see what's going on in all the confusion. He has to go to him and make sure he's okay.

"Get me out of these chains!" he yells to Hurrell. He's freed quickly from his chains, and he looks around, trying to figure out the best way down to the pit.

He sees Ellis trying to flee down the side stairs, and he runs after him. He jumps over seats and down rows, clumsily pursuing Ellis as fast as he can. He manages to get to the bottom first and crouches down behind a row of seats, waiting for him.

Ellis comes shoving his way through the crowd, and Tony leaps up and slams his fist slap bang into the middle of Ellis's face. Ellis goes down with a thud, looking completely surprised. Tony snatches the gun out of his hand and tucks it into the pocket of his jeans. Then he grabs Ellis's shirt and pulls him up, so he can see who took him down.

"Going somewhere, Ellis?" he asks, a smug grin on his face.

“Fuck you!” Ellis kicks him viciously, struggling to get free, but Tony punches him once, twice, three times, taking great pleasure in the crunching sound he hears as his fist connects with Ellis’s nose.

He stops when Ellis goes limp, blood spraying from his nose. Then he lets him fall to the floor. He draws the gun and points it at Ellis’s head, seeing the man’s eyes widen in fear.

Tony leans in close, pressing the gun right into Ellis’s forehead. He sees Ellis flinch, expecting the final shot, but instead Tony just laughs and says: “Give me your clothes.”

“What?” Ellis’s mouth opens and shuts like a fish.

“Now!” Tony orders, waving the gun around impatiently. “Or I shoot your head off and take them from your corpse.”

Ellis strips fast, and Tony grabs the jeans and shirt from him. “You can keep the underwear,” he says, wrinkling up his nose in distaste. He turns away, and then, in one smooth move, turns back and delivers a cracking punch to Ellis’s jaw, sending the man back down again. Ellis groans, clutching his jaw, and Tony suspects he’s broken that as well as his nose.

“Aw, did that hurt, **pussy boy**?” he says mockingly, and then he runs down to the pit, grinning from ear to ear.

~\*~

Walid’s entourage has fled, and Mac is nowhere to be seen, either. There is just the two of them, alone out here in the pit, waiting for the final curtain. Walid is standing there, arms folded over his chest, watching him musingly.

“It’s such a shame that it had to end this way,” Walid says. “It was such good fun while it lasted. Still...” he shrugs. “I was defeated by a worthy opponent; I give you that, Jethro.”

“It’s Gibbs to you, Walid.”

“You want us to be so formal after what we’ve been through together? That makes me sad.” Walid sighs. “Did you not find me a fascinating adversary, Jethro? Did it not take all your ingenuity to bring this to pass?” He waves at the helicopters above. “I must say, I am most impressed. I knew you were good, but I had no idea you’d prove to be this good. I wonder where I made a mistake,” Walid says thoughtfully. “I thought I was playing such a good game.”

“Oh, I can tell you your mistake,” Gibbs growls. “And it’s one that’s brought down better men than you, Walid. Your mistake – your giant, mother-fucking mistake – was Tony.”

“Tony?” Walid raises an intrigued eyebrow.

“Yeah, you mistook him for an idiot, the way everyone always does – and that’s what he wants, Walid. And then you gave him to me. You gave him...to me.” Gibbs pauses, his chest heaving, his throat hurting. “He’s the joker, the wild card, the single most important card in

this whole fucked-up game, and you didn't realise it, so you went and gave him to me." Gibbs shakes his head incredulously.

"Tony," Walid repeats, looking dumbstruck. "You're right, Jethro. I had no idea he was so important."

"You thought you could use him to fuck with my head, but all that did was make me grow stronger. Tony reminded me who I am, and once I remembered that, you didn't stand a fucking chance," Gibbs says scornfully. "You thought I was just a wolf to be brought down. You forgot a wolf is at his most dangerous when he has a mate to protect."

"Really? How very touching," Walid sneers.

"You wouldn't know because you've never cared – really cared – about anyone except yourself in your entire life. You don't know how it feels to have a big, brave, loyal heart like Tony. You can't even begin to understand just how powerful that makes him. **That** was your mistake."

Walid shrugs. "All very interesting. Now, I expect your people will have some questions for me, but after that I must get on a flight back home. Did I mention that I have diplomatic immunity? They won't be detaining me for long."

He inclines his head at Gibbs and starts to walk towards the edge of the pit. Gibbs feels a surge of white hot fury and goes after him with a roar of rage. He throws himself on Walid, brings him down, and straddles him. It's like every other fight out here; this is how they always end, with him banging his fist into someone's face over and over again.

First, he does what he's wanted to do for a long time; he tears those sunglasses off Walid's head, snaps them with his fingers, and tosses them away. Walid looks up at him and his dark eyes are surprised, and, for the first time, filled with genuine fear.

Gibbs is pleased; he likes the way it feels to have this man in his power at last, after so many months of dancing to his tune and playing the game by his rules. He raises his fist and punches hard, connecting with Walid's jaw. Walid screams and tries to turn his head away.

"What's the matter, Walid? Not a fighter?" Gibbs grins down on him. "You're not though, are you? You prefer to make others do your fighting for you."

Walid twists and struggles beneath him, but he's no match for Gibbs who is battle-hardened from fighting out here, week after week, for six long months. Gibbs shows no mercy. He sinks his fist into Walid's face over and over again, thinking of Steve, Rajul, Brian, Ben, and all the people this man's evil has destroyed.

He doesn't ever want to stop. He wants to keep punching until Walid suffers the same fate they all did. He wants him obliterated, smashed into the ground, and removed from the face of the Earth. His anger rises up, and this time he can't control it. It's too much and it consumes him, overwhelming him completely.

"Jethro," a voice says.



He almost doesn't hear it at first, and he keeps on punching.

"Jethro," that voice says again, quietly insistent, demanding his attention.

He pauses, looking down on Walid's bloody face.

"Jethro."

He looks up and sees Tony walking towards him, the glare of the floodlights giving him in a hazy halo.

Gibbs looks down on Walid again and raises his fist.

"Jethro." Tony stops in front of him, making no movement. "Don't do it. It's not who you are."

It is though. He looks up at Tony, remembering Hernandez. He put a bullet in that bastard's head and has never regretted it for a moment. He won't regret killing Walid, either.

He clenches his fist, wanting to strike.

"Every time they sent you out into the pit you didn't have a choice; you had to fight. Now you don't," Tony says quietly. "This time it's your choice."

The anger rises up inside him again, making him shake. He wants this; he wants it so bad.

"*Control the anger or it will destroy you,*" Tony says, quoting his own words back at him. "I think it already has a bit, hasn't it?"

He thinks of his mother, and the rage he felt at her death that has never gone away. That rage ruined his relationship with his father for a long time. Then there's his family, and the rage that he turned in on himself. He locked himself up in a life of loneliness for twenty years, keeping everyone out. He even kept Tony out for ten of those years – ten years when they could have been together. And now there is this. He has so much anger; it feels like a bottomless pit.

"Where does it end, Jethro?" Tony asks, crouching down in front of him. "I've often wondered. Do you go to jail? Do you end up with a bullet through your head from taking on one fight too many? When will it ever be enough? Will you ever be able to get all the anger out? And why keep doing it? Does it make you feel alive?"

*Yes.*

He has never felt more alive than when fighting in the pit, allowing the fury to course through him.

He remembers walking home with his mom, and how she used to draw him out, encouraging him to laugh and talk with her, despite his shyness. He felt alive then. He remembers making love to Shannon, her white skin so soft against his; he felt alive then. And he remembers swinging Kelly around and around, until she was giggling and giddy; he felt alive then too.

Then he remembers dancing with Tony, locked up in a stall at night, taking comfort in each other. He remembers kissing him and making love to him. He definitely felt alive then.

The rage seems to collapse in on itself and then it's gone. He looks down on Walid and feels nothing. He's completely numb. It's over.

Tony holds out his hand, and slowly, aching all over, Gibbs takes it. Tony's hand is warm and strong and it will never let him fall. Tony helps him up, pulls him away from Walid, and takes him into a corner of the pit, away from harsh glare of the floodlights. All around them is chaos, noise and confusion, but here, with Tony, it seems almost quiet.

"Here. Clothes." Tony hands him a plain black shirt. Gibbs stares at it. It's been so long since he wore clothes that he's almost forgotten how. "I think you should put it on." Tony grins. "Unless you want Fornell to see you naked. Hmm, actually, I think you should put it on because I don't want Fornell seeing you naked. You're mine, and I don't want him ogling you."

"Fornell..." Gibbs finds his voice at last.

"Ah...right...yes...I forgot to tell you about that. Um...with Vance being so unhelpful, I wasn't sure we could rely on NCIS to provide much by way of backup. So I went to see Fornell. Gave him a cell phone and told him to keep it on him night and day and be ready, when he got the call from McGee, to send in every single resource he could lay his hands on, at a moment's notice."

Gibbs looks around them, at the FBI agents swarming all over the pit, and the FBI helicopters overhead. "Looks like he delivered."

"He said he would." Tony shrugs. "I like him a bit more now. But not much. I'm still kinda jealous of him." He makes a little face.

"NCIS is here too. I saw the trucks."

"I know. Looks like McGee worked a little miracle of his own." Tony gives a proud little smile. "That's my probie!"

McGee. NCIS. Fornell. Probie. They're like words from another lifetime. They should have some meaning for him, but somehow they don't. What the hell is wrong with him? He's free. After six months of a living hell, he's finally free.

So why can't he feel anything right now?

~\*~

Gibbs is badly beaten up. He's covered in blood and bruises, and Tony thinks it's very likely he has a concussion from the repeated blows he took from Mac.

"C'mon – we need to get you dressed," Tony says firmly.

He holds out the pants, and Gibbs steps into them. Tony pulls them up around his waist and fastens them for him. They're too big on his flat, washboard stomach, but they'll do. Then Tony shakes out the shirt and guides Gibbs's arms into the sleeves. He stands in front of him and does up the shirt for him as if Gibbs is a child. Right now he seems as helpless as one.

He's just finished when something comes hurtling towards them, screaming loudly, a creature seemingly constructed of whirling black pigtailed and big, black leather boots.

Abby launches herself into his arms. "TONY! I was so worried! Oh, Tony!" She hangs around his neck, hugging him so tight he can hardly breathe.

He finally manages to disengage himself enough to look at her. "Hey, Abs! Good to see you. And that is the understatement of the year, trust me." He grins at her.

"Where's Gibbs? Is he okay? Please tell me he's okay! Where is he, Tony?" she asks, looking around, not even seeing the man standing right beside them. Tony doesn't blame her; Gibbs has a shaved head, a badly bruised and bloodied face, one of his eyes is closed, and he's wearing clothes he wouldn't be seen dead in at home. He's also got that same lost, confused expression in his eyes that he's had ever since Tony pulled him off Walid.

"He's right here, Abs," Tony says, taking her hand and guiding it gently to rest on Gibbs's chest.

He sees the look of shock in her eyes, closely followed by a sadness so profound it makes a lump rise in the back of his throat.

"Gibbs...oh Gibbs." Abby doesn't launch herself at Gibbs as she did with Tony. She simply puts her arms gently around him, like he's made of china, pulls him close, and holds him there.

At that moment McGee comes hurrying over, accompanied by Fornell, and, much to Tony's surprise, Vance.

"Tony! Thank God you're okay! We've been looking all over for you. Is Gibbs here? Is he okay?" McGee asks breathlessly.

Tony jerks a thumb over his shoulder at where Abby is still gently holding Gibbs, rocking him against her, talking softly into his ear. He sees the shock on all their faces at how Gibbs looks, and while he doesn't blame them, it makes him angry all the same. Gibbs has been through hell and all they can do is look at him as if he's a stranger. They have no idea what he's been through, but in the coming few days they're going to find out.

"He's right here," he replies, stepping in front of Gibbs and Abby to give them some privacy. "I'm surprised you are though," he says to Vance.

Vance looks both angry and contrite at the same time – which Tony thinks is quite a feat to pull off.

"Agent McGee presented me with compelling evidence to show that SecNav was dirty. I called in Agent Fornell to conduct an investigation," he says tightly.

“Way to go, McWhistleblower!” Tony says, with an admiring glance at McGee.

McGee flushes and rolls his eyes. “You left me a good place to start. I just did a lot more digging and found what we were looking for.”

“NCIS and the FBI joined forces to conduct a top level investigation into Walid’s little setup,” Fornell butts in. “We had a task force assembled to deploy immediately we got your call. We were closing in on them in any case, but it looks like you’ve delivered them all up to us on a plate.”

Tony glances over his shoulder again to see that Abby has released Gibbs, and he’s standing there, swaying gently in the wind.

“I’ve got a lot of questions for you,” Fornell says. “We’re going to need your help unravelling this mess, figuring out who the key players are, what the criminal charges are...”

Tony doesn’t hear the rest of that. He runs to Gibbs just in time to catch him as he falls.

“Get me a paramedic! I need the damn paramedics over here now!” he screams, and McGee goes running off to call an ambulance over.

Tony sweeps Gibbs up into his arms, ignoring the way his muscles protest at the weight. Gibbs carried him when he was hurt, and he’s damn well going to return the favour. Gibbs is unconscious, and his face is a worrying grey colour.

A paramedic team comes rushing over with a gurney, and they try to take Gibbs from him.

“Careful!” Tony shoves them away so he can gently place Gibbs on the gurney himself. He goes with the gurney back to the ambulance, holding Gibbs’s hand. “You give him the best treatment in the whole damn world,” Tony tells the paramedics fiercely as they bustle around Gibbs. “Because he’s the bravest bastard in the whole damn world, and he just saved us all.”

### **Chapter End Notes:**

Your kind words are the only payment I receive for writing fan fiction. I love hearing from you – please leave a review below.

## Chapter Six- The Strength of the Wolf... by Xanthe

He dreams he's in a cage. Every so often, his captors push a stick through the bars to taunt him, making him angry. He prowls around the tiny cage, becoming more and more frustrated by his captivity. He snarls at his captors and bites on his own paws in distress, making them bleed.

Sometimes they put a chain around his neck and drag him out. They wrap a muzzle around his snout so he can't bite them, and they beat him until he's good and angry. Then they remove the muzzle, throw him into a pit, and make him fight.

When he's done they hurl him back into the cage, and the whole cycle starts all over again.

He wakes up howling. Someone puts a hand on his head and strokes him gently, and he hears a familiar voice whispering something in his ear. He doesn't know what it's saying but the sound of the voice calms him, and he sleeps again.

This time Gibbs dreams that they beat him so hard with the stick that a piece of it breaks off and gets lodged in his paw. He tries to bite it out, but that just pushes it in deeper. When they throw him out into the pit, he's sore and limping.

They send a man out into the pit to fight him, and Gibbs prowls towards him, snarling, wanting to tear into his flesh with his teeth. He wants to hurt someone else as badly as he's hurting, but when he gets close, the man rolls over and smiles at him.

"Hey, it's me," he says. "It's Tony."

Gibbs doesn't know what to do next. Nobody has ever smiled at him in the pit before. Tony sits up and holds out his hand. Gibbs limps closer, warily, and Tony reaches out and gently touches his fur, stroking his head. It feels good. He wants to be angry, but instead he stretches out and lets Tony pet him. Then Tony touches his injured paw with careful fingers.

"This will hurt, but afterwards you'll feel better," he says softly.

Tony takes hold of the splintered stick and tugs it out of his paw. Gibbs howls, but the pain only lasts a few seconds. Then it fades, and he does feel better. He licks Tony's hand, and Tony pulls him close and holds him, kissing his fur.

Gibbs rolls over and does something he's never done before; he allows Tony to touch his belly. Tony strokes softly, cautiously, clearly aware of the great honour he's being offered. It feels so good that eventually Gibbs falls into a deep, contented sleep.

When he wakes up, he's not in the cage anymore. He's lying on something soft, and it takes him a few moments to realize that was a dream; it felt so real. He lies there with his eyes closed, trying to figure out where he is. His body aches, and his head hurts; it feels like someone is drilling a hole through his skull from the inside out.

Slowly, Gibbs opens his eyes and blinks a few times. He's in a hospital room. The drapes are closed, but he can see daylight around the edges. Even that small degree of light hurts, and he turns his head away with a growl of pain.

“Hey...you’re awake.” Tony’s face looms into view. “Want some water?”

He gives a tiny nod, because anything more than that hurts even worse. Tony puts a glass of water to his lips, and he takes a few sips and then turns his face away.

“Real glass,” he mutters.

Tony holds up the glass of water and nods. “Yeah. Not plastic. Couldn’t stand another plastic cup. You’re in the hospital, Jethro.”

Gibbs squints, wishing it didn’t hurt to keep his eyes open. “How long?”

“A week. You were bleeding into your brain. They had to operate and keep you sedated until the swelling went down, but you’re going to be fine.”

A week? The events of that last Fight Night feel like they happened just a few hours ago. Tony is sitting beside the bed. He looks tired and there are yellowing bruises on his jaw.

“You okay?” Gibbs rasps.

“Me? Yeah. Just...things were hairy for a while. Wasn’t sure you were going to make it.”

“And am I?”

“You want the damage? You were badly beat up, your left eye might never be the same again, your ribs are cracked, you had a sub-dural hematoma, and you’ll get headaches for a while.”

“There any good news?” Gibbs squints at him.

“Yeah – they tested for STDs, and you’re clear,” Tony says quietly.

In view of the amount of unprotected sex he’s had in the pit over the past few months, that’s a miracle. Then he remembers that Tanner ran blood tests on every newcomer, so maybe anyone with an STD was screened out before they were thrown into the pit.

“Me too. Clear I mean. Although that’s not a surprise as I only slept with you,” Tony adds.

Gibbs looks at the crumpled blanket and pillow on the armchair in the corner of the room.

“You been sleeping here?”

“Yeah. No worse than those thin mattresses in the stable.” Tony shrugs.

“Vance...”

“He yelled at me a bit. Said I was running out of leave time, and to get my ass back to NCIS. But I told him I still had my leave because I was on an NCIS undercover op, even if he did only sanction it after the event. So hah!” Tony grins. “After the few weeks I’ve had, he really doesn’t scare me anymore.”

“Anymore? He used to?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow and then wishes he hadn’t.

Tony laughs out loud. “Well, I don’t like alpha dogs who try to tell me what to do. They remind me of my dad. Except you, obviously.” He gently strokes Gibbs’s hand with one of his fingers, and Gibbs moves his hand out of the way. He’s not even sure why, just that he doesn’t want to be touched. Tony’s eyes flash with anxiety. “Talking of fathers, I’ve spoken to Jack a few times,” he says quickly, in a clear distraction from the awkward moment.

Gibbs grimaces. Much as he loves Jack, he can’t face him right now.

“He knew you were missing, but I might have implied you were working an undercover op.” It’s Tony’s turn to grimace. “Sorry, Gibbs – but he’s an old man, and I had no leads on where you were. I didn’t want him worrying himself to death.”

“That’s fine, Tony.” He thinks he’d have probably done the same himself, and he’s relieved Tony spared Jack months of worry.

“He knows you’re in the hospital, but I said you needed some time. You’ll have to give him a call when you’re up to it – he wants to hear from you, and I can’t brush him off forever. He’s already suspicious. But I didn’t know what you’d want to tell him – or how much you’d want him to know.”

The last thing Gibbs wants is a hospital visit from Jack, so he’s glad Tony headed that one off at the pass. The last time his father visited him in the hospital was after he was injured in Kuwait, and the time before that was after his mom died. Neither of those visits went well, and he doesn’t want a repetition of either of them. His relationship with his father is much improved these days, but all the same, he doesn’t want to handle the memories that Jack sitting by his hospital bed will inevitably bring up.

Gibbs glances around the room and sees a laptop on a table with some messy piles of paper beside it.

“You set up office in here?”

“Yup!” Tony grins. “Fornell needs my input, and McGee skypes me every few hours.”

“I have no idea what you just said.”

“Never mind. Vance said I have to have a psych eval before I can officially go back to work, and that’s another reason not to hurry.” Tony pauses, biting on his lip.

“I’m not seeing a shrink,” Gibbs says immediately, guessing where this is going.

“Look, I hear you, I’m not happy about it, either.” Tony leans forward. “But you’re gonna have to suck it up if you want your job back, Gibbs. You’ve been gone six months.” He pauses again and then sighs. “Look, they know what happened to us. They’ve seen footage from the cell phones they took from the people in the crowd, and you were on some of that footage. They \*know\*, Gibbs.”

He doesn't want to think about that, either. For so long it's been his own private hell. He can't stand the thought of other people looking in on it and judging him for the choices he made.

"How the hell can they \*know\*? They weren't there."

Tony nods and leans back again. "They know enough. They're listening to testimony from all the fighters and spectators and putting together a case. Fornell will want to interview you – he's running lead on this."

The idea of talking to his old friend Fornell about any of this makes him feel nauseous. He must have gone pale, because Tony gets up, grabs the waste basket, and shoves it in front of his face just as he hurls. He's got nothing to vomit up, but he spits out some yellow bile from the pit of his stomach.

The act exhausts him, and he leans back on his pillows. Tony hands him the water again, and he gulps down enough to take the foul taste away.

"Oh look! Fingers!" Tony says, in another clear attempt at distraction. He holds up the hand with the broken fingers and wiggles them around and then winces. "Ouch. They're stiff and still need some work. But they're mended. Almost. Kind of. Getting there."

"And your back?"

Tony shrugs. "It's fine. The docs have taken a look at it, but there's not much they can do. It's healing, but I'll have permanent scars like you said."

Gibbs gazes at him, knowing it's worse than Tony just said. How damaged are they, physically, mentally, and emotionally? The scars go far deeper than their bodies. He feels tired just thinking about that; it's not a complication he can handle right now.

At that point the door opens, and a man in a hospital uniform enters. Gibbs feels a sense of unease, thinking immediately of Tanner. He's not feeling kindly disposed to the medical profession in general right now.

"You're awake, Agent Gibbs! That's excellent! Agent DiNozzo will be relieved. He's barely left your bedside for the past week."

"That so, DiNozzo?" Gibbs glances at Tony, who shrugs.

"Ducky brought me in some clothes and stuff. He's the only one I allowed to visit. Abby, Ziva and McGee wanted to, but I knew you wouldn't want them seeing you this way."

Gibbs grunts. Tony, as always, knows him far too well.

The nurse gives a bright smile. "Well, you're looking much better. I'm just going to check..." He leans across to the IV line, and Gibbs reaches out and grasps his wrist firmly, squeezing down hard.



Tony stands up. "I told you before, no medical treatment that he hasn't approved – or me if he's unconscious. Understand? You run every single thing past either him or me first."

The nurse gasps out his agreement, and only then does Gibbs release his wrist. The nurse rubs it, gazing at him anxiously. "Well, it's clear you still have your motor skills. I expect you have a bad headache; I'll go get you some ibuprofen."

"Don't. I don't want any," Gibbs growls.

"But you..."

"What did I just say?" Tony says firmly. "He doesn't want the drugs. He'll let you know if he changes his mind."

The nurse gives a wide-eyed nod and scuttles from the room.

"Damn it. I think we freaked him out. None of this is his fault; I'll go charm him later, buy him a coffee," Tony says with a sigh. "I made sure they told me every damn drug they were pumping into you while you were out of it, and I checked each one with Abby first. It turns out I'm listed as your next of kin." He shrugs, gazing at Gibbs intently. "Who knew?"

Gibbs remembers putting Tony down as his next of kin years ago, and he also knows that Tony lists him as his. Tony is the only one he trusts to make the right decisions if he's unable to make them himself.

"You sure about the pain meds though?" Tony asks.

Gibbs doesn't reply. He's too exhausted. He closes his eyes and falls asleep again.

When he wakes up it must be some time later because it's dark outside, and Tony is talking softly into a headset as he works at his laptop.

He finishes up and turns, then smiles as he sees that Gibbs is awake.

"I got you food. Looks like shit, but they say it's all you can have right now."

He helps Gibbs to sit up and then puts a tray in front of him. It does look like shit, but Gibbs eats it anyway. He feels much better afterwards. Tony takes the tray away and then drags the armchair over to the bed and sits on it, putting his feet up on the side of the bed.

"What's happening?" Gibbs asks quietly. "Did they catch everyone? Did Hurrell make it? Is he okay?"

"Sam's fine. He did a fantastic job, Boss! He got all the fighters free and neutralised the stable owners and their armed guards, so there wasn't any bloodshed when our guys showed up. He's been a great help to McGee and Fornell, pointing out all the bad guys. That took a long time. We arrested a lot of people that night."

"Walid?" Gibbs asks. "The bastard told me he had diplomatic immunity."

“Yeah, he bragged about that a lot. But it seems that **someone**,” he stresses the word thoughtfully, “sent some footage of the fights from Scott’s phone to Walid’s eldest brother.” Tony gives a little shrug. “Seems big bro wasn’t impressed by Walid’s little freak-fest, especially what happened after each fight.” Tony arches his back, wincing slightly, and Gibbs can see he’s finding it hard to get comfortable.

“His brother going to make life hard for him back home?”

“Oh, it’s better than that. Big bro said Walid had dishonoured the family, and he disowned him. He also rescinded his diplomatic privileges just as Walid was getting on a plane to fly home. Shame.” Tony breaks into a shit-eating grin. “Damn it, Jethro, did you really think I’d let that bastard walk?”

Gibbs manages a tight smile. “Taught you well.”

“Yup! You did! He’ll face justice, Jethro – they all will, thanks to you.”

Justice. It’s that itch he always wants scratched. So why can’t he feel that usual sense of satisfaction right now? In fact, he can’t feel anything at all, except a deep sense of emptiness.

“Oh, and here’s something you might find interesting.” Tony takes his feet off the bed and leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “It seems that our friend Mac wasn’t a prisoner like we were. I thought it was weird he wasn’t in chains when I first met him, but I forgot about that with everything that happened after.”

Gibbs frowns. “I don’t get it. He was made to fight in the pits, just like us.”

“Nope. He wasn’t.” Tony shakes his head. “It seems that Mac was a huge aficionado of the fights. He watched them from the beginning and after a few years he decided that being a spectator wasn’t enough; he wanted to take part. So he approached Walid and offered to fight for him.”

“What?” Gibbs gives Tony an incredulous look.

“Yup. Seems nuts to me too, but Mac loved the whole thing – the atmosphere, the crowd, the fighting...and the fucking. I guess it’s no weirder than McGee and his online gaming thing.” Tony rolls his eyes. “Only in this case there was nothing virtual about the fighting; he got to experience the real deal. He also loved the fame – I know it’s insane, but having that reputation out there, being loved by the crowd and all the chanting and adulation he got from them – he just lapped that up. He craved it. You saw how he milked it for all it was worth.”

“Yeah. I saw.” In a strange way, Gibbs can even understand it. He never gave a crap about being popular, or the adoration of the crowd, but the adrenaline high of fighting in the pit week after week was definitely addictive. Even though he hated it, he knows that some part of him found it intensely satisfying. “Walid agreed to that?”

“Yup. You know Walid and his mind games – he turned it into a wager to amuse himself. They had a deal; at the end of the season, if Mac won he got to stay on in Walid’s organization as his chief trainer with the big pay check that goes with the job. If he lost, he became the property of his new owner just like any other fighter. Mac had to live in Walid’s

stable during fight season and do what Walid said, but he had a lot more freedom than most of the fighters.”

“Figures.” There was always something off about the way Mac seemed to be enjoying it so much; it seems obvious now.

“And, uh...I might have suggested to Fornell that Walid and Mac share a cell.” Tony gives another shit-eating grin. “I thought Walid might like to know what it was like for his fighters to be locked up in a cell all night with the fireman. I doubt Walid has been getting much sleep; Mac’s got an eye for the pretty boys, and Walid’s a good-looking guy.”

“Maybe I taught you too well,” Gibbs says musingly.

Tony laughs out loud, and for a moment Gibbs feels that same sense of ease they had with each other back in the stall. Tony is cut from the same cloth as himself. He has the same sense of natural justice but without the anger and personal baggage. They think the same way, and they share the same fundamental values and way of looking at the world. It’s always been a bond between them.

Then the moment passes and reality comes crushing back in. They aren’t in that stall in Scott’s stable anymore. Everything is different now.

“What about Scott?” Gibbs asks.

“Under arrest, along with Frank, Tanner, McGuire...even Pete. Ellis is too although he’s in the prison hospital right now.”

Gibbs frowns. “He resist arrest?”

“Uh...no. He kind of ran into someone’s fist and took a bit of a beating.” Tony gives a little grimace. “He’s got a broken nose and a broken jaw.”

Gibbs actually manages a grunt of laughter at that. “He shoulda been more careful who he called a pussy boy, huh, Tony?”

Tony gives him a knowing grin, confirming Gibbs’s suspicion about how Ellis got his injuries. Not that he had any doubt.

"SecNav's been arrested too," Tony continues. "The FBI is running an investigation into corruption at the highest level. Not just SecNav, but all the people Walid was bribing and blackmailing - federal agents, LEOs, judges...Walid's tentacles spread far and wide. The FBI seized a huge amount of material from his office - turns out Walid was a meticulous record-keeper, so there are files on everything and everyone. The FBI is going to have some fun going through it all."

"Fornell must have his hands full with all this."

Tony shakes his head. "Fornell is just running the investigation into the fights - there's enough work there alone to keep him busy for a year or two. He had to hand over Walid's

files to another team. Hell, I think the FBI is going to need to take on a few new agents to handle it all. "

"So the FBI's gonna take all the credit for busting this?"

"Don't they always?" Tony rolls his eyes. "I've written up and signed a deposition stating that I saw Ellis kill Rajul. I'm guessing Fornell will want you to do the same about him killing Ben and Brian," Tony says quietly. "When you're ready to talk to him."

"I killed Brian." Gibbs closes his eyes, feeling that tiredness sweep through him again.

"But Ellis coerced you..."

"Shut up, Tony. I want to sleep."

This time, he dreams he's being chased. Tony is beside him, running with him, but he's slowing him down, putting them both in danger. Their pursuers are gaining on them, their dogs barking excitedly as they close in. Gibbs decides to turn away from Tony, so that their pursuers will have to split up to pursue them.

"Stop! Wait!" Tony calls, scrambling after him, but they will be faster alone and stand more chance of survival.

It buys them more time, but his breath is coming in heaving gasps, and he's so tired. He can't keep running forever. When he realizes it's impossible to outrun his pursuers, he hides under a bush. If he's very quiet, and very still, they won't find him here. He needs to be alone right now, to lick his wounds and heal.

He wakes up to find a woman in the room, talking quietly to Tony. She looks up and smiles at him.

"Agent Gibbs, I'm Doctor Sheldon. I'm glad you're awake. How are you feeling?"

"Fine. When can I go home?"

She smiles. "Soon. First, I want to talk to you about some of the symptoms you can expect. Agent DiNozzo tells me you're a man who likes to hear it straight, so I'm going to do just that." She comes over to stand beside the bed. "We did a full blood work up on you when you were first admitted, and you had a cocktail of different drugs in your system. I've got a full list here – you can look into them in your own time and feel free to ask me questions if you have any."

She places a piece of paper on the nightstand.

"There were so many substances in your system that you're going to feel a difference initially, now that they're gone. Luckily, you were sedated through the worst of the withdrawal, but you are going to notice a difference in your moods and energy levels."

"Fine. When can I go home?" he repeats.

She gives a little laugh, combined with a shake of her head. "In addition, you did suffer a severe head injury. As a result of both that and the drug withdrawal, you might experience headaches, sweating, shaking, irritability, mood swings and cravings. There might also be hallucinations – or very vivid dreams – and erectile dysfunction." She pats his hand apologetically, and he moves it away. He wishes people would stop trying to touch him. He doesn't like being in here with the bright lights and all the people coming and going.

"I'll be fine."

"We can give you some medication to help alleviate some of the symptoms, but Agent DiNozzo tells me you're unlikely to take it."

"No." He shakes his head. "Just tell me when I can get the hell out of here."

"I'll do some tests this afternoon. If they're all okay, and as long as there's someone at home to check on you, then you should be well enough to go home in a couple of days."

"I can do the checking," Tony says.

"Fine," Gibbs snaps. "Do whatever the hell tests you want so I can go home."

She nods and walks over to the door. "I said irritability was one of the symptoms," he hears her murmur to Tony on her way out.

"Oh no, he's always like this." Tony grins, but he isn't close enough to head-slap, and Gibbs isn't in the mood in any case.

He just has to get out of here. He needs to go home, back to his own house, shut the door behind him, and be alone so that he can heal properly, by himself.

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Ducky arrives a couple of days later, bearing the clothes Tony asked him to bring from Gibbs's house. Tony meets him out by the vending machine in the hallway.

"How is he?" Ducky asks, gazing at Tony earnestly from behind his spectacles as he hands him the bag with the clothes.

Tony shrugs. "He's, you know, Gibbs."

"Being gruff with everyone, complaining about the food, and demanding to be released at the earliest opportunity?" Ducky smiles.

"Yup." Tony grins, rubbing his healing fingers absently.

"A good deal happened while you were away, I think," Ducky says, in his usual perceptive way.

“You could say that.” Tony gives a wry grunt. “It’s like it was its own little world, Ducky. Like we were living in a bubble. Now we’re back in the real world again, and...” He trails off, shaking his head.

“And you are wondering whether any part of what existed in that bubble can also exist here, in your normal lives?” Ducky asks softly.

Tony looks up to find that Ducky’s eyes are gentle and kind. “I have seen the way you’ve been with him since your return, Anthony,” he says, patting Tony’s arm. “I believe that while you were being held captive, he gave you some indication that your feelings for him were reciprocated. And yet now you are free, you wonder if...”

“If it was the drugs, the captivity, the confined space – being shoved together alone all those nights. See, Ducky, for just a while, I got a glimpse of the real Leroy Jethro Gibbs. The one he doesn’t show to anyone – and I mean anyone. I bet Shannon was the last person who got to see him. He talked – I mean, really talked. We both did. And I thought I knew where I stood. But now it’s like someone pressed a reset button, and he’s old Gibbs again, and I haven’t a clue where we go from here.”

“Hang on in there, Anthony.” Ducky squeezes his arm gently. “You’ve both been through a terrible ordeal. There will be a phase of adjustment.”

“Maybe. Just...I have this feeling he wants everything to go back to how it was before.”

“It’s his life. He must have been dreaming of returning to it for a very long time.”

“Yeah, but I wasn’t in it before – not the way I want to be anyway. So, where do I slot into it now?”

Ducky smiles. “He is, as we both know, an infinitely stubborn man who often doesn’t know what’s good for him. I think, Anthony, you will need to be as stubborn as he is and very patient too. Give him time to figure it out. I think he will, eventually. I have known Jethro a great many years, and one thing I have never known him to be is a fool.”

Tony manages a wry smile at that. “Okay, Ducky. I’ll wait the old wolf out.”

“Wolf?” Ducky raises an eyebrow.

“Just...kind of an in-joke.” Tony smiles.

He returns to Gibbs’s room to find Gibbs emerging from the bathroom, freshly shaved. He’s walking slowly, like every single part of his body aches, but he’s looking much better now.

His face is still covered with bruises and his left eye is badly bloodshot. His knuckles are grazed, and he has a new scar on his forehead. He looks like a battered old dog that’s been in one too many fights but lived to tell the tale.

“Hair’s growing back!” Tony reaches out to touch the silver stubble on Gibbs’s scalp, and Gibbs jerks his head away impatiently. “Here.” Tony hands him the bag of clothes and then goes over to pack up his laptop.

When he turns around again, Gibbs is dressed in a pair of jeans and a navy blue polo shirt – and looking down at himself with a frown. “I thought you said Ducky brought me stuff from home?” He glances up irritably. The jeans are too big around the waist and the polo shirt too small across the chest.

Tony sighs. “You changed shape, Gibbs. Six months on the James Scott diet and exercise plan will do that to a person.”

Gibbs gives him a glare and fastens his belt tight around his waist with an annoyed yank of his fingers, clearly pissed off by the all too visible signs of how much he’s changed.

He refuses to be pushed to the entrance of the hospital in a wheelchair, to nobody’s surprise, so Tony walks him down there slowly.

“Parking garage is this way,” Tony says as they emerge into the late fall sunshine, and then he’s aware Gibbs isn’t with him, and he turns and looks back.

Gibbs is standing just outside the entrance to the hospital looking up at the sky overhead, and Tony can see him almost visibly drinking in the rays of the sun.

Tony goes back over to him. “Been six months, Tony,” Gibbs rasps, his voice barely audible, “Six months since I last felt the sun on my skin.”

Tony stands there, watching, swallowing down the lump in his throat. Gibbs endured six months of captivity; the only time he saw the outside world was when he was about to be thrown into the pit to fight for his life. He only got to feel the wind in his hair and breathe fresh air for one night a week, and then he was thrown back inside, shut away from daylight. Tony has tasted a few weeks of what that was like, but to endure six months of it?

No wonder Gibbs is standing there like a new-born foal, soaking up the sun’s rays and relishing the feel of it on his skin. Ducky’s right; Gibbs needs a phase of adjustment, and Tony intends to give him that, but he’s also prepared to fight for what they had back in Scott’s stable.

And Gibbs might find that he isn’t the only one who fights to win.

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People, streets, houses...it all looks so strange after months of artificial lighting and the interior of Scott’s stable. Gibbs gazes out of the car window, feeling tired after the walk down from his hospital room.

His physical weakness irritates him, just as the change in his appearance irritates him. He wants everything back to normal, so he can put this behind him and get on with his life again.

They drive down a familiar street, past familiar houses, and pull up outside his house. It’s his sanctuary, where he can hole up, hide out, and lick his wounds before facing the world again.

He walks slowly up to the door, Tony by his side, opens it, and then turns. Tony pauses on the doorstep, a surprised look in his eyes.

“Problem, Boss?”

“Yeah. I don’t want you coming in.” He can see the hurt and concern in Tony’s eyes, but he ignores it. “You can go home now, Tony.”

“Doctor says you need someone checking on you,” Tony replies stubbornly.

“So check on me. Call, get Ducky to call, whatever. But I want to be alone.”

Tony is gazing at him thoughtfully, but he makes no move to go.

“Look, DiNozzo, I’ve been locked up with a bunch of guys for six months. I had no say over anything that happened to me, and no place that was mine. Now I do. And I want to be alone in it. Got that?”

Tony nods, and Gibbs nods back and shuts the door in his face...only to find it doesn’t close. He looks down to see Tony’s boot stuck in the way.

“I get it. Really, I do. And you can do the whole Garbo routine and have some time alone, Jethro, but don’t think I don’t know what you’re doing, and don’t think I’ll let you do it forever.”

“And what the hell is it I’m doing?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

“Going lone wolf. It’s all you know, I get that – it’s what you always do, and you’re reverting to type, as usual.”

“That so, DiNozzo?”

“Yeah, and that was fine back before I sucked your dick, and you sucked mine, and we both found we liked it. Now things are different. So you can have your time, but don’t think I won’t come flush you out eventually if you take too damn long.”

Gibbs gazes at Tony stonily, and Tony gazes back at him just as stonily, and Gibbs has a sudden realization that the cobra isn’t the most dangerous opponent a wolf can face.

Tony removes his boot from the door. “Like you once said to me, Jethro: if anyone can ever get in your face and make you do something you don’t want to do, it’s me. Remember that.”

Then he turns on his heel and walks back to the car. Gibbs watches him go. They’ve spent so much time together these past few weeks and experienced so much, condensed into that short space of time, that it feels strange to suddenly be alone.

He closes the door and walks slowly, stiffly, into his house. It’s all exactly as he left it, except cleaner. There’s no dust, so he’s guessing someone came here and cleaned it while he was gone; probably Abby.

He opens the fridge and finds it stocked with fresh food and several cans of Caf-Pow. Definitely Abby.



He walks from room to room, just rediscovering his home. He loves this place; he lived here with Shannon and Kelly, and a part of his soul resides here with their memories. Occasionally he's heard Kelly laughing, or Shannon running up the stairs calling his name. Sometimes, when he's sitting at the table, if he looks up quickly he can catch a glimpse of Kelly playing hopscotch in the hallway.

He opens the door to the basement and walks slowly down the stairs, hanging on to the handrail. This room has always been his refuge, where he can shut the door and lick his wounds until he feels restored enough to face the world again.

There is no boat here. There hasn't been a boat here for a long time. He's been working on other projects for the past couple of years; mending chairs, making toys, carving a picture frame, and a mirror, and decorations for Mike's coffin. It was close, intricate work that made him concentrate on something other than his job. It freed up his mind, blocked out his problems, and gave him the kind of peace he never found anywhere else...at least, not until he danced in a small, windowless room with Tony a few weeks ago.

He needs this sanctuary now. He reaches the bottom of the stairs and walks unsteadily over to his workbench. He finds a bottle of Jack there, presumably also a gift from Abby. He opens it, pours some into a mason jar, and drinks it down in two fiery gulps.

Then he limps over to the big table in the centre of the room. It's strange; he's been hiding his limp all these months because it revealed a weakness he couldn't afford to show, but now the old injury from his childhood hurts so much that he can barely walk on it.

His knee gives way, and he stumbles and falls down onto the floor. The smell of sawdust is suddenly in his nostrils, and he is immediately back in the pit again. The memory is so sudden, so vivid, and so visceral that it takes him by surprise, and he leans over and heaves up the contents of his stomach onto the floor. The bourbon comes up, scalding his throat as he spits it out onto the sawdust on the floor, and then his last hospital meal, a dull brown spew. He lies there on the floor, panting, and his stomach cramps again, forcing him to heave some more.

When he's done, he lies back in the sawdust, gazes up at the ceiling overhead, and laughs. Of all the things they've taken from him, the ability to enjoy the peace and sanctuary of his own basement is the one thing he never expected.

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His apartment is just as he left it. There's no sign of forced entry; Walid's men must have picked the lock on his door very carefully. They also took their camera and the remains of the drug-laced pizza with them. They cleaned up after themselves meticulously, leaving no clues behind, just like when they abducted Gibbs and Sam and all the others.

His colleagues have also tidied up; the place has been dusted for prints, and Abby has clearly restored everything to a level of neatness it never possessed before. The kitchen chairs are arranged tidily around the table, and the washing up appears to have been done.

He calls Ducky and tells him to check on Gibbs at regular intervals. Maybe Gibbs is right; they've been together almost 24/7 for weeks. Maybe they need a break from each other. It's definitely nice to be home, back in his own space again.

A glance into the fridge reveals some fresh food, even a bowl of salad with a little post-it note on it with a skull and crossbones in the corner, bearing the message, in Abby's scrawled handwriting: "*Eat this, Tony. It's good for you!*"

"Yeah, like that's ever gonna happen, Abs. I've been eating healthily for weeks, and in that time I've broken all the fingers on one hand, been slapped across the face more times than I can count, and whipped until I passed out. I now associate healthy food with pain and who can blame me?" He removes the salad from the fridge and throws it in the garbage.

He decides he's too tired to eat, and he goes into the bedroom, toes off his sneakers, throws himself face down on the bed, and falls asleep almost immediately.

He wakes up with a start when his alarm goes off thirteen hours later. He raises his head and glares at it. It's weird to think of the stupid thing going off every day while he wasn't even here to be woken by it.

Today is a workday, and he might as well go in and face that particular hurdle. It has to happen at some point.

He walks into the bathroom and slowly removes the sweatpants and tee shirt he slept in last night. His back aches, but it's been aching almost constantly since the whipping. He's been putting this off, but he decides this is another hurdle he has to face at some point.

He thinks about it for a moment, psyching himself up into it, and then he turns and takes a look at his back in the bathroom mirror.

The scars are similar to the ones Gibbs bears on his back, so he knew what to expect, but it's still a shock to see them on his own skin. He was whipped longer and harder than Gibbs, and the scarring is more extensive as a result. His scars are also fresher and therefore darker than those Gibbs bears, standing out in livid contrast to his pale flesh, and the skin feels knotted and tight; that's what's causing all the aching.

He remembers his wrists being bound in rope and hauled over his head, so he was barely standing on tiptoe. He remembers the agony of that first stroke and how holding onto Gibbs's gaze was all that saw him through it. He remembers how it felt when the blood started flowing down his back.

He turns on the shower and gets under the hot water, knowing that the memory of what happened that day will be as impossible to forget as the scars on his back.

The warm water floods over him, soothing him, and he knows he'd do it all again. That whipping was a turning point, and it was worth enduring it to save not only Gibbs but also Sam, Greg, Matt, and all the other poor bastards trapped in that nightmare. If only he could have saved Steve, Rajul, and the others who died too. He knows he did a good thing, but right now that's no help.

When Gibbs was whipped, there was nobody to hold his gaze, or touch his hand in the darkness after. There was nobody to talk to him in the night and distract him from the pain. When Gibbs was thrown into the pit there was nobody to make a deal for him, so he didn't have to fight. And when Gibbs tried to escape, there was nobody to tell him that he was right to try, and that what happened after wasn't his fault.

Gibbs had five months alone in that nightmare before Tony arrived. He might be Gibbs, he might be a lone wolf who prefers to slink off and lick his wounds alone, but he has to be hurting all the same. If he refuses to let anyone help him, if he shuts out the world and thinks he can push it down and carry on like it never happened, then Tony fears for what that will do to him.

After all he's been through, and all he's suffered, Gibbs deserves to have someone put their arms around him and hold him; someone who knows, and cares, and loves him. And Tony wants to do that. He wants to be there for Gibbs, the way Gibbs was there for him throughout that whipping, keeping him strong through the pain and making it clear he's not going through it alone.

Tony puts his head back and if there are hot tears running down his face he pretends not to notice as they mingle with the hot water.

When he's done, he gets out of the shower, dries himself, and then slowly returns to his bedroom. He opens up his closet and dresses in a dark grey suit, white shirt, and plain black tie. It's his work uniform, his Armani armour, just another one of those masks he wears so well, and nobody who sees him will guess what lies beneath, written on his skin and seared into his soul.

Then he smiles at himself in the mirror, the big, bright, happy, Tony smile, and only when he's satisfied that his disguise is in place, does he go to work.

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The elevator pings, and Gibbs prowls out of the doors and into a room with metal tables laid out in rows. There's a man working at the end table, talking to himself as he looks down on the dead body in front of him. He's young, with thick dark hair, wearing a pair of glasses that he occasionally pushes up his nose in an earnest way.

Gibbs prowls close, walking silently on all four paws. The young man looks up and then backs away, a scared expression in his eyes; Gibbs can smell his fear from several feet away.

"A...Agent Gibbs...is that you?"

"Who the hell do you think it is, Palmer?" he barks.

"But...it can't be you," Palmer whispers, still backing away from him.

"Why not?" He paces closer, tail swishing angrily.

“Uh...well...because I just weighed your heart,” Palmer says, pointing at the corpse. Gibbs turns and finds himself looking down on his own dead body lying on the table, his chest cut open and his heart missing.

He wakes up with a start, wondering where he is and why his head hurts so much.

He’s lying on a bed. His bed. In his bedroom. In his house. There’s an empty bottle of Jack on the nightstand, which explains the headache. He’s missing something though. He fumbles around on the mattress, patting it, wondering what the hell it is he’s missing. He just knows that something isn’t there that should be.

Tony.

He’s looking for Tony. Where the hell is he?

“Tony!” he mumbles, patting more frantically. Then he remembers; he sent Tony away. He stops patting the empty expanse of mattress beside him and falls back on his pillow. “Stupid damn bed.” It feels too big and open. Too exposed.

He falls off the side of the bed, grabs the mattress, and tugs it onto the floor. Then he hauls it out into the hallway and crams it into the bathroom. It’s a tight fit in the small room, and one side of it squashes up against the tub, but it’ll have to do. He goes back to his bedroom for a pillow and blanket and takes them back to the bathroom.

He’s still wearing the clothes that don’t fit. He doesn’t like how they feel against his skin, all hot and scratchy, as if they don’t belong there. He strips them off and throws them into a heap by the toilet. Then he lies down on the mattress on the floor, pulls the blanket over his head, and falls asleep again.

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“Hey – McCavalry, how’s it going?” Tony asks cheerfully as he strides into the squad room.

“Tony! I wasn’t expecting you back for a few days.” McGee comes over and pumps his hand enthusiastically, grinning from ear to ear.

“Well, there’s work to be done, and you know me and how much I love hard work.” Tony winks.

“Uh, no...not really.”

“Sure you do. Here. Catch!” Tony throws a Nutter Butter at him, and McGee catches it deftly in one hand. “Hmm...no fumbling? Who are you, and what have you done with my McGeek?” Tony asks with a suspicious frown.

“Tony!” He’s taken by surprise as Ziva wraps him in a brief hug. Then she draws back, looking embarrassed.

“You missed me!” he says with a big grin. “Go on! Admit it! You missed having me around, Zee-vah!”

She glares at him. "I am simply pleased that I will not have to get used to working with a new field agent. Annoying as you are, I have become accustomed to your strange and often disgusting habits."

"Aw – and I missed you too, my favourite ex-Mossad liaison officer turned probationary NCIS agent!"

"I am already regretting your return," she says, rolling her eyes as she returns to her desk.

Tony grins and goes over to Gibbs's desk, where he was sitting before he got himself abducted. He was reluctant to take Gibbs's place at first, but sitting here saved him from having to look over at Gibbs's empty desk and feel that pang of missing the man several times a day.

"Sit rep, McGee! Where are we at, what are we doing, and who are we doing it to?" Tony asks, sitting at the desk and putting his feet up on it.

"Right now, what you're doing is coming with me, DiNozzo," a dark voice says behind him, and he can feel his jaw hardening as he realises it's Vance.

He follows Vance up to his office and takes the offered seat.

"Your team has been giving assistance to Agent Fornell in wrapping up the recent investigation you were involved with," Vance tells him, taking his own seat behind his big desk. "I've told them to hand over everything to the FBI; it's their case now."

Tony can feel his hackles rising. Not that he wants to handle the aftermath of this particular case, but he doesn't like not being consulted about it. "Why?"

"Because you've been working on it for long enough, and I want my Major Crimes Response Team back out there working cases again."

"This **was** a case."

"I know; a case that two members of my staff can't work on because they became victims rather than investigators, and therefore have had to be recused as a result of their personal involvement."

"You say it like it was our fault," Tony growls, leaning forward.

"In your case, DiNozzo, it was."

"If I hadn't gone in there..."

Vance holds up a hand. "I'm not arguing about this, DiNozzo." His expression softens. "You did a good job," he adds in a more conciliatory tone.

"I wish I could say the same of you."

Vance's eyes flash, but then he nods. "I was taking my orders from SecNav. I had no reason to distrust him, and I gave you long enough, DiNozzo. You hadn't made any progress in five months."

"Because we hit Walid-shaped brick walls whenever we tried to get anywhere!"

"I'm running a federal agency here, DiNozzo. How much longer was I supposed to give you?"

"As long as it took! This was Gibbs we were trying to find. Gibbs!"

"I was running interference for you from SecNav for months! I bought you at least three more than he wanted to give you!" Vance snaps, and for the first time Tony gets an inkling that Vance might not totally be the bad guy here. He didn't go the extra mile, and he should have, but he wasn't dirty himself.

There's silence for a moment. Then Vance sighs. "Is this going to be a problem for you, DiNozzo? Because if it is, I'm sure I can find an assignment for you as an agent afloat."

Tony nods slowly, understanding. "A problem for me? No. But then I'm not the one you left out there. When Gibbs gets back..."

"If and when Agent Gibbs returns to work, I'll handle him," Vance says firmly. "In the meantime, your team will finish helping Fornell wrap up NCIS's involvement in this case. I expect you to spend the next few days at the Hoover building doing just that – after you've been cleared to return to work by Psych Services."

"Will I be seeing the pretty shrink with the man's hands? Because I find that disturbing; it's kind of a mixed message..."

"You can see her this morning. I'll make the appointment now." Vance smiles at him sweetly.

"It's really not necessary," Tony says, wondering if he can charm his way out of this particular ordeal.

Vance leans forward. "DiNozzo – Tony – I've seen your medical report, and I've seen some video footage of what went on in Walid's sick little circus. I think it's very necessary."

Tony feels himself flushing. He wonders if Vance has seen footage of Gibbs fucking him in the pit and goes cold. Vance has certainly seen some footage of what went on in the pit, and he must know Gibbs participated too. Gibbs is the most intensely private man Tony has ever known. How can he return to work knowing that his team and his boss have seen him in that way? How does anyone come back from that?

"One more thing." Vance opens his desk drawer, removes an NCIS badge, and pushes it across the desk towards Tony. "This belongs to you, I believe, Agent DiNozzo." He stresses the word 'agent'. "I've put a commendation on your file," Vance adds quietly. "What you did, going into that place without backup, weapons, or authorization, was stupid and

foolhardy in the extreme. It was also damn brave. You're a good agent, DiNozzo. Used to wonder what the hell Gibbs saw in you, but now I know."

Tony reaches out and picks up his badge, feeling a little surge of pride at having it restored to him.

Vance gives him a tight smile. "Welcome home, Agent DiNozzo."

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For the first time in months Gibbs isn't woken up by a klaxon or bright lights. Instead, he's woken by the smell of coffee.

"Hmm...it's an unorthodox place to sleep, but it does look comfy," an unmistakably British voice murmurs.

He sits up to find Ducky standing in the bathroom doorway with a cup of coffee from FHC in his hands. The smell alone seems to speak straight to some special coffee gland in Gibbs's body that hasn't had its fix for six months, and he sits up and reaches out for it wordlessly.

"Of course, you could choose to remain in your current detoxified state," Ducky says, giving it to him. "I wasn't at all convinced that it was a good idea to start clogging up your arteries with caffeine again after all this time, but Anthony insisted."

"Tony sent you?" Gibbs inhales the coffee deeply before taking a sip. It's warm and strong, and so alien and yet familiar at the same time that he has to pause to process the moment.

"Yes, he did. In fact, he gave me some rather strict instructions about your health and welfare."

"No need. I'm fine." Gibbs savours a second sip, revelling in the sensation of the coffee on his tongue, overpowering his taste buds, which seem to have become enfeebled after months of plain, healthy food.

"Yes, he said you'd say that, and that I'm to ignore it. Which I am." Ducky comes into the room and crouches down in front of Gibbs. He holds up three fingers. "How many fingers am I holding up?"

Gibbs rolls his eyes and pushes his hand away. "President Obama," he replies facetiously.

"Ah good. You are your usual self. I was wondering." Ducky gets up and glances around. "And the reason you're sleeping in the bathroom, Jethro?"

"The bedroom was too big." Gibbs finishes drinking the coffee, enjoying the buzzing sensation of caffeine circulating in his veins again after so long. He feels a pang as he realizes just how much he's missing those drugs Tanner used to pump into him. He might have hated them, but they gave him a kind of hyped up energy that kept him going. Without them, he feels drained and tired all the time.

"Hmm...a cryptic reply, but I sense the truth."

Gibbs gets up. After so many months being naked in front of other people, he doesn't give any thought to being naked in front of Ducky, so he's taken by surprise at Ducky's sharp intake of breath. At the same time, he catches sight of himself in the bathroom mirror, and he stops short, understanding the reason for Ducky's shock.

He doesn't look like himself. It's not just the fact his hair is only just starting to grow back, his left eye is bloodshot, and he has yellowing bruises on his face. It isn't even the fact that his body is solidly muscled, his abdominal muscles forming a perfect six pack, and his pectorals and biceps hard and bulging. Ducky isn't reacting to any of those things. Instead, his gaze has gone to the network of marks and scars covering his body from head to toe from his battles in the pit. He looks like a raggedy old wolf that has fought once too often to retain his status as alpha male in the pack.

"Oh, Jethro. What have they done to you?" Ducky asks softly.

Gibbs stares at himself blankly in the mirror. He doesn't want to think about what they did to him. He can't allow himself to think about that, because if he does, he isn't sure where that ends.

"It's nothing, Ducky," he says hoarsely, reaching for his bathrobe to cover up the all too obvious evidence that it isn't.

"Ah, my dear Jethro." Ducky shakes his head sadly. "Our generation of men – we really are not very good at admitting to our sorrows, are we? You have always locked yours away, nursing them close, unwilling to share your private sadness. We fell out over that once, if I recall."

Gibbs turns to him, remembering Ducky's anger that he'd never told him about Shannon and Kelly.

"This is different," he growls.

"Is it?" Ducky raises an eyebrow. "Why?"

"Ducky, I'm a soldier. I've had worse." Gibbs shrugs.

"Hmm." Ducky gives him a contemplative look. "I very much doubt that, Jethro. Regardless, I hope that if you have learned anything over the years, it is that it is easier to heal if you first admit to feeling pain."

Gibbs stares at him. Right now he doesn't feel anything, but he isn't going to share that.

"And that you don't have to bear that pain alone. It isn't necessary, when you have good friends to help carry a little of the burden."

"I'm not going to start bawling my head off like a little kid – what the hell use is that?" Gibbs snaps.



“Some might find it helpful.” Ducky gives a shrug. “And even if that’s not exactly your style, Jethro, there might be better ways of managing your distress than pushing away the people who can help you most.”

“I’m not pushing you away!”

Ducky pats his arm gently. “I wasn’t talking about me, Jethro.”

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“I’ve read Director Vance’s report on what happened to you, Agent DiNozzo.” Dr Bracco leans forward and steeples her extraordinarily big hands on her desk.

*Don’t look at the hands, don’t look at the hands...* Tony tries to keep his eyes fixed on her face instead.

“I’ve also read the medical report. You underwent some extreme physical trauma.”

“Extreme physical trauma?”

“You were whipped.”

“Ah. That. Yeah.” Tony shrugs. “But that was weeks ago. I’m well enough to return to work now.”

“Physically – maybe.” She gives a tight little smile. She has pretty eyes. “But psychologically?”

“I’m fine. Look, I was only there for a few weeks. Gibbs was there for months. I didn’t even have to fight in the pit – well, not properly. Not a life-threatening, knock-down fight. I only fought against Gibbs, and I knew he wasn’t going to hurt me. Not really.”

She glances down at her report, but he’s damn sure she doesn’t know about Gibbs breaking his fingers because he never told anyone that, and he’s sure Gibbs hasn’t, either. It could be someone else has, but Fornell is up to his ears in testimony right now, so Tony doubts that particular bit of information has filtered through. She probably knows about the sex-in-the-pit thing though. He refuses to call it rape. It wasn’t exactly the best sex of his life, but he’s not going to saddle it with that name and all that comes with it.

“Gibbs fought dozens of times out there. In comparison to that, what I had to face was nothing.” Tony shrugs.

“Let’s talk about Agent Gibbs then. Will you have a problem working with him after this?”

Tony almost laughs out loud. He has no intention of talking about his feelings for Gibbs to a shrink of all people. Although, maybe he *\*does\** need his head examined for falling for someone as complicated to love as Gibbs. Then again, maybe that’s part of the attraction.

“I always wanted a dog,” he tells her suddenly. “There was this stray, used to hang around outside the house when I was a kid, after my mom died. He was a stubborn mutt. He limped and got into fights, but he’d hang out with me.”

“You were lonely.” Dr Bracco smiles at him encouragingly. She *\*is\** pretty...if it weren’t for the weirdly oversized hands.

“Yeah, I was. I wanted to adopt the dog, but my dad wouldn’t let me. He said the dog was wild – not a house dog. And he was right. That was part of the attraction, I think,” Tony muses. “See, that dog didn’t really like anyone but me, and that made me feel special.”

“Are you saying that’s how you feel about Agent Gibbs?”

“I’m saying I understand Gibbs. I get him. And he gets me. We won’t have any trouble working together.” He crosses his fingers behind his back. Not for that reason anyway.

“He’s been away for several months. You were team leader during that time. How will you feel relinquishing that role to him again?”

“I’ve been team leader for several months before. Wasn’t a problem when he came back and took over again.” He shrugs.

“So you harbour no feelings of ill will towards him?”

Tony laughs out loud. “He’s the single bravest person I’ve ever met. He kept us all alive back there. He got us out of there in one piece at great personal cost.”

“You didn’t answer the question.”

“No,” Tony says firmly. “I don’t have any feelings of ill will towards Agent Gibbs.” He might want to slap some sense into that stupid, stubborn head of his, but he’s never felt any ill will towards Gibbs. “I’m worried about him. He’s endured a hell of a lot. I’m not sure I could have gone through what he has these past few months without cracking.”

His shoulders are aching, and he grimaces and tries to roll them back. He hates the way the scarring feels so heavy and knotted, like there’s something physically weighing him down.

“I don’t envy you doing a psych eval on Gibbs,” he says with a grin. “He’s a tough bastard.”

She leans back, gazing at him curiously.

“They whipped him too, you know, and he didn’t have anyone there to take care of him afterwards. At least I had him looking out for me, bartering for medical treatment.” Tony shrugs.

“Do you feel then, that because Agent Gibbs’s suffering was so extreme, that you are not allowed to have suffered too, Agent DiNozzo?” she asks quietly.

“What?” He looks into those deceptively pretty eyes, winded by the question.

“All you’ve wanted to talk about since you got here is Agent Gibbs. I understand that you admire his strength and fortitude, but it seems to me you have your own problems, Agent DiNozzo, and focussing on his might be a way for you to avoid facing yours.”

He stares at her. “I didn’t…”

“You lost faith in Director Vance and took leave to pursue your own desperate plan to get Gibbs back. You allowed yourself to be drugged, abducted, and imprisoned. You were physically tortured, beaten and abused. And through it all you stayed strong in order to rescue the people trapped in that horrific situation. Who stayed strong for you, Tony?”

He gazes at her blankly, swallowing hard. “Gibbs,” he says quietly. “We stayed strong for each other. That’s how we got out. When he was down, I lifted him. When I was down, he did the same for me. He’s my partner. We’re a team. That’s what we do.”

He realizes, with a pang, just how much he misses that. As horrendous as it was back there, at least they had each other, but now he feels more alone than ever. He remembers that night before the final Fight Night, when he made Gibbs dance with him. He knows that, given the choice, Gibbs wouldn’t have done that. He only went along with it because he was locked in a small room with him and there was no escape. Gibbs is like that stubborn mutt he befriended as a child; he’s not house-trained, and he never will be.

“And who is there for you now?” Dr Bracco asks. “You’ve both been hurt, and you both need support. Can you give him support, if you won’t ask for any yourself? Does he even know how much you’re hurting? Have you told him?”

No. Gibbs asked, back at the hospital – in fact it was the first thing he asked – but Tony played it down, aware of how much greater Gibbs’s injuries were.

“I’m not hurting,” he says mulishly.

“Your back has been causing you discomfort since you came in, and you haven’t even tried to process your feelings about what happened to you.”

“Pretty eyes and man’s hands; you lure people in and then go for the killer blow, huh?” Tony says, without smiling.

She nods, slowly. “You went through a considerable ordeal, Agent DiNozzo. It will have changed you in some ways. Don’t try and force yourself to be the same as you were before in order to please others – or even to convince yourself that it didn’t affect you. It did.”

Tony looks down at his feet and then up again, into those pretty eyes. “Yeah, I know.”

She smiles. “I’m going to sign you as fit to return to work, Agent DiNozzo. Just bear in mind that there will be struggles along the way and asking for – and accepting – help isn’t a sign of weakness.”

“No, that would be saying you’re sorry,” Tony mutters. She raises an eyebrow. “Never apologise; Gibbs views that as a sign of weakness.”

“You’re not Gibbs, and you are allowed to acknowledge your own ordeal without always comparing it to his,” she says gently.

He gives a bark of laughter at the irony of that, realizing that he’s been doing the exact same thing as Gibbs, in his own way.

How can he expect Gibbs to let him in, when he won’t admit that he’s hurting himself? Back in that stall they couldn’t hide anything, and they had no choice but to reveal their weaknesses to each other. It would seem that now they are free, they are lapsing back into old patterns of avoidance and denial.

Clearly, adjusting to life back in the real world is going to be even harder than he thought.

~\*~

Ducky leaves, but not before giving him a stern admonishment to take frequent naps, rest up, and eat at regular intervals. After he’s gone, Gibbs glances around the place. Throughout his captivity, all he wanted was to get back to his old life, but now he has it, he realizes he has no idea what to do with it.

His life before was always the job, and when it wasn’t the job it was whatever he was building in his basement. Now he has neither of those outlets. He isn’t medically fit to return to work just yet, and he knows no doctor in their right mind would sign him as fit, no matter how hard he glares at them. And as for the basement...he can’t even bring himself to go back down there. Just the thought of smelling the sawdust makes him feel like throwing up again.

He sits down on the couch and tries to read, but he can’t concentrate. The caffeine has helped, but he rages against his lack of energy. He’s tired and listless now that he is no longer pumped full of drugs. It’s not just that though; he had become accustomed to being in constant danger and needing to be constantly vigilant and the frequent adrenaline surges that came with that situation. Now he’s safe, he finds he has no idea how to relax.

He picks up his cell phone to find it’s filled with text messages from Abby, ranging from calm to panicking. He deletes them.

Then he calls his father, for something to do.

“Hello there, son!” Jack sounds so pleased to hear from him, and his warm, deep voice washes over Gibbs. “How are you doing? Tony told me you’d been working deep undercover, but would it have been against the rules to let me know you’d be gone so long?”

“Didn’t know myself, Dad,” he replies, gazing at the empty fire grate. He considers telling his father the truth, but how can you tell an old man about the living hell his only child has endured for so many months? He finds he can’t bring himself to do it. He wouldn’t even know where to start. “But I’m back now.”

“Tony said you were injured. I wanted to come visit, but he said to wait until you’re better. Perhaps I can come up now. I can close up the store...”

“No.” He says it more harshly than he intended and can hear his father’s hurt in the wounded silence that follows. “I can’t do that right now, Dad. I’ll come visit you soon though.”

“Leroy...”

The name reminds him of Scott, and he has to force himself not to end the call on the spot.

“I’m fine, Dad,” he interrupts abruptly.

“When you say you’re fine is when I worry about you the most. You were always the same. I remember when you were in the hospital after the accident. You were just a little kid, and you were hurting so bad, and you wouldn’t even talk to me for weeks. Then one morning I asked you how you were, and for the first time since the accident you replied. You said, ‘I’m fine’, and you clearly weren’t. You’ve been doing that ever since, Leroy.”

“I don’t know what you want from me, Dad. I am fine. It was a hard few months, but I’m still here.”

“Have you got people there for you? I know young Tony cares, and Dr Mallard, and there’s that sweet girl, Abby.”

“Yes, I’ve got people here for me, Dad.”

“But will you let them help?”

He doesn’t want their help. He just wants to get back to his life, move on, and leave this behind him. The last thing he wants is to look into Abby’s eyes and see her pity. He only has a vague recollection of her holding him on that last Fight Night, but he doesn’t want her seeing him that way forever. He’s a leader. He has to go back there and lead those people, and he needs them to trust in him. He doesn’t want them looking at him and seeing that pale, beat up man from that final fight in the pit. He has to erase that memory and make them see him as strong again.

“Sure, Dad. Stop worrying. I’ll be fine.” He grimaces as he says that, knowing what his father thinks of that particular phrase, but Jack lets it pass this time, and he ends the call a few minutes later after some mindless small talk.

He needs a drink, but he’s finished the bottle of bourbon, so he goes out for more. It feels strange to be walking around in the open, among people again. He’s skittish, jumping at the slightest noise, the adrenaline surging through his body unnecessarily whenever he senses a threat. He stops at Sears to buy new clothes in his current size, grabs a pile of jeans, tee shirts, and polo shirts, and then, feeling ridiculously exhausted after only an hour out of the house, he returns to the blessed peace of his own home.

He’s so tired that he falls asleep instantly on the couch.

He dreams that he’s prowling through the house, silently, on all four paws. It’s his house, but it seems quiet and lonely. He’s looking for something; he’s not sure what, just that it’s hiding somewhere in the house.

He noses through the bedrooms and pushes his head around the door to the bathroom, but finds nothing. Then he slinks down the stairs. He pauses at the bottom, gazing at the door at the end of the hallway, the one leading to the basement. He doesn't want to go there. He heads off towards the kitchen and the living room instead...but he can't find what he's looking for there.

In the end, he has no choice but to nudge open the door to the basement with his nose. He pauses at the top of the stairs, looking down. There's a man down there. Gibbs goes down the stairs, his muscles bunched up, his fur standing on end. He doesn't like it down here. Something bad happens down here. He can feel the sawdust clinging to his paws, and the scent of it sickens him.

The man in the basement turns, and he recognizes him.

"Hey, Gibbs! It's me, Brian." He's just a skinny kid, about the same age as Jimmy Palmer and just as much of an innocent.

The basement suddenly opens out and transforms into a big pit, sawdust thick underfoot, and all around them people are yelling and screaming. His paws gather pace, and he finds himself running across the pit, the sound of the crowd echoing around in his head.

*"Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!"*

He knows he has no choice. Brian gets down on his knees. He doesn't even try and fight. He just bares his throat, and Gibbs leaps into the air, fangs bared, and sinks them into the soft flesh of his neck. He bites down hard, savaging him, until there is no possibility that he's still alive. He can feel Brian's blood dripping down his jaw, sinking into his fur, staining it red.

He draws back and looks down on the savaged corpse, throat slashed to ribbons, eyes wide and staring...to find it isn't Brian.

It's Tony.

He wakes up with the scream dying in his throat and the sound of knocking on the door. It's dark outside, so he must have slept for a few hours.

He gets up and opens the door to find Tony standing there, a boxed pizza in one hand, a couple of beers in the other.

"Pepperoni, ham, beef, pork sausage, Italian sausage, and bacon?" Tony holds up the box.

Gibbs can't find a good reason to refuse – not one that Tony will accept anyway – so he opens the door to let him in. The smell of baked cheese hits him the minute Tony is inside, and suddenly he's back in that room off the infirmary, with the pizza he bartered for, watching Tony eat.

Gibbs leans against the wall, winded by the power of the memory, watching as Tony moves slowly around the place. He's lacking his usual bounce, his shoulders are hunched, and he looks tired. Gibbs wants to put his hands on Tony's shoulders and ease his sore muscles for him, but he finds he can't, so he simply stands there, his fingers aching.

“Did you go back to work today?” he asks, judging that to be the most likely reason for how exhausted Tony looks.

“Yeah. Saw that woman from Psych Services – Dr Bracco. Kind eyes – man’s hands,” Tony says with a glimmer of a grin.

Gibbs sits down next to Tony on the couch and takes a slice of pizza. He hasn’t been hungry since he got home, so he’s just going through the motions.

“You eat today?” Tony asks, glancing at him, his green eyes casual, which Gibbs knows is when he’s at his most perceptive.

“You know I did. Ducky not only made breakfast, he sat and watched me eat it. Said he had to report back to you, so you already know I ate. Stop fussing, Tony. I’m fine.”

“Hmmm.” Those green eyes look even more lazy and casual now, which is a dead giveaway.

Gibbs glares at him. “You spoke to Jack too? Christ, Tony!”

“I said I’d let you do the lone wolf thing for a while. I didn’t say I wouldn’t keep an eye on you while you did it.” Tony shrugs. “And Jack phoned me, not the other way around – he was worried about you and wanted to get my opinion.”

“What did you tell him?”

“That you’re fine, which you aren’t.”

Gibbs grunts and finishes his slice of pizza. It feels greasy in his belly, and he wonders if he’ll be able to keep it down.

“Neither am I,” Tony adds, and Gibbs glances up immediately, a little knot of anxiety forming in his belly. Tony’s face is a little flushed, but he ploughs on determinedly. “How can we be? It’ll take some time. More for you than me – you were there longer. You went through more, and you went through it alone. I had you.”

“I’ll be fine.” Gibbs says it again, automatically, like a mantra.

“I know, but right now you aren’t, and it’s okay to admit that.”

“It might be okay, but what the hell use is it?” Gibbs shrugs. “Did Bracco sign you as fit for work? Looks like you’ve put in a long day – is that why you’re hurting?”

“I’m not...” It’s as automatic for Tony to brush off the concern as it is for him. Gibbs watches him visibly pull himself up short. “Yes, Bracco signed me as fit for work, and yes, my back aches now. I asked Fornell if he’d give me a few moments alone with Ellis to return the favour – I was only half joking.”

“You saw Fornell?” Gibbs gazes at him blindly. He’s known Fornell for years, and the man is one of his closest friends. He’s also an extremely thorough investigator. He’s probably

already seen the footage of him fighting and fucking in the pit, and that knowledge chills Gibbs.

“Yeah. After the psych eval I went over to the FBI. He’s doing a good job – there are several stable owners under arrest, and he’s slowly going through testimony from fighters, audience members, guards – everyone who was there. This will take a long time to unravel, Gibbs, but he’ll make sure it goes to court, and all those bastards are put away for a long time.”

“Good.” He watches as Tony rolls his shoulders, trying to get comfortable.

“Skin feels too tight, muscles bunch up,” Tony mutters. “Your eye is looking a bit better.” He scrutinizes Gibbs thoughtfully. “Apart from that, you still look like shit.”

“How did it go with Fornell?”

“The first few minutes were the worst, but he didn’t screw with me,” Tony says. “He knows what happened, he knows it’s not our fault, and he tries not to let the pity show too much in his eyes. He kept it business-like. Even called me ‘DiNotzo’ to keep things from getting sappy; he knows how much that pisses me off.”

“What about the team?” Gibbs asks quietly.

“They know too, but they’re kind enough not to mention it. I put on a good show, and they were happy to let me. They want what you want.”

“What’s that?” Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

“For everything to go back to normal, like none of this ever happened. For me to be my usual goofy but brilliant self.” He gives the bright, shiny Tony smile. “For you to walk in there and say ‘Saddle up! Dead petty officer in Rock Creek Park!’ And for everything to be the same again. That is what you want too, isn’t it, Jethro? To get on with your life, to shove this away, and for everything to go back to the way it was before?”

Gibbs takes a sip of his beer, avoiding Tony’s eyes. “Be simpler that way.”

“Well, tough. Because I don’t give a damn about rule twelve, or what the agency makes of us being together. I swore to myself a few weeks ago that I was done hiding, and I meant it. So, if going back to the way it was before means you cut me out of your life, then forget it because I’m not going without a fight, and I can fight just as dirty as you.”

Gibbs looks up, startled. It seems he’s not the only one who makes unbreakable vows to himself.

“I’ll leave you to think about it.” Tony glances at his watch. “Because right now, there’s somewhere else I have to be.”

He leans forward and kisses Gibbs gently on the lips, as if he has the right, which he does, but it feels strange all the same. They’ve never kissed here in this room, in their regular lives. Their entire relationship was played out in a tiny metal stall in Scott’s stable, forced into an



intimacy that they spent ten years avoiding. Gibbs has no idea how to be with Tony outside of that environment.

Tony's lips are warm and gentle, and they somehow relieve an ache that he wasn't even aware was there. He pushes Tony back on the couch and returns the kiss with interest, hard and passionate...and then suddenly his mind fills with images of Tony from his dream, his throat slashed and bloody. Then he's back in the gym watching Tony being whipped, powerless to help him. And without pause he's back in the pit, thrusting his cock into Tony, unable to ignore the pain in his eyes but having to keep going anyway because there's no choice for either of them.

The images are all jumbled up in his head, dreams mixing with memories, overwhelming him, and he draws back with a hiss and turns away.

"Get out," he snaps.

"Jethro...what just happened?"

"Get the hell out, Tony. And don't send Ducky over again. And tell Abby to stop texting me. I don't want to see or hear from anyone right now – understand? Just leave me the hell alone."

"Hey..." He feels Tony's hand on his shoulder and turns, knocking it away angrily.

"I said get out. Go!"

Tony's eyes are dark. He gives a curt nod. "Okay. You can have more time, but if you need me – you call." Tony goes over to the door and then glances back. "And don't drink all that Jack, Gibbs." He jerks his head at the box of liquor Gibbs bought earlier, lying in the hallway. "It won't help."

Then he's gone. Gibbs sits down on the couch, shaking. He has no idea what he's feeling. There was a simplicity to their relationship when they were captives, but now they're back in the real world, he can't get a handle on it. It doesn't help that he can't feel anything properly. His emotions come in surges. He gets waves of anxiety, of anger, of sadness...but then they're gone, fading out as quickly as they came, and it's easier without them. That little interlude with Tony proved that if nothing else.

He just needs some space and silence to get control of them, and then he'll be able to trust himself again.

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Tony drives to a familiar Starbucks across town. He gets out of his car, takes a deep breath, and walks inside.

She's there, as he knew she would be, sitting in their usual spot, in the corner, stirring a cup of chai. There's a cup of coffee on the table, in front of the empty chair, waiting for him. Same time, same place, where she promised to be until he got back.

Jan Hurrell looks up, her dark hair bobbing, and she sees him. She doesn't say a word. She just gets up, walks over to him, takes his face between her hands, and looks into his eyes.

"Thank you, Tony DiNozzo," she says quietly, her voice aching with sincerity. "Thank you for keeping your promise and bringing my husband home again. Thank you for risking yourself to find him. Thank you for every single thing you endured out there, with those bastards. Thank you."

She kisses his forehead and then releases him, and he finds his throat hurts too much to speak. She takes hold of his hand and leads him back to their table.

"I bought your coffee. I bought one every time I came here, every week you were missing," she tells him.

He manages a smile at that. "You knew I'd be here one day though."

"Yes. I knew it wouldn't be while Gibbs was in the hospital, but I heard via Agent Fornell that he's out now?"

"Yes."

"So I thought it might be tonight, but I wasn't sure what kind of shape you'd be in, or if you'd be up to it. I knew you wouldn't forget though, and I intended to keep coming back until I saw you."

"How's Sam?" Tony asks.

She nods, a bit too enthusiastically. "He's home. He's safe. He's...if not quite well, he will be again, one day. I'll make sure of that." There's a determined tone to her voice, and he believes her. She **will** make sure of it. Her determination lends him strength too. If she can do that for Sam, then he can do it for Gibbs. "Sam wanted to come with me tonight, but I said this was just for me and you, this time. He can come next time. I think he's a little bit jealous." She grins.

"Yeah, I got that impression too, back..." He pauses. "Back there," he finishes with a shrug.

"And how are you?" she asks, gazing at him searchingly.

"It's tough," he admits, honestly.

"Tell me about it!" She shakes her head. "Much as I wanted Sam back, I can't pretend it's easy having him home again and finding out what happened to him. Not that I'd shirk hearing about it; he actually had to endure it, so the least I can do is listen. You did a great job from all I've heard, Tony."

He shrugs. "I just made a phone call. Sam was the real hero. So was Gibbs. We worked as a team."

“But you were the catalyst. They were ground down by that place, and I can understand why. You walked in there and reminded them that they’re Marines and inspired them to fight back.”

“I don’t know how they survived it all those long months, Jan – honestly,” Tony tells her bluntly.

“Because they’re strong, brave men – that’s partly why we love them, isn’t it?” She puts her hand over Tony’s. “On that subject...Sam told me about you and Gibbs. How is that going?”

“Not great. He’s so fucked up, Jan. But I figure, I’ve waited ten years, I’m good at waiting.” Tony shrugs, and Jan squeezes his hand.

“I’ve been married to Sam for all that time, as you know, but it’s hard even for us. Even harder for you, with what you have being birthed in that place.” She gives a little shiver. “The drugs screwed with Sam, Tony, and what they made him do...he feels so guilty, like he betrayed me, which is not the way I see it at all,” she says firmly.

“I told him you’d feel that way. I said you’d just be glad he found a way to get through it and come home alive.”

“And you’re right. Sam’s told me everything, and I don’t judge him for any of it. It wasn’t his choice, and, as you said, he got by any way he could. But he’s having a hard time forgiving himself. It’s probably the same for Gibbs.” She hesitates. “Probably TMI, but don’t expect anything in the bedroom for a while, Tony.”

He laughs out loud. “Hell, I’m nowhere near expecting anything to happen there right now!”

“Good.” She squeezes his hand again.

“But he’s hard work. He doesn’t talk, and he keeps pushing me away. I don’t think he wants me around. He just wants his old life back, without the hassle of a boyfriend.”

“Don’t give up on him, Tony. It’s hard for them.”

“Give up on that stubborn old bastard?” Tony snorts. “Never gonna happen. I’ve hung in this long – he’s never gonna get rid of me now.”

She grins at him. “I always knew you and I were on the same wavelength – and not just because of our taste in macho Marines with bad haircuts and terrible clothes.” She leans forward and kisses his cheek. “I need to get back to Sam. Hang on in there – and trust your instincts. It might get worse before it gets better, Tony, but I’m here if you need me.”

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Gibbs dreams that they tie him up on a table, and Dr Tanner leans over him.

“We’ll make the incision here,” he says, pointing at his chest.

They don't give him any anaesthetic, and it hurts as the scalpel slices through his skin, cutting in deep, leaving a trail of blood in its wake. He watches as Tanner opens up his chest and cuts out his heart. He holds it aloft triumphantly and then places it on a spare gurney beside the operating table, still beating.

It doesn't hurt when Tanner sews up his chest; when he's done there isn't even a scar.

Tanner leans over him. "Wait here while we bring in the others," he says, untying him.

Gibbs watches from the operating table as they wheel in three gurneys, each with a body bag on it, and place them beside the one with his heart on it.

"Time to leave now," Tanner says, and Gibbs gets off the operating table and goes over to the gurneys. "Hurry! We don't have much time!" Tanner calls.

He points, and Gibbs can see that a wall is being built around the gurneys. He watches as brick after brick is put in place, and Tanner is right; he doesn't have long before the gurneys are completely walled in.

He has to see who is in the body bags before he leaves. He unzips the first one to reveal his mother's face, cold and white in death. He moves on to the next one, opening it to see Shannon's long red hair, falling lifelessly over her white shoulder. Kelly's corpse is lying in the third body bag, her dark hair in pigtails, and her body as icy and pale as the others. He thinks that maybe he should feel something, but then he remembers that Tanner cut out his heart, so he can't feel anything now.

"You need to come with me," Tanner instructs, leaving the room. Gibbs follows him and then turns to look back. The room is now completely walled up, all the bricks in place except one. He looks through the gap where the last brick will go, and sees the four gurneys inside, lined up next to each other: His mother; Shannon; Kelly; and his own still beating heart, just sitting on its gurney, pulsing eerily in this room of death.

"Here – this is for you." Tanner puts the last brick into his hands. All he has to do is slot it in place, and they'll be safe in there, walled up together, where nobody can touch them.

He looks into the room again, and instead of the beating heart he sees a wolf.

A white wolf.

The wolf looks thin and starved. It falls off the gurney and comes stumbling towards him, howling at him in a forlorn, reedy tone, begging to be let out.

Gibbs raises the brick, places it against the waiting gap in the wall, and then pushes it slowly into place.

As he turns away, he finds he's not in human form anymore. He's a wolf again. He looks down on his four black paws as he prowls silently away.

Gibbs wakes up, feeling calm and serene. He's lying on the mattress in the bathroom, a half empty bottle of Jack beside him.

It's been several days since Tony advised him against drinking it, but that was advice he didn't take. Tony has at least left him alone since then, as has everyone else. Tony still calls every evening, but apart from those brief, terse conversations, they've all done as he asked, and given him some time and space to recover.

And he is recovering. He's kept his hospital appointments, rested, and physically he feels a hell of a lot better, even if he does go through half a bottle of bourbon a day.

Gibbs gets up and looks at himself in the mirror. His mind feels clearer now that he's got his emotions under control. He can't keep living like this. He needs to get back to the coping mechanisms that always worked so well in the past, and those are his job and his carpentry. It's time to reclaim at least one of those, before he goes insane. Question is: which one?

In the end, he opts for the easiest one.

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On his last day at the Hoover building, Fornell takes Tony into a conference room and shuts the door behind them. He's got a briefcase in his hand, which he places on the table.

"Your colleagues at NCIS have been very helpful," he says, waving at Tony to take a seat. "Agent McGee, in particular, was a great help to me in figuring out how the fights were publicized and how the location details of the venue were disseminated each week – because, as you know, those often changed. It was nearly all done via text messages, and a private, members' only website. All audience members were personally checked by Walid's organization before they were allowed into the venue."

Tony grins. "Good old McGeek. He loves that kind of stuff."

"And Agent David was helpful in interviewing some of the audience members, fighters, and stable owners," Fornell continues. "We had a lot of people to interview, so it was useful to have someone experienced to share some of the load."

"Okay," Tony says slowly, wondering why Fornell brought him in here for this private chat.

"As you know, we recovered video footage of the fights from cell phones in the audience." Tony glances up sharply. "I did not allow your team to see any of that footage," Fornell says firmly.

Tony feels a wave of relief at that, but he knows the message wasn't intended for him.

"I'll make sure he knows," he says quietly. Ziva and McGee know what the fights entailed, but knowing and seeing video of Gibbs actually fighting out there are two different things, and he's glad Fornell has spared Gibbs that.

"The footage on the cell phones wasn't all there was," Fornell continues, and Tony feels his heart skip a beat. "At Scott's house, we found video footage of all Gibbs's fights."

"Okay. Figures. Scott and Frank would have analysed Gibbs's form in detail after each fight, so Frank could work on his weaknesses." Tony tries to keep his tone neutral.

“They were all on these disks. One disk for each fight.” Fornell unlocks the briefcase and opens it to reveal dozens of disks in neatly ordered slots inside. Fornell removes the top disk and places it in the DVD player attached to the plasma at the end of the room.

Tony’s stomach flips as he sees clear, all-too-vivid footage of himself, standing with that stupid red hood over his head. This clearly wasn’t taken on a cell phone; one of Scott’s entourage had to have been filming it on a video camera. The hood is removed, and Gibbs is released into the pit. He prowls around the edge, looking every inch as deadly as Tony remembers.

Tony grows cold; it’s one thing to have it as a memory but another to see it played out all over again in front of him.

Gibbs strides towards him, and at that moment Fornell presses the pause button. “I have been through every second of the footage we’ve taken off the cell phones and all the private footage from the stable owners. This is the only video of this particular fight still in existence,” he says. “And I’m the only person who has seen it.”

He presses the eject button and retrieves the disk, holding it between his thumb and forefinger. “We have more than enough evidence to bust these guys. We don’t need this one,” he says, and then he snaps his fingers, causing the disk to crack in two. He snaps it again and then hands the shattered remains to Tony.

“Thank you for your help this week, Agent DiNozzo.” He pronounces Tony’s name correctly, for the first time.

“Thank **you**, Agent Fornell,” Tony replies softly.

“Tell Gibbs that I need to speak to him when he’s ready. He’s a material witness, and he’ll very likely be called upon to testify.”

“He won’t like that.”

“No. He won’t.” Fornell shakes his head. “But he’ll do it because he wants to see justice done. I know the man, DiNozzo.”

“Me too. He’ll do it because he’s Gibbs, and it’s his duty, and he’s never yet shirked his duty. But you might have to give him some time, Fornell. I don’t think he’s ready to face you just yet.”

“Understood. I know it won’t be painless, considering our history,” Fornell says quietly. “But this could have happened to any of us. It could have happened to me. Make sure he knows I understand that. The fact he’s my friend might make this hard for him; but the fact I am his friend means I will **not** let him down. This is a big case, and it might take a while, but I will make those bastards pay for what they did. He has my word on that.”

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Everything is exactly as it was when he left all those months ago. The same orange walls, the same familiar smell, the same faces walking through the hallways. Those faces turn to look at him as he passes, and he can hear the whispers echoing in his wake.

He ignores them and strides confidently into the squad room. This is his domain. He's ruled this place for years, and nobody is going to steal that from him. He's Leroy Jethro Gibbs, and this is where he belongs.

He walks over to his desk and sees McGee glance up, look down, and then glance up again immediately. Ziva's head swivels at the same time, and the two of them share a look of surprise.

"Uh...um...good to see you, Boss. Are you...here to see Director Vance?" McGee stutters.

"Nope. I'm here to work." Gibbs sits down at his desk and frowns when he sees it cluttered with all kinds of things that don't belong on it. He grabs his wastebasket and sweeps Tony's Mighty Mouse stapler, a pair of socks, an old photograph of a very ugly dog, and various other sundry items into it. Then he gets up and deposits the wastebasket on Tony's desk.

He can feel the gaze of the entire office on him. Ziva's jaw is hanging open, McGee's eyes are popping out like they're on stalks, and the surrounding personnel are all pretending to do their filing while sneaking surreptitious peeks at him out of the corners of their eyes. The entire office is deathly silent.

Gibbs stops, very slowly and deliberately, in the centre of the squad room, knowing that everyone is looking at him. Good – that's what he wants.

"Sit rep, McGee! What are you working on?" he demands.

"Uh, we just wrapped up with Agent Fornell a few days ago. Tony is still there, but I think he finishes today."

"You \*think\*, McGee?" Gibbs rounds on him.

McGee flushes. "Uh...um...no, I know...he said he'd be back later."

"What else? David?" Gibbs turns to glare at her, and she sits up straight and beats out a verbal report in response to his tone.

"Director Vance was waiting for Tony to return before sending us out to work cases. Until then we're writing up our reports. We got a little behind because there was so much going on, and we were working such long hours at the FBI," she admits.

"Then if you're behind, get back to work," he commands. "I want those reports on my desk by the end of the day."

He has no idea if that's fair or reasonable; he just needs to exert some authority. This is him, back to normal, just the way they want him to be. He's not the beat-up man from the pit who took one punch too many, but Leroy Jethro Gibbs, back at work, same as ever, business as usual.

He sweeps from the room, suppressing his limp the way he did in the pit. He can't show weakness here anymore than he did back there. They are both his arenas, and he will dominate them both by the sheer force of his will; he's good at that.

He buys a Caf-Pow and takes it down to Abby's lab. She's standing at her workstation, hopping from one foot to the other in time to the blaring beat of her music, and it's such a familiar sight that it stops him in his tracks.

"What am I looking for? What am I looking for?" Abby mutters, staring intently at her screen as she moves her mouse around at lightning fast speed.

"Maybe this?" Gibbs enters the room silently and holds up the Caf-Pow in front of her face. It nearly goes flying as she shoves it to one side and throws her arms around him.

"Gibbs! Nobody told me you were coming back today! How are you? How have you been? You've been so naughty! I'm really cross with you for not letting me come visit! Tony said to leave you be, said you were like some old wolf, holed up until you got better. But I was not happy about that, Mister, let me tell you, and..."

"Abby...I'm fine." He disengages himself from her bone-crunching hug and allows her to stand back and scrutinize him.

"Well, you don't look too bad. But you're kind of all...muscly." She prods a finger into his bicep. "And I don't like your hair," she adds.

"It's growing back." He runs a hand over his short hair.

"It'd better! I liked my silver fox the way he was, with the softer belly and the longer hair!" She pouts.

"Give it time."

She throws her arms around him again, squeezing tight. "I've missed you so much," she tells him fiercely. "I mean, Tony is good, but he's not you, and I like my team all together. I was so worried all the time and..."

"Abby." He grabs her firmly and pushes her back. "I'm back now and everything is going to be just the way it was."

"Promise?" Her green eyes are anxious.

He smiles and kisses her cheek. "Promise," he says softly.

The ice firmly broken, he can feel the normality settle around him like a cloak as he leaves Abby's lab, making him feel euphoric. This is proving easier than he'd expected.

Ducky is a more daunting prospect. He looks up as Gibbs enters Autopsy and gives him a stern glare over the top of his glasses.



"I wondered when you were going to make your way down here, Jethro. Word of your return has spread already, you see. The prodigal son indeed." He makes a clicking sound with his teeth.

"You disapprove?" Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

"If your doctor deems you well enough to work then I suppose you are." He pauses and looks at Gibbs searchingly. "Are you, Jethro? Are you really?"

"Yes, Ducky. I am," Gibbs says firmly.

"Well then, I look forward to seeing you convince a certain someone of that."

Gibbs gives a curt little laugh. "Vance doesn't scare me."

Ducky shoots him a withering look. "Oh, I wasn't talking about our esteemed director, Jethro. I was talking about Anthony."

"I can handle Tony."

"Is that so?" Ducky's eyes are as perceptive as usual behind his glasses. "Because I've seen a new side to Anthony these past few weeks, Jethro, and if you're not careful, then he might very well be the one handling you."

~\*~

Tony finishes at the Hoover building just before lunch. On his way out, he passes a tall, handsome man in navy-blue chinos and a pink striped shirt. Tony is halfway along the hallway before he realizes who it is. He turns to find the man turning too, an expression of shocked delight on his face.

"Tony...is that you?"

"Greg?" Tony strides back up the hallway towards him, and Greg meets him halfway.

"Greg!"

Tony grabs him and pulls him into a hug, which Greg returns, patting his back, both of them genuinely pleased to see each other.

Tony pulls back to look at him. "Don't take this the wrong way, Greg, but I almost didn't recognize you with your clothes on."

Greg laughs. "I was about to say the same thing! You're looking good, Tony."

"You too. I had no idea you're such a snappy dresser! Love the Ermenegildo Zegna shirt."

"Love the Berluti shoes." Greg glances down at Tony's feet. "Man, isn't it great to be wearing clothes again?"

"Tell me about it! Uh, so..." Tony gestures awkwardly. "You're...?"

“Oh, yeah – I’ve just been going through my testimony with Agent Fornell’s team. I’ve been here a few times now, so they trust me to find my own way to the cafeteria for lunch. Want to join me?”

“Sure, I don’t have to get back to NCIS right away.”

They find a quiet table in the corner of the cafeteria to eat.

“So, how are you doing, Greg?” Tony asks, as he takes a forkful of spaghetti.

“Not too bad, considering. I’m going back to work next week.”

“You’re a personal trainer, yes?” Tony remembers one of the conversations they had back at Scott’s stable.

“Yup! I work in a gym. That’s why they targeted me in the first place. They took me one night – I’d been working late, and it was my turn to lock up.”

“How long ago?” Tony asks curiously.

“A year and a half.”

Tony looks up, shocked. “That long? You survived two whole seasons fighting?”

“Just about. Sometimes it feels like I didn’t survive at all. It feels like I’m still there, fighting for my life every week.” Greg gives a tight little smile.

“Yeah, I know the feeling. Hey, what happened to Matt? Is he okay?”

Greg looks down and then up again, his lips twisting bitterly. “Look, Tony, I’m gay. I knew I was gay from when I was old enough to understand what it meant, and I’ve been out and proud of it since I was sixteen years old. The gym I work at is a gay gym. The reason I got my job back so quickly is because my ex is the manager there, and we’re good friends.”

“Uh, okay.” Tony wonders where this is heading.

“And Matt isn’t gay.” Greg shrugs. “He’s straight, and I’m a complication he doesn’t want in his life. He made that clear from the minute we were rescued.”

“You were in love with him,” Tony says quietly.

“You know what that place was like. You clung onto someone...” Greg shrugs again.

“Honestly, I don’t know, Tony. It felt like love at the time, but maybe it was just loneliness.”

Was that how it was for Gibbs, Tony wonders? Just loneliness? Wanting someone to hold onto at night? That, combined with the drugs making him so horny he didn’t care who he fucked. Maybe he’s been an idiot, and the way Gibbs is holding him at arm’s length right now is because he’s trying to extricate himself from an unwanted ‘complication’, just like Matt.

“How are you?” Greg asks. “And how is the old wolf? Is he still snarling at everyone?” He grins.

“He was badly injured in that final fight, trying to keep it going long enough for help to arrive,” Tony says quietly. “He’s getting better physically, but mentally and emotionally...I have no idea.”

Greg looks surprised. “But you two were so close.”

“Well, right now we don’t feel close at all. He barely talks to me. Maybe it’s like with you and Matt. Maybe it was just the drugs and the loneliness.”

Greg bursts out laughing and then trails off when Tony doesn’t join in. “You’re kidding right?”

“No, Greg, I’m not. I’m bisexual; I fell for Gibbs years ago, but he never gave any indication he was anything but straight, so I just, you know, worshipped him quietly from afar.” Tony gives a tight little smile. “And yes, I thought we had something back in Scott’s stable, but maybe I was kidding myself.”

Greg gives him an incredulous look. “Tony – are you insane? Gibbs nearly tore my dick off just for talking to you.”

“Like I said, the drugs...”

“No,” Greg says forcefully. “Listen to me, Tony – I will never forget the expression on his face when they were whipping you. He was out of his mind; anyone could see that. He lived every single one of those lashes with you, and it was destroying him to see you in that kind of pain and not be able to make it stop.”

“He hated me being hurt; doesn’t mean he wants to spend the rest of his life with me.”

“Then there was the way he looked at you, when he knew you couldn’t see,” Greg says, leaning forward across the table and gesturing insistently with his fork. “I saw though. There was this expression of the most intense love, pride, and worry on his face, all mixed up. I used to envy you and fear for you at the same time, being the focus of all that Wolfman intensity. All my life, I’ve wanted someone to look at me that way. Tony, that man loves you, passionately, and I think you’re the only one who could ever handle him. He’s one intense bastard.”

“Oh yeah.” Tony grins. “He’s definitely that.”

“Some people are perfect for each other. It just works, and that’s what I saw in you two,” Greg tells him firmly. “You balance each other out; you lighten him up, and he grounds you. You belong together. Trust me – I’ve seen a lot of guys in love, but never one as much in love as Gibbs is in love with you.”

It’s good to hear. He’s been getting so little back from Gibbs that he was starting to wonder if what they shared back in that stall was just a figment of his imagination. He remembers that

kiss a few days ago, when it felt like he'd woken a sleeping wolf. Gibbs was as passionate then as he was back at Scott's stable, before something spooked him, and he pulled away.

He swaps cell phone numbers with Greg and returns to NCIS, feeling better than he has in days.

"Hey – McGee! I'm back!" he announces the minute he walks into the squad room. "FBI work all done and boy, am I glad to see the back of that place. Much as I hate the orange..." he glances at the familiar NCIS walls, "I prefer them to that weird shade of puce the FBI has going on. So, what's been happening here? Sit rep me, Probie!"

"Uh..." McGee gets up, flushing wildly. "I just gave a sit rep, Tony."

"You did? To who?"

"To me, DiNozzo," says a familiar voice behind him.

~\*~

Tony whirls around, a shocked look on his face.

"You're back? Boss," he adds, his eyes narrowing as his sharp-eyed gaze rakes over Gibbs. Gibbs glances down at his familiar, workday clothes, the new ones he bought from Sears, and then back up at Tony.

"Yes, I'm back, so clear the rest of your junk off my desk. I need to go talk to the director." He glances up at where Vance is standing above, gazing down on the squad room darkly.

"But..." Tony opens his mouth to protest, but Gibbs brushes past him.

"Now, DiNozzo," he growls.

He runs up the stairs two at a time, feeling strong again for the first time in weeks. His body has healed, and his mind will do what he tells it. It's that simple.

He strides into Vance's office confidently, shutting the door behind him.

"Agent Gibbs, I didn't know you were intending to return to work today," Vance says.

"I'm fit to work, so here I am." Gibbs shrugs. "Lot of catching up to do, so if you don't mind, Director..."

"I do mind," Vance says sharply. "Look, Gibbs, you've been through a hell of an ordeal. Before you can return to work, I need you to see Dr Bracco from Psych Services, just to make sure you're fit for duty."

"Me? See a shrink?" Gibbs laughs in his face. "C'mon, Leon! We both know that's not going to happen."

“Gibbs, it’s agency policy that any agent returning to work after the kind of trauma you endured, has to be cleared by Psych Services first.”

Gibbs shakes his head, chuckling softly to himself. “Is it agency policy to leave an agent out in the field alone too?”

Vance sighs. “Gibbs, if you’re going to have a problem working with me then that’s all the more reason for you to see Dr Bracco.”

“The only problem I’m going to have working with you is if you make me see some idiot from Psych Services.” Gibbs smiles sweetly. “I’m not the kind of guy who spills his guts to a shrink. I’ll tell her what she wants to hear, if it’ll make you feel better, but it’s a waste of time.”

Vance leans back in his chair. “If I waive this requirement…”

“Then everything can go back to how it was before. No hard feelings about you leaving me out there to rot.” He bares his teeth slightly at Vance, who shifts uncomfortably.

“Fine. Go back to your job. But if you’re not fit for work, then I’ll suspend you. Got that?”

“Got it.” Gibbs strides out of the office, grinning to himself. Wolves can be cunning when they have to.

It’s been a good day’s work so far, but he needs coffee, so he heads for the elevator. Someone falls into step beside him just as he reaches it, and a split second later he finds himself being shoved into it. He swings around and finds himself face to face with Tony just as the doors close, trapping them in the tiny space together – which is precisely what he’d been trying to avoid.

Tony immediately slams his hand on the emergency switch, bringing the elevator to a juddering halt. “What the hell do you think you’re doing?” he demands.

“Coming back to work.” Gibbs shrugs. “What does it look like?”

Tony’s eyes narrow. “Have you seen Dr Bracco?”

“Nope. No need.” Gibbs shakes his head.

Tony rocks back on his heels, a look of realization in his eyes. “You screwed one over on Vance to get out of it, didn’t you?”

Gibbs shrugs. “I’m fine, as you can see. I’m better than fine, Tony. I just needed some time to heal. No need to see some damn shrink.”

The expression in Tony’s eyes hardens. “If anyone needs to see a shrink, it’s you.”

“Why? So I can talk about my **feelings**?” Gibbs sneers. “What the hell use is that?”

Tony leans in close. "Right now, I'm not sure you have any feelings, Gibbs. I don't think you've been feeling much of anything since you woke up in the hospital, and anything you do feel scares the hell out of you, so you shove it down and pretend it's not there."

"You're talking crap, Tony. I've done black ops, and I've fought in wars. I'm not some little..." he waves his hand, looking for the right expression.

"Pussy boy?" Tony supplies for him, raising one eye dangerously, daring him to take the bait.

Gibbs glares at him. "I'm not a kid, Tony. I'm fine now. I've had a lot worse than what Walid's little army of misfits put me through."

"Really? Worse than being made to fight for your life every week? Worse than being imprisoned in a tiny cell for six months? Worse than being beaten and abused repeatedly? Worse than being made to shoot an innocent person in order to save three others? Worse than being repeatedly raped?" He pauses. "Worse than being made to eat all that healthy green shit and denied coffee?" he adds facetiously.

Gibbs stares at him blankly. "I wasn't raped." He made that vow to himself right at the beginning. Nobody was going to fuck him in the ass, and he made sure of that by winning every single fight. He clenches his fists by his side.

"Do you want to look it up in the dictionary?" Tony asks. "Because I'm pretty sure you'll find the definition of rape is any act of sexual intercourse forced on a person. Or did you **want** to have sex with all those guys in the pit?"

Gibbs can feel his heart racing as images of himself fucking stranger after stranger in the pit crowd into his mind. It was no more than mindless, drug-fuelled rutting, and he feels a surge of anger and helplessness as the memories flood in. He knows he did those things, but right now, he can't fathom how.

Tony is gazing at him intently. "You're too hung up on who does what to who. I told you before; being fucked is good. You've seen how much I like it. You might like it too, if you gave it a chance. It's not the act of penetration that makes it rape, Gibbs; it's the lack of consent." Tony moves in a little closer, so close that Gibbs can feel the heat radiating off his body. "You're not a rapist, Jethro. Is that what you've been thinking? Because you fucked them, that made you a rapist?"

Gibbs finds he can't move. He's rooted to the spot as the memories replay in his head...and then get stuck on one in particular. He's looking down on Tony, who is looking back up at him, his face bloody and bruised, his forehead beaded with sweat, and his eyes flashing with pain as Gibbs fucks him in the sawdust.

"No," Tony says firmly, reading him like a book. "I told you at the time – that wasn't rape. We're not putting that label on it. You saved my life and yours by fucking me in the pit that night. Don't you **dare** call it rape. If it was any kind of rape, it was them raping us, not you raping me. Understand?"

Gibbs closes his eyes, trying to block out that one memory as it keeps replaying in his head.

“You know what I think?” Tony says, and his voice is so close he has to be standing almost on top of him. “I think I made a mistake leaving you alone for so long. I think it’s given you a chance to shut down. And I think you only don’t want me around because I make you remember what you want to forget.”

Gibbs opens his eyes to growl out a reply, but before he can say anything Tony has him pinned against the elevator wall and is kissing him hard on the mouth. He’s still for a moment and then his body responds, his cock hardening for the first time in weeks.

He grabs Tony’s face between his hands and wrests back control of the kiss, returning it passionately. Tony’s scent, his taste, and the feel of his skin under his fingertips makes Gibbs come alive, and with the pleasure also comes all the pain he’s been blocking out.

He growls in frustration and tears himself away. It seems it’s not possible to have one without the other. If he wants Tony, then he has to have all the bad stuff too, and he doesn’t want that. But he wants Tony so bad, damn it.

Tony is standing in front of him, his chest heaving. “So he is in there, that white wolf of yours,” he says softly. “I knew he was. He just needs feeding. Let me feed him, Jethro.” He reaches out and brushes his hand through Gibbs’s short hair. “He’s hungry...let me...let me...” He leans in and kisses Gibbs again, gently this time, holding him close.

Gibbs feels as if he’s been starved for weeks. He’s too hungry for Tony to push him away, so he holds on tight, feeling some part of him grow stronger as they kiss.

Finally they come up for air, and he stares at Tony, wondering how the hell \*this\* fits into resuming his old life.

“Seems like the only way to get through to you is to lock you up in a tiny steel box so you can’t get away,” Tony says, with a twisted grin.

Gibbs sighs. “You’re making too much of this, Tony. I told you, I’ve been through bad stuff before, and I’ve handled it. Why the hell should this be any different?”

“Seriously? You’re seriously asking that?” Tony takes his face between his hands and gazes at him intently. “Because you’re an honourable man, and they made you kill. Because you’re a private man, and they forced you to fuck out there in front of all those people. Because you’re a good man, and they tried to make you into a bad one – and that’s how you’re feeling right now. Bad. And that’s why you’re trying so hard to shove everything down, so you don’t have to feel that way.”

Gibbs pushes his hands away. “So you’re my fucking shrink now?”

“Look, I get the bravado. I’ve even done it myself – although admittedly your mask is a hell of a lot more gruff and macho than mine. I bet you waltzed back in here like you owned the place and dazzled everyone with your...your...” He waves his hands in the air. “Your Gibbs-ness.”

Gibbs rolls his eyes. “You’re talking crap, Tony. As usual.”

Tony rocks back on his heels, looking at Gibbs thoughtfully. “See, people think you’re an unfeeling bastard, and that’s exactly the way you like it, isn’t it? You’re the big, bad wolf – nothing can hurt you, can it? But I think it’s the opposite. I think you feel things too much, and you have to control those feelings to stop them from eating you alive.”

“Fuck you,” Gibbs growls, torn between wanting to kiss Tony again and wanting to punch him.

Tony shrugs. “You have. Plenty of times. And I really hope you’ll do it again, but you have to open up and let me in on what’s going on in that thick skull of yours.”

“Why? You seem to think you have it all figured out already,” Gibbs says sarcastically.

“Just following my gut, like someone once taught me,” Tony throws back at him. “See, I just had lunch with Greg, and he reminded me...”

Gibbs feels a familiar surge of possessive jealousy. “You saw Greg?”

“Yeah – he was at the Hoover building today, giving evidence to Fornell. Why? Does that bother you?” There’s an amused gleam in Tony’s eyes.

“No,” Gibbs lies. “We’re done here, DiNozzo.” He slams his hand angrily on the elevator switch and it lurches into life.

“Oh, we’re nowhere near done, Gibbs,” Tony growls at him, slamming the switch back again. The elevator comes to another juddering halt.

Gibbs sighs and turns towards him. “What do you want from me, Tony?”

“I want you to be honest.”

“I am.”

“So you’re not jealous of Greg?”

“Nope.” Gibbs shrugs. “You can have lunch with whoever the hell you like, Tony.”

“And you’re totally fit to be back at work?”

“Uh-huh.”

“And you aren’t having any problems handling what happened to you during your six months at Scott’s luxury hotel?”

“Nope.”

“So you’ll be going over to the Hoover building to give your testimony to Fornell tomorrow?”



Gibbs flinches. Damn Tony for throwing out the sucker punch and taking him down with it. He never even saw it coming.

Tony gives him another of those twisted little grins and leans in close. "I told you, I can fight dirty too, Gibbs."

Gibbs thinks of Ellis's broken jaw and nose, and Walid sharing a cell with Mac. He's all too well aware of just how dirty Tony can fight; he was an idiot to forget it.

"Especially when there's something really worth fighting for," Tony adds. He reaches across Gibbs and flicks the emergency switch. "Now we're done," he says.

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As it turns out, nobody goes anywhere for the next few weeks because they catch a case.

And Tony can't deny that it *\*does\** feel good to have Gibbs stride into the squad room and tell them to "saddle up".

"Dead petty officer in Rock Creek Park, Boss?" he asks, wondering what it'll take to earn a head-slap from Gibbs these days.

"Nope. Dead lieutenant in an alley in Georgetown," Gibbs throws back at him, and for a moment it's just like old times.

It feels even more so, but in a darker way, when they get out there and find their lieutenant with a gunshot wound to the back of his head. Tony glances at Gibbs to find him glancing back at him. Is he remembering Steve, Tony wonders? Or Brian, Ben, Rajul or any of the others killed just like this?

If Gibbs is suffering, physically at least, Tony sees no sign of it. The man appears to be made of iron as he strides around, leading the investigation like the previous several months never happened. He seems to have lost none of his investigative skills and drive for justice, pushing them hard to solve the case, and Tony can see how relieved McGee and Ziva are to have him back.

Abby's a different matter. When he takes some evidence down to her lab a few days later, she grabs his arm.

"What's going on with Gibbs?" she demands, looking over his shoulder at the door and speaking quickly.

"What do you mean?" he asks cautiously.

"I mean, what's the deal with him? He looks like Gibbs, he walks like Gibbs, and he definitely yells at you guys like Gibbs." She gives a little grin. "But he's not Gibbs."

"You mean he looks, talks and sounds exactly like Gibbs, but is really a kind of pod-Gibbs?" Tony muses. "Did you ever see that movie? Man, that was a good one. *'Invasion of the Body-snatchers'*. A true movie classic."

“Tony!” She thumps him on the arm. “Concentrate. I’m talking about Gibbs here! You must have noticed. I know the others haven’t, because, well, they’re not us, but you and me, we know him better than that.”

“Yeah, we do,” Tony says quietly.

“It’s like he’s someone just as Gibbs-like only more so...”

“You mean like a wolf in wolf’s clothing?” Tony gives a little grin.

“Exactly! That’s totally it!” She thumps him on the arm again. “And it’s not right! I want real Gibbs, not pretendy-Gibbs. Do something, Tony!”

“I’m working on it, Abby, trust me,” he tells her grimly.

“Then work harder! I’m afraid we’re losing him!”

“I won’t let that happen.” Tony shakes his head. “I’m getting there, Abby. It’s just hard because, well, he’s Gibbs, and he’s a stubborn bastard. I have a plan though.”

“You do?” Her eyes brighten. “Tell me about it!”

“Can’t, Abs. You’ll just have to trust me on this one. Let’s just say there’s a white wolf that’s starving right now, and I’m damn well gonna make sure it gets fed.” He rolls his shoulders, wincing as the muscles protest. His back is aching from several days running around and very little sleep, and his anxiety about Gibbs is just making it worse.

“And how are you, Mister?” Abby asks, prodding his chest.

“Me?” Tony takes a step back to avoid her pointy finger. “I’m not pod-Tony, Abs. I’m real Tony, promise.”

“I think you’re extra-topping-Tony,” she says.

“What does that mean? Is it good?”

“Yes! It’s like you’re Tony-Max. Or Tony-Pow!” She picks up her Caf-Pow and takes a long slurp. “I may have had too much of this,” she says around the straw.

“Ya think?”

“It’s been a long week, and I’m mainlining to stay awake. But you, Tony, you’ve got some new hard, shiny thing going on. I can’t place it, but it’s like you’re in love or something. Are you in love, Tony?” She peers at him suspiciously.

“Yes, Abby, but it’s not new.”

“Hmmm...I thought so! Not the walking on air kind of love, but more the ‘I know what I want, and I’m damn well going to get it!’ kind of love.”

“Whatever you say, Abs.” He leans forward and kisses her gently on the cheek.

“Now that! That was definitely not a pod-kiss!” She stares at him sadly and then pushes him towards the door. “Go save him, Obi-Wan DiNozzo! You’re our only hope!”

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Being back at work is the ideal distraction. It consumes his every waking minute, so he doesn’t have too much thinking time, and it’s exactly what Gibbs needs. His body aches with the pressure of keeping going, but he’s used to ignoring his own physical needs, so that doesn’t bother him.

They’re so busy that he crawls home for a few hours each night, drinks half a bottle of Jack, and fall asleep on the mattress in the bathroom. He needs the Jack because it keeps the worst of the nightmares at bay. They still creep in, maybe one or two a night, but if he doesn’t drink before going to sleep then he gets hardly any rest at all. The bourbon takes him down and keeps him under, and he needs the sleep too much to question how he comes by it.

He tries to eat, but there’s a feeling of nausea in his belly that never goes away, so he doesn’t manage much. It doesn’t matter because he’s not hungry and when he does eat everything tastes like a combination of grease and cardboard anyway.

It’s a difficult case, and one that will take all of their skill and dedication to crack, so he pushes his team hard. They don’t seem to mind. In fact, he thinks they relish having him back so much that he could push them to the point of total exhaustion and beyond, and they wouldn’t protest.

At the end of the first week, Gibbs goes down to Abby’s lab to hear her latest report. She gives him that strange look she keeps giving him, and when he leans over to kiss her cheek she moves away. He frowns.

“Problem, Abs?”

“No! Just...” she shivers, rubbing her arms, which are covered in goose-bumps. “I don’t feel safe, Gibbs.”

“I know, there’s a murderer on the loose, but I won’t let him hurt you, Abby. You know that.”

“It’s not the murderer. I know you’ll catch him,” she says with a dismissive wave of her hand. “It’s this place.” She glances around the lab. “It doesn’t feel safe. It feels like there’s a scary wild wolf prowling around that could creep up on me at any moment.”

“Not a wolf that will hurt you though,” he says quietly.

She turns to him, chewing on her lip. “Maybe. I don’t know. I just don’t like it. It feels wrong. When you kiss me, it doesn’t feel like you anymore, Gibbs. It feels like it’s something you’re doing because you know it’s what you \*do\*, rather than what you want to do.”

He rolls his eyes. "I don't have time for this, Abby; I have a murderer to catch." He turns to go, striding towards the door.

"Come back to us, Gibbs," she calls after him. "I miss you!"

He turns back towards her, a snarl on his lips, and is shocked to see her visibly recoil as if he truly is that wild wolf she just said she's so scared of.

He gets into the elevator and just as the doors are closing, Tony suddenly appears out of nowhere and throws himself inside. The doors shut, and Gibbs clenches his fists. He's managed to avoid Tony quite successfully for several days, by the simple expediency of barking orders at him and working him into the ground, and he doesn't want a repeat of their last elevator conversation.

Tony turns towards him, and Gibbs puts up a hand.

"Forget it, DiNozzo. I don't have time for this right now."

"Not even for this?" Tony leans in close and kisses him gently on the lips. It takes him so much by surprise that he doesn't have a chance to respond before Tony pulls away and a split second later the elevator doors open, and Tony walks out into the squad room as if that didn't just happen. Gibbs blinks, staring after him.

A few seconds later, Tony stands in front of his desk and gives a verbal report, same as usual, not even a glint of anything in his eyes.

Two hours later, Gibbs finishes washing his hands and is about to leave the restroom when Tony emerges from one of the stalls, pulls him into it, and kisses him again. This time he puts a hand on Tony's chest, intending to shove him away, but Tony's lips feel so warm and good against his own that he finds himself pulling him close instead and kissing him back.

Tony draws back, a little smile on his face, and pats Gibbs's cheek.

"I love you," he says softly, and then he leaves. Gibbs is left, once again, standing there, wondering what the hell just happened.

Later that day, Tony squeezes Gibbs's shoulder briefly when he's sitting at his desk and then moves away before Gibbs can shrug off his hand.

The following day he stands just a little too close when they're walking down to Autopsy, his arm brushing against Gibbs's as they move.

They bring in a possible suspect for questioning, and Tony conducts the interrogation while Gibbs and Ziva watch through the observation room window. As Tony finishes he turns and fluently signs, "I miss you" at the mirror with his hands, before turning back, without missing a beat, and showing the suspect out.

"What was **that**?" Ziva asks with a frown.

“Just DiNozzo, messing about as usual,” Gibbs growls. Abby’s clearly been giving him signing lessons.

On his way home from work that evening, Gibbs is just about to get into his car in the parking garage when Tony appears from nowhere, pulls him into an embrace, and kisses him on the lips. It’s warm, gentle and loving, asking for nothing and giving everything. And then, just as Gibbs starts wanting more, Tony pulls away and leaves without saying a word.

The following day, when Tony gives Gibbs a file he lets his fingers linger on Gibbs’s hand a fraction of a beat too long, stroking gently, then moves his hand away just before Gibbs realises what he’s doing and starts to shake him off.

Over the next few weeks, Tony ambushes Gibbs repeatedly. He kisses him in the elevator, the conference room, the stairwell, and the parking garage. It’s not a long kiss – often it’s barely more than a sweet touch of lips on lips – and then he disappears as suddenly as he came. Each time he murmurs something in Gibbs’s ear just before he goes: “I love you”, “I want you”, “I miss you” – and each time Gibbs is about to tell him to leave him the hell alone, but Tony is always gone before he can get the words out.

Slowly, gradually, Gibbs feels something warm starting to stir deep inside. It isn’t much, but the knot of anxiety in the pit of his belly that he’s been ignoring for weeks slowly starts to loosen. He finds he can keep down a little more food and maybe he needs a little less Jack to help him sleep at night.

He starts to look forward to Tony’s surprise attacks, enjoying the fact that he never knows when they’ll happen. Tony doesn’t push. He doesn’t start another argument, or ask anything from Gibbs that he isn’t ready to give. He just reminds him, a dozen times a day, in tiny, brief moments, that he loves him.

Gibbs finds himself glancing at Tony across the room instead of avoiding his gaze, and he starts to see the tired lines around Tony’s eyes, and the way his shoulders are becoming more and more hunched as the case takes its toll. He finds his fingers itching to dig into Tony’s sore back and soothe out the stiffness.

Their murderer is a scumbag called Lance Briggs, and they trace him to a warehouse by the docks a few days later. He’s armed, dangerous and has left a trail of victims in his wake. Gibbs motions his team into position to flush him out of the warehouse, and a second later Briggs bursts out of the exit closest to where Tony is holding position and makes a run for it, shooting his gun wildly, with Tony in hot pursuit.

Gibbs feels a surge of an old, familiar protective instinct stirring inside. He charges after both Tony and Briggs, finding the energy from somewhere to run as fast as they are going, ignoring the pain in his knee. He rounds a corner and finds that Tony has brought Briggs down and is struggling with him.

Time seems to slow down, and in that moment, seeing Tony down on the ground, Gibbs’s heart suddenly bursts into life. It pounds painfully in his chest, full of fear, anxiety and anger. Gibbs is hardly aware of what he’s doing – he just explodes. He sprints the short distance to where they are fighting, yanks Briggs bodily off Tony, and plants his fist in the man’s face repeatedly.

He's back in the pit, fighting for survival, using all his stored up anger and hate to win a fight he must not lose. His clothes are a hindrance, weighing him down, and all he wants to do is protect the person he loves most in the world and stop any harm ever coming to him. He couldn't protect his mom, or his wife, or his daughter, but he can damn well protect Tony.

Suddenly he's being dragged backwards off Briggs, whose face is a bloody mess, and Tony is pulling him away, talking to him in low, urgent tones.

"We've got him, Gibbs. It's okay – we've got him..."

He calms down enough to see that Ziva and McGee are cuffing Briggs, shooting worried glances in Gibbs's direction. They've never seen him like this before. Tony pulls him down the side of the warehouse, away from their startled gazes.

"Hey...it's okay. I'm okay," Tony tells him, rubbing his shoulders comfortingly.

Gibbs looks down on his own bloody knuckles and then up at Tony's split lip and the red mark on his jaw. He grabs Tony's face and holds it.

"You're okay? You're okay?" he asks repeatedly, checking Tony for signs of further damage.

"I'm fine. Ziva and McGee have taken Briggs to the car. I thought I should settle you down before we head back to NCIS. You were out of it back there."

Gibbs gazes at Tony helplessly. "Thought he was hurting you...thought I was going to lose you." He rests his forehead against Tony's, breathing heavily.

"I'm fine. I can handle myself." Tony's hands caress his shoulders, warm and loving.

"Ssh...it's okay. I've got you," he says, pulling him close and holding him tight.

"Why did you wake me up?" Gibbs hisses into his shoulder. "All that damn kissing! All those touches...I was doing fine, but you had to go and wake me up. Damn it, it \*hurts\*, Tony."

"I know...I know," Tony says softly. "But you couldn't stay all locked up like that forever, Jethro."

Gibbs draws back. "Why the hell not?"

"Well, it was freaking Abby out for a start." Tony grins. "And me," he adds, his grin fading. "And you deserve better than that, Jethro. After what you've been through, you deserve so much better than being all alone, unable to feel a damn thing, and having to go through the motions and pretend at being who you are because you've forgotten how it feels to be the real you."

"Damn it!" Gibbs turns and walks away, feeling winded. It hurts so much he can barely breathe. He couldn't handle seeing Tony being attacked after what they went through together, and he can't handle his own anger, shame, pain, and guilt, either. It's all too overwhelming. It reminds him of the worst time in his life, after Shannon and Kelly were killed, when he had to shut down just to keep from going under.

He leans against the warehouse wall, struggling for breath, and feels Tony's hand on his shoulder, squeezing, lending him that same invisible support he's been giving to him for weeks. He realizes now that is all that has kept him going throughout this case. He might have thought he was doing fine, but he was barely functioning. He was like an automaton, going through the motions, acting at being himself. No wonder Abby was so scared of him.

"I'm here," Tony says quietly. "I'm not pushing. There's no pressure. Just come to me when you're ready. And here." He puts his hands on Gibbs's face and draws him in. "Let's feed that white wolf some more." He kisses Gibbs softly, sweetly, just once, and then draws back.

There's no time to talk; they have a job to do. Gibbs somehow manages to force himself back to the car, Tony beside him, still offering him that support, their arms touching as they walk.

After the interrogation and the paperwork are all done it's nearly two a.m. Gibbs is too tired to think about what happened back at the warehouse. He just goes home, drinks half a bottle of Jack, and throws himself on his mattress in the bathroom to sleep.

He hears a nuzzling sound at the bathroom door a few hours later. He turns over, trying to ignore it, but then it turns into a scratching noise. He buries his head under his blanket, but instead of going away the scratching sound becomes a whimper, which then turns into a howl. He can't ignore it anymore. He gets up, goes over to the door, and opens it.

There's a skinny white wolf sitting there, gazing at him dolefully.

"You want to come in, don't you?" He glares at it. The wolf gets to its feet unsteadily, its body swaying. Gibbs can see its ribs and realizes the creature is half-starved.

The wolf presses its nose into Gibbs's hand, and he sighs and steps to one side, allowing the wolf to slink into the bathroom. The wolf lies down on the mattress and looks up at him hopefully.

"That's my damn bed," Gibbs growls. The wolf gives a little whine and rests its head on its white paws, daring him to kick it off the mattress. Gibbs is too tired to argue. He lies down on the mattress beside the wolf and closes his eyes. He feels the wolf moving closer, and then it lays its head on Gibbs's shoulder. Gibbs reaches out, wraps his arms around it, and holds it close.

He isn't sure why, but somehow having the wolf in his arms makes him feel incredibly sad. He buries his face in the wolf's fur and finds himself crying, great, wrenching sobs that rack his body. His tears disappear into the wolf's fur, and it nuzzles in even closer, raising its head to lick the tears from Gibbs's cheeks.

Now he's started crying he can't stop; he holds the wolf tight and sobs convulsively into its fur.

He wakes up to find his pillow wet. He feels wrung out, and he's hurting inside, but at least the world isn't muffled and numb anymore.

He knows what he has to do. He takes a shower, gets dressed, and walks wearily out to his car. He drives over to Tony's place, unsure what the hell he's going to do or say. He isn't used to being this weak and this vulnerable. He doesn't like how it feels.

He pulls up outside Tony's apartment block and is just about to get out of his car when he sees Tony emerging; he's dressed in one of his work suits, although they've been given four days leave following the case, and he's carrying a bunch of flowers.

Gibbs feels his gut tighten. Where the hell is Tony going? He remembers that Tony had lunch with Greg recently and feels a surge of jealousy. He hates the way he's at the mercy of his emotions, being buffeted by one blow after another. He feels like he's hanging in the wind, and if he has to take one more punch then he'll go down, once and for all.

Tony gets in his car and drives away, and Gibbs's gut pings uncomfortably. He hasn't felt his gut making its presence felt in weeks, and he has the distinct feeling something bad is going to happen. Acting on instinct, he puts the car in gear and follows Tony.

Tony pulls up outside a small house half an hour's drive away. He gets out of the car, and Gibbs sees him visibly bracing himself. He looks as scared and vulnerable as Gibbs feels right now, and Gibbs's heart goes out to him. It seems his gut was right. What is Tony going to put himself through now?

Tony's shoulders are hunched, as they have been for days, but Gibbs sees him making a conscious effort to straighten them, standing up tall and proud. Tony takes a deep breath, and then he walks slowly up to the house and knocks on the door.

A tiny Indian lady answers it. She's dressed in a purple and gold sari, and her eyes fill with tears when she sees Tony. He offers her the flowers.

"Mrs Patel? I'm Tony DiNozzo – we spoke on the phone earlier? I was with your son Rajul when he died. He gave me a message for you."

"Please...come in..." She stands to one side to let him in, and Gibbs sees Tony take another deep breath, and then he disappears inside the house.

Gibbs rests his head on the steering wheel. Rajul, Steve, Brian, Ben... He's been trying so hard to forget them while Tony is doing his best to lay their ghosts to rest. He feels a surge of pride for Tony, for all he did to save them, for not forgetting those who didn't make it out of that nightmare, and for standing by him these past few weeks when he was pushing him away.

Gibbs reaches for his cell phone and makes a call, and then he sits back in his seat and waits.

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Mrs Patel is sweet and welcoming. She makes him tea, and he sits on her couch and looks at all her photographs of Rajul, from when he was a baby to when he graduated from high school.



Tony hopes it helps her to know Rajul loved her and that his last thoughts were of her. He isn't sure if that's any comfort, but he wants her to know that her son was with someone who was kind to him in his last few minutes. He doesn't tell her the details of her son's death; no parent needs to know something as ugly as that. Tony has seen the FBI report, and he knows what Fornell's team told her. She'll find out more when it goes to court, and he hopes she's ready for that. He warns her, gently, what it might entail, and she nods, blinking the tears out of her eyes.

Finally, he says goodbye and emerges into the sunlight. It's a beautiful late fall day, much warmer than it has any right to be at this time of the year.

Tony walks slowly towards his car, waiting until Mrs Patel has closed the door behind him. Only then does he allow his shoulders to sag. He pauses beside his car, breathing heavily. That was painful but necessary. He didn't want to re-live the events of that horrible day, but he promised Rajul he'd do this, and he's glad he did.

Still, it hurts. He rests his arms on the side of the car, feeling the soreness in his shoulders. It's like someone has taken handfuls of his skin and is twisting it, pulling him down. He takes a few deep breaths, steadying himself...and is taken completely by surprise when he feels two hands descend on his shoulders, soothing the sore skin.

"Ssh, I've got you," a familiar voice says in his ear, and he relaxes, smiling to himself as he remembers his own words of yesterday being whispered back to him.

Gibbs's fingers feel so good, digging into his aching shoulders, and Tony surrenders to the massage for a couple of minutes. Then he turns. Gibbs looks...like Gibbs again. Tony isn't sure what the difference is, just that the white wolf is back, balancing out the dark one. He thinks it's that same white wolf he's got to thank for Gibbs being here right now and giving a damn about him.

It's interesting that the white wolf burst into life when he was threatened yesterday and now again today, when he's feeling so low after visiting Mrs Patel. Then again, he's always known that Gibbs's white wolf has a streak of protectiveness a mile wide. That's one of the main ways Gibbs has always shown his love. He's not the kind of guy who'll make any flowery declarations; this is how his white wolf expresses itself.

"Did you follow me?" Tony asks.

"Yeah." Gibbs shrugs. "I was driving over to your place and got there just as you came out with the flowers...wondered where you were going. My gut said it was bad, so..."

"You followed me. It's kind of a habit you have." Tony gives a little grin, remembering so much of their shared history, going right the way back to when he was a cop in Baltimore.

"Well, now you can follow me." Gibbs jerks his head at his car, and Tony doesn't have a chance to ask him where they're going because Gibbs strides off.

Tony drives after Gibbs to a marina a few miles away and gets out of his car.

Gibbs goes into the marina office, emerges a few seconds later with a basket, and jerks his head at Tony again. "This way."

Tony follows Gibbs down to the water and watches him jump on board a big, white yacht. Gibbs turns and holds out his hand to help Tony climb on board too.

"Nice." Tony stands on the deck, glancing around.

"Belongs to an old friend. He said I could borrow it for the afternoon." Gibbs puts the basket down. "Food," he mutters.

Tony sits down and watches as Gibbs takes the boat out onto the open water. The sun feels good on his face, and he feels himself relaxing, really relaxing, for the first time in months.

They end up in the middle of nowhere. There's just blue water all around them, no other boats in sight, and the sun shining overhead. Gibbs stops the boat and comes over to him.

"Take off your clothes," he orders.

Tony glances up at him in surprise. "What?"

"Clothes." Gibbs jerks his head impatiently, holding up something in his hand. Tony squints through the glare of the sun and sees a bottle of massage oil. "Somethin' I've wanted to do for a few weeks," Gibbs mutters. "Watching you walk around with those aching shoulders."

Tony grins and undresses, and then he lies down on the towel Gibbs has placed on the front deck.

He's not exactly sure what he's expecting, but he had no idea that Gibbs knew how to give such fantastic massages. Gibbs's fingers are strong and sure as they slide into his shoulders and neck, digging in just deep enough to give relief without being painful. Tony sighs and spreads out, allowing Gibbs to have control over his body. It feels so damn good to be here, under the sun, having his shoulders massaged by such strong, expert hands.

He feels Gibbs's lips on one of his scars, and then feels him trace it down from shoulder to thigh, bestowing dozens of tiny kisses on it as he goes. Tony has a sudden, vivid memory of doing the exact same thing to Gibbs several weeks ago, infusing each kiss and each long, deep sweep of his fingers with all the love he possessed.

Now Gibbs is returning the favour. Gibbs is not a man who can speak easily about those things he cares about the most, but he can show it; and right now, after weeks of being shut out, Tony knows that Gibbs is telling him exactly what he means to him.

That knowledge brings a lump to Tony's throat, and he swallows down hard and wipes his face on the towel.

"You okay? Going too hard?" Gibbs asks.

"No...just right," Tony replies softly.

He allows himself to drift off as those deft fingers and gently caressing lips show him just how much Gibbs loves him; after an hour or so, he is in absolutely no doubt about how deep that love is.

Finally, Gibbs draws back, and Tony turns over to see him gazing down on him with a satisfied smile on his face.

“One more thing.” Gibbs picks up Tony’s hand and gently massages the fingers he once broke, slowly, one by one, easing out the stiffness. Tony looks up at him as he works; Gibbs has that same look of intense concentration on his face that he always has when he’s working on building something in his basement.

Tony remembers how Gibbs held him down and broke these fingers, one by one, all the time asking Tony to trust him, even though Tony didn’t know why he was doing it. Tony did trust him. He always has. He always will.

“Come here.” Tony grabs Gibbs’s hand and pulls him down beside him onto the towel. Then he reaches out and undoes one button on Gibbs’s shirt.

Gibbs doesn’t stop him, so Tony moves on to the next, and then the next.

“You okay with this?” Tony asks quietly, unzipping Gibbs’s fly. “I mean...without the drugs, without the danger, and without the ‘we might die tomorrow’ atmosphere? You ready for this?”

Gibbs grins and presses Tony’s hand against his cock, which is rock hard. “How does that feel?”

“Pretty ready.” Tony grins back and finishes stripping Gibbs’s clothes from his body.

Then he takes Gibbs’s face in his hands and kisses him deeply. The sun bathes them gently as they lie naked under its warm rays, caressing each other slowly. It’s been weeks, but Tony wants to savour their first love-making as free men. He doesn’t want it going too fast; he wants to enjoy it.

He explores Gibbs’s body in the daylight for the first time. He covers his skin with dozens of kisses, enjoying the scent and feel of Gibbs’s body under his fingertips and lips.

Gibbs rolls over on top of him and gently stretches his opening with his fingers, smiling down on Tony the entire time. Tony is so relaxed that by the time Gibbs sinks his hard cock into him, it feels instantly pleasurable.

Gibbs makes love to him slowly, taking his time, kissing Tony repeatedly as he moves inside him. The sky is blue behind Gibbs’s face, framing him, making his blue eyes seem an even deeper shade. They both reach climax at almost the same time, and instead of being a brief moment of pleasure snatched in the midst of an on-going nightmare, it feels relaxed and peaceful.

Afterwards, Gibbs rests his head on Tony's chest, and Tony wraps his arms around Gibbs's body, and they lie there for a long time in the gently rocking boat under the warm rays of the late afternoon sun.

Eventually they move, their muscles protesting at having to shift. Gibbs withdraws from his body, and they cover themselves in blankets and devour the contents of the picnic basket.

Then they lie down on the deck of the boat, wrapped up in each other's arms, and gently kiss as the sun goes down around them.

Tony can feel Gibbs tracing his fingers gently over the scars on his back, and he remembers lying in their stall the night he was whipped, with the blood drying on his skin, and how Gibbs crawled across the floor to be as close to him as possible and held his hand all night long.

Gibbs made a promise to him that night, and now, lying here on the deck of the boat, wrapped up in Gibbs's arms, Tony knows that Gibbs remembers that promise too.

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It's getting late by the time they return to the marina. They stop beside Tony's car, and Gibbs hesitates. Then he leans in, plants a kiss on Tony's cheek, and pulls back.

"Night, Tony."

He turns to go, but feels Tony's hand on his arm, pulling him back.

"Hang on. That's it? It's late, and it's an hour's drive home for me but twenty minutes to your place. Why don't I stay over with you tonight?"

Gibbs thinks about the half-eaten containers of food in his living room, the mattress in his bathroom, and the many empty bottles of whisky everywhere, and shakes his head. "Not yet."

"Why not? After the day we just shared."

"It was good. Let's quit while we're ahead." Gibbs turns on his heel and walks back to the car, feeling Tony's gaze burning into his shoulders as he goes.

Gibbs looks around for a bottle of whisky to help him sleep when he gets home and finds there are none left. He thinks about it for a moment, but the dreams are too vivid for him to handle a whole night of them. One or two is manageable, but he has no intention of tossing and turning the entire night with a head full of them, which is what happens when he doesn't drink a good half a bottle of Jack before going to bed.

He shoulders his jacket back on, grabs his keys, and opens his door...to find Tony standing outside, hand poised to knock.

"Going somewhere?" Tony asks, with a raised eyebrow.

"Walk. Fresh air." He shrugs. "You following me, Tony?"

“You followed me. Fair’s fair.” Tony gives a sweet smile.

Gibbs glares at him. “You said you weren’t going to push.”

“I said I wasn’t going to push because I was going to wait for you to come to me. You did. So now we’re in different territory.”

“Go home, DiNozzo,” Gibbs growls.

“No. See, you can boss me around all you like at work – that’s fine. I don’t mind. I kinda like it.” Tony grins. “I’m sure as hell used to it. But when we’re on our own time, we’re equals, and you don’t get to tell me what to do. Haven’t you figured that out yet?”

“It’s my damn house, and you’re not coming in,” Gibbs says firmly, cutting to the chase.

“Fine. I’ll sit on the doorstep until you invite me in.” Tony shrugs. “See, I figured out what today was all about. It’s okay for you to look out for me, but you won’t let me do the same for you. You have to be the big, bad wolf all the time, don’t you? You can never show fear, or vulnerability, or let anyone in to help you, and as long as you do that, we’ll never have a relationship of equals.”

God, he needs that drink now! Right now. Gibbs shoves Tony to one side, steps out of the house, closes the door behind him, and then locks it, which he never usually does but he doesn’t want Tony snooping around in there while he’s gone.

“I was wondering why all your marriages after Shannon failed,” Tony says quietly.

Gibbs stiffens. “You’ve gone too far, DiNozzo.”

“No, I haven’t gone far enough. They fell in love with you because they thought you cared about them, and I think you actually did. I don’t think you find it hard to care about people, Jethro. But you won’t let them care about you in return. That’s what happened with all those ex-Mrs Gibbsses, isn’t it? That’s why they all left.”

Gibbs clenches his fists angrily. “You don’t know shit, Tony.”

“I’ve been watching you for ten years, Gibbs. I know more than you think. You were still hurting about Shannon and Kelly, but you never let any of your exes into that pain. You refused to let them help, like you refused to let your dad help after your mom was killed. It’s the lone wolf in you, I get that.” Tony shrugs. Then he leans in. “But I refuse to be an ex-Mrs Gibbs, Jethro. I’m here to stay, so you’d better figure out how to make a place for me in your lair.” He jerks his head at the house.

Gibbs shoves his keys into his pocket. He won’t take the car. He intends to drink too much to make that sensible. He’ll walk down the road to the nearest bar instead.

“You want to stay out here, then fine,” he growls at Tony. “But I’m going out.” He prowls down the driveway and then glances back. “Don’t damn well follow me, DiNozzo.”

“No intention of it.” Tony sits down on the doorstep and leans his head back against the door. “But I’ll be here, waiting, when you get back. One of these days you’ll finally get it through your thick skull that I’m not going anywhere.”

The bar is only a few minutes away. He’s often been here when he needs to get out of the house and nurse a quiet drink alone. He sits down at the bar and settles in for a long night ahead. If Tony is still there when he gets back, at least he’ll be too drunk to have a conversation with him.

“Hey, Gibbs,” the barman says, putting a glass of bourbon in front of him.

“Hey, Bill.” Gibbs downs the drink in one fiery gulp.

“Haven’t seen you here in a long time; you been away?”

“Yeah.” Gibbs shoves the glass back at Bill and gestures his head for a refill.

“Did you get married again?” Bill asks. “Only you’ve got that same look on your face that you had when you were getting your last divorce.”

Gibbs grunts, remembering how often he used to come down here during his messy break-up with Stephanie.

“Women, huh?” Bill grins, putting another whisky in front of him.

Gibbs grunts again. Women, men – it makes no difference. The common denominator in being lousy at relationships isn’t gender – it’s him.

He isn’t sure how many whiskies he’s consumed when someone sits down at the bar beside him an hour or so later. It’s late and the bar is practically empty, so he’s annoyed as there are plenty of other seats.

He turns to look at his unwanted company and his stomach does a queasy flip.

“Hi, Gibbs,” Sam Hurrell says. “It’s good to see you again.”

Gibbs stares at him. “Tony called ya?”

“Yes. He figured you’d be here – said it was the closest bar within walking distance.”

“You’ve gotten fat, Sam,” Gibbs says, downing another whisky.

Hurrell grins. “Yeah – I know. Jan keeps feeding me, and it’s so good that I can’t stop eating after months of chewing though that shit they fed us as Scott’s place.” He gives Gibbs a critical stare. “And you’ve gotten thin,” he says. “You’re much thinner now than you were when I last saw you. Frank would never have let you get this thin – he had to keep you bulked up enough to win in the pit.”

Gibbs clenches his jaw and jerks his head at Bill to bring him another drink.

“I eat, you drink...there are all kinds of ways of handling it,” Hurrell says, sitting back in his chair.

Gibbs takes a gulp of the drink Bill puts in front of him.

“I’ve thought about you a lot these past couple of months since that final Fight Night,” Hurrell tells him softly. “Wondered how you were doing. Me and Jan met up with Tony a few times, and he said --”

“You met up with Tony?” Gibbs glances sideways at Hurrell. Tony has seen Greg, Hurrell and Rajul’s mom, while he’s seen nobody. He’s just tried to shut it away and pretend it didn’t happen.

“Yeah. Tony and Jan got close while you and I were away.”

Gibbs turns in his chair and takes a good look at Hurrell. He is fatter, but he’s a big guy and carries it well. It actually suits him, as if this is how he’s supposed to be. His hair has grown back in a soft shade of light brown, and he looks completely different to how he did back at Scott’s stable. His shoulders are relaxed, his face has lost that anxious look, and while he might not exactly be at peace yet, he looks as if he’s getting there.

“You’re not doing too well, I think, old friend,” Hurrell says softly.

“And you are?” Gibbs glares at him.

“I have good days and bad. Nobody ever said it was going to be easy.” Hurrell shrugs. Then his face lights up. “But here – see – some good came out of it.” He gets his wallet out of his jacket pocket, opens it, and takes out a photo, which he places in front of Gibbs. It’s a picture of Jan, holding a little girl. “Her name’s Melissa,” Hurrell tells him, a genuinely happy smile curving at the corners of his mouth. “She’s Steve’s daughter,” he adds.

Gibbs gazes at the little girl in the picture. She’s got blonde curly hair and a sweet smile. He can see Steve’s features in her and it makes his gut churn. He really doesn’t want to remember that night.

“Me and Jan took a trip to meet Steve’s girlfriend Tanya, and Melissa. They’re doing okay, but struggling financially, so we’re helping out. We’ve become close.” He picks up the picture and puts it back in his wallet. “I owe it to Steve to make sure his little girl is okay,” he says quietly.

Gibbs nods and takes another gulp of his drink. “I never said...” he pauses and then forces himself on. “About that final night...I never said, because I didn’t see you again after, but you did a great job, Sam.”

“You gave me the confidence, Gibbs. There was only one guard, like you said there would be, and I took him out. I freed all the fighters – it all went down exactly like you planned.”

“Always knew you could do it. You should believe in yourself more.”

Hurrell gives him a beaming smile. “I’ve wanted to see you for a while. I wanted to say thanks – for that and for everything else you did for us. You took the brunt of it all, you came up with the plan that got us rescued, and you got us all organized. We only got out of there alive because of you.”

Gibbs stares into his drink.

“I’ve spoken to several of the fighters since we were rescued, and you’re a legend to them, Gibbs. They know we’re only free because of you, and they know you took one hell of a beating in the pit that night because you were buying time for us. So thank you. From all of us.”

The noise of that final Fight Night comes crashing back into his head. Everything was at stake; his life, Tony’s, Sam’s, all the fighters in Scott’s stable and in all the other stables. He fought his heart out in the pit that night, and he can still hear the sound of the crowd baying for his blood. He takes a deep, heaving breath inwards.

“D’you get flashbacks – to the pit?” he asks.

Hurrell nods. “All the time. And nightmares – incredibly vivid nightmares that make me wake up screaming.”

“Yeah. Me too.” Gibbs strokes the side of his glass with his thumb and then turns to look at him. “How d’you get through it, Sam?” he asks hoarsely.

“With Jan’s help,” Hurrell replies, leaning forward. “She’s been incredible. I told her everything – all of it, even the...” He flushes. “Even the stuff I’m most ashamed of. She doesn’t judge me. I’m doing a good job of that all by myself.”

Gibbs gazes at him, suddenly overwhelmed by how good it is to see him again. “You shouldn’t,” he mutters. “You’re a good man, Sam. One of the best I’ve ever known.”

“Thank you,” Hurrell says softly. His eyes are glowing with pride, and Gibbs is aware just how much those words mean to him. Hurrell places a hand on Gibbs’s wrist and speaks quietly and urgently. “Listen, Gibbs, one thing I do know, more than anything else, is that I couldn’t have got through this alone – and you can’t, either.”

“I’m not used to being so damn weak. I can’t do this shit, Sam,” Gibbs says despairingly.

“Sure you can. You’re a Marine.” Hurrell smiles at him. “Besides, you’re forgetting something, Gibbs. Something important.” Gibbs raises a questioning eyebrow. “The strength of the wolf is in the pack,” Hurrell reminds him softly. He gets up and puts a hand on Gibbs’s shoulder, squeezing firmly. “And Tony’s your pack, Gibbs. Let him be your strength.”

He squeezes again, and then he turns and leaves.

Gibbs stares into his glass for a long time after he’s gone, just gazing into the amber liquid. He thought the fight was over, and he’d won, but he’s still fighting, and he’s so tired of it. He thought he’d beaten Walid, but somehow he’s still imprisoned, only the prison is of his own making now; and for as long as he stays walled up inside it, Walid is the winner.



He's taken one blow too many, and he's staggering around, punch drunk, unable to stand properly. He wants to lie down. He wants to give in. He wants to stop fighting.

He finishes his drink with one last gulp, and Bill walks over. "You want a refill?" he asks.

Gibbs shakes his head, feeling something inside him finally give. "Nope. I gotta go home," he says. "Someone's waiting for me."

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It's a long wait, but finally Tony sees Gibbs walking unsteadily up the driveway. Tony gets up, but Gibbs doesn't say a word to him. He doesn't even look at him. He just gets out his keys and fumbles drunkenly with the lock. The door swings open, and Tony waits, wondering if he'll be spending the night on the porch.

Gibbs walks into the house and then pauses. "You comin' in or not?" he mutters, holding the door open.

Tony gives a small, satisfied smile and follows him into the house. Gibbs turns on the light, and Tony blinks, taking in the mess of take-out boxes littering the living room. Most of them are half filled with food, some of it seriously stinking. He takes a step forward and almost trips over something that rolls away and clangs into something else. Looking down, he sees half a dozen empty bottles of whisky.

He glances up at Gibbs to find him looking at him, a defiant challenge in his eyes, clearly expecting an argument. Tony doesn't give him one.

"C'mon...I'm beat, and you're drunk on your ass. Let's go to bed," Tony says.

Gibbs nods and then stumbles drunkenly straight into the coffee table. Tony grabs him, pulls one arm over his shoulder, and walks him up the stairs towards the bedroom.

"Goin' the wrong way," Gibbs mumbles as Tony kicks the bedroom door open. Tony glances inside and sees the bed is missing a mattress. "This way," Gibbs says, pulling him towards the bathroom.

Tony opens the bathroom door and sees the big mattress crammed into the tiny space, with a couple of pillows and a blanket on top. There are empty bottles of Jack strewn all around.

Gibbs leans against the bathroom door, a mulish look in his eyes, and Tony is all too well aware of just how much he hates showing any sign of vulnerability.

"Got something to say, Tony?" Gibbs demands belligerently.

"Yeah; let's get some sleep." Tony shrugs off his clothes, leaving them in an untidy heap in the bathtub, and then he lies down on the mattress.

Gibbs looks down on him for a long moment, and then suddenly he breaks into a low, deep chuckle.

“What’s so funny?” Tony asks.

“I just finally got it,” Gibbs replies, holding onto the bathroom wall while he undresses. He slings his clothes into the bathtub on top of Tony’s and gets under the blanket beside him.

Tony pulls him close, holding him tight, trying to ignore his painfully thin midriff and the ribs he can feel beneath his fingers. Somehow, here, lying on a mattress in the bathroom surrounded by empty whisky bottles, those ribs feel far worse than they did on the boat a few hours ago. The context changes everything.

“You finally got what?” Tony murmurs into the hair that is thankfully growing back as soft and silver as before.

“I finally got it into my thick skull that you aren’t going anywhere.”

Gibbs gives a tired, defeated smile, and then he slings an arm around him, buries his face in the crook of Tony’s neck, and falls fast asleep.

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Gibbs dreams the helicopters and trucks didn’t come. He dreams he’s lying beaten in the sawdust with Walid standing over him, and that the FBI and NCIS don’t show up this time. Walid stakes him out on the ground, tying him down in the sawdust.

They make him watch as they herd Sam, Tony, Greg, Matt, and all the other fighters into the pit and force them to kneel down, execution style, their foreheads touching the ground.

“You lost, Wolfman,” Walid tells him. There’s a gun in his gloved hand, and he holds it against Sam’s head and pulls the trigger. Sam’s head explodes, and he falls forward, his blood staining the sawdust.

“NO!” Gibbs howls, but it’s pointless. He lost, and Walid has won.

A crowd of people gathers around, closing in on him. He can see Scott, Ellis, Tanner, Mac, Frank, McGuire, Pete...all of them getting closer and closer, looming over him, looking down on him.

Walid gives the gun to Scott, and he steps forward and places it against Tony’s head. Gibbs struggles against the ropes tying him down, trying desperately to get free. “Don’t kill him! Don’t damn well kill him! Not Tony! No!”

Tony raises his head and looks straight at him. “Don’t worry about me, Boss,” he says, with a crooked little smile. “I’m not going anywhere.” Scott takes aim, pulls the trigger, and....

“Hey...it’s okay,” a voice says, and Gibbs wakes up, gasping for air, the scream dying in his throat. Tony is leaning over him, stroking his hair gently. “That was one hell of a dream. You’ve been whimpering for ages. I wasn’t sure whether to wake you up or not.”

“Wasn’t a dream,” Gibbs says gruffly, getting up and going over to the basin. He fills it with water and splashes it over his face, shaking from the nightmare. He can still smell the

sawdust and feel it under his fingertips from where he was scrabbling to get free. He washes his hands, scrubbing his fingernails to get rid of the sensation.

Then he crawls back onto the mattress, gets hold of Tony, and pulls him close, inhaling the scent of his hair. Gibbs holds on tight until his shaking dies down. It wasn't real. Tony is alive and well and safe in his arms right now.

"You have them a lot?" Tony asks. "The nightmares – is that why you sleep in here?"

"Every night," he replies. "Whisky helps. A bit. It's not why I sleep in here though."

"Then why?"

Gibbs gives a wry grunt of a laugh. "I have no idea."

"I can see why you kept me out." Tony strokes a hand through his hair. It feels good. It reminds Gibbs of his mom. "Nightmares, drinking too much, not eating enough, sleeping in here...anything else I should know about?"

"Yeah. I can't go into the basement," Gibbs replies honestly, looking at Tony in the small, dark room. Being in this enclosed space reminds him of the intimacy of their time in the stall, and it's easier to open up and talk in here, like he did back there. Tony continues stroking his hair gently. "Can't stand the smell of the sawdust." Gibbs shudders. "Threw up in there when I first got home."

"No wonder you had to return to work so soon. That basement is your sanctuary, your den; it's where you go to lie low, lick your wounds, and heal yourself. We'll find a way to get it back."

"Yeah?" Gibbs says hopefully. He hasn't been able to do that for himself because he can't stand to be down there, but maybe Tony can find a way.

"Yes." Tony kisses his mouth firmly. "I promise."

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They wake up late the next day, and after a leisurely lovemaking session they finally crawl off the mattress, take a shower together, and get dressed. Tony doesn't want to put his suit back on again, so Gibbs throws him a pair of his sweatpants and a tee shirt to wear.

Tony raids Gibbs's fridge and cupboards and manages to find enough ingredients for a good brunch, determined to get some flesh back on Gibbs's bones. He watches Gibbs eat, noticing that he manages a little, but not as much as he'd like.

"Not good?" He gestures with his fork at the plate of eggs, bacon and sausages in front of Gibbs.

"Tastes like..." Gibbs hesitates. "Sawdust." He grimaces. "You gonna kick my ass about it?" He gives a questioning little grin, and for the first time Tony gets the sense that Gibbs finally

sees them as equals. He's so used to being the one in charge that he hasn't found this process easy, but he's getting there now.

"Nope." Tony shakes his head. "You'll get your sense of taste back eventually, but I figure it'll take time. I can wait. I'm a very patient man, Jethro."

"You are? Since when?" Gibbs asks incredulously.

"I've been waiting patiently for you for ten years," Tony points out, stealing an uneaten sausage from Gibbs's plate. Gibbs has to cede that point to him.

After brunch they clean the place, throwing out the food containers and piling up the bottles in a box to take for recycling.

"I'm going to go home, get a few clothes," Tony tells Gibbs when they've finished.

"You moving in now, DiNozzo?" Gibbs raises an eyebrow.

"Makes sense until we've figured a few things out," Tony replies with a shrug. "That okay?"

Gibbs's answering smile makes it clear it is. Tony returns home and packs up a couple of suitcases of clothes. An idea occurs to him, and he grabs his iPod and decides to stop off at the mall on his way back to Gibbs's place.

He finishes up and glances around his apartment. He's only brought enough for a few days, but somehow he knows he won't be coming back to live here again. Eventually, he'll move the rest of his stuff over. He's been in love with this man for ten years, and he meant what he said. He's not going anywhere; he's with Gibbs to stay.

He returns to Gibbs's house a couple of hours later, with his TV and DVD player as well as the suitcases and his shopping. Gibbs is out taking the bottles for recycling, so Tony orders in Chinese, Indian and Mexican food for dinner, as well as pizza, just to cover all his bases.

Then he goes down into the basement to set up what he has planned.

Gibbs returns home half an hour later, almost tripping over the suitcases in the hall. "I thought you said a **few** clothes?" he says, looking bemused.

"Oh, these are just enough for a few days. I've got two more closets full at home!" Tony tells him cheerfully.

"Why does anyone need this many clothes?" Gibbs demands, as they fill up the closet in his bedroom to bursting point.

"Because some of us actually like to dress nicely," Tony tells him, with a pointed look at his baggy old NIS sweatshirt. He remembers Jan telling him how she reformed Sam's wardrobe, one item at a time, and decides to do the same with Gibbs. The man is far too good-looking to hide under those cheap, shapeless clothes.

The food arrives, and Gibbs stares at the vast quantity in disbelief. “Are we expecting company?”

Tony grins. “Nah...I just figured that if I give you enough options there’ll be something here you want to eat.”

“You’re my mom now?” Gibbs rolls his eyes.

“Mom, dad, insanely handsome boyfriend...I don’t give a damn as long as you eat.”

“Insanely handsome?” Gibbs raises an amused eyebrow, and Tony laughs.

They sit down on the couch with the massive array of take-out in front of them, and Tony notes that his strategy is working, and Gibbs picks a little from all food choices, eating more than Tony suspects he’s done in weeks.

They watch a movie, and then Tony gets up and goes down to the basement for a few minutes to get it ready, before returning to the living room. “C’mon. Time for bed.” He holds out his hand.

Gibbs sighs. “I know the way upstairs, Tony.”

“Yeah, but we’re not going upstairs,” Tony says quietly. “C’mon, Jethro. Trust me.”

~\*~

Gibbs allows Tony to haul him to his feet and lead him along the hallway to the basement. He’s already figured out that’s where they’re going, but he has no idea what Tony has in store for him. He stiffens as he gets to the doorway. He’s getting used to Tony seeing him so vulnerable, but he really doesn’t like the idea of throwing up in front of him.

“S’okay,” Tony says, pushing the basement door open. “Just trust me.”

He leads Gibbs into the room, and Gibbs pauses at the top of the stairs, stunned. The entire basement is decked out with lit candles, glowing prettily in the dark. Down below, where the boat used to be, is a soft pile of sawdust, and on top of that is a mattress, complete with fresh pillows and blankets.

“I thought we could try making love down here; it might be a good distraction,” Tony says, leading him down the stairs. “The mattress is from the guest room, so if it doesn’t work, or you don’t want to stay here, then we can just go back upstairs to the bathroom to sleep. No pressure. Take it in your own time.”

Gibbs stops at the bottom of the stairs, hesitating. “Feel like a damn idiot,” he mutters. “Stupid to feel like throwing up because of the smell of sawdust.”

“Actually, scent is the single strongest prompt for memory,” Tony says. “Read it in a porno mag once. See – some of us do read them for the interesting articles.” He winks and holds out his hand. Gibbs takes it and allows Tony to draw him over to the centre of the room. “One more thing.” Tony takes an iPod out of his pocket and plugs it into the set of speakers on

Gibbs's workbench. He presses a button, and a familiar song starts playing softly in the candlelit room.

Tony holds out his hand. "Wanna dance?" he says with a grin. "They're playing our song, Jethro."

Gibbs gives a little laugh, shaking his head wryly; only Tony could think up something like this.

*"Don't know much about history, don't know much biology, don't know much about a science book, don't know much about the French I took. But I do know that I love you, and I know that if you love me too what a wonderful world this would be,"* Sam Cooke croons from the iPod.

"You think I'm looking at this the wrong way?" Gibbs asks as he takes Tony's hand.

"Actually, no." Tony pulls him in close, and they start slowly swaying around the room in time to the music. "I think you're starting to look at it the right way, Jethro."

He kisses Gibbs's lips gently, nuzzling into him, and Gibbs rests his hands on Tony's butt and tries to relax and forget about the smell of sawdust. Somehow, the smell doesn't seem as bad now, and he finds he can ignore it while Tony is holding him.

They dance for the duration of the song, the candles flickering around them, bathing them in their soft glow. Tony alternates kissing him with crooning along to some of the lyrics, his breath tickling Gibbs's neck.

When the song ends, Tony starts unbuttoning his shirt, kissing him repeatedly as he undresses him. Gibbs returns the favour, undressing Tony in turn.

When they're both naked, Tony gestures with his head to the mattress. "Want to try it?"

"So far, so good." Gibbs nods, prepared to at least try.

Tony takes his hand, and they sink down on the mattress together. The scent of the sawdust overwhelms him immediately, as it's all around them, but this time Gibbs doesn't find himself instantly back in the pit.

Tony's kisses keep him grounded in the here and now, anchoring him, demanding his attention, and he explores Tony's body with his mouth and hands, focusing on it intently, the way he always does when they're making love. He loves how responsive Tony is, how he arches up into him, and how he moans and whimpers with pleasure, never holding anything back, letting Gibbs know exactly what he likes.

The candles give Tony's skin a soft, dappled effect, and Gibbs loves the smooth sensation of all that golden skin under his fingertips as he works his way over Tony's body, claiming it and making it his.

"Here." Tony fishes out a tube of lubricant from under the pillow and hands it to him. Gibbs takes it, leans over him...and then stops. "Problem?" Tony asks. "Want to go upstairs?"

“No.” Gibbs flips Tony over so that he’s on top and hands him the lube. “Well, you said it was good,” he mutters, gazing up at him expectantly.

Tony takes the lube with a smile. “Oh, it’s good, but are you sure?”

Gibbs nods, wordlessly. He doesn’t want to think about this too much; he just wants to let go and allow it to happen. He opens his legs as Tony leans over him, looking down on him. There’s a halo of candlelight around Tony’s head, and he looks...insanely handsome. Gibbs grins at that thought and relaxes into the mattress.

Tony slides the tip of his lubed finger inside him, and Gibbs forces himself not to tense up. It actually feels fine, and he opens up some more. Tony leans down and kisses him as he slides his finger back and forth, getting into a rhythm.

Gibbs’s cock is hard and starting to leak; the sensation is exquisitely pleasurable, and he finds himself wanting more. Tony pushes another finger inside him and continues to finger fuck him while kissing him repeatedly at the same time. It feels so damn good that he opens up even wider. Tony slides a third finger inside him, and Gibbs feels himself getting impatient.

“Get that hard cock of yours inside me, DiNozzo,” he growls at last, unsure he can hold on much longer if Tony doesn’t get in him soon.

Tony laughs. “Damn, you’re bossy.”

“That’s never gonna change. Equals – yeah – but I’m still me.” Gibbs grins up at him.

Tony lubricates his cock, and Gibbs watches, fascinated by the sight of Tony’s hand wrapped around his cock, the head disappearing in and out of his fingers. Then Tony positions himself between Gibbs’s thighs.

“Tell me if you want me to stop,” Tony says, before pushing in gently a little way.

There’s a burn, but it’s got a pleasurable edge. Gibbs lies back, relaxing as Tony pushes in further, and allowing him in. It feels uncomfortable, and he gives a little grunt, feeling full and stretched, and not entirely sure that he likes the sensation. Tony pauses, looking down on him, and then takes hold of his hand and squeezes, before pushing in the rest of the way until he’s fully inside him. Gibbs gasps, trying to force his body to adjust to the intrusion.

Tony squeezes his hand again. “Still with me?”

“Yeah. Just do it, Tony,” Gibbs says, from between gritted teeth.

Tony moves his hips a little way back and then pushes in again, and Gibbs feels an explosion of pleasure rocket through his nerve-endings.

“What the hell was that?” he whispers, looking up at Tony, startled.

“Prostate.” Tony grins.

“Shit...that is nothing like how it feels during a doctor’s exam.”

Tony's grin widens. "Told you it was good!"

Gibbs releases a long, shuddering breath. "Good? It's..." He doesn't finish that sentence because Tony pushes in again and a firework display seems to ignite in his senses.

Tony is looking far too smug as he thrusts in and out, gazing down on him with a knowing little smile on his lips. Gibbs sinks deeply into the mattress, looking back up at him, enjoying the little kisses that Tony drops on his mouth every so often.

It stopped being uncomfortable some time ago. Now every inward thrust just sends sparks through his body, making his cock rigid with pleasure. He wraps his hand around it and pumps it in time to Tony's thrusts, losing himself in the sensation.

As he lies there, looking up at Tony, with the scent of sawdust all around him, Gibbs thinks there's a certain irony to the fact that he tried so hard to stop himself being fucked in the sawdust back in the pit, only to end up on his back, surrounded by sawdust, being fucked anyway.

This is nothing like the pit though. This is a special kind of intimacy, to be shared only with someone he loves and who loves him in return. There are no gawking spectators and no threat of death hanging over them; there is just him and Tony, sharing something intensely private and pleasurable.

Tony speeds up, and Gibbs is barely sure where that pleasure is coming from now as the nerve endings in his cock and his ass combine to create one big overload of sensation. It all explodes at the same time, and he comes over his own fist and belly.

When he comes to, Tony is lying in an exhausted heap on top of him, his head angled to one side on Gibbs's shoulder, gazing at him from gleaming green eyes.

"So, was I right, or was I right?" he asks, looking as irritating as only a Tony DiNozzo who has been proved right can be.

"Smart-ass." Gibbs slaps the ass in question fondly.

Tony gives a happy, gurgling laugh and slowly pulls out of him. He gets up and goes around the room, blowing out all the candles, and then he returns and drops down beside Gibbs on the mattress. Gibbs pulls the blanket over them both, and they share another long, deep kiss.

"So, I was thinking, I could make you a closet," Gibbs murmurs sleepily. "For all those damn clothes of yours."

Tony smiles and snuggles in close against his chest, and Gibbs holds him tight as they both fall asleep.

~\*~

It's dark in the basement without the candlelight, and when Tony wakes up a couple of hours later he wonders where he is at first. Then he remembers; he's wrapped up in Gibbs's arms, where he belongs. The actual place doesn't matter, as long as he's with Gibbs.



He stretches out, luxuriating in the feel of Gibbs's firm body against his own. It's been a long, hard road to get here, but now he finally has this grey wolf tamed enough to lie quietly beside him. Tony doesn't kid himself that Gibbs will ever change; he'll always be stubborn, grumpy, and ornery, as well as loyal, brave, and protective, and Tony wouldn't want him any other way. Gibbs is the sum of his parts, good and bad, and Tony knows he can't have the white wolf without the dark. He wouldn't want that anyway.

He glances up and sees Gibbs's blue eyes shining in the dark room.

"You awake?" Tony whispers.

"Yeah. You woke me up. You're thinking too loud." Gibbs taps the back of his head in a mock head-slap. "What's going on in there?" Gibbs asks, stroking Tony's hair where he just tapped.

"Not much. I was just thinking about wolves," Tony says, resting his chin on Gibbs's chest. "You?"

"I was thinking about fighting," Gibbs replies.

Tony sits up a little way, feeling uneasy.

Gibbs pulls him down. "Damn it, DiNozzo – you're letting in cold air."

"Fighting?" Tony rolls over onto his side, next to Gibbs, and gazes at him expectantly.

"Yeah. Been fighting a long time, Tony. Fought my dad, fought my ex-wives, and fought Walid. I'm a stubborn bastard, and I never once gave in – until I fought you."

Tony smiles. "Well, like I said, I fight dirty."

"So do I." Gibbs grunts.

"Well, maybe this was one fight you didn't want to win."

"Yeah – against an opponent who refused to give up."

"Couldn't. Too much to lose," Tony says softly. He trails his fingers over Gibbs's stomach, enjoying the fact that nobody else on Earth could make this particular wolf roll over and show them his belly. This old wolf is his, and Walid found out the hard way just how dangerous a Tony DiNozzo in love can be.

"Think I finally met my match." Gibbs strokes his hair again.

"Winner takes it all, huh?" Tony says with a grin, placing his hand possessively on Gibbs's chest, over his heart.

Gibbs pulls him close and kisses him. "And the loser."

~\*~

He dreams he's trotting through woodland, the moon dappling his grey coat. He feels strong and sure-footed as he runs across the grass. He's sleek, fit and muscled, and he has a mate by his side.

Tony runs with him, barefooted, just as strong and sleek as he is. They run through glades and streams, laughing as the water splashes on Tony's bare feet, and Gibbs's paws.

They reach the edge of the woodland and pause. Over there, out on the flat, open grassland, lies danger and darkness, but it's a darkness Gibbs knows he has to face. He pads out slowly from the safety of the trees and walks towards it.

He finds himself in a hollowed out pit and there is sawdust under his paws. Enclosing the pit are bleachers; empty, silent, and eerie.

He stands there, in the middle of the pit, puts back his head, and howls at the moon.

Gibbs wakes up with a start. A couple of hours must have passed since their last conversation, and Tony is fast asleep beside him. Gibbs gets off the mattress and goes upstairs to use the bathroom. On his way back, he glances out of the window to see that there's a full moon shining outside.

He knows what he has to do. He goes back down into the basement and quietly gets dressed. Then he crouches down beside Tony and nudges him awake.

"I have to go somewhere," he says.

Tony sits up, his hair sticking up at a dozen different angles at once. "You want me to come?"

"Yes." Gibbs doesn't hesitate. He's done pushing Tony out. He needs him for this, and he isn't too proud to admit it.

Tony gets dressed, and they go out to the car together.

"You know the way?" Tony asks, and Gibbs nods, not even needing to question how Tony knows where they're going.

"Yeah, I looked in McGee's files when he was at lunch one day."

The drive takes a couple of hours, and they arrive when the night is at its darkest, just before dawn. There's nothing here, on this site where that last Fight Night was held, just open grassland. There is still a faint smattering of sawdust though, showing where the pit once was.

Gibbs parks beside the pit and gets out. Tony makes no move to join him; he understands that there will always be a part of Gibbs that is a lone wolf and there are some things he must do alone.

Gibbs goes over to where the pit once was and walks around it, scuffing the sawdust with his boots. It looks so different now. There are no bleachers, or holding pens; no trucks or hotdog

vendors. There's no referee, no commentator, and no Walid, sitting up there on his throne, playing at being an emperor. There is no Scott, looking down on him, and no Frank cheering him on. There are no stable owners, biting their nails nervously as they watch their fighters perform. There's no baying mob, crying out the name he was given in this place.

*"Wolf-man! Wolf-man! Wolf-man!"*

Gibbs prowls around the outside of the pit, remembering how it felt to stand here, just before a fight, the adrenaline making his heart pump fast. He remembers stepping out into the pit, and the roar of the crowd.

*"Wolf-man! Wolf-man! Wolf-man!"*

He remembers how much a part of him enjoyed it, even while another part of him hated it. He remembers feeding that part that enjoyed it, in order to survive.

He is both dark and light wolf, like everyone else. They are both inside him, and he needs them both. He hugs them both close as he walks around the pit. They kept him alive out here. The dark wolf helped him find the anger to fight and gave him that killer instinct that helped him win, while the light wolf reminded him what it's like to love and gave him something to fight for instead of against.

He pads out into the middle of the pit, remembering that final Fight Night with the rain pouring down and the helicopters flying in.

He remembers other Fight Nights too; his first one, when he didn't know what hell awaited him; and the Fight Night when they threw Tony into the pit against him.

He remembers Steve being murdered that night, and he bows his head in remembrance of all the fallen: Ben, Brian, Rajul, and all the many others whose names he doesn't know. So many lives so pointlessly sacrificed. He grieves for them all.

Then he remembers the things he did because he had no choice if he wanted to stay alive and keep others alive. He allows himself to feel the great sense of guilt and shame that he's been carrying around inside. That opens up the floodgates and other emotions rush in, demanding to be felt too: pain, sadness, grief, terror, shock, confusion, anger, and hatred, all crowding in.

He falls to his knees, throws back his head, and howls at the moon, giving cry to all his anguish. A terrible happened to him and right here is where he must face it. They captured him, beat him, abused him, and forced him to commit acts that went against his nature. They stole a part of his soul and kept it captive until Tony came along and freed it.

His howls turn into wrenching sobs, and he cries for a long time, his body shaking.

Then it's over. He's done. Spent. He's fought his last battle in this pit.

He hears a sound behind him and then Tony appears. He sits down in the sawdust beside Gibbs and puts an arm around his shoulders. It's cold, but Tony warms him, and they sit there quietly for a long time.

“I was an angry kid who lost his mom,” Gibbs says eventually, looking straight ahead. “I became an angry man who lost his wife and daughter. I’ve been angry too long. It kept me from living. It pushed away the people I loved. My dad, my ex-wives...you.”

The pit was his catharsis. It’s where he got that anger out, punching away at faceless strangers in place of old enemies, over and over again.

“I don’t want to be angry anymore.” He glances at Tony, who is gazing at him silently. Tony nods, understanding him, the way he always has.

What happened here changed him. He tried to pretend it didn’t and carry on as usual because he didn’t know how to handle it, but he won’t do that anymore.

“You’ll have to lead the team for a while,” Gibbs continues. “I’ll go and see Fornell next week. There’s a lot to tell him. Might take some time.”

“Sure,” Tony says quietly. “Take as long as you need.”

“And I have other people to see. Brian spoke about his father, and Ben had a wife and a couple of kids.”

“I’ll come with you, if you want?” Tony offers, and Gibbs nods, wondering why it’s always been so hard for him to accept help before. It seems so easy now.

They sit there together, watching the first faint rays of dawn painting the horizon a rosy pink, and Gibbs thinks that it really is a wonderful world.

He turns to Tony. “Let’s go home,” he says.

## **The End**

### **Chapter End Notes:**

Thank you to all those who have been with me as I posted this week! Your insights and discussions have been amazing, and I’ve loved sharing this journey with you. To those coming in to read it in one go - I hope you enjoyed it too and look forward to reading your comments a86;

Friendly feedback adored!

18th June, 2011

I want to thank everyone who sent me such amazing feedback to Two Wolves. I always reply to feedback and intend to reply to all your kind messages in time - but I’m a lot slower than usual at the moment.

**A few hours after posting the final chapter of the story, I fell over and broke my ankle. I was taken to the hospital and a couple of days later I had an operation to have it pinned and plated. I came home on Wednesday evening but I'm in a lot of discomfort and obviously have limited mobility so I'm being taken care of 24/7 at the moment. I get online when I can, but I can't stay on for long and get tired very easily.**

**It's a long, slow road back to recovery. I can't put any weight on my ankle for ten weeks and at the moment I'm still recovering both from the severity of the injury and the operation.**

**Hugs!**

**Xanthe**

Your kind words are the only payment I receive for writing fan fiction. I love hearing from you, please leave a review below.

This story archived at <http://www.xanthe.org/viewstory.php?sid=83>