



I Wasn't Waiting for You

by Jilly James

Title: I Wasn't Waiting for You

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Fandom: Criminal Minds, slight NCIS

Relationship(s): Tony DiNozzo/Aaron Hotchner, Hotch/Beth, Rossi/Strauss (implied)

Content Rating: R

Warnings: Violence (including murder, or discussion of rape as part of a case file), death of a minor character.

Spoilers: Up to season 9 of CM and season 5 of NCIS, but specific spoilers for the Replicator arc in season 8 of Criminal Minds.

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Summary: Hotch is an unbonded guide with no interest in finding his sentinel. He prefers it with the BAU, and a sentinel could get in the way. Tony is able to function highly as an unbonded sentinel, and he's fine with the situation the way it is. When their paths cross while Hotch works a case in New York, their disinterest is put to the test, especially when Hotch is in the path of a killer.

Word Count: ~14,300

Acronyms:

AD – Assistant Director

BAU – Behavioral Analysis Unit

DD – Deputy Director

GABA – gamma-Aminobutyric acid

HRT – Hostage Rescue Team

MDMA – methylenedioxyphenethylamine (Ecstasy)

SFA – Senior Field Agent

SSA – Supervisory Special Agent

TAD – Temporarily Assigned Duty

Unsub – Unidentified Subject

S&G or **SnG** – Sentinel and Guide (fictional)

Tony's senses felt stretched thin, as if he were barely keeping them under control. The sights, sounds and smells of New York on a busy Monday in May were not what he needed after eight days of exhausting his senses looking for two kidnapped kids all across New England.

"You okay, Tony?" Agent Paul Taylor, his guide pro tem, asked sounding concerned. Tony normally didn't work with guides, but he was using his senses so much on the manhunt that it had been necessary. The resultant sensory-fatigue headache had necessitated Paul driving him back to the Bureau after their flight landed earlier in the day.

"Yup. I'm fine." Actually, he desperately needed some downtime in an isolation unit.

Taylor glanced away from the road briefly, quickly assessing. "You say '*fine*' but you look like hell."

"It's just sensory fatigue. I'll be okay," he immediately deflected.

After several minutes of silence, Taylor offered, "If you need a guide again..." he trailed off leadingly.

Tony internally winced. He was considered the strongest unbonded sentinel in the US, stronger even than more than ninety-nine percent of bonded sentinels, and many guides were eager to work with him, preferably on a permanent basis. But he usually did better without guide support. It wasn't that grounding his senses on a guide didn't help, it was that something always tugged at him in a way that felt *wrong*, and it grated on him enough that he'd rather work alone than deal with it.

Sandburg believed that there would be a single guide who he could bond properly with, something that happened with some of the stronger sentinels and guides. Tony didn't know about *that*, he just knew he was fine on his own. He always had been; not just in the nearly seven years he'd been a sentinel, but pretty much his entire life.

He and Agent Taylor had worked well together, so opting for diplomacy, he replied, "Thanks. I usually do okay on my own, but I'll let the guide coordinator know we meshed well if something comes up again."

Tony could easily sense the disappointment from Taylor, but he just ignored it and tried to block out New York as they drove the last few minutes to the office.

As they pulled into the Bureau parking structure, he was suddenly aware that the tight, stretched sensation was easing somewhat. There was also that odd pull in his chest, similar to what he'd experienced with guides, but much stronger, and instead of *wrong* it felt very *right*. He closed his eyes and tried to block out everything, just focusing on whatever was tugging at him.

A couple minutes passed and he was peripherally aware of Agent Taylor speaking urgently to him. A smell captured his attention and his eyes snapped open. "*Guide,*" he whispered. *His* guide was here. His guide was here in New York, and it was completely different to anything he'd experienced before. Any thought he'd ever had about not wanting a guide was forgotten in an instant.

Tony dialed up his second scent dial, seeking out the location of his guide. Quickly he could tell that the guide was currently in the building; it wasn't just a lingering scent. He desperately needed time in isolation, not using his senses, but he didn't care; the need to find his guide was all he could focus on.

Ignoring Taylor, he briskly went inside and up to the twenty-third floor. As soon as he stepped off the elevator, he knew his guide was close. He was suddenly able to zero in on the guide's heartbeat as well as scent.

"Sentinel DiNozzo. May I have a word?" a woman called out to him as he headed the correct direction to find his guide. Only the fact that she smelled strongly of his target halted him.

"Sentinel *Agent,*" he replied reflexively.

Brow furrowing in confusion, she said, "Pardon me?"

"It's Sentinel *Agent* DiNozzo. I'm not a sentinel consultant, I'm a fully qualified investigator." He never used to be fussy about how he was addressed, but then people stopped seeing his qualifications and only cared about his senses. So much had changed for Tony, and being picky about how was addressed was just symbolic of the whole thing.

"Of course," she replied, head dipping a bit in acknowledgment. "May I have a word?"

He hesitated. The pull to find his guide was strong, but this woman had to know the man — and by the scent he knew it was a *man*. Eventually, he gestured her into the nearest unoccupied room, which happened to be an interview room. "What can I do for you, Section Chief Strauss?"

She seemed a bit flustered for a second that he knew her, but quickly recovered. "I would like to review a case with you. I know you have a lot of latitude in choosing your own cases, and I

thought if you were aware of our situation, you might be willing to aid us if we identify a suspect?"

He knew she meant in tracking the suspect, not in terms of figuring out who it was, and he felt the resentment again that he was seen as a sensory tool, and his brain was overlooked as unimportant. He said nothing, but gestured for her to continue. If his guide was in the BAU, which was the logical conclusion, he at least wanted the information she had.

With growing concern, he listened to her tale about a killer targeting the BAU itself, replicating their solved crimes and stalking the team. The team was in New York on an entirely different case, but Strauss was covertly pursuing the Replicator case on her own and wanted to know if Tony would be willing to help.

He rubbed the back of his neck, trying to get his thoughts in order, knowing he was fighting instinct. "I think it's a forgone conclusion that I'll be helping you with this case. Unless I've completely misinterpreted what my senses have been telling me, my guide is on your team. With a known threat against him, I'm not going to be able to let it go. And as much as I'd like more information, my instincts demand that I find him first. *Soon*. Meaning, before we discuss this further."

Brows pulled together in a frown, she responded, "There's only one guide on the team, but I think you must be mistaken."

"And why's that?"

Hesitating for a moment, she finally replied, "He's a level one guide, so I can't see how he could be your match."

"Ma'am, I'm only the second sentinel to score at a level six while unbonded," he said without arrogance, because it was simply a fact. Jim Ellison was the only other to ever achieve that. Pre-bonding ratings were often indicative of where you'd be after bonding. Most sentinels went up a level, though a few stayed the same. There was really no place for Tony to go, so he was in a very small group that, when bonded, would defy the limits of the current rating system.

"Yes, I'm aware."

"Then you know my guide will be rated a level six after we bond, even though he'll be much stronger than that. The scale simply stops at six."

"What's your point, Agent DiNozzo?" She subtly straightened her clothing, and stood up a little straighter.

“My point is that the very strongest guides cannot access their empathic gifts without a bond. So they would obviously test low on the scale. The fact that he’s been documented at a level one means nothing.”

She paled a bit. “I-I didn’t know that.”

He really needed to stop this conversation. “I need to meet him, whoever it may be, and determine if he’s who I’m being drawn to. We can discuss your *Replicator* case further at another time.”

“Yes... of course. If you’ll wait here, I’ll send Agent Hotchner. Even though he’s in the middle of a case, he’s presently waiting for information from two of his team who are in the field, so he can spare the time to...” she trailed off for a moment. “To talk.”

Once she was gone, he considered for several moments. He knew the name. Aaron Hotchner, Unit Chief of the BAU. If that’s who his guide was, there was no way Hotchner thought he was a level one guide. He may have let that perception stand for his own reasons, but his spirit animal would have given it away. High-level guides had a very specific set of spirit animals that *only* they had, and the only way one would have their rating registered incorrectly is if they didn’t disclose or lied about their spirit animal.

It was about a minute before he heard Strauss talking to someone and he was able to hear the voice of his guide for the first time. Hotchner must have been doing research silently, because the voice was clear and *perfect* and he felt his senses easing even though they were dialed up. Strauss was vague about getting the agent away, and Tony relaxed further as the heartbeat drew closer.

Hotchner hesitated outside the room, then entered. As soon as he was in the room, he flinched and reeled back against the door causing it to close with a bang that made Tony wince. Immediately, he held up his hands in warding-off gesture, and Tony belatedly realized he’d started to move forward.

“Stop,” his guide said with a slight waver in his voice. Hotchner closed his eyes and took a deep breath, then his composure settled over him like a mask. He finally met Tony’s gaze. “This can’t happen. I’m in the middle of a case.”

Tony frowned, utterly confused by the reaction. “I’m not proposing we bond right this second. But we—”

"I never intend to bond," Hotchner interjected. "I *chose* not to reveal that I was a high-level guide, Sentinel DiNozzo."

"Sentinel *Agent*," Tony snapped, feeling like his nerves were suddenly frayed.

Hotchner gave him a searching look, then nodded his head, probably understanding more than most people Tony had to correct. "Agent," he acknowledged, then took a carefully measured breath. "I'm in a relationship with someone I care very much for, and my work with the BAU is my priority. I cannot devote myself to being your guide. Also, I'm in the middle of a case. This can't happen," he finally repeated.

Tony felt like he'd been punched in the chest. It had gone to shit so damn *fast*. His guide, probably the only possible guide for him — someone who felt so perfect and *right*, after near seven years of *wrong* — had rejected him. "Go," he managed to grate out.

"Agent—"

"You need to *go*!"

In the next moment, his guide was gone, but Tony couldn't stop following Hotchner's heartbeat.

Tony took a seat in the lounge area of the hotel lobby behind a pillar and let his senses out to play, looking for signs of his guide or any possible trouble. The day had been absolute shit; he'd spent most of the afternoon in an isolation suite trying to get his head around the most recent cluster fuck that was his life since coming online.

His supervisory agent had chased him down, stating that Agent Taylor had reported that Tony had likely found his guide. Tony refuted the notion. "*False alarm*," he'd claimed; said his senses had been overworked and he just needed rest. Everyone bought it, because why would Tony lie about finding his guide, after all.

His guide.

His guide who was nothing like Tony expected. He didn't care that his guide was male or older than him or anything superficial; he only cared that his guide didn't want anything to do with him. Tony had always thought if he found his guide, he'd have found the one person who would be there no matter what.

But he now realized that was ridiculously romanticized nonsense. High-level guides and sentinels didn't form platonic bonds. Just because biology said their skills matched, didn't mean anything else about them was going to fit. And their lives certainly didn't seem to fit in this particular case.

As much as he wanted to just put this whole thing behind him, the Replicator issue Strauss has briefed him on wouldn't let him go. Hotchner may not be willing to accept being Tony's guide, but it didn't change the fact that he *was*, and Tony couldn't settle the sentinel in him while a threat to his guide was running around.

Once he'd rested a bit and wrestled his senses under control, he'd decided to check his guide's hotel, make sure there were no immediate threats. From then on, he'd be keeping an eye from a distance. Tony had a *lot* of latitude to choose his own cases because the Bureau didn't want to lose him, and they nearly had several times. So if Tony wanted to get on this Replicator thing, he would. Officially, Hotchner's team wasn't on the case anymore, so Tony could take it if he were so inclined.

The current problem was that there was absolutely no indication his guide was staying in this hotel. He could detect faint traces of his scent from second-hand contact with his team, but it was clear that he hadn't been in this hotel himself. But why would he stay separate from his team?

Dammit.

He'd been able to get the BAU's hotel easily enough, but asking a bunch of personal questions about Hotchner would raise red flags, and he couldn't afford that. Though he reminded himself that the whole team was being stalked by this whack job.

Knowing it was risky, he opened up his hearing and his sense of smell, turning up the second set of sensory dials most unbonded sentinels couldn't even visualize, much less use. Normally he needed guide support to use those dials extensively, but he was willing to take the chance.

Keeping his eyes closed, he breathed deeply, letting the huge amount of sensory data filter through his brain, and he knew something wasn't right. Before he had even consciously processed what he'd heard, he was up and running for the stairs and drawing his weapon.

By the eighth floor he'd processed that Erin Strauss was in serious danger. Relying on the element of surprise, he kicked the room door in, his weapon unerringly finding its target.

The guy was fast. He had positioned himself behind Strauss, giving Tony no clear shot. The section chief was disoriented and had tears on her cheeks, and Tony could smell the drugs

already in her system. This had to be the Replicator, already replicating the BAU's most recent case.

"Let her go," Tony barked.

"If you want her to live, put your gun down," a hard-eyed man replied.

"Not a chance. You shoot her, you're getting a bullet between the eyes, and I promise you, I don't miss. Ever," he growled.

"It's already too late for her," the creep said, a smirk gracing what part of his face Tony could see.

"Let her go," he ordered again, wary as he noticed that the perp was actually moving subtly closer.

"Okay then," was said just before Strauss came hurtling toward Tony. And while Tony grappled with her uncoordinated, flailing weight, he was knocked into by who could only be the Replicator. He tried to get his hands free, but was too late to stop him from getting out the door.

Tony got out into the hall just as the perp was fleeing around a corner. "Fuck!" He couldn't shoot wildly in a hotel, someone would get killed, and he couldn't hunt until he had called for help for Strauss.

It took more minutes than he could spare before he heard the sirens in the distance. Even before the paramedics arrived, SSA Blake came running in wearing her nightclothes and demanding information.

"She's been overdosed on MDMA and methamphetamines. I have to go," Tony rattled off quickly.

"Wait! I need to know what happened."

"You'll have to wait. I'm gonna lose the scent trail."

She continued to protest, but Tony had to go. He *had* to.

“What was DiNozzo even doing at our hotel?” Rossi asked abruptly as he paced the hospital waiting room.

Hotch didn’t want to get into that story. Not now. He’d tell Rossi later, although even he wasn’t clear on *why*. “We’ll find out eventually, but it’s not really important right now.”

Looking pained, David seemed to fold in on himself a bit. “They don’t know if she’s going to make it, Aaron.”

“She’s strong, Dave.” He let Rossi get his composure back before they began working on a plan for what they’d do if she survived. Because even if she lived, Hotch was confident they needed to let the Replicator think that Strauss had died tonight.

Unexpectedly, a man Hotch recognized entered the waiting room — the Alpha Sentinel Prime of New York. He had apparently received a call from DiNozzo and had a weird proposition for Hotch and Rossi.

An hour later, he was back at the Manhattan field office, trying desperately to track down DiNozzo. He needed to hear what happened first hand, then DiNozzo needed to sit down with a sketch artist.

Hotch forced himself to stay focused on the case, on what the bigger picture was, and refused to think about DiNozzo beyond how he related to finding the Replicator. He’d think about the other issues later, when he didn’t have a killer to catch.

Another hour passed, and he and most of his team were getting frustrated as they got the run around trying to track down DiNozzo. Rossi had stayed at the hospital, in part to see how Strauss progressed, but also to take the next steps in carrying out their new plans.

“Why isn’t he answering his damn phone?” Morgan exploded in frustration.

“Because he’s on his way to Washington D.C.,” a voice said from the doorway.

Hotch whipped around to find the Assistant Director of the New York field offices standing casually in the doorway, holding a folder. “Why is he going to DC?”

“Because you’re headed there in the morning, and the assumption is the Replicator is going there, too,” Assistant Director Williams replied calmly.

“So he’s working the case officially?” Hotch was honestly torn. No doubt a sentinel of DiNozzo’s caliber would help, but he also didn’t want to deal with the personal side of this *at all*. And

frankly, being around DiNozzo was almost painful with the long suppressed *want* it stirred up in Hotch. He hadn't discussed that he'd found his sentinel; not with anyone on the team, not with his brother, and not even with Beth.

"Not exactly," the AD hedged. "The Director wants this kept quiet. Your team has twenty-four hours before he takes other action."

"And DiNozzo?"

Williams gave Hotch a speculative look, and Hotch was certain the AD *knew*. "DiNozzo finally lost the scent trail about fifty miles southwest of New York. He then called in a verbal report, followed by a call to the Alpha Sentinel Prime of the US asking for authorization for a *Hunt*. His request was granted. DiNozzo has been in contact with the Prime for DC for support in his Hunt. *Our* Director has agreed to provide Sentinel DiNozzo whatever he needs from us in his efforts to find the Replicator."

Now he was certain both the AD and the Director knew he was DiNozzo's guide.

The AD continued. "Your team will work in parallel, but a Sentinel Hunt is sentinel business. If they contact you, please provide whatever they request." He passed over the folder, then moved as if to leave but looked back. "That's the transcription of the report. He also said someone would deliver the sketch of the unsub to your offices tomorrow."

As soon as the door closed, Spencer said, "Someone on this team is Sentinel DiNozzo's guide?"

Hotch almost corrected him to add "*Agent*" but then bit back the response.

Morgan stopped his pacing and stared. "How'd you come to that conclusion, boy genius?"

"A Sentinel Hunt is only ever authorized if a sentinel's guide is in direct danger. The Replicator is stalking the BAU, so his guide has to be someone on the team."

"And a sentinel on an authorized *Hunt* is allowed to execute the target," Morgan murmured thoughtfully.

"None of which is relevant right now," Hotch said, attempting to steer the conversation away from very dangerous ground. "Wheels up at seven, so everyone back to the hotel and get a few hours' sleep. Nothing else we can do here tonight."

They all looked at him with that damn figuring-it-out *profiler* expression.

Yeah, they *all* knew.

Everyone did a good job of having their game faces on first thing the next morning. Rossi was back with them, preparing to accompany Strauss' "body" back to DC. In reality, she had survived the night and was under the protection of the S&G Center in New York. Not even the New York AD knew she'd survived; only his team and the Director were aware.

Rossi was going to break the news about what was going on to Strauss' kids in person. Make sure they knew how to act until this situation was resolved. After he finished with the ME's "examination" of the Jane Doe they were using, he'd join them again in Quantico.

Hotch had gotten very little rest, his mind going over and over everything that had happened yesterday. He hadn't discussed the sentinel issue with Beth, letting her assume his preoccupation was related to his brother's arrest in relation to their latest case. His worry about safety had led him to leave Jack behind with Beth this morning, his son's safety taking precedence.

"What do we know about DiNozzo," Morgan asked as soon as they were in the air.

Reid was poised to respond, but Hotch interjected, "DiNozzo's not the issue right now."

Morgan's brows shot up. "He's on a *Hunt* for the same unsub we're tracking. How is he not an issue?"

Hotch forced himself to not react. He did not want to discuss the sentinel with the team, but he also could admit that if this didn't affect him personally, he'd readily agree that the team should know as much as possible about him. Part of him appreciated that Morgan didn't point out the obvious; that DiNozzo's guide was on the team.

"All right," Hotch allowed. "Fill us in, Reid." He ignored the looks Rossi and Blake were shooting him.

"Anthony DiNozzo, forty years old on June 9th, online for nearly seven years. Notable in the sentinel and guide community for rarely needing to work with guides, in fact is reported to prefer not to, yet is able to utilize the high-level sentinel's secondary sensory dials. He's level six without a bond, so the theory is he'll be another Ellison if he ever bonded, and certainly one of the small number of alpha sentinels. Although, there are a few countries that don't acknowledge the authority of the Guide Council, and so there are not complete records. There

are rumors that DiNozzo is the strongest unbonded sentinel on the planet; but certainly that's true within the records of the Council."

"How do you know all that?" Blake asked, looking a little stunned.

Hotch closed his eyes briefly and took a careful, steadying breath. He'd heard of DiNozzo through the Bureau grapevine, but he hadn't realized he was quite that strong a sentinel.

Reid continued. "I pay attention to any official releases from the Guide Council, and the Bureau S&G Office. I read his public profile, plus I talked with his last assigned guide yesterday. He just completed an eight-day manhunt, and now he's started a Sentinel Hunt." His eyes cut quickly toward Hotch before he added, "He has to be very proficient with his senses to accomplish that. According to Guide Taylor, Sentinel DiNozzo has nearly left the Bureau several times. Even though no one knows the full reason why, the end result is that he was given near complete autonomy in selecting his cases."

"Agent DiNozzo," Hotch interjected. "He has expressed that he prefers he be addressed as *Agent*."

Everyone looked his direction, but he kept his expression blank.

Finally, Morgan asked, "Any particular reason the Bureau would be so accommodating to one sentinel?"

"If what I heard is accurate, it's because he's unbonded and yet he's the second strongest sentinel at the Bureau, possibly the strongest, depending on who you ask. The Bureau has no alpha sentinels, so there's a lot of pressure on DiNozzo to bond," Reid answered quickly.

"How long has he been with the Bureau?" JJ asked.

"A little over six years. He was with the police for about six years, and then also with NCIS for nearly six. He has undergraduate degrees in Sports Science and Sociology. Masters in Forensic Psychology, which he obtained just before coming online. There's nothing about any further education in his public Bureau profile."

"What can we expect from him as we look for the Replicator?" Morgan asked.

"Sentinel Hunts are very rare," Reid began. "The sentinel leading the Hunt is always the one whose guide is in danger." Hotch could almost feel that everyone wanted to look at him. "If there's a scent reference sample, multiple sentinels can utilize the exemplar to aid the lead sentinel, but ultimately the lead has complete autonomy in the Hunt. In this case, we know the

sentinels who came to the hotel last night couldn't get the scent distinctly, so only DiNozzo knows what they're looking for. I'd say, at the moment, he's on his own."

Rossi gave him a *look* and Hotch knew that a talk would be coming.

Early afternoon, Tony pulled up in front of the Hoover Building into a no parking zone, and fired off a quick text. He then focused on reeling his senses in for a few minutes so he could try to re-center himself. There was no scent trace of the unsub in DC yet, but Tony needed some guide support to really let his senses out to play any more. His senses were stressed from combing New York, DC, and the route between the two for more than twelve hours. There were five sentinels on standby in DC, and more could come from New York if Tony managed to catch the trail again.

A few minutes later, the passenger door opened and a familiar smell filled the car as the person slid into the passenger seat. "Not sure why you asked for me, DiNoteso," Fornell said, peering at Tony intently.

"What's the matter, Fornell? Don't tell me you didn't miss me," Tony jibed, reluctantly grounding his sense of smell on the clean, masculine scent of the older guide. His olfactory sense was so overworked at the moment, there was no way he could conduct this Hunt without the guide to ground himself on as a sensory baseline.

Fornell snorted. "Seriously, why me?"

"I need a guide for this Hunt; someone I know I can work with, is compatible, and is good in the field. And I know *you* won't try to drag out our 'working relationship'."

Fornell winced a little and Tony felt like an ass. The last thing the older man needed was Tony reminding him that he already had a sentinel... one whose head was permanently lodged in his own ass. "Sorry, Tobias. I didn't mean it that way."

"Nothing but the truth, Tony," Fornell said somewhat woodenly. His scent pile now had notes of distress that really made Tony feel like an insensitive prick. With an obvious attempt at a subject change, Fornell said, "If Ellison authorized a Hunt, you found your guide. So why aren't you working with him or her?"

Tony hesitated for a second before replying, "We are in the same metaphorical boat, Fornell. Doesn't mean he's not in danger. And it sure doesn't mean my drive to keep him safe is any less."

“Ah hell, kid.” He scrubbed his hands over his face, radiating an empathetic sort of frustration.

“I’ll be forty next month, old man. Not a kid anymore.” Despite surface appearances, Tony knew he could count on Fornell. He had given Tony a path away from NCIS when he’d needed it most, and they’d kept in touch over the years.

Fornell just snorted. “How bad off are you right now? Empathically, you feel terrible.”

In response, Tony just sighed and pushed up the sleeve of his Henley to his elbow. He desperately needed to ground as many senses as he could before he went any further with this Hunt. Although, he drew the line at taste. He had never grounded taste on a guide, and he planned to keep it that way.

Fornell said nothing, just rested his hand on Tony’s arm, watching carefully as Tony acclimated his guide imprint; adjusting his sensory baseline to include the guide, which was always steadier and more flexible than without.

He felt a soothing empathic bubble surround him. He didn’t let many guides buffer him like that, but he desperately needed it, and he trusted Fornell. The soothing waves of *guide* saturated his being. Fornell may have seemed crotchety as hell, a true member of the bastard brigade, but he sure as fuck *felt* good.

After a few minutes, Fornell said, “Let’s get this show on the road, *kid*. Who we looking for?”

Feeling better than he had since the beginning of the kidnapping case in New England, Tony passed him the sketch he’d done over the course of the night. Tony’s drawing skills were top notch in terms of translating what he’d seen onto paper. Now, if he had to try to draw from someone else’s impressions, like a sketch artist would, he’d be sunk. Fortunately, he’d seen the unsub in person.

“I know this guy,” Fornell murmured.

“You do? Who is it?” Tony asked urgently.

“I can’t quite place him, but I know that face. Damn. *Who is that?*” With the Replicator bringing systems down, they couldn’t even run it through facial recognition. “I’m pretty sure he’s Bureau, or maybe Justice. I’d head back in and fax it out to the alphabet soup and down to Quantico, but he’s probably fucking watching anything that happens surrounding this case.”

That didn't surprise Tony at all. It was pretty obvious it was someone high up, somewhere in the law enforcement machine in order to have the access to read the BAU's reports. "I need to go to Quantico anyway. I don't believe for a second this guy hasn't been there at some point; I'm hoping it might give me something to Hunt from. We can drop the sketch with the BAU and let them decide who to release it to."

Fornell just nodded, staring with furrowed brow at the sketch.

They were still a few miles from Quantico when Tony caught the scent trail again. He abruptly pulled to the side of the road, ignoring Fornell's exclamation of surprise. Hopping out of the car, he dialed up scent as much as he could.

Fornell caught on quick. "You got the trail again," he stated.

Not replying, Tony just concentrated on trying to catalogue the information. He was beginning to feel frustrated when he felt guide-touch on his shoulder and a soothing voice whispering instructions.

After a couple minutes, he pointed in two different directions. "That way, and that way."

"One toward Quantico. Which way do you want to go?"

Tony was torn, but the need to confirm that the Replicator was not presently in the same building as Tony's guide won out. "Quantico."

Fornell insisted on driving, despite Tony's protests. "While you're distracted sniffing the wind, I don't want to die in a fiery crash. I'll go where you say, but I *am* driving."

He was more *sentinel* than FBI Agent as he followed the smell of the Replicator towards the BAU offices. The perp targeting Tony's guide had the fucking balls to come into Hotchner's workplace. Recently. *Very* recently. He had to have been here within the last hour for the scent to be this strong.

There was some level of awareness that the majority of the BAU team plus his guide were in a room together, so Tony catalogued that as *safe*. Ignoring everyone and everything else, he followed the scent trail to a closed office door with the nameplate of *David Rossi*. He knew the office was empty, but the Replicator had chosen this office for a reason.

“Everyone stays out,” he nearly growled as he opened the door. He was aware of Fornell doing his best to keep people at bay, but he would only focus on it if there were a problem.

It only took a few seconds for all the sensory data to sort itself out in his mind. He went to the door, where Fornell was physically standing in the way of anyone even trying to enter. Hotchner was standing nearby, arms crossed over his chest, and several of the profilers were near. “I need gloves and an evidence bag,” he said, avoiding eye contact with his guide.

The questions started again, but happily the youngest of the bunch — a tall, thin agent who looked about twelve — got the supplies Tony needed. He bagged the envelope, then returned to the group, pulling the door shut behind him.

He handed off the bagged envelope, addressed to David Rossi, to the kid who’d gotten him the evidence bag. “It’s laced with MDMA and meth. There are five sentinel and guide pairs on their way to get the scent profile of that room, so everyone needs to stay out until they’ve finished. The two strongest scents in that room are Agent Rossi and your unsub.” He looked to Fornell. “You give them the sketch?”

“Gave it to a blond computer tech. She’s making copies.”

“Good. Let’s go.”

“Agent DiNozzo, we need to synchronize our efforts,” Hotchner retorted, expression blank.

It took everything in Tony to ignore that voice and everything about his guide. His sensory baseline had to stay grounded on Fornell. He couldn’t afford to be around Hotchner and have that allure pulling at him. “I don’t have the time. I can’t lose the trail again.”

“We need to work together,” Hotchner insisted.

“That’s not even possible.” Tony finally met his guide’s eyes, registering a minute flinch. Even if a Sentinel on a Hunt could easily work within standard law enforcement procedures, there was no way Tony could use his senses the way he needed to around the guide who had rejected him. He would completely destabilize.

Instead of saying anything further, he went the opposite direction from Hotchner, brushing past the kid and Agent Blake.

As soon as he was out of the building, he opened his sense of smell as wide as he could tolerate. He wasn’t losing this guy again.

Hotch looked up as Rossi entered his office and closed the door, taking a seat across from his desk. "Something on your mind, Dave?"

"I think you know already," Rossi replied evenly.

Willfully choosing to misunderstand, Hotch asked, "I assume you're up to speed on the current situation?"

"From DiNozzo's sketch, Blake identified our unsub as John Curtis, an SSA in Intelligence Oversight. Garcia's working on possible locations. And considering that he slipped in falsified forensic reports to my office, and taking into account the nature of the drug used, he clearly hoped to turn us against one another. We had a bunch of sentinels and their guides here sniffing things, and now we're waiting, so until then..." he trailed off leadingly.

When Hotch didn't say anything, Rossi added, "I already knew you were a guide, I just didn't know you were a level *six* guide."

Hotch's head snapped up, but he really didn't have anything to say to that. It wasn't a surprise that Rossi knew what was in his personnel file.

"How much of your gifts are blocked?"

Sitting back in his chair, Hotch tossed his pen on the desk and gave in to having this discussion. "Almost all of them. What empathy I have access to is pretty nominal, and I keep it locked down most of the time."

"But you knew you weren't really a level one?" Rossi prodded.

"I used to see my spirit guide all the time... I knew what I was; what my real rating was." When he'd come online, it had seemed like all his plans for the future would fall apart if he found a sentinel, so he claimed he never saw his spirit guide.

"Does being a guide bother you that much?" David asked but without any hint of judgment.

Hotch blew out a breath. "I never wanted it to define me. When I came online, I was already in love with Haley, I had my eye on joining the BAU... I didn't want a sentinel interfering." Guides almost always joined sentinels in their work. Hotch had never wanted to just be useful for

grounding someone's senses. He internally winced a little as he thought about DiNozzo's insistence on being called "*Agent*."

Rossi was silent for several long moments. "What about the longing?"

Aaron flinched and almost reflexively touched his chest, but he'd trained himself out of that reaction long ago. "It never goes away," he finally replied woodenly.

"So why aren't you with your sentinel, Aaron?"

"Because I'm not ready to leave the BAU, plus we have a case to work." He took a breath to steady his composure. "And I'm with Beth," he added belatedly. He knew the slip hadn't been lost on Rossi. No one he'd ever been in a relationship with had ever filled that empty place inside him, but it didn't mean the feelings he had for her weren't *real*.

"Do you think Beth would be happy knowing she would never be able to be what you need?"

Hotch just glared.

"Help me understand, Aaron. Because it seems like you've been living with this missing part of yourself that you've been filling up with work and *responsibility*."

Hotch shook his head, not able to have this discussion. It was hard enough that he was put in a situation where he felt like he *had* to try to work with DiNozzo. He'd tried to prioritize the case, and that meant keeping on top of what the sentinel was doing. So he'd asked DiNozzo to sync up on their efforts, and had been completely unprepared for how painful it had been when the sentinel said he couldn't be around Hotch; because *that* was the clear message.

And as much as what little gift he had access to was locked down, he could *feel* that DiNozzo had grounded on Tobias Fornell, and that made him angry when he had no right to be.

"What do you think of DiNozzo?" Rossi asked out of the blue. When Hotch didn't immediately reply, he added, "I know you've formed an impression, Aaron, so what do you think?"

"I don't care for this *Hunt* business." It was really a license for the sentinel to execute someone if they so desired, and Hotch didn't have any appreciation for that.

Rossi snorted. "Forget about the Hunt. What do you think of *him*?"

Huffing a little in annoyance, Hotch reluctantly admitted, "He's clearly a strong sentinel, though I can understand why he insists on people remembering he's an agent, because he's an

impressive investigator.” Which was Hotch’s unsubtle way of admitting he’d checked into DiNozzo’s background when he’d had a few minutes.

“I think you’re being deliberately obtuse, Aaron. What do you—”

A sharp knock at the door and then Morgan stuck his head in. “We got a possible location on Curtis. Rural Virginia.”

Mind now fully on the case, Hotch picked up his phone to immediately call for helicopters. “Did you text the location to the sentinels?” Hotch wasn’t even sure he wanted the sentinels to know, but not relaying the information wasn’t an option.

“Sent, but no acknowledgement yet,” Morgan called back.

“We’re not done, Aaron,” Rossi murmured on his way out the door.

From there, everything was frantic until they were in the helicopters headed deep into rural Virginia. Hotch needed to focus, but riding in the helicopter he couldn’t help but wonder where DiNozzo was. Once they had an ID on Curtis, the sentinel had refused to share any information with the BAU team, uncertain of how closely Curtis was monitoring their actions, or to what degree he had infiltrated their systems.

He assumed the sentinels were still hunting somewhere in Virginia, but the further they flew, the less likely it seemed the sentinel Hunt would be successful. It was too far into heavily wooded, rural areas. Curtis had had at least an hour head start on DiNozzo and a good two hours on the other five sentinels. Even though they’d sent the sentinels the location, unless they were already close, the BAU team would beat them.

Hotch listened to the updates from Garcia, and suddenly their satellite imaging was overridden, followed by the controls of the helicopter itself. Then they were going down.

Tony moved near silently through the trees, sound dialed up to keep track of the other sentinels as they converged on Curtis’ position. The guides were keeping back as the sentinels needed complete silence in the dark for their approach; however those with law enforcement training would move in once they had Curtis.

He knew by scent and by sound exactly where Curtis was, and they did not want to alert him, because Tony smelled a fuckton of explosives on this property. He was tracking the incoming helicopters, but it was too late to act by the time he realized Curtis meant to crash it.

Forcing his worry down, Tony signaled the other five sentinels to continue. They were each converging from a different direction to ensure Curtis had no way of escaping. Even unbonded, Tony was the strongest sentinel on the Hunt. There was another level six, three level fives, and a level four with remarkable olfactory sense.

Even though John Curtis was not in sight yet, they all heard when he changed position to move to the site of the downed helicopter. In sync, and near soundlessly, the six sentinels adjusted course.

Tony could hear his guide's heartbeat on the helicopter, and only its strong, steady rhythm kept him on track. There was no smell of major injury that he could detect, and there was no scent of fuel on the air, so presumably Curtis just hard-landed the helicopter rather than crashed it.

The first clear visual he had of Curtis, the man was at the door of the helo pulling Alex Blake's unconscious body from the back. There was a sharp smell of sedatives in the air.

"The shot's mine," Tony whispered so soft only a sentinel could hear. He wasn't giving Curtis another chance to use a body as a shield. When he was close enough to be certain of his aim, he took the shot, splattering blood and brain matter all over the side of the hard-landed helicopter.

It took everything in him not to go to his guide and personally ensure Hotchner was uninjured. He could tell by sound and by scent that the guide would be okay when he woke, though he desperately wanted to reassure through touch. But he was only just holding on at the moment, and physical contact was the absolute worst thing for him in that condition.

The other helo was almost at their location. Tony had one of the other sentinels check on Hotchner, while he moved Alex Blake away from where John Curtis' body lay.

The rest of the BAU team arrived just as Hotchner, Blake and Reid were waking. There were lots of questions, but Tony was letting the other sentinels run interference and brief the HRT and BAU agents about the situation, including the explosives the sentinels had detected. Now that the threat to his guide was past, everything started catching up with him; the exhaustion, the sensory overuse, the rejection by his guide, and it was too much. His sense dials kept slipping out of his control, particularly scent and hearing. He tried to completely shut off the second-level high-sensory dials, but they just dialed up further.

Tony wasn't just experiencing sensory fatigue, he was worried he was bordering on sensory collapse. His senses kept instinctively reaching out for his *guide*, and the more he yanked them away, the worse things got. He needed Fornell to get there. Immediately.

The guides arrived just when Tony didn't think he could handle it anymore. He had lost his ability to regulate his senses on his own and everything was slowly being blown wide open. It was agonizing. He was getting too *much* sensory input from his guide, which he could not afford, and so couldn't maintain Fornell as his sensory baseline.

Fornell was suddenly right there, hands firmly holding Tony's face. "Can you dial down?"

Tony shook his head as much as he was able. The senior guide walked him through each of the ten dials like he was a rookie sentinel, murmuring low and steady. He attempted to buffer Tony empathically, but Tony couldn't help resisting this time even though he knew he needed it.

Despite getting the dials somewhat under control it wasn't enough to stop hearing every heartbeat on site, smelling every single person, seeing things in obscene clarity and detail down to the cellular level, feeling every minute change in air current, and even tasting the damn drugs still lingering in the air.

Desperately trying not to, he kept zeroing in on Hotchner, keenly aware of every skipped heartbeat and every flinch of pain. At the wrong moment, he looked up and met his guide's gaze and dialed up his sight fast and hard, and suddenly everything went white.

Hotch sat at his desk, head in his hands, waiting for... something. He had any number of things that needed urgent attention — paperwork, case reports, returning to New York to get his son — but he couldn't seem to manage anything.

Hyper-sensory collapse.

That's what Fornell had said when he'd called from the S&G Center in DC. A state where a sentinel completely loses their ability to regulate their senses. In hypo-sensory collapse all the senses dial themselves off, which caused the sentinel to go into shock. With hyper-sensory collapse, the sentinel zones on all five senses at once, causing a coma-like state. Both conditions could be fatal.

When Hotch had seen the sentinel go down, he'd tried to go to him, then caught himself. Not that the other sentinels and guides present would have let him near DiNozzo, which had made him irrationally angry. He recognized instinct was heavily at work, but he'd spent nearly twenty years ignoring his guide instincts, and it should be simple to keep ignoring it. Except that it wasn't easy. Not anymore.

There was a brief tap at his door, but before he could say a word, Agent Fornell entered, closing the door behind him. As soon as he was seated, he reached into his pocket, pulling out a titanium wristband, similar to the one Fornell himself was wearing. Fornell tossed it onto Hotch's desk.

Hotch glared at the guide identification band. Wearing them was optional for guides below level three.

"You were never a level one," Fornell began. "You put yourself at risk by not wearing it."

Reluctantly, he admitted the truth of that. There were drugs that a level one or two could take reasonably safely that a level five or six could have extreme reactions to. Mostly the reaction was erosion of empathic barriers, and since Hotch didn't have access to his gifts unbonded, he hadn't felt it was much of a risk.

"The DC Sentinel and Guide Center had wanted to talk to you, but Dr. Sandburg intervened and told them to leave you be. He'll go to the wall to protect your right not to bond, but even he was vexed that you aren't wearing your ID. No one wants to discover that blocked empathic gifts are affected by GABA agonists."

Saying nothing, Hotch reached for the ID and quickly fastened the wristband, feeling a lead weight settle in his stomach. He had many questions, but the only thing he really cared about at the moment was, "Is DiNozzo all right?"

"I'm sure he'll be fine. He's a tough kid."

Eyes narrowing, Hotch asked, "Why aren't you with him?"

"The last two people on the planet who should be around him are both sitting in this office." Before Hotch could ask for clarification of that, Fornell continued. "Right now he's under heavy sentinel-safe sedation and in complete isolation. Normally, in the absence of his own guide, they'd want to wake him to the last guide he had an imprint on, but Tony is unusual in that he can sense that sentinel-void that guides carry and he draws away from it instinctually. So, he can only work with bonded guides until he stabilizes again.

"If I were around, considering that we had a limited four-sense imprint, his senses would reach out for me, but then he'd fight them, which would be *very bad* in this situation. He'd be unable not to try to imprint on *you*, so that leaves you out."

Hotch wasn't certain how he felt about that, so he stayed focused on the sentinel. "Is everything being done for him?"

Fornell's brows shot up. "Of course. Everyone is very invested in Tony recovering... Sandburg and Ellison will actually be here in the morning so Sandburg can take over. If they can bring him out of his coma in the next two days, a week or two in isolation should get him back to his baseline."

He knew he should be relieved by that, but he couldn't get his emotions to line up with what he thought they should be. He resented other guides helping DiNozzo, and he really had no right to feel that way. "Why'd he pick a Bureau guide for his *Hunt*?"

With a smirk, Fornell leaned back more comfortably in the chair and Hotch was pretty sure the guide was reading him. In some ways it has always been maddening that Hotch was a high-level guide, but without a bond, the lowest level guide had more useful skills than he did.

"I've known Tony since he was with NCIS. I brought him to the Bureau when he couldn't find his feet there after he came online. So there was familiarity, plus he knows I'm not gonna want to bond with him."

Hotch just raised a brow in inquiry.

"I should make you work harder for it, but you've had a rough day so I'll be nice. I already have a sentinel, one who doesn't want to pursue a bond. So, I'm not gonna be chasing Tony around the playground pulling his pigtailed."

The idea of Fornell's sentinel rejecting him and leaving him with that perpetual longing seemed—

He brought himself up short. *Damn.*

His emotions were suddenly all over the place, so he threw out a question, hoping to give himself time to get his bearings. "Why'd DiNozzo leave NCIS?"

Fornell looked torn, but then shrugged. "Eh, fuck it. I don't owe them anything." He peered at nothing for a few moments. "Tony's team lead, Jethro Gibbs, level five sentinel, was caught in an explosion back in 2006, lost his memory, retired from NCIS, and left the team to Tony. I don't know what all went on during those first couple months, but the team fell apart, and from what I can tell, only Tony was holding it together.

"Then Tony wound up in a precarious position without backup and came online under life-threatening stress." Scratching thoughtfully at his jaw, the older guide continued, "Most sentinels undergo a certain amount of personality shift when they come online, but Tony's was

drastic. He went from being one of the most entertaining and light-hearted federal agents, to one of the biggest hard asses. He was like a sonic boom in the sentinel and guide community, not to mention what he did to NCIS.”

Fornell actually smiled wryly. “Level six unbonded sentinel, which is so rare it’s almost myth, ridiculous control of his senses right from the start, able to utilize the enhanced sensory dials without a guide, only one zone out his whole training period; it was like a work of fiction. And it’s fucking annoying how clueless he is about how remarkable that all was; how remarkable *he* is. I know from acting as his guide that his mind is ridiculously well ordered, which, if you knew him, you’d know what a contradiction that seemed to be.

“When he got out of the Center after some initial training, he blew up NCIS. He had his senior agent suspended for dereliction of duty, and when he couldn’t get the team’s Mossad liaison position terminated and have her shipped back to Israel, he went after the director of the agency, who had been blocking his efforts. Investigation turned up several illegal actions on the part of the director, plus what amounted to espionage on the part of the Mossad officer. I handled those investigations myself. The liaison was sending classified case material back to Mossad, and the director had given her the access.”

“That’s why Sheppard suddenly stepped down,” Hotch murmured, thinking back. He’d heard of Gibbs, too; legendary agent, complete bastard by all accounts.

“Mm. Higher ups wanted to keep a lid on it as much as possible. Leon Vance came in and really started cleaning house, uncovering even more procedural oddities. Tony led the internal investigation while another team took over Major Case. I think the hardest thing to see in that time was Tony losing his sense of humor. He’d always been a smart ass, and suddenly, he never even smiled.”

When Fornell didn’t seem inclined to say anything else, Hotch asked, “So what happened?” He knew he should let this go, he didn’t need to know more about DiNozzo.

“Gibbs came back in the middle of NCIS’ internal investigation. I was surprised the Mossad officer hadn’t called him in sooner, but she seemed to think she’d be able to ride the storm, and once we had proof of her espionage, we didn’t give her the opportunity to call for reinforcements. Out of courtesy to Mossad, we sent her back to Israel, but she’s never again welcome on US soil.”

“So... When Gibbs came back?” Hotch prompted.

“Right.” Fornell looked lost in thought for a moment. “He was furious about what had happened to his team. At first, he tried to get the Mossad officer back, but he caved on that

pretty quickly when he saw the proof. He eventually persuaded Vance to give him Major Case again.

“The senior agent who had been suspended came back as a probationary agent. For some reason Tony agreed to work as Gibbs’ SFA, but the team never really gelled again. Maybe it was two sentinels clashing? Or resentment over the way the team had deteriorated? Neither would ever explain, so I don’t know what all went wrong there, but one day Tony calls me and tells me he’s leaving NCIS, and was I serious about my offer to bring him to the Bureau.

“Of course I was, but even if I hadn’t been, the higher-ups nearly tripped over themselves to get him. He already had twelve years of excellent work as an investigator, and promised to be an alpha sentinel some day. Director Vance tried everything to keep him, but when Tony makes up his mind about something, he’s stubborn as a mule,” Fornell concluded with an amused curl of his lip.

Hotch gave Fornell an assessing look. “Gibbs is your sentinel, isn’t he? DiNozzo might have kept the truth of what happened to himself for that reason.”

Fornell snorted. “Save your profiling for someone who wouldn’t just tell you for the asking. Yes he is, but Tony didn’t spare me the details for my sake, I can promise you. I already knew Gibbs was a grade-A bastard.” He gave Hotch a speaking look, then got to his feet. “Not much more I can tell you. The kid’ll be fine soon enough, and everyone will get on with their lives.”

He paused at the door and looked back. “Out of curiosity, what’s your spirit animal?”

Reflexively, Hotch thought to deflect the question, but then realized there was no reason anymore not to answer. “A wolf.”

Fornell sighed. “Of course it is. Damn alpha guides,” he muttered as he left the office.

Hotch finished explaining the last few days to Beth, laying out everything that had happened from the moment Strauss had sent him to meet with Anthony DiNozzo on Monday afternoon.

Beth looked up from her contemplation of her hands. “You’ve been an online guide for twenty years?” She shook her head, getting to her feet and pacing. “How do you expect me to react to this?”

“I don’t have any expectations,” he replied quickly. “You’re allowed whatever it is that you’re feeling.”

“Thank you, Aaron,” she replied with a bit of bite. “I mean how do you expect me to react to the fact that I’ll never be enough for you?”

He blinked, uncertain how to respond to that, as it wasn’t what he had been expecting her to say. “I’m sorry, Beth; there was no deliberate attempt to mislead you. Haley knew I had chosen not to be a guide and it was never an issue. This is the way I’m accustomed to my life being.”

“What? An aching void all the time? I can only assume Haley didn’t know much about guides, because if she loved you, I can’t believe she would want you to live with that.” When he started to respond, she held up a hand. “You spoke, now it’s my turn. My grandmother was a guide. She *never* found a compatible sentinel, and I know just how painful that was for her, Aaron. By today’s measure, she’d probably be a level three or four, so I *know* that what she went through is nothing like what you’ve been dealing with.”

Her hands began moving furiously as she paced. “No wonder you work all the time! It’s probably a miracle you don’t work even *more*. It distracts you from the pain of not having your sentinel. It was already cruel that you came online more than fourteen years ahead of him.” She shook her head in frustration. “I don’t understand how you can tell me this and then say that it doesn’t mean anything has changed?”

Hotch was a bit stunned and floundering in the face of her ire. “Beth, I chose the direction for my life. I don’t regret Haley, or Jack, or you.”

She glared. “I care about you so much, Aaron, but it seems to me you made these choices because you couldn’t face not being in control. You’ve put yourself through unneeded suffering. But even if I were willing to accept that it was okay for you to suffer, don’t you think I deserve to be in a relationship where I’m *enough*?”

“You are enough, Beth.”

“No, I’m not. I never can be. And we can both be angry at fate or biology or whatever it is, but you will always, *always*, seek distractions to fill that empty space, because we both know I never can.” She gave him a look that was resolved, but also pleading for understanding. “I can’t come in last place behind the things you need to distract yourself from the sentinel you don’t want. That’s madness.”

Rossi had a suite in New York and had offered up the second room to Hotch, so even though Beth offered to let he and Jack stay the night, he felt it was better to give her space. He put Jack to bed, then joined the other profiler in the living room.

“How is Strauss?” he asked. He’d been keeping on top of her progress but he’d prefer to hear it directly from Dave.

“Better. Happy to be alive, and glad this is over. She’s coming back with us tomorrow.”

“They’re already letting her out of the hospital?”

“It’ll be a while before she’s back to work, but, they’re letting her go home.” After a pause, Rossi asked, “You want to tell me what happened with Beth?”

Hotch sighed. “She... Well, let’s say she wasn’t happy.”

“Did you expect her to be?”

Hotch wasn’t sure how to answer that. He was still reeling a little from everything that had happened, and not just with Beth. “She said I made the choices I did because I couldn’t bear to not be in control.”

“And what do you think?”

Hotch honestly didn’t know anymore.

Tony stared at the familiar house for a long time, debating about going in. He’d been in isolation for a week at the DC Center, and he felt almost like himself again. Technically he wouldn’t be discharged from the Center for at least another week, but they were giving him a little latitude now that he wasn’t spiking all over the place; provided he didn’t use his senses in any way while he was out.

He hadn’t planned on this, but he’d been lying in his bed reading, or rather, trying to read, and he decided he couldn’t let this one go.

Taking a steadying breath, he headed inside and then down the familiar steps.

“Wondered how long you were going to lurk around out there,” Gibbs commented without looking up from the piece of wood he was working on.

“Well, I was busy deciding if this would be worth the eventual frustration headache,” Tony replied in an even, conversational tone.

Gibbs stiffened, but didn’t say anything. Instead he just held up the Bourbon with an inquiring shake of the bottle.

Tony shook his head. “Don’t know how you can handle that. Not just the taste, but aside from beer or a half glass of wine, alcohol fucks with my senses.”

There was a loud silence for several beats before Gibbs blandly said, “I don’t stay dialed up the way you do, so it doesn’t matter.” He used a rasp on the piece of wood for a few seconds. “Heard you were in with sensory collapse. They already let you out?”

“Well, I’ve always been a fast healer,” he said evasively. Instead of tap dancing, he just blurted out, “You’re an idiot.”

Gibbs finally looked at him, brows shooting up in surprise. “I’ll admit to being a bastard, but no one’s ever called me an idiot.”

Tony snorted. “Maybe not to your face. And, yeah, you’re a bastard, too, but rejecting your guide makes you an idiot on top of being a grade-A bastard.”

Both hands tightened on the workbench and Gibbs’ jaw was so clenched, Tony was surprised something didn’t snap. “You don’t know anything about it.”

“About why you made that dumbass decision? You’re right, I don’t. I have no earthly idea what could prompt you to reject your guide. But what I do know is that you’re not any less protective of him; I know you’re not any less worried. And I sure as hell know it would rip your heart out if anything happened to him. So, considering what I *know*, I can only conclude that whatever your bullshit rationalizations are, you’re still an idiot.”

“You know *nothing* about it,” Gibbs gritted out.

“Don’t I?” Tony asked with pained amusement lacing his tone. “You think after six years of using my senses like no other unbonded sentinel pretty much *ever*, that sensory collapse was just due?”

After a beat, Gibbs said, “You found your guide.”

"Yep!" he replied with false cheer, popping the P. "And he really doesn't want anything to do with me, so that was fun. And yet he was in danger, so it didn't matter that he doesn't want to bond, it only mattered that he could have been hurt. So don't think for a second that I don't know what it feels like to be separated from your guide.

"But, hey, Tobias' sentinel doesn't want him, my guide doesn't want me, maybe we should just make our working relationship permanent and get on with our lives."

The piece of wood snapped. "Don't push me!"

"Or what?" Tony snarled, doing a fair imitation of his tiger spirit animal. He forced himself to take a calming breath and get his emotions under control. He knew from experience that shouting matches with Gibbs didn't yield *any* results. "I didn't come here to fight with you. I came here because considering what I feel every minute since my guide said no to a bond, I couldn't let it rest without telling you I think you're an ass."

Gibbs' hands were braced on the workbench. "You already thought I was an ass."

"For the way you treated me when you got back from your Mexican siesta? Yeah, that's true. You threw a fit because your toys weren't in the same place when you decided you wanted them again, and you really couldn't handle that I was a stronger sentinel than you."

"It was *never* that," Gibbs vehemently protested.

"Whatever, Gibbs. You call it what you want, but what I remember is that if I perceived something you didn't, you never trusted it, because if *you* couldn't smell it or see it how could I?"

"It wasn't about your senses."

"That's right... what was it you said? That you couldn't trust me because everything fell apart under my leadership? So when I tell you I smell grape Kool-Aid, the fact that you thought I was shitty leader somehow means my nose can't be trusted? That was bullshit rationalization and you know it!

"Ziva was engaging in espionage from day one; that had nothing to do with my leadership. McGee was being an insubordinate little twat before you left, it just hit critical mass when you weren't there to intimidate him into good behavior. I readily admit I let him get away with it, and so I had to face the consequences of it when you were gone. I nearly paid with my life when he ignored my orders and I wound up without backup."

When Gibbs seemed set to respond, Tony made a slashing motion with his hand. “No! I’m not going through this again. We couldn’t see eye to eye on these issues six years ago; that clearly hasn’t changed. You think I don’t understand that you would have handled it all differently? That you’d have devised some punishment but officially swept everything under the rug? I understand you just fine, Gibbs. You clearly don’t understand me well if you think I was going to let that shit slide just because it’s what you’d have done.”

“I would *not* have let it go!” Gibbs growled

“Then why were you so angry? You know what? Doesn’t matter. It’s been six years... we’ve all moved on. Except your guide, who fucking aches for you. I *hate* working with temp guides, because I can feel the void they have in them. I can feel the yearning for a sentinel. And if you have no reason for staying away from him other than your own emo bullshit, well... like I said, you’re an idiot. Figured I owed it to you to tell you that face to face.”

“I want your assurance you will not use the high-level sensory dials without guide support and at least a four-sense imprint for the next three months. I’m not kidding about this, Tony,” Blair concluded with a glare.

“I know you’re not. I’m just amused by how much of a mother hen you are.”

The glare intensified. “This is not mother-henning. Sensory collapse is no joke; sentinels die from it, and just because you recovered ridiculously fast and feel like ‘normal’ does not mean that you’re not vulnerable.”

Tony held up his hands in a surrender gesture. “I will follow the doctor’s orders.” He hesitated a second. “Thanks for coming out to help me get through this.”

He could smell sadness in Blair’s scent pile, but he chose to ignore it. “It was no problem, Tony. We needed to spend some time on the east coast anyway.”

“Oh, you know you can admit that I’m you guys favorite. It’s all right. I won’t tell anyone,” Tony teased.

Jim snorted from where he was sprawled in a chair, reading a magazine and Blair just rolled his eyes. Blair gave Tony a searching look. “You sure about moving to DC? It’s going to make things harder.”

Tony’s brows just shot up. “Am I certain, Jim?”

Not looking up, Jim replied, "He's sure. If you'd rejected me, I'd have still watched over you. Couldn't do any less, Chief."

"Damn sentinels," Blair huffed. "Just take your time with the move and let things settle, okay?"

"No promises, but I'll try to be—" he broke off, head cocking to the side as his guide's presence grabbed hold of his senses. "Hotchner's here," he murmured, focused on the steady heartbeat.

"Your senses okay? You're only using your main dials right?" Blair immediately asked.

Tony winced a bit. He'd automatically turned up his second set of dials to get a better fix on his guide.

Blair didn't even need a response, just sighed with exasperation. "I'll go see why he's here." The alpha pair left and Tony fussed with his bags while listening to the conversation. He didn't even try not to listen in, and was surprised that Hotchner was there to talk to Tony. Blair was politely grilling him about his intentions, but Tony's guide seemed to be clamming up.

Without conscious thought, he found himself leaving his room and walking to the reception area. He came up behind Blair, who went silent. "It's fine, Blair. Is it okay if we use one of the conference rooms?" He wasn't sure what this was about, and he wasn't ready for hope, but he wouldn't ever deny his guide.

"Of course. Just remember to keep your senses set low, and let us know if you need anything." Blair shot Hotchner a warning look before he and Jim moved away.

Within a few minutes, they were in small, soundproofed room with a white noise generator on, standing across the table from one another. Tony noticed that Hotchner was clearly tense and seemed tired, he was also dressed casually in a polo and jeans.

"Why'd you need to talk to me?" Tony asked without preamble, because this wasn't easy for him.

"I..." Hotchner trailed off and rubbed the back of his neck, his scent pile becoming saturated with frustration. Whatever this was, it was something Hotchner was uncomfortable with. "I owe you an apology."

Tony's brows shot up. "And why's that?"

“When we met, I should have spoken to you... talked through the problems instead of just shutting things down. I know that couldn’t have been easy.”

Frowning, Tony replied, “It’s done, you don’t have to apologize. I’m not going to bother you or make your life difficult, so don’t worry.”

“That’s not—” Hotchner sighed. “Look, can we just sit? It’s not my intention for this to be confrontational.” A little reluctantly, Tony took a seat when Hotchner did, and then his guide continued. “I’ve always been certain of what I wanted, and even when that changed, I kept trying to convince myself that it hadn’t.”

That made the kind of sense that didn’t. “I’m not sure what you’re trying to say.”

“That’s because I’m saying it very badly,” his guide said in a self-deprecating tone. “Every day I had to force myself not to call to see how you were, and not to come here. Every day I thought about other guides helping you recover and it... wasn’t easy.” He glanced away and added. “I want to be your guide; it’s something I’m certain of, but after twenty years, I don’t know what to do. I don’t know how to change a lifetime of avoiding this.”

Tony felt his world shift almost out of control, his senses finally took the three-sense imprint of his guide and fed it into his baseline. His entire being eased in a way he’d never experienced before. With just three senses, he was more comfortable in his senses than he ever had been, in spite of the collapse just two weeks ago.

Forcing himself to stay focused on the situation, he eventually managed to say, “There is nothing I want more than to be your sentinel.” He hesitated, not even sure what to say. “It radiates from you how hard this is... can you tell me why?”

“I could give you the list of reasons I’ve been telling myself for twenty years, but someone recently pointed out to me that I don’t like not being in control of things. I didn’t want my life decided for me, so I made the choice to not function as a guide.”

Tony could readily understand, but there was a piece he wasn’t quite getting. “Why would your life be decided for you?”

“Well, for instance, if there weren’t other... *considerations*, I’d choose to stay with the BAU and stay in the DC area. My son considers this home.”

Tony easily inferred that *he* was the *consideration*, but he wasn’t sure what that had to do with the BAU. Unless... “Wait, you think you’re joining me in New York?” Yeah, he knew that most

guides joined their sentinels on the job, but he figured that's just the way things worked out. It wasn't *mandatory*.

Hotchner just looked blank.

"You came here thinking you were giving up the BAU and your home in order to be my guide?" It was mostly a rhetorical question, and Tony flopped back in his seat. "Wow. That's just really stupid."

"Excuse me?" Hotchner asked, posture stiffening.

"It's crazy that you'd be prepared to make that sacrifice without discussing it with me first."

"The Bureau will expect it," Hotchner insisted, frowning.

"Like I care. The Bureau would treat me like a glorified bloodhound if I let them get away with it. I'm not saying I'm ready to be a profiler, but I have a lot of the requisite training, and I can learn."

It was subtle, but Tony could read the relief and hope in his guide's expression. "If they want you badly enough in another department, they will refuse to let you join the BAU," Hotchner warned.

Tony snorted, this was such a small issue compared to the fact that his guide had said yes. "The Bureau hasn't been very successful in bullying me yet, so I need you to have a little faith in me. I promise that I'm not going to be the cause of uprooting you and Jack from your home."

His guide was staring at him searchingly, but eventually nodded. "So where do we go from here?"

"Are you sure about this?" Tony asked, glancing around at the house.

"Absolutely. Wouldn't have offered if I wasn't," Rossi replied as he showed Tony around. "I think it's a good idea that you two are waiting to bond, but there's no reason for you to get a new place when you're going to have to move again."

Waiting to bond was really the only choice. Tony was maintaining only a three-sense imprint on Aaron, so while they had moved on at least to first names, they hadn't touched each other in

any way. That was actually at Tony's insistence. He needed to be sure of Aaron before he let his senses go further.

The Bureau had put up more fuss than Tony had expected, but less than Aaron had thought, but in the end, Tony got his way. He always did. Because his threats to leave the Bureau weren't empty. When he didn't have anything to lose, he'd refused to allow the higher-ups to control him, and now that he had *huge* stakes, that hadn't changed. Of course, the Bureau thought that gave them leverage. It didn't. Tony preferred working in law enforcement and being able to act as a sentinel, but he'd shut it all off and teach high school basketball before he let someone control him that way.

Tony was starting with the BAU officially tomorrow. It wasn't that the BAU couldn't occasionally benefit from a sentinel, it just wasn't a full time need, which meant the Bureau had to reconcile itself to Tony being as much an SSA as a sentinel. The Bureau would prefer that Tony worked full time using his sentinel gifts, but they were Tony's senses and the Bureau could just fuck off. Personally, Tony was happier with it this way. From a work perspective, he'd rather be known as a good agent than a strong sentinel.

A lot of sentinels wouldn't work with the alphabet soup because they did tend to treat sentinels like they were useful only for their senses. Local police departments were much better about giving sentinels full cases and letting them balance investigator with sentinel. Those without investigative leanings gravitated toward the military, or worked as sensory "consultants."

It had only been two days since Tony had seen Aaron, though he'd spoken to him on the phone several times while Tony had been in New York quickly wrapping up his life there. Still, two days and he was getting a little sense-hungry. He wanted to scent his guide again, see him, and hear him speak; listen to the steady thump of his heartbeat.

After he finished getting his stuff situated in his temporary accommodations, which were very sentinel friendly, he joined Rossi in the kitchen.

"Wine," he offered as soon as Tony was in sight, holding up a bottle of shiraz.

"Thanks. Just a half a glass... Anything more messes with my senses." At Rossi's surprised expression, Tony added, "It has to do with not being bonded and how high functioning I am. Staying stable without a guide requires... focus."

The wine was excellent, not that he really expected anything less from Rossi. At the intense look Rossi was giving him, Tony finally inquired, "What's on your mind?"

“Thank you... for being there and saving Erin. She’s very important to me, and I can’t imagine...” he trailed off, shaking his head.

Tony’s brows shot up in surprise; he didn’t get thanked all that often. To be fair, he didn’t hang around after cases all that much. He tapped his fingers on the countertop for a second before nodding. “You’re welcome.”

“As uncomfortable as it might be for you, she’s going to thank you herself when she’s back to work in a couple weeks. Although, you’ll likely run into her here before then.” At Tony’s face, Rossi laughed. “Don’t look so uncomfortable, kid. The ‘thanks’ won’t actually hurt you.”

And there was someone else calling Tony “kid.”

“You up to a question about sensory collapse?” Rossi asked seemingly out of the blue.

Tony was surprised, but didn’t have any aversion to answering. “What’s on your mind?”

“One of the Marines I served with died after sensory collapse. We couldn’t get him to help in time. I’ve always wondered... did he suffer that whole time?” Rossi radiated relaxed and calm, but Tony could smell the distress in his scent pile.

“Hyper or hypo?”

“Hyper.”

“Then no. He wasn’t aware of anything. From what I’ve heard, hypo-sensory collapse can be very distressing, but if it was hyper... he wasn’t aware of anything.”

Rossi just nodded and looked away for a few seconds. Eventually, he gestured to the kitchen. “Carbonara?”

“Sounds good.”

“You know you have to work for your dinner, right?”

With a grin, Tony just pushed up his sleeves.

After dinner, while he and Rossi were chatting in the library, his cell rang, Fornell coming up on the caller ID. He excused himself and stepped into the hall. “Hello?”

"I figure this is your fault, DiNoteso," Fornell began without preamble.

"I haven't done *anything* in a couple weeks, Fornell. Whoever died, it's not my responsibility," Tony said dryly.

Fornell snorted. *"Someone showed up here this past weekend, said he was done being an idiot."*

Tony nearly dropped the phone. "Is that right?" he eventually managed.

"Yeah, and I figure you're to blame."

"I'll never admit to anything."

"Just like I'll never admit that I'm grateful."

"Then we're agreed?"

"Yeah." Tony thought Fornell was going to hang up, instead there was silence followed by a soft, *"Thank you, Tony."* The phone went dead.

Before he could put too much thought into it, Tony called Aaron.

Tony knocked on Aaron's door. It was already nine, but his guide knew Tony needed to see him before they had to face the public tomorrow.

The door opened and the first thing he noticed was that his guide looked relaxed and happy. As it was early June, it was warm enough for both of them to just be in t-shirts and jeans. "I could get used to that look," Tony commented as he entered, careful to stay away from touching, but filling his senses with Aaron immediately.

"T-shirt?" Aaron asked, looking a bit bemused.

"Happy," Tony corrected.

"Oh." And he'd managed to actually fluster the seasoned profiler. "Would you like something to drink?"

“No. I just needed to see you. I figure Jack’s already in bed?” Tony really liked Aaron’s son. The kid was really enthused about his dad bonding to a sentinel. He already thought of his father as a superhero because of his work, but with his dad being a guide, it seemed to make it even more concrete for the seven-year-old.

“Yes, though he’ll be sorry he missed you.” They chatted about Jack, and then Aaron mentioned the sentinel-safe cleaning company that had come out. Everything felt good to Tony’s senses, so they must have done a good job.

Tony just enjoyed listening to Aaron speak, about anything really, but he was acutely aware that he was being carefully assessed. Finally he asked, “Something wrong?”

After a beat, Aaron replied, “You think I’m going to back out.”

Tony glanced away for a second, then met his guide’s eyes. “I’d say I’m worried about it.”

“Is that why you’re so careful not to be too close to me?” There was no inflection in Aaron’s tone, but Tony could scent that this troubled the guide.

“The more senses I imprint, the more I incorporate you into my sensory baseline, the harder it is if you decide not to bond.”

“That’s not going to happen,” Aaron said with surety that Tony could also detect in his scent, and it made him feel a profound relief; it didn’t eliminate the worry but it eased it tremendously. There was another pregnant silence before Aaron added, “Dr. Sandburg mentioned you shouldn’t use your secondary dials without a four-sense imprint. I’m assuming you only have three with me.”

Tony frowned. “That’s correct. Whenever you’re near, I can’t stop those three senses from searching for you. In terms of my dials... I’m not prepared to do anything we’re not ready for just because it would make things easier at *work*.”

Aaron huffed a bit and glanced away. “I am admittedly terrible at asking for what I want.”

“And what is it that you want?”

Meeting his gaze, Aaron replied, “To feel like I’m actually your guide.”

“You don’t feel that?” Tony asked, feeling puzzled.

“Yes, but not in the way that the Center describes. Dr. Sandburg indicated that with so much of my empathy blocked that it won’t really open up to you until we start to have actual physical contact.”

“Hmm.” He needed to think on that for second, but it did bring to mind another issue. “I didn’t bring it up before, but we have to be careful not to imprint taste until we’re ready to bond. It would be too difficult. And we need a week off for bonding.”

Aaron blinked. “I thought nesting was two to three days.”

“Yes, but you’re going to finally have your gifts crashing down on your head. *You* won’t be ready.”

Nodding, Aaron looked like he was mulling the situation over in his mind. “But we can stop with the carefully maintained distances?”

The fact that Aaron *needed* the contact made it so much easier for Tony to just lay his arm out and open his hand. Aaron stared for a couple seconds, then slid his hand into Tony’s. That first touch nearly whited out Tony’s brain. His senses were humming, dials shifting and moving as if trying to resettle into a new normal.

Then Aaron’s empathy latched onto Tony, and it wasn’t subtle. They both gasped at the same time. Awareness of his guide flooded through him and without giving it thought, he pulled his guide toward him. Perhaps too hard, because Aaron wound up half sprawled over Tony.

He framed Aaron’s face with his hands, taking note of the tension leaving his guide’s body. He breathed in that alluring guide-scent, now so much closer than ever before. “You feel so... *perfect*,” Tony whispered.

Aaron had one hand tight on Tony’s arm, and the other touching his own chest. He seemed overwhelmed. “There’s something there... I can feel *you*,” he finally murmured.

Fighting the overpowering urge to kiss Aaron, Tony rested their foreheads together, breath mingling between them. “*Guide*.”

The last bits of tension bled away and Aaron relaxed into Tony. “*Sentinel*,” he breathed.

The End