



All Your
Reasons

by Jilly James

Title: All Your Reasons

Author: Jilly James

Fandom: Avengers, NCIS

Relationship(s): Tony DiNozzo/Bruce Banner

Content Rating: NC-17

Warnings: Violence, discussion of empathic rape.

Spoilers: MCU through the first Avengers film, NCIS up to Season 11. I play fast and loose with canon, especially the Avengers. I also abuse the hell out of Norse mythology, Old Norse, and Icelandic.

Beta Thanks: Huge thanks to Naelany for tackling even my weirdest pairings!

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

Summary: Bruce Banner has a list of reasons by he's not looking for a guide and isn't interested in bonding. After a chance encounter on the streets of DC, the Hulk is clearly on board with having found their guide. Once Tony gets past being plucked up, sniffed, and taken away, he manages to accept a sentinel with a serious multiple personality disorder. Bruce is clearly outnumbered.

Word Count: ~18.6k

Acronyms:

SFA – Senior Field Agent

CI/CT – Counter Intelligence / Counter Terrorism

LEO – Law Enforcement Officer

FLETC – Federal Law Enforcement Training Centers

Fictional:

SGC – Sentinel and Guide Council

Center – Sentinel and Guide Center

SnG or S&G – Sentinel and Guide

Part One

31 May 2011

“Go home, McGee,” Tony ordered absently, not looking up from his paperwork. It was late and they’d had a rough case after many, many rough cases. The rest of the reports could wait.

Tony glanced at the team probie. “You, too, Carmody.” He knew she’d never make it on their team, but he’d do the best he could with her for as long as he had her.

There was silence for several long beats before McGee offered, “I’m almost done, and I can stay and help if you need me to.”

Tony’s hand tightened around his pen, but otherwise he displayed no reaction. McGee was trying, had been trying for some time, but Tony wasn’t sure he’d ever trust the junior agent again, and that distrust weighed heavily between them every damn day.

It had been over seven months since McGee and Ziva had shattered the trust on the team by turning off their comms while Tony was getting voice prints for a domestic terrorist case, leaving him without backup for several hours. McGee had managed to survive the disciplinary action, and Tony had subsequently, though reluctantly, accepted him back on the team. The junior agent was still on probation and carefully watching his step to ensure he didn’t fail and get permanently assigned to a desk or, even worse, fired.

Finally looking up, Tony managed a half smile that hopefully only Tony knew was faked. “I’m not staying much longer, but if we don’t catch a case tomorrow, you can help me with the requisitions.” One of the many changes over the last seven months had been that Tony no longer hid how much work he actually did, and McGee had become acutely aware of what a flop he’d been as a Senior Field Agent while Gibbs was in Mexico.

Amongst the other painful changes were the strict adherence he expected from the junior agents to the chain of command, and Tony’s complete change of demeanor on the job. He no longer even made an attempt at trying to lighten the atmosphere in the office.

McGee nodded and began getting ready to go, seemingly relieved, though Tony wasn’t sure if it was because he was being allowed to help tomorrow or because he was getting out of the office. He hesitated by Tony’s desk. “Hey... your birthday is coming up, and I wondered if we could do a team dinner or something?”

Tony considered for a few seconds. His birthday was on the ninth, and pretty much the last thing he wanted to do was anything with the “*team*.” Instead, he pasted on another fake smile and said, “Sure. That’d be great.”

McGee looked so relieved, Tony felt guilty for not being able to get past this shit.

Once everything was quiet and Tony was alone, he threw his pen down and dug the heels of his hands into his eyes. It was pushing midnight, he’d had a long couple of days, and he was tired. He was tired of a lot of things. Not the least of which was NCIS as a whole. What he used to love, he’d started to hate.

Not for the first time, he thought he should have taken that special operation from Sec Nav after they’d caught the Port-to-Port killer. Being on a mole hunt right now would be better than this. But his team had been unstable in the wake of everything that had happened, and Tony had refused the assignment.

“You gonna get past this?” Gibbs’ voice interrupted his reverie.

Tony looked up to find the sentinel leaning on the probie’s desk, drinking coffee and watching Tony closely. “Do I need to?” Tony retorted sharply.

“You agreed to let him back on the team, Tony,” Gibbs stated without rancor. “You could have said no. I’d have backed you.”

Tony glanced away. Ninety percent of the reason he’d said yes was the blatant emotional manipulation from Abby. The “*comms incident*,” as everyone referred to it, had split up the team; Ziva spectacularly failed her probation and was presently riding an analyst’s desk in Counterintelligence, and McGee had been slated to go back to Cyber Crimes. But Abby had poured on the tears and the guilt and Tony had okayed McGee coming back with a one-year probation and mandatory re-training.

But nothing had been the same since. He never felt comfortable in the field anymore unless Gibbs was around. He was working with one agent on a disciplinary probation, and a string of probies who were green as grass.

He met Gibbs’ piercing gaze again and said, “I know I did, but it’s not—” he broke off mid-sentence as an odd sensation swept over him. It was like a funny energy suddenly running under his skin and he felt a little breathless.

“Tony?” Gibbs felt concerned. “Your heart rate just shot up.”

Tony just blinked and stared. Then the thought caught up with him. Gibbs *felt* concerned. There was nothing in his expression, so how had Tony known that? “I feel... weird,” he finally managed.

Gibbs set his coffee down, watching intently. “*Weird*, how?”

The sensation of energy rushing under his skin got more intense. Suddenly he felt like he’d been punched in the sternum and he reeled back, clutching at his chest.

“*Tony!*” Gibbs darted toward him, grabbing Tony’s arms and trying to steady him, but awareness of *Gibbs* flooded through him, it was painful and jagged, and Tony flailed away.

The sensation of energy got sharper, like he was being electrocuted, and images and feelings and *everything* poured into him. He couldn’t hear, he couldn’t see, all he could do was *feel*.

Tony stared at the alpha guide who ran the DC Metro area S&G Center for several seconds, then shook his head and said, for what felt like the hundredth time, “I’m sorry, I don’t recall ever seeing an animal.” He was acutely aware they were checking him for deception, both in his empathic signature and in his chemical and physical deception markers. He was counting on semantics and the fact that he was splitting hairs on the matter of his spirit guide to keep the suspicion at bay.

Finally, the alpha guide, named Jarod Baker, leaned back in his seat with a sigh. “I honestly don’t know what to make of you, Guide DiNozzo. Every sentinel and guide for a radius of a hundred miles felt you come online, yet you barely test at a level four. We don’t even feel level six guides come online that way. And now you’re telling me you’ve never seen your spirit guide, which we only ever encounter in some guides level two and below. I just...” he huffed a little.

“Guide DiNozzo,” one of the visiting alpha guides from another area interjected, “can you tell us more about this energy you reported feeling when you came online?”

Tony ruthlessly kept his reaction behind shields the other guides hadn’t been able to penetrate, even though they’d tried. Something he shouldn’t be able to do, especially as a “level-four.” He’d let the thing about feeling zapped by energy slip when he’d come out of his three-day coma.

Deliberately, he let his frustration and emotional upset leak through his shields, hoping it would stop this questioning. “I’ve told you as much about it as I can. It was disorienting and I wasn’t

conscious for very long, so what more do you want? How can I explain something to you I don't understand myself?"

He'd been stuck at the damn Sentinel and Guide Center for more than a week after he'd awoken. He'd spent his thirty-eighth birthday being empathically poked, and he was at his end. "It sucks that I present a mystery you can't unravel, but unless you're going to declare me an unstable guide, I'm done."

One of the guides actually looked like she was thinking about it, but Guide Baker just shook his head. "Your shielding has been perfect since you awoke. However, I'd like to request that you come in monthly for evaluations for the next year so we can determine if there's anything else unusual about your situation, or see if your abilities change over time."

Feeling like that was the best he'd get, Tony nodded curtly and pushed back from the table, leaving the conference room quickly before they could change their minds. He fired off a text to Gibbs that he'd be at the office later in the day.

It was only a matter of a few minutes to get his stuff together, he'd been ready to go for *days*, but the discharge paperwork seemed to take an age.

When he walked out of the building, finally tasting freedom, he wasn't really surprised to find Gibbs waiting for him in the parking lot, leaning against his pickup.

"I called a cab," Tony muttered.

"I sent it away," Gibbs retorted. "Get in."

Taking a steadying breath, Tony steeled himself, then hopped in the passenger's seat. There was a second coffee cup perched on the dash. Tony raised a brow in inquiry and Gibbs nodded. With a grin, Tony took a sip, sighing happily. They'd deprived him of stimulants of any sort all week and he'd missed his caffeine. "Thanks, Gibbs."

Without saying anything, Gibbs started the truck and steered them the wrong direction. When Tony started to say something, Gibbs just held up a hand and then turned the radio on. He directed the truck into some horrible traffic due to both commercial construction as well as roadwork. The ambient noise must be hell on Gibbs' senses with the construction sounds and the honking and... *oh*.

"I know you're not telling them what's really going on for your own reasons," Gibbs said as lowly as he could get away with, "but I've got your six, Tony. I'll keep your secrets if it comes to it, but I need to know that if you're in trouble, you're going to come to me."

Tony stared out the window, murmuring, "You're that sure?"

Gibbs snorted. "I've been around guides when they came online before. Nothing like that. *Ever*. My gut said not to say anything to the Center. Although if you'd stayed in that coma even one more day, I would have."

"I truly don't know what happened to me, Gibbs. I'm not lying about that." While the *what* was a mystery, he did know what happened *while* he was in his coma, but that was really no-one's business.

"But you are withholding information, and that's your right as far as I'm concerned, but if you're in trouble, or if you feel you're not stable in the field, you need to tell me. We'll sort it out, Tony."

He just nodded, feeling conflicted. Gibbs had proven over the last few months that he had Tony's back, but Tony felt strongly that he wasn't supposed to talk about this. Not yet.

Tony hadn't woken up to a spirit guide, he'd woken up to *two*. And they weren't anything like he'd ever heard spirit guides should be. They actually communicated with him; not in actual words, but in images and impressions and emotions. And they were very clear that Tony needed to hide what he was.

At least for now.

14 December 2012 (Eighteen months later)

Tony hunkered down to get the last shot he needed of the crime scene they were processing. He checked his team again; McGee was almost done sketching, and the probie who'd finally managed to mesh with the team, Elliot Walters, was organizing the evidence in the van.

The sound of a siren rose from the distance then quickly passed their location. That was the fifth in a few minutes and Tony wondered what the hell was going on. They had been called out early when the body of a Navy lieutenant was found on display at the DC War Memorial, and had spent the last couple hours processing the scene and taking witness statements.

Getting to his feet, Tony considered opening up his shields a little to see if he could get any impression about what was going on, but before he could, Gibbs crossed to him from where

he'd been interviewing people. He seemed tense. He angled his body so he could speak to Tony softly and yet seem like he was consulting his notes. "Any *impressions*?"

That was their code for was Tony getting any odd empathic echoes from the scene. It wasn't something most guides could do, at least, not that Tony had ever heard of, but it had become a critical skill as the world had gotten incredibly weird earlier in the year.

An alien invasion did tend to stir things up, though they couldn't have predicted just how much things would change. Tony had been in Italy on a case when the invasion by the Chitauri had occurred, and though the battle had been confined to New York, it was like opening the floodgates for weird and freaky shit to start happening all over the world.

Just last week, Tony had been attacked by some weird robotic experiment in some guy's basement. The Petty Officer had managed to get ahold of some Chitauri armor and done some really questionable things with the tech he'd built as a result.

Since that world-changing cluster fuck this past May, Tony would sometimes get an echo of something not quite human in the empathic noise around a crime scene. It was always disconcerting, but he only ever discussed it with Gibbs.

He shook his head in response to Gibbs' question and fiddled with the camera while whispering, "Whoever dumped the body was organized, unemotional, and decidedly *human*."

Gibbs relaxed a bit. "That's a really clear read." Another couple sirens were heard in the distance.

"Not many people through here yet today, easy enough to filter out the noise." He spotted his spirit guides looking off into the distance. He registered that it was the direction that the sirens had been going. "Any idea what's going on?"

"I'm hearing a lot of sirens headed toward Capitol Hill," Gibbs responded, still seemingly absorbed in his notes.

Tony could read between the lines and knew that Gibbs hadn't dialed up to try to get more information. He leaned into Gibbs' space, under the guise of showing him a photo on the camera screen. His boss grounded best on touch, which was uncomfortable for Gibbs, so Tony tried not to make a big deal out of it. Still, sometimes Gibbs needed to suck it up and use his senses.

After a few seconds, Gibbs tensed. "Something's wrong. Screaming, weapons' fire, and some kind of aircraft I don't recognize."

“I’ll get McGee headed back with the evidence, and Ducky and Jimmy.” It was the right call from a procedural standpoint. They couldn’t leave a probie on his own with the evidence, and Walters also had fifteen years of military service, so the division of labor was right, though Tony knew McGee wouldn’t see it that way.

He got Ducky, Jimmy, and McGee headed back to the Navy Yard — and he had been right that McGee had been upset about having to go back while the probie got to stay —and joined Gibbs and Elliot in the Charger.

Gibbs peeled out and Tony held on. He thinned his empathic barriers and reached out to try to get some intel, knowing Gibbs or any nearby sentinel or guide could feel what he was doing at such a large scale. Hopefully in the chaos, and with them in motion, no one would be able to attribute it to him.

“Anything?” Gibbs asked tersely.

“A lot of fear. Some confusion and frustration. Anger,” Tony murmured.

They had barely cleared the Washington Monument when they hit the police roadblock, and the day suddenly took a really surreal turn. Even Tony could see the crowd of screaming people off in the distance headed their way. They added their vehicle to the roadblock and went to get briefed before the tide of people hit them.

Apparently, one of the new breed of crazed villains who had arisen in the wake of the Chitauri invasion had attempted to take control of the Capitol Building this morning with some freakish mad-scientist creations. The new Dr. Frankenstein had lost control of his minions, who were starting to run amok and randomly attack people.

A nervous looking LEO offered, “SHIELD has taken tactical command and ordered the roadblocks with instructions to get people off the street.” His expression shifted to awed. “The Avengers supposedly arrived a few minutes ago.”

Tony moved into position to direct people off the street and into buildings behind the barricade, when his cell phone lit up with an alert from dispatch about the problems on Capitol Hill. *Who ever said NCIS wasn’t on top of things?* Tony thought sarcastically.

“I swear, Gibbs,” he muttered, knowing Gibbs would hear him even if they were on opposite sides of the street, “if this is like Mimic or C.H.U.D., I’m out of here. Just no.”

Tony could feel the exasperation through the empathic connection he left open to the members of his team. Elliot was emotionally steady, and on the same side of the street as Tony, prepared to direct people off the street and into an auditorium. Those who had gotten caught in the roadblock were already inside and peering out windows.

“And even if this is something perfectly normal, if the city gets torn up, the road construction is going to be hell on traffic for *months*.”

Gibbs’ exasperation increased but it was laced with amusement, too.

When the sea of crazed humanity hit them, there wasn’t time to do anything but direct people. Tony started projecting calm and reassurance as strongly as he could, which was apparently pretty damn strong considering the way the panic abruptly ceased and people started following directions.

And then Tony saw the... things.

“What the fuck?” he griped, taking an involuntary step back.

They were quadrupedal and kept low to the ground, he couldn’t tell if they were machines or an animal or some creepy hybrid. They moved like big crabs, were the size of lions, and had a sort of insect-like appearance, but there were flashes of metal here and there. He suddenly realized there were really six legs, not four, making them even more like insects.

“Jesus, what is that?” Elliot ground out.

Tony kept projecting calm, but the tide of people had thinned out and the LEOs were managing now. Gibbs joined them as they watched the dozen or so lion-sized *things* advance on them. “No heartbeats,” Gibbs offered, herding them back to be behind the blockade of cars. Not that Tony thought being behind vehicles was going to do much.

“No empathic signature,” Tony added. *Real* animals had some sort of presence on the empathic spectrum.

“I’m getting bigger guns,” Elliot grouched, quickly getting shotguns off the LEOs, and then handing Gibbs his sniper rifle case.

Tony would like to blame the crazy that was this whole situation on the invasion back in May, but there was no way those freaky lab experiments advancing on their position were cooked up in the last seven months. “Just how long have these grotesque things been in the works?” he griped. “And how is it we never ran into this shit before May?”

“Focus, DiNozzo,” Gibbs barked, setting up his sniper rifle and taking aim at one of the *things*.

“Believe me, I’m focused. Focused on the fact that the world apparently has an obscene number of Dr. Frankensteins running about and they all picked this year for their damn debut.” It was like the alien invasion had given the super villain freak show permission to come out of their creepy closet.

Gibbs fired off a head shot. Or what was hopefully the head. The thing stumbled, but got back up. Another shot and the same result.

“Joints,” Tony offered.

Gibbs shot one of the legs clean off, but the thing just dragged along on the other five.

“So,” Tony offered conversationally, “do we have any idea what these things do when they catch someone?”

“Shouldn’t we run and not find out?” a nervous LEO asked. Tony projected calm at him reflexively even as he shook his head at the higher-ups sending someone that new to this position.

Gibbs looked like he wanted to headsmack someone. “There are civilians in the buildings behind us!” he barked.

“*Let’s not find out what they’ll do,*” a loud voice from above them said at the same time Tony registered the whooshing sound, and then Iron Man landed in front of the barricade. The arms of his suit opened up and explosive rounds hit the lion-crab-insect things with astonishing precision, blowing them to pieces.

“Well, that was messy,” Iron Man said glibly as parts of *things* rained down all along the street.

Tony had always been a fan of Iron Man since he first made his appearance in the world more than two years ago, but right now he totally adored the guy in the red and gold armor. Because he really hadn’t wanted to find out what happened when one of those science experiments caught someone.

“*What?*” Iron Man yelled, catching everyone’s attention. “Who called a Code Green? We have this under control. Green definitely not needed!” There was a pause, obviously listening to his comms, and Gibbs’ head-tilt told Tony he was following whatever was being said. “He’s headed this way?” The note of alarm in Iron Man’s voice had Tony’s hackles up. “Hey... Just because he

likes me better than you, does not mean that I'm going to be able to send him back to the jet! He pretty much does what he wants to do!"

Iron Man turned to face them. "You all need to clear the street. Get inside and do not shoot at him. It'll just piss him off."

But Tony felt something coming and he was frozen in his tracks. Whatever it was pulled at him like nothing he'd ever experienced.

"DiNozzo!" Gibbs barked. "Get out of the street."

"I..." he felt stuck and his breathing felt off and his heart was beating too fast.

"Is this a DC thing? The crazy from Capitol Hill is contagious?" Iron Man asked conversationally, even though Tony could feel the worry and urgency pouring off the man. "Most places, if I say, '*danger, clear the street,*' people, ya know, *clear the street!*'"

Tony heard it before he saw it; something heavy coming down the road at speed. He could hear the crunch of metal and the reverberations of solid impact. Then he saw something big and green, and realized the Hulk was headed right for them, and Tony wasn't bothered by it at all. He just stared.

Gibbs grabbed his arm and tried to pull, but the Hulk roared in anger and increased his speed.

Acting on instinct, Tony shoved Gibbs away, *hard*, vaulted over the hood of the squad car, and skirted around Iron Man who also tried to grab him, earning another roar of anger.

Tony stood in the street, feeling the pull of this big green dude, who abruptly slowed, cocked his head to the side and approached Tony slowly. Then Tony was standing maybe a foot from eight-feet of huge and green and muscles, and he had no idea what to do.

The Hulk was taking deep breaths and made a plaintive sound deep in his throat that made Tony ache. Then the big guy reached out and Tony was carefully grabbed and lifted, and then he was being *sniffed*. The realization hit him just as the Hulk started rumbling in contentment.

So much went through Tony's head at that moment, not the least of which was what a cosmic joke it was that his sentinel was a huge green rage monster. *What was he supposed to do with this?* He felt the presence of his spirit guides, urging him on, and he resented the little fuckers. They'd known exactly who his sentinel was, and they'd never given him a clue.

Feeling ridiculous with his feet dangling off the street, and with a too-large head pressed into his neck, Tony mentally shrugged and wrapped his arms around his sentinel the best he could. Maybe he was a weird guide because he had the weirdest sentinel on Earth?

“He’s cuddling with a fed,” he heard Iron Man say with no small amount of astonishment laced with exasperation. *“Well, how should I know why? But he’s not doing anything destructive, so I call it a win for the budget.”*

“DiNozzo,” Gibbs called out, and Tony heard and felt the worry and near panic in his boss.

Hulk’s head snapped up and he growled Gibbs’ direction.

“It’s fine, Gibbs. He’s gonna feel threatened by a sentinel, so just back off, okay? You need to trust me.” He sensed more than saw Gibbs agreement, but felt the empathic signature move back.

In his peripheral vision, he spied one of the cops moving into position with his gun raised. “Hey!” Tony barked, causing the hold the Hulk had on him to tighten painfully. “Are you an idiot? He’s bulletproof. *I’m not*. You fire that weapon my direction and the *best* thing that will happen is that Gibbs is gonna shoot *you!*”

Hulk growled threateningly at the cop pointing a gun at them, and he tried to put Tony down, but Tony just held on, knowing that the cop would be a pancake for threatening the sentinel’s guide. Big ‘n Green rumbled approvingly and stroked Tony’s back while glaring at the cop who looked like he was gonna piss himself.

Iron Man moved over and yanked the gun away. “The Big Guy finally has a teddy bear and I’m gonna be annoyed if you put holes in it.”

“Gosh, Stark,” Tony called out, “I’m not exactly feeling the appreciation here.”

“Hey, if you can get the Big Guy back to the jet without destroying the city or causing *an incident*, I’ll appreciate the hell out of you. Want an island of your own?”

“No, but a Ferrari wouldn’t be amiss,” Tony said jokingly, even as he focused on sending soothing energy to his sentinel who was humming happily, even as he continued to take deep breaths, obviously already imprinting.

And that brought Tony up short. How the hell was he supposed to *bond* with the Hulk?

“Want to fill in the rest of the class on what that was about?”

Tony glanced over at Iron Man who was walking along with them at a distance comfortable for the Hulk, looking casual with his faceplate up, but Tony could feel the man’s hyper vigilance. “You don’t exactly seem like *‘the rest of the class’*.”

It had been a struggle to get Big ‘n Green to let Tony *walk* and not be carried, but Tony refused to be carted about like a damsel in distress through the streets of DC, even if they were in an evacuation zone. But the big guy insisted on holding Tony’s hand, which was done very delicately. The whole thing was surreal.

“Trust me, they can hear. And assuming they miss anything, JARVIS will fill in the blanks,” Stark retorted.

“I’m surprised you haven’t worked this out yet. It’s fucking with my preconceived notions.” Tony gave Stark a speculative look. “You must get tired of people expecting your ass to be welded on that pedestal.”

Stark snorted. “I like high places, so it works out.”

Tony wasn’t so sure about that, but he didn’t say anything, and then had to surrender to being pulled close and petted for a couple seconds by his enormous sentinel.

“The thing is, if I didn’t know better, I’d have said this was a sentinel thing,” Stark offered blandly.

“That’s exactly what it is,” Tony managed to get out from where his face was smooshed into his sentinel’s lower chest.

“Then several people have been keeping secrets, and that’s very naughty,” Stark retorted dryly. “Want to tell me your name, or should I just keep calling you Cuddle Bunny?”

Tony managed to get them moving again before replying, “Tony DiNozzo. Apparently formerly of NCIS, because I don’t see the big guy here getting through FLETC.”

“*‘Tony’*?” Stark repeated. “Well, that won’t work. I guess *Cuddle Bunny* it is.”

He ignored the nickname as he peered down the street to the intersection where there was a jet of some kind that had managed to land on the street. He recognized the distinctive form of Captain America, standing with his arms crossed, watching them approach. He spotted Black

Widow leaning against the jet, and Hawkeye a little less in the shadows, obviously talking to her.

There were several people in blue uniforms milling about, and suddenly Tony ground to a halt, nearly getting yanked off his feet by the Big Guy, who managed to correct course before Tony face-planted. He peered down at Tony, blinking in confusion and made an interrogative grunt.

Tony patted his sentinel's arm. "Sorry. Just need to adjust my worldview for a minute. I'd say *carry on*, but you just stay with me." Seriously, how the fuck was he supposed to *do* this?

At that moment, he could barely see the forms of his spirit guides on top of the jet and he glared. "You little assholes," he muttered.

Stark looked poised to say something, but Tony held up a hand and started toward Captain America, pulling his sentinel along. He could feel the Hulk getting agitated as they got closer to more people, so he halted a bit away from the crowd; who, of course, were all watching them.

The Captain closed the remaining distance. "Agent DiNozzo," he greeted, giving Hulk plenty of space.

"Just *Tony* is fine, Captain. So, uh, this is rather... unexpected."

"Frankly, we had no idea Banner was a sentinel. And please call me Steve."

"Now, Cap," Stark began, "*someone* had to know. They just didn't think they had to share."

"There may have been a reason for that," Rogers countered.

Tony could practically *feel* an old argument brewing, so quickly interjected, "So, I'm here, he's here... there's the jet. Now what?"

Both Stark and Rogers seemed a little nonplussed and it took a beat before Steve replied, "The situation is outside our normal operational protocols. Usually when Dr. Banner's alter ego is needed on a mission, the situation is somewhat... different."

"What he's trying to say," Stark offered, "is that enormous green rage monsters don't usually come back home docilely and sporting a new puppy. So, we're at a loss."

Tony was amused and annoyed, so he just glared at Stark, who held up his hands in a *no harm* gesture. "How does he usually shift back?" Tony was anxious to meet the part of his sentinel who could actually talk to him.

“Typically, when he’s done burning off his *energy*, he’ll sleep and shift back automatically,” Steve replied, watching carefully and bemusedly as the Hulk kept petting at Tony’s hair and shoulders, even down his back and arms.

“Sleep, eh?” He turned to his sentinel, who was nearly two feet taller than Tony, and reached up. The Hulk met him part way, and Tony framed the big face with his hands, scratching at the big guy’s jaw. “Hey there, Big ‘n Green, need to temper those emotions a bit, so let’s try this, okay?”

Tony had heard the “rage monster” thing before, but the reality wasn’t exactly like that. Hulk’s emotions were very *base*, but they weren’t limited to anger. Anger was certainly there, and anger was a very dominant emotion in anyone. But, at least with Tony around, the strongest emotions felt possessive and protective.

Because he’d been hiding his abilities since he came online, he didn’t have a lot of practical application for his empathic skills, but he let his spirit guides nudge at his mind and sent waves of calm, and safe, and *rest* at his sentinel.

It didn’t take long before the sentinel shifted and shrunk, and *holy shit that was weird*, Tony thought. He wound up with his hands framing the face of a man with curly dark hair who was a few inches shorter than Tony, wearing nothing but stretchy black pants and blinking at Tony in confusion, before pulling back in shock.

“Oh, god no,” he whispered.

Tony wasn’t sure what to make of that.

“Damn,” Stark muttered, and Tony turned to find him with his armored hands braced on his knees. “You’re like a double dose of Xanax. Warn a guy next time, will ya?”

Captain America was blinking at Tony in astonishment, and beyond that, there were actually people sitting on the ground shaking their heads as if trying to clear them.

“Too much, huh?” he asked, a little worried he’d sedated the whole area.

Steve Rogers shook his head, “Considering that Dr. Banner is back to himself, I’d say it was just enough.”

Tony met Banner's eyes, feeling the horror and confusion and *fear* pouring off the man. Abruptly, the sentinel turned on his heel and walked toward the jet, leaving Tony staring after him in surprise.

"So, let's sum up what we've learned in the time we've been stuck here and unable to leave," Stark began, pacing the interior of the jet, his helmet was off, but he was still wearing the rest of the armor.

"Stark," Steve interrupted, "now's not the time."

"Now is exactly the time. We're a *team*, and we need to clear the proverbial air. So, Banner has been a sentinel since *before* his little lab accident, so obviously he knew about this, and Agent Romanoff apparently also knew because SHIELD told her; though they didn't tell Barton, and he can sort out his angst fest over that later."

Barton's raised brow was his only reaction, and Tony privately thought that Clint Barton could care less; between his emotional tone and his demeanor, he was just cruising along. Right now, Tony also felt like he was just along for the ride, which was fucked up since he was at the middle of this mess.

"Stark," Steve tried again.

"You are clearly not understanding the 'summing up' portion of the program. Let's try again! So we have a secret sentinel on the team, who apparently isn't interested in being a sentinel so suppresses it, except that his guide was wandering around out there — and we have at least confirmed that Banner and the Big Guy agree they share a guide, yes?"

Banner's arms were crossed over his chest and his jaw was set. He said nothing.

"Yes," Tony supplied with false sweetness, "I'm both of their guide."

"Great!" Stark said with patently false enthusiasm. "Except that our Dr. Banner apparently wants to be self sacrificing and his alter ego won't let him. So every time Cuddle Bunny gets too far away, the Big Guy makes an appearance and we have to go through getting him settled down again, and I cannot take another dose of guide-Xanax today."

Tony sighed. "Big 'n Green likely won't stop charging to the fore when I'm not around until we are bonded and he has the security of that connection."

“We cannot *bond*,” Banner gritted out, clearly on repeat, because he’d heard this several times already. Tony felt how conflicted the man was. “I just need time to learn to control this.”

Though he understood the struggle Banner was going through, Tony couldn’t help that the rejection, and a very public one at that, hurt him deeply. “That’s not going to work,” he offered, crossing his legs and leaning back in his seat.

“How do you know that?” Rogers asked before Banner and Stark could get into it *again*. The two geniuses had been arguing non-stop since Banner asked Tony to leave the jet the first time.

“Because the only way to stop it is to figure out how to suppress the sentinel entirely.”

“I’ll figure it out,” Banner replied, not looking at Tony.

“And wouldn’t that just make things horrible for the entire planet,” Tony retorted, trying not to be snide.

Stark stepped into his field of vision, arms crossed and frowning. “Meaning?”

“Meaning that you have a being who is driven hugely on base emotions and very *sensitive* to anger. He has almost no control mechanisms, except the one you propose to take away. That’s just stupid.”

Tony felt legitimate confusion from everyone on the jet and he threw up his hands. “Seriously? The Hulk could have, *should have*, an epic body count, but he doesn’t. Why? What is stronger than the emotions that drive him?”

He held up two fingers illustratively and ticked off his points. “A sentinel’s two primary imperatives: Protect the guide, protect the tribe. Let’s say Banner makes the sentinel truly dormant, then what do you have? Frankly, the sentinel drive in the Big Guy is so strong, I think you have no chance in hell of turning it off, but I really question all of your sanity if you really choose to try to go that route.”

The emotions on the jet were so conflicted and stunned, and coupled with the utter devastation coming from Banner, it was too much. He dialed off his empathy as much as possible and stared fixedly at the front of the jet.

“Get us in the air, Barton,” Rogers said sounding tired. “Agent DiNozzo will be coming with us.”

Part Two

Tony really wasn't sure what he expected, but he was oddly surprised to be getting a room in Stark Tower and left to his own devices while the Avengers disappeared into a conference room, presumably to yell about this morning.

"Sir," a disembodied voice that had been introduced as JARVIS said, "shall I arrange to have your dwelling closed and your belongings transported to New York?" Stark had explained that JARVIS monitored every room in the building at all times, but would only record if expressly ordered to.

There was something both disconcerting and yet refreshing about talking to someone who didn't have any empathic footprint. "That seems premature considering how desperately my sentinel wants me back in DC."

"Do you believe the logical course of action will be rejected in this instance?" JARVIS queried.

"I believe that people are rarely susceptible to logic when their emotions are heavily involved."

"I see. Then what do you require during your tenure here?"

"Something to wear and sentinel-safe bath products," Tony retorted almost without thinking. "While Dr. Banner seems intent on keeping his distance, the other guy isn't going to, and I sincerely doubt we want Big 'n Green getting a rash. Assuming he's even susceptible to mundane sentinel issues," Tony muttered the last under his breath.

"No, indeed we do not. Anything else?"

"I'm going to need a computer to use. Also, is it okay if I use this phone? I'd like to check in with my boss."

"Certainly, Sir, though my protocols are such that I will be monitoring your communications."

"Do what ya gotta do, J," Tony retorted, beyond caring because he figured he'd never have privacy again no matter what. He picked up the phone and dialed Gibbs' number.

"Gibbs," his boss barked sounding more growly than normal.

"Hey, Boss," Tony said tiredly.

There was a long pause before Gibbs finally said, “Jesus, DiNozzo, you don’t do anything halfway.” The sound of a deep breath came over the line. “You okay, Tony?”

“Uncertain at this point, and I know my calls are being monitored, so figure yours will be too in the near future if they aren’t already.”

Gibbs snorted.

“Anyway, I wanted to let you know I’m safe and in New York.”

“You’re with the Avengers?”

“Yeah. For now. No clue what’s next.”

“You need anything?”

“Nah. I’m good. Just... watch your six, Gibbs.”

“You, too, Tony. And if you ever need anything...” he trailed off, and Tony could hear the contingency plans they had made in that silence. And then there was a click.

Tony knew Banner was standing in the doorway of his room, he just didn’t acknowledge it as he set the phone down and then shrugged out of his jacket, hanging it up next to the wool overcoat he’d taken off earlier.

“As soon as I heard you call that other sentinel, Gibbs, I started feeling the *other guy* pressing to get out,” Banner offered.

Tony was still on the fence about how to handle the situation. He didn’t want to see his sentinel distressed or on a rampage, but he couldn’t spend the rest of his life not doing anything or talking to anyone.

“I think we should probably talk,” the sentinel prompted.

Stiffening, Tony took a steadying breath before turning around. Tony had already tried to talk and been completely shut down thus far. Banner’s body language was different than before. While earlier, he’d seemed defensive and borderline hostile, now he seemed more pulled in on himself.

“Okay,” Tony conceded.

“Do you mind if I come in?”

Tony gestured to the chairs. The room was quite big and there was a seating area, so it didn't feel quite so much like they were sitting in a bedroom, despite the king-sized bed looming in the background. He sat across from his sentinel and waited.

Banner huffed out a breath and dragged his hands through his hair. “I'm sorry... I didn't handle things well earlier. I always considered it a bit of a cosmic joke that I came online as a sentinel. I'm not exactly... the type.”

“But you did and it probably saved a lot of lives when you had your... accident.” He really wasn't sure how to adequately describe what Banner had gone through.

“Maybe.” Banner sighed. “Probably. I'd never thought of it in terms of what you mentioned earlier. Until you made that connection, I'd never had reason to be grateful to be a sentinel. I've always just turned the senses off as much as I could. But then I was sitting on the jet this morning, monitoring the team's comms and I felt this wave of... emotion and energy. Like something was reaching out for me. And the next thing I knew, everything was over and there you were.”

Tony winced a little. “That was probably me. I was empathically scanning the area as much as I could to get a pulse on the situation, and then started projecting my aura on the crowd to calm them down. I'm not sure which you felt.”

Banner sighed and slumped a little. “I don't have anything against you, I don't even know you, but you have to understand that I can't drag you into this.”

“Look, I understand that you've got... reasons. But digging your heels in and just refusing to deal with it isn't going to make it go away.” Tony was trying to be the voice of logic and not the voice of emotion, but it wasn't easy, because he sort of wanted to yell at his sentinel right then.

“I can't *be* a sentinel. As me, I'm a scientist, and as him... there's not enough control to function the way a sentinel should,” the man was obviously weary and frustrated.

“I'm not exactly a normal guide, you know. There has to be a reason why your guide is *me* and my sentinel is, well,” he waved toward Banner, “the two of you.”

“Just how *not normal* are you, Cuddle Bunny?” Stark asked from the doorway, now dressed in jeans and faded Led Zeppelin t-shirt.

“I don't suppose you have any respect for privacy?” Tony asked dryly.

“Not really,” he retorted pushing off the doorframe. “Well, just my own.” He made impatient come-on motions. “Join us in the conference room and you can tell us just how not normal you are.”

Tony felt like he was on a runaway train and there was only doom for him at the end of it. With a sigh, he pushed to his feet and followed Stark, acutely aware of Banner bringing up the rear.

Everyone was in street clothes, so Tony was the most formally dressed in his button-up shirt and suit pants. And they were all watching him. He’d noticed earlier that Thor wasn’t around, but Stark had mentioned that the Asgardian wasn’t on Earth very often. Banner started to take a seat far from him, but then sighed and sat next to Tony.

“So, just how strange a guide are you?” Stark asked seriously

“What’s that?” Rogers asked.

“I arrived as Cuddle Bunny was telling Banner that he’s ‘*not exactly a normal guide.*’ So, how not normal?” When Tony didn’t immediately reply, Stark reached for a hand-held device that was tech way beyond anything Tony had ever handled. “According to this you’re maybe a level four guide, or maybe a level two; the S&G Center can’t even make up their mind about you. But whichever rating, they agree you’re pretty unremarkable as a guide.”

“That was unremarkable?” Rogers muttered looking at the others. “What we experienced on the street was *unremarkable?*”

“I lied,” Tony said baldly.

“About what, exactly?” Rogers asked, leaning forward.

“Everything, pretty much.” He braced his elbows on the table. “Look, if you hacked into the S&G records, you know that my coming online was anything but normal, and I had reasons to not want to be on the radar.”

“Wait, what are we talking about here?” Barton asked.

Stark tapped the small transparent tablet against his hand. “Every sentinel and guide for a hundred miles felt him come online. Mundanes pretty much didn’t feel it, so they kept it contained, but because of the widespread effect, it was classified as a level five empathic event. There are only six levels, by the way.”

Barton whistled lowly. "Damn."

Stark speared Tony with a look. "What else?"

"I spent three days in a coma, except I wasn't in a real coma. I was training on the psionic plane." When Stark made a face, Tony added, "Yeah, I've heard all the skepticism about other planes of existence, but regardless, something went on in those three days, because I knew exactly how to hide my abilities and shield myself no matter what they threw at me. And I've been flying under the radar ever since."

"You're very willing to be honest with us," Romanoff observed.

"Believe me, I have fully realized the enormity of the situation. I knew I was possibly blowing my cover with the way I used some of my abilities today, but I hoped I'd pass without notice in the midst of the chaos. And I probably would have until my sentinel came bounding down the street in his shiny green glory."

Banner winced and Tony sighed. "That wasn't a dig, Dr. Banner. I came online the way I did for a reason, and I always knew if any of it came out, it was a lost cause." Not that Tony didn't have some contingency plans in place, but he hadn't figured getting away from his sentinel in the mix if his cover ever got truly blown.

"Just call me Bruce," the sentinel said tiredly.

"What else?" Stark prompted, like a dog with a bone.

"Sir," JARVIS interrupted, "Director Fury has overridden my security protocols. He will arrive on this floor in forty-four seconds. He asked me to relay that this would not have been necessary if you were not avoiding his calls. Again."

Stark sighed and dropped his head.

"I thought you were going to stop doing that?" Rogers said. "Why didn't he try to contact any of the rest of us?"

"I may have had JARVIS block those calls." When everyone started to react, Stark held up his hands. "We, you know, *the team*, needed to get our head around this before Fury had a chance to spin things to his favor."

"It's very reassuring to know that your opinion of me is consistent, Stark," the Director of SHIELD said as he strode into the conference room and took a seat as close to across from Tony as possible. He pinned Tony with a look.

Tony felt rather like a specimen under glass, but instead of reacting, he just raised a brow in challenge.

"Interesting theory you have about the Hulk and his sentinel imperative to protect the tribe. It annoys me that my people didn't come up with it." He tapped his fingers against the table rhythmically. "You've been misrepresenting your abilities since you came online. Why?"

"They're my abilities. There's no law that says I'm obligated to tell anyone anything, or to use my abilities in any way." He held up a hand before anyone could say anything. "Tell you what, I'd be a lot more willing to lay my cards on the table, if everyone would agree to an empathic scan."

Unsurprisingly, there was a lot of discussion about it, and clarification that, no, Tony wouldn't be able to read anyone's mind, plus he vowed not to discuss the empathic impressions he received. Romanoff and Stark were the most hesitant, but everyone finally agreed.

Then Fury added, "You can scan me... for two minutes. Whatever you can get in that time is it." Of course Fury would know that a complete, in-depth empathic scan took about ten minutes, maybe less depending on the power level of the guide.

"Five," Tony countered.

"Three. Final offer."

Tony made a show of considering it, worrying at his lower lip with his teeth. Finally, he said, "Deal."

Fury poked at his watch and there was a double beep. "Clock's ticking."

Tony closed his eyes, and reached out for his spirit guides first, and felt their approval and push to go ahead. He knew exactly what Fury was expecting, that Tony would take the three minutes to get whatever read he could, and then Tony would do the others later. *Sorry, Director Fury, Tony thought, not playing by your rules.*

He carefully reached out to every person in the room except Bruce, because wrapping his sentinel up in his empathy right now wouldn't be a good idea. He touched each of them so gently they couldn't be aware of it until he was sure he had a solid connection to everyone,

then let his empathy unobtrusively read every nuance of all of them at once. It was tiring and stretched his empathy thin, but it was also over with *fast*.

It would take him time and meditation to sort out all the individual impressions, but he knew that, fundamentally, there were no insidious intentions here.

“How long, JARVIS?” Stark asked, voice sounding a little strained.

“One minute, thirty-two seconds, Sir,” the cultured voice responded immediately.

Tony opened his eyes and focused on Fury, who was somewhere between annoyed and resigned but also felt impressed. “You still owe me a minute and a half,” Tony said without inflection.

“Well played,” Fury conceded. “And you laid a *lot* of your cards on the table with that stunt. As far as I know, no guide on the planet can do that.”

Tony’s brows shot up. “Are you trying to say I’m an alien?”

“Not necessarily,” Fury hedged, leaning forward, lacing his hands together. “SHIELD has been following you since the day you came online. Just watching, waiting to see if anything happened.”

“What exactly were you expecting?” Tony asked, annoyed that he’d been under surveillance all this time. He was surprised, and the surveillance had to have been pretty damn good because neither he nor Gibbs detected it.

Wait.

“Damn it. Elliot Walters?”

Fury inclined his head.

Tony just groaned in frustration. His unwillingness to violate people’s privacy had let a double agent work across the aisle from him for nearly a year. No doubt SHIELD used more conventional methods while they waited to slip their double agent into position. “Why exactly was watching me so damn important? Because I just put a lot of my cards on the table, Director.”

“But not all. There’s something you’ve been keeping to yourself since you came online and I want to know why.”

“And I’ll answer that question once you tell me why it was so important to keep such close watch.”

Fury considered for several seconds before saying, “We keep a close eye on certain... coincidences, you might say. And, almost to the minute, you came online when Thor’s hammer landed on Earth.”

Everyone else exchanged looks, but Tony just frowned in confusion. He knew about Thor but didn’t get the reference to Mjølfnir being on Earth without Thor.

Bruce and Stark tag-teamed filling him in. Tony agreed it was a weird coincidence, but there was no reason to think it was more than that.

“Now you,” Fury prodded. When Tony hesitated, the director added, “Spirit guides are significant to sentinels, and particularly to guides. They represent the scope of your abilities and the strength of them. The fact that you’re keeping yours a secret makes me think it’s something alien.”

“No,” Tony instantly denied. “Perfectly normal really. It’s just... there’s two of them.”

Fury just blinked for a few seconds. “Two?”

“Yes, two. That’s why I didn’t say anything.” Well, that and they didn’t want him to.

“What are they?”

“I’d... rather not say yet. But they’re not aliens.”

Fury’s jaw clenched a few times. “Are they in the sentinel and guide registry list of known spirit animals?”

“Um, no. But they are Earth animals.”

“I need you to help me understand why you can’t reveal them,” Fury insisted.

“Honestly? Because they don’t want you to know yet.”

“They... Don’t. Want. Me. To. Know.” He rubbed his forehead. “You give me as big a headache as Stark does. Are you trying to tell me that your spirit guides communicate with you?”

“Not verbally, no. But they can certainly send images and impressions and emotions.”

Fury just stared at him for a long time. Finally, he said, “I’ll give you no more than a week on the spirit guides and then I expect them to get over whatever objection they have to me. Now, what can we expect from the Hulk in the near term?”

“You think I’m psychic on top of empathic?”

“I think you’re my shiny new expert on what’s going on with the most mysterious and unpredictable member of this team. And I’d like to know if he’s going to be making more appearances.”

Tony glanced at Bruce who looked resigned and just nodded his head. “Okay then... I doubt he has much in the way of needs, but probably the most profound is a guide. His guide is here, and if that need is fed by contact between myself and Dr. Banner... well, he’ll probably stay quiet. But if he doesn’t get the empathic connection he desires, and other stuff,” Tony said carefully, “no doubt he’ll assert himself.”

“Violently?” Fury asked.

“I doubt it. As long as I’m available and unthreatened, he’ll be okay. He was very careful with me.”

“Really?” Bruce asked.

“Really really,” Tony replied immediately. Bruce didn’t get it, but Stark and Barton both started laughing.

Ignoring his teammates, Bruce just watched Tony. “You aren’t afraid of him?”

“Not at all,” Tony replied with conviction.

“Well, then, you two can get to know each other and spend lots of time together,” Fury said getting to his feet. “I expect status reports daily. And, Stark, stop ignoring me.”

“Wait,” Tony called after the retreating director of SHIELD. “Status reports on what?”

“How you two are progressing on bonding,” Fury retorted not looking back.

“Absolutely not!” Tony yelled.

“Welcome to SHIELD, Agent DiNozzo.”

“Now wait a minute!” But the infuriating man was gone before Tony could correct *that* misapprehension.

Tony startled awake, awareness of someone in his room hit him, but almost simultaneously he realized it was his sentinel. Mostly Banner, but he could feel Big ‘n Green pushing at Banner’s mind. Swinging to a seated position, he started to reach for a light, but the room was suddenly bathed in a very low illumination that didn’t hurt the eyes. He belatedly realized it had to be JARVIS.

Peering up at his sentinel, he realized how close to the edge Banner was. His eyes were bright green, skin tinged green in places and he was panting. “I can’t keep him under control,” Bruce gasped.

Tony wanted to scream that this wouldn’t happen if Bruce would stop avoiding him, but instead, he curled his fingers around Bruce’s wrist. “Just let him out and I’ll settle him down.”

“We’re *indoors*,” Bruce gritted out.

“Bruce... it’ll be fine. I realize you barely know me, but try to have a little faith.” Tony had been in Stark Tower for two days now and Bruce had avoided him the entire time.

In barely the blink of an eye, Bruce had shifted, and then the Hulk pulled Tony out of bed and sniffed at him, even as he rumbled in distress. And suddenly Tony was glad he wasn’t sleeping naked.

“JARVIS, record this, please.” He needed some proof to show Banner that *the other guy* was perfectly safe with Tony. He’d already shown he could force the Hulk back, but he thought doing that too often would be counter productive. Hulk was coming out for a reason and they needed to work this out.

“As you wish, sir,” JARVIS replied in as low a volume as possible, but still earning a warning growl from the Big Guy.

“Hey,” Tony said, letting his guide voice out, “I know this is hard, but we’ll figure out a way through. Just listen to my voice and relax. I won’t make you go away, okay?”

“To-ny,” Hulk rumbled, holding on somewhat too tight, but Tony just petted at the big shoulders.

“Hey... my name!” he replied with a grin.

It took some time, but he managed to get his sentinel in the bed and lying down; he acted like it was the strangest experience in the world and kept poking at the mattress. The bed was sturdy enough, so he figured it could support the thousand-odd pounds that the Hulk probably was, plus Tony’s weight. Tony pressed close and spoke in low soothing tones.

“I know you probably understand more than anyone gives you credit for. You don’t feel all that confused to me, it’s just very primal the way your brain works. I’m not sure the reasoning part of your brain functions much at all in this form. And that’s okay. We’ll manage.” Tony knew a big chunk of what Hulk needed was the empathic connection from the bond, and when he didn’t get that or physical contact through Bruce, he’d push to the surface. The best Tony could do was let his empathy flow, because he’d never force an empathic link.

“How about I just talk for a while and if you feel like you have something to say, just interrupt me. Okay?”

Hulk rumbled approvingly.

“You like hearing me talk I take it?”

There was a grunt. “To-ny talk.”

“Okay, then.” Making sure to keep the guide voice going, Tony just started talking. He kept to happier events in his life, some stuff about work, discussing his favorite movies, and gradually felt the emotional tone of his sentinel change.

Interestingly, his sentinel’s more aggressive, primal emotions were fairly contained, which meant the Hulk had pushed his way out just to get the guide connection Bruce was starving them of. And Tony really didn’t know what to do with that.

It had to be Bruce’s choice, but Bruce was locked in the cycle of believing he was dragging Tony into something horrible and unlivable. Fate had put them in circumstances they might not have chosen for themselves, but life was like that sometimes, and all you could do was figure out the best way to own it and move on.

Tony’s voice was getting hoarse, and he felt like he’d been talking for hours, when he realized his sentinel was asleep. The Hulk was peacefully conked out and almost making a purr-like

sound. Interestingly, he wasn't shifting back. Tony wasn't sure what to make of that, except that he was more certain with every passing moment that anyone's understanding of the way this incredibly powerful being worked was horribly incomplete.

When he woke again, his head was resting on a much smaller chest and he could feel the waves of nervous tension bleeding off his sentinel. "It is way too early for that much negative emotion," Tony grouched.

"I slept here," Banner stated.

"Well, yes. Obviously."

"I thought you'd calm him down and send him back."

"Well, that's not working, now is it?" Tony sat up, shoving back the covers. "You are a brilliant scientist. Are you being deliberately obtuse about this?"

Bruce got up and grabbed one of Tony's t-shirts and tugged it on. "We cannot have a bond."

"You keep saying that, but you have no solution for dealing with the situation other than to avoid me, which brings him to the surface." Tony was trying to be reasonable, but it was hard in the face of Bruce's dogged self-hate.

"We have to find a solution that doesn't involve dragging another person into the freak show that is my life. Don't you understand that I spent years learning control and now it's completely shattered?" Definitely some anger buried in there on top of everything else.

"And perhaps you misunderstand what control you do have," Tony retorted.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Bruce asked defensively.

"It means that from what I read in the mission reports, when you let him out on purpose, you have better integration and he's more in control of himself. When he breaks out, it's chaos. Maybe fighting him isn't the solution."

Bruce just shook his head. "You don't understand."

"Of course I don't! No one can truly understand what it's like to be in your situation, Bruce, but do you get that I'm trapped now, too? I can't leave without you, because the Hulk won't tolerate it. I can't leave with you because we're unbonded, and people could do crazy things, like... brush up against me, or frown at me, and get a big green rager in their face for it."

“Exactly!”

“Exactly, what?” Tony asked bemused.

“I could lose control and hurt people! And you don’t know that being bonded would make that any better.”

“Oh for...!” Tony fisted his hands in his hair. “You think I don’t have to worry about what might happen if I ever lost control? Or if I lashed out at someone in anger? And I do have a pretty good indication that bonding would help. So far *he* hasn’t behaved much differently than any other unbonded sentinel in the protection of their guide. The sentinel is uncertain and unsafe in their ability to keep the guide until the bond cements, and so they are territorial and often irrational.”

“You don’t even know that you can form a bond with him,” Bruce bit out.

“Oh my god!” Tony wanted to strangle his stubborn sentinel. “Of course I can’t. It’s with *you*. You’re not really two people. There’s only one set of empathic pathways in your head, Bruce. That’s absolutely the same whichever way you appear. He’s part of *you*, if I’m bonded to you, I’m bonded to him. It’s that simple. When you touch me, he receives the benefit of that imprint. The reason he keeps coming to the surface is because you stay away from me like I have the plague.”

Tony caught himself and felt some unwilling amusement. “Actually, I’ve had the plague, and you avoid me more than anyone did when I was infected with Y. Pestis.”

Bruce blinked at him a few times before shaking his head. “I need to...” he looked around, seemingly rather lost. “I have work to do.”

Unable to do anything, and feeling powerless and defeated, Tony just watched Bruce leave.

“JARVIS?”

“Yes, sir?” the AI responded immediately.

“As soon as he’s in his lab, please queue up the recording of last night.”

Tony poked at his eggs, feeling incredibly frustrated and horribly *stuck*. He was used to making the best of bad situations, but he didn't even know how to approach this one.

"Interesting night?" Stark asked, sliding into a chair across the table from Tony.

Tony just snorted.

"Well, in other news, you're still trending on Twitter."

Pushing his plate away, Tony dropped his head on the table. "Those pictures are going to haunt me forever," he muttered to the tabletop. As the civilians had been at a distance and inside, the pictures weren't the best quality, but it was pretty obvious he was getting a big old hug from eight feet of mean and green. Plus, somehow his name had gotten released, and horrible headlines were all over the Internet about the "*Hulk's new love interest*." The sentinel/guide thing had not leaked, for which Tony was grateful, but he figured it was only a matter of time.

"Fury is sending over one of his stooges later this morning because you're ignoring him and won't sign your paperwork. Mind you, I fully support your passive aggressive stance on the matter."

"I don't work for SHIELD," Tony said, still talking to the tabletop, "and my lack of bond with Bruce is none of their business."

"You can work for me," Stark offered with no inflection.

Tony tipped his head so he could peer at Stark with one eye. He could feel this was oddly important to the Avenger for some reason. "What in the world would I do for you?"

Stark shrugged one shoulder. "We'll call you a security consultant."

"Are you crazy?"

"Probably. And we can figure out what you'll actually do when we actually need to."

"That was... vague."

"That a yes?"

Tony sighed. "Yes. But if Cuddle Bunny appears in my job description, I'm not signing it."

"Killjoy." Stark got to his feet. "How you feel about Snuggle Bear?"

The attractive woman in a non-descript suit extended a hand to Tony. “Deputy Director Hill,” she offered.

“If you don’t want me inadvertently getting a solid surface reading on you, best to not shake hands,” Tony replied casually.

She considered for a second, but left her hand extended, so Tony shook it, getting nothing of major concern off the woman. He was also impressed that she was unfazed by him reading her. “How much does touch tell you about someone?” she asked, taking a seat.

“Surface emotions, intentions, hints of inner conflict. Not much different from what I’d get from a basic scan of your emotions.”

“Which you don’t do automatically?” She felt legitimately curious.

“I don’t need that much clutter in my head. I read what people project almost all the time, because it’s good to have a pulse on the emotional tone in any room, but I don’t need to know the state of all the people around me all the time — unless there’s some pressing need. Besides, it’s invasive.”

Hill nodded, looking thoughtful. “When you scan people’s emotions, they don’t feel it?”

“Not that I’m aware of.”

“Director Fury reported feeling your empathic scan quite intensely.”

“That’s different. A deep empathic scan is incredibly invasive... it’s touching every empathic synapse and receptor. It’s feeling the core of a person, all their emotions and conflict and the very fiber of their being, and even any empathic damage they have picked up over the course of their life.”

“And under what circumstances would you do that?”

“If someone agreed to it, or if there were exigent circumstances.” Before she could ask another question, he held up a hand. “I don’t think you came here ask me questions that could be answered by any S&G Center in the country, and probably even by the sentinels and guides you have employed at SHIELD.”

“True. But as far as we know, there’s not another guide quite like you.” She pulled a folder out of her case. “Director Fury would like to know why you have yet to sign the paperwork for your security clearance.”

“Because I don’t plan to work for SHIELD. So you guys can keep sending it, but I’ll keep ignoring it.”

“May I ask why?” He sensed no surprise in her.

“While I believe Director Fury is attempting to do right by my sentinel, we all know that hasn’t always been the case in terms of the SHIELD organization. My loyalty is to Bruce Banner, not SHIELD. I won’t put myself in a position to have that kind of conflict of interest.”

“We have no interest in harming Dr. Banner,” she said immediately.

“You can give me no guarantees about the future, Director Hill, and you know it. Please don’t think you can manipulate me or coerce me. Being backed into a corner makes me incredibly... unfriendly.”

She nodded. “Are you at a point yet where you’re ready to reveal your spirit guides?”

“No,” he replied, offering nothing further.

“And are you progressing in your efforts to bond with Dr. Banner?”

“That is really none of your business,” Tony retorted sharply.

“With all due respect, Guide DiNozzo, it really is our business. We are content to monitor the situation, but we need to know when circumstances change for either you or Dr. Banner. You both have potential for great benefit to the world, or great harm. We will continue to ask, and we will be watching.”

Well, there was nothing creepy about *that*.

“I watched the video,” Bruce said from the doorway of Tony’s room.

Tony looked up from the Avengers’ mission brief he’d been reviewing, and making notes about what he saw as failures in the intel provided to the team.

“It... wasn’t what I expected.”

Gesturing to the armchairs, Tony waited until Bruce was seated before replying, “He’s safe with me, Bruce.”

“I saw that.” He huffed in frustration.

“Would you at least *try* to work with me?”

“How?”

“Spend time with me; talk to me, actually physically touch me. Just... anything other than this avoidance. He’s going to get more insistent the more you stay away.”

Bruce stared off at nothing for several moments before nodding.

Looking around the room nervously, Bruce said, “I’m not sure this is a good idea.”

Tony ran his hand down Bruce’s back, letting his aura fill the room and felt his sentinel relax. They’d spent the last couple day spending several hours a day together, getting to know one another and trying to become comfortable with one another. However, Bruce’s resistance to a bond hadn’t wavered.

“Look, Stark had this room done to be relatively Hulk safe.” Tony gestured at the fairly wide-open space with lots of big pillows on the floor and a couple sturdy couches and chairs. “He’s not going to break anything just by being in here, and I really think the key to the two of you having better integration is for you to give him some breathing room. You know he’s not going to get out of control with me here.”

To some degree, this whole thing was becoming exhausting for Tony. He wasn’t used to being nurturing and caring all the damn time, but he didn’t know how else to manage the situation. He was on tenterhooks all the time, compensating for the lack of bond with empathy, his voice, and patience. And it was starting to drive him absolutely insane. He wanted a beer and a movie and to get off, because fuck if he was at all sure what him masturbating would do to Bruce, whose senses were unwillingly fixed on Tony every waking moment, and probably asleep as well.

When Tony had tried to go to the shooting range with Natasha yesterday, Bruce had shown up with the Big Guy pressing at him because Tony was around someone armed without the

sentinel present. Tony pointed out that Bruce wouldn't be so neurotic if they were bonded, but Bruce just couldn't see it. His *reasons* for keeping Tony at an emotional and empathic distance clouded everything.

Tony stepped back and said, "Just relax and let him out. And I don't mean let your anger loose. See if you can feel the sentinel part that the two of you share, and pull at it."

Bruce closed his eyes and Tony could feel his concentration, but nothing happened.

He fought back a sigh. "Bruce, don't try so hard. Just give him permission to come see his guide."

Bruce's brow furrowed, but it only lasted a second, and then he was shifting. It was the calmest he'd ever experienced the Big Guy on first shift.

"To-ny." And there was a very toothy grin to accompany his name that probably would have scared anyone else. Hulk had a better grasp of language than most gave him credit for, but Tony found it kind of charming the way he always said Tony's name with two syllables.

"Hey there, Big 'n Green," Tony replied, surrendering to being picked and sniffed, per usual. Suddenly Tony wasn't sure what to do other than keep the Big Guy company. He wasn't gonna treat the Hulk like a child and get him toys or try training him like he was a puppy.

Suddenly he had a thought. "Have you ever seen your spirit guide, Big Guy?"

When Hulk just cocked his head to the side, Tony asked, "Some kind of animal lurking around sometimes... it doesn't feel dangerous to you. In fact you kind of like it? I figure with the way Bruce pushes his senses down that he likely doesn't see it, but you're all about those senses, aren't you?"

He wasn't sure he was getting through, but then Hulk said, "Big bear."

"Really? Well, that shouldn't surprise me, I suppose. I could probably call your spirit guide, but it's kind of rude. Can you think of him and we'll see if he can show up?"

In the next breath, a *huge* polar bear was between the two of them and then rubbing up against Tony, nearly knocking him off his feet.

"White bear like To-ny."

“He’s your spirit guide, he’s definitely going to like me... and you,” Tony replied, stroking the head of the polar bear.

Hulk suddenly plopped on the floor and pulled Tony into his lap. “To-ny my guide.”

That made him smile. “Yes, I’m your guide,” Tony said rubbing his hand over the enormous jaw.

Bruce finished watching the recording of their afternoon in what Tony had mentally dubbed Hulk’s playroom. “I remember pieces of it,” he admitted softly.

“And you shifted back without having to sleep it off or have me forcefully calm you.”

Frustration and uncertainty poured off the sentinel as he rubbed at his forehead. “I’m going to spend some time in my lab.”

That was Bruce’s way of telling Tony he was at his limit. Tony forced back his own frustration. “Yeah, of course.”

Bruce hesitated. “Movie tonight, right? You said you had to correct the horrible lapses in my cinematic knowledge.”

Making himself smile, Tony nodded. “I’m meeting with another SHIELD goon in a little bit, but after that, any time is fine.”

“Have you considered initiating the bonding when you have access to the Hulk?” Agent Sitwell asked absently as he made notes in his tablet.

Appalled, Tony just stared. Sitwell had been obnoxious since he’d arrived, but this was beyond the pale.

At the protracted silence, Sitwell looked up, “Did you understand the question, Guide DiNozzo?”

Tony’s hands clenched and he forced himself to remain calm. “I understood the question just fine. I’m just uncertain which implication I find more upsetting.”

“Pardon?”

“You are aware that platonic bonds aren’t possible for high level guides and sentinels?”

Sitwell looked annoyed. “Of course. I assure you, I came to this meeting prepared with all necessary information about your type of,” he made a vague dismissive gesture, “gifts.”

“Well then let’s talk about the least disturbing part of your suggestion; that I should engage in penetrative sex with the Big Guy,” Tony bit out.

“As I understand it, the physical portion of the claiming can be handled through digital penetration, much the way female sentinels claim their mates,” Sitwell said, peering at Tony over the top of his glasses.

Muscles in Tony’s jaw and eye began to twitch. “Okay then, moving on... even more troubling is the fact that you would have me circumvent Dr. Banner’s *will* by forging an empathic link he has expressly said no to. You would have me force an empathic bond on a being with very limited decision making skills and so base in his mindset that he’s truly incapable of giving informed consent.”

Tony stood up and braced his hands on the table. “Did you really come here and tell me to become a rapist, Agent Sitwell?”

“Get *out*,” Stark said dangerously from the doorway of the conference room.

“Mr. Stark, this doesn’t concern you,” Sitwell retorted sharply, getting to his feet.

Ignoring the remark, Stark looked to him, expression softening somewhat. “Tony, Banner is fighting off the Big Guy. You need to go deal with that and leave this idiot to me.”

“And me,” Rogers said, from his position behind Stark, arms folded across his chest.

He found Natasha and Clint standing in the doorway to Bruce’s lab, and trying to talk calm into him. Bruce was clearly barely holding on, eyes blazing green as he clenched his hands on a worktable and panted, attempting to keep the Hulk at bay. Tony had no doubt that if the Hulk had broken free, he’d have attacked Sitwell. Without the bond in place, Bruce and the Hulk were incredibly protective over even minor threats to Tony.

“You guys need to go,” Tony said as soon as he was in the room. “Thanks for trying to talk to him.”

The instant they were gone, Bruce grabbed ahold of him and pulled him close, sniffing at Tony's neck. And that was the first time Bruce had initiated grounding contact on his own. "He had no right," Bruce gritted out against Tony's skin.

"They can't force a bond on us. It's okay."

"No! He had no right to suggest that you should... put yourself in harm's way like that."

Tony ran his hands up and down his sentinel's back, projecting calm. He realized that aside from anger, the predominant emotion was protectiveness and that was a first from Bruce.

The entire team, still sans Thor, was gathered in the conference room, all of them staring at Nick Fury, who was stoically bearing the scrutiny.

Bruce sat right up next to Tony, hand wrapped around Tony's wrist. He hadn't let Tony away from his side since Sitwell's visit the afternoon prior. Last night was only the second time they'd shared a bed, this time with Bruce in the driver's seat and not the Hulk. Bruce wouldn't talk about his conflicted emotions, but Tony felt them all the same.

"You asked for this meeting, DiNozzo," Fury prompted.

Tony looked to Stark. "You certain we're secure here?" He'd already asked twice, but needed to be sure.

"Except for the device that Nick is using to record this meeting, we're completely free of any ears but JARVIS'."

With a put upon sigh, Fury pulled out his phone, and tapped a few commands.

"The device is no longer recording," JARVIS intoned.

"What's this about?" Fury asked impatiently.

"Sitwell," Tony replied immediately.

"Did you drag me here for an apology?" Fury asked, radiating annoyance.

"No. I dragged you here to tell you he's probably a double agent."

Fury's eyes narrowed. "Based on?"

"I gave him a *thorough* scan."

"He reported that you didn't. Unless you lied again and led us to believe we'd be able to feel a deep scan."

"I didn't lie. You inferred. If I do it without finesse, or quickly, of course you'll feel it. But I'm not just a blunt instrument, Director. I don't run around doing full scans on people I meet; it's exhausting and I don't need the mental clutter. But I was so certain he was a threat to me, I couldn't not scan him. Sitwell is a mass of deception. It's so fundamental to who he is, I can only conclude long-term undercover operative of some kind."

Fury's jaw worked, but he just stared at Tony.

"Look, do something about it or don't, I'm not sure I care at this point. But keep him away from me. Also, I'm not fighting with you over my abilities again. They're none of your damn business."

He pushed back from the table and got to his feet, Bruce mirroring his actions. "I know Steve and Tony want to talk to you, so I'll leave you to it."

"Spirit guides!" Fury called after him.

"Kiss my ass," Tony called back.

Part Three

The entire team gathered for dinner. Tony didn't really feel part of the team, but he gamely participated in the conversation, even though the stresses of the last week were really wearing on him. Something had to give in the situation and soon.

No one mentioned the earlier confrontation with Nick Fury, and Tony had no idea what the end result was, but he could *feel* the stress of it in the empathic tone of the group. He could also sense Natasha was really preoccupied with something, and she kept shooting Tony looks. He concluded she wanted to talk to him. With how protective Bruce had been the last day, it likely wouldn't be happening soon unless she was willing to sacrifice privacy.

“Sir,” JARVIS’ voice broke into the conversation as dinner was winding down, “Mr. Odinson has arrived on the landing pad. He will be on this floor shortly.”

“Thanks, J,” Stark replied, tossing his napkin on the table and getting to his feet. “Come on, Cuddles, meet the last member of the team.”

Tony rolled his eyes at the name, but gamely followed everyone into the main living area. It was only a few seconds before the big god of thunder exited the elevator; red cape, hammer and all. Tony suddenly had a voice go through his head saying, “*No capes!*” He nearly giggled.

Before the introductions could even be made, Tony realized he was being stared at by Thor. Stared at with such ferocious intensity it was disconcerting.

Everyone looked back and forth between the two of them, and Bruce even growled a little.

Stark finally said, “I’m just going to insert myself into this incredibly awkward silence and pretend it’s not happening. So, Thor... what brings you to Earth? Care to meet the newest member of the team, or are you working on your laser vision?”

Thor seemed to snap out of it and glanced around the room, then met Tony’s gaze again, but with less *heat*. “Forgive my rudeness. I was unprepared, though I am joyful that the Verndari have once again returned to Midgard. A momentous day indeed, and cause for much celebration!”

Everyone stared at Tony and the silence was deafening.

After several long, awkward moments, Tony blurted out, “Stop looking at me like that! I’m not an alien, and I sure as hell am not a *Norn*.”

Thor exploded into deep laughter. “Indeed you are not, friend. You are Verndari, not the great Verðandi.”

“Glad that’s cleared up,” Stark muttered.

Before everyone could start asking questions, Steve took control of the situation. “Let’s just all sit and Thor can explain what these Verndari are.”

“You know not your own history,” Thor commented with a shake of his head, as they made their way into the living area, “and yet you embrace the legacy of the Verndari readily enough.”

“That isn’t exactly clearing things up,” Stark commented dryly.

Tony was just confused.

“What know you of the ancient Guardians of the realms, Midgard amongst them?”

“Do you mean sentinels?” Rogers asked cautiously.

“Nay. The wielders of the *Heilagt Orka*, or what you might call sacred energy. The same energy that fuels the *Bifröst*.”

“Now that’s the second time the Bifrost has come up in relation to Tony,” Clint commented, and Tony noticed Thor wince a bit at the pronunciation.

“What has the *Bifröst* to do with Tony Stark?” Thor asked, brows raised.

“He means me,” Tony waved a hand. “Tony DiNozzo. I’m Bruce’s guide, so I’m sort of along for the ride here.”

“Guide? Nay, friend. What Midgardians call ‘guide’ we call the *Heilagt Arfleifð*, the legacy of those who wielded the sacred energy; for one cannot channel such fearsome power and remain unchanged. The descendants of the Verndari have the potential to become your world’s *guides*. But that is not *you*.”

Tony was internally denying that any of this had anything to do with him, so he was grateful the others kept the questions moving.

“Where are these Verndari now?” Steve asked.

“They are no more. More precisely, they *were* no more. Some will be pleased to find that changed, others will not.” The Asgardian was watching Tony closely.

Clear as mud, Tony thought.

“What happened to them?” Clint asked curiously.

“The Great Guardians were fearsome warriors, but their powers were only to be used to protect their homes and their people, to defend against attack. When the realms pushed the Verndari to help them wage war against one another, they channeled the sacred energy back into the Well and faded from existence.”

“And their descendants carried the guide gene?” Stark asked. At Thor’s frown of confusion, Stark added, “Why do guides have empathic abilities? Presumably that’s this legacy you mention.”

“Indeed! The energy was wielded using the power of the mind, and so the mind itself was altered, leaving their children forever changed. Even in Asgard we have those who wield the gifts of the mind. They are well thought of, but also a lingering symbol of the mistakes made which drove the Verndari from among us.” Thor looked around. “And what is this news of the *Bifröst*?”

Tony really didn’t think he was one of these Verndari things, but he answered, “Nick Fury noted that I came into my guide abilities at approximately the same time as you and your... um, hammer, were banished to Earth.”

Thor’s brows shot up. “You became Verndari at that exact moment in time?”

“That’s what he said, but it’s just *guide* abilities,” Tony clarified.

Ignoring Tony’s denial of being one of these guardians, Thor replied, “The *Bifröst* had not been opened to Midgard in more than a thousand years prior to that night. It draws its power from the same energy well as the Verndari drew theirs.” He rubbed his chin, looking thoughtful.

“You think the Bifrost itself gave Tony his... gifts?” Steve asked, clearly unsure how to address the issue.

“Nay. The *Bifröst* is purely energy. Rather, something drew on its power while it was open to Midgard; or perhaps something travelled along it with me.”

Tony felt his spirit guides a few seconds before they suddenly appeared, circling overhead briefly before swooping in to land, one on Tony’s knee and the other on his shoulder. The two ravens peered at Thor, heads cocked to the side.

Thor paled, looking utterly bewildered.

“Does anyone else think it’s a bad sign when the God of Thunder reacts that negatively?” Stark asked conversationally.

Eventually, Thor managed, “Hello, old friends.”

The two ravens peered at Tony and he knew they wanted to go to Thor, so he mentally sent them permission. Normally he wouldn’t want anyone touching his spirit guides other than

Bruce, but this felt like it was okay for some reason. They flew across the room, both landing on the couch near the Asgardian.

Thor looked to Tony for permission, and when Tony nodded, he reached out and gently stroked their breast feathers. "We have missed you," he whispered, though everyone could hear him clearly.

"What exactly is up with the birds?" Clint asked, echoing everyone's bewilderment.

"Huginn and Muninn were the guides of the Verndari Elder. They remained in Asgard when the Verndari left us, and were often advisors to my father until they too vanished."

Tony nearly choked. How could his spirit guides possibly be *the* Huginn and Muninn?

Thor continued, "My mother has long believed they remained in the nine realms and did not retreat to the Well as they were tasked with choosing when the Verndari would return. They could have easily pulled the energy of the *Bifröst* to accomplish their charge when I was banished." He looked over at Tony. "And they have chosen you, Tony DiNozzo, as the first of the Great Guardians on Midgard."

"Now, wait a minute," Tony said, pushing back into his chair. "I'm a *guide*. I display all the characteristics of one. I have a sentinel, the whole deal."

Laughing, Thor shook his head. "I feel the energy flowing through you, friend Tony. Every Guardian had a sentinel; some had more than one! They had a primary bond with one they called their *Verja*, or Defender, and often many secondary bonds. Fierce protectors were needed, for when a Verndari used their gifts in defense of their people, they were vulnerable to attack and frequently greatly fatigued by their labors. Never has a Verndari had as fierce a defender as the one you have chosen!"

Tony had been so caught up in the information coming from Thor, he hadn't been paying terribly close attention to his own sentinel's state. He tuned into Bruce, and found conflicted feelings that would take him several minutes to sort out, but he didn't sense the Hulk pressing to get out, so that was something.

All of a sudden, Stark started cracking up. And it was no mild amusement. Eventually, he actually had tears on his cheeks from the force of his laughter.

"What amuses thee?" Thor asked, looking as perplexed as Tony felt.

Stark pointed at Tony and Bruce. "All this angst over Bruce dragging you into his problems, when really, you're dragging him into *yours*."

Thor looked bemused, but turned his attention to Bruce, "Are you displeased to have been chosen to protect your Guardian?"

Tony dropped his head into his hands and groaned.

He registered Bruce getting to his feet. "Excuse us. I need to talk to Tony." A hand closed around his wrist and tugged.

Though he didn't plan on surrendering to being manhandled on a regular basis, Tony was perfectly happy to get out of the current situation.

When they were in Tony's room with the door shut, Tony waited for Bruce to say something, but Bruce just stared at him.

"Does it make a difference?" Tony blurted out without thinking about it too much.

Bruce's brows drew together in confusion. "What?"

"That I'm dragging you in, and not the other way around."

Sighing, Bruce rubbed his forehead. "It kind of does."

"You know that's fucked up, right?"

"Rationally, yes. I hear the double standard, but I can't help that I feel differently now. I'm not... completely sure what to make of the situation yet."

"Why is it different? Just give me something here," Tony asked, feeling a little desperate.

"It's just..." Bruce started pacing. "It's different if you *need* me, as opposed to me needing you."

Tony shook his head and pinched the bridge of his nose. "What the hell am I supposed to do with that?"

"I honestly don't know. I have no idea what to do from here."

“Have you ever really opened up your senses to me?” Tony asked abruptly. “I know you can’t help but keep track of me aurally, you’ve been stressed into scenting me, and you let me touch you, but have you really opened up and just let your senses go?”

“No... I was afraid it would trigger the urge to bond with you,” Bruce admitted.

“You mean you don’t have that urge already?” Tony asked with a frown.

“I do, but it seemed it would make things more intense,” Bruce said evasively. At Tony’s perplexed expression, the sentinel awkwardly rubbed the back of his neck. “I already find you attractive. I only use my senses with you when I can’t help it, and I worry if I opened up that way, I’d very *much* want to have sex.”

Tony wasn’t sure how to react to his sentinel so desperately *not* wanting to have sex with him.

Bruce finally huffed. “What if that translates to the *other guy*?” he clarified.

Unable to help himself, Tony rolled his eyes. “I don’t think it will, but what if it did?”

“I don’t want you to get hurt!” Bruce snapped.

“Would you just let me take care of myself? You’ve seen me with him, and it needs to sink into your skull that his most pressing need with me is to protect me. He wouldn’t hurt me. And if he tried, I could drop him as if he were a fifty-pound child if I chose to.”

Mouth open, Bruce was poised to reply, but then snapped it shut. Finally, he said, “I’m not used to trusting anyone... I’ve spent years managing this on my own. Then Stark came along... and he kind of muscled his way in, but he wants me around for the scientist in me. And I’m comfortable there.”

“No one’s asking you not to be a scientist. You go out in the field with them already, nothing would change. Why would you think you were just going to sit around here looking out for me when I do nothing but threat assessments and watch movies?”

Bruce didn’t really have much of a response to that, but Tony could feel his resolve almost in tatters.

He pressed his advantage, “Would you try setting aside your worry about the Big Guy, and just open yourself up to the sentinel in you. See what happens?”

“What if bonding makes it harder to control him?”

“I’m not a soothsayer, Bruce, but I’m inclined to think it will make it easier not harder. I think you’ll coexist instead of fighting each other.”

“It’s a big risk.”

“Doing nothing is a bigger risk.”

Bruce took a deep breath and blew it out slowly. “I was online before you, before the Hulk even existed. How can there be some mystical connection,” he waved in the vague direction of the living area, “between us? Because I... me, the scientist wasn’t chosen to be some powerful protector of whatever you are.”

Tony slumped a little, fighting his frustration. “I don’t know that I’m bought into what Thor said — not that I’m trying to deter you from bonding! — but if those damn birds of mine had the power to change me, why wouldn’t they have their choice of protectors? If there’s a design here, they chose you for a reason. Is there any chance your senses got stronger or harder to control around June first in 2011?”

“Oh, hell.”

“What?”

“I was in New York pursuing a possible cure. I didn’t take the serum until the fourth, but my senses had been spiking almost since I arrived in New York. I assumed it was related to the risk and... someone else who I hadn’t seen in a long time,” he said evasively. “Afterward, I knew my senses were much stronger, and harder to suppress, but I attributed it to the serum.”

Stark had made sure Tony had all the available information on Bruce and the Hulk, so he already knew all about Betty Ross, but he wasn’t going to poke at that wound. He wasn’t sure how to feel about possible confirmation that Huginn and Muninn had made some changes in Bruce. “You never tried to use your senses?”

Bruce shook his head emphatically. “I was never successful using them without a guide. I don’t know about the other guy; for all I know, he could have mastered them. But my only choice was to turn them off. The most I’ve ever used them is around you.”

They stared at each other for a long time, before Tony said, “What do you want, Bruce?” He couldn’t keep trying to *persuade*; it was starting to feel manipulative.

There was a long silence and Tony could *feel* a change in Bruce. "I want to try." Putting action to words, Bruce stepped into Tony's space. "Teach me how to use my senses, Tony." He reached out and cupped Tony's face.

Because Tony had been rated somewhere mid-level, he hadn't worked with sentinels other than Gibbs, who already knew how to use his dials. But Tony knew the mechanics of it well enough, so he started to explain.

"No," Bruce interrupted. "Teach me how to experience *you*."

Oh, damn, Tony thought. "When you decide to play, you go all in," he whispered.

Bruce drew Tony closer until their lips touched. For all that it was chaste, it was also electric. The sentinel drew back, peering at Tony intently, then started backing him up until they bumped into the wall. Then the sentinel started properly scenting him.

"It's so easy with you," Bruce murmured against the skin of his neck. "My dials just seem to adjust. Scent is up so high, but I'm able to filter out everything except you. How is that possible?"

The question sounded rhetorical, and Bruce was busy nosing behind Tony's ear, which was giving him the shivers, but Tony answered reflexively. "I don't know. Do we need to figure it out?" he asked breathlessly

"No." Bruce's hands slipped under his t-shirt, sliding across his abdomen and around to his back, the contact making Tony's knees feel wobbly. "I can't help but catalogue things, note differences or unexpected variances." He traced the protrusions of Tony's spine. "You smell like rain and honeysuckle."

"That doesn't really make sense. I've been in the tower for over a week," Tony replied somewhat mindlessly.

"I'll always know your smell." Sensitive hands swept across Tony's chest, glanced over the nipples, causing him to gasp. "You don't have any hair," the sentinel observed.

"It's not uncommon for guides to have it all removed."

Bruce pressed his nose against Tony's collarbone as his thumbs grazed over Tony's nipples again. "This is insane. My whole world is resetting, and I want nothing so much as to taste you, but I *know* I won't be able to stop." He pulled back a bit and looked at Tony closely.

“And you’re not ready,” Tony stated, sort of wanting to sink through the floor, because they were back on *this* track again.

Watching his every reaction, Bruce asked, “Are you?”

Tony opened his mouth to say yes, but the words wouldn’t come. *What the fuck?*

“I’ve been avoiding you and denying our connection. Let’s try it the other way for a couple days, where I embrace this, and see what happens.”

All he could manage was a nod.

Bruce’s hands slid over Tony’s ribs, then settled on his hips. “I’m going to my lab for a little while... clear my head. If it’s okay, I’d like to sleep here.” They’d slept in the same bed twice; once when Bruce was the Big Guy all night, and the other time after Sitwell’s visit.

“Yeah... I... that would be good.”

A chaste kiss was pressed to the corner of Tony’s mouth, and then Bruce was gone.

Tony slid down the wall and stared at nothing for a long time.

“Cartoons?” Bruce asked when they were alone in Tony’s room two nights later.

“Oh, don’t get bent out of shape about it. He wasn’t into anything else. And I’m pretty sure it was Shrek himself and not the fact that it was an animated feature that caught his attention. I mean, seriously, Bruce, he’s got to relate on some level to a big green guy. We tried other genres, but he got restless.”

Bruce snorted in amusement. “He likes spending time with you... I can feel him more content on the days I let him out,” the sentinel admitted.

“And that’s a good thing?”

“Yes. I don’t feel like I have to fight him all the time. And the more time you and I spend together... well, I feel less fractured,” Bruce admitted, not looking at Tony. “I remember more of today than I expected. It’s as if we share mind space sometimes.”

Tony wasn't sure what to say to that. Privately he thought better integration was a good thing, but he had no basis for that opinion, plus, it wasn't happening to him.

The last couple days had been really good. Bruce was taking every opportunity to be with Tony, to begin imprinting his senses fully on his guide, but there was so much uncertainty about what would happen when they did bond, that it added an edge to everything that Tony didn't know how to counteract. In truth, he was tired of managing the whole thing. Not that Bruce wasn't worth it, but the constant having to be in *guide mode* was kind of exhausting. His empathy felt ungrounded and sort of frayed around the edges.

Bruce seemed lost in thought, but *felt* okay to Tony, so he slipped into the bathroom to shower and change. After, Bruce took over the bathroom and Tony climbed into bed. He sighed, thinking briefly on all the things that were left hanging in his life.

It was the twenty-third of December. Tony had never been one much for celebrating the holidays, other than his marathons of *It's a Wonderful Life*. In fact, he usually worked the holidays, but this year he felt in limbo. His life was on hold until he and Bruce bonded, but it would also be completely new and strange after they bonded. He had no idea what to expect from the future at this point and it was unnerving.

He was so lost in thought, he didn't notice Bruce until he slid in next to Tony. "What are you thinking about, Tony?"

"Ah... just wondering what the future holds," he replied truthfully if a bit vaguely.

Bruce made a vague noise of agreement. He was lying next to Tony propped on his elbow. "May I touch you?" the sentinel was gradually getting used to being able to touch Tony throughout the day whenever he wanted, but when they were in bed, Bruce always asked.

"Of course."

A warm hand immediately settled on his stomach and fiddled with the hem of his t-shirt. "Is it all right if I remove this?"

Tony nodded and the t-shirt was on the floor a couple seconds later. He could almost feel Bruce's gaze as it slid over his chest and up to his face.

"You're a beautiful man, Tony... in every way I could possibly mean it."

Surprised, Tony just blinked, not sure what to say.

“Just accept it.” Bruce pressed a light kiss to his jaw. “I’m not sure I deserve the dedication and patience and loyalty you’ve shown me.”

“Bruce,” Tony whispered, feeling unaccountably sad that nine days of patience had that much meaning.

“No... let me say it. I’ve been reading about sentinels and guides, and I know how hard it is for them to stay away from each other after they meet. Most couples bond within two days of their first touch. And whatever the scope of your gifts, you’re still a guide, so I know this hasn’t been easy.” Bruce’s hand slid up his chest, tracing the contours of his collarbone.

The sentinel stared fixedly at Tony as he continued to explore. “I’ve had my aversion to this *thing* inside me to fuel me and make it easier to stay away, but you’ve only had your dogged respect for my right to choose, and I can’t tell you how much it means to me.”

The strong but sensitive scientist’s hand cupped Tony’s jaw, thumb tracing his cheekbone. “I spoke to an alpha guide in Cascade today. I wanted to know what you were going through these last nine days. He said having me near but not empathically connected to you would leave you feeling emotionally frayed. That your empathy would be strained from the effort of not connecting with me.”

“Bruce, it’s okay,” Tony whispered.

“Just tell me if that’s what you feel.”

“It’s... tiring,” Tony admitted. “I have to fight not to reach out for you.”

“He explained that letting our minds touch isn’t the same thing as bonding. I’ve felt your aura, but you’ve never touched my mind. Why not?”

“Because you were fighting it. It’s supposed to feel very good to sentinels, and doing that when you didn’t want it felt manipulative and abusive.”

“Even though it’s hurt you?” Bruce inquired without inflection.

“Let’s not do this... I’ll wait for you as long as I need to. Maybe that’s the benefit of whatever the ravens did for me. Maybe I can hold out longer than most.”

His sentinel leaned down and pressed a kiss to Tony’s mouth, surprising him by licking at his lower lip. Bruce shuddered, burying his face in Tony’s neck. “Will you bond with me?”

Tony wrapped his arms around strong shoulders. "Of course I will, Bruce. *All of you.*"

Pulling back to stare into Tony's eyes, the sentinel murmured, "Let me feel it, Guide."

"Sentinel," Tony whispered, and it was such a relief to let his empathy reach for his sentinel that it was almost a type of pain. Their minds connected quickly and Tony felt the duality in Bruce's mind, both parts reaching out for Tony without hesitation. The fraying edges of his empathy were soothed and eased and he trembled under the weight of their connection.

Bruce pressed their foreheads together, breathing hard. "Fuck," he gasped. "That's so..." he trailed off, then claimed Tony's mouth, licking inside, and Tony's brain whited out. Suddenly Tony could let down all his barriers; the rigid control of his mind, and the refusal to admit his physical need for his sentinel's touch.

It was like a switch had been flipped, and a side of Bruce he'd never experienced surged to the fore. He broke away, pressing Tony's hands into the pillows, then quickly divested them both of the remainder of their clothes.

Then he began imprinting in earnest; touching, smelling and tasting every inch of Tony's body. Bruce's mind tugged at Tony's in a delicious way at the same time he licked over a hardening nipple. Tony shuddered as physical and empathic sensations merged.

When the sentinel began exploring his cock and balls, he nearly came undone. A tongue swiped wetly over his hipbone and Tony trembled. "Imprint on me," Bruce ordered, making Tony aware that he was now the one holding back.

He closed his eyes, feeling the journey of his sentinel across his skin even as he focused on actually learning Bruce down to the core of his being. Some of the most fractured parts were left mended in the wake of Tony's imprint, his empathy healing as it learned the very nature of his bondmate.

The sentinel growled and flipped Tony over, palming Tony's buttocks roughly. Tony's body was lax and receptive, but his mind was pulling aggressively at Bruce... binding them together, making them both stronger.

His legs were pushed apart and a wet tongue swiped across his hole. Gasping, he arched his hips, then a slick finger slid deep inside him. Insanely, it felt like they were almost racing each other; the sentinel trying to physically imprint every last inch of him before Tony could finish cementing the bond.

The stretch in his asshole increased deliciously as his sentinel finger-fucked him open. Tony started to feel energy flowing under his skin; the same as the night he'd come online. It was sharp and hot and he wrapped his sentinel in it, pulling them ever closer together.

The fingers disappeared from his ass and he was yanked to his knees. He braced himself on his elbows and the energy pooling around and in them was at an almost painful peak when Bruce pushed his cock into Tony in one powerful thrust.

Tony moaned, rocking back to meet the hard thrusts. He saw lights sparking in his peripheral vision and the room felt bathed in the energy that had pulled Tony online. He alternately pushed it out to his sentinel and pulled it into himself, learning how to control it and use it to cement the connection between them.

Bruce suddenly pulled Tony up and back onto his lap, fucking up in to him and nailing his prostate with every thrust, biting at Tony's shoulder blade. Tony reached back, grasping for something to hold on to, lost in the sensations and emotions flowing between them. The connection was wide open and it was like he could feel him fucking himself. It was strange and disorienting and yet so insanely *right*.

He struggled to tie off the bond, to make it complete, not sure why it wasn't yet, when abruptly he felt Bruce's mind fully surrender. The connection was so perfect and profound, orgasm slammed into the both of them simultaneously.

Breathing hard, his head flopped back, resting on Bruce's shoulder. The aftershocks of both of their pleasure raced through him. The pleasure its own proof the sentinel had claimed his mate, and the stark sharing of those sensations evidence that the guide had done the same.

He suddenly realized the energy he'd thought was just a visualization was literally flowing visibly around the room. Lifting his head, he blinked at the slowly undulating white light drifting around them.

"Pull it back into yourself," a voice whispered in his mind. Exhausted, and without conscious thought, he mentally reached for it and pulled. It hit him *hard*, and the world went black.

Awareness came slowly. Tony could feel his sentinel, his protector, by him, wrapped around him. He felt lax and contented, completely whole and utterly new. He was lying in bed on his back, covers pulled up to his chest and Bruce was there, carding his fingers through Tony's hair.

He blinked and the room swam into focus.

Bruce was peering down at him. "How do you feel?"

"Good," he replied assessing himself quickly. "Should I not?"

"You've been out for a couple hours."

Tony's brows shot up in surprise. "That must have freaked you out."

"It would have, but Huginn said it was normal and not to worry."

"He *said*?"

"Mm. Chatty little thing when he gets going. Apparently you needed to finish accepting the *sacred energy* before they could speak to you... or me."

Tony couldn't even begin to wrap his brain around that, so he just pushed it aside. "How are you feeling?"

"I feel... whole." He pressed a chaste kiss to Tony's lips. "Thank you, Tony."

They stared at each other for a long time and Tony felt something odd stirring in him, but he wasn't sure what to do with it. It felt like something needed to be done, but he found that really annoying because they just finished doing a whole *lot*.

It was Bruce who broke the stalemate when he murmured, "Will you accept me as your Defender?"

Tony blew out a breath and squeezed his eyes shut for a few seconds. "Ah, Bruce... nothing's ever going to be the same, is it?"

"No," Bruce said a bit sadly. The true empathy of two people who'd had their lives abruptly taken out of their control passed between them.

He pulled his Defender down into a kiss, relishing the closeness and the connection humming between them. "Of course I accept you," he whispered against Bruce's lips.

Bruce touched their foreheads together. "*Guardian.*"

That shared truth passed between them, and they both accepted their new future.

The End